

Charles Debrille Poston (the "Father of Arizona")



Charles D. Poston, in his later years.



Charles Debrille Poston's final resting place at the summit of Poston Butte near Florence, Arizona. This is where he had wanted to build a "Temple to the Sun".

Charles Debrille Poston , by Mary Nan Crowther (28 Nov 1997) as revised by Phil Crowther (20 Mar 2000)

Charles Debrille Poston was born in Hardin County, Kentucky on April 20, 1825. He was one of the children of Temple Poston and Judith Dibrell. Although he died in virtual poverty in Phoenix, Arizona on June 24, 1902, during his life he accomplished much. Because of his role in convincing Congress to create the territory of Arizona, he is known as the "Father of Arizona". He was an explorer and entrepreneur, politician and Indian agent, expert on agriculture and irrigation and a conservationist, author, poet, religious and eccentric.

In an effort to alleviate his poverty and in recognition of his valuable service, the Legislature of Arizona in 1899 voted him a pension of \$25 per month. The act describes some of his accomplishments:

Whereas Charles D. Poston in January 1854, prospected the Ajo mines in what is now Pima County, Arizona, and in the same year, organized on said mines the first mining company to invest capital and to do development work on mines in what is now Arizona, after its transfer to the United States under the Gadsden purchase; and was from 1856 to 1861 Deputy Clerk and Recorder of Dona Ana County, New Mexico, which then embraced all Arizona, and in 1863 gave Arizona her name, and obtained President Lincoln's signature to the act, that, together with the then delegate to Congress from New Mexico, he had drawn and obtained Congressional enactment thereof, creating the Territory of Arizona; and in 1864 was elected first delegate to Congress from Arizona, and from 1867 to 1880 was register of the United States land office of Arizona and

Whereas, from the above and many other well-known facts, Charles D. Poston, among all other pioneers, was pre-eminently the moving spirit, and in fact, may be truly said to be the father of Arizona

The foundation for his later accomplishments was set in Kentucky, where he studied the law and was admitted to the bar in 1847, at age 22. In September 1848, he married Margaret Haycraft, the granddaughter of Samuel Haycraft, Sr., one of the founders of Elizabethtown. Their first child, Sarah Lee Poston, was born on November 3, 1849. Another child was born in 1851, but died shortly thereafter. Even worse, the difficult birth left Margaret Haycraft paralyzed for the rest of her life.

In the meantime, Charles was encouraged by the discovery of gold in California to seek his fortune out west. He left his wife in the care of her relatives and began a life-long pursuit of fame and fortune. His first adventure began in 1853-54 with the exploration of a large portion of the Gadsden Purchase on behalf of the Iturbide family. This venture resulted in the founding of Yuma, Arizona, where he first met S. P. Heintzelman, then a Major in the Army. From 1854-1856, he returned east to obtain funding for a silver mining company, which was eventually formed with his friend S. P. Heintzelman as President. He returned to Arizona, stopping to outfit his expedition in San Antonio, where (as the letter below indicates) he took the time to visit with several Dibrell cousins.

From 1856 to 1861, he conducted silver mining operations at the Heintzelman and other mines, which were frequently threatened by the Apache and by bandits. In 1861, the Union forces succeeded in igniting a war with the Apache and then abandoning the Southwest. This quickly led to anarchy with the result that his brother, John Lee Poston, was killed at the Heintzelman mine. After several harrowing adventures, Charles was compelled to abandon the mines, leaving over \$1 million in equipment behind.

Back in Washington, Charles volunteered to serve as an aide to his old friend (now General) Heintzelman, and was asked to help convince President Lincoln and the Congress to create the separate territory of Arizona. While this had been tried several times before, it was thought that since Charles was a Union man and possessed considerable powers of persuasion, that he might succeed. Charles took to the task with his characteristic thoroughness and conviction. Lincoln and his staff supported the measure, and with the assistance of key members of Congress, the measure was passed and signed into law in 1863.

Charles was appointed by President Lincoln to serve as Arizona's first superintendent of Indian affairs. In July 1864, Charles was elected as Arizona's first delegate to Congress, but was defeated only a few months later when the first regular election was held. He returned to Arizona until 1868, when he was asked to serve as special envoy to Asia and to study the irrigation practices of Asia and Europe. During this time he met many of the titled heads of Asia and Europe. He practiced law in England until 1876, when he returned to the United States for the centennial year.

In 1877, he again turned towards the Sunset land to take charge of the United States land office in Florence. By 1880, he was living in Tucson, and had started to take on the persona of a somewhat eccentric elder statesman. While his frequent and highly opinionated letters to the editor became the source of amusement to many (he even took a shot at one editor who impugned his integrity), he also championed several worthwhile enterprises, such as the formation of the Pioneer's Historical Society, his conservation efforts and his efforts to resolve the Indian situation.

In 1884, his wife died in Kentucky and in 1885, he was briefly married to Mattie Tucker, a much younger woman. In 1890, he moved to Phoenix as Agent of the Department of Agriculture, a job which he held until 1895. He was widely recognized as an expert on agriculture and irrigation. However, starting in 1895, he appears to have begun his final slide into poverty. This was exacerbated in 1898 by the death of his only daughter Sarah Lee Poston. She had married Dr. Benjamin Franklin Pope, and they had several children. Dr. Pope was eventually appointed chief surgeon of the Fifth army corps in the advance on Santiago, and died at his post in the Philippines in 1898, with the rank of deputy surgeon general. Mrs. Pope died on the Pacific while returning home with her husband's remains.

In 1899, the Arizona Legislature attempted to assist by voting the pension noted above. He died in Phoenix on June 24, 1902, and narrowly escaped being buried in potter's field. In 1925, his remains were removed to his beloved Poston's Butte near Florence, where he had once hoped to build a Temple to the Sun. This wish was partly fulfilled, as he was buried under a pyramid-shaped monument at the summit of the hill.

Letter from Charles Dibrell Poston to Frank Dibrell

(copied from the transcribed Dibrell History)

**Phoenix, Arizona
April 5, 1892**

**Mr. Frank Dibrell,
Seguin, Texas**

Dear Sir:

I saw your name in a newspaper the other day, which reminded me of a very pleasant visit to Seguin in 1856 many years before you were born. At the time my cousins, Joe and Anthony Dibrell, owned a store in Seguin and a farm a few miles Southeast.

I was on my way to Arizona to seek my fortune. Have had many vicissitudes. Have been rich, have been poor, have been in Congress, have been around the world, have been at the old home of the De Brilles, at Lagnx on the Marne, just above its junction with the Seine, 25 miles above Paris. Our great ancestor whom I very well remember, was a soldier of the Revolution and you or any of his descendants can join the "Sons of the American Revolution" by getting a transcript of the record of his services from the pension office. My number National is 1915, District of Columbia 115. I shall be glad to hear from any of the Dibrell family in Texas or in the Choctaw Nation.

**Fraternally yours,
(Signed) Charles Debrill Poston**

Source Information

A. W. Gressinger, "Charles D. Poston, Sunland Seer" (pub. 1961)