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LIVING IN | ST. ALBANS, QUEENS

Bluesy Home Market With a Jazzy Past



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

THEY LIVED HERE Under a Long Island Rail Road bridge that spans Linden Boulevard in St. Albans, passers-by are dwarfed by famous former residents — including John Coltrane, Fats Waller and James Brown. [More Photos >](#)

By JOSEPH PLAMBECK
Published: December 5, 2008

IT used to be easy for residents to rest on St. Albans's laurels.

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For several decades, starting in the 1940s, this serene neighborhood in southeastern [Queens](#) was a bastion for some of New York's most famous African-Americans. Jazz greats like Count Basie and [Ella Fitzgerald](#), as well as sports heroes like the [Brooklyn Dodgers'](#) Roy Campanella, called it home. By the 1970s, the area was solidly African-American and middle-class, and living there was a sign of success.

Visitors today don't have to look far to see the neighborhood's pride. Near the [Long Island Rail Road](#) station in St. Albans, a giant mural depicts some of the neighborhood's famous residents.

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But then came the 1980s, when, like much of the rest of the city, the neighborhood faced rising crime rates and drug use. And then, in the last 10 years, with real estate prices rising, investors and developers sought out one-family houses, the predominant housing stock, and converted them into two-family houses or built row houses where detached houses had once stood.

Suddenly, parking became more scarce. Quiet streets became busier. More renters moved in, some longtime residents say, without any commitment to the neighborhood.

A result, said [Robert Gibbs](#), a 32-year veteran of local real estate, was "a real decline in the area" — though not steep enough to put him off. He lives here, in a four-bedroom colonial that he bought for \$36,500 in 1978. He estimated the house would now sell for about \$400,000.

Greg Mays, a local community organizer, said:

“Overdevelopment in southeast Queens was the biggest threat that we faced before the credit meltdown. The silver lining of the meltdown is that all of the development came to a roaring halt.”

Even before the downturn, though, community organizers had been fighting to preserve the area’s history and protect its suburban feel. Last fall, with the support of Mr. Gibbs and Mr. Mays, among others, the City Council rezoned much of the neighborhood to make it much more difficult to build multifamily homes or convert single-families.

It is the tranquil atmosphere that has lured many new residents, including Blanche Charles, a nursing assistant who lives with her two children in a three-bedroom home she bought last year. “It is a nice, quiet neighborhood,” she said, “and usually no one is on the streets at night.”

Those are just the attributes that need protecting, said Mr. Mays, the president of the Addisleigh Park Civic Organization, which is named after the 650-house enclave where many of the well-known African-Americans lived.

Last year, his group formed a partnership with the [Historic Districts Council](#), a preservation research and advocacy group, to come up with a definitive history of the area and its architecture. That research has been sent to the state’s historic preservation office so that Addisleigh Park will be considered for the National Register of Historic Places. “It’s always nice to know that your neighborhood has a little magical significance,” Mr. Mays said.

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

In St. Albans, where almost all the buildings top out at two stories and decades-old trees line the streets, the bustle of the city seems far away.

Mr. Gibbs says it draws people who “enjoy the idea of having a country setting while living in the city.”

The heart of the neighborhood is the intersection of Linden and Farmers Boulevards. Anything northwest of that is generally considered Addisleigh Park, an upscale area with

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St. Albans, an area of about three square miles, is roughly bordered on the north by Hollis Avenue, on the east by Springfield Boulevard, and on the south by Merrick Boulevard. A campus for the St. Albans Veterans Affairs Community Center sits in the southwest corner.

Most of the housing is single-family colonials — usually with three or four bedrooms — although two-family houses and row houses have made inroads and are scattered throughout. Lot sizes are big by [New York City](#) standards: usually 40 or 50 feet by 100 feet.

Many of the people moving out in recent years, Mr. Gibbs said, have been retirees, who lived here for decades and decided to go south. In general, he said, younger families have taken their place.

Rupert Green, who teaches computer certification classes, moved here from the [Bronx](#) five years ago and bought a two-family house for \$426,000 last year. He now rents out the two-bedroom top section of the house for \$1,100 a month, and lives in the one-bedroom below.

“People watch out for each other,” said Mr. Green, an immigrant from Jamaica. “When snow falls, people help each other. That’s why we live in the neighborhood.”

Although the numbers of West Indians, Latinos and other minority members have grown in recent years, St. Albans remains solidly African-American. More than 70 percent of the nearly 225,000 residents living in Community District 12, which includes St. Albans, identified themselves as African-American, according to the 2000 census.

Pride in [Barack Obama](#)’s election to the presidency is omnipresent; his name and face are displayed in windows and on paintings sold in local stores. It is even audible. On one recent afternoon, as a man in a Lexus sport utility vehicle drove down Merrick Boulevard, Mr. Obama’s acceptance speech blared out his car window.

WHAT YOU’LL PAY

St. Albans has been hit hard by the economic downturn; buyers will find a good selection and dropping prices.

In the past year, several brokers said, prices have declined by more than 20 percent, because sellers have had to compete with an influx of foreclosed homes for sale. The market values of many homes in St. Albans are now below the city’s assessed values, Mr. Gibbs said.

“We haven’t hit the bottom yet,” he said. “It’ll be another year or so before things start to turn around.”

Generally, buyers will find detached one-family homes with three bedrooms averaging about \$350,000 and four-bedrooms \$375,000. Two-family homes sell for about \$550,000, although some are priced around \$700,000.

There are now 48 one-family homes on the market, for \$350,000 to \$400,000, said Randy Saa, a broker with Century 21 American Homes. Twenty two-family homes are listed; prices range from \$525,000 all the way to \$700,000.

Buyers pay a premium to live in Addisleigh Park, where there are nine homes for sale, Mr. Saa said. One-family homes there generally start around \$450,000.

WHAT TO DO

The neighborhood's main commercial zone extends down Linden Boulevard from the intersection of Farmers Boulevard, and offers Caribbean restaurants and soul food. One of the biggest draws, residents say, is Jean's [Caribbean](#)-American Restaurant, right at the corner of Linden and Farmers. Beauty salons are plentiful.

In the warmer months Roy Wilkins Park, all 50-plus acres of it, is a popular destination and the site of the 325-seat Black Spectrum Theater.

Just to the west of the Addisleigh enclave lie the 11 acres of wide open green space at St. Albans Park.

THE SCHOOLS

Through Grade 5, many students attend either St. Albans (Public School 36) or Roy Wilkins (P.S. 136), which also includes prekindergarten. Both schools perform below the city average. On the state proficiency exams taken last year at No. 36, the better performing, 53 percent of fourth graders met standards in English and 70 percent in math, versus 61 and 80 citywide.

For Grades 6 through 8, nearly 700 attend Linden (Intermediate School 192). Of eighth-graders, 34 percent met standards in reading and 42 percent in math, versus 43 and 60 citywide.

Springfield Gardens High School was replaced in recent years with two smaller schools at the same site: George Washington Carver and Excelsior. SAT averages at Carver last year were 389 in reading, 405 in math and 384 in writing, versus 488, 503 and 475 statewide.

THE COMMUTE

Although St. Albans has no subway stop, commuters have a few options. The Long Island Rail Road stops near Addisleigh Park and the St. Albans Community Living Center. The northern part of the neighborhood is served by the railroad's Hollis station, at 193rd Street and Woodhull Avenue. For both trains, getting to [Manhattan](#) requires a transfer at the Jamaica station; the total trip to Pennsylvania Station takes about 30 minutes at peak times.

Many commuters take the Q3, Q4 and Q83 buses to neighboring Jamaica and transfer to the E train.

The neighborhood is also served by the Q77 bus.

THE HISTORY

St. Albans is prominently featured in the monthly tour of Queens jazz sites offered by the Flushing Council on Culture and the Arts. It starts at the Flushing Town Hall and makes its way to nearby Corona and then to Addisleigh Park before returning to Flushing. The cost for nonmembers is \$35.

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