

A stake in history

Setauket project reclaims a nearly forgotten heritage

BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

Peering out from behind her face mask and fleece hood on a cold January morning, Helen Sells' eyes flicker with pride as she surveys the houses along Christian Avenue in Setauket — many of which were the residences of long-ago Sells family members.

"We go back," she says. "Way back."

Thanks in part to the work of archaeologist Christopher N. Matthews, a former Hofstra University professor who she has braved the cold and the pandemic to meet on this day, Sells has been able to trace her lineage to the Setalcotts, the original Native American inhabitants of this area, as well as to the 19th and early 20th century African American families that formed the nucleus of this community. It's one that Matthews has illuminated through years of research, culminating in the October 2020 release of his book "A Struggle for Heritage: Archaeology and Civil Rights in a Long Island Community" (University Press of Florida).

Matthews posits in his book what social scientists call a "counter map" of historical Setauket that is a few blocks southwest of the center of Setauket village, an area that comprises Mill Pond, the post office and town green area. Such maps, he writes, "are created to represent people,



Says Helen Sells, president of the Setalcott Native American Council: "We go back. Way back."



"It's good to see that the story is finally getting told," says Carlton Hubble Edwards.



The Setauket community, including Bethel AME Church, formed around Christian Avenue.

events and ideas that have been left out or misrepresented by official maps and related documentations of a place."

In this case, Matthews' map goes beyond Setauket's Revolutionary War past. The community is well-known as the site of a battle between Patriots and Loyalists in 1777 and the center of a spy ring that has been the subject of books and

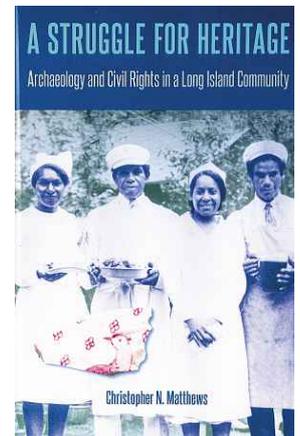
the AMC dramatic series "Turn." Setauket was also one of the stops George Washington made during his 1790 presidential tour of Long Island.

While important, those celebrated events are only part of the story of the hamlet, founded in 1655, that along with Stony Brook and Old Field is often referred to as the Three Village area. The map that Matthews has helped

piece together highlights the African American and Native American enclave and the places associated with the peoples' long-observed history.

Matthews' research has helped put Sells' heritage into the context of both Setauket's and Long Island's history. She is president of the Setalcott Native American Council,

See COVER STORY on E8

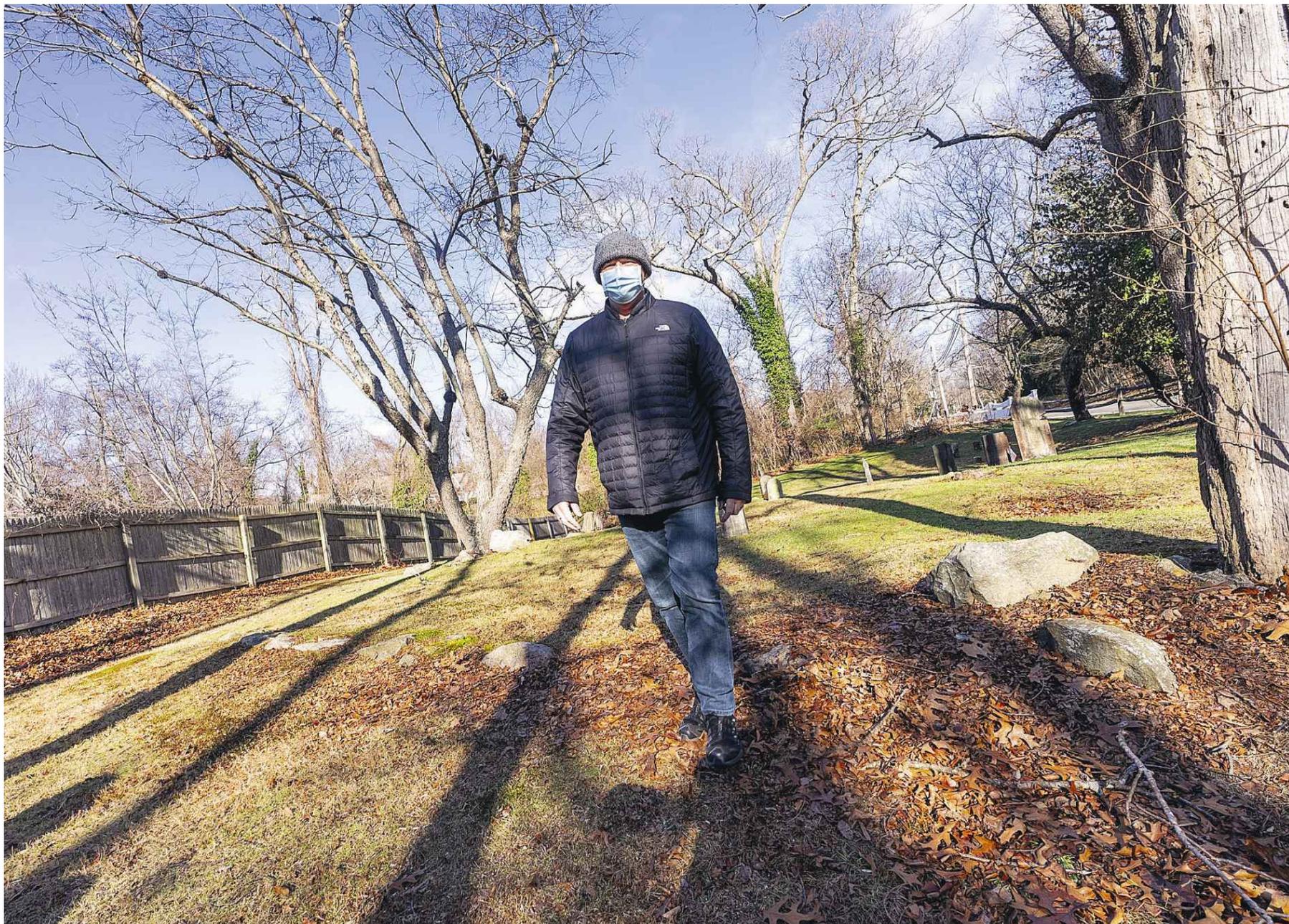


LEARN MORE

Christopher N. Matthews' new book, "A Struggle for Heritage: Archaeology and Civil Rights in a Long Island Community," was published in October 2020 by University Press of Florida. The "counter map" of the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill area created by Matthews and his students is at nwsdy.li/Counter-map ofSetauket.



ON THE COVER. The homepage of "A Counter-Map of Setauket," a site created by Christopher N. Matthews, Alexis Aley and Sophia Hudzik.



LANE DADDONA

Christopher Matthews walks through Old Bethel Cemetery, stopping where the footprint of the original Bethel AME Church, built in the 1840s, is visible just behind him.



LANE DADDONA

Sarah Ann Sells, Hellen Sells' great-aunt, is buried at Laurel Hill Cemetery, which was laid out in 1815 by the Town of Brookhaven as a "Negro Burial Ground."



LINDA ROSER

A sign marks the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill Historic District, which was established in 2005 during the first phase in preserving historical sites led by the Higher Ground Inter-Cultural and Heritage Association.

Into Setauket's history

Christopher N. Matthews' book "A Struggle for Heritage: Archaeology and Civil Rights in a Long Island Community," includes photos of the Hart family members. Clockwise from upper left: Hannah Hart, Jacob Hart, Ernest Hart, Lucy and Minnie Hart, and Daniel Hart.

COVER STORY from E6

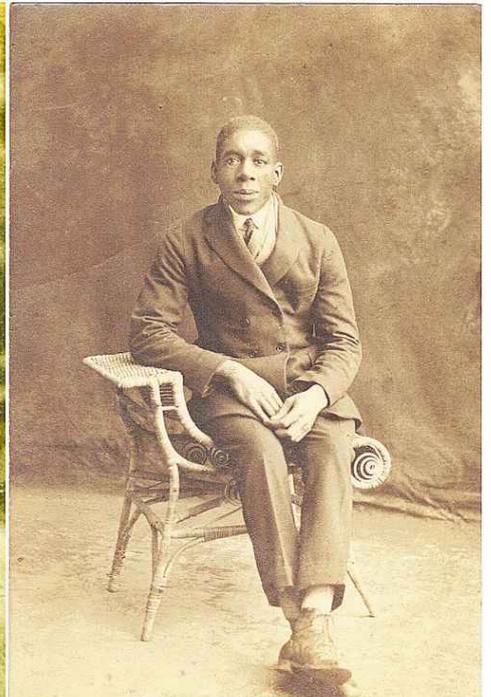
which represents the descendants of the indigenous people who lived in this area. Her ancestors include enslaved people brought from Africa to labor on the farms of the English settler families in the 17th and 18th centuries, and later, freed men and women who worked in Setauket's shipbuilding and agricultural industries. Members of her family — and the others who grew up around her in this tightly knit community — have also served their country.

"Our boys went to war," says Sells, 82, of Middle Island. "We have professional people that have come out of this community. Nurses, teachers, State Police officers."

Like most everybody else from this community, Sells' family has been active in the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in whose parking lot Sells and Matthews are meeting.

"I've been going here since I was an apple in my mother's eye," Sells says as she looks admiringly at the white clapboard church building, built in 1909 and the latest home for a congregation that dates to 1846, and perhaps earlier. "My grandfather was an assistant pastor here, and my grandmother played the organ,"

The Sells family is one of a few dozen that make up the heart of what is now known as the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill Historic District. The designation was bestowed in 2005 by the Town of Brookhaven after a local group called the Higher Ground Inter-Cultural and Heritage Association organized to preserve some of the old houses in the historically Black community located just a few blocks from modern Route 25A, but easily



overlooked by contemporary Long Islanders on their way to nearby Stony Brook University or the local Starbucks.

Three years later, Matthews met Higher Ground's founder, Robert Lewis. "He had an interest in spotlighting this community, and I had an interest in working with a community like this," said Matthews.

In 2011, and with the support

of Higher Ground, Matthews and some of his Hofstra archaeology students excavated the site of a long-vanished house once owned by the Jacob and Hannah Hart family. The insights gleaned from that dig and others seeded Matthews' book about the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill neighborhood — and its conspicuous absence from the

established historical narratives.

Local historians applaud the work done by Matthews, 55, who now teaches at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

"It's wonderful," said Bev Tyler, former president of the Three Village Historical Society. "It's the kind of work we need more of."

Matthews' project, said Brookhaven Town Historian

Barbara Russell, "has given that community a chance to shine. I love what he's done."

The book is based on not only Matthews' research, but that of Lewis and others with deep roots in the community who, like Sells, have contributed old photos and documents — and perhaps, most importantly, their memories.

Back on Long Island earlier



Christopher Matthews, left, and Brandon Ungar work in 2011 at corner of Lake and Main streets in Setauket where the Jacob and Hannah Hart home, above right, once sat. Buttons and other items found in the dig attest to Hannah's work as a laundress.



THREE VILLAGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

in New York (in 1827) the significance of places like this — and there were likely similar, secret gathering spots for Blacks and Native Americans throughout Long Island — transcended even religion.

“This is an assertion of independence,” he says, gesturing at the silent gravestones. “This was where people of color could come in safety and not be under someone’s thumb.”

EATO HOUSE

Fast forwarding a century, we come to the Eato House, built around 1900 and named for David Eato, who moved from Port Washington with his wife, formerly enslaved in the South, to become pastor of Bethel AME. The Eato House looms large in the story of the preservation of this community. By the late 20th century, Matthews says, “it was unused and had fallen into disrepair.” The Higher Ground organization secured a grant to stabilize the structure. “The hope is to restore it,” he says. “This could be a museum or a learning center.”

What’s also revealing is how the community arranged itself around the Eato House. According to public records, it appears that Black families in the area bought one large lot to be subdivided and used by other members of the community.

“This became a shared space,” Matthews says, gesturing at the homes — some old, many remodeled — nestled in the hills behind the Eato House. “It was about wanting to be together for safety and comfort, so you weren’t isolated.”

The community that coalesced here is also a reminder of why a Black presence remained in Setauket in the first place. There was a robust maritime industry on Suffolk’s North Shore; there were farms; there was labor.

“People didn’t want to leave,” Matthews said. There were livelihoods to be eked out spearing eels, harvesting crops, pounding together the timbers of ships and, later, working in the factories that sprang up in the nearby Chicken Hill neighborhood.

LUCY HART KEYES AND MINNIE HART SANFORD HOUSES

Two sisters, the youngest daughters of Jacob and Hannah Hart, owned the side-by-side homes across Christian Avenue from Bethel AME. Yet, as Matthews explained, the two



JEREMY BALES



Irving Hart Memorial Legion Hall was founded in 1949 after Black veterans were not welcomed at the existing post.



Sisters Lucy Hart Keyes and Minnie Hart Sanford, both born around the turn of the 20th century, bought side-by-side homes in their 20s. They still stand on Christian Avenue.

this year, Matthews showed a visitor some of the sites on his counter-map. Places that, like the Sells family, go way, way back.

OLD BETHEL CEMETERY

A short drive west on Christian Avenue from the current Bethel AME Church brings us to its original site, and the old church cemetery. Two hundred

or so years ago, this area would have been deep in the woods between the Setauket and Stony Brook settlements, a place where African Americans, enslaved or newly freed in the early 19th century, could have gathered safely — to speak freely or to worship. In fact, Matthews notes that archaeological evidence discovered by a nearby creek sug-

gests the presence of indigenous settlements here.

“There could be a tradition of using this space for burials and other life-marking rituals that goes back longer than anyone knows,” he says, as the winter wind whistles through the ancient headstones. “It’s a sacred spot.”

It was here that in the mid-1840s, a group of Black

residents organized and built the original Bethel AME. The footprint of that structure is still outlined in the middle of the cemetery.

Again, Matthews unwinds the history even further. He points out that the first recorded example of slavery in Setauket dates to 1672. Between then and the gradual abolishment of the institution

Landmarks full of meaning

COVER STORY from E8

women — both born around the turn of the 20th century — had very different lives. Lucy remained in Setauket, where she married, raised a family and worked as a housekeeper for some of the prominent white families in town. Minnie, by contrast, rented out her house while she traveled as a Pentecostal minister. She returned to Christian Avenue late in life, when she and her sister began each day by raising the curtains of their adjacent homes to greet each other.

“The sisters were in their 20s when they bought these homes,” Matthews says. “They were obviously making a commitment to the Christian Avenue community by doing so. And it’s wonderful to still have the two houses here as touchstones for the area.”

LAUREL HILL CEMETERY

The oldest documented landmark on the counter-map is this cemetery, laid out in 1815 by the Town of Brookhaven as a “Negro Burial Ground.” Like the Old Bethel Cemetery, Laurel Hill is on elevated terrain that drops down to a stream that feeds Long Island Sound.

Also, like Old Bethel, its proximity to sites where evidence of Native American settlements has been discovered suggests the deep connection between the local Black and indigenous populations.

“This is an ancient cultural landscape,” says Matthews.

Alongside the marked graves of many 19th and 20th century residents, he speculates, might be the unmarked graves of those from antiquity — a jarring thought as one is about a mile from the Route 25A business district.

IRVING HART MEMORIAL LEGION HALL

The Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill community has a tradition of military service dating to the Civil War. But after World War II, when some Black veterans sought to join the local Legion post, they were discouraged. According to one account related in Matthews’ book, Ku Klux Klan sympathizers who belonged to that post objected to the pres-



Carlton Hubble Edwards, left, Helen Sells and Christopher Matthews braved the cold to meet at Bethel AME Church, which was founded in the 1840s.

The Eato House was built circa 1900 for the Rev. David Eato, who moved from Port Washington with his wife, herself formerly enslaved, to become the pastor of Bethel AME.

ence of African Americans.

The Black veterans of Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill responded by forming their own post, building it on land donated to them by yet another local property-owning Black woman, Rachel Midgett. American Legion Hall Post

1766 opened in 1949. (At least one white veteran left the other Setauket post to join Black veterans in solidarity at the new one.)

In 1953, the post welcomed a young soldier just back from the Korean War, in which he had served with the 24th

Infantry Division. Carleton Hubble Edwards, now 91, is still a member — and active in the efforts to preserve and document his community’s history. With a family tree nearly as extensive as Sells’, Hub, as he’s known to friends, he has deep roots in the

Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill community.

“Hub is a treasure,” said the historian Russell. “We talk periodically and I’ll say ‘Hub, do you remember who built these houses . . . ?’ He’ll go through a list of every builder and every home in the community.”

Edwards assisted Matthews in the research for his book — and left his home for the first time in months to greet the archaeologist for this counter-map tour.

Edwards, who worked for decades in the Three Village School District, even starting a community basketball program, is gratified to see that his Legion Hall and the neighborhood he grew up in are being recognized.

“A lot of people of color have history here,” says Edwards, wearing his Korean War veteran cap. “It’s good to see that the story is finally getting told.”

The historian Tyler, also a native of Setauket, has known Edwards most of his life. An expert on the Spy Ring (having given tours that have attracted hundreds of visitors since the success of “Turn”), Tyler, too, is happy to see the new focus on the Bethel-Christian Avenue-Laurel Hill area. “The history of our community and our country is a history of many, many people, including immigrants and indigenous people,” he said. “This should be lauded and celebrated as an example of the diversity we have in this country.”

As Matthews sits in a pew at Bethel AME — where its minister, the Rev. Gregory Leonard, has invited the archaeologist and his guests to escape the cold — he reflects on the months of research and field work he did to help literally and figuratively uncover the area’s forgotten history.

“The project in Setauket was the most meaningful of my career,” says Matthews, who left Hofstra in 2012 and has continued to investigate historically Black communities, including his most recent field project, in New Jersey’s Bergen County.

“I was lucky to have the chance to do this work, and to learn directly from those whose stories are not only fascinating, but also need to be heard,” he says.