

Alexander Ernst: 2021 Research Award Entry Essay

Reflection upon my Research Strategies

I wrote my research paper on John Andrew Jackson, a man who escaped slavery in the early-to-middle nineteenth century. The plantation he escaped from was once owned by my fifth great-grandparents, which is what initially drew me to this subject. The book Jackson wrote about his experience—which was introduced to me via a family member—was the source I drew from the most during my research. Using it as a starting point I explored whatever subject drew my eye. When I decided on the final focus for my paper, namely, the connection Jackson had to Harriet Beecher Stowe and the influence he may have had on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I narrowed my research to the relevant subjects. From Jackson's life and a wide range of connected subjects, I focused on his life, his interaction with Stowe, and the historical impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

My research into *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and later by extension the Civil War, was primarily through the Wyndham Robertson Library. While there was a wealth of information relating to those subjects, one of the main challenges I faced was finding information about Jackson. Little has been written about him; I was only able to find a small handful of articles that mentioned or focused on him. This prompted me to turn my attention to events and people around him, the context of what I knew of Jackson's life, rather than trying to find information about him specifically. In finding that context I was able to focus in on my subject.

I chose to write about the subject I did because it interested me—and writing is, generally, easier when you care about the subject. I chose or set aside articles and other sources based on a million different reasons, some based in logic or experience, a handful based on intuition. With avenues of research I did the same, balancing the time I had to research new ideas with further study into the resources I already had. I made the choices that resulted in my final work because they seemed to be

the best course of action at the time. I made them, the good and the bad, by choosing the best course of action I could see.