

Inaugural Address of Governor Aretas Brooks Fleming

Delivered February 6, 1890

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The usual time for the inauguration having long since passed, delayed as it has been by a contest that has produced some bitterness of feeling, all will recognize the propriety of brevity upon this occasion, and the impropriety of utterances calculated to prolong or increase political animosities. The present should not be employed to keep open election wounds. It is better that these be healed as speedily as possible, that the people of our State may again address themselves, undisturbed and unharrassed by politics, to the successful development of our vigorous young Commonwealth and to securing their share of the wealth which a beneficent Providence has so bounteously placed within its borders.

Our millions of acres of timber growing upon a fertile soil, underlying which are hundreds of thousands of acres of the choicest steam, gas and coking coals, an undetermined and possibly unlimited quantity of petroleum, and vast mineral deposits, all in the infancy of development, present a most inviting field for both capital and labor.

And whilst we welcome capital, and promise it safe and profitable investment, it is also needful that by wise laws, fairly administered, we lend a helpful hand to labor, and encourage those "Who earn their bread by the sweat of their face" to make their homes among us.

Labor should not be regarded as the legitimate prey of avaricious selfishness, nor denied any safeguard which the laws can give, to secure to it an equitable portion of the fruits of our common industry and enterprise.

In the administration of local government the strictest economy should be maintained. The extent to which the people are now burdened by unnecessary, discriminating and oppressive Federal taxation, through the operations of our monopoly-breeding and class-enriching tariff, increased the necessity of making our local tax burthens as light as possible.

But I do not desire to speak at greater length upon these general subjects. I am urged by a sense of public duty to a more important matter, one that concerns the whole people, and which it is particularly appropriate that I should discuss on this occasion.

Under a Republican form of Government, such as ours, where all power resides with the people, who through the ballot choose their own public servants, and thus dictate public policy and direct and control their own governmental affairs, all must recognize the supreme importance of free, honest and unpurchased elections, and the danger to our political institutions from crimes against the suffrage.

Isolated cases of illegal and improper voting may occur, despite the greatest care and watchfulness. But these occasional crimes against honest elections do not seriously affect and can not really endanger our political system. It is in organized fraud; in systematized efforts by political organizations in close and pivotal States and throughout the nation to carry elections by fraud and purchase, that positive peril and imminent danger to our form of government exists.

The tendency to adopt the methods of the Quays and Dudleys for the achievement of party victory, is a menace to free institutions and free government that challenges the thoughtful attention and serious consideration of patriotic citizens of all parties.

The property and personal liberty of the citizen should be protected and held sacred in the eyes of the law and of the people, but it is vastly more important, looking to the broader consequences, that the power of his vote and its free exercise should be safely guarded and kept inviolate.

This constitutes the basal structure of our government, and upon it rests our entire political system as designed and fashioned by the fathers of the Republic. Without a free ballot we can not have a free government; without an honest ballot we can not have an honest government. We may as well expect wholesome, perfect fruit and grain from tainted seed or defective germ as good and honest government from unfair, corrupt, elections.

Having these cardinal principles in mind, considering the cloud that hung over our State election, considering the charges of illegal voting and general corruption preferred by the people and press of the State, and now, in the light of what has been clearly proven, considering also the finding of the Joint Committee and the final action of the Joint Assembly, let all the people say whether or not the contest was honestly or wisely undertaken; whether or not this successful resistance to an assault on the purity of the ballot in West Virginia, was not an imperative duty enjoined by a true regard for the rights of the people; whether or not I, rightfully, and as a choice of the majority of the electors of this State, stand here about to assume the duties of the office of Governor.

The individuals who conceived, planned and executed, so far as they were able, the scheme of fraudulent voting in certain counties that so nearly achieved success, may, to discredit the character of the tribunal that has righted the wrong they attempted upon they people, endeavor to ease their consciences by clamorous charges of political burglary and theft, and through their newspaper organs seek to divert the attention of their own party followers from the crimes proven against them by the testimony taken and filed. But this testimony remains. It will stand against them as long as the records of this contest shall be preserved, and upon it I confidently ask the judgment of the people of West Virginia, as I sought and obtained that of the highest tribunal to which under the Constitution and laws of the State I could appeal.

What we have endured and expended in this contest counts for naught in comparison with the preservation of the political rights of the people through an uncorrupted ballot.

Fellow citizens! Upon assuming the responsibilities of office, allow me in conclusion to say, that every duty will be performed as it may seem best for the general good. With the assistance of the other State officers in the Executive Department, and of the Legislature, in making only needed and economical appropriations, I shall endeavor to maintain the finances of the State in as satisfactory a condition as they now are under the faithful and honest administration of my predecessor.

It will be my highest aim at all times to see that the laws are enforced impartially, to the end that all the people in every walk of life may be protected in every right, and have equal opportunities and privileges under the government of our State.

I am ready to take the oath of office, and with "malice toward none and charity to all" enter upon the discharge of my duties.