

# Heritage History: Defining and Preserving Cultural Legacy at the Old Dixie Schoolhouse

MIA LAKRITZ



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: I chose the Old Dixie Schoolhouse as the topic of my final project because, as I learned more California history in my history classes at UC Davis, I began to realize how little true California history I had been taught in my sixteen years in California schools. In addition, I witnessed years of controversy about the name of the Dixie School District, in which the Old Dixie Schoolhouse resides, and witnessed how activists on both sides interpreted history for their benefit. At first, I was interested in the schoolhouse as a focus for this project primarily to have an opportunity to find out which aspects of history told by activists were true based on historical evidence. What I found throughout my investigations was something much deeper than the mere history of the schoolhouse; I found an intertwined story of history, community, and land and discovered how much history there is still to learn, about my community and about our nation as a whole.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: You don't have to look far to find works of public history in the American landscape. They're all around us, taking forms such as preserved buildings, roadside markers, memorial plaques, and statues in public parks. Yet, like the eager students in the opening of Mia Lakritz's essay, most of us walk past these works every day without giving them much thought. After reading Mia's essay, however, you will be much more likely to pay attention. As she demonstrates through her analysis of the Old Dixie Schoolhouse in Marin County, heritage preservation efforts are neither neutral nor inconsequential. In this essay, you will learn about the construction of the school house during the Civil War years and the efforts to preserve the building during the 1970s. Most importantly, however, Mia brings the significance of this historic site into the present, showing us how today's*

*visitors to the school house are presented with an incomplete story of the past, one that glorifies Anglo-American accomplishments in the region and excludes the contributions of Native Americans and Mexican Americans. Mia Lakritz was one of only two students in my Writing in History (UWP 102C) course this year who took the option I offered to embark on a public history project as opposed to writing a conventional research paper. We can all be thankful that she rose to the challenge.*

—Melissa Bender, University Writing Program

On any given school day in the small suburban enclave called Marinwood just north of San Francisco, hundreds of eager students rush to their morning classes paying little notice to the inconspicuous building fenced off in front of their middle school. This building, known now as the Old Dixie Schoolhouse, is “Marin County’s last remaining, mid-Victorian one room schoolhouse.”<sup>1</sup>

The original building was constructed in 1864 by James Miller as the first school in the newly created Dixie School District, established the year before by Miller. The building was used as the sole schoolhouse in the area until 1954, when population growth called for an expansion in the capacity of the school district. In 1972, as the building was threatened by destruction, community members preserved it as a historic site and it was moved to its current location in front of the local middle school.

According to James Loewen, public monuments tell stories of at least two eras: the era that the monument is memorializing and the era in which the monument was preserved.<sup>2</sup> In this case the first era is late 19th- and early 20th-century California, and specifically



Figure 1. From [dixieschoolhouse.org](https://www.dixieschoolhouse.org/).

1 “The Old Dixie Schoolhouse.” n.d. <https://www.dixieschoolhouse.org/>.

2 Loewen, “Some Functions of Public History.”

the accomplishments and lives of the first Anglo-American families to settle in the region: James Miller and his family. The political and social context in which it was preserved, 1972, was a year in American culture marred by identity politics and deep political fissures following a decade of activism and political engagement. In 1969, a group of Native Americans occupied Alcatraz Island across the bay from Marin, in what is still the longest occupation of a federal facility by Indian people.<sup>3</sup> In Marin County, 1972 was at the tail end of two decades of rapid growth for the relatively small community, jumping from a population of 80,000 in 1950 to 200,000 in 1970. The ethnic makeup of the community also became increasingly white as redlining kept people of color from buying homes in the new suburbia. Census data notes an increase in the percentage of white residents from around 86% in 1950 (including Latinos) to 95% in 1970 (excluding Latinos).<sup>4</sup>

The preservation of the Old Dixie Schoolhouse in this time period shows a community grappling with a rapidly changing economy and society and attempting to create and preserve heritage in a changing world. Community members preserved the schoolhouse in order to maintain a sense of heritage and to claim an expansive history on the land on which they reside. This raises the question of whose history is told and honored by the schoolhouse as the Anglo-Americans who predominate the area today are not the original inhabitants. Since most of the residents at the time were white, it is logical to conclude that the majority of those involved in the preservation of the site were white as well. Other clues about whose history the monument honors can be found within the museum itself, where the majority of history is focused solely on Anglo-American contributions to Marin history and strikingly ignores the Native Coast Miwok inhabitants of the area as well as Mexican-Californios who owned land and ranched in the region for decades pre-conquest. By only preserving the history and contributions of Anglo settlers and consequently erasing local history of both Native and Mexican Americans, and by placing the schoolhouse in a prominent position at a local educational institution, the Old Dixie Schoolhouse served and continues to serve as an attempt to claim and validate Anglo-

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3 Johnson, "We Hold the Rock."

4 "Marin County: 1860-2010," Bay Area Census, Accessed February 25, 2020. <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/counties/MarinCounty50.htm>

American presence on the land.

**Recent controversies about** the racist origins of the name Dixie, which remained the name of the local school district even after the schoolhouse fell into disuse in the 1950s and which many community members saw as a commemoration of the Confederacy, embroiled the local community in heated discussions.<sup>5</sup> The discussions focused on the prevalence of racism in the largely white suburb and the importance of the history of the founder of the schoolhouse and the school district, James Miller. As the controversy grew, many community members felt that changing the name of the school district would dishonor the legacy of Miller and his family, while name-change activists argued that its roots were racist, as Miller was a Democrat and likely a Southern sympathizer, since he named the school district a common name for the Confederacy in the middle of the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, as all of these conversations were taking place, no activists were calling for the “Old Dixie Schoolhouse” itself—the monument which this paper focuses on—to change its name, nor was there any sense of urgency around the monument and what was being taught there, despite the centrality of the schoolhouse’s history and its connection to Miller. As a community member and former student in the school district, what struck me about the debate was the emphasis on history and Miller’s legacy by pro-Dixie community members, even ones with no connection to the Miller family. This caused me to question what this history meant to our community and why so many community members were concerned with our community’s heritage.

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5 Activists like Kerry Peirson have in fact been calling for authorities to change the name of the school district for more than 20 years. To read about their activism, read <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/apr/20/dixie-school-district-california-name-change>.

6 According to the descendants of James Miller, he named the school district on a dare because the area was so highly Republican he thought he would get a rise out of people. For a primary source of this anecdote see <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/apr/20/dixie-school-district-california-name-change>. He was also a registered Democrat and active member of the party as this newspaper article from 1861 supports: *Marin Journal*. 1861. “Democratic Convention,” August 24, 1861.

All monuments and museums are constructed. Curators must pick and choose what gets included; when community members themselves are the curators, what they choose to include shows what the community values. Likewise, the Old Dixie Schoolhouse has been constructed to serve the needs and desires of community members with power and resources. The placement of the schoolhouse in a prominent location—it stands in front of the local middle school—validates the importance of the schoolhouse and also serves the purpose of validating the existence of the middle school, as it gives the impression that the middle school is part of a longer chain of history and grounds the community in heritage.

Within the schoolhouse, museum curators use inauthentic replicas of readers and school rules from the 1860s, when the school was founded, to teach about the history of the schoolhouse and that time period in general. The curators purchase these



*Figure 2. McGuffey reader and “school rules.”  
From [dixieschoolhouse.org](http://dixieschoolhouse.org).*

readers from wholesale suppliers of created heritage in order to create a narrative of history that is useful and palatable to those funding and attending the museum—i.e., Anglo-Americans. According to Cynda Vyas, a former elementary school teacher and volunteer docent at the museum, the main visitors to the museum are elementary school children from surrounding districts. Photographic evidence shows that the current docents are exclusively white or white-passing and most of the students who visit are white as well. Marin’s population is currently 85.5% white and the area around the museum, Lucas Valley-Marinwood is 81.1% white according to the 2010 census. Moreover, only certain districts that are close enough to the school to bus or have the funds and adequate parent chaperones for a field trip can visit the museum. Because of this, according to Vyas, the few schools in Marin that are primarily

people of color do not come to the museum.<sup>7</sup> If the museum were actually interested in telling the story of the lives of James Miller and his family, the curriculum would contain accurate history while still keeping content relevant for the elementary school visitors. In fact, the use of these readers shows how the history within the museum is constructed to give a sanitized, digestible vision of pioneer life without any discussion of the nuances of this time period.

Inside the schoolhouse, the original wooden desks are lined up facing the teacher's desk and the walls are filled with pictures of past presidents including George Washington and Abraham Lincoln (who ironically

the schoolhouse seems to claim heritage from when the name Dixie directly contradicts everything Lincoln stood for), along with portraits of the James Miller family. Vyas reports that when they teach young children on school trips they always point to the portraits of James Miller



*Figure 3. James Miller and family. From [dixi-eschoolhouse.org](http://dixi-eschoolhouse.org).*

and his family and ask who the students think they are. Most of the time both students and parents assume that they are presidents because they recognize the portraits of the other presidents. By presenting and encouraging this comparison, the schoolhouse romanticizes James Miller and his family as the “founding fathers” of this area of Marin, giving him more importance than he arguably deserves in the history of the area. This is a strong example of the creation of history because these students are young and impressionable and largely unaware of the violent

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<sup>7</sup> Marin is highly segregated. For an excellent analysis of Marin's history of redlining and racial segregation, along with its current struggle to desegregate Sausalito-Marín City School District (the only school in the county that is majority African-American and which does not visit the museum) see Rainey, “A Tiny Marin County District Got California's First School Desegregation Order in 50 Years.”

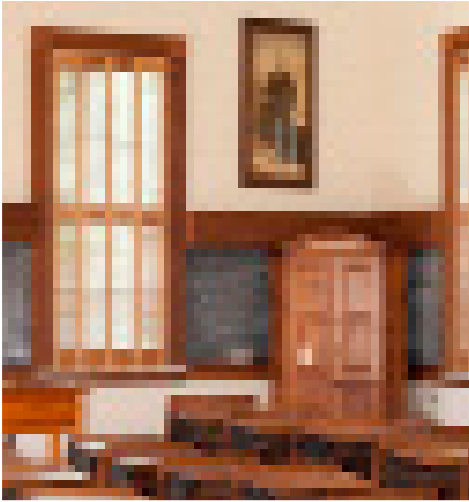


Figure 4. Portrait of Abe Lincoln in schoolhouse. From [dixieschoolhouse.org](http://dixieschoolhouse.org).

conquest of California, influenced greatly by Anglo-American settlers like James Miller. This is not to say that James Miller was a bad person; rather, it is to say that romanticizing him and his contributions is dangerous to young minds who have yet to learn about the mission system which killed thousands of Indigenous people as well as the strikingly violent conquest of California's Native population by Anglo-Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Many supporters and funders of the Dixie Schoolhouse would probably be deeply offended by this analysis. Activists in favor of keeping the Dixie School District's name praise the positive qualities that Miller possessed, including "building the first orphanage over at St. Vincent's in San Rafael, building several local schools, naming the Truckee River after an Indian chief, and adopting two Indian orphans."<sup>9</sup> The point of this essay is not to slander the name of James Miller, though it is worth noting the prevalence of slavery and trafficking of young Indigenous children, especially in California; rather it is to point out that the singularity of focus on him and his family's contributions to the area erases the contributions of other groups, especially Native Americans and Mexicans.<sup>10</sup> In fact, when analyzed

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8 To read about the genocide of Native Americans in California, see Benjamin Madley's essay "California Yuki Indians: Genocide in Native American History."

9 "The History of James Miller/Founder of Dixie School." n.d. *We Are Dixie* (blog).

10 Knowing about the history of Native American slavery does not make me sympathetic to the idea that James Miller adopted two Native American orphans. To read about Native American slavery in California, especially in regards to children, see Michael Magliari's essay "Free State Slavery: Bound Indian Labor

closely, the acknowledgement of these groups is almost entirely ancillary to Anglo-American historical figures. For example, on the Dixie School District's website the author notes that the first Anglo-American in the area before James Miller, Don Timoteo Murphy, helped organize "30 ranchers and their *Indian servants*" to go up to the gold fields and writes that when nuns first came to build the orphanage mentioned above they had four Indians rowing the boat [emphasis mine]. However, there is little attempt to include these "servants" in the narrative of the schoolhouse, nor are they seen as active players in this narrative. Native history is in fact not told at all after the arrival of Anglo-Americans anywhere on the website, nor is there any mention within the schoolhouse itself other than these two small moments.

As James Loewen notes, "People don't usually think about images that aren't there."<sup>11</sup> Without images and other forms of acknowledgment of Native American history, people will not think about them, thus contributing to their erasure, and in a sense, their genocide. This is especially striking because of the existence of explicit evidence of Native history in the form of shell mounds in the hills surrounding the schoolhouse.<sup>12</sup> There is no visual marker or acknowledgement of these shell mounds anywhere on the campus of the middle school or in the schoolhouse. Without visual markers of Native history, visitors to the museum are invited to forget about this history, thus contributing to the myth of Anglo-American accomplishments and connection to this land. If we see the schoolhouse as an attempt to validate Anglo-American presence on the land, the corresponding erasure of Native American history makes perfect sense as it would cause cognitive dissonance to understand and acknowledge Native history in the area, the good and the bad, and still feel like white Americans have a justified historical connection to the land and continued right to live and claim heritage there.

**In light of the controversies** surrounding the name Dixie, it is also imperative to address the erasure and exclusion of African-Americans

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and Slave Trafficking in California's Sacramento Valley 1850-1864." See also *The Other Slavery* by Andrés Reséndez, which takes a much wider scope on the topic.

11 Loewens, 68.

12 Roop, 2018.



by the schoolhouse. While the majority of African-Americans in Marin county trace their heritage to workers who came to work on shipyards during and after World War II, African-American history goes all the way back to the time of James Miller.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the continuing usage of the name Dixie for the schoolhouse and the replica glass above the entrance with the name Dixie Schoolhouse (even though the schoolhouse when it fell into disuse in 1954 was named Mary Silveira Elementary School), romanticizes the Confederacy and the old south, while excluding those African-Americans from the schoolhouse who are not likely to feel welcome in a space that honors the legacy of slavery. Of all the groups mentioned whose history the Dixie Schoolhouse erases, none is more explicitly ignored than African-Americans, as the name Dixie clearly honors and appropriates the legacy of white supremacy and slavery. In a county with the highest amounts of racial disparity and the least ethnic diversity in the state of California, this can be seen as a monument to the history of racism in Marin county and in America at large.<sup>14</sup>



*Figure 5. Door details. From [dixieschoolhouse.org](http://dixieschoolhouse.org).*

In this way, it is hard to see why activists who were so adamant about changing the name of the Dixie School District were not as concerned with the Old Dixie Schoolhouse sitting in front of the seat of the district. That controversy, seen as part of a larger story around

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13 To read about Early African-American pioneers in Marin see this article by a local historian at the Anne T. Kent California Room: “Geary, ‘Little-Known Stories of Marin’s Early Black Settlers.”

14 Marin County wins most racially inequitable county in state: Halstead, 2017. <https://www.marini.com/2017/11/20/report-marin-tops-state-in-racial-inequity/>. Marin cities claim least amount of ethnic diversity in Bay Area: Pera, 2019. <https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/01/27/marin-cities-top-list-of-least-diverse-in-region/>.

confederate monuments across the United States, brought united cries from people who saw the name as a monument to a racist Confederate past. Unfortunately, the general public does not place as critical of an eye on other types of monuments like the Old Dixie Schoolhouse, which is marketed as an



Figure 6. Desk details, Superior. From [dixieschoolhouse.org](http://dixieschoolhouse.org).

informational history museum while in reality serves as a monument to pioneer history and preserves a narrative of continued heritage for Anglo-American residents. In his essay “Heritage in Between,” Tsim D. Schneider looks at prominent monuments to Indigenous Coast Miwok peoples and to local history in West Marin; Schneider analyzes how non-Native longtime residents to the area responded to monuments of Native history as if it was their own, revealing the “adoption and sense of ownership that comes from coopting aspects of someone else’s culture.”<sup>15</sup> In the same way, the Old Dixie Schoolhouse co-opts and creates a sense of ownership over local history by presenting its content, exclusively made up of Anglo-American history, as the beginning and end of the historical record in Marin. As anthropologist Paul Shackel argues, “Heritage is necessary for sustaining local identity and a sense of place, especially by those communities and locales that are threatened by transformations in the global economy.”<sup>16</sup> Here we can see the psychological mechanisms of the creation and sustenance of the Old Dixie Schoolhouse. As the community was threatened by rapid population growth, and more Anglo migrants to the area were cut off from their own heritage as they moved across time and place, it was necessary to create a heritage that would tether them to this place. The erasure of Native and Mexican history is a psychological comfort, as the primarily Anglo residents of this small suburb did not see themselves in their (Native and Mexican) history,

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15 Schneider, 62.

16 *Places in Mind: Public Archaeology as Applied Anthropology*, 10.

preferring to see themselves as part of a larger chain of Anglo-American excellence.

**In addition to the two parts** of history that Loewen's claims that every monument recognizes, he also acknowledges a third moment which is the time period in which the author is writing. In that same vein there are two moments in history that should be acknowledged in this paper: the first when I was a second-grade student and went to the schoolhouse on a field trip, and the other as a college student returning after years living away from the community, going back to experience the schoolhouse in a new way. Going back after witnessing the intense debates about the name change was eye opening. I can now see how as a young, impressionable student (with all the best intentions from my teachers I might add), I was fed a problematic and biased narrative about the schoolhouse and what it represents. Going back makes me wonder what else I have missed in my education, raising the question of what it would mean if we started to look at all of the monuments in our lives with a critical lens and an accurate understanding of history. If we did this, how many more monuments would be torn down? How many more protests would be sparked if American history was not co-opted by a narrative of Anglo-American superiority? Taking down confederate monuments is no longer as controversial as it used to be—even the American Historical Association supports this step—but what would it mean to expand our definition of an offensive monument? Recent scholarship has tackled this subject. Pioneer Mother Monument by Cynthia Prescott and “United We Commemorate” by William D. Moore are but a pair of examples of scholars looking back at monuments to American pioneers and what these monuments say to our collective memory. The changing of the school district's name was a positive step, but when the name was replaced only by the name of the man who chose the offensive name in the first place,



*Figure 7. The author (left) and former elementary school teacher and current volunteer docent, Cynda Vyas outside of schoolhouse. Photo by author.*

have we really made progress? What the Old Dixie Schoolhouse meant in the past is important, but more important is for our society to take a collective look at our history with a critical eye and begin to question whether what our predecessors valued is what we value. Each community has the choice of what heritage to preserve and how to preserve it, and it's never too late to alter or expand that history to make sure that what is being preserved is true history and not a narrative of Anglo-American superiority.

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