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A House Museum Has a New Message: New York Had Slavery, Too

Reopening after years of restoration, the Lefferts Historic House in Brooklyn now also acknowledges the enslaved people who lived and worked there.

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The Lefferts Historic House in Brooklyn, which recently underwent a \$2.5 million architectural restoration. The focus of its exhibits and programs is changing, too. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

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By Laurel Graeber

June 22, 2023

In 1765, a young woman named Flora came to live on the Lefferts family farm in what is now the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. Skilled in treating illnesses with medicinal herbs and in preparing and preserving food, she took charge of the farmhouse's kitchen, planning daily meals on the 250-acre property.

But Flora was property, too. Her record of enslavement is one of 25 personal histories recently unearthed by ReImagine Lefferts, an initiative dedicated to redefining the identity of the Lefferts Historic House in Prospect Park. This Brooklyn institution, which consists of the homestead where Flora worked — it was burned during the American Revolution, rebuilt in 1783 and relocated to the park's east side in 1917 — was originally a monument to the Lefferts family, prosperous Dutch immigrants who arrived in the 1660s.

"The house is this very large artifact, landmarked artifact, of a pretty brutal history," Dylan Yeats, the ReImagine Lefferts project coordinator, said in a recent interview inside the building. When it became a museum in the early 20th century, he added, "it was about fancy antiques and beautiful decorations."



A view of the Lefferts house in 1919, two years after it was moved to Prospect Park. Credit...Prospect Park Archives/Bob Levine Collection

HESSE FLATOW

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Now, as part of a larger movement among house museums that reflects the influence of Black Lives Matter, the Lefferts estate is acknowledging a more shameful side of its past. Along with museum groups like the [Northern Slavery Collective](#) and initiatives including [DyckmanDiscovered](#), at the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum in Manhattan, ReImagine Lefferts reminds New Yorkers that the North had slavery, too.

Drawing from primary sources that include the [New York City Municipal Archives](#) and the [Lefferts family papers](#), ReImagine Lefferts has been constructing biographies of previously unacknowledged residents like Flora, who is believed to have died on the farm in 1817, and Grace, who was born into slavery there in 1802. (New York State did not abolish slavery until 1827.) Through the initiative's continuing work, the museum will feature contemporary art, historical exhibits and public programs that are inspired not only by enslaved Africans but also by the Lenape, the region's Indigenous inhabitants.

"It's a new definition of what a museum should or could entail," said Morgan Monaco, the park administrator and president of the [Prospect Park Alliance](#), which operates the Lefferts museum with the [Historic House Trust](#).

Last month, the museum celebrated the completion of a [\\$2.5 million architectural restoration](#) of the house, funded by the City Council. The building, which has been closed since 2019, now has a refurbished exterior, structural reinforcements and a new shingled roof, meticulously recreated in the 18th-century Dutch style.



The north side of the house before it was closed in 2019 for restoration. Credit...via Lefferts Historic House Museum

HESSE FLATOW

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The roof as it was being replaced. The new cedar shingles are arranged in the original style. Credit...via Lefferts Historic House Museum

Although the house, which offers free admission, has not yet reopened, it is hosting special outdoor events. On Sunday, Steelpan Day, a festival of music of the West Indian diaspora, will unfold on the lawn, and on July 2, Rise in Spirit: Emancipation Celebration will offer music, dance, theater and games.

The museum's plan is to have "more contemplative type of experiences indoors, very active experiences outdoors," said Maria Carrasco, the vice president for public programs at the alliance.

On July 8, regular programs on the museum's grounds will resume, and on Aug. 1, for a celebration of J'Ouvert, the holiday heralding emancipation in the Caribbean, the house itself will open for an exhibition. In addition, Adama Delphine Fawundu, who works in

HESSE FLATOW

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photography and multimedia, will be the museum's first artist in residence. She drew the museum's attention with "[In the Face of History, Freedom Cape, 2020](#)," a photographic self-portrait in which she stands in front of the Lefferts house, wearing a paper cape printed with documents illustrating African American women's contributions to voting rights. When she begins her six-month residency in July — the goal is to have two resident artists annually — she will use the rediscovered Lefferts histories as creative inspiration.

"Giving those to artists to sort of reflect on, visually and creatively, is the idea," Yeats said, "as well as to signal to the surrounding communities, 'We're doing something different here.'"

Image



A view through the back door of the house, which is also the visitors' entrance.
Credit...Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

HESSE FLATOW

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This remaining exhibit shows a linen sheet from a family related to the Leffertses. Future exhibits will point out how much domestic work was done by enslaved people in such households. Credit... Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Before the restoration, the Lefferts house catered mostly to families; children could plant potatoes, harvest flax, play with reproduced artifacts and see how linen was woven. Although, more than 20 years ago, the museum began to acknowledge that the Leffertses owned slaves, it did not identify who, for instance, might have stitched the fine linen garments the family wore. (A reproduction of a man's shirt from the early 19th century is in the house.)

"The viewpoint now," Carrasco said, speaking of future exhibits and visitor information, "is this is a person that was owned by the Leffertses, that lived here in Brooklyn and who's probably buried at the Flatbush African Burial Ground."

ReImagine Lefferts and its partners, including the [Flatbush African Burial Ground Coalition](#) and the [Weeksville Heritage Center](#), envision the museum as becoming a community center as well, hosting speaker panels, symposiums and meetings on neighborhood issues. The initiative is also [surveying city residents](#) to ask what they

HESSE FLATOW

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would like to see inside the house, with a view toward installing new exhibits in 2024. To make the museum still welcoming to families, Monaco said, the displays will not focus on oppressed people's suffering, but on "their legacy and the resilience of their stories."

Shanna Sabio, who is on the board of the burial ground coalition and an adviser to ReImagine Lefferts, said an installation might ask young visitors to consider what they might have done at the time to help Isaac, an enslaved man who escaped the Lefferts farm after less than three months, taking along family members who were in bondage nearby.

"Allowing people to see themselves as possible agents in the shaping of history," Sabio said, can "make history more personal."

Another project adviser, George Stonefish, a Lenape elder and organizer, would like the museum to teach how much the Dutch residents depended on Indigenous people for sustenance. He has suggested planting the so-called three sisters — corn, squash and beans — in the Lefferts garden and inviting the public to the museum for powwows and artisan demonstrations that highlight Lenape culture.

"We're not something that you see in a museum behind glass that looks pretty, and you say, 'Oh, they did that?'" Stonefish said. "Oh, no. We do that *now*. We need to have that message."

Image



The second floor has not yet been restored. The back staircase leads to small rooms that are thought to have been living spaces for enslaved people; one of the museum's goals is to open them to the public. Credit...Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

HESSE FLATOW

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In what was originally the house's kitchen, the restoration process revealed beadwork on the underside of a ceiling joist. The museum is conducting research to determine whether this was made by people enslaved by the Lefferts family. Credit...Andrea Mohin/The New York Times



In the attic, a chimney with a double flue. The house's venting system and tiny pieces of animal fat detected in the plaster reveal that this space was used to smoke meat, a technique that was practiced by enslaved Africans. Credit... Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

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In December, ReImagine Lefferts was awarded a \$275,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation to develop new exhibits and programs. The museum has also received \$625,000 in state funds to continue work on the house, which is yielding its own secrets. During the initial restoration, the team working with Assya Plavskina, the alliance's construction supervisor for historic preservation, discovered what appear to be a decorative finish and carved beading on the underside of a ceiling joist in the house's kitchen. Where servants worked, "it would have been not typical to ornament the spaces," Plavskina said, which suggests that enslaved Africans might have created the details.

Work in the attic also revealed a chimney venting system for smoking meat, a culinary technique enslaved people practiced. "In the cross-section of the plaster here," Plavskina said, "you can see remnants of animal fat."

The museum intends to conduct further research on those spaces, as well as restore other rooms where enslaved people lived and worked that until now have been used for administrative purposes. Eventually, Carrasco said, the initiative hopes to find descendants of the farm's enslaved Africans and invite their involvement in museum programs.

Systemic racism "is continuously being felt," Carrasco said. But, she added, "if you don't recognize its beginnings, it's hard to end it." ReImagine Lefferts, she said, "is a way to start that conversation."

Lefferts Historic House


452 Flatbush Ave, Brooklyn; prospectpark.org.



Enslaved People Lived Here. These Museums Want You to Know.

June 26, 2019

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