

OPINIONCOMMENTARY**GUEST ESSAYS**

It's time Sag Harbor recognizes these Black communities as a historic district



Millie Brown waters plants in her garden in the Ninevah Beach neighborhood of Sag Harbor on Aug. 8, 1974. Credit: Newsday/Ike Eichorn

By Renee V.H. Simons, Debbie Jackson, and Bernadette McKetney-Brown

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The history of Long Island includes the well-known and insidious use of illegal redlining against people of color. These practices prevented Black people and others from enjoying the many benefits of the

GI Bill for veterans who served in World War II, obtaining bank mortgages for home purchases despite financial worthiness, and using private or even publicly funded recreation facilities.

In response to being banned from white beach communities, two Ivy League-educated Black women, architect and educator Amaza Lee Meredith and her older sister, schoolteacher Maude Terry, led groups of friends and relatives to purchase second homes and plan a “resort” community from scratch on undeveloped land in Sag Harbor. Other similar subdivisions were formed on adjacent land. These new Sag Harbor individuals — with cash — negotiated land and construction deals to build homes, formed associations, and engaged in cooperative funding arrangements.

The process began in 1947 and resulted in the formation of Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest and Ninevah Beach. In recognition of their significance, the three communities were added to both the New York State and national historic registries in 2019. That was wonderful, but those designations are honorific. They do not offer any legal protection or preservation. Now it's time for the village of Sag Harbor to designate these communities — known

as the SANS Historic District — as the treasures they are in order to legally preserve them.

In 1994, Sag Harbor's Historic District, which covers the entire business district, expanded east but stopped short of Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest and Ninevah Beach. That was acceptable. In general, homes or areas must be at least 50 years old to be considered for Historic District designation. The SANS subdivisions — Azurest was incorporated in 1947, Sag Harbor Hills in 1950, and Ninevah Beach in 1952 — were slightly younger and not eligible for consideration in 1994.

At the time, though, the village noted that the three subdivisions “deserve future study as early resort communities built for African Americans.” That was a fair assessment.

But the study never occurred as the village ignored or dropped the ball for nearly 30 years.

In December 2022, the village board voted to establish the Historically Black Beach Communities Overlay District for the three communities — which is nice but not the same as establishing a locally designated SANS Historic District. By avoiding making a decision on the Historic District preservation, the village simply addressed

landscaping preservation and house size limitations. Overlay zoning alone will not preserve these communities into the future. The overlay zoning law actually allows unlimited demolition which is counterintuitive to preserving these planned communities which are listed in the Library of Congress.

With real estate agents and others seeking to buy properties in the SANS Historic District, it's important that the character and culture of these communities, born in response to discrimination, be protected and preserved. Residents of Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest and Ninevah have self-funded, met all petitioning bench marks, and provided numerous levels of documentation to the village.

Now it's time for Sag Harbor Village to do the right thing and stop kicking the SANS Historic District designation “can” down the road.

This guest essay reflects the views of Renee V.H. Simons, Debbie Jackson, and Bernadette McKetney-Brown, the president, vice president and treasurer, respectively, of the SANS Sag Harbor Organization.