

# Secrets, Supplies, and a Big Skirt

## By The History Place in Morehead City \*

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Here's a North Carolina story that you might not know. It includes combs, pins, two pairs of men's pants, a shirt, five pounds of sugar, and some army boots—a total of about thirty pounds of supplies, all found hidden in a woman's skirt. The woman was Emeline Pigott, and her story is one of courage, strength, and love. Why did she have so many things in her skirt? What made this country girl become so well known?

Pigott was born December 15, 1836, in the Harlowe area of Carteret County. She moved with her family to a farm on Calico Creek, in what is now part of Morehead City, when she was about twenty-five years old. This was her home when Confederate soldiers arrived in the area to defend coastal North Carolina from the Union army during the Civil War. The Pigotts did what they could to help the South's cause. Emeline nursed the sick and wounded. Her family entertained Confederate soldiers camped nearby in its home, feeding them and giving them a place to relax for a while.



Emeline Pigott. *Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.*

One of the soldiers, Stokes McRae, fell in love with Emeline, and she fell in love with him. But they decided not to marry until after the war. When McRae returned to the battlefield, he took along a special Confederate flag that Emeline had made just for him. He survived the battle of New Bern but lost the flag. McRae was killed at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in July 1863. Devastated by the news, Emeline rededicated herself to helping the Southern cause in any way she could.

That way would turn out to include spying. Who would ever suspect a pretty, friendly young woman of being a spy? How did it happen?

The Confederate army left coastal North Carolina and moved on to New Bern. Pigott traveled there to continue nursing sick and wounded soldiers. When New Bern fell to the Union, soldiers were transferred by flatcars on a train to Kinston, and she went along. Pigott traveled as far west as Concord to care for them. She met and charmed a variety of people who would later help her, as she would help them. Some were strangers who had come from the North to profit from the difficult conditions.

Pigott teamed with one woman she met—the widow of a Union soldier—to pass through both Confederate and Union lines. By the time she got back to Carteret County, the Union army had taken over the area. Her family now entertained Union officers. It was the perfect time for her to join in the entertaining and learn as much as she could from the enemy about their plans.

How did she get important information and supplies to Confederates nearby? There were several ways. One way was to leave mail, medicines, food, or other supplies next to a certain tree or under logs specially marked in the woods. We're not sure how these places were marked, but rocks probably were placed in a certain way, or perhaps string was tied to branches in ways not obvious to most people walking by. Another way was to carry mail and supplies personally. This was far more risky, since most travelers could be searched by Union soldiers. Pigott's most famous adventure involved this second way of delivering information to her Confederate friends.

That day, not only did Pigott have what she believed to be valuable information about the Union army written in a note—tucked into her blouse next to her heart—she wore a hoop skirt filled with all the supplies listed at the beginning of this article. Women of the 1860s wore big skirts supported by an undergarment similar to a hula hoop, covered in cloth and fastened at the waist. Pigott's hoop skirt also had lots of pockets where she could keep things out of sight. She and her brother-in-law, Rufus Bell, got into his carriage and headed toward Beaufort to deliver all they had collected. Along the way, however, they were stopped, arrested, and sent to jail. Emeline Pigott was about to be searched!

Thinking quickly, she insisted that she be searched by a suitable woman. It would be most improper for a man to check her skirt! While the soldiers left to get a woman to complete the search, Pigott stuck her note in her mouth, chewed it, and swallowed it. She tore some mail she was carrying into bits. When the soldiers returned, there were no papers—just an amazingly full skirt.

Officials imprisoned Pigott in New Bern. She and a female cousin (allowed to go with her to keep her company) were shut in the basement of a local house. (This house now serves as a gift shop for Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens. Look for the historical marker on the sidewalk to learn more about Emeline Pigott's stay.) The women later told people that someone tried to kill them by dropping chloroform into their room. They poked holes in the window to get fresh air and recovered from the scare, they said. Was the information that Pigott had been gathering so valuable that someone felt she should die? We may never know.

Emeline Pigott knew some influential people on the Northern side and was released without going to trial. She returned to her family's farm. She never married. Her heart was always with Stokes McRae. She remained active in the community until her death on May 26, 1919. The family cemetery is open to the public, appropriately located on Emeline Place in Morehead City.

*\*Based on an article from the publication, Morehead City's Centennial Jubilee, edited by Ben R. Alford, and on other historical documents from the Jack Spencer Goodwin Research Library. Submitted by The History Place in Morehead City, which has an exhibit on Emeline Pigott that includes a trunk of her personal belongings and the carriage she was riding in at the time of her arrest. Access [www.thehistoryplace.org](http://www.thehistoryplace.org) to learn more about this and other stories of real-life coastal history, or call 252-247-7533, ext. 101, for a brochure.*