

The Wizard of Potter Place

HISTORY

BY Paul Heller

It seems somehow fitting that the title “America’s first native-born magician” was bestowed on Richard Potter in the pages of a magic magazine published by none other than America’s most celebrated magician, Harry Houdini. Potter, the child of a slave, became a legend in 18th and 19th century America. His exploits were reported in Houdini’s magazine, *Conjurer’s Monthly*, by G. Dana Taylor in the December 1906 issue:

Potter was a hypnotist and a celebrated ventriloquist. Here are a few of the wonders he performed. Before a score of people and in the open air, free from trees, houses, or mechanisms, he threw up a ball of yarn and he and his wife climbed up on it and vanished in the air. A person coming up the road asked what the people were gazing at, and being told, he said he met them going down the road. Potter also crawled through a solid log. One day he happened to be passing a farm where several men were trying to start a load of hay, which was to be pulled up the hill into a barn. Potter laughed at them and unhitching the horses, he produced a rooster from his pocket and hitching him on with a string he pulled the load up into the barn....

Fact, fiction or magic?

It can be difficult to separate fact from legend in the matters of the great magician’s life story. There has been speculation that he was the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin — a lineage that makes an appealing story were it not for the fact that Franklin had been several years absent from the country when Richard was born in 1783. It was

once believed that he was the son of Sir Charles Henry Frankland and his slave, Dinah, but later research showed that Sir Charles (also known as Sir Harry) died 15 years before Richard’s birth.

Although Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1783, Richard never lived as a slave. He attended the public school in Hopkinton, Mass., and at age 10 was taken into service as a cabin boy by Sir Harry’s friend, Captain Skinner. Apparently, one transatlantic crossing was all the boy could tolerate. He left the captain’s employ when they docked in England and joined a circus.

There is speculation among historians that he joined the troupe of John Rannie, a well established ventriloquist and conjurer. There are reports that Potter met Napoleon while assisting Rannie in a performance for the emperor. Rannie was one of the first magicians to establish a name for himself in America. Potter presumably returned to the Boston area with Rannie in 1801 and served the Scottish performer while learning the skills of ventriloquism and conjuring. They toured America for more than a decade.

Boston became their home base between tours. Richard met Sally Harris, who at times was reported to be



A ticket to a Potter performance

a Penobscot Indian and at other times from India. Perhaps in the telling the tale of her origins in India evolved into a heritage of American Indian, much as Harry Frankland became Benjamin Franklin. She was strikingly beautiful and her comeliness was remarked upon by all who met her. According to biographer Mary Grant Charles, Richard and Sally married on March 25, 1808.

She soon joined Richard in his performances and one of his few surviving handbills advertises Mr. and Mrs. Potter’s show as “Evening’s Brush to Sweep Away Care.” She had a reputation as an accomplished singer and dancer, and appeared with her husband through much of his performing career.

A solo artist

By 1811 Rannie had amassed enough wealth to permit him to retire to his home in Scotland, and Richard — known as “Black Potter” — became heir to his conjuring legacy, at least in the

► POTTER PLACE continued on page 36

POTTER PLACE *continued from page 35*

United States. One of his earliest performances without Rannie was in Andover, near the site of his future home. His official debut as a solo performer has been cited as November 1811 at Boston's Columbian Museum (1795-1825). The doors were to open at early candlelight and the performance began at 7:30. Ventriloquism was a popular feature of his act — many of the apocryphal stories about Potter employ his skills at throwing his voice to confound bullies and vex adversaries, as well as for comic effect. Magician Jim Magus, author of a history book about African American magicians, records this story:

“Once while at a market Potter picked up a pig and asked the animal, ‘Is this woman asking a fair price for you?’

Using his ventriloquist talents, he caused the pig to reply, ‘No sir, I'm worth but half the price.’

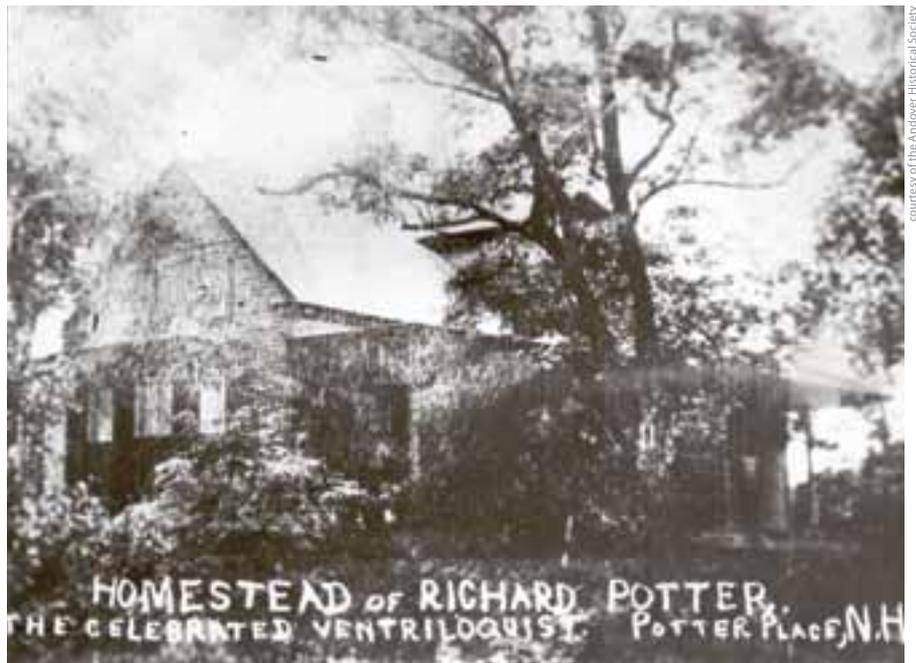
The woman who was offering the pig for sale began screaming, ‘Help! This man has bewitched my pig!’”

Potter's performances soon established him as the most renowned conjurer and ventriloquist of his time. Some of the effects recalled by his audiences included frying eggs in a beaver hat, sword swallowing, drawing seemingly endless streams of ribbons from his mouth, drinking molten lead, and directing a turkey to drag a log across the stage. He was known for discovering chickens in ladies' pockets, and rabbits and bumblebees in gentlemen's top hats. It has been reported by more than one observer that his entrance on stage was in a carriage drawn by two geese — a comical visage to an audience of that era.

Life in Andover

In 1814 the successful entertainer returned to Andover. He and Sally purchased 175 acres of farmland and created an agricultural haven. He was noted for the quality of the horses bred and kept on his farm, and a steady supply of beef and pork was produced from the fields he cleared from the forest.

He built a magnificent home, reminiscent of Frankland Manor, in a



Only known image of the original Potter house in Andover

neighborhood of humble log homes. John Robie Eastman's *History of the Town of Andover* indicates that Potter designed his future home and the construction was contracted to Esq. Graves. The grandeur of the home was such that it was reported that the Potter homestead was used as a model for New Hampshire's governor's mansion. One report described the architecture of the house as curious and well worth the visit. Over the years, subsequent owners modified the structure. While much of the original character had been obliterated, there were surviving architectural details rendered by an artist in the *Union Leader* before fire leveled the house, then owned by the Andrews family, in 1923.

Sally and Richard had three children, and only young Richard lived to enjoy a satisfactory and self-sufficient adulthood. But even his life saw complications from debt and drink. There were tragic circumstances surrounding the lives of Henry, who died after falling under a cart at age 7, and their daughter, Jeanette, whose mental limitations precluded her from assuming the responsibility for her own household and who died at age 20.

In her sorrow, Sally turned to the use of alcohol to deaden the pain of her children's outcomes. Richard, on

the other hand, became an outspoken advocate of temperance. An anonymous 1872 report about the Potters in the *Merrimack Journal* observed: “The intemperance of his wife was a perpetual source of trouble to him. In his absence she would run up heavy bills against him and on one occasion he resisted payment...The amount was greatly curtailed but the case went against Potter.”

The Potters lived in their home at Potter Place until 1835, when Richard died at age 52. A year later, Sally died at age 49. They were buried in front of the home and, in 1849, the graves were moved a short distance to a small enclosure close to the old train depot. The Northern Railway was granted a right of way through Potter's old farm with the condition that it, and its successors, name the station “Potter Place” and perpetually care for the graves of Richard and Sally. The burial plot, surrounded by a white fence, was visible from the trains that passed through; the conductors pointed out the final resting place of the “Great Magician” and his wife. **K**

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