

Ancestor Envy

By Dani Crossley

I recently had the pleasure of researching the ancestors of one of our members, Bill Brobst. It was a great experience as most of his family lived in the Hemlock, West Hemlock and Valley townships in Columbia and Montour counties. Many are buried in Straub's Cemetery, where my husband takes care of the grounds there. The names would be familiar to many of you. What caught my eye was the story of Bill's third great-grandfather, James S. "California Jim" Short. I'm fortunate to have some interesting characters hanging about my family tree (look up Sam's Point near Ellenville, NY), but there's just something special about ancestors that either came over on the Mayflower or blazed the Oregon Trail following the lure of California gold. Bill's 3x great-grandfather was just such a man.

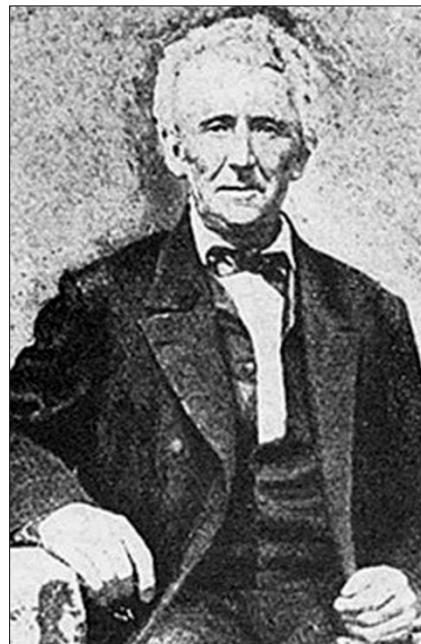
James S. Short was born in 1806 in Illinois. He was a contemporary of Abraham Lincoln! They spent a lot of time together as young men and James was asked for his memories of Lincoln by various of Lincoln's biographers.

"My first acquaintance with Mr. Lincoln was in May or June 1831 at New Salem," said James Short. "At that time I lived in Coxe's Grove, on the line between Morgan and Sangamon, and on coming into New Salem at that time, Mr. Lincoln was pointed out to me by my sister, now Mrs. Elias Hohimer, whom Mr. L. had before that time employed to make him a pair of pantaloons," Short later wrote contemporary biographer William H. Herndon. *"Without the necessary of a formal introduction we fell in together and struck up a conversation, the purport of which I have now forgotten. He made a favorable impression upon me by his conversation on first acquaintance through his intelligence & sprightliness, which impression was deepened from time to time as I became better acquainted with him."*

In a letter to Martin M. Morris on March 26, 1843, Mr. Lincoln wrote that Short was "as honorable a man as there is in the world." James Short was one of the first residents of the New Salem area and came to know Mr. Lincoln as soon as he moved to New Salem, shortly after he had taken a flatboat to New Orleans for Denton Offut. His farm was near the farm owned by James Rutledge, father of Anne Rutledge. Mr. Lincoln sometimes stayed at the Short farm and visited at the Rutledge farm. Short recalled Mr. Lincoln's fondness for "pitching quoates, telling Stories, and all proper amusements." Mr. Lincoln was "cheerful, and full of Highlarity and fun which made him Companionable and rather conspicuous among his associates."

Short came on hard times and relocated to California. His luck there was bad until he was appointed an Indian Agent for the Round Valley Indian reservation in California by President Lincoln. Things went from bad to worse and he was (falsely, he claimed) accused and suspended from his post in 1863. Even though he wrote to Lincoln for help, he was not reinstated and returned eventually to Madison County, Iowa where he died in 1874. He's buried there in Union Chapel Cemetery.

If you're wondering how he could possibly be connected to Montour/Columbia counties, his granddaughter, Olive Sarah Flint, married Martin Luther Brobst (who thought he'd try his luck out west for a few years in the late 1880s) in Colorado in 1890. They returned to Martin's home in Hemlock township a few years later and stayed. Olive Sarah Flint Brobst has her own interesting story, but that's for another time.



James S “California Jim” Short