

August 15-19, 1843

Davis, Samuel H.

*Minutes of the National Convention
of the Colored Citizens Held at Buffalo
Presscopy – Bell, ed. Minutes and Proceedings of
the National Negro Conventions 1969*

GENTLEMEN:

I consider this a most happy period in our history,—when we, as a people, are in some degree awake to a sense of our condition; and are determined no longer to submit tamely and silently to wear the galling yoke of oppression, under which we have so long suffered; oppression riveted upon us, as well by an unholy and cruel prejudice, as by unjust and unequal legislation. More particularly do I consider it ominous of good, when I see here collected, so much of wisdom and talent, from different parts of this great nation, collected here to deliberate upon the wisest and best methods by which we may seek a redress of those grievances which most sorely oppress us as a people.

Gentlemen, in behalf of my fellow-citizens in Buffalo, I bid you welcome, from the East and West, the North and South, to our city. Among you are the men who are lately from that part of our country, where they see our brethren, bound and manacled, suffering and bleeding, under the hand of the tyrant, who holds in one hand the Constitution of the United States, which guarantees freedom and equal rights to every citizen, and in the other “the scourge dripping with human gore,” drawn from the veins of his fellow-man. Here also are those who live in my native New England, among the “descendants of the pilgrims,” whose laws are more in accordance with the principles of freedom and equal rights; so that but few laws are found recorded on their statute books, of which we need complain. But though their laws are not marked with such palpable and flagrant injustice towards the colored man, as those of the South; yet there we are proscribed, by a fixed and cruel prejudice, little less oppressive. Our grievances are many and great; but it is not my intention to enumerate or to enlarge upon them. I will simply say, however, that we wish to secure for ourselves, in common with other citizens, the privilege of seeking our own happiness in any part of the country we may choose, which right is now unjustly, and, we believe, unconstitutionally denied us in a part of this Union. We wish also to secure the elective franchise in those States where it is denied us,—where our rights are legislated away, and our voice neither heard nor regarded. We also wish to secure, for our children *especially*, the benefits of education, which in several States are entirely denied us, and in others are enjoyed only in name[.] These, and many other things, of which we justly complain, bear most heavily upon us as a people; and it is our right and our duty to seek for redress, in that way which will be most likely to secure the desired end.



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In your wisdom, you will, I doubt not, take into consideration these and the many other grievances which we suffer, and form such organizations, and recommend such measures, as shall, in your wisdom, seem most likely to secure our enfranchisement—the benefits of education to our children, and all our rights in common with other citizens of this republic.

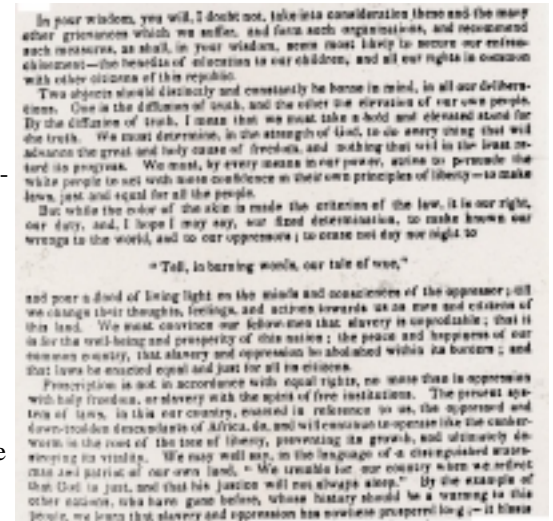
Two objects should distinctly and constantly be borne in mind, in all our deliberations. One is the diffusion of truth, and the other the elevation of our own people. By the diffusion of truth, I mean that we must take a bold and elevated stand for the truth. We must determine, in the strength of God, to do every thing that will advance the great and holy cause of freedom, and nothing that will in the least retard its progress. We must, by every means in our power, strive to persuade the white people to act with more confidence in their own principles of liberty—to make laws, just and equal for all the people.

But while the color of the skin is made the criterion of the law, it is our right, our duty, and, I hope I may say, our fixed determination, to make known our wrongs to the world, and to our oppressors; to cease not day nor night to

“Tell, in burning words, our tale of woe,”

and pour a flood of living light on the minds and consciences of the oppressor; till we change their thoughts, feelings, and actions towards us as men and citizens of this land. We must convince our fellow-men that slavery is unprofitable; that it is for the well-being and prosperity of this nation; the peace and happiness of our common country, that slavery and oppression be abolished within its borders; and that laws be enacted equal and just for all its citizens.

Proscription is not in accordance with equal rights, no more than is oppression with holy freedom, or slavery with the spirit of free institutions. The present system of laws, in this our country, enacted in reference to us, the oppressed and down-trodden descendants of Africa, do, and will continue to operate like the canker-worm in the root of the tree of liberty, preventing its growth, and ultimately destroying its vitality. We may well say, in the language of a distinguished statesman and patriot of our own land, “We tremble for our country when we reflect that God is just, and that his justice will not always sleep.” By the example of other nations, who have gone before, whose history should be a warning to this people, we learn that slavery and oppression has nowhere else prospered long;—it blasts



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a nation's glory and prosperity—divides her power—weakens her strength, and grows like a corroding consumption in her very vitals. "God's judgements will not sleep forever, but he will visit the nations of the earth in justice." We love our common country—

"With all her faults, we love her still."

This is the land where we all drew our first breath; where we have grown up to strength and manhood; "here is deposited the ashes of our fathers;" here we have contracted the most sacred engagements, the dearest relations of life; here we have found the companions of our childhood, the friends of our youth, the gentle partners of our lives; here are the haunts of our infancy, the scenes of every endearing hour;—in a word, this is our own native land[.] I repeat it, then, we love our country, we love our fellow-citizens,—*but we love liberty more*[.]

We, as a people, are called upon to raise our voice in our own behalf, and plead our own rights, because so few are found to plead for us. The oppressed of every other land, no matter how distant their location, no matter what their complexion, when the fact is known that any people are oppressed, and are seeking their freedom, the friends of liberty are ready to espouse their cause, with all the talent and eloquence which this great nation possesses. Men of every rank can plead the cause of freedom. Even the slaveholders, who hold their iron grasp, like the grasp of death, on the necks of fellow-men; yes, who rule this nation too, with more than a tyrant's sway, can talk very earnestly in freedom's cause, and plead with their potent eloquence for the rights of men. What was it, a few years since, that caused so much excitement in this nation, and among the friends of liberty throughout the world, in behalf of the patriotic Greeks! Was it not the fact, that they were oppressed and were seeking their freedom! Money, as well as arms and ammunition, were sent out from our own land. And not only these, many of freedom's noblest sons eagerly volunteered their own services, risking their lives and fortunes to the dangerous chances of war with the infidel, tyrant Turks, to secure the liberty and independence of the unconquerable Greeks.

D. voted Poland also, in her severe but vain struggle to throw off the Russian yoke, shared in the warmest sympathies and ardent prayers of freedom's votaries. They were expressed in our halls of legislation and literature, and in the temples of God, with all the force and charms with which high-wrought eloquence and soul-

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stirring poetry could invest them.

These things ought to encourage us[.] When we show to this nation and the world that we are properly awake to our own interests, and by wise, persevering, and determined measures, are seeking our rights, we too shall have the sympathy and assistance of the lovers of freedom, wherever freedom's friends are found.

How is it in regard to Irish liberty? Behold how the leaders of each political party seem to vie with each other, which shall be foremost in the cause of Irish repeal, and who can plead most for the liberty of that unhappy people.

These things should encourage us to seek our own liberty and the liberty of our brethren in bonds, by every means in our power; to make known the multitude and insufferable wrongs, imposed on us by arbitrary and oppressive laws, bearing us down to earth, here in our own native land; enacted, too, by the very people who bid eternal defiance to tyranny, and declare, in the most broad and unrestricted terms, for universal freedom and equal rights, and claim to themselves alone the honor of waving, untarnished, the banner of liberty among the nations of the earth.

It is time that we were more awake to our own interests, more united in our efforts, and more efficient in our measures. We must profit by the example of our oppressors. We must act on their principles in resisting tyranny. We must adopt their resolutions in favor of liberty. "They have taught us a lesson, in their struggle for independence, that should never be forgotten. They have taught the world emphatically, that a people, united in the cause of liberty, are invincible to those who would enslave them; and that heaven will ever frown on the cause of injustice, and ultimately grant success to those who oppose it." Shall we, then, longer submit in silence to our accumulated wrongs? Forbid it, heaven! that we should longer stand in silence, "hugging the delusive phantom of hope," when every gale that sweeps from the South, bears on its wings, to our ears, the dismal sound of slavery's clanking chains, now rivetted on three millions of our brethren, and we ourselves are aliens and outcasts in our native land.

Is the question asked, what shall we do? Shall we petition for our rights? I do not pretend to dictate the course that should be pursued; but I have very little hope in petitioning longer. We have petitioned again and again, and what has been the result? Our humblest prayers have not been permitted a hearing. We could not even state our grievances. Our petitions were disregarded; our supplications slighted, and we spurned from the mercy-seat, insulted, abused, and slandered;

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and this day finds us in the same unhappy and hopeless condition in which we have been for our whole lives—no other hope is left us, but in our own exertions, and an “appeal to the God of armies!” From what other source can we expect that help will come? Shall we appeal to the Christian community—to the church of our own land? What is her position? Behold her gigantic form, with hands upraised to heaven! See her increased and made rich by the toil, and sweat, and blood of slaves! View her arrayed in her pontifical robes, screening the horrid monster. slavery, with her very bosom—within her most sacred enclosures; that the world may not gaze on its distorted visage, or view its hellish form! Yes, throwing around this accursed system, the very drapery of heaven, to cover this damning sin and give it character and respectability in the eyes of the country, and in the eyes of the world. We cannot, therefore, look to her for help, for she has taken sides against us, and on the side of slavery. Shall we turn to either of the great political parties of the day? What are our prospects there? Is there any hope of help? No, they are but the slaves of slavery, too, contending which shall be most faithful in supporting the foul system of slavery, that they may secure the vote of the slaveholder himself, and of his scores of human cattle. Shall we then look to the abolitionists, and wait for them to give us our rights? I would not say a word that would have a tendency to discourage them in their noble efforts in behalf of the poor slave, or their exertions to advance the cause of truth and humanity. Some of them have made great sacrifices, and have labored with a zeal and fidelity that justly entitle them to our confidence and gratitude. But if we sit down in idleness and sloth, waiting for them, or any other class of men to do our own work, I fear it will never be done. If we are not willing to rise up and assert our rightful claims, and plead our own cause, we have no reason to look for success. We, ourselves, must be willing to contend for the rich boon of freedom and equal rights, or we shall never enjoy that boon. It is found only of them that seek.

In regard to the elevation of our own people[.] On this subject I cannot now enlarge, nor need I, for we all know, and see, and feel its need. We know that any people wanting in intelligence and moral worth, cannot long be free. In the language of one of our most distinguished orators, “For ourselves and in ourselves there is a mighty work to be accomplished,—an influence to be exerted, which can come from no other source. We must learn to act in harmony with the principles of God’s moral government, or permanent prosperity can never be ours.”

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