

Virginia Key

HISTORY TASK FORCE

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THE CITY OF MIAMI, FLORIDA

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Saving Virginia Key Beach

For most of 1999 a broad-based grass-roots effort, involving environmentalists, public parks activists, and concerned citizens in the African American community, has been under way to reclaim, restore and preserve the historic public beach and park on Virginia Key, a 1,000 acre barrier island adjacent to Key Biscayne, and just off shore from the city of Miami itself.

Much as was the case with the Miami Circle archaeological site, the catalyst for much of this activity was the familiar debate between private developers, on the one hand, and the above named activists on the other. Virginia Key's most outstanding claim to historical significance is that it was once a segregated Beach, for "Colored Only." It came close to being "separate but equal," with amusement rides, a bustling "Dance Floor," a boat ramp, Refreshment Stand (home of the legendary corn dog), beautiful picnic area, and other amenities.

Miami's African American community today is a virtual diamond mine of memories and recollections of that era, when, in spite of the indignity of racial discrimination, the park was a "paradise," comparable to a faraway tropical getaway, for families, churches, social groups, etc. From baptisms and sunrise services to lovers' lane and prom nights, Virginia Key was the place that unified all of Black life. All neighborhoods and social classes. (See "Remembering..." on the reverse side for more insight into how important these parks were throughout the segregated South). Furthermore, as Cubans and other immigrants (often from places where "race" is not so neatly defined) arrived during that era, many of them too became a part of the Virginia Key Beach experience. Like famed American Beach in north Florida, "it was the only place we could go."

The history of the beach is as interesting as the place itself. It was established as Virginia Beach, a 77-acre Dade County Park with one-half mile of beachfront, in 1945, in prompt response to a bold wade-in protest at segregated Baker's Haulover Beach, led by the late Judge Lawson A.

Thomas. Its *de-facto* use as a Black bathing beach, however, is much older, however. As early as the 1930s, African Americans would travel by boat to this preferred spot, then known popularly only as "Bears Cut." The notoriously swift current could be (and often was) deadly, but it was a place the community could claim as its own – no small consideration in the social scheme of things at the time. Even earlier than this, a fascinating survey map of Virginia Key (showing its original shape, prior to all of the present land fill) dated 1918 indicates the location of a "Negro Dancing Pavilion" at the location of the present Beach, on the shore of Bear Cut.

It says much to note that since the official designation of Virginia Beach as a Negro park and bathing beach, a sewage treatment plant was constructed there and an uncontrolled waste dump operated for years on the island. The legacy of these actions are still a source of concern and consternation.

What has created the most concern, however, was a recent initiative by the City of Miami to explore the possibility of a privately owned and built upscale (\$250 per night) "ecocampground" resort on the site, thus excluding much of the public from a publicly owned park, which happens to be the only oceanfront beach in the City of Miami. This project (only the latest in a staggering list of proposals and boondoggles offered for Virginia Key over the years) was seen as a possible solution to the City's well-publicized fiscal problems at the time, but not the least of the problems with it is that it is in clear violation of a Deed Restriction that stipulates that the site be used "for public purposes only."

The broad-based protest against this misuse led to the creation, thanks to Commissioner Arthur E. Teele, Jr., of a City-sponsored Task Force, which serves as a public forum for formulating an alternative land-use plan for the park. Initial plans are for restoration of the historic site as an African American/Civil Rights Museum complex with nature trails and a History Walk.

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The Past, Present, and Future of a Miami Jewel

Virginia Key Beach may be one of Miami's best kept secrets. In fact, any one arriving in South Florida after 1982 might not even be aware of its existence. That is because in that year, ownership of the Park was transferred from Dade County to the City of Miami, which, soon afterwards, closed the facility for public use, citing the high cost of park maintenance. Yet, as the only oceanfront beach within the City limits, it is in many ways the crown jewel of Miami's parks.

Its prime location, however, is but one of many distinctions that make Virginia Key Beach special. Although much of its scenic beauty was destroyed by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, and a combination of ill-planned developments and invasive exotic plant species continue to pose threats to the environment, the site still remains extraordinarily beautiful, a pleasant surprise to many first-time visitors.

The Park's present status as a largely unused and disturbed environment is hardly typical of its history. Much of this history, preceding the modern era, is unknown, due in part to a lack of sufficient record keeping and archaeological investigation. Scant historical accounts do indicate Seminole activity on Virginia Key in the mid 1800s, but this is surely but a fraction of a much larger story yet to be uncovered. On the other hand, the modern history of this site is quite well known and is especially rich and revealing as a part of South Florida's shared heritage. In its heyday, Virginia Key Beach was a "Paradise," to quote an often used term, with a peculiar history that was colored by the politics of the Southern Jim Crow era. It was a Park reserved for "the exclusive use of Negroes."

In the summer of 1945, as the nation and the world began to recover from the ravages of World War II, and American soldiers – both Black and White – returned home to the democracy for which they had fought, Miami, Florida, regained its global appeal as a sun-and-fun capital with miles of sandy beaches. Yet none were accessible to Americans themselves, if they were of African descent. A bold protest at all-white Baker's Haulover Beach, led by the late Judge Lawson E. Thomas and others, foreshadowed the "wade-ins" of the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, as several African Americans challenged the law and dared to swim there. The prompt result was a decision by County officials to designate a 77-acre site on Virginia Key, with barely one-half mile of beachfront, as "Virginia Beach," a Colored-only a Dade County Park.

the new facility was an immediate success, even though, in those pre-Rickenbacker Causeway days, it was only accessible by boat, from a dock on the Miami River near Overtown. To the credit of all parties concerned, "separate but equal" in Miami was not the farce it was in so many other Southern cities, where "Colored"

Parks were often mere vacant lots compared to their landscaped counterparts reserved for Whites. Virginia Beach, by contrast, mirrored Crandon Park on Key Biscayne with very similar, if slightly smaller, versions of such attractions as the popular Merry-Go-Round, and even offered amenities not available at Crandon, such as the Mini Train ride.

There were cabanas, rented by the day, and even "Cottages," actually small apartments which were especially popular with honeymooners and visiting African American celebrities (often entertainers who could perform, but not stay, at Miami Beach hotels). A bustling Refreshment Stand offered the famous Corn Dogs and other delicacies, and a circular concrete Dance Floor featured an outdoor juke box. Churches and organizations held social gatherings there. Baptisms and Sunrise Services were held. It was a prime gathering place on Prom Nights. In short, Virginia Key Beach, as it was popularly known, was the center of African American life in Miami, unifying neighborhoods and social classes, attracting visitors from surrounding Counties as well.

As the recently rekindled interest in this historic site has revealed, its history as a preferred recreational venue for African Americans began well before its establishment as a County Park in 1945. Community elders today fondly remember visiting the area by boat as early as the 1930s, when it was known only as "Bears Cut," where watchful parents strictly supervised their children wading in the swift current. (The island was also a rendezvous point, as some recall, for rum runners during the Prohibition era, who would excavate sharp dropoffs to facilitate their clandestine offloadings of contraband). An intriguing map has surfaced, dated 1918 and based on a survey carried out in 1916, which indicates an even earlier use of the Beach, showing the indicated location of a "Negro Dancing Pavilion" in the same place as the future park.

Segregation would end relatively peacefully, but with another bold protest, in the early 1960s, and Virginia Key Beach would become accessible to all. Its shady picnic area and cookout pits made it ideal for family outings, and a place for families of diverse backgrounds to meet and interact. The Beach would be enlarged to include a new northern section, now highly popular with windsurfers, and a portion was even reserved for a time as a clothing-optional beach for naturists. All of this would come to an end with the closing of the Park in 1982, followed by a series of ambitious development proposals for the site, none of which succeeded in finding public approval.

Through all of its changes, however, its history and the wealth memories of the African American "Paradise" have endured. These are now the foundation for the exciting community endeavor, spearheaded by a City of Miami-appointed community Task Force, to restore and preserve Virginia Key Beach as an Historic Landmark, commemorative park, and as a beautiful natural environmental attraction to residents and visitors alike for generations to come.