

Brooklyn's varied past revealed at history fair

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By Matthew Sweeney
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At the Brooklyn Public Library History Fair on Thursday, more than 3,000 students learned that there's more beneath your feet than asphalt and concrete.

As his fourth grade students swarmed around a display of artifacts recovered from the waters off Brooklyn, PS 9 teacher Larry Goldberg took in the surroundings of the third annual fair at the Main Branch of the BPL at Grand Army Plaza.

"It's an excellent exhibit," Goldberg said. "You can see by the faces of the children."

The classes will follow up on the fair during the week, using guides, lesson plans, lists of books and historic facts about Brooklyn developed by the Library, the Borough President's Office, Borough Historian Professor John Manbeck, and the Brooklyn Coordinating Council.

The students, however, had their own understanding of the exhibits on the various neighborhoods and cultures that have created Brooklyn's history.

"People from other countries bring different stuff to New York City to show each other what country they came from," said Bobby Pittman, a 4th grader at PS 9. "They get to see stuff they've never seen before."

Several of the 44 exhibits gave attention to the Colonial and Revolutionary War era in Brooklyn.

"I didn't know exactly what this was going to be, but when I came in I just said 'Wow'," said Barabara Omalade, a professor of history at City College.

Omalade, who said she has a

particular interest in the 18th century, was visiting the fair with her son, Krishna, 12, whom she is home schooling.

"If you dig deep enough all of these neighborhoods have rich histories," she said. "There has been an attempt to preserve a lot of the colonial areas, and it's all coming together here."

Ron Schweiger, a teacher at PS 129 in Brownsville, led an exhibit on the history of Clarkson Avenue with fifth grader Edward Roberts.

According to Schweiger, one of the most fascinating topics for students was the fact that there had been slaves in Brooklyn. Most, he said, thought slavery had only existed in the South. Sammy Anderson, the last slave born in Brooklyn in 1810, died a free man in 1902, age 92.

"I like the fair because I learn about New York," Roberts said, adding that New York included the Canarsie and the Rockaway Indians.

When Abike Jotayo welcomes visitors to the Weeksville Historic Houses she dresses in period clothes, and says, "Welcome to the 1800s, everything you thought you knew about life changes here."

Located in Bedford Stuyvesant, Weeksville is a historic African American community, dating back to the early 19th century.

For Jotayo, the everyday objects of that living past are powerful reminders of lives not unlike ours.

"If someone picked up your picture 100 years from now what would they think about you?," she asked students visiting her table at the fair.



Students from PS 9 check out some of the sunken archaeological treasures a scuba diver recovered from New York Harbor at the library's history fair.

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