



ORATION

DELIVERED BY

FRANCIS S. KEY, ESQ.,

IN THE ROTUNDO OF THE CAPITOL OF THE U. STATES,

On the 4th of July, 1831.

THE spectacle of a happy people, rejoicing in thankfulness before God and the world for the blessing of civil liberty, is no vain pageant. It presents an offering acceptable to Him who gives to virtuous effort its impulse and its success; and it holds forth to all mankind a light to animate and direct them in the pursuit of blessings which are the common right of all.

We are assembled, therefore, in the discharge of a high and holy duty. We have opened the records of time, and read that bright page that proclaimed to the world the solemn purpose of the fathers of our country, and the sacred pledge they gave for its fulfillment. The pledge has been redeemed—the purpose is accomplished—and we are here, in the rich possession of what valor has won, and wisdom has preserved for us.

Well may he fear, who has been honored as the instrument of expressing your feelings on such an occasion, to address himself to those who have just listened to the glowing language of the paper we have heard. Can he attempt to take you back to the proud period when this glorious instrument was first unrolled in that assembly of patriots whose names it has made immortal? Can he hope to show you how they gathered around it? Can language or the speaking canvas paint the kindling countenances with which they leaned to hear it?—the high resolve, seen upon every brow?—the ready hands, which pledged life and fortune and sacred honor to sustain it?

Your imaginations must portray this scene. Your own feelings give you a conception of its grandeur, and show you, in all the glory of the act that has ennobled them, the men whose names have gone forth to an admiring world, and will be handed down to distant generations.

They sleep in honored graves, a rescued land their monument, and their names engraven on the hearts of their countrymen. All have left the scene of their labors and honors but one, whose light still lingers among us, upon whom we are still permitted to look with reverence and affection—whose days have been prolonged that he might see the rich fruits of a patriot's labors, and that the world might see, in the grateful homage of a thankful people, the reward that awaits such labors. I shall leave it to your warm hearts, my countrymen, to offer a tribute of praise to these, our benefactors, above all that language can express. I shall leave it to yourselves to call up the circumstances of the scene to which I have alluded, which witnessed the event that has marked this day as a day of gladness.

I shall endeavor to discharge a more humble duty, by filling up such portion of your time as I may feel allowed to claim on this occasion, by inviting you to consider with me what that blessing is which calls forth, on this day, a nation's gratitude and joy.—What it is which, throughout the limits of our spreading country; calls together countless multitudes, assembled, like ourselves, to testify their reverence for the day. What it is that raises their song of triumph, as if one heart animated all the mass, and beat in every pulse of our population.

Is it that this fair new world was opened to the enterprize of our fathers? That this broad and beautiful land is our birth right? This is indeed a blessing which demands our thanks; but human happiness requires more than any land, however enriched by nature and adorned by art, can give. There are portions of the earth, fair and favored as our own inheritance, where there is no rejoicing, whose patriots (if there be any) can only weep over their wrongs—where all the bounties of providence are marred by the folly and wickedness of man.

Is it that the country thus rich in the gifts of Heaven, was rescued from foreign dominion?—that, in the instrument just read to us, it cast off all dependence upon the power that oppressed it, and stood forth as an independent nation among the people of the earth? and that, what was thus nobly declared, has been gloriously accomplished?

This, too, deserves our thanks. But had this been all, had nothing further been effected for the security and happiness of a delivered people, it might have proved a short-lived joy. Too often have such struggles terminated, even when successful, only in a change of masters. Too often some new misrule has started up in the weakness and disorder of a period of revolution, more intolerable than that which was overthrown.

Such might have been the condition of our country. But it was foreseen and provided for by the men she had called to her councils. At the commencement, they looked to the close of the conflict. At the moment when they announced resistance, they announced all the purpose and the full extent of resistance. They declared what they meant to put down, and what they meant to set up. They entered upon the overthrow of one authority and the establishment of another, as upon one and the same work; and thereby both ensued the success of their effort, and made that success the blessing which we find it.

Had their measures been dictated by less wisdom or courage, they would have made it a much less work, a far inferior project. They might have determined upon resistance blindly, leaving it to circumstances to guide them in its course and in its results.

These might have led them to select some other power to whom they might transfer themselves and their country, in consideration of protection, and in the poor hope of finding a more lenient master. Or they might have established a new dynasty, calling the head of some favored family to a throne, under stipulations and limitations that he was to promise to regard. And if an oligarchy seemed preferable, they could have parceled out all power among themselves, to be held by them and their heirs or successors, for the welfare of the people. Very respectable authorities were to be found for all these schemes. Either of them would, no doubt, have been preferred by the eminent political writers of those days, to that which was adopted. That a people could govern themselves, a people neither born nor bred to such a business, would never have been the opinion of men who took their views from the learning of that day, which had been made the pensioned advocate of power. In those days, if a writer was inclined to defend popular governments, there were not many parts of the world where it could be done with safety; while the doctrines that denounced such governments had hosts of retainers, every where maintained and richly rewarded.

In England the freedom of enquiry upon such topics could not always be restrained; and men have at various periods been known and honored there, as the fearless champions of civil liberty. Yet even they have generally professed to approve of a restricted monarchy, and looked upon governments purely popular with fear and apprehension.

Under such circumstances, and in such times, no ordinary men could have put forth the Declaration of American Independent.—And the men who made this fearless appeal to God and the world, in behalf of the long violated and almost forgotten rights of mankind, were no ordinary men. They were fitted by Providence to the exigency to which they were called.

There were men of learning among them, but they were also men of wisdom. There were many others summoned from their farms and workshops, to whom politics was, in a great measure, a new study. But they brought to it strong minds and devoted hearts, and,

bowing to no human authority, determined to work out its questions for themselves. They were not ignorant of man and the affairs of the world, and they knew perfectly the men they represented and the things around them. With such qualifications it is not wonderful that they mastered their subject, and became legislators and statesmen, such as the world has rarely witnessed. From such men, no evil of sophistry could hide the truth; and no fear of man could deter them from maintaining it. Hence we see in the declaration of their purpose that hold and eloquent avowal of the great principles of truth and freedom to which we have been listening.—Hence they put at issue, in the holy strife upon which they were entering, the establishment of a government which should rest upon no other foundation than the will of the people. The result soon manifested the wisdom of their determination. It brought the nation together as one man; all saw that they were parties in the conflict; that their dearest rights were to be sustained or lost forever; and they became a nation of Patriots. The friends of civil liberty were awakened. They saw that upon our fields was to be decided the fate of nations, the destiny of man. The benevolent of every land gave us their sympathy and prayers. Some gave us—(a gift never to be forgotten)—themselves.

It was the avowal of these principles, and this purpose that sanctified their cause, justified their appeal to Heaven, and gave it its success. Such a cause, it has been truly said, is—

“Not often unsuccessful: power usurp’d
Is weakness when oppos’d: conscious of wrong,
‘Tis pusillanimous and prone to flight.
But men that once conceive the glowing thought
Of Freedom, in that hope itself possess
All that the contest calls for—spirit, strength,
The scorn of danger and united hearts:
The surest presage of the good they seek.”

It is therefore, that I invite you this day to remember not only the defeat of usurpation, but the establishment of freedom—that we are not only relieved from a yoke of bondage, but exalted above kings—and that to the men whose deeds we this day commemorate, we are indebted for the wisdom which devised and secured to the land they had delivered the blessing of a free constitution. This was the crown of their labors—this is the crown of our rejoicing.

They were no common difficulties that presented themselves, when the principles they had proclaimed were to be brought into a system, adapted to the situation and circumstances of the community, for which it was intended. Were they to be brought together as one people, forming one great republic, the sole depository of all power? Or if organized as separate commonwealths, how were they to be so united as to oppose the force of other powers, and avoid dissensions among themselves.

I do not mean to fatigue you with constitutional disquisitions. These difficulties were happily accommodated, and I trust, sufficiently removed by the simple but wise principle they adopted. The people were to form a General Government of limited and defined powers, intended to secure the common interest—the States to be independent

republics, in all other respects having exclusive power in whatsoever concerned their separate interests.

Exactly to define these boundaries of power so as to prevent doubt and controversy, was not to be expected. Human language cannot make nice distinctions with perfect accuracy, and if we resort to the spirit of an instrument for its construction, we enter a still broader field of disputation.

From the nature of institutions thus organized, it follows, of necessity, that they must, in some measure, be exposed to two opposite dangers.

The one is, that as the tendency of power is ever encroaching, the General Government may become a vast consolidated dominion, with immense resources and unlimited patronage, dangerous to the power of the States, and the rights of the people. The other is, that the States will gradually weaken the powers of the General Government, and dissolve the Union.

It is not easy to see how these dangerous could have been removed, or more effectually guarded against. It must be left (as it is) to the good sense of the people, to exercise their vigilance towards both. Experience will determine (if it has not already done so,) which is the most to be apprehended, and how the tendencies of each are to be checked. On whichever side encroachments may appear, let a double guard to be set to arrest its progress, and let us patiently wait the correcting voice of the people, expressed as the constitution prescribes. We must become a very different people from those who devised this constitution, if, with the remedy in our hands, and the dangers foreseen, they are permitted to come upon us.

May we not take hope and courage from the past? More than half a century has gone over us. Many trials have been endured. Times of peace, of war, of general and local excitements have passed away, and we are safe. Our scheme of government was looked upon by the world as an experiment. The friends of arbitrary power predicted its failure, the friends of freedom regarded it with apprehension.

It has outlived these hopes and fears—and most unworthy of our inheritance, degenerate sons of our fathers shall we be, if we suffer it to perish in our hands.

Is there any thing in the aspect of the present, to throw a gloom upon our joy? Are any of the blessings of Providence withheld from us? Any of the improvements of art or science denied to us? Is not the face of our country rich in the beauties of nature, the labors of industry, the profusion of plenty? Where can the patriot look, without saying, with glistening-eyed heart of rapture.

“This is my own, my native land—“

And are not the kingdoms of the earth looking to us with respect, as the nation “that will neither do nor suffer wrong?” And are not the oppressed of the world thronging to our happy shores, to behold and partake our joy?

Are not our people improved like their country? Growing not only in physical but intellectual strength?

Where is benevolent enterprise more active and untiring? Where are the charities of life more cherished, and where does religion! the great promoter of happiness, achieve more successfully her peaceful triumph?

If thus improved, and improving in other things, are we deteriorating in patriotism? Is our country less loved, as it becomes more worthy of our love?

This is the persevering virtue of republics. This was most conspicuously the virtue of Americans: shining not only among the chiefs and leaders of the nation, but pervading all classes of the people, and animating the humblest follower in the ranks. Splendid instances of this in our history will recur to your memories. The men of these days were in nothing more remarkable than in their disinterested devotion to the public good.

The workings of selfish ambition, so natural to the corrupt heart of man, were subdued by the all-absorbing love of country. Sacrifices of personal interest and feelings to the common cause, seemed not only to be submitted to, but to be sought for, and the zeal and energy of those days were seen, not in seeking the honors and emoluments of office, but in the faithful discharge of its duties.

Are these virtues still extant? Is there no generous enthusiasm to follow these bright examples? Can we point to no instance of high official station, seeking the man, who would not seek it? Can we find no man, drawing the eyes of an admiring and grateful country upon him, only by the splendor of his services? and disdaining to acquire, by the utterance of a word, what he would only consent to take at the command of the people?

Yes, my countrymen, we have such a man. It may yet be said of our land, as of Rome, "She hath not lost the breed of noblemen, and we have a people, wise and patriotic, who delight to honor him."

Are the dangers to which I have alluded as threatening the perpetuity of our institutions, more formidable at present than in past periods of our history?

There are, (as there often have been,) agitations and loud complaints of oppression in some of our States. But do they portend a dissolution of our Union? Is there any portion of our country that will not bear much wrong, and bear it long, before so desperate a remedy is resorted to?

Let them appeal to the great body of their countrymen; and let them patiently abide the result of that appeal. To determine upon the justice of their complaints may require time, and the experience to be derived from passing events, and perhaps some clearer proofs of actual suffering. But it cannot be believed that the nation, when it sees undoubted evidence of the unjust and unequal operation of a system, will desire or permit any portion of the country to bear burthens for another. Patriotism, like charity, (of which virtue it is a branch) will teach the complainers to "suffer long and be kind." And the same virtue will teach their opponents to bear with the complaints, examine them emphatically, and not "seek their own" (particularly through doubtful questions) to the injury of their brethren.

This is the constitutional remedy for wrongs. it is a safe one; and, sooner or later, it is a sure one. The people at larger can have neither interest nor inclination to bias them. They may occasionally err, but they always mean to do right, and give them time and information, and they will seldom do otherwise.

These agitations will be thus calmed. The tree of liberty may be shaken by these blasts, but its roots are in all hearts, and it will stand.

Let us remember that it has been said "the Union must be preserved"—and that he who said this, hath already done much to maintain it.

He has done much also to quiet our apprehensions as to the other source of danger to which I have alluded.

The accumulation of power, in the hands that wield the general government, must be watched with unceasing vigilance.

Whether this has been done; whether some encroachments do not already appear, are subjects for the consideration of the people. A most important question of this nature is now put before them, and the issue involves consequences of infinite moment.

If it shall be determined that the vast and innumerable objects of internal improvement throughout such a country as this, which have any bearing, direct or indirect, upon the general welfare, are to be selected and accomplished by the authority of the General Government; and if the necessity for this shall create (as it will do) another necessity, and the immense revenues for such expenditures are to be taken from the people (as they must be) by taxation of some sort, and put into the hands that are to be armed with this authority, then will it be seen that the impoverishment of the people is the last of the evils we have brought upon us. They will be made weak, and the hands that rule them will be made strong—so strong that if they will be tempted by the strength, the powers thus given may be held, and all others grasped, from a deluded and enfeebled people. Offer to a man power like this, and you may as well offer him a crown; for you tempt him with the ready means of purchasing it.

Such temptations as the history of the world shows, are not always resisted. It is our happiness to know that they sometimes are—that the days of disinterested patriotism are not gone, and that they have been resisted—that he who said “the Union must be preserved,” refused to accept power and patronage almost unlimited, and put it back to the people to say whether they would keep or give what would be safe with them, and safe no where else. “We have not lost the breed of noble men.”

We may look upon either of those rocks which threatens us in our course without dismay. His hand is on the brim, whose eye is on them both, and he will bear us onward triumphantly between this Scylla and Charybdis.

I have said, that patriotism is the preserving virtue of Republics. Let this virtue wither, and selfish ambition assume its place as the motive for action, and the Republic is lost.

Here, my countrymen, is the sole ground of danger.

We are in a state of unexampled national prosperity, and to nations as to individuals, great are the hazards and responsibilities of such a state. Times of difficulty and danger give men their virtues, and prove and exalt them. We become listless and luxurious in times of ease and security. Men who inherit an estate generally prize it and enjoy it less than the ancestor who earned it; and we, who inherit freedom, may learn to value it less than the men who won it.

Let us not indulge the unworthy thought that to us is left the privilege of enjoyment, without the obligations of duty. We are responsible for the most sacred of trusts—to our country—to the world—to our God.

Let us not imagine that nothing is left for us to do. This is never the condition of an individual or a nation. Patriotism may still find its appropriate labors among us.—There are yet things to be done, necessary to be done for the honor and safety of our land, left unaccomplished, from necessity, by those who have gone before us: left for the times of peace and prosperity which we enjoy, and left for us to understand and execute. Abundant as are the blessings around us there are evils to be seen—not to be hid in despair, or mourned over in heartless despondency, but to be looked at, and met, and overcome, with

the spirit of men who think nothing that concerns its honor and happiness above the power of such a country to accomplish. Many and great will be the toils and triumphs of patriotism, before our whole land shall present to the eye of heaven, what heaven has given us the means of making it, a picture of human happiness without a blot.

The spirit of this virtue still abides among us. Let us exercise and cherish it, and while we frown upon the men who betray the selfishness of their aims, let us give our confidence and our honors to those, and to those only, in whose hearts it lives, and in whose lives it shines.

The present time then is a time for joy, another year has passed over us and adds its proof, to that of those before it, of the stability of the blessings of freedom.

It ought not sensibly to impair our happiness, however we may regret it, that the joy with which this day is celebrated is not universal. It can never be otherwise—men who look for causes of discontent will find them or make them. That some of our countrymen therefore will meet together this day in such a mood, must be expected. They will pour forth their lamentations over the wretched state of the country and the sad prospects before us. But all that is wretched in the country, or sad in prospect, will appear to be (when we come to understand them) that they, and those they approve of, and who approve of them, are not taken to govern the country; and that they have the sad prospect before them that they never will be.

Time is perhaps the only cure for such a sorrow, and we trust they will long be enabled to see that the country can live and flourish under the continuance of this calamity.

The present is a time for joy, and the past shines upon it in reflected brightness—Is there any cloud to be seen in our anticipations of the future?

There is no discoverable cause among ourselves for an apprehension, that institutions, conferring so much happiness on a people, and resting on the will of the people, will be impaired by time. We may rather expect, from the spirit of the age in which we live, their improvement. What is there that is not improving? Who can look back even for a few years, who can hear or see what is daily passing in the world, without astonishment at the increasing intellectual power of man? It seems as if we are but just now getting dominion over the world that God made for us, that we were but now learning how to use and apply the materials and agencies of nature.

As men increase in knowledge and intelligence, will they not increase their means of understanding and providing for what constitutes their happiness? And is the science of government the only one that admits of no improvement? May not its principles be so modified and applied as to produce new and great results; so that all the parts of the political machine may work harmoniously, and the ruling power, the will of the people, be brought to bear more effectually upon all its movements?

Among no people of the world are the discoveries of art and science more zealously sought out and beneficially applied than with us; and we have advantages, for making and applying improvements in political concerns, peculiarly our own. All our constitutions are alterable at the discretion of the people, without tumult or confusion, without a revolution, or what might even be called a reformation. Each State may adopt and change its own systems, and make its own experiments, the results of which are open to the benefit of all. It must be, under such circumstances, that if our people improve in every thing else, they will improve in knowing how to govern themselves and their affairs, so as to produce the greatest amount of happiness.

If such shall be the case, if the cause of freedom shall live and flourish here, what will be the consequence? Will the rest of the world look on in apathy? If a man, by a new system of husbandry, improves his estate and doubles his crops, will his neighbors do nothing but wonder at him or praise him? No, my countrymen, we hold a rich deposit in trust for ourselves and for all our brethren of mankind. It is the fire of liberty. If it becomes extinguished, our darkened land will cast a mournful shadow over the nations—if it lives, its blaze will enlighten and gladden the whole earth.

Already hath its pure flame ascended, and kindled more than one noble strife. The kingdoms of the earth are moved, the friends of man are awakened, and the arm of the patriot is strong and his heart steadfast, as he thinks of our glory.

The oppressor may roll on his countless hosts, but he commands only their hands—their hearts will bow in reverence to the spirit they are sent to exterminate, and they will soon learn that they too are men, not

“Mere machines of murder.”

We hold too this deposit from God, who warmed the hearts of our fathers with a sense of their rights and their duties, and heard their appeal—and we hold it for Him—to sustain it for his great purpose in bestowing it—the good of man.

However darkly we may speculate upon the future destinies of nations, we have a light shining on distant days, which cannot mislead us—the holy light of prophecy.

This tells us of the coming of a brighter day than has ever shone upon a fallen world—a day when man will find no foe in man—when “nations will learn war no more”—but live together, in love, as the members of one great family upon earth, under the care of the common father of us all.

There are signs in the times in which we live, which indicate the dawning of that day of brightness—and among them, none more dearly, than the present “moving of the nations,” and the advancing cause of freedom, for

“This tempestuous state of human things
Is only as the working of a sea
Before a calm, that rocks itself to rest.”

However distant that day may be, it cannot come till the power of the oppressor has fallen, and man has regained his rights. Men cannot be brethren till they are equal. Nations will “learn war” as long as they are subjected to the sway of arbitrary and capricious rulers, having interests and passions of their own, and no common feeling with the great body of the people,

“Who deem a thousand or ten thousand lives
Spent in the purchase of renown for them,
An easy reckoning”—

When nations become free, and equal rights are secured to all their people, they will wage no war of passion or for conquest—The great body of the people in two such governments cannot be brought into angry collision with each other; and the governing

power being with them in both, can have few temptations to overcome the love of peace and the feelings of humanity. The free citizens of a happy country can have no inducements to a war of aggression upon others. He rests in the shade of his own trees, or in the circle that holds his own hearth, and in such scenes the heart of a man grows warm with love towards his brethren. Is it not a glorious privilege to be permitted to labor in such a cause, and for such a consummation? to see that in promoting the freedom and happiness of the world, by sustaining our own, we work with the bounteous Giver of good, in effecting his purposes of love to man; and that we work for him—for the glory of his name and the welfare of his creation.

He it is who rules the nations and reigns in the hearts of men. May we look to him, that we may understand and feel and fulfill the high duties he has placed before us. And as the world advances to this sure period of its destined blessedness, as people after people put forth their strength and join the holy family of nations that love us as brethren and “learn war no more,” shall not this our land, and this our day, be “freshly remembered”? and that which is now celebrated as the birth day of freedom to a nation, be honored as the birth-day of freedom to the world?

Rare Francis Scott Key Fourth of July Oration Given to State Library

By ARTHUR POUND, State Historian

A notable addition to New York's famous collection of Fourth of July orations has recently been made by the Hon. Jesse Merritt, historian, of Nassau county. Mr. Merritt has given to the State Library a first edition copy of a rare address delivered by the author of "The Star-Spangled Banner," Francis Scott Key, "in the Rotunda of the Capitol of the United States" on July 4, 1831.

In his own day, Francis Scott Key was better known as a public speaker than as a poet. On February 22, 1814, seven months before composing "The Star-Spangled Banner," Key delivered an important patriotic oration at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexander, Va. For two years the Nation had been distressed by a painful and so far unsuccessful war; and the young lawyer's eager mind was full of the burning fervor which in September burst forth in the poem that later became our national anthem.

On July 4, 1831, honored with the invitation to speak under the Congressional auspices, he appeared as one of the elder bards and statesmen. Eloquently, in words full of meaning for us today he reviewed the sacrifices of those who has established and preserved the Nation.—

"Under such circumstances, and in such times, no ordinary men could have put forth the Declaration of American Independence. It brought the Nation together as one man; all saw that they were parties in the conflict, that their dearest rights were to be sustained or lost forever; and they became a nation of patriots. They saw that upon our fields were to be decided the fate of nations, the destiny of man....

"We hold a rich deposit in trust for ourselves and all brethren of mankind. It is the fire of liberty. If it becomes extinguished, our darkened land will cast a mournful shadow over the nations—if it lives, its blaze will enlighten and gladden the whole earth...

"The oppressor may roll in his countless hosts, but he commands only their hands...they will soon learn that they too are men, not 'mere machines of murder.'"

These inspiring and sustaining words, spoken by the author of our national anthem 111 years ago, can be repeated today without a change.

Fourth of July orations are decisive expressions of the American spirit and as such have for years been sought and collected by the State Library. The late Walter Stanley Biscoe, Senior Librarian, compiled a list of 1928 printed items, of which the Library then possessed 900. Under his successor, Joseph Gavit, the list has risen to 2300 titles, of which the Library now has about 1100.

Of these the earliest dating is July 4, 1777, when William Gordon preached on the patriotic theme before the General Court of Massachusetts. Since that time patriotic Americans have delivered Fourth of July orations the wide world over to all manner of audiences, as the following instances from the State Library collection indicate:

By George R. Parkhurst, on shipboard in the Pacific, 1849;

By "An American Seaman," board the Nassau Prison ship at Chatham, England, 1813;

By Captain George F. Noyes to Doubleday's Brigade, before Fredericksburg, 1862;

By Horatio Seymour, former governor, to inmates of Auburn prison, 1879;

By some unknown and perhaps misguided patriot to the insane inmates of the Ohio Lunatic Asylum, 1846.

Through the generosity of Mr. Merritt, the Francis Scott Key 1831 oration from the National Capitol now takes its place as a highly valued item in this extensive collection of patriotic addresses in the State Library.