

Inaugural address  
of  
Ryland Fletcher  
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**Saturday, October 10, 1856**  
**Inaugural Address**

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

In assuming the responsible station assigned me by the freemen of Vermont, I desire to express to them through you, their Representatives, the profound sentiments of gratitude with which this honor so highly distinguished and so cordially conferred, has inspired me, and to give them the assurance of my most sincere devotion to the interest of this Commonwealth.

During the past year, under the protecting care of a merciful Providence, general health has prevailed, a bountiful harvest has rewarded the labors of the husbandman, and the laudable and varied pursuits of our citizens have been prosecuted with merited success.

For these continued blessings, it becomes us to make a public and devout acknowledgement to that great and good Being whose watchful Providence and propitious smiles have been vouchsafed to the people of this State during the vicissitudes of another year. In the discharge of our high duties, let us not only keep in mind our obligations to those who have committed their interests to our care, but also recognise our accountability to a higher tribunal than public opinion.

In conformity with ancient usage, and in compliance with a provision of the Constitution of the State, I respectfully suggest to your consideration the following subjects, your attention to which I deem important to the interest of our people.

No more important subject can possibly engage your attention, as guardians of the public interests, than the education of the people of this Commonwealth. The natural principle of self-protection imposes upon a State the most assiduous care of this important element of its prosperity. The object and effect of a thorough system of education is to develop the latent powers of the human mind, to bestow upon the people knowledge, and thus fit them for the proper discharge of their various duties in their relations to each other as social beings and to the State as citizens. A State, therefore, the government of which rests solely in the people themselves, can alone secure its prosperity and perpetuity by thoroughly educating that people, by training and disciplining the popular mind into a development of its best powers, and then widely diffusing information and knowledge, by the aid of which those powers can be brought to bear upon their complex and important duties as citizens.

The establishment and protection of a thorough system of Education, I conceive, therefore, to be as necessary in a free Commonwealth to protect itself against the dangers which have destroyed and still beset nations, as is that commendable prudence and forethought in individuals, which lead them to protect themselves from the assaults of disease, and their property against the ravages of the elements.

If, therefore, we would sustain and improve the already high character of our State, promote virtue and morality, give stability to our institutions and protection to person and property, we must carefully watch and liberally cherish the fountain of popular intelligence, the Common School. From this source is derived that elementary knowledge, the importance of which cannot be fully appreciated, because it underlies and is the basis of all other learning, and which is sufficient to enable the great mass of community to fulfill their relations to the Society and the Commonwealth to which they belong. A wise system of public Education, while it firmly establishes and munificently sustains the Common School, fosters also the higher institutions of learning, the Academy and College, which complete the good work begun in the primary school, and impart a thorough mental training and culture. These literary institutions are of vital importance to the well being of the State, for they contribute to the acquisitions of science and the adornments of art, they furnish to the acquisitions of science and the adornments of art, they furnish to the Common School its wisest regulators and teachers, and, far beyond those who immediately received and enjoy their benefits, they shed widely about them a disciplining, salutary and elevating influence upon the whole people.

To the pressing demands of our schools, academies and colleges upon your care and protection, I earnestly invite your attention.

I am unable to lay before the Legislature the actual condition of the schools throughout the State, as no State Superintendent of schools has been appointed and no statistical report been made in regard to that subject, as required by the law of 1845, since 1851. The sentiments of a great proportion of the people upon this subject have been most clearly indicated by the numerous petitions which have been presented to the Legislature for a series of years. It is a cheering consideration that signal improvements in the system of education have marked the history of the last few years in many parts of this country and in Europe.

Aided by the experience of other States and our own unrivalled advantages in the independence and intelligence of our people, and their freedom from pauperism and foreign prejudice, ignorance and bigotry, we ought to present to the world a shining example of a Commonwealth, which lays in the minds of its youth the deep and strong foundations of its future prosperity, and whose most diligent care is freely to offer to every one of its people the blessings of a sound education.

In intimate connection with education, as the morals of a people depend to a great extent upon their intelligence, stands the subject of the prohibition of the Traffic in intoxicating Drinks. I respectfully invite your attention to this subject, as one which concerns the most vital interests of your constituents, and which is among the first to enlist the warmest sympathy of the philanthropist and the profoundest thought of the patriot and legislator.

The sentiments I have long entertained and freely expressed upon this subject are well known to my fellow citizens. My confidence in the power and duty of the Legislature to prohibit the Traffic in Intoxicating Liquor as a beverage remains unshaken. I deem the principle of prohibition to be in perfect accordance with our Constitution and in harmony with the obligations which the government owes to the people. Few, if any of the sources of evil have been so prolific of mischief, have sent forth so vast a desolation, and produced such overwhelming misery throughout all the departments of social and domestic life, as the sale of intoxicating liquors. The people have a right to demand at the hands of their agents protection from these evils so destructive of the happiness and well-being of society.

I conceive that the true interests of the State, and the hopes of the rising generation, require a prohibitory law with ample powers effectually to enforce its provisions, prescribing penalties commensurate with the offences it prohibits, and adapted to accomplish its great design, the extinguishment of the traffic. The constitutionality of several of the most important provisions of the present law of the State upon this subject has been settled by the Supreme Court, a tribunal which has the just confidence of our citizens. Coming from all portions of the Commonwealth, you have personal knowledge of the practical operation of this law, and its adaptation to accomplish the purposes for which it was designed, and are well fitted to judge of the necessity of further legislation on this subject.

Agriculture is our great leading employment and source of support. This department of labor manifestly deserves every attention and encouragement which will tend to its advancement and prosperity. The application of science to agriculture has already disclosed the secrets of the composition of the soil and the laws which regulate the germination and growth of vegetable organization. Through the investigations of science, also, have been discovered the nature and properties of fertilizing substances, and under their judicious application, barren wastes have been converted into smiling and productive fields. It is a happy omen that agriculture is now attracting the attention and exciting the interest of all classes of our citizens. I conceive it to be the duty of government to encourage and increase this interest; to give every possible facility and protection to this pursuit; to furnish to the popular mind correct accounts of the discoveries of science in this department; to promote agricultural education; to offer honours and premiums to encourage an honorable emulation and valuable discoveries and achievements in this most ancient and useful art; and thus to stimulate cultivation and improvement in every branch of this department of industry, and induce habits of domestic economy by every practicable means.

On the success of our manufactures depends to a great extent the prosperity of our agriculture. It becomes us to develop the resources of our own State and to encourage the productive industry of our own citizens. Any inducement which the Legislature can consistently present, that will lead to increased interest and larger accomplishment in this department, and prevent the existing draft upon our resources, resulting from the extensive sale, in this State, of articles manufactured elsewhere from raw material taken from Vermont, will, I am confident, advance materially the prosperity of the Commonwealth.

The great interests of agriculture and manufactures being the grand sources of our wealth and independence, every encouragement which you can extend to them will contribute greatly to the welfare of the State. As a large portion of the members of the Legislature are engaged in these pursuits, they will undoubtedly receive from you that consideration which their magnitude demands.

Our railroads constitute an important item in the catalogue of our interests. Cars, richly laden with the varied productions of the earth or freighted with human beings, are hourly rolling through the valleys and over the mountains of our Commonwealth. Vast amounts of property and the safety of great numbers of the people are committed to the charge of corporations, which exist by the authority of the Legislature and are to a great extent subject to your regulation and control. While these agents of the public convenience should receive such favor as a wise Legislature would bestow, they should also be subjected to rigid police regulations to guard against the melancholy and wholesale destruction of human life, which has too often marked the history and marred the utility of this great modern invention.

Applications for the increase of the number of banks and the amount of banking capital will doubtless come under your consideration. The facilities afforded by these institutions have, beyond a doubt, been beneficial to the business interests of the country. A safe and efficient banking system is one of the most important means of promoting the pecuniary prosperity of the people. Allow me respectfully to suggest the importance of a candid and dispassionate examination of this subject, a freedom from all improper feeling and bias, and a strict regard to the *actual* wants of the community.

In concurrence with the recommendation of my immediate predecessor in each of his annual messages, I invite your attention to the militia of the State. A well regulated militia has been relied upon by our wisest statesmen as one of the firmest securities which a free government can erect against the dangers which may beset it. This branch of the public service constitutes a strong arm of the Commonwealth, which should neither be cut off nor suffered to become palsied by inaction. A careful examination by you of the condition of the militia, and the laws regulating this subject, is earnestly recommended.

The framers of our constitution designed to provide for the speedy and impartial administration of justice, as one of the fundamental interests of the State. It is declared in our Bill of Rights, that "every person within this State ought to find a certain remedy, by "having recourse to the laws, for all injuries or wrongs, which he may receive in his person, property or character; he ought to obtain rights and justice freely, and without being obliged to purchase it; completely, and without any denial; promptly, and without delay, conformably to the laws." Complaint is not unfrequently made of the great delay and burdensome expense incident upon actions in our courts of justice. The great accumulation of business in some of the counties of the State operates not only to deny to parties a decision of their cases "promptly, and without delay," but also to subject them to a heavy and severe increase of the costs of litigation. The poor man is virtually debarred from a hearing of his claims by his inability to defray the expenses of their prosecution. I believe that a serious evil is experienced by our citizens in this respect, which addresses itself to the wisdom of the Legislature for a remedy.

Much complaint has also been made that our laws regulating attachment upon mesne process are injurious to the interest of both debtor and creditor, and seriously cramp the enterprise and industry of our people, by impairing that feeling of confidence and security which must characterize all healthy business relations. In some of the United States this evil has been avoided by the passage of Insolvent Laws, in others by allowing attachment on mesne process only in cases of manifest fraud, and in others by providing that an attachment by one creditor shall, under certain regulations, be for the benefit of all. I believe that the interest of our State are

seriously prejudiced by our present law upon this subject, and that they demand of you a careful consideration of the evil and the various remedies which may suggest themselves to you minds.

The strength and efficiency of laws depend very much upon their simplicity and stability. Free States are more frequently governed too much than too little, and they often times fall into the mistake of a too hasty and extensive legislation. The law-making power ever act calmly and deliberately, and should particularly exercise great watchfulness to prevent the passage, under the guise of a professed public benefit, of enactments whose whole design and effect are to accomplish private and personal ends.

The state of the public finances is always a subject of interest to the legislature and the people. An annual and full exhibit of their condition affords our constituents the most complete means of scrutinizing the conduct of those to whom the care of the Commonwealth has been entrusted, and who appropriate and expend her funds.

This exhibit in some of the States is made by the Executive in his annual message. As, under our system, disbursing officers do not report to the Executive, I can only direct you to the Auditor's Report which should exhibit the condition of all our financial affairs. Our people require a discreet frugality on the part of their public servants, and they are too well informed to be deceived in regard to the necessary expenditures of time and money in conducting the affairs of government. They require in the management of public matters the same economy which a wise man exercises in his own affairs, that true economy, which denies all unnecessary and useless expenditures, but is liberal and even munificent in everything that conduces to the lasting glory and prosperity of the Commonwealth.

The term of office of one of our Senators in Congress will expire on the third day of March next. It therefore devolves upon the Legislature to elect a Senator to represent this State in the Congress of the United States for six years from that date.

I have thus adverted to some of the matters connected with our domestic policy. But we constitute a part of another Government, in whose action we have a most vital interest, and I deem it proper to devote some attention to the measures and the policy of that Government, which are now deeply agitating the country.

The national Republic, which our fathers established, rested for its ground work upon the great principle of the natural freedom and equality of man, and the inalienable character of those rights. Though from causes beyond their control, a system of domestic slavery existed in some of the colonies which united together to shake off oppression and to found a nation, whose vitalizing principle should be the civil and religious freedom of its people, yet, by the common opinion of all the early patriots and statesmen from every section of the Union, this institution was regarded as a lamentable evil and a shameful contradiction to the national idea, and its extension was carefully prohibited, and its extinction confidently expected as speedily as the circumstances of the country and the anomalous nature of the evil would permit. That the founders of the republic considered Liberty to be national, and the cardinal principle of the government, and slavery local and exceptional; that they aimed to spread the blessing of the one over the wide extent of the national territory, and to confine the evils of the other within its already established limits; and that such was the plan and practice of the government in its earlier days of purity, is conclusively shown by the terms of the Declaration of Independence, the Ordinance of 1787, the careful avoidance of the word slave in the Constitution, the prohibition, under the severest penalties, of the African Slave Trade, and the abundant testimony of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Henry, and many other early statesmen, both from the North and the South, in regard to the blighting influences of Slavery and the vital necessity of the prohibition of its extension. That, on the other hand, the Government has now widely deviated from and even totally reversed the principles and practice of the early republic on this subject, is made evident by the denial to Congress of the frequently exercised right of excluding Slavery from the national territories; by the repeal of the Compromise of 1820, by opening to the curse of Slavery a vast and beautiful region, which had been solemnly and forever dedicated to Freedom years before, and by the natural consequences of that perfidious robbery manifested in the high-handed outrages which have recently desecrated the soil of Kansas by an armed and marauding invasion, by the prostitution of the ballot box, by a code of worse than Draconian laws, imposed upon a people who had no agency in making them, and by a long and terrible series of murders, conflagrations, rapines, groundless prosecutions; cruel imprisonments, and other crimes

which the advocates of slavery have not hesitated to perpetrate to secure to their wrongful and ruinous control a territory which desired and was entitled to the blessing of Liberty; and all this accomplished, either through the direct action or the permissive and encouraging non-interference of the General Government.

The change in the relation of Slavery to the National Government has been total and complete. At first it was merely a local institution, admitted to be an evil, its existence deeply deplored, and only tolerated on account of the supposedly difficulty and danger of its sudden abolition, while on the other hand its extension was universally deprecated and positively prohibited. Now, it has become an aggressive and powerful principle, which has taken possession of every department of the Federal Government, except the popular branch of the Legislature; it opens the avenues to public and official position only to those who bow before its monstrous claims; it demands the revival of the horrors of the African Slave Trade; it insists upon the right of passing through the free States with its Slaves; it breaks down the long established securities of Freedom; it blockades the national highways; it closes the common territory of the country to the free citizens of the North; and by the strong arm of power, with the bayonet and the sword, it crushes a people, whose only offence is that they claim the right to regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, and will not submit to its insolent and oppressive demands.

The rapid extension of Slavery and the aggressive nature of its demands, excite the most anxious solicitude in our minds for the success and perpetuity of the Union; and the imminent danger to our free institutions has stimulated all lovers of Liberty to endeavor to restore the action of our Government to the principles of its patriotic founders, from which it has so widely deviated. The people of Vermont have ever, and with increasing force and unanimity, spoken in unmistakable terms in opposition to the extension of Slavery, and I doubt not your action in regard to this subject will be complete accordance with the earnest sentiments of your constituents.

Our country has not only lavished her blood and treasure to secure her own liberty, but when distant nations, encouraged by her example, have sought to be free, her sympathy and her contributions have rolled in tides of mighty impulse to their assistance. The imprisonment of a foreigner, who had simply declared his intention of becoming a citizen of the united State, was recently considered, by our Government, an insult to the majesty of the nation, and on a remote sea our ships of war opened their frowning port holes and sternly demanded the immediate release of the prisoner.

But citizens of this and other States of our confederacy, who have emigrated to Kansas, a portion of our own country under the direct authority of the Federal Government, with the intention of making that Territory their home, relying on the assurances of that Government that they should be "left in perfect freedom to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way," have, by lawless and repeated invasions of the people of another State, been deprived of the dearest rights of freemen; their lives and property have been threatened and destroyed, and they have been subjected by these invaders to the most cruel and tyrannical enactments which have characterized modern legislation; and yet, notwithstanding their frequent appeals to the President for relief, none has been afforded them; their robbers and murderers remain unpunished, some even in official positions under the Federal Government; and obedience to the pretended laws of the Territory is enforced by the armed soldiery of the United States.

The recollection of our own early history as a Commonwealth should awaken in our breasts the liveliest sympathies for our brethren who are struggling for freedom in Kansas. Vermont was once the scene of similar depredations, hardships and cruelties. Her early settlers were ejected from their possessions, and were denied all law and justice, by the emissaries of a government which wrongfully claimed dominion over them.

I earnestly suggest to your careful deliberation the question whether, in view of the great wrongs to which our citizens in Kansas are subjected, and the utter neglect of the General Government to protect them, some action is not required of you, equal to the importance and emergency of their cause.

I trust the Legislature will prove itself a generous patron to the noble charities that distinguish this age, its acts bear the impress of humanity and benevolence.

Relying with confidence on the wisdom of your deliberations and action, I tender you, gentlemen, my hearty co-operation in all your laudable efforts for the public welfare.

RYLAND FLETCHER..

Montpelier Oct. 10, 1856.