

# LINCOLN BEACH

## **"Weeds, snakes, and a contaminated lake."**

These were the swimming conditions that New Orleans provided for African Americans prior to the opening of Lincoln Beach. In 1938, Sam Zemurray, president of United Fruit Company, sold a 2.3-acre tract of land to the Orleans Parish Levee Board. The tract was along the lakefront in the Little Woods section of New Orleans East. The city asserted that Little Woods was a 'separate but equal' recreational area, in compliance with the standard established in Plessy v. Ferguson. However, many African-Americans recall a 12-mile trip on an unpaved road that was followed by crossing active railroad tracks, and waste from nearby fishing camps which polluted the swimming water.

African-Americans continued to seek out other options so they could stay cool in the tropical summers. Some visited the nearby Seabrook in spite of police harassment and the city's refusal to provide lighting or lifeguards. The most impactful tragedy at Seabrook occurred in 1931, when a group of six family members all drowned together due to a sinkhole in the lake. Such drownings became increasingly common as structural improvements were made along the North Shore of the lake. Real estate investments increased the value of homes in burgeoning white communities. Additionally, the white sand that was imported for the newly constructed and segregated Pontchartrain Beach eroded the South Shore.

After 25 years of struggle for recreational equality and against environmental racism, the Orleans Levee Board invested \$500,000 in building a lakeside amusement park for African-American citizens, who comprised about 200,000 - or 32% - of the city's population in 1950. More extensively developed than the park designated in 1939, Lincoln Beach was a better equipped site. Some remember tickets for free admission to Lincoln Beach that came in Sunbeam Bread. There was a Midway with rides, a ferris wheel, rollercoaster, and games of chance. Patrons dined at the Carver House Restaurant, and danced atop its terrace.

There were two swimming pools with a lifeguard corps and a swimming teacher, Edward X. Dunn. One of the pools was named in honor of Capt. Nolan McNeal, a formerly enslaved man and fighter for Black progress. Highlights at Lincoln Beach included bathing beauty contests and diving expositions. It was Beach was also the site of the annual Negro State Fairs. Musical artists included Fats Domino, Irma Thomas, Earl King, The Neville Brothers, Nat King Cole, The Ink Spots, Ernie K-Doe, Dr. John, and many others.

Despite marked improvements, most African-Americans recognize that Lincoln Beach was a park of lesser quality than the Whites-only Pontchartrain Beach. Lincoln Beach was a quarter-mile in length in contrast to Pontchartrain Beach's half-mile, and it was difficult to arrive at. But it was a place where African-Americans produced culture through their bodies. And as many have said, "It was a place where I felt safe."

Since its closure following the desegregation of public accommodations under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Lincoln Beach has become dilapidated. It barely shows the skeleton of what it once was. As soon as Pontchartrain desegregated, the Orleans Levee Board

abandoned caring for Lincoln Beach. And once Pontchartrain Beach integrated, owner Harry Batt disinvested in his own property. White violence was initially enacted against African-Americans that began to integrate Pontchartrain. Eventually whites stopped attending the park at all.

Mr. Leon A. Waters took me to Lincoln Beach in the summer of 2018. We stood on the levee looking down into a forest that blanketed the beach. Mr. Waters said to me, "They let that forest grow so we'd forget it (segregation) ever happened."

Resources for this writing: Leon A. Waters - Andrew Kahrl - Keith Weldon Medley - WWOZ - Members of the Carrollton/Hollygrove Senior Center Community



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