

A northerner's view of southern slavery, 1821

Introduction

Aurelia Hale of Hartford, Connecticut, offered her impressions of southern life in this letter of June 11, 1821. Hale, then about twenty-two years old, had recently traveled to Washington County, Georgia, to serve as a schoolteacher. Writing to her sister, she declared that the “manner of living” in the south was “better than at the North.” Georgians, she wrote, “differ in every respect from the Northerners, are much more agreeable, polite, attentive, and friendly.” Hale seemed to revel in southern gentility and aspired to a similarly privileged life, writing that since moving to the South, “I now can move in the sphere I have always wished to.”

Another aspect of southern life that Hale seemed to find agreeable was slavery. At first, she wrote, “we were astonished by the number of blacks; but now they have become quite familiar to us.” Initially taken aback by slavery, she soon found it “no inconvenience at all to be waited upon. I have one and sometimes two to attend me.” Hale was pleased with the lifestyle slavery allowed her, telling her sister, “We ride in state I assure you, with blacks on all sides. One little Negro stands behind the Carriage; With a face shining like a glass bottle.” She was evidently oblivious to the human costs and horrors of the institution that enabled the “manner of living” she preferred, writing that the slaves she encountered were “To appearance as happy as if worth thousands.”

Excerpt

When we entered Savannah we were astonished at the number of blacks; but now they have become quite familiar to us, We find it no inconvenience at all to be waited upon. I have one and sometimes two to attend me. And can find them sufficient employment.

I like their manner of living here, better than at the North they have a greater variety of dishes, and the most of them entirely different from ours. . . .

I designed to write you a long letter, but Mrs [S]ansom's Coach is wa[i]ting for us to ride. I will leave the remainder till I return; perhaps I shall get some new ideas. We ride in state I assure you, with blacks on all sides. One little Negro stands behind the Carriage; With a face shining like a glass bottle. To appearance as happy as if worth thousands.

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Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. Identify specific passages and phrases that indicate Aurelia Hale's regard for African Americans in Georgia.
2. Explain how Hale's view of slaves relates to her need to be seen as a respectable woman from a respectable family.
3. Compare the content of this letter with that of letters written by Angelina Grimke. (Transcripts of letters by Angelina Grimke can be found in the Gilder Lehrman Collection.)

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Image

Dear Sarah

Washington Wilkes County June
11th 1821

You probably, as well as many other Friends are expecting a Letter, and perhaps may consider yourself in some degree slighted. I have this evening been writing Mother, for the first time since I left home. I should not be surprised if you found a repetition in all your Letters; as I have had so little time to write, and generally many around me while writing, which rendered it almost impossible to collect my ideas, or to find words to express them.

I consider it unnecessary to say again I am delighted with Washington; for I have often repeated it when writing Brother Horatio. His Letters will give you some information respecting our Passage and arrival here, together with the arrangements made since I am now boarding at Mr Biches, for further particulars you can refer to Mother's Letter. The Geo. differs in every respect from the Northerners; are much more agreeable, polite, attentive, and friendly. I believed them very hospitable and kind, but did not expect half the attention. When we entered Savannah we were astonished at the number of blacks; but now they have become quite familiar to us, We find it no inconvenience at all to be waited upon. I have one or two sometimes two to attend me, and can find them sufficient employment.

I like ~~the~~ their manner of living here, better than at the North they have a greater variety of dishes, and the most of them entirely different from ours. Generally have a desert after dinner.

Aurelia Hale to her sister Sarah, June 11, 1821. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC08934)

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For breakfast we have Coffee and Tea. Waffles, Biscuit, Hominy, Indian bread several dishes of meat &c. and for ~~Supper~~ nearly the same (with the exception of Indian bread and meat) with the addition of Cakes.

I designed to write you a long letter, but Mrs Tensons Coach is waiting for us to ride. I will leave the remainder till I return; perhaps, I shall get some new ideas. We ride in state Fapsee you, with blacks on all sides. One little Negro stands behind the Carriage, with a face shining like a glass bottle. So appearance as happy, as if worth thousands.

While at Mr Campbell's Trade to Church, he lies, a mile from W. But now I board so near, as to render it inconvenient to ride. We shall always have a ride after Church, Sabbath evenings, when the weather will permit. Ohs delightful Fapsee you.

It is almost night, the mail is about closing, Mrs Birch says I must finish my letter ~~this~~ before we ride. I have every thing to write you, and many inquiries to make about the Girls. How are Eliza Melinda Catharine &c. you know who I would inquire about Eliza and Martha Smith I have not forgotten. Remember me particularly too them.

What Meetings do you attend now ~~I~~ not the Methodist I hope altogether. though I advised you to attend frequently when I left home. I have attended since, and think if you ever enter Geo. and wish to be respected you must not become a Methodist. I am glad I have escaped from them. Take my advice attend the Episcopal Church occasionally, and the Presbyterian with Eliza Ann Smith. Be particular about your Company. ~~and~~ all you think beneath you. If you do not try to render yourself respected no person will do it for you.

Few Girls would have undertaken what I have for the sake of respectability. But I assure you I have not yet regretted it. I now can move in this Sphere I have always wished to.

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The sphere in which our ancestors moved. We descended from a respectable family; the first in the State of Con. Can we sink below them, and grovel in insignificance? No! my pride would not let me. My task will be great, but pride and ambition will carry me through.

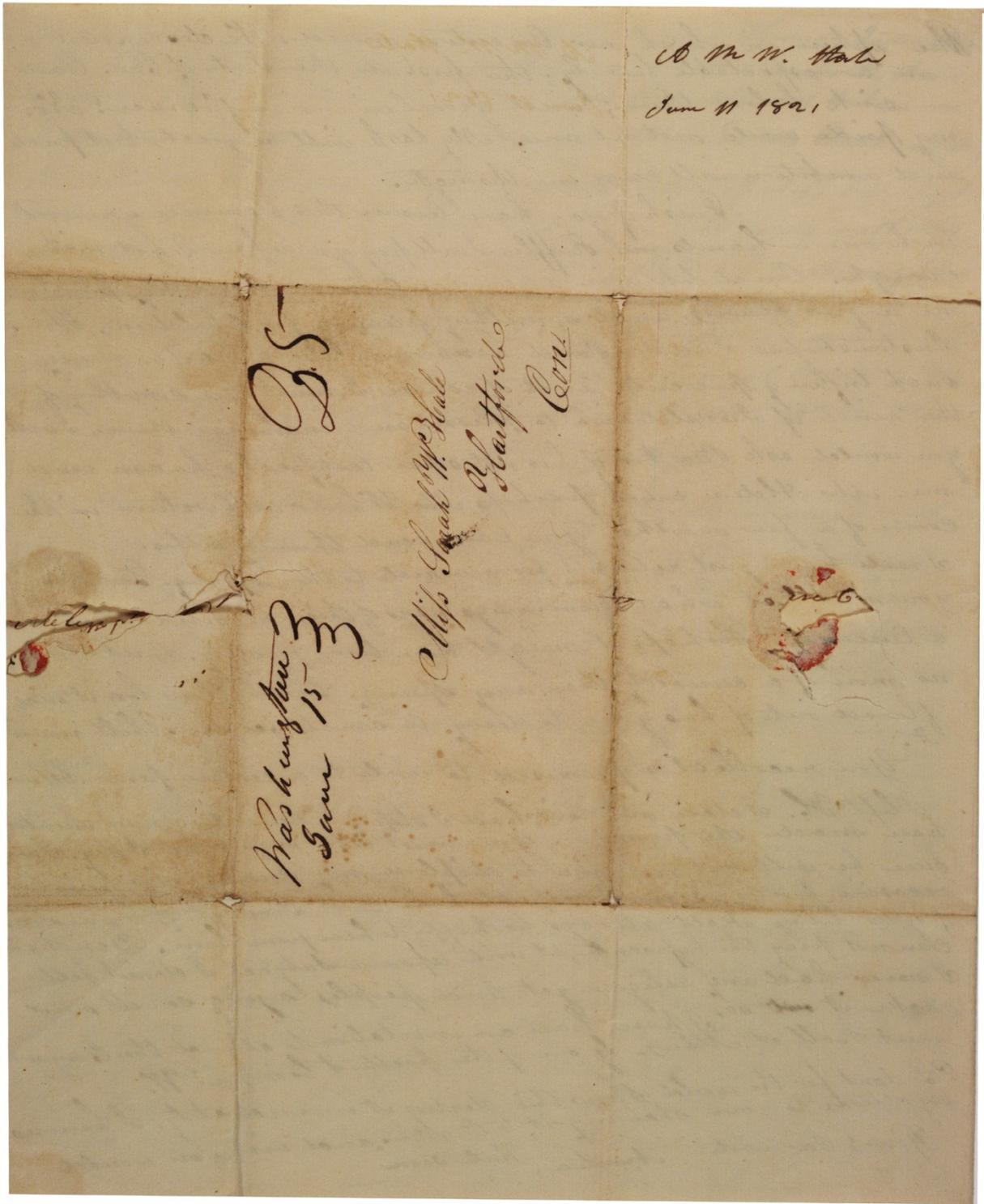
I wish if you have leisure this summer you would work me a handsome Ruffle. I will pay you when I get rich enough. And likewise when you can conveniently paint me a few flowers, and something pleasing for Children. The Instructions I understand has been in the habit of making such trifling presents, and of course I must give something of the kind if I would wish to please and encourage them. I wish you would ask Brother if has not some certificates, he can send me. Mr Alden and perhaps Mr Wheeler will return in the course of a few months. You can send them by either. I ~~was~~ have just return'd from a ride to the Spring. Per collect you ~~will~~ at what Cummings says of this. he says it was a Curious. Perhaps it might have been formerly. But it is no more of a curiosity than any Spring. The hollow log it once flower'd out of has gone to decay. A small fence is built around it.

You recollect I promised to write to a certain person before I left G. I dare not do it, had I stop'd to consider I never should have made the promise. You must tell him what I say. I am sure he will not wish me to displeas my Friends, nor give occasion, for censure. I respect him and through the medium of your letters shall always be happy to hear from him. Besides I cannot play the hypocrite, at write upon a subject I do not feel I never had any religion yet. and people saying so will never make it ~~not~~ so. I have had an invitation to attend the Commemoration at Athens. by one of the prettiest beauties in W.

I don't for the world shew this. destroy it immediately. I have no objections to your shewing it to Brother, and wish you would

Yours In haste Amelia. Write soon

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Transcript

Aurelia Hale to her sister Sarah, June 11, 1821. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC08934)

Washington Hills County June

- 11th 1821

Dear Sarah

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When we entered Savannah we were astonished at the number of blacks; but now they have become quite familiar to us, We find it no inconvenience at all to be waited upon. I have one and sometimes two to attend me. And can find them sufficient employment.

I like [*struck*: the] their manner of living here, better than at the North they have a greater variety of dishes, and the most of them entirely different from ours. Generally have a desert after dinner.

[2] For breakfast we have Coffee and Tea. Warfles, Biscuit, Hominy, Indian bread several dishes of meat &c&c and for Supper nearly the same (with the exception of Indian bread and meat-) with the addition of Cakes.

I designed to write you a long letter, but Mrs [S]ansom's Coach is wa[i]ting for us to ride. I will leave the remainder till I return; perhaps I shall get some new ideas. We ride in state I assure you, with blacks on all sides. One little Negro stands behind the Carriage; With a face shining like a glass bottle. To appearance as happy as if worth thousands.

While at Mr Campbell's I rode to Church; he lives a mile from W. But now I board so near, as to render it inconvenient to ride. We shall always have a ride after Church, Sabbath evenings; when the weather will permit. O 'tis delightful I assure you.

It is almost night, the mail is about closing, Mrs Birch says I must finish my letter [*struck*: this] before we

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ride. I have every thing to write you. and many inquires to make about the Girls. How are Elisa Melinda Catharine &c&c you know who I would inquire about Elisa and Martha Smith I have not forgotten. Rember [*sic*] me particularly too them.

What Meetings do you attend now [*struck*: I hope] not the Methodist I hope altogether. though I advised you to attend frequently when I left home. I have attend mind since, and think if you ever enter Geo. and wish to be respected you must not become a Methodist. I am glad I have escaped from them. Take my advice attend the Episcopal Church occasionally. And the presbyterian with Elisa Ann Smith. Be particular about your Company. And all you think beneath you. If you do not try to render yourself respected no person will do it for you.

Few Girls would have undertaken what I have for the sake of respectability. But I assure you I have not yet regreted it. I now can move in the sphere I have always wished to [3] The sphere in which our Ancestors moved. We descended from a respectable family; the first in the State of Con. Can we sink below them? and grovel in insignificance? No! my pride would not let me. My task will be great, but pride and ambition will carry me through.

I wish if you have leisure this summer you would work me a handsome Ruffle. I will pay you when I get rich enough. And likewise when you can conveniently paint me a few flowers and something pleasing for Children. The Instructresses I understand have been in the habit of making such trifling presents. And of course I must give something [*sic*] of the kind if I would wish to please and encourage them. I wish you would ask Brother if has not some Certificates he can send me. Mr Alden and perhaps Mr Wheeler will return in the course of a few months. You can send them by either. I [*struck*: rode] have just return'd from a ride to the Spring. Per[*text loss*] you r[*text loss*: ecolle]ct what Cummings says of this, he sets it [*text loss*] a Curiosity. Perhaps it might have been formely [*sic*]. But its now no more of a curiosity than any Spring. The hollow log it once flowed out of has gone to decay. A small fence is built around it.

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I have had an invitation to attend the Commencement Ball at Athens—by one of the prettiest beaus in W.

PS dont for the world shew this, destroy it immediately. I have no objections to your shewing it to

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Brother, and wish you would

Write soon

Yours In haste

Aurelia.

[docket]

A M W. Hale

June 11 1821

[address leaf]

Washington } 35
 5 am 15 }

Miss Sarah W. Hale

Hartford

Con.