

A Brief Introduction

Thurgood Marshall Regional Park: Home of the Port Chicago 50 Military History, Nation-Wide Impact, and Restored Justice

Located on the rolling grasslands of the Concord Hills and ancestral territory of the Chupcan Peoples, this new park aims to share stories of social injustice and bravery, connect community, and offer protected, restorative space for people and nature. In addition to providing protected habitats, recreational opportunities, and highly accessible open space, Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50 will feature local histories, including that of the 1944 disaster at Port Chicago, the brave servicemen who stood up to social injustice, and the subsequent events that led to the desegregation of the Navy. Although local, this story is not well known to many East Bay residents. Below, we introduce the history that gives the new park its name.

The Port Chicago 50

During World War II, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine was the largest ammunitions shipping port on the US West Coast. Here, hundreds of thousands of tons of munitions were loaded onto ships to be used in combat in the Pacific Theater. In the segregated military of the time, many Black men were assigned to this dangerous job without proper training. Under these harsh conditions, disaster loomed. Then, on July 17, 1944, a catastrophic explosion aboard the SS E. A. Bryan claimed the lives of 320 sailors and civilians, blew out windows as far as San Francisco, and measured 3.4 on the Richter scale. Most who perished were Black sailors.

Following the explosion, the sailors were soon ordered back to work under the same unsafe conditions. Hundreds of servicemen refused to return without proper training and improved safeguards. The refusal led to the threat of mutiny charges and execution by firing squad. Despite these threats, 50 men stood their ground and were charged with mutiny in the largest mass mutiny trial in U.S. naval history. These brave men became known as the "Port Chicago 50."



Stevadores handling munitions at Port Chicago Naval Magazine, circa 1943/1944
Image courtesy of the U.S. Naval Historical Center



Aftermath of the Port Chicago explosion, July 18, 1944
Image courtesy U.S. Naval Historical Center

Thurgood Marshall's Advocacy

Thurgood Marshall, a young NAACP lawyer at the time, played a crucial role in advocating for the Port Chicago 50 and fighting for their just treatment during their trial. He highlighted the racial discrimination and unsafe working conditions faced by African American sailors and contended that the men were protesting these conditions, not committing mutiny. Despite his efforts, the 50 men were charged with mutiny and sentenced up to 15 years in prison. Though his subsequent efforts to overturn the convictions were not immediately successful, his involvement was a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement as it launched the trial into a national story, brought attention to the broader issues of racial inequality in the military, and eventually led to the desegregation of the armed forces.

Although civil rights movements continued across the nation, over the years the story of the Port Chicago 50 fell into the background. In the 1980s, author, scholar, and civil rights activist Dr. Robert Allen brought new attention to the story and reenergized the efforts to bring justice to these men. After decades of failed attempts to clear the men's names, public and political support for the Port Chicago 50 grew, with calls for their full exoneration. Finally, eighty years after the explosion, on July 17, 2024, Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro officially announced the full exoneration of the Port Chicago 50 sailors, signifying a landmark moment in history and officially clearing the names of these brave men. Del Toro stated, "The institution, the Navy, the military, our nation has an obligation to protect these men and women who serve so courageously," reaffirming the men's basic legal rights to a safe workplace.



Trial for the "Port Chicago 50" at Yerba Buena Island, CA, September-October, 1944.
Image courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Center



Thurgood Marshall, NAACP lawyer and civil rights advocate,
US Supreme Court Justice (1967-1991)



Secretary of the Navy presents at 80th commemoration of Port Chicago Disaster. July 20, 2024.

The Future

Today, Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50, which sits on the former Concord Naval Weapons Station (an extension of the Port Chicago Naval Magazine) honors the enduring legacy of Thurgood Marshall, the courageous sailors of Port Chicago, and all the nation’s servicemembers, ensuring their stories of resilience and bravery continue to inspire future generations.

The future park will include:

- A visitor center to feature local histories, including the 1944 Port Chicago Disaster that killed over 320 men, most of whom were Black sailors, the mutiny trial that ensued, and the fights for social justice and civil rights that led to the desegregation of the Navy.
- 3,000 acres of open space to connect Concord communities, made highly accessible with new public transit routes, public access points, and staging areas.
- Recreational opportunities, including camping, hiking, biking, and picnic areas.
- Protected habitats and wildlife corridors to support the many native species of the area.

Together, we will build Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50 to honor the past, protect the future, and provide access for all.



Rendering of the future Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50