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.
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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Aurelia Hale to her sister Sarah, June 11, 1821. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC08934)
In breakfast we have Coffee and Tea. Water, Preserved, Hominy, Indian Bread, several dishes of meat, &c. and for dinner nearly the same, with the exception of Indian bread, and meaty, with the addition of Old salt.

I designed to write you a long letter, but Mrs. Sampson's Coach is waiting for us to ride. I will have the remainder told you, perhaps I shall get some new ideas. We ride in style. Suppose you with Hackett's in all will be behind the Carriage. With a face shining like a glass bottle. Its appearance as happy as if worth thousands.

While at Mrs. Campbell's, Priece & Church, he lives a mile from it. But now I broach so near, as to remain it inconvenient to ride. We shall always have a ride after Church, Sabbath evenings, when the weather will permit. It's delightful I assure you.

This almost fills the mail is about closing. Mrs. Buck says I must finish my letter this before we ride. I have everything to write you, and many inquiries to make about the girl. How are Eliza, Amelia, Catherine &c. Do you know who I wish for Eliza and Martha Bath. I have not forgotten. Remember me particularly to them.

What Meeting do you attend now. I hope not the Methodist. I hope altogether. Though I desired you to attend frequently when I left home. I have attended mind once, and think, if you ever enter, or wish to be respectable, 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 your think, believe you. If you do not try to please yourself, respect others, and person will do it for you.

Yes, who would have thought what I have for the sake of respectability. But suppose you. I have not yet neglected it. I now can more in the Spirit. I have always wished to
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? Not
my pride would not let me. My task will be great, but pride
and ambition will carry me through.

Parch if you have leisure this summer you would
work one a handsome Beagle. 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 have been in the habit of making
such to their presents. And of course I must give something
of the kind if I would ask to please and encourage them. I wish
you would ask Brother if he not some last year he can send
me. Mr. Allen and perhaps Mr. Wheeler will return in the
course of a few months. You can send them by either.
I made have just returned from a ride to the Spring. Perceive
you in what Guemaring says of this, he says it was
a curiosity. Perhaps it might have been formerly. But it is
no more of a curiosity than any Spring. The hollow log it once
flowered 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. I have not done so, I did not expect to receive news should
have made the promise. You must tell him what I say. I am
sure he will not wish me to displeasure my friends, nor give
occasion for censure. I respect him and though the medium
of your letter shall always be happy to hear from him. Besides I
cannot play the hypocrite, at what a subject I almost fell
I never had any religion yet. And people saying so will never
make it go so. I have had an invitation to attend the Common
meet Ball at Nixing. If one of the prettiest ladies will...
I do not for the world think this deserving it immediately. I have no
objection to your viewing it to Bristian and wish you would
Yours sincerely Amelia. Write soon.
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Washington Hills County June - 11th, 1821

Dear Sarah

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 Briches, for further particulars you can refer to Mothers Letter.

The Geo. differ 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 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. Generally have a desert after dinner.

[2] For breakfast we have Coffee and Tea. Waflles, 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[il]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 descend 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[
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.

You recollect I promised to write to a certain person before I left H. 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 displease 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 peoples saying so will never make it
[struck: not] so.

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.