

Worksheet #1: The Origins of the Gettysburg Address

Directions: The information presented in this reading can help you understand the Gettysburg Address better by giving you some background information on the speech, often described as the greatest speech ever delivered by an American president. Read the "Historical Context" and then answer the questions.

The Gettysburg Address: A Historical Context

The Battle of Gettysburg was a turning point in the Civil War. General Lee was turned back from his northern invasion into Pennsylvania by the Union army, led by General George Meade. This was the last time General Lee tried to bring the Army of Northern Virginia into the North.

After three days of fighting (July 1-3, 1863), nearly 40,000 soldiers were killed and many more were wounded. Residents of Gettysburg raised the idea of creating a national cemetery on the site. Pennsylvania Governor Curtin responded quickly and by mid-July a plan was put into operation. Bodies were gathered together and buried in a large site located on Cemetery Hill.

A United States Cemetery Board of Commissions was placed in charge of creating the national cemetery. They wanted to dedicate the ground in a formal ceremony that would honor the final resting place for so many fallen soldiers. They selected the Honorable Edward Everett of Massachusetts, one of the best-known speakers in America.

Others well-known people were invited, too, including the President Lincoln, cabinet members, General Meade, members of the diplomatic corps, and members of the House and Senate. The formal invitation to the President was sent on November 2nd, weeks after Everett's invitation. The invitation asked Lincoln say something briefly at the conclusion of the ceremony. Edward Everett's oration was the central focus; President Lincoln was the conclusion. The invitation said, "It is the desire that, after the Oration, you, as Chief Executive of the Nation, formally set apart these grounds to their Sacred use by a few appropriate remarks." This he agreed to do, and he went on to do it in two minutes with ten memorable sentences totaling 272 often quoted words.

Mr. Everett spoke for two hours and four minutes that afternoon. What he said was not a surprise to the audience because the text of his speech had been published and widely distributed days before the event. There did not appear to be much interest in what the President would say. His reputation as a storyteller had even made some Board of Commissions members fear that he would not be up to such a solemn occasion. How wrong they were.

The day following the dedication, Mr. Everett sent a note to President Lincoln congratulating him for his address. He said, "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 you did in two minutes." In his reply Lincoln noted that Everett was expected to make the long speech. He said, "In our respective parts yesterday, you could not have been excused to make a short address, nor I a long one."