

HEADBOARDS OF STONE - A MISSISSIPPI GRAVEYARD RABBIT BLOG

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Early Settlers On The Pototoc Trail - Potts Camp, MS.

The Pontotoc Trail, used for so many years by the early settlers of Mississippi, was once an old Indian trail. Later it became a road. Although Mississippi became a state in 1817, Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians held a large part of the land. By the treaties of Dancing Rabbit and Pontotoc of 1830 and 1832, the Indians agreed to give up the land in the Mississippi and move west of the Mississippi River. Colonel Erasmus Ferdinand Potts, born August 21, 1801 in South Carolina, traveled the Pontotoc Trail to the Federal Land Office in Pontotoc Ms. in 1836 to purchase land and settle and raise a family.

Col. Potts purchased several sections of land in Marshall and Benton Counties. He also owned land in the Delta. His first home, and a large trading post, was built on the Pontotoc Trail, a short distance from the Tippah River. At this time in history before erosion of the hills, Tippah River ran wide and deep with steep banks, so there were only a few places it could be forded. Where the Pontotoc Trail passed, east of the river was a natural ford, with a broad field and a high bluff on the south. From the bluff poured cool springs of water and the trees near by for firewood made this an ideal place for weary travelers to stop overnight. They used wagons, buggies, and horseback for transportation and as a long journey usually took several days, Colonel Potts encouraged people to stop at the camping site and furnished them with supplies. His hospitality became so widely known, people began to call the place Potts Camp.

Records show that Colonel Potts owned many slaves, cultivated a vast acreage of crops and raised hundreds of head of cattle, driving them overland to Memphis to be sold, or shipped to New Orleans on cattle boats. He also shipped quantities of grain.

Colonel Potts built a 22 room mansion and a girl's school named "Woods Academy". Mary Potts, and her mother, Elizabeth, were instructors there. The school burned in 1855 and the students were transferred to Pontotoc.

In 1856 Potts invested in the Mississippi Central Railroad and furnished most of the material and labor for the section between Holly Springs and Oxford. He became master mechanic and one of the directors of the railroad company. The entire railroad was completely destroyed during the War Between the States. Because of the mud and dusty roads, Potts and his workers layed boards a long distance on the Pontotoc Road. They built the first levee in the Mississippi bottom, also Tippah River bottom.

The first Potts Camp Post Office was built of logs near his home, with Colonel Potts' daughter, Mary, as the first postmistress. It closed when the Civil War started in 1861. Elizabeth Brownlee, whose family settled near Columbus, was the wife of Colonel Potts. They reared three children; another child died at age two and a half years old. (*photo top right Potts Camp in Pioneer Days, courtesy of Dale Potts Hollingsworth*)

When the war broke out, Colonel Potts, was too old to fight, so instead, he spent his time and money to help the Confederacy. No one really knew how he came about the name Colonel, however it happened, he had the name before the Civil War.

The Federal Troops stationed in Memphis and Holly Springs rode through the country raiding homes, burning barns and houses and stealing horses, food, and valuables. When the Federals began to take over this area Colonel Potts counted his gold and silver one night, blindfolded two slaves to go with him and rode away in a wagon. After the men dug the holes to bury the treasure, they were blindfolded again. I could find no record or knowledge if it's location was ever known or discovered.

Colonel Potts was arrested, tried on three counts, and convicted for helping the Confederacy. He was sent to Memphis then to Alton Federal Prison (near St. Louis, MO, on the river banks). He was too old to stand the brutal treatment, so the first settler of Potts Camp died December 16, 1863. Federal Troops brought his body home in a metal box filled with shavings. His wife wouldn't let them bury him until she examined the body to be sure it was her husband. After finding a scar on his ear she was satisfied, so they buried him in "Potts Cemetery", near Winborn. After the Federals helped bury Colonel Potts they ripped the carpets from the floors of his home, loaded them in the best carriages the family owned and drove away.

Later in 1870 Elizabeth was buried near him.

His son, James Benton Potts, was injured while serving the Confederacy and never completely recovered. James B. is buried in Hillcrest Cemetery in Holly Springs