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## SECTION III

### Land, Politics, and Anti-Slavery Protest Citizenship (1834-1846)

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#### Lesson 11

#### Weeksville: Safety and Independence

**Grade Level:** Middle & High School

**Objectives:**

Students will

- Understand how black New Yorkers intentionally founded the village of Weeksville in order to create a land-owning community of full citizens with voting rights.
- Write diary entries from the perspective of a new Weeksville resident.

**Time:** Two 50-minute class periods

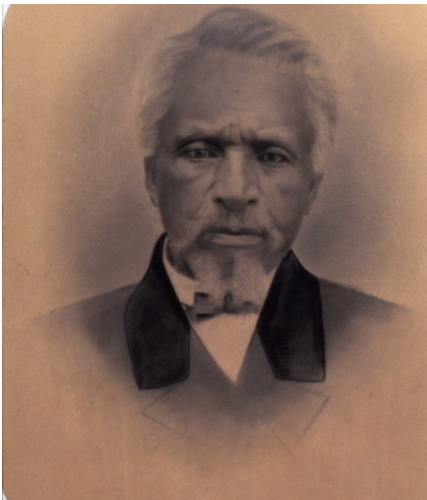
**Materials:**

- Worksheet 1: What's Happening in Weeksville?

**Background:**

Just one year following the Panic of 1837, free black New Yorkers intentionally founded the village of Weeksville in order to create a landowning community that would support them as full citizens with voting rights. As Brooklyn's property prices tumbled and wealthy white landowners (many who were former slave owners) began selling off their large, rural estates that they could no longer maintain, black land investors, such as Henry C. Thompson and Sylvanus Smith, bought portions of these at auctions and sold them to other black New Yorkers through advertisements in African-American newspapers. Although the investors never lived in the area that became Weeksville, their investments helped to produce one of New York's earliest and most successful free black communities.

Land acquisition by African Americans in the Ninth Ward, the most distant and secluded of Brooklyn's wards from the bustling downtown area, began as early as 1832. Three years later, Henry C. Thompson purchased 32 lots indirectly from John Lefferts' estate in the area; and in three more years, he sold two lots to James Weeks, an African-American longshoreman who resided in the area and for whom the area was named after. As a result, the independent African-American community of Weeksville emerged and thrived for the next few decades.



“African-Americans also created independent communities...The second largest, and the only one to have an urban rather than a rural economic base, was Weeksville, established in the 1830s four miles east of downtown Brooklyn. Weeksville’s African-American population reached 521 by 1855.”

—Judith Wellman, “African American Communities,” in Peter Hinks, John McKivigan, and R. Owen Williams (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition*. (Greenwood press, 2007), vol.1. pp. 23-28.



Top: *Sylvanus Smith*, ca. 1870. M1989.4.1. Brooklyn Historical Society.

Sylvanus Smith was one of the original seven land investors in Weeksville. Although he owned land in Weeksville, Smith lived in Brooklyn, near the Fulton Ferry landing.

Bottom: Detail from *Sidney's map of twelve miles around New York: with the names of property holders, &c. : from entirely new and original surveys*. J.C. Sidney. 1849. NYC-1849.FI.RA. Brooklyn Historical Society.

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# LESSON PROCEDURES

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1. Remind students that amendments to the New York State Constitution in 1821 required that black men in New York needed to own \$250.00 (\$5,102.04 in 2012 dollars) worth of property and live in the state for three years to be able to vote. White men had no property qualifications and only had to live in the state for one year.

Ask students the following questions:

- Why would the constitution be amended to include such a requirement?
- Predict the consequences of this action.

2. Place students in small groups and pose the following scenario: *It is 1838 and you are a group of black land investors in Brooklyn who are frustrated with voter discrimination and racial hostilities. After the Panic of 1837, property prices have been tumbling and it has come to your attention that wealthy white landowners are selling off large estates that they can no longer afford. Brainstorm how you could work together to help other free blacks acquire property and gain full citizenship (i.e. pooling resources together to buy and sell off plots of land to black families seeking the means to vote.)*

3. Have groups share their ideas. Explain to students that in 1838, just eleven years after the abolition of slavery in New York, black land investors, such as Henry C. Thompson and Sylvanus Smith, bought portions of estates from wealthy white landowners and sold them to other black New Yorkers. James Weeks, a free African American, purchased land from Henry C. Thompson, marking the establishment of Weeksville, a village of free African Americans. Ask students the following questions:

- What will free blacks moving to Weeksville need in order to thrive and preserve their freedom?
- What types of places should the community of Weeksville have in order to meet the needs of free blacks who move there?

4. Tell students that Weeksville's residents participated in anti-slavery activities and established schools, an orphanage and elderly home, churches, benevolent associations, and newspapers.

5. Distribute **Worksheet 1: What's Happening in Weeksville?**

Ask student groups to read the worksheet together and discuss the following questions:

- What kinds of institutions did Weeksville residents establish?
- How did acquiring property help the residents of Weeksville challenge discrimination and racial hostilities in Brooklyn?
- What other benefits (besides citizenship) might result in establishing a community in Weeksville?
- What challenges might result?

6. Have students write a diary entry from the perspective of a new Weeksville resident. Entries should include specific details about daily life in this free black community. Allow time for students to share their entries with the class. Visit [www.weeksvillesociety.org](http://www.weeksvillesociety.org) for more information.

## Linking Past and Present

- Have students investigate the Statement of Community District Needs for Community Board 8, the geographic district that encompasses historical Weeksville (available at <http://www.brooklyncb8.org/needs-statement.php>). Using what they learned about the Weeksville community in the 19th century, ask students to design a plan for a community service project based upon the stated needs.