Speech Given by Frederick Douglass in April, 1889, at the Sub-Tropical Exhibition in Jacksonville, Florida (as copied from the newspaper)

The following text is taken from The Florida Times Union newspaper of Friday, April 5, 1889. It includes the speech that Frederick Douglass made on his train trip to several southern cities, including stops at Jacksonville and St. Augustine. His speech in Jacksonville was made at the Sub-Tropical Exhibition:

“Mr. Douglass arose and advanced to the stand smiling benignly. He paused for the deafening applause to die away, and then in a mellow, well-modulated voice, the venerable leader began his address, speaking extemporaneously with perfect ease of speech and grace of manner, warming to his subject as he progressed, and most happily combining wisdom, wit and pathos in the following eloquent address:

Bishop Arnett, I thank you for your kind, for your eloquent, and I may say, your enthusiastic welcome to Florida and to your Sub-Tropical Exposition. I could have wished, however, that you had been a little less eloquent, a little less enthusiastic, so that my poor jog-trot eloquence would show to a little better advantage than it will do now after your eloquent and enthusiastic speech.

Shakespeare says, “Some men are born great, others achieve greatness, and others still have greatness thrust upon them.” This afternoon I feel that I have greatness thrust upon me. I do not feel equal to the occasion. I feel exceedingly small in view of this overwhelming welcome to this part of the United States. Since I have been sitting here I have been thinking and feeling of the past and of the vast and wonderful change that has taken place in the condition of our people—the colored people of the United States. I have been wondering how I should have felt sixty years ago, aye, fifty years ago—ah, less than that—forty years ago, had it been told never so solemnly never so impressively, ever so prophetically, that I should live to see the day when I could with safety to my person, to my liberty, tread the soil of Florida, of South Carolina, of Georgia, of Alabama, of Mississippi, and of Louisiana. Why, the very names of these States sent a shudder through me, and sent back the blood to my heart cold, at the very thought of entering them. And yet, here I have lived, here you have lived, here all of us have lived to see a vast and wonderful change. We see to-day a new heaven and a new earth in comparison with that of fifty years ago. Why, it really seems to me that the sun rises and sets in a different place than where it used to. The very air seems changed. We breathe freer; we breathe deeper; we have aspirations higher than we ever dreamed of in those days. The change is so great, so vast, so wonderful, so complete, so sudden that we hardly know what to do with it—hardly know what to make of it. God hath wrought wonders in our case. Who dreamed thirty years ago that the people of Florida, the people of this vicinity would ever see a Sub-Tropical Exposition like this, with a Colored department connected with it! Whoever dreamed of such a thing! Whoever dreamed of the streets of Jacksonville being paraded with drum and fife, banner and badge, and with brazen trumpets discoursing music, on the part of the black man! [Applause]. It is amazing.

Look back at our history and think what it has been! It was said once by Daniel O’Connell that the history of Ireland might be traced like a wounded man through a crowd, by the blood. It was a terrible statement, but terrible as it was, it was true: and true of Ireland’s history, truer still of that of our own people. Our history has been a history of blood. Our prayer coming out of beneath the throne: “How long, how long, O Lord God Almighty, how long shall these things be?”

We are here, in answer to that inquiry. Our chain broken, out fetters riven, our yokes removed, our necks not bowed down, we go at liberty along your streets before all the people. But you shall see, and I shall see, and the people shall see, that what has been done in our case has been well done—well done not only for us, but well done for the men who once held us in bondage. [Applause] I appreciate thoroughly the utterance of Cowper, who said:
I would not have a slave to till my ground,
And fan me while I sleep,
And tremble when I wake,
For all the gold
That sinews bought and sold
Have ever earned. No, dear as freedom is,
And in my heart’s best estimation prized
Above a price I’d be myself the slave,
And wear the bonds, than fasten them
On him.

And the American people will yet come to say this and will rejoice. Even the old masters shall rejoice
that they are liberated in our deliverance, [applause] for no class of men can put a chain about the ankle
of another without finding the other end of it about his own neck.

I rejoice, my friends, to see you and to hear you. Our progress has been great, but we must not overrate
it. We ask our friends here – our white friends, who are looking upon us- not to judge us too severely, not
to measure us from the heights they have attained, with their advantages; but rather measure us from
the depths, from the depths, from the depths, from which we have come- and we have come from the
deeps. [Applause]. Where, under the whole heavens, can you find an example of any class of people
emancipated under more unfavorable conditions, or even equally unfavorable conditions, as we were
emancipated? Nowhere! Search our examples, and all examples are against the idea of the disadvantages
of such emancipation as ours. We were not emancipated by the moral convictions of those who once held
us. We were not emancipated by the moral convictions even of the country itself. We were emancipated
not in peace, but in the tempest and whirlwind of civil rebellion through a military necessity. Emancipated
is hardly the word- we were “turned loose.” When the Egyptians’ slaves were emancipated they were told
to help themselves to the gold and silver of the Egyptians. They had something to go out with. They did
not go out empty-handed, and those Hebrews have been engaged in the jewelry business ever since.
[Laughter.] They have got the money and know how to hold onto it. That is what you must learn, how to
get the money and how to keep it.

When the 20,000 slaves of Russia were emancipated a few years ago, they were given something
to begin life with. They were given spades, and plows, and hoes, and three acres of land apiece on which
to begin their career of freedom. They were not turned out naked to the world, naked to the cold; but
they were given something whereon to stand and wherewith to make bread for their little ones.

We were turned loose without land, without hoes, without plows, without any means of making
a livelihood; turned loose to the open sky, turned loose without money, our aged, decrepit, our infants in
arms, our sick, our dying without anything- turned loose! Turned loose! The old masters in their wrath
said to us: “Clear out! the old quarters are denied to you; the old fields are denied you. Go away! The
Yankees have freed you, now let them feed you” [Laughter.]

But at least there came a change with them. They found they had sent away the hands and left
the mouths; they had sent away the muscle and had left the stomachs. [Laugh.] And then finally they
said: “Come back, Pompey, and come back, Caesar!”- for you know they never called us by any other than
those great names of the Greeks. [Laughter.] I heard once about a colored baby being brought into a
Methodist church to be baptized by the Bishop. He had baptized all the little white children and found no
objections. When the little colored baby was brought up the Bishop said “Name this child.” “John Wesley,”
responded the mother. “John Wesley, indeed!” said the Bishop. “No! No! Name him Pompey.” [Laugh.]

Well, the old masters called to Pompey and Caesar to come back and go to work, and but for this
we should all have died of hunger. It was strange that we should be emancipated in this way. Our good
friend, Abraham Lincoln, to whom reference has been made and properly made, by Bishop Arnett, was a
just, a kind man, but he did not see far enough ahead, or had not sufficient co-operation of his countrymen to give us a start in life. Many people said: “They will die.” I remember hearing Mr. Doolittle on the floor of the United States Senate, in reply to Charles Sumner, say: “It is no use to legislate for these people. They will die. Like all the colored races they must disappear before the great Anglo-Saxon race.”

I thought of this to-day when I saw these streets so crowded with our people. [Laughter]. There is no “die” to us. If slavery could not kill us, liberty will not. [Cheers].

Another thing some of us are troubling ourselves about now is the “negro problem.” There is no negro problem. Men are telling us how to solve it. One of your distinguished fellow-citizens has suggested that we be set apart in one spot of this country, all in a gang by ourselves. [Laughter]. Great mistake! For my part, I am for staying with my white brethren. I am in for living with them. It reminds me of our old class meetings years ago when they said: “Bre’dren, I has been wid you, and is still wid you, and mean to be wid you to de end.” [Laughter.] That is to say, I am going to build my house so near my white brother’s that if my house catches fire the white man’s house will be in danger. [Laughter.] Common danger will induce common safeguards. None of your pushing me off to one side. [Laughter.]

Now, my friends, I see that this Committee of Arrangements has determined that I shall do a good deal of speaking while I am here. They are going to play me for all I am worth. They have me down for a reception, for a hand-shaking, and for speeches and lectures, but it they will only provide me with a fore-runner equal to the one I have had this afternoon in Bishop Arnett (and he may make a speech as long as I am sure he feels like making), I shall have a good time after all.

I said a moment ago that we were to be measured from the depths from which we came, and those depths were terrible. Did you ever think of a man like myself, who who has grown up to weigh 235 pounds, that I have had to fight with a dog, name “Nep,” under my master’s table, for crumbs of bread? Well, I did. I had to skirmish with old “Nep” for a share of the Johnny-cakes. I used to fight for them; and now, my friends, see how fat I am. [Laughter.] I cannot be too thankful. None of us can be too thankful. Even our old masters cannot be, for the result has placed us in a state in which we can rebuke oppression in other parts of the world. We used to denounce the crowned heads of Europe, but it brought back to us only taunts and derision.

Go, let us ask of Constantine
To lose his grasp on Poland’s throat;
And beg the head of Marmouds line,
To spare the struggling Souliote.

“Will not the scourging answer come from turbaned Turks and fiery Russ: “Go, loose your fettered slaves at home before you ask of us?”

And then again they said to us, if we rebuked them for their tyranny:

“United States, your banner wears two emblems- one of fame;
The other that it wears reminds us of your shame.
The white man’s liberty and types
Stand blazoned on your stars,
But what’s the meaning of yon stripes”
They mean your negroes’ scars.”

Now, however, we are free. No longer this inconsistency confronts us. It no longer blunts the edge of our rebuke of injustice abroad; and you, our old masters, should rejoice that your country, great in its geographical position, great in its mammoth industries, great in discoveries, great in educational
institutions, great in its wealth, and great in the march of intellect is in accord with the spirit of liberty and civilization of the ages. [Applause.]

But, my friends, I remember that I am to speak at another time, and I will release you from listening to any further remarks, especially in view of the fact that we have on this platform the Right Reverend Bishop Payne, an older servant of your cause and my cause, and our country’s than I am; and I [am] quite sure that he will be willing to say a few words to you on this occasion.

I thank you for your welcome, and for your kind attention and consideration [Applause].