*6 December 2022*

**Joseph Knight plaque unveiling**

**Speech by Sir Geoff Palmer**

**Leader of Edinburgh’s Slavery and Colonialism Legacy Review Group**

It is great honour to have been invited to unveil this unique plaque which has been installed at the request of the Lord President. This historical plaque is an important part of our history because it states publicly that Joseph Knight, the black servant of Sir John Wedderburn of Ballindean, the 6th Baronet of Blackness, no longer had to work for Sir John Wedderburn’s household in Perth, Scotland, as a perpetual servant. Therefore, the Court of Session in 1778 gave Joseph Knight his freedom in Scotland.

John Wedderburn went to Jamaica in 1747. His father was executed after the battle of Colluden in 1745. By 1769 John Wedderburn had become one of the largest and richest slave owners in Jamaica. Wedderburn purchased Knight as a boy. Knight was born in Africa and transported to Jamaica. Wedderburn helped Knight to become literate. In 1769 Wedderburn left Jamaica and returned to Scotland, bringing Knight with him.

Knight continued to work as a pocket-money paid servant for Wedderburn at his estate in Bellindean, Perth. In 1774 Knight decided that he would leave Wedderburn’s service. He wanted his own home because he had heard that in 1772, a black person, Somersett, had gained the right to remain in England rather than be transported into slavery in the West Indies. Knight was married to one of Wedderburn’s local female servants. She was expecting a child. Wedderburn effected Knight’s arrest and was supported by the Justice of Peace Court in Perth. Knight appealed to the Sherriff Court in Perth and this Court denied Wedderburn the right to retain him as a perpetual servant without his consent.

Wedderburn appealed this decision in the Court of Session from 1774 to 1778. For different reasons, significant numbers of those involved legally in this Knight vs Wedderburn case were distinguished and well known. For example, the Judges include, Lord Arniston (Henry Dundas’ half-brother), Lord Baxfield (who transported the Scottish Martyrs), Lord Auchinleck (James Boswell’s father) and intellectuals such Lord Monboddo, Lord Gardenstone and Lord Kames. During the Knight case, Lord Gardenstone cited a Scottish Judge’s statement of 1687 regarding reference to slavery, “But we have no slaves in Scotland.” Knight was represented by Henry Dundas (Lord Advocate) and John MacLaurin (who became Lord Dreghorn resident of Dreghorn Barracks, Edinburgh). Dundas (1776) agreed that Knight could be freed from his servitude in Scotland (Britain) but he would be “doomed” like “every black man” as a chattel slave in Jamaica. Dundas later (1792) delayed the abolition of the slave trade for a “generation” to benefit slave owners. After much discussion (1774-1778) of the rights of all people and the “necessity” of legal slavery in the West Indies, in 1778 a majority of the Judges of this Court of Session case in Edinburgh rejected Sir John Wedderburn’s claim for “perpetual service” regarding Joseph Knight. This plaque tells the world of a decision that is in keeping with the comment of one of the Judges, “we sit here to enforce right not to enforce wrong”. Indeed, that “right” was the natural human right to be free.