



# **Shrewsbury High School Mascot Ad Hoc Study Committee**

## **Report to the Shrewsbury School Committee**

**June 9, 2021**

# Introduction & Background

- November 2020 the School Committee received a petition to change SHS mascot and subsequently received a counter petition to keep the mascot
- School Committee charged the Superintendent to form a study group to:
  - Investigate the origins of the mascot at SHS
  - Learn about the mascot's historical context
  - Solicit and consider viewpoints regarding how the mascot is perceived currently as a representation of the school community
  - Share its findings with the community
  - Make a recommendation to the School Committee regarding whether to maintain or change the mascot

## Membership of the Study Group

- Call for applications
- 134 applicants
- 8 members selected from each group
  - SHS Students
  - SHS Staff
  - SHS Alumni
  - SHS Parents

## Meetings of the Study Group

- Total of 9, two-hour meetings via Zoom
- Utilized a variety of methods for discussions
  - Small group discussions using “breakout rooms”
    - groups mixed across stakeholder groups
    - same stakeholder groups meeting together
  - Small group discussions were summarized for the larger group
- These conversations helped members build their understanding of the topics and other members’ perspectives on the questions before the group



## **Concerns before the study group's first meeting...**

- Online commentary in the community and response
  - Comments were insulting, belittling, and disrespectful.
  - Behavior was condemned by Superintendent and Principal in a message sent to the community with a request that the debate be constructive and respectful.
- Civil discourse was a key goal of the study group.
- As its first business, the study group established a set of group norms that emphasized this approach.

# Study Group Norms and Essential Questions

- Be respectful, actively listen, stay engaged
- Commit to learning, not debating
- Reserve judgment
- Confidentiality
- Intent versus impact
- Social positionality
- Speak your truth
- Expect and accept non-closure

## Sources used:

- Resources from the U.S. Department of the Interior, University of Michigan, and a keynote address from Changeworks consulting.

## Essential Questions

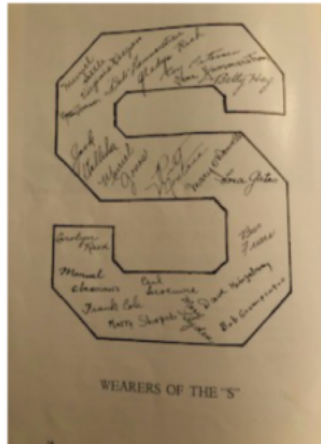
- 1) What should a school's mascot represent about that institution and contribute to its culture?
- 2) How is the current *Colonials* mascot perceived in different ways by SHS stakeholders, including students, staff, parents, alumni, and community members? How do perceptions differ within these groups, and how do they differ across groups?
- 3) How do both the historical context and the current perceptions of the *Colonials* fit with the mission and core values of Shrewsbury High School and the Shrewsbury Public Schools?

## Essential Questions

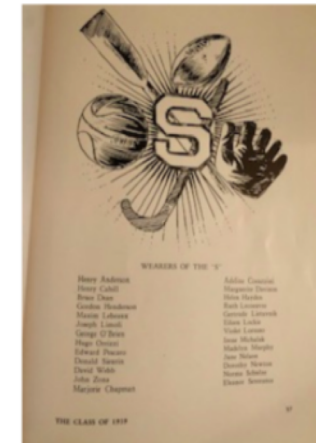
- 4) Is it possible for the *Colonials* mascot to be defined in a way that reflects what a mascot should represent for the Shrewsbury High School community?
- 5) What are the potential impacts of keeping or replacing the mascot in both the short term and long term, including potential impacts on a) the culture, climate, and spirit of the current SHS community; b) the perceptions of SHS alumni and members of the Shrewsbury community; and c) the perceptions of those outside of the Shrewsbury community?
- 6) What are the potential impacts of keeping or replacing the mascot, in both the short-term and long-term, on the operations and finances of SHS and the school district?

# Origin of the Shrewsbury Mascot

- Prior to 1940's
  - Indians
  - Wearers of the "S"
- Began in the mid- 1940's
  - High school was known as Major Howard W. Beal Memorial High School



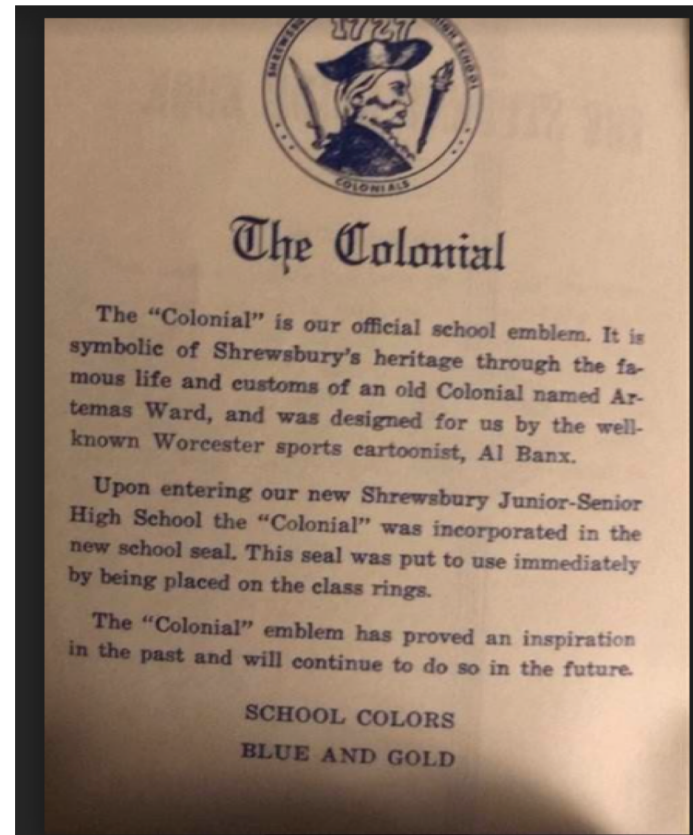
1938 Maj. Howard W. Beal Memorial High School Yearbook Sports Section



1939 Maj. Howard W. Beal Memorial High School Yearbook Sports Section

# History of the Colonial as the Shrewsbury Mascot

- Colonials nickname was created by Worcester Telegram & Gazette cartoonist Al Banx
  - Believed to reference the colonial history/era of the Town
- 1957 Move to new SHS (now Oak Middle School)
- 1965 Student guidebook officially connected the Colonial nickname to General Artemas Ward



## Current rendering of the SHS mascot



## Mural in the east stairwell of SHS





## Process and Presentations

- The creators of both petitions to the School Committee were invited to speak
  - Members from the group proposing to change the mascot presented to the study group
  - Members from the petition to keep the mascot declined to present to the study group
- Read and reviewed scholarly articles about Settler Colonialism
- Sought out expertise from colleges and universities (one guest speaker)
- Sought out perspective from indigenous people's groups (not able to connect)
- Read news articles regarding mascot changes in other communities
- Solicited feedback through community online exchange
  - Utilized ThoughtExchange platform

# **Feedback Through Community Online Exchange**

- Presentation of exchange results provided to the study group by ThoughtExchange Co-Founder and CEO, Dave MacLeod
- Mr. MacLeod will present summary of the exchange to the School Committee

## Financial Considerations

- The cost for changing the mascot entirely is estimated to range from \$430,000 to \$790,000
- Cost is dependent on:
  - What is replaced and when (sooner vs. later)
  - Phased in approach
    - Costs would include updating uniforms, scoreboards, playing surfaces, signage, promotional materials, furniture, letterhead, etc.
- Changing the Colonials logo but not the name would incur fewer costs
- Consensus to be phased in to mitigate impact of cost

# Study Group Recommendations

- 31 current members
  - 17 indicated they favored changing the mascot
  - 12 indicated they favored keeping the mascot
    - 9 of those who favored keeping the mascot indicated they believed the mascot should be updated to be more inclusive
  - 2 did not make a choice
- The members of the study group did not come to consensus on one recommendation for the School Committee, but instead the study group provides arguments for two different options:
  - Change the nickname and mascot entirely
  - Keep the nickname Colonials but update the mascot's presentation

## **Study Group Perspectives: Option to Change the Mascot (1)**

### *Arguments for Changing the Mascot:*

- To many, the mascot inspires pride, but also a sense of shame.
- Shame stems from associating Colonials with “Settler” Colonialism.
- Mascot can be seen as a symbol that affirms the removal of Native Americans and disregard for people of color, although it was not its original intent.

## **Study Group Perspectives: Option to Change the Mascot (2)**

*Arguments for Changing the Mascot:*

- Growing discomfort given historical context.
- Ongoing process, signals care and concern for those who feel they have been silenced or excluded today, inclusivity and equal representation.
- Should not be viewed through a strictly financial lens.
- Not an erasure of history, but reflects a deeper understanding of our nuanced and complicated history.

## **Study Group Recommendations: Option to Change the Mascot (3)**

*Arguments for Changing the Mascot:*

- Controversy of mascot is a sign it is not a unifying symbol.
- Evolution of our society and speaks to the courage of students and their generation.
- Connections to enslaved people & injustices during this time period.

## **Study Group Recommendations: Option to Change the Mascot (4)**

### *Arguments for Changing the Mascot:*

- The change is not an attempt to change history or walking away from our tradition. The change is more about being cognizant of all aspects of our history and the awareness of the intent versus the impact of these aspects. What might have been acceptable in the past might not be acceptable today.
- Gender biased.
- Iconography of a white male no longer represents the rich diversity of the current SHS student body. In fact not only does the current mascot fail to unite it is divisive and suppressive to many.



# **Study Group Recommendations: Option to Update the Mascot**

## **(1)** *Arguments to Update the Mascot:*

- Keeping the Colonials name with a “rebranding” of the iconography and updated messaging regarding what the nickname represents to the community in 2021 is the best path forward.
- Belief it is possible for the Colonials mascot to be defined in a way that reflects what a mascot should represent for the Shrewsbury High School Community.
- The word Colonial is not the same as the words colonizer or colonialism.

## **Study Group Recommendations: Option to Update the Mascot**

### **(2)** *Arguments to Update the Mascot:*

- Many positive and admirable qualities associated with the Colonial - fighting for freedom from oppression, perseverance in the face of adversity, strength in unifying for a common purpose. These qualities represent our community and the culture of Shrewsbury High School in 2021.
- Colonial mascot is a source of pride in the community as it is associated with Artemas Ward and other colonists who fought to establish this country. It unites past with present.
- Replacing the mascot would have a negative impact on the culture, climate and spirit of the current Shrewsbury High School community.

## **Study Group Recommendations: Option to Update the Mascot (3)**

### *Arguments to Update the Mascot:*

- Concerned with the expense of removing the mascot from Shrewsbury High School's uniforms, field, and gym.
- It should be made clear that the override funds are not going to pay for new uniforms, updates to the new turf field, or replacing gyms floors.
- The horrors of our local history are unquestionable - the subjugation and annihilation of native people is a stain on our past that we continue to reckon with. This is undeniable.

## **Study Group Recommendations: Option to Update the Mascot (4)**

### *Arguments to Update the Mascot:*

- The word “Colonials” is too closely tied to the overt act of “Colonialism”.
- It was Colonial Americans, people made up of different races, religions, both men and women and socio-economic status who risked their lives and livelihoods standing up to a great colonial power in the name of independence, liberty and freedom.
- Millions of immigrants have come to this country seeking and that enables all of us to enjoy the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness started with the Colonial people of America.

## Key Takeaways

- The mascot study group:
  - Spent a significant amount of time in a good faith effort to meet its charge
  - The tone and tenor of discussions were respectful and thoughtful and signals that our community can address divisive, emotional issues without rancor
  - The adult members of the study group frequently recognized how thoughtful and eloquent the student members of the group were throughout the process, and students' contributions were particularly appreciated

Questions?