

1827. William Hamilton, Emancipation Address

William Hamilton, Oration Delivered in the African Zion Church on the fourth of July, 1827, in commemoration of the Abolition of Domestic Slavery in this state (New York, 1827). Source: D. Gellman and D. Quigley, ed. (2003). *Jim Crow New York, A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship 1777-1877*. NY: New York University Press, 221-226.

LIBERTY! kind goddess! brightest of the heavenly deities that guide the affairs of men. Oh Liberty! where thou art resisted and irritated, thou art terrible as the raging sea and dreadful as a tornado. But where thou art listened to and obeyed, thou art gentle as the purling stream that meanders through the mead: as soft and as cheerful as the zephyrs that dance upon the summer breeze, and as bounteous as autumn's harvest.

To thee, the sons of Africa, in this once dark, gloomy, hopeless, but now fairest, brightest, and most cheerful of thy domain, do owe a double obligation of gratitude. Thou hast entwined and bound fast the cruel hands of oppression—thou hast by the powerful charm of reason deprived the monster of his strength—he dies, he sinks to rise no more

Thou hast loosened the hard bound fetters by which we were held. And by a voice sweet as the music of heaven, yet strong and powerful, reaching to the extreme boundaries of the state of New-York, hath declared that we the people of colour, the sons of Africa, are FREE!

My brethren and fellow-citizens, I hail you all. This day we stand redeemed from a bitter thralldom. Of us it may be truly said, "the last agony is over," THE AFRICANS ARE RESTORED! No more shall the accursed name of the slave be attached to us—no more shall *negro* and *slave* be synonymous.

Fellow-citizens, I come to felicitate you on the victory obtained—not *by* a sanguinary contest with the foe—there are left no fields teeming with blood: not a victory obtained by fierce-flaming, death-dealing ordinance, vomiting forth fire and horrible destruction—no thousands made to lick the dust—no groans of the wounded and the dying. But I come to felicitate you on the victory obtained by the principles of liberty, such *as* are broadly and indelibly laid down by the glorious sons of '76 and are contained in the ever memorable words prefixed to the Declaration of Independence of these United States: viz. "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." A victory obtained by these principles over prejudice, injustice, and foul oppression.

This day has the state of NEW-YORK regenerated herself—this day has she been cleansed of a most foul, poisonous and damnable stain. I stand amazed at the quiet, yet rapid progress the principles of liberty have made. A semi-century ago, the people of colour, with scarcely an exception, were *all slaves*. It is true, that many in the city, who remained here in the time of the revolution, (when their masters left at the approach of the British) and many too from the country, who became a kind of refugee, obtained their liberty, by leaving the country at the close of the war, or a few years respite from slavery: for such as were found remaining after the revolution, were again claimed by their masters. Yes, we were in the most abject state of slavery that can be conceived, except *that* of our brethren at the South, whose miseries are a little more enhanced. Without going back to the times of Negro plot, when a kind of fanaticism seized the people of New-York, something similar in its bearing and effect to the sad circumstances that took place among the people of *New England*, in their more puritanic times, and about a half a century before the fancied plot, when they put to death the good people for being witches.

Yes, my brethren, in this state we have been *advertised, and bought, and sold like any commodity*. In this state we have suffered cruelly: suffered by imprisonment, by whipping, and by scourging.

I have seen men chained with iron collars to their necks. I have seen—

—but hold! Let me proceed no farther. Why enter into the blood chilling detail of our miseries? It would only dampen those joys that ought to glow and sparkle on every countenance: it would only give vent to feelings that would not be reconcilable with the object of our assembling. The cause of emancipation has ever had its votaries, but they stood single and alone. After the revolution, they drew nearer together.

It would be foolishness in me, my brethren, to tell you that by all the rules laid down by naturalists, for determining the species of a creature, that we have souls, and are men. We too *irresistibly feel that we have, and are such*. We can more easily doubt that we *exist*, than doubt that we are *men*. To the second proposition, and my soul for it, if there is *any* difference in the species, that difference is in *favour* of the people of colour.

I know that I ought to speak with caution; but an ambidexter [sic] philosopher, who can reason contrarywise, first tells you, "*that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,*" next proves that *one class of men are not equal to another*, which by the bye, does not agree with axioms in geometry, that deny that things can be *equal*, and at the same time *unequal* to one another—suppose that such philosopher, should keep around him a number of slaves, and at the *same time* should tell you, that God hath no attribute to favour the cause of the master in case of an insurrection of the slaves. Would not such a reasoner only show a heterogeneous mind? although he should be called an abstruse reasoner, what kind of superiority does he discover? Does he not reason, and act like one that battles with the elements? Does he reason like a man of true moral principles? Does he set a good example? Does he act in conformity to true philosophy? True philosophy teaches, that man should act in conformity to his reason, and *reason*, and the *law* of God and nature, declare that all men are equal, and that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, are their unalienable rights.

It is a maxim among civilians, that the principles of government, and acts of the legislator, should be in unison. What ought to be considered the most vital principles of our general government, are contained in the words already mentioned, as standing in FRONT of the Declaration of Independence; and in that article of the constitution, that declares that *no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due course of law*. What a jargon does that law of the United States form with the principles here laid down, that gives to *one class of men* the right to arrest, wherever they may find them with its jurisdiction, *another class of men*, and retain them as their lawful property? This, no doubt is *superior* legislation, and bespeaks *superior* minds.

In these United States, among white men, there is an almost universal prejudice against the amalgamation of the blood of the white and black population, which goes so far as to create in them supercilious fear, or rather horrible sensation, that the pretty white, will be changed thereby to the dingy mulatto. Yes, true it is, and true though it is *white men masters*, do amalgamate the blood, and the *children of such amalgamation*, they *hold* as slaves; and worse, they *sell* as slaves.. .. [W]hite men sell the children of their own begetting, for sordid gold.

Authority and gold are their gods, their household gods, their sanctuary gods. . . . What titillation of soul they receive from these gods! How bold! how venturous! how stubborn! how pliant! how wise! how simple! how every thing *but virtuous* they are!

I am sorry to break from this unravelling so soon, for I did mean, to unravel this *mystery* of superiority. But it is necessary that we devote a few moments to a subject of vital interest to us. And here let me particularly address the youth. With you rests the high responsibility of redeeming the character of our people. White men say, you are not capable of the study of what may be called abstruse literature, and that you are deficient in moral character. I feel, I know, that these assertions are as false as hell. Yet I do know, you are sunk into the deepest frivolity and lethargy, that any people can be sunk. Oh Heavens! that I could rouse you. Has this frivolity taken from you all shame? Has this lethargy taken from you all ambition? YOUTH OF MY PEOPLE, I look to you. Shall this degrading charge stand unrepelled by contrary facts? Oh! that I could enflame you with proper ambition. Your honour, your character, your happiness, your well-being,

all, all are at stake, and involved in the question at issue. And it is for you to retrieve or acknowledge that your fathers have been slaves deservedly.

First, my young friends, let me invite you to *the path of virtue*. It is a straight, open path, strewed with the sweetest aromatics: it is the path of pleasure, the path of honour, the path of respectability. Vice, from which I would call you, is its opposite; it is a crooked, thorny way, full of stinking weeds, the path of trouble, debasement, misery, and destruction.

Next, I would invite you to the *study of the sciences*. Here lies an open field of pleasure, that is increased at every step you take therein. If you have labour, be assured that your compensation is infinite. It has been the policy of white men, to give you a high opinion of advancement, when you have made but smattering attainments. They know that a little education is necessary, for the better accomplishing the menial services you are in the habit of performing for them. They do not wish you to be equal with them—much less superior. Therefore, in all advancements they assist in (I speak of them generally) they will take care that you do not rise above mediocrity.

My young friends, it is a laudable ambition that prompts us to the highest standing in literature. Is there any thing noble or praiseworthy obtained by sneaking conduct? Why look up to others, when we may obtain the highest standing ourselves? There is a height of knowledge which you may easily attain to, that when arrived at, you will look down with amazement, at the depth of ignorance you have risen from. I am sorry to say it; but I speak with the intention to quicken you, that *properly speaking*, there is none learned among us. If there is, now is the time to show themselves; it is worse than felony to keep back. It is too true, that men of prime genius among us, that have possessed high talents for improvement, have suffered improper considerations to keep them down. Therefore, my young friends, I look to you, and pray you, by all that *proper pride* you feel in being men, that you show yourselves such, by performing acts of worth equal with other men. Why not form yourselves into literary companies, for the study of the sciences? The expense would not be as great as you incur for useless gratifications, beside the advantage of receiving pleasure, infinitely beyond what those gratifications afford.

I would now turn to the female part of this assembly, particularly the young. *It is for you to form the manners of men*. My female friends, it is for you, not by proud, but modest conduct, to lead them in the true line of decorum and gentle manners. First, I would have you discountenance that loud vocability of gabble, that too much characterizes us in the street: I would look upon him, or her, that hailed me with too loud, or vulgar accents, as one who had forgot what is due to female modesty. Next, and most of consequence, I would have you prefer his affections and company most, who endeavours most to improve his mind. If you give preference to men of understanding, depend on it, they will endeavour to make themselves suitable to your wishes. But above all, endeavour *to improve your own minds*. I know that in the ability to improve, you are more than a match for white females, in all proper female education. Here, let me close, with our best thanks and wishes to the State of NEW-YORK.