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Dedicatory address of Hon. Ralph O. Brewster at the unveiling of the memorial to Hannibal Hamlin, Bangor, Maine

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HANNIBAL HAMLIN
AN APOSTLE OF FREEDOM

BY

RALPH O. BREWSTER

GOVERNOR OF MAINE
DEDICATORY ADDRESS

of

HON. RALPH O. BREWSTER
Governor of Maine

AT THE UNVEILING OF THE

Memorial

to

Hannibal Hamlin

BANGOR, MAINE

September 15
1927
Hannibal Hamlin, An Apostle of Freedom

Mr. Chairman, and Friends:

The rugged, homespun State of Maine was never more aptly personified than in the one whose service we commemorate today. In the most tumultuous half-century in the history of America this man stood like a rock. Party, friends, traditions, all faded into insignificance before the principle for which he stood. In his early career when he was first a candidate for the Senate of the United States he failed of election by a single vote because he refused even to lift an eyebrow to indicate any weakening of his stand against the enslavement of his fellowmen.

At the pinnacle of his power, as second in command of the ship of state in the worst storm of its career, with utter selflessness, he used all his influence and powers of persuasion to emancipate the slave and was probably the first to hear the immortal document of Lincoln read to human ears.

Missing the Presidency of the United States by a scant six weeks, he could yet praise the man who had succeeded him and whose limitations he did not then understand. Here was a man who could quietly and calmly return to his Hampden home and accept a comparatively minor though lucrative position from the man who took his place.

Within a year, however, the tragic weakness of his successor was widely known. A fortune in those days was tossed aside without a moment’s hesitation and from his humble farm he issued an arraignment of his successor that attracted the attention of the country once again to the man from Maine. He lived to see the impeachment proceedings defeated by a single vote and that vote furnished by a Senator from Maine and the son of the man from whom Hamlin had received his anti-slavery views. But he returned to power to carry out the course he thought was right.
FREEDOM PERSONIFIED

History as the shadow of great men finds a convincing illustration in the shrine we rear today. The evolution of freedom is the theme to which America's symphony has been set. Three centuries have scarce sufficed for its prelude to be done. Freedom to worship impelled the Pilgrims to what seemed a barren shore. Freedom from foreign rule steeled the arms of the minute men at Concord Bridge. Freedom for their countrymen, however dark their skin, urged Hamlin and his fellows to an infinitely greater sacrifice than had freedom for themselves. Religious tyranny, foreign domination, and human slavery have successively been laid low by the spirit of America in its grapple with the world. Each took a century to conquer. Our century lies before.

It is well carefully to contemplate the relation of history to its great men and to ponder how far its path might have varied if their work had not been done. They may only bring to a focus the aspiration of their fellows, and yet in peculiar measure they must be privileged to give it form. In all great crises a few iron-souled leaders are the rocks upon which men build their castles in the air.

We cannot believe that America would have remained a colony if Washington had not lived, nor that slavery would still be rampant if Lincoln had not appeared. But by them it came. Through them we were enabled to move to loftier heights.

America profoundly appreciates the moral and spiritual qualities of its leaders. America reveres their memory and their service in a most intimate and personal sense. Gratitude wells up for their vision and their sacrifice and regret for the calumny they were without exception compelled to undergo.

But gratitude alone would not warrant the reverence we display nor would our heroes desire that we should idolize their names. In them we find the men we seek ourselves to be. Hannibal Hamlin crystallized in human
form the aspirations and desires of a host of men of Maine and arrested the attention of the nation by the principle for which he stood. To him they yielded allegiance as the magnet draws its steel.

AN UNPOPULAR CAUSE

In the American tragedy of the last century Hannibal Hamlin played a leading role. We cannot now credit that the issue could have been other than it was, but in the first half of the last century politics, business, and even religion were dominated by the slave. "Abolitionist" was the worst term of derision that a man could hear applied. The darkest hour precedes the dawn. The dark cloud of slavery never rested more menacingly upon the horizon of America than in the period from 1840 to 1860 when Hannibal Hamlin appeared upon the scene.

William Lloyd Garrison was being led through the streets of Boston with a rope about his neck while fashionable society jeered him from their steps. Policy and politics had struck an unholy alliance in the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Timid souls in the North desiring peace at any price and business interests seeking to stabilize an unsettled economic life yielded before the menace of an obviously outraged South and were ready not merely politically to traffic with the slavery coalition, but were ready to ostracize socially and politically any of their neighbors who dared resist. Thus does tyranny ever seek to rivet on its chains.

Into this scene strode Hannibal Hamlin from his Oxford county hills after a brief period of discipline along the Penobscot shores. Through twenty years steadfastly and yet calmly he maintained his anti-slavery views. He would never yield one inch. A seat in the Senate of the United States could be lost by a single vote without the tremor of an eyelash. That prize of power was dangled in vain for two months before his waiting gaze if he would deviate but a hair's breadth from his denunciation of
slave power. Turning from the party which had honored him for twenty years,—leaving political associates who appeared to hold the key to power,—joining with groups which seemed to be almost outcasts in our social, economic, and political life,—he calmly cast the die in that memorable speech in the Senate of the United States in 1856 which electrified the country and foretold, as we may now realize, the beginning of the end.

Nor does his life seem to have happened at all by chance. Favored by his birth in the genius-breeding atmosphere of Oxford County in the year 1806—the same year that Lincoln was born upon the other rim of the settled United States—reared upon a soil that has been more fertile of leaders than any similar area in the Western Hemisphere, Hannibal Hamlin experienced a most happy youth.

THE INDIVIDUALISM OF THE FARM

A year at Hebron comprised his formal education beyond the country school, but affords a very inadequate picture of the cultural influences that were brought to play. Even in his household he was thrown in daily contact with perhaps the most cultured Governor that Maine has ever known. Enoch Lincoln was as conspicuous in the field of letters as in the political life of our State,—a dreamer and a poet who yet received the highest political honors at the hands of his fellow-men and failed of making a far more profound impress upon the life of our State and nation only through his untimely end.

One is left, however, in doubt to determine whether the library or the farm exercised a more potent influence in producing the one whose memory we are gathered here today to honor. At each change of scene in this extraordinary career—and changes of scene were very frequent in the turbulent political life in which he played his part—we find him constantly and instinctively returning to the
soil. Back to the farm he came from Hebron upon his brother’s death. Back to the farm he came from a brief clerkship in a Boston merchant house with his ambition for the stage balked by a parent who did not believe in self-determination to that extent. Back to the farm he came from a brief excursion as a surveyor and from his experience as a teacher in a little country school. The law was now exercising upon him its lure and a law book accompanied him in his journeys behind the plow. Back to the farm again he came from the publication of the “Jeffersonian” where he acquired his knowledge of the freedom of the press.

A year in a Portland office completed his preparation for the bar and there under the tutelage of General Samuel Fessenden he settled his anti-slavery views that were to exercise so profound an influence upon the development of the United States. There he formed also a lifelong friendship with that great pioneer in the battle for freedom from the tyranny of strong drink. To these two friendships he owed the victory in the worst fight of his career.

Thence again he went to what was then a real frontier with the pioneering instinct of his fathers still strong within his breast. Curiously enough, he settled in Lincoln, although to remain but for a short time before he came to Hampden where he so long made his home. Prevented for a few years by the limitations of his practice from the possession of a farm, he threw himself into the activities of his community with all that extraordinary energy that was characteristic of his life. Five years in the Legislature following his service as captain of the local rifle company prepared him to endure with equanimity his defeat for Congress by a scant two hundred votes. Three years later the verdict was reversed. He went to Congress and adopted the fashion in clothes that characterized his individuality for the remainder of his days. Now his biographer tells us he was once again able to afford the possession of a farm.
AN APPEAL TO THE PEOPLE

But his restless spirit could not stop. Ideas were crying for leadership. Within three years he was defeated for the Senate of the United States by one vote because he would not deviate in the slightest from his uncompromising anti-slavery views. Repeated opportunities were offered him to indicate some softening, but he would not yield one inch. A year later he returned again to the Legislature and the next year was elected to the Senate of the United States over the virulent opposition of his entire party machine. Three years later he won his re-election in the bitterest fight of his career against almost all the leaders in his party organization in the State.

Before his term was up, in a speech that attracted nationwide attention, he renounced the party of his youth that had honored him with every office within its gift—although over the constant opposition of those who were its leaders in political life in Maine. This presaged a prompt enlistment in the seemingly hopeless fight of those who were definitely espousing the anti-slavery cause.

The pro-slavery section of the dominant party in the nation was then at the zenith of its strength. The Missouri Compromise had been repealed. A glad accord seemed to have been struck between the northern and southern wings of the Democracy that entrenched them indefinitely in power.

That was the signal for Hannibal Hamlin to take his stand and back to the people of his native State he joyously returned to give in every hamlet an accounting of his faith. A hundred speeches a month in every corner of Maine, in the course of a campaign of calumny and abuse from his former party associates who regarded him as a renegade of the deepest dye, were a preparation for a vote of confidence by the people of his State in his triumphant election as the first Republican Governor of Maine. His name went ringing through the nation once again on that September morn.
LOYALTY TO LINCOLN

With the backing of his State he soon returned again to Washington to become one of the recognized Congressional leaders of the anti-slavery group with all the bitter invective to endure that was visited upon one thus placed.

A nomination tendered him that he did not desire was to him but a call to service in an all engrossing cause. With utter self-abnegation he blazed the trail of freedom throughout the union states. Lincoln had no more loyal servant in his long and gloomy fight.

Of his many distinguished services it is not necessary here to speak. Indelibly have they been written upon the hearts and the minds of his countrymen. Sixteen times he was a successful candidate for the suffrage of his fellow-citizens. Defeated once for the Senate and once for the lower House he kept steadfast on his course. Men might change, but eternal principles were guiding him aright.

Cast down from the pinnacle of power because he would not plan for self, he could return to his humble Hampden home and quizzically remark that an attempt to make a politician out of a good farmer must always fail.

He turned aside here for a period to occupy those boundless energies with the development of his native State in whose manufacturing and recreational possibilities he had the most profound faith. A railroad toward Moosehead Lake took up his time until he was again elected to the Senate of the United States after another bitter contest that permitted him to prevail by a single vote.

Twelve years more in the Senate in reconstruction days crowned his service to his country and revealed his breadth of view. A voluntary retirement to his well-loved Bangor home was interrupted by a brief year as Minister to Spain.

PRINCIPLE WAS SUPREME

What a life was there! How worthy of the traditions that have made America great! Unyielding in his devotion to the cause of liberty, breasting calumny and ignominy,
untouched by lust of power or dread of shame, he moved steadfast in the battle toward the goal of what seemed right.

Those two great souls rising from what were then the extremes of the United States recognized instinctively that they were in accord. Both were united by a tie that was far more subtle than association upon this earth.

What a lesson we may gain as we breast the tides of chance! Human slavery and dollar slavery were placed by him in the same class. Honesty as the best policy found no place in the household of his soul. Honesty was far more elemental than considerations of that sort. Unmoved by triumph or defeat, he continued on his course to that safe haven of a service that embraced all his fellowmen.

All his early victories were secured in spite of the hostility of the party machine that perhaps exceeded in virulence anything we since have known. The fires of an unrighteous cause blazed high, but he came through the flames untouched. Machine might win, or machine might fail, but it could not affect his course. Of him might it be said as did the biographer of Blaine: "Jealousy will attack him, as it has the great hearts who have lived before and worn themselves out in the service of the people. But truth crushed to earth rises very rapidly upon our free soil. He has shown too much independence to suit the truckling politicians of the day, and for this they seek to wound him. He spoke and voted against this bill, .... and there are some mousing partisans who seek to knife him, politically, for this alone. Some wonderful statesmen have conceived the idea that nothing should be done but at the behest of the party, and everything else is treason. He has never hesitated to declare his independence of party whenever it claimed his allegiance in a course he could not approve; and this should certainly testify to his political honesty, if nothing further. In all this he is a thorough Republican, however, for if Republicanism is not political freedom, what in the world is it?"

We cannot too often remind ourselves of the lives of
these pioneers. By their compass America must orient its course, if we are to remain steadfast upon that Mayflower voyage that has not yet reached its port.

Slowly the portents again are forming. Spiritual ignorance and greed may once again seek to seize the reins of power. Upon the consecrated leadership of men with the spirit of Hannibal Hamlin must the destiny of a free America most intimately depend. Yet their inspired eloquence is entirely dependent upon ears that will hear and eyes that will see the vision that they bring. The danger in America is not that we may lack leaders who are worthy of any cause, but rather that the minds and ears of the people may be closed by a siren song or by a paean of error dinned incessantly into their undiscriminating ears until the voice of the patriot is silenced in the medley of many sounds. It is well occasionally to remember that Lincoln and Hamlin were the arch demagogues of their day.

FREEDOM—YESTERDAY AND TODAY

A free press means a press free from propaganda of interests of every sort—personal, political, or economic. Freedom of the press means freedom in the printing of the truth. A free republic is dependent upon an informed electorate. If our means of information could be controlled for a generation by special interests of any kind freedom in America would inevitably be at an end. More accurate and intelligent thinking is essential today upon a variety of complicated questions in our political, social, economic, and religious life than ever before in the history of America and there often seems to be less evidence that matured judgments are being sought in the hysterical agitations bred by the sensationalism of the press. Sacco and Vanzetti are already ancient history. In a few brief days the names of the world fliers will have passed from out our sight. Dempsey and Tunney now loom upon the stage. Soon the spotlight of the press will consign all else to the hopeless and ignominious obscurity of an inside page.

No abuse of our editors, however, should blind us to
our faults. Patrons make bootleggers and readers make the press.

In the troubled seas of today each for himself must apply the lessons of Hamlin’s life. Freedom was its theme from the beginning to the end.

Freedom of opportunity for all our fellow-men in enjoying the economic, social, and spiritual rewards of life within the United States must be kept clear before our vision amid whatever morass of material madness may threaten to engulf our world. A new order dawns, born of the vision and the sacrifices of men of other days. A new culture and civilization swim within our ken. If worthy of the traditions of a Hamlin, we shall not let it fail.

Anarchy and its twin progeny found in lawlessness of every sort pale into insignificance before the lofty devotion to principle that the life of Hamlin is calculated to inspire. As Bangor and America flow by this consecrated spot, they may gather renewed inspiration and devotion to the ideals for which he stood. In the granitic soil of Maine we may still breed men with that quality in their fibre that shall assist the United States in the accomplishment of its destiny of service to mankind. The turbulent period of the past century threatens to be eclipsed by the mighty issues that are thronging upon our modern stage. Naked now before the world, America must demonstrate its capacity for leadership of civilization to new heights. All of our material marvels and achievements are not worthy of the sacrifices of those men of other days. Their eyes were placed upon a goal far beyond the lap of luxury in which we seem temporarily to take our rest. Impatient of the restraints and responsibilities that are imposed by material power, Maine and the nation will continue on their course. Slavery in every form must finally disappear, whether in appetites or passions or domination of one’s fellow-men by whatever legal or economic device a new order may bring to pass. Into that period we move rejoicing, guided and inspired by this soul of other days. He stands here like a sentinel to guide and guard our journey on and up to God.
Toward the maelstrom of another struggle, America moves its destined way. The restless lust for power at the expense of one’s fellowmen did not cease at Yorktown or Appomattox but still lurks within our midst. Dollar slavery may be worse than human slavery. It rests not merely upon material possessions but far more subtly upon the idolatry of the common man. A civilization devoted primarily to material aggrandizement is ready to be enslaved. A despot will not be wanting with the opportunity and the cunning to fasten on the chains to the dull and plodding animals lured by lust of sudden gold.

WHAT HAMLIN REPRESENTS

Hannibal Hamlin stands for freedom purchased at the cannon’s mouth. Hannibal Hamlin means conscience controlling ambition at every turn. Hannibal Hamlin is a glittering illustration of service above self. Hannibal Hamlin placed principle above policy in the great issues of his life. Hannibal Hamlin glimpsed the vision of a free America and spurned any suggestion of a compromise that would enslave his soul.

Before this shrine successive generations of Americans may wisely pause and contemplate the lesson that his life seems designed to teach. The smallest part of our heritage is this rich and bountiful land teeming with the miracles that the genius of the last century has poured into our lap. The priceless inheritance of Americans is the urge to make men free. In subtle guise and ever more alluring form, autocracy sets its lure. It always seeks the habiliments of religion and the welfare of its fellow-men until the very elect are deceived. A cross and a crown of thorns are the symbols of a social order that objects to any change. “Abolitionists” and “Black Republican” were terms to make pariahs of men of conscience less than a hundred years ago. It is vain for us to hope that the days of persecution for a righteous cause were ended in 1865. “Leave to them the abuse” was the maxim of Hamlin throughout
those turbulent days. From Hamlin's life we may learn the lesson that violent abuse of a man and his motives does not prove that he is wrong.

And what is the sum of it all? We end as we began. Among all the men who have been bred upon this granitic soil none seems in such especial measure to symbolize those qualities that we like to think are typical of Maine.

Rugged, uncompromising devotion to his conception of the right gave him a half-century of struggle equal to that of any patriot in the history of our land.

LOVE OF HOME

But peace came at last. He lived to see events vindicate the wisdom and the righteousness of the cause for which he fought. He was privileged to return to what was always home.

Bangor was the center although never the circumference of his affections that roamed the world. Here he loved always to return and in the twilight of his days rendered testimony to his most intimate regard.

At a public meeting in old Norumbega Hall in honor of Merchants' Week, he made his last appearance to testify to his love. The picture is both entrancing and inspiring if we may see the scene aright. His old neighbors gathered about him in the ripeness of his years. From his retirement he emerges for the last time to declare once again his devotion for the home of fifty years. “Out of a kind regard for our merchants I come to testify my respects... We have in Bangor a measure of integrity, and enterprise, and honesty equal to any town in the world. I love the city of Bangor. It has been my home for long years. If I can add a word for her prosperity, if I can say Godspeed, it is a pleasure for me to do so. For that purpose I am here tonight—I may add probably the last time I may ever tread these boards. God bless and prosper our city! God bless you all!”

May the citizens of Bangor, of Maine, and of the nation be uplifted by that confidence as they pause upon occasion to worship at this shrine.