**Why** **a Fleetwood mansion to replace and erase a 200-year-old building is inappropriate on the historic grounds of** **Freetown.**

**by Carol Adrianne Smith**

This article focuses on the significance of preserving the history of Freetown in East Hampton, New York. Freetown was created in 1799 by the Gardiner family and other enslavers to house but keep segregated and oppressed their dedicated formerly enslaved Africans and formerly enslaved Indigenous Montaukett people, who built East Hampton from the ground up. It provides a very brief factual history of how Freetown came to be. It further discusses the significance of creating a historical legacy center at the heart of Freetown within the Neighborhood House of Three Mile Harbor Road, a unique colonial structure erected in Freetown. Comparably, East Hampton has over fifty museums honoring White colonial heritage. While only one exists in the East Hampton area, covering the historical contribution of the one formerly enslaved Indigenous family, and none exist that honor the Black enslaved. However, thousands of enslaved families contributed over 300 hundred years of East Hampton's precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial history. We seek to demonstrate the significance of building a legacy center to honor the once enslaved and then freedmen of East Hampton in the heart of Freetown within the Neighborhood House to serve a model for the nation and to stop the erasure of the Indigenous people, the enslaved and the Whites that assisted them out of oppression.

**Montaukett Indigenous People**

We cannot honestly discuss Freetown without mentioning the Montauketts, also known as the native people of Long Island.1 These known Paleoindians are unique natives that inhabited the Atlantic Coastal Plain from Canada to the Carolinas and used the Algonkian language across the Long Island Sound from 9000 to 12,000 years ago.1 Archeologists have found at least fifteen known Clovis/Paleo chipped stone points on Long Island and in the Three Mile Harbor area, where Freetown stands today at the eastern end of south fork.1 These excavated stone points indicate their early existence 1. In addition, records demonstrate a revered leader of the Montauketts, Sachem Mongotuck (Long Knife), who had 300 warriors and 50 canoes at his disposal.2,3

**Colonized**

Unfortunately, when Long Island was colonized in the 1500s, 4, the ancient ways of life of the Montaukett people, established over thousands of years, were severely disrupted.

**From the 1600s – 1800s**

From the1600s through the1800s, enslaved and formerly enslaved people of color in East Hampton lived and worked in the homes of Whites.5 But not only the Montauketts of East Hampton were enslaved. African and Caribbean captured individuals were also victims of enslavement.5 Colonizers brought those of African descent from Africa and the Caribbean to the shores of East Hampton town. The cruel realities of chattel slavery cannot be ignored. The life of the enslaved was predicated on inhuman bondage to implement the use of Black and Indigenous people to enrich the economic development of White culture in East Hampton.5,6-13, The history of enslaved people of color in the United States is well documented: lynchings, Jim Crow, denial of education, rape, torture, stealing of land, redlining, housing discrimination, and the splitting up of families through the sale of one or more members, usually never to see or hear of each other again. 6-13

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**Free labor**

Montauketts and the African descent enslaved kept the livestock pastured, were gin keepers (a gin is an enclosure for grazing animals), mended the fences that separated grazing fields in Montauk, tended the house and children, tended fields, and whaled for the Gardiners and others for several hundred years.5 Still, the harsh fact remains that Indigenous and the African and Caribbean enslaved were the fodder, hence the economic engine for the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and were relegated not as human beings but as property. After some time, some White enslavers showed empathy towards their workers.

**New York State’s Emancipation Act**

In 1799, the passage of New York State's Emancipation Act occurred, so John Lyon Gardiner and other wealthy local enslavers set aside portions of their extensive landholdings labeled "Freetown" to allocate specifically for their now African decent and Indigenous workers.5 Land given to the some of the workers in Freetown was designed and deceptively valued as worthless since it was considered unsuitable for agriculture but conveniently situated along main roadways connecting to wealthy residential areas, farmlands, local businesses, and shipping ports like Northwest Harbor.5 Freetown was convenient for the White enslavers; they wanted their workers to quickly get uptown since they were no longer living on their plantations or in their houses.5 Montauketts and the African enslaved and the recently freed no longer living at their Masters houses still worked for the Whites to survive.5 They helped make colonial life for the White populations as comfortable as it was while they themselves were inhumanely still considered property and suffering daily mental anguish as they traveled uptown to their master's mansions daily or traveled to work the docks for and with their masters.5 Freetown was the only place the selected free workers could "believe" that they owned land. These enslaved and freed individuals of Freetown were the backbone of East Hampton's prosperity and were the reason the East Hampton community's wealth grew exponentially and continues to grow even today.5

**Mansions**

There were never mansions in Freetown. In fact, the uptown mansions were left behind after the laborers' long days of work and often carried painful memories of finished workdays.6,7,13 It is more than likely that the workers enjoyed leaving the mansions behind as they headed home to Freetown.

**Post Traumatic Stress Disorder of the enslaved.**

Mansions owned by their masters were historically symbols of terror and sadness underlined in the formerly enslaved hearts.6.7 No enslaved person who could keep their sanity truly wanted to be physically owned and controlled to survive and support one's family.7 The enslaved experienced a "forceful assault against them who in return developed a countervailing resentment of slaveholders.7-13 These elements of forced human labor and control go against the grain of being treated and being considered a human being.7-13 Long-term mental and emotional warfare repeatedly caused the enslaved and freed workers to have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) throughout their lives. Nevertheless, the benefits of over two hundred years of free labor to Whites are unmistakable. There is no record of having mansions in the establishment of Freetown. Over time, those designated to live in Freetown were often told it was their property, but only to later have it arbitrarily be seized by their white owners thus constantly maintaining terror subconsciously in their workers and PTSD.7-13

## **Disease**

East Hampton church death records detail that smallpox and other European diseases replaced tuberculosis amongst Montauketts, and native deaths between 1825 and 1879 were of consumption, with the deceased ranging from 11 months to 58 years.3

**East Hampton developed the First Settlement House in the nation and then turned into the Neighborhood House**

There is documented evidence that Settlement houses in New York State were deliberately placed in impoverished neighborhoods.15-18 These Settlement houses were then named Neighborhood Houses.7 The settlement houses were often re-education centers run by wealthy White women, with mostly good intentions, to teach the poor and the disadvantaged how to read and survive.14-17 The leaders of the settlement houses were often white women from the Suffrage movement or Catholic or Episcopalian missionaries.15,16,17,18 Conceptually, the Black and Indian children and individuals were still to be kept segregated from White children to maintain later Jim Crow rules because the houses were only placed in "colored only" or very impoverished areas.19,20,21 There are few records that the enslaved or the Indigenous people living in Freetown attended any school, which is disturbing in itself; however, the East Hampton Settlement house more than likely initially assisted Indigenous formerly enslaved individuals even though the records of that period have strangely vanished probably due to the stigma of helping the Indigenous Montaukett Indigenous and the formerly enslaved who were not allowed to learn how to read while they were enslaved due to the laws of the segregation.19,20,21  Hence, over 300 years of academic suppression from 1500 to the late 1800s under the United States anti-literacy laws.

**Segregation and the Neighborhood House**

The birthright freedoms that Whites enjoyed as American citizens throughout their generational journeys as the Settlement Houses that began in the 1860s starkly contrast against the realities of survival, inequality, and humanity for African descent and Indigenous people living under the yoke of; post-reconstruction 19,20,21organized violence inflicted by the Klu Klux Klan (KKK), race-based exclusion from the homestead act of 1862, constitutional overlays sustaining second class non-citizen status (Dred Scott v. Sandford decision, Plessy V. Ferguson), Fugitive Slave Act and Jim Crow public accommodation whose threads continue to exist today. These "uncomfortable" facts are not to be shouted down or gotten over; instead, they must have their rightful place in truthful historical representation to honor all contributions and set a path for healing and progress.

**East Hampton ‘s Neighborhood House historical significance**

The Neighborhood house under the name of the Settlement House appears to have been established at least 10 years before the 1886 dates with the history of Settlement houses based in New York State; therefore, it stands to reason it was one of the very first in New York state.16 East Hampton shaped the economic and theocratic role in the colonial period, the American Revolution, and the establishment of the United States of America, as it was directly tied to the Caribbean sugar plantation system and Atlantic Slavery. 5 Thus, having one of the first if not the first Settlement Houses in the United States is expected. The Neighborhouse also served as the only hospital on the East End under the Nursing Association.16,22, during which time disease was prevalent among the Montauketts, Africans, and White of East Hampton. Some records about the East Hampton Neighborhood House, once called the Settlement House, show that it was a hospital established in the late 1800s on Olivia Pharoh’s Montaukett land. Colonizers more than likely unethically seized her land to accommodate White people and displace those individuals of Freetown.3 There is evidence that the land was removed from Olivia Pharaoh so that the Neighborhood House could be built. Still, there is no corroboration of letting the formerly enslaved or enslaved benefit from it for healing if they were ill. However, there are numerous records describing how White patients benefited.

**Freetown**

Approximately seventy years before establishing one of the first Settlement houses in America, in 1799, the new settlement of Freetown was established, and people of color were kept on the outskirts of the village of East Hampton. It was created to provide a "colored" labor pool for the town.5 Following Freetown's establishment, for hundreds of years, Montauketts and the formerly enslaved Africans would travel uptown and work in their white employers' mansions. Located north of the village, Freetown was a segregated "colored" neighborhood established by John Lyon Gardiner and other wealthy East Hampton landowners 5. The Whites made a concerted effort to keep those whom they considered 3/5 humans away from their white elite community after work hours. Whites further impoverished and subordinated the emergent non-White working class by not implementing proper deeds of lands to those who lived in Freetown.5 Whites controlled the labor and the land under all circumstances.5 The settlement at Freetown permitted the non-White labor force to be close enough to the village for work but still separate and beyond immediate visibility.5 Most Whites did not want to see Blacks or the Indigenous in their part of town. Even when East Hampton Village was incorporated in 1920, it still did not include the Freetown neighborhood as a valid residency status on land records.5 Again, it is evident that former White masters whose homes and shops were still maintained by their laborers treated these laborers as less than human and undeserving of their property despite the worker's constant dedication to them. From 1840 through 1920, the Freetown neighborhood expanded to encompass southern African American migrants from the United States who formed unions with the already-established African and Caribbean once-captured persons and Indigenous families.5 Despite changing economic patterns that produced new labor opportunities, people of color had to remain employed in similar capacities as seamen, laborers, and domestic servants in enormous uptown mansions.5 The 14th- through the 19th-century Montaukett settlement and, more generally, of non-White settlement in East Hampton Town indicates that White power was the central force behind the geographic distribution and movement of people of color and the development of non-White communities.5 In both Montauk and Freetown, the placement of the non-White labor force was intentional and distanced from White visibility.5

**Why does Fleetwood Mansion not historically fit in Freetown in 2024 to replace the colonial structure of the Neighborhood House in Freetown establishes in the 1800s’?**

Fleetwood architecture does not fit in Freetown because its design is for opulent homes for the Hamptons gentry, an ultra-rich class of white people living in high status communities.23 Fleetwood architecture is the ultimate show of White wealth and superiority.23,24 The most an African person of decent or Montaukett could be in the Fleetwood era is a servant, as no enslaved person of Freetown would ever be allowed to purchase a Fleetwood home or be allowed to live in the segregated clusters throughout the Hamptons, where these homes were built as showplaces for the rich. The whole reason for Freetown was to support formerly enslaved workers but also to maintain separate White wealth because the once enslaved were deemed less than worthy but used like chattel cattle with easy access to Freetown5. The enslaved everyday life of servitude to the upper-class White elite did not find peace in such mansions but found comfort and peace in their lands away from mansions. The Fleetwood mansion will destroy the memory and the entire purpose of Freetown.

**Conclusion**

Preserving this past with a legacy center will benefit the community by knowing the Native Indigenous, African descent, and White people whose stories must be captured before they are erased. The center has an appropriate ability to become a tribute filled with artifacts and historical facts of a people who created, built, and exponentially created the wealth of East Hampton, New York, which now stands as a playground for the ultra-rich5. There are concerted efforts that seek to erase or hide the truth of those who are no longer here 25, but their ancestors from the Black, White, and Indigenous sides are still alive today. Moreover, East Hampton has over fifty museums honoring white colonialism but only one museum representing the once-enslaved populations Indigenous population and none for the formerly Black enslaved (see Figure 1).

**White, Black and Montaukett Historical Colonial Structures in East Hampton, New York**



Figure 1. Historical Colonial Buildings: White Colonial museums are blue; Black museums are red; and Montaukett are yellow.

It is appropriate for an actual restoration of the current Neighborhood House (approximately 200 years old). A center provides a unique opportunity to end erasure, appropriation, and disenfranchisement so that the actual history can be preserved and told now and into the future. The approximately 50 museums in East Hampton that recognize, celebrate, and sustain the historical legacy of the colonial period to the present of the White community are in stark contrast to the Fowler House26, which stands alone as a restored house of a formerly enslaved legacy Montaukett. There are none of the enslaved Black persons of East Hampton, even though approximately 1700 enslaved people were recorded4. The preservation of the settlement house and creation of a legacy center become the foundation to elevate to its rightful place and honor the history and contributions of formerly enslaved African and Indigenous people while preventing the erasure of a vitally important historical legacy. Further, the installation of a permanent archive, a center for scholarly resident research, and a detailed architectural restoration would benefit the town, the region, and the nation. The legacy center will preserve the honesty and integrity of the land on the other side of the tracks, also known as "downtown" in my beloved East Hampton. It would also be a valid symbol of outstanding historical content to benefit all communities.

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