

During World War II, according to Dr. Marvin Dunn's *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*, the area was used to train Negro troops. Before that, in the 1930s, as Mrs. M. Athalie Range reports, it was unofficially known only as "Bear's Cut," a beach accessible only by boat. The strong currents and sharp dropoffs prevented wary parents from allowing their children to wade "more than a few inches" into the water, but which provided a precious haven for relaxation. (Boat transportation from downtown Miami was still the only means of access for several years after the park opened).

Whether Virginia Key actually figured in Seminole Indian and/or Underground Railroad activity remains to be determined. It would be the possibility that pirates such as Black Caesar might have used the area. Evidence of even earlier Tequesta or other Indigenous American presence would also seem to merit investigation. As part of the general history of the area, however, these phenomena were prevalent enough to warrant inclusion in a commemorative memorial to the island's history.

In the same sense, Virginia Key's history after the Jim Crow era is also worthy of inclusion. It may not be known to what extent the island was a first landfall for boat people, rafters, and others seeking at great risk to find a better way of life in the U.S., but this history is also appropriate for inclusion in the overall memorial.

Finally, because a significant part of Virginia Key's beauty and appeal is its natural environment, the natural history of this island with its unique flora and fauna should also be displayed as an integral part of the memorial.

B.) Significance of The Civil Rights Movement

No nation on earth is a static "finished product," but the young, vibrant, diverse, and ever-changing United States, whose social landscape in less than twenty-five generations has been, and continues to be, shaped by a number of tumultuous historic events with world-wide impact. Many of these had to do with our ongoing struggle as a nation to truly live up to the motto of "E Pluribus Unum," to become truly One. Many, who have come to these shores and have joined those already here.

Of all of these contentious events, one of the greatest was certainly the non-violent Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s which gave birth to a "New South," and, by extension, to a new nation in many ways. As a result of breaking down the stultifying barriers of racial segregation, all Americans could enjoy more freedom of interaction and a more diverse

restrictions on human potential.

The Civil Rights Movement was in fact only the latest in a long series of battles, that began with resistance to slave raids on Indian villages, continued aboard ships, took on the form of escape activity, and subtler forms in the New World, gave rise to an African movement, a Civil War, and new Constitutional Amendments, all served not

only to assert the rights of Africans, but ensured freedom for all. Until all citizens are free, no citizen is truly free.

The "Dream" of equality that was so eloquently stated by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is not yet the reality. With so many Americans have fought, died, and still continue to fight for the movement that gave so much power to that vision, and engendered such progress toward social justice should not be forgotten or erased from the history that our future generations will learn. On the long and hard struggle, and those who courageously participated in it, deserve a place of honor and prominence.

C) Looking Backwards in Other American Cities

1. Civil Rights Memorials

It is no accident that the reborn nation which emerged from the Civil Rights era has found a collective need to honor this history with tangible memorials and educational centers, especially, but not exclusively, in the South.

Birmingham, AL, for example, once "a hateful stepchild" which had earned the ugly nickname of "Bombingham" for its rampant racial violence (including the murder of four little girls in a church), now proudly boasts one of the finest and most successful museums in the nation dedicated to the memory of the Civil Rights Movement.

Likewise, in Memphis, TN, the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, has been converted into the Lorraine Motel Civil Rights Museum, an acclaimed facility

attracting some 125,000 visitors per year.

In Savannah, GA, a new Civil Rights Museum is receiving a very positive reception by the public. The Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta has long been a national landmark. The Civil Rights era is an essential part of African American History Museums throughout the nation.

In addition to museums, monuments, such as the Dr. King Memorial in Montgomery, AL, and the Dr. King Memorial in the South, have been erected, the design of which has inspired the Malcolm X Branch Library in San Diego, CA.

The National Park Service is highlighting many of others in their lead tourist promotional campaign, through their web site.

These few examples, and their success as tourist destinations, among the many others that exist, show that support for a Civil Rights Memorial is not without practical and economic value.

2) Local Historic Heritage Projects

Just as the importance of the Civil Rights Movement for public commemoration, so has the local heritage recently established Key Biscayne Heritage Trail, on an island adjacent to Virginia Key) is an excellent example of markers at significant sites and attractive information served to make the Key Biscayne experience much more meaningful for residents, visitors, and tourists alike. All societies have strengthened by tangible connections to our past history.

In a similar fashion, the Overtown Folk Life Village life, incorporating such landmarks as the historic Lytle House, and Chapman House, as well as the Black History significant locations, provide a highly valuable opportunity to become acquainted with much of the little-known African American history of Miami-Dade County. This history includes the fact that the oldest standing buildings in Miami began life as slave quarters (English plantation), and that nearly one third of the original City Charter were African American men. In Coconut City Brown house illustrates the role played by Bahamian immigrants in the nineteenth century.

Thus, Virginia Key is but another highly significant local heritage that needs to become integrated into the lives of local residents and transformed into a series of tourist attractions in their own right.

III. The Planning Process

A) Principles

Given the historic and symbolic value of Virginia Key site for a South Florida memorial to the Civil Rights Movement, the need for additional high quality parks for local residents, and several important considerations should be born in mind for development.

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1. There should be a moratorium on private development. We believe that the process should actively seek broad involvement, hear from parks department officials as well as park design and management from around the nation, environmental groups, non-profit organizations, students and faculty in redesigning this land.

a) To provide for maximum effective use of the park for the public benefit.

b) To make the park a meaningful attraction for local residents, tourists, and future generations.

c) To ensure environmental responsibility in the park's construction, and use.

2. Open all public parkland for use by the public by July 1, 1999 to fully insure the rights of all residents.

3. All existing deed restrictions should be adhered to in order to avoid further erosion of the public's historic right to their property.

4. Free and clear public access to the beach; all public property should be maintained.

5. Public participation should be insured throughout the process of redesigning the use of public land with due public notice in major newspapers. The need for public charrettes, paid for by the city and other sources of funds is paramount. All city and county resolutions should be completed on schedule and issued in writing.

6. Those Virginia Key Advisory Board or Waterfront Commission members with a personal interest of their own, or by members of their personal friends in future economic benefit from the park should consider that this might constitute a conflict of interest and should consider removing themselves from their respective Committees.

7. Public bathroom facilities should be made available and adequate security should be maintained in all public areas.

8. Public access to public land should not be inhibited by parking restrictions or inadequate public transportation.

9. Public parkland should be used to enhance the area through walking trails, public campgrounds. It should be used for contemplation and relaxation as well as be redesigned for active recreational uses and as entertainment venues. There should be a paramount value to keep all activity small scale.

10. Public parkland on Va. Key should be used to revitalize the civil

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rights struggle of African Americans and others who have fought oppression. A memorial structure should be constructed that will be a place of contemplation and tell the history of the struggle. It should be developed in cooperation with the Black Archives. The park should be a non-commercial service to the community, act as a tourist attraction.

11. Commercial eating and recreational facilities should be strictly limited to small scale operations.

12. Educational programs for youth should be a major objective in redesigning the public parkland- done in conjunction with the Biscayne Nature Center.

13. A Wilderness Campground should be created for inner city children, children at risk, and others, similar to the youth camp at Biscayne National Park.

14. Any designs should be completed only after full and active consultation with an ethnically diverse group of local citizens in the fields of environmental science and local history and with due deference to the ecological and historical nature of this island.

B. The Coalitions Involved

-Virginia Key Park Coalition is working in tandem with a number of related organizations whose names addresses and relevant information is included below:

The Black Archives,

Public Parks Coalition of the Urban Environment League

The Sierra Club

The Friends of Virginia Key

Tropical Audubon

C. The Process to Create a Final Plan

Stage I: Present to July 4, 1999

A. Secure initial funding to re-open the two park areas by July 4, 1999.

B. Initial planning by Virginia Key Parks Coalition to involve:

1. Process of public inclusion; advertise meetings that are held at night;

2. Identify grant funds such as Safe Neighborhoods Park Bond funds for landscape architects and other professionals to draw up plans for the Civil Rights Park

C. Involve churches and other non-profits in raising needed money to reopen the parks by July 4, 1999 as specified by the Waterfront Board.

Stage II: July 4, 1999 through 1999

- A. Seek funding sources, including use of state and federal money to renovate existing structures
- B. Complete Stage II of planning which will include monthly meetings and culminate in a public charrette and presentation of the plan with drawings and funding possibilities to the City Commission by December 1999.
- C. With City Staff, begin writing grants for state and federal funds available if the park remains a park.
- D. Historical designation
- E. Initiate a Virginia Key Volunteer organization to begin the process of cleanup and replanting.

The history of Virginia Key Beach goes back much further than its opening as a County Park in 1945. Its fascinating Natural History and Plant Life, the earlier history of Indigenous Peoples, including Black Seminoles, the Underground Railroad, Piracy, etc. can also be told, as well as the post Civil Rights-era when the key may have been a first landfall for refugees. These subjects will require further research, but certainly the role of early African Americans in building and establishing Miami as well as in the Civil Rights struggle, will be a central focus.

It is worth noting that the traditional African approach to history is inclusive in this way.

IV. Structure:

The African American Commemorative Museum and Park can include the following:

- o Nature and Heritage walking trails with artwork, information stations, and nameplates identifying significant plant life combined with meditation areas;
- o Restoration of existing historic structures with possible new uses;
- o Reconstruction, as deemed appropriate, of former structures, such as the mini- train, superintendent's house, office, cottages, shabanas, etc., with possible re-use as museum, welcome center, living rooms, etc.
- o New construction, as needed, for a secure Museum.

A. General Considerations:

The Museum and Park should be constructed in a manner appropriate to the

hurricane-prone location.

New or re-construction must be in conformity with previous building codes and with restrictions pertaining to Virginia Key.

Due consideration should be given to the possibility of National Historic Site Designation in all restoration and reconstruction.

B. Individual Components

1) Walking Trails

a) **Heritage.** At least one Walking Path should run the length of the historic County Park site (approximately 0.4 mile; not the entire portion of the original Park, the site of the old boat ramp on the east side is now included in the NOAA Tropical Marine Fisheries Laboratory property) documenting the history of Virginia Key by means of informational panels. The device of the walkway is especially symbolic of the Civil Rights era, in which so many of the most significant actions were carried out on foot and walks.

This path may be at ground level or could include raised sidewalks, if appropriate, and may be a combination of the two.

The panels must be of durable material, e.g. porcelain tiles as used in many outdoor installations, and mounted in ways appropriate to a hurricane-prone location.

Panels can include reproductions of photographs, and informational text panels in several languages. One artist's proposal suggests a large mural at each end of this walking path.

Artwork, such as life-size sculptures (these have been used very effectively in locations like the Birmingham Civil Rights Museum and downtown Baltimore's Civic Center), plaques, murals, etc. can be placed along this path to bring various aspects of history (see above) to life even more effectively and aesthetically.

Meditation Areas may be placed along this walkway, including benches, artwork, landscaping, and/or informational text panels.

b) **Nature.** The Heritage Walk should include the Nature Trail of Virginia Key along with nameplates identifying plants and animals. Nature trails can be expanded to cover a larger portion of the site. These can be modified to be bicycle trails.

2) Restoration of Historic Structures

Several of the historic structures from the Old County Jail remain intact, but are in need of repair and refurbishing:

a) Carousel Building