



John Hanks (1802-1889)

John Hanks was a cousin of Nancy Hanks Lincoln who moved in 1822 to southern Indiana from Kentucky, where he had been born. There Hanks first met Abraham Lincoln and lived off and on in the Lincoln household until he returned briefly to Kentucky in 1826. In 1828, Hanks moved to Macon County, Illinois, settling near Decatur. Though

illiterate, he got word to the Lincolns of the fertility of the Illinois soil, and they joined him in Macon County in 1830. John and Abraham worked together splitting rails from black walnut and honey locust trees then hired out to take a flatboat of goods to New Orleans. Although Hanks stated that Lincoln was shocked on the trip in 1831 at the sight of “Negroes chained – maltreated – whipt and scourged,” Lincoln recalled in 1860 that John had turned back at St. Louis and never completed the trip to New Orleans.

In 1860, as Lincoln’s political career was ascending, a Republican lawyer named Richard Oglesby took Hanks to get some of the rails he and Lincoln had split 30 years earlier. At the Republican state convention in Decatur in May, Oglesby announced that Hanks had a contribution and Lincoln’s cousin came down the aisle carrying a banner attached to two rails that proclaimed “ABRAHAM LINCOLN The Rail Candidate For President in 1860.” Hanks created such a stir with this he was able to sell rails from the old farm for years for a dollar a rail.

A fifty-nine-year-old Hanks later served in the Illinois infantry as a wagoner and was discharged in 1864. He attended Lincoln’s funeral in Springfield and has the dubious distinction of being one of the first to capitalize on the martyred president by displaying relics associated with Lincoln. John Hanks lived in retirement in Decatur from 1865 until his death in 1889.

The Louisville Wharf, ca. 1856

Courtesy of the W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, the University of Alabama