

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

Reflection Paper: Russell Handelman

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Over the last few years I have been struggling with the idea of what really is history and what importance does it really have in our lives. Plain and simple, history is the study of a culture, people, country or even just an event from the past. The average person would probably describe history as an event that occurred in the past like a war or major societal event. Of course I have always understood history on this surface level as a series of events that helped shape the world we live in today. However, this interpretation of history has not satisfied me, as it is very difficult to build a genuine connection to ideas and concepts that occurred so long ago. It's not enough for me to know there was an American Civil War 150 years ago but rather I've felt this need to look past the face value concepts and to find a real connection to the historical event and to use that to better my life and understanding of history. One thing I have learnt for sure is that I am not alone on these feelings about history. Like Eric Foner mentions in his book *Give Me Liberty*, many Americans look at history as something of the "ancient" past and how it has no relevance to our lives today. The struggle with history has never been about learning or understanding the facts but rather building a connection to those facts and drawing back relevance to life today. We constantly here questions like why is this important, how does this connect back to our lives, how does this better our understanding of history. For the longest time I struggled with these historical questions and connections because I couldn't look past the simple details and to stretch my imagination. I believe that my involvement and contribution to the community based learning project on London's antislavery movement in the 19th century has helped me to overcome these historiographical obstacles since the project pushes you to look past the simple facts and to broaden your ideas to a more personal level. By focusing my line of research to London and its role in the antislavery movement, I was better able to understand the movement since I have more of a personal connection to London. To study slavery from an external perspective gives one interpretation of those historical events, but, to study slavery within my own city and community gives a whole new interpretation of those events. The project showed me that history is not just about knowing the facts but rather finding how those facts connect back to you in order to truly understand the bigger picture. Although there was no slavery here in Canada, the project taught me how slavery was a global epidemic and that it affected every one of us. Slavery and its abolishment helped to shape almost all societies, not just America. Through the hands on research and work, the CBL has not only given me a better understanding of American Slavery but it has further allowed me to understand the major ideas and themes within this course as well has taught me many valuable things about myself and my city, London.

The community-based learning project was an in-depth, highly detailed group project designed to show London's role within the antislavery movement during the 19th century. Although Canada and more specifically London did not practice slavery, the project proved this country to be an institution to racial slavery. Canadians often disassociate themselves with racial slavery since it was not practiced within our borders, however, history will show that Canada played a very big role within the antislavery movement and that in fact slavery was a global problem and not one just within America. Contrary to belief, racism was alive and well in Canada during the 19th century. As seen through the life of William Wells Brown, Canada was by no means free of racism. Although there was no comparison to that of American racism, Canada and more specifically London struggled with their acceptance of blacks within the community. My role in the project was to research and learn about London's black community by honing my research on a famous abolitionist. Along with a partner, I studied the life of Williams Wells Brown and his role towards the abolishment of racial slavery in America. My goal was to learn about Brown's life and to use his experiences and testimonies to better understand London's mentality

towards blacks and their contribution towards ending slavery. Although there was a lack of reputable sources on the life of Brown here in London there still was enough to understand the culture of the city at the time and how he greatly contributed towards the fight against slavery. Brown was not a fighter but rather a preacher. Born into slavery he knew what oppression felt like so his view on London's community was a view widely accepted then and now. Brown was a voice for black men and women everywhere as he spoke of a better life North of the borders. As Samuel Ringgold Ward wrote, Canada was a "great moral lighthouse for black people on the continent"ⁱⁱ. London began to form a community of back abolitionists; men and women tired of racism and slavery looking for a better life. The AME church or also know as the Fugitive Slave Chapel as explained by Brown was a beacon of light for blacks fleeing from America as it spoke of change and progress.

The goal of this project was to gain a better understanding of our community and its role within the abolishment of slavery. I feel that through my research component I gained a much greater understanding for the antislavery movement and how it functioned both in America and here in Canada. London still had its issues but also showed its true colours, which were ideas of freedom and liberty. Here in London we led the fight to abolish slavery as voices of freedom were spread throughout the continent. Before I conducted my research I was very limited in my knowledge of slavery abolition. Today I can safely say that I am well informed not only on the struggles of slavery in America but as well as how my city was a pioneer in helping to end the horrors of slavery. Although I did not interview community leaders from today, I am still able to understand how Brown's work with the abolitionist community during the 19th century helped to form the community in which we live today since my research was strictly community based.

Throughout the American history survey course I was hit with many different themes, ideas and concepts on how the American people established the great society we all know today, a society that preaches unity, freedom and liberty not only within its own borders but everywhere in the world. A country that once enslaved millions of people on the basis of skin colour and race is now a world leader in human rights and the freedom of speech. To study American history is to learn of this very progression of freedom and liberty amongst men and women everywhere. As seen within this history, freedom is something that has changed over time, however one thing that has always remained constant is that America is the voice for freedom. The War of Independence was a war for freedom and separation of oppression. The constitution was founded off the basis of freedom of the individual. Now finally, the civil war and abolishment of slavery is again the cry for freedom. The men and women who founded this country off the basis off the "free man" now embraced slavery, oppression and racism, all ideas that contradict freedom. American History comes with many different themes but maybe its most important is that freedom is something worth dying for. This idea will be engraved in the minds of Americans no matter your skin colour or race for all of eternity. We see this idea of "give me liberty, or give me death" within every facet of this course. Men and women were willing to die for their freedom because of how important it was and how important it still is. The CBL on the antislavery movement teaches us how freedom was an idea sought out from every corner of the Atlantic world. Men like William Wells Brown travelled hundreds of miles solely to find a place to be a free man. The project shows how like many other times in American History there are people who will fight against an evil in order to achieve the greater good. My research on London's antislavery movement shows how the fight for freedom will never die and that it was quite alive during the 19th century. Although the form in which this expression of freedom had changed, its underlining purpose was the same as the mentality this country was founded on. American history tells stories of great people who went to

great lengths to establish good in this world and to help society overcome obstacles that may have been impossible to do so before. To learn about the abolishment of slavery is to learn about America and what it stands for. Although many Americans did not support the freedom and liberty of the black community, looking back as a 21st century individual it is quite difficult for them to argue against the right for black people's freedom since their lives were given to them off that exact stance. The project opened up these new ideas as it pushed me to think out of the box when connecting slavery back to my own life today. By focusing on London and its role in the antislavery movement, I was given a new perspective on this history and was able to better understand not only this topic but also the bigger picture within American history.

Throughout the course of this project I have been learning and gaining so much new knowledge on the topic of slavery and its abolishment. Prior to the assignment I was unaware of London's role within the antislavery movement, as well, I was not very well read on the life of Wells Brown. The assignment brought forth a whole new outlook on this topic of study as it brought me back to the original themes and concepts discussed all year round. Essentially this community based learning project was a great way to sum up the year as it tied in everything talked about all year round in this class. However, despite all the academic knowledge gained from this project, it was the idea of working with my community and classmates that affected me most. Often in this world, ideas are thrown to you at face value. It's then up to the individual to interpret and apply those ideas how they see fit. I'm not sure if it was intended or not, but studying slavery and its abolishment as a means of a group/community assignment taught me the value of working with others and how powerful a group can really be. It was the simple structure of the assignment and way it was formatted that affected and informed me most. Slavery was something conquered by every free man and woman in the Atlantic world. Just like one man didn't create slavery, one man didn't end it either. This project was designed to show the value of a community and how when people work together anything can be accomplished. Slavery is something the free world never wants to experience again. By pairing up with historians against slavery and by focusing our work on London's antislavery movement, this project is sending a message to every Canadian and American that slavery is no longer accepted in society today. Although I could never understand the hardships those slaves went through, I can at least educate and inform myself enough to never allow it to happen again. What I learned from this project was that history matters to everyone in this world. In order to insure a safe and prosperous future we must learn about the past and protect that history. This project should be important to every person in this world that believes in freedom and liberty because to learn about slavery and oppression means to take a stance against it. We live in a world now where human rights and free speech are so widely accepted. Voices of oppression no longer exist in our society, thus I am proud to know that my city contributed to the free world. Yes the CBL was an extremely informative and educational assignment, but even more so, it was a life lesson on the values of community, teamwork and freedom of expression. These themes common within the project are also themes common within this American history course. The project helped open up the course and gave me a better understanding of the greater picture because I participated in something that required those very qualities I've been studying all year round. Not only am I leaving this project a better history student and a more informed individual on London's antislavery movement but I am leaving as a better person as I've learnt what it means to be part of something so large and so important. The antislavery movement was all about individuals contributing their small piece and doing their job in order to help the greater good. The CBL mimicked

this exact strategy as my small research contribution helped this class to create something amazing.

ⁱ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty, (seagull fourth edition), W. W Norton & Company*, xxii.

ⁱⁱ Nina Reid-Maroney, "History, Historiography and the Promised Land Project," in *The Promised Land: History and Historiography of the Black Experience in Chatham-Kent's Settlements and Beyond*, ed. Boulou Ebanda de B'beri, Nina Reid-Maroney, and Handel Kashope Wright (Toronto, ON: The University of Toronto Press, 2014), 64.

References

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