

Inaugural Address of Governor E. Willis Wilson

March 4, 1885

Fellow Citizens:

That West Virginia is destined, in the near future, to the prosperity and power of a great State, is no longer problematical. It but requires that we shall be alive to our public and private duties, prompt in the protection of our own interests and true to ourselves.

The kind hand of nature has left her mountains, hills and valleys teeming with the most important and valuable elements of wealth. Within no State or Territory of this Union - within no other area of 24,000 square miles upon which the foot of civilized man has ever rested - are to be found such varied and exhaustless natural resources as here harbingers the dawning of brighter and better days. Incomparable in these, she stands without a rival.

The State's Material Resources

In the very heart of the 58,550 square miles of the Appalachian Coal Field, we have 16,000 square miles within our own borders. Its many seams, lying above water level, and exposed in the mountain sides in thousands of places, can be mined cheaper than in any other portion of this matchless coal tract. Recognized as superior to any other coals in America, with the exception of anthracite, they are of every variety necessary to the arts and manufactures.

Although, from causes not now of difficult solution, this immeasurable basis of wealth has, until the past few years, invited in vain the active energies of capital and labor, yet breasting every obstacle, with a steady and rapid progress, we not only rank, to-day, amongst the largest of the coal-producing States, but the employment of 6,400 persons in and about the mines, and a production of 2,805,500 tons of coal for the year 1883, being an increase of nearly 33 percent over the next preceding year, present the cheering and unmistakable assurance of the prosperity awaiting us in this important business, if our people but move with a firm and steady step for their own protection and industrial safety.

In every county throughout the range of this wonderful coal formation are those iron ores "which belong to, and are found in, the Appalachian coal measures, consisting of brown oxides, carbonites and black bands, and, in some places, nodular red hematites," while the whole tier of counties lying east of the coal section, and along the entire eastern border of the State, is within the immense brown and red hematite belt of the Atlantic Commonwealths.

Nearly two-thirds of the State's surface is yet covered with the originals, composed, in the main, of hard woods of magnificent growth and quality, the oak, poplar, walnut, cherry, sycamore, ash, chestnut and locust attaining a size unsurpassed east of the Rocky mountains.

Dr. John P. Hale, probably the best authority in the State upon the subject, says: "Rich as is West Virginia in coal, iron, timber &c., she is scarcely less rich in that indispensable necessity to human health and comfort, and to animal life - common salt. Fossil, or rock salt, has not been found in the State, but salt brines of greater or less strength, and in greater or less abundance, are

found by artesian borings, at greater or less depth, throughout the Appalachian coal field, which underlies the greater portion of our State."

Add to these the agricultural, stock-raising and wool-growing advantages of a generous soil and mild and healthful climate, and West Virginia offers the absolute guarantee of a fair and profitable return for brain, brawn and capital.

Transportation

But why is it that, possessing all these splendid resources and natural advantages, located within easy distance of the Atlantic seaboard, and surrounded by populous and thrifty States, our development has been so limited and retarded? Why is it that capital, avoiding, has turned from us to seek investment in regions more distant and less favored? Why is it, that the tide of immigration has swept over and beyond us, to a more Western locality, to engage in the up-building of great and prosperous States? Why is it, that there are so few lateral railroads connecting with our trunk lines, and reaching back, into the interior of the State, to those fields of untold, yet undeveloped wealth?

There is a reason for these things just as certain as there is a cause for every effect. Is it because we have not invited and protected capital? The history of our legislation demonstrates the reverse. Is it because the immigrant has been offered no encouragement to choose his home amongst us? The hand of a generous and hospitable people has ever been extended. Is it because of unfriendly railroad legislation? In no State of the Union can there be found such liberal, and even prodigal, enactments as our statutes present upon this subject.

Of the half-dozen trunk line railways controlling the internal commerce of the United States between the East and West, two of them - the Baltimore & Ohio, and the Chesapeake & Ohio - pass through our State. The one, for nearly half a century, and the other, for fifteen years, have traversed our domain.

With a full appreciation of the extent of the statement, I declare here, that the constant and unrelenting practice of these two companies, by rebates, drawbacks and special contracts, in discriminating against our people in freight and passenger charges, in the interest of the Western States and Territories, has done more to discourage immigration, the investment of capital, the construction of lateral railroads into the interior, and the development of the State's resources, than all other causes combined. I assert furthermore, that had they in the exercise of the franchises and privileges conferred upon them by the munificence of our law-making power, dealt with our people with simple, even-handed justice, the State of West Virginia would, this day, be one of the most prominent of the States in population, wealth and material prosperity.

Railroad Discrimination

What encouragement do they offer to agriculture in exacting from us twenty-five to fifty percent more for carrying a carload of grain from West Virginia to the Eastern market, than from a Western State? What to the stock-raiser in charging, for instance, \$40 for a carload of cattle from Ohio and \$60 from West Virginia to the same market? What to the manufacturer with the same character of discriminations against him both East and West? What to the immigrant, when,

added to these disadvantages of location, he ascertains the fact that immigrant tickets are not sold nor immigrant trains run for West Virginia, and if he desire to stop there, on his journey from an Eastern city, he must pay more than is required to convey him hundreds of miles still farther West? What to the capitalist, who may desire to invest his funds in the construction of a lateral railroad into the interior of the State from one of these through lines, when he knows that beside all these embargoes, the business of his road, if constructed, must continually be subservient to the will of the trunk lines in the capricious or avaricious arrangement of freight rates and charges?

Not only are these ruinous discriminations made as against our whole people in the interest of States East and West, but the same methods are applied to particular localities and particular persons within our own State, thus controlling at will the entire business and industrial interests of the State.

The turnpike has long ago ceased to be more than a road for local travel and traffic, while railroads have become the real arteries and highways of State and continental commerce. They occupy a position far beyond the boundaries of mere private enterprise, and every consideration of public policy and the general welfare demands their regulation and control by just and reasonable laws.

Railroad Monopolists

It is no longer a question whether the State has the power to remedy these hurtful and pernicious evils. The judicial mind has reached forth and grasped the problem, in all its bearings, and declared, in unmistakable terms, that railroad corporations are created for public purposes; that they are the servants of the people; that their roads are public highways, and that the right to control them and regulate their freight and passenger charges within, and, in the absence of Congressional legislation, from points within to points without; and from points without to points within, the State, is a necessary sovereign power of government that can neither be bartered nor given away by State legislation.

We may be told to wait for Congress to act. We have already waited many years, and relief is still denied. The House of Representatives, following the lead of the broad-minded, noble and intrepid Texan, has again and again passed reasonable, just and salutary measures, only to suffer defeat in the Senatorial end of the Capitol where the demands of the public are seldom heard and corporate monopoly reigns supreme.

This is no new subject to our people; they passed directly upon it in 1872, when, by their vote, they declared by their Constitution that,

"Railroads heretofore constructed, or that may hereafter be constructed, in this State, are hereby declared public highways, and shall be free to all persons for the transportation of their persons and property thereon, under such regulations as shall be prescribed by law; and, the Legislature shall, from time to time, pass laws applicable to all railroad corporations in the State, establishing reasonable maximum rates of charges for the transportation of passengers and freights, and providing for the correction of abuses, the prevention of unjust discriminations between through

and local, or way, freight and passenger tariffs, and for the protection of the just rights of the public; and shall enforce such laws by adequate penalties."

He Defines His Position

Many States have similar constitutional provisions, and have applied the statutory remedy without hesitation or evasion. None need it so sorely as we, as none are discriminated against so mercilessly. I stand by this constitutional command in its every line and syllable, and shall, in the future, as I have in the past, give freely whatever assistance I can, that it may be obeyed in letter and in spirit.

We assure, most cheerfully, every protection to railroad corporations that we secure to ourselves. We would not do them injustice in one single particular, nor place one obstacle in the way of their legitimate success. We will ever be ready to encourage and assist them in all their lawful undertakings. But having given them corporate existence, with all their powers and privileges, for the benefit of our own citizens, we demand that our lands shall no longer be used as a mere pathway for the commerce of the West; that their franchises shall not be applied as so many instruments to hinder our development and delay our prosperity; that our people shall receive the same consideration and fair dealing accorded to those of neighboring States; that there shall be no greater charge for freight or passengers for a shorter than a longer distance, in the same direction, and that for all persons there shall be the same facilities and the same price for like services by the abolition and prevention of every species of extortion and discrimination.

We shall insist, also, in common justice to all tax-paying persons, natural and corporate, that the unlawful evasion of taxes by the Chesapeake & Ohio, and the Baltimore & Ohio railroad companies, so long and so successfully practiced in the past, shall not be repeated; and that they shall pay their taxes for the support of government - State, county and district - fully, and without compromise, just the same as all others are required to do.

It is to be hoped, too, that our Legislature will enact such laws as may be necessary to effectually prohibit the distribution of railroad passes to public officers, and members of political conventions, concerning which this State has not escaped experience of an exceedingly instructive nature.

Federal Relations

But, fellow citizens, weighty as are all the interesting questions relating directly to the material development and financial prosperity of the State, it is of vastly more importance to the great body of the people that our political institutions be preserved in all their purity, simplicity, strength and vigor, and, to this end, that we shall ever hold in view the self-evident truths, that, "free government and the blessings of liberty can be preserved to any people only by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality and virtue, and by a frequent recurrence to fundamental principles"; and that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," as truly and as certainly in times of peace, as when the lowering clouds of war are obscuring the sun-light of freedom, the passions of man run mad, and civil authority has been subordinated to the iron hand of military power.

Possessed, as we are, of the best form and system of government ever devised by the wisdom of man, or consecrated by patriot blood, so rests upon us the gravest responsibility ever assumed by any people, to preserve inviolate the priceless inheritance, that it may pass from our hands as it came from the fathers, a blessing to posterity in ages yet to come.

A Federal Government for Federal purposes, and State Governments for home rule. Combining in unity, by written, organic law, all those specifically delegated powers of the respective States, indispensable in our dealings and intercourse with foreign nations, and such other limited powers, only, as for the general welfare, are necessary to be exercised internally, the acme of the science of free government has been attained in creating the United States of America - the grandest political organization upon the face of the earth - while reserving to the people and to the States respectively, guaranteed against the dangers of centralization and consolidation, the inestimable and exclusive right of local self-government.

The Right Of Self-Government

From the earliest days of Colonial history until the present hour the liberty-loving American, with an unchanging and unswerving fidelity, has maintained this reserved right of local self-government as the true, if not the only reliable and perfect safe-guard to the institutions of our country. It was for this that thirteen independent colonies, with the free offering pledge of life, of fortune and of sacred honor, united in one common cause to resist a common danger, repel a common enemy, and establish the independence of these States. It was because of its jealous regard that the old articles of confederation were but "a rope of sand," and the Constitution of the United States lay hopelessly stranded upon public disfavor, until the guarantee had come from almost every State, from Massachusetts to the Carolinas, (a guarantee that was promptly fulfilled by the adoption of the first ten amendments), that the omission of a bill of rights should be supplied, and all undelegated powers reserved by affirmative declaration.

The creation, by organic law, of the three departments of government - legislative, judicial and executive - as a barrier against encroachment, providing that they should be separate, distinct and coordinate, was an immense advance over all other forms and experiments for the security and perpetuation of free government; but for a further and more potential security, through the wisdom, the patriotism and the love of human freedom, that actuated, moved and directed the founders of the Republic, that vast residuum of undelegated powers was carefully reserved to the States and to the people.

That the Federal Government conceived, fashioned and created in and by delegated powers alone, should remain entirely within the sphere of its political action, as prescribed by the Constitution of the United States, is as vitally essential to the preservation of our governmental system, as that the States should refrain from attempting a reclamation of those powers delegated and surrendered by the adoption of that instrument.

Upon this fundamental principle of local self-government, rests the entire fabric of American institutions. Once destroyed, whether through the violence of civil commotion, or, possibly, the yet more dangerous though insidious encroachments of legislative and judicial implications, and free government, upon this continent, will cease to be, as surely as ambition is still aggressive; as

surely as the history of recorded time presents no Democratic or Republican form of government that has survived the invasions of a single, central law-making power.

American Patriotism

Imbedded in our constitutional history, and standing out in bold relief through the stern letter of the law, it was the plain object and purpose of the founders that there should be a Union of States for the protection of States.

Trusting to an American patriotism, as broad and deep as the love of human liberty, we can believe, with an unshaken and unfaltering confidence, that in the onward march of coming centuries, when star after star of equal magnitude and of equal glory, shall have been received into the radiant constellation, beaming forth in transcendent splendor from the blue field of the banner of the Republic, and millions upon millions more shall have joined the expanding population of this broad land, that there shall still be standing, in imposing grandeur, this everlasting bulwark against monarchy and despotism - an imperishable Union of imperishable States - where a free press, free speech, free conscience and a free people, under the blessings and guidance of the great Ruler of the Universe, shall have advanced the conquering ensign of human civilization of the uttermost possibilities of physical, mental, moral and religious achievement. In such a trust,

Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union strong and great!
Humanity, with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

And now, Mr. President, contemplating with unfeigned solicitude, the duties and responsibilities of the high position to which I have been called, I am ready to take upon myself the oath of office.