

Inaugural address
of
Ryland Fletcher
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Inaugural Address.

*Fellow Citizens of the Senate,
and House of Representatives:*

I welcome you to the commencement of the labors of another year in behalf of the people of Vermont, who have committed their public affairs to our care.

I cannot fail to congratulate you upon the continued material prosperity and general health of our people, and to express the confident hope that the peace and happiness, the morality and intelligence, which have so long characterized and distinguished the inhabitants of the State of Vermont, may suffer no diminution among us hereafter. For these manifold blessings we cannot be too grateful to that divine Providence, by whose favor we enjoy them all. With a fervent solicitude that all our deliberations and actions may result in the true welfare of our constituents, and above all, that they may accord with the dictates of an enlightened public conscience and His recorded will, "in whom we live and move and have our being," let us reverently assume the high responsibilities cast upon us.

The legislative action of last year in establishing a Board of Education will, in my opinion, if sustained by future legislatures, prove of great public benefit. That vital interest of a State, the education of its people, by a thorough attention to which its free institutions can alone be preserved, will by the provisions of that enactment be placed under the continued and systematic direction of a board of men aware of the great importance of the subject committed to their charge, and conversant with the wants of the community in that respect. Without in the least taking the practical supervision of public education away from the people themselves, to whom it of right belongs and by whom it can be best exercised, but in reality only aiding and encouraging their efforts in its behalf, it is confidently expected that by the Board of Education an organized system of operations will be devised, and energy and order infused into all public action upon this subject.

In conformity to the organic act of the Legislature, the Board entered immediately upon their labors. They were at first embarrassed on account of the apparent inadequacy of the prescribed salary of the Secretary to the labor and expense necessarily attendant upon the proper discharge of his duties. But they were fortunately relieved from this embarrassment by the generous offer of the managers of all our railroads to pass the Secretary, in his necessary visits to the different parts of the State over their roads, free of charge. I gladly take this public opportunity to make known my grateful sensibility of the generosity of this act, and to express my hope that the managers of our railroads, which have so greatly contributed to the wealth and prosperity of our State, may ever give that encouragement to the cause of popular education, which will in turn show its beneficent effects, as well in connection with the particular branch of mechanical and financial science, in which they are engaged, as in every other department of industrial and intellectual activity. J. S. Adams, Esq., of Burlington, was appointed Secretary of the Board. His report, containing a valuable array of facts and suggestions, will be laid before you, and I bespeak for it your careful attention. Justice to a faithful public officer requires me to state that the zeal and energy, with which he has discharged the laborious duties of his office, merit the lasting gratitude of our people.

I am confident that the people of Vermont look with a growing desire for the revival and encouragement of a thorough and well organized Militia system. The legislation of last year in this direction has already favorably resulted in the formation of several uniform companies in different parts of the State. I have had the pleasure of witnessing some of these companies on parade, and have greatly admired their tasteful and appropriate uniforms, their good discipline and soldier-like appearance. They reflect credit upon themselves and honor on the State. If their services should ever be called into requisition, I should rely with confidence upon their fidelity to a soldier's duty. The efficient labors of the Adjutant and Inspector General during the past year, in encouraging and assisting the re-organization of the Militia, are deserving of high commendation. The free sentiments of the people of Vermont justly cause them to look with disfavor upon a standing army. But in these changeful times, and in the peculiar relations which the different sections of our country bear to each other, and which the country at large sustains towards foreign nations, the occasion may arise requiring an armed force in our midst to protect us from domestic dissention or foreign invasion. In such an unfortunate event, the surest

safeguard for our cherished liberties, will be found in a patriotic and well disciplined citizen soldiery, which, being one in interest and sympathy with the people, can never be used to oppress or harass them.

I earnestly recommend to you the continuance of the existing laws prohibiting the sale of intoxicating drinks. I am confident that the prohibition of this demoralizing and destructive traffic meets with the cordial approval of a large majority of our people, and that it has accomplished and is still accomplishing a great and good work in arresting the evils of intemperance.

The Railroads of Vermont, though of inestimable value in developing the agricultural and mineral resources of the State, have yet generally proved unprofitable to those by whose energy and enterprise they were constructed. In some instances the mortgages given to secure the payment of their bonds have been foreclosed, and the original corporations divested of all interest in them. In other cases legal proceedings have been commenced to accomplish a similar result. The legal interest and management of most of our railroads will thus, in all probability, soon be vested in trustees under mortgages, while the equitable interest and real ownership will be in the bondholders. I think it desirable that some general law be enacted, providing, with suitable restrictions, that in such cases the bondholders may form themselves into new corporations for the management and operation of their respective roads, and that they may enjoy all the privileges and franchises of the old companies. Such an enactment will obviate the necessity of applications to the Courts of Chancery on the part of the bondholders, to be put into the possession and use of their respective roads, and thus save expensive and perhaps protracted litigation. A general law, such as I have suggested, would have the good effect of placing the management of our railroads in the hands of their real owners, which would undoubtedly result in their more prudent and profitable operation. Moreover, a responsible party would thus be brought within the reach of the laws in case of mismanagement. It might also be made to add to the taxable property of the State, as the bulk of the railroad interest, being now composed of Bonds, which are mostly owned by non-residents, is exempt from taxation.

I commend to your vigilant examination not only the general laws of the State in regard to Banks, but also the present condition of each one of those important institutions. The country is at present bending under a financial storm unsurpassed for many years. Nothing can more certainly prevent this crisis from becoming appalling, than a firm conviction in the public mind that the banking institutions, with which the wealth and credit of the community are so intimately connected, are perfectly sound and reliable. Every possible precaution should be taken that the confidence so long bestowed by the public upon the Banks of Vermont, should at this trying period, be both deserved and sustained. No surer means can be adopted to preserve this confidence, if it is, as I am convinced, well merited, than a more than usual thoroughness in the examination and reports of their respective conditions. If any imperfection exists in the general laws regulating banking, or in their enforcement and operation in regard to particular banks, the defect ought to be promptly remedied, and wide-spread disaster will be thus happily avoided.

Whatever you can consistently do to elevate the profession of Agriculture, and promote that commanding interest of our State, which is the source of human subsistence, and therefore lies at the foundation of all other branches of the public economy, will, I trust, receive your cordial approval.

The Report of the Superintendent of the State Prison will be laid before you, and will, I presume, receive the attention which the importance of that public institution to the well-being of the State requires. The true aim of prison discipline is not, I conceive, merely to punish the offender, or by imprisonment to restrain him from the commission of crime, by also by consistent reformatory means to prepare him for a re-entrance into society. I deem it worthy of enquiry by the Legislature, whether a greater amount of moral instruction, than the prisoners receive under existing regulations, will not tend to advance the great ends of all human punishment, the reformation of offenders and the prevention of crime. In this connection, I feel that I should be remiss in the performance of my duty, did I not urge upon you the pressing necessity for some separate and peculiar provision for the punishment of juvenile offenders. Institutions for this purpose have been established in many of the States of the Union, and from my investigations I am convinced they receive the cordial support of the communities where their influence has been properly tested. I believe the conviction has become general in Vermont, also, that this subject demands legislative action. Prosecuting officers, judges and jurors, are frequently heard to express their perplexity how to deal with young offenders; the law directing them to one

course, while their sense of right and all the best feelings of their natures prompt another. At present, a child, which detected in crime, is either discharged from motives of pity, by which exemption from punishment he may be encouraged to a continued course of guilt, or he is incarcerated in the jail or penitentiary, where the idleness of the one and the infamy and depraved associates of both, rapidly ripen him into the hardened and abandoned villain. Surely, one or more public institutions under the supervision of the State, the future destiny of which will in some measure be affected by the character of each one of the rising generation, some wisely devised house of combined correction and instruction, adapted to lead him back to the paths of virtue and usefulness, seems alike the dictate of wisdom and humanity. It is quite probable, that owing to the fortunate lack of destitution and crime among our people, in comparison with the more thickly populated portions of the United State, institutions of this kind cannot be advantageously sustained in every county. In this case, fewer Houses of Correction would be required, and a larger extent of territory might be accommodated by each than is comprehended within any of our county organizations. I would further suggest for the consideration of the Legislature the propriety of authorizing proper moral instruction in our jails, under the direction of the keepers. A feeling of respect for humanity is pained by the thought, that any one who bears its image, however low and degraded, should be left like an outcast from the human family, without an effort to improve and elevate him. Sympathy for the unfortunate lies deep in the hearts of the people of Vermont, and they have never suffered it to be appealed to in vain.

No branch of my official duty has been more agreeable to me than that of ministering to the indignant deaf, dumb and blind children of the State the charity which our laws have so bountifully extended to those unfortunate beings. Under the generous provisions of our Statutes in this respect, more than thirty children have received instruction during the past year, at the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, at Hartford, Connecticut, and the Perkins Institution for the Blind, at Boston, Mass. These children are subjected to a thorough course of education in all the branches of learning taught in our Common Schools and Academies, and moreover are instructed in some useful kind of manual labor, adapted to their unfortunate condition, by which they will be enabled to support themselves through life. Their progress, I have good reason for knowing, is creditable to themselves and the State. By the means of this noble charity many of our youths, who would otherwise have lived and died in intellectual and moral darkness, have been rendered intelligent and useful members of society. The annual appropriation for this purpose is not entirely exhausted by those who are now enjoying its benefits. There is therefore an opportunity for the education of a few more beneficiaries from this State, at each of said institutions, and I hope, if any cases of necessity for public aid in this respect exist among our people, application will be made to me in their behalf in the manner prescribed by law.

In conformity with the Act of the General Assembly, passed at the last annual session, to provide for completing the Geological Survey of the State, I appointed Reverend Edward Hitchcock, D. D., of Amherst, Mass., as State Geologist. The survey of the State has been prosecuted by Dr. Hitchcock and his associates during the past year. For an account of the progress and result of the survey, I would refer you to his Report, which will soon be laid before you. I have no doubt that the thorough investigation and exploration of the geological and natural history of the State, contemplated by the act referred to, will result in valuable scientific discoveries and great profit to the Commonwealth.

In pursuance of the Act of the Special Session of the Legislature, providing for rebuilding the State House, I appointed Hons. George P. Marsh, Norman Williams and John Porter a committee to prepare a plan according to which the State House should be rebuilt. These gentlemen have discharged this duty and their report is submitted to you with this communication. I appointed Hon. Thomas E. Powers, Superintendent of the work provided for by said act. He immediately commenced operations and the work has thus far proceeded with extraordinary despatch. The present advanced state of the new building affords conclusive proof of the energy of the Superintendent and his peculiar fitness for that position. I congratulate the people of Vermont upon the agreeable prospect of soon having a Capitol more beautiful and commodious even than the splendid edifice, the recent destruction of which we all so much lament.

In order properly to discharge the duties imposed upon me by the Act of the last Legislature, entitled "An Act for the relief of the poor in Kansas," I caused full inquiries to be made into the condition of the people of that Territory. I directed the Secretary of Civil and Military Affairs to write to Hon. John W. Geary, at that time

Governor of Kansas, informing him of the action of the Legislature, and that I stood ready to extend the aid contemplated by said act, upon proper proof of the existence of cases of necessity. The letter of the Secretary, and Governor Geary's reply, are transmitted to you with this document. I also made inquiries of numerous private gentlemen, well acquainted with the condition of the people of Kansas, and used every means I could command to ascertain whether such necessity existed as would justify the expenditure of the appropriation. I learned from various sources to my complete satisfaction, that the private aid, which last autumn was so bountifully extended to the oppressed and exhausted people of Kansas, by the charitable and liberty-loving citizens of the North, had been amply sufficient to satisfy the immediate wants of the poor of that Territory, and that there was therefore no occasion for the food and clothing provided by said act. Though no portion of the money thus appropriated has been expended, I am still proud of this act of benevolence on the part of the representatives of the people of Vermont, and I shall always remember with grateful exultation that they have placed thus publicly upon our Statute Book the evidence of their sympathy for the oppressed and destitute victims of the aggressive spirit of slavery.

Nothing has occurred during the past year to diminish the indignation and alarm, which the great majority of the people of Vermont have felt at the rapid increase of the Slave power and the extravagant nature of its demands. On the contrary, by the recent decision of the Supreme Court of the United States, in the case of Dred Scott, if the opinions of the majority of the Judges as expressed by them are to be received as law, there is little hope that the spread of Slavery will ever be stopped under our present form of government.

By that decision Slavery is no longer sectional; it is made national, and declared to be recognized by the Federal Constitution. The Constitution is said by its own force to carry slavery into every Territory of the Country, and any act of Congress or Territory, prohibiting property in slaves, is pronounced unconstitutional and void. This decision conflicts with the legislation of Congress from the foundation of the government down to the year 1854, when the fruitful source of all our woes, the Kansas and Nebraska Bill, by northern treachery and the insatiate demands of the South for an enlarged slave market, and an increased political power, was sprung upon our unsuspecting people. It declares unconstitutional the numerous organic acts of Congress, establishing the territorial governments of the North-West Territories of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa and Oregon, the Compromise of 1820, and the act for the admission of Texas. It contradicts the opinions of our most eminent statesmen and jurists, expressed for a long series of years, both in Congress and from the bench of the Supreme Court, by Clay, by Marshall, and all the leading men of the country both from the North and the South, with the single exception of Mr. Calhoun, deemed, in his life time, even by his fellow slaveholders, as extreme and fanatical in his support of slavery. Not even the people of the Territories themselves are allowed to exclude slavery from their midst; they are doomed to its withering curse, and notwithstanding the sounding promise in the Kansas and Nebraska Bill, that they should be left "perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way," they cannot, while in the territorial condition, shake it off. The great improbability that, when slavery has once planted its foot upon a Territory, it will ever be abolished, is proved by the impotent efforts of the best citizens of the older Slave States, to rid themselves of the system of slavery, which is degrading and ruining them.

The logical results of this decision are alarming in the extreme, and may well arouse the freemen from their dangerous apathy. If, as declared by the majority of the Court, the Constitution guarantees property in slaves, and prohibits any law interfering with the right of the master to his slave, it is a fair inference, if not a necessary conclusion, that the slaveholder may, for purposes of pleasure or profit, take his slaves with him in his journeys through the Free States, and hold them here, notwithstanding the absolute prohibition of slavery by their laws. But fortunately, most of the abhorrent doctrines enunciated by the majority of the Judges were unnecessary to the determination of the case before them, and therefore not clothed with the authority of law. They have been well and boldly characterized by one of the dissenting Judges, the oldest member of the Court and the only surviving associate of the venerated Marshall, as extra-judicial and of no binding force as authority. I am sure, when one of the Judges themselves use this indignant and unqualified language, that the people of Vermont will not quietly acquiesce in an unnecessary and unauthorized declaration of doctrines they have always loathed, and which they consider hostile to the genius and spirit of the Republic to which they belong.

When, if the alarming prostitution of every department of the general government to the nefarious behests of slavery shall continue, the Supreme Court shall declare authoritatively, what they have already foreshadowed, that the slaveholder may bring into the Free States his train of slaves, and hold them there as his property, notwithstanding the absolute prohibition of slavery by their Constitutions and laws, it will then, in that day of the doom of the Republic, be time for Vermont and her sister Free States to consider what course they shall take to maintain and enforce a right she has never yielded and will never surrender, the absolute and total prohibition of slavery within her borders.

My grateful acknowledgments are due to the people of Vermont for the honor conferred by my re-election. The best return I can make for the generous confidence reposed in me, is the solemn pledge here upon the threshold of my duties, that my every effort shall be to promote the highest interests of our cherished Commonwealth.

RYLAND FLETCHER

Montpelier, October 9th, 1857.