Speech of Frederick Douglass at the Sumner Memorial, March 17th, 1874.

He was here to pronounce no formal eulogy upon Charles Sumner, but to make one of a vast procession of mourners on the day when his dust had been committed to the soil of his native State amid extraordinary tokens of sorrow of those who knew him well and loved him extremely.

Mr. Sumner's character was remarkable and singular within our day and generation. It has been well said of him that he was in some sense a theorist, and he thought this class of greatness was the highest. One of the proudest minds of New England has said there are three grades of human greatness—first, the greatness of administration; second, that of organization; but a higher form still is the power to discover truth—to know just where it may be found. In this, Mr. Sumner excelled. All the distance between man's mind and God's mind is filled with truths, to be organized into forms for human aid. Truths which to us are self-evident, known and spoken by our children at school and the fireside, have cost immensely in feeling and suffering. Truth is born of agony, sweat, tears and blood. Man's right to form his own opinions, to think for himself, what has not this right to think cost? Go back but three centuries, and you view men torn to pieces for asserting their right to think—men torn from the bones—men and women tied with fagots and burnt up for asserting this right.

Now, take this right of the black man to his freedom—very plain it seems. What was the great truth for which Sumner struggled, and made his name dear to every colored man's heart? Simply that each individual man belongs to himself—that his arms, his conscience, and his affections are his, and yet on asserting this but a few years ago, our deceased friend was struck down beneath the dome of yonder Capitol, and his warm red blood made to stain the floor supposed to be sacred to freedom of speech.
Mr. Sumner has been accused of being unpractical. The speaker had once mentioned this to him, and he unraveled the whole mystery. He said to prepare the Senate to vote was the work, the vote was only the shout of victory. His mission was to rock the cradle of principles until they were able to stand and walk alone. He was far in the advance when the hour for voting came—he had been to that point and gone on. He could not attempt his eulogy here; notwithstanding his efforts for the fugitive slave bill, and his work to save the virgin soil of Kansas from the hell-born, black curse of slavery. The speaker thought, Mr. Sumner’s best work for us was after the close of the late war, when there was a cry to reconstruct the rebellious State governments. He opposed every step towards reconstruction without a full, clear, complete recognition of the rights of the colored man. He chided Massachusetts for her haste, and his voice did more to reconstruct the Union on a true basis than that of any other man in the United States. He sympathized with the beautiful types of the former speakers, but held that there is a rainbow over the chasm made by the death of our friend; the stone crashes amid the solid rock below; the principle still lives though the man has died. The man is now living who will seize the banner laid down by Charles Sumner and lead us to higher plains of privilege. Massachusetts has no second Charles Sumner, but were he to select a man to tread in his footsteps, he could find a champion of liberty still living, and though she has lost Charles Sumner, she has a Wendell Phillips.

Were he an office-seeker he might suppress what he now said. He had one regret about his relations to Charles Sumner, one cause of complaint against himself—when the Presidential campaign was upon us, having the opportunity, he did not place the name of Charles Sumner at the head of the column of names. He regretted and ever should regret that, as a colored man, he did not lift his name aloft among the broken
fetters of four million slaves, and, shaking those fetters, demand that we lift the man who broke them to the first place of the nation.

The speaker said that he was not one of the forgetting and forgiving kind. What was Millard Fillmore compared with Charles Sumner, in his connection with the fugitive slave law? History is given us for a purpose.

Fillmore represents at Buffalo the old dispensation when this land was the hunting grounds for slaves--the dispensation of the lash and the blood-hound. He is gone. How tame, how limited, how narrow is the stream of feeling awakened by his death, though he filled the Presidential chair.

Here is a man gone who represented the coming time. Mr. Sumner took hold of our cause when no man loved us, and has made himself glorious in the eyes of all Christendom.

We need not stand here and talk, for it is only talk. Words are vain. We go away from this place feeling how utterly worthless are all our utterances. We feel as if we had been looking at Niagara; listening to heaven’s pealing thunder and yet dare not venture a description of it.

Mr. Sumner has wrought a work that will be his monument through all generations. With all his greatness he was eminently childlike, especially when dealing with colored men; and while he could stand up against a Brooks, Keitt, and Clay, and breast the torrent of a pro-slavery press, and these would touch him nowhere, let a colored man drop a word of gratitude in his ear, and it went straight to his heart and made his face as childlike as that of the babe dandled on the knee.

We do well to be here this evening. These meetings do us credit, which no other meetings have ever done us.

The New York Tribune, in noticing the past, brands the colored man with ingratitude for not following Mr. Sumner in voting for Mr. Greeley.
He never shared this reproach; he believed that the colored man had
sense enough and devotion enough to do what they thought to be right.

When the Presidential nomination was a matter of doubt, there was
great mystery about what he thought and would do. Many have since
censured him, but he must share his censure. The speaker seized the
opportunity to call his attention to the fact that he had been over-
rulled by his party, and advised him to wrap his Senatorial robes around
him and be inactive— not to help our enemies.

For some weeks it looked as if the Greeley party would go into
power, and he (the speaker) withdrew his advice formerly tendered and
said that he would rejoice if he could only speak his words for General
Grant, but that if he could not go for us, to go for Greeley, for a
neutral position was the worst possible one, for both himself and the
colored race. The speaker believed in General Grant then and believed
in him now. Mr. Sumner said the only thing which caused him any
hesitation was the prospect of the coalition party upon the interests
of the colored race. The help of our race was in this, as in all
other events of his life, his guiding star.

It was meet and right to sing of him and speak of him in loving
words on all occasions, for he was our friend— more devoted to the
colored man’s interests than the colored men themselves. This is
philosophical. The redeemer always comes from heaven. The reformed
man never has the purity of one who never has fallen. A man who han-
dles a grubbing-hoe will hardly feel a cambric needle if put in his
hand. Living in the heaven of liberty, nursed and cultured in beauty
and tenderness all his life, Charles Sumner had a deeper sense of our
wrongs and a purer appreciation of our rights than we could have.
Frequently has he stood in the Senate and demanded rights for us which
we said we were not ready to accept.

Excelsior has been our motto, but the more Charles Sumner got for
us the more he wanted for us. Each higher level he brought us to only
prepared us for another still higher. There are coming up from the
North, South, East and West, men who will speak mightier words than
any yet spoken.

All might well speak on an occasion like this. Let us go home
and teach our children the name of Charles Sumner; tell them his utter-
ances, and teach them that they, like him, can make their lives sublime
by clinging to principles. While stars were falling all around us
Charles Sumner shone brightly, untainted by corruption—pure, spotless,
stainless. When men of the Young Men’s Christian Association were
going down, this great man kept his skirts clear. We commend him as
the model.