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Martha's Vineyard Commission

DRI #712 Shearer Cottage Expansion

MVC Staff Report – 2021-9-13 DRAFT

1. DESCRIPTION

- 1.1 **Owner and Applicant:** Eric Van Allen, Chuck Sullivan (architect)
- 1.2 **Project Location:** 4 Morgan Ave. (Map 3, Lot 132), 7 Highland Ave. (Map 3 Lot 119), and 5 Morgan Ave. (Map 3, Lot 120), Oak Bluffs
- 1.3 **Proposal:** Expansion of the Shearer Cottage from six to 15 bedrooms.
- 1.4 **Zoning:** Residential 2 (R2)
- 1.5 **Local Permits:** Building permit, special permit and/or variances
- 1.6 **Surrounding Land Uses:** Single-family homes in the R2 district, protected land owned by East Chop Association, and other parcels owned by the applicant.

Project History: Charles Shearer, a former slave and a professor at Hampton University, and his wife Henrietta, who was of partial Blackfoot Indian descent, first came to Martha's Vineyard in 1895. In 1903, they purchased a cottage with several lots on a hill abutting the Baptist Temple in Oak Bluffs, (then known as Cottage City). Henrietta sought to increase the family income by opening a laundry in a separate structure beside the cottage. In 1912, Shearer Cottage was fully established and became the first inn on Martha's Vineyard to cater to African Americans. In 1917, Henrietta passed away and the laundry business was closed, leaving only the cottage.

Guests in the early years were primarily business owners, politicians, lawyers, doctors, and intellectuals from Boston and other cities in the Northeast. Prominent African Americans who summered at Shearer Cottage included Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and family, US Congressman and Mrs. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Henry Robbins (court stenographer for the Sacco-Vanzetti trial) and his wife, and many others. In addition, Lionel Richie and the Commodores performed their first concert at Shearer Cottage in the 1970s. Liz White (great-niece of Charles and Henrietta) established an African American summer theater, known as the Shearer Summer Theater, which ran from the 1940s to the 1960s.

The cottage is also well known for the many social and charitable groups it has hosted over the years, including the Martha's Vineyard Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Cottagers, and was listed in the Negro Motorist Green Book, a guide to places and services considered safe for African American travelers, which was published between 1936 and 1966. In 1997, the cottage was the first landmark to be designated on the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard. The cottage guest book and other artifacts have been featured in an exhibit at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

The properties have remained in the family for more than 100 years. Efforts to renovate and expand the cottage began at least 20 or 30 years ago, when the owners attempted to obtain grant money for that purpose but were unsuccessful. The following history of renovations since 1903 has been provided by the applicant:

4 Morgan Avenue was purchased by Henrietta and Charles Shearer in 1903. At that time, the property consisted of a single family home (the “Main House”). Soon after this purchase, a concrete slab was laid next to the Main House to operate an “open air” laundry business. In 1912, the Main House was renovated (presumably expanded) to include twelve guest bedrooms, several shared bathrooms and an industrial-quality kitchen facility. The laundry business closed in 1917 or soon thereafter.

After 1912, the property went through three significant changes. First, sometime between 1925 and 1930, the concrete slab originally used for the laundry business was enclosed and converted into several guest rooms and shared bathrooms (the “Bungalows”). Second, in the early 1950s, the Shearer family purchased 7 Highland Avenue (approximately 21,000 square feet of undeveloped land), which sits directly behind and abuts 4 Morgan Avenue. Soon after this second land purchase, the Main House was expanded onto 7 Highland Avenue to accommodate onsite laundry, storage and a staff bathroom. A two-room building was also constructed on 7 Highland Avenue directly behind the Main House (innkeeper quarters and additional storage). And finally, in or around 1970, the interiors of the main house and the bungalows were converted into six “efficiencies” equipped with kitchenettes and private bathrooms. The Inn ceased offering food and beverage services after this most recent renovation.

The Shearer family is not aware of any other major renovation or reconfiguration of the property.

Project Summary: The properties currently include two buildings – the main two-story cottage with three bedrooms, and a separate one-story building to the south with three rooms. The property across the street at 5 Morgan Ave. is currently used for parking. The main cottage will be gut-renovated and expanded to the south, with a total of five bedrooms, and the separate one-story building will be demolished. A new two-story building with eight bedrooms (including a basement level) will be constructed immediately west of the main cottage, and a new one-story building with two bedrooms will be constructed immediately south of the main cottage. The new campus will extend onto 7 Highland Ave. to the west, which is also owned by the applicant. The western portion of the site will be regraded to allow for windows and doors on the basement level of the larger of the two new buildings. The total number of bedrooms on the properties will increase from six to 15, and the total square footage will increase from 3,061 ft² to 9,003 ft², not including deck and porch space, which will increase from 906 ft² to 2,085 ft².

2. ADMINISTRATIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 **DRI Referral:** Oak Bluffs Zoning Board of Appeals
- 2.2 **DRI Trigger:** 3.1b (Commercial construction of more than 3,500 ft²), 3.1h (Parking for 10 or more vehicles), 4.1c (Five or more dwelling units or rooms); mandatory review
- 2.3 **LUPC:** September 13, 2021
- 2.4 **Public Hearing:** Not yet scheduled

3. PLANNING CONCERNS

- 3.1 **Water and Wastewater:** The property drains into Oak Bluffs Harbor, and the proposal includes a single Title 5 septic system to serve the new buildings. Information about the existing and proposed wastewater flow is still pending.

- 3.2 Stormwater and Drainage:** The proposed new parking area will be permeable, and a large patio proposed for the area north of the main cottage will consist of permeable turfstone pavers. The total impervious surface area will increase by about 2,975 ft² as a result of the larger buildings.
- 3.3 Energy:** The applicant is considering rooftop solar panels, as recommended by staff, and has proposed adding one or two electric vehicle charging stations in the parking lot, with a longer-term goal of having one EV station per parking space.
- 3.4 Traffic and Transportation:** There are currently 12 parking spaces, with 12 proposed, including a handicapped accessible space on Morgan Ave. The applicant also plans to encourage guests to use alternate modes of transportation such as bikes and public transit, and to possibly offer free bus passes.
- 3.5 Character and Identity:** The new buildings and exterior renovations will retain some features of the original structure, including cedar sidewall, double-hung windows, and decorative moldings facing Morgan Ave. However, certain historic features will be modified, including replacement of the large second-floor balcony with a smaller railing and double doors, replacement of the solid railing on the first-floor porch with a cross-fence design, and the addition of a second floor on the northern part of the building. The new buildings to the west and south will be visible from in front of the main cottage, including the gables and chimney of the building to the west (behind the cottage), which will be taller than the existing structure.
- 3.6 Economic Development and Housing:** The cottage has recently accommodated overnight guests and private gatherings, including reunions, retreats, weddings, conferences, etc., by private invitation. As proposed, the expanded inn will offer daily, weekly, and monthly rates, whole-house packages, and private events from May through October. The applicant has stated that the inn will also offer whole-house packages and private events, and daily rates to the extent practicable, in the off-season. All private gatherings would begin after 9AM and end before 8PM, with sound-generating events such as lectures limited to Fridays and weekends from 12-6PM. The applicant estimates the addition of one or two new employees as a result of the project, with onsite housing for up to four employees. As proposed, the inn may also barter with local businesses seeking housing for their senior staff members.
- 3.7 Lighting and Landscape:** Lighting and landscape plans have not yet been provided.