

History 3311F

Nina Reid-Maroney

Robyn Chanter

Video Diary Reflection

I chose to centre my video diary project around the memorial stone of Josiah Henson because I, like many others, became aware of his life through reading Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I found Uncle Tom a very interesting character, and thought it was unfortunate that the term 'Uncle Tom' is now sometimes seen as a derogatory one. Due to this it was very interesting to learn the history of the man who inspired the character.

What I found particularly interesting when we visited the Uncle Tom's Cabin historical site in Dresden, was that basically the whole site, apart from the name, is dedicated to telling the true story of Josiah Henson. They recognise that Stowe's book is needed to bring tourists in, but other than that they tell the story of Henson and the Dawn settlement exactly as it happened. The cemetery on the site, and specifically Henson's own memorial stone, cement to visitors that Henson's life and story was real. At the site, I became very interested in Henson's memorial stone because of the obvious visual connection to England – specifically Queen Victoria. To have a replica of her crown placed on the stone, which lives in a small Canadian town thousands of miles away from England, shows to me that the historical connections between England and Canada are not just political, but to some degree very personal as well.

As I mentioned at the end of the video, Henson's escape from the slaves states of America to Ontario, Canada, feeds the general belief that Canada's part in slavery was solely as a place of freedom. In fact, Canada also had slavery even during the time that Henson lived there. The only reason Henson was not enslaved in Canada was because of John Graves Simcoe's gradual emancipation act, which disallowed new slaves coming into the country. Therefore, in Canada, he

was free – but not every African was. Indeed, this belief of Canada as a place of freedom is supported by Henson’s participation in the Underground Railroad, as well as his founding of the Dawn Settlement. Through both of these, Henson not only made sure that other slaves could be free, but also gave them the opportunity to gain skills that they would have been lacking due to their upbringing as a slave. These skills would help them lead successful lives as free men or women.

Overall, the Uncle Tom’s Cabin historic site, and in particular Henson’s memorial stone, portray him to have been an outgoing, successful man who managed to do things that would never have been expected of him when he was born into slavery. He not only fought for his own freedom, but the freedom of many others as well, travelling far distances to England, and back into the slave states, to help those still enslaved. He is a figure, in the history of slavery, who should not only be remembered because of a novel, but because of his own actions also.