



Museum Grants for African American History and Culture

Sample Application MH-259767-OMS-26
Project Type: Small Project (\$5,000-\$100,000)

Discovering Amistad

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$97,250
Amount of cost share:	\$22,935

Discovering Amistad will evaluate, revitalize, and expand the durability and interpretive impact of its exhibits and educational programming. Project activities include developing accessible all-weather multimedia interpretive exhibitions and companion educational resources that extend learning beyond the narrated tour and increase year-round accessibility. Project planning and development activities will involve consulting with national humanities scholars, museum professionals, and cultural leaders with expertise in interpreting African American history. The team will also recruit a graduate-level intern to support research and writing as well as contribute to exhibit content and curriculum development, while gaining mentorship and hands-on training. The exhibitions are designed to prompt reflection, expand perspectives, and encourage dialogue through thoughtfully curated content and facilitated courageous conversations. The outcome of the project activities will be reduced geographic barriers to participation and increased statewide access by integrating shipboard, dockside, classroom, and digital experiences with upgraded display panels, the addition of interactive dockside and shipboard exhibits, and a renewed curriculum for grades 8-12.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

Evaluating and Enhancing Discovering Amistad's Exhibitions and Programs Amistad Museum Plus (AM+)

NARRATIVE

Project Justification

Discovering Amistad (DA) seeks \$97,250 in federal support, matched by \$22,935 in cost share, to evaluate, revitalize, and expand the cultural relevance, durability, and interpretive impact of its exhibits and educational programming. This project—Amistad Museum Plus (AM+)—will strengthen DA's ability to deliver audience-centered, culturally responsive, and measurable learning experiences across shipboard, dockside, classroom, and virtual environments, including programming presented during the ship's annual Voyage for Freedom, which brings the vessel to 6–8 Connecticut and regional ports for dockside tours, student programs, and community events. AM+ responds directly to needs identified through community listening sessions, educator feedback, visitor observation, and staff assessment. Each year, DA reaches more than 14,000 people, including over 4,000 students from more than 25 school districts. Approximately 200 educators participate in professional development aligned with Connecticut's African American Course of Studies. An additional 300 community members attend the Freedom Forum honoring "unsung community heroes," and 60 high school students participate in the Amistad Leadership Academy, implementing service projects in their communities. While DA's live interpretation and hands-on programming are highly effective, existing exhibition infrastructure is limited by weather exposure, lack of interactivity, and inconsistent integration across learning environments. AM+ will address these gaps by developing accessible, durable, all-weather, multimedia interpretive exhibitions and companion educational resources that extend learning beyond the narrated tour and increase year-round accessibility. Through modular exhibitions, interactive ship portals, traveling displays, and multimedia interpretation, AM+ will elevate African American voices, foreground the lived experiences of the Mende people, and present the *Amistad* story through asset-based, decolonized, and historically rigorous frameworks. These enhancements will preserve core historical content while improving safety, usability, and engagement. Community voice is central to this work. AM+ will sustain engagement through focused feedback loops, targeted focus groups, and prototype testing. A streamlined core team will lead the project, consulting subject-matter experts at key milestones to ensure clarity, efficiency, and accountability. The project will proceed in clearly defined phases with milestone checkpoints. The Executive Director and Director of Education will jointly oversee progress, vendor coordination, and overall accountability.

Sept–Dec 2026: Planning—define goals, recruit team, engage designer, revise curriculum, secure funding.
Jan–Apr 2027: Design—develop and refine content; finalize budget and production plans.
May–Aug 2027: Fabrication—manufacture components and prepare for installation.
Sept–Dec 2027: Launch—public unveiling, promotion, and evaluation.

Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Alignment

AM+ advances Goal 1 (Objective 1.1) by refreshing the grades 8–12 curriculum and deepening culturally grounded interpretation, and supports Goal 3 (Objective 3.2) by strengthening exhibitions and expanding public access. The project enhances experiential learning with measurable outcomes—greater engagement, improved understanding, and expanded off-site reach—evaluated through visitor interaction data, educator feedback, and pre/post assessments. AM+ builds DA's capacity to serve students, educators, and community members while promoting cultural literacy.

African American History and Culture (AAHC) Alignment

AM+ advances Goal 1—building the capacity of African American museums to serve their communities—specifically Objective 1.1, by enhancing public programs, exhibitions, and school offerings. Through upgraded exhibits, interactive shipboard and dockside interpretation, and a refreshed grades 8–12 curriculum, AM+ strengthens exhibitions and school-based learning, aligning clearly with AAHC priorities.

Organizational Strategic Alignment

AM+ directly advances DA's 2023–2026 Strategic Plan priority to develop new tools and media to reach broader and more diverse audiences. The project supports DA's mission to connect people of all ages with the

Amistad story and motivate action toward dismantling systems that perpetuate racism and inequality. The project advances DA's core values by:

- Centering African American lived experience and leadership
- Elevating historically marginalized narratives
- Encouraging informed, cross-cultural dialogue
- Affirming a strong commitment to human rights
- Ensuring interpretation, design, and evaluation are inclusive and accessible to diverse audiences

The Need

At a time when public understanding of human rights, equity, and inclusion is both urgent and contested, DA has identified a clear need to strengthen how narratives of freedom, resilience, and social justice are presented and sustained across its educational environments. While DA's programming is impactful, community feedback and internal assessment indicate growing demand for learning spaces that consistently reflect inclusive, decolonized perspectives and are accessible across geography, age, and learning style. Too often, historical narratives related to enslavement and resistance are minimized or framed through Eurocentric lenses, limiting deeper understanding and engagement.

Currently, DA's core shipboard experience relies primarily on a live narrated tour that powerfully interprets the 1839 *Amistad* uprising. The tour traces the story from West Africa—introducing Mende culture and leadership traditions through figures such as Sengbe Pieh—through the Middle Passage and the illegal international slave trade, the rebellion aboard *La Amistad*, and the subsequent legal struggle in Connecticut and New York that led to the captives' return to Sierra Leone. Hands-on interaction with replica artifacts, documents, and tools enhances learning and allows visitors to physically engage with the story.

However, this experience depends on live interpretation, weather, and staff availability and lacks durable, interactive exhibits to extend learning and ensure consistent access across seasons and sites. Likewise, DA's classroom programs use multimedia, discussion, and object-based learning but lack the ship's immersive, place-based experience. These offerings currently operate in parallel rather than as an integrated system. AM+ addresses this gap by combining the strongest elements of shipboard, dockside, and classroom programming into a cohesive, scalable, and sustainable learning experience. Through durable, all-weather multimedia exhibitions, interactive displays, and modular digital resources, AM+ will reduce reliance on live narration alone, increase consistency and safety, and expand access for audiences who cannot visit the ship due to geographic, financial, or logistical barriers.

Enhanced technology and interactive interpretation will allow DA to reach landlocked and distant communities, support virtual and hybrid engagement, and provide measurable data on visitor use, learning, and engagement. By strengthening interpretive infrastructure and planning for evaluation and maintenance from the start, AM+ addresses needs for accessibility, durability, and impact—keeping the *Amistad* story relevant, accurate, and transformative.

Current Offering	Enhancement with AM+
Ship/Dockside Tours	Multimedia, Touch-screen interactives, Audio tours, Digital games, Artifact displays, Physical Braille elements, Captioning, “Hear and read” functionality, Audio narration, Wheelchair-accessible exhibits, and digital interfaces
Classroom based Interactive Learning	Virtual tours and traveling exhibits, including ship models
Teacher Development	Exhibitions and resources for culturally responsive teaching
Community Freedom Forums	Visiting scholars, virtual learning, audio tours, and classroom media
STEM programs with Mystic Seaport's Planetarium	Digital displays and virtual engagement with students

Primary Audience

The primary audience for AM+ includes people of all ages and backgrounds from across Connecticut and the region. Representing the next phase of DA's community engagement efforts, the project will serve a broad mix of general visitors, educators, and students in grades 8 through adulthood. AM+ is designed to expand DA's existing audience by reaching both coastal communities along the Long Island Sound—where the *Amistad Freedom Schooner* docks each summer as part of the Voyage for Freedom—and landlocked communities served through DA's in-school programs. By integrating shipboard, dockside, classroom, and digital experiences, AM+ will reduce geographic barriers to participation and broaden statewide access. The enhanced experience will also support America 250 by highlighting the role that Connecticut places and citizens played in the *Amistad* uprising, while drawing clear connections to the Civil Rights movement of the 20th century and the ongoing relevance of these histories today.

Ultimate Beneficiaries

AM+ has the potential to reach a global audience by engaging visitors with the *Amistad*'s impact on U.S. history, its connections to Cuba and West Africa, and its place within the broader history of the international slave trade. The project seeks to foster informed dialogue that deepens understanding of the histories and lived experiences of communities across the African diaspora.

Project Work Plan

Activities and Sequence

1. *Assemble Core Project Team* - Convene a streamlined team of DA staff, scholars, historians, education advisors, and museum design experts to guide planning.
2. *Content Review and Prioritization* - Review, update, and prioritize existing humanities content related to the *Amistad* uprising and its significance to Connecticut and national history.
3. *Audience Definition and Outcomes* - Define primary audience segments and establish intended learning outcomes for each AM+ exhibition and program element.
4. *Interpretive Framework Development* - Identify and prioritize content and interpretive approaches most relevant to specific audience subgroups, emphasizing asset-based, decolonized perspectives.
5. *Exhibition Concept Development* - Conduct 3–5 structured exhibition concept workshops to:
 - a. Finalize interpretive themes and key messages.
 - b. Assess material options (e.g., UV-resistant aluminum, acrylic/polycarbonate, high-density urethane, cast metal, or wood).
 - c. Identify opportunities and limitations related to safety, durability, transportability, and cost.
 - d. Research and select tools to measure visitor engagement (e.g., QR use, dwell time).
6. *Benchmarking and Best Practices* - Review best practices and comparable exhibitions at African American museums and culturally responsive institutions.
7. *Exhibition Specifications and Budgeting* - Develop an exhibition checklist and technical specifications aligned with budget, including translation needs, accessibility, weight, size, and materials; finalize the manufacturing budget.
8. *Educational Program Integration* - Conduct 3–5 educational development meetings to align exhibitions with school-based programming and revise the in-school curriculum accordingly.
9. *Design Development* - Engage a museum design consultant to produce display concepts and create a comprehensive design document outlining interpretive goals, content hierarchy, materials, and fabrication requirements.
10. *Production Planning* - Develop a detailed production and installation timeline, including fabrication, testing, and delivery milestones.
11. *Prototype Development and Testing* - Produce exhibition prototypes and identify elements suitable for duplication or adaptation for in-school and traveling use.
12. *Community Review and Refinement* - Conduct focus groups with educators, students, and community representatives to test prototypes and refine content, design, and usability.
13. *Final Design and Fabrication* - Finalize designs, select manufacturing partners, and secure additional production funding as needed.
14. *Marketing and Public Engagement* - Develop and launch a coordinated marketing and public relations campaign to support rollout and audience awareness.

15. *Fabrication and Installation* - Oversee fabrication, delivery, and installation of AM+ exhibitions.

Risks and How We Will Mitigate Them

DA recognizes potential risks and has established clear mitigation strategies with designated oversight.

Risk: Delays in securing expert participation

Mitigation: DA will draw from its established network—including Connecticut Freedom Trail, Connecticut Department of Education, Central Connecticut State University, Yale's Gilder Lehrman Center, Connecticut Black and Puerto Rican Caucus, Brown University, Ruby and Calvin Fletcher African American History Museum, Amistad Research Center (Tulane), and Enslaved.org (Michigan State). Invitations and MOUs will be issued in the first quarter, with alternates identified. The Executive Director will oversee contracting.

Risk: Funding gaps or cost overruns

Mitigation: Monthly budget reviews by the Executive Director and Board Treasurer; fixed-cost fabrication contracts where possible; phased implementation if needed. DA has secured a \$20,000 Connecticut Humanities grant and is pursuing additional support.

Risk: Vendor delays, weather exposure, or scheduling conflicts

Mitigation: Milestone tracking with monthly reviews; contracts with firm deadlines; built-in contingency time; durable materials for shipboard conditions. The Director of Education will manage timeline adherence.

Risk: Multi-partner coordination challenges

Mitigation: Biweekly project check-ins and centralized tracking of deliverables, co-managed by the Executive Director and Director of Education. Recorded meetings and shared online access to allow partners to provide feedback on their own schedules as well as in-person and virtual meetings to best fit complex schedules.

Risk: Inconsistent interpretation or accessibility barriers

Mitigation: All components will undergo scholarly review and educator testing and will follow universal design principles, including captioned digital content. Each element will reflect rigorous scholarship, cohesive interpretive design, clearly defined educational objectives, and alignment with the C3 Framework and state curriculum standards.

DA Project Management Team

- *Paula Mann-Agnew*, Executive Director/Project Manager, brings over 25 years of nonprofit leadership and 17 years of adjunct teaching experience in African American Studies and culturally responsive practice. She will provide overall project leadership, oversee financial management, monitor benchmarks, and ensure the project is completed on time and within budget.
- *Chris Menapace*, Director of Education/Project Facilitator, has extensive experience in public history, curriculum design, and exhibition development, having led multiple permanent, traveling, and digital exhibitions across Connecticut. He will supervise staff and consultants, manage exhibition development, and integrate new curriculum materials aligned with the project's goals.
- *Victoria Meskill*, Operations Manager, has experience managing complex renovation and operational projects. She will provide administrative coordination, documentation, and logistical support, assisting with scheduling, procurement, and internal communications to ensure smooth project implementation.
- *Ree Norfleet*, Director of Community Initiatives, brings over eight years of nonprofit experience in community development, facilitation, theater, and human resources, supporting community engagement and program implementation. She will lead focus groups, gather community input to inform exhibit content, and provide administrative support to the Project Manager.

Advisors and Humanities Consultants

During project planning and development, DA will consult with national humanities scholars, museum professionals, and cultural leaders with expertise in African American history, interpretation.

- *Dr. Akeia de Barros Gomes*, Director, Center for Black History (Newport Historical Society); Visiting Scholar/Lecturer, Brown University's Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (Newport, CT)

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- *Dr. Karen Francis-Barnes*, Curriculum Specialist at Great Oaks Charter School (Bridgeport, CT)
- *Dr. Troy Brown*, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the Connecticut Judicial Branch (Hartford, CT)
- *Tammy Denease*, President, Hidden Women; historian, artist, and storyteller (West Hartford, CT).
- *Dr. Walter Hawthorne III*, Professor of History, Michigan State University; Director, Enslaved.org and MATRIX Center (East Lansing, MI)
- *Andre LePelle Keitt*, historian, storyteller, and teaching artist (Hartford, CT)
- *Kai Perry*, President, Connecticut Amistad Committee (New Haven, CT)
- *Thomas Thurston*, former Director of Education and Public Outreach, Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery (New Haven, CT)
- *Dr. Samuel Pieh*, historian, voiceover artist, translator, and Sengbe Pieh descendant (Rossville, TN)

Additional partners include Stephen Armstrong (Connecticut State Department of Education); State Representative Bobby Gibson; Frank Mitchell (Toni Harp Historical Museum); Brenda Simmons (Southampton African American Museum); Joanne Steinberg (New Haven Museum); Christopher Freeman (Mystic Seaport Museum); and Sally Whipple (Connecticut's Old State House/Connecticut Humanities), along with the Alliance of HBCU Museums and Galleries, Inc.; Amistad Research Center (Tulane University); Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Yale University); Center Church; the Center for Black History at Newport Historical Society; Connecticut Freedom Trail; Connecticut League of Museums; Dixwell Avenue Congregational United Church of Christ; Eastville Community Historical Society; Faith Congregational Church; First Congregational Church of Norwich (Castle Church); Los Angeles Maritime Institute; Michigan State University; Museum Association of New York; Mystic Seaport Museum; Organization of Black Maritime Graduates; Ruby and Calvin Fletcher African American History Museum; Southampton African American Museum; Southold Historical Museum; and Tall Ships America.

Time, Financial, Personnel, and Other Resources

- DA staff: Executive Director will devote ~5% time to oversight; Director of Education ~20% to facilitation and implementation; Operations Manager ~10% to support logistics; Director of Community Initiatives ~10% to community engagement and program support.
- DA seeks IMLS funding to engage consultants, support exhibition design and production, and employ a graduate student intern for mentored training in education, interpretation, and community outreach.
- DA will facilitate approximately 20 hours of structured planning sessions, conducted through a combination of virtual meetings and in-person convenings.
- DA will leverage existing organizational resources and collaborate with academic advisors and humanities experts to expand and refine content.
- DA will draw on established partnerships, including Connecticut's Old State House, to inform best practices in durable, weather-resistant exhibition design.
- Award-winning Lumiblime Productions (Meriden, CT) will provide creative development and videography.
- During development, DA staff will conduct mini focus groups to assess the effectiveness of content and experience prototypes. Participants will be identified through state, regional, and national networks, including CT Coalition for History, CT Freedom Trail, Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Connecticut State Department of Education, Connecticut Council for the Social Studies, the Association for the Study of Connecticut History, Anti-Racist Collective at Yale, State Education Resource Center of Connecticut, and New Haven Museum.
- The AM+ budget includes travel for IMLS-required meetings and professional development.

Track Progress

DA's Project Facilitator will track progress using a Gantt chart and provide regular, milestone-based updates to the Project Manager and Board of Directors. Follow-up evaluations with prototype participants and educators will document outcomes, including unintended impacts, and inform final design decisions before full production of AM+ elements. To ensure measurable impact, DA will establish baseline data prior to installation, including attendance, dwell time, and pre-program surveys assessing knowledge and perceived

relevance. Post-installation evaluation will track QR code usage, digital interaction rates, dwell time by exhibit component, and knowledge gains measured through pre- and post-visit questions. We will also assess educator-reported classroom integration and post-visit actions such as website engagement and repeat visitation. Eventbrite may be used to capture visitor zip codes and email data to better understand geographic reach. To ensure robust feedback, we will prioritize both digital and paper surveys administered through Google Forms to allow anonymous responses. This dual-format approach will maximize accessibility, encourage candid input, and provide meaningful data to inform ongoing refinement and impact assessment. Results will be compared to baseline and historical visitation data to assess changes in learning, engagement, and behavior, providing clear quantitative and qualitative evidence aligned with IMLS expectations.

Project Results

AM+ will upgrade display panels, add interactive dockside and shipboard exhibits, and refresh DA's grades 8–12 curriculum—creating an integrated, historically grounded interpretive system. Core components include:

Contextual History

- **Chronological Timelines:** A comprehensive timeline tracing the *Amistad* story from West Africa through the legal struggle for freedom, highlighting key events, courtroom proceedings, and rulings that resulted in the captives' return to Sierra Leone.
- **Geographic Mapping:** Animated time-lapse maps showing the transatlantic slave trade, West African cultural regions, and the captives' journey from Sierra Leone to Cuba, Connecticut, and back to Africa.
- **Trade Context:** A concise overview of the transatlantic slave trade and the sugar economy that shaped schooner *Amistad's* voyage.
- **Maritime Experience:** Interpretive visuals, videos, and explanatory content highlighting key ship features, daily life aboard, and crew activities to convey the lived maritime experience.

Historic Lived Experience

- **Preparation and Leadership:** Interpretation of Mende cultural systems that foster leadership, critical thinking, and collective action, including communication through storytelling and music.
- **Rebellion Artifacts:** Interactive engagement with replica objects—such as shackles, machetes, and drums—to ground learning in material culture.
- **Courtroom Experience:** Interpretation of the legal struggle, including the Declaration of Independence and John Quincy Adams's arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court.
- **Personal Narratives:** First-person stories of the *Amistad* Africans that humanize the historical account and center individual experience.
- **Mende Culture:** Expanded interpretation of pre-capture Mende society through music, dress, social norms, and artistic traditions.
- **Language and Interpretation:** An audio experience highlighting the role of the Mende language and interpreter James Covey, whose translation was critical to the captives' legal victory.
- **Celestial Navigation:** Developed in collaboration with Mystic Seaport Museum, an exhibition recreating the night sky as seen by the captives to explain the role of navigation in the *Amistad* story.

Contemporary Connection and Reflection

- **Reflection Space:** A concluding space inviting visitors to reflect on the experience, share personal responses, and recognize individuals they identify as modern heroes, reinforcing the continued relevance of the *Amistad* story today.

Influence on Primary Audience

AM+ is designed to engage a broad regional audience while deepening understanding of African American history, including communities reached during the ship's Voyage for Freedom to ports across the region. A central goal of the project is to present interpretation through decolonized, asset-based frameworks that elevate African American voices and lived experiences. DA recognizes that when exhibitions lack inclusivity or cultural relevance, they can unintentionally discourage participation by BIPOC communities and limit overall impact. By centering the legacy, resilience, and contributions of African Americans through a humanistic lens, AM+ is intended to increase engagement among core audiences while also offering transformative learning

experiences for all visitors. The exhibitions are designed to prompt reflection, expand perspectives, and encourage dialogue through thoughtfully curated content and facilitated “courageous conversations.” AM+ connects people of all ages to the *Amistad* story and inspires action to advance human rights and challenge racism.

Resulting Work Product

Researched, culturally relevant multimedia exhibitions, including:

- 10 multimedia display panels installed on the ship and 3–5 traveling displays for the Voyage for Freedom tour (target: Summer/Fall 2027).
- QR codes on displays linking to 12–15 audio and video modules featuring Amistad figures, maritime demonstrations, vessel tours, slave-trade maps, and Mende cultural content.
- Handheld multimedia “Focus 3 Player” devices will be available onboard for self-guided tours, featuring short-form educational videos and audio narratives.
- 1 modular pop-up exhibition system designed for transport and installation in landlocked communities, supporting at least 10 school or community installations annually (target completion: Fall 2027).
- Exhibition scripts: 12–15 interpretive scripts developed using asset-based, decolonized frameworks and reviewed by humanities and community advisors.
- Artifact protection: Up to 20 artifacts or reproductions in conservation-safe display housings.
- Interactive digital components: 3–5 interactive kiosks or projection experiences incorporating international video content from Sierra Leone and linguistically relevant voiceovers.
- Updated in-school curriculum: 3 curriculum units (grades 8–10) with teacher guides and student materials, aligned with C3 and state social studies standards.
- Virtual ship tour prototype: 1 interactive virtual tour with analytics to track use, duration, and reach.

Access

DA’s AM+ digital products are designed to ensure broad public and educational access both on-site and off-site. On-site visitors will engage through QR codes, handheld multimedia devices, interactive kiosks, and Focus 3 Player–style systems featuring layered audio, video, and interactive storytelling. Content will include Spanish translations, captioning, audio narration, Braille components, and “hear and read” functionality to support visitors who are visually or hearing impaired. Physical spaces and digital interfaces will be fully accessible to wheelchair users and individuals with mobility challenges. Off-site audiences will access AM+ content through virtual tours, traveling exhibitions, and educator resources aligned with classroom standards. Using plain language, culturally responsive interpretation, multilingual elements, and universal design, these tools create self-paced learning experiences.

Sustainability

AM+ represents the next phase of DA’s in-person humanities programming, building on work delivered statewide since 2015. This interactive, inquiry-based experience connects historical interpretation to contemporary issues, reinforcing the enduring relevance of the *Amistad* story. Long-term stewardship is embedded in the project design. Following installation, AM+ components will be integrated into defined staff responsibilities and routine operations, including scheduled inspections, cleaning, digital updates, and annual condition assessments. A digital master version of all exhibit panels and content will be maintained, ensuring that reprints, updates, or replacements can be produced efficiently as needed. The Executive Director will oversee asset management, while the Director of Education will supervise content updates and curriculum alignment. DA will sustain the project beyond the grant period through a dedicated annual maintenance line item, repair and replacement reserves, targeted fundraising and sponsorships, and shared stewardship with city and dock partners. An AM+ Advisory Team of staff, scholars, and community members will guide ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement.

