



**CITIZENS  
FOR  
HISTORICAL  
EQUITY**

PROPOSAL TO NAME  
CONCORD HILLS REGIONAL PARK

# **THURGOOD MARSHALL REGIONAL PARK**



**2020 OCTOBER**



## Citizens For Historical Equity

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### To Whom It May Concern


The movement to honor the national Black history in Contra Costa County by naming Concord Hills Regional Park **"Thurgood Marshall Regional Park"** is supported via petition by over 680 citizens.

Please join us in ensuring the national Black history at Port Chicago is honored with a park name. Representation matters!


*Signed,*

### Citizens For Historical Equity

  
Lewis Thrower

  
Jonathan Shelton

  
Fatima Call

  
Alexander Wills

Phone Number: 925-322-0970  
Email: [info@HistoricalEquity.org](mailto:info@HistoricalEquity.org)



# HISTORY OF PORT CHICAGO

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, many Americans enlisted to fight overseas to defend the safety of our nation, and Black men were no exception. A total of 1.2 million Black patriots enlisted and served in the U.S. military during World War II, and they all faced the same familiar discrimination they faced in American society.

Black servicemen at the segregated **Port Chicago Naval Magazine** in Port Chicago, California, wanted to fight overseas for American democracy, but were denied their request. Instead, they were assigned to load dangerous explosive munitions onto cargo vessels without proper training and under unsafe working conditions.

On July 17, 1944, in the largest home front disaster of WWII, a deadly explosion occurred at Port Chicago Naval Magazine that killed 320 sailors and civilians, 202 of whom were Black American patriots. This tragic event became known as the **Port Chicago disaster**.



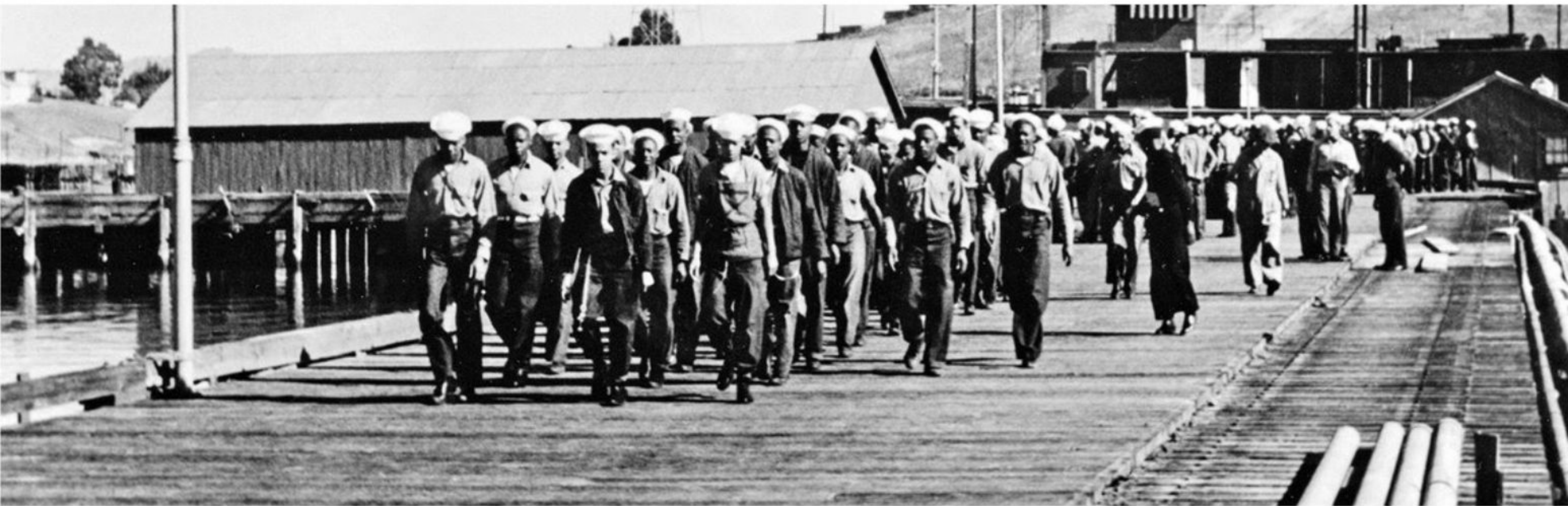
Following the explosion, hundreds of the surviving Black servicemen refused to load munitions until there were safer working conditions. The Navy labeled this an act of mutiny – punishable by death by firing squad – and the majority of the servicemen reluctantly returned to duty. Fifty men, known as the **Port Chicago 50**, held out in protest and were found guilty of mutiny in the largest naval mutiny trial in U.S. history. All fifty Black servicemen were sentenced to 15 years of incarceration and hard labor.

NAACP Chief Counsel **Thurgood Marshall**'s national advocacy work, during and following the trial, along with his federal appeal campaign, was instrumental in the freeing of the Port Chicago 50 and the desegregation of the United States Armed Forces.



# THURGOOD MARSHALL'S ROLE AND INFLUENCE

Prior to the Port Chicago disaster, the NAACP, under Walter White and Chief Counsel Thurgood Marshall, were working to desegregate the military. In 1940, Marshall sent a message to President Roosevelt stating, "the NAACP is opposed to the separate units existing in the armed forces at the present time." Marshall was against discrimination in all military assignments and was opposed to Black men performing dangerous duties unless White men were also performing those same dangerous duties in the same unit.



For the trial of the **Port Chicago 50** in September 1944, the Navy invited the national press to cover the trial, hoping the national coverage would serve as a lesson to all Black servicemen to follow orders without question. The Navy didn't count on the presence of **Thurgood Marshall**, who acted as defender of the Port Chicago 50 in the court of public opinion.

Over 12 days, Marshall personally interviewed every one of the fifty servicemen to relay their story to the national press. He spoke directly to all Americans in saying:

*"I want to know why, at the time of the explosion, every man loading ammunition was a Negro... This is not fifty men on trial for mutiny. This is the Navy on trial for its whole vicious policy toward Negroes."*

Immediately following the guilty verdict on October 24, 1944, Marshall and the NAACP persisted by printing and circulating "Mutiny" pamphlets that told of the injustices at Port Chicago. Marshall directly corresponded with the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, about how segregation of the Navy was putting the country at risk. He argued that with Black men making up 10% of the military, and with those men having heard the story of Port Chicago, they were poised to protest if unjust policies were not rectified. Public opinion was starting to shift.





**WITH THE HELP OF MARSHALL AND OTHER ADVOCATES,  
THE PROTEST OF THE PORT CHICAGO 50 RESULTED IN  
ACTUAL SYSTEMIC CHANGE.**

On April 3, 1945, Marshall appealed the guilty verdict of the Port Chicago 50 and made a personal appearance at the Navy's Judge Advocate General's Office in Washington D.C. to present his argument. Later that same month, Eleanor Roosevelt, in support of Marshall's appeal campaign, sent James Forrestal, now Secretary of Defense, a copy of the NAACP's "Mutiny" pamphlet with a note that read: "I hope in the case of these boys special care will be taken."

Although the convictions of the Port Chicago 50 were upheld on June 12th, 1945, mere days later the Navy announced they would discontinue segregation. On July 26, President Truman officially signed Executive Order 9981 which declared "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin." Six months later, the Port Chicago 50 were released from prison and returned to active duty, no doubt due to Marshall's appeal campaign.

The brave men who died in the terrible explosion at Port Chicago were the catalyst for a regional civil rights movement that would begin the process of national integration. This event was a pivotal milestone in our nation's ongoing fight towards racial equality and justice. The Port Chicago 50 protest, initially termed a "mutiny" of Black servicemen, was perhaps the first meaningful and productive civil rights protest in United States history – pre-dating Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott by more than a decade... and it happened right here in the East Bay Area.



# EDUCATION AT “THURGOOD MARSHALL PARK”

We anticipate the park will be an annual destination for local schools to bring students to learn about the history of Port Chicago Naval Magazine and the patriotism and bravery exhibited by the servicemen and those who protested and advocated on their behalf. Visitors will learn of the **national civil rights history** that was made through the sacrifices and persistence of the Black and Indigenous people of our region.



The visitor center should focus primarily on the **Port Chicago disaster** and the **Port Chicago 50 protest**. The stories interpreted at the visitor center should represent the highest ideals of this country, through the experiences and loss of the Black American sailors at Port Chicago. The park will also interpret the histories of the Indigenous people of this land, and other communities who have used the property, including the United States Navy.

Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall is the **common thread** that connects the stories of the Port Chicago disaster and protest, to the national story of Navy desegregation, and, through Marshall's pro-Native activism and Indian Law legacy, the story and struggles of the Indigenous people of the land. Marshall's life and career will not be the primary focus of the education at the future visitor center, but he acts as an overall "narrator" of the many stories interpreted at the park through his connection to them all. The name on the park should represent what people will see and learn when they visit the park. **Thurgood Marshall represents that for this park.**



# REPRESENTATION MATTERS

Thurgood Marshall's name will serve as a beacon to the Bay Area and the entire country that the East Bay Regional Park District invites and welcomes Black visitors and honors the cultural stories of the land. As a shining example of Black excellence and a symbol for justice, Marshall is a hero whom future generations can aspire to be; a person who was rewarded, not punished, for standing up for what was right.

Representation of our national heroes, of all races, is extremely important, and **our region lacks representation of Black heroes in regional park names**. Naming the park to honor Thurgood Marshall will go a long way towards correcting that omission. Children of all races and cultures, particularly Black children, can look up to Marshall and feel a sense of **pride and self-esteem**, which is of vital importance for our community.



## PROPOSAL

In the interest of honoring the Black and Indigenous history in the Pittsburg/Concord, CA area, we propose Concord Hills Regional Park be named "**Thurgood Marshall Regional Park**."