Abolition’s Unwitting Sacrifice:
How the British abolitionist movement betrayed the Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone

James Leader, Jr.

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Finally, I would like to thank anyone who is taking the time to read this paper. It is long.

Thank you,
-JLL
Abolition and the Sierra Leone Colony (1785-1793)

1785: Thomas Clarkson wins Cambridge prize for essay on the slave trade

April 1787: Ship with 400 freed, English slaves sets sail for Freetown.

July 1787: William Wilberforce agrees to take up abolition in Parliament. As a result, Committee for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade is formed

December, 1789: King Jimmy burns Freetown.


April 23, 1789: Wilberforce delivers his 12 propositions to the House of Commons. Abolition vote is postponed to next session.

January, 1791: Alexander and Anna Maria Falconbridge depart for Sierra Leone.

December, 1790: St. George’s Bay Company created by Sharp and friends to help rebuild Sierra Leone colony.


1790: News of slave revolts in St. Domingo, Martinique and British Haiti along with publication of Paine book turns public

March, 1792: Clarkson arrives in Sierra Leone and is appointed Governor.

April 20, 1791: Slave trade bill loses by 75 vote majority. Soon after, the Sierra Leone Company Charter is approved by the House.

February 1792: Company ships to supply and rebuild Freetown land in Sierra Leone. They do not spend time on shore.

July, 1793- Clarkson returns to England to petition for supplies and is moved as Governor.
As the passengers of Lieutenant John Clarkson’s storm-battered fleet approached the stretch of West African shore that was to be their home, a slave-ship, sent from England to pick up a new load of bonded passengers, glided past the ships close enough for its dark purpose to be clear to all aboard. While a slave ship in the waters near the West African coast would have been a familiar sight to any experienced eighteenth-century sailor, to at least one third of Clarkson’s passengers, who were African born and recently freed American slaves, the appearance of such a ship so close to their new home may have been the most shocking and frightening moment of their trans-Atlantic journey.\(^1\) Though John Clarkson, and the Sierra Leone Company’s board of wealthy abolitionists and merchants who were bankrolling him, had guaranteed that the waters of Sierra Lone would be free of slave trading, the slave ship’s presence, and the scene that awaited Clarkson’s settlers ashore, made it quickly apparent that the slave trade was alive and well in their new land. Even before setting foot ashore in March of 1792, Clarkson’s 1,000 black loyalists, who had fled slavery in order to support England during America’s revolution, witnessed the first broken promise of the Sierra Leone colony.

The biggest surprise was yet to come. When the settlers dropped anchor and headed for shore, they realized that the bustling and settled, freed slave port of Granville Town, which Clarkson had described to the settlers in the most glowing terms, was just a few abandoned huts and miles of uncultivated wilderness. From the few remaining survivors, the colonists learned that all but a few of the former inhabitants were dead or sold into slavery. Most shockingly, the crew of the British ships that had been sent by the Company to restore the colony to livable conditions for the new settlers had barely set foot on shore.\(^2\) For a time united in the task that lay ahead, Clarkson and his settlers held a makeshift church services on the barren beach and

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christened their new settlement with a name that symbolized both their bonded past and hopeful future: Freetown.

In the weeks that followed, hundreds of the settlers died of disease, and with no shelters prepared for the rainy season, those who survived slept in makeshift huts that were visited by baboons and leopards. In both the Company’s Parliamentary charter and Clarkson’s recruiting efforts in Nova Scotia, where the black loyalists had been sent after the end of the war, the settlers had been promised 20 acres of all the best land, but when the rains stopped, the plots of the settlers had been promised remained unsurveyed for months. These former slaves who had crossed the Atlantic on the promise of land ownership became urban dwelling day laborers who relied on the Company for their rations and their pay. When land was finally given out, the Company instituted heavy taxes and kept all of the best property for its own people. John Clarkson did an honorable job trying to keep his lofty recruiting promises, but even he was unable to provide the kind of independence and self-governance that was so important to the settlers, heavily influenced by the ideals of the American Revolution.

What is, at first, so shocking about all of these Company failures to prepare the colony and follow through on promises, is that the Sierra Leone Company was guided by many of London’s leading abolitionists. Men like Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and William Wilberforce had raised thousands of pounds to set up the colony, and Freetown was their best chance to actually do something for the cause they had spent much of their professional lives fighting for. As I will argue in Chapter 2, many of these men were idealists, and their movement often suffered from their dogged refusal to see enslaved blacks as anything but men equal to whites in their entitlement to human rights. Freetown was the ultimate idealist’s dream, but the

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3 Walker 146.
4 Walker 151.
directors somehow decided this was the moment to become practical and economically focused. Beyond the purely philosophical level, Sierra Leone was meant to be the ultimate proof that black people could take care of themselves without slavery. With all that was at stake, both morally and politically, it seems odd that the Company directors would allow such ill preparation and execution of their plans.

Most recent histories on the subject blame weather, native conflicts, slave trading presence, disease, and John Clarkson’s failures as a Governor for the struggles of the Sierra Leone Colony. When the Company’s directors in London are blamed at all, they are excused by the difficulties of long-distance communication and the naiveté of the abolitionist movement. However, in the Company’s own address to Parliament, before a single Freetown settler arrived in Africa, all of the aforementioned problems had been mentioned as reasons for the struggles of the first attempt at Sierra Leone colonization, wealthy British abolitionist Granville Sharp’s disastrous settlement of Granville Town. However extensive their knowledge of Sharp’s failed colony, the Company was either unable or unwilling to prevent the same death and destruction from visiting the colony’s second attempt.

While it is somewhat easy to excuse Sharp, who was after all a private citizen single-handedly building a colony from abroad, the Sierra Leone Company was far better funded, organized, and ambitious than Sharp’s Granville Town ever was. The Company, made up of 100 stockholders led by 13 directors, agreed to a constitution and began petitioning Parliament in the spring of 1791 for the right to create a trading colony in the territory know as Sierra Leone that the Company would finance in the hopes of developing trade between Africa and Great Britain. Company Chairman Henry Thornton, expressing views contradictory to the Company’s abolitionist roots, said that the goal of the stockholders was, “[C]arrying on trade between Great
Britain and... Africa." Sierra Leone was widely accepted as the only possible trading port on the West African coast, and by selling the idea of prosperous trade, not black resettlement, the Company got its charter. 

As shall be seen through the course of this paper, the goals of a successful trading post and a self-governing black colony were rarely one and the same, but in order to build a colony the Company needed settlers, and freed slave Thomas Peters was just the man they needed. Peters represented the black loyalists of Nova Scotia, who after almost a decade in their new home were tired of waiting for the land and rights they had been promised during the war. Peters enthusiastically supported resettlement for his people, and the Company immediately sent him and John Clarkson, at the time simply the unemployed brother of Director Thomas Clarkson, to Nova Scotia to recruit settlers. From the awkward marriage of abolitionists and the merchants of imperial trade, which still engaged heavily in slave trafficking, the Sierra Leone Colony was born.

While Clarkson and Peters promised a free land, black settlement in Nova Scotia, the Company had already begun diverging from the free-land message of Clarkson and the self-governing model of Sharp. In a report given to Parliament in 1791, the Company proposed to generate income from taxing the colonists for land and reserving some of the best territory for Company use in developing trade. The report even cited the findings of a fellow abolitionist who had traveled to Sierra Leone and reported the destruction of Granville Town, but no warning was sent to Clarkson in Nova Scotia. It is unlikely that the Company was intentionally deceiving Clarkson and the settlers, but many of the Company’s directors, profit-seekers and

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5 “Substance of the report of the court of directors of the Sierra Leone Company to the general court, held at London on Wednesday the 19th of October, 1791” (London, 1792) 50-55.
6 Ibid.
7 Walker 106.
8 “Substance of the report... 1791” 7-15.
abolitionists alike, were primarily concerned with forming a profitable colony not ensuring the loyalists were treated fairly. Despite the warnings of those who had actually been to Sierra Leone and the refusal of the British government to provide the colony with the requested military forces, the Company pushed forward, perhaps with the same vain hope as Sharp had held on to for Granville Town that the demands of the situation would bring the colonists “to habits of industry and good order”.  

After the settlers arrived in Africa, Clarkson, who was quickly appointed Governor, struggled to keep his colonists alive and fulfill the commitments he had made in Nova Scotia. Despite his difficulties, the Company largely ignored his requests for resources and accepted the colony’s struggles as just a part of the process. Several of Clarkson’s fellow administrators also proved totally inept, drunk, or both, and his efforts to get more help were largely unsuccessful. The title of Governor carried only nominal powers, and Clarkson lacked the Company support to force his surveyor, a particularly drunk and inept official, to begin dividing up the land. When the Company finally did send help, the new officials orders and views on black settlement only challenged Clarkson and thwarted his efforts at land allotment. Of course some of these problems were out of the Company’s hands, but the overall quality of Clarkson’s colleagues suggests a lack of either proper care in selection or funding on the part of the Company. Clarkson was essentially on his own in Sierra Leone. So while he almost completely failed to fulfill any of his promises to the settlers, the fact that he kept their hope, and patience, alive for so long was, in itself, a remarkable feat.

Without considering the larger picture of the abolitionist movement, the actions of the Company’s directors certainly seem odd. From a profit standpoint, spending the proposed

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9 Ibid.
10 Wilson 117-123.
£150,000 to establish a colony on a site a few short years after the previous inhabitants had been
driven off seems risky enough, but entrusting the colony to a 28-year-old lieutenant with no
experience and his alcoholic advisers approaches downright recklessness. Even from the
standpoint of an abolitionist, Granville Town had at least relieved London of nearly 500 of its
poorest citizens; the Sierra Leone Company was helping the black veterans of a lost war find
land. Other than Thomas Peters, the Company’s directors had no interaction with the black
loyalists of Nova Scotia, and whether or not they were given the land they had been promised
during the American War had little to do with the slave trade debate. If the Directors were
motivated by a desire to help the loyalists, or even turn a profit, they certainly went about it in a
strange fashion.

On this question of what could have possibly motivated the Company’s directors to
pursue a colony and then so ignore the settlers needs, the secondary histories portray a good-
against-evil struggle between the selfless abolitionists, led by Clarkson and Sharp, and the profit-
seeking Company directors like Chairman Henry Thornton. Ellen Gibson Wilson’s two accounts
of the colony, The Black Loyalists (1976) and John Clarkson and the African Adventure (1980),
portray Clarkson as a virtuous, if a bit naïve, governor. She blames the greedy Company and
their land taxes for betraying the settlers. James Walker’s The Black Loyalists (1992) describes
the struggles of the Black Loyalist community from the American south to Sierra Leone and pits
their idealism and hope against the crushing greed of the Company’s directors and their
obsession with developing trade.

The problem with these secondary sources is that they spend little time putting Sierra
Leone into the abolitionist context because they are far more focused on what happened in Africa
and America, not London. Of Wilson’s two histories of the colony, one compassionately tells
the story of the black loyalists struggle for freedom while the other describes the brave journey of young John Clarkson on his “African Adventure.” Works by Walker (1976), Clifford (1999), and Hochschild (2005) follow a similar theme to the former and an essay by Kup (1972) focuses on the latter. Sbacchi (1975) addresses whether or not Sierra Leone was a success for the Company and England but gives little attention to the abolitionist motives. Works on the British abolitionist movement and its leaders abound, but they rarely look past the walls of Parliament and wealthy British society. There are countless primary sources from both the English and African sides of Sierra Leone that tie the two together, but up until now, no secondary work has focused on synthesizing the convergent movements of British abolition and Sierra Leone colonization.

The problem with all of these views is that they fail to properly put the Sierra Leone Company, and its colony, within the context of the struggling abolition movement of the 1790s. Sharp’s Granville Town colony was meant to prove that freed slaves would not be a burden in a predominantly white society and that trade could occur in Africa without slavery, and it took only a few short years for the colony to fail. The 1791 slave revolt in Haiti further hurt the movement by seemingly proving a common argument of the anti-abolitionists, namely the potential of a black uprising.\(^{11}\) The largest blow came when Sierra Leone Company director William Wilberforce’s bill against the slave trade failed to pass Parliament in April, 1791.\(^{12}\) The movement had plenty of supporters, but it needed something to ease public fears about what blacks would do after they were freed. With the abolition cause perhaps at its nadir, Thomas Peters’s visit to London, and his petition for land, could not have come at a better time.

\(^{11}\) Hochschild 265.  
\(^{12}\) Hochschild 226.
With this abolition context in mind, a re-examination of the Sierra Leone Company’s failures is needed. There is clearly a gap between the promises and goals of the Company and the efforts it made to promote them, but simply blaming a profit motive or ineptitude leaves far too many questions unanswered. Examining the specific failures of the Company alongside the state of the abolitionist movement, it appears that the Sierra Leone colony was created as a political tool for the abolitionists. Far from being at odds, the profit-seekers and abolitionists within the Company both held an economically viable colony as their top priority. While the Colony was presented to both its settlers and Parliament with lofty goals and even revolutionary ideas, the broken promises and tragedies of the colony’s early years can be attributed to the Company’s directors, abolitionist and merchant alike, who seemed more concerned with the viability of Sierra Leone as a political tool, rather than as a colony.

In the course of this study, I will start by linking the abolitionist movement with the Freetown colony. By using the memoirs of Granville Sharp along with other primary and secondary accounts of Granville Town colonization, I will show how the abolitionist movement became wedded to Sierra Leone colonization. I will then use the diaries and official correspondence of leading abolitionists in London to show why their failures in Parliament pushed them towards resettling Sierra Leone with blacks and how, from the beginning, the interests of the abolition movement dominated over the best interest of the colony’s settlers. Finally, I will reexamine the well-studied early years of the Freetown colony and place it within the context of the struggles of the abolitionist movement. I will lean heavily on the primary accounts of Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, Anna Maria Falconbridge and John Clarkson because they were at the heart of both abolition and Sierra Leone. Sharp (1820) and Clarkson (1808) wrote memoirs about their two decade struggle for abolition, and the two Sierra Leone
colonies feature prominently in their discussion of the time period from 1787-1794. Anna Maria Falconbridge and John Clarkson wrote letters and diaries both before and after arriving in Sierra Leone, and their accounts, which rarely disagree on important issues, help to paint a picture of life on the ground in Freetown while also reflecting on the actions of the Company from a settler’s perspective. Unfortunately, many of their accounts, especially of what went wrong in Africa, are either incomplete or unavailable. I have been able to obtain the volume of John Clarkson’s diary starting from his departure from London and ending with his first week in Africa, but the volume addressing his year in Freetown was inaccessible. The numerous letters between Clarkson and Company representatives were also unattainable. With this in mind, I will also rely on several secondary works on both Sierra Leone and abolition to tie together the strands of primary history.

Abolition’s leaders in London were by most accounts honorable and well-meaning men, but in their passionate quest to end slavery, the directors who founded the Sierra Leone Colony neglected and exploited a group of people who had fought their way out of the very bondage the founders were working to end. Such ironies abound in the early history of Sierra Leone, and it seems fitting to start this study with Granville Town, where dozens of long freed slaves returned to African only to be thrown back into bondage.
Chapter 1 – The Union of Two Struggling Dreams:

Granville Town

While the colony[of Granville Town] was again in a state of advance, the settlers received a formal notice from… the neighboring Chief, that he had resolved on burning their town… They fled from their homes, and abandoned their plantations; and the judicial sentence was carried into execution.– *The Memoirs of Granville Sharp* (1820)\(^{13}\)

On the 22\(^{nd}\) of June, 1772, Lord Mansfield, Chief Justice of the King’s Bench, ruled that the return to bondage of escaped slave James Somersett could not be sustained by any moral or political reason and set the legal precedent for the freedom of all of England’s slaves. While the scope of domestic British slavery was nothing like that of its colonies in 1772, the Mansfield ruling meant that hundreds of slaves were now free and, because they rarely chose to stay with former masters, were also essentially homeless.\(^ {14}\) Like the landless peasants of the Industrial Revolution, many of these freed slaves made their way to London, where the racism and labor conditions of the city often pushed them onto the charity of abolitionist lawyer and fundraiser Granville Sharp (1735-1813). The black sailors and workers, made unemployed by the end of the American Revolution, swelled the numbers further, and by 1786, Sharp estimated that over 400 freed slaves, his “African orphans”, were completely dependent on his philanthropy for survival.\(^ {15}\)

By testing the limits of the funds he was able to raise on their behalf, these new dependents got Sharp involved in the African experiment, and his leadership of the project is important for understanding how Sierra Leone became so tied to London’s abolitionist movement. Granville Sharp was first and foremost an abolitionist, and because African


\(^ {15}\) Sharp Memoirs 260, Walker 96.
resettlement can be seen historically as a very different movement from abolitionism, in both its proponents and ideological groundwork, it is important to note that the repatriation of slaves to Africa was not his idea. Sharp’s career, before and after the Sierra Leone episode, was almost entirely focused on legal battles on behalf of slaves and their freedom. Sharp was not born with money or a title, but his parents had enough to give him a legal education. Almost immediately, Sharp became involved in the abolition struggle. In his first major battle, he even helped fight for abolition in the Mansfield case. A decade later he prosecuted the captain of a British slave-ship, known as The Zong, for throwing 122 sick slaves overboard rather than feed them. He even communicated with Americans like Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to fight slavery in the United States. Sharp’s career in abolition spanned nearly half a century, but Sierra Leone was the first and last time he would concern himself with African resettlement.16

The idea of Africa was actually first proposed to him by his “African orphans” in 1787. In a letter to his brother after the colony was founded, Sharp wrote about how botanist Henry Smeathman, who had traveled to Africa through much of the decade, suggested African resettlement to the black poor saying, “A proposal was made to them… to form a free settlement at Sierra Leone. Many of them came to see me about the proposal: sometimes they came in large bodies together.”17 Once the territory of Sierra Leone was proposed as a location, Sharp asked many of his African-born freedmen about the area, who approved, and when the Royal Treasury agreed to fund any initiative to remove the black poor “nuisance” from London, Sharp became convinced that Africa was the answer he needed.18 Through the encouragement of the black poor and concern about the pressing financial costs of their continued survival, Sharp became the

17 Sharp Memoirs 5.
18 Sharp Memoirs 16.
champion of Sierra Leone colonization. While he would dedicate the next five years of his life to settling freed slaves in Africa, Granville Sharp was, above all else, an abolitionist reformer, and the next half-decade would test his loyalties between his cause and his colony.

In forming his settlement, Sharp’s training as an abolitionist and lawyer, not an administrator or colonizer, was apparent from the beginning. His plan for governing Granville Town, which was influenced by his abolitionist agenda, doomed the colony from the beginning. Though the colony would be on an undeveloped shore, where massive public works and construction projects would be needed to make the colony suitable to the rains and perils of the West African coast, Sharp’s government plan, based on the heavily democratized theocracy of the Ancient Israelites blended with a bit of Saxon lore, was completely decentralized. Sharp’s complex government was based on breaking the colony into groups of one thousand, then one hundred, then fifty and ultimately ten individuals. At the head of each group would be an officer, and the members of each successively smaller group would be, according to Sharp, bound together “by the reciprocal ties or alliance of frank-pledge, which our Saxon ancestors, and many savage nations, in some degree maintained.” Each group would be responsible for a rotational share of duties in public works and military service, and the penalty for defaulting on such obligations would be added service to the group. Hours of service to the colony would also serve as the colony’s unit of currency and taxation. Though it seems intuitive that such a wide dispersion of powers would make the process of governing slow and the enforcement of rules next to impossible, Sharp’s belief in an equal voice in government for all dominated and gave his colony a government suited for a century-old Greek city-state, not a fledgling African colony. Sharp also hoped that Granville Town could dispel the myth that white labor was impossible in

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20 Sharp Memoirs 267.
Africa, a myth currently used in Parliament as a reason against abolition, by having his colony consist of Africans, African Americans and even white settlers.\textsuperscript{21} On an unsettled shore of Western Africa, Granville Sharp was building an egalitarian utopia.

Unfortunately, the colony’s few short years were far from utopian. Before departing for Africa, no preparations had been made for the fleet’s arrival, and no land had even been purchased for the settlers to land upon.\textsuperscript{22} Due to weather delays that put off the voyage for weeks, the 400 freed slaves and sixty white women of Sharp’s initial colony set sail on April 8, 1787, just weeks before the rainy season would ravage the African coast. Considering the racial conventions of eighteenth century England, it may seem odd that Sharp sent sixty white women along with such a large group of black settlers, but there is strong evidence to suggest that the women were convicted prostitutes, perhaps meant for white and black settlers alike.\textsuperscript{23} Sharp was progressive to the core.

When the colonists arrived, they were immediately met with the full force of the summer rains, and according to Sharp, who likely based much of his account on reports from the few survivors of the colony that joined the second attempt at colonization, “a great portion of them very soon died.”\textsuperscript{24} Once the rains subsided, just over half of Sharp’s 460 settlers had survived to begin the process of town building. Sharp’s “pledge-bound” society had already broken down during the rains, and when work began the colonists indulged heavily alcohol, fought and swindled each other, which only further hindered efforts at building.\textsuperscript{25} Even with the drop in population, the British government had only funded six to eight months of supplies for the

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Sharp Memoirs 270.
\textsuperscript{25} Sharp Memoirs 21.
colonists. It was soon apparent that unless some miracle saved them, Granville Town was headed for starvation. When he heard of their plight, Sharp spent the remainder of his funds in order to send a ship full of supplies to Granville Town. As mentioned, his funding largely came from benevolent contributions to his project, and he hoped to encourage his donors, a list that included both Clarkson brothers, to continued contributions with plots of land in the new colony.\textsuperscript{26} Despite the efforts of his fundraising techniques and the nearly £1,700 of supplies they produced, it only took until the following summer for Granville Town commander Jeff Reid to write to Sharp, requesting trade agents and more supplies.\textsuperscript{27} Land plots in a starving colony were likely no longer attractive products, and Reid’s letter asked for more than Sharp and his friends could give. Perhaps realizing that benevolence alone could not support a colony, Sharp began to seek out investments from the business community, in exchange for future interests in trade, in order to re-supply the colony. Unbeknownst to the father of Granville Town, the colony he was working to save had already been destroyed.

In December of 1789, a Temme chief near Granville Town, named King Jimmy, sent the struggling colony written notice that in three days’ time, the entire town would be burned and all remaining inhabitants taken or killed. Three days later, the King made good on his threat: Granville Town was destroyed. The Temme chief was upset with Granville Town because the settlers had rather ironically joined forces with a slave ship in a complaint against him to Captain Henry Savage of the \textit{HMS Pomona}. Savage bombarded Jimmy’s village and soon thereafter left African waters. This conflict compounded rising tensions between the colony and the natives over rights to a water hole Jimmy felt the British had no right to buy from a neighboring tribe, and as soon the war-ship and its soldiers left African waters, Jimmy sent his warning to Granville

\textsuperscript{26} Sbacchi 61.
Town that scattered the colonists along the coast. In a sign of how bad things had become in Granville Town, many even took refuge with local slave traders. It would take months for word of King Jimmy’s raid to reach England, but Sharp did not seem entirely surprised. He had already cited the vices and ignorance of London’s black poor as the primary causes of the colony’s trouble, and after learning of Jimmy’s raid, Sharp was entirely determined to find new black settlers for his colony who did not come from his “African orphans” in London. If there was ever to be a British colony in Africa, Sharp would need more money, and many, many more settlers.

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**Nova Scotia**

While Lord Mansfield’s decision freed slaves in England, another British proclamation, coming this time from the sword not the gavel, freed thousands of American slaves with the stroke of a pen, and by 1790, thousands of freed American slaves lived under British rule in Nova Scotia, waiting for the land and freedom that the Empire had promised them a decade before. Such a powerful order came in 1779, as the British made their push for the American South, and in hopes of destroying the Southern economy, British General Sir Henry Clinton promised freedom to any slave who escaped to British ranks. Countless American slaves risked their lives to reach the British. Some estimates have up to one-fifth of the South’s slave population, up to 100,000 men, women, and children, at some point crossing British lines. While a majority of these slaves were eventually returned to their masters, many British generals took great pains to ensure that the promise of the Phillipsburg Proclamation would not be broken. The

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28 Sharp Memoirs 273. 
30 Walker 94. 
31 Walker 3.
result was 4,000 former slaves who were suddenly the responsibility of the British Empire. Along with the thousands of white loyalists who now needed British asylum, the black loyalists were spread across the Empire. Up to 3,000 of them were sent to Britain’s newest North American settlement, Nova Scotia.  

The black loyalists’ experience in Nova Scotia is crucial to understanding why the promises of John Clarkson and the Sierra Leone Company were appealing enough for the black loyalists to make them want to travel across the ocean. While the Phillipsburg Proclamation made no promises about what the British Empire would do with the freed slaves after the war, as newly free British citizens, the loyalists expected that they would receive all the rights and privileges of any British subject. According to John Clarkson, who knew the loyalists as well as any British man, paramount amongst these rights and privileges was the freedom and independence they hoped would come from land ownership. Though their belief in a Crown that, unbeknownst to them, had just shipped its black poor to Granville Town with little protection may have been naïve, Britain’s treatment of the white loyalists gave them reason to hope. Once they arrived in Nova Scotia, the almost 30,000 white loyalists were quickly given almost 13,000,000 acres of cultivable land. Surveying fees, quit rents, and per acre prices were waived, and the Treasurer of Nova Scotia was given access to the Army Engineers to help clear and survey land. After a year in Nova Scotia, Governor John Parr estimated that by August of 1784, 20,000 people were already settled on their land, a remarkable feat of planning and government administration. Simultaneously, the black loyalists were sent to uncultivated and forested landmasses and generally put as a last priority for distribution. While they congregated  

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32 Walker 6.
34 Walker 21.
in large numbers in places like Port Roseway or Birchtown, they were scarcely able to farm a living out of the ground, and by 1787, according to Clarkson, many of the black loyalists began to believe that, despite the best efforts of the British government in London, the local government was making it impossible for them to find land and freedom in Nova Scotia. Like Sharp’s black poor in London, many of the black loyalists were dependent on the land-holding, white loyalists for employment and even charity, and while they no longer had masters, only a select few were enjoying the true freedom and independence of land ownership that they so desired. The Nova Scotia dream was dying, and the local government seemed disinterested in the plight of the black loyalists.

Not content to accept their fate as second-class, landless citizens the black loyalists decided to petition Parliament directly, and they looked to Thomas Peters, who had led a group of his fellow freed slaves against their masters in the Black Pioneers British military division, to travel to London personally. Risking possible enslavement on a trans-Atlantic journey, Peters went to England in late 1790 with a petition from his fellow black loyalists asking for their promised land, and little else.35 Immediately, his story reached Granville Sharp, and Peters was soon at the center of the abolitionist movement in London.

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While Peters made his way to London, the seeds of the Sierra Leone Company were being planted in wealthy London homes. Since receiving Reid’s letter regarding the plight of Granville Town, and before news of King Jimmy’s raid, Sharp began working to ensure that his colony at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River would not simply fade away. Again turning to his group of wealthy abolitionist that made up the Committee for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, Sharp founded the St. George’s Bay Company in February 19, 1790, “for the purpose of

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35 Walker 95.
carrying forward the benevolent design of the Founder."\textsuperscript{36} St. George’s Bay was the official name for the general area of land surrounding the mouth of the Sierra Leone River, and so the name of the Company left no doubts as to where this new enterprise would seek to foster trade. Sharp’s hope was that by encouraging slave-free trade between Sierra Leone and Africa, the St. George’s Bay Company could perhaps make Granville Town self-sufficient.

The Committee for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, led by prominent abolitionist Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), had been raising public awareness of the horrors of the slave trade in Africa, and colonizing Sierra Leone was seen as a potential political tool in the abolition debate. While some of the initial shareholders sought to profit from Sharp’s promises of trade between the colony and the Empire, many of the Company’s directors and shareholders saw their investment as a benevolent gift rather than a profit-seeking venture. The emphasis on abolition was evident in the Company Charter, proposed to King George shortly after the Company’s formation. It had three main goals: “to colonize a small part of the coast of Africa, to introduce civilization among the Natives… at the same time abjuring all concerns whatever in the odious traffic of human bodies.”\textsuperscript{37} By renouncing slavery, abolition was built into the foundation of the charter that would found the Sierra Leone Colony. Sharp’s ideas of black self-governance or land ownership were completely absent. The Company proposed its charter in Parliament, and on May 30, 1791, St. George’s Bay Company was incorporated and renamed the Sierra Leone Company. When the bill passed the London \textit{Times} stated its creation was “for the purpose of undermining the Slave Trade.”\textsuperscript{38} The colony had its cause and its funding. All it needed was people.

\textsuperscript{36} Sharp 273. \\
\textsuperscript{37} Sharp 274. \\
\textsuperscript{38} Walker 102.
It was into this coincidence of wants that Thomas Peters and his petition arrived in London. It is debated which side sought out the other, but either way, it did not take long for the causes of Sharp and Peters to be united. The Sierra Leone Company asked Parliament to pay for the Nova Scotians’ transport to Sierra Leone, and, happy to solve another freed slave problem, the House quickly agreed.\(^{39}\) The Company selected Naval Lieutenant John Clarkson, the younger brother of Sierra Leone Company director Thomas Clarkson, to join Peters on his journey to Nova Scotia and help recruit settlers. The 25-year-old Clarkson had recently taken leave from the Royal Navy because his Christian values objected to warfare, and his manners and famous brother had made him popular in the wealthy circles that made up the Company’s directors. Clarkson was clearly aware of the ultimate purpose of his voyage: on his journey to America, Clarkson wrote, “I could not serve the cause [of Abolition] in a more effectual way.”\(^{40}\)

The Company was eager to get underway, and Clarkson and Peters left for Nova Scotia on August 19, 1791. Peters, who had been free but landless for over a decade, came to London looking for land, and in these impassioned fighters for abolition, he must have thought he found people who shared his dream. Unfortunately for Peters, and the hundreds of hopeful settlers who would follow him to Africa, the struggles of abolition and black loyalist land rights were not one and the same, and as the abolitionist debate in London intensified, proponents of the former became increasingly less concerned with the concerns of the latter.

\(^{39}\) Sharp, 275.

Chapter 2 – A Colony Born Out of Defeat

Can the cries and groans, with which the air now trembles, be heard across this extensive continent?... If they could reach the generous Englishman at home, they would pierce his heart... He would be enraged at the conduct of his countrymen.– Thomas Clarkson, *Essay on Slavery and Commerce* (1785)\(^{41}\)

As was outlined in the introduction, there was a clear difference between the expectations of the colonists who landed in Sierra Leone in March of 1792 and the preparations of the Sierra Leone Company for their arrival. The site was not prepared for landing. The land rights had not been clearly established with the local chiefs.\(^{42}\) The appointed governor had never reported for duty, and most shockingly, the landing was again timed just a month before the start of the rainy season. That these factors caused the death and destruction of the colony’s early years is a contention that would not be debated by any historical source on Sierra Leone. What is unclear in secondary source material is quite simply: why? Why had this gap in expectations and reality developed in such a short, seven-month, time period between Clarkson’s departure for Nova Scotia and his landing in Sierra Leone?

The answer must lie in London, where the abolitionist debate raged for almost a half-century before all the Empire’s slaves were freed. England is historically credited for its early abolition of the slave trade, but the 1772 Mansfield decision was followed by 35 years of heavy opposition to abolition. The Slave Trade Regulation Act of 1788, which abolition historian Dale H. Porter calls a “stopgap measure, of little importance”, was the only success of the time period, and though the bill merely regulated how many slaves could be crammed into a transport ship at a time, it was fought bitterly in Parliament for almost a year.\(^{43}\) However insignificant the bill, it


\(^{42}\) Walker 102.

brought further attention to the abolition movement and added fuel to a raging public debate that had, for the first time, moved from the papers and churches of London to the floors of Parliament. Abolition’s struggles in those debates, and the economic and legal questions the movement’s leaders were largely unable to answer, resulted in the motivation and haste that hurried the organization of Sierra Leone.

The Mansfield decision was certainly a victory for the abolitionists, but it was the slave trade, not just slavery in England, that abolitionists were truly passionate about fighting. Sharp and his abolitionist friends were happy with their victory, but the Mansfield success seemed to only further motivate the abolitionists to push for further legal blows to the slave trade. After his work on the Mansfield case, Granville Sharp began to search for other legal cases worthy of his attention, and in 1781, when a former slave brought him the news of one hundred and thirty slaves being thrown into the sea, Sharp immediately gathered his forces to prosecute the ship’s captain and his crew whom he described as “murderers.”\(^{44}\) What made the case so controversial was that it actually only came to the attention of the general public after the Captain of the ship in question, the *Zong*, filed a claim with his insurance company for the worth of the slaves he had personally ordered to be thrown overboard. The insurance company alleged that the Captain had simply mismanaged his cargo, and the resulting legal battle, completely void of interest for the lives of those involved, shocked the public.\(^{45}\) Even though Sharp failed to have murder charges successfully carried out against the captain, he did send the minutes of the trial and detailed accounts of the *Zong* voyage to England’s newspapers, bishops, and Admiralty. Included in his

\(^{44}\) Sharp Memoirs 236.
\(^{45}\) Sharp Memoirs 237.
memoirs are letters from bishops across England, even one from the Archbishop himself, promising to aide him in his efforts in light of the Zong case.⁴⁶

While Granville Sharp fought the legal battles that helped make abolition an issue for the elite, Thomas Clarkson began to bring the slavery debate from the courts to the masses. Clarkson, who had the life long goal of becoming a clergyman, was a somewhat accidental abolitionist. While studying Latin at Cambridge in 1785, Clarkson wrote the equivalent of his senior thesis on the slave trade, and his essay won the prize for its subject matter and its excellent use of Latin. After graduation, Clarkson could not tear himself from the subject matter of his essay, and he decided to devote his life to the cause.⁴⁷ In 1786 Clarkson met a wealthy London publisher who shared his abolitionist sympathies, and the man agreed to mass-produce a condensed, translated version of his essay. The publisher also introduced Clarkson to Granville Sharp’s wealthy friends, and Clarkson suddenly had the funding and notoriety to travel across England, researching the issue and writing prolifically about the horrors of slavery. Fully aware that no amount of public support would enact a bill on its own, Clarkson also scoured England for a Parliamentarian willing to join his cause, and after a nearly yearlong search, he met William Wilberforce. Wilberforce, a 28-year old, third-year Parliamentarian, agreed to bring forward a ban on the slave trade as soon as he read Clarkson’s essay.⁴⁸ After this victory, Clarkson wasted no time organizing his wealthy friends into a committee to aide Wilberforce’s endeavor, and in July of 1787, the Committee for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade was born.

The Committee was highly effective in gaining public support for its cause, but, reflecting the Christian values of its founders, its rhetoric was entirely moral, with no concern for

⁴⁸ Thomas Clarkson, 155.
economics or finance. The Committee, originally made up of two Anglicans, Sharp and Clarkson, along with nine Quakers from an abolitionist group within their own religion, shared an objection to slavery that was rooted in Christian values and principles.\textsuperscript{49} Recent scholarship on America’s own abolition debate suggests that this emphasis on values and principles, not economics, came from the more “sensitive” abolitionists refusal to see blacks as commodities. While it was one thing to write of the horror stories of the Middle Passage, debating an anti-abolitionist on economic grounds often meant speaking of a black man as a piece of property, and it seems logical that Clarkson and his friends were unwilling to argue in these terms.\textsuperscript{50} Reflecting this inability, while Clarkson’s essay spent some time on the commerce of slavery, most of his writings, and other written materials published by the Committee, sought to play on the heart-strings and religious beliefs of the public.\textsuperscript{51} The main passage of Clarkson’s essay describes the horrors of the slave trade through fictional accounts of atrocities and mistreatments, and at one point he argues that, due to their treatment by supposedly God-fearing whites, slaves see Christianity as “a system of murder and oppression.” He goes on to argue that those who engage in the slave trade, “are not Christians. They are infidels. They are monsters.”\textsuperscript{52} The Committee published at least 15,000 copies of Clarkson’s essay and just as many of other texts along a similar vein.

Another prominent example of Committee literature was Alexander Falconbridge’s \textit{An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa}. Falconbridge (c1740-1792) was one of the abolition movement’s ultimate redemption stories. After spending years as a naval surgeon on

\textsuperscript{50} Oakes, “Property in Man” (2009)
\textsuperscript{51} J.R., Oldfield, \textit{Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery the Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) 44.
\textsuperscript{52} Clarkson, “Essay on Slavery and Commerce” Found in Kitson, 44.
slave transport ships, no doubt seeing some of the slave trade’s worst horrors, Falconbridge had a change of heart and left the only job he knew to join the movement.\textsuperscript{53} Falconbridge soon became the Committee’s slave trade expert, at times traveling with Thomas Clarkson and speaking on the treatment of human cargo.\textsuperscript{54} The young surgeon’s horror stories made him a favorite within abolitionist circles, and along with his enigmatic wife, Anna Maria, Alexander Falconbridge would soon become famous names within the abolitionist movement.

While Clarkson and Falconbridge toured the nation making their case, the Committee also added an image to their campaign by creating a seal for their movement (below). Written across the top of the seal were the words, “AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER…” The image of the shackled African in a tattered loincloth was a common depiction of a slave, especially on the tropical islands of the Empire, and the imagery of his bound hands praying reveals the Committee’s religious ties and their efforts to link the movement to equality under God. The use of ellipses instead of a question mark after the statement seems to make the question entirely rhetorical and challenge the viewer to action, not an answer. Clarkson felt that the seal helped greatly to bring attention to the Committee’s cause, and it would remain a prominent image for the movement for some time.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53}Falconbridge, 1-3 (from SAE)
\textsuperscript{54}Clarkson 405.
\textsuperscript{55}Thomas Clarkson 450.
The materials and speeches excited support from religious leaders and local officials, and as their popularity grew, Clarkson had no trouble gathering signatures from influential citizens across the country for countless petitions to Parliament. By May of 1788, the House of Commons was “loaded with petitions from various parts of the kingdom.” As a result, the King ordered that a specific Privy Council report be put together “to take into their consideration the present state of the African trade, particularly… the practice and manner of purchasing or obtaining slaves…”  

56 Soon after, on May 9; Prime Minister Pitt stated in Parliament his plan to “move a resolution relative to a subject, which was of more importance than any which had ever been agitated in that house.”  

57 Despite Pitt’s lofty promise, in the very same speech he proposed to have the abolition debate postponed so that more evidence could be collected, and after a brief debate on whether or not a vote should take place, it was decided that the next session of Parliament would decide the issue after the King’s Privy Council had come back with evidence.

56 Thomas Clarkson 471.
57 Thomas Clarkson 504.
The passions of the House, which Clarkson believed could have passed a bill that very day, would have time to cool. 58

While the discussion in Parliament was a new step for the abolition debate, the forces of the anti-abolitionist movement had spent decade since the Mansfield decision formulating a three-pronged attack against abolition. In brief summary, the case against abolition, as outlined by Porter, had three main elements: economic, legal, and moral. Morally, it was argued that Africa had practiced slavery for centuries and thus deserved it. It was also argued, rather ironically, that slavery was the only way to prevent black depopulation because if left to their own devices, Africans would kill each other off. Legally the basic argument, which was invoked from slave trader to joint-stock company, was that the slaves were property and thus could not be taken by government. Just as simply, the economic case against abolition was that freeing the slaves would ruin African trade, release myriad black poor into society, bankrupt merchants, ruin England’s African colonies, and put other nations who still practiced slavery at a trade advantage. 59 In the mercantilist world of Imperial England, the international balance of power was perhaps the nation’s top priority. By making abolition a threat to such power, the anti-abolitions united their cause with British strength. While the Privy Council took almost a year to gather their evidence, the anti-abolitionist campaign had time to circulate these views to the public and remind it of the true cost of abolition.

Following the abolitionists’ model, the anti-abolitionists made their case for the slave trade public. The moral arguments of the anti-abolitionists hardly stacked up against Clarkson’s touching religious and moral appeals, and they knew it. Instead, the anti-abolitionists decided to combat the economic and legal problems in the claims made by the Committee and its followers.

58 Thomas Clarkson 508.
59 Porter 55-60
In the London *Times*, an openly abolitionist paper since 1788, anti-abolitionists started to publish economic and legal attacks on abolition under pseudonyms, in particular “Consistency” and “Wellwisher”. In April of 1789, a month before the abolitionist debate was set to begin in the House, “Wellwisher” wrote on abolition:

> I have good reason to believe, that nearly one third of the commerce of this kingdom depends on the African trade... [with abolition] the trade of England will be transferred to the other nations of Europe, who are waiting with impatience for the completion of this mad...this treaonable scheme.\(^60\)

The argument was nothing new, but for what seems to have been the first time, the debate had moved to a public forum.

While Wellwisher developed the economic argument, others warned of political ruin. On April 4, “An Englishman, and a Man of Humanity” asked, “If Mr. Wilberforce carries his cause.[*sic*] I should be glad to know what is to become of our settlements on the Coast of Africa.” The idea was that without the slave trade, England could not compete economically in Africa and would be forced to abandon its interests or be conquered by a slave trading power. With no viable African products to replace slavery, the author posed a question the abolitionists could not answer saying “What compensation is to be made to the nation at large for the loss of so much trade and commerce?” The article also brought up the legal argument against abolition: “What consideration is to be made to the Planters in general for altering the nature of their property, and to those in particular who have bought large tracts of land... upon the faith of being supplied with the means of cultivating them?”\(^61\) The strategy of the anti-abolitionists was to make it seem as if the abolitionists had not made plans to address these problems, and to argue

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that even if abolition was something that should eventually be dealt with, the movement was being far too hasty by proposing an end to the trade before preparation was made for replacing it.

On a note unrelated to economics or law, but relevant to the discussion of Sierra Leone, the anti-abolitionists also publicized their argument that it was better for Africans to be somewhere other than Africa. According to Thomas Clarkson, and abolition historians, there was considerable research at the time to support the idea that the black population of Africa, especially in areas near the coast, was declining. While from a modern perspective it does not seem the least bit surprising that the constant threat of capture and enslavement, along with the obvious decline in adult men, could lead to a decrease in the birth rate, it was thought by many at the time that it was Africa, not the slave trade, that was causing such depopulation. Accordingly, the anti-abolitionists argued that, “[slaves] were better off in the islands than in their own country.”62 As we shall see in the next chapter, these arguments clearly affected the planning of the Sierra Leone Colony.

Whether or not the abolitionists had thought out many of these questions or not, their chosen style of persuasion made them especially vulnerable to the anti-abolitionists’ efforts to appear the more practical side of the debate. Abolition historian J.R. Oldfield explains that the purpose of the Committee’s pamphlets had been to “introduce readers to the subject of the slave trade and arouse their sympathy and interest.”63 With an emphasis on sympathy and interest, not commerce or law, the nearly apocalyptic tone of the anti-abolitionists’ response made the abolitionist literature looked naïve and idealistic. The result was a decrease of support for abolition in Parliament. Clarkson noted in his memoirs that the anti-abolition articles “were

62 Thomas Clarkson 35.
63 Oldfield 44.
thought most likely to influence the members of the House of Commons."64 When the House of Commons reconvened in May of 1789 to discuss the slave trade, Wilberforce discovered that the anti-abolitionists were winning the war of words.

On May 12, 1789, William Wilberforce submitted a motion for the abolition of the slave trade, and while his eloquent speech helped secure a symbolic victory for the movement, the anti-abolitionists were able to capitalize on the effect of their literature and again stall a vote on abolition. Wilberforce’s speech, which lasted for three and half hours, was centered around twelve propositions condemning slavery which he hoped the House would vote on as a precursor for the slave trade bill passing. All but one of these propositions dealt with the morality of the slave trade. Wilberforce’s only attempt to address the issues of commerce vaguely argued that Africa had fertile soil and could produce “articles” that “might probably be substituted in the place of that [trade] which is now carried on in Slaves.”65 Throughout his career Wilberforce was a highly skilled politician, and it seems likely that he would have addressed the issue of commerce more concretely if he had been able to. Clarkson and Wilberforce had spent a decade researching the horrors of slavery, but they were completely unprepared, or unwilling, to discuss its finances.

What made the debate especially frustrating for Wilberforce was the fact that very few anti-abolitionists argued with most of his propositions. There was no doubting that slaves were mistreated and that this caused all kind of negatives consequences. The sides disagreed on the issue of depopulation, but they both seemed to agree that there was not enough evidence to definitively say what effect slavery had on the black population.66 Unfortunately for

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64 Thomas Clarkson 34.
66 Thomas Clarkson 76.
Wilberforce, there was a big difference between agreeing that the slave trade causes death and violence for Africans and deciding to abolish it. After unanimously agreeing to put Wilberforce’s propositions on the books, the House agreed to again forestall a vote on abolition so that the anti-abolitionists could gather evidence of their own. It was impossible to know at the time, but Wilberforce and Clarkson had lost their best shot at abolition for a decade. Circumstances were about to get a whole lot worse for abolitionists.

As William Wilberforce and the anti-abolitionists sparred back and forth over when a vote could finally occur on abolition, events unfolded that pushed the tide of public opinion farther in the favor of the status quo and conservative behavior. According to Clarkson’s memoirs, written in 1808, the French Revolution, which he was notoriously a supporter of, caused the English public to see, “a government as it were dissected. They had seen an old constitution taken down, and a new one put up, piece by piece.”67 As a reaction to the Revolution, Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man(1791) argued that it was lawful for the public to revolt if the government did not take care of their needs and rights. The threat of a black uprising had long been a tool of the anti-abolitionists, and Clarkson argues that these two events made the lower classes rumble, “so as to alarm a great number of persons of property in the kingdom.”68 With the idea of a revolt of the lower classes in the minds of England’s elite, the slave revolts in the French islands St. Domingo and Martinique further tied abolition to revolution. According to Clarkson, the anti-abolitionists capitalized on these events by publicizing the horrors of the revolts in an attempt to stir up fear. Many anti-abolitionists went so far as to claim that the rumor of abolition had inspired these uprisings. As a result, a massive book of evidence against slavery that the Committee had

67 Thomas Clarkson 209.
68 Thomas Clarkson 211.
formed since Clarkson had begun his travels was seen as a dangerous political tool, and many members of Parliament found it “too profane for many of them to touch.”

Matters got worse in April of 1791 when slaves on the British island of Dominica began to rebel against their masters. When news reached London, the fear of Empire-wide revolt gripped the city. Meetings were held in public taverns and petitions were sent to Parliament asking for troops to be sent throughout the Empire to put down any rebellion. At the heart of these meetings and petitions was an insistence that the potential for abolition had caused these insurrections. It was thought that by discussing abolition, the seed of freedom had been planted, and before it could grow, the slaves had taken matters into their own hands through violence. One letter to Government, cited in Clarkson’s memoir, made it clear that abolition was at the center of the issue: “the best way of preserving them [the colonies] would be to bring the question of the Slave-trade to an immediate issue; and that it was the duty of government… to oppose the abolition of it.” After three years of delays, the anti-abolitionists now demanded that a vote occur right away. Unable to risk appearing disloyal in a time of crisis, the abolitionists had little choice but to agree.

Still optimistic that the bill could prevail, William Wilberforce ended the nearly three-year period of evidence gathering by proposing his Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade on April 18, 1791. Despite the turning tide of public opinion, which Clarkson recalled had many viewing abolitionists as “monsters”, Wilberforce and many of his colleagues still believed the House wanted abolition. After two days of intense debate, which ended with an impassioned plea by Wilberforce at three o’clock in the morning of the 20th, the bill finally went to a vote.

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69 Ibid.
70 Thomas Clarkson 212.
With 88 votes for abolition and 163 against, Wilberforce’s bill lost by a majority of 75 votes, and for a time, the abolitionist dream was on hold.71

While the result was a “grievous one” for Clarkson and the Committee, they immediately set to work rebuilding their movement. The Committee had learned from their loss, and they knew that changes would have to be made to gain more support for the movement. The Committee had succeeded in winning hearts but not minds, and in order to answer their more concrete challenges, they turned to Africa to help assuage doubts about abolition. It is easy to imagine why the connection was so quickly made between the economic criticism of abolition and African colonization. The Committee could produce all of the evidence on fertile soil and natural resources that they wanted, but it was all hypothetical and impossible to prove. At the time, there was no economic incentive for the free market to produce anything but slaves on the African coast, and so there was almost no trade in anything but human beings. A successful African trading colony with no ties to slavery could prove that these resources could be cultivated and eventually replace slavery as a source of income for England. By colonizing Africa with freed slaves, the Committee could also calm fears about what to do with slaves once they were free and reassure the rather ironic doubts about Africans’ ability to survive in Africa. Finally, a British colony without slavery ties would answer the political question of how England would keep a presence in Africa without participating in the slave trade. Such a replacement would even appease mercantilist concerns about world power. Committee member Granville Sharp was still looking for money and colonists to people his Granville Town dream, but before the session of Parliament that had voted down abolition broke for the summer months, it approved a Committee-proposed charter for the Sierra Leone Company.

71 Thomas Clarkson 337.
Chapter 3 – Four Months to Plan a Colony

I am surprised our boasted Philanthropists, the Directors of the Company should have subjected themselves to the censure they must meet, for sporting with the lives of such numbers… I mean by sending so many here at once, before houses, materials for building or other conveniences were prepared to receive them.- Anna Maria Falconbridge (June 1792) 72

The Sierra Leone Company got its charter in May of 1791, and in August of that same year, John Clarkson left London for Sierra Leone to recruit as many freed slaves as possible to populate the new colony. As has been discussed, the scene upon Clarkson’s arrival in Sierra Leone was completely unprepared for such a large mass of settlers. While some of the difficulties of the colony’s first year were more related to Company decisions after the settlement, a topic that will be discussed in the fourth and fifth chapters, many of the factors that led to the high death toll in the first months could have been prevented by more planning on the part of the Company. Anna Maria Falconbridge, wife of Alexander and witness to Sierra Leone’s first months, cited the “hare-brained” decision to populate the colony so soon as the leading cause of the deaths that visited the colony in its first year. 73 The connection between the Sierra Leone Company’s rush to colonize and the abolition movement’s poor state of affairs in 1791 cannot be a coincidence, and, in fact, the Company was well aware of the damage their haste could cause. The goals of abolition were simply paramount, and Sierra Leone was an abolitionist project.

On March 28, 1791, Henry Thornton petitioned parliament for the rights to create a trading company in Sierra Leone, and at first, it appeared that the Company had little to do with abolition. Thornton had been put in charge of the Company because it was believed that his strong reputation as a businessman would give the “expectation of success” to the Company’s

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72 Falconbridge 150.
73 Falconbridge 130-140.
plans.\textsuperscript{74} Not forgetting his purpose, Thornton’s petition told Parliament the purpose of the Company was “for carrying on trade between the kingdom of Great Britain and the coasts, harbours, and countries of Africa.” There was no mention of abolition, and it is likely that Thornton was wary of connecting his bill to the controversial abolitionist movement that was set to be voted on in a few short weeks. When the bill was proposed, and after its opponents had time to react, even the reasons presented against giving the Sierra Leone Company incorporation were limited to concerns about trade and fair competition.\textsuperscript{75} As a trading venture, the Sierra Leone Company needed Parliamentary permission to carry out its business, and when such permission was finally given on May 30, the Sierra Leone Company was officially in business. The British Empire loved trade with colonies, and Thornton’s proposition had the best chance of succeeding if it seemed economically focused.

No matter how much Thornton chose to downplay the connection, the Sierra Leone Company was born directly out of Sharp’s efforts in Granville Town. Even before the destruction of Granville Town, it had been Sharp’s idea to put together a group of merchants to trade with his struggling colony.\textsuperscript{76} Sharp’s public proposal for the formation of the St. George’s Bay Company promised the kind of trade that he hoped would fund his colony, but he also emphasized the benefit of trading with “free settlers” of Africa.\textsuperscript{77} Alexander Falconbridge, one of the few men in the movement with naval experience, was rewarded for his services to abolition and chosen to survey St. George’s Bay for the Company. Along with his wife, he left for Africa in January of 1791 to see how bad things really were. The Company’s ties to abolition were strengthened further when Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce came on as directors

\textsuperscript{74} Sbacchi 62.
\textsuperscript{75} Reasons against giving a territorial grant to a company of merchants, to colonize and cultivate the peninsula of Sierra Leona [sic], on the coast of Africa” (London: British Library, 1791).
\textsuperscript{76} Sharp Memoirs 339.
\textsuperscript{77} Sharp Memoirs 347-48
of the Company. 78 Soon after, it was decided that Thomas Clarkson’s brother John, also a member of the Committee for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, would travel to Nova Scotia to recruit settlers. 79 No matter how much Company chairman Henry Thornton avoided mentioning the movement in his proposal, the Company was made up entirely of abolitionists and was taking on the task of rebuilding the colony of the so-called father of abolition. Commerce was certainly a goal but only because commerce would further the abolition cause. It may have looked like just another joint-stock trading company, but clearly abolition was at the heart of the Sierra Leone Company.

While Granville Sharp’s failures in Africa can almost be excused by the complete lack of experience he and his fellow planners had with African colonization, the Sierra Leone Company Directors were explicitly aware of the problems their colonists would face in Africa. Even before the Company’s charter was approved, opponents predicted the difficulties with poor administration, land rights, and vulnerability to foreign invasion, among others, that would visit the colony in its early years. 80 When Alexander Falconbridge returned from his voyage in Sierra Leone, he reported just how destroyed Granville Town really was and described the tenuous situation with the local chiefs. Perhaps most shockingly, the Company’s own report to its shareholders in October of 1791 acknowledged the high death toll of Granville Town and attributes it to landing near the rainy season and the poor accommodations provided for the settlers upon arrival. 81 Both before Clarkson was sent to recruit settlers and while he was busy in Nova Scotia, the Company knew that poor preparation and timing had caused high mortality in

78 Sharp Memoirs 273.
“Substance of the report…1791”
Sbacchi 63
79 Thomas Clarkson 373.
80 “Reasons against giving…”
81 “Substance of the report…1791” 5.
Granville Town, but the eleven months they allotted between their incorporation and Clarkson’s landfall hardly provided adequate time to do much better than Sharp had in 1787.

For the abolitionists, the potential deaths were worth the risk because the sooner they had a colony in Africa, the sooner they could answer the economic and ideological questions that had stumped them during the first round of abolition debates. While abolitionists were certainly in control of the Company, they were also indirectly motivated by a profit goal because, as outlined in Chapter 2, an economically viable Sierra Leone that did not engage in the slave trade held all the answers for the economic and legal challenges of the anti-abolitionists.

Falconbridge’s efforts in Africa also improved relations with the natives. Along with detailed information on the desultory state of Granville Town, Falconbridge brought the son of King Naimbanna, a local Temme chief in Sierra Leone, to receive education in London. Falconbridge and his wife had worked diligently in Granville Town to improve relations with the local chiefs, and when they returned to Africa a year later with Clarkson’s Freetown settlers, King Naimbanna recognized the Falconbridges and hurried to embrace them.\(^2\) Naimbanna was an ally of King Jimmy, who had burned Granville Town, and Falconbridge’s efforts, though largely ignored by the Company in their report on his travels, went a long way towards restoring trust between settlers and natives in time for John Clarkson’s settlers.

While Falconbridge’s bittersweet report of a destroyed Granville Town with placated natives encouraged the Committee in London, John Clarkson was already traveling across the ocean to find enough settlers to build England’s newest colony. The date of Falconbridge’s return is not clear in the sources, but Wilson makes emphasizes that Clarkson left before Falconbridge’s

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\(^2\)Falconbridge 145.
return and did not know the degree of Granville Town’s destruction.\textsuperscript{83} Clarkson left London for Nova Scotia in August, and Falconbridge was back in London in time to report on the state of the colony and be on the ships sent to Sierra Leone that arrived in January of 1792. This timeline suggests that Falconbridge returned to London some time between Clarkson’s August departure and November at the very latest. The Company may have been hoping to avoid sending Clarkson to Nova Scotia in the middle of winter, but if they thought the situation in Africa warranted an exploration voyage by Falconbridge, it seems rather reckless to send Clarkson to recruit settlers without any idea as to the state of the colony he was headed for.

However uniformed he may have been, John Clarkson’s youthful idealism and genuine sympathy with the black loyalists’ cause made him the perfect man to recruit them for Sierra Leone. Thomas Peters, who actually left London before Clarkson so that he could start to stir up the Nova Scotian loyalists’ interest in Africa, gathered interested families from across the colony and brought them to Halifax to meet Clarkson. Clarkson arrived in Halifax on October 7, 1791, and he went straight to the office of Nova Scotian Governor John Parr to begin the diplomatic work of making the local government sympathetic to his cause. Clarkson had been warned that the Halifax government might resent his purpose, and while in Nova Scotia, his efforts were divided between appeasing the local government and appealing to the disgruntled blacks.

In order to achieve the latter aim, Clarkson wasted no time visiting the communities where the landless blacks lived a state-supported existence, and he immediately came to the conclusion that they would be better off in Africa.\textsuperscript{84} He attended their church services, and as a deeply religious man himself, the faith of the former slaves moved his heart. He agreed to preach on freedom and Sierra Leone from the pulpit, and it was in these church gatherings that Clarkson

\textsuperscript{83} Wilson 76-77.
\textsuperscript{84} Wilson 63.
formed the bond with the former slaves that would motivate his frustrations with the Company in the years to come. When the loyalists asked if they would have to pay quit-rents on land, which they argued had kept them impoverished and landless in Canada, Clarkson promised that the Company would never seek to profit from their work on the land. Clarkson painted a picture of a developed colony with thousands of acres of free, cultivable land just waiting for a group of black settlers to farm it. He also promised that the slave trade was greatly diminished by the Sierra Leone River. Clarkson’s description of the colony was so tempting, and life in Nova Scotia so bleak, that even after encouraging anyone with land or means in Nova Scotia to remain, interested recruits far exceeded Company expectations. By mid-November, nearly 1,500 loyalists had signed up for young Clarkson’s voyage. On January 15, 1792, after weeks of delays, the 15-ship fleet, carefully designed by Clarkson to comfortably carry the slaves on this unheard of reverse Middle Passage, set sail for Africa.85

As Clarkson gathered the settlers, the Company went about preparing for their arrival. After learning that Clarkson hoped to depart Nova Scotia by the New Year, the Company sent three ships and around 100 Europeans to prepare the land for the new colony. Of this group, forty were skilled laborers, ten were administrators, sixteen were soldiers, and the rest were women and children. While Clarkson’s fleet filled with over 1,000 settlers certainly exceeded initial Company estimates, by the time they sent the fleet, Clarkson’s letters, full of optimistic numbers that approached the eventual reality, had reached London. The idea that forty laborers could make much progress at building infrastructure, surveying land, or preparing any kind of agriculture for over 1,000 people was totally unrealistic. The advance fleet, comprised of nearly as many women and children as laborers, seemed more a burden than help for the new colony.

85 Wilson 68.
The almost non-existent troop level also reveals the Company’s relaxed attitude towards the territory. Clarkson’s group of peaceful men, women, and children were coming to inhabit an area that fewer than three years before had been burned and pillaged by the nearby Temme. No advanced group went to negotiate terms with the native tribes, and somehow sixteen soldiers were expected to protect the colony from its potential attackers. The Governor initially appointed to the colony, unemployed Captain and friend of John Clarkson Henry Hew Dalrymple, had actually resigned when his proposed 150 troops had been cut to just sixteen. This was surprising because Dalrymple was such staunch abolitionists that he freed the slaves and let the land go uncultivated at his family cocoa plantation in Grenada. In addition, a peacetime appointment as a Royal Governor would have been a major posting for any Captain, which was actually a relatively low rank on the Royal Navy hierarchy for men of stature. For Dalrymple to resign over the low troop level either betrays cold feet or, more likely, a military man’s unwillingness to enter hostile territory, responsible for the lives of over a thousand civilians, with just over a dozen armed men. Such a low troop presence was completely at odds with their promise made to Parliament only a few months before that in light of the dangers of attack from slave-traders and locals, “sufficient strength shall be sent out for security.” It appears that Company did not meet his desired troop level due to the cost of hiring fighting men, and while the effects of low troop levels would not be felt until several years into the colony’s growth, 134 additional soldiers really would have been helpful in building and protecting the colony in its dark early months.

While it might be easy to excuse the Company for not knowing what exactly was needed to supply this far larger than expected group of settlers, Clarkson meticulously updated the

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86 Sharp 275.
87 Wilson 74.
88 “Substance of the report…1791”
Company on exactly what kind of supplies and personnel he would need upon arrival. As busy
as Clarkson was recruiting settlers in Nova Scotia- and his letters reveal a whirlwind few months
that go a long way towards explaining his exhaustion on the voyage East- the young Lieutenant
still found the time to regularly update Company Chairman Henry Thornton on his numbers and
needs. In mid-October, once Clarkson had realized that his group would be so large, he wrote to
Thornton updating him on his numbers and mentioned his wish that Governor Dalrymple “will
have everything in readiness for our arrival.”89 Over the course of the next month, Clarkson sent
the Company reports on how many units of each kind of clothing, tool, worker, and food he
would need for his young colony. His estimates were based on his expected number of settlers
and the colonial experience of the Nova Scotians. Clarkson’s emphasis on saving money for the
Company in other letters also seems to suggest that he would not exaggerate the needs of his
colonists. Clarkson’s letters also stressed the need for land to be cleared and infrastructure to be
prepared for his settlers. His diary contains at least half a dozen of these letters written to
Thornton while in Nova Scotia, and it appears that they were largely ignored by the Company.

Clarkson’s emphasis on preparing the land intensified when, in early November, he heard of
a claim made by a group of the white Nova Scotians, who wanted the landless blacks to stay in
the territory as laborers, that the last attempt to colonize Africa had failed miserably because land
was not surveyed in time for the rainy season. The implication in the report of the previous
attempt at African colonization was that a trip to Africa meant the same landlessness the blacks
suffered in Nova Scotia with an unsheltered monsoon season to survive.90 Clarkson vehemently
denied the report, but his next letter to Thornton seemed to be influenced by this scare attempt by
the Nova Scotians: “I hope there will be a surveyor ready to mark out the proper allotments of

89 John Clarkson 46.
90 John Clarkson 52.
land, and if Dalrymple could employ any of his men to prepare wood for raising the huts it
would be very serviceable.” On the 28th of November, Clarkson sent Thornton another letter
which asked for the Company to send mechanics and engineers to the colony and again
emphasized the importance of surveying before the colonists’ arrival saying, “I shall rest
satisfied conscious[sic] that on my arrival in Africa, I shall find that the Surveyor has marked
out the different allotments of land for five in a family, four, three, six or any other numbers so
that we may put them in possession without delay.”91 Of course no huts were built or allotments
for any combination of settlers laid out, and while the Company did send a surveyor, it will be
shown that his function was to immediately facilitate trade, not land for the Nova Scotians.
Clarkson was simply ignored by the Company and its employees.

In fact, it was not just the surveyor and carpenter who were inactive prior to Clarkson’s
arrival in Africa. The entire advance crew seems to have hardly set foot on shore. The low
numbers and resources for rebuilding would have likely produced disappointment for the settlers
no matter what, but the ships seem to have treated the month in African waters as a tropical
vacation. Perhaps it was the low troop levels that kept the Europeans on board or maybe it was
the drunkenness and incompetence that would characterize Clarkson’s assistants. No matter the
cause, the lack of preparation had horrible consequences. Some time near the beginning of 1792,
the Company realized that the colony was perhaps underprepared and sent a ship full of supplies,
but according to their 1795 history of the colony, “She indeed arrived too late to be of any
advantage to the colony.”92 The slow to arrive ship was just one of the many consequences of a
hasty preparation.

91 Ibid.
92 “Substance of the report of the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone company, delivered to
the General Court of Proprietors, on Thursday the 26th February, 1795” (London, 1795)
John Clarkson’s 52-day voyage from Halifax to Sierra Leone was far from easy. With behavior uncharacteristic of a Navy man, Clarkson was bedridden with a strange combination of symptoms that included hysterias, fever, immobility, and violent headaches. At one point, after lying motionless for over 24 hours, he was actually pronounced dead. It was not an easy voyage for his fellow passengers either. Though the travelers behaved excellently and divided responsibilities and supplies without violence or upheaval, typhus and other illnesses took the lives of 65 of the settlers before reaching land. As the fleet approached Africa, the loom of land seemed to give some strength to the young Captain, and he traveled to each ship in turn, preaching on the promise and hope of their new land.93

Despite his renewed strength and sermons of hope, the usually idealistic and optimistic Clarkson still felt anxious about what kind of colony would greet him in Africa. Somehow, despite sending out at least half a dozen letters to the Company while in Nova Scotia, Clarkson had not received any communication in return. For Clarkson’s anxieties, this silence had the positive benefit of keeping him unaware of King Jimmy’s destruction of the Granville Town colony. In fact, Clarkson’s last communication about the natives had come the day he set sail for Nova Scotia from England when a returning merchant told him the “natives were inclined to be very friendly.”94 Unfortunately, he had still heard rumors in Halifax of the violence, but without official word from the Company, Clarkson had ignored these stories and pressed onwards. Now that the arrival was imminent, he began to let the rumors bother him and even doubt how much the Company had done to prepare for his arrival:

I could not help fancying the report I had heard at the Governor’s table at Halifax […] might have been[sic] some foundation in truth. At other times I thought, as I

93 Wilson 76-77.
94 Clarkson 37.
had not heard from England […] and the Directors might not have provided for
our reception […] I could not help giving way to those despondent reflections.95
Clarkson would soon find a situation far worse than even his “despondent reflection[s]”
had dreamed of.

As the Lucretia sailed into the mouth of the Sierra Leone River, John Clarkson was on deck
to spot the flags of the Sierra Leone Company on the three-ship fleet that waited for them in the
harbor. When he thought he saw his friend Dalrymple approach him by boat, Clarkson ordered a
13-gun salute for the Governor, only to discover that it was just a messenger carrying news that
Dalrymple had resigned. To make the day even more dramatic, his brother Thomas and the rest
of the Company directors were imploring John to accept the post of Governor in Sierra Leone.96
It is worth emphasizing that Dalrymple resigned before the fleet left England. There was ample
time to appoint a new governor before the ships sailed. Alexander Falconbridge was a part of the
voyage and obviously had experience dealing with the Temme, but he was passed over for the
post. Clarkson, only a Lieutenant with no command experience, was promoted to Governor
based solely on his own reports from Nova Scotia and perhaps his famous brother. Despite his
failing health and a fiancee waiting in England, Clarkson felt that the opportunity, and less
cynically perhaps his duty to see through his promises to the loyalists, necessitated he take the
position. Soon after deciding to accept the post Clarkson wrote in his diary: “Feeling
additionally impressed… that if I left the Colony, inevitable ruin must be the consequence… I
was compelled to sink all private considerations… and to remain with the poor Nova Scotians till
the Colony is established or lost.” 97

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95 Clarkson 168.
96 Wilson 79, 81.
97 Wilson, John Clarkson and the African Adventure 81.
Clarkson was certainly committed to the cause, but his somewhat surprising appointment, given his complete inexperience with the region, had more far-reaching ramifications than either he or the Company might have expected. According to Anna Maria, both Falconbridge’s saw the Clarkson appointment as a betrayal by the directors. Alexander and his wife had made the round trip voyage to Sierra Leone from England twice in a year, and though they had been hesitant to return to Africa the second time, Anna Maria was persuaded by the Company Directors, whom she initially believed to be some of the most righteous men in England. The Company had stressed to the Falconbridges how important their work in Africa had been and just how badly the abolitionist cause needed them to return. After a few days in Sierra Leone to watch the Company’s appointed councillors in action, Anna Maria wrote, “never were characters worse adapted to manage any purpose of magnitude than some whom they have nominated.”

The seemingly nepotistic appointment of the inexperienced Clarkson as governor and the incompetent band of councillors sent to help him gave Anna Maria doubts about the directors true intentions with the Colony. Perhaps more importantly for the colony, the news drove Alexander into heavy bouts of drinking that made him largely ineffective and miserable for his entire time in Sierra Leone. The loss of a man who had sat with the local chiefs in palaver and made the safety of the entire colony possible cannot be underestimated, and one can only wonder what the Colony’s first years would have been like with a sober, motivated Falconbridge guiding Freetown.

Perhaps it was the flattering offer of command, but it seems somewhat odd that Clarkson showed few signs anger or frustration with his brother and the Company for their rather cavalier attitude towards settling the people to whose future Clarkson had spent nearly half a year

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98 Falconbridge 134.  
99 Ibid.
pledging his loyalty and commitment. Thomas Clarkson’s letter, far from apologizing for the fewer than requested supplies or absent command post, celebrated the attention the colony was already drawing in England telling his brother that “The Eyes of England are upon you & this Infant Colony. No Establishment [has] made such a Noise as this in the Papers or been so generally admired.”\footnote{Wilson, John Clarkson and the African Adventure 80.} As far as the company was concerned the very appearance of Clarkson’s settlers on the coast was success enough. The Company could boast to the papers of their colony with freed slave settlers and a famous governor. On his own in Africa though, John Clarkson had to face the stark reality of turning a barren shore into a hospitable home for nearly 1,200 colonists before the rains came. It is unlikely that Thomas Clarkson would have liked the “Eyes of England” to witness what followed.
Chapter 4- Marooned On a Hostile Shore

It is quite customary of a morning to ask, “how many died last night?"
-Anna Maria Falconbridge, (1792).

Throughout the history of the British Empire, stories of colonization and settlement are
wrought with sickness, starvation, massacres, and a staggering death rate. From the completely
wiped out Roanoke Colony of 1584 to the chaos and starvation of Port Jackson in 1788, death
and hardship seemed to be accepted parts of the colonizing experience. Yet the sufferings of the
Nova Scotians during their first year in Sierra Leone are especially tragic in light of the promise
and hope with which they arrived. These were not convicts sent to relieve an overburdened
prison system or soldiers sacrificed for the expansion of Empire; they were men, women, and
children who had suffered under bondage in America, fought for England against their former
masters, and trusted the Empire enough to twice pick up their lives and start over in a new land.
From the beginning, the poor preparation of the Sierra Leone Company thrust the former slaves,
forced to transition from life near the Artic Circle to eight latitude degrees above the equator,
into the wild, with next to no shelter and limited supplies. While it is certainly not as well known
in history, Sierra Leone’s first year rivals any horror story from Virginia or New South Wales.

The fast-approaching rainy season necessitated immediate action to prepare the colony,
and though the Company trusted Clarkson as Governor, the directors devised a command
structure that prevented any central authority from governing effectively. In a system
reminiscent of Granville Sharp’s convoluted Israelite power structure, the Company sent seven
men to Africa to serve as councillors with an equal vote in decision-making as the Governor.
Unbeknownst to Clarkson, who assumed this structure was due to the Company’s lack of faith in
his abilities, this command structure had actually been put in place to ensure that his predecessor
did not become too authoritarian. No matter the reason, Clarkson’s only real authority lay in the
ability to cast a deciding vote if there was a deadlock. With so many men having a voice in every decision, each meeting seemed to devolve into an altercation or power struggle.\textsuperscript{101} Clarkson quickly tired of this command structure. Within a week of arrival he wrote in his diary, “I am now without the power of controlling what I see to be wrong.” He even lamented “I ought not to hesitate in doing justice to myself and connexion, by returning to a northern climate.”\textsuperscript{102}

If John was second-guessing his decision to stay, there is no doubt that it was his fellow councillors who made him homesick. One of the seven other counselors, a Dr. Bell, arrived at Sierra Leone “so drunk, as not to know who I [Clarkson] was”, and after two days of drunken fever during which Dr. Bell was not once capable of identifying his Governor, the counsel suffered its first death by alcohol and was quickly down to seven.\textsuperscript{103} When Clarkson refused to give Bell a full honors funeral, the rest of the councillors were outraged and immediately began to dislike their sober and puritanical leader.\textsuperscript{104} Clarkson had been lured into staying by his brother’s promises of promotion and a virtuous enterprise, but Thomas had essentially hamstringed his brother from the start.

After the conflict over Bell’s funeral, the command structure quickly disintegrated, and the councillors became a detriment to the colony. The other councillors seemed to decide that their position gave them unchecked authority, and they spent their time pilfering the supplies and taking extra soap, food, and spirits while the settlers were immediately put on rations. Councillors would even undertake assorted building projects, ordering timber and supplies to be brought to shore, and then abandon the project while the goods were soaked in the afternoon rains and high tides. Even more troubling to the settlers, who had left two homes already due to

\textsuperscript{101} Wilson, \textit{John Clarkson and the African Adventure} 85.  
\textsuperscript{102} Clarkson 171.  
\textsuperscript{103} Clarkson 172.  
\textsuperscript{104} Wilson \textit{John Clarkson and the African Adventure} 86.
racism and inferior treatment, many of the petty officers sent by the Company made it known that they were above the blacks, shouting racial insults and insisting upon respect from the blacks in a way that was painfully reminiscent of the American South so many of them had left behind.\textsuperscript{105} Beyond treating the black settlers poorly, the councillors even turned on the Falconbridges, taking Anna Maria’s tent away during the peak of the rainy season. Soon after, she became so sick that her head was shaved, and she was bed-ridden for weeks.\textsuperscript{106} However unruly they may have been, Clarkson was still too weak to really monitor the councillors’ activities. Even if he had been vigilant, the power structure made it impossible for him to censure a colleague without majority approval. It was truly an impossible situation for the young Lieutenant, and he was almost literally alone in organizing the colony.\textsuperscript{107}

On top of poor leadership, as the supplies sent by the Company were unpacked, it became clear that the directors’ first priority was immediate trade and production, not helping the colonists survive the summer. Clarkson inherited sugar-boiling pans and machines for producing cotton in place of timber or grain. Instead of gold to trade with the natives for supplies, the Company had sent English novelties like flower-pots and penny knives. The Company sent white workers, who were also ill-suited for building shelters, and it seems unlikely that the group of sugar plantation experts and former American plantation owners (hardly a political group to send to oversee the execution of a colony by freed slaves) were suited for the meticulous record-keeping and public works knowledge needed to ration and employ the colonists. The Directors wanted a sugar crop to report to England, and while tons of supplies were ruined when the settlers’ first attempt at a storehouse took on gallons of water in a rainstorm, the plantation owners patiently waited to turn a profit.

\textsuperscript{105} Wilson \textit{The Black Loyalists} 149.
\textsuperscript{106} Falconbridge 134.
\textsuperscript{107} Wilson \textit{John Clarkson and the African Adventure} 87.
While Clarkson struggled to control his councillors and assert his authority, the settlers worked to prepare their strip of land near the mouth of the Sierra Leone River for the rainy season. Soon after his arrival, Clarkson was taken ashore to survey the land, and though the lack of man-made structures was disheartening, he found the land itself to be “most rich and beautiful.”\textsuperscript{108} Clarkson was so impressed that he decided to form his new colony almost on top of the destroyed Sharp colony, and the settlers immediately got to work clearing about 80 acres of land that had already became overgrown from the previous settlement. Streets were laid out and named after the Company’s twelve directors, and the site was officially named Freetown.\textsuperscript{109} With Clarkson sworn in and a town outline laid out, the ceremony was over, and it was time to begin preparing for the rain.

Not surprisingly, with power struggles and discord at the top, the organization of the building process quickly broke down and became inefficient. Tropical Africa is hottest just before the rains, and with the temperature rising to 114 degrees in the afternoon, the former Nova Scotia residents, were exhausted in the heat. With most of the councillors busy jockeying for position and arguing with each other off-shore, the land went unsurveyed and so few endeavored to build permanent shelters with the imminent prospect of a move making all living arrangements seem temporary.\textsuperscript{110} On top of this confusion, the clerk sent by the Company to manage the store of supplies, both for building and eating, did not arrive until well into the rainy season. Inexperienced employees were forced to fill in and corruption and mismanagement resulted in wasted rations and lost or stolen building materials.\textsuperscript{111} As a result, most shelters were makeshift tents, and by April 30, the colony had already run out of bread. Tornadoes ripped

\textsuperscript{108} Clarkson as cited in Wilson The Black Loyalists 145.
\textsuperscript{109} Wilson The Black Loyalists 145-6.
\textsuperscript{110} Wilson The Black Loyalists 146
\textsuperscript{111} Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 87.
through the camp, destroying whatever permanent buildings had been cobbled together, and
snakes up to 18-feet long had no trouble entering the tents at night to the terror of those inside.
Anna Maria Falconbridge even reported that a large baboon seized a 12-year old girl from her
tent at night and carried her off into the jungle. The West African coast was no place for tents,
and the colonists would soon learn that tornadoes and baboons were nothing compared to the
endless drenching of the monsoon season.

By late March the rains had begun, and disease and rancor almost instantly plagued the
colony. By the first week in April, Clarkson already reported open “dissatisfaction” amongst the
settlers, and when he was forced to cut the rations in half on April 7, one councillor warned his
Governor: “with hunger comes Mutiny.” That very day, an assembly of the black settlers
appointed Thomas Peters their “Speaker-General” and delivered Clarkson a petition signed by
132 settlers with the warning that a band of setters were ready to rebel if their demands were not
met. Clarkson called all of the settlers around a cotton tree and told them that they must choose
between himself and Peters, whom he now called a traitor. He even went so far as to say “either
one or other of us would be hanged upon that tree before the palaver was settled.”

Every single colonist chose Clarkson, and Peters was spared but humiliated. Clarkson had escaped
mutiny, but this would not be the last time the colonists would speak out for their rights.

Remarkably, through all of these hardships the colonists continued to appeal to Clarkson
for aide. One woman wrote to Clarkson asking for soap saying, “I am in great want of som, I
have not had aney since I have bin to this plais I have been sick.”

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112 Falconbridge 148.
113 Letter from Councillor Watt to Clarkson, April 7 1792 as cited in Wilson John Clarkson and the
African Adventure 149.
115 Christopher Fyfe ed, Our Children Are Free and Happy (Edinburgh: Edingburgh University Press,

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wife had a child for whom he requested a curious shopping list of “Oat meal Molassis or shugger a little wine an spirits.” While it is hard to imagine how an infant could survive on such an odd list of rations, the direct appeal of a desperate father directly to the Governor reveals how strong the bond was between Clarkson and his charges. As the situation got harder, this bond, according to Anna Maria Falconbridge, was the only thing that kept the settlers from “driving all the whites from the colony.” Rather than rebelling with violence or insubordination, the colonists appealed to Clarkson’s fairness in petitions and letters. One petition, sent at the peak of the rainy season, asked Clarkson for the right to have black jurors, a decrease in the cost of supplies until they were given their promised land, and increased responsibility within the colony so that they could “take the troubles off your honours hands by taking of small matters upon ourselves.” Clarkson’s governance may have kept a degree of peace in the colony, but a bit more Company preparation could have allowed him to focus on building and planning for the planting season, not finding a way to find a newborn something to eat.

Soon after consolidating his power after what historians now call the “Peters Rebellion”, Clarkson received bad news from a passing slave ship that sunk any remaining hopes that the colony could improve its lot before the worst of the rains. The slave ship’s crew told Clarkson that a ship full of supplies sent by the Company barely made it out of English waters before losing its mast, and it was unlikely that the Colony would be re-supplied for weeks. The Company was supposed to have sent three months of full rations and another three of half, but Clarkson was already on half rations less than a month after arrival and the rains made gathering any food from the land nearly impossible. The combined forces of constant rain and hunger resulted in disease, and within a month from their landing 40 had died and another 500 were

116 Fyfe Document 8.
117 Wilson The Black Loyalists 152.
118 Fyfe Doc. 7.
sick. With even fewer bodies to help shore up shelters and try to gather food, the situation continued to deteriorate, and by July 800 settlers, and the entire medical staff, were totally incapacitated due to illness. Anna Maria Falconbridge wrote, “five, six and even seven are dying daily, and buried with as little ceremony as so many dogs or cats.”

By the end of the rains, nearly half of the colony’s white officials had been taken by disease, and of the close to 1,500 black settlers who had departed Halifax, fewer than 1,000 lived through the combined difficulties of trans-Atlantic journey and unsheltered summer.

While the settlers struggled to survive, the Sierra Leone Company directors went straight to planning future projects. They happily reported to their investors the that they had the rights to nearly 250,000 arable acres along the Sierra Leone River that could be cultivated, and that land taxes on that area alone would generate £12,500 a year for their stockholders, which meant a steady four percent return on their investment before a single sugar plant was in the ground. In reality, it would take years for half of that land to be surveyed, and as it turned out, most all of it was not arable. The Directors also ordered Clarkson to engage in negotiations with people living on some of the more fertile islands nearby, and valuable resources were sent away as presents to court prospective land sellers. The Directors even entered negotiations with another British enterprise that had sent an expedition into modern-day Liberia as a possible second Freetown colony. It is unclear who would populate the expanded Sierra Leone colony or its offshoot, but it is reasonable to speculate that such an empty colony was to be advertised as a home for freed slaves throughout the Empire. If this were the case, the abolitionists could boast a home for the freed slaves caused by abolition and answer one of their most difficult challenges. In July, the very month when so many of the settlers were bed-ridden, the Directors even mulled the idea of

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119 Falconbridge 148.
120 Wilson *The Black Loyalists* 147.
sending a second wave of settlers from North America. The Freetown settlement needed to succeed and advance, regardless of what was really happening in Africa.\footnote{Wilson \textit{John Clarkson and the African Adventure} 91.}

It was not as if the Company was unaware of Clarkson’s troubles. He was in frequent contact with his brother and Chairman Thornton, and while a supply ship did not reach the colony during the rainy months, the slave traders were constantly passing by and willing to transfer mail back home.\footnote{Wilson \textit{John Clarkson and the African Adventure} 91.} Given the frail state of the colony and Clarkson’s health, these plans, none of which ever came to fruition, seem completely out of touch with reality.

Not content to wait for these future projects to bring glory to the Company and the abolitionist cause, the directors also began attempting to shape public opinion through positive reports on the colony. A Company report in the \textit{Times}, dated July 9, 1792, painted a rosy picture of a colony handling adversity with harmony and courage. It called the death and disease that was sweeping the colony “the fever which the Free Blacks had brought with them from Nova Scotia” and reported that by April 24, the outbreak “appeared to be entirely stopped.” Overall, the report stated, the entire colony was in “remarkable good health.” The report also portrayed the colonists as already self-sufficient and not the least bit dependent on trade or supplies for support. It conceded that there had not been dramatic progress in trade in the “short eight weeks” of settlement, but the temporary shelters built by the settlers were described as a “town” for accommodation during the rainy season. The economic motives of the Company were also revealed in the final paragraph which stated that “It appears that Coffee and Cotton may in most parts be cultivated, and Sugar also in several places[;] they have discovered a large quantity of rich Iron Ore.”\footnote{Report from the Colony of Sierra Leone, \textit{The Times} [London] 9 July 1792.} There is curiously no mention of 18-foot snakes or kidnapping baboons, and in

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\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Wilson \textit{John Clarkson and the African Adventure} 91.}
\item \footnote{Wilson \textit{John Clarkson and the African Adventure} 91.}
\item \footnote{Report from the Colony of Sierra Leone, \textit{The Times} [London] 9 July 1792.}
\end{itemize}
reality, beyond the name, the colony described in the *Times* bore little resemblance to the chaos and sickness of Freetown.

The disparity between the Company’s representation of events and the harsh reality was not lost on John Clarkson, and his growing frustrations further reveal how out of touch the Company was with its colony. In a summertime journal entry, Clarkson wrote, “The whole of instructions received from the directors… they are not calculated for us in our present state, they only perplex and depress our spirits.” He even wrote his brother a letter clearly spelling out his dislike of Company policy in which he went so far as to say, “Your government is of the most absurd kind and calculated to make miserable those valuable people I brought with me from America.”¹²⁴ Some of Clarkson’s anger was alleviated when his request for sole authority over the colony was granted in July, but the divide between the Company in London and the man who had promised the Nova Scotians a better life had been created in those hard summer months and would not soon be forgotten.

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¹²⁴ Wilson *John Clarkson and the African Adventure* 90.
Chapter 5 – Broken Promise, Broken Dream

I promised to make it my business to see that their proper allotments of land were given them and declared I would never leave them till each individual assured me he was perfectly satisfied.—*John Clarkson’s Journal* (1791)\(^{125}\)

During the American Revolution, the black loyalists had fought for an end to their bondage, but even then, according to black loyalist historian Ellen Gibson Wilson, without land “no true independence was believed possible.”\(^{126}\) Endeavoring to obtain such independence, thousands of freed slaves boarded British transports to Nova Scotia and lay their lives and safety at the mercy of the British Empire. They were disappointed in Nova Scotia, and despite being able to at least live without a master where they were, they again trusted in the egalitarian promises of the Empire they had fought for and willingly went to Africa, where hundreds like them were still being captured and sold, all in the pursuit of land. John Clarkson had sworn to them that they would have land to farm and have it upon arrival in Sierra Leone, and so nearly two thousand people followed him across the ocean. Once they arrived in Freetown, however, not only would the land distribution take years to complete, but the colonists quickly discovered that land in Freetown would come with a price.

Many of the blacks in Nova Scotia had given up hoping that the colonial government would ever give them land to farm, and for most, it was John Clarkson’s promise that the land would come without a tax that drew them to his Company. At the time, the main way of taxing colonial land was called a “quit-rent”, which was actually a medieval concept that meant an annual, fixed tax on land based on acreage. In Nova Scotia, the quit-rent had been high enough to keep many from being able to afford staying on tracts of land large enough to farm at a profit. Clarkson promised the Nova Scotians such a system would not be in place in Africa, and as the

\(^{125}\) Clarkson 150.
\(^{126}\) Wilson *The Black Loyalists* 18.
sole envoy of the Company, and with no answers to any of his letters while in North America, Clarkson’s word on Sierra Leone policy was trusted as law. Some pointed out that the contract between the Sierra Leone Company and its settlers stated that each family would receive at least 20 acres of land “subject to such charges and obligations with a view to the general prosperity of the Company as shall hereafter be settled by the Company”, but Clarkson wrote in an advertisement and no doubt preached in the churches of the black loyalists that the clause “was by no means to be considered as an annual rent.”\textsuperscript{127} This promise was a major selling point for Clarkson because both he and the Nova Scotia government were promising the black loyalists land. The only difference was that Clarkson’s land came with no strings attached. Just as slavery had bound them to the land in America, the tax on land in Nova Scotia made the black settlers little more than feudal peasants, slaves not to a master, but to a tax that did not decrease in case of drought or crop failure. Clarkson’s land meant true freedom for the former slaves, and so thousands signed up for his mission.

While Clarkson described a colony of free land and independence in Nova Scotia, the Company’s Directors quickly set to work formulating the best way to make Freetown profitable, and these efforts immediately undermined Clarkson’s promise. In the Company’s first report to its shareholders, the stated purpose of the Company was put simply as this: “The leading object in the formation of the Sierra Leone Company may be briefly stated to have been to introduce just and honorable commerce with… Africa.”\textsuperscript{128} In order to achieve this commerce, the Company elected to preserve the best harbor-side property for its own use in trade and building. The Company also cited its primary source of initial income to be “arising out of land revenue, derived partly from quit-rents, and partly from a gradually increasing tax upon the produce of

\textsuperscript{127} John Clarkson 54.
\textsuperscript{128} “Substance of the report…1791” 37.
their district.”¹²⁹ The Company cannot have believed that within a year the colonists would develop the agricultural sophistication actually to profit from their use of the land they were paying tax on, and it seems as if the settlers, even if they had received land promptly, were destined to be in the Company’s debt almost immediately. The report was a signal to critics of the colony, and of abolition, that from the start, commerce in Africa could come from something other than slaves. Of course what it meant for the settlers, was that before they even left for Africa, Clarkson’s promise had been made impossible to keep.

Naturally, before the land could be taxed, it would have to be allotted to the settlers, and the surveying process was clearly not a priority for Clarkson’s colonial employees. The first surveyor was a man named James Cocks, who instead of marking out the territory before the settlers arrived, as he had been instructed by Clarkson, spent most of his time drilling soldiers and staying aboard the ships. The second appointed surveyor of the colony was one Richard Pepys, and from the beginning he earned the depictions of villainy and ineptitude that both Falconbridge and Clarkson gave him in the historical record. One of his first tasks as surveyor was to plan and coordinate the building of a storehouse, and it was somehow built without doors or a floor. The result was rotting food that made those who worked inside ill, and a whole lot of wasted supplies and manpower.¹³⁰ After the storehouse, Pepys was instructed by Clarkson to busy himself exploring the Company’s property and breaking it into parcels of land for the settlers, but when the rains started, Pepys refused to travel far from camp and did almost nothing through the summer. At this point, Clarkson lacked the authority to order Pepys to do anything, and months were wasted without any land given out to settlers.

¹²⁹ “Substance of report…1791” 53.
¹³⁰ Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 87.
Once Clarkson obtained sole authority in July, the surveying process got underway, but land for the black settlers was low on the list of priorities Clarkson had been sent from England. Though he personally believed that nothing could be accomplished in trade or growth before the blacks were on their own land, his hands were tied by the commercial focus of the Company. The cost of surveying such rough and unknown terrain was high, and the Company had promised a positive return to its shareholders. As a result, Clarkson’s first priority was to be the building of a suitable waterfront for trade and to keep laborers nearby. The black loyalists were moved into small lots along nine residential streets perpendicular to the shore and intersected by three broad streets parallel to the water. This lay-out was vastly different from the plan sent by Granville Sharp, which was comprised of three villages of 100 families centered around a town hall and based on his previous model of breaking down the colony into democratic units, and with “farming land” allotted to each family no bigger than a vegetable garden. Claiming that more land was soon to follow, the Company was not yet abandoning its promise of 20 acres per family, but such generous allotments would have to wait for the colony to grow.

These small lots were a direct breach of the contract between the Nova Scotians and the Sierra Leone Company. As previously mentioned, the contract stated that each family would get at least 20 acres. Even more was to be given to families with children, and all allotment was “subject to such charges 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 Land.”131 One way to read this clause is that the twenty acres could be withheld if it were in the greater interest of the Colony’s prosperity, but according to an attorney, “the grant could be subject to charges and obligations including property and income taxes, rental payments and so forth [but] a refusal to make a grant to a person willing to undertake the obligations and pay the charges” would likely

131 John Clarkson 155.
have been a breach of contract. While, as the settlers had suspected back in Nova Scotia, the contract did provide for the institutions quit-rents, this dramatic reduction in acreage violated the Company’s legal promise to the settlers. The Company cared more about keeping its word to its shareholders and its ability to report gains in the papers. The stipulations of the contract with the loyalists would have to wait.

Fortunately for the settlers, Clarkson still held putting the Nova Scotians on land as his top priority. When he was given sole power, he reported the most exciting benefit from his new authority was the ability to put the settlers on land because “[I have] no other end in view than the happiness of those committed to my care as well as the general civilization of this benighted continent and the company’s prosperity.” For Clarkson, the list certainly seemed to go in that order. Clarkson also had very skeptical views when it came to trading with England. He reported to his superiors that so far his territory was only able to supply “mahogany wood and fish.” Anna Maria Falconbridge agreed writing that it was far too early to “meddle with trade.” Her husband seemed to agree with her, and as trade agent he mostly spent his time, when not drinking, helping Clarkson encourage the surveying process. In 1791 the Company had reported that “No country produces more variety of excellent and beautiful timber fit for every purpose.” Clarkson and Falconbridge’s claims on available trade must have raised some doubt about his abilities in the minds of the Company. The Company may have had tunnel-vision when it came to developing trade, but the Governor of the colony certainly had land allotment as his first priority. Of course he could not survey and assign the land himself, and

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132 email from James Leader Sr.
133 Wilson 106.
134 Sbacchi 68.
135 Falconbridge 156.
136 “Substance of the report…1791” 21.
beyond Company interference, there were plenty of obstacles in the way before land settlement could get underway.

Part of what hindered the land surveying process was just how close the other African villages were to Freetown. Such proximity caused problems whenever surveying actually got underway, and such conflicts were a direct result of the Company’s hasty preparations. Based on the 1787 negotiations with King Jimmy, the Company believed that they owned twenty square miles of land around the river, but before Clarkson’s surveyors could make it far past the shore, they seemed to stumble on village after village of natives. The relatively dense population of natives on the coast is especially interesting in light of the Sierra Leone Company 1791 report that the population of the coast was “inconsiderable.”137 Anna Maria Falconbridge made it clear in several of her letters home that she blamed the Company’s decision to send Clarkson to gather Nova Scotians before such land issues were settled was directly causing the land conflict. She was especially shocked, having joined her husband in visiting the ruins of Granville Town and reporting to the Directors in person, that the Company had failed to resolve the issue that had helped to cause such destruction during Sharp’s initial attempt.

In order to clarify the Company’s land holdings, Clarkson had to hold several meetings with local chiefs, and weeks were wasted before any new lines could be drawn. Were it not for the strong relationship that Alexander Falconbridge and his wife had developed with the local chiefs, these negotiations may have delivered Freetown to a similar fate as its predecessor. Still, Clarkson’s lack of military protection forced him to grant huge concessions and agree to limit his current development to two square miles around the shores of Freetown.138 Obviously, this meant that 1,000 settlers could not have 20 acres of land per family, and even if Clarkson had

137 “Substance of the report…1791” 13.
138 Falconbridge 173.
negotiated for more land, the lack of a military presence in Freetown, which the Company still refused to increase, meant that more distant farms would be completely without protection from the native populations. From incompetent surveyors to unclear boundaries and insufficient protection, John Clarkson didn’t have a chance to fulfill his promise in any reasonable time frame; however, with the land negotiations finally settled, a newly powerful Clarkson could push his agenda of land surveying without obstacle.

The relatively cramped territory of Freetown can be see in a 1795 map of the Sierra Leone territory (see below), and this map raises further questions as to just how the Company thought they would be able to give land to so many settlers. Freetown and Granville Town can be seen on the southern shore of the Sierra Leone River, and the two settlements are surrounded by natural barriers to the south with the mountains, to the north with the river, and to the east by an area described as “Low and Swampy.” To the west of the settlement, there is the boundary between natives and settler territory, presumably the border agreed to by Clarkson in the negotiations with King Jimmy. The land within the semi-circle (added by the author) was roughly the entire area of the Freetown colony in 1792, which was roughly six and a quarter square miles or 4,000 acres. With the mountains so close to the coast, I can only assume that the Company had hoped to spread west, to where King Jimmy turned out to be, and east along the river. The 1795 map, though, makes it clear that after the Granville Town location, the southern shore of the river is “Low and Swampy.” While the northern shore is described as “Level Land Covered with Wood”, it is also dotted with “Native Town[s]”. The lack of available land for colonial expansion, without military efforts, only emphasizes how little the Company knew about the land they were sending settlers to live in. It is unclear exactly where the Directors

139 Sbacchi 69.
140 “Substance of the report…1795”
originally planned to put the nearly 1,500 settlers who left Halifax on 20 acre plots, but even assuming that the settlers lived in family units of five, that would mean 7,600 acres of farm land in addition to the land the Company would need for its own projects and the white settlers. Whether the Company intended to break its contract with the settlers from the beginning or simply assumed that there would be plenty of land in Africa for everyone, such poor planning ensured from the start that John Clarkson would never be able to keep his promises.
While the settlers were certainly not happy with the great reduction in their colony’s land mass, they quickly agreed to accept land allotments one fourth the size of their 20 acre promise in exchange for a new promise for more land when it was obtained, and surveying got underway. Using his new powers, Clarkson chose to ignore the Company directive that saved the most fertile land, which was closest to the water, for Company use in trade and manufacturing and made the land available to the settlers.\footnote{141} Forty lots of five acres each were then surveyed, and by November they were given out to Nova Scotians. An unknown number of larger plots were also given out to white settlers. Such an unfair distribution of scarce land could not have helped relations between the races.\footnote{142} Many even refused to leave their smaller, waterfront properties because they had spent nearly eight months developing them. Even with these conflicts, as 1792 drew to a close, a small percentage of the black loyalists finally had some real land to call their own.\footnote{143} Promises were still unfulfilled, but Clarkson had, at least momentarily, appeased the settlers.

In December, a long-awaited supply ship from the Company arrived which was, for several reasons, a great disappointment for those interested in settling the colonists. Alexander Falconbridge, who had obeyed his Governor and used Company resources for land surveying not developing trade, was fired by the Company and replaced with a new agent. The Company accused Falconbridge of failing to perform his duties as a trade agent, and according to his wife, the news was a “mortal stab” to the man who had spent nearly the past five years serving the Company in Sierra Leone. Falconbridge quickly descended into a drunken spiral, and a short time later, he left his wife a widow and his work undone, dying from alcohol poisoning. Ironically, Falconbridge, who had only joined the colony out of a sense of abolitionist duty, was

\footnote{141} Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 113.  
\footnote{142} Sbacchi 72.  
\footnote{143} Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 106.
replaced by a man named Wallace, who had 25 years of experience in West Africa, as a slave trader. Unlike Falconbridge, who also had a slave-trading past, Wallace was unrepentant of his slaving days and was open about his pro-slavery views. The Sierra Leone Company, still run by some of London’s leading abolitionists, replaced one of their former stars with a trade agent for hire in direct opposition to their views. The values of the Company were clearly now for sale.

For the colonists, the supply-ship was a disappointment because instead of carrying grain or rations, it carried more industrial equipment and flowerpots for trade with local chiefs. The sickness and starvation of the summer were over, but if the colonists hoped to fortify themselves better for the next monsoon season, they would need more help from the Company than gifts for trade. Anna Maria Falconbridge was also frustrated with the Company’s insistence on sending useless supplies, writing that what the Company sent was “no better adapted for an infant colony than a cargo of slaves would be for a London market.” Falconbridge’s frustration is understandable. By December the Company would certainly have heard about the deaths of the summer. By sending yet another ineffectual shipment, the Company revealed a continued preference for furthering trade goals over colonist safety.

For John Clarkson, the ship contained a troubling 38-page letter from Company chairman Henry Thornton. Far from appeasing his fears about the fate of the settlers land, the letter made it perfectly clear to Clarkson what the priorities were in Sierra Leone. In his previous letters to the Company, Clarkson worked to emphasize that the Company’s goals for trade and the settlers’ goals for land went hand in hand. I was unable to obtain a record of the correspondence between Chairman Henry Thornton and Clarkson, but Ellen Gibson Wilson refers to the letters from

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144 Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 116 (Wallace’s first name is not mentioned in sources)
145 Falconbridge 182.
146 Falconbridge 155.
Clarkson as at times “almost abusive” in his efforts to make this point. Thornton was a dedicated administrator who thanked Clarkson for speaking his mind, but Clarkson’s tone must have made it clear to Thornton, who had been appointed for the purpose of trade, that Clarkson’s views were not in line with the Company’s commercial goals.\(^\text{147}\) In this new letter, the chairman cautioned Clarkson that if he did not stop insisting that the Company’s ambitious trade goals were impossible “the world” would blame Clarkson, not the African climate, the Nova Scotians’ character, or the Company for the colony’s struggles. Thornton’s use of the phrase “the world” to refer to those observing the Colony’s progress makes it clear just how much public attention Freetown was getting, and one might suspect that Thornton’s claim that anything but the Company would be blamed for the Colony’s failures was an effort, by Thornton, to make the power situation known: Clarkson would make Sierra Leone succeed on the Company’s terms, or else.\(^\text{148}\)

While the useless supplies and the letter must have certainly been a disappointment, perhaps the ship’s most damaging cargo to the settlers came in the form of their newest deputy Governor, William Dawes. The Company sent Dawes, an experienced colonial official who had spent the past four years at the Australian penal colony, to more actively pursue its goals of trade and commerce. The Company obviously suspected that Clarkson was not doing all that he could to further its economic aims, and after four years of guarding convicts, Dawes seemed like just the man to get the colony into shape. Compared to Clarkson’s previous helpers, Dawes was a model of hard work and efficiency, and while Clarkson was wary of his past, he trusted Dawes immediately with responsibility and independence. Dawes quickly became unpopular with the

\(^{147}\) Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 120.

\(^{148}\) Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 120-123.
Nova Scotians, but in the eyes of Clarkson, he was an effective and organized leader.\textsuperscript{149} Finally confident that someone could supervise the colony in his absence, Clarkson decided it was time to travel back to England to explain the colony’s situation in person and press for further funds and resources.

Meanwhile, in England, the Company was working to explain the lack of trade coming from Clarkson’s colony and quell rumors about deaths over the summer. A report dated from the Colony September 10 and published in the London \textit{Times} December 3, sounded very similar to the July report. It stated that the colony was recovering “from all the difficulties with which they had had to struggle”, and “the full establishment of the colony was not questioned.” The happy update even reported that “the regular distribution of lands” was underway. By September 10, not a single black settler had been put on a piece of land much larger than an acre, and unless this account is taken as simply pure fabrication, it can only be a reference to the settlement agreement with King Jimmy. The report does not include the one-fourth reduction in total land, but the progress of the Company botanist and mineralogist, sent after the summer months to collect data on the flora and fauna of the region, are lauded. The lack of trade is attributed to the “immediate wants of the colony” and the fact that the “company’s ships had […] been detained so much at Sierra Leone, that no African produce had been collected, nor any general trade to Sierra Leone as yet begun.” Clarkson could only report wood and fish at this time, but the Company chose to attribute the lack of trade to ships being detained. Finally, the report promised, “the arrival of the York [the supply ship] as well as a Commercial Agent, would facilitate the Colony’s progress at this respect.”\textsuperscript{150} Of course the Company already had a commercial agent, and the Governor was still insisting that trade was impossible until land was allotted. No clearer proof is needed that

\textsuperscript{149} Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 122-125.
\textsuperscript{150} All of the above from The Times [London] 3 Dec. 1792.
Dawes and Wallace the trade agent were sent to change the course of the colony, and as embarrassed as the Company may have been to publish such an un-promising report, their promises of future gains reveal that the hard summer had done nothing to lower their expectations for immediate commercial progress.

As if he could read the Times from abroad, Clarkson decided sometime around the first of December that he could not achieve his goals from abroad, and that it was time to briefly return to London. Clarkson’s motives for leaving may have had something to do with the fiancée awaiting him in England, but before and after his departure, he made it clear to the colonists that he had every intention of returning and giving them the land he had promised. While Clarkson did feel it necessary to report in London to explain the death toll and slow trade, the settlement currently crammed 300 houses into 36 acres. He truly believed that returning to England was the only way to do better for his settlers.  

More than a month before his departure, Clarkson began to prepare his colonists for new leadership. In a sermon to the Nova Scotians, he promised to return but also urged them to accept white officials other than himself who “have come out to do you as much good as myself, and who will act by you conscientiously.” This may have been directly meant for Dawes, who Anna Maria Falconbridge reported was “almost universally disliked”, and many settlers seemed to fear that Clarkson was the only person who cared for their interests.

As his departure approached, there seemed to be real progress on the horizon, but Clarkson knew that it would take time for his promises to be fulfilled. Not content to leave without more forward motion, Clarkson pressed his surveyor to move beyond the 40 allotments and distribute all of the available land. Pepys consented, and soon after Clarkson’s departure

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151 Wilson 121, Sbacchi 65.
152 Wilson 123.
was scheduled for New Year’s Day, 1793, the surveyor promised to begin the land allotments on the second day of the New Year. This promise allowed Clarkson to leave his settlers for a time, but he assured Dawes that he would never leave Sierra Leone for good “till I have performed in a conscientious way all I promised.”\textsuperscript{153} On his last Sunday in Africa, Clarkson wrote in his diary that he was concerned that the administration that was to replace him did not share his views on land distribution: “I know some of the officers have considered my conduct too mild […]what I consider of the most importance, is to be punctual in giving them their lands, that they may not have the same cause for complaint that they had in America.”\textsuperscript{154} Clarkson truly seemed dedicated to his settlers. While his governorship was one of the colony’s early accidents, it is hard to imagine what state the settlers would have been in with a more Company-compliant Governor.

The settlers were aware of how lucky they were, and they saw Clarkson’s departure as both a terrifying and potentially rewarding change in their lives. They did not like or trust Dawes, or almost any other white official in Freetown for that matter, and so to ensure that the Company would not blame Clarkson for some of the colony’s early difficulties, the settlers sent Clarkson home with a petition, signed by 49 leading settlers. The primary purpose of the petition was to tell the Company how much they appreciated their Governor. This document is the best first-hand proof I have encountered of the bond between Clarkson and the settlers. After absolving Clarkson of any wrongdoing thus far the colonists requested:

\begin{quote}
[T]o the gentilmon of the Sierloen Companey in England we they humble pitioners wold desire to render thanks to the honerabl of the Sierraleon Companey that it heth pleased allmight god to put it into the hearts to think of them on us whne we ar in distress and we wold wish that it might please the gentilmon of the Companey as our govener is a goin to take his leave of us […] we wold Bee under stud by the gentilmon that our ardent desire is that the Same John Clarkeson Shold returen Back to bee our goverener.\textsuperscript{155}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{153} Wilson 121.  
\textsuperscript{154} Wilson 125.  
\textsuperscript{155} Fyfe Doc. 12. 
The petition goes on to remind the Company of Clarkson’s land promises and seems to imply that they do not believe they will get their land without him. The Company’s policies created a rift between black and white in Freetown, and John Clarkson seemed to be the only man who was admired by both.

John Clarkson boarded the *Felicity* with his petition and all the information he would need to argue his case in London. In his final update on Freetown, he reported the colony was in “perfect health […] every thing bids fair […] to crown our wishes with success.”\(^{156}\) The settlers gathered to wish him well on his voyage on the twenty-seventh, and according to Mrs. Falconbridge, as the ship disappeared on the horizon, Clarkson’s departure “operated more powerfully upon people’s feelings, than all the deaths we have had in the Colony.”\(^{157}\) Unfortunately, the settlers were right to despair. Change was coming to Freetown, and the settlers had lost their only protector.

\(^{156}\) Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 126.

\(^{157}\) Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 127.
Conclusion—Changing of the Guard

In your Being here we wance did call it Freetown, but since your absence we have a Raison to call it a Town of Slavery. Freetown settler Luke Jordon (October 19, 1794).

The story of the Nova Scotians, and for that matter the Sierra Leone Company, does not end with John Clarkson’s departure, but the young governor’s exit was certainly the end of the land dream held by settlers and governor alike. In Sierra Leone, this realization only took a day to sink in when surveyor Richard Pepys reversed his promise to begin surveying at the beginning of the New Year and instead got to work with now Governor Dawes on a fortress for Freetown. For Clarkson, the realization of betrayal took months but was perhaps equally painful.

By returning to London, Clarkson knew that he would face scrutiny for the high death toll and his strongly worded letters home, but even in his most argumentative letter, Chairman Thornton expressed his undying gratitude and respect for Clarkson’s efforts. The only real conflict in the letters was over the realities of trade, and Clarkson hoped that his trip to London, and the small cargo of African goods he brought with him, would appease the commercial wishes of the Company enough for him to achieve real gains out of land distributing. Clarkson, however, underestimated how much his letters had irked his employers. He was not greeted with the hero’s welcome he may have expected.

John’s employers were certainly happy to see him, but once the former governor began to push for his own agenda in London, he slowly began to realize that the Company was not really interested in his opinion. Upon his arrival, the Company gladly accepted his cargo and thanked him profusely for his work. He was even immediately given permission to return to the colony in three months, sooner if he desired. After his

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158 Fyfe 43.
159 Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 133.
initial meeting with the Company, Clarkson stayed in London waiting to be called on for counsel or guidance by the Company. His main public activity was submitting the settlers’ petition to the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and it received an only lukewarm response from abolitionist circles. After he put forth the petition, he began to realize that while Company members were appreciative of his efforts, they ignored him in public and rarely, if ever, mentioned him as part of the colony’s future.\footnote{Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 130.}

With his critical letters and, perhaps more importantly, his continued advocacy of the settlers’ rights, Clarkson had created the perception that he was a spokesperson of the Nova Scotians, not the Sierra Leone Company. Through the history of the Company, the priorities had been mixed between an abolitionist agenda and commercial gain, but the rights and dreams of Nova Scotians were a distant third, at best, on the Company’s list of priorities.

With this fracture between Clarkson and the Company ever growing, a packet of letters from the Colony was all that was needed to permanently divide the two. The Company received letters from Dawes and their newest administrator, a man named Macaulay who was also sent from Australia to co-govern with Dawes, that gushed about how well the Colony was progressing and claimed that even the colonists preferred Dawes’ authoritative administration to Clarkson’s “harangues and consultation.”\footnote{Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 133.} The new leadership had reorganized the command structure, pushed most of Clarkson’s allies to resign, and imposed new, almost puritanical rules, like daily prayer before work, on the colonists. Pepys was working on a fortress, and Dawes and Macaulay made promises of trade and production improvements in the near future. The Company shareholders finally
had their model of freed slave industry and good behavior under white rule, the perfect situation to report to abolition’s opponents.

John Clarkson, on the other hand, was devastated by the news and received desperate pleas from his former settlers and officials for his immediate return. He heard of Pepys’s treacherous abandonment of land surveying in favor of a fortress. More shockingly, he was told that Pepys had announced to the settlers that he would not survey the land because Clarkson had lied to them in Nova Scotia and had no power to make such promises.\textsuperscript{162} Letters from individual colonists gave him the disturbing news that Macaulay was allowing slave traders to abuse the colonists and trade openly at Freetown, and that rations had even been decreased despite the improved prosperity.\textsuperscript{163} One of Clarkson’s fellow officials who remained behind wrote that Pepys was “as black a Hearted insinuating villain as this day exists.”\textsuperscript{164} The settlers begged for his return and the chance to meet his new wife to be, and one man even warned that “ther is some of our pepol will not Be contented with aney thing.”\textsuperscript{165} Clarkson was certain that he must return at once to save his settlers.

The Company took the letters from Africa very seriously, and it only took a few days for Clarkson to realize that he would be unable to fulfill his promise to return. Company officials dropped hints that he should step down, and a few hours before Clarkson was to leave London for his wedding, the Company asked him for his resignation. Clarkson insisted he would “rather die than be the first to give up a Situation

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\textsuperscript{162} Fyfe Doc. 13.  
\textsuperscript{163} Fyfe Doc. 18.  
\textsuperscript{164} Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 133.  
\textsuperscript{165} Fyfe 33.  
\end{flushleft}
where I knew I could do so much good.”166 Despite his initial refusal to go quietly, Clarkson knew that if the Company would not honor the promises he had made in Sierra Leone, then there would be conflict in the colony for years. Clarkson also knew that if he fought the Company his settlers would ultimately be the losers, and told his friends, “My feelings have been so much hurt, that I have almost been ready to expose the People who are deserving of blame and forget the future and prosperity of the Nova Scotians.”167 However hurt he may have been, Clarkson’s first loyalty was to his settlers, and as the above quote implies, his decision to step down quietly was for their benefit, not his own.

While John Clarkson stayed in contact with his settlers for the rest of his life, his dismissal as Governor of Freetown was the end of his official involvement with abolition and public life. He obtained his marriage license the day he was dismissed, and a few days later, on April 25, 1793, he finally married his fiancée, Susan Lee. Now a married man, Clarkson, at the urging of his brother Thomas, looked for a promotion in the Royal Navy to provide income for his new family. The brothers’ old friend William Wilberforce still held John in high esteem and promised to use his influence to move him up the list to become a Post-Captain, but John increasingly became uncomfortable with the idea of fighting a nation that espoused many of the rights and liberties he had fought for in Sierra Leone. In 1795, John retired from the Royal Navy and moved to a small town along the Thames, sixteen miles away from London, where he used his talents and energy to make a small fortune in England’s booming lime trade. Clarkson died on April

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166 Wilson John Clarkson and the African Adventure 135.
167 Ibid.
2, 1828, and after decades of life away from abolition, his last words reportedly still
lamented the continued existence of slavery.\textsuperscript{168}

With Clarkson out of the way, the Company was free to pursue its trade ambitions
for the colony. On October 1793, it published a report in the \textit{Times} bragging about a
shipment of “Elephants Teeth, Frankincense, Bees Wax, Bum Coral, Guinea Grains,
Rices in the Hair, 40 tons of wood and sponges”.\textsuperscript{169} Hardly the acres upon acres of
tobacco, coffee, and sugar that the Company had hoped for, but it was still tangible
evidence of the potential for an African trade that was not in humans. Alberto Sbacchi,
who wrote a brief article assessing the success of the Sierra Leone Company with regard
to their initial goals, concludes that while the early years of the colony had been
tumultuous and, at times, embarrassing for the Company, the long term benefits of
developing African trade was a commercial success for the Company and England.\textsuperscript{170}
What Sbacchi does not point out is that such a successful trading colony came at the cost
of the promises the colony was built upon.

However ready the Company was to move on, the settlers did not soon forget
their promised land. Even after they heard that Clarkson had been replaced, they
continued to petition for land and their old governor to return. In completing the cycle of
promise and disappointment, the settlers even sent two of their own with a petition in
hand to replicate the Thomas Peters journey a half-decade before that had started the
African enterprise. The lengthy petition started by thanking the Company for the good
that they had “wished to do” by transporting the settlers from Nova Scotia to Africa with
a promise to do anything to help the Company’s “good intentions.” The settlers also

\textsuperscript{168} Wilson \textit{John Clarkson’s African Adventure} 140-145, 183.
\textsuperscript{170} Sbacchi 160.
insist that they would not like to trouble the Company but that “We at last feel ourselves so appressed that we are forced to trouble your Honrs that your Eyes as well as our may be open.”\textsuperscript{171}

After nearly two years of broken promises and the heartbreaking resignation of Governor Clarkson, the settlers had plenty they wanted to open eyes about. The letter highlighted the “extortionate Price” of supplies in the only available store, company owned of course, for the settlers. They petitioners also cited the high level of interest they were forced to pay on debts, despite John Clarkson’s promise to the contrary, and a new practice by Governor Dawes of watering down the Rum. Most troublingly, they also complained that Governor Dawes “seems to wish to rule us just as bad as if we were all Slaves.” The petitioners even found it necessary to remind the Company, “we have not the Education which White Men have have[,] yet we have feeling the saem as other Human Beings.”\textsuperscript{172} It is one of the many ironies of the Sierra Leone colony that less four years after Wilberforce’s slave trade bill was defeated for failing to view slaves as property rather than people, the Company founded by Wilberforce and others who fought for his cause received such a reminder from its settlers.

While the petition made it clear that the loyalists were unhappy about the governance of the colony, the petition begins and ends with an emphasis on land. When the petitioners discussed the dangers of the rainy season, it was the ownership of land, and the resulting building of permanent shelters, that they hoped would make them safe. When they complained about the poor pay by the Company and its monopoly of employment opportunities, it was land that they argued would make them self-sufficient.

\textsuperscript{171} Fyfe 36.
\textsuperscript{172} Fyfe 37.
The petitioners closed by pointing out the discrepancy between Clarkson’s twenty acre promise and the settlers’ current allocation and specifically blamed Pepys for refusing to survey the land, pointing out that if they had just been given the tools, the land would have been surveyed months ago.\textsuperscript{173} The letter closes with a seemingly genuine statement of assurance that the directors must not know about this state of affairs or else they would have fixed it. Like in Nova Scotia, where the loyalists believed that it was the local government and not the British Empire that was to blame for their broken promises, the very same settlers still trusted in the benevolence and intentions of the men in London. This time though, the white men in London had no new venture to use the petitioners and their people for, and as a result, the petition did little to influence the public or even the Company.\textsuperscript{174}

Soon after the petitioners returned empty-handed, Freetown felt the effects of England’s war with France, and the Company again failed to protect the colony. When it became clear that England was going to war, Thomas and John Clarkson worked to make the Freetown colony an apolitical effort for abolition, and the French National Convention agreed as long as the Company provided certain information about the Freetown settlement to ensure that it was not a military threat. Wilberforce and the other directors did not want to appear disloyal to the nation and insisted that the Company receive permission from the Secretary of State. When he could not convince enough of his colleagues to circumvent national authorities, Thomas Clarkson, who felt that this would endanger the settlement, resigned as a director. The British were eventually against dealing with the French on Freetown’s behalf, and as a result, Freetown was

\textsuperscript{173} Fyfe 39.
\textsuperscript{174} Fyfe 33-35.
unprotected from French attack. It did not take long for the unprotected colony to be noticed on the African shore, and in September of 1794 the settlement was attacked and plundered by the French. In a rather ironic twist of fate, the only casualty was the surveyor, Richard Pepys, who died of exposure hiding in the wilderness he had so doggedly refused to clear.\textsuperscript{175}

In the rebuilding years that followed the attack, the Company’s governors in Sierra Leone increasingly moved towards an authoritarian style of government that left little room for black self-governance or land rights. The freedom of religion that Clarkson had instituted was nominally maintained, but the American born settlers, who were almost entirely Methodists, were required to attend Anglican church services.\textsuperscript{176} After this rule was instituted, a common perception among the black settlers was that the whites were trying to convert them to Anglicanism and the rift between black and white settlers grew even wider. Further restrictions were placed on who and when settlers could marry, and black men and women were fined and even flogged for “living in sin.”\textsuperscript{177}

By 1800, tensions became so bad that a group of the black settlers claimed Nova Scotian independence and carried out an armed uprising against the Company. The rebellion’s leaders were hanged and over two-dozen settlers were banished from the colony.\textsuperscript{178} In the months that followed, the Company completely changed the political organization of Freetown and outlawed any organization of black settlers. By the end of the year, 500 former slaves who had rebelled against colonial officials in Jamaica joined

\textsuperscript{175} Wilson \textit{John Clarkson and the African Adventure} 137.
\textsuperscript{176} Wilson \textit{The Black Loyalists} 199.
\textsuperscript{177} Wilson \textit{The Black Loyalists} 206.
\textsuperscript{178} Wilson \textit{The Black Loyalists} 233-234.
the colony, and by sheer force of numbers, it became clear that there would be no 20 acres for any of the Nova Scotians. Black and white relations improved in the decade that followed, but Clarkson’s Halifax promises were all but forgotten as the colony grew into just another British trading port.\textsuperscript{179}

Rebellion and unrest stripped away Freetown’s political value for the abolitionists, and the movement quickly lost interest in the Sierra Leone Company. Shortly after his brother’s dismissal, even Thomas Clarkson sold his shares in the Company to pay for other abolitionist projects.\textsuperscript{180} In examining abolition’s roughly decade long involvement in colonization, it is hard to ascertain how much the Sierra Leone Company helped or hurt the cause. Certainly had the colony completely failed it would have been a blow to the movement, but because the public promises of the Company had been so optimistic about the possibilities for trade and black resettlement, the hard fought, slowly developing colony was not exactly a flagship example of the sound economic and political rationality of the abolition movement. In truth, anything short of a harmonious port town full of peaceful, freed slaves that sent cases of exotic produce and the world’s finest timber would have been a let down from expectations.

In the following ten years of the debate on abolition, there is a somewhat surprising scarcity of references to the colony. Sharp and Thomas Clarkson describe the events in Africa as significant parts of the abolitionist movement, but neither mention Freetown in their discussions of abolition’s ultimate victory and its causes.

In reality, while the colony made sense for the movement in the aftermath of Wilberforce’s parliamentary failure, as the abolition debate evolved, many of the issues

\textsuperscript{179} Wilson \textit{The Black Loyalists} 240-250.  
\textsuperscript{180} Sbacchi 83.
that brought about the Sierra Leone colony were becoming less important. By 1793, Britain was at war with France, and any loss in world power, not matter how well it could be replaced down the road, was put on hold. When the debate resumed in the early 1800s, Sierra Leone was a distant memory.

The Company may not have achieved all of its goals, but the settlers, hundreds of deaths and a trans-Atlantic voyage later, were in the same position, if not worse, that they had so suffered under in Nova Scotia. At the beginning, the Sierra Leone Company’s settlement of Freetown was a bold new experiment in a more noble African trade and black independence, but by the end, it was just another trading post, with a dependent black work force hardly freer than any other imperial minority. In the years that followed, the abolitionist movement gathered strength until its ultimate success in 1807, but the Nova Scotians, lost in the whirlwind of industrial England’s unrelenting progress, were sacrificed for a movement they hardly knew.
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Authors Note: A number of these primary and secondary sources are collections of letters or essay that I cite in the paper. Whenever this occurs, I have attempted to note within a footnote.

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