




Landscapes of Exclusion

STATE PARKS IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH

Canoeing at Reedy Creek State Park. Photograph by Charles Clark, 1964. Courtesy State Archives of North Carolina.



From the beginning of the national state park movement in the late nineteenth century, advocates emphasized the importance of easily accessible scenic landscapes. State parks would offer citizens relief from the stresses of daily life and opportunities to relax in the mountains, forests, and on the waterfront. Like the national parks but closer to home, state parks were conceived as tangible expressions of American democracy, preserving public lands and promising recreational access to all. In the South, however, this promise was not extended to the region's large African American population. From the construction of the South's first scenic state parks early in the twentieth century, these landscapes enforced the system of racial segregation and white supremacy known as Jim Crow. These policies reigned from the 1890s to the 1960s.

Supported by the U.S. Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896, most state parks built in the South in this era excluded African Americans. Although the *Plessy* ruling had endorsed the doctrine of "separate but equal," the "separate" provision was rigorously enforced in all southern affairs, while equality was given little more than lip-service. Despite early enthusiasm for their construction, a state park movement did not begin to grow until the 1920s. During this decade, National Park Service director Stephen Mather received proposals from around the country, and while most of the sites were not in his estimation of "national park" quality, they could, he believed, form the basis for state park systems. Beginning in the late 1930s, access to African Americans was gradually extended in a limited number of segregated park facilities constructed by both federal and state agencies.

New Deal programs, including the Civilian Conservation Corps, Works Progress Administration, and Resettlement Administration, provided an opportunity for the Park Service to implement Mather's vision of systematic expansion. These federal agencies channeled financial resources, labor, and land into the construction of public parks. State park construction was a high priority for the Park Service at the time, and the New Deal led to tremendous growth in the number of facilities designed and constructed. Of the more than 700 state parks completed nationwide between 1933 and the end of the New Deal in 1942, about 150 were located in the southern states.

Jim Crow rule in the South meant that African Americans were excluded from enjoying the benefits of state parks. Pressured by the increasing influence of the NAACP and other African American advocacy groups, as well as the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and other civic associations, the National Park Service initiated efforts to extend state park access to black southerners by 1935. The agency met with little success, however, in the face of indifferent or hostile state officials, white residents, and its own policies. Although it was sympathetic to African American causes, the FDR administration wanted to maintain support among southern Democrats for New Deal programs and did not push too hard in its attempts to develop state parks and other recreational facilities for African Americans.

The agency's official policy was nondiscrimination, but in practice the Park Service accommodated racial segregation. Citing "local custom," it allowed state officials to decide whether or not to include separate facilities for African Americans. This arrangement greatly hindered any expansion of African American access even in parks constructed on federal lands, such as through the New Deal's Recreational Demonstration Area (RDA) program. The Park

Service did not consider meeting the “separate but equal” standard by proposing separate racial accommodations at every park it designed, but limited consideration to sites with adequate expectations of African American visitation. Park design and construction was guided by racial stereotypes: African Americans were perceived as “social” and “gregarious” by nature, while whites were viewed as more “contemplative.” Planners often presumed that white visitors appreciated grand scenic spaces in which to contemplate “nature,” while African Americans cared for little more than day-use areas for picnicking and sports.

The result of these policies—the perpetuation of inequality in recreational facilities—was made clear during the construction boom of the New Deal, when only nine state parks in just five states were made available to black southerners. Some facilities were small “Negro areas” located adjacent to or within larger parks restricted to white use, such as those at Oklahoma’s Roman Nose State Park and South Carolina’s Hunting Island State Park. The segregated spaces were often demarcated with physical barriers—streams, lakes, roads, or wooded areas—and typically the African American sections had a separate entry road. Other

African American parks, such as Booker T. Washington State Park in Tennessee and North Carolina’s Jones Lake State Park, were fully separate, often built in conjunction with a whites-only park. Typically such facilities not only were small and intended for day use but were poor in scenic and recreational quality and offered fewer amenities than parks designed for whites.

The first state facility constructed exclusively for African Americans, Watson State Park in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, exemplified the situation. The park’s main promoter and namesake, Dr. John Brown Watson, president of Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal College at Pine Bluff, had pressed the federal government since 1933 to build such a facility, hoping that New Deal programs would add federal leverage to bring state recreational benefits to African Americans. But as elsewhere in the South, the Park Service focus in Arkansas was on constructing facilities exclusively for whites, primarily in the scenic Ozarks and Ouachita Mountains. The project for African Americans in Pine Bluff languished until Watson donated land for it from his own estate in 1937. Even then, its construction only served to demonstrate recreational inequality:





Opposite page: Campers at Crabtree Creek, 1943. Courtesy State Archives of North Carolina. Above: Master plan of Booker T. Washington State Park, 1940. Courtesy Tennessee State Library and Archives.

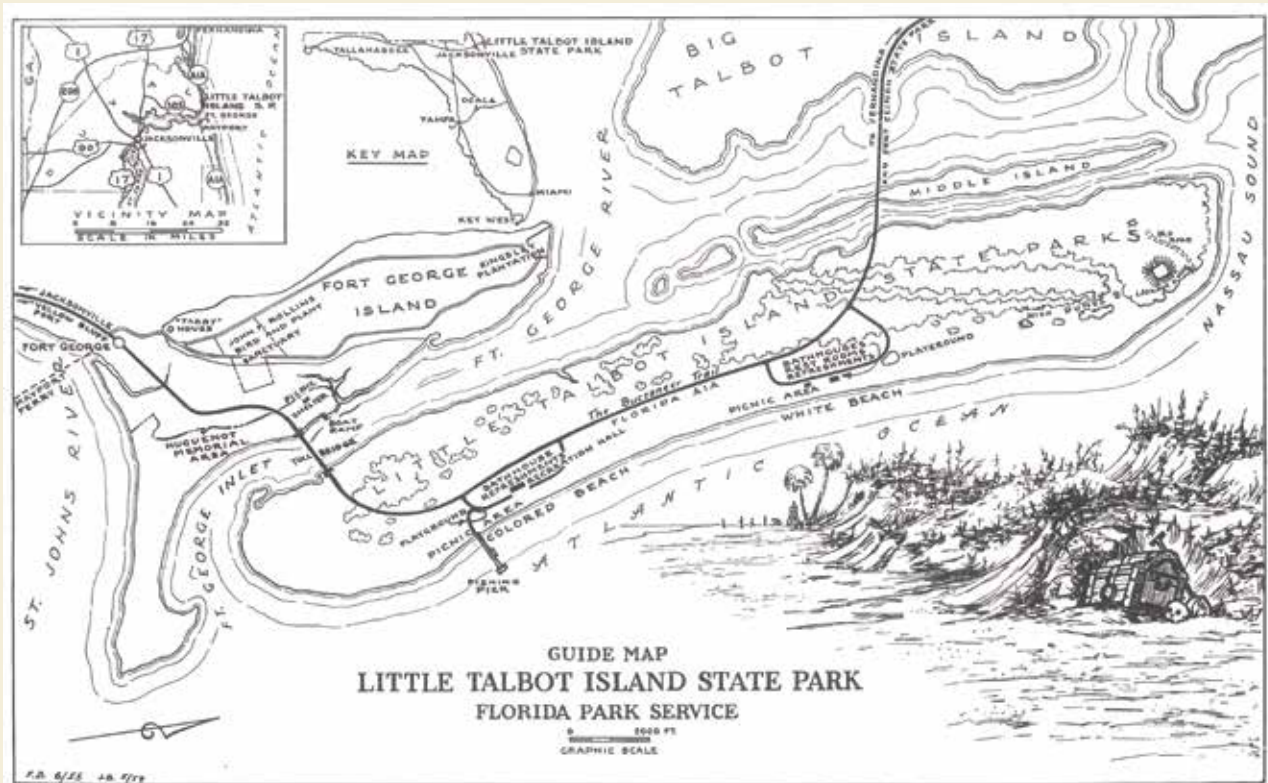
the hundred-acre park with its minimal facilities stood in stark contrast to the more than eighteen thousand acres of state park land of varied topography offering a wide range of experiences to white Arkansans. In 1944, Watson State Park was closed after an Arkansas judge agreed with Dr. Watson's widow that the state had failed in its promise to maintain the park.

During World War II, the Park Service ended its direct involvement in state park construction, leaving further park system expansion to the states. Between 1949 and 1954 the number of state park facilities for African Americans grew significantly. By 1954 nearly every southern state had constructed at least one—either a “Negro area” or a separate park—for a total of twenty-eight. At the same time whites had access to more than two hundred state parks. In rare cases, such as Florida's Little Talbot Island State Park, opened in 1951, park planners designed separate “white” and “colored” beach facilities with the intention of demonstrating their equality. Mississippi's park agency constructed Carver Point State Park in 1954, which included a lodge that was touted as equal to the one provided at nearby Hugh White State Park. The neglected New Deal-era facilities at Tennessee's Booker T. Washington and T. O. Fuller state parks, both exclusively for African American use, were given significant upgrades in 1950.

The irony of the postwar expansion of access was that most African Americans were no longer seeking additional segregated spaces. The war years were pivotal in galvanizing African American demands for civil rights, and organizations such as the NAACP abandoned earlier calls for equalization of separate facilities, demanding instead the desegregation of southern institutions. They were specifically working to overturn *Plessy*, and the vast inequality in state park access made southern park systems a productive target for constitutional challenges. But the state park agencies persisted, hoping to convince federal judges that they were at least attempting to meet the “separate but equal” standard. It was a daunting challenge, given the growing sympathy in the courts for overturning *Plessy*, but also because state legislatures were generally reluctant to fund these efforts. In 1950, the Texas legislature rejected a modest proposal to fund construction of a handful of African American state parks. The only facility developed in the state was a small, segregated section of Tyler State Park, which had been the target of a lawsuit. The rest of the expansive Texas system of nearly four dozen state parks remained officially off-limits to African American visitors.

State park agencies faced another serious obstacle—the persistent rejection of site proposals by local white residents who refused to allow “Negro parks” near

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Map of Little Talbot Island State Park (1959), indicating separate white and “colored” beaches. Courtesy Jacksonville Historical Society.

their homes. Although the New Deal construction of the two African American parks in Tennessee was followed by postwar plans to add several more, none were built because white property owners and their political representatives protested. In South Carolina, a search for a park location in the Greenville area commenced in 1947, but site after proposed site was rejected by white residents. A letter from one resident expressed her objection to a forestry commission proposal to construct the facility within Paris Mountain State Park, complaining that desegregation would ruin the scenic park. In 1949, an alternate site was acquired, although it took six years to complete Pleasant Ridge State Park because of funding delays from the South Carolina legislature.

By the early 1950s two significant state park lawsuits were working their way through the federal court system. These suits, filed by NAACP lawyers in 1951 and 1952 respectively, challenged the constitutionality of white-only access to Virginia’s Seashore State Park and the segregated “dual use” facilities at Maryland’s Sandy Point State Park. Concurrently, desegregation pressures intensified in 1954 with the U.S. Supreme

Court’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which overturned *Plessy*. The ruling ignited vitriolic white outrage throughout the South, prompting many politicians to promote a campaign of “massive resistance” to what they perceived as federal violation of states’ rights. Nonetheless, the court ruled in late 1955 that segregation of public parks, like education, was unconstitutional.

A few states, including Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma, complied with the ruling and desegregated their state park systems. Other states reacted with hostility toward the court, including Virginia and South Carolina, which threatened to close or lease their entire park systems if desegregation was demanded. These states continued to operate their park systems on a segregated basis, interpreting the ruling in the same manner as *Brown*, that desegregation of parks, like schools, could commence “with all deliberate speed.” Citing public safety concerns about race mixing, many delayed compliance for as long as they could. In 1963, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Watson v. Memphis* that states and municipalities could no



Above: Picnicking at Booker T. Washington State Park, 1950. Courtesy Tennessee State Library and Archives. Below: Children at the Cherokee State Park entrance in the 1950s. Courtesy Kentucky Department of Parks.



longer delay the desegregation of public parks, the South Carolina legislature closed its entire state park system to all visitors. The court ruling and subsequent passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act finally forced states to desegregate their parks. Most did so without fanfare, fearing violence in the parks—a fear that proved to be unjustified. South Carolina reopened its parks on a desegregated basis in 1964, although it maintained bans on swimming and cabin use until 1966, when the legislature approved opening the facilities to all.

The end of Jim Crow marked the beginning of a long silence regarding the history of the South's state

parks. Only a few of the once-segregated facilities have acknowledged this history, and those mostly in small ways, with interpretive markers, visitor center displays, and brochures. The most significant acknowledgments are in the visitor center at Jones Lake State Park in North Carolina and in restoration projects at Kentucky's former Cherokee State Park (now part of Kenlake State Park), both constructed exclusively for African Americans. Of the dual-use parks, only Lake Murray State Park in Oklahoma interprets its segregated history, having restored the buildings in Camp No. 3, originally constructed for African American use in 1939, along with other New Deal-era structures in the park. In similar state parks around the South, the former "Negro areas" have simply been incorporated into the larger park, their separate entrance roads and smaller spaces remaining as hints of their Jim Crow origins. In time, additional parks may choose to interpret this past and move forward in the ongoing struggle for racial justice.

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