

Introduction

Brooklyn's Promised Land, Weeksville, 1835–1910

“A Model for Places of Much Greater Pretensions”

In 1910, fifty-nine-year-old Alfred W. Cornish, born in New York State and a plasterer by trade, and forty-five-year-old Frances Cornish, his wife, born in Washington, D.C., were renting a house at 1698 Bergen Street, Brooklyn, New York.¹ Alfred Cornish had lived in this general neighborhood, off and on, since at least 1870, when he returned from Civil War service in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.

Little did Frances and Alfred Cornish know that in the late 1960s a coalition of students, Boy Scouts, and local citizens would rediscover and identify their home as one of four nineteenth-century houses on Hunterfly Road, part of a once-thriving African American community called Weeksville. Part of this rediscovery included a salvage operation in houses about to be demolished between Troy Avenue, Pacific Street, Schenectady Avenue, and Dean Street (now the site of Weeksville Gardens). There, behind a mantelpiece, young searchers found a tintype of what people began to call the “Weeksville Lady.” This unknown woman became the image and inspiration for a major effort to preserve and restore the Hunterfly Road houses as the centerpiece of the Weeksville Heritage Center. As tangible remains of a lost world, these houses and the Weeksville Lady form a powerful physical link between past and present. This is the story of these buildings, the people who built them, and the community they represent.

By their own actions, Weeksville's residents defined what was important to them—physical safety, education, economic self-sufficiency, and political self-determination. But, as they made personal choices, the Cornish family and their Weeksville neighbors also reflected major

changes in the lives of all African Americans in the nineteenth century. Weeksville's story reflects in a microcosm the story of African Americans throughout Brooklyn, the state of New York, and the nation as a whole.

In 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, almost four million African Americans lived in the United States. Close to half a million (488,070) of them lived as free people.² Of these free people of color, 226,152 or 46.3 percent lived in the North. In theory at least, northern free people had choices about where to live. In 1860, the majority (55.7 percent) lived in mixed-race neighborhoods in large cities (defined as places with a population of more than 10,000). Of the 44.3 percent who lived in rural areas, many lived as single families or small groups in neighborhoods dominated by European Americans. Some African Americans chose another option—to move outside the United States to Liberia, Canada, or Haiti. And a very few enterprising pioneers made yet another decision: they formed independent free black communities—a hundred or more throughout the United States. Weeksville was one of these.

While reformers such as Frederick Douglass worked for racial integration within the dominant European American culture, Weeksville's founders intentionally created in the 1830s a race-based geographically separate community, advertising land “for sale to colored people.” Nestled among steep hills and valleys of the Bedford Hills in eastern Brooklyn, Weeksville was figuratively (and parts of it were literally) a city upon a hill. Whereas many Long Island communities were made up of Dutch, English, and African American families who had known each other for generations, Weeksville's population was primarily African American. Many of its residents were new to the region, coming from all over the United States (including the South), the Caribbean, Western Europe, and Africa. By the 1850s, national leaders such as Henry Highland Garnet, Rufus L. Perry, and Martin Delany consciously attempted to make Weeksville part of what Wilson Jeremiah Moses called the “golden age” of black nationalism.³

By almost any measure, Weeksville was a success. It was one of the two largest independent free black communities in the United States. In 1850, 366 African Americans lived in Weeksville. By 1855, its African American population had grown to 521. People generally lived in safety, supported themselves financially, educated their children (in Colored



Weeksville Lady, a tintype of an unknown woman, taken ca. 1880, discovered in 1968 during the initial archaeological dig at Weeksville. Courtesy Weeksville Heritage Center.

School No. 2, which became Public Schools 68, 83, and 243), and set up their own churches (Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, Berean Baptist, and later St. Philip's Episcopal). Many of them also took an active part in local, state, and national politics. They enjoyed an exceptional rate of property ownership (10.4 percent of the total population owned property in 1850, a far larger proportion than that of any other known African American urban community).⁴

Weeksville residents also established at least two newspapers (*Freedom's Torchlight*, the *National Monitor*, and perhaps also the *People's Journal*). They formed the Citizens' Union Cemetery, supported the Abyssinian Benevolent Daughters of Esther Association, and created a baseball team, appropriately named the Weeksville Unknowns. In 1864, Weeksville became home to the African Civilization Society, which first promoted efforts to establish a colony in Liberia and then supported

work among freed people of color in the South. Howard Orphan Asylum and the Zion Home for the Aged, both located in Weeksville, served the larger African American community in Brooklyn, Long Island, and New York City. After the Civil War, Weeksville residents spearheaded a successful effort to integrate Brooklyn's public schools. P.S. 83, the direct descendent of Colored School No. 2, became the first school nationally to integrate its teaching staff along with its student body. Weeksville's orphanage, home for the aged, and school all offered professional employment opportunities for women and led the way toward the vocal leadership of African American women in the Progressive movement.

Whereas most independent black communities were rural, Weeksville was suburban, tied economically to the city of Brooklyn, with a wide variety of occupations and a relatively large proportion of skilled workers, business owners, and professionals—both women and men. Between 1865 and 1910, Germans and native-born European Americans (with a scattering of Irish, Canadian, West Indian, and Chinese immigrants) joined African Americans in Weeksville, poised at the beginning of the great migration of African Americans from the South in the nineteenth teens.

Weeksville nurtured exceptional African American leaders. Junius C. Morel, principal of Colored School No. 2, was a nationally known journalist, educator, promoter of the black convention movement, and activist. Morel was born in South Carolina and lived in Weeksville from 1847 until his death in 1874. He wrote prolifically for more than thirty years for the *Colored American*, *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, and *Christian Recorder* (the national African Methodist Episcopal newspaper), espousing both African American independence and racial and gender integration in public schools. Susan Smith McKinney-Steward, daughter of Sylvanus Smith, an early Weeksville landowner, became one of the nation's first African American woman doctors and a contributor to Zion Home for the Aged. Her sister, Sarah Smith Tompkins Garnet, Brooklyn's first female school principal, married Henry Highland Garnet. Garnet, a nationally important African American minister, abolitionist, and activist, helped establish the headquarters of the African Civilization Society (organized first to Christianize Africa and then to send African American teachers to Freedman's schools) in Weeksville before he emigrated to Liberia. T. McCants Stewart, lawyer, Brooklyn

School Board member, and A.M.E. pastor in Weeksville, promoted the integration of Weeksville's school and also emigrated to Liberia, where he revised Liberia's legal code. Maritcha Lyons developed her career as a teacher of teachers in Weeksville's integrated school. With McKinney-Steward and Sarah Smith Garnet, Lyons became one of Brooklyn's most important female leaders, advocating equal rights for both women and African Americans.

Many scholars have written recent histories of African Americans in Manhattan and Brooklyn, but few have included references to Weeksville. Manhattan studies include Thelma Willis Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City*; Graham Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City*; Shane White, "Somewhat More Independent": *The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810*; Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863*; Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American? Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784–1861*; and Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris, *Slavery in New York*. Carla Peterson, *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City*, presented a detective story that uncovers the history of her family, which includes key African American leaders in both New York and Brooklyn.⁵

A few historians have written about the history of African Americans in Brooklyn. Craig Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn*, covered three centuries of race relations in Brooklyn. Robert Furman incorporated a focus on slavery and abolition in *Brooklyn Heights: The Rise, Fall, and Rise of America's First Suburb*. In 2012, Prithi Kanakamedala completed a study of abolitionism and African American life in Brooklyn, *In Pursuit of Freedom*, for the National Endowment for the Humanities project of the same name, sponsored by the Brooklyn Historical Society, the Weeksville Heritage Center, and the Irondale Ensemble.⁶

Scholars who have focused on Weeksville itself found few secondary references. When James Hurley, Dolores Jackson McCullough, and Robert Swan began their research in the late 1960s and early 1970s, only two historians, both of these in the twentieth century, had mentioned Weeksville in print. In 1912, Eugene Armbruster noted that

Malboneville, Carrsville, and Weeksville were “neighborhoods in Bedford.” In 1928, he described Weeksville and Carrsville, with some details about its institutions, as lying between Crow Hill and the Long Island Railroad. In a church bulletin published about 1930, Mardita Hardy also noted the existence of the Weeksville community. In 1977, Robert Swan published a summary of his meticulous and detailed research, based on his extensive unpublished research papers, in Charlene Claye Van Derzee, *An Introduction to the Black Contribution to the Development of Brooklyn*. James Hurley prepared an exceptional annotated bibliography in 1978. About the same time, Dolores Jackson McCullough wrote an extensive student paper on Weeksville for her degree program at the City University of New York. David Ment and Mary Donovan dealt briefly with Weeksville in 1980 in *The People of Brooklyn: A History of Two Neighborhoods*. In 1988 Joan Maynard and Gwen Cottman published *Weeksville Then & Now*, a concise summary, with photographs, of the historic village and its twentieth-century rediscovery. Archaeologists and architectural historians (including William Cary, William Askins, Roselle Henn, Edward Chappell, Joan Geismar, Neil Larson, and others) studied the Hunterfly Road houses themselves in depth. Archaeologist Joan Geismar’s work over many years deserves special mention. This book builds on this legacy of caring and careful research.⁷

If Weeksville is so important, why was its history virtually lost? The answer relates to two phenomena: First, Weeksville’s physical existence was, literally, almost wiped out after the Civil War. Between 1865 and 1890, Brooklyn’s exploding population and the expansion of its grid system obliterated much of the historic village of Weeksville. Developers rebuilt Weeksville, leveling its uneven terrain, straightening its streets, moving or destroying many of its houses, and bulldozing its archaeological evidence. The Kingsborough public housing project in 1941 and urban renewal in the late 1960s destroyed still more of Weeksville’s historic fabric. Except for extensive archaeological work around the Hunterfly Road houses, almost nothing has so far been discovered of the foundations, privies, middens, and gardens that Weeksville residents created before the Civil War.⁸

Second, manuscript sources for Weeksville were relatively few. Before the Civil War, with few exceptions, Weeksville’s residents created almost no written documents. Adults in Weeksville placed a high value

on education, and they sent a high proportion of their children to the local school. But many of the first generation of Weeksville's adults were themselves unable to read or write. Except for the prolific journalism of educator and journalist Junius C. Morel and scattered works by ministers, Weeksville residents produced very few written sources before the Civil War.⁹

Instead of private manuscripts, this study relies heavily on public sources: newspapers, census records, deeds, assessments, wills, city directories, and Civil War pension records. Huge advances in online access to much of this material have aided this research immensely.

Newspapers deserve special mention. Before the Civil War, newspaper coverage of Weeksville was slim, primarily because Weeksville's separatism and independence made few blips on the radar of even vocal and powerful abolitionist presses. The *Brooklyn Eagle*, *New York Times*, and African American newspapers (such as Frederick Douglass's *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, and the *Christian Recorder*) carried only a few references to Weeksville. Of the two (and perhaps three) newspapers published in Weeksville itself, only one issue of one of them has ever been discovered.

After the Civil War, newspapers covered Weeksville more extensively. European American presses reflected three main perspectives: (1) developers and city planners worked to expand the grid system to Brooklyn's hills; (2) public school reformers (including Junius Morel, principal of Weeksville's Colored School No. 2; T. McCants Stewart, Weeksville resident and school board member; and Rufus L. Perry, Baptist minister and editor) debated how best to incorporate Weeksville's school into the larger Brooklyn school system; and (3) social reformers, both European American and African American, dealt with problems such as poverty, family disruption, old age, and crime, forming the local roots of the national Progressive reform movement. Police reports formed a fourth perspective, reporting on crime throughout Brooklyn, including Weeksville. Unless they dealt specifically with individuals who appeared elsewhere in the Weeksville story, I have not used these crime reports, and I have made no attempt to quantify them.

Newspaper articles demand critical analysis. Mainstream reporters generally reflected the view of people in the dominant European American culture. Much of the coverage in Weeksville in the *Brooklyn*

Eagle, for example, reflected the paper's Democratic politics, decidedly unsympathetic to African American independence. Some of the *Eagle's* coverage, however, particularly after the Civil War, was relatively straightforward, covering African American events and issues much as it reported activities of other Brooklyn citizens. African American newspapers such as the *Christian Recorder* and T. Thomas Fortune's *Globe* and *New York Age* provided particularly useful details.

Weeksville's virtual disappearance changed in 1966, when James Hurley, Joseph Haynes, and students at Pratt Institute rediscovered four frame houses on the old Hunterfly Road. (One, 1706–08 Hunterfly Road, burned in the 1970s and was reconstructed in 1990–91.) When the Model Cities Redevelopment Program project decided to demolish houses near the corner of Dean Street and Troy Avenue as part of a project to beautify Bedford-Stuyvesant, Jim Hurley, local residents (including William T. Harley), students from P.S. 243, participants in a government program called Youth in Action, and Boy Scouts from Troop 342 received permission to retrieve objects from the houses and yards around them. Out of this grew Project Weeksville and the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History, a community-based effort to discover and preserve Weeksville's history.¹⁰

Through Pratt Institute and the New York City Community College, Project Weeksville worked with Barbara Jackson and students in P.S. 243, promoted archaeological work, and supported Robert Swan's historical research. In 1970, student testimony, aided by Loren McMillan, director of Historic Richmond Town on Staten Island, convinced the city of New York to save these buildings from demolition and designate Weeksville a city landmark. Students from P.S. 243 raised the first eight hundred dollars toward the purchase of these houses.¹¹

The legendary Joan Maynard, executive director of the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History, created a remarkable grassroots effort that brought Weeksville to national attention. Under her direction, what seemed like the impossible task of preserving and restoring the Weeksville buildings became a reality. In 2003, Pam Green became Weeksville's second executive director. With Green's leadership, the renamed Weeksville Heritage Center extensively restored the houses on Hunterfly Road, opened them with furnished interiors in 2005, enhanced Weeksville's community service role (with

a farmers' market, concerts, and programs), and developed plans for a seven-million-dollar visitor center, completed in 2014.

As part of this immense process of preserving, restoring, and interpreting Weeksville's historic fabric, Pam Green received a Save America's Treasures grant to nominate the houses on Hunterfly Road to the National Register of Historic Places at the national level of significance. As a result of that work, the Weeksville houses are now listed on the National Register as the Hunterfly Road Historic District in New York, Kings County. This book began with extensive research for that National Register nomination, and its origins have shaped its current form. It focuses in part on the buildings of Weeksville, especially the remaining houses on Hunterfly Road. These houses are virtually intact examples of homes of free people of color in the urban North, continuously inhabited both by African Americans and European Americans from their construction until their acquisition by the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History in 1968.

But, as Ned Kaufman argued, places without people and story lose their meaning. To understand the historic meaning of these buildings, this book is a social history, highlighting the stories of people who created this community. These houses help tell the stories of families who represent the development of Weeksville from a thriving pre-Civil War African American community (1835–65) to its gradual absorption after the Civil War into the city of Brooklyn.¹²

The significance of these houses depends on when, where, and by whom they were built. If they were built before the Civil War, they represent Weeksville when it was predominantly an African American community. African Americans formed 82 percent of Weeksville's population in both 1840 and 1850. By 1865, however, African Americans formed only 33 percent of Weeksville's population. So if these houses were built after the Civil War, they were most likely constructed as rental housing in a predominately European American community.

Determining construction dates for these houses is not easy. On the one hand, architectural evidence strongly suggests a construction date before the Civil War. The basic style of these houses (with their gables parallel to the street), together with some of the physical details (including heavy timber framing, hand-wrought nails as well as cut nails, central chimneys, and interior fireplaces) indicate a construction

date before 1850. To complicate matters, each house is different in form, supporting the idea that they were constructed by different people from different cultural hearths (including New England, South Carolina, and the Chesapeake) at different times. Interestingly, none echoes the predominant Dutch cultural forms of houses in the surrounding area. But each shares features common to the others (beaded molding, for example) suggesting that the houses were related to each other “by finish, framing, or form” and constructed, as architectural historian Edward Chappell hypothesized, “in a single era.”¹³

In contrast to architectural evidence, archaeological materials, maps, and assessment records suggest that no houses were located on this site before the 1860s. The earliest artifact recovered from archaeological digs was a bottle manufactured between 1857 and 1870 under the cellar of 1698 Bergen Street, so that no house could have been located earlier on that site. Most artifacts date to the 1870s and later. The 1869 map by Matthew Dripps supports this hypothesis.¹⁴

There is also a third hypothesis, one that reconciles the conflict between architectural and archaeological evidence. In fact, these houses were built before 1860 but moved to their current location after the Civil War. Two written sources support this conclusion. First, the *Brooklyn Eagle* published a list of property sold in 1863 by the estate of real estate investor Samuel Bouton. This list described the property purchased by Frederick Volckening on the current Hunterfly Road site only as “lots” without houses. Second, Volckening’s tax assessment included only empty lots on this site until 1874. All three extant Hunterfly Road houses were, in fact, almost certainly built by and for African Americans before 1860 and moved to their current location by German-born carpenter Frederick Volckening in the early 1870s. Moving buildings was common in the nineteenth century, and we know that extensive earthmoving took place in Weeksville after the Civil War, as developers filled in a local pond, built sewers and sidewalks, and leveled out the rugged terrain.¹⁵

As they struggled to build a community and assert their rights as free Americans, Weeksville’s citizens created and constantly re-created a positive African American identity. They participated in every major national effort against slavery and for equal rights for free people of color, including the black convention movement, voting rights

campaigns, the Underground Railroad, the Civil War, resistance to the draft riots in New York City, and Freedman's schools. After the Civil War, they developed an African American professional class and helped promote a variety of social service activities. They also created a remarkable school—one that whites as well as blacks attended. As a separate independent African American community, Weeksville also showed a persistent connection with emigration, especially emigration to Liberia.

This book is organized both chronologically and topically. Chapter 1 outlines issues of slavery, freedom, and economic development in the Brooklyn area between the American Revolution and Weeksville's origins in the 1830s. Chapter 2 outlines Weeksville's development before 1860, the high point of its existence as an independent black community. Chapter 3 traces specific events during the 1850s and 1860s, as Weeksville residents were caught up in increasingly dramatic debates over slavery, emigration, and Civil War. Chapter 4 outlines debates over Weeksville's school, the emergence of an orphanage and home for the aged, and the growing importance of women as leaders, as Weeksville merged into a multiethnic neighborhood, forming local roots of the emerging state and national Progressive movement. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss physical changes in Weeksville, as Brooklyn's grid gradually absorbed the old landscape. Chapter 7 discusses twentieth-century changes in Weeksville's built environment, as well as the rediscovery of the historic community in the 1960s. Each chapter includes brief biographies of one or more of Weeksville's families including the Weeks, Morel, Graham-LeGrant, and Bundick families, with vignettes of many of Weeksville's most famous national figures. And each chapter also focuses on the changing neighborhood of the houses on Hunterfly Road.

Today, the Weeksville Heritage Center and the small houses along the old Hunterfly Road bear witness to a community whose founders believed that African Americans, as Americans, are created equal. The dominant European American culture had guaranteed to every citizen the "inalienable right" to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Yet, ironically, in order to assert their rights as American citizens, people in Weeksville had to set up their own community—not in Liberia, Canada, or Haiti—but on the outskirts of Brooklyn, in the margins of a space created by European Americans.

Weeksville's founders saw themselves as American citizens, and they wanted homes on American soil. From the beginning, they viewed this community as a base for physical safety, economic prosperity, education, and political power in America. Only by withdrawing from dominant-culture communities could they live out what many would call the American dream. Only by creating a separate space could they explore the full meaning of freedom.