

## Spencer Burke's Chapel Speech

Thank you Mohammed, Thank you to the Vestry and to Reverend Squire for allowing me to speak today.

Good morning. I want to share with you a recent experience that opened my eyes. A few months ago I competed in a speech contest sponsored by the American Legion. The subject was the US Constitution and I was the winner for Delaware County. During this process, I developed a better understanding of how a document written more than 200 years ago directly impacts our lives today. Our forefathers crafted that pertinent piece of paper on the foundations of hope, faith and love. They hoped for the evolution of one nation under God. They had faith that by addressing the needs of society this land would prosper, and they had love for their country.

In Mr. Brandon's Civic class this year, we learned about the Constitution and how it is important for us to understand and maintain our civic duties and obligations so we can make sure hope, faith and love will always be at the core of our everyday lives. This speech is titled, The Constitution-A Pertinent Piece of Paper:

Envision over a period of 200 years being one of tens of thousands of Africans who were kidnapped and chained against their will, then being forced and crammed aboard sailing ships for weeks and months at a time and brought to America, a foreign land, far far away from home only to be sold in slave markets.

Imagine the mental suffering endured when these Africans, now in a foreign land had to see their own family members, their loved ones, whom they knew they would never see again, alive or dead, sold off for a few dollars and standing there helplessly with no comfort or hope.

Now close your eyes and imagine the physical suffering, the daily beatings until their skin peeled off their backs, the hard labor, plowing the fields, cleaning the houses morning until night with absolutely no pay... and no say, all because these slave owners decided these Africans, these Nobodies to them, were just a piece of property owned by a piece of paper, they were also easy prey!

From the 1770's to the 1860's slavery in the United States was a hot topic of debate. One of President Abraham Lincoln's famous quotes is: "You must remember that some things that are legally right are not morally right."

Many others felt the same way, but no one spoke about slavery so bluntly as Frederick Douglas, an escaped slave, turned abolitionist who said in 1846 and I quote:

"Men do not go into slavery naturally-they don't go into slavery at the bidding of their fellowmen-they don't bow down their neck to the yoke merely by being entreated to do so...NO! Something else is necessary, the whip must be there, the chain must be there, the gag must be there, in order to induce the slave to go to the field and labour for another man without wages."

And being that Mr. Douglas was so vocal, he protested the Dred Scott Decision in March 1857 where the Supreme Court ruled in Scott v. Sandford that Scott, a lifelong slave, who was claiming his freedom by running away to a free state, was "still" a slave. Frederick Douglas pointed out that the Constitution

said and I quote: “We the people,” not “We the white people.” He added and I quote: “Slavery lives in this country not because of any paper Constitution, but in the moral blindness of the American people who persuade themselves that they are safe, though the rights of others may be struck down.”

Well, fast forward to now, almost 146 years later and open your eyes. It is because of the drafting of a Pertinent Piece of Paper-The Constitution, that I can stand before you today.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified on December 6, 1865 and Section 1 of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment states:

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

Section 2 of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment states:

“Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.”

Before the amendment was official, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 after three bloody years of the Civil War. A war that was fought between the Southern and the Northern States, with the southerners trying to maintain slavery, while the northerners were trying to end it.

Yes, slavery was an ugly injustice that we usually as Americans don't like to relive or revisit but thankfully that Pertinent Piece of Paper-The Constitution of the United States of America, made it possible that it would never rear its ugly head again.

This is just one of many examples of how and why the Constitution is so important. It is important to us all.

Just imagine those Founding Fathers all huddled together in one room, knowing that they were there for one purpose: To create the Law of the Land, and in order to do that they started by writing the Preamble which states that: We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.

The Constitution is loaded with Seven Articles and 27 Amendments, with the first 10 Amendments, the Bill of Rights being adopted in 1791.

In Article V, in order to amend the Constitution, BOTH Houses of Congress have to approve the Amendment by a Two-Thirds vote in each house and ratify it by Three-Fourths of the state legislatures.

OR, an amendment may be proposed by Congress and ratified by CONVENTIONS called for that purpose.

There is no set time limit placed on the ratification process, only stating in the Constitution that it must be “reasonable.” Well imagine in 1789 having Amendment 27, which limits Congressional pay raises

proposed and not approved until two hundred years later in 1992. Gregory Watson, a college student in 1982, a regular citizen like you and me, was writing a term paper for a government class when he discovered that the 27th amendment was still on the table and if enough states ratified it, then it would become part of the Constitution.

Reasonable time? Well, it took ten years from the time of Mr. Watson's discovery in 1982 to officially get Amendment 27 ratified in 1992.

Gregory Watson went on a one man crusade, referencing Article V: Amending Constitutions, writing to state legislators and finally getting someone to listen and take action.

It is our civic obligation to understand the workings of the government and to give of our time. It is expected that we go out and vote, but so many of us throw that privilege away. It is our duty to pay taxes and respect the rights of others. Our forefathers wanted that for us. They paved the way so that we could take the baton and run with it. So many of us complain about the three forms of government: the Legislative, the Executive and the Judicial, but we do nothing. We've got to take action. So many of us stand by and wait for the Gregory Watsons of the world to get things done.

Yes, I stand before you today on the weltered backs of my ancestors who allowed me to stand firmly in my beliefs, my hopes and my dreams and I will never take that for granted.

I believe as American citizens, we need to free ourselves from the shackles of all the ugly injustices of the past, whether provoked or endured by our ancestors, and to carry with us in our Hearts and Souls, the **“only”** Pertinent Piece of Paper that **“really”** matters -The Constitution of the United States of America.

Thank you.