

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

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The Community-Based Learning project for the 2301E U.S. Survey history course focuses on the local community of London, Ontario and the city's involvement in the harbouring of fugitive slaves who escaped from the United States of America during the Civil War era. A main component of the project brings forth the importance of visiting the anti-slavery community Oberlin, Ohio and seeing how the Underground Railroad connected from this small American community to the city of London, Ontario which, at the time, was called London, Canada West. There were four different teams working together to complete the project, consisting of the research team, the communications team, the website team, and the event team. I took a role as a part of the website team; I proof read the incoming research and transcribed a letter. These documents were directly uploaded to the website. My role in the team allowed me to gain an overall understanding of all of the research that has been put into this project and through this, I am able to create a closer connection to living in London. Because of the work that I put forward in this project, I am able to feel like a valuable part of the London community just as the people in the past. Ultimately, a Community-Based Learning project enables a student of a history course to feel directly connected to their surrounding community.

My part in the Community-Based Learning project consisted of proof reading the documents that are posted to the website and transcribing the letter Lewis C. Chambers wrote to the American Missionary Association about his members of the churches he worked for. My project work fits in with relation to the overall project goals because I am making sure that historically accurate information is being presented in the most coherent way possible. Proof reading and editing the class's research enables me to gain a broad understanding of all the collected research while also making sure that the information is presented in a grammatically correct manner and maintains legible form. This is especially important since it is being shared publically on the Huron Anti-Slavery History website. In addition to proof reading, I worked on transcribing the letter written about the several congregations found in Lewis C. Chambers' churches. Through transcribing this letter, this action fits particularly well to the importance of the overall project goals because it is crucial to be able to clearly read primary documents and use their information to understand how people involved themselves directly in the anti-slavery movement. Since I was able to complete these critical project goals, a part of the project has legible form available online because of the efforts I put forth.

Although the project goals remain extremely important since these goals affect the entire group's work, delving more specifically into the work that I particularly contributed to the CBL project allows for definite historiographical themes to be explored. The historiographical themes exemplified through my work consists of the importance of literacy and the value of historiography itself.

I transcribed the Lewis C. Chambers' letter that he wrote to the AMA about the churches he was a minister for and this letter issues the theme of linguistics and its importance in history. Even though the letter clearly dictates to "Use black ink, and be careful in your statistics that your figures, and the names of persons and places, be written with great distinctness. Devote time to your Report to give us your best thoughts in a condensed form,"<sup>1</sup> Lewis Champion Chambers does not provide penmanship of utmost clarity when filling out the form. As the transcriber, I can surely reiterate that this letter was very difficult to transcribe. L.C. Chambers' writing is messy and incoherent half of the time. The repeatedly incorrect use of grammar has

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1. "American Missionary Association Letter," last modified March 29, 2015, <http://huronantislaveryhistory.weebly.com/american-missionary-association-letter.html>

the ability to have anyone assume that L.C. Chambers perhaps wrote this letter in a hurry, whereas the letter administered to him by the AMA tries to tell him otherwise. Because I am taking on the role of a historiographer, a person who is writing about history, I can argue that my project work has emphasized on the historiographical theme of linguistic comprehension and coherent writing, and how these aspects should be consistently followed in primary sources. As people writing letters of importance would have knowledge that this information could become an important primary resource in the future, a writer should then hold the common decency of always producing legible writing. To give Lewis C. Chambers the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he did not have thorough knowledge of writing proper grammar under his belt. The work I did through transcription frames my efforts into a larger interpretive stance towards lasting materials of history because my work illustrates how difficult it can be to transcribe primary sources from people of the past.

In addition to the transcription of the letter, I also proof read multiple documents that are on the CBL website. Proof reading these documents further relates to the fact that my work has a similar stance on larger, lasting documents of history because these documents in the CBL project came in from many different researchers and most websites follow a criteria of sounding the same throughout each and every webpage. As a proof reader of many documents on the website, the writing can have a regulated style so that the website does not seem inconsistent in its presented style. With the website following a regularly written style, this is much like most written textbooks or historiographical books, and so the act of editing documents also ultimately explores the theme of language and its importance in history, just as transcription does.

The theme of historiography itself becomes utterly valuable as well. Without being able to converse with the writers of past documents, transcribers are often unable to perfectly transcribe a letter in its entirety. Historiography is important for this reason. Illegible writing will always exist, and same with talented transcribers and writers who gather the most amount of information they can from any available documents; transcribers would perhaps even have to research for and use other documents to fill in the blanks of any primary source they wish to transcribe in its entirety. My work plays on the theme of historiography as a bigger stance to historical materials because even though the writing of history and documents can sometimes be illegible, we must constantly remember the importance of historiographers and how hard they work to gather, interpret, and share the realities of all sources, especially of those primary sources written with poor handwriting.

Many challenges were faced as a student of a CBL project; this includes intellectual, logistical, and technical problems that I experienced throughout the assignment. The intellectual problem that I ran into was the transcription of the Lewis C. Chambers letter. I have not transcribed a letter before and this was my first transcribing experience; I was able to complete most of it, but not without the help of Professor Reid-Maroney as well. This experience was important for my contribution to the project as it was the most difficult feat I faced and I was able to learn about the difficulty in transcribing primary sources with poor handwriting. Additionally, I fought logistical problems as well. This relates to the fact that I was issued one document to edit from the leader of the website team, but I felt that this was such a small amount of information and there had to be more documents going onto the website. I noticed that many of the documents already posted online did not resemble being edited, so I contacted the website director and explained the situation, because I assumed these documents were already proof read by the other editor. I also contacted the other editor, but did not receive a reply, so in this case, I individually proof read the documents and re-sent them to the website

director to be uploaded a second time. Careful communication for planning and organizing who edits what document is a suggestion I would make to the next set of CBL students. Finally, the technical problem I faced refers to the interview section of the project. I was filmed explaining my role as an editor and stating what I learned about the project, but there were problems with recording, therefore the videos were lost. I had to re-film my role and what I learned at my own home with my cellular phone. Though many problem emerged while being a CBL student, I was actually able to overcome all of the presented challenges.

The Community-Based Learning project had research questions posed by community partners. The method of research that we follow is community-based, too. As a student of the project we're also expected to consider the construction of historical knowledge and contemporary problems that are relevant to the history we are researching. One of the questions we are asked is "How do we know what we know about the past?" Considering this project in particular, the provided collection of primary sources and secondary sources allows us to know what we know about the past. As stated in *Voices of Freedom: Volume 1*, primary sources give "students the opportunity to encounter ideas about freedom in the actual words of participants in the drama of American history."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, historiographers have been able to collect these important sources over their years of work and they exemplify the importance of keeping history alive. Since there have always been people writing, collecting, and sharing documents of history while continuously researching and finding new information every day, this is how we know what we know about the past. Many pieces of history can be forgotten, but sometimes remembered as well. Pieces of history that may be forgotten would most likely consist of histories told by people that belong to minority groups. These minorities are generally people who are not white, experience poverty, don't have economic and social power, and may be disabled. Therefore, stories and histories of people that fall under these categories are not often able to be told, and if they are, they are usually repeated by a person of power in a skewed manner. Occasionally there will be unaltered documents written by a minority person or group that manage to appear through random times in history. This ties into what is remembered, too. If people of power are sharing their experiences, they have better reach and other people are more likely to listen. Predominantly, the construction of historical knowledge is most likely presented by people who are white, who are of importance, and who hold a higher position in the hierarchy of economic and social status. History itself becomes a major influence to modern anti-slavery movements too. Historians help frame the problem of modern slavery by compiling documents of previous abolitionist movements, understanding how these actions affected abolitionism, and then sharing them with the modern world—people interested and participating in modern anti-slavery movements could use these old abolitionist tactics and apply them to current anti-slavery movements. Overall, the research questions that have been posed have allowed me as a CBL student to think in deeper, critical terms of history and its presentation by historians.

A Community-Based Learning project not only can make a class feel more involved with the city they live in, but can also positively affect a larger context of people outside of the project. A CBL project is generally published, therefore the people behind the project have the ability to influence an external crowd, not just one another in the course. If someone doesn't know about or holds the same interest in London's involvement in the anti-slavery movement from many years ago, the website and the event allow a person to engage and interpret the history behind

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2. Eric Foner, *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History (Fourth Edition) (Volume 1)* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), xvii.

slavery and anti-slavery. The website enables people from around the world to read the research we have collected and the Historians Against Slavery event ensures that people can also learn about our assignment through verbal communication. Historians Against Slavery was crucial to the CBL as we heard from Dr. Carol Faulkner, who is extremely educated in the topic of anti-slavery, as well as modern-day anti-slavery movements, and this also forms an outer, yet similar perspective to the one we issued through our website. If this specific project were to be continued for next year's class, the class could focus on finding more connections from other cities to London in reference to the Underground Railroad; they could also expand the research to surrounding areas outside of London, and students could locate more primary sources from slaves themselves that migrated to London. Conclusively, the CBL project is very important to the class and its surrounding community as it maintains a multiplicity of ways of informing a city about its involvement in a positive movement like anti-slavery, and in the end, learning this kind of information could potentially make a person feel prouder of being a London resident.

### Bibliography

Foner, Eric. *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History (Fourth Edition) (Volume 1)*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.

London Anti-Slavery Research Project. "American Missionary Association Letter." Last modified March 29, 2015. <http://huronantislaveryhistory.weebly.com/american-missionary-association-letter.html>