

114 CURTIS, ROBERT I. – [ROBERT IMALY CURTIS]

Printer & Publisher

Wheeling

Publisher of the *Virginia North-Western Gazette* (1820-24) at Wheeling and its succeeding *Wheeling Gazette* (1824-35).

Curtis was apparently a printer trained in Philadelphia; the New Jersey native was working at a press in Carlisle, Pennsylvania at the start of the War of 1812 and enlisted in a state militia unit there that September. He became acquainted with the Old Northwest as a result of that service, being sent to defend the border along the Niagara frontier. Curtis gained notice when the forces there refused to cross over into British Canada in late 1812; he was the first of thirteen privates in a brigade of 600 men who volunteered to go into Canada, but the mutinous spirit of his peers brought the attempt to an ignominious end.

When he mustered out in December, in a reduction of the frontier force there over winter, Curtis remained, settling down in the Lake Erie port of Erie, Pennsylvania. By the following summer, he had organized a press office there, the first in five years, and second overall. At the start of August 1813, he began publishing the *Northern Centinel*, a weekly paper that became an essential source of information on events along the Canadian border for papers throughout the country for much of the war with Britain; as events on that frontier moved further west, Curtis even proposed moving his paper to Detroit in April 1814, in the wake of the American victory in the Battle of the Thames, but such never came to pass. Rather, he continued publishing in Erie until June 1815, when his money and supplies ran out. A year later, Curtis resumed the paper as the *Genius of the Lakes* in partnership with John Morris.

This affiliation continued until 1820, though under rather estranged conditions after 1818. That summer a competing paper emerged, the *Erie Patriot*, seemingly shaking Curtis's faith in the town's supporting his existing paper. So in March 1819, he moved his press office to Mayville, New York, some thirty miles to the east at the northern end of Lake Chautauqua. There he began issuing the *Chautauque Eagle*, while still printing the *Genius* for Morris in Erie. This rearrangement did not help Morris much, as the region now had a choice of three weeklies and not the one it had had before 1819; he closed the *Genius* just two months later. Yet Morris was not deterred; he started a new paper there in September 1819 under his own name, *The Phoenix and Erie Reflector*, once again printed by Curtis in Mayville. This challenge brought the brief life of the *Patriot* to an end with a month. But it also weakened the financial standing of Curtis and Morris alike. Curtis chose to move on to a more settled situation in April 1820, closing his *Eagle*, and taking down Morris's *Genius* at the same time.

Such a situation was in Wheeling, some 180 miles to the south. The seat of Ohio County had a stable, profitable weekly, the *Virginia North-Western Gazette*, with a proprietor who was looking to sell. Curtis thus became its owner, taking on that formal title in September 1820, though he had likely been working in there since his springtime departure from Mayville. Curtis would conduct this paper profitably for the next fifteen years, both with and without financial partners. At the time, Wheeling's *Gazette* evinced a mildly Federalist character, reflecting the commercial concerns of its founders; Curtis would eventually embrace a Whig perspective, reflecting a concern with the domestic manufactures that his business was so

dependent upon. From his days on Lake Erie through his years in Wheeling, the supply of paper and its transport from eastern mills was a frequent issue. The development of roads and canals (internal improvements) and their positive effect on the local economy were central to his editorial perspective; such a commitment can be seen in the renaming of his journal in May 1824, turning the regionally-focused *North-Western Gazette* into the locally-centered *Wheeling Gazette*. The refreshed paper was a supporter of Henry Clay's American System, and his presidential candidacy, as was Curtis. Of course, this inclination made him suspicious of Andrew Jackson and his supporters, and eventually he would be drawn into a political and legal controversy as a result of that suspicion.

Following the disputed 1824 election of John Quincy Adams, Jackson launched a four-year-long campaign to displace Adams in the next election. Key to his censure of the capitol's political leaders was the supposed "corrupt bargain" that third-place candidate Henry Clay made with second-place Adams to assure that first-place Jackson did not become president. Jackson soon added a story about being approached by one of Clay's managers with a deal to gain the Tennessean's silence. That story was recounted in a letter from Carter Beverly, Jackson's manager in Virginia, to Duff Green, the editor of the Jacksonian *United States Telegraph* in Washington, who published the letter. Curtis knew of inaccuracies in Beverly's story and published an article in his *Gazette* detailing them, insinuating that Beverly (and Jackson, by implication) had lied about the supposed offer. Beverly filed a libel suit against Curtis in the fall of 1827, bringing immediate national attention to the Wheeling editor. In the trial that December, both sides argued the "truth" of their writings, and so the falsity of the other's; the jury found that they could not determine the truth of one side or the other, and acquitted Curtis – to the resounding condemnation of Jacksonian papers in the west and the deafening silence of the general's eastern supporters. Even Green sidestepped the issue, reprinting Curtis's own published account of the trial without comment or follow-up.

By 1835, Curtis had tired of the journalistic grind, looking instead for the quieter life as a gentleman farmer, where he could raise his growing family in peace. He sold his interest in the *Gazette* to Samuel H. Davis (126) effective with the end of that year. He used the profits from this sale, and perhaps from the military land warrants he received for his war-time service, to buy a substantial farm near Moundsville in Marshall County, about a dozen miles south of Wheeling along the Ohio River. There Curtis lived out the remaining years of his life, though manifestly immersing himself in the pursuit of scientific agriculture; the 1840 census reports his occupation as "horticulturalist." His long life came to a subdued end in 1874, at the age of eighty-three, surrounded by his immediate family.

Personal Data

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| Born: | ca. | 1791 | Burlington, New Jersey |
| Married: | Sept. 24 | 1822 | Anna Applebee Fox @ Marshall County. VA/WV |
| Died: | July 1 | 1874 | Moundsville, Marshall County. VA/WV |
| Children: | George B. (b. 1829), Elizabeth (b. 1830), Robert B. (b. 1832), Rev. Josiah F. (b. 1834). | | |

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; U.S. Army, *War of 1812 Service Records*; Kline's *Carlisle Gazette*, 1 Jan. 1813; Sanford, *Erie County*; Cranmer, *Wheeling and Ohio County*; Belko, *Invincible Duff Green*; libel suit report, *National Intelligencer*, 27 Dec. 1827.