

FRANK WILLIAMS: THE LINCOLN LAWYER

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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

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Rhode Island was a Lincoln state, supporting Abraham Lincoln in both the 1860 and 1864 elections, and as far as Frank Williams is concerned, it still is. Williams, a retired chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, is also a well-known expert on Abraham Lincoln. His collection of books and other Lincoln materials exceeds 50,000 items, and he has written or edited 11 books on Lincoln. A wonderful storyteller, the judge kept his audience at the Babcock Smith House alternately enthralled and amused as he told stories of his hero Lincoln and compared him to the leaders of today.

"We need a Lincoln," Judge Williams said at the March 4 event. "He was the leader we needed for those times. He was bold, brassy, forthright and honest. That's what we need in our leaders today."

The former chief justice chairs the Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission and his talk soon turned to the important role that Rhode Island played in the Civil War.

"There are great stories about our heritage, about our boys," Justice Williams said. "We want to tell the stories about the home front too, to give them the glory they deserve for supporting the war effort."

Lincoln first came to Rhode Island while on the campaign trail in 1860 after John Eddy, a merchant from Providence, heard Lincoln deliver his famous Cooper Union speech in New York.

"The odds on favorite for the Republican nomination was William H. Seward," Judge Williams related. "The New York establishment sees (Lincoln): 6 feet, 4 inches tall, an ill-fitting new suit that was wrinkled from travel, speaking with this southern Indiana accent, but a few minutes into his speech, Lincoln had their attention. He minced no words about discussing the major issue of the day, which of course, was slavery. He grabbed their attention and respect."

Eddy asked Lincoln to speak at Railroad Hall, now the site of the Federal Courthouse on Kennedy Plaza. The dark horse candidate for the Republican nomination repeated his hour-and-a-half Cooper Union speech, ending with "Let us have faith that right makes might and in that faith, to the end, let us dare to do our duty."

Rhode Island did its duty, first in helping to elect Lincoln and then when the war broke out, with her blood and her treasure. Rhode Island's quota was 780 soldiers in the first call-up; 3,147 Rhode Islanders signed up. Eventually, some 13 percent of the male population would go off to war, more than any other state.

"Rhode Island never had these draft riots," Williams told us. "There was no draft here because every time Lincoln called for troops, Rhode Island met its quota."

Rhode Islanders fought in every battle from Bull Run to Appomatox and served everywhere from Massachusetts to Texas. The field artillery was the pride of Rhode Island, according to Judge Williams.

"Eight batteries of artillery, that was our strength," he said. "Arnold's and Brown's artillery batteries at Gettysburg sustained great casualties but held against Pickett's Charge. The same two batteries again, at Spotsylvania in 1864, actually attacking. Imagine that, artillery attacking!"

"We have a great story to tell and we hope to tell it in the next four years with your help. We need to remember the war's 150th anniversary and Rhode Island's role in all of this."

The Babcock-Smith House is sponsoring a series of talks all year long about our local history, told by local historians. For more information, go to www.babcock-smithhouse.com.

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