# The Promised land Freetown and the Book of Letters for 1196 Souls of the 15 Ships from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone in 1792

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*Pioneers…were dispatched on shore to clear, make roadway for their landing, which being done (on March 11, 1792) they all disembarked, and marched towards the thick forest, with the Holy Bible, and their preachers (who looked like them, black men) going before and singing the hymn, ”Awake, and sing the song”* This is from the written account of Reverend Anthony Elliott, as he witnessed it all as a boy of fifteen who arrived in one of 16 vessels (including one medical ship) on the shores of Sierra Leone. Historic accounts tell us they gathered under a big cotton tree they called Harmony hall, and there as Baptist, Huntingdon, Methodist and Anglican, held the first known interfaith thanksgiving service to bless, dedicate and name their promised land, Freetown.

The faith of those 1196 souls is alive and active in Sierra Leone today. The 230th celebration of the founding of Freetown was marked by the congregation from the churches founded in 1792 by the Nova Scotians. They are the Zion Methodist Church (formerly Zion Chapel) Wilberforce St, pastored today by a direct descendant of those pioneers; College Chapel (Rawdon St) and the Regent Road Baptist church. The Bishop of the current Huntingdon chapels across the interior towns of Sierra Leone spoke of the maiden role of Zion Huntingdon Chapel at the thanksgiving service.

During the celebration, the congregation learned of the history-making initiative of the students of Auburn High School, Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia to collect 1196 letters, one for each soul of our dearly departed ancestors. They named their initiative #1792 Project Book of Letters. Our ancestors were from the earliest African Canadian communities, approximately 3500 persons of African descent called Black Loyalists arriving in Eastern Canada after the American War of Independence in 1784. From among them 1196 braved the Atlantic Ocean crossing in 16 Ships to Africa. Rather than relive the pain of enslavement and become second class citizen in Canada, they chose an equal and free settlement in Sierra Leone in 1792.

It was fitting that selected letters from the # 1792 Project Book of Letters were read during the 230th Candlelight Vigil Ceremony on the grounds of St John’s Maroon Church. The church’s founders were the Jamaican maroons who had been exiled to Nova Scotia Canada from their hometown, Trelawny in the hills of Jamaica by the British. History tells us that they had resided in the community spaces in Nova Scotia left behind after those who departed in 1792. The maroons later also chose to come to Freetown and arrived here in September 1800. The #1792 Project Book of Letters is an important connection from the past to a collective future as people of and from Africa, living on the continent or in Atlantic Canada or the United States.

This connection starts with keeping alive the deeds and legacy of these great men and women of the 16 ships, and sharing our reflection on our common heritage here in West Africa and in Atlantic Canada, much like the students at Auburn Drive High School are doing.

Those 1196 Souls sailed the Atlantic on 16 vessels named: the Joy, the Felicity, the Beaver, the Somerset, the Par, the Eleanor, the Catherine, the Morning star, the Prince William Henry, The Venus, the Two brothers, the Prince Henry and the Sierra Leone. In the American war for independence, they were Black Loyalist who had done the civil works for the armies. In 1791 when they signed up in Nova Scotia for the Sierra Leone voyage, they were recorded as farmers, carpenters, sawyers, masons, blacksmiths, coopers, saddlers, barbers, tailors, shoemaker, weaver, and bakers. They lived in homes they had built with their hands and planted gardens where they could. They were also mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles in a community with preachers and teachers. They understood the agreement they were signing in expectation of a free settlement on the coast of Africa. It read;

*That every Free Black (upon producing such a Certificate) shall have a Grant of not less than Twenty Acres of Land for himself, Ten for his wife, and five for every child, upon such terms and subject to such changes and obligations, (with a view to the general prosperity of the Company) as shall hereafter be settled by the Company, in respect to the Grants of Lands to be made by them to all Settlers, whether black or white.*

*That for all stores, provisions, or, supplied from the Company's Warehouse, the company shall receive an equitable compensation, according to fixed rules, extending to blacks and whites indeterminately.*

*That the civil, military, personal, and commercial rights and duties of Blacks and Whites, shall be the same, and secured in the same manner*

No doubt, our ancestors had what it took to build and maintain their promised land. Freetown owes its distinct characteristics to what they established during their first 50 years of settlement (for example grid streets, 2-storey wooden framed homes with business space below, and churches with community schools).

The 16 ships carried people with determination, experiences, education, skills and the hope it would take to build the promised land and remain among the fellowship of the free in a time when enslavement was still rampant. Recorded stories of a few of them speaks to their collective aspirations and contributions and it is not far-fetched to think that each one of the 1196 letters that will be in the #1792 Book of Letters will echo those hopes and dreams in their descendants on either side of the Atlantic ocean. To share a few;

The work started by Cato Perkins in Nova Scotia and carried on by John Ellis, Anthony Elliott, Mary Ash and William Ash and trusteed to generations since, stands as the Historic Zion Methodist Church on Wilberforce Street, the oldest Church in Freetown.

The “Epistle of the Society of Sierra Leone” writings of and signed by David Edmond, George Carroll, John Gordon, Eli Aikim, John Ellis, and 10 other prominent Nova Scotians in 1811 in support of the Paul Cuffe’s trade agreement between Sierra Leone and the recently formed USA ,sits in the rare collection of United States Congress.

Mary Perth’s contribution to education began in Virginia as a preacher among the enslaved, continued in Freetown teaching young children, and unto being a caretaker of the first experimental school for Africans in London, the African Academy, Clapham.

The Petitions of Thomas Peters to the Governors of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the British Parliament and his last one to the British colony authorities in Freetown, just prior to his death, amounts to the life’s work of a civil advocate for his community. They produced change starting with the petition to have the British Parliament honor their US wartime promise of land grants and consent to support 16 ships to carry the 1196 Souls to the promised land in Freetown.

Methodism in Africa cannot be told without the work of Moses Wilkinson, Henry Beverhout, Violet King and Boston King, who founded another of the oldest church in Freetown that has grown to become College Chapel on Rawdon street.

David George is a recorded legendary in the formation of the Baptist Churches in the US and Canada. The Regent Road Baptist church, his last Church, seats on the land beside the creek he baptized his congregation in Freetown.

Nathaniel Wansey, gave the full measure to their cause of a promised land free from “masters” and with a constitution giving the settlers self-determination. After the constitution was ratified, he led the fateful charge in September 1800 to undo the last remaining stronghold by the British in the newly formed colony.

The #1792 Project led to a twin proclamation. The Halifax Municipality proclamation to recognize the 230th year anniversary of the Exodus, on January 15, the anniversary of the day the 16 ships first left Halifax for Sierra Leone. The Freetown Municipality proclamation to recognize the arrival of the Ships and all of its founding passengers disembarking to establish Freetown on March 11.

Canadian author James Walker in his book “The Black loyalist; the search for a promised land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783-1870” tells us that at the 70th anniversary (1862) there were only 22 of our founding ancestors remaining. At the 78th anniversary celebration held at the Zion Chapel (Wilberforce St) there were only 5 women, aged 81 -88, the final survivors from the 16 ships. The Sierra Leonean Historian A. B. C Sibthorpe wrote in the Artisans Newspaper of February 25, 1885, a eulogy to the Nova Scotian settlers, thanking them for their founding contribution to a new and thriving culture and lifestyles trends that defined Freetown. He lamented that…” in a few years, not one of their race will remain and their name will be forgotten.” Gladly that has not been the case, and so 230 years later the Auburn Drive High School students have added their contribution to keeping our ancestors’ memory alive.

It will be fitting, that when the #1792 Book of Letters is compiled, the Auburn Drive High school students of Nova Scotia, would take it on a visit to the Zion Methodist Church in Freetown during a future Anniversary Celebration. The reading of the letters and the responses they will evoke at such a celebration would serve as a remembrance to our collective ancestors who sailed across the vast waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The #1792 Book of Letters will have become a bridge across these same waters more than two hundred years later, a new and lasting legacy of the shared history between Canada and Sierra Leone.

*Adrian Labor, Barbara Morgan and Akindele Decker are the curators at the* [*https://Africancurator.com*](https://Africancurator.com)*; We are direct descendants of David Edmonds, Anthony Elliott, and George Carrol families, all who arrived among the 1196 settlers in 1792. We are curating our story from our perspective as descendants of the settler families,* [*our churches communities*](http://zionfreetown230.com) *and* [*history of the Freetown.*](https://historicfreetown.com) *We salute the students at Auburn High on their curation* [*of #1792 Book letters Projects*](https://abn.hrce.ca/abn/general-information/1792-project) *around our collective story.*