As the hot days of August gave way to the cooler climate and changing season of fall and September, one of the worst natural disasters in recent American history began. On August 23, 2005 the National Weather Service started warning residents in the gulf coast states about an approaching hurricane, named Katrina, which could have a devastating effect upon making landfall. By August 28, the mayor of New Orleans made the announcement for the evacuation of the city, and, by the following day, the storm had made landfall. Katrina produced 100-140 mph winds, constant rainfall and damaging tornados. The cost was beyond imaginable, totaling over $100 billion in repairs and damages, hundreds of thousands without jobs, and nearly 3,500 deaths across several gulf coast states. As the storm surge retreated, and sun and clear skies returned to the 90,000 square miles of the United States affected by the storm, dire questions needed answered as a direct result of the loss. Who would be responsible for the cleanup efforts, a scale of which had never been faced before? With family and relatives scattered across the country, who would be responsible for retrieving the dead, identifying their remains, and making sure a proper burial was secured? Would it be the responsibility of local, state, or federal agencies to shoulder the burdens created by this unprecedented natural disaster? The consequences and hard decisions Katrina confronted the nation with are similar to those from a man-made disaster 151 years ago at Gettysburg. Many of these same problems had to be answered, and dealt with quickly.\(^{1}\)

The battle that occurred at Gettysburg from July 1 - 3, 1863 took a devastating toll on both the Union and Confederate armies, as well as the community. At the end of the battle, 51,000 men were casualties of the fighting; missing, wounded, killed, or captured. In the immediate aftermath thousands of dead men and animals were still unburied, and the fields for miles were
littered with the materials of war. Over 20,000 wounded filled barns, homes, churches, and meadows which had been converted to serve as field hospitals. The Gettysburg community of 2,400 citizens, not used to the hard hand of war like numerous communities in Virginia, was overwhelmed with what had happened around them and what had been left behind. Although the Union Army of the Potomac left details to treat the wounded, bury the dead and gather up military equipment the sheer size of the disaster eclipsed their ability to fully manage the situation. In the days after the battle, a reporter for the *Philadelphia Age* described the challenge:

“The ground was tramped into a bog, and was covered with every conceivable thing—old broken muskets, bayonets and ramrods, pieces of wagons, broken wheels, cartridge boxes, belts, torn clothing, blankets, fragments of shells, and sometimes unexploded ones, bullets, cartridges, powder—everything used in war or by soldiers was scattered around in plenty. The grain and grass which once grew there, was almost ground to a jelly. Everywhere could be seen traces of the carnage. Hundreds of dead horses, still unburied, lay on the field; and [in] boggy places and spots distant from the town, many of the men were still unburied.”

Local citizens, confronted with the disaster literally in their backyard, also recorded the horrific scenes around them. One of them was David Wills, a prominent Gettysburg citizen and attorney, who wrote “Our dead are lying on the fields unburied, (that is, no grave being dug) with small portions of earth dug up alongside of the body and thrown over it. In many instances arms and legs and sometimes heads protrude and my attention has been directed to several places where the hogs were actually rooting out the bodies and devouring them.” Within a week of the battle the community received important support that would help with the cleanup when Pennsylvania’s governor, Andrew Curtin, dispatched militia to Gettysburg and then went to see things for himself. Over a week since the start of the battle, however, steps that began the large cleanup, including battlefield dead, and assist the local populace in this charge, came in the form of more Union troops and the governor of Pennsylvania.

Andrew Gregg Curtin, the wartime governor of Pennsylvania, served in that office from 1861-1867. Curtin appointed David Wills as the agent representing the governor for the cemetery project after he visited the battlefield in July 1863. (Library of Congress)
On July 9, 1863, the 36th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia arrived “in Gettysburg in [the] afternoon after [a] tedious march of 35 miles.” The regiment had a wide range of responsibilities in regards to the aftermath of the battle, including: gathering wounded, sending walking-wounded further to the rear, burying men and horses, and collecting any federal property in the form weapons, clothing, and equipment. To assist in the organizational efforts that this work required, the colonel of the regiment, Col. H.C. Alleman, was made the military governor of Gettysburg and the surrounding fields of battle. As the 36th Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia settled into camp just south of Gettysburg and across from the Evergreen Cemetery, the Governor, Andrew Curtin, arrived in town. Curtin arrived late in the afternoon of July 10, and toured several of the many hospitals in and around the town, as well as portions of the battlefield itself.

Accompanying Curtin on most of the tour, both as a guide and companion was David Wills, a fellow and important Republican in Adams County. Some historians have argued that the intent of Curtin’s visit was limited. “Curtin’s only plans at the outset of his Gettysburg visit were to see that Pennsylvania’s soldiers were being taken care of properly in the battlefield hospitals and in the army,” wrote Kathleen Georg. Although that may have been the governor’s original intent of his visit to Gettysburg following the battle, there is no question that what he saw and those he talked with changed the outcome of the trip. Sensing the need for someone to take charge of the civilian end of dealing with the disaster, Curtin appointed Wills to act as the agent of the state and the governor’s office. Why did Curtin select Wills and not someone else? What equipped Wills for the job? What did Curtin see in the young attorney?

David Wills was Adams County born and bred. Born on a farm on February 3, 1831 near Bendersville, Wills was destined to be the only son of his parents union. At age four tragedy struck the family when David’s mother passed away. By age twelve, David, his sister, and father moved into Gettysburg, and within the year, he had enrolled in the Preparatory School at Pennsylvania College. Upon completion of his studies and graduation in 1851, David left Gettysburg for Cahaba, Alabama where he took a job as principal of the academy located in said town as well as teaching several of his own courses in its halls. After a year in the south, however, Wills returned to Pennsylvania and picked up the study of law in the Lancaster office of Thaddeus Stevens. Moving from the Deep South to study law with political titan Thaddeus Stevens within a year is a startling contrast. Although there has yet to be found any written explanation for this change in location and career, Wills’ change in politics, which will be explored later, may have had some influence on his decision. Just two years later, Wills was admitted to practice, and in 1854 opened his law office in Gettysburg. Not only was his professional life growing, but so was his personal life. In June 1856 David Wills married Catherine Jane Smyser and by the time of the battle the family had grown to three children with Catherine four months pregnant.
In the brief period between 1854 and 1863 Wills prospered in his profession and became a leader in the community. He served several times as the burgess of Gettysburg and president of the town council, an achievement considering he was elected in a strongly Democratic community as a Republican. Wills also acted as the councilman and attorney for the borough of Gettysburg, a post he held for a decade. He also served as county superintendent of schools of Adams County. After successful election to the post, in which he had become “the first officer elected to that position under the new law, creating and defining that office,” Wills set to work “organizing and systematizing the complex affairs of this position, and the results show that the selection was a most fortunate one for the people.”

This was not the only praise that Wills received for all of his endeavors, however. A contemporary biographer of Wills wrote, “His success in his chosen profession was marked and brilliant from the first, and of all this his previous life as a student, or as principal of the academy, had given earnest of abundantly….Young as he was…he has impressed…that strength of intellect and force of character are commanding qualities.”

David Wills was energetic, a visionary, and was extremely competent, all faculties he would need to take on the role that Curtin gave him.

Besides being a rising leader in his community, Wills aligned himself with the Republican Party in a strongly Democratic county. One historian of Lincoln’s Gettysburg visit noted that upon “Transferring his allegiance from Whiggery to the newly organized Republican party, he became a local political leader as well…." To be a political leader in various posts within a strongly entrenched Democratic community speaks to Wills’ abilities and standing amongst his peers and those of other political thought. Based on Wills’ involvement in numerous professional roles he was most certainly a progressive of his time. Perhaps it was these skills, experiences, and personality traits that left Governor Curtin feel that Wills was the best person to act on his and the state’s behalf in Gettysburg for the work that remained unfinished. No doubt the numerous
posts he held and the education he had received demonstrated that he had long since established a reputation for getting things done. Although we may never fully know how David Wills acquired the full faith and confidence of Governor Andrew Curtin, one thing has remained clear until today, the job was an immense undertaking.

Several weeks later, one of Gettysburg’s newspapers reported on Wills’ appointment, as well as his chief duties: “Governor Curtin has made arrangements with David Wills, esq., of this place for the removal of all Pennsylvanians killed in the late battles, furnishing transportation for the body and one attendant at the expense of the State.”10 The three day battle in Gettysburg had reaped nearly 51,000 casualties alone, with Pennsylvania adding 5,886 to that total.11 In order to accomplish this task, Wills had to locate nearly 1,000 Pennsylvania dead still laying on the battlefield in temporary graves, track down the fate of 1,300 Pennsylvanians listed as missing and captured and determine their status, and also learn the condition of some 4,000 wounded Pennsylvanians scattered for miles about the area. The magnitude of this operation was immense. In an era without typewriters, computers, phones, or automobiles, all of this work had to be done manually. Correspondence, often times numerous letters to and from one sender, was written by hand. All communications made via Gettysburg’s one telegraph had to be written first, delivered to the telegraph office, and sent by someone trained as an operator. A conversation by telegraph only increased the amount of writing Wills had to do. Locating the temporary graves, as well as learning the condition of the 4,000 wounded had to be done by horseback, wagon, or on foot. All of these activities took countless hours.12

Tracking Wills’ telegraph communications provides an example of a typical day Wills spent as the state agent. On July 24, Wills received a telegraph communique from Harrisburg in search of a wounded Pennsylvanian. Wills, after an extensive search for the soldier, replied, “W.H.H. Coates 121 Reg P.V. not on our list of wounded. Made inquiry of, two of his comrades here and they say that they are of the opinion he was not wounded he was not in the first corps Hospital where he would have been if wounded. He might accidently have been in the other Hospital, but my list would certainly have showed it.”13 Reflecting on the time and effort spent to track down this information about the fate of one soldier further illustrates the enormity of the task as he had to the same process for 3,999 other Pennsylvania soldiers as well. In response to another telegraph communication, Wills admitted that his work as an agent of the state was “an undertaking of much greater magnitude than [I] contemplated.”14

These aspects of Wills’ work filled all of his waking hours each and every day. The Harrisburg Daily Telegraph reported on July 20, 1863, “every arrangement has been made at Gettysburg, by Governor Curtin, for the removal, on application to David Wills, residing there, of the bodies of Pennsylvanians killed in the late battle…”15 Local Gettysburg newspapers reported just a day later that between 600 to 700 coffins had already been assembled by town carpenters for those requesting their loved ones remains to be sent home.16 As this position became a massive project for Wills, he also struggled to find time away from the realities of war. His own home, like all those in Gettysburg housed several of the many wounded who were in need of shelter. After four days in Edward McPherson’s barn west of town, Capt. Francis B. Jones was on his way to the Wills home in the town’s center, known as the Diamond. Mrs. Wills, upon taking food to the wounded at that location sent an ambulance for Jones the following day. “An ambulance with attendant came and took me into (town), where Judge and Mrs. Wills received me into their
home most cordially, and I slept in a clean comfortable bed, after the hospital attendant had
given me a refreshing bath….In fact, their house was full of wounded.”17 Several other Union
officers also received care at the residence, including Capt. William H. Rexford and Col. Henry
Morrow, both of the 24th Michigan Infantry, a regiment of the famed Iron Brigade.18 As July
reached an end, however, the unfinished work left Wills with a decision to be made regarding not
only the Pennsylvania dead still to be located, identified, and sent home, but the dead of
numerous other Union states.

When David Wills accepted the task of acting as an agent for Governor Curtin, his main duty
was to the dead and wounded from Pennsylvania. It was expected that agents from other states
would see to their casualties. Besides the army, there was no Federal disaster relief organization.
Each state was forced to improvise. Many began to realize that the sheer number of dead and
dying far outweighed the practicability of returning all who gave their last full measure of
devotion to their loved ones and home. The dead who had received a hasty burial and parts of
their shallow graves that were exposed to the elements posed a serious health risk to the
surrounding community. Despite the success of Wills and the other state agents in dealing with
some of the dead, it was not a success in quantity; thus, something else had to be done. One
Gettysburg National Military Park historian commented, “The graves were deteriorating too
rapidly, however, for this solution to be successful. Curtin’s plan also only properly disposed of
the Pennsylvania dead, leaving the other Northern states to fend for themselves.”19 Another Park
historian agreed, noting that a decision on the matter would soon be forced to be made based on
the situation and necessity. “In any event, the decision would have to be made soon as to which
alternative to choose—ignore the situation and let the families and friends bear the burden;
remove the Union dead to a common burial ground purchased by one or all of the states; let the
families and friends remove those whom they could not transport a long distance and reinter the
remains in the civilian cemetery; accurately record the graves and delay any decision.”20 Wills
realized the gravity of the situation and called together, on July 23 or July 24, the historic record
is unclear, a meeting of all the state agents from other northern states engaged in this work to
develop options that met the needs of this problem.21 Once again, Wills demonstrated that
Curtin had made the right decision in making him an agent for the state as he worked to find a
solution to this massive problem.

Throughout the month of July, although Wills only concentrated on the Pennsylvania dead, he
became acquainted with a score of state agents, giving them considerable advice and assistance
in regard to their work. Several of these agents, like Massachusetts Agent Henry Edwards, had
earlier ideas different to what Pennsylvania and other northern states were doing with their dead.
Edwards and other Bay state agents proposed that Massachusetts buy a portion of the battlefield,
collect the bodies scattered in graves on the battlefield, and inter them in a plot somewhere atop
Cemetery Hill near the town’s private Evergreen Cemetery. At the same time, Andrew Cross of
the Christian Commission of Pennsylvania “exchanged views [with Wills] about the desirability
of transforming a portion of the battlefield into a cemetery and getting all of the eighteen states
that had lost sons at Gettysburg to cooperate in the venture.”22 Cross eventually took the idea to
the press in an appeal entitled “To the Patriotic of the Land — A Cemetery for those who Fell at
Gettysburg,” published in the Harrisburg Daily Telegraph on July 29, 1863. At the meeting of
July 23 or 24 that Wills had convened, similar ideas had been proposed there as well. From this
meeting an idea was born to create a national cemetery for the Union dead at Gettysburg. But whose idea was it?

Theodore Dimon was born in Fairfield, Connecticut on September 19, 1816. A graduate of Yale and the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in medicine, Dimon had married in 1841 before he practiced medicine at the New York State Prison in Auburn, New York. With gold fever sweeping the country, the young doctor left for the gold fields in 1849 only to return three years later in 1852. Dimon resumed practicing medicine until 1861 when the war broke out and he enlisted in the 19th New York Regiment. During most of the second summer of the war, Dimon was transferred to the 2nd Maryland Volunteer Infantry from June through October 1862, where he saw action at Second Manassas, Chantilly, South Mountain, and Antietam with that unit. Shortly before fighting began at Gettysburg, Dimon was mustered out of service and had returned home to New York. As news of the battle of Gettysburg and its mass casualties swept across the nation, a call for trained surgeons and medical staff went out. Dr. Dimon answered the call, and upon arrival at Gettysburg “was detailed to assist John F. Seymour, the New York State agent for the relief of sick and wounded soldiers.” Dimon recalled on July 16, “I was detailed to duty with Mr. John F. Seymour, general agent of the State of New York for relief of sick and wounded New York soldiers. He was discharging the laborious duties of his office here nearly alone and needed my help.” Because of his association with Seymour, and the departure of Seymour from Gettysburg, Dimon attended the end of July meeting that Wills had called. Dimon was not only tending to the wounding and preparing the dead to be sent home to New from Gettysburg, but he also had state agent duties as well. He brought both perspectives with him to the meeting. He later wrote:

“While engaged in the various duties above named I was constantly solicited for pecuniary aid in the expense attending the exhumation, disinfecting, coffining and transportation of our dead soldiers to their former homes….It seemed wrong to leave the soldier ‘buried like a dead horse,’ when in another year all marks of his grave would be obliterated by the owner of the soil. It occurred to me as practicable to have a piece of ground purchased for a burial place on or near the battlefield, to which the dead bodies of all our soldiers should be removed and there buried by regiments and states and their graves permanently marked. David Wills, Esq., the agent of Pennsylvania, heartily approved the project and we both addressed the Governors of Pennsylvania and New York on the subject.” From Dimon’s account it appeared he was responsible for the idea of a national cemetery at Gettysburg, and that Wills had merely supported the idea, not been its creator. Writing a week after the meeting, Dimon continued, “August 1, 1863. At my request, therefore, a meeting was held at the office of David Wills, Esquire, agent of the State of Pennsylvania. At this meeting I presented a proposition that a portion of the ground occupied by our line of battle on Cemetery Hill should be purchased for a permanent burial place for the soldiers of our army who lost their lives in this battle, or who died here of their wounds. And that their bodies should be gathered from the fields in which they were interred and deposited in this burial place by regiments and States with proper marks designating their graves.” Not only does this reinforce the notion that it was Dimon who planted the idea for a national cemetery and several key design features therein, but that it was he who had put forth the idea at the July meeting. Two weeks later,
Seymour, who had since returned to New York, wrote, “The suggestion of the purchase of ground at Gettysburg for a cemetery which originated with you was at once approved by the Governor of this State and he telegraphed to Governor Curtin of Pennsylvania.” But was Dimon the sole originator of the idea of a national cemetery at Gettysburg? Kathleen Georg points out, “Dimon’s letter to New York’s General Agent, John F. Seymour, indicates that the conception of a common or national cemetery originated with himself….However, there were others who made the same claim.”

One of those who contested Dimon’s version was David Wills. The first indication that Wills had anything to do with the idea of a national cemetery at Gettysburg came from correspondence written to Governor Curtin by Wills on July 24, 1863. “Mr. Seymour is here on behalf of his Brother the Governor of New York to look after the wounded &c. on the battlefield and I have suggested to him and also the Rev. Cross of Baltimore and others the propriety and actual necessity of the purchase of a common burial ground for the dead, now only partially buried over miles of country around Gettysburg,” wrote Wills. It has been established that Dimon was at the meeting that this idea was proposed. Why then did Wills omit Dimon’s name and idea? Retired Gettysburg National Military Park historian Kathy Georg believes it “may perhaps have to do with politics and the fact that Wills intended to impress Curtin with the importance of those supporting the plan, in an attempt to persuade Curtin to endorse it as well.” Further support to Dimon, Seymour, and Georg, came nearly a hundred years earlier than Georg’s conclusion. On June 26, 1891, Benjamin B. Snow delivered remarks at the dedication of the monument of the 111th New York Infantry on the Gettysburg battlefield. Snow opined that not only should the men of the 111th New York be proud of the work that they had accomplished at Gettysburg thirty years earlier, but also that a fellow townsman of where this regiment originated had helped create the cemetery that now rested yards from their monument. “Added to this is the fact that the idea of purchasing this field ‘for a permanent burial place for the soldiers of our army who lost their lives in this battle’ originated with your fellow townsman, Surgeon Theodore Dimon,” Snow remarked. “To him is the credit due of initiating the movement which culminated in the consecration of these grounds as the hallowed resting place of the honored dead who here gave the last full measure of devotion to their country’s defence [sic]. A grave at Gettysburg! What mausoleum more honorable! What monument more enduring!”

The truth may lie somewhere between Dimon and Wills accounts of that late July meeting. The sheer scope of the cleanup efforts at Gettysburg demanded the attention of many during the months following the battle. Wills and Dimon were but just two men, representing two states whose dead dotted the landscape in hastily built graves. Representatives for numerous other states, as well as civilian relief organizations and an army presence all worked towards a common goal. Certainly numerous ideas were proposed during this period by various parties invested in this work. Both Wills and Dimon could have had similar ideas about a cemetery, and both pursued those respective ideas with their superiors, Wills with Curtin and Dimon with Seymour. Either way, the project moved forward with both men contacting their respective governors about the idea, and Wills became the dominant force, organizer, and doer of the cemetery project. This is a critical point to consider when moving beyond the argument of whose idea the cemetery originated with. Even if Dimon was the originator of the cemetery idea, it was only an idea until someone actualized it. David Wills became that person and it was he who helped make the Soldiers’ National Cemetery a reality. At the same time, Governor Curtin
endorsed the project and gave Wills the task of implementing it. This was a powerful endorsement by the governor and evidence of his continued confidence in Wills to get the job done. Wills’ new duties, in addition to still representing the state of Pennsylvania, included “making all the financial arrangements, determining the reburial methods, creating a permanent committee for perpetual care of the cemetery, hiring a surveyor and landscape architect and, most importantly, purchasing the land for the cemetery grounds.”

Out of these duties, the first challenge that arose was finding and securing suitable land for the project. The latter task proved the most difficult challenge for Wills.

The first location that Wills selected for the site of the cemetery was on Cemetery Hill, a critical position held by the Union army throughout the battle and the center of their army’s line of battle. The selection comprised about eight total acres of land and was then owned by two citizens of Gettysburg, Edward Menchey and Peter Raffensperger. Wills had selected this ground because of the importance that it had held during the battle, a fitting tribute to those who would be buried there. On the heels of meeting with the state agents, on July 24 Wills wrote to Governor Curtin in which he described the two tracts of land:

“It is the elevated piece of ground on the Baltimore Turnpike opposite the cemetery. It is the place where our army had about 40 pieces of artillery in action… and for their protection had thrown up a large number of earthworks…. It is the point on which the desperate attack was made by the Louisiana Brigades on Thursday evening when they succeeded in reaching the guns…. It was the key to the whole line of our defences [sic].—the apex of the triangular line of battle. It is the spot, above all others, for the honorable burial of the dead who have fallen on these fields.”

The agent for Pennsylvania continued to pursue this ground and Curtin’s approval of purchasing it intensely. Four days later, July 28, Wills wrote to Curtin again. “Please Advise me immediately by Telegraph in reference to the contense [sic] of my letter Saturday,” Wills wrote. “Shall I buy the land, there is an offer for it. I fear I can not hold the owners longer without a promise to purchase.” Following Wills’ letter, Governor Curtin received another from Gettysburg citizen, lawyer, and president of the Evergreen Cemetery Association David McConaughy. McConaughy notified Curtin that he had “purchased & now hold all the land upon Cemetery Hill which encircles the Ever green Cemetery Grounds…. “ McConaughy purchased this ground to enlarge the Evergreen Cemetery while at the same time “to secure so as to be held in perpetuity, the most interesting portions of this illustrious battlefield, that we may retain them in the actual form & condition they were in, during the battles, the most eloquent memorials of their glorious struggles & triumphs.” He wished that the “battlefield should be held by the sons of Pa. and not by those of other states.” Not only was McConaughy’s idea to preserve key battlefield ground and terrain, but to also make his cemetery, Evergreen, the focal point of Cemetery Hill, where Union dead would be buried and visited by those coming to see the battlefield. At the same time, in a community the size of Gettysburg and a limited number of influential community members, McConaughy’s dislike of Wills, coupled with the knowledge of Wills’ intent to purchase the ground on Cemetery Hill, could have been a key motivator for McConaughy to make the purchase.
McConaughy’s plan, however, was essentially rooted in parochialism. No idea of nationalism, both for the battleground and the cemetery ever came through into his plans. McConaughy had no bigger picture in mind, and his idea, which also included a “noble national monument, and $5.00 fee per burial paid by the state of Pennsylvania to the Evergreen Cemetery Association, threatened the burgeoning idea of a cemetery amongst state agents, Wills, and others. “When Wills found out, he accused McConaughy of being a ‘speculator,’” wrote former Gettysburg historian Eric Campbell. “Wills also realized that McConaughy’s plan [for a cemetery attached or a part of the Evergreen Cemetery] would change the very nature of the project to one of local influence, instead of a cemetery of national character as he and his fellow state agents had envisioned. This situation obviously presented a problem if the Soldiers’ National Cemetery was to become a reality.”

The situation was tenuous. If McConaughy succeeded with his plan, support for a national cemetery from individual states might be lost. Wills believed his idea and plan moving forward was the key in holding onto all the support that had been thus far generated. “There is no doubt all the states will unite if made a national exclusive burial ground for soldiers,” Wills contended. “Eight have been consulted and semi-officially adopt the place and their representatives positively decline doing anything in the matter [if it is] an independent burial ground. They oppose the plan being made use of for advancement of local enterprise and expense of the public.”

Escalation of the problem continued. Wills had no other choice than to look at other ground, and correspondence from both Wills and McConaughy to Governor Curtin increased twofold. By August 10, Wills had not only selected a new site for the cemetery, he had also purchased the ten acres of ground. According to retired Park historian Kathy Harrison, “The general area of the ‘left center’ [of where the cemetery would be placed] might [have] include[d] Ziegler’s Grove, the Brien Farm, the Leister Farm, or perhaps the Frey Farm” on the northern end of Cemetery Ridge. After the purchase, Wills wrote to Curtin, “There have been several agents here from other states, & all are very much pleased with the location. It is beautiful ground for burial & ornamentation but not quite so elevated as the ground I first wrote you about, but which I failed in buying. Instead of addressing you a letter for approval of the purchase I have drawn the agreement subject to your approval. You will please endorse it & return it to me without delay.”

Not all were as pleased with the location as Wills suggested.

As many citizens of Gettysburg, members of the Evergreen Cemetery Association, and others associated with the national cemetery project learned of Wills’ selection and purchase of ground on the left center of the Union line during the battle, they were distraught with the selection. Believing that the most proper location for the cemetery was the tract that McConaughy had already purchased and owned, a letter to Governor Curtin from numerous residents and non-residents of Gettysburg was drafted decrying Wills location. They believed that the situation and its escalation was a direct result of tenuous relations between Wills and McConaughy. Before Governor Curtin could react to Wills’ letter, or the one that had originated from Gettysburg, Wills had moved even further along with his plan for the new ground by drafting a circular letter to be sent to all state governors in the Union with dead at Gettysburg. Included in the circular was the following: Pennsylvania will buy the grounds, approximately 12 acres, identified dead will have numbered headstones keyed to a master list; unknown will get one stone and buried in a common grave, enclosed the whole cemetery with a stone wall, build a keepers house, landscape the grounds, each state would be assessed for expenses according to the population.
and representation in Congress, Pennsylvania would be responsible for the maintenance of the cemetery, and state agents would be appointed. The circular also contained plans for a ‘suitable monument’ as well as the suggestion by Wills that “the dead should be buried in ‘order of companies, regiments, division and Corps,’ without state partitions. This would make the cemetery a truly ‘national’ soldiers’ cemetery, and not a vision of state provincialism.” Wills did not find success with this new ground, nor everything that he had laid out in the circular. Despite these setbacks, Wills had demonstrated keen insight and had proposed some very interesting ideas about how the cemetery should be laid out and proper upkeep and maintenance established.

Many of the state agents working with Wills on this project did not agree about his idea of how the dead should be buried. Wills, in order to maintain support and cooperation from these agents and their respective states had to shelve his idea of a national cemetery where the men were buried indiscriminately of their state affiliation. Instead, the majority of the agents preferred and succeeded in an arrangement of the dead with separate state plots within a common enclosure. It is striking, that for two years of the war, the main war effort was to preserve the Union, to prevail against the notion that states were sovereign and could secede from the nation if they so wished. Even with the addition of the Emancipation Proclamation changing war aims, fighting for the Union still remained a primary war aim for large portions of the civilian North and those in the rank and file. Yet, despite this, northern states did not want a national cemetery where the slain of their state were buried indiscriminately. They wanted each of their own soldier’s sacrifice signified and made to stand out in well-marked individual state sections.

Wills also did not receive approval of the grounds he had purchased by local factions. On August 14, 1863, Governor Curtin received a letter from D.H. Buehler and Edward G. Fahnestock. These men had met with both Wills and McConaughy to see if a solution could be achieved and the original site of the cemetery procured. We “found that the main difficulty lay in the peculiar relations subsisting between them,” the letter noted. However, “Mr. Wills finally agreed to accept the more elegible [sic] site adjoining the Cemetery, if we could guaranty a full and unconditional title to the state.” These words ultimately reflected well on Wills, demonstrating that he was willing to compromise for the greater good. The settlement occurred with the Evergreen Cemetery Association offering the originally selected tracts of land to the state of Pennsylvania at no profit to the organization. The acreage was sold at cost to the state under the condition that the cemetery and ground had “an open railing enclosure of ordinary height” to separate the two cemeteries. Wills had been instrumental in the acquisition of the ground that became the cemetery. Despite several obstacles that stood in his way, he exhibited tireless efforts and energy in finding ground that could be purchased, drawing-up contracts, negotiating prices, working with local landowners, securing funds from the state, and keeping the governor informed. Like so many other aspects of this project, Wills had again demonstrated success and his ability to complete any task before him. With the grounds secured, Wills’ next move was to find and hire a landscape architect to design the layout of the cemetery. Wills selected one of the nation’s leading ones in the United States Department of Agriculture, William Saunders.

Clearly Wills’ original duties as an agent for Governor Curtin had both radically changed and expanded. The addition of an architect to design and layout the cemetery only underscored this
fact and highlighted the importance of Wills to the project. It is probable that few others associated with the project would have had the vision to not only seek the work and knowledge of an architect to design the cemetery layout, but also seek the best in the country. William Saunders, in his autobiography wrote of Wills’ contact and job offer. “About six weeks after the battle I received a letter from David Wills, of Gettysburg, acting as agent for Governor Curtin asking me to meet him at that place for the purpose of consulting upon the selection of a site and land for a cemetery to be used for the interment of soldiers who fell in that battle,” wrote Saunders. Through a mishap in the address and mailing of the invitation to Gettysburg, it was nearly another three weeks, nine since the battle, before Saunders arrived in Gettysburg to examine the ground. “When I reached there I found that Mr. Wills had purchased property. I was pleased with the site, but saw it was angular, and its front on the Baltimore Pike was only about 150 feet. I therefore told Mr. Wills to get more ground, extending the front line and straightening out other lines, which was speedily done, adding about 5 acres more to the cemetery and simplifying its outlines.”

Wills had to go back to the Evergreen Cemetery Association for the additional ground. This time, however, no tensions, lost time, or disagreements ensued, and work continued on schedule. Although something made this second transaction easier in acquiring more land, the historical record does not leave a clearer picture of how it unfolded. Speculation could reason that Wills and McConaughy had worked more cooperatively together, burying their tenuous relationship, or used an intermediary from the start. Wills’ vision and that of the other state agents was taking on real, tangible proportions. While work on the cemetery design proceeded Wills continued his labors as state agent. In late August, a suggestion made to Governor Curtin significantly increased his already heavy workload.

With the cessation of reburials and removal of the dead due to the health risk it posed to the community at large, Wills wrote Curtin towards the end of August on the topic of what to do while the moratorium on this action was in place. “[I]n the meantime the grounds should be artistically laid out, and consecrated by appropriate ceremonies,” Wills wrote. Although Wills had already begun the project to have the grounds “artistically laid out” by contacting Saunders, this was the first mention of a ceremony or consecration of the grounds. Two weeks later the governor wrote back to Wills on this topic, noting that if it was to be done it needed to be planned carefully. “The proper consecration of the grounds must claim our early attention; and, as soon as we can do so, our fellow purchasers should be invited to join with us in the performance of suitable ceremonies on the occasion.” Unlike many of the other aspects of this project in which Wills had solely endeavored and then reported back to the cemetery committee, state agents, and respective governors, per Curtin, this effort must include all of the “fellow purchasers” – meaning all the Northern states with troops at Gettysburg - in both the planning of and “the performance” of a consecration ceremony. As one historian noted, “Because the entire project had been planned and financed by the states, the dedication ceremony would naturally be controlled by, and emphasize their role.” Although a consecration ceremony had been decided upon, the details, which would be critical to its success, remained to be planned. Wills had to work more closely with those invested in the project for their approvals in answers to the aforementioned questions, but the onus to secure dignitaries and organize the ceremony was his. Once again, Governor Curtin demonstrated his utmost confidence in Wills to have the energy needed for this new task and the diplomacy it would take for its delicateness.
Wills’ first order of business was to secure the orator for the ceremony, which would have much to do with its success or failure. “I am therefore instructed, by the Governors of the different States interested in this project to invite you cordially to join with them in the ceremonies, and to deliver the oration for the occasion,” Wills wrote. The recipient was well-known orator, politician, and educator Edward Everett. The New England native accepted heartily, a coup for Wills and the committee, yet there was a catch; Everett could not accept the date of October 23 that had been suggested for the ceremony. Everett wrote that there was not nearly enough time for him to be able to research the events of the battle, place a deeper meaning on those events, write his oration, and memorize it to its fullest. Everett proposed a new date, November 19, 1863, readily accepted.

The new date for a consecration and dedication ceremony of the cemetery was set. Although Wills had successfully landed his main speaker, “The change in date from October 23 to November 19 necessitated another round of letters to the governors,” creating additional work for Wills. At the same time Wills worked through the details of the ceremony and the layout of its grounds, the task of removing and reburying the dead, which had been on hold for weeks, needed to resume.

Once again, David Wills accepted a new and challenging provision within his role as agent for Governor Curtin by securing an orator for the consecration ceremony. With the cooler weather, and the health threats reduced, the reburial of the dead could resume. Wills had to find someone to take on this large, grisly, and critically important task. By mid-October Wills had put out a call for bids to the surrounding communities for the work. All bids had to be received by October 22, 1863 to Wills, and, after receiving 34 bids for the job with costs that ranged from $1.59 per body to $8.00, Wills awarded the contract to the lowest bidder, Frederick W. Biesecker. With the contract in place, Wills instructed Biesecker to begin his work on Monday, October 26. At the same time, Wills also hired Samuel Weaver, onetime Gettysburg photographer, to oversee the exhumation and identification of the Union dead to work alongside Biesecker and his crew. What Weaver was doing professionally at the time of his hiring by Wills is hard to say. Weaver left his occupation blank on the official census form in 1860; however, in the November 1863 special census, his occupation was listed as “Daguerian” artist. Helping his son, Peter, also a photographer, record battlefield images and scenes following the engagement may have prompted Weaver to provide his former occupation title to the census data despite now being employed by Wills. Robert Harper, writer and editor for the Adams County Sentinel, reported on October 27, “This work is to begin immediately…the Cemetery grounds having been appropriately laid out for the purpose.” In Biesecker and Weaver’s work Wills was intimately involved.

Surely Wills’ daily schedule was filled to capacity when the next aspect of his position was added. Wills affirmed Curtin’s confidence in him by displaying an ability to balance both the burden of continuing to assist in the locating of Pennsylvania dead for families as well as supervising the design aspect of the Cemetery, the reburial of the dead, and the planning for the
consecration ceremony. Time devoted to his pregnant wife and children must have been little during this period. Now, at the end of each day, Wills reviewed all the work done by Biesecker and Weaver. “When Weaver identified a corpse, the name, company, and regiment of the soldier were written on the coffin. He then issued the coffin a number and recorded all of the information in his log, which was given to Wills each evening for review,” wrote historian Jeffrey Anderson.⁵⁰ In addition, “Items that were located with identifiable soldiers were sent to Wills….In all, Weaver sent David Wills two hundred and eighty-seven packages containing personal belongings of fallen soldiers, which Wills then returned to the families of the men,” yet another massive undertaking.⁵¹ With the size of the cemetery project grown exponentially from a necessary solution to one of ornate design, features, and money, and now a consecration ceremony that would draw national attention, Wills, who was overseeing the ceremony and procession thereof, needed some well placed help.

Yet another aspect to Wills’ seemingly endless workload was to plan the procession to the new cemetery before the official ceremonies. Wills needed someone with skills and abilities to not only orchestrate a potentially large procession, but also ensure the safety of both those in the procession and the thousands attending. He selected Ward H. Lamon, who was President Lincoln’s bodyguard and United States Marshal in the District of Columbia to serve as the procession’s marshal. This selection, according to one historian, was “a stroke of genius.”⁵² By bringing Lamon into the fold, however, Wills had to find additional time in his daily schedule to work with Lamon individually. Lamon “had orally assured Wills that President Lincoln would be glad to participate” in the procession or ceremony thereafter.⁵³ This was significant. Traditionally, in popular thinking, Wills’ invitation to President Lincoln to say “a few appropriate remarks” at the cemetery dedication was thought to be an afterthought. But scholarship on the invitation by Wills to Lincoln suggests that Lincoln had received an oral invitation from Governor Curtin and Wills’ invitation was a formal follow-up. Although the
historical record may never be settled, Wills’ selection of Lamon and Lamon’s assurances of Lincoln’s presence adds yet another layer to this story.

After four months of arduous labor as state agent and point person for Governor Curtin on the national cemetery project, November 19, the day of the new cemetery’s dedication, had arrived. In the two weeks that led to the ceremony Wills even got involved in coordinating transportation to and from Gettysburg, not only for dignitaries, but also the general public. Coordinating with numerous railroad companies, in the final hours of this project, Wills took on yet another layer to his responsibilities. His role as agent for Governor Curtin even took a personal aspect for himself and his family. In the days before the ceremony, Wills and his family were host to many political officials and dignitaries attending the procession and dedication. His guests included Edward Everett and President Abraham Lincoln. On November 19, 1863, “Wills marched with the state agents or commissioners like a mother hen watching over her flock….“54 After nearly an hour of seating guests on the speaker’s platform, “Wills supervised the comfort of the state agents” for the duration of the ceremony.55 Following the historic events and moments of the dedication ceremony, Wills, Everett and Lincoln returned to the Wills’ home. In the days following, many recognized not only the effort that Wills had put into this project but also its success. Robert Harper, editor of the Republican leaning Adams County Sentinel, said of the day, “a perfect success…systematic arrangements, the beautiful order which prevailed throughout the ceremonies,” and even the rival Democratic newspaper the Compiler also praised Wills.56

For many, the unfinished work ended with President Lincoln’s train leaving Gettysburg late on the evening of November 19 and the public praise of Wills. For David Wills though, acting as an agent for Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin, his work continued for two more years. On November 20, 1863, the day after the dedication ceremony, the reburial process resumed. By December, Wills wrote final letters to all the cooperating governors in the cemetery project. In it he proposed December 17, 1863 as a meeting date for the commissioners of new cemetery. He hoped that each of the eighteen states that had invested in the Soldiers’ National Cemetery would send representatives to the meeting set to take place at the Jones House in Harrisburg. The goal of this meeting was to devise ““a plan for the protection and preservation of the grounds near Gettysburg,” provide for expenses already incurred, complete the work already begun, and arrange for the proper adornment and care of the grounds.”57 On December 17, Wills traveled to Harrisburg to meet with twelve commissioners representing ten states. At the conclusion of the meeting, the representatives had organized the association, elected Wills as president, passed and adopted five resolutions, and had Wills appoint a five-member committee to find proposals “to procure designs of a monument to be erected in the cemetery.”58 Wills’ election as president of the association is yet another testament to his abilities.

By April of 1864, “Arrangements were then made for commencing the work of enclosing the grounds, and an Executive Committee was appointed, to whom was referred the details of the work.”59 Within eleven months, in March 1865, Wills reported further on the progress made by the cemetery committee as well as the physical progress within the cemetery itself. “The enclosure around the cemetery grounds in nearly completed….The division fence between the Soldiers’ National Cemetery and the local cemetery…is already put up complete. The front fence and gate way is…ready to put up…[and] [t]he gate lodge is also built,” reported Wills.60
month also witnessed the completion of preparation for the cemetery grounds of grading and planting to take place in the coming spring. Perhaps the most important work that Wills began as president that spring was to honor Lincoln’s promise “to never forget what they did here. “A contract has been entered into for putting up the headstones, and the work has been commenced,” Wills wrote. Despite the nonchalant way in which Wills reported the commencement of work on the headstones, it was in fact a significant achievement. Following the burial of each soldier, the dead received wooden stakes with numbers on them that corresponded to the list that Wills received and reviewed daily from Biesecker and Weaver. Confirming the details contained on those rolls, having the stones laid, and that information chiseled on to them was a monumental undertaking itself.

Concurrently to this work and progress, Wills and the cemetery association board met again in June 1864 to deliberate on the numerous proposals submitted for what became the Soldiers’ National Monument. “After mature deliberation,” Wills wrote, “the board adopted the design proposed by J.G. Batterson, of Hartford, Connecticut….The board has not yet entered into a contract for the construction of this monument, but expect to do so during this year.” One year later, Wills had organized yet another historic event to take place in the Soldiers’ National Cemetery, the laying of the cornerstone to the centerpiece monument. On July 4, 1865 the cornerstone for the Soldiers’ National Monument was laid in a position looking out over the more than 3,000 Union dead who now lay in the Soldiers’ National Cemetery. As the events of that day took place, one historian wrote, Wills knew “that his two-year responsibility as Curtin’s agent was about at an end.”

As president of the cemetery association, David Wills oversaw the creation of the Soldiers’ National Monument, focal point to the artistic design and layout of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery, dedicated in 1869. (NARA)
What had started as a position to honor the dead from the battle of Gettysburg from the state of Pennsylvania had developed into a national project of lasting significance, and that it did so had a great deal to do with Wills energy and vision. Little could David Wills have imagined that with one visit from Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin to the small town following the climactic engagement that many aspects of his life would be put on hold to act as an agent for the governor for the next two years. Wills took on vast quantities of responsibilities and work when identifying and returning home dead Pennsylvania soldiers was not enough to honor those that had given their “last full measure of devotion.” He helped usher in a formal way of honoring America’s war dead, even while that war still raged without an end in sight. Further cementing his place in history, it was Wills who extended a formal invitation to President Lincoln to attend the ceremony that was in place to dedicate the cemetery, setting the stage for the now immortal Gettysburg Address. But it was his ability to provide unifying energy and an administrative competence that oversaw the design of the cemetery, the reburial of the dead, and the planning of the dedication ceremony and procession that was his lasting work. So too was the relief he brought the Pennsylvania families whose family members had been killed or wounded at Gettysburg. In 1929, Franklin Menges spoke in front of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives about what Wills had accomplished at Gettysburg. “Had it not been for two men, possibly one, the immortal Gettysburg address of Abraham Lincoln…might never have been written or delivered,” noted Menges. “Two men are mainly responsible for it. One is David Wills, a lawyer and judge of Gettysburg….” Yet, despite the immense amount of physical labor and work that Wills had accomplished, and the tangible results felt and seen since November 19, 1863, Wills never wrote why he had accepted this position by Curtin and what the work had meant to him. Perhaps it is his words, written in a supplemental report to the Committee of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that truly reveal the man who had made his mark on Gettysburg:

“These men came here from the east and from the west, stood side by side, and fought and fell in one common cause and for one common country, irrespective of State organizations or geographical lines, and their dust is now in common, mouldering together on this National Battle Field. Their names and the record of their deeds, will make one of the brightest pages of the history of this great struggle; and they are worthy of all being written in letters of gold.”

Endnotes:

2 Gettysburg Compiler (Gettysburg, PA), July 1863, Copy in Gettysburg National Military Park Library, V10-4 Establishment of the National Cemetery. This article originally appeared in the Philadelphia Age and was later reprinted by in whole by the Gettysburg Compiler.
3 David Wills to Governor Andrew Curtin, July 24, 1863, Letter, Copy in Gettysburg National Military Park, V10-5 David Wills Correspondence.
4 Robert E. Nale and Jean A. Suloff, eds., The 36th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteer Militia: July and August 1863, Copy in Gettysburg National Military Park Library, V6-PA36 MIL.
5 Nale and Suloff, The 36th Regiment.


Frank L. Klement, The Gettysburg Soldiers’ Cemetery and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address: Aspects and Angels (Shippensburg: White Mane Publishing, 1993), p. 4. The Whig Party existed from the 1830s-1850s and had originally formed as opposition to the Democratic Party and the policies of President Andrew Jackson. The main ideologies of the party included Congressional superiority over the Presidency, modernization, and economic protection. The party had four of its members elected to the White House during this time. Under the mounting strain and pressure of the slavery question, the party fractured. Many former Whigs, including Abraham Lincoln, joined the new party that rose from the ashes of the Whigs, the Republican Party.


Busey and Martin, Regimental Strengths and Losses, p. 275.

David Wills to Dr. King, July 24, 1863, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.


Harrisburg Daily Telegraph (Harrisburg, PA), July 20, 1863


Coco, A Vast Sea of Misery, p. 34.


Georg, “‘This Grand National Enterprise,’” p. 4.

Campbell, “‘A Field Made Glorious,’” p. 23.

Klement, The Gettysburg Soldiers’ Cemetery, p.5.

The 19th New York Infantry was later converted to the 3rd Regiment New York Light Artillery on December 11, 1862.


Dimon, From Auburn to Antietam.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

David McConaughy to Governor Andrew Curtin, July 25, 1863, Letter, Copy in Gettysburg National Military Park Library, V10-4 Establishment of the National Cemetery.

Campbell, “‘A Field Made Glorious,’” p. 24.
The story and relationship between David Wills and David McConaughy is far deeper and longer than this cursory examination. Additionally, the dispute over the selected ground for the cemetery project is far more substantial in depth than constraints on this examination will allow. Further study is suggested for interested readers.

Georg, “This Grand National Enterprise,” p. 27.


Campbell, “A Field Made Glorious,” p. 27.

Wills, Revised Report, pp. 11-12.

Ibid.