History 2301E Community-Based Research: Antislavery in 19th Century London

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Community based learning is a form of education that allows students and educators to first hand participate and learn in the communities around them. There are many ways in which this program helps students to learn in non-traditional ways. The program allows for our professor to connect the issues being discussed in class to the specific community we visit. For example, during our trip to Oberlin Ohio we were able to make connections to our class discussions on American slavery, the Underground Railroad and the fugitive slaves that may have come from Ohio into our own community. In History 2301 at Huron University College we as a class were able to participate in this program and benefit greatly from it. The research project and the community based learning program will help many students including myself to appreciate the research process, and excel for the rest of our university and adult lives.

My main task in the project was research. My job was to take names from a primary source that I had access to, and try to find more information about the people whose names were on the document. The primary source in question was a letter from London's Fugitive Slave Chapel, now the British Episcopal Methodist Church. On this letter were several names of members of the church community. Along with my partner, I went to the 'London Room' at the London Public Library's central location. In the 'London Room' I looked through many records all of which were around the dates 1850's to the 1870's. The first thing my partner and I looked through was the census records. I looked through the print census, and even had access to an Ancestry database on the library's computers. Both of these helped greatly. I was able to find a majority of the people whose names we had access to. Along with census records I was able to look at the microfilm copies of London and surrounding area registries. The microfilm was a very helpful tool to have access to as it showed things about the people that were not available in the census. For example, I was able to see some of people's street addresses, (whereas on the census I was only given a general district where the person lived). The microfilm even showed my partner and I the jobs our people in question had at the time. Along with census records my partner and I also looked though death records. This had to be done through Ancestry as the printed documentation of death records in the 'London Room' were organized by year and by cemetery, thus looking through each year/cemetery for the names we had would have taken much more time than we had, especially when for a majority of the people we were looking for, we had no idea when they had passed away, or if they were even living in London when they died. On ancestry we found a few of the people whose names we had, but not as many as my partner and I hoped to find. Along with the rest of the information we were able to find, my partner and I were also able to find a book that told us where each of the 'districts' were located throughout different areas of London. This was greatly useful because it gave us an idea of where the people who attended the Fugitive Slave Chapel church, or at least those who were on our list of names lived. This was one of the easier tasks in my role of the research in the project. My partner and I saved this task for last, knowing that we would have all the information we needed to complete the mapping process. All of the previously stated tasks may seem like small and mediocre tasks to someone not involved in the project, but they most definitely were not. Without being too overconfident, I was knew that my work would be the basis of the project. Part of the reason I was so eager to do research was because I knew I would be getting more of a direct hands on experience in the research. I knew that this project would impact the rest of my university life as it showed and taught me how to use many resources like the 'London Room' at the London Public Library. Now I know that if I ever have another chance to participate in

primary research I will be confident and more helpful to my project and its members, as I am now very familiar with finding information, using different research techniques like microfilm, and Ancestry databases. Furthermore, participating in a primary research project has shown and given me a great appreciation for those who do much more in depth research than our small project. My partner and I spent more than fifteen hours doing research, and we came up with a lot of useful information, but not as much as we originally had expected to. I thought it was going to be much easier than it was. That being said, it got easier as time went by and I would not have traded my position for another task in the research project.

Along the journey of collecting research for the project, my partner and I ran into many challenges. Towards the beginning of my research I found it difficult simply to find information as I was not familiar with census records or anything else I was going to use in the 'London Room'. It was also challenging not knowing for sure if the people we found in the census records were really those who we set out to find. Often, I found that everything about the person would match up except for one minor detail. For example, the ages of people we were trying to find often became a factor. I found a match to one of the people on our list in the census records but there were two people with the same name, with two different ages. This was a challenge because I wanted the research to be accurate, but I did not want to possibly leave out someone whom I spent so long trying to find records of. In this sense this challenge was intellectual and a bit logistical, as I was always questioning if the information was correct, but the census proved to be confusing and difficult at times. Another challenge I ran into to was purely technological. While researching in the 'London Room' I had the chance to use microfilm documents. Both my partner and I had never used a microfilm machine before, let alone seen one, but we knew there was information that would be helpful there so we persisted, and with some trouble eventually figured out how to use the machines. The most challenging aspect of this project was time. Whether it be time management or time restrictions, I was always very cautious of the time I was using. I was lucky that my partner had the exact same schedule as me on the days we went to the library, so there were no challenges there. However, trying to work in time around all of my other classes to go to the library was difficult. I found that while at the library, I would be starting to get a chain of some really good information coming up, and right as I did it would be time to pack up and head back to campus for class. This happened a lot (almost every time I was at the library), but it did show me that I needed to manage my time at the library wisely and only pursue information I knew would be useful. The time management aspect of this project will help me for the rest of my university life. Every semester there comes a time when the papers and assignments seem to pile up. Using time wisely and carefully at the library really showed me the amount of work I can get done in a short period of time. Another side of the time management aspect is the fact that my partner and I had to drop a few leads in our research because we knew we didn't have the time to complete the task. If I had the time I know I could have found more information and done much more research, this was particularly frustrating, but I assume that this is a normal problem to run into when doing primary research as an undergraduate student.

This research project has taught me that it is important to keep the past alive in our present. While completing the research I couldn't help but feel aspects of Whig interpretations of history coming into play. In other words I could see that past events, no matter how terrible, always lead

to the advancement of freedom, and knowledge. For example, I was able to see first-hand through my research that although the lives of fugitive slaves were filled with hardship, their fights for freedom lead to future movements that our class discussed during lectures. Things like the 'New Left' and Anne Moody's book *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, show how the world has been progressing, and fighting for African American rights, all because of fugitive slaves like those I was researching. During my research I was also able to take things I learned about the people I researched, and apply them to information I learned on the class trip to Ohio. This Ohio trip gave me the chance to view fugitive slaves in completely new ways, and being inside and close to the places that these important anti-slavery historical events happened gave me a much more enjoyable learning experience. I often imagined the people I researched from the Fugitive Slave Chapel in London in situations like the fugitive slaves in Oberlin Ohio where they would have to hide in houses, so not to be caught by authority figures. Through learning about African American history in my course and doing primary research in the area I was able to draw parallels between past events and modern day events. For example, I saw many similarities between the lynching of Emmett Till, and the recent shooting cases of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. These connections are important because although history and civil rights have improved greatly since the slave trade and later African American history, there are still cases in which discrimination and ignorance are alive. The connections I am able to make to larger themes in history are important to me as a history student. They show me how important and relative the past is to the present, and even show me how I can begin to draw conclusions about all aspects of modern life within the context of the past.

In conclusion, for me personally this class research project initially seemed like it would not be a big deal. It seemed like any other research project but with a more hands on experience. This all changed when I was able to attend the event that my class held in Huron's Great Hall, and when the class research website was launched. The event and website showed me that what our class was doing was a bigger deal to the anti-slavery history community than I thought. This project is not only important to Huron's history community, but to anyone who is interested in learning about Canadian and American anti-slavery history. This is one of the more exciting aspects of the project as it shows how the anti-slavery history message of freedom and knowledge are able to live on forever. This project is just the start of something much greater in the research of London's anti-slavery history. I feel like I am able to understand the history of my local community much more than I could ever have imagined. I can even say I would be glad and honored to continue this research project as the experience has left me enlightened, and grateful. I am proud to say that I was able to participate in such an amazing learning experience, and I hope that more history and maybe even English classes can take a community based learning approach to them. This learning experience has taught me lessons that I will continue to utilize for the rest of my university and adult life.