



President James K. Polk State Historic Site

A Photographic Tour

Introduction

The historic site comprises 21 acres of the original 150 acres that belonged to James K. Polk's parents, Samuel and Jane Polk, who were married in December of 1794. Ezekiel Polk, Samuel's father, gave the couple these 150 acres as a wedding gift. John Knox, Jane's father, passed away just before she married Samuel. In his will, he left many items for Jane, including two enslaved girls named Violet and Luce who lived with the family here on the site starting when they were 6 to 9 years old. The future president of the United States was born on November 2, 1795 and spent his first 11 years here with his family. In 1806, the Polks and the enslaved members of their household moved to the Duck River Valley in Tennessee. Soon thereafter, the family sold the property to neighbors.

By the 1850s, the original birthplace was in ruins. By 1900 little more than the basic foundations remained. Although the buildings you see today are not the original structures of the Polk homestead, they are historic structures from the same time period, and they came from elsewhere in Mecklenburg County. After being moved to this site in the 1960s, the buildings were restored based on a description recorded by the former North Carolina Governor David Swain when he visited the area in 1849.

In 1904, the Mecklenburg chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) placed a marker at the site to identify it as the former Polk homestead. Over the next fifty years, efforts were made to create a more substantial memorial to the only president to be born in Mecklenburg County.



Eventually, the state of North Carolina agreed to create a new state historic site, complete with a visitor's center and restored local cabins. The President James K. Polk State Historic Site was officially opened in 1968. First Lady, Mrs. Lyndon "Lady Bird" Johnson dedicated the site on May 20, 1968.

Exterior of the Main House

The main house is constructed of white oak with faux red clay daubing pressed between the logs. Historically, daubing was used to insulate and reinforce a building's structure. The logs are cut on the half-dovetail -- traditional for historic log cabins -- to create a stable structure. The house is also elevated atop large stones, which prevents the lower logs from rotting and provides circulation underneath the structure. This crawlspace area made a great place for chickens to hang out and stay cool!

Upon arriving at the home, 19th century visitors would have known the Polk family was

above-average economically based on several key features. First, the house has three glass windows. This was a sign of wealth because glass panes were generally imported from England and then brought from a distant harbor all the way to the backcountry. Additionally, the size of the house - two rooms on the main floor and a second floor with two additional rooms - indicated the wealth of the family. Many people of lower economic status lived in simpler one-room cabins, some with two floors, much like the Polks' kitchen house.

Interior of the Main House

The main house contains period furnishings from the late 1790s and early 1800s. Unfortunately, none of the furnishings came from the Polk family. The main room in the house is known as the parlor. The room features pine paneling, chair railing and a simple mantelpiece, all constructed from locally available pine wood. These details add to the finished feel of the interior and mark the space as more refined than the rustic interior of the kitchen house.

In some ways, the parlor was like our modern living room, but the space was used for much more than what a modern family uses their living room for today! This space was multipurpose because it was the family's main shared space. Below are some of the most common uses for the parlor:

Dining Room

Though food was cooked in the kitchen house, the family ate their meals in the main house. Violet or Luce would have brought the meals in, the drop leaf table brought into the middle of the room and the sides raised. The family could then have enough space to eat.

Office and School Room

Both business and schoolwork were conducted in the parlor. The main crops grown by Samuel Polk on the farm were cotton and corn, with some tobacco and wheat to supplement. He would sit at a desk like the one we have here and record information on his harvests, trading, market costs and debts or loans that were either owed to or by him.

Jane could also use the parlor as the school room for the couple's five children. The Polk children were taught primarily at home for their early years, though James K. Polk would attend the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill from 1816 until 1818 while in his early twenties.

Bedroom

The pencil post bed served as Jane and Samuel's bed, and the trundle underneath was probably used by either the children when their own beds were given to visitors or by Violet and Luce if they were required to spend the night in the main house to tend to the family. The bed frame is constructed of solid wood with ropes wound between holes to support the mattress. The mattress was known as a "tick" and was filled with natural materials like corn husks, flax husks or hay. Over time the ropes would loosen and needed to be tightened. A bed "key" or "wrench" was used to tighten the ropes.

Back Bedchamber

The back room is where some of the children, visitors or family members would have slept. The room includes two rope beds, dressers and a wardrobe. The wash basin was the family's primary means of bathing as baths were few and far between!



Packhouse

During the Polk's time, the pack house was typically used as storage for tools, feed and other items. Animals were probably not housed here. Mostly like, they were left to graze freely. The packhouse is open, meaning it does not have clay daubing because it was used to dry crops, which needed air to circulate to prevent molding. A typical farm at this time would have also had a number of additional buildings on the property, including a smokehouse for preserving meat, a corn house for drying corn, an outhouse and a building for housing the family's cotton gin.

Kitchen House

A separate structure for cooking was preferable because an attached kitchen carried a great risk of fire, and an active fire produced soot and ash and would overheat the main house in warmer months. This kitchen house is made from the same natural resources as the main house, including white oak logs and red clay. Many families would have lived in a structure more like this if they could not afford to build a larger, separate home. A mixture of lime and water, known as whitewash, was used to keep the kitchen bright, help deter certain pests from laying eggs in the wood and even act as an antibiotic.

The enslaved members of the Polk household may have slept in a kitchen house like this or they may have had a separate cabin where they

spent the evenings. Violet and Luce were later joined by two enslaved persons whose names we do not know. We only know their presence because they were recorded as taxable property in Mecklenburg County records. Before moving to Tennessee, one of the women gave birth to a child named Elias. It is unclear who his father was. It is likely Violet or Luce were married out to an enslaved man on another farm in the area and Elias would have stayed with his mother. While it is possible his father was a Polk family member, we do not have any evidence to support that theory. Elias spent much of his life enslaved by the Polks, even working for President James K. Polk in the White House.

Violet and Luce would have been responsible for a wide variety of tasks on the homestead, including domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, working in the kitchen garden and laundry, as well as farm labor such as harvesting, processing crops and assisting in the fields. The two enslaved persons were probably focused mainly on farm labor.

We continue to research the lives of the people the Polk family enslaved, including on the two plantations that President Polk owned in Sommerville, TN and Yalobusha County, MS.





In that effort, we have created the “Enslaved Polks” digital project to share stories about Violet, Luce, and Elias’s lives. Scan the QR code here to explore the project:



Interior of the Kitchen

The large open hearth is typical of the early 1800s. Most of the cooking was done with hot coals placed on the hearth, rather than in or above the actual fire. Just like we use a burner on the stove, piles of coals on the hearth were used to concentrate heat beneath a pot or pan.

There are many items made of iron near the hearth, including a Dutch oven, a spider skillet, a toaster, and trivets. If women wanted to cook directly over the fire, they would use S hooks to hang from the hooks in the back of the fireplace.

To regulate the cooking temperature, you could use these hooks to change the distance from the flames of the fire, just as we would now adjust the knobs on our stove eyes. These items are still used today during our open-hearth cooking demonstrations.

Once per month, we host live cooking demonstrations in the Kitchen House.

Chores

The kitchen is where the Polk children probably spent much of their time doing daily chores. Boys would have often been responsible for chopping wood, fetching water with a yoke, working with larger animals, hunting and helping Samuel in the fields before heading off for their lessons. Girls were responsible for cooking, churning butter, sewing, cleaning and tending the family’s kitchen garden. Of course, depending on the number of male and female family members, lots of the chores would be done by whoever was available. While gender roles often determined who was responsible for what around the farm, the necessity of these tasks meant that they would have to be done one way or the other!

Food Storage

Gourds were widely used for food storage because they are very versatile. They were used for dried beans, corn, rice and even for making musical instruments. Of course, there was no refrigeration in the Polk’s time. Instead, people stored food in root cellars and springhouses to keep it cool.

Ceramic vessels, typically covered with cheese cloth or another temporary barrier to keep bugs out, were used for pickling vegetables and making sugared preserved fruits. Large barrels were also used to preserve and store food and beverages.

Kitchen Garden

The garden is surrounded by a paled fence to keep out animals such as rabbits and deer. The garden is planted in a European style with raised beds and walkways between for easy access to each bed. The garden was the family's primary source of herbs, vegetables and medicinal herbs. It was reserved for the family's personal use rather than for cash crops, which were grown on the more distant fields. An average family's kitchen garden was probably much larger than the one here at the site, often measuring approximately one square acre or more. Today, the Charlotte Herb Guild volunteers their time and talents to help tend the garden.

Monument

In 1904, The Mecklenburg Chapter of the DAR erected a stone pyramid monument in memory of James K. Polk. For more than sixty years, it was the only evidence that a president of the United States spent his boyhood in Mecklenburg County. When the state created the historic site, the DAR gave permission for the monument to be moved to its present location.

Cemetery

Believed to have originally been located on Ezekiel Polk's land, this presumed family cemetery was originally situated near Interstate 485. Over the years the cemetery was largely abandoned and had been subject to vandalism and decay. In 1988, the proposed route of I-485 threatened to bisect the historic cemetery. In response, the North Carolina Department of Transportation and the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources moved the cemetery to the President James K. Polk State Historic Site. There are 101 reburials currently in the cemetery but only 10 recognizable headstones have survived.

The Polk family cemetery has special importance to the history of the area. It is the resting place for James K. Polk's grandmother, Maria Polk, and several other relatives who died before James' birth. The cemetery also includes Alexander and McCleary graves, two families that intermarried with the Polks and were also some of the founding families of Mecklenburg County.

