

LI Life



BOARD by BOARD

The 1920s "Little House," which sheltered Black farmhands on the East End, was taken apart and will be rehabilitated.

Preserving Black history on LI **E8**

WAINSCOTT HERITAGE PROJECT

BUCKET LIST

Learn to perform magic to entertain family and friends **E6**



LINDA ROSIER

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

A calendar of events, from art projects to lectures to movie screenings **E2**

LI's hidden Black history

New focus on Black stories after protests

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

Brenda Simmons was working for the Southampton Village mayor in 2008 when a letter came across her desk calling for a building at the village entrance to be torn down because it was “an eyesore.” But Simmons knew that building — and she knew how special it was.

Known as “The Barbershop,” which opened in the late 1940s, Simmons said it was the heart of the Black community in Southampton. As a child in the 1960s, she ran errands there for her aunt, who was the beautician in the salon next door.

“The beauty and barber shops were not just a place you got your hair done. They were a gathering place for our community, like a community living room for us,” Simmons said. “They were a safe haven, a place that we felt at home; a place we felt like family. I didn’t want to see it torn down.”

That was the start of her 13-year advocacy to convert the old barber shop into a museum. In 2010, the Village Historic Preservation Board designated it as the first African American historic landmark in the Village of Southampton. Eventually the building was purchased by the town Community Preservation Fund. And on Juneteenth 2021, the Southampton African American Museum opened.

Simmons, the museum’s founder and executive director, said what kept her going was knowing that it was important to leave a legacy for the community — and make sure the



Brenda Simmons at the Southampton African American Museum, where she is founder and executive director. It's housed in a preserved barber shop that was nearly torn down. ■ Video: newsday.com/liife



stories of Black people on Long Island were being told.

Her mission is being reflected at museums, historic homes and preservation sites across the Island, where there’s a growing recognition of the need to highlight the area’s Black history. Black Long Islanders like Simmons and Georgette Grier-Key, executive director and chief curator of the Eastville Community Historical Society in Sag Harbor, said they’ve been doing this work for decades. But they and others point to the national attention since the summer of 2020, when the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer sparked worldwide protests and a racial reckoning, as leading to an

increased urgency among local community leaders to move these stories forward.

“While an interest in Black history isn’t new, it probably got intensified during George Floyd [protests] and really intensified when people started seeing an effort to suppress and even rewrite African American history in the United States,” said Anthony Richards, curator and tech director of the Joysetta & Julius Pearse African American Museum of Nassau County in Hempstead. He was referring to standards approved in 2023 to teach Black history in Florida, which have come under fire, particularly for their handling of slavery.

“The way to combat it is to continue to put the truth out there and find the hidden history and let people know about it,” Richards said.

SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Joshua Ruff, co-executive director of collections and

programming at The Long Island Museum in Stony Brook, said he believes that both the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement impacted museums around the country.

“On the one hand, you had this incredible movement for social justice that was a call to action,” he said.

And with pandemic lockdowns, museums suddenly had more time to focus on long-term planning. “There was a lot of attention on returning to your institution’s core collections and looking at what you have for long-term collections management and maintenance projects that had been put on hold,” he said. “Those were the two catalysts that really pushed us in the direction of the urgent need to really start making strong and lasting improvements in how our collection represents and reflects Long Island.”

As a result, incorporating local Black history was part of the museum’s larger plan in

2022 to start building diversity and equality into its permanent collections. Ruff said the museum now has 20 items specific to Black history, including photographs, and has put on art exhibits focusing on the works of artists like Reynold and Joan Ruffins, who lived in the historically Black Sag Harbor communities known as SANS (Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest and Ninevah subdivisions).

At the Whaling Museum & Education Center in Cold Spring Harbor, a temporary collection on Black whalers is part of a strategic plan to highlight the stories and perspectives of historically marginalized people on the Island. Executive director Nomi Dayan said she brought in the collection in December 2022, when she realized the last time the museum had highlighted whalers of color was 40 years before. She explained that the exhibit, which will close on Labor Day, has led to more Black visitors to the museum, which she said is also an important goal: to make sure that visitors see themselves reflected in the exhibits.

WHOSE STORIES?

Changes have been seen at Long Island’s historic homes as well, with efforts to expand whose stories are being told. This became particularly important at the Joseph Lloyd Manor in Lloyd Harbor, where Jupiter Hammon, one of the first Black published poets in the United States, was born into slavery in 1711. He spent most of his life enslaved at Lloyd Neck, where the 18th century merchants lent their name to the area.

Andrew Tharler, the education and engagement director for Preservation Long Island in Cold Spring Harbor, said the organization has operated the historic house museum since 1982. The focus had been on the Lloyds’ wealth and access to luxury materials. But in 2019, the organization did an internal analysis of the way it was interpreting the home’s history and determined the need for a concerted effort to emphasize Hammon’s story and those of other enslaved



Georgette Grier-Key stands on the former site of the Pyrrhus Concer home in Southampton. An effort to reconstruct the dwelling into a museum about the iconic Black whaler, philanthropist and former slave has run into hurdles involving land use approvals from the village.

LANDEE DADDONA



LANDEE DADDONA

From left, Susan Macy, Wainscott Heritage Project president Esperanza León and Carolyn Logan Gluck inside a container carrying the remnants of the "Little House."



LANDEE DADDONA

The container held salvaged parts of the 1920s "Little House," which sheltered Black farmworkers from the South.

people in the area. The first of their programs debuted just after the summer of 2020.

"The tours have been completely changed, and the way we talk about the history, artifacts and architecture has shifted in response to the work we've been doing to uncover more of this history and to think about these stories from a different perspective,"

Tharler said.

Preservation Long Island also operates two other historic houses where records indicate enslaved people lived: the Sherwood-Jayne Farm in East Setauket, which was an operational farmstead for more than 150 years, and The Custom House in Sag Harbor, the 1763-1822 home and office of Henry Packer Dering, one of

the harbor's first postmasters. Tharler said the goal is to bring that history to the forefront at these sites as well.

In the Town of Huntington, efforts are underway to open a Huntington African American Museum. The museum group's board chairman, Barry D. Lites, said the museum, which is in the fundraising stage, is "a long time coming." He added that

the museum has a preliminary construction/equipment budget of \$25 million. Its capital campaign began in earnest in the last quarter of 2023 and to date they've raised \$550,000.

CRIPPEN AND COLTRANE

There are also separate plans to preserve two homes, both of prominent Black Long Islanders, in Huntington.

One is the John and Alice Coltrane house in Dix Hills, where the couple moved in 1964 and John Coltrane composed "A Love Supreme."

The second home is that of Peter Crippen, at 61 Creek Rd. in Halesite, which remained in the family from the 1860s to 2009, when it was sold for the

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Preserving LI's Black history

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town's sewage treatment plant expansion. Crippen played an important role in the local Black community. In 1843, he was one of the seven founders of the African Methodist Ebenezer Church (now Bethel AME Church, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985). Lites said funds have already been raised to disassemble and store the timbers of the Crippen house, which will eventually be reconstructed and integrated into the planned African American Museum.

Robert Hughes, the Town of Huntington historian and the secretary for the Coltrane home, said all these efforts were in the works prior to 2020. "But they've kind of finally come to fruition. It's a confluence of efforts that were out there already reaching a plateau, and just more public awareness because of the state of race relations in the country and people asking what they can do to help the situation," he said.

A WHALER, A FARMHAND

There are also numerous preservation efforts on the East End. Among these is an ongoing project begun in 2013 to reconstruct the Pond Lane home of Pyrrhus Concer, a Black whaler, philanthropist and former slave who settled in Southampton and owned property there.

"We think the Pyrrhus Concer Museum is going to be significant and important to the northern region and understanding of the magnitude of slavery here, but it's currently at a standstill," Grier-Key said.

Despite having received local landmark designation in 2021, and \$2 million from the village's Community Preservation Fund, the project is in limbo. According to Assem. Fred W. Thiele Jr. (D-Sag Harbor), the holdup has been getting land use approvals from the village.

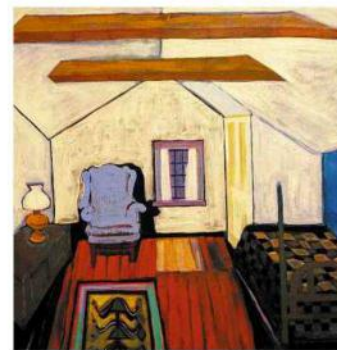
A more recent preservation effort involves a dilapidated, single-room, one-story frame structure formerly on Wainscott Hollow Road that locals called the "Little House." Esperanza León, co-founder and president of Wainscott Her-



Georgette Grier-Key, special projects coordinator at the Southampton African American Museum, recently gave a tour to second-graders.



MORGAN CAMPBELL



MORGAN CAMPBELL

Joan Ruffins' untitled interior bedroom scene is at The Long Island Museum.

Joshua Ruff at The Long Island Museum in Stony Brook.

itage Project, said the 1920s structure housed Black migrant workers from the South, and was a piece of local history on the Strong family's potato farm.

León, who lives in Wainscott, learned that new owners planned to demolish it in May 2021. As a member of East Hampton Town's Architectural Review Board, she galvanized several others to preserve it.

Without a foundation, the house couldn't be moved intact, so the plan switched to salvage. Over the course of three days in June 2021, it was taken apart in sections, labeled, bundled and photographed and is currently in a container at East Hampton Town Hall. León said there aren't enough parts to rebuild the structure, but the ultimate goal is to rehabilitate

it so that it reflects Wainscott's agricultural history. The group is awaiting funding to move forward.

"This work is a reminder to bring those stories to people's attention because there's hardly any documentation about Black history here," León said. "It takes being very conscious every moment of recognizing that there might be

another story hidden away somewhere — with the Indigenous populations as well. We want to be cognizant of all those people that have been a part of the fiber of Wainscott."

But not all buildings have been saved, and Grier-Key said that often advocates fight with land developers to recognize the historic significance of structures.

"I think there's been a lot of groundwork, a lot of struggling, a lot of residents and citizens trying to come together to preserve the vernacular of African American and the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of color) community on Long Island, which is suffering greatly because of how development happens," Grier-Key said. "There's a hopeful injection of understanding and wanting to learn more, but the dollar signs have to follow."

"One of the things we have to do is get the message across that this history is American history — it's not just for the Black folks."