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JACK TAR AND ABE LINCOLN: HOW THE SAILORS VOTED IN '64

Voting in the field was a hot issue in Lincoln's day, and it has troubled historians ever since. As early as 1861, President Lincoln heard with favor General Benjamin F. Butler's proposal to recruit Massachusetts troops personally. What made the proposal attractive was the hope that this Democratic general could attract Democratic citizens who would otherwise stay home and vote against the Republicans. In 1862 David Davis worried that Republican Leonard Swett would lose the race in Lincoln's old congressional district in Illinois because loyal voters were in the ranks and away from home, leaving only the disloyal to vote the Republicans out. By 1864 most states had solved the problem by allowing soldiers to vote in the field. This did not solve the historian and political analyst's problem, however. Questions about the fairness of that voting remain. Was the Army overwhelmingly exposed to the blandishments of pro-administration newspapers and propaganda? Did the politics of the commanding officers prevent a free and fair election in their units?

These questions remain largely unanswered, and, in the arguments over them, one body of voters has been overlooked altogether: the men who voted, not in the field, but on the decks of the ships of the United States Navy. At first blush, it seems that these might safely be lumped with the soldiers; whatever historical and political factors explain the one should explain the other. A closer look at the correspondence of the harried politicians who struggled for Lincoln's reelection in 1864 shows that soldiers and sailors were, at least as voters, very different groups of men.

Although historians have largely forgotten the sailors' votes, politicians at the time did not. Thurlow Weed, "The Dictator" of New York Republican politics, became "so anxious about the Navy Vote" that on October 10, 1864, he wrote President Lincoln about the problem. And the sailors' votes did pose a special problem: how could an agent distribute ballots to men at sea without a seagoing vessel by which to reach them? They could not, and such vessels were not easy to come by for civilian purposes in wartime. In New

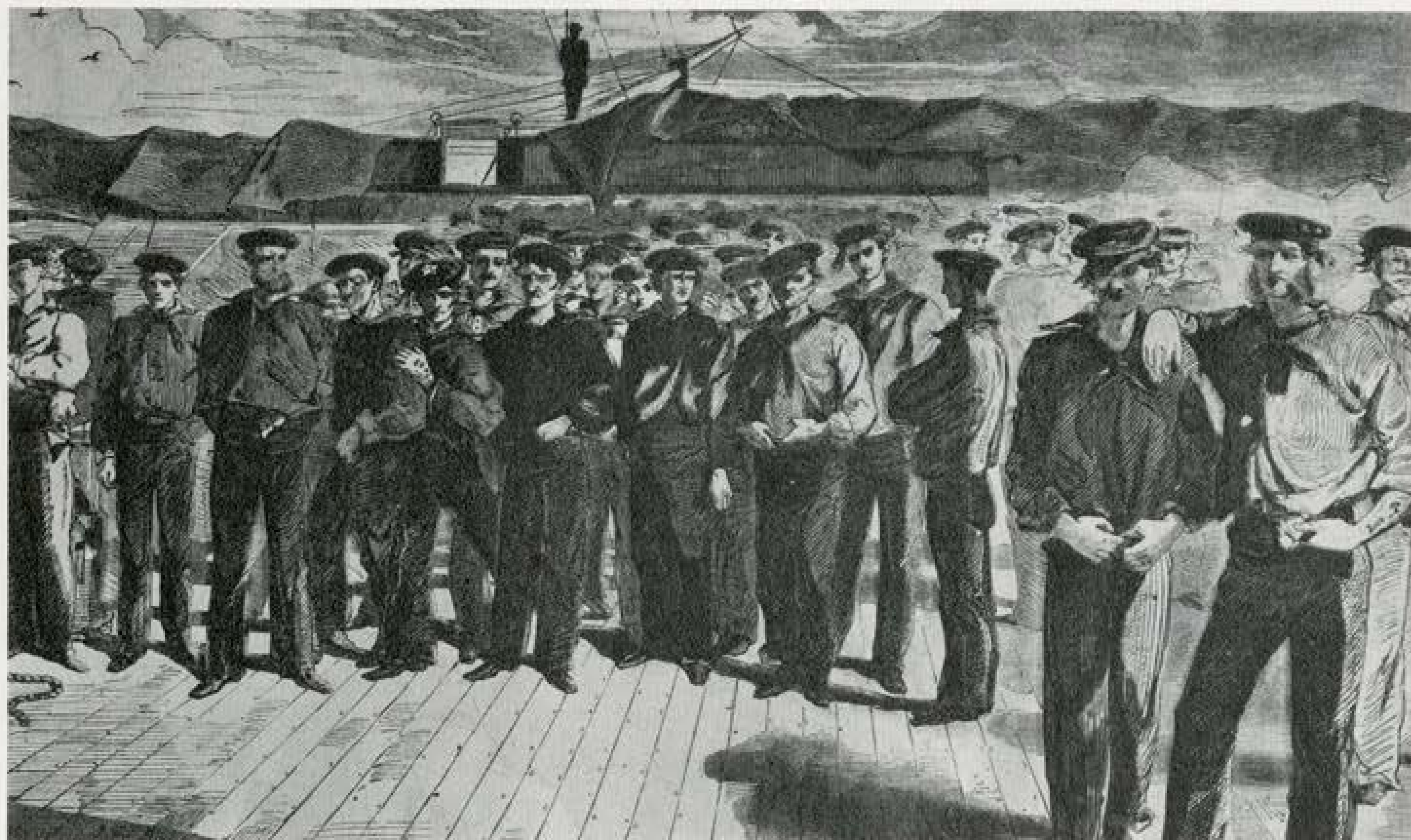

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FIGURE 1. These men were potential voters — but for whom?

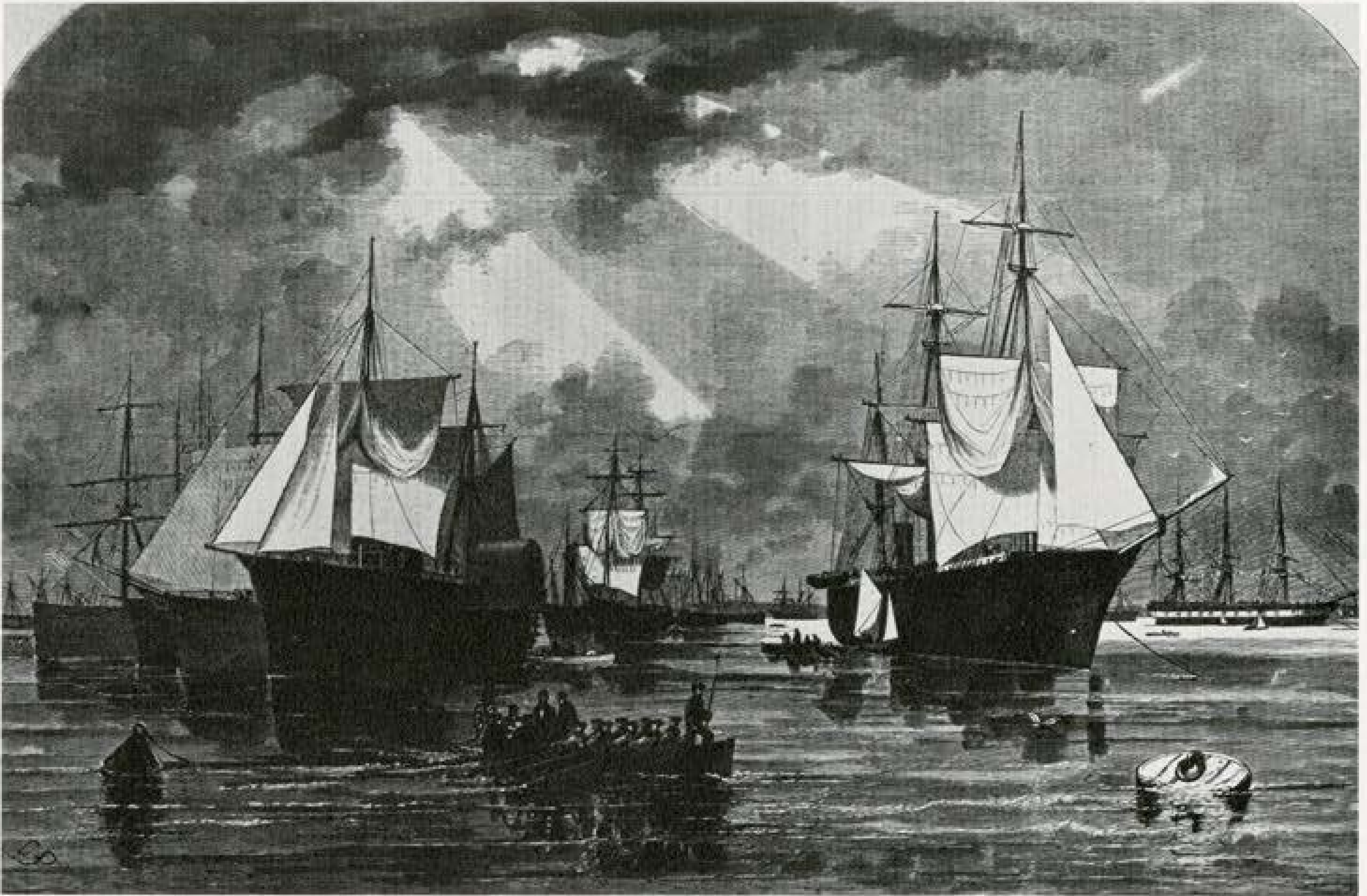

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FIGURE 2. The ship that carried Weed's agent to the blockading squadron, the *Circassian*, is on the reader's right.

York City, Simeon Draper, Collector of the Port of New York and head of the enormous patronage-dispensing New York Custom House, wrote George Harrington, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, "for a steamer (Revenue cutter) to go to the Blockading Squadron." Harrington apparently failed to understand the important political purpose of the mission and failed at first to lend the cutter. Weed, however, telegraphed Harrington and was confident of a "a favorable answer."

Like all good political managers, "The Dictator" was inexhaustible in his efforts to seek out potential voters. While he worked on getting a revenue cutter to visit the blockading squadron, he also fretted about "the vote of the Sailors on the Mississippi" River. Weed wrote Frederick Seward, Secretary of State William H. Seward's son and his Assistant Secretary of State, "asking him to obtain a Government Steamer . . . to go from Cairo [Illinois] down the River to the different Gun Boats." If he succeeded in obtaining the necessary vessels, Weed promised President Lincoln, "we shall save many thousand Votes."

Weed's letter got immediate results. On October 11, 1864, Lincoln and Secretary of State Seward called on crusty Gideon Welles, the Secretary of the Navy. Welles accommodated the President's request, but, as his diary entry for that day shows, the Navy Secretary distrusted anything which bore the stamp of approval of William H. Seward and his crafty manager Thurlow Weed:

> The President and Seward called on me . . . relative to New York voters in the Navy. Wanted one of our boats to be placed at the disposal of the New York commission to gather votes in the Mississippi Squadron. A Mr. Jones was referred to, who subsequently came to me with a line from the President, and wanted also to send to the blockading squadrons. Gave permission to go by the Circassian, and directed commanders to extend facilities to all voters.
>
> Much is said and done in regard to the soldier's vote, and many of the States not only have passed laws but altered their constitutions to permit it. The subject is one that has not struck me favorably. I have not perhaps given the subject the consideration that I ought — certainly not enough to advocate it, and yet it seems ungracious to oppose it. Were I to vote on this question at all, I should, with my present impressions, vote against it.

The administration and the New York Republicans acted quickly, but not quickly enough. On October 21, one J. Springsteed wrote Weed from Cairo that he had arrived on Tuesday, but "There was no Boat to be had without waiting until they Could repair [the] dispatch Gun Boat *Volunteer* which would take till Friday or Saturday." Springsteed was "waiting patiently," but he feared "failure for the reason that [Democratic incumbent] Gov. Seymours agents were here some ten days ago Collecting the Votes here and then went on a Gun Boat for New Orleans Stopping all Boats they will meet." Weed's agent did what he could while marooned at Cairo. There and seven miles away at Mound City were six boats. On the *Great Western*, he found "about 30 from our State of which they [the Democrats] got all but Seven which I got." On the other five vessels, he reported gloomily, "we did not get a vote." The only redeeming feature was that few of the river sailors were from New York. Springsteed tried the twelve marines stationed at Cairo and got only one vote to the opponents' eleven.

Springsteed reported that the Democratic agents procured "a great many votes by Saying it is there only Chance." Apparently the agents told the sailors that no Republican agents were coming. He also found "a great dissatisfaction among the men that they are not paid." He had very little hope for favorable results from the rest of the vessels in the squadron of fifty boats.

News from the blockading squadron was little better. The excitable Weed scrawled a letter to President Lincoln, saying that the "Adversary is making the Canvass sanguinary." The political battle seemed desperate, and news from a Major Richardson, dispatched to get the votes from the blockading squadron, was bad. The major had written Weed from

Beaufort, North Carolina, to tell him he found "most of the Sailors against us." The explanation was simple: "They are largely Irish."

The dependence of the United States Navy on foreign-born seamen had long troubled naval reformers and Secretaries of the Navy. As early as 1825, Samuel Southard, Secretary of the Navy under President John Quincy Adams, had recommended excluding even naturalized immigrants from the service. In 1837 Congress sought a solution by passing a bill to recruit naval apprentices, eighteen years of age, who, they hoped, would be native Americans. Recruited mostly from the large cities on the coast which had a seafaring tradition, the apprentices themselves were frequently of foreign birth or parentage. In 1864 the ethnic composition of the United States Navy was a political problem for the Republican administration. Irish-Americans were consistently Democratic voters.

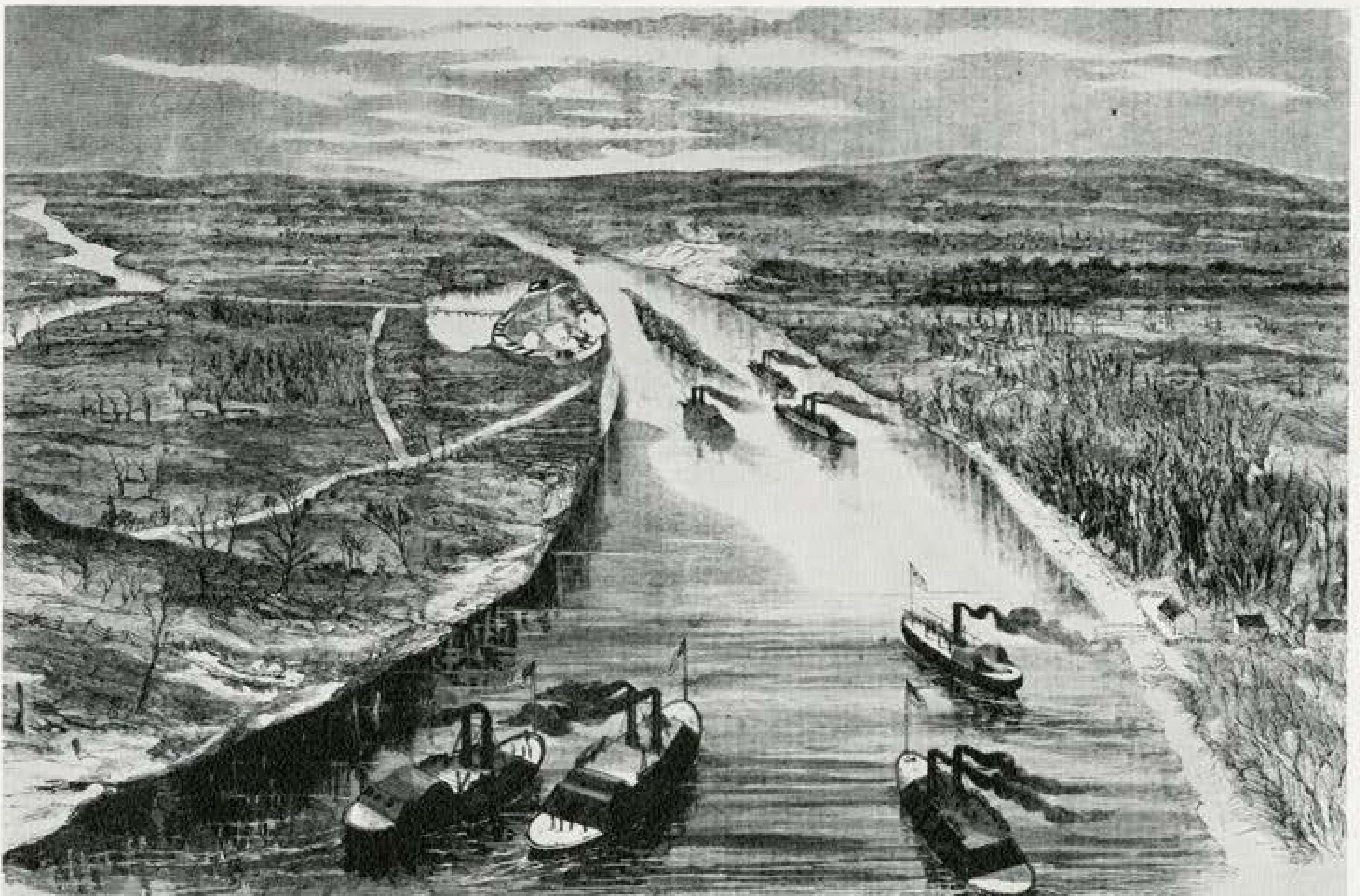
Thurlow Weed reported another problem to the President: "Another Agent writes to the State Committee that Admiral Lee is against us." Samuel Phillips Lee was an acting rear admiral, well connected in the Lincoln administration. He was Postmaster General Montgomery Blair's brother-in-law. He had fought at New Orleans in 1862, which gained him promotion to command the North Atlantic blockading squadron off Virginia and North Carolina. There he was most successful in capturing blockade-runners, but Gideon Welles thought his "caution runs into timidity." Lee was no man to command a fleet to attack Wilmington, North Carolina; he was "destitute of heroic daring." Therefore, Welles transferred Lee to the Mississippi River. The Blair family's origins were Democratic, and this Virginia-born brother-in-law was evidently a Democrat and not at all helpful to the Republican agents who came to distribute ballots to the river gunboats.

Just before the election, Weed conferred with Major Richardson, who had returned from his expedition "to collect Sailors votes" from the blockading squadron. Though "a most thorough man," Major Richardson was not successful. "The Sailors are nearly all against us," Weed told the President. "The Officers generally were right," although "the Commander of one of the finest Vessels was hostile and abusive." The sailors opposed the administration, Weed reported, "for a simple but potent reason — *their Grog has been stop [ped]!*"

On September 1, 1862, the United States Navy stopped issuing the "spirit ration," long a target of temperance reformers and naval reformers. War and a moralistic Republican administration seem finally to have tipped the scale in the reformers' favor. Hard-drinking and tradition-bound seamen apparently detested the move. At the time of the American Revolution, sailors went to the revolutionary cause in overwhelming numbers because of the practice of British custom commissioners who inspected their personal sea chests for goods on which a duty was owed. Traditionally, these trunks had been exempt from such inspections; in fact sailors regarded their personal sea chests as sacred. They were also notorious for liking their grog, and the end of the spirit ration probably earned the administration the common sailors' undying hatred. Disrupting traditions of the sea was dangerous business.

Weed reported that Major Richardson "secured only about 500 Votes," a disappointing figure for the state of New York, which contained the nation's most important port and probably supplied an enormous percentage of the Union's sailors. The only silver lining to be found in this gloomy political cloud was that "the Adversary did not move in that direction." Though Governor Seymour was apparently diligent about the river fleet, the Democrats largely forgot the blockading squadron. The problem was probably not lack of cooperation with the Democrats by the Navy Department. Gideon Welles prided himself on keeping the Navy above partisanship.

President Lincoln, of course, was most grateful for the large role the Navy played in bringing Union victory in the Civil War. When he was invited to attend the National Sailors' Fair to be held in Boston right after the election, Lincoln wrote a



From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 3. A Union river gunboat fleet meanders up a Southern waterway.

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 4. Thurlow Weed's behavior during the Civil War seemed thoroughly out of character. In the past he had been largely indifferent to policy, but he became so upset at Lincoln's policies that he nearly broke with the administration.

gracious note in *lieu* of attending. He wrote the note, ironically, *on election day*:

> Allow me to wish you a great success. With the old fame of the Navy, made brighter in the present war, you can not fail. I name none, lest I wrong others by omission. To all, from Rear Admiral, to honest Jack I tender the Nation's admiration and gratitude [.]

Lincoln was sincerely grateful for the sailors' services in the war, but politically he could have done without them. Jack Tar was a Democrat.

LINCOLN AUTOGRAPHED *DEBATES*: THE ARCHIBALD WILLIAMS COPY

This is the seventh article in a series on the signed presentation copies of the *Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas in the Celebrated Campaign of 1858, in Illinois*. The copy bearing the inscription, "To Hon: Archibald Williams, with respects of A. Lincoln," was the property of Kenneth K. Bechtel of San Francisco when Harry E. Pratt wrote "Lincoln Autographed Debates" for *Manuscripts* in 1954. It is now the property of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. The library was unable to describe the book's history since Mr. Bechtel's ownership.

Archibald Williams was born in Kentucky in 1801. He came to Quincy, Illinois, in 1829. There he established a successful law practice. Quincy lay in what was called the Military Tract, the land between the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers most of which had been granted as bounties to soldiers in the War of 1812. Most of the veterans were forced to sell their claims to Eastern land speculators. Some lost them in tax sales, not realizing their liability to pay taxes on the claims. Questions of priority of owership and clarity of title racked the Military Tract, and it became a paradise for lawyers (who could get good fees from the well-heeled speculators and their agents). Williams was soon noted for his abilities as a lawyer in land disputes.

Williams became acquainted with Lincoln when both men served in the Illinois Legislature at Vandalia in the 1830s. The Quincy Whig served in the Illinois Senate from 1832-1836 and in the Illinois House from 1836-1840. Usher F. Linder remembered Lincoln and Williams sitting near each other in the southeast corner of the old State House in Vandalia; they were "great friends," he said. Legal work also brought the two men together. Lincoln was associated with Williams in several cases and apparently took some of the Quincy lawyer's cases on appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court in Springfield.

Both former Kentuckians were Henry Clay Whigs. In 1848, when Lincoln dropped Clay for Zachary Taylor and some hope of winning, Williams was apparently slow to switch his loyalties. Lincoln told him flatly, "Mr. Clay's chance for an election, is just no chance at all." Both Williams and Lincoln were friends of Orville Hickman Browning, another Quincy lawyer and active Whig politician. "I know our good friend Browning," Lincoln told Williams, "is a great admirer of Mr. Clay, and I therefore fear, he is favoring his nomination." Lincoln instructed Williams to ask Browning "to discard feeling, and try if he can possibly, as a matter of judgment, count the votes necessary to elect him." Williams evidently jumped on the Taylor bandwagon, for, after the election, Lincoln wrote a letter recommending his appointment as U.S. District Attorney (Lincoln did not like the idea of rewarding holdouts for Clay's nomination with appointive offices). Williams gained the appointment and held office until the Democrats took over the Presidency in 1853. In 1852 he joined with Lincoln in organizing a meeting to express sympathy for Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth.

In 1854 Williams joined the many Illinois Whigs who denounced the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He ran for Congress, but, even with Lincoln's help (he came to Quincy to make a speech in Williams's behalf), he lost. Williams evidently had designs on the United States Senate seat to be filled by the state legislature in 1855. Lincoln wanted the seat too, but he explained to a legislator apparently pledged to Williams: "Of course I prefer myself to all others; yet it is neither in my heart nor my conscience to say I am any better man than Mr. Williams." Despite their competing ambitions, Lincoln and Williams were evidently in substantial agreement on political principles in this tumultuous period of confusing politics. Lincoln told one supporter in 1855 that a set of resolutions Williams had drawn up fairly accurately described the ground on which he would be willing to "fuse" with other anti-Nebraska groups. Three years later Williams was once again mentioned as a competitor for the Senate seat Lincoln sought in his historic campaign against Stephen A. Douglas.

Ambition for office did not drive the two men apart. The copy of the *Debates* which Lincoln gave Williams is some evidence of this (Lincoln also gave Williams's law partner Jackson Grimshaw a signed copy). Even more important was President Lincoln's appointment of Williams as U.S. District Judge in Kansas.

Usher Linder remembered Williams as a man "over six feet high, and as angular and ungainly in his form as Mr. Lincoln himself; and for homeliness of face and feature, surpassed Mr. Lincoln." Linder also recalled that Lincoln thought highly of Williams as "the strongest-minded and clearest headed man he ever saw." Linder, who knew both men in the legislature, was a Universalist in religion and thought everyone would go to heaven. If he was correct in his "views of the mercies of God," Linder said long after his old friend Archie Williams was dead, "he is now walking the golden streets with Douglas and Lincoln."