

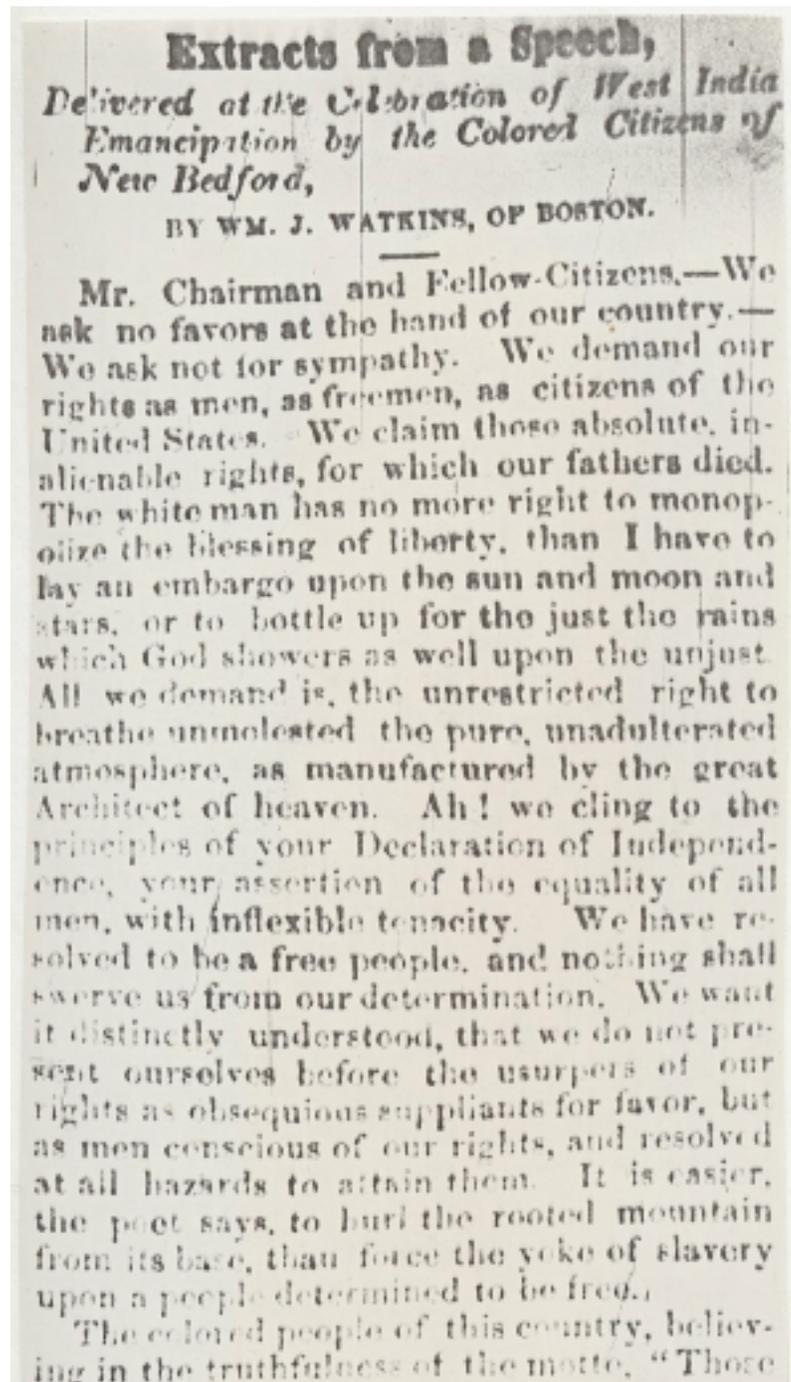
EXTRACTS from a SPEECH,

*Delivered at the Celebration of West India
Emancipation by the Colored Citizens of
New Bedford,*

BY WM. J. WATKINS, OF BOSTON.

Mr. Chairman, and Fellow-Citizens,—We ask no favors at the hand of our country.— We ask not for sympathy. We demand our rights as men, as freemen, as citizens of the United States. We claim these absolute, inalienable rights, for which our fathers died. The white man has no more right to monopolize the blessing of liberty, than I have to lay an embargo upon the sun and moon and stars, or to bottle up for the just the rains which God showers as well upon the unjust. All we demand is, the unrestricted right to breathe unmolested the pure, unadulterated atmosphere, as manufactured by the great Architect of heaven. Ah! we cling to the principles of your Declaration of Independence, your assertion of the equality of all men, with inflexible tenacity. We have resolved to be a free people, and nothing shall swerve us from our determination. We want it distinctly understood, that we do not present ourselves before the usurpers of our rights as obsequious suppliants for favor, but as men conscious of our rights, and resolved at all hazards to obtain them. It is easier, the poet says, to hurl the rooted mountain from its base, than force the yoke of slavery upon a people determined to be free.

The colored people of this country, believing in the truthfulness of the motto, “Those



who would be free, themselves must strike the blow," recently assembled in a National Convention, and we told the people of the United States just what we want, and what we intend to have; and, in defiance of the Baltimore inquisition, we *agitated* the question which is to-day rocking this Union from centre to circumference; and we intend to agitate, and *agitate*, and AGITATE, until, like the widow in the gospel, we weary, by our continued agitation, the unjust judge, and wring from him the determination, that "although he fears not God, nor regards man, yet he will avenge us of our adversary, lest we weary him." And that is the way, and the only way, to stop the agitation of this vexed question.

"Go! tame the wild torrent, and stem with a straw,
The proud surges that sweep o'er the sands that confine them
But presume not again to give freemen a law,
Nor strive with the chains they have broken to bind them."

Mr. Chairman, if the people of these United States were what they profess to be, viz., ardent devotees at the shrine of Liberty; if they really sympathized with the oppressed, this day would be observed throughout the land as a day of thanksgiving unto God.— Yes! Hallelujahs loud and long would be heard resounding upon every hill-top and in every valley of this Republic, from the Madawaska to the Rio Grande. The orators of the nation, her priests and poets, would vie with each other in words of adulation, and

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in glorification of the day on which eight hundred thousand men and women and children burst the shackles that confined them, leaped forth into the sunlight, and sang, for the first time, the soul-inspiring anthem of the free. Where are your popular orators to-day? Where are your chief priests, those who say they are called of God to minister in holy things? They are not here. They would not be caught in this company for the world, for the very obvious reason, that their sympathies flow in another direction. You know some men's actions and opinions are "controlled by the hand that feeds them."— A man or a woman must be in possession of a backbone that is not of gutta-percha quality, to enable them to stand on such a platform as this without falling. Some men talk very loudly about "backbone," when in Faneuil Hall, and eliciting the rapturous plaudits of the multitude; but, after all, they show sometimes that the vertebrae *they own is of the whalebone order.*

I had the honor, Mr. Chairman, to appear before a Joint Committee of the Legislature of this State, last February, in behalf of a number of our colored citizens, who petitioned for the grant of a charter to form a military company. The Committee, composed of the three political parties, listened to our remarks as though they really believed us to be endowed with the same mental, moral and physical conformation with themselves. We

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waited in anxious suspense for several weeks for the Report of that Committee, as we anticipated at least a minority report from the Free Soil member, in favor of granting us our petition. But, lo! we awoke one morning, and found that all of them—Free Soiler and all—had deemed it “inexpedient” to give us our rights. Well, we tried to swallow that pill. We thought we would wait with patience, till the Convention appointed by the liberal men of Massachusetts to revise the Constitution assembled. With expectations of a somewhat sanguine character, we appeared, a few weeks ago, before a Committee of that Convention. They, too, presented a report adverse to our petition. The subject came up in the Convention, in due form, for consideration. The Free Soil party was there in all its glory. It was represented by such men as Charles Sumner, Henry Wilson, Anson Burlingame, and a host of eloquent *talkers* in the cause of liberty. I am here to-day, sir, in part, for the purpose of criticising the Free Soil party for its action in that Convention. It is high time these gentlemen were beginning to show forth their faith by their works. If they are our real friends, we want them near unto us, and round about us, when their proximity will be advantageous to *us*, as well as to themselves. We want them in the storm; we can do exceedingly well in the sunshine. We are told they sympathize with us in our affliction.—

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I believe they do; but we want that sympathy manifested in something more tangible than lacteal demonstrations. *We demand our rights as citizens of these United States.* It is a settled fact—a fact as fixed as the laws that govern the universe—that in this land where the Lord has placed us, we intend to die and be buried. And if we are dumb, when we are gravely told that we are not citizens of the United States, as we were in the Constitutional Convention the other day, we deserve to be banished to Liberia, (“with our own consent,”) and, O! horrible fate, under the auspices of the American Colonization Society!! I, for one, sir, will not be ostracised by Whigs, or Democrats, or Free Soilers, without protesting against the ostracism; I will not submit to a *quiet* excommunication from the pale of American citizenship. I have the right, and I shall exercise it fearlessly and boldly, and above-board, to call in question the validity of the process by which I am made a pilgrim and a stranger; the *modus operandi* by which I am made an alien in the land of my birth. Now, sir, the speeches of our Free Soil friends in the Convention, upon the merits of our petition, were admirable specimens of rhetoric. Those honorable gentlemen talked very eloquently about our fathers having fought for liberty; about Crispus Attucks’ blood being the first that was shed for American Independence.— They created a “sensation,” and there they

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left us. What man among them vindicated our rights as citizens of the United States?— Was not the militia law the veritable bugbear that frightened them, and padlocked their mouths? Verily, verily, I say unto you, such was the case. Did any of them maintain our right, under the Constitution of the United States, to be enrolled in common with white men in the militia? Not one. Rufus Choate laid down the law, and Charles Sumner, with all his “backbone,” bowed acquiescence; and Henry Wilson said Amen, tho’ perhaps reluctantly.

But, perhaps some one asks himself the question, “What could our Free Soil leaders, or any body else do, when the United States Militia Law expressly declares that ‘every able-bodied *white* male citizen shall be enrolled in the militia,’—thus virtually exempting the black man?” Well, I will answer that question by telling you what I could do, and what I would have done, had I had an opportunity. When Rufus Choate told me I was not a citizen of the United States, I should have proudly and imperatively demanded something more than his mere *ipse dixit*. I should have looked in his eagle eye, and asked him whether or not the Constitution of the United States knows a man by the color of his skin, the texture of his hair, or the symmetry of his physical organism? If he had deigned to answer me—and I suppose he would—he would have

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answered me in the negative. I should then, with all my imperfections, have endeavored to argue the unconstitutionality of the Militia Law, if, as he says, it prohibits me, on account of my color, from serving in the militia. But I should have been told, that the Constitution gives to Congress the power to organize the militia. Yes; but where does it confer the right to ostracise the black man in the organization? I know Congress has the power to organize, and discipline the militia; but where does she obtain the right to declare that the militia shall be composed of "white" citizens alone? Such proscription is in direct contravention of the whole tenor of the Constitution, unless complexional distinction is therein recognized. The organization of the militia does not imply the proscription of the black man, any more than the proscription of the white man. Congress has no right to enact any law that conflicts with the Constitution, and any law, if law it can be called, so enacted, must be unconstitutional.

Now, our Free Soil friends know this very well, and they could have expressed it much more forcibly than I can do. What could they have done? Why, they could have consistently maintained this ground:—We have met here to revise the Constitution of Massachusetts. The mischievous interloper, "white," shall be expurgated from our statute-book, and *our* citizens shall, if they

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please, be enrolled in the general militia.—
And if the crisis shall arrive when the militia shall be summoned into action, to defend “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honors.” and our colored citizens shall not be allowed to participate in this defence, in common with their white fellow-citizens, why, then, we will carry the whole matter up to the Supreme Court, and have the constitutionality of the law tested. They should have taken for their text, “*Fiat justitia, ruat caelum,*” preached from that, and thrown expediency to the winds. But they did not do it. They preferred to trim their sails to catch the popular gale, by virtually declaring, in common with Whigs and Democrats, that we cannot legally be enrolled in the militia. *O tempora! O mores!*

“Give me th’ avowed, erect, and manly foe,
Open, I can meet, perhaps return his blow;
But of all the plagues, kind Heaven, thy wrath can
send,
Save, O save me, from a doughface friend!”

The colored people of Massachusetts have worked faithfully for their political friends. We have been threatened with starvation, with a loss of the means of subsistence; but our course has been marked by unbending integrity, by an inflexible adherence to principle. In a word, we have not suffered our opinions to be controlled by the “hand that

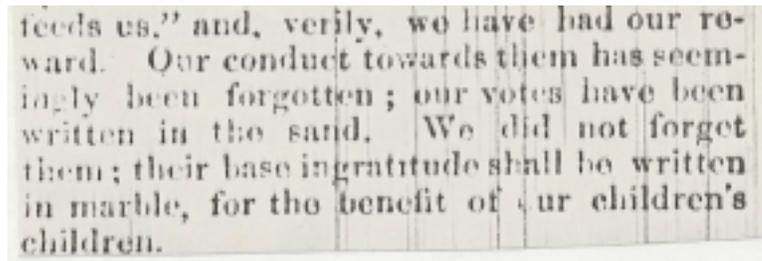
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