

# TILSEN UNIVERSITY

In the 1950s and 1960s, when my father and grandfather were building houses in Minnesota and Florida, developers were free to assign names to the roads they paved, and so I grew up with streets named after my siblings and cousins, such as Caren Court, Vicki Lane and James Road. By the time my youngest sister and I were born, though, city councils were less liberal with naming rights, and so all I got was a one-block avenue with one house and two drainage ditches on it behind Pomp's Tire in Lino Lakes, Anoka County, Minnesota. At least no one will ever be embarrassed to live on the streets bearing these names.

Yale University is considering renaming Calhoun College, and the university itself, in light of the fact both John C. Calhoun and Elihu Yale are said to have been heavily involved in the slave trade, massacring Indians, and other activities that are now viewed unfavorably in some quarters. My solution: Yale should take the initiative and rename the entire enterprise Tilsen University, after Ebenezer Tilsen, the great hero from the Revolutionary War era.

Ebenezer Tilsen has no recorded association with the slave trade. There is no evidence that he ever owned any property at all, nor had any successful business venture to speak of. His hands are clean of the stain of massacre and atrocity, as far as the record shows, in as much as there is no indication that he ever picked up a blade or musket. He is recalled only as a hero, although it is not known which side in the war considered him such; no specific charge of disloyalty or wrong-thinking can be definitively pinned on him.

Tradition suggests the hero Ebenezer Tilsen was a descendant of Good King Til of Norway (no relation to Til the Terrible), a name honored in the annals of history and legend, respected if not loved even by hostile Swedes. There is no corporation or other major institution named

for him yet – a green field branding opportunity.

That's my suggestion, anyhow. The name even looks good in big lights at the top of a tower, such as those the university favors to house its most important offices.

Our liturgical tradition has refrained from heroizing our ancestors. The minor holidays bearing the names of individuals – Fast of Esther, Fast of Gedalia – are so named for the historical event, not to honor the individuals, most certainly not Gedalia, who was not well regarded, at least before being assassinated. Our legends and history openly display the flaws and reveal the shortcomings of our ancestors and rulers. Even Noah – the sole family head picked to re-start a corrupted humanity after the flood – is described with the qualification, “righteous, for his time,” the equivalent of saying, “a good football player, for a

Jew” or “a good dancer, for a white person.” While the Maccabees get some play for their role in the Hanuka victory, the Hasmonean dynasty was viewed as corrupt and problematic, and ultimately the liturgy presents God as the hero. We call the holiday “Hanuka,” not the “Feast of the Maccabees.” So, too, with the Exodus story, as told in the Bible and recounted in the Hagada, where God is thanked and praised, while the human failings of Moses are portrayed bluntly alongside his greatness.

As heirs to an evolving civilization, a certain modesty befits our attempts to celebrate people of merit. Our moral shortcomings are ubiquitous and thus “invisible,” but even a minimal retrospection suggests that few of us will stand the test of time. It would be good if our descendants really can advance in their moral lives beyond our corruption, narcissism and greed. At most, we can hope that we will be remembered as “good, considering the times” and that we will do nothing that our descendants will be ashamed of but rather will be a source of pride.

