

# History 2301E Community-Based Research: Antislavery in 19<sup>th</sup> Century London

Reflection Paper: Andrew Ross

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During the 2014-2015 academic year, members of the History 2301E course at Huron University College at Western University have been immersed in a class project concerning London and its link to the antislavery movement. History 2301E is an American history survey course so what was the connection with London and Canada? Were slavery and the abolitionist movement not simply American issues? As stated in the project outline, we as Canadians have tended to consider the American racial slavery system as something that occurred over a century ago, in places other than Canada. However, Canada does have important ties to antislavery movements in the United States and across the Atlantic. This community-based learning project has focused specifically on the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church of the mid-nineteenth century in London, Ontario, placing it in the continuum of the global framework of the antislavery movement. In short, the intent of the project has been to “explore, document, contextualise and present research findings on the antislavery movement in 19<sup>th</sup>-century London.”<sup>1</sup> This project paper aims to touch upon the challenges and successes of research I undertook in relation to the project as a whole and will work to intertwine the findings back into the broad spectrum of the taught course. It will also respond to some questions related to what I learned from the process – about research, about deriving meaning from that research and the study of history, about community engagement for mutual benefit, how participation in a community-based project can bring history to life and that there are lessons to be learned from history.

The project was broken down into a number of discreet parts: research, working with community partners, visiting Oberlin College in Ohio, creating a research website, hosting a public event, and finally writing this paper reflecting on the project from a personal perspective and as a part of a much broader and complex narrative. The research portion began with transcribing letters related to the AME, and using them as a springboard to conduct more directed research to further our knowledge about London’s black abolitionist community and our understanding of that community’s role in the larger antislavery movement. Working with community partners included reaching out to the group that has ownership of the London AME Church (which became more commonly referred to as the “Fugitive Slave Chapel”) and that was instrumental in its preservation. Research material gathered from various sources, the visit to Oberlin College and a tangible connection to the chapel combined to serve as a way to fully comprehend the Underground Railroad and the link between Oberlin and London as part of the antislavery movement. With all information gathered, a website was created to provide a simple-to-navigate and an easily accessible forum where one could visit and learn about the antislavery movements that tied the London region to the bigger antislavery system. Finally, the public event hosted by the project students at Huron University College on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 was an effective way to allow members of the community and public at large, some of

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Reid-Maroney, *History 2301E*, Western University, Huron University College, London. 2015.

whom were involved in our project as it moved forward, to view our findings in a public setting.

My role in the project was as part of the research team. Because my home base is Ottawa, I was asked to visit the Library and Archives Canada (LAC). My mission was two-fold. First, I was to see what primary source information exists in the archives that might shed more light on the AME or British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church, most particularly on members of the congregation or individuals associated with it or the local black community. Second, I was to learn about the archives in general – about the available resources and how to access them – and about researching with primary sources – the benefits and challenges they present.

To work in the LAC one first must register so I now have a pass to enter and use the resources. One is not allowed to take bags into the research areas (storage lockers are provided) and notes must be taken electronically as pens and pencils are not permitted. I discovered that archivists (and librarians) tend not to work in the main building in downtown Ottawa but in an office building across the Ottawa River in Gatineau so I spoke with an archival technologist working in one of the large reading rooms. (I submitted an online request to Skype with an archivist but never received a response). I described the research project to the technologist who suggested some sources to use, the principal one being the census of 1861. I learned that Canada's early census documents are only available on microfiche. A project in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was done to microfiche all the census documents and then the originals were destroyed. The microfiche have been digitized so censuses can actually be accessed online. The search tool for the censuses was not developed by the LAC but by organizations like Ancestry.ca. The quality of the search tool is therefore not always consistent. I also learned that the census data had been collected by people going door to door in 1861, filling out large information tables as they went. This process has its advantages and disadvantages for researchers. Because the information was collected by hand and probably by untrained individuals, the accuracy and consistency of the information raises some concerns. However, the fact that the information was collected based on geographical location meant that if one found a household of black people (column 13 on the census record indicates if a person was of colour), it was likely that other black people lived in the same neighbourhood.

To begin my research, I created a spreadsheet in which I listed the names of people who signed an 1861 letter to the Reverend Lewis Chambers who was an early minister of the BME Church. Because the letter was handwritten, it was difficult to be sure of the spelling of everyone's name. I systematically went through the 1861 census looking for each name, soon realizing the need to limit the search so I concentrated on "Middlesex" which I further refined to "London." The work was tedious and unfruitful at first. However, when I made my first substantial find, I felt like a detective who had finally found an important clue. I was surprised not to find information about the officers (superintendent, secretary and treasurer) of the church. Instead, I first found Cornelius Butler, a

farmer, born in the United States, Wesleyan religion, aged 31, married, coloured, living with his family in a single storey log house. Listed with Cornelius were his wife, aged 30, and an eleven-year-old daughter, both born in the US. Four more children ranging in age from 8 to 1 were born in Upper Canada, which suggests the family arrived in Canada between about 1850 and 1852. Listed on the same page were other coloured people: a single Wesleyan farmer born in the US, two Roman Catholic women born in the US who may have been mother and daughter, a Baptist couple with six children, the last two of which were born in Upper Canada, suggesting an arrival there after 1855, a blind 75 year old woman who could have been one of the wives' mother, and an illiterate father with a sixteen year old son, both born in the US and working as farmers around London. Some individuals were not listed in any census reports either before or after the letter on which I was basing my research was written in 1861.

After exhausting my search of the 1861 census, I looked at some London City directories which were books listing addresses and containing advertisements. It was difficult to figure out the layout, as they all seemed a bit different. I was able to find references to people I had not been able to locate in the census. For example, the church superintendent and secretary were listed in an 1872-1873 directory as plasterer and secretary for Proof Line Road Company respectively. In the end, I was only able to identify details about a few of the people who signed the 1861 letter. This suggests a number of things: the collection of census data was inconsistent – some people may never have been approached; some people may not have understood the concept of the census and refused to participate; data that once existed has been lost over time; the data exists but the search tool failed to produce to it; more information exists in the city directories or other documents not discovered or accessed. This suggests that one can never be sure of having the complete story.

The Fugitive Slave Chapel was replaced in the late 1860s by a more robust structure and then served as a residence. As a simple wooden structure it fell into disrepair. A threat of demolition in 2013 sparked renewed interest in the structure and it was moved to a safe location beside the BME church that replaced it. Why the interest in this seemingly insignificant building? It serves as an important reminder of the role London and communities in Canada like it played in the antislavery movement. London served as a safe haven and refuge for former slaves who had escaped slavery in the United States via the Underground Railway. The American slave acts of 1793 and 1850 made even remaining in the free northern states a dangerous proposition. By the mid-1850s, London had a sizable black population of about 350 people.<sup>2</sup>

The research conducted in this project has uncovered a thought provoking discussion of larger historical themes. My particular contribution to this project was to learn more about the people whose names appeared on an 1861 document. The fact that Cornelius Butler appears to have left the United States at the time of

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<sup>2</sup> Beth Emanuel BME Church, "Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project Documentary," 1 Mar. 2015, *Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project*, 9 Apr. 2015, <<http://fscpp.ca/vid.html>>.

or shortly after the 1850 slave act suggests that he feared being enslaved (we do not know if he was an escaped slave from the south) and wanted to escape the racism and prejudices against blacks in mid-nineteenth century America. By including Historians Against Slavery (HAS) in the project outcomes, we were able to put into context the historical significance of our project work against a modern and active view in the antislavery movement. Historians Against Slavery is a “group of scholars who bring historical context and scholarship to the modern-day antislavery movement in order to inform activism and develop collaborations to sustain and enhance such efforts.”<sup>3</sup> With the motto “using history to make slavery history,”<sup>4</sup> this essentially means that HAS is working to inform the 21<sup>st</sup> century about slavery issues from the past, with a view towards the eradication of modern-day slavery. The organization drives home the ongoing existence of an issue that our project could simply confine to history. What I found particularly profound about the perspective of Historians Against Slavery was the inclusion of a piece about William Cooper Nell’s who, in his 1855 work *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* that was contemporary with our research project subject, focused not on the antislavery movement but focused on patriotism as a way to highlight and secure black freedom and citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

Over the course of its history, the name of the church central to our story changed names. First known as the AME church, the name changed to the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church to make it independent from its American roots, severing ties with the United States’ 1850 Fugitive Slave Act that caused some ex-slave preachers to be fearful, and thus the Canadian division of the AME, the BME, was born.<sup>6</sup> The BME church then became known as the Fugitive Slave Chapel, an appropriate name and a historiographical choice as it served as a refuge for slaves fleeing from the United States.<sup>7</sup> Methodism, which at the time was one of the largest religious denominations in the United States and Canada, had a general disregard for class and race, and thus was seen as a safe haven for fleeing slaves.<sup>8</sup>

This project served to use a local example to illustrate a theme that is central to the history of the United States – slavery – support for it and against it, different attitudes in the north and the south, the role of government in enabling slavery, a prelude to the American civil war. The inclusion of Historians Against Slavery highlighted that slavery still exists today across the world. The project

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<sup>3</sup> Historians Against Slavery, "About Us," 1 Jan. 2013, *Historians Against Slavery*, 9 Apr. 2015, <<http://www.historiansagainstsavery.org/main/about-us/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> A. Nevell Owens, *Formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Nineteenth Century: Rhetoric of Identification*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Archaeology, "History of Fugitive Slave Chapel Site," 25 Jan. 2014, *Museum of Ontario Archaeology*, 9 Apr. 2015, <<http://archaeologymuseum.ca/fugitive-slave-chapel-site/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Charteris, "A Brief history of the A.M.E Church in the United States and Canada," *History* 2301E, London, 7 Mar. 2015.

also highlighted for me how interesting it can be to conduct research using primary sources – I made assumptions about some of the people I discovered in the census. I will never know how accurate I was in my analysis. History, I learned, is a continuum – events and political, social, economic and cultural circumstances in the United States forced black people over the border to safety in Canada; London served as a refuge yet blacks were not free of the racism and prejudices that emerged in their new community and elsewhere in Canada and it still persists here today and around the world. The Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project and witnessing the move of the building to its new site was an important illustration of community engagement where our project was enhanced by the experience, the chapel was saved from demolition and the preservation project's website is linked to ours, expanding exposure of the subject. Participation in different aspects of our project made history real for me. Finally, how participation in a community-based project can bring history to life and that there are lessons to be learned from history.

A group of students has worked together and with others to research and interpret one aspect of antislavery history. The project matters to me in that it takes a local issue and places it in a broader historical context. Through my census research, I may have been able to provide names to some of the slaves who escaped from the United States and found freedom and safety in a small London wooden church. If we have helped a community organization enrich its story, we have been successful. The research conducted by our team shed light on another otherwise potentially overlooked community based project – the restoration of the Fugitive Slave Chapel. This chapter of the BME served as one of a series of sanctuaries for slaves who successfully escaped oppression via the Underground Railroad, and the preservation is crucial. Further research could be conducted to discover other churches in the network of organizations that helped escaped slaves find security in a new country. By learning more about Canada's, London's and the Fugitive Slave Chapel's roles in the antislavery movement, we are able to better understand the past in hopes of securing a better future for all.

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