
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

The Master Speech Files, 1898, 1910-1945

Series 1: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Political Ascension

File No. 427

1931 April 28

New York University Charter Centennial Dinner

SPEECH OF THE GOVERNOR AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
100TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER ON TUESDAY EVENING,
APRIL 28, 1931.

It is a privilege to take part, with the Chancellor and Counsel of New York University, in this celebration of the 100th anniversary of the granting of the University's charter.

I think that the keynote of this celebration should be one of thankfulness for the vision, for the broad and distinctive aims of the founders of the University a century ago.

I cannot help wondering whether Albert Gallatin, Morgan Lewis, John Delafield and the other founders were not regarded as somewhat radical when they announced three aims as follows:

- 1 - To safeguard democracy by making higher learning accessible to representatives of all ranks.
- 2.- To apply higher learning not only to the ministry, law and medicine but also to the needs of merchants, mechanics, farmers, manufacturers, architects, engineers and others.
- 3 - To assist in giving an honorable direction to the destinies of a great city.

These gentlemen were doubtless several generations ahead of their time, for I think it is a matter of record that for many years after 1831 nearly all of our colleges and universities were rather distinctly inaccessible to representatives of all ranks of the people. Furthermore, these institutions for many years continued to limit their curriculum to the historic professions instead of branching out to cover the needs of a new type of civilization. Also a hundred years ago there was little general consideration

in our colleges of any relationship between the college and the community in which it was located.

In a very true sense, New York University has come to realize the dreams of the founders, for today with 40,000 students and 1700 instructors it is carrying out the three great aims and, incidentally, is giving concrete expression to them through the lives of ^{a greater number of} ~~more~~ adolescents citizens ~~than~~, I think, ^{than} in any other institution of learning of the whole world.

What impresses me most is that New York University has a positive and actual influence upon the lives of such a huge body of students. It has been and is a tremendous factor in educating not just the rich and the leisure class, but has made it possible for ~~the~~ young people in practically every walk of life to obtain advantages of higher learning. In this it fits in with the true ideal of education in a democracy.

The final aim - the giving of honorable direction to the destinies of a great city has been carried out, as exemplified by the very large number of public spirited citizens who graduating from New York University have taken ^{a useful} ~~an honorable~~ part in shaping ^{these} destinies and ^{in aiding} ~~carrying on~~ the public service of the city.

I am glad that the State has within its borders so ^{distinctively} ~~distinctly~~ a New York institution. I am proud of its past and its present and in common with millions of others I look forward to a future in which New York University will continue to render ^{an unstinted} ~~a useful~~, practical and honorable service.

At New York University Charter Centennial Dinner,
New York City, April 28, 1931

The Three Aims of the Founders of New York University

Chancellor Brown, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very glad to have this opportunity of coming here at the invitation of the Chancellor and the Council of New York University, to take part in this One Hundredth celebration of the granting of the Charter by the State Government, a hundred years ago.

I feel that I might very properly come to a meeting of educators and students, because for the past four months I have been occupying the dual role of student and professor. It is only some two and one-half weeks ago that I had the great pleasure of graduating and sending to their homes some two hundred and one students who had been in continuous study and session for about three months.

They left behind them a vast number of examination papers, eleven hundred and twenty to be exact, and it became incumbent on me at that time to assume the role of student. I discovered that a very large number of the examination papers related to subjects with which I was not at all familiar. In fact, very few other people were familiar with them. Of course, in examination papers where the students might choose their own subjects, possibly it is not surprising that the professor found it necessary to give a mark of failure to about thirty-three and one-third per cent of those papers. However, about sixty-six per cent of them passed and will now be added to those great volumes that come from Albany every year, those great contributions to the fund of human knowledge known as the Statutes of the State of New York. Some of the examination papers were very good, and I think, will be of very material help to our State, but I sometimes wish that in the preparation of these papers the graduating class, like some other graduating classes, had had the benefit of the same kind of liberal education, the same kind of broad training which characterizes the graduates of New York University.

I was much impressed with the statement of the Chancellor in regard to the aims and ideals of the founders of the University. I cannot help thinking that those founders in the year 1831 must have been somewhat in advance of their time. I take it that they would have qualified as radical in that period, the same type of radical that some people are not alarmed at in 1931. They builded perhaps, better than they knew. I found somewhere the expression of the aims of these radicals of 1831, summed up in three comparatively short sentences.

When I think of some of the names of the founders, all I can say is that they were the substantial New Yorkers of that day. They had Albert Gallatin, Morgan Lewis—and by the way, Morgan Lewis, the great-grandfather, I think, of my old friend and playmate, Secretary Ogden Mills, who occupies Morgan Lewis' house today, was the Governor of the State of New York from the same little town on the Hudson river, Hyde Park, that I come from—and John Delafield—why, there are Albert Gallatins and John Delafields around New York today.

Those three aims they had sound just as if they had been promulgated yesterday: First, to safeguard democracy (spelled with a small d) by making higher learning accessible to representatives of all ranks.

That was positively Bolshevik in 1831. As I remember it, in the '30's of the last century and the '40's for that matter, the college catalogs of Harvard, Yale and Princeton, contained the names of the undergraduates in two categories: At the top, the undergraduates who were entitled to put

p. 927

the magic letters "Esq." after their names, and then below the line, the undergraduates who could only be called plain "Mister." Here was New York University daring to say one of its aims was to make higher learning accessible to representatives of all ranks. It took the educational world of this country two or three generations to grow up to that idea. I am inclined to think that New York University was one of the pioneers of the thought that every young person if his family could possibly scrape together the money, was entitled to some form of higher learning.

Another aim was that of applying higher learning not only to the ministry, to law, and to medicine which were the aristocratic professions of the day, but also to the needs of merchants and mechanics—note the word mechanics—farmers (how many farmers go to New York University now, Chancellor?), manufacturers, architects, engineers, and others. Again a generation or two ahead of their time, daring to suggest making a part of the regular curriculum new professions that were just beginning, a beginning that was made necessary by a civilization that was undergoing back there in 1831 one of the most drastic changes that ever occurred to civilization in the history of the world—the beginning of the machine age, the beginning of the iron horse, the steamboat, the manufactures of engines and appliances were to revolutionize the life of our nation.

The third aim of these radicals: To assist in giving an honorable direction to the destinies of a great city, a great state, and a great nation. And that was radical, the very thought that an institution of learning should make any effort to correlate its activities with the activities of the community in which it was situated.

How often, throughout our country, are we aware of the institution located in a city, where there is not only no bond or tie between the institution of learning and the city, but a positive enmity between gown and government. There was an innovation that century ago, in the thought that a university could play an active and useful part in the development of the community in which it was located.

How well these three aims have been lived up to!

When we think that today forty thousand adolescent citizens are enrolled in one or another of the schools of the great New York University, it gives one food for thought, forty thousand young people at the critical period of their lives obtaining the higher learning and coming as was hoped for by the founders from every rank and walk of life. How well that aim of a diffusion of knowledge has been lived up to! A university that can give teaching in practically every one of the modern sciences and every one of the modern arts and every one of the practical trades, for that matter, every one of the vocations and avocations which go to make up our complex civilization, and finally, that last aim of being of service to the community,—than such a university, I take it, there is no finer or more useful body of men in the history of our city during these hundred years. The graduates of New York University have made themselves felt in a positive and a useful way in the life of our city and of our State. They have lived up to the hope of the founders, that the University would become an integral part of our public life.

And so, tonight, I think that I have the right to take it upon myself to congratulate Chancellor Brown and the Council, the graduates and the student body of this typical New York institution of higher learning. I take very great pleasure, also, in so far as it lies in my power, in ratifying and in renewing this charter from the State of New York, ratifying it and renewing it for another hundred years to come.

I am very confident that the century that lies ahead of the University will bring with it the same fine ideals, the same unselfish work, and the same practical usefulness that has marked the course of the previous century.

I wish much that I might stay with you this evening, to hear my other friends who are going to speak, but I have to go back because there is just one examination paper which I have not yet corrected, a little matter of two or three hundred pages, entitled "An Act to Revise the Town Law of the State of New York," and there again I wish that in my labors this evening I might have the composite help of the Chancellor, the Council, and the faculty of the University.

So, will you let me thank you again and say good-night to you. I wish that I might stay, but I have to go.