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Advocates push nationwide movement for land return to Blacks after victory in California

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MANHATTAN BEACH, Calif. — A Black family's successful fight to reclaim a picturesque stretch of Southern California shoreline has ignited a national movement, with activists eyeing White-owned properties around the country they say rightfully belong to African Americans.

A landmark law signed by California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) on Sept. 30 provided for a seaside park in Manhattan Beach to be returned to the Bruce family, which owned the land before the city used eminent domain to seize it in 1924. The victory was hailed as a watershed moment, the first example of Black people forcing the return of property that was taken from them by one means or another, often violently, over the years.

At the same time it raised a question: Would the Bruce's Beach case be a one-off, or a tipping point in a national struggle over [Black land ownership](#)? Activists and scholars say there are other similar cases nationwide, but proving them — and getting the current property owners to cooperate — will be a different matter, forcing another chapter in the nation's racial reckoning and raising thorny questions about how to right past wrongs.

"The reason it's getting so much attention now is there's been a precedent set and that's what's giving hope to other families," said Kavon Ward, who helped lead the successful fight on behalf of the Bruce family and has co-founded a group called Where Is My Land aimed at advocating for other Black people who are trying to reclaim lost and stolen land. "This is just the beginning."



Kavon Ward visits Bruce's Beach. Ward helped lead the fight on behalf of the Bruce family and has co-founded a group called Where Is My Land to help others. (Allison Zaucha/For The Washington Post)

Ward said she has already heard from more than 100 people eager to make the case that they have a rightful claim to property now occupied by others. Her group is turning its attention to a tract of land in Cleveland now partly owned by the Cleveland Clinic that activists say rightfully belongs to former businessman Winston E. Willis. As with the Bruce case in California, advocates say, Willis was deprived not just of his property but also of decades of potential prosperity — a scenario that, repeated many times over, lies at the root of the [wealth gap](#) between Whites and African Americans.

But the Cleveland case, along with many others, may be difficult to press to a successful conclusion, experts said.

Bruce's Beach offered a clear-cut case where a family's historical claim to a property was well documented. The spot in question was once home to a thriving African American resort owned by Charles and Willa Bruce, who endured years of harassment from White neighbors — including threats and intimidation from the Ku Klux Klan — before the city of Manhattan Beach used eminent domain to oust them entirely. The Bruces were paid a pittance and told a park would be built on the site, but the property lay vacant until it was transferred to the state in 1948, and subsequently to Los Angeles County.

In recent years that history has gotten more attention, and after Ward formed the group Justice for Bruce's Beach in 2020, a county supervisor took an interest in the case, as did state officials. It still took months of advocacy to get the land back for the Bruce family, and even required a change in state law to allow L.A. County to move forward with the land transfer.

Few other cases will be so straightforward, said William A. Darity Jr., a scholar at Duke University who co-authored a book on reparations published last year.

"I just think there are thousands of these cases, and a very small percentage of them have the degree of specificity that the Bruce Beach case does where you know exactly who owned the property, how it was taken and by whom," Darity said.

The first payments will fund a housing program, but critics want direct cash payments — and fear anything short could mean trouble for reparations elsewhere. (Christopher Vazquez/The Washington Post)

Darity pointed to examples such as the [Tulsa Race Massacre](#) of 1921, where White mobs destroyed a Black business district, killing and injuring hundreds of residents and displacing many more. It would be extremely difficult to untangle how all the properties in question changed hands, Darity said. Determining how to get the current owners to return the properties or pay compensation would create even more hurdles.



Charles and Willa Bruce on the plaque at Bruce's Beach. (Allison Zaucha/The Washington Post)

Still, the developments at Bruce's Beach have given hope to Aundra Willis Carrasco, whose brother Winston is 82 and residing at an assisted-living facility in Cleveland as his sister works to publicize his case. According to Willis Carrasco, Winston Willis owned multiple thriving businesses around 105th Street and Euclid Avenue in Cleveland beginning in 1968, before being forced out through a combination of illegal and fraudulent tactics by private developers and city officials and judges who conspired with them. The world-renowned Cleveland Clinic now occupies much of that prime real estate.

"It should be surrounded by the yellow tape they use in law enforcement because 105th and Euclid is the scene of a crime," Willis Carrasco said in an interview. "They never paid him for it, and it was taken from him illegally."

A spokeswoman for the Cleveland Clinic said it had no information, while a city spokeswoman did not respond to requests for comment.

Ward said Where Is My Land was considering several possible paths for moving forward with the Willis case in Cleveland but declined to discuss them publicly at this point.

Elsewhere, too, African Americans and their advocates are pressing communities to reckon with and reconcile a history of housing policies that have disproportionately harmed Black Americans. Black people are far less likely than Whites to own land and homes and the generational wealth that goes with them, and the situation has shown little sign of improvement. Black homeownership rates are hovering at their lowest levels since the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, reaching 46.4 percent in the first quarter of this year compared to 75.8 percent of White families, according to census data.

"This is an important social movement that is challenging this nation to really, really think about how to right these historic wrongs," said Emmitt Y. Riley III, associate professor of Africana studies and political science at DePauw University. "I think this starts the conversation, because no one I think can reasonably conclude that in a country that has been organized around racial inequality, that somehow Blacks were not exploited for their property."

Riley and others questioned whether White Americans are ready to confront the issue in a serious way, even after [George Floyd's murder](#) in 2020 and the growing public awareness of the nation's history of racism in policing tactics and other policies.

In some cases, though, elected officials are responding to some degree.

In Minneapolis, lawmakers have passed the Minneapolis 2040 Plan, ambitious housing legislation that includes "Freeway Remediation," a provision that acknowledges the "disparate impact" freeway construction in the city historically has had on communities of color. The plan calls for compensating Black families and descendants affected by the razing of communities of color to build highways. Similarly, officials in Lansing, Mich., are exploring the impact of Interstate 496 on the communities razed to construct it.

Meanwhile, housing advocacy groups in some cities, including Los Angeles, Seattle and Boston, have launched mapping projects that trace the history of racial covenants in their cities. The legal language — which typically restricted selling a home to anyone who wasn't White — was used in cities across the United States to keep neighborhoods segregated.

Housing advocates are also targeting the harmful effects of redlining, the practice in which banks declined to lend in certain areas, often lower-income and minority neighborhoods. In Minneapolis, for example, homes in formerly redlined areas underperform the city's \$266,500 median assessed value by 25 percent, according to data from the Mapping Prejudice Project.

After the attention garnered by the Bruce family's experience, California set up a task force to study and recommend reparations for African Americans. The two-year process is meant to address the harms of slavery and systemic racism, according to the California governor's office.

The Bruce family, meanwhile, has chosen for now to lease its property in Manhattan Beach back to Los Angeles County, though terms have not been made public. The property is occupied by a small grassy park and a lifeguard station, and on a recent morning the scene was idyllic as surfers waded into waves of the Pacific and children played in the park. A plaque at the site includes some of the history of the Bruce family.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn said the economic harm done by seizing the land in the 1920s is practically incalculable.

Hahn pointed to Manhattan Beach's affluence today. The median price of a home in the town of 35,000 residents — where African Americans make up less than 1 percent of the population — reached a record \$2.9 million in August.

"It's not an exaggeration to say that they would have been millionaires if they had been able to hold on to their property and their successful business," Hahn said. "This was an injustice inflicted not just upon Willa and Charles Bruce, but on generations of their descendants."