



# Shady Rest Country Club

## Preserving History, Revitalizing Legacy

America's First Black Country Club:  
A Legacy Worth Preserving







## Introduction

Nestled in the heart of Scotch Plains, New Jersey, Shady Rest Country Club stands as a beacon of Black excellence and resilience. As the nation's first Black-owned and operated country club, it played a pivotal role in history, providing a haven for recreation, culture, and progress during an era of segregation.

Shady Rest isn't just a building—it's a legacy. From hosting legends like John Shippen, an African American who was the first U.S. professional golfer, to its vibrant musical nights featuring Ella Fitzgerald, this historic clubhouse embodies a story of determination and triumph.

Today, we have an extraordinary opportunity to restore this landmark, honoring its past while shaping its future. Together, we can ensure Shady Rest continues to inspire generations to come.

Be part of preserving history. Join the movement to revitalize Shady Rest.



Shady Rest is more than a clubhouse; it's a symbol of resilience and Black excellence. Preserving it ensures that its legacy continues to inspire generations.

*- Adapted from Sylvia Hicks, former chairperson of the Preserve Shady Rest Committee*



An aerial view of the 9-hole golf course at Shady Rest Country Club in Scotch Plains, New Jersey.



# Historical Significance

## A Origins and Milestones

Shady Rest Country Club was founded in 1921, a time when segregation limited access to recreation and social spaces for African Americans. In response, a group of Black investors purchased the former Westfield Country Club, transforming it into a haven for community, leisure, and cultural enrichment.

Not only was Shady Rest one of the first African American country clubs, it was also the longest-lived. It outlasted all its counterparts, remaining a Black-owned and operated club until 1964. This remarkable longevity underscores its enduring role as a cultural and recreational sanctuary, even as the social and political landscape evolved.

Shady Rest became a trailblazer, hosting icons like John Matthew Shippen, Jr. (1879 - 1968), America's first Black professional golfer, and Althea Neale Gibson (1927 - 2003), the first Black tennis player to win a Grand Slam (and an accomplished golf pro in her own right). Beyond sports, the clubhouse's Villa Casanova transformed into a lively venue for music and social gatherings, attracting entertainers like Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie.



Restoring the Villa Casanova Speakeasy and creating a John Shippen Museum will not only honor history but also ensure Shady Rest remains a beacon of inspiration for the next century.

*- Inspired by community feedback for restoration priorities*

## B Historic Evolution

Shady Rest's story begins in the 18th century as a modest pre-revolutionary farmhouse, later transformed into the Westfield Country Club. In 1921, the site took on new life when Black investors reimagined it as Shady Rest Country Club, a sanctuary of opportunity and culture.

The architectural evolution mirrored its significance. The original Dutch Colonial farmhouse expanded over the years, adapting to its role as a vibrant social and cultural hub. Additions like the Villa Casanova, located in the basement of the building, and the grand clubhouse porch reflected the aspirations of a community determined to create a space as beautiful and dignified as its purpose.

Today, Shady Rest stands as a living timeline, its walls bearing witness to centuries of transformation, from humble beginnings to a nationally celebrated landmark of African American achievement.



Each transformation of Shady Rest—from a private revolutionary homestead to a community hub to a present day place for recreation and reflection—reflects the tenacity and vision of the Black community.

*- Based on the architectural history and community-driven development*



## C Community and Cultural Impact

Shady Rest Country Club was more than a place for recreation; it was a cultural and social lifeline for the Black community during an era of segregation and the cause for black social and economic advancement that followed. Its grounds were graced by pioneers, visionaries, and trailblazers who left indelible marks on history.

At the heart of Shady Rest's legacy is John Shippen, America's first Black professional golfer. For over three decades, Shippen lived and worked at the club, shaping its championship 9-hole course and inspiring a generation of golfers. His contributions underscore Shady Rest's significance in the history of sports and racial progress.

The club also played host to Althea Gibson, the first Black athlete to break racial barriers in tennis by winning a Grand Slam. Her presence on Shady Rest's courts highlighted the club's role as a proving ground for excellence.

In its heyday, Shady Rest was a unique confluence of musical, economic, and athletic achievements of Black America in the early 20th century. It attracted athletes, artists, and professionals at the pinnacle of their careers, becoming a hub for excellence that resonated far beyond its walls. Jazz legends like Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie brought life to the Villa Casanova, the club's famed speakeasy, transforming its basement into a celebrated stage. Shady Rest captured the attention of a wide audience, from local visitors to admirers reading about its vibrant happenings. As a cultural satellite of Manhattan during the Harlem Renaissance, it stood as a testament to the richness and resilience of Black culture, offering a space where talent flourished free from discrimination.

Building on its vibrant cultural and athletic legacy, Shady Rest also played a pivotal role in Black political and intellectual life. Civil rights leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, then head of the NAACP and lyricist of the Black National Anthem, frequented the club. They networked, and conducted critical business at Shady Rest, further solidifying its place as a focal point of African American progress and empowerment. This intersection of recreation, activism, and intellectual exchange elevated Shady Rest beyond a country club, making it a cornerstone of Black excellence and resilience during the early 20th century.

Today, Shady Rest remains a living testament to these extraordinary individuals and the community that supported them. Its restoration ensures that this rich cultural tapestry will continue to inspire future generations.



Shady Rest wasn't just a country club—it was a lifeline for a community, where milestones were celebrated, and dreams were nurtured.

*- Inspired by accounts of the club's cultural and social significance*



John Matthew Shippen Jr.





## Vision for the Future

Restoring Shady Rest Country Club is more than a project—it is a unique opportunity to reclaim and celebrate a site that embodies the richness of Black life in its totality. Shady Rest stands as a testament to the complex interplay of residential and urban living, arts, sports, politics, and economics during a transformative era in American history. Its revival will honor the achievements of the athletes, artists, and leaders who shaped its legacy, while offering future generations a tangible connection to this extraordinary chapter of resilience and excellence.

### Planned Restoration Goals

- **The Villa Casanova Speakeasy:** Bring back the club's legendary basement venue, where musicians like Ella Fitzgerald once performed, creating a unique entertainment space for today's visitors.
- **Second-Floor Lady's Restroom:** Restore this historical feature to honor the club's original design and ensure modern accessibility.
- **Black Tennis Hall of Fame:** Attract this prestigious institution to celebrate pioneers like Althea Gibson and reinforce Shady Rest's legacy in sports history.
- **John Shippen Museum:** Dedicate the third floor to the story of America's first Black golf pro and Shady Rest's championship course, creating an educational and inspiring space for all ages.

This future honors the past while inviting the community and visitors alike to experience a reimagined Shady Rest—a living testament to resilience and excellence.

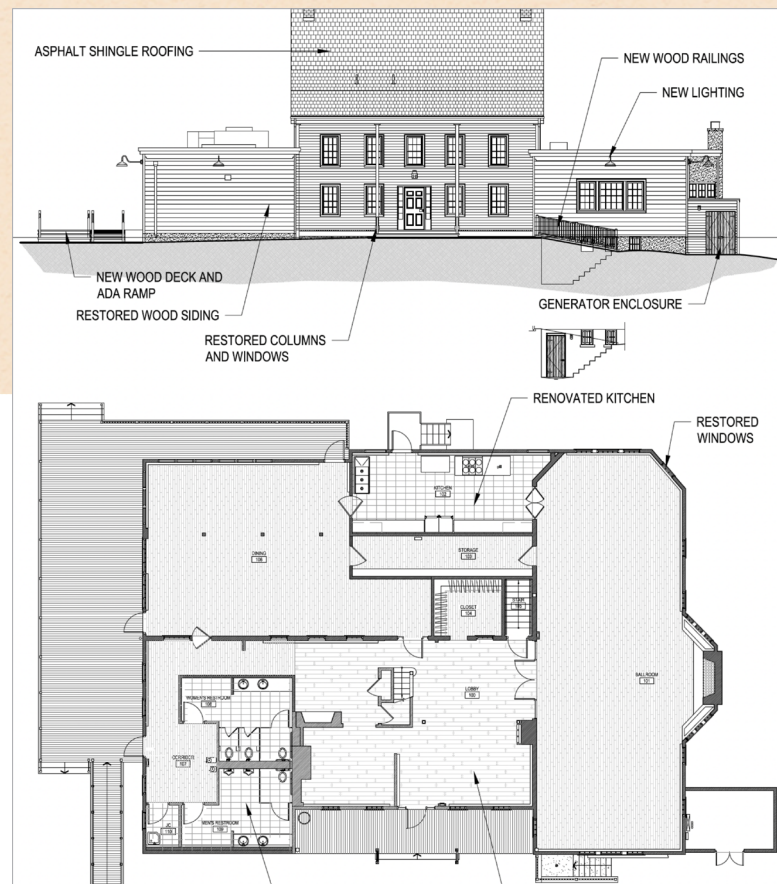


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### Long-Term Vision

- Transition the senior center to a downtown development, opening the clubhouse to broader community use.
- Establish a full-time restaurant, blending historic charm with modern amenities, to make Shady Rest a destination for dining and events.



- Restoration schematic highlighting improvements made to the Shady Rest Clubhouse. - Barton Ross & Partners Architects, LLC.



## Funding Opportunities and Impact

Restoring Shady Rest Country Club is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to preserve a piece of American history. Your support will directly contribute to revitalizing this landmark and ensuring its story continues to inspire generations to come.

### Why Your Support Matters

- **Preserve History:** Help protect the legacy of the nation's first Black-owned country club and its pivotal role in civil rights and cultural history.
- **Transform Communities:** Support a project that enriches Scotch Plains and creates opportunities for education, recreation, and celebration.
- **Inspire the Future:** Be part of a movement to honor the achievements of icons like John Shippen and Althea Gibson, inspiring future leaders and athletes.

### Ways to Contribute

- **Individual Donations:** Every contribution, big or small, brings us closer to realizing the vision for Shady Rest.
- **Corporate Sponsorships:** Partner with us to champion Black heritage and community impact.
- **Legacy Giving:** Leave a lasting mark by supporting the future of this historic treasure.

All donations are managed by the Preserve Shady Rest Committee, a dedicated organization ensuring every dollar goes toward preserving and enhancing this iconic site.

Join us in shaping the future of Shady Rest. Donate today and be part of history in the making.



Every contribution helps bring Shady Rest back to life, preserving its place as a historic and cultural treasure for the Scotch Plains community and beyond.

*- Based on the Preserve Shady Rest Committee's dedication to restoration*



Althea Gibson, half-length portrait, holding tennis racquet. c.1956.

- New York World Telegram & Sun photo by Fred Palumbo





# Contact Information and Acknowledgements

## How to Get Involved

Your support is vital in preserving Shady Rest Country Club and its legacy. Whether through donations, volunteering, or corporate partnerships, there are many ways to make an impact:

- **Donate:** Contributions can be made directly to the Preserve Shady Rest Committee.
- **Volunteer:** Join community efforts to bring this restoration project to life.
- **Partner:** Explore sponsorship opportunities to align your organization with this historic initiative.

Visit [preserveshadyrest.org/](http://preserveshadyrest.org/) or contact us at [Email Address] for more details on how you can contribute.

## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to our partners, donors, and the Scotch Plains community for their unwavering support. Together, we're preserving history and inspiring the future.





*Preserve the Past,  
Inspire the Future*