

The role of freed slaves in establishing the Sierra Leone settlement in the eighteenth century

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Abstract:

The abolitionist movement, was an activity that aimed to end slave trade, it appeared in England during the eighteenth century, was a major topic for the public and it was supported by Protestant religious figures and even human rights associations that worked to undermine and end this trade, and many petitions and protests that complained and opposed the existence of this slavery were submitted to the relevant authorities. This prolonged struggle in England culminated in the liberation of slaves and the prevention of this brutal trade in the English lands that had prevailed for hundreds of years, and this came after the decision of "Judge Mansfield" in 1772 to liberate a black slave named "Somerset".

With the rise of the American independence revolution against England, which lasted from 1775 until the peace conference was held in Paris in 1783, Britain announced that all black slaves who had fought with her during this war against America after the decree of 1775, and despite the defeat were free and no longer a property of their former masters.

Resolution 1772 led to the emancipation of slaves in England, and also attracted other slaves from other countries to come seek their freedom in England. Their number increased remarkably with the arrival of loyal blacks after 1783, and together they formed a group of miserable and poor people scattered in the English streets and ports, begging for living as most of them were unemployed, had no craftsmanship or workmanship, which created a panic among the population and a social crisis for the government, but with the intervention of some philanthropists who provided them with food-aid, that later turned to the creation of a committee of their own for relief and this latter worked with the government to find a permanent solution by moving them to another place in Africa, specifically in Sierra Leone, in order to form a settlement to them.

Keywords:

Slaves; Loyalists; Granville Sharp; Henry Smeathman; Sierra Leone.

1. Introduction

In the second half of eighteenth century, England knew an operation of liberating black slaves that led a lots of them to escape to Britain, most of them from the American continent, seeking their freedom. This caused overcrowding and congestion in the streets of England and spread of fear among the population also resulted a social and economic crisis of the government and they scattered all over the country and even formed their own areas. This situation necessitated the intervention of some people with potential in charitable activity and even the government in order to get out of this predicament.

In this article, I will try to answer the following questions:

How did they liberate these slaves? And what were the results of their liberation on England? What was the solution that the English found to get rid of these slaves?

1. Slaves Emancipation:

2.1 Somerset's case:

James Somerset was taken from Africa to America as a slave in 1749. He was sold in Virginia to "Charles Steuart", a Scottish merchant and slave trader in "Norfolk," who served after 1765 as a high ranking British customs officials. In 1769, Steuart took Somerset with him to England , Somerset escaped from steuart, but was recaptured. Steuart decided to sell Somerset back into slavery in Jamaica, and in late November 1771, Somerset was bound in chains on a ship " Ann and Marry" on the "Thames", awaiting shipment.¹

Fortunately for "Somerset",² "Granville sharp"³ a leader of slavery abolitionist network that existed in London, who heard about him by some people⁴. Granville Sharp brought him into court before Lord Mansfield,⁵ chief Justice of King's Bench in January 1772,⁶ and on June 22nd of the same year a judgment was released to free "Someset"⁷ and also stated that any slave who sets foot in England would become free and could not be carried back to slavery.⁸

This judgment set free between 14000 and 15000 men at once in England, and they became homeless: suffering from cold and hunger in the streets of the monopolists, many of them became beggars, and others were involved in the crime prevalent in the poorer areas of the city.⁹

2.2- Lord Dunmore's proclamation:

As an armed conflict between England and her American colonies began to appear inevitable in 1775, the attention in some British quarters turned toward the half million American slaves hands who could recruited as invaluable allies within the enemy camp, or even accepting them as soldiers, but it was met with resistance from senior British strategists.¹⁰

For this war, Lord Dunmore¹¹ a British's governor in Virginia declared in November 1775 his proclamation that all intended servants and negroes were able and willing to bear arms in supporting Britain will have their freedom in return.¹²

This promise of freedom led the British Army to attract tens of thousands of black recruit² who took every opportunity to leave their masters, in hope of finding a happy asylum under the protection of the British Army.¹³

At the end of the war, because of their fidelity and bravery, the English nation was determined to an enormous expense in transporting them and their families from the American provinces to Canada.¹⁴ Black Loyalists in particular flocked to Canada by thousands. Nova Scotia received the majority of British Loyalist refugees in North America in the years after the war. Population surveys conducted in 1784 found that Nova Scotia had gained over 28,000 new inhabitants, which was double the number of settlers who had lived there before the war. By the end of the Loyalist migration, about 30,000 refugees had arrived in Nova Scotia. They estimated 3,000 free Blacks, as well as 1,200 slaves brought over by their Loyalist masters. In July 1783, a town was founded near "Port Roseway" as a settlement for Loyalist refugees. This town was named "Shelborne", and by the end of the same year it already had almost 8,000 settlers. During this influx of refugees, Nova Scotia Governor John Parr decided that Black Loyalists should have a separate settlement nearby, rather than residing within "Shelborne". This neighboring settlement was named "Birchtown", after the general who had signed certificates of freedom for the Black Loyalists in New York. By January 1784, "Birchtown" had become a parallel Loyalist town that was home to 1,485 free Blacks, making it one of North America's biggest Black settlements. Also, another major destination for black loyalists after the war's end was Great Britain. This would seem an obvious choice and many loyalists viewed Britain as a refuge, or even home, and it was estimated up to five thousands black loyalists immigrated to Britain, the majority of them male and former soldiers. Those who were lucky (or unlucky) enough to survive in the war, they were struggling to make a living in England, and it soon became common to see black veterans begging for food in the streets of London.¹⁵

3. Transporting the black poor to Sierra Leone:

3.1 The Sierra Leone geographical site:

Sierra Leone is situated on the western coast of Africa. It shares Borders with two countries: Guinea to the north and east, and Liberia to the South. Its western border is a 210 mile (340KM) coastline on the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁶ Lying between latitude 3 and 10 degrees north, and between longitudes 10, 5 and 13, 5 degrees west.¹⁷

Sierra Leone roughly circular in shape and covers approximately 27,900 square miles (71,749 squares KM). Its name, given by Portuguese explorers in the 15th century, means "Lion Mountain". Its territory include several offshore islands, Including, Sherbro, Banana, and Buance.¹⁸

3.2 The Committee for the relief of the black poor:

Poverty was noted as the most characteristic feature of Britain's blacks by observers and collectively they became known as the "Black Poor". The plight of indigent black poor in London became a matter of public on January 5th, 1786, when the "Public Advertiser" reported that a gentleman, named "Jonas Hanway"¹⁹ had authorized a baker in the city to give out quarter loaves of bread to every black in distress. That same gentleman was taking subscription to assist this purpose. Five days later he met men at a coffeehouse with several other gentlemen, all prominent men and know philanthropists, including the chairman and a director of the bank of England²⁰ to form the committee for the relief of the black poor.²¹

By April 1786, the committee of the relief of Black poor had raised close to nine hundred pounds , and hired a room in the "White Raven" in "Mile End" and another at the "YorkShire Stingo" on "Lisson Green" in "Marylebone", which they kept open for several hours each day to distribute relief.²²

As news of the committee of the relief of the black poor spread, the number of needy attending at the White Raven and the "YorkShire Stingo" rose dramatically. It soon became apparent that short-term relief was no answer to the entrenched problem of poverty among London's black community; the fundamental cause was chronic unemployment.²³

In the meantime, a proposal for a settlement in west coast Africa , exactly in Sierra Leone came to the committee, through the good offices of "Granville Sharp", who introduced the mercurial botanist "Henry Smeathman",²⁴ who lived in Africa for four years, where he had dreamed of the possibilities of an agricultural settlement on the sierra Leone river to produce export crops for Atlantic Markets.²⁵

After obtaining the approval of the Committee, "Smeathman" formally presented his proposals to the Treasury in a document dated 17 May. On May 24th, the Treasury submitted Smeathman's plan to Navy Commissioners for their opinion (perhaps particularly on Smeathman's estimates for provisions), and they replied the same day with an agreement, and accepted to provide him with money for his plan.²⁶

3.3 Preparations:

Smeathman's proposal was quickly approved by the committee as well as the British Treasury, which agreed to allot him 14 pounds for each black, in order to encourage them to migrate to Sierra Leone, and this amount of money is condition to the blacks in exchange of going to Sierra Leone.²⁷

The government agreed to provide these blacks with supplies and provide them with all the necessities for a period of three months after their disembarkation,²⁸ while providing them with: 400 firearms, a quantity of gunpowder and bullets, along with sending more than 25 professionals in order to help them establish this settlement, especially in the agricultural and health field, including four doctors, farmers, gardeners and a specialist in plants, trees and seeds. There were also some craftsmen, such as blacksmiths, weapons makers, land surveyors, builders, carpenters, engineers, tanners, weavers, linen makers, and baker, as "Sharp" suggested establishing schools on board ships to teach them how to read and write, and showed the committee a great importance for setting up a church by sending a person who takes care of them and rings the bells called "William Gray", and there were even a group of craftsmen took their families.²⁹

Also The committee suggested in May that blacks should be divided into groups of 12 to 24 people, where each group is chaired by a corporal, and at a meeting on June 7th, 1786, it chose 8 of the most qualified corporations among these blacks,³⁰ and three positions were created to conduct and organize the campaign during the trip and shortly after: there were the fleet captain who was appointed captain "Thomas Boulden Thompson"³¹ and was in January 1787 and he had an experience in the field, and the supervisor had been selected "Joseph Irwin"³² by blacks, and finally the delegate that was chosen by The board of directors of the navy was appointed "Gustavus Vassa"³³ on December 4th, 1786 and is responsible for warehouses and supplies.³⁴

Also, three ships: "Atlantic", "Belisarius" and "Vernon", were hired to transport the blacks. It was announced that Vernon would start its journey later than the other ships in order to take the blacks who wished to join the project,³⁵ as well. The government stated that this small fleet would be escorted by a warship called "Nautilus" and would be under the command of "Thomas Boldan Thompson" in

order to defend and guard these settlers while staying there in Sierra Leone for the longest time, and it was prepared on January 6th, 1787.³⁶

The request of the blacks was also accepted on October 6th, 1786, by providing them with stamped certificates by the king, and the website below indicates that they are free and are considered British subjects and are in an armored box.³⁷

3.4 The departure and the foundation of sierra leone:

Commander "Thomas Baldon Thompson" waited for the fair winds before departure as he inquired about the agreement with local leaders about the plot.³⁸ The response from "Lord Sydney"³⁹ was that if he did not reach an agreement he would have to search for another place and when he became aware of this decision he immediately took off on February 23rd, 1787, but unfortunately during the departure of the warship "Nautilus" from the canal "Spidthead", the ship hit the sandbank, also the fleet did not sail too far from the canal until it was struck by the storm, which led to the separation of the ships on February 27th, as "Vernon" lost its fore topmast and some of Nautilus's stocks were destroyed after falling to the sea, the "Atlantic" and "Belisarius" ships were ordered to be placed at "Plymouth Harbor", on 1 March Thomas went to the "Torbay region" and found "Vernon" there and initiated repairs and carpenters from that area were instructed and a priest to make a new fore topmast for the "Vernon", but Because of the persistence of the hurricane, repairs were stalled, and on March 9th, the ships "Nautilus" and "Vernon" sailed to "Plymouth", but with the severe hurricane they returned to "Torbay" and on March 15th, they sailed again, and on March 18th, almost a month after sailing, the ships returned to "Plymouth".⁴⁰

"Thomas Boldan Thompson" made preparations again for Africa, and he and "Irwin" appeared to inspect and verify stock and order to speed up the repair process. He also provided himself with the supply of ships from "Plymouth" stores and requested to maintain sufficient stock for six months. Within nine days, "Vernon" and "Atlantic" were shipped with more than 9,000 lb. of bread, 2240 4-lb. pieces of pork and similar quantities of other types of supplies carried on "Vernon" and "Atlantic". Also ordered a supply of dried fruit in the form of raisins and currants, in addition to 5020 lb. of suet were accordingly put on "Vernon", and the next day after loading the ships moved into the sailing site. On April 9th, 1787 at half past one, the small fleet sailed to Sierra Leone and has 411 black people on board.⁴¹

After a passage of just over 4 weeks,⁴² the British ships caught sight of land on May 5th, and five days later the grueling journey to Sierra Leone was finally over. The colonists landed in Frenchman's Bay, which they soon renamed St. George's Bay. Thomas B. Thompson," captain of the *Nautilus*, chose the place nearby where the settlement would be built. Thompson, Joseph Irwin, and Patrick Fraser (the missionary) officially bought the land on June 11 from⁴³ King Tom⁴⁴, a local Temne chief after⁴⁵ an agreement was signed for £59 12s 5d worth of trade goods including 130 gallons of rum, 25 iron bars, 2 dozen lace hats, muskets, powder, shot, cotton goods, tobacco and beads. The settlers cut their way into the bush, renamed the bay St George's bay, and the hill St George's hill, raised the British Flag.⁴⁶

By the terms of the treaty, Tom promised that he "forever quit claim to a certain district of land for the settling of the said free community to be theirs, their Heirs and successors forever". The district involved was of considerable extent , stretching eastwards from the settlement several miles along the River Sierra Leone as far as Gambia Island, " and southerly or inland twenty miles". Frenchman's Bay was renamed after the patron saint of England, as St.George bay, and Tom promised, on behalf of himself and his successors, that:" I will bear true allegiance to his Most Gracious Majesty King George the Third,...and protect the said free settlers his subjects to the utmost of my power against the insurrections and attacks of all Nations and people whatever".⁴⁷

4. CONCLUSION:

Finally, I concluded that:

The freed slaves during the eighteenth century are not, as some have claimed, the result of the efforts of religious people to liberate them, but also the result of a military strategy, it means that they used them as a military means to win the war in exchange for giving them freedom

Also, in fact the British government was really aiming not to help black people but to cleanse England of generating undesirable elements, and also to use them as a way to create an agricultural colony that would replace its colonies in America that were lost.

The foundation of Sierra Leone was not only a social movement that aimed to help black slaves, but it was a religious, economical and cultural movement intended to provide Britain with agricultural products, and spread Christianity and the English culture.

5.CITATIONS:

1 George Van Cleve, Somerset's case and its Antecedents in Imperial, Law and History Review, Vol 24, No 3, America Society for Legal, Fall 2006, p 601.

2 Ibid

3 Granville Sharp: an eminent English philanthropist, born in Durham 1734. He early distinguished himself by his earnest opposition to negro slavery, and published in 1769 "A Presentation of Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of tolerating Slavery in England". Granville Sharp was one of the originators of the Association for the Abolition of Negro Slavery, and took a prominent part in founding the colony of Sierra Leone. Died in 1813. **See:** Joseph Thomas, The Universal Dictionary of Biography and Mythology: Pro – Zyp, Cosimo. Inc, New York, 2010, p2008.

4 These people are abolitionists: Thomas Watkins, Elizabeth Cade, and John Marlow. **See:** Peter P. Hinks, Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition, Vol 2, Greenwood Publishing Group, USA, 2007, p 643

5 Lord Mansfield (William Murray): He was born in 1705 in Scotland. After his study, became a MP, Solicitor General and Attorney-General. In 1756 he was appointed Chief Justice of the Court of King's Bench. He died in 1793. **See:** Neil Andrews , Contract Law, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p 688.

6 John Joseph Crooks, A History of the Colony of Sierra Leone, Western Africa: With Maps and Appendices, Browne and Nolan. Limited, London, 1903, p 24.

7 Gretchen Gerzina, Black London Life before Emancipation, First Published, Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, 1995, p 129.

8 John Joseph Crooks, Ibid, p 24.

9 Stephen J. Braidwood, Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Black and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786-1791, First Published, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1994, pp20, 31.

10 James W. St. G. Walker, The Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of doctor of philosophy at Dalhousie University, 1974, pp1-2.

11 Lord Dunmore (John Murray): governor of the colony of New York , in 1769, afterwards, the last royal governor of Virginia, after committing many depredation upon the colonists, he returned to England, where he died in 1809. **See:** Charles N. Baldwin, A Universal Biographical Dictionary, New York , 1825, p167.

12 Julia Bibko, The American Revolution and the Black Loyalist Exodus, A Journal of Student Research, The College at Brockport, Vol. 1 , Article5, 12-2016, p59.

13 Julia Bibko, Ibid, pp59-60

14 Ibid, p135.

15 Black Loyalists soon realized that they could hardly rely on the British government for aid. In order to be compensated, claimants needed clear proof of their losses, evidence of their freedom, and most importantly, money. Therefore “the illiterate, the poor, and the poorly connected” were routinely marginalized within this system.³³ Only 47 Blacks successfully filed claims for pensions or property compensation from the British government. The result was that just one man was awarded money for his property losses, while three received meager annual allowances and twenty were given small sums that ranged from five to twenty pounds. In contrast, few White Loyalists were totally denied assistance, while the majority of Blacks received nothing. Allowances of even the poorest Whites tended to be higher than those for the wealthiest Blacks and Whites who were given direct compensation rarely collected fewer than twenty-five pounds. See: Julia Bibko, *Ibid*, p61-63.

16 Suzanne LeVert , Sierra Leone, Marshall Cavendish, New York, 2007, p7.

17 Patrick Puy-Denis , La Sierra Leone, Karthala Editions, Paris,1998, p15.

18 Suzanne LeVert , *Ibid*,p7.

19 Jonas Hanway: he was an English merchant, philanthropist, traveler, and author, born at Portsmouth 1712, died 1786. See: Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, Vol2, T. Tegg, London, 1840, p36

20 The Committee’s members included men of considerable standing in the world of finance, like “George Peters” was governor of the bank of England and “Thomas Boddington” a director,” John Julius Angerstein” a noted philanthropist and was also an art-collector whose pictures later formed the basis of the National Gallery. Over half of the Committee eighteen members were (or had been) bankers or merchants, and several of others were also boards of the public merchants(chiefly hospitals). General Robert Melville was an energetic supporter of charities in London and Scotland. The first chairman was Montagu Burgoyne, an unsuccessful Whig politician and advocate of the agricultural allotments system as a way of providing help to “laboring poor”of countryside. The other member were Benjamin Johnson, Jonas Hanway, James Pettit (or peter) Andrews, Joseph Andrews, Samuel Thornton, Henry Thornton, Samuel Hoare, Richard Shaw, F.Mathews, John Osborne, George Drakke. See: Stephen J. Braidwood, *Ibid*, pp 64-66.

21 Cassandra Pybus , *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty*, Beacon Press,Boston, 2006, p103.

22 *Ibid*,p 106.

23 *Ibid*,p 107.

24 Henry Smeathman (1742–1786) was a businessman and private tutor with a love of natural history. He therefore met other natural historians such as “Dru Drury”, “Daniel Solander”, “Joseph Banks” and “John Fothergil” who provided him with money to sponsor him to go to Sierra Leone to collect natural history specimens in 1771. He had most success collecting insects, which his sponsors used in their own collections and for selling. “Henry Smeathman” also hoped to collect duplicate sets to sell at a profit for himself. Dozens of Henry Smeathman’s specimens ended up in Dru Drury’s collecting cabinets and were illustrated in Drury’s three volumes of *Illustrations of Natural History* (1770–82). “Henry

Smeathman” lived and worked with Africans and had African assistance in excavating termite mounds. He acknowledged this in a paper to the Royal Society in 1781. “Henry Smeathman” stayed in Africa until 1775. Although he was initially against slavery, he took three African wives and, lived among African and European traders, became less opposed to the slave trade. After leaving Sierra Leone, “Smeathman” spent four years in the British West Indies helping sugar planters to get rid of ant infestations. He suggested a plantation settlement in Sierra Leone but, unlike the Caribbean, with a free labour market particularly made up of emancipated (freed) enslaved people who fought for Britain in the American War of Independence and other Africans in Britain. There were about 5,000 Africans in London in the 1780s, and maybe 10,000 across England. See: Natural History Museum, Slavery and the Natural World, Chapter 2 : People and the Slave Trade, W.P.H, London, 2007, pp8-9.

25 Cassandra Pybus ,Ibid, p 108

26 Stephen J. Braidwood,Ibid, p 87.

27 Julia Bibko, Ibid,p 64.

28 ibid.

29 Stephen J.Braidwood, Ibid, pp87,148

30 Ibid, pp91-93.

31 Thomas Boldan Thompson (February28th, 1766 –March 3rd, 1828): Born in the city of Kant, a Royal Navy officer and commander with extensive experience in West Africa where he worked there under the direction of his uncle Edward Thompson, commander of a small African naval fleet. He played a major role in the slave trade abolition movement, as he presented evidence strongly condemning the slave trade to the House of Commons committee in 1790, and he also contributed significantly to the beginnings of the establishment of the Sierra Leone settlement. See: Logman, The Annual Biography and Obituary For the year 1829 , Vol 13, Longman, London, 1829 , pp319,329.

32 Joseph Irwin: writer and friend of Henry Smeathman, who, after his death, compensated the latter for charring and supervising the project. See: Douglas R.Egerton, Death or Liberty African Americans and Revolutionary America, Oxford, University Press , Oxford,2009 , p212.

33 Gustavus Vassa (1745-1797): his real name is “Olaudah Equiano” and he was born in the village of "Ibo" which is currently in Nigeria, after being kidnapped by slave traders, he was taken across the Atlantic to the farms of the West Indies and In the year 1757, he came to London for the first time and he was 12 years old, and this after he bought it from an English naval commander named “Pascal” about 30 pounds and gave him as a gift to his cousins, where he taught him and baptized him in Saint Margret's Westminster. In the year 1762 the English leader sold him again to a merchant and took him to the West Indies, and after reaching the age of 21 he bought his freedom for about 40 pounds and that on June 10, 1766, and after a year he returned to England and worked as a merchant and sailor and in the year 1786 appointed As the first black worker in the Sierra Leone project. In 1792 he married an English woman “Susanna Gullan” and he had two daughters, “Ann Marry” and “Joanna”.

See: James Walvin , African's Life 1745-1797 : The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano, Continuum, London, 2000 , pp1,188

34 Stephen J. Braidwood, Ibid, P171.

35 Simon Schama, Simon Schama, Rough Crossings: Britain the Slaves and American Revolution, First Edition, HarperCollins Publisher, New York (USA) , 2006, p194

36 Stephen J. Braidwood, Ibid, pp 90, 144.

37 PRO T1/638/249 , Agreement between Mr. Joseph Irwin and the Black Poor, 06 .10. 1786.

38 Stephen J. Braidwood, pp 148-149.

39 Lord Sydney (1733- June 30th, 1800): His real name was "Thomas Townshend". He was born in London and educated at the "Clare College" school, then Cambridge where he graduated in 1753 AD and was chosen as a Parliamentarian in 1754 AD. He married in the year 1760 from "Elizabeth Powys" and in 1767 he was appointed a pay changer and a private consultant, and in 1782 he became Minister of the Interior and responsible for concluding a peace treaty with America, and to relieve British prisons he recommended sending criminals and establishing a colony for them in the Botany Cap, Australia.**See:** Daniel Webster Hollis, British Political Leaders: A Biography Dictionary, ABC-CLIO, California, 2001,p305

40 Stephen J. Braidwood, Ibid, pp 144, 280.

41 Ibid, p160.

42 Prince Hoare, Memoirs of Granville Sharp, Public Library, London, 1820, p316

43 Jonathan Huddleston, And The Children's Teeth Are Set on Edge: Adam Hodgson the Razing of Cation Chapel, W.P.H,W.P.P, 2010, P 412.

44 King Tom: sub-chief of the Koya Temne kingdom. **See:** Moira Ferguson, Anna Maria Falconbridge and the Sierra Leone Colony: A Female Traveller in Conflict, Un article de la revue Lumen, Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Canada, Volume 16, 1997,p 19.

45 Julia Bibko, Ibid,p66.

46 Jonathan Huddleston, Ibid, p 412.

47 Stephen J. Braidwood,Ibid, p183.