

Curtises & Botany

By Howard W. Curtis

Notwithstanding Darwin, the famous naturalist, we Curtises have made our own mark on the natural sciences. There have been a number of prominent Curtis botanists throughout the years. The first and certainly the most famous was a Quaker, **William Curtis** (1746-1799), who was born in Alton, Hampshire Co., England. He was a trained pharmacist whose greater interest was the study of flora and insects. At the age of 26 he was appointed “Praefectus Horti and Demonstrator to the Society of Apothecaries” at the Physic Garden in Chelsea, London, where he maintained a large garden and grew beautiful, exotic plants. He was chiefly interested in British flora and set out to record and describes all the plants growing within a 10-mile radius of London. In 1787, he began the publication of the illustrated Curtis’s Botanical Magazine, which has continued in publication to the present time! In 1984, its name was changed to Kew Magazine, but in 1995, it was returned to its roots with the historical and popular name. In his home town of Alton, Hampshire, there is currently a Curtis Museum, “named after the Quaker Curtis family” and founded in 1856 by Dr. William Curtis, a cousin of the botanist William, whose works are displayed there, along with much more of local historical interest.

The most interesting American Curtis botanist I have thus far run across is the **Rev. Moses Ashley Curtis** (1808-1872). He was born in Stockbridge, MA, the son of the Rev. Jared Curtis (1777-1862). He is from the Thomas Curtis of Wethersfield line [*Thomas₁, Joseph₂, Thomas₃, Elnathan₄ who settled in Stockbridge, Issacs, Jared₆*]. Moses Ashley Curtis was born May 11, 1808 at Stockbridge. He graduated from Williams College in 1827 and three years later moved to Wilmington, NC, to be a tutor for that state’s Governor Dudley’s children. In 1833 he returned to MA to study for the ministry; married Mary de Rosset the following year, and was ordained in 1835. In 1837 he returned to NC to teach in an Episcopal school at Raleigh and in 1841 he became the rector of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Hillsborough. It was in the 1840’s that he began to wander the state through the Alleghany Mountains collecting and identifying all manner of plant life and corresponding with the country’s leading men in that field. But, his specialty, for which he was noted as the “highest American authority” was that of mycology (the branch that deals with fungi). Other writers of the day mentioned his conviction of the importance of wild fungi as a food source – particularly during the devastation following the Civil War (which he spent in NC), during which (according to Dr. Asa Gray): “*he turned his knowledge of them to useful account for his family and neighborhood; and he declared that he could have supported a regiment upon excellent and delicious food which was wasting in the fields and woods around him.*”

In 1847 he moved to take charge of a parish at Society Hill, SC, but returned to Hillsborough in 1857 and remained there until his death on April 10, 1872. He and his wife had 10 children, five of whom had died before their mother’s death in 1903. Most of Moses Ashley’s finds were published by his friend Miles Moses Berkeley in his *Notices of North American Fungi*, which he began publishing in 1872, after Moses had died. The papers of Moses Ashley Curtis are now in the Archives of Carolina’s Southern Historical Collection.

A second American Curtis botanist of note was **Allen Hiram Curtis** (1845-1907), the son of Gaston G. Curtiss, who was born in NY around 1820, a merchant, at Hastings, Oswego Co., NY and Floretta A. (_____) Curtiss, who was born in NY around 1822 or 23 and whose parents were both born in MA! Thus far, I have been unable to find the lineage for Gaston. [There was a John Curtis, Sr. & a John Curtis, Jr. in Hastings in the 1830 census, who may be his father and grandfather.] Gaston was still in NY at the 1860 census, listed as an “Agent” but by 1870, had moved south to Liberty, Bedford Co., VA, where he was listed as “Farmer & Assistant Assessor.” By the 1880 census, Gaston had apparently died, and Allen had moved to East Jacksonville, Duval Co., FL with his mother and where he was listed as a “botanist & a widower.” He subsequently became an Associate Editor at the *Jacksonville Times Union*, but continued his botanic interests, discovering all sorts of Florida plants. Of particular note, is Curtiss’ Milkweed, a now endangered species, because it grows in scrub habitats. It was on such an environment that Edward Bok and his wife Mary Louise Curtis [*of the William of Scituate Curtis family through Cyrus H.K. Curtis,*

the famous publisher] built their lush tropical garden out of the sands on top of the Lake Wales Ridge. [NOTE: The Bok Gardens are still open to the public and the Curtiss Milkweed may be seen there today.] Three other significant Curtis names (of men still living) appear as of particular importance to botany in 20th century America.

In Madison, WI stands a significant – and most appropriate– tribute to **John T. Curtis**, the “Curtis Prairie.” It’s a 25-hectare area (about 62 acres) of restored tall-grass prairie located within the 1235 acre University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum, begun in 1934 by Aldo Leopold of the University. John T. Curtis is one of the foremost experts in prairie grass, which once covered the mid-western United States. The section that became the Curtis Prairie had been farmed between 1836 and 1920. It became a horse farm around 1927. In 1933, the entire Arboretum area was purchased by the University. The prairie section was apparently one of the most challenging to restore. Curtis estimated in 1959 that from nearly 2-million acres of native prairie grass in Wisconsin, there were just remnants left, with none larger than 40 acres. Through his hard work, and that of his students, the original land was indeed restored to its 1836 condition.

On the Internet is to be found a monumental work – a *Photographic Atlas of Plant Anatomy* – developed by **John D. Curtis**, Ph.D. and Michael D. Nowak of the Biology Department of the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point along with Nels R. Lesten, Ph.D. of the Dept. of Botany at Iowa State Univ. When it was placed on the Internet, it was noted that Nels had already retired from teaching and John was about to do so as well, and wrote that: “*Between the two of us we have over 60 years of plant anatomy teaching and research experience. We felt it would be a shame if the thousands of plant anatomy images we have taken for teaching and research were to retire with us. Therefore, we have put many of these images on this website with free access given to anyone interested. We have made no effort to give a balanced treatment of anatomy topics although most topics are represented. Because much of our research has been on plant secretory structures, this set of image reflects that bias. We hope that these images will be useful to people teaching (and taking) plant anatomy and related courses.*”

The Atlas can be found at: <http://botweb.uwsp.edu/anatomy/>.

Finally, a **Dr. Peter S. Curtis** is head of the “Curtis Lab” at Ohio State University where he is also a professor of “Evolution, Ecology & Organismal Biology.” He describes his work at the lab, thusly: “*Research in the Curtis lab at the Ohio State University revolves around plant and ecosystem ecology. An overarching theme is understanding the ecological consequences of human activity at local to global scales. This theme is pursued through major projects investigating the impact of global climate change on northern hardwood forests, and with developing methods for restoring native tall grass prairie ecosystems*

It would be wonderful to know if these three Midwest educators are related – as their location and/or study interests are so similar! Ironical that it’s so much easier to find out about relationships that existed *before* the present! It is certainly wonderful to know that from one of the master’s of Botany in the 18th century, through the 19th century and now, into the 21st century, the Curtis name remains a significant one in the study, teaching and understanding of our now so greatly endangered plant world!

When I shook my family tree, a bunch of nuts fell out.