

## ORATION

[Delivered by Thomas R. Street, in Virginia City,  
N. T., on the occasion of the Emancipation  
Proclamation Celebration, January 1<sup>st</sup>. 1864.]

*Ladies and Gentlemen*—This is the first anniversary of a day destined to become memorable in the annals of the world. (applause.) The beginning of the New Year has, for centuries, been celebrated throughout Christendom with feasts and songs, as the dawning of a new era, the commencement of a new life. It has lately been made, to our race, a day of rejoicing and jubilee indeed, for it is a day on which was lifted from us the burden of centuries of oppression and wrong; it is a day when the shadows and darkness were driven from above us by the tempest blows of war, and the colored people of America were raised into the sunlight of a broader and freer manhood. (applause.) A thousand hearts to-day are moved by the same new and untried emotion, as the great waters are moved by the same breath from God. The welcome sound of freedom has waited upon the hearts of millions of people already disenthralled, and even the unmanacled limb, the unfettered mind and unimprisoned thought, grows freer and broader as the song of liberty soars and swells above its dwelling place (applause.) With what a proud boast and great joy do we herald the conquering idea which unbinds our fate, and places us in possession

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of a victory over oppression and wrong,  
over ignorance, helplessness and despair!  
We are not here to-day for the purpose of  
establishing principles of justice, but to  
rejoice over those already established. It  
has been said that our race is ignorant and  
benighted—how should they be otherwise?  
It has been said that our race is intellectu-  
ally inferior—why not? Do our fields pro-  
duce without labor? If heaven withhold  
its dews and rains, shall we look for re-  
turns from an arid soil? (applause.) If our  
race are unskilled in the arts of modern  
civilization, it is only because the oppressor  
has purposely prevented us from becoming  
familiar with them. If they are ignorant,  
it is only because they are debarred the  
ordinary institution, such as are extended  
to the child of the poorest and meanest  
criminal. But I will not on this occasion  
advert to the disadvantages under which  
we have labored, or the unfairness of cen-  
suring us for not achieving results without  
means. It is rather my pleasant task to-  
day, to express our joy and gratitude at  
the issuance and the practical benefits of  
the great philanthropist's free measure of  
the age, the *magna charta* of our race, the  
Emancipation Proclamation of Abraham  
Lincoln, which was issued on January 1<sup>st</sup>,  
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elling principle of justice. The principle which it embodies and utilizes, is the outgrowth of the advancement of the age, but it is none the less welcome to its recipients, none the less generous in its gift of joy, and none the less gratefully and thankfully received by all of our race, because of its being acquiesced in by a majority of the American people as a military necessity.

The pages of classic history blaze with the achievements of men upon whose brows the sun of Asia and Africa burned a dusky hue. Hannibal carried the arms of victorious Carthage to the home of the Anglo-Saxon beyond the Alps. Ptolemy, Cecrops and Africanus, were renowned for triumphs of art and arms, but the pages of modern history are not filled with pleasant and glorious tales for our perusal; on the contrary, these pages are colored and dyed with oppression and degradation. (applause.) Unpaid labor, unworthy subservience and unhappy fate surround with a mournful hue our recent history "oppression has ever been the handmaiden of civilization" upon this western continent. The footprints of the pioneer whites were followed by the sorrowful steps of the enslaved African. The republic which began its existence with the declamation that all men are created equal, falsified its own assumption of universal freedom. Our race were not permitted to share in the free-

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dom they aided to achieve, and since the United States became a nation, the chains of slavery have, until recently, been riveted but more strongly upon our limbs. The growth of the American republic might fitly be compared to the construction of a mighty edifice, the title deed to the land on it was constructed, was acquired by toil and privation, by combat with the savages and the elements, and the seal by which it passed to its present possessors, was reddened with blood and sacrifice. Upon this fair heritage a mighty temple of human power and progress was to be constructed. Its walls were built of the achievements of ages and progress; its timbers were brought from all quarters of the globe. "Liberty to all!" was the watchword which the master workman imparted to the craftsmen who toiled for its erection and battled for its preservation. (applause.) The fair-haired Saxon and the dusky son of Ethiopia, alike, labored upon its walls, but while the former enjoyed its shelter, gloried in its grandeur and exulted in its greatness; the latter was unjustly deprived of the fruits of his labor, and the God of Justice is rocking that temple to its foundation stones as a consequence. The tyrants who held the African in bondage, are being swept away by pestilence, by famine, and by terrific blasts which Azrael the death-angel moves with his beating wings, and

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the robes of justice are being purified by the bath of blood, into which, those who have so long disgraced her sacred name have recklessly plunged her. (applause.) I speak of the rights of the colored race; it is a subject about which there has been much of misrepresentation and much of the Anglo-Saxon what he calls social equality. We have as little desire for social equality with him, as he can have for social equality with us. (That is so.) We prefer to mix with our own people, to form our own society, to have our own customs, our own manners and our own destiny. (Good.) The rights we ask are those which properly belong to every member of the human family, of whatever country or race, the right to eat what we earn, to enjoy unmolested our lives, liberty and property, and to be justly protected in the exercise of those rights by the Government which we aid in supporting and preserving. (Applause.)

We demand for ourselves and for our posterity only that liberty which is our God—given, inalienable right. Every dew-drop sparkling in the sunlight, every star-beam on which angels footsteps run from heaven to earth, every bud that blossoms in beauty, every creature that roams the forest or the plain, up through all animated nature to “Creation’s Lord,” tells the same tale of natural, eternal freedom,

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the inborn, ineradicable, inalienable right of every man to himself and the products of his labor. (Loud applause.)

It is fortunate for us and for our children, that the Emancipation of the colored race occurred because of, and simultaneously with the reconstruction of the great American republic. No second *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, or Denmark Vesey, has arisen to lead our brethren in the South to a freedom in which the horrors and excesses of Saint Domingo might have been repeated. It is the Federal Government itself, and not an insurrectionary leader that has declared freedom to the slave, and encouraged the freedmen to fight for the liberty of his enslaved kindred and race. (Applause.) Let history record it in glowing letters, that no colored man has ever proved a traitor to the American republic, that no emancipated slave has ever struck a blow against his country. (Great applause.) And can the reproach of cowardice be longer laid upon a suffering and patient people? The gallant conduct of the 2d Louisiana regiment at Port Hudson, and the fearless bravery of the South Carolina Volunteers, has shown how desperately even slaves can fight when their swords are sharpened by the thought that they are battling for their own freedom as well as for the freedom of their country. (Loud applause.)

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President Lincoln—God bless him!—has declared that, when this slaveholders' rebellion is crushed, no man freed by the operation of the Emancipation Proclamation shall ever be returned to slavery. (Applause.) We believe that the great loyal American people will keep faith with us and with our enslaved brethren, and therefore for the present and for the hopeful future. This day, upon the first anniversary of our independence, we give our joyous praises to the Giver of all good and perfect gifts. (Applause.) The progress of our race toward freedom, its advancement in all the arts of civilization, its steps upon the road of intellectual advancement, during the last half century, have been wonderful beyond computation. The present century dawned upon us with little of light breaking through its murky gloom. No bow of promise gleamed above the darkened clouds which hemmed in the horizon of our hopes. Slavery and chains, oppression and wrong, lowered at every point of the compass—but see how much has been accomplished. In the British West Indies all the slaves have been emancipated. In the French West Indies there are no longer any bondmen. On the shores of our father-land an African republic has been successfully inaugurated and aided by emigration, and the conversion of the natives to Christianity is rapidly extending its influence and

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power. Slavery has retired southward, step by step, from the soil of the American republic. The political convulsions of the last few years—convulsions instigated and brought about by slavery itself—has resulted inevitably in the event we celebrate. Missouri has declared for freedom, Delaware has declared for freedom, West Virginia has declared for freedom, Maryland, Kentucky and Tennessee are preparing to follow, and it is not unlikely that the sun of 1870 may shine upon a mighty nation, whose soil no bondman's foot shall ever again be pressed. (Loud applause.) Slavery, aggressive by that very necessity of its nature which demands expansion as a condition precedent of existence, has met the all conquering hosts of freedom, and the end is before us. The influence of this triumph of justice and right has extended beyond the theatre of the immediate conflict. California, at the last session of her Legislature, wiped out the reproach which had for many years rested upon her laws, by removing the disability, which had previously existed, against receiving the evidence of colored men in Courts of Justice, and we hope that the first Legislature of the dawning State of Nevada will adopt a similar measure for our civil and criminal Code. It is true that the Emancipation of our race has been accomplished through a mighty civil convulsion, accompanied by

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much of blood and sorrow, but such has been the history of every great movement in favor of liberty. Freedom is not as poets and sculptors picture, a delicate maiden with a pleasant smile, but a mighty warrior covered with the scars of a thousand battles, and ever struggling with opposing tyranny. It was through a bloody convulsion that the Parisians succeeded in hurling the weak, unworthy descendant of Hugh Capet from the throne of the Bourbons, and gave to France a new liberty. It was through a bloody convulsion that the Stuarts were driven into exile, and a Protestant King enthroned in England. It was through a bloody and wearisome war that the Spaniards were driven from the dykes of Holland, and a free and mighty nation builded up upon a Territory wrenched from the embraces of the ocean, and going further back into the ages dim, before the man of sorrows suffered and died on Calvary; and we read yet, with a wonder mingled with reverential awe, the strange story of how God's chosen people were rescued from slavery, when Pharoah of old refused to strike off the chains from the Israelites and they arose and fled in the night-time from unpaid and weary tasks. Onward they went, down into the bosom of the waters which, guided by angel hands, rolled back on either side, and let them pass out in safety from the land of bond-

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age, and when the haughty and tyrannical Egyptians would have followed them, the rushing waters of the Red Sea overwhelmed the oppressor, while the song of Miriam, the dark-eyed prophetess of Israel, rang out upon the midnight air. (Applause.) "Sing ye to the Lord for he hath triumphed gloriously, the horse and his rider he hath cast into the sea." Thus, of old, "God Almighty repealed the fugitive slave act." (Loud applause.) And, to-day, after a lapse of many centuries, the story of a people's deliverance can be repeated, as millions of our people pass from slavery into freedom, through the waters of a Red Sea which overwhelms their pursuers upon every battle-field, and strews the land with the chariots and horsemen of the oppressor. (Applause.)

We have, indeed, great cause for rejoicing here to-day. The spirit of adventure and desire for wealth has brought many of our people to these western deserts, where we possess a facility to develop and advance seldom vouchsafed to our race. It should be our duty, and doubtless be our purpose to so conduct ourselves as to achieve our own good opinion as well as the respect of all others. We have here an opportunity to attain alike material, intellectual and moral advancement unmolested by despotic exactions, and unhampered by tyrannical restrictions. When I

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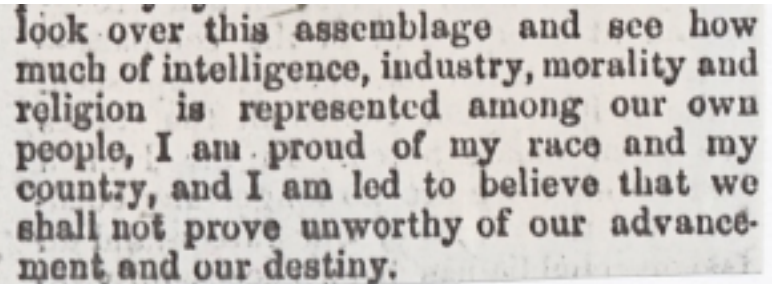
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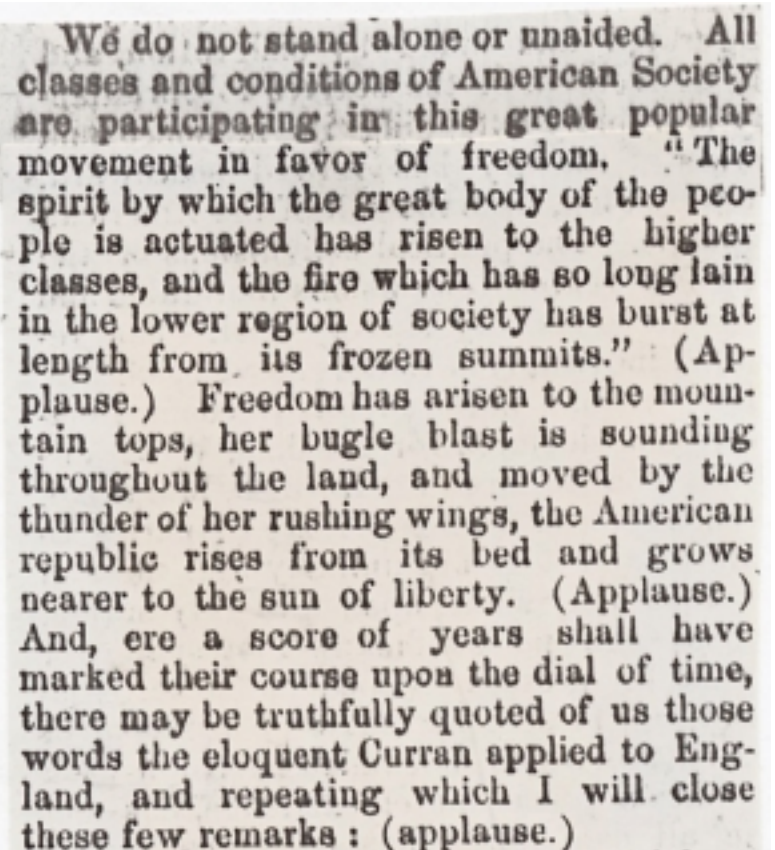
look over this assemblage and see how much of intelligence, industry, morality and religion is represented among our own people, I am proud of my race and my country, and I am led to believe that we shall not prove unworthy of our advancement and our destiny.

We do not stand alone or unaided. All classes and conditions of American Society are participating in this great popular movement in favor of freedom. The spirit by which the great body of the people is actuated has risen to the higher classes, and the fire which has so long lain in the lower region of society has burst at length from its frozen summits." (Applause.) Freedom has arisen to the mountain tops, her bugle blast is sounding throughout the land, and moved by the thunder of her rushing wings, the American republic rises from its bed and grows nearer to the sun of liberty. (Applause.) And, ere a score of years shall have marked their course upon the dial of time, there may be truthfully quoted of us those words the eloquent Curran applied to England, and repeating which I will close these few remarks: (applause.)

"I speak in the spirit of the British law, which makes liberty commensurate with and inseparable from British soil, which proclaims even to the stranger and sojourner, the moment he sets foot upon Brit-



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