

# The Olympian and Princess from Roxbury

Thomas Pelham Curtis and Princess Clarissa Pelham (Curtis) Cantacuzene

By George Curtis

This is a true story about an amazing family that had its moments of glory and time of grieving. It's a story about a military hero, a West Point reject who became an Olympic champion and a daughter who became a princess. There are some great characters here so let me start at the beginning.

This is a Roxbury, MA Curtis family of the line from William Curtis and Sarah Eliot 1632, Isaac, Samuel, Obadiah, Thomas to Herbert.

Herbert Pelham Curtis was born in MA in 1830 and died 1892 in St. Paul, MN. He graduated from Harvard with a law degree and served with distinction as a Union officer in the Civil War. Herbert married Anna Isabella White in April 1864 and had a boatload of kids. After the war, Herbert stayed on in Washington, DC to help get the county back together and by 1882 was a Professor of Law at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Sometime during all this, Herbert and Anna were living in San Francisco, CA were one of their sons, Thomas Pelham Curtis, was born on Jan 9, 1873.

Tom initially went off New York and attended the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) for five months until he was discharged for falsifying a leave log. After West Point, he was a private in the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia's 1st Corps of Cadets from March 1892 to March 1895. The 1st Corps was the elite infantry battalion in Boston. Tom served in the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corp during World War I.

After his short stint at the USMA, Tom focused in on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where he received a degree in electrical engineering. While there, Tom played football, ran track and was a member of the Boston Athletic Association (BAA). As the story goes, the idea was hatched at the BAA to participate in the 1896 First Olympiad to be held in Athens. The U.S. Olympic track and field trials did not exist. Curtis and other members of the Boston Athletic Association decided to compete in the inaugural games at the last minute, according to an MIT News Office report in 1996. The Boston group joined a team from Princeton and sailed for Greece less than two weeks before the games began.

One report states that the team trained in secret at Pennington, NJ before sailing. The MIT account stated that the athletes trained for an hour a day on the steamship *Fulda's* rear deck and that they practiced during a stop in Gibraltar. They arrived in Athens the day before the games began, April 5, 1896, on a Sunday, according to the MIT story. Curtis qualified for the finals in the 100-meter and 110-meter hurdles. But his trainer saved him for the hurdles, and Curtis edged Great Britain's Grantley Goulding for the victory. That, Curtis acknowledged later, was the race "I had come especially to run."

And the gold medals? Curtis didn't get one. Gold medals were not given to Olympic champions until the St. Louis Games in 1904. The winners of the events during the 1896 Games were presented an olive branch from the sacred grove of Olympus, a large silver medal, and a diploma printed in Greek.

In 1893, Tom married Frances K. Small of San Francisco, born there in 1872, and they four children, all born in Cambridge, MA. They were Helena Pelham (1894-1894), Clarissa Pelham (1899-1939), Thomas James (1901-1993) and Herbert Pelham (1903-1974). Thomas James married Elizabeth Longfellow in 1928 and this family is buried in the Longfellow Cemetery, Roque Bluffs, Washington Co, ME.



Olympian Thomas Pelham Curtis-1896

At this point, the story turns Clarissa Pelham Curtis, daughter of Thomas Pelham and Frances Curtis. Clarissa was born in Cambridge, MA on November 27, 1899. By this time her parents were prominent in the Boston social circle. Her brother Thomas James Curtis was a student at Harvard University in 1920 and probably introduced Clarissa to the dashing Russian Prince Michael Cantacuzene, a Harvard senior and son of Prince Mikhail Canatacuzene-Count Speransky and Julia Dent Grant, first-born grandchild of Ulysses S. Grant. Prince Mikhail and Julia escaped to New York via Finland and Norway after the 1917 Russian Revolution with their jewel sewn in the lining of their clothes, arriving February 1918. Their three children, Michael and his two younger sisters Bertha and Ida had a difficult escape through eastern Russia, arriving in San Francisco from Yokohama, Japan in September 1917. Their grandmother, Mrs. Frederick Dent Grant, cared for the children in California and Florida until their parents arrived in early 1918. Amazingly, Michael was a student at Harvard in 1918 and, on September 6<sup>th</sup>, registered for the military draft. There has to be great story about their escape from Russia!

Clarissa announced her engagement to Prince Michael in early May 1921 and the first of two marriage ceremonies took place at the Russian Orthodox Church in Roxbury, MA on June 27, 1921 and the second the next day at the village church in Nahant, MA where the Curtis family had their summer home.

By 1925, Prince Michael and Princess Clarissa were living in Chicago, IL where he had set up his own real estate business. Two children resulted from this marriage, both born in Chicago - a daughter Irina, born Dec 1925 and a son Rodion, born Oct 1928. Somehow, after 1930, the marriage started to fall apart. In 1933 Clarissa left Michael with the children and returned to her Boston family home. Prince Michael filed for divorce charging Clarissa deserted him and refused to return to their farm home in Wadsworth, IL. The uncontested divorce was granted in April 1935.

The story spirals down to a sad ending in 1939 with the suicide of Clarissa in her Greenwich, New York City apartment. Apparently she turned on the gas of her kitchen stove. Her brother Tom found her body. No suicide note was written.

Prince Michael remained in Illinois remarrying twice before his death in 1972. He was buried Forest Lake, Lake Co, IL. But that's not the end of the story! There is yet another generation.

Irina Cantacuzene, born in Chicago on December 30, 1925, married Douglas Erickson in 1945 at the Cantacuzene family farm in Wadsworth. She died from cancer in October 1984 in Miami, FL.

Rodion Cantacuzene graduated from the Naval Academy in 1952 and retired at rank of Captain. He married Melissa Macneilly in 1960 and they had three children – Michael, Rodion and Clarissa. It's great he carried down his parent's names. Michael has a farm in Aldie, VA and is a former Peace Corp officer. Rodion is an attorney with a practice in Lubbock, TX.



Ensign Rodion Cantacuzene, 1953



Princess Clarissa Curtis Cantacuzene