

On Long Island, a Beachfront Haven for Black Families

In the 1930s, a group of trailblazing African-Americans bought plots for themselves in Sag Harbor, establishing a close-knit community that's spanned multiple generations.



By Sandra E. Garcia

Oct. 1, 2020

WHILE VACATIONING ONE summer in the late 1930s, Maude Terry decided to go fishing. On her way to Gardiners Bay in eastern Long Island, she came across a secluded, underdeveloped, marshy, wooded area that faced a beach. Immediately, she felt a sense of tranquillity in the sylvan space, surrounded by tall old oak and walnut trees. Green shrubbery and weeds grew amid the sand at her feet, and her skin turned sticky in the salt air. It was heaven.

The T List A weekly roundup of what the editors of T Magazine are noticing and coveting right now. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

At the time, Terry was a Brooklyn schoolteacher who spent most summers with her husband, Frederick Richards, and her daughter, Iris, who were both doctors at Harlem Hospital; her sister Amaza Lee Meredith, the chair of the art department of Virginia State University in Ettrick, Va. (who was also one of the first Black female architects in the United States), would occasionally join them. The sisters had grown up in Lynchburg, Va., and lived most of their lives up and down the East Coast: Come summer, Terry would usually rent a cottage in Eastville, an area on the outskirts of Sag Harbor, the beachfront village that — although it straddles the rich, mostly white enclaves of Southampton and East Hampton — has always remained a bit more subdued, at least compared to Long Island's other storied warm-weather escapes, which begin at the eastern edge of Queens and stretch more than 100 miles out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Just over two square miles large, Sag Harbor had grown into a bustling port town by the late 1700s, after an influx of whalers, ship captains and their crews had settled in the area. But until the mid-1900s, Eastville remained an outlier, several blocks that were singular in the region for their embrace of diversity, welcoming Native Americans, manumitted Black people and European immigrants from France, Portugal's Azores and Cape Verde, Africa. The neighborhood was one of few places where Black and Native Americans could coexist without experiencing daily, virulent oppression. Eastville, in fact, had been a forerunner in welcoming Black men who were formerly enslaved, many of whom found work in oceanside towns as whalers, fishermen or shipbuilders. The women, meanwhile, worked as seamstresses, launderers or bakers to earn money while their husbands were at sea for years at a time. Often, the wives were the property owners so that they could keep their home and family together in the event that a ship didn't make it back, which offered these women unprecedented agency.

Even long after the abolition of slavery, most Black people in the United States had difficulty becoming homeowners, primarily because they were discriminated against when they tried to get bank loans. Their mere presence in a neighborhood was also thought to devalue property, so many white residents wouldn't live near them. In Eastville, things were different: In 1840, in response to segregated conditions at Sag Harbor's churches, Black people were even able to build their own church, St. David A.M.E Zion, which is believed to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Terry and Meredith — who first began coming to Eastville in the 1930s alongside dozens of other Black families who spent their summers in rented cottages and bungalows — also hoped to buy their own homes there. And so that day, after fishing, Terry decided she and her sister should attempt to purchase the 20-acre plot she had discovered. They soon learned it was owned by Elsie and Daniel Gale, a white mother and son, of nearby Huntington, who had wanted to sell it but had been unsuccessful, partly because it was built on reclaimed marshland and thus unsuitable for growing vegetables. Terry, however, saw more in the land than other prospective buyers: She envisioned a place where Black families could rest, grow, raise families and simply exist without the burden of systemic oppression.



William Pickens III with his son John on their private beach. Jon Henry

In 1939, Terry, 52 at the time, and Meredith, 44, brokered a deal: They promised to find buyers for the 70 parcels that the Gales had platted, most of which were 50 by 100 to 125 feet, recruiting Black families and friends, many of them from Brooklyn, to move in. In doing so, they created not only the oldest historically Black subdivision in Sag Harbor but one of the most enduring Black beachfront communities in America, alongside Highland Beach in Maryland, which was founded in 1893 by Charles Remond Douglass, a son of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, where prominent people — including the Obamas — have vacationed since the turn of the 20th century. In honor of the vision the sisters had, they named their new community Azurest: a “heavenly peace, blue rest, blue haven,” as Meredith wrote in her sister’s eulogy.

WITHIN AZUREST, Black people could buy land for \$700 to \$1,000 (around \$13,000 to \$18,500 today). In 1947, the Gales cordoned off 200 more lots to create a second section, under the same terms offered for the first: Working with two friends — Dorothy Spaulding, a lawyer, and James Smith, a civil engineer — the sisters created contracts and bylaws that deterred white people from intruding, not that the wetlands were that desirable to them once Black families started arriving. The four partners soon established the Azurest Syndicate, incorporating themselves as a financial institution that helped sell the land at a profit to cover their 10-year mortgage with the Gales, which was paid off in 1962. (Terry died six years later; Meredith died in 1984 at Azurest South, the house she had designed and built for herself, which is on the Virginia State University campus.)







The social worker, psychotherapist and writer Lora René Tucker. Jon Henry





Brooke Williams and her daughter, Ada. Jon Henry

Professional, middle-class Black people whom the sisters knew from sororities at Columbia University's Teachers College, where they both studied, and Fort Greene, the neighborhood where Terry taught at Brooklyn Technical High School, as well as from previous jobs and unions, soon started to summer in Sag Harbor. Once Azurest was nearly full, a group that called themselves the Sag Harbor Beach Development Company worked with white landowners throughout the 1950s to create two more Black subdivisions: Sag Harbor Hills and Ninevah, both comprising similarly sized plots of the then devalued land that hugs Sag Harbor Bay.

All told, there are 195 buildings in the subdivisions — which, alongside several other sites and structures, collectively go by the acronym SANS — all erected before circa 1977 across the 154 acres that lie north of Sag Harbor village's Hampton Street, which still divides the predominantly white community from the historic Black one. Most of these houses reflect the dominant architectural styles from the eras in which they were built: They're single-story, traditional ranch-style, saltbox or midcentury-modern wood-frame homes that the residents often designed themselves, creating variation from street to street, though some of them share the same gray, sea-weathered shingle or clapboard exteriors.



A map outlining the SANS subdivisions — Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest and Ninevah — of Sag Harbor, N.Y. The New York Times

With little access to credit, those who bought property had to get creative. The Azurest Syndicate underwrote the land for potential owners, allowing them to pay for it slowly, starting with a \$100 down payment. In the early days, some landowners ordered kits for homes with gabled roofs and wraparound porches from Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogs for around \$500, then assembled them with help from friends. Others waited to build on their land until they could afford it or made structures piecemeal. J. Howard Payne Jr., a lawyer and former naval officer, purchased his Ninevah property in 1954 for \$600, paying \$200 upfront. Over the next few years, he built his own house using plans that he saw in an advertisement in Popular Mechanics, according to his son Michael Payne, a 75-year-old former attorney for the Department of Justice who still recalls visiting the plot as a child and seeing the surprise on his father's face when he realized he could buy something that faced a picturesque marsh. The family rented their home in Harlem, but J. Howard's wife, Natalie,

used the money she had saved from the housing allotment funds that she received from her husband's naval service to invest in a home. "He threw up the house here for about \$5,000," says his son, who now owns and spends summers on the property. Michael recalls going to the nearby Southampton Lumber Co. with his father, where he watched him arrange a payment plan for the materials he needed to build his modest, boxy home, where the family started summering in 1957. For the Paynes and some of their neighbors, the lumberyard "acted, in effect, like a bank," Michael says.



Brooke Williams and Josh Liberson's kitchen. Jon Henry

Because the lot was low-lying and prone to flooding, J. Howard decided to invert the typical structure, situating the main living areas on the top floor, which made it easier to enjoy views of nearby Little Northwest Creek. In 2010, Michael and his wife, Susan Henriques-Payne — who is 70 and also grew up spending summers in Sag Harbor at her family's home in Chatfield's Hill, another Black subdivision created around the same time as Azurest that has seen considerable new construction by white interlopers in the past 20 years — razed and rebuilt his father's house, raising the entire structure several feet and adding floor-to-ceiling windows so they could better observe the passing egrets, herons, swans, foxes and raccoons. Though the 2,300-square-foot home is now in the Modernist style, with a flat roof and large glass windows, the couple still wanted to pay respects to their elders: The old kitchen sink, for instance, was moved downstairs, where Michael cleans and scales his catch from fishing trips; the bubble glass that his father had installed in a window is now used for the outdoor shower, where visitors can wash their feet after coming back from the beach. From the beginning, "it was about having a vision and pulling together," says Michael. "Instead of spending money every summer sending your kids to camp, you invest in a property like this, and it's safe and there are people like you."

TODAY, THE SANS subdivisions have a distinct, summer-camp-like atmosphere. There aren't many streetlights, and where there's not pavement, there's sand. The sounds of deer rummaging through backyards and rustling fallen leaves crackle in the air. The houses, though increasingly distinct from each other, share a sense of common history: Even the fully rebuilt ones appear lived in and comfortable, like they've already raised a family. Together, they've survived financial, racial and interfamilial disputes, and are reminders of the tenacity of the people who developed this terrain.



The artist Michael A. Butler surrounded by books and historical documents pertaining to the Eastville community. Jon Henry

The original Black families who purchased homes in Sag Harbor were able to transcend the economic stratification that still exists between Black and white Americans. (As of 2016, the net worth of a white family was on average nearly 10 times that of a Black family, according to the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public-policy organization.) These Sag Harbor pioneers not only had the opportunity to accrue intergenerational wealth but to learn from one another: about the schools and universities their children should attend, the neighborhoods they should buy into, the artists they should support, the professional careers they should pursue and the new spaces that they, together, could figure out how to navigate.

Indeed, the subdivisions provided some of the country's first Black middle-class families a chance to learn how to be rich in a place where their status was both accepted and encouraged, as opposed to questioned, resented, envied or, worse, actively denied — as was the case in most other majority-white East Coast coastal communities. Several of these Sag Harbor families, a large portion of whom have managed to maintain and pass down their homes over the past 80 years, through one or two generations, have become fully intertwined: Payne and Henriques-Payne are one of a handful of married couples who live in the subdivisions today who both spent time there in their youth; they reconnected later in life and bonded in part because they shared the same respect for and history in this Black enclave, and remained committed to keeping its essence alive. As each summer passes, the young and teenage children of those former generations are now developing their own beachfront traditions and bonds, which continue off-season, back in New York City. Everywhere, there's a shared understanding and respect for the idea of community: a recognition that all they have is each other.



Michael Payne and his wife, Susan Henriques-Payne, in their home overlooking the bay, on the eastern edge of the village. Jon Henry

Richard and Dorothy Granger, both dentists in Glen Cove, Long Island, came to Sag Harbor Hills in the early 1950s. Their daughter, Beverly Granger, 70, a retired dentist and ceramist who was born a year before her parents built their home, now lives in a renovated 2,500-square-foot, two-story house on the original plot of land with her 73-year-old husband, Aloysius Cuyjet, a retired physician who grew up in Sag Harbor. Granger renovated the home in 2003, after her mother died, puncturing the exterior with square windows and adding sliding glass doors that provide views of Sag Harbor Bay beyond her own private beach. Back in 1951, when the home was completed, it was modest, with sketchy wiring and inadequate heating. Back then, she remembers being able to skip across the properties and through the woods to meet her friends.

She also recalls a time when there was no way to tell where one house ended and another began. All the children in the subdivisions belonged to every adult that lived there. If a child scraped her knee in front of the Grangers' house, she could walk in scuffed and walk out with a bandaged wound. If one mother cooked, all the kids nearby ate. If one mother was on the beach, all the children were looked after. "I felt loved there in a way that, now having lived in many other communities, I realize was unusual and incredibly empowering," says Brooke Williams, 54, who grew up spending summers just outside Azurest and now owns her own small house in Sag Harbor, where she spends summers with her husband, Josh Liberson, 49, and their daughter, Ada. "Our pride of place — of the various achievements of our friends and family — and our cohesion and generosity toward each other came from a profound sense of love," she says.



Family photos and works by Claude Lawrence and Thornton Dial in E.T. Williams's 19th-century Eastville home. Photograph by Jon Henry. Clockwise from bottom left: Thornton Dial, watercolor and ink on paper; Claude Lawrence, "It's Over and Yet," 2014, Acrylic on Canvas, Copyright Elnora Inc.; Claude Lawrence, "Saturday Subdued," 2014, acrylic on canvas, Copyright Elnora Inc.

Brooke's father, E.T. Williams, who is 82, first came here in the 1940s. He lives in a nearly 200-year-old house that has been inhabited only by free Black men since it was purchased by David Hempstead in 1869, and then by William Trott in 1922, and then by himself in 1968. Within 10 years, the Williamses bought seven other homes nearby, creating a kind of family compound: Brooke's two-story, 1,500-square-foot shingled original cape — where her grandfather used to stay as the then-owners' guest — is a stone's throw from her father's; her younger sister, Eden, 51, has a nearby cottage that once belonged to their grandmother. E.T., an avid art collector who grew up in Brooklyn and has sat on the board of several major museums, spends half the year in Sag Harbor with his wife, Auldlyn, who is 80, in their two-story, 1,650-square-foot clapboard cottage, its walls hung with paintings by prominent Black American abstractionists such as Romare Bearden and Claude Lawrence. "You go out there, and you've got a whole mess of summer friends," Brooke says. "We're lucky to spend that kind of time."

WHEN THESE FAMILIES first set down roots in Sag Harbor, many parts of the country still had separate water fountains for white and Black people. Throughout the United States, there were unwritten laws, ghost rules that were understood and barely spoken, which Black people abided by to ensure their own survival. While the children in SANS ran through the woods discovering Native American trails, Black kids around the country were desperate for a place where they could exist without having to discover the weight of the color of their skin. Indeed, leisure spaces were some of the most segregated, racially fraught places in the Jim Crow era, according to Andrew Kahrl, a professor at the University of Virginia and the author of "The Land Was Ours" (2012), a history of how Black communities near beaches were pushed out by white people looking to build their own wealth.



E.T. Williams surrounded by works of the painter Claude Lawrence. Photograph by Jon Henry. On wall, from left: Claude Lawrence, "Citizenry," 2015, Copyright Elnora Inc.; Claude Lawrence, "the Ritz," 2016, Copyright Elnora Inc.

Places like Sag Harbor ultimately provided a haven for Black people that sought an escape from the daily insults of a racist society. It allowed them to convene and find pleasure and community in a time when survival was the priority and joy was an afterthought. Beyond the beach, one of the ways they did so was by joining national organizations like the Comus Social Club or the Guardsmen — or, for the children, Jack and Jill of America — which allowed rich Black families across the country to get to know one another, whether on winter ski weekends or group trips to Panama. Because the families in Sag Harbor were unlike many Black families in America, they stayed close to one another, not only to share experiences but also because they had a shared — if “very privileged,” as E.T. puts it — way of life. “Places like Sag Harbor played an important role in both sustaining Black communities as well as helping to provide outlets for socialization and leisure,” Kahr adds. “This is an important component of how African-Americans worked to resist racism as well as transcend the strictures of a segregated society.”

Much like schools at the time, the country’s pools and beaches were also segregated. While the American Red Cross offered Black children swimming lessons in Sag Harbor during the summer, other Black families around the nation stayed away from such spaces in order to avoid persecution by white people who monopolized the coast. In fact, the racist ideas and stereotypes that white people held were amplified in recreational settings. Children were not exempt. And spots where people could go to enjoy themselves and relax were, then as now, some of the most heavily policed. Many counties and towns didn’t bother creating legal ordinances that restricted beaches or public pools to white residents, but it was understood that Black people who challenged the norm would be met with violence. In Sag Harbor, meanwhile, the children could laze on their private beaches or congregate at Havens Beach, the only one open to the public, whiling away their summer days.





A longtime resident, the ceramist Beverly Granger, in front of the beachfront home she inherited from her parents. Jon Henry



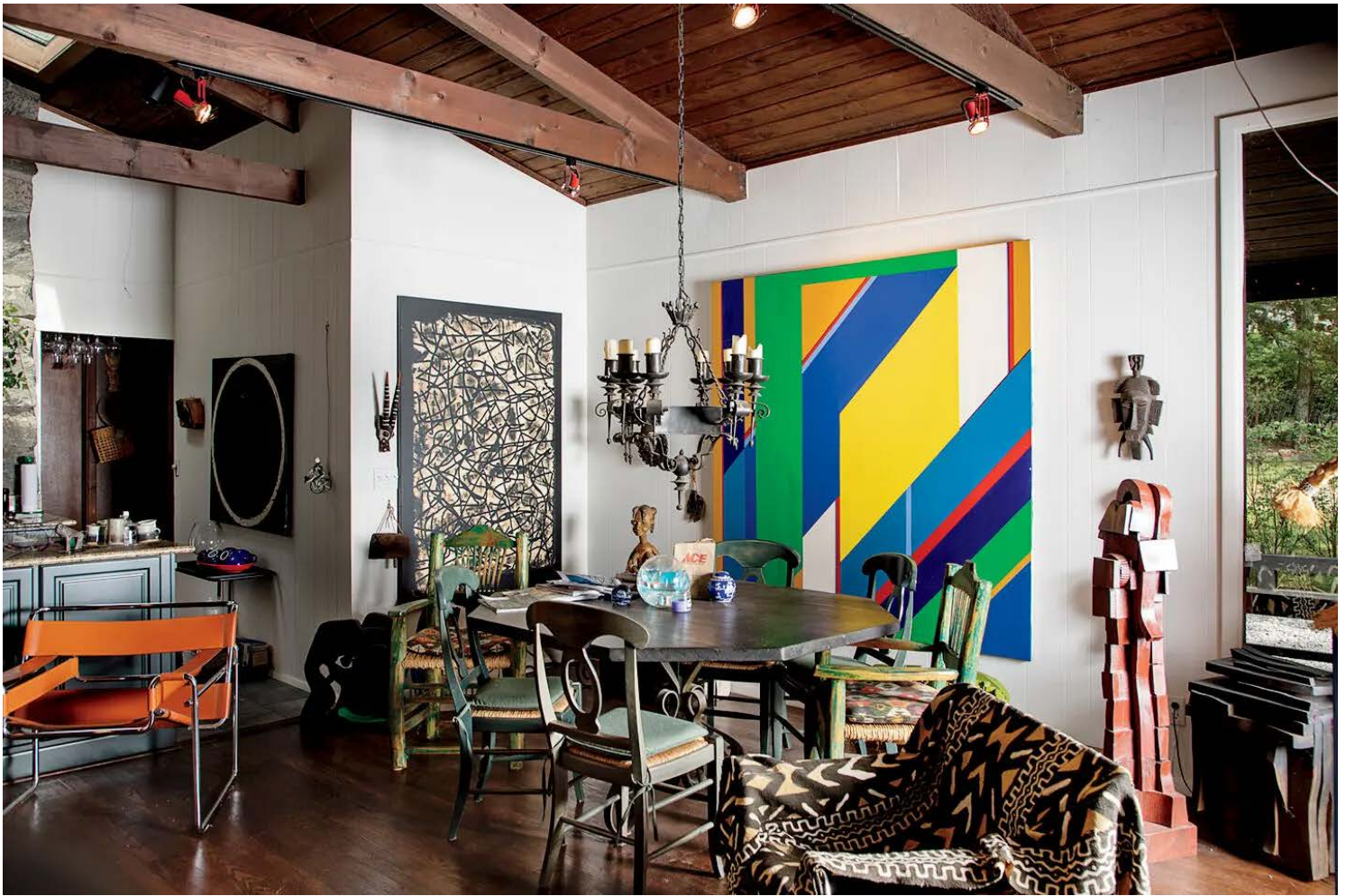


The altar of the St. David A.M.E. Zion Church, founded in 1840 by African-Americans and Native Americans. Jon Henry

That doesn't mean, however, that the SANS children weren't haunted by racism when they traveled through the whiter parts of town. "We didn't go alone," Cuyjet recalls. "We always traveled in groups." Payne remembers being around 13 years old when he went into the village with his father for a haircut. The Payne men could easily be mistaken for white people because of their light skin, which Payne attributes to a few white ancestors. The barber told the Paynes and a white customer that appointments were required, so the latter got up to leave but was told he could wait; when the Paynes said they would, too, the barber sent for the police. There are now laws, of course, meant to prevent such incidents, even if racism is no less rampant, but Payne will never forget that experience — and the double-consciousness, as W.E.B. Du Bois famously called it in "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903), that it forced him to confront at a young age.

Most of the subdivisions' current residents do not feel those same pressures set upon them, or their children, as they did when they were teens. Granger told me that she feels just as comfortable on Main Street as she does on her private beach. This past spring, Sag Harbor staged its largest Black Lives Matter demonstration, a low-key affair that included a march. And as the 2,200-person village — more than 91 percent of which is white, according to the recent census — has continued to evolve, becoming more like the posher Hamptons with which it shares the seacoast, it no longer intimidates the Black residents who are an indelible part of its fabric. "I am a member of a discriminated minority," Payne says. "But there is no way that I can sit here and say, 'Oh, I feel set upon, this country has treated me badly.'"

THESE DAYS, the Sag Harbor subdivisions are increasingly under threat, as Hamptons developers attempt to buy multiple lots so they can combine them and build outsize homes. And the SANS neighborhoods aren't all Black anymore, though several of the founding families remain.



Works by Frank Wimberley in his and his wife's dining room. Photograph by Jon Henry. On wall: Frank Wimberley, "Flotsam," 2003, courtesy of Berry Campbell; Frank Wimberley, "Catcher," 1987, courtesy of Berry Campbell.

Last year, the subdivisions received national and state landmark status, which are mostly celebratory designations. Some longtime residents are now hoping that Sag Harbor will name the subdivisions a historic district, which will protect the area's character and culture and limit renovation in the area. But infighting between Black homeowners — those who welcome the landmarking and those who are afraid it will keep them from being able to change and remodel their homes in the future — has caused friction. "We're all having a conversation about whether there should be a preservation measure," says Kathleen Mulcahy, Sag Harbor's mayor.

Since most of the properties in the Black subdivisions do not have a shared vernacular, as they do in the whiter parts of the village — which is dominated by 19th-century frame structures on smaller flatland lots — local officials are hesitant to secure the subdivisions' future. "We have no legal standing," says Renee V.H. Simons, 71, who has a home in Sag Harbor Hills and helped lead the fund-raising effort for the national and state landmark applications. "We've got to figure out how to define and preserve our concept."

For now, at least, the neighborhoods' legacy remains intact. On a steamy Monday in July, down Granger's private beach, a mother sat in her chair as her two children played close to the shore, their heads protected by bucket hats as they chased minnows glinting in the water. Up the hill, the family who lives next door was eating breakfast at a picnic table in the backyard, laughing as they drank their coffee. Granger and her husband were inside, listening to music. And in the morning's gentle light, a particularly perilous summer felt, for the moment, both carefree and bucolic — just as the beachgoers hoped it might be.

FALL DESIGN AND LUXURY OCTOBER 4, 2020
