Memorandum to File Describing Initial Research on Lefferts Historic House (LHH)

Background

New York Appleseed supports parent-organizing efforts at schools and community school districts. In 2017 New York Appleseed and its partner IntegrateNYC4me began supporting an emerging parent organizing effort called Live Here, Learn Here in community school district 17 (District 17). District 17 comprises most of what is known as central Brooklyn. Its schools are predominantly African American. Using funds from a donor who wanted her donation to support work in Brooklyn, New York Appleseed and IntegrateNYC4me facilitated an oral history project around schools in District 17 that culminated in June.

District 17 also includes all of Prospect Park in which LHH now sits (in the park's so-called Children's Corner). LHH is a structure originally built in 1783 in Flatbush and moved in 1918 a short distance to the edge of the park. It is operated jointly by the Prospect Park Alliance (PPA) and the Historic House Trust of New York City (HHT) as an educational resource for children. LHH is advertised and interpreted as the homestead of the Lefferts family without reference to other occupants. In a visit to LHH in April 2017, I also learned that enslaved individuals also lived in the house. Although permanent exhibits at LHH make generic references to slavery in Kings County and a few references to the Lefferts family's ownership of enslaved persons, there is no indication that the house was also occupied by anyone but the Lefferts.

Live Here, Learn Here has initiated a partnership with Weeksville Heritage Society (WHS) as part of its efforts to address issues of race and privilege in District 17. WHS commemorates the community of free African Americans that created a community called Weeksville in current-day Crown Heights (also in District 17). Live Here, Learn Here is supporting three community conversations at the WHS In the fall of 2017.

In a June 2017 meeting with WHS, Kelly Bare from LHLH and I reported to outgoing WHS president Tia Powell Harris and Obden Mondésir, WHS oral history associate, that the City Council had recently allocated $2.5 million for a restoration of LHH and that this influx of capital may represent an opportunity to push for an interpretative plan at the house that covers both sets of occupants -- free and unfree -- who lived in LHH. With the enthusiastic encouragement of Ms. Powell Harris, I approached Councilmember Brad Lander in hope of getting a meeting with representatives of PPA. In the resulting meeting, Maria Carrasco, vice president for public programs at PPA agreed to work with WHS, Live Here, Learn Here, and Appleseed towards some new interpretive strategies. A rough summary of this meeting is attached.

This memorandum summarizes my findings on LLH, the Lefferts family, and slavery in Kings County with a view towards an advocacy strategy.

Key Findings

- The official explanations of LHH's interpretive goals vacillate between the extremely broad and imprecise ("an environmental history lens to interpret the changing relationships of people to the land over the course of 300 years"[1]) and the highly specific when it comes to the Lefferts family as occupants and owners of the house.
- As a result, the current interpretive strategy honors the Lefferts as occupants of LHH and omits to mention the other people who lived in the house, even though these enslaved individuals probably outnumbered the Lefferts family members at times.
- The structure that was moved to Prospect Park in 1918 and that is currently maintained by PPA and HHT does not represent "300 years" of history, but a specific period of history -- the time when the house was built in approximately 1783 until the 1850s when the house was significantly expanded - overlapping in significant part with the period in which the institution of slavery was at its height in Kings County.
- The current interpretive strategy addresses slavery in Kings County generally, but largely fails to explain the fact that the Lefferts were some of the largest slaveholders in Kings County, that the Lefferts actively traded in enslaved persons, and that the Lefferts doubled down on slavery in the post-revolutionary-war period when many in New York State were doing the opposite.
- Interpretation of slavery for children presents challenges and hazards. Many of these challenges can be addressed by juxtaposing the narrative of enslavement with the narrative of active resistance offered by WHS.

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On the one hand, PPA chooses to use LHH as part of a much larger investigation of "environmental history" and the "changing relationships of people to the land over the course of 300 years."[2] "This allows us to hone [*sic*] in on specific historic periods from the past, including the time of slavery in New York, as well as, other periods that help us tell the story of the people that helped shape the Brooklyn of today," explains the overview prepared by PPA for Councilmember Lander. The immediate area around LHH in the Children's Corner, for example, has reconstructed dwellings that would presumably have been used by people during other periods of history.

This "lens," while not necessarily inappropriate conceptually, has in practice fostered confusion about the role of the Lefferts homestead structure as preserved and situated in Prospect Park, the Lefferts family, the time periods interpreted, and the relationship among all three. Some of the PPA and HHT website materials suggest that that the Lefferts were a typical Kings County family living by itself in a typical Kings County dwelling and that LHH somehow stands for the entirety of the Lefferts family

[1] "LHHM Overview 6 10 17 for Brad Lander," document prepared by PPA for Councilmember Lander following my conversation with him.
[2] Overview.

history in Kings County. In fact, many of the materials seem to blur the distinction between the entire Lefferts family and the specific structure built by Peter Lefferts and now preserved in Prospect Park.

The PPA website, for example, indicates the structure was "[b]uilt by a Dutch family in the 18th-century farming village of Flatbush." In fact, the descendants of Pieter Janse Hagewout that became known on Long Island as the Lefferts were not just "a family," but one of the most extraordinary families in early Kings County. "Dutch family" is a misleading, since the Lefferts had been established for well over 120 years at the time LHH was built.[3] Peter Lefferts, who oversaw, the construction of LHH, was as American as apple pie, having served as a first lieutenant in the Flatbush militia in 1776 and as a delegate to the 1788 New York Constitutional Convention.[4] The Brooklyn Historical Society refers to the Lefferts straightforwardly as "an American family."[5] The house - better understood as a mansion or plantation house - was likely built, at least in part, by enslaved persons and was once situated on 240 acres.[6] Evincing even more outrageously the tendency to conflate family and structure and confuse historical eras, the HHT website presents LHH as "one of a small number of farmhouses surviving from Brooklyn's Dutch settlement period."[7]

At other times, however, PPA, LHH, and HHT can be quite specific about LHH as *the homestead of the Lefferts family* built at a particular moment in time. An invitation to click on a "history," link on the LHH webpage of the PPA website takes the visitor to a paragraph exclusively on the Lefferts family history and the history of the structure. The HHT website describes the house as a "museum of family life in Brooklyn in the 1820s." LHH includes period rooms furnished exactly as the Lefferts had them.

Regrettably, LHH's vacillation between *a broad historical scope and imprecision* with regard to the LHH's meaning and era and *specificity* about the Lefferts as owners and occupants of the house ultimately serves to confuse the Lefferts family history with the specific history of the structure and therefore to obfuscate the specific meaning of the house as a distinctly American structure built at a particular moment in American history,[8] to elevate the Lefferts' family history above other possible histories offered by the structure, and to elide the histories of other the occupants of the house and the Lefferts' specific role in their enslavement.

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[3] BBH, "An American Famil y Grows in Brooklyn," http://www.brooklynhistory.org/exhibitions/lefferts/introduction/.
[4] BBH, "An American Family," http://www.brooklynhistory.org/exhibitions/lefferts/the-lefferts-clan/peter-and-john-lefferts/.
[5] BBH.
[6] Wellman, 22.
[7] http://historichousetrust.org/house/lefferts-historic-house-museum/.
[8] For an excellent description of how distinctly late-eighteenth-century-American LLH is, see Daniel Bluestone, "Dutch Homesteads in Modern Brooklyn" in *Buildings, Landscapes and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation*, (W. W. Norton, 2011), p. 80-81.

The current interpretive strategy honors the Lefferts as occupants of LHH and omits to mention the other people who lived in the house.

It was common in Kings County for enslaved persons to live in the same house with their owners,[9] and PPA does not dispute that people enslaved by the Lefferts lived in LHH. As a result of the shifting vagueness and ambiguity about LHH's meaning and era and specificity with regard to the Lefferts family, the visitor to LHH today, however, learns about only one set of people that lived in the structure. Between 2010 and April 2017 I have visited LHH probably scores of times with my young children. Although I have taken courses on issues relating to the interpretation of plantations in the South and was well aware of the persistence of slavery in New York State, I never in all my visits understood that enslaved persons lived with the Lefferts in LHH. None of the permanent exhibits in LHH make mention of this fact. This is significant given that most visitors' experience of LHH is self-guided.

This interpretive choice honors one set of occupants over the others even though enslaved persons represented the majority of people living in the house. While Peter Lefferts, who oversaw the original construction of LHH, was alive, there were eight Leffertses and 12 enslaved persons living in the house at one time.[10]

The specific structure that was moved to Prospect Park in 1918 and currently maintained by PPA and HHT does not represent "300 years" of history, but a specific period of history -- the time when the house was built in approximately 1783 to the 1850s - overlapping in significant part with the period in which the institution of slavery was at its height in Kings County.

As scholar Daniel Bluestone points out, by deciding against moving the 1850s-era wing of the Lefferts homestead to Prospect Park in 1918, preservationists made a decision not to honor LHH's evolution and resulting structural accretions; they opted instead for the building's original, "pure Dutch" appearance.[11] These preservationists specifically rejected the opportunity to "measure the changing standards of domestic space between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries and helped them see how people had earlier adapted historic houses for changing needs." To the contrary, "Prospect Park introduced a strain of discontinuity between the Lefferts homestead and its place in Flatbush history."[12] In other words, by honoring architecture over site and original appearance over structural evolution, preservationists in 1918 specifically rejected the kind of "environmental history lens" now used by PPA.

As such, LHH represents an approximately 75-year period in the history of the Lefferts homestead at most. As described above, however, the current interpretive program, conflates the long history of the family with the structure -- almost as if LHH were still in its undisturbed homestead context. If PPA is now using the structure to "interpret the changing relationships of people to the land over the course of 300 years," then it is imperative to be clear that the LHH does not represent

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[9] "The slaveholder and enslaved often lived under the same roof or in close quarters," http://pursuitoffreedom.org/gradual-emancipation/.
[10] Wellman, 22.
[11] Bluestone, quoting from an contemporaneous article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. 102.
[12] Bluestone, 102.

continuity over 300 years, but instead signifies a *particular and deliberately selected* stage in those changing relationships of people to the land, to domestic space, and to each other.

That particular stage in the history of the Lefferts' family and homestead was *the period of the last rise and fall of slavery in Kings County* - the period during which the Lefferts and other Kings County families doubled down on the institution of slavery even as the rest of the state and other urban areas in the North moved towards emancipation.[13]

The current interpretive strategy addresses slavery in Kings County generally, but largely fails to explain the fact that the Lefferts were some of the largest slaveholders in Kings County, that the Lefferts actively traded in enslaved persons, and that the Lefferts doubled down on slavery in the post-revolutionary-war period when many in New York State were doing the opposite.

As demonstrated in the "LHHM Overview" prepared for Councilmember Lander, LHH does not shy away from the realities of slavery in Kings County. Notwithstanding specificity about the Lefferts in other contexts, however, LHH contains only a few mentions of the Lefferts' intensive participation in enslaving and trading in human beings. In fact, the Lefferts clan was "one of Kings County's biggest slaveholding families," which "derived much of their wealth from the labor of enslaved people."[14] The Leffertses engaged actively in the "trade, sale, and purchase of enslaved people up until emancipation was enacted in New York in 1827."[15]

Although many in New York State (including both the enslaved and the enslavers)[16] were troubled by the tensions between the ideals of freedom expressed in the American Revolution and the persistence of slavery, the Lefferts and other slaveholders in Kings County doubled down on slavery due to the importance and profitability of agriculture in Kings County in the post-Revolution period. In 1790 "African Americans accounted for over 30% of Kings County's population."[17] All but 46 of them (1478) were enslaved. Despite the trend to emancipation across the state as a whole, by 1820 that number had only dropped to 879.[18]

At the historical moment LHH was built, slavery was actually growing as an institution in Kings County -- even as an abolitionist movement was gathering momentum across the state, in New York

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[13] The failure to be historically specific about the period represented by LHH may have something to do with the alarmingly inaccurate information about slavery in NYS contained in the "Overview" prepared by PPA for Councilmember Lander in response to New York Appleseed's inquiries. The four-page document contains multiple inaccuracies (including a reference to slavery ending in New York State in 1799 (it was actually 1827), a reference to "July 5, 1779, the Gradual Emancipation Act that freed enslaved Africans in New York," (The Gradual Emancipation Act was enacted in 1799, not 1779, and did not free any enslaved Africans currently living in New York. A separate 1817 law emancipated enslaved individuals as of July *4*, 1827. Freed African Americans chose to celebrate emancipation on July *5*, 1827, Louise Mirrer, James Oliver Horton and Richard Rabinowitz, "Happy Fifth of July, New York!," *NY Times*, July 3, 2005, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9906EEDA1531F930A35754C0A9639C8B63).

[14] Brooklyn Historical Society, "An American Family Grows in Brooklyn."

[15] "An American Family..."; "Slaveholding families that became wealthy during this period included the Lefferts," In Pursuit of Freedom, http://pursuitoffreedom.org/gradual-emancipation/.

[16] Judith Wellman, *Brooklyn's Promised Land: The Free Black Community of Weeksville, New York*, pp. 35-6.

[17] "An American Family..."

[18] Wellman, 37.

City, and in nearby Brooklyn. "Following the American Revolution," according to WHS's Pursuit of Freedom exhibit, "slavery actually strengthened in Kings County, unlike neighboring Manhattan, Philadelphia, and Boston. Enslaved labor was essential to the county's growing agricultural economy and prosperity." Even though New York State enacted the law for gradual abolition in 1799 and a second 1817 law abolishing slavery in the state as of 1827, Peter's son, John Lefferts actually increased his numbers of enslaved people from 5 in 1810 to 8 in 1820.[19]

Interpretation of slavery for children presents challenges and hazards. Many of these challenges can be addressed by juxtaposing the narrative of enslavement with the narrative of "active and creative resistance" offered by WHS.

Our discussions with PPA and my visits to the Wyckoff House Museum and the Old Stone House in Brooklyn confirm that the presentation of slavery in Kings County for children is fraught with difficulty. Presenting only the horrors of slavery risks telling a story of "passive helplessness."[20] Yet presenting enslaved persons as living fulfilling lives or "contributing" to "the transformation of Brooklyn" can trivialize the gravity of the crime.[21] What is needed, as scholar Judith Wellman points out, is a counter-narrative of "active and creative resistance" by African Americans to the reality of slavery.[22]

Fortunately, the history of African Americans in Kings County readily supplies this narrative. According to WHS's Pursuit of Freedom exhibit:

> "Gradual emancipation lasted 28 years and there was no guarantee of equality at its end. But as long as slavery existed so did the desire to be free and enslaved people found ways to resist their oppression. They were assisted by a small, but significant, free black community who resided in the town of Brooklyn. These pioneers represented the first wave of anti-slavery activists."

The community of free African Americans emerging at Weeksville, Brooklyn in the 1830s is perhaps the shining example of "active and creative resistance" to the reality and legacy of slavery in Kings County.

The histories of LHH and Weeksville are impossible to separate. As Wellman points out, the stubborn persistence of slavery and slaveholders like the Lefferts in Kings County well into the 1820s was the "geographic and social context for what would become the village of Weeksville."[23] "Weeksville represented a refusal to live … 'in the shadow of slavery.'"[24] More specifically, James Weeks purchased part of the old 240-acre Lefferts estate (land presumably once worked by enslaved persons) to create Weeksville. The sale of the land by the Lefferts to the African Americans who created Weeksville was not an accident of history, but all part of the same emancipation story. As one of LHH's exhibits correctly implies, emancipation in 1827 forced the Lefferts to change the way they could profit from

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[19] *Of Cabbages and Kings County: Agriculture and the Formation of Modern Brooklyn*, p. 83.
[20] Wellman, 37.
[21] PPA overview.
[22] Wellman, 37.
[23] Wellman, 37.
[24] Wellman quoting Leslie Harris, 41.

their land and the types of crops they grew.[25] Emancipation probably also occasioned land sales by the Lefferts family beginning in 1829 and continuing throughout the nineteenth century.[26]

[25] Lander Overview. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the death of Peter Lefferts' son John in 1829 must also have contributed to these historical developments.
[26] Wellman, 33.