

The Life of Captain John Curtis of Brunswick, Maine

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As the age of “wooden ships and iron men” came to a close with the dawn of the Second Industrial Revolution, the memories of many storied, seafaring men have become lost to the continuous passage of time. Through curiosity and research, the memories of such sailors can be preserved for the historical benefit of future generations. Captain John Curtis (figure 1)ⁱ, of Brunswick, Maine, is one such influential sailor of his time whose story is not fully told. As a merchant sea captain during the Civil War period, Curtis was influenced by the dominance of cotton as an American export, often porting out of Mobile, Alabama. These experiences allowed him to have a unique view on the impending Civil War because he consistently saw both Northern and Southern viewpoints. Captain John Curtis was a man who loved his country and family with a passion, a true American idol of patriotism.



(Figure 1) Portrait of Captain John Curtis painted in London



(Figure 2) Curtis Family Crest

John Curtis was born on October 4th, 1823 in Nobleboro, Lincoln County, Maine, into a prominent and original New England family (figure 2) and was one of six children of his parents Christopher S. Curtis and Eliza Ann Hutchingsⁱⁱ. Curtis’ brother, Mason Curtis, died in a maritime incident, which inspired Curtis to continue the legacy his brother had left on the sea. Curtis was married to Letitia Bammer, an Irish immigrant from Belfast, by Reverend Albert Williams in 1850.ⁱⁱⁱ John and Letitia had eight children following marriage, six of which survived because the death of young children from illness was common during the period.

Before becoming a sea captain, John spent his early adulthood at sea and was a first mate on the 'Kennebec' and 'Conqueror,' building his reputation as a strong, charismatic leader. He had accumulated education in subjects such as trigonometry, astronomy, business, and law, and had outstanding physical stature of "six feet two inches and 325 pounds."^{iv} This size was an intimidation factor that Curtis used to his advantage as exemplified by the recollection of William John Curtis of the "sense of security that [he] felt when [his] father stepped over the rail and ordered the crew aft to set sail"^v during a "free fight"^{vi} aboard his ship. Although he had such a remarkably large frame, Captain Curtis was described as "wonderfully agile"^{vii} and without "a superfluous pound of flesh on his body."^{viii} Captain Curtis' bravery was one of his outstanding characteristics, anecdotally illustrated through his experience with a shoal of bottlenose dolphins of the coast of Orr's Island. After seeing about seventy dolphins moving in the water, the townspeople brought out their weapons, hoping to attain the animals' blubber which was used to light lamps. While alongside one of the largest dolphins and on his boat, Curtis "Jump[ed] upon the back of his intended victim,"^{ix} and "the next moment the company saw their gallant captain riding off astride upon the back of the dolphin. A full quarter mile was the hero thus borne over the water by this novel mode of navigation."^x His unique attributes and bravery helped him to become a suitable candidate for captainship at around the age of thirty years old.

This first chance at captainship arose upon the 'Windsor Forest,' (figure 3) a merchant vessel owned by John Malcomson of Liverpool built in Bowdoinham, Maine. The 'Windsor Forest' frequently travelled from Mobile, Alabama to England capitalizing on



(Figure 3) Print of the 'Windsor Forest'

the cotton trade and booming textile industries. During these ventures to the South upon the 'Windsor Forest', Curtis wrote home to his wife Letitia, describing the conditions of pre-Civil War America. In the letters, Captain Curtis was deeply saddened by the growing tensions of the South and illustrated his patriotic nature by writing, "oh dear could my life save my country I would willingly lay it down this moment and thank god that it could be bought so cheap."^{xi} Also in these letters to Letitia, Captain Curtis makes it clear that he will not return to Brunswick over the course of the war because he wanted nothing to do with the "men who helped ruin this our dear country."^{xii}

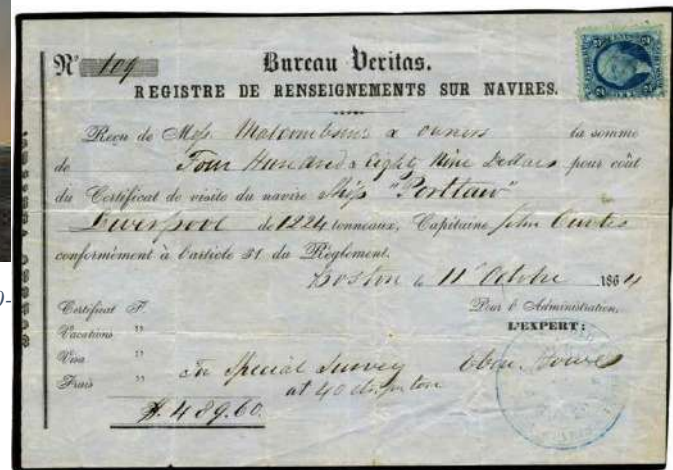
During Curtis' time in avoidance of the Civil War while on a mercantile voyage from

Cardiff to Bombay in January 1864, the

'Windsor Forest' brunt at sea of the coast of



"Ship Burning on the Open Sea" Albert Bierstadt ca. 1850-1860



(Figure 4) Registration of the Portlaw

modern-day Mauritania. As described in Curtis' personal journal, the cause of the fire was the flag captain taking an open candle, unbeknown to me, into the store room to draw varnish and holding it too near the varnish. Whilst running, it ignited and some of the fire flying on his pants which burned his leg. He lost his presence of mind, dropped the burning can and ran."^{xiii} Captain Curtis moved his entire crew onto life boats without any casualties from the fire and after six days on the open Atlantic Ocean, they were finally rescued by "Finland brig Aino of Callao of the commanded by Captain F. Wyberg"^{xiv} who received them "with all the kindness that it was possible for a man to feel, supplying us with everything we wanted."^{xv} The heroic response from Captain Curtis granted him another opportunity to captain a ship under the financial supervision of John Malcomson, whom Captain Curtis would later name one of his children after.

The final ship to be captained by Captain John Curtis was the 'Portlaw,' partially owned by John Malcomson of Liverpool and Captain Curtis himself (figure 4)^{xvi}. The 'Portlaw' was built in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and at one point was "considered to be the handsomest

vessel ever built on the ‘Merrimac.’^{xxvii} After being launched in August 1864, the ship flew the English flag due to the controversies surrounding the Civil War and was commercially based out of Liverpool, England. In 1869, while near Bermuda, the ‘Portlaw’ was in distress and forced to port for repairs, forcing Captain Curtis to report to Bermuda to oversee,^{xviii} where he contracted Typhoid and died on July 3rd, 1870 at



age 46. While in Bermuda, Curtis left a good impression on the locals, as exemplified by “the large attendance of the inhabitants of all classes at his funeral”^{xix} as described in his obituary (figure 5)^{xx}. Curtis was buried at Saint George’s Parish in Bermuda, but he has a grave marked in honor of him in the Pine Grove Cemetery in Brunswick, Maine.

Captain John Curtis’ legacy rests in the impact of the Curtis Memorial Library funded by his son William J. Curtis in 1903. The land donated on the corner of Middle Street and Pleasant Street in downtown Brunswick, Maine was the plot that Captain Curtis had bought for his family in 1869 before his death in 1870. The learned nature of Captain Curtis lent the dedication of a library to be fitting to leave as a gift to the town of Brunswick, Maine. Throughout most of his life, Captain Curtis “kept a ‘commonplace book’ in which he inscribed quotation from his favorite writers,”^{xxi} and was known as a “great reader”^{xxii} The theme of patriotism found in Captain John Curtis’ life exemplifies his admirable character and dedication to the cause of unity, making him a model of the American spirit for future generations to look upon as a guide.

(Figure 5) Obituary of Captain John Curtis

ⁱ "Paintings @ Curtis – Captain John Curtis." Curtis Creative Spaces. April 21, 2016. Accessed June 09, 2019. <http://curtiscreativespaces.com/paintings-curtis-captain-john-curtis/>.

ⁱⁱ "Captain John Curtis Genealogy." Ancestry. Accessed June 1, 2019. <https://www.ancestryclassroom.com/family-tree/person/tree/70647260/person/30224405119/facts>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Filion, Ron. "San Francisco Genealogy." San Francisco Genealogy - Newspaper Vital Notices, 1850, Births & Marriages. Accessed June 1, 2019. <http://www.sfgenealogy.org/sf/sf1850b.htm>.

^{iv} Helmreich, Louise R. *A History of the Public Library in Brunswick, Maine*. Brunswick, ME: Brunswick Public Library Association, 1976.

^v Curtis, William John. *Memoirs of William John Curtis*. Portland, Maine: Mosher Press, 1928.

^{vi} Ibid.,.

^{vii} Ibid.,.

^{viii} Ibid.,.

^{ix} Wheeler, George A., and Henry W. Wheeler. *History of Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell, Maine*. Somersworth, NH: New Hampshire Publishing Company, 1974

^x Ibid.,.

^{xi} "Capt. John Curtis on Secession, Mobile, Ala., 1861." Maine Memory Network. Accessed June 1, 2019. <https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/1875/page/3091/detail/36114/display>.

^{xii} "Capt. John Curtis." Maine Memory Network. Accessed June 2, 2019. <https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/1875/page/3091/display>.

^{xiii} "Windsor Forest Burning." Curtis Memorial Library. August 21, 2015. Accessed June 2, 2019. <http://www.curtislibrary.com/windsor-forest-burning/>.

^{xiv} Ibid.,.

^{xv} Ibid.,.

^{xvi} "Captain John Curtis." Ancestry. Accessed June 1, 2019. <https://www.ancestryclassroom.com/family-tree/person/tree/70647260/person/30224405119/facts>.

^{xvii} Board of Arts and Manufactures for Upper Canada. *The Journal of the Board of Arts and Manufactures for Upper Canada, Volume 5*. Board, 1865.

^{xviii} "Bermuda Royal Gazette." *Bermuda Royal Gazette*, March 29, 1870.

^{xix} "Bermuda Royal Gazette." *Bermuda Royal Gazette*, July 12, 1870.

^{xx} *Ibid.*,

^{xxi} Helmreich, Louise R. *A History of the Public Library in Brunswick, Maine*. Brunswick, ME: Brunswick Public Library Association, 1976.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*,