

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

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In historical studies it is crucial to understand that many themes and events have deep, often hidden connections, and that these connections are the foundation for truly understanding each event and the overall themes that embody them. This was no more apparent to me than during my participation of the History 2301E Community Based Learning (CBL) project. During the CBL the entire class took on various roles in the research and displaying of London's part (In particular the Fugitive Slave Chapel) in Ontario's slave communities. In order to understand this better much of the findings during the research of the project have to be considered and compared with the themes and events that took place in America at this time, the themes and events that were the subject of learning in the history course itself. Of course in trying to understand and interpret history many problems arise. Some are physical problems of finding documents, or contacting the right people. However, the most challenging obstacles are the mental ones, the questions that an individual ultimately comes to ask of themselves and the material they are researching as they try to understand and connect the themes and events they are learning about. While the CBL seems to be a simple look at a chapel and community of freed slaves in Southern Ontario it in-fact is a shining light into the tangled and large web of events and themes that connect the American slave society; and all the people it affected, to the community and area of Southern Ontario and the effects it had on both the individuals and the community in general, and how it still affects us today.

My role in the CBL was to research the Reverend Lewis C. Chambers who was a former slave that had fled to Canada, and became a part of the black religious movement in Southern Ontario. One of the logistical difficulties I found when researching Chambers was the lack of sources on him. He is not mentioned by anyone else save an interview with him recorded in one book. Other than that it is only through his own hand written documents preserved and digitized by the AMA that I was able to uncover a small part of the identity of Chambers and the role he had in Southern Ontario. It was also difficult at times to read what chambers had written both due to the style of writing and the linguistics he used. I was not prepared for the way in which Chambers used the English language and had to become more open to different types of wording and slang to understand what Chambers was trying to say.

One intellectual obstacle that was very hard for me to overcome was how I viewed both Canada's (Ontario specifically) participation in and linking to racism, slavery, and discrimination. Often we overlook Canada's dark side on these issues, especially concerning people of African descent. There has been focus, increasingly so over the years towards Canada's horrible treatment of Aborigines, still many do not know of our role towards black people at the time. Often we look back at the Underground Railroad and praise ourselves as a land of freedom for people of all kinds even back at this time, but this was far from reality. Throughout the course and through my study of Chambers I encountered a lot more of the real facts about just how Canada fit in the racial picture of the day.

The first thing I came to realize is that Canada was home to slavery as well. In fact every country in the world is still home to slavery as pointed out also by our guest speaker Dr. Carol

Faulkner at our CBL project event. Both are very hard facts to conceive and believe as it is ingrained in western culture that slavery is something that happened in the past here (and to Canadians only in America) and happens only in the present “somewhere else/ the third-world”. The lifting of this Canadian biased veil on our involvement in slavery, helped me to accept and understand that slavery still happens to this day even in our own country, and every other one as well. This is an important example of how history can have real-world implications today, as it tells us why and how things actually came to be today, and those things that may seem hard to believe can in-fact be true, just as things in the past may have been inconceivable but did actually happen.

Another issue that troubled me was just how much discrimination was an issue here in Canada as much or more than it was in America during this time. What really brought light to this issue is when Chambers himself noted that people in Ontario were more hostile to blacks than people in the northern US. This was very surprising for me to read as like the issue of slavery I had previous notions that Canada was a place of acceptance, and equality to freed slaves. However I had to accept and understand that this was obviously not the case as I had first-hand accounts from a freed slave himself as to the true attitudes of the people of the time. Chambers also recounted how property of blacks was damaged and destroyed and how many suffered the same forms of abuse he did.

This brings me to a positive observation I had about Chambers and the entire black community in Southern Ontario, which was just how determined, hard-working, and benevolent they were in their efforts throughout their life, and how much they contributed to the wider community. As noted in the extensive coverage of the matter during the lectures and through the readings, slavery was an unimaginable horror, and escaping from slavery often meant abandoning loved ones, facing slim odds of success, and facing the threat of severe punishment and even death if caught. Yet these courageous people decided to risk it all to rise against the cruel, unfair, and horrible oppression they faced. Where a lot of them found refuge was here, in Southern Ontario. Of course, the struggle did not end there. As noted previously the discrimination here was even harsher than in parts of the US. The only saving grace was that the former slaves were now allowed to live freely. Despite the tough conditions presented to them here however they established wide-reaching communities and brought a lot of good to these communities. In particular Chambers himself ministered to various churches and welcomed people of all races; he did not care about race but only cared about letting anyone who wanted to, hear the word of God. Despite facing discrimination and violence Chambers refused to do the same to others, and because of people like him we are a better community, province and country for it today.

The project is also important for the Fugitive Slave Chapel itself, as the uncovering and the presentation of the found information on the Chapel itself and the black society in Southern Ontario, provides us all with a much greater understanding of the historical significance of this chapel and how it was a part of shaping London today. I know others did work pertaining specifically to the chapel and both its past and present state. This work no doubt gives a greater meaning to the chapel itself and should allow those who are interested in the chapel’s historical

significance or just the role freed slaves had in London in the past to now access this information much more easily. It is often not the lack of desire for knowledge that stops most people from learning but the difficulty in finding the information. This where the CBL helps immensely as it compiles a lot of sparse and hard to find information into one condensed and easily findable source. The people who worked on the website did an excellent job compiling and organizing the information in a visually pleasing and easy to navigate manner. This website should be a great benefit to those interested in Southern Ontario's role during American slavery and to historians alike.

Overall I felt that the CBL was a very unique take on a history assignment as opposed to the conventional essay, and I felt had a stronger sense of real-world implications, both in what was learned and what was accomplished through the completion of this project. First, it is great to work on a project with an entire class. It is great to see students able to choose and work in a way that they enjoy, and excel at. Everyone did very well on the parts of the assignment they chose and it is a testament to what can be accomplished when individuals work together, using what each is good at to create a better end product. Of course there also were issues that came with this as well. As a member of the research team I was able to experience, the historical aspect of the project, which I enjoyed. However I was detached from all the other workings of the other groups. Likewise I feel that the other groups would feel they did not necessarily learn much historically speaking about Southern Ontario during American slavery throughout the project as they did not directly do any research. It would be beneficial if there was a way to further integrate all the groups while still allowing people to work the way they prefer. One idea would be to increase the amount of information shared, perhaps getting the research team to present their ideas during class time to the class, so everyone gets to hear what has been discovered and how it is a part of the project as a whole. Likewise the other groups could outline their plans and display or talk about the progressions they have made, and then ask for any of the students to contribute ideas as to how to make that part of the project better. For example, perhaps the website team could show what has been done so far on the website, then take suggestions from the class on how to improve the website both aesthetically and functionally. This is not to say that any part of the project was done poorly, in-fact the opposite is true. I was very impressed by how well everything had been done by my fellow classmates and congratulate them on doing the CBL to a standard I felt was professional. It is just that by sharing each part of the project in this manner it allows it to be a true class-project, where everyone is still doing what they do best but at the same time is still a part of and connected to everything else.

The presentation by Dr. Carol Faulkner was a perfect culmination of the CBL and highlighted the question of what to do with the information we have learned. Dr. Faulkner talked about the Free Produce movement back in the 18th century, and how it compares to the fair trade movement now. She talked about the importance of realizing that slavery still exists in every country today (as I mentioned earlier, a key conclusion I came to in my personal research), and how choosing what we consume and purchase affects the use of slaves, and the continued existence of slavery today. She also used the past Free Slave movement as a way to demonstrate

that this type of thing has been done before and under harsher circumstances than what we face now, thus using the past to enrich the present, another large lesson from the CBL. Overall she made it clear that slavery is still a large part of our world as it was back then, and it is up to us as people with power to use that power to help combat this horrific and evil practice. It was a great way to tie up the project as it took the themes of the project and presented them in a manner that affects each and every one of us personally, and raised awareness about an issue that still affects us today, and one we can do something about.

Thus, the CBL was a unique way of undertaking a historical project that not only enriched the knowledge of those looking into the finished work but of those who took part in the project. I learned many things I would not have doing a typical historical essay, and I felt a connection with what I learned and the community I live. For me the CBL, and what it taught me have inspired me to do more as a student, historian, and as a human-being, that to me is a resounding success.

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