



BROOKLYN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

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Brooklyn Historical Society, Weeksville Heritage Center, and Irondale Ensemble Project Receive Major Funding to Explore the Underground Railroad and Abolitionism in Brooklyn

Brooklyn, NY – Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) has been selected, along with its partner institutions, the Weeksville Heritage Center and Irondale Ensemble Project, to receive two major federal grants to fund *In Pursuit of Freedom*, a multi-faceted program that memorializes the history of abolitionism and the Underground Railroad in Brooklyn. The U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education; Underground Railroad Educational and Cultural (URR) Program awarded BHS \$936,000 and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has awarded \$400,000 toward the program. Both grants are highly competitive.

Designed and implemented by the three organizations, *In Pursuit of Freedom* will provide new resources for understanding Brooklyn's leading role in the abolitionist movement through exhibitions, a website, historic markers, walking tours, a commissioned outdoor public art work, an original theater piece, an educational curriculum that will be distributed nationally and a scholarly symposium.

"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 communities all over America. Brooklyn leaders and activists, black and white, were vital to the national movement. Their untold stories need to be understood. With this project we hope to invigorate civic discourse about the relationship of this pivotal history to our present lives."

These awards complement \$2 million of funding granted by the City of New York City in 2008, through an RFP that was initiated by the Downtown Brooklyn Development Corporation that will be administered by the Economic Development Corporation.

"I am impressed that the project links three highly esteemed Brooklyn cultural entities to provide a deeper understanding of Brooklyn's rich and historical impact on the abolitionist movement. Together, this invaluable network will preserve an important piece of Brooklyn's past that is uniquely woven into the fabric of our nation's history," said U.S. Rep. Edolphus "Ed" Towns, who has supported this project from its inception.

A team of prominent scholars will guide the program and provide scholarly expertise. Chaired by Bret Eynon, Dean for Teaching and Learning at LaGuardia Community College, and Jennifer Scott, Research Director at Weeksville, the *In Pursuit of Freedom* advisory board includes: **David W. Blight**, Professor of History, Yale University; **Cynthia R. Copeland**, educator and historian; **Graham Hodges**, George Dorland Langdon Jr. Professor of History and Africana & Latin American Studies; **James Oliver**

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Horton, Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies & History at George Washington University and Historian Emeritus, National Museum of American History; **Gunja SenGupta**, Professor of History, Brooklyn College, CUNY; **Clarence Taylor**, Professor of History, Baruch College, CUNY; **Mike Wallace**, Distinguished Professor of History at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, and co-author of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*; **Judith Wellman**, Professor of History, SUNY Oswego; and **Craig Steven Wilder**, Professor of History, MIT, and author of *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn*.

About the Project

The *In Pursuit of Freedom* program comprises four inter-related components:

- A commemorative artistic installation in Downtown Brooklyn. The installation 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 available at key locations in Brooklyn.
- Three interpretative exhibits. Installed at the Brooklyn Historical Society, Weeksville Heritage Center and the Irondale Center at Lafayette Avenue Church, each installation will include images, maps and primary source documents, and will be closely aligned with the needs of teachers and students.
- An original ensemble created theater piece. The 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. The website will connect all of the components to make the project available to a national and international audience.

All aspects of the project will utilize some extraordinary artifacts and documents held by the Brooklyn Historical Society, including a rare copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Abraham Lincoln; original letters written by abolitionists, Henry Ward Beecher and William Wilson; propaganda tracts; numerous slave bills of sale; as well as newspapers, anti-slavery pamphlets from the 1840s; and early photographs of the people and places crucial to the story. It is expected that new research conducted in the archives of local churches may well add to this important, little studied history.

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, the Brooklyn Historical Society 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 an activist ensemble theater company that is housed in their newly renovated home in the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Irondale was founded in 1983 and exists to explore collaboration, creativity, pedagogy and the process of theater making. In order to produce and present socially relevant theater, Irondale combines activities and programs related to research, education and performance. www.irondale.org