

## Embracing the American dream

*Ambler Wormley will be honored with a plaque on the African American Heritage Trail.*

By **Elaine Cawley Weintraub** - February 7, 2024



*Ambler Wormley bought the Oak Bluffs service station in the 1940s. –Courtesy Michael DeBettencourt*

Every community has its stories tucked away and almost forgotten, but as long as someone remembers, the story is not lost. There are many people whose lives of everyday heroism and refusal to give up hope are lived quietly and without fanfare.

The African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard had heard for many years about the life of Ambler Wormley, and we knew that he was a business owner and local politician who had bought several properties on the Island, but it was not until we spoke to David deBettencourt, who was kind enough to share his amazing recollections of Ambler Wormley — a man he had known well — that we gained a complete picture of his life. We now plan to move ahead with dedicating a plaque on the trail honoring the extraordinary achievements of Ambler Wormley.

Wormley was born in Fredericksburg, Va., in 1892 and came to the Vineyard when he was 10 years old. He grew up in Oak Bluffs, and registered there for military service in WWI. In 1919, together with his mother Sarah Wormley, he purchased the house at 3 Uncas Ave., and the

property later passed to his sister, Ella Page. The property remained in the family until 1963. Ambler married Minnie Haynes in 1920, but they later divorced. The census records show that at that time, he listed his occupation as a chauffeur. In 1926, he purchased a property at the site of the Barn Bowl and Bistro and opened a small garage, and in 1928 he bought the gas station now known as DeBettencourts on New York Avenue. He operated a Socony Vacuum Oil Co. that operated as a gasoline station and auto-repair business. In 1947 he sold his business to Nelson deBettencourt and retired.

At a time in our history when opportunity for African Americans was so limited and every road ahead was restricted because of race, Ambler Wormley refused to accept those limitations. He embraced the American dream. He was a military veteran who had served his country, and was a member and onetime commander of the Gov. Thomas Mayhew Post of the American Legion. He served for several years on the finance committee for the town of Oak Bluffs.

“He must have been very determined,” notes Casey Reagan, who has advocated for several years for recognition on the African American Heritage Trail for Ambler Wormley. “It was very hard for Black people right through to the 1960s, so I know he must have been brave and he must have been smart.”

An old, faded photograph that hangs on the wall of the office at the gas station on New York Avenue shows Ambler Wormley standing in front of his garage. There is a sign prominently displayed: “Wormley Socony.” The photograph was difficult to decipher until Mack Searle, a student in Chris Baer’s photography class at the regional high school, came to the rescue. Thanks to her restoration work, the photograph now shows to the world a young man proud of his achievements.

The Heritage Trail has always been a public history project, drawing its strength from the community it serves, and the quest to honor Ambler Wormley with a permanent site at DeBettencourts Garage on New York Avenue has had many supporters and friends. Johnny Tiernan, whose grandfather, Nelson deBettencourt, bought the gas station from Ambler Wormley in 1947, commented, “Twenty years before he had civil rights in America, he sold a gas station to a white man. He couldn’t safely vote in most parts of the country, but here he was buying and selling property in Oak Bluffs. He’s an important part of the story of the diversity of Oak Bluffs.”

“What can I tell you about him?” asks David deBettencourt. “He lived his life, bought property, worked hard, and when he got tired of working, he sold the garage. He lived in a little house adjacent to the gas station until he retired, and then he bought a little house down on Hiawatha Avenue, and lived in it for the rest of his life.” David recalls Ambler as a friendly, happy person, and enjoyed sharing the story

of how the garage was sold to his father. “My brother, Buddy, was riding his bike home from school, and Ambler saw him and yelled to him, asking if our dad wanted to buy the garage. Buddy came home and told my dad, and he went straight down there and they concluded the deal.”

David’s recollection of Ambler is that he was keenly interested in buying property. He had bought a house at 3 Uncas Ave. in 1919 with his mother, Sarah Wormley, and he bought several houses on Pacific Avenue in the 1940s and ’50s. His recall of the time his father bought the gas station from Ambler is remarkable. He recalls that there was a young woman working at the gas station whose name was Geraldine Smalley, and that she was the granddaughter of the famous Amos Smalley, who harpooned the great whale.

According to his obituary published in the Vineyard Gazette, Ambler Wormley lived alone, but two of his sisters and one brother lived on the Vineyard. David deBettencourt remembers his brother George. “I remember all those people back then. They were always very nice to me,” he says.

The connection between the gas station and the African American community remained strong, and David deBettencourt recalls that his father sold the Green Book at the gas station, and that they had many customers who were staying at Shearer Cottage, and would use deBettencourts to fuel their vehicles. The present owner of the gas station, Mike deBettencourt, is delighted that Ambler Wormley’s story will be told.

The African American Heritage Trail is proud to recognize Ambler Wormley, and a plaque will be placed at the gas station on New York Avenue honoring the extraordinary achievements of a man born in Virginia only 28 years after the end of the Civil War, who came with his family to Martha’s Vineyard and grew up to become a member of a vibrant, diverse community. Significantly, he accepted no limitations, but worked tirelessly to achieve his ambition to become a business owner, a property owner, a veteran proud to serve his country, whose sense of civic responsibility brought him to serve on the finance committee of his town. A man who, despite the racial prejudice of his era, believed that a man of color could have the confidence to take on the world and win. He is a worthy role model for all who follow in his steps.

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