

Virginia Key Beach Park

MIAMI, FLORIDA



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The Story of Virginia Key Beach Park

The story of Virginia Key Beach Park begins in 1896. This was the year the City of Miami was founded with approximately one-third of the signatures of the City charter being Black men (which was no accident considering their predominant role in the early building of the City). Segregation became a day-to-day reality throughout the South. It was this reality that systematically excluded all Blacks from Dade County's miles of beaches, its most famous attraction. As the City grew, by 1920, many of these beaches were developed into parks and public swimming facilities exclusively for the white population.

D.A. Dorsey, an African American millionaire, purchased what is now known as Fisher Island so that Blacks could have a beach of their own. Due to increasing property taxes, Mr. Dorsey was obligated to sell the property. As a result, the Black community was left without a beach to enjoy, except for the designated beach locations they would travel to in Fort Lauderdale and Pompano Beach.

There were unofficial areas that were exclusive to the African American population. One such place was a very special beach located on Virginia Key, known as "Bears Cut." This property became an official recreation site for "colored only" as a direct response to a bold protest led by the late Judge Lawson E. Thomas. Under Judge Thomas' leadership, Black men defiantly entered the water with the intention of being arrested at Baker's Haulover in North Dade County, a beach exclusively for Whites. To avoid costly embarrassment, County authorities decided against legal action of the protesters. Instead, they acquiesced in very short order to the protesters' demands for an officially designated swimming area for Blacks. Although only accessible by boat from a downtown dock on the Miami River, "Virginia Beach, a Dade County Park for the exclusive use of Negroes," was opened on August 1, 1945.

Virginia Key Beach quickly became a cherished getaway, social gathering place, and even a sacred site for religious services. The beach included such amenities as large shaded picnic areas with barbecue pits, cottages, a boat ramp and the famous Mini-Train and Carousel ride. With its lush windswept palms and inviting beach, Virginia Key lured thousands to this tropical paradise. The scenic beauty, the openness and the fresh air offered visitors an experience different from everyday life in Miami. Though the park remained segregated throughout the 1950's, it was not a factor for many new Caribbean, South American, and Cuban immigrants who preferred Virginia Key Beach to other Miami beaches.

In 1982 the City closed Virginia Key Beach Park, citing the high cost of maintenance and operations. The park has remained closed ever since, except on a daily rental basis and as a training facility for law enforcement agencies and large entertainment events. In June 1999, a group of citizens called the Virginia Key Beach Park Civil Rights Task Force was established in response to plans of private development of the beach park. Later that year, the Miami City Commission established the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust to oversee the development of the historic park property. The Trust has been working diligently to restore and preserve this historical jewel. At the end of the restoration process, Virginia Key Beach will provide the community an estate for family events and corporate meetings, as well as a pristine beachfront for swimming and water activities. The new Virginia Key Beach Park is scheduled to reopen with all of the amenities of the past as well as some new venues as suggested by the community. In August 2002, Virginia Key Beach Park was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.





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