

The BOOKER T. WASHINGTON Papers

To James R. B. Van Cleave¹

[Hotel Manhattan, New York City] February 9, 1909

My dear Sir: It is a matter of keen regret to me that, owing to a long standing promise to speak in New York on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, I find myself unable to accept your generous invitation to speak in his home city on that day. There is no spot in America where it would have given me greater satisfaction to have spoken my word than in Springfield, the city that he loved and the city where his body rests.

There are many lessons which can and will be drawn from the life of our great hero, but there is one above all others at this moment that I deem fitting to call attention to on this occasion. Among other reasons, I do so because of recent occurrences in this city of Lincoln's adoption.

When Lincoln freed my race there were four millions. Now there are ten millions. Naturally, more and more this increase means that they will scatter themselves through the country, North as well as South. A large element already is in the North. If my race would honor the memory of Lincoln and exhibit their gratitude for what he did, it can do so in no more fitting manner than by putting into daily practice the lessons of his own life. Mr. Lincoln was a simple, humble man, yet a great man. Great men are always simple. No matter where members of my race reside, we should resolve from this day forward that we shall lead sober, industrious, frugal, moral lives, and that while being ambitious we shall at the same time be patient, law-abiding and self-controlled as Lincoln was. These are the elements that will win success and respect, no matter where we live.

Every member of my race who does not work, who leads an immoral life, dishonors the memory and the name of Lincoln. Every one, on the other hand, who leads a law-abiding, sober life is justifying the faith which the sainted Lincoln placed in us.

In every part of the country I want to see my race live such high and useful lives that they will not be merely tolerated, but that they shall actually be needed and wanted because of their useful-