The Emancipation of Slaves

Letter from Lafayette to 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 indias—if it Be a Wild scheme, I Had Rather Be Mad that Way, than to Be thought Wise on the other tack.

Source: This is an [**Early Access document**](http://founders.archives.gov/about/EarlyAccess) from [The Papers of George Washington](http://founders.archives.gov/about/Washington).

Letter from Washington to Lafayette, Headquarters Newburgh, 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 the Bondage in wch 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.

Source: this is an [**Early Access document**](http://founders.archives.gov/about/EarlyAccess) from [The Papers of George Washington](http://founders.archives.gov/about/Washington).

Letter from Lafayette to Washington, Paris, February 6, 1786

—an other Secret I intrust to you, my dear General, is that I Have purchased for 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.

Source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Confederation Series, vol. 3, *19 May 1785 – 31 March 1786*, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994, pp. 538–547.

Letter from Washington to 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 & mischief; but by degrees it certainly might, & assuredly ought to be effected & that too by Legislative authority.

Source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Confederation Series, vol. 4, *2 April 1786 – 31 January 1787*, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995, pp. 41–45.

**Vocabulary:** *benevolence*: generosity; *laudable*: commendable; *livres*: French money

Background: The Marquis de Lafayette was a young French nobleman who volunteered his service and aide during the American Revolution. He met George Washington in the summer of 1777 and went with him to Valley Forge for the winter.  
The two men remained close, almost having a father/son relationship, during Washington’s lifetime.

1. What type of primary sources are these documents? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

2. Who wrote these documents? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

3. On line 2, the statement, “Now, My dear General, that You are Going to Enjoy some Ease and Quiet” is   
 written. How does knowing the date on line 1 help you to understand what happened before this  
 letter was written? Why might the General “Enjoy some Ease and Quiet”? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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4. What plan is the Marquis de Lafayette proposing to George Washington? Underline evidence in the   
 text to support your answer. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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5. In lines 10 – 15, how does George Washington respond to his request? Underline and annotate   
 evidence in the text to support your answer. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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6. The word ***precedent*** in line 11means *an act that may be used as an example*. To what is this   
 referring exactly? How do you know? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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7. What are the three best words or phrases that help you to understand the meaning of the word   
 ***emancipation*** on line 11? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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8. What did the Marquis de Lafayette do in order to accomplish his plan? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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9. In line 19-20, Lafayette says, “to Make that Experiment which you know is My Hobby Horse.” What   
 does Hobby Horse mean in the context of this document? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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10. Does George Washington agree or disagree with the Marquis de Lafayette on the idea of   
 emancipating slaves? Provide textual evidence from the document to support your answer.   
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11. Is this exchange of thoughts and ideas on the issue of slavery unique for this time period? Explain   
 why or why not using evidence from the text. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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