

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places **DRAFT** Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name Mary E. Bell House
 other names/site number Selah and Mary Ann Smith House
 name of related multiple property listing N/A

Location

street & number 66 Railroad Avenue not for publication
 city or town Center Moriches vicinity
 state NY code NY county Suffolk code 103 zip code 11934

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide X local

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official Date

Title State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register ___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register ___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Category of Property
(Check only **one** box.)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

- private
- public - Local
- public - State
- public - Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC / Single Dwelling

RECREATION / Museum

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE VICTORIAN

foundation: Brick

walls: Weatherboard

roof: Asphalt

other:

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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The Mary E. Bell House, located at 66 Railroad Avenue, is in the hamlet of Center Moriches in the Town of Brookhaven. Located on east central Long Island, Brookhaven is the only town in Suffolk County that extends from North Shore to the South Shore. Center Moriches, which is flanked by the hamlets of Moriches and East Moriches, is located on the South Shore on the eastern end of the Town. All three of the hamlets are located on Moriches Bay and are divided by a series of creeks that run south through the communities into the bay. Center Moriches is roughly divided in half by the Montauk Highway; land along the creeks and bay is all located south of the highway. Railroad Avenue, which is lined by late nineteenth and early twentieth century residences, extends north from the center of the hamlet past the Long Island Railroad line. 66 Railroad Avenue is approximately one-tenth of a mile south of the railroad. A concrete sidewalk runs in front of the house, which is situated within an open, grassy lawn. The nominated lot is the intact remnant of the parcel historically associated with the Mary E. Bell House. Historically, the house was situated on a larger parcel with wooded land located to the rear. After the Town became the owner of the property, much of the land was subdivided and sold for commercial use. While this has impacted the house's setting, the open lawn around the house reflects the historic appearance of the land close to the building.

Narrative Description

The Mary E. Bell House is a two-story, two-bay by three-bay, front-gabled frame house built ca. 1872. The house has clapboard siding, an asphalt shingle-covered roof, a central brick chimney, and a brick foundation. A simple cornice band runs under the roofline on all elevations. A one-story, shed-roofed wing, added ca. 1880, is located on the north elevation. The shed-roofed wing has vertical board siding and a wide horizontal board under the roofline.

A one-story, full-width, low-pitched hipped-roof porch extends from the façade (east elevation). It has a simple wood deck at ground level and chamfered posts with angle brackets support the roof. On the first floor, a door with two elongated panels and a six-pane fixed window is located in the southern bay. It is flanked to the north by a two-over-two window. The second floor has two two-over-two windows. The side wing is set back from the façade; a board and batten door leads into the wing.

The south elevation has two two-over-two windows on both the first and second floors. The west elevation (rear) has a two-over-two window on the first floor and a six-over-six window in the attic level. The siding at this elevation is wider on the first and second floors and narrower in the gable. The shed-roofed wing is flush with the rear elevation and extends into the main mass of the house by approximately one foot; a narrow vertical trim board marks the transition between the vertical board siding of the wing and the horizontal clapboard on the house. An additional six-over-six window is located within the south elevation of the wing. The wing covers most of the north elevation on the first floor and has a central six-over-six window over the bulkhead doors to the basement. The second floor of the house, above the wing, has two two-over-two windows.

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The simplicity of the house's design belies what appears to be a more complicated construction history. An examination of the framing members visible at the ground and basement level demonstrates that at least some of the house is of timber-frame construction. The building has substantial oak sills, timber-framed floor joists, and pegged joints. The heavy sawn floor joists for part of the kitchen and wing are attached to the timber framed floor joists with mortise and tenon. While heavy timbers are used at the ground level, smaller, sawn members are used in the attic. While the form and finishes of the house reflect its late-19th century construction, the use of timber-framing is anachronistic. It is clear that the Smith family either salvaged these timbers from an earlier building or worked with builders who preferred this earlier, more-labor intensive system. It is likely that the family worked with skilled members of the local African American community to build the house. Salvaged timbers or trees harvested from the house's woodlot for a new timber-framed structure would have represented a savings on materials. If Selah Smith was unfamiliar with timber-framing, he could have traded, bartered, and/or paid for this work to be completed. The inset side wing may reflect an accommodation to the house's design due to salvaged timbers or the presence of an earlier recessed porch that was later expanded into the more substantial lean-to.

On the interior, the house is divided into a basement (accessible from the exterior) and two floors. The first floor is divided into a parlor, narrow hall, kitchen, and workspace (shed-roofed wing) (Figure 2). On the second floor, the house is divided into two bedrooms (Figure 3). Throughout, the house was simply finished. It retains original wood floors, painted plaster walls, doors, baseboards, and window and door trim.

On the first floor, the parlor features windows with wood panels underneath, all framed by trim. A very narrow side hall connects the parlor and the kitchen. The staircase, which runs to the north, has simple angled trim, wooden steps, and no railing. The kitchen, which has a historic period stove and furnishings, has a small built-in pantry. Wood panels are also located below the windows in the kitchen. A door leads from the kitchen to the side wing, an open work space with a historic period stove; ghost marks on the wall suggest a larger stove was historically located in this space.

On the second floor, a small landing leads to two doorways. The five-panel door to the west leads into one large room which was historically divided into two smaller bedrooms; the dividing wall was removed at some point during the twentieth century. The four-panel door to the east leads to the second bedroom. It has one small closet and access via a steep staircase to the attic. Outside the house, angled cellar doors at ground level north of the wing provide access to the brick basement. Brick steps lead down to the basement level, which has unusual circular brick walls. It is unclear if this was related to a cistern or was simply a preferred design for a root cellar.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Ethnic History – Black

Period of Significance

ca. 1872 - 1923

Significant Dates

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance extends from the construction of the house in ca. 1872 through the death of Mary E. Bell in 1923.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

The Mary E. Bell House is significant under Criterion A in the area of ethnic history for its association with the Smith and Bell families and the African-American community of Center Moriches during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Enslaved Africans were brought to Long Island in the earliest stages of the region's settlement and made up a significant portion of the population by the time New York passed its gradual abolition law in 1799. After the formal end of slavery in 1827, African-Americans faced the challenging task of building successful new lives. In Center Moriches, Abraham and Henry Perdue became prominent leaders and landowners within the small black community. In the decades after they founded the Moriches AME Church, the community and its number of black landowners grew. Selah Smith moved to Center Moriches, purchased land, and built a home for his family on Railroad Avenue in ca. 1872. This home, which would remain in the family for over a century, provided security, stability, and opportunity to his family. The house and land provided a safe space, the ability to supplement their income with a garden and independent work, and was located close to the AME Church that they played an active role in. Mary E. Bell (née Smith) inherited the house after her father's death. With her husband, Ernest Bell, she raised a family of four children in the house and worked as a laundress. Mary E. Bell played a central role in her church and community; with Annie Arch, she was critical to the small congregation's survival. She fostered its transition from the AME to the AMEZ denomination, led its Varick Society of Christian Endeavor, and held prayer meetings at her home. After her death in 1923, the congregation renamed itself the Bell AMEZ Church in her honor.

Early History of African Americans in Moriches

Easily accessible from the mainland, the northern shore of the Town of Brookhaven was the first area to be settled in the town. In 1655, a group traveled from New England and, attracted by its protected harbor, established a new community in Setauket. These settlers, and later others, purchased tracts of land from the Seatacote and Unkechaug tribes.¹ The Town of Brookhaven was created in 1666, when the land became part of the Colony of New York, and the legal foundation for the town's government was formalized by the Dongan Patent in 1686. By the early eighteenth century, large landowners began establishing estates in the southern part of the town. For example, Richard Floyd II purchased 4,400 acres of land between the Pattersquash Creek and Forge River in 1718. Other large landowners in the Moriches region included William Tangier Smith (St. George's Manor) and Richard Woodhull (Mastic).² In addition to these large estates, smaller settlements developed in the region. Families who settled the land divided into necks by creeks east of the Forge River, which became known as the Moriches, primarily focused on farming and fishing.³

The Town of Brookhaven's records first note the sale of an enslaved person in the town in 1672.⁴ Eastern Long Island was never reliant upon enslaved labor to the same extent as colonial Connecticut or New York

¹ B.F. Thompson, *The History of Long Island; from its Discovery and Settlement, to the Present Time* (New York: Gould, Banks & Co., 1843), 408.

² John A. Strong, *The Unkechaug Indians of Eastern Long Island: A History* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 111; Richard Mather Bayles, *Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Suffolk County* (Port Jefferson, LI: Richard Mathew Bayles, 1874), 228.

³ Bayles, *Suffolk*, 277.

⁴ Town of Brookhaven, *Records of the Town of Brookhaven, Suffolk County, NY from 1798-1856* (Port Jefferson, NY: Times Steam Job, 1888).

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City. Between 1700 and 1790, most of the enslaved people that were either sold or bequeathed were African, although some were Native Americans, who were more often indentured. Prominent families in Brookhaven that owned enslaved Africans included the Floyds, Carles, Woodhulls, Thompsons, Strongs, Brewsters, and Smiths.⁵ Some also employed local Unkechaug or Setauket people on their plantations.⁶ This, along with the forces of disease, war, and shared oppression, contributed to intermarriage between Native and African people. For most of the colonial era, Long Island had a substantial enslaved population. Slave-owning families averaged from two to four enslaved individuals, although many well-to-do farmers owned between six and twenty people. While it was not as large as New York City's urban enslaved population, which was second only to that of Charleston, South Carolina, Long Island's population was 17 percent black in 1771. Nearly all were enslaved.⁷

After the Revolutionary War, the New York State legislature attempted to bring an end to slavery. In 1790, people of color made up 16 percent of the Town of Brookhaven's population; 46 percent were enslaved and 54 percent were free.⁸ In 1799, New York State passed a bill for the gradual abolition of slavery. According to the law, a master could only retain the services of an enslaved person born after July 4, 1799 until age 28 for a male and 25 for a female.⁹ There were many problems with this new law, particularly in how it affected the family unit. Parents often remained enslaved and were being resold to different owners without their children moving with them. When children were born to enslaved mothers, owners reported the names of the new child and its mother to local municipalities to establish their claim upon the child. Brookhaven's town records include records of 108 children born during this period.¹⁰ The law was revised in 1817 to prevent enslaved Africans scheduled for emancipation from being sold out of state.

Between 1799 and 1827, many enslaved individuals gained their freedom through manumission, the legal freeing of slaves. New York required owners of enslaved people to certify that the person that they intended to manumit was under fifty years old and was in good health before manumission, to ensure that owners were not freeing old or sick individuals to avoid caring for them and to prevent former enslaved people from becoming the public's responsibility. The institution formally ended in New York on July 4, 1827. On Long Island, many enslaved individuals and families transitioned to independence gradually. Even after some were given or able to buy their freedom, they worked under contracts until a certain age as indentured servants or tenant farmers. While black individuals and families often lived in the houses or on the estates of their employers even after the end of these contracts, many preferred to establish their own independent households when possible.¹¹

Henry and Abraham Perdue, leaders in the small black community in Center Moriches, were born in 1795 and 1797, respectively. As a result, they were born into slavery and not directly affected by New York's gradual

⁵ Patricia and Edward Shillingburg, "Disposition of Slaves on Long Island from 1680 to 1796," 2003, Available at <http://www.shelter-island.org/disposition_slave.html>; New York, Federal Census, 1790.

⁶ Strong, *Unkechaug*, 111.

⁷ Kathleen G. Velsor, *The Underground Railroad on Long Island* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2013).

⁸ Allison Manfra McGovern, "Race and Ethnicity in Early America Reflected through Evidence from the Betsey Prince Archaeological Site, Long Island, New York," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter* 13 (2010): 6.

⁹ Lynda Rose Day, *Making a Way to Freedom: A History of African-Americans on Long Island* (Interlaken, NY: Empire State Books, 1997), 39.

¹⁰ Brookhaven, *Records*, xxii-xxiv.

¹¹ Day, *Making a Way to Freedom*, 42.

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manumission laws; local histories suggest that they were owned by the Havens family from birth. Children born to enslaved parents after 1799 were effectively indentured to their mother's owner, who maintained control of them even after the end of slavery. Lt. Col. John Havens (1787-1850) farmed his family's land in Center Moriches in addition to owning a paper mill in Patchogue where he ran a general store. In 1820, Havens, who was land poor, sold his property in Moriches and moved to Patchogue. It appears that he kept the Perdue brothers enslaved until 1827, when slavery ended in New York state. Brookhaven's Town Records report that John Havens manumitted a man named Ira in 1825; the records only state that he was less than 45 years old, as specified by the law. Three years earlier, Josiah Smith manumitted a man named John Perdue who had been owned by the estate of Oliver Smith. There are no Town records for manumission of a man named Abraham or Abram.¹²

Abraham Perdue purchased land on Union Avenue, near the center of the village, between 1828 and 1830.¹³ Perdue's home appears to remain intact at the corner of Hallock Lane and Red Bridge Road; it is a modest, vernacular one-and-a-half story frame house (Figure 1).¹⁴ Local accounts and census records report that Abraham worked as a peddler and day laborer. Despite the challenges that he and other recently freed blacks faced during this era, he was able to buy land and become a central figure in the area's black community. Abraham and his wife Hagar had five children: Louise, Frances, Jerusha, Augusta, and Abram. In the 1860 census, he was reported as owning real estate valued at \$500. Abraham's brother, Henry, also did well for himself as a free man. He owned and farmed land valued at \$200 just east of John Havens's land on Main Street; just a decade later, his landholdings would be worth \$1000.¹⁵

Abraham and Hagar regularly attended services at the local Methodist church. During the 1840s, Abraham began holding prayer meetings at his home for members of the local black community. As the group grew, its members decided to establish themselves as a formal congregation. The trustees of the new congregation, Abraham Perdue, his brother Henry Perdue, and Harry Howard, purchased a quarter acre of land to build a church in 1846 from Samuel Terry for \$20 on the road heading north from the hamlet to Manorville (later known as Railroad Avenue).¹⁶ The group affiliated itself with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The AME denomination, which originated in disputes beginning in 1787, was formally founded in 1816 by the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen in Philadelphia in response to the mainstream Methodist denomination's weak position on slavery and discrimination within the church. It reflected the real need for an independent church led by black leaders who could respond to the needs of their communities. Most early African-American churches on Long Island affiliated with the AME Church, the fastest growing of the independent black denominations

¹² Brookhaven, *Records*, xx-xxii, 242.

¹³ Bell A.M.E. Zion Church, "History of Bell A.M.E. Zion Church, 1847-1955," 7. Town of Brookhaven archives.

¹⁴ The 1873 map shows A. Perdue as owning a house on Union Avenue. The 1888 map shows a house owned by "Perdue" next to one owned by Mrs. Carl. This was likely Abraham's daughter, Mrs. Frances Perdue Carl. The house associated with Mrs. Carl remains extant and is similar in appearance to the Bell house. By 1902, Red Bridge Road had been laid between the two homes. The house at 67 Redbridge Road, which is briefly described in the narrative, is locally known as Abraham Perdue's house. F.W. Beers, "Center Moriches, Eastport, Blue Point, in Brookhaven and Southampton. Long Island," in *Atlas of Long Island, New York* (New York: Beers, Comstock, and Cline, 1873); E. Belcher and Hyde, "Plate 19. Centre Moriches," in *Atlas of Suffolk County, Long Island, New York* Vol.1 (Philadelphia: Balliet and Volk, 1902); Church, "History," 7; Mary and Van Field, *The Illustrated History of the Moriches Bay Area* (Center Moriches, NY: Moriches Bay Publications, 1990), 187.

¹⁵ Federal Census, New York, 1860, 1870; Field, *Illustrated History*, 160.

¹⁶ Church, "History," 7.

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founded between 1813 and 1840. During this period, as the number of free blacks increased, more attended white churches and felt a desire for churches of their own. As in Center Moriches, many were wage earners and landowners and had a social and cultural need for the church to serve as an extended family. As historian Linda Day describes, "The role of the church was so critical in shaping the community's identity that, in many respects, freedom seemed to mean founding one's own church."¹⁷

The small Center Moriches congregation built a modest frame church on Railroad Avenue (later 54 Railroad Avenue) in 1847.¹⁸ (Figures 1 & 4) Much of the work to construct the 18-foot by 24-foot church, which cost around \$400 to build, was done by the members.¹⁹ The census did not begin reporting the local post office until 1860 so before that time it is challenging to accurately determine which families lived in a particular area of the Town of Brookhaven. In 1860, 24 people in Center Moriches were recorded in the census as black or mulatto. Most lived with white families as a domestic or laborer; Abraham and Henry were the only landowners.²⁰ In the decades following the completion of the church on Railroad Avenue, a small African-American community began to develop in its immediate vicinity. The 1858 map of the community does not list landowner names in this portion of the hamlet, but it does show a concentration of buildings on Railroad Avenue.²¹

In 1874, Center Moriches had a population of around 600 people, two white churches, a schoolhouse, post office, four stores, two hotels, a grist mill, several tradesmen, and a nascent tourism industry. The completion of the Sag Harbor Branch Railroad to Manorville in 1845 and Eastport in 1870 contributed to its growth.²² A comparison of the 1870 census data and an 1873 map of Center Moriches provides clues about the African-American members of the community (Figure 5). George L. Smith and Nathaniel Udall both owned land on Railroad Avenue, valued at 500 and 300 dollars, respectively, and worked as fishermen. Luther B. Smith, who lived on Main Street at the foot of Railroad Avenue, owned land valued at 200 dollars and worked as a common laborer. Abraham Perdue, who lived further south on Union Avenue, worked as a common laborer and owned land valued at 600 dollars. These landowning families made up nearly half of the 28-member black community recorded in Center Moriches in 1870. Fewer people lived and worked for white families; one large family, headed by Edmund Taylor, may have been tenant farming. Henry Perdue was the only other black landowner.²³

The pattern of individuals and families of color transitioning from living with the white families that employed them to living independently and owning land was relatively common on Long Island during the nineteenth century. In many cases, the result was increasing residential segregation as a result of both push and pull factors. For example, black families in desirable coastal areas were often displaced by wealthy white individuals. In other cases, families of color chose to settle together and create a mutually supportive,

¹⁷ James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 10-13; Day, 54; Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: the Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 82-3.

¹⁸ This original church building is extant but not in its original location. It was moved north to 123 Railroad Avenue in 1953 to make space for a new church building to be constructed. At that time, it was repurposed as a residence.

¹⁹ Field, *Illustrated History*, 160; Church, "History," 7.

²⁰ Federal Census, New York, 1860.

²¹ J. Chace, *Map of Suffolk County, Long Island, New York: from Actual Surveys* (Philadelphia: John Douglass, 1858).

²² Bayles, *Suffolk*, 278-9.

²³ F.W. Beers, "Center Moriches," 1873; Federal Census, 1870.

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welcoming community; the Eastville community in Sag Harbor (NR Listed as part of Sag Harbor Village Historic District Boundary Increase, 1994) and the Bethel Christian Avenue community in Setauket (NR Listed, 2017) are notable examples that developed during this period.²⁴ A slightly different pattern is evident in Center Moriches. While a small group of black families in Center Moriches settled in the general vicinity of Railroad Avenue, map and census records generally show a racially integrated community. Railroad Avenue was home to both white and black families; more commonly, black families, such as Henry and Abraham Perdue's, were completely surrounded by white families.²⁵

Selah Smith

The presence of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the willingness of a white landowner to sell land on Railroad Avenue to black buyers, attracted new families to settle in this area of Center Moriches. Little is known about Selah Smith, one of these new buyers. In the 1870 census, Selah (48) was living in Huntington with his wife, Mary Ann (41), and daughters Alice E. (10), Ida W. (9), and Mary E. (5); as no real estate value is given, it is very likely that they were living in a rented home. Both Selah and Mary were born in New York and worked as a farm laborer and washerwoman, respectively.²⁶ Selah Smith purchased land and built the nominated house on Railroad Avenue in Center Moriches ca. 1872 (Figures 1 & 5).²⁷ It is unknown if there was any relation between Selah Smith and George or Luther Smith, who had previously settled in the area. Smith was a common name among free blacks in the region, who often took the last name of the family to whom they had been enslaved.

It is unknown whether Selah Smith hired, or worked with, a local builder to construct the home, or whether he primarily built it himself. In any case, connections with members of the existing black community and congregation were likely invaluable to the newly arriving family. For example, Abraham Perdue lived next to Edward Chichester, a white carpenter with a shop.²⁸ Abraham may have been able to connect Selah with Chichester or to skilled laborers within the black community. The resulting two-story frame house was built in a modest, nineteenth century vernacular form. Front-gabled, two-bay by three-bay buildings like the Mary E. Bell house are common throughout the northeast. This building type could be adapted for commercial or residential construction, dressed up with decorative details or kept simple, and allowed flexibility for later additions, if desired. Typical of this house type, the Bell house has a full width porch; the bracketing on the porch posts offers its only decorative extravagance. The small shed-roofed wing located on the north elevation appears to be a slightly later addition to the home (ca. 1880); it may have initially been a slightly inset porch.²⁹ While the house type and form is typical of its period, the use of heavy timber framing for at least some of its structure is not; heavy framing is visible on the ground and basement level. The motivation to use this outmoded, more labor-intensive system is unclear. It may reflect Smith's preference, those of his builders, and/or a pragmatic,

²⁴ See Section III of the Bethel Christian Avenue Historic District nomination for a discussion of the formation of communities of color on Long Island during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Judith Wellman, Robert Lewis, Judith Burgess, Christopher Matthews, and Karen Martin, "National Register listing for Bethel Christian Avenue Historic District, Setauket, Suffolk County, NY," 2017, 25-29.

²⁵ F.W. Beers, "Center Moriches," 1873; Federal Census, 1870.

²⁶ Federal Census, 1870.

²⁷ F.W. Beers, "Center Moriches," 1873.

²⁸ Federal Census, 1880; F.W. Beers, "Center Moriches."

²⁹ This addition first appears on the 1888 map. F.W. Beers & Co, "Center Moriches," in *Atlas of the Towns of Babylon, Islip, and the South Part of Brookhaven in Suffolk County* (New York: Wendelken & Co, 1888).

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frugal choice to harvest, prepare, and use timbers from Smith's land if time and labor was less costly than purchasing materials. Alternately, it may demonstrate the use of salvaged timbers from an earlier building as a cost-saving measure. In either case, this unusual detail reflects Smith's ingenuity and the extra considerations that black landowners may have faced when building homes during the period.

The construction of this home represented no small amount of hard work and sacrifice and reflects the high value that African Americans placed on owning land. It also demonstrates the desire to, in historian Andrew Weise's term, create "places of their own."³⁰ As a landowner, Selah Smith was able to ensure greater stability and security for his family. Land ownership also offered the family more opportunities for greater economic subsistence, such as supplementing their income through gardening, raising livestock at a small scale, or operating a small business from the home. By settling near other black landowners, Smith hoped to participate in forming a community and "a place of social comfort and cultural affirmation, if not racial pride, a 'safe space' in which to nurture families and educate children, a symbol of resistance to white supremacy and a foundation for politics."³¹

After moving to Center Moriches, Selah and Mary Ann appear to have maintained a successful life for their family. Mary Ann continued working as a laundress; it is likely that the ca. 1880 addition to the northern side of the house was constructed to provide a dedicated workspace for her. All five daughters, Alice E. (18), Ada E. (17), Ida W. (17), Mary E. (14), and Hannah (11), lived with their parents in 1880; the youngest four attended school (likely the one located to the south on Railroad Avenue) (Figure 6). The family also maintained a garden on their land north of the home.³² The Smiths attended services at the Moriches AME church, which had been growing steadily. By this time, its members included families who lived in Center Moriches as well as families who lived in other nearby communities. In 1878, the church's trustees purchased an additional one-eighth of an acre of land from Mr. and Mrs. George W. Howell for \$25 to enlarge its burial ground at the rear of the church. The Smiths joined the community of mourners with Abraham Perdue and his wife Hagar died on November 4 and December 2, 1888, respectively.³³ Mary E. Smith (later Bell), along with Annie Arch of Manorville, played an important role in keeping the congregation together in the decade after their passing.³⁴

Mary E. Bell

The end of the nineteenth century marked a time of transition for the Smith family. Selah Smith died on January 12, 1891 at the age of 69; while the date of his wife Mary Ann's death is unknown, she does not appear in the 1900 census. Only a few months after her father's death, Mary E. Smith gave birth to her first child, Ethel, in July 1891.³⁵ While this decade brought sadness to the Smith family, property ownership meant that it did not necessarily also bring instability. A photograph of the house which appears to date to this period (ca. 1895) shows five black women, one with a small child, standing behind the fence. (Figure 7) The

³⁰ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African-American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6, 8.

³¹ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African-American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6, 8; Day, *Making a Way to Freedom*, 52.

³² Federal Census, New York, 1880; F.W. Beers, "Center Moriches," 1888; Photograph of the Mary E. Bell House, undated, collection of the Ketcham Inn Foundation.

³³ Church, "History," 11; *The Signal*, December 6, 1884.

³⁴ Church, "History," 11.

³⁵ "Selah Smith," New York, State Death Index, 1880-1956; Federal Census, New York, 1900.

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individual women have not been identified. However, it seems clear that it shows either the five Smith daughters or Mary Ann Smith and four of her daughters.³⁶ In any case, the photograph depicts well-dressed women and a neat fence surrounding a tidy house and yard. A garden and small shed are visible in the background. The existence of this photograph alone, in addition to its subject matter, confirms that the Smiths had disposable income. Their apparent choice to include the property in the photograph, instead of focusing the family alone, also demonstrates the high value that they placed on it.

In 1895, Mary E. married Ernest Bell (Figure 9). Ernest's background is unclear. The 1900 census reports that he was born in North Carolina in 1875; later censuses appear to report in error that he was from New York. African-Americans began traveling north in significant numbers during the late nineteenth century to escape poverty and structural racism in the rural south, find jobs, and create better educational opportunities for their children. When it increased in scale during the mid-1910s, this movement would become known as the Great Migration.³⁷ By 1900, Mary E. (33) and Ernest (25) were living at the house on Railroad Avenue with their young family: Ethel (8), Alice (2), and Lillian (1). Ernest worked as a day laborer. An occupation was not listed for Mary E., who was busy managing the household, garden, and children; it is possible that she also supplemented the family's income by working as a laundress like her mother had.³⁸

During the 1890s, Mary E. Bell continued to play an important role in the life of the Moriches AME congregation. In 1897, the congregation changed its affiliation from AME to African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ). The AMEZ denomination, which originated in 1800, was officially formed in 1821 in New York City. James Varick, its most prominent leader, became its first Bishop. While the AME and AMEZ churches emerged in response to the same forces and were both based on Methodist doctrine, the two denominations had minor, but significant, differences. The AMEZ had a smaller geographic range than AME until the late nineteenth century and had weaker central leadership. Individual AMEZ congregations and members of the laity had greater authority and democratic rights than in AME churches. This, in part, may be responsible for its more liberal approach to involving and elevating women within the denomination. The AMEZ first allowed women to vote for church trustees in 1876, allowed female delegates to its annual conference in 1896, and ordained its first female deacons and elders during the 1890s.³⁹

In addition to the denomination's empowerment of female religious leaders, one of the factors that may have inspired this denominational shift in Center Moriches was the AMEZ's Varick Christian Endeavor Society, which had been founded in 1896. James Varick was more literate than other early leaders in the AME and AMEZ churches; it is important to note that this founding generation of leaders had nearly all been legally and

³⁶ The woman on the far right may be Mary Ann; she appears somewhat older than the others and is wearing a hat and slightly more formal clothing. If the photograph shows Mary Ann and Mary E. at the center with her daughter, the photograph likely dates to ca. 1895. Photograph of the Mary E. Bell House, undated, collection of the Ketcham Inn Foundation.

³⁷ Federal Census, New York, 1900; Wiese, *Places*, 5, 37, 68-69; The 1880 census records a 6-year old Ernest in the household of Edward Bell in Beaufort, Carteret, North Carolina. It is likely that this is the same person that traveled to Long Island and later married Mary E. Smith.

³⁸ E. Belcher and Hyde, "Center Moriches," 1902; Federal Census, New York, 1900.

³⁹ Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 91, 113-114; David Henry Bradley, *A History of the A.M.E. Zion Church: part I, 1796-1872* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1956), 95, 101, 150-1

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forcibly denied the privilege of learning to read and write.⁴⁰ Varick placed a high priority on education, taught classes to African-American children in basic subjects, and was active in racial advocacy; these values remained strong within the denomination.⁴¹ The Varick Christian Endeavor Society, which operated in addition to Sunday schools, was essentially a youth group with an educational and social mission inspired by Varick's work. Mary E. Bell served as the local leader of the Society in Center Moriches from its inception.⁴²

Christian Endeavor societies, like the Varick Christian Endeavor Society, very popular during the period among protestant denominations. Christian Endeavor societies focused on attracting and retaining young adults, especially young men, as an active and integral part of a congregation and its community. As in Center Moriches, most Christian Endeavor Societies were run by women. These organizations offered activities like weekly Bible studies, co-ed social activities such as picnics and dinners, and service projects (tutoring, preparing meals for the needy, etc.). Varick Christian Endeavor Societies were especially successful; in 1902, the AMEZ church boasted nearly 800 societies with a total of about 20,000 members.⁴³

While the AMEZ denomination sent preachers to the small church, Mary E. Bell and Annie Arch were at the heart of the social and religious black community in Center Moriches. The church's history states that every Sunday Annie Arch "drove her horse and wagon in the summer and sleigh in the winter all the way from Manor to worship with her friends and neighbors." Annie, who had grown up on her family's land in Manorville and had never married, continued to operate the farm and work as a laundress. When the weather was too bad to return, she often stayed with Mary and Ernest Bell after the service.⁴⁴

The 1910 census offers a problematic record of the Bell family; many of the ages and dates are incorrect. However, it does confirm basic information about their lives. The family had grown; Alice (12) and Lillian (11) were joined by Eugene (8). Ernest continued working as a farm laborer, Mary worked as a laundress from home, and Alice was old enough to work as a cook for a private family (Figure 8).⁴⁵ The church remained an important part of the lives of the family. In 1912, the church's pastor, Rev. Ossie S. Prime, christened the three children. Despite Mary's work, the congregation suffered during the early 1910s. The African-American community in Center Moriches had always been small, and the loss of members due to relocation or death was too much for the congregation to survive. When the church closed in 1914, Mary E. Bell remained at the

⁴⁰ Irvine Garland Penn, *The United Negro: His Problems and his Progress, Containing the Addresses and Proceedings of the Negro Young People's Christian and Educational Congress, held August 6-11, 1902* (Atlanta: D.E. Luther Publishing Co., 1902), 542; Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 73.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 112.

⁴² Church, "History," 9; Cicero Richard Harris and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, *Historical Catechism of the A.M.E. Zion Church. For Use in Families and Sunday Schools* (Charlotte, NC: AME Zion Publication House, 1922), 30.

⁴³ Sally G. McMillen, *To Raise up the South: Sunday Schools in Black and White Churches, 1865-1915* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 202; Penn, *The United Negro*, 67-8, 186, 542.

⁴⁴ Church, "History," 9; While the church history refers to Annie Arch's husband, the census shows that she lived alone and was never married. Federal Census, New York, 1880, 1900, 1910.

⁴⁵ E. Belcher Hyde, "Centre Moriches," in *Atlas of a Part of Suffolk County, Long Island, New York. South Side—Ocean Shore*, Vol. 1 (New York: E. Belcher Hyde, 1915); Federal Census, New York, 1910. A comparison of the 1900 and 1920 census makes the problematic information given in this census clear. The ages of each of the children are about a decade too old. It also reports Ernest and Mary's marriage as 23 years long (1887). According to the previous census, it would have been about 15 years at this time. Given the other incorrect information presented here, and with no other corroborating information available, we have chosen to use the 1895 marriage date as given in the 1900 census.

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heart of the local religious community, albeit in a more informal way, by holding prayer services at her home.⁴⁶ The waning of the congregation came at a time of struggle for the Bell family. By 1915, Ernest had become a patient at the Central Islip State Psychiatric Hospital. Three years later, he obtained a deferment from the draft in WWI due to insanity. He would continue to be institutionalized until his death in 1950.⁴⁷

In February 1920, Mary (58) was living with her children, Alice (22), Lillian (21), and Eugene (18). Alice worked as a housekeeper for a private family and Eugene was a truck driver.⁴⁸ During the last years of Mary's life, the AME Zion congregation to which she had devoted herself began to revive. The local African-American population was growing as a result of the Great Migration; many were attracted to this area for farm work. In 1922, the AME Zion Conference sent Rev. William E. Wright to serve as the church's pastor. Mary E. Bell died on February 17, 1923 and was buried in the Moriches AME Zion church cemetery.⁴⁹ Soon after, the congregation officially adopted a new name, Bell AME Zion Church, in honor of Mary E. Bell.⁵⁰

Later History of the Mary E. Bell House

Alice Bell, who had been born in the Railroad Avenue house, inherited the property after her mother's death. Alice played an important part of the life of the AME Zion congregation as it grew and matured between the 1920s and 1950s (Figures 10 & 11). She served on the church's Trustee board and was active in the Ladies Aid and other organizations at the church. When the congregation made the decision to build a new church building in the early 1950s, the Ladies Aid organization played a critical role in fundraising through dinners, programs, and musical events that were well-attended by the larger Center Moriches community. Construction of the new church (extant) began in 1954 and was completed the following year; the old church building was moved further north on Railroad Avenue and was repurposed as a residence at this time (Figure 1).⁵¹ During this period, Alice became well known for her sweet potato pies; they played a prominent role in church fundraisers for the rest of her lifetime. While Alice was active in the church, she otherwise lived quietly. She worked as a housekeeper and never married or drove a car; every Sunday morning, she walked the short distance from her home to the church. In honor of her years of dedicated work, she was ordained a Deaconess and became a lifetime member of the Women's Home and Overseas Missionary Society in 1982.⁵²

When Alice died in 1996, she intended for the house to pass to the church. Unfortunately, legal and tax issues resulted in it falling into private hands and being used as rental property. Within a decade, the house had fallen into disrepair and it was threatened with demolition in 2009. Members of the Bell AMEZ Church and local historic preservation advocates, including Bert Seides of the Ketcham Inn Foundation, advocated for the building to be recognized and preserved. On February 15, 2011, the Brookhaven Town Board adopted a

⁴⁶ Church, "History," 9.

⁴⁷ Research on Ernest Bell. Ketcham Inn Foundation.

⁴⁸ Federal Census, New York, 1920.

⁴⁹ "Mary E. Bell," NYS Death Index Death Certificate, Town of Brookhaven; Later in the twentieth century, the small cemetery behind Bell AME Zion was disinterred and moved to Mount Pleasant Cemetery. It does not appear that headstones were moved along with the burials.

⁵⁰ Church, "History," 9.

⁵¹ Church, "History," 11-15; "Ex-Slave was Founder: C. Moriches Church gets \$500 Donation," *The Patchogue Advance*, January 20, 1955.

⁵² Willie Hill, "Save The Historic Bell House," *The Press of Manorville and The Moriches*, May 15, 2010.

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resolution to designate the Mary E. Bell house a historic landmark and take ownership of the property. The Town of Brookhaven and Ketcham Inn Foundation, who have a formal stewardship agreement for the property, worked together to restore the house, which had its grand opening to the public on June 22, 2019. (Figure 12) The house is maintained as a historic site, is located within the local historic district, and is open to the public for special events.⁵³

⁵³ Cathy Meinhold, "The Mary E. Bell House is progressing to historic preservation," *The Tide of Moriches*, October 2014; Willie Hill, "Save The Historic Bell House," *The Press of Manorville and The Moriches*, May 15, 2010; "History's Heroes," *The Press of Manorville and the Moriches*, May 7, 2010; Brookhaven Town Board, "Resolution of Adoption to Designate the AME Zion Bell House, also known as the Mary E. Bell House, as an Historic Landmark," February 15, 2011.

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Photograph of the Mary E. Bell House, undated. Collection of the Ketcham Inn Foundation.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
 previously listed in the National Register
 previously determined eligible by the National Register
 designated a National Historic Landmark
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
 recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University
 Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

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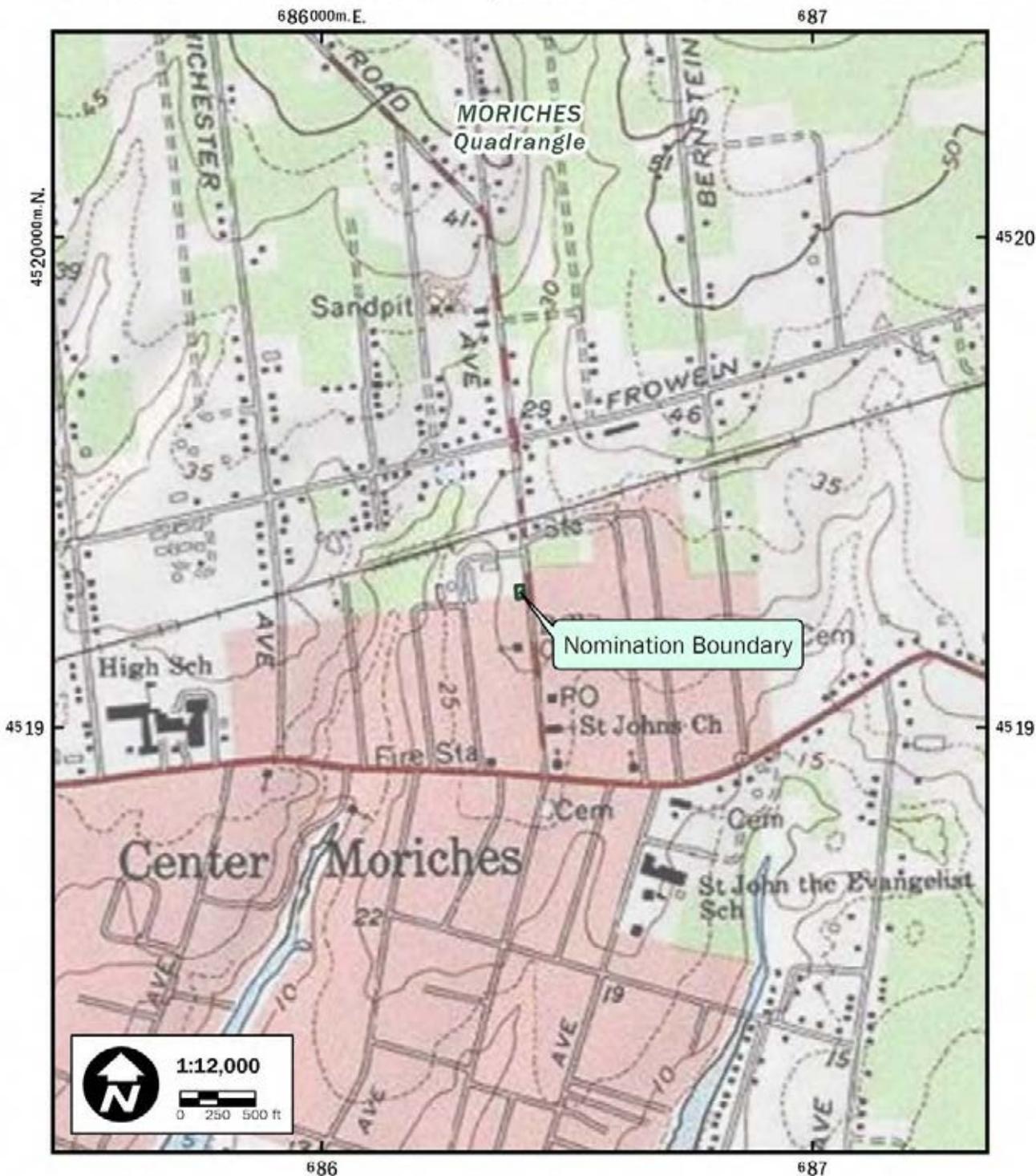
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Mary E. Bell House
Town of Brookhaven, Suffolk County, New York

66 Railroad Avenue
Center Moriches, NY 11934



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter

 Nomination Boundary



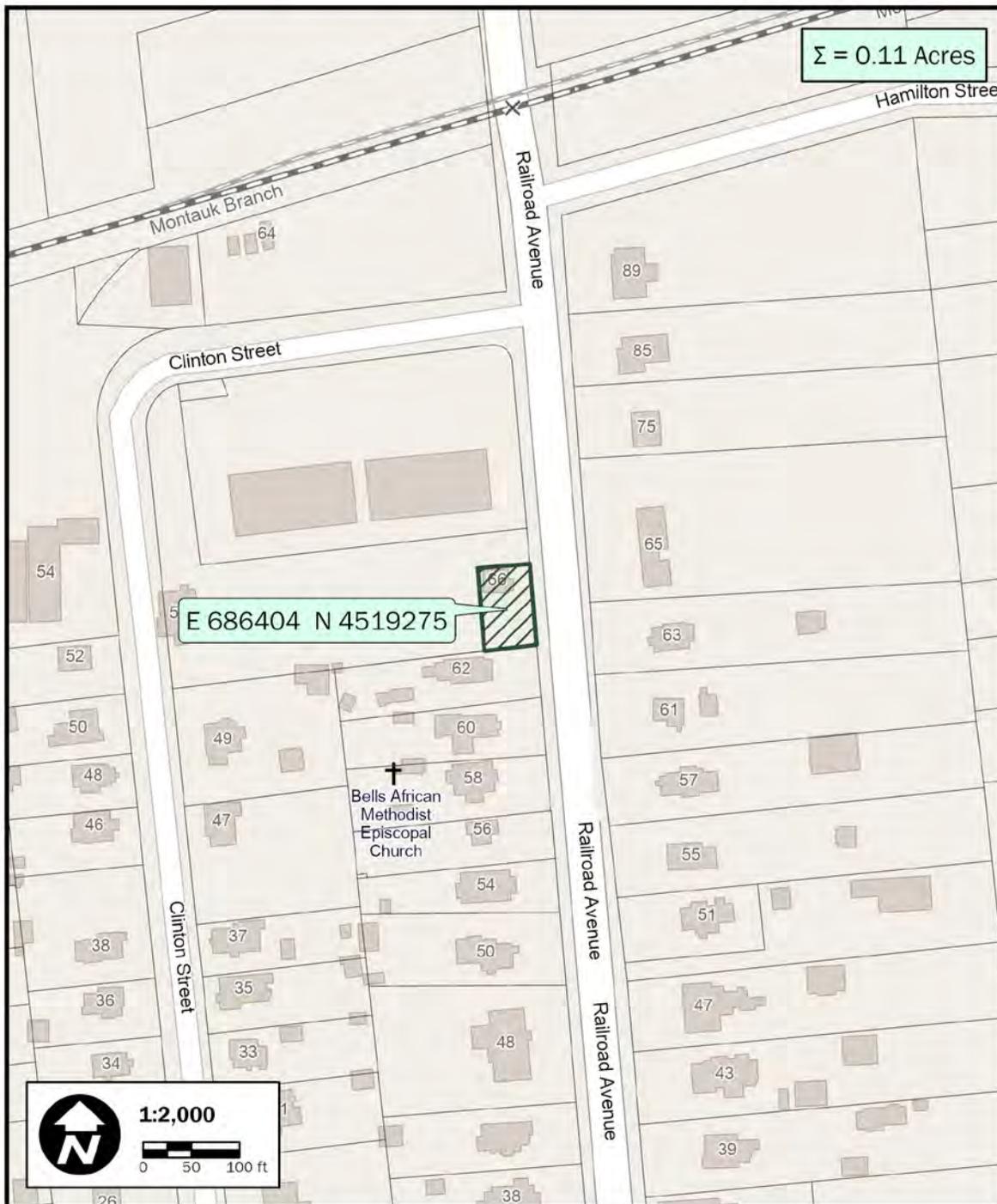
Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation

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Mary E. Bell House
Town of Brookhaven, Suffolk County, New York

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Units: Meter

 Nomination Boundary



Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation

Mary E. Bell House **DRAFT**
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11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jennifer Betsworth (NY SHPO)
organization _____ date July 2020
street & number _____ telephone _____
city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____
e-mail _____

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: Mary E. Bell House

City or Vicinity: Center Moriches

County: Suffolk State: NY

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0001
Façade (east elevation), facing west. Photographed by Bertram Seides, August 5, 2018.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0002
Southeast and east elevations, facing northwest. Photographed by Bertram Seides, August 5, 2018.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0003
Northeast elevation, facing southwest. Photographed by Bertram Seides, August 5, 2018.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0004
Southwest elevation, facing northeast. Photographed by Bertram Seides, June 15, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0005
Northwest elevation, facing east. Photographed by Bertram Seides, June 15, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0006
First floor, front parlor, facing east. Photographed by Mary Rood Hendler, June 22, 2018.

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NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0007

First floor, view of living room doorway and narrow hall towards kitchen, facing west. Photographed by Mary Rood Hendler, May 15, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0008

Stairway, facing north toward hallway landing. Photographed by Bertram Seides, June 14, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0009

Second floor, west side bedrooms (dividing wall removed during late 20th c.), facing west. Photographed by Bertram Seides, June 5, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0010

First floor, kitchen, facing north. Photographed by Bertram Seides, June 5, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0011

North elevation, detail, looking into lean-to off of kitchen, facing west. Photographed by Mary Rood Hendler, May 15, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0012

First floor, lean-to interior, facing south. (Inc a 2 ft setback bc of timber frame?) Photographed by Mary Rood Hendler, May 15, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0013

First floor, lean-to interior, facing south. Possible outline of historic heating stove on wall. Photographed by Bertram Seides, May 6, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0014

First floor, looking from lean-to into kitchen, facing south. Photographed by Bertram Seides, June 5, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0015

Basement, cellar stairway leading to circular brick pit, facing north. Photographed by Bertram Seides, June 15, 2020.

NY_Suffolk Co_Mary E. Bell House_0016

Circular brick basement, facing south. Photographed by Bertram Seides, June 15, 2020.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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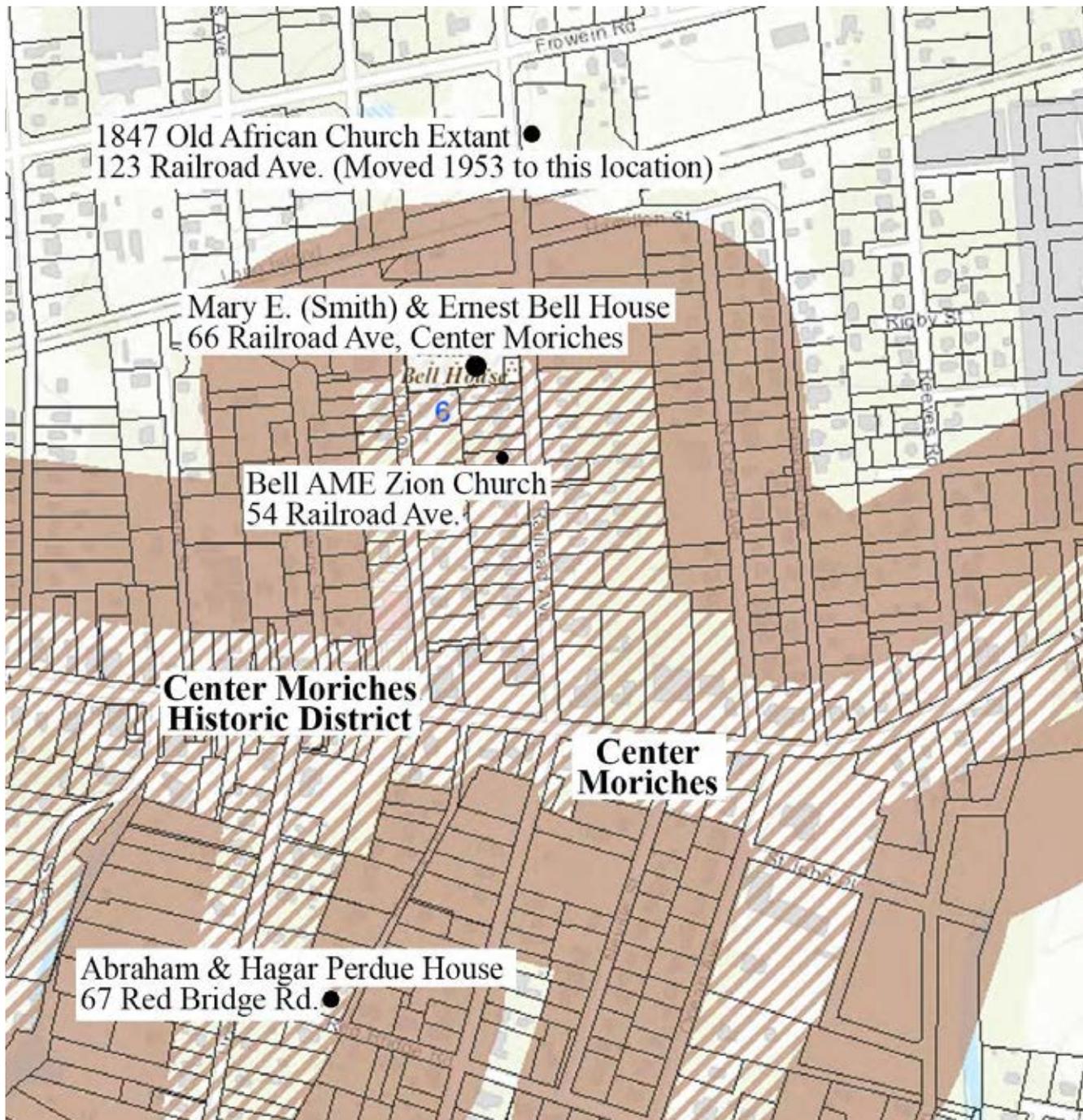
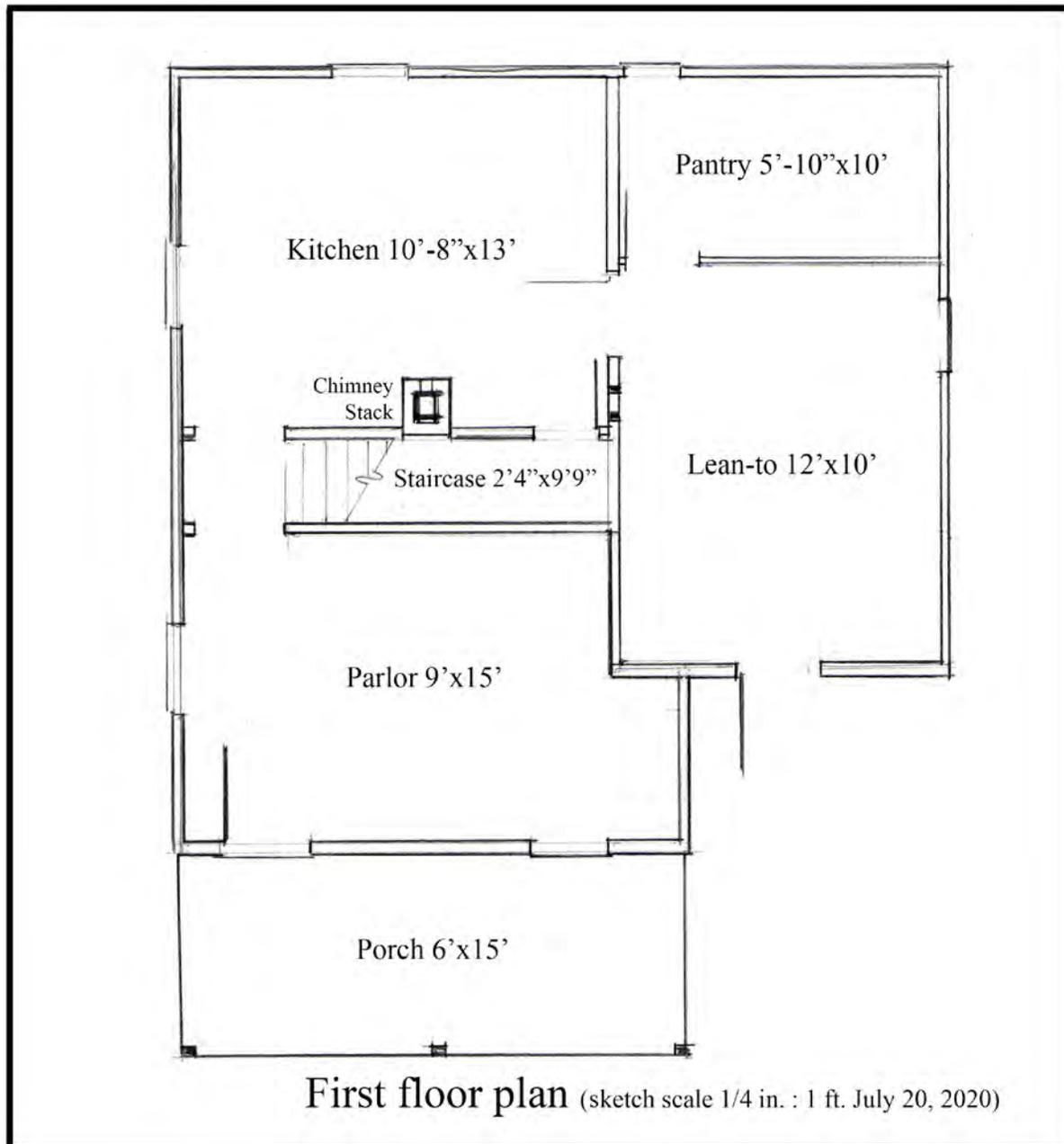


Figure 1. Location map showing significant buildings noted in the Mary E. Bell House nomination. Courtesy Ketcham Inn Foundation.

Mary E. Bell House **DRAFT**
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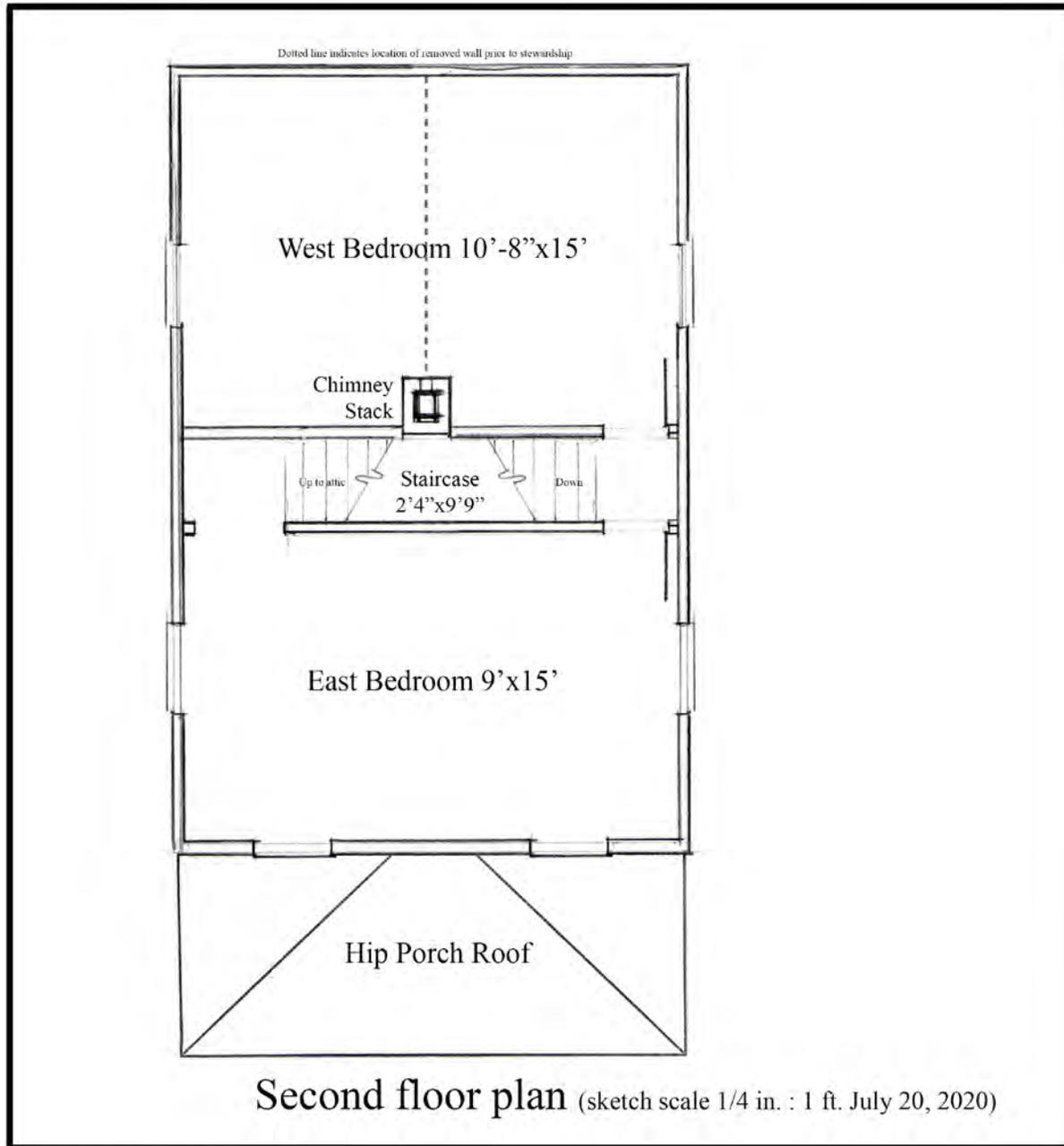


Mary E. Bell House
66 Railroad Ave. (Old Church St.)
Center Moriches, Long Island, New York, 11934

Figure 2. Mary E. Bell House, first floor plan. Courtesy Ketcham Inn Foundation.

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Mary E. Bell House
66 Railroad Ave. (Old Church St.)
Center Moriches, Long Island, New York, 11934

Figure 3. Mary E. Bell House, second floor plan. Courtesy Ketcham Inn Foundation.

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Figure 4. Bell AME Zion Church, constructed 1847. Photograph taken ca. 1950.

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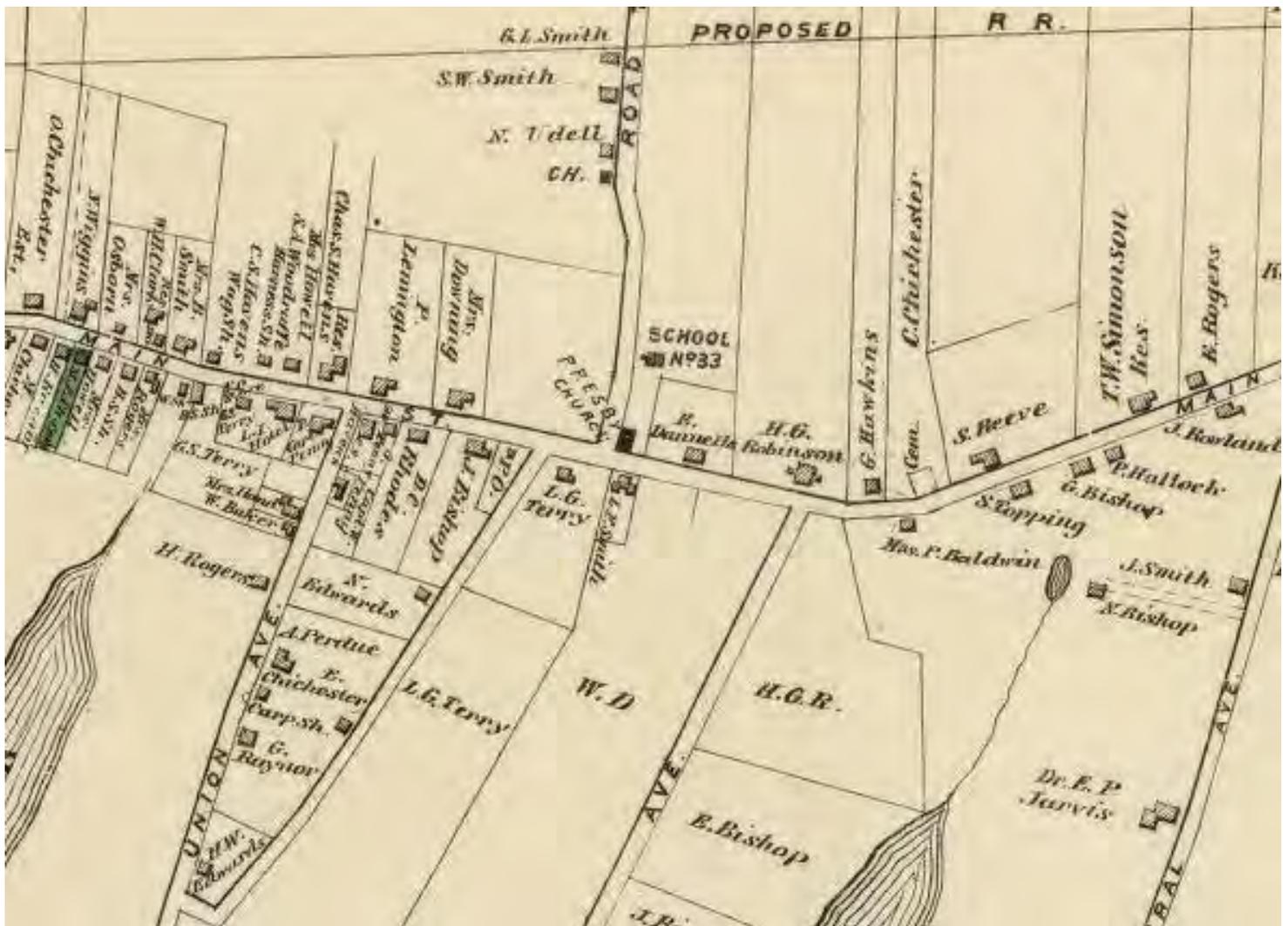


Figure 5. F.W. Beers. "Center Moriches, Eastport, Blue Point, in Brookhaven and Southampton. Long Island." In *Atlas of Long Island, New York*. New York: Beers, Comstock, and Cline, 1873.

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Figure 6. F.W. Beers & Co. "Center Moriches." In *Atlas of the Towns of Babylon, Islip, and the South Part of Brookhaven in Suffolk County*. New York: Wendelken & Co, 1888.

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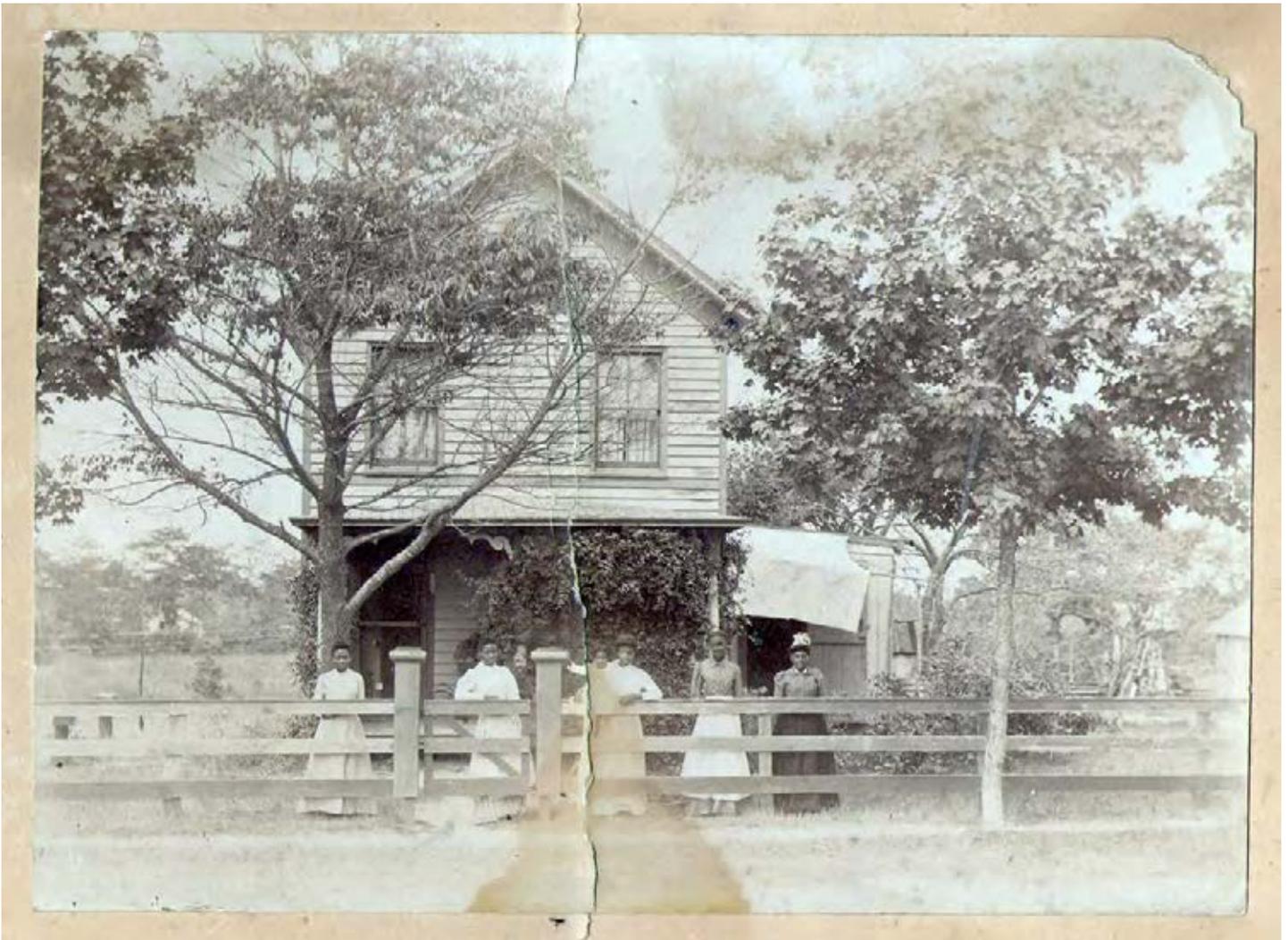


Figure 7. Smith-Bell House, taken ca. 1895. Courtesy Ketcham Inn Foundation.

Mary E. Bell House **DRAFT**

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Figure 8. E. Belcher Hyde. "Centre Moriches." In *Atlas of a Part of Suffolk County, Long Island, New York. South Side—Ocean Shore, Vol. 1*. New York: E. Belcher Hyde, 1915.

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Figure 9. Locket image of Ernest Bell. Courtesy Ketcham Inn Foundation.



Figure 10. Bell House, ca. 1930-40.

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Name of Property

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Figure 11. Alice Bell in front of house, 1959. Courtesy Ketcham Inn Foundation.

Mary E. Bell House **DRAFT**

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Figure 12. Bell House opening as a historic house museum, June 22, 2019. Photograph by Carroll Roe.































