Curriculum Development Project:

An Introduction to Historically African-American Neighborhoods of Columbus, Ohio

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This curriculum development project is intended to provide a basic historical introduction to areas of the city of Columbus, Ohio, where African Americans have traditionally lived. The information provided in this project is meant to serve as a starting point for teachers to introduce their students to the history of the city in which they live. For some teachers and students, this curriculum may be their first opportunity to explore neighborhoods in Columbus with which they are not familiar. For other teachers and students, this curriculum may seem basic because they live in these neighborhoods and thus know the history. Teachers are encouraged to add to the historical narrative as they see fit. This project consists of three parts: basic historical background; a selection of activities teachers may use to help their students to understand the landscape; and a selected bibliography.

Historical Background

Like many large cities in the United States, Columbus has an interesting history molded by decades of both challenges and successes. Located in the center of the state, Columbus is a hub for industry, business, and transportation. Columbus has a diverse population of almost 755,000 people (Dispatch, 2008), representing a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status levels, and nationalities. In some areas of the city, neighborhoods have developed where people of similar backgrounds live, work, and play together. For example, Columbus has several historically African-American neighborhoods, where the African-American population has thrived for many decades.

The history of African Americans in Columbus goes back to late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some historians have argued that African Americans helped found Franklinton, the city that later became Columbus (Moreland, 1977). Columbus was a popular place for refugee slaves to settle because of its central location – marshals in search of fugitive

slaves concentrated their efforts on the borders of the state rather than on the towns in the middle

of the state (James, 1979). Many homes and buildings in Columbus were important stops on the

Underground Railroad; these locations around town are often marked with special historical

signage. The majority of African-American immigrants to Columbus came from the South

(James, 1979). They worked as farmers and domestic workers. They also started their own

barbershops (James, 1979). According to the US Census, 573 African Americans resided in

Columbus in the year 1840 (James, 1979).   Prior to the Civil War, Columbus had a larger

population of African Americans than any other northern city in the United States (James, 1979).

In the nineteenth century, the majority of African Americans lived in what is now the

downtown area, near the intersection of Broad Street and High Street (James, 1979). Over the

decades, Columbus began to grow outward as public transportation made downtown accessible

from outlying areas (Neighborhood Design Center [NDC], 2003). As the central business

district expanded, the population of African Americans began to move further away from the

heart of the city. This is because African Americans in Columbus usually lived near their jobs –

near the factories or railroads, or along the Scioto River (James, 1979). Oftentimes, the land

from which these communities sprang up was located right in the center of the smells, sites, and

sounds of industry. Such land was more affordable for immigrants to Columbus (Winter, 2009).

Other African American residents lived in the alleys behind the wealthier homes east of High

Street (Pratt, Medberry, Davidson, Jones, Malone, & Randall, 1904).

Based on the US Census, the most rapid growth in Columbus's African-American

population occurred between the years of 1910 and 1920 (James, 1979). African Americans

created their own self-sufficient neighborhoods, as segregation kept them from fully participating

in the civic and business life of other areas of the city (Moreland, 1977). Segregation persisted

in Columbus until the middle of the twentieth century.   Even until 1948, African Americans

were banned from theaters, hotels, and restaurants, as wells as from holding certain types of jobs

(Moreland, 1977).

The historically African-American neighborhoods in Columbus experienced growth and

development through the first few decades of the twentieth century. During this time, they were

flourishing neighborhoods, with their own businesses, schools, and churches. Artists, musicians,

and entertainers came to these neighborhoods, and the population thrived. However, when the

stock market collapsed and the Great Depression set in, the economic expansion began to wane

(Moreland, 1977). During the mid-twentieth century, federally-funded urban renewal programs,

as well as interstate highway development, reshaped the city (Hunker, 2000). Some have argued

that the construction of Interstates 71 and 670 was implemented with disregard for these African-

American communities (NDC, 2003). In particular, the construction of Interstate 71 caused the

destruction of many homes (Hunker, 2000). In the year 2000, African Americans made up 25%

of the population of Columbus, living predominantly on the east side of the city (Hunker, 2000).

Many of these east side residents are, or are descended from, the people who were displaced by

the Interstate construction, forced to move to these areas without sufficient assets or connections

to the place (NDC, 2003).

A disproportionate number of African Americans in Columbus today live in poverty

(Hunker, 2000). Low-income populations tend to have less social mobility, economic power,

and political power, all of which keep them isolated in the poor, older neighborhoods near the

city's center (Hunker, 2000). Some of these poor, older neighborhoods are areas that are, or

were, historically African-American. Without resources to sustain businesses and keep buildings

and homes in repair, some of these neighborhoods have experienced a decline. Another reason

for the decline is that African Americans have taken their business, income, and economic power

to other places in the city (NDC, 2003).   In recent years, however, Columbus's historically

African-American neighborhoods have experienced urban renewal. Neighborhood

organizations, such as the Mount Vernon Avenue District Improvement Association, have

supported the movement to revitalize the area. Also contributing to the renewal are tax

abatement policies and rehabilitation assistance programs (NDC, 2003). The neighborhoods

around Long Street and Mount Vernon Avenue have even been designated Neighborhood

Commercial Revitalization areas (NDC, 2003).

  The historically African-American neighborhoods of Columbus have experienced periods

of highs and lows, just like all neighborhoods across the city. These neighborhoods have rich

histories linked to the lives that helped to establish Columbus as a successful city. What follows

are basic historical introductions to four such neighborhoods (see Figure 1): Long Street and

Mount Vernon Avenue (collectively known as the King-Lincoln district), American Addition,

and Flytown.

Long Street

  In the 1890s, an African-American neighborhood developed north of Long Street,

between Taylor Street and Seventh (James, 1979). In this area were a variety of African-

American services and businesses: hotels, stores, churches, theaters, and schools.   The Long

Street area (also referred to as part of the King-Lincoln district) became a center of African

American life. This was one of the key areas in the city where an African American professional

class developed, including pharmacists, doctors, dentists, and morticians (Moreland, 1977).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Long Street neighborhood was a

social heart of the African American community. Business and services did well in this area at
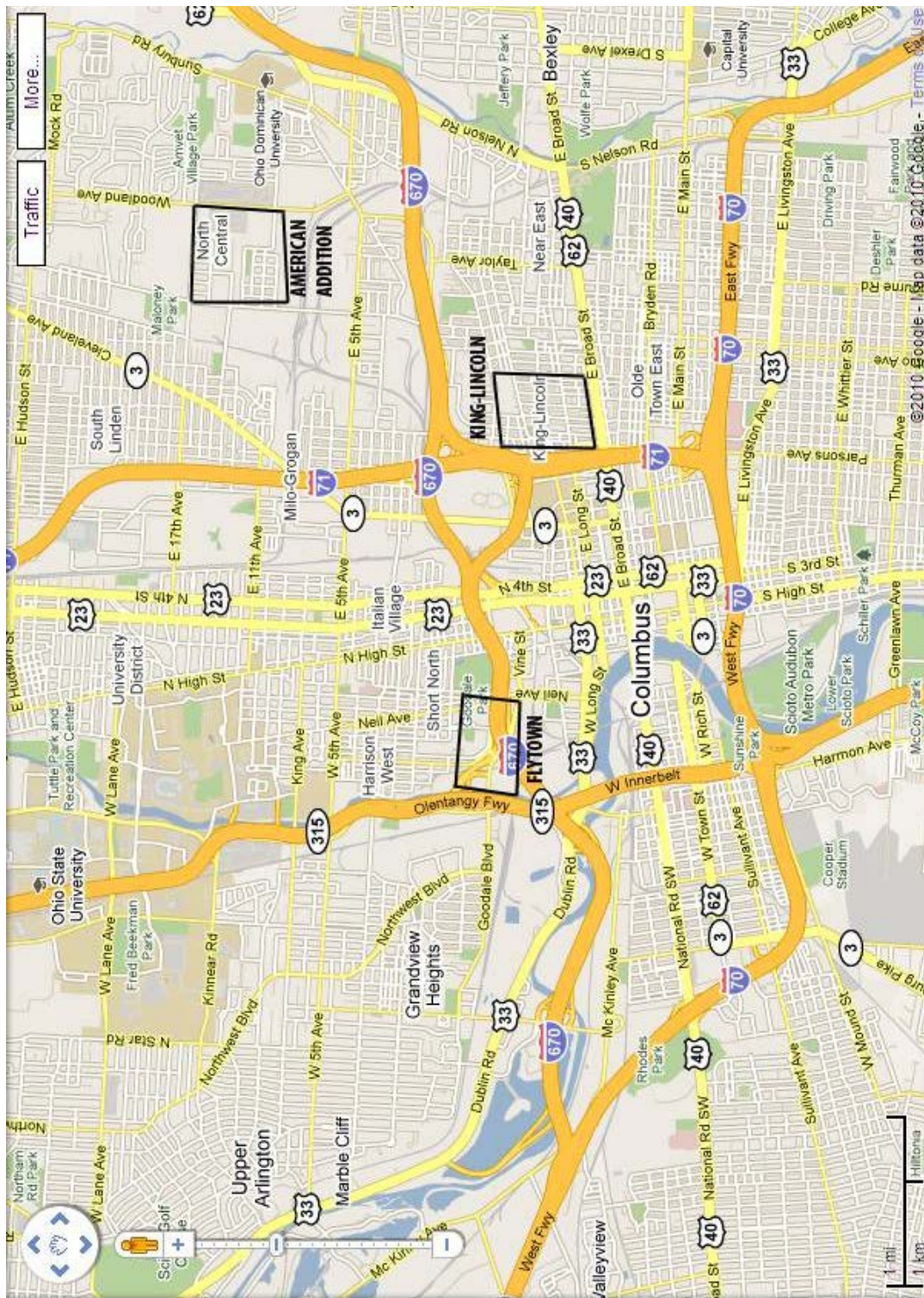
Figure 1. Map of Columbus, OH with approximate location of neighborhoods. (Adapted from

http://maps.google.com).

that time. As with other neighborhoods in Columbus, however, Long Street experienced decline

during the mid- to late-twentieth century. However, Long Street is now on the rebound and is

now once again home to many thriving businesses and organizations.

The Long Street area is particularly known for its two theaters. The Pythian Temple

(theater) was built in 1926 and served as a lodge, social center, and theater (Winter, 2009). The

temple (theater) eventually fell into disuse. In 1987, the theater was renovated, and together with

the adjacent Garfield School, it became the King Arts complex (Winter, 2009). Today, the King

Arts Complex offers cultural and educational programming designed to inform visitors about the

contributions African Americans have made to the city, the nation, and the world (King Arts

Complex, 2010).

A second theater, the Lincoln Theater, also supported the social life of Long Street. This

theater was originally built in 1929 by the Grand Order of Odd Fellows and was named the

Ogden theater (Darbee & Recchie, 2008; Hunker, 2000). Like the Pythian Temple, the Ogden

theater hosted a variety of African American musicians. Some of the famous musicians who

visited this neighborhood include Gillespie, Davis, and Basie (NDC, 2003). The Ogden theater

became the Lincoln theater when it was purchased by the Keith Theatre company, which then

proceeded to ban African-American patrons until the city was desegregated. Prior to this

transition in ownership, the Ogden was managed by a prominent African American entrepreneur,

who rented the storefronts on the main level for commercial space (Darbee & Recchie, 2008).

The Lincoln theater was renovated in the years 2007-2009 and is now used by local performing

arts organizations (Grossberg, 2009).

Mount Vernon Avenue, Blackberry Patch/Poindexter Village

The area around Mount Vernon Avenue is another historically African-American neighborhood that has experienced its share of both struggles and successes. Like the Long Street area, the Mount Vernon neighborhood was settled as African Americans moved eastward from the central city upon the expansion of business and industry. Also like Long Street, Mount Vernon Avenue is referred to as part of the King-Lincoln district. Mount Vernon was home to a variety of African-American-owned businesses, including Mort's Menswear, Schiff's Shoes, the Cameo Theatre, and the Limelight Lounge (Hunker, 2000; Robinson, 1997).

In her book, *A Street Called Home*, Columbus resident and artist Aminah Robinson (1997) painted a visual scene of the Mount Vernon neighborhood as it may have appeared in the 1940s. Describing the neighborhood, Robinson stated her parents "walked with everybody else up and down Mount Vernon Avenue. That was a self-sufficient street; it knew how to survive. People wove in and out with their horses and carts and trucks. . . everything you needed you could find on Mount Vernon Avenue" (1997, inside front cover). Robinson's 1997 book illustrates some of the well-known residents of this neighborhood: from the Brownyskin Man, who sold fried pork rinds in paper sacks, to the Chickenfoot Woman, who sold fried chicken feet; from the Iceman, who delivered 100 pound blocks of ice, to Dr. Kickapoo the medicine man, who sold everything from snakeroot to peach leaves.

The Mount Vernon area also incorporated Blackberry Patch/Poindexter Village. The Blackberry Patch was the name given to an area of shacks established by the poorest and most recent immigrants from the South in the nineteenth century (NDC, 2003). Poindexter Village is the name of the housing project that was built on the area of Blackberry Patch when the shack

settlement was demolished (Robinson, 1997).   Robinsons's parents lived in Blackberry Patch

and later in Poindexter Village. In her book, Robinson described the area:

> At the turn of the century, African Americans came up from the south looking for
> a better life, and some of them settled in a shantytown called the Blackberry
> Patch. … The day came when the shacks in the Blackberry Patch were torn down
> to set up the Poindexter Village, the third metropolitan housing authority
> development in the United States. … The first families moved into Poindexter
> Village in the spring of 1940, and many of the mothers and fathers of those
> families had grown up in the Blackberry Patch. (1997, inside front cover)

Mount Vernon Avenue, including Poindexter Village, thrived until the middle and late

twentieth century. In the 1970s, the federal Model Cities Program cleared huge tracts on the

north side of Mount Vernon Avenue, replacing local businesses with subsidized housing and

shopping centers (NDC, 2003). Many businesses on the south side of the street were also razed

(NDC, 2003). Additionally, the construction of I-71 severed the connection between Mount

Vernon district and downtown Columbus, which led to more disinvestment (Darbee & Recchie,

2008). In the 1980s, however, the area experienced a turnaround, as homes were restored and

new businesses were created (NDC, 2003). Today, the Mount Vernon Avenue neighborhood

continues to grow.

American Addition

During the decade of 1910-1920, many of the new settlers in Columbus wanted to live a

more rural way of life. They settled in the rural area on the periphery of northeast Columbus, in

an area that became known as the American Addition (James, 1979). Roughly speaking, this

area was located east of the Milo-Grogan neighborhood, north of 5th Avenue, south of 17th

Avenue and west of Woodland Avenue. The settlers in this area lived in houses built of

abandoned train boxcars and other scrap metal (James, 1979). City services, such as sewer,

water, and garbage disposal were unavailable. Although the population was very poor, residents of the American Addition tended to look out for and care for each other (James, 1979).

The Great Depression severely impacted the residents of the American Addition. As unemployment rose, it became increasingly difficult for residents to keep their homes supplied and in repair (James, 1979). Residents of this neighborhood were helped by the Clintonville Township trustees, Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, and the Columbus Urban League. The Columbus Urban League was an organization founded by Dr. William J. Woodlin to address the problems of inadequate housing, unemployment, delinquency, social welfare, sanitation, and health care (James, 1979). While the Urban League held housing clinics in this neighborhood, the American Addition remained city of shacks well into the 1950s (James, 1979). Unemployment and lack of social mobility tended to keep residents permanently settled in homes that were never intended for long-term use.

In 1954, residents of the American Addition began to fight to have their neighborhood annexed by the city of Columbus (James, 1979). Annexation would mean the city would provide public transportation, sewage, street maintenance, garbage removal, and better police and fire services in the area (James, 1979). After a struggle to convince the city that Additioners called the place home and wanted to live there permanently, the neighborhood was finally annexed by Columbus in 1959. At this point, slum clearance began, and utilities and other improvements were made. By the 1970s, the community became an attractive place to live, although today this area of Columbus does not seem to be commonly known as American Addition.

Flytown

Many settlers to Columbus arrived by railroad and initially lived in temporary camps (James, 1979). Flytown was one such area. Its initial settlers were immigrants of several

different backgrounds, including the Irish, Italians, and African-Americans, who lived close to the factories, warehouses, and other places of employment in this part of the city (Hunker, 2000; NDC, 2003). Flytown comprised an area roughly corresponding to the part of Columbus that is west of Neil Avenue, south of Victorian Village, east of the Olentangy River, and north of Nationwide Boulevard. Flytown had a reputation for being a slum neighborhood, with industrial pollution and an almost constant flow of immigrants (Hunker, 2000). Flytown was demolished in the 1950s to make room for Interstate 670; at this time, the mostly African American population moved to neighborhoods east and southeast of I-71 (Hunker, 2000). This neighborhood acquired its name from the fact that homes were built so quickly, they seemed to "fly up" overnight (NDC, 2003). Prior to its demolition, Flytown had many of the same attributes as other predominantly African-American areas of the city.

Summary

The Long Street area, the Mount Vernon Avenue area, American Addition, and Flytown are just four examples of historically African-American neighborhoods in Columbus. This paper is meant only to provide an introduction – much more could be written about the histories of these communities. The next section will address potential ideas for incorporating classroom activities that help connect the history of these Columbus communities with students' real-life experiences.

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Ideas for Activities

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In connecting this historical curriculum to hands-on activities, teachers need to focus on the strengths and assets of the communities. As in all major cities in the United States, there are areas of Columbus that are referred to with derogatory names and stereotypical assumptions. These untrue notions perpetuate myths, hurt community relationships, and keep people

distrustful and afraid. When teaching about Columbus, teachers need to be aware of their own

biases and suppositions about neighborhoods and residents. It is true that all communities have

their low points and their challenges. These low points can be acknowledged openly and

honestly, however, the emphasis needs to be placed on the successes, positive attributes, and

unique contributions of each community.

Teachers might consider using the concept of "landscape" to help students explore the

historically African-American neighborhoods of Columbus. The landscape of the city consists of

more than geography; it also includes the political, social, and economic terrain. The following

are starting points for activities based on the concept of landscape.

The Historical Landscape

Students can learn about these historically African-American neighborhoods directly

from long-time residents. Teachers might consider inviting elders to come to class to speak

about their experiences and perspectives. The community members could speak directly to the

class as a whole. Or, students could practice interviewing skills by talking one-on-one with the

residents. Interview questions might include, for example:

- How long have you lived in this neighborhood?

- How has your neighborhood changed since you have been living there?

- What is unique about your neighborhood?

- What can others learn from your experience?

Ohio State University has created an online resource of narratives about life in black Columbus

(see link at the end of this paper). In addition to meeting with residents in person, students could

read through these narratives to learn more about the history of these neighborhoods from the

perspective of the people who live there.

In addition to an oral history project, teachers might consider a visual history project wherein students collect photographs of the development of these communities over time. The historical society, the public library, and the Internet are all sources of historical photographs of Columbus. Students could take photographs of the neighborhoods as they currently exist, comparing them to previous photographs and creating a timeline of development. They might also create an exhibition of photographs that highlight the positive qualities or unique characteristics of the neighborhoods.

The Political Landscape

The subject of Columbus's historically African-American neighborhoods is easily connected to the academic content areas of social studies, particularly politics and government. Teachers might consider inviting members of city council, or even the Mayor, to visit the classroom and discuss important issues in the Columbus community. Prior to the visit, students could bring in newspaper articles relating to current events in these neighborhoods. Teachers could then help students organize a list of questions to ask council members. Students could write letters to the editor of *The Dispatch*, or to their city council members, to discuss pressing issues impacting these neighborhoods.

The issue of gentrification is significant when considering the historically African-American neighborhoods of Columbus, although it is not mentioned specifically in this curriculum development project. If a teacher feels adequately prepared, he or she might also be able to lead an activity on gentrification and its impact on these neighborhoods. Students could research what gentrification means in two ways: (1) the academic definition of gentrification, or how it is defined in the literature; and (2) the personal meaning of gentrification, and how it is defined and experienced by residents who live in gentrified neighborhoods. The latter could be

done through interviews or document analysis. For an interesting study of high school students'

perspectives on gentrification in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, see *Harlem on our*

Minds (Kinloch, 2009), mentioned in the bibliography of this project.

The Economic Landscape

Teachers might consider inviting members of the Long Street Businessmen's Association

to the classroom to talk about the life cycle of the economy: businesses coming, going, and

growing. Invited speakers might also discuss entrepreneurship and the challenges of owning

businesses in Columbus. Inviting these speakers to class is a way for students to see the ways in

which these communities continue to thrive and be successful. From another perspective, a

project could be created in which students trace how money spent on goods and services in

Columbus flows through the system and back into the local neighborhood economy (or not).

Addressing the issue on a more individual level, the organization 100 Black Men of Columbus

provides volunteers – some of whom live in these neighborhoods – who could speak to students

about handling money, basic financial principles, budgeting, and investing.

Summary

These activities provide starting points for thinking about how to connect the theme of

Columbus history to students' everyday lives. Activities may be adapted depending upon where

students live (inside or outside these neighborhoods), as well as adaptation to meet students'

grade levels and cognitive abilities. The final section of this paper will provide a list of works

cited, as well as bibliographic information for further research.

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Other Resources

1) 100 Black Men of Central Ohio, Incorporated

http://www.100bmco.org/

2) Bronzeville Neighborhood Association

http://bronzeville.wordpress.com/

3) Central Ohio Minority Business Association

http://www.comba.com/

4) City of Columbus King-Lincoln district plan, July 2002

http://assets.columbus.gov/development/planning/kinglincoln.pdf

5) Columbus Historical Society list of recommended readings

http://www.columbushistory.org/reading.html

6) Columbus Neighborhoods photo galleries (WOSU public media)

http://www.columbusneighborhoods.org

7) Columbus, Ohio City Council

http://www.columbuscitycouncil.org/

8) Historical Points of Pride in the Near East Side (Ohio State department of geography)

http://www.geography.osu.edu/maps2serve/history.htm

9) King Arts Complex

http://www.kingartscomplex.com/

10) Kinloch, V. (2009). *Harlem on our minds: Place, race, and the literacies of urban youth.*

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11) Literacy Narratives of Black Columbus (Ohio State project)

http://people.cohums.ohio-

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13) Long Street Businessmen's Association, Inc.

http://www.lsba.biz/homepage.html

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http://www.geography.osu.edu/maps2serve/story.htm

15) Mount Vernon Avenue District Improvement Association, Inc.

http://www.mvadia.org/

16) Near East Side Timeline and Maps (Ohio State department of English)

http://people.cohums.ohio-

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17) Neighborhood maps of Columbus, Ohio

http://columbus-ite.com