
"THERE IS NOT A DAY ON WHICH I DO NOT REJOICE OVER THE ARRANGEMENT ABOUT LOUISIANA"


"I have received your letter...and while I find therein the kindly expression of your friendship to me, I also recognize with pleasure the liberal sentiments which, we must hope, will come into fashion sooner or later. Amongst the hopes born of the Revolution, we reckon upon the abolition of the slave trade and the gradual emancipation of the blacks. The government of the Convention has supported prosecution, the sword and the flame; there remained; however, after so many horrors and ravages, a situation not unfavorable to agriculture and one which philanthropy could turn to account. I see that they have chosen the prejudices of the old system, combined with the violent deeds of the conquest, the intrigues of Carrier, and the dogs of Pizarro; it is one more cause of sorrow for the friends of liberty, but they must consider that the reflux of public opinion is but temporary, that so great a store of generous ideas and manifest principles will bear fruit eventually, and that their cause will triumph at last in the Old World even as it has been firmly established in the New.

"This letter will be handed to you by M. de Foncier, a distinguished officer of engineers and an estimable man in every respect, to whom I personally am under obligations and whose well-being I earnestly desire. In his behalf I ask all the proofs of kindly interest that are in your power. My wife, who is no less attached to him than I, joins in this expression of our friendship... I live so withdrawn from the world in my dear country estate...that I can give you no very certain news; but it seems to me that there is no thought of sending you collaborators, and that diplomatic affairs will remain in the hands in which I greatly like to see them. There is not a day on which I do not rejoice over the arrangement about Louisiana, as if I were just hearing of it for the first time. I have acknowledged your friendly good offices in regard to my affairs. Of course it should be possible for me to keep for my children those territories which I have just received; but after two expensive revolutions, one exile, and a term of captivity...I shall consider myself fortunate if I can pay my debts and have enough left to live on. It would have been necessary for me to choose the less favorable of the two plans suggested by Mr. Gallatin, if I had not found in Mr. Parker a conditional purchaser who allows me the privilege of paying him fifty thousand crowns in two years with the interest secured by the mortgage on the land; I shall be the less able to discern it because I still have many debts and my income, including my retirement-pay, is very modest. It will be very fortunate for me if Mr. Jefferson's valuation of four or five dollars per acre can be realized; I fear that Mr. Gallatin's is the more accurate; in any event, my arrangement with Mr. Parker has no drawbacks, for if I have not the wherewithal to pay him, he will have paid for my American property only the equivalent of the sum lent to me. I have informed you that I sent Mr. Madison my power of attorney in blank so that Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Gallatin and himself can fill it in as they please...

"Do you think it is still possible to go on with the Santo Domingo business, and to reassure as to their liberty the men to whom it was promised, and whom it has been as deplorable and more unjust to send back into slavery than it was to free them without proper precautions?... The public reports will have told you that the negotiations of the mediators are not broken off; it is plain that the English government has tried to go back on the Treaty of Amiens; that it has gone astray in its conclusions regarding this country, and that it is disturbed today about our preparations. But things have gone so far on both sides, that continued peace is becoming very difficult."
This letter was written by Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, in 1803. By way of background - he had been given, by Act of Congress, 11,000 acres of land in Louisiana in recognition of his service as a General in the American army during the Revolution. (President Jefferson also offered him the Governorship of the new Territory, but he declined, believing his duty, as a patriot, required that he remain in France.)

As for the reference to slavery - some years earlier Lafayette had acquired a plantation in Santo Domingo with the express purpose of using it as an experiment in giving slaves their freedom.

The letter says a lot about the man, revealing his enduring faith in the goals of the French Revolution in which he participated; his humane concern for the slaves he had freed; his deep love for France and especially his estate, "La Grange", to which he had "retired" after his years in captivity and exile (and where this letter was written); his desire to provide a legacy for his children; his disillusionment with the French government under Napoleon (as First Consul) which he felt had betrayed the ideals for which he had struggled; his personal relationship with American leaders such as Jefferson and Madison; his trust in others as exemplified by the blank power of attorney he gave them; his willingness to accept responsibility for his debts; and, finally, his modesty in signing the letter simply "Lafayette", dropping the "de" before his name. (He wanted to be thought of as a professional soldier with democratic values rather than as a member of the privileged aristocracy.)

J. L. A.