

June 23, 1869

**ADDRESS BY AMOS KENDALL AT THE FIRST  
COMMENCEMENT CEREMONIES OF GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY  
[then called "The National Deaf-Mute College"]**

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN,--

This occasion brings to me a train of interesting memories. About fifteen years ago an adventurer brought to this city five partially educated deaf-mute children, whom he had picked up in the State of New York, and commenced exhibiting them to our citizens in their houses and places of business. He professed a desire to get up an institution for the education of unfortunates of that class in the District of Columbia, raised considerable sums of money, and gathered a school of about sixteen pupils. Apparently to give respectability and permanency to his school, he sought and obtained the consent of some of our leading citizens to become its trustees. It soon appeared, however, that he had no idea of accountability to them, and only wanted their names to aid him in collecting money to be used at his discretion. On being informed by the trustees that such an irresponsible system was inadmissible, he repudiated them altogether.

In the mean time, an impression had gone abroad that he maltreated the children, and it led to an investigation in court, ending in the children being taken from him and restored to their parents, except the five from abroad, who were bound to him who now addresses you as their next friend.

The trustees then had a meeting to determine whether they would abandon the enterprise or go forward. Having in the mean time understood that there were from twenty to thirty of their fellow human beings in the District who, from deafness or blindness, were cut off from all means of education in the ordinary schools, they determined to go forward. They adopted a constitution, raised contributions, hired teachers, and opened a school in a house set apart for that purpose at Kendall Green.

At the session of Congress, in the winter of 1856-57, they procured an act of incorporation, containing a provision for the instruction of the indigent deaf and dumb and blind in the District at the expense of the United States. This act, by allowing the institution to receive pupils from all the States and Territories, and leaving all details as to the objects of study, the arrangement of classes, the length of time the pupils should be taught, to the discretion of the directors, enabled it to expand, should it ever become practicable and desirable, into a great national institution, in which all the higher branches of science, literature, and art should be taught.

The institution was organized under its charter in February, 1857. In May of that year the board of directors was so fortunate as to secure the services of E. M. Gallaudet, Esq., under whose energetic and prudent management, first as superintendent and then as president, the institution rapidly advanced to the front rank of similar institutions, not only in our country, but throughout the world.

At his instance an act of Congress was passed in April, 1864, authorizing the institution to confer degrees and issue diplomas. The time seemed now to have arrived for carrying into effect a project vaguely entertained from the origin of the institution. The State institutions taught little else than those branches of knowledge taught in the common schools. The deaf and dumb in the various States, desirous of attaining or able to attain to a higher degree of culture, were not numerous enough to justify the maintenance of a college in each State for their instruction; but it was believed there were enough of that class in all the States to sustain one such institution. And where could that be so appropriately located as at the seat of the general government? Influenced by these considerations, and in the belief that there were enough deaf-mutes partially educated who panted for higher attainments, and would find means to pay for them, the directors, in the summer of 1864, organized a new department in their institution, denominated the "National Deaf-Mute College." In the mean time they had been relieved by Congress of the charge of the blind, and authorized to take the deaf-mute children of soldiers and sailors.

Thus has our institution been matured; the progress of the college has been most encouraging, and buildings for the accommodation of all its departments are springing up on the confines of your city, an ornament to your surroundings, and a testimony to the benevolence of our people and our government.

In ancient times it required the exertion of Divine power to enable the dumb to speak and the blind to see. The restoration of sight and hearing was the subject of miracles in the time of Christ. It was a part of his holy mission to cause the deaf to hear. We do not claim that there is anything supernatural in the teaching of the dumb in this our day; but is it not the fruit of that love to our neighbor which Christ taught his disciples, and that use of those faculties of the mind which God gave to man from the beginning?

What more noble invention has Christian civilization brought to man than the means devised to teach the blind and the deaf to read and write? And what more godlike charity can there be than in furnishing the means to enable these unfortunate children of darkness and of silence to receive the lights of knowledge and religion, virtually to enable the blind to see and the deaf to hear? And where shall our benevolence stop? Shall we be content to merely fit them for the animal drudgeries of life, or shall we enable those who have aspiring minds to soar into the heights of science and art, to solve the problems of nature and admire the wisdom of God?

But the subject is not merely one of benevolence; it is also one of public policy. How many hands are made permanently useful to society, and how many minds

are awakened to aid in the progress of our age, by the deaf and dumb institutions?

It is an accepted proposition that, the brain being unimpaired, the destruction of one of the senses renders the rest more acute. If the sight be lost, the hearing becomes more distinct; if the hearing be lost, the eye becomes more clear and piercing. Why then may it not be, that persons deprived of hearing are more fitted to excel in some branches of learning than those in the full possession of all their senses? Silence and seclusion are conducive to study and meditation. In the silence of the night the astronomer can best study the heavens. In the silence of the desert and cave the hermit can best meditate on the vanities of life and the attributes of God. And is it unreasonable to hope that men whose atmosphere through life is silence, may, if allowed the benefit of a superior education, become prominent in all those branches of learning to the acquisition of which silence is conducive?

Why may we not expect to find among them our most profound mathematicians and astronomers, our most clear thinkers and chaste writers, our most upright men and devoted Christians?

My dear young friends of the graduating class, although you have been well taught, not only in books, but in your duties to God and man, I desire to say a few words to you at parting.

There is an old book, seemingly considered almost obsolete in some of our colleges and seminaries of learning, and yet it contains the earliest record of the principles and precepts on which are based all order, all law, and all religion that deserves the name or is useful to man. That old book is the Bible. I beg you to read and study it, not merely as religionists, but as men seeking after truth. You will find in it, as you doubtless have found, much that you cannot understand, and some things that may stagger your faith; but you will find this great principle running through it from beginning to end, that obedience--obedience to the law and rightful authority--is the only guarantee of human happiness, national and individual, here and hereafter. The lesson is first taught in the story of Eve and the apple, --whether fact or allegory it matters not, the teaching is the same. It is repeated throughout the book, from Genesis to Revelation, in narratives, in parables, in promises, in threatenings, in songs, in prayers, in prophecies, in famines, in pestilences, in wars, desolation, and captivities. All, all are represented as flowing from disobedience to lawful authority. And is not this book (in some parts the first of all books) worthy of profound study, if it were only to see whence came that principle on which all order, law, and just governments are based, and to trace it through the ages down to our own day?

I know not what your religious opinions are. You go out into the world at an era when society is shaken as by an earthquake. So wonderful have been the inventions and discoveries of modern times that men's faith in everything old seems to be shaken. Strange and absurd theories, reversing the order of God and nature, are broached and find believers.

Remember, young men, that whatever else may change, the moral principles inculcated in the Old Book are unchangeable, and if its religion be called in question, tell the caviller to hold his peace until he is prepared to offer a better. Sweet is the Christian's hope, and none but a devil incarnate would seek to destroy it.

[End]