

Virginia Beach: A Sundown Town

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The 40 ACRES Archive lives at the intersection of artistic production, historical research, and contemporary gestures of repair. This multidisciplinary research project centers the history of the U.S. Reconstruction era, which historians often refer to as the second founding of the United States of America. This reconstruction should have supported the first Black Freedmen communities in the U.S. through social programs, reparations and repatriation, but instead only valued the mending of White America. Public awareness concerning the ways Black communities were popularly harassed, and officially dismantled, is vital in order to fully understand and acknowledge today's inequalities, rationalize our immense lack of supportive federal infrastructures, or plot ways forward. By looking back at this moment in history – both regionally and nationally – we are given vivid insights into how the country reconstructed itself around a new white supremacy, and repeatedly forestalled the advancement of a multicultural society.

To properly contextualize any history of Virginia Beach we must first acknowledge that the land now called Virginia Beach was home to Algonquian speaking tribes for over 15,000 years before the arrival of English settlers.

For more information about the history of Virginia Beach: [vbgov.com \(essay\)](https://www.vbgov.com/essays).

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The popular definition of Sundown Towns are areas that for decades after the Civil War and Reconstruction, formally or informally, have excluded African Americans or other groups from settling there and “spending the night”. Traditionally, there would be marked placards or signs that warned these groups, mainly African Americans, to leave the premises of the town before sundown. Sundown was an especially strategic deadline, as it allowed African American maids and other workers to provide services to the town for the day, while also permanently preventing them from fully settling and integrating into the nightlife – the leisure time – of the community. Understanding Virginia Beach’s history as a Sundown Town requires us to analyze the implicit ways that the Whiteness of the town was preserved. Through historical photographs, television, and other forms of popular media, many have seen the violence that was popularly used to enforce the Whiteness of a Sundown Town; yet, the historian James W. Loewen describes that there were “softer” methods of enforcement, such as ordinances, informal actions by the police, freezing out African Americans from social interactions and from institutions, buying them out, and other forms of bias, White residents and lawmakers worked to maintain a pure White image, and keep its Black people within a state of perpetual subjugation. ¹

¹ Loewen, James W. *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*. New York (N.Y.), NY: The New Press, 2018.

At first observation, Virginia Beach's foundation appears to be for commercial purposes catered toward wealthy, White citizens. In 1883, at the height of the Gilded Age (a period of rapid economic growth in the United States), Marshall Parks, a prominent developer and entrepreneur from Norfolk, began focusing his attention on the area, and calling it "Virginia Beach."² That same year, Parks and his investors organized the Norfolk and Virginia Beach Railroad and Improvement Company to acquire additional property to build a small hotel and a pavilion. On July 17, he completed his railroad service and a train began running from the Broad Creek terminal in Norfolk to the oceanfront. The train made four to five round trips a day during the summer and brought visitors to the first hotel at what is now called Virginia Beach, fittingly named Virginia Beach Hotel. Following lackluster investment success, the hotel, pavilion, railroad, and over 1,500 acres of land were sold at auction to C. W. Mackey for \$170,000. Under his management, he improved the hotel and pavilion, reopened it on June 6, 1887, renaming it the Princess Anne Hotel. It was not until another reacquisition by Vanderbilt Interest did the newly renamed hotel find success. The Princess Anne Hotel was considered one of the most luxurious year-round resorts. The hotel offered accommodations for nearly 400 guests with ballrooms, verandas, salt and freshwater baths, steam heat, electric lights, elevators, a post office, and much more. Distinguished visitors and celebrities such as Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, Alexander Graham Bell, and the McCormack family of Chicago were among the patrons of the Princess Anne Hotel.³

At the heart of the Princess Anne Hotel, were the Black laborers who served as the lifeblood of the entire resort. The laborers who staffed the hotel and performed for its guests

² Souther, Jonathan Mark. "Twixt Ocean and Pines: The Seaside Resort at Virginia Beach, 1880-1930." Thesis, University of Richmond, 1996, 6

³ Jonathan Mark Souther (University of Richmond, 1996), 21

were forbidden to set foot on the beach until late at night, right after the last steam train had returned to Norfolk and the overnight guests had retired to their quarters. By the time of the Princess Anne Hotel's burning on June 17th, 1907, there were at least 200 Black laborers employed by the establishment.⁴



Since Virginia Beach was founded on commercial enterprises geared towards wealthy White citizens, African Americans were not intended to be included within the equation of the city, except as cheap labor. Furthermore, the preservation of Whiteness served as a key role in increasing the commercial prospects of Virginia Beach. In 1899, the Chesapeake Transit Company intended to build a railway between Virginia Beach and Cape Henry, seeking the potential for large profits in the area. The Chesapeake Transit Company then began negotiations with the N.V.B and the S.R.R for the right-of-way through its property, with the condition that the resort that would be established at Cape Henry would be “only for the persons of the Caucasian race.”⁵ This condition is a representation of how the reputation and success of Virginia Beach relied on maintaining its White appearance, a key quality of a Sundown Town.

One of the most famous hotels at Virginia Beach during this period was the Cavalier Hotel. Construction began in 1926 and finished 13 months later. The hotel housed various famous guests, such as ten former presidents, prominent actors, writers, and models. Almost all the employees at the Cavalier were African American, and most were housed in quarters at the

⁴ Jonathan Mark Souther, (University of Richmond, 1996), 68

⁵ Jonathan Mark Souther (University of Richmond, 1996), 52.

rear of the hotel, away from the cottages where the Cavalier’s few White workers lived. Once again, African American employees were forbidden to go to the beach, except during the late-night hours. Carlos Wilson, a bellman at the Cavalier hotel, recalls that African Americans were subject to arrest if they stayed on the beach “too long” into the early morning hours.⁶ The Cavalier Hotel, akin to other hotels in Virginia Beach, exploited Black labor, while also attempting to maintain the Whiteness of the city. The Cavalier therefore strictly adhered to the strict social principles on race at the time.⁷



To understand Virginia Beach’s history as a Sundown Town and the systemic anti-Blackness that dwells at the core of its founding, one must also know the history of Seatack. Seatack is a historic neighborhood and community borough of Virginia Beach, that was located in what used to be Princess Anne County. Seatack derived its name from the War of 1812, when the community became the target of cannonballs fired from British ships and was the location where British troops came ashore, hence the name “Sea-Attack,” shortened to “Seatack.” The first African Americans who settled in Seatack in the late 1700s and the beginning of the 1800s were free and owned their own farms and homes. Many of them were craftsmen, builders,

⁶Jonathan Mark Souther (University of Richmond, 1996), 105.

⁷Jonathan Mark Souther (University of Richmond, 1996), 105.

farmers, fisherman, and hunters, and whatever resources they needed they retrieved them on their own. As the area soon to be known as the commercial town of Virginia Beach developed, Seatack became a vital part of ensuring the success of the new resorts and hotels opening at the beach. The land of Seatack had historically been overlooked by White capitalists, but as commercial attitudes toward leisure shifted and beach destinations became more desirable during the Gilded Age of the late 19th and early 20th century, Seatack's land suddenly became valuable for Virginia Beach's growing hoteliers.

The village of Seatack, which was once composed of Black subsistence farmers, by the early 20th century became a dense cluster of shotgun houses constructed by the resorts to house their Black laborers.⁸ The geographic dynamics in this situation between the shelter for workers and the shelter for customers set an image that the Black laborers within Virginia Beach were not meant to feel equal. The hoteliers of Virginia Beach, who were the very founders of the town, intended to maintain a perfect White image of the town, even going as far as putting their Black laborers (who nearly all worked in the hotels) into a separate area closed and hidden away from the sights of the rich White guests. As the historian Andrew Kahrl states, "Virginia Beach offered visitors rides aboard wicker baskets pulled by Black males. And like other cities by sea, town fathers saw it as their duty to prevent the presence of Black persons except in a service capacity."⁹ Furthermore, when Virginia Beach became a town, its founders intentionally drew Seatack outside of the lines of its jurisdiction in an effort to maintain the "Whites-Only" image, characteristic of a Sundown Town.¹⁰ Thus, Black people in Virginia Beach were subjected to a state of invisibility when not visibly working for White people, and had to develop their own

⁸ Andrew Kahrl, "Sunbelt by the Sea," *Journal of Urban History* 38, no. 3 (2012): pp. 488-508,

⁹ Andrew Kahrl, "Sunbelt by the Sea," 491

¹⁰ Fernandes, Deirdre. "Checkered History: For Va.. Beach Blacks, Power Still Elusive." *Pilot*, September 8, 2009.

social spaces. Important examples of historic Black beaches in Virginia include Brights Beach, City Beach in Norfolk, Bay Shore Beach in Hampton, Rockaway Beach and Ocean Breeze Beach.¹¹

Virginia Beach was also no stranger to violence when it came to preserving its racial hierarchy. In early September of 1926 a group of robed and hooded individuals abducted Father Vincent D. Warren, a Catholic priest who taught Black children in Princess Anne County. Per Warren's account, three robed men, presumably Klansmen, abducted him from the side of the road and proceeded to interrogate him on allegations that he was planning to create a Catholic school in Princess Anne County for Black children. Eventually, the hooded men dropped Warren off on the side of a road four miles from Norfolk, and he received transportation from a Black man on the way home. Warren's abduction was further evidence of the White community's involvement in the preservation of Whiteness in and around the town, which was necessary in order to appeal to White people with money, and attract them to their hotels and resorts.¹²

Furthermore, in his testimony, Warren also revealed that the Black citizens of Princess Anne County were well acquainted with the county Klan. Just two days before Warren's kidnapping, Warren stated that he received information that two Black men had been pulled from their homes by mobs and severely beaten. In another case, a Black woman threw a party for her friends in her own home in the county, and a band of Klansmen showed up at her house to break up the festivities. In his own words, "A reign of terror among the Negro residents of the county has been existing [for] several months."¹³ Adding to the significance of this event, Forrest Bailey, director of the American Civil Liberties Union, wired Governor Harry F. Byrd to demand further

¹¹ Watson, Denise. "Locals remember fun, frustration of local segregated beaches" Daily Press, July 13, 2018.

¹² "SAY SOME OF ABDUCTORS OF PRIEST KNOWN: INFORMATION THAT WOULD LEAD TO IDENTITY OF MEMBERS OF HOODED BAND WITHHELD IT IS SAID." New Journal and Guide (1916-), Sep 11, 1926.

¹³ New Journal and Guide (1916-), Sep 11, 1926.

investigation into the abduction of Warren, after Princess Anne Sheriff J. C. Litchfield reported to Byrd that there was “nothing to investigate in the kidnapping.”¹⁴ Perhaps this would suggest that there was a greater conspiracy at hand given the Sheriff’s disinterest in investigating the kidnapping, despite the wealth of evidence and testimony against the perpetrators. This kidnapping therefore also demonstrates the involvement of law enforcement in efforts to preserve segregation and the racial hierarchy. Violence, even against other White people if they were sympathetic to the plights of Black citizens, was par for the course in the continual effort to maintain Whiteness in the area.

As far as the role of legislation in this effort, in 1938 a Virginia Beach law required African Americans who worked at the resort or in the nearby homes to be fingerprinted, photographed, and registered with the police every summer. Kahrl writes that the town of Virginia Beach “made being black, not at work, and anywhere near the beach a criminal act.”¹⁵ This is just another example of the ways that Black people within the town of Virginia Beach were subject to high scrutiny and control of the White government, another symbol of a Sundown Town, even if the city did not overtly advertise itself as one.

Along with the kidnapping of Father Warren, another great example of Virginia Beach’s Sundown Town history happens early in September of 1950, when a group dressed in robes resembling the Klan burned a cross to prevent the sale of land to a Black family. At 2AM in the dead of night, Helen Williams, a White business owner, discovered a burning cross, made with

Cross Burned To Prevent Virginia Beach Land Sale

two-by-fours, about seven feet tall and four feet wide, on a tract of land between Virginia Beach and Oceana.

¹⁴ “To Aid Abducted Priest.; Liberties Union Denounces Virginia Sheriff for Failure to Act.” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 7, 1926.

¹⁵ Kahrl, Andrew. “Sunbelt by the Sea,” 492

The cross was burned at a site where a real estate manager was auctioning land that was advertised towards Black people. When asked about why someone would have burned a cross in that area, Williams responded by saying that “I am certain some people don’t relish the idea of colored people buying lots in that tract of land.” To make matters even more apparent, Williams also remarked that “I remember when I was a child there was a lot of talk about stopping Negroes from buying land in that section. Only two years ago a colored man attempted to build a home in that very tract... it was generally well known in this vicinity that threats from some White persons caused him to cease building and move on.”¹⁶ Interestingly enough, the tract of land the cross was burned on was actually adjacent to land owned by Black landowners. However, according to the *New Journal and Guide*, the land potentially served as a buffer between White Virginia Beach, and Black Norfolk. The commentary from Williams and the insight provided on the newspaper articles demonstrates that there was a priority within the area to maintain segregation between White and Black communities, in order to preserve the elite appeal of the coastal resorts.

In 1951, a group of African Americans filed a lawsuit against the Princess Anne County government after they were refused entry into Seashore State Park in Princess Anne County. The only state park in the area that was open to Black families at the time was three hours away in Prince Edward County.¹⁷ The courts put the lawsuit on hold to await the ruling of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954, which ultimately ruled against segregation in public schools. However, a year later, in 1955, the Virginia Board of Conservation and Development decided to lease Seashore State Park to a private operator to continue segregation whilst allowing the board

¹⁶ Bowler, J. "Cross Burned to Prevent Virginia Beach Land Sale: Pranksters Blamed for Fiery Cross use "Klan" Plan in Effort to Frighten Colored Buyers." *New Journal and Guide* (1916-), Sep 02, 1950.

¹⁷ “Tate v. Department of Conservation and Development, 133 F. Supp. 53 (E.D. Va. 1955).” Justia Law. Accessed September 18, 2022.

to own and protect the state's financial investment.¹⁸ The Norfolk Journal and Guide, in an article published soon after, recognized this attempt clearly: "two things are quite apparent in the decision of the highest state officials to lease to a private operator... (1) None of the reasons offered for the action is valid, except the desire to continue use of this and seven other similar parks exclusively for White persons and (2) this step is only the beginning... of a series of acts of retaliation against Negroes for their wholly proper legal efforts to achieve first-class citizenship and equitable use of public facilities."¹⁹ The park fully reopened following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which nationally outlawed such segregation in public places. This instance demonstrated the extent that the Hampton Roads area as a legislative jurisdiction was still working to preserve the racial dynamics of the past nearly 100 years after the end of the Civil War.



Regardless of the attempts to exclude the African American community from popular leisure sites on the coast of Virginia, African Americans still managed to create their own leisure opportunities. Before the end of segregation with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, there were various beaches in the tidewater area for African Americans to enjoy their leisure time. Of these sites, one of the most important was Seaview Beach. Seaview Beach was located in Hampton Roads, and in 1947, *Life Magazine*, published a photo-essay on Seaview Beach calling it "Virginia's

best-known Negro resort."²⁰ Twenty-one local African American businessmen came together in 1945 to fund the enterprise, and in 1946, the founders expanded the beach to include a restaurant,

¹⁸ "History of Virginia State Parks." Department of Conservation and Recreation, n.d.

¹⁹ "Plan to Lease Seashore State Park must Shame Fair-Minded Virginians: AN EDITORIAL." *New Journal and Guide* (1916-), Mar 05, 1955.

²⁰ "A Fine Day at the Beach." *Life magazine*, August 18, 1947, 115.

rides, and a ferris wheel. By 1956, the founders had invested over a million dollars into the resort, demonstrating the extent that African Americans went to create their own spaces in spite of the segregation around them.²¹ However, after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 removed the need for separate beaches, Seaview beach closed down and was demolished soon after.

In 1963, the city of Virginia Beach merged with Princess Anne County and grew into a sprawling suburb. This growth was primarily powered by the unfolding of integration and the movement of White residents from Norfolk to Virginia Beach. From 1960 to 1980, the White population of Norfolk fell by 28 percent, and many of the new residents in Virginia Beach were White people who had lived in Norfolk.²² Virginia Beach became a refuge for White citizens fleeing racial integration, and the population doubled, with 95% of the new arrivals listed as White.²³ The desirability behind this oceanfront relocation could perhaps be traced to the efforts that the area took to maintain its strict racial structure for centuries. Within Virginia Beach, preserving Whiteness was a form of preserving capital. The hotels and resorts along the oceanfront haven relied on appealing to elite White guests, which in a racist world, necessitated the maintenance of a strict social hierarchy that demanded both labor and suppression of Black life.

²¹ DeBarri, Sherri. Seaview Beach and Amusement Park, October 1, 2017.

²² Roberts, David K. "Separate, but Equal? Virginia's 'Independent' Cities and the Purported Virtues of Voluntary Interlocal Agreements." *Virginia Law Review* 95, no. 6 (2009): 1551–97. 72

²³ Fernandes, Deirdre. "Checkered History: For Va.. Beach Blacks, Power Still Elusive." *Pilot*, September 8, 2009.

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