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THE BLESSINGS OF LIBERTY

VOICES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUAL RIGHTS IN AMERICA

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Introduction

The Constitution of the United States begins by stating its purposes and goals, one of which is to "secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." The "blessings of liberty"—what are they?

You might think of the right to vote. Or the freedom to express your thoughts and opinions without fear of being punished for them. Or the opportunity to work hard and get ahead and make a good life. Or the basic security of knowing that the foods you buy are safe to eat. Or the assurance that the laws apply equally to all, that there is not one law for the rich and another for the poor, or one law for white people and another for people of color, or one law for men and another for women.

While those and similar blessings of liberty have been enjoyed by many Americans, for too long in our nation's history they have been denied to too many. In this book, you will meet some courageous people who dedicated themselves to securing the blessings of liberty for those to whom they were denied.

Our focus here is on the United States from about 1840 to 1920. The civil rights struggles of the later twentieth century are examined in a companion volume titled *A More Perfect Union*.

In this book, you will meet reformers who battled corrupt corporations or tried to help factory workers and people living in city slums. You will meet men and women who struggled to achieve equal rights and freedom for Black Americans after the Civil War. And you will meet many remarkable women who fought for the right to vote.

You will meet these people through their own words, written or spoken. Their words can be painful, especially when they describe the wrongs that brought suffering to many Americans. But their words are often inspiring, as they remind us that America's promise to "secure the blessings of liberty" must be extended not just to some but to all.