

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

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This year in American History, I participated in my first community based learning experience. Unlike classic university coursework, the project presented a unique opportunity to critically reflect and think on the connections between course material and the outside world. The connections formed through cooperating with community partners and exploring public venues with links to the Anti-Slavery movement enriched the themes within our course by breathing life into issues of social justice, equality and freedom. Within this reflection I will look back upon the connections built with both community partners and individuals with great knowledge of the issues covered throughout the process that enhanced the learning experience. The findings that I have discovered through these connections and will reflect on are that real world application of knowledge grasped through education inherently enhances its value and practicality, the study of history contains patterns and important details that can be connected to and shape the future and finally that learning about and connecting with the history of the city you live in can shape your experiences and views. Through reflecting on the goals of the project, my own role in its completion, the connections to local history, intellectual and logistical challenges associated with the project and oral history, the larger historiographical themes that were explored and my personal learning goals the educational value of community based learning will be affirmed.

The aspect of the project that I assisted with was the creation of an online database that compiled primary sources and analysis completed by the research division. In addition to the work completed by the research team, the website also hosts several works completed by myself and members of my team, such as photo galleries, interviews, interactive maps and short films. The first aspect of the project I completed with the assistance of Cal Perry, consisted of short interviews of our fellow classmates with respect to their role in the project and what they had gained from the experience. In addition we conducted interviews with a member of the London community, namely Todd Miller about his family connection to a fugitive slave named Thomas Henry Miller. In addition, with the assistance of Megan McPhaden another member of the website group, I conducted several interviews with members of the London Municipal Government and the Fugitive Slave Chapel project at their open house. The main subjects of the interviews were Harold Usher, the Councilor for Ward 18 of the City of London, D. Menard, a member of the London Heritage Council, the Pastor of the Beth Emanuel Church, and finally the Chairmen of the Fugitive Slave Chapel Project all of whom had a connection to the subject matter of our project. Finally, during my visit to Beth Emanuel Church's open house, I was able to capture several photographs of the interviews in progress as well as documents and architectural features within the church to add to the Fugitive Slave Chapel and gallery section of the website. My role in the project exceeded my expectations, as I was able to be at the forefront of our connection with our community partners, the Fugitive Slave Chapel Project, and members of the London community with personal connection to the historical theme of our project. Completing this aspect of the project gave me an advantage over those in the research team who analyzed primary written sources, as I was able to receive knowledge first hand that came from others personal experience.

Ninety five percent of students (age thirteen to nineteen), Ninety-two percent of adults, and seventy percent of teachers strongly supported real world or community based learning as an opportunity to improve the quality of education in public schooling (). The goal of community based learning, and the reason it garners considerable support from educators and students is because it allows students to practice problem solving and make connections in the context of their lives and communities. 1 Specifically in the case of our project the goal was to use community research, build connections with the community through our event, website and communication with community partners to reconstruct the very important and interesting history of London's anti-slavery movement, and determine its present-day relevance. The project quickly became of personal interest and importance to figures in London's municipal

government and members of the Fugitive Slave Chapel project because of its connection to their past, present and future and its relevance in their own world. Only through further donations and increased awareness will the Fugitive Slave Chapel project be completed and both the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the municipal heritage council have a vested interest in seeing that occur after the amount of time and effort they have already invested into its completion. Every member of the project that I had the opportunity to speak with appreciated the interest and effort our class had invested in the project and the historical themes behind it. It is because of this that I believe the primary objective of the project has been fulfilled. Although the website for the project may require additional work even after the conclusion of the course, the purpose of the project was not to present a completed work but to begin the recovery of London's rich anti-slavery history, build lasting connections with the community and in the process recognize the value in educational projects that connect learning with real world history and experience. At the culmination of our yearlong journey, an event took place on the morning of April 7th. At that event I was able to reconnect with all the community partners I had met while working on the project and introduce them to the finished product that our class had produced. The knowledge that this website will be visited by them in the future and possibly used as a base for their own research into the subject matter of our project brings into context the practical value of our completed work and its importance both to our class and broad community.

The exceptional learning process that characterized our Community Based Learning Project was accompanied by unique challenges not often experienced in regular coursework. The first intellectual challenge I faced occurred in the interview I conducted with Todd Miller the great grandson of Thomas Henry Miller. Gathering accurate and detailed information on historical figures from their distant descendants can be arduous. Information is lost between generations, and it was only after completing the first half of the interview that I realized that based on the lack of specific details in his stories and his direct knowledge on the topic I would have been better off interviewing his father, or his brother whom he explained were highly interested in the genealogy of their family. I left the interview with important knowledge about Thomas Henry Miller, a man that became the first minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Owen Sound and who played a crucial role in supporting those who escaped the United States on the Underground Railroad. However, there was a great deal more I could have learned, and instead had to rely on online sources to complete my research. A majority of the problems I faced from my role in the project, conducting and filming interviews reflect the challenges of recovering oral history. Oral history,

“can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. It may take the form of eye-witness evidence about the past, but can include folklore, myths, songs and stories passed down over the years by word of mouth.” (2)

The issue with oral history revolves around the objectivity and accuracy of personal accounts, and whether or not these accounts have been subjected to personal beliefs and biases. When a person recounts their personal experience, they may not have a picture of all aspects or details of what they are recounting, and because they are presenting knowledge from their own perspective, information may be embedded with and subject to personal opinions. In addition, over generations' figures and events can be glorified, vilified or altered by the passage of time and the interests and viewpoints of those recounting them. For example, a descendent of a departed leader may embellish the importance and impact of his decisions and role in history. They may also choose to forgo mentioning negative aspects of the person that would influence

others opinion of their relation in a negative manner. These issues however, can translate into advantages when subjectivity or personal opinions add value to the account by adding different insights into an issue or event, and give voice to marginalized groups often ignored in conventional historical accounts, such as women, members of minor groups and members of different disadvantaged groups. In the case of my interview with Todd Miller about his ancestor Thomas Henry Miller, Todd's personal anecdotes and views on his great grandfather's experience on the underground railroad and his role in the founding of Owen Sounds black community and Methodist Episcopal Church only added value to the account. The logistical challenges I experienced during the project were not as significant, and mainly focused on communication between the different groups involved in the project and the transfer of material between them. Notwithstanding, the challenges that I encountered in completing my portion of the project, I found the entire experience to be very valuable and a significant factor in the completion of my personal learning goals.

Despite the unique challenges involved, the process and completion of the Community Based Learning project satisfied my personal learning goals and promoted my growth as an individual. Having to solve the unique challenges presented by my role in the project brought me closer to my peers, developed my personal identity and morals, teamwork skills, leadership, and communication skills. I developed my teamwork, leadership and communication skills through the process of organizing the members of my group to act productively and complete the project on time, in addition to close cooperation with both Cal Perry and Megan McPhaden in conducting interviews and meeting with community partners. My personal identity and morality were advanced through greater understanding of the struggle of African Canadians in escaping the United States, the challenges they faced within Canada, and the role our project and the Fugitive Slave Chapel have had and will have in the correction of racial tensions in the present day within London. The uniqueness of the project and CBL also allowed me to complete challenges not present within regular classwork advancing my ability to communicate with members of the wider community productively. In addition, I learned a great deal of general information I found fascinating about the history of London and its involvement in the anti-slavery movement, of which I was completely ignorant at the onset of the project. Through cooperation with Historians Against Slavery we had the opportunity to understand how the discoveries we made about slavery in the distant past affect the future. The importance of recognizing the message Historians Against Slavery promotes can be seen in the words of George Santayana, an Italian philosopher who famously proclaimed, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (3).

During the course of the project I came to understand several of the larger historical themes from our study of American History. These themes such as the evolution of liberty, reform movements and the search for social justice, and conflict between racial, social and economic groups are not only relevant to our study of history, but also to our understanding of current events and social issues in the present day. After attending the event and listening to the lecture from Carol Faulkner that concluded our project the relevance and the repetition of these themes within American History were put into context. I realized that the project addressed this diverse group of themes through our study of American History by comparing the accounts given in the text "Voices of Freedom" by Eric Foner with the context of his other book "Give me Liberty", the interviews I conducted in the project, the research gathered by my classmates, and the themes discussed in the conclusion of our project by Dr. Faulkner. The first theme, the evolution of liberty was a difficult issue to examine in our study as a result of the contradictory nature of American freedom. Despite the precedents established during the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence and Thomas Jefferson's desire that the United

States would embrace the proposition that all men would be equal, men of color were not considered nor treated as equal (4). Therefore Thomas Jefferson famous proposition and his Declaration of Independence was really only to apply to white men, not men of color nor probably even white women. Even in our present day and age it is difficult for some groups in our society to consider themselves as equal members of our community.

While slavery no longer exists in the United States, Dr. Faulkner's lecture made it clear that slavery still exists across the world, namely in African, Asian and even in some instances in North America (5). There is also a significant distinction between free and fair labor in many parts of the world. As a result of poor working conditions and wages below what could be considered a living wage and child labor in third world countries, a fair labor movement has emerged that attempts to boycott those products not produced by countries with supported workers (6). This movement is similar to the one conducted during the 19th century known as the free labor boycott which attempted to distinguish between cotton, sugar, and other products produced by slave labor in the south and those created by small farms without the use of slaves (7). These boycotts reflect not only reflect the idea that the extent and understanding of liberty changes throughout the history of the United States, but also that themes and events repeat themselves within history, and that by studying history we can better understand the present and make wiser decisions.

While neither boycott produced their intended results, the complete abolition of slavery both relied on and empowered consumers, raised awareness to the issue they were trying to solve, connected activists with other activists and producers, connected slaves and consumers of their products, and raised awareness of the economic empowerment and independence slaves could hold. The search for social justice and the solution to conflict between racial, economic and social groups has also been reflected throughout American history, and can be seen in several primary documents within *Voices of Freedom* and the interviews I conducted at the Fugitive Slave Chapel and with Todd Miller. In the interview with the members of the FSC project, I learned about the role the chapel had in the past, as a place of worship and serving as meeting point, to its current status as the precursor to a museum which will educate others about the struggle of the fugitive slaves and the anti-slavery movement in London. The message that the Fugitive Slave Chapel is trying to send is similar to that of *Voices of Freedom* documents, such as the Appeal of the Cherokee Nation (1830), Letter by a Fugitive Slave (1840) and A Protest against Anti-Chinese Prejudice (1852), all of which display the hardship most minorities had in attaining equality in the US. The search for social justice and struggle between racial, economic and social groups was fundamental to the development of American civil rights, liberty, and equality (8).

My experience working on this project has shown me the value of Community Based Learning. The way that work is done outside of the class room in the real world has a beneficial and significant impact on a students' learning experience. It was fascinating to incorporate practical fieldwork with my classroom experience. In the case of our project, the information gathered concerning the Fugitive Slave Chapel, and the London Anti-Slavery community compiled on the class website may work towards easing current racial divisions amongst London's different communities through greater education and community cooperation. In addition, the material of the project highlights an important historiographical theme in American history; the idea of America as a beacon of freedom, equality and democracy to the world stands in stark contrast to its past association with slavery. Our course which together with our CBL experiences made us appreciate the human spirit and how events which took place in our own city of London, Ontario played a role in the abolition of slavery in the establishment of our Black Community in Canada and in providing freedom to those in desperate need of it.

An advantage of CBL is that it raises important questions and provides practices which will be helpful for future classes. Others can expand the scope and depth of the knowledge that has been uncovered through gathering of personal accounts, focusing on the City of London, Ontario and its role in the anti-slavery movement and discovering more about slavery in particular. The CBL project was very interesting and was extremely beneficial to my growth both as a student and a person and I am thankful for the opportunity it afforded me.

Footnotes (Chicago)

- 1) Melaville, Berg and Blank *Community-Based Learning Engaging Students For Success And Citizenship*. Pg. 2
- 2) Department of History "What Is Oral History?" University of Leicester
- 3) *Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress* Scribner's, 1905: 284
- 4) Thomas Jefferson "The Declaration of Independence," Preface
- 5) Faulkner, Dr. Carol. "History 2301E at Huron: London Antislavery Research Project"
- 6) Faulkner, Dr. Carol. "History 2301E at Huron: London Antislavery Research Project"
- 7) Faulkner, Dr. Carol. "History 2301E at Huron: London Antislavery Research Project"
- 8) Foner, Eric. *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History*.

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