



**SANTA MONICA  
CONSERVANCY**  
Celebrating Our Architectural Heritage

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## **AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE BEACH IN SANTA MONICA AT THE BAY STREET SITE CONTROVERSIALLY SOMETIMES CALLED THE "INKWELL"**

"A Place of Celebration and Pain." These words top the 2008 plaque installed that commemorates the oceanfront Bay Street Beach site, 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 4<sup>th</sup> and Bay Streets vicinity.

For leisure activities from the 1910s 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 on land deeds prevented them from buying property in certain areas and from using various public or private accommodations as a result of the lack of enforcement of California's civil rights law implemented as early as 1893.

The African American beach site was originally situated near Pico Boulevard where Shuttlers 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 into 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 controversial 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 beach-goers' 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 used or recognized universally within any community as the name of these leisure locations, with some people refusing to ever use this alternative name. (continued on back)



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*

Although this site was enjoyed by African Americans, there were white American homeowners and business people in 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 which included local white residents and businessmen blocked the development effort of a black investment group, the Ocean Frontage Syndicate. Led by Norman O. Houston and Charles S. Darden, Esq., they had 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 for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 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, as well as Nick Gabaldón, the first documented southern California surfer of African-American and Mexican-American descent, with a landmark monument at Bay Street and Oceanfront Walk. On June 26, 2019 more recognition of the site’s national, state and local significances was recognized with the Bay Street Beach Historic District being nominated for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

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 Bay Street Beach 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 Bay Street Beach touches many people’s lives as they come to enjoy the beach at 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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### ***Santa Monica, Los Angeles and African Americans history in the region resources:***

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