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Los Angeles Times California Section

Erasing a line drawn in the sand

Manhattan Beach renames a park to honor a black couple forced to give up their resort in the 1920s.

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In two weeks, Manhattan Beach city leaders and residents plan to gather at a small park by the ocean to lift the veil from a commemorative plaque, revealing a piece of little-known local history.

"This two-block neighborhood was home to several minority families and was condemned through eminent domain proceedings commenced in 1924," the plaque reads. "Those tragic circumstances reflected the views of a different time."

After debate last summer, the City Council voted to rename the park Bruce's Beach, acknowledging the African American couple who bought the land overlooking the Pacific in 1912.

There, Charles A. and Willa Bruce created one of the few places in Southern California where black families could swim and relax along its sun-bathed shores. They ran an inn called Bruce's Lodge, a cafe and a dance hall.

By the mid-1920s, city leaders contended that the land occupied by the Bruces' resort would better serve the community as a public park. The city used its powers of condemnation to buy the land from the Bruces and other nearby residents, removing most of Manhattan Beach's African American residents and visitors.

No park was built there for three decades.

Some who know this slice of history believe that the story of Bruce's Beach merits more than a commemorative plaque and should be explained in a more detailed exhibit that speaks to the issue in the context of segregationist practices of the time. The City Council has not embraced that idea, approving only the name change and plaque.

It's not known yet how many people will attend the dedication March 31; planning started just last week. But among those committed to show up are Robert L. Brigham and Alison Rose Jefferson — historians generations apart — who researched the story of Bruce's Beach. They and others took the issue to City Hall, winning the backing of Mitch Ward, the city's first black elected official, who requested the ceremony.

An invitation will probably be extended to Bernard Bruce, 72, the grandson of Charles and Willa, welcoming him to the town that forced his ancestors out.



OWNERS: Charles A. and Willa Bruce operated a resort in Manhattan Beach until the city condemned their property. (Bernard Bruce)

White and upscale

Manhattan Beach is best known for its wide sandy beaches that draw visitors from throughout the region. Cyclists glide along the Strand, past multimillion-dollar residences and well-kept gardens thick with roses. Tourists flock to the city's upscale restaurants and bars.

The city of 30,000 remains predominantly white — 89% in the latest census. Just 0.6% of its residents are black, only a small increase since 1970.

Brigham moved to Manhattan Beach from Los Angeles in 1939 at age 12 with his middle-class parents. He recalled riding through the city by bus and wondering why two blocks of seaside land sat barren, pockmarked with weeds and empty Coca-Cola bottles.

"I said to some of the adults, 'Why is it?' " said Brigham, 79. "They would put me off, saying, 'You don't want to know,' or 'You're too young' or 'I don't know.' "



HISTORIAN: Robert L. Brigham visits the newly renamed Bruce's Beach. "There's a kind of tension between people who are very conscious of the history of Bruce's Beach and those who would rather forget about the whole thing," the retired teacher says.

(Richard Hartog / LAT)

Years later, as a Cal State Fresno graduate student in history, he set out to write his master's thesis on Bruce's Beach and returned to his hometown to ask old-timers the same question. Why is that land *still* vacant?

"There's a kind of tension," he said, "between people who are very conscious of the history of Bruce's Beach and those who would rather forget about the whole thing."

Brigham, who taught at Mira Costa High School for 38 years, learned that Willa Bruce bought the land in 1912 and that she opened the resort with her husband. Beachgoers flocked there from fast-growing black communities in Los Angeles. A few other black families built homes nearby.

"You would take the Red Car down to the beach and spend a day on the beautiful beach or rent a room if you desired," Miriam Matthews, Los Angeles' first black librarian, said in an essay prepared for the California African American Museum. The resort hosted Sunday school gatherings and families, and "if one tired of the sand and surf, the parlor was available for listening to music or dancing."

White resentment festered.

Beachgoers would find the air let out of their car tires, Brigham wrote in his 1956 thesis. Local members of the Ku Klux Klan tried to set fire to the resort's main building. Someone burned a cross nearby. White residents roped off the sands to keep blacks away.

Eleven years after the resort opened, city officials started condemnation proceedings, and

its buildings were razed in 1927. The Bruces received \$14,500.

'Part of my dreams'

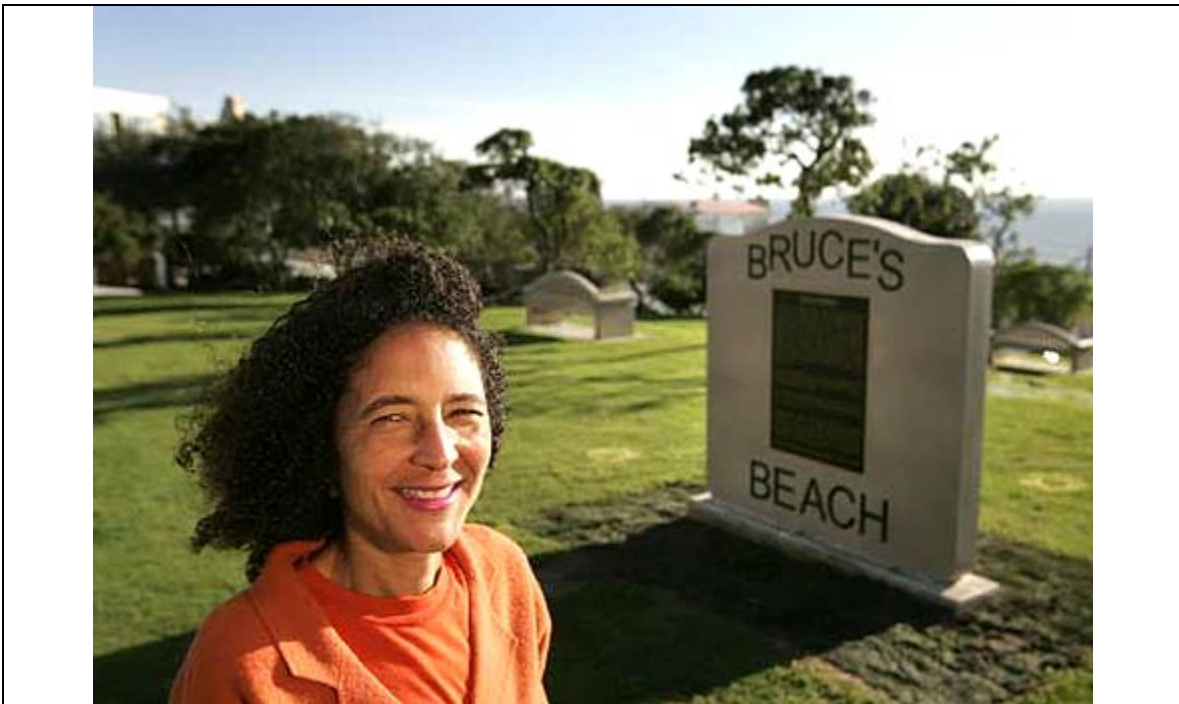
Nearly 50 years after Brigham finished his thesis, Jefferson, a master's candidate in historic preservation at USC, read a Los Angeles Times column about Bruce's Beach. Her interest piqued, she tracked down Brigham's thesis and delved deeper, uncovering a cache of old photographs at the Los Angeles Public Library.

"It's the whole idea of these middle-class people who were African American, figuring out how to take part in the California dream," Jefferson said. Now an associate historian at Historic Resources Group, a consulting firm, Jefferson is writing her master's thesis on the region's black recreation spots in the Jim Crow era.

She found Bernard Bruce at his home in Los Angeles. He was born in 1934, after the resort was demolished. He told Jefferson that his mother was ill for many years after the eviction.

"These people, they worked on the railroad, they saved their money, they put up a resort and they lost everything," Bruce said in a recent interview. "How would you feel if your family owned the Waldorf and they took it away from you?"

Growing up in South Los Angeles, he could only imagine what the old resort was like. "It was part of my dreams," he said. When he told school friends that his family once owned a beach, they would laugh at him. But he has long held the proof in his hands: faded photographs showing his grandparents relaxing on the sand.



USC graduate student Alison Rose Jefferson has helped keep alive the story of Bruce's Beach. (Allen J. Schaben / LAT)

Last summer, Jefferson went to Manhattan Beach to urge council members to rename the park Bruce's Beach.

Grappling with the story has not been easy for the city, she said later. "It requires that they need to do some thinking about the history of the community. And it also requires that they do some soul-searching for themselves as well."

One man presented a petition opposing the name change, signed by 53 park neighbors. Some wanted to keep the name of 32 years, Parque Culiacan, after a sister city in Mexico. Some worried about parking problems if the small park attracted tourists. One councilman suggested that the city make a public apology but not change the name.

Four council members appeared poised to reject the Bruce's Beach name when Ward — mayor at the time — spoke eloquently in favor of the change, describing the Bruces as early African American entrepreneurs who deserved city recognition. It passed, 3 to 2.



CELEBRATING: Councilman Mitch Ward, left, the city's first black elected official, urged the City Council to change the park's name. (Bob Chamberlin / LAT)

Mixed response

A few loose ends remain as the dedication approaches.

Councilman Jim Aldinger, who opposed the name change, said earlier this month that he is uncomfortable with the idea of a ceremony. He called it unnecessary. "I don't know who we would invite to it," he said.

The issue of an exhibit has not been resolved, although the current mayor, Nicholas W. Tell Jr., said he would support a display at a nearby county lifeguard building. Lawyer

Robert Garcia, executive director of the City Project, a public resources advocacy group, is encouraging the city to create an art project at the site.

Others disagree, including local businessman Bob Beverly Jr., who grew up near the park. "Save the art for looking out at the coast there; that's God's art," he said.

Bernard Bruce said Manhattan Beach officials have not yet contacted him with news of the name change or the dedication. He likes the notion of a ceremony. "The beach is resurfacing. It's coming back now, because it was never done right in the beginning," he said. "It's going to come out the way it should be."

Two weeks ago, Ward was resoundingly reelected to the council. Several of his opponents significantly outspent him, but he emerged as one of the top two vote-getters among eight candidates vying for two seats.

Ward, 45, the owner of a local computer technology service, moved to Manhattan Beach 16 years ago after a stint on Wall Street.

He likes the close-knit feel of the town and learned of Bruce's Beach after he moved in.

"Sometimes you think about it, and — that's just mean," he said. "I could get angry. But I've learned over the years, you lose a little bit of your dignity that way. I just don't dwell on it."

He understands why the Bruces wanted to own a beach. When he moved from New York, he bought a home on the beach himself.

"My first day there," he said, "I lay down in my front yard and thanked my lucky stars."



Mary Mingleton, Manhattan Beach, CA, 1926. (Los Angeles Public Library On Line Photo Collection)

(INFOBOX BELOW)

Ready for its dedication

The Manhattan Beach City Council approved a large plaque to honor the African American family that once operated a resort at what is now a city park. The plaque says:

Bruce's Beach

In 1912, Mr. George Peck, one of our community's co-founders, made it possible for the beach area below this site to be developed as Bruce's Beach, the only beach resort in Los Angeles County for all people. Charles and Willa Bruce were the African American entrepreneurs who settled here, thus the name Bruce's Beach. This two-block neighborhood was home to several minority families and was condemned through eminent domain proceedings commenced in 1924. Those tragic circumstances reflected the views of a different time.

The land was referred to as City Park and Beach Front Park and later named Bayview Terrace Park through a community contest in 1962.

The park was designated Parque Culiacan on March 16, 1974, at the time of a visit from representatives of our first Sister City.

The Manhattan Beach City Council renamed the park as Bruce's Beach in July 2006, commemorating our community's understanding that friendship, goodwill and respect for all begins within our own boundaries and extends to the world community. All are welcome.

A project of Leadership Manhattan Beach Class of 2003.