Inauguration of Suffolk University President James McCarthy

Keynote Speech by Professor Robert Allison
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Faneuil Hall

If these walls could talk this Great Hall would resound with the voices of our collective past. Bostonians have gathered here since 1743 for solemn and joyous, mundane and extraordinary civic events. Men and women who have spoken here—the Adamses, Frederick Douglass, Lucy Stone, Washington—surround us, and challenge us to carry on the work begun here.

It is especially sobering for college faculty to look into these faces. Hancock, Webster, Lucy Stone, the three Adamses were college graduates—John Quincy Adams even taught at another local institution. But others—Peter Faneuil, Henry Knox, Frederick Douglass, and George Washington—had little formal education.

Little education—but they were educated. Washington accumulated one of America’s most formidable libraries, and read every book—on agriculture, law, and military science, but also theology and philosophy, the works of Shakespeare, Robert Burns, and Adam Smith, Don Quixote and Gil Blas, and Thomas Truxton on the Rigging of a Frigate.

Henry Knox dropped out of the Latin School when his father abandoned the family. He pursued an education working in his bookstore, stocked with all branches of literature, arts, and sciences, making it one of Boston’s intellectual centers; he himself studied works of artillery and fortification design, for which he mastered calculus and engineering.

Peter Faneuil mastered geography, accounting, and languages to manage his global business enterprises.

For Frederick Douglass, education was the key to unlock slavery’s physical and mental chains. A bear today, Douglass wrote, is the same as the bear of a thousand years ago. But men and women, unlike bears, learn from the past, improve upon the past, look back on the past and hand down to the next generation knowledge of the past, “that they may carry their achievements to a still higher point. To lack this element of progress,” Douglass said, “is to resemble the lower animals, and to possess it is to be men.”

For these men—and for Lucy Stone, who taught school for nine years to pay tuition at Oberlin—education was not simply a credential. A Bostonian not represented here left the Latin school after just a year and wrote of his classmates’ completing college knowing “little more than how to carry themselves handsomely, and enter a room genteely, (which might as well be acquired at a Dancing School),” proud, conceited, and completely lost in the world, “unable to dig, and ashamed to beg, and to live by their Wits it was impossible.”
The Suffolk student’s path is closer to that of Washington, Douglass, Faneuil, Knox, or Stone, than the finishing school Franklin mocked. We have young Knoxes after a day’s work studying engineering or math in the Archer building; Lucy Stones forming debating societies; Peter Faneuils earning MBAs in the Sawyer Business School; Frederick Baileys being transformed by English-class encounters with the classics of literature.

Future generations will know them through the painters and sculptors—the Stuarts, Copleys, and Healys—now in NESAD’s studios.

Past and present, these men and women remind us of education’s profound purpose. Not to learn a trade or enter a room genteelly, but to become informed citizens. John Adams mandated this in our state’s Constitution, creating not merely a government, but a civil body politic, where each of us covenants with the whole people, and the whole people with each citizen, and says that “Wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge, public schools and grammar schools . . .; to encourage private societies and public institutions . . . for the promotion of agriculture, arts, sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country; to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality . . .; sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people.” (ch. 5, sec. 2)

Sincerity, good humor, and generous sentiments are essential, because men and women who can think for themselves will disagree. Free people argue. Because we will disagree, we need to get along.

Even creating this building caused an argument. Some Bostonians were skeptical when Faneuil offered to build a meeting place for the town of Boston. Only after a contentious debate did they accept his offer—367 for, 360 against.

Since that first argument about whether to build it, this hall has seen and heard many more—on the Stamp and Tea acts, on incorporating Boston as a city, on abolishing slavery, revising the Massachusetts Constitution, on votes for women. George Healy’s painting behind me is of an argument in progress between Webster and Calhoun; Frederick Douglass and Jefferson Davis carried on that same argument from this platform. Contentious and bitter, not “civic dialogues” but arguments on which the fate of the city, the nation, the world, depended.

Arguments are not signs of moral decline or personal malice. They are signs that men and women have distinguished themselves, as Douglass said, from the bears to become thinking members of society. Even men and women of similar principles will disagree. Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison disagreed on the means toward abolition; Lucy Stone left one women’s rights group to start her own. All signs of an ability to apply logic, weigh arguments, and reach a decision; an ability to think for oneself.
As the argument between Calhoun and Webster, between Davis and Douglass, tore the nation apart, Abraham Lincoln delivered his own inaugural address. A president’s first duty, he said, was to transmit his office unimpaired to his successor. We think of this daunting challenge at this moment of change and renewal.

We think also of our obligation to our students’ learning to think critically and creatively. We must know, as Lincoln said, that the dogmas of the quiet past are ever inadequate to the stormy present, but must also recognize as Lincoln did that to know where we are going, we must know where we have been.

A university is critical to informed disagreements, to our ability to withstand the relentless pressure of conformity and groupthink, which debase language and erase history, and make tyranny not only possible, but inevitable.

Lincoln broods over us from the balcony; John Adams glowers over our shoulders. Writing home from Paris in 1780, a guilt-ridden Adams lamented that public duty took him from his family and that duty also denied him leisure to explore Paris’s cultural wonders. “I could fill Volumes with Descriptions of Temples and Palaces, Paintings, Sculptures, Tapestry, Porcelaine, &c. &c. &c.—if I could have time,” he wrote Abigail. But the Tuileries and Versailles were distractions from duty. “I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine.”

We all have our studies to attend. The legacy of John Adams and Peter Faneuil, of Washington and Lucy Stone, Douglass and Lincoln, challenges us to learn so that we can with good-humored sincerity and generous benevolence argue with one another and transmit their legacy to our students, our children and grandchildren, giving them the liberty to study their world that they may have the power to shape it anew.