

A Brief History of the Struggle for Beach Integration in Sarasota

Content Warning: This document contains quotations from period sources that use racist language.

In the 1940s and 50s, African Americans in Sarasota lived under official and unofficial Jim Crow rules that severely restricted their access to all aspects of life in their hometown. Across the country and particularly in the South, Jim Crow referred to a wide spectrum of oppressive, racist laws and unwritten rules designed to enforce racial injustice and white supremacy.

For many decades Sarasota was, like so many predominantly white communities in the United States, a Sundown Town. Any African American outside the Sarasota neighborhoods of Newtown and Overtown after dark was subject to harassment, police incarceration, and violence. Just traveling to certain wealthier areas like Longboat Key at any time of the day or night could require work permits or permission from white employers. Many businesses and public facilities such as stores, restaurants, and recreation areas like beaches were entirely off-limits to African Americans under Jim Crow oppression.

Just like today, in the 1940s and 50s Sarasota's beaches were a popular tourist attraction, regarded as some of the best beaches in the world. Although African Americans paid taxes to support public facilities just like everyone else, the Black community was forced to swim in dangerous and distant locations or risk harassment and arrest if they ventured onto whites only beaches.

Anthony "Tony" Major as quoted in *Newtown Alive*, by Rosalyn Howard and Vickie Oldham, recalls, "We could not go to Lido Beach. We could not go to Longboat Key. To go to the beach we either had to go to Venice or all the way up to the Sunshine Skyway and swim. I guess they thought we [were] going to make the sand black, or something. 'Cause Lido had the whitest sand in the world. It was rated as one of the top beaches with the whitest sand in the world. But we couldn't swim there."

Over the years, Sarasota city and county officials promised "separate but equal" accommodations, including segregated beaches, but through continued inaction, they refused to keep those already discriminatory promises.

In 1949 Mary Emma Jones, a prominent Newtown resident and community organizer, began calling on the city government to honor its obligations and provide a beach for African Americans. In 1951 she appeared in person before the Sarasota City Commission, a brave act and the first time a woman of color had directly addressed the all-male, all-white government body.

Although money was appropriated in 1953 to create a segregated beach for use by African Americans, the local government failed to secure any actual beach, largely because of tremendous resistance from white residents in all of the proposed locations.





In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the landmark *Brown v Board of Education* decision that "separate but equal" public services were unconstitutional. This had a profound effect on schools in the United States, but the ruling also applied to any tax supported public facilities, including beaches.

In 1952, Newtown resident Neil Humphrey had helped start the first Sarasota branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Walter Gilbert, who would become Sarasota's NAACP president in the early 1980s, remembers Neil Humphrey from this time: "Mr. Humphrey was probably 5'5" might've weighed 155 lbs., really soft spoken. If he raised his voice you could hardly hear him. I thought he was a meek little man. But in these NAACP meetings he was fire and brimstone. He was telling us how we'd go down there, what we'd say, how we were to act. He wasn't having no troubles. I'm looking at all the other people saying "yes sir, Mr. Humphrey." It changed my perspective. His persona changed right in my face. I wanted to be like this guy, not only business-wise, I wanted to be a leader like him."

In 1955, Neil Humphrey petitioned the local government to follow through on its promises to provide beach access to African Americans. The city

commissioners suggested building a pool in Newtown instead of a beach and no more progress was made. In September, Humphrey and the NAACP began to organize a large-scale protest against Sarasota's racist, segregationist beach restrictions.

On Sunday, October 2, 1955 around 100 African Americans from Newtown caravanned to Lido Beach and held a wade-in. As detailed in *Newtown Alive*, by Rosalyn Howard and Vickie Oldham, "It was NAACP president Neil Humphrey, Sr. who organized the caravans. Humphrey, a successful Newtown businessman, possessed the necessary financial independence to challenge the establishment. Shortly after the fight for the integration of the beaches came about... Mr. John Henry Rivers... moved his family from Mobile, Alabama to Sarasota looking for better opportunities."

John Rivers, who would succeed Humphrey as head of the Sarasota NAACP recalled that first caravan to Lido Beach, "We had some problems. The reporters came, and they identified the cars, took pictures of the cars... the tag number and all of that stuff. And from the tag numbers, the system could pick up the names of the people. And some of the people were fired just because they went to the beach."

In response to the wade-in on Lido Beach, local newspapers and many city leaders called for government action to create a beach for African Americans, forming commissions and exploring possible locations. But as before, nothing concrete happened.

The NAACP and the Newtown community wade-ins continued as a regular weekly protest. Parents brought their sometimes reluctant children, teaching them lasting lessons on the importance of resilience in the face of discrimination. Rivers recalls “And then the next day, they cancelled out everything, closed the beach on us. And, at that time...I was leading the group. So, we... left Lido...headed back into town on the second day that we were there. Then, I decided, I said... ‘Let’s go back.’ And we turned around and went back. And, sure enough, the beach was full of people. And the policemen came back, and say, ‘Oh, the beach is closing again.’ I said, ‘No, no, you go on to town. If we need you, we will call you. But other than that, we don’t need you.’”

The NAACP made it clear that “separate but equal” was unacceptable and their stated goal was full integration of all of the county’s beaches. The wade-ins continued into the following years in the face of continuous and often vehement opposition. The white community organized in response, with aggressive refusal to let African Americans anywhere near “their” beaches. Longboat Key began to incorporate into a city, Siesta Key residents took out an ad in the paper and held hours long community meetings on how to keep the beaches whites-only.

The city’s white leadership and residents refused to consider integration and took more and more drastic measures to keep African Americans away from the beaches that they had every right to use. Sarasota passed ordinances allowing law enforcement wide discretion to shut down beaches when African American protestors arrived and then re-open them once the protestors left.

Emergency City Ordinance 913, September 4, 1956, stated in clear and racist language: “Whereas members of the negroid race have recently adopted the practice of visiting public gulf bathing beaches within the City of Sarasota heretofore used exclusively by members of the Caucasian race in conformity with long established custom

and usage...” It’s worth noting that even this city government document only references “established custom and usage” rather than any written law, since such laws had been deemed unconstitutional in 1954.

The ordinance went on to grant police new powers to suppress peaceful protesters: “Whenever members of each of two or more different races shall, at the same time, enter or be upon any public gulf bathing beach within the corporate limits of the City of Sarasota, it shall be the duty of the Chief of Police or other officer or official then in charge of the police forces of the City of Sarasota and he is hereby authorized and directed, by and with the assistance of such police forces, forthwith to clear the area involved of all members of all races present.”



The city commission was by no means alone in its desperation to keep African Americans off Florida beaches. In 1956 county and state lawmakers across the state took the drastic measure of trying to actually sell the public beaches to private companies that wouldn’t be bound by the Supreme Court’s ruling. The governor vetoed the privatization law, but it is emblematic of the racist fear of integration that ruled in city government that the selling of beaches had wide support among public officials in Sarasota.

One promise the city government did keep was building a pool in Newtown for African Americans. While the pool was being built the protests were paused, but the day the pool opened in November, 1957, residents organized another caravan and wade in, refusing to accept racist and unconstitutional restrictions on their freedom. Time and again, the NAACP made it clear that full and unqualified desegregation was the only acceptable outcome.

Into the 1960s, Sarasota's beaches remained segregated and the protests continued. In 1961 the federal government threatened to withhold funding to fight beach erosion if Sarasota's beaches remained segregated, which had some effect on loosening resistance to integration. In 1964 the landmark Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in schools and public facilities as well as hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and all other public accommodations, and that certainly had an impact, along with the continuous struggle across the country for civil rights throughout the 1960s.

It's impossible to point to a specific date when Sarasota's beaches became fully integrated. There was no city ordinance, no official announcement, no article in the paper. It's fair to say that from Mary Emma Jones' first letter to the city commissioners to full desegregation by the end of the 1960s, it was a twenty-year fight for equal access. In the face of blatant, often unflinching racism and official discrimination, Newtown residents continuously stood up for and demanded their rights. They would not accept anything less, and nor should anyone.

All images in this document are sourced from:
Newtown Alive, "The Integration of Sarasota Beaches"
<http://www.newtownalive.org/integration-sarasota-beaches/>



More information

NEWTOWN ALIVE WEBSITE

- Beach Integration: <http://www.newtownalive.org/integration-sarasota-beaches/>
 - VIDEO: Fredd Atkins We have a full interview. Here's a clip of him discussing beach issue. <http://www.newtownalive.org/team/fredd-atkins/>
 - VIDEO: Dr. Edward James, Discusses his grandmother Mary Emma Jones and the beach issue, library integration: <http://www.newtownalive.org/team/edward-james-ii/>
 - AUDIO: John Rivers Discusses the Fight for Social Equality and Justice in Sarasota <http://www.newtownalive.org/nwtnpod006/>
- Newtown Alive book: <http://www.newtownalive.org/get-the-book-today/>
- Podcast: <https://open.spotify.com/show/3BkSwVRUig7EkyMDpkYNu9>

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Newtown Historic District Final Report, pp 177-181. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AVKKc1fEJRTTTS3fqgY_psMf7vTePSX/view?usp=sharing
- "Wading in the Waters: The Desegregation of Sarasota's Beaches," research paper by Judy Jesiolowski https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IUY7RgFjO85zuwh_dK0gOfvbYZgZtgqb/view?usp=sharing
- "Caravans to Lido broke beach barrier Ian Cummings," Sarasota Herald-Tribune, 7/13/2014 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y3FwJVk0AacS5Ns2taCnp4ZHRn7evEbV/view?usp=sharing>
- "A Beach Too Far," Sarasota Magazine, 6/1/2005 https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ils_5rbkEu5Syq7NnQcLywl7nUie_dmS/view?usp=sharing
- Newspaper Clippings Folder <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1pV6Q4ld4k-GkORFQIGJilHXBOoJ6llk1t?usp=sharing>
- Images Folder <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Wbe19OT-54BaVDZ6juJT56UHBM5Lgvklo?usp=sharing>

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