



California

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Bruce's Beach to be returned to Black family 100 years after city 'used the law to steal it'

California governor apologizes for city's seizure of first west coast resort for Black people, which almost certainly would have made heirs millionaires

Guardian staff and agencies

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A beachfront property seized from a Black family in southern California nearly a century ago will be **returned to the family's descendants**, in a move hailed as a milestone in the fight for reparations and the return of lands stolen from people of color.

In 1912 Willa and Charles Bruce bought land in Manhattan Beach, a Los Angeles seaside suburb, turning it into a thriving resort run for and by Black residents despite harassment and violence from white neighbors.

But in the 1920s the Manhattan Beach city council used eminent domain to take the land from the Bruces, purportedly for use as a park. Yet the land lay unused for years until was transferred to the state in 1948.



📍 Bruce's Beach in Manhattan Beach, California. Photograph: Dean Musgrove/AP

This week the descendants of Willa and Charles Bruce, including the couple's great-great-grandson, watched California's governor, Gavin Newsom, sign a law that allows ownership of the property known as Bruce's Beach to be transferred back to the family.

With a half-dozen descendants of the couple present, Newsom apologized for how the land was taken before signing the bill during a ceremony at the property on Thursday.

"There are other families waiting for this very day, to have their land returned to them," Patricia Bruce, a cousin of Willa and Charles Bruce, told the Associated Press.

The legislation unanimously approved by state lawmakers was necessary to allow the start of the complex legal process of transferring ownership of Bruce's Beach. LA county officials moved earlier this year to return the valuable property to the descendants, granting them the wealth they have been denied for generations.

In a [recent interview](#) with the Guardian, Anthony Bruce, a 38-year-old great-great-grandson, called the return of the property “a reckoning that has been long overdue”.

“For me and the generations after, this would mean an inheritance - and that internal security of knowing that I come from somewhere, that I come from a people.”



📷 Bruce's Beach on Thursday evening. Photograph: Jay L Clendenin/Los Angeles Times/Rex/Shutterstock

Amid rampant segregation, hate crimes and threats, the Bruces built the first west coast resort for Black people. Situated along what became one of southern California's signature beaches, fronted by rows of multimillion-dollar homes, it included a lodge, cafe, dance hall and dressing tents.

“The journey here was far from easy,” said Kavon Ward, a Black resident who learned of the property's history and founded Justice for Bruce's Beach.

Ward also co-founded Where Is My Land, an organization that aims to return land taken from Black Americans and get restitution. The organization is looking at several other unspecified projects, including one in California, to see if its goals are possible.

Janice Hahn, the county supervisor who led a government push to transfer the land, said the heirs would almost certainly be millionaires now if the property had not been taken.

“The law was used to steal this property 100 years ago, and the law today will give it back,” Hahn said.

Newsom said the Bruces could have become like other leading southern California entrepreneurs, like the Getty family that garnered fame for its oil wealth and art collection.

The Bruces' property along the south shore of Santa Monica Bay encompasses two parcels. The county's lifeguard training headquarters building sits there now, along a scenic beach walkway lined with luxury homes overlooking the beach.

In Manhattan Beach the population of 35,000 is more than 84% white and 0.8% Black, according to the city website. This year, the city council formally condemned the efforts of their early 20th-century predecessors to displace the Bruces and several other Black families.

The county, meanwhile, has outlined steps needed to move forward with the transfer, including assessing the value of the parcels and trying to find a means to lessen the tax burden on the heirs.

Patricia Bruce, 65, of Hawthorne, said the family has not yet decided what it will do with the property.

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