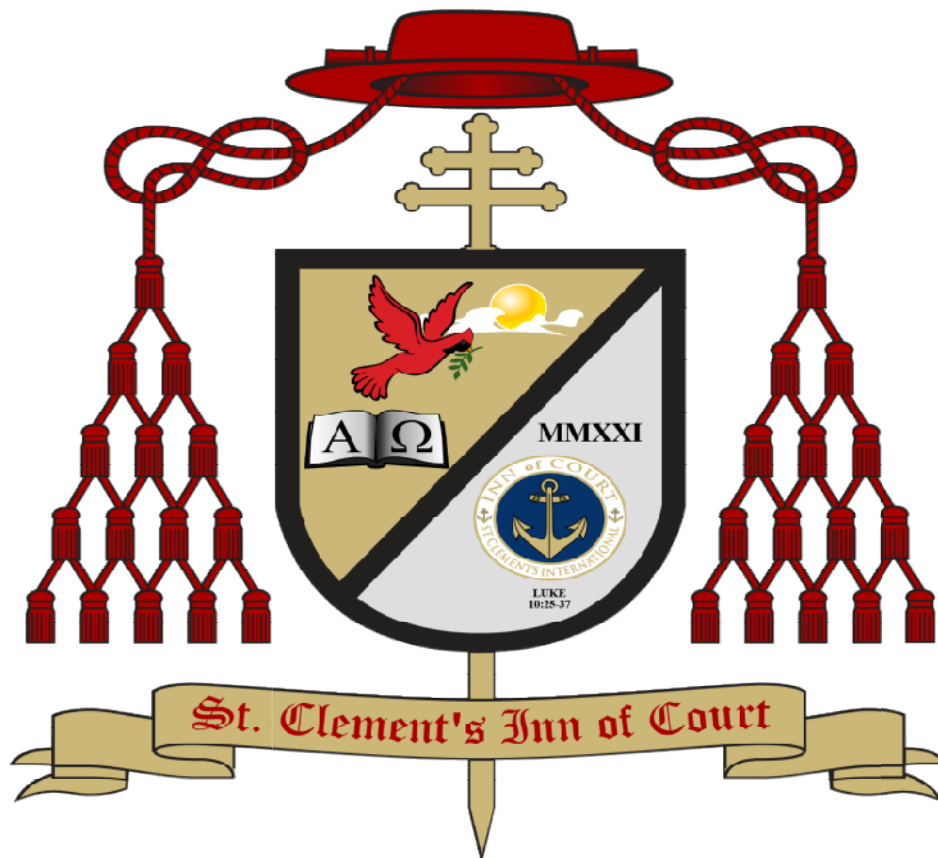


ST. CLEMENT'S INN OF COURT INTERNATIONAL



On the Founding of the William Wilberforce International Human Rights Law Centre

By

Roderick O. Ford, Litt.D.

ON THE FOUNDING OF THE WILLIAM WILBERFORCE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW CENTRE

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† To the President of St. Clements University, St. Clements University, and to its Faculty and Staff; to my fellow American Clergymen; to my fellow Members of the American Bar; to our new friends within the American Inns of Court:

Greetings to you and Happy New Year!

INTRODUCTION

This letter memorializes the history and purpose of our founding of the William Wilberforce International Human Rights Law Centre. It is therefore largely a personal reflection of the undersigned author. It is thus largely the story of an African American kid growing up in rural northern Florida (United States) who tried to unravel the mystery of race relations in the United States, the Western Hemisphere, Europe and Africa. This search led him to the erudite writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, during the late 1980s, particularly to Du Bois' doctoral thesis, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America 1638-1870*, which began as follows:

¹ Roderick O Ford is an American lawyer. He holds the Doctor of Letters degree (Christian Theology—Law and Religion, '16) from St. Clements University.

This monograph was begun during my residence as a Rogers Memorial Fellow at Harvard University.... The question of the suppression of the slave-trade is so intimately connected with the questions as to its rise, the system of American slavery, and the whole colonial policy of the eighteenth century, that it is difficult to isolate it, and at the same time to avoid superficiality on the one hand, and unscientific narrowness of view on the other. While I could not hope entirely to overcome such difficulty, I nevertheless trust that I have succeeded in rendering this monograph a small contribution to the scientific study of slavery and the American Negro

I desire to express my obligation to Dr. Albert Bushnell Hart, of Harvard University, at whose suggestion I began this work and by whose kind aid and encouragement I have brought it to a close; also I have to thank the trustees of the John F. Slater Fund, whose appointment made it possible to test the conclusions of this study by the general principles laid down in German universities.

W. E. BURGHARDT Du BOIS

Wilberforce University,
March 1896

It should be noted here that, during this period when I was researching and writing my undergraduate history thesis paper, titled “The Philosophies and Times of W.E.B. Du Bois,” when I learned that Dr. Du Bois’ first teaching assignment was at Wilberforce University in Ohio (U.S.A), which is a historically-black college (HBCU) founded by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1856, and named in honor of the great British Member of Parliament William Wilberforce.

While at Wilberforce University, Du Bois met Rev. Alexander Crummell, who became in 1853 the first person of African descent to earn a college degree from Cambridge University. Indeed, it was there at Wilberforce University that the father Pan-Africanism (Rev. Crummell) would influence the greatest Pan-African scholar of the twentieth-century (Dr. Du Bois). Several years later, I learned of the contributions of William Wilberforce as being an international hero of human rights and staunch opponent of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. I began to take note that Wilberforce was highly honored in the African American community, as previously noted. And I began to note the symbolic significance of the name “Wilberforce” which several towns, schools, and parks had been named after.

But what impressed me the most was Wilberforce’s own Christian faith and his willingness to associate with grass-roots Christian Evangelicals, Anglicans, Quakers, and others, in order to help form the political coalitions that were necessary and that enabled him, as a Member of Parliament, to push for the successful abolition

of the British transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833. I thus reasoned that the national and international problems which plague us today (e.g., inequality, tribalism, and racism) will require the same combination of forces—i.e., Wilberforce’s fidelity to the Christian faith and zealous legal or public-policy advocacy—to effectuate positive change. I also reasoned that a new legal society (e.g., an “inn of court”) should be established in order to bring like-minded Christian lawyers and judges together under one umbrella, guided and inspired by Wilberforce’s ideas and example. Today, I am pleased to report to you that the Wikipedia article on “William Wilberforce” now memorializes our work as having founded the William Wilberforce International Human Rights Law Centre:

Memorials

Wilberforce's life and work have been widely commemorated. In Westminster Abbey, a seated statue of Wilberforce by Samuel Joseph was erected in 1840, bearing an epitaph praising his Christian character and his long labour to abolish the slave trade and slavery itself.

In Wilberforce's home town of Hull, a public subscription in 1834 funded the Wilberforce Monument, a 31-metre (102 ft) Greek Doric column topped by a statue of Wilberforce, which now stands in the grounds of Hull College near Queen's Gardens. Wilberforce's birthplace was acquired by the city corporation in 1903 and, following renovation, Wilberforce House in Hull was opened as Britain's first slavery museum. Wilberforce Memorial School for the Blind in York was established in 1833 in his honour, and in 2006 the University of Hull established the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation in Oriel Chambers, a building adjoining Wilberforce's birthplace. Various churches within the Anglican Communion commemorate Wilberforce in their liturgical calendars, and Wilberforce University in Ohio, United States, founded in 1856, is named after him. The university was the first owned by African-American people, and is a historically black college. In Ontario, Canada, Wilberforce Colony was founded by black reformers, and inhabited by free slaves from the United States. **In 2019, St. Clements University, which is registered in the Turks and Caicos Islands (British West Indies), founded the William Wilberforce International Human Rights Law Centre.**

Amazing Grace, a film about Wilberforce and the struggle against the slave trade, directed by Michael Apted and starring Ioan Gruffudd and Benedict Cumberbatch was released in 2007 to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Parliament's anti-slave trade legislation.²

² See, “Memorials” at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wilberforce

Hence, the world now knows that St. Clements University, through the noble work of our St. Clement's Inn of Court, is affiliated with the great name of William Wilberforce.

I. Summary of the Life and Times of William Wilberforce

Turning to the extraordinary life and work of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759 to a very well-to-do family in Eastring, Yorkshire, England. (In 1777, when his uncle and grandfather died, he became independently wealthy.) In 1776, at age 17, Wilberforce entered St. John's College, Cambridge. Wilberforce earned a B.A. degree from Cambridge in 1781 and the M.A. degree in 1788.

While in college, Wilberforce met William Pitt, a future Prime Minister and Wilberforce's life-long friend. Pitt and Wilberforce frequently visited Parliament to watch debates and committed to each other help in getting elected a Member of Parliament. In 1780, at age 21 and while still a student, Wilberforce was elected an M.P for Kingston upon Hull as an "independent." In other words, Wilberforce was neither a Tory or a Whig.

In 1783, Pitt became England's Prime Minister, and about this time the movement to abolish the slave trade was launched and gained momentum.

By 1783, the triangular route that took British-made goods to Africa to buy slaves, transported the enslaved to the West Indies, and then brought slave-grown products such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton to Britain, represented about 80 percent of Great Britain's foreign income. British ships dominated the slave trade, supplying French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and British colonies, and in peak years carried forty thousand enslaved men, women and children across the Atlantic in the horrific conditions of the middle passage. Of the estimated 11 million Africans transported into slavery, about 1.4 million died during the voyage. The British campaign to abolish the slave trade is generally considered to have begun in the 1780s with the establishment of the Quakers' anti-slavery committees, and their presentation to Parliament of the first slave trade petition in 1783.³

³ Ibid.

In 1785, while on a trip through Europe, Wilberforce read a book called *The Rise and Progress of Religion*, written by the non-conformist Phillip Doddridge. Wilberforce suddenly felt a sort of “evangelical” conversion. “He started to rise early to read the Bible and pray and kept a private journal. He underwent an evangelical conversion, regretting his past life and resolving to commit his future life and work to the service of God.”⁴ Somewhat reserved, and a little ashamed, Wilberforce wondered whether he should exit public life altogether, and resign from Parliament. During that time, the Methodists and the “enthusiasts” were frowned upon in the Church of England and among British high-society. Therefore, Wilberforce turned to Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary’s, and sought advice on whether or not to exit public life. He also sought advice from the Prime Minister William Pitt. But both Pitt and Newton encouraged Wilberforce to remain in public life.

Wilberforce’s conversion to Christ could not have come at a better moment in history. For at about the time of Wilberforce’s conversion, consultations with Pitt and Newton, and decision to remain in public life, a grass-roots Christian group known as the “Testonites” sought to petition Parliament for a bill to abolish the slave trade. In 1786, A few members of that group—including Sir Charles and Lady Middleton—reached out to Wilberforce, and implored him to take up the cause of abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. This caused Wilberforce to begin to study the situation.

Wilberforce's involvement in the abolition movement was **motivated by a desire to put his Christian principles into action and to serve God in public life**. He and other evangelicals were horrified by what they perceived was **a depraved and un-Christian trade, and the greed and avarice of the owners and traders**. Wilberforce sensed a call from God, writing in a journal entry in 1787 that **"God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners [moral values]"**. The conspicuous involvement of evangelicals in the highly popular anti-slavery movement served to improve the status of a group otherwise associated with the less **popular campaigns against vice and immorality**.⁵

In 1787, Wilberforce met an Anglican clergyman named Thomas Clarkson, who was a zealous human rights advocate and abolitionist. Rev. Clarkson has collected a voluminous amount of data. “Clarkson began to visit Wilberforce on a weekly basis,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

bringing first-hand evidence he had obtained about the slave trade.”⁶ On March 13, 1787, at a dinner organized by Bennet Langston, which included several other Members of Parliament and British high-society, Wilberforce was formally enlisted to take up the cause of the abolition of the slave-trade in Parliament. On May 12, 1787, Prime Minister Pitt encouraged Wilberforce to move as expeditiously as possible. And, in 1787, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade also encouraged Wilberforce to present an abolition bill before Parliament.

In May 12, 1789, Wilberforce gave his first major speech against the transatlantic slave trade, relying heavily upon Rev. Clarkson’s evidence. From between 1789 to 1795, Wilberforce presented three abolition bills, in 1791, 1792, and 1793, respectively, and all three were defeated. By 1795, the Revolt in Haiti had so alarmed the British West Indian slave power, that a conservative and reactionary shift against humanitarian aid nullified Wilberforce’s efforts. The “Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade” ceased to exist. Rev. Clarkson was driven underground and had ceased to carry out his former public advocacy. From between 1796 and 1800, the abolition movement in England seemed timid or non-existent.

In 1805, Wilberforce managed to get his Abolition Bill passed in the House of Commons, but the House of Lords voted it down during that same year. Significantly, during the next year, in 1806, an English maritime lawyer named James Stephen introduced a new and novel idea— he recommended that the abolitionists first attack the slave-trade going to French colonies, by making it illegal for any British citizen to participate in such a trade. During that period, England was at war with Napoleon and France! This new resolution quickly passed in the House of Commons, and on May 23, 1806, the House of Lords enacted, with Royal approval, the Foreign Slave Trade Bill. Although this bill did not affect British slavers roaming the Atlantic, it did, at least, lay an important precedent leading to the ultimate abolition of the transatlantic slave-trade. Almost a year later, Parliament finally outlawed the slave trade, passing Wilberforce’s Abolition Bill, on February 23, 1807. With tears streaming down his face, Wilberforce was given cheers and standing ovation in the House of Parliament. The Slave Trade Act received royal assent on March 25, 1807.

Although the 1807 Act prohibited the slave-trade, the institution of slavery remained, and Wilberforce was called upon to work towards the abolition of African slavery throughout the British Empire. Wilberforce continued to work for the abolition of slavery until his death on July 29, 1834. On the next month, Parliament

⁶ Ibid.

enacted the “Slavery Abolition Act 1833” on August 28, 1834.

II. Co-Founding of the William Wilberforce International Human Rights Law Centre

As you are well aware, the William Wilberforce International Human Rights Law Centre was co-founded by *St. Clements University* and the *St. Clement’s Inn of Court* in order to provide an international professional certification forum and continuing education centre primarily for lawyers, judges, and human rights advocates around the world. Our Law Centre is a place for global professional networking between like-minded lawyers, judges, clergymen, and human rights advocates from around the world. At our Law Centre’s founding, it has provided the following professional programmes: the *Diplomate in International Human Rights Law*; the *Master of Arts in Theology and Human Rights*; and the *Doctor of Letters (International Human Rights Law (or) Law and Religion)*, a post-doctoral award.

But I think that it is important for the world to know that our Law Centre was founded to honor the life and work of William Wilberforce, and for us to present Wilberforce’s life and work as an example of the sort of people we hope to attract to our Law Centre. For by selecting the name “Wilberforce,” our Law Centre has committed itself to redressing the perennial wrongs that are today being perpetuated against the voiceless, the powerless, the despised, and the disenfranchised. And, finally, we want the world to know that by selecting the name “Wilberforce,” our Law Centre honors not only William Wilberforce—a great man and a great Member of Parliament—but we also honor our Lord and Savior, the Prince of Peace.

Yours Faithfully,

Roderick O. Ford

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[This is a draft copy. Therefore, please excuse any grammatical errors.]



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