

Kendal, John, letter to enslaver Thomas Watters

Letter from John Kendal, to enslaver Thomas Watters

September 8, 1816

Title Statement

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Descriptive Summary

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MSS 16902

Unit ID

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Unit ID

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Unit Date

September 8, 1816

Mixed Materials [X032762755]

1 (folder)

Language

English

Creator

Kendal, John

Extent

0.04 Cubic Feet One legal-sized file folder

Repository

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

This collection is open for research.

Immediate Source of Acquisition

This collection was a purchase from Maggs Bros. Ltd., to the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia Library on 24 April 2025.

Preferred Citation

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Content Description

This collection contains a two-page letter written by John Kendal, a partially freed Black man from Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands, to his former enslaver, Thomas Watters. Watters was a British trader from Kendal in Cumbria who worked in the West Indies. Also included is a transcription of the letter provided by the dealer.

Kendal writes to Watters so he may "fulfil the favor that you promised" and grant his full release from enslavement so he could receive payment for work and sue those who renege on contracts with him.

The passing of the 1807 Act on the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire officially ended the trade in enslaved peoples between Africa, the West Indies, and America by Britain. However, it did not end slavery in the British Empire. Those enslaved remained enslaved unless they were given their freedom. This was the case for Kendal, who was freed at some point by Watters but could not receive protections under the law without the expressed release by Watters.

The letter makes clear that the colonial merchants and seamen took advantage of the legal limbo and refused to pay wages to Kendal, knowing he would be unable to take advantage of any legal protection.

He shares two stories where he works and when he asks for his wages "the first thing they told me, that I must Sue the Law for it Because they knew it was not in my Power to Sue the Law for it..." Kendal expresses worry in the letter, reminding Watters that he has written several times and received no response. Kendal's desperate letter mentions his interest in caring for his family with a wage, stating that he has "two children to maintain."

He also shows a certain amount of closeness to Watters, asking him to send his regards to his wife and children and saying that he was sorry to hear that Watters had been ill. He also leaves Watters' instructions on how to contact him.

The letter is important because it provides rare insight in to the life of a Black enslaved person on the cusp of freedom shortly after the passing of the British Slave Trade Act. Kendal's voice shows through the words of the letter allowing us to witness the appalling insecurity of the position of a former enslaved person who was forced to beg for the basic rights which the abolition of slavery had promised. (Maggs Bros. description)

Keywords

enslaved persons

Enslavers

Tortola (British Virgin Islands)