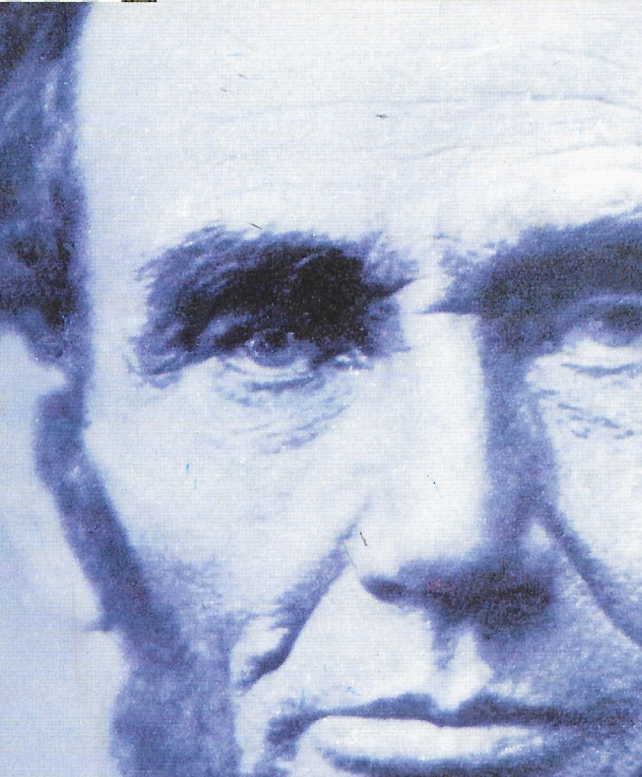


President Lincoln listened patiently to Everett's lengthy speech, noting the powerful cadence of his delivery. Then he rose, his lanky frame casting a shadow across the lectern. He reached into a pocket of his black frock coat and withdrew a single sheet of paper. He began his address with words that have since become immortal.

A New Birth of Freedom



Four years and seven months ago we brought forth on this continent a nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great testing, whether that nation, or a so conceived and so dedicated, endures. We are met on a great battle-field of this war. We have come to decide whether that nation, or a so conceived and so dedicated, endures.

by William C. Kashatus

A crowd of nearly fifteen thousand dignitaries, spectators, and military personnel descended upon the sleepy little town of Gettysburg on Thursday morning, November 19, 1863. They gathered to hear Edward Everett (1794-1865), the nation's most prominent public speaker, deliver an oration at the dedication of a national cemetery for the Union soldiers who had fallen in battle there three months before. The event promised to be memorable.

Rain showers had cleared by sunrise and the day dawned bright and clear. At ten o'clock, President Abraham Lincoln, who had spent the night at a private dwelling, appeared in the town square. He had been invited—at the last minute—by the Gettysburg Cemetery Commission to make “a few appropriate remarks.” It was a matter of protocol.

Mounting a black steed, Lincoln took his place behind a military escort of color guard, staff officers, and ranks of



infantrymen for the three-quarters of a mile procession to the new cemetery. Federal and state officials followed. Thousands lined Baltimore Street, the community's main thoroughfare. Bands played. Cannon boomed. Local entrepreneurs set up tables along the parade route and sold cookies, lemonade, and battle relics, including buttons and canteens, and dried wildflowers gathered on the battlefield.

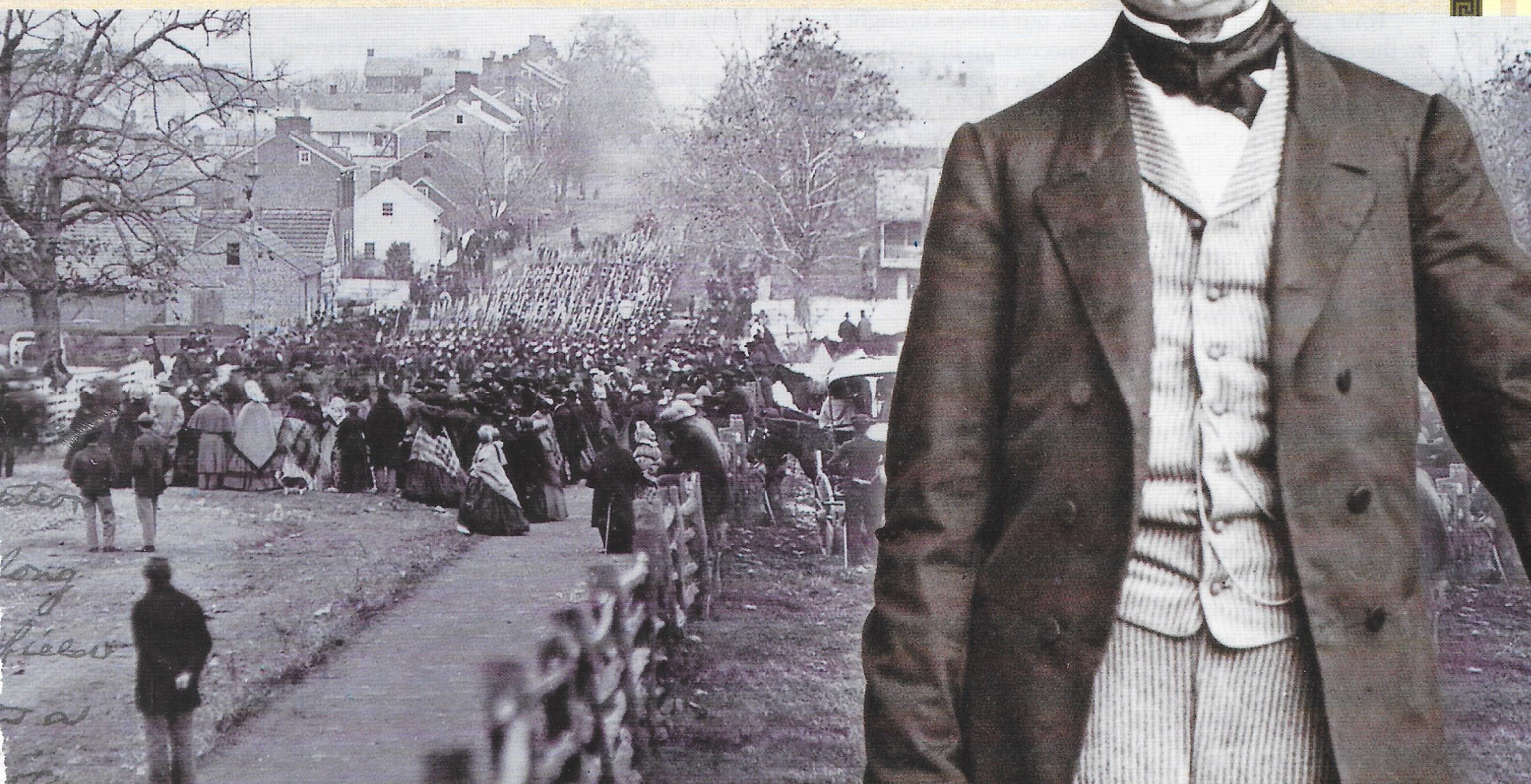
As the cavalcade approached the outskirts of town, the new cemetery came into view.

Graves fanned out in a semi-circular configuration in the middle of the boot-shaped tract of land that would serve as a final resting place for the Union dead. Not all of the work had been completed, though; rows of stacked coffins remained to be buried. A three-foot-high speaker's platform was surrounded by federal marshals wearing bright yellow sashes and Union soldiers with rifles who stood shoulder-to-shoulder.

Shortly after eleven-thirty, Lincoln and Everett, accompanied by Pennsylvania's "War Governor" Andrew Gregg Curtin (1817-1894), ascended the stage and the ceremony began. Prayers were said. Letters were read



Procession to dedication ceremonies (below). Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address (facing page). Noted speaker Edward Everett (above). Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Gregg Curtin (right).



from dignitaries who could not attend, including one from General George G. Meade, a native Pennsylvanian and commander of the Army of the Potomac, whose fallen comrades filled the cemetery. Everett, the keynote speaker, was then introduced.

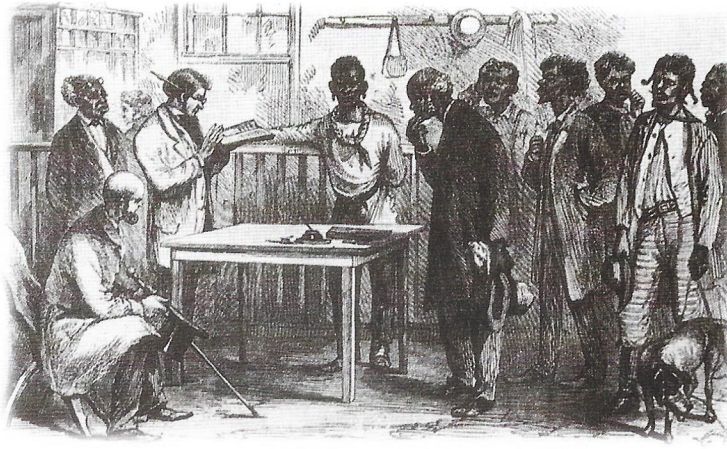
For the next two hours, Everett, an ordained minister, former president of Harvard College, and secretary of state from 1852 to 1853, enthralled the assembled with his dramatic gestures, crisp diction, and graphic recitation of the details of the Union's victory at Gettysburg. Although he had placed a thick manuscript before him, he delivered his oration from memory, fixing the battle in the larger context of the Civil War. He criticized the Confederates for their atrocities and absolved General Meade for allowing General Robert E. Lee to escape. Evoking the imagery of ancient Greece, he bade farewell to the Union dead, comparing them to the "great martyr-heroes" of Athens.

President Lincoln listened patiently to Everett's lengthy speech, noting the powerful cadence of his delivery. Then he rose, his lanky frame casting a shadow across the lectern. He reached into a pocket of his black frock coat and withdrew a single sheet of paper. He began his address with words that have since become immortal.

"Four score 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." The crowd was utterly silent. Lincoln continued, his high-pitched tenor voice piercing the warm summer day. "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."

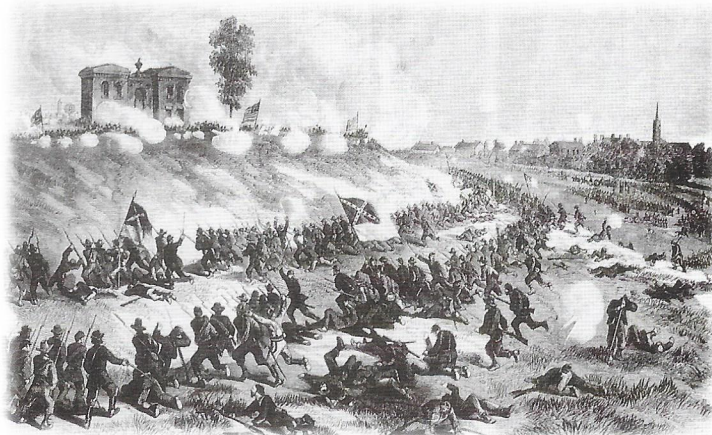
The audience broke out in applause, mistakenly believing that Lincoln had finished. When the cheering subsided, he continued.

"But in a larger sense,



Freed blacks register to vote in Macon, Georgia, during the first registration under Army rule, September 1867

Confederates charge Cemetery Hill (below) and Union sharpshooters positioned at Round Top (facing page) during the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1863.



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."

More applause. Lincoln was, after all, only expected to pronounce a formal dedication, not to deliver an full-blown address. He had surpassed all expectations. His presentation was polished, his delivery emphatic. Nothing like the colorful stump speeches that had marked his earlier political career and that some feared would resurface at this most solemn occasion. Waiting for the crowd to quiet, Lincoln concluded his remarks.

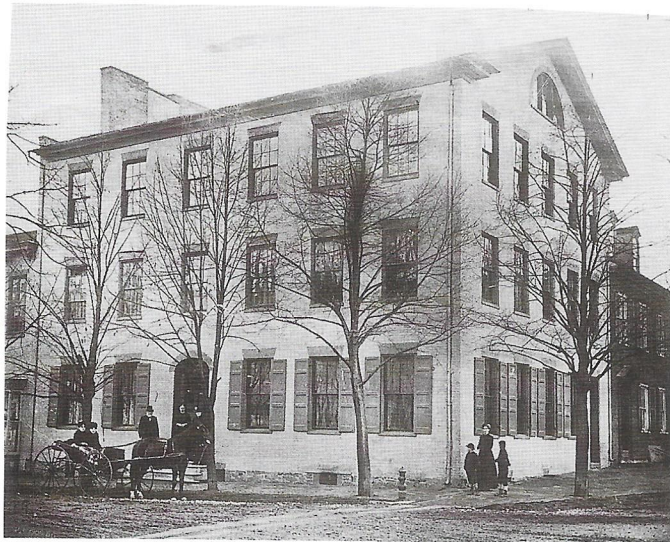
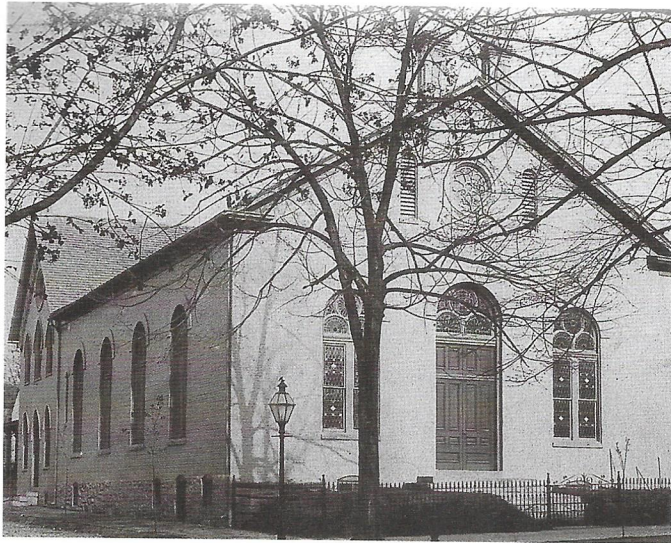
"It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that this government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

After giving his remarks, Lincoln turned to his friend Ward Lamon and confessed that the speech was "a flat failure." Several of the president's cabinet members also expressed disappointment. While Republican newspapers such as

Harper's Weekly called the speech "as simple and felicitous and earnest a word as was ever spoken," the Democratic press was especially critical. Calling Lincoln's address "a perversion of history so flagrant that the most extended charity cannot regard it as otherwise," Wilbur F. Storey of the *Chicago Times* insisted that "it was to uphold the Constitution and the Union created by it that our officers and soldiers gave their lives at Gettysburg. How dare he, then, standing on their graves, misstate the cause for which they died and

After giving his remarks, Lincoln turned to his friend Ward Lamon and confessed that the speech was "a flat failure." Several of the president's cabinet members also expressed disappointment.





Gettysburg landmarks (from top to bottom): Gettysburg Presbyterian Church, where President Lincoln attended services after dedication ceremonies; the David Wills house, where he stayed; and the railroad station at which he arrived.

libel the statesmen who founded the government? They were men possessing too much self respect to declare that Negroes were their equals, or were entitled to equal privilege." The *New York World* accused Lincoln of "gross ignorance or willful misstatement," reminding him that "this United States" was not the product of the Declaration of Independence but "the result of the ratification of a compact known as the Constitution" which said nothing whatsoever about equality.

Although the Gettysburg Address lasted but two minutes, it profoundly affected the nation. The message was too powerful for the general public to immediately grasp its import. There were no details of the battle, no names of soldiers, no mention of sites. Instead, the president's words were distinguished by abstractness. Only in the following weeks would Americans begin to comprehend the significance of the speech as did Edward Everett who later admitted, "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 Lincoln did in "two minutes."

Today, most historians consider the Gettysburg Address the greatest speech ever delivered in American history. Not only does it reflect Lincoln's deeply held political convictions rooted in the Declaration of Independence, but it also demonstrates a strong moral resolve that inspired him to link the abolition of slavery to his original goal of preserving the Union. The Gettysburg Address is an enduring example of Abraham Lincoln's exceptional ability to grow, during his presidency, from a shrewd politician not very well respected by his own cabinet to a deeply spiritual leader who is considered to be the greatest president the nation has known.

Lincoln has been widely portrayed in American folklore. School students first encounter him as a gangly rail splitter on the Illinois prairie, a humble frontiersman named "Abe" who spoke in a backwoods accent, and cared little about wealth or power or prestige. Another popular image is "Father Abraham," the Great Emancipator who led the Union to victory over slavery and, afterwards, healed the nation by forgiving the Confederacy "with malice toward none."

Abraham Lincoln was complex, paradoxical, aggressive, ambitious, and disappointingly human. He was able to win the Republican nomination for the presidency in 1860 because of his shrewd manipulation of the slavery issue. Instead of alienating the competing factions within the party, Lincoln united them by conceding that the South had a constitutional right to preserve slavery while also demanding that Congress prohibit its extension. That same reasoning allowed him to win a clear majority of the electoral votes in the 1860 election. Divided over the slavery issue, the Democrats split into factions, paving the way for Lincoln's victory. But Lincoln was hardly respected by the political elite of Congress when he assumed office in March 1861.

Many believed he was woefully unprepared for the presidency, lacking the will and purpose to lead in the face of the mounting crisis confronting the nation. As his first year in office unfolded, his cabinet members quarreled constantly and undermined one other. General George B. McClellan, Lincoln's appointment as chief of the Army of the Potomac, even ignored his orders. The pressure grew so severe that Lincoln, who suffered from recurring bouts of depression, once said he would "like to hang" himself.

When war erupted on April 12, 1861, with the Confederate assault on the federal arsenal at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, Lincoln took unprecedented executive action. In order to

prevent Washington, D.C., from becoming entirely encircled by pro-secessionist state governments in Maryland and Delaware, and to insure the transportation of loyal troops to the isolated nation's capital, Lincoln ordered federal soldiers to arrest secessionists in those states and suspended the writ of habeas corpus. He also called up the state militias, expanded the navy, ordered a naval blockade of the South, and approved the expenditure of military funds—all without congressional approval. Lincoln's unprecedented actions provoked the wrath of antiwar Democrats who chastised him as "King Linkum I, a race mixing dictator who aimed to centralize, militarize, and mongrelize the Union of states." He defended his actions later that year in his annual message to Congress, insisting that the "dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so must we think anew, and act anew and then we shall save our country."

His willingness to "think anew" was a valuable personal asset, even though his political opponents called his expansion of executive power despotic. In peacetime, such activities would have been clearly unconstitutional, but Lincoln transformed them into coherent policies on military grounds. He defended their necessity, as well as their legitimacy, by pointing to the Constitution's war emergency clauses which, he claimed, existed to give the nation a reasonable capacity for self-defense. More important, his unprecedented use of executive power allowed him to carry out his fundamental purpose of preserving the Union, an objective he saw as intimately related to the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

Throughout his political career, Lincoln often evoked the tenets of the Declaration of Independence to remind himself of the obligation he had as a public servant. "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration," he said in 1861. "It is the great charter of freedom that enables the world to grow and expand into the universal liberty of mankind." He would find great strength in that principle during his presidency and vowed to enforce it from the very beginning.

Traveling from Springfield, Illinois, to Washington, D.C., where he would assume the executive office, Lincoln made his first visit to Philadelphia on February 22, 1861. As he stood before Independence Hall, he admitted to being "filled with deep emotion" and spoke of his reverence for the Declaration which gave "liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time." Addressing the impending crisis, the president-elect added: "If this country cannot be

saved without giving up that principle—I would rather be assassinated on the spot than to surrender to it. It is the only principle that I am willing to live by, and, in the pleasure of Almighty God, die by." It was because of his strong belief in the Declaration of Independence that Lincoln rejected the notion that the rights of liberty and the pursuit of happiness were confined to the white race.

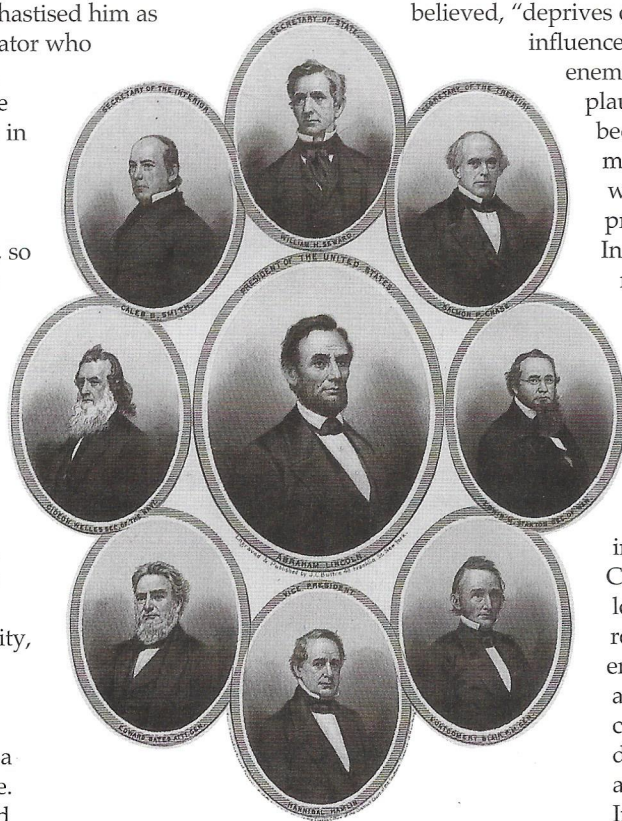
Lincoln had long been morally opposed to slavery, an institution "founded on a monstrous injustice." Slavery, he believed, "deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world and enables the enemies of free institutions—with plausibility—to taunt us as hypocrites because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of the Declaration of Independence, insisting that there is no right principle of action but *self-interest*."

Curiously enough, for as great an emphasis as he placed on the principle of liberty, Lincoln did nothing to abolish slavery when he became president. He assured southerners that he had no intention of interfering with the institution in their states. When the Civil War broke out, he reassured the loyal border states of his promise and revoked orders by Union generals emancipating the slaves of Confederates in Missouri. There were those, of course, who recognized the contradiction between his rhetoric and actions.

In August 1862, Horace Greeley, the influential abolitionist editor of the *New York Tribune*, published an open letter to the president in which he attacked him for his negligence on the issue. In his reply, Lincoln insisted that his primary goal was to save the Union—with or without slavery. "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by

freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union."

Lincoln had no choice but to proceed cautiously on the issue of slavery. While he had a strong moral revulsion against the institution, the idea of emancipating slaves by executive order went against his political instincts. He understood that he had not been elected on an abolitionist platform and he knew that as president, he had sworn to uphold the Constitution, which placed strict limits on his ability to interfere with slavery. Lincoln also realized that a president who defied public opinion could lose his capacity to lead altogether and that most Northern whites viewed the black race as inferior. Many also suspected that emancipation would trigger a massive influx of



President Abraham Lincoln surrounded by his cabinet (clockwise, from top): Secretary of State William H. Seward, Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, Vice President Hannibal Hamlin, Attorney General Edward Bates, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, and Secretary of the Interior Caleb Smith.

former slaves into the North who would compete for jobs held by whites. Race riots in New York, Philadelphia, and Buffalo dramatized these attitudes. If Lincoln moved too quickly on emancipation, he risked offending the border states, and increasing the Democrats' chances for victory in 1864. Yet if he didn't make a move, he would alienate abolitionists and lose the support of Radical Republicans, which he simply could not afford. As the casualty lists grew to appalling lengths, he began to reconsider the meaning of the war in a way that transcended politics and public opinion.

Lincoln began to question why the South was winning the war if, in fact, the will of God prevails. "God wills this contest, and wills that it should not end," he wrote in a personal reflection known as *Meditation on the Divine Will*. "By His mere quiet power, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without human contest." Lincoln began to wonder whether he "might be an instrument in God's hands for accomplishing a great work" and looked for some kind of sign to provide him with direction.

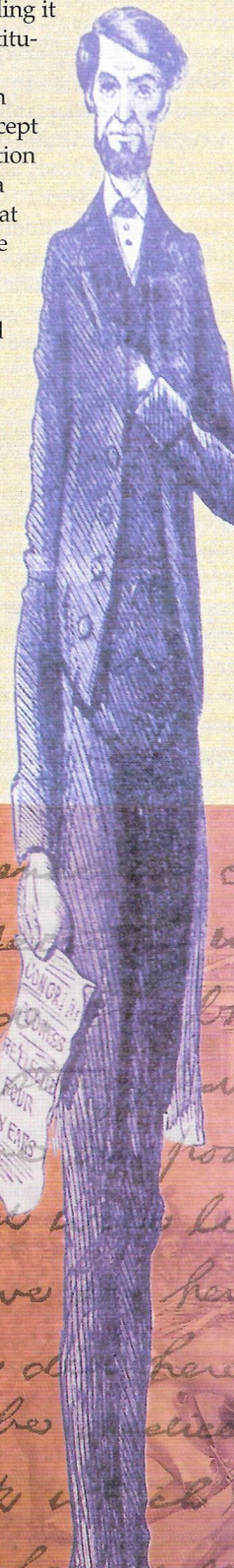
On July 22, 1862, Lincoln announced to his cabinet his decision to free the slaves. Several especially cautious members pleaded with him to forget about emancipation, but he refused. He did, however, withhold public issuance of the Proclamation until a Union victory could give it credibility. Five days after the North's victory at Antietam, on September 17, 1862, Lincoln

Lincoln was not immune from satirical essays and political cartoons, such as "Long Abe," a caricature portraying a "tall character of great stature" (right). His own hand of the Gettysburg Address believed to be the version he used (below).

issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation declared that unless the rebellious states returned to the Union by January 1, 1863, the president would declare their slaves "forever free." When the Confederacy rejected his demand to free their slaves, Lincoln issued the edict on New Year's Day 1863 as he had promised, calling it an "act of justice warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity."

While the Emancipation Proclamation had no immediate impact on slavery, except for slaves living in the unconquered portion of the Confederacy, it did represent a sea change in Lincoln's view of the war. What began as a war to save the Union became a struggle that, if won by the North, would free the slaves. It also marked the transformation of Lincoln from a shrewd politician to a moral leader who had come to believe that God's will could be partly known and that the only hope for the nation lay in conformity to that divine will. Lincoln's newly-found spiritual faith liberated him, eliminating the sharp tension he once felt between restoring the Union and abolishing slavery. He had come to realize that he could not save the Union "half free and half slave" as he had hoped.

Over the course of the following year, Lincoln's sense that the Civil War had some deeper religious meaning



But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate this ground as a hallowed place, where the living and dead, who here sacrificed to, far above all else, or detract. The world will long remember what we here never forget what they did here for the living, rather, to be sure, this unfinished work which we here have begun today.

increasingly manifested itself in his actions and behavior. He toured hospitals to visit the sick and wounded of both armies. He attended soldiers' funerals. The doors of his White House were open to anyone who wished to see him. This visible display of compassion inspired trust, loyalty, and admiration not only from his subordinates, but from the people. They saw him as a man without pretense. "I claim not to have controlled events, but that events have controlled me," he said. "Now, the nation's condition is not what either party or any man devised, or expected. Only God alone can claim it."

Lincoln had grown immeasurably in office. No longer did he assume that he or any man could control the events of the war, but that all he could do was to place a firm reliance in his own faith in God to act in the best interests of the entire nation, both North and South. In the process, he melded his political creed rooted in the natural rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence with his evolving faith in God and a strong moral revulsion against the institution of slavery. The Gettysburg Address represents the most articulate statement of this transformation in his thinking.

The Battle of Gettysburg, which took place during the first



Political cartoons (above) were overshadowed by works which celebrated Lincoln, such as A.A. Lamb's Emancipation Proclamation (below).

three days of July 1863, marked the turning point of the Civil War. General Robert E. Lee had recently rallied his troops to a decisive victory at Chancellorsville. The need to gain supplies, the fading hope of European recognition, and the possibility of striking a final blow at the Union prompted him to launch an invasion of the North. In early June, Lee began maneuvering his army for such an assault. After a hard-earned victory at Winchester, Virginia, the Confederates advanced across Maryland and into Pennsylvania. Frustrated by General Joseph Hooker's timidity in halting the invasion, Lincoln replaced him with General Meade as commander of the Army of the Potomac. Four days later, on Wednesday, July 1, Meade met Lee

nearly by accident at Gettysburg.

More than one hundred and sixty-three thousand soldiers waged a vicious and costly fight on the Adams County farmland. Lee attacked repeatedly but could not dislodge Union soldiers from their positions which spanned a four-mile front. The battle climaxed on the afternoon of Friday, July 3, when Confederate General George E. Pickett led a heroic but fruitless charge against the center of the North's lines, losing nearly half of his fifteen thousand men.



*Address delivered at the dedication of the
cemetery at Gettysburg.*

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers
brought forth on this continent, a new na-
tion, conceived in liberty, and dedicated
to the proposition that all men are cre-
ated equal.*

*Now we are engaged in a great civil war;
testing whether that nation, or any nation
so conceived and so dedicated, can long
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ish from the earth.*

Abraham Lincoln.

November 19, 1863.

Meade's victory ended the most threatening Confederate invasion of the North, giving the Union an undisputed victory. The psychological impact of the battle was great for both armies. If Lee had won, he might have been emboldened to launch an assault on either Washington or Philadelphia. Such an attack would have rejuvenated the Confederacy, possibly bringing it foreign support. Instead, the Union victory boosted the North's morale, proving that the federals could defeat the South if they had effective military leadership. Lee's army, on the other hand, never fully recovered from Gettysburg. Loss of both officers and soldiers was staggering, and the blow to Southern morale devastating. Many would later consider Gettysburg "the high tide of the Confederacy."

Legend holds that Lincoln did not spend much time writing the Gettysburg Address, possibly even crafting it on his train ride from Washington. However, five drafts of the speech exist, suggesting that he did take painstaking measures to articulate his feelings. Any less attention, he believed, would have served to diminish the tremendous sacrifice made by both armies, which totaled more than fifty-one thousand casualties. There are indications that he began working on the speech nearly two weeks before the dedication and continued to work on it up to the day of the event, adding the final touches that morning.

The Gettysburg Address—only two hundred and seventy-two words in ten sentences—appealed to Americans' reverence for the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln redefined the meaning of that document for future generations by calling on Americans to rededicate themselves to the principle "that all men are created equal" so that "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." It was a masterful stroke of oratory insisting that the American people must, in consistency with the principles of that Declaration, relinquish their prejudice against blacks. The two sentiments could no longer coexist

Accompanying the president to Gettysburg were his two young personal secretaries, John Nicolay (left) and John Hay (right). Text of the Gettysburg Address in Lincoln's hand (left).



Lincoln (circled)
awaits the arrival of
Edward Everett at the
dedication ceremonies.

if the great sacrifice of "those who here gave their lives that that nation might live" was to be duly honored.

Lincoln was able to espouse such profound idealism—just four months after the bloodiest battle in

American history—because he had spent a good part of his own political career highlighting the inconsistency of slavery with the principle of universal equality contained in the Declaration of Independence. He had long believed the Declaration to be a pledge "to all people of all colors everywhere" and that that pledge was a statement of a permanent ideal, to be distinguished from the Constitution, which was a constantly evolving testimony to the ideal of human equality. Lincoln had earlier insisted that the framers of the Constitution avoided the use of the word "slave" or "slavery" because the "plain, unmistakable spirit of their age was hostility to that principle and toleration only by necessity." At Gettysburg Lincoln was implicitly stating his refusal to tolerate the principle of slavery any longer, placing the Constitution above the moral conventions of society that had once condoned it. No longer would he allow political expediency to overrule his own moral judgment or spiritual convictions.

By associating the sacrifice of the Union soldiers at Gettysburg to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln gave new meaning to the proposition that "all men are created equal." If there had been any doubt remaining that Lincoln made his original war aim of preserving the Union synonymous with the moral objective of emancipation, it was now eradicated. By including the phrase "under God"—which does not appear in the extant drafts, but added as he spoke—Lincoln revealed his awareness that the ideal of human equality could not occur without divine guidance. It was almost as if he had become an Old Testament prophet, attempting to rally a Christian nation around the higher ideal that America would be, from that day forward, united and eternally free.

Abraham Lincoln was unique among America's leaders. He never was able to distance himself completely from his basic moral instinct that slavery was a grave injustice, even when political necessity demanded it. Nor did he see himself as an exceptionally religious man, refusing to join any church because of his dislike for their dogmas. But the Gettysburg Address shows that Lincoln's leadership was grounded in an unshakable belief that God's will was discernible and that the best hope for the nation lay in conforming to that will. His outward display of humility at the dedication ceremonies at Gettysburg indicated that he acted on this conviction without



being self-righteous or contriving, but with a strong respect for the dignity of the American people, appealing to their fundamental sense of justice and morality. In so doing, Lincoln gave a powerfully new, unprecedented meaning to the phrase "all men are created equal" and a new birth of freedom to the nation. ❖

William C. Kashatus, of Paoli, is a regular contributor to *Pennsylvania Heritage*. He received his bachelor's degree in history from Earlham College, his master's degree from Brown University, and his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. He is director of educational programs for the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester. His work has appeared in a number of magazines, periodicals, and newspapers. His most recent book, *Connie Mack's '29 Triumph: The Rise and Fall of the Philadelphia Athletics Dynasty* was published this year by McFarland and Company.

The author gratefully thanks author and historian James M. McPherson, of Princeton University, for reviewing this article prior to publication.

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