

# The Clerk's Black History Series



## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County Nick Gabaldon



(February 23, 1927 – June 6, 1951)

“First African-American Surfer”

**Nick Gabaldon** - was born Nicolás Rolando Gabaldón on February 23, 1927 in Los Angeles, California to an African-American mother and a Mexican father. “Nick” grew up and attended school in the Santa Monica area. He was a very active teen and often skipped school to spend the afternoons at the beach, riding waves with only his body. In the early 1940’s, California’s segregation was enforced by harassment and intimidation and the “white” beaches were off limits. Bay Street Beach, a 200-foot, roped off area, of the Santa Monica State Beach, was the only place in Southern California that minorities could visit without fear of harassment or

violence. This seaside refuge was located down the hill from nearby Phillips Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, the first African-American church established in Santa Monica in 1905, and the earliest African-American community settlement in the 4th and Bay Streets vicinity. And it was there, on that tiny sliver of beach, that Nick Gabaldon borrowed a lifeguard’s paddleboard and taught himself to surf, on the small waves of the Bay Street Beach.

After serving a stint in the Navy Reserves during WWII, Nick enrolled in Santa Monica College where he continued working a lifeguard at Bay Street Beach. In 1949, Nick met Buzzy Trent, a white surfer and lifeguard, who was so impressed with Nick’s surfing talent, he invited him to surf in Malibu. Malibu was the West Coast’s mecca of surfing. Unfortunately, Malibu Beach was an all white beach and Nick could not walk onto the beach without fear of confrontation or violence. In order to surf with his new friends, Nick would get to Malibu Beach by entering the ocean with his surfboard at Bay Street Beach and paddle 12 miles up the coast to Malibu. Nick would arrive and ride a wave into the beach, as if he had been there the whole time.

Buzzy introduced Nick to the other surfers and it wasn't long before Nick became part of the group. They soon became a surfing clique - surfing from sunrise to sunset, all summer long.

On June 6, 1951, Nick was surfing in Malibu, attempting a move known as “shooting the pier.” The swells were coming from the south creating some of the biggest waves ever witnessed in that area. Nick, rode his board toward the pier when a monstrous eight-foot wave broke, smashing his body into the pilings of the pier. Nick disappeared under the waves, under the pier. His friends and other surfers responded instantly, searching for Nick, but they only found his surfboard. Three days later his body washed up on Las Flores Beach, further east of the Pier. His surfing friends were called over to identify his body.

On February 7, 2008, the City of Santa Monica officially recognized Bay Street Beach, as well as Nick Gabaldon, the first documented southern California surfer of African-American and Mexican-American descent, with a landmark monument at Bay Street and Oceanfront Walk.

