

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Virginia Key Beach Park

other names/site number DA7007

2. Location

street & number East of Biscayne Bay & North of Rickenbacker Causeway N/A not for publication

city or town Miami N/A vicinity

state Florida code FL county Miami-Dade code 025 zip code 33149

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Barbara C. Mattick, DSHPO 5/13/02
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Florida State Historic Preservation Officer, Division of Historical Resources
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register
 - See continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register
 - See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
 - See continuation sheet.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Virginia Key Beach Park
Name of Property

Miami-Dade, Florida
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- buildings
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include any previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
4	0	buildings
0	0	sites
5	1	structures
0	0	objects
9	1	total

Name of related multiple property listings
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION and CULTURE/Outdoor Recreation

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION and CULTURE/Park

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

MASONRY VERNACULAR

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE
walls CONCRETE BLOCK
roof CONCRETE SLAB
other WOOD
GLASS BLOCK

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7 Page 1

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

SUMMARY

Virginia Key Park is a large recreational park occupying 77 acres on the barrier island of Virginia Key in the City of Miami (Miami-Dade County), Florida. The site is dominated by natural and exotic tropical vegetation. Within the park are nine contributing resources and one noncontributing structure. All of the buildings are utilitarian masonry vernacular structures designed for recreational use. They include the concession stand, restrooms/bathhouse, a smaller restroom and an octagonal carousel house with carousel remnants inside. Also, five historic structures remain: an historic paved parking lot, a circular concrete slab that served as a dance pavilion, and three picnic pavilions. Additionally, the beachfront is a significant part of the setting. The one noncontributing structure is a tunnel for a miniature train that was constructed in 1956, outside of the period of significance. The site retains the majority of its historic integrity with the exception of the loss of two raised wood-framed park offices, an overnight cabin and the metal-framed cabanas. Currently, the site is closed to the public and subject to random vandalism.

SETTING

Virginia Key Beach Park is a 77-acre park located on the southeastern portion of the barrier island of Virginia Key. The island and the park are part of the City of Miami in Miami-Dade County. The park lies approximately 2.4 miles east of the mainland of the city. The island is situated between Fisher Island to the north and Key Biscayne to the south. The island is connected to the mainland by the Rickenbacker Causeway, which traverses the southernmost portion of the island. The park is bordered on the north and west by mangroves, to the south by a commercial complex and to the east by the Atlantic Ocean. While not a part of the park, the commercial marine complex to the south, occupies land historically associated with the park that was developed into a separate complex beginning in the 1980s¹.

The population of Miami-Dade County is slightly over 2.25 million and the population of the City of Miami is 360,000. The African American population of the county and the city are 457,000 and 81,000, respectively.

The island of Virginia Key contains both natural and man-made features. To the north of historic park is a newer beachfront park developed after the closing of the historic park in 1982. The central portion of the island contains a large trash dump and a massive sewage treatment facility. Also located on the island is a small lagoon with a collection of small wood framed buildings that constitute a small marina and restaurant. None of these sites is visible or accessible from the historic park. The main entrance to the historic park is accessed

¹ Miami Dade County Historic Preservation Board, Virginia Key Vertical File and Photographic File; Miami-Dade County Parks Department, Map Room; personal interview Mr. Walter Gene Tinnie; on-site inspection, July 23, 2001; oral interview Mrs. Athalie Range, July 24, 2001.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7 Page 2

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

from the north side of Rickenbacker Causeway by a short paved road. Access to rest of the island is attained by a single road maintained by the county to the west of the historic park from Rickenbacker Causeway.

The park is landscaped with large native and exotic vegetation (Photos #1 & 2). Coconut palms line the beachfront and other areas surrounding the central buildings (Photo #3). Large exotic trees line the walkways from the parking lot to the concession stand and the restroom/bathhouse. Large native trees and several park benches surround the parking lot. At the north end of the park, seagrape trees have encompassed the majority of the foundation where the cabanas once stood. The miniature train tunnel is heavily forested with trees covering the dirt berm on either side.

CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES

Parking area

Large native trees and several park benches border the large paved parking area constructed in 1949 by the county.

Dance Pavilion

The Dance Pavilion is a simple circular poured concrete slab. The 1952 structure is 40 feet in diameter. The slab was poured in four equal "pie" shaped quarter sections (Photo #5). The slab is identical today as when it was poured in 1952.

Alterations

Photographic documentation indicates the dance pavilion was surrounded by coconut palms during the historic period.

Concession Stand

The concession stand is a 1952, one-story concrete block building with a flat built-up roof on a concrete roof slab. The large recessed concession area dominates the front of the building (Photo #6). Eight concrete block pillars support the recessed area. A three-sided counter fills the interior space of the open area. The front of the enclosed area contains a set of two over two single hung windows, a pair of entrances and a single doorway at the north end. The building contains asymmetrical fenestration and entrances. The north elevation contains a single ventilation opening. The rear (west) elevation contains a recessed central bay with a doorway and a bank of two over two single hung windows and a single doorway on the southwest corner. Iron grates cover the fenestration and doorway in the bay (Photo #10).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 7 Page 3

VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida

Alterations

A doorway and pass-through window on the south elevation was enclosed with concrete block after the historic period.

Bathhouse/Restroom Building

The 1952 bathhouse is a concrete block building that contains the original dressing rooms, showers, and restrooms. The roof is a flat wood structure with two raised monitors. The monitors are wooden and contain air vents. The north elevation contains two recessed entranceways for the men's and women's areas. The concrete block between the two entrances contains thirteen alternating rows of glass block. At the north end of both the east and west elevations are single recessed entryways. There is no fenestration on the building. Heavy native vegetation surrounds the structure on all sides (Photo #9). The interior is currently inaccessible; however, the original floor plan is intact, as is the original tile floor.

Alterations:

The roof has been damaged on the east elevation by an overgrown seagrape tree, but the damage is repairable.

Carousel Building

The 1951 Carousel structure is housed in an octagonal building constructed of concrete block, glass block and wood (Photo #11). The hip roof is covered with v-crimp metal roofing and is topped with a ventilated cupola. The ventilation openings are covered with wood louvers. Each of the eight facades measures 22'10 1/2". The large retractable bay doors dominate the elevations. At least four of the original bay doors are intact. Above the bays are concrete ventilation openings. Flanking the bays are recessed panels of glass brick. The interior is devoid of materials except for the structural support for the carousel. No riding vehicles remain at the site.

Alterations

Alterations are limited to the loss of several original bay doors. They have been replaced with steel and wood garage doors or plywood. The corner column glass bricks have been covered with stucco and have been painted over. This alteration appears to be reversible and a number of the riding vehicles have survived and been maintained.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 7 Page 4

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

Picnic Pavilion

The Picnic Pavilion is a c.1952 utilitarian structure of simple construction (Photo #12). The flooring is a simple poured concrete slab. At the north end two concrete sono tubes support a flat concrete roof slab. The barbecue pit is constructed of rough-faced concrete blocks. Metal grills for the fuel and food remain intact.

Restrooms

The c.1952 concrete block restroom building displays a flat wood trussed roof with a tar and asphalt finish. The concrete block on the west elevation is imbricated and contains a single door. The north and south elevations contain the entrances to the separate restrooms. A three-quarter wall and flat room project out from the entranceways. Fenestration is irregular.

Smaller Picnic Pavilions

Two smaller picnic pavilions, c. 1952, are located to the southwest and west of the restrooms. Each consists of a simple concrete slab roof with two one-foot sono tubes. The barbeque pits are constructed of concrete blocks. A large poured concrete slab extends outward from each pavilion.

NON-CONTRIBUTING RESOURCE

Miniature Train Tunnel

A 70-foot wood tunnel surrounded by native coral rock is located to the northwest of the Picnic Pavilion. Constructed at the end of the ride of a miniature train, it is the only surviving resource relating to the miniature train. The tunnel is constructed in a traditional post and beam construction with a flat wood roof over the crossbeams (Photo #13). The roots of the surrounding vegetation have compromised portions of the roofing. While original designs called for prefabricated concrete slabs for the roofing, there is no evidence these were ever included. Both ends have decorative tin flashing with wood plank opening surrounds in a zigzag design. The tunnel is approximately 8 ½ feet wide and approximately 8 feet high. The original track is no longer intact. The tunnel is accessible by foot, but is well hidden by vegetation. While the vegetation is much heavier than during the historic period, it has actually fulfilled the intention of the original design to provide a more exotic feel to the tunnel.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 36) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION

SOCIAL HISTORY

ETHNIC HERITAGE: Black

Period of Significance

1945-1951

Significant Dates

1945

Significant Person

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

UNKNOWN

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of Repository

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 1

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

SUMMARY

The Virginia Key Beach Park fulfills Criterion A at the local level in the area of Ethnic Heritage: Black for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Under Criterion A, the development of the park is associated with the history of the African American population of the City of Miami and surrounding areas. The park is also significant to Social History and Recreation history of the black communities in the city and county during the 1940s and 1950s. Beginning with the incorporation of the City of Miami in 1896, the city had been a segregated community.¹ The creation of a beach park "for the exclusive use of Negroes" was the first public facilities dedicated to the black community and proved to be the turning point in race relations for the city.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

Virginia Key

Virginia Key was formed from a larger peninsula as a result of a hurricane in 1835. At that time the island was much smaller than it is today. Subsequent mapping of the island indicates a steady increase in the size of the island, a result of the natural shifting of shoreline on a barrier island, infill and dredging.

In 1848, Assistant U.S. Coast Surveyor Frederick H. Gerdes of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers (TOPOGs) surveyed the unnamed island north of Key Biscayne and named it Virginia Key. In his field notes, Gerdes noted: "The Island above Key Biscayne has no name, used to belong to the mainland, but the Cut (Narrows Cut) broke through about 10 or 12 years ago." He then named it Virginia Key.² His notes did not give a reason for his choice of the name. In his notes the following year Gerdes measured the island to be three miles long and one mile wide; subsequent notes later indicated the island to be one and a half miles long.

Little is known or recorded of Virginia Key during the next two decades. However, because Union forces during the Civil War heavily blockaded Key Biscayne and Key West, it is likely that Virginia Key was also patrolled and considered government land. Virginia Key was platted and approved by the assistant in charge of the U.S. Coast Survey in December 1870 as covering sections 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 20, and 21 of T. 54, S. 42E, Florida,³ placing the land under the jurisdiction of the U. S. Department of the Interior. During the same survey, Sections 3, 4, 10, 15; portions of 21, portions of 28, and all of 32 and 33 were declared swamp and overflow under the act of September 28, 1850 (9 Stat., 519), and were patented to the State of Florida on May 4, 1885.⁴

¹ George, Paul S., "Colored Town: Miami's Black Community". p. 441.

² Blank, Virginia Key, p. 665

³ Letter from Commissioner F. A. Ballinger of the Department of the Interior, General Land Office to Secretary of the Interior, March 23, 1907.

⁴ Ibid. State received ownership in 1885.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 2

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

Although the City of Miami was incorporated in 1896, the barrier island never experienced the extensive development of the peninsula. Lack of drinking water, a fierce tide on the southern end, shifting shorelines and the coastal weather of a barrier island all contributed to its continuing isolation.

Several factors led to the enlargement of the island soon after the turn of the twentieth century. First, the creation of Government Cut in 1909 created a second barrier island north of Virginia Key known as Fisher Island. This cut into the Biscayne Bay changed the natural tidal flow of the oceanic waters and created a bigger buildup of sand along the beaches of Virginia Key and the north end of Key Biscayne. Secondly, once the cut was made, the City of Miami deepened it to create a deep-water port for Miami. Needing a place to put the spoils, the City acquired submerged land in Biscayne Bay adjacent to Virginia Key from the State of Florida. The excavated sand was dumped on the northern and western portions of the island, thereby steadily increasing the size of the island.

During the following decades, the federal lands on the island would be transferred between the Department of War and the Department of Interior several times. The Secretary of War recommended to the President on February 10, 1897 that "all lands owned by the United States" on Virginia Key, Key Biscayne and Key West be set apart for military purposes. Outgoing President Grover Cleveland approved the plan and the land was transferred to the War Department on February 11, 1897.⁵ The land would remain under military rule until President Woodrow Wilson, by executive order, placed the military reservation on Virginia Key under the control of the Secretary of the Interior for disposition on April 28, 1916.⁶ Subsequently, President Wilson removed portions of Sections 9, 17, 20 and 21 from the Department of the Interior and reserved them for naval purposes on August 23, 1918.⁷

Popular belief holds that there was a "Negro Dancing Pavilion" on the island in 1918, indicating use of the island by local black residents during this period of time. This belief is based on the appearance of those three words on the official U.S. Coast Survey that was conducted by 1917 by T. W. Palmer and F. C. B. Legro⁸ of the Department of the Interior. This map shows the land still owned by the government, portions of Sections 17, 20 and 21 that were surveyed at that time. Communication within the Department of the Interior, General Land Office demonstrated that these sections of Virginia Key were actively being used by the U.S. Naval Station of Cocoanut (sic) Grove as a target range at that time. Since this was an active military facility during wartime, it is not possible that a dancing pavilion was there at the same time. The earliest this pavilion could have been

⁵ Executive Order 2372, President Woodrow Wilson; Grover Cleveland would remain in office until March, 1897.

⁶ Executive Order 2372.

⁷ Executive Order 2944

⁸ Letter to Mr. Charles W. Atkinson, Chief of Field Division, Department of the Interior, General Land Office from the Commissioner of the General Land Office dated July 1918.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 3

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

constructed would have been after the disposition of these lands to the State of Florida in 1924.⁹ Additionally, since the inspection was conducted after complaints of civilian activity on the island, dredging of sand from Bears Cut for construction concrete, it is also highly unlikely that the use of the island for dancing would have gone unnoticed. The surveyors specifically noted that the island was deserted and was devoid of any signs of human occupation.

On August 11, 1924, Executive Order 4062 allowed 66.12 acres of the above noted sections to be transferred to the Department of Interior.¹⁰ This action apparently was the direct result of the building boom that was taking place in Miami at that time. The releasing of Virginia Key and lands on Key Biscayne were initiated by developers hoping to create new developments similar to Miami Beach and Coral Gables on the islands. Ownership would be transferred to the State of Florida, and eventually to Dade County Board of County Commissioners. The lands that make up the Virginia Key Beach Park are these lands.

During the 1920s and '30s, the island did experience some development, but not the kind most people anticipated. Based on the rapid development of Fisher Island to the north and Key Biscayne to the south, numerous plans were proposed to develop the island for luxury residences or planned communities. However, the use of the land was soon determined by the necessities of the day. The northern and western sections of the island became home to a city dump. In addition, these sections increased as sand was continuously excavated from Government Cut to keep the deep-water channel open. In the 1930s, the island was home to a small group of men who sought refuge from the economic depression. Their small group of huts was on the northern end of the island, facing Fisher's Island near the present-day public beach to the north of Virginia Key Beach Park.

During the 1920s, black residents had begun to visit the beaches of Virginia Key. Denied access to all the beaches along the Atlantic Ocean, the isolation of the island gave black residents an opportunity to swim away from the eyes of the police and political leaders. They gathered along the shores of Bear Cut. Over the years, the name would be corrupted to Beers Cut. While whites knew of this practice, no one objected because the waters of the cut were treacherous and the beach was isolated.

The park provided many black Miamians with their first beach experience. Throughout the 1920s and '30s, blacks usually only went to the beach once a year, with church groups. Individual churches would charter buses and travel to Broward County for a daylong picnic as there were no public beach facilities for blacks in Dade County. Family reunions were also held at the beach. During the week, school children were brought to the beach for science lessons.

⁹ Letters from Wegner, map on p. 6 of Virginia Key Task Beach Park Booklet.

¹⁰ Executive Order 4062.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 4

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

The beach served as more than just a bathing beach to the black communities. Church outings and sunrise services were held on the beach. During these services, many followers were baptized by immersion in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Previously, church picnics and family reunions could only be held in Broward County, to the immediate north of Dade County, as blacks were denied access to city and county parks and all bathing facilities in Dade.

The island became the focal point of new development in the spring of 1938. With a war raging in Europe, many Americans speculated that the U.S. must eventually become involved. This appears have been a factor in the development of the Virginia Key Harbor Project. Approved by the U.S. Navy, plans called for a combination airplane base and ship anchorage. The project, which would include \$5 million in Federal funds, had the full support of Florida Congressman Claude Pepper and President Franklin Roosevelt. They both wrote letters of support and spoke publicly in favor of the project.¹¹ The new twelve-hundred-acre complex would include "an air base, seaport ringed by hangars, shipper berth, docking facilities, channels and approaches, runways, a Concourse of the Americas, a county auditorium, offices, a hotel, warehouses, fuel tanks, a fishing pier, outdoor auditorium, tennis courts, grandstand, golf course, dance pavilion, railroad to the mainland, passenger ferries, car ferries."¹²

A causeway from the mainland was begun in 1941. Materials included: twenty-seven thousand barrels of cement, fifteen thousand tons of sand and twenty-two thousand tons of crushed rock worth \$800,000. Pilings were sunk in the bay.¹³ Construction continued throughout World War II, although by then, the project had been removed from the U.S. Department of the Navy and was being funded by the new Miami Greater Area Port Authority.¹⁴

In March 1944, the Dade County Commission gave permission to the Navy to conduct Negro training on the beach at Virginia Key. They would use the beach along Bear Cut that by then had become an accepted, though unofficial, Negro beach. This action was necessitated because of the Navy's inability to train black enlisted men in the water along the segregated beaches of Miami Beach.¹⁵

African American History

Black settlement in the area today known as Miami coincided with the arrival of Europeans. Early Spanish explorers enslaved the indigenous populations to provide the manual labor needed to build new settlements. Within one hundred years, the native peoples were decimated through disease, starvation, forced enslavement

¹¹ Blank, Key Biscayne, pp 157-159, Miami Herald article on April 20, 1941.

¹² Blank, Key Biscayne, pp. 158-159

¹³ Blank, Key Biscayne

¹⁴ various Miami Herald articles from 1941 through 1944.

¹⁵ Dunn, Blacks in Twentieth Century Miami, p. 160.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 5

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

and exportation to Cuba and Hispanola. African slaves were brought to Florida and the Bahamas to replace them. By the early 1800s, three distinct ethnic heritages developed among the former Africans: American slaves, black Seminoles and black Bahamians.

Black Seminoles did not settle along the eastern lands of Dade County, preferring the lands to the east of the Miami River Falls known as the Everglades.¹⁶ There would be little interaction among the Seminoles and the white settlements until the turn of the twentieth century.

The first recorded settlement of black Bahamians in the area was in the community of Coconut Grove in the early 1880s. Coconut Grove is located a few miles to the south of Miami. Many of these early settlers worked at the Peacock Inn, the first hotel in the area, or the surrounding farms. They formed the small community of Kebo that soon became known as Black Grove. Here, the Bahamians taught the American settlers how to clear and farm the land. The thick natural vegetation imbedded its roots in the oolitic limestone and coral rock, making it all but impossible to clear. They taught the northern settlers what could be planted, and how to cultivate crops.¹⁷

Four miles to the north of Miami was the settlement of Lemon City. It was formally settled following the Civil War with the assistance of the Freedman's Bureau. The Bureau assisted many former slaves in relocating to Lemon City from Georgia, Alabama and north Florida from 1865-1877.¹⁸ Black Bahamians also settled there during the same period, leading to a quite sizeable black community. Most of these residents were employed as laborers grubbing the pineland, building roads and railroads and harvesting coontie root. Both of these communities developed in a manner common to the south, with the white and black settlers living in separate sections of their communities.

Throughout the 1880s and '90s, south Florida black communities experienced numerous changes, some more subtle than others. First, the black areas of towns developed into complete communities, with black-owned businesses and a larger number of wealthy merchants and professionals. Following the end of Reconstruction, blacks also experienced increased efforts to disenfranchise black voters. As white Democratic rule was reestablished, the Republican Party, the party of choice for most black voters, steadily lost strength and influence. Subsequently, Florida followed other southern states to legally limit the voting rights of black voters through the use of poll taxes and literacy tests.¹⁹

In 1896, the new City of Miami was incorporated. Of the 368 men who voted, 162 were black. They were, for the most part, workers on Henry Flagler's East Coast Railroad. They had cleared the land, built the railroad and

¹⁶ Porter, Black Seminoles

¹⁷ Dunn, Blacks in Twentieth Century Miami, pp. 34-44.

¹⁸ Tebeau, History of Florida, p.260; Dunn, p. 32; Peters, Lemon City

¹⁹ George, "Colored Town", pp.433, 435, Shofner, Custom, Law & History", p.289.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 6

VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida

carved out streets from the wilderness. Flagler needed their numbers and votes to meet state requirements to incorporate. However, they were soon disenfranchised and allowed to vote three years later only when their numbers were needed again to move the county seat from Juno to Miami.²⁰

The charter for Miami included provisions for a "Colored Town." The wealthy northern founders, Julia Tuttle, Henry Flagler and William Brickell, followed the traditions of the South and created a segregated city.²¹ Colored Town encompassed the area west from the railroad tracks near Avenue F from Sixth Street to First Street and west to Avenue H, covering approximately fifteen percent of the total area of the new city.²² Over the next twenty years, Colored Town's population varied from twenty-five percent to forty percent of the city's total population. For instance, the 1910 census of Miami indicates that blacks numbered 2,258 and constituted 42 percent of the population.²³

While the population increased rapidly, the boundaries did not; boundaries were only allowed to expand slightly to the northeast after blacks began to intrude into surrounding white neighborhoods. Colored Town quickly became greatly overcrowded. There were no electric or sewer systems, no paved streets, and few instances of running water. Housing shortages and poor sanitation led to high levels of disease. Deaths were frequent and often with no solutions forthcoming from outside the borders of Colored Town.

Even in these conditions, however, Colored Town prospered. By the 1910s, Colored Town would be home to all black Miamians and had a flourishing business district along Avenue G (renamed Northwest Second Avenue in the 1920s.) Kelsey Leroy Pharr, recording secretary for the Colored Board of Trade, wrote in the *Miami Metropolis* the following article:

In the City of Miami, there are owned and controlled by race-loving Negroes; 3 drug stores, 6 refreshment parlors, 1 theatre, 17 grocery stores, 4 meat markets, 5 fish markets, 9 barber shops, 2 bicycle shops, 7 boarding houses, 2 fruit stands, 17 hackmen, 9 draymen, 4 real estate offices, 11 restaurants, 4 lunch counters, 3 insurance companies (one of which has it's [sic] home office in Miami), 1 saving association, 2 undertaking parlors (the firm of Carter and Pharr, having the only licensed colored embalmers south of St. Augustine), 12 tailor shops and pressing clubs, and two expert cutters, 1 plumber, 1 printer, 1 blacksmith shop, 2 bakeries, 1 ice dealer, 14 dressmakers, 5 shoeshine parlors, 1 milliner and dealer in notions, 1 furniture store, 1 carriage and automobile trimmer and painter, 3

²⁰ Dunn, *Black Miami in Twentieth Century Miami*, p.p 58-59. This information is footnoted and credited to Thomas Fleischmann in "Black Miamians in The Miami Metropolis, 1896-1990, Tequesta, 52(1992); Porter and Dunn, *The Miami Riot of 1980*, p. 2; Parks and Bush, *Miami the American Crossroad*, p.28;

²¹ Parks and Bush, *Miami the American Crossroad*, p. 28; George, "Colored Town", p. 435.

²² Carson, Rachel, "Miami, 1896-1900", Tequesta, XVI (1956), p. 8.

²³ George, "Colored Town", p. 436; Porter and Dunn, p.5.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 7

VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida

hair emporiums, 2 upholsterers, 2 shoe-makers, 2 livery-men, and 7 stone, wood and painting contractors.²⁴

What Mr. Pharr did not note is the less reputable areas of Colored Town. At the northeastern edges were the juke joints, taverns and houses of prostitution. This vice-filled section was controlled and patrolled by white Miami, in particular, the Miami Police Department and the Dade County Sheriffs Department. There were no black police officers, and white officers only entered Colored Town to restore order or to search for a black suspected of committing a crime. This situation, combined with the blacks' inability to vote, created a dangerous racial relationship between white and black Miamians.

These conditions continued to deteriorate during the 1910s and '20s. Sheriff Dan Hardie and Police Chief H. Leslie Quigg openly espoused racist views of blacks. Brutal beatings and tortures were routinely administered and just as routinely ignored. The black citizenry tried to fight back with the creation of the Colored Board of Trade, the Greater Miami Negro Civic League and a local unit of the United Negro Improvement Association under the national leadership of Marcus Garvey. Some success was made with the creation of the first black high school in 1923 and the securing by black drivers for the exclusive operation of buses and cars-for-hire in Colored Town.²⁵

Race relations and living conditions did not improve through the 1920s. However, in 1934, an exposé in the *Miami Herald* caught the attention of President Roosevelt. Subsequently, members of the Works Progress Administration arrived to assess the conditions. The result was the creation of what is believed to be the first federal housing project in the southeastern United States. The project was the Liberty Square Housing Project. These new dwellings had all the amenities not available in Colored Town, which by then had begun to be known as Overtown. Wealthier blacks and merchants began to move to land surrounding the project. Living conditions continued to improve throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. In 1941 when the United States entered World War II, black Miamians had begun to make substantial changes in their quality of life, including voting.²⁶

World War II proved a pivotal point in how black Miamians viewed themselves and their potential for a better life. Thousands of black Miamians enlisted in the military, numbering approximately one third of new black enlistments in Florida. While many shipped out to be stationed across the world, other black enlisted men were stationed in Miami. Their presence increased the attention given to the earlier mentioned community organizations, and new groups were organized to aid in the war effort. Throughout the war, black servicemen caused many in the white communities to question segregation. It was difficult to explain why black servicemen who were defending the country had to be housed in separate hotels and was unable to use the hotel

²⁴ Parks and Bush, *Miami the American Crossroad*, pp. 60-61.

²⁵ Porter and Dunn, *The Miami Riots of 1980*, pp. 6, 9; George, "Criminal Justice in Miami"; p.157; Dunn, *Blacks in Twentieth Century Miami*, pp. 131-139; Parks and Bush, *Miami, the American Crossroads*, p. 58.

²⁶ Porter and Dunn, p. 10;

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 8

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

pools and the beaches. In 1944, black navy men had to be transported to Virginia Key beach for training because they were not allowed to enter the waters of Miami Beach. It was this atmosphere of thawing race relations that led to the development of Virginia Key Beach Park.

From 1945 through 1960, the lives of blacks changed dramatically in Miami. The development of the federal housing project exposed to the nation the inadequacies of Colored Town. Until that time, the majority of white Miamians were completely ignorant of the living conditions within the black community. As World War II continued, new military housing was developed for black veterans. By 1944, the first multiracial task force had been created in Dade County, the Dade County Interracial Committee. The squalid conditions of Overtown were exposed. Citizens were appalled that rents were as high for these slums as in new white housing developments. Political pressure began to grow to provide adequate housing for the county's black residents and black military families.

At the same time, federal courts had repeatedly begun to rule that laws that legalized segregation were unconstitutional. In April 1946, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that "Dade County's power to segregate black residential districts, which had been granted by a special act of the 1937 legislature," was illegal.²⁷

While these judicial rulings eliminated the legal aspects of segregation, it was much more difficult to eliminate prejudice. Bombings of black homes and housing complexes escalated and racial tensions rose. The presence of the Ku Klux Klan increased in direct proportion to the attempts of black Miamians to integrate white neighborhoods.

Efforts by the Congress on Racial Equality, led by G. E. Graves, focused on several fronts: buses, housing, and public facilities. By 1959, they had successfully integrated neighborhoods in Miami and Coconut Grove, forced the construction of modern housing projects and subdivisions for blacks, secured the end of segregated bus and railroad cars and facilities, won a significant contract to drive the city buses, and integrated both county and city public facilities, including beaches and pools.

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the turn of the twentieth century, blacks and whites both enjoyed Miami's beautiful white beaches that stretched as far as the eye could see. These beaches were known collectively as Ocean Beach. Beginning in 1909 with the creation of Government Cut, the beaches were developed in earnest. As throughout the South, the rights of blacks were increasingly limited as Jim Crow laws created ever more restrictions on their movements. Jim Crow laws had been upheld in the 1896 U.S. Supreme

²⁷ Dunn, p. 207.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 9

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This ruling created the landmark ruling of "separate but equal." In the matter of swimming facilities in the greater Miami area, the separate dictate was embraced; the equal was not.

When Carl Fisher began to develop Miami Beach, it was a segregated development. Blacks were completely barred from ownership, while Jews were limited to the area south of Lincoln Avenue.²⁸ Blacks were allowed to work in the communities, but they were not allowed in the town after dark. And they were banned from the beaches at all times. Meanwhile, the City of Miami also outlawed access by blacks to most city parks and all city pools. At the same time, access to beaches along Biscayne Bay became increasingly difficult as the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods grew. By the 1910s, Jim Crow laws and actual physical access had limited the black residents to a few swimming holes near present-day Arch Creek. While blacks lived in the most prestigious city in South Florida, they were effectively barred from any swimming activities. During the 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project recorded no accesses to beaches or pools in the Miami area.²⁹ Even when the Liberty Square Housing Project was constructed, politicians eliminated the plans for a pool. While no reason was given publicly, privately it was expressed that the white residents refused to allow federal funds to be used for such a recreational activity. Whites heavily opposed blacks bathing in public facilities.

In the early twentieth century, one of Miami's most prominent black citizens sought to provide access to beaches to blacks. In 1918, Dana A. (D.A.) Dorsey purchased Fisher Island to develop a resort for Negroes. Unfortunately, the exorbitant prices and taxes on land during the Florida Land Boom of the 1920s forced Dorsey to sell the land. Blacks were once again without a beach.³⁰

Judge John Johnson recalls that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, blacks went to a place known as Community Beach near Alton Road and Fifth Street in Miami Beach. They would park their cars on land that is today the U.S. Coast Guard Station and take a ferry the rest of the way.³¹ However, these excursions were only for the brave of heart, usually young men. Retired dentist Edward Braynon, Jr. noted, "They would go up there to swim. But if they were caught they'd be in big trouble."³² Other residents such as Athalie Range remember visiting Virginia Key at a place known as Bears (Beers) Cut. Here, parents watched closely because the shore had a steep drop off and a strong current.³³ The extensive dredging for sand at Bear Cut during this building boom may have created these conditions.

In May 1945, the Reverend John Culmer of the St. Agnes Episcopal Church, dentist Ira P. Davis, lawyer Lawson Thomas and others gathered in Davis' office. They were members of the Negro Service Council

²⁸ Blackman, Ethan, Miami and Dade County, pp. 78-79.

²⁹ McDonogh, Gary, *The Florida Negro, A Federal Writers' Project Legacy*, pp. 56-62.

³⁰ Nielsen, p. 24. The Dana Dorsey House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1989.

³¹ "A Historic Dip" by Kirk Nielsen, *Miami New Times*, August 14, 1999, p. 24.

³² Nielsen, p. 25.

³³ *Ibid*, Nielsen, p. 24.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 10

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

(NSC), a forerunner of the Urban League of Greater Miami. They discussed the possibility of forcing the issue to allow blacks to use a beach. They discussed a "wade-in" at an all-white beach called Baker's Haulover. They wanted to force the arrest of the blacks for wading into the water at a white beach. They knew that recent decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that segregation of public parks and lands was unconstitutional. Then, Lawson would be able to defend those arrested in court and force Dade County to provide bathing facilities for the county's black residents.³⁴

The NSC approached a coalition of black ministers and churchgoers called the Negro Interdenominational Alliance (NIA). The NIA agreed to assist. However, on the day of the wade-in, no representatives of the NIA showed up to take part. Five members of the NSC met near the entrance to the park. There, they convinced two young black servicemen stationed on Miami Beach to go in the water with them.³⁵

When sheriff's deputies were called to the beach, Dade County Sheriff Jimmy Sullivan ordered them not to arrest the bathers, knowing the action was indefensible in court. Instead, he related to Rev. Culmer and Lawson that County Commissioner Charles Crandon would meet with them the following morning to discuss the issue. On June 5, 1945, the Miami Herald reported that County Park Superintendent Don Martin announced plans for a Negro beach. It was to be located on the southern side of Virginia Key along Bear Cut. The construction firm of Powell Brothers from Fort Lauderdale received the contract to construct a departure dock on the Miami River along with a footbridge and a wharf on the key. Boat shuttles were provided to take bathers to the key until the completion of the Rickenbacker Causeway in 1949.³⁶

The original structures on Virginia Key were in place in less than two months. These buildings, given their size and configuration, were probably surplus military buildings. The parking area was at first linear, parallel to the shore and extended south from the park facilities. Until recently, it was believed these structures were the ones currently located on the island. However, aerial photographs, taken between the opening of the causeway in 1949 and 1950 when the structures in the photograph are destroyed in the hurricane, indicate otherwise. Photographs showing the hurricane damage verify the foundations of the structures along the beach as shown in the aerials.³⁷ Although some of the original structures survived the hurricane, they have subsequently been lost over time.

It was such natural disasters that led the county to develop permanent structures on the island. In 1948, the county provided renourishment to the beach devastated the previous winter by a storm, constructed the newer \$29,000 parking lot, and added twelve cabanas and running water. Following the hurricane of 1950, the county quickly began to reconstruct the park facilities. Plans were drawn up and approved to construct permanent

³⁴ Nielson

³⁵ Nielsen, personal interview with Athalie Range and Gene Tinnie, August 22, 2001.

³⁶ Ibid, Nielsen, p. 25.

³⁷ Miami-Dade County Historic Preservation Division, Virginia Key file

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

Section number 8 Page 11

**VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida**

facilities that included dressing and rest room facilities for men and women and a concession stand. The plans went through several revisions until being approved in 1951. By 1952, the bathhouse, concession stand and an improved parking lot with room for twelve hundred cars were completed. By 1952, the carousel was in place as well. The shoreline had been stabilized with groins extending along the entire stretch of the park. A miniature train, track and "depot" were completed sometime between 1953 and 1957 when a tunnel was added. The picnic pavilions, restrooms cabanas, superintendent house, park office and triplex cabin for overnight visitors were also in place by 1952.

Virginia Key Beach Park was dedicated on August 1, 1945.³⁸ A brochure for the park billed it as "South Florida's only improved park for the exclusive use of Negroes."³⁹ Blacks flocked to the new county park. On any given weekend, an average of 1,100 bathers and picnickers could be found there. While crowded, the only real troubles stemmed from the long wait to get on the three daily ferries that brought visitors from the mainland. Officer George Busby maintained order on horseback. His presence is believed to be the first assignment of a black officer outside of the Overtown and Liberty City areas of Miami.

Church groups came on Sunday mornings for sunrise services. The churches also utilized the facilities for baptisms. Enid Pinkney recalls that her father, the Reverend Henry Curtis, of the Church of God, baptized white-robed adult members of his congregation in the sea. Accompanied by much shouting, crying and singing, the occasions were also cultural events. After the church services, the congregation stayed for picnics and cookouts.

The park became a symbol of the new civil rights that many black Americans were just beginning to fight for. In Miami, blacks could swim freely and openly in one of the few such places in Florida. The beach park was black Miamians' inspiration to work towards the integration of other public recreational facilities, such as the Orange Bowl and golf courses. At night, the park was just as active. A jukebox was installed next to the dancing pavilion. During the day and on most weekend nights, dancing at the park was a favorite pastime for Miami blacks.

During the early 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement began in earnest in the United States. But in Miami, the acquiescence of Sheriff Sullivan and the use of county funds and lands to create a recreational park had changed the dynamics of the city. Local families, churches and businesses began to move into new subdivisions designed especially for black military veterans. Other military veterans that had been stationed in Miami during the war returned. They joined civic and fraternal organizations while their wives and children became involved

³⁸ This is the date most often cited as the date the beach was dedicated. Marvin Dunn claims a date of August 8, 1945. Mr. Garth Reeves, editor of the Miami Times, a black newspaper insists the date was the first.

³⁹ Virginia Beach brochure

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 12

VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida

in church and school activities. They became active in the efforts to integrate other venues, such as schools, buses and lunch counters.

Across Rickenbacker Causeway was the island of Key Biscayne, home of the wealthiest of Miami's residents. Near the center of the island was a beach, called Crandon Park, for the exclusive use of whites. Virginia Key Beach Park and Crandon Park were designed as mirror images of each other, separate but equal. When political pressure to increase toll revenues from the Key Biscayne Bridge increased in the early 1950s, a merry-go-round, miniature train and zoo were added to Crandon Park. Continued pressure by civic leaders from the black community ensured that a merry-go-round and miniature train were also added to Virginia Key Beach Park.⁴⁰

At the height of the Civil Rights Movement in 1959, Miamians were fighting for integrated facilities. Now a recognized voting block and an influential political force, black leaders once again looked to the beaches for a solution. Civic leaders, including G.E. Graves, an Episcopal minister and future Miami commissioner, and the Reverend Theodore Gibson decided that it was time to desegregate Crandon Park also. Reverend Gibson agreed to go before the Dade County Commission to formally request the integration of the park. His appearance was repeatedly delayed that day. As they waited, members of CORE and others became impatient. Unable to wait any longer, they drove to Crandon Park shortly after noon. Led by Dr. John O. Brown, the groups, which included *Miami Times* publisher Garth Reeves and Oscar Range, asked to use the bathhouse, and promptly proceeded to use the facilities. As they did so, segregation officially ended for Dade County. Unable to justify segregation of public facilities, the integration of private facilities would follow.⁴¹

The creation of Virginia Key Beach Park was the catalyst that forever changed the City of Miami and Dade County, now known as Miami-Dade County. Once blacks were legally allowed in public areas outside of what was once known as Colored Town, they embarked on a road to freedom and desegregation. Their insistence and quiet perseverance allowed them to make strides in a community deeply rooted in racial discrimination. Although legal discrimination would end in 1959 with the wade-in at Crandon Park, the battle was far from over. As a result, powerful white Miamians sought to destroy the cohesiveness of the black community. Urban renewal and federal highway projects eventually dissected the Overtown and Liberty City communities. Racial tensions grew until a series of riots in 1978 and 1980 all but destroyed the black community.

Today, Virginia Key Beach Park stands as a symbol to the efforts of black Miamians to change their lives and their futures. Their efforts to integrate buses, subdivisions, railroads and voting precincts are represented by the beach that was known as the Negro Beach through the 1980s. The beach is still intact, while the historic black community has been all but leveled in the decades that followed. It is hoped that the creation of the Virginia

⁴⁰ Blank, pp. 167-168.

⁴¹ Dunn, p. 215, Nielsen, p. 26.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 8 Page 13

VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida

Key Task Force and the Virginia Key Trust will ensure that the beach will forever survive to remind future residents of a tropical vision dreamed of and achieved by a small, dedicated group in 1945.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 9 Page 1

VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section number 9 Page 2

VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK
Miami-Dade County, Florida

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