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NICK GABALDON (1927-1951): A SoCAL SURFING PIONEER

Surfing aficionados credit Nick Gabaldón as California's first documented surfer of African American and Mexican American descent. A skilled recreational surfer, his legacy has inspired many, including surfers of color, to consider him as a role model. Born Nicolas Rolando "Nick" Gabaldón, Jr. in California to parents, Cecilia and Nicolas Gabaldón Sr., he grew up in Santa Monica.

Graduating from Santa Monica High in 1945, Gabaldón was one of the few African American students matriculating at the school during this era. He served in the United States Navy from 1945–1946. Upon returning home, Gabaldón enrolled in Santa Monica College and emerged as an honor student and a writer, worked at various odd jobs and resumed surfing.

As a teenager, Gabaldón began surfing in the Pacific Ocean at the Bay Street Beach. White Americans referencing the skin color of the beachgoers who visited the area derogatorily called this beach, "the Inkwel." Gabaldón and other African Americans in Southern California, however, transformed the hateful moniker into a badge of pride. Though some refused to use this name for site in the past or the present.

A handsome, athletic and well-liked young man, Gabaldón taught himself to surf using the 13-foot rescue surfboard of a White lifeguard he befriended at the Bay Street Beach in the World War II years. He honed and challenged his surfing skills 12 miles north at the famed, Malibu Surfrider Beach; sometimes paddling from Santa Monica's Bay Street Beach to get there. Before the "Gidget" novels and movies, which popularized surfing, legendary surfers such as Bob Simmons, Joe Quigg, and Matt Kivlin respected Gabaldón for his surfing ability. Gabaldón was wave riding in southern California when the sport and beach culture were emerging to influence fashion, music, and movies.

Although he experienced a common bond in the water among the surfing community, prejudice was not far away on land or in the ocean. Gabaldón, for example, was called derogatory names by some White beachgoers but rarely by fellow surfers. Besides the bigotry reflected in limited beach access, Gabaldón and other early Black surfers had to deal with the challenge of purchasing the necessary equipment and having access to transportation that brought them to the best surfing locations. Nonetheless Gabaldón exhibited the courage and dedication to be a participant in this particular sport heretofore associated mainly with White southern Californians and the people of the South Pacific.

Gabaldón died in a surfing accident at the Malibu Pier in 1951 at 24. Although little is known about the details of his life, his passion, athleticism, discipline, love and respect for the ocean live on as the quintessential qualities of the California surfer. His legacy offers an empowering story of the pursuit of freedom and self-fulfillment. Gabaldón was an African American pioneer in America's "frontier of leisure," challenging racial hierarchies when he surfed, paddled and hung out at the beach public space at the core of the California's formative, mid-twentieth century identity.

In 2008, the City of Santa Monica officially recognized surfer Nick Gabaldón and the Bay Street Beach with a landmark monument at Bay Street and Oceanfront Walk. More interest has developed in the reclamation and recognition of Gabaldón and others like him who shared the beach at this site who pursued their California dreams and the use of Santa Monica beach public space. Two documentary films debuted, “White Wash” (2011) by Ted Woods and “12 Miles North: The Nick Gabaldón Story” (2012) by Richard Yelland and Nike. Both films examine Black surfers, but through different lens and distinctive directions, and discuss the historical Bay Street Beach site. On June 26, 2019 more acknowledgement of the Bay Street Beach site’s national, state and local significances and Gabaldón were recognized with the Bay Street Beach Historic District being listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



From L to R: Ricky Grigg, unknown, Vicki Williams and Nick Gabaldón enjoying Malibu. Photography courtesy of Vicki Williams by Joe Quigg, circa 1950.

In further recognition of his influence on many people, Rick Blocker, a surfer and advocate for diversity and inclusion in the sport, in 2013 commissioned a portrait painting of Gabaldón by Los Angeles artist Richard Wyatt. The painting is Wyatt’s interpretation of what Nick Gabaldón looked like, not a direct replication of any of the few photographs that are known to exist of him. Beginning in 2012 the Black Surfers Collective has joined other groups including, Heal the Bay, Surf Academy and the Santa Monica Conservancy for a beach celebration honoring those who have come before us on Nick Gabaldón Day, in June.

All of these public process activities create an identified sense of place and inclusive social history in the landscape, allowing for a more culturally inclusive, shared civic identity, and history encompassing public process and memory. Further they help educate a broader array of citizens about their collective California dreams, and the nation’s layered cultural, natural and historical heritage.

*--This text was written by Alison Rose Jefferson, M.H.C. | Ph.D. who has been a consultant on the Nick Gabaldón Day since 2013. A historian and heritage conservation consultant, she is the author of *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era* (University of Nebraska Press). She is a featured historian in several documentary films about the African American experience, including “12 Miles North: The Nick Gabaldón Story.” Learn more about Jefferson’s work at her website: www.alisonrosejefferson.com. This article incorporates an encyclopedia entry about Nick Gabaldón co-written by Jefferson and Rick Blocker published at www.BlackPast.org, an online reference guide to African American history. Revised April 2024*