



(l-r) Meda Simmons Bruce, Harvey Bruce, and Willa Bruce, date unknown. Courtesy of the California African American Museum

## Mrs. Willa Bruce – An Entrepreneur Pursuing the California Dream in Manhattan Beach

Mrs. Willa Ann Bruce (b. 1862, Missouri), and her husband, Charles Aaron Bruce (b. 1860, District of Columbia) were American pioneers. In February 1912, Mrs. Bruce purchased waterfront property in the barely developed and unincorporated town of Manhattan Beach. A visionary entrepreneur, Willa opened a resort where racially diverse Americans could enjoy the ocean. During the Jim Crow era of racial segregation, she faced the barrier of exclusionary real estate practices. Mrs. Bruce proclaimed to the Los Angeles Times in 1912: “Whenever we have tried to buy land for a beach resort we have been refused. But I own this land and I’m going to keep it.”

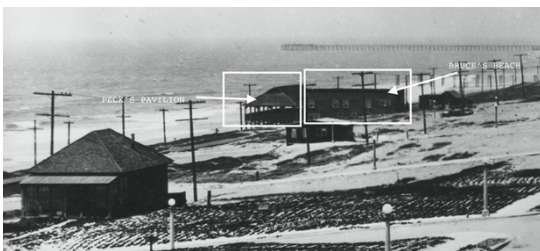
## Racist Harassment at Bruce’s Beach

Bruce’s Beach would come to represent more than a seaside escape for visitors to swim, relax, and socialize. Harassment from some white neighbors began immediately after the resort opened.



Louise and Byron Kenner at Bruce’s Lodge. Miriam Mattheus Collection/UCLA

“No Trespassing” signs were posted on a strip of beach directly in front of the Bruces’ resort owned by Manhattan Beach subdivider George Peck. This forced guests to walk a half mile to reach the water. As the popularity of the resort soared, harassment of residents and guests intensified. Influenced by vocal white resident concern of an African American “invasion”, city officials deployed tactics to control beachfront access and economic development. In 1924, the Manhattan Beach Board of Trustees passed a series of ordinances aimed to thwart the Bruces’ business. As the Bruces’ and their guests remained undeterred, city officials voted in favor of eminent domain to condemn the Bruce’s property to build a park. This action would compel the Bruces to give up their property. On July 4, 1924, the California Eagle reported: “It seems that the Ku Klux Klan is operating unrestrictedly along the waterfront [in the South Bay]”. The article noted that Klan pamphlets were distributed to Black fishermen in Redondo. The Eagle article also asserted “it is understood that some Ku Klux who recently moved in the vicinity object to the presence of Colored folk...influenced the servants of the people and ...condemned Bruce Beach.”



Peck’s Pavilion sat on the west side of the strand. The Bruce’s Resort was east of the strand. Original Photo Courtesy of the Manhattan Beach Historical Society

## The Bruce’s Beach ‘Grand Affair’

When the resort opened in the summer of 1912, it was one of the few places where Black beachgoers could access a bathhouse and other amenities. By the early 1920s, thousands of Black families visited and the Bruce family constructed a new frame building that included lodging, a dance hall, and a restaurant. Miriam Matthews, Los Angeles’s first black librarian, said in an essay prepared for the California African American Museum, “You would take the Red Car down ... and spend a day on the beautiful beach or rent a room if you desired. Sundays were reserved for school gatherings and families, and the resort offered a getaway overlooking the Pacific Ocean. If one tired of the sand and surf, the parlor was available for listening to music or dancing.” They expanded their property by purchasing an adjacent lot. Other Black families were inspired to invest and develop property near Bruce’s resort, creating a diverse summer community.



Visitors to the Bruces’ Resort standing on the boardwalk, looking south at the lodge. Miriam Mattheus Collection/UCLA

## Motive Behind Eminent Domain

In a letter to the Manhattan Beach News published February 4, 1927, the Bruce family wrote: “...the attempt to make a park out of these two blocks was a direct slap at us because we were not born white people.” In 1943, Frank Daugherty, a member of the City’s Board of Trustees involved in the condemnation, admitted in a personal essay for the Manhattan Beach News: “We had to acquire these two blocks to solve the problem [of Black people purchasing property here]. We voted to condemn these two blocks and make a city park there...Our attorneys advised the members of the council never to admit the real purpose in establishing the park...”

MEET ME THERE!—WHERE?

## Bruce’s Beach

THURSDAY, JUNE 8, 1922  
GRAND EXCURSION AND SUNDAY SCHOOL PICNIC  
Given by the St. Paul Baptist Church

A grand outing and day of pleasure. Various contests are open and prizes worth your while will be awarded the winners at 3:00 P. M.

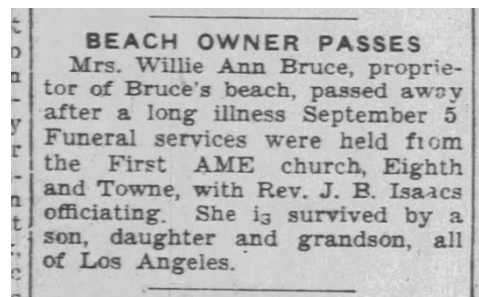
—Note The Contests—  
Most Popular Minister on Grounds; Most Popular Young Lady on the Grounds; Most Popular Married Lady on the Grounds; Most Popular Marriageable Young Man on the Grounds; Largest Family on the Grounds.

—Fare—  
Adults—Round Trip, 75c; Children (6 to 12 years)—Round Trip, 40c.  
Trains leave 4th and Hill Sts., at 9:50 a. m. and 1:00 p. m.  
—Return 5:30 p. m. and 6:00 p. m.  
REV. R. N. HOLT, Pastor  
Phone: South 4918.  
C. L. COLES, Chairman General Committee  
Phone: 271884.

Tickets on Sale at: California Eagle Office, 824 Central Ave.;  
Mattox & Sons Grocery, 5122 Long Beach Ave.; May’s Sweet Shop, 2014 at Hooper; Johnson’s Pharmacy, Cor. Normandie and Jefferson.

## The Legacy of Bruce’s Beach

The Bruce family surrendered their land on May 16, 1927, receiving a fraction of what they requested for their property and thriving business. In response to the exclusionary practices along the Manhattan Beach shoreline, a series of peaceful protests were supported by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The led to a new lease that would make the beach open to all citizens. Although the Bruce family were forced to abandon their dreams in Manhattan Beach, memories of the diverse community they started endure.



Bruce Family Obituaries published in The California Eagle