

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

Reflection Paper: Christopher Kelly

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During the course of this past school year I have been involved in a Community Based Learning (CBL) project in an American history class run by Dr. Nina Reid-Maroney at Huron University College. The CBL was set up with the goal of joining the lessons learned in class about the role that freedom plays in the American narrative to examples of antislavery history in Canada. That opportunity presented itself in the form of the Fugitive Slave Chapel, a small church built in London, Ontario in 1848 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church congregation. The Church was established by a group that consisted largely of escaped American slaves, all of who had crossed the border into Canada with the goal of escaping their former lives. The Church represented a meeting place and sanctuary for a community that would have needed to work hard to reconstruct identities in a new place that, while not as oppressive as the United States, would still by no means have been an easy place for displaced African-Americans to live.

Fast-forwarding to November 12, 2014, the Fugitive Slave Chapel found itself on the back of a flatbed truck moving to a new home within London. The efforts of the Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project to protect the church from destruction were motivated by the fact that, “the chapel was more than just a church. In addition to being a safe haven for escaped slaves, it was a pillar in London’s early Black community, and a centre for abolitionist activities.”¹ This represented an opportunity for our class to marry our course syllabus with a practical community initiative. Our class project would use the Preservation Project as the foundation from which to examine London’s role in the history of slavery in America. We were able to connect Canada and the former slaves of America through a process that involved archival work into the past of slaves that escaped north towards London. This research was then collected, synthesized, and published in a website that will act as an educational resource going forward. Finally, at the end of the school year, we put together an event to celebrate all of our class’s work, as well as to solidify the US-Canadian links in our course with a keynote speech by an antislavery historian from Syracuse University, Dr. Carol Faulkner. I was put in a small group within our class tasked with putting on this end-of-year event. The event brought the work of everyone in Huron’s American History class together in a tangible manner, and the challenges and successes my group encountered will be discussed at greater length further on in this reflection.

The CBL project this year has been a fulfilling experience that has taken advantage of the skills I have acquired in my past three years in Huron’s History program while, at the same time, convincing me of history’s applicability in the “real world”. I will begin this reflection by analyzing the “macro” issues: the large concepts from our course and how the project as a whole reflected those. From there, I will carry out a detailed account of the part of the project that I am most knowledgeable—the concluding event. Reading this paper should bring to light the unique challenges associated with creating a class project from scratch, and at the same time, should highlight the important part that London and Canada play in the American slavery narrative.

Freedom and the place it holds in American history are two basic concepts that our course has covered. Taking a moment away from this unique class project that my classmates and myself took part in, I would like to spend a short amount of time devoted to some of what we learned about freedom in the formal aspects of the course. Based on

¹ Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project: About the Project.

the length restrictions of this paper, there will not be an in-depth analysis, but I believe there are a few examples to illustrate how understanding freedom in the American past is not a simple, straightforward task.

The first comes from one of our course texts, Dr. Eric Foner's *Voices of Freedom*. Foner has gathered an encyclopedic series of documents all designed to highlight the fact that, "the very universality of the idea of freedom...can be misleading. Freedom is not a fixed, timeless category with a single unchanging definition."² The looseness of the term's definition is obviously captured in a number of the text's documents, but I would like to first focus on a piece written by the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass. As the Civil War carried on longer than most officials expected, there came the reluctant realization that the Union would require black soldiers to fight in order to offset the unexpected casualty figures. This allowed Douglass to capitalize on the message he had been delivering since the beginning of the conflict: that blacks should be allowed to participate in a war they believed would guarantee their liberty. Douglass addressed blacks in the North who he believed owed it to themselves to volunteer for the Union side, saying, "with every exulting shout of victory raised by the slaveholding rebels, I have implored the imperiled nation to unchain against her foes, her powerful black hand."³ This rising call to arms seems to imply that at least some blacks truly believed they would be well on their way towards equality if given the chance to exercise a show of unity and force.

Sadly, the vision laid out in 1863 did not match the reality in, for example, 1944. As American participation led to the onset of yet another opportunity for African Americans to achieve a semblance of equality, it is difficult to see just how much liberty the population received as a result of their collective sacrifice almost a century earlier. The historian Charles Wesley wrote in 1944 about *African Americans and the Four Freedoms*. In doing so, he highlights just how little progress had been made by the group. He claimed that, "Negroes have wanted what other citizens of the United States have wanted. They have wanted freedom and opportunity. They have wanted the pursuit of the life vouchsafed to all the citizens of the United States by our own liberty documents."⁴ This painful account shows how difficult African American life was in the middle of the twentieth century. It certainly is at odds with the attitude held by blacks during the course of the Civil War, a time that Frederick Douglass described as, "our golden opportunity."⁵ Moving forward through history to the examples such as the struggle carried forward by Martin Luther King Jr. into the 1960s, it is evident that any progress made for true black liberty was slow, and often only occurred in extreme circumstances.

In another excerpt from *Voices of Freedom* we read an essay by Henry David Thoreau, the outspoken abolitionist and anti-war campaigner, where he pointed out that, "when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves...I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and

² Foner, E. *Voices of Freedom: A documentary history* (Volume One). New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2014., xv

³ *ibid.*, 294

⁴ Foner, E. *Voices of Freedom: A documentary history* (Volume Two). New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2014., 204

⁵ Foner (Volume One), 296

revolutionize.”⁶ Thoreau’s essay was written in objection to the United States involvement in the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. He and a minority in the North were opposed to the ambitious expansionist movement that most of the nation supported. Thoreau and his like-minded supporters feared that, “far from expanding the “empire of liberty,” the real aim of the administration of James K. Polk was to acquire new land for the expansion of slavery.”⁷ The hypocritical nature of the idea of freedom in American history took a central theme in our class this year. It was important early on in the course to grasp the notion that freedom and slavery are inextricably interconnected within the American narrative.

The uncomfortable dichotomy that constitutes the very backbone of American history (the country celebrates liberty as a fundamentally American virtue, yet has one of the most embarrassing pasts of systemic slavery) was arguably more difficult to grasp in what I termed the more formal portion of class work. This brings me to our involvement in the CBL project, a process that allowed me to get much closer to understanding the hypocritical nature of America’s past and the message it enjoys portraying to the rest of the world. While I cannot speak with absolute certainty in claiming that my peers realized the same benefit, I am convinced that at least a portion of them, especially those in my smaller group, would agree with that statement.

As noted above, I said that I believe it was important in Huron’s American History class to grasp the notion that freedom and slavery are inextricably interconnected. I took careful care to not use the past tense when describing this characteristic of our course, because the second fundamental tenet of our class was to challenge the notion that slavery is an issue somehow left behind us. This was something that I will admit was a struggle to understand, that is until our smaller group got together and began planning our year-end event with Dr. Faulkner as the speaker.

Perhaps the greatest dilemma our group faced was the challenge to bring the past in line with the present. The biggest questions we asked ourselves were: how can we convince people that slavery is a foundational aspect of American— and even if indirectly, Canadian—history; and, how do we convince people that slavery is an issue that remains relevant in 2015? It was important to our group that we involve as many community partners as possible throughout the process. In doing so we hoped to spread the message that London has a significant role to play in the history of slavery. I can say with confidence that my group was successful in meeting that goal. We were able to attract attention for a wide range of the Huron and London communities, with guests ranging from social and cultural activists to local politicians and businessmen, and of course, the students at Huron. All too often academic work that has been carried out with the purpose of involving the ‘public’ who are not directly affiliated with any institutions of higher learning fails in reaching that target audience. If that occurs, it does not necessarily matter how good the work done in the project was. Without an audience, it could almost be considered meaningless. We were lucky to drum up enough interest in our event that there is no possibility that the hard work myself, my peers and Dr. Reid-Maroney carried out could be considered invaluable. The fear that we would fail to bring enough of an audience to our year-end event was one that stuck with me throughout the planning process, and I count it amongst my groups’ greatest successes that we were able to put on a very well-attended event.

⁶ *ibid.*, 264

⁷ *ibid.*, 262

Dr. Faulkner spoke to our class about modern day slavery. While that may seem to be a strange concept to grasp, she was very convincing in her argument that slavery still exists in 2015, although it takes shape in a slightly different form. Her speech, *Boycotting Slavery, Then and Now*, provided our audience with compelling evidence that paints modern day slavery in a light that many would not have considered before. At any university, but especially a liberal arts college such as Huron, there is a great deal of stress placed on the importance of producing well-rounded individuals who possess a sensitivity to the world around them. One of the great accomplishments of this group project is that I believe we were able to speak to this sensitivity on two levels. With Dr. Faulkner's keynote, we learned about the implications of modern slavery on a global level. In the class research of the Fugitive Slave Chapel, we were given insight into a local history, one that is able by default of its geography to make a more lasting impact on individuals learning about it. Students in our class, and indeed anyone who was present for the year-end event, should have an appreciation of both the global and local lessons that can and should be taken away from our project.

This acknowledgement of realities that lay outside our individual and collective purviews is one of the reasons the CBL project is such an important and rewarding process to go through. There are a few aspects of the CBL program at Huron that I would like to highlight, just to demonstrate how exactly this American History project fulfilled the goals that were set out for our class.

The Huron CBL website claims that, "through Community Based Learning, students have an opportunity to participate in independent study with forms of active learning. CBL enables our students to overcome the real and imagined boundaries that conventionally appear to divide the academy from the community."⁸ This is the second CBL project I have participated in, and one of my favourite aspects is one that I suspect my peers generally do not enjoy. The fact that this is an independent study is something that makes the project unique to most of the others I would normally engage with during the course of a normal school year. So while the concept of designing a whole project essentially from scratch frustrates some, I get excited about the opportunity to try something different. There are not many chances in our undergraduate careers to be creative in the planning stages of a project, so CBL always represents a welcome change in the rhythm that most school projects seem to fall into.

In all, I am proud of the work that my class, my group and myself were able to accomplish. The event was well-attended, the website is something tangible that we can all look back on and be reassured that a legacy of our work behind, and most importantly, the CBL project helped me to make sense of what we learned in class and bring all of that information together. The unique nature of the project is something that I believe should not cause people to shy away from it. We attend a liberal arts school, and the type of creative thinking that the CBL promotes is directly in line with one of the tenets upon which our school was founded: sound learning. Our class proved to me that this type of creative project can not only be successful, but that it should be a component of every student's time spent at Huron.

⁸ Student Life and Support Services- Community Based Learning, Retrieved from: <http://www.huronuc.on.ca/CurrentStudents/StudentLifeandSupportServices/CommunityBasedLearning>

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