

*The following address was delivered by S. Laing Williams (d.1921) as part of the "Jubilee Celebration 1863 – 1913" for fiftieth anniversary of the emancipation of the slaves held at Abraham Lincoln Centre on January 5, 1913. Others who delivered addresses were Louis Brandeis and the Rev. Celia Parker Woolley. S. Laing, the first African American to be admitted to the Chicago Bar Association, and his well-known spouse, Fannie Barrier Williams, joined the interracial All Souls Church (Unitarian) in 1888. In introducing S. Laing, Jenkin Lloyd Jones called the prominent lawyer and social reformer "my friend and parishioner."*

## FIFTY YEARS OF EMANCIPATION

### S. LAING WILLIAMS, CHICAGO

The mighty significance of the Proclamation issued by President Lincoln fifty years ago is scarcely understood and appreciated by the present generation of men and women. We are living today in an entirely different political and social atmosphere. The popular understanding is that the Proclamation freed merely the black men and women held in slavery. The important fact is that there were two kinds of bondsmen held in servitude, the slave and the slaveholder. Emancipation freed both, master and slave. I believe that the time will come when our religious and ethical understanding will become so enlarged and amplified, that the white men who held other men and women as chattels will be more the objects of pity than was the black bondsman. The blight of slavery pulled us all down to the lowest levels of savagery, and after fifty years of freedom we are still endeavoring to get rid of the hate, the prejudice and the injustice that poisoned the whole atmosphere of our national life.

After fifty years of emancipation we are here to rejoice over the long distance we have traveled to this day when we can openly confess our great sin of commission and omission. The man who is mostly concerned as an object of emancipation, is here, and is coming more and more in evidence, and is by all indications destined to play an important part in the future history of this country.

He is fast overcoming the fear and timidity and blight of bondage. The nation is slowly but surely readjusting its feeling and ethical responsibility to this man, who had the nerve and courage to help free himself, and to help in the enlargement of the idea of liberty and American citizenship.

We are here to rejoice that Emancipation has been such a tremendous success, and because the emancipated man, was a man every inch worthy of his freedom. To use a familiar vernacular, the man emancipated has been an everlasting hustler. Though starting from the zero point of dependence and poverty, he has become; a farmer owning and working thousands of acres of land, in all parts of this country. He has become an ever-increasing taxpayer. He has become a builder of churches, of schoolhouses and homes, in every part of the land. He has gone into business, establishing scores of banks and insurance companies, in the management of which there has been no charge of defalcation or mismanagement. His assets today, after fifty years of freedom, are \$900,000,000 in farm lands. He has won high degrees from the best universities of America and Europe. He has become a member of Congress, a United States Senator and a minister to foreign parts representing the United States government, and in no case has he been disloyal to his country. When the monster rebellion, from 1860 to 1865, put this nation in peril, it was the black man, 200,000 strong, who eagerly came to the rescue and saved the nation from ruin.

Is this new citizen of the American Republic, with all these evidences of his efficiency and loyalty, a fit man to be valued at his true worth? Has white America got the courage and the ethical

sense to refrain from doing him injustice? It seems to me, and I, think to most of us, that we cannot succeed in this country in trying to establish a double standard of human excellence. We are bound to hold that a man or woman of nobility must not be crushed in this country because of his complexion. We cannot found a great government on the trivial principle of social equality. Let me deserve and have justice to myself and my family and I will envy no man who wraps himself about in the guise of a social superiority.

In the presence of this company of men and women who make and unmake public opinion, I cannot refrain from appealing in behalf of the present generation of bright, aspiring and deserving young colored men and women, who in vain knock at the door of opportunity for employment. They have been educated in the schools that you have built for them, but when they ask for a chance to use their education or training, in factory or shop or business house, they are ruthlessly thrust back with a cruel denial. Fair play to all classes who are clothed with the mantle of American citizenship should be the watchword of our government. The Negro is destined to make splendid contribution to the forces that make for righteousness in government. A government "of the people, for the people, and by the people," cannot be realized in this country until every man and woman can feel that they are needed and appreciated for what they are worth, and can contribute to the well-being of the entire country.

We make no plea for favors, we ask only for justice. To ask for less would be to discredit our own self-respect.

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