

COMMON COUNCIL MEETING

GENERAL SERVICE, HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Jack Flynn, Chair

DATE: Thursday, June 23, 2022

LOCATION: Council Chambers-2nd Floor. City Hall

TIME: 6:00 PM

TOPIC(S) OF DISCUSSION/CONSIDERATION:

- **RESOLUTION NUMBER 51.52.22R**

A RESOLUTION OF THE COMMON COUNCIL HONORING THE LIVES AND LEGACY OF ADAM BLAKE, JR. AND CATHERINE BLAKE AND RENAMING STEUBEN STREET IN THEIR HONOR

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD: YES

Council Member Love, at the request of the Mayor, introduced the following:

RESOLUTION 51.52.22R

A RESOLUTION OF THE COMMON COUNCIL HONORING THE LIVES AND LEGACY OF ADAM BLAKE, JR. AND CATHERINE BLAKE AND RENAMING STEUBEN STREET IN THEIR HONOR

WHEREAS, the Kenmore Building, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, has been a prominent façade on North Pearl Street and has played a prominent role in Albany history for over 140 years, from its days as a hotel, to its recent renovation into apartment, event, commercial and co-working space; and

WHEREAS, the story of the Kenmore’s founders, Adam Blake Jr., and his wife Catherine is fascinating in its own right; and

WHEREAS, Adam Blake, Jr., was born on April 6, 1830 and raised by his adoptive parents Sarah and Adam Blake, Sr., who managed the Van Rensselaer Manor for the powerful Van Rensselaer family, by whom Adam Sr. and Sarah had been enslaved; and

WHEREAS, Adam Jr. grew up at his parents’ house on Third Street between Lark and Swan Streets and at the Van Rensselaer manor, where he received his education alongside the Van Rensselaer children, scions of one of the wealthiest families in American history; and

WHEREAS, in his 20s, Blake worked his way up to the position of head waiter at the Delavan House Hotel, Albany’s premier hotel and restaurant of the era, before opening three successful restaurants of his own by 1865; and

WHEREAS, in that year Blake obtained the lease for the Congress Hall Hotel in Albany, renovating and expanding to the large and once-elegant lodging to such a high standard that Charles Dickens chose to stay there during his visit to Albany in 1868; and

WHEREAS, the Congress Hall Hotel also gained a reputation, under Blake’s management, as a training ground for many young men of color who went on to successful careers in the restaurant and hospitality industries of America’s leading resort towns; and

WHEREAS, Adam Blake Jr. married his wife Catherine and they built a life in an graceful townhouse on First Street between South Hawk and South Swan Streets, together with their several children; and

WHEREAS, in 1878 the State of New York, using its eminent domain power, demolished the Capital Hill Hotel to make room for the new Capitol Building, for which Adam Blake received \$190,000 in compensation; and

WHEREAS, Blake used that money, sparing no expense, to build the Kenmore Hotel in a majestic Victorian decorative brick style, earning it praise as “the most elegant structure on the

finest street in Albany” and “first class in every particular,” boasting such modern conveniences as hot and cold running water, indoor restrooms, an elevator, steam heat, telephones in guest rooms, and a palatial dining room when it opened in 1878; and

WHEREAS, Blake also managed the Averill Park Hotel and owned several other commercial properties in the area; and

WHEREAS, as successful as he was in business, Adam Blake was also well known for his activism on social issues, particularly through his service as Treasurer of the New York State Equal Rights League and his work to desegregate Albany’s public schools alongside James Matthews, the first Black judge in New York State, during the 1870s; and

WHEREAS, it is also thought that Blake was active in the Albany Underground Railroad; and

WHEREAS, newspapers of the day are replete with accounts of Blake’s sizeable financial contributions to a wide variety of worthy causes; and

WHEREAS, after Adam Blake, Jr., died on September 7, 1881, at the age of 51, his funeral reflected the influence he had throughout the City of Albany and beyond, as it was attended by people of all races, from all walks of life, from all around the country; and

WHEREAS, eulogizing Blake at the dedication of a stained glass window installed in his honor at the Israel AME Church on Hamilton Street, Dr. William Johnson said:

He loved liberty and abhorred slavery. He believed in the equality of all, in the manhood of all, and in the common brotherhood of all. He was identified with Frederick Douglass and Stephen Myers ... and their counterparts, in uniting efforts tending to the overthrow of slavery [and] he took active part in state and national councils of the oppressed.”

and;

WHEREAS, at his death, Adam Blake, Jr.’s personal fortune was estimated to exceed \$10,000,000 in today’s money, a remarkable figure, especially for the adopted son of formerly enslaved parents in United States of the 19th century; and

WHEREAS, after Adam Blake’s passing, his wife Catherine continued to successfully and shrewdly operate the Kenmore, expanding its footprint to include nearly an entire city block, before selling the hotel at a handsome profit in 1888, having all the while raised four children who were under the age of 10 at the time of their father’s death; and

WHEREAS, though the Blakes’ most visible legacy, the Kenmore Building, suffered a period of decline and neglect in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it has now been revitalized

into 93 richly appointed, modern apartments with numerous amenities, as well as 35,000 square feet of commercial space; and

WHEREAS, the space within the building once occupied by the legendary Rain-Bo Room nightclub, haunt of such famous entertainers as Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway, as well as infamous gangsters like Jack “Legs” Diamond, has been restored into the Kenmore Ballroom, a sophisticated event space for weddings, social events, and corporate and non-profit functions; and

WHEREAS, part of the building has also been transformed into the Blake Annex, a co-working space dedicated specifically to non-profit organizations, named after Adam Blake Jr. and Catherine Blake because, according to the Blake Annex’s website, “The Blakes were innovators, changemakers and thought-leaders and their vision and legacy lives on ... at the Blake Annex”; and

WHEREAS, the story of Adam and Catherine Blake, currently not commemorated by any monument or historical marker in the City has, like the edifice they built, suffered a period of neglect and apathy, but is equally worthy of revitalization and commemoration;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Common Council of the City of Albany honors the lives and legacy of Adam and Catherine Blake, two of the most remarkable, prominent, and successful entrepreneurs, activists, and residents of Albany in the 19th – or any other – century by renaming Steuben Street “Adam & Catherine Blake Way” in their honor; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Common Council directs that two signs shall be produced reading “Adam & Catherine Blake Way,” which shall be placed in consultation with the Division of Traffic Engineering.

To: Danielle Gillespie, City Clerk

From: Brett Williams, Senior Assistant Corporation Counsel

Re: Common Council Legislation
Supporting Memorandum

Date: May 5, 2022

Sponsor: Council Member Love, at the request of the Mayor

RESOLUTION 51.52.22R

TITLE

A RESOLUTION OF THE COMMON COUNCIL HONORING THE LIVES AND LEGACY OF ADAM BLAKE, JR. AND CATHERINE BLAKE AND RENAMING STEUBEN STREET IN THEIR HONOR

GENERAL PURPOSE OF LEGISLATION

This resolution corrects a longstanding injustice in the City of Albany by finally officially commemorating the remarkable lives and legacies of Adam Blake, Jr., and Catherine Blake, by honorarily renaming Steuben Street in honor of these Albany residents – people of color who rose from humble origins to become some of the most affluent and influential entrepreneurs and activists in the history of this City, near the location of the Kenmore Hotel, which they built and operated and which has recently undergone an impressive revitalization.

NECESSITY FOR LEGISLATION AND ANY CHANGE TO EXISTING LAW

Sections 323-63.2 and 323-63.3 of the Code of the City of Albany require the Common Council to review and approve all applications for honorary street renamings. Such approval is accomplished by resolution of the Council.

FISCAL IMPACT

None.

FAX TO
518.434.5696

Application Form
Proposed New Street Names and Revisions to Existing Street Names

City of Albany Department of General Services
One Conners Boulevard, Albany, New York 12204-2514, Telephone (518) 434-5670

Instructions: This application must be completed in full, either typed or printed, and submitted to the Division of Engineering – Department of General Services. Complete one (1) form for each proposed street name. Include additional sheets as necessary.

1. Applicant's Name: PETER GANNON endorsed by Councilwoman Joyce Love
Address: 1 STEUBEN PL
ALBANY NY 12207
Phone No. 518 527 7497
Fax No. _____

2. Proposed Street Name (check applicable box and fill in associated information)

New Street

List the Nearest Connecting Street: _____
List the Proposed Street Name Selections in Order of Priority:
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Existing Street

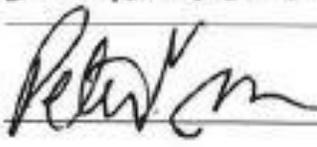
Existing Street Name _____
List the Proposed Street Name Selections in Order of Priority:
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
Reason for proposed change: _____

Honorary Street

Proposed Honorary Name to be Placed Under Existing Street Name
ADAM + CATHERINE BLAKE WAY

Location(s) of Honorary Existing Sign(s) Proposed:
Existing Street Name STEUBEN PLACE
From PEARL ST
To CHAPEL ST

Number of Honorary Sign(s) Proposed 2 (1 ON POST, 1 FREE STANDING)
Reason for proposed name: GRAND OPENING OF BLAKE ANNEX (4/6/22)

Applicant's Signature  Date: 2/15/22

