

The Historic Black Community of Bruce's Beach



The Bruce Family

In May, 1912, Mrs. W.A. Bruce purchased Lot 8 of Block 5 in Peck's Manhattan Beach Tract from Los Angeles real estate agent Henry Willard. On June 17, 1912, they opened "Bruce Beach Front", a seaside resort for bathing and fishing would be a "grand affair". Guests would arrive to find "a small portable cottage with a stand that sold soda pop and lunches," rented bathing suits and provided access to bathing showers and dressing tents. While her husband, Charles, worked as a dining-car chef on the train running between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles, it was pioneering, 50-year-old Willa who ran the business and greeted guests.



*Family photo taken about 1920 -1924, before the last girl was born.
Ana Gonzales, Prioleau Granddaughter*

The Prioleau Family

In 1919, Major George and Mrs. Ethel Prioleau purchased the southern half of lot 4, block 12. Major George Washington Prioleau served in the famed Buffalo Soldiers of the 9th Cavalry during the Spanish-American War. Despite facing blatant racism and enduring brutal weather conditions, the buffalo soldiers earned a reputation for serving courageously. Through public letters and editorials, Prioleau challenged racial segregation and attacked the hypocrisy of fighting a war for liberation in Cuba while the United States remained locked in a mindset of racism. He retired in 1920 and moved with his family to Manhattan Beach. In 1921 he helped found the Bethel AME Church in Los Angeles where he often preached without pay.

Ethel Prioleau graduated from Normal Teacher Training College in Kansas. While her husband was stationed on various military assignments, Ethel began teaching classes for Army Officer's wives. Ethel helped her husband start the AME church. In 1931, she contributed to end segregation at public pools when she sued the city, along with NAACP member Betty Hill, complaining that she was not allowed to use the swimming pool in nearby Exposition Park.

Swimming Pools Opened To All After Persistent Two Year Court Fight

Holding that in the absence of a state law a city has no right to restrict attendance at playgrounds by race, Judge Walter Gates Monday held that the rule of the City Playground Commission forbidding colored children the right to use the swimming pools at certain hours is invalid. His decision ends a long two years legal battle in which colored citizens headed by Mrs. Ethel Prioleau, who filed the case sought a writ of mandamus to prevent the enforcement of the rule. Attorneys Jennings and Macbeth represented the plaintiffs.

California Eagle 1931

Ms. Elizabeth (Emma) M. Patterson

The other half of the Prioleau lot was purchased by Ms. Elizabeth M. Patterson in 1922 and together they built a duplex. Ms. Patterson was born in Tennessee about 1877. Elizabeth was a longtime friend of the Prioleau family from when they lived in Kansas.



Emma Patterson

Mrs. Mary Ramsey Sanders (Washington)

On September 15, 1923, Mrs. Mary Sanders bought lot 6, Block 12. Mrs. Sanders was born 1872 in Canada and immigrated to the United States in 1887. Mrs. Sanders worked as a caterer for private families and was "one of the better cateresses in Los Angeles" and "a woman of considerable success and prestige."

Mr. and Mrs. Milton B. and Anna Johnson

Mr. and Mrs. Milton B. and Anna Johnson purchased lot 1, Block 12. Milton B. Johnson was born in Canada and came to the United States in 1874. He married Anna E Davis October 27, 1914. Milton worked as a porter for Steam Railroad.

James & Lula Slaughter

The Slaughter family moved to Manhattan Beach two years after the condemnation proceeding began. Mr. and Mrs. James Slaughter opened a 10 room boarding house at 120 26th st. Manhattan Beach in May 1927, the same month the Bruce Resort closed. They lived full time in Manhattan Beach with their seven children: Ruby, James, Richard, daughter William "Willie", Robert, Estella, and Virginia Slaughter.



1927, 13 year old Estella Slaughter and her class at Center Street School in Manhattan Beach



James Slaughter, Miriam Matthews Collection

Historic Civil Rights Acts

In the midst of the condemnation proceedings, black beach goers continued to visit Manhattan Beach despite harassment from neighboring white residents.

In May, 1927, the City entered into a series of leases with local businessman Oscar C. Bessonette that allowed them to treat the beachfront as private property and arrest unwanted visitors.



Elizabeth Catley Slaughter
November 28, 1928-June 15, 1969

On July 4, 1927, a 19-year-old Black UCLA student, Elizabeth Catley, was arrested for swimming and “trespassing” on the “private beach.” while visiting the Slaughter family who lived on 26th st. Manhattan Beach police imprisoned her for five hours in a cold jail cell in Redondo in only her wet bathing suit to protect her.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took action. On July 17, Dr. Henry C. Hudson, President of the Los Angeles Chapter of the NAACP along with John McCaskill, a Manhattan Beach resident, and his friends, J.H. Conley, and Romalious Johnson, were arrested for resisting an officer when they peacefully protested and refused to leave. They were taken to jail and required to pay \$10 bail.

On Tuesday, August 2, 1927, the four men were put on trial in Manhattan Beach City Hall for resisting arrest. Bessonette was represented by the Manhattan Beach City Attorney and the four defendants were represented by Attorney Hugh Macbeth.

Macbeth questioned Bessonette about the “No Trespassing” sign:

Macbeth: Did you have a sign posted?

Bessonette: Yes, “No Trespassing”.

Macbeth: Did this sign mean no trespassing by Colored people?

Bessonette: It meant no trespassing by undesirables.

Macbeth: On July 17, when these four defendants seated here were arrested and lodged in jail were there any other people sitting in the same spot?

Bessonette: Yes.

Macbeth: Were they arrested?

Bessonette: No.

Macbeth: Then your sign was posted for colored peoples only?

Bessonette: For undesirables.

Macbeth: You consider colored people undesirables?

Bessonette: Yes.

Officer Haddock testified that he had been given specific orders by Bessonette to keep Black people off the beach. Despite Haddock and Bessonette’s admissions to racial discrimination, the local court found in favor of the City.

The *Eagle* reported that the defendants appealed to the Superior Court of Los Angeles County on August 12, and Macbeth moved for “an arrest of judgement in the Manhattan court”, which was granted by Justice of the Peace (and Manhattan’s City Clerk) Llewellyn Price. At the very next meeting of the City Council, the City cancelled its lease with Bessonette. The next day, *The California Eagle* proudly declared: “NAACP Wins Beach Victory.”



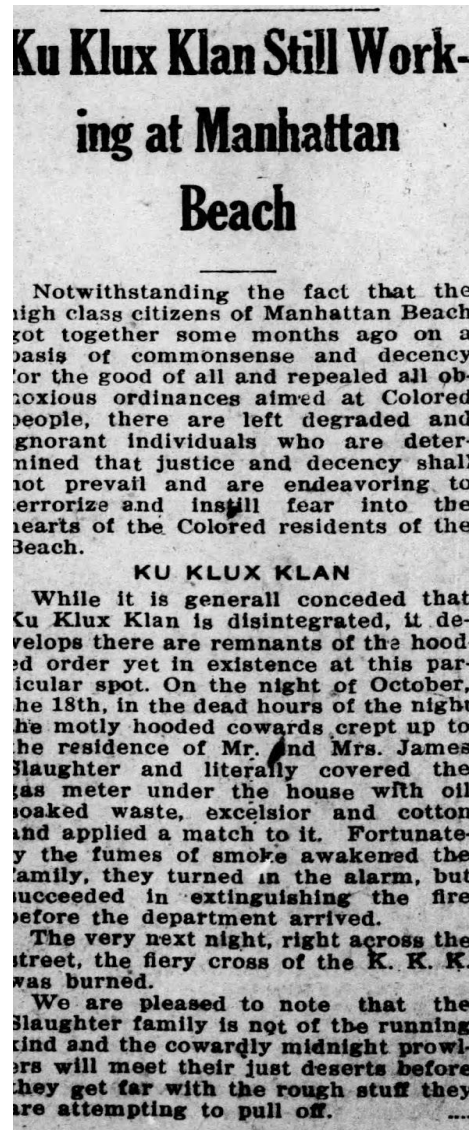
Attorney, Hugh Macbeth Sr.

Hugh McBeth

Hugh Macbeth graduated from Harvard Law School in 1908 and founded the *Baltimore Times* before moving to Los Angeles in 1913. In 1914, he was appointed special counsel to the Los Angeles District Attorney's office. He had a long legal career fighting against racism and segregation. In addition to defending Hudons & the bathers at Manhattan Beach, he helped Betty Hill and Ethel Prioleau end segregation at local swimming pools. Twenty years after the Manhattan Beach case, Macbeth would argue *Oyama v.*

California, against California's Alien Land Act, in front of the United States Supreme Court. The Court's ruling for Oyama in January 1948 ended the Alien Land Act and set a legal precedent for later rulings against segregation.

The Presence of the Ku Klux Klan & the "Race War" of 1928



California Eagle, October 28, 1927

On October 18, 1927, "hooded" individuals approached the Slaughter house during the night and covered the gas meter with oil-soaked waste, accelerant, cotton and lit a match to it. The Slaughters were awoken by the smoke, but were able to extinguish the

fire before the fire department arrived. The *California Eagle* reported that “there are individuals who are determined that justice and decency shall not prevail and are endeavoring to terrorize and instill fear into the hearts of Colored residents of Manhattan Beach.” The following night, October 19, 1927, the *Eagle* stated that “the fiery cross of the KKK” was burned across the street from the Slaughter home. Other reports state shots were fired at their home. Despite these attempts at intimidation, the Slaughters were “not of the running kind”.

By February, 1928, the multiple racially-motivated incidents had sparked an investigation by the 1928 Los Angeles County Grand Jury. One of the first investigations was the alleged “anti-race arson plot at Manhattan Beach, where it is charged houses of Negro residents have been dynamited and set on fire by white citizens objecting to the presence of Negroes.” District Attorney Asa Keyes intimated that “some big names” are involved in the arson play. “Dynamite, bullets and the secret torch are all alleged to have been employed by residents in order to induce the negroes to travel. Certain citizens objected to a colored settlement.” *The Venice Vanguard* reported “It was learned that seven Manhattan Beach citizens have been questioned by operatives in regard to the race trouble. One of these seven, it is said, has been Jack Garvin, Manhattan’s chief of police. The other six are business men of the community.”

Acknowledging the Bruce Legacy at the Park

Although there are some published plans for the park development, it was not until 1956 that the area was landscaped into a terraced park that absorbed a portion of Bayview Drive. This work coincided with Robert Brigham’s Masters thesis, which provided a comprehensive review of the plight of the Bruce family and other Black residents that arrived in Manhattan Beach beginning in 1912 and the racially motivated eminent domain proceedings.

The site was referred to as City Park and Beach Front Park until 1962, when the Kiwanis Club and the Manhattan Beach City Council sponsored a naming contest, resulting in the change to Bayview Terrace Park. In 1974, the park’s name was subject to another change to Parque Culiacan as an act of goodwill toward Manhattan Beach’s Sister City in Culiacan, Mexico.

In December 2005, Manhattan Beach resident and activist, Patrick McBride, requested that the park be named after the civil rights issues related to the park’s history. In response to Mr. McBride’s comment, Mayor Fahey requested a name that addressed the history of the area. Mr. McBride was passionate in his advocacy for this cause. Manhattan Beach Parks and Recreation agreed and stated “The Commission has an interest in sending the message that Manhattan Beach stands for, amongst other things, diversity and recognizing that the greatest blemish in our history is the events of the 1920s at Bruce’s Beach”. In July 2006, after intense public comment from members of the community, the name of the park was officially changed.

The newly named Bruce's Beach park was dedicated on Saturday, March 31, 2007, and the ceremony attracted around 250 people, including Willa and Charles's grandson, Bernard Bruce. Bernard told the crowd: "This is a happy day for my family and me. It is a happy day for Southern California, for African Americans, for the whole country. We are remembering our past."