

SPEECH OF WM. C. NELL

Mr. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: The struggle for Equal School Rights, which for so long a series of years has taxed our hearts, our heads and our hands, having, through the aid of many friends, at length been triumphantly successful, it was but natural that the gratitude of parents and children should desire to make some record of the emotions awakened by such a signal and public good. With partial kindness, you have been pleased to make me the recipient of these honours, in recognition of the humble services it was my privilege to render the cause we have all loved so well.

Any attempt to express the feelings which swell my heart at this, the proudest moment of my life, it is no affectation to say, would be wholly unavailing. Your own hearts can best interpret mine. To be surrounded by such a constellation of friends from various walks of life, comprising those who have known me from early boyhood, and those of but recent acquaintance—realizing the fact that this is their united testimonial, approving my course in so glorious a reform—to be elaborate on such a theme calls for abilities far transcending any that I possess. I should be doing injustice, however, to my own sense of right were I to allow the occasion to pass without referring to others whose words and deeds, on promotion of the movement, should engrave their names indelibly upon the tablets of our memory.

To secure accuracy of names and dates, I have committed them to paper; but, anticipating the mental feast in reserve for us from the distinguished friends who have graced our meeting with their presence, I will be as brief as the circumstances will admit.

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In the year 1829, while a pupil in the basement story of the Belknap street Church, Hon. Harrison Gray Otis,

then Mayor of the city, accompanied Hon. Samuel T. Armstrong to an examination of the coloured school. It chanced that Charles A. Battiste, Nancy Woodson and myself were pronounced entitled to the highest reward of merit. In lieu of Franklin Medals, legitimately our due, Mr. Armstrong gave each an order on Dea. James Loring's Bookstore for the Life of Benjamin Franklin. This is the copy I received! The white medal scholars were invited guests to the Faneuil Hall dinner. Having a boy's curiosity to be spectator at the "feast of reason and the [...] of soul." I made good my court with one of the waiters, who allowed me to seem to serve others as the fee for serving myself, the physical being then with me subordinate. Mr. Armstrong improved a prudent moment in whispering to me, "*You ought to be here with the other boys.*" Of course, the same idea had more than once been mine, but his remark, while witnessing the honours awarded to the white scholars, only augmented my sensitiveness all the more, by the intuitive inquiry which I eagerly desired to express—"If you think so, why have you not taken steps to bring it about?"

The impression made on my mind, by this day's experience, deepened into a solemn vow that, God helping me, I would do my best to hasten the day when the colour of the skin would be no barrier to equal school rights. I need not tell you that it was several years before any movement could be made promising a favourable result. In the year 1840, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Francis Jackson, Henry W. Williams, and myself, signed a petition, asking the City Government to grant equal school rights. Of course, but little, if any, progress was made at the time. In the year 1846, another petition was forwarded from George Putnam and eighty-five

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others. In 1849, Jonus W. Clarke and 227 others renewed the appeal, which was urged through several years' attendance with agitations and individual skirmishes not always confined to our white citizens, until, in May, 1854, George F. Williams, Esq., submitted an able report to the City Government, recommending equal rights and equal privileges to coloured children. His efforts, responded to by a few members of each branch, paved the way for that action in the succeeding Legislature which accomplished the long sought-for object. As a means to this end, petitions were circulated, and, though but to a limited extent, it resulted in 1,469 names being forwarded. Of this number, I had the honour of obtaining 311 in Boston, which was augmented by 87 through the exertions of our zealous friend Lewis Hayden. It will not be individious to mention two places in the Commonwealth whose earlier and successful struggles in the same reform prompted their ready and cheerful cooperation with us. Wesley Berry headed the one from Nantucket, and the name of Hon. Stephen C. Phillips, with the leading clergymen and officials, graced the other from Salem with 114 names—a success achieved by the joint labours of the wife of Charles Lenox Remond and Mrs. George Putnam, formerly of this city. John B. Bailey and Peter Randolph in Charlestown were faithful auxiliaries, and the exertions of white anti-slavery friends in East Bridge-water, Lexington, Bolton and Leominster were no less praiseworthy, some towns, including Lynn and Haverhill, sending 300 names and upwards.

These petitions were promptly responded to by the Legislature. In the House, the bill was ordered to a third reading with an affirmative shout, not more than half a dozen voting audibly in opposition. The Senate

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as readily cooperated, and the Governor placed his sign manual to the bill, April 28.

To the honour of that Legislature be it recorded, that equal school rights found there a host of strong and vigilant supporters; among them, Mr. Kimball, of Salem, and that trio, including the member from Essex, so like a *Prince* in defending Humanity's claim, that eloquent and *Swift* witness against those who would despoil us of our rights, and that other last mentioned now, but more prominent *then* than all, who was never *Slack* in fulfilling his promises, and whose efforts continued until they were crowned with brilliant success.

The City Government, inspired by the State's laudable example, with commendable haste reversed the action of their predecessors, and acceded to the proposition suggested by one influential member, who remarked that "the coloured people had in effect abolished the school themselves, and it would be absurd in refusing to pass the order"; and the vote was sustained by 38 Yeas to 6 Nays; thus confirming that saying of a wise man, "There are no limits to the power of an intelligent and determined people." Fortunately, the *Bishop* who superintended at the city educational altar proffered his willing heart and hand to secure to our children what the letter and spirit of the law guaranteed.

D'Aubigné, in his History of the Reformation, says, "Opinions make their progress like the waters that trickle behind our rocks, and loosen them from the mountains in which they rest; suddenly the operation is revealed, and a single day suffices to lay bare the work of years, if not of centuries." How beautifully this truth has been illustrated in the reform we this evening meet to celebrate! an accumulation of words and deeds dotting its whole

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history to its culmination.

The two extremes of opinion on the Anti-Slavery question have met in this discussion. Some have expressed opinions legal, and otherwise favourable to the right, who else had no affinity with the anti slavery cause. We have profited by both.

Hon Richard Fletcher, Hon. Charles H. Warren, John A. Bolles, Esq., Hon. Stephen C. Phillips, Edmund Quincy, T. W. Higginson, Rev. Daniel Foster, Rev. E. A. Stockman, Hon H. Wilson, Hon. C. T. Russell, acted in unison in promoting this desirable object.

Hon. G. S. Hilliard and Rev. John T. Sargent, on one occasion, were the only two in the School Board to vote in our favour; and Mr. Hilliard, on several occasions since, when his legal duties required otherwise; has volunteered his acquiescence in our appeal.

Benjamin F. Roberts, who, in 1849, instituted a suit against the city for excluding his child from the public schools, so nobly defended by Hon. Charles Sumner, whose argument, though not then influencing the Supreme Bench, had a most potent bearing on the members of the Legislature which granted our rights. Associated with him in this case was Robert Morris, Esq., whose very presence as a coloured member of the Massachusetts Bar was a living protest against all exclusive coloured institutions.

The brothers Francis and Edmund Jackson, and those other brothers, Henry I. and William I. Bowditch, each pair like Dickens's brother Cheeryble, were specially active, rivalling each other in these kind offices.

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Wendell Phillips, Esq., who, from the moment of signing the first petition with Wm. Lloyd Garrison, like him has always been ready, in and out of season, with his rich gifts of voice and pen, before legislative and other committees, to advocate our claims; Rev. Theodore Parker, who, side by side with Wendell Phillips in those memorable struggles to rescue Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns from the hell of American slavery, so, side by side were their names appended to the Boston petition for equal school rights, and, but for an imperative engagement, they would have been side by side here this evening to receive our unfeigned thanks for their abundant labours in this cause.

William J. Watkins also buckled on his armour, and did most efficient service; and you, Sir, our worthy Chairman, your white plume, like that of Henry IV. at the battle of Navarre, was always seen at that point where the blows fell thick and fast in our defence. I am aware how notorious it is that the good man shrinks from the open proclamation to his face of his really good qualities. But while the friends assembled will not doubt my veracity in these statements, they and those who have helped rear for us and our children the Temple of Equality, will indulge me on this special occasion, in view of the past, present and future history of school rights. Let us not forget to duly honour those who, by their exertions, have secured to us these blessings.

While I would not in the smallest degree detract from the credit justly due the *men* for their conspicuous exertions in this reform, truth enjoins upon me the pleasing duty of acknowledging that to the *women*, and the *children* also, is the cause especially indebted for success.

In the dark hours of our struggle, when betrayed by traitors within and beset by foes without, while some men

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would become lukewarm and indifferent, despairing of victory, then did the women keep the flame alive; and as their hopes would weave bright visions for the future, their husbands and brothers would rally for a new attack upon the fortress of colourphobia. Yes, Sir, it was the *mothers* (God bless them!) of these little bright-eyed boys and girls, who, through every step of our progress, were executive and vigilant, even to that memorable Monday morning (September 3, 1855), the trial hour, when the coloured children of Boston went up to occupy the long-promised land. It was these mothers who accompanied me to the various school-houses, to residences of teachers and committee-men, to see the laws of the Old Bay State applied in good faith.

An omnipresent consciousness of my own experience when a school-boy, and how my heart would have leaped in the enjoyment then of equal school rights, has proved a strong incentive to my interest for your boys and girls; for, having none of my own, I took the liberty of adopting them all as my children—and the smiles of approbation with which so many of them have greeted me, in their homes and the highways and by-ways of life, have imparted to me a wealth of inspiration and encouragement not obtainable from any other source. He that makes glad the heart of a child, receives in return whole volumes of benedictions, and is richer far than if upon his brow were entwined a monarch's diadem.

These mothers have also laboured at home to instill into them minds of their children the necessity of striving to obtain, as also to appreciate, these rights—emulating that New England mother, who was said to mingle instruction in her children's bread and milk, and put good morals into their apple pies! With commendable zeal, the boys

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and girls have endeavored to profit by these counsels.

On the morning preceding their advent to the public schools, I saw from my window a boy passing the exclusive Smith School (where he had been a pupil), and, raising his hands, he exultingly exclaimed to his companions, "*Goodbye forever, coloured school! To-morrow we are like other Boston boys!*"

In my daily walks, I behold the companionship, in studies and healthful glee, of boys and girls of all colours and races in these temples of learning, so justly a theme of pride to every citizen; sights and sounds indeed to me chief among ten thousand, and altogether lovely; and since the 3d of September to the present time, the sun, moon and stars are regular in their courses! No orb has proved so eccentric as to shoot madly from its sphere in consequence, and the State House on Beacon Hill, and old Faneuil Hall, remain as firm upon their bases as ever.

This union of mothers and children with husbands and fathers has contributed vastly to the great result. They have been the allied forces, which conquered our Sebastopol.

To the coloured boys and girls of Boston it may now in truth be said, the lines have fallen to you in pleasant places; behold, you have a goodly heritage—may it stimulate you to greet the voice of Wisdom, as she sweetly offers the choicest treasures of her gathered stores—

"With eager hand the glowing page to turn,
To scan the earth and cleave the distant sky,
And find the force that holds the planets in their spheres."

Do not waste your spring of youth in idle dalliance, but plant rich seeds to blossom in your manhood, and bear fruit when you are old. The public schools of Boston are the gateways to the pursuits of honour and usefulness;

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and if rightly improved by you, the imagination almost wearies as future prospects dawn upon its vision; for,

“Hills over hills, and Alps on Alps arise.”

In response to your floral tribute, so pleasing and acceptable, allow me to say, that I needed it not as an evidence of your satisfaction with the rights obtained, or my participancy therein, for the pleasure of service has abundantly rewarded me. Endeavour to retain the impressions made upon your memories by this meeting, for, after all, you children are the parties benefitted. Your parents have laboured to achieve this good for you, and to them you must ever render due honour. The three children of an Eastern lady were invited to furnish her with an expression of their love before she went on a long journey. One brought a marble tablet, with the inscription of her name; another presented her with a garland of flowers; the third entered her presence, and thus accosted her: “Mother, *I have neither marble tablet nor fragrant nosegay, but I have a heart; here your name is engraved; here your name is precious; and this heart, full of affection, will follow you wherever you travel, and remain with you wherever you repose.*” I know of no more appropriate advice to boys and girls than to commend their imitation of that child’s example; and when a few short years have rolled away, and all proscription shall have done its work in the land, may

“You love at times to pause, and strew the way
With the wild flowers that luxuriant pend
From Spring’s gay branches, that whene’er you send
Your memory to retrace your pilgrimage,
She by those flowers her winding course may bend,
Back through each twilight and each weary stage,
And with those early flowers wreath the white brow of age.”

I could cull from my chapter of experience and observation many an unkind and insulting remark uttered against the rights of coloured children in Boston, by

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school-committee men, editors, and others occupying responsible positions; but, as they can be reserved for future use, to "point a moral," if *not* to "adorn a tale," let us, in this hour of victory, be magnanimous enough to cover with the charity of our silence the names of *all* who have opposed us.

MADAM: In accepting this elegant token from your hands, I am not vain enough to monopolize the honour and gratitude so eminently due to those I have mentioned, and others who have promoted this great work. Let it be regarded as a joint offering to them all, to be held in trust by me only so long as I am faithful to the elevation of those with whom I am identified by complexion and condition—the cause of humanity.

May we all *Watch* each other, that our *hands* may be diligent—our *hours* consecrated, each *minute*, indeed every *second*, in that movement upon our *dial-plate* indicating a *chain* of Human Brotherhood. The associations of this evening will be my *main-spring* henceforward—its recollections more fragrant than *choice flowers*—ever enduring as *time*. Friends, go on!

"Oft as the memory of this hour returns,
May friendship's flame within your bosoms burn,
And, hand in hand, improvement's course pursue,
Till scenes of earth have faded from your view;
Then your glad spirits, freed from bonds of clay,
Shall soar triumphant to the home of day—
Where softer dews than Hermon's give perfume
To flowers sweeter than in Sharon bloom,
Entrancing music breathe in airs divine,
And toil no more the spirit's flight confine;
But ever onwards through its bright abode,
Bask in the presence of its Maker, God."

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