



Benjamin F. Ficklin, Monticello's colorful Confederate owner

By Rick Britton

History has generally overlooked Benjamin Franklin Ficklin. This is somewhat surprising, considering that Ficklin was instrumental in founding the Pony Express, participated in one of the Civil War's most desperate assaults, ran the blockade for the Confederacy, was arrested in connection with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and barely escaped death numerous times while running freight and mail across the rough-hewn American West.

He also once owned Monticello.

Born in Albemarle County on Dec. 18, 1827, Benjamin Franklin Ficklin was the son of the Rev. Benjamin Ficklin, a well-to-do property owner and magistrate who also operated a dry goods store in Charlottesville. Ben's older brother, Slaughter W.

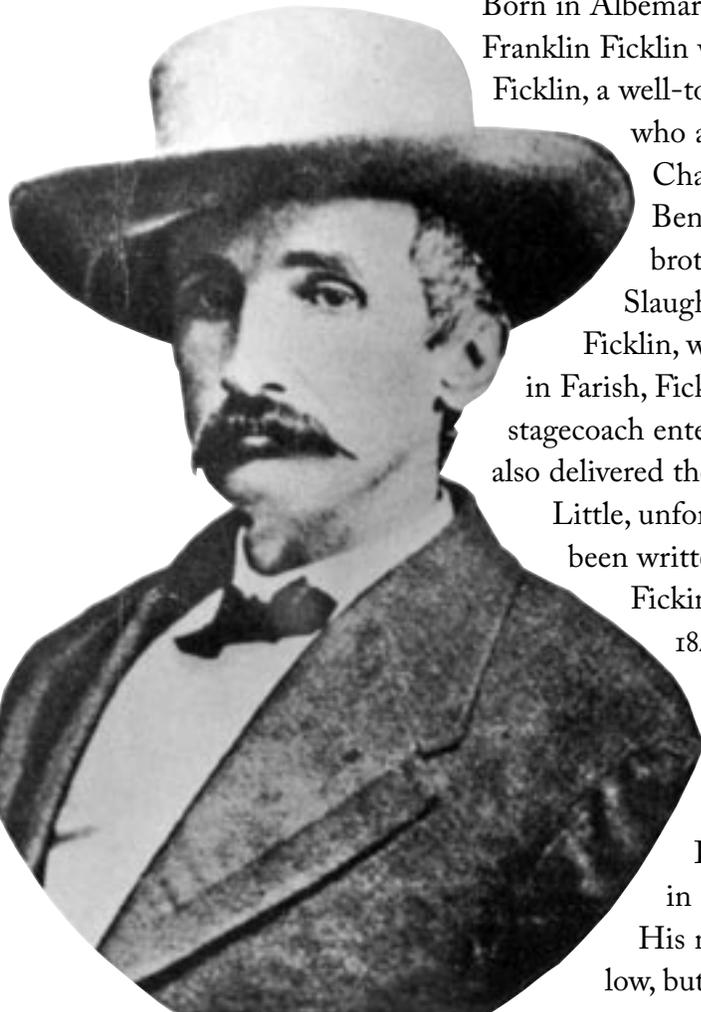
Ficklin, was a partner in Farish, Ficklin & Co., a stagecoach enterprise that also delivered the U.S. mail.

Little, unfortunately, has been written about Ficklin's youth. In

1844, at age 16, Ficklin entered Virginia Military Institute in Lexington.

His marks were low, but his pranks

Albemarle County native Benjamin F. Ficklin held the title to Monticello in the waning days of the Civil War.



Virginia Military Institute Archives

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became legendary. He once buried the superintendent's boots deep in the snow, and on another occasion painted the superintendent's horse with zebra-like stripes. After another nighttime prank, this one involving a howitzer and lots of broken glass, Ficklin was dismissed and unceremoniously sent home.

He later wheedled himself back into VMI – claiming, with more than a bit of exaggeration, that he had since fought in the Mexican War and had been “left for dead on the field of battle” – and succeeded in graduating, fourth from the bottom of his class, on July 4, 1849.

Ficklin then taught school for a brief period, but the lure of the West was too great. By the early 1850s he was out on the plains in the employ of the massive Russell, Majors & Waddell freight line. Ficklin apparently learned quite a bit as a route agent for this firm. “He familiarized himself with [the West],” said the San Angelo (Texas) Evening Standard, “made the acquaintance of the Indians, proved himself a shrewd trader, and mixed freely with the military.”

After armed conflict between Mormon settlers and U.S. troops in the Utah Territory, known as the Mormon War, broke out in 1857, Ficklin signed up as courier and scout with an Army expedition. When the expeditionary force ran short of forage and food in midwinter, Ficklin, during a 41-day trek, braved blistering cold – and belligerent Latter-day Saints – in order to locate the much-needed supplies.

By 1860 Ficklin was working as a route superintendent for the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company. The Pony Express was founded as part of this company's huge operations. Many authorities on the West maintain that Ficklin first hatched the audacious idea for this horse-and-rider mail service. “Ben Ficklin is the man who originated the Pony Express and carried it into operation,” William W. Gwin, who represented California in the U.S. Senate in 1850-55 and 1857-61, wrote in his memoirs.

Under superintendent Ficklin's management, the 1,966-mile relay route between St. Joseph, Mo., and Sacramento, Calif., was established across treacherous mountain terrain, sun-baked desert sands, and hostile Indian country.

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While the Pony Express operated for just over 18 months, Ficklin's tenure was even shorter. After just three months, he once again followed the call of adventure: War had broken out between North and South.

Back in his native state, in May 1861 he was commissioned a major and appointed temporary quartermaster general of Virginia's provisional army. Not content behind a desk, however, Ficklin joined Confederate forces in the field and on July 1 participated in the disastrous assault at Malvern Hill, southeast of Richmond. There, according to Charlottesville editor James Alexander, Ficklin "succeeded by his own hands in saving a cannon abandoned by those who had served it."

But army life between battles was notoriously dull, and Ficklin turned to the high seas. He became a blockade runner, operating three ships in that risky business – the *Virginia*, *Coquette*, and *Giraffe*.

Ficklin's ocean-going operations must have proven quite lucrative, for on Nov. 17, 1864, he purchased Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and 600 surrounding acres from the government of the Confederate States of America. Having been the property of Uriah Phillips Levy, a commodore in the U.S. Navy who owned Monticello from 1836 until his death in 1862, the estate had been seized by the Confederacy under its Alien Enemies Act, which authorized the confiscation of property owned by Northerners.

According to an account in the Lynchburg Republican, the deputy marshal handling the auction sale of Monticello first told the large assembled crowd that one acre of the property – the Jefferson family cemetery – was reserved and would not be sold. "Monticello was put up," the newspaper noted, "and the first bid was \$20,000, the last \$80,500, and Lieutenant-Colonel B. F. Ficklin the purchaser. ... The bust of Mr. Jefferson, which stood in the hall on a fluted Corinthian pedestal, brought only \$50, and will still retain its place, as Mr. Ficklin repurchased it."

The Lynchburg newspaper also described the condition of the Monticello house: "Visitors have defaced the walls of the house by scribbling their names over them. Hundreds of them can be seen and read on each side of the front entrance to the hall; pieces of

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the bust of Mr. Jefferson were chipped off; chairs, tables, mirrors, vases broken and destroyed, and in some cases mementoes of rare virtue and art have been purloined.... Shame, shame upon our thoughtless countrymen; why should they be so disrespectful to the sepulcher of the great patriot of the Revolution?"

Ficklin did not acquire the title to Monticello until March 17, 1865, a mere three weeks before Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Although it is unclear whether Ficklin ever stayed in Jefferson's home, Ficklin family lore holds that the adventurer took his aged father to Monticello, where he died.

(The U.S. government never recognized the Confederacy's or Ficklin's ownership of Monticello; after the Civil War all confiscated properties were returned to their previous owners. In 1879, after years of disputes among the heirs of Uriah Levy, his nephew Jefferson Monroe Levy bought and took possession of Monticello.)

In April 1865, Ben Ficklin was in Washington, D.C. On the 16th of the month, two days after President Lincoln was killed by John Wilkes Booth, Ficklin was arrested on suspicion of involvement in the assassination. A telegraph operator had reported Ficklin to the

Visitors on the East Portico of Monticello shortly after the Civil War.

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authorities, saying the 37-year-old ex-Confederate presented “the appearance of a refined pirate.” Ficklin was never tried, and was released after spending a couple of months in prison.

Within two years he was back in Texas, running the U.S. mail between San Antonio and El Paso. When his stagecoaches were attacked by Kickapoos, Ficklin managed to obtain cavalry escorts. He later armed his passengers with Spencer repeating carbines.

The adventurous Benjamin Franklin Ficklin died March 10, 1871, but not from a bullet, arrow, or cannonball. Rather, a jagged fishbone lodged in his throat during a dinner at the Willard Hotel in Washington. When a physician tried to remove it he severed an artery, and Ficklin drowned in his own blood. His body was transported to Charlottesville and lies buried in the city’s Maplewood Cemetery.

“Take his character throughout,” noted the Charlottesville Chronicle, “and he was one of whom his mother State may well be proud.

Brave, adventurous, kind-hearted and generous, he had at the same time gifts of intellect which made him the foremost man in every enterprise in which he was engaged.”

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Ficklin’s Charlottesville grave.

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