

EQUAL SUFFRAGE: ADDRESS FROM THE COLORED CITIZENS OF NORFOLK, VA TO THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES (1865)

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As the Civil War was coming to a close, and fresh off passage of the 13th Amendment, African Americans began to gather to give voice to their understandings of the nature of freedom, citizenship, equality, and their place in the post-Civil War America. A thousand African American men formed the Colored Monitor Union Club in Virginia and pressed for full rights of citizenship. After being turned away from trying to vote in Virginia, a group of them gathered to write this address in which they articulated a vision of freedom and the franchise that would find its way into the first federal civil rights legislation, the 14th Amendment, and, eventually, the 15th Amendment.

Excerpt:

Fellow Citizens:

We are exercising our assembly rights to weigh the conditions of African Americans in the South, especially the right to vote. The undersigned have been appointed a committee, by a public meeting of the colored citizens of Norfolk, held June 5th, 1865, in the Catharine Street Baptist Church, Norfolk, Va., to lay before you a few considerations touching the present position of the colored population of the southern States generally, and with reference to their claim for equal suffrage in particular.

We ask for the rights of citizenship; this will help promote our prosperity. We do not come before the people of the United States asking an impossibility; we simply ask that a Christian and enlightened people shall, at once, concede to us the full enjoyment of those privileges of full citizenship, which, not only, are our undoubted right, but are indispensable to that elevation and prosperity of our people, which must be the desire of every patriot.

This is not merely a white man's country; we've been here, too. ...It is a common assertion, by our enemies, that "this is a white man's country, settled by white men, its government established by white men, and shall therefore be ruled by white men only." How far are these statements true and the conclusion reasonable? Every school-boy knows that within twelve years of the foundation of the first settlement at Jamestown, our fathers as well as yours were toiling in the plantations on James River, for the sustenance and prosperity of the infant colony. Since then in New England, New York and the middle Atlantic States, our race has borne its part in the development of even the free North, while throughout the sunny South, the millions upon

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millions of acres, in its countless plantations, laden with precious crops, bear witness to the unrequited industry of our people....

We have fought loyally for our country, both in the American Revolution and the Civil War. Again, is it true that this government owes its existence entirely to white men? Why, the first blood shed in the Revolutionary war was that of a colored man, Crispus Attucks, while in every engraving of Washington's famous passage of the Delaware, is to be seen, as a prominent feature, the woolly head and dusky face of a colored soldier, Prince Whipple. ...Then what has been the behavior of our people during the past struggle? ...Over 200,000 colored men have taken up arms on behalf of the Union...and on a hundred well fought fields, have fully proved their patriotism and possession of all the manly qualities that adorn the soldier.

We are denied many of our civil rights in the South. ...In many of the southern States, it is still a crime for colored men to learn or be taught to read, and their children are doomed to ignorance; there is no provision for insuring the legality of our marriages; we have no right to hold real estate; the public streets and the exercise of our ordinary occupations are forbidden us unless we can produce passes from our employers, or licenses from certain officials; in some States the whole free negro population is legally liable to exile from the place of its birth, for no crime but that of color; we have no means of legally making or enforcing contracts of any description; we have no right to testify before the courts in any case in which a white man is one of the parties to the suit we are taxed without representation, and, in short, so far as legal safeguards of our rights are concerned, we are defenseless before our enemies....

To improve our situation, all we ask is for the right to vote. Fellow citizens, the performance of a simple act of justice on your part will reverse all this; we ask for no expensive aid from military forces, stationed throughout the South, overbearing State action, and rendering our government republican only in name; give us the suffrage, and you may rely upon us to secure justice for ourselves, and all Union men, and to keep the State forever in the Union....

Please listen to our concerns. In concluding this address, we would now make a last appeal to our fellow-citizens of all classes throughout the nation. Every Christian and humane man must feel that our demands are just; we have shown you that their concession is, for us, necessary, and for you expedient. We are Americans, we know no other country, we love the land of our birth and our fathers, we thank God for the glorious prospect before our country, and we believe that if we do but obey His laws He will yet enthrone her high o'er all the nations of the earth, in glory, wealth and happiness.... With these reflections we leave our case in the hands of God, and to the consideration of our countrymen.

Signed, on behalf of the colored people of Norfolk and vicinity, June 26th, 1865.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**