The Montreal Mechanics' Institute: Bringing Venue to Voice

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The regions that became Canada were a part of Transatlantic Slavery from the 1600's until 1834, when the Slavery Abolition Act came into effect throughout the British Empire.[1] The abolitionist movement in Britain and its empire had been condemning the Transatlantic Slave Trade since the 1770s.[2] Abolitionism was in part sparked by the resistance of enslaved people enacted in various ways, including escape attempts and legal challenges. This resistance created cracks within the institution of slavery, which were then exploited by black and white abolitionists.

In Quebec, the fight to abolish slavery began in 1789 when chief justice Sir James Monk freed two enslaved people from their owner on a legal technicality.[3] This challenged the institution because slave owners no longer had full confidence that their rights to possess "human property" would be protected by the state.[4] In 1790, Louis-Joseph Papineau presented a petition to the provincial authorities to abolish slavery, marking the decline of slavery.[5] However, for abolition to be realized the support of elite members of white society and the wider community was needed. The Montreal Mechanics' Institute acted as a venue and platform for abolitionist ideas to be presented, and for the support of the community to be sought.

The Montreal Mechanic's Institute (fig. 2), now known as the Atwater Library and Computer Centre, was founded in 1828. It is now located in Montreal's Westmount neighbourhood at the intersection of Sainte Catherine Street and Atwater Avenue (fig. 3).[6] The Institute was originally located at the intersection of St. James Street and St. Peter Street (fig. 1), built on top of the site of the Cimetière des Pauvres, a burial site for enslaved black people during the French regime.[7] The construction of the Montreal Mechanics' Institute over a black burial site is an act of desecration, continuing the denial of humanity, disrespect, and oppression of black people that originated with Transatlantic Slavery.[8]

The Montreal Mechanics' Institute is the sole survivor of the many mechanics' institutes established in Canada in the nineteenth century.[9] The institute ran a lecture series from its inauguration in 1828 until the beginning of the twentieth century.[10] Through its lecture series, abolitionists were given a stage to discuss their cause with the wider Montreal community. While prominent black abolitionists like the formerly enslaved Frederick Douglass emerged on the lecture circuits of American and British anti-slavery societies, it would appear that the only abolitionists given the opportunity to advocate publicly for the demise of slavery in Montreal were elite white men.[11]

In 1860, one of the abolitionists to give a lecture at the institute was H. L. Gordon, an American Quaker, lawyer, and poet[12]. Gordon's lecture was entitled "Harper's Ferry Tragedy", and detailed the story of Captain John Brown, a white abolitionist. On 16 October 1859, Brown led a group of abolitionists both white men and free black men, to seize an military armory at Harper's Ferry in Virginia.[13] The year prior, he had come to Virginia and leased farm land, in preparation for his insurrection.[14] During this year, he recruited both white and black abolitionists to devise a plan to seize the federal armory. Following the occupation of the armory, Brown and his fellow insurrectionists used the United States' military weapons against the American military.[15] This attack initiated a battle that would come to be called the precursor to the American Civil War.[16] In 1859, Brown was tried by the state of Virginia and hung for treason and conspiracy with enslaved people becoming a national symbol for abolition in America.[17]

Upon his capture and trial, Brown stated that he felt that "only bloodshed would cleanse America of the sin of slavery".[18]

In his lecture, Gordon framed Brown as a heroic example of "one great truth, namely that slavery rests upon an insecure basis, that is it rests on cowardice, cruelty, and meanness," underscoring how Brown had advanced the cause of liberty.[19] Gordon's lecture attempted to highlight "a new born hope for the African," where it is possible for a white person to love and die for a black person, as Brown had done.[20] Gordon went on to point out that, after slavery the only remaining distinction between black and white people was prejudice.[21] This is of note because the abolitionist movement has been criticized for overlooking how racism affects the lives of black people outside of slavery and after abolition.[22]

In 1861, the institute held a public meeting to discuss the matter of an enslaved black American John Anderson.[23] In the 1850's, Anderson came to Canada after he had killed a white man during his attempt to escape his owner in Missouri.[24] By 1860, his whereabouts were reported to the American Government.[25] This became a complicated jurisdictional matter because slavery had been abolished in Canada at the time. However, surrendering him to the American government meant sending him back to where he would be enslaved, if not executed for the murder of a white man.

The case of John Anderson was brought to trial in Toronto in 1861 where three justices and a jury were charged with deciding Anderson's fate.[26] Two of the three justices wanted him to be sent back to the Unites States, a country which viewed him as the property of white people.[27] In court, the Ashburton Treaty's extradition clause was discussed.[28] It stated that, "any person having committed murder in either territory[29] and having sought refuge in the other should be given up".[30] However, the Canadian public largely disagreed with this decision because Anderson had killed a man only in self-defence of his liberty.

On the evening of 17 January 1861, the opinion of the Canadian public was made clear. The public meeting at the Montreal Mechanics' Institute was attended by many Montreal elites, such as Mayor Charles Seraphin Rodier and the future Mayor Reverend John Cordner, as well as more than 800 members of the general public.[31] Although abolitionism existed within the British Empire since the late eighteenth century, in the nineteenth century this sentiment grew increasingly strong within Canada.[32] Edgar Andrew Collard explains that as Canada approached abolition in the 1830's, many American enslaved people fled north to Canada as fugitives on what would be called the Underground Railroad.[33] Collard furthers, that the terrible injuries, physical suffering, and horrific stories these individuals brought with them destroyed any continued attempt to represent slavery as a mild and justifiable institution.[34] However, it should be noted that Transatlantic Slavery was fully operational in this region only decades before. Therefore, this new-found sympathy for American enslaved people highlights a chosen ignorance of their past actions and hypocrisy within Montreal's white public. With this new-found sympathy, the consensus reached at this meeting was that Anderson's actions were justified by his desire to be free.[35] This sentiment was then expressed to the provincial government at the time, in an attempt to sway their decision.

In conclusion, the Montreal Mechanics' Institute acted as a platform and community access point for white male Montrealers to come together in support of abolition. Although the voices heard were those of white elites, they told the stories of enslaved black people struggling for freedom, and they represented the opinions of the public. In both lectures, the cause of abolition was advanced by the underscoring of the humanity of black people. This emphasis directly challenges the dehumanization of black people that had been used to justify slavery for

hundreds of years. However, it should be noted that both lectures took place after 1835, when abolition was enacted throughout the British Empire. This means that this group of abolitionists never advocated for the freedom of enslaved people in Montreal, Quebec, or what would become Canada. That said, the community nature of the abolitionist role that the Montreal Mechanics' Institute played embodies the collective action that was necessary to challenge the distribution of power within a society and, thereby, abolish slavery.[36]

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[1] Nathan Baker, "Anti-Slavery Society of Canada," The Canadian Encyclopedia (date of last access 3 March 2020) https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/anti-slavery-society-of-canada

[2] Natasha L. Henry, "Black Enslavement in Canada" (date of last access 3 March 2020) https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/author/natasha-l-henry

[3] Dorothy W. Williams, Blacks in Montreal: An Urban Demography (Montreal: Les Editions Yvon Blais Inc, 1989), pp. 13-14.

[4] Williams, Blacks in Montreal: An Urban Demography, pp. 13-14; In this case, the legal technicality led to the dismissal of the suit of the owner against the escaped enslaved person.

[5] Williams, Blacks in Montreal: An Urban Demography, p. 14.

[6] Anon, "History of Mechanics' Institute of Montreal," Atwater Library and Computer Centre: History and Archives (date of last access 3 March 2020) https://www.atwaterlibrary.ca/history-and-archives/history-of-the-mechanics-institute-of-montreal/

[7] Edgar Andrew Collard, "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," Montreal Yesterdays (Toronto: Longmans Canada, 1962), p. 117.

[8] Charmaine A. Nelson, "Black Cemeteries Force Us to Re-examine Our History With Slavery," The Walrus (date of last access 25 April 2020) https://thewalrus.ca/black-cemeteries-force-us-to-re-examine-our-history-with-slavery/

[9] Anon, "History of Mechanics' Institute of Montreal" (date of last access 3 March 2020)

[10] Anon, "History of Mechanics' Institute of Montreal" (date of last access 3 March 2020)

[11] Many prominent white female abolitionists also emerged within the American and British movements. William S. McFeely, Frederick Douglass (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991).

[12] James Duncan, "Major Events in Canadian History: The Atwater Library's Abolitionist Connections" (date of last access 3 March 2020)

[13] Christopher Waldrep and Michael Bellesiles, "Chapter 5: The Civil War," Documenting American Violence: A Sourcebook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). pp. 5-7

[14] Christopher Waldrep and Michael Bellesiles Michael, "Chapter 5: The Civil War," pp. 5-7

[15] John Brown Invasion: an Authentic History of Harper's Ferry Tragedy (1859), Act of Congress, Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Massachusetts, Massachusetts, USA.

[16] John Brown Invasion.

[17] John Brown Invasion.

[18] John Brown Invasion.

[19] Hanford Lennox Gordon, "A Lecture on the Harper's Ferry Tragedy," Montreal Mechanics' Institute Lecture Series, Montreal Mechanics' Institute, Montreal, Quebec, 10 January 1860.

[20] Hanford Lennox Gordon, "A Lecture on the Harper's Ferry Tragedy," 10 January 1860.

[21] James Duncan, "Major Events in Canadian History: The Atwater Library's Abolitionist Connections," Montreal's Hystory (date of last access 3 March 2020) https://montrealhistory.org/2010/02/the-atwater-librarys-abolitionist-connection

[22] Nathan Baker, "Anti-Slavery Society of Canada," The Canadian Encyclopedia (date of last access 3 March 2020) https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/anti-slavery-society-of-canada

[23] James Duncan, "Major Events in Canadian History: The Atwater Library's Abolitionist Connections" (date of last access 3 March 2020)

[24] James Duncan, "Major Events in Canadian History: The Atwater Library's Abolitionist Connections" (date of last access 3 March 2020)

[25] James Duncan, "Major Events in Canadian History: The Atwater Library's Abolitionist Connections" (date of last access 3 March 2020)

[26] Edgar Andrew Collard "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," (Toronto: Longmans Canada, 1962), p. 115.

[27] Collard, "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," p. 115.

[28] Collard, "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," p. 115.

[29] The mention of "either territory" in the Ashburton Treaty refers to either the United States of America or the regions that would become Canada.

[30] Collard, "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," p. 115.

[31] Collard, "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," p. 114.

[32] Collard, "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," p. 117.

[33] Collard, "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," p. 117.

[34] Collard, "The Case of the Fugitive Slave," p. 117.

[35] James Duncan, "Major Events in Canadian History: The Atwater Library's Abolitionist Connections" (date of last access 3 March 2020)

[36] Paul Finkelman, Rebellions, Resistance, and Runaways in the Slave South (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989).

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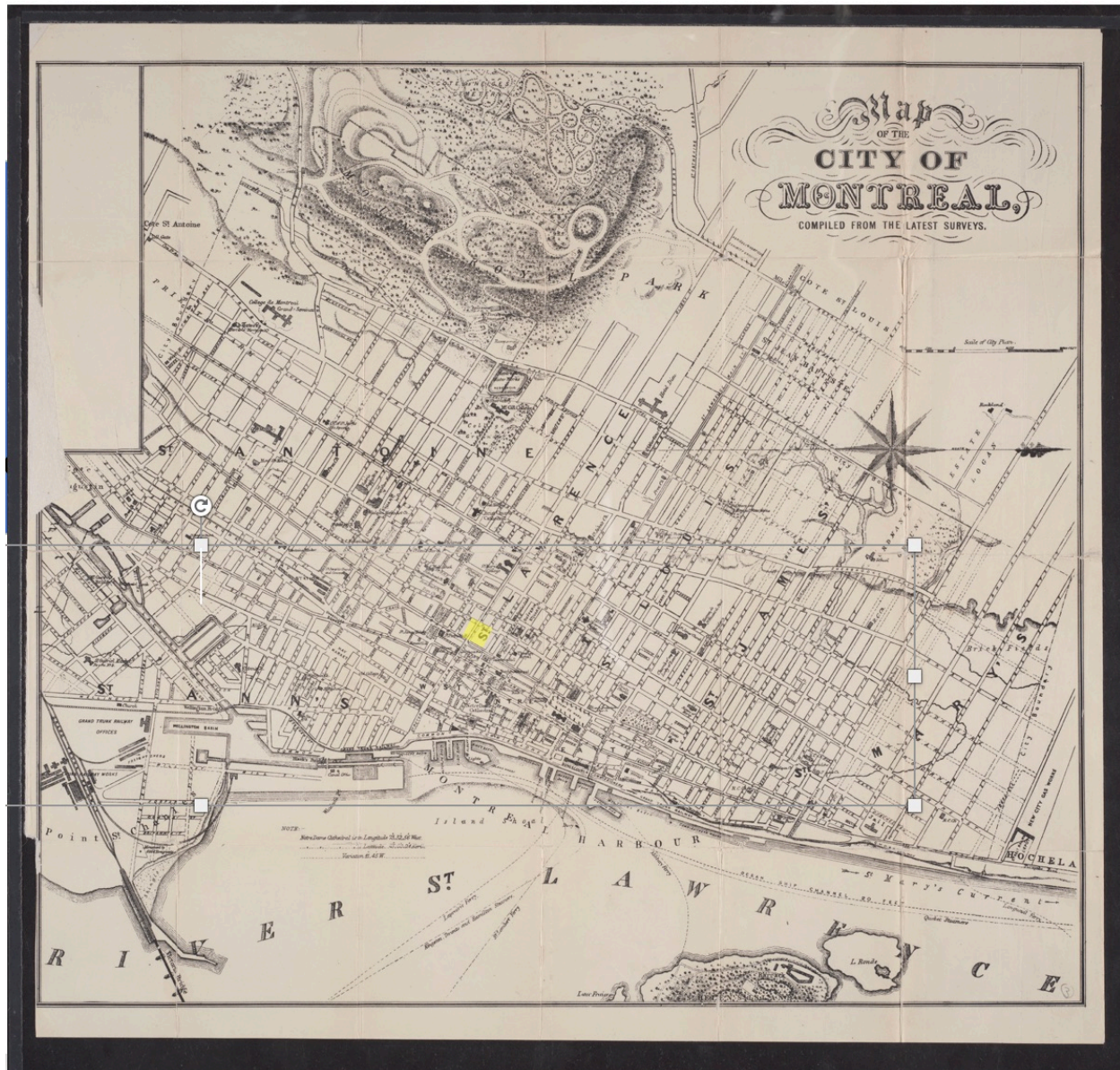
Plate List

Fig 1: Samuel Edward Dawson, <u>Map of the city of Montreal: compiled from the latest surveys (1888)</u>, Map, 49 x 54 cm, McGill University Library, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Fig. 2: Atwater Library: History and Archives, Sketch of Mechanics' Institute of Montreal,1828 (2009), Paper and Pencil, Atwater Library and Computer Centre, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Fig. 3: Jane O'Brien Davis, Atwater Library and Computer Centre, 2020, (2020), Photography, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.