

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

RURAL REDLINING: HOW RILEY
ROBERTS ROAD LOST ITS WAY

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Historians, journalists, and sociologists have documented how 20th century bankers, insurance agents, and city officials discriminated against Black Americans through a system known as redlining. This practice segregated Black residents into certain neighborhoods and reduced the value of their property, making it far more difficult to pass down generational wealth. A similar but less obvious phenomenon occurred in rural areas on Maryland's Eastern Shore. After the

Civil War, Black residents typically found themselves able to buy only the lowest land with the poorest soil. That too set up a cascade of events that imperiled Black Marylanders' ability to pass down generational wealth.

This thesis shows how laws, policies, and customs caused an Eastern Shore community to disappear, with a new generation unable to share in its ancestors' investments. Those factors include the difficulty majority-Black towns had incorporating, which made it harder to receive funds for rebuilding and harder to maintain control of what goes on within their borders; a lack of investment in historic Black properties, in part because state agencies prefer to work with established non-profit historic societies, most of which are white; poor ditch management in lower lands; and an inability to attract state open-space funds to help preserve their lands.

For the most part, journalists have not been covering this, because the story is happening slowly and without a major "news hook" to lure in traditional editors. This thesis uses Riley Roberts Road as a case study to examine the broader issue of Black towns, how we've lost them, why that history is crucial, and what we can do to make sure we don't forget the ones that are still with us.

RURAL REDLINING: HOW RILEY ROBERTS ROAD LOST ITS WAY

By Rona Anne Kobell

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Riley Roberts Road going east from the DNR Wildlife Management Area. Photo: Rona Kobell

Preface

For much of U.S. history, the government has discriminated against this nation's Black residents. Local, state, and federal governments segregated urban neighborhoods through various mechanisms that directed where Black families could buy homes, live, and work. In Baltimore, the practices became codified with a city ordinance.¹ Such ordinances soon spread to Chicago, Louisville, Detroit, Kansas City, and dozens of other cities where Black families migrated from

¹ Garrett Power, "Apartheid Baltimore Style: the Residential Segregation Ordinances of 1910–1913," *Maryland Law Review* 42, no. 2 (1983): 289–328, <http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/mlr/vol42/iss2/4>.

the rural American South.² In 1917, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Louisville ordinance in *Buchanan v. Warley*, and the rest of the ordinances were deemed unconstitutional. Yet that decision did not halt segregation.³

Redlining, a practice by which banks and insurers drew lines on a map delineating where they would lend money to Black families, came to define a legacy of segregation.⁴ Federal housing hewed to the red lines, too, placing public housing in areas often cut off from the rest of the city.⁵ These practices overlaid an infrastructure of inequity that persists.⁶

In my 17 years as a Chesapeake Bay reporter, mostly focused on Maryland and its Eastern Shore, I began to realize that a land segregation of sorts predated this urban practice and still exists. I have come to think of this practice as rural redlining, though I have not seen any other scholars who have noted the phenomenon refer to it that way. Calling it rural redlining has allowed me to see patterns between Baltimore, where I have lived for more than two decades, and the rural Shore, which I have covered for almost as long. Land segregation on the Shore was not about red lines on maps. Instead, laws, policies, and customs in several Shore communities deprived Black families of the wealth that they reasonably had expected to derive from their land. Those practices ranged from only being able to buy the low land that white people did not want to the many hurdles for grants to preserve land and historic structures.⁷ That redlining is

² Lawrence T. Brown, *The Black Butterfly: The Harmful Politics of Race and Space in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021): 75.

³ Erin Miller, “The Neglected Case of *Buchanan v. Warley*,” *SCOTUS Blog*, February 10, 2010, <https://www.scotusblog.com/2010/02/the-neglected-case-of-buchanan-v-warley>.

⁴ Brown, *Black Butterfly*: 12–13.

⁵ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017): 17–38.

⁶ Lawrence Lanahan, *The Lines between Us: Two Families and a Quest to Cross Baltimore's Racial Divide* (New York: The New Press, 2019): 11–12.

⁷ John Kellogg, “Negro Urban Clusters in the Postbellum South,” *Geographical Review* 67, no. 3 (July 1977): 310–321, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/213725>.

still occurring as climate change brings sea level rise, intermittent flooding, erosion, and a loss of community. Many Black residents can't even bury their dead; there is too much water in the cemetery.⁸

I will show how, in one community on the Shore, Black families have been unable to pass down wealth via land to their heirs. One reason they have been unable to preserve what they have is because the land they originally settled on—the only land they could get—was already low. The manner in which journalists cover this story—or didn't, as the case is here—shapes how we understand it. One community cannot tell us about every community, but it can give a sense of how several factors worked together to reach an unfortunate result. *Redlining* serves as a metaphor for what I have seen in this community. It's not an exact comparison, but it feels applicable.

This Black community may not have the plantation homes and grand restorations that have occupied the Shore's historical preservation movement for the past century. Yet the Black laborers, cooks, teachers and preachers who lived in this place expected to pass down their land to their children, to give them the head start they never had.

I could have looked at many communities to illustrate this point. But I chose to focus on Riley Roberts Road, in Dames Quarter, on the Deal Island Peninsula, in Somerset County. In choosing Riley Roberts Road, I am using the skills acquired in pursuit of this degree. It is a microhistory, which I learned about in Rick Bell's course. It requires the use of data, which I learned in Sean Mussenden's course. It advances a theory, which Linda Steiner taught me in her

⁸ *Smithville*, directed by Wyman Jones Jr. (2018; College Park, MD: Maryland Sea Grant, 2018), <https://www.chesapeakequarterly.net/V17N34/main1>.

graduate course. Finally, it employs anthropological techniques, which I studied with Grit Martinez. I have endeavored to bring all these elements together here, in addition to using skills honed over a long career as a reporter.



Milton Wigfall's former home on Riley Roberts Road. Photo: Rona Kobell

Table of Contents

Chapter I. Introduction: Defining Redlining

Chapter II. Research Summary

Chapter III. Deal Island and the Quarters of the Damned

Chapter IV. Methods

Chapter V. Dames Quarter in the News

Chapter VI. Meet the Wigfalls: A Microhistory

Chapter VII. The Forgotten Quarter

Chapter VIII. Opportunistic Preservation

Chapter IX. The Importance of Incorporation

Chapter X. Sensing a Pattern

Chapter XI. Conclusion: How to Improve Coverage and Context



The author trying to walk up Riley Roberts Road a few days after a nor'easter. Photo: Carrie Samis

Dedication

The author wishes to thank her husband, journalist Jesse Walker, and her children, Maya and Lila Walker. Earning a Master of Arts in the middle of a pandemic while working full-time and also founding a non-profit organization was challenging. There were many nights I couldn't make dinner or spend time with the children or ferry them to their activities. I also want to thank my father, Gerald, and my late mother, Helen.

I am grateful to my committee, particularly chair Deborah Nelson. My thanks also extend to Sandy Banisky, whom I had the pleasure of working with at *The Baltimore Sun*, and Rick Bell, the professor who taught me to love microhistories.

I extend my gratitude as well to Merrill College and its administrators for encouraging me to take up this course of study, especially Rafael Lorente, who helped me shape the original idea two years ago. I would also like to thank Serap Rada for her wise counsel.

Aaron Horner, a Deal Island native, is a researcher at the Nabb Center at Salisbury University who provided invaluable help with maps and research. Vince Leggett of Blacks of the Chesapeake offered encouragement and sound advice. Eddie Dean escorted me up the road in his pickup truck when my small minivan could not get there. Carrie Samis, of Princess Anne, introduced me to many sources. Mo Bussink rented me her beautiful cottage. Islanders pointed me in the right direction while I was on my bike or doing my research.

Last but not least, I dedicate this research to the people of Riley Roberts Road, past and present. I could not have accomplished this work without your trust and your time



Rowhouses near Druid Hill Park with lead paint problems. Urban redlining segregated neighborhoods of once-grand homes like these. Photo: Rona Kobell

I. Introduction: Defining Redlining

For close to 100 years—and in many ways still—Black life on the two sides of the Chesapeake Bay was a study in contrasts.

In 1850, about half of the Eastern Shore’s population was still enslaved. Those who were free worked as mariners or loggers; in some cases, they bought their freedom and were able to hire themselves out as farm workers for meager wages.¹⁰

¹ Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985): 1–4.

In 1850, more than 90 percent of Baltimore City's population was free. Black workers had well-paying, skilled jobs as longshoremen, caulkers on ships, and streetcar operators. Socially, Black men and women in Baltimore had freedoms their Shore brethren never knew. They could shop in many stores, rent property across neighborhoods, and even buy alley houses in some neighborhoods to plant roots and grow some generational wealth.¹¹

"Slave or free, no greater number of blacks could be found anywhere in the nation," according to a report on the city's website. "By the time the Civil War erupted, the City contained 26,000 free blacks and approximately 2,000 slaves. Even more remarkable, during that same period Maryland alone accounted for one out of every five free blacks in the country."¹²

Those numbers would grow. From 1850 to 1900, Baltimore's population exploded, going from 169,000 to 508,957.¹³ Close to a fifth of those residents were Black.¹⁴ Locust Point was the second busiest port in the country, after New York City. While many of those immigrants would go on to Detroit and Chicago, thousands of Black immigrants from the Shore came to stay. They secured jobs at nascent factories, such as Bethlehem Steel, Glenn Martin Airport, or one of the city's 27 fertilizer factories. Close enough to their roots but far enough away to build anew, Baltimore's Black immigrants from the Shore made the city home.¹⁵

Tension simmered between Baltimore's Black and white populations and among the city's different immigrant groups.¹⁶ The situation reached a boil in 1910, when a white woman named Margaret Franklin Brewer sold 1834 McCulloh Street to a Black civil rights attorney

² Antero Pietila, *Not in My Neighborhood* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010): 8.

³ "The History of Baltimore," Baltimore Department of Planning, accessed November 20, 2021, <https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/History%20of%20Baltimore.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pietila, *Neighborhood*: 9.

⁶ "The History of Baltimore."

⁷ Power, "Apartheid Baltimore Style."

named W. Ashbie Hawkins. The sale crossed a line, as the house was close to one of the city's poshest neighborhoods; Hawkins had to fight in court to keep the property. He won, but a war over housing codes quickly began. In 1910, Baltimore would be the first city in the nation to legislate segregation through a city ordinance.¹⁷

Redlining got its name from the lines banks and insurance companies drew on maps to show where Black people could get loans and insurance.¹⁸ Newspapers, including *The Baltimore Sun*, cheered on the restrictions, arguing that it was the best defense against a “Negro invasion” bringing crime and disease to Baltimore.¹⁹ In 1917, the Supreme Court ruled that such segregation ordinances were not constitutional, and in 1968, Congress passed sweeping federal legislation mandating fair housing.²⁰ Multiple court battles ensued and continue to this day to ensure adequate affordable housing. But in many cities, including Baltimore, the vestiges of more than half a century of segregated housing are hard to shake. The city has largely all-white neighborhoods and largely all-Black ones; the life expectancy between them can differ by as much as 20 years.²¹

Restricted opportunities on the Shore fueled migration to Baltimore. In 1910, about 87 percent of Baltimore's Black population was native to Maryland; many came from the Shore.²² Black people migrated because they had to, according to Maya Davis, the longtime Maryland state archivist who now directs the Riverdale House Museum. The land they were able to get—

⁸ Pietila, *Not in My Neighborhood*: 6–8, 16–17.

⁹ Rothstein, *Color of Law*: 39–58.

¹⁰ Brown, *Black Butterfly*: 74.

²⁰ Ibid: 90–100.

²¹ “In Poor Baltimore Neighborhoods, Life Expectancy Similar to Developing Countries,” Kaiser Health News and Philip Merrill College, February 16, 2016, <https://khn.org/news/map-in-poor-baltimore-neighborhoods-life-expectancy-similar-to-developing-countries>.

²² Ron Cassie, “The Great Migration,” *Baltimore*, February 2020, <https://www.baltimoremagazine.com/section/historypolitics/the-great-migration>.

the land white people didn't want—was either prone to floods, bereft of quality soil, or in an undesirable location. Often, Davis said, these towns' and neighborhoods' names reveal the lack of elevation: Gum Swamp in Dorchester County; Sandy Ground in Worcester County; Shockoe Bottom in Richmond, Virginia.²³

“By far the most common sites for these new Negro settlements were the bottomlands,” wrote geographer John Kellogg in 1977. “The damp, poorly drained lowlands were of considerably lower value than the better-drained land, owing in some part to the association of bottomlands with disease.”²⁴

Kellogg, a geographer, based his conclusions on deep study of several southern cities, notably Lexington, Kentucky, but also Atlanta; Durham, North Carolina; and Richmond.²⁵ He found several patterns in migration, with help from the records from the U.S. Census and the Freedmen's Bureau. Like Maryland, Kentucky was a border state, and its power structure was sympathetic to slaveholders.²⁶

Kofi Boone is a landscape architect professor who has studied communities in what are colloquially known as “Black lands”—land that Black people owned or settled in parts of the country that were largely segregated. Boone has worked with residents of Princeville, North Carolina, the first incorporated Black town in the United States. Princeville was built on the floodplain fringe of Tarboro, an all-white town; it has flooded numerous times as a result.²⁷

²³ Maya Davis, Zoom interview with author, November 19, 2021.

²⁴ Kellogg, “Negro Urban Clusters,” 313.

²⁵ Kellogg, “Negro Urban Clusters.”

²⁶ John Kellogg, “The Formation of Black Residential Areas in Lexington, Kentucky, 1865–1887,” *The Journal of Southern History* 48, no. 1 (1982): 21–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2207295>.

²⁷ Kofi Boone, “Black Landscapes Matter,” *World Landscape Architect*, June 3, 2020, <https://worldlandscapearchitect.com/black-landscapes-matter-by-kofi-boone>.

Boone said the work of geographers Jeff Ueland and Barney Warf, which found a close correlation between race and elevation, has influenced his thinking about land and segregation.²⁸

“Land was available, but it was literally available land, and dependent on the willingness of the white owner to sell it,” he said. “There were a few exceptions where that available land was high ground, but not many.”²⁹

In my research into the community on Riley Roberts Road, I have examined several mechanisms that contributed to its demise:

- Land preservation programs that prefer to purchase development rights and property that is on the water, which Black communities often didn’t have.³⁰
- Historic preservation grants that did not reach Riley Roberts, and thus could not prevent the loss of its schoolhouses and the potential loss of its church.³¹
- A lack of incorporated Black towns on the Shore. Without the ability to control their own destiny, these towns are subject to the whims of more distant politicians, who are inclined to spread flood-prevention grant money to more vote-rich areas.³²
- News coverage that scarcely noted the disappearing towns, letting them fade without proper obituaries and without helping them stem the tide. When reporters do cover these places, they seem more amused that residents voted for Donald Trump and question

²⁸ Jeff Ueland and Barney Warf, "Racialized Topographies: Altitude and Race in Southern Cities," *Geographical Review* 96, no. 1 (2006): 50–78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30034004>.

²⁹ Rona Kobell, “Climate Change is Wiping out Harriet Tubman’s Homeland, and We’re Doing Little About It,” *The Boston Globe*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2019/10/24/climate-change-claiming-harriet-tubman-homeland-among-other-key-sites/hCnqd8w61SdnWBVJvfYTKI/story.html>.

³⁰ “Program Open Space: An Overview,” Maryland Department of Natural Resources, <https://dnr.maryland.gov/land/pages/programopenspace/program-open-space-101.aspx>.

³¹ Susan G. Pearl, “School Buildings Constructed in Maryland with Financial Assistance from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, 1918–1932,” *National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form*, March 2010.

³² *Smithville*.

climate change than they are serious about providing a full picture of the assaults the land endured before the seas began to rise.³³

- A lack of flood control, including from ditches that discharge onto low points.

In this thesis, I will explain how something like redlining happened in rural communities and why Riley Roberts Road is a good case study. I will discuss how government inaction allowed land to be lost. I will show how Black communities with different government structures have preserved what they had. Finally, I will look at how a lack of news coverage facilitated the neighborhood's demise, and how more complete reporting could change the trajectory of these communities.

³³ "Deal Island Drainage Assessment," A. Morton Thomas & Associates, Inc., January 2020, <https://amtengineering.com/projects/deal-island-drainage-assessment>.



Flooding in the ditches on Riley Roberts Road in front of the old Rosenwald School. Photo: Rona Kobell

II. Research Summary

I began thinking about this thesis topic in early 2017, when I interviewed Charles Ross for a magazine feature about Harriet Tubman.³⁴ Ross is Tubman’s great-great-great nephew, born and raised in Dorchester County not far from the farm where Tubman had been enslaved. Ross is an artist and educator, and I had gone to Dorchester County to tour the new Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park and Visitor’s Center with him.

As he squiggled his Suburban through the narrow roads, we passed his high school. He casually mentioned that he likely went to school with the descendants of those who had enslaved his family. Though I had covered the Eastern Shore for almost two decades at that point, this

³⁴ Rona Kobell, “Remember Aunt Harriet,” *National Parks*, Fall 2017, <https://www.npca.org/articles/1634-remember-aunt-harriet>.

comment struck me. People on the Shore tend not to move away. That's partly out of love for the outdoors and for their families, but it's also because their wealth is often tied up in their land. As we passed sickly loblolly pines and once-high ground that had become marsh, I began to think about this conundrum. Families stayed on the Shore because of their land, but now their land was betraying them, taking on water, drowning in salt, unfit to grow crops, and unlikely to fetch much on the market.³⁵

I thought about all of the programs I'd written about over the years that help preserve land and build resilience. The Department of Natural Resources Rightly earns kudos for its land preservation efforts, but those only protect large tracts of quality land, either saved as open space or protected with easements to allow farming or forestry to continue. The Federal Emergency Management Administration and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration assist communities when disaster strikes, but they are designed to provide aid to incorporated municipalities. Most Black settlements, I would later learn, were not incorporated. I had also noticed that a lot of the Shore's Black churches, sharecropper homes, and other remnants of 19th century life had collapsed. Yet there appeared to be *some* money for preservation, as skipjacks, lighthouses, and tobacco barns welcomed tourists along the byways.

I began to think of these policies working in concert as a sort of rural redlining. I live in Baltimore, so redlining was a term I knew. It became my frame of reference when looking at this loss of history on the Shore. I wondered if scholars had noticed this phenomenon too—even if no one had called it “rural redlining,” surely some had observed the practice.

³⁵ Charles Ross, interview with author, May 2017.

I started by reading histories of what life was like in Maryland for enslaved and freed Black residents from 1850 on, to determine the kind of communities they created. Helpful books included *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*,³⁶ *The Underground Railroad Records*,³⁷ *Bound for the Promised Land*,³⁸ and *Stealing Freedom along the Mason-Dixon Line*.³⁹ These gave me an idea of the fluidity with which Black people moved in Maryland. I then burnished my understanding of redlining in Baltimore with several excellent books: *Not in My Neighborhood*,⁴⁰ *The Black Butterfly*,⁴¹ *The Color of Law*,⁴² and *The Lines between Us*.⁴³ The paper “Apartheid Baltimore Style,” by land-use scholar Garrett Power, was also instructive in showing systematic segregation in the city.⁴⁴

I tested my hypothesis a bit with an “Ideas” piece in *The Boston Globe*, headlined “Climate change is wiping out Harriet Tubman’s homeland, and we’re doing little about it.”⁴⁵ I looked at a study from geographers Jeff Ueland and Barney Warf that looked at altitudinal segregation in 146 southern cities; it concluded that Black residents usually could buy only the lowest land.⁴⁶ That led me to look for further studies of southern cities, to see if I could find patterns. Geographer John Kellogg’s “Negro Clusters in the Postbellum South” discussed the common ground different southern cities had—that is, the bottomlands.⁴⁷ His case study of

³⁶ Fields, *Slavery and Freedom*..

³⁷ William Still, *The Underground Railroad Records* (New York: The Modern Library, 2019).

³⁸ Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land* (New York: Penguin/Random House, 2004).

³⁹ Milt Diggins, *Stealing Freedom along the Mason-Dixon Line* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

⁴⁰ Pietila. *Not in My Neighborhood*.

⁴¹ Brown. *The Black Butterfly*

⁴² Rothstein, *The Color of Law*.

⁴³ Lanahan, *Lines*.

⁴⁴ Garrett Power, “Apartheid Baltimore Style”

⁴⁵ Rona Kobell, “Climate Change”

⁴⁶ Ueland and Warf, “Racialized Topographies.”

⁴⁷ Kellogg, “Negro Urban Clusters.”

Lexington helped me see that the patterns I noted on the Shore occurred throughout the south.⁴⁸

Kate Clifford Larson's work helped me understand the neglect that persists around historic properties in Black communities.⁴⁹ That led me to investigate how the Maryland Historic Trust operates. Anthropological studies from Michael Paolisso's team at University of Maryland were valuable too, particularly "Cultural knowledge and local vulnerability in African American communities."⁵⁰

Because I'd written about Dorchester County for *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post* and had helped make a film about one of the communities there—*Smithville*—I knew I would want to look elsewhere for my thesis.⁵¹ I chose Somerset County because it had the second highest sea-level rise after Dorchester.⁵² And then I chose Deal Island because my previous visits there had enchanted me (see **Methods**). I also knew from driving there that the ditches drained poorly. Understanding the soil and hydrology was important too, and for that I turned to the Maryland Geological Survey's 1990 study of the county's hydrogeology and groundwater resources.⁵³

⁴⁸ Kellogg, "Lexington."

⁴⁹ Kate Clifford Larson. "Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument Historic Resource Study," National Parks Service, August 2019.

⁵⁰ Christine D. Miller Hesed and Michael Paolisso, "Cultural Knowledge and Local Vulnerability in African American Communities," *Nature Climate Change* 5, no. 7 (2015): 683–687, https://anth.umd.edu/sites/anth.umd.edu/files/Miller%20Hesed%20and%20Paolisso%202015%20supplement_online.pdf

⁵¹ Rona Kobell, "Climate Change is Washing Away the Chesapeake's Treasures," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/climate-change-is-washing-away-the-chesapeakes-bay-treasures/2019/01/25/bd0321d0-1e62-11e9-8b59-0a28f2191131_story.html.

⁵² D.F. Boesch et al, *Sea-level Rise: Projections for Maryland 2018* (Cambridge, MD: University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science, 2018), https://www.umces.edu/sites/default/files/Sea-Level%20Rise%20Projections%20for%20Maryland%202018_0.pdf.

⁵³ William Werkheiser, *Hydrogeology and Groundwater Resources of Somerset County, Maryland* (Baltimore: Maryland Geological Survey, 1990), https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc6000/sc6046/000000/000001/000000/000077/pdf/mdsa_sc6046_1_77.pdf.

I have seen pieces of my thesis in several of the papers I have referenced—Black people received low land in rural areas; they couldn't get assistance when they needed it; and Baltimore residents experienced severe discrimination that robbed them of generational wealth. I think my work advances the research in this area because it explains the redlining principles well-known in urban areas and shows how the same principles were at work in rural areas. It then applies this phenomenon to one place, Riley Roberts Road, to show how each facet of rural redlining harmed property values and quality of life. It then presents a control group of sorts with Highland Beach, to show how a Black community can thrive when discrimination doesn't constrict its ambitions.

III. Devil's Island and the Quarters of the Damned

When outsiders talk about Deal Island, they usually mean a four-town peninsula that dates back to 1670, when the area was a rogue's colony dangling into Tangier Sound. (It can be confusing, because there is also a Deal Island town on the Deal Island peninsula. But "Deal Island" generally refers to the four-town area.)

Quakers fleeing persecution on Virginia's Eastern Shore came here first. The English named it Devil's Island because of the rowdy behavior among the watermen; religious settlers, mostly Methodists, later changed it to Deil's Island, then Deal's Island, and finally Deal Island.⁵⁴ The island retains an air of lawlessness. From Princess Anne for 18 miles along Deal Island Road, there is no local government, no law enforcement, and mostly no trouble.⁵⁵ The ministers serving the dozen or so churches along the peninsula assume many tasks of government: distributing food to the needy, updating residents about important developments, and getting social services for those who need them.⁵⁶

Its most famous resident was Joshua Thomas, known as the Parson of the Islands, who is best remembered for telling the British they would lose badly in Baltimore during the War of 1812. The British laughed, but Thomas was right, and they came back to tell him so.⁵⁷ A less well-known resident was a waterman's daughter named Emma Berdis Jones, the mother of the writer James Baldwin.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Greg Stiverson, "History of the Deal Island Area, 1607–1877" (unpublished manuscript, April 30, 1977), Hall of Records, Annapolis, MD.

⁵⁵ Personal observations, November 1–December 1, 2021.

⁵⁶ Michael Paolisso, interview with author, November 19, 2021.

⁵⁷ Rebecca Miller, "Joshua Thomas: 'A Diamond in the Rough,'" *Somerset County Historical Bulletin*, Fall/Winter 1994.

⁵⁸ Bill V. Mullen. *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

The towns, each about three miles apart, are still there. None has its own government. The first one is Dames Quarter, which was called the “Quarters of the Damned” because of the rough-hewn original settlers who plied their boats in the creek once called “Fannie’s Gut.” Next comes Chance, then Deal Island, and then Wenona. In Wenona, there is a much-noted sign on Arby’s—the local bar, grill, coffee shop, convenience store, and outfitter: “It’s not the end of the world, but you can see it from here.”⁵⁹ Locals are particular about the towns. Dames Quarter is not Deal Island. Chance is not Deal Island. Wenona is sometimes Deal Island, because it’s so small. So the Deal Island Peninsula encompasses several distinct towns that have no municipal governments and rely on Somerset County for public services, save for a volunteer fire department.⁶⁰

So many descendants of the original settlers remain that the phone book lists people by their first names. The most common surnames in the white community are Webster, Abbott, and Benton; in the Black community, they’re Jones and Wallace.⁶¹ Websters dominate in the cemetery at the island’s central church, St. John’s.⁶² At least five streets are named for Webster family members, in addition to roads named “Hotel,” “Cemetery,” “School,” and “Church.”⁶³

To reach the peninsula, take U.S. 13 to Princess Anne and turn right at Deal Island Road. Thick strands of loblolly pines bookend the two-lane road. The forest periodically stops for a mile or two so a town can emerge, often consisting of a white clapboard Methodist church, a few modest homes, and a shuttered country store. But continue down the road about 12 miles, and the

⁵⁹ Personal observation, November 1, 2021.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “Telephone Directory of Deal Island, MD. 21821,” accessed Nov. 8, 2021, https://www.telephonedirectories.us/Maryland/Deal_Island/ZIP/21821

⁶² Personal observations, November 1–December 1, 2021.

⁶³ Ibid.

lush pines give way to skinny sticks, barren of leaves. The salt marshes of Delmarva are moving into the remaining hardwoods, creating a mix of dead and dying trees known as a ghost forest. For the next several miles, marsh toggles with trees struggling to remain upright.⁶⁴

Most have lost the struggle. This part of the Eastern Shore endures a daily assault from climate change. The waters are rising, the land is sinking, the saltwater is inundating the land and the groundwater beneath it, and the marshes that sustained forests are becoming open water where trees cannot grow.⁶⁵ Adding to the difficulties are the myriad ditches that the state of Maryland, Somerset County, and private landowners have dug to build roads, control mosquitoes, and move water off their own land and onto someone else's. The mosquito ditches altered the hydrology of the area, and many wildlife managers believe the state never should have built them.⁶⁶ They became breeding grounds for biting greenhead flies, and they didn't appear to reduce the mosquito population. Wildlife managers thought the ditches would help move water more quickly from the surfaces to the waterways. Instead they are filled with stagnant and often fetid water. Rather than helping drain the water out to sea, they hold it here and help push saltier water inland into farm fields and to roadways. The soils on Deal Island drain poorly, exacerbating the ditch issue.

Researchers have found little increase in the Deal Island Peninsula's rate of sea level rise for the past 1,000 years.⁶⁷ But that's changing quickly. From 2011 to 2018, the water rose a

⁶⁴ Personal observations, November 1–December 1, 2021.

⁶⁵ Kate Tully et al., "The Invisible Flood: The Chemistry, Ecology, and Social Implications of Coastal Saltwater Intrusion," *BioScience* 69, no. 5 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biz027>.

⁶⁶ William McInturff, interview with author, November 29, 2021.

⁶⁷ Michael Kearney, "Sea Level Change during the Last Thousand Years in Chesapeake Bay," *Journal of Coastal Research* 2, no. 4 (Autumn 1996): 977–983, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4298548>.

quarter of an inch during a typical year.⁶⁸ Saltwater is moving into freshwater systems rapidly, which is killing the plants that live in the marsh and help protect the land from erosion.⁶⁹

Dames Quarter is just past the largest ghost forest on the peninsula heading west. Still large enough to merit its own election district, the community consists of four main roads off of Deal Island Road: Hodson White Road, Long Point Road, Messick Road, and Riley Roberts Road. All are to the north except Riley Roberts, which requires a turn south. Though a few Black families lived down each of the roads at one time, Riley Roberts was the heart of the Black community, with a thriving church and an elementary school for Black children.

It took me three tries to navigate Riley Roberts Road. The first time, I neglected to check the tide charts; my small minivan made it a quarter of the way up before I had to back out. The second time I tried at low tide, but the gauges at the side of the road indicated that the water was still above one foot. The third time, a source with a high pickup truck took me at low tide—and we still had to glide through high water.

The Maryland Real Property Database lists 90 properties on Riley Roberts Road. Most are vacant lots and marsh owned by out-of-towners or government entities. Of the couple dozen pieces of property that have or recently had livable houses, three are listed as owner-occupied. Of those, only one belongs to a descendant of the original Riley Roberts families.⁷⁰ Her name is

⁶⁸ Jeremy Cox, “On Deal Island, Marsh Grass Predicts Where Land Will Drown,” *The Chesapeake Bay Journal*, May 18, 2021, https://www.bayjournal.com/news/climate_change/at-deal-island-marsh-grass-predicts-where-land-will-drown/article_ee4e30c0-a445-11eb-a0c5-2b446910ad76.html

⁶⁹ Tully et al., “Invisible Flood.”

⁷⁰ The Maryland Real Property Database, State Department of Assessments and Taxation, accessed November 2021, <https://sdat.dat.maryland.gov/RealProperty/Pages/default.aspx>.

Marlene Pinkett Wigfall Wallace, and she was adopted into the Wigfall family as a toddler and married into the Wallace family as an adult.⁷¹

In 1877, a Maryland atlas showed a substantial community on Riley Roberts with Macedonia United Methodist Church at its center.⁷² Julius Rosenwald built one of his signature schools there in the early 1900s to educate Black children in a time of segregation.⁷³ There were several stores, and a Black-owned resort called Henry's Beach that Black bathers could use. Residents picked and canned tomatoes and beans; later, they cooked in Ocean City resorts. Many left for college and didn't return.

These places disappeared for both environmental and socioeconomic reasons. The homes, wood frames that initially didn't have running water or electricity, just disintegrated. Some burned. Others were torn down. Others succumbed to the salty tide and whipping winds. Some fell into obsolescence after Ocean City integrated in the early 1960s.⁷⁴ Once Black bathers were able to put their towels down in Ocean City, there was no more need for a Black resort like Henry's Beach.⁷⁵ And yet the fact that the Deal Island peninsula was home to an all-Black beach reminds us that segregation was alive even deep in isolated island communities.

The first Black residents on Deal Island were enslaved. According to the 1798 Federal Tax District Assessment, the Deal Island peninsula included nine owner families and 39 enslaved

⁷¹ Marlene Wigfall Wallace, phone interview with author, November 11, 2021.

⁷² Graham, *1877 Atlases*.

⁷³ Susan G. Pearl. "School buildings."

⁷⁴ Fern Shen, "Ocean City Shores Chilly for Some Blacks," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1992/07/19/ocean-citys-shores-chilly-for-some-blacks/ae913318-91bf-4ead-a723-e4deb96bac91>.

⁷⁵ Jenifer Dolde, "A Place for Everybody: Henry's Beach on the Segregated Eastern Shore," *The Chesapeake Log*, Spring/Summer 2021, https://issuu.com/cbmm/docs/chesapeakelog_2021-02_sprsum/s/12169434.

people. By about 1840, a free man named Arthur Wallace began buying land and bringing in family members to help him cultivate it.⁷⁶

Once Arthur Wallace helped establish a community, more freedmen came. They worked in the oyster industry or as mates on skipjacks in the mid to late 1800s. Rarely were they able to buy their own boat, due to discrimination in banking and competition from white captains.⁷⁷ But they had a knack for harvesting, shucking, and selling oysters. Excellent mariners, they often knew the best bars to tong.⁷⁸

Arthur Wallace's family founded the John Wesley Church, and his kin settled in the neighborhood across from it. The church is "Colored Church" on early maps, and the school "Colored School."⁷⁹ Older white people on the island still refer to the neighborhood near the church as "the old Colored town." They settled on the low land because that was all the sellers would let them have, a phenomenon Ueland and Warf call *racialized topography*. Ueland and Warf found a close correlation between race and elevation. That land was low to the ground, and had soil too sandy to grow crops or too wet to sustain them.⁸⁰ That would prove to be the case in the Quarters of the Damned, at least on Riley Roberts Road.

⁷⁶ Maryland Historic Trust Archives, 1798 Federal Tax District Assessment, Monie Hundred, Land Schedule for Nicholas Roe.

⁷⁷ Harold Anderson, "Black Men, Blue Waters: African Americans on the Chesapeake," *Marine Notes*, March-April 1998, http://web.archive.org/web/20211109045917/https://www.mdsg.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/MN16_2_BlackMenBlueWaters.pdf.

⁷⁸ Kate Livie, *Chesapeake Bay Oysters: The Bay's Foundation and Future* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015): 47–50.

⁷⁹ Benson Maps, Edward H. Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture, Microfilm Collection, Salisbury University.

⁸⁰ Ueland and Warf, "Racialized Topographies."



Voyd "Ducky" Wallace, a.k.a "the junk man," who helped me find the Wigfall descendants. Photo: Rona Kobell

IV. Methods

My approach to this thesis included some old fashioned shoe-leather reporting, a lot of time in archives, and one lucky break.

I had been thinking about Riley Roberts Road since University of Maryland anthropology professor emeritus Michael Paolisso, an island resident, took me through the community four years ago, when I was covering his Deal Island Peninsula Project.⁸¹ I then pulled the tax records from the state's real property database, and I found myself wanting to know more about the families who lived there. Then, about two years ago, a farmer I was interviewing for a story on saltwater intrusion took me through the same community and told me that it had been a place where people had thrived. The farmer, Bob Fitzgerald, had grown up about a mile away. His father and he would drive down Riley Roberts Road to pick up laborers for their farm, where they grew tomatoes.⁸² Fitzgerald showed me a copy of the 1877 atlas, where there were names of the first residents in the community.

I cross-checked the names with the tax records, but found little. The names on the map included Jones, White, and Wallace, which are not exactly unusual. Census records were not helpful at first without first names, which the map didn't provide.⁸³ Vince Leggett, a historian who runs Blacks of the Chesapeake, told me I needed to find the Wigfalls. If you find them, he told me, you will unlock the story of Riley Roberts Road, Macedonia Church, and Dames Quarter. But I could not find Wigfalls in the tax records, and there were too many to find in a search without first names in Census records.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Michael Paolisso, interview with author, March 2018.

⁸² Robert Fitzgerald, interview with author, March 2019.

⁸³ Graham, *1877 Atlases*.

⁸⁴ Vincent Leggett, interview with author, October 5, 2021.

A breakthrough came when I returned to Macedonia's graveyard and found a lovely headstone with the name Nolden Superior Wigfall. He served in World War I and was buried with military honors. My friend Renee Flowers, who has deep roots on the Shore, reminded me of the time I found her great-great grandfather's headstone, quite by accident, and was able to look up his obituary. Like Nolden, he had an unusual name: Verbie Cornish.⁸⁵ I went back to the Nabb Center and looked in the *Salisbury Daily Times* for an obituary. The archivist told me if there was no obituary within three days of the death, there likely wasn't one. But I insisted on checking four days out, and on the fourth day, I found it.⁸⁶ From it, I was able to find the names of his parents and siblings. Through census records, I was able to confirm what the local residents told me: The Jones, Wigfall, Roberts and Wallace families were all related, by blood or marriage. The whole community was kin.

From there, the work became similar to the journalism I have practiced for 25 years. I knocked on doors, conducted interviews, walked the street, attended church services, listened, and asked if there were others I should approach. Before long, I could reconstruct a bit of what life was like on Riley Roberts Road.

For the historic preservation and land preservation questions, I searched databases online, looked through the library at the Maryland Historic Trust, and consulted Nabb Center maps to determine how land had changed. I spoke with historians, archivists, and land managers about their efforts to preserve Black history, and with the heads of historical trusts that had neglected to make such an effort. I used my background in covering the Chesapeake Bay to form my questions about land management. Heritage Quest was extremely useful for Census records;

⁸⁵ Renee Flowers, interview with author, November 4, 2021.

⁸⁶ Aaron Horner, interview with author, November 10, 2021.

LexisNexis and the University of Maryland libraries helped with newspaper clippings; and the files at the Nabb Center allowed me to learn what the press had written about Dames Quarter. Renting a house on Deal Island meant I could take my time and visit the local church multiple times. It also helped me observe the marsh changes hour by hour, especially with winds and tides.



Rip-rap on the breakwater to protect the Deal Island Peninsula from more flooding. The project brought the news media to the island, but they didn't focus on Dames Quarter. Photo: Rona Kobell

V. Dames Quarter in the News

How we cover communities has a lot of influence on their fate. Consider *The Washington Post*'s Hannah Dreier, whose excellent reporting on Black families' inability to obtain aid after flooding because some lacked clear title prompted the Federal Emergency Management Agency to change how it defines ownership.⁸⁷ Coverage of a possible buyout on Smith Island after Superstorm Sandy ultimately resulted in several million dollars worth of investments there, despite scientists'

⁸⁷ Hannah Dreier, "FEMA Changes Policy that Kept Thousands of Black Families from Receiving Disaster Aid," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/09/02/fema-policy-change>.

assurances that the island will eventually disappear due to climate change.⁸⁸ And coverage of Isle de Jean Charles' plight in Louisiana helped the indigenous community on the shrinking land capture the attention of federal officials. They received a grant to move to higher ground with their entire tribe united.⁸⁹

I have been fortunate to have seen laws and policies change because of my own work, though not always in the most beneficial ways. After several stories I wrote in *The Baltimore Sun* exposed the Maryland Department of Natural Resources' use of taxpayer funds to purchase land that wasn't worth the price because it couldn't be developed, the state changed its preservation criteria to include development potential as a primary motivator for acquisition.⁹⁰ It developed a scoring system for lands, though it doesn't always buy the land that scores the highest. Similarly, I wrote about an earmark to Maryland watermen for what was supposed to be a sanctuary program to keep oysters in the Chesapeake Bay; instead, federal and state managers were letting watermen harvest the bulk of those oysters.⁹¹ Those stories led to an end of that program and more oversight over oysters in the state. Along with other work from reporters in other states, the story also helped lead to the demise of earmarks in general.

What happens when a community disappears with no coverage? That appears to be the case for Riley Roberts Road. I searched LexisNexis and JSTOR for "Dames Quarter,"

⁸⁸ Rona Kobell, "Breakwater to Protect Smith Island's Marshes Will Help People, too," *Chesapeake Bay Journal*, November 13, 2014, https://www.bayjournal.com/news/wildlife_habitat/breakwater-to-protect-smith-island-s-marshes-will-help-people-too/article_4ab42ec9-4130-5c3e-a9be-a7853298761f.html.

⁸⁹ Robynne Boyd, "The People of Isle de Jean Charles are Louisiana's First Climate Refugees, but They Will Not be the Last," September 23, 2019, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/people-isle-jean-charles-are-louisianas-first-climate-refugees-they-wont-be-last>.

⁹⁰ Rona Kobell, "Land Gamble Became State's," *The Baltimore Sun*, October 7, 2007, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2007-10-07-0710070044-story.html>.

⁹¹ Rona Kobell and Greg Garland, "Oystermen Reap Federal Bounty," *The Baltimore Sun*, April 1, 2007, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2007-04-01-0704010013-story.html>.

“Macedonia,” “Riley Roberts,” and “Henry’s Beach.” I found nothing relevant. The word “Deal Island” yielded some more, but mostly about its skipjacks, the iconic two-sail bateau that watermen have used to dredge for oysters for 150 years. Once a year, in October, the few skipjacks that remain race for bragging rights; the event brings tourists to the island and is often an occasion for a feature story. The organizers even crown a Little Miss and Little Mister Skipjack, who must answer questions and present a song. This appears to be the only regular coverage the community gets.

Various historians and archivists told me my best bet for news clippings on Riley Roberts and Dames Quarter was in the Nabb Center. Aaron Horner, a Deal Island native and Nabb Center researcher, has a degree in geography as well as history. He gave me four folders full of clippings. None mentioned Riley Roberts. None featured anyone from the Black community.

A burst of news articles hit around 2016, when Paolisso and the University of Maryland anthropologists began their work on climate change on the island. The outlets that published those stories included NBC News, the *Chesapeake Bay Journal*, *E and E Daily/ClimateWire*, *The New York Times*, *Terp* (a magazine at the University of Maryland), *The Salisbury Daily Times*, and *The Atlantic*.⁹² Most interviewed researchers, government officials, a pastor or two,

⁹² Erik Ortiz, “How to Save a Sinking Island,” November 13, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/specials/deal-island>; Jeremy Cox, “At Deal island, Marsh Grass Predicts Where Land Will Drown,” *Chesapeake Bay Journal*, May 18, 2021, https://www.bayjournal.com/news/climate_change/at-deal-island-marsh-grass-predicts-where-land-will-drown/article_ee4e30c0-a445-11eb-a0c5-2b446910ad76.html; Scott Waldman, “Maryland Island Denies Sea Level Rise, but Wants to Stop It,” *E&E News/Scientific American/ClimateWire*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/maryland-island-denies-sea-level-rise-yet-wants-to-stop-it>; Moises Velasquez-Manoff and Gabriella Demczuk, “As Sea Levels Rise, So Do Ghost Forests,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/08/climate/ghost-forests.html>; Liam Farrell, “The Tides That Bind,” *Terp*, October 10, 2017, <https://terp.umd.edu/the-tides-that-bind>; Jenna Miller, “Deal Island Flooding: ‘The Waters are Rising.’” *The Salisbury Daily Times*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.delmarvanow.com/story/news/local/maryland/2018/07/20/deal-island-flooding-waters-rising/801792002>; Virginia Gewin, “Slow-moving catastrophe threatening 350-year-old farms,” *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/03/maryland-salt-farms/554663>.

and some watermen. None of these seven articles quote any Black residents. None mention Riley Roberts Road. None talk about the other Black communities that had been there, and none talk about reasons beyond climate change that communities had disappeared. Some, like the NBC article, focused on the island's overwhelming support of Donald Trump for president. The *E and E Daily/ClimateWire* article noted that few on the island believed in climate change, and that the state was investing close to \$1 million on a living shoreline project to protect the island from rising seas and erosion.⁹³

I was familiar with what I considered this shallow approach from those who dropped in to communities I had covered extensively over the years. In June of 2017, James “Ooker” Eskridge, the mayor of Tangier Island, in Virginia, did an interview with CNN saying he loved Trump like a brother and was losing his island to erosion, not climate change. He asked the CNN reporter to tell Trump to reach out. A few days later, Trump did, calling Eskridge to tell him the island wasn't going anywhere.⁹⁴ From there, the political press pounced on the island, with headlines like “the doomed island that loves Trump” (from *Politico*)⁹⁵ and “the Trump-loving, climate sceptic island sinking into the sea” (from the *Sydney Morning Herald*).⁹⁶ My own reporting from the island took a different approach, as I had met Eskridge and many other Tangiermen over the years and knew they were intelligent, thoughtful people. That their beliefs differ from the reporters who covered them does not mean they deserved to lose their homes, as

⁹³ Waldman, “Maryland Island.”

⁹⁴ Amir Vera, “Mayor of Tangier Island says he got a call from President Trump. And they talked about sea level rise,” *The Virginian Pilot*, June 13, 2017, https://www.pilotonline.com/government/nation/article_4ef881aa-10f2-5141-8dad-81cec306476f.html.

⁹⁵ Earl Swift, “The Doomed Island That Loves Trump,” *Politico*, August 19, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/08/19/tangier-island-donald-trump-2016-219349>.

⁹⁶ Matthew Knott, “The Trump-Loving, Climate Sceptic Island Sinking into the Sea” *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/the-trump-loving-climate-sceptic-island-sinking-into-the-sea-20211028-p593v2.html>.

many media consumers who called Eskridge at home seemed to imply.⁹⁷ I wrote what I knew, and what they told me, and the stories that I did ran nationally in the Gannett network of newspapers.⁹⁸

Part of the problem may be a lack of diversity in newsrooms. The environmental beat tends to be among the least diverse in an industry that has been struggling with a lack of non-white journalists. David Sachsman, of Fairfield University, conducted a study of 652 reporters who covered the environment in some capacity. More than 96 percent were white, compared to 91.6 percent of journalists nationwide on other beats. Environmental reporters are twice as likely to be men as they are to be women.⁹⁹ The Society of Environmental Journalists acknowledged in a statement on systemic racism that the group “is overwhelmingly white. The field of environmental journalism is overwhelmingly white. This is not only a disservice to our newsrooms and organizations, but also to the public.”¹⁰⁰

In a study called “Repeating history: has the media changed since the Kerner Commission?,” the University of Arkansas media scholar Michael Bowman argued that the answer was largely no.¹⁰¹ The commission, which President Lyndon Johnson established to investigate structural racism, found that journalists were adept at covering the civil rights protests but not at examining the systemic racism that led to the unrest. Bowman looked at events such as

⁹⁷ James Eskridge, interview with author, July 6, 2017.

⁹⁸ Rona Kobell, “Tangier Mayor Hopes Trump Call Leads to a Sea Wall,” *Delmarva Now*, July 7, 2007, <https://www.delmarvanow.com/story/opinion/columnists/2017/07/07/tangier-mayor-trump-call-sea-wall/103477920>.

⁹⁹ David Sachsman, “Environment Reporters and U.S. Journalists: A Comparative Analysis,” *Applied Environmental Education and Communication* 7, no. 1–2 (2008): 1–19, <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs/63>.

¹⁰⁰ “SEJ Stands With Journalists of Color Speaking Out About Systemic Racism,” Society of Environmental Journalists, June 9, 2020, <https://www.sej.org/sej-stands-journalists-color-speaking-out-about-systemic-racism>.

¹⁰¹ Michael Bowman, “Repeating History: Has the Media Changed Since the Kerner Commission?” *Race, Gender & Class* 25, no. 1–2 (2018): 17–30, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2233853236>.

the protests and riots in Ferguson, Mo., after police killed Michael Brown, and in Baltimore, after Freddie Gray died in police custody. He concluded that reporters were still more interested in covering the clashes than in examining what ignited the violence. And he found that newsroom diversity hadn't changed much either:

One of the biggest concerns identified by The Kerner Commission was the media's failure to convey the hardships, deprivation, despair, and sense of defeat common among minorities that contributed to violent protests. The perception that the press was there to support white institutions caused black leaders to avoid speaking openly to reporters about issues facing African-Americans. This reluctance among black community leaders to speak to journalists, along with the mainstream press's propensity to appeal to their core white audience minimized attention directed toward critical problems that sparked tensions....This failure to report on issues important to minorities was attributed in part to the lack of diversity in America's media. The Commission noted that "fewer than 5 percent" of those in the news business were African-Americans. Consequently, African-Americans did not have much of a voice in newsrooms across the United States during the Sixties in determining which stories should be covered. While there have been modest improvements in employment since the Kerner report, African-Americans still occupy a small percentage of key positions in newsrooms across the United States....The small number of minorities in America's newsrooms not only

limits opportunities for minority voices to be heard on important issues, but can also lead to a journalistic bias.¹⁰²

I have covered this area for 17 years, and I have only met one person of color on the Chesapeake Bay beat—Darryl Fears of *The Washington Post*. A Pulitzer Prize winner, he occasionally writes about the Shore, but he’s much more nationally focused and often covers the inner workings of Washington agencies that focus on the environment and public lands.

Would a reporter of color have discovered the Riley Roberts Road story sooner than I did, and perhaps written about it while the place could still have been protected? Some Black reporters might say yes. In February 2018, *CleanTechnica*, which is part of Nexus Media News, interviewed four leading Black climate reporters, who discussed how their perspective shows them stories others miss.

Talia Buford of *ProPublica* argued that reporters of color are “able to draw from our own experiences—or at least things we’ve heard of and understand from our communities—to piece together what the different implications could be in a way that may not be apparent to other reporters.”¹⁰³ Vann R. Newkirk of *The Atlantic* added: “It has always been about race: who gets in and who’s left out. If you tie in the climate change framework to that, you’re going to see people of color living in communities that are marginalized day to day. They’re the people [who are going] to suffer the first and worst. These are issues that can’t be untied or detangled from each other.” Justin Vorland of *Time* agreed: “Climate change will hit people of color and black America harder than elsewhere. You can look at any climate impact, really, and the situation is

¹⁰² Bowman, “Repeating history”:23

¹⁰³ Shravya Jain-Conti, “Four Leading Black Reporters on the Changing Climate Beat,” *CleanTechnica*, February 8, 2018. <https://nexusmedianews.com/four-leading-black-reporters-on-the-changing-climate-beat-501ad5b8bb28>.

consistent.” And Brentin Mock of *CityLab*, who writes frequently about history and the environment, summed up the racial disparities in history and in newsrooms:

Everything starts first with slavery, and then also with racial segregation, which took away the choice of where black people could live post-slavery....We couldn’t live where we wanted to live, and the places where we were told we could live were often the places that were least desirable. They were often the most dangerous places and those places that posed the highest risk to public, financial and even mental health....The people living in the most at-risk areas are often people of color and people with low income. And if you don’t have a diversity of reporters or writers who can kind of represent all of these various perspectives, then you are doing a disservice to your readers, because they are not getting the whole picture.¹⁰⁴

Mock in particular believes the environmental beat is the new civil rights beat. And he covers it that way, with stories that fuse environmental justice and history. But he has acknowledged that it can be a lonely place, as many of his colleagues on the beat are writing about kayak trips and rare plants.¹⁰⁵

The “climate deniers lose their island” approach may grab headlines, but it does a disservice to the many people who live on these islands, are in tune with the rhythms of the Chesapeake, and have different experiences than those of us in cities and suburbs. They are people, and they have the same rights as anyone else to protect their homes.

¹⁰⁴ Shravya Jain-Conti, “Four Leading Black Reporters.”

¹⁰⁵ Brentin Mock, talk at Rona Kobell’s Journalism 201 class, Philip Merrill College, University of Maryland, February 5, 2020.

At the Nabb Center, Horner seemed perplexed about my interest in a part of town he hadn't thought about much, but he gamely helped me figure out where the Wigfalls settled. "For every town that did succeed, you are talking about 10 towns that never even did," he told me. "Basically, you are going to have to recreate this history." So that is what I did.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Aaron Horner, interview with author, November 10, 2021.



John Jones with Marlene Pinkett Wigfall Wallace in front of Macedonia. Photo: Rona Kobell

VI. Meet the Wigfalls: A Microhistory

In 1896, Nolden Superior Wigfall came into the world. His parents, Clement and Sally, had moved shortly after Emancipation from South Carolina to a home on Riley Roberts Road. The original Census records indicate that neither could read or write.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, “All Persons, by Sex, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Health Insurance Coverage: Calendar Year 1880 and 1890,” Monie Hundred, U.S. Department of Commerce, accessed November 8, 2021.

The Wigfalls were not the first Black family to settle on Riley Roberts Road. The Jones, White, Wallace, and Fields families were already there. So was the Roberts family: Riley Roberts had worked for the highway department, and the county had named the road for him. A few white families lived there as well, notably the Shores girls, whose father, Delmas Shores, ran the store, Shores and Shores. (Their mother was also a Shores, from Chance. Their father was from the Oriole line of Shores, about seven miles away.)¹⁰⁸

Clement Wigfall quickly found work as a waterman, and Nolden followed in his footsteps. Though few Black watermen owned their own skipjacks, most could make a decent living as mates on the vessels. Many Black families lived off the road, in what residents called the “Old Field.”¹⁰⁹ Marshy and secluded, the neighborhood lent itself to a childhood of crabbing in the ditches and catching minnows in jars.¹¹⁰ Residents recall a beauty that was almost transcendent, with moon rises and sunsets to rival any place on the peninsula.

“At that time, the neighborhood was mostly Black people, and we never had a moment’s trouble,” said Ruth McInturff, 92, the oldest of Delmas Shores’ daughters.¹¹¹ Her sister, 75-year-old Nora Christine “Chris” Shores Kline, agreed. “We may have gone to separate schools, but the minute that school bell rang, we were together. We were born here, raised here, and we were family.”¹¹²

The Shores girls were among the first to have a bathroom built in the 1940s, which meant Ruth no longer had to confront the neighborhood rooster on her way to the outhouse. In the Old Field, electricity and plumbing took much longer. Chris used to deliver groceries for her

¹⁰⁸ Ruth McInturff, interview with author, November 11, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Chris Kline, interview with author, November 11, 2021.

¹¹⁰ Chauncey Wallace, interview with author, November 13, 2021.

¹¹¹ Ruth McInturff, interview with author, November 11, 2021.

¹¹² Chris Kline, interview with author, November 11, 2021.

father, and she visited most of the Old Field homes. The land was so low, she said, that more than once he ran her bicycle into a ditch. At 14, she began taking the truck on deliveries. On cold nights, her father delivered kerosene for heat to the homes in the Old Field.¹¹³

The neighborhood was full of characters. Ed Hall, who canned tomatoes, came to the store every Saturday—payday—for 25 cents’ worth of gas to go to Salisbury for the evening; he’d come back and buy 25 cents more, but never would he pay 50 cents all at once. Neighbors would come in and pump their own molasses; kids played horseshoes at the store. A grape soda cost 5 cents, and a whole bag of cookies was just a quarter.¹¹⁴

Oscar Wilson didn’t have a car, so he’d come down the road using horses that pulled him on a wooden sled. A man named Luke Wilson slept with one eye open on his porch, a woman everyone called Molly used to drink out of a saucepan, and a fellow known as Shorty Pop Pop seemed to be the most popular fellow on the street.¹¹⁵ At the end of the road was an unofficial dump site, where island residents deposited everything they didn’t want, from wheelbarrows to bicycles. The children would run down there and start a “demolition derby,” racing each other through the marsh.¹¹⁶

“We had a family that lived across the street, and they were really into music,” recalled Ida Wigfall Thomas, one of two children still alive from the 12 born to Melora and Hanson Wigfall, who were cousins to Nolden. “They used washboards, tubs, and those spoons you had to beat together. Every weekend, we’d gather, and they’d play on the porch.”¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Marlene Wigfall Wallace, phone interview with author, November 11, 2021.

¹¹⁵ Chris Kline, interview with author, November 11, 2021,

¹¹⁶ Sylvester Wallace, interview with author, November 18, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Ida Wigfall Thomas, phone interview with author, November 29, 2021.

In 1933, a huge storm flooded the town. Ruth remembers a little girl floating to her home on a mattress, crying.¹¹⁸ The community bounced back, though, and more Wigfall relatives moved to the area. Like their white counterparts on Deal Island, the families married each other—Wigfalls to Wallaces and Wallaces to Robertses. “In these communities, everyone is kin to each other,” said Voyd “Ducky” Wallace, who grew up in Dames Quarter and went to school on Riley Roberts Road and is related to Marlene Pinkett Wigfall Wallace through marriage.¹¹⁹

Church was the glue. The founders laid the cornerstone for Macedonia United Methodist Church when the Civil War ended.¹²⁰ Every year the church held camp meetings, where “praise bands” came from all over the region to play music and sing. Macedonia was known for its excellent singers. According to church historian John E. Jones Jr., who grew up on the street, cars lined the whole mile of the road during the camp meetings.¹²¹

Ida Wigfall Thomas, who lives near Princess Anne now, remembers the community closeness. Many of the men worked together, canning tomatoes and picking strawberries. The women would come to her home for quilting bees, where they would sew elaborate patterns of wedding rings and frame them. Thomas had a horse named George, who would trot her “as far as I’d let him” down Riley Roberts and then they’d turn back home. Her father, a strict but kind man, planted a flower garden filled with every color of the rainbow. She loved to pick the tomatoes he grew.¹²²

In 1952, a new excitement came to Dames Quarter. Lorraine Wigfall, who was one of 12 children born to Hanson and Melora, had married George Henry, who was descended from a

¹¹⁸ Ruth McInturff, interview with author, November 11, 2021.

¹¹⁹ Voyd Wallace, interview with author, November 11, 2021.

¹²⁰ Claudia Mouery. *Deal Island* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009): 23.

¹²¹ John Jones Jr., interview with author, November 11, 2021.

¹²² Ida Wigfall Thomas, phone interview with author, November 29, 2021.

prominent freed Black family in Somerset County. The Henrys moved to Philadelphia, where Lorraine became a successful beautician. But it nagged at Lorraine that Black families were only allowed to go to the beach one day a year, after Labor Day, on “Colored Excursion Day.” Even this day was less a gesture of goodwill and more an opportunity to unload food before it spoiled and souvenirs before they became dated. On a visit home, Henry noticed some beachfront property available on Long Point Road, across the main road from Riley Roberts. She and George bought it, and Henry’s Beach was born.¹²³

“Everything that was on the radio, she had to the beach,” recalled her nephew, Sylvester Wallace. She ran cabarets that would last three days. We would come home and change and go back out again.”¹²⁴ James Brown, Percy Sledge, Otis Redding, and Earth, Wind and Fire all played Henry’s Beach. Lorraine served the freshest Maryland seafood to busloads of beachgoers from Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore.

Sylvester’s brother, Chauncey, was too young to attend the concerts, so he’d sneak over and duck inside. When Aunt Lorraine caught him and put him out, he said, he’d listen with his ear to the door.¹²⁵ Henry’s Beach had a baseball field too, and traveling players with the Negro Leagues would play there. John Jones and Sylvester Wallace also played at a field nearby with their local team, the Dames Quarter Rams. All of Ida Wigfall Thomas’ brothers played on it as well. But while the white players could take the bus to games, they had to walk with all of their equipment.¹²⁶

¹²³ Dolde, “Place for Everybody.”

¹²⁴ Sylvester Wallace, interview with author, November 18, 2021.

¹²⁵ Chauncey Wallace, interview with author, November 9, 2021.

¹²⁶ Bob Fitzgerald, interview with author, March 2019.

After workers built the Chesapeake Bay Bridge in the 1950s and Ocean City became a destination, many of the Riley Roberts residents took jobs there and moved, as transportation to work was difficult. Chris Kline's former neighbors, Fred and Suzy Roberts, put in a good word for her at the hotel where they were cooks. Because of that, she said, she was one of the few teenagers with a coveted front-desk job at a resort. Several Wigfalls moved to the Bivalve area, outside of Salisbury, to be closer to the water and to canning jobs.¹²⁷

By 1965, the year Nolden Superior Wigfall died, Riley Roberts Road had begun its slow decline. Some of the homes had burned down due to kerosene mishaps. John Jones' father was burned alive in his home from such a tragedy with a wood stove and a kerosene heater.¹²⁸ Some homes collapsed from wind and water. Many times, residents say, the older people died and left the houses and the younger people couldn't be bothered to come back. The land wasn't worth much, so the county sold it at a tax sale. Lorraine closed Henry's Beach in 1982, after years of letting others manage it. Her customers were not as interested in going back to Henry's when they could go everywhere else.

In 1977, tragedy struck the close-knit community. Chauncey and Sylvester's uncle, Thompson Wallace, and five other family members drowned when Thompson Wallace's new skipjack, the *Claude Somers*, went down in a 70-knot squall. Another captain came to the rescue and pulled the boat and the crew for a time, but when the conditions became too dicey, the rescuer said he had to let the *Claude Somers* go. Thompson Wallace refused to leave his boat; he'd worked for years to afford to buy her, and he was only out oystering that day because he needed money to make repairs and payments. His crew stayed with him, and they all drowned.

¹²⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "All Persons, by Sex, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Health Insurance Coverage: Calendar Year 1900 and 1910," Monie Hundred, U.S. Department of Commerce, accessed November 8, 2021.

¹²⁸ John Jones Jr., interview with author, November 9, 2021.

It was one of the worst fishing disasters in Chesapeake Bay history. Word on the island, Bob Fitzgerald recalls, was that the crew was foolish to go down with their boat when they could have been saved. But Chauncey Wallace, who lost his beloved uncle at just 11 years old, prefers to think of it differently. They put everything on the line to get that boat. They died doing what they loved, on a boat a Black man owned. No one could take it from him.

“They all died with smiles on their faces,” he said.

Even in daylight, Riley Roberts Road is eerie now. It is, Chauncey said, a place of ghosts, memories, things that aren’t there anymore. Hunters towing camouflaged duck boats roam through to the state’s boat ramp, seemingly uninterested in the dilapidated houses that once formed a community.

The desolation still shocks Marlene Wallace, the only one of the original families still there. Wallace raised all of her children there, in a home she and her husband brought over from Long Point Road. The home looks like it was once grand, but it flooded in October and it may not have much time left.

“I lay up in this bed, and I tell my great-grandchildren how I grew up here, and what we had to play with, and they just sit here, amazed,” she said. “We had no television, no computer. We’d sit in front of the radio and imagine.”¹²⁹

Added another Wallace son, Sylvester: “This was a blooming place. It was full of life. We all worked together. There was a lot of unity. Wherever you went, there was love. Pure love.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Marlene Wigfall Wallace, phone interview with author, November 11, 2021.

¹³⁰ Sylvester Wallace, interview with author, November 18, 2021.

The Wigfalls, Joneses, and other families stressed education, and that meant getting out. All of Voyd Wallace's children left; many of Riley Roberts' did too. They became educators, doctors, engineers, administrators. Ida Wigfall Thomas became a nurse in Salisbury.¹³¹ At first the push came just from a lack of opportunity in the area. But residents could see the water rising. Once, John Jones recalled, the water came up so high he could jump off his porch steps for a swim.

Walking down Riley Roberts Road now, John Jones remembers where everyone was, all of his uncles, his cousins, and those not related by blood or marriage but somehow still family. Milton Wigfall's house is falling down. There, in the woods, he remembers, was the White family.¹³²

The only piece that remains is the church. That it endures, even with water often up to its steps, is nothing less than the work of the Lord, said Macedonia pastor Tony Johnson.¹³³ Services draw about 25 worshippers a week, and it is the only place on the peninsula to follow strict COVID procedures (masks, sanitizing, contact tracing forms).¹³⁴ The church needs work, Jones said. The floor has flooded, and the heating system malfunctions. The graveyard is so wet that coffins occasionally pop up.¹³⁵ When that happens, the church has to call someone to put them back in the ground; John Jones had to help the church take care of it in early November 2021, after a nor'easter.¹³⁶ Lorraine Wigfall died one month before her 100th birthday; while she was alive, she devoted herself to the church, and gave donations. Others chip in too; the graves were

¹³¹ Ida Wigfall Thomas, phone interview with author, November 29, 2021.

¹³² John Jones Jr., interview with author, November 21, 2021.

¹³³ Tony Johnson, interview with author, November 30, 2021.

¹³⁴ Personal observations from three visits to church.

¹³⁵ John Jones Jr., interview with author, November 21, 2021.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

back in the ground just two weeks after the storm pushed them up. It's barely enough. Johnson takes a small salary of \$100 a week. For that, he drives 40 minutes each way on Sundays and occasionally other times. He's been doing it for 10 years.¹³⁷

"There is a special spirit within this church, and I felt it instantly," said Johnson, who makes his main living from owning a clothing store in Salisbury. "Here, they were looking for someone to love them."¹³⁸

Though Macedonia has defied all the odds, no one's sure how long the last Black church standing on the peninsula can continue. Jones is 69, and he's one of the church's younger members. He comes every week from Salisbury, 40 minutes away, as do several other members. Through a joint "church on the Bay" service with the other island churches during COVID, Macedonia has attracted some white worshippers from elsewhere on the island. Some have joined the choir; they contribute to the collection plate, and Johnson said he loves having them there. But it may not be enough to keep the church going in the long term. Eventually, Jones said, it will become like the rest of Riley Roberts Road: a memory.

¹³⁷ Tony Johnson, interview with author, November 28, 2021.

¹³⁸ Tony Johnson, interview with author, November 28, 2021.



John Wesley Church in a state of total disrepair. There were three Black churches on the peninsula. Only Macedonia remains. Photo: Rona Kobell

VII. The Forgotten

Even on a peninsula that doesn't get much attention for anything but its skipjack races, Dames Quarter and Riley Roberts Road seem forgotten.

A few decades ago,, the towns of Deal Island, Chance, and Wenona explored the idea of merging into one incorporated town. The hope was that, with a local government, they would be able to assess taxes and better control their own futures. Ultimately the residents decided not to do it because, as one explained, they didn't want the government in their lives.¹³⁹ But the

¹³⁹ Robert Fitzgerald, interview with author, November 19, 2021.

incorporation effort never included Dames Quarter, and residents there do not recall ever being asked to join it. Later, in the 1980s, the Somerset County government talked about extending a sewer line up the peninsula and hooking up the island. But the county planned to begin this line only from Chance, and to exclude Dames Quarters. That plan, too, never came to fruition.¹⁴⁰

When local historian Paul Baker Touart wrote his book *Somerset: An Architectural History* for the Maryland Historical Trust and the Somerset County Historical Trust, he inventoried dozens of the county's rural churches. Yet he did not include Macedonia United Methodist Church, even though it has held services in the same historic building since 1865. The book, published in 1990, also does not include the Dames Quarter school, the old Rosenwald school that at the time would have been a Head Start daycare center and still in good shape. It includes other county schools—whites-only ones—a few country stores, some farms, some villages, and a lot of grand estates.¹⁴¹

Richard Crumbacker, editor of the *Crisfield-Somerset County Times*, thinks he understands why. Though Dames Quarter is about as far from Chance as Chance is from Deal Island, and about as far as Deal Island is from Wenona, it feels farther because of the expansive marsh separating Dames Quarter from Chance. Crumbacker said he thinks Dames Quarter has more in common with the upland towns to the east. And Deal Island shares a fire department with Chance, as well as a school; those two structures form a social nexus. Students from Riley Roberts Road would be zoned for the Deal Island school now, but for decades they weren't. They attended their own all-Black school.

“There was probably division by the races,” he said. “I wouldn't be surprised about it.”¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Richard Crumbacker, phone interview with author, November 20, 2021.

¹⁴¹ Paul Baker Touart. *Somerset: An Architectural History* (Annapolis: Maryland Historical Trust, 1990).

¹⁴² Richard Crumbacker, phone interview with author, November 20, 2021.

Some of this institutionalized amnesia stems from what Rev. Janice Humphrey calls “segregation in the mind.”¹⁴³ This mentality puts white history at the forefront and suggests that Black history and culture are not as important. That those who write the record don’t ask the Black community to contribute.

One example: Deal Island has a new skipjack museum. It includes relics of the heady oyster days. But it has nothing about the *Claude Somers* accident that killed the six Black oystermen from Deal Island with Riley Roberts roots. Bobby Shores, who founded the museum and solicited the collections, said the Black community complained that his group didn’t involve them. Shores told them to submit something and he’d display it. So a community member dropped off a photo of Black veterans from the island. It sits in a case. There is nothing about one of the deadliest accidents on the Chesapeake.

When I told Humphrey this, she said she wasn’t surprised. “Segregation in the mind,” she repeated. Shores insists that that’s not so, and that he very much wants to display a photo of Capt. Wallace as well as an article about the accident; it’s just that he has between 8,000 and 10,000 images on three computers, and no one to help him sort them.

Would he hang a display honoring the crew? “Yes, the plan is to do that, it’s just a question of time and help,” Shores said. “We all remember it. That was tragic, tragic. It certainly should be here. It was probably the worst tragedy here.”¹⁴⁴

Humphrey, a minister in Salisbury, lives in the community across from John Wesley Church. The structure is one storm away from total collapse, and Humphrey’s whole family is buried there. She drives by and pretends she doesn’t see it.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Janice Humphrey, phone interview with author, November 20, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Bobby Shores, phone interview with author, December 11, 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Janice Humphrey, phone interview with author, November 20, 2021.

Humphrey has experience with riding by and pretending she can't see something. For her entire childhood, she rode a bus past the white school on Deal Island to attend classes at the Rosenwald school on Riley Roberts Road. Thanks to engaged teachers and a principal who made sure the students never went without, Humphrey said, she and her fellow students had fresh lunches and new books. Still, it stung not to be able to go to the school closest to home.¹⁴⁶

Ignoring Black history promotes the idea that these communities weren't important, argues the retired Salisbury University historian Clara Small. Small calls this "purposeful neglect," and attributes it to history "written not by blacks, but about blacks."¹⁴⁷

State, federal and private funds have helped restore hundreds of Rosenwald schools nationwide, including several on the Eastern Shore. Yet the Maryland Historic Trust did not list the Dames Quarter school on its list of the surviving Rosenwald structures, even though for decades Somerset County ran a Head Start center out of it.¹⁴⁸ In her 2009 book on Deal Island, author Claudia Mouery said of the Dames Quarter school: "Now the building sits dormant, surrounded by high marsh grass and weeds. Eventually the marsh will take ownership, as it has with many other deserted structures."¹⁴⁹

The University of Maryland anthropologist Michael Paolisso had been studying the island for nearly two decades when he applied to NOAA for a grant to work with faith-based communities on their approaches to climate change. In rural communities like Deal Island, where no government officials live, Methodist ministers become the de facto leaders. Paolisso and several of his doctoral students researched Deal Island for years; at least three students wrote

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Clara Small, phone interview with author, November 17, 2021.

¹⁴⁸ Alison Ruthern, interview with author, November 23, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ Mouery, *Deal Island*: 24.

their dissertations on island history, island culture, and the threat from climate change.¹⁵⁰ Though Paolisso cares deeply about communities of color and had reached out to several in Dorchester County for his work, he never worked with any of the Black churches in either Dames Quarters or Deal Island/Chance.¹⁵¹

“We have never been successful in integrating the African-American churches out there in our work,” he said. “We all got the impression they didn’t want to share their stories, life, resources and all of that. There was a real resistance and a reluctance to engage with us.”¹⁵²

He lamented that perhaps the group didn’t employ the right strategies for engagement. His work predated the murder of George Floyd and the most recent surge in civil rights activism. “I think if we tried today, we would do it differently.”¹⁵³

Paolisso and his team also focused on a ditch in Dames Quarters, along Hodson White Road, that was flooding the community. For more than three years, the professor negotiated with the state, the county, and the State Highway Administration to fix the problem, which occurred when the county cleaned out the ditch and caused it to dump into a larger, state-managed ditch. All the while, he said, the flooding on Riley Roberts Road was continuing. No one in the government was paying much attention to it. Eventually, Paolisso’s work would lead Somerset County to conduct a ditch study, and the study would conclude that Riley Roberts Road was the most in need of a ditch overhaul—and that its needs were also the most expensive, due to the

¹⁵⁰ Catherine Joanne Johnson. “Resilience to Climate Change: An Ethnographic Approach” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2016), <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/18685>.

¹⁵¹ Miller Hesed and Paolisso, “Cultural Knowledge,” 683–87.

¹⁵² Michael Paolisso, interview with author, November 15, 2021.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

neglect the area had suffered.¹⁵⁴ But that study, published just before the pandemic, has not changed anything for Riley Roberts residents.¹⁵⁵

“They were sort of in a biased way focused on the Hodson White side of Dames Quarters,” Paolisso said of the government officials and his own team. “It was our default. When we think of Dames Quarter, we do not necessarily think of Riley Roberts Road.”¹⁵⁶



Walking along the impoundment, an area the Department of Natural Resources flooded to increase duck habitat. The power lines indicate a community was once there. Photo: Rona Kobell

¹⁵⁴ A. Morton Thomas & Associates, Inc., “Deal Island Drainage Assessment,” January 2020. <https://amtengineering.com/projects/deal-island-drainage-assessment>.

¹⁵⁵ Interviews with Wallace family members, November 2021. They say there had been no ditch work.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Paolisso, interview with author, November 19, 2021.

VIII. Opportunistic Preservation

Maryland has one of the most robust land conservation programs in the country. Called Program Open Space, it's designed to take in a lot of money when development pressure is high, and less when it's low. It does that by keeping a half of a percent of the real estate transfer tax.¹⁵⁷ The fund reaches such high numbers that governors often can't resist the temptation to raid it for budgetary needs.¹⁵⁸ But when they don't, the state uses the funds to purchase large tracts of land, frequently ecologically valuable areas adjacent to the Chesapeake. It also gives some of the funds to counties, which they use to renovate recreational centers, parks, and other amenities. And some funds preserve farmland through easements to keep the land out of development.

Maryland made its first land purchase on Riley Roberts Road in 1948 to enhance duck hunting. The Maryland Wildlife Administration, a precursor to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, purchased the 1,75-acre Manokin River Club, a private hunting preserve. By 1962, state and federal agencies had set aside 8,000 acres of tidal marsh stretching from Dames Quarter and through Riley Roberts to Deal Island. They built an impoundment and effectively flooded one side of the marsh along the road, so the waters would support diverse Chesapeake Bay grasses that would bring in different waterfowl species and encourage more hunting, said John Moulis, eastern regional manager for the Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife and Heritage Service.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ "Program Open Space: An Overview."

¹⁵⁸ "Open Space Falls Short," *The Baltimore Sun*, March 9, 2014, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-open-space-20140309-story.html>.

¹⁵⁹ John Moulis, phone interview with author, November 19.

What they didn't do then, and likely wouldn't do now, is buy out the property owners on Riley Roberts Road. For one thing, Poulis said, the state rarely calls landowners; rather, it waits for landowners to come to them. That usually happens when the landowners have struck out on the private market, and *that* usually happens when they learn their property is not as developable as they thought because much of it is too wet to build on. The process, Poulis said, "seems to be more opportunistic than strategic."¹⁶⁰

Under John Griffin, who ran the Department of Natural Resources under Govs. Parris N. Glendening and Martin O'Malley, Program Open Space tightened some of its parameters. When land evaluators scored property, they were to note if the property flooded and evaluate its development potential. Generally, land evaluators favored large tracts of dry land in development corridors, such as those near Ocean City or Southern Maryland. Riley Roberts properties were too small and too wet to be worth state funds.

That hasn't stopped speculators from trying. According to Crumbacker of the *Crisfield-Somerset County Times*, speculators often show up at tax sales to bid on Riley Roberts parcels because the taxes owed are minimal and the buyers hope the state will purchase the land for much more. Typically, Crumbacker said, they hold on to the land for a few years. When the state makes no move to buy it, they stop paying the taxes and the land goes back on the tax sale rolls. Thus, Riley Roberts rarely feels stable, with those who remain not knowing who owns the land next door.¹⁶¹ Even those who wanted to stay in their properties haven't been able to do so, thanks to county and state laws. Since 1984, a state law forbids building within a thousand feet of the Critical Area, which the Riley Roberts structures all are. A house that is close to the water also

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Richard Crumbacker, phone interview with author, November 13, 2021.

needs a nitrogen-removing septic system, if the owner could put one in at all; new drainfield regulations make that almost impossible on the wet lots. Lifting the houses, as others have done on Deal Island, is not an option for most Riley Roberts homeowners, said Mary Phillips, assistant director of the county's Department of Technical and Community Services.¹⁶² The county requires a 25 percent match of lifting costs. The average owner portion in the county is \$35,000, she said. Many Riley Roberts homeowners don't have that. Their homes may not even be worth that much.¹⁶³

The congressman representing Dames Quarter in Washington is U.S. Rep. Andy Harris, a Republican anesthesiologist who told the *Easton Star-Democrat* that the science behind climate change is "uncertain."¹⁶⁴ Harris' press secretary, Walter Smoloski, is familiar with the flooding along the road, but not because of constituent calls. He knows it because he's gone duck hunting at the impoundment. Smoloski said that Harris is quite familiar with the flooding issues in Somerset and Dorchester but that no one has reached out for assistance. If folks from Dames Quarter ever do reach out, Smoloski told me, "then we're more than happy to help."¹⁶⁵

Like federal aid and state easements, historic preservation also tends to be opportunistic, said Alison Luthern, architectural survey administrator with the Maryland Historic Trust, a state agency that reviews and helps preserve properties.¹⁶⁶ The trust relies on nonprofit historical societies in the counties to identify important structures and help preserve them. In Somerset, the county's historical society and its trust are made up of "entirely white" boards of directors,

¹⁶² Mary Phillips, phone interview with author, November 19, 2021.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Andrew Sharp, "Harris Answers Questions on Health Care, NSA, and More." *The Easton Star-Democrat*, August 22, 2013. https://www.stardem.com/news/local_news/article_3e9d58c7-afd2-509d-afe2-7e1850bed9b5.html

¹⁶⁵ Walter Smoloski, interview with author, December 23, 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Alison Luthern, interview with author, November 23, 2021.

according to Randolph George, the trust's new president.¹⁶⁷ George said the group is trying to change but admits "we don't know how to do it.....t's a segregated place. It's terrible."¹⁶⁸

George has recently undertaken a project to help preserve a Black church outside Princess Anne. But Trust directors have invested most of their time and energy preserving the Teackle Mansion, a Princess Anne plantation whose literature still refers to the old property's many enslaved people as "servants."¹⁶⁹ The historical society makes its headquarters at the mansion, and many of the photos on its website are from events there.¹⁷⁰ Other foundations that specialize in Eastern Shore preservation, including the Bartus Trew Providence Preservation Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, require a match for many of their grants.¹⁷¹ Low-income communities can scarcely afford to match multi-thousand-dollar grants. Preservation is expensive—a 2016 study found that fixing the John Welsey church on Deal Island will run at least \$737,000, and the cost is likely more today.¹⁷² For these reasons, Luthern and others say, Black communities do not have the wherewithal to save many of the places that tell their stories.

The Rosenwald School in Dames Quarters was not on the trust's radar until Carrie Samis, director of Princess Anne's Main Street organization and a consultant to the trust, drove by it on her way to go birding. Samis immediately recognized the construction as one of the Julius Rosenwald structures, and she alerted Randolph George of the possible opportunity to preserve

¹⁶⁷ Randy George, phone interview with author, December 11, 2021.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Paul Baker Touart, *African American Heritage* (Salisbury: Lower Eastern Shore Heritage Council: n.d.).

¹⁷⁰ Somerset County Historical Society, <http://www.somersetcountyhistoricalsociety.org>.

¹⁷¹ "Bartus Trew Providence Preservation Fund: Guidelines & Eligibility," accessed November 23, 2021, <https://forum.savingplaces.org/build/funding/grant-seekers/specialprograms/bartus-trew>.

¹⁷² Paul Baker Touart. *John Wesley M.E. Church Historic Structures Report*, (Annapolis: Maryland Historical Trust, 2016).

it.¹⁷³ For reasons unknown to Ruthern and her colleagues at the trust, the structure made it into the narrative history of the state's 156 schools but not its list of surviving schools. It also received no mention in Touart's book or his inventory for the Trust, conducted separately.¹⁷⁴ Touart did not return calls or emails seeking comment.

George said he was not opposed to preserving the school, but he insisted on buy-in from the Black community, and it didn't seem to be forthcoming. "For come-heres, to put a new roof on it, it doesn't make any sense," George said, using the Shore term for the mostly white new residents arriving from other places.¹⁷⁵ George himself is one: a retired neurosurgeon from Birmingham, Alabama, who purchased a former plantation south of Princess Anne.¹⁷⁶

Unbeknownst to George, the community did try to buy the school. Sometime around 2005, John Jones said, Macedonia's leaders bid \$1,000 on it, hoping to turn it into a fellowship hall.¹⁷⁷ They were outbid, and the new buyer let the property fall into greater disrepair.¹⁷⁸ John Jones said no one ever reached out to him for a grant to help. He didn't reach out to anyone either. "I didn't know that was available," he said.¹⁷⁹

Emmanuel Johnson, who was pastor at the time of the sale, said members were devastated that an outsider came in. "They had memories there. Most went to school there."¹⁸⁰

According to George, the owners are thinking of selling the property. When told that the Black community in Riley Roberts was interested, George said he hadn't spoken to anyone there.

¹⁷³ Carrie Samis, interview with author, November 4, 2021.

¹⁷⁴ MHT publications.

¹⁷⁵ Randy George, interview with author, November 13, 2021.

¹⁷⁶ Randy George, interview with author, November 16, 2021.

¹⁷⁷ John Jones Jr., interview with author, November 21, 2021.

¹⁷⁸ Dean Burrell (Berlin councilman), email to author, November 12, 2021.

¹⁷⁹ John Jones Jr., interview with author, November 21, 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Emmanuel Johnson, interview with author, November 16, 2021.

He'd talked to a couple Black leaders in Princess Anne but didn't get much support. "So I didn't push it any further. I just let her go," he said.

George added: "For that Rosenwald thing to become anything, you'd have to have African-American people putting their heart and soul into it. Otherwise, it's just going down the toilet. And there's nobody there anymore."¹⁸¹

When John Jones heard that it could be available again, he sighed. The place had deteriorated so much since the church's bid 16 years ago.

"It's too late, I think," he said. "It's just too far gone now."

¹⁸¹ Randy George, phone interview with author, December 11, 2021.



Princess Anne, above, is one of only two incorporated towns in Somerset County. The other is Crisfield. Photo: Rona Kobell

IX. The Importance of Incorporation

Maryland's Eastern Shore has 54 incorporated towns. They range from Ocean City on the southern end, with approximately 7,000 year-round residents, to Templeville on the northern end, which has 123.¹⁸² None of the Shore's historically Black communities incorporated.

¹⁸² *Municipal Incorporation Handbook* (Annapolis: The Maryland Municipal League, n.d.), <https://www.mdmunicipal.org/DocumentCenter/View/19/MunicipalIncorporationHandbook?bidId=>.

In a recent article for the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Leora Waldner, Kristine Stilwell, and Russell Smith argue that incorporated towns enjoy many advantages:

Municipal incorporation can be a powerful tool for Black communities, even in impoverished areas. With cityhood, citizens can chart the course of their own destiny, improve services, gain access to grant funds, deploy new tools to attract economic development, and protect their neighborhoods from noxious land uses such as new hazardous waste plants. Moreover, with cityhood, residents gain a formal seat at the bargaining table in county and regional planning processes.¹⁸³

From 1865 to 1900, Black communities founded about 400 towns and settlements. Only about a fourth of them ever became legally recognized municipalities.¹⁸⁴

In the absence of any studies I could find through the University of Maryland library database that spoke specifically to the Shore's dearth of incorporated cities, I turned to Clara Small. She is one of the leading scholars and historians on African-American history on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Her books include *Compass Points: Profiles and Biographies of African Americans from the Delmarva Peninsula*, which focuses on Shore residents' Civil Rights contributions, and *They Wore Blue and Their Hearts Were Loyal: The United States Colored*

¹⁸³ Leora Waldner, Kristine Stilwell, and Russell M. Smith, "Wither or Thrive: Post hoc Municipal Incorporation Outcomes in New Cities of Color," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 41, no. 6 (2019): 821–841, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07352166.2018.1555438>.

¹⁸⁴ James Padgett and Scott Sholl, "The History and Legacy of Eatonville, Florida's Pioneering African-American Town," *The Journal* (James Madison Institute), Fall/Winter 2017, <https://www.jamesmadison.org/the-history-and-legacy-of-eatonville-floridas-pioneering-african-american-town>.

Troops of Dorchester County, Maryland. She is now working on a biography of Kermit Travers, one of the last Black skipjack captains in the state. Small taught for 36 years at Salisbury University until she retired in 2013. When she left, she said, they did not replace her with someone well-versed in Black history. She now consults with towns and counties to help tell these stories. She has been involved in the effort to preserve towns and churches with connections to Harriet Tubman. She is frustrated to see them deteriorate, but mechanisms often aren't in place to help them thrive.

Black towns could not incorporate, in Small's view, because "the goal was to keep Black communities under the thumb of the local establishment, so the counties could control them, and where they lived."

Highland Beach's experience shows some of the advantages of incorporation. In the early 1890s, Charles Douglass, his wife Laura, and their young son, Haley, went to the Bay Ridge Inn hoping to rent a place for swimming and sunning. Management turned them away, saying they didn't rent to Black patrons. The Douglasses began walking away and eventually encountered the descendants of the Brashears family, Black farmers who had acquired waterfront property in 1858 when owner Howard Duvall began breaking up and selling his plantation. This was just across the bay from the Eastern Shore. From the center of the Brashears' land, Charles Douglass could look across the water and see Talbot County—the land where his father, Frederick Douglass, had been enslaved.¹⁸⁵

Charles Douglass eventually purchased 48 acres of land just south of Annapolis, bordered by the Chesapeake, Oyster Creek, and Black Walnut Creek. He subdivided the land, laid out

¹⁸⁵ Jack Nelson, Raymond L. Langston, and Margo Dean Pinson, *Highland Beach on the Chesapeake Bay: Maryland's First African-American Incorporated Town* (Virginia Beach: The Donning Company Publishers, 2008): 9–11.

streets, named them all for prominent Black politicians and poets, and advertised vacation homes to Black families. He named the town Highland Beach because he could see that the land was higher than much of the other properties around them.¹⁸⁶

Charles may have been influenced by his father, who had just bought a church in Fells Point, demolished it, and built five alley houses. Douglass did so both because he wanted to pass down equity to his heirs, but also because he believed in affordable housing and had a fondness for the neighborhood, where he had worked as a caulker in his younger days.¹⁸⁷ A year after the older Douglass settled on the Baltimore houses, his son bought the Brashears' land. He hoped to build his father a retirement home.

Mary Church Terrell, one of the first Black American women to graduate from college and an early activist in the civil rights and women's suffrage movements, had a house in Highland Beach; so did Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the celebrated poet; so did prominent doctors, architects, and educators. Langston Hughes, W.E.B DuBois, and Thurgood Marshall visited. The most famous visitor, though, was Frederick Douglass, who died before Charles had finished his father's summer house. The town owns it and maintains it as a museum.

Highland Beach retains a summertime resort feel. It has narrow streets, and the houses often have names affixed to wooden signs: "Rainbow Cottage," "Twin Oaks." There are no commercial businesses in town, and only residents can use the private beach. Many residents are descendants of their homes' original owners. This is not the case for the county's other Black resort town. Carr's Beach, a Black beach resort where Chuck Berry and James Brown sold out

¹⁸⁶ Ibid: 17.

¹⁸⁷ *Five Minute Histories: Douglass Place*, Baltimore Heritage, October 22, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2XITB8OMnQ>.

shows, is now a condo community; so is its sister property, Sparrows Beach.¹⁸⁸ Brown's Grove, a popular beach resort closer to Baltimore on Rock Creek, was destroyed in a 1938 fire and never rebuilt.¹⁸⁹ (The Bay Ridge Inn, which famously turned the Douglasses away, would burn down too. Wood from the ashes would be used to build in Highland Beach.)

After Charles Douglass died in 1920, Highland Beach decided to incorporate so it could have public electricity and trash pickup and so its town leaders could collect taxes and enact zoning laws.¹⁹⁰ In 1922, the Maryland legislature passed a bill affirming Highland Beach as a town. Gov. Albert Ritchie signed it into law. Highland Beach became the second incorporated town in Anne Arundel County and the first incorporated Black town in all of Maryland. It remains so: The only two separate towns in the county are Annapolis and Highland Beach. Annapolis has 40,000 people. Highland Beach has 118.¹⁹¹

William H. Sanders and his wife, Zora Lathan, moved to Highland Beach from Washington, D.C., in the early 2000s, purchasing a home with a view of Black Walnut Creek. Sanders, who has a doctorate in environmental engineering and spent much of his career at the Environmental Protection Agency, ran for mayor. He is now in his fifth term. Lathan, a longtime landscaping planner and manager of environmental organizations, became the town planner.¹⁹² Largely because of their expertise and Highland Beach's incorporated status, which allowed it to receive such monies, Sanders secured more than \$500,000 to build a green Town Hall; Lathan

¹⁸⁸ Phillip L. Brown, *The Other Annapolis, 1900–1950* (Annapolis: Annapolis Publishing Co., 1994).

¹⁸⁹ Gilbert Sandler, *Small Town Baltimore: An Album of Memories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

¹⁹⁰ Nelson et al., *Highland Beach*: 35-58, 41, 131.

¹⁹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "All Persons, by Sex, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Health Insurance Coverage: Calendar Year 2020," U.S. Census Quick Facts, U.S. Department of Commerce, accessed October 5, 2021.

¹⁹² Zora Lathan and William Sanders, interview with author, October 5, 2021.

helped secure grants for rain gardens, rain barrels, solar panels that help the town remain energy independent, and living shoreline projects that protect the town from flooding. Because zoning allows only one house per double lot, the town is better protected than many of its neighbors against flooding.¹⁹³

Had Highland Beach not been incorporated, Sanders said, he didn't think it would still be standing, let alone be able to maintain those projects as well as a popular museum and a beach.

"We have been blessed with our legacy and that the people who built Highland Beach had some means," Sanders said. "A lot of smaller communities would look at all we've done and not know how to do it themselves. I could see them missing the boat on opportunities, because they don't know how to respond to them."¹⁹⁴

Another Black town that has benefitted from incorporation is Eagle Harbor, a hamlet in Prince George's County. Eagle Harbor sits on the Patuxent River and has just 63 residents, but it has a mayor and a town council. As such, it has been able to challenge the power plant outside its borders when the plant discharges into the river and has been able to acquire grants to beautify streets and install stormwater conveyances to stop flooding. Eagle Harbor has always elected Black mayors. James Crudup held the position for nearly three decades. He was on a first-name basis with his state senator, Thomas V "Mike" Miller—the longest-serving senate president in the country and also one of the most powerful. Miller would always take his calls; whatever he needed, Crudup said, Mike made sure he got.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Rona Kobell. "Highland Beach Rainwater Measures Have Other Communities Seeing Green," *Chesapeake Bay Journal*, December 10, 2014, https://www.bayjournal.com/news/pollution/highland-beach-rainwater-measures-have-other-communities-seeing-green/article_f2360931-9661-565c-9cb2-8d7eb14e26fd.html.

¹⁹⁴ Zora Lathan and William Sanders, interview with author, October 5, 2021.

¹⁹⁵ James Crudup, Zoom interview with author, October 5, 2021.

Eagle Harbor's neighbor, Cedar Haven, hasn't been as fortunate. It's not incorporated, and therefore can't levy taxes or organize trash cleanups. Housing values tend to be higher in Eagle Harbor, and its land is better shielded from floods and storms due to the protections Crudup could secure through his relationships as a member of the Maryland Municipal League and similar organizations.¹⁹⁶

In his seminal work on environmental justice in the 1980s and 1990s in Houston, scholar Robert Bullard argued that incorporation was a key bulwark in protecting a community from unwanted pollution. Houston has no zoning, and the communities weren't able to stop industries from locating in Black communities until they won the right to incorporate.¹⁹⁷

Many other scholars consider incorporation a potential civil rights tool. In the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, scholar Ankur Goel and his co-authors assert that “neighborhood incorporation represents an opportunity for Black communities to exercise and amount of self-determination with American society...the strategy seeks to undertake the unfinished business of the civil rights movement through group effort, community values, and self-rule.”¹⁹⁸

At the Maryland Historic Trust, Luthern said it's unusual to distribute grants like the ones Highland Beach got to individuals. Incorporated towns fare much better in grant competitions than those without such backing. (So do nonprofits, such as historical societies.)¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Tara Lohan, “Dr. Robert Bullard: Lessons From 40 Years of Documenting Environmental Racism,” *The Revelator*, April 17, 2019, <https://therevelator.org/bullard-environmental-justice>.

¹⁹⁸ A. J. Goel, W. J. Lovett, Jr., R. Patten, and R.L. Wilkins, “Black Neighborhoods Becoming Black Cities: Group Empowerment, Local Control and the Implications of Being Darker than *Brown*,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 23, no. 2 (1988): 415–481.

¹⁹⁹ Allison Ruthern, interview with author, November 23, 2021.

St. Gabriel, Louisiana, is an example of incorporation protecting a Black community, but only to a point. Residents fought for and won the right to incorporate so they could keep power plants and other toxic-emitting businesses out of their town. They did, but about 30 such businesses have lined up outside the town's borders in the unincorporated and impoverished Iberville Parish. About 70 percent of St. Gabriel's 7,300 residents are Black. Still, the town can use its zoning powers to keep out undesirable industries.²⁰⁰

"When companies come in here with a new plant, all we have to do is go to meetings and say, 'We don't want that here,'" Hazel Schexnayder told *Times-Picayune* reporter Tristan Baurick. "If we fill a room, they know we can vote them out. They have to listen to us."

The chemical industry didn't oppose St. Gabriel's incorporation, but they have opposed other Black communities' attempts to do so now that they see the power residents can wield. The paper reports that nine chemical companies convinced a judge to issue an injunction barring a neighboring town, Geismar, from incorporating. Since then, Baurick reported, few have tried.²⁰¹

Even if Black communities like the one on Riley Roberts, or even the rest of Dames Quarter, wanted to incorporate, they most likely could not. Maryland rules now require at least 300 residents for incorporation.²⁰² Many Black towns have a fraction of that. Also, the county has final approval over whether a town incorporates. Counties often frown on the procedure, because it means a loss of both control and revenue.²⁰³ Neither Highland Beach nor Eagle Harbor would be able to incorporate under today's standards.

²⁰⁰ Tristan Baurick, Lylla Younes, and Joan Meiners. "In Parts of Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley,' Toxic Emissions are Set to Rise with a Raft of New Plants," *New-Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 30, 2019, https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_49fe4540-f74a-11e9-8d20-eb0f97323b91.html.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² *Municipal Incorporation Handbook*.

²⁰³ Ibid.

The decision also requires 20 percent approval from residents. That’s why Deal Island, Chance, and Wenona abandoned their efforts to incorporate jointly—a decision that left out Dames Quarter completely. No one town wanted to give up their identity, and many residents did not want another layer of government control.²⁰⁴

Sacoby Wilson, an associate professor with the Maryland Institute for Applied Environmental Health and the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics in the University of Maryland, has studied environmental justice for nearly two decades. He said the issues unincorporated towns face range from flooding to highways to repositories for unwanted public works projects, such as landfills or impoundment ponds. Whatever others don’t want, Wilson said, “gets pushed to the fringes of the city limits. If you are unincorporated, you have a limited voice of power.” Unincorporated areas also can’t hook up into public water and sewer, which means they are on well water and septic systems that are more likely to expose their yards to flooding and pollutants.²⁰⁵

“In my career, some of the communities with the most serious environmental justice issues were the unincorporated communities,” he said.²⁰⁶ He is now working to steer Chesapeake cleanup funds to unincorporated communities.

²⁰⁴ Robert Fitzgerald, interview with author, March 2019.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Sacoby Wilson, Zoom interview with author, October 4, 2021.



Alex Green, of Harriet Tubman Tours, examines the wreckage of Bazel Church's roof in Dorchester County. The church has ties to Tubman's community. Photo: Rona Kobell

X. Sensing a Pattern

Riley Roberts Road and Dames Quarter are hardly alone in their predicament. Across Hooper's Strait in Dorchester County, state and federal tourism officials have invested millions in a visitor's center honoring Harriet Tubman, who escaped from the land where she was enslaved and then led scores of others to freedom. But while the museum thrives, the low-lying Black churches where Tubman kin worshiped and are buried have fallen into disrepair. Malone's

Church, a mile from Tubman's birthplace in Harrisville, is falling apart. It hasn't held a service in years.²⁰⁷

Bazel's Church, which the slaveowning Meredith family sold to freedmen in 1880 for \$1, has a buckling roof and sides that have caved in. The town of Smithville, where Harriet Tubman's sister-in-law lived with her husband, once had an ice-skating rink, a store, and plenty of work picking local tomatoes. Today, three residents remain, all elderly. Smithville's church survives only because three congregations merged into one; its fellowship hall floods occasionally, and it struggles to bury people in its cemetery because of an encroaching marsh.²⁰⁸

Even on its own peninsula, Riley Roberts has company. John Wesley Church, which supported a thriving Black community on Deal Island, is boarded up with water in its graveyards. Most of the homes, which a prominent Black family named the Milbournes had originally settled, have been sold to newcomers, who have raised them. Milbourne remains on the tombstones, shined granite on top of graves filled with minnows and grass growing in them. St. Charles, which served the Black community in Chance, is closed due to flooding; the community surrounding the church on one side looks a bit like Riley Roberts, with houses collapsing and lots of "No trespassing" and "Beware of dog" signs. Just around the corner, though, are the new waterfront homes on Roland Parks Road, and many "for sale" signs for the estate-like abodes.²⁰⁹

The situation is likely to become even more precarious. The Eastern Shore's sea level is expected to rise three feet by the year 2100, according to Ming Li, an oceanographer at the University of Maryland's Center for Environmental Science. That's twice the projected 0.8 to 1.6

²⁰⁷ Rona Kobell. "Climate Change."

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Personal observations, November 1–December 1, 2021.

feet relative rise of mean sea level for Maryland from 2000 to 2050, according to a report that Li's institution prepares every five years for the state.²¹⁰ If Li's predictions come to pass, half of Dorchester County will be underwater. Much of Somerset County, which has the second-highest sea-level rise after Dorchester, will follow. One news site analyzed the most expensive places per person to protect in the face of climate change. Dames Quarter made the list at \$611.4 million for 53 miles of seawalls, costing \$3.9 million per person for the estimated 162 residents.²¹¹ This is partly due to the state of its ditches, which a survey indicated would be among the most expensive on the peninsula to fix because they are already in such bad shape.

All over the peninsula are shuttered churches and boarded-up stores; marshes encroach into homes. Nationwide, coastal shoreline counties include 10 percent of the land but 39 percent of the population. Coastal rural lands are home to 9.5 million people; more than half of Marylanders live on the coast, often on low lands.²¹² These are examples of what Ueland and Warf's racialized topographies. In their 2006 study of 146 southern cities, they found that Black residents got the lowest land while whites got higher elevations.

"Many black communities in southern cities took shape after the Civil War and during the long years of Jim Crow, in which African Americans—because of low purchasing power, exclusionary zoning, restrictive covenants, and naked oppression—often found themselves

²¹⁰ D.F. Boesch et al. *Sea-level Rise*.

²¹¹ Samanda Dorger, "This Is How Much Sea-Level Rise in These Cities Will Cost Taxpayers," July 30, 2019, <https://www.thestreet.com/personal-finance/this-is-how-much-sea-level-rise-in-these-cities-will-cost-taxpayers-15034750>.

²¹² William H. Nuckols, Peter Johnston, Daniel Hudgens, and James G. Titus, "Maryland," in *The Likelihood of Shore Protection along the Atlantic Coast of the United States, Volume 1: Mid-Atlantic*, ed. James G. Titus and Daniel Hudgens (Washington: Environmental Protection Agency, 2010), <http://risingsea.net/ERL/shore-protection-and-retreat-sea-level-rise-Maryland.pdf>.

consigned to the least desirable areas, many of which were swampy, mosquito infested, prone to smoke from fires, and frequented by floods,” they write.²¹³

That has meant Black Shore families have often not been able to benefit from a key way rural families escape poverty: a gift of land. Often, families call it a “home place.” Without land and homes passed down, said Maya Davis, “history is lost at the expense of Black people.”²¹⁴

The Wallaces and Wigfalls and Roberts families had land, and put houses on it from elsewhere or built them there. Marlene’s house was grand; it came from Long Point Road, near Henry’s Beach. It still has two lions posted on its entryway, reminiscent of a DuPont estate. The house she and her husband first had is gone, with only the cinder block foundation remaining.²¹⁵

In the past, when erosion and high waters forced islands to evacuate, residents barged their homes to the mainland. Crisfield includes several homes rescued from Holland Island when residents abandoned it in the 1930s.²¹⁶ In Willis Wharf, on the Virginia side of the Shore, a neighborhood called Little Hog Island commemorates the barrier strip that once included farms and homes but now is only inhabitable by birds.²¹⁷

The homes on Riley Roberts weren’t worth moving; residents rarely had the money for good materials like bricks and stones. The prefab materials were no match for winds and tides.²¹⁸ Saltwater intrusion does the same thing to wood-frame houses that it does to the trees in ghost forest: It eats away at them until nothing is left. The winds shear off roofs and break off doors.

²¹³ Ueland and Warf, “Racialized Topographies,” 6.

²¹⁴ Maya Davis, Zoom interview with author, November 19, 2021.

²¹⁵ Marlene Wigfall Wallace, phone interview with author, November 11, 2021.

²¹⁶ Kate Livie, “Holland Island, against the tide,” *Beautiful Swimmers*, November 6, 2013, <https://katelivie.com/beautifulswimmers/holland-island-against-the-tide>.

²¹⁷ Diane Tennant, “The Eastern Shore Island Left Behind,” *The Virginian-Pilot*, January 16, 2011, https://www.pilotonline.com/life/article_12b4ad24-56a8-5c60-8f4f-e98efece65b2.html.

²¹⁸ Personal observations; interview with John Jones Jr., November 21, 2021.

And without real foundations, everything just rots, said historian Kate Clifford Larson, who has inventoried many Shore sites associated with Harriet Tubman for the National Parks Service.²¹⁹

“Bad housing just deteriorates so fast in that environment,” Larson said. “And with climate change, it’s going to be more and more difficult to save the sites.”²²⁰

Residents may have understood the houses weren’t worth much, but only more recently have they become aware that their land is in the same shaky boat. Kevin Beverly grew up in Smithville in the 1960s, on land his grandmother inherited from her father when she came of age. His stepfather found an abandoned house in the woods, and he and his extended family dragged it to the parcel and fixed it up. Beverly, who is now the president of a 500-employee health information company in Silver Spring, grew up without running water. No one called a doctor unless they were near death. Though *Brown vs. Board of Education* was decided in 1954, Dorchester County schools did not desegregate until 1971.²²¹

Once the elder generation parceled out the land, Beverly said, “nobody really had an incentive to stay there. Their land was all gone, and that was the only wealth they had.” And once that land started flooding on a more regular basis, everyone realized that “there was no money coming from there.”²²² They would have to leave, as he did, and seek fortunes elsewhere. Though Beverly has done that, he still mourns what’s lost. He kept the land, putting a new mobile home on it for his mother until she died. In 1989, he added a septic tank so he could install a bathroom. But the land has little value, at least monetarily.

²¹⁹ Larson, “Historic Resource Study.”

²²⁰ Kate Clifford Larson, Zoom interview with author, November 11, 2021.

²²¹ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, “School Desegregation in Dorchester County, Maryland,” September 1977.

²²² Kevin Beverly, phone interview with author, November 11, 2021.

What should have been his inheritance has been lost to winds, tides, rising seas. But it's also been lost, he says, because officials never fought to save a historic Black community. In a place where the most important investment after a plot of land was a burial plot, Beverly and his family members fear they are losing that, too. The marsh draws ever closer to their beloved church and cemetery. The county officials know about it, but they have said that they don't have the funds to help protect it and that it's not their role anyway.

"The government structures don't give you a lot of hope in that there are people who don't want much to change," Beverly said. "Eventually, nature is going to take that space, and I am not sure we can do anything about it."



The Dames Quarter School was built as a Rosenwald School. Many have been restored, but the church tried to buy this one and save it and wasn't able to do so. Photo: Rona Kobell



The Shores ladies: Ruth, 92, seated, and her sister, Chris, 75, kneeling. Photo: Rona Kobell

XI. Conclusion: Improving Coverage and Context

Even with diminished resources, newsrooms prove time and time again that they can cover a crisis. Tornadoes, building collapses, hurricanes, tsunamis, insurrections: We are on the scene, recorders and notebooks in hand, documenting the destruction.

But what happens when the destruction comes not with one blow but with several smaller hits? What happens when the culprit is not a single storm but a culmination of laws, policies, customs and circumstances that slowly wear a place down? What is the story when the perpetrators aren't obvious, the victims aren't easy to find, and nobody's quite sure when the decline began and when it will end?

That is the story of Riley Roberts Road. It is the story of many small towns on the Eastern Shore that Black families established after the Civil War. They are stories that end with whimpers, not bangs. If we do not pay attention, we will not hear them. And they are important stories. They tell us about the strong, resilient people who built a community on low land and willed it to thrive. Their children became educators, pastors, mariners, chefs, entrepreneurs. They were part of the fabric of a rich Black life on the Eastern Shore. And then they were gone, or mostly gone, with little trace of their contributions and little to pass on to their children.

The systematic demise is not as obvious as the quick blow. I spent years covering the Eastern Shore before I saw the story, and then it took me three more years to gather the information in this thesis. It's not easy, but it's necessary.

Journalists are often black-and-white thinkers. They write headlines about Trump-loving people who deny climate change and then lose their land, without much to say about how they landed in this predicament and without interviewing the Black residents who aren't flying Trump flags. We don't always look deeper, focus on nuance, or try to see who people really are. A

reporter of color may well have found this story before I did. But diverse leadership is also crucial. I pitched this story to my bosses more than two years ago, after I wrote a story and made a film about a similar issue in Smithville. My bosses felt it had been “done.” I couldn’t convince them that the story of a different Black town was also interesting and, well, different. We do not, after all, have quotas on how many stories we can write about skipjacks or waterment or lighthouses. Why should we on Black towns’ disappearing heritage?

The officials whose policies hurt Riley Roberts Road may have not intended to deprive Black people of their generational wealth, but that was the result all the same. Understanding how that happened, and journalism’s complicity in that, can make us better reporters. A more diverse staff, more time spent in communities, and a greater understanding of policies to preserve land and aid communities will all help with that effort. It may be too late for Riley Roberts Road, but it is not too late for many others in the same boat.

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