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Article Summary: George Arthur Williams, born in 1864, was one of the last dirt farmers to achieve prominence in Nebraska politics. His political successes and failures were probably attributable to the same characteristic-devotion to principle. His unswerving support for economy in government and for prohibition cost him votes in his later campaigns. But he never lost the respect of the leaders of both parties. In 1932, it was said of him that he was "just too honest to be elected governor."

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Photographs / Images: George and Mabel Williams with five of their eight children, about 1902; Lieutenant Governor Williams at home

## **FAIRMONT FARMER-POLITICIAN, GEORGE A. WILLIAMS**

*By William G. White, Jr.*

George Arthur Williams was nearly 1 year old when his father Charles Williams first saw him. Charles, a direct descendant of Oliver Cromwell, had joined the Union Army shortly after emigrating with his family from England to LaFayette, Illinois. George was born there in August, 1864, while his father was using his blacksmithing skills in the Army. George attended school in Galva, Illinois, but was never graduated from high school. In 1888 he married Mabel L. Grubb. After two years of marriage they moved to the Grubb family farm in Fairmont, Nebraska, and upon arrival broke ground on another 240 acres of virgin prairie.

George's parents were Baptists, and George and Mabel followed their example. In 1893 they attended meetings held by Elder William Byington White, president of the Nebraska Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Much to the regret of both their families, George and Mabel joined the Adventist church at the conclusion of those meetings.

Two years after joining the Adventist church the George Williams family moved to Alabama as self-supporting missionaries. Under Williams' leadership, an Adventist church was organized at Citronelle, Mobile County, and a building erected. Williams found that he could not support there his expanding family, which eventually included eight children. Concerned about Adventist educational opportunities for his children, he moved the family to Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1901, where he opened and operated a mercantile business which became successful. After the denomination's Battle Creek College and Review and Herald Publishing Association moved, and the Battle Creek Sanitarium managed by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg was destroyed by fire, Williams moved to Franklin, Kentucky, and opened another mercantile business. Less than a year later, in

December, 1903, he assumed the management of the Southern Training School store in Graysville, Tennessee. While at Graysville, Williams completed a business course at the Adventist-operated school to conclude his formal education.

Having demonstrated his business abilities at Graysville, Williams was called by the church to Atlanta in 1908 to serve as manager of the Atlanta Sanitarium. In December, 1909, he took his family back to Nebraska where he settled in Harlan County. After two years of farming he became business manager of the church-sponsored Nebraska Sanitarium in Hastings and operated a farm north of town. After 20 years away from the Grubb farm at Fairmont, Williams returned there in 1914, and once again took up full time farming.<sup>1</sup>

Williams, well liked and respected by his fellow farmers, during World War I was a member of the Fillmore County Council of Defense and manager of the county's second American Red Cross fund drive. He was also a long-time member of the Sons of Union Veterans.<sup>2</sup> During the spring and summer of 1918, his friends convinced him to run for a seat in the state House of Representatives. Before filing for the Republican nomination from the 41st district, Williams sought the counsel of Nebraska Adventist officials. Receiving their blessings,<sup>3</sup> he entered the August Republican primary, was nominated, and defeated Robert H. Lowdon in the November general election. His record pleased his constituents, for in the 1920 primary he ran unopposed for the Republican nomination.<sup>4</sup>

Endorsing Williams for a second term, the *Nebraska Signal* of Geneva said:

The same integrity and high sense of morality that has always characterized his home life and his business relations marked his course in the legislature. He was always found on the right side of questions involving morality, clean citizenship and that have to do with the rights of the people. Being a man of broad education and wide business experience, and the same hard worker in the legislature that he is on his farm, he was able to impress his personality on his fellow members and exert an influence that was somewhat unusual. The daily newspapers frequently referred to him as one of the leading members of the house and his counsel was frequently sought by members of both houses and by state officials.

No member of the house was made a member of more committees, and only five members of the 100 served on as many committees as did Mr. Williams. He was chairman of the railroad committee, secretary of the road and bridge committee, and a member also of the committee on school lands and funds, conference committee, code committee, and sifting committee. Membership on the sifting committee, appointed near the close of each session, is always eagerly sought. At various times Mr. Williams was chosen to preside over the house while in committee of the whole, and not even in

the heat of debate were any of his rulings ever questioned. Mr. Williams alone or in connection with other members introduced thirteen bills, ten of which became laws.<sup>5</sup>

*The Signal* also endorsed Williams for the speakership of the House:

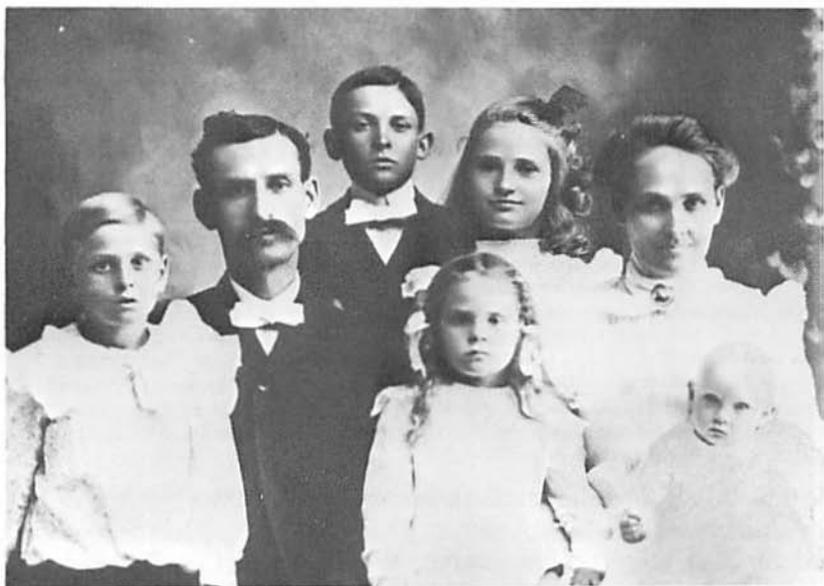
No doubt there is considerable material in the house for the speakership, but probably no member is better qualified by education and wide experience than Mr. Williams. He is a man of fine education. He is a good parliamentarian and an able public speaker. His ability as a presiding officer was demonstrated on several occasions during the session two years ago. He has had a wide experience in business as a farmer.

He is a real dirt farmer and has been such for a number of years and he is an intelligent student of the many trying problems that now confront the farmer and the stock raiser. An element not always considered in the selection of men for public place is Christian character and the sturdy manhood that puts their possessor above petty suspicion, even though his constituents may not always agree with him on every detail of legislation and every element of public policy.<sup>6</sup>

He indicated his willingness to accept the speakership but did not actively seek it. In November, 1920, he was elected for a second term as state representative. While in the Legislature he introduced the "glaring headlight" bill, was a strong leader in the framing and passage of highway legislation, and was singularly responsible for the passage of a sound, workable cooperative hail insurance law. He ardently supported ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. He was a leader in the development of the civil administration code and many other measures. One of his most pleasant tasks was co-sponsoring the Nebraska Capitol Bill at the request of Governor Samuel R. McKelvie, thus initiating construction of Nebraska's third state Capitol.<sup>7</sup> One newspaper in evaluating Williams' second term reported:

Representative George A. Williams of Fillmore, chairman of the house committee on committees, and prominent among the several floor leaders, is generally considered gubernatorial material on the Republican side. Mr. Williams did not make political hay, although it is probable that he indulged in more work and worry than any other member of the lower house. He is classified as level-headed, a clean hard fighter, a conscientious, diplomatic leader in the cause of his party even though sometimes singled by his own diplomacy, and of analytic mind. As chairman of the committee on revenue and taxation and several conference groups, his duties were at all times difficult. The fact became known early in the session to new members as already it was known to old members that Mr. Williams was close to the governor. This made him the target of the anti-administration crowd, of which the four democrats were not the ring leaders.<sup>8</sup>

Williams, however, did not run for governor. Instead, he sought the Republican nomination for secretary of state in the 1922 primary—and lost.<sup>9</sup> Even though out of office, Williams lost none of his interest in state and local politics. He corresponded with his friend, United States Senator George W.



*George and Mabel Williams with five of their eight children, about 1902, Battle Creek, Michigan.*



*Lieutenant Governor Williams at home. Courtesy of Ada Williams Turner.*

Norris of Nebraska, concerning Williams' support of Norris' proposed constitutional amendment to replace the electoral college with direct election of the president. Williams was also favorable to Norris' unicameral legislative plan for Nebraska.<sup>10</sup>

After a three-year absence from state politics, Williams ran successfully for the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor in the spring of 1924 and was elected in the November general election. Elected twice more in succession, he served as lieutenant governor from 1925 to 1931, four years with Governor Adam McMullen and two years with Governor Arthur J. Weaver.<sup>11</sup>

The primary function of the lieutenant governor then was to serve as presiding officer of the state Senate. While no longer involved in the formulation of bills, he was highly respected by both parties as a fair and talented parliamentarian. It was reported that during his six years as presiding officer of the Senate he never made a parliamentary mistake.<sup>12</sup>

Much of his time away from the four-month legislative sessions was spent in traveling and speaking throughout the state at gatherings such as the state fair, town homecomings, church meetings, and patriotic and historical commemorations. Williams, a good public speaker, always gave his audiences something serious about which to think, but added touches of humor as well. Always popular with the ladies, Williams would sometimes begin an address by complimenting the women: "I understood this was to be a gathering of husbands and wives, but I see you men have brought your daughters with you."<sup>13</sup>

During his six years as lieutenant governor he witnessed the fruition of the Capitol bill, which he had co-sponsored; he was the first man to occupy the lieutenant governor's office in the magnificent new building and the first to preside over the Senate in the new Capitol.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the 1920s the furtive, hooded Ku Klux Klan had considerable popularity in Nebraska, claiming an unverified 15,000 members by the early 1930s. Membership in the Klan, common among office seekers, was viewed as an asset in some political circles because the Klan purported to stand for morality—prohibition, anti-pornography, anti-sexual promiscuity, and respect for the law.<sup>15</sup> Many religious and civic groups believed essentially the same things. However, those who joined the Klan had to swallow its anti-social beliefs—religious

and ethnic bigotry toward the Catholic, Jew, and Negro—even though they felt uncomfortable doing so.

It is apparent that Williams had ties with the organization, though records of membership are nonexistent.<sup>16</sup> But his own political beliefs and his Christian conscience would not have permitted him to long remain identified with the Klan, as his life and his statements attest. Long before the upsurge of human rights issues, Lieutenant Governor Williams demonstrated his personal concern on these matters that would seize national attention in the 1960s and 1970s:

My father, a Civil War veteran, taught me the principles of Lincoln republicanism when a boy. For more than forty years I have by vote and voice supported those principles. All thru the years I have never wavered in the belief that those principles enunciated by Lincoln and exemplified in the lives of McKinley, [Theodore] Roosevelt, and a host of others have been the chief factor in the wonderful progress and prosperity of our country . . . Lincoln's great concern was for the welfare of the people; for the preservation of their rights and privileges. His great heart was touched and his indignation aroused as he marked the evidences of oppression and inequality. He stood for equal opportunity for all, high or low, rich or poor, but his chief concern was for the common people who could not protect themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Williams believed in economy in government. In remarks to the Senate of 1929, he informed the senators that the 1927 session of the Legislature cost the taxpayers \$184,328 and the cost per day for each branch was \$1,152. He broke this down to the point that a five minute speech cost the people \$24, and a one minute speech cost \$4.80. He concluded, "True economy is the economy of time. Are your speeches in harmony with this principle?"<sup>18</sup>

As lieutenant governor, Williams rendered valuable assistance in preparing Union College for accreditation by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. He approached the chancellor of the University of Nebraska and persuaded him to give the Adventist college moral and professional support. The university was of some help to the college, and the chancellor even offered Union President M. L. Andreasen an honorary doctorate if he could secure accreditation for the college, thus insuring Lincoln of another strong collegiate institution. Andreasen accepted the offer of help but turned down the honorary degree when Union College was finally accredited as a degree-granting liberal arts college in 1937.<sup>19</sup>

Sensing unrest in the Republican Party in the 1930 election,

Williams did not enter the primary. Democrat Charles Bryan did capture the state house from Republican Arthur J. Weaver, but Williams' Republican replacement, Theodore W. Metcalfe, was elected. Shortly after leaving office, in January, 1931, Williams' advice was sought by his successor and friend, Lieutenant Governor Metcalfe, when Governor Charles Bryan (who along with his brother William Jennings Bryan were friends of Williams) left the state without notifying the lieutenant governor. Metcalfe discovered the governor's absence and assumed his duties as acting governor. Bryan was outraged. Williams' advice to Metcalfe on how to handle the unpleasant situation is unknown, for he kept no copy of his reply.<sup>20</sup>

Williams, a man of compassion, in 1931 began working to secure the release of an inmate at the Nebraska State Penitentiary. William W. Cryderman had murdered two women in Valentine, Nebraska, in 1916. The 18-year-old youth had been found guilty and sentenced to be executed on June 23, 1916. On June 22 the state Supreme Court stayed the execution and in August commuted the sentence to life imprisonment. Cryderman, a good prisoner, by 1931 had become a Seventh-day Adventist as a result of a prison Bible study group. In 1931 Williams and Elder S. E. Wight, formerly of Lincoln and then president of the West Michigan Conference on Seventh-day Adventists, tried to secure Cryderman's release and to remove him to his home state of Michigan. Cryderman was released in February, 1935, and audited classes at the Adventist-operated Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University) in Berrien Springs, Michigan. During the summer he worked at a lumber camp at Hastings, Michigan. Wight, then president of the Indiana conference of the church, put Cryderman to work that autumn on the construction crew at the conference boarding academy. He also arranged a job for him as an engineer at an Adventist-owned mine in Lafayette, Indiana. Cryderman hoped to earn enough money to return to Emmanuel Missionary College but never did so. After working three years in Lafayette and living with the owner's family, he disappeared. In the mid-1950s he reappeared and was hired by the Adventist-operated White Memorial Hospital in Los Angeles. There he contacted fellow employee Ada Turner, a married daughter of George Williams. Williams' efforts in Cryderman's behalf had been rewarded; Cryderman continued to lead an honest life.<sup>41</sup>

Williams was missed in Lincoln, and by 1931 supporters throughout the state were urging him to run for governor. With the support of ministers, judges, farmers, state legislators, and others he entered the Republican primary in the spring of 1932. Williams' staunch support of prohibition, which was losing support among the voters, may have weighed against him.

During the campaign, Williams was commissioned an admiral of the Nebraska "navy" by Lieutenant Governor Metcalfe in an attempt to enliven the primary. Writing to Metcalfe, Williams said, "I understand the chief responsibility resting upon the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska at this time is to see to it that the coming election shall result in every position in the Ship of State being filled with worthy republicans and that the democrats be cast into the depths of the sea to the end that Nebraska may again resume her rightful place as the greatest state."<sup>22</sup>

Williams' primary campaign was characterized by extensive traveling and public speaking. Some of his efforts were undermined by a self-appointed, well-meaning campaigner who irritated some influential voters. Williams proposed a reduction in automobile license fees and reform of the property tax system. Despite his efforts and his personal and public record, Williams was defeated in the six-man gubernatorial primary in April. Republican Dwight Griswold was pressed only by Kenneth S. Wherry; Frank Myers, Murray F. Richard, Robert G. Ross, and Williams trailed. Between April and November Williams campaigned for Republican gubernatorial nominee Dwight Griswold and for the national ticket at the request of the Republican National Committee. Of course, 1932 was a disastrous year for the Republicans nationally and in Nebraska as Franklin D. Roosevelt promised to lead the nation out of the Great Depression. Democrat Charles W. Bryan was reelected governor.<sup>23</sup>

By 1934 the Democrats exercised such control over state politics that Williams gave little thought to running for public office, but by 1936 he contemplated running for secretary of state. His supporters in government, however, urged him to run again for lieutenant governor, and he acceded. They felt his experience and abilities would be valuable as Nebraska launched its Unicameral Legislature in 1937. He obtained the nomination, and in the campaign pledged himself to support a revision



*Williams about 1911 became business manager of the Seventh-day Adventist Nebraska Sanitarium, Hastings. Courtesy of Loma Linda (California) University Heritage Room. . . .(Below) Williams farm near Fairmont before modernization.*



of the tax system, a teacher retirement plan, an increase in teacher credential requirements, and the ratification of the child labor amendment to the United States Constitution.<sup>24</sup>

Williams' membership in the Anti-Saloon League proved a problem. One advisor warned him that if he could not convince the pro-liquor faction that he was not a fanatic, or if he maintained the same attitude toward the Anti-Saloon League that he held in 1932, it would spell defeat for the ticket. Whether he hedged his stand on liquor is not known, but the 1936 Democratic landslide buried the Nebraska Republicans. George Williams never ran for public office again.<sup>25</sup>

As an Adventist, Williams had a long-standing interest in religious liberty and was active in such affairs during his years in and out of public office. Some of his work was as a "troubleshooter" for the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference Religious Liberty Department. He was frequently called upon to assist Adventists having difficulty with Sunday closing laws. In the mid-1930s Williams, when offered the department's associate directorship, declined because of his 1936 election bid. During the 1930s and early 1940s, Williams authored a number of articles for *Liberty*, an Adventist-sponsored magazine.<sup>26</sup>

As an ardent prohibitionist, Williams, while campaigning for lieutenant governor in 1928, paid nearly \$900 for 50,000 special "prohibition" issues of the Adventist journal *Signs of the Times* for distribution in Nebraska. During his years in office, he continued his prohibition efforts and spoke frequently before Woman's Christian Temperance Union groups and others. He resigned as president of the Anti-Saloon League of Nebraska in 1936 when campaigning for the lieutenant gubernatorial nomination, but he stubbornly refused to surrender his convictions. In a state that was becoming increasingly "wet," this may well have cost him the election in November.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1940s Williams was a member and eventually vice-president of the Allied Dry Forces of Nebraska. Even when health problems restricted his activities in 1945, the organization refused to accept his resignation.<sup>28</sup>

In 1936 Williams was appointed a member of the executive committees of the Central Union and Nebraska Conferences of the Adventist church and of the boards of management of four Adventist institutions including Shelton (Nebraska) Academy (now Platte Valley Academy), Union College in Lincoln, and

Boulder Sanitarium and Porter Memorial Hospital in Colorado. His advice was always sought, and his presence lent prestige to each of the groups in which he served.<sup>29</sup>

His "retirement" from politics did not mark an end to his interest in good government. He carried on an active correspondence with public officials, including Nebraska's congressional representatives.<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, Williams was strongly opposed to Franklin D. Roosevelt and to his New Deal programs.<sup>31</sup> Republican United States Senator Kenneth S. Wherry asked Williams to advise him on political matters. In 1944 at Wherry's request, Republican Senator Hugh Butler placed a letter from Williams concerning agricultural legislation in the *Congressional Record*. Williams also corresponded with Representative Carl T. Curtis, whom Williams had encouraged to run for public office years before.<sup>32</sup>

Williams came out of retirement in 1942 to serve briefly as interim pastor of the Lincoln City (now Capitol View) Seventh day Adventist Church, which he had attended while a legislator and lieutenant governor. During his brief pastorate there, he led the congregation in paying off the church mortgage.<sup>33</sup> In calling upon Senator Hugh Butler to help solve a war-time visa problem for an Adventist minister, Williams was paid this accolade by the senator in a letter to the State Department: "Former Lieutenant Governor George Williams of Fairmont, Nebraska, . . . is one of the outstanding citizens of the state, known perhaps to more people individually than any other man in the state. No one has a better reputation than Mr. Williams."<sup>34</sup>

Williams' health had begun to fail during the early 1940s. After several hospitalizations and surgeries, he died in the Boulder (Colorado) Sanitarium in July, 1946. Funeral services were held in Fairmont with Elders N. C. Wilson, Carl Sundin, and D. E. Venden officiating.<sup>35</sup>

George A. Williams was one of the last dirt farmers to achieve prominence in Nebraska politics. His political successes and failures were probably attributable to the same characteristic—devotion to principle. His unswerving support for economy in government and for prohibition cost him votes in his later campaigns. But while losing his last two election bids, he never lost the respect of the leaders of both parties. Writing to Williams in late 1944, Senator Wherry's chief aide said, "You little know, George, how much all of us appreciate

hearing from you because ever since my first contact with you in 1936 I have realized how fundamentally sound and sincere you are. Frankly, you're my ideal of a real public servant and a real American."<sup>36</sup> A Nebraska penal official once wrote to Williams, "[You are] . . . one politician who never trimmed his religious ideals one particle for popularity or votes. Such men are all too few."<sup>37</sup> Perhaps a Republican party leader said it best in 1932 when he was discussing with Williams his primary campaign possibilities. He concluded by saying, "George you're just too honest to be elected governor."<sup>38</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Interview with Estelle Williams Jackson, Bruning, Nebraska, September 19, 1977; Carl Sundin in *Central Union Reaper* (Lincoln), organ of the Central Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, August 6, 1946, 6.
2. *Who's Who in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Press Association, 1940), 421.
3. Jackson interview.
4. *Nebraska Signal* (Geneva), August 22, 1920, 1; November 7, 1918, 1; April 15, 1920, 10.
5. *Ibid.*, October 14, 1920, 8.
6. *Ibid.*, December 30, 1920, 2.
7. *Ibid.*, November 4, 1920, 2 and October 28, 1920, 2; *The Nebraska Blue Book*, Lincoln, Legislative Reference Bureau, 1918-1920, 22; *Who's Who in Nebraska*, 421.
8. Unidentified article attributed to the *Sunday Lincoln (Nebraska) Journal*.
9. *Nebraska Signal*, July 27, 1922, 1.
10. George W. Norris to George A. Williams, November 25, 1922, George A. Williams Papers, Andrews University Heritage Room, Berrien Springs, Michigan, hereafter referred to as Williams Papers.
11. *Nebraska Blue Book*, 1926, 238; 1928, 263; 1930, 263.
12. Jackson interview.
13. Interview with Ned Saunders, Lincoln, Nebraska, July 27, 1977.
14. *Who's Who in Nebraska*, 421.
15. Interview with Frank Marsh, Lincoln, Nebraska, July 28, 1977.
16. Gail S. Carter to Williams, October 31, 1931, December 7, 1931, June 2, 1932, Williams Papers; William Piel to Williams, February 1, 1932, Williams Papers; Paul E. Cook to Williams, May 19, 1932, Williams Papers; Jackson interview.
17. Williams to the Douglas County (Nebraska) Republican Women's Club, February 8, 1932, Williams Papers.
18. Williams' personal notes, Williams Papers.
19. Everett L. Dick interview with M. L. Andreasen, 1961.
20. Theodore W. Metcalfe to Williams, July 30, 1931, Williams Papers; Jackson interview.
21. W. T. Fenton to Williams, December 1, 1931, Williams Papers; S. E. Wight to Williams, December 6, 1931, and January 11, 1932, Williams Papers; S. E. Wight to William W. Cryderman, January 11, 1932, Williams Papers; William W. Cryderman to Williams, November 28, 1935, Williams Papers; interview with Miss Evelyn Jordan, Lafayette, Indiana, January 1, 1978; *Omaha World-Herald*, March 9, 1916, 1; Nebraska State Penitentiary records; letter from Ada Williams Turner to the author, May 18, 1978.

22. Williams to Theodore W. Metcalfe, January 11, 1932, Williams Papers.
23. "Williams for Governor" campaign card; *Lincoln Evening Star Journal*, April 14, 1932, 1.
24. George C. Snow to Williams, January 2, 1936, Williams Papers; *Nebraska Signal*, April 16, 1936, 7.
25. Jess P. Palmer to Williams, April 15, 1936, and April 18, 1936, Williams Papers; *Nebraska Signal*, November 5, 1936, 7.
26. Charles S. Longacre to Williams, June 29, 1932, July 12, 1936, and November 18, 1935, Williams Papers.
27. J. R. Ferren to Williams, October 19, 1928, Williams Papers; interview with Alonzo L. Baker, Riverside, California, September 19, 1977; Herbert Ford to Williams, March 9, 1936, Williams Papers.
28. Williams to Seventh-day Adventists of Nebraska, May 18, 1944, Williams Papers; Harold D. Wilson to Williams, January 23, 1945, Williams Papers.
29. Sundin, 6.
30. Williams to Senator Edward R. Burke, May 23, 1937, Williams Papers; Senator Edward R. Burke to Williams, August 12, 1937, Williams Papers; Williams to Governor Samuel R. McKelvie, November 18, 1938, Williams Papers; Senator Kenneth S. Wherry to Williams, January 26, 1943, Williams Papers.
31. Williams to Oliver O. Kuhn, March 16, 1937, Williams Papers; Williams to Burke, May 23, 1937, Williams Papers; George A. Williams; *American Institutions vs. Alphabetical Cryptograms*, unpublished manuscript, Williams Papers; Jackson interview.
32. Wherry to Williams, January 26, 1943, Williams Papers; Senator Hugh Butler to Williams, September 22, 1944, Williams Papers; Representative Carl T. Curtis to Williams, October 23, 1944, Williams Papers.
33. Interview with Mrs. Iva Speidel, Lincoln, Nebraska, July 27, 1977; Jackson interview; interview with Mrs. Alice Jackson Saunders, Lincoln, Nebraska, July 27, 1977.
34. Butler to H. C. Monroe, January 10, 1945, Williams Papers.
35. Sundin, 6.
36. Frederick H. Wagener to Williams, November 4, 1944, Williams Papers.
37. W. H. Osborne to Williams, n.d.
38. Jackson interview.