

A

SOUTH CAROLINA

PROTEST AGAINST SLAVERY:

1776

A LETTER FROM HENRY LAURENS, SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE CONTI-  
NENTAL CONGRESS, TO HIS SON, COLONEL JOHN LAURENS;  
DATED CHARLESTON, S. C., AUGUST 13th, 1776.

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## NOTICE.

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THIS Letter is taken from the Collection of the Zenger Club. It was privately printed by that Society, in the initial number of their historical Series. It is now reprinted as additional evidence against the Southern theory, that the same antagonism that now prevails between the North and South on the subject of Slavery, existed at the time of the American Revolution. Mr. Everett, in his late oration at New York, says: "At the time of the adoption of the Constitution, and long afterwards, there was, generally speaking, no sectional difference of opinion, between North and South, on the subject of Slavery. It was in both parts of the country regarded, in the established formula of the day, as 'a social, political, and moral evil.' The general feeling in favor of universal liberty and the rights of man, wrought into

fervor in the progress of the Revolution, naturally strengthened the anti-slavery sentiment throughout the Union. IT IS THE SOUTH WHICH HAS SINCE CHANGED, NOT THE NORTH."

Perhaps this letter of a distinguished South Carolinian, now first printed for circulation, will serve to show the accuracy of this opinion.

NEW YORK, *August 1, 1861.*

## LAURENS' CORRESPONDENCE.

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[HENRY LAURENS TO JOHN LAURENS.]

CHARLESTON, S. C., 14th August, 1776.

UNCOMMON and exceedingly mortifying, my dear son, has been the late long interruption in our correspondence. I find that I have not put to paper in any address to you since the 29th April, and unless certain letters referred to have reached you, I have no ground to hope that you have learned any thing concerning me since November last; in the meantime, after long and anxious waiting, I have had the pleasure of receiving your letters of the 5th December from St. Augustine, and of 20th March by the hand of Mr. Read; but that which you say was sent, via Virginia, franked by the postmaster, came no nearer to me than Cockspur, when it was either destroyed or returned in the packet; if Governor Wright, who was there, had been possessed of my feelings, he would have sent a son's letter to a

father, notwithstanding the opposition of their political tenets.<sup>1</sup>

Once more I will attempt to present my love to you by the hands of Monsieur Rilliet, who, poor gentleman, is making another effort after many disappointments to regain a footing on his native soil; you will see in the schedule of letters,<sup>2</sup> he is already the bearer of several to you, which are now perhaps not worth carriage. I have not time to review them, and since they are written and packeted, let them go.

I told you in my last that I was going to Georgia. I began my journey the 1st May, and at Wright's, Savannah, Broton Island, and New Hope, found crops of rice amounting to about thirteen hundred barrels, which I caused to be removed to places less exposed to the threatened depredations of picaroons from St. Augustine, in such places that great value still remains. I have lately learned that each plantation is again well covered—the best crop, they say, that ever was borne

<sup>1</sup> Sir James Wright, baronet, was the son of Judge Wright of South Carolina. He held at different periods the highest posts in Georgia, having been attorney-general, judge, and lieutenant-governor, before assuming the government of the colony in 1761. He was governor at the commencement of the revolution, and was the last who administered affairs in the name of the king. He died in England.

<sup>2</sup> Letters referred to: 26th November and 6th December, by Rainier from Georgia.—4th, 8th, and 16th January, by M. Rilliet; copies by Snow Mobile, Captain Smith.—22d February, 6th and 14th March, by M. Rilliet; copies by Mr. Demar via West Indies.—16th and 19th March, by M. Rilliet.—26th and 28th March, by Mr. Sandy Wright, to be forwarded through St. Augustine.—29th April, by M. Rilliet.

at Broton Island—but what of that? The whole will either be destroyed, stolen, or lie with the farmer to perish by time and vermin—no small sacrifice at the shrine of liberty, and yet very small compared with that which I am willing to make; not only crops, but land, life and all must follow in preference to sacrificing liberty to mammon. In such sentiments I found the people of Georgia with a few exceptions, but none more hearty than our Highland friends, the McIntoshes. Lachlan is colonel of a battalion upon continental establishment; two of his sons, Lach and William, are subs; his brother William commands a troop of rangers in pay of the colony, or, as I should now say, the State. Joe Habersham is major, and John a captain in the battalion; in a word, the country is military.

My negroes there, all to a man, are strongly attached to me—so are all of mine in this country; hitherto not one of them has attempted to desert; on the contrary, those who are more exposed hold themselves always ready to fly from the enemy in case of a sudden descent. Many hundreds of that colour have been stolen and decoyed by the servants of King George—the Third. Captains of British ships of war and noble lords have busied themselves in such inglorious pilferage, to the disgrace of their master and disgrace of their cause. These negroes were first enslaved by the English; acts of parliament have established the slave trade in favour of the home-residing English, and almost totally prohibited the Americans from reaping

any share of it. Men of war, forts, castles, governors, companies and committees are employed and authorized by the English parliament to protect, regulate, and extend the slave trade. Negroes are brought by Englishmen and sold as slaves to Americans. Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, &c., &c., live upon the slave trade. The British parliament now employ their men-of-war to steal those negroes from the Americans to whom they had sold them, pretending to set the poor wretches free, but basely trepan and sell them into tenfold worse slavery in the West Indies, where probably they will become the property of Englishmen again, and of some who sit in parliament. What meanness! what complicated wickedness appears in this scene! O England, how changed! how fallen!

You know, my dear son, I abhor slavery. I was born in a country where slavery had been established by British kings and parliaments, as well as by the laws of that country ages before my existence. I found the Christian religion and slavery growing under the same authority and cultivation. I nevertheless disliked it. In former days there was no combating the prejudices of men supported by interest; the day I hope is approaching when, from principles of gratitude as well as justice, every man will strive to be foremost in showing his readiness to comply with the golden rule. Not less than twenty thousand pounds sterling would all my negroes produce if sold at public auction to-morrow. I am not the man who enslaved them;



they are indebted to Englishmen for that favour; nevertheless I am devising means for manumitting many of them, and for cutting off the entail of slavery. Great powers oppose me—the laws and customs of my country, my own and the avarice of my countrymen. What will my children say if I deprive them of so much estate? These are difficulties, but not insuperable. I will do as much as I can in my time, and leave the rest to a better hand.

I am not one of those who arrogate the peculiar care of Providence in each fortunate event, nor one of those who dare trust in Providence for defence and security of their own liberty while they enslave and wish to continue in slavery thousands who are as well entitled to freedom as themselves. I perceive the work before me is great. I shall appear to many as a promoter not only of strange, but of dangerous doctrines: it will therefore be necessary to proceed with caution. You are apparently deeply interested in this affair, but as I have no doubts concerning your concurrence and approbation, I most sincerely wish for your advice and assistance, and hope to receive both in good time.

I finished my journey going round by Mepkin, and returned to Charleston the 1st June. Half an hour after I had entered my house, intelligence was brought of a fleet at anchor a little to the northward of Charleston bar; for the history of this fleet I refer you to Jack Wells' <sup>1</sup> paper of the 2d inst., and to certain notes which

<sup>1</sup> Thomas, in his History of Printing, gives a brief account of John Wells, the editor here referred to.

I have added. His account, although true in general substance, is the most bungling and inaccurate of any thing I have seen from him; it would be easier to build a true and proper narrative at full length than to mend the botchery which he took a full month to compose. I wish you or somebody else would publish a fair and honest compilation from his gazette and my papers. You know me too well to suppose I would in a little exaggerate or suppress. You may add as much of what follows as may appear to be necessary, but let the whole be cleverly done and introduced by such declaration of candour as these accounts are well entitled to; nothing more abhorrent to me than publications of falsehood for truth.

Upon the tremendous range of fifty-five sail of hostile ships before our doors and in full view, after wishing they had rather come as seekers for freights of rice, I thought it my duty to add to the dignity of vice-president of the colony (now State, observe) the several offices of engineer, superintendent of works, aid-de-camp, and occasionally any other which could in the least contribute to the service of my country, then seeming to verge on a precipice, and to require the support of every man in it. I, who you know had resolved never again to mount a horse, I, who thought it impossible for me to gallop five miles in a day, was seen for a month and more every day on the back of a lively nag at half-past four in the morning, sometimes galloping twenty miles before breakfast, and sometimes

setting the horse fourteen hours in eighteen, and, what you will say was more extraordinary, I never got a tumble; but mark, he was a trotting horse. I will never cross a pacer again if I can avoid it. I have spoken so particularly of myself, not meaning to claim any singular or extraordinary merit, but because I know you will draw pleasing inferences of my state of health from an account of such exertions. The president<sup>1</sup> was as diligent, as active as a man could be, and so much more useful than myself, as his authority, superior abilities, and advantages of youth enabled him. Every man, except a few unhappy misled, whom the people call tories, and a few of a worse stamp, whom I call property men, was animated, discovered a love of country, and a boldness arising from an assurance of being engaged in a just cause. Charleston was in a very short time enclosed by lines, trenches, and redoubts; wharves were cleared of all incumbrances; streets strongly barricaded; retrenchments within; batteries erected for defence at practicable landings above the town. Thousands of men came in from the country, from North Carolina and Virginia, and all this with a degree of celerity as amazing as our former neglect had been. Much indeed are we indebted to General Lee, as well as to his seconds, the Brigadiers Armstrong and Howe; these arrived at a critical time, and we were favoured by weather, which fortunately withheld the

<sup>1</sup> John Rutledge was president and commander-in-chief of the colony of South Carolina at this period.

enemy from striking a sudden blow; and every moment of the interval was improved to advantage on our side.

General Lee at first sight was exceedingly displeased with the fort at Sullivan's; wished we could save our stores and abandon it, although he acknowledged the exterior work was impregnable; however, as that could not be done, he recommended some amendments, gave advice, orders, and his presence in the beginning of the action, to which, if we do not altogether owe the honour of the twenty-eighth of June, we are certainly greatly indebted; but, from the general's better knowledge of the harbour and the vast importance of that post, he must now be of a different opinion.

At the approach of the ships of war towards Sullivan's, the ramparts and parapets of Fort Johnson, where Colonel Gadsden had chosen his command, were seen covered by officers and soldiers, every one interesting himself in the fate of the sister fortress, and standing ready in case of need to second her efforts. All the batteries round the town were at the same time manned, guns loaded, every article in readiness for acting in turn. Troops of regulars and militia properly stationed for repelling all attempts to land; engines and men at proper stands for extinguishing fires in the town. There was every appearance of an universal determination to give General James Grant the flat lie. It was the fortune of his old friend Will Moultrie to speak first, and he monopolized the glory of the day.

The country militia as well as the town continued

cheerfully to do duty on this frontier as long as one of the enemy's fleet remained in sight; the Active was the last; she with a tender went about ten days ago to Bull's Island, the property of Captain Shubrick; landed forty white and twenty black men; killed by platoon firing a few head of cattle; augmented their black guard by stealing six more negroes, and then sailed off the coast or perhaps only a little out of sight. To hear Shubrick's overseer relate the manner of their firing on the cattle, and the very few of their shot which hit the mark, is droll enough, and serves to raise the contempt of those, who with single ball, at one hundred and fifty yards' distance, will hit the circle of an English crown.

After the attack upon Sullivan's Island, seconded by ravages and murders by the Cherokee Indians on our western frontier, who probably acted in a concerted plan with the ships and troops, I believe there were few men here who had not lost all inclination for renewing our former connexion with your king and his ministers; however that might have been, the great point is now settled. On the 2d instant a courier arrived from Philadelphia, and brought a declaration of the 4th of July, by the representatives of the thirteen united colonies in congress met, that from thenceforward those colonies should be "Free and Independent States." You have no doubt seen the paper, or will in a few days see the copy often repeated at full length; therefore I need not mark the particular contents. This declaration was proclaimed in Charleston with great

solemnity on Monday, the 5th inst., attended by a procession of president, councils, generals, members of assembly, officers civil and military, &c., &c., amidst loud acclamations of thousands who always huzza when a proclamation is read. To many, who from the rashness, impolicy, and cruelty of the British administration, had foreseen this event, the scene was serious, important, and awful. Even at this moment I feel a tear of affection for the good old country and for the people in it, whom in general I dearly love. There I saw that sword of state which I had before seen four several times unsheathed in declarations of war against France and Spain by the Georges, now unsheathed and borne in a declaration of war against George the Third. I say even at this moment my heart is full of the lively sensations of a dutiful son, thrust by the hand of violence out of a father's house into the wide world. What I have often with truth averred in London and Westminster, I dare still aver; not a sober man, and scarcely a single man in America wished for a separation from Great Britain. Your king, too, I feel for; he has been greatly deceived and abused.

Soon after the men-of-war had anchored within our bar, alarming accounts were brought of new attempts by John Stuart, Henry Stuart, Alexander Cameron, and other ministerial agents to stir up the savage Indians to attack our western frontier; several intercepted letters from them confirmed the reports. The Indians, and particularly the Cherokees, had amused us by the

most flattering talks, full of assurances of friendship and promises to follow our advice, which always had been that they should observe a strict neutrality; but very suddenly, without any pretence to provocation, those treacherous devils, in various parties, headed by white men, and pushed on by those who are in employment for this cruel purpose, made an inroad upon our settlements, burned several houses, and murdered about sixty persons, chiefly women and children. Colonel Williamson in South, Brigadier Rutherford in North Carolina, were immediately in arms, and a large command marched from Virginia. What Rutherford and the Virginia troops have done, we are not yet informed; but Colonel Williamson and his parties have driven back the savages of the lower towns, killed as many as could be come at in fight, and taken some prisoners, among whom are no less than fifteen white men; they have also destroyed Seneca, Keowee, Warracky, Estatohee, Toxawa, and Sugartown, together with the crops of corn and other grain found in fields and barns, the only possible way of reducing the barbarians. This intelligence comes from Colonel Williamson in late letters. If the Virginians act their part well, the Cherokees will soon be reduced to the utmost distress, and may possibly turn their vengeance against those hellish instigators to this hellish war. At the entrance of Seneca, a new town which, I am told, was very extensive, on the banks of Keowee, Colonel Williamson suffered from an ambuscade; his horse, by two shot, was killed

under him. Mr. Salvador, a gentleman whose death is universally regretted, was killed by his side; eight men wounded, two of whom are since dead. He nevertheless rallied his troops, attacked the savages, beat them out, and after destroying a town of near four miles long, marched forward. He is undoubtedly a brave man, and not a bad general. You know his deficiency in education; what heights might he have reached if he could have improved his genius by reading. If we succeed against the Cherokees, the Creeks and other Indians may continue to be simple spectators of our contest with British ships and soldiers; otherwise we shall be attacked on all sides and greatly distressed; but men here are fearless of distress, and determined to maintain their rights, trusting in a righteous God for a happy issue.

I told you in a former letter of the dangerous insurrections by thousands of the back country people; these were suppressed by the vigilance and activity of Colonel Williamson in a first instance, and in a second and more formidable by Colonel Richardson and troops from North Carolina. Hundreds, or more properly thousands, were taken prisoners, informed truly of the nature of the dispute between Great Britain and the colonies, converted, and sent to their habitations. About a hundred of their colonels, captains, and other officers, (from whence it appears that the whole body was very large,) were brought to Charleston; these, except thirteen or fourteen of the most tenacious, soon con-



fessed their errors, united in the American cause, and also returned home. Of the thirteen or fourteen were some sensible men, particularly their chief, Colonel Robert Cunningham, a man of great honour, whose conscience, as he said, fettered him in the oath of allegiance, although he admitted the injustice of taxing Americans without their own consent, and censured the British administration; he often moved me while I was president of the Council of Safety, and often since the president of the colony, to accept from him and his companions an oath of neutrality; he would not at first believe that the British administration were so wicked as to instigate the savages to war against us. As soon, therefore, as he was convinced of the truth, his conscience freed him from old obligations, and he most heartily desired to take the oath of fidelity to the United Colonies, and to have an opportunity of giving proofs of his sincerity. His fellow-prisoners joined him in a petition to the president and council, who ordered the whole to be released. They immediately repaired to Colonel Williamson's camp and offered their service; but he, considering their long absence from their several homes, recommended to them the care of their families. Not all, however, whom we have enlarged have continued faithful. Some of the common fellows have quoted the example of Sir James and broke their parole; most of these are now among the Indians; some of them have again been taken prisoners, and must suffer the penalty of an old law. Kirkland, you may have heard,

made his escape where he left his son, a child of ten or twelve years old, in gaol; we know nothing of him since his flight; possibly this ignorant fellow may have found his way to Sir James's; he was confident of a hearty welcome there, and of much free conversation with the master of that house. If he were honest, he might make a tolerable serjeant; but any thing less than a regiment will fall short of his own mark.

The Reverend Mr. Cooper from time to time gave offence to his parishioners, and they have dismissed him. The king's officers, that is to say, the attorney-general, chief and assistant judges, postmaster, and Mr. Outerbridge, are confined to the postmaster's house. The late commander of Fort Johnson and the collector are at large on their parole. W. Wragg remains at his plantation, and lately James Brisbane and some seven or eight others of our neighbours, who had signed the association and acknowledged the justice of the American cause, but refused to do any thing which might endanger their property in a case of conquest by the other side, (these and some who play still a more cunning game are *property men*,) were sent to Cheraw gaol. The success of the 28th of June made some converts, and these gentlemen in particular advanced so far as to consent to bear arms, take the test oath, &c., but still under the air of obedience to avail themselves of the plea of compulsion and to save property; such men deserve no station of honour on either side. I can have no pity for these, while I sincerely commiserate the

circumstances of the king's officers and of every suffering candid man, although he may be my enemy.

Mrs. Stuart, the wife of the cruel superintendent, had been long confined to her house and hindered from leaving the colony. The people had hoped that Stuart would in the case of his own have had some tender feelings for the wives and innocent children of our friends on the Indian frontier; but when we found that he had struck the blow, instead of retaliating as *his* friends ever do, the president and privy council ordered Mrs. Stuart to be enlarged; no valuable end could be obtained by a continuance of her suffering.

America is now well supplied with gunpowder and arms, and every day will probably increase our commerce by slow steps.

The General Assembly is to meet on the 17th of September, when the Declaration of Independence will be recorded among our acts, and every salutary measure pursued for the welfare of the State. To tell you the Virginians had routed Lord Dunmore; that North Carolina is very quiet; Maryland and Philadelphia as yet unmolested; New York likely to become the seat of war for this summer; that Boston is now secured to us by strong fortifications; that the New England privateers had made prizes of several transport ships, and prisoners of many hundred Highland soldiers, would probably be to relate what you will know before this can reach you; but it may be new to you that General Lee and General Howe went last week to Georgia,

whence some expedition is intended to the southward. The season of the year and some other circumstances are not so favourable as to give me sanguine hopes of success; and you will feel some concern when I tell you we expect another visit by the British ships and troops in the winter months.

I have now gone through with much intelligence, such as it is; don't wonder if I tell you I write in haste. I had determined to take time by the forelock, and to have saved four or five days for writing to my friends in England; but through some unexpected public calls, and the long sickness of my good man James, I am reduced to one, and I must copy for different conveyances; however, I have a few words more to add. I am now by the will of God brought into a new world, and God only knows what sort of a world it will be; what may be your particular opinion of this change I know not. You have done well to avoid writing on politics. Remember you are of full age, entitled to judge for yourself; pin not your faith upon my sleeve, but act the part which an honest heart after mature deliberation shall dictate, and your services on the side which you may take, because you think it the right side, will be the more valuable.

I need not tell you, whatever may be your determinations, to avoid all party disputes, and to act inoffensively and circumspectly in the state where you are. I cannot rejoice in the downfall of an old friend, of a parent from whose nurturing breasts I have drawn

my support and strength; every evil which befalls old England grieves me. Would to God she had listened in time to the cries of her children, and had checked the insidious slanders of those who call themselves the king's servants and the king's friends, especially such of them as had been transported to America in the character of civil officers. If my own interests, if my own rights alone had been concerned, I would most freely have given the whole to the demands and disposal of her ministers in preference to a separation; but the rights of posterity were involved in the question. I happened to stand as one of their representatives, and dared not betray my trust.

I am now more than ever anxious to see you; to see my dear Harry and your sisters; to see your uncle and aunt—but when and where? God direct you for the best; but pay particular attention to those friends, especially to your eldest sister and to Harry. Your other sister is at an age and has qualities to make her foster-mother happy. I could add very much on this head, but clouds and darkness are before me.

Remember me respectfully to each of my old friends; tell them that as an individual I have a right to acknowledge my obligations to them, and that I will take every opportunity of showing my regard; and although I hold my life by a most precarious tenure, yet I trust in God we shall meet again as friends. Particularly inform both the Messrs. Cowles that I will, when it is possible, look into our accounts and adjust

them; it has not been in my power to do so since my arrival from England. Mr. William Cowles will do me the justice to own, that it is not my fault those accounts were left unsettled. I had often wrote to him for them. I made one journey to Bristol for the sole purpose of settling them, and when I was leaving the kingdom I again took Bristol in my way to Falmouth for the same purpose. I waited there to the very last hour for saving my passage in the packet, and did not receive the papers from him, till I had kept the post-chaise long in waiting at my door, and in despair was just stepping into it. My friend is to blame on this score.

I am glad you continue with Mr. Becknel and your brother with Mr. Henderson; frugality is essential to you both. Consider I cannot supply you while the sword of Britain remains unsheathed. Improve every moment of your time, my dear son, and continue your guidance and protection to your brother and your sisters—your respect and duty to your distressed uncle and aunt. I feel much for them. May God protect and guide you all, and may he still give peace and mutual friendship to the divided family of Britain, and promote the happiness, equally of the ancient root and of the transplanted branches. If you do not come, enquire for opportunities in Holland and in France, and write as oft as you can, and Harry too.

Adieu, my dear, dear son.

MR. JOHN LAURENS.

HENRY LAURENS.

Why do you never say a word of M. B. ?