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LINCOLN'S GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

BY JESSE W. WEIK

ONE can hardly contemplate the recent fiftieth anniversary of the great struggle at Gettysburg without at the same time recalling the simple but lofty utterance delivered there by Abraham Lincoln a few months after the battle. Should no other incident of the event be preserved, that speech will in itself be sufficient to place the story of that desperate and momentous conflict safely within the limits of a glorious immortality. Though it comprises but two hundred and sixty-six words and less than three minutes were consumed in its delivery—as compared to the thirteen thousand words and almost three hours of Edward Everett's effort on the same occasion—yet it will always take high rank as one of the gems of English oratory.

In viewing it as a literary production we should not forget that Mr. Lincoln's incursions into the field of letters were alike brief and desultory. As a youth his educational opportunities were pitifully meager, so that there is much significance in the observation of his law partner, Mr. Herndon, who contended that "Abraham Lincoln read less and thought more than any other man of his day and generation." At his home in Springfield he had practically no library, the only books there being a few gilt-covered and gaudily bound volumes lying on the marble-top table in the parlor, placed there by his wife, doubtless for ornamental purposes. If he found it necessary to consult any particular volume, he either visited the library at the State House or availed himself of the library of Mr. Herndon, who had a rather extensive accumulation of books and pamphlets and who subscribed for the leading periodicals, thus keeping up with the vital questions and best thought of the day.

When, late in January, 1861, Mr. Lincoln began the preparation of his inaugural address, he found it almost impossible, owing to the endless throng of visitors at his home and his quarters at the State House, to make any

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material headway with it. It was his first state paper, and he was naturally anxious to acquit himself with due credit. In order, therefore, that it might have the benefit of his great concentration of mind, he betook himself to an unoccupied room over a dry-goods store belonging to his brother-in-law, Mr. C. M. Smith, not far from the State House, where, cut off from all intrusion for an hour or so each day, he could work with some degree of comfort and satisfaction. Years afterward, when I was in the store one day, Mr. Smith led me upstairs to this room, where I was shown the table, the chair, and the identical inkstand and pen Mr. Lincoln is said to have used. When the latter began his work, he sent for Herndon and told him what books and papers he would probably need, and Herndon promptly secured them for him. Here is the list: Andrew Jackson's Proclamation against Nullification, Henry Clay's speech on the Compromise of 1850, and a copy of the Constitution. Later he asked for Webster's reply to Hayne. With this rather limited array of material for reference he prepared the address. It will thus be seen that he was not a very great or omnivorous reader, and that such knowledge as he had been able to acquire had indeed, as he himself so tersely expressed it, "been picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity."

It is proper to state here that Mr. Herndon was a radical and uncompromising Abolitionist. He read everything on the subject that was published, besides keeping in close touch with Sumner, Phillips, Garrison, and the rest of the Abolition leaders in the New England States. For years he carried on a correspondence with Theodore Parker, who kept him supplied with anti-slavery literature, especially copies of his own sermons and addresses, all of which, in one way or another, dealt with the burning question of the hour. Whenever Herndon found in one of these pamphlets a significant or noteworthy utterance, an item that might be of interest or helpful to Lincoln, he turned it over to him. Sometimes the latter would read it at once—he usually read aloud—but he generally folded it up in his inside coat pocket to be read later. Of course he took no such radical or advanced stand on the slavery question

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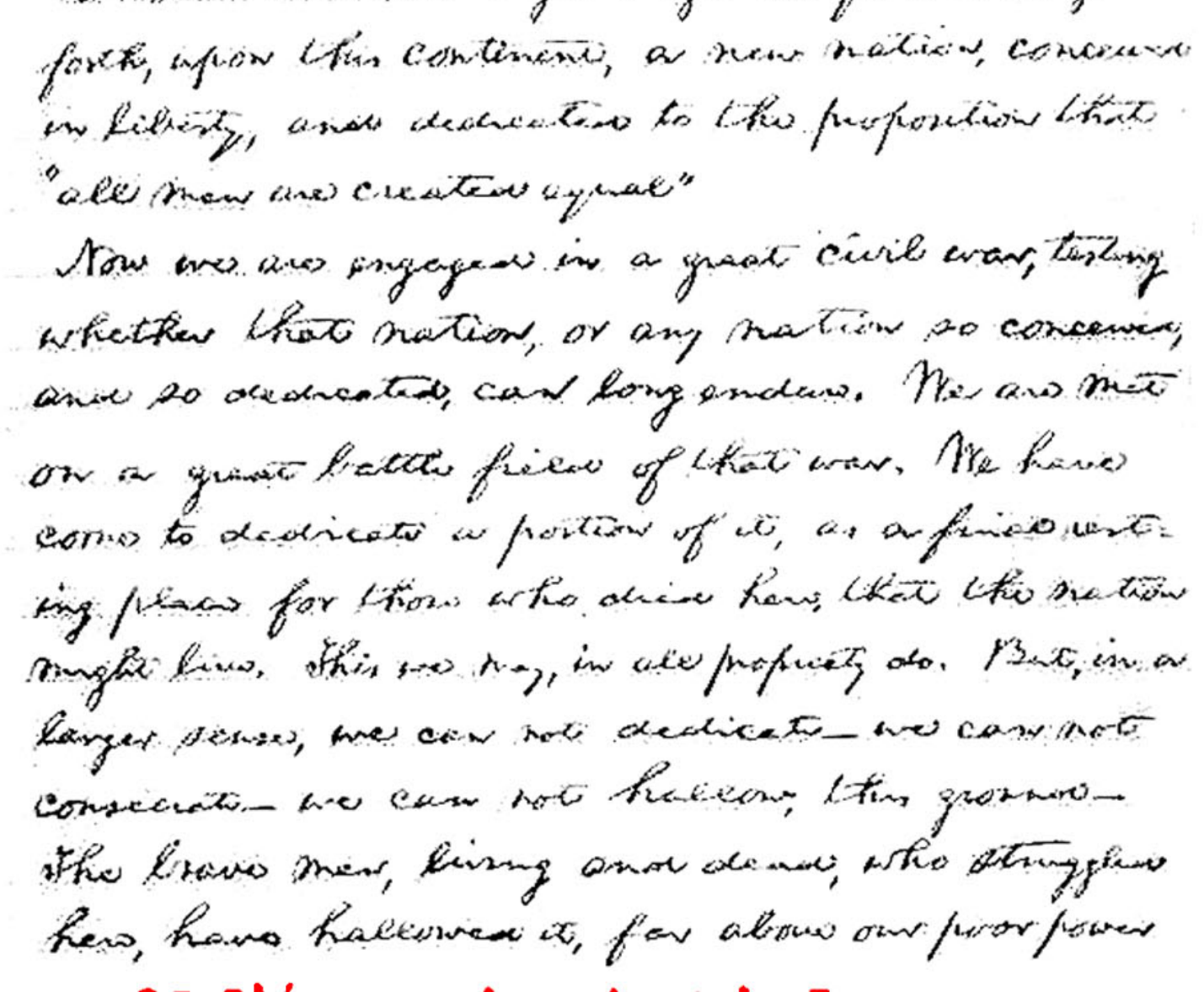
as Parker, but, as will appear later, it cannot be said that the extreme utterances of the zealous Boston preacher, so constantly brought to his attention by Herndon, did not deeply impress him and, possibly, shape his views.

Some years ago, when Mr. Herndon had decided to retire from the practice of law and was preparing to remove to his farm in the country, he sent for me to help him dispose of the great store of papers in his office that had accumulated during the many years of his service at the bar. The purpose was to classify or put them in some sort of order, destroying such as were no longer of any value; but when we came to examine them, we found so many either written by or in some way related to Lincoln, and therefore entitled to preservation, that the work of destruction was the lightest part of our task. On the top of the old bookcase I noticed a pasteboard box, which, when taken down, was found to be filled with letters and papers tied up in bundles. Two or three packages, I remember, contained the correspondence of Mr. Lincoln during the campaigns of 1856 and 1858, and including letters from such men as John Bell, Thaddeus Stevens, and Joshua R. Giddings. There were also sundry bundles of legal documents, and other papers of corresponding value and importance. The lid was gone from the box, and I was removing the deep coat of accumulated dust when I encountered one package on the top of which, underneath the string, was a strip of paper, about two by five inches in size, which bore this brief and suggestive indorsement in Mr. Lincoln's handwriting:


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

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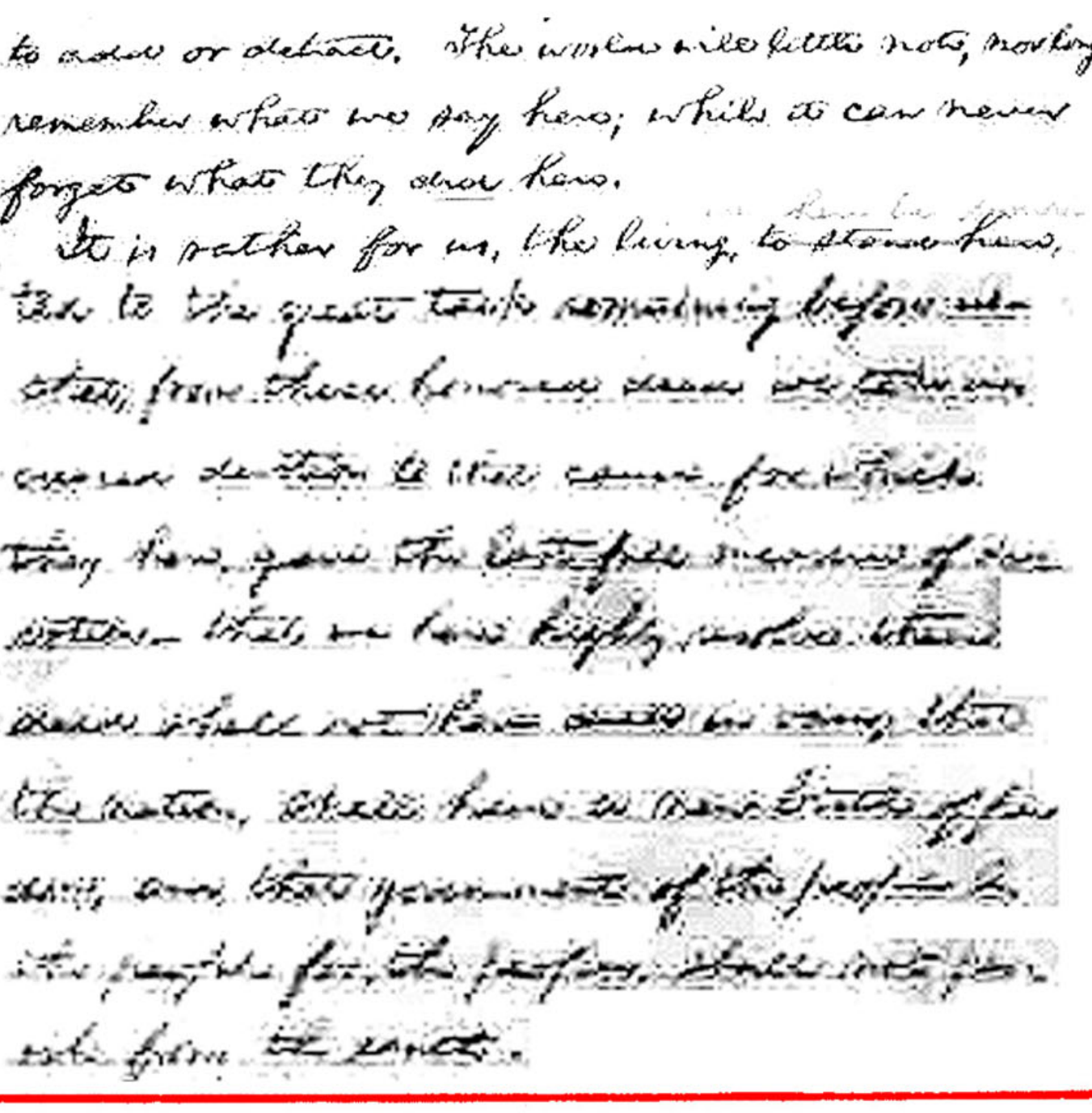

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a 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 cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget 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 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 a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

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