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Union Square and the Sanitary Commission.

ADDRESS

BY THE

HON. SAMUEL B. RUGGLES,

AT UNION SQUARE,

ON THE OPENING OF THE

METROPOLITAN FAIR,

APRIL 8TH, 1864.



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1864.

THE "Ladies' Association of the City of New York" for the Metropolitan Fair, in aid of the United States Sanitary Commission, was organized by the appointment of an Executive Committee, consisting of:—

MRS. HAMILTON FISH, PRESIDENT.

MRS. DAVID LANE, FIRST VICE PRESIDENT.

MRS. A. V. STOUT, SECOND VICE PRESIDENT.

MRS. ELLEN R. STRONG, TREASURER.

MRS. JOHN SHERWOOD, SECRETARY.

MISS CATHERINE NASH, ASSISTANT SECRETARY.

MRS. MARSHALL O. ROBERTS,
" FRANCIS LIEBER,
" WILLIAM H. VAN BUREN,
" RICHARD M. HUNT,
" JONATHAN STURGES,
" ALFRED SCHERMERHORN,
" DAVID DUDLEY FIELD,
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" BENJAMIN NATHAN,
" JOHN JACOB ASTOR,
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MRS. GURDON BUCK,
" OGDEN HOFFMAN,
" JAMES B. COLGATE,
" JOHN A. DIX,
" ALEX. HAMILTON, JR.,
" THOMAS F. MEAGHER,
" PHILIP HAMILTON,
" FREDERICK BILLINGS,
" MORRIS KETCHUM,
" AUGUST BELMONT,
" SAMUEL B. SCHIEFFELIN,
MISS KATHERINE HONE,

MRS. JOHN JAY.

The Common Council of the city having permitted the erection of a portion of the buildings for the Fair on Union Square, they were

duly inaugurated on the 8th of April, 1864, in presence of an immense assemblage.

CHARLES KING, LL. D., President of Columbia College, having been called to the chair, the Rev. MORGAN DIX, D. D., Rector of Trinity Church, solemnized the occasion by appropriate prayers; after which, Hon. SAMUEL B. RUGGLES, by special invitation of the Ladies' Committee, delivered the following address:—

UNION SQUARE

AND

THE SANITARY COMMISSION.



A FEW years ago, the emperor Nicholas of Russia, in an autograph letter on political matters to Victoria, Queen of England, after addressing her Majesty as a sovereign, asked leave to appeal to her in her higher capacity and nobler attributes as a woman. Instructed by an example so gallant and lofty, let me now tender to the women—the high-minded and noble-hearted women of New York—my thanks for the honor they have shown me on this most interesting occasion. The Great Metropolitan Fair, the splendid offspring of their energy and perseverance, has already been inaugurated, and formally ushered into the world; and it now only remains for me in their behalf, and by their invitation, briefly and imperfectly to announce the reasons which led them to select the present locality on “Union Square” for one of the scenes of their noble and unrivalled pageant.

It may not be fully known to all in this vast assembly that we now stand on ground pre-eminently classic and historical, and consecrated by some of the most eventful scenes in our Revolutionary and national history. Immediately at our feet, and nearly bisecting the present elliptical enclosure of Union Square, the antiquary may find the lines of the veritable highway, old as New Amsterdam, and leading out from the Bowery of the brave and gallant Governor Stuyvesant, to the rural and leafy retreats of the Dutch burghers at Bloomingdale and Harlem. It was in those delicious abodes, that the early inhabitants of the Dutch colony found those surpassing "creature comforts" which their fair descendants have this day disinterred, dug up, and reproduced in that unsurpassable apartment known as "the Knickerbocker Kitchen." Within that sacred enclosure let all repair who would fain reascend the stream of time, and creep back for a couple of centuries into antiquity. There they will be fondly ministered unto by angels in Dutch attire, superadding all the elegance and grace of modern refinement to the sterling worth and solid virtue of those most excellent and trusty ancestors, whose blood they inherit, and whose names they so worthily and proudly bear. But, let us leave this scene of temptation, and get back, if we can, into our ancient road.

It was in the darkest hour of 1776, more than a century after the capture of New Amsterdam from the Dutch, that an overpowering English force compelled the broken and nearly disheartened army of Washington to retire over this very road into Westchester, and thence by his most masterly but melancholy retreat through the Jerseys. But, thanks to the God of Battles and the Architect of Nations, Trenton, and Saratoga, and Monmouth, and Yorktown were yet in reserve, enabling our patriot chief, after seven long years of fearful struggle, to return and reconduct the army of the Revolution down this very road, into the despoiled and desolated city that had so long lain captive. Such are the revolutionary lights and shadows of the Bloomingdale Road, upon which the statue of the Father of his Country now sits steadily and solemnly looking.

The miseries of the war of the Revolution were by no means terminated at the peace. Need we record the dismal story of the jealous and distracted, bankrupt and ruined States, practically disunited for every high political purpose, and just ready to fall to pieces, under that most miserable apology for a government denominated the "Old Confederation?" What American does not know and fully appreciate the magnificent civil achievement of 1787, the master-piece of our

own peerless Hamilton and his immortal associates, who, gathering up these discordant and disorderly fragments, and uniting them firmly by a common Constitution, under one common sovereignty, brought into being the American Union, and sent out the proudly united Republic to claim its height and rank in the great family of civilized nations! Under the magic hand of creative political genius, the old vessel of State, that rickety flotilla of shallops feebly lashed side by side, was transformed and transmuted into a line-of-battle ship, symmetrical and majestic, bearing aloft the ensign of the Great Republic, and announcing to the world the transcendent sovereignty of the American Union, then, and now, and for ever, undivided and indivisible.

It is a curious historical coincidence, that among the illustrious architects who founded our Government on the basis of the Constitution, was Gouverneur Morris, excelled by few, if any, of his colleagues for breadth of vision and splendor of creative genius, especially in things material—and that to his lot it should afterward fall to plan the fundamental framework of the city we inhabit. The self-same Gouverneur Morris who gave the finishing touch to the draft of the Constitution, as Commissioner of the State of New York, under the act of 1807, stamped indelibly upon the map of this our

Island of Manhattan the large public square known as "Union Place." With eagle eye piercing the future, Mr. Morris selected the very spot on which we are now standing, then far away from the dust and din of the city, to become the very centre and heart of the great metropolis—discerned by his prophetic vision, to bear the name, and to be for ever consecrated to the memory, of that glorious and immortal Union which he had labored so successfully to call into being.

The national sovereignty of the American Republic, as established in 1787, was bounded westward by the Mississippi River. But twenty years had not elapsed, before the sagacious and far-seeing policy of Mr. Jefferson annexed to that sovereignty the vast intervening continental expanse between the Mississippi and the Pacific. This splendid act of statesmanship trebled at once the area of the Republic, and vastly augmented the highest elements of its political dignity and power. No longer a narrow belt of States looking out on the Atlantic, with a trackless wilderness in the rear, the nation rose, at a single bound, to the transcendent rank of a great continental power, commanding the two great oceans of the globe. Our city, the predestined commercial focus of the nation, became at once a great continental metropolis, awaiting only the

inevitable progress of the immense interior to exhibit the vast plenitude of its power.

As early as 1834, thirty years ago, it became evident, at least to some of us, that Union Square, as the type and exponent of a great continental Union, was much too small to fulfil its legitimate office, and it became necessary to add to its then irregular area the two large triangular tracts of land on the east and on the west. By that conjunction the whole was fused into one common mass, and then re-issued to the city and to the nation in its present spacious and rectangular condition. The venerable old Bloomingdale Road, the witness of the defeats and of the triumphs of Washington, by a little gentle and kindly persuasion, was deflected just a trifle from its ancient course, thereby permitting the erection of the iron fence on the outer line of the present elliptical and symmetrical area. Enclosing nothing but open space, the very creation of God himself, subject to no decay, and impervious to the "tooth of time," it is destined, like the square of imperial Trajan in the Eternal City, to remain for all coming time the type of our continental Union, and the bright and imperishable jewel of the city.

It is an interesting fact, and made more so by our recent history, that when this elliptical form of enclosure was proposed, cutting off large open spaces at

the four corners, to be occupied by arid pavements, the plan was seriously objected to, and was only adopted after the earnest assurances of its advocates that in the great public exigencies of the country, requiring the assemblage of large masses of our citizens in public meetings, the time might come, and probably would come, when these large open spaces would be needed. Has not the history of the present rebellion most singularly and fully verified that prediction? Can any man or woman in this immense assembly ever forget the eventful and memorable April of 1861—the parricidal and audacious attack on Sumter—the dark and devilish treason which avowedly, and with cold-blooded and accursed contrivance, “sprinkled blood in the face of the people,” to goad its wretched votaries into fury and madness? Still less can we cease to remember the sublime and all but instantaneous assembling of the four monster meetings that were congregated at once in this same square, in these same spacious national openings, to find a theatre adequate to the utterance of the national voice; a fitting altar for the solemn and undying vow of those multitudinous masses to devote all of life, of fortune, and all that was dear, to defend and preserve for themselves and their descendants, for ever, the precious and sacred Union which they had inherited from their fathers. Still less shall we ever forget the scenes of the following

day, when our friends, brothers, sons were found already equipped in battle array, and hurrying in regiments from this very square, to save the national capital from the ineffable infamy of rebel assault and capture. My friends, Union Square has fairly won its place in American history, and intends to keep it.

The little nucleus of defenders sent forth for the defence of Washington has steadily swollen, until it contains the largest army of modern times. The scale on which it acts is necessarily enormous. Its inevitable vicissitudes, whether for good or ill, are measured not by individuals, nor yet by thousands, but by tens and hundreds of thousands. I have no present occasion for exhibiting the wonder-working operations of the Sanitary Commission. Its benevolence is on a scale for which human history furnishes no parallel. It has already received the grateful acknowledgments, so justly due, of the multitudes that the present Fair has congregated. The civilized and benevolent world across the Atlantic is looking on with admiring wonder, and in due time will impartially record the story. And yet I cannot refrain from adverting for a moment to the rare and singular forecast of that little handful of friends and neighbors, all of them living in the immediate vicinity of this same Union Square, who planted the germ of the splendid organization which

now overspreads half of the continent, gathering up and infolding within its tender and loving embrace every sick and suffering soldier on that broad expanse. Need I tell the story of this wondrous charity to the noble-hearted women of New York, themselves the very actors, associates, and performers in the great Christian drama? Could any grace of language surpass, or even approach, the moral beauty of these mute but eloquent structures now around us—offspring of their taste and feeling, with all the precious contents, outpourings of the benevolence of a continent? Need I utter a word in praise of the creative energy, the untiring perseverance, the tender, thoughtful love which have called these structures into being, except to say, that they all come welling up from that most precious of earthly things—the heart of woman?

But the conflict we are now waging requires all our powers of head or heart. If it be said that the downfall of the Roman empire was the greatest tragedy in the history of our race, in its permanent consequences it does not approach the mighty drama our continent is now performing, involving, as it does, the welfare and happiness, peace and security, not only of the thirty or forty millions of the present generation, but of the hundreds of millions yet unborn, but who must take their place, for weal or woe, among the coming centuries. In such a struggle, for such a stake, can

any sacrifice be too costly—any generosity too unbounded? Our lines of camps, intrenchments, and battle-fields already stretch from the Atlantic far away into the remote interior nearly two thousand miles. At every point in this immense array, the men and women of the Sanitary Commission, obedient, methodical, and faithful, will be found at their post, instant and ready for their vast labors of Christian charity. Can any thanks of ours repay them? Have they not won already the undying gratitude of their country at home, and the unbounded admiration of every benevolent heart abroad? Nor have we any words wherewith to pay the women of New York—and can only give them our hearts, our inmost hearts, and our most earnest prayers. The God of justice and mercy will not withhold their full reward, nor look unmoved on labors such as theirs.

NOTE.

The most valuable feature of the Sanitary Commission is its strongly-marked nationality. It seeks positively to discourage, by all proper means, every movement, impulse, or feeling merely sectional. Its practice is, to return to the donors any funds contributed exclusively for the benefit of soldiers from any particular locality, State, or section.

The following extract from the circular issued in March, 1863, under its authority, entitled, "*How shall we best help our camps and hospitals?*" distinctly indicates the ground the Commission has uniformly maintained:—

“Unlike State agencies and local societies, the Commission distributes its stores with absolute impartiality among soldiers from every State. It studiously ignores all distinction between New Englanders, New Yorkers, and Missourians, and endeavors to discourage the work of the ‘*State agent*,’ who lavishes comforts and luxuries on the Jerseyman or Rhode Islander, in general hospital, and turns away from the Vermonter or Pennsylvanian in the next bed. It holds such discrimination to be demoralizing to the People and to the Army, and to be merely a manifestation, in milder form, of the foul spirit of sectionalism, that has brought on us the calamities of civil war.

“The existence of the Commission tends to nationalize the humanity and charity of the whole people; and through these their generous instincts, stimulated into such noble and unprecedented activity during the last eighteen months, to intensify the feeling, that we are one great Nation, and not a mere aggregate of States and sections; that our Army is a national Army, and not a mere collection of State contingents. The Commission has done the country some service, in relieving the sufferings and saving the lives of its soldiers; still more, in teaching the Army the importance of sanitary laws; but its highest office has been, and is, to nationalize the sympathy of the People with the sufferings and privations of the People’s Army.”

