

# Pools, Play, and Protests:

## Public Swimming Pools and the Fight for Civil Rights

*Ebony Vandross*

**BEFORE YOU READ:** Is it harder for some groups of people to enjoy all kinds of play? If so, which groups? What makes it harder?

### Swimming While Black in the 1960s

In 1964, the swimming pool at the Monson Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Florida, was host to a very important yet often forgotten milestone in the ongoing Civil Rights movement. On June 18th, 1964, white and black activists staged a “dive in,” jumping into the pool together to protest racial segregation laws. In response, the manager of the hotel

poured muriatic acid into the pool and onto the protesters in an attempt to drive them out. Police officers arrived on the scene and arrested several of the protesters, while the hotel manager faced no charges. The next day, the Civil Rights Act was passed by the United States Senate.

When President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law on July 2nd, 1964, segregation was officially outlawed. So why does it seem like black people are still, to this day, getting kicked out of swimming pools? Here are three recent examples:

### Swimming While Black in the 2010s

In 2015, 15-year-old Dajerria Becton and other black youth went to a private pool party in McKinney, Texas. Residents in the upper-class neighborhood made comments to the black guests, telling them to “go back” to their “Section 8” housing. Someone called the police, and Dajerria Becton ended up being pinned face-down on the ground by a police officer. In response to cries of protests from the other children present, the officer pulled out his gun and charged at them as well. In 2018, a settlement of \$184,850 was awarded to Dajerria’s family after they filed an excessive force claim against the police department. Officer Casebolt resigned from his position. In 2016, a grand jury declined to indict him for assault.<sup>1</sup>

In 2018, a 38-year-old South Carolina woman pleaded guilty to assaulting 15-year-old Darshaun RocQuemore Simmons who was at a community pool with his friend. According to Simmons, “This lady walked up to us and was like y’all have to leave. We said, ‘yes ma’am.’ When I started walking out, she just started hitting me.” Simmons recorded the incident on his cell phone, and also said that the woman “called me the N-word.”<sup>2</sup>



*Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X met at the U.S. Senate, where they had come to listen to Senators debate the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was the only time the two men ever met; their meeting lasted only one minute. Photo by Marion S. Trikosko via the Library of Congress.*

In July 2018, the pool manager of an apartment complex in Memphis, Tennessee, called the police on Kevin Yates, a black man who was wearing socks in the pool area. The manager claimed that socks were against the dress code. According to Yates, other people at the pool were wearing socks, but he believes he was singled out on the basis of race. The manager was fired following the incident.<sup>3</sup>

## Race and Gender at the Pool

The Civil Rights Act may have made segregation illegal in 1964, but society is still trying to catch up. Why are swimming pools in particular so slow to desegregate? Why are white people still so fearful of black people being in the same pool with them?

According to historian and author Jeff Wiltse, pools used to be gender segregated, but in the 1920s, cities and towns started letting men and women swim in the same pool. That is when whites started insisting on racial segregation at pools. He goes on to explain that white swimmers and public officials “did not want black men having the opportunity to interact with white women at such visually and physically intimate public spaces.” White people worried that if blacks and whites swam together, then “black men would assault white women with romantic advances, that they would try to make physical contact with them, and that this was unacceptable to most northern whites.”<sup>4</sup>

## Who is Allowed to Play?

Despite decades of people fighting for civil rights, there are still white people who believe that black people don’t belong in the same pool with them. Play is supposed to inspire feelings of joy and freedom. It’s supposed to bring people together. Yet racism still gets in the way. Thankfully, people are fighting back. They are telling their stories to show there is still work to be done. They are using anti-discrimination laws to protect their right to play.

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*In June 1964, James Brock dumped acid into the water at the Monson Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Fla. He was trying to disrupt swimmers who were protesting the hotel’s whites-only policy. Photo: Bettmann/Corbis.*

### AFTER YOU READ:

1. What surprises you about this article? What questions do you have?
2. Research the Civil Rights movement, and present your findings to the class.

**Sources:** 1. Montana Couser, “McKinney, Texas, Girl Who Was Slammed to the Ground by Police at a Pool Party in 2015 Wins Settlement,” *The Root*. June 21, 2018. <[www.theroot.com](http://www.theroot.com)>; 2. <[www.cbsnews.com/news/stephanie-sebby-strempel-pool-patrol-paula-pleads-guilty-to-assaulting-black-teen-at-pool](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/stephanie-sebby-strempel-pool-patrol-paula-pleads-guilty-to-assaulting-black-teen-at-pool)>; 3. <[www.nytimes.com/2018/07/09/us/memphis-pool-manager-fired-socks.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/09/us/memphis-pool-manager-fired-socks.html)>; 4. <[www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10495199?storyId=10495199](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10495199?storyId=10495199)>.

## Civil Rights Act of 1964

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s helped bring about many changes in the law. One was the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. It makes racial segregation illegal, and it outlaws unequal application of voter registration requirements.