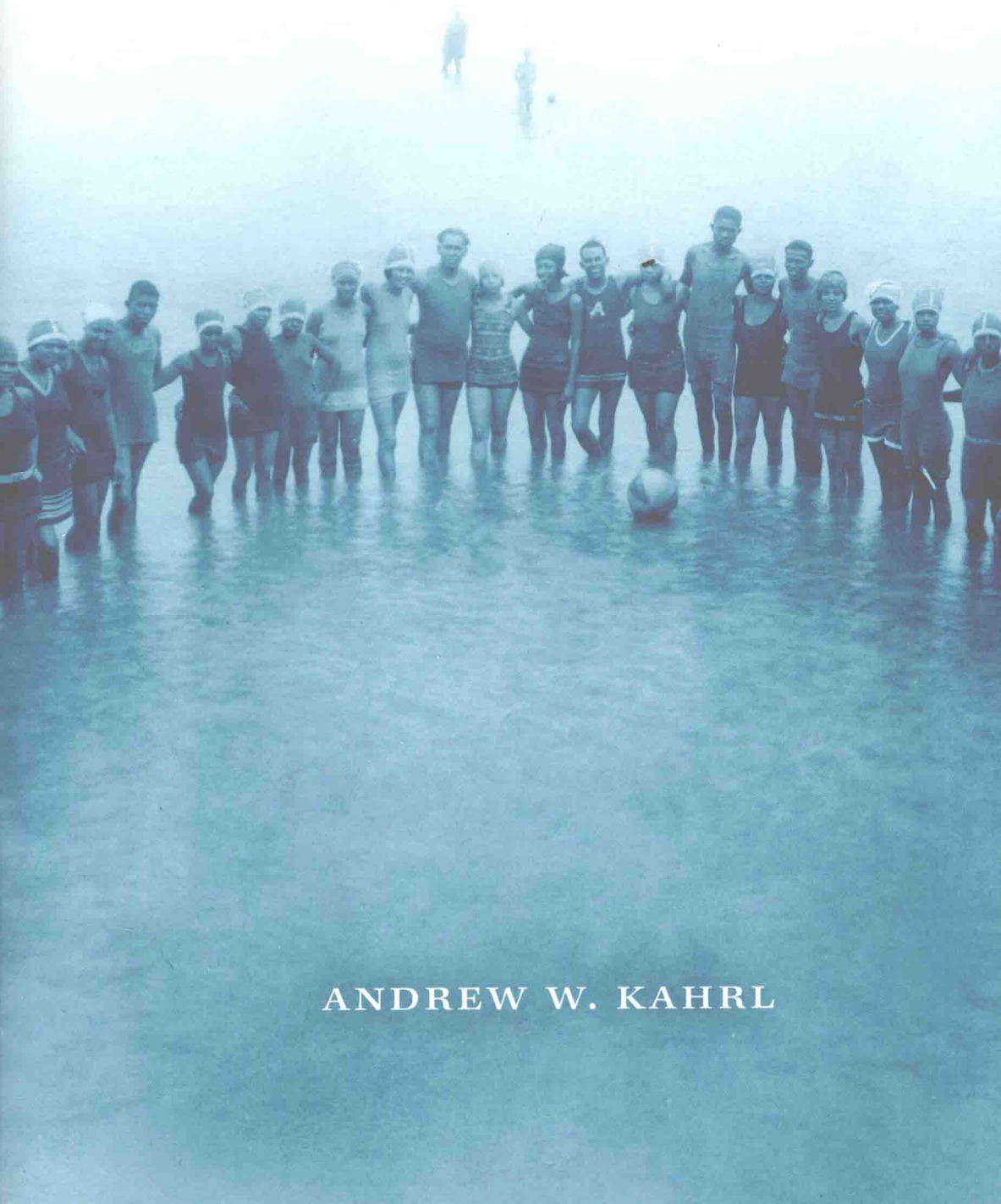


The Land Was Ours

African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South



ANDREW W. KAHRL

THE LAND — WAS — OURS

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to the Sunbelt South

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For Aileen

THE LAND WAS OURS

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INTRODUCTION: "BRING BACK MY YESTERDAY"

On Sunday June 28, 2009, they came back for one last dance on the beach. Except now it was the parking lot of Sam's on the Waterfront. Some might have looked in vain for the cavernous, open-air pavilion where James Brown, Lloyd Price, Dinah Washington, Etta James, and others performed before sweat-drenched crowds. Instead they found tennis courts, boat slips, and clusters of luxurious, air-conditioned, waterfront condominiums. For the persons who passed the security gate leading to the Villages of Chesapeake Harbour that afternoon for the First Annual Carr's Beach Historic Music Festival, there was little visual evidence to remind them of the past they had come to commemorate. Only a country road recently rededicated as "Carr's Beach Road" bore testament to an earlier stage of coastal capitalism on the Annapolis Neck Peninsula.¹

But came they did, to, as George Phelps put it, "bring back my yesterday." On this day, the persons old enough to remember Carr's Beach shared their memories with the enthusiastic, mostly white residents of the private, gated community that emerged following the beach's demise in the early 1970s. As they danced in the parking lot, they evoked a bygone era when, as a homeowner's blog read, "people would pack into the pavilion to listen and dance to the music of Major R&B stars of the day, who's [*sic*] voices and music could be heard throughout the area for miles."²

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, this and similar attempts to commemorate the world African Americans made under segregation proliferated and became woven into public history narratives, public policy debates over the persistence of racial inequality, and real estate redevelopment strategies both in the city and along once-rural, now-exurban shorelines. And they came to hold a mirror on an America striving to become postracial and color-blind. Magnified is the heroism and creativity that emerged from black spaces and institutions on the "colored" side of

the “color line”; obscured are the larger forces that made—and ultimately unmade—both the color line and places behind it. Here on this summer afternoon in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, few seemed to note (or want to note) the irony of a corporately owned condominium developer paying tribute to a black cultural institution whose demise proved so essential to their own rise, and to a place that, while it still lived, proved more a nuisance to neighbors and an obstacle to waterfront real estate developers. Back when those voices could be heard for miles, they were more likely to inspire a call to the county sheriff’s office reporting loud noise and suspicious activity rather than a written tribute. The property’s history of black ownership was more likely to be mentioned by those seeking to direct development elsewhere than touted by real estate agents as a marketable “piece” of history. Back then, one African American Chesapeake property owner remembered, “if you had flown over the Chesapeake and pointed down [there], whites would have said, ‘that’s nigger land.’”³ Back then, the sandy shores of Annapolis Neck Peninsula suffered from what real estate insiders euphemistically referred to as a “stigma.” Today, that stigma has become a selling point. “The Villages of Chesapeake Harbour,” a local real estate agency website reads, “have a unique identity not found anywhere else in the Annapolis area. . . . In addition to Carr’s Beach, Sparrows Beach and Bembe Beach are adjacent to the property. All were popular in their day.”⁴ And all were, at one time, part of the approximately 246 acres owned by African Americans on the peninsula; today, only 6 of those acres remain in blacks’ possession.

Though he came to the Carr’s Beach Music Festival, and accepted an award for his lifetime of community service, George Phelps seemed in no mood to celebrate. “That was a very important piece of land [and] African Americans owned just about all of it,” he later told me. Indeed, properties on the peninsula are some of the most expensive in the mid-Atlantic region, with homes routinely sold at the height of the housing bubble between 2003 and 2006 for over \$1 million.⁵ “[But] the children s[old] the damn land for nothing, and now they’re bawling that they ain’t got this and they ain’t got that and the other. They *had* the land. . . . Goddamn, they gave it away. . . . I don’t know, I get so frustrated.”⁶

Most conversations with African Americans old enough to remember this and other separate black beaches and resorts that once dotted the shores of the Chesapeake and the Atlantic and Gulf coasts similarly veer from nostalgia to frustration, from before to after “integration.” “It was just

like being in heaven,” Juanita Doris Franklin said of the black Methodist resort, Gulfside Assembly, on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. “When you got on Gulfside’s grounds, your whole everything changed. . . . If you went down and stayed a week, it was just like medicine. . . . It was truly a spiritually uplifting place.” Asked to describe the resort’s three-decade-plus struggle to survive in the face of dwindling finances, malignant neglect from public officials bent on coastal redevelopment, and, finally, the destructive winds of Hurricane Katrina, Franklin added: “It hurts me to my heart to even think about going down there.”⁷ On those dwindling finances, fellow Gulf Coast resident Pat Harvey explained, “[After integration] we got caught up in the magic of ‘we can go to the beach down here,’ and we’ve been going to this same beach all our lives.”⁸

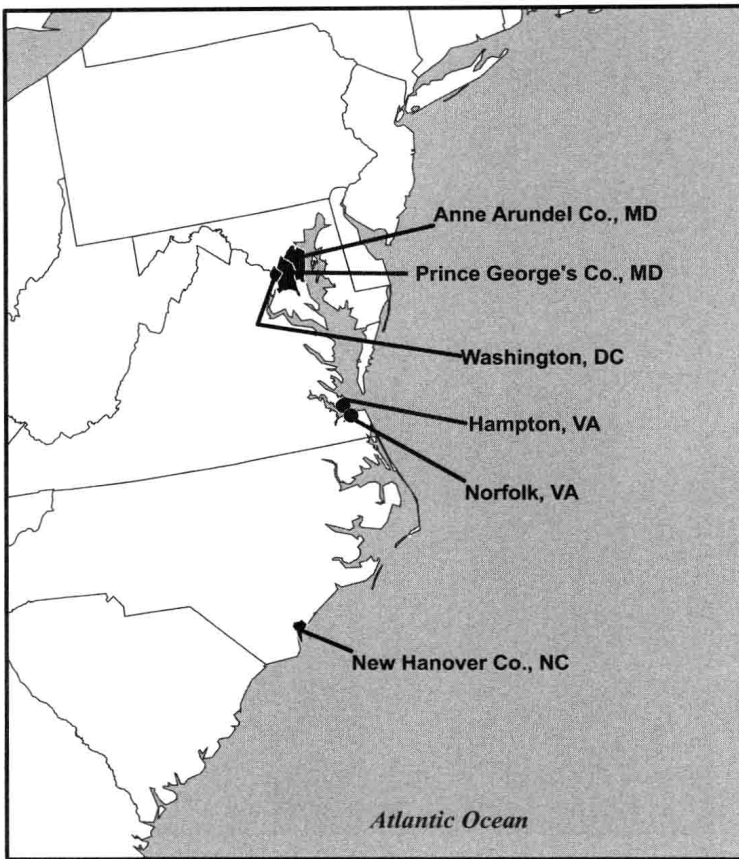
Others shared similar stories. “When I moved to [the African American summer community] Arundel-on-the-Bay in 1971,” John Moses remembered, “the houses were very, very inexpensive . . . because white people wouldn’t live here because black people lived here and black people wouldn’t live here because black people lived here.” “After integration,” Ray Langston said of the neighboring African American summer village, Highland Beach, “this was the last place in the world [young African Americans] wanted to go. They’d been coming here since they were children. . . . It was very dead, very few people here on the weekends. And then sometime shortly after that came an awakening period where people came to realize what they had and how valuable this property is and . . . that, of course, was around the same time white people wanted to buy back waterfront property.”⁹ “Now [that] all those rich folks bought up all that property over there and built those million dollar homes” on the land where the former black-owned Bay Shore Beach in Hampton, Virginia, once stood, Bill Carson commented, “you would never know it was here, [that] they used to have dance halls, bars, a hotel, everything. . . . This place has changed since then, I’ll tell you. This place has changed.”¹⁰

Indeed, it has. Fifty years ago, a wooden groin topped with a metal fence extended into the waters off Hampton’s shore, dividing “white” from “colored” sand and water and, perhaps fittingly, accelerating rates of erosion on both sides. Fifty years ago, the presence of a black man or woman on or near white sands in anything but a waiter’s jacket or pushing a white baby’s stroller would have, at the least, elicited hostile stares, and more likely, catcalls, threats of violence, and summoning of local authorities. Today, those visible signs of American apartheid are a thing of the past. In

their place you will often find vacation resorts facing well-groomed sand beaches forcibly stabilized by beach nourishment projects aimed at halting natural and human-caused processes of erosion and beach movement. Along beaches where signs that read “No niggers or dogs allowed” once stood, you will instead find “no trespassing” signs erected by private homeowners and beach associations, or, as often, you will find the beach no longer there, washed away by the effects of decades of coastal real estate development and the endless, and hopeless, struggle to fortify and preserve coastal property. Also washed away in Americans’ rush to the sea are the mom-and-pop restaurants, do-drop inns, nightclubs, and seaside amusement parks that sustained black social life, nourished cultural traditions, and gave rise to forms of black business activity and struggles for economic empowerment throughout much of the twentieth century.

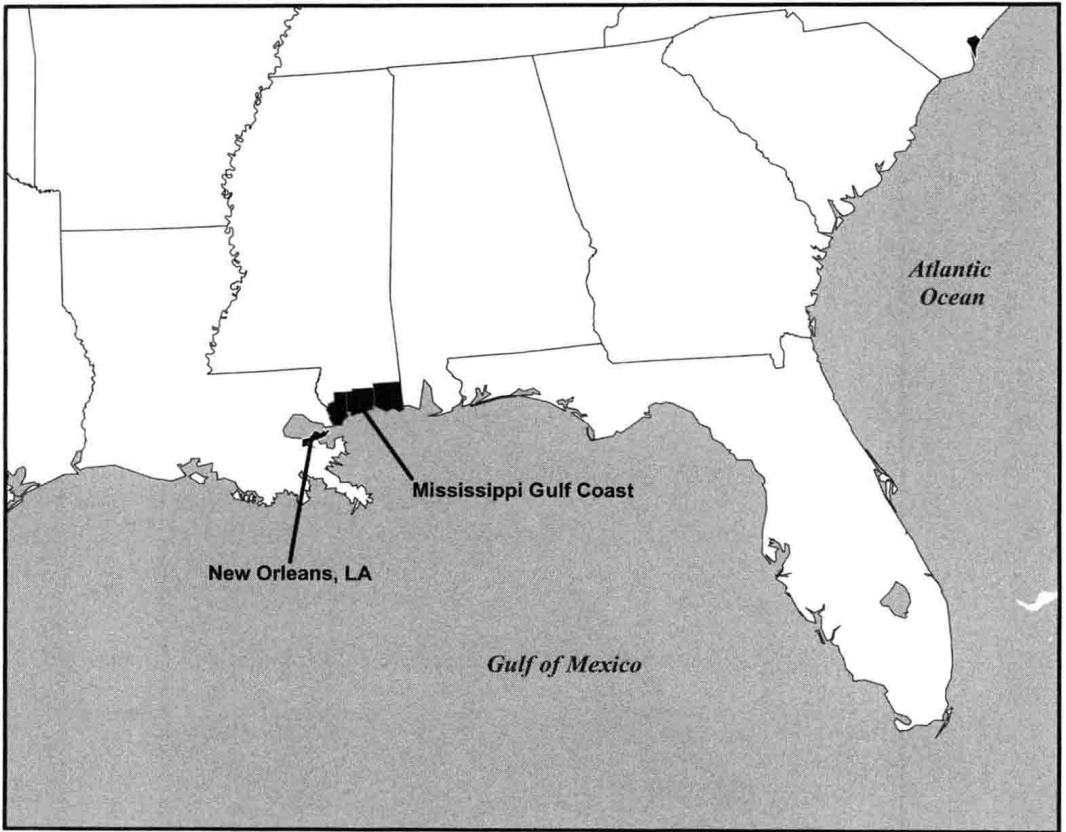
How did we go from a time when it was unremarkable for African Americans to own comparatively large amounts of property in coastal and waterfront areas but unthinkable for them to be seen among whites on public beaches except in a service capacity, to a time when racial but not class diversity at commercial resorts and beachfront communities is increasingly common and unremarkable, while black coastal landowners have become, as one African American native of the South Carolina Sea Islands described in 1982, an “endangered species”?¹¹ How did we go from a time when living by the beach meant living day to day, far from the main channels of commerce and power, to a time when sand itself is a valuable commodity, and living by the sand the pinnacle of success? How did we go from rural and sparsely populated to segregated shores, and from segregated to gated, overdeveloped shores? And how is the disintegration of black landholdings and small business ownership tied to the pursuit of reckless and unsustainable environmental policies?

Through a series of thematic case studies set along the coasts of the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico and their related estuaries (see Maps 1 and 2), this book excavates the histories of African American beaches and traces the evolution of what I label “coastal capitalism”—characterized by the commodification of the beach as a commercial asset, exploitation of natural resources and environmental engineering of coastal zones and bodies of water for aesthetic and recreational purposes, and the transfer of public lands to private entities.¹² In this story, the shore itself—that liminal, mercurial, and volatile space dividing land from water, where the boundaries separating public resources from private property become indistinct



Map 1. Atlantic seaboard

and highly contested, and where the limits and consequences of humans' historic quest to tame unruly environments are laid bare—earns its rightful place as a dynamic historic actor in its own right. The shores that persons of color owned and frequented during the first half of the twentieth century highlight the pivotal role of landownership and development strategies in shaping and giving spatial definition to African Americans' performance of class, pursuit of pleasure, and struggle for economic empowerment. Conversely, the shores that African Americans steadily lost over the course of the second half of the twentieth century (and continue to lose at alarming rates today) demonstrate the inextricability of environmental and human exploitation—power over lands and power over persons—and force us to reassess the familiar story of America's triumph over



Map 2. Gulf of Mexico

segregation, its achievement of civil rights, and its slow, painful, but nevertheless inexorable progress toward a more just and equitable future.



The history of African American coastal landownership begins in the decades following emancipation. By the time General William Tecumseh Sherman completed his march to the sea in 1864 and his victorious campaign northward in early 1865, the South's Atlantic coastal region, once home to some of the largest and most profitable plantations in North America and richest cash crops on the global market, lay in ruins. Sherman administered the coup de grâce, but the region's economic ruin was also a

casualty of, to various degrees, unsustainable farming techniques, unmanageable labor regimes, and the inherent environmental limitations and vulnerabilities that, quite literally, came with the territory.¹³

In the decades following the war, coastal regions that once constituted the heart of slave power in the United States witnessed a profound transformation. As railroad lines linked farms to factories, and the agricultural Black Belt to the industrial cities of the North and the textile mills of the Piedmont, the region's political and economic power shifted to the interior. Coastal lands that once generated considerable wealth for the South's slavocracy and sold for upwards of \$5,000 per acre before the war could, by the 1870s, be fetched for \$50 an acre or less. Other stretches of southern coastlines remained, as they were before war and emancipation, forsaken and forgotten—the land of mosquitoes, predatory animals, dense forests, and sandy, nonarable soil. As a result, coastal zones became ripe for black landownership during an era when, as the historian Manning Marable notes, “the development of a strong black land base became an ideological imperative of black thought.”¹⁴ For many freedmen and women, living by the sea promised an opportunity to realize propertied independence and a deliverance from the coercive labor arrangements that emerged in the wake of slavery's demise. By 1910, African Americans owned over 15 million acres in the South, with coastal counties exhibiting some of the highest rates of black landownership.¹⁵

It was here where a different South took shape during an era that historians and the public alike referred to by way of the racist minstrel character Jim Crow. To venture into many of the small towns and villages situated on barrier islands or peninsulas was to venture outside of what was—and remains—the archetypal “Jim Crow South” and into places characterized by high rates of religious and ethnic diversity, social practices and cultural sensibilities that shocked, horrified, and piqued the curiosity of visitors, and more fluid relations of power. Recounting a visit to Plymouth, North Carolina, a remote river town near the Albemarle Sound, in 1921, Bruce Cotten, a tobacco planter's son, speculated that the inhabitants had “partaken too heavily of the Lotus Plant[s]” that lined the waterways leading into town. “A motley crowd of whites and blacks [crowded] the sidewalks and . . . streets . . . [giving] the impression of an Oriental Market Place. . . . There was plentiful signs of bootleg whiskey, as well as intimacies between black girls and white boys, which were openly going on and jested about. . . . My first impulse was to inquire my way to the American Con-

sulate.”¹⁶ The black landowning families who carved out remote compounds along shorelines proved no less curious to African American outsiders. Black Carolinian Evelyn Williams described the striking contrast between the black families who lived in the town of Wilmington, North Carolina—and who labored in whites’ homes, worked as schoolteachers and in other professions, and preached habits of frugality, sobriety, and respectability—and her ancestors, the extended Freeman family, who shared in common several hundred acres of land along the Atlantic coast and Myrtle Grove Sound and were “notorious for their clannishness, hard drinking, and economic independence derived from fishing, farming, and operating illegal moonshine stills . . . [and who] reciprocated the disdain in which they were held by Blacks in the city.”¹⁷ Like the land itself, the people who lived by the sea lived in what the marine geologist Orrin H. Pilkey describes as a state of “dynamic equilibrium” resistant to legal definition and political categorization.¹⁸

As blacks came to the coast seeking refuge from the South’s unique brand of “racial capitalism,” a broader economic and cultural revolution began to transform the political economy and ecology of the coastal South.¹⁹ Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, small pockets along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts emerged as summer playgrounds and winter havens for the nation’s monied elite. Following completion of a railroad line connecting the port city of New Orleans to the bucolic, undeveloped shores of neighboring Mississippi in 1869, a steady stream of planters and merchants fled from the humid city, frequently host to yellow fever epidemics during the summer months, to newly built second homes by the sea. Offshore, large yachts owned by deep-pocketed pleasure seekers floated past flatboats and skiffs manned by black, Italian, and Eastern European fishermen. Places of labor became places of pleasure. On the Georgia coast, the collapse of long-staple cotton and the rise of black subsistence fishing and farming were soon followed by the development of exclusive winter resorts owned by prominent families of the nation’s Gilded Age aristocracy, where, as one writer later described, “Rice fields became duck ponds for hunters [and] field hands became guides and caretakers.”²⁰

By the 1920s, this trickle of pleasure seekers and second-home owners already showed signs of becoming a flood. The emergence of the field of coastal engineering, the mass production of the automobile, investment in roads and infrastructure development on the state and federal level, and the

rise of a white-collar workforce with weekends off, paid vacations, and disposable incomes led to an infusion of capital investment in coastal real estate and the rise of leisure-based economies, fed the notion that coastlines could be stabilized and made habitable on a mass scale, and increasingly made protection of coastal property a matter of state and federal concern.²¹

As witnessed most spectacularly in South Florida (and repeated elsewhere on a smaller scale), a speculative fever descended onto America's shores in the 1920s, and a culture of coastal capitalism took shape and spread. There were fortunes to be made from these unproductive sands and volatile shores, and it required little effort—just lots of guile. America's coasts gave birth to some of the most outrageously corrupt and fraudulent investment schemes imaginable, and witnessed some of the most epic collapses.²² Privatization of formerly common-use lands accelerated, as did the conversion of environmental “amenities” into capital. As early as 1918, rural sociologist Charles J. Galpin observed, “The rural picnic spot has been turned into a commercial amusement park; the sylvan retreat into the private estate; the swimming place on the lake into the bathing beach; the fishing grounds into the private game reserve; the quiet lake with its rowing parties into the center for the private launch parties or public regattas. It is either ‘no trespass here’ or ‘pay as you enter’ there.”²³ In early 1920s South Florida, John Kenneth Galbraith commented, “an inordinate desire to get rich quickly with a minimum of physical effort”²⁴ drew in trainloads of speculators and led to a remarkable period of environmentally reckless development and unfathomable appreciation of waterfront real estate—followed by a storm that temporarily washed those dreams of quick and easy profits out to sea. Surveying the wreckage of a busted speculative real estate market in South Florida in 1928, Henry S. Villard reported, “Dead subdivisions line the highway, their pompous names half obliterated on crumbling stucco gates. . . . Gaping structures, tragically uncompleted, are mute reminders of ambitious schemes for apartments, casinos, [and] country clubs. . . . All the extravaganza of picture cities, all the fantastic hokum of lot-selling and lot-buying, all the hypnotism of get-rich-quick—which used to transform the most unsuspecting tourist into a frenzied financier—has vanished like a soap-bubble.”²⁵

Reports of coastal capitalism's demise were, to say the least, greatly exaggerated. Nature's devastating assaults on coastal zones and burgeoning vacationlands did not hasten a flight of capital, but instead brought it under the protection and subsidization of the state. In 1926 the American

Shore and Beach Preservation Association, a group dedicated to furthering state and federal governmental involvement in the “economical development and preservation” of beachfront property, was formed. Its efforts to draw legislators’ attention to the growing importance of these coastal natural resources in a more mobile, consumer-driven economy quickly became apparent with the passage, in 1930, of the Rivers and Harbors Act, which led to the creation of the Beach Erosion Board (BEB) within the Army Corps of Engineers. Prior to the formation of the BEB, the Army Corps of Engineers’ involvement in the fortification of coastal zones had remained strictly limited to federally owned lands and in the interests of national security. Beginning in the 1930s and accelerating in the decades following World War II, the Corps’ interests in shoreline protection veered from protection from invasion to protection of coastal leisure economies and real estate markets. In 1936, Congress passed the Act for the Protection and Improvement of Beaches along the Shores of the United States, which (albeit vaguely) made the protection of all shorelines against erosion a federal responsibility and elevated the role of the BEB from that of adviser to administrator. That same year, Congress also passed the Flood Control Act of 1936, which established protection of property from flooding as a federal responsibility and led local administrators of New Deal agencies in burgeoning coastal zones to use the threat of coastal erosion to justify embarking on massive, and often ecologically disastrous, measures of fortification.²⁶

Along with making beaches seemingly more stable, New Deal-era programs helped to make the beach more desirable to an increasingly mobile American public through funding of research and development of pest control chemicals and local efforts at mosquito control. In burgeoning “vacationlands” federal grants and work programs allowed cities to construct ditch drainage systems and establish mosquito control districts.²⁷ At the tiny resort town of Virginia Beach, Virginia, workers in Civilian Conservation Corps camps, and later, German prisoners of war, drained wetlands that bred mosquitoes (and sustained marine life and migratory populations) as part of a broader effort to stimulate the region’s severely depressed economy by enhancing its recreational appeal.²⁸

The rise of coastal capitalism played a vital role in the broader transformation of the South from what President Franklin D. Roosevelt labeled in 1938 “the Nation’s number one economic problem” into the nation’s fastest-growing region by the turn of the twenty-first century. On the beach, the