A passion to uncover the history behind a CCDS landmark, and a new unit of study on 19th century settlers in Cincinnati leads a class of first graders to discover the historic Broadwell House. (Read the story inside.)
Visiting the Hamilton County Recorders Office to search for 200 year old property deeds; finding the name Phebe Broadwell (d. 1865) on a broken tombstone in Clermont County; examining hand hewn beams in the Broadwell House attic; locating Broadwell Road on a current greater Cincinnati map; what connects these events? The Broadwell House!

On the Cincinnati Country Day School campus sits the stately Broadwell House (c. 1804), a two story limestone structure which served as a private home through the 18th and 19th centuries. Although previously used as a residence by CCDS Heads of the School, the house currently serves as a place for various school meetings and functions.

My fascination with the Broadwell House began about a year and a half ago. I have taught in the lower school at CCDS since 1990. With scarcely a notice, I drove by the Broadwell house for years when traveling to and from school.

As a first grade teacher, it dawned on me that a class field trip to the Broadwell House could provide authentic support to a new unit of study about early 19th century settlers in the Cincinnati area. After all, wasn’t this an actual early settler house? As I attempted to gather teaching material related to the Broadwell House, I began to realize that the information did not exist in one neat and tidy bundle. When library visits and communications with the Indian Hill Historical Society yielded helpful but brief results, the enormity of answering what had seemed like very basic questions began to dawn on me.

A year and a half after these initial questions, I find myself with an ever-growing passion for reading and researching history. Motivated by my early questions, I have learned to access primary sources such as early property deeds, census records, and old maps. I have begun to piece together the history of the Broadwell House.

CCDS is fortunate to have such a significant and accessible historical resource on the campus. The Broadwell House seems an obvious treasure trove full of catalysts waiting to be utilized. The house provides an ideal “real life” context to teach history. It contains abundant opportunities for authentic learning experiences.

Authentic Learning: In this type of learning, materials and activities are framed around “real life” contexts in which they would be used. The underlying assumption of this approach is that material is meaningful to students and therefore, more motivating and deeply processed.” L. Herold, M.Ed.
As a concrete resource, the house supports opportunities for students of all ages to construct meaning. Meaningful connections to history, through a focus on the Broadwell House could be extended to students’ own personal stories and stories of others. The house contains rich opportunities that could support a wide variety of learning styles.

This year, first grade has used the house to connect students to several authentic learning opportunities. We launched the study by asking students which CCDS structure was the oldest and which was the newest. This question led to a trip in which we compared the older Broadwell House and the newer CCDS Upper School. Students carefully observed and noted similarities and differences in building materials, size, and architecture.

Although first grade visits the Upper School daily for lunch, most students had never visited the Broadwell House before. With curiosity piqued the students zoomed in on the Broadwell house. They looked, touched, and discussed structural materials (limestone, wood beams, iron latches, and fixtures) which helped them understand early Ohio settler home construction. Many questions arose such as wondering where the building materials came from and how they were transported to the building site.

The house visit sparked several follow up lessons. Utilizing information about early settler life learned through books, class discussions, and other resources, the students began making many connections. The students imagined what the Broadwell House rooms might have been used for and how they might have been furnished in 1804. They thought about the types of transportation the Broadwell family might have used to travel from their former home in Morristown, New Jersey to Cincinnati, Ohio.

The class constructed a model stone Broadwell House and made furnishings including “corn cob beds”. First grade held an early settler exhibit in the old house and celebrated with a luncheon in the newer Broadwell House conference room. First grade plans to work with the newly formed Environmental Council which uses the CCDS campus to “promote environmental awareness in everything (we do), both inside and outside the classroom” to enhance the house with landscaping.

First grade will continue to take advantage of this incredible resource and hopes others in the school community will catch the bug and join us. There will always be more questions and connections to research. I hope that everyone might find their own “Broadwell House” and experience this intense interest in learning, this thrill of discovering information, and this excitement of making connections. Answering questions that cannot easily be answered with a quick trip to the internet requires persistence, tenacity, and the attitude that answers probably can be unearthed. As with most situations in life, the hard work and subsequent discoveries yield very satisfying rewards.

1st graders meet in the conference room at the Broadwell House.