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'I Don't Know Mr. and Mrs. L.L.C.': New Neighbors Unsettle a Black Enclave

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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.

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, and he can remember when Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis were his house guests. His grade-school principal built the house across the street; his family doctor lived two doors down. 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.?”

“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.

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 an 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.

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.

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.

“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.

“If Bronster was putting up a house of 4,000 square feet, people would be fine with that,” Ms. Sharp said. “But putting up a house of 53 hundred square feet represents a tipping point. The next one is 55, and the next one is 59. And he’s got big money behind him and is going to make this neighborhood what it never has been.”

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.

Like others interviewed for this article, Ms. Sharp, who is white, said the tensions were not racial. She said that since moving to Sag Harbor Hills from another neighborhood in the village last February, she has been welcomed into her neighbors' homes. "It's exactly why I moved here," she said. In 14 years in her previous house, she was never invited to a neighbor's party. "There's a real sense of community here. And that's about, unfortunately, to be interrupted."

Mr. Bronster said he had no intention of changing the community's atmosphere. He, too, was drawn by the neighborly feel, he said.

"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 that $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.

Kennedy Scott (carrying hula hoop) at the beach with her family for her seventh birthday. Sag Harbor Hills can have 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.

“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.”

“We’re on defense,” she said. “So then you get called a rabble-rouser.”

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.”