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Julia Cumes for The New York Times

Visitors at Dorothy West's Oak Bluffs cottage, now a site on the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard.

By CELIA McGEE

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OAK BLUFFS, Mass. — It serves no purpose except sea-air-scented confusion to look for Dorothy West's house on Dorothy West Avenue. Her cottage stands on Myrtle Avenue, in the part of Oak Bluffs known as the Highlands and since the early 20th century as a summer haven on Martha's Vineyard for an African-American social elite.

The street named for her more than a decade ago intersects with the one where she used to sit on her porch entertaining visitors — or, late in life, waited inside with manuscript pages and tiny scribbled notes for her Doubleday editor and friend, [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis](#), to arrive for their weekly work sessions on "The Wedding." That novel, her second and her first in 47 years, was finally published in 1995, when Miss West, as it was always important to address her, was 88.

But on Saturday it got a little easier to find her place.

Neighbors, friends, relatives and a passel of distinguished scholars, local officials and fellow authors gathered to dedicate the house as a site on the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard. They unveiled a boulder solidly planted in West's front lawn and inset with a bronze plaque commemorating the youngest member of the Harlem

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Renaissance — “the Kid,” as the Harvard law professor Charles J. Ogletree Jr. said in a speech, using the term of affection employed for her by [Langston Hughes](#). Until she died in 1998 — also on Aug. 16 — Dorothy West was the final survivor of that cultural flowering.

Leonora Costanza, a friend who became West’s caretaker and inherited the house that the author had moved into full time in 1943, stood nearby as Pat Bransford, a Vineyard friend of the West’s, read a poem by the Harlem Renaissance poet Helene Johnson, who was West’s cousin. Ms. Johnson and West, an only child, grew up like sisters in Boston. After they moved to New York in the 1920s, the writer [Zora Neale Hurston](#) lent the young ladies her apartment at 43 West 66th Street, where they were joined by West’s beautiful, vivacious and complicated mother, Rachel, the model for Cleo, the central character in the novel West published in 1948, “The Living Is Easy,” to much acclaim. Reissued in 1982 by the Feminist Press, it remains “an American masterpiece,” said Cynthia Davis, an English professor at the [University of Maryland](#) currently writing a biography of West with Verner D. Mitchell, an associate professor of English at the [University of Memphis](#).

Dorothy West’s father, Isaac Christopher West, a successful wholesale-fruit merchant nicknamed the Black Banana King, stayed behind in Boston, where Dottie, as she was called by those close to her, was raised in an imposing home, attended the prestigious Girls’ Latin and, at 17, tied for second prize with Hurston in the short-story contest sponsored by Opportunity, the National Urban League magazine.

Her father, born into slavery in Virginia, first gave her mother a summer house on the Vineyard as a 21st birthday present. But that one, near the Oak Bluffs harbor, burned down.

“This is the first time we’ve had the house of an author included on the African American Heritage Trail, and it’s fitting that it’s Dorothy West’s,” said the Harvard professor [Henry Louis Gates Jr.](#), who rents a house every summer in Oak Bluffs. “I visited her there many times. She was so warm and charming. She would reminisce about people she knew — and people she didn’t. She created a sort of English upper-class drawing-room effect that always made me want to have a cup of tea. There was definitely also that atmosphere to her writing.”

In 1948, while working in the billing department at The Vineyard Gazette, West began a column on people, events and her beloved nature haunts in and around Oak Bluffs. “She was certainly the voice of black society on the Vineyard,” said Mr. Gates. “I first came here in 1981, and it was only at the end of the summer that I realized that this was the same Dorothy West — who I had thought was long gone.”

Another reason for West’s unwanted obscurity, and her second novel’s decades-long gestation, was the low profile she kept in the face of the militant or street-inflected African-American literature that emerged with the ’60s.

But in the kind of twist with which West salted her writing, fame arrived in the 1990s when [Oprah Winfrey](#) produced a two-part television movie of “The Wedding.” Many at the time were unaware that during the Depression, West worked as a welfare relief investigator and for the W.P.A. Federal Writers’ Project, traveled to Britain with the cast of “Porgy and Bess” and joined other prominent black artists, activists and theater people on a trip to the Soviet Union to make the movie “Black and White.” During the ’30s she also founded and edited two magazines, The Challenge and, with [Richard Wright](#), The New Challenge.

[Halle Berry](#) starred in “The Wedding,” and “Dottie had Oprah on speed dial,” said Abigail



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McGrath, the West niece whose wedding inspired the novel and who owns the cottage next door. “Once, she called Oprah when she thought someone had parked illegally in front of her house.”

West stipulated in her will the creation of a writing and journalism scholarship at Martha’s Vineyard Regional High School. Elaine Cawley Weintraub, co-founder of the African American Heritage Trail, teaches history there. “I started the trail because many of my students were African-Americans from the Vineyard,” she said, “and there was almost nothing about the African-American presence, which goes back as far as whites’.”

On a bus tour that followed the dedication ceremony Ms. Weintraub pointed out designated landmarks associated with historical figures like the Vineyard’s only African-American whaling captain; the 18th-century preacher who brought Methodism to the island; Isabell and [Adam Clayton Powell Jr.](#), whose former house is at the corner of Myrtle and Dorothy West Avenues; and the family of Charles and Henrietta Shearer, who boarded many prominent artists, writers and musicians at their Shearer Cottage, where a celebratory reception was held late Saturday afternoon.

One of the many people pleased with the fresh attention that the new memorial plaque will bring to West and her work was her goddaughter, Blythe Coleman-Simmons, Ms. Costanza’s daughter and the sixth generation of her family in the Highlands.

“Dorothy was like a grandmother to me,” she said, “and a mother to my mother. When I was 2, I started to dress myself, with everything on backwards or inside out, and say, ‘I’m going to Dottie’s house.’ Later we would talk about everything and take walks. She loved feeding the birds. She collected stray cats. I would practice my writing and reading with her. But the richness of her house should also come from other people seeing its richness. And seeing where that magnificent writing came from.”

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