

Will a Dollar General Ruin a Rural Crossroads?

A fight over a proposed chain store is also about what “country” means to different people in a small community.

By Michael Corkery Photographs by Andrea Bruce

Reporting from Ebony, Va.

June 2, 2023

Anne Hartley’s brick house in Ebony, Va., overlooks windswept fields, a Methodist church, a general store and the intersection of two country roads, a pastoral setting that evokes an Edward Hopper painting or a faded postcard from the South.

Now this scene is being threatened, Ms. Hartley said, by a plan to build what every small American town seems to have: a Dollar General.

A descendant of one of Ebony’s founding families, Ms. Hartley says the discount store — which would be built next to her home — will create traffic problems in the area, with people drawn to the brand’s signature yellow sign and its aisles filled with inexpensive food and household staples.

Beyond the store itself, Ms. Hartley and many others with ties to Ebony think it will open the door to additional development that will spoil the character of their tiny, rural community of about 230 people. The name of their website and the rallying cry for their campaign against the Dollar General is “Keep Ebony Country.”

“We don’t want over-commercialization to destroy the integrity of the community,” Ms. Hartley said.



Anne Hartley and her husband, Al Hartley, own a house next to the proposed Dollar General location.

Jerry Jones also has strong feelings about Dollar General. He, too, grew up in Ebony and, for several years, was Ms. Hartley’s classmate at the local public school. He went on to manage grocery stores around southern Virginia and later owned a gas station in Ebony that sold freshly baked biscuits and deep-fried baloney burgers.

Mostly retired now, Mr. Jones owns the land where the Dollar General would be built. He said the store would provide the county's residents a convenient and affordable place to shop, while also generating sorely needed tax revenue.

"You still need to have that balance between the people with nicer things and the people who live paycheck to paycheck," Mr. Jones said. "To me, Dollar General fits right in with that."

The dispute in Ebony, which has been going on for more than three years, is about planning and zoning, but it also touches on a deeper issue simmering in many parts of rural America, whether the disputes are about cellphone towers or snowmobile trails. What does "country" mean to different people in a small community?

In most places, Dollar General is winning. Across the United States, the company has made an aggressive push to permeate thousands of far-flung or impoverished communities with stores that, along with low prices, are criticized for their unhealthy food offerings and low-paid employees.

An increasing number of these proposed dollar stores are leading to disputes, generating opponents in small towns and struggling cities. The retailer has been assailed by a think tank for the negative effects it has on small businesses and by the Biden administration for the unkempt condition of its stores.

Yet, a vast majority of the proposed dollar stores are being built. One in three stores that opened in the United States in 2022 was a dollar store.

Those who oppose the proposed Dollar General in Ebony are trying to buck the trend.



At Ebony General, locals can get hot food.





About 90 miles south of Richmond, Ebony sits on the edge of Lake Gaston and is a haven for second homes that serve as an important tax base. Ebony is part of Brunswick County, once a hub for tobacco farming, where the median household income is about \$49,600, far below the statewide median of \$80,600. More than half the county's population is Black.

The five-member Brunswick County Board of Supervisors approved a zoning change that would allow the store to be built in a 3-to-2 vote.

The supervisors who voted to approve the store declined to comment, citing a lawsuit that Ms. Hartley and other opponents filed challenging their decision.

In a statement, Dollar General said that it offered fresh produce in thousands of stores and provided a "safe work environment" and "competitive wages."

"We regularly hear from communities, particularly in rural areas, asking us to bring a Dollar General to their hometown," the company added. "We understand a Dollar General would be welcomed by many Ebony residents and hope to be able to serve that community."

Many of the opponents of the store are driven by their appreciation for Ebony's past and what they hope can be preserved. And some relative newcomers to the community are sympathetic to their argument. Mohamed Abouemara moved to southern Virginia from New York to operate convenience stores and has run the Ebony General Store for nine years.



Mohamed Abouemara has owned Ebony General for nine years and said a Dollar General would hurt his business.

He said his store, where locals can socialize and buy hot food, played an important role in a rural community.

A dollar store, he said, would significantly hurt his business. “Jerry is a friend of mine,” Mr. Abouemara said of Mr. Jones. “I am not angry at him. But if he still owned his store, he would not let a Dollar General come here.”

A sense of place.

Ms. Hartley is a meticulous keeper of family and Ebony history. Her family has owned land in the area for generations, and her great-grandfather named the community in the late 1800s after a black horse called Ebony.

The family also ran a local store. When Ms. Hartley was growing up in Ebony in the 1960s, her father operated a business, which had a butcher shop, a barbershop and a mill in the back. Ms. Hartley helped her parents in the store when she was still a child, and she remembers her father working long hours, from early in the morning until late in the evening. “It was the center of our family life,” she said of small-town retailing.

Ms. Hartley attended the University of North Carolina, where she majored in math and later worked as a computer programmer, a rare position for a woman in the 1970s and '80s and a point of pride for her.

She now owns her family’s house in Ebony, where family photos, spanning many generations, cover the walls and side tables.

Ms. Hartley’s primary residence is in Chapel Hill, N.C., about 90 miles south, but she regularly visits the house in Ebony.

Ms. Hartley says she is intent on protecting a rural intersection from a box store for the good of a community and local economy, which is seeking to boost tourism

Her lawsuit argues that the county has violated its own comprehensive plan that calls out the importance of the area’s scenic landscapes. The county has said in court papers that the plan is merely meant as a guide for development.



Ms. Hartley's house includes photographs of her family spanning many generations.

Dozens of local residents and people with roots in Ebony have mobilized against the development as part of the Ebony Preservation Group. They have raised donations to support their legal fight and lobbied the state to have the community considered to be part of the National Register of Historic Places.

Elizabeth Nash Horne, whose parents and grandparents are buried in a cemetery next to the proposed store, said a chain retailer in Ebony was “just unnecessary.” There are already three existing dollar stores only a few miles from Ebony.

Some say they recognize that the county needs tax revenue. “But are we going to sell our soul for anything that comes along?” said Bobby Conner, who grew up in Ebony and now works on tourism initiatives for Brunswick County.

The main route into Ebony from the interstate is Route 903, a two-lane road lined by billboards advertising real estate that eventually opens up into farm fields and pine groves.

Route 903 comes to an intersection in Ebony where there is a gas station on one side of the road and, on the other, the Ebony General Store, a dimly lit warren of canned vegetables and soda bottles where the smell of fried catfish mingles with that of steaming hot dogs.

Sid Cutts, a home builder who has developed properties on Lake Gaston, said Ebony and other historic-looking crossroads were becoming increasingly rare in the South.

“I use the term rural elegance,” Mr. Cutts said in describing Ebony.

Mr. Cutts said his clients from larger cities who were building lake houses were important to the community because they spent money at the local businesses. But they are seeking the down-home charm they can find at the long-running Ebony General Store, he said, not another Dollar General.

'I am pure country.'

Jerry Jones's grandfather first bought land in Ebony in the 1950s.

Mr. Jones says he, too, has Ebony's best interest at heart in seeking to bring a Dollar General to the community.

Mr. Jones's father and grandfather bought land in Ebony in the 1950s and many members of his family still live in Ebony. Several of them are neighbors of Ms. Hartley.

Mr. Jones did not go to college, but he worked his way up through A.&P., managing several stores in Virginia.

In the 1990s, Mr. Jones built a gas station and convenience store across from the Ebony General Store.

He sold his store in 2005 and now lives in a nearby town, though he regularly farms land in Ebony. Mr. Jones said he didn't understand how putting a third business in a well-trafficked intersection would destroy Ebony's rural character.



Mr. Jones regularly farms land in Ebony and has relatives who live in the community.

“What character do they really want to save?” he said. “I am still going to be out there on my tractor. None of that is going to change one iota. I just won’t have to drive as far to get a cold drink or a Pop-Tart.”

Mr. Jones’s aunt Betty Lett lives across the street from where the store would be built. She thinks a dollar store would bring new excitement to Ebony.

“I am pure country,” Ms. Lett said one afternoon while sitting across from Mr. Jones in her living room. An antique doll perched on a swing hung from the ceiling.

Mr. Jones shrugged off the criticisms of dollar stores — that their aisles and dumpsters outside are a mess and that their employees underpaid. He pointed out that the hourly minimum wage in Virginia is \$12.

“I never even made it to \$10 an hour,” said Ms. Lett, who retired in 2007, after four decades of factory and distribution center work. “I should go back to work,” she joked.

Shaunton Taylor, who stopped to fill up on gas at the Ebony General Store one afternoon, said she would still shop there even if a dollar store came along.

Ms. Taylor lives in a home on a family homestead, three miles from the site of the proposed Dollar General. The homestead was first inhabited by her great-grandparents, who were farmers.

“I am open-minded about new things, especially in a rural area,” said Ms Taylor, who works at a nursing home and also writes poetry. “You have to accept anything new.”

This year, Ms. Hartley asked for the Virginia Supreme Court to hear the case, arguing that the issue of how a county interprets its comprehensive plan would “affect all Virginians for years to come.” She is confident that her group will eventually prevail.

In the meantime, Ms. Hartley reached out to Mr. Jones with an offer: She told him that a supporter of her group would match whatever the developer of the Dollar General store would pay Mr. Jones for the property — about \$88,000, Mr. Jones said.

But Mr. Jones declined. His idea and the preservation group’s idea for what should happen with the land, he said, “just don’t match.”

6/2/23, 9:08 AM

Will a Dollar General Ruin a Rural Crossroads? - The New York Times

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