

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

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Over the course of this past academic year I have been able to participate in a Community-Based Learning (CBL) project with the second-year American history class. The project has involved work with community partners to investigate the history of African American communities in Southern Ontario with specific focus on the African Methodist Episcopal Church or Fugitive Slave Chapel here in London. Through partnership with the congregation of Beth-Emmanuel British Methodist Episcopal Church the class has examined the Fugitive Slave Chapel's connections to antislavery movements in both the United States and Canada from the nineteenth century into the present. This project has explored associations between local and global history as well as encouraging a critical approach to what we consider to be accepted historical narratives and their significance. This CBL project has allowed the class to make connections not only between various historical figures and events, but also learn how to understand the relationship between that past and the present through the examination of primary sources and articulate this relationship to a contemporary audience. This was achieved through our interaction with other historians through the Oberlin Archives and Historians Against Slavery and the presentation of our findings in our final class event. Our class's experience with CBL has shown it to be an effective method for forming tangible connections between history and the present as well as allowing for a deeper exploration of often-unchallenged local historical narratives.

Community Based Learning encourages students to take their learning outside of the classroom and connect their research objectives to the local community. This encourages students to be involved with their communities and how they themselves are personally involved in history as opposed to simply observers. This project was not only important as a learning experience for us as students but both the process and results were beneficial to the local community. The congregation of Beth Emmanuel Church has been in the process of documenting and preserving their history, which dates back to 1848. The chapel is representative of the history of the black communities in London and their connection to both other black communities and antislavery efforts. Our project has allowed us to participate in an ongoing effort to maintain connections between a community and its ancestors as well our local community's place in the history of antislavery in both Canada and the United States.

Examining the history of people who have moved across borders presents both a unique challenge and an opportunity. When looking solely at the history of a state, or something within a state, the story often stops at the borders. It can be difficult to find sources between multiple groups and locations or challenge a historiography tied to a nation's identity, such as Canada's reputation as a haven for escaped slaves. By looking at history from a thematic, as opposed to national perspective there is an opportunity to form a more complete historical record and build an understanding of the international connections between groups. The nineteenth century witnessed a great deal of transatlantic movement among both slaves and abolitionists leading to a vastly scattered history. To understand the

history of one black community in London requires knowledge of surrounding circumstances, movements, and people. These wider connections require research that can extend from local to international sources.

For this project I was able to join the class on our trip to the Oberlin College Archives to examine primary sources. Through this trip we were able to learn from historians who specialize in antislavery movements and find documents connecting Oberlin to London through the American Missionary Association and the Underground Railroad. Oberlin is also an example of a community with a strong relationship to its history. Oberlin also has a similar historiography to Canada in terms of its antislavery reputation. On our tour, we were informed of Oberlin's abolitionist origins and history of accepting black students, many of which went on to continue antislavery work. However, as we were informed, the "Hotbed of Abolitionism" was not always on the forefront of racial integration and its activism had ebbed and flowed throughout the centuries.¹ Though this was acknowledged, Oberlin's triumphant civil rights history was far more celebrated. This is a similar pattern to Canada's historiography, where instances of racist legislation, segregation, and prejudice are not denied but are not part of the dominant historical narrative.

My role in the project was to contextualize some of the background elements relevant to antislavery movements and the Underground Railroad, specifically Oberlin College, the American Missionary Association and Canada West. My research came mostly from secondary sources and I was not directly involved with many primary sources beyond the letters found at the Oberlin Archives. I found my research on Canada West proved to be the most surprising and most relatable to the overall themes of the project and course because of the relationship between Canada and freedom. Typically, Canada is considered to be the "promised land" of freedom for African Americans escaping slavery and persecution in the United States. Canada carries the mythos of being the "happily ever after" for any black person fleeing the United States and many people, especially Canadians, are content to accept this as the end of the story. In fact, the very name "Fugitive Slave Chapel" invokes an image of relived refugees rebuilding their lives in the land of freedom. However, as we have examined in class, freedom is not as easily defined as simply the opposite of slavery. Many African Americans who came to Canada looking for freedom and respect were faced with discrimination similar to what they would have faced in the United States. Not only was this revelation a great disappointment but also caused many to return to the US either during or following the American Civil War.

In this example the CBL project presented an opportunity to not only research a piece of local history more deeply, but also present this more complete picture to the community. The "promised land" narrative is the one most often reproduced in schools for students in Southern Ontario, myself included. Because of

¹ Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism* 9.

the way this dominant narrative is presented most people accept Canada as having a positive history for its black citizens. Within a university setting there are many opportunities to access resources to critically examine a topic from multiple perspectives. However, these resources are not available to everyone and it is important to make our relevant findings accessible to the community that we have researched. For our project, this was achieved through the creation of a website to display our research and a closing event to present our findings and connect our project to wider themes of freedom.

In our closing event we were able to hear from Dr. Carol Faulkner from Historians Against Slavery who spoke on the connection between the free produce movements of the nineteenth century and contemporary free trade.² Her examination of these two movements was framed by how we define freedom and how the literal freedom from enslavement is not the end of the struggle from freedom. Unlike the free produce movement, free trade extends beyond simply buying products made by people free from the literal ownership of others. Instead, free trade encompasses the rights and dignity of workers and extends freedom into the realm of human rights. Freedom is associated with an individual's ability to control his or her own destiny, which requires both legal and economic freedom. The inclusion of Historians Against Slavery in our project highlights the connection between our investigation of nineteenth century slavery and contemporary incarnations of slavery. This connection shows a continuity of slavery throughout history, which changes and evolves with the times. The objective of Historians Against Slavery is to create an awareness of this continuity and emphasize the fact that ending one kind of slavery does not end them all, or solve the issues of limited freedom.

This event was the first time in which I was exposed to the Free Produce Movement. I was surprised to learn that abolitionists in the United States did not universally support this movement. Many abolitionists believed that this movement did not address the issues attached to racial prejudice which, for many was the root of the problem of slavery. The Free Produce products were often of a lower quality than slave produced products and were more expensive but this not to stop many, including Lucretia Mott, well known activist and abolitionist, from supporting this movement. Mott believed that it was important for those against slavery to not participate in any way including the consumption of goods produced by slaves. For her, abolitionists had to move beyond simply talking about ending slavery and fully undertake a slavery free life which included food and other products such as cotton based garments. This ideal makes abolitionism a lifestyle choice instead of just a political decision. When considering these issues that the Free Produce Movement faced, one cannot help but reflect on the similar problems that face the Fair Trade movement today. Many activists are unwilling to support Fair Trade because of the optics of a 'white saviour' attitude. Like the Free Produce Movement, the goods that

² Faulkner, "Boycotting Slavery Then and Now"

have been produced that are Fair Trade are often more expensive and even harder to source, which makes the participation in this movement possible for only those that can afford the higher priced items. While these issues make these movements more difficult to be successful they do not stop people from participating. From what we have learned about the Free Produce Movement further research opportunities for the class have arose. Research about the Free Produce Movement within the Canadian context might yield some interesting findings. Possible research questions could include an examination of the movement in Canada as well as looking at the importation of Canadian goods as a source for slave free products in the northern states. It would be intriguing to research into primary sources from abolitionists that address these questions. Diaries, pamphlets and other documents might hold the answers to the larger importance of the Free Produce Movement. Our CBL project revealed some promising research though there continues to be room for further projects and improvements. As with any large group, it was difficult for our class to clearly and consistently communicate among our various sections. Though each group was able to achieve their respective goals it was difficult to understand the research as a whole until the project had been completed. There were also limitations in terms of accessible resources, especially primary sources. As with any historical As part of an international history, artifacts related to the Underground Railroad and antislavery movements are scattered throughout the Atlantic world. Though our class was able to travel to Oberlin and gain some firsthand experience of the College's mission, we were unable to take many resources with us for further study. The Oberlin-London connection is also only one aspect of London's antislavery history. Further projects will be able to investigate connections between London and other institutions that supported abolition.

Our class CBL project was able to examine the continuities between history and the present on an international scale. Through our involvement with both community partners and historians from various groups we were able to create a fuller understanding of African American communities in Canada and in particular here in London, while also being able to develop skills that allows us to transfer what we learn in the classroom into the wider public. Although there are opportunities for improvement within the project, overall I have thoroughly enjoyed my first community based learning experience. I have enjoyed being able to take what I have learned in the classroom and use it in other environments. I look forward to participating in my other community based learning projects in the rest of my university career. CBL is an enriching experience that allows for students to engage with many other forms of history such as digital and archival research. This project has provided a unique and useful experience for engaging in history in a practical manner for both the entire class and myself.

Bibliography

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