

BFHS Oral Testimony, February 13, 2018

Hello. I'm Kathy Benson Haskins, a member of Landmark East Harlem and East Harlem Preservation.

I support landmark designation for Benjamin Franklin High School, now Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics.

This grand structure merits designation for its architecture, its historical and cultural significance, and its unique rooftop greenhouse.

The building's Georgian Revival style, according to Edward Rothstein in *The New York Times*, "while strongly associated with the six decades that framed the beginning of the 20th century, is still so influential that it has become (even when rejected) 'the quintessential American style.'" Rothstein's review of a 2011 exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York noted that a photograph of BFHS showed a building that alludes to the colonial past not just with its name but also with a portico that resembles a Greek temple, topped by a cupola meant to echo small-town churches and city halls. He wrote that the photograph revealed:

"... a double aspect of the style, which is one of the things that has made it so flexible. In one respect it elevates a building, invoking the classical past that the founding fathers had also looked to for inspiration; the place is meant to be imposing, worthy of allegiance and devotion. In another respect, it humbles that same building: It is not meant to overwhelm but to welcome. It turns the grand into something comfortable . . . here is the democratic side of pillared grandeur."

Benjamin Franklin High School is significant historically and culturally as the first high school in East Harlem and as the alma mater of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. More importantly, it was the first high school founded on the community school model by progressive educator Leonard Covello, who grew up just blocks away and who served as the school's first principal. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Congressman Vito Marcantonio, fellow East Harlem residents, were instrumental in creating the school.

Another famous Italian-American, Frank Sinatra, visited BFHS in 1945 at the invitation of Covello. In an effort to subdue racial tensions after a riot between African-American and Italian-American students, he sang "Aren't You Glad You're You."

Finally, BFHS is unique because of its rooftop greenhouse. It was Covello's idea, a way to attract Italian students in particular. The Italian immigrant community valued work over education but might see horticultural education as work-related. The greenhouse was retained when BFHS reopened as the Manhattan Center, and it remains a feature of the school to this day.

Thank you.