

AN
ORATION
ON THE
ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE
DELIVERED
ON THE
First Day of January, 1813,
IN THE
AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

By GEORGE LAWRENCE

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Introduction

Little is known about George Lawrence, who delivered this New Year's Day oration. Lawrence was not among the early leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City, which was chartered in 1801 by black members of the John Street Methodist Church. There are no further known publications by George Lawrence. Abraham Thompson, who offered a prayer at the beginning of this service, was one of the founders of the church and, together with James Varick and Leven Smith, one of the first three ordained ministers of this new congregation. For further on the early development of the AME Church in New York City, see Carol R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 141-146.

This oration is an example of the New Year's antislavery sermon tradition within the early African Methodist Episcopal Church. For further on this rhetorical tradition and similar holiday sermons, see William B. Gravely, "The Dialectic of Double-Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808-1863," *Journal of Negro History* 67 (Winter 1982) 4:302-317, and Leonard I. Sweet, "The Fourth of July and Black Americans in the Nineteenth Century: Northern Leadership Opinion Within the Context of the Black Experience," *Journal of Negro History* 61 (July 1976) 3:256-275.

Lawrence gave his oration on the fifth anniversary of the abolition by the United States of slave importation. However, as he notes, this was only a "partial restoration" of rights and a pre-condition to the "full fruits of emancipation." (6) Lawrence sets contemporary conditions for blacks against the invocation of a utopian lost African civilization. He reviews the bitter conditions of African enslavement and transport to the Americas, even while acknowledging that his audience may find confronting this history "excruciatingly painful." (9) However, knowledge of this shared history, he argues, will enable the black and white communities to find union and "social love." (10) Like many black social commentators of the period, Lawrence emphasizes black intellectual attainments despite oppressed circumstances, writing "the noble mind of a Newton could find room, and to spare, within the tenement of many an injured African." (13) Lawrence concludes with a positive and optimistic vision of expanding liberties and social justice.

— Joe Lockard

This is an annotated edition of the original text of George Lawrence's *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, delivered on January 1, 1813 at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City. Original spelling, punctuation and page citations have been retained; minor typographic errors have been corrected.

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ORDER OF THE DAY

1. The service began with a piece of appropriate Sacred Music, sung under the direction of Mr. William Hamilton.
2. A Solemn Address to Almighty God, by the Rev. Abraham Thompson.
3. A Hymn.
4. An Introductory Address, delivered by Mr. Peter Malachi Eagans, who also read the Law Abolishing the Slave Trade.
5. The Oration, by Mr. George Lawrence.
6. A Hymn.
7. A Solemn Address to Almighty God, by the Rev. William Miller.

COMMITTEE OF ARRANGEMENTS

Samuel Reed, Chairman
Peter Williams, jun. Sec.
John Marander,
William Miller,
Thomas A Francis,
Francis Williams,

Daniel Auldridge,
John Goff,
William Hamilton,
Robert Williams,
Nicolas Bartow,
George Collins.

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AN ADDRESS

By PETER MALACHI EAGANS.

January 1st, 1813.

Citizens,

I rise to address the venerable appearance of this crowded audience, the dignity which I behold in the countenances of so many in this general assembly, the solemnity of the occasion upon which we have met together, joined to a consideration of the part I am to take in the important business of this day, fills me with an awe hitherto unknown, and heightens the sense which I have ever had of my unworthiness to filled this sacred stage.

But allured by the call of some of our respected committee with whose request it is always my greatest pleasure to comply. I almost forgot my want of ability to perform what they required; in this situation I find my only support in assuring myself that a generous people will not severely censure what they know was well intended, though its want of merit should prevent them from applauding it.

And I pray that my sincere attachment to the interest of Africa and the descendants of Africans, and my hearty detestation of every design formed against her liberty and justice, may be admitted as some apology for my appearance in this place.

I have always from my earliest youth rejoiced in the felicity of my fellow men, and have ever

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considered it as the indispensable duty of every member of society to promote as far as in him lies the prosperity of every individual, but more especially of the community to which he belongs: and also as a faithful subject to the abolition of the slave trade, to use our utmost endeavours to detect, and having detected, strenuously to oppose every traitorous plot which its enemies may devise for its destruction.

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**AN ORATION
&c.**

Respected Audience,

WE have again assembled with warm and grateful hearts, to celebrate our annual anniversary. It presents a period rendered venerable by the wise and humane fathers of our liberties, who laid the foundation of the happiness we now enjoy, and plucked from the very jaws of destruction, our devoted mother country. Gratitude then towards that veteran band of patriots, whose patriotism was crowned with justice, and shod with humanity, calls aloud. And shall we be backward in showing it? No, God forbid! The name of a Sharp, a Pitt, and a Fox, as the strong tower of our defence, cemented and made still stronger by the aid of many others, shall ever dwell with delight on our memories, and be treasured up in our hearts as the choicest gifts of heaven; for heaven gave them and heaven again shall receive them.

In our behalf they struggled long against a host of powerful and malignant enemies, who being supplied with the wisdom of Satan, and bound by the impulse of avarice, made an almost impenetrable defence: but that great and alwise being who holds the reigns of justice and destiny of nations, using them as arrows of his divine will, they passed the brazen walls of their opponents, and brought to light the august era of this thrice blessed and ever memorable day. Animated by the reverse of our hard fortunes, my brethren, and beholding the many blessings incident to our present situations: anticipating

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the advantages necessarily arising from the good work already begun, as we verge towards the summit of our happiness, it becomes us to make public our joy, for which purpose we are convened. We now celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and a partial restoration of one of those rights most congenial to the human heart, it becomes the grand epoch of our boast; a day joyful to every bosom through whose veins our noble blood does flow, we hail it as the birth day of justice and triumph over atrocious vice; we rejoice for a nation rising from the dark and dreary gulph of desponding servitude and shining forth conspicuously as she ascends the lofty mount of arts and sciences, giving presages of future greatness; and should we not rejoice when we consider that we make a part of this nation, although we were never exposed to all the piercing blasts of adversity that they were, yet does the refulgent beams of prosperity, delate our hearts with joy. We rejoice for the abolition of the slave trade; and our joy overflows when we reflect that this heaven born plant shall bring forth the full fruits of emancipation, and divulge that bright genius so long smothered in slavery.

The subject of this day calls for our serious attention; at the recurrence of this season we rejoice, not because we have gained a victory over our enemies by the arts of war, or that we have become rich and opulent, no, but it is the epoch that has restored to us our long lost rights. It is a subject congenial with my heart, and I cannot but regret my inability to do it justice, although confident, that was my talents equal to the most eloquent and profound orator that ever graced the world, I could not fully

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expound it. The task is arduous—even experience might shrink before its magnitude. The field is very extensive, presenting to view various objects of infinite magnitude; such as past sufferings, present mitigation, and future happiness.

All buoyed up to sign on the sea of reflection, the first forms a melancholy spectacle; a scene fraught with misery and horror. We behold Asia, Europe and America, claiming an authority, as far distant from moral rectitude, or the laws of nature, as heaven is from hell. They usurp the throne of justice, and she takes her flight from off the face of the earth. They commence their traffic in the innocent sons and daughters of Africa. View them divide their spoils dragged from our mother country, a country once rich in the enjoyments of liberty and all the glory nature could afford. Nature there caused the wild desert to be more fruitful and fragrant than the best cultivated gardens, the inventions of men, ever could produce. Her inhabitants was happy seated in the very temples of bliss and with nature for their guide, their employments were innocent, neither did they seek evil, contented in the enjoyments of their native sports; they sued not for the blood of their fellow men; they arose in the morning with cheerfulness before their God, and bowed down their heads at night, fully sensible of his goodness. But ah, my friends! the scene changes. Alas! the rose was nipt in the bud, and too soon did the canker worm enter the trunk of its support. Africa! thou was once free, and enjoyed all the blessings a land and people could. Once help up as the ornament of the world, on they golden shores strayed Liberty, Peace and

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Equality; but the usurping power of accursed demagogues, brought desolation within thy borders, thy populous cities are laid waste, thy mourning millions loaded with chains, are driven from their native homes, and far and wide does the ravages of merciless power, extend like the besom of destruction, sweeping off thy inhabitants without regard to age or sex. Thus did the baneful deed of avaricious power pierce the hearts of our ancestors, separated and dashed asunder the most sacred ties of nature, and hurled them, my brethren, not only from their native country, but to enhance their misery, separated them from their dearest relatives; the aged parent from the tender child; the loving husband from the affectionate wife. We cast the eye of retrospection, and behold the field crimsoned with the blood of those slain; and the earth drinks deeply of the tears of those that yet live, but to meet a worse fate,* while the heavens reverbrate with their shrieks, and nature stands amazed! Yet the scene does not end here; misery is still pouring in like a deluge; we view them hurried on board some floating dungeons, whose rules, more like fiends, were never in the shape of men. Tis here our ancestors drank the wormwood and the gall!—Tis here they even died for lack of that care, which is due to the most inferior of the brute creation!—Tis here some noble spirits fired with indignation, and disdainng to submit to savage rules, sought an asylum in the bosom of the sea!—Tis here death that grim monster, so dreaded by the na-

* Slavery

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tions of the earth, at whose approach crowned monarchs quake and tremble; at whose sight the countenance once flushed with the crimson vigour of health, turns pale, the vivid eye that flashed with cheerfulness, sinks dimly back in its sockets, not willing to meet this ghastly visage. But view the contrast: Here injured innocence leaps to meet him, and receives him as a bosom friend. Yet death is their only alternative and rescue, from a set of beings, who through various customs, and the impulse of avarice, had trampled under foot, the most sacred rights of their nature. They who commenced and supported a trade begun in savage wars, prosecuted by unheard of barbarity, and ended in perpetual exile and slavery. But to harangue you on the sufferings of our ancestors I know is excruciatingly painful, yet bear with me a little, although it rends the tender heart, or forces the silent tear, it is expedient. In reflecting on their situation, our celebration demonstrates itself, to be fully sensible of ours; we need but view theirs. They were pressed down beneath the surface of nature; we soar aloft as the towering eagle to an eminence commanding a view of the world, and three fourths we behold drenched in human gore, and the loud clarion of war is forboding their total destruction; thus while the dark clouds of strife and contention are encompassing them in, we enjoy the perpetual sunshine of peace and happiness. Then let us be united, the glory of people is union; united in the bonds of social love, they become strong and vigorous, wise and discerning; they press undauntedly forward, and are sure of conquest; the sturdy oak fall before them; the stubborn rock yield to their force, and as

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the sun bursting forth from behind some dark cloud, they disperse the icy mountains of adversity and soar up to the meridian of prosperity. They are not tossed on the tempestuous sea of contention, but sail gently down the course of life, on the silver current of friendship. Union is the foundation of liberty, and its perfection is social love.

“This only can the bliss bestow,
Immortal souls should prove;
From one short word all pleasures flow,
That blessed word is LOVE.

Love shall never fail: the man of love shall be held in everlasting remembrance, his memory shall be blessed; no spices can so embalm a man, no monument can so preserve his name, as works of love. Love gives worth to all its apparent virtues, inso much that without it, no quality of the heart, no action of the life is valuable in itself, or pleasing to God. Without love, what is courage but the boldness of a lion, or the fierceness of a tyger? What is power but merciless oppression? What is justice but passion or policy? What is wisdom but craft and subtlety? Without love what is riches but a barren shore or congealed stream? And what is man, that noble structure, but the ravenous wolfe, or more subtile viper? What is devotion but mockery of God? What is any practice, how auspicious soever in itself, or beneficial to others, but the effect of pride? For says one of the ancient worthies, though I had faith that I could remove mountains, and had not love, I am nothing. Though I give all my goods to feed the poor, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love is the chrystal fountain from whence flows all human happi-

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ness; its golden mines shall never be exhausted, its silver brooks shall never run dry. Let this then be our rallying point, for this shall ward against animosities and contentions—this shall bring down the blessings of heaven upon our heads—this shall cause our society to flourish, and this shall break the chain that still holds thousands of our brethren in bondage.

My brethren, the land in which we live gives us the opportunity rapidly to advance the prosperity of liberty. This government founded upon the principles of liberty and equality, and declaring them to be the free gift of God, if not ignorant of their declaration, must enforce it; I am confident she wills it, and strong forbodings of it is discernable. The northern sections of the union is fast conceding, and the southern must comply, although so biased by interest, that they have become callous to the voice of reason and justice; yet as the continual droppings of water has a tendency to wear away the hardest and most flinty substance, so likewise shall we, abounding in good works, and causing our examples to shine forth as the sun at noon day, melt their callous hearts, and render sinewless the arm of sore oppression. My brethren, you who are enrolled and proudly march under the banners of the Mutual Relief, and Wilberforce Societies, consider your important standings as incorporated bodies, and walk worthy of the name you bear, cling closely to the paths of virtue and morality, cherish the plants of peace and temperance; by doing this you shall not only shine as the first stars in the firmament, and do honor to your worthy patrons, but

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immortalize your names. Be zealous and vigilant, be always on the alert to promote the welfare of your injured brethren; then shall providence shower down her blessings upon your heads, and crown your labors with success. It has been said by your enemies, that your minds were not calculated to receive a sufficient store of knowledge, to fit you for beneficial or social societies; but your incorporation drowned that assertion in contempt; and now let shame cover their heads, and blushes crimson their countenances. In vain they fostered a hope that our unfavorable circumstances would bear them out in their profane insinuations. But is that hope yet alive? No; or do we know where to find it? If it is to be found, it must be in the dark abysses of ignorance and folly, too little, too trifling for our notice.

There could be many reasons given, to prove that the mind of an African is not inferior to that of an European; yet to do so would be superfluous. It would be like adding hardness to the diamond, or lustre to the sun. There was a time whilst shrouded in ignorance, the African was estimated no higher than beasts of burthen, and while their minds were condensed within the narrow compass of slavery, and all their genius damped by the merciless power of cruel masters, they moved in no higher sphere. Their nature was cramped in infancy, and depraved in riper years, vice was showed them for virtue, and for their labor and industry, the scourge was their only reward. Then did they seem dead to a better state, but it was because they were subject to arbitrary power; and then did their proud oppressors assert, though against their better judgment, that they

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were destined by nature to no better inheritance. But their most prominent arguments are lighter than vanity, for vacuous must the reasons of that man have been, who dared to assert that genius is confined to complexion, or that nature knows difference in the immortal soul of man: No! the noble mind of a Newton could find room, and to spare, within the tenement of many an injured African.

My brethren, the time is fast approaching when the iron hand of oppression must cease to tyrannize over injured innocence, and very different are the days that we see, from those that our ancestors did; yet I know that there are thousands of our enemies who had rather see us exterminated from off the earth, than partake of the blessings that they enjoy; but their malice shall not be gratified; they will, though it blast their eyes, still see us in prosperity. Our day star is arisen, and shall perform its diurnal revolutions, until nature herself shall change; and my heart glows with the idea, and kindles with joy, as my eye catches its radiant beams dispersing the dark clouds of ignorance and superstition. The spring is come, and the autumn nigh at hand, when the rich fruits of liberty shall be strewn in the paths of every African, or descendant, and the olive hedge of peace encompass them in from their enemies.

Some of the most profound historians inform us, that if there is any truth fully ascertained by reason or revelation, it is this; that man is but to be happy. Then it is evident that the human being never was formed for slavery; for between no two things in existence does there exist so irreconcilable opposition, as between the human mind and slavery. Water and oil, fire

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and snow, may, by the powerful arts of chymistry, be taught to forget their friendly antipathies, and rush together into friendly embraces; but by no arts can human nature, even in the earliest stage of action, be taught to salute slavery as a friend—no! Take the child of three days old, confine him in some obscure cell; and at once you behold anxiety and misery fixed on his countenance, square his life there agreeable to your own rule, with all the tenderness that state will afford, but teach him not to crave liberty if you can. No, there is a something within him, tells him liberty is his own, and to have it is all his study; his noble mind without the help of arts and sciences, soars aloft and beholds throughout creation to liberty all lay claim, from the almost undiscernable plant to the stately oak their liberty, commands, the brute creation through their train enjoying all the liberty they are capable of and shall man who God created free and pronounced lord of his creation be enslaved by his fellow man, heaven forbid; man was made to be happy, therefore liberty is his undoubted right.

In all the ages of the world, whether we take the present or retrospective view, we behold mankind worshiping at the shrine of liberty, and willingly sacrificing their all in pursuit of that fair goddess. We behold the rational man walk undauntedly in the very jaws of death to retain his liberty; he surmounts all difficulties; wades through all danger; he industriously climbs the rough and craggy mount, and undauntedly leaps forth from its lofty and dangerous precipice if he but beholds the most distant gleams of liberty; so attractive, so congenial is liberty with the human heart: from the crowned mon-

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arch down to the lowest miscreant the world affords, all sue for this; yes, that particle of creation cannot be found that either by words or actions does not lay strong claim to this celestial good, and it is evident that all creation, both animal and vegetable, were destined for liberty, for neither can thrive or come to perfection without it, and he who called this world to light from the dark and loathsome abodes of chaos, caused liberty to be the golden pillars on which alone can happiness dwell secure.

Then Fathers, Brethren and Friends, although depressed under many grievances, yet the strong fibres of that pressure must give way, and the time is not far distant when our tree of liberty shall reach the sun, and its branches spread from pool to pool. Then let us stand firm in union, let us transmit to ages yet to come, deeds that shall bear record with time and not find their rival; let us cultivate the minds of youth; let your examples clothed with wisdom be strewn in their paths; by you let their tender minds be impressed with human principles; let your virtues shine conspicuously before them, as lamps that shall light them to a glorious victory over their enemies, and conduct them to the haven of immortal bliss; let malice and hatred be far from your doors; let your hearts be linked in the chain that bids defiance to the intrigues of your enemies; let not the cries of the widow and orphan pass you unnoticed: although this happy land abounds with humane institutions, yet has your individual aid, opportunities to alleviate the miseries of thousands; many are the miseries of our exiled race in this land, and dark are the clouds that shrouds them in woe. O! then, let us call forth our every power,

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arrayed in wisdom and ornamented with virtue, such as shall gain the applause of men and be sanctioned by God; these shall alleviate their present miseries and finally burst with the refulgent beams of liberty on their devoted heads.

And, O! thou father of the universe and disposer of events, thou that called from a dark and formless mass this fair system of nature, and created thy sons and daughters to bask in the golden streams and rivulets contained therein; this day we have convened under thy divine auspices, its not to celebrate a political festivity, or the achievement of arms by which the blood of thousands were spilt, contaminating thy pure fields with human gore! but to commemorate a period brought to light by wise counsel, who stayed the hand of merciless power, and with hearts expanded with gratitude for the providences, inundated in the sea of thy mercies we further crave thy fostering care. O! wilt thou crush that power that still holds thousands of our brethren in bondage, and let the sea of thy wisdom wash its very dust from off the face of the earth; let **LIBERTY** unfurl her banners, **FREEDOM** and **JUSTICE** reign triumphant in the world, universally.