Restoring the Name of Cape Canaveral

James R. Knott
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Response of Circuit Judge James R. Knott, of West Palm Beach, Upon Receiving the D.B. McKay Award from the Tampa Historical Society at Tampa, Fla., on November 14, 1974

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen: The honor of being referred to as leader of the movement to restore the name of the Cape means a great deal to me. Some day I plan to write a piece on “Restoring the Name of Cape Canaveral,” with all the details. Fortunately for you here tonight, I haven’t gotten around to that yet, and this will be only a summary.

As they always say at the Emmy and Oscar awards in an agony of self-effacement, I wouldn’t be here tonight if it were not for people like your own Hampton Dunn, whose perseverance and dedication in his writings were so important throughout the ten-year period of our effort to
restore the name. Of course we are profoundly grateful to our Legislature and our Congressional delegation for their energetic and indispensable work.

The Canaveral question became an issue of the will and preference of the people of the State of Florida and their rightful concern for the preservation of their historical heritage, as against the understandable pride of the family which occupied political center stage in the United States and their countless friends and sympathizers after the dreadful assassination of President Kennedy. The issue was a political one, requiring action by the government. It was also strongly emotional, and involved ambivalent feelings. These factors called for an approach which would assure that no lack of respect for the late President was involved.

**Most Ancient Place Name**

Our task was to rouse the United States Government from indifference to a matter not concerned with war and peace or with serious economic and social problems facing the country. This was accomplished by demonstrating its significance to the people of Florida and the nation; by showing the need to rectify a violation of our sense of history, continuity, tradition and identity all brought about by arbitrary fiat in consigning to oblivion the most ancient place name on the Atlantic coast.

Within ten days after President Johnson had announced the change of name to Cape Kennedy in his message to Congress on November 28, 1963, the directors of the Florida Historical Society passed a resolution calling for the restoration of the name of Canaveral and for the retention of the name of the Kennedy Space Center. Newspaper editorials to that effect began to appear. An organization in the Cape area called the "Missile, Space and Range Pioneers," with 700 members limited to the early astronauts and the engineers and others associated with them, took a vote which showed they favored restoring the Canaveral name by ten to one. Newspaper polls there showed that 93 percent of the citizens felt the same way. When Mrs. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, of Miami, spoke before our Historical Society in Palm Beach and suggested that it would be more appropriate to change the name of Cape Cod to Cape Kennedy, the applause was loud and prolonged. This brought home to me the strength of public sentiment on the question.

As our efforts progressed, historical societies and civic groups throughout the state passed resolutions favoring the restoring of the Canaveral name. The Florida Legislature formally urged action by Congress, conditioned, however, upon the consent of Senator Edward Kennedy.

**Sudden Hearing**

Senator Spessard Holland sponsored a bill in the U.S. Senate to restore the historic name, and after it had been pending for some time, I suddenly received a telegram from him that within four days a hearing on the bill would be held in Washington by the Senate Interior Committee. It fell upon me to assemble a representative group of Florida citizens to testify at the hearing and then to notify the Senator of those expected to appear. Hurried telephone calls over the state on my part were not altogether successful, in view of the short notice, inconvenience and personal expense incident to the Washington trip; each of us had to pay his own way. One hoped-for star witness from the Canaveral area, then sojourning in a western state, said his financial condition was such that he could not go unless his expenses were paid; by the time of our third long
distance conversation, I had decided that his testimony in any event might be less than persuasive because his voice showed that he and John Barleycorn were boon companions.

A suitable group was finally assembled. Former Governor and Supreme Court Justice Millard Caldwell, Chairman Adam G. Adams of the Metropolitan Dade County Historical Board, Mrs. Frances Ann Jamieson, president of the Florida Association of Women Lawyers, and I appeared with our two Florida senators before the Interior Committee and testified for the bill. But Robert Kennedy had recently been murdered and Teddy had just been through his Chappaquiddick experience, and the bill failed to pass. While Ted Kennedy had stated publicly that he would not oppose the measure but would "let the people of Florida decide the question," he privately indicated his opposition, according to Senator Holland, saying that passage of the bill so soon after Chappaquiddick would make it appear that he was being chastised by Congress. Thus are our political idols motivated solely by impersonal considerations in their grand designs for the public good!

Since it was within the power of the President to restore the name, we believed that that stone should not remain unturned and asked "Bebe" Rebozo to investigate the possibility of Presidential action. To no one’s surprise, he reported that he was unwilling to burden Mr. Nixon with the matter.

**Enter Senator Jackson**

We waited for time to go by. When the 1972 Florida presidential primary came along, Senator Henry Jackson, chairman of the Interior Committee, was a candidate, together with Senator Muskie and others. I met with Senator Jackson and discussed with him the earnest concern of our voters regarding Canaveral. As Jackson traveled throughout the state, others gave him the same message in different localities. Ultimately Jackson announced publicly that he favored restoring the name, and that his committee would hold hearings on a new Senate bill for that purpose.

Again, a number of us went to Washington. Senators Gurney and Chiles, former Chief Justice Alto Adams of the Florida Supreme Court, John Harrison, president of the Historical Association of Southern Florida, Mrs. Lucien Proby of Miami, Mrs. Ada Coates Williams of Ft. Pierce, Rudy Sobering, of Lake Worth, and I all testified before the Senate Interior Committee.

We presented letters from the presidents of 28 Florida colleges and universities, all living past presidents of the Florida Historical Society, the mayors of all the major cities in Florida, the president of the Florida Senate and the speaker of the House, the president of the Florida Bar and the president-elect of the American Bar Association (who happened to be Chesterfield Smith), resolutions of the Governor and Cabinet and all the local historical societies, together with scores of newspaper editorials and magazine articles and finally, letters from six former governors of Florida. Incidentally, all but one of the former governors asked that the wording of his letter be furnished for him, and since each letter had to say the same thing in a different way, their wording required some verbal exercise.

**Senator Muskie’s Outburst**

Senator Jackson’s Interior Committee reported the bill out favorably. Jackson got a good vote in Florida. But Senator Muskie’s Florida vote was a great disappointment to him and in an angry
outburst he announced with a flourish of publicity that the Canaveral bill was an insult to the memory of President Kennedy and that he would oppose it on the Senate floor and call for a roll call vote. We had several of Muskie’s leading Florida managers and supporters write him about the matter, which seemed to quiet his protests. The bill passed the Senate without a dissenting vote on July 21, 1972. We felt we had won the battle then. There were no Kennedys in the House of Representatives, and the House was expected to fall into line. But we were wrong.

Congressman "Tip" O'Neill, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Majority Whip in the House, got a telephone call from Mrs. Rose Kennedy asking him to kill the measure in the House. O'Neill got in touch with California Congressman George P. Miller, chairman of the House Science and Astronautics Committee, to which the bill had been referred. As luck would have it, Mr. Miller happened to be a devoted and ardent admirer of President Kennedy; we were told by some California people that he even had a picture of Kennedy over the mantle in his living room, with a sort of eternal light shining over it. Chairman Miller was only too happy to follow Tip O'Neill's suggestion about the matter, and he immediately proceeded to remove the bill from the calendar, so that it could not be considered by his Committee during that session.

Letters to the Editor

Thus the bill "died in committee," as the saying goes. More time passed, and with still another session of Congress, the bill needed to be passed once again by the Senate as well as by the House. Congressman Miller, who was very elderly, got defeated for reelection. Senator Jackson said there was no use for the Senate to continue passing the measure without promise of favorable action by the House. So we decided to address ourselves to the problem of Congressman O'Neill through writing letters-to-the-editor about his opposition for publication (we hoped) in all the Boston newspapers. Toward generating expressions of national sentiment, similar letters were to go to other papers in leading cities throughout the country, including the Wall Street Journal, which had previously carried a front page article on the controversy about Cape Canaveral. This, by the way, was the first and only time my name ever appeared on the front page of the Wall Street Journal. These letters pointed out that a practice of renaming historic sites could have resulted in Boston Common becoming "Garfield Common," and that the people of Massachusetts might have reservations about changing the name of Plymouth Rock to "Kennedy Rock." The letters were to be signed by President Johns of Stetson University, who was also president of the Florida Historical Society, and by former Governor Caldwell.

The letters were ready to go out. And if all else failed, we had plans about taking legal action. Meanwhile, though, we had been encouraging the Florida Legislature to take further steps. On April 16, 1973, the Florida Senate, by a vote of 37-0, and on May 8, 1973, the Florida House, by a vote of 88-1, passed a bill restoring the name "Cape Canaveral" for all official state use. Governor Askew signed the bill into law on May 28, 1973. On request of our Congressional delegation the Board of Geographic Names, in Washington, agreed to consider restoring the name of Cape Canaveral. Since the purpose of the law creating the Board was to achieve uniformity of geographic names, they were now in the position of deciding whether to maintain a name (Kennedy) which plainly violated the principle of uniformity through conflict with the official Florida name of Canaveral.
Victory at Last

This Board had kept itself informed about all our efforts. They had representatives at the Senate committee hearings and heard the citizens of Florida speak in earnest tones about the preference of our people. It was announced that they would meet on October 9, 1973. We publicized this fact and urged people to write them. After receiving nearly 2000 letters about Canaveral, of which only 16 expressed opposition to restoring the name, there was scarcely any doubt about the action the Board intended to take. Their executive secretary assured me that he did not believe it necessary for us to make another trip to Washington to attend their meeting. The poor fellow probably felt that he’d seen enough of me, anyway.

The Board restored the name. They stated that their action was taken to bring Federal usage into agreement with that of the State of Florida, and further, was "based on overwhelming support from the residents of Florida." So now, when an -airline pilot tells us that we are flying in view of "Cape Canaveral" - as many of them continued to do after its name was changed to Cape Kennedy - we know he’s not just saying it wishfully, but that his words are confirmed by the maps!

About the Author

JUDGE JAMES R. KNOTT

James R. Knott, senior judge of the Circuit Court for Palm Beach County, is a native of Tallahassee. He became circuit judge in 1956, succeeding the late Judge Chillingworth, who was murdered by drowning at sea.

Judge Knott served two terms as president of the Florida Historical Society, and is now a member of its Board of Directors. He was president of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County for eleven years, and is now president emeritus. He is a trustee of the Henry Morrison Flagler Museum, in Palm Beach, and recently received the D. B. McKay Award for contributions to Florida history from the Tampa Historical Society, for leading the movement to restore the name of Cape Canaveral, our most ancient landmark.

His family has had a long association with this state, his grandfather having been a volunteer with the Federal troops in the Seminole Indian War in 1836. His father was an officer of our State government over a period of some 45 years, serving as State Treasurer and State Comptroller. He was also our first State Auditor (1895), and was Democratic nominee for Governor of Florida in 1916.
PAST RECIPIENTS OF
THE D. B. McKay AWARD

For Distinguished Service in the Cause of Florida History.

Frank Laumer, 1972
Dade City, Florida
Author of book, Massacre!
For his thorough research and excellent book on the 1835 Dade massacre that took the life of Maj. Francis Dade and almost an entire detachment of 100 foot soldiers from Fort Brooke-Tampa.

State Senator David McClain, 1973
Tampa, Florida
For his courageous, statewide fight to save the State Capitol in Tallahassee.

Circuit Judge James R. Knott, 1974
West Palm Beach, Florida
For his successful ten year struggle, on a state and national level, to restore the name Cape Canaveral to the bulge on Florida’s East Coast which was changed to Cape Kennedy after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963.