

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

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In the American Survey History class at Huron University College we were given the task of conducting historical work on the Fugitive Slave Chapel here in London, Ontario. When given the project task I at first decided to join the research based group which was to conduct interviews and do in depth research into different aspects of this project. However that changed when Professor Dr. Reid-Maroney kindly offered me the opportunity to be part of the website group and be responsible for the music aspects of the website, I then switched groups and was now part of the website group. The purpose of this paper is to help explain my learning experience through this Community Based Learning (CBL) project.

When recording myself playing the historical music I also gained some knowledge into this area of history. I will use the external research that I conducted to help build a better understanding on what I am talking about. Also not only will this section of the paper help explain what I learned through doing this project but also others who read this document will too learn more about the history related around the anti-slavery actions and the fugitive slave chapel. I will explain what I have learned through doing historical work with not only my history group but also doing work within the community, such as the short interview that I had with the slave chapel representative, Delta McNeish.

Furthermore, with examples from my experience and other sources, this paper will explain what I have learned through doing this Community Based Learning Project on the Fugitive Slave Chapel. Not only will it explain what I have learned but one who reads this will also gain more knowledge and different approaches to learning about the anti-slavery history of North America. Finally I will give my overall opinion on this project and my thoughts on what can be added onto this historical research project.

My first role was to be part of the research group and conduct research material and archival like research in relation to the topic of the Fugitive Slave Chapel. However with the offer that was laid out to me by my professor I decided to switch into the website group of this project and be in charge of the musical part of the website. With this task at hand, I recorded myself playing songs that had a relation to anti-slavery during the mid-late 1800s. These songs were "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and also the song "Get Off the Track". On top of recording these songs, I decided to provide some external historical research into these songs and post them also on the website so that those observing and listening to the material can learn the history behind these songs. I also decided, with the help of a good friend, to record a Metal version of one of the songs; this was to bring the message of anti-slavery into a modern and updated genre of music, rather than keeping in its traditional format.

In regards to my learning experience, I feel that I had learned and gained some useful skills from my involvement in this project. I feel that I gained and strongly developed my working ethic in regards to group work. When in the website group everyone had a task and objective that had to be done. Some of these tasks were related to going over historical documents and research that was provided by the research group, and putting them on the website. Along side that, interviews were also conducted by some of the group members to help explain what people in the class learned and how they feel towards the project. My task was to take charge of the music aspects of the website. When doing a portion of the website and assisting in the group project I feel that I gained good cooperation and communication skills from my role in this project. In regards to communication, I had to communicate with my group members and give them updates on my section and work for the website.

Another skill that I feel was obtained through this project was expressing this anti-slavery history and message through methods that are of my personal interest. I am passionate towards music and when doing these recordings with some historical background on the songs, I felt that I was putting the context of historical interpretation in the works of something that I know and enjoy very much, music. If anything I have learned how to apply music to more than just for past-time leisure but in a more educated and learning method of presentation. Also doing the research into the songs, I was able to gain more historical knowledge of how this music was used in history's past to express anti-slavery and freedom. An example of this is the song that I covered which was the song *Get Off The Track* by the Hutchinson Family Singer group, which was to go out against slavery as mentioned in the following quotation: "Get Off the Track! received its public release in late spring. The song fast became the Hutchinson Family Singers' antislavery anthem and was soon available at music stores all over the North,"¹.

Other skill that I feel I have obtained from my involvement with this project is my interpretation of history. The songs that I was producing and recording were used to express anti-slavery such as the song "Get Off the Track" and also "Follow the Drinking Gourd". In regards to "Follow the Drinking Gourd", I learned that this song was believed to been used to help slaves escape from the South and direct them safely to the North and also that this song is important to the civil rights movements in America². In essence, I was re-recording and re-interpreting these messages through a historical context which I feel contributed to my skill of historical interpretation. I also have learned and gained skills that can be applied to my working skills and can be put into my work portfolio for a career after post-secondary education.

This next section will go over how this project relates to the themes and information expressed throughout the American History course, particularly with reference to the course theme of Freedom and its definition. The following quotation is from one of the required readings in *Voices of Freedom* vol. 2 which explains, "We claim freedom, as our natural right, and ask that in harmony and co-operation with the nation at large, you should cut up by the roots the system of slavery, which is not only a wrong to us, but the source of all evil which at present afflicts the state."³. When reflecting on this quotation from the Petition of Black Residents of Nashville, it appears that they want freedom and requests help from the nation to obtain freedom. This can be related to the spread of an anti-slavery message done by the Hutchinson Family Singer group where as previously mentioned in this paper had the song "Get Off the Track" as an anti-slavery piece that was in various areas for sale in the North. When reflecting on this comparison, the song "Get Off The Track" helps spread the message of anti-slavery, which could contribute to the awareness of freedom laid out by the document in *Voices of Freedom*. When looking through the source *Singing for Freedom*, we see that in the song "Get Off

¹ Gac, Scott. *Singing for Freedom: The Hutchinson Family Singers and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Antebellum Reform*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007),177

² Bresler, Joel. Follow the Drinking Gourd: A Cultural History. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*. Reviewed by Tobler, Cheryl A. 39 (2007), 211
http://www.jstor.org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/stable/20465054?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

³ "Petition of Black Residents of Nashville," *Voices of Freedom 2014*, vol.2 Fourth Edition, ed. Foner, Eric (New York, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2014), 3

The Track”, there are lyrics that are to encourage people such as lawyers, priests and also politicians to join the car of freedom, or else they would have to clear out of the way of the train to avoid being run over by the abolitionists convoy⁴. When reflecting on this quotation from *Singing for Freedom*, it seems that there is a message to encourage people such as politicians to join the awareness of anti-slavery.

When reflecting on the work I have done in this project, I note that the songs and the information that I provided with them, can be sources for historical information and also can be methods of historical interpretation as it expresses the songs of anti-slavery and freedom from slavery as mentioned in this reflection paper....Overall through the work that me and my group put forth, I feel that this Community Based Learning Project was successful in bringing awareness towards anti-slavery and I have received positive feedback from fellow classmates and my professor in regards to the website and my musical contribution to the website.

Works Cited

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⁴ Gac, Scott. *Singing for Freedom*, 179