

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

History Faculty Research and Publications

History, Department of

7-2-2012

Reclaiming Beaches for the People on the Fourth of July

Andrew W. Kahrl

Marquette University, andrew.kahrl@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/hist_fac



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kahrl, Andrew W., "Reclaiming Beaches for the People on the Fourth of July" (2012). *History Faculty Research and Publications*. 78.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/hist_fac/78

C H Support the center behind fine resources like HNN
N M Center for History and New Media

C H Support the center behind fine resources like HNN
N M Center for History and New Media

[Tensions linger in U.S. over 'common women...](#)
[Plans to destroy prewar building in former...](#)
[History-rich Georgia island wins second look...](#)

HISTORY MADE EVERY DAY. SPONSOR

On Other Websites

HISTORY MADE EVERY DAY. SPONSOR

- [No List](#)
- [Alexis Coe: Being Married Helps Professors Get Ahead, but Only If They're Male](#)
- [Paul Finkelman: 2nd Amendment Passed to Protect Slavery? No!](#)
- [Robert O. Self: Have We Reached a Political Realignment Yet?](#)
- [Linda Gordon: Why Abortion Is a Labor Issue](#)
- [Ira Chernus: Gun Ownership as Sin](#)

AMERICAN HERITAGE
The Source for American History
www.AmericanHeritage.com

AMERICAN HERITAGE
The Source for American History
www.AmericanHeritage.com

[Petition to Reform the Filibuster](#)
[History and the New Social Sciences](#)

- News
- HNN Teacher's Edition
- Google Questions
- HNN Articles
- Blogs
- Hot Topics
- Roundup
- Books
- Features
- HNN Videos
- Student Shortcuts
- login

Reclaiming Beaches for the People on the Fourth of July

SHARE

Like 19

By Andrew W. Kahrl

7-2-12

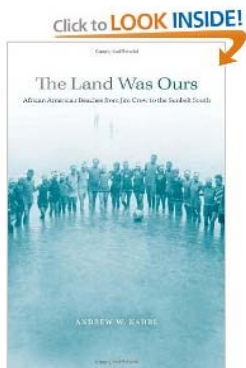
HNN Join the HNN Community
Subscribe to our FREE Newsletter
History News Network

A project of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University

Andrew Kahrl is assistant professor of history at Marquette University. He is the author of "The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South" (Harvard, 2012).



Montrose Avenue Beach, Chicago. Credit: Wikipedia



During these dog days of summer, millions of Americans will flock to the nation's shores for comfort and relief. Who will go, where they will go, and who they can expect to find there speaks volumes about class in America. Now more so than ever, the distribution of people on America's beaches each summer mirrors those bar graphs that illustrate the distribution of wealth in the nation as a whole. Long stretches of shore are the exclusive dominion of America's super rich. A

substantial segment is fenced off for the enjoyment of a shrinking upper middle class who can still afford to go on vacations or own second homes. What little remains is for the rest of us; and of that, a dwindling amount could be considered safe for bathing. My neighborhood in Milwaukee,



HISTORIANS RATE OBAMA



Recommend 1.6k Send



HISTORIANS RATE OBAMA



American Revolution Museum at Yorktown



To learn more about the whole story of the American Revolution and the museum that will replace the Yorktown Victory Center, visit www.historyisfun.org

American Revolution Museum at Yorktown



To learn more about the whole story of the American Revolution and the museum that will replace the Yorktown Victory Center, visit www.historyisfun.org

compare textbook prices at OVER 30 stores
SAVE up to 40% over campus bookstores
directtextbook

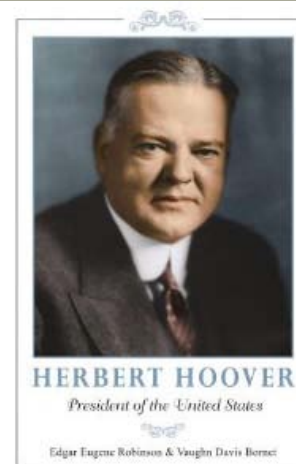
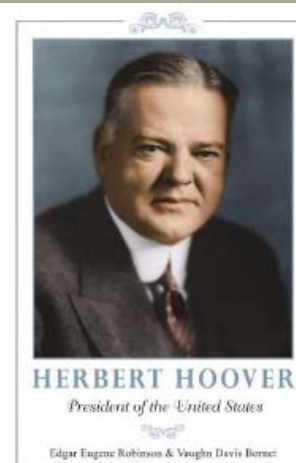
compare textbook prices at OVER 30 stores
SAVE up to 40% over campus bookstores
directtextbook

Wisconsin, for instance, hugs the western shore of Lake Michigan. Yet few of my mostly white, well-to-do neighbors can be found bathing or picnicking on this urban shoreline (voted for the second year in a row as **one of the nation's most polluted**). Those of us who can afford to will rent a cottage along a secluded, sometimes privately owned, beach, or stay in an expensive seaside hotel in one of America's vacation destinations, where the price of admission includes exclusive access to a spacious, well-manicured beach. Meanwhile, our neighborhood beach plays host to the city's working poor, mostly black and Hispanic, who come despite the occasional water quality alert, and despite the sorely neglected state of the beach itself, another victim of our city's struggle to maintain basic public services in our age of austerity.

In many ways, our beaches embody both the promise and the contradictions at the heart of American ideals of freedom and equality. Legally, the shoreline belongs to all of us. As enshrined in the public trust doctrine, a descendent of English common law, the sands below the high-tide line are entrusted to the states for public use. Yet, with few exceptions, the doctrine hasn't been enforced by the states, much less honored by those individuals fortunate enough to live by the sea. Instead, the past several decades have seen the enclosure and privatization of vast stretches of America's beaches in a manner that has paralleled the growing concentration of wealth during those same years. The class segregation of America's beaches has been accomplished via a host of legally dubious, but ostensibly non-discriminatory, means. Wealthy communities and seaside subdivisions conveniently neglect to include public parking spaces near the beach, look the other way when homeowners fence off easements leading down to the shore, or enact rules and regulations (such as prohibitions against eating or drinking on the beach) designed to ensure that, for those coming from the inner cities or other points inland, a trip to the shore will be an expensive and time-consuming exercise in frustration.

This is not to say that these blatantly exclusionary measures have gone unchallenged or not been rightly castigated as un-American. Four decades ago, on the eve of what historians have begun to call our "great divergence," some planted a flag for the people in the sands of some of America's most exclusive beaches. In 1964, Edward T. "Ned" Coll quit his job as an insurance executive in Hartford, Connecticut, and founded the Revitalization Corps, a stateside version of the Peace Corps aimed at getting privileged young Americans involved in solving the problems that plagued America's inner cities. Coll's idealism and belief in the power of communication and communion knew no bounds. Among his many initiatives was one called "Operation Suburbia," which asked wealthy families to play host to inner-city children at their vacation homes along the Connecticut shore. But what began as an appeal to rich white Americans' sense of obligation to those less fortunate quickly morphed into a crusade against the (unconstitutional) privileges they enjoyed. Along Connecticut's 253-mile long coastline, there are 72 miles of sandy beach. Yet at the time, less than 9 of those miles could be considered truly open to the public. The rest were private beaches owned by individuals, country clubs, or homeowners' associations, or resident-only town beaches. For the impoverished children of Hartford and Harlem, where the Revitalization Corps operated, no amount of charitable acts could overcome the legal and structural barriers that denied them access to the sea, and the ability to enjoy that summertime ritual of going to the beach. Coll became determined to breach the Connecticut Gold Coast's sand curtain. On hot summer weekends, he loaded black and Puerto Rican kids from Hartford's North End onto buses bound for the coast, barreling past "no trespassing" signs and the waving arms of private security guards. Children in makeshift swimsuits poured onto the beach, followed by mothers carrying blankets and picnic baskets. Coll, meanwhile, stood ready to defend their constitutional rights to often-bewildered public officials or property owners.


Unlike most progressives today, Coll actually was a class warrior. He tried to avoid creating situations that pitted working-class whites against the black poor, while seeking out those that heightened distinctions between the rich



and (multiracial) poor. Coll saw working-class white racism as merely a symptom of the disease of economic inequality. The real source of urban blacks' summertime deprivations were not those poor whites who stood ready to pounce on any person of color attempting to invade "their" neighborhood parks, swimming pools, or beaches. Rather, it was those wealthy persons who claimed much of the great outdoors for themselves, and left the rest to fight over the few remaining grains of sand. Through his highly publicized, staged events, Coll worked to create an impression of the rich and their methods of exclusion as downright un-American, while casting the movement to open America's beaches to the public as a continuation of the nation's founding ideals. On the Fourth of July 1974, Coll staged an amphibious invasion of the Madison Beach Club, the most prominent seaside club in one of the coast's wealthiest summer towns. From a nearby public landing, Coll loaded children onto a motorboat that ferried them over to the private beach. As they arrived, club members gathered their belongings and made a hasty retreat to the club's patio. Carefully keeping their toes on the public sands below the high tide line, the children planted an American flag and serenaded club members with patriotic hymns, while Coll, evoking the Spirit of 1776, asked club members whether they planned to "stand up there like kings or come down and have a positive ... afternoon of friendship." Later, a parachutist jumped from a plane that carried a banner reading, "Free America's Beaches," and landed ashore.

In a state with a long tradition of *noblesse oblige* to the poor, and where support for the principles of racial liberalism was widespread, it was rare to hear defenders of private beaches mention the skin color or class backgrounds of the persons Coll brought ashore. Instead, their arguments were couched in abstract appeals to all Americans' right to private property. Yet even that argument collapsed under the weight of another hallmark of America's fight for independence: freedom from "taxation without representation." For the beaches of virtually every improved shoreline in America have been built and maintained, in part, by federal agencies funded by American taxpayers. Awareness of their vulnerability to this legal argument compelled some of the wealthiest coastal municipalities to adopt ironclad policies against accepting federal funds for any public works projects, so as to guard against the threat of the sweltering masses pouring in from the inner cities. As Coll's incendiary tactics generated increasingly extreme responses from wealthy coastal municipalities, both white and black inland residents took notice and began to perceive common interests. During a decade when issues such as affirmative action in the workplace and school busing drove a wedge between blue-collar whites and minorities, and hastened the collapse of the New Deal coalition, Coll's decision to take the fight for racial equality to the fat cats (as opposed to picking on those whose prejudices masked their own anxieties), bore fruits. More than any other issue Coll embraced during his long and peripatetic career as an activist, the beach issue, he told me years later, crystallized for both white and black Americans the common sources of their frustrations and deprivations. It was not the beach, of course, but what the beach signified.


But despite some noteworthy legal and legislative victories, the nationwide campaign for open beaches that blossomed in the early 1970s was pronounced dead by the 1980s. (Although Michael Moore did attempt to revive it in 1994, staging his own amphibious assault with kids from Harlem on one of Greenwich, Connecticut's town beaches for his short-lived show *TV Nation*. Many on the Left became more concerned with saving America's coasts from pollution than in exposing them to more human use. As the nation drifted rightward, growing numbers of Americans chose to dream of someday owning their own private beach instead of asserting their right to those same beaches now. Today, hyper-localism and paranoid resistance to any sign of federal intrusion have become, for Tea Partiers and fellow travelers, synonymous with the patriotic virtues of nation's founders. Ned Coll's spirited, if ultimately unsuccessful, campaign to open Connecticut's Gold Coast to the urban poor, however, reminds us of an equally fervent patriotic tradition among the American left, and of a time when the concentration of wealth and privilege was seen by many as one of America's problems, not its virtues. Indeed, for those seeking to draw attention to the vast gulf separating the 1 from the 99 percent, Coll's fight against the hoarding of America's recreational resources by the elite, is instructive.



One Weird Trick to Stay Asleep All Night

Breaking Sleep Solution
Cambridge scientists have discovered a revolutionary secret to help you sleep all night long.

[Learn More »](#)



By law and by nature, beaches embody competing definitions of American freedom, one grounded in the right to privacy and personal accumulation, the other in personal responsibilities to protect and defend the common good. In their use for pleasure and recreation, beaches also speak volumes about who we are as a nation. As many of us head to the shore this Fourth of July weekend, we might stop to look around and observe who we are sharing this precious resource with (and who is absent), and ask ourselves whether this picture is reflective of what we want this nation to be.

Related Links

- **HNN Hot Topics: July 4**

Sorry, the browser you are using is not currently supported. To use the comments, Disqus recommends the following browsers:

- [Firefox](#)
- [Chrome](#)
- [Internet Explorer 9](#)
- [Safari](#)

AMERICAN HERITAGE



The Source for American History
14,000 STORIES | 4,000 HISTORIC SITES | 50,000 ARTIFACTS
www.AmericanHeritage.com

AMERICAN HERITAGE



The Source for American History
14,000 STORIES | 4,000 HISTORIC SITES | 50,000 ARTIFACTS
www.AmericanHeritage.com


Newsmax Headlines


- [Obamacare Debacle: Families Priced out](#)
- [Art Laffer: 'Whole Economy is Shrinking'](#)
- [Boy Scouts Urged to Keep Gay Ban](#)
- [China Hacked NY Times' Computers](#)
- [Obamacare Expose Makes NY Times Best-Seller](#)
- [Declassified: 'Financial War' Could Wipe Out 50% of Your Wealth](#)
- [Eight Cancer Tests Can Do More Harm Than Good](#)
- [Obama: GOP to Blame for Contracting Economy](#)

What's This?

[Home](#) | [Free Newsletter](#) | [Submissions](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Donations](#) | [Archives](#) | [Internships](#) | [About Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [FAQs](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [All Articles](#)



 **The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus**

 **The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus**