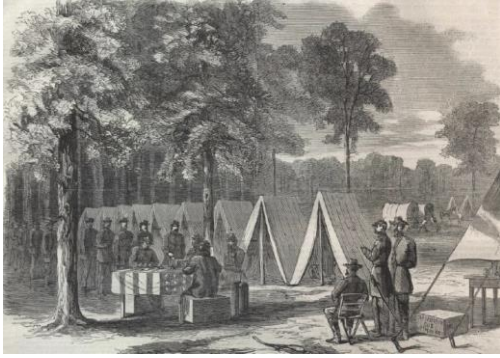


Absentee Voting During the Civil War By Alan F. Rumrill



Soldiers voting at a military encampment

There has been a great deal of discussion recently concerning absentee voting. Many voters feel uncomfortable assembling with others in public and question the safety of gathering at a public polling place during a pandemic. Consequently, many voters wish to vote absentee to avoid crowds that might develop where voters congregate to cast their ballots. There have been questions about the possibility of fraud and dishonesty occurring during the absentee voting process. Absentee voting in times of national emergency has occurred several times in our nation's history.

The earliest example of absentee voting may have occurred in New Hampshire in 1775 when the town of Hollis allowed Continental soldiers to send a representative to vote in their place at a town meeting. The state of Pennsylvania allowed soldiers to send in their ballots during the War of 1812.

Absentee voting began to have more of an impact during the Civil War, however. President Abraham Lincoln was running for reelection after more than three years of war. His opponent in the general election was General George B. McClellan, former Commanding General of the Union Army. Approximately 1,000,000 Union soldiers were away from home serving in the military in 1864. It was obvious that most of them could not all return home to vote in the election.



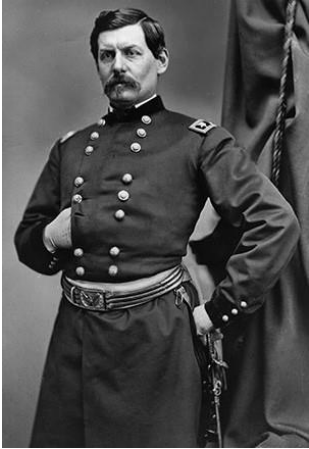
President Abraham Lincoln

The Republican Party, of which Lincoln was a member, began to lobby for laws to allow soldiers who were far from home to mail in their ballots from the battlefield. Wisconsin became the first state to pass legislation to allow for absentee voting by soldiers. The troops voted at polling locations in their camps and the ballots were mailed to state officials.

Nineteen of the 25 Union states eventually approved mail-in voting by soldiers. Some states let the men mail in their ballots personally. The New Hampshire Legislature considered the request for absentee balloting. There was a bitter fight in the state legislature beginning in 1863. There were arguments regarding whether only officers or all troops would be allowed to vote from the field. The state Supreme Court eventually approved only part of the legislation. The soldier's voting bill allowed servicemen to vote absentee for President and members of Congress, but not for local races, because it was deemed unconstitutional.

The *New Hampshire Sentinel* (now *Keene Sentinel*) reported on the progress of the move to approve absentee voting, and then on the vote itself. The newspaper reported that agents for General McClellan in New York had been arrested and charged with committing fraud for

opening sealed envelopes containing ballots for Lincoln and substituting ballots for McClellan. The General's supporters also complained that they were not allowed to get access to the soldiers and that soldiers' votes were detained at the Post Office in Washington. Postmaster Brown denied the claim, as did his chief clerk and superintendent of soldiers' mail, both of whom were McClellan supporters.



General George B. McClellan

In the end, about 150,000 of the 1,000,000 servicemen were able to vote by mail. Winchester, New Hampshire infantryman Elmer Bent declared that there should be no doubt about an eventual Union victory and that people on the home front should support the current administration. He also suggested that his comrades in the 14th NH Regiment were almost unanimous in their support of President Lincoln's reelection. It is apparent that a large majority of soldiers agreed with Bent; the *Sentinel* reported that 191 members of the 14th Regiment voted for Lincoln and only 12 voted for McClellan. Ultimately, slightly more than 2,750 New Hampshire soldiers voted absentee in the election – 2,066 of them voting for Lincoln and 690 for McClellan.

Having the opportunity to vote absentee when they were sacrificing so much for the nation was undoubtedly good for morale among the troops, allowing them to feel like they could still have a voice in the political process despite their physical absence from their own hometowns and states. Abraham Lincoln would have won in New Hampshire by more than 2000 votes even without the soldiers' vote, however. Nationally the margin was even wider. President Lincoln won the popular vote by more than 400,000 votes and the electoral vote by the wide margin of 212 votes to General McClellan's 21 votes.

Ultimately, the election was largely uneventful, despite the arguments by McClellan supporters that mail-in voting would result in widespread fraud and dishonesty in the election process. Building on that first extensive mail-in voting experience during the Civil War, absentee voting has become much more widely used in this country. Three states now conduct voting exclusively with mail-in ballots and all 50 states allow absentee voting.

Two days after the presidential election of 1864 the weekly *Sentinel* reported that: "A prominent copperhead politician in Keene threatened, a week or two ago, that if Lincoln was re-elected, 'blood would flow in our streets.' Well, as soon as the glad news came that the Union cause was triumphant at the polls, the aforesaid copperhead politician was invisible..." The Copperheads were a political faction that opposed the Civil War and wanted an immediate peace settlement with the Confederates. The *Sentinel* reporter continued his article with the words: "The election has passed off very quietly, neither blood runs, nor do copperheads clamor in our streets. All is quiet and calm." Let us hope that the same may be said of a presidential election held in the midst of a pandemic.