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# Acknowledgments

This project began when I, like many before me, became intrigued and puzzled by the mysteries of the Gettysburg Address. It seemed odd that the origins and writing of a speech that had become such an important part of American identity should be surrounded by so many questions. Early on, it became clear that much of the confusion arose from the encrustation of error accumulated over the decades, of stories repeated but never verified, and of supposedly eyewitness accounts by persons who were merely reporting what they thought others had said. Then the task became a matter of seeking the earliest and most reliable evidence and putting the fragmented history of the events together with the silent testimony of the texts. I was astonished at the story I discovered of Lincoln's own understanding of the eventful journey that brought him to create a speech he knew to be remarkable, and I hope that this history of Lincoln's journey to the "new birth of freedom" helps reveal a new depth to America's most admired speech and to its most beloved president.

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W R I T I N G   T H E   G E T T Y S B U R G

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# Introduction: The Mysteries of the Manuscripts

A brilliant November day. Ten thousand mourners wait. He rises.

The throng of eager listeners was swayed by his stirring words. Their hearts swelled with deeper emotions as the speaker poured out the fervor of his own patriotic soul, always in full sympathy with the brave defenders of the country, over the nameless graves which consecrated that field of blood.

“The world will little note, nor long remember, what *we say* here; but it can never forget what they did here.”

Noble words of a true-hearted patriot! Such honor to the brave does not often hallow their sleeping dust. . . . His generous nature clasped the lifeless forms of those who saved their country by nobly sacrificing themselves; and he would recognize the obligations of the living to the martyred dead.<sup>1</sup>

Lincoln at Gettysburg. Few images of the American past run deeper in the national memory than that of the tall martyr president dedicating the cemetery for the honored dead of the greatest battle of the Civil War. But in our postheroic era, depictions like this one, published by William Makepeace Thayer less than a year after the ceremony—even before Lincoln was relected—seem irretrievably remote. It may be that the iconic scenes and

well-worn passages of this story have been told and retold so many times that the tale has changed from vividly classic to hopelessly archaic, any semblance of vitality lost beneath tradition, homily, and trivia.<sup>2</sup> Controversy and debate have swirled around what exactly Lincoln said, what he wore, what he meant, the response of the crowd, the color of his horse, whether he wrote on the train, and a myriad of other matters. As early as 1906 a beleaguered book reviewer expressed only half-joking surprise that “so minor an incident as the delivery of an address, strictly occasional, by a man who was not a noted orator” should inspire three books in that year alone. Forty years later, James G. Randall, one of the first academic historians to specialize in Lincoln and the war, bemoaned “the unprofitable realm of Lincoln-at-Gettysburg apocrypha.”<sup>3</sup>

No area of that realm has been more unprofitable than the quest to know how Lincoln wrote and revised the Gettysburg Address. Some of the first newspaper articles about the Gettysburg dedication ceremony, 150 years ago, noted that Lincoln’s words were reported inaccurately, and the 1870s saw the first debate about which of the handwritten copies of the speech he may have held while speaking; to the present these questions have remained unanswered. These mysteries of the manuscripts are important because the search for a secure history of Lincoln’s best-known speech is at heart an effort to understand his ideas and purposes at a crucial moment in the war, for there is no more effective way to enter into people’s thinking than to look over their shoulder as they compose and revise. It is in the spaces between words, in the differences and choices made between one sentence or phrase and another, that we approach most closely the enigma of creativity and thought. Yet for the Gettysburg Address, confusion and uncertainty about such fundamental issues as which of the five handwritten versions Lincoln wrote first, which manuscript was the one—if any—he read from at the ceremony, and which report of his words is most reliable have prevented comprehensive analysis of Lincoln’s vision and a clear sense of the evolution of his thought as he wrote and spoke about the central issues of the great Civil War and the nature of the American experiment.

Many of the mysteries of the manuscripts arise because, although the Gettysburg Address is the most admired work by our most admired president, the dramatic and surprising story of Lincoln’s speech has never been fully told.<sup>4</sup> For Lincoln, getting to the speech—as a statement of ideas and as an event—was both an intellectual and a physical journey. Lincoln be-



gan to compose his words in Washington with one set of ideas, incorporated in the draft of the speech that he took with him when he left the White House. Yet by the time Lincoln stood on the platform at Gettysburg a day later, he had traveled a long road, one that had become more meaningful with each step. He had journeyed by carriage, train, and horseback, passing in part over familiar terrain that he now saw in a new light. He had experienced for the first time the battlefield of Gettysburg and the little town in the grip of patriotic celebration of loyalty and commemoration. And he had deeply felt the solemn funeral rites for 3,000 heroes and more.

Lincoln's journey to Gettysburg is encoded in the manuscripts and words of his speech and reflected in the texts of his revisions. Through these documents we can trace, at times word by word, the arc of his thought. Lincoln's own words reveal that he experienced writing the Gettysburg Address as an eventful process that was fraught with the possibility of failure but that he knew finally resulted in a success beyond expectation. A year after the Gettysburg ceremony, when Lincoln told his old friend James Speed about how he came to write his speech, he rehearsed a three-act drama of contemplation, composition, and revision that was surrounded by anxiety and permeated by doubt, but he saw that this story of sudden reversals and unlooked-for achievement gave a particular cast to the words that he wrote and spoke. As an accomplished storyteller, Lincoln knew that the narrative he spun that night to his friend explained the nature of the final speech, a journey he experienced as paradoxical, surprising, and, he recognized, triumphant.

Lincoln's own story of how he wrote the Gettysburg Address, and the words of the speech themselves, cannot be fully comprehended without a clear chronology of composition and succession of manuscripts and words. Five versions of the speech in Lincoln's handwriting survive, but the heart of the mystery lies in determining the chronological and editorial relationships of just two of them: the so-called Nicolay text described and published in facsimile by John Nicolay, Lincoln's secretary, in 1894, and the so-called Hay text, found in the papers of Lincoln's assistant secretary John Hay and first published in 1908.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps because it was thought that the history of the speech was already known and was inconclusive as to the order of the texts, efforts to solve the issue have centered on textual approaches such as counting word differences among documents to see which are most closely related. This is a useful approach, but texts can be edited for many purposes, and as it turns out, the nature of Lincoln's edito-

rial changes, drawing first on one document and then on another, precludes resolving chronological or editorial relationships on the basis of counting words only. Establishing the order of these two documents and the other versions of the speech requires in addition fixing for the first time the timing and stages of Lincoln's composition and revision process, often to the very hour, because the evidence of the texts can only be read in context: the history of those days surrounding the ceremony clarifies the mysteries of the manuscripts.

Bringing together the events and the words in a comprehensive narrative for the first time reveals a secure order for Lincoln's manuscripts, an order that is confirmed by the near totality of evidence, both textual and contextual. New sources and old evidence interpreted in a new light at last can provide confidence in a historically verifiable and textually supported chain of composition, performance, and revision that is written in Lincoln's movements and inscribed in his texts. The story that Lincoln told to Speed, read in the context of events and the evidence of the manuscripts, precludes the possibility that the Hay and all other existing texts were written before the speech; that story, again in conjunction with the texts and the events, confirms that the Nicolay document was the delivery manuscript. It alone is the sole surviving textual evidence and documentation of the compositional history that Lincoln told to Speed as a dramatic narrative; it encompasses a whole series of episodes of writing and revision that brought Lincoln from Washington to the stand at Gettysburg, and from an early, discarded conception of his speech to a new and more powerful vision pronounced on the battlefield. The chief witness in that story, through the recollections of Speed and seconded by the history of the texts and the events, is Lincoln himself.

As Lincoln saw, the speech that became the Gettysburg Address was not preordained; it was created, and its eventful history of composition reveals its contours and shape in ways that cannot be seen without the lens of Lincoln's lived experience. On the very morning of his speech, for example, Lincoln toured the battlefield and visited the site where his "gallant and brave friend, Gen Reynolds," had died.<sup>6</sup> On returning to his quarters to review his manuscript, Lincoln initiated an unexpected revision, changing the text he had prepared the night before and bringing a new vision to his speech. He included a wholly new second page incorporating a more assertive sense of dedication into his speech, and he underlined one word and one word only on the first page that he had retained from the draft he had

brought from Washington: “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they did here.” On the speakers’ platform, Lincoln’s deeply felt dedication to the cause and to the sacrifices of soldiers like his friend Reynolds led him to pronounce those words with such feeling that many listeners were moved to tears, difficult as that might be to believe in a postheroic world. This same powerful emotional impulse prompted him to add the words “under God” to his speech—words incorporated today in the Pledge of Allegiance because of this—though they are not found in his earlier drafts.

In that moment was born the authentic legend of Lincoln at Gettysburg; this is how the “few appropriate remarks” Lincoln was asked to give at the ceremony became the Gettysburg Address, history and memory intersecting to make an American myth. It is a myth that happened to be true for many who lived it, and it is a legend that is real for those who experienced it as such and who still believe in its power to transform. At first only some of those who witnessed that day expressed a sense of the emotional power of the scenes that unfolded before them. Over time, and in part because of the assiduous work of partisans and boosters, moralizers and patriots, the small cohort who carried the flame became the legions of a cause, part of the larger Cause Victorious, a myth nurtured in the North and among Unionists that inversely mirrored the secessionist myth of the Lost Cause.<sup>7</sup> The legend grew in schoolrooms, from pulpits, and in the pages of the daily press, and it was continued even a century later from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial by a prophet who still had a dream, but it began in a historical event whose reality resides in the details and trivia of a moment.

The texts tell the tale, but we can only see their history through the sources available to us, refracted by time and distorted by the lens of myth and memory. Recognizing the processes that created the legend of Gettysburg allows us to correct for these layers, taking us down through the accumulated sediments of memory to the bedrock of lived experience and a myth that has shaped American identity. Reconstructing Lincoln’s journey to Gettysburg, a journey that as a people we have all made with him, allows us to trace across Lincoln’s manuscripts the development of the new and more radical vision of the war’s meaning announced by the “new birth of freedom.” As individuals, we recognize that memory, with all its inaccuracies and distortions, gives us identity and makes us who we are. As humans in social communities, we find meaning in memory, myth, and legend, allowing us to make sense of lived and shared experience in ways

that serve our need to feel connected to others and to larger purposes. In a sense, the Gettysburg Address remade America, but it might also be said that through the processes of reflection, repetition, and revision, America has constantly remade the Gettysburg Address.<sup>8</sup> The Gettysburg myth was built by veterans and partisans, opportunists and ideologues (and sometimes these were all the same), but the legend prospered and thrived because it reflected the ideals of, first, a people at war, and then, a nation defining its character during an era that created a new and somewhat terrifying vision of what a people united could be: “The unprecedented power,” as *Harper’s Weekly* put it welcoming Lincoln’s second inauguration, “of a Government founded upon the popular will.”<sup>9</sup>

His entire political life, Lincoln recognized the power of the people’s will, and he sought to guide and lead that force toward what he considered its proper ends. For Lincoln, the great danger within Stephen Douglas’s “popular sovereignty” was that it threatened to seize authentic democracy and replace it with rule by the will of only a part of the whole. The same ideas and tools that Lincoln developed during the 1850s in his struggle against Douglas and popular sovereignty served also in the struggle against secession, which Lincoln similarly defined as the effort of a part of the people to dictate to the whole.<sup>10</sup> However, by 1863 the massive transformations and new issues brought by the war demanded new responses; emancipation was one such, but it was a first step, not a culmination. A Union restored on the basis of the Emancipation Proclamation would have remained a house divided, part slave, part free. The real break in Lincoln’s vision and policies came in mid-to-late 1863 and arose from the accumulated weight of decisions and policies by which the administration felt its way forward. Lincoln saw this clearly and described it quite forthrightly in the Annual Message of December 1863, written precisely during the two weeks bracketing the Gettysburg Address, in which he outlined the path by which he came to what he called a “new review” and a “new reckoning” about the course and destination of the war.

Most crucial in the new reckoning were the radical implications of administration policies regarding recruiting and arming formerly enslaved blacks. Building upon the policy that blacks could be citizens, in July 1863, and in response to Confederate massacres of African American soldiers, the Lincoln administration forthrightly proclaimed, “It is the duty of every government to give protection to its citizens, of whatever class, color, or condition,” and then began to impose this view in its economic and Recon-

struction policies. In early October 1863 the Lincoln administration, over the strong objection of some border state Unionists, instituted a remarkable and little-known policy of compulsory emancipation of enslaved men, with compensation to their previous owners, in most of the border states and of their enrollment in the army, effectively extending the draft to slaves and providing the essential foundation for the extension of full citizenship.<sup>11</sup> Most crucially for Reconstruction, the Annual Message of 1863 announced for the first time that only states that had abolished slavery would be readmitted to the Union: there would be no reunion with slaveholders. At the same time, Lincoln also pushed behind the scenes for state governments then in formation in the occupied South to enfranchise blacks who had served the Union.<sup>12</sup> This set the stage for his public statement of April 1865 in support of voting rights for some of the freedmen, perhaps the most radical and controversial public statement made by a president to that time. Hearing that speech, John Wilkes Booth resolved to strike.

Taken together, these and other new departures of 1863 and 1864 were already beginning to implement some of the ideas and policies that can be found in the three great postwar amendments to the Constitution that collectively created what some recognize as the Second American Republic: eradication of slavery throughout the nation, as in the Thirteenth Amendment, symbolically signed by Lincoln in 1865; declaration of equal protection of rights under the law regardless of race, as in the Fourteenth Amendment (1868); and extension of voting rights (albeit limited at first) for freedmen, as in the Fifteenth Amendment (1870).<sup>13</sup> In an early and still nascent form, this was the “great task” evoked at Gettysburg, which in 1864 Lincoln several times defined quite precisely, telling an Ohio regiment, for example, “what the country is now engaged in,” which was nothing less than assuring the survival of “a free Government where every man has a right to be equal with every other man.” Driving the point home, he declared that “every form of human right is endangered if our enemies succeed.”<sup>14</sup>

Emancipation had been a middle ground, a military strategy with deliberately limited social and political implications. By 1863 and 1864, however, Lincoln was coming to see that the new nation born of the war would include blacks and whites coexisting in a single society, as affirmed by his silent retreat from advocacy of colonization. That society, in Lincoln’s emerging vision, would be founded upon equal rights in civic life and be-

fore the law for all. This may seem an inevitable progression, but in part that is because Lincoln helped make it seem inevitable, for these issues divided Americans for the next century. In new forms, they divide us still.

Lincoln in his debates with Douglas and before had already recognized the natural rights that were denied to the enslaved: the right to one's own labor and the right to determine one's own life. This was the conceptual foundation of the emancipation policy, imposed and justified by military necessity. It was only after mid-1863 that he implemented the far more politically volatile and radical extension of civil and political rights, which were not asserted in the emancipation strategy of 1862. These were the issues that divided the nation during Reconstruction, the issues that brought forth the three great amendments, and the issues that eventually broke the Republican Party's commitment to equality of rights, allowing demagogues and Ku Klux Klan terrorists to reverse for a century and more the political and social gains of the war and Reconstruction. The "new birth of freedom" of the Gettysburg Address, then, was not mere poetry—it was also a statement of new and evolving governing principles that added up to a revolutionary transformation. "However it may have been in the past," Lincoln was quoted in news reports as saying within days of his return from Gettysburg, "I think the country now is ready for radical measures."<sup>15</sup>

And here is where a secure sequence of composition and revisions of the Gettysburg Address can illuminate these larger political and conceptual evolutions. Lincoln had trouble with the second half of his speech, with the majestic last sentence that resolved upon a "new birth of freedom," and we can see the difficulties he encountered in the ungrammatical, penciled revisions in his manuscript made on the very morning of the ceremony itself. But this is only apparent if we recognize that this document, the Nicolay document, and no other, was indeed his Battlefield Draft, held while looking out across the freshly mounded graves. The speech Lincoln gave there, on the battlefield, was whole and complete. Lincoln would later reframe certain phrases, but as noted by Lincoln scholar Douglas Wilson, the relatively few changes Lincoln made to his speech culminating in his last handwritten version in March 1864 were "more about texture than meaning."<sup>16</sup>

In the texts of Lincoln's manuscripts and his spoken words can be discerned the development of his evolving vision, revealing the Gettysburg speech to be a crucial milestone, when Lincoln crafted and refined the keynote phrases and central political vocabulary through which he made sense of the new reckoning and defended the new policies of his presidency.

Seeing this requires at last solving the mysteries of the manuscripts. If we do not know which manuscript Lincoln held when he first said the words “a new birth of freedom,” we cannot know the difficult and eventful process by which those words came to be written, a process that Lincoln himself recognized. If we cannot place in proper sequence his revisions and handwritten copies of the speech, then we cannot understand the reasons and contexts for his spontaneous declaration, on the speakers’ platform, with the mourning crowd before him: “This nation, under God . . . , shall not perish.” And without standing in the crowd and witnessing the impact of his powerful invocation of “what they did here,” we cannot understand the birth of the authentic legend of Gettysburg, the collective project that eventually brought to bear the energies of an entire nation in defining what has become the Gettysburg Address.

That moment depicted by William Makepeace Thayer, who was among the first to celebrate the scene of “Lincoln at Gettysburg” that comes to stand for the meaning and majesty of the Civil War and of the American experiment, was indeed a vision worthy of note, iconic and powerful. But we must have confidence in our knowledge of Lincoln’s words before we can hear what he said. Lincoln’s speech has helped make the battlefield and the cemetery at Gettysburg into landmarks of the American imagination, but Lincoln’s journey to Gettysburg made both his manuscript and his spoken words. It was by writing the Gettysburg Address that Lincoln arrived at the “new birth of freedom.”

