

Pastor David George and the First Baptist Church in Africa

From Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone, 1791–1810

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Summary:

After years of broken promises and hostility in Nova Scotia, Pastor David George joined the Black Loyalist migration to Sierra Leone in 1792. He helped organise the settlers, led them in worship on arrival, and established what became the first known Baptist church on the African continent. His ministry connected Black Baptist communities across Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, and England. Through persecution, political unrest, and missionary difficulties, George remained devoted to preaching, prayer, pastoral leadership, and the wider Church.

Outline:

1. Persevering ministry in Nova Scotia

- George served courageously despite broken promises, racial hostility, and threats to his life.

2. The Black Loyalist migration to Sierra Leone

- Thomas Peters, John Clarkson, George, and the churches helped organise a new settlement in Africa.

3. Worship and the first Baptist church in Africa

- The settlers praised God on arrival, and George preached, baptised converts, and built a meeting house.

4. Connections with British Baptists and missionary work

- George met John Rippon and John Newton and later welcomed Baptist Missionary Society workers to Freetown.

5. A legacy of courage, prayer, and leadership

- For fifteen years, George guided the church through hardship and left one of the earliest Black Baptist autobiographies.

Text

In 1791, David George and his family, along with hundreds of other Black Loyalists, had been in Nova Scotia for almost a decade, and the promises of freedom and farms had not materialised. George proved a bold and courageous pastor, facing sustained hostility that at times threatened his life. In October 1791, Thomas Peters, the political activist, returned from England, where he had presented the Black Loyalists' grievances to the Secretary of State. While there, Peters met several senior abolitionists associated with the Sierra Leone Company (SLC), which had been seeking a suitable body of settlers for its colonisation project in Sierra Leone.

Peters secured the SLC's support for the Black Loyalist cause, along with a promise of migration to Sierra Leone for a new life in the land of their fathers. Twenty-five-year-old John Clarkson, Thomas Clarkson's brother, arrived a few days later, on October 7, 1791, dispatched by the SLC to enlist Black volunteers for the Sierra Leone project. For David George, the prospect of moving to Sierra Leone was welcome.

When Clarkson found him, George was conducting a church service. He later said, "I never remembered to have heard the Psalms sung so charmingly in my life before," and he recognised in George that no business or person of rank could deter "him from offering up his praises to his Creator." Clarkson made George, along with Thomas Peters and John Ball, a supervisor and deputy among the Black settlers as he brought together a body of migrants.

Peters and Clarkson travelled hundreds of miles across the province recruiting settlers. They promised each free Black settler at least twenty acres of land, with ten for his wife and five for every child. The response was enormous and came mainly through three church communities. The Huntingdonian congregation, led by Cato Perkins

and William Ash, left “en masse for Sierra Leone.” The Wesleyan Methodists were led by Moses Wilkinson and Boston King, though it is unclear how many migrated with the colonists. The third church group was Baptist.

George tells us that “almost all of the Baptists went except a few of the sisters whose husbands were inclined to go back to New York; and sister Lizze, a Quebec Indian, and brother Lewis, her husband, who was an half Indian, both of whom were converted under my ministry, and had been baptized by me” [sic]. Only a few “scattered Baptists” remained in the towns around the province. The meeting house at Shelburne was sold for £7.

The governor had not anticipated such interest, and many white residents strenuously opposed the Black volunteers because of the loss of cheap labour it would entail. Interest in this “return to Africa” was immense and, as one historian put it, “took on overtones of the Old Testament delivery of the Israelites from bondage in Israel.” With the help of Peters and George, Clarkson had brought together the largest organised exodus of freed slaves, in a move that would devastate Nova Scotia’s economy. On January 15, 1792, a flotilla of fifteen ships carrying 1,193 colonists sailed from Halifax for Sierra Leone, including David George, his wife, and their six children. Most had been born in America—mainly Virginia and South Carolina—although forty-nine of the oldest settlers were returning to the continent of their birth.

When the Nova Scotian settlers came ashore at Freetown in March 1792, their Black pastors led them in a procession of praise. Members of the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion, the Calvinistic Methodists, sang William Hammond’s hymn from *A Select Collection of Hymns to Be Universally Sung in All the Countess of Huntingdon’s Chapels*:

*Awake and sing the song
Of Moses and the Lamb;
Wake every heart and tongue,
To praise the Saviour’s name.*

George preached that first Sunday and continued for several weeks “under the sail.” He recalled, “We then erected a hovel for a Meeting-house, which is made of posts put into the ground, and poles over our heads, which are covered with grass.” In the weeks

immediately after their arrival, while they were worshipping under the sail, two women were converted, and three others, converted before sailing, were baptised together in the river.

Shortly after arriving, George told John Clarkson, the settlement's governor, that he wished to visit his Baptist brethren in England. He travelled there in 1793 and met Dr John Rippon of London and other Baptist pastors connected with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), formed in 1792 and responsible for sending William Carey to India later that year. George was also introduced to John Newton. His autobiography was recorded in conversation with John Rippon and Samuel Pearce and later published in Rippon's *The Baptist Annual Register*. It is among the earliest Black Baptist autobiographies.

George's interest in the wider Church is evident in a letter he wrote after his return: "I want to know," he said, "how religion flourishes in London." Back in Freetown, George pastored the Baptist church and defended the SLC during revolt and political unrest. In June 1794, an insurrection broke out among the settlers, but it was suppressed without bloodshed, and six of the leading men were sent to England for trial.

Amid the political turmoil, George's response was "resignation and more prayer." The white British missionaries who worked with him became entangled in political affairs. In 1795, the BMS appointed Jacob Grigg and James Rodway to serve in Sierra Leone. They were the first missionaries sent by that organisation after the India group. Grigg and Rodway arrived in Freetown in December 1795 and were commended to George's Baptist congregation. George received them warmly and described them as "two most excellent young men."

The BMS's work in Sierra Leone soon encountered difficulties. Rodway's health deteriorated, forcing him to return to England in September 1796. Grigg initially remained but was asked to leave after becoming embroiled in a political dispute with Governor Zachary Macaulay.

George served his congregation for fifteen years at the first known Baptist church on the African continent. During his pastorate, the Baptists maintained denominational primacy in Sierra Leone. His ministry displayed bold preaching, courageous resistance amid persecution and the threat of death, wisdom and leadership during political unrest, and love for the wider Church.

David George died in Freetown in 1810 at the age of sixty-seven. His enduring legacy includes the church he shepherded, the communities he helped lead from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone, and one of the earliest published autobiographical accounts by a formerly enslaved Black Baptist.

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Historical account prepared for The Krapf Project.