

Unique Town Has Exotic Past, Serene Present

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN
You have to hunt for Navassa. It's not one of those little towns with a tourist trail down the middle where the weary traveler stops for coffee or gas, not a place you pass through on your way to somewhere else. It almost seems to hide from the world in the heart of Northwest Township adjoining Leland.

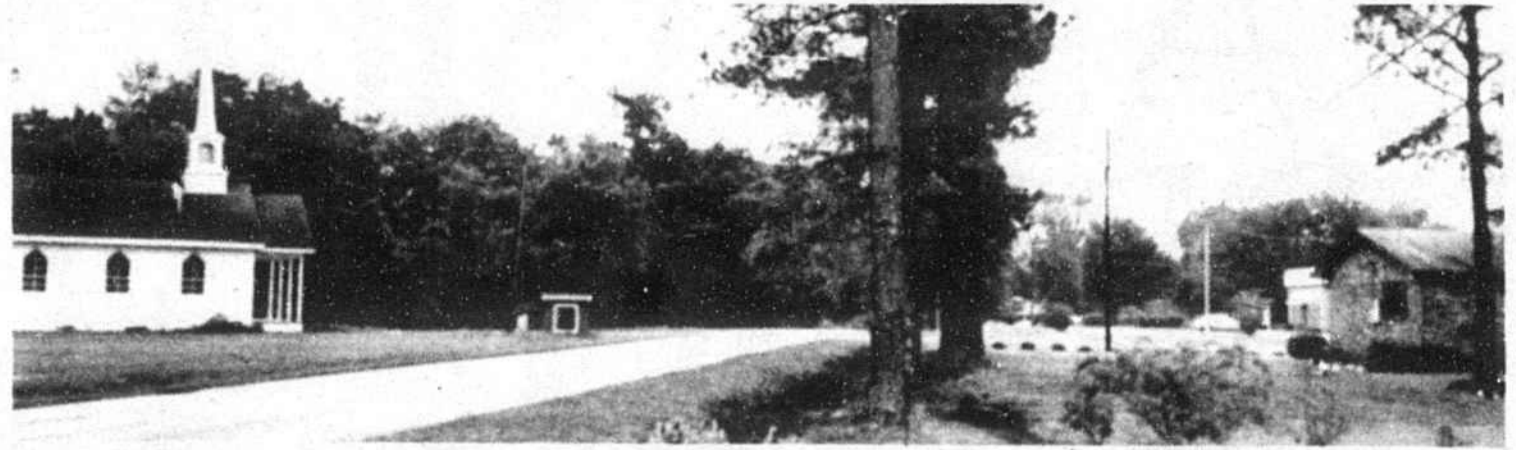
Once upon a time, though, long before incorporation, the community had great importance for this area. It owed its early livelihood and its name to a Caribbean island called Navassa. The valuable import from this tiny island was guano, a fertilizer made of bird excrement, that was packed and distributed in Navassa, N.C. in the late 1800s. So successful was the Navassa Guano Company, organized in 1869, a post office was established in the Brun-

wick County community, even in the absence of any form of government.

The mining of guano deposits was short-lived, however. An attempted uprising among island laborers in 1889 led to a bloody massacre, abandonment of the island, and in 1916 to the placement of Navassa under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Fortunately, the island's namesake has fared better. Other fertilizer companies succeeded the ill-fated Navassa Guano Company until the 1950s when the name "guano" disappeared for good. Although that was the end of the community's industrial era, it was probably a turn for the better for what is now the town of Navassa.

Incorporated in 1977 by Louis Brown, the town's first and present mayor, Navassa built a Town Hall



IN THE HEART OF NAVASSA is this intersection, where the Davis Chapel Baptist Church, Chucky Brown's home and the Town Hall (corner visible on right) converge. STAFF PHOTOS BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

in 1983. Through Community Block grants, streets have been paved, a water system established, a ballfield built and 14 houses rehabilitated. Brown proudly declared in a 1984 interview, "Navassa was below poverty-level guidelines. We had a lot of dilapidated property and people still using outhouses. I saw the need and now we don't have that anymore."

This is, however, no growing, thriving city with new businesses springing up on every corner. The population remains comfortably under 500, 98% of the residents black, and the business element consists of one convenience store. Most able-bodied residents obviously work in Wilmington or nearby Brunswick County towns.

An exception is Charlena Alston, town clerk, who is one of the town's three employees. "There's no unemployment problem here," Charlena declared, "but most young people leave when they graduate from high school. Then they usually come back. A lot of families stay for many generations."

Upon reflection and a closer look at Navassa, it's easy to understand why folks are content in this home-

town. While there may not be what other cities call "high society," or "great opportunities," there are traditions that are meaningful to Navassans, two churches (Baptist and Methodist) for spiritual undergirding, and there is evidence the people have a good time together.

Since 1982, for instance, there has been an annual town festival, always held the weekend after July 4. Charlena described plans for this year's events: "On Thursday we'll have a block party and there's a banquet on Friday. Then the parade is Saturday morning, with floats and a combined band from all the high schools. All afternoon there'll be rides and games at the ballfield."

Something new is being introduced at this festival. "We're having a boat ride, a cruise from Carolina Beach to Wrightsville Beach," Charlena said.

A tradition was born early this year with observance of Martin Luther King's birthday. "We had a march to the fire department and speakers at a dinner," Charlena explained.

In addition to such annual events, townspeople enjoy their ball park year-round. There are tennis courts,

a basketball court, and this year lights have been added.

If you want still more excitement, get this! Chucky Brown of Cleveland Cavaliers basketball fame, has a beautiful home across the street from Town Hall. According to Charlena, he spends a lot of time in Navassa.

Into this peaceful pastoral scene has recently come the word that usually spells change and growth: annexation. Petitions have been submitted to Navassa officials, asking that a square-mile area west toward Leland be annexed by the town. Eulis Willis, longtime town councilman, said there was talk that Leland wanted to annex the area but the people preferred to be a part of Navassa. The action awaits only the final red tape, according to Willis.

Driving through the little town, with its well-kept lawns, its homes that reflect a mix of middle and low income but all neat and attractive, one can't resist the hope that Navassa remains forever as it is. Without fast food restaurants, industrial smokestacks and traffic, it's almost Utopian. Well, at least it's like Charlena put it: "This is a quiet, nice place to live."



NAVASSA'S CHIEF CELEBRITY, basketball pro Chucky Brown, lives in this attractive two-story house across from the Town Hall.

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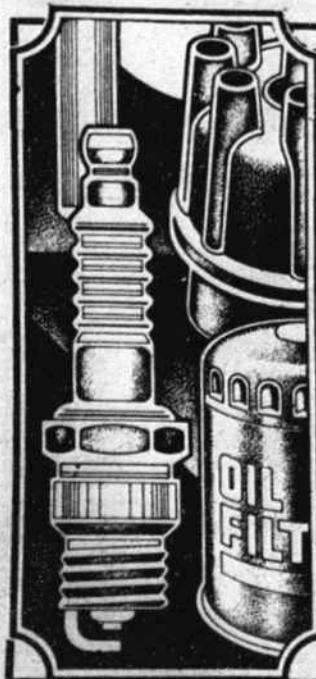
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