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Descendants of Slave Settlers Sell Prince William Enclave
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An acre of land in **Gainesville** wasn't worth much in 1865.

It was worth so little, in fact, that white landowners were willing to rent it to freed slaves who had traveled there in search of land. In a flurry of sales during the 1880s, many of the former slaves bought property for \$10 an acre or even less.

They called the land, which lies roughly along Routes 29 and 15, **the Settlement**. It became one of Northern Virginia's most significant, and most stable, black communities.

The original settlers believed land was power. They held on to it tightly, parting with bits only when they were desperate for cash. They educated their children on the value of a dollar and the greater value of land.

But time and circumstance have altered those lessons.

Pursued by developers offering as much as \$300,000 an acre, dozens of families — many of them descendants of those original pioneers — are opting to sell their property, and a part of Prince William County's African American history is being transformed into hundreds of luxury houses.

For the sellers, there are regrets, but there is also a conviction that they are being true to their ancestors' original purpose: to provide economic security for their families.

The founders "probably wouldn't be very happy that the land was being sold and great big houses were going on it," said Maxine Thomas, 74, a descendant of an original resident whose family has 15 acres under contract with a \$4.5 million price tag.

"What would I tell them? Well, I would just tell them that we have to move on," she said. "We can't hold on to it forever."

The land deals that have conveyed more than 160 of the 383 acres of the original Settlement mark the community's death, but residents said its history had already faded. The Shady Inn dance hall, a hot spot that drew people from miles away, is now a small, quiet church. The general store is gone. Many descendants have moved away. They turned the old homes into summer getaways, then stopped visiting altogether.

Still, it wasn't easy to persuade some of the landowners to let go, even for big bucks, said Carmen Amaya, a real estate agent who pulled together a pending deal for Equity Homes to buy 30 acres from seven families. Fifty to 70 houses will be squeezed onto the land, she said. Another development already underway will include 233 houses.

Amaya said she had to do a lot of talking and, in some cases, begging.

"They've had their land since the 40-acres-and-a-mule era," she said, referring to Union Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's order that gave each free black family on the Georgia coast 40 acres of abandoned plantation land and an Army mule.

To some residents, selling their land for millions pays true homage to their ancestors.

"They were aggressive people. You come from slavery, and what do you have? Nothing," said Loretta Martin Watson, 78. "I can sell my land. . . . They allowed me that privilege."

In 1865, when those original settlers arrived in **Gainesville**, it was a mere speck on the map, miles from the hustle and bustle of Washington. The land, owned by defeated and now poor Confederate planters and yeoman farmers, was thin-soiled and scrubby.

"The soil wasn't any good. In many cases, these pieces of land were woods," said historian Eugene Scheel.

Yet about 15 families who had little more than the scars of slavery and the new taste of long-sought liberty were able to coax enough wheat and corn out of the red clay to build a solid community.

Soon **the Settlement** boasted a church, a country store, two midwives, a bordello and a reputation as a place where

moonshine and deep religion coexisted harmoniously. In the community's heyday, Duke Ellington and the International Sweethearts of Rhythm played at the music hall.

There were other black enclaves in Prince William County, but few thrived as **the Settlement** did. While racism and Jim Crow laws blocked many African Americans from owning property elsewhere in the country, **the Settlement** expanded to include holdings bought by the core families' cousins and friends. Relatively isolated, they bartered among themselves without interference from whites or local government — an unusual freedom that likely contributed to the enclave's longevity, experts said.

Land was important in the South's agricultural economy, and it had special significance to former slaves.

"Land was associated with the slaveholder, and the slaveholder was associated with wealth, and so blacks bought land," said Lucious Edwards, a Virginia State University historian.

In the three decades after slavery, blacks accumulated land more rapidly than whites, said Vanderbilt University economist Robert A. Margo. By 1900, about 22 percent of black male heads of household owned their homes.

But some all-black communities became targets of white backlash, and government policies deprived many black landowners of their property, Edwards said. One of the most common ways was to delay notice of overdue taxes and then confiscate the land, he said.

The Settlement survived. Even in 2000, when whites had begun to move into the **Gainesville** area, **the Settlement** was still 66 percent black, whereas the county was 19 percent black.

In the den of Loretta Martin Watson's home in **the Settlement**, a small spotlight hangs over a painting of a white planter standing on a porch, holding a document. Slaves are gathered around him.

"You know what this is? This is the Emancipation Proclamation," she said. "He's reading the paper, and they're kneeling down crying."

Watson's ancestor Eliza Brooks learned of her freedom as she and other slaves gathered around a woodpile on a Hopewell, Va., plantation, or so the family history goes.

"When they called them to the woodpile, they said, 'You're free to go.' Well, free to go where?" she said. "Eliza Brooks, she's the person who was the slave; the small children, she gathered them up and started heading north."

From Hopewell, Brooks found her way to **the Settlement**, and the family sank its roots there. One of Watson's great-uncles was the blacksmith. A great-aunt owned the country store.

Even though they are selling the land today, the feelings Watson and her brother Marvin Martin, 74, have for it run deep.

Martin, a retired printer who lives in **the Settlement** full time, said he's holding on to four acres. "I don't plan to sell, but money talks," he said, saying that he's going to wait for a better price.

Watson, a District resident for 41 years, sold three acres to developer DR Horton in 2003 but still owns a log cabin she built on her aunt Georgia Barnes's property in 1983 as a weekend getaway.

Aunt Georgia, the family historian, liked to survey the thick woods.

"When I was little girl . . . she would say, 'That's a good house spot,'" Watson said of the place where she built the cabin. "I had promised her that I was going to build this house. She could have sold this land and lived a better life."

But she didn't. Cherishing the land was an attitude shared by Aunt Georgia's generation.

Alfred Powell, 75, recalled how passersby admired a walnut tree that still sits in the yard of the family's circa 1901 home up a gravel road off Lee Highway. Those passersby made offers, but Alfred H. Strother, Powell's grandfather, wouldn't budge. "Granddaddy refused to sell the walnut tree," he said.

"That walnut tree has to be 400 or 500 years old," said Clayton Powell, 59. "That distinguished that property."

The fact that their grandfather wouldn't so much as sell a tree causes the family, which is now selling the land, some anguish. Six of seven remaining Powell siblings gathered recently at the Arlington home of sister Maxine Thomas to talk about the pending \$4.5 million sale of 15 acres. They were jovial, reflective and guilt-ridden.

The family can trace its ancestry to the Rev. Moses B. Strother, a founder of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, who they believe adopted their grandfather, and to James Montgomery Peters, a runaway slave who fought with the Union Army. They have memories from **the Settlement** of picking blackberries and strawberries, getting eggs from hens, raising hogs and milking cows.

In Thomas's sunroom, paintings of scenes from the Underground Railroad adorn the walls. They also keep photographs, newspaper clippings and deeds, the latter holding more sentiment these days.

Land sales and property values in **the Settlement** rose after a brief yet bitter fight in 2001 between the landowners and an environmental group that wanted to preserve the land as an African American heritage park. The group's plan would have allowed the land to remain with the families for one more generation, after which they would have been required to sell it to the county for the park. The land never would have realized its true market value, residents said.

"They were almost disenfranchised," Supervisor W.S. Covington III (R-Brentsville), who represents the area, said of **the Settlement's** residents. "I'm glad they're getting something for their land."

Patricia Lightfoot, 69, considered an outsider because she moved from Fauquier County to **the Settlement** in 1966, rounded up her neighbors to fight the proposed park. She has made **the Settlement** and its history a personal crusade. "The major reason [to fight the plan] was that it would prevent us from selling our land," she said.

Although she plans to keep her hilltop ranch house, she also plans to sell some property to a developer.

But as residents pack and homes are torn down and new ones go up, Willetta Wilson Grayson, 77, said she gets an odd feeling.

"It's strange," she said as she sat in a dining room of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church. "It's something to look around and remember all the black people. Now, you look up and see white people."

The church sits on Lee Highway. Most parishioners drive from out of town, and even those who live close by cannot take the scenic shortcuts through woods to the church. Those dirt paths, worn by the feet of their ancestors, have been replaced by houses and blocked by bulldozers plowing land to build more houses.

Unlike its longtime parishioners, the church isn't going anywhere.

"We got all these bodies back here," said deacon Nimrod Dade, 64.

The cemetery is a history lesson. Whole families are buried side by side like royalty. Some graves have no tombstones, no names. They are marked only by large rocks that, because of their size and distinctive shapes, somehow seem appropriate tributes to now-nameless freed slaves.

The church and its cemetery will remain as a reminder of what once was. And there's one more remnant: The sign for the subdivision under construction by DR Horton reads "Hopewell's Landing."

"I insisted," Loretta Watson said.

The Settlement that never had a real name now has one as a tribute to Eliza Brooks's roots, she said.

The Powells hope to follow suit by lending their ancestors' name to the Equity Homes luxury development, even though they worry that the walnut tree will be knocked down when their 100-year-old home is razed.

"Maybe we'll call ours Strother's Glen," Thomas said.

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Section: A Section
Page: A1
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