



# Sandwiching in History Tour

## Potts Inn

15 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, Pottsville, Pope County

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By: Ashley Sides

*Special thanks to: Margaret Motley, Kara Bowers,  
and Garry Penman of the Pope County Historical Foundation  
and Potts Inn Museum*



Hi! I'm Ashley Sides, Preservation Outreach Coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for joining us for Sandwiching in History! Welcome to Potts Inn.

I can't wait to tell you the history of this special place, and after that we will get to tour the inside. But first, I want to express my sincere thanks to the good folks at the Pope County Historical Foundation and the Potts Inn Museum who are hosting us today: Margaret Motley, Kara Bowers, and Garry Penman. Let's thank them for letting us take this tour. [APPLAUSE]

You're standing in front of the former home of John Kirkbride Potts, built in 1858, and also known by the names of Potts Inn, Potts Station, or Potts Tavern. It is well known for its role as a station on the famous Butterfield Trail, and it remained the home of Potts family members for well over a century. It is the oldest home in Pottsville, and in fact Pottsville owes its origins to this house.

But we have to start our history much earlier than 1858. This was not Kirkbride Potts's first home in this area.

Kirkbride Potts was born in 1803 in Pennsylvania and moved with his family to New Jersey when he was around 9. At age 17, he set out for new opportunities, taking with him two enslaved families. In Missouri he met William and Robert Logan and traveled with them and their families in 1823 to sparsely settled Arkansas Territory.

They initially settled on the south side of the Arkansas River west of here in modern-day Logan County, but an 1828 federal treaty with the Cherokees required them to relocate, offering them preemptive privileges to obtain new land patents elsewhere at a reduced price as compensation. They redeemed them for land on Galla Creek, which runs through this area from Crow Mountain south to the Arkansas River.

Kirkbride and the daughter of Robert Logan, Pamela, married in 1829. They would go on to have 11 children, with 9 living into adulthood. With the help of his slaves, Potts built a two-story log house on Galla Creek at the foot of Crow Mountain just a mile north of here. The family lived there for 25 years. That house no longer survives.

It would have been smaller than this one, but it represented an earlier version of what this place would become under the Potts family. It was located by the old Military Road, which was the main route through here. During Indian removal in the 1830s, the Pottses found themselves along one of the routes of the Trail of Tears, and Kirkbride served as an Indian agent. For other travelers who were passing through, the log home offered hospitality when they needed to stop for the night or get a good meal. They must have stayed busy. In 1848, Kirkbride wrote to his sister in New Jersey, "Could you get me the draft of a convenient farm house and send it to me. I told you I had an idea of building and I am at a loss for a good and convenient plan to build upon. We have had a great deal of company since we got home and being in such a public place we have not house room enough. Last night, we had 13 members with us going to the Legislature and we have someone almost every night."<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, with a house so prominently located on the main thoroughfare, where travelers were stopping in, it served as a hub for the mail. Locally addressed mail would be dropped off at the house to be picked up by area residents, and letters could be sent out as well. Kirkbride became the local postmaster. In the hallway of this house, you will see an old desk with a tall back that opens to reveal cubbyholes for sorting mail. This was Kirkbride's "post desk" that he designed himself and had local artisans build. The desk even contains an 1847 copy of *Laws and Regulations of the Post Office Department*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Motley and Bowers 2021, 10)

<sup>2</sup> (Crossman 2021, 251)

Let's talk about the mail for a minute. In territorial Arkansas, and I expect for some time into statehood, there wasn't a good, organized postal system. If you wanted to send a letter to family back home in the east, you most likely had to send it, along with a few coins, with some merchant, trapper, or wagon that happened to be heading that direction. No guarantees your letter would make it. So you might send several copies of the letter by different travelers to increase your odds.

In 1849, gold was discovered in California, and Kirkbride Potts, along with others in the area, caught the fever that was spreading across the nation and joined the flow of travelers heading west. Potts didn't strike it rich in gold; he discovered another opportunity. The miners needed to have food provided, so Potts organized cattle drives to supply meat to the miners. He made a nice profit off this endeavor and returned to Arkansas with enough money to build the bigger house he had dreamed of.

That's this one. It is a simple Greek Revival house with a two-story porch, the upper level being supported on two-tiered columns. The house is referred to as being two-and-a-half stories, because the attic is spacious and usable. Four large chimneys stand outside the house, allowing all eight rooms of the house to be warmed by fireplaces. Three of the chimneys are original brick. The bricks were handmade in brick molds using clay from the creek. You can still see the brick molds they used on the second floor of the house.

The fourth chimney is a replacement made of local stone after the original brick chimney was damaged sometime in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The story goes that the stonemason went to the quarry, had a quantity of stone cut out, returned to the house, and built this chimney with every piece fitting perfectly and little to no stone left over.

The kitchen was built behind the house, independent from it. Today it is attached by a breezeway, but originally it was completely separate as a safety precaution—if a cooking fire got out of control, you wouldn't risk losing your whole house.

The well house is an outbuilding beside the kitchen. Water would be drawn from the covered well, and it could be poured into a trough that would fill a basin inside the well house. It would stay cool in there, and jars would be immersed in the trough of cool water to keep them refrigerated.

The other outbuilding that still stands is the original smokehouse. It was built using the logs from the Potts' first house.

This home was completed in 1858. It was also most likely built by enslaved people owned by Potts. These individuals are not known, but the museum staff are researching to see if they can be identified. It is known that Potts arrived in Arkansas some 30 years earlier with two enslaved families. A few years prior, in 1845, he had mentioned having eight African Americans, which he said counted as part of his family. As late as the 1920s there were still six or so cabins behind the house that were said to have been slave quarters. They may have looked like this one,

which was relocated here from elsewhere to preserve it. It is not known what became of the Potts family's enslaved people after they gained their freedom in the wake of the Civil War.

But in 1858, the Civil War was still to come. One of the most noteworthy episodes in this house's history occurred between 1858 and 1861, at which point the Civil War interrupted it: The Potts house became a station on John Butterfield's Overland Mail route, popularly known as the Butterfield Trail.

Prior to the establishment of the Overland Mail, communications with the West Coast were painfully slow. After 1849, with so many Arkansans heading to California, there was a great need to send letters west—but the distances were far greater, the mining communities were remote, and the transit time was much longer than to send mail eastward. Nationwide there was a strong demand for a quicker, more efficient, and more organized mail system to the West Coast.

Without a reliable overland route, the mail typically moved by ship. From Arkansas it would be sent down the Mississippi River by steamboat to New Orleans. Another ship would take it across the Gulf to Panama. It would be carted across the Isthmus of Panama (there was no canal at that time), then loaded onto another ship and then taken northwest to California. This 5,200-mile trip took a solid month and was very expensive. The other alternative was a 13,000-mile sea route around the southern tip of South America, which took 3-4 months! The railroad was still in the future, so in the meantime, the U.S. government commissioned a horse-drawn overland mail route to be set up and running by September 16, 1858. The contract was worth \$600,000 per year, but the condition was that the mail had to be able to make the trip one way in 25 days or less.

A New York stagecoach operator named John Butterfield won the federal contract to establish and operate this overland mail route. The route was to begin at two locations: One would start at St. Louis and come down through northwest Arkansas to Fort Smith. The other one would start at Memphis and cross Arkansas from east to west until it also reached Fort Smith. The route from Memphis to Fort Smith varied somewhat, sometimes dipping down to Little Rock and sometimes coming straight across, but it generally followed the old Military Road. That's the route that came through here. After merging in Fort Smith, a single route would run from there to San Francisco. It traveled along a southerly route via places like El Paso and Tucson in order to avoid the problem of routes to the north that would become impassable at times in the winter due to snow. At about 3,000 miles, Butterfield's Overland Mail route became the longest stage line in history.

In addition to transporting mail, this was also a great way to transport passengers to the West Coast or between stops along the way.

How did a stage line work? Nowadays on a long car trip you have to stop and refuel every so often. When horses are pulling your coach or wagon, you have to stop and change them out for fresh ones every so often. Because time was of the essence in delivering the mail, you couldn't

wait for the horses to rest and then continue on with the same team; you just got new horses and kept moving. The trip was made in *stages*. Hence the term *stagecoach*.

Stations were spaced out along the route every 15-20 miles or so when possible, though sometimes local conditions meant there wasn't a station for 30 or 40 miles. There were two kinds of stations: swing stations and home stations. Most stations were simple swing stations, which was a bit like a race car's pit stop: it was meant to be fast. Swing stations were often little more than stables. The coach conductor would blow his post horn two miles before the station to alert the station crew to prepare a fresh team of horses. When the coach arrived, the swing station keepers had less than 10 minutes to change the team and grease the axles before the coach was on its way again.

Every 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> station or so was a home station. Home stations had a tavern and also included facilities to house a station master, herders, harness makers, cooks, and blacksmiths. The stage would stop for up to 20 minutes to change horses *and* the driver, and to allow passengers to eat a quick hot meal. Passengers could also leave the stage to spend the night if they chose to. The stage would go on, and they could catch the next one.

Each coach driver was assigned to a 60-mile stretch of the route. He would get off at the home station, wait a day or two until the next coach arrived coming the other direction and drive the next stage back the same 60 miles to his previous home station. This enabled each driver to be intimately familiar with his 60-mile part of the route, which helped him make the drive as efficiently and consistently as possible.

Like I mentioned, the first Butterfield run was made in September 1858. The Potts' new home was completed earlier that year, right on the route. So it became one of the home stations, called Potts Station. It was a well-respected stop on the route, earning a reputation for good food and hospitality.

The coach would pull up next to this rock, which was a stepping stone to help the ladies get into and out of the coach.

Potts Inn could accommodate up to 32 guests staying overnight. The 8 rooms were furnished with 4 beds each, and guests could sleep in the attic if necessary; usually that would be for the children. The Overland Mail crew probably had their own quarters on the property. The driver would have spent his time between this station and the other home station on his route.

Butterfield's Overland Mail Company was popular. For a 10¢ stamp you could mail a letter to the West Coast and get it there reliably in about 23 days. For \$200—which was a lot back then—you could ride as a passenger and journey between east and west in an easier way than ever before. It wasn't comfortable, jolting along in a cramped coach or wagon along rough roads with very limited amenities, but it was pretty safe, and you didn't need your own horses or wagon. The Overland Mail was consistent: The stage went by twice a week in each direction, meaning the Potts could expect arrivals four times a week, but they wouldn't necessarily

know how many passengers would disembark wanting to eat or stay. Very occasionally, if river conditions were right, Butterfield's steamboats would carry the mail and passengers on the Arkansas River instead of having them go by coach. In those cases, Potts Station would be bypassed. But it's likely that the stagecoach pulled up to Potts Inn more than 300 times over the years, while passengers and mail went by steamboat only 12 times.

But Butterfield's Overland Mail Company only functioned on this route for about 2 ½ years. When the South seceded from the Union, the Confederates started seizing the coaches and livestock to use them in the war effort. Butterfield was ordered to transfer all remaining assets north to the Union-held Central Overland Trail, ending Butterfield's operation through Arkansas and the Southern states as of March and April 1861.

The Butterfield stage line was just one of many casualties of the Civil War. Four of Kirkbride and Pamela's sons joined the Confederate Army and went to fight in the war. Two of them were killed.

The house itself came through unscathed, and slowly life began to rebuild after the war ended. Potts Inn continued to host guests of all kinds and serve as a hub of local community life. In 1869, the railroad finally came knocking and Kirkbride and Pamela deeded a right of way to the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad to build across their land. The railroad is still there, to the north of the house, with trains running daily, except that it no longer stops and the depot is no longer there. But for many years, the railroad brought passengers to Potts Inn just as the Overland Mail coaches had.

As Pope County became more settled over the years, the community that coalesced here took shape. With Potts Station being the Butterfield Trail home station, and later with the train depot nearby, the early businesses were established in this immediate vicinity. After Pamela and Kirkbride Potts died in 1878 and 1879 respectively, generations of Potts descendants continued to live in this house and serve the community in various ways. Their son James Potts became the postmaster. He petitioned to name the community Pottsville in honor of his father. The petition was granted, and Pottsville was incorporated in 1897. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the commercial center of town shifted to the north along Highway 64, but Potts Inn has continued to play a central role in the culture of the city.

The last member of the Potts family to live in this home was Mary Potts, daughter of James and Ada Potts, and granddaughter of Kirkbride and Pamela Potts. In the 1960s there was a surge of interest in protecting and restoring this 100-year-old house that was starting to show its age. A Russellville woman named Marge Crabaugh spearheaded a movement in cooperation with several descendants of the Potts family to transfer ownership of the house to Pope County and open it as a museum. Grants were written, restoration consultants were called in from Colonial Williamsburg, and much-needed repair work was done. The house was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1970, and it opened as Potts Inn Museum in 1973.

The Pope County Historical Foundation continues to be responsible for the operation and upkeep of the museum. Under their stewardship, Potts Inn has continued to be the cultural heart of Pottsville. Numerous events take place here, like Easter egg hunts and the annual Butterfield Days festival. For years, local school students have contributed to promoting the legacy of Potts Inn by dressing in period garb and narrating the history of the house to visitors on special occasions. And we're in luck, because they will be doing this for us today!

Historic preservation is an ongoing effort, and it is a partnership between many different entities. The Arkansas Historic Preservation Program is proud to have been able to partner with the Pope County Historical Foundation on numerous occasions to help restore and preserve this historic property. In recent years alone, we have been able to provide grants for ramps and sidewalks for accessibility in accordance with the American with Disabilities Act, assessing sills and initiating repair, and repairing a portion of the roof. In the coming months, Potts Inn will be receiving a complete reroofing by Pope County, as well as a fresh coat of paint. Where there's a will, there's usually a way, and the Pope County Historical Foundation has been diligent about utilizing the various available means to protect Potts Inn for future generations to visit, learn from, and enjoy.

In a moment I would like to invite you to tour the house. You will be able to visit all the levels, including the attic, but watch your head on the low attic entry as you go up the stairs. You'll be able to look into each room from the rope barriers in the doorways and read about each space and the items that are there. Behind the house is the detached kitchen, and near it you will find the well and well house.

They are shaded by a huge bois d'arc tree that was here before Kirkbride Potts was even born. That's something to think about: that tree likely dates to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and has seen all of the changes and all of the history we have just talked about, which took place on this property.

You may also enjoy looking into the various other cabins that are here on the property. With the exception of the smokehouse—which is original to Potts—the others have been relocated to this site from elsewhere, but they recall a time when there would have been other such buildings here, such as stables and slave cabins. Many of them have special exhibits of their own, such as historic clothing, dolls, medical equipment, farm implements, and arrowheads.

Staff from the Pope County Historical Foundation are here to answer any questions you may have as you explore the house and museum grounds.

Thank you for coming, and we hope to see you next month at Presbyterian Village in Little Rock!

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