

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

Reflection Paper: David Martin

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The Fugitive Slave Chapel, an African Methodist Episcopal Church in London, Ontario is a place of historical significance, but despite growing up in the area I had never heard of this church until the beginning of the project. But through the Community-Based Learning Project in Huron's American History class, centred on the Fugitive Slave Chapel, I was able to learn about its importance to London's past; specially the African-American community in London, and its connection to the abolitionist movement in the United States. The knowledge that I gained from this project is attributed to the fact of being one of the editors for the website that was created to showcase and distribute the research that was collected by my fellow classmates.

Working as an editor for the website allowed me to read a majority of the collected research; in doing so I noticed that a Community-Based Learning Project is much more bottom-up in its approach to analyzing the past. This works well though with the top-down approach that is found in the classroom, as this provides many of the larger themes that can be applied to the project. The ideas of freedom and individualism are both major themes in the class, and can be clearly seen in the project. As well, even though this project was done in the context of American history, it gives Canadians a chance to discuss how we view and interpret the past in relation to African-Americans fleeing to Canada. More importantly to Americans, and the rest of the world, the discussing of discrimination and slavery is still very relevant.

A main theme in the course was the idea of freedom, and how it changed over time. Looking at the time when the Fugitive Slave Chapel was operating there is a paradox in the idea of what freedom was in the United States. In the class to get an understanding of how freedom was understood we discussed key political persons and major institutions. The U.S. Declaration of Independence states that all men are equal, echoing Thomas Paine's writings in his pamphlet titled *Common Sense*, where he states that "All men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others forever..."¹ Now Paine was discussing the Americans relationship to the English, but the idea all are equal and deserve the same freedoms also hold true for the institution of slavery.

One way slavery was defended as not being morally wrong was through interpreting the Bible as being pro-slavery. In 1850, the *De Bow Review*, a southern magazine published an article that supported this belief, that holding slaves is a right that is permitted by the Bible.² The Methodist Episcopal Church though did not support this belief, and actually had a large number of African American members and was active in the abolitionist movement. Though the Church itself did not discriminate, the white members did, which led to some African American to remove themselves from the Methodist Episcopal Church and create the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. The A.M.E. Church, from its very beginning would become active in the abolitionist movement, which would lead it to spreading into Canada with the fleeing slaves.³

While not being a slave is one aspect of freedom, there is obviously more to it, which did come up in the research, which brings us more into the bottom up approach to understanding the past. In the book *The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* by American abolitionist Benjamin Drew and published in 1852, we read first hand testimony from former slaves that fled to Canada. In one account, Nelson Moss who lived in London at the time, said that he fled to Canada, not because of the lack of prejudice, but because children had the possibility to be educated together. Another slave

that fled to Canada, Aby B. Jones, while not saying that this is his reason for going to Canada was solely because of the education, he does note that the lack of segregated schools creates an equal opportunity for all to prosper.⁴

This leads us back to the beginning of this project, Oberlin College, located in Oberlin, Ohio. Oberlin College was prominent institution in the abolitionist movement, being one of the first school's of higher education to allow men and women to attend regardless of colour. The College was opened in 1833 and during the nineteenth century regularly graduated students in a non-segregated school, but this advancement on freedom would take a major step backwards.⁵ In 1896 the Plessy v. Ferguson case ruled that states could make laws that required separate facilities based on race, concluding that as long as the facilities were equal it was not discrimination. This ruling was not just in the context of education, but rather to all aspects of American society.⁶

This idea of "separate but equal" would become accepted across many states, and while there was discussion about equality within the government, not much would change, until the 1950's and the 1960's with the civil rights movement. In 1954 the case of Brown v. Board of education of Topeka, the court ruled that segregated schools was unconstitutional, essentially striking down the rulings of Plessy v. Ferguson.⁷ With the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, we see the government being more involved with the civil rights movement, and creating equal opportunity to reverse the lingering effects of slavery.⁸

In our research we discovered that African American slaves came to Canada to gain equal opportunity in education and employment, but this also goes with the wider theme of individualism within American culture. In the Jackson era there is a change of what individualism entails, and included not only politics, but as well intellectual, social and cultural expression. This led to the reformers of the nineteenth century in the Abolition movement.⁹ In the project, we see the Rev. Lewis C. Chambers, a minister in the A.M.E. Church who worked with the American Missionary Association (A.M.A.) reporting on the needs of the African American community in Southwestern Ontario.¹⁰

While the Church and other institutions were actively engaging in the abolishment movement, we can see the slaves themselves actively taking part in this expanding idea of individualism. Not only did slaves flee north to find freedom and equality, it was also a political statement as already freed African Americans would emigrate north. They were taking their freedom into their own hands, and making a statement about the failed expectations of the American nation in their idea of liberty and equality.¹¹

While the project clearly fits into the themes of the course, and compliments the class material, it begs us to ask the questions of why does this matter now? How does this shape how we view our past? To Canadians it is important because it challenges the normal and wide known thought among Canadians, about Canada's place in the anti slavery movement. While Canada afforded some an opportunity to prosper, Canada may have not been the complete safe haven for fleeing slaves, as many now believe. In the research provided, we see in Drew's book that African Americans in Canada, like Nelson Moss, Aby B. Jones who were mentioned earlier, say that though they are free, they still face prejudice. A third freed slave in the London community, Alexander Hamilton says that he would go back to the United States if slavery was abolished.¹²

Another account of the London community by William Wells Brown, a black abolitionist and former slave, paints the same picture about the treatment of African Americans. He wrote about how many whites wanted to keep a separation between the white and black communities, and provides an example of how the London Free Press published an editorial that argued it was "unnatural" for African Americans and whites to be educated in the same schools. He does point out though that the situation was better in Canada than it was in the United States, as there was room for social mobility for African Americans.¹³ This changes how we usually see our community in the context of the Anti-Slavery movement in the United States, and also how the African Americans were treated in Canada's past. Canada is usually seen in connection with underground railroad, and being where slaves fled to remove themselves from prejudice, but in reality they also faced racism in Canada.

Moving on from Canada's past, the discussion of the abolitionist movement in the United States is still very relevant to the world today. At John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in 1961, he gives a very whiggish portrayal of history, in that they have been progressing forward in their fight for equality, but have we actually been moving forward?¹⁴ The end of the project brought us to the presentation by Dr. Carol Faulkner, from the group Historians Against Slavery, who discussed how this relates to today and what we can learn from the movement.

Dr. Faulkner discussed specifically the free produce movement within the anti-slavery movement. She relates this now to the current Fair Trade movement, a connection that I have never made and something that I never thought about. Both these movements had very similar goals, to provide consumers with the ability to buy goods from a place that had the same moral standards as them. The free produce movement showed that the produce they were buying came from the labour of freemen who were paid for their work. The current Fair Trade movement allows consumers to buy a wide range of items that came from workers that are fairly paid for their goods and services.

So we are still fighting to provide the equal rights to workers around the world today; in the Atlantic slave trade an estimated 12,500,000 slaves were brought to the Americas, that is compared to the roughly 30,000,000 slaves estimated to be present across the globe today.¹⁵ That does make us ask the question of have we progressed since the abolitionist movement? As this is a reflection paper I will not answer this question, but this project, in its discussion of slavery and freedom does bring it up, and something that would need to be further researched in another project.

That question of how this project relates to the present is the only intellectual difficulty that I came across. Most of the problems that I and the website group faced dealt mostly with the logistics of dividing the documents among the editors, as we never really knew how much the research group had collected. This was not a major problem that hindered our work, it just resulted in some of the editing being done and the documents uploaded to the website very late in the semester. The project did though lead me to have a better grasp of the overall themes that are presented within the classroom. It then overlaps and connects Canadian history with American history by showing the connecting between the London community, and Canada to the abolitionist movement in the United States. Showing us that while Canada was less prejudice than the United States, but it was not the safe haven as it is usually seen. It then ended with the presentation by Dr. Faulkner, who showed us how the wider anti-slavery movement

connects with the present. The Community-Based Learning Project provides us with a different way to view the past, but works well with the way we learn about the past in the classroom.

Notes

¹ Thomas Paine, "Common Sense", In *The Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History Fourth Edition Volume 1* ed. by Eric Foner (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 96

² "Slavery and the Bible" In *The Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History Fourth Edition Volume 1* ed. by Eric Foner (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 219

³ Craig Charteris, "A Brief history of the A.M.E Church in the United States and Canada" *London Anti-Slavery Research Project*, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://huronantislaveryhistory.weebly.com/what-we-found.html>

⁴ "Benjamin Drew's London, 1856: First-Hand Narratives" *London Anti-Slavery Research Project*, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://huronantislaveryhistory.weebly.com/benjamin-drews-london-first-hand-narratives.html>

⁵ "*Oberlin and Canada West: Antislavery Connections*" *London Anti-Slavery Research Project*, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://huronantislaveryhistory.weebly.com/oberlin-and-canada-west-antislavery-connections.html>

⁶ John Marshall Harlan, "Dissent in Plessy v. Ferguson", In *The Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History Fourth Edition Volume 2* ed. by Eric Foner, 53-58 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014) 56

⁷ Nina Reid-Maroney, American History (presentation, London, On, March 17, 2015)

⁸ Johnson, Lyndon B. "Commencement Address at Howard University" In *The Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History Fourth Edition Volume 2* ed. by Eric Foner (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014) 280

⁹ Nina Reid-Maroney, American History (presentation, London, On, November 4, 2014)

¹⁰ ⁵ "*Oberlin and Canada West: Antislavery Connections*" *London Anti-Slavery Research Project*, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://huronantislaveryhistory.weebly.com/oberlin-and-canada-west-antislavery-connections.html>

¹¹ Nina Reid-Maroney, American History (presentation, London, On, November 13, 2014)

¹² "Benjamin Drew's London, 1856: First-Hand Narratives"

¹³ "William Wells Brown: A Story Untold" *London Anti-Slavery Research Project*, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://huronantislaveryhistory.weebly.com/william-wells-browns-notes-on-visiting-london.html>

¹⁴ Nina Reid-Maroney, American History (presentation, London, On, March 26, 2015)

¹⁵ Carol Faulkner, "Boycotting Slavery then and Now" (presentation at Huron University College, London, On, April 7, 2015)

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