

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

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The American antislavery movement is often identified with movements such as the American Anti-Slavery Society, and based around the northern states of America. Prominent figures, like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass are identifiable as the faces of antislavery in the mid-nineteenth century. However, little is known historically about more localized movements and efforts to free, assist, and educate slaves or former slaves. For instance, the role of Ontario-based groups and individuals involved in antislavery is widely considered integral to an understanding of North American antislavery¹. As a part of a community-based learning initiative, Huron University College's second year American History class attempted to learn more about, and reveal the significance of, such individuals and their roles in opposing slavery in the United States. As a member of this class, I participated in this project by transcribing a letter between L. C. Chambers, a Sunday school teacher in Canada West or modern day Ontario, and Reverend George Whipple. Both the sender and the recipient are examples of people who contributed to antislavery by doing what they can, while not necessarily becoming publicly known for their actions. I also created an index of key words for several primary sources to facilitate a Search function on the website, but that portion of the project was not ultimately applied to the site. In my work on the community-based learning project with the American History class, and based on the work of my classmates and Historians against Slavery, I have developed a better understanding of primary sources in historical research. Involvement in community-based learning, in the use of multimedia, public awareness, research and analysis skills, and connections to contemporary issues, constitutes a process to make history more accessible and relevant to a general public, while deepening an understanding of the past.

Stouffer, in his book *The Light of Nature and the Law of God: Antislavery in Ontario, 1833-1877*, highlights the sparseness of historical research regarding antislavery in Ontario. He does, however, point to several studies which shed light on that aspect of North American antislavery. The earliest is Fred Landon's 1919 thesis, "The Relation of Canada to the Anti-Slavery and Abolition Movements in the United States." However, the thesis lacked cohesion and neglected the roles of the Church in Antislavery. It was not until the 1960s that more comprehensive studies emerged, contextualizing the Canadian movement in international antislavery, identifying the role of the Church and other organizations, and recognizing that Canada was not necessarily a "prejudice-free haven."² Although the Canadian colonies, as British possessions, outlawed slavery, racial inequality continued to exist both socially and systematically. Our class, in approaching this project, appreciated that entry into Canada did not always guarantee "freedom" for escaped slaves. For many, free life carried similar challenges which plagued slave life, such as political powerlessness, social marginalization, and poverty. Study of these challenges in establishing a new life in the Colonial Canada in the mid-1800s can be connected to contemporary issues. The Canadian colonies, as recipients of former slaves, can easily be perceived as containing a benevolent and charitable society which valued freedom and equality. While these values may have been important to many British settlers of the region, generations of racialized rhetoric and cultural misconceptions led many to also have difficulty treating escaped slaves as social and political equals. Similarly, Canada today possesses a reputation for housing refugees and immigrants from developing nations. While this may reflect progressive and benevolent social values, social and political inequality can still be perpetuated in society by unsympathetic or ignorant individuals, or systematic forms of discrimination.

¹ Allen Stouffer. *The Light of Nature and the Law of God: Antislavery in Ontario, 1833-1877*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. 1992: 1.

² Ibid, 4.

In Stouffer's research on antislavery in Ontario, he highlights the role of the Church in perpetuating moral and religious grounds for involvement in antislavery. Our work in the community-based learning project involved the use of primary sources which support Stouffer's notion that religious institutions played an important role in antislavery. Free Americans, British settlers, and slaves, all considered religion to be critically important in both personal and social life. As a result, churches had a great deal of power to influence popular thought regarding the moral aspect of slavery and antislavery. Stouffer found, however, that churches were, at most, "surprisingly ambivalent."³ Church involvement and stance on antislavery varied between denominations, and sometimes even from congregation to congregation.⁴ Clergy and adherents alike sometimes had little or no interest in antislavery. Many regarded the problem of slavery in another country as irrelevant to their own lives, and others opposed intervention in the affairs of a neighbouring nation, which risked upsetting a friendly and stable economic and political relationship.⁵ Many churches promoted, as opposed to activism, prayer for the plight of slaves in America.⁶ While this approach eased the consciences of the many British North American congregations who opposed slavery in theory, it was of little consolation to slaves or freed slaves with enslaved family. Not all Church communities remained inactive regarding the problem of slavery. Anglican clergy publicly opposed slavery and racial discrimination in the Toronto-based Anglican journal, the *Church*.⁷ The public nature of the *Church's* views on antislavery encouraged community involvement in antislavery, or attempts to provide opportunities for former slaves and their families. For example, Anglican mission workers in London opened a Sunday school for black children and adults in the 1850s.⁸ Canadian Presbyterians and Methodists also became involved in antislavery and efforts to improve the circumstances of former slaves. As powerful and spiritually significant institutions, churches in the nineteenth century had the capacity to influence public thought and action regarding antislavery, but did not always make full use of that influence.

An important source which our class found and studied for the project, was a letter from L.C. Chambers, who traveled between Ontario settlements to preach and teach Sunday schools to black and white children and adults. The letter, which was addressed to a "Rev. Mr. George Whipple," appears to be a report between colleagues regarding the challenges as well as benefits of missionary work in these communities. Chambers revealed in his letter that he reached the congregations where he must teach by walking, often for many exhausting miles.⁹ He preached in today's Chatham-Kent county, in Dresden and Thamesville. While the traveling was difficult, and the work sometimes stressful, Chambers found that it was very rewarding, as his students and congregations requested his sermons and lessons for future.¹⁰ The congregations, Chambers said, consisted of both black and white people, and belonged to different denominations, including Methodist, Baptist, and Wesleyan. The people in the regions where Chambers worked were mostly poor, and he, as a missionary, tried his best to assist them. They at times, went to him for food, leading Chambers to suggest that "white friends" should attempt to assist the poor more. This suggests that those in poverty tended to be black members of Chambers' congregation. That Chambers provided free lessons and sermons for the people, also showed the extent to which the clergy in North America attempted to contribute to antislavery or the

³ Ibid, 5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 143.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 145.

⁸ Ibid, 148.

⁹ L. C. Chambers to George Whipple. Dresden, Canada West. March 19, 1859.

¹⁰ Ibid, 21.

improvement of the lives of former slaves and their families or descendants. The letter also reveals the poverty in which many blacks lived, despite their freedom, in British North America.

While Chambers' letter provided valuable insights and interesting details about work connected to the antislavery movement in Canada West, it also poses challenges to the reader and any researcher attempting to draw conclusions from it. Reading and transcribing the letter involved difficulties such as understanding the handwriting, and filling in the factual gaps. When I first saw the letter, the writing was near-indecipherable to me. Not only did it appear hastily written, but it had been photocopied. Also, written script has evolved since the mid-nineteenth century, and the twenty-first century eye is not trained to identify the style Chambers used. However, careful reading and re-reading allowed me to decipher some words and part of words, and identify letters. Once I became familiar with the appearance of most letters, I was able to identify words and numbers in most of the rest of the letter. Sometimes, it was necessary to infer words based on identifiable letters and context. The punctuation also had to be inferred, since Chambers used none. As a result, the tone was at first difficult to grasp. To better illustrate the process of transcription, I first made a literal transcription, of the word-for-word language Chambers used, including archaic, erratic, or confusing spelling, grammar, or style. I then made a second transcription, based on the first, which stayed as true as possible to the first, while making more grammatical and stylistic sense. For instance, the second transcription included punctuation, capitalization of proper nouns, and more modern or accurate spellings of words like "saide" and "Wesleyings."¹¹ This process of transcription was very valuable as a learning experience for me. It demonstrated the ambiguity and contextual implications of primary sources, and the importance of approaching such sources without bias or prior assumptions. The transcribed letter is important to the project to make the source more accessible to a wider audience. While most people can, with time and practice, manage to decipher Chambers' words and message, it saves the audience time and effort to have a transcription. The content is also relevant to our research as a class, as it demonstrates the role of Canadian clergy in supporting freed slaves in British North America, and provides local examples of early black communities in what is now Ontario.

A major difficulty in teaching and learning history, is the assumption that, as history, subject matter concerning the past remains in the past, and does not change or inform an approach to the present. The community-based learning project our class undertook, and our cooperation with Historians Against Slavery, was part of an attempt to demonstrate how history remains relevant to contemporary social, especially humanitarian issues. Slavery, commonly associated with the European colonial era and the triangle trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is not a dead issue. Human trafficking and exploitation continues in many industries around the world, and contrary to the assumptions of many, in North America as well. Joel Quirk, in his post on the Historians Against Slavery blog, proposes that historians should "approach slavery as but one manifestation of much larger patterns of exploitation and exclusion," and not contrast slavery with "freedom," since the term sometimes ignores the "ideological and political" constraints that exist even in the state of freedom.¹² This approach serves to make the seemingly more explicit historical slavery less distinguishable from modern forms of exploitation and trafficking. Because contemporary exploitation is not often defined as slavery, it becomes easier for the average person to ignore or justify a lack of action. Carol Faulkner addressed this notion during her visit to Huron University College on April 7th, 2015,

¹¹ Ibid, 2.2.

¹² Joel Quirk. "Uncomfortable Silences: Anti-Slavery, Colonialism and Imperialism." *The HAS Blog* (blog). *Historians Against Slavery*. 13 February, 2015.

<http://www.historiansagainstsavery.org/main/2015/02/uncomfortable-silences-anti-slavery-colonialism-and-imperialism/>

in the talk, “Boycotting Slavery: Then and Now.” Faulkner used the example of boycotting non-fair trade goods to exemplify a form of antislavery which contemporary consumers can use as a form of protest. She pointed to examples of boycotts during the American slavery era of the mid-nineteenth century, such as the purchase of “free” cotton and sugar to demonstrate conscientious objection to the methods involved in the production of regular cotton and sugar. A similar form of objection is available today in the form of fair trade products such as coffee, chocolate, and clothing items.¹³ Although Faulkner recognized that both forms of boycott today and during the nineteenth century did not directly contribute to eradication of the root problem, such forms of protest raise awareness of the issue, and provide alternatives to slavery or exploitation for at least a portion of the people in such a position.

By linking modern slavery or exploitation to historical slavery using public methods such as boycott, and this community-based learning project, historians and students can demonstrate to a non-academic audience that slavery did not end with the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Rather, such public forms of raising awareness through events, social media, research, and selective consumption, act as a means of showing that modern exploitation is not any less inhumane than the kinds that were outlawed around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Organizations like Historians Against Slavery make that connection between exploitation and historical slavery, and make academic history more accessible to a general audience. The involvement of history students in the project also reveals to the students that history is not limited to academia. Rather, historical studies can serve activist causes, influence social change, and inspire curiosity in our shared narrative. My involvement in the community-based learning project was a means for me as a history student to develop relevant skills, such as reading, interpreting, and analysing primary sources, while discovering non-academic uses for historical research. The project, by emphasizing multiple media, community involvement, and contemporary issues, raises public awareness about humanitarian issues, and connects them to historical interpretations and responses to similar concerns.

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¹³ Carol Faulkner. “Boycotting Slavery: Then and Now.” Historians Against Slavery. Huron University College, Great Hall. London, Ontario. 7 Apr 2015. Presentation.