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West Hartford to rename street in honor of two enslaved women

By Deidre Montague

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The West Hartford Town Council unanimously voted to rename New Street to Dinah Road. (Ted Glanzer/Hartford Courant)

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WEST HARTFORD — The West Hartford Town Council unanimously agreed to change the name of a city street this week, a small move that points to a larger goal — changing the town’s physical landscape to bear witness to its history and culture.

New Street in Blue Back Square will henceforth be named Dinah Road, in honor of two women named Dinah who were enslaved in West Hartford in the mid-18th century.

The change, a nearly year-long process of gathering signatures and support, was spearheaded by the Mayor’s Youth Council and the Witness Stones Project.

At the meeting Tuesday, Hall High School student Priya Sinha raised a question for the

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“Are we willing to honor the voice of an African American slave who never had one, or act as if the past never happened?”

Sinha is a member of the youth council and the Witness Stones Project, which allows students to learn about the lives of enslaved individuals and work to amplify their stories through art, music or writing. It was through this project several students wrote letters to the town council wanting to change the name.

“Watching the students at work, the input that they had, what they learned from a civics perspective, and a history perspective ... I am just very proud and I think this is a wonderful outcome,” said West Hartford Mayor Shari Cantor.

According to the town historian, Tracey Wilson, Dinah and her daughter were forced to toil on the estate of John and Jerusha Whiting on land stretching east and west of Hall High School, local research shows. Her daughter was probably born there, and her mother passed away when she was 10 years old. When the Whitings died, the daughter, Dinah, was inherited by Jerusha’s nephew, John Haynes Lord. In 1791, a Black man, Prince Hall, reportedly paid for her freedom.

As the Witness Stones Project gathered information on people who had been enslaved in West Hartford, the question became how to share it.

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how do we get other people in the town to know about it, how do we change the cultural landscape of the town?” Wilson said.

At that time, the Town Council did not have a process for changing the names of roads, so they spent about six months coming up an ordinance in response to the students’ letters, Wilson said.

Wilson also said that since the eighth-graders who started the process moved on to high school, three students from the Mayor’s Youth Council, including Sinha and Sarah Granquist from Hall High School and Tzionya Goldfischer from New England Jewish Academy, collected 150 signatures to support the name change.

Sinha said her experience obtaining the signatures required for the petition was sometimes difficult.

“As I would walk around my neighborhood door to door, before I could even finish my sentence, some would simply just say no. It almost felt like we weren’t going anywhere as a town,” she said.

“I didn’t just feel rejection, I felt the hatred we (people of color) face in the community. ... If we want to keep improving the lives of people of color, changing this name is a necessity,” Sinha said. “We often preach as a town that we want more diversity and to honor those from different backgrounds. So here I am, a person of color, asking you to make this change.”

After the 150 signatures were collected, the three students had to speak before the Planning and Zoning Commission, where they received a unanimous vote for the name change on May 5.

“They had to be persistent to keep at it, but they are really engaged in the project and really believed in this idea that our landscape needs to tell more stories than it does right now,” Wilson said.

Sinha said many people of color in West Hartford don’t feel that they belong, but the

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“As a person of color, especially a woman growing up in West Hartford, it was not the same experience as many of my friends who are white,” she said. “I found it hard to find representation and people like me. ... I constantly face microaggressions and subtle racist comments.

Councilor Carol Blanks agreed.



“For me as a Black woman with West Indian and Cuban roots, sitting on this council is huge. When I grew up in Hartford, coming through West Hartford, everybody was like, ‘Ooh, you got to be careful, okay,’ because there’s not many of us that are born in West Hartford, and certainly at that time, we were not sitting on this council,” she said.



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“I know I’m not the first Black woman sitting on this council, and there are others who paved the way, but I would like to recognize and be thankful for Dinah and Dinah.... I’m just really proud of this moment, proud of this council to be able to support this resolution because it’s history-making for me, as well. Not only today, but in many years to come, my name will be associated with this.”

Councilwoman Adrienne Billings-Smith also shared her excitement and gratefulness to Wilson and the students.

“What we are doing here in West Hartford is ... making sure that we are living up to our vision, our mission and our promise to our residents. What you guys are doing is creating that space for folks.

“I grew up in the South, so I already knew what it was to drive through towns that I didn’t necessarily belong in,” Billings-Smith said. “So when Blanks says that about our

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The name change will not become official until August 15 in order to give current residents of the LOFTS apartments at 15 New Street time to update important information at their banks, the DMV and other places.

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