

Video Diary Reflection

The African Free School

Whilst studying slavery and its reconstruction it is useful to highlight events or institutions that facilitated or hindered the establishment of African American identity. The transformation of thinking, both for those who were slaves and slave owners, was education. Consequently, when researching places of interest I came across New York's 'African Free School'. The school was the first school facility in America that allowed African students, both free and indentured, to receive a formal education and gain a degree of intellectual autonomy.

When I visited the original location of the school, I was not surprised that it no longer existed. Considering the history of racial conflict that has existed between the late eighteenth century and the present era, to expect the school to remain would be naïve to say the least. However, what I was surprised about was the lack of physical memory. Rather than a memorial or sign there was litter and boards. In the place of gratitude or admiration was dereliction and neglect. The communities the school helped to liberate would not now even look up at the building's sorry state.

Located between 135 and 137 Mulberry Street in Little Italy, New York, the original building has been transformed, likely dozens of times, throughout the past two hundred years. Arguably, schools such as the African Free School transformed African slaves into American citizens, both constitutionally and ideologically, but this seems to have been forgotten. The pupils and alumni of the school would unlikely be

able to imagine a world where a black man is not persecuted, nevertheless become the president of the United States.

If the first school in America to educate black people has been forgotten, what else has? Whilst we are able to find mention of the school in journals and history books, we can no longer see any physical evidence that it ever existed. Researching the school also revealed a complete disregard for the humanity of such an institution. Always mentioned as an accolade of John Jay and Alexander Hamilton's Manumission society, the people that worked in the school, and the people that graduated from have largely been disregarded.

I have gained something truly valuable from this video project in terms of appreciating what exists now, in terms of what existed before. History students so often trawl through books and online articles, forgetting that what we read is a reality now, as much as it was then. When we decide to open our eyes to what has truly physically and ideologically changed, can we ever really make history.