



CITY OF MANHATTAN BEACH CITY HALL

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TO: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

FROM: Bruce Moe, City Manager

MEETING: City Council Regular Meeting, August 18, 2020

SUBJECT: Agenda Item No. 16 – Consider Request by Councilmember Hersman and Councilmember Stern to Discuss the History of Bruce’s Beach

DATE: August 18, 2020

SUPPLEMENTAL ATTACHMENT

ATTACHMENT(S):

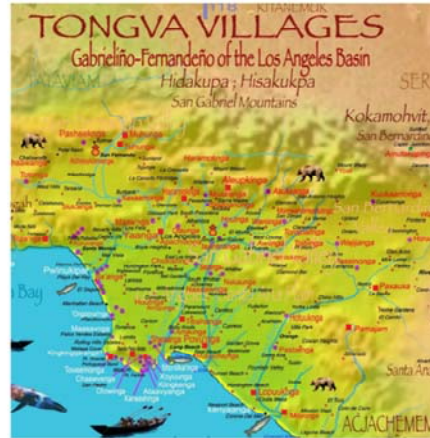
- 1) PowerPoint Presentation



The historical account was taken from Robert Brigham's thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Social Science at Fresno State College in 1956, as well as Dr. Alison Rose Jefferson's book, *Living the California Dream-African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era*, and Jan Dennis' book, *A Walk Beside the Sea*. Additional information from the Manhattan Beach Historical Society, the Los Angeles Times, as well as the Los Angeles Public Library were used to create this presentation.

PRIOR TO 1912 – PRE-INCORPORATION

- Native American Land
- Spanish Era
- Mexican Era
- American Era



Gabrielino-Tongva villages existed in the Los Angeles basin for thousands of years before Spanish Era (1769-1821), Mexican Era (1821-1848).

Manhattan Beach was a part of the Rancho Sausal Redondo, originally granted to Antonio Avila by Mexico in 1822. The last person to own the entire original grant was a Canadian, Daniel Freeman, in 1885. It was in the early 1900's that three principal subdividers came to what is now Manhattan Beach – George Peck, Stuart Merrill, and Frank S. Daugherty.

Prior to incorporation, there were approximately twelve families who lived year-round in Manhattan Beach. Although subdivided, water was available from two central wells and had to be delivered in buckets

1912 – MANHATTAN BEACH

- Incorporation
- Willa Bruce Purchases First Lot
- Willa Bruce starts business



Charles and Willa Bruce's wedding photo. Courtesy of The Beach Reporter/Daily Breeze and "Skirts Across the Sand" by Jan Dennis



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The City of Manhattan Beach was incorporated in 1912. There were approximately 600 residents at incorporation, most of them were part-time cottages, or sheds for weekend or summer leisure.

On February 15, 1912, Mrs. Willa Bruce purchased the first of two adjacent lots along the Strand between 26th and 27th Streets from Henry Willard for \$1,225. This was Lot 8 of Block 5 of the Peck Tract. The history is not clear whether she and her husband, Charles Bruce, were the first African American residents in Manhattan Beach, but certainly one of the first, and considered a pioneer by many because of her entrepreneurial spirit.

Mr. and Mrs. Bruce built a two-story building with accommodations for dancing upstairs and a café downstairs on the first lot in 1913 known as Bruce's Lodge.

On August 13, 1920, Mrs. Bruce purchased Lot 9 next to her original lot.

AFRICAN AMERICAN BEACH LEISURE



Mary Mingleton enjoys the surf at Manhattan Beach, possibly at the African American resort of Bruce's Beach shortly before it was condemned by the city. Courtesy of the Shades of LA Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



Susie Thorton, Grace Williams, Mary Mingleton, Grace Harris enjoying a hayride to Bruce's Beach. Courtesy of the Shades of LA Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



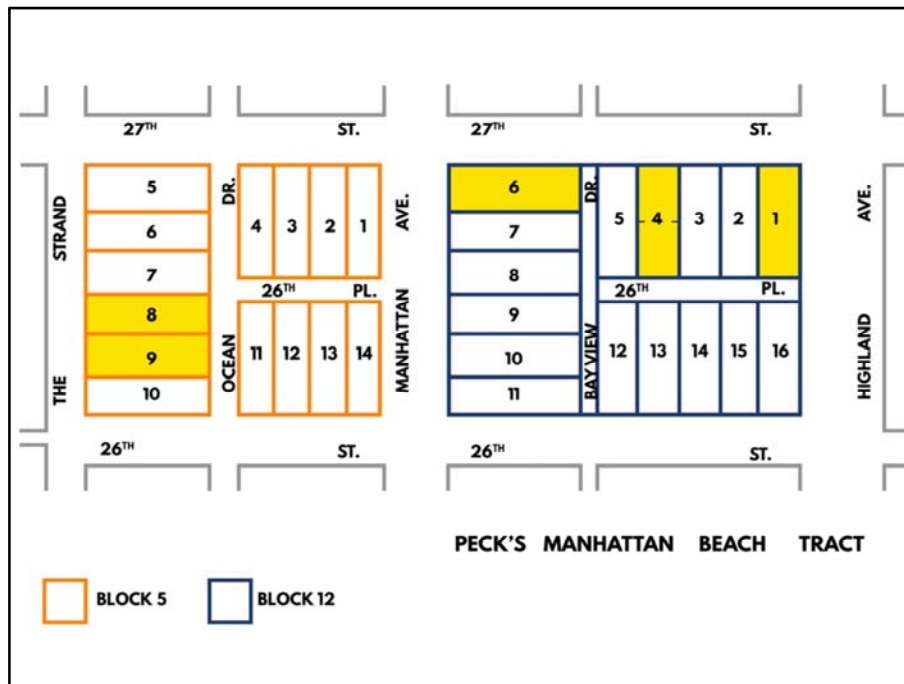
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The Bruce's successful business of renting bathing suits, umbrellas and other beach items, as well as later a dining hall and small overnight accommodations, became a very popular venue for African American Angelenos on weekends and in the summer.

Because there was limited access for African Americans on the beach in Southern California, "Bruce's Beach" as it was to become known, was very popular. According to one resident, the business was a source of considerable income for its owners, the Bruce's.

Many African American families enjoyed the beach facilities at Bruce's Beach and by 1919, six African American families moved to Manhattan Beach. Four of these families moved into lots on the property between 26th and 27th Streets west of Highland, which is now Bruce's Beach Park. The entire area from Highland to the Strand and 26th and 27th Streets was known as Blocks 5 and 12 of Peck's Manhattan Beach Tract.



The four African American families who moved into the Bruce's Beach tract were:

1. Major George Prioleau, a retired Army chaplain, and his wife, who purchased half of Lot 4, Block 12 of the Bruce's Beach tract in 1919 from the original owners. Of note is that Major Prioleau was previously an enslaved person and after the Civil War graduated from Wilberforce University before he became one of five African American US Army Chaplains serving from 1884-1901.
2. A friend of the Prioleau family, Elizabeth Patterson, bought the other half of Lot 4 in 1922 and together they built a duplex.
3. In 1923, Mary R. Sanders purchased Lot 6, Block 12. She was a seamstress and considered a woman of considerable success and prestige. A cottage was already built on the lot and Mrs. Sanders used it for weekends and as a summer retreat.
4. Also in 1923, another African American family, Milton and Anna Johnson, acquired Lot 1, Block 12 in the Bruce's Beach tract.

The other two African American families who bought lots outside of the Bruce's Beach tract on 26th Street, fronting Block 5 include:

John McCaskill and Elisa Irvin, who purchased Lot 3, Block 4, on July 15, 1923. They owned the property from 1923 to 1973.

The Slaughter family purchased Lot 2 of Block 4 in 1926 and built a lodging house in 1927. Brigham says that many guessed that the Slaughter family “sought to replace the Bruce’s as host after the condemnation in 1924.”

Other African American families moved to Manhattan Beach near the Bruce’s Beach tract.

There is conflicting information as to whether these African American families, along with the Bruce’s, are the only African American families to have moved to Manhattan Beach during this time period.

Brigham surmised that the possible reasons for the concentration of African American families in one area are as follows:

The Bruce’s, “pioneers” among the [African American] residents in Manhattan, attracted settlers to their immediate vicinity because of their business. Visitors spent the day at the Bruce’s and some stayed overnight in the lodge. Those who purchased in the vicinity had friends among those who visited.

Another reason is there may have been a refusal of some realtors in the area to sell lots to [African American] families in the more established part of town, south of Marine Avenue.

There was no evidence of restrictive covenants on the properties in the early days. However, such covenants did occur later.

DISCRIMINATION AT BEACH



Beachgoers in Santa Monica.
Courtesy of the Shades of LA Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



A group of friends at the beach. Ralph Bunche is at the center, wearing a cap with Connie, Helen and Margaret.
Courtesy of the Shades of LA Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



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At some beaches and swimming pools in Southern California during the first half of the twentieth century, there was discrimination towards African Americans, other communities of color, and marginalized groups. At swimming pools, varied local ordinances and private practices at different times and manner of implementation which inhibited these groups swimming until these ordinances were challenged and repealed, and private discriminatory actions were fought from the 1930s to 1950s.


As Manhattan Beach became more and more popular among Los Angeles' African American families, the resentment and fear among the white townspeople became increasingly evident.

VIOLENCE & DISCRIMINATION

- Limited beach access
- Vandalism and arson
- Active KKK presence
- Cross burning



June 6, 1924, Manhattan Beach News. Courtesy of Manhattan Beach Historical Society.


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Violence and discrimination to limit the African American families on the beach or make it more difficult for them to remain increased. Examples of this included:

The beach in front of the Bruce’s Lodge was roped off at both ends to limit the beach area that the African American families could use.

Many African American beachgoers returned from the beach to find the air had been let out of their tires.

A house belonging to an African American was burned in the early 1920’s.

The Klu Klux Klan (KKK) was a new group who had been gaining strength in the 1920’s across the United States. The KKK had active chapters in Hermosa Beach and Redondo Beach.

An alleged Klansmen set fire to a mattress under the main building of Bruce’s Lodge.

Since Prohibition was in effect at the time, an apparent plan was hatched to plant

alcohol at Bruce's Lodge and then follow up with an arrest. This failed to get support and did not actually happen.

"10 Minute Only" parking signs were placed in front of Mrs. Sanders' property to inconvenience and intimidate her and her guests.

A burning cross was set near one of the homes belonging to an African American outside of the Bruce's Beach tract.

ORDINANCES

- Ordinance preventing bathhouses (and other entertainment) without Board of Trustee's approval
- Ordinance preventing new bathhouses east of the railroad line



By 1924, the residents of Manhattan Beach were resisting commercialized amusement in the City. The Board of Trustees (later the body changed its name to the City Council) enacted an ordinance in 1924 that stated that anyone wishing to open a “bathhouse, social club, theater, dance hall, billiard or pool room, public shooting gallery, public bowling alley or other place of public amusement” must apply to the Board of Trustees. In addition, a new ordinance made it illegal for any bathhouse to be erected east of the Pacific Electric right of way, the railroad track that went along just west of the Strand. Although this did not affect the Bruce’s business, they would not be able to expand their business, nor could anyone else build such a facility. In Robert Brigham's thesis he asserts that both ordinances were enacted to limit the African American families, and specifically the Bruce’s, from building more amusement areas.

EMINENT DOMAIN

- Petition to take the property by eminent domain
- Protests dismissed
- Litigation



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Once violence, intimidation and legislation failed to deter the African American families, a new discussion took place.

George Lindsey, a Manhattan Beach resident since 1920 and realtor, who was interviewed by Bob Brigham in 1955, appears to be the person who spearheaded the issue of condemnation of the property.

In 1921, Mr. Lindsey approached the Board of Trustees, requesting that they take measures to discourage the African American families from establishing homes in Manhattan Beach. Although sympathetic, they were reluctant to take action "lest they go on record as being bigots."

There is some question whether Mr. Lindsey pursued the condemnation, as some believed it was the KKK, and others thought that the person who wanted to plant the liquor was responsible.

By 1923, the Bruce's built on the second lot. Ms. Bruce stated in an LA Times Article from 1912, "Whenever we have tried to buy land for a beach resort we have been refused, but I own this land and I am going to keep it." She goes on to say that it would be unjust that they should not be allowed to "have a little breathing space" at the seaside where they

might have a holiday.

Mr. Lindsey felt the Board was not moving fast enough and he circulated a petition requesting condemnation of the Bruce's Beach tract. He presented the petition to the Board on November 15, 1923. They took it under advisement.

At the Board's next meeting on December 6, 1923, no action was taken. Another petition was received protesting the filed petition by Lindsey. This latter petition was submitted by some of the property owners of the Peck Tract who voiced their opposition to condemnation.

On January 3, 1924, the Board introduced an ordinance to acquire for public park purposes, Blocks 5 and 12 of the Peck Tract, and to pay the damages and costs of such acquisition. The ordinance was adopted on February 7, 1924.

Nothing happened for a few months and Brigham speculated that perhaps the Board wanted the African American families to just sell their properties so that they didn't have to go through the condemnation.

In June of 1924, another ordinance was passed declaring their intention to condemn the properties. Individuals had an opportunity to protest the proposed condemnation.

Several protests were opened and examined. Since this all occurred many years before the Ralph M. Brown Act, which requires all decisions of local legislative bodies to be made before the public, the Board apparently reviewed the protests outside the public forum and decided that the protests were not sufficient to warrant abandoning the condemnation proceedings. Of the approximately 8,000 lot owners who could protest, only 329 had done so, and only one included an affidavit as required by law.

With the protests dismissed, the Board voted to approve an ordinance to condemn. It also directed the City Attorney to bring an action in the name of the City for condemnation of all lots in the Peck tract.

On November 25, 1924, the lawsuit was filed. The litigation lasted until June 10, 1929.


The condemnation covered 30 lots in the tract. Five were owned by the African American families and had either cottages on their lots or the two lots of the Bruce's Lodge. The other 25 lots were owned by white owners and none had buildings on them.

The "original owners" of the tract, held 14 lots at the time. Although they answered the complaint, they did not fight the condemnation. The other white owners did not file answers to the complaint.

Mr. and Mrs. Bruce, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, Major and Mrs. Prioleau, and Ms. Patterson all

filed answers opposing the condemnation, stating in part, that the real reason behind the action was to banish them from the said City, and more particularly, from that portion of the City so close to the Pacific Ocean, contending that the motivation was to entirely free the City from their presence because of the fact that they were African American and that the said proceedings are arbitrary, oppressive and inspired by racial prejudice.

EMINENT DOMAIN		
Owner	Property	Settlement
B.H. Dyer, R. L. Rice, H.M. Eichelberger	<u>Block 5</u> Lots 1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 <u>Block 12</u> Lots 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, and 12	\$21,147.31
C. W. Stone	<u>Block 5</u> Lot 3	\$1,325.71
Geo. W. Yarro	<u>Block 5</u> Lots 4 and 6 <u>Block 12</u> Lot 11	\$6,461.13
Lillie D. Dosta	<u>Block 5</u> Lot 7	\$2,911.23
WA Bruce	<u>Block 5</u> Lots 8 and 9	\$14,500.00
M.B. Johnson	<u>Block 12</u> Lot 1	\$1,273.04
Anna E. Johnson	<u>Block 12</u> Lot 1	\$1,273.04
Emma K. Barnett	<u>Block 12</u> Lot 1	\$1,342.08
Elizabeth Patterson	<u>Block 12</u> North ½ Lot 4	\$1,865.66
Geo. And Ethel Prioleau	<u>Block 12</u> South ½ Lot 4	\$1,874.37

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After the defendants waived trial by jury, the court appointed “three disinterested persons, residents of Manhattan Beach” to determine the compensation to be paid. The referees were all realtors, C.A. Daugherty, U.T. Thompson, and George H. Kern.

Once dollar amounts were designated for each of the lots, some attorneys objected to the dollar amounts.

Mrs. Sanders objected that she felt the fair market value of her Lot 6 was \$6,500, rather than the appraised value of \$3,800. She eventually received \$4,129.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson estimated the value of their property at \$5,000, but the recommendation of the referees was \$3,645.12. They were eventually awarded a slightly higher amount of \$3,795.12. Note that in the filing of their answer, they requested \$16,000 for their property and another \$20,000 in damages.

The Bruce’s filed their answer claiming \$70,000 for their property and \$50,000 in damages. They received \$14,500 for their two lots.

Mrs. Sanders’ daughter recalls that the trial judge insisted on the right of the African American families to repurchase elsewhere in Manhattan Beach. According to her, he said

he would “throw the case right out of court” if not guaranteed.

Brigham states that there is no evidence that anyone thought that the amounts awarded by the referees were unfair. “In fact, without exception, surviving members” of the families involved agree that the referees were “quite liberal.”

Mrs. Sanders purchased a lot across from the tract at 26th and Highland. Her daughter, Ethel Atkinson, kept the apartment building on that lot until 1953.

The daughter of the Johnsons, Mrs. Barnett-Holt, purchased a home at 23rd Street and Highland Avenue in 1927.

John McCaskill, who had joined with Eliza Irvin in 1923 to build a duplex, owned the home many years after the condemnation.

Major Prioleaus and family moved the entire structure to a lot on the corner of 25th Street and Bayview Drive.

The Slaughter family who erected the Slaughter hotel, eventually left the City.

The Bruce’s did not purchase another lot in Manhattan Beach.

EMINENT DOMAIN

Owner	Property	Settlement
Mary Sanders	Block 12 Lot 6	\$4,129.09
Sarah I. Ambrose	Block 12 Lot 7	\$1,075.00
Marion R. Wyser	Block 12 Lot 7	\$1,075.00
So. Calif. Bond and Finance Corp.	Block 12 Lot 7	\$128.09
R. C. Ruperd	Block 12 Lot 10	\$1,568.08
Grace Stuart	Block 12 Lot 13	\$1,200.00
L.A. Dreisbach	Block 12 Lot 14	\$913.95
M.W. Mitchell	Block 12 Lot 14	\$25.00
Clara M. Monroe (Darlington)	Block 12 Lot 15	\$1,200.00
H.A. Ecclestone	Block 12 Lot 16	\$1,755.85

“SWIM-IN”

- Police took down names of 25 African American Beachgoers
- Elizabeth Catley arrested for swimming in the ocean.
- NAACP held a “swim-in” at the beach.



Los Angeles Chapter of the NAACP. Executive Board meeting in 1923. Courtesy of the Shades of LA Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



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After condemnation but before the final judgment, a crisis at the beach in 1927 had major consequences.

In 1927, the City leased the beach frontage and pier to Oscar Bassonette, a resident, for one dollar for a period of 12 months. After turning the beach into private property, Mr. Bassonette posted “no trespassing” signs and roped off the beach between 25th and 27th Streets, requiring Bruce’s Beach visitors to walk a quarter mile around the ropes to get to the beach. Local police were asked to enforce the “no trespassing” signs.

On Memorial Day, the police took the names of 25 African American individuals on the beach. They gave their names but did not leave the beach. The *California Eagle*, an African American newspaper, gave the following advice:

“If they solicit your names, refuse and give them a chance to make a show down, and you will find that some of the present obstacles will evaporate overnight.”

On July 4th, Elizabeth Catley, a 19-year-old African American woman, a student from UCLA, was arrested for bathing in the ocean.

On July 17, 1927, the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement

of Colored People (NAACP) tested the prohibition against African Americans using the ocean. In its first act of civil disobedience, about a dozen members of the NAACP had a “swim-in” at the beach. Mr. Bassonette and his police enforcers told them to leave the beach or be arrested. Several African American individuals were arrested. In their trial, the lease of the beach to Mr. Bassonette was introduced. During questioning, it was clear that Mr. Bassonette told the police to keep African Americans off the beach. He also indicated that the “no trespassing” sign was meant for African Americans.

The Board of Trustees revoked the lease to Bassonette and secured a perpetual lease of its entire beach frontage for the public.

The *Los Angeles Times* on August 16, 1927, reported on this action stating that the City’s actions set an example to other cities by securing the two miles of beach for all residents and visitors. The NAACP won the fight to prevent this obvious civil rights violation and secured the beach for all to enjoy. This accomplishment contributed to racial restrictions attempts at Southern California public beaches fading away in the forthcoming decades.

PAINFUL ADMISSION

"We tried to buy them out, but they would not sell....We had to acquire these two blocks to solve the problem, so we voted to condemn them, and make a city park there. We had to protect ourselves. Our attorney advised the members of the council never to admit the real purpose in establishing the park, especially during the council meeting."

-Frank Daugherty, Board of Trustees
The Redondo Reflex, 1945



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Despite the condemnation and the limitations to enjoy the beach, some African American families continued to live in Manhattan Beach. However, whether sensitive to the feeling that they were not wanted or actual incidents that drove them out, except for the Atkinsons and McCaskills, the African American families from this time period left Manhattan Beach.

In a 1945 newspaper clipping from The Redondo Reflex, one of the original developers, Frank Daugherty, was also on the Board of Trustees of the City, admits that the condemnation was racially motivated. This article, although painful to read today, sheds light on the history of Bruce's Beach. In this article he states, "We tried to buy them out, but they would not sell....We had to acquire these two blocks to solve the problem, so we voted to condemn them, and make a city park there. We had to protect ourselves. Our attorney advised the members of the council never to admit the real purpose in establishing the park, especially during the council meeting."

In 1948, the City adopted a Resolution for matching lands with the State and County of Los Angeles. Under this resolution, the property condemned in 1929 would be accepted by the State under the condition, among others, that the land be accepted for use as a public beach or park, and that all rights conveyed by the City to the State are for use as a public beach or park only. Today, the property at the Strand is owned by the County.

TRACT MAP



THE PROPERTY NOW

- 1956: Park established
- 1962: Park named Bayview Terrace Park
- 1974: Park named Parque Culiacan
- 2003: LMB proposed a renaming contest and the City installed a plaque
- 2006: City renamed the Park, Bruce's Beach



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After condemnation, the City did not build the park for almost 30 years. This fact has led people to believe that the City did not actually want the park and that it was a subterfuge to remove the African American families and the Bruce's business from the City.

The property was transformed into five stepped terraces in 1956 with shrubs and trees planted.

Interestingly, Robert Brigham was a member of the City's Park Commission in 1955. Perhaps his inquiries and interviews with residents about Bruce's Beach for his thesis is what caused the City to move forward with the Park at that time.

In 1962 the site was established as Bayview Terrace Park.

In 1974, the City renamed the park Parque Culiacan, after the City of Culiacan, Mexico to honor its sister city.

In 2003, the Leadership Manhattan class proposed a contest to rename the park as Culiacan was no longer Manhattan Beach's sister city. The theme of the contest was "To demonstrate the best of Manhattan Beach by celebrating the best of our past while encouraging the best for our future."

Although 120 entries were submitted, the City decided to keep the name. The City accepted the \$3,600 raised for the plaque and a new plaque was installed. There was reference to African American Angelenos using the Bruce's Beach resort and that "minority families" were "housed" in the two block tract, but the message on the plaque related more to the sister city program than to the tragic history of the park.

In 2006, the renaming of the park was brought up again to City Council. There was a suggestion to rename it after Rosa Parks, who had died in October of that year.

The City's Parks & Recreation Commission was charged with looking at the name change. They unanimously agreed that if the Park's name should be changed, it should be Bruce's Beach.

Commissioner Lear stated at a meeting, "The Commission has an interest in sending the message that Manhattan Beach stands for, amongst other things, diversity and recognizes that the greatest blemish in our history is what happened in the 1920s at Bruce's Beach."

Because the Commission was only charged with whether the City should change the name to "Rosa Parks Park," the recommendation to the Council and the Council determination was that they would not change the name. Mayor Mitch Ward asked that the Commission go back and look at other names for the park.

When the idea of renaming the park "Bruce's Beach" became known, some community members objected because it would "bring up bad feelings" or some did not want it to be remembered at all.

In the discussion at City Council on July 5, 2006, Mayor Ward, in attempting to get consensus on renaming the park Bruce's Beach, recalled that he had read that in 1912, George Peck bucked the then current practice of racial discrimination, and opened the two blocks for purchase by the African Americans. Mr. Peck was also said to have built a fishing pier near the resort for the African American families.

The facts about George Peck have been disputed. Robert Brigham stated that since George Peck did not try to stop the condemnation and was also a part of the bogus lease to keep African Americans off of the beach, he did not graciously open the tract to African American families as some believed.



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In the end, the Council voted in favor of changing the name to Bruce's Beach Park. The language referenced George Peck and how he made it possible for the beach area to be used by African Americans.

REFERENCES

- Robert Brigham's thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Social Science at Fresno State College in 1956.
- Dr. Alison Rose Jefferson's book, *Living the California Dream-African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era*.
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