

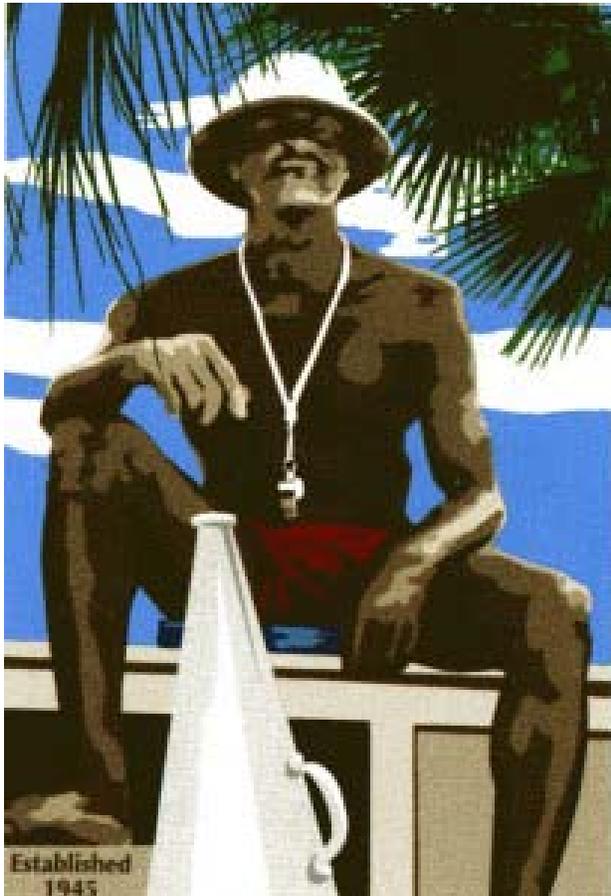
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# Historic Virginia Key Beach Park

4020 Virginia Beach Drive

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Designation Report



Historic and Environmental Preservation Board

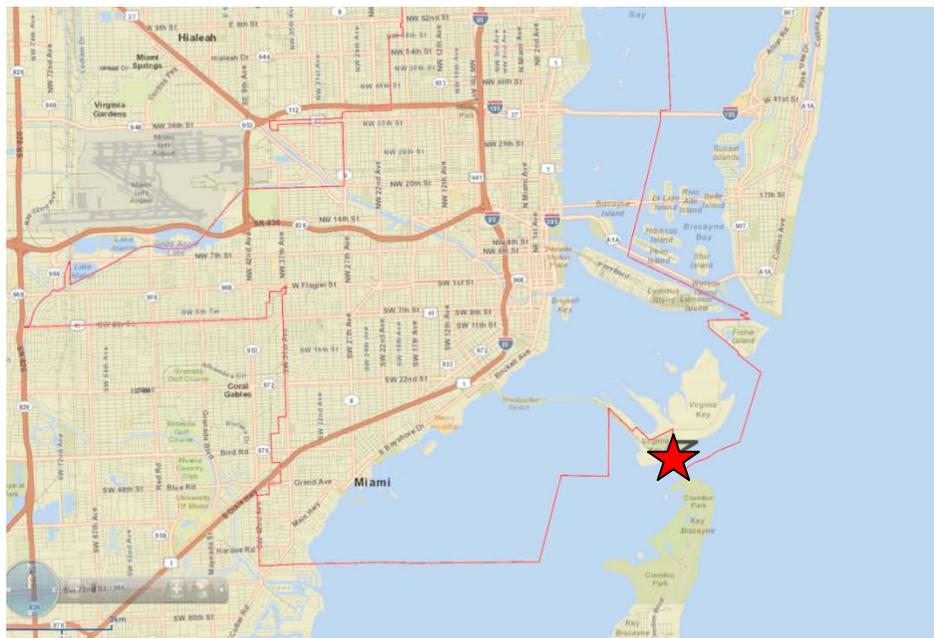


City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI  
PRESERVATION OFFICE  
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD  
ON THE DESIGNATION OF THE  
HISTORIC VIRGINIA KEY BEACH PARK  
AS A HISTORIC SITE

Written by Marina Novaes  
November 2013

# Location and site maps



## Contents

- I. General Information
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## I- General Information

Historic Name: Virginia Key Beach

Current Name: Historic Virginia Key Beach Park

Date of Inauguration: 1945

Location: 4020 Virginia Beach Drive Miami, FL 33149

Present Owner: City of Miami

Present use: Park

Zoning: CS

Folio No.: 01-4221-000-0010, 01-4220-000-0012, 01-4216-000-0060

Boundary (Legal Description): 21 54 42 25.06 AC GOUT LOTS 1 & 2 IN SEC LOT SIZE  
1091614 SQ FT OR 11434-234 0490 3 FAU 30-4221-000-0010

20 54 42 12.234 AC M/L BEG NE COR OF SEC TH N 89 DEG W  
125.20FT SELY AD 303.27FT SWLY AD 517.03FT SELY AD  
381.58FT S 45 DEG E 630FT N TO POB FAU 30-4220-000-0010  
or 11434-234 0482 3

16 54 42 73.74 AC M/L S1000FT OF S1/2 INC SUBMERGED  
LANDS & RIP RTS LOT SIZE IRREGULAR OR 11434-234 0490 3

Setting: Historic Virginia Key Beach Park (HVKBP) is an 82.5-acre site located 2 miles southeast of downtown Miami, Florida, and approximately 1 mile southwest of the tip of Miami Beach. It is approximately 8 miles from the northern boundary of Biscayne National Park and 40 miles from its headquarters and visitor center at Convoy Point. The park is located on the southeastern side of Virginia Key, which totals approximately 1,250 acres. Virginia Key is part of a chain of barrier islands that extends along the Florida coast from Miami south to Key West and is accessible via a toll causeway from Miami. Virginia Key is part of an evolving landscape that became its own island in the 1830s following a

hurricane that separated Virginia Key from Miami Beach. In addition to natural forces, man-made changes have also influenced the island. In 1902, a channel was created near Virginia Key to establish direct ocean access to the port of Miami and subsequently it quickly developed as the major seaport on Biscayne Bay. Since the channel was created currents have scoured the Atlantic shore of Virginia Key and deposited the sand elsewhere. As a result, Virginia Key is less suitable than surrounding islands for resort development and has retained some of its natural character.<sup>1</sup>

Integrity: The Historic Virginia Key Beach Park has integrity of setting, feeling, design, association, and location.

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous. Virginia Key Beach Park – Special Resource Study, report to Congress. National Park Service. 2008.

## II- Statement of Significance

Virginia Key is part of a chain of natural barrier islands that extend from Miami to Key West along the Florida coast. Once part of Miami Beach, Virginia Key became a distinct island after a hurricane in the 1830s. Not only natural forces influenced the island's landscape but man-made interventions as well; in 1902, a channel was created near Virginia Key to establish direct ocean access to the port of Miami changing ocean currents that battered the island's Atlantic shore leaving it less attractive for resort development. Since the island wasn't developed, it was used as a landfill and deposit of dredge spoils, a sewage treatment plant was built and water channels were created as part of a mosquito control project damaging most part of the island's natural character, especially in the northern portion.

In the 1950s and the 1970s a series of groins were placed along the shore to stabilize the beach but currents continued to erode its shore, consequently, unlike the surrounding islands, Virginia Key remained undeveloped and retained much of its natural mangrove. In addition to the mangroves, the island's Atlantic shore is fringed with freshwater wetlands, tropical marine hammock, coastal strand, and seagrass communities. These plant communities provide valuable habitat areas for wildlife, including several threatened and endangered species.<sup>2</sup>

Federally protected species present at Virginia Key include the Hawksbill Sea Turtle (*Eretmochelys Imbricata*) and the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta Caretta*), which nests on the island, the West Indian Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), which is frequently observed in the near offshore waters, and the American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*), which has been observed in the lake at the Virginia Key Beach Park. The island also provides suitable habitat for other threatened and endangered species including the Gopher Tortoise and a variety of shore and seabird species, including the Peregrine Falcon, Bald Eagle, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork and Piping Plover. The island is a stopover for migratory songbirds. Together, the coastal plant and animal communities along the Virginia Key shore represent an important vestige of the natural heritage of Biscayne Bay.<sup>3</sup>

Today, Virginia Key also houses the Miami Marine Stadium and recreational areas, the National Marine Fisheries Institute, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, the University of Miami, Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science and the MAST Academy. Miami Seaquarium is the only large private enterprise on the island, other businesses include restaurants and concessions providing recreational equipment rental. In 1999, community activists and environmental groups stopped the plans to develop a resort in the area and the Virginia Key Beach Park Civil Right Task Force was created to monitor land use decisions.<sup>4</sup> The Virginia Key Beach Park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002 for being associated with the history of the African American population of the City of Miami evidencing

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<sup>2</sup> City of Miami. Virginia Key Beach Park Master Plan – site assessment. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

social history in the segregation era. The Virginia Key Beach Park was created in 1945 as a “colored only” beach.<sup>5</sup>

The years following the Civil War were bitter for the defeated south, especially for the African American population. For most African Americans Reconstruction did not provide with either the legal protections or the material resources to ensure anything like real equality. Most black men and women had little power to resist their oppression for many decades to come.<sup>6</sup>

Laws restricting the rights given to African Americans by the constitution started to emerge and soon became a network of state and local statutes known as the Jim Crow laws. By the first years of the twentieth century an elaborated system of racial segregation was created. Blacks and whites could not ride together in the same railroad cars, sit in the same waiting rooms, use the same washroom, eat in the same restaurants, or sit in the same theaters. Blacks had no access to many public parks, beaches, or picnic areas, and could not go to the same schools or live in neighborhoods with whites. This dark period of our history [theoretically] lasted until the 1960s.<sup>7</sup>

In Miami-Dade County, there were very few parks and beaches where African Americans were allowed. Before The Virginia Key Beach, African Americans swam and had picnics at another nearby island, today’s Fisher Island. Dana A. Dorsey, a black real estate millionaire who was born in Quitman, Georgia in 1872 and moved to Miami in 1897, was first engaged in truck farming, and then began to invest in real estate. He started to purchase land and soon accumulated large blocks of real estate. Listed as the only black real estate agent in Miami in 1914, Dorsey acquired Elliot Key and Fisher Island in which he provided access to the black population. <sup>8</sup> Dorsey bought Fisher Island in 1918 from Herman B. Walker and sold it to Carl Fisher in 1919.<sup>9</sup>

For decades after Fisher Island was sold, African Americans living in the Miami-Dade area had to drive all the way to a segregated beach in Dania Beach to enjoy a good day of leisure at the beach and swim in the refreshing waters of the ocean. Some black teenagers, mostly boys, would risk their lives diving in the quarry pits near Liberty City which when filled with water were “deliciously and dangerously inviting” .<sup>10</sup> Some others, would go for a quick dip in a remote “white only” beach taking the risk of being arrested.

After World War II, African Americans soldiers began to demand recognition of their contributions during the war giving the Civil Rights Movement momentum. In 1944, the Committee on Racial Equality was formed and advocated the use of direct-action

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<sup>5</sup> Cole, Vicki L. Virginia Key Beach Park – nomination report. DA7007. City of Miami. 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Brinkley, Alan. “The unfinished Nation” – Volume I: To 1877. Columbia University. 2010 - Sixth edition.

<sup>7</sup> Brinkley, Alan. “The unfinished Nation” – Volume II: From 1865. Columbia University. 2010 - Sixth edition

<sup>8</sup> Eaton, Sarah and Chase, Charles. “D. A. Dorsey House” designation report. City of Miami. 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Viglucci, Andres. Orlando Sentinel. May 16, 2013. [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2013-05-16/travel/os-travel-miami-mansion-20130516\\_1\\_miami-beach-mansion-fisher-island-club/2](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2013-05-16/travel/os-travel-miami-mansion-20130516_1_miami-beach-mansion-fisher-island-club/2)

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, Andrea. “A beach for everyone.” The Miami Herald. Feb. 16, 2008.

protest to demand civil rights. In Miami, the "Negro Service Council" was created in 1945 by Judge Lawson E. Thomas, Dr. Ira Davis, and Father John Culmer, who had been active since the 1920s advocating for African American rights. The trio formulated a direct-action protest plan to demand access to the county's beaches. In the summer of 1945, at the "white only" Baker's Haulover Beach, a group of African Americans led by Judge Thomas staged a protest, in the form of a "wade-in", against the segregation laws.<sup>11</sup>

According to The Miami Herald's article, "A beach for everyone:"

Eugenia B. Thomas, widow of Lawson Thomas, did not go to the wade-in, but shared her version of the encounter: "They went into the water, and the sheriff comes out and says, 'Get out of the water. Are you going to put them in jail?' Thomas asked. The deputy stammers. Thomas tells the group, 'go back into the water,' which generates more stammered protests from the deputy."

No arrests were made that day, but historians later would hail the moment as the start of the civil rights movement in Miami.

Shortly afterward, Eugenia Thomas said, county Commissioner Charles Crandon called Lawson Thomas's law office. "Tell Thomas to come down here and we'll work something out," she said Crandon told her husband.

The compromise was Virginia Beach, which opened in August 1945.

The black community, Thomas said, got "the best, the prettiest beach. You look ahead and there's nothing to block you. It's just God's water."<sup>12</sup>

Mr. Gene Tinnie, The Historic Virginia Key Beach Park Trust chairman, adds to the historic occurrence:

The original 1945 wade-in which was led by former Judge Lawton Thomas whose widow, Mrs. Eugenia B. Thomas was a founding Board Member of the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust in 2001, was accompanied by three courageous women who participated in the wade-in.

The key people and places included both the planning the wade-in included Father Culmer, and took place at the office/home of Dr. Ira P. Davis, which was known as "The Little White House," because that is where leaders met and planned many activities and strategies for the Black Community during that time. The initial demonstration for the

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<sup>11</sup> Anonymous. Virginia Key Beach Park – Special Resource Study, report to Congress. National Park Service. 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, Andrea. "A beach for everyone." The Miami Herald. Feb. 16, 2008.

Black Beach was coordinated at the ILA Longshoremen's Hall (right across from the Lyric Theater), by Judge (his name, not a title) Henderson, the brother of the late Janie Reeves, Garth Reeves's (founder and owner of the Miami Times Newspaper) first wife, who just recently passed away. The wade-in itself, as we all know, took place at Baker's Haulover, the site of present day Haulover Beach, where the white-only park was to be built. The leader of the wade-in, was Atty (future Judge) Lawson E. Thomas, who had "a bag of cash" on hand to bail out anyone who got arrested, as was the plan for the wade-in.

The number of actual protesters was less than promised, but three sailors were recruited who eagerly joined. It appears they were at the USO in Overtown, near the ILA Longshoreman's Hall. One of them John Hill, is believed to have become the husband of Mrs. Mary Hill, a longtime local activist.

The sheriff who responded to the wade-in (he was alerted in advance) is believed to have been THE sheriff of Dade County at the time or one of his officers; because he was able to reach Commissioner Crandon by phone, and get the message, "Tell Lawson to come down here Monday morning and we'll work something out." No arrests were made during the wade-in.<sup>13</sup>

Rickenbacker Causeway was completed in 1947, before that, the black community had to make sacrifices to spend a day at the beach, the only transportation was by ferry. Nevertheless, the beach was always crowded.

Wilhelmenia Franks Jennings, whose father ran ferry boats for fishermen and tourists, developed a booming business. She and her two sisters, Witlean and Marie, fell in love with the island.

"He would take us over on the island for picnics," said Jennings, 90. She and her husband of 57 years, Sonny, spent part of their honeymoon there. In later years, they brought their families and out-of-town guests.

"It seemed like we stayed all day," said her daughter, Patricia Jennings Braynon, director of the Miami-Dade Housing Finance Authority. "They would pack up picnic baskets and take food out there. It was always a family event whenever we went."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Tinnie, Gene. "Additional Content for the City of Miami Historic and Environmental Preservation Board (HEP Board) – Historic Virginia Key Beach Park Historic Designation Report 2013. Sent by email to staff on 10/22/2013.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson, Andrea. "A beach for everyone." The Miami Herald. Feb. 16, 2008.

"Some of the special occasions at the site are documented and many are not", says Mr. Gene Tinnie, "but we know there were numerous church socials, Easter Sunrise Services, and baptisms, as well as some annual events like the Pineapple or Coconut Festival. There was at least one major AKA Sorority gathering there as part of a larger conclave. The Beach Park highlighted such amenities as Cottages and Cabanas for rental use.

Notable personalities would include WAME radio host "Butterball" who famously would water-ski at the site. Dr. Dorothy Fields, founder of the Miami-Dade Black Archives, tells the great story about Rev. Edward Graham standing in the bow of the boat as it approached the park and diving gracefully into the water, swimming to the beach and being there by the time the boat docked and the rest of the passengers disembarked. One of the boats was the "Noman," owned by Mrs. Henrietta Jennings, a member of the prominent Braynon family. And, there was Mrs. Pinkney's father, a Reverend, who conducted baptisms. Mrs. Enid Pinkney is a founding Board Member of the Trust and the Executive Director of the Historic Hampton House Trust.

Some of the most recognized icons of the place are not well remembered by name, like the mounted policeman, the train driver who kept up a lively banter with the passengers, and some of the lifeguards."<sup>15</sup>

Between 1950 and 1953, the park was improved due to a hurricane that destroyed most of its structures. The new plans were designed to provide facilities identical to those at the nearby white-only Crandon Park on Key Biscayne. The new improvements included: a paved entrance driveway, a paved parking lot for 660 cars, a boat launch, rental cabins, changing cabanas, a park office and first aid station, lawn picnic areas with shelters, a concession building and bathhouse and a smaller restroom building. Also installed during this period were a carousel, identical in every detail to the carousel at Crandon Park, as well as a miniature train ride that encircled a lake, which was a scaled down version of the miniature train and zoo at Crandon Park.<sup>16</sup>

According to Mr. Gene Tinnie, "The Historic Mini Train currently operating on Historic Virginia Key Beach Park, "Biscayne/Virginia Rickenbacker Central" Model F7A Cab Locomotive and three Standard G-16 Passenger Coaches, SN #1783859 manufactured by the Miniature Train Corporation (MTC) of Rensselaer, Indiana is the exact model and date the our original mini-train. The current mini-train began its life at an amusement park in New Jersey. Detailed MTC production and sales records allowed the Trust to determine how many MTC mini-trains were sold in the segregated South, and thus what a rarity it was to have one at a Black Park.

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<sup>15</sup> Tinnie, Gene. "Additional Content for the City of Miami Historic and Environmental Preservation Board (HEP Board) – Historic Virginia Key Beach Park Historic Designation Report 2013. Sent by email to staff on 10/22/2013.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous. Virginia Key Beach Park – Special Resource Study, report to Congress. National Park Service. 2008.

The Historic Merry-Go-Round currently operating in the Historic Beach Park is an antique 1949 model manufactured by the Allan Herschell Company of Tonawanda, NY, SN #JRA226. The original amusement ride provided great enjoyment for many years; following the closure of the Beach Park in 1982 local rumors suggested that many of the pats and carousel horses were removed and kept as private mementoes."<sup>17</sup>

Although civil rights laws desegregated all public beaches in the 1950s, the park remained a popular destination for many African Americans. In 1982, Virginia Key Beach Park was transferred from the county to the city of Miami with the stipulation that the area be kept open and maintained as a public park and recreational area. However, the city closed the park soon after the transfer alleging the high cost of maintenance and operations. The facilities fell into disrepair.<sup>18</sup>

After being closed for more than 25 years, the park reopened on February 23, 2008. The 40 million project to restore the park was a community effort and an achievement for black Miamians. Mary Athalie Range, a civil rights activist and politician who was the first African-American to serve on the Miami City Commission, was determined to reclaim the park, her exertion led to the creation of the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust in 2001.

The story of Mrs. Range's involvement is the story of Mrs. Range herself and her lifetime of activism and political engagement which earned her the respect to which all elected officials deferred. She was in her 80s when Mr. Gene Tinnie approached her about joining the cause to save the Historic Beach Park from development. Mrs. Range, after taking a day or so to think about it, decided that she could take on one more fight, especially for a cause as worthy as this one. "All the people who come to Miami should know who made this into an attractive place to come to in the first place," as she once observed.

She brought more than just her name and past achievements to the table; as a successful businesswoman she brought organizational discipline and knowledge to the collective effort of the coalition. She also brought a wealth of experience in both politics and people skills, which was a source of very astute guidance and leadership on her part. And she brought her highly respected ability and willingness to "speak truth to power," without which the effort might not have been impossible, but would certainly have had a harder path to fruition.

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<sup>17</sup> Tinnie, Gene. "Additional Content for the City of Miami Historic and Environmental Preservation Board (HEP Board) – Historic Virginia Key Beach Park Historic Designation Report 2013. Sent by email to staff on 10/22/2013.

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous. Virginia Key Beach Park – Special Resource Study, report to Congress. National Park Service. 2008

Equally important was the nature of the effort. What was most remarkable was that the coalition was culturally diverse: historic preservationists, environmental activists, public park activists (public land for public use), across the spectrum of age, ethnicity, social class, educational levels, etc., bonding with members of the African American community, many of whom fit some or all of these categories. This was the kind of movement which Mrs. Range led.<sup>19</sup>

Focusing on the restoration of the 82 ½ acre park to its former glory and promote black history awareness, the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust has been working nonstop since its creation. Not only the restoration and assurance that the park remains public and open, the Trust has plans to create an indoor/outdoor museum experience.<sup>20</sup>

The “Free To Be Museum Center” is based on the “Free to Bee You and Me” concept created in the 1970s by award-winning actress Marlo Thomas, encouraging independence and self-fulfillment through love, solidarity and mutual assistance and respect - “the joys of creation, cooperative relationships with parents, siblings and friends.” The “Free to Bee” concept challenges parents and children to take personal responsibility for their neighborhood and community. In addition, the Trust envisions the Patricia and Philip Frost Museum of Science’s Wildlife Center within the park boundaries.

To finalize, a few words from M. Athalie Range (1915-2006), founding chair:

Virginia Key Beach was special to us because of the laws of segregation. It was the only place that welcomed us and the only place where we could be free, in a way. It was not a very good feeling to have the coast of Miami as a beach with all this beautiful water around you and you couldn’t enjoy it during the days of segregation when blacks were not welcome. Signs on beaches said: No Jews, No Dogs, and No Coloreds.

I remember the popcorn, corndogs and Nehi sodas. The hurdy-gurdy music of the carousel, the whistle of the beach’s mini-train. I remember how going to the beach was an all-day affair; families would pack blankets and enough food to feed a small army and while away hours at the beach dancing, swimming and fellowshiping.

There were several developers and entrepreneurs who wanted to build on the beach. When we found that out, through public meetings, we had to plead with them not to let this happen. That is when we made the push to revitalize the beach as it was in those days. People don’t know the history

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<sup>19</sup> Tinnie, Gene. “Additional Content for the City of Miami Historic and Environmental Preservation Board (HEP Board) – Historic Virginia Key Beach Park Historic Designation Report 2013. Sent by email to staff on 10/22/2013.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.virginiakeybeachpark.net/newsletters/sunrise\\_34.pdf](http://www.virginiakeybeachpark.net/newsletters/sunrise_34.pdf)

of South Florida. Nobody talks about the segregated beaches and golf courses.

Those were our lunch counters (at the concession stand). Those are things that need to be remembered. I hope my 10 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren will be able to enjoy the work we're trying to accomplish today. There is a legacy here.

### III- Description

Views and vantage points within the Virginia Key Beach Park that are character defining features of significance and integrity are those that establish the relationship of the various cultural features to the natural setting and which establish the relationship of the park to the context of the ecological and urban environment.

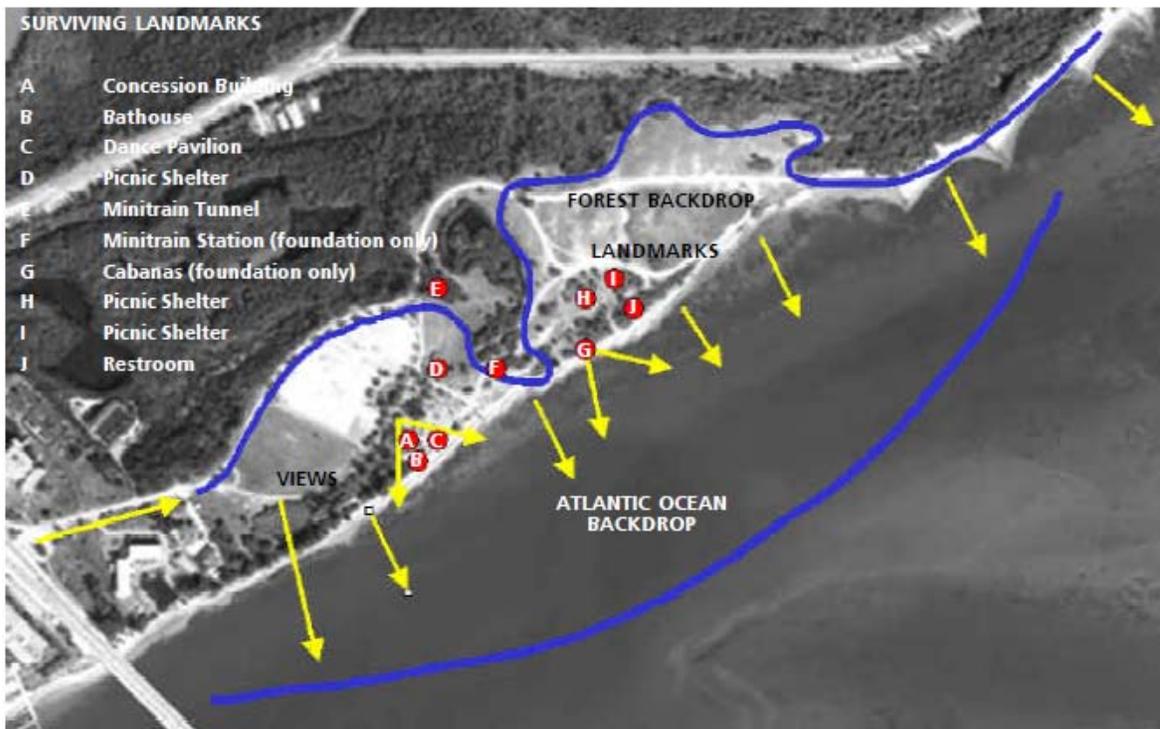
The recreational and social importance of the park continues to be based on its natural features as a barrier island with considerable accessible shoreline and thus views that typify important characteristics of the topographical setting are key character defining features. The Atlantic Ocean provides an important backdrop from vantage points throughout the park, but especially from the shoreline. The juxtaposition of the recreational facilities with the ocean is visible from a variety of vantage points and places the recreational facilities within the unique ecological context of the region. Several vantage points within the park offer views of the natural state of the shoreline and provide an important contrast to the more manicured area in the vicinity of the concession building, restroom and carousel. These vantage points include the area of the park east of the lake and mini-train track, where remnants of vegetation typical of barrier islands remain. Views of the eastern shore of the park are evocative of natural barrier island dune and coastal hammock communities, although infestation with Australian Pine has significantly altered the character of the vegetation.

No significant development is visible from within the park, establishing the park's unique place within the urban context. The park is visible within its undeveloped context from vantage points on Key Biscayne, the Rickenbacker Causeway and the water.

Another significant vantage point within the park is the entrance, which is important for providing an overview of the context of the recreational facilities and their relationship to one another. The approach from Rickenbacker Causeway has been altered by adjacent development. The view from the current entrance encompasses a large area of the park and establishes its generous size as a first impression. The view includes the curving entrance drive, the manicured lawn area and parking lot within the entrance drive loop, glimpses of the ocean and park facilities, groves of shade trees and the vegetated backdrops that define the park's spatial organization.

Significant backdrops from this vantage point are the vegetation lining the curving entrance drive and the mass of vegetation surrounding the lake, which conceals the eastern half of the park from view and prevents the entire park from being visible from the entrance. This "concealing" of the full extent of the park evokes a place that has significant size and complexity and supports the impression that the park is generously proportioned, with much to be discovered. This vegetation mass was not present during the park's period of significance, although a dense cluster of trees between the lake and parking area in the vicinity of the mini-train tunnel would have had the same effect. The view of the gracious curve of the entrance road as it passes around the lake and disappears is also important in establishing the generous size of the park and the leisurely character of movement through the landscape.

Individual elements visible from multiple perspectives within the park are prominent landmarks representing the park’s recreational function. The dance pavilion, once surrounded by a circle of coconut palms, was a significant landmark. The intact carousel, restroom, concession building and mini-train tunnel were also important landmarks during the park’s period of significance. Foundations and other remnants remain of other important landmarks, including the cabanas, park office and mini-train tracks and station. The superintendent’s house, rental cabins, pier and boat launch were important landmarks of which remnants remain off-site.<sup>21</sup>



\*The description section of this report was entirely taken from the Virginia Key Beach Park Master Plan report.

<sup>21</sup> City of Miami. Virginia Key Beach Park Master Plan – site assessment. 2008. “Views and Vantage Points”

## **IV- Application of Criteria for Designation**

The Historic Virginia Key Beach Park has significance as it relates to the historic heritage of Miami and possesses integrity of setting, feeling, design, association, and location. The property is eligible for designation as a historic site under the criteria (1) and (3) as numbered in Sec. 23-4 (a), of Chapter 23 of the City Code.

### **(1) Are associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the past;**

The Historic Virginia Beach Park is associated with the legacy of Mary Athalie Range, a civil rights activist and politician who was the first African-American to serve on the Miami City Commission and was determined to reclaim the park saving it from development, her exertion led to the creation of the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust.

### **(3) Exemplify the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community;**

The Historic Virginia Key Beach Park is associated with the social history of the black community of Miami-Dade in the segregate era. It is also significant as an environmental preservation site.

## V- Bibliography

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## VI- Photographs



