Taking history to the streets

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OK, SO Johnnie Cochran was no George Washington. But the late civil rights attorney is certainly as deserving of having a school named after him as is George Washington's Virginia plantation.

Last month, the Los Angeles Board of Education voted unanimously to change the name of Mount Vernon Middle School, which Cochran attended in the 1950s, to Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. Middle School. Likewise, the City Council is poised to rename a three-block section of 17th Street, where the school is located, after O.J.'s counsel.

I say fine. For too long, L.A. has allowed itself to become a place of no places. And homages, big and small — to local boys and girls who "done good," to people who have enriched our city — give texture and historical resonance to our often anonymous neighborhoods.

I generally love L.A.'s merciless lack of nostalgia. Last week, I saw Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" at the Mark Taper Forum and found myself sympathizing with the character of Yermolai Lopakhin. Lopakhin, the self-made son of a serf, advises the aristocratic yet penniless family in the play to cut down their cherry orchard and subdivide it so they can pay off their mounting bills. Appalled by such an unsentimental solution, the family ends up losing their estate to the arriviste Lopakhin himself.

He'd make a good Angeleno. In Southern California, we expect buildings and places we love to disappear. I know that if I wait long enough, the population — and character — of any given neighborhood I might live in is likely to radically change. I know that the dreams of those who came before me are not the same as mine and will not be the same as those who come after. I think there is something beautifully democratic about this cycle of demolition and reconstruction. Different waves of newcomers get to remake the city in their own image. But my admiration for this city's spirit of change doesn't mean I don't want to remember what was. I hope Lopakhin puts up a plaque in his new Russian subdivision: "The cherry orchard was here."

Not long ago, I walked into the Nat King Cole Post Office on Western Avenue and Third Street just to ask the postmistress why the station was named for the late, great singer. "Why shouldn't it be?" she snapped.

I expected her to say that the great , smoky-voiced crooner was raised in a house that

once sat on the site. But, in any case, I learned that Cole was born in Alabama, raised in Chicago and bought a house in Hancock Park in 1948, the same year the U.S. Supreme Court banned racially restrictive real estate covenants.

Street signs are an even more efficient way of teaching history. Of course, there are already plenty of L.A. street names that refer to local historical figures and places — Mexican politicians and ranchers, scores of Anglo oil barons and landowners and developers — but there are too few popular 20th century icons. In my Koreatown neighborhood, there are two honorary markers, both on Wilshire — one dedicated to Rabbi Edgar F. Magnin, the "rabbi to the stars" who preached at the Wilshire Boulevard Temple, and the other to Robert F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in a kitchen corridor at the Ambassador Hotel (which in that great L.A. tradition was recently torn down). That's a start, but there's a lot of catching up to do. L.A. has far fewer honorary street signs than the other two largest American cities. As of 2000, Chicago had 860 and New York 115. Our fair city had only 15.

I propose that the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment encourage neighborhood councils to research their areas' past and propose the names of their VIPs to honor either by formally renaming streets or with a simple marker, which costs the city very little.

Renaming streets may seem like a picayune way to honor the past. But, over time, some street names can develop a resonance that far exceeds their literal meanings. People from far-off places marvel when I tell them I was born on Sunset Boulevard. (Of course, I don't say it was Sunset at Vermont.)

Not that you can control what a street name comes to signify — we just have to embrace the possibilities. A few years ago my friend Elias Nahmias and I lobbied former Councilman Nick Pacheco to rename a stretch of Clarence Street in Boyle Heights after Gabriel García Márquez. We thought it would be cool if kids could grow up routinely sounding out the name of one of the all-time great Spanish-language authors.

In a letter to the Nobel Prize-winning novelist seeking his approval, we told him that Clarence Street had become the moniker of a street gang. Although García Márquez wound up giving the project his reluctant blessing, he wasn't so sure about what history would make of it. He feared that one day we would all be reading about the notorious exploits of the García Márquez gang.