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## MEMORANDUM

TO: Martha's Vineyard Commission  
FROM: Eric Dray, Preservation Consultant  
DATE: September 17, 2023, revised 10.12.23  
RE: Architectural Peer Review - DRI #744, 3 Uncas Avenue, Oak Bluffs

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As peer review for the above-captioned DRI, I have been asked to assess the historical and architectural significance of 3 Uncas Avenue in Oak Bluffs.

### A. Historical Significance

3 Uncas Avenue is a representative example of the cottages built within the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company, a company founded in 1866. The Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company development was intended as a secular equivalent to Wesleyan Grove Campground and is an extraordinary example of a late-19<sup>th</sup> planned resort community built on 75 acres of land that extended from Wesleyan Grove to Nantucket Sound.

As reported in a 2018 article in the *Martha's Vineyard Quarterly*, the development was guided by an 1866 plan drawn up by Robert Morris Copeland, a Boston landscape architect. The article notes that, although the village of Riverside, Illinois, designed in 1869 by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, is often claimed to be the first planned community in America, the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company development actually preceded it by 2-3 years, and may hold that honor.<sup>1</sup> As built out, the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company development is a unique district of curvilinear streets, numerous parks, and an outstanding collection of Campground-style cottages.

The cottage at 3 Uncas Avenue is located within the Cottage City Historic District and, as such, is listed on the State Register of Historic Places. According to the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) Building Form for 3 Uncas Avenue (OAK.735), the house was built in 1874. The Historical Narrative in the Building Form states:

[The cottage] is significant as part of the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company development which began soon after the growth and popularity of the Wesleyan Grove Campground. The development became the secular alternative to the campground and flourished as one of the most popular and well-known East Coast summer resorts.

3 Uncas Avenue is also an example of a cottage that was relocated in the later-19<sup>th</sup> century. As noted in the MHC Area Form for the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Development (OAK.C):

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<sup>1</sup> Skip Finley, "Captains of Cottage City: The Men Behind the Boom of the Bluffs," *Martha's Vineyard Museum Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 3, August 2018, p.11-12.

Later, during the 1880's and '90's, many of the original cottages were moved to other locations and, especially around Ocean Park, larger and more elaborate homes were built.

That appears to be the case with 3 Uncas Avenue. According to its MHC Building Form (OAK.735), this cottage was moved in ca. 1889 from 152 Circuit Avenue. This likely refers to the parcel at the west end of Nashawena Park now identified as 156 Circuit Avenue, on which a considerably larger house was built in ca. 1900.

## **B. Architectural Significance**

The cottage at 3 Uncas Avenue is a good example of the Campground style. This is a style classification that is unique to Martha's Vineyard. Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) documentation classifies the cottage as Victorian Eclectic in style. This is a catch-all category that MHC uses for houses that do not reflect characteristics of styles that they recognize state-wide. As a local style, the MHC does not include Campground in their list of styles and, as a result, cottages like 3 Uncas Avenue are classified as Victorian Eclectic. For purposes of this analysis, the cottage at 3 Uncas Avenue should be understood as an example of the Campground style.

The architectural significance of 3 Uncas Avenue will be assessed through two questions:

### **1. What portions of the existing building have architectural significance?**

Quoting from Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Development Area Form OAK.C:

The architectural style of the private homes within the Land and Wharf Company development generally followed that of the cottages within the Wesleyan Grove Campground. Although the Campground had been in operation since 1835, it was not until the 1860s that permanent cottages were erected on the tent sites. Therefore, designs and construction techniques of cottages within both Wesleyan Grove and the new development are essentially the same. Cottage designs imitated the open tent, with the wide double doors opening into a large family room, with window frames and 2nd floor doors most often in the arched Gothic style. Cottagers vied with one another for elaborateness of decoration, challenging the creativity of the local woodworkers.

In a September 8, 2023 letter to the MVC, the Vice-Chair of the Cottage City Historic District Commission wrote, “[3 Uncas Avenue], even its current state, offers significant architectural detail representative of a residential past found throughout Oak Bluffs.” I would argue that it is not just significant architectural detail that survives, but the overall form of the house is intact, despite a few minor additions and alterations. The cottage at 3 Uncas Avenue remains a contributing example of Campground Cottage architecture found throughout the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company development. Reference is made to Photos 1-7 and Figures 1 and 2 for the following description.

The form of 3 Uncas Avenue consists of a 1 ½-story, gable-front main block with a porch that originally wrapped around both sides of the main block (Photos 1, 2). That porch was added after this house was relocated from the west end of Nashawena Park in ca. 1889. It is possible that the original porch was too delicate to relocate, and it was rebuilt sometime after 1892 when the cottage is first shown on the 1892 Sanborn-Ferris Map without any front porch and before the 1898 Sanborn-Ferris map when it is shown with a porch that wrapped around both side elevations of the main block (see Figures 1 and 2). The right side of the porch on the front elevation has since been enclosed, and it appears that portions of the porch on the right side elevation have been removed. A small, covered balcony is centered in the second story of the front gable.

There is an offset, stepped-down, 1 ½-story rear ell followed by a one-story ell with shed roof (Photo 3). These rear ells, or at least the 1 ½-story component, are likely original and both are shown on the earliest map that shows the cottage in this location (Figure 1). A small porch on the northeast side of the rear ell, shown on the 1892 map, has been enclosed. The roof form remains intact with its deeply-projecting open eaves, and low-pitched, shed-roofed wall dormers (i.e. dormers that share the wall plane of the elevation below).

As Photos 5-7 demonstrate, many of the ornamental features are still in place. The front porch retains its ornamental details, including the turned posts that rest on chamfered posts, and jigsaw cut scroll brackets. Also still extant are the unusual triangular cut exposed rafter tails of the porch roof. It is possible that the original posts and trim may also be extant within the enclosed portion of the porch. The second-story centered balcony and gable peak also retain their decorative embellishments (Photo 6).

The 2023-8-21 MVC Staff Report states that the cottage has a derelict appearance due to the siding being taken off. This appears to be only partially accurate. The asbestos siding shown in the 1978 Building Form Photo (Photo 1) has been removed, but in a number of cases, it appears that original clapboard or flushboard siding beneath is intact. This would not be surprising; in most cases, asbestos siding was installed over the existing siding. Note, for example, the wood siding visible behind the black paper in Photos 4-6.

In terms of fenestration, all extant windows appear to be wood, single-glazed, double-hung sash that may be early if not original windows. Most windows on the main block have a 2/2 muntin pattern. It is unknown if this cottage also had the paired front doors typical of this cottage style – an analysis of interior framing would quickly reveal if that was the case.

In terms of the plywood covering of window and door openings on the first story, it is likely that some of the original or early wood windows and doors lie behind the plywood coverings. These plywood coverings should be seen as a protective measure, not evidence of the building's dereliction.

## ***2. What is the relationship of the existing building to its streetscape/neighborhood?\****

The visibility of 3 Uncas Avenue is currently obscured by shrubbery. Plant material is not taken into consideration when reviewing visibility of a building from public ways in local historic districts. Similarly, the impact this house has on the Circuit Avenue streetscape should be considered without the current shrubbery.

The cottage at 3 Uncas Avenue is prominently sited at a bend in the road at the northeastern end of Hiawatha Park (one of the seven parks in the planned community), and is bounded by Hiawatha, Circuit and Uncas Avenues. The house fronts on Circuit Avenue and should, in my opinion, be understood most importantly as part of the Circuit Avenue streetscape.

As early Sanborn-Ferris maps show, the Circuit Avenue streetscape was predominantly residential in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century. Using Sheets 6, 8 and 9 of the 1904 Sanborn-Ferris maps that cover this stretch of Circuit Avenue as an example, Circuit Avenue was then lined with cottages extending in both directions from 3 Uncas Avenue, and there were only a few commercial buildings (see Figures 4-6).

There is no question that the character of Circuit Avenue north of 3 Uncas Avenue has subsequently become more commercial, including the replacement of historic cottages with commercial buildings. The character of Uncas Avenue south of 3 Uncas Avenue has also changed dramatically (Photos 12, 13). But that is not the case from 3 Uncas Avenue south along Circuit Avenue.

This cottage, and the ca. 1900 cottage across the street, 105 Circuit Avenue, serve as the last residential buildings heading north before turning the bend and entering the more commercial portion of Circuit Avenue. Conversely, heading south, these two cottages mark the beginning of the residential portion of Circuit Avenue (Photos 8-11).<sup>2</sup>

\*Note – this Memorandum does not address the significance of the outbuilding located west of the cottage. This outbuilding is not shown on early-20<sup>th</sup> century Sanborn-Ferris maps and may have been built later or moved to this location. The outbuilding is partially clad in tongue-in-groove or “novelty” siding and does have the appearance of an early-20<sup>th</sup> century building.

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<sup>2</sup> 105 Circuit Avenue continues to be classified as residential despite an apparent commercial use on the first floor.





Photo 1. View of 3 Uncas Avenue from Circuit Avenue, looking SW (1978 MHC Building Form Photo).



Photo 2. View of 3 Uncas Avenue from Circuit Avenue, looking SSW (September 2023).





Photo 3. View of 3 Uncas Avenue from Uncas Avenue, looking west (September 2023).



Photo 4. View of right side elevation from Circuit Avenue, looking east (September 2023).





Photo 5. View of 3 Uncas Avenue front porch from Circuit Avenue, looking SE (September 2023).



Photo 6. View of 3 Uncas Avenue gable peak from Circuit Avenue, looking south (September 2023).





Photo 7. View of 3 Uncas Avenue left side porch from Uncas Avenue, looking NW (September 2023).

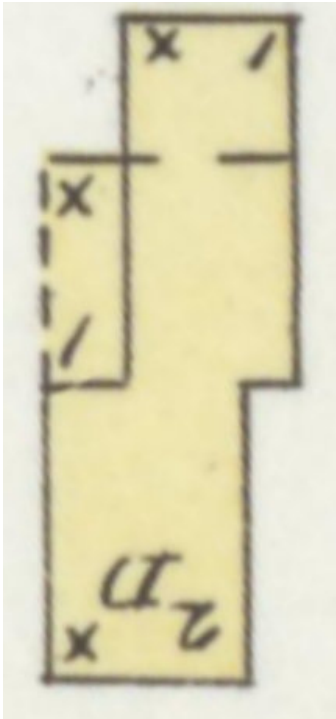


Figure 1. Detail of August 1892 Sanborn-Ferris map.

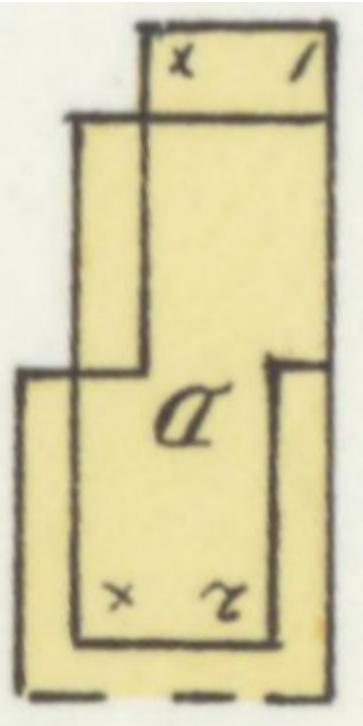


Figure 2. Detail of July 1898 Sanborn-Ferris map.



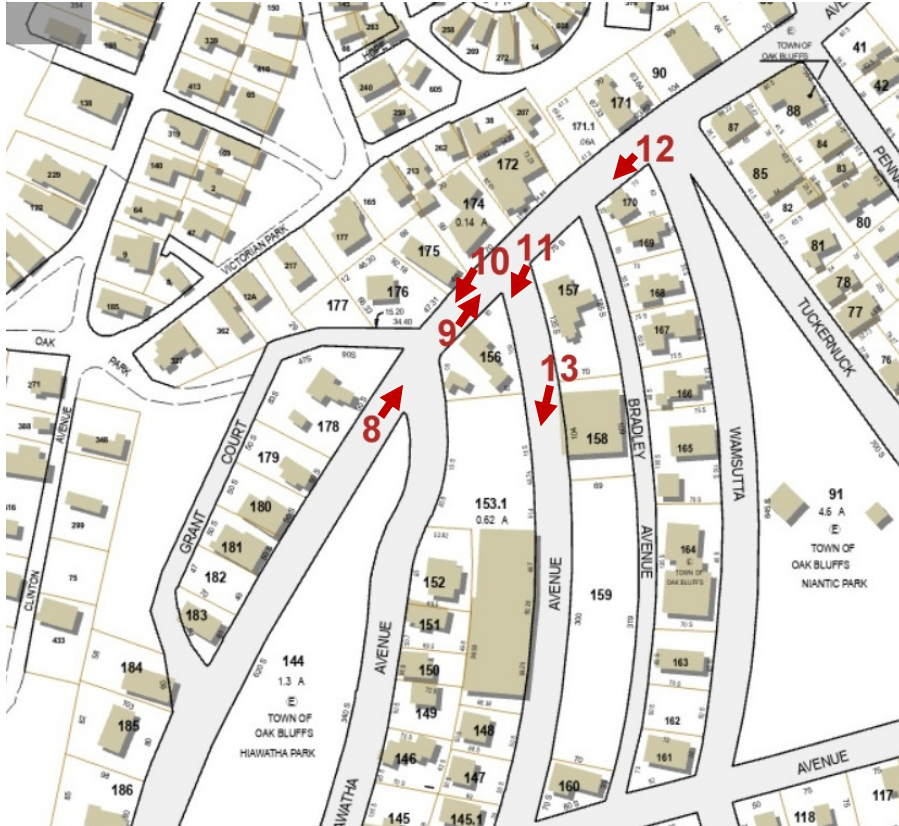


Figure 3. Photo Locator Diagram.



Photo 8. View from 113 Circuit Avenue, looking NE, arrow to 3 Uncas Avenue added (September 2023).





Photo 9. View of Circuit Avenue looking SW, 105 Circuit Avenue at right, 3 Uncas Avenue at left (September 2023).



Photo 10. View of Circuit Avenue looking NE, 3 Uncas Avenue at right, 105 Circuit Avenue at left (September 2023).





Photo 11. View from intersection of Circuit Avenue and Uncas Avenue looking SW, 3 Uncas Avenue at left, 105 Circuit Avenue at right (September 2023).



Photo 12. View from 89 Circuit Avenue, looking SW (September 2023).



Photo 13. View from 8 Uncas Avenue, looking south (September 2023).



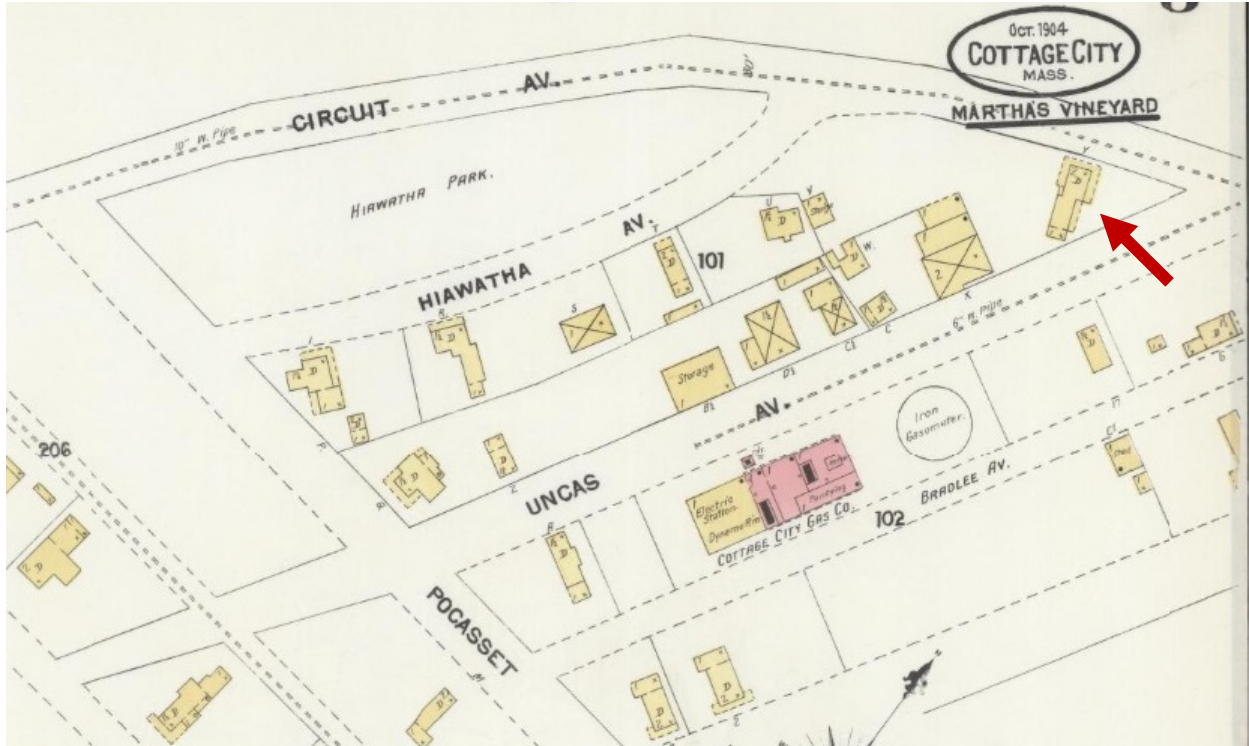


Figure 4. Detail of October 1904 Sanborn-Ferris Map of Cottage City, Sheet 8 (arrow to 3 Uncas Avenue added).

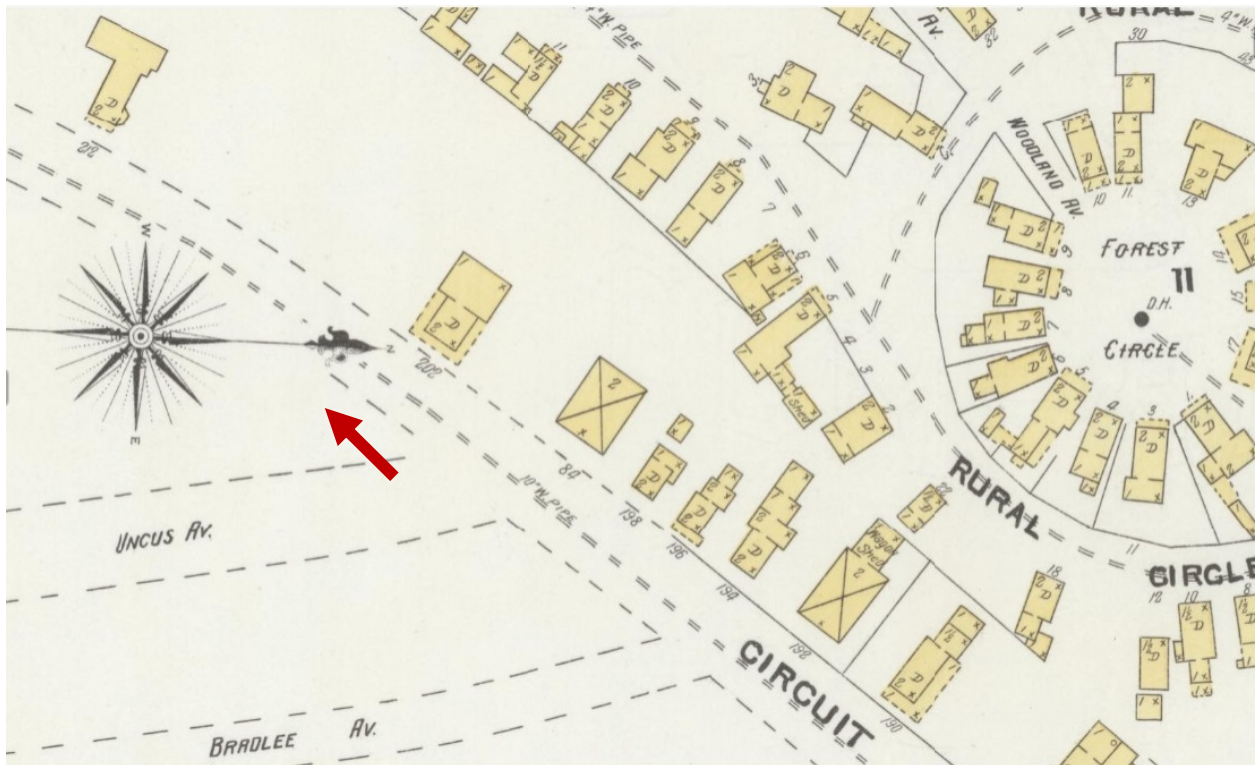


Figure 5. Detail of October 1904 Sanborn-Ferris Map of Cottage City, Sheet 6 (arrow to site of 3 Uncas Avenue added).



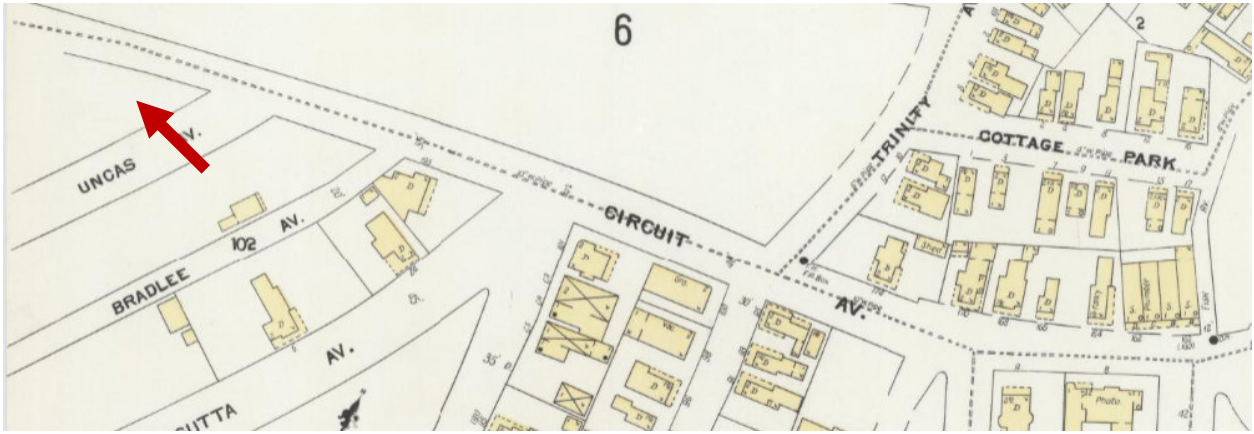


Figure 6. Detail of October 1904 Sanborn-Ferris Map of Cottage City, Sheet 9 (arrow to site of 3 Uncas Avenue added).