ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Gettysburg Address

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Lincoln was invited to speak at Gettysburg in 1863 to commemorate the cemetery that would hold the bodies of the Union's dead from the great battle that raged July 1-3, 1863. Initially the dead were buried where they fell, often in shallow graves. At the end of July local lawyer David Wills wrote: "Our dead are lying on the fields unburied (that is no grave being dug), with small portions of earth dug up alongside of the body and thrown over it. It many instance arms and legs, and sometimes heads, protrude, and my attention has been directed to several places where the hogs were actually rooting out the bodies and devouring them." Additionally, only a portion of the soldiers were properly identified, making it impossible to return the remains of most to their families. Clearly, the bodies could not long remain in their hastily dug graves. Just a week after the battle, Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin visited Gettysburg and appointed Wills to coordinate the removal of all Pennsylvanians killed in the battle. An 1851 graduate of Pennsylvania College, David Wills studied law under the noted abolitionist and congressman Thaddeus Stevens, gaining admission to the bar in 1854. That same year Wills became the first superintendent of the Adams County Public Schools. As befitted a Stephens protégé, Wills was a pro-abolition Republican.[1]

In those first few weeks after his appointment Wills attempted to locate and identify the remains of Pennsylvania's soldiers and return them to their families. But soon Wills realized that plan was not practical, so on July 24, 1863, he submitted a plan to Governor Curtin identifying East Cemetery Hill, the key to the Union position during the battle, as the ideal location for the cemetery. On August 13 Wills notified Curtin that he and the other state agents had agreed that the expense of the cemetery would be shared by all the states according to their representation in Congress. By mid-August Wills had

[1] David Wills to Andrew Curtin, July 24, 1863, in John Russell Bartlett, "The Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg: With the Proceedings at Its Consecration, at the Laying of the Corner-Stone of the Monument, and at Its Dedication," (Providence: Board of Commissioners of the Soldiers' National Cemetery, 1874), 1-2; *Revised Report of the Select Committee Relative to the Soldiers' National Cemetery Together with the House of Representatives and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: Singerly & Myers, 1865), 161-165; H. C. Bradsby, *1886 History of Adams County, Pennsylvania: Containing History of Their Counties, Their Townships, Towns, Villages, Schools, Churches, Industries, etc.; Portraits of Early Settlers and Prominent Men; Biographies* (Chicago: Warner, Beers & Co., 1886), 375-376.

purchased five parcels of land comprising seventeen acres atop Cemetery Hill and adjacent to the Evergreen Cemetery. Having procured a location for the cemetery, Wills called on William Saunders, a landscape gardener and rural architect from the Department of Agriculture, to design the cemetery. By arranging the graves in a semi-circle Saunders was able to take advantage of the oddly shaped parcels that Wills had cobbled together and also ensure that no state received a more privileged position than any other. [2]

While Saunders designed the cemetery, Wills gave serious thought to the dedication ceremonies. There was little question as to who should give the dedicatory oration; sixty-nine-year-old Edward Everett was the obvious choice. After graduating from Harvard University at the age of seventeen in 1811, Everett served five terms in the House of Representatives, won four terms as the governor of Massachusetts, was the Secretary of State in 1850, and served in the United States Senate for eighteen months. A staunch Whig and Unionist, Everett was the vice-presidential candidate on the Constitutional Union Party ticket that opposed Lincoln in 1860. In 1863 Everett held no high political office, but was invited to Gettysburg because he was the foremost orator of the day. His oration on George Washington, which he delivered 134 times, earned more than $58,000 for the Mount Vernon Memorial Committee. All told, Everett earned over $100,000 in royalties for his speeches. Everett combined oratorical excellence with political insight, making him an ideal choice to deliver the dedicatory address.[3]

On September 23, Boston mayor F. W. Lincoln privately inquired whether Everett would prepare and deliver an oration at the dedication of the cemetery. Everett indicated his acceptance and that same day David Wills sent a formal invitation. In response to Wills' letter Everett replied that he would be happy to take part in the ceremonies but could not possibly prepare an appropriate address before November 19. Wills agreed, changing the date of the dedication to November 19.[4]

On November 2 Wills wrote a letter to President Lincoln inviting him "to be present, and participate" in the ceremonies, but it is likely that letter was more of a follow-up than an initial contact. In mid-October a number of local papers had reported that Wills had told them he expected Lincoln to be at the dedication. Lincoln's acceptance of the invitation was no small matter. Rarely did Lincoln leave Washington, D.C., making his acceptance of the invitation to speak at Gettysburg extraordinary and underscoring the argument that Lincoln viewed this as an important opportunity to define the meaning of the war.

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[2] *This Grand National Enterprise:The Origins of Gettysburg's Soldiers*, National Cemetery & Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association (Unpublished manuscript located at the Gettysburg National Military Park Library, 1982), 16, 20, 31.

[3] Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Gettysburg Declaration* (Fort Wayne, IN: Lincoln National Life Foundation, 1964), 93-94.

[4] ____, *Edward Everett at Gettysburg* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1963), 1.

In the days leading up to November 19, the town prepared for visitors. David Wills invited the key figures to stay at his house, and soon was preparing for more than thirty houseguests. Harvey Sweney, a Gettysburg resident living on the town's main street, noted: "Nothing scarcely could be heard but the loud snort of the iron horse and the rumble of the long and heavy trains . . . every building public or private was filled and for miles around town the houses were filled with the congregated throng." The little town of Gettysburg, with a population of only 2,400, was overflowing with visitors. "All the rooms in the hotels were engaged several weeks ahead but our old town roused up to action . . . Churches, public schools, town halls, all the private dwellings, barns, etc. were thrown open to receive them," Sweney wrote.[5]

Back in Washington, Lincoln worked through the morning of November 18 before boarding the train for Gettysburg at noon. Accompanying the President were several of his cabinet members, including Secretary of State William Seward, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, and Secretary of the Interior John Usher. Additionally, French minister Henri Mercier, Italian minister Joseph Bertinatti, Canadian minister William McDougall, as well as secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay, Charlotte Everett Wise (Edward Everett's daughter), and several lower ranking public officials, military personnel, and reporters also travelled with Lincoln. That three cabinet members accompanied Lincoln to the ceremonies reveals its importance.[6]

At the train station in Gettysburg a mob formed, eager to glimpse the president. David Wills, Edward Everett, and a receiving committee met Lincoln and escorted him the block to Wills' house where a formal dinner was planned. The president had been inside for just a few moments when citizens called for a speech. After several minutes Lincoln appeared, briefly acknowledged their presence, and ducked back inside the house. The crowd was not discouraged, and during dinner even more well-wishers congregated on the square.[7] After dinner, Lincoln reappeared and addressed the crowd:

> I appear before you, fellow-citizens, merely to thank you for this compliment. The inference is a very fair one that you would hear me for a little while at least, were I to commence to make a speech. I do not appear before you for the purpose of doing so, and for several very substantial reasons. The most substantial of these is that I have no speech to make. [Laughter.] In my position it is somewhat important that I should not say any foolish things.
>
> A VOICE – If you can help it.

[5] Harvey Sweney to Andrew Sweney, November 29, 1863, folder 8-18b, Gettysburg National Military Park Library.

[6] Warren, *Lincoln's Gettysburg Declaration*, 56.

[7] Ibid, 65.

> Mr. LINCOLN – It very often happens that the only way to help it is to say nothing at all. [Laughter.] Believing this is my present condition this evening, I must beg of you to excuse me from addressing you further.[8]

This short little speech is called "The First Gettysburg Address" by some historians, but in truth it was nothing more than some off-the-cuff remarks. Lincoln had suffered through several embarrassing situations in the early years of his presidency after making extemporaneous remarks, and he was not going to make a fool of himself the night before the dedication ceremonies. A number of Southern papers reported this speech rather than the one he gave the following day, convincing their readers that Lincoln really was an uncouth jokester who could not even be serious at a funeral.

The special correspondent of the New York *World* observed, probably accurately given the descriptions of the evening's festivities: "There seemed to be among the great crowds many who came to Gettysburg simply to have a good time, and to them it did not matter much whether the occasion was a funeral or a marriage."[9] While hundreds of people made their rounds, Lincoln remained at the Wills House. After passing time in the parlor, Lincoln went to his room, accompanied by William Johnson, his African-American servant. According to Wills:

> Between nine and ten o'clock the President sent his servant to request me to come to his room. I went and found him with paper prepared to write, and he said that he had just seated himself to put upon paper a few thoughts for to-morrows exercises, and had sent for me to ascertain what part he was to take in them, and what was expected of him. After a full talk on the subject I left him.[10]

An hour later Lincoln left his room and made his way next door to talk with Seward about what he had written.

Controversy surrounds the question of when Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address. Did he compose it in Washington before November 18, on the train on November 18, at the Wills house on the night of November 18, or did he deliver it extemporaneously? The issue matters since the amount of time that Lincoln spent preparing his remarks gives us a sense of the importance he ascribed to the occasion.

[8] New York, *Herald*, November 20, 1863.

[9] New York, *World*, November 21, 1863.

[10] "Statement Given By Judge Wills to Charles M. McCurdy, About 1890," Folder 9-G17a, Gettysburg National Military Park Library.

Mostly likely Lincoln wrote a rough draft in Washington, put the finishing touches on it at the Wills house, and added a few words while giving the Address.

The nineteenth of November boasted a blue sky and a temperature that reached 52 degrees.[11] Despite the weather, it was a solemn day. The *Adams Sentinel* noted:

> The ground in these vicinities is yet strewn with remains and relics of the fearful struggle – ragged and muddy knapsacks, canteens, cups, haversacks, threadbare stockings trodden in the mud, old shoes, pistols, holsters, bayonet sheaths, and here and there fragments of gray and blue jackets . . . hides and skeletons of horses still remain upon the ground. Grave marks of unrecognized heroes were in every quarter of the field, and rows of graves ranged along the line of the stone or wooden fences.[12]

The procession to the cemetery lined up at 9:00 a.m. As President Lincoln made his appearance on the square he surely noticed the national flag flying at half mast. Eight-year-old William Storrick remembered the scene well. The square was "rife" with people who were "awed by the appearance of the great tall man . . . We and others shook hands with him and then Mr. Lincoln walked to the curb and mounted a horse . . ."[13] Harvey Sweney observed that the procession was "a living sea of human beings" with Lincoln at its center: "He sat gracefully bowing with a modest smile and uncovered head to the throng of women, men and children that greeted him from the doors and windows."[14]

The Reverend Thomas H. Stockton, chaplain of the House of Representatives, opened the ceremonies with a moving prayer. After Stockton's prayer, Edward Everett rose and opened with a call for patience:

> Standing beneath this serene sky, overlooking these broad fields now reposing from the labors of the waning year, the mighty Alleghenies dimly towering before us, the graves of our brethren beneath our feet, it is with hesitation that I raise my poor voice to break the eloquent silence of God and Nature. But the duty to which you have called me must be performed; - grant me, I pray you, your indulgence and your sympathy.

Beginning with an explanation of funerals in ancient Athens, Everett then discussed the causes of the war, the first two years of the struggle, the three days at Gettysburg, and finally offered some thoughts regarding the meaning of the great

[11] Jacobs, *Lincoln's Gettysburg World-Message*, 63.

[12] Gettysburg, *Adams Sentinel*, November 24, 1863.

[13] Gettysburg, *Star and Banner*, November 26, 1863; Gettysburg, *Times*, November 20, 1938.

[14] Harvey Sweney to Andrew Sweney, November 29, 1863.

events.[15] The oration was exactly what the state officials had envisioned when they asked Everett to speak. After an hour and fifty-seven minutes, Everett finished his oration. Lincoln stood, grasped Everett's hand, and exclaimed, "I am grateful to you."[16]

Those present enjoyed Everett's speech, though some later noted that it had been too long for the occasion. Henry Jacobs wrote that "the [length], however, would have been pardoned, and the speech have been commended as being what its author intended, viz. the crowning effort of his life, if President Lincoln had not been there." After a brief musical selection, Ward Hill Lamon, chief marshal for the event and a personal friend of Lincoln, rose and announced "The President of the United States!" [17]

Joseph Gilbert, the Associated Press reporter at the dedication ceremonies, offered perhaps the best description of Lincoln's delivery of the speech:

> He stood for a moment with hands clasped and head bowed in an attitude of mourning – a personification of the sorrow and sympathy of the nation. Adjusting his old fashioned spectacles, a pair with arms reaching to his temples, he produced from a pocket of his Prince Albert coat several sheets of paper from which he read slowly and feelingly. His marvelous voice, careering in fullness of utterance and clearness of tone, was perfectly audible on the outskirts of the crowd. He made no gestures nor attempts at display, and none were needed.[18]

As Lincoln spoke, Gilbert started to record the Address in shorthand:

> Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new Nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. [Applause.] Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that Nation, or any Nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We are met to dedicate a portion of it as the final resting-place of those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our power to add or

[15] *Revised Report*, 182.

[16] Warren, *Lincoln's Gettysburg Declaration*, 99.

[17] Henry E. Jacobs, *Memoirs of Henry Eyster Jacobs*, ed. Henry E. Horn (Gettysburg, PA: Adams County Historical Society, 1974), 63.

[18] Joseph I. Gilbert, "Lincoln in 1861," *Proceedings of the National Shorthand Reporters' Association Annual Meeting* 19 (1917): 134.

> detract. [Applause.] The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. [Applause.] It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work that they have thus far so nobly carried on. [Applause.] It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom; and that Governments of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from this earth. [Long-continued applause.][19]

Over fifty years later, Gilbert recalled, "He had not been known to prepare his speeches in advance and as he was expected to speak extempore, I was relied upon to take shorthand notes of his remarks." But the reporter was unable to fulfill his assignment: "Fascinated by his intense earnestness and depth of feeling, I unconsciously stopped taking notes and looked up at him."[20]

There remains a great amount of debate over what exactly Lincoln said at Gettysburg. Much of this confusion originated with Lincoln himself. In the four months after the ceremonies, Lincoln wrote and distributed five different copies of the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln wrote the first draft partly on Executive Mansion stationery and partly on regular paper, and the second draft on the same type of paper as the second page of the first draft. The early histories of the first two copies are somewhat of a mystery, but it seems likely John Nicolay had both until 1901, when they passed from his estate to John Hay. In 1916 the Hay family donated both manuscripts to the Library of Congress where they continue to reside. In early 1864 Edward Everett asked Lincoln for a copy so that he might auction it to raise money for the New York Sanitary Fair. The copy remained in private hands until the 1940s, at which time the estate of James Ames generously offered the document to the Illinois State Historical Society for the sum of $60,000, much less than Ames' original purchase price. Schoolchildren raised the lion's share of the money by donating their pennies. When they fell short, Chicago millionaire Marshall Field III stepped in and contributed the balance. This copy, frequently referenced as either the Everett or Illinois version, is now in the collection of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. In 1864 historian George Bancroft requested a copy for a collection to be bound and reproduced for sale at the Baltimore Sanitary Fair. The original version remained in the possession of Bancroft's family until 1929. In 1949 a benefactor purchased the speech and donated it to Cornell University, where it remains.

[19] Abraham Lincoln, "Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg, November 19, 1863," *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols., eds. Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955) 7:19-21. Hereafter Collected Works.

[20] Gilbert, "Lincoln in 1861," 134.

The Bliss copy, the final version and the one now commonly accepted, came about as a result of an accident. When Lincoln produced the copy for George Bancroft he wrote on both sides of the sheet of paper, something that made reproducing the item in the desired format impossible. Thus, Bancroft's stepson, Alexander Bliss, requested another copy. The president complied, and the original remained in the hands of the Bliss family until 1949. The Bliss version was also a "mistake" in that it consists of three pages, not the desired two. Cuban Oscar Cinta purchased the draft in 1949, and willed that it pass on to the American people upon his death, which occurred in 1957. It is now located in the Lincoln Bedroom.[21]

Each version differs. Lincoln continued to edit the Address in ways that did not greatly change the meaning of what he had to say but certainly changed the look. There are convincing arguments for each of the first three copies' being the closest to what Lincoln *actually* said, while the Bliss version is probably closest to what Lincoln *wanted* to say. In a May 5, 1909, letter Robert Todd Lincoln noted: "The Baltimore Fair version represents my father's last and best thought as to the address, and the corrections in it were legitimate for the author, and I think there is no doubt they improve the version as written out for Col. Hay, - and as I said to you before, I earnestly hope that the Baltimore Fair version will be used."[22]

While the exact text of the speech is murky, Lincoln's purpose is quite clear. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, ending slavery in the areas under Confederate control. Emancipation was justified as a necessary war measure and the document was constructed to withstand the legal challenges that would surely come from a hostile Supreme Court. At Gettysburg Lincoln took the opportunity to put moral force and eloquence behind the legalistic language of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Lincoln did so by invoking the Declaration of Independence in the first line, not a new tactic for him. John Nicolay called the document "his political chart and inspiration"[23] while Lincoln himself proclaimed, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."[24] A private letter in 1855 to his best friend, Joshua Speed, reveals that Lincoln was not merely publicly invoking the Declaration to make political hay, but that he was also considering the document in his private life:

[21] Boritt, *Gettysburg Gospel*, 287-290.

[22] Nicholson, *Scrapbook.*

[23] Nicolay quoted in Ida M. Tarbell, *The Early Life of Abraham Lincoln* (London: S. S. McClure, 1896), 166.

[24] "Speech in Independence Hall, February 22, 1861," in *Collected Works* 4:240.

> As a nation, we began by declaring that "*all men are created equal*." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, *except negroes*." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, *and foreigners, and catholics*." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty---to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocracy.[25]

As Gary Wills so eloquently demonstrated in his 1992 Pulitzer Prize winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, the president sought to identify the Declaration as the central document in the United States' founding, not the Constitution. Whereas the Constitution established and promoted democracy, the Declaration announced the need for democracy to include equality, a stance that Lincoln had moved to throughout his life. However, the Declaration had no legal standing in 1863, and as such Lincoln had been forced to base emancipation on the legalistic argument that it was a military necessity rather than the humane argument, supported by the Declaration, that it was morally just.

After the ceremony, Gilbert looked at Lincoln's original manuscript and completed his transcription of the Address. In the ensuing months Lincoln received many requests to produce copies of the Address that could be published or sold to raise funds for the war effort, and complied on several occasions. Of the five versions now in existence most argue that the last one Lincoln penned, now known as the Bliss copy, gets closest to what Lincoln wanted to say. At any rate, the differences are more cosmetic than consequential. Gilbert's report is quoted above because it was the most widely circulated at the time.[26]

After a dirge and closing prayer, the crowd dispersed. Lincoln retired to the Wills house for a late lunch. Shortly thereafter, the President made an appearance on the square to shake hands with the many well wishers. With the train back to Washington not scheduled to leave for a few more hours, Lincoln had one special request. He wanted to meet John Burns, the citizen who had taken up arms and joined the Union forces during the July 1 fighting. A committee quickly brought Burns to the Wills residence. After talking with the old man for a short while, Lincoln, Seward, and Burns walked two blocks to the Presbyterian Church to listen to an address by Governor-elect Charles Anderson of Ohio. Before Anderson's address was finished, Lincoln and his party arose and left, arriving back in Washington, D.C., at 1:00 a.m. the following morning.[27]

[25] Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855, in *Collected Works* 2:323.

[26] Abraham Lincoln, "Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg, November 19, 1863," *Collected Works*, 7:19-21.

[27] Gettysburg, *Compiler*, November 21, 1914.

Already some people were offering their reactions to the president's words. A student at the local Lutheran Theological Seminary, Junius Remensnyder, noted in his diary that the Gettysburg Address, "Was as fine a speech as I ever heard."[28] A few days later Gettysburg resident Henry Sweney wrote to his brother that Lincoln's "modest appearance and dignified manners, to say nothing of the noble speeches he made here, has endeared him to the hearts of the people and added thousands of friends to him on that day."[29] But the praise was not so universal. In Richmond, the influential *Enquirer* noted, "President Pericles, or rather Abe, made the dedicatory speech; but had to limit his observations within small compass, lest he should tell some funny story over the graves of the Immortals." The Richmond *Examiner* offered harsher criticism: "A vein of comedy was permitted to mingle with the deep pathos of the piece. This singular novelty, and the deviation from classic propriety, was heightened by assigning this part to the chief personage. Kings are usually made to speak in the magniloquent language supposed to be suited to their elevated position. On the present occasion Lincoln acted the clown."

But of all his speeches, the Gettysburg Address was the one most often referenced in the funeral orations prompted by Lincoln's assassination two years later. In 1911 Sun Yat-sen founded the modern Chinese government on the "Three People's Principles," and made clear that his inspiration was Lincoln's notion of "government of the people, by the people, for the people." Two years later Earl (later Lord) George Curzon declared Lincoln's Second Inaugural and Gettysburg Address to be the two best speeches in the English language, beating out William Pitt's toast after the British victory over Napoleon's fleet at Trafalgar. Perhaps most memorably, at the centennial commemorations of the speech in 1963, Dean Rusk declared, "The central commitments of the American experiment are probably known to more people in other lands through the words of the Gettysburg Address than through those of the Declaration of Independence."

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[28] William E. Barton, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: What He Intended to Say; What He Said; What He Was Reported to Have Said; What He Wished He Had Said* (New York: Peter Smith, 1950), 175.
[29] Henry Sweney to Andrew Sweney, November 29, 1863, Gettysburg National Military Park Library.