

November 19, 2022

by Dan Friesen

Today, November 19, 2022, marks the anniversary of one of the most well known and oft quoted speeches in America's history. The Gettysburg Address was given by President Abraham Lincoln on November 19, 1863, in the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, namesake for the bloodiest battle in the Civil War fought on July 1, 2, and 3, 1863.

Thirty years ago, in 1992, my father, George Friesen, and I offered the first WAI tour in the USA, which visited this famous battlefield later calibrated by historians as "the highwater mark of the Confederacy".

In those early years of WAI, the great majority of our travelers were actively involved in walking clubs that encouraged walkers towards a goal of walking in all 50 states. We therefore routed our first USA tour to walk in as many states as possible. It was a racehorse tour from Portland, Oregon, across the USA to Washington DC, up the coast to walk in the New England states during the colorful fall foliage season, then back across the US on a northern route to Portland. We walked in 20 states in 20 days! A first-time traveler was reported to have called home to exclaim to her husband that "these people are serious!"

That was a different era and a different style of travel. Much has changed about the WAI travel model and philosophy of travel in the intervening years. One of the activities that made a profound impression on me during that first Adventure in the USA, however, was our visit to Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania. We spent several hours in the visitor center, marveled at the huge Cyclorama\*, and toured the battlefield with our bus in the company of a superb battlefield guide.

*\*The Cyclorama is a gigantic circular painting, a popular form of art in that era, depicting Pickett's Charge, the so-called "highwater mark of the Confederacy". Historians generally mark the maximum point of penetration of this catastrophic Confederate military action of Pickett's Charge as the "highwater mark", the turning point beyond the cause of the Confederacy began its descent.*

We've visited Gettysburg with many groups over the years. The experience has never been anything but moving and profound. The battlefield guides are great storytellers and, amidst an almost endless catalogue of Civil War drama, the story they tell of Gettysburg is one of the Civil War's most dramatic.

Our most recent visit was just last month when our *Hiking the Appalachian Trail* group took a break from hiking the Trail to visit Gettysburg National Military Park. Ironically, this visit, led by WAI guides, Scott Isom and Tim Friesen, coincided with my reading of the battle, and the famous Lincoln discourse, in volume 2 of *The Civil War*, by Shelby Foote.

Lincoln's speech was an unlikely candidate to be remembered the week after it was given, much less merit being memorized by countless school children and students of history and

admirers of Honest Abe. Besides the fact that his tall gangling appearance, accentuated by his stovepipe hat, was often less than dignified, Lincoln's manner of speech and pithy and colloquial grasp of the English language was not appreciated by most of his contemporaries. The influence of his backwoods upbringing was unmistakable in his speech. Stories and levity were tools he often used to make a point or defuse an opponents attack. Shelby Foote sets the stage for Lincoln's famous speech:

*Lincoln accepted an invitation to attend the dedication of a new cemetery at Gettysburg for the men who had fallen there in the July battle. The date, November 19, was less than three weeks off, and the reason for this lateness on the part of the committee was that he had been an afterthought, its original intention having been to emphasize the states which were sharing the expenses of the project, not the nation. Besides, even after the thought occurred that it might be a good idea to invite the President, some doubt had been expressed "as to his ability to speak upon such a grave and solemn occasion."*

*However, since the principle speaker, the distinguished orator Edward Everett of Massachusetts had been chosen six weeks earlier, it was decided—as Lincoln was told in a covering letter, stressing that the ceremonies would "doubtless be very imposing and solemnly impressive"—to ask him to attend in a rather minor capacity: "It is the desire that after the oration, you, as the Chief Executive of the nation, formally set apart these grounds to their sacred use by a few appropriate remarks". Duly admonished to be on his good behavior, to avoid both length and levity, Lincoln accepted the invitation, along with these implied conditions, on the day it was received.*

The point was clearly made that the committee wanted the comments short and solemn. Even then, some protested that having Lincoln speak injected a political element into this somber occasion. Nationwide elections had just finished a couple of weeks earlier and political tensions were still in play. Foote continues:

*Lincoln held to his intention to attend the ceremonies, despite the quips and adverse comments in and out of print. He was, he remarked in another connection this week, not much upset by anything said about him, especially in the papers. "These comments constitute a fair specimen of what has occurred to me through life. I have endured a great deal of ridicule without much malice, and have received a great deal of kindness not quite free from ridicule. I am used to it."*

In the three weeks leading up to the ceremony, Lincoln was typically over-busy. On the night of November 18, the eve of the dedication, he had still not settled on the form and content of his speech. Just one of the distractions during this period was a mysterious ailment of his son, Tad, particularly worrisome since Tad's brother Willie had died under similar circumstances about a year and a half earlier. Foote describes the trip north to Gettysburg on the eve of the speech:

*The four-car special, carrying the President and three of his cabinet members—Seward, Blair, and Usher; the others had declined, pleading the press of business—his two secretaries, officers of the army and navy, his friend Ward Lamon, and the French and Italian ministers, left the capital around noon. Lincoln sat for a time with the others in a drawing room at the back of the rear coach, swapping stories for an hour or so, and then, as the train approached Hanover Junction, excused himself to retire to the privacy of his compartment at the other end of the car. “Gentlemen, this is all very pleasant,” he said, “but the people will expect me to say something to them tomorrow, and I must give the matter some thought.”*

The crowd in Gettysburg the next morning was well over 10,000, many drawn by the prospect of picking up war relics in the battlefields surrounding the town. Pickings for such were good; it was later estimated that over 500 tons of ammunition had been fired over the 3-day battle. The internment of the dead for this early July battle was still ongoing in November but was suspended for the day in light of the occasion.

Once all had assembled at the cemetery for the ceremony, the main speaker, Edward Everett, was introduced. Foote ably provides context:

*“Mr. President,” Everett said with a bow, tall and white-haired, just under seventy years of age, a former governor of Massachusetts, minister to England for John Tyler, president of Harvard, successor to Daniel Webster as Secretary of State under Millard Fillmore, and in 1860 John Bell’s running mate on the Constitutional Union ticket, which had carried Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee.*

*“Mr. Everett,” Lincoln replied, and the orator launched forthwith into his address.*

*“Standing beneath this serene sky,” with “the mighty Alleghenies dimly towering” before him, Everett raised his “poor voice to break the eloquent silence of God and Nature.” He did so for two hours by the clock, having informed the committee beforehand that the occasion was “not to be dismissed with a few sentimental or patriotic commonplaces.”*

When Everett finished, the crowd responded with prolonged applause, and after a song by a Baltimore choir, Lincoln was announced. He rose and approached the rostrum and began his comments while the photographer adjusted his tripod in front. Lincoln began:

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*“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 and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield 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 the 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 that they have thus far so nobly carried on. 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 the cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."*

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Foote records what happened when Lincoln finished and sat down.

*He finished before the crowd, a good part of whose attention had been fixed on the photographer anyhow, realized that he was fairly launched on what he had to say. In reaction to what a later observer described as the "almost shocking brevity" of the speech, especially by contrast with the one that went before, the applause was delayed, then scattered and barely polite. Moreover, the photographer missed his picture. Before he had time to adjust his tripod and uncap the lens, Lincoln had said "of the people, by the people, for the people" and sat down, leaving the artist with a feeling that he had been robbed.*

There was a smattering of applause and Lincoln felt immediately that he had underperformed. Foote tells us that he turned to his friend and "said gloomily: 'Lamon, that speech won't scour. It is a flat failure and the people are disappointed.'" Scour was a prairie farming reference to a plow that "would not clean itself while shearing through wet soil."

Immediate reviews were mixed. Some papers excoriated the president. The Chicago Times wrote "The cheek of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat and dishwatery utterances" of the President.

Others saw the literary genius immediately. Foote reports

*...not all editors were as scathing as the one in his home state; a Massachusetts paper, for example, printed the address in full and remarked that it was "deep in feeling, compact in thought and expression, and tasteful and elegant in every word and comma."*

*A Cincinnati editor had already described it as "the right thing in the right place and a*

*perfect thing in every respect.”*

*When Everett remarked in a letter next day, “I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes,” Lincoln replied: “In our respective parts yesterday, you could not have been excused to make a short address, nor I a long one. I am pleased to know that, in your judgment, the little I did say was not entirely a failure.”*

Everett then asked Lincoln for a copy of the speech, which Lincoln forward after making minor edits that produced a final draft only two words longer than the original.

Today, 159 years later, Lincoln’s prophecy in the Gettysburg Address that “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here” turned out to be only partially correct. Today, no one remembers what the featured speaker, Edward Everett, said during his two hour speech, yet Abraham Lincoln’s words are considered a classic benediction of American ideals with classic lines that most Americans recognize even when they don’t recall their source.

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