

February Birthday Carnival

*John Q. Barrett**

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In Jamestown, New York, in the winter of 1914, the 1,200 plus members of the Fraternal Order of Eagles celebrated the completion of the new Eagle Temple by hosting a winter carnival. On each of six nights, a crowd of over 3,000 people gathered for fun and entertainment, including musical performers and speakers.¹

Saturday evening February 21st, “Carnival Night,” closed this celebration of Jamestown’s new civic center. After opening remarks from the president of the building committee and performances by a baritone soloist and then a piano soloist, the principal speaker that night was Jamestown attorney Robert H. Jackson.

In the concluding section of his speech. Jackson commented on February birthdates in American history:

It is appropriate that we turn our attention to some of the great Americans whose service and sacrifice have made our nation worthy of the Eagle on the evening of the anniversary of Washington’s birth.

During February chill days we celebrate each recurring birthday of our two great Americans, Washington and Lincoln, and this month marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of a third great American, Samuel J. Tilden. The stories and lessons of their lives have been exhausted by scores of able men and mangled by scores of little men. We are compelled to listen to so much pure drivel about our great men and the sentiment of patriotism is so

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¹ See *Closing Night of Carnival*, JAMESTOWN MORNING POST, Feb. 23, 1914, at 6, 9.

often profaned by being associated with the amateur orator and the ambitious politician that it almost requires an apology from one who introduces it. But in the lives of our great men are wholesome, vital lessons and patriotism, though often aroused in behalf of sham enterprises and by mediocre agitation, is a genuine and deep seated sentiment.

George Washington will always be revered as America's greatest warrior and constructive statesman. The art of war has become rather obsolete of late and we are coming to respect the achievements of peace more highly than those of war. However, the genius with which he conceived the plans of revolution, the tireless energy and dauntless courage displayed in their execution and the character of the man himself will always be popular themes with Americans. He was one of the richest men of his time and the perfect confidence of the colonists which he enjoyed contrasts significantly with the suspicion which rests upon the moneyed class today.

Abraham Lincoln was the best loved of all Americans. He was not so stern and reserved as Washington and while probably no more respected he was better loved than the great General. He was intensely human and broad minded. Lincoln saw good will in the southern people even while in rebellion against his authority and they returned his confidence in ample measure. He stood between the desolated confederacy and the deluge of fierce partisanship which swept over it after his assassination and saturated the South with corruption. Lincoln was a politician to a greater extent than Washington and was one of the most abused men of his time. Yet if a rustic radical should come out of the West today antagonizing so many vested interests and criticizing so many established institutions, he would be as much abused as Lincoln was in his time. Many of us who worship at Lincoln's shrine would join in the persecution of him were he to reappear today. We must not forget that of his doctrine, much which now seems conservative common sense was unheard-of radicalism fifty years ago. He is the most quoted of men and his Gettysburg Address is the best known American Classic. If he could know the causes which

his words are distorted to support, I wonder if his humor or his wrath would be most aroused?

Samuel J. Tilden, although probably as deserving of fame, is not so well known as Lincoln or Washington. His light does not throw its radiance so far because he never stood upon so high a pedestal. His ideals were never reflected upon a Presidential background. It is no longer considered partisan to mention Samuel J. Tilden with respect. He has won a prominent place among America's great statesmen. He is less famous for what he attained than for what he renounced. Thousands of ardent followers would have resorted to violence to have seated him in the presidency to which they believed him elected [in 1876]. But he sacrificed his claims to his country's peace and his compensation has come after his death. His victorious opponent is less known, less honored than he and the very names of the conspirators who deprived him of the presidency have been forgotten. And the bitterness of defeat and the exhilaration of the victory have vanished.

This [Jamestown, New York] community wishes this [Eagles] fraternity well. The constructive genius and energy of Washington, the high integrity, humor, understanding and charity of Lincoln, renunciation without bitterness that harmony may prevail as taught by Samuel J. Tilden, are valuable lessons which we trust them to exemplify. May you [Eagles] enjoy a long and prosperous tenure in your new home. We know that in fraternal, social and civic work you will deserve well of the emblem which you share with the American people.²

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Robert Jackson's words, which pleased his large audience, are interesting for their content and as an early moment in his history. They exhibit some of the writing power for which he in time became world renowned as a United States Supreme Court justice and the chief prosecutor at Nuremberg. In spots, they manifest plenty of self-confidence

² *Id.* at 6, 9.

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and perhaps some hubris. They are forward-looking and optimistic, as Jackson was. And they quite obviously invite one to draw both parallels and contrasts to later events, in Jackson's life and in our own time.

As historiography, Jackson's words also invite, at least in spots, challenge and debate. He would have welcomed that—substantive, constructive discussion and learning abounded in the Jamestown community and the Chautauqua County, New York, region in which he lived and spoke in 1914, and they were central to the realms in which he spent his entire life.

Jackson was, in this speech, making no claim to be an historian. Although he had special teachers, mentors and educational resources, he had not attended even a day of college. He had been a lawyer for only a few months. And he was less than two weeks past February 13, 1914, his 22nd birthday.