

Sugar Island

The African-American Amusement Park That Never Was

By Patrick Livingston

Michigan has two Sugar Islands—one in the St. Marys River and the other in the Detroit River. This article concerns the latter of those two islands.

On a sunny spring day in 2012, the crew of the *EV Clinton* set out into the lower Detroit River in search of an almost forgotten shipwreck lying just beneath the waves at a crumbling Sugar Island dock. Their hope was to find the sunken vessel known to local divers and residents as the *Seabreeze*. If confirmed, the wreck would stand as perhaps the last remnant of an ill-fated venture to create an amusement park on Sugar Island by and for African Americans in the 1940s.

Sugar Island, roughly 30 acres in size and located just off Grosse Ile in the mouth of the Detroit River, was acquired in 1776 from the Pottawatomies by Alexander and William Macomb. Over time, it became a popular destination for river recreation. John Clark, a fisheries and shipping operator, bought the island in 1851 and began running steamers to it for the public. His heirs built a dock, dance hall, and refreshment stand to expand the enterprise before selling it to the White Star Line in the early 1900s. White Star added ball diamonds, a nursery, and a roller coaster and included the park on the route of their famous steamers *Greyhound* and *Tashmoo*.

In the mid 1920s, unable to compete with nearby Bob-lo Island, White Star sold the island to concentrate their amusement operations at Tashmoo Park on Harsen's Island in the St. Clair River. When the new owner's plans to develop residences on Sugar Island stalled, the dance hall remained in use for occasional moonlight excursions. But that ended dramatically one June evening in 1936 when the *Tashmoo* struck a submerged rock and sank at Amherstburg, Ontario.

The island lay idle until late 1944, when African-American businessmen in Detroit formed the Sugar Island Amusement Corporation and purchased the island a few months later for \$36,000. *Billboard Magazine* reported "the development of an exclusively colored park in this part of the country will provide an essential recreational outlet for Detroit's 300,000 colored population and at the same time reduce racial friction."

The hard truth that motivated the enterprise was a de facto Jim Crow environment in which white business owners ignored Michigan's segregation ban in public places and public transportation. Instead of allowing for integration, owners of most amusement venues—such as Bob-lo Island (see sidebar)—set aside a few dates during the season that were as designated "colored days." Policies like this motivated African Americans to open their own amusement parks throughout the country. Sugar Island was preceded by African-American owned parks in Chicago and Washington, D.C. Likewise, in 1945, a consortium of black church congregations purchased 100 acres in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to establish Fairview Park—a site that is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Sugar Island investors, who included prominent business owners from the Paradise Valley community, were optimistic about their new venture. They announced plans to charter a boat for the upcoming season to depart from the foot of Joseph Campau. In addition to the existing dance hall, restaurant, and other structures, the corporation unveiled plans to erect a bingo parlor, concessions, and rides including a new roller coaster after the war ended. One-week stands were being booked for top flight bands including Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington.

But the reality of rebuilding a park that had been vacated for more than a decade overwhelmed the company's ambitions. Hopes to attain passenger ships, for instance, proved overly optimistic at a time when wartime demands placed vessels, fuel, and crews at a premium price. It wasn't until June 1946 that Zimmie Moore Hairston, president of the Sugar Island Amusement Corporation, announced the acquisition of the



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Duke Ellington was one of the big-name musicians scheduled to perform at Sugar Island once the park opened.

steamer *Seabreeze* and the barge *Edgewater* for \$20,000. At 96 feet long, the *Seabreeze* could tow the *Edgewater*, transporting 600 passengers in total. The two vessels were scheduled to sail to the park twice each day under the direction of Captain Frank Emig.

By early August, 150 stockholders had purchased shares that brought the company's capital to more than \$50,000. And after a ship christening was held in West Grand River Park, everything was in place for a late summer opening. That is, until Grosse Ile Township filed a lawsuit against the Sugar Island Amusement Corporation. According to the complaint, the island had been zoned for residential purposes only. As such, the township wanted to secure a temporary and permanent injunction against the planned amusement park.

Elvin H. Wonzon, counsel for the Sugar Island group, responded that the township didn't have a good case. He argued that not only had the company never been made aware of such zoning restrictions, but they felt that the "suit was merely for the purpose of weakening the efforts of the company to establish an outstanding recreational center for all people."

As such, in mid-November, the Sugar Island Amusement Corporation filed a motion to dismiss the injunction filed with the court. Their argument? The Michigan Legislature revoked the authority of all townships to pass such zoning ordinances during 1930 to 1936. According to the township's original complaint, the township adopted Sugar Island's designation for residential development in 1929 and amended it in 1936. As the township's zoning ordinances passed during that timeframe were illegal, they should have no bearing on the corporation's development plans.

While battling in court, the Sugar Island Amusement Corporation would lose a major component to its park plans less than a month later. As the *Grosse Ile Camera* reported, the *Seabreeze* sank at its mooring off Sugar Island December 5. Settled in 18 feet of water, the ship was held upright by lines

attached to the dock, with its pilot house and smokestack visible above the water. Only one of the steamer's lifeboats was salvaged.

With no other media reporting the sinking or status of the vessel, a headline in the March 1947 edition of *Billboard* made a surprising announcement: "Sugar Island Spot Will Open May 30 in Detroit." The article quoted Hairston, who acknowledged that difficulties of getting a practically new park in shape, plus transportation problems, caused a delay. The article further stated that the company "purchased its own ship and plans to run an excursion steamer from Detroit." While noting pending deals to lease rides and concessions and to modernize the dance hall and include a bar, the article mentioned nothing about the *Seabreeze* or its sinking the previous winter.

A few months later, the tides changed yet again. A June edition of *Billboard* explained that plans were indefinitely on hold and cited "a long series of legal and other difficulties" as the problem. Legal restrictions against various types of commercial enterprise on the island were making the operation nearly impossible to continue, and at the time of publication, the island was operating merely as a picnic grounds.

While the article did not mention the *Seabreeze* specifically, it did mention that the company was struggling with access to the island. The group attempted to provide transportation by its own boats, but found itself back in the courtroom when the company tried to secure parking for its patrons' cars. As the article summed it up: "Situation is complicated by its proximity to Grosse Ile and privately owned Hickory Island where owners of swank summer homes have resented the park's nearby location."

On July 10, 1947, two weeks after the company dropped plans for the enterprise, the Circuit Court threw out Sugar Island Amusement Corporation's suit against Grosse Ile Township, upholding the township's "right to deny other than residential development."

Sugar Island Amusement Co. Announces Daily Runs to
THE BEAUTIFUL SUGAR ISLAND
ONLY 18 MILES FROM DETROIT



STEAMSHIP SEA BREEZE

Boat Leaves for the Island Nightly at 8 P.M. and Returns at 11 P.M.
Daily Excursions to the Island Leave at 9:30 A.M. and 12:30 P.M.

Special Invitations Are Extended to Fraternal, Social and Religious Organizations

TICKETS ARE \$1.10 ROUND TRIP

For Further Information Call Ca. 3214, Mrs. Zimmie M. Hairston,
PRESIDENT OF SUGAR ISLAND AMUSEMENT CO

Segregation at Bob-lo

In June 1945, a group of high school graduates was boarding the Bob-lo steamer *Columbia* for a celebratory trip to the island park. Among them was Sarah Elizabeth Ray, the only nonwhite in the class. Although she was allowed to board, the ship's purser forced her off before the boat left the dock. Ray, with the help of the NAACP, sued the Bob-lo company and won in Recorder's Court.

Rather than pay the \$25 fine, Bob-lo appealed the case to the Michigan Supreme Court. It argued that the park was exempt from the law because its destination was in Canadian waters and, therefore, engaged in foreign commerce and was beyond Michigan legal jurisdiction. When the Michigan Court upheld the ruling, Bob-lo appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. In February 1948, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Ray and Bob-lo was forced to integrate.



A postcard depicting the dancing pavilion on Sugar Island. A fire destroyed the building in 1954.

As the township's suit moved through the court's docket, the company faced and lost yet another legal battle—this time, against the Fix Brothers of Buffalo, from whom the company originally purchased the *Seabreeze* and the *Edgewater*. To satisfy the Buffalo firm's \$8,000 claim against the company, Sugar Island was arranged to be sold at public auction April 20, 1948. The island wouldn't be purchased until a few months after that, however. The Dunbar and Sullivan Dredging Company ultimately purchased the land as an "act of goodwill" to the downriver community.

The remaining buildings were destroyed by a series of fires culminating with the destruction of the dance hall in 1954. Dunbar and Sullivan, long known for their river dredging work, announced plans to significantly expand Sugar Island using rocks and other spoils from their operations. They proposed to develop a "high class summer residence with accommodations for yachts" but gave up the plan when permission to quadruple the size of the island was denied by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Sugar Island remained quiet until 1985, when William Herschler of Oak Park purchased the island from Dunbar and Sullivan for his home. He planned to build a 3,600 square foot house on the south end powered by solar and wind. But the residence never materialized, and the island has been used by boaters for picnicking and camping ever since. In 2011, Sugar Island was sold to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to become part of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

Today, the *Seabreeze* still lies off the island's south dock. Divers describe the ship lying on its starboard side in 18 feet of water with its boiler and engines intact. The remains of the pilot house, torn off by the swift current many years ago, lie about 100 feet south of the wreck. (Even though the ship is adjacent to the dock in relatively shallow water, the swift current at this juncture of the Detroit River makes this a difficult and dangerous dive.)

A sidescan sonar taken by the Wayne County Sheriff's Department clearly shows the remains of the double decked vessel—one of the few remnants left of what may have been the first and only African-American owned island amusement park for people of color on a Great Lakes island.

Patrick Livingston is a tour guide for Summer Discovery Cruises. He would like to extend his gratitude for assistance for this article to Dr. Art Carter, the Wayne County Sheriff's Department Marine Unit, Jim Hoover, Maryanne Sweder, Jerry Malloy, Steve Stewart, Tony Gramer, Gary Longton, the Grosse Ile Historical Society, Mike Wasil, the Burton Collection of the Detroit Public Library, and Wayne County Register of Deeds. ■

Whatever happened to the *Seabreeze*?

The sinking of the *Seabreeze* was mentioned just once in print media after its demise in December 1946. So whatever happened to the steamer?

After the sinking, the ship lay at the Sugar Island dock, its upper works exposed. Eventually, the elements caused its cables to part and the *Seabreeze* rolled onto her side, its railings just beneath the surface. The Fix Brothers of Buffalo, to whom the ship's ownership reverted in the U.S. District court case, continued to keep the vessel on their books, a longstanding tactic practiced by owners of obsolete merchant vessels for use as a long-term tax write-off. The ship's documents were not surrendered until July 1955.

As far as the cause of the ship's sinking, that remains a mystery to this day. Although there is consensus among downriver natives that the *Seabreeze* was intentionally sunk to thwart the efforts of the Sugar Island Amusement Corporation, there is no hard evidence supporting the anecdotes.



Wayne County Sheriff's Department