

Abraham Lincoln papers

Abraham Lincoln, Draft of Gettysburg Address, Nicolay Copy¹, [November 1863]

1 President Lincoln was invited to attend the dedication of a military cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the site of a decisive Union victory in July 1863. The main address had already been assigned to a famous orator, Edward Everett of Massachusetts. In his letter of invitation, the ceremony's organizer, David Wills, told the President: "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" (David Wills to Abraham Lincoln, Nov.2, 1863). The speech was widely admired at the time and would become perhaps the best known of all Lincoln's writings. Edward Everett wrote Lincoln the next day: "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" (Everett to Lincoln, November 20, 1863).

There are five known drafts of the Gettysburg Address in Lincoln's hand. Three were definitely written out for persons requesting them after the address had been delivered. Of the remaining two, one of these may have been written out after the fact, but at least one was drafted before delivery on November 19, 1863. This is the one presented here, referred to as the Nicolay copy, because it belonged to his secretary, John G. Nicolay. Although Nicolay believed that this was the copy Lincoln held in his hand and appeared to read from at the Gettysburg cemetery dedication, he himself recognized that what Lincoln actually said on that occasion differed significantly from the text of this document. (See John G. Nicolay, "Lincoln's Gettysburg Address," *Century*, XLVII (February 1894), 596-608.) Nicolay believed that the first page, on Executive Mansion stationery, was the first page of the incomplete draft that Lincoln brought with him to Gettysburg, and that the second page, whose text is in pencil, was composed just before the speech was delivered in Pennsylvania. While the text of the first page suggests that it belongs to a preliminary draft, the awkward juncture with the text of the second page constitutes a strong reason to doubt that the two leaves belong to the same draft. (See Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 193-94.) Like the other manuscript of the address thought by some to be a preliminary draft, the Hay copy (*q. v.*), this draft conspicuously lacks the phrase "under God," which Lincoln was heard by reporters to say at the event, and which he included in the three copies made afterwards. For a full discussion of the five extant manuscripts of this famous address, see *Long Remembered: Facsimiles of the five versions of the Gettysburg Address in the handwriting of Abraham Lincoln* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1963).

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Executive Mansion,

Washington, , 186 .

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon 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 it, as a final resting place for those who died here, that the nation might live. This we may, in all propriety do. 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 hallowed it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here; while it can never forget what they did here.

It is rather for us, the living, to stand here, we here be dedica-²

² This partial sentence comes at the end of the first page of the manuscript. In striking “to stand here,” and substituting the awkward “we here be dedica-,” Lincoln may have been attempting both to cancel abandoned language and to form a bridge to an already completed second page of another draft that began in the middle of the word “dedicated.” This would explain the perhaps inadvertent dropping of the second part of a sentence that, in its latest form would read: “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.”

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ted to the great task remaining before us — that, from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here, gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation, 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.