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Marquis de Lafayette's Correspondence on his Emancipation Plan, 1783–86

MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE TO GEORGE WASHINGTON
Cadiz, February 5, 1783

Now, my dear General, that You are Going to Enjoy Some Ease and Quiet, Permit me to Propose a plan to You Which Might Become Greatly Beneficial to the Black Part of Mankind. Let us Unite in Purchasing a Small Estate Where We May try the Experiment to free the Negroes, and Use them only as tenants. Such an Example as Yours Might Render it a General Practice, and if We Succeed in America, I Will Chearfully Devote a part of My time to Render the Method fascionable in the West Indies. If it Be a Wild Scheme, I Had Rather Be Mad that Way, than to Be thought Wise in the other tack.

GEORGE WASHINGTON TO MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE
Newburgh, N.Y., April 5, 1783

The scheme, my dear Marqs. which you propose as a precedent, to encourage the emancipation of the black people of this Country from that state of Bondage in which they are held, is a striking evidence of the benevolence of your Heart. I shall be happy to join you in so laudable a work; but will defer going into a detail of the business, till I have the pleasure of seeing you.

MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE TO HENRY KNOX
Chavaniac, Auvergne, June 12, 1785

I Confidentially intrust to You, my dear Sir, that I am about purchasing a fine plantation in a french Colony, to make the experiment for Enfranchising Our Negro Brethren, god grant it may Be propagated!

MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE TO GEORGE WASHINGTON
Sarguemines on the French Frontier, July 14, 1785

You remember an idea which I imparted to you three years ago. I am going to try it in the French colony of Cayenne, but will write more fully on the subject in my other letters.

MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE TO GEORGE WASHINGTON
Paris, February 6, 1786

Another secret I intrust to you, my dear General, is that I have purchased for a hundred and twenty five thousand French livres a plantation in the Colony of Cayenne and am going to free my Negroes in order to make that experiment which you know is my hobby horse.

GEORGE WASHINGTON TO MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE
Mount Vernon, May 10, 1786

The benevolence of your heart my Dr. Marqs. is so conspicuous upon all occasions, that I never wonder at any fresh proofs of it; but your late purchase of an estate in the colony of Cayenne, with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country; but I despair of seeing it. Some petitions were presented to the Assembly, at its last Session, for the abolition of slavery, but they could scarcely obtain a reading. To set them afloat at once would, I really believe, be productive of much inconvenience and mischief; but by degrees it certainly might, and assuredly ought to be effected; and that too by Legislative authority.

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