Sag Harbor: Escape haven for jetsetter New Yorkers

Pictured are some of the homes in Azurest and Ninevah Beach, all of which are less than half block from the waterfront beaches.

By Michael Patterson

When New York City's jetsetters and high-powered executives want to relax and enjoy a weekend or a few weeks in the sun by the seashore in the summer, they take off to the fashionable Hamptons, a cluster of small towns and villages on the extreme eastern end of Long Island, a narrow, 100-mile-long strip of land that juts out from the city straight into the Atlantic Ocean.

These quaint towns, many of which have a history that dates back to the 17th Century, contain the summer homes of some of the world's most wealthy individuals.

The area has remained a choice location for vacation homes because of its close proximity to the sea, its privacy and a minimum of commercial development.

Thousands of acres of virgin forest still line the coastline, despite its nearness to the most highly developed city in the world.

The vast majority of the summer residents of the Hamptons are white. However, nestled in the center of the Hamptons in a tiny, former whaling village called Sag Harbor, there is an enclave of middle to high-income black families who have settled on the choicest beach front property in the area.

These black families began settling in the village in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the black population of the village has been steadily growing since then.

Many of the most influential black families on the East Coast have their summer homes in Sag Harbor. Some of the more well-known individuals include, Earl Graves, the publisher of **Black Enterprise** Magazine; noted black novelist William Demby, author of "Love Story Black;" supermarket chain executive Bruce Llewellyn, the CEO of Fedco, a chain of 28 stores in New York City and William Pickens, III, a founding trustee and secretary of the United States-Japan foundation.

Other influential residents include prominent judges, doctors, lawyers and business owners. However, not all of Sag Harbor's black residents are wealthy.

Many of them are middle-class working people who worked hard over the years to be able to afford a place in the sun and surf away from the headaches and pressures of big city life.

One thing that makes Sag Harbor different from most of the municipalities in the United States is that it is one of the few places in which the black population is richer than the white population.

Most of the whites who reside in the village live in or near the downtown section; the majority of them reside in the village on a year-round basis, and most make their living by operating or working in local service industries or small retail businesses.

Sag Harbor's blacks reside in choice locations on or near the village's virgin beaches. They pay taxes, but they rarely use municipal services, such as schools and garbage collection.

Some of Sag Harbor's long-time black residents have begun to retire in the village, and they are beginning to become involved in local politics and municipal affairs, but for the most part, the village's black residents are in the area for "hot fun in the summertime."

"I like it because it is near the sea. It's a congenial community, and the people are warm," said Roger Butler, a New York City civil engineer who has owned a home in Sag Harbor for the past five years.

"I've been coming out here for the past 30 years," said Beatty Bullen, a retired New York City Transit Authority worker. "I grew up in Harlem, so this has always been wonderful for me — the water, green grass, the country living.

"There aren't many places in this country where blacks have beach front property." Bullen likes Sag Harbor so much that he retired in the village four years ago.

The village's black neighborhoods are divided into six main sections: Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest, Ninevah (these three areas are on or adjacent to the waterfront), Chatfield's Hill and Eastville, an historical black community, which dates back to the whaling days of the 19th Century.

The oldest development, with the exception of Eastville, is Azurest, which began to be populated shortly after World War II, when a white real estate developer, of Huntington, L.I., sold the property between the village's main road, Highway 114, and the beach, an area of about a square mile, to three black families from N.Y.C. — the Smith's, the Terry's and the Spaulding's.

These three families, in turn, sold the land to several other black families. News about the resort was spread primarily through word of mouth.

Sag Harbor Hills, Ninevah and Chatfield's Hill, two neighborhoods adjacent to Azurest, were developed in the same manner. People who owned property there would invite friends out for weekends, and they would end up purchasing land and homes. "I came out here for a look, liked it and decided to buy a house," Bullen remarked.

The village's newest black neighborhood, Hillcrest Terrace, is currently being developed by the same method. The houses in Hillcrest Terrace and the other four developments are very modern in style. They range in size from two-bedroom vacation type cottages to five-and six-bedroom luxury homes.

Most are situated on at least a half-acre of land, and range in price from $50,000 to over $300,000.

By contrast, many of the homes in the nearby areas of Easthampton, Southampton and Bridgehampton range in price from $100,000 to $2.5 million.

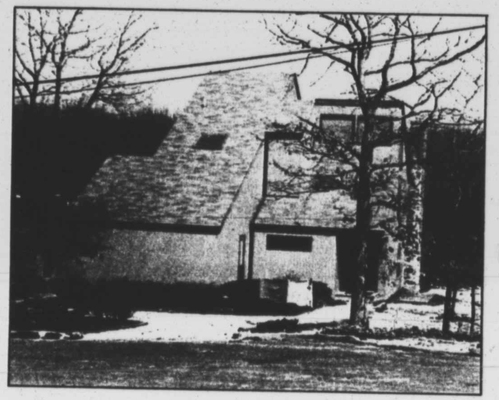
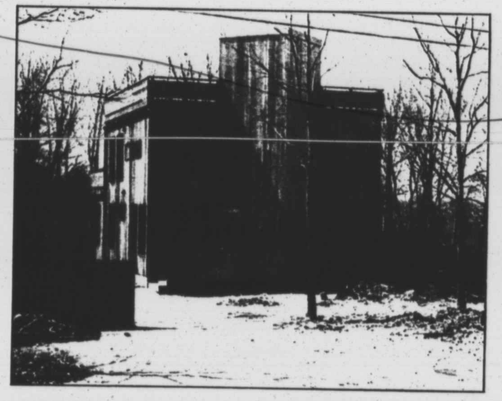
Eastville, a black neighborhood closer to the village's downtown than the other black areas, is an area rich in history. Eastville was settled by blacks who came to work in Sag Harbor during the mid-nineteenth Century, when the village was a thriving whaling port.

George E. Finckenor, a local historian, explained that whaling crews often contained significant numbers of Africans, who were prized for their ability as harpooners.

Many of these Africans decided to remain in the area, where they married women from Long Island's Shinnecock Indian tribe. Runaway slaves and fugitives from wrecked slave ships also settled there.

Currently, Eastville, with its picturesque colonial homes and A.M.E. Zion Church, which dates back to the 19th Century, is still a black area. St. David's A.M.E. Zion Church, which was built in 1840, was recently granted landmark status on the National Register of Historic Places. There are undocumented reports that St. David's was a stop on the Underground Railroad.

During the winter months, all of Sag Harbor's black areas have a very low population, with only 100 or so residents remaining in their homes. As soon as the weather begins to warm in the early Spring, the area begins to come alive.

By July, the homes, beaches and streets are filled with "summer people," who spend their invaluable vacation time socializing, swimming, riding in their boats and fishing in Long Island's productive ocean and bays.

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