

1809. Abolition of the Slave Trade

Joseph Sidney, An Oration Commemorative of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the United States; Delivered Before the Wither force Philanthropic Association of the City of New-York, on the Second of January, 1809 (New York, 1809). Source: D. Gellman and D. Quigley, ed. (2003). Jim Cow New York, A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship 1777-1877. NY: New York University Press, 58-63.

Friends, Countrymen, and Fellow-Citizens,

Deeply affected with the various sensations and emotions which the occasion is so peculiarly calculated to excite, I rise to address you. We, together with our fellow-citizens at large, this day celebrate the commencement of a new year.... But in addition to the general joy which this day occasions to the American empire, and in which we, in common with our fellow-citizens, participate; I say, in addition to the cause of general rejoicing, the return of this day opens to us, my countrymen, a newly discovered source of joy, of which ourselves, and the sympathizing friends of suffering humanity, are the exclusive partakers. On this auspicious day, we celebrate the anniversary of that glorious era, which, in these United States, put a period to that inhuman species of traffic, that, with relentless cruelty, had so long plundered unhappy Afric of her sons.

My friends, 'tis not an illusion of fancy, 'tis a truth recorded in the annals, and enrolled among the statutes, of the United States, that no African, nor a single individual descended from African ancestors, shall henceforth be imported into this country as a slave.-What a stride is this towards the total abolition of slavery in America! what a progress towards the consummation of our fondest hopes! what a presage that the exertions, the good wishes, and the prayers of the humane and benevolent, will finally triumph!-And with what transports of joy may we not hail the return of this memorable, this auspicious day, this jubilee of freedom!! . . .

Since, then, the Slave-trade is by law for ever abolished, may we not, my countrymen, without incurring imputation of rashness or presumption, look forward to the period when slavery, in this land of freedom, will be unheard of and unknown? Yes! this is what we most ardently desire, what we fondly anticipate, and what, I think, we may with certainty expect to realize.

The immediate emancipation of all our brethren in the United States, is an event which we cannot reasonably expect; and, perhaps, ought not to desire. For it is a lamentable fact, that our brethren in the South are in a state of deplorable ignorance. Uneducated as they are, and unacquainted with every thing except the plantations on which they toil, and from which they are never suffered to depart, it is incredible that they can possess sufficient information to render their immediate emancipation a blessing either to themselves, or to society at large. But a want of information, on the part of our southern brethren, cannot be urged as an argument against their gradual emancipation...

New-York, and several other of the middle states, actuated by a spirit similar to that which animated the sages of New-England, have obeyed the voice of humanity; and are gradually abolishing slavery. Would to God that I could say the same of the southern states! but truth compels me to observe, that in the southern section of the United States, and particularly in Virginia, slavery still exists in all its horrors, unrelieved by the slightest degree of mitigation!

Alas! what is man, and of what is he formed! How contradictory in his professions! how strangely inconsistent in his actions!

No people in the world make louder pretensions to "liberty, equality, and the rights of man," than the people of the South! And yet, strange as it may appear, there is no spot in the United States, where oppression reigns with such unlimited sway! . . .

Heaven grant that some WILBERFORCE, some champion of African freedom, whose warm, whose expanded, whose benevolent heart, is capable of beating in unison with their sufferings, may arise in Virginia; assert the long neglected and abused rights of Afric's sons; and institute that plan of gradual emancipation, which has been so successfully adopted and pursued in New-England and New-York! . . .

But I shall waive these reflections, and proceed, my countrymen, to suggest to you, some of those duties which have devolved on us, in consequence of our having recently obtained our freedom, and which appear to me peculiarly proper to be called to mind, on the present occasion.

Freedom has broken down that wall of separation, which formerly distinguished our rights and duties, from those of the white inhabitants. Our rights and duties have, of course, assimilated to theirs. And, permit me to add, that the judicious exercise of these rights, and the punctual performance of these duties, involve considerations, which are all-important, both to ourselves and to our country.

Among the most valuable of our newly acquired rights, is that of suffrage. This right is particularly valuable, inasmuch as it enables us to express our choice with respect to our rulers. Good rulers are a blessing, but bad rulers are, and must be considered, a curse to any nation. The right of suffrage, brings with it a duty of the highest obligation. For as this right gives us the power of voting, so it devolves on us the indispensable duty, of bestowing our votes on those, and on those only, whose talents, and whose political, moral, and religious principles, will most effectually promote the best interests of America.

My countrymen, you cannot be unacquainted with the fact, that there has existed, for some time past, in our country, two great political parties. At the head of the Federal Republican Party was the immortal WASHINGTON, the Father of his country. Hamilton, Jay, Adams, Pinckney, King, and Pickering, together with most of our old revolutionary officers and soldiers, were among the illustrious characters, who attached themselves, through principle and patriotism, to this party.

After achieving the independence of their country, this distinguished band of patriots formed the federal constitution; and from that circumstance, were denominated Federalists, or Federal Republicans. The single object of this party was, to preserve the liberty, to promote the happiness, to increase the prosperity, and to extend the respectability of the United

States. Being satisfied as to the immense advantages, which are to be derived from commerce, and knowing, that the interests of the middle and eastern States are intimately connected with it, this party, while in office, gave to commerce every possible encouragement. To this end, a small navy was built to protect our vessels from the armed ships of foreign nations. So long as Federalists remained in office, so long this country enjoyed an uninterrupted state of increasing prosperity-And so long as this happy state of things continued, so long did agriculture and commerce unite hand in hand, to diffuse their riches, and to extend their blessings to every class of citizens. . . .

Such was the state of our affairs, when the Anti-federal or Democratic party, consisting of a set of ambitious, designing, and office-seeking men, first adventured from its native cave of filth and darkness, into open day. A number of abandoned printers, mostly foreigners, enlisted in the service of this party: and from that moment, commenced a persecution against federal men, and federal measures; which persecution, for cool and malignant cruelty, can never be exceeded. To destroy the reputation of distinguished federalists, calumnies the most vile, were daily circulated through the country. Even the virtues and services of WASHINGTON did not prove a shield sufficiently broad, to protect him against the envenomed shafts of malice. . . .

Thus feeding on detraction, and fattening on the mangled reputation of federalists, the democratic party became a majority-and thus their leader, Mr. Jefferson, became the President of the United States. And from that inauspicious day, though the current could not instantly leave its wonted channel, yet, the tide of American prosperity soon ceased to flow, and all our goodly prospects vanished.

One of the first acts of the present administration, was to displace those revolutionary officers whom Washington had placed in office, as a small reward for all their labours, toils, and dangers. Washington placed in office real patriots and statesmen, who fought to procure our independence; others have bestowed these high dignities on foreigners, probably as a reward for their insurrection and slander.

Our infant navy, the protector of our commerce, fell an early victim to the fury of the Virginian Junto. Nor could that fury be appeased, until our commerce itself had received the stroke of death. Yes, my countrymen! An unlimited embargo, wielded by the mad democracy of the southern states, has, like the besom of destruction, swept our commerce from the ocean! . . .

Nor is it in the eastern states only, that this rash measure is felt. We all, my countrymen, most sensibly feel it. The poor and the labouring class of people, in every state, are peculiarly its victims. Yes, we do feel,

and we shall indubitably continue more and more to feel, its hard and partial operation. Nor do we find a probability of relief, in the partiality of our democratic rulers for undeserving emigrants to our shores. . . .

... Now, the southern states, which comprise the great body of the democratic party in our country, being hostile to commerce, and this party having laid the embargo, and being still the ruling party, we cannot rationally expect that commerce will again flourish, until the general government shall be administered by federalists, the real friends of commerce, and the genuine disciples of Washington. It is not within the limits of probability, that a change of measures for the better, will be effected, in any other way than by a change of men.

How important then, that we, my countrymen, should unite our efforts with those of our Federal friends, in endeavouring to bring about this desirable change-this change, so all-important to commerce, to our own best interests, and to the prosperity and glory of our country!

But there is another consideration, which appears to me worthy of being suggested. The great hotbed of democracy is Virginia, and the other southern states. All the democratic members of Congress, who have any considerable influence in directing the machine of government, belong to the South. And almost all the free inhabitants of the southern section of the United States, are of the democratic party. And these are the very people who hold our African brethren in bondage. These people, therefore, are the enemies of our rights. And as the democrats in this state are acting with these, our enemies, we should not only be wanting in duty to

ourselves, but we should be destitute of the spirit of freemen, were we not to turn our backs upon democracy, and unite with our federal friends, to place men in office possessed of humanity, justice, firmness, and American patriotism.

Besides, is the great idol of democracy our friend? That he is not, is evident; else he would respect the rights of our African brethren; several hundreds of whom he keeps as slaves on his plantations. What did WASHINGTON? This illustrious and humane man, feeling that slavery was incompatible with the principles for which he fought, most generously emancipated every slave that he owned, and gave to each a portion sufficiently large to answer his exigencies, until he could procure employment

Can you then, my countrymen, for a moment hesitate in choosing between your enemies and your friends? between slavery and freedom? Will you run into the camp of your enemies? Will you flock to the Slavery-pole of democracy?-Or will you patriotically rally round the standard of liberty?-a standard which was erected by IMMORTAL WASHINGTON; and which has been consecrated by the blood of the MARTYRED HAMILTON.

Before I conclude, permit me, my countrymen, to impress on your minds a duty, which it is our highest interest ever to observe. This duty consists in endeavouring unceasingly, by pure and upright conduct, to convince the world that we are not only capable of self-government, but also of becoming honourable citizens and useful members of society. Let it be our business to demonstrate to the conviction, even of the enemies of our freedom, that sobriety, honesty, and industry, are among the distinguishing traits of our characters; that we know too well the value of liberty, ever to abuse her inestimable privileges; and that although the "Ethiopian cannot change his skin," yet his heart may, nevertheless, become an habitation for all the virtues which ever adorn the human character.

A conduct, on our part, in all respects dignified and proper, will effectually put to silence every cavil which may be offered against African emancipation, and must eventually convert our enemies into friends.

I need scarcely to remind you, my countrymen, on an occasion like this, that all those whose exertions have, in any degree, contributed to bring about the interesting event which we this day celebrate, and, in particular, "The Manumission Society of the City of New-York," whose kind interference has greatly ameliorated our condition, are all eminently entitled to our warmest gratitude.-Long may they all be remembered, and amply rewarded for their "labours of love!"-May they have the satisfaction of realizing that their efforts for our happiness and usefulness in life, have been crowned with success! And may we always be possessed of that evidence of gratitude to these our benefactors, which springs from pure and upright conduct!

And let me add, that such a conduct is the best evidence which we can possibly produce, of that gratitude which we owe to the GOD OF MERCIES, for his interposition in our behalf. HE has ever been our kindest benefactor; and, as such, we owe him a debt of gratitude, which we can never cancel. While we therefore, my countrymen, in unison, lift up our voices in praise and thanksgiving to this GOD of mercies, let us supplicate, that by a more general extension of freedom and of pure patriotism throughout our country, every return of this anniversary may be accompanied with additional causes for JOY AND REJOICING.