

Haiti's Liberty Will Shine on Forever

On Jan. 2, 1893, the 89th anniversary of Haiti's 1804 independence, Frederick Douglass, former Minister and Consul General to that nation, addressed an audience of 1,500 people in Chicago. Here are excerpts of that speech. Emphasis is in the original.

No man should presume to come before an intelligent American audience without a commanding object and an earnest purpose. In whatever else I may be deficient, I hope I am qualified, both in object and purpose, to speak to you this evening. My subject is Haiti, the Black Republic; the only self-made Black Republic in the world. I am to speak to you of her character, her history, her importance and her struggle from slavery to freedom and to statehood. I am to speak to you of her progress in the line of civilization; of her relation with the United States; of her past and present; of her probable destiny; and of the bearing of her example as a free and independent Republic, upon what may be the destiny of the African race in our own country and elsewhere.

...There are many reasons why a good understanding should exist between Haiti and the United States. Her proximity; her similar government and her large and increasing commerce with us, should alone make us deeply interested in her welfare, her history, her progress and her possible destiny.

Haiti is a rich country. She has many things which we need and we have many things which she needs. Intercourse between us is easy. Measuring distance by time and improved steam navigation, Haiti will one day be only three days from New York and thirty-six hours from Florida; in fact our next door neighbor. On this account, as well as others equally important, friendly and helpful relations should subsist between the two countries....

Now, notwithstanding this plain possibility, it is a remarkable and lamentable fact, that while Haiti is so near us and so capable of being so serviceable to us ... she is the one country to which we turn the cold shoulder.¹

...A deeper reason for coolness between the countries is this: Haiti is black, and we have not yet forgiven Haiti for being black or forgiven the Almighty for making her black. In this enlightened act of repentance and forgiveness, our boasted civilization is far behind all other nations. In every other country on the globe a citizen of Haiti is sure of civil treatment. [Applause] In every other



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The great abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass was the Ambassador to Haiti, and its close friend. Portrait by Sarah J. Eddy (1883).

nation his manhood is recognized and respected. Wherever any man can go, he can go. He is not repulsed, excluded or insulted because of his color.... Vastly different is the case with him when he ventures within the border of the United States. Besides, after Haiti had shaken off the fetters of bondage, and long after her freedom and independence had been recognized by all other civilized nations, we continued to refuse to acknowledge the fact and treated her as outside the sisterhood of nations.

No people would be likely soon to forget such treatment and fail to resent it in one form or another. Not to do so would justly invite contempt. In the nature of the country itself there is much to inspire its people with manliness, courage, and self-respect. In its topography it is wonderfully beautiful, grand,

and impressive. Clothed in its blue and balmy atmosphere it rises from the surrounding sea in surpassing splendor. In describing the grandeur and sublimity of this country, the Haitian may well enough adopt the poetic description of our own proud country:

A land of forests and of rock,
Of deep blue sea and mighty river,
Of mountains reared aloft to mock,
The thunder shock, the lightning's quiver;
My own green land forever.

It is a land strikingly beautiful, diversified by mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers and plains, and contains in itself all the elements of great and enduring wealth. Its limestone formation and foundation are a guarantee of perpetual fertility. Its tropical heat and insular moisture keep its vegetation fresh, green, and vigorous all the year round....

Fortunate in its climate and soil, it is equally fortunate in its adaptation to commerce. Its shoreline is marked with numerous indentations of inlets, rivers, bays, and harbors, where every grade of vessel may

1. However, prior to its independence, Haiti enjoyed a close relationship with the U.S.A. Citizens of all races and classes fought alongside American forces throughout the War of Independence, most prominently, at the 1779 battle of Savannah, Ga., and through the decisive 1781 battle at Yorktown.

The first Treasury Secretary of the U.S., Alexander Hamilton, who was born in the West Indies, was particularly close to Haiti, first devising a tax program that Haitian leader Toussaint L'Ouverture applied to increase production and raise the living standards of the work force of emancipated slaves. Hamilton also drafted a "Constitutional plan" for Haiti, dated Feb. 21, 1799, which, by 1801, became the core of Haiti's new Constitution.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln officially recognized Haiti as independent, and signed a treaty "of amity and commerce" in 1865.

anchor in safety. Bulwarked on either side by lofty mountains rich with tropical verdure from base to summit, its blue waters dotted here and there with the white wings of commerce from every land and sea, the Bay of Port au Prince almost rivals the far-famed Bay of Naples, the most beautiful in the world.

No other land has brighter skies. No other land has purer water, richer soil, or a more happily diversified climate. She has all the natural conditions essential to a noble, prosperous and happy country. Yet, there she is, torn and rent by revolutions, by clamorous factions and anarchies. . . . Port au Prince, a city of 60,000 souls, and capable of being made one of the healthiest, happiest, and one of the most beautiful cities of the West Indies, has been destroyed by fire once in each 25 years of its history. . . . The fault is not with the ignorant many, but with the educated and ambitious few. Too proud to work, and not disposed to go into commerce, they make politics a business of their country. . . .

A Friend to Haiti

While representing the United States in Haiti, I was repeatedly charged in certain quarters, with being a friend to Haiti. I am not ashamed of that charge. I own at once, that the charge is true, and I would be ashamed to have it otherwise than true. . . .

From the beginning of our century until now, Haiti and its inhabitants under one aspect or another, have, for various reasons, been very much in the thoughts of the American people. While slavery existed amongst us, her example was a sharp thorn in our side and a source of alarm and terror. . . .

In thinking of Haiti, a painful, perplexing and contradictory fact meets us at the outset. It is: that negro slavery was brought to the New World by the same people from whom Haiti received her religion and her civilization. No people have ever shown greater religious zeal or have given more attention to the ordinances of the Christian church than have the Spaniards; yet no people were ever guilty of more injustice and blood-chilling cruelty to their fellow men than these same religious Spaniards. . . .

These Spanish Christians found in Haiti a million of harmless men and women, and in less than 60 years they had murdered nearly all of them. With religion on their lips, the tiger in their hearts and the slave whip in their hands, they lashed these innocent natives to toil, death, and extinction. When these pious souls had destroyed the natives, they opened the slave trade with

Africa as a merciful device. . . .

I have, since my return to the United States, been pressed on all sides to foretell what will be the future of Haiti—whether she will ever master and subdue the turbulent elements within her borders and become an orderly Republic. Whether she will maintain her liberty and independence, or, at last, part with both and become a subject of some one or another of the powerful nations of the world by which she seems to be coveted. The question still further is, whether she will fall away into anarchy, chaos, and barbarism, or rise to the dignity and happiness of a highly civilized nation and be a credit to the colored race? I am free to say that I believe she will fulfill the latter condition and destiny. . . .

I can speak of her, not only words of admiration, but words of gratitude as well. She has grandly served the cause of universal human liberty. We should not forget that the freedom you and I enjoy today; that the freedom that 800,000 colored people enjoy in the British West Indies; the freedom that has come to the colored race the world over, is largely due to the brave stand taken by the black sons of Haiti 90 years ago. When they struck for freedom, they builded better than they knew. Their swords were not drawn and could not be drawn simply for themselves alone. They were linked and interlinked with their race, and striking for their freedom, they struck for the freedom of every black man in the world. . . .

In forecasting the future of this people, then, I insist that some importance shall be given to this and to another grand initial fact: that the freedom of Haiti was not given as a boon, but conquered as a right! Her people fought for it. They suffered for it, and thousands of them endured the most horrible tortures, and perished for it. It is well said that a people to whom freedom is given can never wear it as grandly as can they who have fought and suffered to gain it. Here, as elsewhere, what comes easily, is liable to go easily. But what man will fight to gain, that, man will fight to maintain. To this test Haiti was early subjected, and she stood this test like pure gold. . . .

In the face of such facts; in the face of the fact that Haiti still lives, after being boycotted by all the Christian world; in the face of the fact of her known progress within the last 20 years in the face of the fact that she has attached herself to the car of the world's civilization, I will not, I cannot believe that her star is to go out in darkness, but I will rather believe that whatever may happen of peace or war Haiti will remain in the firmament of nations, and, like the star of the north, will shine on and shine on forever.