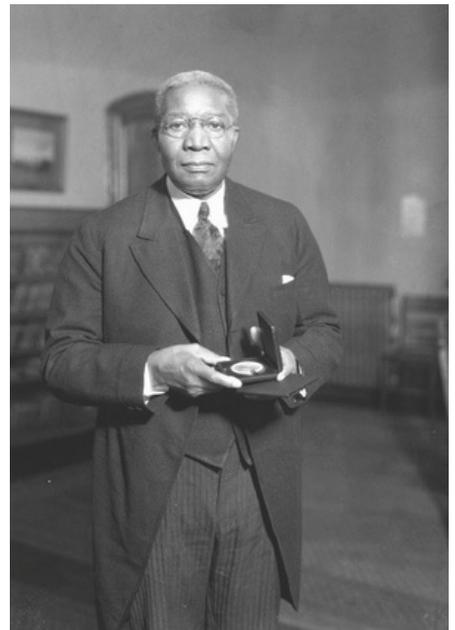


*Robert Russa Moton*

# OUR AMERICAN STORY

On May 30, 1922 - 101 years ago, Dr. Robert Russa Moton gave the keynote address at the dedication ceremony of the Lincoln Memorial. We note the importance and the irony of his remarks. The only African-American who gave a speech that day, Dr. Moton highlighted America's continual march towards freedom.



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## DR. ROBERT RUSSA MOTON'S SPEECH

"When the Pilgrim Fathers landed upon the shores of America in 1620, they laid the foundations of our national existence upon the bedrock of liberty. From that day to this, liberty has been the common bond of our united people. In 1776, the altars of a new nation were set up in the name of liberty. In 1812, in the name of liberty we struck for the freedom of the seas. Again in '61 when the charter of the Nation's birth was assailed, the sons of liberty declared anew the principles of their fathers and liberty became coextensive with the Union. In '98 the call once more was heard and freedom became coextensive with the hemisphere. And as we stand in solemn silence here to-day, there still come rumbling out of the east the slowly dying echoes of the last great struggle to make freedom coextensive with the seven seas. Freedom is the lifeblood of the Nation. Freedom is the heritage bequeathed to all her sons. It is the underlying philosophy of our national existence.

"But at the same time, another influence was working within the Nation. While the Mayflower was riding at anchor preparing for her voyage from Plymouth, another ship had already arrived at Jamestown. The first was to bear the pioneers of freedom, freedom of thought and freedom of conscience; the latter had already borne the pioneers of bondage. Here, then, upon American soil within a year met the two great forces that were to shape the destiny of the Nation. They developed side by side. Freedom was the great compelling force that dominated all, and like a great and shining light beckoned the oppressed of every land to the hospitality of these shores. But slavery like a brittle thread was woven year by year into the fabric of the Nation's life.

"And how shall we account for it, except it be that in the Providence of God the black race in America against its will was thrust across the path of the onward-marching white race to demonstrate not only for America but for the world whether the principles of freedom were of universal application and ultimately, no doubt, extend its blessings to all the races of mankind.

"In the process of time, as was inevitable, these great forces of liberty and the forces of bondage from the ships at Plymouth and Jamestown met in open conflict upon the field of battle. And how strange it is, through the same overruling Providence, that children of those who bought and sold their fellows into bondage should be among those who cast aside ties of language, of race, of religion, and even of kinship in order that a people not of their own race, nor primarily of their own creed or color, should have the same measure of liberty and freedom which they themselves enjoyed.

"What a costly sacrifice upon the altar of freedom! How costly the world can never know nor justly estimate. The flower of the Nation's manhood and the accumulated treasure of two centuries of unremitting toil were offered up; and at length, when the bitter strife was over, when the marshaled hosts on both sides had turned again to broken desolated firesides, a cruel fate, unsatisfied with the awful toll of four long years of carnage, struck at the Nation's head and brought to the dust the already wearied frame of him whose patient fortitude, whose unembittered charity, whose never failing trust in the guiding hand of God had brought the Nation weltering through a sea of blood, yet one and indivisible, to that peace for which his heart yearned. On that day Abraham Lincoln laid down his life for America—the last and costliest sacrifice.

"To-day, in this inspiring presence, is raised a symbol of gratitude for all who are blest by that sacrifice. But in all our vast country there are none more reverent than those 12,000,000 black Americans who, with their fellow countrymen of every race, pay devout homage to him who was for them, more truly than for any other group, the author of their freedom. There is no question that Abraham Lincoln died to save the Union. It is equally true that to the last extremity he defended the rights of the States. But when the last veteran has stacked his arms, when only the memory of high courage and deep devotion remains, at such a time the united voice of grateful posterity will say: The claim of greatness for Abraham Lincoln lies in this, that amid doubt and distrust, against the counsel of chosen advisers, in the hour of the Nation's utter peril, he put his trust in God and spoke the word that gave freedom to a race and vindicated the honor of a Nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

"But someone will ask: Has such a sacrifice been justified? Has such martyrdom produced its worthy fruits? I speak for the Negro race. Upon us, more perhaps than upon any other group of the Nation, rests the immediate obligation to justify so dear a price for our emancipation. In answer let me review the Negro's past upon American soil. No group in all our country has been more loyal. Whether bond or free, he has served alike his country's need. Let it never be omitted from the Nation's annals that the blood of a black man, Crispus Attucks, was the first to be shed for the Nation's freedom. So again, when a world was threatened with disaster and the deciding hand of America was lifted to stay the peril, her black soldiers were among the first to cross the treacherous sea. No one is more sensible than the Negro himself of his incongruous position in the great American Republic. But be it recorded to his everlasting credit that no failure to reap the full reward of his sacrifices has ever in the least degree qualified his loyalty or cooled his patriotic fervor.

"In like manner has he served his country in the pursuits of peace. The Negro has been the Nation's greatest single asset in the development of its resources. Especially is this true in the South, where his uncomplaining toil sustained the splendors of that life which gave to the Nation a Washington and a Jefferson, a Jackson and a Lee. And afterwards, when devastating war had leveled this fair structure to the ground, the labor of the freedman restored it to its present proportions, more substantial and more beautiful than before.

"While all this was going on, in spite of limitations within and restrictions without, he still found a way, through industry, integrity, and thrift, to acquire 22,000,000 acres of land, 600,000 homes, and, in addition, to own and operate business enterprises, including banks and insurance companies, with a combined capital amounting to more than \$150,000,000. All of this, with his 100,000 professional men and women and the reduction of his illiteracy to 20 per cent, not to mention his schools and his churches, would seem to show some justification for the sacrifice. A race that produced a Frederick Douglass in the midst of slavery and a Booker Washington in the aftermath of reconstruction has gone far to justify its emancipation. And the Nation where such achievement is possible is full worthy of such heroic sacrifice.

"But Lincoln did not die for the Negro alone. He freed a Nation as well as a race. These conflicting forces planted 250 years before slowly divided the Nation in spirit and in ideals. Passing suddenly beyond the bitterness of controversy, his death served more than war itself to emphasize the enormity of the breach that had developed between the sections.

"That tragic event shocked the conscience of the Nation and stirred a great resolve to establish forever the priceless heritage so dearly bought. From that day, the noblest minds and hearts, both North and South, were bent to the healing of the breach and the spiritual restoration of the Union. With a devotion that counted neither personal loss nor gain, Abraham Lincoln held steadfastly to an ideal for the Republic that measured at full value the worth of each race and section, cherishing at the same time the hope under God that all should share alike in the blessings and privileges of freedom.

"Lincoln has not died in vain. Slowly through the years that noble spirit has been permeating every section of our land and country. Sixty years ago he stood in lonely grandeur above a torn and bleeding Nation, a towering figure of patient righteousness. To-day his spirit animates the breasts of millions of his countrymen who unite with us to pay tribute to his lofty character and his immortal deed.

"And now the whole world turns with anxious heart and eager eyes toward America. In the providence of God, there has been started on these shores the great experiment of the ages—an experiment in human relationships, where men and women of every nation, of every race and creed, are thrown together. Here we are engaged, consciously or unconsciously, in the great problems of determining how different races can not only live together in peace but cooperate in working out a higher and better civilization than has yet been achieved. At the extremes, the white and black races face each other. Here in America these two races are charged under God with the responsibility of showing to the world how individuals, as well as races, may differ most widely in color and inheritance and at the same time, without humiliation or embarrassment, make themselves helpful and even indispensable to each other's progress and prosperity. This is especially true in the South, where the black man is found in greatest numbers and the two races are brought in closest contact. And there to-day are found black men and white in increasing numbers who are working together in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln to establish in fact what his death established in principle—that a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal can endure and prosper and serve mankind.

"As we gather on this consecrated spot, his spirit must rejoice that sectional rancors and racial antagonisms are softening more and more into mutual understanding and effective cooperation. And I like to think that here to-day, while we dedicate this symbol of our gratitude that the Nation is dedicated anew by its own determined will to fulfill to the last letter the task imposed upon it by the martyred dead, that here it firmly resolves that the humblest citizen, of whatever color or creed, shall enjoy that equal opportunity and unhampered freedom for which the immortal Lincoln gave the last full measure of devotion.

"Twelve million black Americans share in the rejoicing this day. As yet, no other name so warms the heart or stirs the depths of their gratitude as that of Abraham Lincoln. To him above all others we owe the privilege of sharing as fellow citizens in the consecration of this spot and the dedication of this shrine. In the name of Lincoln 12,000,000 black Americans pledge to the Nation their continued loyalty and their unreserved cooperation in every effort to realize in deeds the lofty principles established by his martyrdom.

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, I somehow believe that all of us, black and white, both North and South, are going to strive on to finish the work which he so nobly began to make America an example for the world of equal justice and equal opportunity for all who strive and are willing to serve under the flag that makes men free."