

# The History of Bruce's Beach

## **Mrs. Willie "Willa" Bruce – An Early Manhattan Beach Entrepreneur**

Willa Bruce (b. 1862, Missouri), and her husband, Charles Aaron Bruce (b. 1860, District of Columbia) were Black American pioneers. In February 1912, Mrs. Bruce purchased a lot on the Strand in Manhattan Beach, determined to create a destination where racially diverse Americans could relax and enjoy the ocean. During the time of Jim Crow-era exclusionary real estate practices, Willa proclaimed to the *Los Angeles Times*, “Wherever we have tried to buy land for a beach resort we have been refused. But I own this land and I’m going to keep it.”

## **Harassment at Bruce's Beach**

Harassment of the Bruces and their guests from some White neighbors occurred immediately after the resort opened. “No Trespassing” signs were posted directly in front of the Bruces’ property on a strip of beach owned by subdivider George Peck. Guests of the resort were forced to walk a half mile to reach the water. As Bruce’s Beach popularity soared, White residents expressed concerns about an “invasion” by African Americans. In 1924, the Manhattan Beach Board of Trustees passed a series of ordinances aimed to thwart the Bruces’ business and drive the Black community out of the City. When these laws failed to discourage Black residents and their guests, the City pursued more aggressive measures.

## **The Racist Motivation Behind the Eminent Domain Action**

On July 4, 1924, the *California Eagle* reported that Black fishermen in Redondo Beach were given Ku Klux Klan pamphlets labelled “Colored Folks Beach three miles North.” The *Eagle* speculated that the Klan was “operating unrestrictedly along the waterfront,” including Manhattan Beach. The article suggested that the Klan influenced the Board of Trustees in condemning Bruce’s Beach.

In a February 4, 1927, letter to the *Manhattan Beach News*, the Bruce family wrote: “...the attempt to make a park out of these two blocks was a direct slap at us because we were not born white people.” In 1943, Frank Daugherty, a member of the City’s 1924 Board of Trustees, admitted to the *Manhattan Beach News*, “Our attorneys advised the members of the council never to admit the real purpose in establishing the park...”

## **The Bruce's Beach ‘Grand Affair’**

When Bruce’s Beach opened on June 17, 1912, it was one of the few places Black beachgoers could access a bathhouse and other amenities. Hundreds, even thousands of Black families visited the resort. By the summer of 1916, a two-story lodge with a dance hall and restaurant known for its “good, bountiful fried fish meals” was commissioned. In 1920, Willa purchased the adjacent lot for development. Encouraged by the Bruces’ success, other Black families bought property nearby, creating a summer community for Black Angelinos.

## **The Condemnation**

Ordinance No. 282 prompted legal proceedings to condemn Blocks 5 and 12 to create a public park. This area included 30 lots, of which, only 5 were developed. These 5 lots were owned by members of Black resort community and included Bruce’s Beach.

## **The Legacy of Bruce's Beach**

On May 16, 1927, the Bruce family left Manhattan Beach. Although they received compensation, it was far less than they requested for their property and thriving business. The resort was soon demolished, but the Bruces’ legacy would persevere. A series of peaceful protests occurred that summer along the Manhattan Beach shoreline supported by the NAACP. Although the Bruce family were compelled to abandon their dreams in Manhattan Beach, the memory of the diverse community endures.