

Research Processes: Trevor Thomas

When it came time to choose a topic for HIST586, my interest in religious history led me to select the Second Great Awakening, the evangelical revival that occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. At the time, I was studying the very same movement in Prussia for an independent research project with another faculty member and was curious about the parallels between the German and the American Awakenings. I have also always been interested in the effect of education on abolitionism and the Civil Rights movement, and previous studies of George Washington Owens (KSAC's first African-American graduate) spurred me to go further back in time. I eventually settled on the relationship between religion, abolitionism, and higher education in the former Northwest Territory. I selected the Northwest states (Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan) because their initially sparse populations allow a unique perspective on how religion can affect a developing society, especially one grappling with complicated issues like slavery. The trends I noticed as I researched eventually became my thesis: fired with the moral mandates of the Second Great Awakening, institutions of higher learning founded by evangelical abolitionists often became centers of anti-slavery sentiment.

My thesis had three different parts, each which had to be proven to make the thesis valid. The first item I had to prove was that the "moral mandates of the Second Great Awakening" actually encouraged an opposition to slavery. I studied for this a number of sermons and writings from prominent Second Great Awakening theologians and ministers that I found through Kansas State's database search function. I also had to prove not only that the Second Great Awakening spread to the American Northwest, but that it led revivalist ministers into the Northwest, convinced them to found educational institutions, and remained an important influence on the faculty and students. The most important sources for proving the link between education in the Northwest and the Second Great Awakening were the writings of the institutions' founders, their professors, and university-sponsored histories. These items were mostly found through the Hathi Trust Digital Library. Finally, I had to prove that the students and professors of the institutions were engaged in anti-slavery activities, and that they were motivated by the tenets of the Second Great Awakening in doing so. I relied on publications that the students and professors made, as well as newspaper clippings describing their activities. The constitution of the Lane Anti-Slavery Society was a particularly intriguing source, as religion is clearly evident in many of the reasons the society puts forth for freeing the slaves.

The Southern states provided a particular challenge for my thesis. The South's reaction to the Second Great Awakening does not directly pertain to my thesis, but the states south of the Mason-Dixon line experienced the same religious revivals and the same rush to found new educational institutions as the Northwest did. A failure to prove why the South did not at least entertain the notion of abolitionism because of evangelism could mean the failure of my thesis as viable. However, through the study of the writings of Senator John C. Calhoun, perhaps the most influential defender of slavery and states' rights in the antebellum era, and other Southern intellectuals, I discovered the justifications Southern slaveholders used that in their mind reconciled revivalist evangelism and holding slaves. Many used a paternalistic argument to justify slaveholding, while Calhoun in his speech "Slavery a Positive Good" pointed out the miserable condition of Northern and European industrial workers.

I approached research knowing a number of challenges awaited me. Since many of the institutions I studied were very small prior to the Civil War or do not even exist anymore, much of their source material was bound up in special collections inaccessible without actually traveling to the specific institution. I attained the sources I could (such as the inaugural speech by Dr. Thomson at Ohio Wesleyan University), but for many I worked around this by finding their citations in university-sponsored biographies and histories, which allowed me to “access” the documents through secondary sources. These histories and biographies I attained through Kansas State’s Interlibrary Loan system, since the books were not widely available outside the universities themselves. By far the most useful resource in my research was the Hathi Trust Digital Library, which through its digitized collections provided for me a wealth of primary and secondary sources published by the universities I studied. The Gale Sabin Americana database that Kansas State provides access to also gave a number of primary sources in the form of sermons and lectures.

I evaluated my sources based on their importance within the community. My paper is titled “Engines of Abolition,” because I prove that these institutions were true drivers of the abolitionist movement in the Northwest. Some schools I found were simply too small to demonstrate a noticeable effect on the wider region, even if they displayed the same abolitionist zeal as larger institutions. In addition, I had to rule out schools that were not necessarily founded on the principles of the Second Great Awakening, or were otherwise established outside the time frame I set (roughly 1800-1850). These criteria ruled out a lot of schools with rich histories and a close involvement with the abolitionist movement, but to include them in the paper would compromise the integrity of the thesis. Much of the information on the schools discussed in this paper was obtained by published university catalogues on Hathi Trust.

Since most of my sources were obtained through Kansas State database subscriptions, it is safe to say this project would not be possible without library resources. By learning which databases provided which sources (Sabin Americana for older prints, Hathi Trust for officially published primary and secondary material, JSTOR for secondary analysis, etc.), I could quickly and effectively locate the items I needed.