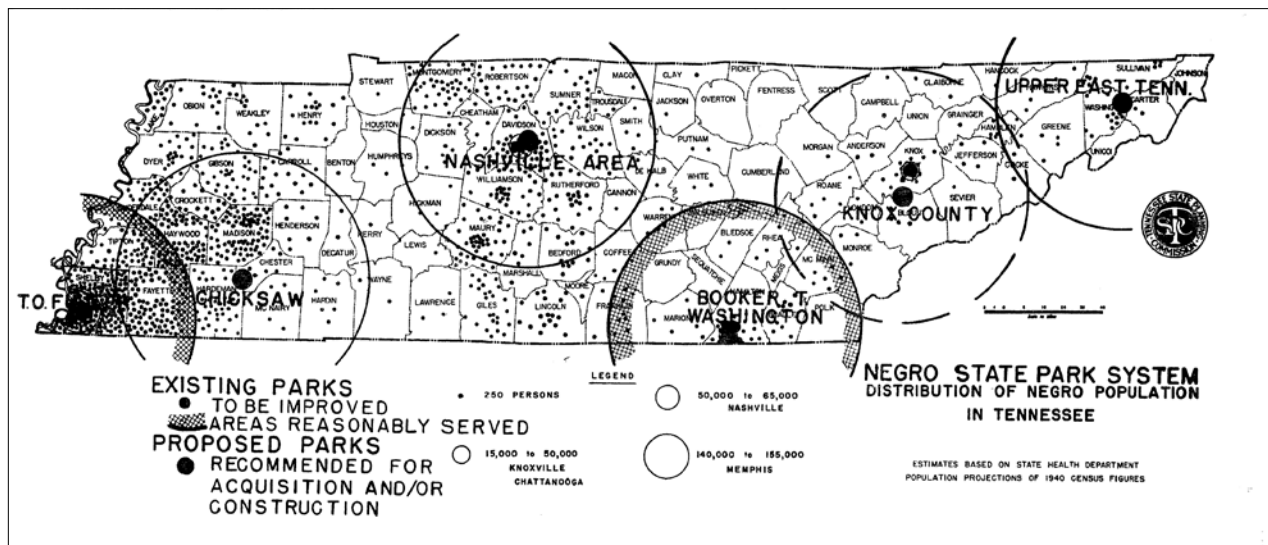
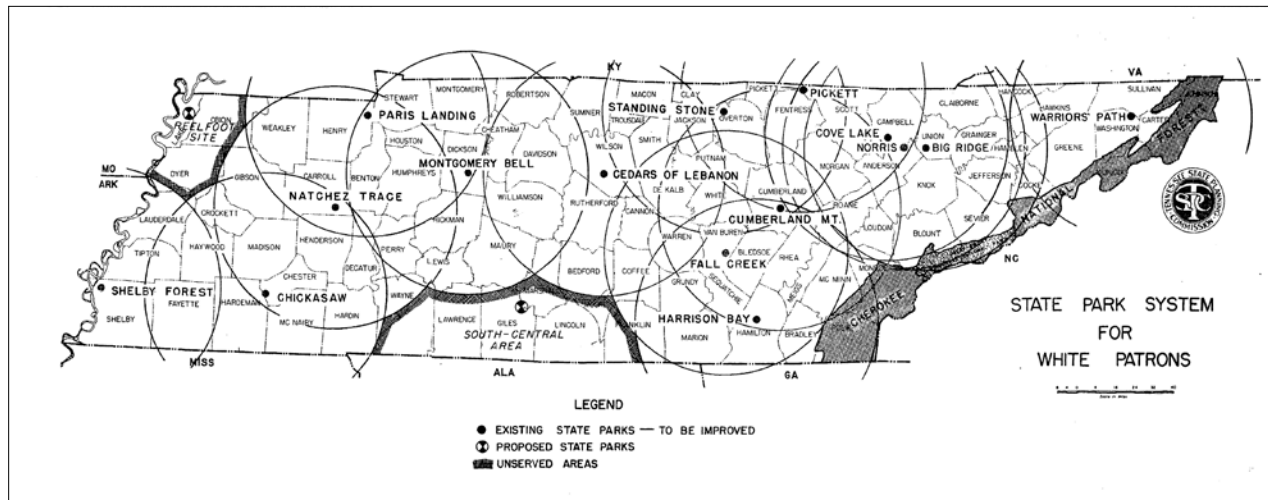




# LANDSCAPES OF EXCLUSION

STATE PARKS AND JIM CROW  
IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

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The Tennessee Division of State Parks' 1952 plan for expanding its "white" and "Negro" park systems. Courtesy Tennessee State Library and Archives.

by the Tennessee Division of State Parks in 1952, for example, presented separate "white" and "Negro" park systems. The "white system" illustrates that the state had largely succeeded in providing a park within fifty miles of all white residents. In contrast, the "Negro system" included only T. O. Fuller State Park in Memphis and Booker T. Washington State

Park near Chattanooga. Moreover, the maps show that planners envisioned African American access remaining unequal, foreseeing just three additional "Negro" facilities. (None were constructed prior to the desegregation of Tennessee's state parks in 1962.) As the historian Robert R. Weyeneth observed, "As public policy, duplication represented a feeble nod in

the direction of providing 'separate but equal' facilities that were emphatically separate and never equal."<sup>18</sup> Across the South, white visitors had exclusive access to a broader array of state parks, including choices near home, and to the best scenery, larger land areas through which to roam, the most interesting and special historical artifacts, and the best-developed recreational facilities and accommodations.

The states' limited attempts to provide space for African Americans took two forms: a "Negro area" either as part of an original "dual-use" design or added to an already existing state park that accommodated whites, or a separate park site, often in proximity to a park for whites. During the decades of segregated state parks from the 1930s through the early 1960s, half of the forty sites that were ultimately made accessible to African Americans consisted of entirely separate parks; the other

half were the dual-use type. Both types commonly occupied a relatively small fraction of land area, never included the highest-quality locations, and typically offered relatively rudimentary physical facilities. Their construction and maintenance were often characterized by delay and neglect, and a significant number of envisioned facilities never went beyond the planning stage, stalled by problems with funding or with locating sites that would not attract protest from local white residents.

Among the dual-use parks, the African American sections were nearly always much smaller than the main, white areas and were normally provided with day-use facilities only. To maintain racial separation, these areas typically had separate access roads and were set apart from the rest of the park by both distance and landscape features that formed buffers between the Black and white sections. The most common buffers were tracts of forest and expanses of water, such as lakes or ponds.



Joe Wheeler State Park Negro Area, near Rogersville, Alabama, 1953. Photo by C. E. McCord. Courtesy National Archives, Morrow, Georgia.

cally—by the time the United States entered World War II in 1941, about 150 had been constructed. In contrast, in 1941 only nine state parks in just five southern states permitted segregated African American access. Additionally, the Park Service had constructed segregated group camps for African American youth in only four southern RDAs between 1938 and 1940, although such facilities were originally envisioned in ten of the sites.

Of the fifteen southern states, African American access to state parks during the New Deal was limited to Arkansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The organized group camps in the RDAs were located in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia, although only one of these—the segregated camp at Crabtree Creek RDA near Raleigh—would eventually become a state park facility for African Americans.<sup>13</sup> Before the end of the New Deal, the Park Service attempted to foster further consideration in the South. The congressionally mandated Park, Parkway, and Recreational-Area Studies, carried out by state planning commissions in collaboration with the Park Service, highlighted the need for additional state parks that allowed African American access. But the Park Service and the states took little action on these proposals as World War II approached and New Deal park funding dried up.

The successful provision for African Americans amid the general park construction boom in the region was limited by contradictory Park Service policies. On the one hand, the agency

articulated an official policy of nondiscrimination and had worked in the South with all apparent sincerity to construct state park and RDA sites for African Americans. Park Service concern about the issue is evident in Herbert Evison's response to a 1940 inquiry on the topic: "I should like to assure you that the National Park Service is tremendously interested in the problem of providing reasonably adequate facilities for Negro recreation, as evidenced by many developments of the past three or four years throughout the South."<sup>14</sup> But the potential for success was undermined by the agency's policy of accommodating what it called "local custom" regarding race and thereby avoiding confrontations with white expectations of both racial segregation and inequality. The Park Service typically yielded to local white protests against site proposals for African American facilities, which significantly hindered planning and construction even of projects on federal lands. The expansion of African American facilities was also thwarted by the insistence at the agency's highest level that planners provide evidence that they would be used sufficiently to justify the expense of construction.<sup>15</sup>

Given these constraints, Evison's reference to "many developments" was a clear overstatement. Moreover, his use of the phrase "reasonably adequate" suggests that neither the federal nor the state agencies had envisioned full recreational equality. Adherence to "separate but equal" ought to have meant the duplication of facilities for Black and white at each state park site, but no federal or state park official had advocated for this standard. Playing by the South's rules, the Park Service settled for Af-



Fig. 2.2. An African American scouting group at Camp Whispering Pines in the Crabtree Creek Recreational Demonstration Area, 1943. Courtesy State Archives of North Carolina.

frican American facilities that were far fewer in number, smaller in size, and limited in amenities relative to parks for whites.

Nonetheless, although outcomes fell far short of Park Service goals, the New Deal effort initiated important changes in southern approaches to race and recreation. The work of the Park Service, encouraged by the pressure and support of African American interest groups, planted the seed of consideration in the region's state park agencies. With changing social expectations and demands, state offi-

cially were subsequently more inclined to act on the acknowledgment that African Americans needed and deserved access to parks. Such effort toward provision would vary by state, often considerably, yet the concern would become part of the states' planning considerations after federal financial support ended with World War II. (Fig. 2.2)

The conflicting policies of the Park Service reflected a wider federal ambivalence regarding



Fig. 2.8. Jones Lake State Park in 1940. Courtesy State Archives of North Carolina.

the state using “private cars, taxis, trucks, and trailers equipped with church pews. Groups of several hundred were common.” Success was credited in part to the hiring of African American staff, and attendance at the park grew in the next two years before the war, from 25,000 in 1940 to 38,000 in 1941.<sup>107</sup>

The creation of the park was hailed in the Black press as a sign of progress. Claiming (incorrectly) that the site was the “first State park for Negroes in the South,” Norfolk’s *Jour-*

*nal and Guide* announced that it had twelve spacious buildings, as well as “picnic booths with rustic tables and seats, a boat house, concession stand, rest rooms for both men and women, bath houses and a board walk leading from the bath house to the pier.” Citing its electrification, modern plumbing, ample parking, beautiful beach, and well-stocked lake, the paper proclaimed the site as “superior to any in the State for members of the race.” The article concluded with praise for the agencies that

made the park available: “The Jones Lake Recreational Area is indeed a demonstration of the fact that North Carolina thinks of the welfare of all of its citizens, physically, as well as intellectually and spiritually.”<sup>108</sup> (Fig. 2.9)

Despite the popularity and success of Jones Lake, inequality among the parks remained evident. White-only Singleterry Lake State Park included a hundred-person camping area in its first season, while Jones Lake was restricted to day-use facilities including its beach, bathhouse, bathing pier, picnic shelters, and boats.

Furthermore, by the following year, the North Carolina system encompassed six state parks for whites but only the one park for African Americans. The Park Service would soon add the federally controlled Crabtree Creek RDA, near Raleigh, which included an organized group camp for African Americans in its Reedy Creek section.<sup>109</sup>

The camp in the Crabtree Creek RDA for African Americans was called Camp Whispering Pines and was touted as existing “for the health, recreation, enjoyment, education and



Fig. 2.9. Swimming at Jones Lake State Park, 1940. Courtesy State Archives of North Carolina.



“slightly larger”). New construction also included bathhouses, picnic shelters, and toilet facilities. Remarking on the segregated arrangement, and probably providing reassurance to anxious whites, the *News & Observer* noted the large buffer zone that separated the parks: “The two areas will be better than a mile apart at the Crabtree dividing lines.”<sup>112</sup> (Figs. 2.12, 2.13)

Fig 2.12. (left) Girls picnicking in Reedy Creek State Park, 1964. Photo by Charles Clark. Courtesy State Archives of North Carolina.

Fig 2.13. (below) Playing horseshoes at Reedy Creek State Park, n.d. Courtesy North Carolina Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC at Chapel Hill.



In 1952 the *Rocky Mount Sunday Telegram* reflected on North Carolina’s creation of the two exclusive state parks for African Americans. During a year of mounting legal challenges to park segregation, the paper declared that their existence was evidence “of the State’s progressiveness by the vast majority of North Carolinians.”<sup>113</sup> By that time, however, the true progressive stance, adopted by African Americans and supporters nationwide, was to reject the idea of segregated facilities, demanding instead the desegregation of all institutions.

### Parks in Tennessee

Tennessee’s state park planning got under way in 1935 with the creation of its State Planning Commission, and reorganization in 1937 resulted in the Division of State Parks, housed in the Department of Conservation. The division would develop the sites planned by the planning commission, which during the New Deal worked with a range of federal agencies including the Park Service, CCC, WPA, USDA, and TVA.<sup>114</sup> Remarkably, two of Tennessee’s first four state parks—T. O. Fuller in Memphis and Booker T. Washington near Chattanooga—were reserved for African American use. After the auspicious start, however, the state was unable to develop any additional state parks for African Americans despite a search for sites that continued through the 1950s. This failure was largely attributed to the opposition voiced by local white residents to proposed sites. As one observer noted, “fear of white reaction seemed

to be prominent in all considerations for Negro parks.”<sup>115</sup> Even the two existing African American parks were burdened by delays.

Booker T. Washington appears to have been a state park in name only until most of its facilities were completed in 1950. Twelve years earlier, it was sited on TVA land along Chickamauga Lake and development was expected to commence in the spring of 1939.<sup>116</sup> The Chattanooga area had a relatively large African American population, which used existing municipal parks frequently but for whom few such sites were available.<sup>117</sup> County planners envisioned cabin camping outside the city for African Americans, who lacked “a really open space, away from the city in healthful surroundings.”<sup>118</sup> These officials also sought such accommodation to benefit “Negro tourists [who] often slept in their cars because there were no hotels or courts in Chattanooga to accommodate them.”<sup>119</sup>

The park master plan displays a broad array of proposed facilities on the largely wooded site, including a recreation lodge, picnic facilities, swimming and boating, ball fields, and tennis courts. A group camp was also recommended with a lodge for dining and recreation, shower facilities, and cabins, all of which would be accessed by a road network that curved its way around the park.<sup>120</sup> Despite the elaborate plans, a variety of aesthetic and functional problems made the park less desirable among Chattanooga-area African Americans than planners had hoped. As Nancy L. Grant notes, “The initial complaint regarding Booker T. Washington Park involved its proximity to an industrial site, which diminished its esthetic value and hampered the park’s development.

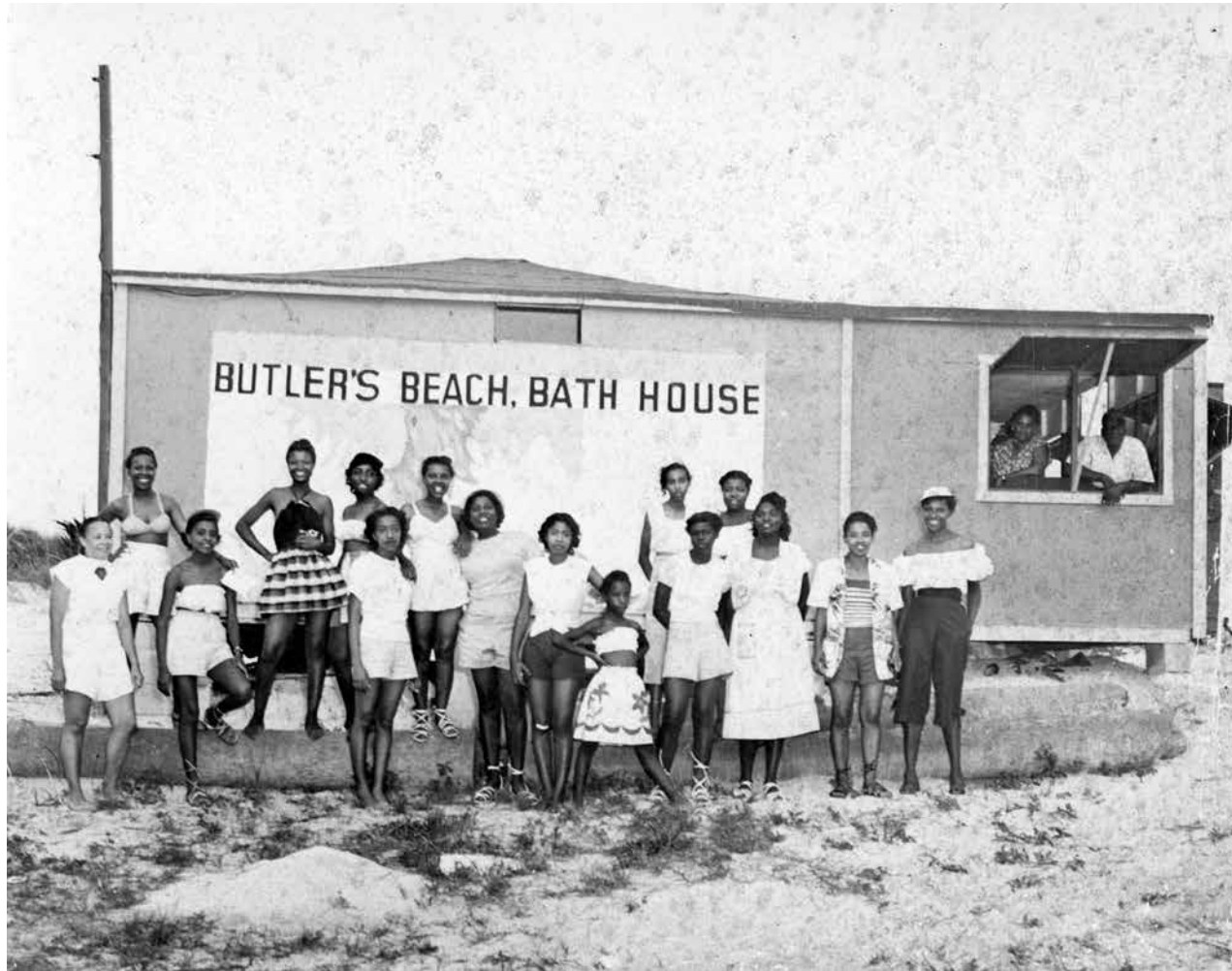


Fig. 4.2. A group photo at the bathhouse on Butler Beach in the 1950s, prior to the site's development as a state park. Courtesy State Archives of Florida.

being pursued vigorously: "We felt, with due reason, that the negro project was in the Tally [Tallahassee] office discard. However, promise was extracted to rush work. Please keep the heat under them so that this promise is fulfilled by Labor Day. . . . With a good will, such simple construction can be finished by the above date."<sup>25</sup> In addition to board members, local advocates also pressed for the park's completion. Several months before the

park opened, Martin Williams, president of Jacksonville Beach Chamber of Commerce, wrote to the Board of Parks: "The increasing number of requests we are now receiving from the colored personnel of the Armed Forces in training in the Southeast add additional pressure to the long felt need."<sup>26</sup>

The agency made a concerted effort in the design and construction process to demonstrate that the facilities for Black and white

were virtually identical. Of the park's 1,651.12 acres, the white recreation facilities occupied an area of 5.74 acres while those in the African American section included 4.59 acres.<sup>27</sup> Planners noted that the recreation facilities provided were the same in both areas, while the local media highlighted this emphasis on equal though separate facilities. (Fig. 4.3) On September 1, 1951, just before opening day, the *Florida Times-Union* published a photograph of the park with a caption explaining that "the picture shows structures at the white section—at the northern end of the island. Those for the negro area on the southern end of the island are identical with those

shown." The paper reported that in each area, "the park board has drilled a 535-foot well at each center, providing a good artesian flow; covered the sand with pine tree bark, placed three wooden walks toward the beach, with shower heads at the end of each, and erected what will for [the] time being answer the purpose of dressing rooms, picnic areas with tables, benches and fireplaces, concession stands and toilet facilities. . . . An additional facility planned is a play area for each center, to include swings, seesaws, etc., for use of children."<sup>28</sup> After a year of operation, Florida Park Service acting director Walter Coldwell reported that the "use of the two beaches, one

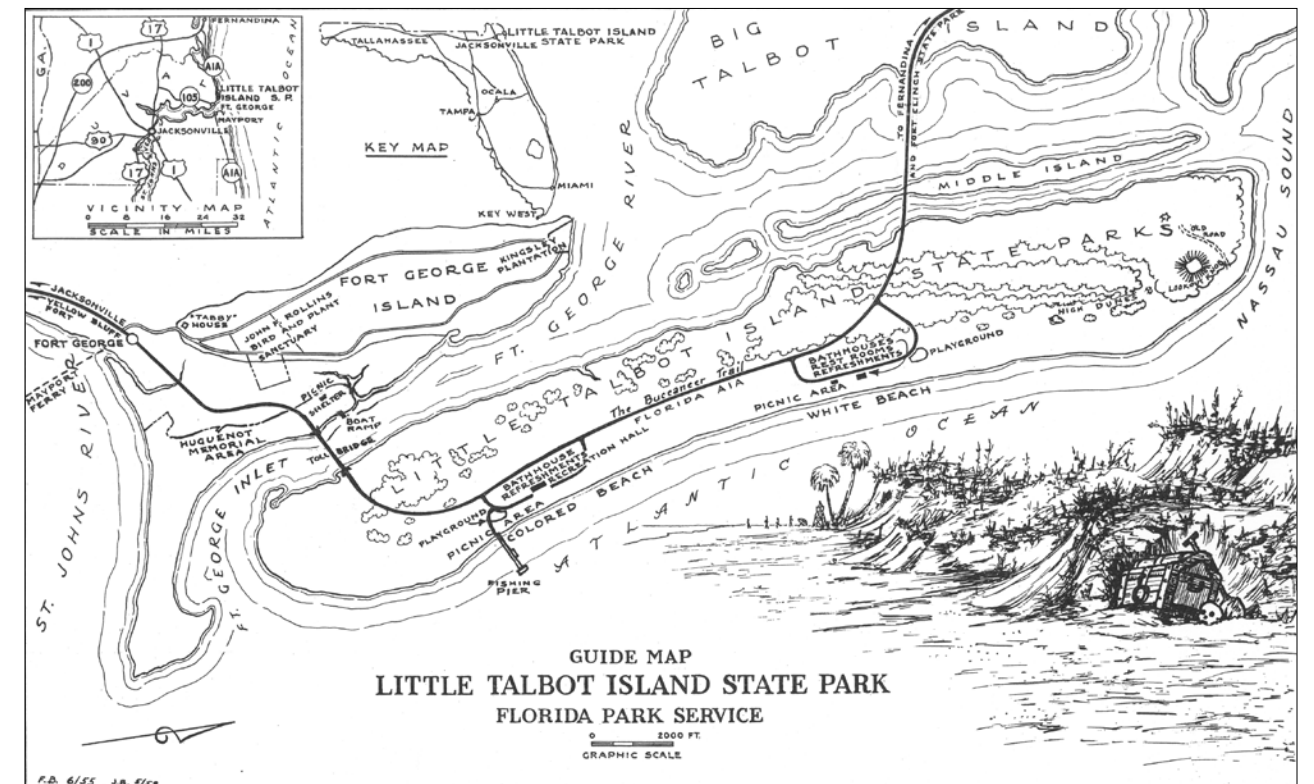


Fig. 4.3. Map of Little Talbot Island State Park (1959), indicating separate white and "colored" beaches. Courtesy Jacksonville Historical Society.