

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Virginia Key Beach Park  
Miami, Florida



# Special Resource Study

## *Report to Congress*



**Virginia Key Beach Park Special Resource Study  
Report of Findings and Conclusions  
National Park Service  
September 2008**

**Virginia Key and Virginia Key Beach Park**

Virginia Key Beach Park (VKBP) 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. As the crow flies, 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. (See map on page 11.)

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, manmade 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.

**Natural Resources**

The plant communities that once occupied the entire barrier island chain along northern Biscayne Bay remain largely intact only on Virginia Key. While the mangroves in surrounding areas were cut down and their habitat filled to permit development of resorts, Virginia Key retained most of the mangroves on its western Biscayne Bay shoreline and these areas have been designated as Critical Wildlife Habitat and therefore, are protected from human activity of any kind. Virginia Key Beach Park also contains protected natural resources that include the coastal band mangrove remnant at the park's eastern end, mangrove and freshwater wetlands, and coastal strand and tropical marine hammock communities. These plant communities include a number of rare plants which are found in the coastal strand and hammock areas. These communities also provide critical habitat areas for federally protected endangered species, including the hawksbill and loggerhead sea turtles, the West Indian Manatee, and the American Crocodile. The island provides suitable habitat for other threatened and endangered species including the gopher tortoise and a variety of shore and sea bird species, including the peregrine falcon, bald eagle, roseate spoonbill, wood stork and piping plover. The island is a stop-over for migratory song birds. Other protected resources include jurisdictional wetlands and mangroves.

Although some of its original vegetation and character remains, Virginia Key has been heavily affected by human activity. Along with large deposits of dredge spoils on its northern tip, the center of the island is occupied by a large sewage treatment plant and a closed landfill. The entire island is heavily infested with exotic vegetation, including extensive stands of Australian pine, which gives the island a profile very different from undisturbed barrier islands.

Only minimal private development has occurred on the island. Together with the sewage plant and landfill, other public facilities dominate the island; including the publicly owned Miami Marine Stadium and recreational areas operated by Miami Dade County. A number of research institutions and schools occupy the island as well, including the National Marine Fisheries Institute, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, the University of Miami Rosenstiel School Of Marine and Atmospheric Science, and the Maritime and Science Technology Academy. Miami Seaquarium is the only large private enterprise on the island. Other private enterprises include restaurants and concessions providing recreational equipment rental. Environmental groups have long opposed private development on the island and in 1999 community activists were instrumental in blocking the development of a private resort on the site of VKBP.

### **Cultural Resources and History**

Until the 1950s, the laws in Dade County, Florida, where Virginia Key is located, included many codes designed to isolate Americans of African descent, not unlike other counties across the South. In the same year as the city of Miami's incorporation, 1896, the Supreme Court ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson established the doctrine of "separate but equal" as a legal construct to replace the Civil Rights Act of 1875. The ruling opened the door for local, State, and Federal laws that dictated the separation of black and white society. Miami and Dade County's segregationist "Jim Crow" laws were similar to those in other regions of the southern United States.

Among the segregation restrictions imposed on Miami's African-American citizens was exclusion from the county's beaches. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the community evaded this restriction by boating out to Virginia Key, where an unofficial "Negro beach" was tolerated on the isolated and inaccessible island's southeastern shoreline. Its laid back, natural setting was similar to the Caribbean islands, where a majority of Miami's African-American community originated. Without the pressure of white harassment, the community was able to relax and enjoy one another's company. In addition, the beach offered a place where baptisms could be performed. With no other place in the county available for this centrally important ceremony in the community's religious life, Virginia Key filled an important gap. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the beach was the community's paradise.

The official presence of African Americans on Virginia Key began during World War II. As American involvement in World War II escalated, Miami Beach became a training

hub for soldiers, with over 500,000 soldiers trained on the beaches and barracked in the commandeered hotels. Because Dade County code prohibited African Americans from entering the water along the “whites-only” beaches, the U.S. Army established segregated training facilities for African-American soldiers on Virginia Key.

Following the war, African-American soldiers returning to the United States began to demand acknowledgement of their contributions during the war effort. In 1944, the Committee on Racial Equality was formed and advocated the use of direct-action protest to demand civil rights. In 1945 the Negro Service Council was created by three Miami professionals, Judge Lawson E. Thomas, Dr. Ira Davis, and Father John Culmer, who had been active since the 1920s as advocates for improved living conditions for Miami’s African-American citizens. The trio formulated a direct-action protest plan to demand access to the county’s beaches. In the summer of 1945, at the “whites-only” Baker’s Haulover Beach located approximately 20 miles north of VKBP, a group of African Americans led by Judge Thomas staged a protest, in the form of a wade-in, against the segregation laws that prohibited African Americans from using the city and county public beaches. Prepared to be arrested, Judge Thomas was instead invited by county officials to discuss the issues. Within a month, the director of parks announced a compromise – the creation of a “colored only” beach at Virginia Key. The legally segregated public beach for the African-American community, VKBP, officially opened on August 1, 1945.

Improvements to the park at its opening consisted of a pier, picnic tables, and a few small surplus army buildings used as a park office and changing cabanas. Access to the beach was by private boat, as it had been during the previous decades, and a limited ferry service was also implemented. Rickenbacker Causeway, linking Key Biscayne and Virginia Key to the mainland, opened in November 1947. By 1949, VKBP had unpaved parking facilities for 1,200 cars, as well as changing cabanas and a wood frame house for the park superintendent. A hurricane the following year destroyed all of the park structures. Plans for new facilities to replace those lost in the hurricane were designed to provide facilities identical to those at the nearby “whites-only” Crandon Park on Key Biscayne.

Completed between 1950 and 1953, new facilities included: a paved entrance drive, 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. During this period, visitors to VKBP were also invited to visit Crandon Park Zoo, where separate “whites-only” and “colored-only” restroom facilities were provided. A concrete dance floor surrounded by coconut palms, called the “Negro dance pavilion,” remained from the beach’s era of unofficial use. The park facilities surviving from this period are listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in recognition of their significance in the civil rights struggle of Miami Dade County’s African-American community. Public expenditure for high-quality recreational facilities

for African Americans initiated a significant change in the status and quality of life of the local community.

Although civil rights laws desegregated all public beaches in the 1950s, the park remained a popular destination for many in the African-American community. In 1982, VKBP 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 recreation area. However, the city closed VKBP soon after the transfer, citing the high cost of maintenance and operations. After nearly 20 years of non-use, site facilities fell into disrepair.

Over the last 8 years, local efforts have been promoting the recognition and restoration of the park. The VKBP Trust (Trust) was established in 2001 and currently manages the site. In 2002, the park was added to the NRHP as a locally significant site. The State of Florida also recognizes the site with an historical marker. The city of Miami recently reopened the park for public use on February 22, 2008.

### **Virginia Key Beach Park Special Resource Study**

Proposals for new parks are analyzed by the National Park Service (NPS) in Special Resource Studies (SRS) to ensure only the most outstanding resources are considered for addition to the National Park System. Potential new units must possess nationally significant natural or cultural resources, be a suitable and feasible addition to the system, and require direct NPS management instead of protection by some other government agency or the private sector.

Public Law 107-343, enacted on December 17, 2002, directs the Secretary of the Interior to conduct an SRS of VKBP in Biscayne Bay, Florida. Virginia Key Beach Park was used for recreational purposes by African Americans during an era in the Nation's history when public beaches were legally racially segregated. Specifically, the law directs the Secretary to evaluate the national significance of the site and determine whether it is suitable and feasible for inclusion in the National Park System.

### **Planning Process**

The first step in the SRS process was to conduct scoping meetings with other agencies, stakeholders, and the public. In 2005, the planning team conducted several trips to assess the park and held six scoping meetings at various locations throughout the Miami area. The objective of the meetings was to present and describe the purpose and goals of the SRS and to obtain input on issues, concerns, and desired future conditions for the VKBP site. More than 60 participants attended the meetings.

Following the 2005 meetings, a newsletter was mailed to more than 200 persons to request written comments regarding their concerns and ideas on the future management and use of the park. The team also consulted other agencies and organizations, including

appropriate tribal, local, State, and Federal government agencies and interested non-governmental organizations.

The next step in the study process was to evaluate the park using the SRS criteria. Potential new units to the National Park System must: (1) possess nationally significant resources, (2) be a suitable addition to the system, (3) be a feasible addition to the system, and (4) require direct NPS management instead of protection by other public agencies or the private sector. Once these criteria were evaluated, the findings were presented to the NRHP and National Historic Landmarks Program (NHL), the Southeast Regional Directorate, and the NPS Washington Offices; all concurred with the findings.

In 2008, a newsletter was distributed and two meetings were held to present and discuss the findings with the public. More than 20 participants attended the meetings and three comments were received.

## **Evaluation of Special Resource Study Criteria**

### ***National Significance***

The first SRS criterion is the evaluation of national significance. As stated in the NPS Management Policies, 2006, national significance for cultural resources will be evaluated by applying the NHL criteria (contained in 36 CFR Part 65).

The first applicable NHL criterion states that sites must be specifically associated with events that have made a significant contribution to or that outstandingly represent the broad patterns of United States history.

Virginia Key Beach Park was founded in 1945 following a series of events and a wade-in demonstration at the “whites-only” Baker’s Haulover Beach, located approximately 20 miles north of VKBP. Although this event is an early instance of a successful planned nonviolent act of civil disobedience, neither the events leading up to the demonstration, the demonstration itself, nor the location of the demonstration ever achieved a strong association with the broader national civil rights struggle and did not spur other events or lead to broader civil rights movements.

The second applicable NHL criterion states that sites must be associated importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States.

The park is associated with Judge Lawson Thomas. Judge Thomas directed the wade-in at Baker’s Haulover Beach which led to the establishment of VKBP. He was an important figure in and around Miami at the local level, but he was not individually exceptionally significant within a national historic context. In addition, although nationally prominent celebrities and civil rights leaders recreated at the park, they were not “associated importantly” with the site as the criterion calls for, as they also recreated at other sites around the country, such as: Highland Park, Maryland; American Beach,

Florida; and Lincoln Beach, Louisiana. To be associated importantly, the site has to be the one site that best represents the person's nationally historic contributions.

### National Significance Findings:

The opinion from the NHL Program states that it does not appear that the property meets the NHL criteria for national significance. The site did not represent a major event or turning point in the national struggle for civil rights, and is not associated importantly with persons nationally significant in the history of the Civil Rights Movement.

Therefore, based upon the opinion of the NHL Program and an analysis of the NHL criteria for national significance, the finding is that VKBP is not nationally significant as defined in the NPS Management Policies, 2006.

### **Suitability**

The second SRS criterion is the evaluation of suitability. To be considered suitable, an area must represent a cultural or natural resource that is not already adequately represented and protected for public enjoyment in the National Park System or by other Federal agencies, State or local governments, or the private sector.

Similar to the efforts of the wade-in at Baker's Haulover Beach, there are other instances of African-American citizens and organizations defending their right for equal access to recreational areas, including beaches. A few examples of areas already protected for public enjoyment are:

- American Beach at Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve located in the Jacksonville, Florida area was established in 1932 and brought into the National Park System in 2004.
- Frank B. Butler Beach County Park located in St. Augustine, Florida, was established in 1927 and is included in the State of Florida's Black Heritage Trail.
- John U. Lloyd Beach State Park located in Florida began the fight for equal accommodations starting in 1927 and continued until the park was established in the 1950s. Recommendations in the park's management plan are being implemented and include the installation of interpretive stations at visitor access points for the purpose of communicating the history of the park to the public.
- Twin Lakes State Park in Virginia was established in 1949 and is still protected and interpreted through the State park system today.

Cultural resource properties are also evaluated for suitability based on whether they fit into an NHL theme study. Virginia Key Beach Park most appropriately fits into the theme study, entitled, "*Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites*" (2003). Within this theme study, property types that are associated with important events in the national struggle for civil rights are identified. One of these property types is a gathering place and this is where VKBP would most appropriately fit. According to the theme study, a gathering place must:

- mark the site of a major event or phase of civil rights history;
- be associated with a model grass-roots demonstration; or
- be the focal point of a grass-roots project at the national level.

The events that occurred at the park, or 20 miles north at Baker's Haulover Beach, were not associated with a major event or turning point in the national struggle for civil rights, a model grass-roots demonstration, or a national project that used the beach as a focal point.

**Suitability Findings:**

Although the park is an impressive example of a segregated beach-front recreational facility, in assessing a comparison of VKBP to other NPS, State, and local properties, it is apparent that resources similar to those of VKBP are adequately represented by other public entities. In addition, VKBP does not meet the requirements to be categorized in an appropriate NHL theme study. Therefore, VKBP does not meet the criteria to be considered suitable for addition to the National Park System.

***Feasibility***

The third SRS criterion is the evaluation of feasibility. To be considered feasible a proposed area must be of sufficient size and configuration to ensure long-term sustainable resource protection and visitor enjoyment. It must also have the potential for efficient administration at a reasonable cost.

The 82.5-acre VKBP site constitutes a land parcel of appropriate size and configuration to allow for NPS administration and interpretation of resource values to visitors. The site is located 2 miles east of downtown Miami and is easily accessible by a toll road.

The city of Miami and Miami-Dade County are currently conducting a master planning process to study Virginia Key in its entirety. The city's population growth, urban development trends, and demands for waterfront access and recreation have created the need for a comprehensive master plan study. The city's objective is to develop waterfront and public open space areas; offer policies for the use, development, and management of land; and protect and enhance natural resources while providing necessary infrastructure and traffic flow. In addition to recommendations for future island-wide improvements and protection of remaining public beaches, parks and conservation areas, the city's intent for VKBP is to preserve the historic area. Therefore, there are no anticipated land use conflicts associated with the areas surrounding VKBP.

The city of Miami currently owns the VKBP property, thus no acquisition costs would be anticipated by the NPS if the site were to become an NPS unit. Long-term operating costs of VKBP would include all operational, staffing, maintenance, and administrative costs. Initially, without additional facilities, operating costs could range from \$500,000 to \$800,000 per year. After the initial transfer of property from the city to the NPS, facility development would be needed. Construction of (1) visitor contact facilities, such as restrooms, drinking fountains, and information/orientation facilities; and (2)

interpretive trails, waysides, kiosks, and other interpretive media would be needed. One-time construction costs could range from \$3 to \$8 million. Once these facilities are in place, long-term operating costs could increase and range from \$800,000 to \$1.1 million per year. There is potential to offset some construction and long-term costs by establishing partnerships with tourism and historic preservation organizations and local governmental and community agencies to provide for access, property management, visitor services, and on-site personnel support.

**Feasibility Findings:**

Site analyses have not uncovered management feasibility issues related to land ownership, political or community support, acquisition costs, threats to the resource, potential access, property size, or configuration. The historic and natural settings of the park are of sufficient size and shape to ensure long-term protection of resources and accommodate public use.

Therefore, apart from potential NPS operational and development costs, VKBP appears to be feasible for inclusion in the National Park System.

***Does Virginia Key Beach Park Require Direct NPS Management?***

The fourth SRS criterion requires that the site need direct NPS management for its protection and that management by other public agencies or the private sector is not adequate.

The Trust is implementing a \$40 million master site plan. (See map on page 12.) Already completed in accordance with the plan is the restoration and repair of historic structures including, the concession stand, bathhouse facilities, picnic pavilion, carousel, dance pavilion, and the mini-train and tunnel; the drainage system; a 37-acre parking lot; lighting; paved circulation; historic landscape restoration; shoreline re-nourishment; and a sewer project to connect to the county's sewer infrastructure. The Trust reopened the park for public use in February 2008.

Also, the Trust has selected an architect and is in the initial design phases for the Historic Virginia Key Beach Park Museum and Cultural Center, to be located on park property. The center will focus on the social, historical, ecological, and environmental aspects of the park and the surrounding area.

**Direct NPS Management Findings:**

Given the amount of interest to protect and interpret the site by the city of Miami and the Trust, the finding is that the site does not require direct NPS management for its protection.

## **Special Resource Study Conclusion**

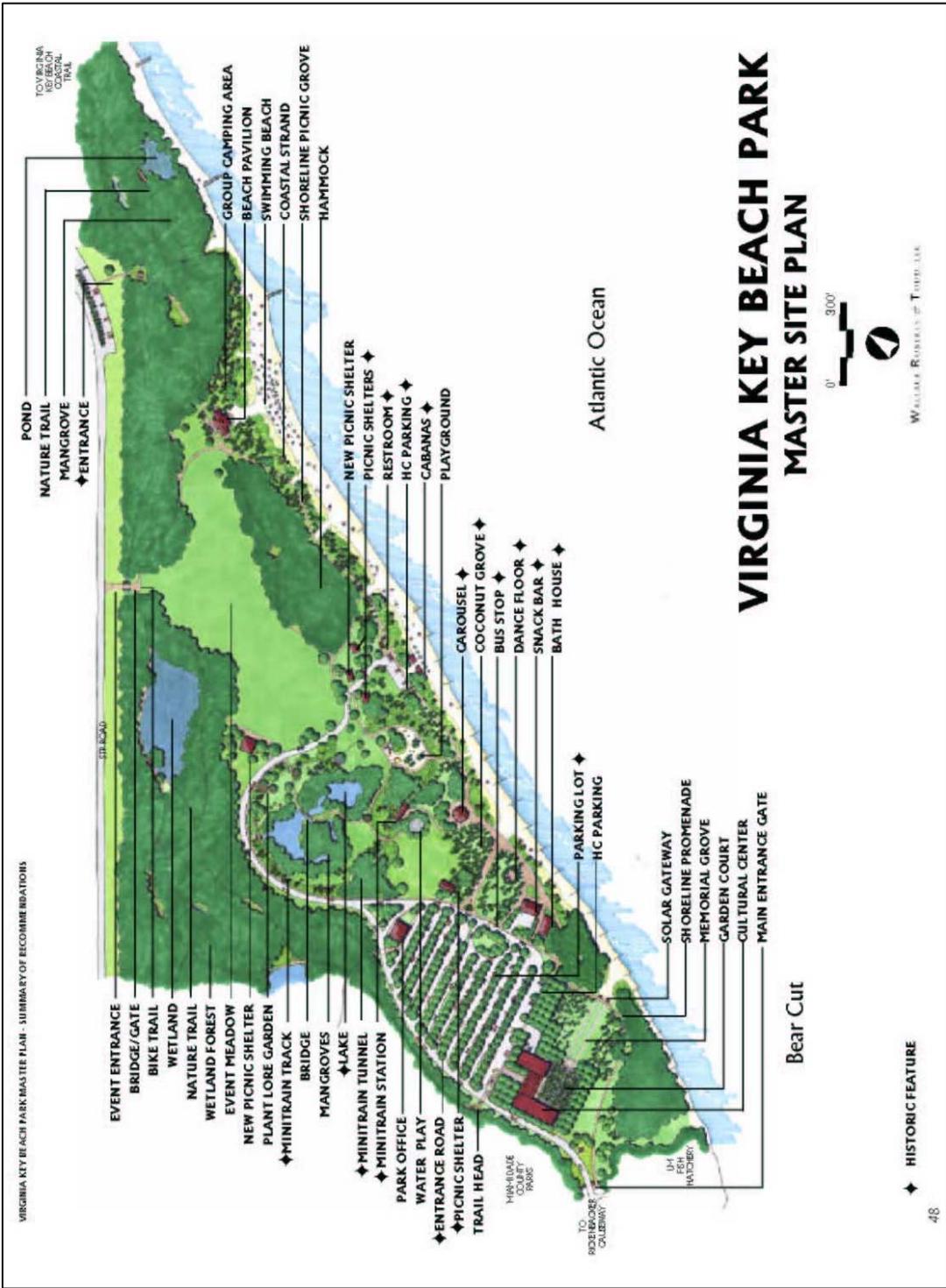
Virginia Key Beach Park meets only one of the four required SRS criteria that are necessary for the site to be considered for inclusion in the National Park System. That criterion is feasibility.

The NPS has concluded that, although the park does not meet all the criteria, it is an important historical and cultural site. It deserves recognition for its role in the history of civil rights in Miami. Its significance, however, appears to be best recognized by its listing in the NRHP with the possibility of upgrading its level of significance from the local level to the State level.

In addition, the NPS manages grant and technical assistance programs to help its non-Federal partners conserve, protect, and interpret historical, cultural, and recreational resources. Partnering programs may be a viable option to further enhance and protect the resources of the park. Examples of partnering programs that the city of Miami could take advantage of are the Preserve America Initiative and the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program.



Map of Virginia Key and Surrounding Area



Virginia Key Beach Park Master Plan  
 Developed by the Virginia Key Beach Park Trust

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**Virginia Key Beach Park Special Resource Study  
Comment Summary**

Newsletters mailed to public	July 1, 2008
Public meetings	July 15 and 16, 2008
Comments period ended	August 10, 2008

<b>Total Comments Received</b>	<b>3</b>
Individual Comments	2
Agencies/Organizations	1

**Agency / Organization Letters**

National Parks Conservation Association

**Discussion of Individual Letters**

- One commenter suggested that the study area be expanded to include the remainder of Virginia Key to create a cohesive park.
- Concerns were raised about the site not being permanently protected in its current capacity. The site recently reopened to the public after being closed for 20 years and the manager of the site is a new entity that will continuously have to search for funding to ensure its longevity. The hope is that the site will be preserved and the sustainability of the current site manager can be guaranteed for future years through partnerships with the NPS.
- Concern that the NPS guidelines for designating units of the System, while objective and impartial in principle, are applied in ways that appear to be subjective and arbitrary.
- Identify the issues and challenges of managing VKBP in order to determine the best way in which a partnership arrangement with the National Park Service can be mutually beneficial.