

Phillips, Sylvanus ^[1]

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by Michael B. Dougan, 1994

April 1775–31 Oct. 1830

Sylvanus Phillips, pioneer Arkansas settler and land speculator, was born in Jackson township, [Union County](#) ^[2]. No record of his family origin or early life is known prior to his settlement in Arkansas at the mouth of the St. Francis River in 1797. In 1799, when Indian troubles threatened, Phillips moved to Arkansas Post, remaining there for a number of years. As one of the earliest Americans in the area, he was intimately involved in land speculations after 1803, often in association with the St. Louis land speculator William Russell. His name appears prominently in *The Territorial Papers of the United States* ^[3] usually in connection with land deals. Although not involved in the grossest frauds of the day, his relations with Russell were not entirely legitimate.

His most famous development was the town of Helena, plotted in 1820 by Nicholas Rightor and William Russell and named after Phillips's daughter. Located where Crowley's Ridge meets the Mississippi River, Helena enjoyed a modest prosperity and an unenviable reputation. Stories of its wickedness were commonly reported by eastern travelers to Arkansas, most notably G. W. Featherstonhaugh, who, however, never visited the town.

Phillips held a number of offices, including a term on the Territorial Council and as clerk of the county named after him; he was commonly addressed as Colonel Phillips, presumably a militia appointment. In politics he was associated with the Conway faction in opposition to Territorial Secretary Robert Crittenden. He was twice married in Arkansas: to Phebe Dunn on September 1808 and to Rebecca Kendrick on 25 Aug. 1812. He died at his home near Helena and was buried there.

References:

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