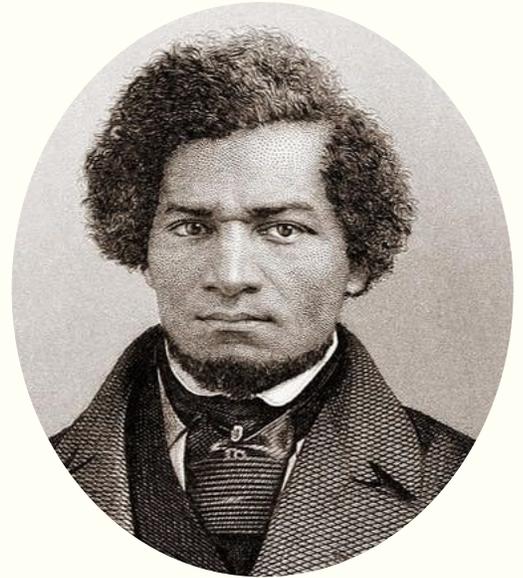


DECORATION DAY SPEECH DELIVERED IN UNION SQUARE

ON MEMORIAL DAY, MAY 31, 1878

BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Fellow-citizens, I am not here to fan the flame of sectional animosity, to revive old issues, or to stir up strife between races; but no candid man, looking at the political situation of the hour, can fail to see that we are still afflicted by the painful sequences both of slavery and of the late rebellion. In the spirit of the noble man whose image now looks down upon us we should have "charity toward all, and malice toward none." In the language of our greatest soldier, twice honored with the Presidency of the nation. "Let us have peace." Yes, let us have peace, but let us have liberty, law, and justice first. Let us have the Constitution, with its thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments, fairly interpreted, faithfully executed, and cheerfully obeyed in the fullness of their spirit and the completeness of their letter. Men can do many things in this world, some easily and some with difficulty; but there are some 'things which men cannot do or be. When they are here they cannot be there. When the supreme law of the land is systematically set at naught; when humanity is insulted and the rights of the weak are trampled in the best by a lawless power; when society is divided into two classes, as oppressor and oppressed, there is no power, and there can be no power, while the instincts of manhood remain as they are, which can provide solid peace. I do not affirm that friendly feeling cannot be established between the people of the North and South. I do not say that between the white and colored people of the South, the former slaves and former masters, friendly relations may not be established. I do not say that Hon. Rutherford B. Hayes, the lawful and rightful President of the United States, was not justified in stepping to the verge of his constitutional powers to conciliate and pacify the old master class at the South; but I do say that some steps by way of conciliation should come from the other side.



**STATUE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN IN
UNION SQUARE DECORATED FOR
MEMORIAL DAY IN 1876**

TAGS:

Inequality

American Identity

DECORATION DAY SPEECH BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS – MAY 1, 1865

SOURCE

This speech was delivered by Frederick Douglass on May 30th, 1878 in Union Square

BACKGROUND

Written by Dr. Leslie Harris, Professor of History at Northwestern University

In May 1878, Frederick Douglass delivered a Decoration Day speech in Union Square. Decoration Day, the precursor to today's Memorial Day, emerged among African Americans in Charleston, S.C., who on May 1, 1865 gathered at the Race Course, the antebellum horse racing track that was converted by the Confederate Army into a prison holding Union prisoners of war, 257 of whom died and were buried in unmarked graves. But by 1878, the meaning of the war was rapidly changing, and the meaning of Decoration Day with it. Northerners turned from the project of emancipation, citizenship and racial equality for former slaves and all blacks, to an explicit embrace of former Confederates and at least an implicit alignment with southern policies of disfranchisement and white supremacy.

Frederick Douglass' speech is a fiery call to remember the basis for the Civil War. He calls on the North in particular to remember that it was a "war of ideas...a war between old and new, slavery and freedom, barbarism and civilization." "Let us have peace," says Douglass, "but let us have liberty, law, and justice first."

Frederick Douglass's 1878 call to defend the highest ideals of the Civil War would not convince the majority of whites to continue the fight for black rights. The withdrawal of federal troops from the south the year before had left the political rights of African Americans in the hands of a region dedicated to reinstating white supremacy. The 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* would make legal "separate but equal" Jim Crow segregation, which was separate and unequal. It would take another century of struggle for the nation to begin to heed Douglass's call to defend the full meaning of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

As you read the source consider how it informs these questions:

- What are important qualities of being American that are important to Frederick Douglass
- What are the tensions between the ideals and reality that Frederick Douglass observed in his speech?

HISTORICAL NOTES

Definitions of terms used in the source.

13th Amendment: Ratified in 1865, abolished the practice of slavery in the United States

14th Amendment: Ratified in 1868, granted citizenship to all persons "born or naturalized in the United States," including former enslaved persons, and provided all citizens with "equal protection under the laws."

15th Amendment: Ratified in 1870, the amendment prohibited states from disenfranchising voters "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

"Noble man, whose image now looks down upon us": Frederick Douglass is referring to the statue of Abraham Lincoln that is erected in Union Square.