

Was a Curtis in Command of Admiral Lord Nelson's Funeral Barge in 1806?

In April 2009, the Curtis/s Family Society received a query from Chris Clarke of Capetown, South Africa asking if we had any information in our records of a Curtis being in charge of the funeral barge that carried Admiral Lord Nelson up the Thames River to London in January 1806. Our genealogist replied that the society's records had nothing relevant to the query by Chris.



In subsequent e-mail exchanges, Chris said his grandmother, Lydia H. Curtis, told the story of her grandfather who was a river pilot on the Thames River and was in charge of the barge (shallop) that carried the body of Nelson. Lydia Harriet Curtis was born in Leicester, England in 1865 and died in her 93rd year in 1958. The 1871 UK Census lists Lydia with her father John Samuel Curtis who was born about 1826 and died in Billesdon, Leicester in 1914. Chris was only able to trace his family back to Samuel Curtis, born in 1803. I was not able to find the Samuel born 1803 but did find a John S. Curtis in the 1841, 1851, and 1861 UK Census living in St. Martins, Norwich, England. The trail appeared to grow cold and, unfortunately, no further discoveries were made.

Admiral Lord Nelson was killed in the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805. His body was preserved in a cask of brandy mixed with camphor and myrrh lashed to the mainmast of HMS Victory for the voyage to Gibraltar. There the body was transferred to a lead-lined coffin filled with wine spirits for the voyage to England. Nelson lay in state at Greenwich for three days. Nelson's coffin was placed in one of the royal barges, originally made for King Charles II, and taken up river to the Admiralty for the night. The next day, on January 9, 1806, a funeral procession consisting of 32 admirals, over a hundred captains, and escorted by 10,000 troops took the coffin from the Admiralty to St. Paul's Cathedral where Nelson was interred.

So, at this point in time, there is nothing more than a grandmother's story about her grandfather. Chris has attempted to contact the National Maritime Museum in London but to no avail. The records on the preparations and planning for Nelson's funeral are held by the British National Archives but not available online. That's where we believe the real truth lies.