

LINCOLN LORE

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NOTABLE FOURTHS OF JULY

The Fourth of July, 1863 was undoubtedly the most glorious celebration of the nation's birthday observed in the city of Washington up to that time. In the morning at 10:30 A.M. Abraham Lincoln released this message to the people:

The President announces to the country that news from the Army of the Potomac up to 10 P.M. of the 3d is such as to cover the army with the highest honor, to promise a great success to the cause of the Union, and to claim the condolence of all for the many gallant fallen; and that for this he especially desires that on this day He whose will, not ours, should ever be done, be everywhere remembered and revered with profoundest gratitude.

(Signed)

Abraham Lincoln.

Supplementing the reports of the Gettysburg battle was the advice about the fall of Vicksburg, the most strategic point on the Mississippi in possession of the enemy. This long-hoped-for victory allowed Lincoln to remark, "The Father of Waters again flows unvexed to the sea." The double triumph coming at so timely a season contributed to the enthusiasm of the people and also gave Lincoln a theme for the brief speech he was to make that night. The people began milling about the White House in the late afternoon and in the evening a band began playing patriotic airs in front of the executive mansion. The President appeared at the central window under the portico and addressed the great concourse of people in these words:

"How long ago is it—eighty odd years—since on the Fourth of July for the first time in the history of the world a nation by its representatives, assembled and declared as a self-evident truth that "all men are created equal." That was the birthday of the United States of America. Since then the Fourth of July has had several peculiar recognitions. The two most distinguished men in the framing and support of the Declaration were Thomas Jefferson and John Adams—the one having penned it and the other sustained it the most forcibly in debate—the only two of the fifty-five who sustained it being elected President of the United States. Precisely fifty years after they put their hands to the paper it pleased Almighty God to take both from the stage of action. This was indeed an extraordinary and remarkable event in our history. Another President, five years later, was called from this stage of existence on the same day and month of the year; and now, on this last Fourth of July just passed, when we have a gigantic Rebellion, at the bottom of which is an effort to overthrow the principle that all men are created equal, we have the surrender of a most powerful position and army on that very day, and not only so, but in a succession of battles in Pennsylvania, near to us, through three days, so rapidly fought that they might be called one great battle on the 1st, 2d, and 3d of the month of July; and on the 4th the cohorts of those who opposed the declaration that all men are created equal, 'turned tail' and ran. Gentlemen, this is a glorious theme, and the occasion for a speech, but I am not prepared to make one worthy of the occasion. . . .

The time came however, when there was an "occasion for a speech" on "the glorious theme" in memory of the Gettysburg victory and then Lincoln was prepared to "make one worthy of the occasion."

The serenade was widely circulated and it appeared in the Boston Morning Journal with the several places noted where applause occurred. One of the statements so marked which apparently appealed to the large group assembled, was the reference to the confederate retreat in which Lincoln stated that in the final stages of the contest the opponents 'turned tail' and ran. The intellectuals at Boston took exception to this crude figure of speech as used by the President and the criticism reached his ear which caused him to say, according to Noah Brooks, one of his secretaries: "Some people were very much outraged by that phrase which they thought improper, so I resolved to make no more impromptu speeches if I could help it."

This resolution about the making of impromptu speeches evidently came to mind when he was serenaded at Gettysburg the night before the dedication of the cemetery. He was then at the home of Col. Wills and although he broke his resolution by saying a few words, they did not take the form of a speech. He remarked, "I have no speech to make. In my position it is somewhat important that I should not say any foolish thing." As late as the fall of Richmond he stated, "The hardest of all speeches which I have to make is an answer to a serenade. I never know what to say on such occasions."

The importance of Lincoln's reaction to the Boston criticism and to extemporaneous speaking in general, is evident when we consider the preparation of the remarkable address which he made on November 19th at the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery. In the light of such an attitude towards extemporaneous speaking, how foolish it is to assume that Lincoln would wait until he was enroute to the battlefield before writing down what he was to say, or postpone the completion of the address until the morning of its delivery.

The inspiration for the Gettysburg speech was the Gettysburg victory. One might be safe in concluding that the actual preparation for the immortal address began in those hours following the Gettysburg victory when he associated in his mind those other historical events which had occurred on the birthday of the nation. The opening lines at the cemetery, "Four-score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation" recall the Fourth of July atmosphere of 1776. The "eighty odd" years of the July 1863 serenade speech became "four-score and seven" at the dedication. He concluded that the nation "our fathers brought forth," "conceived in liberty," and "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," "under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." The actual climax of the Gettysburg address was the "new birth" emphasis, and so recognized by all contemporary commentators, it was couched in the nativity sentiment of both the Declaration of Independence and the extemporaneous speech at the White House.