

By August 1863, the country's political landscape had changed. The south's rebellious secession and the civil war that followed faded the hopes of millions of people across the charred terrain. For the once proud and glorious south, strategic dominos had fallen the wrong way. Speculation for a gritty, hard fought victory had given way to the sad specter of defeat.

Carolinians in particular had an immediate worry. Captains of incoming slave ships had warned of a hurricane gaining strength in the Atlantic that was soon to come ashore. Be it the military, or the weather, southerners had hell coming straight at them.

A month earlier, General James Longstreet's forces had suffered a crushing defeat at the battle of Gettysburg. Retreating, his fighting force was unable to continue the

hopeless struggle. Contrary to what General Lee had promised Longstreet, there were no reinforcements coming. No white knight would ride in on a white horse for a distinguished turnaround that would overcome the impossible. Wounded, battered and disheartened, Longstreet's remaining soldiers staggered back to a homeland better remembered for what it was than the uncertain future that lay ahead.

Then there was the unspoken; for some, few they may have been, there was one of the many reasons for the war's inception. For everyone living below the Mason Dixon Line there was that lingering 'slavery problem'. First thought to have been one of those fly-by-night concerns that, given time, would go away—like everything that was inconsequential. Of course, there were those liberal thinkers who imagined it to have been something not worth worrying about. After all, it wasn't as if the problem involved real people.

The slave trade had been the backbone of the southern economy as far back as anyone cared to remember. History was just that; something gone, left for anyone who had the time to care.

Slavery's continuation was tethered to all levels of socio-economic stability. Even more, there was the consideration of dignity. If the south lost the war, slavery would be gone. Oh, my goodness. Why that's what the coloreds were there for. What would rightful citizens do without them? That fear alone was more than landowners dared to imagine. If the unthinkable wasn't enough, undermining their tradition was the ugly rumor that slaves were being periodically abducted. That ongoing 'crime' was said to have been perpetrated by a renegade, former slave named Harriet Tubman. Word was, she shipped them up north; on what would later be labeled the despicable Underground Railroad.

A powerbroker named Colonel Joshua John Ward got wind of the news during a military briefing at his home, the renowned Brookgreen Plantation. There he housed over a thousand slaves. That made him the largest slave master in the land.

It went without saying that the hotly rumored railroad had enraged the all-powerful land baron. Nothing was going to get in the way of his profits. Nothing, I tell you. Nothing. If that had to be written in all capital letters, then so be it.

He was in every way determined to put an abrupt halt to that unbridled witch and teach her a lesson that she wouldn't soon forget. And whatever the Colonel wanted the Colonel got. Not being a young man anymore, struggling with what was first diagnosed as advanced arthritis, mere walking had become a major undertaking unto itself. For any of the esteemed Colonel's directives to be properly carried out he would need help.

Not far from the Colonel's glorious acreage, life on her farm was different. It was calm and relaxing, with no shouting over how Miles Sapp should behave and his many responsibilities that he often neglected. Feelings in that home were that way and no one was the wiser. So she and Miles had hoped.

The late day chill had Miles in the main room, poking logs in the fireplace with a metal rod to promote more heat before returning to the letter that rested atop a rarely played piano. The instrument was lavish gift from a suitor in years past. Sadly, the gentleman—who had been quite accomplished in playing himself—was lost in battle; it could have been Gettysburg, I'm not at all certain. For the longest, Miles was unknowing as to how the piano got there, having never heard her play a note. Then when she accidentally told of its origin and generous placement, Miles pouted over not having been able to afford it for her. That sulking soon waft.

Back at the piano, he looked down at the letter. Sudden banging from wooden window shutters shook him. It took more than a moment for him to collect himself, his thoughts. With quivering fingers, he lifted the paper to proofread it. Then he paused before dipping his fountain pen back into the inkwell. He was where self determination and self preservation came to where being alive tomorrow made the most sense. Attaching his name to the letter was suicide. There was no need to give Dr. Mudd the last laugh when signing Miles' death certificate.

The strength of the letter had come from earlier church talk that could've been nothing more than a reckless back and forth between two wannabe martyrs. But it wasn't. They were evil men intent to kill. Miles knew that the moment he heard their threats. And if nothing were done to prevent it he'd be a willing accomplice to first degree murder. They hang people for that.

He mumbled something, unsure if a written warning would put himself in danger. Then...

“What are you doing?” came from another room.

Startled, he hurried to put the letter away. Her melodious call had interrupted his tension. There was more.

“Miles, dear?” My, my, what the sound of her voice brought to him. There was something about it that rained wonderment and delicate virtue. How badly he wanted to make her his bride. Then his life would have meaning.

He accidentally banged a piano key, sending the high-octave ricocheting. “Coming!” he responded with great eagerness.

Stirred, he scampered into the narrow hallway en route to the bedroom, where lace curtains swept inward, sending her tempting scent to disturb his masculine senses. By then, he was at the doorway. The sight of her was what fairytales were about.

“I thought you left me,” she purred in a lazy, femininely receptive manner. “Perhaps something important had summoned you?”

“My dear, Sarah. Dread the thought. Do away with such nonsense.” He eased closer to stroke back wayward strands that hung over her unforgettable face. “You are as far as I can see.” He wasn’t usually this way. She brought out the emotional caring that had been trapped by all his many years of marriage.

She tittered with the sweetest southern flavor with a smile that had a way of towing men closer. Having been raised on old money, she didn’t have to work; thus preserving her youthful beauty forever. “Is everything all right?”

“With you, everything’s perfect.”

He couldn’t imagine what had uplifted her so suddenly. That’s when he realized that he had but one leg in his pants. The other standing uncovered. He was at a loss to explain his love-struck foolhardiness.

“Silly boy,” she played. “We haven’t much time before you have to go back to your wife.” She peeled back the covers, revealing the invitation to her nude, seductive softness.

With the pressure of what to do with his letter, Miles tried to collect himself, thoughts having streamlined into one masculine persuasion.

“I had not the courage to awaken you. The sight of you sleeping, so peaceful, is a sight that men everywhere would wantonly die for.”

“Live within me, Miles. Live within me,” she offered.

By any measure, she was the true spirit of the south. Certainly, those northern boys had no one who could remotely compare to her. All by herself, Sarah was the reason why the war had to be won. In generations to come there would possibly be more like her. They must be protected, almost worshipped. Right then, if a vote were taken he’d have signed up. Too bad, that feeling of dedication to the cause of war wouldn’t last.

*Dear Mr. Lincoln,*

*If it weren't for the urgency of this letter, I'd take liberties by asking your advice on the matter of what I should do about Sarah. That, however, must wait for quieter hours. Regretfully, the crisis at hand is of a much more pressing nature.*

*Recently, I was in church and overheard two men talking about killing you. One of the men isn't from around here, an unsavory sort named John Wilkes Booth. It made me uncomfortable just to sit within two rows of him. Stranger still was the other man, a doctor. My family doctor as far back as when everything seemed right with the world. I owe the good doctor money. And amidst this unsettling revelation, I use the word 'good' advisedly. Don't think that I'm telling you this to get out from paying him. To the contrary, I'm trying to do the right thing. Given my history, the right thing hasn't always turned out proper. It all began when my mother came to visit...*