

Some Hanover Area History

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Legend of girl reporter debunked

Questions raised about Mary Shaw Leader and Gettysburg Address.

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Mary Shaw Leader known by Civil War and journalism historians as one of the first female war correspondents and one of the few reporters to recognize the importance of the Gettysburg Address may have done nothing more remarkable than copy a story from another newspaper.

The Leader legend

The legend goes that Leader walked 15 miles from Hanover to Gettysburg to attend the dedication of the Gettysburg battlefield cemetery. She then faithfully wrote down Lincoln's words so they could be printed in her family's weekly newspaper, *The Hanover Spectator*.

Adding to the mystique is a gravestone memorial erected to Leader in 1941 in Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Hanover, which reads: "Pioneer newspaper woman, her firsthand report of Lincoln's Gettysburg address bore witness to its greatness. In her account for the *Hanover Spectator* she garnered Lincoln's words from his own lips."

Another bit of the story is the comment that the 28-year-old woman recognized the importance of the speech by reportedly calling it "remarkable," as noted in a Feb. 15, 1927, column in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

The evidence speaks

The *Spectator's* story about Lincoln's speech has no byline and did not appear until Nov. 27, 1863, almost a

week after the dedication of the cemetery, which took place on Nov. 19, 1863.

After the introduction, the article goes on to say "taken from the *Phila. Inquirer*:-" This is followed by an account of the ceremonies, including the word-for-word record of Lincoln's speech.

The Nov. 20, 1863, *Inquirer's* story on the celebration is exactly the same as the Hanover newspaper's account attributed to the Philadelphia newspaper, and is also minus a byline, other than "Special Despatch to the *Inquirer*."

The possibility exists that Leader reported on the ceremonies in Gettysburg then transmitted her story to the *Inquirer*. This is contradicted by a Nov. 21, 1863, story in the Philadelphia newspaper.

"Detention met the passenger at every [train] station, and the correspondents of *The Inquirer* who left the city [Philadelphia] at eight o'clock on Tuesday morning, reached Gettysburg at ten in the evening."

The statement is a clear indication that the newspaper had sent its own reporters to hear the dedication first hand. Leader may have been one of these reporters, however that seems unlikely.

The only section of the Nov. 21, 1863, article that could be most easily attributed to Leader is the account of Lincoln's stop in Hanover, where he was delayed to allow an eastbound train to pass.

The president came out and made a few remarks before journeying to Gettysburg. These words, in part and in total, appear in both newspapers.

The writer of the Philadelphia version of the story had to have heard it secondhand since "the correspondents" arrived in Gettysburg a day before the



Monument to Mary Shaw Leader erected in 1941 at Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Hanover.

president. Or the information was provided directly to the newspaper by a reporter other than those who were charged with covering the speech.

This reporter could have been Leader.

Remarkable or not?

Another part of the Leader legend is that she described Lincoln's speech as "remarkable." That word appears neither in the article reporting on the speech nor in any local commentary from that day's paper or subsequent editions of *The Spectator*. Perhaps, Leader wrote those words to a friend or colleague, or perhaps

they were noted in a diary. If so, no record has been found.

In the beginning ...

So how did the Mary Shaw Leader legend get started?

On Feb. 15, 1927, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* editorial page column, Girard's Talk of the Day, referred to Leader's story. The columnist wrote that he had a copy of the paper in which Lincoln's famous speech was chronicled. It would seem that he did not notice the attribution to the *Inquirer*.

Girard credits George R. Prowell, a York County historian, with pointing out the woman's accomplishment as well as providing a copy of the newspaper.

In the column, Girard reported that Leader told Prowell that "She was present next day (Thursday) at the historic gathering and had a place close to the President."

Later in the column, Girard noted that Leader wrote: "Then our great President began to deliver a remarkable speech. After his speech Mr. Lincoln sat down amid a scene of much enthusiasm."

If Leader wrote this, it did not appear in *The Hanover Spectator*.

According to reports on the dedication of a memorial to Leader from Encounter at Hanover: Prelude to Gettysburg, "Most newspapermen at the Battlefield cemetery dedication ... gave their space to the nearly two-hour flowery oration of principal speaker Edward Everett, and neglected or overlooked the President's words—but not Mary Leader. She brought back to the little Hanover weekly newspaper the President's full three-minute text and printed it all, acclaiming it was a 'remarkable speech'."

During the ceremonies to honor Leader with the gravestone monument, William Anthony sat on the platform of honor as the man "who conceived the plan of honoring Mary Leader," as reported in *The (Hanover) Evening Sun* on Nov. 17, 1941.

Anthony had been an apprentice at the *Hanover Spectator* from 1886 to 1891. The article stated that he "has never forgotten the courteous treatment and kindnesses bestowed upon him by Mary Leader."

Another former apprentice of *The Spectator* Baxter B. Chenoweth of Taney-

town, Md., was also present at the ceremony. Obviously both men agreed with the account that Leader reported on the speech, although neither was working at the newspaper at the time of the incident.

Even during the ceremony more discrepancies come to light, particularly, in a speech by Dr. Robert Fortenbaugh, a professor of history at Gettysburg College.

The (Hanover) Evening Sun reported that he said Leader's famous story appeared in the Wednesday, Nov. 25 edition of the newspaper. *The Hanover Spectator* was published on Fridays.

Further, no mention of Leader's accomplishments in reference to Lincoln's speech were included her obituary from

"There is one case after another that what we have long believed may or may not be so."

Dr. Charles Glatfelter

the *Hanover Herald* on July 5, 1913.

"Miss Leader was of a kind and obliging disposition, being ever willing and anxious to render all assistance possible to those in need, or in distress, and has many friends who lament her demise."

This obituary also lists Leader as Mary Sophia, not Mary Shaw.

The family speaks

The late Delores Fuhrman Feeser, formerly of Hanover, who was related to the Leaders through an illegitimate child allegedly fathered by Mary's brother William H. Leader, said during an interview in the late 1990s that the Fuhrman family had artifacts from Leader, such as photographs and a pocket watch. There were family stories too, including Leader's reporting of the Gettysburg Address and her 15-mile walk to the Adams County town.

Feeser added that family stories say that Leader was an intelligent woman, who was publisher of *The Hanover Spectator*.

From the documentation within the newspaper, Leader's position is uncertain.

Her father, Senary Leader, founded *The Spectator*, a Whig and then later Re-

publican paper, on Oct. 6, 1844. He came to Hanover via Baltimore to take over operation of a newspaper that had formerly been known as the *Democrat*. Senary Leader died in 1858.

At that time, his wife, Maria Jennings Leader, took over as publisher of the paper as reported in her obituary (*Hanover Citizen* on Feb. 11, 1875).

Maria Leader advertised the paper for sale into 1861, which was removed by late 1861.

The listing of an M. Leader as publisher remained on the paper until Jan. 9, 1890, when F.M. Baughman (Mary Leader's brother-in-law) and W.H. Leader (Mary's brother) were listed as publishers.

Say it ain't so

Regardless of Mary Leader's position with the paper, there is no evidence to suggest she did not work there, nor is there evidence she did not go to hear Lincoln speak on Nov. 19, 1863.

However the newspapers of the time do not definitively prove that Leader wrote the Hanover article about the Gettysburg Address, nor that she was one of the few to recognize its greatness.

The discounting of historical stories by historical fact happens "all too often," said Dr. Charles Glatfelter, former president of the Adams County Historical Society and professor of history at Gettysburg College, in an 1996 interview about Leader and her legend.

"There is one case after another that what we have long believed may or may not be so."

For John McGrew, a Hanover area historian, who was interviewed in the same year, "it's what's in black and white at that time that counts."

Both men speculated that a variety of forces could have shaped the Mary (Sophia) Shaw Leader story, but could not pinpoint just one theory.

Feeser said when she first heard about the discrepancies that she would hold out hope that something would prove Mary Shaw Leader was the reporter who trudged 15 miles to Gettysburg to chronicle Lincoln's great speech.

She said that it's something she has always believed, and she is not willing to let that belief go easily.