

The Keeper of Rose Island Light

Charles Slocum Curtis (1839-1922)

Jeremy D'Entremont, NE Lighthouses (NELH), by permission
Researched and compiled by George Curtis



One of our members sent me a link to a story about the Rose Island Lighthouse off Newport, Rhode Island featured on the 'newenglandlighthouses.net' website.

Rose Island, about a mile offshore from Newport, has a commanding position in Narragansett Bay's East Passage, with a lighthouse on its tip. What peaked our member's interest was the mention of Charles Slocum Curtis as the keeper from 1887 to 1912, the longest stay in Rose Island's history.



Charles Slocum Curtis

(Photo courtesy Terence Moran,
great-grandson.)

Every day near sunset, Keeper Curtis would turn his head toward Newport's Fort Adams and listen for the "sundown gun." After hearing the cannon blast, he'd lower the Stars and Stripes, and then go up in the tower to "light up" for the evening. He rigged a mirror on a pole, outside the living room window, making it easier to check the light during the evening. After going to bed, Curtis would rise to check the light again at midnight. During the day, Curtis kept busy tending the family's vegetable garden, or boating to Newport for supplies. (Source: NELH)

While the fog bell was still in use (subsequently replaced by a fog horn), Curtis and his wife Christina, had to go ashore one day. They left their daughter, Mabel, alone on the island. Thick fog suddenly rolled in. (Source: NELH)

Young Mabel couldn't get the fog bell mechanism started, so she grabbed a hammer and manually rang the bell, approximating its official time sequence for several hours until parents returned. Mabel often rowed herself to Newport to attend school. (Source: NELH)

A great deal about the Curtis family's years on the island is known, thanks largely to Charles's grandson (Mabel's son), Wanton Chase (1909-2008). His vivid memories played a vital role in the recent restoration of the lighthouse as a living museum by the Rose Island Foundation. (Source: NELH)

The full story of Rose Island can be found at www.newenglandlighthouses.net/rose-island-light-history.html.

In researching this Curtis family, I hit the same stonewall others in the family experienced, that is, Charles Slocum, James Washington (1816-1880), Samuel (1787-1869) and Sarah Rodman, Samuel (1747-1807) and Susannah Gordon, Samuel Curtis (b. abt. 1731), stonewall, and wife, Amie Case, all of whom lived in the area of South Kingstown, Washington Co, RI. Several family trees on Ancestry.com, had connections to the Curtis family of Roxbury, MA but no sources.

Using Find-A-Grave.com to search cemeteries in the South Kingstown area for all Curtis burials, I came across the great-granddaughter of Charles Slocum Curtis. I e-mailed, then telephoned her. She was so helpful as she discussed her research and problem areas. Armed with her suggestions, I launched back into finding all I could about the Curtis fami-

lies around South Kingstown and Washington County. The name Christopher Curtis kept popping up, but two separate people so I switched from Ancestry.com over to Familysearch.com and in their Rhode Island births/marriages/deaths found a Christopher Curtis marriage to Sarah Winterton at Narragansett, RI in 1724 with two children listed Winterton Curtis and Samuel Curtis. Now I had the scent. A follow-up revealed the father of Christopher as “possibly” Samuel Curtis, whose “mother was Sarah Carwithen. Sarah was the wife of Richard Curtice, son of the Master Mariner! I ran upstairs and pulled out the book on the Master Mariner published by Harlow Curtis in 1955 and there on page 3 was:

“It is evident that Samuel² (son of Richard¹) returned to New England and he probably settled in Rhode Island. He may have married a daughter of Christopher Youngs. Rhode Island vital records show a double wedding on August 27, 1724, Christopher Curtice to Sarah Winterton and Sarah Curtice to Abraham Johnson. Samuel's mother was Sarah Carwithy. Christopher Curtice had a son Winterton Curtice - no record - also a son Samuel Curtice, born 1727, who married Annie Case, March 19, 1746, and had two children, Samuel, born August 14, 1747, and Sarah, born February 25, 1752. Samuel died September 30, 1762, age 35 (born 1727).” The **circumstantial** evidence encouraging.

This was very exciting stuff, indeed! At this point, the ancestral line of Charles Slocum Curtis was believed to be, Charles Slocum, James Washington (1816-1880), Samuel (1787-1869) and Sarah Rodman, Samuel (1747-1807) and Susannah Gordon, Samuel Curtis (c.1727-1769), Christopher (b. c.1702), Samuel (b.1651), Richard Curtice and Sarah Carwithy/Carwithen of Salem, MA & Southold, NY. But alas, Y-DNA test results of Curtice/Curtis men in the Curtis DNA Project who have documented ancestral lines to Richard Curtice of Salem did not show a match with a living male ancestor of Christopher Curtis of South Kingstown, Rhode Island. I was back where I started.

Lighthouse keeper Charles Slocum Curtis was born in South Kingstown on July 26, 1839, the second of ten children to James Washington Curtis (1816-1880) and Elizabeth Dodd. According to the 1856 Newport Directory, his father James was manager of Curtis & Holland, woolen manufacturers, owned by Rodman & Sons of his grandmother's family. James was also a Newport city alderman and councilman. Charles, his oldest brother George and younger brother Samuel, all enlisted in the Rhode Island Volunteers at the beginning of the American Civil War. Samuel died 1862 after contracting tuberculosis in North Carolina. George survived his stint in the cavalry but died in 1864 aboard the Braque *Helen Snow* out of New Bedford, MA from ship's fever. Charles survived the war and his marriage to Elizabeth “Lizzie” Rawson on June 19, 1870 was included in the Newport vital records. He was 30 and she was a young 19 years old. At that time, Charles was a carpenter by trade and was hired into the Newport police department in 1873. By the 1875 RI census, Charles and Lizzie had two sons, George W. Curtis, age 3, and Edward Rawson Curtis, age 1. George died in Jersey City, NJ in 1902 and Edward at Ft. Wadsworth, Staten Island, NY in 1908 from heart complications. Edward was a fisherman living at Rose Island Light with his parents from 1896 to 1905, according to the Newport City Directory.



Christina McPhee Curtis

(Photo courtesy Terence Moran)

Tragedy struck the Curtis family when Lizzie died on November 19, 1877 in Newport, leaving Charles a widower and two young sons motherless. At the time of the 1880 Federal Census that summer, Charles was still single with two sons but in November married Christina McPhee.

Christina was born in Pictou, Nova Scotia on November 8, 1845. By the summer of 1880, she was one of six servants in the Newport home of retired merchant Thomas Mott.

In the 1885 Rhode Island state census, the Curtis family consisted of Charles, policeman/carpenter, wife Christina and children George W. (1871-1902), Edward Rawson (1873-1908), Mabel Morse (1881-1984) and Samuel Alexander Curtis (1883-1958).

By 1886, Charles was assistant keeper at the Seaconnet Light, across from Newport, according to the Newport Directory. By the next year he was listed as keeper at the Rose Island Light. The 1918 issue of the Newport directory was the last to list Charles as the keeper of the Rose Island lighthouse.

Charles Slocum Curtis passed away on December 9, 1922 and Christina followed him on December 28, 1922. Both are buried in Braman Cemetery, Newport. Their legacy is carried on by their children, Mabel, her brother Samuel and subse-



Mabel M. Curtis

quent generations. Mabel (1881-1984) married Stephen Wanton Chase (1878-1966) in 1903 and had four children and a number of grandchildren. Samuel (1883-1958) married Bes-sie Edna Lawson (1882-1978) in 1909 and produced three sons with four grandchildren. Landmarks around South Kingstown still bear the Curtis name like Curtis Corner Road, Curtis Corner Baptist Church and Curtis Corner Middle School, to name a few.

Thus, we are left with yet another stonewalled Curtis family. The Y-DNA results of a descendant of Christopher Curtis, living in the Newport, RI area, is a close match to two Curtis men living in Australia. Based on their family history, my guess is the most recent common ancestor of the Rhode Island and Australian families was living before 1700 and possibly in Cornwall on the southwest coast of England. Hopefully, new discoveries will come to light to help solve the puzzle of the connection between the Australian and Rhode Island Curtis families.

