

**CLASSIFIEDS / REAL ESTATE****These Long Island homes came from a kit**

Sears homes could be purchased from a catalog cheap and put together upon delivery, making the American dream a bit more accessible to those who couldn't - or weren't allowed to - enjoy it.



Matthew and Jamie Stalter with son, Remsen, 14 months, at their Massapequa home. Neighbors tell them it was originally built from a kit purchased from Sears. Photo Credit: Danielle Silverman

**By James Kindall**

Special to Newsday

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Growing up in Massapequa Park, Leslie Sullivan thought of her family home as simply a comfortable place to live and hang out with friends, she says. Still, she was pleased when one of her companions would marvel at the foyer or the spacious living room that always featured a large tree at Christmastime.

It was a “welcoming house,” says Sullivan, 60, a retired senior media vice president who worked for Major League Baseball and now lives in Philadelphia. “Most of my friends loved my parents' home more than they loved their own.”

One day, the next-door neighbor revealed their house had a surprising back story. It was, in fact, one of the Sears, Roebuck and Co. “kit” homes built in the early 1900s that virtually revolutionized the U.S. housing market.

“When we found out, we were astonished,” says Leslie's sister, Chickie Alexander, 62, who works for a company that provides software for long-term-care nursing facilities and who now lives in Coral Springs, Florida. Their family sold the home in 1984. “They were great houses. I would have no problem living there again.”

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Georgette Grier-Key, executive director of the Eastville Community Historical Society, inside the society's offices in Sag Harbor in a home built from a Sears kit. Photo Credit: Gordon M. Grant

The three-story home on Grand Boulevard, a model known as “The Verona,” is one of the finer examples of the 370 models of house kits the company shipped around the country.



Others are sprinkled throughout Long island, such as a "Rosita" currently listed for \$495,000 in Westhampton Beach that originally was purchased for \$990. Smaller models are valued today as "starter" homes, while larger Sears kit homes can sell for millions of dollars.

"I heard it was a kit home when I was a kid," says owner Lynn Lomas, 70, a retired teacher

who played in the Westhampton Beach bungalow when it was owned by his grandfather. "But it didn't mean anything to me back then."

## Middle-class breakthrough

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What many people may not know is that these houses represent a retailing initiative that created a home-ownership breakthrough for the middle class — and helped provide access to a middle-class lifestyle for Americans who were otherwise excluded by race or ethnicity.

"It put homes within reach of a lot of people," says Sarah Kautz, preservation director at Preservation Long Island, a nonprofit dedicated

to safeguarding historic buildings and artifacts.

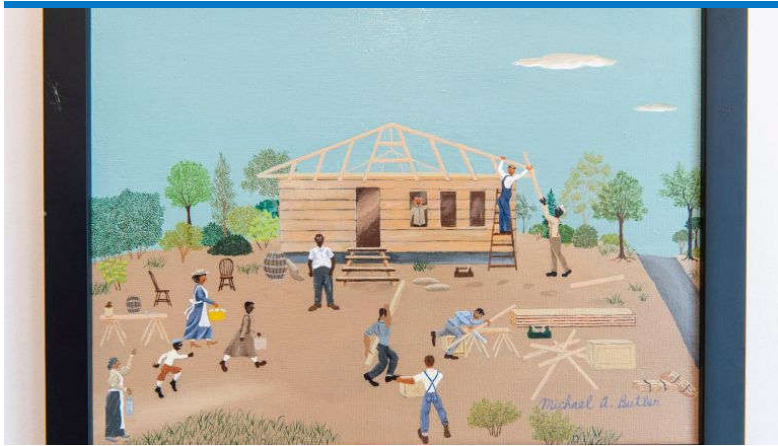
"They really were an excellent concept."

Founded in 1893, Sears, Roebuck and Co. was the Amazon of its day, issuing an annual 600-plus-page catalog through which consumers could order vacuum cleaners, medicine, corsets, sewing machines, shotguns, gravestones, bicycles, automobiles and, yes, even houses.

## A way to sell building supplies

It ventured into home sales in 1908, when a manager overseeing the company's failing building supplies department came up with the idea of combining all the parts necessary to build a house, plus the plans, and

shipping to the buyer directly. “Sears Modern Homes” caught on, and they were sent by rail around the nation and put together either by the buyer or a contractor.



A painting by Michael A. Butler, titled "Lunchtime at Lippman's" depicting the construction of Heritage House, a Sears kit home built in the 1920s in Sag Harbor. Photo Credit: Michael A. Butler

About 70,000 were built in the United States. For a few dollars more, the company threw in “modern” conveniences such as central heating, indoor plumbing and electricity.

“They had all the stuff we take for granted now, but it was a big deal back then,” Kautz says.

The homes ranged from a modest \$659 bungalow to the \$6,488 “Magnolia,” a colonnade-faced mansion. Kits contained from 10,000 to 30,000 pieces, including pre-cut lumber, lath, flooring, roof, pipes, cedar

shingles and paint. One reason many are still around today is the high quality of materials, such as oak flooring, cypress siding and cedar shingles.

“That’s something folks don’t understand,” says Andrew Mutch, a Michigan man who created the “Kit Home Hunters” website and, along with other researchers, has located 11,000 such homes in the country. As the biggest retailer of its day, Sears used its size to purchase top-notch building materials, then mass-produced them at bargain prices. For example, Mutch says, the 93-year-old white pine windows in his own Sears home still work just fine.

“You can’t buy windows today that last *twenty* years,” he says.



Lynn Lomas on the front porch of his Westhampton Beach house, which was built from a Sears kit. Photo Credit: Veronique Louis

No one knows how many Sears homes were built on Long Island since the company’s records were destroyed. Most were constructed in the Midwest and Northeast, Mutch says, with clusters found here and there, usually the result of a developer who built several at a time. The company stopped selling them in 1942, mostly because of wartime rationing.

Mutch’s research, using government records and newspaper ads, came up with an unusual

find on Long Island. Twenty-one kit homes apparently were built in the mid-1920s by a developer in the Hollywood Gardens section of Massapequa Park. And another 10 are scattered elsewhere in the village, a rare concentration.

“It’s a unique area,” he says. “You can drive down the street and see block after block of Sears homes.”

The news that his residence — the one once occupied by Leslie and Chickie — was one of the high-end Sears homes was an eye-opener for Matthew Stalter, 42, a New York City firefighter. He and his wife, Jamie, 33, a financial planner, bought it four months ago. A previous owner told him it was a Sears home, but he didn’t think much about it until he mentioned it to his boss, who knew about the history and explained their rarity, he says.

“I had no idea,” Stalter says. “I thought he was kidding.”

His next-door neighbor, Ed Celona, a police officer, has a 1926 center hall Dutch Colonial that also is a Sears product. He says he knew about his home’s background because he bought it from the elderly man who purchased it in 1946. Celona and his wife, Jaime, lived in a ranch home only a few doors down and bought the Sears house two years ago.

“This is my dream home,” says Jaime, a high school teacher. “It has everything we wanted — the hardwood floors, the thick molding, the high ceilings. All the things you would pay extra for if you were building a home.”

## **'Barn-building' in Eastville, LI**

Sears homes also helped minorities obtain residences. Whereas Levittown, the nation’s first mass-produced suburb, had a restrictive covenant stating homes could be sold only to whites, anyone with land and money could order a kit home.

The “Heritage” house in Eastville, for instance, headquarters of the Eastville Community Historical Society, is a mail-order home purchased in 1920 by African American entrepreneur Lippman Johnson, a confectioner who sold peanut brittle. Located in Sag Harbor, Eastville is one of the nation’s earliest known communities of African Americans, Native Americans and European immigrants. Johnson’s descendants occupied the one-story residence until the mid-1980s. His descendants still live in the area and are active with the society today.

Catalog homes helped, but didn’t solve housing resistance against minorities, says Georgette Grier-Key, executive director and curator at the society. She noted there were other ways to impede such settlements.

“It didn’t eradicate racism,” she says. “You still had to deal with the people who made the delivery.”

An artist and former president of the society, Michael Butler, says he doubts this was a problem in Johnson's case since Eastville was a well-established, multiracial community, even back then, a statement backed up by Grier-Key. He painted a picture of friends and neighbors chipping in to help Johnson put the house together after it was purchased that hangs in the society today. The scene likely is accurate since many were constructed with "barn-building" camaraderie.

"Anyway, that's the way I imagined it," he says.

## That Hamptons Verona

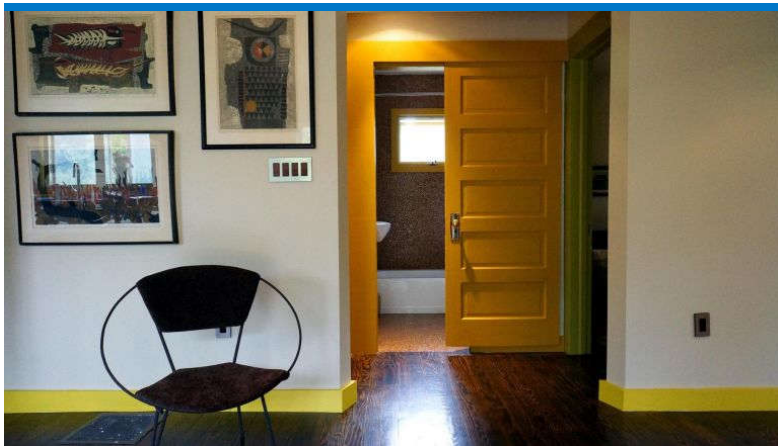
The Sears home on the market in Westhampton Beach — a three-bedroom, one-bathroom cottage — has its own tale. It is owned by Lynn Lomas, along with his brother and their wives, and currently is rented out. But it once belonged to his grandfather, Walter Lomas, the local butcher.

Originally, it was purchased by the owner of the village market, who rented it to Walter. One day, Lomas asked if he could buy it. His boss replied that Walter had been paying rent all this time and it didn't seem fair. So, he gave it to him.

"He told my grandfather, 'It's yours,'" says Lomas, who lives in Quogue.

His grandfather occupied it for 57 years, until his death. It later went through several owners before the Lomas clan decided to buy it back. Lomas says he has fond memories of playing in the screened-in porch and warming himself by the oil stove in the living room as a child. But he and his co-owners have decided now is the moment to sell.

"It's one of those things where we've had it awhile and enjoyed it, but it's time to let it go," he says.



Inside Helene Verin's Sears kit home in Jamesport. Photo  
Credit: Vas Kozyreff

Helene Verin, a shoe designer and adjunct professor of design at the Fashion Institute of Technology, isn't about to let go of the 1925 Sears home she bought five years ago in Jamesport. Her research determined it was a model called "The Kismet" that cost \$438. The home was dilapidated when she moved in, but she tried to stay true to its origins by keeping the front intact while opening up the interior.

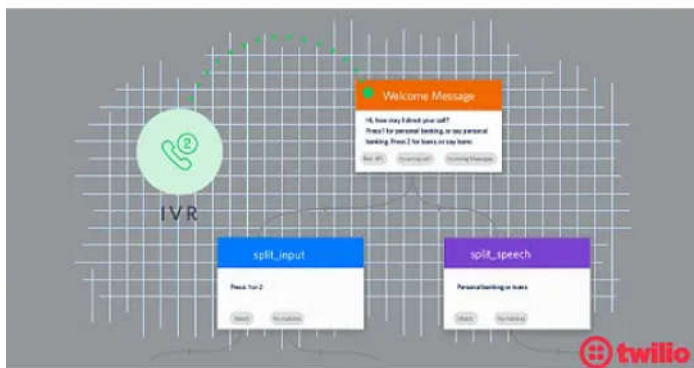
Now, it is a cherished weekend getaway spot from the city

“The thing about them is they were very well made,” she says of the homes. “They were beautiful and humble, and people have been able to do wonderful things to them.”

For Chickie Alexander, her family’s Massapequa Park kit home will forever remain the treasured site of the pool parties and barbecues of her past. But she also remembers there were six children and two parents occupying a home with only one and a half baths.

“Aside from that,” she says, “I loved that house.”

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