

# Former Farming Families Feud

Wainscott subdivision called a 'noose' around 17th-century homestead

BY LEIGH GOODSTEIN

The Hand and Strong families have been neighbors in Wainscott since the 18th century, when the Hand family left East Hampton Village to farm in Wainscott.

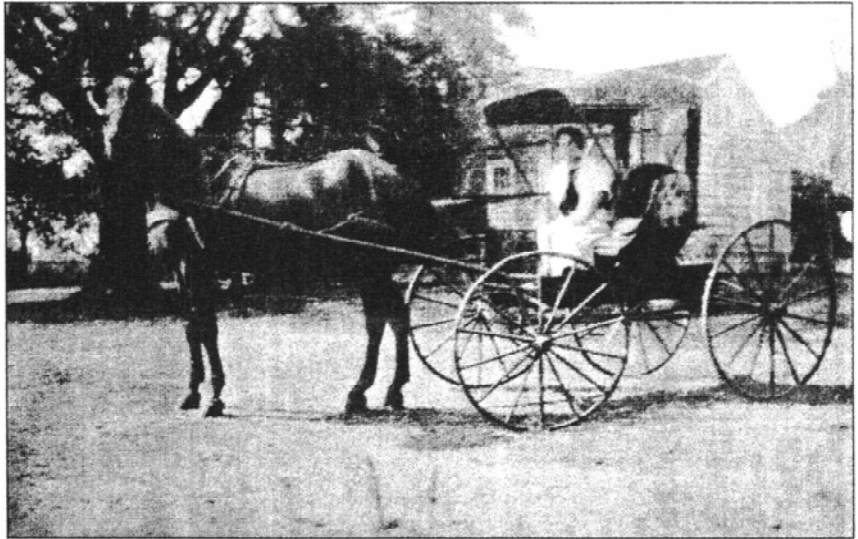
Today, John and Jeff Hand want to subdivide 20.7 acres they inherited from their father, Albert Hand Jr., into five lots, retaining two on which to live themselves. Five lots, Laurie Wiltshire of Land Planning Services told the East Hampton Town Planning Board in October, are the least the young men will need to provide them with the means to stay in the community.

Meanwhile, John Nealon is waiting to find out the fate of his own house, in which members of his mother's family, the Strongs, have lived for the past 300 years. Will it remain in its present setting, on five acres on Wainscott Hollow Road with 20 acres of farmland views, or will it become a solitary homestead set amid five south-of-the-highway-size houses?

Mr. Nealon fears that houses built on the Hands' farmland will encircle the historical Strong homestead and overpower it. Separating the house from the fields to the west would make it "an entirely different place," he said.

According to Mr. Nealon's attorney, Jeffrey Bragman of East Hampton, the Hands' farmland once was owned by the Strongs. Trails through Mr. Nealon's property open to the west to reveal the Hands' expansive farmland. A small cut in the brush on Mr. Nealon's property used to make room for a bench.

"I used to sit out there, but when they



Bessie Hallock Strong, John Nealon's grandmother, posed for a photo in 1913 next to the Strong family house.

*Courtesy of John Nealon*

started putting up those showcase houses, I took the bench away," Mr. Nealon said of the 10,000-square-foot residences beyond the Hand property, across Town Line Road in Southampton Town. "Twenty years ago, there was nothing there."

Thomas Strong, who immigrated from Taunton, England, in the mid-17th century, built the house as a workshop and later made it his home. Mr. Nealon inherited it from his grandmother. Since he moved there in 1984, Mr. Nealon has remodeled the kitchen and the bathroom and added a pool. Otherwise, the house remains in its original state.

As part of his crusade to gain recognition for Mr. Nealon's house by the town,

Mr. Bragman approached the state, asking it to add the house to the State and National Registers of Historic Places. "The state fell all over themselves to list this place," he said, and did so last August.

The Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities has also expressed concern over the fate of Mr. Nealon's property. Charla E. Bolton, a preservation advocate for the group, said in a letter to the planning board that the Hands' "ill-conceived subdivision plan . . . succeeds in severing the Nealon property from its historical context by ringing it with house lots."

However, Ms. Wiltshire, the Hand brothers' representative, disagrees.

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John Nealon, the owner of this 300-year-old house in Wainscott, stood on a porch added to the house in the early 19th century. *Leigh Goodstein*

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"This subdivision has many merits," she said in a letter to the planning board. "It preserves a local family and a working farm. It preserves historic structures and historic farmland views." About 15 of the 20 acres would be preserved as farmland under the proposed open-space subdivision.

In 2002, over 20 family members and friends rallied around the Hand brothers to support their subdivision proposal, and the town board granted an exemption from a subdivision moratorium then in place.

Everett Hand built a house and barn in the late 19th century. The Hand brothers sold the house and the lot on which it sat last year, and the house was torn down, but the barn still stands and is going to be preserved, according to Tara Burke, a senior planner for the town.

The Hands' first proposal to create eight lots was downsized later to the five they are proposing now. Ms. Wiltshire said John and Jeff Hand could not afford to build houses for themselves anywhere else in town.

"I don't want to take anything away from them," Mr. Nealon said last week. According to an architectural historian he hired, Stephen Bedford, Mr. Nealon's house, which was built in 1695, could be the third oldest in East Hampton.

The foundation, which is under only one portion of the house, is still in use, and the rest of the house sits on a bed of loose rocks. Mr. Nealon still uses kitchen cabinets added in the 19th century, lead-paned windows, and wide planked floors, and fireplaces and a bread oven maintain the original mortar,

stone, and brick work. A south-facing porch with a room above it was added in the early 19th century.

Neither Dr. Bedford or Mr. Bragman agree with Ms. Wiltshire's description of the Hand brothers' proposed project. "This subdivision is a noose around the neck of the Strong family homestead," Mr. Bragman said.

Since Mr. Nealon has obtained listing on the State and National Registers, the planning board could issue a positive declaration under the State Environmental Quality Review Act, which would require the Hands to more thoroughly assess how the subdivision will affect neighbors.

Mr. Bragman has suggested a different placement of the Hand lots, putting some of them on Wainscott Main Street rather than Town Line Road or Wainscott Hollow Road.

"Everyone has a different idea of how to develop this property. We're trying to balance it all out," Daniel Voorhees, the Hand brothers' attorney, said this week.

Mr. Bragman has suggested that the Hand brothers are resisting placing some of the lots on Main Street because Mr. Voorhees has an interest in a house that looks across that street to the Hand farmland, where the houses would be directly in the line of sight.

"There are a thousand ways to put this together," Mr. Bragman said, referring to where the lots could be placed. He suggested that the board limit the subdivision to four lots instead of five, also keeping future houses far from Mr. Nealon's property line.

The Hand subdivision application will appear before the planning board again in April.