

Forward

The “Soldier’s National Cemetery” at Gettysburg was a unique idea, brought about through the patriotic ardor of a handful of Gettysburg residents who used their influence with Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin to establish a proper burial ground for the almost countless Union dead that lay in battlefield graves or temporary graveyards at field hospital sites, in plots of ground more appropriate for growing vegetable gardens than shallow, unkempt graves for the defenders of the Union cause. Despite some bickering and misunderstanding of purposes in the beginning, the Adams County men who began the movement to provide the Union dead a proper and fitting burial ground persevered and with the appointment of Gettysburg attorney David Wills by Governor Curtin, the plan was set into motion. The task appeared overwhelming- Wills’ responsibility included the disbursement of state funds to oversee the purchase of land, obtain the best landscape architect for the cemetery design, supervise finances for the reburial process, and organize a proper dedication ceremony.

While the Soldiers’ National Cemetery was designed to be a proper burial ground for those who here gave their lives for the cause of Union, it was also a place of healing. Wounds that remained on the nineteen acres caused by shot, shell, and the axe and spade which scoured the earth for artillery lunettes and earthworks, were removed and the land smoothed and cleaned. With as much dignity as possible, the dead were removed from those scattered burial sites and the boxed remains placed side by side in state plots according to William Saunders’ exceptional design. Semi-circular grave markers bearing the names and regiments of the dead were installed along with numbered marble markers in three sections where the dead are “known only but to God.” By the time of its completion in 1869, the cemetery was the perfect model of memorial grounds. At the same time, national cemeteries at other Civil War battlefields were being established and developed, each with similarities in landscape design and gravesite placement. Only Gettysburg’s cemetery retained the large semi-circular design with formal walking paths and the Soldiers’ National Monument in the center where the cost of the nation and memory to those who now lay in the cemetery would be forever honored.

The Soldiers’ National Cemetery (the original name of the cemetery) at Gettysburg soon became synonymous with the Gettysburg Battlefield, identified commonly as a portion of the battlefield where the dead rest for eternity. While the names of those buried here have passed into history, it was *the* one singular event that distinguished this cemetery from other national burial grounds at Civil War sites- the delivery of a famous address.

It was during the dedication ceremony on November 19, 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln spoke to a war-weary crowd of civilians and soldiers. Though the featured speaker was Edward Everett, who gave a two hour-long lecture on the Gettysburg Campaign with a stirring rendition of its climactic moments as a Union victory, it was the President’s simple words that have survived long past that day and became indelible as a national proclamation; so important to our memory today that it is inscribed in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, and on the

memorial to the speech itself that stands near the entrance to the national cemetery at Gettysburg. Visitors who come to Gettysburg to visit the national cemetery go there for one collective purpose- to see for themselves the site of the Gettysburg Address.

There is more to the story of the Soldiers' National Cemetery than what popular memory has preserved. The papers in this volume, generated by the programs of the 2014 Gettysburg Seminar, "*The Unfinished Work – Lincoln, Wills, and the Soldiers' National Cemetery*", hosted by Gettysburg National Military Park on September 12-14, 2014, explore not only the humble history of the cemetery and how the Gettysburg Address still inspires Americans today, but some of the backstory and evaluation of Abraham Lincoln's speech and the importance of his trip to Gettysburg during the wet and somewhat dismal month of November 1863. Likewise, our contributors have provided more personal views of the importance of the cemetery, stories of those who rest there in quiet dignity, and why these places- be they Gettysburg, Stones' River, Vicksburg, Antietam, Arlington, or Colleville-sur-Mer, France, overlooking Omaha Beach- are indeed special places to not only commemorate the events that occurred on that ground where the honored dead now lay, but as places of healing and understanding the cost of a nation at war. Sacred are they as places to honor, remember, and fully comprehend "the last full measure of devotion."

John Heiser
Historian, Gettysburg National Military Park
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