

# "A sickening state of things"

Letter from Rachel Lazarus to Eliza Mordecai, Oct. 9, 1831. Mordecai Family Papers (#847), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

## As you read...

In this letter, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus of Wilmington writes to her relative Eliza Mordecai of Mobile, Alabama, to tell her of the events of September 1831. By October 9, she would have had a few weeks to reflect on the insurrection and the rumor and hysteria that followed. She concludes in her letter that white southerners would have to live with the constant fear of slave insurrection — until they freed their slaves.

## TO FREE THE SLAVES?

After Nat Turner's Rebellion, serious debates took place in both Virginia and North Carolina about whether slavery should be ended. In Virginia, the legislature only narrowly defeated a measure to abolish slavery. The measure failed in part because whites did not want hundreds of thousands of free blacks living among them. Some argued (as Rachel Lazarus did in her letter) that freed slaves could be sent "back" to Africa, but this was expensive and impractical. And since most slaves by then had been born in the United States, most did not consider Africa their home.

Instead, white residents of both states accepted the "sickening state of things" — that whites must live in fear of insurrection as long as slavery continued, and that slavery must continue. The harsh "black codes" passed in the later antebellum period reflected these fears, as would southerners' responses to the growing abolition movement in the North.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Note that, unlike Moses Ashley Curtis, Rachel Lazarus considered the plot to be very real and very dangerous. Why do you suppose that might have been?
- Why did Rachel tell Eliza Mordecai about Jacob? What do you imagine might have happened to Jacob after the Mordecais received her letter?
- Why did Rachel Lazarus believe the slaves should be freed? Why might you suppose so few slaveholders actually did free their slaves? (We'll look at this issue in greater depth when we cover the antebellum period.)

Wilmington Octr 9th 1831—

You have no doubt heard of the alarm we have experienced on the subject of insurrection — many of the reports were totally false, others excessively exaggerated, that is, as to their being actually in arms, & on their way to commit savages, but the appalling

fact admits of no doubt, that there was a deep laid & extensive plot formed, & that an early period in the present month had been fixed on for its perpetration. — The disclosure was made by a mulatto, a freeman, to a gentleman in So Washington. Several have been executed in Duplin, Samson & here, & the jail is now crowded with the accused. It is a sickening state of things — one to which we are always in a more or less degree liable, & it will require more than a herculean<sup>1</sup> effort in ourselves to [illegible] the fetters of our slave population & to transport them to their own land<sup>2</sup>. — Till this is resolved on & executed we can have no security but in a state of unremitted vigilance. I do not know if you remember Billy an African belonging to Mr. L— he & another man of ours are among the accused. They have confessed among other things that their plot had been formed & was just ready to be put into execution 12 months ago, but that some informations were given which caused the removal of Jacob [illegible] who was to have been their leader & they gave it up till they could fix on another. This Jacob was sold by his master to a speculator who took him to Mobile, where he now is. He has written by mail to his wife here. I am particular in mentioning this because I think it will be well to let the proper authorities know, that such a character is in their vicinity....

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## Notes

1. A *herculean* effort is an effort worthy of Hercules, who in Greek myth performed twelve labors, or tasks, requiring tremendous strength. In one, he diverted a river to clean the greatest stables in Greece. In another, he fought a lion whose skin made him invulnerable to arrows or spears; Hercules strangled the lion to death with his bare hands. So, obviously, to say that your efforts are “herculean” is hyperbole, or exaggeration.
2. That is, to Africa. During the antebellum period, several attempts were made to buy slaves, free them, and send them “back” to Africa. In 1847, a group of freed slaves founded the colony of Liberia, on the coast of West Africa. But by 1831, few African Americans had been born in Africa. Most thought of the United States as their home and would not have agreed that Africa was “their own land.”