

**DISTRICT OFFICE**  
105 EAST 116TH STREET  
NEW YORK, NY 10029  
(212) 828-9800  
FAX: (212) 722-6378

**CITY HALL OFFICE**  
250 BROADWAY, ROOM 1882  
NEW YORK, NY 10007  
(212) 788-6960  
FAX: (212) 442-1564  
mviverito@council.nyc.gov



THE COUNCIL OF  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
**MELISSA MARK-VIVERITO**

COUNCIL MEMBER, 8<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT

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February 11, 2011

Commissioner Adrian Benepe  
NYC Department of Parks and Recreation  
The Arsenal, Central Park  
New York, NY 10021

Dear Commissioner Benepe:

I am writing to express my concerns about a particular statue located outside of Central Park in my district in El Barrio/East Harlem and to make an inquiry regarding the broader issue of statues and monuments in our city's parks.

Statues and monuments are an important way to commemorate honorable individuals of local, national and even global significance. However, as our understanding of history continues to evolve and be reevaluated, we may discover that men and women who were once revered would not meet the kind of standards and criteria that today would be considered acceptable, particularly when it comes to issues of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. As time goes on, local communities may raise objection to the memorializing of these individuals' legacies. What would be the best means for community members to voice their concerns regarding individual statues and monuments, and what is Parks' receptiveness to engaging with communities on these issues? Also, have there been any recent examples along these lines that have been brought to Parks' attention, and if so, how were they addressed?

Part of my impetus in raising these concerns is a particular case in my community, El Barrio/East Harlem, which is comprised primarily of people of color. The statue of Dr. James Marion Sims, which is located at the corner of 103<sup>rd</sup> Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue right outside of Central Park, serves as a constant reminder of the cruelty endured by women of color in our country's history. I am disturbed that a monument honoring an individual who tortured enslaved women and young Irish immigrants for the advancement of medicine not only is located in a neighborhood where people of color are the majority, but also that there is not any acknowledgement of the women and children who were sacrificed in the name of his contributions to science. Dr. Sims' autobiography documents the pain and anguish endured by these women, and includes startling details recounting the excessive amount of operations to which these women were subjected.

While I do not dispute Dr. Sims' contributions to the field of gynecology, I find it grossly insensitive that his likeness is memorialized, given the means by which he achieved recognition in the scientific community. It is unjust and unfair to commemorate Dr. Sims as the "father of gynecology" without recognizing the women and girls who suffered and whose lives were taken as the "mothers and daughters of gynecology." It is important that we perpetuate an unbiased and fully encompassing historical truth to the community, which this statue, without context, does not accomplish.

Because this statue is as a constant reminder of the inhumane manner in which his medical practices were perfected, I request that a reevaluation of its current location be conducted. It is my belief that a monument that aligns with the ideals of a community in which the majority is people of color would be more appropriate for our neighborhood. As an advocate for transparency, I encourage the Department to make this reevaluation process one that encompasses the voices and concerns of the surrounding community.

At a broader level, I urge the Department to develop a protocol, if one does not currently exist, by which community members could approach the Parks Department regarding other statues and monuments they might find offensive, and that Parks makes a good faith effort to be responsive to these concerns. Additionally, I also ask that Parks provide information on the process and standards by which the placement of a statue or monument in a city park would occur today.

I would be more than happy to engage in ongoing discussions regarding the matters raised in this letter. Thank you in advance for your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Melissa Mark-Viverito". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Melissa Mark-Viverito  
Parks & Recreation, Chair