

# The Historic Black Community of Bruce's Beach



estate agent Henry Willard. On June 17, 1912, they opened "Bruce Beach Front", a seaside resort for bathing and fishing. 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.



Emma Patterson

## **Ms. Elizabeth (Emma) M. Patterson**

The other half of the Prioleau lot was purchased by Ms. Elizabeth M. Patterson in 1922 and together they 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.

## **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."

## **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.

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.

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."

## **The Bruce Family**

On February 19, 1912, Mrs. W.A. Bruce purchased Lot 8 of Block 5 in Peck's Manhattan Beach Tract from Los Angeles real

## **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 with 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, Major Prioleau challenged racial segregation and the hypocrisy of fighting a war for liberation in Cuba while the US 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.



## **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. The lived full time in Manhattan Beach with their seven children: Ruby, James, Richard, daughter William "Willie", Robert, Estella, and Virginia Slaughter.



James Slaughter, Miriam Mattheus Collection

