

Journal Divided – “Railsplitter”

Excerpt from Chapter 14 of Michael Burlingame’s *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (pgs 1633-1637)

Link to full Chapter Fourteen

<http://www.knox.edu/documents/pdfs/LincolnStudies/Burlingame,%20Vol%201,%20Chap%2014.pdf>

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A few days before the Decatur Convention met, Oglesby, who had been seeking ways to emphasize Lincoln’s humble origins (to justify something like Henry Clay’s cognomen, “the mill boy of the slashes”) had asked Hanks what Lincoln had been good at as a young settler in Illinois. “Well, not much of any kind but dreaming,” replied Hanks, “but he did help me split a lot of rails when we made a clearing twelve miles west of here.” Intrigued, Oglesby urged Hanks to show him the spot. They rode out, identified some rails that Lincoln and Hanks may have split three decades earlier, and carried away two of them. When Oglesby proposed to some friends that the rails be introduced at the Decatur convention, they told him to go ahead, for it could do no harm and might do some good.¹ He was not the only Illinois Republican to think the rail splitter image would help Lincoln. In March, Nathan M. Knapp had told a friend: “I want Abe to run; then I want a picture of him splitting rails on the Sangamon Bottom, with 50 cts per hundred marked on a chip placed in the fork of a tree nearby. I think it will win.”²

¹ Jane Martin Johns, “The Nomination of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency, an Unsolved Psychological Problem,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 10 (1917-18): 564-65; Plummer, Oglesby, 41-42.

² N. M. Knapp to Ozias M. Hatch, Winchester, Illinois, 12 March 1860, Hatch Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.