

Inaugural Address of Governor Henry M. Mathews

March 4, 1877

FELLOW CITIZENS: Sincerely grateful for the honor of having been elected to the highest office within the gift of the people of my native State, I am deeply sensible of the great responsibility which it devolves upon me. Conscious, too, of my limited experience in public affairs, I distrust greatly my ability to discharge well and satisfactorily the important duties now before me.

It is, however, my earnest desire to have the counsel, support and encouragement of the wise and patriotic of all parties, who regard as of the first importance the welfare of the whole State.

After an earnest and honorable effort to elect the candidate of his choice those who represent what he considers the correct principles of free government, the election over, the labors of the party man as such, cease. he then, without compromising or abandoning his opinions, ascends to the higher plane of patriotism; if, of the unsuccessful party to yield a cheerful acquiescence in the result, and to give a cordial support to an administration established in the mode prescribed by law. If of the successful party, to aid in securing an administration which will allay any bitterness engendered by the strife of parties, which shall be just and impartial, frustrating every evil intent to the State, protecting all and oppressing none.

The majority of the States now have their traditional policies, which have been fixed for years in the minds and hearts of the people, while the policy of our State may yet be said to be in the process of formation. To avoid errors which it may be difficult if not impossible to correct in the future, demands the united wisdom and cordial co-operation of all, whatever may be their party ties and political aims, who are interested in the good government and advancement of the State.

If we look back on the comparatively short period which has elapsed since the ending of the war, we have great reason to rejoice at the harmony which now prevails among all of the citizens of our State, however widely and discordantly and bitterly they may have differed in the past.

The condition of West Virginia, or that which is now West Virginia, during the war and at its close was very unlike that of any other State. The people of the Northern States, with rare exceptions, were thoroughly united in the support of the government of the Union. The white population of the Southern States, with but equally rare exceptions were thoroughly united in an allegiance to the cause of secession. Here the native population was about equally divided in sympathy, conduct, and active support, between the cause of the Union and the cause of the Confederacy. The contest was thoroughly internecine. Each community was divided, and many families had their representatives in both armies. When the war ended the most hopeful who anxiously desired the establishment of a perfect peace, looked forward to a long period to be characterized by feuds and strifes begotten of the war. It was, as we then thought, not unreasonably apprehended that for many years the political parties of this State would be a party of Unionists and a party of Confederates.

To the credit of the intelligence, temper, patriotism and hearts of our people be it said, these apprehensions were happily groundless. There has been here, in a degree unsurpassed and

perhaps unequalled elsewhere, a renewal of good feeling. The legitimate results of the war have been accepted in good faith, and political parties are no longer aligned upon the dead issues of the past. We have ceased to look back mournfully, and have said

"Let the dead past bury its dead,"

and with reorganized forces have moved up to the living issues of the present. It is true that in an animated campaign such as that through which we have just passed, we "do as adversaries do in law; strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends." And when the contest is over only a short time is necessary to allay its animosities and we unite in an effort to give to our State an increased and permanent prosperity. We recognize and admit the fact that as all citizens contribute to support the government all are equally entitled to its protection and should be consulted in its administration.

When this state of feeling is fully recognized and the great material resources of the State be made generally known, we may confidently expect an influx of capital and immigration. We now have a system of free education which has been pronounced by my most competent judges one of the best and most efficient in the Union. Our public institutions are well organized, skillfully and economically managed. The mere exhibition at the Centennial Exposition of specimens of our minerals, agricultural products, and manufactured articles, so many of which were sent from this city of industry and successful enterprises, has attracted attention in an unusual degree to our State. With a preserved and increased harmony, a law abiding spirit, a code of just laws, the right of freedom and property assured, we may confidently expect at an early day a prosperity and a future in the Union unsurpassed by many of the older states. The interest of each individual, not only in political affairs proper, and in public enterprises, but in the affairs and industries of his immediate neighborhood, determine, to a great extent, the progress of a State. Prosperity cannot be obtained by legislation alone. Indeed, a few laws well executed are better than many slumbering upon the statute books or a code of conflicting enactments. Not unfrequently is it that legislation is much more beneficial which repeals laws rather than increase their number. The smaller, more simple and comprehensible the code, the less litigious and more prosperous will be a people.

For some months matters transcending in interest and importance, the affairs of any state, because they relate to and vitally affect all of the States have pressed upon our attention. I cannot omit to refer to what should be a subject of congratulation to every patriotic American.

But a few weeks since the most painful forebodings as to our future as a Republic prevailed from Niagara to the Gulf, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. After the most exciting national canvass which we have ever known, the result of the Presidential election was left in great doubt. A contingency had arisen for which not only no clear provision had been made by law, but which had never been anticipated.

Party spirit ran high and each party claimed determinedly that it had triumphed. Any possible work of a peaceable adjustment was despaired of. neither party could endure the suggestion even that it should make some concession. That the Republic was tottering to its fall and would soon be one more of that long line of

"Giant forms of Empires on their way to ruin. One by one they tower and they are gone."

seemed not impossible. That scenes of civil strife would again be re-enacted here seemed not unlikely. New dispositions were made of the national troops, and there were rumors of military organizations, and intemperate and bitter expressions were freely indulged in.

When an attempt was made in Congress to devise a means of settling peaceably this great, absorbing and exciting question, there were few so hopeful as to believe the attempt would succeed. When, however, it was announced that the Joint Committee, to whom this great and patriotic labor had been assigned, had reported, and that the report had been accepted by both houses of Congress, a grateful sense of relief extended throughout the country, for it was seen that at least a peaceable settlement was secured.

"From this nettle danger we pluck the flower safety." The creation of the High Commission to determine the question connected with the Presidential succession was the work of wisdom and patriotism, and as impartial as human intelligence could desire.

It was believed that a tribunal was created which would be the endorsement of justice, and far beyond the reach of those motives and influences which sometimes determine the conduct of partisans. Whatever may be our individual opinions of its action, let time, the old justice that examines all offenders, extinguish prejudice and assuage passions before judgment of its decision is pronounced. It is enough now to realize that both parties are under the highest obligation to carry out the decision, whether acceptable or distasteful in the utmost good faith. Neither time nor change can diminish the honor and praise which are due to those unselfish statesmen, who, in the highest effort of patriotic duty, gave us a tribunal which they at heart believed would hold the scales in perfect equipoise and impartially, and be as blind to mere personal, sectional or party considerations as the Goddess of Justice herself.

I can, in conclusion, give you no fuller pledge of my earnest desire to discharge faithfully my duty as the Chief Magistrate of the State than that contained in the oath of office which I am now about to take.