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CALIFORNIA WASH: A MEMORIAL, 1996

This site-specific public art project by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison recognized only a portion of the layered history of this Santa Monica location at Pico Boulevard and the oceanfront. The artwork reflects the path waters took to reach the sea before the developing city replaced the natural washes with storm drains.

The narrative artwork and a memorial address the vanishing ecology of the area. This site is a termination point, an 18,000 square foot section of the Pico-Kenter storm drain outflow cover. Harrison and Harrison designed their environmental landscape art to reflect the visual and formal structure of a California coastal wash. A combination ramp and stairway takes a serpentine path through a planted landscape that echoes the original wash ecologies from Mandeville Canyon to the beach.

Harrison and Harrison confront the concrete public works conditions, and the effects humans have on the bay environment with a successful aesthetic solution.

What their environmental landscape art does not discuss are the layers of human, social beach use of the site in the history of Santa Monica and the Los Angeles metropolis.

The beach frontage has gone through many transformations from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. Increased development has added various layers of built structure density. Effort to halt beach erosion have changed where the actual beach and mean tide line are located on the ocean front.

By the time the incorporated City of Santa Monica was founded in 1886, its beaches and canyons had been popular with people in the region and long-distance visitors from the east since the 1850s. Summer campers stayed in tents in the earlier days. By the 1870s and 1880s, modest and more luxurious hotels emerged as places popular with visitors who had the financial resources and white ancestry to be accommodated at these facilities.

As bathhouses became all the rage, an article in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 9, 1886, noted "the value of hot saltwater baths as cures for ills from 'biliousness' to rheumatism" was touted. Rather than swim in the ocean, the Victorians most often preferred their dips in huge, heated saltwater plunges (what we call a swimming pool today). In 1887, the Crystal Plunge was built at the end of Front Street, what we currently know as Pico Boulevard, where the Hotel Casa del Mar now stands.



As the twentieth century dawned, the Bay City was fully developed as a beach resort, with the Santa Monica Electric and Power Company providing power to homes and businesses. Tent houses on wood platforms and simple, wood structures used by visitors dotted the beach around the Crystal Plunge in the Ocean Park District of Santa Monica into the decades before the beach club era began in the 1920s.

In 1905, a storm damaged the Crystal Plunge beyond repair. An early version of the storm drain outflow was already built by the time the plunge was abandoned in 1908. In these years the oceanfront area around Pico Boulevard south to Bicknell was emerging as a gathering place where African Americans from Santa Monica and all over the Los Angeles environs came to enjoy the beach, sun and surf. This seaside retreat was located not far down the hill from Phillips Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, the first African American church established in Santa Monica in 1905, and the earliest African American community settlement in the vicinity of 4th and Bay Streets.

Although this site was enjoyed by African Americans, there were Anglo American homeowners and business people of the Bay cities who tried unsuccessfully to "purge" them from their enjoyment of this stretch of the beach. The Santa Monica Bay Protective League blocked the development effort of a black investment group, the Ocean Frontage Syndicate, which had plans to build a "first-class resort with beach access" where Shuttlers Hotel is currently located near Pico Boulevard.

By the early 1920s, when exclusive beach clubs were allowed to rise near the foot of Pico Boulevard, the section of the beachfront that is remembered today as the principal gathering place for African American beachgoers was compressed to the portion between Bay and Bicknell Streets, a quarter of a mile south of Pico Boulevard. The lavish Casa del Mar Club (today the Hotel Casa del Mar) opened in 1924 on the site of the former Ocean Park Crystal Plunge. It was the first of three large private clubs and the most successful that would open between Pico Boulevard and the Santa Monica Pier to the north.

North of the Casa del Mar, the Edgewater Club was built in 1925. Later, in the 1930s, the Edgewater was known as the Waverly Beach Club and as the Ambassador Club in the 1940s. (Today a new building at the site houses Shuttlers Hotel on the Beach.) A string of lavish, exclusive and highly advertised beach clubs (and some private residences), would be constructed beginning in 1922; by the 1930s they stretched all the way from Pico Boulevard to Santa Monica Canyon.

While at the public areas of the beach all classes more or less mingled together, at the beach clubs the members stayed within their own private, fenced-in beaches. Restrictions and open discrimination against African Americans, Mexicans, Asians, and Jews was imposed at most of these private clubs. Pushed southward by the exclusive clubs, the portion of the public beach accessible for African American groups was reduced.

Today, the beach area around Pico Boulevard remains attractive for people from all walks of life. Older development of the early twentieth century has given way to new buildings overlooking the sea. The only original beach structure standing is the Hotel Casa del Mar, the former club. The human and environmental conditions continue to evolve at this beautiful seaside place memorialized by the "California Wash" artwork.

Sources: "California Wash, 1996, the Harrison Studio, From the Internet: http://theharrisonstudio.net/?page_id=301 ■ Jefferson, Alison Rose. "African American Leisure Space In Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known as the "Inkwell." *Southern California Quarterly*, 91/2 (Summer 2009): 155-189 ■ Marquez, Ernest, *Santa Monica Beach: A Collector's Pictorial History*, Santa Monica, CA: Angel City Press, (2004).