

UC Hastings namesake killed, displaced California tribes. But changing name isn't enough

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University of California Hastings College of Law sign

While no one living today enslaved African Americans or carried out genocide against Native Americans, our world is a product of those past injustices. What do those living today owe for the crimes against humanity perpetrated by their forebearers, of which some may be indirect beneficiaries?

For the two of us, this question is not an academic exercise. One of us, James Russ, is president of the Round Valley Indian Tribes (RVIT), a Sovereign Nation of Seven Confederated Tribes. The other, David Faigman, is chancellor and dean of UC Hastings Law in San Francisco. Over 150 years ago, the founder of Faigman's law school promoted and financed expeditions to kill the indigenous population in and around the Eden and Round Valleys in Northern California.

In the mid-19th century, genocide of Native Americans was effectively the official policy of the California and federal governments. [Serranus Hastings helped lead these efforts](#) and profited greatly from the killing and displacement of Indigenous peoples. His primary targets were the Yuki Indians — a name bestowed upon them meaning “enemy” in the Wintun language — who were located on lands he claimed as his own. The result was that numerous Yuki were killed and virtually all others were displaced or forced into bondage.

Hastings later became the first chief justice of the California Supreme Court and, in 1878, he donated \$100,000 in gold coin for the state to establish the first law department of the University of California in his name.

In a white paper commissioned for the school, historian Brendan Lindsay, author of “Murder State: California’s Native American Genocide, 1846-1873,” found that the crimes committed against Indigenous peoples by Hastings and scores of others continue to reverberate today. Multiple tribes were commanded onto the Round Valley Indian Reservation in 1863, many of which harbored historical animosities toward one another. The Yuki no longer formed the core population of Round Valley, now outnumbered by other tribes, some from many miles away. As Lindsay observed, the “reservation remained a horrific place for internees. Native Americans, in addition to the continued specter of violence, rape, and kidnap, suffered from malnutrition, disease, and exposure.”

In 1936, RVIT, a conglomeration of the descendants of several tribes, including the Yuki, achieved recognition by the federal government. Despite federal recognition — something [many California Indian groups are still battling](#) for — life remains difficult for the Native Americans of Round Valley. Since World War II, the reservation and its surrounding area have witnessed a steady economic decline.

In 2017, UC Hastings began examining its founder’s criminal acts and reached out to the Tribal Council of the RVIT. Like the reckonings taking place at other institutions throughout the country, a principal question concerned whether UC Hastings should remove the Hastings name.

The school entered into conversations with RVIT with no preconditions and, similarly, the RVIT Tribal Council went into the dialogue with eyes open, sensitive to the prospect of empty assurances and unfulfilled promises.

Early on, it became clear that [the Hastings name](#) was just one of many issues to resolve. Yet, repeatedly in our conversations, a principal grievance of RVIT representatives was their erasure from California and American history. Erasing the Hastings name would not remedy that continuing insult.

UC Hastings and RVIT came to realize that a proactive and respectful partnership between the law school and the descendants of those its founder had so grievously harmed was the best form of remembrance and redress. Specifically, we needed to come to terms with the horrors visited upon Indigenous peoples of California and, importantly, find ways a major law school could assist descendants still in need. In order to help effectuate this relationship, RVIT formed a committee of Yuki tribal members and tribal elders.

UC Hastings and RVIT are discussing ways that we can partner going forward, including by organizing pro bono legal support and assist tribal leadership with economic development, efforts to meet the social needs of the community and federal, state and county matters, including water and property rights.

In addition, UC Hastings will dedicate a permanent and public memorial to the Yuki people on its campus. Other initiatives, such as an Indigenous Law Center and an annual lecture series, will build upon the school's mission to serve society as a center of higher learning.

In the months and years ahead, we expect this partnership — this friendship — to inspire many additional joint ventures.

We are committed to a process where no outcome, including changing the school's name, is entirely foreclosed. While we recognize the law school's name will continue to be an issue on which reasonable people will disagree, RVIT and UC Hastings are aligned in the view that substantive redress of past injustices must be the first priority of this long-term relationship.

Changing the name of the school would be of little benefit to the living descendants of Serranus Hastings' crimes. These atrocities should not be erased — instead, it should be a societal goal to never forget this sordid chapter of American history and the challenges that Native Americans continue to face.

At the present time we are committed to remembering and redressing past injustices and to forging a future path of mutual respect and friendship.

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