

Captain Caleb Curtis, Boston Seafarer & Merchant

Al Field and George Curtis

This story began with a very old newspaper clipping sent to me by Al Field dated April 21, 1812. It seems that a ship's mate on the American brig *Adventure* by the name of John Chipman of Boston gave testimony to a Boston justice of the peace about the sinking of the American merchant ship *Adventure* by a French naval squadron under the command of Commodore Jean Baptiste Henri Feretier southeast of Bermuda on March 23, 1812. The *Adventure* had departed the English port of St. Croix on March 15 with a cargo of rum and molasses when she was hailed by the French squadron, boarded, scuttled and sunk. The master of the *Adventure*, Captain Caleb Curtis, and his crew were taken aboard the French frigate joining some 100 other prisoners. Seems the French squadron, comprised of the 44-gun frigates *L'Andromenche* and *L'Ariane* plus the 16-gun privateer brig *La Mameluke*, were on a Caribbean duck shoot and had sunk upwards of thirty sailing ships from various nations. A French officer told Chipman that the squadron had orders to destroy all vessels bound to or from enemy ports, which in 1812 were British ports.

It seemed the French had more prisoners than they cared to entertain so Chipman and others were placed aboard the captured American brig *Betsey* and set free eventually sailing to Boston. Captain Curtis was not among those released and Chipman was prevented from speaking with his captain before departing.

The questions to both Al and me were: Who was Captain Caleb Curtis and wasn't 21 years old a bit young to be a ship's captain? The 1812 newspaper article yielded the initial clue. The *Adventure's* cargo was on the account of "Messrs. N.H. and C. Curtis, owners of the brig *Adventure*.....bound for Boston Bay for orders." Subsequent research revealed Caleb's father, Nathaniel was a sea captain who died leaving his 14 year old and youngest son Caleb fatherless along with his siblings.

Al continued his newspaper search and found the golden nugget in the book "*The French Assault on American Shipping, 1793-1813*." The sinking of the *Adventure* is chronicled to include that "*Caleb Curtis, master and owner with Charles and Henry B. Curtis. Nathaniel Curtis and Captain Curtis had privated adventures on board. Henry B. Curtis was the vessel's agent. Charles Curtis was a partner.*" Nathaniel, Henry and Charles Curtis were Caleb's brothers.

Captain Caleb Curtis survived his encounter with the French navy and returned to Boston. The French captain was not so fortunate as the *L'Andromenche* was sunk several months later in a duel with the British Navy. In July 1817, the ship *Mary and Susan*, Caleb Curtis, Master, was reported loading cargo at Boston's Lincoln and Wheelwright's Wharf for Liverpool. In early November 1819, the *Mary and Susan* sailed for Charleston, SC. In July 1824, the *Bowditch*, Caleb Curtis, Master, delivered cargo to Boston. This was the last newspaper report on Caleb Curtis as a ship's master. The February 11, 1824

edition of the *Boston Patriot* reported the February 1, 1824 marriage of Miss Caroline M. Agry, daughter of Captain John Agry of Hallowell, ME to Captain Caleb Curtis of Boston. The marriage intentions were filed on January 10, 1824.

I found nothing more about Caleb as a ship's captain after 1824 but he continued to be referenced by that title. By 1829, brothers Caleb and Nathaniel Curtis were listed in the Boston directory as "merchants of commerce" at 15 Rowe's Wharf, Boston with residence on Chestnut Street. By 1831 Caleb was operating the Charleston Insurance Company, specializing in marine and fire insurance. The company was later incorporated into the Neptune Ins. Co. which continued until the 1890's. By 1850 Captain Caleb was well-positioned in the Boston commercial arena when he was appointed by the Governor of Massachusetts to the 3-year term as Commissioner of Pilots for Boston Harbor, a position of prominence.

Caleb Curtis was born on February 11, 1792 in Roxbury, MA and died there on April 1, 1864. His wife, Caroline, was born in Hallowell, ME about 1805 and died in Boston on March 15, 1873 of cancer and dropsy. The Curtis family lived on Chestnut St, Boston from at least 1825 until Caroline's death, an address that linked the brothers.

From the records of the Third Parish of Roxbury, both Caroline Martha Curtis, wife of Caleb and their daughter Caroline Elizabeth, born April 1826, were baptized on April 20, 1826. Their second child, Caleb Agry Curtis was born February 18, 1828 (died January 6, 1903) and another daughter Ellen was born in about 1832. Ellen married David Van Brunt on September 7, 1856. Caleb Agry Curtis married Emily Adams of Boston on Jan 13, 1864. Caleb Agry applied for a passport in March 1885 and gave his residence as Manchester, NH. Clara Curtis, age 17 years and Amy Curtis, age 19 years, were to accompany him on a voyage to England.

Caleb's father Nathaniel was the fourth generation of a line from the immigrant William Curtis of Roxbury 1632; hence, Nathaniel⁴, Isaac³, Isaac², William¹ Curtiss and Sarah Eliot, who arrived in the colonies from Nazeing, Essex Co, England in 1632.

Nathaniel⁴ was married twice, first to Elizabeth Curtis (1750-1794), daughter of Reverend Philip Curtis and Elizabeth Bass and after Elizabeth's death, to Lydia Young (1742-1810). That union produced thirteen children including the Nathaniel⁵ (1774-1857) of this story, and his brother Caleb.

Nathaniel⁵ married first Rosanna Reed in 1797 and Abigail Leeds in 1842. Nathaniel's son, Nathaniel⁶ (Jr.) (1799-1873), who was really Nathaniel Curtis III, and cousin Caleb⁶ Jr. both were successful merchants in Boston. Nathaniel⁶ married Emily Matilda Hall (1802-September 1873) and had children Francis Louisa⁷ (1823-1873), Nathaniel⁷ William (1825-1897) and Hall⁷ (1834-1906). Notice that several of this family died in 1873? Nathaniel⁶, his daughter Francis Louisa⁷, her husband Charles Mixter and two

daughters were aboard the ill-fated iron clipper *S.S. Ville Du Havre* out of New York that collided with a Scottish clipper the morning of 22 November 1873. The *Ville Du Havre* sunk in twelve minutes with the loss of 226 passengers. Of the Curtis and Mixer families onboard, only the two Mixer daughters, Madeline and Helen, survived and were living in the Nathaniel⁷ Curtis household in 1880. Both Nathaniel⁷ William and his brother Hall⁷ Curtis were successful professionally and had children to carry on this Roxbury Curtis line.

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