

Renaming Indian Head Highway seemed like a good idea. How did it go wrong?

A Native American tried to get the Maryland highway's name changed to honor the Piscataway tribe

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Gabrielle Tayac, a Native American scholar and historian, still remembers as a girl hearing from her father the oral history passed down in his family for over 100 years: How the town of Indian Head and the highway through it got named.

“We were driving down Indian Head Highway, and he said, ‘They killed our people and put their heads on spikes,’” said Tayac, an associate professor at George Mason University. “My father said, ‘That’s why Indian Head was called this.’”

For Tayac and others of the two Piscataway tribes in Southern Maryland, the name of Indian Head Highway — a 20-mile stretch of road that runs from Southern Maryland to the edge of the District — has long conjured up horrific images of a violent time for the Native Americans who once dominated the area.

So in this age of social justice and racial reckoning, it seemed like the right time to propose changing the name of the more than 80-year-old route — to Piscataway Highway to honor the Piscataway Conoy Tribe and the Piscataway Indian Nation, which total about 4,500 members and can trace their roots in the area back centuries.

Tayac supported the effort by a fellow Piscataway, who got a veteran Maryland legislator to sponsor a bill that lawmakers passed unanimously and Gov. Larry Hogan (R) signed into law this spring.

But what seemed an easy win turned out to be riddled with troubles: The bill to rename Indian Head

Highway did not have the widespread support of Piscataway tribal leaders and members, and many supporters are now realizing that the wording of the legislation was faulty — so faulty that it was not really a win at all.

“This was meant as a good thing,” said Lucille Walker, executive director of the Southern Maryland Heritage Area, which covers Calvert, Charles and St. Mary’s counties and areas that are home to the Piscataways. “I think people in the government wanted to recognize the First People. The problem was the process.”

‘Bad for our tribe’

For starters, Jesse Swann — an enrolled member of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe who identifies himself as chief and who mustered support for the name change — did not have the backing of some tribal leaders.

Swann and a group of supporters got nearly 5,000 signatures in an online petition. He said he had tried for seven years to change the offensive name but had no luck until Del. Jay Walker (D-Prince George’s) heard about his effort and decided to sponsor the bill. (Jay Walker and Lucille Walker are not related.)

“A lot of people just thought the name was wrong,” Swann said. “It’s just bad for our tribe.”

Other proposals had been made in the past to rename the highway after President Barack Obama or Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, but those efforts also failed. This time, Jay Walker gauged support for it at town halls and constituent forums and felt it would succeed.

“When I said maybe we should honor the Native Americans, they were all like ‘That’s a good idea, let’s do it,’” he said.

Plus, he said, the murder of George Floyd “changed the dynamic.”

“The millennials, like my daughter, her generation — they don’t stand for stuff like that,” Jay Walker said. “The timing was there.”

The bill had support — including from the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs and Prince George’s County Executive Angela D. Alsobrooks — but Piscataways were split on the renaming.

Francis Gray, who identifies himself as the tribal chair of the Piscataway Conoy council, told The Washington Post the council did not support the way the bill was introduced and passed because he felt it was “fast tracked” and no one reached out to him or the tribal council leaders until the last minute.

“Within our tribal community, it is very concerning that this bill was not fully vetted and that no outreach to Piscataway tribal leadership was attempted prior to [the bill] being introduced,” Gray wrote in a March 30 letter.

Plus, he said, the “renaming of this highway has mixed support amongst our membership.” Some were offended by the term “Indian Head,” he wrote, while others were “concerned that the name change will erase references to ‘Indian Headlands,’ a term which was used in historical records to identify the Southern Maryland region where our people resided.”

To further complicate matters, historians and tribal members say there are different versions of how the area came to be named “Indian Head.”

Beheadings or a geography?

Some Piscataways and historians cite the bloody past, while others point to the region's geography — a promontory jutting into the Potomac River.

The area was once the main territory of the Algonquian Indians, which includes the Piscataway tribe, and they can trace their roots to the land back 10,000 years. The name Piscataway in the Algonquian language means “where the waters merge” and is a reference to the area where the Piscataway Creek and the Potomac River converge, according to Tayac.

In the early 1600s, the Piscataways numbered around 12,000 and included several interconnected tribes, whose land stretched from Point of Rocks, Md., along the Potomac River and around the Chesapeake Bay.

But due to attacks by colonists and tribes from the north who saw them as “aligned with the colonial government,” the Piscataways suffered a period of massive violence and loss, said Julia A. King, an anthropology professor at St. Mary's College of Maryland who has studied the Piscataways.

Owen Lourie, historian for the Maryland State Archives, said the earliest map he has seen with the word “head” is from 1861.

Lourie said 19th-century maps named the area for its large concentration of Native Americans and used the word “head” to describe the land where they lived because it “sticks out into the Potomac River.”

“They're using the word ‘head’ in the name as a synonym for a coastal feature,” Lourie said. Another map from the late 18th century calls the area where Piscataways lived “Indian Land.”

In the 1890s, people moved to the town during the post-Civil War depression to work at the newly established Naval Proving Ground. The town of Indian Head was incorporated in 1920, and the first parts of Indian Head Highway were built in the 1940s to give better access between the naval facility and Washington.

In 2012, two groups of Piscataways — the Piscataway Indian Nation and the Piscataway Conoy Tribe — received recognition from the state of Maryland as official tribes.

While some Piscataways subscribe to the geographical explanation for the name of the town and highway, others adhere to the oral history that elders passed along for generations, as Tayac's father had shared with her.

“It's something he carried with him,” said Tayac, who was a curator for 18 years at the National Museum of the American Indian in D.C. “It was a memory he had, and I always knew that story, and it always stuck with me. It's been like a background noise. It's like the name of the Washington football team. It becomes a dreadful little hum.”

Rename vs. ‘designate’

Weeks after the legislation's passage, Swann and his supporters were surprised to learn the highway, which is also called Maryland Route 210, was not being renamed after all.

The bill did not call for a name change but instead said officials should “designate Maryland Route 210, as

the Piscataway Highway,” the Maryland Department of Transportation wrote in a March 11 letter to the House Environment and Transportation Committee, adding that the legislation did not “clarify the exact meaning of ‘designate.’”

In other words, the road will still be called Indian Head Highway, although it will get two signs along part of it with the additional name of Piscataway Highway. Jay Walker, the bill’s sponsor, was disappointed with the outcome.

“I don’t think anybody expected it to be that way,” he said. “The will of the legislative body was to rename Indian Head Highway to Piscataway Highway and that has not changed.”

Changing the name of the road and the signs on it would have been a cumbersome, drawn-out and costly process, MDOT said, warning that it would involve replacing signs, reprinting maps and changing mailing addresses. A name change would also make it hard for emergency rescuers to find the road and would cause “confusion and potential costs with legal or real estate documents that reference a road name that no longer exists.” MDOT said there was no estimate for the cost to rename the highway because no one had asked for it.

The bill moved forward with no amendments, passing both the House and the Senate unanimously.

In a letter to Maryland legislators, Swann said he and his supporters felt “bamboozled and defeated” that the name was not being changed. He vowed to push state officials to “get this hiccup taken care of.”

Hogan, in a May 24 letter to Swann, said the legislature had “declined to call for a renaming of this roadway” when it passed the bill, so officials from the state’s highway department will put up two signs that “designate” it as Piscataway Highway. The governor also outlined a few ways to get the roadway officially renamed: The General Assembly can submit a bill to formally rename the highway and pass the law in future legislative sessions, or go through the lengthy standard process of submitting a request directly to MDOT.

Officials said the signs, which cost about \$400 each, would go up this fall.