

The *Lincoln* Herald

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From the Collection

Illuminated Manuscript: The Gettysburg Address

Accession Number 80.1098

Steven M. Wilson

Editor's Note: Steven Wilson is the Assistant Director and Curator at Abraham Lincoln Library & Museum, Lincoln Memorial University.

“...the silly, flat, and dish-watery utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to intelligent foreigners as President of the United States.” Chicago Times, November 23, 1863

“...a perfect gem; deep in feeling, compact in thought and expression, and tasteful and elegant in every word and comma.” Springfield (MA) Republican, November 20, 1863

There are as many myths surrounding the creation and presentation of the Gettysburg Address as there are the possible location of the Holy Grail. Perhaps not, but the sentiment is the same.

Abraham Lincoln gave his most revered and remembered speech on November 19, 1863, to a crowd of upwards of 15,000, near the site of a proposed national cemetery. The exact location of the speech as well as many other aspects of Lincoln's presence at the event, are still argued today. Some of the most patently dubious facts are easily discounted primarily because of Lincoln's well-known care in crafting his speeches. No, the Gettysburg Address was not written on the train trip to Gettysburg from Washington nor was it dashed off on an envelope prior to Lincoln's arrival. The event was far too important and Lincoln too meticulous not to have devoted time to creating, as David Wills requested, “a few appropriate remarks.”

The most destructive battle in the Western Hemisphere had occurred just four months before Lincoln, battling with smallpox at the time, gave his speech. Less than half of the Union dead from the battle had been re-interred in the new national cemetery, and the most destructive war in American history continued. Lincoln would have known the ceremony was solemn acknowledgement of the sacrifice of those who died, those who would yet die, and their commitment to saving the Union. What he said, how he said it, was important to him.

What Lincoln actually said, although we know he did not have time to commit the speech to memory and had to read it instead, is not known. The newspaper accounts that survive generally agree on the wording. The Associated Press version, distributed to newspapers across the north (the first version was printed November 20, 1863, just a day after the ceremony) is likely the most reliable; but, even in distribution of that document, there are differences. In writing the Gettysburg Address, Martin P. Johnson notes that the New York *Tribune's* Gettysburg Address is most likely closest to Lincoln's deliverance; but, as the address made its way across the North telegraph, operators or recipients may have chosen to edit the speech as they saw fit. Edward Everett, the principle speaker at Gettysburg, asked for and received a copy of the speech from David Wills, who later said of this version, "I did not make a copy of my report of President Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg from a transcript of the original, but from one of the press reports."

On January 30, 1864, Everett wrote to the president to request a copy of the speech to sell at a charity fair. Lincoln complied and wrote less than a week later that he was sending a copy to Everett, written in his own hand. It is likely that Lincoln in his Everett document did what writers often do—revise their work when given an opportunity.

The Everett copy is one of five remaining copies of the Gettysburg Address written by Lincoln. In this copy and the John Nicolay, John Hay, George Bancroft and the Bliss copies, there are variations from text to text, sometimes minor, but differences never-the-less. Three of their copies were written by Lincoln to sell at charity events to benefit Union soldiers and sailors. Lincoln, in the Alexander Bliss copy of the Gettysburg Address, provided a document that was titled, signed, and dated.

Other "copies" of the Gettysburg Address have appeared in hundreds of formats from postcards, to key chains, to souvenir documents

printed on what purports to be velum. If it looks old, it must be old; but, of course, that's not the case. These numerous renditions of the document don't dilute the importance of the original speech nor the five documents that have survived over the years.

The artistic interpretations either of the Address or of Lincoln's presentation attempt, in some fashion, to convey the importance and impact of the Gettysburg Address. It is timeless. Those three-hundred odd words could almost be considered a prayer for those who died on that and other battlefields. Lincoln's desire in those "few appropriate words" was to convey his appreciation and that of the nation's for the sacrifice of those who fought or died to preserve what has been called an experiment.

The Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum have a number of paintings and scores of artifacts that range from the trivial to the artistic. One of those artifacts is an illustrated and illuminated Gettysburg Address. Our records show this item was donated by Carl Schaefer to Lincoln Memorial University on the eve of World War II. The timing was appropriate if unplanned. America was about to become embroiled in the most destructive conflict in world history. Nearly 3% of the world's population died in World War II, although the exact number is an estimate.

Prior to donation, the work was "once the property of the Van Sweringen interest," that is, O. P. and M. J. Van Sweringen, whose father was wounded at Gettysburg.

Alberto Sangorski designed and painted the illuminated copy, and Marion Lane was responsible for the calligraphy. The firm of Sangorski & Sutcliff, the premier bookbinders of the early 20th Century, was known for creating luxurious books decorated with gilt work and precious stones. One of their most famous works was a manuscript copy of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat, which was aboard the ill-fated liner R.M.S. Titanic when she sank in 1912.

The Sangorski and Lane piece in the museum's collection reminds us of the impact of the Gettysburg Address, both in words and intent, and the almost incalculable value of those sentiments expressed by Abraham Lincoln during that solemn ceremony a century and a half ago.

Lincoln was wrong when he said, "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here...." His address has become a precious, almost sacred document that transcends events, eras, and civilizations. The Gettysburg Address, like Abraham Lincoln, belongs to the ages.