

Inaugural address  
of  
Carlos Coolidge  
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**Saturday, October 13, 1849**  
**Inaugural Address**

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

With a grateful sense of the confidence reposed in me by the people, and by you, their delegates, I tender to you my unfeigned respects, and cordially proffer my best efforts for the public service. The chronicles of the political year, just closed, bear no record of adversity inflicted upon us or upon our cherished institutions. In prosperity we and they stand, testimonials of the goodness of Him who ruleth over all: and as well the secret as the audible invocation shall rise from each heart, that these institutions, alike our glory and security, may ever remain, as hitherto they have been, the supports of civil, political and religious liberty.

In presenting to you such topics as I deem appropriate to this communication, I may seem to draw too largely on your courtesy by commenting on a subject which I discussed to some extent on a former occasion. My reason for reviving the consideration of it is, that I am confirmed in the conviction that it involves the vitality of the State government as it *is*, and the welfare of those who shall succeed us. In performing the various duties constitutionally enjoined upon them, the General Assembly are charged with a large number which are special or temporary – which relate to persons, offices and corporations – which, in short, are not laws in the political sense or character of law. Important, highly so, indeed, as all these are, they do not make any part of the legislation of the State – the framing of statutes that are to constitute the law of the land. The influences from acts of the former kind are transient – they injure no public interest, disturb no public peace. It is not so with the latter. These depict the prevalent characteristics of the times, both moral and intellectual: so that the laws of a State may be justly called the reflex of the character of the people.

In clear perception of the qualities of the people, and aiming to provide only so much of government as should meet their actual wants, the framers of our Constitution carved it out in simplicity of design, and thus rendered easy the task of developing the principles of that instrument. It was the peculiar felicity of the earliest political age of this State, that the framing of the statutes was committed to men who, in performing that work, added to the purest intentions and the soundest judgment the knowledge derived from profound study and observation. Hence sprang that admirable system, or codified series, of laws, which for so many years remained intact, and which even now constitutes the vigorous body of our statutory enactments.

But the “spirit of the age” – and that spirit is ever restless, innovating upon what *is* – has laid its hand, as well on the laws of our country as on other things valuable. The consequences are seen in the decay of that reverence for the law which is its best sanction – in the contempt of legal restraints, in many portions of the Union daringly avowed – and in the greatly multiplied outrages that are heard of, are soon forgotten, and never punished.

At the present, the bias of many men of upright minds but ardent temperament is strongly set towards the most serious changes in the rules of civil duty and conduct: and principles, long held to be so essential to the security of human rights as never to be debated, much less impugned, are now regarded by some as obstacles in the path of improvement which the genius of reform is soon to remove, as so much lumber of the past. Such spirit, having ascendancy, would make the laws bend to the impulses of society – in other words, they would have no force other than that of popular passion – a state of things which is the chief condition of anarchy. Believing that instability in the laws of any state invariably opens the way for ultimate denial of obedience to the civil power, I submit that prudence demands a steadfast opposition to every legal change which is radical, until its necessity shall be made manifest. Let us preserve something of the past to hold on by. The anchor must not drag. Whatever changes in our legal code may be projected, now or hereafter, it is to be fervently desired that the cardinal doctrines on which our fathers settled the government of this state, may be held firmly in their places and have all honor. The celerity in which the thoughts and passions of men are forced onward warns them who have in charge the public peace and safety, to watch more intently the tendencies of the day.

Our little republic contains all the elements of true greatness, with unlimited resources for all innocent enjoyment in social life. That so many of these elements have been put in motion and so many of these resources have been opened – producing for her people a happiness in measure never surpassed, shared by all in remarkable nearness to equality – is justly to be ascribed to the vigorous impress made on the character of our political forefathers by the excellent constitutional and legal doctrines under which they deposited their rights and privileges as citizens and as freemen. In view of this subject, and trusting in your indulgence of these prolonged remarks upon it, I have embraced the few opportunities falling to me to urge upon the elevated patriotism and discriminative judgment of my fellow-citizens the exercise of increasing vigilance, lest the innovating spirit of the day shake our honest polity.

In discharging the duty assigned to me by the Constitution, I have to inform you that in compliance with the requirement of a resolution of the General Assembly of 1848, directing the appointment of three persons “to digest and prepare a general law regulating and governing all Railroad Corporations,” &c., I appointed as Commissioners for that service Messrs. CHARLES K. WILLIAMS, of Rutland, LUCIUS B. PECK, of Montpelier, and ERASTUS FAIRBANKS, of St. Johnsbury.

Railroads have proved themselves to be powerful agents in controlling and directing the leading interests of every country into which they have been introduced. That they are effecting important changes in the relations of communities and States, in the methods and rules of business, and in social as well as commercial intercourse, is apparent; and it is obvious that similar results, in conformity to the law of self-interest, will ever follow the establishment of these new modes of communication. Although the Railroads of this State are not yet entirely completed, the facilities afforded by such portions of them as have been put to use, are daily testifying to the large influence over our internal trade which these modern improvements are destined to exert. It is not presumptuous to express the opinion that, notwithstanding the great changes to be wrought by these agents in the particulars alluded to, and in others – and allowing full weight to the immense capital absorbed by them – the spirit of enterprise in our inhabitants will be quickened – the agricultural power of the State enlarged, its general resources developed, and its aggregate wealth enhanced – and all to a degree that will remove every doubt of the utility of railroads. They are already among the wants of the civilized world. They will become features of its glory. The imagination cannot now grasp the magnificent aspect of our country as it will open to the vision of those who may live to see the whole land interlaced by one vast network of iron.

Vermont is geographically divided by her noble mountain range. Common trials and dangers united the earliest settlers of these wilds, and formed and fixed in them a common character. The dwellers on both sides of this physical barriers were brethren. They constituted but one household: When one member suffered, the other members shared in the suffering. The unity thus created has never been broken. From that time till now, the people have held the State administration far above sectional jealousies – thereby signally illustrating the patriotism that first regards the whole. It is worthy of observation, however, in respect of trade and social intercourse between the residents of the East and the West, that this lofty pile of nature has caused a practical severance between communities and person who, being bound by political ties, would wish to be ever cemented by interest, sympathy and friendship. It is an enlivening anticipation that when the elliptical lines stretched across our beautiful mountain, with all their connecting ways, shall be completed we shall become one in the interchange of the social offices that make up human happiness, knowing more of each other, and loving each other not less.

The subject of International Exchanges will doubtless secure your attention if, as I trust, it has retained its hold in your favor. The provision heretofore made for this agency is not, in terms, made permanent. It will be for you to determine on what basis it shall be put.

In November last, I received M. ALEXANDRE VATTEMARE’s Report of his operations, which will be transmitted to you. This communication is not the place for a review of that report; but I cannot refrain from soliciting your favorable consideration of the subject. While the commerce of the world brings to us, in our insular position, the physical comforts and luxuries that other countries produce and diffuse, let it be our endeavor to draw from every source the products of science, literature and the arts and look to the time and the occasions when we may recompense them to whom we thus become indebted. The strength of Vermont consists in intellectual character of her people, and therein is the element of her renown. She can bring from

afar – from every land, distant as it may be – the true riches, the fruits of mental labor and the refinements of pure taste and incorporate them with her own solid virtues. She can educate all her children, and do it thoroughly. She can raise men, and they may help to move the world. Let her then study how she can most completely prepare herself to maintain her just claim to equality of honor among her confederate States, and before foreign nations; and, as means to the end, emulously to, and, according to her ability, give, all that is required for the attainment of a distinguished reputation in the world of letters.

A resolution, passed at the last session of the General Assembly, having assigned to the board, to whom should be committed the framing of a general railroad law, the further service of preparing a general law for incorporating Manufacturing Companies, that subject has been submitted to the Commissioner before named.

In accordance with an act of the last General Assembly, entitled “An Act to provide for the expenses incurred under certain resolutions of the Senate and House of Representative,” I have received and examined copies of documents which in my judgment, “serve to illustrate the early history of this State,” and having accepted them, I have ascertained the expense of the same and drawn a warrant therefor.

Acting under the resolution passed in 1848, “providing for preserving the materials for completing the Geological Survey,” I appointed Mr. ZADOCK THOMPSON, of Burlington, to perform the service contemplated by the General Assembly. That gentlemen having undertaken it, his report upon the state of those materials will be soon laid before you.

Mr. JAMES MCM. SHAFTER resigned the office of Secretary of State, in January last, and I appointed Mr. FERRAND F. MERRILL, of Montpelier, then the Secretary’s Deputy, to fill the vacancy caused by said resignation.

In June last, Mr. C.N. CARPENTER resigned the office of State Librarian, and to supply the vacancy, I appointed Mr. GEORGE NICHOLS of Northfield.

The grave subject of Slavery, as it exists within the American Union, stands in the line of topics appropriate to this communication , and I am not at liberty – nor have I disposition – to recede from it. It is the heavy burden of millions of generous hearts. It being evil and only evil, these hearts will never find rest until all shall have been done for the extinction of it that man may rightfully do. It would appear, perhaps, to all the rest of the civilized world, merely supererogatory for Vermont to reiterate, what she has so often and so emphatically declared, her unrelenting hostility to the bondage of human beings. But it is fit – nay more, it is our duty – as a State, and as a people, to make every leading public occasion commemorative of our sentiment and purpose in respect of this highest national crime.

In relation to Slavery within the States that compose the Union, it suffices to remark, that this State having entered the Confederacy under a federal constitution that, by compromises, guarantied to the States in which Slavery then existed, the continuance of such dominion over their black population as, to the shame of humanity, was maintained at that period – and having continued in the confederacy on the same terms until now – she can not, perhaps, justly assail the institution, as it is in those States, by any other than the moral agencies which are calculated, as persuasives, to work out desirable changes in the opinions of men. But, to the utmost possible extent, in the employment of such agencies, we are, I think, justified; and, to my view, it is worse than apolitical blunder in our fellow-citizens of the Slave States, to attempt to shut out from themselves by statutes, resolutions, and paper burnings, the light of that truth which will, in due time, penetrate all minds, and animate all men with the love of pure freedom. The anti-slavery spirit of the people of this great nations will no slumber nor falter. Against all opposition on the part of Slaveholders, the great work of enlightening the general mind in Slave-holding States goes steadily forward; and if they that labor therein do not forget the great physical changes in the condition of mankind are the results of agencies directed by One wiser than they, and shall not impiously attempt to forestall His designs – the freedom of the Slaves in these States will be attained, and that just when and in what manner it is best it should be.

The continued existence of slavery, and of its traffic, in the District of Columbia, is an anomaly. That small national domain having been made up by cessions from slave states, it is objected to the abolition of slavery therein that, whatever rights of legislation, government and police the Federal Government acquired by the acts

of cession, individual rights of property were not thereby conveyed continued to have the right to purchase and hold slaves, under the federal jurisdiction as under their former respective state governments. The conclusion drawn by those who maintain the objection is, that Congress has no constitutional power to abolish slavery in the district, without the consent of the owners of the slaves. While the question has been much considered and many able minds have taken an opposite view of the case, and while in relation to this, some difficulties exist, not insuperable, yet embarrassing – it is enough for us to say, that the people of this State cannot concede to slavery on any federal territory a power superior to that of the Federal Government, nor be made to believe that there is not a way by which this foul blot upon the national escutcheon may be removed. They, therefore, insist that it should be. They have no doubt that if Congress will do in this behalf what it may, the flag of the Union – emblem of liberty – would no longer throw its graceful folds from the capitol over the slave pen and its contents of unmitigated misery.

The imminent question of this time, touching the peace of the Union, is that of the *extension* of slavery. Under circumstances so peculiar as to have impressed the event very deeply in the public mind, Congress failed to establish territorial governments for New Mexico and California. The inhabitants of these territories have, therefore, been constrained to regulate their civil affairs as they best could, under the laws of the country existing when it was acquired, so far as those laws have not been affected by the exercise of a military jurisdiction, maintained by the Executive of the United States. It is not easy to define the nature of the government under which the people of those lands have lived; but it is apparent they were abandoned by the power that owed them protection. Being thus remitted to their natural indefeasible rights – rights recognized by our Declaration of Independence – rights which the founders of the organic law of our State emphatically asserted – the inhabitants of these territories have instituted proceedings towards the formation of a State Government for each, and therein made such progress that, in much probability, one of them, if not both, will be found, with a State Constitution in hand, knocking at the door, during the next session of Congress, for admission into the Union. These constitutions may contain provisions excluding slavery from the soil they cover, or they may be silent upon the subject. With respect to that which the people of California shall present, there is little room for doubt that it will bear express terms of exclusion. New Mexico being in greater proximity to the Slave States, and having, as it is represented, a portion of its land suited to slave labor – it may be apprehended that her organic law will leave the subject untouched. In such case, it will be insisted by all slave owners, and doubtless by many others who, preferring the non-extension of slavery, nevertheless regard the question more as political than moral, that it will be the duty of the present States to admit her into the confederacy, on the ground that slavery being a State institution it may be allowed or repudiated at the pleasure of the particular State. But whenever a constitution for a new State shall be presented, without guaranty against involuntary servitude except for crime, Vermont, if I do not greatly misapprehend the sentiment of her people, will be found opposed to the admission sought for, and enforcing her opposition in all the ways in which she may constitutionally act. She holds that slavery is a moral evil – not merely a physical and political one: and hence she deduces the conclusion that, upon first principles, no community of men, in either separate or confederate relations ought to be permitted to establish institutions for enslaving men. As a member of the Union, she has an undoubted right to consent or object to the coming in of a new member. That she will feel it to be her duty to object on the occurrence of the supposed case, I do not entertain the slightest doubt. And she will not stand alone in making such demonstration. So rapidly has been evolved the sensibility of the people of the eastern, middle and western sections of the country, in relation to this eminently critical question – uttering but one sentiment and one determination – that we may confidently trust, that it is too late for slavery to succeed in placing her foot on American soil not now within her control.

I need hardly add, in conclusion, that any action that the General Assembly may in its wisdom think proper to take, to embody the long-entertained and deeply seated sentiment of the great mass of our common constituency in relation to the manifold evils of domestic slavery, will assuredly command my ready assent and co-operation.

CARLOS COOLIDGE.

Executive Chamber,  
Montpelier October 13, 1849. }