At the turn of the twentieth century, white supremacy was firmly in place throughout the South. In the wake of the Populist challenge to the prevailing class and racial order, New South elites had imposed tighter spatial boundaries and harsher political constraints on African Americans. Yet in southern cities, vibrant black communities emerged behind the walls that confined them. Blacks created churches and mutual aid associations, formed civic organizations, held commemoration ceremonies, and conducted a rich, informal social life, sustaining group solidarity in the face of adversity. The emergence of a black middle class was profoundly threatening to whites. In Wilmington, North Carolina, they responded with a devastating riot and political rout in 1898. Atlanta was scarred by a race riot in 1905. Almost any show of resistance was met with violence, while the scourge of lynching continued unabated. Indeed, Florida had one of the highest rates of lynching of any state in the period 1890–1930. Even in the 1980s, black residents were reluctant to recall the 1934 lynching of Claude Neal for historian James McGovern. Yet the limits imposed on black advancement varied from place to place. In some cities, particular local circumstances opened small windows of interracial negotiation and cooperation.\(^1\)
Miami, an “instant city” in the nation’s southernmost state, was largely built by the labor of African Americans. Low-paid black laborers worked in construction, on the railroads, and in agriculture, while black women served in the households of whites. Several black neighborhoods grew up, including Colored Town, located just north of downtown Miami. Soon after the city was established in 1896, black business owners and professionals established themselves. By 1905 a Colored Board of Trade had formed. The first black lawyer, R. E. Toomey, went into practice in 1913. Dana A. Dorsey, a black carpenter who came from Georgia in 1897, profited from the building boom and became one of the wealthiest men in Dade County. In 1913, Geder Walker opened the Lyric Theater on 2nd Avenue, a “major center of entertainment” that offered vaudeville acts, motion picture shows, and theatrical performances. By the 1920s, an array of nightclubs and hotels had earned Colored Town the moniker “the Harlem of the South.” Although Miami’s social order was shaped by racial inequality, the configuration of race relations there was unique for a southern city. It was an unusual hybrid of well-heeled northern transplants and tourists, southern whites, and southern and Bahamian blacks.2

In recent years, historian Raymond Mohl has characterized Miami as “south of the South,” a city defined by a vastly more complex set of cultural, demographic, and economic forces than those that prevailed elsewhere in the region. Mohl and other scholars have delved into the history of New Deal housing and building projects in Miami, the complex history of labor organizing, and the conflicts between African Americans and Cubans that have shaped local politics since the 1960s. More attention needs to be focused on race relations in Miami, the ground upon which so many controversies were fought and so many compromises were forged and then forgotten.3

Miami was (and in many ways remains) a racially divided city. Some walls were physical; a boundary between white and black residential areas located just east of the Lyric Theater that opened in 1915. Others were symbolic or situational, such as the elaborate etiquette that required blacks to defer to whites they encountered on the street, prohibited even indirect physical contact between the races through the use of common textbooks or water fountains, and prevented blacks and whites from sharing recreational spaces. In fact, black Miamians were formally
excluded from most city parks until the 1960s. The legacy of the psychological distance, demeaning gestures, and legal strictures defines some residents in Miami to this day.

In 1945, when Miami’s blacks advanced the cause of civil rights by gaining access to recreational space on the oceanfront, the compromise that gave them access to Virginia Key Beach did not overtly challenge the status quo or arouse concern among whites that organized black citizens would go on from their “separate but equal” beach to demand access to all public accommodations. Whites were able to “give” blacks Virginia Key Beach because it represented little or no threat to their real estate interests and political power—or so they believed at the time. Yet the creation of waterfront park on Virginia Key had unforeseen consequences. It provided a new gathering place for the black community in a natural setting. Churches and social groups used it for entertainment, organized recreation, and everyday beachside activities. It was a distinct, defensible, and largely self-policing public space where blacks could be free of white surveillance and control. It was a place that generated solidarity and fueled later civil rights activism in South Florida.

It was a place to remember, yet in time it was largely forgotten. Only recently has it been remembered anew, as oral histories have revealed the rich community life that African Americans enjoyed there. Unusually, the effort to save the land and the memories was initiated by environmentalists who found common cause with African Americans. Until the late 1970s, the historical experience of the black community remained largely invisible to outsiders. Since then, historians have illuminated important facets of Miami’s black history. However, little attention has been paid to the city’s tradition of interracial dialogue as it intersected with the development of the urban environment, the creation of public parks, and changing patterns of land use on the waterfront.⁴

Recent portraits of other Florida cities have painted a picture of complex social and political conditions that shaped black-white relations. Nancy Hewitt has examined how women from differing racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds “vied with one another, with city officials, employers, and coworkers, and with men in their community to claim public space, fashion political agendas, and construct activist identities” in Tampa. The “boomtown character of life on the Florida frontier and the blurred boundaries between racial and ethnic communities ensured the
expansive character of women’s roles.” Similar conditions existed in Miami. White women played a powerful role in promoting Royal Palm Park in 1915. In 1999, a small group of black women was central to the recreation of Virginia Key as a public beach. Yet how gender and race relations operated earlier in Miami’s history remains a mystery. Paul Ortiz’s *Emancipation Betrayed*, which explores forms of black resistance, commemoration, and organization building in Florida between the Civil War and 1920, concludes that “African Americans in Florida . . . created the first statewide civil rights movement in U.S. history.” Irvin Winsboro’s edited collection illuminates more recent forms of black resistance to segregation and challenges the notion that in the 1950s, Florida, under the leadership of Governor LeRoy Collins, was more moderate than its southern neighbors. How does Miami fit into this evolving understanding of race relations? 

When I interviewed Bahamian immigrant and World War I veteran James Nimmo in 1984, I first realized that memories of segregation, still fresh in the minds of a dwindling group of elderly residents of African heritage, are critical pieces of evidence that help us understand power and place in Miami’s past. Capturing memories through oral history involves gathering, organizing, contextualizing, and analyzing work that has been done, and often forgotten, by others. It also involves asking new questions of elders. All too often, historical and educational institutions have promoted bland and consensus-oriented narratives or pursued a limited range of esoteric questions. At the same time, nonprofit advocacy groups and the public have lacked the research and conceptual tools to build alternative narratives that challenge the contemporary configuration of political and economic power. Multiculturalism itself has become mainstream, absorbed into corporate thinking about competition between global cities instead of enhancing neighborhood and community life. Focusing on the political culture of land use within the modern growth economy and on the constraints and possibilities of public space can shed light on black-white relations. This chapter builds on the work of others to portray the history of black Miami and the process that led to the 1945 wade-in at Baker’s Haulover beach.

How did segregated black neighborhoods in Miami evolve within and beyond the dominant white culture? Given the disgraceful social conditions they were forced to endure, when and how did blacks, who came
to Miami from diverse places, build a powerful sense of solidarity, com-
memorate their own pasts, and effectively demand their rights and ne-
gotiate with whites? How did segregation limit the freedom of African
Americans while shaping their aspirations and sense of possibility? Was
there any real coherence in the southern racial system that was imposed
or affirmed by white leaders in Miami?

Racial Segregation and Miami’s White Power Structure, 1896–1914

Miami, which preacher and promoter E. V. Blackman called the “Magic
City,” was founded in 1896 where the Miami River meets Biscayne Bay.
Most of the new residents at the time were likely unaware of the pre-
vious history of the place they called home. Near the site of a Native
American burial mound, William English established a plantation that
relied on the labor of enslaved Africans in the 1830s, even before Florida
had become a state. The enterprise failed because of the area’s isolation
during the Seminole Wars, and the entire region remained largely un-
inhabited until the 1880s. The city of Miami was incorporated in 1896
after Rockefeller partner Henry Flagler agreed to extend his Florida East
Coast Railway south from Palm Beach and build an upscale hotel.8

The memoirs of Miami’s early developers affirm the invisibility of
blacks for whites. Yet black laborers made substantial contributions
to the city’s growth. In addition, the rhetoric of, A. C. Lightbourne, a
black champion of incorporation, and the fact that black voters enabled
the city to reach the population threshold incorporation required were
essential. The disappearance of black Miamians from early histories of
the city attests to whites’ understanding of urban development as their
own accomplishment within a racialized system they benefited from
disproportionately. Whites’ conception of themselves as pioneer entre-
preneurs, aided by Flagler’s money, influence, and initiative, fit into the
values of the dominant American culture at the time.9

Soon after the railroad reached the bay, the first newspaper, the ambi-
tiously named Miami Metropolis, began reporting on the city’s growth.
The descriptions and images it published suggest the distance whites
established between themselves and blacks. Photographer J. W. Cham-
berlain made one of the first photographs of the new city. In the fore-
ground are twelve black men with wheelbarrows, picks, and axes. Behind
them stands a smaller group of relatively young, well-dressed white men, most of them from the South, who became prominent businessmen, real estate developers, and local officials. This scene underscores the normative, asymmetrical pattern of black labor overseen by whites. In the background are the remnants of the long-standing Native American burial mound that John Sewell, Flagler’s construction boss, had his black laborers destroy, in the process digging up and desecrating countless human remains. From that day on, disrespect for the indigenous people who had been there before marked the city; history was shoved aside in the name of progress. Another photograph of an unpaved Miami street includes a half-dozen two-story buildings and a group of black construction workers that Sewell proclaimed to be his “black artillery.” Sewell used them not only as a work crew but also as voters in order to count enough residents to incorporate the city, although blacks’ voting rights were soon taken away by state law. In his memoir, Sewell wrote that,