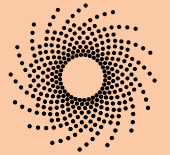


Caribbean Immigrants in Brooklyn

AN AMERICAN STORY

A PROJECT OF



BROOKLYN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

YOUNG SCHOLARS

PS 233



Caribbean Immigrants in Brooklyn **AN AMERICAN STORY**

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*The Young Scholars of PS 233, The Langston Hughes School,
wish to give a special thank-you to all the people who made
this book possible.*

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“One-Way Ticket”

*I pick up my life
And take it with me
And I put it down in
Chicago, Detroit,
Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is North and East—
And not Dixie.*

*I pick up my life
And take it on the train
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield,
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake,
Any place that is
North and West—
And not South.*

*I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them.*

*I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket—
Gone up North,
Gone out West,
Gone!*

— Langston Hughes, 1949

*Langston Hughes your name is our
school // You are an amazing person
// Almost every person in this school is
inspired by you // I am sure I speak for
everyone in this school // We always
wanted to meet you // It would have
been an honor // We gather here today
to celebrate you // We have much
more to come // That’s how much
we love you Langston Hughes.*

— Kezia Gray, 2017

Langston Hughes was a poet.
He is important to our school, PS
233, because it’s named after him.
“One Way Ticket” is about African
Americans leaving the South because
they weren’t treated equally. They
went north, east, and west because
they wanted hope and a better life.
Caribbean immigrants, like African
Americans, moved for a better
life too. They came to New York
City looking for opportunities. Our
book looks at the history of East
Flatbush, Brooklyn—our school’s
neighborhood—and Caribbean
immigration to NYC.

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Foreword

The Young Scholars of PS 233 Langston Hughes were given a remarkable assignment. They were tasked with writing a book detailing the history of their school's neighborhood, East Flatbush, as well as the history of Caribbean immigration to Brooklyn. A feat for any researcher, this was a particularly daunting one for fourth-grade students.

With this weighty task, I entered the classroom of Mary Evans not knowing what to expect. All I had were disparate pieces of information collected from dated secondary sources, grainy pictures, and oral history clips. After each session with the students, I found myself pleasantly surprised. Not only did the students grasp the difficult assignment, they understood the value of their work. Tracing the story of Caribbean immigration to Brooklyn meant shedding light on a group of people often left out of history books. European immigration was an important feature of New York City's history, but so, too, was Caribbean immigration. Immigrants from Haiti, Grenada, Jamaica, Barbados, and other Caribbean islands contributed just as much as any other group to the story of Brooklyn.

Over the course of our sessions, we had the opportunity to consider the nuances that shaped the experiences of Caribbean immigrants in Brooklyn. To what extent did racism impact the lives of newly arrived immigrants? How did Caribbean immigrants maintain their culture and community in a new land? What was the dynamic between African Americans and Caribbean immigrants in Brooklyn? These are just a few of the questions posed, raised, and explored during our meetings and field trip to Ellis Island.

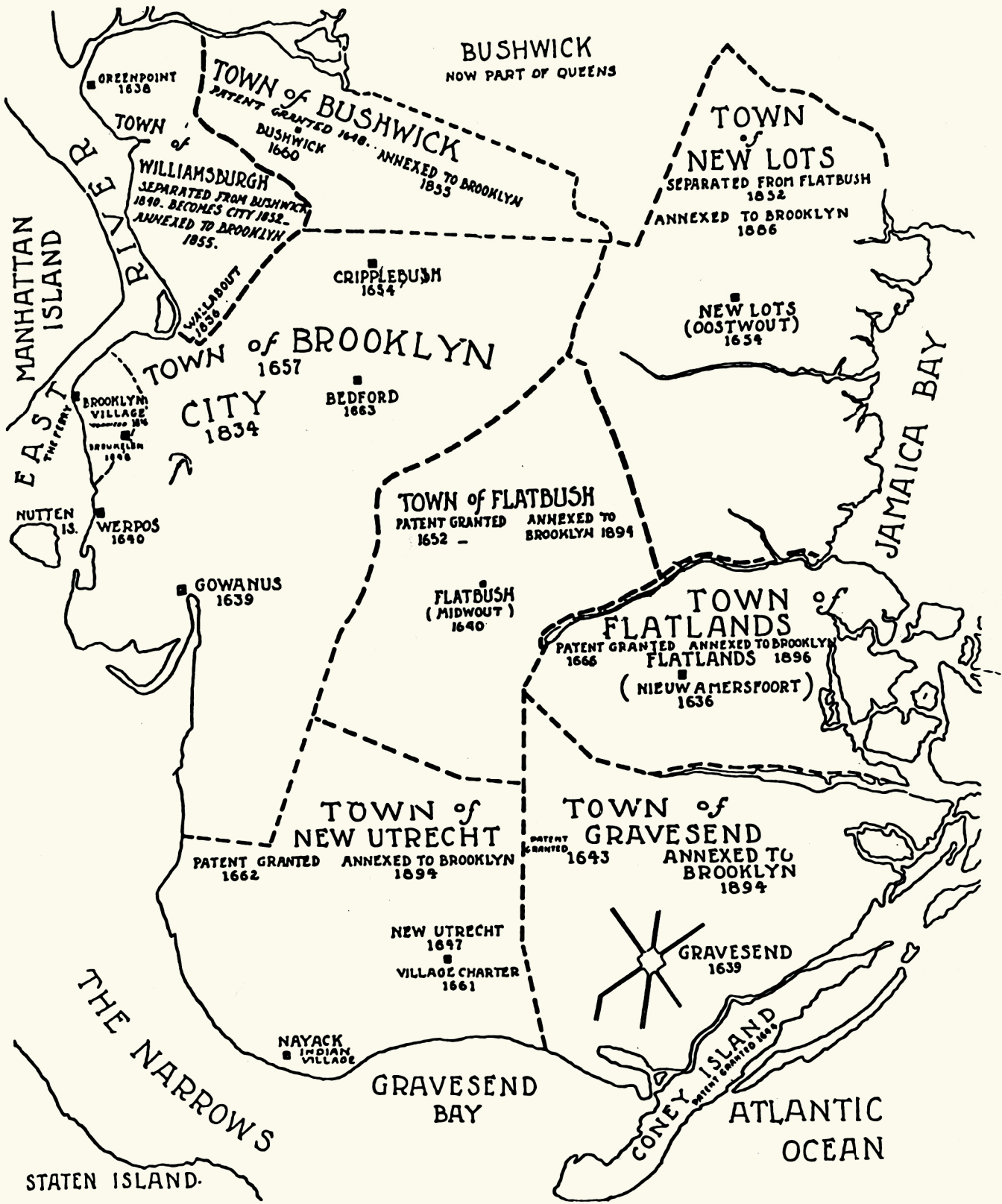
The Young Scholars were given a unique opportunity and took advantage of it at every moment. In doing the research for this book, they were inspired to interview their family and friends about their experiences growing up in the Caribbean and their motivations for coming to Brooklyn. They spent time learning the recipes from their families' homes that continue to keep them grounded in their history and culture. They compared and contrasted the experiences of Caribbean immigrants in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They wrote, they complained about writing, and then wrote more. They pushed each other to complete their tasks and honor deadlines.

It is because of the Young Scholars of PS 233 that the disparate primary and secondary sources I brought into the classroom came together in the form of this remarkable work. They proved themselves worthy of the title Young Scholars by calling attention to Caribbean immigration and demonstrating that it is truly an American story.

Jessica Rose, Program Educator

The History of East Flatbush

Before Brooklyn became a borough of New York City in 1898, it had six different towns: Brooklyn, Flatbush, New Utrecht, Gravesend, Flatlands, and Bushwick. Eventually all were combined into the City of Brooklyn, and in 1898, Brooklyn became part of the City of Greater New York. The neighborhood of East Flatbush was located in the town of Flatlands. The land where our school is located used to be owned by the Williamson family. Genealogy records show that the Williamson family was in Brooklyn as early as the 1600s, and their family married into other wealthy Dutch families, including the Voorhees, Wyckoff, Bergen, and Remsen families. Many of the wealthy Dutch settlers made their money from slave labor. Many Brooklyn streets are named after these families, including Remsen Avenue in East Flatbush. Today, the neighborhood of East Flatbush is home to many Caribbean immigrants.



Map showing boundaries of the original Dutch and English towns comprising today's Brooklyn.

Map showing the original six towns that would become a part of Brooklyn.

[Brooklyn neighborhood map], circa 1970, gelatin silver prints, V1973.5.339;
Brooklyn photograph and illustration collection, V1973.5; Brooklyn Historical Society

An Inventory Taken of all the Personal Estate of John Lefferts Deceased, the 2 ^d of March 1778				
16	Head of Cattle	at	Each	208 0 0
7	Yearling Ditto	at	Each	42 0 0
2	Horses	at	Each	28 0 0
1	Ditto	at		12 0 0
1	Ditto	at		8 0 0
Negroes By Name				
	Harvey	at		60 0 0
	Anne	at		60 0 0
	Ben	at		60 0 0
	Dick	at		60 0 0
	Joan	at		30 0 0
	Dyne	at		16 0 0
	Joach	at		10 0 0
2	Floughs	at	Each	2 5 0
1	Iron tooth Harrow	at		0 16 0
1	Iron Crow Bar	at		1 5 0
1	Grining Stone	at		0 6 0
1	Dumg Fork	at		0 9 0
1	Spade	at		14 0 0
1	Hyding Chair	at		19 0 0
1	Wagon	at		11 0 0
1	Ditto	at	Each	4 0 0
2	Hogs	at		1 15 0
1	Boys Riddle	at		0 5 0
1	Small Churn	at		0 5 0
1	tub	at		0 8 0
3	keelers	at	Each	2 0 0
2	Looking glasses	at	Each	12 0 0
2	Feather Beds	at	Each	8 0 0
2	Ditto	at	Each	9 0 0
2	Set. Curtains	at	Each	1 10 0
2	Ditto	at	Each	4 10 0
2	Bugs	at	Each	6 0 0
6	White Bed Sheets	at		1 4 0
1	Blanket	at	Each	6 0 0
6	Pillows	at	Each	3 0 0
3	Cushings	at		
2	Hand Irons	at		1 6 0
2	Iron Pots	at		1 10 0
1	Frying Pan	at		0 8 0
1	Wardens	at		0 8 0
1	tea Kettle	at		9 10 0
1	Light Day Clock	at		10 0 0
20	Quarter Plates	at	Each	0 1 6
6	Quarter Dishes	at	Each	0 12 0
	Chains & Carthen Ware			2 10 0
1	Silver tankard			22 0 0
9	Silver table spoons			9 0 0
6	tea Ditts			0 10 0
Bonds Due exclusive of Interest				
1	of Abraham P. Lott			150 0 0
1	Hendrick Grogel			250 0 0
1	Jammuel Tormen			100 0 0
1	Peter Covenhoven			500 0 0
1	James Huyker			250 0 0
1	John Voorhees			150 0 0
1	Philip French			75 0 0
1	Teunis Jernys			100 0 0
1	Janet Lefferts			100 0 0
1	Bernardus Hout			200 0 0
1	John Covenhoven			100 0 0
1	John Van Nichten			55 0 0
1	Abraham Bogart			15 2 6
1	John Van Der Veer			110 0 0
1	Barent Smock			434 0 0
1	Elbert Adriaens			100 0 0
1	Peter Oudwater			125 0 0
1	Teunis Schenck			200 10 0
1	Not. of Lott & Lefferts			50 0 0
1	Roelof Schenck			50 0 0
	Cash in Paper money			222 0 0
	Total Amount			

This is a letter from Jan Lefferts. It is about the sale of Anne, a slave, for 38 pounds, which is equal to about \$8,000 today.

Estate inventory of John Lefferts, 1778; Lefferts family papers, ARC.145; Brooklyn Historical Society

Know all man by these presents that I Gillegam Corael for flatbush
have for the Consideration of thirty eight pounds to me in hand
paid by Jan Lefferts of the same place bargained sold &
Delivered unto the said Jan Lefferts one certain niger Girl
called anna to have and to hold the said bargained premises
unto the said Jan Lefferts in withins whereof I the said
Gilleam Corael have hereunto set my hand and seal the
twenty second day of may Annoqe Domini 1751
sealed and Delivered
in the presence of
Cornelis Corael
Simcyon Corael
Gelyam ^{his} Corael
mark

This is a list of the things that Jan Lefferts owned. The list includes slaves.

Slave bill of sale, 1751; Lefferts family papers, ARC.145; Brooklyn Historical Society



Why People Leave

Limited resources, high unemployment, and limited opportunities for advancement were some of the main reasons people left the Caribbean. People began to leave the Caribbean for the United States and Europe in large numbers beginning around 1900, but many more followed in the 1920s. Many of these people came to New York City. By 1920, Caribbean immigrants made up about one-fourth of the black population in New York City, and by the 1930s they made up one-fifth of the city's total black population. Even though many of the people who left the Caribbean were looking for better work, some were educated and wealthy.

Women from Guadalupe at Ellis Island on April 6th, 1911.

National Park Service; Statue of Liberty N.M. & Ellis Island, Sherman Collection



Chapter 3

Ellis Island

Ellis Island was an inspection station for new immigrants off the coast of Manhattan. It was open from 1892 to 1954. A fire in 1897 destroyed the original wood building. Fortunately, there was no loss of life. The new building opened in 1900. It is still standing and is now a museum.

At Ellis Island, immigrants were inspected. They had to pass fitness tests, health exams, and mental acuity tests. These tests were considered important at the time because the government only wanted to let immigrants they believed would be good workers into the country. Taking these tests was very stressful. Immigrants traveled by boat and were often tired and hungry when they arrived. A lot of people traveled in third class or steerage. They were afraid of being sent back because they had travelled so far to get to America.

Many people think that only Europeans came through Ellis Island. However, many people, including Caribbean immigrants, were processed at Ellis Island. We learned about their experiences at Ellis Island from primary sources like oral histories. One Caribbean immigrant who passed through Ellis Island is Vera Clark Ifill. She emigrated from Barbados when she was 7 years old. Ellis Island was very busy and filled with people speaking lots of different languages. When she arrived she remembered there was a “mass of people” and everyone was “bewildered” because they were in a new land.

A woman from Guadalupe.

National Park Service; Statue of Liberty N.M. & Ellis Island, Sherman Collection



Our Visit to Ellis Island

During our visit to Ellis Island we pretended to go back to the early 1900s and became immigrants just arriving at Ellis Island. We imagined that we had traveled in steerage and hadn't bathed for three weeks. As soon as we arrived, we had to take physical tests or we would have been sent back to our home country. Our first test was walking up the stairs. We also had our eyes checked for diseases and did jumping jacks and push-ups. People who didn't pass the physical test were given a mark on their shoulder for more tests or to be sent home. Luckily we all passed. The inspectors were looking to see if we would get tired.

Caribbean immigrants in front of Ellis Island.

National Park Service; Statue of Liberty N.M. & Ellis Island, Sherman Collection



Young Scholars participating in a fitness test at Ellis Island.

Afterwards we had to solve a puzzle to prove that we were smart. During our last test we had to answer questions about why we wanted to live in America. If the inspector did not like our answers, we could have been sent back to our countries.



Daniel completing mental acuity test.

After we had lunch, we were taken to the stairs of separation. At these stairs you were divided into groups. Some people were given train tickets to other cities in America, others were sent to the hospital on Ellis Island, and some were sent back to their home country. After we experienced what it was like to be newly arrived immigrants being processed at Ellis Island, we went to the museum library, where we listened to interviews with immigrants from the Caribbean who came through Ellis Island.

VOICES FROM THE CARIBBEAN

Ella Dowleyne

Date of Birth: February 14, 1892 **Interview Date:** May 21, 1986

Interviewer: So you haven't passed on the recipes and the tradition, you're still doing it yourself? Can you tell me about that?

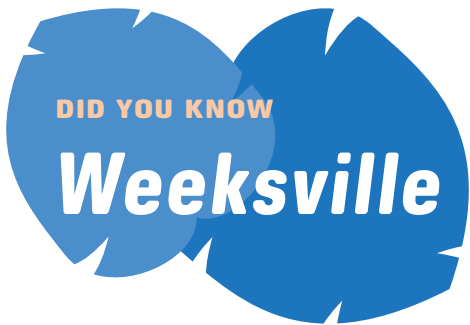
Dowleyne: And even the boys have married the girls now from down south. These girls are crazy about it, so they all meet here on Saturdays. It has green okras, and we boil the okras, you know okras, very delicious. And then we put the cornmeal in it and stir it and then you have to stir it sharp that it doesn't get lumpy, and it comes out like a smooth paste and that's the dish, what they call the calaloo. Well, now the bacalao is the codfish. We generally use it with the codfish and they all think it's a very delicious meal, and they all meet here on Saturdays.

VOICES FROM THE CARIBBEAN

Vernon Nicholls

Date of Birth: January 6th, 1909 **Interview Date:** September 29, 1994
Immigrated from Barbados in 1915 at the age of 6

And living in Brooklyn at that time, we came in, I believe it was the latter part of September or October. Because soon after I got here, as I say, coming from Barbados you have a constant temperature of roughly seventy, seventy-five degrees. And during those first few months, we had an early snow that year, and for the first time in my life I saw snow and had to go out, taken by my mother, to feel this white stuff that was on the ground, which I had never seen before and never experienced touching this cold, damp substance.



The community of Weeksville was established around 1838 by James Weeks, an African American man. Weeksville was a community of African Americans. Many African Americans wanted to have their own community because they did not want to worry about racism. Living together meant they were safe and had more opportunities.

Even though Weeksville was mainly an African American community, we know that some Caribbean immigrants lived there too. Caribbean immigrants chose to live in Weeksville for the same reasons African Americans did. Even though they had different traditions, immigrants had a lot in common with African Americans. Both faced discrimination, and they wanted greater opportunities.

We know that Caribbean immigrants lived in Weeksville from census records. The 1850 census lists two immigrants, Caroline Guiles and Joseph Merrell. We do not know what islands they were from, but we know they were likely from the Caribbean because they are listed as West Indian.



This is a picture of an unidentified woman that was found by people who rediscovered Weeksville.

"The Weeksville Lady," circa 1880, Courtesy Weeksville Heritage Center



The three houses you see in this picture are houses that African American people lived in. These houses are in Weeksville. The three houses are now part of a museum.

[Hunterfly Road], 1922, Eugene L. Armbruster, V1987.11.2; Eugene L. Armbruster photographs and scrapbooks, V1987.11; Brooklyn Historical Society

A photograph of a page from the 1850 census of Weeksville, showing a list of residents with their names, ages, and other details.

This is a census of Weeksville in 1850. This photo also proves that the community included people from the Caribbean. They likely moved there to avoid discrimination.

Courtesy Weeksville Heritage Center

Settling in NYC

Large numbers of Caribbean people stopped coming to America after 1929 because of the Great Depression and laws passed during the 1920s that made it hard to enter the country. It wasn't until after 1965 that Caribbean people began coming to America and settling in New York City again.

Between the early 1900s and 1960s, Caribbean immigrants settled in neighborhoods where there were already black people or people from the Caribbean. At first, immigrants settled in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant. In the 1960s, Caribbean neighborhoods grew. You could now find large numbers of Caribbean immigrants in Flatbush, Crown Heights, and our school's neighborhood, East Flatbush.

Even though discrimination forced black people to live in separate neighborhoods, they made homes in these communities. We listened to oral history interviews where people described their neighborhoods and how much they loved where they lived. A Caribbean man from Guyana said that he loved where he lived, because it felt like home.



Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood, 1958.

Proper citation needed here

Guided
Reading
Questions

1

What were the six towns of Brooklyn?

2

Why is the Williamson family important to East Flatbush?

3

Can you name some countries in the Caribbean?

4

Why did Caribbean immigrants come to America?

5

Why did immigrants have to do exercises when they arrived at Ellis Island?

6

What is it like to travel in steerage and would you want to travel that way?

7

What was Weeksville?

8

Why might Caribbean immigrants have chosen to live in Weeksville?

Glossary
of Terms

Bewilder, Bewildered

To confuse someone or be confused

Census

A count of people

Emigrate

To leave one’s country

Genealogy

A family history; you can create a genealogy by asking your family about their history

Immigrant

A person who moves from one country to another

Mass

A lot (of people)

Mental Acuity

The ability to understand something

Oral History

Recorded interview with a person talking about what happened in his or her life in the past

Primary Source

Documents that we use to learn about the past because they were made at the time we want to study; examples of primary sources are pictures and letters

Steerage

Third-class travel that is uncomfortable and crowded

Tradition

Statements, beliefs, legends, and customs

Wealthy

Rich

Credits

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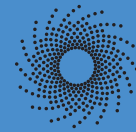
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Caribbean Immigrants in Brooklyn: An American Story is the result of a 6-month “Young Scholars” partnership between Brooklyn Historical Society and P.S. 233. The Young Scholars program is designed to introduce a core group of students to the dynamic process of historical research about their neighborhood, and to share these students’ interpretive work beyond the walls of their classroom. Young Scholars programs truly express Brooklyn Historical Society’s mission to connect the past and present and make the vibrant history of Brooklyn tangible, relevant, and meaningful for today’s diverse communities and for generations to come and are a hallmark of its Education Department.

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