

With Lincoln on the Eve of the Gettysburg Address

A “few appropriate remarks” to dedicate the Gettysburg Cemetery redefined America.

By: Tim Brady



Signs proclaiming “George Washington Slept Here” have been a hook for inns up and down the East Coast since the days of tri-cornered hats. Abraham Lincoln’s links to the hospitality industry are less obvious, yet his associations with particular beds and sleeping quarters remain of historic interest to many.

The Soldier’s Home in Washington, D.C., where Lincoln and his family often visited to escape the stifling heat in the city as well as the endless demands of a war presidency, has recently been restored and trumpets its connection to the 16th president. And although Lincoln never actually slept in the Lincoln Bedroom in the White House (it was used as an office during his tenure), the room remains one of the most well known in that most famous of national homes, and a night snuggled beneath its comforters has become, in recent years, a reward for political patronage. It’s also possible to visit the bed in the narrow townhome on 10th Street, directly across from Ford’s Theatre in Washington, where Lincoln breathed his last breath in April 1865.

Recently, one more famous Lincoln bed has been recovered and added to the collections at the Wills House in Gettysburg, Pa.

On Nov. 18, 1863, the night before he gave the most famous speech in American history, Abraham Lincoln was the guest of Gettysburg attorney David Wills. Wills was the young town leader given the overwhelming task of overseeing the clean-up of Gettysburg and organizing the dedication of a national cemetery for Union soldiers killed at the battle the previous summer. Earlier that month, Wills invited the president to attend and deliver “a few appropriate remarks” for the occasion. He subsequently sweetened the invitation by offering his own bed for the president to rest in on the evening before the ceremony.

This turned out to be no insignificant gesture. The dedication of the battlefield drew upward of 15,000 visitors to the small town of 2,500. Sleeping accommodations were difficult to come by. According to Gettysburg historian Gabor Boritt, the Wills House, which was the most prominent in town and typically housed five members of the Wills’ family, was packed on the evening before the dedication. Thirty-eight people were crammed beneath its three stories, including keynote speaker Edward Everett.

Since the death of Daniel Webster, Everett was widely acknowledged as the nation’s greatest orator. His “specialty” was dedicating military cemeteries. Among his most famous speeches were those given at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. No one, including the president, begrudged his star billing at Gettysburg. Along with Lincoln, Everett was the only dormer in the Wills house with his own bed; but at least one person had his eye on Everett’s sleeping quarters, and the former secretary of state was so alarmed at the prospect of having to share his room that he couldn’t sleep. Seems that Gov. Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania was arriving on a late train and, like so many others, had been promised accommodations by Wills.

Literary genius in 272 words

Everett was 69 years old in November 1863, had recently suffered a stroke, and had a serious bladder problem. He was also about to give a two-hour address, one that he’d been working on

for several weeks, and hoped to recite from memory (as was his habit). Not surprisingly, Everett wanted some alone time on the eve of the dedication, and was greatly relieved when other lodging was found for the governor.

We can assume that the president was feeling less pressure about his own talk. He was merely being asked to give a few “Dedicatory Remarks,” as they were described in the program the next day. That didn’t mean Lincoln was so blasé that he jotted down his speech on an envelope on the train to Gettysburg. That myth has long been refuted. As Garry Wills so masterfully described in his book *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, the address that Lincoln gave at the cemetery on Nov. 19, was the product of a lifetime of thought, study, political experience, and literary genius all packed into 272 words that not only did what the occasion called for—magnificently dedicate and memorialize the grounds where so many lost their lives in horrendous battle—but also offered a timeless reason for that great suffering, elevating it to a cause that did as much as words were able to help Americans understand what the Civil War was all about.

Whether Lincoln actually wrote out the concluding lines of that speech in David Wills’ bedroom remains a matter of historical question. It is certain that he had worked on his talk in Washington before he left for Gettysburg. But several accounts say he did. Boritt, whose *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* is a careful blow-by-blow account of what happened in Gettysburg from the battle through the dedication, thinks the president probably did work on his speech, and quotes Wills as saying he witnessed the president laboring away. But whether Lincoln actually wrote “*shall not perish from the earth*” in the Wills’ house, Boritt says, “We may never be certain.”

Impact was unimaginable

It hardly matters. If Lincoln physically wrote out the last lines of his great address in Wills’ house or not, human nature tells us that at some point in the evening, perhaps when the 15,000 revelers out in the street quieted down, and the social and political demands of his day were done, the president stretched out in the bed provided for him, shut his eyes, and ran through his mind and perfected those same phrases that would move millions for generations to come.

He couldn’t imagine the impact his words would have on the history of the nation. As Wills makes clear, the Gettysburg Address redefined the United States. That “new birth of freedom” and the “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” of which Lincoln spoke in his concluding lines, described the transforming nature of what happened at Gettysburg—what was happening throughout that horrible war. But as Lincoln lay in bed, listening to the town of Gettysburg go to sleep, he would have been amazed at the notion that the particulars of how he crafted his coming speech would be so fussed over in years to come. “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here . . .” is how he imagined it.

In February 2009, on the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, the Wills House was re-opened to the public. The room the president occupied that night has been recreated to look, as closely as possible, the way it did on the night he occupied it in 1863. Right down to the walnut dresser, where he might have tossed his stovepipe hat, and the marble-topped washstand, where he would have freshened up in the morning.

In the process of the room’s restoration, the actual bed that Lincoln used was discovered in a town in Ohio. A descendant of David Wills, Ohio University music professor Allyn Reilly, had kept it for many years and agreed to donate it to the restoration when he and his wife learned the house in Gettysburg was being refurbished. The only problem was the couple was using the bed to sleep in. Could they get a replacement? Yes, said the National Park Service, that could be—and was—arranged.

Lincoln no doubt would have appreciated the anecdote and smiled at the practicality of the Wills family and its use of the bed through all of these years. It's a good, solid piece of furniture made of rosewood and long enough, with side rails 6½ feet in length, to have accommodated Lincoln's lanky legs. Which makes it possible to picture him lying content in its comfortable frame, satisfied with the speech he was about to deliver, and getting a solid night's rest before he made history the next day.

The Gettysburg Address

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.

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 battle-field 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 can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not 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.