

1995

Bedford-Stuyvesant

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Recommended Citation

Charles, M. A. (1995). Bedford-Stuyvesant. In *The Encyclopedia of New York City*. First Edition. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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The Encyclopedia of New York City

Ferry down the main road, which was close to Fulton Street, and Hunterfly Road. After the Battle of Long Island the area was invaded by English troops. Later it became gradually transformed as farmland was divided into housing lots and sold to new arrivals. As early as 1790 more than a quarter of the residents were blacks (mostly slaves). The Lefferts family bought land from the Lambertses, who became prominent developers in the area. Leffert Lefferts became a judge and town clerk in Bedford after he graduated from King's College, and his family was among the first to sell land to blacks. In 1835 John Lefferts sold the land that became known as Weeksville to Henry C. Thompson, a free black; Carrsville was built on the land bought in 1832 by another free black, William Thomas. These transactions and others affected the ethnic composition of Bedford, which by 1834 was also referred to as Bedford Corners.

The neighborhood was the site of a station of the Brooklyn and Jamaica Railroad (forerunner of the Long Island Rail Road), which was constructed in 1836 and traversed Atlantic Street (now Atlantic Avenue). Its population reached fourteen thousand in 1873 and included Irish, Germans, Jews, Scots, Dutch, and blacks. The ethnic diversity of the neighborhood was reflected in the names of its institutions: the Jewish Hospital, the Colored Orphans Asylum, St. John's Episcopal Church, and St. Mary's Hospital. The opening of the elevated railway (about 1885) and the Brooklyn Bridge (1903) linked the area more closely with Manhattan and spurred the construction of brownstones and the growth of new neighborhoods called East Brooklyn, New Brooklyn, and St. Marks (all in what is now Bedford-Stuyvesant). At the turn of the century Bedford Corners and particularly Stuyvesant Avenue attracted residents from the middle and upper classes, including the retailing entrepreneurs F. W. Woolworth and Abraham Abraham. More than 45,000 persons lived in the neighborhood in 1920.

As the population continued to grow, brownstones that had formerly housed one family were subdivided into several units. The opening of the municipal subway system in 1936 gave the neighborhood a new link to Manhattan. The neighborhood attracted large numbers of eastern European Jews, Italians, and later blacks from the South and the Caribbean, many of whom settled in the western section. As the population rose the communities of Bedford and Stuyvesant Heights became one large area of black settlement, and the neighborhood acquired its current name. By 1940 it had more than 65,000 black residents, and members of other ethnic groups left. Organizations were established to give financial and social assistance to blacks, among them the Paragon Progressive Federal Credit Union, formed by F. Levi and other

West Indians in 1937. Black churches moved to Stuyvesant Avenue and other parts of the neighborhood and worked with the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and other institutions to fight racial discrimination, segregation, and poverty, but inadequate housing and unemployment persisted and impoverished the neighborhood. At the same time residents began to exert a stronger political influence, and in 1968 they elected Shirley B. Chisholm to the U.S. Congress, where she was the first black woman to serve. Senator Robert F. Kennedy's visit to the neighborhood in the late 1960s inspired his support for the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. The Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History was formed in 1971 to commemorate the role that blacks played in developing the neighborhood, and the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Plaza, which includes the Billie Holiday Theater, was completed in 1976. The 1980s saw large-scale settlement of black immigrants from the Caribbean, primarily Guyana, Jamaica, and Barbados, and to a lesser extent Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Bedford-Stuyvesant is the largest black neighborhood in New York City. Although it has considerable poverty and some badly deteriorated housing in the northeastern section, its reputation as a slum is largely undeserved: most of the neighborhood consists of well-maintained brownstone and brickfront housing built in the early twentieth century. Among the historic features of Bedford-Stuyvesant are the Weeksville Historic District, the Stuyvesant Heights Historic District, and the Brooklyn Children's Museum (built in 1899). Boys High School (1891) is an enormous, striking terra-cotta building in a Romanesque Revival style; among those who attended the school were Isaac Asimov and Norman Mailer. The population of Bedford-Stuyvesant is 85 percent black, 13 percent Latin American, and 1 percent white.

Mary H. Manoni: *Bedford-Stuyvesant: The Anatomy of a Central City Community* (New York: Quadrangle / New York Times Books, 1973)

David Ment and Mary S. Donovan: *The People of Brooklyn: A History of Two Neighborhoods* (New York: Brooklyn Educational and Cultural Alliance, 1980)

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Bedford-Stuyvesant. Neighborhood in north central Brooklyn (1990 pop. 135,000), bounded to the north by Flushing Avenue, to the east by Broadway and Saratoga Avenue, to the south by Atlantic Avenue, and to the west by Classon Avenue. Before 1977 it extended as far south as Eastern Parkway. Its name is derived from those of two middle-class communities in nineteenth-century Brooklyn — Bedford (to the west) and Stuyvesant Heights (to the east) — and is often abbreviated as Bed-Stuy. In the 1630s and 1640s the Dutch West India Company purchased from the Canarsee Indians the woodlands that became Bedford, a community recognized by the English governor Richard Nicolls in 1677. Its central location between the towns of Bushwick, Jamaica, and Flatbush influenced the farmer Thomas Lambertse to build a public inn in 1668. Seventeenth-century Bedford was a farming hamlet inhabited by Dutch families and African slaves. Farmers carted surplus goods, to be sold in neighboring communities, to the Breuklen