IN 2015, MCKINNEY, TEXAS, MADE THE NATIONAL NEWS FOR A racial incident where young black teens were confronted at a neighborhood pool by white adults. The police were called, who ultimately used unreasonable force to subdue the teens, including a young girl in a bathing suit. The incident shocked a lot of people, but for historians of the civil rights movement, the story was not a surprise.

Soon after, The Washington Post ran a story by Jeff Wiltse, an associate professor of history at the University of Montana and author of the book Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pool in America. Wiltse provided a nuanced view of the history of public pools and racial relations.

As public spaces and recreational amenities, public pools have long been a staple of summer afternoons, a place where people can gather to cool off, exercise, play, and interact with their friends and neighbors.

Early public pools were built in large northern cities during the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were built primarily to serve poor and working-class boys (both black and white). Wiltse’s research reveals that those with power were concerned about the location of such pools and the impact that visibility might have. He writes, “In 1910, for example, the proposal to build a large municipal pool in New York’s Central Park generated intense opposition from the city’s middle and upper classes, because it would attract large numbers of immigrant and working-class kids into their oasis of genteel recreation. ‘I should consider it disastrous if the only swimming pool belonging to the city was put [in Central Park],’ one critic told The New York Times. ‘It would attract all sorts of undesirable people.”’ Instead, the pools were located underneath the Manhattan and Queensboro bridges, where working-class swimmers would be less visible.

During the 1920s and 1930s, pools began to be integrated by gender—for the first time, males and females swam together.
Northern cities in what is now thought of as the Rust Belt reacted to gender integration with racial segregation. Now that women and men swam together, public officials and white swimmers were uncomfortable with black men swimming with white women, given the visual and physical intimacy that characterizes public pools. Wiltse writes, “In attempting to explain why black swimmers were being attacked at Highland Park Pool but not at other city pools, the Pittsburgh Courier wrote: ‘The whole trouble seems to be due to the way Highland Park Pool is operated. It is the only city pool where men and women, girls and boys swim together. This brings the sex question into the pool and trouble is bound to arise between the races.’” In the South, these problems didn’t even arise, because public officials enforced racial segregation from the beginning, explicitly excluding blacks from “whites-only” pools.

After World War II, public pools continued to desegregate. In response, middle- and upper-class whites in northern cities retreated from public pools, and the country saw a rise in private neighborhood pools, where residential segregation and club membership could prevent blacks from having access. Southern cities were more likely to shut down their public pools than to allow integrated swimming.

Wiltse writes about Warren, Ohio, where a court order mandated desegregation in its municipal pool in 1948: “The local newspaper covered the first day of interracial swimming by printing a front-page photo showing a dozen children waiting to enter. The last two children in line were black; the caption read: ‘Last one in the water is a monkey.’ The racial antipathy expressed

\textbf{FIGURE 1} 
A sign posted at a public pool in Selma, Alabama (date unknown) 
in the newspaper was shared by many local whites, who stopped using the pool when they realized black residents intended to use it. Similarly, in 1962, several years after Pittsburgh’s municipal pools were desegregated, a sign posted outside a city pool still used exclusively by whites read ‘No dogs or niggers allowed.’ Public pools were racially desegregated, but that did not mean blacks and whites started swimming together.”

Forced desegregation coupled with white racial sentiments changed the way swimming as a public amenity has been offered. Once a widely available public amenity, public pools are no longer readily available in many cities. Even today, racial incidents still occur when racist whites are confronted with the reality of nearly-naked black bodies in close proximity to their own.

**FURTHER READING**