

CHARLES CURTIS – THE 31ST VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

By Thomas Curtis, CFS Member

Vice President Charles Curtis and His Amazing Ancestry

United States Vice President Charles Curtis, who served from 1929 to 1933, was a pioneer in every way. Consider:

- He was the last elected member of the Executive Branch born in a territory, not a state,
- As Senate Majority Whip, he led the floor fight in the Senate that led to the passage of the 19th Amendment which guaranteed women the right to vote,
- He was the first Vice President who was born west of the Mississippi River,
- He was the first elected member of the Executive Branch to open the Olympic Games, and
- He was the first – and so far only – elected member of the Executive Branch with significant Native American ancestry.

Charles Curtis was born on January 25, 1860, in Kansas Territory. His Native American ancestry came from his mother Ellen (Pappan) Curtis who was at least 3/8 Native American. Ellen was the great-granddaughter of White Plume, the chief of the Kaw tribe, and his wife Me-na, the daughter of Pawhuska who was the chief of the Osage tribe. Their daughter Wy-He-See (Ellen's grandmother) married Louis Gonville whose mother is believed to be from the Potawatomie tribe and whose father was a French-Canadian trapper. Their daughter Julie Gonville (Ellen's mother) married Louis Pappan (Ellen's father), the son of another French-Canadian trapper.

Unlike his mother, Charles Curtis's father Orren Arms Curtis was a purebred Yankee. Both of Orren Arms Curtis's parents – William Curtis and Permelia (Hubbard) Curtis – have exclusively New England ancestry, stretching back to the Great Puritan Migration from England in the 1630's. William Curtis's parents Thomas and Eunice (Peet) Curtis both came from Stratford, Connecticut, and have ancestors who were among the pioneering settlers of Stratford and Connecticut. Thomas Curtis's great-great-great-grandmother was Widow Elizabeth Curtis who had come to Stratford with her three sons about the time Stratford was founded in 1639.

Thomas's other pioneering Stratford ancestors include William Judson, whose fortified house at the north end of Stratford provided protection for the early Stratford pioneers, and John Peet who was the first sexton and bell ringer of the Stratford Church. More key pioneering Connecticut ancestors are Nathaniel Foote, one of the Ten Adventurers who first settled Wethersfield (the second oldest English settlement in Connecticut), and Thomas Welles, the only man in Connecticut history to hold all four of the top governmental offices (Governor in 1655 and 1658, Deputy Governor, Treasurer, and Secretary).

While it's always nice to know where someone came from, it's most important to know where someone went in their life. So let's take a look at the life of Charles Curtis.

Charles Curtis Is Raised by His Grandparents

When Charles Curtis was born in Kansas Territory, the territory was engaged in a virtual war as pro- and anti-slavery forces fought to make Kansas either a 'free' state or a 'slave' state in the years immediately prior to the start of the Civil War. True to his Yankee heritage, Orren Arms Curtis, Charles' father, was an ardent 'free'-state supporter and he had come to Topeka, the bastion of 'free'-stater in Kansas, in 1855. There about 1859 he married Ellen Pappan whose Native American ancestors had possessed that part of Kansas before the arrival of European American settlers. Orren and Ellen Curtis's first child Charles was born January 25, 1860, and their second child Elizabeth was born September 2, 1861.

Ellen (Pappan) Curtis died about April 1863 from cholera, leaving her two children motherless. At about that time, their father Orren Arms Curtis left to fight for the United States Army in the Civil War, practically leaving them fatherless as well. Consequently, Ellen's parents Louis and Julie (Gonville) Pappan took care of their two grandchildren Charles and Elizabeth Curtis. In 1865 the Gonville's moved from Topeka to the Kaw reservation at Council Grove, Kansas, where Charles Curtis soon followed them.

Meanwhile Charles' father Orren Curtis lived a less-than-exemplary life. He married and soon was divorced from Rachel Funk in 1863. In 1864 he married Lucy Jay. That marriage also ended in divorce. Orren Curtis was also dishonorably discharged from the Army and court-martialed in 1865 for "executing the bushwhackers", three prisoners in his custody who he hanged. He was sentenced to a year's hard labor at the Missouri State Penitentiary but was pardoned a month later. Consequently he had little role in his children's upbringing.

Charles Curtis left the Kaw reservation in the late 1860's and returned to North Topeka where he lived with his paternal grandparents William and Permelia (Hubbard) Curtis who had moved there from Indiana in the early 1860's. William Curtis built a racetrack and his grandson Charles Curtis became a successful jockey who became known as "The Indian Boy." Referring to Charles Curtis's career as a jockey, "Vice Presidents of the United States" by Mark O. Hatfield published in 1997 states:

His mounts made a lot of money for the local gamblers and prostitutes who bet on him, and he recalled that after one race a madam bought him "a new suit of clothes, boots, hat and all," and had a new jockey suit made for him; others bought him candy and presents.

In 1871 William Curtis brought suit to claim on behalf of Charles and Elizabeth their mother's 'half-breed' land in Topeka over their father's claim to the same land. William Curtis won the suit and Orren Curtis then left Topeka for good, leaving Charles' grandparents to care for him completely for the rest of his childhood. When Charles' grandfather William Curtis died in 1873:

[Charles] set out to join his other grandparents Louis and Julie Pappan, who were traveling with the Kaw Tribe from Kansas to the Indian Territory of Oklahoma. Still on the tribal roll, and "longing for the old life," he wanted to live on the reservation. Grandmother Julie talked him out of it. She invited him to her wagon and asked why he wanted to go to the Indian Territory. While she would have liked nothing better than to have him live with her, she told him that on the reservation he would end up "like most of the men on it," without an education or future prospects. If Charley expected to make something of himself, he should return to Topeka and attend school. "I took her splendid advice and the next morning as the wagons pulled out for the south, bound for Indian Territory, I mounted my pony and with my belongings in a flour sack, returned to Topeka and school," Curtis recounted. "No man or boy ever received better advice; it was the turning point in my life." [From "Vice Presidents of the United States"]

Charles Curtis returned to Topeka where he lived with his grandmother Permelia (Hubbard) Curtis who was a very strong-willed woman. In 1876 she insisted that Charles end his jockey career and attend high school. After he graduated, Charles studied law and was admitted to the Kansas bar in 1881 when he was just 21.

Charles Curtis's Goes to Congress

In 1884 Charles Curtis married Annie Elizabeth Baird though he hardly settled down. In that year he began his political career which propelled him into the Vice Presidency. He ran for Shawnee County Attorney, a race that he won after shaking nearly every hand in the county.

In 1892, he continued his political ascent when he ran as a Republican for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and won. In winning that election Curtis Used his personal charm to buck the trend in Kansas that year which generally favored candidates of the Populist Party. His political savvy in winning election against the Populist tide attracted the attention of House Republican leader Thomas B. Reed who made him one of his lieutenants.

Given his Native American heritage, Curtis not surprisingly came to serve on the Committee on Indian Affairs in Congress. In 1898, he drafted what became known as the Curtis Act which allowed the federal government to divide communal tribal lands in Indian Territory (which would become Oklahoma) into individual plots. Many Native Americans vigorously opposed the Curtis Act because it destroyed tribal identity, but Curtis and others with Native American heritage believed the assimilation it fostered would ultimately serve Native Americans best.

When the 20th Century arrived, Charles Curtis climbed further up the political ladder. On January 23, 1907, he was elected by the Republican Kansas state legislature to a seat in the U.S. Senate that had become vacant by the resignation of Joseph R. Burton following Burton's conviction on federal corruption charges. Curtis served until 1913 when Democrats controlled the Kansas state legislature and selected their own candidate. Shortly thereafter, the 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed which stipulated the direct election of U.S.

senators. Charles Curtis then won the first direct election of a U.S. senator in Kansas in 1914. Not long after he took office in 1915, he was elected Republican Whip of the Senate.

One of Charles Curtis' most notable accomplishments as Whip was leading the floor fight in the Senate that led to the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1919 that guaranteed women the right to vote once it was ratified by the states. American women got the right to vote in part because of the efforts of Charles Curtis. Charles Curtis followed the successful passage of the 19th Amendment by proposing the first version of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This proposed Amendment did not pass however.

In 1925, Charles Curtis became the Senate Majority Leader, the leader of the Republican majority in the U.S. Senate. According to "Vice Presidents of the United States":

Remarkably, Curtis maintained good relations with both the conservative and progressive wings of his party. The conservative Pennsylvania Senator George Wharton Pepper recorded that Curtis as majority leader "displayed a remarkable talent for accomplishing good results for his party by what in international parlance are termed 'conversations' with the other side. He was unusually adept at making deals." The progressive Nebraska Senator George Norris noted that, while he often disagreed with Curtis on legislative matters, he never knew Curtis to violate his word or fail to carry out an agreement. Idaho Senator William Borah acclaimed Curtis "a great reconciler, a walking political encyclopedia and one of the best political poker players in America."

Charles Curtis – A Curtis / Native American Vice President

By the time he became Majority Leader, Curtis wanted the ultimate American political prize – the Presidency of the United States. In 1924 he was considered as a potential Vice-Presidential candidate on the Republican ticket, but his wife Annie (Baird) Curtis was seriously ill and he would not leave her side to attend the Republican convention. (She died June 29, 1924.)

However, when President Calvin Coolidge decided not to run for reelection in the next election in 1928, Curtis saw that as his opportunity to seek the Presidency. According to "Vice Presidents of the United States," he pursued the presidency through the back rooms where he was so adept:

Curtis made no speeches and continued to devote his attention to his functions as Senate majority leader. The New York Times called his campaign "quieter than gumshoes." This was how Curtis wanted it. Serving as his own campaign manager, he planned to work the back rooms as he always had, hoping that if the convention frontrunners deadlocked, he would emerge as the compromise candidate – in the way delegates had turned to Warren Harding in 1920.

Unfortunately for Curtis, the delegates selected Herbert Hoover - who had been considered the frontrunner - as the Republican Presidential nominee on the first ballot. However, because Hoover was a progressive who was not well-liked by farm state conservatives, the convention chose Charles Curtis, a farm state conservative, to balance the Republican ticket. With Republicans credited for the 'Roaring 20's under their political leadership for most of the decade,

the Republican ticket of Hoover and Curtis swept to victory in the 1928 election. This victory represented two milestones – first, Hoover and Curtis were both born west of the Mississippi River - the first President and Vice President born there - and second, Curtis was the first Vice President with significant non-European ancestry thanks to his mother's Native American heritage.

Alas, like many other Vice Presidents, Charles Curtis' term in office was notable mostly for gaffes. His term in office also coincided with the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929. In the 1930 midterm election Curtis made the remark that "good times are just around the corner." They weren't and the ticket of Hoover and Curtis was soundly defeated in its bid for reelection in 1932 by Franklin Roosevelt. Curtis' most positive accomplishment as Vice President was opening the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles as he became the first elected U.S. Executive branch official to open the Olympic games. Like many Vice Presidents and because he was a conservative serving under a progressive, he had virtually no influence on President Hoover's policies which were themselves quite ineffective in dealing with the Great Depression.

When Charles Curtis left the Vice Presidency in 1933, he stayed in Washington, DC, instead of returning to Kansas and resumed his legal career. He died there from a heart attack on February 8, 1936, when he was 76. He is buried in Topeka Cemetery in Kansas. Charles Curtis -- the most well-known American descendant of Widow Elizabeth Curtis of Stratford – well served his country and helped build a better America for women, Native Americans, and U.S. all.