Reconstruction as seen through the Martha Johnson letters

Created by: Victoria Hughes, Vermont Historical Society

Grade level of lesson: grades 7-12

Length of lesson: 2 class periods & homework

Description of topic: This lesson explores the beginnings of Reconstruction through the letters from Martha Johnson to her family in Peacham, Vermont. As part of the National Freedman’s Relief Association, Martha Johnson taught at schools for freed slaves near Beaufort, South Carolina. The eleven letters begin with Martha’s arrival in Beaufort in March 1863 and end with her death in December 1871.

Description of lesson’s context: Students should have an understanding of the Civil War and slavery in the United States. An introduction to the beginning of Reconstruction and the Port Royal Experiment would help students better understand the reasons Martha Johnson was in South Carolina. http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/reconstruction/section1/section1_rehearsal.html or http://sc150civilwar.palmettohistory.org/edu/emancipation/port-royal-experiment.htm

Students will need an introduction to the SCIM-C guided inquiry process which is used to analyze the primary sources in the lesson. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN7J1T0w9eo or http://www.historicalinquiry.com/publications/scimStrategy.pdf

Objectives:
- Analyze and interpret secondary & primary sources for information about a period and to understand the historical context.
- Gain historical empathy to understand the worldview of historical actors.

Essential question: To what extent does an individual’s experience (as reflected through primary sources) help historians understand a larger historical era?

Focusing question: To what extent do Martha Johnson’s letters support or challenge the interpretation that the Port Royal Experiment was a “rehearsal for Reconstruction?”

Culminating assessment: Write an essay answering the focusing question. Use examples from primary sources to support your argument.

Teaching & learning activities:
1. Explain that students will be analyzing some primary sources from the 1860s using a method called SCIM-C. Pass out copies of the SCIM worksheet with questions to guide students through summarizing, contextualizing, inferring and monitoring. Highlight the historical question “To what extent do Martha Johnson’s letters support or challenge the interpretation that the Port Royal Experiment was a “rehearsal for Reconstruction?”
2. Pass out copies of Martha Johnson’s letter dated March 11, 1863. Give students time to read the letter. As a group, answer the four categories of questions, starting with summarizing and ending with monitoring. Discuss interpretations of the letter. In the letter, Martha Johnson is telling her family in Peacham about her travels by boat to Beaufort, SC; her appointment as a teacher by the Freedman’s Association; and the sale of a plantation on Port Royal Island to people who formerly were enslaved. Discuss how this source relates to the historical question. Discuss questions the students might have about the Port Royal Experiment based on this letter.

3. The final step of the analysis process is “corroborating.” Tell students they will be using additional letters from Martha Johnson to investigate her experience in Port Royal from 1863 until 1871. Students should look for changes over time and ways the additional sources can help them understand what was happening in South Carolina, particularly as it relates to Reconstruction. Challenge the students to think about what the letters tell historians about Martha as person AND what the letters tell historians about the larger historical context.

4. Break students into small groups. Pass out excerpts from other letters, one excerpt to each group, along with another copy of the SCIM worksheet. Ask students to analyze the excerpts. As a class, discuss the excerpts in chronological order, highlighting how the excerpts corroborate or challenge their analysis of the first letter.

5. Ask students to think about the benefits and challenges for historians focusing on one collection of letters. What parts of the story are missing? Are Martha’s letters a valid historical source for answering the historical question? Brainstorm a list of other primary sources the students would want to consult.

6. Hand out additional primary sources that relate to the letters, including a period map of Port Royal, photographs of slave quarters in Port Royal and similar materials. Most of these were found on the Library of Congress American Memory website by searching “Port Royal, South Carolina.” [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html) Ask students to repeat the SCIM analysis process (with or without the worksheets, depending on their abilities) with these supporting sources. After they have analyzed the source, have them fill out the Corroborate worksheet (the final step of SCIM-C). Discuss how the additional sources support or challenge the students’ analysis of Martha Johnson’s letters.

7. Assign the culminating assessment essay. Encourage students to seek out additional primary and secondary sources to learn more about later developments of Reconstruction which they can compare and contrast with the Port Royal Experiment.

Products & performances:
Check in with students as they analyze individual sources. Encourage students to use the SCIM-C steps for analyzing primary sources, even if they don’t fill out the worksheet questions for each source.
**Formative assessment of products & performances:**
After students have analyzed one primary source and before they look at another source, ask them to write down questions they have about the topic. The questions can be ones that the previous source did not answer or questions that the previous source inspired.

**List of resources for teachers and students:**


Excerpts of Martha Johnson’s letters to be used in the lesson: [excerptjohnsonletters.pdf](excerptjohnsonletters.pdf)

**Additional primary sources from the Library of Congress:**

*Map*
Port Royal and surrounding islands: [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3912p.cw0389140](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g3912p.cw0389140)

*Photographs*
Port Royal, South Carolina, View of farmhouse: [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpb.01370](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpb.01370)

Port Royal, South Carolina. Slave quarters: [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpb.00806](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpb.00806)

Port Royal Island, South Carolina. View on Mill's plantation: [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpb.00762](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpb.00762)

*Letters*
Mansfield French to Salmon P. Chase, Tuesday, January 06, 1863 (Condition of freedmen in South Carolina): [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d2101100))](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d2101100)))

Proposition to the president to employ the emancipated negroes at Port Royal ... Springfield, Vt. January 27th, 1863: [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.17703700](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.17703700)

John C. Robinson to Abraham Lincoln, Wednesday, February 01, 1865 (Sale of land in South Carolina to former slaves): [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d4041900))](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d4041900)))

*Sheet music*
Contraband of Port Royal. 1862: [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/dukesm:@field(DOCID+@lit(ncdhasm.b1015))](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/dukesm:@field(DOCID+@lit(ncdhasm.b1015)))

*Broadside*
Education among the freedmen ... To the friends of education among the freedmen: [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpe:@field(DOCID+@lit(rbpe15704100))](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpe:@field(DOCID+@lit(rbpe15704100)))

**Additional primary sources from other locations**

Beliefs of the National Freedman's Relief Association: [www.roanokefreedmenscolony.com/nfra.pdf](www.roanokefreedmenscolony.com/nfra.pdf)

Qualifications for teachers with National Freedman’s Relief Association: [http://faculty.assumption.edu/aas/intros/freedteachers.html#defi](http://faculty.assumption.edu/aas/intros/freedteachers.html#defi)
**Historical question:** To what extent do Martha Johnson’s letters support or challenge the interpretation that the Port Royal Experiment was a “rehearsal for Reconstruction?”

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<tr>
<th>Summarize</th>
<th>Contextualize</th>
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<td>1. What type of document is this source?</td>
<td>1. When and where was the source produced?</td>
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<td>2. What specific information, details, and/or perspectives does this source provide?</td>
<td>2. Why was the source produced?</td>
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<td>3. What is the subject and/or purpose of the source?</td>
<td>3. What was happening within the immediate and broader context at the time the source was produced?</td>
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<td>4. Who was the author and/or audience of the source?</td>
<td>4. What summarizing information can place the source in time and place?</td>
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<th>Infer</th>
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<td>1. What is suggested by the source?</td>
<td>1. What additional evidence beyond the source is necessary to answer the historical question?</td>
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<td>2. What interpretations may be drawn from the source?</td>
<td>2. What ideas, images, or terms need further defining?</td>
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<td>3. What perspective or points of view are indicated in the source?</td>
<td>3. How useful or significant is the source for its intended purpose in answering the historical question?</td>
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<td>4. What inference may be drawn from absences or omissions in the source?</td>
<td>4. What questions from the previous stages need to be revisited in order to analyze the source satisfactorily?</td>
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**Historical question:** To what extent do Martha Johnson’s letters support or challenge the interpretation that the Port Royal Experiment was a “rehearsal for Reconstruction?”

1. What similarities and differences exist between the sources?

2. What factors could account for these similarities and differences?

3. What conclusions can be drawn from the accumulated interpretation?

4. What additional information or sources are necessary to answer more fully the guiding historical question?
Beaufort, S.C. Mar. 11th, 1863.

Dear Parents

I little expected, when I received your letters, that I should be in Dixie land, or it was answered, but so it is - I am here. I suffer, although I hardly know whether I am in the body or out. It had been so long since I had made my application to the Freedmans Association, and had heard nothing from it, that I had given up ever hearing from them but, I was summoned to appear before the Clergymans committee for examination. I went, and was accepted, and Mary also, but it was so late in the season, she did not like to take Olie south so I concluded, I could come alone, and here I am. There were two other lady teachers came with me but both entire strangers to me and one another until we met on the steamer that brought us here. We left N.J. on Thursday the 5th and arrived here yesterday the 10th after an unusually long and rough passage. The vessel was very heavily laden and had head winds all the way. I was very seasick for two days and obliged to keep my berth and for the other three - was not able to take scarcely a bit of food, for I still felt the nausea although I did not throw up. I am now so tired and weak. I should be on the bed if it was not for writing letters. So they will go tomorrow, on the vessel we came in, as I may not have another opportunity to send for a week or two and I am anxious to let you all know where I am so I can hear from you as soon as possible. For it will be a long time, to me any way, to wait for letters, and I expect my friends will like to hear of my safe arrival in Dixie, when they knew I was on my way there. I am at the residence of Mr. French, called the Mission House, where all the Teachers stay until they receive their appointments for the different places around here. Where mine will be is as yet unknown to me but shall know in a few days. Beaufort is supplied for the present with Teachers so we shall probably be sent back on some of the Plantations. Mr. French has just come in and says he has good news. One of the largest Plantations on Port Royal Island, belonging to one of the worst of rebels, was bought this morning by the Slaves belonging on that place, and a neighboring one, with money saved from their own earnings of past summer - they paid seven hundred and ten dollars for eight hundred acres. Government is trying to secure all the land she can for the benefit of the Colored Race. I am in one of the most ancient looking houses, large square rooms, immense fireplaces that will hold big logs, beautifully carved Mantel pieces and cornius, elegant pieces of furniture, but all having the marks of War, defaced and broken. I will give you next time a description of the town and the appearance of the country around but I am so tired now I cannot write much more for I am weak from seasickness as well as fatigued from seeing and hearing so much that is new, and interesting. It seems as though I had
lived a month in the last six days. I begin to realize something of War where I am now in a sense I never did before. It is as warm as June. Yesterday there was no fire, except in the kitchen, but this morning it was raining and we have fire in our rooms. But now the sun is coming out and it will be very warm again, while you are shivering with cold and the ground covered with snow. Don’t fail to write soon so I shall [have] it before many weeks. Love to Grandpa Bailey and Emma. Remember me to any of my friends who may inquire and accept the same from your daughter Martha. Direct to Beaufort S.C. care of Gen. Saxton. Pass this around to Clarissa as I don’t think I shall be able to write to her by this stemer [sic].

Martha
Excerpt #2

Perryclear Plantation Apr. 11th, 1863

Dear Sisters

…I can see from the window where I am writing into “Secesh” country not more than two miles from here, across Broad river. I am on one end of Port Royal Island. I do not know how long it is but it is ten miles to Beaufort and may extend as far the other way from B or farther, but it is narrow. A point of Lady’s Island is not more than half a mile from here when the tide is low. It seems as though we might almost step across. Mr. Root has three Plantations under his charge. Twelve Negro cabins on this place and as many more on the other two places. The men and women work in the field, and both receive the same pay except a few who are too old and infirm to labor- they are supported on the Plantation. They have nearly done planting corn and sweet potatoes and are preparing the ground for planting cotton, which is to be planted this month. There is a certain number of acres of corn, which is to be cultivated for the Government, that is for the use of the Superintendent and the horses, mules, and cattle on the Plantations, for which the colored people are paid twenty five cents per day for their work and each man woman and child has a certain number of [illegible] 4 of which make an acre, to cultivate for their own use, and to take the best care of their cotton ground. They work very industriously and save their money most of them. They are in the field early in the morning but most of them get through their tasks by three or four o’clock - they have seen so much hardship that they are not strong as northern men. No person has the energy or strength to labor here that they have in cooler climate. And another thing, they do not have a kind of food to make them vigorous for Hominy is nearly is nearly all their living. The Government gives them rations of flour or hard bread, a small portion for each one, and they buy a little Molasses and Meat occasionally. They all keep fowls, but sell all their eggs and chickens as the soldiers give them thirty cents per doz. for eggs and in the same proportions for their chickens. And they seem so anxious to save enough to buy them a little house some day. There are exceptions of course, as among white people, some are lazy and don’t care to do anything as long as the Government gives them enough to eat and something to wear. It is an exception, not the general rule. The Government will not give them rations after the present crop is harvested, so the lazy ones will have to work or suffer. Very few of them could read when Mr. and Mrs. Root came here, but now there are eight to ten women that have learned their letters and can read a few verses in the Bible. To be able to read the Bible is their great desire. They come in after a hard days work to read a few verses and then go home and read it over again by their pitch pine fires until they can read it quite well. They seem so grateful for a little instruction it is a pleasure to teach them. The children are quick to learn as white children and as full of fun and mischief. I never think of their black skins when I am with them and have become as much attached to them as to any white children. I shall be very sorry to leave them. I hope to be located permanently soon, but I am very happy here…

Your sister Martha
Excerpt #3

Perryclear Plantation Apr. 25th 1863

Dear Brother and Sister

…There are quite a number of children in the place and several other places near have no Teacher so I think I can have a nice school. The nearest white family is three miles from here so we have to depend upon our work and ourselves to make time pass pleasantly. I have not had time as yet to feel lonely for I find employment and amusement also among these people until I am tired and then it seems so good to rest, for it is so warm that one gets tired so soon - the sun today, is as hot, as one of the hottest days in Vermont. The mornings and evenings are quite cool and so damp that it is not considered prudent to expose oneself to either very much, for I find if I go in the Garden after sundown I am chilled in a few moments. I shall try to be very careful so as not to get sick and obliged to go north, as much pleasure as it would offer me to see you all. The Teachers in Beaufort do not have but one lesson of three hours in a day and sewing school two days in a week in the afternoon and are required to visit among the families in each ones district as often they can consistently. I have not had school here more than three hours in a day as that is as much as it profitable for the children, until they are more advanced, for they cannot study themselves much, and everything has to be talked into them. Three hours is as much as is good for Teacher or pupils at one time. I am very much interested my work and never think of these black faces when I am with them; they are quick to learn, as full of fun, and mischief as white children. You would smile to see them come into school in the morning. The boys touch their caps, if they have any if not, make the motion. The girls curtsy in the manner peculiar to the race with a “Good morning maam” and when school is closed, in the same manner as they go out. I could hardly maintain the school marm dignity the first day I was in school. Some of the men will touch their hats when I meet them as gracefully as any gentleman. The women are more uncouth than the men. I think perhaps it is owing in part to their dress, for they wear cotton bag dresses very narrow skirts not reaching much below their knees. While the men dress like white men. On Sunday they dress more like white women. Mr. Root is a Congregational minister so he has religious services here every Sunday and all the people come…
Excerpt #4

[Donor’s note: part of letter, 1863-1864]
[Editor’s note: Mr. and Mrs. Root are still in residence.]

…I realize more and more every day the awful wickedness of Slavery and wonder they are as good as they are. I have visited them in their homes as much as I could find time or strength. They seemed a little suspicious at first, but now they give me a pleasant greeting and seem pleased to see me and have me talk with them. They all seem to have a strong religious element in their natures. Cut off from all earthly comfort, they have gone to God for consolation. Their childlike faith and entire confidence in their Heavenly Father is often a reproof to me for I have so much more given me than these poor degraded children of our common Father. I have not yet heard one man or woman speak unfriendly of their old Massa or Missus. Say they worked them hard and did not give them enough to eat and don’t care to see them but never seem [to] cherish a revengeful feeling towards them. I am very tired and will leave this until Monday to finish…
Excerpt #5

[Donor’s note: part of a letter, 1863]
[Editor’s note: Mr. and Mrs. Root are no longer in residence.]

…My school is so far away. If I do my duty by my school and visit among my people I have very little time or strength for household work. It is a mutual benefit to Sup. and Teachers to mess together. We have the benefit of his cook and the house and table is made more pleasant for him than if left entirely to the care of a colored woman.

The Secesh took the house servants with them so it is very difficult to find a woman on the Plantations that knows how to do work in a house properly.

The people have worked very industriously all through the season and saved their money to buy land. Superintendents have been staking out their lots for them all over the Islands - it has been expected that a larger part of the land was to be sold in small lots to the “people” the first of January - it is not certain that it will be done so soon; in all probability it will be sometime sold to the “people.” They are so ambitious to own land I hope they will not be disappointed.

The great fear that has prevailed at the north of the colored people all working north if they were free - nothing but Slavery will drive them from their homes. They are so strongly attacked to their old homes. They do not like to go to another Plantation to live and almost without exception reply when asked if they would like to go north, I had rather stay in my old home. I am used to this place, and don’t know anything about the “North.”

This work is so great that I sometimes for a few moments feel discouraged. I can do so very little comparatively. I, for the most part, am hopeful and content with doing all I have strength given me and grateful to my Heavenly Father that I am permitted to work in this field. I am more and more interested in these people and long to do so much for them. Wish I could get at them in their homes - teach them to live like civilized beings. They are improving, seem to wish to have their dress improved and that is one step which I do all I can to encourage…
Excerpt #6

Perryclear Jan. 12th 1865

Dear Brother & Sister

…Our Sancho got exemption papers so we have him to do for us. We have one trial that we were free from last year that is wood. These people think it superfluous to have wood more than enough for one day. Sancho did not always give a good supply would burn the last stick at night and then must in the morning till he went to the wood brought a stick on his shoulder cut it before we could get our breakfast. So we thought we would get a cord. Engaged a man the last day of Nov. being Thurs. to cut a Cord in the woods. Promised to do it the next Sunday so waited patiently a week heard nothing from the man. So I went to see him. Finally we got small part by the middle of the month - the last day after dark the remainder came, 3/4 of a cord in all - not quite discouraged we engaged another man last week to cut another but he did not do it. Another still this week which promised to do it this week - two days more before it will be done…

With much love to you both, from Martha
Excerpt #7

Perryclear Point Mar. 28th 1865

My dear Brother & Sister

…Have got my new scholars arranged and my school in working order again - they are progressing finely - 33 children & 10 adults at Perryclear Point and almost as many more at Wm. Perryclear - have been to the latter place three times per week; but after this week shall not go there. The children must come here. Find I cannot walk so far as the weather is getting warm - have had a ride occasionaly since Mrs. Kingman has been here but cannot depend on riding. Beside I have enough to do at home with housekeeping thrown in - find my strength somewhat failing for a few weeks but was anxious to continue as long as I could for the sake of my Adult class - now they are at work and would not come very much and the children can come to me. There is plenty of work there for one Teacher but no place to live and no means of getting there from here only to walk - have thought of Lib & wished there was some means of transportation. Should try to have her come if she wished still to, but I see no remedy for the main difficulty. Horses are very scarce and high. Mr. K. has not been able as yet to get enough to do his work on all of the Plantations under his care as he wishes. Will have to cultivate less Cotton and have more done with the hoe than he designed. The people have been preparing the ground for planting for several weeks - have already planted Peas, Squashes, and Irish Potatoes. Will plant corn and Cotton next week.

Last Sunday Mr K., Miss Clary, and I went to Church (colored) on Ladies Island. Crossed the river and walked two miles. Heard a Colored preacher Kit Green. His text was in Acts… He read all of the chapter where Paul heard a voice saying “it is hard to kick against the bricks.” Asked if they knew what kicking against the bricks meant - it was kicking against God. It is the only sermon I have heard since I left N.Y. and I enjoyed it very much. The preacher possessed a good deal of native talent. If he had had the benefit of an education would be equal to the average of white preachers.

The Church was built in Sesech times for the Colored people - a frame, boarded on the outside, no windows, a few wooden shutters, and a floor. Rough made movable benches will seat about two hundred - every seat was occupied. We were the only white faces in the house.

My new scholars, a large part of them are quite light colored but few of them have ever been slaves. But are as ignorant and not as good looking as the real negro - were the most forlorn looking set of people I ever saw. Were ragged and dirty. Had been following Sherman’s army and fared hard on the journey - the children are bright and eager to learn. It is a pleasure to teach them. I enjoy this work more and more…

Yours with much love, Martha
Excerpt #8

Brickyard April 12th 1871

Dear Sister

…You need not worry about the Ku Klux, they are not near us. There are too many northern people about here for them to care to come here. Uncle Kit is still in jail. Will stay out his time probably there, not be sent any further. Heard the others concerned are having a new trial this month, have not heard anything from it. Do not think anyone believes Uncle Kit guilty of any intentional wrong only through ignorance…

As ever you sister, Martha
Excerpt #9

Brickyard Oct. 20.th 1871.

Dear Brother & Sister

…Arrived at Gery Hill which consists of a few Cabins scattered about. I started in pursuit of a conveyance for us to Perryclear - teams are very scarce among the colored people and I only heard of two in the place and they were both away from home. So I turned back and found Mattie had found a boy and mule & cart that happened along and had our trunks taken to the nearest house which proved to belong to the railroad hands. It was nearly dark and a man (colored) said he would try to find us a horse & cart to take us and leave our baggage until morning. So we sat down on the baggage to wait his return and while we were waiting a white man who was a stranger only been a few weeks in the place commenced harnessing a [illegible] of horses into a buggy - he inquired where we wished to go. Said he was going to Beaufort and would take us where we wished to go, but he was a stranger and if we knew the way he could go with us. It was dark, the road crooked & blind by daylight, so thanked him for his kindness and thought we would trust our colored friend would get us a conveyance for they know all the paths in the dark as well as by daylight. He started off and we felt rather forlorn but tried to have faith that all would end well. He was not gone but a few minutes when he came back and said “I do not like to go away and leave you here for you cannot spend the night here comfortably. I think you had better get in and I will take you wherever you say. I know you can find a lodging place in Beaufort if in no other.” So we got in and told him if he would take us a mile on our way we could find a place to stay. So we got to within a few rods of Uncle Sancho Brien’s, one of the old Perryclear people, who lives two miles from the Point on some rented land. Uncle Sancho & Aunt Minna have a good sized cabin and no one but themselves occupy it. They were very glad to see us but so overcome with surprise & pleasure as to be hardly able to give us a welcome for a few minutes, did not last long however. I asked Aunt Minna to give us some supper for we had eaten nothing but an apple since our supper on the Steamer the night before. I did not suffer from hunger for the effects of the seasickness still remained but her rice & eggs we relished very much. They gave us their bed with clean sheets and copperplate spread and they slept on the floor on a pile of Cotton. I have never lodged in one of the Cabins before, Mattie has. The next morning as soon as we were dressed started for the place where several of the old Perryclear people live on a part of the old plantation, where there was a women who owned a horse & cart. Engaged the cart and Sancho Floyd to go for our trunks…

Tell all the news. Martha