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125 Years at 1372 Dean

By LIZ ROBBINS JULY 12, 2013

Kenya Keppel remembered how her friends on the block begged to play in “the Castle,” as they called her house. The three-story Romanesque Revival brick residence certainly stood out on Dean Street in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, for its slate-shingled turret.

The tower was closed to exploration but not to imagination, and Kenya felt like a princess hosting hip-hop dance parties in the basement and sleepovers in the living room. No home has felt as special since.

In reality, when her mother, Denise Alves-Keppel, bought the house at 1372 Dean Street in 1983 for \$66,000, crack vials littered the sidewalks. The block was a well-trod path from the drug corners of Franklin Avenue.

Built in 1888 for \$8,000, the house sits on a leafy street in Crown Heights North between Brooklyn and Kingston Avenues. Now it is under contract for \$1.32 million — \$20,000 above asking price — sold to Amber Mazor, the founder of the company Perfect Renovation, which specializes in restoring historic Brooklyn brownstones.

“I’m sad,” Ms. Keppel, 32, said from Coral Springs, Fla., where she is a mother of two and teaches kindergarten. “If I could win the lotto, I’d buy it and take care of it.”

Instead, her mother will take her winnings to Queens. Soon, Ms. Alves-Keppel, 62, will deliver the house vacant, her three tenants having been sent away. Together with John Broome, her partner, she will move into a house he owns in Jamaica.

The house on Dean Street is more than just an address: it is a time capsule, chronicling the history and social transformation of Brooklyn.

From farmland to society hub in the 19th century, to a home for middle-class black families after World War II, and now a destination for young professionals and investors, the northern section of Crown Heights has undergone significant changes over the past 125 years.

Crown Heights historically begins at Washington Avenue and spreads east, bounded by Atlantic Avenue to the north. Market-rate rentals now dominate along newly stylish Franklin Avenue (of the wine and cheese bars), while longtime West Indian and African-American renters are struggling to afford the neighborhood, causing resentment and distrust.

The section of homes stretching between Nostrand and Kingston Avenues — Crown Heights North, where 1372 Dean Street sits — registered a 135 percent increase in white residents from the 2000 census to the 2010 census. The median house value jumped 126 percent, to \$561,237.

Since then, the change has been exponential. As recently as December, a town house in Crown Heights selling for \$1 million or more was unheard-of, according to Gregory Todd, the Corcoran Group broker for 1372 Dean Street. “Now 11 have sold — all in the last eight months,” he said.

“I think there’s a wave you can see almost visibly marching eastward,” Mr. Todd said. “Now, it’s like ‘Wow!’ The wave has finally lapped over Franklin Avenue and the market is finally starting to appreciate the quality of the housing threshold.”

Everybody wants in on a deal. Over the past year, both new and longtime residents of Dean Street said, they have received handwritten fliers, filled with exclamation points, under their doors, offering to buy their

homes for cash.

For developers like Mr. Mazor, 42, the neighborhood is full of potential. “These houses are hot and the demand is rising,” he wrote in an e-mail.

Ms. Alves-Keppel said she tried to sell the house five years ago, but because its certificate of occupancy is for a five-family residence and most buyers want either a two-family or a one-family dwelling, it was difficult. Four months ago, she called Mr. Todd, because she remembered him from a community meeting. He has lived in Crown Heights for 12 years and started working there in 1987, as a community activist for the Brooklyn Ecumenical Council.

In three open houses at 1372 Dean in May, more than 80 people traipsed up and down the main staircase and back down the servants’ staircase. They included a couple who drove away in a Mercedes, a man holding a bike helmet accompanied by a pregnant wife lingering in the house’s two gated parking spaces — the real treasure of the house, some felt — a woman saying she could pay \$1.5 million (but did not), and a man carrying his blond infant in a Baby Bjorn. There was one black family from Long Island, with young twins and a teenage boy.

In 1982, Ms. Alves-Keppel remembers, the sale notice for the house ran in The Amsterdam News. A friend of her mother’s worked as a barmaid at the nearby Kingston Lounge, now defunct, and knew a man who ran numbers for residents of Dean Street. He recommended the block.

Against everyone’s arguments, she bought the house, with the money her father left her in his will. “It was all I wanted,” she said.

Since 1888, the address has belonged to modest men and women who defined the ambition and determination of their generations: a banker, a 1900s-era female writer using a male pen name, a self-proclaimed capitalist, a female Jewish lawyer, a black judge in criminal court, a single mother and, now, a renovation company owner.

Public transportation first hastened the development of rural Bedford, as it was known before 1900. The Brooklyn Bridge opened in 1883, but according to the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission, the completion of the Kings County Elevated Railway along Fulton Avenue in 1888 was what spurred the building of single-family homes.

That year, Francis T. Kimball, a banker from Boston, hired a Boston architect to build the house on Dean Street for his second wife soon after they were married. It was attached to a Queen Anne-style brick house finished three years earlier.

(That house, 1370 Dean, was sold two years ago for \$700,000, but the owner did not complete renovations and it is vacant. Across the street is the George B. and Susan Elkins house, the oldest free-standing wood farmhouse in Crown Heights, built in 1855. Declared a landmark but dilapidated, it has undergone halting renovations that are the talk of the neighborhood.)

The Kimballs started a family there but did not stay a lifetime. They had a daughter, Mildred, in 1891, and a son, Lindsley, in November 1894. Less than six months later, Mildred died. Lindsley F. Kimball would become president of the United Service Organizations and of the National Urban League; found the New York Blood Center; and become an executive of the Rockefeller Foundation.

Around 1896, Frances Louise Howland and her husband, Henry, a wholesale hardware merchant, moved into the house, along with an assortment of siblings and Frances's mother. Mrs. Howland was better known by her pen name, Mr. Kenyon West, under which she wrote literary criticism and a 1903 novel based on a Revolutionary War battle in Philadelphia.

The novel, "Cliveden," was part love story, part spy tale and war chronicle, portraying a wry and undaunted female protagonist in love with a British soldier. Mrs. Howland's description of the house at the center of her story seemed to parallel the life of 1372 Dean Street: "The spacious

stairway up and down which soldiers rushed,” she wrote, “is peopled with ghosts of the past.”

Mrs. Howland became a member of the Martha Washington Colonial Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Her sister, Clara Rennelson, widowed and 10 years older, also lived in the house and also was an author.

When the Howlands moved to Montclair, N.J., in 1904, the house was bought by Lizzie and John Bentley, who listed his occupation as “capitalist” in city records and who owned several properties in Brooklyn. By 1911, the new owners, Edgar and Fannie Haviland, were already throwing parties for Brooklyn society. The Havilands made headlines in 1914 when a local magistrate slammed into a taxi they were riding in a block from Dean Street. The magistrate walked away without injury, after helping to extricate the Havilands and their daughter Constance from the car. Mr. Haviland was a manufacturer of shade rollers. After he died, his widow and children moved to suburban Westchester County.

The next occupants in the house were two sisters, Katharine and Alice Blanke, who lived there together from 1922 to 1952, approximately. They gave teas and had a live-in housekeeper, but the records show little else about their lives.

The neighborhood’s population had evolved from Anglo-Saxon Protestant beginning in the 19th century to Italian and Irish Catholic immigrants and Jews in the 1930s. The 1930s census from Crown Heights North shows that already 15 percent of the 4,376 residents were black.

After the Depression, the black population grew as Crown Heights offered lower-cost housing, in the larger tenement-style buildings around Crown Heights North that drew African-American residents, according to Craig Steven Wilder, the head of the history department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and an authority on social migration in Brooklyn. The extension of the subway, connecting overcrowded Harlem to Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant, was one

factor in drawing blacks to the Brooklyn neighborhoods. But Dr. Wilder, a native of Bedford-Stuyvesant, cautioned against oversimplifying.

“Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights were neighborhoods that were hard to generalize about — there was a lot of change happening, and a lot of diversity never got articulated,” Dr. Wilder said.

The population was also becoming more transient, if the house at 1372 Dean is an indication. From 1952 until 1959, it had six different owners, according to the city’s tax records. In 1959, Albert R. Murray Sr., a prosecutor in Brooklyn, bought the house from a lawyer, Edyth Widdi, whose parents and husband were born in Russia and spoke Yiddish. Mr. Murray was the first black person to own the house, and he helped accelerate the demographic changes taking place in both Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights.

Born in Appling, Ga., Mr. Murray served in World War II and went to Brooklyn Law School. He opened a real estate practice in Bedford-Stuyvesant with Abraham Kaufman in the late 1940s.

Theirs was one of the first Jewish-black partnerships in Brooklyn. By the mid-1950s, the two held 125 properties between them in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights, running their business out of four real estate and law offices.

According to Albert R. Murray Jr., known as Sonny, Mr. Kaufman lent money to the buyers, mostly blacks who had moved up from the South, and Mr. Murray found the real estate. Mr. Murray also rented apartments and had help in the business from his wife, Odetta. As a landlord, Mr. Murray was quite handy: he had been an electrician and plumber in the Army and continued to fix up houses he owned.

Mr. Murray, upon buying the house at 1372 Dean Street, changed the certificate of occupancy and broke up the house into five apartments. He never lived there. In 1959 he sold the house to a black couple, Levi and Marie Graham, and they lived there until 1982. (A height chart for their

children is still marked on a basement wall.)

By the late 1950s, Mr. Murray and his wife concentrated on developing a hotel property in the Poconos that became a premier resort for blacks. In 1965, Mayor Robert F. Wagner appointed him the first black judge in Brooklyn Criminal Court.

At least one of Judge Murray's decisions was memorable. In May 1969, he sat on a panel with two white judges, sentencing a group of students to five days in jail for storming the administration building of Brooklyn College in 1968 and taking over the registrar's office.

The takeovers were happening on college campuses throughout the country, and in Brooklyn, militants were demanding greater black enrollment, more black and Puerto Rican instructors, and courses in black studies. But Judge Murray disapproved of their methods.

"I don't know who appointed you to defend the cause of the Negro," Judge Murray said to the 35 students, all but 3 of whom were white, according to The Associated Press. "None of you have my permission to fight my battles."

Denise Alves-Keppel spent her early years on 149 Nevins Street in what was then called South Brooklyn and now goes by Cobble Hill. Her father, a Portuguese seaman, needed to be near Red Hook. Her mother, Odessa Livingston, always had the travel bug.

When she was 4, she and her mother moved to Bedford-Stuyvesant, on Madison and Nostrand. Then they moved to Sterling Place, between Utica and Rochester, and after that, Lincoln Place in Crown Heights.

Ms. Alves-Keppel married, twice. She was working as a medical records keeper in several Brooklyn hospitals when she found the Dean Street house, thinking of her daughter, then 2 years old. "I wanted her to have a yard to run around in," she said.

The neighborhood by then was 96 percent black, and Ms. Alves-Keppel

already knew some neighbors from visiting them with her mother as a child.

The owner at the time, Emma Hicks, a widowed beautician, died at 61 while Ms. Alves-Keppel was under contract to buy the house. When Ms. Alves-Keppel finally moved in with her toddler, she found the shag carpeting on the first floor under water. Ripping it out would be the first of many laborious projects.

Over the years, Kenya ran in the backyard and up and down the stairs, and grew to become an accomplished sprinter at Clara Barton High School in Prospect Heights. As a fifth and sixth grader, she attended Berkeley Carroll, which meant a tedious two-bus commute to Park Slope.

Though she felt her house's turret would fit in to that historic neighborhood, she was more comfortable on Dean Street in Crown Heights. "It was kind of rough and aggressive, but you still had people out there who cared," Ms. Keppel said. "Even though you had the drugs, there was pride: this is our block."

Inside, the house has maintained some touches of 19th century living: mantles and fireplaces, some molding on the ceilings, wood floors under the linoleum. Stained-glass windows have seashells embedded into them.

Kenya's favorite place in the house was her hiding spot: the linen closet on the first floor that mysteriously had two stairs but was boarded up beyond that. Twenty years ago, Ms. Alves-Keppel took a hammer to the closet and discovered a back staircase that had been used for servants.

Every night after work, Ms. Alves-Keppel and a girlfriend took down the wall and exposed the staircase. "We'd come in, chisel and bag it," she said. The staircase enabled Ms. Alves-Keppel to adjoin a second floor apartment to her first-floor one.

When her mother became ill four years ago, she moved in. Ms. Alves-Keppel took her mother to dialysis and treatment until she died last August, at 87. At one point, four generations of the Keppel family lived in the house,

including Kenya's daughter, Kiara-Simone, who is now 10 and a star swimmer in Florida.

Ms. Keppel is happy for her mother, who retired this year. She will help her pack up her track trophies, the urn containing her grandmother's ashes, African masks her mother brought home from vacation, along with a framed 1835 "bill of sale of Negroes." A recent yard sale brought in \$80.

Mr. Mazor said he would upgrade the interior, which has dated design features. He will most likely keep the property as a rental at first, perhaps retaining a unit for himself. He also plans to renovate the large garden behind the property.

The collard greens Ms. Alves-Keppel has been growing in the backyard garden will be uprooted from the soil. "They're mostly weeds anyway," she said.

Correction: July 21, 2013

An article last Sunday about the history of a house on Dean Street in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, gave the incorrect name of the school from which Albert R. Murray Sr. received his law degree; it is Brooklyn Law School, not Brooklyn College of Law. The article also misstated in some editions the name of an organization founded by Lindsley F. Kimball. It is the New York Blood Center, not the New York Blood Bank.

Sheelagh McNeill contributed research.

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