



Doug Kuntz for The New York Times

John Nealon's house on Wainscott Hollow Road was built by John Strong and has always been owned by his direct descendants.

Is the Setting as Historic as the House?

By PETER BOODY

ON the South Fork, the specter of a subdivision rising just beyond their own greenswards may give homeowners nightmares. But John Nealon says he is not concerned about newer, bigger mansions overshadowing his own totem of wealth and power, but about local history and an old house few newcomers know about.

The central part of his modest salt-box in Wainscott, hidden from view on Wainscott Hollow Road behind a thicket of trees and brush, is believed to have been built in 1695. Modest additions were made in the 19th century. Two local historians, Charles Halsey and Jeanette Rattray, cited it decades ago as the fourth-oldest house in the Town of East Hampton.

The house was built by Thomas Strong and has always been owned by his direct descendants. Mr. Nealon's great-grandfather was Charles W. Strong, a farmer, chauffeur and the town truant officer in the 1930's, and he inherited the house and other properties from Bessie Hallock, Mr. Strong's daughter, who died in 1969.

Now Mr. Nealon, 50, an accountant with an office in Bridgehampton, and his lawyer, Jeffrey Bragman of East Hampton, are in the middle of a battle to gain recognition for the Strong house, which sits on five acres, and to protect its setting. As part of that campaign, last year they got the state to list the house on its Register of Historic Places and to nominate it for the National Register.

They contend the house is threat-

ened by a 20.7-acre subdivision now being considered by the East Hampton Town Planning Board and proposed by another old Wainscott farming family, the Hands, neighbors of the Strongs for generations.

The subdivision property is owned by the estate of Albert C. Hand Jr., whose family is proposing five one-acre building lots. The remaining 15 acres would continue to be leased to a local potato farmer.

Two of the subdivision's lots lie directly behind the Strong house just beyond Mr. Nealon's pool and a line of rough vegetation. The trophy houses that will rise there will destroy the Strong house's visual link to the land, Mr. Nealon and his consultants say. They contend that the view is just as important to preserve as the house itself.

"Very few houses built for the average man and family circa 1700 have survived in any condition anywhere, making its survival a key element in understanding life on Long Island circa 1700," wrote Steve M. Bedford, the principal planner at Fitzgerald & Halliday, the Hartford planning consultant Mr. Nealon hired. In a pamphlet he prepared for the planning board, Dr. Bedford presents computer simulations of huge houses looming over Mr. Nealon's backyard.

Mr. Bragman, Mr. Nealon's lawyer, has proposed an alternative plan that would move the two lots to the south, one onto Wainscott Main Street and another behind existing barns and outbuildings on the Hands' property. Another lot would remain just north of Mr. Nealon's acreage on

Wainscott Hollow Road.

While old-timers are well aware of the Strong house, in the 1940's Bessie Hallock let the vegetation grow up, screening it from the road. Mr. Nealon came to live there in 1984 and has been making improvements and landscaping the property since.

He rents the house out in the summer, listing it most recently for \$95,000.

The Hands' consultants cite the Strong house's long history as a rental property as a blot on its significance as an historic homestead. "Mr. Nealon does not come before this board with 'clean hands' required by

The owner of a 1695 house battles a subdivision.

the law when a person is seeking relief," the Hands' lawyer, Daniel G. Voorhees of East Hampton, wrote in an October 2004 letter to the planning board.

He accused Mr. Nealon of illegally modifying a shed to serve as living quarters. This is an illegal second dwelling with no certificate of occupancy, he said, and added that Mr. Nealon had no certificate for his pool, either. The property's tax assessment fails to include these improvements, so Mr. Nealon "is not paying his fair share," Mr. Voorhees wrote.

Mr. Bragman called these accusations "largely baseless" and said the shed was used for storage, not as liv-

ing quarters. "Virtually all the allegations have no bearing on the planning board's review," he said. "They are making these disparaging allegations to distract the board from the real focus — a quality environmental review. It's irrelevant that it's been a summer rental. Many houses in East Hampton are rented."

The Hands — Albert Hand's sons, Jeff and John, and his widow — say they need the money from the sale of the five lots. Their friends rallied in their support in 2003, when they asked the Town Board for an exemption to the moratorium on most subdivisions while a comprehensive plan is developed. The board granted the exemption, which Mr. Bragman called "highly unusual" and part of a speeded-up schedule he is trying to slow down.

The Hand subdivision "places a noose around the neck of this house," Mr. Bragman said. But because it is now on the state historic register, the planning board must take a hard look at the subdivision's impact on the Strong house and might require the Hands to conduct a costly environmental impact study.

"This is a very typical community conflict," said Laurie Wiltshire of Land Planning Services of Wainscott, the Hands' consultant. She dismissed the historic significance of the Strong house's setting because vegetation has blocked its views for years. She said that shifting the two building lots, as Mr. Bragman has proposed, would ruin other historic views from Wainscott Main Street and that redesigning the subdivision now would be too costly.