

We, the undersigned scholars of California and the West, write to protest the recent decision by the California legislature to replace the statue of Thomas Starr King with that of Ronald Reagan in Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol. We wish to address both the process and the substance of the decision.

In the first place, the decision was made in such an off-hand way that the public had no opportunity for input. By contrast, when the original decision was taken to place statues of Father Junipero Serra and King in Statuary Hall, there was controversy and prolonged public debate. One of our number, Professor Albert Hurtado of the University of Oklahoma, is writing a biography of the Berkeley historian Herbert Eugene Bolton, a scholar active at the time of the debate. Professor Hurtado is thus able to speak with authority about how much passion went into the discussion at that time. As historians, we feel that the historical identity of California, an identity bound up with these statues, is too important to be relegated to the last day of a crowded session as happened in this instance.

Secondly, we believe that, in the discussion that ought to take place about these statues, Thomas Starr King should receive full consideration as a remarkable man. In addition to his work on behalf of the Union during the Civil War—and his fund-raising for the Sanitary Commission, the precursor to the Red Cross—there were many other ways in which he was an important part of the founding moment of the state of California. The most significant seem to us to be the following. He visited Yosemite in July 1860 and within a few months was writing about it for a very receptive Eastern audience. Thus nine years before John Muir arrived in the Sierra, King had begun teaching the rest of the country to value the California landscape. In August 1860 he gave a talk to the African American community in San Francisco in which he stated that “wherever we find many races brought together, there God had his greatest work to do”—in the process becoming one of the intellectual fathers of the idea that diversity is positive. This was a radical statement at that moment and would be for many years to come. Moreover, he mentored young writers, especially Bret Harte. And finally, he was a trustee of the College of California (which evolved into the University of California) in its early stages. In short, Thomas Starr King was one of the founding figures and great intellects of early California state history.

We urge that measures appropriate under the laws of the United States and of California be taken to ensure that this issue receives greater attention. If we want our young people to be historically literate, we need to provide a model of treating our history with respect.

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