

Major William Williams at Iowa Lake in 1862*

Marshall McKusick

William Williams was a vigorous man of sixty-four years at the time he commanded the Northern Border Brigade company at Iowa Lake. A unique series of ten unpublished letters to his family and friends describe the hardships, frustrations, and difficulties at the fort during the fall and winter of 1862. These letters are among the correspondence, an early diary, and plans of the fort which are part of the Atwell Collection of Williams' papers in the custody of the Iowa State Historical Department, Historical Museum and Archives Division. This account of the Iowa Lake period of Williams' life is part of a broader examination of the Iowa Northern Border Brigade, which will appear as a book issued by the Office of State Archaeologist, Iowa City.

WILLIAMS WAS BORN IN PENNSYLVANIA in 1798 and received military training in the Pennsylvania militia, holding the rank of major. Arriving in Iowa in 1850, Williams became the sutler (an army term for storekeeper) for the U.S. Army garrison at Fort Clark, where he was known as Major Williams, from his former militia commission. Fort Clark, renamed Fort Dodge, was abandoned in 1852. Williams, who stayed on after the troops had left, knew that the fort had been built on state rather than federal land, and he quietly left for Des Moines to purchase it cheaply from the state. He then encouraged settlement, and Fort Dodge

*I wish to thank Lida Greene, State Librarian, and Jack W. Musgrove, Director of the State Historical Department, Historical Museum and Archives Division for their help in working with the Williams' papers. I wish also to thank Susan Atwell of Fort Dodge for permission to use material pertaining to Williams.

grew into an important frontier settlement in the 1850s, became the county seat, and after the Civil War a railroad and mining center.¹

Williams organized and led a relief expedition from Fort Dodge in the aftermath of the Spirit Lake Massacre of 1857. He was the only experienced officer in the area and was widely respected by the residents of Fort Dodge. They elected him captain of the Webster Guards, which became Company B of the Northern Border Brigade. He was a formidable and outspoken man, vigorous despite



Courtesy of the author
William Williams

his age, which was almost twice that of the other brigade officers of the line. His pay and allowances amounted to \$152.50 a month. He served three months, promptly leaving when the fort at Iowa Lake was completed. He probably drew \$450 for this period, minus his expenses. Privates during this period drew about one fourth this much.²

In 1862, Indian uprisings along Iowa's northern border, and a Copperhead (Confederate sympathizers) rebellion in the southern section of the state, precipitated legislative action creating two state forces, or brigades, charged with maintaining order along the borders. The Southern Border Brigade was formed to quell the Copperheads while a northern frontier force was authorized to patrol and fortify the northwest. Governor Samuel Kirkwood dispatched a volunteer assistant, Schuyler Ingham, to muster troops in northern Iowa. He raised five companies—a total of 250 mounted men—known as the Northern Border Brigade.

The northern border trouble stemmed from problems with the Santee Sioux. The Santee Sioux, restricted by treaty to a reserva-

¹This period of Williams' life is described in his papers edited by Edward Breen, *The History of Early Fort Dodge and Webster County* (Fort Dodge: Walterick Printing, 1950).

²Williams' expedition of 1857 is described by Thomas Teakle in *The Spirit Lake Massacre*, State Historical Society (Iowa City 1918). The pay scale is from William Ingham's Company A book, Historical Museum and Archives Division.

tion in southwest Minnesota, were in debt to traders and had not received their overdue annuities to buy supplies. Hungry, frustrated, and angry, a group of them began plundering supplies on the reservation, driving off or killing the whites. Under the leadership of Chief Little Crow, the revolt spread as more Santee joined the uprising. Within a few days, the Indians were murdering settlers and raiding isolated settlements over a wide area. The Minnesota western frontier was in chaos, with several hundred killed and thousands of whites fleeing to safety in the larger towns. The revolt began August 16, and within a few days the main Indian force repeatedly attacked Fort Ridgely, but were driven off. The Santee then surrounded the town of New Ulm and during the fighting most of the houses were burned. When the Indians finally left, the town was a shambles and the volunteer militia evacuated to a place of greater safety.

By late August, word of the Indian uprising reached the isolated Iowa settlements, and tales of Indian atrocities brought on a frontier panic. Believing an Indian invasion to be imminent, the settlers abandoned much of northwest Iowa. Hundreds of families camped around the town of Fort Dodge. Further west, a continual stream of wagons moved south through Sioux City with frightened refugees from Nebraska Territory, Dakota Territory, and northern Iowa. In Sioux City itself many of the residents packed their belongings, ready to flee should the Indians appear.

The Northern Border Brigade defense followed the main road through thinly settled counties. This road began at Blue Earth, Minnesota, and crossed the state line at Iowa Lake. It then ran westward to the Little Sioux River and diagonally to Sioux City. The only frontier force in Iowa at the time of the Indian uprising was the Sioux City Cavalry, a ninety-man company finally mustered into federal service as part of the Iowa Sixth Cavalry. The Sioux City troops were stationed in small detachments at settlements along the road all the way north to Spirit Lake. The Northern Border Brigade was in state rather than federal service; the troops were supplied and paid out of state funds, and were administered through the Iowa Adjutant General. Schuyler Ingham placed the Border Brigade at settlements along the entire road, to supplement the Sioux City Cavalry at Spirit Lake and Sioux City.

The Minnesota garrisons mustered during the uprising developed a patrol line south to Fairmont. Ingham stationed Major

William Williams at Iowa Lake with orders to build a fort and extend the patrol line from the Fairmont garrison of Wisconsin Troops to Iowa Lake, and west to join patrols from Estherville. Elsewhere along the road, other Border Brigade companies continued the patrol line. The Brigade built a fort at Estherville, which covered the road west to the Sioux City Cavalry stationed at the palisaded brick courthouse at Spirit Lake. Other Border Brigade forts were built along the road at Peterson, Cherokee, Correctionville, and Melbourne, with outposts elsewhere. By the end of September, the chain of forts was under construction and the patrol line was complete. The mounted men called it the "Pony Express" and messages were quickly relayed across the frontier from the Minnesota garrisons to federal troops stationed at Sioux City.

At the end of September the uprising in Minnesota was ended by the defeat of the Indians at the battle of Wood Lake, and the subsequent surrender of most of the Santee. However, the frontier defenses continued to be maintained in case of some new outbreak of Indian warfare. After December, the Border Brigade was reduced when the Iowa Lake Company was mustered out, the fort being garrisoned by a detachment from Estherville. The last Border Brigade troops were disbanded in December 1863. Detachments of the Iowa Sixth Cavalry garrisoned all the forts except Iowa Lake through the spring of 1864 and there were still a few Minnesota troops stationed at the head of Spirit Lake until 1866, long after the danger passed. The defenses were never attacked, and all the forts rapidly disappeared after the Civil War when settlers tore them down to reuse the lumber and logs.³

Major Williams, with Company B, arrived at the Iowa Lake post in early October 1862 after a long march from Fort Dodge, following the slow moving, heavily loaded wagons. The soldiers

³For further reading about the Iowa frontier during this period see: Dan E. Clark "Frontier Defense in Iowa 1850-1865" *Iowa Journal of History* 16: 315-386 (Iowa City, 1918); William H. Ingham "The Iowa Northern Border Brigade of 1862-3" *Annals of Iowa* 5:481-523 (Des Moines, 1902); Guy B. Logan "Historical Sketch, Northern Border Brigade (State Militia)" *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers* 6: 173-207 (Iowa Adjutant General, Des Moines, 1911); Marshall McKusick *The Iowa Northern Border Brigade State Archaeologist Report* 8 (Iowa City, 1975 *in press*); C. M. Oehler *The Great Sioux Uprising* Oxford University Press (New York, 1959); and Morton M. Rosenberg *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War* University of Oklahoma (Norman, 1972).

were dismayed to find that only two small cabins had been built, with a third under way. They had been told the detachment from Company A was well along on the work, which proved to be a misrepresentation of the facts.

When the troops arrived they were pleased with the beauty and pleasantness of the location. Iowa Lake was part of a well-timbered area, the southern most of the twenty Chain Lakes, described as beautiful sheets of water abounding in pike and pickerel, ducks, geese, and other waterfowl. The watershed drained to the north and the Indians had long been accustomed to wintering around these lakes, returning downstream at other seasons. Hunting was good and there were groves of maples which the Indian tapped for maple sugar, it being said, "every tree around the Lakes bears their mark." By the middle of October the troops found it much colder than Fort Dodge, with high winds blowing off the lake and heavy rains. At the end of the month quarters were still unfinished and Williams was sleeping in a wagon box, tied down to keep it from being blown away. He was in the box when a tornado hit the camp from the west, accompanied by a cold rain that turned to snow. Williams, only 600 feet from the camp, was deafened by the noise of the wind, drenched and repeatedly blown off his feet as he struggled to reach the shelter in the guardhouse. It took him two days to recover from the chill. Before the tornado, the company had almost been trapped in a prairie fire which had started many miles to the northwest, partly destroying the camp at Spirit Lake. As it approached, the men at Iowa Lake hurriedly burned a 600-foot-wide strip around their camp and had barely finished when the roaring fire passed them by without damage.⁴ In early November Williams wrote his son that he had been meaning to write yet had no place to do it "but in the cold or in a crowd around a fire in the midst of a set of shivering, talking men." All the troops had been suffering from the cold and exposure, but now better quarters were up. Although it was not yet winter they had two snow falls. On December 6, Williams' sixty-fifth birthday, he described the bleak post to his wife:

We are all well here, but have had very severe weather since I came up: severe snow storms and very cold weather yesterday, last night, and this day in particular. It must have been 20 degrees or more below zero. The

⁴Detailed descriptions of the tornado and prairie fire are in Williams' letter to his son-in-law, John Duncombe, October 27, 1862.

ice on the lake is roaring like a cannon and the wood in quarters crack-
ing like pistols, and the air filled with frost.

Elsewhere, he said, the ice was strong enough to bear the weight of teams and loaded wagons. The garrison was out of flour for the men, and corn or any other kind of feed for the horses. An emergency requisition at Algona and Irvington was needed until the brigade quartermaster finally showed up.

Food at the border posts was plain and sometimes sparse. When everything was in stores, daily rations rarely included more than coffee, beans, fresh beef, rice and bread. Breakfast and supper staples at Iowa Lake were coffee and bean soup, with bread and beef at noon dinner. Bread, baked daily, was the best part of the ration, and Williams assigned five men to do all the baking and cooking. Fish and game were added when available and some poultry was kept by a few officers. Meat supplies were irregular. Out of beef for his men, Williams once ordered his scouts to bring in two stray heifers, drolly announcing to his troops that he was taking possession under "Lincoln's Confiscation Proclamation" since the owners who had fled during the panic were "Rebels." He did have them weighed, should the owners return and prove themselves "good Union Men."

In late October Williams began a series of complaints about the brigade quartermaster, saying he was entirely deficient, for his men had put their horses on half rations of corn for two weeks and had been entirely out four days. Nevertheless, supplies continued to be irregular. In late November he wrote a terse note to Captain Ingham which said in its entirety, "Dear Sir: All's Well. Nothing of importance to communicate, *except we are out of corn.*"

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A rectangular fort of sod and logs was built on elevated ground on the east side of Iowa Lake about 500 feet from the Minnesota line. Its military position guarded the eastern flank of the brigade defenses, forming a patrol link between the Fairmont, Minnesota garrison and Estherville. The fort location also provided a base for troopers to scout the nearby East Fork of the Des Moines River. The military post was variously named the Chain Lakes fort and Iowa Lake fort. In Williams' letters it is referred to variously as Fort Webster, Camp Iowa Lake, Camp Wil-

liams, and Fort Williams, the latter term receiving official but brief recognition. When Williams' Company B moved out in late December it was garrisoned by Captain William Ingham's Company A. The two men were not friends and Ingham promptly renamed the post Fort Schuyler in honor of his cousin Schuyler Ingham. This name change was accepted by Colonel Sawyers in his dispatch of February 5, 1862, but occurs nowhere else, and all later dispatches simply refer to Iowa Lake.⁵

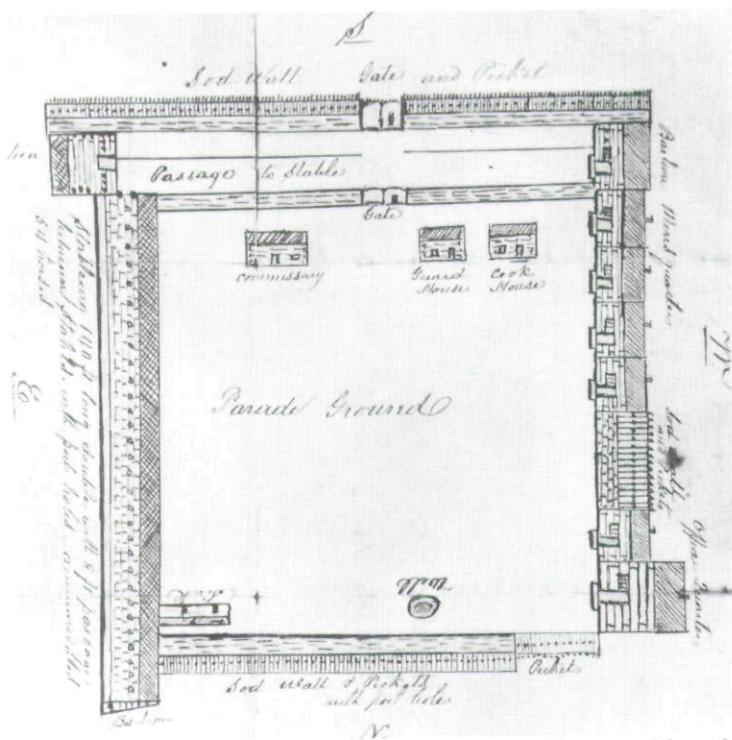
Williams' correspondence states he was given a plan of the fort but found errors in it and got permission to alter the design during construction. As finally completed, the rectangular fort was 140 by 160 feet with reinforced sod walls, sod stable, nine cabins and two blockhouses. In preliminary plans it was described as square, 140 feet to a side.⁶

Because of the variations in drawings and discrepancies in descriptions it is useful to compile a composite plan of the fort's appearance. Despite the reported abundance of timber around Iowa Lake it was easier to use sod whenever possible. The north line was built of sod in two stages, the base reaching a height of about four feet. A thinner four-foot high extension was then added, leaving an inside gun platform or walkway that provided access to the line of rifle ports. Apparently log stockade posts erected along the original low sod wall were left in place. With the onset of cold weather and snow, sod became harder to obtain and the final segment was apparently completed with logs. Near this line was the privy, and the well was placed some distance away.

The west line, as completed, was formed of seven log cabins with rifle ports on the outside walls. Each cabin had a small rectangular window with six panes and a doorway facing the parade

⁵Ruth S. Beitz "They Granted Iowa's Last Frontier" *The Iowan Magazine* vol. 9, no. 3: 10-15, 46, could not locate "Chain Lake" sometimes mentioned in the dispatches, and erroneously concluded that Iowa Lake and Chain Lake had different locations and therefore different forts. Actually Iowa Lake is the southernmost of the Chain Lakes and is so located on both Williams' plans and the more recent U.S.G.S. quadrangle maps.

⁶Basic sources of the description of the Iowa Lake Fort built by Williams are his illustrated, descriptive letters and plans. A more comprehensive written description appears in dispatches by Lieutenant Colonel Sawyers addressed to Governor Samuel Kirkwood, dated December 15, 1862, and February 5, 1863. These are in *Reports of the Adjutant General, State of Iowa*, 1863: 860-870 and 1864: 663-673.

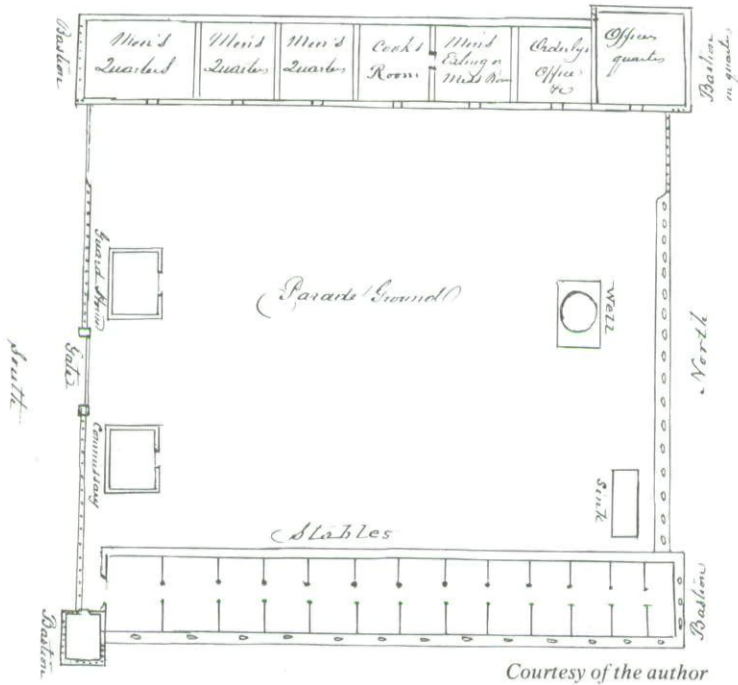


Courtesy of the author

Preliminary plan of the Iowa Lake fort drawn by Major Williams combines vertical and horizontal perspectives. Major changes were made after this plan was drawn in October 1862. The inner parade ground wall was not built and the bakehouse was moved to fill the gap in the west row of cabins.

ground. Six of the chimneys were centered rather than built into the log walls, a feature adding some structural solidarity to the buildings since it is difficult to join logs to a fireplace structure. We may suppose the chimneys were made of logs lined with clay, a common frontier substitute for mortared stone or brick. Four cabins housed enlisted men, and there was a kitchen, mess room and orderly room. The northwest bastion was a two-story structure housing the officers. Unlike the typical blockhouses built by the brigade along the Little Sioux, this bastion lacked a projecting or rotated second story and had a gabled rather than hip roof.

The south line, built of sod like the north line, was tiered to



A preliminary final plan of the Iowa Lake fort drawn by Major Williams shows some evidence of hasty drafting, including the unequal-sized double stable stalls, lack of inner stable wall gun ports, and crudely drawn round gun ports on all walls.

provide a rifle platform inside. Like the north line, the short open segment was finished with logs. The gate on the ground plan appears to have been covered with nine logs between the end posts. Actually such a structure would be very heavy, requiring substantial trusses for support. A closer look suggests the gate is drawn in side profile and was a conventional double gate hinged on pintles. The bottom of the gate as shown on the plan in profile faces the parade ground. Adzed planks possibly were used to lessen the weight and bracing problems inherent in a solid log gate. The guard house was rarely used for confinement and may have been used for auxiliary sleeping quarters or supplies. Company B had a quartermaster sergeant, but a lieutenant was in charge of the commissary.

The stable was a large single-story structure and contained twenty-six double stalls, sufficient for fifty-two horses, although Williams repeatedly wrote it could hold fifty-four. The southeast corner bastion was a two-story cabin with a gable roof similar to the structure on the opposite corner. It was not a typical block-house design and presumably it served as a tack room. No area for corn storage is indicated.

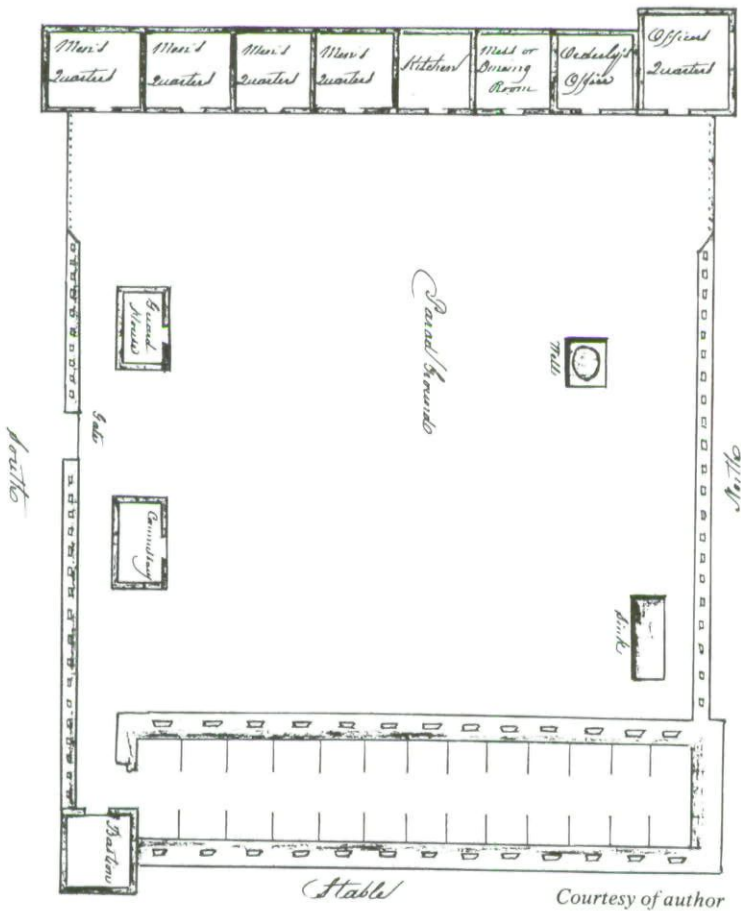
As military architecture, the Iowa Lake fort was a well-designed brigade post. It contained sufficient quarters for a company of men with their horses, and the thick sod walls provided solid protection. Williams' previous military experience is reflected in the final plan. When Williams' Company B left in late December, 1862, the fort was complete except for roofing two buildings on the west side. It was the first fort to be finished on the brigade line.

Some of the troops had expected an easy time, or in Williams' words, "a frolic," but military discipline was consistently enforced.

We have done a great deal of work since we have been here, making hay and hauling it in, cutting house logs and hewing, digging well, building stabling and wall enclosing the ground. I have enforced stout military discipline. . . . It took many of my boys all aback. They, particularly those from the lower part of the county, set off as it appears, thinking they would have a good frolick of it, a good time generally, but I had to drill them in. They are doing very well, considering all with few exceptions were entirely raw hands. . . . The second evening we encamped I had to punish one man for disobedience of order of a sergeant which give them an example they have profited by. I put him under guard, placed him on a little rise of ground about 150 yards from the encampment, and give him no supper, which cooled him.⁷

One man who proved to be a nuisance was sent home with the remark he was "disqualified both mentally and physically; unfit, worthless, incompetent, and good for nothing." Another man, a forty-three-year-old private, continually complained, spent all his time searching for food, shirked duty and persisted in telling the younger lieutenant how to run the commissary. After several reprimands, Williams wrote, "I reined him up and give him a lecture, told him to go to his duty, and do what he was ordered to do. I wanted no more of his thinking and suggestions, that I would do all the thinking, that was my business." Discipline was main-

⁷Williams to Stephen and Marietta McBarrie from Iowa Lake, October 16, 1862.



This is the most accurate plan of the Iowa Lake fort by Major Williams.

tained without the brutality sometimes present among the regular army frontier detachments, for Williams was dealing with friends, neighbors and acquaintances.

On occasion, other steps needed to be taken; the young fourth corporal and the ferrier were both reduced to ranks and replaced, but remained in service. By such tactics the post ran smoothly when Williams was present. His first lieutenant had a harder time. In early December, while Williams was visiting Fort Dodge, he was summoned back to camp.

When I returned last time, as Hefley had written to me I found some disorder had taken place. Something like a rebellion against Lieut. Hefley. I enquired into the matter and found out the instigators. Called them up, put one in confinement a few hours, and reprimanded the other two. Issued some stringent orders, and you never saw a better behaved and more orderly set of men than they have all been since. Somehow, there are many of the Company that don't like Hefley.⁸

This was the last of the discipline problems at the Iowa Lake fort and the troops returned to Fort Dodge at the end of the month to be replaced by a small detachment from Estherville.

Williams displayed keen political partisanship. He was a Democrat, opposed to Abraham Lincoln, and against the abolitionist cause as well. His highly opinionated views were put forth in letters he wrote from Iowa Lake in 1862.⁹

In a lengthy letter to his son-in-law, Senator John Duncombe, in Fort Dodge, Williams proudly reported that only four men in his company were Republicans and told how the men cheered when news reached the fort of the Democratic victories in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana. Duncombe at the time was running for Congress but lost to the Republican candidate in northwest Iowa. The bitterness caused by the great conflict with the South occurs in almost every letter. To Duncombe, Williams described the Fort Dodge Republicans as impudent, white-livered hypocrites and vile scoundrels. In writing his wife on October 18, 1862 Williams became vitriolic:

They care nothing for the welfare of the country or any thing else, but to try to hold on to power and carry their emancipation policy out. Give them office and the country may go to the Devil. Never since the foundation of our government has there been so corrupt, reckless, and unholy a crew been banded together as that party are. They got into power by accident and they appear determined to make the most out of it by plundering, and in every way possible. As to principle I never could make out that they have any—but Negro Negro.

Nor did his temper improve when he learned of Duncombe's defeat:

There is great trouble amongst the Abolitionists on account of the Draft to be made 1st Jany. I hope every one of the unholy Crew may be com-

⁸Williams to his wife December 11, 1862, from Iowa Lake.

⁹Most of the northern states had a strong minority which opposed fighting the South and to varying degrees remained sympathetic to secession of the Confederacy. In Iowa, the strongest resistance to the Civil War occurred in the southern counties near the Missouri border, but there was opposition elsewhere in some of the river towns and even on the frontier among Democrats, politically overwhelmed by the newly formed Republican party.

pelled to go to war, *the cowardly war provoking, negro loving, stinking, hypocritical God forsaken, plunder hunting scamps*. I hope their day is fast approaching, the day when they will all be forced to fight, placed in the front rank side by side with the negroes—forced to mess with them, eat with them, and sleep with them. I suppose there are about this time a great many invalids amongst them I would like to be down and see the poor Devils and inquire into the state of their health.¹⁰

At about the same time Williams received a letter from a Dubuque man, H. Markell, who had been commissioned to raise a regiment named the Hawkeye Riflemen Sharp Shooters for federal service. He mentioned his friendship with the two Inghams and offered to enroll Williams and his whole company in the Union Army, since they were shortly to muster out of the state frontier forces. Needless to say, his proposal did not meet with the enthusiasm he expected. Williams was sufficiently incensed to keep a copy of his irate reply which denounced Yankees, abolitionists and political influence in army commissions, adding that he was not a follower of the Inghams.

The Public Service and those who have Volunteered to serve their Country have been injured severely by having placed over them political *favorites* who are really incompetent to command. I have a good Company and one I will not suffer to be *humbugged*. The speculation of getting permission to raise Regt. through political or party influence has gone far enough for the good of the Service. Should be Stopped. . . I view all such moves (to be candid) as a Yankee Speculation. . . The Estherville man can do as he pleases, but for my part, I want to know who has control or command before I or any of my men will have any thing to do with the Matter. I would never agree to be commanded by an Abolitionist or Yankee of the Mayflower Stock, *hence my Caution*.¹¹

The Estherville man was William Ingham, an ardent abolitionist and strong supporter of President Lincoln and the war against the South. While Williams was denouncing the war, and wrote that he expected to see it end in 1863 without victory, Ingham sat in his quarters in Estherville improving his mind by writing out long quotations, apparently derived from the editorials of Horace Greeley. These passages in Ingham's handwriting appear in his Company A book. He and Williams were apparently not on speaking terms.

The October elections for congressmen and state representatives were complicated by the large absentee soldier vote, gener-

¹⁰Williams to his wife December 11, 1862.

¹¹Williams to Markell December 5, 1862.

ally solidly Republican, which increased the margin of political victory, or in closely contested races, swung the election. There were no secret ballots, and open intimidation and other forms of persuasion occurred. For example, Williams' son, James, stationed at headquarters of the 16th Union Army Corps at Memphis, Tennessee, wrote about the October 1862 election saying:

The all absorbing topic here at present is the elections in Ohio, Iowa, Pennsylvania and Indiana. Various speculations as to the results. I voted here the straight Democratic Ticket—but had to do it on the sly, for had it been known it would probably have resulted in my losing my place. Such are the Liberties that we are enjoying under the rule of King Abraham. . . The vote in the Ohio regiments here was a forced one, many instances which came under my personal observation.¹²

According to Williams, an attempt was made to interfere with the soldiers' voting at his fort. His description to Duncombe does not make the sequence of events entirely clear. But the fact that this brigade fort was almost entirely manned by southern sympathizers must have been well known to the politicians. Schuyler Ingham, representing the governor, and William Pritchard, from the secretary of state's office, showed up and argued that voting could not legally occur because no voting commissioner was present. They underestimated the formidable and knowledgeable commander. In their presence he rallied the troops, told them it was election day and that the state law provided for their voting rights with, or without, a commissioner. He then read the law, providentially having a copy with him. Pritchard was publicly humiliated; an almost unanimous Democratic vote was cast. As Williams phrased it, "I know my rights and the rights of my men, this the powers that be have found out."¹³

¹²James Williams to his family October 18, 1862.

¹³Williams to Duncombe October 27, 1862.

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