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Reflective Essay

The research project I have presented for consideration of this award was the final take-home essay for my course entitled HONR218X Fighting Slavery. A fascinating class that detailed the many-sided battle against slavery from its inception until its demise, the final assignment was equally thought provoking, if not more so. All previous papers in the class enlisted us to use specific sources made available to us by the professor—and *no* other sources—to write a research-based paper about specific issues and events concerning slavery. The final essay was unique for two reasons: for one, the prompt was to give a description of what the course “failed” to include in its history of slavery, and for another, we were required to use at least some outside sources. Upon further questioning of my professor, we were actually encouraged to do almost entirely outside research. This was my first college research paper in which I would be conducting all of my own research without specific guidance, and by carefully selecting several texts from the bountiful library available to me, my research process proved to be successful.

The prompt of this final essay urged me to conduct research on the aspects of antislavery that had not been discussed during my course. That being said, the course was comprehensive and revealed ~~t~~ e more about slavery than I ever before knew, from its earliest practice until its demise after the Civil War. What could I do research on that we did not already cover? The answer to that question came to me by rereading my past papers in the course. Throughout the semester I rationalized that “antislavery” meant more than outright verbal or written dissent to the horrible institution of slavery. This would continue to be the theme of my final essay. Though slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865, through my essay entitled “Slavery is Dead,

but Far From Buried,” I argued that slavery was continually fought from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the conclusion of the Civil Rights Movement.

Before choosing my topic for this paper, I contacted my professor with several questions regarding the amount of research expected of us—I was going into this research project with relatively few guidelines and I wanted a clearer perspective. I asked him whether or not I should rely more on outside research or rather an equal comparison of outside research *and* the text we had already made available to us throughout the course. My professor implicated to me that the more outside research I did, the more impressive and reputable the paper would become. I took his advice and devised my topic to include almost no information learned previously from the course and set to outlining my own research plan.

For this paper my professor set the guideline that only sources found in McKeldin Library could be used, which made the initial process of choosing where to find sources much easier. However, believing that I absorb new information much better through the reading of printed works, rather than online, I decided to make my first foray into the stacks of McKeldin. Before I went, I compiled a list of the source topics I would be looking through. These included the obvious topic, the Civil Rights Movement, and more specific ones including Martin Luther King, Jr., Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois, all of whom I had known a limited amount about from previous years of study in history. Of course, there were far too many books on these subjects than I could ever hope to process, and I only had a couple weeks before the paper had to be submitted.

This is where the difficult decisions were made. With such a short time span to work with, I had to choose a limited number of books, that both validated each other but presented different varieties of information. They had to be relatively brief if I hoped to skim the entire

book. It was essential that they were well-written and to the point, not using too much frilly language and fluff that might slow down my research process. They needed to have an explicit and helpful table of contents and if possible a useful index, so that I could refer to specific pivotal terms when I needed to return from one book to another. I spent a few hours in the library that day and the next, combined, looking through the books for the most useful sources about subjects of which I knew very little. I did know what the theme and topic of my paper were: how slavery was fought *after* it was supposedly done away with. Thus, that was the basis of my search through the abundant sources. I didn't want biographies of the Civil Rights leaders; I wanted specific recollections of their exploits that truly made monumental differences in the fates of African Americans, and beyond. Furthermore, secondhand perspectives would not satisfy my qualifications either. I had to find sources that were abundant with direct quotations from the historical figures I wrote about, to illustrate not only that my points were valid, but that I had done enough research to find the best evidence.

Through my maiden voyage of the research process with this paper, I came to find a thrill in the research. The way I investigated a wide variety of sources, carefully selecting the most pertinent works and pruning passages for my paper, it was all a rather intriguing experience. Though the research process was exhausting, of course, there was a fulfilling spark that I had the entire time of the experience that told me I really enjoyed what I was doing. This has caused me to reconsider my desire to become a teacher of history immediately after graduating. Now I am certain that I want experience conducting genuine research, and I have already applied to internships to bring me closer to that goal.