

A COMMON CAUSE TO ALL

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

MARCH 10, 2023

It is my pleasure to join Terry Austin, Cliff Fleet, and the entire Virginia 250 leadership in welcoming you here to Colonial Williamsburg. And it is a distinct honor to be asked to address you tonight.

It is fitting that we should gather here, in the Tidewater region of Virginia. It was in Jamestown that the very first colonists arrived in the New World and where the first encounters with indigenous peoples occurred. The first ships carrying enslaved people landed here as well. The first representative government met. And it was here in Williamsburg, just a few blocks down the street at the Raleigh Tavern, that the Committees of Correspondence were created and an intercolonial movement towards independence was begun.

Virginia has always been the crucible of our nation. From the very beginning, here in the capital of the richest of the thirteen colonies, representing 40% of all the economic output of the colonies; from the fierce debates that raged at the Governor's

Palace and continued on in the taverns; where incitement to revolution occurred down the street when gunpowder stores were seized by the Crown and a revolutionary army was mustered . . . here, from slave rebellions to abolition movements right through to the Civil War, from the imprisonment of suffragettes and the fight for women's right to vote, from Jim Crow to the civil rights movements and into the present day, Virginia has always been a crucible for great ideas, great debates, and great conflicts; for innovation and injustice; for tragedy as well as triumph; for hostility and reconciliation.

As we gather here in this crucible, where so much history has happened, we must ask: What is our common cause now?

Alexis de Tocqueville, one of many Frenchmen enamored with the idea of America, remarked: "When the past no longer illuminates the future, the spirit walks in darkness". Our motto here at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is: "So that the future may learn from the past". Yet even as we convene to collaborate, converse and plan for an upcoming event of great historical significance, we must acknowledge that many, perhaps most, Americans do not share our love of history. Many think it is irrelevant to their lives, boring and abstract. Many have become cynical about it, believing that history is told in different ways by

different political factions for different political purposes. Some believe history is cherry-picked for heroism. Others believe we over-emphasize the horrific. Many feel their stories are untold. But most are simply unaware. Most are unaware that the ideas that were debated here, the tensions and contradictions that were experienced in this community over two-hundred and fifty years ago, still echo and play out across our nation.

Americans may not be interested in our history, but we know they are interested in their own history. The popularity of genealogy websites is a reminder that we as human beings realize that we need to understand where - and who - we come from, so that we we can understand ourselves. Unless we understand ourselves, we cannot fully claim our lives or chart our futures.

As we commemorate two-hundred and fifty years of history in 2026, our common cause is to discover and reveal our full history, to illuminate our complete and true history, in every community and throughout our nation. We must lift up every hero, whether famous or unsung. We must squarely face the horrors. When history accurately reflects what really happened - then history is a mirror into which we all can look to see ourselves more clearly.

Some may find this prospect daunting. Won't an accurate reflection divide us further? Or disappoint and discourage us more? Our experience here at Williamsburg says no. We have been working for some time to fully discover and reveal the complicated and previously untold story of the Bray School and the First Baptist Church - the very first places where enslaved and free black children were educated and where enslaved blacks gathered to worship. Our work has been a collaboration between our own experts, the local descendant community, and professors at William and Mary . . . and this work has unified and inspired us. We are a stronger and better community for having looked into the mirror of history and seen ourselves more clearly. And far from being afraid to continue to discover the full truth of our history, we are motivated to do more and share more. Our history is becoming a shared American story.

Many Americans are concerned about our current division and discord. You will often hear people say: "We have never been this divided." Or they'll postulate that all Americans were united in their desire for independence from the Crown. The truth is, we have always been a fractious country. From the very beginning, our diversity has been a source of strength, but it has also been a

source of disagreement. We were divided at the time of the revolution over religion, politics, economics, ethnicity, status and class, and divided as well about whether the fight for independence was heroic and wise or treasonous and foolhardy.

Imagine then, in a time of grave consequence and much discord, how difficult it must have been to establish the Committees of Correspondence. Imagine the effort it took to find and build common cause when there was so much the colonies did not have in common. Imagine the forbearance and tolerance required to work together with people over a period of years that you did not completely trust or respect, much less like.

The great movements forward in this country, beginning with our revolutionary movement, did not occur because everyone agreed with each other. They did not occur because everyone liked each other. They did not occur because everyone was the same, or treated in the same way. The great movements forward succeeded because enough individuals decided that their common cause and purpose was more important than their individual differences, disagreements and disappointments.

Not far from here, three Virginians, George Mason, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, put pen to paper. Their words would become the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Our founding documents declare the rights of men and the sovereignty of citizens. These documents assert that power will always be abused and therefore must always be constrained. Their words reflect a deep awareness that innovation, entrepreneurship and political freedom are inextricably linked. And with their drafting, the colonies declared independence and designed a system of laws and government that would both protect rights and liberties as well as divide and restrain power.

These founders did not believe the rights they espoused applied to anyone but white, male property owners. They did not consider the ownership of other human beings to be an abuse of power. Nevertheless, the words of Mason, Madison and Jefferson took both deep thought and great courage to write, and their later ratification by others took the same. These ideals and principles were a radical departure from the past. They were also radical because they would change the world. . . then and now.

As we gather to commemorate the formation of the Committees of Correspondence in 1773 and collaborate to plan for the commemoration of our formation as a nation in 1776, we must never confuse nostalgia with real history. There were then, as there are now, as many hypocrites as heroes; as many who claimed rights for themselves while denying them to others; as many who resented the abuse of power while themselves abusing it.

To see this clearly does not diminish in any way the reality that the words that were written, and the system of laws and government that was designed, have inspired every movement for human dignity, sovereignty, equality and liberty everywhere, ever since. From the French Revolution to the War for Ukraine, from abolition to civil rights, from voting rights to human rights - all of these great movements here and around the world - all have looked to our history for inspiration, justification and motivation.

To quote de Tocqueville once again: “The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.” He went on to remark that our greatest strength lies within our civil society . . . in communities and citizens who gather together to build something

better. It is we as citizens who must focus on those repairs that remain necessary . . . so that we may form a more perfect union.

Thank you for traveling here, for gathering here, for working together here for our common cause. Let us converse with one another and learn from one another. Let us acknowledge all our complexities and contradictions. Let us recognize our setbacks as well as our steps forward. Let us work to discover and share our complete history throughout all our communities and states.

Our 2026 commemoration must be about far more than fireworks and tall ships. It cannot be celebrated by some, resented by others and ignored by most. It must not be about “red states” and “blue states”. It must reflect our diversity while reinforcing our union. It must remind us why the privilege of American citizenship remains the cherished goal of countless people everywhere and reacquaint us with the responsibilities that come with citizenship. And so all of us here tonight must do far more than plan a big party.

We have always been, and will always be, a fractious, restless nation. We have also always come together at times of great



consequence in order to move forward. As in 1773, we too can find a common cause greater than ourselves. We can choose to design and deliver commemorations of our history that deepen every citizens' connection to our nation. We can tell many stories while weaving the thread of our shared American story.

Let us do this work so that when 2026 arrives, Americans in every corner of our nation can look into the mirror of our history and see ourselves and each other more clearly. This is our common cause. Without it, we cannot understand ourselves or our nation and we cannot move forward. Without it, we will not form a more perfect union.

Tomorrow, let us begin.