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Something Must Be Done: The Construction and Dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg

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Abstract

Not only did the armies leave something of a state of chaos behind them after the battle of Gettysburg; they also left their dead buried poorly almost everywhere. Within days, the combination of rain and pigs rooting around the battlefield had exposed multiple skeletons and partially-decomposed bodies. The smell was horrendous, and residents and visitors alike were shocked by the state of the burials.

[*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Something Must Be Done: The Construction and Dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg

By *Hannah Christensen '17*

Not only did the armies leave something of a state of chaos behind them after the battle of Gettysburg; they also left their dead buried poorly almost everywhere. Within days, the combination of rain and pigs rooting around the battlefield had exposed multiple skeletons and partially-decomposed bodies. The smell was horrendous, and residents and visitors alike were shocked by the state of the burials.

Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin was among these visitors. After seeing the state of affairs during his tour of the battlefield on July 10th, Curtin appointed local attorney David Wills to act as his “agent” in affairs related to Pennsylvania’s dead. As agent, Wills did everything from helping families locate loved ones’ bodies to disinterring and sending those remains home. This process was made more complicated by the fact that those grave markers that existed were only partially legible, if at all.

Wills also got to know other state agents, including William Yates Selleck of Wisconsin and Henry Edwards of Massachusetts. It was Edwards and Massachusetts officials who brought up the idea of purchasing part of the battlefield to turn into a cemetery. Wills also got the head of the Christian Commission of Pennsylvania, Andrew B. Cross, in on the idea. When Wills wrote to Governor Curtin about it on July 24th, the governor quickly authorized him to get to work.

Three developments impacted the success of the cemetery project before it really began. First, the military commander at Gettysburg, Colonel Henry C. Alleman, halted the exhumation and shipping home of any more bodies, inadvertently assuring that more would be buried in the proposed cemetery. Second, a fight over the organization of the cemetery occurred between Wills and the Massachusetts representatives. The representatives wanted the dead buried by state, while Wills planned to mix them together. Wills deferred to Massachusetts to keep them on board. Last was a fight over control of the cemetery. The governing body of the local Evergreen Cemetery wanted it under their control, which nearly derailed the entire project when state agents threatened to pull out if the cemetery got its way. Thankfully, Wills was able to out-argue the association, and the cemetery project continued as planned.

Between his first letter to the governor on July 24th and his second on the 30th, Wills took steps to purchase the necessary land, get more states on board, and write to the governors of the other Union states with his plans. By July 30th, Wills already had eight state agents on board and believed that the rest would eventually follow suit. He also had the potential location and cost of land for the cemetery site. After a telegram to the other state governors explaining his plan, Wills went ahead and purchased a total of seventeen acres for \$2,475.87.

At the same time, Wills got the Connecticut and Wisconsin agents to help draft a circular to the state governors, drafted specifications and advertised for bids to rebury the Union soldiers in the cemetery, and contacted one William Saunders to lay out the cemetery grounds. Wills included this information, as well as the total cost of the project—under \$35,000—in his circular to the state governors on August 12th. He also asked the governors to appoint agents to work on the cemetery project and inquired if they wanted to purchase their state's portion of the cemetery.

Wills's report to Governor Curtin in mid-August indicated that progress was being made. Fifteen of seventeen governors had responded, the location and layout of the cemetery had been set, and Wills was ready to move ahead. His suggestion for some kind of dedication ceremony was also well-received and he was immediately authorized to plan one. Wills turned to the other states for suggestions for the ceremony. They were in unanimous agreement with Wills's invitation to Edward Everett of Massachusetts to give the main oration.

Everett's attendance would dictate the date of the ceremony. Wills had originally planned for the dedication ceremony to be on October 23rd, but Everett would not be able to do it before November 19th. So, the ceremony was moved to the 19th; this meant the reburials would start about a month before the ceremony. Now that Wills had the date for the ceremony, he sent out the rest of his invitations: President Lincoln, whom Wills invited to give "a few appropriate remarks;" Vice President Hamlin, the cabinet, foreign ministers, and generals were all invited. Wills also invited the House chaplain, Reverend Thomas Stockton to give the invocation, Reverend Henry Baugher (president of the Gettysburg Seminary) to give the benediction, and several bands to provide music for the occasion. To manage the ceremony and the procession, Wills chose Ward Lamon, the U.S. marshal in D.C. and Lincoln's bodyguard. Wills had high hopes for the dedication ceremony, but several officials were unable to attend, and a few railroad companies backed out of running special trains for the occasion.



President Lincoln at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery, November 19th, 1863.

Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

As November 19th got closer, Wills took care of several last-minute details, and guests began to arrive. Edward Everett arrived on the 17th, President Lincoln arrived after dark on the 18th, and Governor Curtin did not arrive until around midnight. On the morning of the 19th, the weather was perfect, but the masses of people who had arrived for the ceremony made it hard for Ward Lamon to get everyone in line for the procession by the intended start time of 10 o'clock.

According to the program, the military was supposed to form up at 9 o'clock just north of the square, all the civic bodies (except for citizens of states) were supposed to be in line elsewhere at the same time, and the citizens of states were supposed to be in line at 9 o'clock as well. The procession did not start until nearly 11 o'clock.

Once the procession reached the cemetery, the program began. It started with a funeral march from one of the bands, followed by the invocation from Reverend Stockton and a performance from another band. Then, Lamon introduced Edward Everett, who gave a two-hour long speech recounting the entire battle. Everett was followed by a choir, and then President Lincoln was introduced. His short "Gettysburg Address" was interrupted repeatedly by applause and ended with even more applause. Once the applause died down, a choir of Gettysburg residents sang a

dirge, and Reverend Baugher gave the benediction. With the ceremony essentially over, a battery of the 5th New York fired an eight-shot salute, and the attendees dispersed. Wills, the president, and several other prominent guests headed back to Wills's house and later back to Washington.

While the dedication ceremony was officially over, there was still work to be done. The reburials still had to be finished—the process would take until March of 1864. In addition, a commission had to be set up to handle cemetery operations, and a monument had to be erected. While the commission was selected in December 1863, the cornerstone of the monument was not laid until July 4, 1865. The process of creating and dedicating the cemetery was far longer and far more complicated than just the dedication that people celebrate today.

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