

Inaugural address
of
Charles K. Williams
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Inaugural Address

Fellow – Citizens of the Senate and House of Representatives:

Elected by the voice of the people to the office of Chief Magistrate of this State, I enter upon the duties appertaining thereto, with a fearful mistrust of my competency to discharge them in an acceptable manner. But ever accustomed to respect that voice, regarding the confidence and approbation of the people as the highest honor to which any individual can attain and having in repeated instances experienced their partiality and friendship, I shall obey their high commands, and commence the duties attached to the responsible situation in which their suffrages have placed me, trusting that they will duly appreciate an honest and conscientious endeavor to perform them, and that they will with charity and candor veil any imperfections and unintentional errors and mistakes which I may commit.

When I call to mind the distinguished individuals who have heretofore been placed in this office; and more particularly when I reflect upon the dignified, able and honorable manner in which my immediate predecessor has discharged the duties thereof, I feel that I shall have to draw largely upon that charity and candor, and can only indulge the hope, but without any confident expectation, that I shall be able to leave the office with the same reputation which they have carried with them on their retirement.

The first obligation imposed on the Executive by the constitution, is to meet with the General Assembly at the time and place where they are required to meet by the constitution and laws. It is with pleasure that I perform this obligation, and meet you at this time and on this occasion. The assembling of the representatives of the people in their legislative capacity, to consult for the welfare and advance the happiness of those whom they represent, is interesting, as exhibiting the beauty and unostentatious character of our republican institutions, and important, as upon the wisdom and integrity of their measures that welfare in a great degree depends. Identical in interest and feeling with the great body of their constituents, it is not to be doubted they will bring with them the best intentions; that they will be actuated by a sincere desire to promote the interests of the whole as well as that of every individual, so far as the latter is consistent with the former; be governed by the highest principles of reason, virtue and morality; and, above all, that in consulting for the welfare of a Christian people, we shall all earnestly endeavor to conform to the rules of Christian morals, and look to Him for guidance, who holds the destiny of nations in His hands, and by whom “kings reign and princes decree justice.”

Having but little practical experience in the business of legislation, it cannot be expected that in my first annual message I should call your attention to many subjects which may be proper for your consideration. Fortunately, so little legislation is necessary for the interest of this State, and with that interest the reflecting men are so familiar, that I apprehend no inconvenience from my want of experience; and further, it is a highly consolatory reflection, that whatever difference of opinion there may be on other subjects, a great unanimity of sentiment exists in what relates to the prosperity of this State. It is not to be expected, however, that even on this there should be an entire coincidence of views; and on other important subjects, arising from our connection with other State's under one general government, we know there is a great diversity of sentiment. Freedom of investigation and discussion, which is necessary under our free institutions, to enable men to understand what is required of them, unavoidably leads to the formation of parties. It is not in human nature that the minds of all, although aiming to attain the same end, should arrive at the same result, or agree in the measures to be adopted for its attainment. The existence of parties, arising from a difference of views honestly entertained, is not without its benefits as well as its evils. If parties exercise a watchfulness over each other, and a scrutinizing jealousy of the measure proposed by each, it will lead to a careful and cautious investigation of those proposed, before they will be adopted. Thus far parties exercise a beneficial influence; but when there is an indiscriminate opposition by one to all those proposed by the other, and they are influenced by ambition, and seek only the attainment of individual emolument, they prevent or retard the adoption of such salutary measures as the general welfare may require, endanger the principles of civil liberty, and by their excess and violence approximate to the very verge of civil war. At such times the spirit of party may truly be considered as the

spirit of discord, faction and disunion. The lesson inculcated by this view of the nature and effect of parties cannot be misunderstood. It teaches us that we should investigate with calmness and candor, cultivate a spirit of conciliation and charity towards those who differ from us, yielding all due respect to the opinions of others, and the integrity of their motives, unless it is plain and palpable that they proceed from a perverse disposition. But this spirit of charity and conciliation does not require either of individuals or states to abandon their own interest, nor can they be justified in yielding any *moral* principle, or in giving countenance to any great political or moral evil, to appease those who oppose them. In political or Christian ethics there should be no compromise with vice, and no conciliation offered to fundamental error or gross iniquity.

The subject of education pointedly and forcibly presents itself to the consideration of every friend of liberty and humanity. At no previous period has it so much occupied the attention of all classes of community, both in this country and in Europe. The wise and intelligent see the importance of giving an early impulse to the mind in favor of science, virtue and religion. The wild and absurd theories of many of the radical reformers are frequently the result of reflections upon evils existing and apparent, and of mistaken and injudicious attempts to reform them. They see, what should be obvious to all, that there is a great neglect to provide for the mental as well as the physical wants of the great masses of men, and, as an unavoidable result, ignorance, vice, oppression and wretchedness are too prevalent. It is the plain duty of government to provide for the education of the whole body of the people, from whom their future legislators and magistrates are to be chosen, and so to provide for education in the primary schools that all may be fitted to perform the duties which may ordinarily be expected from them, and may lay the foundation of higher and more extensive attainments in literature and the principles of political science. This subject has been so repeatedly brought to the notice of the legislature that I cannot entertain a doubt but that they will give it due consideration; that our schools, academics and colleges will receive all the patronage and encouragement which can be extended to them by an enlightened legislature; and, above all, that they will guard against unsteadiness in their legislation upon this subject, persevere in the system which they have adopted, make such alterations only as experience demonstrates to be necessary to improve and perfect the system. If it does not at once produce all the benefits expected, make still further trials and improvements, and not abandon it, unless it shall be found incapable of further amendments and undeserving of further trial. The report of the able and efficient superintendent will probably suggest further and other views on this subject.

I trust that it will not be thought inappropriate for me to advert to the state of the militia. When I first came into public life, the danger to be apprehended from standing armies, the importance of placing our reliance upon a well-regulated militia composed of our fellow-citizens, and the necessity of such a militia to the security of a free state, were political axioms recognized by all, and were embodied in the organic laws both of this State and of the United States. On this account I may attach more consequence to this subject than is congenial to the times in which we live. The interest of the militia, after receiving a great share of the attention of former legislatures, was suddenly abandoned. It is worthy of consideration whether, as the militia laws are now left, we have not disregarded the laws of the United States in suffering the organization and discipline required by those laws to be entirely neglected. From the return of the Adjutant-General made last year, it appears that in the boundaries of many regiments we soon shall have, and in some already have, a full complement of field and regimental staff officers, but no companies or company officers. Although it may not be considered expedient to revive the frequent training of the militia, or the parades, which were considered by some as ostentatious and expensive; yet an organization conformable to the laws of the United States, into companies, regiments, brigades and divisions, and a requirement that arms should be provided, and for the annual inspection of those arms, appears to me to be required by the laws of the United States. A reliance upon the uniform militia alone, and not on the whole body of citizens enrolled according to law, does not seem to answer the requirement.

The necessity of a strict and rigid economy, in the disbursements of the finances of the State, is too obvious to require a particular notice. Our resources are mostly derived by a direct tax on the people; we are only stewards of the public funds, and are not at liberty to use them for the gratification of our friends, or to promote any selfish views. An extravagant and wasteful expenditure of the public money is an evil to which all governments, of whatever form, are exposed. These remarks I am sensible are somewhat trite, and have so often been made and disregarded, that any one who repeats them hazards his reputation for political sagacity,

and exposes himself to insinuations unfavorable to his sincerity and patriotism. When I reflect upon the great increase of the expenditures of this State since I first commenced public life, altogether disproportionate to the increased population and business; and when I compare them with the expenses of other States in the Union, and find how small a part of our expenditures are paid in salaries, to those who are called into public service and are entitled by the principles of the constitution to a reasonable compensation; and inasmuch as the attention of the Legislature was called but a few years since to this subject by one of my predecessors; and more especially by the Council of Censors, whose duty it is “to inquire in what manner the public money has been disposed of,” I thought it not improper or unsuitable to bring it to your notice in the annual message, and shall dismiss it with this remark, that no reform should be attempted unless called for by the public good, nor until the whole subject is fully and thoroughly considered, lest by partial attempts, not duly reflected upon, the evil should be aggravated and not remedied.

The taxing wild and uncultivated land, as well as the practice which has prevailed in the legislature, in the repeal, alteration or modification of acts, or parts of acts, by a mere reference to the number of the chapter and section, without any mention of the subject or nature of the provision repealed, altered or modified, were under the consideration of the Council of Censors, and particularly noticed in their address to the people. For this reason, I deem it proper to call the attention of the Legislature to the subject, and would refer them to the address of the Council of Censors for the views entertained by them.

The General Government not having thought proper to perform their fiscal operations through the medium of a bank created under their authority, after such an institution had been in operation for a long time, and had received the countenance and sanction of every branch of the government, and having resorted to a system for collecting the revenue and the safe keeping of the same, the utility of which remains yet to be tested, but which does not afford any circulating medium, the business of providing a currency, and aiding the agricultural, manufacturing and commercial interests of the people by the establishment of banks, devolved upon the States. This State has found it to be convenient and useful, and I may add necessary, to establish such institutions, under suitable regulations, in such numbers and at such places as the convenience and interest of the community might require. These banks have performed their duty with fidelity, and have greatly aided private enterprise, and in works of public improvement. They will undoubtedly receive, as they justly deserve, the countenance of the legislature, and not be embarrassed with hostile legislation.

It may be said of our railroads, constructed by private enterprise and the capital of individuals, that the public are experiencing largely the benefits afforded to all the important interests of the State by that capital, and the unparalleled energy and industry which have been displayed in their construction. It is to be hoped that those who have hazarded their wealth, and given their whole time and energies to these great undertakings, will find their reward in the profits of their capital and labor, to which they are justly entitled, and will receive amply the countenance and patronage of an intelligent legislature and high-minded people.

Since the last meeting of the General Assembly, several important amendments to the Constitution, recommended by the Council of Censors, have been adopted by a convention of the people, and become a part of the organic law of the State. Some additional legislation may be found necessary to extend the provisions of the law in relation to elections, so as to embrace the election of the several officers which are hereafter to be made in pursuance of the Constitution as amended. Some further provision is also required in relation to the security to be given by sheriffs and high bailiffs. The legislature are also required to “provide by a general law declaring what officer shall act as Governor when there shall be a vacancy, in both the offices of governor and Lieutenant Governor,” occasioned in any of the ways mentioned in the amended constitution.

It will probably shorten your session, and relieve you from an exciting duty, that the appointment of several officers which has heretofore been made by the legislature is now made by the people, as it was done under the provisions of the first Constitution of this State.

The term of office of one of our Senators in Congress will expire on the third of March next: it is incumbent on the legislature to elect a Senator to represent this State of six years from and after that time.

I am informed by my predecessor, and communicate the information to the legislature, that under the act of 1849, entitled an act relating to international, literary and scientific exchanges, he has appointed Mons. A.

Vattemare and George F. Houghton, agents; and that under the act making an appropriation for the Washington Monument, he constituted Henry Stanley of Poultney, agent.

In our connection with other States under one general government, we have a variety of interests to be promoted, which, although they cannot be the subject of immediate legislation by us may be affected in a greater or less degree by our action. Our agricultural and manufacturing interests should be patronized and protected. The business of the latter is subject to more vicissitudes than the former, and is the first to feel the effects of uncertain and injudicious legislation. As capital, as well as labor, are required for the successful operation of manufactures, they should receive an adequate protection against foreign capital and labor. It is to be hoped that this protection will be again afforded. Although a political necessity may have justified the act of Congress of 1833, which, apparently, recognized a system of ad valorem duties, to be thereafter adhered to, yet, after the experience we have had under the present tariff of 1846, the necessity of again resorting to a system of specific and protecting duties is apparent, which both wisdom and experience demonstrate to be the only safeguard against fraudulent importations. The increase of the agricultural interest in wealth, and the improvement in their farms and flocks, may be attributed to the protection which was heretofore afforded them. With us, at least, there should be no diversity of thought or action on the subject of a protective tariff.

The establishment of an Agricultural Bureau, to be connected with the Department of the Interior, recommended by the General Assembly at our last session, as well as a revision of the existing tariff, so as to give due encouragement to manufactures and a new and increased stimulus to agriculture by a system of specific duties, was strongly urged upon the consideration of Congress by the President of the United States, in his annual message in December last. The lucid reports of the Secretaries of the Interior and the Treasury, accompanying the message of the President, pointed out more in detail the measures to be adopted and the benefit to be derived, and placed beyond cavil or dispute the wisdom and propriety of the recommendation of the President. The just expectations of the country on this subject have not been realized. Owing to a want of coincidence of sentiment between the executive and legislative branches of government, in their views of general policy of the former, a long and profitless session of Congress has been spent in the attempt to compromise that which is not the subject of compromise, and to conciliate where conciliation was not due. The great and substantial interests of agriculture, commerce and manufactures, have been neglected and unprovided for, and the recommendation of the President received but little, if any, attention from Congress or the committees to whom the subject was referred. We cannot but hope that at another session of Congress such a tariff will be adopted as will answer the reasonable expectation of the manufacturer and producer. Those who feel the necessity of such a protection, having seen no good effects from the compromise heretofore made with those who threatened an armed resistance, should hesitate before they again yield to threats of a similar character, as they might thereby disaffect those who feel a deep interest with them, and can have but little expectation of gaining to their interest those who have ever been hostile.

There is another subject, affecting us sensibly in our connection with the other States, in a great degree influencing the action of the general government, which I should gladly have omitted at this time, as I believe a large proportion of our fellow-citizens coincide in opinion in relation to involuntary servitude. But the attitude assumed by some of the States, and the conventions of the people under their authority, threatening a dissolution of the Union unless their views are acceded to by congress; as the proceedings of this State have been treated with disrespect and reproach, in places where respect to the proceedings of every sovereign State should be studiously observed; and as there has been some disposition to find an apology for their violent proceedings, in consequence of the action which those who are opposed to involuntary servitude have thought it their duty to take, it becomes us to review the ground we have assumed, and the resolutions we have passed, abandon them if we are wrong, but if we are right, decidedly and resolutely maintain that ground. On a careful review of the proceedings of the legislature heretofore, I can see no principle advanced which ought to be abandoned or yielded either, to menace or a desire for conciliation. The legality of the existence of slavery and the duty of abolishing it, is not a new question in political history. Neither in Great Britain or France has any difficulty been found in abolishing it, or in the consequences emanating from such an act. The courts of law in Great Britain long since held that it could have no legitimate existence in that country. In Parliament every argument of expediency, the claims of vested rights, of the rights to property, and even the authority of the Holy

Scriptures were urged by the West India planters and the mercantile interest connected with them, in favor of its continuance in their colonies, and were urged in vain. Their arguments were effectually silenced by the most eminent statesmen and by the prelates of their Church, and in language, too, which in this country is treated as ultra and fanatical. The language of our Declaration of Independence, when incorporated into a declaration of rights in the constitution of a neighboring State, was held by the learned judicial tribunals of that State to have immediately effected the abolition of slavery in that State. It is not contended by any one that a law enacted by the legislature of any State on this subject can have any operation beyond its territorial limits. The extent of the powers of the general government may admit of more doubt. I am not disposed to discuss this question, or at this time to attempt to define the limits of their constitutional powers, within which they are restrained, and will only observe, that a more limited construction of the powers of congress than was exercised by them in the incorporation of Texas with the United States, or in passing the late action in relation to persons held to service in one State and escaping into another, would give to the general government all the authority on this subject which the most ardent friend of freedom could desire.

I have no means of knowing how far the late action of Congress upon the several matters connected with slavery, is satisfactory to a majority of the people of this State; all of those measures did not receive the sanction of the vote of their representatives. If it lead to a more thorough investigation of the powers of the General Government, and to an inquiry, what rights are secured, and what duties enjoined, it may be productive of useful results. At any rate it will tend to a determination to exercise whatever authority may yet be left, to protect liberty and freedom. The people of Vermont will, as they always have done, yield due submission to whatever a majority within their appropriate limits may enact, and will resort to no threats of hostile opposition; but when the time and opportunity shall arrive, that they can, in unison with a majority of the people and States in Congress, exercise any legitimate authority on this subject, they will be found the uncompromising enemy of any and every attempt to uphold, extend or continue a system, so uncongenial to the spirit of our republican institutions, and so abhorrent to the principles of Christianity. I will only add, that for myself I cannot assent to the proposition, which has sometimes been advanced, that any State may establish slavery where it is not now recognized, or that it was among the enumerated powers of Congress to impose any obligation on their successors, to admit any State thereafter without such restrictions as they might think proper. Any such attempt of the law-making power, must be considered as an encroachment on the rights of their successors, and an interference with the duty of making treaties, which are to be the supreme law of the land.

My opinions on these subjects are probably well known to my fellow citizens; they have been formed upon careful and deliberate inquiry, have been thus frankly and fearlessly expressed, and will influence me in all my public relations. It is not for me to say, how far they are the opinions of others; I profess not to speak, in this matter, in the name of any party or class of my fellow citizens. The great body of the people read, reflect and decide for themselves, and will undoubtedly ultimately act together on *all* the important subjects which affect the general welfare, and on this one in particular. I have the highest respect for the opinion of those who entertain different views, and whose convictions or duty are not the same as mine; and can cheerfully and cordially cooperate with them, in any measures to promote the interest and happiness of our common country. I should be wanting in that indulgence, which I claim for my own opinions, if I should, on that account, distrust their integrity or endeavor to cast reproach upon their motives.

I have no fears that any action of the General Government within their constitutional limits, on this or any other subject, will in any way endanger the existence of the Union, or produce any dangerous collision between the General Government and that of any of the States. A more peaceable method is provided to settle any controversies between them. We have no reason to believe that any considerable portion of our fellow citizens, or any single State or any number combined, will incur the hazard of a treasonable opposition to the laws of the United States, without any prospect of success, in a cause where they cannot expect the sympathy or assistance of any part of the civilized world, and when either success or defeat must be alike fatal to the institutions to which they so pertinaciously adhere.

Whatever may be the destiny of this confederate republic hereafter, I trust I may say with confidence, that the people of the State of Vermont, the first to obtain admission into the Union, will be among the foremost in their attachment to the cause of civil liberty and freedom, and in their determination to maintain the integrity of

the Union; and the last to countenance, extenuate or apologise, for a spirit of treasonable disunion or rebellion, against the authority of the United States.

I have received from my predecessor communications from several of the States, which will, at an early day, be transmitted to you. Among these, is a communication from the Governor of Virginia, returning the resolutions of the Legislature of this State, transmitted to him at their request. It will be recollected, that a similar proceeding was had by the state of Virginia, a few years since. Accompanying this communication of the Governor of Virginia, is a copy of a resolution of their General Assembly, requesting that the resolution from the State of Vermont “be returned to the Governor of Vermont, and that the *Governor of Vermont* be informed that the Legislature of Virginia understand their constitutional rights, and mean to defend them.” How far such a resolution comports with the dignity of the State of Virginia, I am not disposed to inquire, and it cannot be determined by comparison, as no similar resolution from any other State has ever been received. That it illy accords with the respect and courtesy due from one State to another, in the intercourse between sovereign States is apparent. The surprise at receiving such a communication is diminished by the reflection, that ancient states, like ancient families, when in the course of events they cease to be first, and thereby their dignity and importance is impaired, are apt to betray a spirit of haughtiness, and treat with contumely those who, in the same course of events, are elevated to an equality with them.

I should do injustice to my own feelings, if I omitted to advert to the late striking and afflicting dispensation of the Almighty, in the death of him, who had been elevated to the high and exalted station of President of the United States. The unanimity with which all classes paid homage to his integrity and honesty of purpose, his attachment to the interests of his country, his elevated patriotism, his energy of character, and his splendid achievements, plainly evince that the confidence reposed in him by the people was not misplaced. This striking event should teach us the nothingness of all earthly splendor and greatness, and should admonish those who are in the service of their country, so to perform what is required of them, that in their last moments they may have the consolation of being able to say, as he said, “I have always done my duty – I am ready to die.”

Permit me to assure you of my cordial co-operation with you, in all your endeavors to advance the public welfare and the happiness of the people, and to express the hope, that under the guidance, and with the blessing of that Almighty Being, who has hitherto been our Preserver and Protector, we may be led to the adoption of such measures, and such only, as will promote the peace, and increase the happiness of the people of this State and of the United States.

Executive Chamber,
Montpelier Oct. 12, 1850.

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CH. K. WILLIAMS.