



September 11, 2021
Halifax, Nova Scotia

Dear Nocturne 2021 Participant,

This letter is an **invitation to participate** in the Nocturne Project “*Message in a Bottle- 15 Ships to Sierra Leone.*” *Message in a Bottle* consists of letters addressed **to one of the 1,196 Black Loyalist seafarers who emigrated to Sierra Leone on 15 ships in 1792.** This art installation will be on display at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 during the Nocturne festival October 13-16.

What can you do to participate? Simply write a letter. Write from the perspective of your life and experience now to the experience of seafarers on the journey to Freetown, Sierra Leone in the past. Due date is up to and including October 13. Comment on the journey and the reasons for leaving. What changes have happened? What still needs to happen? Information about this exodus can be found at the [Black Loyalist Digital Collections site](#). Your letter will be placed in one of the 15 bottles and (and with permission) a copy will also be included in a “Book of Letters” available for public view. Although the bottles will not end up in our ocean, the project’s purpose is to make a personal connection to the conditions of life for Black Loyalists over 200 years ago. The extraordinary stories of courage and resistance continue in Nova Scotia today on the road to reparations.

For example, secure housing and land was promised to these early settlers and very few [received what was owed](#). None received the promised 100 acres of land for each head of household despite petitions ([by Thomas Peters](#)). For many, shared Mi'kmaq knowledge was key to survival in the first winters.

To this day land is an issue for African Nova Scotian communities. Soaring real estate prices ([Hammond Plains](#)), location of communities ([Shelburne](#)), land titles ([North Preston](#)), selling potential heritage buildings (Truro) and [locating historical sites](#), can be linked to Nova Scotia’s history. To date there has been no public monument on this land for the 15 ships to [Sierra Leone](#).

Thank you for your participation.

kathrin winkler

Email your letter to winkler.kathrin2@gmail.com

Snail mail to

Message in a Bottle

Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21

1055 Marginal Rd, Halifax, NS, B3H 4P7

To the Attention of Rebecca Mackenzie-Hopkins-Public Programs Manager

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES, SAMPLE LETTER ETC.

To have over 1000 letters, one symbolically for each seafarer that left Halifax for Sierra Leone would be a remarkable message in itself. An actual message in a bottle floating on an ocean does not have much of a chance to reach its destination, but here, **participation is the destination.**

The timing for this project is significant. We are now at the halfway mark of the UN International Decade of People of African Descent. Next year, 2022 marks the 230th anniversary of the departure of the ships to Sierra Leone, and since no commemorative structures at the harbour of Halifax have yet materialized, the time is right. This project hopes to open up pathways to the commemoration of the largest migration of people of African descent in a transatlantic voyage of return to the continent of Africa.

Links to Reference Material

The scope of the Black Loyalist history as well as the work that has been written and researched is monumental. This page has some key resources and links.

[ANSA: African Nova Scotia Community](#)

[R is for Reparations](#)

[Black Loyalist Heritage Society](#)

[Remembering Black Loyalists, Black Communities in Nova Scotia](#)

[Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia](#)

[John Clarkson: Journal of the Voyage](#)

[Nova Scotia Archives](#)

[The Book of Negroes miniseries](#)

[Songs of Freedom](#)

[Senator Wanda Thomas Bernhard.](#)

[International Decade for People of African Descent](#)

<https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/shaping-a-community-black-refugees-in-nova-scotia-0>

<https://ansa.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/files/African%20Nova%20Scotian%20Cultural%20Tourism%20Guide.pdf>

[Conference: Reparations under International Law](#)

Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Black Loyalists: Southern Settlers of Nova Scotia's First Free Black Communities* (2013).

Wanda Taylor, *Birchtown and the Black Loyalists* (2015).

James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (1993).

THERE ARE MANY MORE RESOURCES!

NAMES OF THE 15 SHIPS

Catherine, Parr, Morning Star, Prince William, Sierra Leone, Eleanor, Venus, Felicity
The Beaver, Betsey, Brothers, Mary, Lucretia, Summerset, Prince Fleury

PROJECT COORDINATOR

A heartfelt thank you to Nocturne 2021 and to the Canadian Museum of Immigration for providing the space for the exhibit. Like reconciliation, reparation is urgent but can only grow from truth. Stories are personal, and I began this project with a question, “ How can I understand the significance of the exodus of so many Black Loyalists?” Rather than listening to the doubt and questions about maybe this isn’t up to me....I stumbled ahead! Although travelling to Sierra Leone on a ship is different in almost every way from my personal story of immigration, I did arrive on a boat in 1954 during Hurricane Hazel. From war torn Europe, my parents were eager to leave the past behind. The stories of that ocean voyage, the preparation, separation, leaving family behind for the unknown, always longing for that safe harbour is part of my life.

The sign in front of the school around the corner from my home in the North end of Halifax reads BLAM. The ‘A’ stands for always. Black Lives Always Matter. How did the lives and bodies of Black Loyalists ‘matter’ in 1792? A year ago, Senator Wanda Thomas Bernard presented “Unpacking Anti-Black Racism in HRM:Creating Sustainable Change in Our Communities” and her words “do something” is a challenge that continues. The 15 Ships to Sierra Leone is a collection of personal narratives that continues to shape the history of this province. A special thanks to the A. Sizwe Adekayode and Dr. Lynn Jones for your precious gift of time and discussion regarding this project!

Thanks so much for writing a letter!
kathrin winkler

WRITING THE LETTERS

- 1. There is no specific length required for the ‘letters.’**
- 2. Poetry and artworks can be forms of ‘letters’ for this project.**
- 3. This voyage lasted from January 15, 1792 - March 9, 1792. A second voyage was promised and didn’t happen. More Black Loyalists were eager to leave.**
- 4. Choose one of the ships and gather some information from the resources. For example, many who left had already gone through many hardships, including the race riots in Birchtown.**
- 5. Send the letter to winkler.kathrin2@gmail.com . Please let me know if we can include it in the “Book of Letters”.**
- 6. Who is writing these letters? Every municipal, provincial, federal and band elected official has received an email and as many snail mail info packages have been sent out as I could manage. Schools and organizations will also receive an invitation to ‘write a letter’. There is no public funding involved directing in this project.**
- 7. Connect to your regional history.** “Over 3,000 Black Loyalists migrated to Nova Scotia between 1783 and 1785. About 3,500 people settled throughout Nova Scotia in communities such as Annapolis Royal, Clements, Granville, Birchtown, Brindleytown, Preston, Little Tracadie, Chedabucto and Halifax. 1,196 found conditions so appalling that they left for Sierra Leone.

EXAMPLES OF LETTER “OPENERS”

To a Young Man aboard the vessel Morning Star :

The land you were promised when you joined the side of the British Crown(1775 by Lord Dunmore) never materialized. Thank goodness for Mi'kmaq solidarity that saw you through that first winter enduring hunger and [the pithouse](#). Conversations on the Morning Star must often be about promised land. The bitterness of receiving land that was less than the white Loyalists', often poor soil, far from settlements and smaller is fading as you travel the trade winds to Sierra Leone. Things have changed, yet some of the descendants are challenged to protect their communities, both in Preston and Hammonds plains. Those disappointments spurred you on to this sea journey.....

To a Young Woman aboard the vessel Felicity: What lies ahead for you and what lies behind? Right now, you must be busy with life onboard, and maybe a little tired of the daily fare of” [4 oz Rice](#) or 8 oz Indian Meal with ½ Gill Molasses or Q~ oz Brown Sugar” at supertime. Your courage to seek justice lives on. We know that Black people were denied the [right to vote](#), trial by jury and equitable land grants. In Sierra Leone, women will be voting in elections - at least for a time. You will be remembered as frontrunners for feminists! Just this year, in [Nova Scotia](#), the top court has decreed that [judges must consider racism when sentencing black offenders](#). Justice and rights remain topics more than 200 years later.

To a grandmother on the Eleanor:At 4pm on January 16th you are departing from Sambro's Lighthouse bearing West four leagues, and Clarkson gave the signal to Steer S S E for the night. The Eleanor was given the signal to make more sail, and get into her station. There are snow squalls and the sad news of a newborn's death - not all of you will arrive safely. Even getting to the ships wasn't easy. Your friend, Wilkinson, a middle aged woman, died “ occasioned by a miscarriage on board one of the vessels coming from Shelburne.” Are your thoughts with the grandchildren you left behind in Brindley township? Your wisdom will be needed in the trials ahead. Your midwife skills will be well used - more babies, born between the old and the new, will arrive with you on African shores. Clarkson, who was very ill, mentions you in his journal. In March of the voyage he dined with Captain Redman on board the Eleanor, and he writes, “ ...an old woman of 104 years of age who had requested me to take her, that she might lay her bones in her native country, begged to be brought on deck to shake hands and congratulate me upon my recovery.” Never underestimate the determination of a grandmother.....

To Sally Peters on the vessel Venus* Maybe as you look back toward Halifax, you are musing about your husband. You might be surprised [that poets](#) write of your noble born man, books have been written and movies made about his life. I won't explain what a movie is, and to be sure there are more changes than you can dream about. But the dream of freedom and justice remains the foundation for survival...and as a founder of nations, kidnaped from Africa, surviving the horror of the middle-passage, enslavement, war, endless petitions...Thomas Peters is remembered. There is a statue in Freetown for your Thomas, maybe there will be one of the two of you one day in Digby....

To Harry and Jenny Washington on the vessel the Parr*

Learning about your sea journey is still a hidden history for many white settlers in Nova Scotia. I was surprised to find out that some of the writers of the Declaration of Independence were upset that they 'lost' slaves and one of them, George Washington, had enslaved you. Wikipedia (a couple steps up from books) tells me that you escaped in 1771 and were 'returned' to Mount Vernon, but you were able to flee in 1776 and joined the Ethiopian Regiment recruited thanks to Lord Dunmore's recruitment and promise of freedom. Coming to Nova Scotia brought a similar harsh reality. White loyalists brought between 1200 and 200 slaves with them and " the typical experience of black migrants to the Maritimes after the Revolutionary War was not freedom, but rather slavery, re-enslavement, and other brutal forms of indentured" (Whitfield).

To a seafarer on the Sierra Leone You left on the [Sierra Leone](#) but it did not build confidence to hear the rumours of the bad shape of your ship. On December 19th 1791, the Sierra Leone was reported to be out of repair, and could not be got ready and so it was thought most prudent not to engage her. A couple of days later "the Sierra Leone upset along side of wharf in consequence of a hard gale of wind, and all her ballast being out, but fortunately she was got up again with little or no damage." You just wanted a chance to build community and did sign the [following petition](#) addressed to Mr. Clarkson Agent of the Sierra Leone Society with former Birchtown inhabitants to "settle us as near as possible to the inhabitants of Preston.... Humbly relying upon your interest in this matter and in compliance with this request will be bound to pray-The inhabitants of Birch Town"

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Dear Friend,

I am writing to you as you leave Halifax Harbour on a 3 month long, ocean journey. Do you have a sense of isolation on those ocean waves, maybe even a fear of what lies ahead. I am in lockdown here -- 220 years later there is a pandemic worldwide - it's a disease but medicine is available, getting it takes time. [Health, gender and race are tied.](#) I know that one of the 15 ships that you are on is a medical ship, but I can't figure out who is given passage on it. Stay safe - your daily food rations are really something. Molasses is on the menu for breakfast everyday, and well, molasses is not local food. Local food is a big trend here because of global warming..but that's another letter. So, I did look into molasses and I am horrified that the molasses was part of the what we now know was a triangle trade* (I have added a PS about that). Trade winds made possible that trade, and those trade winds are carrying you to Sierra Leone. My deepest hope is that my grandchildren and yours may flourish on scars that have healed through reparation. Be safe- journey in peace.

Sincerely,
kathrin

PS The triangle trade involved sending goods by sailing ships from Europe to Africa, buying slaves who were then transported across the Atlantic to the plantation colonies of the West Indies, loading up on products like sugar and tobacco, taking those north to the North American colonies where some trade took place before heading on home to Europe. that dominated in all of the colonies. Certainly seaborne trade in these centuries depended entirely on trade winds that circulated the Atlantic in this clockwise direction.



(sample letterhead)