

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

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Over the second semester of American History 2301E I have had the opportunity of working alongside my classmates, Historians Against Slavery, and the Fugitive Slave Chapel in London on a Community Based Learning Project (CBL) targeting slavery in London. The Fugitive Slave Chapel is a church in London that had many members affected by slavery, and whom found refuge in London and attended the Church. The CBL project not only tied in our research throughout the year in slavery with our community, but allowed us to work together to create an event that brings to life the trials and tribulations faced by people both past and present in slavery. Working alongside the Beth Emmanuel Church, the class was able to trace the paths and lives of the Church members who forged lives out of slavery. The project brought our community together, hosting community members from all areas of life, including students, professors, and members of the general public. Throughout the project many challenges were faced, and many questions arose and were answered as I worked and learned about the Church. My job, along with my classmates in the group, was to communicate with the public about the project by creating the event digitally and spreading awareness on several different social media platforms, creating and posting flyers around the community displaying the details of the event, and to ensure attendance to the event by establishing the platform to monitor confirmed attendance. Spreading awareness to an audience who was willing to listen and was interested in the topic proved very difficult. However, it was through this challenge that I was able to see first-hand how the internet has changed history and how it can be presented. This project also brought on many intellectual challenges. Throughout the course it was easy to slip into a mindset that slavery happened far away, and long ago. The reality, however, is that slavery was in Canada, our cities, and in our communities.

My job regarding the Community Based Learning Project was to inform the community about our work, the slave chapel, and the event. This included creating several different social media handles that represented our classes work, and to monitor our progress throughout the semester leading up to and including the event. Having a role on the communications team during this time put into perspective just how vital the internet has become, not only for spreading awareness of our event, but for contacting and organizing the speaker, creating the posters for the event, and for having an article published about our project online. Without the internet, my group would have not only encountered great difficulties, but may not have even existed. This brought into perspective how difficult it would have been for the anti-slavery activists working in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to spread awareness and rally support for their cause. Limited to pen and paper, and travelling to the audiences they wanted to reach, they would have had to rely heavily on word of mouth. Throughout our project, we organized a guest speaker from the United States, and shared our intentions of the project with hundreds of people without having to leave our University Campus. This alone testifies to the role that the internet plays in history, and in our lives. The CBL project challenged me, personally, to see the affects slavery had on our community. Through social media and the internet, this goal was reached, as the great thematic questions of American history began to arise.

Throughout the course, the idea of freedom was prevalent from the beginning to end. What was freedom? How did it change throughout American history? Who was effected by freedom? All of these questions began surfacing the further we got into the project. Freedom took a course of action that began with the slaves. They saw freedom very differently than we would define it today. Freedom, as it was to the slaves, was to not be forced into labor, to be paid for their work, and able to leave willingly whenever they please. The plantation owners need not

think of freedom in that way, as they experienced that freedom already. Instead, they sought freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to associate themselves with whomever and whatever they deemed fit. Two different types of freedom, applied to two different peoples. Carol Faulkner, our guest speaker, came to present on the topic of slavery from the United States. Representing Historians Against Slavery, Faulkner shared on the movements of the past, and their modern day counterparts, comparing the free produce movement to the fair trade movement today. Historians Against Slavery attempt to not only share about slavery in the past, but to prevent slavery from going on in our world today. Through her presentation, she connected the lives of the enslaved population with the goals of the activists, and noted that to make a difference on slavery, the activists needed not only words, or only actions, but to unite their passion to spark action within their communities.

Historians Against Slavery, represented by Carol Faulkner, brought into perspective the scope to which slavery effected people, and still effects people today. Throughout the course it was easy to gain the mindset that slavery did happen, not here, not now, but at one time, far away. But slavery was in Canada at one time, and is still a problem in the modern world. The Community Based Learning Project brought to life the impact of slavery both on the individual, and our community.

This project relayed the significance of slavery in the historical and modern day perspective. Addressing past and present organizations whose goals are to protect individuals from slave labor, Carol Faulkner presented the information in a way that impacts everyone, and gives us all a chance to say no to slavery. Outlining the role of the fair trade movement, which provides fair wages and a safe workplace to workers who typically work on farms in poorer countries, Faulkner encouraged us all to, at the least, have an understanding of how our actions influence slavery and companies alike. Our decisions to purchase fair trade chocolate, coffee, tea, sugar, and many other goods, ensures that the workers who produced those goods are not working in slave like conditions, facing long work hours with little to no pay. With slavery being such a big issue, it is easy to feel like there is nothing one person can do to change anything, but that is not true. We all have the power to influence what goes on around us, to show no tolerance for the companies and groups of people who seek to exploit workers, land, and villages in poorer countries. While the typical slavery we learned about, growing crops, getting whipped, and being worked to death has faded into history, we now face a new type of slavery. One that we can all help shut down. Though we are not in the middle of the conflict, the items we have in our grocery basket at the market can influence the toll that slavery is taking on communities across the world. This project is significant, and matters to the individuals of every community, by portraying what slavery has evolved into, and informing people on how to combat that from the comfort off their homes, grocery stores, and within their lifestyle.

In the future, students working on this project would be able to use the findings of our research and build on the impact in our community and beyond. Evaluating the economic situation of the Fair Trade and Free Produce movements, they could evaluate the contribution of trading from Canada to support those causes. Our class focused majorly on the Bethel Assembly in London, but they could focus more on Canada's contribution to support the anti-slavery campaign when slavery was at its peak. This would further inform the public of Canada's role in the slavery movement, and how they attempted to abolish slavery both on the home front and abroad. Throughout the course we have evaluated the brutal state of slavery in the United States and the horrible conditions the slaves were put into. These conditions, people, and social norm, seem so distant from our reality today. However, as Carol Faulkner pointed out, slavery

occurred, and is continuing today. The future students in American History could evaluate the extent of slavery in Canada compared to the United States, and compare and contrast the social, economic, and political conditions that contributed to the similarities or differences in the slave market.

The Community Based Learning Project has brought a perspective on slavery that in class lecturing could not provide. Allowing us to find slavery's roots in London, and focus on real people who were effected by slavery in our community brings home the topics discussed in American history. Putting this project together and organizing the event has cast a new light on slavery. Understanding that slavery happened in Canada, and not only in the United States, is only the beginning. The people around us every day, in our communities, schools, and workplaces, could have been affected by slavery in the past, with their grandparents or even parents. The role that we as individuals in our community play is a big one. Carol Faulkner pointed this out very effectively, that we can make decisions to combat slavery in our everyday lives. From where we shop and what we buy, to the companies we support, our decisions effect modern day slavery. The Community Based Learning Project is a unique experience for students to apply their knowledge from the course to their lives and their communities. I feel I have gained valuable experience about how history is prevalent in modern society. Often history is presented as only in the past, as if the topics of discussion faded away with their leaders. Occasionally that is the case, but with slavery, the story is far from finished.