

Gettysburg National Cemetery

After the battle of Gettysburg, which took place on July 1, 2 & 3 1863, in which loyal volunteers from 18 states were engaged, governor Curtin of Pennsylvania proposed that it would be proper that all those states should unite in establishing a cemetery on the spot in which their soldiers who had fallen in that conflict, should be honorably interred.

Gov. Curtin approved the purchase of a portion of the battlefield by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. All other states readily agreed to become parties to this arrangement, and on the 19th of November 1863, the cemetery was dedicated with appropriate ceremonies in the presence of the President of the United States, the Governors of the states concerned and other high officials, both state and national.

The entire area was comprised of 17 acres, situated on the center of the Union lines of battle on July 2nd and 3rd, considered to be one of the most prominent and important positions on the whole battlefield.

Many temporary graves were scattered about the vicinity of the battlefield, some marked, some unmarked and not a few were located on the surface of the ground in the surrounding woods. A contract was issued for disinterring, removing and burying in the National Cemetery all the Union dead on the battlefield. The lowest bid of \$1.59 per body was awarded. Many bodies initially were classified as unknowns, but by careful attention to objects found on the bodies such as letters, papers, receipts, certificates, diaries, memorandum books, photographs, marks on clothing, belts or cartridge boxes etc., have the names of the soldiers been discovered. The total number buried in the cemetery was 3,555, of which from New England 22 were from Connecticut, 12 from Rhode Island, 158 from Massachusetts, 61 from Vermont, 49 from New Hampshire, 104 from Maine.

The contents of pockets is particularly poignant: "photo of wife and two daughters", "a knife, a bible and .50¢", "\$6.00 in greenbacks", "a pipe", "match and tobacco box", "bullet molds and screwdriver", etc. In some cases, when perhaps only a pipe was found in a soldier's pocket, that pipe was kept in an envelope with the location of the grave site noted on the envelope. Later, in some cases years later, visitors who had lost loved ones at that battle visited the National Cemetery, and upon looking over the artifacts would say something to the effect that a certain pipe was the one belonging to their family member; thus another grave was removed from the column of unknown to an identified individual.

On the 19th day of November 1863, the day of the consecration of the National Cemetery, the order of procession began with the military led by Generals Couch, Meade, their staffs and the officers and soldiers of the Army of the Potomac; secondly came officers of the Navy and Marine Corps; thirdly by the chief marshal, then President Lincoln, followed by 33 other categories.

The oratory began with a prayer delivered by the Reverend Dr. Stockton, consisting of 990 words. This was followed by the main speaker, Edward Everett, consisting of some 14,000 words, which took him two hours to deliver. Everett was perhaps the best choice for this honor, as he was considered to be the finest orator in the nation. His speech covered all aspects of the Civil War up to that point, step by step, in order to make perfectly clear the singular importance of the Battle of Gettysburg. As for the battle itself, Everett reiterated every nuance of the conflict that took place over those

three days. If any in the audience had been ignorant of any part of the action, they were certainly brought up to speed by the time his speech ended. My purpose here is not to belittle Everett in any way; orators generally are speaking to their immediate audience. What they say is for the moment and not intended to be timeless.

My reason for giving a word count is that each and every one of us, when we were taught about this event, was told that the main speaker is now all but unknown, and the content of his speech completely forgotten, whereas Lincoln's Address, which came at the very end save for the 136 word benediction, is universally acclaimed to be one of the greatest speeches ever delivered in recorded history. It consisted of 257 words and required but two minutes to deliver. These immortal words are:

“Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on 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 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 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 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 here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for 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.”

It is interesting to note that New York's governor Pataki read the Gettysburg Address at the one-year observance of the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. The words do lend themselves in a most appropriate way to this present-day tragedy.