

Presentation to Neighborhoods Committee May 10, 2021

Subject: Recognition of First Lady Mrs. Helen Taft (1909-1913)

Good afternoon Neighborhoods Committee,

My name is Brian Frank. I am a Procter & Gamble retiree and I live in Mt Adams. I wish to thank Council Member Liz Keating for her support in allowing me to share an idea with the Neighborhoods Committee to recognize Cincinnati native and former First Lady, Mrs. Helen Herron Taft.

My initial idea for today's presentation was to focus only on recognizing Mrs. Helen Taft, the wife of President William Howard Taft. As background, I could not find any major public recognition for Mrs. Taft in the City of Cincinnati after reaching out to multiple organizations with connection to the family name and with empowering women. As we have many streets and buildings named after other close Taft family members I thought our City should also recognize Mrs. Helen Taft. With the insights of a friend, Dr. Raman Kasturi, I have broadened my idea and wish to recommend Cincinnati recognize all the First Ladies of the United States. You see I had forgotten about the Presidential Grove in Eden Park and as Dr. Kasturi reminded me of the grove which is near Mirror Lake. Dr. Kasturi is an advocate for Burnet Woods and she helped me think more broadly about how best to recognize our First Ladies including Mrs. Taft.

As you may know, there are several memorial groves that have been planted in Eden Park over the years to commemorate different events and individuals. The largest is the President's Grove which has a tree planted for each US President. Groves were also planted for heroes of 1776 in the "Heroes Grove", for the early settlers of Cincinnati in "Pioneers Grove", and for authors honored by the public Schools at "Author's Grove". In 2009, three commemorative walks were built in the groves-one for Park Commissioners and one for Stewards who made significant contributions to Cincinnati Parks, and one for Park Foundation Presidents.

The Eden Park Presidential grove was established in 1882 at Cincinnati's first celebration of Arbor Day (the last Friday in April) during the American Forestry Association's First National Congress. One tree was planted for each President and the tradition continues to this day. It is estimated that 25,000 people came to honor that celebration in 1882.

I am proposing that a new grove of trees be added to honor the First Ladies of the United States. Rather than plant a unique tree for each First Lady, I propose we consider a grove of cherry trees be planted. This grove will honor the vision of Cincinnati native and First Lady Mrs. Helen Herron Taft. Mrs. Taft brought the idea of celebrating the Cherry Festival to the United States and her vision was that it would be widely celebrated across the country. Ideally the location would be near Mirror Lake as it will create an homage to a grove of over three thousand cherry trees that Mrs. Taft planted along the banks of the Potomac River Basin in Washington DC in 1912.

The initial celebration of the Cherry Festival in the United State is credited to Mrs. Taft. She fell in the love with the Cherry Tree Blossom Festival in Japan which she experienced first-hand when she and her family travelled from Cincinnati to Asia in 1901. At that time Mr. William Howard Taft, a Circuit Court Judge from Cincinnati, Ohio was appointed to lead a civil commission to form a government in the Philippines by President William McKinley. Taft soon became the first American Governor of the Philippines. Enroute to the Philippines, the Taft family spent several months in Japan on their journey to and from the Philippines and this allowed Mrs. Helen Taft the opportunity to experience the Cherry Blossom festival. This created a desire by Mrs. Taft to bring this festival to the United States.

While today we take it for granted that the cherry tree plantings in Washington along the Potomac Tidal Basin must have been a rather easy to accomplish mission as we know it today for the home of the Jefferson Memorial and the Franklin and Eleonore Roosevelt memorial, it is actually somewhat a miracle this park came to be. This area in 1909 was a mosquito infested swamp. Mrs. Taft had the vision to transform this into a new City park full of cherry trees that people the public would want to walk through and enjoy the cherry blossoms creating a festival atmosphere. She publicly announced her plans and asked American nurseries across the country to donate the cherry trees to transform the swamp and begin a new festival park to celebrate cherry blossoms which she had enjoyed with her family in Tokyo, Japan.

Unfortunately, only 100 trees were donated by American nurseries and the park seemed at risk of not being transformed as she had envisioned. Remarkably, Japan's Ambassador to the United States was impressed with Mrs. Taft's request to the public as she shared her love of the Japanese Cherry Blossom Festival that she had enjoyed. The Japanese Government donated 2000 trees but when they arrived they were contaminated with a fungal blight and had to be destroyed. The Japanese Government to their credit sent a fresh shipment with special care taken to prevent the blight and 3000 trees safely arrived and were planted. They survive today as one of our Nation's capital most highly anticipated annual events. The Washington Cherry Blossom Festival today attracts thousands of visitors to travel to the capital from around the world. But that is still not the entire story.

At the time Mrs. Taft was requesting these donations of trees, the public was not aware that Mrs. Taft had suffered a major stroke in May of 1909 and that she had lost most of her ability to speak, stand or walk. With the help of her three sisters from Cincinnati and her daughter Helen, together they helped the First Lady launch this major transformation of swamp into a world class park. This reminds us of the power of sisterhood and the tremendous tenacity of Mrs. Taft to not let personal adversity prevent her from achieving her vision. Mrs. Taft later regained her ability to speak however walking and standing remained a long-term struggle. Without the support of her sisters and her daughter, we may never have seen the Cherry Blossom festival bloom in Washington.

I believe recognizing Mrs. Taft with a celebration of a cherry blossom grove near the President's Grove in Cincinnati should become a major draw for Eden Park. If implemented, this will become our City Park's second cherry tree grove planting as the first is in Ault Park, a gift from Japan to the people of Cincinnati. While this may seem to some as repetitive, in spirit it helps bring alive the true vision of the cherry blossom festival as a neighborhood event celebrated in Japan with hundreds of neighborhoods who all support this annual rite of spring.

With that I thank you for your time and consideration.