

February 26, 2026

Dear Mayor Johnson and the Good People of Chicago:

My name is Valerie Elverton Dixon; I live in East St. Louis, Illinois; and I am writing to ask you to change the name of Jackson Park to Jacqueline and Jesse Jackson Park. For several months, I have been working on an essay to make a strong case for this request, however, in the wake of the passing of Rev. Jackson, I think the time to send this letter is now.

When I learned that the Obama Presidential Center would be built in Jackson Park, I learned that the park is named in honor of President Andrew Jackson. I thought then that a name change is appropriate. I have studied the history of Chicago from its founding by a Haitian of African descent, Jean Baptist Point Du Sable. I have learned of the legal battles of A. Montgomery Ward to preserve the beauty of the Lakefront landscape. I appreciate the vision of Daniel Burnham who planned the Chicago park system. I have studied the history of the park itself from the time when it was the site of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. I have read the pamphlet with essays by Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand L. Barnett – "The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition". I have read several biographies of President Andrew Jackson. I have read biographies of Jesse Jackson, read his speeches, and watched his speeches before the Democratic National Conventions in 1984 and 1988 more than once. I have watched a documentary about Chicago and the original Rainbow Coalition of community organizers when Fred Hampton of the Black Panther Party worked with Jose "Cha Cha" Jimenez and the Young Lords and an organization of poor White people, The Young Patriots Organization, to bring about justice for low-income people. I have read poetry inspired by the city to know in words the heart and soul of a city that has inspired many writers beyond Carl Sandburg writing about Chicago as the "City of the Big Shoulders". I have read Jacqueline Jackson's book of letters to her son during his time in prison – "Loving You, Thinking of You, Don't Forget to Pray". However, more important to me personally than all this book knowledge, are my own experiences with Jesse Jackson. (I will present the insights I have gleaned from my research in a longer essay.)

I know from my research that this request is not unprecedented. Douglass Park (Anna and Frederick) was first named for Stephen A. Douglass, famous for his debates with Abraham Lincoln. In 2020, thanks to a years-long effort by students at the Village Leadership Academy, The Chicago Park district renamed the park. I hope that this request will not require years of effort. I hope this can be done before the opening of the Obama Presidential Center this spring.

The name change that the students achieved, and the one I am requesting now, illustrate an American paradox. Enslavers and the enslaved, the free and the enslaved, are often called by the same proper name. This is the case with Jackson Park. I understand why the political powers of 1880 wanted to name South Park after President Andrew Jackson. He is known as the hero of the Battle of New Orleans at the end of the War of 1812. He was considered the president for the common man, being the first president elected with the votes of White men who did not own property. He held the union together through threat of force in the face of South Carolina's threats of nullification of federal law.

At the same time, Jackson ignored a Supreme Court ruling; he signed the Indian Removal Act that led to the Trail of Tears, a horrific episode of ethnic cleansing that violates our current sense of moral rectitude. Further, Jackson was a slave owner.

In contrast, Jesse Jackson worked his entire adult life to rid the nation of racial and class injustices. He is a bridge figure between the civil rights generation represented by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the politics of Barack Obama. When King died in 1968, Jackson was working on Operation Breadbasket that represented an economic dimension of the civil right movement. This was the pivot to a social democratic politics that King articulated. The Poor Peoples' March was a manifestation of this move. When Jackson ran for president, in 1984 and in 1988, his intention was to bring the needs of poor people to the center of American political discourse. He registered large numbers of people, but he also gave large numbers of people a sense of self-worth. When he led the chant "I am Somebody," people across the globe felt that they were deserving of justice in all its iterations.

The obvious question arises: What difference does it make if Jackson Park is named for President Andrew Jackson or for Jacqueline and Jesse Jackson? The difference lies in our own vision of the world we want to create. When we think about what a thing means, anything, a wink, a smile, a word, a name, there are a multitude of possible meanings. Meaning happens in context. If I say the word “love”, the meaning changes if the context is a tennis match or a whisper from my beloved. So it is with moral meaning. When we think of the moral values that a person’s name embodies, the context of meaning is a fusion of past, present, and future horizons. How does our moral understanding of the past shape our interpretation of the present and our hope for the future? The question for us is whether or not the values embodied in the persons we honor are the values we want to continue to highlight. Are these the values that will help us to craft a better world, the world we want to live in? In this case, the question is: do we want to continue to hold in high esteem the violence of slavery and ethnic cleansing that Andrew Jackson lived or do we want a better example. I say: we need a better example, and Jacqueline and Jesse Jackson are those exemplars. I believe in the moral evolution of humanity, and this evolution demands this name change.

I have included Jacqueline Jackson in this request for a name change because the old saying is true: beside every good man is a better woman. Further, Jacqueline Jackson truly loves Chicago, even its snow-cold days when people have to come together to help each other navigate the weather. In a letter to her son, she writes: “When we left, the streets were covered with snow. Just another beautiful Chicago winter day. I love this place.”

Finally, let us think about hope because I am writing this letter in hope. Jesse Jackson admonished the world to keep hope alive. I am a virtual member of Trinity United Church of Christ, Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III is the senior pastor and Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. is pastor emeritus. Rev. Wright preached a sermon called “The Audacity of Hope” that became the title of a book written by Barack Obama. In the sermon, Wright describes a painting by George Frederic Watts where a woman is sitting on top of the world in tattered clothing, head bandaged, playing an instrument with only one string. Why is the painting called “Hope”? Wright says because there is a vertical dimension, a spiritual dimension of life, that helps us to believe that life will get better while everything around us, everything that we see on the horizontal dimension seems to show us only hardship and doom. Such hope is audacious.

Hope is the expectation that the positive difference we work for in the world will bear fruit. It is an expectation of a brighter day.

It is in Rev. Jackson’s instruction to keep hope alive that reminds us that he is a minister of the gospel, a messenger of the good news that change for the better is possible. Even though the landscape around us at present may seem bleak, even with the reputational harm that Chicago has suffered, even with the daily insults of the current administration, we keep hope alive.

Chicago is more than the Windy Second City. It is an important international city. Jacqueline and Jesse Jackson are world figures. Their significance reaches beyond Chicago and the United States. Renaming the park in their honor recognizes this reality.

At this moment, I and people across the globe grieve the death of Jesse Jackson. Yet we can smile through our tears because his was a life well-lived, a life that was large because of a radical, Divine Love that he allowed to use his life to shine life and hope on us all. Let us honor this life by honoring the values Jesse Jackson lived. Let us keep hope alive. Peace.

Sincerely,  
Valerie Elverton Dixon, PhD