

July 14, 1838
Vogelsang, P[eter]
Colored American

"To be weak is miserable." If we are not possessed of as much of this world's comfort as our neighbors, shall we, for this cause, make ourselves miserable? Shall we entertain a mental debate, whether it is, or is not better to hang or drown ourselves, than to endure such a state of existence?—Not one person present will answer in the affirmative. I know your opinion to be, that our minds would be better employed in discussing the most feasible mode of engaging our energies, to procure a larger amount of comforts.

If, as is the fact, a majority of the citizens of this State enjoy a larger share of political privileges than we do, shall we, for this cause, entertain the question whether it is not best to go to Africa, and endure a privation of comforts in a barbarous land, or to Hayti, and commune with a people whose manners and customs are the antipodes of our own? Is it not more rational, that we should counsel together and devise the best mode of applying the capabilities with which a benign Creator has endowed us, to procure an equal share of political privileges? The mode of applying these capabilities, then, is what we are now to consider. Shall we, relying upon our superior, individual, corporeal strength, regardless of the adverse, greatly counterbalanced numerical strength, commit acts that may lead to a fearful test—or shall we, more rationally, resort to a mental contest? But can we, by throwing down the glove, expect an antagonist to champion us into the arena of "free discussion," and argue the justice of our political disabilities, taking the American declaration of "Rights" as the problem? As well may we expect to find a man that

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will maintain the converse of the axiom, that it is day when the sun is in its meridian height.

But if we should meet an antagonist of sufficient moral prowess to entertain a discussion, he will tell us that 'inalienable rights' means 'personal rights:' that in the state of New York these 'rights' are guaranteed to every man, woman, and child; yet, from the nature of its social compact, women and children, as well as aliens and felons, are deprived of "political rights."—That "political right" is a conventional prescriptive license, agreed upon by a people through their Representatives, and sanctioned by themselves, through the ballot box. Not a natural right, but an arbitrary privilege from the majority. But ask, What reason can be adduced for the political distinction made between '*citizens*' that are not felons?—We will be answered by some of the oft-refuted assertions, such as the aversion of white men to our political elevation, and our intellectual inferiority. Now we deny, point-blank, that all white men are averse to our enjoying political privileges; and suppose we are in general, from our peculiar position, intellectually inferior, is this a good reason for the exercise of tyranny over us? Are our native born colored citizens less capable of judging which candidates for public favor will best legislate for the public weal, than aliens, after a few years' residence? Are we less intelligent than the hoards of ignorant paupers, that are annually disgorged on our shores, who, after a brief residence, are admitted to the ballot box?

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want of education to be visited? Certainly not upon ours. We are surrounded with seminaries of learning, into which we are anxious to gain admittance for our children; we see the rich fruit of education to be gathered in these seminaries; we hear the purling water of science flowing through the halls of these "*alma mater*," our children would fain banquet upon this fruit, and quaff its nectar, but the moment they attempt to clutch these advantages, the omnipresent genii of epidermal distinction waves its magic wand, and presto! they endure the penalty inflicted upon Tantalus, not for *their* transgressions, but for being what an all wise Creator made them.

But if we are deprived of the Right of Suffrage on the score of general ignorance, why allow the exercise of it to those of us who possess a freehold of \$250? If a man, however ignorant in other matters, shall by labor and economy possess himself of this freehold, does this simple fact so enlighten his understanding, as to render him more capable of selectieg his rulers, than he was the day previous to his becoming a freeholder? Mark the inconsistency: Mr. A. spends all his means in acquiring a good education, but not having a freehold qualification, he cannot vote; while Mr. B. hoards up his means, guiltless of the credit of being educated, buys a freehold, and is admitted to the ballot box. Upon what principle can this inconsistency be reconciled? Is it upon the principle of taxation? Does the man who owns this freehold, and spends but fifty dollars per annum for foreign goods, pay more taxes than

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his neighbor, who, without a freehold, expends five hundred dollars a year on taxable articles? Is it upon the score of the general defence? Was there a property discrimination, when, in 1813, we performed our share of labor on the heights of Brooklyn and Harlaem? Was there a property distinction when our people, as a corps of Seafencibles, so labored at stonework on Staten and Long Island, that many of our young men returned with a ruined constitution? Would there be a property discrimination, if the public exigency required a call upon the citizens to repel a foreign invasion?

But let us for the present leave off recapitulating the absurdity of this property distinction, and consider the means of acquiring the Right of Suffrage for all colored men. It is for this purpose we are now assembled.

A few active men among us have essayed the acquisition of this right, by means of Associations.— They are aware of the obstacles in the way. They know it is not only necessary to obtain Legislative approval, but also the sanction of a majority of the people through the ballot box, before the Constitution can be amended. The means they intend to employ is fully set forth, in the preamble and constitution which has just now been read to you.

When we consider the importance of the Right of Suffrage as a badge of freemen, we are amazed at the apathy of our people in the movement to obtain an equal participation with other citizens.— Those of our brethren who are so fortunate as to possess the pecuniary qualification of a colored voter,

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ought not to stand aloof in the agitation of this matter. Their indifference indicates their conscious political superiority over their less fortunate brethren. They certainly ought to be aware that if this political right was enjoyed by all colored men, their own respectability would be enhanced. Our public interest is so closely allied, that a political disadvantage to one portion of our people, is a disadvantage to the whole.

"Man, like the generous vi[.]orted lives,
The strength he gains is from an embrace he gives;
On their own axis as the planets run,
Yet make at once their circle round the sun—
So, two consistent motions acts the soul,
And one regards itself, and one the whole."

The object of this Association is, to unite the people of color in this State, and keep alive the intent of memorializing the Legislature, by agitating the subject. We must petition session after session. Though denied at one session, we must apply to the next. Our petitions must be worded in language decorous, courteous, and dignified. We must weary the Legislature with our prayer, even as the patriarch Jacob wrestled with the angel, until he obtained the blessing. Our Legislature, though they may refuse to grant our prayer, they cannot avoid receiving our memorial. The Right of Petition is secured by us, by the United States and State Constitutions—nay, it is a right we hold from our Creator. It is the foundation of the hopes of all men, for spiritual and temporal mercies. The smile that suffuses the infant cheeks, as it recognizes its mother, is the tacit petition for maternal nurture. Every breath we draw, is, or ought to be, an aspira-

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tion to that great source of mercy, who has promised to hear our petitions. Even from the depths of hell did the rich man petition, and Abraham listened to it.

But our firm reliance is upon the influence of Anti-Slavery Societies. This influence is the Archimedian lever that is to lift the structure of epidermal prejudice from its foundation, and scatter it to the four winds of heaven. The bases of anti-slavery principles is to carry into practice what the declaration of American Independence proclaims in theory. We must support their endeavors in our behalf, by conducting ourselves with prudence in the pursuit of our just rights. We must repudiate from our public proceedings, all violent and intemperate language. We must by our blameless conduct, morally hold up their position, as Aaron and Hur physically held up the hands of Moses while Joshua contended with Amalek. When the lion was ensnared in a net, the rat which had experienced his generosity, went deliberately to work to enlarge the meshes, and enable his protector by his superior strength, to rend the cords with which it was enthralled. We must fritter away the charges of ignorance, of immorality, of idleness, of a want of respect for the laws. These charges, though "baseless as the fabric of a vision," are the cords of the net with which our enemies would confine the energies of the abolitionists.

If we have not been represented in making the laws, we will *not* be justified in violating them. We look to the laws for protection, we are bound to

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render to it our unreserved allegiance. We must not conceal the faults of our people but exercise our just censures in their case, as we would in the case of other classes of the community. It is natural for us to feel a solicitude, for the favorable result of a pending cause in which the liberty of one of our people may be cloven down, but the pound of flesh having been decreed to the holder of the bond, all that we have to look to is that no blood follow. We must submit to the fiat of the majesty of the law, by such conduct we shall untrammel the operation of abolitionism.

It is a matter of great consolation to us to contemplate the all pervading influence of anti-slavery societies. Many years have not elapsed since William Lloyd Garrison unfurled the anti-slavery banner. See the countless numbers that have enlisted in the cause to contend under the standard of universal emancipation. See the conquest they have achieved. In Maine they have made great conquest. In New Hampshire they propounded terms of amity to the candidates for governor at the last election. In Massachusetts they have carried their conquest into the synods of the Presbyterians, and the conference of the Wesleyans. In Rhode Island they are victorious. In Connecticut they have a strong foothold, notwithstanding their late defeat in the attempt to alter the election law of that State. New York is their head quarters, the principal depot of ordnance the sway of a powerful press, from which their unanswerable appeals are sent throughout the length and breadth of the land. In

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New Jersey they are making inroads. In Pennsylvania they are contending manfully. They lately suffered a nominal defeat in Philadelphia; but each jutting flame that shot from the conflagrated Hall, was an appeal to heaven in behalf of the oppressed, and a beacon rocket, that pointed out the dangerous political quicksands, (pro-slavery influence,) upon which the United States constitution will be wrecked, unless the patriots of the land come to the rescue, and support that palladium of freedom, the right of free discussion.

But how can we enumerate their onward march. It is like the mighty Mississippi in its annual rise —receiving its tributary streams—overflowing the barriers of domestic slavery, and undermining and uprooting the aged trees of prejudice that have nurtured in the minds of the community. Who is so blind as not to see the influence that their principles must have in our elections. Contemplate their power as experienced in the return of a Senator and Representative from the county of Oneida the last fall election, look at the effect of their letters containing categorical inquiries that they addressed to candidates for political favors:

“As on the smooth expanse of chrystral lakes,
The sinking stone at first a circle makes,
The trembling surface, by the motion stir’d
Spreads into a second circle, then a third,
Wide and more wide the floating rings advance
Fill all the watery plain, and to the margin dance,

So will their influence spread, from village to village, from town to town, from county to county, and like the rock descending from its mountain bed, acquiring renewed impetus to its velocity, or like

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the great Halstrom, it absorbs within its mighty vortex, all minor political considerations and party distinction, and resistless as a mountain torrent, or a mighty avalanche from the summit of the Alps, bear down and crush beneath its principles of "Human Rights" all distinction of cast. Then will petitions in behalf of our political rights, pour into the halls of our legislature.

"Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks
In Vallambrosa."

Then shall we find a champion, another Wilberforce, to thunder his eloquence against the unjust political distinctions between different classes of citizens, and cease not his exertions but with the erasure of this shameful inconsistency from our State constitutions. Then will our legislature, actuated by a principle of justice, propound to the citizens of this state these words, "Shall the State constitution be so altered as to grant to these petitions the object of their prayer? Say yes or no," and the independent voters, now disenthralled from the influence of a cruel and unjust prejudice, which, like the ceremonys of Egyptian mummies, envelopes and shuts out the light of reason from their minds, go with alacrity to the polls, and with one simultaneous acclamation that the heaven's will reverberate the echo of the word—Yes!

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