Historic SANS

Sag Harbor Hills, Azurerest, Ninevah Beach

11963

Historical Context

- First residents vacationed in Rt. 114 historic Eastville section cottages/homes which date back to 1830 and cottages east of SANS; then, walked through SANS undeveloped land to Havens Beach, SH's public beach

- Maura K et al. focused on land and negotiated/partnered with then land owner, who under financial pressure sold the property known as Azurest

    - Azurest name – brainchild of Maura K, also known as "MaMaude"
    - Maura K's house was designed by notable sister and one of the first Black female architects out of VA, Amaza Meredith featured in the book, Dark Space by Gooden, Columbia University Professor, available on Amazon.

- All (sandy) roads were private until Village took over (via agreement) in Azurest and Sag Harbor Hills. Ninevah roads remain privately owned. Originally, homes had well water. Associations arranged for Town Water access when roads were paved.

    - **Azurest** 1947 (currently about 140 properties with multiple lot owners) – Maura K and Meredith, Richards, Terry families Initially, family and close friends bought
    - **Sag Harbor Hills** 1950 (currently about 140 properties with multiple lot owners– Sag Harbor Dev. Corp. (Hugh & Martha Lynch) developed lots and roads
    - Developed and sold lots to interested buyers using Model Homes near entrance. Ex., Pickins Acres
    - Deeded all current and futures owners rights to Reserve Beach in perpetuity; Reserve under SHHIA oversight (listed owner)
    - **Ninevah** – 1952 – Privately developed and sold by family owners

- Mortgages provided by Construction firms since banks would not lend to African Americans under any circumstance , notwithstanding their strong credit worthiness .

Landmarking Situation

- Over the years, resident oral history was relied upon to foster and reinforce the sense of pride, tradition, and heritage; Media and other external audiences recognized cultural significance over the years
- Recent development and turnover underscored the importance of documenting and pursuing Landmark recognition and designation for cultural significance
- Developers defying neighborhood scale and character preferences of most residents – combining lots to supersize house sq. footage, clear cutting trees to maximize house size, ignoring wetland preservation needs -- sense of community economically driven vs human/extended “family” interaction driven
- SHH (July ‘16) and Ninevah (Aug. ‘16) gathered over 51% owner petition agreement; Azurest in process with at least 30% to date
- Petitions submitted to SH Trustees and ALL Boards; Currently awaiting response and commitment to Landmark; Understand Village can extend Landmarking locally if amenable (within a 3 mos. timeframe)

SANS (Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest, Ninevah Subdivisions) efforts:

- SANS process kicked off early 2016; SHPO, Assemblyman Thiele, and National Registry representatives visited the SANS site.
- SANS held two Sag Harbor-wide information sessions - one in 2016 and one last year, 2017; Planning a 2018 session with Preservation experts.
- SANS received unanimous Village Trustee support under the proviso that SANS self-fund its Survey, which is required for any Historic District designation; SANS raised funds and started the Survey process including Oral Histories March 2017
- SANS submitted its Survey the beginning of March 2018; SANS inputted to Trimble software/GPS system over 300 homes
- SHPO has not confirmed Survey satisfying submission requirements yet after more than 90 days, although recent activity/acknowledgement occurring.

SANS (Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest, Ninevah Subdivisions) efforts:

- Early positive Survey feedback from independent Survey reviewer and Preservation expert, Judith Wellman, said the following:

"I have just finished reading the SANS Survey. It is beautifully done! A model for us all! So well-written and well-organized, covering key sources: maps, deeds, oral histories. Very impressive to have interviewed so many people and have so thoroughly documented 306 structures, identifying so many by architects/builders. Nice insight about land sales being promoted through various social networks and clubs. Works well to divide properties into three time periods. And excellent highlighting of main themes, connecting SANS both to suburbanization and to issues of space and race.

Brava! This is really a wonderful piece. Thank you so much for doing this and for sharing it. Love to know how it affects development trends locally."

Gratefully yours,

Judy --- Judith Wellman, Director, Historical New York Research Associates
Professor Emerita, SUNY Oswego

- The SANS area continues to be under siege by developers anxious to flip historic resort cottage houses to build 5-7 bedroom homes, paying cash up to $1.1+ million (no inspections) to original family owners.
- SANS residents continue to attend as many Village Board meetings as possible to ensure the Village honors the Building Code and not succumb to developer pressure and legal prowess.
- We are receiving ongoing press coverage.

Opinion

The North's Jim Crow

By Andrew W. Kahrl

Dr. Kahrl studies the history of segregation.

May 27, 2018

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this article appears in print on May 28, 2018, on Page A19 of the New York edition with the headline: The North's Jim Crow.

Last month in Philadelphia, a white Starbucks manager summoned police officers to confront a pair of African-American men after one asked to use the restroom before he had purchased a drink. About two weeks later, at Lake Merritt Park in Oakland, Calif., a white woman called police to report a black family that was grilling food for a picnic.

In both instances, the victims were accused of violating laws or rules governing conduct in commercial establishments and public spaces. In the first case, it was for trespassing or loitering. In the second, it was for using a charcoal grill outside of the designated areas.

“Quality of life” laws serve as a potent instrument of racial segregation. They provide commercial establishments, law enforcement officers and everyday citizens with tools enabling them to police racial boundaries while at the same time claiming to simply be upholding the law.

In contrast to the Jim Crow laws of America’s dark past, these laws supposedly apply to everyone. But in practice, they clearly don’t. Like most middle-aged white people, I have spent countless hours in Starbucks without buying anything. Plenty of white people have barbecued, blasted music and drunk alcohol at that same Oakland park, without anyone calling the police.

The selective enforcement of minor ordinances, as many critics note, performs the same work today that segregation laws did in the past. But it would be inaccurate to call this a new form of Jim Crow. What it is, rather, is a form of Jim Crow that whites in the North have been developing since the early 1900s.

As white segregationists in the South were placing “whites only” signs in the windows of restaurants, in the North, more enlightened (or, rather, more savvy) white proprietors and public officials realized that rules restricting public spaces to local residents and the strict but selective enforcement of laws against things like disorderly conduct and loitering could be used to impose racial segregation.

Take public beaches. In the South, white officials literally drew color lines in the sands and the waters off shore. In the “racially liberal” Northeast, towns devised elaborate, and ostensibly colorblind, procedures for determining who could access public shores, and what they could bring and do once inside, and then proceeded to enforce them for black and brown people only.

In the 1930s, Long Branch, N.J., passed an ordinance requiring all residents to apply for a pass that would allow access to only one of the town’s four public beaches. Town officials claimed the rule was meant to prevent overcrowding. Without exception, though, black applicants were assigned to the same beach and were denied entry to the others.

In the wealthy, all-white towns along the Connecticut Gold Coast, where blacks were effectively excluded from living by racist housing policies, local officials kept public spaces segregated by narrowing the definition of who constituted the public. While nearby urban black populations swelled and the demand for access to public places of recreation spiked, towns like Greenwich, Westport and Fairfield restricted their beaches to residents. It was obvious whom these laws were meant to exclude.

These wealthy enclaves were also among the first to use privatization as a means of segregation, a practice that would proliferate in the decades following the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The Harlem Renaissance novelist Ann Petry once wrote that her “most humiliating Jim Crow experience” took place in Connecticut, where she grew up. She had gone on a trip to a beach with her Sunday school class. The beach was technically private, but that had never mattered — until Petry, the only “colored” girl in the group, came along. On this occasion, the children and their teacher were deemed trespassers and told by a guard, “If you don’t get off the beach, I’ll call up the sheriff.” The children were forced to have their picnic on the church lawn. “We ate,” Petry later wrote, “in a clammy silence.”

The civil rights icon Constance Baker Motley, who grew up in New Haven, Conn., in the 1930s, recalled accompanying two white teenage friends to a private beach in the neighboring town of Milford. Although Motley’s white friends were not members, they went there often. But with an African-American joining them, “there was suddenly a membership requirement.” The three returned to New Haven, Motley dripping in sweat and stewing in indignation, her white friends having learned an important Jim Crow lesson.

Most white Americans prefer to consign such naked acts of discrimination to a shameful past that we have supposedly overcome. But in light of these recent incidents, it would be more accurate to call the forms of Jim Crow that prevailed in the Northeast in the early- to mid-20th century the cutting edge in technologies of exclusion, a sign of things that were to come.

It will take more than sensitivity-training sessions and the public shaming of racist, hypervigilant white women to dismantle today’s system of segregation. Limiting the power of white people to use the law to act out their vision of a “quality” life that excludes black people is a place to start.

Andrew W. Kahrl, an associate professor of history and African-American studies at the University of Virginia, is the author of “Free the Beaches: The Story of Ned Coll and the Battle for America’s Most Exclusive Shoreline.”

BLACK VOICES 08/09/2011 01:31 pm ET Updated Oct 09, 2011

By Trymaine Lee

Sag Harbor, NY — The little boys and girls in the old photographs are all grown up now; long gone are the days when they would dig clams in the sand with their toes and chase each other down the length of the beach until the sun sank into the bay.
The summers of their youth were spent with their families here in the traditionally African-American enclaves of Azurest, Ninevah Beach and Sag Harbor Hills, which lie side by side along a bright stretch off Gardiners Bay.

It was an escape from New York City, Philadelphia or wherever home was when it wasn't summer. There was an open-door policy at most of the cottages, which were owned by relatives or by folks who'd known each other so long that they considered themselves relatives. Everyone was a kissing cousin, an uncle or aunt, and every summer was like a family reunion. Extended families included executives, lawyers, entrepreneurs and educators.
"We all went to the same beaches, the same parties. We were family," said Joanne Carter, 74, who started summering here with her family when she was 14, and raised three children doing the same. "The nice thing, it being in an all African-American community, was that a lot of the kids that were raised in some of the wealthier black families, who were raised mostly with Caucasian children, this was an opportunity for them to reconnect with their roots over the summer."

Middle-class blacks, many from Brooklyn and Queens, bought vacation properties here in waves, beginning in the 1930s, during a time when they were legally or socially restricted from doing so in most other areas of the country.
"It was a safe place," she said, where they all could just be.

As the generations shift and many of the older residents pass on or retire and migrate back down South, those in line to carry on the legacy — now in their 30s or early 40s — are often unable or unwilling to take up these homesteads. They have gone off to college, started careers and families elsewhere. Often they can't handle the financial burden or would rather cash in on properties whose values have ballooned as much as ten times in some cases. Or they find no need for self-segregation, believing the whole world, even that of the white and the wealthy, has opened up for them in ways their forebears never could have imagined.

Meanwhile, more non-black home buyers are flocking to the area, looking for a deal as the rest of the Hamptons has grown increasingly out of reach. Aggressive real estate agents without traditional ties to the area finally see "value" in a section of Sag Harbor that had long been devalued by outsiders. The soured economy and foreclosure crisis has hastened the turnover. 'For Sale' signs have sprouted, something unheard of in a place where for generations homes had been kept mostly "in the family."
"Life has changed since the '60s to the '90s," said Dianne McMillan Brannen, a real estate agent who lives in Ninevah Beach and married into one of the longtime black families there.

As of late July, as many as 20 homes were for sale in the area, according to McMillan Brannen, by far the most on the open market as many longtime residents could remember.

"There are kind of contending forces in the Sag Harbor area. There is a strong tradition of trying to hold on to those properties. There is a kind of insiders' real estate market where folks, I think, do attempt to first of all keep property inside of a family; if not, have them sold to somebody that they know or that there is some connection to," said Craig Williams, 43, whose family began coming out to Sag Harbor in the 1960s from Teaneck, New Jersey. "Then there is also a trend from the youth point of view, the succeeding generation ... that is looking to have the freedom to do what they want: either cash in on the property to do other things, or venture outside of the campus, if you will."

Williams, who lives in Philadelphia with his wife and 2-year-old daughter, recently purchased property and built a second home in nearby East Hampton, opting for his dream space over traditional boundaries.

"I think her Hamptons experience will be different than mine. Ultimately, I think it will be for the better," Williams said of his daughter. "The sense of freedom to be able to enjoy everything that the region has to offer is as enriching as that kind of isolated experience, that sense of having that enclave that's entirely our own."

There are 480 homes in the three developments: 300 in Sag Harbor Hills, 100 in Azurest and 80 in Ninevah Beach. Today, about 30 percent of the residents of these developments are not black, local real estate agents estimated, up dramatically from decades past when you'd have been hard-pressed to find a single white face on these private beaches.

Some have called it gentrification, a term scoffed at by homeowners here, given the term's association with urban blight, poverty and the notion of whites rescuing and resurrecting a place broken by poor minorities.
"It's not gentrification," said Kathy Tucker, 86, a longtime resident of nearby Eastville, an early home to black whalers who worked on ships that came to port in Sag Harbor. Eastville became an early feeder community to the black beach communities. "There have always been gentry here," she said.

Indeed, the restaurateur B. Smith lives here. So does Earl Graves, the magazine publisher, and Susan L. Taylor, former editor-in-chief of *Essence* magazine. Colin Powell summered here in his youth, as did Lena Horne and Langston Hughes. And before he passed away, the lawyer Johnny Cochran had a home here.

"This was never a struggling, derelict community," said Leslie Edwards, another local real estate agent. "The demographics are still upscale," she said, a blend of old and new money.

William Pickens IV, 41, whose great-grandfather was the first to establish roots in Sag Harbor, said that the reason for the influx of new residents is a simple one.

"White people are coming in because blacks can't afford this lifestyle anymore," said Pickens, sitting on a bench on a swath of beachfront property owned by his family in Sag Harbor Hills. "But my family has been here since day one. We're not going anywhere." "I don't know what life would be like without this place," he said.

Most people shared the common rituals of summer time here, where the roads weren't paved and street lights didn't go up until the early 1980s; getting the family car stuck in the dirt was an annual rite of passage. There were parties and picnics and seafood fests with steamed mussels and clams. And of course, there was summer love. Pickens' parents met in 1962 on the beach. "She was striking, walking along the beach in an orange bathing suit, an orange scarf on her head and sunglasses," the elder Pickens, William Pickens III recalled.

But life as he and so many others have known it is changing, if ever so slightly.

The annual fish fry has been cancelled for the third year in a row. In years past, the matriarchs of the families would fry the fish and make the potato salad and other fixings. But these days they can't muster enough volunteers to pull it off. And catering has gotten too expensive.

The old St. David A.M.E. Zion church in Eastville, founded 171 years ago by African-American and Native American whalers, has been alternately leased to other congregations or shuttered because of the area's aging and shrinking black population.

"There was a cultural shift in Sag Harbor and the congregation aged out," Pastor Tom Macleod, a minister in Sag Harbor told the Sag Harbor Express in April. He said the year-round African-American population has decreased in recent years and that "more gentrification in Eastville" has priced many blacks out.

And the Labor Day footraces held each year down by the Pickens place, which have gone on for decades, has seen fewer and fewer children participating.

"It's a new world out here," Pickens said, ambling down a path toward the beach.

In his book "Sag Harbor," author Colson Whitehead, who spent the summers of his youth coming out here, chronicled Sag Harbor's changes during the 1980s, documenting it through music, as disco faded into hip-hop, and the coming-of-age of his protagonist, Benji.

"It's already not what it was," Whitehead said one recent evening after a talk and book signing at a local library. "The traditions will stay as long as people keep them alive," he reasoned. "But real estate in this area trumps everything else."

Back in Sag Harbor Hills, a few blocks from where Pickens stood on the beach, his father, William Pickens III, stood in the living room of his home, regarding a portrait of his grandfather, Dr. William Pickens Sr., who in 1904 became one of the earliest black graduates of Yale University. He came to Sag Harbor in the early 1930s and laid roots that would stretch four generations.

"For black people all during the first half of the 20th century, there were only three or four places to go like this all over the country," said William Pickens III, a former corporate executive and a local historian. There's Oak Bluff in Martha's Vineyard, Atlantic Beach in South Carolina, Highland Beach in Maryland, he said. But there has never been anything like the communities in Sag Harbor.

"While I'm not happy to see the changes happening, I understand the how and why. Market forces are market forces," Pickens said. "But what we are trying to do is encourage young prosperous black folks to take a good look at this place, to come in and compete for this property," he said. "This is precious land, and we intend to keep as much of it as we can."

Investors Move Next Door, Unsettling a Black Beachside Enclave

The New York Times August 25, 2016

By John Leland

William Pickens III has spent most of his 80 summers in Sag Harbor Hills, a beach community of modest bungalows on the edge of the Hamptons. His grade-school principal built the house across the street; his family doctor lived two doors down. Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis were his house guests. Those were the people who came to Sag Harbor Hills.

About a year and a half ago he noticed a change.

There were new buyers, and they were different. They did not mix much, and they identified themselves by names like 81 Harvest Holdings L.L.C. or 45 Hillside Holdings L.L.C.

“I don’t know Mr. and Mrs. L.L.C.,” Mr. Pickens said. “But I know the family on either side of them, because I grew up with them. But who the hell is L.L.C.?”

William Pickens III, 80, has lived in Sag Harbor Hills, a subdivision of the Long Island village of Sag Harbor, for 66 years. Some residents have grown wary of an increasing number of investors sweeping up properties in the area. Credit Nicole Bengiveno for The New York Times

“It’s worrisome,” he added. “May not be illegal, but it’s worrisome.”

Sag Harbor Hills and its neighboring subdivisions in the Long Island village of Sag Harbor, Ninevah and Azurest, are uncommon among American beach communities. After World War II, when Sag Harbor was home to a robust African-American working class, developers offered parcels in an undeveloped swath of town for $1,000 or less. Black families bought in, creating three adjoining communities linked by dirt roads. Two nearby subdivisions, Eastville and Chatfield’s Hill, also attracted black home buyers. As in other black enclaves of segregated communities, laborers lived next to professionals and high rollers. For many it was a world of their own, a decompression zone — home in a way that even their city residences might not be, because it had been built by people like them.

A sign at one of three entrances to the enclave, which became home to a robust African-American working class after World War II.CreditNicole Bengiveno for The New York Times

The racial makeup kept home prices down. White buyers tended to choose other parts of Sag Harbor.

That is changing. As house prices in the Hamptons soar, Sag Harbor Hills and its neighbors are now luring investors looking for bargains.

A lawyer named Bruce F. Bronster, backed by investors, has bought at least nine properties in the three communities, each registered to a different L.L.C. Others have followed. In November, residents received a mass email saying a buyer was willing to pay up to $600,000 in cash for houses — was anyone interested?

“It feels like a hostile takeover,” Beverly Granger, a retired dentist, said, adding that strangers have come onto her property to post offers to buy. “People are very aggressively buying up properties and wanting to put bigger homes that are out of character for the community. It just feels different.”

On a recent afternoon, the shaded ranch houses and small lots gave Sag Harbor Hills the feel of a quiet suburb, shaggy in a few spots, embellished with home additions in others, all leading to a ribbon of bayside beach. Neighbors waved as they passed one another on the street.

Beverly Granger, a retired dentist, lives in a home in Sag Harbor Hills that belonged to her parents. “It feels like a hostile takeover,” she said of the recent wave of investors.CreditNicole Bengiveno for The New York Times

Because banks in the 1950s and 1960s would not lend money in African-American areas, the homes that went up were small. So family life took shape outdoors, among neighbors, said Ms. Granger, who has spent summers in Sag Harbor Hills since 1951.

“There was no television,” Ms. Granger said, describing life in the hamlet. “You got a little bit of radio. And so you really went in the homes to sleep and eat, and the rest of the time you were outside doing things.” Neighbors watched one another’s children, she said. Houses tended to stay within families or among friends; turnover was rare.

With the arrival of celebrities like Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, the restaurateur B. Smith and Allan Houston of the New York Knicks, the communities rivaled Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard as a vacation mecca for successful African-Americans. Colson Whitehead, writing about the summers of the black elite in his novel “Sag Harbor,” described an oasis apart from his white prep school. “We fit in there,” he wrote.

At a village trustees’ meeting this month, residents faced off. Mr. Bronster was seeking approval to build a house of 5,300 square feet on several combined lots, the biggest in an area where the median house size is 1,378 square feet. Neighbors, including a group called Save Sag Harbor, which formed to keep big-box stores out of downtown, came ready to oppose him.

Mr. Bronster brought backup to the small-town gathering.

“He brought his architect, he brought a land-use attorney and some other attorney, and he had aerial photographs and professionally done graphs,” said Victoria Sharp, a former director of the AIDS center at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital in Manhattan.

Kennedy Scott (carrying hula hoop) at the beach with her family for her seventh birthday.CreditNicole Bengiveno for The New York Times

“I’m especially appreciative of the history of the neighborhood, how it was started, what it means to the residents who live there and how that has enabled the community to develop a very warm and gregarious and welcoming sense,” he said. “That’s why I want to be there.” He added that he was developing dilapidated houses to rent to “year-round families that want to be part of the community.”

An even bigger house, of 5,900 square feet, has been proposed for four combined lots that belong to Robert Kapito, the president of the investment firm BlackRock, who is also one of Mr. Bronster’s investors. Mr. Kapito earned more than $20 million last year, according to company filings. Final approval for the two houses is pending.

Renee Simons, who lives next to the site of Mr. Kapito’s proposed house, said that she felt dismissed by the newcomers, and at odds with some neighbors, who hope the new houses will raise the value of their homes.

A woman preparing to relax on a beach in Sag Harbor Hills. Residents spoke of close ties between neighbors and a sense of history that they fear could soon be lost.CreditNicole Bengiveno for The New York Times

“It feels like us versus them, which is not healthy,” Ms. Simons said. “It’s not what I come here for. There’s such an increase in contention now.”

Dianne McMillan Brannen, a real estate agent who has lived in Ninevah for 25 years, said she worried about a domino effect: investors combining lots to build bigger houses, which drives up sales prices, which tempts more families to sell, until eventually a historically rare African-American haven looks like just another upscale beach resort. In the last year, she said, 13 houses have been sold to builders or investors, compared with the usual four or five.

“An identity is the most important thing that could be lost,” Ms. Brannen said. “This area is not always going to be African-American. You could have 250 homes, and it would be an entirely different set of people here. And those sets of people are not going to regard it as we have regarded it. And they’re not going to have a story to tell about what’s happened previously. And unless we tell that story, it’ll go away.”

Mr. Pickens, whose grandfather was an early field secretary of the N.A.A.C.P., said he welcomed newcomers, whatever their race, but not investors or people with four or five houses and no commitment to the community.

“This is sort of reverse integration,” he said. “That’s fine, that’s the American way. But there are 5,000 miles of coastline in America, and five are commanded and owned by blacks. So we treasure what we own. That begins to disappear. Think about that. So that’s what we’re dealing with. And once you leave here, you can’t afford to come back.”

Of the newcomers, he asked: “Do they really want to be here or do they want to see us out of here? I’m for integration, I’m not for elimination.”

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 26, 2016, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Black Enclave’s Newcomers: Mr. and Mrs. L.L.C..

Another Big House in Ninevah Spurs Community Debate

SAGHARBOR EXPRESS.COM

By Christine Sampson July 19, 2017

It was just months ago that Manhattan attorney Bruce Bronster earned approval for a much-debated 3,740-square-foot house at 48 Lincoln Street in Ninevah Beach. That house had been scaled back from an original proposal of 5,260 square feet. On July 13, another Lincoln Street project in which Mr. Bronster is involved that calls for the construction of a 3,736-square-foot house to replace one that is 1,122 square feet cleared Sag Harbor's Board of Historic Preservation and Architectural Review. It, too, came with a healthy dose of discourse.

But the conversation around this particular house, at 55 Lincoln Street, took on a particular urgency this time.

Residents of Sag Harbor's historically African American neighborhoods, Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest and Ninevah, petitioned the ARB to consider the character and history of the neighborhood when approving such building projects. Many residents of the three neighborhoods have banded together under the name SANS, and are fairly far along on a cultural and historic resources survey that has the potential to earn landmark status for the neighborhoods and place them on the New York State Register of Historic Places.

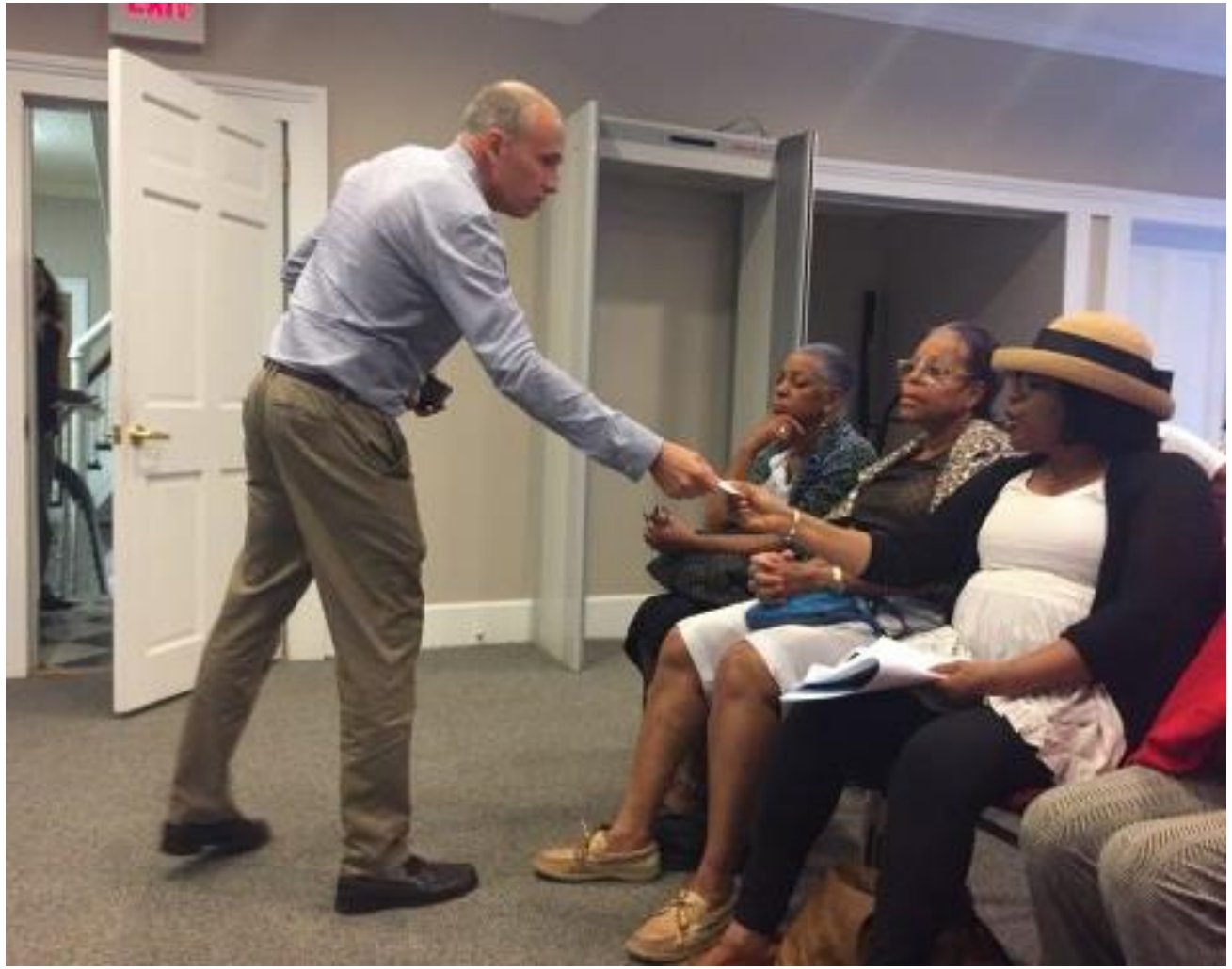
A rendering of what the new house at 55 Lincoln Street will look like. Courtesy Peter Cook, Architect

But that takes time — the survey won't be done until this fall, at the earliest. The ARB meets twice per month, and it seems like lately, nearly every ARB meeting involves at least one property of significance to someone in SANS. And the board can only evaluate applications based on their historically aesthetic and architectural significance, leaving its chairman, Anthony Brandt, to tell the SANS residents last week that "there's only so much we can do."

"I do understand the anguish of this community. Any community that is subject to sudden change on this scale is going to go through this level of distress," Mr. Brandt said. "We can't save a community all by ourselves. The community has to save itself and I know you're working to that end."

Mr. Bronster said he has made an effort to join the local homeowners' associations and make himself accessible to those who want to better understand him and his process.

"I have spent a lot of time and effort and money and patience and attention being part of the membership of the communities, changing the plans and addressing the issues that have been brought up," Mr. Bronster said. "I would like to move forward on this house. We are subject to the board, subject to the Building Department and we complied with every regulation."



Manhattan attorney Bruce Bronster, left, hands his business card to SANS residents during the July 13 meeting of the Board of Historic Preservation and Architectural Review. Christine Sampson photo

He handed his business card to several residents who indicated they wanted to talk to him personally.

Some who got up to speak took issue with the physical aspects of the house — its façade or windows or finished cellar — but others focused on its larger impact.

Cheryl Crooks observed an increased number of fences in the area.

“It seems like the whole flavor of the neighborhood is just not conducive, not quaint, not welcoming as it used to be,” she said.

“What’s important to us as a community is our beach,” Gwyned Simpson said. “Our area is being grossly overpopulated really quickly. We have all kinds of problems, people coming in, taking off their clothes at the beach. The area is changing very quickly and it’s becoming overpopulated with people who have no interest in the neighborhood but who are becoming part of the neighborhood. It is drastically changing the culture. You have to think about when approving these six- or seven-bedroom houses that can hold a lot of people.”

But that’s not the kind of thing the ARB can consider, Mr. Brandt said.

“In the case of individual houses, if they meet the code, and they do, there’s not a lot we can do that isn’t an aesthetic judgment on these houses,” he said. “So far, with these houses, I don’t think anybody on the board feels they are horrible houses. The community is diverse architecturally and in many other ways. I emphasize again, there’s not much we can do. That’s not our job. … I want the public to understand that we can’t do this. We can’t save your community.”

Historically black beach enclaves are fighting to save their history and identity

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Historically black beach communities struggle to maintain their heritage

By Troy McMullen July 27, 2017

Sag Harbor Hills and the neighboring districts of Ninevah Beach and Azurest are unique among beach communities in the Hamptons, the collection of affluent towns on the eastern end of New York's Long Island long known for attracting wealthy summer residents.

Founded in the village of Sag Harbor after World War II, in an era of deep segregation in the United States, they were home to a robust African American population. Developers offered parcels of land in parched areas of the village for just a few hundred dollars or more. Working-class black families purchased much of the land, eventually creating several communities linked by dirt roads along Route 114.

Though their roots are working class, these neighborhoods of modest ranch houses and bungalows today are a haven for middle-class and upper middle-class black families, populated by doctors and lawyers, artists and academics. They rank as the oldest African American developments in the Hamptons and are among a handful of beach communities in the United States with African American roots.

Towns including Highland Beach near Annapolis, MD and Sag Harbor Hills in the Hamptons in New York, feel pressure from gentrification

The racial makeup of the districts kept home prices down for decades with many white buyers choosing to live in other parts of the village.

Yet that is changing as home prices in the Hamptons continue to rise, says Dianne McMillan Brannen, a broker with Douglas Elliman who has lived in Ninevah for more than 25 years. “Investors are being lured to these areas now and are looking for bargains,” she says. She estimates that about a dozen homes sold to investors last summer, up from four or five the previous year. “We welcome investment, but there is a real concern that these areas will lose the cultural identity that made them distinctive.”

Sag Harbor is not alone. Across the country, some historically black beach communities that have long escaped major property development and an influx of real estate investors are increasingly fending off both.

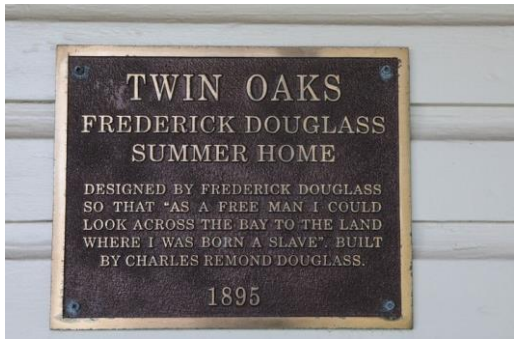
As values soar in surrounding locations, pricing out many second home buyers, historically black beach enclaves from American Beach near Jacksonville, Fla., to South Carolina’s rural Sea Islands are seeing sharp increases in development and new home buyers.

Historically black beach communities date back as far as the 1930s in a handful of coastal areas across the United States. (Cheriss May/For The Washington Post)

Like gentrification debates raging in largely urban areas across the nation, the increase in new money, along with a generational shifts, is sparking concerns in some historically black beach communities about the possible loss of their culture and identity.

“The irony is that many of these places were deemed undesirable when African Americans first moved there,” says historian Andrew W. Kahrl, author of “The Land Was Ours: How Black Beaches Became White Wealth in the Coastal South.” “Some of these areas are gold mines today, but those luxury resorts in parts of coastal Georgia, South Carolina and around the Chesapeake were havens for African American life and culture.”

Historically black beach communities date back as far as the 1930s in a handful of coastal areas across the United States. Many sprang up during segregation when blacks were either barred from whites-only beaches or simply unwelcomed. While most were in the South, many took shape in the Northeast and Upper Midwest, evolving into beachheads for thriving economic and social life for African Americans.



Twin Oaks" is the summer cottage built in 1895 for Frederick Douglass by his son, Charles Douglass. (Cheriss May/For The Washington Post)

The Frederick Douglass Museum and Cultural Center is housed in "Twin Oaks.“ (Cheriss May/For The Washington Post)

Audrey Davis grew up spending her summers in Highland Beach, a historic African American enclave near Annapolis. The town was a haven for affluent black Washingtonians seeking refuge from segregation and drew many black intellectuals including Paul Robeson, Booker T. Washington and Langston Hughes.

Her grandfather, teacher and author Arthur P. Davis, in the 1940s purchased the two-story wooden home that her parents still own today. “It was actually made from reclaimed wood from a whites-only hotel across the street,” says Davis, who is director of the Alexandria Black History Museum in Virginia. “Our whole family would gather there in the summer because we cherished the sense of community.”

But, she says, there is not a month that goes by that her parents do not receive a letter or two in their mailbox asking if they would consider selling the house. Though the waterfront community is relatively small — about 100 year-round residents — there has been a gradual uptick in home sales the past few years. The once-remote location of Highland Beach is slowly growing more integrated, with about 20 white and five Hispanic residents making Highland Beach their home, according to census data.

Highland Beach is a historic African American enclave near Annapolis. The town was a haven for affluent black Washingtonians. (Cheriss May/For The Washington Post)

“Younger people looking for an affordable home on the water are mostly interested in the area,” she says. “My hope is that new people to the community will have the same sense of its history and importance as we do.”

African American homeownership along South Carolina’s Sea Islands dates to 1865 when the Union army issued orders to give freed black men the island chain and abandoned rice plantations. Despite decades of decline, fueled by ravaging storms and overzealous development, a dwindling number of black families still live and work on the islands today.

Known as the Gullah, they are descendants of enslaved Africans who lived in the Lowcountry regions of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

A firm population count of blacks on the Sea Islands is difficult to obtain. But as part of an application for protected status in 2005, the Gullah/Geechee estimated their total population in the Carolinas, Georgia and northern Florida at 200,000, according to Marquetta Goodwine, co-founder of the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition.

Though much of the island chain in South Carolina has been declared a Cultural Heritage Corridor by the National Park Service, that has not stopped developers from chipping away at waterfront locations. Property projects large and small now dot many locations, and some locals fear it will eventually resemble Hilton Head, the upmarket waterfront resort in South Carolina that was once home to the Gullahs.

“They’re communicating with the developers, but when you have a multimillion-dollar development coming into an area, it’s always going to be an unequal conversation,” says Bernie Mazyck, president of the South Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations.

Oak Bluffs, Mass., a sliver of Martha’s Vineyard that is home to a lively African American population, has long attracted wealthy second home buyers. But the town holds a unique history for African Americans.

Located seven miles off the Cape Cod coastline, on the northern tip of the Vineyard, its harbor drew freed slaves and laborers in the 18th century and white locals sold them land. The town eventually became a popular destination for freed blacks, who came to work in the fishing industries.

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, middle-class blacks began buying and renting summer homes in Oak Bluffs, eventually turning the town into a mecca for successful African Americans. Martin Luther King Jr. vacationed in Oak Bluffs, as did Joe Louis, Harry Belafonte and Dorothy West, a Harlem Renaissance writer. Barack Obama made regular trips to the town during his time in office.

Renaissance writers who came to the Vineyard and found inspiration near the water and thus named the beach that was once segregated from the white beach.

Yet despite its history and oceanfront location, Oak Bluffs has not experienced the same kind of real estate squeeze as other historically black beach communities, says Richard Taylor, a real estate executive and director of the Center for Real Estate at Suffolk University in Boston. He is also the author of “Martha’s Vineyard: Race, Property, and the Power of Place.” He credits local officials, who have tightened already demanding rules on residential development to fend off new buyers’ dreams of building larger homes closer to the ocean.

And while the town has seen a fair share of new buyers — white and black — the Vineyard’s long history of celebrating African American culture has kept it as a vibrant location for black homeowners, Taylor says. “We have film festivals and book clubs and churches all dedicated to the history and culture of African American life,” says Taylor, who has owned a home in the East Chop section of Oak Bluffs since the 1970s. He pointed to the popularity of the African American Heritage Trail of Martha’s Vineyard, a preservation effort started in 1997 by a local high school teacher. “Black culture is deeply integrated into a way of life on the Vineyard, and that’s helped keep this history vibrant and alive.”

In Sag Harbor, the influx of money underscores the challenges facing many historically black beaches. While home prices and the pace of sales are falling across the Hamptons, Sag Harbor is bucking the downward trend.

Last year, the median price of a house in the Hamptons fell 5.3 percent from 2015, while the number of sales was down 13.7 percent, according to appraiser Jonathan Miller. But Sag Harbor saw a 25 percent increase in the median home sale price in 2016 compared with a year earlier, rising from $1.2 million to $1.5 million.

Though homes in the historically black sections of Sag Harbor have not yet reached those sales levels, prices are rising, says Frank Wimberley, a 90-year-old artist who has kept a home in Sag Harbor Hills almost half his lifetime. Still active today, the abstract painter creates new works in a studio at the back of his modest beach bungalow.

“It’s worrisome because it’s beginning to feel like a takeover,” he says. “These areas were born when blacks were unwelcome in a lot of places. And for me and many longtime residents, they will always be places of special significance.”

Brannen, the broker with Douglas Elliman, is more blunt. “Rising home values are good, but eventually this part of Sag Harbor will look like just another upscale beach resort,” she says. “And I don’t think anyone wants that.”

Development Pressure Grows in Azurest, Sag Harbor Hills and Ninevah

SAGHARBOR EXPRESS.COM

By Peter Broody June 20, 2018

After a meeting between neighbors and the builder of a proposed house on the waterfront in Azurest, the Sag Harbor Zoning Board of Appeals now appears poised to approve variances to clear the way for a new, larger structure at 47 Terry Drive.

Meanwhile, in another case involving redevelopment in neighboring Sag Harbor Hills, the board chairman threw cold water on a proposal to tear down a modest 1940s house and replace it with something much larger 15 feet from its front property lines.

In the Azurest case, a modest and compact one-story house currently stands on the small waterfront parcel. Residents praised the board for having suggested last month that owner George Spadoro meet with members of the historically African-American communities of Azurest, Sag Harbor Hills and Ninevah, known collectively as SANS, to go over his plans.

Many residents fear that “zoning creep,” as one speaker called it at Tuesday’s continuation of the board’s hearing on the plan, is eroding the character of their formerly modest waterfront community.

“It’s not just about this house. It’s about others that are going to follow,” said Michael Pierce, who lives across the street.

Attorney Brian DeSesa speaking at the Sag Harbor Zoning Board of Appeals meeting on Tuesday. Peter Boody photo

As originally proposed, the structure would have protruded into the “sky plane” required by the village’s “pyramid” height law by about 7,200 cubic feet. As revised, it will protrude by 6,080 cubic feet.

The roofline of the existing house is 14 feet above grade. The proposed height of the new structure would be 19.6 feel above grade including two stories, one of which will be partly below grade. Brian DeSesa, attorney for Mr. Spadoro, said there are a number of redeveloped houses on Terry Drive that have two stories.

Residents expressed muted appreciation Tuesday for Mr. Spadoro’s modifications, but they challenged his lawyer’s assertion that he had “given up” plans for a swimming pool. “He can’t give up what he never had,” one speaker said.

The board closed the hearing on the application Tuesday and informally agreed the plans should be modified even further with a reduction in ceiling height to nine feet. The case was held over to next month’s meeting for revised plans.

“I’m not here to say I oppose” the application, said Mr. Pierce, “but I don’t totally support it.” The board “has to decide what’s too much,” he added.

Ray Redhead, who has a house next door, said he liked the plans and had “zero problems whatsoever.”

Renee Simons, a community activist who has helped lead the effort to win a national historic district designation for the SANS communities, said it was “important not to set any precedent.”

“Once it’s allowed,” she said of the proposal’s inclusion of a 36-inch-high “parapet” on the roof to hide mechanicals, “it’s going to be, ‘well, I want one too.’” She worried that it could be converted to a rooftop deck.

“These non-conforming lots get overdeveloped because there don’t seem to be any restrictions,” commented Will Sharp. He noted the proposal still impinges on the village’s pyramid law and that it “changes the fabric of the community” when people assume they can always obtain variances from the ZBA.

Michael Williams, president of the Azurest Property Owners Association, thanked the board “for asking George Spadoro to talk with us and consult with us before this meeting.” He said it was “a unique thing for us to do as a home owners association.”

“We are concerned about zoning creep,” he declared. “A lot of time and effort has been invested in creating the code and it does seem that codes are overridden by personal want.” He said the neighborhood was moving toward becoming “a very upscale and attractive seaside community like those in California.”

“I hope you pay attention” to variance applications that don’t weigh actual need versus mere “want.”

“We have to decide this one here today,” Mr. McGuire replied. “Are you okay with the changes?”

Mr. Williams questioned why the parapet had to be three feet high. Any lower and it wouldn’t hide the mechanicals, Mr. DeSesa said.

On another front, the board — after registering some resistance to the proposal — agreed to continue the hearing next month on plans for another property in the SANS area, 11 Gull Rock Road in the Sag Harbor Hills community.

Applicant Bruce Bronster wants to construct a new residence on the property in a location that will require two front-yard setback variances on the corner lot at Hillside Drive East.

The proposal to tear down the modest house from the 1940s that stands there now and replace it with a much larger structure has been conditionally approved by the Board of Historic Preservation and Architectural Review, according to Mr. Bronster’s attorney for the case, Mr. DeSesa, who presented the application.

Board Chairman McGuire, noting the proposed house will contain six to seven bedrooms, said it “could be built on this piece of land” in such a way that “it wouldn’t require any variances” and it could still be “a huge house. I wouldn’t vote for it.”

Sag Harbor Residents Try Preservation Push to Thwart ‘Mega-Mansions’

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

By Leslie Brody Photographs by Heather Walsh for The Wall Street Journal
June 24, 2018

SAG HARBOR, N.Y.—As Renée Simons drives through a patch of the Hamptons that has drawn black families for generations, she points with pride at modest homes that once hosted such luminaries as singer Lena Horne and poet Langston Hughes.

But Ms. Simons shakes her head when she sees construction equipment. Some homeowners in this section of town have cashed in, selling their properties to investors who have torn down older structures to put up multimillion-dollar luxury homes, and more are under way. Like many residents, Ms. Simons worries the community spirit in this traditionally black summer retreat is threatened by development as real-estate prices soar.

Ms. Simons is leading a group hoping to persuade state officials to designate the woodsy haven a historic landmark, to honor its cultural legacy and protect its old-fashioned feel.

“If we don’t say anything we’ll lose the essence of this neighborhood,” she says. ‘‘Children won’t remember what it took to be here.”

An excavator removes dirt from a new home construction site in the Sag Harbor Hills subdivision.

This spot grew after World War II, when discrimination barred African-Americans from getting mortgages and enjoying beaches elsewhere. It is among a handful of similar waterfront resorts, such as Oak Bluffs in Martha's Vineyard, Mass., and Highland Beach, Md.

Sag Harbor, a former whaling village, was suffering economically in the late 1940s, when a landowner sold a swath of unused land to two African-American sisters. They recruited buyers for lots for about $1,000 or less. Word-of-mouth drew others looking for a carefree respite from racial tensions.

Now roughly 300 houses make up three subdivisions called Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest and Ninevah. Some residents hope a landmark designation of those neighborhoods will push village officials to add teeth to restrictions on development and bar new homes that some see as out of scale.

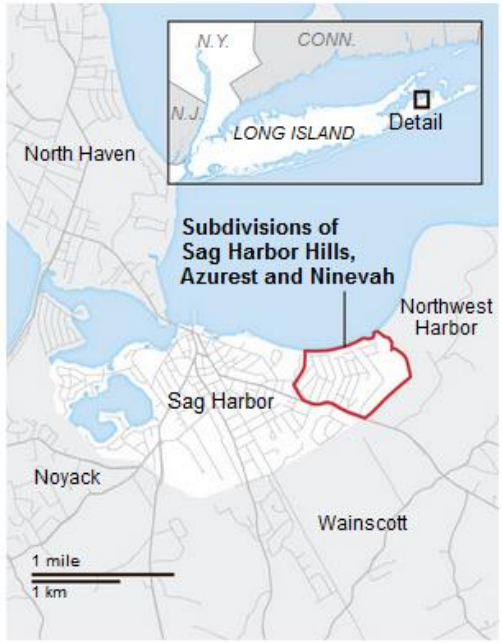
Susan Henriques, whose family has been here since 1946, is concerned about investors changing the feel of a place where many long timers have deep emotional attachments.

"It's not a color thing, it's a cultural thing," she said.

A landmark designation wouldn't change the construction regulations in Sag Harbor, but some residents hope it would inspire the village's Board of Trustees to take more protective steps.

Other residents, however, are concerned that adding new rules could limit their ability to make home improvements or hurt their property values in a hot real-estate market. Restaurateur B. Smith, for example, sold her home for nearly $8 million in April.

Mayor Sandra Schroeder declined to comment.



Source: Village of Sag Harbor


William Pickens III, 81, long-time resident, stands on the porch of his home built in the 1970s, in the African-American community of Sag Harbor Hills.

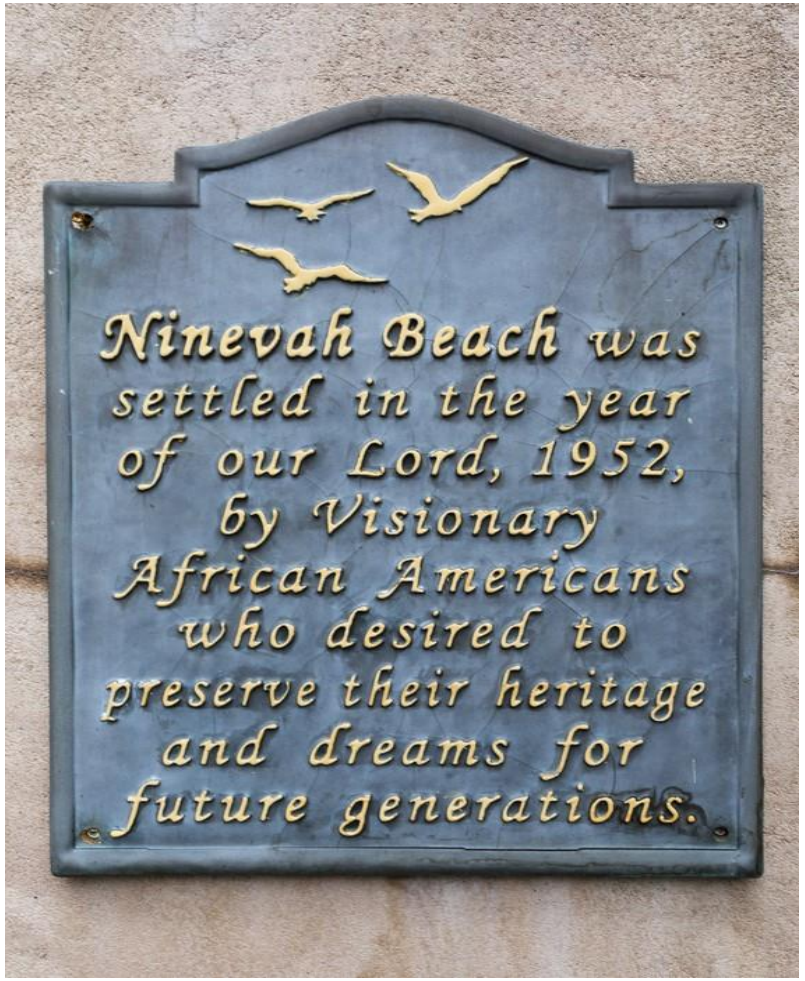
Builders and some residents say the new homes are beautiful upgrades that obey local codes, and, in some cases, replace bungalows that were falling apart. Hyman Rabinovitch, a retired urologist from one of the first white families to move into Ninevah 17 years ago, said the “magnificent” improvements made it more desirable.

“Times change, this is America,” he said. “No rules have been broken.”

Bruce Bronster, an attorney who said he bought 11 properties in the area with partners in the past three years, said he loves the area’s collegial nature and intends to move in with his family someday.

“I’ve been welcomed in this community by the vast majority of people who regularly come up to me and encourage all of the positive change,” Mr. Bronster said.

But tensions were clear at a hearing this month at the village’s Board of Historic Preservation and Architectural Review, which decides whether to approve construction projects. Mr. Bronster sought to demolish a home and build a six-bedroom house with a detached two-car garage and swimming pool.



A plaque marks the entrance to Ninevah Beach, on Lincoln St., in Sag Harbor, NY.

A half dozen residents got up to complain, saying developers have already cleared too many trees and are creating space for so many guests that the beach will get too crowded.

“I understand the anguish in this community,” said Anthony Brandt, chairman of the board. He said if houses meet local codes, the board must allow them, and so far the proposals were well designed. “We can’t save your community. You have to do it, and I know you’re working to that end.”

The board approved the new house.

Supporters of a landmark designation have raised $25,000 for a preservation consultant. They plan to document the roughly 300 properties with pictures and oral histories to bolster an application to the State Historic Preservation Office.

Peter Cook, an architect working on some of the new projects, disputed the assumption that buyers wouldn’t embrace the area’s friendly ways. He said: “It’s unfair to say that someone buying one of these houses doesn’t want to sit on their front porch and wave to you as you walk by.”

A truck delivering building supplies in front of a house under construction in the Ninevah Beach community, in Sag Harbor. Photo: Heather Walsh for The Wall Street Journal

Racially Charged Slurs Levied in Sag Harbor Hills

SAGHARBOR EXPRESS.COM

By Peter Broody July 11, 2018

In darkness less than 50 yards away, a young man in a group of 20 or more college-age young people carousing on the beach in Sag Harbor Hills at about 10:15 p.m. on the night of July 4 yelled the racial epithet "N____r" at a group of black people as they were having a barbecue and playing Charades on the deck of a waterfront house on Ninevah Place.

Sunny Hostin, a legal correspondent for ABC and a host of "The View" and her guests couldn't believe what they'd heard. She has been renting in the historically African-American community for 12 years and had always felt safe and secure there, she said.

"Everyone was so stunned. Everyone just jumped up. I thought I must have mis-heard," said Ms. Hostin in a phone interview on Tuesday. "I know everyone on that beach but these voices were not familiar."

One of her astonished guests called out, "Really?"

"Then they yelled it again," Ms. Hostin said. "We were so stunned."

"What?" one of her guests called.

"This is America!" came the reply, Ms. Hostin said. "We are patriots!"

"Yes, this is America," answered one of her guests, after which the people on the beach began shooting off fireworks, Ms. Hostin said.

The View's Sunny Hostin. Photo courtesy of ABC/Heidi Gutman

Ms. Hostin called the police. Officers “in one or two cars” arrived in minutes with emergency lights flashing, she said, but the crowd had scattered and police found no one on the beach.

But meanwhile Ms. Hostin, a former federal prosecutor specializing in child sex crimes and previously a trial attorney for the Department of Justice Anti-Trust Division, had gone to the edge of the back lawn and intercepted a group with her cellphone. She said she felt she “had to document this” and recorded a video of them passing by as she asked them about the incident. When she discussed it on “The View” on Monday, she aired the brief video.

“Were you the ones yelling the N-word?” she can be heard asking as people file by. “Oh no, there was someone else,” a young woman replies from off camera.

“Do you know who they were?” A young man replies from off-camera, “There were about 30 people here a half an hour ago but they left.”

One of Ms. Hostin’s friends is heard to ask, “And they are your friends?” He denied they were his friends.

About 30 minutes after police had left, shortly after midnight, Ms. Hostin said, the beachgoers “came back … They called us ‘pussies’ for calling the police,” she said. One of her guests called police back to the house. This time, Ms. Hostin said, the found “a couple of guys” on the beach and interviewed them. The officers also found car keys on the beach and took them to headquarters.

The next morning, a young woman came with her mother to the house looking for her keys and denied knowing anything about the incident.

Ms. Hostin said the Sag Harbor Police Department had taken the incident seriously and that Chief Austin J. McGuire had just called her personally to discuss it. “He assured me they were investigating,” she said.

Chief McGuire confirmed on Tuesday that he had spoken with Ms. Hostin and that the case was under investigation. He said the epithet had been “completely unprovoked,” which surprised him. “I thought there had been an argument about something but, no, Sunny said it was unprovoked.”

He declined to comment further except to say that whether or not a crime had been committed “depends on the manner” in which the N-word was used. “Just to use the word is not a crime,” he said.

He said he had been chief here for two and a half years and had been doing police work for 22 and never experienced “anything like this” outside of altercations during which epithets are uttered.

In Sag Harbor, he said, “You don’t expect that to happen because it’s us.”

Ms. Hostin said in an interview with Inside Edition on Monday, “In 12 years or more” of visiting Sag Harbor Hills every summer, “nothing like that has ever happened. That beach has always been our safe haven.”

Eligible For National Historic Status, SANS Is Subject Of Guild Hall Lecture

SAGHARBOR EXPRESS.COM

By Alisha Steindecker August 8, 2018

Eunice “Jackie” Vaughan longs for the days when the children in her Sag Harbor Hills neighborhood would call her “Nanny” or “Auntie Jackie.” The great, great grandmother and retired grade school teacher first came to Sag Harbor as a teenager in 1942, and her family bought a home in the coastal enclave of Sag Harbor Hills some three decades after that.

But the historically African American beachside communities of Sag Harbor Hills, Ninevah and Azurest — collectively known as SANS — have changed since that time.

SANS community members gathered at Guild Hall in East Hampton on Saturday afternoon to hear Andrew Kahrl — associate professor of history and African American studies at the University of Virginia, and author of “The Land Was Ours” and “Free The Beaches” — discuss the importance of sustaining black beach resorts in African American life.

They also learned that all three SANS neighborhoods are eligible for national historic designation, following the completion in March of a survey of the roughly 300 properties in the area. The next step, according to Julian Adams, the director of community preservation services at the State Historic Preservation Office, is to turn that eligibility into a formal nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. He expects that to materialize early next year.

Andrew Kahrl presented a talk about historically African American beach communities on Saturday. Alisha Steindecker photo

“These were places where African Americans could enjoy their fleeting moments of leisure and dignity on their own terms, places where they could get a rest from white racism,” Mr. Kahrl said of beachside communities across America, including Highland Beach and Carr’s Beach in Maryland, Hilton Head in South Carolina, Oak Bluff’s in Martha’s Vineyard, Amelia Island in Florida and Gulfside in Mississippi. He estimated that at various points there were over 100 such communities in existence, though that number is constantly being revised. “These were not accommodations to the world of Jim Crow, they were in defiance of it.”

Mr. Kahrl explained at length that several African American beachside communities, much like SANS, were founded in the 1940s by those looking to escape the racism that often prevented them from enjoying public beaches, at a time when Jim Crow was strictly enforced in the South and subtler forms of segregation persisted in the North. It was still a decade before the Civil Rights Movement took full effect and African Americans wanted — and needed — to create safe places for themselves where they could go cool down during the summer months.

But it didn’t take long, Mr. Kahrl said, for white Americans to realize that there was black demand for outdoor leisure spaces. After World War II, when coastal real estate became some of the most sought after, they tried to capitalize on the demand.

“It’s important to remember that Jim Crow was first and foremost a system of economic exploitation, one that was made possible by political domination and social ostracism,” Mr. Kahrl said. “If there was ever a way to make money off of black people, you could be sure a white man was there to try it.”

The crowd at Guild Hall absorbed that statement, mumbling and stirring in their seats.
At the time that the SANS communities were settled in the 1940s and 50s, Sag Harbor was a financially distressed village. Black American professionals, including lawyers, doctors, engineers and professors, bought parcels of land there for a few thousand dollars, though they did not have the advantage of taking out mortgages from the bank like white Americans did.

But the increasing demand in recent years for coastal real estate in the Hamptons has attracted outsiders who many in the SANS communities say don’t value the history of the place because they either don’t know it or don’t understand it as part of American history. That’s partly why SANS is vying for official historic recognition.

“The majority of homes here are still in the original families’ hands for two, three generations, and it’s something that we felt that if we didn’t document it, it would disappear,” said Renee Simons, who coined the term SANS and has been a leading figure in the community’s push for recognition. “We hear stories of blacks but it’s mostly very negative on TV. You never hear about the group of people who really founded an area and built second homes. And if you don’t hear now, you will not hear.”

Indeed, new homes that are upwards of 4,000 or 5,000 square feet have emerged in the area, overshadowing modest beach houses that average 1,400 square feet.

Ms. Simons explained that SANS has undertaken a task of documentation of notable people who both lived in and visited the area, which could help reinforce that the communities deserve historic recognition. Among these individuals were Lena Horne, a singer and movie star; Langston Hughes, a famous writer, poet and playwright; Dr. William Pickens Sr., an organizer of the NAACP in 1909; and, General Colin Powell, a former U.S. Secretary of State.

William Pickens III, who is almost 82 years old and says he has spent nine tenths of his life in Sag Harbor, fondly recalls riding bikes with the "honorable General Powell." It was a time when he knew all of "the cousins and the aunts and the grandparents" in the area, he said. "That is a tapestry of humanity…and that's what we have here. We have community."

While Mr. Kahrl explained the many similarities of the SANS communities to other African American beach resorts nationwide, he also said the residents of SANS are quite notable. They are engaged in politics and willing to make their voices heard. They are not sitting back and watching change happen, but they are actively working to make sure it's the kind of change they want.

"Many of these actions take place without the public noticing, or at least without the type of pushback that is needed to prevent developers from simply scooping up as much properties as they can," Mr. Kahrl said in an interview.

That's not the case with SANS.

"One of the things that we can pride ourselves on as a community [is] we have been very present at many levels, whether it's board meetings, whether it's [Sag Harbor Village Historic Preservation & Architectural Review] meetings, whether we continue to hold up the torch with making sure that our history is known," said Dr. Georgette Grier-Key — the executive director of Eastville Community Historical Society — who has also been actively involved in SANS's pursuit of historical recognition. Eastville is another historically African American community in Sag Harbor.

Mr. Kahrl emphasized in an interview, like many residents explained themselves, that the SANS communities are not objecting to change.

"Change happens, it's a question of what type of change happens and who benefits from it and who loses," he said. "They don't object to new neighbors; what type of neighbors are coming in here? Do they want to be neighbors?"

Walking in his Sag Harbor Hills neighborhood before the lecture, Mr. Pickens stopped to fix a fallen-down post on a neighbor's property meant to protect the grass. He explained that it's difficult to get to know his new neighbors on a personal level, a connection he is used to having, and one that is important to him.

"All these homes put up trees so you can't even see them — privacy is something that the newcomers seem to want to have," he said. "I say, where's the sense of belonging, where's the sense of enjoying each other?"

"We didn't have fences, you know."

Likewise, Aloysius Cuyjet, another SANS community member, said he's used to seeing post-it notes stuck on his home that ask if he's willing to sell. "This is the one place where the masks would come off when we were growing up," he said to a round of applause. "I think the value of that at least for me personally transcends any dollar transaction that might occur."

While historic designation of the SANS neighborhoods will not legally prevent unwanted change, Mr. Kahrl explained that it's a first step to empowering a group of people with a sense of purpose that can be transferred between generations.

"It has an effect that isn't written into law but it can certainly work to help ensure that that history is not going to be simply eroded," he said. In Highland Beach, Maryland, for example — which was founded by Frederick Douglass's son — historic recognition "stamped an identity on that stretch of the shoreline as being an historically black beach community — and one that has a rich history that is in need of protection."

"They recognized that history can be a powerful force in the present," he added.

A sense of urgency to keep community alive and to ensure that the SANS story is recognized as an American story — and not just an African American story — was an ever-present feeling throughout the lecture at Guild Hall on Saturday. Though community members acknowledge the power of outside forces such as rising real estate taxes that can at times pressure families to sell their homes, it appeared that they would not do so without a fight.

"When I greet people in the morning, I say, 'I'm not moving — how are you doing today?'" Ms. Simons joked, to a chorus of laughs.