

Gregory Wigmore
2008 UELAC Loyalist Scholarship Award Recipient



In 2008, the UELAC Loyalist Scholarship committee was pleased to award a UELAC Scholarship to a second well-deserving candidate, Gregory Wigmore. Born in Welland, Ontario, Gregory graduated from Carleton University in 2002, receiving a BA with combined highest honours in Journalism and History. He worked briefly as a historical researcher for the federal government's Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution. In 2003, he began graduate studies in the history of early North America, receiving his MA in History, University of California, Davis (2005).

From 2007 – 2008, Gregory was a Fellow of the David Library of the American Revolution. As a PhD candidate in 2008, Gregory conducted his research at University of California, Davis under the supervision of Dr. Alan Taylor, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of Early America and Upper Canada. His dissertation entitled "The Limits of Empire: Allegiance, Opportunity, and Imperial Rivalry in

the Detroit River Borderland" examined the emergence of the Canadian-American border during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In February of 2009, Gregory Wigmore presented "Flags of Convenience: Patronage, Entitlement, and Loyalism on the Edge of Empire" at the UC Davis Interdisciplinary Symposium of the Western Canadian Studies Association (WCSA) – Canadian Studies: On the Edge.

The Riddell Award from the Ontario Historical Society for the best article on Ontario's history published in 2011 was awarded to Gregory Wigmore for his article "Before the Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom in the Canadian-American Borderland," published in the Journal of American History (September 2011).

An excerpt from the OHS citation reads:

"Wigmore adds a new and compelling chapter to the little known history of slavery and freedom in the years before the War of 1812, by examining the borderland straddling the Detroit River. He shows how authorities on both sides of the line came to attach meaning to the international boundary. Wigmore tells this story with clarity and precision. The article is based on extensive research in primary and secondary sources and includes several references to the work of William Renwick Riddell, after whom this award is named. Moreover, Wigmore brilliantly connects his local study of slavery and freedom to cutting-edge research questions concerned with borderlands, boundaries, and sovereignty."

On 21 October 2013 the National Post published a commentary written by Dr. Gregory Wigmore. Using the example of Matthew Elliott, a Loyalist refugee and British Indian agent, Wigmore examined the Canadian slave trade of the early 1800s.

While working as a lecturer in the Department of History at Santa Clara University, Dr. Wigmore was awarded a one week 2014 Filson Fellowship from The Filson Historical Society, Kentucky's oldest privately supported historical society (1884). Gregory received the Howard H. Peckham Fellowship on Revolutionary America, a 2014 Post-Doctoral Fellowship from The Clements Library, University of Michigan; and the Edward Hildebrand Graduate Fellowship, University of California, Berkeley (2014-2015). Currently, Dr. Gregory Wigmore is an Adjunct Lecturer at Santa Clara University, History Department, Santa Clara, CA.

Following is the thesis summary for – “The Limits of Empire: Allegiance, Opportunity and Imperial Rivalry in the Detroit River Borderland” by Gregory Wigmore.

This dissertation examines the emergence of the Canadian-American border during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Between the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the British Empire and the new American republic vied for the allegiance and cooperation of borderland inhabitants in order to achieve sovereignty over the Great Lakes region. During this period, the Detroit River valley served as a hub of transatlantic trading networks; as the vital centre of a web of Indian diplomacy stretching into the heart of the continent; as a theatre of hostilities during the wars for dominion over North America; and as a far-flung settlement in the British colonial and American territorial projects along the Great Lakes.

Three turbulent events compelled the inhabitants of the Detroit River region to demonstrate their allegiance and choose sides in the Anglo-American struggle over North America: the Revolutionary War, which threatened British Detroit; Britain's belated evacuation of Detroit in 1796 and its attempts to persuade loyal residents to resettle across the river in Upper Canada; and the War of 1812, during which control of the region changed hands several times.

This project examines the question of whether, and in what circumstances, local peoples identified themselves as a part of a larger entity, extending well beyond the banks of the Detroit River, or whether the rugged hardships of frontier life and pursuit of a livelihood rendered them indifferent to such lofty concepts as national identity. Examining the actions of local inhabitants during this period of Anglo-American competition, Greg's research reveals the fluid and complex nature of individual loyalties, which presented several challenges to British and American authorities.

Even the allegiances of renowned Loyalists and Indian agents such as Alexander McKee and Matthew Elliott proved less than clear-cut. Like several of their colleagues in the British Indian Department, McKee and Elliott developed close kinship ties to neighbouring First Nations. These relationships, and their own experience as refugees, enabled them to more readily identify with the plight of natives dispossessed by American expansion than did most of their fellow subjects and servants of the Crown. They worked toward a convergence British and native aims, seeking to assemble about a joint military force to resist American expansion, a goal often at odds with the aims of British officials overseas, who sought a rapprochement with their former colonies. They also joined local merchants, land speculators, soldiers, settlers, enslaved peoples and other civil servants in seeking to exploit unprecedented opportunities along the emerging border, in order to improve their own circumstances.

Some government officials viewed the actions of border peoples as opportunistic or disloyal. However, for many individuals, such aggressive behaviour proved essential, in order to provide for their families and get ahead on the margins of empire.