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Democracy Dies in Darkness

THE PRICE OF PROGRESS IN GUM SPRINGS

IN HISTORIC FAIRFAX ENCLAVE, SENSE OF COMMUNITY AT RISK

By Eric Lipton

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The tar-paper shacks, outhouses and muddy, rutted roads that marked parts of Gum Springs for most of Kay Holland's life are gone now, replaced by the fruits of the mostly black community's struggle for a better life and the kinds of services other Fairfax County residents took for granted.

After decades of activism, the 60-year-old Holland and several of her neighbors can point with pride to the improvements: modern and affordable housing, a community center and a park. A hospital, a police and fire station and a library all lie within walking distance.

But now Holland and many of her longtime neighbors have mixed feelings about the way suburban development is changing Gum Springs, a 230-acre area just north of Mount Vernon that was home to freed black slaves before the Civil War. At a time when many descendants of longtime residents are dead or have moved away, new development has attracted dozens of families of various races who have little interest in the community's past.

It's enough to make Holland believe that Gum Springs is losing its roots.

"It would be heartbreaking," said Holland, whose ancestors were among the original settlers of Gum Springs. "But as the old families die out and people move away, this seems to be turning into just another place to live, rather than a place of rich history and a sense of belonging and a sense of pride."

John Michael Vlach, a George Washington University professor who specializes in folk cultures, said Gum Springs is typical of some close-knit, sleepy communities where the change to suburbia contrasts starkly with the not-too-distant past.

"In this place, where people were tied by kin, by race, by class and mutual oppression, they were beyond being neighbors. They were family," Vlach said. "That's different from suburban America, which is essentially a landscape of individuals who have little to do with each other. There is no profound neighborliness."

Like Holland and others, longtime resident Ronald Chase, president of the Gum Springs Historical Society, laments the loss of a lifestyle.

"There was a day when any adult could talk to a child who was misbehaving and that child would straighten up," said Chase, 43, whose family has lived in Gum Springs for more than 100 years. "And when someone would {die}, the church bell would ring, the entire community would stop and they would attend the funeral. We are losing that."

At the community's 105-unit West Ford public housing complex, completed in 1987, several residents said they were unaware that the complex is named for the former slave who started a farm at Gum Springs in 1833, after being freed by Hanna Washington, a relative of George Washington. Contrary to what county officials initially promised, the West Ford complex is entirely government-subsidized rental housing, instead of owner-occupied, which has contributed to the transience of residents, Chase and others say.

And at the Village at Gum Springs, an upscale town house complex that replaced a run-down trailer park, residents say they don't have the time to get to know many of their neighbors, particularly in the larger Gum Springs community.

The town houses -- like much of the rest of Fairfax County -- are filled with professionals, some white, some black, some from places as far away as India and Panama. The tiny green plots that serve as front yards are marked with home-security signs and notices that warn against trespassing.

"This is just a starting point for us," said Beth Kiser, 27, a private school teacher who moved into one of the town houses with her husband in 1992. A house-buying guide was next to her, on her living room table. "It is not a place where we are going to spend our days."

Gum Springs got its name from a large gum tree that stood in a swampy area that was a popular watering hole in George Washington's day. The area is bounded by Route 1 on the west and Holland Road, named after Kay Holland's family, on the east. In 1990, 75 percent of the neighborhood's estimated 2,000 residents were black.

The neighborhood's roots go back to 1833, when West Ford, a carpenter and foreman at Mount Vernon, bought the land for \$500. After the Civil War, freed blacks flooded into Gum Springs for farming jobs and to help build a trolley line from Mount Vernon to Washington.

A group of black settlers pooled their money in the 1890s -- a financing method that Gum Springs families used several times afterward -- to buy some of the Ford property, which they then sold at cost to other blacks so they could build homes. Many descendants of that group own land in Gum Springs.

Gum Springs was never an affluent place, but before World War II, with booming farms and the nearby trolley line, a black middle class emerged.

"A sense of commitment to this community was something that was handed down," Holland said. "You saw how your grandparents had struggled to hold on to what they had and make Gum Springs a better place. And with each generation it did get better."

In the 1930s, Ben Holland, a distant in-law of Kay Holland, angry that Gum Springs children had no high school, helped talk Fairfax County officials into providing him with a school bus. He drove the bus for a year without pay on the 80-mile round trip to Manassas, the closest community with a high school for blacks.

The area began to be overwhelmed by housing development and shopping centers during the 1950s. Many Gum Springs residents lost their farming jobs, and conditions worsened. By the early 1960s, county officials condemned about 200 Gum Springs houses, many of them vacant, and shut down community wells, which had become breeding grounds for insect larvae.

Inspired by the civil rights movement, Gum Springs residents began to organize, demanding their fair share of county services.

"We wanted our community to be just as good as the neighborhoods two miles away that had developed," said Holland, who joined the Gum Springs Community Action Program in the late 1960s. "We were part of the county. We paid taxes. We deserved the same kind of services."

Gradually, with the help of the county and federal governments, the rebuilding of Gum Springs began. Roads were paved, sewer lines installed, and after the neighborhood children were sent to desegregated schools in the mid-1960s, a community center was opened at the former Gum Springs Elementary School.

The activism, fueled by community speeches at churches and clubs, pulled people together, residents said. "If a person had a leak in his roof, he wanted to do something about it, he attended the meeting," said the Rev. Thomas H. Brown, 70, who was chairman of the Gum Springs Civic Association in the 1970s. "There was a sense of pride that developed, and the more results they got, the harder they worked."

There are still reminders of the bygone days of Gum Springs. The gum tree and spring are long gone, but near new apartment buildings are tree-lined side streets with wood-framed houses that boast porches and yards.

On those older streets, many residents still know each other and, like Chase, live in houses that have been passed down through generations. But they are boxed in by residents who know little about the community.

"It has not turned out the way it was supposed to," said Dan Moon, 39, a Gum Springs native who is still angry that the county-run West Ford housing complex is not owned by its residents. "There is too much moving in and out by people who have no tie to Gum Springs. It is simply a roof over their heads."

Brown said it is up to the younger generation to find ways to bridge the gaps. The community's churches also must play a role, he said.

"It is just like when you are putting together a soup and someone puts a {different} substance in it," Brown said. "You don't throw that pot of soup out. We don't want to destroy the place because different kinds of people have moved in. You just have to adjust to a different-tasting soup."

CAPTION: At top, a Gum Springs house is shown in a 1960s Fairfax health department photo. Above, town houses are part of the new Gum Springs.

CAPTION: Longtime resident Kay Holland walks with daughter Norma.