

California beach returned to Black family nearly a century later

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Descendants of Charles and Willa Bruce have been returned the couple's beach front property, which was seized by city officials in the 1920s [Jae C Hong/AP Photo]

Los Angeles, July 21 (RHC)-- A Black-owned beach in the United States that served as a rare resort for Black patrons in segregation-era California, before it was seized by local officials in the 1920s, has been

returned to the descendants of its original owners.

Activists and local legislators have long said the move by officials in 1924 to seize the property in Manhattan Beach in Los Angeles County, which was owned by Black couple Charles and Willa Bruce, was motivated by racism.

In a Wednesday ceremony, Los Angeles County officials returned the deed of the prime property to Marcus and Derrick Bruce, the great-grandsons of the property's owners, in what they described as the righting of a century-old racial injustice.

"It's surreal and it's almost like being transported to the other side of the known universe," said Anthony Bruce, a great-great-grandson of the Bruce couple. "It's just I want to make sure that I don't lose focus as to what Charles and Willa's dream was."

Community activist Kavon Ward, of Justice for Bruce's Beach which spearheaded the effort to return the land, watched the handover from the crowd. "This is one win, but we deserve more wins," she said. "And I'm going to help all the Black families that I can try to reclaim the land that was stolen from them."

Charles and Willa Bruce bought the sprawling 650 square metres (7,000 square feet) property in 1912, but suffered racial harassment from white neighbours as they established a resort for Black patrons.

Twelve years after making the purchase, the Manhattan Beach City Council condemned the property and took the land through eminent domain. The property was later transferred to the state of California in 1948. In 1995, the state transferred the property to Los Angeles County.

Janice Hahn, a member of the county board of supervisors, learned about the property's history and launched the complex process of returning the property to the heirs of the Bruces after consulting county lawyers.

The process required state legislation and vote by the county board of supervisors, as well as the task of identifying the rightful heirs.

Hahn said she hoped the apparently unprecedented process would have a knock-on effect. "Today, we're sending a message to every government in this nation confronted with this same challenge: This work is no longer unprecedented," Hahn told Reuters news agency at the ceremony.

Under an agreement with the Bruces, Los Angeles County will lease the beach, which houses a lifeguard training facility, at an annual rent of \$413,000 plus all operation and maintenance costs. The county also maintains the right to outright buy the land for up to \$20m.

"This is the deed right here," Derrick Bruce said at the ceremony. "And this means a great deal to us because our forbearers struggled greatly to accumulate enough wealth to buy land here in this Manhattan Beach."

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