Kentucky’s Segregated Parks and 1930 Black Population

In 1942, Henry Ward, a congressman from Paducah, drafted a bill in the Kentucky legislature that segregated urban park systems in five of Kentucky’s largest cities. The law mandated that, “all public parks established and maintained for the recreation, pleasure and welfare of the colored population shall be held, managed and controlled by a Colored Park Board of Commissioners of the city wherein the parks are located.” Although many cities across the Commonwealth had segregated parks prior to 1940, Henry Ward’s legislation was the first law under segregation that gave power and resources to black communities to organize and develop recreation and leisure programs appropriate for black communities. Louisville was excluded from this law, although the city had segregated parks. The largest black park in Louisville was Chickasaw Park, established in 1907. All of the largest black urban parks, Chickasaw in Louisville, Stuart Nelson in Paducah, and Lexington’s Douglass Park still exist today. Source: 1930 U.S. Census

After opening Kenlake State Resort Park on Kentucky Lake in the mid-1940s, the State Parks Department built Cherokee State Resort Park a few miles down shore. With a beach, a boat house, two cottages, a restaurant, and a full-time staff of over 50 people, Cherokee State Resort Park was the first and only black resort park in Kentucky. A 1960 Kentucky State Highway map located the park as the former “colored” vacation site in the South. Kenlake closed during integration in the 1960’s, to the disappointment of many black communities. Kenlake remained open and received cottages from Chickasaw. In 1969 the Murray State University Sculling Team renovated the property to house the Team’s troubles. The renovation did not include any historical recognition of this unique park.