

The Bethel-Christian Avenue- Laurel Hill Historic District

The preservation of an indigenous minority
community in Setauket, Long Island.

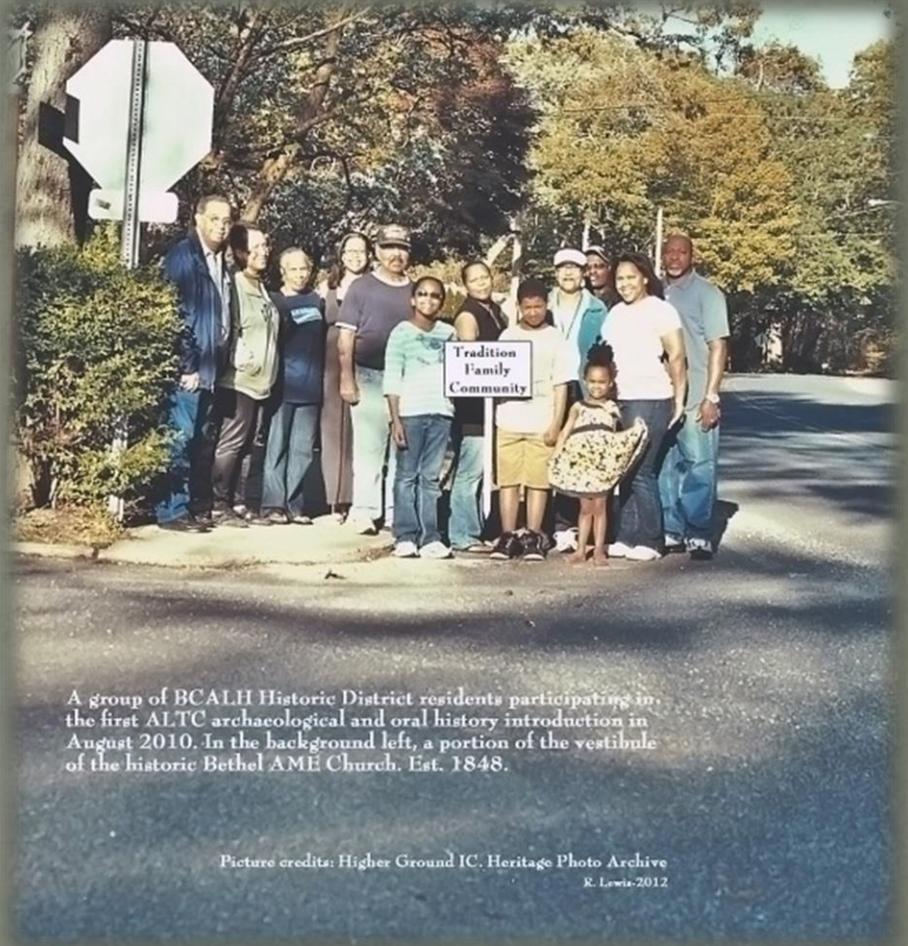
by “A Long Time Coming,”

A Collaborative Public History & Archaeology Initiative
of Higher Ground Intercultural and Heritage Association

Robert E. Lewis, Christopher N. Matthews,
and Judith A. Burgess, ALTC Co-Directors

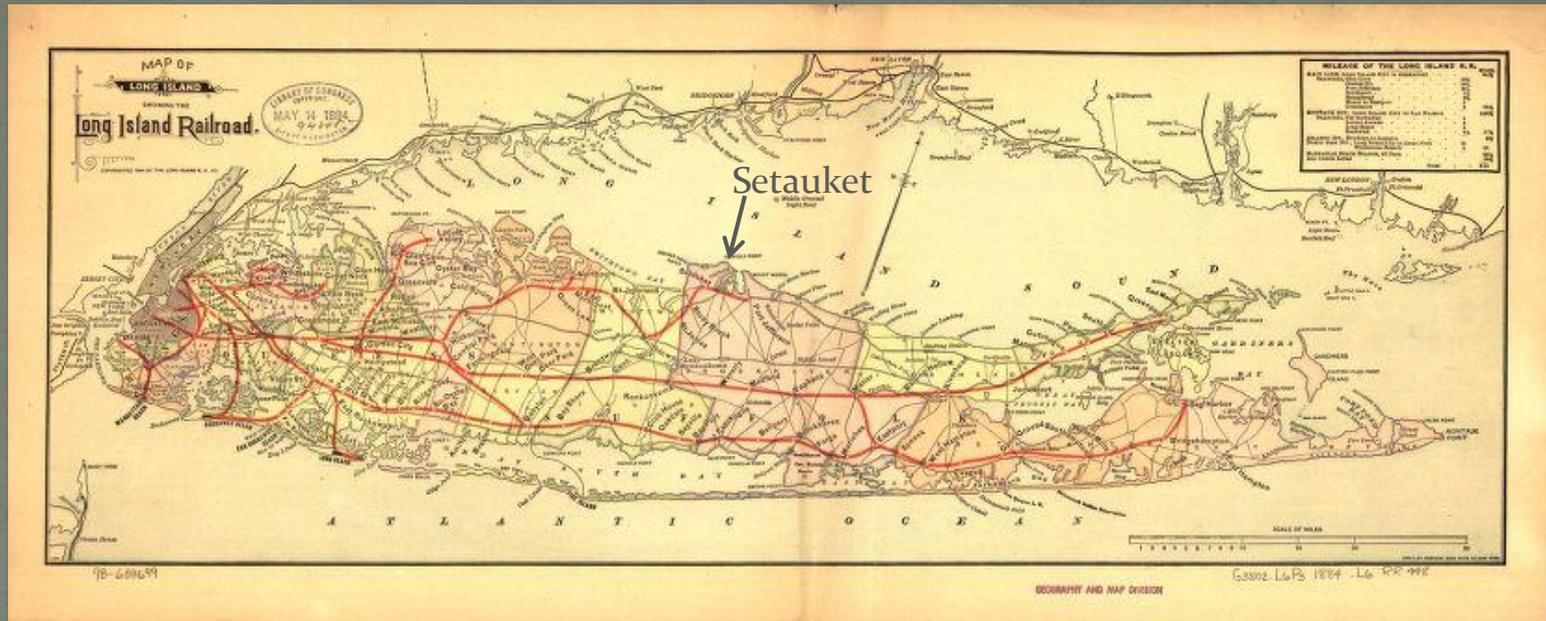
Tucked in between a well-known historic district and rapidly encroaching suburban development, a small community of mixed heritage Native and African Americans still live in their ancestral home on eastern Long Island.

This essay—presented in photographs, oral history excerpts, and text— seeks to tell a bit about this community’s past and to give a sense of how they live now as a people struggling to survive in a place they have always called home.



A group of BCALH Historic District residents participating in the first ALTC archaeological and oral history introduction in August 2010. In the background left, a portion of the vestibule of the historic Bethel AME Church. Est. 1848.

Picture credits: Higher Ground IC. Heritage Photo Archive
K. Lewis 2012



Founded in 1664, Setauket was the first colonial settlement in the Town of Brookhaven in Suffolk County.

Setauket has become well-known as the site of a famous Revolutionary War spy ring that helped to undermine the British. In addition, the village retains a rich stock of 18th and 19th century houses.

These historical associations have helped Setauket cement its place among other high-end residential sections that make up Long Island's wealthy North Shore.

An ancient community

History in Setauket actually starts with the area's original settlers, the Native American Setalcott Tribe.

Mostly known today through their "prehistoric" culture, many people in the minority community still self-identify as Setalcott.

The indigenous community also descends from enslaved African men and women, who worked in the fields and homes of white families as well as other African Americans who moved to the area in later years.

As others did elsewhere on Long Island and in New England, Native Americans and Africans married, creating a mixed-heritage minority community in Setauket. It is this historical community and their descendants that are the focus of the "A Long Time Coming" project.



Christian Avenue

Starting in the middle of the 19th century, several Native and African American families settled on and near Christian Avenue in Setauket.

Christian Avenue was by then the location of the African American Laurel Hill cemetery and the Bethel AME Church.

The houses pictured here were home to multiple generations of the Hart family, including Jacob Hart (1854-1931, above) and his daughter Lucy Hart Keyes (1900-1989, below).



The Christian Avenue Streetscape of Today



The streetscape of Christian Avenue reveals the unique historic character of the Native and African American community's past. Old growth trees still line the road. Yards are often unmanicured, reflecting a tradition of respect and closeness with nature. Some lots contain multiple dwellings, a strategy of providing for families across the generations.

An enduring sense of place

Elders in the minority community can tell us about this ancient place.



“I’d like to talk about my life on Christian Avenue”

My first awakening to Christian Avenue, Setauket was at Bethel AME Church at age 4 years, visiting my Grandfather and Grandmother who were then Reverend and Mrs. DuVal stationed there at the time ...

Horses and wagon were still moving there up and down Christian Avenue. There was so few cars passing that you got to know the car and driver. The roads were not wide enough for two cars to pass at the same time. The roadway did accommodate two horse and wagons to pass each other though.

Two years later I started school. It was quite a long walk through East Setauket to the famous School on the Hill. I made the trek for 12 years. Spring and Summer were good, but winters were terrible. Heavy snowfall sometimes five to six feet and temperatures were below zero. And we did have a pond on the end of Christian Avenue that stayed frozen. Great for skating if you had skates.

About 1934 and '35 the road was widened and a new avenue was added between Christian Avenue, Setauket and West Meadow Road, named Locust Avenue. At this time we still had the horse and wagons and my Grandmother, Rebecca Lewis, was going back and forth to Strong’s Neck. The horse was fast and many times I thought the wagon would turn over.

The springtime meant getting our gardens planted for the fall, with harvest in the fall.

The foliage in this area was beautiful. The laurel bushes all in bloom made this place another world. I readily understand our cemetery’s name being Laurel Hill. The wildflowers along the road, the roses, the buttercups, added to the beauty. During the summer it was great to walk Christian Avenue. The road was narrow allowing the tree branches from each side of the road to reach each other forming a canopy or shield from the hot sun. It was just beautiful. So nice and cool. At this time another road was completed crossing Christian Avenue on the west end, which was Mud Road.

August was a time the harvesting of fruits and vegetables, which we canned for the winter. Also, the Summer meant getting the family together to enjoy the great outdoors. We had the most delicious food including fish and clams from the bay and a special dessert for our August work, blueberry pie. The berries were plentiful then. ...

Today all the land on Christian Avenue has lot numbers. I have spent a little while as #32, #30, #9 and at #54 where I am today.

I spent my life on Christian Avenue, Setauket. I married, raised my family here. Our surrounding neighbors of this community many times helped us out, and it has been a blessing to all of us who live and have lived in this area, Christian Avenue, Setauket.”

-Pearl Lewis Hart, statement read at a Town of Brookhaven public hearing, June 21, 2005

Landmarks of the Native and African American Community

Several sites on Christian Avenue mark and characterize the history of the Native and African American community in Setauket

Old Bethel Cemetery



Old Bethel Cemetery on Christian Avenue in Stony Brook marks the site of the first Bethel AME Church in the area. An 1848 deed provided $\frac{1}{8}$ th acre of land to the church trustees for the purpose of building a house of worship. A line of stones laying on the ground surface behind the front line of gravestones may indicate this building's foundation.

Bethel AME Setauket

The Bethel AME Church moved to its current location on Christian Avenue in Setauket in 1871.

Marriages, baptisms, funerals, and the other events that mark the vital moments of community life were celebrated and memorialized here.

Moreover, the church has always been an institution maintained by the community itself, allowing them refuge and a place to gather and engage as a community within the larger world.



Laurel Hill Cemetery

“Be it known that Isaac Satterly and Benjamin F. Thompson were duly appointed by the Trustees of the Town of Brookhaven in the year of eighteen hundred and fifteen to lay out a negro burying ground in the village of Setauket known and called by the name of Laurel Hill . . . ”

An 1853 document states that in the year 1815 , slave owners Isaac Satterly and Benjamin F. Thompson took legal action to designate land along Christian Avenue, in Setauket, as a cemetery for people of color. This site is still known as Laurel Hill Cemetery, which has been under the auspices of Bethel AME Church since 1871.



Irving Hart American Legion Post 1766

After World War II, Native and African American veterans hoped to join the American Legion in Setauket, but faced racial exclusion.

Rachel Hart Midgett donated land on Christian Avenue for the community to build their own post building.

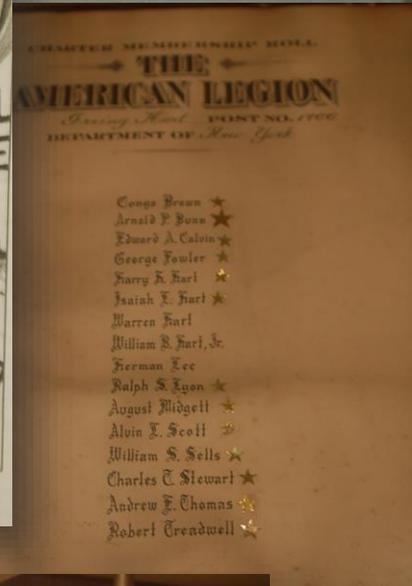
The Legion Hall is a place for community building and self-empowerment by recognizing the achievements of community members.

Carlton 'Hubble' Edwards, the post's Sergeant-at-Arms, maintains an extensive archive of members' military portraits and other historic photographs of community events, including images of the Suffolk Giants, a Colored baseball team he and others played for in the 1940s and 50s.



Ted Green, commander for 25 years, laments that financial problems may force the historic Post to leave its home.

Maxine Hicks Photo



Congie Brown ★
Arnold P. Bunn ★
Edward A. Calton ★
George Fowler ★
Harry H. Hart ★
Isaiah F. Hart ★
Warren Hart
William B. Hart, Jr.
Ferman Lee
Ralph S. Lyon ★
August Midgett ★
Alvin I. Scott ★
William S. Sells ★
Charles C. Stewart ★
Andrew F. Thomas ★
Robert Trendwell ★



The struggle to remain



While the minority community on Christian Avenue thrived for generations, in recent years many have been displaced by skyrocketing property taxes and the increasingly high cost of living on Long Island.

The community was especially shocked by the loss in 2004 of the mid-19th century R.W. Hawkins house (photo), which members of the Calvin family had lived in since the early 1900s. The new home built on the lot is lived in by newcomers to the neighborhood.

Community member and activist Robert Lewis observed that “*we now live with a totally ‘out of character’, upscale replacement located in the center*” of our community.

Fighting Back



Founded June 21, 2005, the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill Historic District was the first phase in the preservation of Setauket's mixed heritage Native and African American community. This initiative was spearheaded by Higher Ground Intercultural and Heritage Association, a community-based non-profit preservation organization.



Why a historic district?

The BCALH historic district stands out because of its recognition of both the historic and the cultural significance of the Native and African American community.

Robert Lewis described it this way:

“... there are living lives embedded in this [historic community]. Significant ancestral heartbeats cannot be measured nor studied in the text, pictures, and documents. This undetectable portion of our proposal and most important part is the lives of the individuals that went before.”

Forging Allies

In 2007, community members partnered with local academics and activists to create a new project, “A Long Time Coming.”



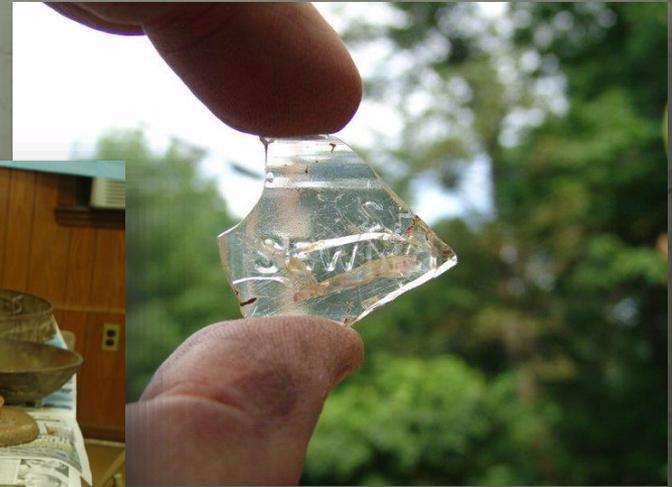
This collaborative initiative seeks to unearth, record, and share the minority community’s rich history—ultimately generating interest and support for their long-term preservation efforts.



Evidence of the community's achievements has been recovered through archaeology.



Archaeology uncovers details of the everyday lives of the minority community that may not have been recorded, such as foodways, religious practices, and skilled trades.



Archaeology also generates public interest in preserving the minority history of Setauket.



Local school groups, college students, and community members have worked together on the “A Long Time Coming” project.

Oral history also adds to our understanding of our past.



The presence of the past and the coming of the future



Rather than simply a site of past events or notable stylistic conventions that deserve appreciation, the BCALH historic district is preserving the history and culture of the people *still living there*. The Christian Avenue community is a living manifestation of a distinct and indigenous way of life that has survived in Setauket for centuries. Its survival, however, has long required the active effort by community members and their allies.

The goal of 'A Long Time Coming' is to help this community resist a well-known trend of historic minority community displacements across the United States and remain where they have been for generations.

For more information

ALTC Co-Directors Robert Lewis, Christopher Matthews, and Judith Burgess are grateful for the support and contributions we have received from the Native and African American community of Setauket, who have shared their stories and suggestions for the project.

We are especially thankful for the help of the members and officers of Higher Ground Intercultural and Heritage Association. We also thank Rev. Gregory Leonard, Helen 'Hart of the Morning Star' Sells, Barbara Russell, Karen Martin, Beverly Tyler, John Strong, Lynda Day, Charla Bolton, and the Hofstra University College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Department of Anthropology for their guidance and support. We offer special thanks to Jennifer Anderson and Zoe Burkholder for their comments and suggestions on this photo essay.

To stay informed about the community and the project, please join the "A Long Time Coming" project Facebook group at:

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/198562296851737/>

Captions and Credits

Slide 2. Photo by Robert Lewis, courtesy of Higher Ground Intercultural and Heritage Association.

Slide 3. Map of Long Island showing the Long Island Railroad, 1884. Long Island Railroad Company. Library of Congress g38021 r004480 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/gmd/g38021.r004480>

Slide 4. Top: Robert Lewis, Helene 'Hart of the Morning Star' Sells, and Reverend Gregory Leonard at the blessing of the Jacob and Hannah Hart site prior to excavation on June 2, 2011. Photo by Christopher Matthews. Bottom: Setalcott Corn Festival Sign.

Slide 5. Top: Jacob and Hannah Hart home, undated photograph, courtesy Three Village Historical Society. Bottom: Lucy Hart Keyes home, June 2012, photo by Christopher Matthews.

Slide 6. Images of present-day Christian Avenue homes and streetscape, June 2012. All photos by Christopher Matthews.

Slide 7. Left: Violet Thompson and Pearl Hart during an interview July 2011, photo by Christopher Matthews. Right: Pearl Hart conversing with Charla Bolton during a community workshop event in September 2010, photo by Robert Lewis.

Slide 10. Old Bethel Cemetery, June 2012, photo by Christopher Matthews.

Slide 11. Bethel AME Setauket, June 2012, photo by Christopher Matthews.

Slide 12. Images of Laurel Hill Cemetery, June 2012, photo by Christopher Matthews.

Slide 13. Top: Theodore Green, Irving Hart Memorial Legion Post Commander from an article in the *Three Village Herald*, February 23, 2000. Right: Founding members of the Irving Hart Memorial Legion Post, photo by Christopher Matthews. Bottom: Judith Burgess, Carlton Edwards, and ALTC Interns Ariel Flajnik and Tami Longjohn, June 2011, photo by Christopher Matthews.

Slide 14. R.W. Hawkins house, built ca. 1860, demolished 2004, , photo by Robert Lewis.

Slide 15. Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill Historic District Marker, photo by Christopher Matthews, July 2012.

Captions and Credits, con't

- Slide 16. Christian Avenue looking into the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill Historic District, photo by Christopher Matthews, July 2012.
- Slide 17. Top: ALTC Interns Ariel Flajnik and Tami Longjohn laying in archaeological test unit, June 2011, photo by Christopher Matthews. Bottom: Community members and ALTC directors filling in community timeline at community workshop, Fall 2010, photo courtesy Jamie Atkinson.
- Slide 18. Left: Rick Long Tree Sells and Jordan Brown sifting for artifacts at the Lucy Hart Keyes Site, Fall 2010, photo by Robert Lewis. Right: overview of the foundation remains of the Jacob and Hannah Hart home site, June 2011, photo by Christopher Matthews.
- Slide 19. Left: Kiara Settles preparing to dig at the Lucy Hart Keyes site, Fall 2010, photo by Robert Lewis. Center: sample artifacts collected from the Ernest Hart cabin on display at a community workshop, Fall 2010, photo courtesy Jamie Atkinson. Right: fragment of Sperm Sewing Oil bottle recovered from the Jacob and Hannah Hart home site, June 2011, photo by Christopher Matthews.
- Slide 20. Left: Rick Long Tree Sells excavating at the Lucy Hart Keyes Site, Fall 2010, photo courtesy Jamie Atkinson. Right: Community members and ALTC directors discussing the Ernest Hart artifact collection at a community workshop, Fall 2010, photo courtesy Jamie Atkinson.
- Slide 21. Left: Oral history interview of Idamae Glass being conducted by Michelle DeCastillo at a community workshop, Fall 2010, photo courtesy Jamie Atkinson. Right: Sample page scanned from a photo album shared with the project by Idamae Glass, community workshop, Fall 2010.
- Slide 22. Sample historical documents that record activities of community members. Left: Jacob Hart account page from Tyler Store records, courtesy Three Village Historical Society. Index page for names starting with the letter H from the records of the Overseer of the Poor for the Town of Brookhaven, 1905-1921, courtesy the Office of Town of Brookhaven Historian. Bottom center: Register of attendance book Setauket School No. 1, 1898-1899, courtesy the Office of Town of Brookhaven Historian. Right: Announcement of the death of Jacob Hart, *Port Jefferson Echo*, 1931.
- Slide 23. Angel DeCastillo and Kiara Settles showing their discoveries at a community workshop, Fall 2010, photo courtesy Jamie Atkinson.