

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

Reflection Paper: Samuel Robins

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A component of the second year American History course involved a class project that required the development of an understanding of the most significant themes of the course. Those themes centered on slavery and abolition. Throughout the course we learned about the path to slavery and eventually its abolition leading to American freedom. The class project introduced the students to new information on slavery in the United States but more importantly Canada's role in the transatlantic movement against slavery. London Ontario had deep ties to the antislavery movement, as it was one of the stops on the Underground Railroad. Part of the project consisted of researching a community of former slaves who settled in the area. Moreover we had to research the congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; a church that was home to London's black abolitionist community. The research consisted of going through archival documents related to the church and the community as well as working with community partners to explore new research and sources of archival documents to further our research. There are many roles that people could have taken on in order to complete this project; there were research roles, collection of data, as well as people who designed a website at the end of the project for public viewing. This project is important to the course because not only do we learn more about the history of slavery in America, but also we learn about Canada's role in the institution of slavery. Canada played a pivotal role in the anti-slavery movement and we learned how London, Ontario provided a safe haven for slaves escaping hardship through the creation of an abolitionist community.

There were many roles that one could have been involved with in order to contribute to this project; the role that I was involved with was the research and archival part. My role consisted of going to the archival section of the D.B Weldon library and looking through cemetery and church records to see if certain names matched their records. Although very tedious, I found this role to be quite interesting as well. I had never examined and researched archival documents before this project and I found it very interesting and rewarding upon completing my task. Through the completion of my role I learned about the vast number of people who came from the United States to escape slavery, hardship and forced labor. I found it very interesting how one of the biggest African American communities in London was founded through the efforts of the anti-slavery movement. I feel as if my research helped other members of my class in completing their parts because without the research that my fellow peers and I found the project would not have been as successful. The role I played was useful to the overall completion because the research we found in the archives was able to provide further insight into the black community in London. Going through the records one learns about how the community transformed from a simple safe haven community for freed slaves, into a bustling African American community that contributed to development of the province of Ontario, whether it was through the black volunteers that aided the British in the war of 1812 to the establishment of an African American regiment in the Union army during the civil war¹. Through this research I not only was able to help my group but I obtained a better understanding for myself as to what these people endured to become free and the hardships they faced and overcame in order to establish a community for themselves in Canada.

While working in a group dynamic can be rewarding one is also faced with challenges. Some of the challenges that I faced while trying to work with the other

¹ Black settlement in Ontario. (n.d.). Retrieved April 1, 2015, from <http://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/Slavery-to-Freedom/History/Black-settlement-in-Ontario.aspx>

members of the research section were concerned with coordination, communication and efficiency. Coordination is hard in a group setting because one must coordinate a time to meet up that works best with everyone's schedule. The problem is that there may be three or four people working on a particular part of the project that all have different things to do at different times and the difficult part is finding the perfect time for everyone to gather and share information. Luckily in my group we had parts of the week where we had no class or very little class on certain days. We utilized those gaps in class times to meet up at the archival section at the library and research the different archival documents. Communication is also a challenge when one is working with three or four people to complete a task. Communicating when to meet up can be difficult, because although everyone has cellphones and computers, the multiple platforms of communication can actually lead to confusion and disorganization, however we were able to overcome this speed bump and organize the time and the place to meet up. The third challenge we faced was efficiency. Being efficient is when one achieves maximum proficiency and results from a given situation or task, however the problem when researching old documents is that they might not have been organized well or there could be missing documents. One of the biggest challenges we faced as a group was the lack of documents and we had to go through stacks of books and documents to find names from old records however sometimes the names were not in the document or were left out of the pages. This frustrated us and made our task more difficult. However we were able to work with what we had and find most of the names given to us to research. If we were unable to find them in the archival section in the library, we turned to the archival database online where we were able to find more names. Although facing problems while working in a group occurs, it is the ability to overcome those challenges that makes working with those people more rewarding. We were able to overcome those challenges, research our topic and not only complete our section of the class project but also assist our peers in completing their class project sections.

The class project introduced us to the important themes of the course, and through the completion of the project we were able to see how those themes unfolded. One of the biggest themes of the course was freedom, and asking ourselves; what is freedom and how does it change over time? This theme goes hand in hand with the topic of slavery as the people who came to London, Ontario through the underground railroad were leaving their homes, in the hopes of becoming free people. Their lives in the United States were terrible and they were forced into slavery and worked very hard, however with the emergence of an abolitionist community in Canada they had a possible way out, a place of hope to try to reach. Researching the topic of slavery and how they escaped to seek refuge in the North, we begin to uncover the vast reach of the underground railway and how people would hide slaves in their homes and sent them along home by home till they reached the north². In the north, across Canadian borders slaves would become free. One of the main focuses of the project was on London Ontario's connection to the antislavery movement, predominately through the emergence of an African American Church, called the Fugitive Slave Chapel. The church was called the Fugitive Slave Church because the congregation was mainly made up of fugitive slaves escaping persecution in the United States³. Later on as the community developed, the name of the church changed to the British Episcopal Church. It was very interesting researching the

² Foner, E. (2012). *Give me liberty!: An American history* (Seagull third ed.). New York: W.W. Norton.

³ Short History of Beth Emanuel BME Church. (n.d.). Retrieved April 1, 2015, from <http://bethemanuel.ca/history.html>

church because one learned about the hardships these people faced while trying to escape to freedom. An excerpt from John Brown's book outlines that although it was very dangerous for the slaves, they continued to travel great distances because they knew their freedom was waiting. "*I travelled chiefly by night, that being the safest time. Indeed, I made very light of any real privations I now experienced. The sense of present security, and the certainty of freedom awaiting me*"⁴

When related back to one of the bigger themes we studied over the course: freedom, we learned through our research that although they made it across the border and into Canada, the now free slaves were still treated like second-class citizens and faced prejudice and discrimination upon arriving in London⁵. Although London had its own laws that provided equal rights, the law and government was run by white people who were often prejudiced and unforgiving to the African American Population.⁶ London's Fugitive Slave Chapel however became a place and symbol for freedom. The ability for these people to come from such hardship and develop a community as well as a house of worship became a beacon of hope for many slaves still trying to gain their freedom. The African American community made up of predominantly free slaves helped to shape London into what it is today through its help in diversifying and growing London's African American community.

Overall the project in my opinion matters, it was a great learning opportunity, not only to further my understanding of slavery and the anti slavery movement as a whole, but to understand how the community where I attend university, was shaped by slavery and free slaves seeking refuge and freedom. This project helped to further our understanding of the themes of the course, which include freedom, how freedom changes overtime, the history of slavery, the civil war and the Abolitionist movement. In my opinion the class project touched on all of these topics, providing not only more insight into the course itself but about the history of London as well. By working on this project, I did something I have never done before which was research actual archival documents in an archives room. It was a new experience for myself and I enjoyed it. I had to go to the archive rooms of the library, find the old records that needed to be researched and look over and read through them. It was a new experience for myself that I enjoyed. Overall I think this project was very informative and educational. We as a class not only learned about the slave trade and the anti -slavery movement but we also learned about Canada's role in the anti -slavery movement. A country I did not typically associate with slavery and Abolitionists turned out to have played a major role in the anti -slavery movement and the abolition of slavery.

⁴ Brown, J., & Chamerovzow, L. (1855). *Slave life in Georgia a narrative of the life, sufferings, and escape of John Brown, a fugitive slave, now in England* (p. 165). London: W.M. Watts.

⁵ Short History of Beth Emanuel BME Church. (n.d.). Retrieved April 1, 2015, from <http://bethmanuel.ca/history.html>

⁶ IBID

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