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IN SEARCH OF A MAN NAMED DITTO

by William Stubno

Most people, visiting Ditto's Landing, have heard that it was named for one of the area's earliest settlers, Old Man Ditto. Yet little today is known about this early pioneer who came to the region when it was a vast wilderness.

It has been said that John Ditto (the first name, James, appears in all the records) came to the Big Spring in the fall of 1802 and constructed a lean-to pole shelter against a bluff. Soon realizing that he was close to a suitable location to carry on business with the Indians in the vicinity, he moved to the nearby Tennessee River and established a trading post. (1) Thereafter, Ditto established a ferry and a boat yard near the trading post and then faded into oblivion. (2)

This account of the story of Old Man Ditto has been handed down for generations. Yet how accurate is the historical information on this individual who is, perhaps, the earliest settler of Madison County? The answer can be found in contemporary records, whereby a preliminary investigation into them has already substantiated some of the folklore, and has added new information as well, on the life and times of James Ditto.

Records investigated so far reveal that Ditto was born before 1755. (3) His place of birth was probably somewhere in Pennsylvania or Maryland, where various members of the Ditto family first settled in America. (4) As a young boy he apparently migrated with his family from the Pennsylvania or Maryland
countryside by way of the "Great Wagon Road" through Virginia, to one of the five counties created by the North Carolina legislature--"Johnson and Granville in 1746, Anson in 1750, Orange in 1752, and Rowan in 1753.(5) These counties were created specifically for the Irish Protestants and Germans who migrated southward in great numbers from Pennsylvania and Maryland.(6)

One of the earliest records found thus far in North Carolina concerning a Ditto family member was a Granville County deed stating that a Henry Ivy on December 19, 1758, sold 130 acres on the west "side of Mill Swamp in Ross' line" to William Ditto for 18 pounds.(7) Ditto sold the property the following day for 13 pounds and 5 shillings.(8) A William Ditto was again found in 1774 in a Chatham County, North Carolina record, specifically the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions stating that he was appointed overseer of Harmons' Road "from Loves Creek to [the] Guilford County Line."(9) Chatham County, incidentally, was formed in 1770 from Orange County which had been formed in 1752 from Bladen, Granville, and Johnston Counties.(10)

By the middle of the 18th century, the Ditto family in North Carolina was concentrated mostly in Chatham County.(11) In fact, a James Ditto was mentioned in 1782 in Deed Book C as being the neighbor of Henry Bray who had taken a William Ditto to court in 1778 over a land dispute in that county.(12) Perhaps this William Ditto, who may have been the same individual who purchased land in Granville County from Henry Ivy in 1759, was related to James Ditto.(13)
The name James Ditto again appeared in the court records in 1782. The minutes stated that he was petitioning the Governor of North Carolina "for a pardon for his lenient and benevolent treatment to prisoners when in his power," suggesting that the individual in question was loyal to the British during the Revolutionary War which had ended the previous year.(14)

In 1788, a James Ditto was found purchasing land in northwestern South Carolina near the Pacolat River, an area easily accessible by the migration roads from Chatham County, North Carolina.(15) In 1790, the first U. S. Census listed a James Ditto with a large family living in Pendleton County, South Carolina. This James Ditto in South Carolina has been identified as Old Man Ditto.(16) He was again listed for a second and final time in South Carolina in the 1800 Census.(17)

Between 1800 and 1807, James Ditto of South Carolina migrated to the "Bend of the Tennessee" and eventually established a ferry in 1807 at a place which would be called Ditto's Landing, located along the northern banks of the Tennessee River in fractional section 30, township 5 south, range 1 east of the Huntsville Meridian Line.(18) At the time that the landing was established, the tract upon which it stood was owned by the Federal Government. In 1812, LeRoy Pope entered the land and later assigned it to John Brahan who made the final installment payment prior to his receiving the patent or title to the land in 1817.(19) Brahan later sold it to Colonel James White, a wealthy merchant from Virginia.(20)
Although Ditto never held title to Ditto's Landing, he did live on 160 acres of land with his family in the southwest quarter of section 28, township 5 south, range 1 east of the Huntsville Meridian Line. For a short time, he made payments on the property, but transferred it to his son, Michael, who eventually received title to the acreage. (21)

The role played by Ditto as an Indian trader has yet to be examined. It is assumed, however, that when contemporary sources are analyzed, information on that facet of Ditto's life will come to light.

According to the records, Ditto's final years, before his death in 1828, centered around mercantile pursuits. (22) Nevertheless, he was undoubtedly an unassuming man, evidenced by the few earthly possessions he owned when he died: one bed, two books, two trunks, one oven, and one tin cannister all of which were appraised for $5.75. (23) Yet he was rich in other respects, for he was instrumental in helping to establish an area which became vitally important to the westward expansion of the nation.

Footnotes

1 "Ditto's Landing Once Very Important as Trading Post," The Huntsville Daily Times, 3 March 1931.

2 George Wartz, statement made to Kathleen Paul Jones by George Swartz, 26 April 1930, copy located in the files of the author.

Early American court and census records revealed that individuals with the surname, Ditto, lived in southeastern Pennsylvania and adjacent Maryland.


Ibid., pp. 81 and 84.


North Carolina records place the Ditto family mostly in Chatham County, North Carolina, in the latter 18th century. Author's note.

Laird and Jackson, eds., Chatham County Court Minutes, p. 69.


Records of the Commissioner of Mesne Conveyence, Book D, p. 48, Greenville County Courthouse, Greenville, South Carolina.


Letter from James Ditto to Andrew Jackson, November 1813, Andrew Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

20 Deed Book K, pp. 182-183, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

21 Credit Prior Final Receipts and Credit Prior Final Certificate, File 249, Huntsville, Alabama, Michael Ditto, assignee of Alexander Hunter, John C. Hamilton, Thomas Roland, and James Ditto, Records of the Bureau of Land Management, Record Group 49, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Circuit Court in Chancery, Book F, pp. 267-269, Department of Old Records, Madison County Law Library Building, Huntsville, Alabama; Tax Rolls, Madison County, Mississippi Territory, Records of the Territorial Auditor, Record Group 3, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

22 The records of Madison County, Alabama, contain numerous cases concerning Ditto's financial dealings up to the year of his death in 1828.

23 Probate Record Book 2 and 5, p. 136, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.