

Lazarus, Rachel Mordecai ^[1]

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1 July 1788–23 June 1838

Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, teacher and correspondent of author Maria Edgeworth, was born in Goochland County, Va., the daughter of Jacob ^[2] and Judith Myers Mordecai. At age four, she moved with her parents to Warrenton, N.C., where her father was engaged in the mercantile business. After her mother's death in 1796, Rachel, along with some of her brothers and sisters, lived with her aunt in Richmond, Va., where she was educated. When her father opened a school at Warrenton ^[3] in 1809, Rachel became one of the teachers as well as the general directress.

In preparing herself for teaching, Rachel Mordecai was greatly influenced by the works of Richard Lovell Edgeworth ^[4] and his daughter Maria, in particular *The Parent's Assistant* ^[5] (1796), *Practical Education* ^[6] (1798), and *Early Lessons* ^[7] (1801). At the time of their appearance, the ideas incorporated in these volumes were considered revolutionary, with their deemphasis of a classical, prescriptive education for children and their advocacy of encouraging the curiosity of children in natural and scientific phenomena. In one of her *Tales of Fashionable Life* ^[8], "The Absentee" (1812), Maria Edgeworth depicted a Jewish London coach maker in the clichéd characterization of Shylock; his name was Mordecai. On 7 Aug. 1815 Rachel Mordecai wrote the celebrated author a gentle letter of reproof, saying that happily her family had not experienced in either Virginia or North Carolina the prejudice against Jews evidenced in British literature. Richard Lovell Edgeworth immediately replied, commending the young teacher, and Maria Edgeworth attempted to make amends by writing *Harrington* ^[9] (1817), a novel with a Jewish heroine. The result was a correspondence between Rachel Mordecai and Maria Edgeworth that grew into a remarkable commentary on literature, domestic customs, politics, and scientific inventions that lasted until Rachel's death. (Members of the two families continued to correspond until the mid-twentieth century.) This literary friendship stimulated a wide range of interests in Rachel Mordecai, and while she led a relatively quiet life in Wilmington ^[10], N.C., she was undoubtedly one of the best educated women in the state during her time.

In 1821 she married Aaron Lazarus, a native of Charleston, S.C., but a resident of Wilmington, where he was engaged in the shingle and naval stores ^[11] business. Lazarus was a widower with seven children, some of whom had attended the Mordecai School in Warrenton. Besides her household duties, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus concerned herself with the education of her stepchildren and her own four: Marx Edgeworth (b. 6 Feb. 1822), Ellen (b. 13 July 1825), Mary Catherine (b. 12 Sept. 1828), and Julia Judith (b. 9 Oct. 1830). Her son attended The University of North Carolina ^[12] in 1838 and later studied medicine in Philadelphia. In later years, along with his sisters Ellen and Julia, he became involved in reform and social movements, and all three were considered eccentric by other members of their family.

As Rachel Mordecai Lazarus was traveling from Wilmington to Richmond to see her father - who had a disability - in 1838, she stopped in Petersburg to visit her brother Samuel. There she suddenly became ill and died. In her last moments she was converted to Christianity and was buried in Blandford Cemetery.

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The Education of the Heart: The Correspondence of Rachel Mordecai Lazarus and Maria Edgeworth. Southern Jewish Historical Society: <http://www.jewishsouth.org/resources/education-heart-correspondence-rachel-mordecai-lazarus-and-maria-edgeworth> [16]

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