The Real Story of the Gettysburg Address

Written Especially for the GOLDEN BOOK

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At daybreak of July 1, 1863, two armies—170,000 men—were converging toward the little town of Gettysburg, in Pennsylvania. General Robert E. Lee was in command of the Army of Northern Virginia, numbering 78,000. The Army of the Potomac, numbering 92,000 men, was under the command of Major General George G. Meade. By ten o'clock, 370 Union and 272 Confederate cannon were pouring their rain of death over an area of fifteen square miles. For three days, the battle, the most crucial of the Civil War, was waged with intense fury. By midnight of July 4th, Lee and his army were retreating toward the Potomac, leaving behind them 2,592 killed, 12,709 wounded and 5,150 missing. The Union losses were 3,072 killed, 14,497 wounded, 5,434 missing.

A few days after the battle, Andrew J. Curtain, Governor of Pennsylvania, visited the battlefield to make provision for the burial of the dead and the care of the wounded. He designated David Wills, a prominent citizen of Gettysburg, to supervise the task and to render any other appropriate service in behalf of the state.

Mr. Wills early conceived the idea of establishing a national cemetery, to be consecrated and shared by the eighteen states whose sons had participated in the three days' battle. Governor Curtain concurred in the plan and authorized Mr. Wills to enter into negotiations with the governors of the other seventeen states.

The date set apart for the consecration of the grounds was originally October 23rd. Edward Everett, by common consent the foremost orator of the time, was unanimously selected to deliver the oration at the dedication.

Mr. Everett promptly acknowledged the invitation and, after pleading engagements which would prevent his acceptance at any time during the month of October added:

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"Should such a postponement of the day first proposed be admissible, it will give me great pleasure to accept the invitation."

The 19th of November was accordingly agreed upon for the commemoration ceremonies. Formal invitations to attend were then sent to President Lincoln and his Cabinet, to General Meade, to the Governors of the interested states and others. President Lincoln was not at this time invited to speak. Some of the members of the Cemetery Board expressed doubt that he could do justice to the occasion. After some discussion, it was decided to ask the President, as head of the nation, to deliver a few appropriate remarks and Mr. Wills addressed the following letter to him on November 2nd:

"The several states having soldiers in the Army of the Potomac, who were killed at the battle of Gettysburg, or have since died at the various hospitals established in the vicinity, have procured grounds on a prominent part of the field for a cemetery, and are having the dead removed to them and properly buried. These grounds will be consecrated and set apart to this sacred purpose, by appropriate ceremonies, on Thursday, the 19th instant. Hon. Edward Everett will deliver the oration. I am authorized by the governors of the different States to invite you to be present and participate in these ceremonies, which will doubtless be very imposing and solemnly impressive. It is the desire that after the oration, you, as Chief Executive of the nation, formally set apart these grounds for their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks. It will be a source of great gratification to the widows and orphans that have been made almost friendless by the great battle here, to have you here personally; and it will kindle anew in the breasts of the comrades of these brave dead, who are now in the tented field or nobly meeting the foe in the front, a confidence that they who sleep in death on the battlefield are not forgotten by those highest in authority; and they will feel that, should their fate be the same, their remains will not be uncared for. We hope you will be able to be present to perform this last solemn act to the soldier dead on this battlefield."

Accompanying this official invitation, was a private note from Mr. Wills, asking the President to be his house guest during his stay in Gettysburg. "As the hotels in our town will be crowded and in confusion at the time referred to in the enclosed invitation," wrote Mr. Wills, "I write to invite you to stop with me. I hope you will feel it your duty to lay aside pressing business for a day to come on here to perform this last sad rite to our brave soliders on the 19th instant. Governor Curtain and Hon. Edward Everett will be my guests at that time, and if you come you will please join them at my house."

ALTHOUGH Edward Everett had been invited to speak five weeks before an invitation had been sent to the President, no suggestion was made to him that he "lay aside pressing business for a day" nor was any limitation put upon him as to the character of his speech.

It is an interesting and characteristic commentary on the time and the event that Lincoln was treated with so much contempt and that he accepted with so much good grace. That he was solicitous to attend and "to perform this last rite to our brave soldiers," is made evident in his note to Stanton, in response to the latter's tentative plans for the trip to Gettysburg. "I do not like this arrangement," he wrote. "I do not wish to so go that by the slightest accident

we fail entirely and, at the best, the whole to be a mere breathless running of the gauntlet. But any way."

"On November 18th, we started from Washington," John Hay records in his diary, "to go to the consecration of the Soldiers' Cemetery at Gettysburg. On our train were the President, Seward, Usher, Blair, Nicolay and myself; Mercier and Admiral Raymond; Bertinniti and Captain Isotta, and Lieut. Martinez and C. M. Wise; W. MacVeagh . . ." and others.

"At Gettysburg," Hay records in his diary, "the President went to Mr. Wills, who expected him, and our party broke like a drop of quicksilver spilt. . . . We went out after a while following the music to hear the serenades. The President appeared at the door, said a dozen words meaning nothing, and went in."

What Lincoln Said There

On the morning of the 19th, the appointed hour for the ceremonies having arrived, the President, escorted by military and naval officers, members of the Cabinet, Judges of the Supreme Court, Governors and other distinguished guests, proceeded to the scene of the consecration.

In due order, Mr. Everett delivered his oration, which consumed two hours. It is unquestionably one of the finest examples of forensic eloquence in the English tongue. He traversed the pages of history, drew a fitting parallel between the obsequies held over the Peloponnesian soldiers who had been killed in battle, when Pericles pronounced his famous oration, and the present occasion, analyzed the history and the causes of the Civil War, of which Gettysburg was the turning point, and characterized the rebellion of the Southern states as a crime against national sovereignty.

At the close of Mr. Everett's oration, and after the singing of a hymn, composed for the occasion by Benjamin B. French, President Lincoln was introduced by Marshal Ward Hill Lamon. The President then delivered the brief address that has since become the model of forensic eloquence throughout the English speaking world. He said:

Fourscore 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.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for 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 can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause to which they gave the last full measure of devotion —that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Many pages could be written concerning the effect of Lincoln's address on the audience. There is a score of reputable witnesses who give varied accounts of what they saw and heard.

Some aver that the President's words were received in "hushed silence," either because of their impressive solemnity or that they did not realize that the President had concluded his remarks. Others are equally clear in their recollection that his utterances were loudly applauded. Benjamin French, whose hymn was sung and who heard the address, three days after the event wrote in his diary, "Anyone who saw and heard the hurricane of applause that met his every word at Gettysburg, would know that he lived in every heart. . . ." Newspaper accounts published on the following day interpolated periodic applause.

"As a matter of fact," comments Ward Hill Lamon, in his *Recollections*, "the silence during the delivery of the speech, and the lack of hearty demonstrations of approval immediately after its close, were taken by Mr. Lincoln as certain proof that it was not well received. In that opinion we all shared. . . . Mr. Lincoln said to me after our return to Washington, 'I tell you, Hill, that speech fell on the audience like a wet blanket. I am distressed about it. I ought to have prepared it with more care.'" Elsewhere, Lamon says, "He said to me on the stand, immediately after concluding the speech, 'Lamon, that speech won't *scour!* It is a flat failure, and the people are disappointed.' (The word 'scour' he often used in expressing his positive conviction that a thing lacked merit, or would not stand the test of close criticism or the wear of time.)"

In his diary of the memorable events of that day, John Hay made this illuminating entry: "In the morning, I got a beast and rode out with the P— and suite to the Cemetery in procession; . . . and after a little delay Mr. E— took his place on the stand—Mr. Stockton made a prayer which thought it was an oration—and Mr. E— spoke as he always does, perfectly; and the President, in a firm, free way, with more grace than is his wont, said his half dozen lines of consecration—and the music wailed, and we went home through crowded and cheering streets."

How different from this passing reference to one of the most momentous events in history, is the more mature judgment of Nicolay and Hay, in their monumental history of Lincoln and his time, recorded nearly thirty years later: "If there arose," they wrote, "in the mind of any discriminating listener on the platform a passing doubt whether Mr. Lincoln would or could properly honor the unique occasion, that doubt vanished with the opening sentence; for then and there the President pronounced an address of dedication so pertinent, so brief yet so comprehensive, so terse yet so eloquent, linking the deeds of the present to the thoughts of the future, with simple words in such living, original, yet exquisitely moulded, maxim-like phrases that the critics have awarded it an unquestionable rank as one of the world's masterpieces in rhetorical art."

Among the few who instantly recognized the far-reaching effect of the address was Wayne MacVeagh, who later distinguished himself as a lawyer, Cabinet member, diplomat and orator. He had gone to Gettysburg as the President's guest and was seated near him on the platform as he spoke. "I waited until the distinguished guests who wished to do so had spoken to him, and then I said to him with great earnestness, 'You have made an immortal address.' To which he quickly replied: 'Oh, you must not be extravagant about it.'" And Edward Everett, writing to the President to thank him for having arranged for a seat on the

platform for Mr. Everett's daughter, said of the President's speech: "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes." Lincoln's reply to this—"I am pleased to know that in your judgment the little I did say was not a failure"—and the two other comments given above are the only recorded instances where Lincoln made any mention of his Gettysburg address after its delivery.

When and Where It Was Written

THE question "When and where did Lincoln write the Gettysburg Address?" has been asked and answered many times and in as many ways. The most prevalent, because it is the most popular, theory is that, on the journey from Washington to Gettysburg, Lincoln wrote his masterpiece on the back of an envelope or a scrap of paper. This fiction probably first derived from a statement in "The History of Abraham Lincoln and the Overthrow of Slavery," by Isaac N. Arnold, published in 1866. "President Lincoln," that writer says, "while on his way from the Capitol to the battlefield, was notified that he would be expected to make some remarks. Retiring a short time, he prepared the following address. . . ." Other writers took up the legend and it was given such universal currency by Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews in *The Perfect Tribute* that it has been generally accepted as true. We are told in that admirable story that "Lincoln glanced across the car. Edward Everett sat there. . . ." The fact is that Mr. Everett was already in Gettysburg and had been there for several days. Then follows the dramatic story that Lincoln asked Seward for some paper, "to do a little writing," and on the brown wrapping paper which Seward tore from a package of books, wrote his address.

One who was as well qualified to speak as anyone, for years a close friend of the President and his erstwhile law partner, and who presented him to the audience at Gettysburg, Ward Hill Lamon, says:

"A day or two before the dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Mr. Lincoln told me that he would be expected to make a speech on the occasion; that he was extremely busy, and had no time for preparation; and that he greatly feared that he would not be able to acquit himself with credit, much less fill the measure of public expectation. From his hat (the usual receptacle for his private notes and memoranda) he drew a sheet of foolscap, one side of which was closely written with what he informed me was a memorandum of his intended address. This he read to me, first remarking that it was not at all satisfactory to him. It proved to be in substance, if not in exact words, what was afterwards printed as his famous Gettysburg speech."

At nine o'clock in the evening of the 18th, Lincoln sent his servant to Mr. Wills to request some writing paper. Mr. Wills delivered it in person, whereupon the President inquired, "Mr. Wills, what do you expect of me tomorrow?" "A brief address," Mr. Wills responded.

"It was after the breakfast hour on the morning of the 19th," Nicolay writes, "that . . . Mr. Lincoln's private secretary went to the upper room in the house of Mr. Wills which Mr. Lincoln occupied, to report for duty, and remained with the President while he finished writing the Gettysburg address during the short leisure he could utilize for this purpose before being called to take his place in the procession."