

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Samuel Ryan Curtis

The career of Samuel Ryan Curtis illustrates both the versatility of the American pioneers and their westward movement. His parents — Zarah and Phalley Yale Curtis — were originally residents of Connecticut, but early in the nineteenth century they moved westward to Ohio, stopping in New York on the way. Both the date and the place of the birth of their son, Samuel Ryan Curtis, seems to be uncertain, but it appears probable that he was born near Champlain, New York, on February 3, 1805.

His early boyhood was spent on a farm in Licking County, Ohio, with his brothers and sisters. Samuel then secured a cadetship at West Point, graduating on July 1, 1831, with the rank of brevet second lieutenant. He was assigned to the Seventh Infantry and sent to Fort Gibson.

In the fall of 1831, Lieutenant Curtis married Miss Belinda Buckingham of Mansfield, Ohio. Pos-



sibly because of the difficulty of adjusting the requirements of home life and a military career, Lieutenant Curtis resigned his commission in June, 1832, after serving only one year in the army, and returned to Ohio. For a time he considered taking up law, but decided to accept employment as an engineer in charge of construction work on the National Road. In April, 1837, he became chief engineer of the Muskingum River improvement project — a futile attempt to make a shallow river navigable.

It was about this time that he became interested in a railroad to the Pacific Ocean, and in 1839 circulated a petition for a grant of public lands for this purpose — but nothing came of it. Curtis next turned his attention to the study of law and was admitted to the bar of Ohio in 1841.

When the Mexican War began, Curtis, who was a colonel of militia, was appointed Adjutant General of Ohio. A swivel chair position, however, never seems to have satisfied him and he very soon resigned to become colonel of the Third Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Neither the regiment nor its commander saw much active service, although Colonel Curtis served for a time as governor of Matamoras and later of Camargo, Monterey, and Saltillo. He was honorably discharged from service on June 24, 1847.

It was soon after this that Samuel Ryan Curtis came to Iowa. He was employed as chief engineer of the improvement project along the Des Moines



River, and moved his family — a wife, two sons, and two daughters to Keokuk. The Des Moines River project met endless difficulties: a great flood inundated the valley in 1849 and washed out some of the work already done; disagreements over the land grants made the continuation of the work uncertain; and late in 1849 the board in charge decided to employ an engineer at a smaller salary. Curtis went to St. Louis as city engineer.

Between 1850 and 1853 — when a political change threw him out of office — he laid out an adequate sewer system, began the drainage of a lake which had become unsanitary, and constructed a wider levee and more wharves. Most important of all was his work in connection with the Mississippi River. For years the river had been eating away at the Illinois bank and threatened to change its bed and abandon the city altogether. By building a dam across from an island to the Illinois shore and a dike southward from the island, Curtis succeeded in deflecting the current back along the St. Louis levee.

In the fall of 1853, he surveyed a line across Iowa for a railroad to be called the Philadelphia, Fort Wayne and Platte Valley Railroad — also known as the “Air Line” road. This railroad never materialized, but Curtis became convinced that there should be several railroads across Iowa uniting at Council Bluffs “in a great trunk line, running west up the broad valley of the Platte”.

During these years Curtis also maintained a law



office at Keokuk, and was elected mayor of the city in 1856. In his inaugural address he recommended the construction of a canal on the Iowa side around the rapids in the Mississippi River. Indeed, he had suggested this in 1849 in a report made to a private company. It was not, however, until 1877 that such a canal was completed by the United States government — only to be submerged in 1913 when the waters of the Mississippi backed up from the great Keokuk dam.

Perhaps his election as mayor stirred higher political ambitions. At any rate, in the fall of 1856, Samuel R. Curtis was nominated as a candidate for Congress by the newly organized Republican party, and, to the surprise of the politicians, he was elected. In 1858 he was reelected, and again in 1860. His chief interest in Congress was the promotion of a railroad west to the Pacific, although he was also interested in military affairs. In April, 1860, Curtis, as chairman of the Select Committee on the Pacific Railroad, submitted a report to Congress in which the advantages of such a railroad were presented and the central route was recommended.

But the Civil War was looming on the horizon. In December, 1860, Curtis represented Iowa on a committee of thirty-three, appointed to consider the threat of disunion. He also represented Iowa at the "Peace Convention" held at Washington, in February, 1861. Neither of these groups found any solution of the problem, however.



Upon the close of the session of Congress on March 4, 1861, Curtis returned to Keokuk. There the news of the firing on Fort Sumter reached him and he returned at once to Washington. In the course of some of his conferences with officials there, he called upon the Assistant Commissary General and incidentally suggested that provision would soon have to be made for enlisting at least fifty thousand men. Whereupon that officer is said to have exclaimed, "Great God, Curtis! What are you going to do with such an army here?"

Curtis, however, did not limit himself to advice. He returned to Iowa and on June 1, 1861, was elected colonel of the Second Iowa Infantry. On the thirteenth of June this regiment embarked for Hannibal, Missouri, where troops were urgently needed to hold the railroad between that city and St. Joseph. Leaving his men in charge of the situation in Missouri, Colonel Curtis hurried to Washington to attend the special session of Congress called for July 4, 1861. On Sunday, July 21st, came the battle and rout at Bull Run. Colonel Curtis was one of the leaders who tried to halt the panic-stricken volunteers, but without success.

Convinced that his work lay on the battle field rather than in the legislative halls, Curtis resigned his seat in Congress and accepted an appointment as brigadier general. Almost immediately he was plunged into the maelstrom of Missouri politics — at Jefferson Barracks, Camp Benton, and later in



St. Louis. The storm center in Missouri at that time was General John C. Frémont. On October 24, 1861, President Lincoln sent to General Curtis a letter and an order. The order directed General Frémont to turn over the command of the Western Department to Major General D. Hunter. The letter authorized General Curtis to refrain from delivering the order under certain conditions. Curtis, however, felt that the order should be delivered, and Frémont was removed from command.

In accordance with an order issued on November 6, 1861, General Curtis was directed to take charge of affairs in and around St. Louis. The position was as comfortable as handling a porcupine. Men and women of all degrees and shades of loyalty and disloyalty had to be considered.

On Christmas Day, 1861, General Curtis was assigned to command the Southwestern District of Missouri. He established headquarters in Rolla and early in February began an intensive campaign to clear the State of Confederates. The rations prepared for the campaign consisted of "hard bread, flour, hominy, rice, desiccated potatoes, mixed vegetables, sugar, coffee and salt" with fresh meat to be provided on the way.

Having pursued the Confederates under General Sterling Price into Arkansas, he issued a proclamation ordering his men to protect women and children, promising "relentless war" on the foes of the Union, but expressing a hope for peace. On March



6, 7, and 8, 1862, the army of General Curtis met a combined Confederate army at Pea Ridge, Arkansas, and won a decisive victory. As a reward, Curtis was made a major general — the first Iowa man to receive this rank.

It was soon after this battle that General Curtis and his chief quartermaster, Philip H. Sheridan, had a serious disagreement over the purchase of horses and mules offered for sale by certain Union soldiers and camp followers. Sheridan declared that the animals were stolen and refused to pay for them. The men appealed to General Curtis and in the altercation which followed, Sheridan wrote to General Curtis that he would not participate in "jayhawking". He was ordered under arrest, but, at his own request, was soon sent north to buy horses.

Some four weeks after the battle of Pea Ridge, General Curtis started south through the Ozark Mountains, hoping to capture Little Rock. In this he was unsuccessful and as military governor he was soon struggling with the problems of disloyalty and guerrilla warfare. Transportation was difficult and supplies ran short. "For God's sake", wrote his quartermaster, "consider the practicability of getting trains over the road you are going to take!"

In July General Curtis decided to move the Army of the Southwest to the White River in order to meet supplies which were to be sent there under convoy of gun boats. The march through the canebrakes, swamps, and forests in the southern summer



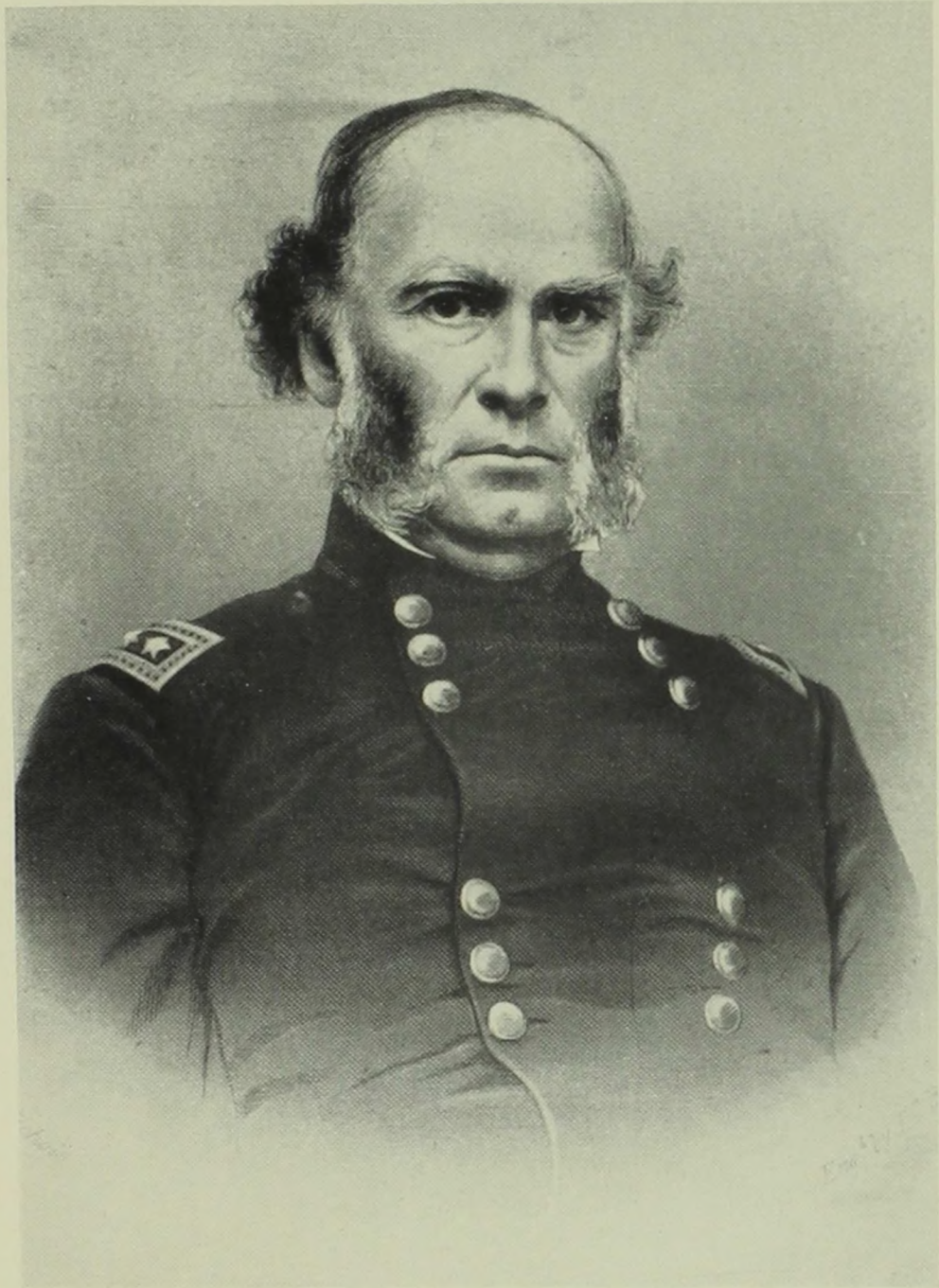
heat was exhausting, and when the men reached the river, they found that the gunboats had already come and gone. General Curtis then moved his army to Helena on the Mississippi River.

His troubles were by no means over. Helena was a rendezvous for escaped slaves who had to be fed by some one. It was also the center of the cotton industry. General Curtis put one of the presses to work, had the slaves haul the cotton which he purchased from the owners, and used the profits to feed the fugitives. It was, no doubt, a good plan; but it caused trouble later for General Curtis.

In September, 1862, General Curtis was assigned to command the Department of the Missouri, including Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas. Guerrillas infested the country; politicians harassed the military authorities; there were charges and counter-charges of fraud and disloyalty. Political enemies and disgruntled speculators charged General Curtis with irregularities in handling the cotton at Helena, Arkansas. In a letter to President Lincoln, Curtis explained the situation and added: "I have lived too long and filled too many private and public places without reproach to be afraid of lies invented by rebel sympathizers and exasperated knaves generally."

Nothing definite seems to have come of these charges, but through the influence of Governor H. R. Gamble of Missouri, who was dissatisfied with what he termed the severity of the Iowa general in the





MAJOR GENERAL SAMUEL R. CURTIS



treatment of disloyalty, General Curtis was removed from the command of the Department on May 22, 1863.

President Lincoln explained that he consented to this removal only because he hoped that it would put an end to the bitter factional quarrel in Missouri, and not because of any criticism of General Curtis. S. H. M. Byers says that the removal was due to Lincoln's desire to placate the Gamble faction in Missouri in the hope of securing the vote of Missouri in the Republican national convention of 1864, but if this was the motive, it failed; the Missouri delegation gave its first vote to General Grant.

At this time, too, General Curtis suffered a personal bereavement when one of his sons, Major Henry Z. Curtis, was killed on October 6, 1863, near Baxter Springs, Kansas, by a band of guerrillas under W. C. Quantrill.

General Curtis was next sent to the Department of Kansas. His chief responsibility there was the protection of settlers from the Indians, but late in the summer of 1864, an army of Confederates under General Sterling Price swept across Missouri into Kansas hoping to capture Fort Leavenworth and the supplies there. Price was said to have fifteen thousand men while Curtis had only about three thousand regular soldiers. The Kansas militia was called out, however, and with its aid General Price's army was defeated and driven back across Kansas into Arkansas, losing, it was estimated, over ten



thousand men and much equipment. One of the battles in this campaign, fought at Westport, now a part of Kansas City, Missouri, was called the "Gettysburg of the West."

Pursuit of the retreating Confederates into Arkansas was hampered by lack of supplies and uncertainty of authority, for General Curtis was then outside his own Department. Moreover, the Kansas militia objected to leaving their State. In fact General Curtis was accused of ordering out the militia for the purpose of preventing the men from voting in the November election. Nevertheless he persisted in his plans and on November 8, 1864, his army fired a final volley at the Confederate raiders as they crossed the Arkansas River, and then returned to Fort Leavenworth.

The usual political inquest followed, and on January 30, 1865, General Curtis was transferred to the Department of the Northwest. He assumed command at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on February 13, 1865.

"Of the Iowa major-generals," wrote a contemporary at this time, "General Curtis is the largest in person. He has a tall, fine form, and, though nearly sixty years of age, is erect and vigorous. His large, hazel eyes give his countenance an expression of gravity and thoughtfulness which comports well with the dignity of his movements and manners. But, if he is sedate, and if he never laughs boisterously, he is nevertheless easily approached and so-



ciable; he is kind and generous-hearted, and would not knowingly injure the feelings of the most humble or unfortunate.

“He has one trait which is not in keeping with his general character. He is nice and precise in dress, and in this respect has been noted for the scrupulousness with which he has complied with the Army Regulations. He never, when on duty, omits a regulation trapping. In many respects he is not unlike General Grant; but not in this.”

When the Department of the Northwest was dissolved in July, 1865, General Curtis was sent to treat with the Indian tribes on the Upper Missouri, and spent much of the fall of 1865 and the spring of 1866 on this mission. His formal discharge from the army was dated April 30, 1866.

Upon returning to civil life, Samuel R. Curtis turned his attention to the Pacific railroad. Indeed, he had never forgotten his vision of a trans-continental railroad and the act of July 1, 1862, providing for the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad named General Curtis as one of the incorporators. He had secured a leave of absence from his military duties from August 29th to September 24, 1862, to attend the organization meeting held at Chicago, where he was chosen to preside.

Inspection work along the line of the Union Pacific Railroad west of Omaha occupied much of his attention during 1866. On December 26, 1866, he finished the inspection of an additional thirty-five miles



of track, signed his report at Omaha, and walked across the Missouri River on the ice in the face of a biting cold wind. On the Iowa side, he stepped into a carriage, and died almost immediately. His body was buried at Keokuk. An equestrian statue now stands in the square of his home city as a tribute to Samuel Ryan Curtis — engineer, soldier, lawyer, citizen.

RUTH A. GALLAHER