

SPEECH OF JOHN S. ROCK, ESQ.

*Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,*—The day that we have assembled here to celebrate has been made sacred in the world's calendar. Twenty-four years ago, the friends of freedom in Great Britain and in her Colonies held grand jubilees, and thanked God and their rulers that 800,000 human chattels were that day transformed into men, and that the slave could never again clank his chains on British soil.

The British Government has, by this act, set us an example which I think hundreds within the sound of my voice would rejoice to see imitated by the United States. (Applause.) What our President means to do in *this* direction, God only knows. I do not pretend to be able to discern the probable results of this war better than he can, but I think I can see as far into the millstone as the man who picks it; and if I do not know all about the white man, I have learned something about the black,—enough at least to say that you have made a mistake by spurning valuable friends, who have stood ready to help you. I have never doubted but that the President was on the side of freedom and humanity, but I confess I do not understand how it is, that when the national life has been assailed, he has not availed himself of all the powers given him; and, more especially, why he has not broken every yoke, and let the oppressed go free. There may be many reasons why he should do as he has done; but I am puzzled to know why he, as a constitutional man and a patriot, has delayed enforcing laws recently enacted for the overthrow of rebellion. We all know that emancipation, if early proclaimed, would not only have saved many precious lives, but the nation itself. Why then delay, when delays are

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dangerous, and may prove fatal?

I believe the only salvation to be obtained for this country must be through the hearty cooperation of the oppressed, bond and free.

It is indeed humiliating to the civilization and Christianity of the nineteenth century that to-day, in one of the most, if not the most enlightened nation on the globe, there exists a "peculiar" and popular "institution," which robs men not only of their earnings, but of themselves and their families; abolishes the marriage relation, ignores chastity, and makes woman the hapless victim of the most depraved wretches, and inflicts upon all who resist its progress tortures which the most barbarous savages of the most barbarous age would have scorned to have inflicted upon their bitterest enemies.

Our enemies argue that West India Emancipation has failed. So have the despots of Europe always said that democratical institutions are a failure. (Hear.) We know that Democracy is now undergoing a terrible trial; but who is there who has lost confidence in the people, and is willing to yield to the "divine right of kings"? If this Government fails now, it will not be because we have reposed too much confidence in the people, but because we have relied too much on the few, who will have proved themselves unworthy of our confidence. (Applause.)

What are the facts about British Emancipation? Did the freed men become idle, disorderly, or bad citizens, after they were emancipated? Not at all. They have been good citizens, and industrious to a remarkable degree, considering the climate and its resources, and the low wages paid for labor. It is

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true that many of the poor planters were left to suffer. Poor things, they had taken no thought for the morrow, but depended solely upon having their pockets filled by god wrung from the sweat and life-blood of the unpaid laborer. There was no chance for them to steal: they were too proud to beg, and too lazy to work. (Applause.) How could they help suffering? Many who were wealthy were ruined. I will tell you how this was done. They attempted to crush freed men by refusing to employ them. Many of those who did employ them, gave them so little that they were unable to provide for their necessities. This aroused the freed men, and many of those who had saved up something during the four years' apprenticeship immediately preceding emancipation, bought small parcels of land, and, instead of working for the planters, they became small proprietors and worked for themselves. This effort on the part of the planters to crush out free laborers was not without its good effects. It taught the blacks the necessity of self-reliance, and the planter that the laborer was worthy of his hire. The exports, as a matter of course, were less, because, instead of cultivating cotton and sugar, the freed men were obliged to turn their attention to cultivating the necessities of life. This enabled them to throw away the coarse and unhealthy food that they were formerly obliged to eat, and live on better diet. Their new relation created new wants. Many things which had been denied them in slavery they were able to get when free, and the surplus of their gardens or fields, instead of being exported, were exchanged in many instances for the luxuries of a higher state, and by this means of their labor was

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turned into a new channel. The reason why it was impossible for Jamaica to export so much as formerly was because the planters failed to encourage labor, and the people consumed more than before of that which was produced. You will please bear in mind that a large proportion of the exports from the British West Indies is now produced upon the estates of men once held as slaves. (Applause.)

The English Government, instead of setting the planters to work to compensate the slaves for what they had plundered from them, paid the planters with British gold, the price of their blood to which they had not the shadow of a right, neither by the laws of God nor of nature. (Applause.) Robbed of everything but their liberty, and without any assistance, the new creatures sprang into a new life, and have nobly vindicated their capacity to enjoy and appreciate their freedom. Why talk about compensating masters? Compensate them for what? What do you owe them? What does the slaves owe them? What does society owe them? Compensate the master? No, never. (Applause.) It is the slave who ought to be compensated. The property of the South is by right the property of the slave. You talk of compensating the master who has stolen enough to sink ten generations, and yet you do not propose to restore even a part of that which has been plundered. This is rewarding the thief. Have you forgotten that the wealth of the South is the property of the slave? Will you keep back the price of his blood, which is upon you and upon your children? Restore to him the wealth of the South, and he will engage to continue to take care of the master well, as he has always been obliged to do, and make a good speculation

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by the transaction. (Applause.) This you owe to the slave; and if you do your duty, posterity will give to you the honor of being the first nation that dared to deal justly by the oppressed.

Freedom in the West Indies is a success. It is a success everywhere, whether gained peaceably or by the sword. (Applause.) We learn by the last census that there is in the Island of Jamaica one hundred and eighty-two churches, exclusive of the Church of England, and that the average attendance on the day schools is 88,521; that crime has diminished, and that the moral character of the whole people is greatly improved. Jamaica has at present some colored men that any country could well afford to be proud of: comprising artists, mechanics, manufacturers, merchants, physicians, professors, advocates, judges and legislators, each honorably filling his station, and proving that the colored man is capable of the higher refinement and culture. Many of these men, you remember, were once slaves. What has been done in Jamaica may be done in the United States. (Applause.)

Our Government has recognized the Governments of Liberia and Hayti. What sort of logic is it that regards the blacks in America as creatures having no rights, but the moment they emigrate to Hayti or Liberia, they are entitled to consideration? Why are we now standing still? Why is it that emancipation is not declared? Can it be possible that we fear Jeff. Davis will "bag us" all, (laughter,) and wish to trim our conduct so that we can say to him, "Have we not been good and faithful servants? Are we not entitled to your favors?" Why such pandering to the

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pro-slavery, or rather secession, element in our midst! Why this Northern servility? I have been told that it is the natural repugnance of the races; that the whites will always have their prejudices, and on this account it would not do to emancipate the blacks, for it would be impossible for the two races to exist together as equals. You may believe this, but I do not believe it. That there are many ignorant white people who believe all they have heard against us, I do not pretend to deny; but I do deny that the masses of the intelligent whites are prejudiced against us. The most bitter pro[-]slavery man in this State, who would send me to the mountains of the moon to-morrow, would insult my daughter, if I had one, the moment my back was turned. This is the character of the negro-haters of this country. (Laughter.) I [never] saw a pro-slavery man or a colonizationist who [was] not, when he had a chance, an amalgamationist (Laughter and applause.) Though often men in high position, they are generally men with low [moral] ideas, who seek by words to conceal their real [mo-]tives. They are opposed to emancipation [because] that will carry certain legal rights with it, and [will] elevate the moral standard. The design is to [keep] the race ignorant and degraded, and without legal [or] moral rights, that it may be at the mercy of the [de-]praved. I do not think the whites have much [preju-]dice, when I see them preferring the society of [the] most degraded blacks to that of cultivated [whites] (hear, hear); and in this I am confirmed by the [fact] that there is no prejudice against black men or [black] women, so long as they remain slaves. This [preju-]dice is not natural. The white child cries after [the]

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black wet-nurse, and refuses to be comforted by [its] mother (laughter and applause); and the [mulatto] child is dandled on the knee of its white father [until] he gets "hard up," then he sells it. (Applause.)

Emancipation will entirely revolutionize [society.] This system of free love must be abolished. This [will] be no child's play. (Laughter.) When the govern[ment] has been brought to the saving knowledge of [emanci-] pation, then the anti-slavery work will have but [fairly] commenced. I hope our friends will not stop [now] and think their work is done. The slaves have [...] for you for more than two centuries. It is but [right] that you should do something for them. (Applause.) They have a heavy claim against you—a long [dia-] logue of outrage and oppression. You must not [forget] them now. The slaves are to be educated for a [high] civilization, they need your friendship, and we [ask you] to cooperate with us, and help clear the way. All I [ask] for the black man is an unobstructed road and a [fair] chance. (Applause.)

The present position of the colored man is a [trying] one; trying because the whole nation seems to [have] entered into a conspiracy to crush him. But few [seem] to comprehend our position in the free States. [The] masses seem to think that we are oppressed [only in] the South. This is a mistake; we are oppressed everywhere in this slavery-cursed land. Massachu- setts has a great name, and deserves much credit [for] what she has done, but the position of the colored peo- ple in Massachusetts is far from being an enviable [one.] While colored men have many rights, they have [but] few privileges here. To be sure, we are seldom in- sulted by the vulgar passers by, we have the right [of]

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suffrage, the free schools and colleges are opened [to] our children, and from them have come forth [young] men capable of filling any post of profit or [honor.] But there is no field for these young men. Their education aggravates their suffering. The more highly educated the colored man is, the more keenly [he] suffers. The educated colored man meets, on the [one] hand, the embittered prejudices of the whites, and [on] the other the jealousies of his own race. The colored man who educates his son, educates him to [suffer.] The more ignorant the colored man, the more [happy] he must be. If we are never to derive the benefits [of] an education, it would be a misfortune for us to see [in-] side of a school-house. You can hardly imagine [the] humiliation and contempt a colored lad must feel [at] graduating the first in his class, and then being rejected everywhere else because of his color. To the [credit] of the nineteenth century, be it said, the [United] States is the only civilized country mean enough [to] make this invidious distinction. No where in the [Uni-] ted States is the colored man of talent appreciated. Even in Boston, which has a great reputation for [be-] ing anti-slavery, he has no field for his talent. [Some] persons think that, because we have the right of [suf-] frage, and enjoy the privilege of riding in the [...], there is less prejudice here than there is farther [South.] In some respects this is true, and in others it is [not] true. We are colonized in Boston. It is five times [as] difficult for a colored mechanic to get employ[ment] than in Charleston. Colored men in business in Mas- sachusetts receive more respect, and less [patronage] than in any place that I know of. In Boston we are proscribed in some of the eating-houses, many of the

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hotels, and all the theatres but one. Boston, [though] anti-slavery and progressive, supports, in addition to these places, two places of amusement, the sole [object] of which is to caricature us, and to perpetuate the [ex-]isting prejudices against us. I now ask you, is [Bos-]ton anti-slavery? Are not the very places that [pro-]scribe us sustained by anti-slavery patronage! [Do] not our liberal anti-slavery politicians dine at the [Re-]vere House, sup at the Parker House, and take [their] cream and jellies at Copeland's?

The friends of slavery are everywhere withdrawing their patronage from us, and trying to starve us [out] by refusing to employ us even as menials. When [our] laboring men go to them for work, as heretofore, [they] reply, "Go to the Abolitionists and Republicans, [who] have turned the country upside down"! The labor- ing men who could once be found all along the wharves of Boston, can now be found only about Central [wharf] with scarcely encouragement enough to keep soul and body together. You know that the colored man [is] proscribed in some of the churches, and that this [pro-]scription is carried even to the grave-yards. This [in] Boston—by far the best, or at least the most liberal large city in the United States.

Now, while our enemies are endeavoring to [crush] us, and are closing the avenues from which we have wrung out our humble subsistence, is there anything higher opened to us? Who is talking our boys [into] their stores at a low salary, and giving them a [chance] to rise? Who is admitting them into their [work-]shops, or into their counting-room? Or who is en- couraging those who are engaged in trade or business? With the exception of a handful of Abolitionists [and]

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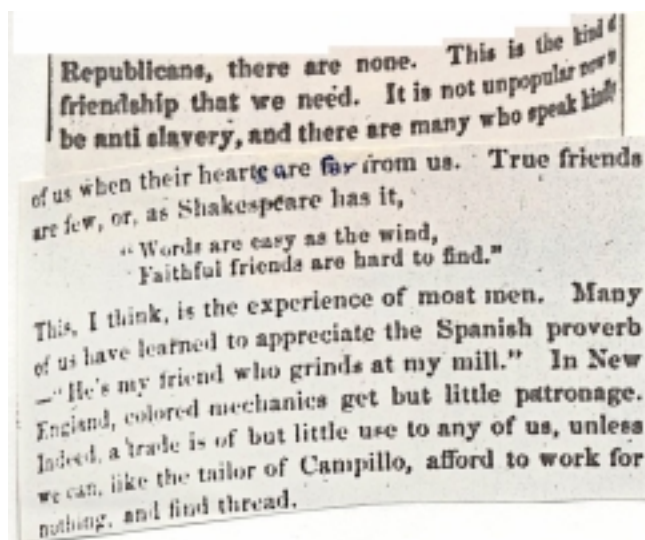
Republicans, there are none. This is the kind of friendship that we need. It is not unpopular now [to] be anti[-]slavery, and there are many who speak [kindly] of us when their hearts are far from us. True friends are few, or, as Shakespeare has it,

“Words are easy as the wind,  
Faithful friends are hard to find.”

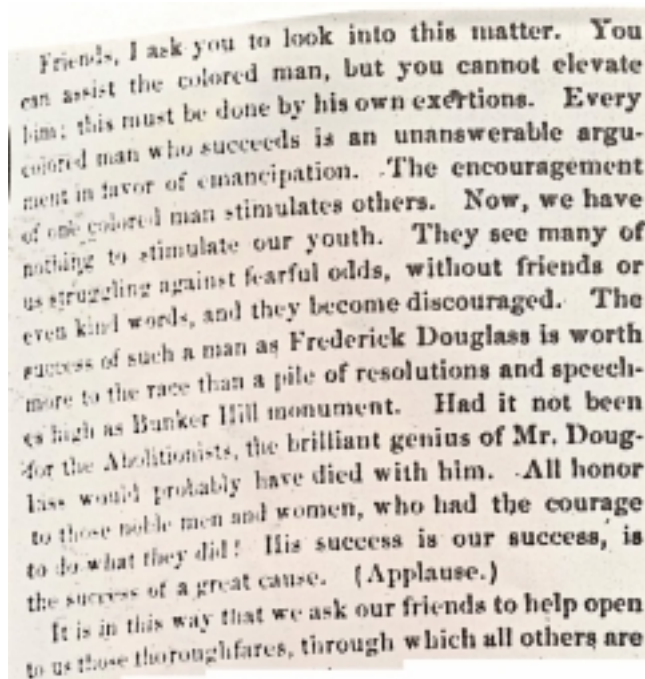
This, I think, is the experience of most men. Many of us have learned to appreciate the Spanish proverb —“He’s my friend who grinds at my mill.” In New England, colored mechanics get but little patronage. Indeed, a trade is of but little use to any of us, unless we can, like the tailor of Campillo, afford to work for nothing, and find thread.

Friends, I ask you to look into this matter. You can assist the colored man, but you cannot elevate him; this must be done by his own exertions. Every colored man who succeeds is an unanswerable argument in favor of emancipation. The encouragement of one colored man stimulates others. Now, we have nothing to stimulate our youth. They see many of us struggling against fearful odds, without friends or even kind words, and they become discouraged. The success of such a man as Frederick Douglass is worth more to the race than a pile of resolutions and speeches high as Bunker Hill monument. Had it not been for the Abolitionists, the brilliant genius of Mr. Douglass would probably have died with him. All honor to those noble men and women, who had the courage to do what they did! His success is our success, is the success of a great cause. (Applause.)

It is in this way that we ask our friends to help open to us those thoroughfares, through which all others are



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encouraged to pass, and in this manner breathe into the anti-slavery movement the breath of life. Then we will become educated and wealthy; and then the roughest looking colored man that you ever saw, or ever will see, will be pleasanter than the harmonies of Orpheus; and black will be a very pretty color.

(Laughter and applause.) It will make our jargon, [wit;] our words, oracles; flattery will then take the place of slander, and you will find no prejudice in the Yankee whatever. (Laughter.)

We desire to take part in this contest, and when our Government shall see the necessity of using the loyal blacks of the free States, I hope it will have the courage to recognize their manhood. It certainly will not be mean enough to force us to fight for your liberty, (after having spurned our offers)—and then leave us when we go home to our respective States to be told that we cannot ride in the cars, that our children cannot go to the public schools, that we cannot vote; and if we don't like the state of things, there is an appropriation to colonize us. We ask for our rights. Hardships and dangers are household words with us. We are not afraid to dig or to fight. A few black acclimated regiments would shake the Old Dominion. When will there be light enough in the Cabinet to see this! (Applause.)

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