

Residents contemplate the future of Nubian Square

By [Laura Crimaldi](#) Globe Staff, January 18, 2020, 7:55 p.m.



Sadiki Kambon of the Nubian Square Coalition spoke at a meeting at pop-up retail business Black Market. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

The heart of Roxbury is getting used to being known as Nubian Square, the name neighborhood voters endorsed on the November ballot and [made official last month](#) by a city commission.

Now the challenge is shaping the area in the image of its new name, residents said Saturday at a meeting about Nubian Square's future. The meeting, which drew about 30

people, was held at Black Market, a pop-up retail business.

“This phase of the name change is just the first step,” said Sadiki Kambon, leader of the Nubian Square Coalition, which pushed to change Dudley Square’s name. “We still have a lot of work to do.”

The to-do list includes tasks big and small, and throughout the meeting some participants lapsed into using the Dudley name and then corrected themselves.

Kambon said the coalition wants the public library and bus station to also be renamed.

Black Market co-owner Kai Grant said she wants people to have opportunities to learn about the Nubian Empire and plans to host education sessions about the early African civilization that inspired the square’s new name.

Dudley Square Main Streets, the nonprofit that helps neighborhood businesses, is discussing what the new name means for the organization, said Haris Hardaway, president of the board of directors.

The more challenging goals will require Nubian Square to grapple with gentrification, put more of its population to work, convince more people to visit the area, and keep it affordable for longtime residents who wish to stay.

“What is Nubian Square going to look like?,” asked Joseph Eubanks Jr., noting an influx of newcomers to the area. “We change it to Nubian Square. Who are we changing it for? Are we changing it for other people, outsiders to come in and buy more property and develop our land? These are issues that are on my immediate mind.”

The effort to rename Dudley Square spanned five years, culminating in a vote last month by the city’s Public Improvement Commission to rename the commercial district Nubian Square.

In November, the city put the question to voters in a nonbinding ballot question. Slightly more than half of voters across the city rejected it, but the precincts near the square

voted overwhelmingly in favor.

The square's former namesake was [Governor Thomas Dudley](#), a cofounder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Many supporters of the name change said he perpetuated slavery and the renaming campaign gained momentum in the midst of a national conversation about whether to remove Confederate statues and the names of former slaveholders from prominent buildings and public spaces.

The historical record hasn't established whether Dudley owned slaves, though he was a political leader in 1641 when Massachusetts became the first colony to legalize slavery. By the mid-1700s, nearly one in 10 people in Colonial Boston were slaves.

Hardaway, who also owns [Final Touch Boutique](#), described a recent exchange he had with a critic who charged that opportunity in Nubian Square "is not made for black and brown people."

"When I hear someone say that Nubian Square and anything down there is not made for us, that is a critical issue," he said. "If we don't start to think that this is for us, then we will never think that we should be here."

Dudley Square Main Streets is recalculating the number of businesses owned by black and brown people in the area, holding an event Wednesday evening when Chase Bank will discuss business lending, and talking with businesses that use Dudley in their name about options, Hardaway said.

The city has made the area a priority for economic revitalization, but the results have been mixed. After several businesses in Nubian Square closed last year, [Black Market hosted a series of meetings aimed at improving the district's economic prospects.](#)

The tide has turned for at least [one beloved business that struggled in 2019.](#)

Haley House Bakery Cafe, which temporarily closed last year, [reopened in December](#) with a new menu and financial strategy focused on efficiency and transparency.

A portion of Saturday's meeting was dedicated to the 2020 Census. Ángel Rodríguez, a doctoral student at Harvard University, presented statistics from the Urban Institute, a think tank, showing that millions of blacks, Latinos, and children are at risk of not being counted.

City Council President Kim Janey urged the gathering to participate in the census because the figures determine federal funding and how many representatives Massachusetts gets in Congress.

"If we're not counted, we get less money. Simple as that," said Janey, who represents Roxbury.

She discussed the final book of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?"

In the book, King wrote about his first conversation with his future wife, Coretta Scott King. They discussed racial and economic injustice and peace, she said.

"Chaos or community," Janey said. "What will we choose?"

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