

**CELEBRATION OF THE SEMI-CENTENNIAL
ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF
THE OLD COLONY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF MASSACHUSETTS;
COMMEMORATIVE ORATION**

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Celebration of the semi-centennial anniversary of the founding of the Old Colony historical society of Massachusetts; Commemorative oration by John Ordronaux

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JOHN ORDRONAUX

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COMMEMORATIVE ORATION

DELIVERED AT TAUNTON, MASSACHUSETTS,

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BY

JOHN ORDRONAUX

OF NEW YORK.



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1903.

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ORATION.

My presence among you to-day is an event which justly awakens feelings of profound gratitude and astonishment ; of gratitude, because of the length of days with continuing health granted me by our Almighty Father; and, next, of astonishment at the rare combination of circumstances which has assigned me so prominent a part in the exercises of the occasion.

This Golden Anniversary, so gratifying to you, is a day of startling reminiscences to me. All my fellow members who assembled in the study of Rev. Mr. Emery half a century ago to organize this Society, have gone to their final reward, and I, alone, spared by the will of a benevolent Creator, am present as their last survivor to participate in these festivities. Surely, no reflecting mind can fail to see the guiding hand of a superintending Providence in these mysteries of survivorship which cluster about longevity.

It is fifty years to-day since the General Court of Massachusetts granted to the Old Colony Historical Society a charter bestowing upon it an official life, with the right of perpetual succession. I was here at that time as a young lawyer recently admitted to the Bar, and a participant in the organization of this Society. Having thus witnessed its official

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birth, and helped to rock its infant cradle, the permission now vouchsafed me to return after so long an interval, in order to witness its fiftieth anniversary, constitutes an epoch in my life of too unique a character not to awaken feelings of wonder, rising into bewilderment. To be thus called upon to mingle the present with the distant past; to revive and renew its miscellaneous associations long faded from view; to set back the clock of the century and reproduce the events of its past hours; to open the catacombs of memory and search its records with inquisitorial eyes—all these acts of reminiscent reproduction seem like the interjection of a feverish dream among the cold realities of a noisy, bustling, discordant world.

There are occasions in life which can never be anticipated or purposely constructed. They cannot be designed by any ingenuity of man, nor repeated at the command of his will. This is one of them, and, in the natural order of time, it is both a privilege and an opportunity which can come to us but once. Summoned by a sense of duty to appear here in order to answer your roll-call, and to rehearse the history of the origin and subsequent career of our Society, I stand as the representative of two distant periods, to each of which I can extend a hand. The first roll-call which I made as its Secretary was in May, 1853. Were I to repeat it to-day, no answering voice would be heard. Neither the call of duty nor the allurements of affection can bring back these departed colleagues.

Fifty years forms a large chapter in the life of any modern

literary society. Fifty years to look back upon and to review, not statistics alone, or tabulated collections of antiquities in your Hall, but much of this work occurring in the midst of, and included in the daily life of an active community like your own—quick to perceive, strong to undertake, zealous to accomplish—a hive of industry whose inhabitants are “Ever reaching to those things which are before!” Fifty years in which to count the graves of an extinguished generation of friends and fellow workmen, and to find myself the last laborer of them all, still able to raise my voice to do honor to their memory.

“ Can such things be,
And overcome us like a summer's cloud
Without our special wonder? ”

To recall all these varying disconnected facts, brings before my eyes a tumultuous stream of names, persons and events that strikes my imagination now, like a tale woven in the loom of historical fiction. Explanations cannot, however, always explain the unexpected, unaccountable changes in men's circumstances. Unseen, yet ever present, is that sovereign “Divinity which shapes our ends” through the labor of our hands, yet independent of our will. For, after all that can be said about it, human life in its last analysis is but a succession of mysteries and miracles born from the womb of Time, each in its turn destined to be disclosed through its fulfilment of some fore-ordained divine purpose. All that we can be sure of in human destiny, is, that He who

holds the issues of life in the hollow of His hand never abdicates His sovereignty. 'Tis His to will and to do; 'tis ours to hear, submit and obey.

In answering, therefore, your very flattering invitation to act as your Orator in a review of this many-sided epic, I have felt that I was obeying a doubly imperative summons speaking to me through the voice of duty, and coming as if from the graves of the founders themselves. And since they are not here to prompt my memory or guide my pen in writing their annals, I trust that I shall not fall into the error of unrolling so large a canvas that my untrained brush may not be able to fill it.

Now and then, in the lives of institutions, as in those of men, there come occasions when it is proper to pause for self-examination; when it seems a duty to review past actions and to measure their results; when the fitting time has arrived to institute, as it were, a day of judgment—to summon parties, to hear witnesses, and to pronounce a verdict upon the facts as presented. This is the mission of History, whether recording the lives of institutions or of men, the differences between which are surface differences alone, the essentials not being widely dissimilar. Such an occasion is the present one. It marks a period of many busy, fruitful years since the founding of this Society, which now offers its life to the scrutiny of a public examination. If you ask me for its monument, it is here—partly in stone, partly in antiquarian contributions, which, under the name of transactions are designed to rescue

your early history from the engulfing waters of oblivion. To speak more specifically, that monument consists of public records, of private annals, of domestic antiquities, whether heirlooms, or other household treasures, of biographical sketches, of families, together with family portraits, their coats of arms and hatchments, the lingering relics of heraldic practice; of private letters, old newspapers, book accounts and such other floating miscellaneous papers as will stand for exhibits of either laws, customs or manners existing during the Colonial or Revolutionary period of American history. All these have been collected and stored in its Memorial Hall. This Museum of Antiquities, charged with the custody and safekeeping of these precious treasures, is the monument I offer you, as an ever-living witness to the fifty years labor of the sons and daughters of the Old Colony. Small in its architectural dimensions and already indicative of its growing incapacity to meet the demands of its increasing accumulations, it pleads with touching emphasis for enlargement. Amid all surrounding monuments of municipal progress here, whether dedicated to educational, commercial or literary purposes, the members of our Society may point to this humble treasure house of ancestral memories with feelings of true filial pride and congratulation. It is a flower of piety grown in the soil of material thrift, small in itself yet fragrant.

The past achievements of Taunton as a centre of industrial activity and of commercial energy were, in my day, second to those of no community occupying this colonial soil, and