I took Dr. Bettye Collier-Thomas’s incredible American History capstone course in the fall of 2010 knowing I would be writing a piece of original research and working intensely. I was excited; I have always loved researching and looked forward to the opportunity to create something new. While I had done research papers using library resources before, I had never done anything as extensive as this. The subject of “Civil Rights in the Urban North” had not, however, been an area of interest for me in the past and I was secretly disappointed that I would not have complete carte blanche to select a topic for my capstone paper. I decided a thesis about African American suffragists in Philadelphia would get as close to my interest as possible while still adhering to the parameters of the assignment.

At Dr. Collier-Thomas’s recommendation, my first action was to explore Temple’s Urban Archives. I was momentarily perplexed when I entered. I expected the archives would look and function like a library, but what I found was a room with rows of tables and a few computers off to the side. Studious and capable-looking students were busy at the tables and I suffered a moment of intimidation. Everyone seemed to know exactly what they were doing and I worried I would appear foolish if I admitted that I had no idea how to find information here. This was a new feeling; I am usually quite good at ferreting out what I need as efficiently as possible. Luckily, I also have little compunction about looking foolish so I quickly asked for help. The staff was quite helpful but doubted I would find anything in those archives. From what I researched, they were right. Boxes and envelopes were deposited at my table and I rifled through them all for clues to the lives of Philadelphia’s African American suffragists. After several days of reading clippings, I found very little mention of African American women and the struggle for the vote. I had gathered a good amount of peripheral knowledge at the Urban Archives and had a better idea of the tone I would eventually use, but no real research data. I did, however, learn the benefit of admitting my ignorance. With this in mind, my next step was to visit David Murray. As the history librarian, I felt sure he would be able to direct me to incredible sources faster than I could investigate on my own.

He had some fantastic ideas and pointed me to incredible digital resources, but he also worried that my topic would be difficult to research. Undeterred, I found myself a comfortable spot in the Samuel L. Paley Library and fired up a computer. I browsed the Research Guides on the library’s website with a particular focus on the History Comprehensive page. The Primary Sources tab was a revelation. My earlier forays into digital resources had not gone much further than the old standby of EBSCOhost. The research guides quickly led me to thousands of primary sources that could easily be searched and narrowed exactly to my topic. It was not all smooth sailing at first. I had little luck with mainstream news; even The Philadelphia Inquirer and The New York Times reels held few pieces of substance dealing with women and next to nothing on African American women in the late nineteenth century. Next, I browsed the African American newspaper reels, searching first for African American suffragists in Philadelphia in venerable but often forgotten papers like the Christian Recorder. Each time I found a suffragist I tried to search using her name and any other affiliations the first article mentioned. Researching women is no easy feat. I often had trouble following women past marriage, since they took their husband’s first and last names, going from something like Miss Mary Smith to Mrs. John Doe. This meant that a reference to Mrs. John Doe could be the woman I was researching, her mother in-law, daughter in-law, or even grandmother in-
law or granddaughter in-law! Many times I had to search using specific years until I began to see a pattern: almost all of the African American suffragists I found were in some way related to the Institute for Colored Youth, a Philadelphia school popular in the mid to late nineteenth century. In fact, in that time period nearly every politically active woman I discovered had either been an Institute for Colored Youth student, teacher, guest speaker, or benefactor.

I began to wonder about this school. Newspaper articles were helpful, but even more references were made to the Institute for Colored Youth in letters found in the Gerritsen Collection and other letters and diaries found through that the Primary Sources in the History research guides. I delved into every database I came across and found several references to the school, often in unexpected places. I began using the school as a keyword to search for suffragists, but the more I discovered about the school the more I wanted to learn. When I read about African American women in the public sphere in the last half of the nineteenth century, there were often only two mentions: her accomplishments at the Institute for Colored Youth and her obituary (which tended to be mainly about her husband). I decided to change my thesis to investigate the Institute for Colored Youth and discover what this school did to nurture such a large number of extraordinary women.

Much of the data collected was found electronically, often in the History research guides but also through census and other government resources. These sources were incredibly helpful as I was able to access them from any computer anywhere, in the library, in my home, even in the coffee shop around the corner. I also used bound books found in the library stacks and special collections. A startling new door was opened when I discovered the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection. I found several books there which are not available anywhere else. Because this highly specific topic had not been extensively researched before, there were no books written solely on the subject but for a doctoral thesis lovingly enshrined in the Blockson stacks. Since the stacks are closed, I relied on the staff to collect materials and make suggestions of related items.

The real lesson in this research has been the value of people. There is no question that Temple’s libraries have an extraordinary amount of material available; I knew that going in. I had previously wandered the stacks in both idle and studious hours, amazed at the sheer volume of information contained in Paley alone. I knew the value of electronic resources but was often overwhelmed by the variations and permutations one tiny Boolean operator would gather. Using Temple's facilities to their fullest only happened when I took advantage of the people there. These knowledgeable librarians, archivists and other staff often suggested several additions to my collection of information and research methods, providing springboards into new avenues and ways of thinking. They were able to help me focus my research and create a work of incredible originality and, I hope, inspiration.