

# VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK MASTER PLAN

prepared for  
VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK TRUST

prepared by  
WALLACE ROBERTS & TODD, LLC  
JUDSON AND PARTNERS

July 2003



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**WALLACE ROBERTS & TODD, LLC, Landscape Architects and Planners  
JUDSON AND PARTNERS, Architects  
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## SITE ASSESSMENT

In June 1945, Virginia Beach was established as the first public beach recreation facilities in Miami Dade County for African Americans. Establishment of the beach park was Dade County's response to a direct action protest held in May 1945 at Baker's Haulover Beach, where three Miami activists staged a "wade-in" to demand access for African Americans to the county's whites-only beaches. Establishment of the "colored" beach was a significant early victory in the civil rights movement and the beach park served as a cherished amenity to the community until the park was transferred to the City of Miami and closed in 1982. In 2000, the Virginia Key Beach Park Civil Rights Task Force was established by the Miami City Commission in response to citizen protest against plans for development of a private ecotourism resort on the site of the historically significant beach park. In order to permit the public to participate in identifying an appropriate use of the park property, the Task Force held a public planning charette in which the participants reached consensus on the principles that should guide future development of the park: preservation and restoration of the park's historic features, commemoration of the significant events leading to the park's establishment, preservation of the park's natural features, provision of educational opportunities related to the site's features and provision of recreational opportunities for all of Miami Dade County's residents.

In 2002, the Miami City Commission established the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust to oversee the development of the historic park property. The objective of this Site Assessment Report is to provide the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust with a general inventory and evaluation of the physical and functional condition of man-made and natural features of Virginia Key Beach Park as a basis for the preparation of a General Plan for the park's preservation and future use and development according to the citizen's vision established by the Virginia Key Beach Park Civil Rights Task Force.

The site assessment reflects the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Preservation of Historic Structures and Guidelines for the Preservation of Cultural Landscapes for documenting the character defining features of a landscape. This methodology provides a basis for evaluation of continuity and change in the landscape and helps to establish the historic significance of existing landscape features. Comparison of existing conditions with the historic site plans helps to identify features of significance and integrity that contribute to the historic significance of the landscape. Safeguarding the integrity of these landscape features is a primary objective of the General Plan. The Secretary's Standards involve several well defined techniques. Preparation of a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) is the primary method of documenting and evaluating the history, significance, integrity and treatment of a cultural landscape, including any changes to its geographical context, features and materials. The components of a CLR include historical research and preparation of period plans; documentation of existing conditions, site analysis and evaluation of the integrity and significance of the landscape features. These components of a CLR are included in the Master Plan. Other components of a CLR include the development of a historic preservation treatment approach and plan, management plan and philosophy, a record of the treatment as well as recommendations for future research. These components are included in the Preservation Plan.

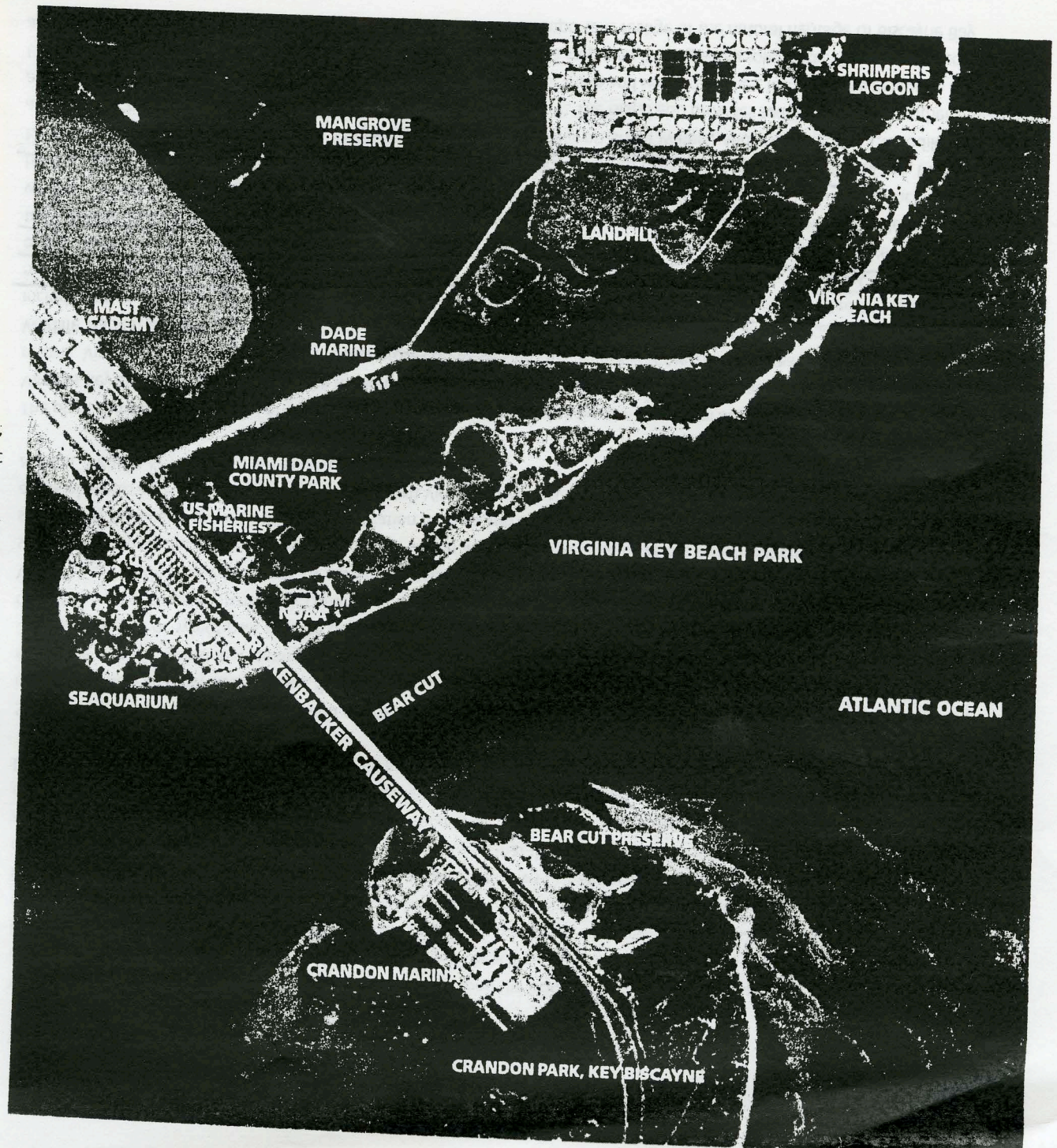
The natural resources of the site are of special significance, both as character defining features of the historic setting and as sensitive and protected natural resources of inherent value. Inventory and evaluation of these resources reflects requirements for cultural landscape evaluation according to the Secretary's Standards as well as requirements for natural resource protection, restoration, interpretation and recreational use.



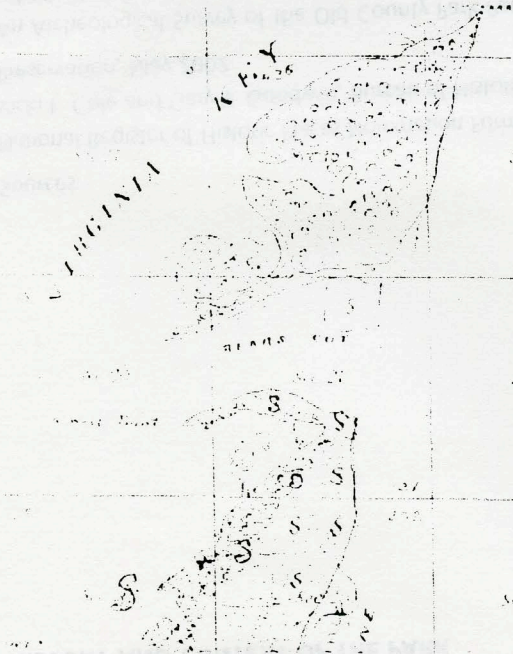
## HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF THE PARK

### Sources:

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- An Archeological Survey of the Old County Park Parcel, Virginia Key, Miami, Florida; Jeff Ransom, BA John Beriault, BA. Mark Lance, MA and Robert S. Carr, MS Archeological and Historical Conservancy, September 2001
- Ecosystem Restoration Report with Draft Environmental Assessment, US Army Corps of Engineers, February 2003
- Shoreline Stabilization Report with Draft Environmental Assessment, US Army Corps of Engineers, February 2003
- Key Biscayne - A History of Miami's Tropical Island and the Cape Florida Lighthouse; Joan Gill Blan
- A History of Overtown: Vibrant Early Life Followed by Social and Physical Deterioration, The Overtown Collective
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- Oral histories collected during the Public Site Planning Session held November 2002-May 2003







Virginia Key Beach Park seen from Bear Cut Preserve (above), 1848 map of Bear Cut

### The natural history of the barrier island

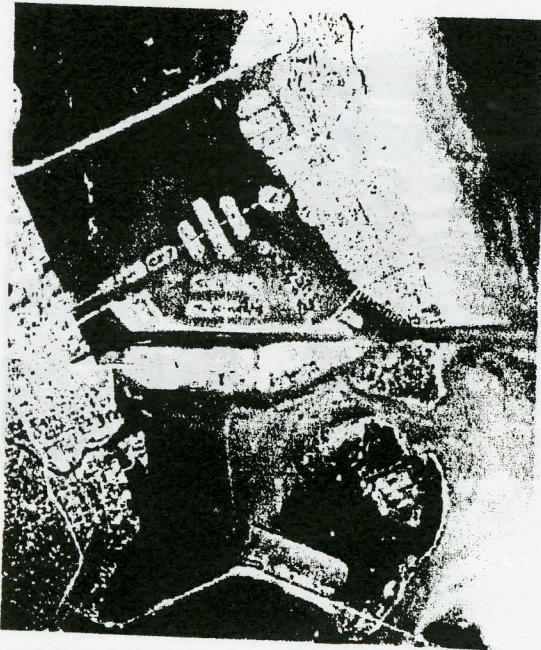
Virginia Key is part of a chain of barrier islands that extend along the Florida coast from Miami south to Key West. Of the many islands in Biscayne Bay, only Virginia Key, Key Biscayne and Miami Beach are part of this natural island chain that forms the northeastern boundary of Biscayne Bay. As a barrier island, Virginia Key is part of an evolving landscape where ocean currents and hurricanes deposit sand and sweep it away. The island chain has evolved over its known history, with Virginia Key taking shape as a separate island only in the 1830s following a hurricane that opened the Norris Cut and separated Virginia Key from Miami Beach. Manmade changes have also influenced the island. In 1896, the same year that the Flagler East Coast Railroad reached the small village of Miami, a channel was dug from Cape Florida to the Miami River and the port of Miami was opened. In 1902, Government Cut was created to establish direct ocean access to the new port and Miami quickly developed as the major seaport on Biscayne Bay. Urbanization of the bay followed, altering the landscape around the island and causing changes to the island itself.

Sand dredged from the new channel and deposited on Virginia Key has extended the once mangrove-rimmed northern tip of the island. The new channel also changed the way currents and sand move along the barrier islands. The sand that currents once carried down the Atlantic shoreline, creating the beaches and dunes that characterized Biscayne Bay's three barrier islands, was swept into Government Cut or swept past it to be deposited on Key Biscayne, bypassing Virginia Key. The Key Biscayne shore developed the growing dune and marine hammock community that can be seen at Bear Cut Preserve while the beach along the Atlantic shore of Virginia Key has diminished, scoured by currents sweeping through Bear Cut and without a natural source of sand replenishment. A series of groins was placed along the shore in the 1950s and the 1970s to stabilize the beach but currents continued to erode the segment of the beach between the two stabilization projects and scoured away a cove. The island's relatively narrow, eroding beach, a lack of access and the swift currents in Bear Cut left Virginia Key less suitable than surrounding islands for resort development and as a result, Virginia Key has retained much of its natural character.

The plant communities that had once occupied the entire barrier island chain along northern Biscayne Bay remain largely intact only on Virginia Key and Key Biscayne. While the mangroves of Miami Beach were cut down and their habitat filled to permit development of resorts, Virginia Key retained most of the mangroves on its western Biscayne Bay shoreline. This area has been designated a Critical Wildlife Habitat and protected from human activity of any kind. The plant communities that verge Virginia Key's Atlantic shoreline include one of the oldest surviving Coastal Band Mangrove communities in Miami Dade County. A giant Red Mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) can be seen near the beach in the eastern end of Virginia Key Beach Park and gives some indication of the age of this vestige of the barrier islands' original plant community. In addition to mangroves, the Atlantic shore is fringed with fresh water wetlands, tropical marine hammock, coastal strand, and sea grass communities. These plant communities provide valuable habitat areas for wildlife, including several threatened and endangered species. Federally protected species present at Virginia Key include the Hawksbill Sea Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*), which nests on the island, the West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), which is frequently observed in the near off-shore waters, and the American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*), which has been observed in the lake at Virginia Key Beach Park. The island also provides suitable habitat for other threatened and endangered species including the Gopher Tortoise and a variety of shore and sea bird species, including the Peregrine Falcon, Bald Eagle, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork and Piping Plover. The island is a stop-over for migratory song birds. Together, the coastal plant and animal communities along the Virginia Key shore represent an important vestige of the natural heritage of Biscayne Bay.

Although it retains much of its original vegetation and character, Virginia Key has been heavily impacted by human activity. Along with





Virginia Key in the context of its urban environment.



Bear Cut Preserve at Crandon Park on Key Biscayne, showing the natural condition of Miami's barrier islands.

the large deposit of dredge spoils on its northern tip, the center of the island is occupied by a large sewage treatment plant and a closed landfill. The mangroves on the Atlantic Ocean side of Virginia Key have also been filled in a series of projects associated with construction of the various public facilities on the island, with only isolated remnants surviving. Water channels were created within the Coastal Band as part of a mosquito control project. This and other drainage projects removed most of the original mangroves along the Sewage Treatment Plant Road and altered the water regime of the remaining mangroves. A tidal connection remains, however, and mangrove species have colonized the artificial water bodies. The entire island is heavily infested with exotic vegetation, including extensive stands of Australian Pine, which gives the island a profile very different from undisturbed barrier islands. The Bear Cut Preserve on Key Biscayne's northern tip directly opposite Virginia Key Beach Park has been cleared of exotic vegetation and bears a closer resemblance to the original natural character of the barrier islands.

Virginia Key's role in the urban context is unique in that very little private development has occurred on the island. Together with the sewage plant and landfill, less unsavory public facilities dominate the island, including the publicly owned Miami Marine Stadium and recreational areas operated by Miami Dade County. A number of research institutions and schools occupy the island as well, including the National Marine Fisheries Institute, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, the University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science and the MAST Academy. Miami Seaquarium is the only large private enterprise on the island. Other private enterprises include restaurants and concessions providing recreational equipment rental. Environmental groups have long advocated against private development on the island and in 1999 community activists opposed the development of a private resort on the site of the Virginia Key Beach Park, which had been closed since the park was transferred from the county to the city of Miami in the early 1980s. The Virginia Key Beach Park Civil Rights Task Force was formed to guide land use decisions for the proposed development site, which was subsequently listed in the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of the significance of the beach park's establishment, in 1945, as the only public beach accommodations for African Americans in Miami Dade County. Virginia Key remains the only site within Miami city limits where it is possible to see the natural character of Miami's ecological context.

#### Early inhabitants and uses

There is no archeological evidence of Native American occupation of Virginia Key. However, artifacts from the Tequesta Indians, who were the earliest inhabitants of the region have been found on Key Biscayne and at the mouth of the Miami River, where the Miami Circle indicates the location of a significant trading post or ceremonial center. In addition, Spanish records indicate that Key Biscayne, which was continuous with Virginia Key until the formation of Bear Cut, was inhabited by members of the Tequesta tribe. Spanish records refer to the island's inhabitants as *Vizcaynos*, after a Spanish castaway named Vizcayno who washed ashore on the island in the 1540s following the wreck of a large Spanish Galleon. Vizcayno adopted the lifestyle of the Tequesta inhabitants, took a wife and had a son before eventually returning to Spain. The island and its inhabitants were thereafter known to the Spanish by his name, which was later anglicized to Biscayne. Earlier European encounters with the island included a stop in 1513 by Ponce de Leon, who landed at Cape Florida and named the island Santa Marta.

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the waters around Virginia Key were frequented by Spanish treasure ships returning to Spain from Central and South America through the Florida Straights, frequently wrecking on the reefs along the Florida coast and providing opportunities for plunder. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century a pirate named Black Caesar operated out of Elliot Key until he was captured by the British navy together with his collaborator Blackbeard. In the early 1800s a pirate calling himself Black Caesar II plundered the region until Andrew Jackson captured him in 1828. During this time, runaway slaves, disgruntled sailors and disinherited young men gathered





Pirates once plied the waters off Virginia Key.



Seminoles settled in south Florida after being expelled from north Florida.

in wild places around Florida frequented by pirate ships and established recruiting centers. There is some indication that a recruiting settlement of this type existed on Key Biscayne. Salvaging foundered ships by less piratical means continued to be an important activity for early settlers in Coconut Grove, including both Bahamians and Americans. The home of one such early settler, The Barnacle State Historic Site in Coconut Grove, commands views of Biscayne Bay and the waters beyond and provides a glimpse of this era when Key Biscayne and Virginia Key were wild, outlying islands at the center of a pioneering maritime lifestyle that once characterized Miami. The islands' isolated position and access to the Caribbean Ocean continued to make for convenient landing and jumping off points for a variety of clandestine activities long after the cessation of pirate and salvage activity. According to oral histories of residents who used the beach in the 1930's during the era of prohibition, bootleggers ran rum into Miami by way of Virginia Key.

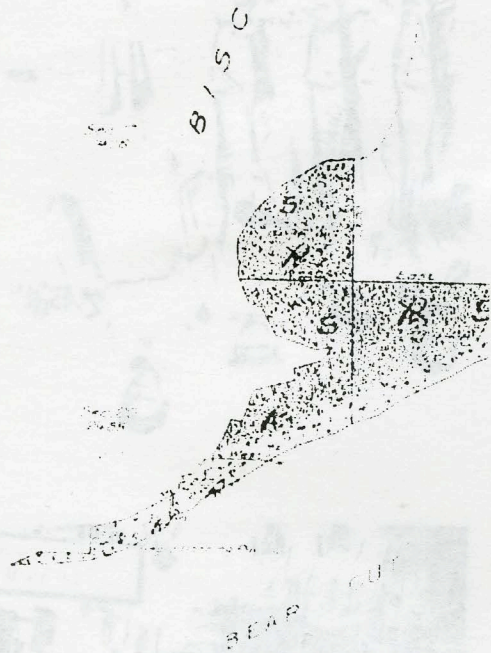
### African American History at Virginia Key

Virginia Key has served as a clandestine haven for African Americans throughout the last three centuries. In addition to the pirate recruiting centers that offered a means of escape to runaway slaves, there is also some suggestion that African Americans made temporary, secret encampments on Key Biscayne and possibly Virginia Key during the 19th century, where they were picked up by ships bound for Nassau. The Bahamas, where slavery was abolished in 1834, was an important destination on the "Underground Railroad." The island continues to the present to provide a landing place for refugees in search of freedom making the reverse journey from Caribbean Islands.

African Americans have also participated in a long history of resistance and refuge that has frequently touched Virginia Key and its environs. During the Spanish colonial period, slavery, in its American form, was illegal in Florida and north Florida became a haven for Africans and Native Americans escaping from Georgia and South Carolina. The native tribes of north Florida, called Seminoles (a word derived from the Spanish word *cimarones*, meaning runaways) included many members and allies of African descent. During the First Seminole War (1817-1818), when the Seminoles were expelled from northern Florida by Andrew Jackson, African refugees joined forces with native tribes in resistance to American forces. Transfer of Florida from Spanish to American control in 1821 introduced harsh slave policies to north Florida and during this transition, the Seminoles, including the Black Seminoles, migrated to the wilder regions of Florida, including especially the Everglades. During the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), resistance to American policies of enslavement and removal of native peoples prompted Seminole attacks on American settlers throughout Florida, including the Miami area, where the legalization of slavery permitted South Carolina planter Richard Fitzpatrick to establish and operate, with slave labor, a plantation on the Miami River. Fort Dallas, located on the north bank of the Miami River at about SE 2nd Avenue, was established on Fitzpatrick's plantation to defend it from Seminole attacks. (The slave quarters from this plantation have been relocated from their original location to Lummus Park.) The Seminole raids included an attack on early settlers at Key Biscayne, who had established a small settlement near the Cape Florida lighthouse, Miami's first built structure. Seminole resistance checked settlement in the area until the end of the Second Seminole War in 1842, when American settlers resumed settlement in the area. (The Wagner House, also relocated from its original location to Lummus Park, was the home of a settler who came to the area in the 1840s.) Settlement on Key Biscayne did not take hold until well into the 1950s, however and was never established on Virginia Key. The single exception to this was the Johnson family, who lived at Virginia Key Beach Park, where Mr. Johnson served as Park Superintendent. The Superintendent's house, the only private dwelling ever established on Virginia Key, was destroyed in the 1980s during filming of an episode of Miami Vice.

While the Johnson family were the first official African American inhabitants of Virginia Key, the official presence of African Americans on the island had begun during World War II, when the island's long history of use by the community was factored into the way the





1918 map of Virginia Key; the notation of a "Negro Dancing Pavilion" may be a later addition. The African American community boated out to Bear Cut during the 1920s and 1930s.



Virginia Beach was the only beach park open to the county's African American citizens until the 1960s.

island was used during the war effort. On May 14, 1942, a Nazi submarine sank a tanker off the coast of Key Biscayne. As American involvement in World War II geared up, Miami Beach became a major training place for soldiers, with over 500,000 soldiers trained on the beaches and barracked in the commandeered hotels. The Gulf Sea Frontier, the Seventh Naval District headquarters, the Submarine Chaser Training Center and a U.S. Naval Air Station to house and service blimps were all established in Miami. The hotels and beaches of Miami Beach were converted to barracks and training grounds by the Army Air Force. Because Dade County code prohibited African Americans from entering the water along the county's world-famous beaches, the US Army established segregated training facilities for black soldiers on Virginia Key, where custom had ceded an isolated segment of the shoreline to use by African Americans. A note on a map prepared in 1918 indicates a "Negro Dancing Pavilion" on the shores of Bear Cut. While this notation may be apocryphal, oral histories indicate that during the 1920s and 1930s, residents of Miami visited Virginia Key by boat with some regularity, establishing an association between the island and the community.

Following the war, African American soldiers returning to the United States began to demand acknowledgement of their contributions during the war effort. In 1944, the Committee on Racial Equality was formed and advocated the use of direct action protest to demand civil rights. The same year the Dade County Interracial Task Force was created and in 1945 the Negro Service Council was created by three Miami professionals, Judge Lawson Thomas, Dr. Ira Davis and Father John Culmer, who had been active since the 1920s as an advocate for improved living conditions for Miami's African American citizens. The trio conceived a direct action protest to demand access to the county's beaches and in May staged a "Wade-in" at the whites-only beach at Baker's Haulover. Prepared to be arrested, the three were instead invited by county officials to discuss the issues. Within a month, the Director of Parks announced a compromise – the creation of a "colored only" beach at Virginia Key.

### African American Experience in Miami Dade County

Like other southern counties, Dade County laws included many codes designed to isolate and demean Americans of African descent. In the same year as the city of Miami's incorporation, 1896, the Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* established the doctrine of "separate but equal" as a legal construct to replace the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which guaranteed equal access to public accommodations for all American citizens, regardless of race or origin and which the Supreme Court had nullified in 1883. The ruling opened the door for local, state and federal laws that dictated the separation of black and white society. Miami and Dade County's segregationist "Jim Crow" laws were similar to those in other regions of the southern United States. Separate residential districts for black citizens were established and withstood legal challenge. A special state legislative act in 1937 upheld the legality of segregated residential districts, limiting the areas where blacks could own property. Throughout the county, a number of black subdivisions were established to isolate the region's black citizens. One of the earliest was known as the "Central Colored District" and was located on the west side of the Florida East Coast Railroad. Workers recruited to the area from the Bahamas and the southern states to work on the new rail line were required to live in the designated district on the west side of the rail line. The self-contained town that developed within this district came to be known as "Colored Town" and later as Overtown, in recognition of its location "over the tracks." Establishment of "colored only" ghettos over the tracks was a technique used throughout the United States that took advantage of the rail line in each town as a convenient and readily recognized barrier.

The city's restricted "colored" districts suffered from overcrowding and a lack of public services including clean water, sanitation, paved streets, health care facilities, adequate housing and economic opportunities. In 1920, blacks made up 32 percent of the city's population but occupied only 10 percent of its space. Church leaders were active in efforts to improve living conditions within these





isolated communities. Overtown, like the other segregated districts, was severely overcrowded and throughout the 1920s Father John Culmer, of St. Agnes Episcopal Church in Overtown, was instrumental in exposing the human toll taken by the city's segregation. In 1929, instigated by Father Culmer's campaign, the Miami Herald published a series of articles exposing the unhealthy living conditions in the neighborhood. National exposure of the conditions as well as increasing activism throughout the United States during the 1930s – including the activity in Miami – influenced the New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration. (Eleanor Roosevelt met with the community activists in Overtown on several occasions.) In response to the national attention initiated by Father Culmer, President Roosevelt sent officials from the Works Project Administration to Miami to investigate. The result was the first federally funded housing project at Liberty Square, which provided all the services that Overtown lacked and marked one of the first federal interventions on behalf of African Americans.

Custom and manners also isolated African Americans from mainstream society and Miami's black neighborhoods coexisted with white society as a parallel, alternative society. Many of the founders of the city of Miami, including early settlers in Coconut Grove, Overtown and Lemon City, made significant investment in the creation of a community that included business, social and civic organizations as well as active churches, which played a central role in black community life and attracted members from the many neighborhoods throughout the county. Despite a degree of prosperity, black life in Miami continued through the 1930s and 1940s to be defined by restrictive laws and customs. During this period, Overtown grew, through consistent activity on the part of the community's many religious, civic, business and social organizations, into a vibrant community. Many businesses in Overtown were owned by blacks and together with a black professional community of doctors, lawyers, architects and educators, served an almost exclusively black clientele. The community also enjoyed an entertainment district centered on NW 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue that drew national headliners – including white and black performers – to its many clubs and nightspots. The name of one such establishment, the Zebra Club acknowledged this realm of integration, as white and black patrons alike made Overtown an entertainment destination. Still, performers of international stature who were making Miami Beach one of the hottest resort destinations in the world, were required, if black, to seek accommodation in "colored only" hotels in Overtown. Similarly, black patrons of mainstream businesses were denied full service – blacks were disallowed from trying on shoes or dresses before purchase and were denied service at "whites only" dining facilities. In addition, blacks were subjected to intimidation by white hate groups. The Ku Klux Klan was active in Miami and in 1925 held a parade on Flagler Street. While good for Overtown business, the persistence of segregation in Miami created a harsh, hostile environment for black citizens.

Among the restrictions and deprivations imposed on Miami's black citizens was exclusion from the county's world-famous beaches. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the community evaded this restriction by boating out to Virginia Key, where an unofficial "Negro beach" was tolerated on the isolated and inaccessible island's Bear Cut shoreline. The beach provided the community with a much needed respite from the harsh realities of life in the city of Miami. Its laid back, natural ambiance recalled the Caribbean islands, which a majority of Miami's black community counted as their place of origin. Miami's black immigrants came from the Bahamas, Trinidad, Tobago, Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti and other nations. The beach offered a place where people from all the disparate neighborhoods and islands could come together as one community and strengthen their bonds with one another as well as with the place they now called home. Creating a sense of belonging was difficult in a place which offered little welcome and undermined the community's sense of being at home by providing daily reminders of outsider status. The beach permitted people to reconnect with the natural world and renew their sense of belonging to a natural order that was beautiful and embracing instead of harsh, ugly and rejecting. The beauty of the natural setting and the stark contrast this made with the crowded, unhealthy conditions of the inner city neighborhoods was a balm for the community. Children ordinarily cooped up in the impoverished atmosphere of inner city neighborhoods were





*Black Miamians waiting at a boat landing on the Miami River for a launch out to Virginia Key; the boat ride out to the beach; the earliest park facilities included a pier and picnic area.*

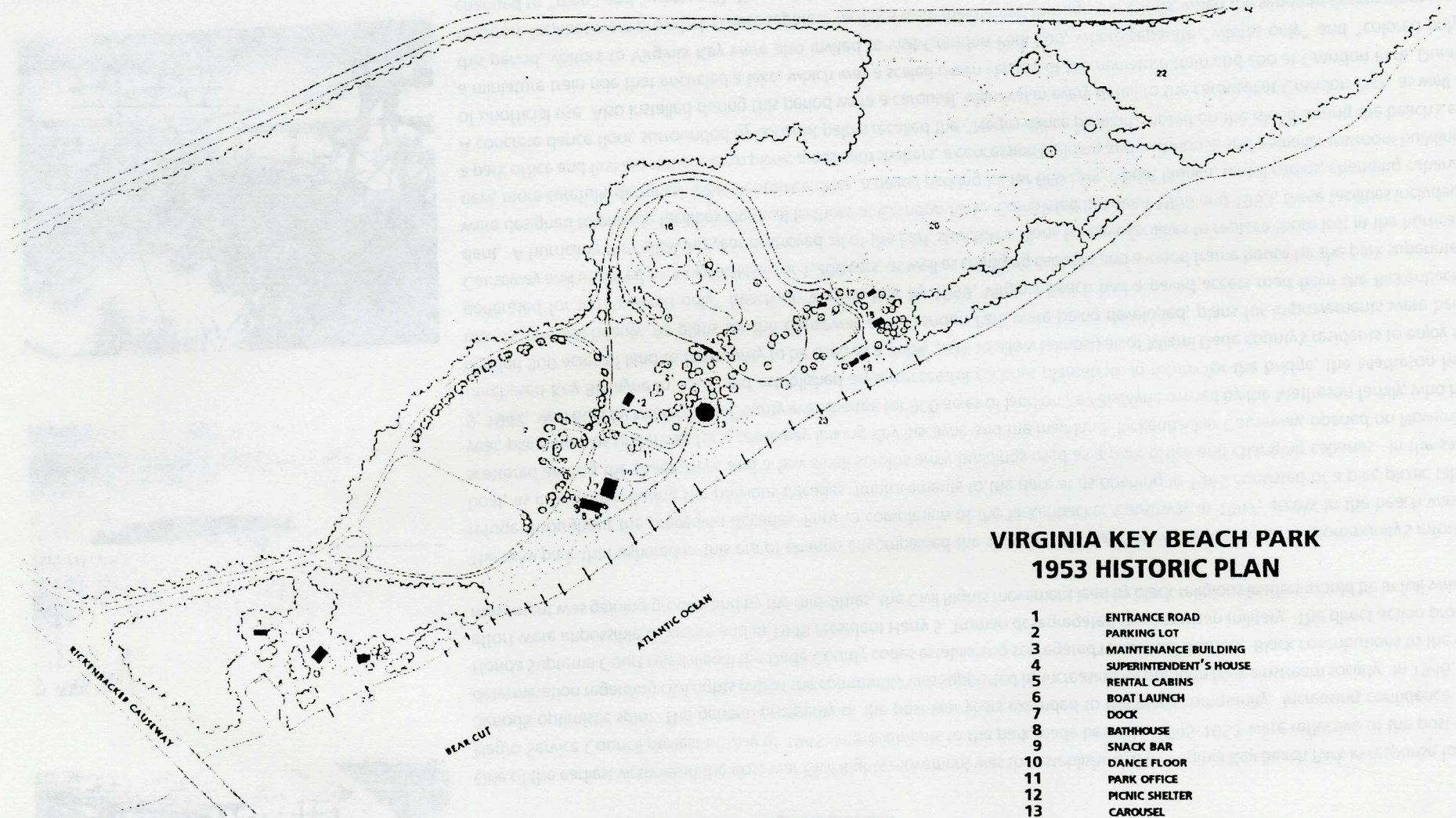
able to discover the same joys that privileged white Miamians and resort visitors enjoyed at the county's other beaches: splashing in the surf, exploring the natural world, discovering sights and experiences to fuel their curiosity and imagination. Without the pressure of white harassment, the community was able to relax and enjoy one another's company. In addition, the beach offered a place where baptisms could be performed. With no other place in the county available for this centrally important ceremony in the community's religious life, Virginia Key filled an important gap. Church groups from throughout the county made their way to this secret, free place of refuge to enjoy this important ritual of spiritual renewal. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the beach was the community's Paradise.

### **The Development of Virginia Key Beach Park**

One of the earliest victories in the post-war Civil Rights movement was the establishment of Virginia Key Beach Park in response to the Negro Service Council protest in May of 1945. Improvements to the park made between 1945-1953 were reflective of the post-war period's optimistic spirit. The general prosperity of the post war years extended to the black community. Increasing confidence and determination regarding civil rights within the community was supported by increasing recognition by mainstream society. In 1946, the Florida Supreme Court ruled illegal the Dade County codes establishing segregated residential districts. Black contributions to the war effort were impossible to ignore and in 1948 President Harry S. Truman desegregated the American military. The direct action protest movement was gaining ground and by the mid-fifties, the Civil Rights movement led by black religious leaders would be in full swing.

The new park that ushered in this era of change encompassed the shoreline of Bear Cut which had been the community's informal refuge throughout the preceding decades. Prior to completion of the Rickenbacker Causeway in 1947, access to the beach was by boat, as it had been during the previous decades. Improvements to the park at its opening in 1945 consisted of a pier, picnic tables scattered among the shade trees and a few small surplus army buildings used as a park office and changing cabanas. In the same year, planning was underway for a causeway linking Key Biscayne and the mainland. Rickenbacker Causeway, opened on November 9, 1947, was built by Miami Dade County in exchange for 900 acres of land on Key Biscayne owned by the Matheson family, who had purchased Key Biscayne in 1909 and established an unsuccessful coconut plantation. In return for the bridge, the Matheson heirs deeded 900 acres of land to the county to be used as a public park to allow (almost) all of Miami Dade county's residents to enjoy the island's unusual beauty. As plans for the Causeway and Crandon Park were being developed, plans for improvements were being generated for the "colored only" beach on Virginia Key. By 1949, Virginia Beach had a paved access road from the Rickenbacker Causeway and unpaved parking facilities for 1,200 cars, as well as changing cabanas and a wood frame house for the park superintendent. A hurricane the following year destroyed all of the park structures. Plans for new facilities to replace those lost in the hurricane were designed to provide facilities identical to those at Crandon Park. Completed between 1950 and 1953, these facilities included a new, more carefully designed, paved entrance drive, a paved parking lot for 660 cars, a boat launch, rental cabins, changing cabanas, a park office and first aid station, lawn picnic areas with shelters, a concession building and bathhouse and a smaller restroom building. A concrete dance floor, surrounded by coconut palms recalled the "Negro dance pavilion" noted on the island during the beach's era of unofficial use. Also installed during this period were a carousel, identical in every detail to the carousel at Crandon Park, as well as a miniature train ride that encircled a lake, which was a scaled down version of the miniature train and zoo at Crandon Park. During this period, visitors to Virginia Key were also invited to visit Crandon Park Zoo, where separate "whites only" and "colored only" restroom facilities were provided. (These separate facilities were maintained through the 1960s, when the separate designations were changed to "men" and "women.") The park facilities surviving from this period are listed in the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of their significance in the civil rights struggle of Miami Dade County's African American community. Public expenditure for high-quality recreational facilities for African Americans initiated a significant change in the status and quality of life of the community.





## VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK 1953 HISTORIC PLAN

- |    |                           |
|----|---------------------------|
| 1  | ENTRANCE ROAD             |
| 2  | PARKING LOT               |
| 3  | MAINTENANCE BUILDING      |
| 4  | SUPERINTENDENT'S HOUSE    |
| 5  | RENTAL CABINS             |
| 6  | BOAT LAUNCH               |
| 7  | DOCK                      |
| 8  | BATHHOUSE                 |
| 9  | SNACK BAR                 |
| 10 | DANCE FLOOR               |
| 11 | PARK OFFICE               |
| 12 | PICNIC SHELTER            |
| 13 | CAROUSEL                  |
| 14 | MINITRAIN STATION, TRACKS |
| 15 | MINITRAIN TUNNEL          |
| 16 | LAKE                      |
| 17 | PICNIC SHELTERS           |
| 18 | RESTROOMS                 |
| 19 | CABANAS                   |
| 20 | SAND PATHS                |
| 21 | LAWN AND SHADE TREES      |
| 22 | NATIVE VEGETATION         |
| 23 | BEACH GROINS              |

Sources:  
1977 aerial photo montage, USCOE Shoreline Stabilization Project Report

"Virginia Beach Cabana Area Development"  
1"=40' 5/9/56

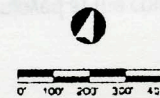
Board of County Commissioners, Dade County, Florida  
Department of Parks, A.D. Barnes, Director

"Virginia Beach Proposed Lake Layout and Grading Plan"  
1"=40' 6/9/58

Dade County Department of Parks NC 243

"Virginia Beach Pavement and Water Line Extension to Service Area"  
1"=40' 5/27/57

Dade County Department of Parks



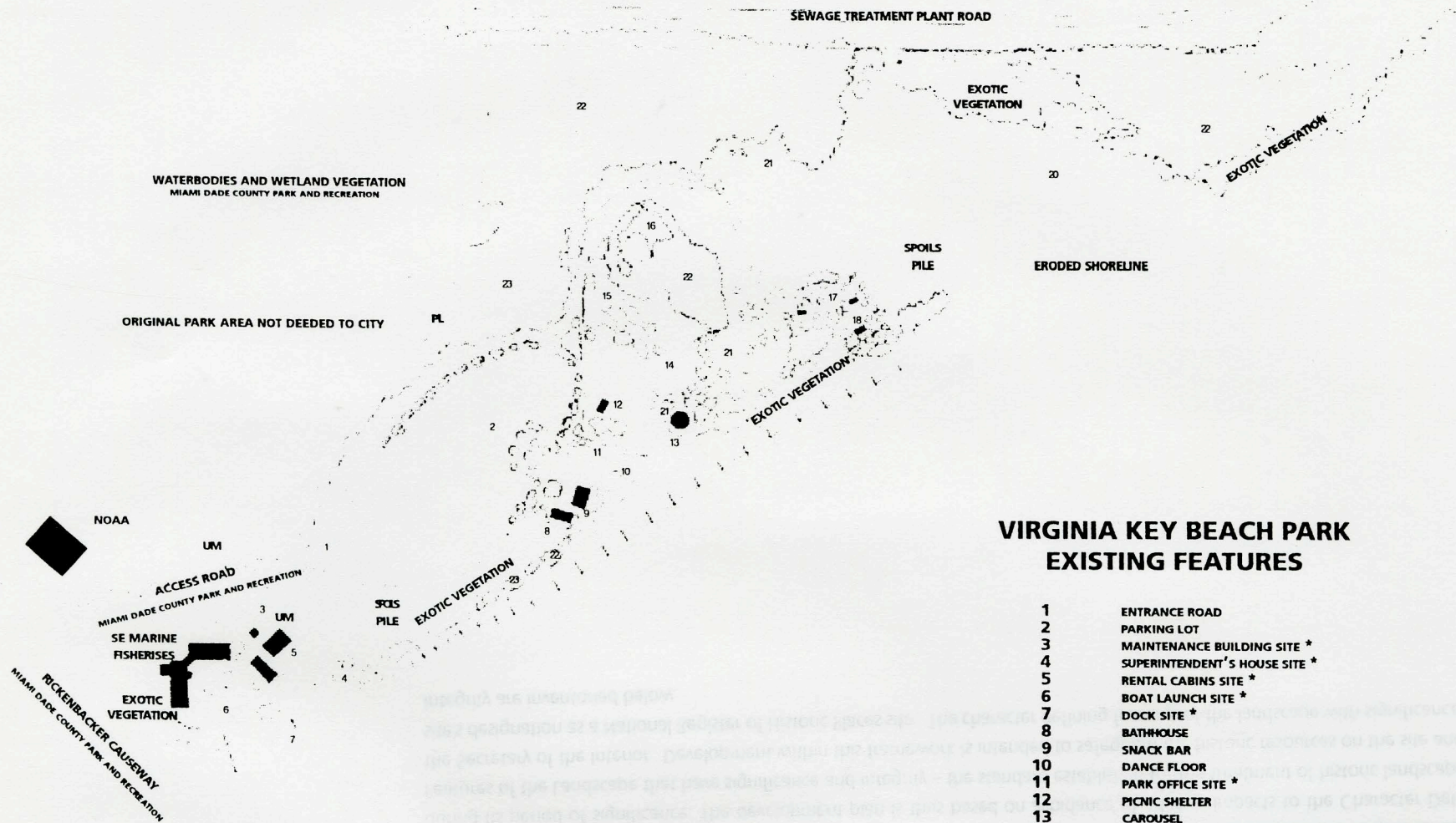


## SITE INVENTORY

In 2002, Virginia Key Beach Park was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as "a property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to broad patterns of our history" in recognition of the establishment of the first public facilities for African Americans in Miami Dade as a turning point in civil rights. The property's significance in the areas of Ethnic Heritage, Recreation and Social History is based on development of the park during the period 1945-53. Features of the park dating from this period of significance, including both contributing structures and the park's landscape setting, require preservation in order to retain the National Register designation. The Civil Rights Task Force empowered by the City of Miami to guide future development on the site established goals that include historic preservation, commemoration of the park's history, and provision of educational and recreational opportunities. The goal of historic preservation requires that the development plan for the park provide commemorative, educational and recreational opportunities within the context of the features that defined the character of the historic landscape during its period of significance. The development plan is thus based on avoidance of adverse impacts to the Character Defining Features of the Landscape that have significance and integrity – the standard established for the treatment of historic landscapes by the Secretary of the Interior. Development within this framework is intended to safeguard the historic resources on the site and the site's designation as a National Register of Historic Places site. The character defining features of the landscape with significance and integrity are inventoried below.

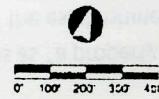
EXISTING LEVITAGES  
VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK





### VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK EXISTING FEATURES

- 1 ENTRANCE ROAD
- 2 PARKING LOT
- 3 MAINTENANCE BUILDING SITE \*
- 4 SUPERINTENDENT'S HOUSE SITE \*
- 5 RENTAL CABINS SITE \*
- 6 BOAT LAUNCH SITE \*
- 7 DOCK SITE \*
- 8 BATHHOUSE
- 9 SNACK BAR
- 10 DANCE FLOOR
- 11 PARK OFFICE SITE \*
- 12 PICNIC SHELTER
- 13 CAROUSEL
- 14 MINITRAIN STATION, TRACKS SITE \*
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- 16 LAKE
- 17 PICNIC SHELTERS
- 18 RESTROOMS
- 19 CABANAS SITE \*
- 20 SAND PATHS
- 21 LAWN AND SHADE TREES
- 22 NATIVE VEGETATION
- 23 BEACH GROINS



\* FEATURE LOST

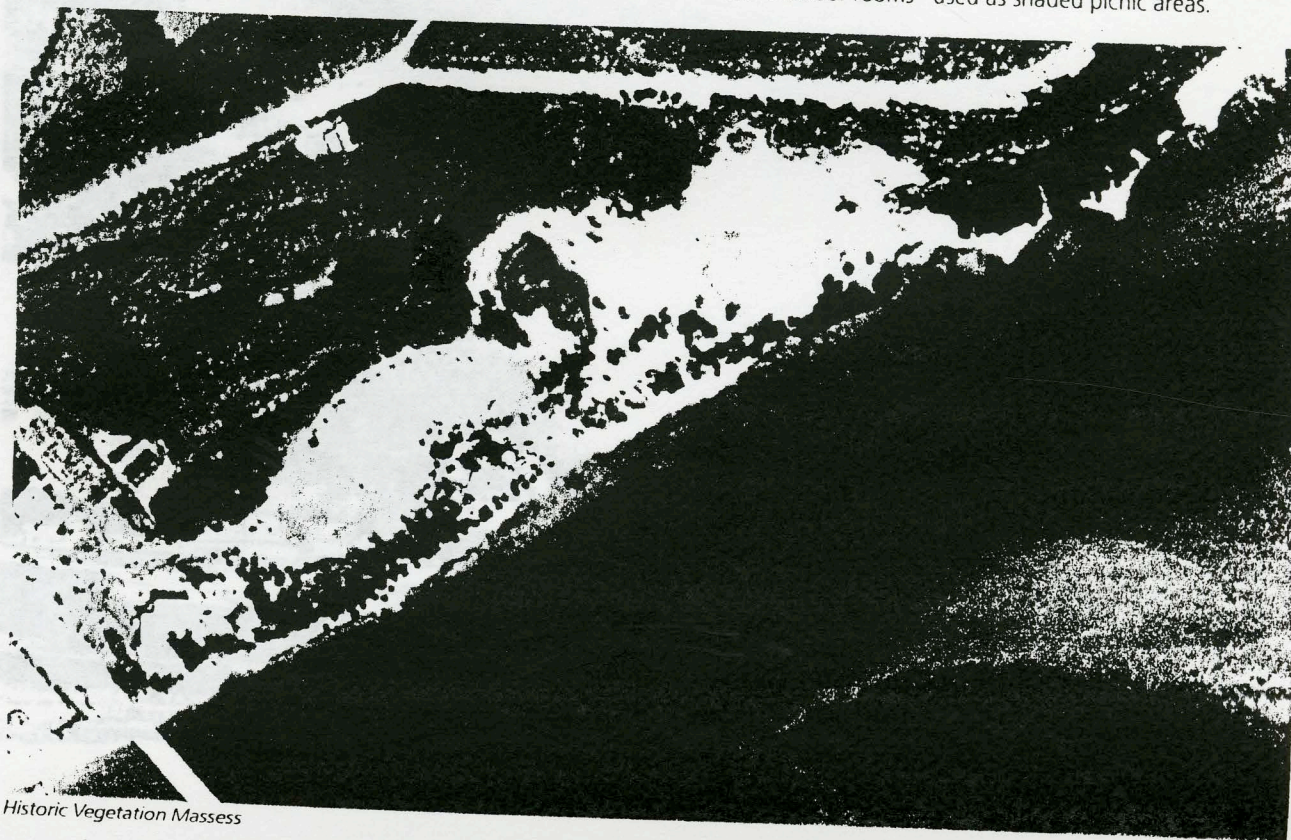




### Spatial Organization and Land Patterns

During its period of significance and throughout its history of human use, the Atlantic Ocean shoreline has remained the central organizing element of the beach park site, with facilities and outdoor spaces all organized along the water's edge. The park is bounded on the north by a tree line and divided into two distinct areas by a lake in the center of the park, now surrounded by a dense mass of vegetation. The park's built facilities are concentrated in the area west of the lake.

During the park's period of significance, the shoreline of the western area was defined by a band of coconut trees along the water's edge. This grove, of which only scattered remnants remain, was a significant feature of the park's spatial organization. The grove served as an "outdoor room" that provided a shaded area for seating and circulation that was continuous with the beach and which permitted views of the water's edge from the interior of the park. In the area east of the lake, a band of more natural coastal vegetation, since lost to shoreline erosion, separated a large open meadow from the shoreline and defined a more inward focused space. Paths and occasional breaks in the vegetation mass provided views and access to the water's edge. Cabanas occupied a position at one such break. During the time since the park's period of significance, growth of vegetation along the northern boundary of the park has separated this area from the road, to which it was formerly open. Shade tree clusters and picnic facilities were scattered on the landward side of the coastal vegetation and defined small "outdoor rooms" used as shaded picnic areas.



*Historic Vegetation Masses*

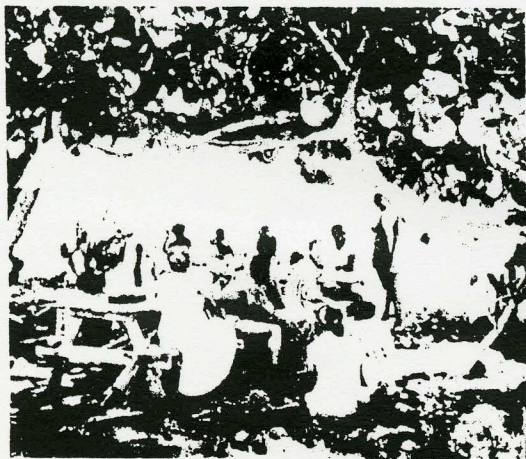




Historic shoreline vegetation defined "outdoor rooms": the coconut grove (above); Seagrape trees (below).



Historic vegetation masses defined the park's spatial organization: the historic coconut grove and lawn areas oriented toward the shoreline



Native shade trees still define outdoor rooms along the park's shoreline but native and exotic vegetation has replaced the coconut grove





*Palm-shaded vantage points with views of the Atlantic Ocean were the park's most significant characteristic*

## Views and Vantage Points

Views and vantage points within Virginia Key Beach Park that are character defining features of significance and integrity are those that establish the relationship of the various cultural features to the natural setting and which establish the relationship of the park to the context of the ecological and urban environment.

The recreational and social importance of the park continues to be based on its natural features as a barrier island with considerable accessible shoreline and thus views that typify important characteristics of the topographical setting are key character defining features. The Atlantic Ocean provides an important backdrop from vantage points throughout the park, but especially from the shoreline. The juxtaposition of the recreational facilities with the ocean is visible from a variety of vantage points and places the recreational facilities within the unique ecological context of the region. Several vantage points within the park offer views of the natural state of the shoreline and provide an important contrast to the more manicured area in the vicinity of the concession building, restroom and carousel. These vantage points include the area of the park east of the lake and mini-train track, where remnants of vegetation typical of barrier islands remain. Views of the eastern shore of the park are evocative of natural barrier island dune and coastal hammock communities, although infestation with Australian Pine has significantly altered the character of the vegetation.

No significant development is visible from within the park, establishing the park's unique place within the urban context. The park is visible within its undeveloped context from vantage points on Key Biscayne, the Rickenbacker Causeway and the water.

Another significant vantage point within the park is the entrance, which is important for providing an overview of the context of the recreational facilities and their relationship to one another. The view from the entrance encompasses a large area of the park and establishes its generous size as a first impression. The view includes the curving entrance drive, the manicured lawn area and parking lot within the entrance drive loop, glimpses of the ocean and park facilities, groves of shade trees and the vegetated backdrops that define the park's spatial organization. Significant backdrops from this vantage point are the vegetation lining the curving entrance drive and the mass of vegetation surrounding the lake, which conceals the eastern half of the park from view and prevents the entire park from being visible from the entrance. This "concealing" of the full extent of the park evokes a place that has significant size and complexity and supports the impression that the park is generously proportioned, with much to be discovered. This vegetation mass was not present during the park's period of significance, although a dense cluster of trees between the lake and parking area in the vicinity of the mini-train tunnel would have had the same effect. The view of the gracious curve of the entrance road as it passes around the lake and disappears is also important in establishing the generous size of the park and the leisurely character of movement through the landscape.

Individual elements visible from multiple perspectives within the park are prominent landmarks representing the park's recreational function. The dance pavilion, once surrounded by a circle of coconut palms, was a significant landmark. The in-tact carousel, restroom, concession building and mini-train tunnel were also important landmarks during the park's period of significance. Foundations and other remnants remain of other important landmarks, including the cabanas, park office and mini-train tracks and station. The superintendent's house, rental cabins, pier and boat launch were important landmarks of which remnants remain off-site.

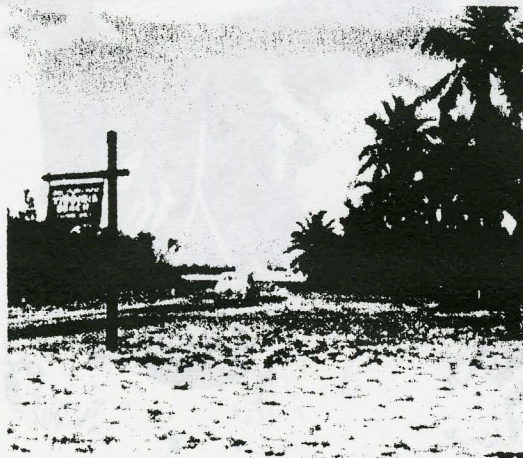




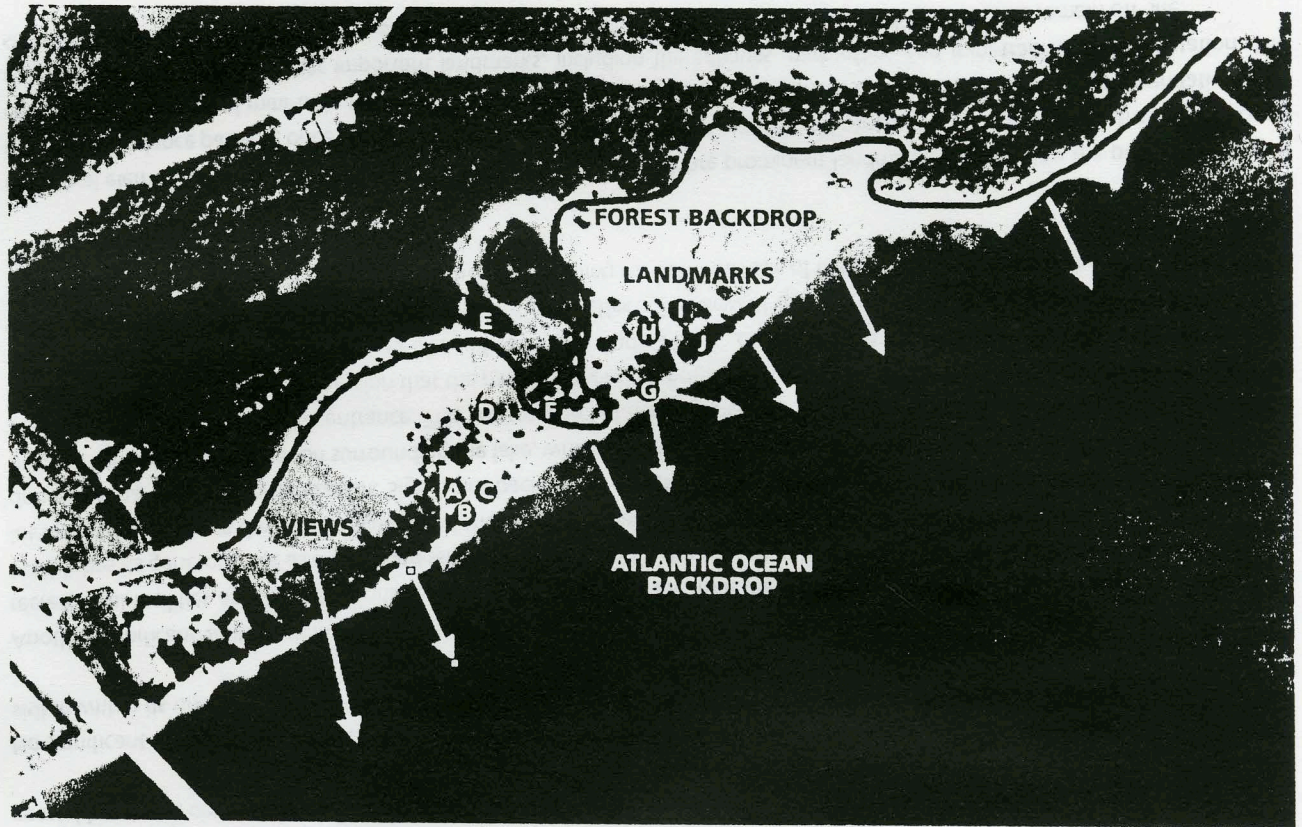
No significant urban development is visible from the park.



Vegetation masses remain as a backdrop through the park.



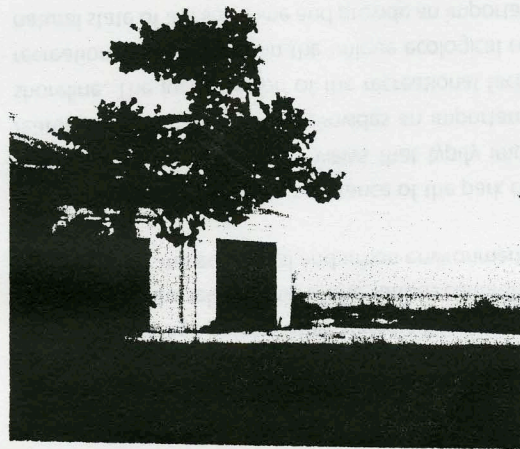
The entrance view has been altered by development along the entrance road.



The Atlantic Ocean remains as the park's the most significant backdrop. Landmarks include many surviving historic structures.

### Surviving Landmarks

- A Concession Building
- B Bathhouse
- C Dance Pavilion
- D Picnic Shelter
- E Minitrain Tunnel
- F Minitrain Station (foundation only)
- G Cabanas (foundation only)
- H Picnic Shelter
- I Picnic Shelter
- J Restroom



The Carousel is one of many remaining landmarks.



### Topography and Drainage

Virginia Key Beach Park's current topography consists, as it did in the period of significance, of a very slightly sloping expanse of fill that replaced much of the natural mangrove and dunes. Around the perimeter of the park there are man-made waterbodies constructed as part of a mosquito control system. The water bodies are noted on a survey dating from the 1960s but their date of construction is not known. Large mangrove trees in this area provide evidence that natural wetland topography existed before the creation of the channels. The channels are linked to the remnants of a natural coastal band mangrove community at the northern end of the park, which includes a small pond. A cluster of large, extremely old red and black mangrove trees near the shore marks the likely location of a connection between the coastal band mangrove and the ocean. There is an artificial lake in the center of the park with a peninsula extending into its center. The lake was constructed in 1958 as an enhancement to the minitrain ride. The lake is connected via a culvert to the channel system on the north side of the entrance road. The tidal connection of this drainage system is not clear. There is no evident tidal connection between the coastal band mangrove along the entire Atlantic shoreline of Virginia Key, though the wetlands are brackish and thus may be tidally influenced, perhaps from the north via culverts under the Sewage Treatment Plant Road.

The inland fill area was created incrementally in association with various building projects, including, possibly, training fields for African American soldiers during WWII. The entrance road is generally parallel to the extent of fill, which is more or less twenty yards north of the current tree line. The main recreational facilities are slightly lower than the rest of the park's inland filled area. There are two large spoils piles in the park that were placed there after the park's period of significance.

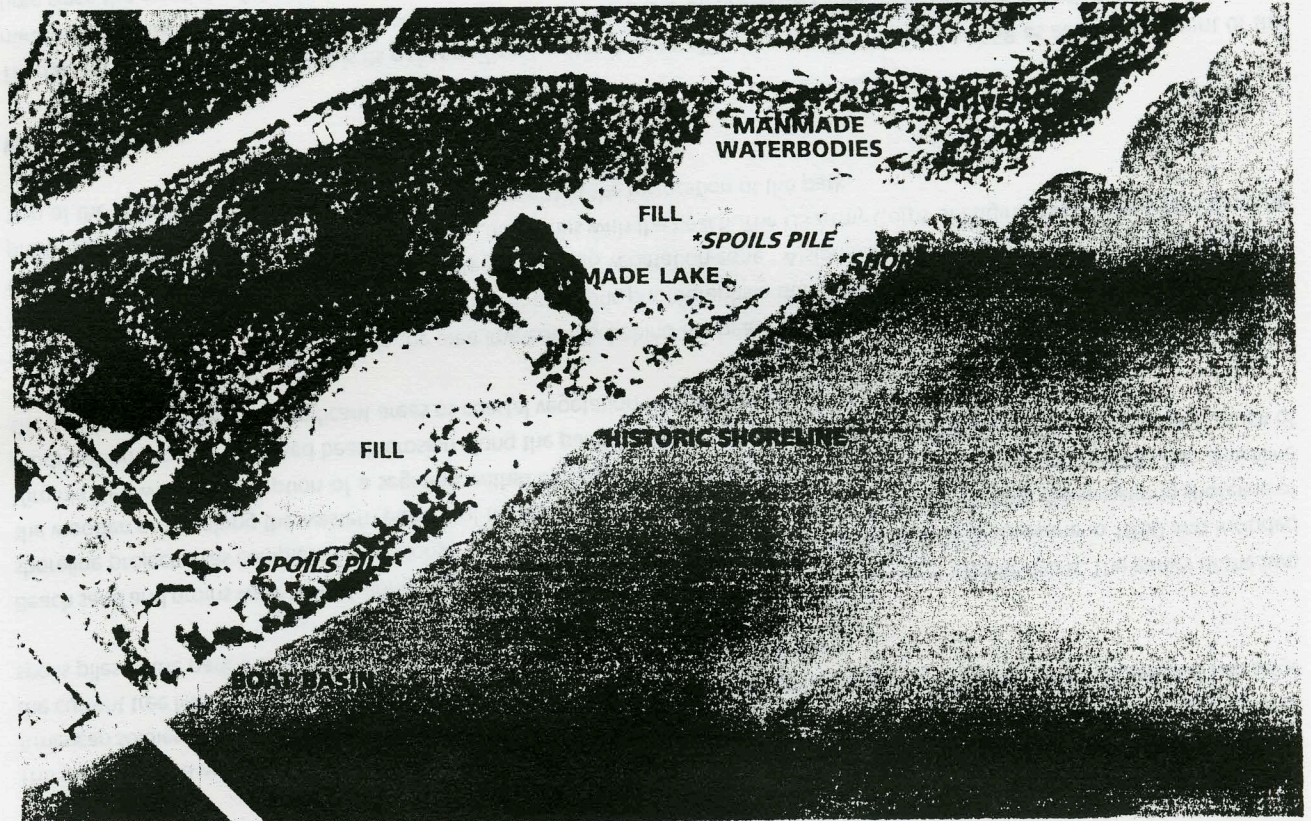
Beach sand and groins were placed along the entire length of the shore in two separate shoreline modifications. The earlier of the two shoreline projects was completed in response to damage caused to the newly established park by a hurricane in 1950 and included the wooden groins along the western portion of the shore. In the 1970s granite groins were placed along the remaining shoreline of Virginia Key with the exception of a segment within the park to the east of the wooden groins. The second of the two shoreline modification projects increased beach erosion along the park's shoreline where no groins had been placed in either project. Much of the park's beach area and significant areas of coastal vegetation have been lost.

During the park's period of significance the area immediately behind the beach on the eastern end was occupied by coastal vegetation. Based on the coastal vegetation that is evident in historic photographs a dune berm similar to the existing vestige east of the carousel building can be assumed to have existed within this vegetation zone. A significant area of the shoreline, visible in historic photographs, consisted of a flat sand esplanade continuous with the beach. The US Army Corps of Engineers has planned a stabilization of the shoreline to be completed as the first element in the restoration of the park.

### Water Features

The lake at the center of the park is its only significant water feature. The lake was developed in 1958 as an enhancement of the mini-train feature and included two islands accessible from the shore by causeways. The mini-train tracks encircled the lake. In the time since the creation of the lake, mangrove vegetation has been established around the lake and obscured the causeways leading to the islands. The natural vegetation has fulfilled unrealized plans to create a "botanical garden" equal to the parallel entertainment feature at Crandon Park, where a mini-train made a circuit through the zoo and gardens.





Historic topographic and drainage features: shoreline erosion, spoils piles and settlement in filled areas have altered the historic character. Settlement has created uneven, unstable areas in lawn areas as well as low points throughout the park that flood.





A shoreline coconut grove was the park's most significant character defining feature. Only scattered trees remain.

## Vegetation

During the park's period of significance, its predominant vegetation consisted of extensive natural vegetation as well as park plantings that were important elements in the spatial definition of the park. Plantings included lawn areas and clusters of shade trees which were predominantly Seagrape, Buttonwood and Ficus. A grove of mature coconut palms existed along the entire sand esplanade in the western area of the site during the 1960s and likely dates from the period of significance. The palm grove was a significant character defining feature of the site's vegetation, as well as its spatial structure. The coconut grove provided shady walking and seating areas along the shore that significantly extended the usable area of the beach. The height of the trees and the extent of the grove were both magnificent and unusual and contributed significantly to the perception of the beach as a high quality recreational setting. The grove set the park apart as a unique and valued asset of the African American community. The circle of palms surrounding the dance pavilion was also a significant feature of the parks vegetation and a visual icon of the park.

Native plant species were also a significant component of the park's historic vegetation. Virtually no portion of the site vegetation is unaffected by invasive exotic vegetation that has established itself during the years since the park's period of significance. Human-related impacts to the site vegetation are abundantly obvious throughout the site, though there are a number of areas that contain what likely should be considered as "Historical" Remnant Vegetation, i.e., vegetation that remains from the time prior to much of the site disturbance and development as a beach park. Individual trees can be identified as having been present during the park's period of significance. An important historical remnant is the Coastal Band Mangrove remnant at the park's eastern end. Mangrove and freshwater wetlands, coastal strand and tropical marine hammock communities can all be found within the park. These plant communities include a number of rare plants such as the Biscayne Prickly Ash, broad leaf spider lily, burrowing four o'clock, necklace pod, sea lavender and the Beach Jaquemontia, which are found in the coastal strand and hammock areas. The discovery of a both a male and female specimen of the federally protected Biscayne Prickly Ash (*Zanthoxylum coriaceum*) during exotics eradication has led to the reestablishment of the largest colony of the species in the United States in the restoration area north of Virginia Key Beach Park. The major plant communities present on the site include:

**Seagrass:** The Atlantic Ocean shoreline of the island is home of a seagrass bed that includes shoal grass (*Halodule wrightii*), manatee grass (*Syrigodium filiforme*) and turtle grass (*Thalassia testudinum*), which provide important habitat for several endangered sea turtle species as well as manatees, wading birds and other sealife.

**Dune:** This association is characterized by vegetation typical of coastal, sandy sites in south Florida that have little foot traffic and are within the salt-spray zone. There are a number of plant species present here that are relatively typical of this situation, including railroad vine (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*), scaevola (*Scaevola plumieri*), dune sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*), sea purslane (*Sesuvium portulacastrum*), Seagrape (*Coccoloba uvifera*) and a limited population of sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*). These species are typical of this harsh pioneer zone. Historic photographs indicate that during the park's period of significance, this area was used as a sand esplanade with heavy foot traffic and included little beach strand vegetation west of the cabanas. This community has an exotic species component which includes Wedelia, Brazilian pepper, earleaf acacia and Australian pine. Much of the Scaevola in this zone is the exotic species (*Scaevola sericea*), a listed pest species.

**Coastal Strand:** This association is a higher-elevation area that parallels the dune. This association is heavily invaded by Australian pines and Brazilian pepper. In addition to these two species, other canopy components include coconut, Seagrape, and seaside



mahoe. Some plants remain from the time that the site was in use as a park, including remnants of the coconut grove that was once here and Seagrape trees. Individual trees can be identified as having been present when the site was in use. Understory plants include many of the species seen in the beach strand dune, as well as a strong component of coin vine. An occasional red mangrove seedling is present. The leeward side of this association generally borders on a sandy service road, and is extremely heavily invaded by exotic species.

**Wetland Forest:** The 1999 report for the park site prepared by DERM (Draft Virginia Key Biological Evaluation: DERM Environmentally Endangered Lands study) states that this area is tidally influenced and thus this association qualifies as jurisdictional wetlands. Based on historical aerial photographs and the 1966 survey which identifies "mosquito control ditches," it is evident that this portion of the site represents a secondary growth wetland area. The area includes remnant natural wetland vegetation as well as native and exotic species established around ditches and water bodies related to earthwork. Virtually all of the vegetation surrounding the lake, with the exception of a cluster of coconut palms near the north exit of the mini train tunnel has been established since the park's period of significance.

Transects of the area between the disturbed edge and the ditch bordering the Sewage Treatment Plant Road characterize an association containing native species, including red and black mangroves – some quite large and representing historical remnant vegetation – as well as leather ferns, cabbage palms, etc. and a major component contributed by Australian pine and Brazilian pepper. As soon as the elevation drops off from the disturbed edge, leather fern begins to become a frequent component of the understory. Often, the ground is heavily covered by Australian pine needles, and this, the soil and water regime, coupled with the low light levels reaching the understory, likely contributes to the generally low species diversity in this association. There are watercourses present within portions of this association, as well as open, likely permanent, water bodies.

**Mixed Forest.** This association is found at the eastern end of the site, approximately at the level of the southerly parking lots associated with the Virginia Key Beach. The vegetation in this areas is, as all of the rest of this site, comprised of both native and exotic species. This area contains some of the species that are typical of coastal hammocks as well as of coastal band mangrove communities. Several extremely large mangrove specimens, including both Red Mangrove and a Black Mangrove, indicate an historically important remnant community, perhaps among the oldest in Miami Dade County.

**Disturbed Edge:** This association borders much of the open portions of the site adjacent to parking lots and other cleared and maintained areas. This association occupies open portions of the site that were modified from their original condition; earthwork, including grading and filling have contributed to the formation of this association. It is heavily invaded by exotic plant species including Brazilian pepper, crowfoot grass, colubrina, and Australian pine; it also includes many native species such as buttonwood, gray nickerbean, native morning glories. Comparison of the current treeline with historic photographs indicates that much of this association has been established since the park's period of significance. The land north of this disturbed edge slopes down rapidly. The sharpness of this edge is the result of previous land contouring rather than any naturally occurring topographic feature.

Restoration of the native plant communities planned by the US Army Corps of Engineers and Miami Dade County Department of Environmental Resources Management is based on removal of exotic vegetation throughout the park in addition to restoration of three natural plant communities, including Coastal Strand, Tropical Hardwood Hammock and Wetlands. A Freshwater Pond with a wetland fringe is also planned. The plant species identified by the US Army Corps of Engineers as native to the site include the following:





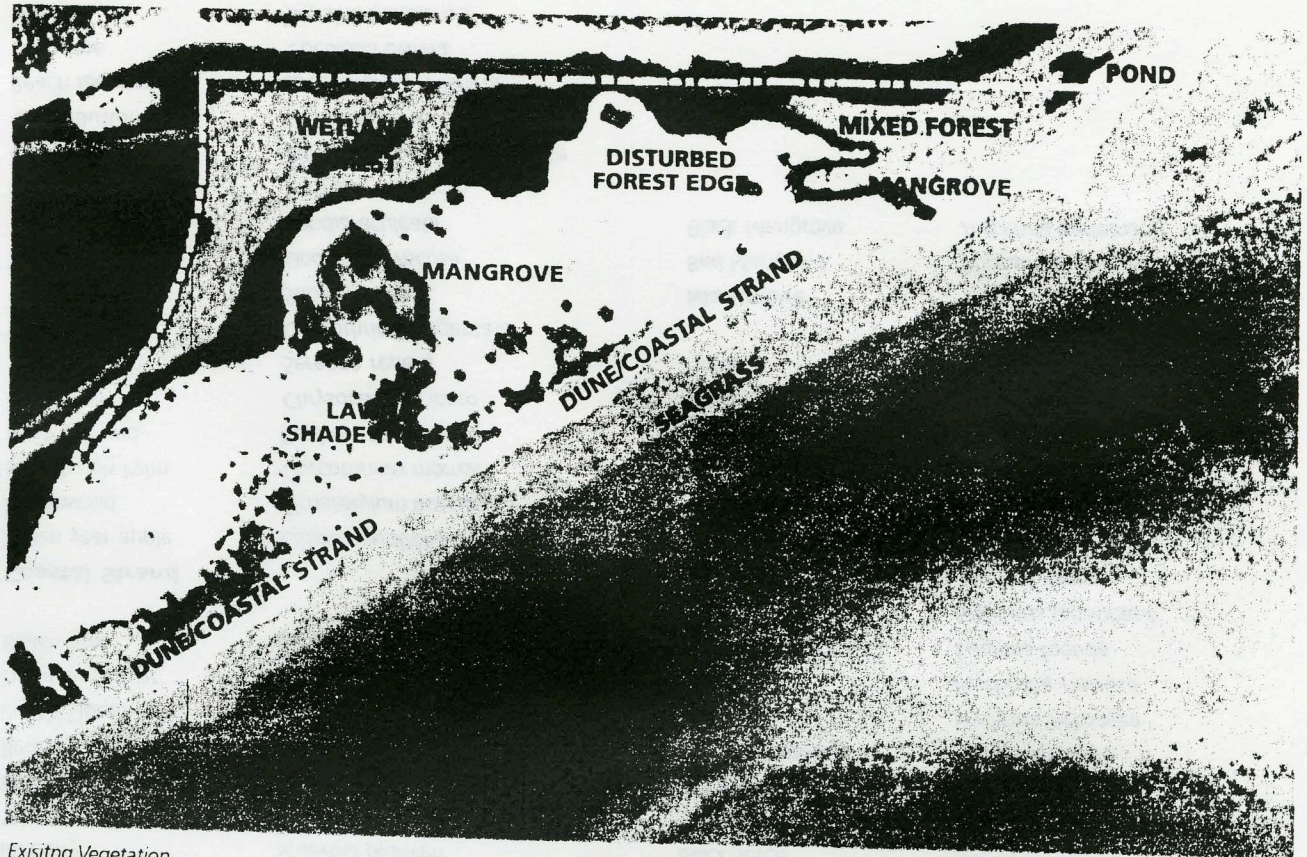
Coastal Strand: Seagrass and invasive Australian Pine



Mixed forest: Tropical Hardwood Hammock species, Mangroves and exotic vegetation



Remnants of the original coastal band mangrove: a giant red mangrove tree



Existing Vegetation

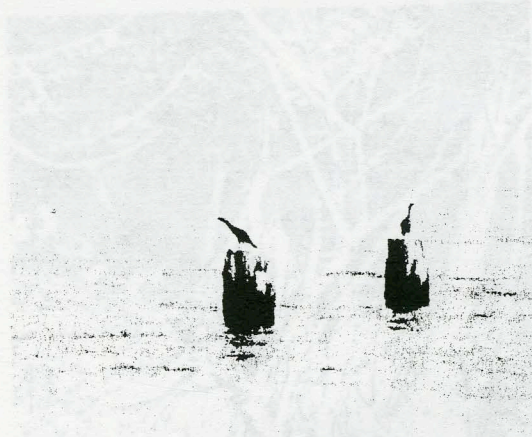


Mangroves surrounding the lake: a suitable habitat for the American Crocodile, which has been observed in the lake

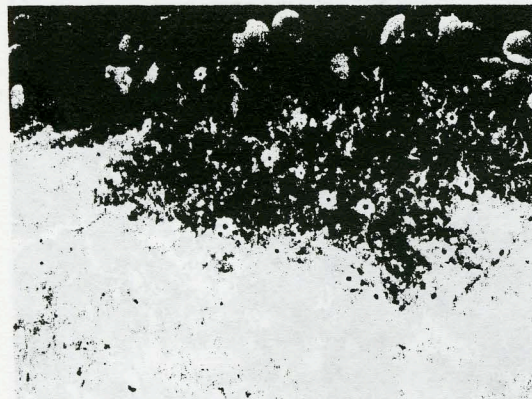


The pond in the mixed forest





Seagrasses are found offshore along the entire park



Dune pioneer: Beach dune flower



Dune pioneer: sea oats

### Plant Species Native to Virginia Key Beach Park

#### Tidal Marsh

|                     |                              |
|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Gulf Cordgrass      | <i>Spartina spp.</i>         |
| Saltmarsh Cordgrass | <i>Spartina alterniflora</i> |
| Salt Wort           | <i>Batis maritima</i>        |
| Saltgrass           | <i>Distichlis spicata</i>    |

#### Dune

|                   |                                |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Sea Oat           | <i>Uniola paniculata</i>       |
| Sea Oxeye Daisy   | <i>Borrchia frutescens</i>     |
| Sea lavender      | <i>Mallotonia gnaphalodes</i>  |
| Bay cedar         | <i>Suriana maritima</i>        |
| Salt Joint Grass  | <i>Paspalum vaginatum</i>      |
| Inkberry          | <i>Scaevola plumieri</i>       |
| Sea Purslane      | <i>Sesuvium portulacastrum</i> |
| Baker's Cordgrass | <i>Spartina spp.</i>           |
| Beach Creeper     | <i>Ernodea littoralis</i>      |
| Beach Elder       | <i>Iva imbricata</i>           |
| Dune Sunflower    | <i>Helianthus debilis</i>      |
| Beach Star        | <i>Remirea maritima</i>        |

#### Coastal Strand

|                    |                                    |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Seven year apple   | <i>Casasia clusiifolia</i>         |
| Fiddlewood         | <i>Cirharexylum fruticosum</i>     |
| Key Thatch Palm    | <i>Coccothrinax morrisii</i>       |
| Necklace pod       | <i>Sophora tomentosa</i>           |
| Cocoplum           | <i>Chrysobalanus icaco</i>         |
| Saw Palmetto       | <i>Serenoa repens</i>              |
| Silver Palm        | <i>Coccothrinax argentata</i>      |
| Cabbage Palm       | <i>Sabal palmetto</i>              |
| Varnish Leaf       | <i>Dodonaea viscosa</i>            |
| White Indigo Berry | <i>Randia aculeata</i>             |
| Coral bean         | <i>Erythrina herbacea</i>          |
| Cats Claw          | <i>Pithecellobium guadalupense</i> |
| Green Buttonwood   | <i>Conocarpus erectus</i>          |
| Beach Jaquemontia  | <i>Jaquemontia reclinata</i>       |
| Seagrape           | <i>Cocoloba uvifera</i>            |
| Myrsine            | <i>Myrsine quianensis</i>          |
| Island Marlberry   | <i>Ardisia escallonioides</i>      |
| Saltbush           | <i>Baccharis halimifolia</i>       |

#### Tropical Hardwood Hammock

|                 |                                      |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Cinnecord       | <i>Acacia choriophylla</i>           |
| Strangler Fig   | <i>Ficus aurea</i>                   |
| Gumbo Limbo     | <i>Bursera simaruba</i>              |
| Florida privet  | <i>Forestiera segregata</i>          |
| Jamaica caper   | <i>Capparis cynophallophora</i>      |
| Lignum vitae    | <i>Guaiaacum sanctum</i>             |
| Satin Leaf      | <i>Chrysophyllum oliviforme</i>      |
| Bloily          | <i>Guapira bicolor</i>               |
| Pigeon Plum     | <i>Cocoloba diversifolia</i>         |
| Wild Tamarind   | <i>Lysiloma bahamensis</i>           |
| Mastic          | <i>Mastichodendron foetidissimum</i> |
| Black Torch     | <i>Amyris elemifera</i>              |
| Joewood         | <i>Jacquinia keyensis Mez.</i>       |
| White stopper   | <i>Eugenia axillaris</i>             |
| Jamaica dogwood | <i>Piscidia piscipula</i>            |
| Coral bean      | <i>Erythrina herbacea</i>            |
| Wild Coffee     | <i>Psychotria nervosa</i>            |
| Spanish Stopper | <i>Eugenia foetida</i>               |
| Soapberry       | <i>Sapindus saponaria</i>            |
| Wild Lime       | <i>Zanthoxylum sp.</i>               |
| Mahogany        | <i>Swietenia mahogoni</i>            |
| Wax myrtle      | <i>Myrica cerifer</i>                |
| Beautyberry     | <i>Callicarpa americana</i>          |
| Red Bay         | <i>Persea borbonia</i>               |
| Black Ironwood  | <i>Krugiodendron ferreum</i>         |
| Firebush        | <i>Hamelia patens</i>                |

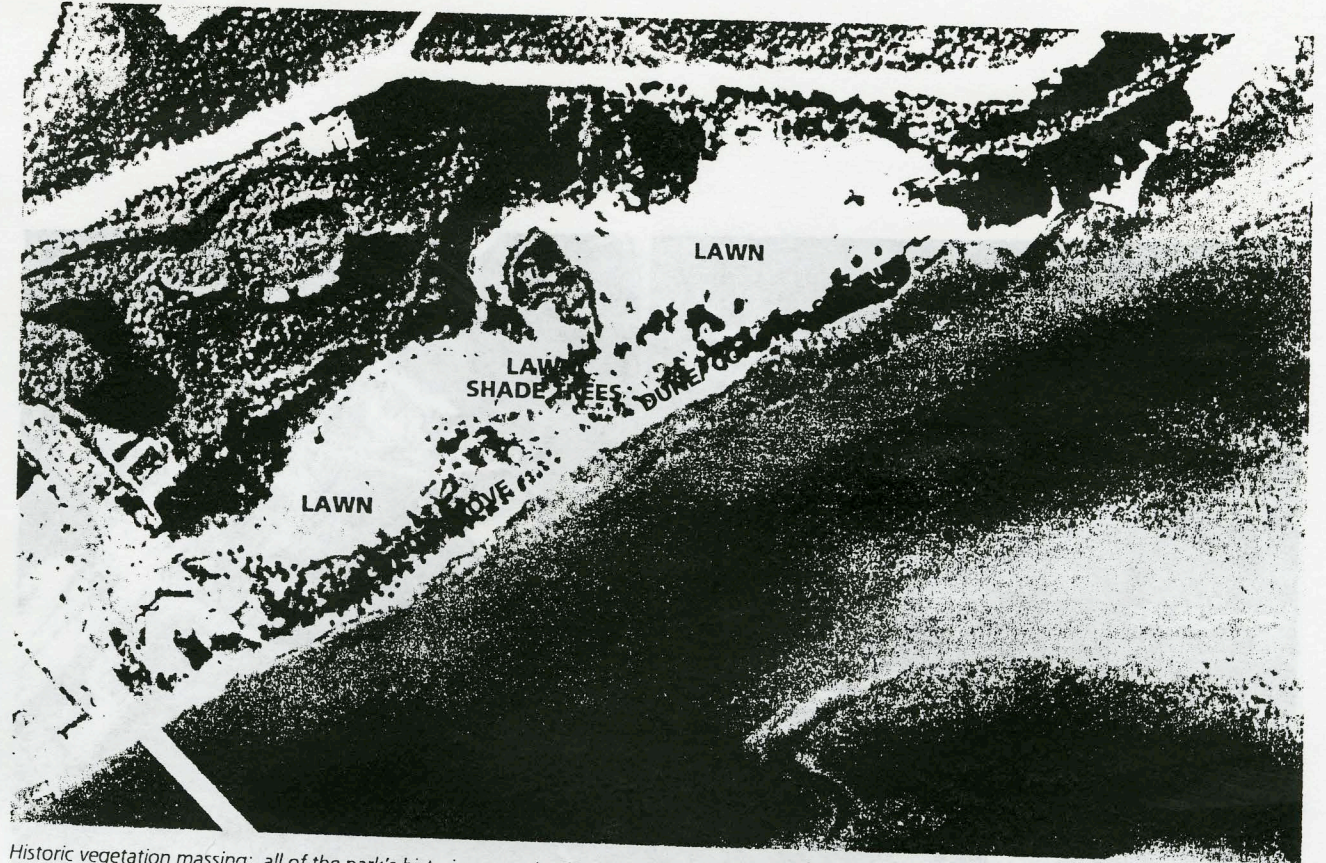
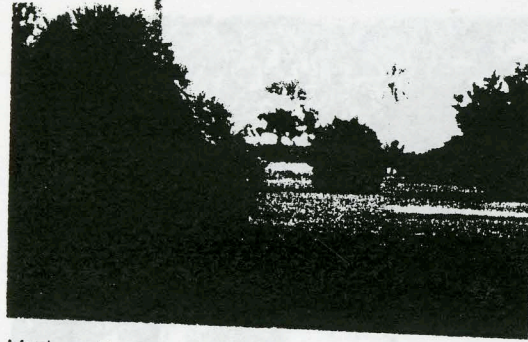
#### Mangrove

|                |                           |
|----------------|---------------------------|
| Red Mangrove   | <i>Rhizophora mangle</i>  |
| Black Mangrove | <i>Avicenna germinans</i> |





Manicured lawn areas have remained a part of the park landscape but undergrowth has engulfed most shade trees.



Historic vegetation massing: all of the park's historic vegetation has been altered by natural succession and invasion by pest species.



The forest edge, consisting primarily of pest species, has encroached on historic lawn areas.



Historic coastal vegetation has been lost to shoreline erosion.



Both native and exotic species have colonized the area of the coconut grove.

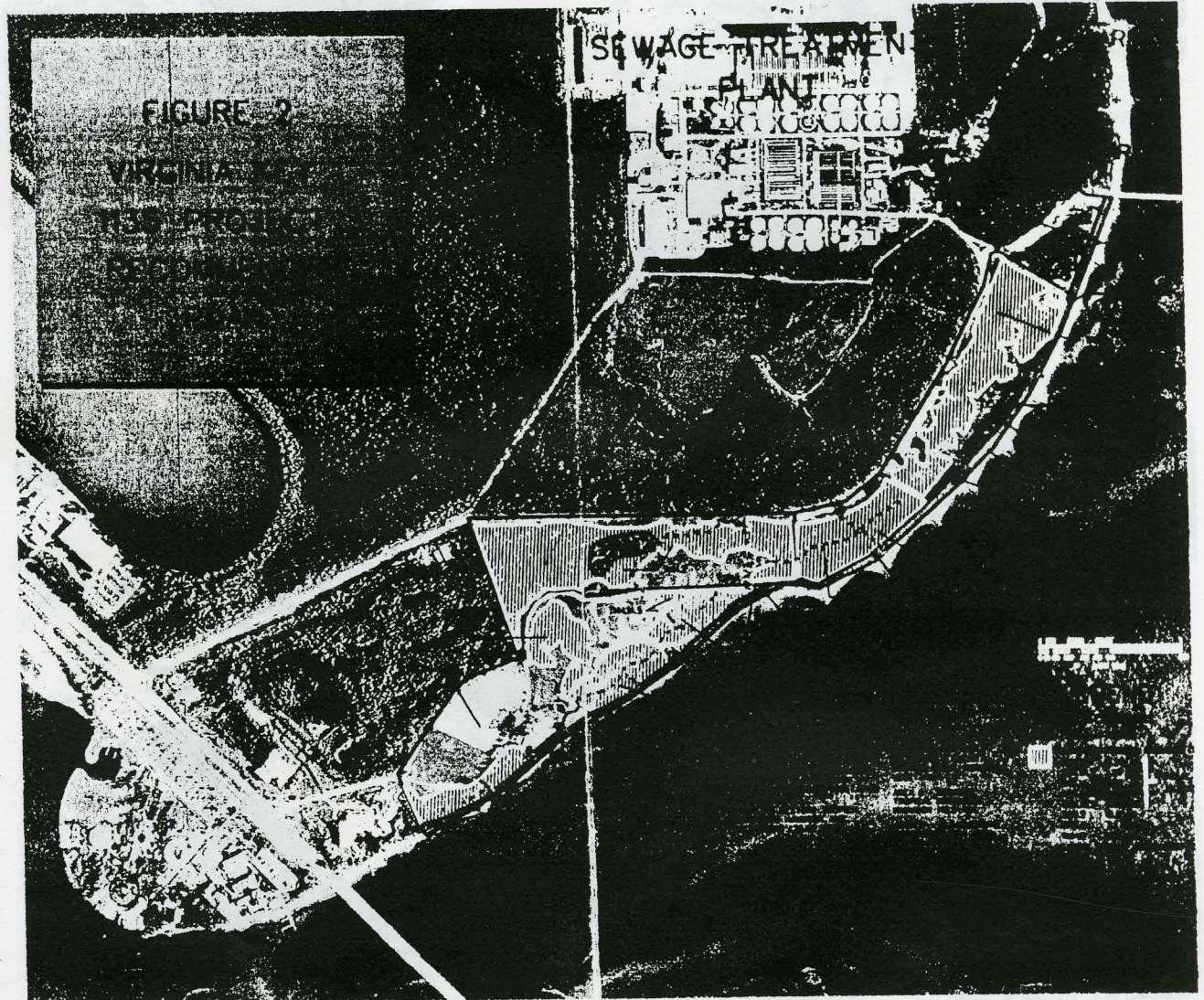




*Invasive pest species will be removed from the site by the US Army Corps of Engineers: Brazillian Pepper (top) and Austrailian Pine (above) are the most pervasize pests.*



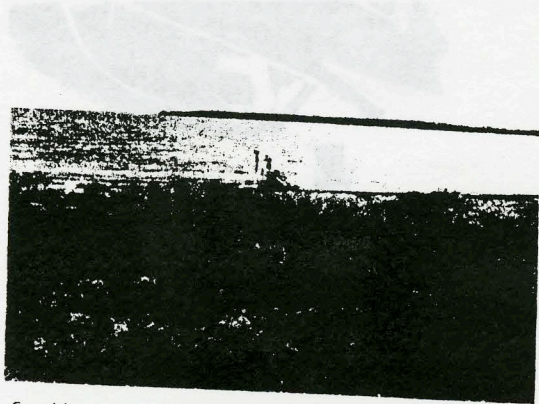
*Eroded shoreline will be stabilized and revegetated*







Significant historic circulation features included a sand promenade shaded by coconut trees



Sensitive native vegetation has replaced the sand esplanade

## Circulation

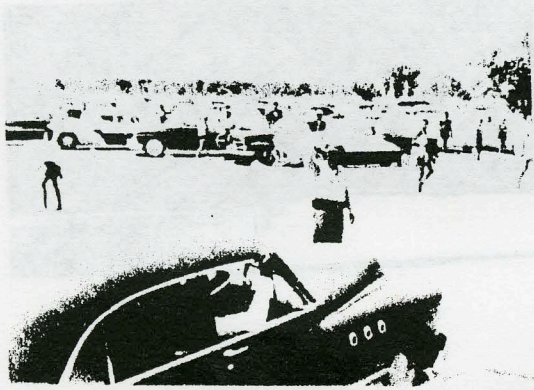
**Land:** Vehicular circulation dating from the period of significance includes a paved entrance drive that loops around a large, open parking area and continues around the lake in the center of the park. The entrance drive and parking lot are separated by a series of planting islands surrounded by hand-cast concrete curbs. East of the lake, vehicular circulation consisted of a meandering network of sandy beaten tracks which ended at the shoreline at the extreme east end and at a parking area for approximately ten cars to the north of the cabanas. Remnants of these remain except where a large spoils pile has been placed near the shore. A track extends into the forested area at the east end of the park and links to a trail leading to the beach. During the park's period of significance, a small open area within this forested area, still visible in a 1960s aerial photograph, may have served as a parking or picnic area. A trail links this area to the STP Road along the park's northern boundary. Two wooden bridges carry the trail over wetlands and water channels. Pedestrian circulation was primarily along a network of beaten foot paths. Circulation along the western shoreline consisted of a sand esplanade within the coconut grove. The recreational facilities and parking lot were linked by paved pathways. A bus stop pull-off was located at the terminus of the main pathway leading to the water's edge. A paved road that follows the shoreline east of the spoils pile was established after the park's period of significance.

The beach park's surviving circulation system is a character defining feature of the landscape that evokes the park's period of significance. The entrance drive, the large manicured lawn and the parking lot represent a landscape design aesthetic rooted in a particular time and are significant character defining site features that establish the place of the park within the social context of its era. The entrance drive, the large manicured lawn and the large parking area carried specific connotations during the park's period of significance and were an important element of the park's symbolic importance. Establishment of the park was a significant victory within the context of the civil rights struggle. As the first public beach recreation facilities for African Americans, the quality of the facilities was of great significance as an indicator of the improved status of the community. Within the context of 1950s American society, the park's entrance landscape connoted quality and therefore status. The curvilinear entrance drive was typical of well-designed public parks throughout the nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. The park's well-manicured lawn, with its clearly evident requirement for diligent maintenance at public expense was a status symbol. Similarly, the large parking lot provided a showcase for the display of increasing prosperity within the community in the form of shiny new cars and was an indicator of the community's new status. This kind of symbolism was typical of post-war American society in general and had resonance for Miami-Dade County's African American community, which participated in the general post-war prosperity. The establishment of the park, and the quality of the facilities provided was part and parcel of the spirit of optimism of the park's mid-century era of accomplishment, prosperity and progress. In addition, the size of the parking lot provided evidence of a large assembly of black citizens – a significant indicator of increasing civil rights for the community, which had not previously fully enjoyed the constitutionally guaranteed right of public assembly.

The "fifties" look of Virginia Key Beach Park also connotes a time when the relationship of people and their natural context was more easy-going. This is especially potent in Miami where the 'fifties represent an era before over-development transformed the region. The meandering sand roads in the eastern area of the park, the casual parking areas, the hand-cast (versus machine extruded) curbing of the parking lot islands, the lack of curbs along the roadways, all evoke a less strained relationship between the automobile and the landscape and thus a more innocent, natural rapport between people and the environment.

**Sea:** Atlantic Ocean access and links to the Caribbean, especially links associated with flights of freedom, are character defining site feature with both significance and integrity. The undeveloped character and isolation of Virginia Key's Atlantic Ocean shoreline





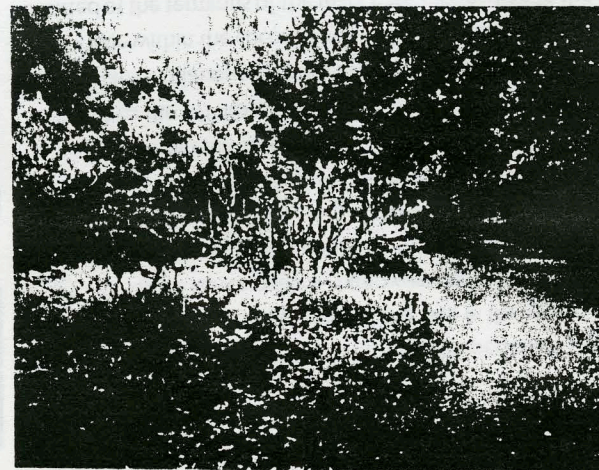
*The parking lot in the 1950s (top) and today (above) with development along the entrance road visible in the background. The parking lot is in poor condition.*



*Sand footpath through native vegetation leading to the beach remains from the historic period*

permits uncontrolled water linkages between the barrier island and the Caribbean and the mainland of Miami. Water transportation was the primary linkage between the uninhabited island and the mainland of Miami during the park's period of informal use as a recreational setting for African Americans until the construction of the Rickenbacker Causeway in 1947. In addition, Atlantic Ocean access played a role in the early use of Key Biscayne and Virginia Key as a recruitment center for pirate ships and as a point of embarkation for African Americans escaping to the Bahamas by ship on the Underground Railroad. The open character of the shoreline continues to permit access to the American shore for refugees from the Caribbean. Free access to an undeveloped shoreline is thus a significant feature of the historic circulation pattern of the site. Features associated with this water linkage include the entire shoreline of the site as well as structures associated with this water link with Miami, which are not in tact. These include remnants of the boat launch and pier as well as the foundation of the Superintendent's house, which served as an arrival point for visitors to the island. These structures are outside the current park boundary. The foundation of the superintendent's house is located in a county-owned parcel adjacent to the park. The boat launch, including the inlet and remnant pier, are part of the NOAA facilities west of the park.

Also associated with this historic circulation system are launch sites along the Miami River. Oral histories indicate that during the 1920s and 1930s, residents of Miami visited Virginia Key by boat with some regularity. Photographs that date from this era show residents waiting at a boat landing on the Miami River. The landing is reported to have been located at SE 5th Avenue. Photographs and oral histories indicate that a variety of types of boat, including fishing boats and launch services, carried groups of residents to the island in the morning and returned at the end of the day to bring them back to the city. Once residents had arrived at the island, they were not able to leave until the boat returned for them.



*Track through the mixed forest remains from the historic period*



*A bridge across the waterway in the mixed forest and leads to the Sewerage Treatment Plant road and parking for Virginia Key Beach (north)*





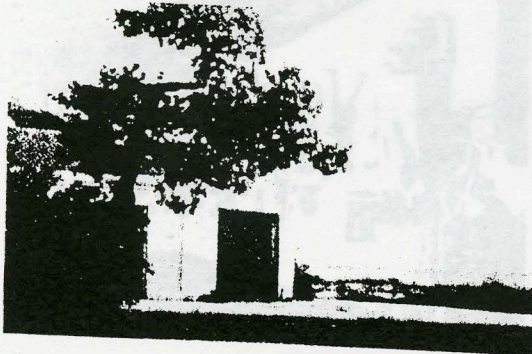
Dance Pavilion



Concession Building



Bathroom/Restroom Building



Carousel building

### Structures

Many structures remain from the park's period of significance. The condition of the structures is discussed in the Preservation Plan. Structures remaining include:

- Dance floor (concrete slab only; coconut trees, benches and jukebox are lost)
- Concession Stand
- Carousel (structure only; carousel horses are lost)
- Bathroom/Restroom Building
- Picnic Pavilion
- Smaller Picnic Paviliosn
- Restrooms
- Miniature Train Tunnel

Remnants remain of several significant structures.

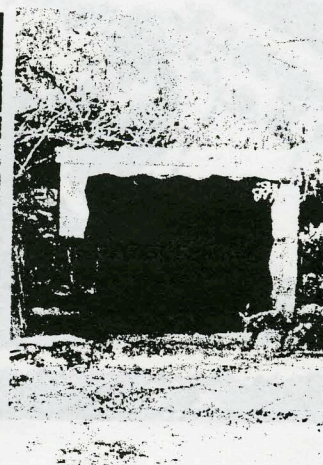
- Park Office (foundation slab only)
- Cabanas (foundation slab only)
- Mini-train station (foundation slab only)

Several structures have been lost:

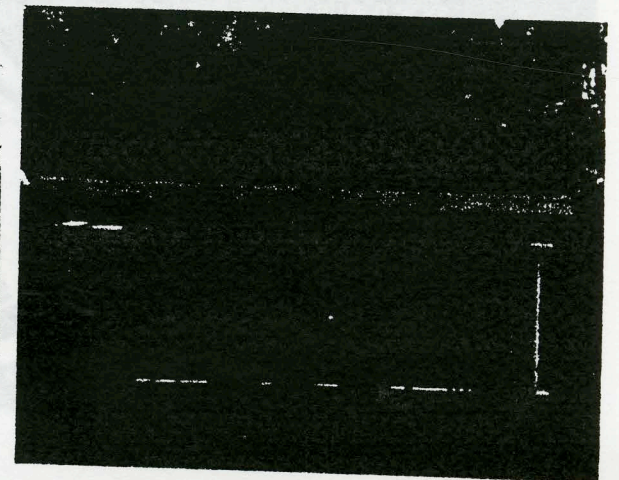
- Superintendent's house (foundation remains on Miami Dade County property)
- Boat launch and pier (remnants remain on National Marine Fisheries property)
- Rental Cabins
- Mini-train and tracks



Restroom Building

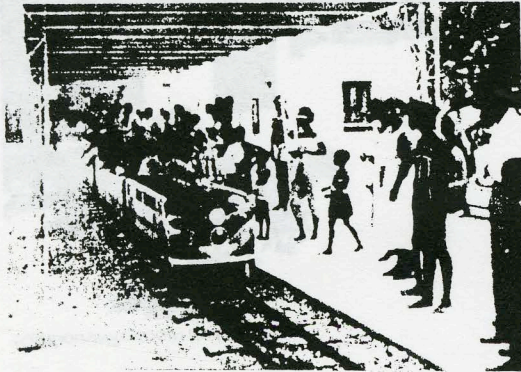


Minitrain tunnel

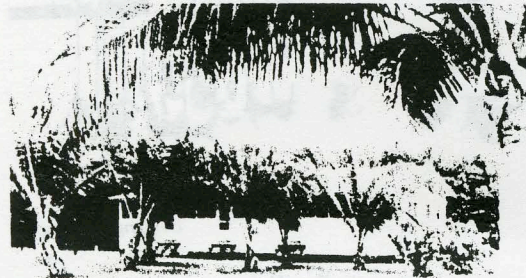


Picnic Shelter

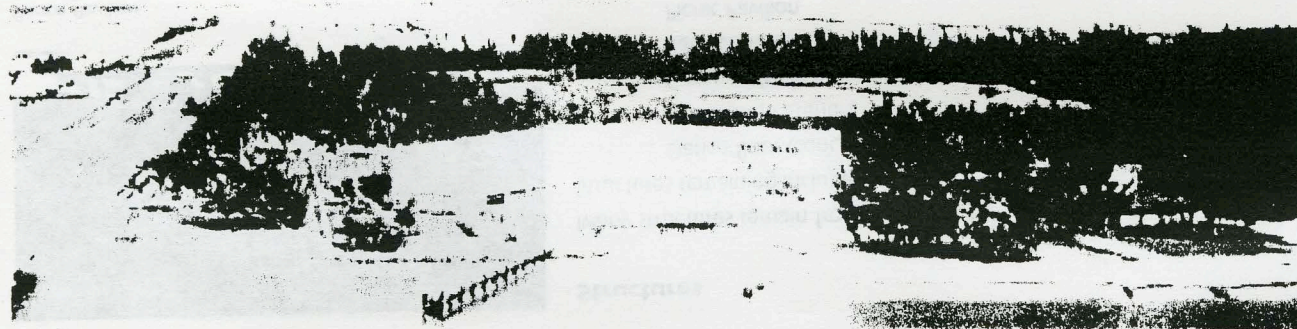
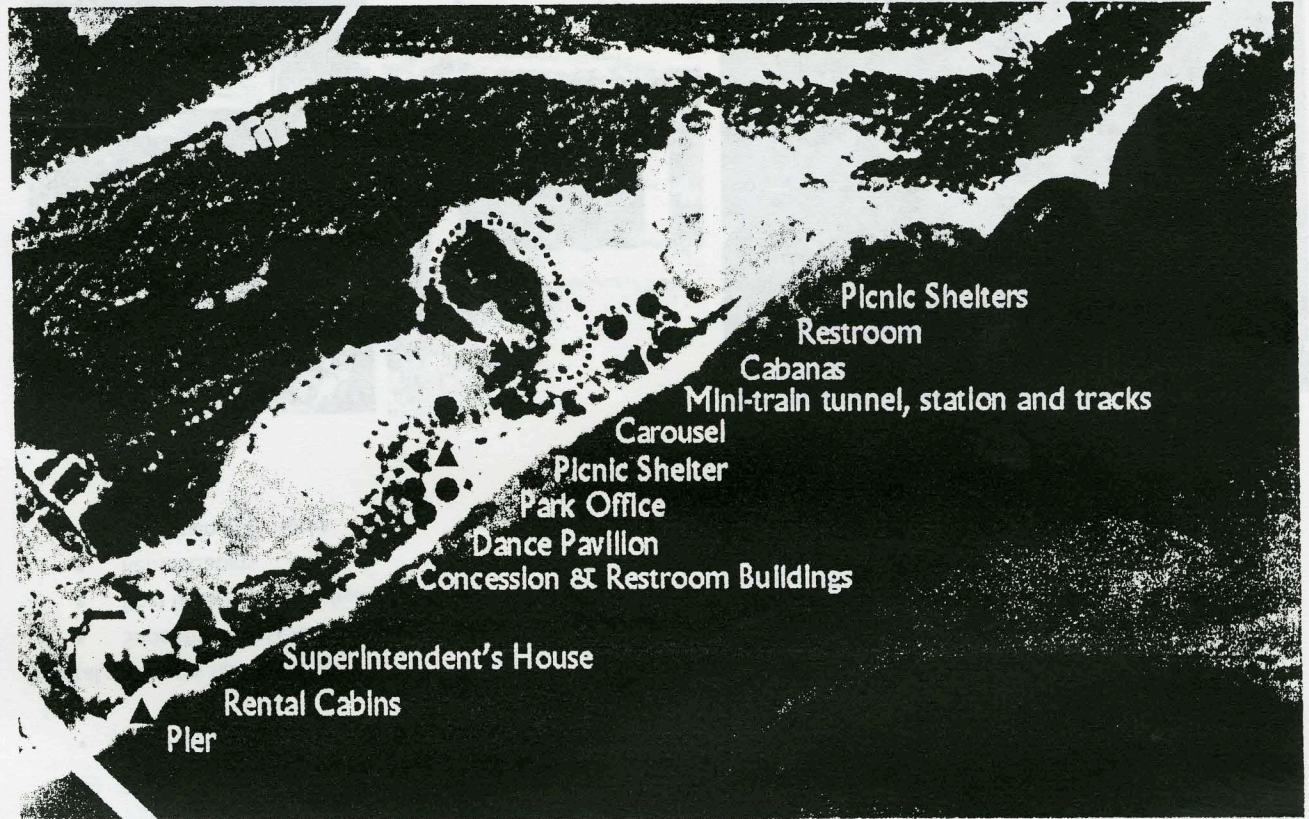




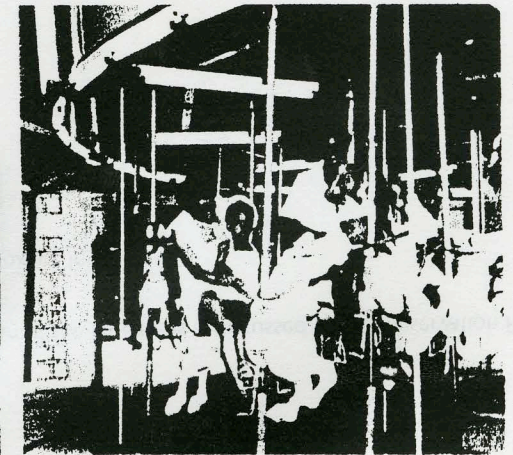
Minitrain and Tracks



Rental cabins



The park's boat launch lagoon incorporated into the National Marine Fisheries site with rental cabins on far right.

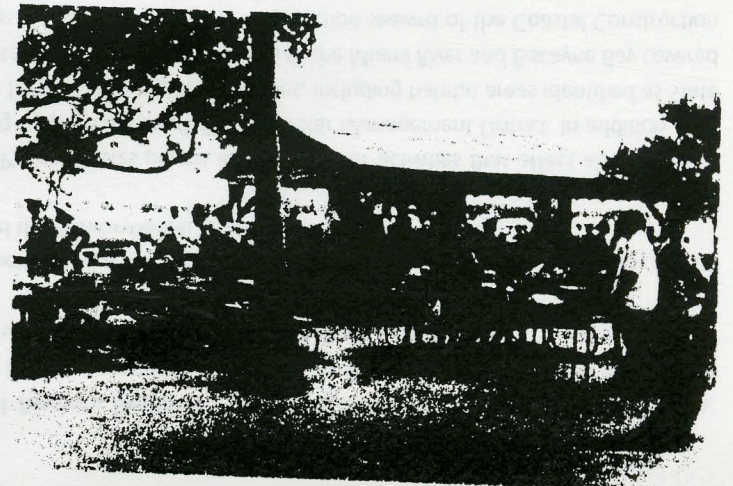
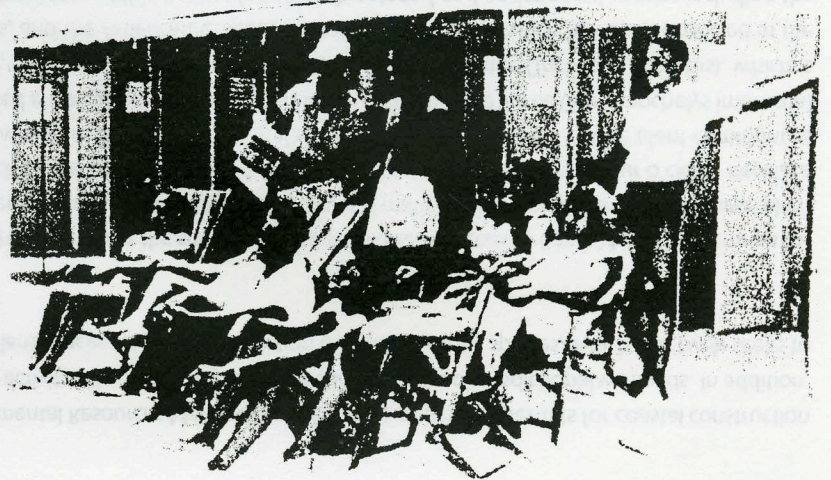
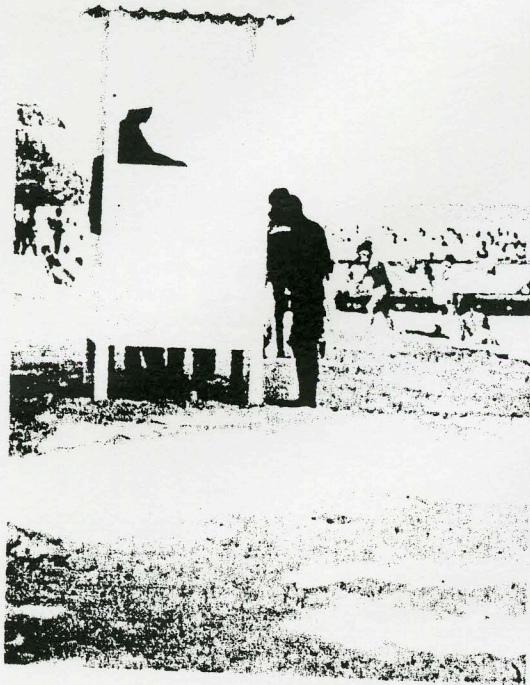


Carousel interior has been lost



**Site Furnishings:**

There are no existing furnishings of significance or integrity on the site. Photographs from the park's period of significance show that standard park furnishings were used throughout the park, including benches with a concrete support and wooden slat seat and back, wooden picnic tables, wood and metal picnic tables, metal barbecue grills, signage with wooden post and signboard with routed lettering. Several distinctive site furnishings are evident from historic photographs as well, including a white-painted wooden lifeguard stand with a flat scalloped roof and metal cabanas with canvas awnings and rustic picnic shelters with palm-trunk posts and metal





## SITE CONSTRAINTS

**Natural Resource Protection and Environmental Agency Review:** As a coastal site with significant natural resources, Virginia Key Beach Park comes under the jurisdiction of the federal, state and local regulatory agencies. All improvements made at the park will be subject to significant permitting requirements which can take extended time periods to complete.

The US Army Corps of Engineers regulates coastal construction and restoration and also coordinates permit applications for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries and the Environmental Protection Agency.

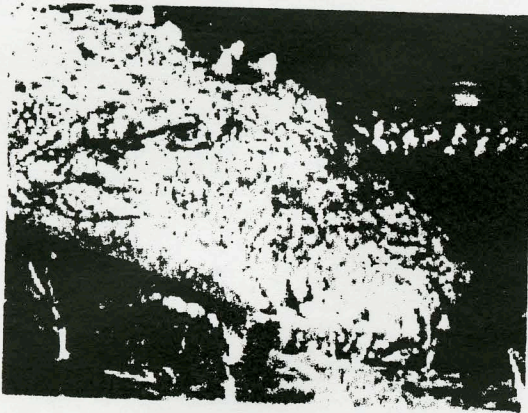
The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) coordinates permit applications for activities that affect air and water quality, storm water management and dredging and filling through the South Florida Water Management District. In addition, DEP regulates and issues permits for activities affecting marine fisheries and protected species, including habitat areas identified as State Aquatic Preserves (including Biscayne Bay) and species protection areas, including areas of the Miami River and Biscayne Bay covered by the Manatee Protection Plan. DEP also regulates and issues permits for coastal construction seaward of the Coastal Construction Control Line and regulates activity on all beaches, including off-shore Motorboat Exclusion Zones, one of which has been established for the Atlantic Shore of Virginia Key Beach.

The Miami-Dade County Department of Environmental Resources Management regulates and issues permits for coastal construction including docks, marinas and bulkheads and any activity affecting mangroves or tidally influenced jurisdictional wetlands. In addition, DERM regulates activities that affect protected plant species, including regulation of invasive exotic species, which it actively seeks to remove in order to protect native plant species.

Protected natural resources at Virginia Key Beach Park include the site's plant communities: the Coastal Band Mangrove remnant at the park's eastern end; mangrove and freshwater wetlands, coastal strand and tropical marine hammock communities. These plant communities include a number of rare plants such as the Biscayne Prickly Ash, broad leaf spider lily, burrowing four o'clock, necklace pod, sea lavender and the Beach Jaquemontia, which are found in the coastal strand and hammock areas. These plant communities provide critical habitat areas for federally protected endangered species, including the Hawksbill Sea Turtle (*Eretomochelys imbricata*) and the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*), which nests on the island, the West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), which is frequently observed in the near off shore waters, and the American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*), which has been observed in the lake at Virginia Key Beach Park. The island also provides suitable habitat for other threatened and endangered species including the Gopher Tortoise and a variety of shore and sea bird species, including the Peregrine Falcon, Bald Eagle, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork and Piping Plover. The island is a stop-over for migratory song birds. Other protected resources include jurisdictional wetlands and mangroves and both on-site and off-shore water quality.

Habitat protection for sea turtles includes the limitation of artificial night lighting. Because the shoreline at Virginia Beach Park is a turtle nesting habitat, artificial light must meet requirements for the protection of turtle hatchlings. Turtle hatchlings orient themselves to moonlight on water to guide them from the nest to the water and artificial shoreline light causes the hatchlings to head in the wrong direction.





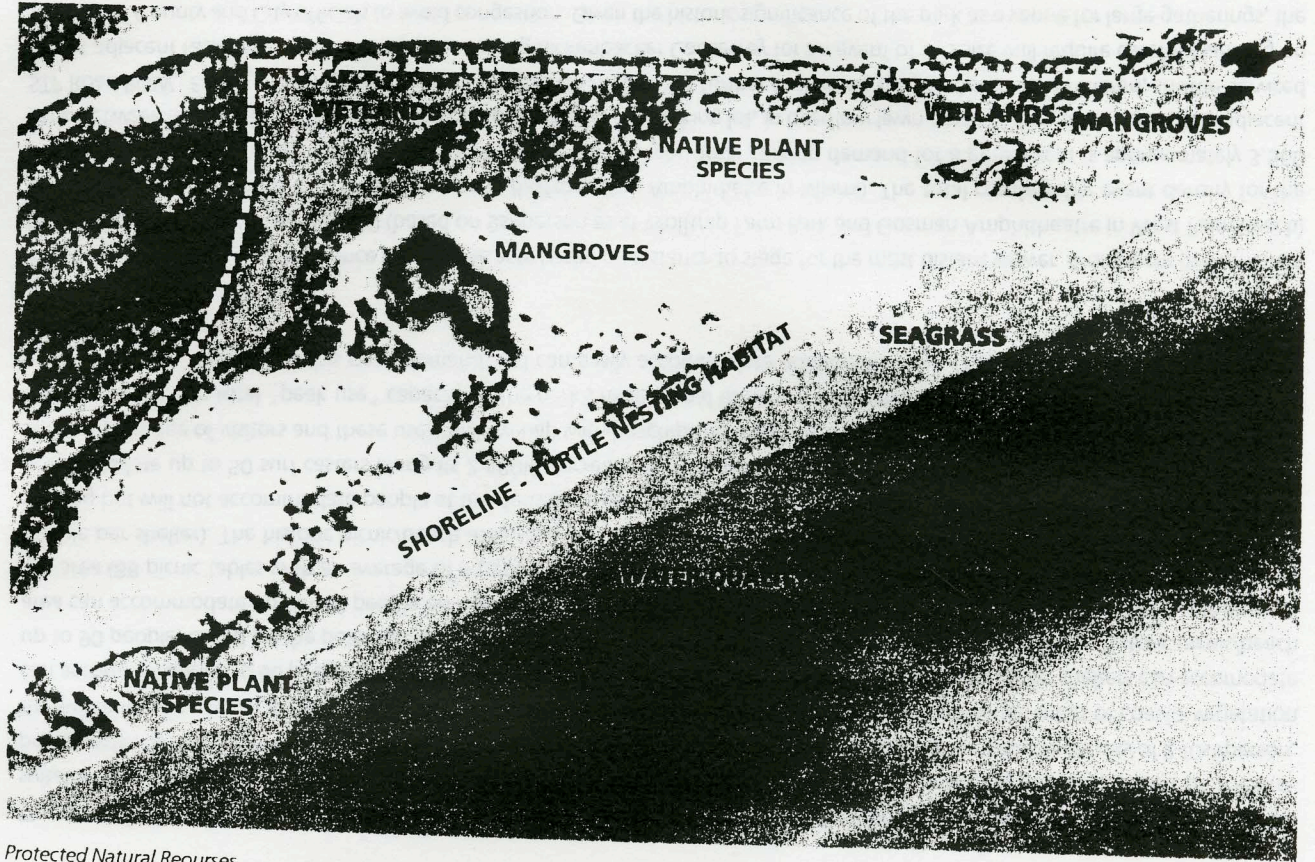
American Crocodile



Sea Turtle



West Indian Manatee



Protected Natural Resources



Native Plant Species



Mangroves and Wetlands



## VIRGINIA BEACH

(NEGRO) 162 ACRES  
ATTENDANCE LAST YEAR 295,314  
FACILITIES

|             |                      |
|-------------|----------------------|
| Apartments  | Fireplaces (5)       |
| Bath House  | Miniature Railroad   |
| Boat Livery | Picnic Tables (88)   |
| Cabanas     | Refreshment Pavilion |
| Dancing     | Swimming             |
| Fishing     | Umbrellas & Chairs   |

FREE PARKING

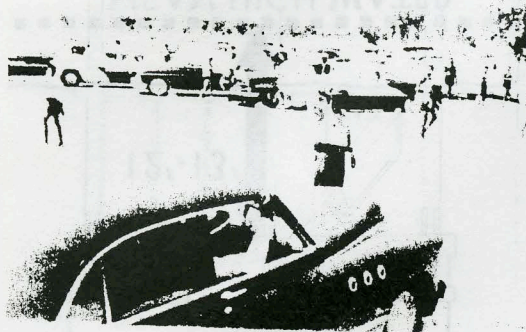
Statistics from the park's period of historic significance.

**Park "Carrying Capacity":** The total number of people who can be accommodated on the Virginia Key Beach Park site is limited by a number of factors, including natural resources protection, parking capacity, lifeguard capacity, safety related to currents in Bear Cut, number of restrooms and comfortable densities and for events, traffic management on Rickenbacker Causeway. Historically, the beach park accommodated as many as 2,400 people, based on the capacity of the parking lots, which was approximately 670 cars with 3-4 visitors per car. This capacity was distributed among the park's various recreational areas but was concentrated primarily along the shoreline in a combined picnic/beach area. During the period of significance, the shoreline esplanade considerably extended the usable area of the combined picnic/beach area but today establishment of native vegetation has reduced this area significantly. Daily attendance on a "peak use" day (exclusive of special cultural events) is thus limited primarily by environmental concerns that limit the overall size of picnic/beach areas appropriate within a sensitive environmental setting. This was not a concern during the park's period of significance because the primary function of the park was to accommodate all Miami Dade County African Americans. Annual attendance during the peak period was approximately 300,000 people. Crandon Park, by way of comparison, accommodates three times that number of visitors in ten times the acreage. Although demand for recreational opportunities at Virginia Key will likely be increased due to its special appeal as a heritage and cultural destination, it will be significantly lower than historic levels.

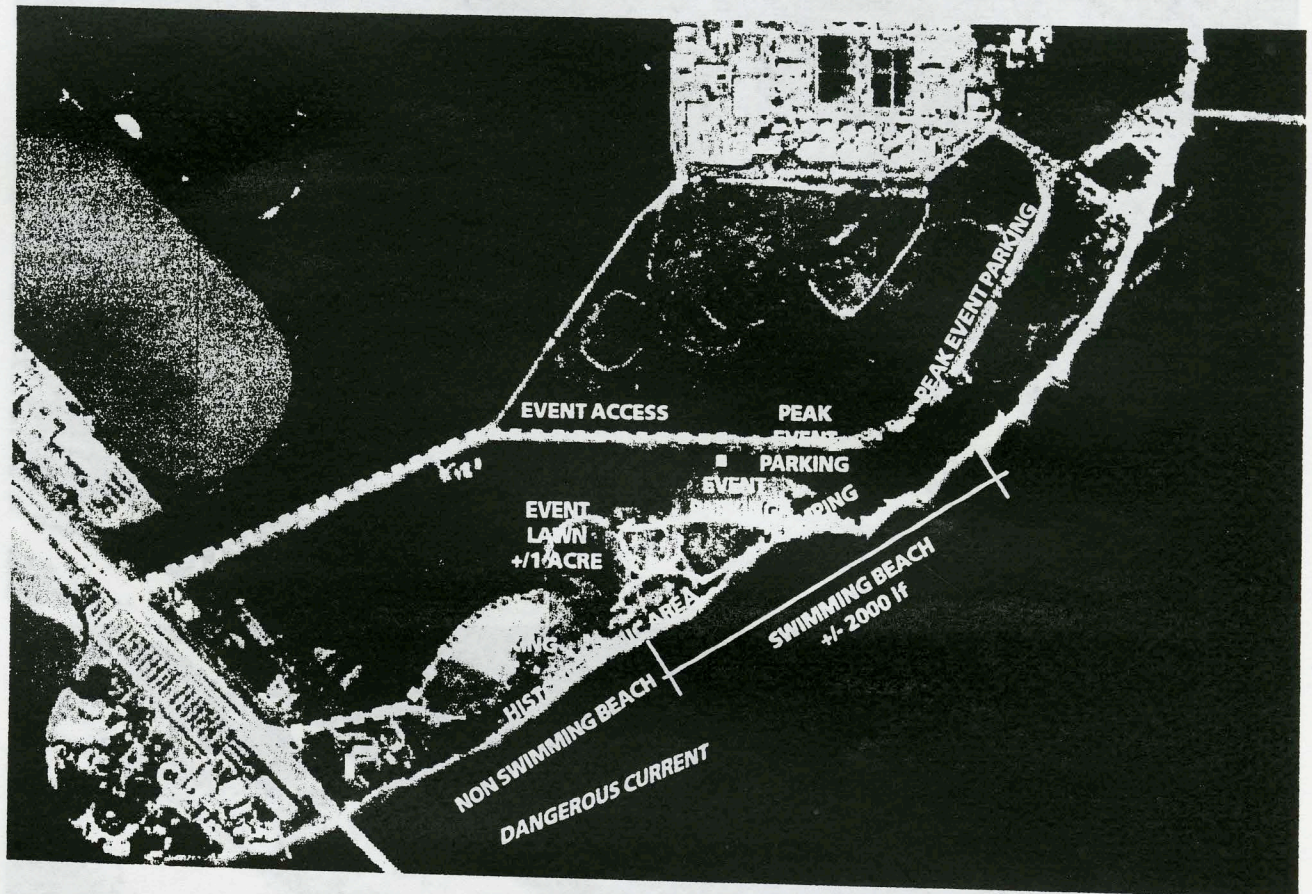
The area of the shoreline that is potentially appropriate for swimming is limited to 2,000lf at the eastern end of the park. (The suitability of the area for swimming will require reevaluation after the shoreline stabilization project is complete. Based on the proposed width of the beach and the capacity of a lifeguard to monitor a maximum of 250 people at an average density of 240sf/person, the swimming beach can accommodate up to 500 people. Group camping sites sensitively located within areas of coastal vegetation can accommodate up to 60 people (based on 15 sites with an average of 4 people per site.) Additional picnic shelters can accommodate up to 90 people, based on the potential for new shelters to be located in appropriate locations in the park. The historic picnic/beach area can accommodate up to 412 people on a peak use day, based on the historic number of picnic tables/grills and picnic shelters in the area (88 picnic tables with an average of 4 people per table and 1 large historic shelter for 30 people and 2 small shelters for 15 people per shelter). The historic picnic/beach area shoreline will accommodate spill over from the picnic areas for activities such as wading but will not accommodate people at the densities expected along swimming beaches. Shore fishing along this shoreline can accommodate up to 50 surf casters along its 2,400lf. Recreational features such as trails and interpretive facilities will be used by a small percentage of visitors and these users will overlap with beach/picnic area users. Based on current standards and environmental considerations, the total "peak use" capacity of the park's recreational facilities is approximately 1,112 people. The capacity of the existing parking far exceeds this peak demand and can easily accommodate additional visitors to a museum/interpretive center or cultural event.

The maximum size of a performance lawn is one acre based on distance to stage for the most distant viewer. A one-acre performance lawn accommodates between 4,800 (based on 9sf/person as at Wolftrap Farm Park and Gosman Amphitheatre in West Palm Beach) and 12,445 people (based on 3.5 sf/person as at Bayfront Park Amphitheatre in Miami). The total comfortable event density for the park is approximately 4,800, requiring 1,371 on-site parking spaces. Total parking demand for a peak event is approximately 3,560 cars. Between 1,500 and 2,000 cars can be parked on site in the parking lot, in overflow lawn areas and on the immediately adjacent STP Road ROW. Excess demand can be met in Virginia Key Beach lots further east along the STP Road and in shared, shuttle-serviced lots at adjacent facilities. Traffic management along Rickenbacker Causeway for an event of this size will require careful planning on the part of County and City officials to avoid congestion. Given the historic significance of the park as a venue for large gatherings, the development of effective traffic management strategies to permit successful events at Virginia Key Beach Park should be a priority. The successful management of the 250,000 visitor annual tennis event at Crandon Park sets a precedent.





The parking lot at Virginia Key Beach Park is recognized as historically significant because it represents an improvement in the status of black citizens of Miami Dade County who prior to the establishment of the park were not able to gather in large numbers without harrassment.



**Peak Use Day Capacity**

|  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| Historic Picnic/beach area:            |                     |
| Tables/grills (88 x 4 people)          | 352 people          |
| Large Historic Shelter                 | 30 people           |
| 2 Small Historic Shelters              | 30 people           |
| Swimming Beach:                        | 500 people          |
| Group picnic/camping sites:            | 60 people           |
| Additional picnic shelters:            | 90 people           |
| Shore fishing (non-swimming beach):    | 50 people           |
| <b>Total park users - peak use day</b> | <b>1,112 people</b> |
| Parking Requirement                    | 317 cars            |
| Parking Capacity                       | 455 cars            |
| Daily Lot - paved                      | 225 cars            |
| Daily Lot - grass overflow             | 230 cars            |

**Event Day Capacity**

|                                    |                      |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Total audience - typical event     | 4,800 people         |
| Parking Requirement                | 1,371 cars           |
| <b>Total audience - peak event</b> | <b>12,800 people</b> |
| Parking Requirement                | 3,560 cars           |
| Parking Capacity                   | 1,695 cars           |
| Daily Lot - paved                  | 225 cars             |
| Daily Lot - grass overflow         | 230 cars             |
| Event Parking Lawn                 | 960 cars             |
| STP Road ROW                       | 280 cars             |

*parking requirement is based on 3-4 people/car*

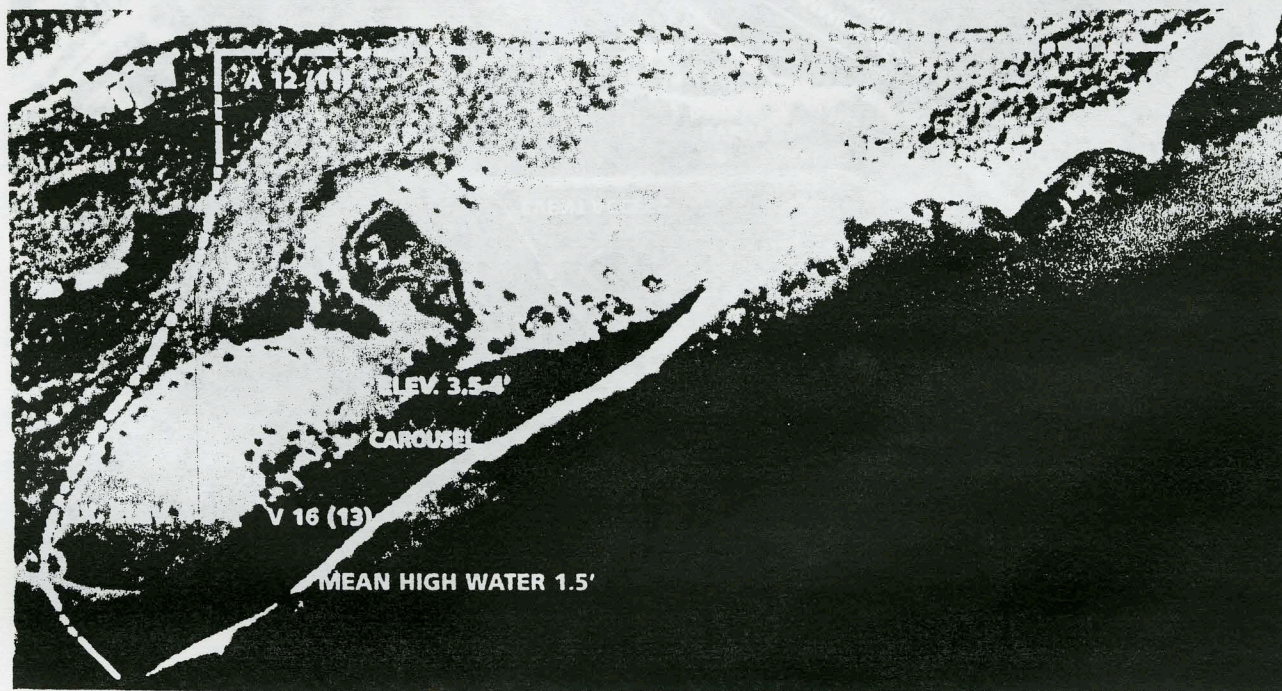
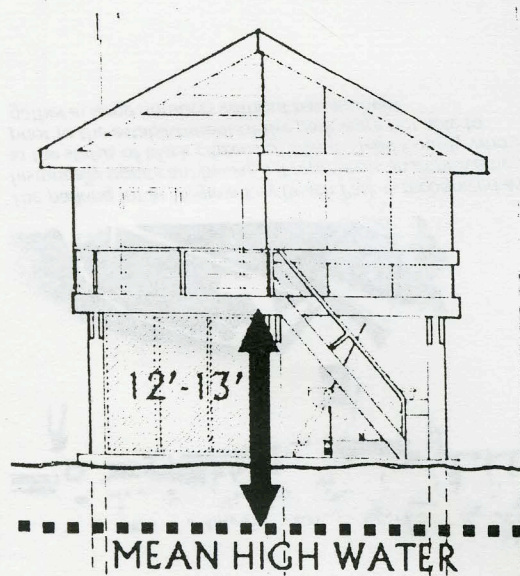




Sign blown down in the 1950 hurricane that destroyed all of the park's original structures.



COASTAL CONSTRUCTION CONTROL LINE (CCCL)



FEMA Flood Hazard Zone Construction Requirements



**Building code requirements:** All construction at Virginia Key Beach Park must meet standards imposed by the site's significant flood hazard. Engineering and building requirements to meet Federal Emergency Management Administration requirements are regulated and permitted through both the city of Miami Building Department and, for construction within the Coastal Construction Control Line, through the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. The majority of the Virginia Key Beach Park site falls within "V" flood hazard zones. V zones require all construction to be on pilings, with the lowest structural member of the structure to be a minimum of 12 feet above the mean high water elevation of the site (1.5') and to include "breakaway" construction at ground level to permit flood waters to flow through the pilings. A limited area along the northern boundary is within an "A" zone, which requires all habitable spaces to be elevated 12 feet above mean high water, but which permits construction to be on fill rather than on pilings.

**Planning and Zoning:** Design of all improvements at Virginia Key Beach Park is subject to review by the City of Miami Planning Board (City Commission) and as a waterfront site requires a Class II Special Permit. In addition, improvements are subject to review by the Miami Dade County Waterfront Development Committee, the City of Miami Parks Advisory Board, and the Waterfront Advisory Board. Current zoning of the site is "Parks & Recreation" either by designation or by interpretation for the area annexed to the city but left unzoned, which is subject to the most restrictive adjacent zoning designation. Permitted uses within this designation include: Public Parks, Clinics and Day Care, Police Facilities, Marine and Marina Facilities, Educational Facilities, Cultural Facilities, museums /art galleries /exhibit spaces, Social & Entertainment Services, restaurants /cafes /retail, Entertainment Facilities.

**Historic Preservation Requirements:** In order to protect the status of Virginia Key Beach Park as a National Register of Historic Places site, all improvements to the park must adhere to the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties and Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes*. Improvements, additions and adaptive reuse of park facilities must not adversely impact the listed historic resources or impair the integrity of the Character Defining Features of the landscape inventoried in this report. Other preservation requirements are documented in Appendix 1: Preservation Plan.

**Limited building sites for new construction:** Because virtually the entire site is protected as either a natural resource or historic resource, potential locations for new construction and site improvements are severely limited. Any site improvements must take into account impacts to resources and avoid, minimize and mitigate these impacts.



## SITE SUITABILITIES

The Virginia Key Beach Park Civil Rights Task Force public design charette findings identified four key goals for appropriate use of the historic beach park site. These goals were articulated in the Mission Statement of the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust that was established to implement the recommendations of the task force: "To restore Virginia Key Beach Park to its original state and to create Miami's historical, environmental, cultural, recreational African-American Museum." Opportunities consistent with the Trust mission and the priorities established through the public planning process address four goals:

- preserving and interpreting the park's historic cultural and natural features
- documenting and commemorating Miami-Dade County's Black Heritage
- providing recreational and educational opportunities
- providing programs and services that overcome barriers to recreational and educational opportunity for all Miami-Dade County residents

### **Goal 1: Preserving and interpreting the park's historic cultural and natural features**

The historic features of the park include structures and a landscape setting that are interconnected. Preservation, restoration and interpretation of the park can be undertaken according to best practices in historic preservation and environmentally sensitive design and operation to reestablish a park that offers an educational and enjoyable glimpse into the natural and cultural history of Miami. While the historic park structures are not distinguished, the character of the historic setting incorporating these structures can be restored to create an evocative setting with a "period" ambiance suitable to understanding the historic and natural context of the events for which the park is recognized as a significant setting. The park can be restored according to the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Preservation of Historic Structures and Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes* and according to best practices in environmentally sensitive design and operation. The restored landscape setting and its features can incorporate interpretive features that permit the entire park to serve as an outdoor museum.

### **Goal 2: Documenting and commemorating Miami-Dade County's Black Heritage**

Miami's position as an important American city and international tourist destination, its role as a focal point of the western hemisphere with connections to the United States, Central and South America, and the Caribbean makes it potentially an appropriate location for a significant memorial museum experience that has meaning for people beyond Miami-Dade County. The site is the only place within the city of Miami with an Atlantic Ocean shore, which gives it a unique link with places beyond the city. This fact, together with its proximity to other important visitor destinations on Virginia Key give it special prominence and potential. Because of this potential, the opportunity can be explored to provide a museum experience unique in the United States focusing on the African experience in America. Public input has identified a desire to recognize those who have contributed to the struggle for civil rights, to acknowledge the effect of segregation on African Americans as well as to memorialize those who lost their lives at Virginia Key. The park is well suited to exploring these themes since the beauty, serenity and dignity can allow for a healing experience to be provided. This site also offers an opportunity to establish a gateway and anchor for other Black Heritage destinations in Miami Dade as well as historical sites around Biscayne Bay. Black Heritage tourism is a growing niche in the United States tourism market with significant potential. The state of Maryland, for example, recently committed \$30 million and half of all operating expenses for a Black Heritage museum in Baltimore in recognition of the potential for such a facility to benefit the economy



The original structures and site features may be restored, reinterpreted and reused both as recreational features and as elements in an "outdoor museum" to give visitors a feeling for what the park was like. The park's original structures and setting as well as the activities, entertainment features, and ambiance can be recreated and can serve as a living "diorama" where visitors may literally taste what it was like to enjoy Virginia Key Beach Park. Reinterpreted features can be used to house artifacts, present signage and graphics, hold performances or present changing exhibitions that further illuminate the story of the park. Artifacts such as the classic cars of the era, the juke box, the music that was part of the dance pavilion experience, the foods that were served in the snack bar, the beach chairs, fashions and toys of the era can be incorporated into the park setting. The presence of people actively enjoying the site features can become an important facet of the park's character and will also serve as a living memorial to its historic significance.

The content and character of exhibitions and programs can be further refined through a more focused process that effectively engages the public, the Trust board, and museum experts to identify an interpretive program that defines a unique focus for the site's public programs and interpretive features. The American Association of Museums recommends that a museum effectively involve its audiences in developing public programs and exhibitions. The site planning process has provided the public the opportunity to help shape the park's interpretive program and to focus the "message." Public input has identified the following themes that are of interest and relevance to the community that could become part of the interpretive program.

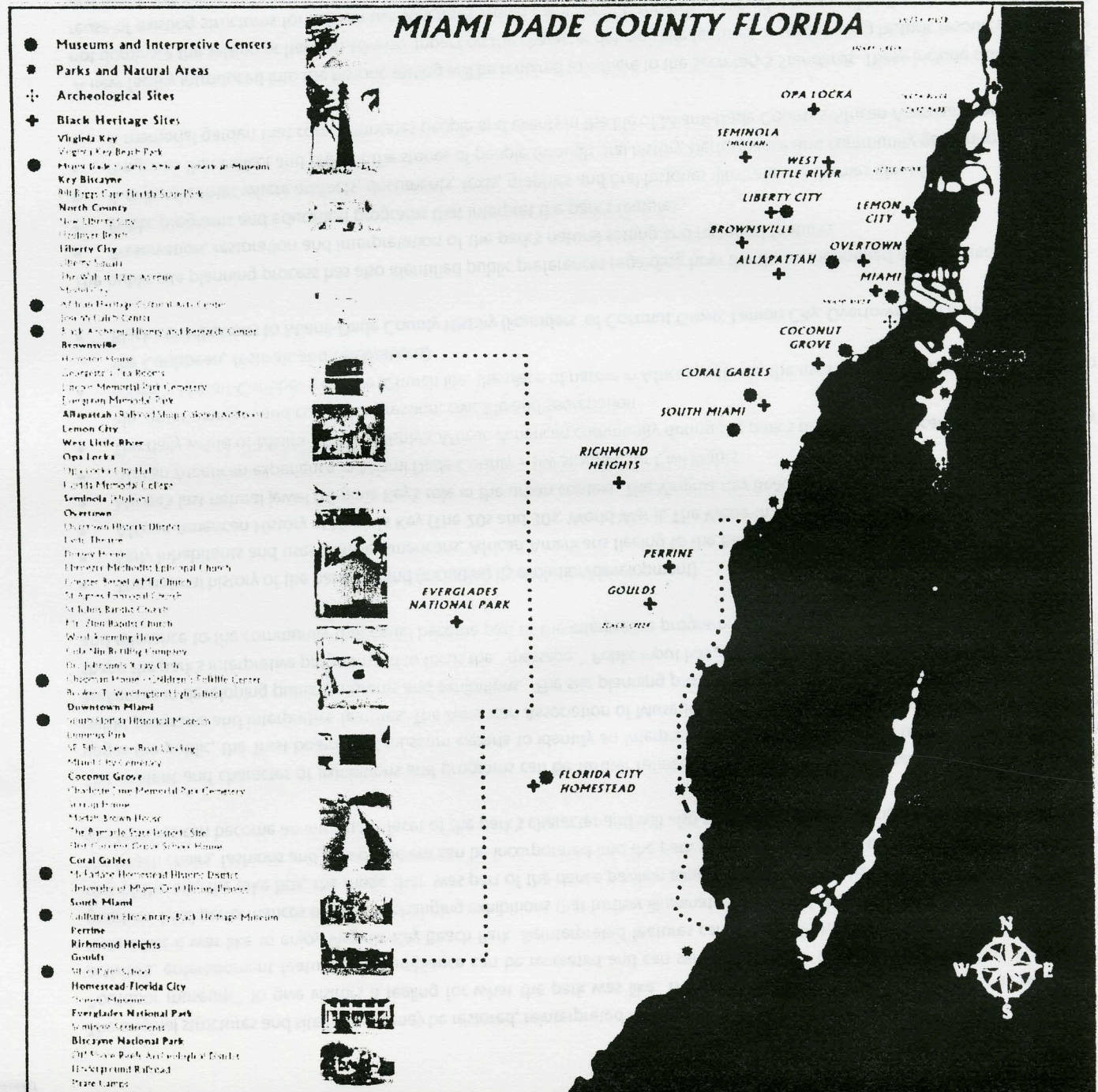
- The natural history of the barrier island (including its evolution/development)
- Early inhabitants and uses (Native Americans; African Americans fleeing to the Bahamas; pirates; rum runners)
- African American History at Virginia Key (The 20s and 30s; World War II; The Wade-in and establishment of the park)
- Miami's last natural jewel (Virginia Key's role in the urban context; The Virginia Key Beach Park Trust)
- African American experience in Miami Dade County – the struggle for Civil Rights
- The daily world of Miami-Dade's County's African American community during the park's period of significance, including family life, entertainment and cultural expression, civic life and segregation.
- Miami's African-Caribbean culture (Church life; the place of nature in African cultures, the uses and significance of plants; links to the Caribbean; festivals and celebrations)
- Black contributions to Miami-Dade County History (Founders of Coconut Grove, Lemon City, Overtown; civil rights figures, etc.)

The public site planning process has also identified public preferences regarding how the themes identified are explored:

- Preservation, restoration and interpretation of the park's natural setting and historical features
- Public programs and education programs that interpret the park's features
- A cultural center where artifacts, documents, texts, graphics and oral histories illustrate the themes identified
- Programs that collect and present the stories of people through oral history, performance and community gatherings
- A memorial garden that commemorates people and events in the life of Miami-Dade County's African American community

A new facility introduced into the historic setting will be required to adhere to the *Secretary's Standards*. These include siting that does not dominate the setting or have an adverse impact on the character defining site features or contributing historic resources. Adaptive reuse of existing structures for interpretive functions would meet these standards as would a new facility that is appropriately sited and which adheres to architectural standards for historically compatible new construction. Architectural standards are described in the Preservation Plan.







### **Goal 3: Providing recreational and educational opportunities**

Evaluation of the potential for existing and proposed uses at Virginia Key Beach Park to meet or not meet present and anticipated future recreational demand is based on information gathered from a variety of sources, including Miami Dade County Parks and Recreation staff and research as well as other sources cited in the assessment.

#### **Influences on use levels**

Beach utilization is influenced by six main factors: 1) custom, 2) service area or location, 3) season, 4) type of facilities and activities available, 5) design and operation of facilities and 6) access. Miami Dade County beaches provide relevant comparisons for Virginia Key Beach Park. Of particular relevance is Crandon Beach Park, which has the same service area as Virginia Key and offers similar activities and features.

**Custom:** Beach users in Miami Dade County tend to show a preference for a particular beach park or area of a beach based on custom. A typical user profile for the five most popular county beaches prepared by the County Parks Department showed a tendency for beach users of similar ethnic background and age to frequent the same beach. While this utilization pattern is influenced by the ethnic make up of the service area closest to the beach, as discussed further under "Proximity," this pattern is also influenced by the custom of using a beach where a level of cultural comfort exists. Haulover and Crandon attract a high proportion of teens and young singles. Other county beaches, including Miami Beach, Bill Baggs, Matheson Hammock and Homestead Bayfront Park attract a higher proportion of young families and older users. Teens and young singles use beach facilities differently than families, showing a higher preference than families for some activities such as large gatherings and loud music. Similarly, beach users of different ethnicity show preferences for different activities. Hispanics show a preference for family group gatherings lasting a half day. African Americans show a preference for all-day, large group gatherings.

**Proximity:** A Miami Dade County study of beach preferences conducted in 1986 indicated that utilization of the five most popular county beaches reflects their location in the county, both in terms of total number of users and in the typical profile of the users. Census data indicates that the population of the county has remained relatively stable in terms of density and ethnic make up, which suggests that utilization patterns have remained the same in the intervening years.

**Haulover Beach,** located in the northeastern part of the county, attracts users from the county's northeast and northcentral neighborhoods. Neighborhoods in this part of the county have a large proportion of African American residents and this is reflected in the user profile of Haulover Beach, which has the largest utilization among African Americans. Crandon Beach is located in the central-eastern part of the county and attracts users from the central and western neighborhoods, where the relatively large proportion of Hispanic residents are reflected in the user profile of the beach. Crandon, however, attracts a broad spectrum of users of all ethnicities.

**Season:** Miami Dade County Parks and Recreation Department records indicate that beach utilization in Miami Dade County follows a seasonal pattern that reflects tourist visitation. At Haulover Beach, attendance is highest during the summer season and on weekends. Crandon Beach shows a more seasonal pattern of utilization, with peak attendance during the Thanksgiving to January holiday period and the April-May Spring Break period. Both parks experience higher utilization on weekends and the lowest utilization during the October-Thanksgiving period. Crandon Beach attracts a larger number of seasonal tourists and one-time users as a result of its



proximity to other tourist destinations such as Seaquarium. The Crandon Beach service area is the same as that of Virginia Key and therefore attendance figures provide a good indicator for demand for activities at Virginia Key.

Cyclical attendance patterns can influence use levels in a variety of ways. A stable attendance level is needed to support any kind of concession. The quality of concession offerings is affected by the quality of the business opportunity. Uneven concession quality can in turn influence perceptions about the beach experience and reduce the overall appeal of the beach, lowering use levels. Heavy concentrations of users can also leave an impression that facilities in general are inadequate and reduce repeat visits. Seasonal or event related crowding can pose maintenance challenges that also influence beach use levels by turning off first time users.

Type of Facilities and Activities: Use of county beaches by residents and visitors is highly influenced by the quality and type of activities and facilities. According to Miami Dade County Parks and Recreation Department research, going to the beach is the most popular recreational activity in the county. A recent opinion survey by the Trust for Public Land related to access to the waters of Biscayne Bay indicates that swimming and picnicking are the two most popular activities at county beaches. Approximately 60% of users at the most popular beaches cite swimming as the activity they enjoy, approximately 30% cite picnicking as the activity they enjoy. All other activities are enjoyed by fewer than 10% of beach users. Use levels are higher for specialized activities available only at a specific beach park. For example, approximately 25% of Matheson Hammock users enjoy boating, fishing or paddling. A high proportion of users cite "other" as the activity they enjoy at county beaches. Activities popular at local beaches include:

- Swimming
- Picnicking
- Walking/Jogging
- Motor boating
- Sports
- Beach sunning
- Bike Riding
- Fishing
- Special Events
- Wildlife Observation
- Eating
- Paddling
- Nature Trails
- Skating
- Playgrounds
- Diving/Snorkeling

Swimming and picnicking are overwhelmingly the most popular activities and the demand for these activities is therefore very high among county residents. The Greater Miami Convention and Visitor Bureau indicates that going to the beach is also the most popular activity for visitors and the main reason for non-business visits to the Miami area. Similarly, swimming is the most popular activity among visitors, along with sunbathing and eating.



Swimming and eating are the two most in-demand beach activities among both visitors and residents and the availability of these activities, as well as the quality, has an overwhelming influence on the use of local beaches. The quality of the swimming experience is by far the most influential factor in attracting beach users. Miami Beach is the destination of choice for swimming in the county, for visitors and residents alike. Miami Beach is the most frequently visited beach, indicating satisfied users who are attracted by the high quality swimming experience offered. Among non-residents, Miami Beach is also the most popular beach destination.

The Trust for Public Land statistics indicate that the availability of special activities and facilities also influences beach use. Matheson Hammock is the second most frequently visited beach after Miami Beach. Motorboating, fishing and paddling are the most popular activities at Matheson Hammock after swimming and picnicking and are nearly as popular as these. The high frequency of use of Matheson Hammock and the popularity of these activities suggests that repeat visitors are interested specifically in these activities. Bill Baggs attracts frequent users as well, with swimming by far the most popular activity. Trail-related activities such as biking, walking, and jogging are also popular at Bill Baggs, suggesting that repeat visitors are attracted to the availability of these activities. Crandon has been visited by almost as many county residents as the overwhelmingly popular Miami Beach, but is not as frequently revisited. Special events, such as organized picnics and sports events attract large numbers of one-time users to Crandon.

While Virginia Key, including the Rickenbacker Causeway, the city beach and Virginia Key Beach Park is not among the most frequently visited beaches, it has attracted a high number of visitors as well as a small number of frequent users. Virginia Key has been visited by only slightly fewer county residents than Haulover or Matheson Hammock. Special activities available at Virginia Key include Seaquarium, which accounts for the overall high number of county residents who have visited the island. Other activities such as windsurfing, sailing, jetski rental and special events at Virginia Key Beach Park attract smaller numbers of repeat visitors. Rickenbacker Causeway is also a dog-friendly beach. These uses are in high demand among small special interest groups.

Some extremely specialized users create a strong, consistent demand for facilities that are not available widely. These include dog owners, boating and fishing enthusiasts, specialized sports participants such as windsurfers and kite sailors, and nudists. Boat launches and storage facilities, boat rental and waters appropriate for fishing account for the popularity of Matheson Hammock. Similarly, nudists account for a strong demand for the clothing optional beach at Haulover. Demand for this activity is so intense that revenue generated by the north parking lot at Haulover, which serves the clothing optional beach, supports the entire beach.

Design and operation: Beach users cite the condition of facilities as an influential factor in their selection of a beach and in the frequency of their use. Well maintained facilities, such as at Miami Beach, Bill Baggs State Park and Matheson Hammock, attract repeat visitors. Maintenance issues and a lack of variety in facilities were cited by Haulover Beach stakeholders as reasons for low repeat visitation.

The design of facilities is also influential. Users show a preference for parks where a theme carries through the design of all facilities in the park. In addition, design can influence the ability of users to identify recreation options and has a strong influence on their perceptions of the extent and quality of facilities. Wayfinding is an important limiting factors at all county beaches. Use patterns on Key Biscayne, for example, indicate that users show a preference for Bill Baggs State Park and that only after parking spaces at Bill Baggs are full, do use levels at Crandon rise. Unclear access points, confusing internal circulation patterns, large, centralized parking lots and the fact that the beach is not visible from the access roads or parking facilities deter visitors at Crandon. Visitors show a preference for the clear relationship between access, parking and the recreational options at Rickenbacker Causeway and Bill Baggs,



where parking lots are aligned with the beach and the visitor can see where beach space is available. Visitors also show a strong preference for minimizing the distance between their parking space and the beach. Large, centralized parking lots at Crandon are perceived as distant from the beach and tend to concentrate users within a short distance of the parking lot. As result, the central portion of Crandon Beach, near the north parking lots accessed from the first entrance to the park along Crandon Boulevard, is the most highly used while the majority of the beach, which must be accessed by foot or from the south parking lot, is largely underused, even on high use days. Similar problems exist at Haulover, where circulation and wayfinding problems concentrate users in areas of the beach that are the easiest to access while large areas are virtually unused. Large concentrations of parked cars also convey an impression of crowding on the beach, which deters some visitors.

Conditions of riptides, lightning, littoral pollution, etc. can limit the number of beach users. Fluctuating factors, such as weather and pollution levels influence daily use levels but long-term factors such as currents, persistent pollution, seaweed deposits and murkiness influence the swimming experience and have an impact on overall use levels. Beach utilization is highest on clear days with low pollution levels.

Access: Income level influences beach utilization. Transit-dependent, low-income county residents without cars do not use county beaches. TPL statistics indicate that a large percentage of inner city children have never visited a beach.

### **Broader trends in the recreational marketplace**

Missed Opportunities: Facilities and activities that are scarce and which attract loyal followers are in high demand. Clothing Optional Beaches attract a highly loyal following. The scarcity of clothing optional beaches means that unmet demand for this beach activity is extremely high. This strong demand translates into revenue dollars. As noted, for example, the parking lots serving the clothing optional beach at Haulover generate sufficient revenue to support the entire beach park. The clothing optional section of Haulover Beach is close to its capacity.

New Demands: Low income county residents without access to automobile transportation have low participation rates in recreational opportunities of all kinds, including beach going. Programs and alternative transportation options that provide access to this population are a potential generator of demand for beach activities.

Beachside overnight accommodation is in high demand throughout south Florida, as real estate and hotel prices attest. Camping sites are available at only five parks in Miami Dade County. Ecotourist type accommodations are non-existent. The feasibility study for the ecotourist campground proposed for Virginia Key lists only five comparable facilities that include overnight camping and short term rental opportunities. Only two of these were within 100 miles. The feasibility report indicated a high demand for this type of facility.

Rental cabanas are in high demand at Crandon Park. In contrast to day-use cabanas, which are available as changing rooms, rental cabanas are leased annually and provide storage for recreation equipment such as beach umbrellas, chairs and bicycles.

Competitive Trends: Black Heritage Tourism is a small but growing niche within the tourism industry. Heritage tourism is currently a \$30 billion a year industry. The most recent Travel Industry Association report stated that as a small segment of the total tourism picture, the African-American market is a \$10 billion a year market. It also stated that African Americans are more likely to visit heritage sites and



ethnic museum exhibits than any other segment of the market. (da Silva, Angela, "African American Heritage Tourism," Preservation Issues, Volume 7, Number 3)

Synergy with other Black Heritage initiatives in Miami Dade County could enhance demand for this kind of experience. The Overtown Folklife Village, the Miami Dade County Black Heritage Trail, Coconut Grove's Junkanoo Festival are possible complimentary attractions that could draw Black Heritage tourists to the area, establish Miami Dade County as a Black Heritage destination and create a larger potential audience for a civil rights memorial and museum.

### **Conclusions**

The poor quality of the swimming experience possible at Virginia Key Beach Park limits the park's recreational potential. Dangerous currents make parts of the beach relatively unsuitable for swimming. Although methods of improving the safety of the beach can be explored, the potential of the beach to attract and retain typical beach users is severely limited, since swimming is the primary activity enjoyed at the most popular beaches. Virginia Key Beach Park is in a poor position to compete with Miami Beach and Crandon as a swimming destination. However, attendance at other county beaches indicates that demand for well-maintained, unique activities other than swimming is also high and can take the place of swimming in meeting the recreational demands of county residents and visitors. In addition, unique activities and features increase repeat visits and help to stabilize attendance. Stable attendance reinforces the appeal of facilities by ensuring the viability of concessions and by building familiarity with the recreation options available. Design and operation of facilities can strongly influence attendance and build loyal repeat visitors.

Virginia Key Beach Park is well-positioned to serve a broad spectrum of Miami Dade County residents and visitors of all ages and ethnicities, especially from the south and central areas of the county. Virginia Key Beach Park's proximity to other parks, recreation options and tourist destinations such as Seaquarium, Crandon Park, and a restored Miami Marine Stadium, enhances its potential as a recreation destination. Crandon Park alone attracts approximately one million visitors per year, with an additional quarter million attending the annual tennis and golf events held at the park. Virginia Key Beach Park will be well placed to attract a proportion of this visitation, as visitors explore the various recreation options available at Key Biscayne and Virginia Key. In addition to this "walk by" traffic, Virginia Key will also attract a loyal following of users interested in its unique features, including educational and interpretive facilities and its historical significance as a gathering place for African Americans. The park also holds high potential demand as a Black Heritage tourist destination. Because Virginia Key Beach Park is positioned to attract tourists visiting nearby destinations, it can potentially serve as a gateway to other Black Heritage Trail destinations in Miami Dade County including Overtown and Coconut Grove.

Design and maintenance of facilities, especially those related to access such as parking and alternative transportation options and programs, are essential to ensuring that Virginia Key Beach Park fulfills its potential to meet demand for recreation.

The reuse of historical facilities for both interpretation and for their historical recreational uses is a key means of realizing the park's vision. At the same time, the historical facilities can meet only a portion of the recreational demands called for by the park's mission. New uses are therefore required as well as new facilities to ensure adequate services, including sufficient restroom and concession facilities. The park can accommodate recreational facilities for most popular beach activities, including:



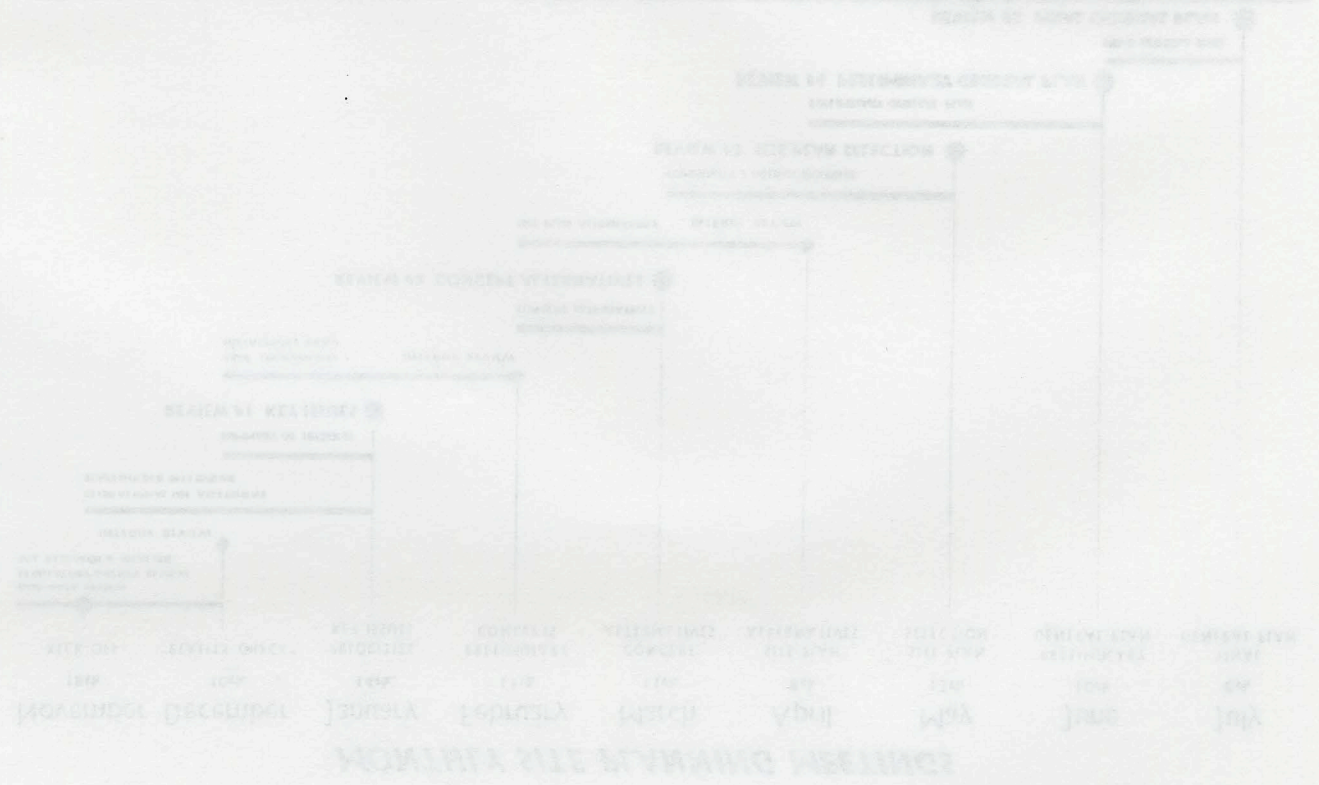
- Beach areas for swimming and snorkeling
- Beach areas for picnicking, sunbathing, kayak launch
- Lawn areas for picnicking
- Concession facilities for dining/food sales
- Concession facilities for equipment
- Storage facilities for equipment
- Day-use cabanas and bath houses
- Trails for Walking/Jogging/Bike Riding/Skating – including dog-friendly facilities
- Nature trails for wildlife observation and nature study
- Performance venue for special events
- Playground area – including the historic Carousel and Mini Train

#### **Goal 4: Overcoming barriers to access**

The park's mission, like Crandon Beach Park, is to provide a place where all county residents can experience the healing powers of the natural world. Virginia Key Beach Park can place a special emphasis on overcoming barriers to access. The park program therefore can include features geared to enhancing access to the park for the county's low-income residents. The park's comparatively compact size makes it a "walkable" beach park with a variety of attractions that are easily explored on foot. In order to make beach going more convenient, affordable and enjoyable for people reliant on transit, facilities and programs can be developed that take into account all aspects of reaching and enjoying a visit to the beach. There are many reasons not to take public transit to the beach: the potential to be stuck there if the bus is unreliable, the walk from home to the bus stop to the beach with heavy and cumbersome equipment, especially after being tired by a day of activity and heat, lack of space or permission to carry equipment on the bus, the long bus ride itself, including waiting and transfers, the challenge of finding an outfit (or outfits) that will be wearable throughout the many phases of the outing, especially the return bus trip after spending a day outdoors, having wet or messy hair in public (ok for the beach, but not for the bus ride). All of these inconveniences – as well as the expense involved in overcoming them – deter those dependent on public transit or with low incomes or who want to reduce their reliance on the car for environmental reasons from visiting the beach. Making the beach transit-friendly means addressing these realities. Several approaches are possible to improve the experience of getting to the beach by making it shorter, more convenient, more reliable and more fun:

- Extend bus routes into the park with shelters, telephones and transit information as close to amenities as possible.
- Provide alternative transit modes such as jitney service, organized group transportation
- Provide carts, buggies or wagons to facilitate carrying beach equipment to the areas of the park remote from the parking lot
- Partner with organizations that can sponsor transportation and supply equipment. Facilitate church groups and clubs that sponsor recreation opportunities for youth such as Optimists Club, Big Brothers and Sisters, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Sierra Club and other groups focused on environmental education. Provide facilities for sponsoring organizations that provide for equipment storage and group activities including camping.
- Make a wide variety of beach necessities affordably available at the park: towels, chairs, umbrellas, coolers, ice, food, recreation equipment such as bikes, rafts, fishing gear and bait, kayaks, kites etc.
- Provide long-term lockers for storage of personal beach gear including clothes, bikes, chairs, umbrellas, coolers, bathing suits.
- Provide and meticulously maintain changing rooms that offer privacy, places to store street clothes, vanity areas and showers.





THESE DATA WERE OBTAINED FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES:

1. VISUAL INSPECTION OF THE SITE

2. INTERVIEWS WITH LOCAL RESIDENTS AND BUSINESS OWNERS

3. REVIEW OF AVAILABLE LITERATURE AND RECORDS

4. ANALYSIS OF SAMPLES COLLECTED DURING THE VISUAL INSPECTION