



Address to the **NEW YORK AFRICAN MUTUAL RELIEF SOCIETY**

by William Hamilton, cofounder

Universalist Church
New York City

2 January 1809__EXCERPTS

In 1808 black leaders of New York City, including several clergymen, formed the New York African Mutual Relief Society to provide a form of health and life insurance for its members. Members' dues were pooled to pay burial costs for members and to provide for their widows and children, among other forms of mutual aid.

My Brethren and Fellow Members of the New York African Society, for Mutual Relief, I congratulate you on this first anniversary of a day¹ which has produced an event that, for its importance to Africans and descendants, stands unrivaled; an event that long and arduous have been the exertions of many philanthropic characters to bring forth; an event that every benevolent mind rejoices to see. This day we are met with hearts big with gratitude, to celebrate an act of congress of the United States of America, which for its justice and humanity, outstrips any that have ever passed that honorable body; by an act bearing date March the second, eighteen hundred and seven, and which became an effectual law, January the first, eighteen hundred and eight, that species of commerce designated the slave trade was abolished. . . .

You my Brethren have formed yourself into an association for the purpose of protecting each other from indigency [poverty], as far as in your power lies, conscious that deep poverty and distress is the bane of improvement, conscious, too, that our advancement in every point of view depends much on our being united in social bodies. . . .

But my Brethren, mere socialities is not the object of our formation, but to improve the mind, soften the couch of the sick, to administer an elixir to the afflicted, to befriend the widow, and become the orphan's guardian, and is this not a noble employment, can there be found a better, you ought to be proud to be engaged in such an exercise. It is employment of this kind that raises the man up to the emperium, or highest heaven. . . .

My Brethren, many and repeated attempts have been made in this city, to establish societies of various kinds among the people of colour, but whether from the impolicy of the plans, our unripeness for those institutions, we will not say, but they have always soon perished or dwindled away to a number so small as scarcely to deserve the name of society; whether this will be the case with this institution or not, remains for futurity to say; but if we may judge from appearances, we shall predict that its standing shall

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. In Philip Sheldon Foner & Robert J. Branham, eds., *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900* (University of Alabama Press, 1998); address in the public domain, reprinted courtesy of the publisher. Full text in BlackPast.org at www.blackpast.org/?q=1809-william-hamilton-mutual-interest-mutual-benefit-and-mutual-relief. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ First anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade as required by the U.S. Constitution and passed by Congress to take effect January 1, 1808.

be long, and that the rays of its beneficence shall make the hearts of thousands of yet unborn members dilate by its cheering effulgence and effusions of benefits in seasons of sickness and distress.

This society has not been formed three quarters of a year, and the number of its members exceed by three times the number of any civil institution yet attempted among us.

The principles on which this institution is founded are congenial not only with the wish, but likewise with the interest of its members; its principles forbid the idea of its members becoming beggars to the society for relief in times of sickness, but it is the pledge, the agreement, and the duty of this institution to pay the sums specified by its Constitution to its sick members, and the widows and orphans of deceased members who have stood as such the limited time. So long as the principles of this society remain unchanged, so long shall its limbs remain unwithered and its trunk uncorrupted, its boughs shall never refuse to bear fruit for want of nutriment in the tree; never can you, my Brethren, be so infatuated as to shake off this institution, except by the over-persuasion of some foul daemon. Guard against the enemy, for enemies we have that would make merry at our overthrow; but above all things let our meetings be conducted with order and propriety, let order be our guide and peace our way mark; let friendship and good will be our atmosphere, be attentive to the sick members, never let it justly be said that we assumed the name of Mutual Relief for nought.

To you, my Brethren, the Standing Committee, let me address myself. Yours is truly an exalted station in which there is much confidence and trust reposed, with you rests the credit of this society, her fame shall spread through your vigilance, it is for you to immortalize her name by your active attention to the duties imposed on you; be then attentive to the sick members, and the widows and orphans of deceased members. If there should be found any one among you who should refuse to do his duty, let him be set aside as an unfit character to have such high trust reposed in him; but surely, my Brethren, there is not one of you who would be so forgetful of his honor and the solemn pledge he has given of the strict performance of the duties assigned him.

The other Officers are no less bounden and no less responsible, and in them is reposed equal trust, and from them is expected an equal attention to their duties. Let us all be united, my Brethren, in rearing this edifice — steady to our several departments — and so on shall be raised a wide spreading dome that shall stand the admiration and praise of succeeding generations, and on its front shall be eternally engraven

MUTUAL INTEREST,
MUTUAL BENEFIT,
AND MUTUAL RELIEF.

