

James Curtis, Sr.
(c.1780-1836)
A Texas Patriot and Legend

By George Curtis

There are a number of stories floating around Texas historical circles about James Curtis, Sr., but one fact is solid: he was a fierce Texas patriot. Very little about his early life exists but there are several stories about his exploits as a soldier in the Texas volunteer army during the revolution against Mexican rule, 1834-1836. The primary sources for this article are the San Jacinto Museum of History, the Texas State Historical Association (TSHA), the Handbook of Texas and the Kemp Biographical Sketches. I've also woven in the genealogical research of our society's genealogist, Al Field. This story would be rather mundane except for the stories about "Uncle Jimmie Curtis" that have been passed down in public records over the generations.

The Early Years

It is not known where James Curtis, Sr. was born or who his parents were. It is believed he was born about 1771-1776. It is probably this James who appears in the 1800 Federal Census for Pendleton, South Carolina as married with two young children. He had married Peggy Isaacs Rutledge of Pendleton, a widow with two young children, sometime just prior to 1800. It appears he followed his father-in-law, Samuel Isaacs, a prominent Revolutionary War veteran, when the Isaac family moved from Pendleton to Lincoln County, Tennessee about 1805. James and Peggy had seven known children and resided in Tennessee until around 1816. About 1816-1817, Curtis moved his family to Alabama, where his wife's siblings had settled. There is one surviving deed of sale for James Curtis when he sold 163 acres east of Mulberry Creek to George Stovall on March 16, 1816. (Mulberry Creek is near Fayetteville, TN close to the Alabama line.) This might approximate his departure from Lincoln County, Tennessee. (Source: Texas State Historical Assoc. - THS)

Arrival in Texas

According to the THS, family tradition states that the Curtis family was in Texas by late 1823, and some documents support the 1823 date. Other sources, however, show 1824 or 1825 as the date of arrival.

Six children were with them in Texas - Sarah Curtis Sims, Elizabeth Curtis Reid, James Curtis, Jr., Washington Curtis, Elijah Curtis and Nancy Curtis Cottle.

The San Jacinto Museum has James Sr. arriving in Texas in 1825, as is stated in the Headright Certificate issued to his heirs February 3, 1838, for one labor of land by the Bastrop County Board. He was one of the "First Three Hundred" settlers of Austin's First Colony. On August 3, 1824, he had received a league of land (4428 acres) from the Mexican government situated on the west side of the Brazos River in the present county of Burleson. His son, James Jr., also received a league in Brazos County in 1824. In 1831 he moved to a place below the town of Mina (Bastrop Co). (For more on the Old Three Hundred, see www.tshaonline.org.)

Bastrop, once known as Mina, is the county seat of Bastrop County, and is located about thirty miles south-east of downtown Austin. The site was first occupied in 1804, when a fort was established at the strategic Colorado River crossing of the Old San Antonio Road and named Puerta del Colorado. The Baron de Bastrop, a shady Belgian man of influence with the Mexican government, obtained permission to create a German colony and selected the site in 1823, but subsequently failed to establish a settlement. The town was probably named Bastrop by Stephen F. Austin in honor of the baron, a longtime friend and coworker. Austin, interested in developing the upper reaches of his original colony, used this name after the German colonization attempt failed and he obtained permission in 1827 to locate a "Little Colony" of 100 families on the site. By 1830 early pioneers such as Josiah Wilbarger, Reuben Hornsby, James Curtis, James Burleson, Edward Burleson, and Jess Barker had located to the Bastrop area. The pioneers met with intense Indian resistance, but by 1830 the settlers from Austin's lower colonies were clearing farms over the southern portion

of the county. (Bastrop County, TX website)

In 1831 Austin received a second land grant; the two grants, Mina Municipality, took in almost all of what is now Bastrop County. The district was presumably named in honor of Spanish general Francisco Xavier Mina. In 1834, the vast municipality, comprising all or part of sixteen present-day counties, was established by the government of Coahuila and Texas, and the town of Bastrop also took the name Mina. When Texas became a republic, Mina Municipality assumed its place as one of twenty-three original counties. In 1837 the Congress of the Republic of Texas changed the county name to Bastrop in honor of the Baron and allowed the town to revert to the name as well. Congress also began whittling away at the boundaries of the huge county; in 1840, when Travis County was formed, Bastrop County shrank almost to its present dimensions. (Source: Bastrop County Historical Society)

James Sr.'s wife, Peggy Rutledge Curtis, had apparently died by 1826, as he was listed as a widower when Austin's colony was enumerated. He was a stock raiser. By 1831 he moved his family to Bastrop County and either lived with or near his orphaned grandsons, James and John Stewart. He lived on the Stewart land on the west side of the Colorado River south of Bastrop. His sons, Washington and Elijah, had head-rights on the east side of the river between present-day Bastrop and Smithville near the present day Alum Creek community.

Now that you have a pretty good idea about James Curtis Sr. and how he got to Texas, let's get to the stories about this rather colorful character. The following stories of his exploits in the evacuation of Bastrop and the Battle of San Jacinto were written by Louis W. Kemp. The Spanish forces were defeated at San Jacinto which led to surrender of Santa Anna and the freedom of Texas from Mexican rule.

Uncle Jimmie's March Into History

Captain John J. Tumlinson organized a company of sixty rangers at Hornsby's Bend on February 22, 1836, and in the latter part of March, the Company was stationed at the abandoned town of Bastrop with orders to get as many cattle over to the east side of the Brazos River as possible. James, Sr., substituted for his son, Elijah, on February 22, 1836 and was under Tumlinson's command. The river was high and, having previously received orders to abandon the town, all of their boats had been sunk before the new order was received. Under the circumstances, there was nothing for them to do but wait for the river to recede. Feeling no apprehension of the coming of the Mexicans, they had become careless and adopted the policy of posting but one guard. A lone sentinel was stationed at the ford. Just prior to this, Captain Tumlinson and Lieutenant Rogers had left the company to move their families to a place of safety, turning the command over to Judge Robert J. Williamson. What Tumlinson didn't realize is that he had placed that one sentry guard into the history books.

Upon awakening on morning, the soldiers saw an army of six hundred Mexicans just across the river and naturally a hasty retreat was ordered. Noah Smithwick was a member of the company and in his "*Evolution of the State*", wrote that he happened to remember that James Curtis was on duty as a sentry at the crossing and remarked to Major Williamson, "You ain't going to leave Uncle Jimmie on guard, are you Major?" Major Williamson replied, "Good God, no! Ride back and tell the old man to come on." Mr. Smithwick said he galloped back and found Mr. Curtis sitting at the foot of a tree with a bottle of whiskey beside him, not conscious of the danger across the river. "Hello, Uncle Jimmie!" he said, "Mount and ride for your life. The Mexicans are on the other side and our men are all gone." "The hell they are!" replied Curtis, "Light and take a drink." "There's no time for drinking. Come, mount and let's be off. The Mexicans may swim the river and be after us any moment," argued Smithwick. "Let's drink to their confusion," said Curtis. After Mr. Smithwick had accepted the invitation, they set out to overtake their company. "Well," said Mr. Curtis, "we can say one thing, we were the last men to leave."

The old men of the company, Andrew Dunn and James Leach, had lost their horses in the retreat and the younger men walked alternately letting them ride their mounts. Becoming impatient at the slow progress be-

ing made, Major Williamson turned the command of the company over to Lieutenant George M. Petty and, with James Curtis and Ganey Crosby, hurried onward. Upon reaching Cole's settlement (Independence), the men found a note stuck on a tree by Major Williamson reporting the capture and massacre of Fannin's men. In crossing the river at Tenoxtitlan in search of the main army, Andrew Dunn and James Leach were swept away by the current and drowned.

In the service record of Ganey Crosby, it is shown that he joined Captain Gillaspie's company April 18th and it is reasonable to believe that Major Williamson and James Curtis joined the main army at the same time. Mr. Smithwick stated that a son-in-law of Mr. Curtis, Washington Cottle, fell at the Alamo whom Curtis swore to avenge. San Jacinto gave him his opportunity and he made the most of it. The boys said he clubbed his rifle and sailed in, in Donnybrook-fair style, accompanying each blow with the cry, "Alamo! You killed Wash Cottle!" [George Washington Cottle](#), a son-in-law, was married to daughter Nancy Curtis. She gave birth to twin sons soon after her husband's death.

General Thomas Rusk related in his anecdotes of the battle:

"On starting out from our camp to enter upon the attack, I saw an old gentleman, by the name of Curtis, carrying two guns. I asked him his reason for carrying more than one gun. He answered, "Damn the Mexicans; they killed my son-in-law in the Alamo, and I intend to kill two of them for it or be killed myself." I saw the old man again, during the fight, and he told me he had killed his two men, and if he could find Santa Anna, he would cut a razor-strop out of his back."

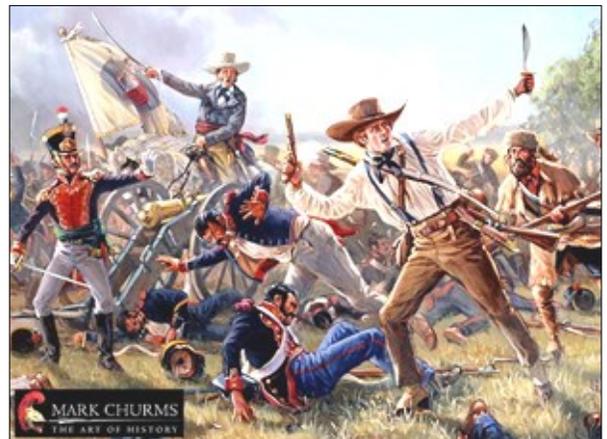
Other recounts say he accompanied each shot at the Mexicans in the battle with the words, "Alamo! You killed Wash Cottle!" At the end of the battle, as Texan officers began to stop the carnage, Curtis was terrorizing a Mexican officer with a knife and yelling, "You killed Wash Cottle. Now I'm going to kill you and make a razor strap from your hide." When Col. Wharton pulled the officer up on his horse stating, "Men, this Mexican is mine!" Curtis raised his rifle and coolly blasted the Mexican officer off the horse. Col. Wharton reacted with rage but Curtis calmly took a drink of whiskey, turned his back and walked away muttering, "Remember Wash Cottle."

General Edward Burleson in the Lamar Papers stated that Mr. Curtis was sixty-five years old when he participated in the Battle of San Jacinto. He was probably the oldest man in the battle. It is only fitting that the

2004 remake of the film, *The Alamo*, was in part filmed in the Mina, Bastrop Co area.

James Curtis. Sr. was a member of Captain Jesse Billingsley's Company of Mina Volunteers at San Jacinto but did not apply for the land due him for having participated in the battle. On December 8, 1837 a Bounty Certificate No. 831 for 320 acres of land was issued in his name for having served in the Texas army from February 22 to July 12, 1836.

James Curtis, Sr., died in the late summer of 1836 in Bastrop County, according to a signed statement by his daughter, Elizabeth Curtis Reid. Other accounts list his death as 1838 which tends to follow his 1837 bounty issue. No gravesite has been found for him or his wife. It is presumed that he was buried in a lost family burial ground possibly on former Stewart, Curtis or



The Battle of San Jacinto



Reunion of Texas veterans of the
Battle of San Jacinto



Colorado River at Bastrop, TX, near one of James Curtis' properties.

Sims lands in Bastrop County. James Washington Curtis, son of James Curtis, died in Bastrop County in 1848, as is shown in the Probate Records of that county. Sarah Curtis, daughter of James Curtis, was married to Bartlett Sims. Elizabeth Curtis, another daughter, married Samuel H. Reid. It's through the Reid descendants that much of this Curtis family history was passed down. Linda Reid conveyed to Al Field that she knows of no living Curtis male descendants, thus, no Y-DNA is available to determine the ancestral line of James Curtis.

(If you would like information on the children of James Curtis and Peggy Isaacs Rutledge, please use "Contact Us" - General Questions, on our web page, for your request.)

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