



BROOKLYN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

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EDC Selects BHS, Weeksville, Irondale Proposal For Abolitionism Commemoration Project

Brooklyn, NY – The New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC), in cooperation with the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) and the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, and in partnership with a Commemoration Advisory Panel, selected *In Pursuit of Freedom*, a multi-faceted proposal to memorialize the history of abolitionism, the anti-slavery movement, and the Underground Railroad in Brooklyn. The proposal was designed by the Brooklyn Historical Society, the Weeksville Heritage Center and the Irondale Ensemble Project in response to a Request for Proposals (RFP) issued by NYCEDC. The project will provide new resources for understanding Brooklyn's important role in the abolitionist movement through exhibitions, marked walking tours, a theater project and a website.

Last year, a panel of noted historians, community leaders and academics were selected to assist with the creation of the RFP and the selection of a local cultural organization to develop and manage a commemoration project to memorialize anti-slavery activity in Brooklyn. The City is providing initial funding of \$2 million for project implementation, with additional private funding to be raised.

"When we supported the rezoning of Downtown Brooklyn, we recognized the rich culture and historical significance of Downtown Brooklyn," said Councilmember Letitia James. "I was happy to have played a role in championing this commemorative effort. I proudly congratulate the awardees, who will do honor to this project in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner."

Councilmember David Yassky said, "The selection of these organizations to commemorate the abolitionist history of Downtown Brooklyn is outstanding news. The Brooklyn Historical Society, Weeksville Heritage Center and the Irondale Ensemble Project have each demonstrated unique sensitivity and commitment to honoring the historic contribution of the Downtown Brooklyn community. I am confident the resulting project will be terrific."

In Pursuit of Freedom contains four inter-related components:

- A commemorative artistic installation in Downtown Brooklyn will be the starting point for visitors to follow a series of historical markers at sites throughout the borough. A self-guided walking tour of these sites will also be created and distributed at key locations in Brooklyn.
- Interpretative exhibits will be installed at the Brooklyn Historical Society, Weeksville Heritage Center and the Irondale Center at Lafayette Avenue Church. Each of these installations will include images, maps and primary source documents, and will be closely aligned with the needs of teachers and students.
- An original theater piece will draw upon the story of abolitionism in Brooklyn as it relates to important issues that continue to challenge contemporary society.
- An interactive website will connect all of the components to make the project available to a national and international audience.

"The history of abolition is complex and powerful," said Deborah Schwartz, President, Brooklyn Historical Society. "The struggle for freedom was not only fought on battle fields, but also in churches, schools, newspapers and local communities all over America. Leaders and activists who lived and worked in Brooklyn were vital to the outcome; their stories need to be told and understood. With this project we hope to invigorate a lively civic discourse about the relationship of history to our present lives. On behalf of my colleagues from

Weeksville Heritage Center and the Irondale Ensemble Project, I extend our thanks to EDC, DCA, the Partnership, and the Advisory Panel for selecting us to carry out this hugely important task.”

The program will be developed in partnership with a group of scholars with unique expertise in Brooklyn’s abolitionist history, including **Dr. Craig Steven Wilder**, Professor of History, MIT; **Cynthia Copeland**, historian and educational curator, New York Historical Society’s *New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War*; Dr. Michael Wallace, Pulitzer Prize winning author; **Dr. Bret Eynon**, academic dean, LaGuardia Community College; and Dr. Clarence Taylor, Professor of History, Baruch College. Two scholars from the Weeksville Heritage Center will also participate in the project, **Dr. Elissa Blount-Moorhead**, a professor at Pratt Institute and Exhibit Designer, and **Jennifer Scott**, a professor at the Pratt Institute and the New School with a background in Anthropology, Preservation and History. The Scholars Council of the Brooklyn Historical Society will review exhibits and other materials throughout the development and implementation of the project.

About the Partners

The Brooklyn Historical Society connects the past to the present and makes Brooklyn’s vibrant history tangible, relevant, and meaningful for today’s diverse communities, and for generations to come. Founded in 1863, Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) functions as a library, museum, and urban education center dedicated to the people of Brooklyn, providing opportunities for civic dialogue and thoughtful engagement. www.brooklynhistory.org

Weeksville Heritage Center documents, preserves and interprets the history of nineteenth century African-American communities in Weeksville, Brooklyn and beyond and creates and inspires innovative and contemporary uses of African-American history through education, the arts, environmentalism and civic engagement. Founded in 1972, Weeksville Heritage Center is a significant historic American site, and a well-documented, rare extant example of an independent African-American community organized by African-American entrepreneurs and land investors. www.weeksvillesociety.org

The Irondale Ensemble Project is a direct descendent of the ensemble movement in American theater, birthed in the cauldron of the Great Depression and coming of age through the progressive politics of the 1960’s. Irondale believes that the theater can be a strong voice for social change. The Irondale community is bound together by a common willingness to confront ideas and engage in inquiry; it transcends class, race and geographic boundary. Irondale exists to explore collaboration, creativity, pedagogy and the process of theater making. The ensemble conducts this exploration in traditional and non-traditional theater spaces: any room or space where people gather can become a theater; any group of participants is an audience. In order to produce and present socially relevant theater, Irondale combines activities and programs related to research, education and performance. www.irondale.org

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