

Wednesday, June 23, 1869

OPENING ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT EDWARD MINER GALLAUDET AT THE FIRST COMMENCEMENT OF THE NATIONAL DEAF-MUTE COLLEGE (now Gallaudet University):

The occasion which brings us together to-day marks an era in the history of civilization. It stands forth without precedent, a bright and shining beacon in the higher walks of philanthropy and benevolence. The unreflecting and cold indifference that, because of their deprivation of a single sense, degraded a half million of God's rational creatures to the level of the imbecile, has given place within the lapse of a single century to the large-hearted practical philanthropy which first discovered the key at whose magic touch the mental prison-bolts should fly back, and has since declared in all the nations of Christendom that the deaf mute is no longer a pariah of society, but is entitled to the respect of his fellow-men, and is capable of a mental culture as full and as valuable to the community as that of his hearing and speaking brother. From the early days of imperfect results, wherein was claimed for deaf mutes only a development that might fit them to perform the humbler functions of intelligent labor, a growing estimate has been placed upon their capabilities, which to-day advances to the high position of according them the academic degrees of college graduation.

Where, in all the march of educational effort since time began, does a greater century stride appear? From mental midnight, starless even by reason of the thick clouds of prejudice and misapprehension overshadowing it, to the high noon of scholarly honors, revealing bright pathways not a few, wherein the so-called imbecile of a hundred years ago may walk onward and upward to the usefulness and influence and fame. From moral darkness, deeper even than that of heathen ignorance, wherein no proper idea of God or religion could germinate, to the full light of comprehended and accepted Christianity, stimulating the soul to the highest development possible in our world of many clouds, and revealing the glorious hope of ripened fruitage under the rays of the Sun of Righteousness in the land of eternal day. For no class of intelligent beings does education perform so great a work as for the deaf and dumb. The starting point is so much lower, the plane of attainment so nearly as high, and the time spent in school-training so nearly the same with the deaf mute as with the hearing and speaking, that the return purchased by education is actually far greater in the case of the former than that of the latter.

Many of the intellectual phenomena presented in the transition from a state of ignorance to the condition of enlightenment in which the training of the schools leaves the mute are unique, and, in not a few instances, intensely interesting to him who would study the operations of the human mind in its various processes of development. It is not, however, our purpose at this time to consider the education of the deaf mute from a philosophic, or even an economic, standpoint; nor yet to tell of the origin and detail the history of this peculiar work in the world; but rather to relate briefly the story of the particular institution which has invited your attendance upon its first commencement festivities to-day, and to show

what grounds its friends have for thanksgiving to that Power which has crowned their labors with results exceeding in speediness of attainment their most sanguine expectations.

It will be remembered by a few here present that in the year 1856 an adventurer from the city of New York brought with him to Washington five little deaf mute children, which he had gathered from the almshouses and streets of the metropolis. With the aid of a number of benevolent citizens he succeeded in setting up a school and in collecting a half score of deaf and blind children belonging to the District of Columbia. His ostensible object was the establishment of an institution for the education of these classes of persons, and in this he was supported by a number of influential gentlemen, most prominent among whom, both in giving and doing, was the Hon. Amos Kendall, to whom belongs the honor of being named the father and founder of our institution. The sharp discernment of Mr. Kendall soon laid bare the selfish purposes of the adventurer, as well as his entire unworthiness and unfitness to direct the work he was aiming to inaugurate. Good, however, ultimated from his efforts in the formation of an association having as its aim the performance of that work, which he would fain have used as a cloak to cover his selfish ends.

On the 16th of February, 1857, an act of Congress was approved incorporating the "Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind," and authorizing the education at the expense of the United States of indigent mute and blind children belonging to the District of Columbia. On the 13th of June following, in temporary buildings provided by the liberality of Mr. Kendall, the school was opened. During the progress of the first year it was discovered that the provision made by Congress fell very far short of being adequate to meet the objects for which it was granted, and on May 28, 1858, a supplementary act was passed supplying the deficiencies of the first law. This second act also extended the privileges of the institution to children of men in the military or naval service of the United States. In the spring of 1859, Congress up to that time having appropriated nothing for buildings, Mr. Kendall added to his former benefactions by erecting a substantial brick structure and deeding this, together with two acres of ground, to the institution.

Thus far the directors had limited themselves to the work of affording the deaf and the blind of the District of Columbia and the army and navy an education suited to fit them for mechanical and industrial pursuits. But in the annual report for 1862 a purpose was announced, which had been in contemplation from the outset, of extending the scope of the institution so as to include a collegiate course of study, the benefits of which might be enjoyed by deaf mutes from all portions of the country. This extension of the work was plainly suggested by the organic law of 1857, the fifth section thereof permitting the directors to receive pupils from any of the States and Territories of the United States, and no limit being placed in the act on the duration of the course of study. Early in the year 1864, it was determined to realize if possible this national collegiate feature of the institution, and the passage of a law of Congress was secured empowering the board of directors to confer degrees.

On the 28th of June, in this year, (1864,) the college was publicly inaugurated, and on the 2d of July Congress recorded its approval thereof by a liberal appropriation "to continue the work for the accommodation of the students and inmates of the institution." On the 8th of September following, the work of the college was commenced, with seven students, in a temporary building, which had been purchased, together with fourteen acres of land adjoining the original grounds of the institution. But one provision was now lacking to open the college freely to deaf-mute youth from all parts of the country, viz: adequate means for the support of those unable to pay for their education. To meet this want a few benevolent gentlemen were found willing to assume the support of individual students, and the college was enabled to receive all worthy applicants.

This private aid, though temporary in its character, was most important at this particular juncture, and the names of Amos Kendall, William W. Corcoran, George W. Riggs, Henry D. Cooke, Charles Knap, and Benjamin B. French, of the District of Columbia, with William Sprague, of Rhode Island, J. Payson Williston and George Merriam, of Massachusetts, and Edson Fessenden and Thomas Smith, of Hartford, Connecticut, subscribers of free scholarships, will be held in grateful remembrance by the young men who have received the immediate benefit of their generosity and by all the friends of the college.

But during the year 1866 an incident occurred, the effect of which was to secure the very end desired by the officers of the college, and this in a manner wholly providential--quite independent of any plans or endeavors of theirs. A young man, residing in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, who had become totally deaf at the age of fifteen, hearing of the establishment of the college, applied to Hon. Thaddeus Stevens for aid in securing admission. Mr. Stevens, with his well known ready sympathy for the unfortunate, promised the young man his assistance, and addressed the president of the college on the subject. To his surprise he learned that there was no law authorizing the free admission of students to the college save from the District of Columbia and from the army and navy. "What," said he, with no little indignation in his tone, "have we been appropriating the money of the United States to build and sustain a college for the deaf mutes of the country, into which a deaf mute from my district cannot be admitted?" On being informed that such was the fact of the defective legislation on the subject, he said, "We will very soon remedy this error, and the young man from Gettysburg shall be as free to enter your college as he who comes from the District of Columbia." This resolution Mr. Stevens carried into effect, by procuring the passage, on the 2d of March, 1867, of a proviso attached to the appropriation for the support of the institution, that deaf mutes, properly qualified, not exceeding ten in number, should be admitted to the collegiate department of the institution from any of the States and Territories of the United States, on the same terms and conditions as had been previously prescribed for residents of the District of Columbia.

Thus did the silent appeal of the Gettysburg boy open the door for the higher education of his brothers in misfortune throughout the land. Thus did the veteran

"leader of the House" of the fortieth Congress, in the midst of the heavy cares of state, which were exhausting his failing strength, find time and vigor enough to secure from the government of his country a boon for the deaf and dumb, the efficacy of which shall endure, as we trust and believe, till that day of joy and peace when the "lame man shall leap as an hart and the tongue of the dumb shall sing."

While private benevolence has performed an important part in the inception of our college work, to the Congress of the United States belongs the honor of establishing and endowing the institution in a manner worthy of the government of a great nation.

Our present distinguished minister to Great Britain, after describing, in his world-renowned history of the United Netherlands, the depression and distress which prevailed throughout the low countries in the closing year in the sixteenth century, records a notable event in the following words: "And thus at every point of the doomed territory of the little commonwealth, the natural atmosphere in which the inhabitants existed was one of blood and rapine. Yet during the very slight lull which was interposed in the winter of 1585-'86 to the eternal clang of arms in Friesland, the estates of that province, to their lasting honor, founded the University of Franeker; a dozen years before, the famous institution at Leyden had been established as a reward to the burghers for their heroic defense of the city. And now this new proof was given of the love of the Netherlanders, even in the midst of their misery and their warfare, for the more humane arts. The new college was well endowed from ancient church lands, and not only was the education made nearly gratuitous, while handsome salaries were provided for the professors, but provision was made by which the poorer scholars could be fed and boarded at a very moderate expense; the sum to be paid by these poorer classes of students being less than three pounds sterling a year. The voice with which this infant seminary of the muses first made itself heard above the din of war was but feeble, but the institution was destined to thrive, and to endow the world for many successive generations, with the golden fruits of science and genius."

If the world justly applauds this act of the estates of Friesland in providing the means of higher education for the youth of the state in general, at a time when it was perhaps least to be expected, shall not more emphatic commendation be given in the pages of history to that government which, having in the first year of gigantic civil war furnished means for the rich endowment of colleges in every quarter of its domain, was ready, in the closing year of the exhausting struggle, while laboring under the pressure of enormous and unprecedented taxation, to assume the burden of maintaining a college for a class once deemed incapable of even the lowest degree of education?

In this college, designed to be national in the bestowal of its advantages, are already assembled students from every quarter of the land. From the Keystone State have come six; from New England seven; four from the Empire State; while the States of the West have sent seventeen; and eight have come from the

South. These, with six from the District of Columbia, form an aggregate of forty-eight youth, representing sixteen States of the Union, who have received the benefits for a longer or shorter period of the course of study opened to them.

To those who are disposed to inquire what range of acquirement in the liberal arts is open to the deaf and dumb, it may be stated that deafness, though it be total and congenital, imposes no limits on the intellectual development of its subjects, save in the single direction of the appreciation of acoustic phenomena. The curriculum, therefore, in our college has been made to correspond in general to what is known as the academical course in the best American colleges, with the design of combining the elements of mathematics, science, history, philology, linguistics, metaphysics, and ethics, in such a manner as to call into exercise all the leading faculties of the mind, and to prepare the way for whatever line of intellectual effort may be suggested by the varying tastes and talents of individuals.

To those who are inclined to ask what avenues of usefulness are open to well-educated deaf mutes, it may be responded that even before the completion of the course of the first graduating class have students of the college performed no inconsiderable service to literature by the translation of foreign publications. Already have some of them become valued contributors to public journals; already has an important invention in a leading branch of science been made by one of their number, while others have been called to fill honorable positions in the departments of the government and as teachers in the State institutions for the deaf and dumb.

But we do not on this occasion feel the need of verbal argument to prove the desirableness of collegiate education for the deaf and dumb.

The government of the United States, in that spirit of enlightened liberality which enacted the law for the endowment of agricultural colleges in the several States, has determined that the experiment of affording collegiate education to deaf mutes shall be tried. Funds necessary for the purchase of lands, the erection of buildings and the employment of competent professors, have been provided. Youth of the class designed to be benefited have eagerly sought to avail themselves of the offered privileges, and to-day, in the persons of our first graduating class, go forth the *living* arguments which shall prove whether the government has done well or ill in their behalf. They, and those who shall follow them year by year, must answer the question, "What can educated deaf mutes do?"--must show whether they can render to society an adequate return in the labor and influence of the manhood for the favors they have received at its hands during the formative and receptive years of youth.

In the belief that the result will abundantly vindicate the wisdom of Congress in founding and sustaining our college, shall we, its officers, go forward in our work--placing our trust in that Providence which has signally seconded our efforts thus far; and relying on the benevolence of an enlightened Christian people, making itself effective through the acts of their national legislators, to perfect and

settle on foundations which may endure till time shall be no more the work they have nobly begun.

"It may not be our lot to wield
The sickle in the ripened field;
Nor ours to hear on summer eves
The reaper's song among the sheaves;

[Yet] where our duty's task is wrought
In unison with God's great thought,
The near and future blend in one;
And whatsoever is willed is done."

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See also:

http://saveourdeafschools.org/columbia_institution_1869.pdf

And:

http://saveourdeafschools.org/amos_kendall_address_1869.pdf