

# Washington Examiner

## Inside the Biden administration plan to remove a statue of William Penn — and its abrupt withdrawal

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The National Park Service quickly realized there was a problem when it announced plans to remove a statue of William Penn from Welcome Park in Philadelphia on Jan. 5.

The plan was announced on a Friday afternoon, igniting a firestorm of controversy, and then abruptly withdrawn just three days later.

Now, emails obtained by the *Washington Examiner* via a Freedom of Information Act request reveal the whirlwind process and communications flurry that led to the reversal.

While it remains unknown who was ultimately responsible for the decision to backtrack, the more than 220 pages of emails released provide insight into the inner workings of the Biden administration.

“The National Park Service’s secrecy over why it reversed plans to remove William Penn’s statute is bewildering and reflects poorly on the Park Service,” said Craig Holman, a government affairs lobbyist for Public Citizen. “Whatever the merits behind the original decision and the subsequent reversal, it is beholden on the Park Service to be open about its decision.”

### ‘Removed and not reinstalled’

Emails obtained by the *Washington Examiner* begin on the Wednesday before the plan was released, with a chain involving four officials at Independence National Historical Park: Superintendent Steven Sims, who had been in the job fewer than three months; Deputy Superintendent Amnesty Kochanowski; public affairs officer Andrew McDougall; and park service historical architect Marilou Ehrler.

McDougall sent the group a draft press release, requests that Ehrler add a paragraph, and, at the bottom, photos of what appears to be a ceremony involving park service rangers and Native American tribes at Welcome Park, writing, “This was a great day.”

The press release was redacted, with the park service citing deliberative process privilege, which is designed to encourage the exchange of ideas and ensure that “agencies are not forced to operate in a fish bowl.”

In total, 23 pages of documents were withheld under that exemption along with attorney-client privilege, while another 48 were withheld with the government citing privacy concerns.

Ehrler responded to the draft Thursday morning with her own text, which was not redacted and closely resembled the final version released the next day. She also suggested shortening the public comment period from 21 to 14 days beginning Monday, Jan. 8, and responded to McDougall's photos.

"It was a great day, but some Lenape do not think it was," she wrote. "This project has been a bit of a dance between multiple nations."

McDougall responded Friday morning by reattaching his original draft and writing, "I certainly do not want [redacted]," "My original draft [redacted]," and "I am unclear [redacted] ... This level of detail should be reserved for [Planning, Environment, and Public Comment]."

Kochanowski also made a few edits, and Sims worked to make the release "short and succinct" in conversations that continued into Friday afternoon. The finalized version of the release was completed by 3:20 p.m. and sent out shortly before 4 p.m.

Sims, Ehrler, Kochanowski, and McDougall did not respond to requests for comment from the *Washington Examiner*.

The release said the rehabilitation would "provide a more welcoming, accurate, and inclusive experience" for visitors, that it was made in collaboration with six tribal nations, and that "the Penn statue and Slate Roof house model will be removed and not reinstalled."

A comment period was to begin Monday and run through Jan. 21, available only through a park service link. "Comments submitted through social media, phone calls, email or mail will not be accepted," it added.

### **'Quite a reaction'**

The next emails released by the park service were received by the agency on Sunday afternoon, Jan. 7, with several people urging the government not to remove the statue and complaining about how hard it was to post comments.

"I disagree with the removal of William Penn's home and statue from the park," one read. "There is no need to erase history in order to explain more of it. I'm not sure whose agenda this is, but please listen to the people of PA and do not remove Penn's house or statue."

Another person wrote, "Don't even think of tearing down William Penn's statue. You bunch of leftists need to leave it the way it is," and a third added, "This plan ... is the most asinine decision I've ever heard. Our government has truly lost its mind. The state is only named after the guy!"

A statue of William Penn stands at Welcome Park in Philadelphia, Monday, Jan. 8, 2024. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

Some commenters appealed to Penn's positive relations with Native Americans, while others suggested adding Indigenous history alongside tributes to Penn.

“What gives you the right to decide for all Americans whom we can celebrate?” read an email that came in near midnight.

Though the release said that social media comments would not be accepted, park officials clearly took notice.

“Not sure if either of you are following the Facebook posting on the Welcome Park public comment period,” Sims wrote to Ehrler and Kochanowski at 8 a.m. Monday morning. “I am noticing quite a reaction to the removal of the William Penn statue. What was the past discussion/sentiment on keeping the statue?”

Ehrler wrote back, “We discussed moving the statue off of the center and also discussed the fact that there are other statues of Penn and other park’s dedicated to Penn in Philadelphia.”

Kochanowski noted that the *Post Millennial* and *New York Sun* already had written articles about the brewing controversy and added, “Yes, it was a deliberate conversation and decision to have the statue removed from the current design.”

An official from the Independence Historical Trust emailed the group just after 9:30 to say it was getting calls, including from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and from donors, and to ask about setting up a meeting.

Sims wrote back and stressed that the public comment period was still open and that feedback would be taken into account.

“We’ll take into consideration all substantive comments,” he wrote. “This is the beauty of the public process because this is the public’s park, and they have a voice.”

Park service officials nationwide were taking notice as well.

Jenny Anzelmo-Sarles, chief of public affairs and chief spokeswoman for the agency, ordered that any responses to reporters were to be cleared in Washington until further notice.

“Can you all please share up the comms plan on this?” she wrote at 9:03. “Until we regroup, please have the park clear any press queries on this up to DC.”

By 10:30 a.m., there were news stories on Fox News, the *Daily Mail*, Hannity.com, the *Blaze*, *Breitbart*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* adding to a growing national story.

Park officials regrouped and by noon were circulating a revised communications plan, the text of which was redacted in the tranche of emails sent to the *Washington Examiner*.

“I have attached a revised press release which will be posted to our Facebook, X, and Instagram channels making clear the statue removal is part of a proposal and the final decision will be informed by public comments,” McDougall wrote at 12:19 p.m.

“If we want an actual apology in there, we could say.... [redacted],” he added.

At 1:38 p.m., a representative with Philadelphia Councilman Mark Squilla contacted Sims to say that his office was getting calls and emails about the statue removal.

“The push is that the Park Service is trying to ‘cancel’ William Penn,” the person wrote, attaching links to stories from two local ABC affiliates.

Press inquiries continued flowing in throughout the afternoon, with questions coming in from the *Wall Street Journal*, *Politico*, the *Washington Free Beacon*, and a producer for the Fox News program *Jesse Watters Primetime*.

The issue quickly worked its way up the chain of command at the park service and the Department of the Interior, under which the park service falls.

Malcolm McGeary, a Biden appointee at Interior who previously directed natural resources policy for Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR), sent an email to four other Interior officials at 2:06 p.m. with the subject line “RE: Penn Park question.” The text was redacted in copies sent to the *Washington Examiner*.

The park service’s national director, Charles F. “Chuck” Sams, was looped into the discussion at 3:14 p.m.

### **‘Released prematurely’**

By 4:30 p.m., the discussion had turned away from the comment process and toward keeping the statue outright.

“Thank you again for drafting this [press release]. Attached are some minor edits,” Sims wrote at 4:34. “Do we want to say anything about the statue remaining up? That’s the question around here.”

At 5:05 p.m., Anzelmo-Sarles, the park service’s national communications chief, told a *Politico* reporter, “I believe [McDougall] will have something for you within the hour.”

Tyler Cherry, communications director for the Interior Department, instructed Anzelmo-Sarles at 5:01 to make sure the *Jesse Waters Primetime* producer received the new statement “so we don’t have misreporting during primetime.”

The new release went out just before 6 p.m.

“Independence National Historical Park has withdrawn the review of a draft proposal to rehabilitate Welcome Park and closed the public comment period,” it read. “The preliminary draft proposal, which was released prematurely and had not been subject to a complete internal agency review, is being retracted. No changes to the William Penn statue are planned.”

The updated release also said the park would still be renovated to mark the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, a detail that did not make it into the original.

Another park service aide notified the offices of Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA), Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA), and Rep. Brendan Boyle (D-PA), along with two other non-Pennsylvania members of Congress who had asked about the controversy, as soon as the release was sent, and at 6:32 p.m., Gov. Josh Shapiro (D-PA) said he had been urging the Biden administration to “correct this decision.”

Social media posts and responses to the media followed, though some reporters had follow-up questions.

“Can you tell me the reason for the withdrawal?” one reporter asked. Another added, “Who in DC ordered the park to remain as-is? I know the PA governor spoke up but he doesn’t control DC. It’s part of the story to know who made the decision.”

Angry emails from the public continued to come in during the initial hours after the updated release.

“It is a shame that you are allowing this ‘Woke’ culture and politics to guide your rehabilitation decisions and consider removing historical statues such as William Penn from Welcome Park,” read one complaint sent at 3:51 a.m. on Tuesday. “It is understandable considering the weak-kneed administration you work for now, please reconsider this egregious decision.”

At least one person weighed in saying they supported removing the Penn statue, writing, “I fully support reconfiguring this plaza-like park to honor the Natives that this land was given to by Penn’s grandson. This land was meant to be a sacred place to gather filled with heritage trees, plants, and grass.”

A *Philadelphia Inquirer* opinion piece pointed out that Penn has many other statues in the city, including a 37-foot-tall one atop Philadelphia City Hall, and that as a Quaker, Penn himself would likely not support having himself aggrandized in such a way.

In the weeks afterward, Native tribes said they weren’t pushing for the Penn statue’s removal but only wanted their stories told. At least one, the Shawnee, said it wasn’t consulted at all despite being listed in the initial park service release.

The final email released in the tranche was sent at 9:25 p.m. Sunday night, apparently from McDougall to himself. He wrote that more than 500 comments had already come in on Twitter, that he received 49 emails and 23 voicemails on Sunday, and that comments were “overwhelmingly, perhaps 99%, opposed to the plan.”

McDougall wrote that his initial draft from the previous Wednesday kept to the purpose of making people aware that they could comment on the rehabilitation, and that the release was subsequently rewritten by Ehrler and Kochanowski.

“I did not present this as we are tearing down a statue of William Penn,” he wrote. “In fact, I didn’t mention the statue at all. That type of detail is for PEPC. I did not suggest our story gets more inclusive by excluding William Penn. People can spot that nonsense from a mile away.”

Yet it remains unclear exactly who within Interior, the park service, or the wider Biden administration made the final call to withdraw the proposal. Interior and park service spokespeople did not respond to questions from the *Washington Examiner*.

“Nothing from the Department on this one,” Cherry, the Interior spokesman, said. “I don’t know if there’s much else to say beyond the initial communication the park put out.”

It is also not known what the next steps are in the proposal to rehabilitate Welcome Park or if the renovation can still be completed by 2026.

The biggest problem of all, according to Cato Institute scholar Chris Edwards, is that making big decisions at the agency level means no one is held accountable.

“Anything high-profile and controversial ought to be made by elected officials, or by city councils or elected mayors,” Edwards said. “Those folks work for us, and nothing ticks me off more about government at all levels than when they seem to have agendas that are different than the agenda of the general public.”

The fact that it remains unknown who made the call on the Penn statue is probably not a coincidence, he added.

“When they hide stuff, they know they’re doing something that’s counter to the interests of the public,” Edwards said. “Governments are least transparent when they are doing things that are the least popular.”