

1. 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."



Stevedores 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 the 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 re-energized 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.



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

Naming update (June 2021)

“Thurgood Marshall Regional Park – Home of the Port Chicago 50” is now the name of the new East Bay Regional Park at the site of the former Concord Naval Weapons Station. The naming was approved unanimously by the Park District Board of Directors at its meeting on June 1, 2021.

NAACP civil rights lawyer and former U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall, helped defend the 50 black sailors accused of mutiny after the devastating Port Chicago Naval Magazine blast on July 17, 1944. The explosion killed 320 men, mostly African American, and injured 390 more. It was the largest home front disaster of World War II. The military trial took place on Treasure Island in nearby San Francisco Bay from September 14 to October 24, 1944.



Although the 50 sailors were found guilty and sentenced to 15 years in prison, Thurgood Marshall’s high-profile appeal paved the way for the desegregation of the entire U.S. military. Marshall went on to argue the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which led to school desegregation nationwide. He became the first black U.S. Supreme Court Justice in 1967 and served for 24 years.

The new parkland formerly known as the Concord Naval Weapons Station, part of the larger Port Chicago military complex, had been referred to as “Concord Hills Regional Park” during the planning process until the permanent name was approved by the Board of Directors in June 2021.

Brochure: EBRPD Support for the Exoneration of the Port Chicago 50

<https://www.ebparks.org/sites/default/files/ExonerationBrochure-PortChicago50-web-2022-10-4v2.pdf>

Video: “A Legacy of Civil Rights: Port Chicago / Concord Hills”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMe_PD9m1Sg