

'You can't sanitise history': Attempt to erase Indigenous past blocked

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Indigenous activist Sam Watson is pleased an attempt to erase an important part of Indigenous history has been taken off the table.

In 2016 an online petition called for the inner-city Boundary streets to be renamed as they were outdated and related to the oppression of Indigenous people.



Sam Watson wants Indigenous history preserved, not erased. Photo: Michelle Smith

It is understood the petition was put together after the street names had been changed, by what appeared to be a sticker, to read "Boundless Street".

The petition attracted 1062 supporters and the Brisbane City Council and the state government considered supporting the change if public consultation proved the change was wanted by the community.

Mr Watson said he spoke directly with Lord Mayor Graham Quirk about the street renaming.

"We both felt that there was a danger that if in fact the name was changed the Brisbane community, and in particular the Indigenous community, could lose a very important part of the history of the area," Mr Watson said.

"You can't change history, you can't sanitise history, you've got to embrace historical record – even if it does have an ugly side.



Signs at Boundary Street, West End, were changed to 'Boundless Street' by advocates for a name change. Photo: Change.org

"By recognising that side and maintaining the true and correct record of what happened, it gives people a better sense of themselves and of the plight."



A spokesman for the Lord Mayor said the matter of renaming Boundary Street had been raised with elders from the Indigenous community and discussed at length.

"The elders expressed their respect for the intent behind the proposal that had been put forward," he said.

"The elders were of the view that the street names should remain unchanged because they were a part of our city's history, which should not be forgotten."

The petition said that during "early Brisbane" Murri people were not permitted to cross Boundary streets after 4pm Monday to Saturday or at all on Sundays.

Local Murri elder Sam Watson does not think the name Boundary Street should be changed.

"Troopers rode the perimeter cracking stock-whips to enforce such tyranny," the petition said.

In 2016 petitioner Michael Colenso said he believed the street names were "outdated" and held Brisbane back from "meaningful progression as a city and peoples committed to truthful and respectful harmony".

Mr Watson said he did not know anybody who signed the petition.

"From our end, at a community level, we would rather council or the state government did more to promote the Aboriginal aspects of the greater Brisbane area," he said.

"The fact that local artists have placed the large Aboriginal flag on the bitumen of the main intersection there is another pointer that our mob feel very closely connected to that area."

Mr Watson said Sydney, Melbourne and Darwin had guide books for tourists that listed sites of Indigenous importance around their cities.

He believed Brisbane should have a similar book published.

"People aren't aware of the rich, cultural character of the Brisbane area," Mr Watson said.