

Project Weeksville: Saving a Black Landmark

Continued From Page 2

tion effort that is unusual not only in this city but across the country. (Weeksville's approximate borders take in parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights and Ocean Hill.)

The Weeksville project started with the curiosity of a few local history buffs, was nurtured by all age groups of community residents, became a curriculum subject at

PS 243, 1580 Dean St., (which is being renamed the Weeksville School) and is now cited by assorted preservation groups as a model "living landmark" program.

Tomorrow, a two-month exhibition on Weeksville opens at the Metropolitan Museum (the 81st Street Entrance Gallery), which Weeksville enthusiasts hope will bring them the kind of exposure needed to complete their goal

of restoring three adjacent wood-framed 1830 houses, already designated landmarks, into a museum.

The Met show, entitled "Weeksville, Save the Memories of Self," includes historic documents, maps, photographs and artifacts (a school primer, water jug, cow bell, dolls, guitars, clothing, buttons, dress patterns), found in local attics and unearthed during the 1968 con-

struction of a public housing project.

Plans for restoration of the three landmarks, known as the Houses on Hunterfly Road at 1698 Bergen St., will also be on view.

"Our purpose is to use preservation as a tool," says Jean Maynard, director of the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History. "The children learn every-

thing about Weeksville and that period in American history through projects in school. But they're also encouraged to go home and learn their family history from parents and grandparents. "Kids learn that history isn't just somewhere else, that it begins here."

During one of those classroom sessions second graders — some dressed in costume — displayed the books they

wrote on Weeksville, talked of its importance in history, learned about quilting and candlemaking and sang period songs.

Three hundred of the young Weeksville experts will be at the museum Tuesday, Feb. 9, to sing 19th century songs and spirituals, to square dance, to demonstrate butter churning and candlemaking.

Much Learned

"A lot has been learned from documents and personal papers found in area attics," says Mrs. Maynard, an artist and former magazine illustration editor who became director of the society in 1974.

"The concerns then were a lot like today. They argued, for example, about who should teach in the schools and there was a specific dispute when a white woman got a teaching job. There were those saying the position should go to a black living in the neighborhood."

If there was ever a community preservation project, Weeksville is most assuredly it.

A Boy Scout troop won a national award for its archeological efforts.

School children testified before the Landmarks Commission to get the Hunterfly Houses designated in 1970.

And the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corp. bought the houses and is holding them in trust until \$25,000 can be raised by the society for their purchase. (Another \$300,000 is needed.)

"If enthusiasm and hard work could do it, that goal would have been reached ages ago," said James Hurley, director of the Long Island Historical Society.

The Weeksville project grew out of Hurley's curiosity in 1965 about the history of the community of which he is a resident.

"This is a neighborhood where preservation is not widely known about or accomplished and it could be a great example to other parts of the city where there are still surviving early wooden houses," says Hurley.

"They're simple little houses. If this were Annapolis, Georgetown or Newport, where you see the same houses, in great numbers, they'd be preserved with no problem."

The full history of Weeksville is yet to be pieced together.

The real growth of the community apparently started with the ending of slavery in the state in 1827. Between 1836 and 1840, James Weeks, a free black seaman from Virginia, bought a piece of Brooklyn's countryside from the Lefferts, a leading land-owning family.

DAILY NEWS FEBRUARY 9, 1976-1



A second grader at PS 243 dressed in Weeksville 19th century costume. Post Photo by Frank Leonardo

Weeksville — A Black Landmark

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Zion Home for Colored Aged, Colored School No. 2, The African Civilization Society, and Abyssinian Benevolent Daughters of Esther Assn. all may be unfamiliar institutional names in New York City today but in the early 19th century they were the heart of a unique black community in what is now Bedford-Stuyvesant.

The old-age home, the public school, the black heritage group and the women's self-help organization were — along with an orphanage, a cemetery and two churches — the nucleus of Weeksville, a pre-Civil War free black community which became an important stop on Harriet Tubman's Underground Railroad.

In recent years, Weeksville has become the focus of a community-based preserva-

Continued on Page 8