Building a Living Archive: Project Proposal

Teacher: Kimberly Walker

School: Jules E. Mastbaum Area Vocational Technical School
Course/Program: African American History (10th grade Honors Ambassador Cohort)
Partner Project: *1838 Black Metropolis + Building a Living Archive*

Project Title:

Seeing Ourselves in the Past: Builders, Makers, and Memory Keepers of Philadelphia's Black Metropolis

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Project Overview:

This project helps students become historians, archivists, and community storytellers. It begins with foundational analysis work in the SDP African American History curriculum, then moves to the November 24, 2025 archival visit at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania—the first major artifact of the project.

In January 2026, students will begin an adapted 1838 Black Metropolis curriculum, deepening their understanding through digital archives, primary documents, and Philadelphia historical geography. Additional experiential learning includes classroom visits by historical reenactors and a city walking tour tracing the footprint of the Black Metropolis.

The project culminates in a reenactment of an Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) graduation ceremony at Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church on May 1, 2026. This experience connects students to the long tradition of Black Philadelphians using **public performance, education, and oratory** to claim space, assert belonging, and make achievement visible.

Students will share their research and showcase their Living Archive artifacts as part of this public ceremony, **continuing a 19th-century tradition in which Black youth used graduation to declare their readiness to lead.**

Historical Grounding: "We Never Will Separate" — Mother Bethel, 1817

At the heart of this inquiry is a powerful act of collective responsibility. On **January 15, 1817**, free Black residents gathered at **Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church** to decide whether to emigrate to Africa or remain in the United States. Their resolution declared:

> *"Resolved, that we never will separate ourselves voluntarily from the slave population in this country.*
> *They are our brethren by the ties of suffering and of wrong, and we feel that there is more virtue in suffering with them, than fancied advantage for a season."*

This statement captures a turning point in Black political thought—a moment when Black Philadelphians chose to stay, fight, and build. They embraced their shared responsibility to struggle not only for themselves but for all people denied freedom.

This same ethic of rooted responsibility is later taken up by ICY graduates, whose public addresses emphasized moral character, civic duty, community uplift, and the obligation to use education in service of others. The 1817 resolution and the ICY commencement tradition are connected: both assert that **Black futures will be built here, by us, for one another.**

This frames how Mastbaum students approach the archive—not as observers of history, but as inheritors of that responsibility.

Connecting Career & Technical Education (CTE): The 1851 Colored Mechanics Fair

As a Career and Technical Education (CTE) school, Mastbaum is a community of builders, designers, and innovators—students learning the trades, technologies, and creative disciplines that keep society moving.

In 1851, Black Philadelphians showcased these very same skills in the Colored Mechanics Fair, an exhibition organized by Black artisans, craftspeople, and entrepreneurs to demonstrate excellence in skilled labor and industry.

In a time when racist laws and social barriers denied them equal opportunity, exhibitors used their craft to assert dignity and intelligence. The 1851 Fair was, in every sense, a CTE exhibition of freedom.

Later, ICY graduates would echo this same message in their commencement speeches—publicly demonstrating that Black learning and Black labor were twin pillars of community strength.

Mastbaum students will see themselves in these historical builders and creators, exploring how skill, artistry, and learning have always supported Black Philadelphia's struggle for freedom..

Educational Purpose of Experiential Learning

Each experiential component of this project is designed to help students restore the record by engaging with Black Philadelphia's history through archives, geography, and embodied storytelling. These artifacts build upon one another, allowing students to encounter the 1838 Black Metropolis through documents, lived spaces, and human experience.

The final ICY graduation reenactment gives students a public platform—just as it did for 19th-century youth—to speak their learning into existence and claim their place in the long tradition of Black leadership in Philadelphia.

Artifact #1 — HSP Archival Visit + Black Metropolis Walking Tour (Nov 24, 2025)

Students begin their experiential journey at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania—the home of the records that document early Black Philadelphia. They analyze primary sources related to Octavius V. Catto, the Institute for Colored Youth, and 19th-century civic life, connecting physical documents to their digital counterparts on 1838BlackMetropolis.com. **This includes commencement programs, student records, oration topics, and documents that reveal ICY's rigorous academic and moral curriculum.**

Following the archival session, students participate in a focused walking tour of the **1300 Locust Street corridor**, one of the central neighborhoods of the Black Metropolis. This tour introduces students to the physical landscape where Black educators, activists, and families built community institutions that shaped democracy and belonging. Together, the archival visit and the walking tour establish the foundation for the entire project, situating students in the places and records they will later interpret.

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Artifact #2 — Historical Reenactors: Octavius Catto & Caroline LeCount (February 2026)

Students next encounter history through **embodied interpretation**, meeting professional historical reenactors who portray Catto and LeCount. This experience is fundamental: it humanizes the archival documents they previously studied and brings voice, emotion, and personal context to two of Philadelphia's most important Black educators and activists. Catto and LeCount modeled what ICY expected of its graduates: **public service, moral clarity, and fearless advocacy.**

Students prepare historian-level questions, engage in dialogue with the reenactors, and reflect on how performance can restore the humanity often missing from written records. This artifact serves as a vital interpretive bridge between the archive and the physical spaces visited in March.

This reenactor visit prepares students for the tone, purpose, and seriousness of the ICY graduation speeches they will create

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Artifact #3 — Black Metropolis 101 Walking Tour (March 2026)

Students expand their spatial understanding of Black Philadelphia through a broader walking tour centered on the Quaker Meeting House, Independence Hall, the President's House, Washington Square Park/Congo Square, and Mother Bethel A.M.E. This tour teaches students to read the city as a layered historical text—one in which freedom, resistance, and community-building unfolded in the very spaces they now walk.

By comparing these landscapes with 1838 maps and archival sources, students analyze how public memory, erasure, and preservation shape our understanding of the Black Metropolis.

- The 1817 resolution declared that Black Philadelphians would remain and build.
- **ICY graduation ceremonies were sometimes held to display Black excellence in sacred community spaces.**

Artifact #4 — Institute for Colored Youth Graduation Reenactment (May 1, 2026)

The culminating experience:
Students perform speeches rooted in archival research, personal reflection, and ICY traditions of scholarship and service.

The ICY graduation was historically a public proving ground—a moment when Black students demonstrated mastery, intellect, and readiness to lead.
By reenacting it, Mastbaum students join that lineage.

Their work restores the record and returns youth voices to Mother Bethel—the same space where Black Philadelphians once declared:

- **We will not leave (1817).**
- **We are builders (1851).**
- **We are scholars and civic leaders (ICY Graduation).**

Essential Questions:

1. How did 19th-century Black Philadelphians define and practice democracy in their everyday lives?
2. What does the 1817 meeting at Mother Bethel teach us about collective responsibility and belonging?
3. How does the 1851 Colored Mechanics Fair reveal the power of skill, craftsmanship, and creativity in the fight for equality?
4. **How did ICY graduates use education and public oratory to model leadership and civic duty?**
5. **How can we, as students and builders today, continue this legacy of learning, building, and public responsibility?**

Enduring Understandings:

- History is a living continuum—the work of building freedom is never finished.
- The 1817 resolution at Mother Bethel reflects a communal ethic of shared responsibility and resistance.
- The 1851 Colored Mechanics Fair embodies the tradition of Black skilled labor and innovation as acts of self-determination.
- Students today continue this legacy as modern-day builders and archivists of community memory.

Student Performance Task / Final Product:

Each artifact must include a “Statement of Responsibility” inspired by:

- **The 1817 Mother Bethel Resolution (collective belonging)**
- **The 1851 Mechanics Fair (craft and skill as resistance)**
- **The ICY Graduation tradition (education and leadership as public duty)**

Students' final speeches in the ICY Graduation reenactment become the capstone performance of this responsibility. Declaring how students see their role as builders of community and keepers of history.

The collective archive will become a **digital and/or physical exhibition**, **potentially housed at Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church**, returning students' voices to the same space where Black Philadelphians once affirmed their commitment to one another.

Connection to Career and Technical Education (CTE):

This project aligns with CTE competencies in **communication, craftsmanship, digital media, and leadership**. Students will act as cultural documentarians—analyzing, designing, and producing creative artifacts that link their trade to a broader historical and social purpose.

Just as the artisans of the 1851 Colored Mechanics Fair used their hands and minds to declare their worth, Mastbaum students will use their skills to declare their presence—as the next generation of builders in Philadelphia's Black Metropolis.

Experiential Learning Unit Plan

Seeing Ourselves in the Past: Builders, Makers & Memory Keepers of Philadelphia's Black Metropolis

Teacher: Kimberly Walker
School: Jules E. Mastbaum Area Vocational Technical School
Course: African American History – Honors Ambassador Cohort (inclusive)
Duration: September 2025-May 2026
Partner Project: *1838 Black Metropolis + Philly250 + Building a Living Archive*

Unit Overview

This experiential unit helps students "see themselves in the past" by connecting their own lived experiences and CTE pathways to the builders, organizers, and innovators of 19th-century Black Philadelphia. Through archival study, walking tours, and creative production, students explore how ordinary people used education, craft, and community to shape freedom.

The ICY Graduation reenactment serves as the culminating event—echoing the public ceremonies where Black youth once demonstrated scholarly excellence, moral character, and civic responsibility.

Students act as historians and memory keepers, producing artifacts for a **Living Archive** that may be displayed at **Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church**—a living link between their stories and the legacy of the Black Metropolis.

Core & Essential Questions

- How did 19th-century Black Philadelphians build institutions and communities of freedom?
- What can their choices—especially the 1817 Mother Bethel Resolution—teach us about responsibility and belonging?
- How did the 1851 Colored Mechanics Fair demonstrate Black skill and creativity as forms of resistance?
- How can my own craft, trade, or talent continue that legacy today?

Enduring Understandings

- History is active and alive; it is built by everyday people who refuse erasure.
- Building and making have always been acts of resistance and imagination.
- Collective responsibility and craftsmanship are part of the same freedom story.
- Students today are the next generation of builders in Philadelphia's ongoing story.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

1. Analyze primary sources from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) and from the 1838 Black Metropolis website.

2. Explain the historical significance of the 1817 Mother Bethel meeting and the 1851 Colored Mechanics Fair.
3. Connect historical craftsmanship **and historical education** to their own CTE learning area.
4. Produce original creative or technical artifacts that align with 1817, 1851, **and the ICY commencement tradition,** linking past and present.
5. Reflect on their personal role as "builders, makers, and memory keepers."
6. Analyze ICY commencement documents and understand the purpose of public oratory.

Learning Activities & Sequence

Phase 1 — Foundations: Restoring the Record Through the SDP Curriculum

September–November 2025

Activities

- Introduce "restoring the record" and the concept of erasure: Carter G. Woodson and Mis-Education
- Teach analysis skills, Cornell notes, and claims/evidence writing.
- Analyze primary source clusters related to early Black Philadelphia.
- Preview digital materials from 1838BlackMetropolis.com.
- Teach students how archives work and why documents disappear. (mini lesson)

Outcome: Students are ready to approach the archive as young historians

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Phase 2 — Artifact #1: HSP Archival Visit

November 24, 2025

Activities

- Archival work with materials on Catto, ICY, and early Black civic institutions.
- Post-trip debrief and reflection: whose voices appear? Who is missing?
- Connect physical documents to digital versions online.

Outcome: Students encounter the "home of the records" they seek to restore. Student will reflect on their **HSP & 1838 Black Metropolis Reflection**

Phase 3 — Launching the 1838 Black Metropolis Curriculum (adapted to fit Mastbaum)

January 2026

Activities

- Begin structured study of 1838 Black Philadelphia.
- Analyze interactive timelines, digital maps, census data, and archival documents.
- Build interpretive questions tied to HSP findings.

- Develop research directions for Living Archive artifacts.

Outcome: Students use the archive to build deeper historical context.

Phase 4 — Reenactor Visits: Catto & LeCount

February 2026

Activities

- Meet historical reenactors portraying Octavius Catto and Caroline LeCount.
- Students ask historian-level questions rooted in prior research.
- Reflect on how performance humanizes historical figures.

Outcome: Students connect archival evidence with lived experience.

Phase 5 — Artifact #2: Black Metropolis 101 Walking Tour

March 2026

Sites

- Independence Hall
- Quaker Meeting House
- President's House
- Washington Square Park / Congo Square
- Mother Bethel A.M.E.

Activities

- Field notes, sketches, and spatial analysis.
- Connect the physical landscape with 1838 maps.
- Reflect on visibility, erasure, and public memory.

Outcome: Students learn to read the city as a historical text.

Phase 6 — Culmination: ICY Graduation Reenactment & Living Archive Showcase

May 1, 2026 | Mother Bethel A.M.E.

Activities

- Students craft speeches, monologues, or creative pieces from research, using education as a form of public leadership.

- Participate in an Institute for Colored Youth graduation reenactment.
- Present Living Archive artifacts publicly.
- Deliver personal “Statements of Responsibility” inspired by:
    - **1817 — collective belonging**
    - **1851 — skilled labor and creativity**
    - **ICY — scholarship, moral discipline, and civic duty**

The reenactment becomes the moment when students embody 200 years of Black civic practice.

Outcome: Students embody, interpret, and publicly share restored historical knowledge.

Materials & Resources

- HSP archival materials (Catto, ICY, Mechanics Fair)
- Journals / reflection notebooks
- Audio/visual equipment for documentation
- Transportation and permission forms for field trip

Expected Outcomes

For Students

- Deeper understanding of Philadelphia’s Black civic and labor history.
- Confidence in working with primary sources and archival materials.
- Recognition of personal identity and community contribution through craft.
  Pride in producing public-facing historical work.

For School & Community

- Establishment of a **Living Archive**.
- Strengthened link between CTE, social studies, and public history.
- Authentic student voice represented in local cultural spaces like Mother Bethel A.M.E.

Teacher Reflection (framing note for portfolio)

Teaching this project at Mastbaum means balancing vision with realism. My “honors” class is inclusive, diverse, and full of students whose brilliance isn’t always recognized by traditional metrics. This work gives them the chance to engage with rigorous content *and* see themselves reflected in it. They are not just learning history—they are *restoring the record* and claiming their place as the next generation of builders in Philadelphia’s story— not only in the builders and artisans of 1851, but in the disciplined, brilliant students of the Institute for Colored Youth who once used their voices to shape their world.