



FINDING AID

Daniel Trotter Potts Letters **1824-1827, 1948**

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HISTORY

Daniel Trotter Potts was born July 18, 1794, to Zebulon and Martha (Trotte or Trotter) Potts in Conshohocken, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. He was the youngest of ten children born to the couple. Zebulon Potts, a supporter of the American Revolution despite his Quaker religion as well as a Pennsylvania state senator, died on March 17, 1801, in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania. Martha died on July 29, 1803, in Montgomery, Pennsylvania. Daniel may have worked in a mill as a young man.

In 1822, he joined William Ashley's and Andrew Henry's Rocky Mountain Fur Company, which was conducting large fur trapping expeditions into the U. S. West. Potts is known as one of "Ashley's Hundred," or part of the initial group of trappers to join the company. Other members of this group include Jedediah Smith, John S. Gardner, and Jim Bridger. William Sublette, Hugh Glass, and Thomas Fitzpatrick joined the company the following year. Many of these trappers are noted as explorers whose routes across the mountains were later followed by those on the Overland Trail. Trotter wrote letters to family and friends from the annual rendezvous held by the company. In these letters, he describes the landscape and some his activities. His letter to his brother from Sweet Lake on July 8, 1827, contains the first known written account of some of the area now designated as Yellowstone National Park, including descriptions of Yellowstone Lake and several geysers and thermal features. This letter was published later that fall in the Philadelphia Gazette and Daily Advertiser and then republished in several other newspapers in the country--the first known published account of the area.

In 1828, Potts left the fur company and travelled to Texas where he planned to buy cattle in partnership with his brother, Robert. However, the funds his brother Robert placed on account were never drawn upon. The family learned of a ship loaded with cattle that had gone down in the Gulf of Mexico in 1828, and Daniel was presumed to have died on board.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

DANIEL TROTTER POTTS LETTERS 1824-1827, 1948

CATALOG NUMBER: MSC 122

VOLUME: 0.1 LINEAR FEET

DESCRIPTION

The Daniel Trotter Potts letters consist of three handwritten letters penned by a fur trapper in the Rocky Mountains to friends and family in Pennsylvania from 1824-1828. The letters include descriptions of the landscape, the wildlife, and interactions, both positive and negative, with various Native American tribes including the Blackfeet, Arikara, Sioux, Crow, Gros Ventre, Ute, Shoshone, Paiute, and Bannock (it is not possible to determine more accurate nations or tribes from the contents of the letters). The letters include the first known written description of the area now part of Yellowstone National Park, which was later published in newspapers and became the first known published account of Yellowstone.

The first letter was written to a friend, Thomas Cochlen, on July 7, 1824, most likely during the annual summer rendezvous. It was read by one of Potts's brothers and then copied and forwarded to one of Potts's sisters in 1825. The letter includes a description of several battles that occurred during the Arikara War of 1823-1824. It also describes the grizzly bear attack on fellow mountain man Hugh Glass, although his name is not given. Potts also describes being separated from his party without adequate supplies and being assisted by a group of Native Americans (nation unknown) as well as a number of skirmishes with the Blackfeet. He also details the weather, mentions hunting buffalo (bison), and describes an area of hot springs, most likely an area near present day Cody, Wyoming.

The second letter from Sweet Lake (now Bear Lake) rendezvous was written to Potts's brother Robert on July 8, 1827. He describes a trip to the Snake and Columbia rivers. His path leads him past the southern edge of Yellowstone Lake and a thermal area that is most likely the West Thumb Geyser Basin. The sight of the lake and the descriptions of the mud pots and geysers are the first known written descriptions of the area that is now Yellowstone National Park. Potts's also describes additional skirmishes with the Blackfeet and is assisted by the "Snake Indians" (Western Shoshone, Bannack, or Northern Paiute) and the "Utaws" or Utes. It is this letter that was published in the Philadelphia Gazette and Daily Advertise and then republished by several other newspapers including the Niles' National Register.

The third letter is posted from St. Louis and is dated October 13, 1828. It is addressed to his brother Robert. Potts describes his difficulties in making any profit as a fur trapper or trader and his decision to leave the Rocky Mountains and head first to St. Louis and then to New Orleans. He also describes the winter weather and additional encounters with the Blackfeet.

The collection also contains a letter written by descendant Anne G. Rittenhouse, from whom the collection was acquired, describing the family genealogy, provenance of the letters, and biographical information on Potts.

Due to the fragility of the letters, researchers must use reproductions. Both physical and digital reproductions are available.

ARRANGEMENT

The documents are arranged chronologically.

PROVENANCE

Purchased from Anne G. Rittenhouse, a descendent of Daniel Potts's brother William, by Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, then donated to the Park, 1947.

RESTRICTIONS: YES. Due to the fragility of the originals, use of reproductions is required.

ASSOCIATED MATERIALS

- Digital images and transcripts of the letters available at the Montana Memory Project (mtmemory.org)
- Potter Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania
- Daniel Trotter Potts Letters (photostats), Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley
- Reproduction of the published newspaper account, biography of Potts, and histories of the mountain men era, Yellowstone National Park Research Library

CONTAINER LIST

Box 1

File Unit Nbr	Title
01.01	Letter to Thomas Cochlan, 1824-1825
01.02	Letter to Robert Potts, 1827
01.03	Letter to Robert Potts, 1828
01.04	Reproductions (see also montanamemory.org), 1824-1828 (2017)
01.05	Provenance and biographical details, Anne G. Rittenhouse, 1948