



GEORGE RIZER/GLOBE STAFF

The James Blake House in Dorchester is slated for restoration and recognition.

A window on the colony

Grant to help restore Boston's oldest house

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The oldest house in history-steeped Boston sits near a Dunkin' Donuts shop and a Kentucky Fried Chicken store, passed every day by thousands of oblivious motorists on congested Columbia Road in Dorchester.

But the James Blake House, built about 1648 near the salt marshes of South Bay, is about to benefit from a dramatic infusion of money and

attention designed to elevate its little-known status as the longest-standing remnant of Boston's Colonial past.

Buoyed by a \$50,000 state grant and seeking to raise \$200,000 more, the Dorchester Historical Society has embarked on an ambitious project to restore the Blake House and open a door on the earliest days of the colony to many more tourists, school groups, and history buffs than currently visit the unassuming home.

One of only a few examples of the earliest Colonial construction techniques left in the United States, the Blake House "is a tangible re-

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reminder of not only the first settlers of Dorchester, but of Massachusetts and New England," said John Goff, a preservation consultant who conducted a two-year study of the house. "It's regionally and nationally important."

It's also important as a reminder of the lives and customs of the area's first white settlers, Puritans from western England who envisioned a utopian future among the golden cornfields and power-generating rivers they discovered on the shores of Massachusetts Bay.

"The restoration will help us tell that story," said Earl Taylor, president of the Dorchester Historical Society. "The structure itself is in excellent shape."

The house's exceptional condition is a result of the massive oak posts and beams that formed its skeleton. The building style is what distinguished West England framing, a type of construction that the original colonists in Cape Ann, Salem, and Boston would have known, Goff said.

The house's story will also show how Dorchester, where the first settlers arrived a month before their counterparts at Boston, became an early gateway to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and how James Blake — a farmer, selectman, deputy to the General Court, and religious leader — prospered through work and marriage to live in a "mansion house."

Built near what is now a congested row of industrial lots and small businesses, the Blake House originally looked out on a creek and sea-fed marshland that swept down to a tidal inlet now covered by acres of asphalt at the South Bay Shopping Center. Bits of marsh grass, a reminder of Dorchester's agricultural and maritime roots, still can be spied in the mud-like mixture used to insulate the attic.

In the Revolution, Goff said, the house probably served as a barracks for Colonial officers or soldiers during the siege of Boston and the fortification of nearby Dorchester Heights in present-day South Boston. After passing out of



PHOTOS BY GEORGE RIZER/GLOBE STAFF

An attic bedroom in the Blake House in Dorchester, which was built around 1648. The Dorchester Historical Society has received a state grant and is planning to restore the house.



A spoon, a marble, and a child's toy gun were among artifacts found in recent years in the Blake House on Columbia Road.

the Blake family in 1825, the house was purchased by the City of Boston in 1895 for a large municipal greenhouse project.

Now, the house is open only on the second Sunday of each month from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Otherwise, visits are made by appointment with Ellen Berkland, the city archaeologist who has lived there as caretaker for nearly five years. Those formal tours don't include the curious types who, puzzled by a 17th-century house in a sea of three-deckers, simply stop and knock on the door.

Taylor said he believes that the house has never received its due

because "Dorchester is off the beaten path and partly because Dorchester itself has been perceived in a negative way over the years." In addition, he said, "it's partially our fault for not publicizing it."

But if the society reaches its goal, Taylor said, the Blake House should become a center for demonstrations of Colonial life, including agricultural and domestic activities from churning butter to shoeing horses to making nails.

"We need to figure out ways to draw more people in," Taylor said.

The house has encountered misfortune before, from the Hur-



ricane of 1938 that destroyed its chimney, to forays by thieves and vandals, to the greenhouse plan that would have demolished it.

The Dorchester Historical Society stepped in, and by 1896 the house had been moved 400 yards from its original location on what is now Massachusetts Avenue to Edward Everett Square. The relocation is believed to be the first time that a house in the United States was moved for historical preservation, Goff said.

The society also restored the house at that time, but the late 19th-century craftsmen who worked on the project had only a rough idea of how a 1648 house should look, Taylor said. The result was an "arts and crafts version of the 17th century," he said.

Today, the roof has slate shingles instead of the original wood. The massive central chimney is gone, and the windows are imported Dutch stained glass, rather than the lead casements of the 17th century. Two gables are gone, and the exterior of the house has painted shingles, instead of cedar clapboards.

A complete restoration is unaffordable, Taylor said, so the project primarily will improve and strengthen what the original restorers did in the 1890s. But today, that "arts and crafts" restoration is also historically significant, as an example of how Victorian Bostonians treated their past.

As Goff walked through the house this week pointing out the ancient marks of hand-held tools, his face lit up in wonder at the building's durability.

"This was a state-of-the-art mansion," Goff said. "You build this way, it'll last 500 years if you keep it dry."