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AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE BEACH IN SANTA MONICA AT THE BAY STREET SITE CONTROVERSIALLY KNOWN AS THE “INKWELL”

“A Place of Celebration and Pain.” These words top the plaque that commemorates the oceanfront site controversially known as the “Inkwell,” an important gathering place for African Americans long after racial restriction attempts at public beaches were abandoned in 1927. This seaside refuge was located down the hill from nearby Phillips Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, the first African American church established in Santa Monica in 1905, and the earliest African American community settlement in the 4th and Bay Streets vicinity.

For leisure activities from the 1920s to the early 1960s, African Americans were able to locate some places where they were relatively free from bigotry to enjoy themselves and take pleasure in the picturesque outdoor offerings of the state. At this time discrimination and restrictive real estate covenants prevented them from buying property in certain areas and from using various public or private facilities.

The African American beach site was originally situated near Pico Boulevard where Shutters Hotel and the Casa del Mar are today, south to Bicknell Street. It emerged as a popular gathering place for African American beachgoers in the County of Los Angeles in the four decades preceding the mid-1960s. African Americans from the Santa Monica and the Los Angeles County environs met for parties and to socialize at this beach. Here they enjoyed the ocean breeze, swim and play games with less racially motivated harassment than at other Southland beaches.

History suggests white Americans probably first used the term “Inkwell” to describe more than one leisure site around the United States associated with African Americans during the Jim Crow era. This term was a derogatory term referencing the “blackness” of the beachgoers’ skin color. Agency was taken by some African Americans to repurpose the offensive term to describe these places they frequented and enjoyed, transforming the hateful moniker into a badge of pride or belonging. The name Inkwell has not been
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Verna Deckard and Arthur Lewis at the beach site (sometimes known as the “Inkwell”) in Santa Monica, CA 1924. *Shades of L.A. Collection, Los Angeles Public Library*

used or recognized universally within any community as the name of these leisure locations, with some refusing to use the name at all.

Although this site was enjoyed by African Americans, there were white American homeowners and business people of the Bay cities who tried unsuccessfully to “purge” them from their enjoyment of this stretch of the beach. In 1922 the Santa Monica Bay Protective League blocked the development effort of a black investment group, the Ocean Frontage Syndicate led by Norman O. Houston and Charles S. Darden, Esq., with plans to build a “first-class resort with beach access” where Shuttlers Hotel is located today near Pico Boulevard.

There were some unfortunate personal assaults on individual African Americans to inhibit their freedom to use the public beaches to the north and south of the City of Santa Monica. By 1927, as a result of legal challenges to these discriminatory practices by the National Association of Colored People, the beach became free for all the public’s enjoyment, and racial restriction attempts at public beaches began to fade away. In spite of these unpleasant events, which persisted in various forms even into the 1950s, many African American Angelenos continued to visit this wonderful site for enjoyment of the sun and surf.

On February 7, 2008, the City of Santa Monica officially recognized this important gathering place controversially known as the “Inkwell,” as well as Nick Gabaldón, the first California documented surfer of African and Mexican American descent, with a landmark monument at Bay Street and Oceanfront Walk. In the celebration of our American, California and Santa Monica heritage, we are encouraged to take a harder look at the complex layers of our history. Although some may not recognize it, these stories of the Inkwell and Nick Gabaldón are part of American history. All of us, no matter how recently arrived, share in these stories.

With this landmark monument, the African American Bay Street beach site controversially known as the “Inkwell,” touches many people’s lives as they come to enjoy the beach in this Santa Monica location. Stories told by the text on the plaque are being infused into the collective memory of local, regional and national public culture. So let us embrace our layered national, regional and local heritage, and renew our sense of civic pride and identity.

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To learn more about the history of Santa Monica, Los Angeles and African Americans in the region, see:

- Jefferson, Alison Rose. “African American Leisure Space In Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known as the ‘Inkwell.’” *Southern California Quarterly*, 91/2 (Summer 2009): 155-189.
- DeGraaf, Lawrence B. “The City of Black Angels....1890-1930.” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (August 1970): 323-352.
- Fleming, Douglas. *Bound For Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005.
- Scott, Paula. *Santa Monica: A History on the Edge*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004.