

# New East Bay park to be named after Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Port Chicago 50

Regional park will be first in county named for Black person

Shomik Mukherjee • June 2, 2021 at 4:07 p.m.



Sailors work on the piers at Port Chicago Naval Magazine. (U.S. Navy Photo. Courtesy of Port Chicago Naval Magazine National Memorial)

CONCORD — When a large regional park eventually opens at the former naval weapons station here, it will [carry the name](#) of Black civil rights attorney and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

And it will feature a visitor center with information about the Port Chicago explosion in 1944 that killed 320 Navy sailors and servicemen — mostly Black men, because the military was segregated. The men were loading munitions onto a cargo vessel when they detonated.

The park's name, Thurgood Marshall – Home of the Port Chicago 50, will commemorate Marshall's defense of 50 workers who were subsequently charged and convicted of mutiny for protesting the port's unsafe labor conditions.

East Bay Regional Park District's board of directors unanimously approved the naming on Tuesday. The regional park will be the first in Contra Costa County named after a Black person; a date for its opening hasn't been set yet.

"It's horrifying what happened, and it's horrifying that it's not more broadly known," Elizabeth Echols, a board member, said at Tuesday's meeting. "And I think it's so important to have this name (commemorate) the courage of these men who risked their lives to protest an unjust and racist system."

The naming received [numerous endorsements](#) from local groups and agencies, including Black labor collectives and chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, as well as the Concord City Council. A [Change.org petition](#) supporting the name received 977 signatures.

"Let's never forget to support representation in our region by honoring the obscured history of the Port Chicago patriots," said Sabrina Pinell, the park district's executive administrator, who started a Black Employee Collective among district employees.



Thurgood Marshall smiles as he sits in a Supreme Court Building office following ceremony at which Marshall was sworn in as the High Court's newest justice in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 1, 1967. (AP Photo)



A cyclist rides his bike in 2019 past the area in Concord that will be a park named Thurgood Marshall – Home of the Port Chicago 50. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group)



Port Chicago, built on the banks of Suisun Bay in Contra Costa County, was decommissioned in the late 1960s. The Navy [transferred 2,500 acres at the site to the park district](#) in 2019 and plans to transfer thousands more acres to the city of Concord for development of a large housing community.

Several residents called in to Tuesday's board meeting to support the naming. Marshall, who served as the Supreme Court's first African American justice, had argued as a defense attorney at the time that the military's segregation policies forced Black men to take on the most dangerous tasks — including handling explosive munitions.

Although Marshall's defense and fierce public awareness campaign did not stop the men from being convicted of mutiny and sentenced to years of prison and hard labor, they were eventually freed after the war. Marshall's arguments later led to the military's desegregation.

Echols said at the meeting that despite growing up in the Bay Area, she "never once" was taught in school or told about the Port Chicago disaster.

Beverly Lane, another district board member, said she wanted the park's naming to ensure that the historical event is never forgotten.

"It will be important for us in that visitor center to re-examine all of the historical narratives that there are in this land through the filter of social justice," Lane said, later mentioning that indigenous populations of Contra Costa County deserve remembrance as well.

Alexander Wills, a board member with the local group Citizens for Historical Equity, said Marshall created and distributed pamphlets that called attention to the Port Chicago explosion and unjust treatment of workers that followed — an important example of how to keep people informed.

"We must acknowledge that these many torchbearers persisted in telling the truth about the events at Port Chicago while others were continuing to bury the story and diminish its importance," Wills said. "With this park naming, the torch is now in your hands."



### **Shomik Mukherjee | Oakland Reporter**

Shomik Mukherjee covers Oakland, with a focus on local politics, developments and activism. He previously reported in Contra Costa County and before joining the Bay Area News Group he worked in Eureka and Santa Barbara. Find him taking walks around town; he is always looking for story tips.