

AMERICAN HISTORY



GETTYSBURG

How the bloody battle and President Lincoln's speech 150 years ago changed the Civil War—and the nation

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After three days of battle, the bodies of more than 7,000 soldiers were left on the fields of Gettysburg.

Even the greatest of battles starts with a single shot. On the morning of July 1, 1863, a young Union soldier from Illinois named Marcellus Jones

propped his gun on a split-rail fence. Taking aim at some gray-clad Confederate soldiers he'd spied nearby, he squeezed the trigger.

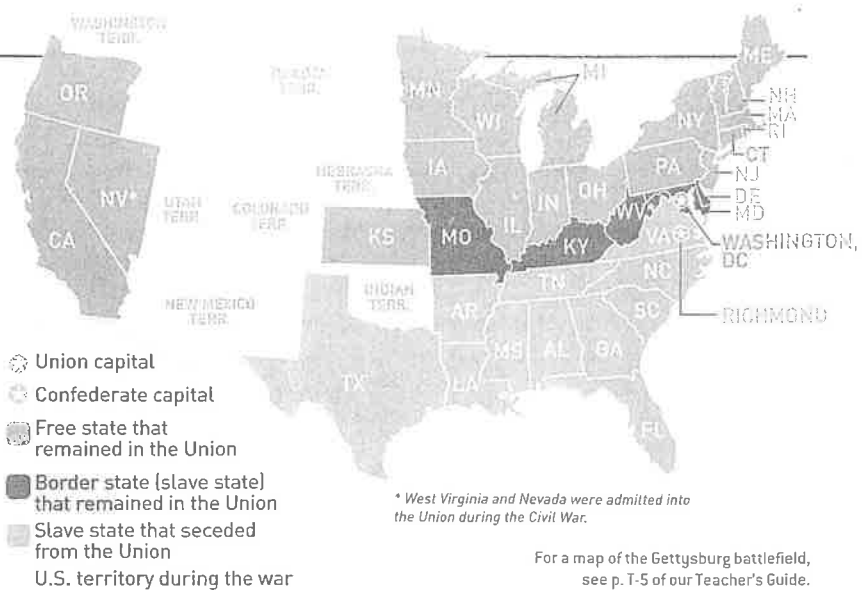
The shot missed. But within 72 hours, the fields, woods, and roads for miles around the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, would be strewn with the bodies of thousands of soldiers. As many as 51,000 were dead, wounded, or missing after the bloodiest single battle in all of U.S. history.

Two years earlier, after decades of clashes over slavery, the United States had been plunged into the Civil War (1861-1865). For Southerners, the last straw was the election of Abraham Lincoln as president in November 1860. They saw Lincoln's election as a mortal threat to slavery, an institution central to their economy and way of life. When, beginning a month later, 11 Southern states seceded (split) from the U.S. to form the Confederate States of America, war followed closely behind.

Most white Northerners wanted to preserve the **Union**—and many didn't care, at least at first, about ending slavery. As for 4 million black Americans, most of them slaves, they saw the war as an event that would either destroy slavery or ensure

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Union** (*n*): the North during the Civil War; also a term for the U.S.
- **Confederacy** (*n*): the 11 states of the South that seceded from the U.S. in 1860-1861



its survival in the U.S. for good.

By the summer of 1863, both the **Confederacy** and the Union feared defeat. The South's economy had been strangled by a naval blockade, its farms and railroads ravaged, and many thousands of its young men left dead on the battlefields.

Northern families had also lost fathers, sons, and brothers in the war. Many now questioned whether the struggle was worth greater bloodshed. Making things worse, the Union's mediocre commanders in Virginia had suffered one humiliating defeat after another at the hands of the Confederacy's brilliant strategist, General Robert E. Lee.

"Invasion of the North!"

The Gettysburg campaign began when Lee spotted an opportunity to cripple the Union's failing morale. By leading his army out of Virginia and north into Pennsylvania, he could strike a deadly blow at the Union's heartland and force Lincoln to sue for peace. In late June 1863, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia began crossing the Potomac River, moving through Maryland and into Pennsylvania.

"Invasion of the North!" screamed

newspaper headlines. Panicked civilians jammed the roads, fleeing the enemy advance. Rebel cavalry galloped into small towns, demanded food and supplies, and paid with worthless Confederate banknotes.

Confederate soldiers committed far worse atrocities against free black Northerners. Nearly a thousand blacks—mostly women and children—were captured and sold into slavery. "I sat on the front step as they were driven by just like we would drive cattle," a local woman wrote in her diary.

Yet as news of this disaster began reaching him, Lincoln also spotted an opportunity. For two years, Lee had outfoxed Union forces. Now, with the right move, the Union Army could trap Lee in Pennsylvania, cut him off from reinforcements, and force him to surrender.

But for this Lincoln needed a skilled commander. Three days before the clash at Gettysburg, Lincoln appointed General George G. Meade to lead Union forces in Pennsylvania. How Meade fared might now decide the fate of the Union.

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Horrible Slaughter

Neither Lee nor Meade had planned to fight at Gettysburg. On the morning of July 1, units of Union cavalry and Confederate infantry—who were searching for food and supplies, especially shoes—happened to meet there. Lieutenant Jones fired his shot. A skirmish escalated as troops on both sides poured in to support their comrades.

Both commanders, Meade and Lee, were miles away. When Lee reached the scene seven hours later, a full-scale battle was under way. In a series of assaults, Confederates pushed the outnumbered Yankees south of town.

When Meade arrived, it was after midnight and thousands of his men lay dead. But the Battle of Gettysburg had only just begun.

The battle was marked more by each side's blunders than its successes. Perhaps the Confederates' biggest misstep was failing to seize the high ground on the battle's first day. By the time Lee launched an all-out attack on July 2, Union troops commanded the important heights of Cemetery Ridge, Culp's Hill, and Little Round Top.

In 19th-century warfare, elevated areas were extremely valuable. They offered better positions for artillery, superior terrain for foot soldiers to attack from, and higher vantage points for commanders to observe troop movements.

Throughout the battle, Union commanders would have a clearer view of the fighting and a more accurate sense of the enemy's location.

Each side sent charges and countercharges sweeping across wheat fields, into a peach orchard, and up boulder-strewn slopes. The slaughter was horrible—made worse by the confusion of battle.

Regiments blundered into one another. Drifting smoke from countless musket volleys left officers confused and men fighting almost blind.

A Union private later recalled “a terrible medley of cries, shouts, cheers, groans, prayers, curses, bursting shells, whizzing rifle bullets, and clanging steel. . . . The lines at times were so near each other that the hostile gun barrels almost touched.”

Then came the afternoon of the battle's third and final day, July 3. Lee ordered a charge straight into the Union lines on Cemetery Ridge. This assault would later be known by the name of one of its commanders, General George Pickett. With Yankee soldiers dug in on the ridge and Yankee artillery on the hills above, rebels were mowed down mercilessly crossing open ground.

Thirty minutes after “Pickett's Charge” began, barely half of about 15,000 Confederate attackers were left. The battle was over. The next day, Lee's army withdrew from the area and headed south.



“For every Southern boy . . . there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon.”

A New Birth

Celebrations swept across the North as the word of the Union victory spread. President Lincoln, however, was furious that Meade had let Lee's army escape. Yet Gettysburg would prove to be the turning point of the Civil War. Though the Confederacy fought on for almost two more years, it never regained its full momentum.

Gettysburg held a symbolic power long after the guns fell silent. To generations of white Southerners, the battle—and especially Pickett's hopeless charge—became a romantic emblem of the doomed Confederacy. “For every Southern boy fourteen years old,” wrote Mississippi-born novelist William Faulkner nearly a century later, “there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863.”

The climactic moment at Gettysburg came not in July 1863, but that November, when President Lincoln visited to dedicate a cemetery for the Union soldiers killed there (*see p. 11*). In his legendary Gettysburg Address, Lincoln acknowledged the awful harvest of death. But he saw something else, too, at Gettysburg: a new birth of freedom, and a challenge for future generations to complete the unfinished work of those three bloody days in July.

—Adam Goodheart



The Gettysburg Address



The toll of the three-day battle was mind-boggling: as many as 51,000 men dead, wounded, or missing. More than 7,000 rotting bodies were left on the field, many of them quickly buried in shallow graves where they lay with little identification. Officials soon saw that they had to create a proper burial ground for the Union dead.

President Lincoln wasn't the featured speaker at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery on November 19, 1863. Edward Everett, a famous orator, gave the main address. He spoke for two hours in soaring language about the battle and the courage of Union soldiers. But it is Lincoln's simple remarks—272 words that lasted less than three minutes—that we remember today. Invoking images of rebirth, and stressing the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, he gave Americans a new understanding of the war's—and the nation's—purpose.

Here's a look at some of Lincoln's key points.

1 **Four score and seven years ago:** The year 1776. A score is 20; Lincoln is counting back 4 times 20 years plus 7, or 87 years.

4 **testing whether that nation . . . can long endure:** Lincoln refers to the primary goal of the North in the Civil War: to preserve the young nation in the face of the Confederacy's rebellion.

6 **consecrate/hallow:** Consecrate and hallow are synonyms, meaning "to declare something sacred or set it apart for a holy use."

7 **The world will little note:** The Gettysburg Address became one of the most treasured and quoted speeches in U.S. history.

10 **a new birth of freedom:** Without actually saying it, Lincoln makes it clear that along with preserving the Union, ending slavery is a key goal of the Civil War. At the start of 1863, he had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring the South's slaves free.

1 **Four score and seven years ago** our fathers brought forth on this continent a new **2** nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that **3** all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, **4** 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 that field, as a **5** final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we **6** can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. **7** The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget **8** what they did here. 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. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the **9** great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have **10** a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

2 **nation:** Lincoln uses the word nation five times to drive home his view of the U.S. as a unified country under a central government, not just a loose alliance of states.

3 **all men are created equal:** A quote from the Declaration of Independence, written in 1776.

5 **a final resting place:** About 3,500 Union soldiers would be buried at Gettysburg. [Most of the Confederate dead were buried at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Va.]

8 **what they did here:** The Battle of Gettysburg is credited, along with the Battle of Vicksburg in Mississippi, with turning the tide of the war for the North.

9 **great task remaining:** In November 1863, a Northern victory was far from assured. The Civil War finally ended after four years in 1865, following General Lee's surrender to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House in Virginia.