

Richie Baldwin

Professor Gramse

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Denali vs. McKinley

1896 marked the year that Mt. Denali was renamed by a gold prospector named Dickey, who decided to name it after the US president at the time, William McKinley, whom he admired (National Geographic). This is not the first, nor would it be the last time that something or somewhere in Alaska would be named something new by settlers, with no regard for those who lived there beforehand—Native Alaskans—or the names they had called those areas for years. Some may argue that it's fine that we called Mt. Denali McKinley for so long, since everyone knew what we were talking about, and it's just a name, but it's bigger than that. Those names that were given freely and used for years in ignorance, are a lasting effect of settlers in Alaska, and the disregard for Native Alaskan life. A prime example of this is Mt. Denali, which would be wrongly called Mt. McKinley for one-hundred-and-twenty years, until it was returned to its original name, Denali, in 2016.

The name Denali has been requested to be used before, such as in 1916, when Charles Sheldon appealed to have the national park that would include the mountain named more accurately after what the area had been called for years by Native Alaskans. Sheldon asked in a letter to Thomas Riggs—a member of the Alaska Engineering Commission—about the park, and the name. He asked that “in the bill you will call it ‘Mt Denali National Park’ so that the true old

Indian name of Mt Denali (meaning ‘the Great One’) will thus be preserved” (National Park Services, 2022). This was disregarded and instead the park was named McKinley National Park, because everyone knew already the mountain by that name. This cemented the mountain as Mt. McKinley until 2016, when the park—which had been renamed thanks to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980—was about to celebrate 100 years. On the eve of the anniversary, the mountain was renamed to its proper title, and once again called Mt. Denali. This event was so important because it was an act that showed cultural sensitivity, and a want to better recognize the Native Alaskan people-- and the rich history and culture they have, and how it intertwines with nature and the land we live on in Alaska.

Some people believe that Mt. Denali should have remained Mt. McKinley in order to recognize the president it was named for and preserve national pride. In response to the letter that Charles Sheldon sent in 1916, Thomas Riggs wrote that the reason they shouldn't name the national park—and so also the mountain-- Denali was because the name was “not descriptive” and that people across the nation already knew of “Mt. McKinley and the various efforts made to climb it”. This thought process, however, disregards Native Alaskans and the culture that existed before Alaska began receiving more settlers, not to mention that Denali actually did describe the mountain, while McKinley was just in honor of a president—who never had anything to do with Alaska. While it is true that many people knew of the mountain as Mt. McKinley, it is ignorant to ignore the many people that also knew of it as Denali. Which is why many people who reside in Alaska, not just the Native Alaskans, respected those who came before’s request to call the mountain Denali. It is unfortunate what happened, but it is only another show of how Native Alaskans and their history were ignored in their own home. This is also why it is important that

Denali was renamed—it is a show of sympathy for Native Alaskans, and in a way an apology for what was done before. It is a recognition of who came before us.

The changing of the name from McKinley to Denali is not just about names, nor is it about which name is more well known. The change is about recognizing who came before us, what culture came before us, who we still live with. It is a celebration of Native Alaskan culture and their history. It is a step towards better embracing the culture that is within our roots in Alaska, and elsewhere in the United States. Looking back and recognizing—even more so respecting—the history of where we live is important, and the renaming of Denali is an example of this, even if it was long overdue.

Works Cited

- “Denali or Mount McKinley?” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, 29 Sept. 2022, www.nps.gov/dena/learn/historyculture/denali-origins.htm.
- “Denali.” *National Geographic*, education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/denali/. Accessed 19 Nov. 2023.