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FREDERICK WILLIAM CURTENIUS

1806 - 1883

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EARLY LIFE .....	1
SPANISH AMERICAN WAR ACTIVITIES .....	3
MEXICAN WAR ACTIVITIES .....	5
CIVIL WAR ACTIVITIES .....	8
LATER LIFE .....	12

**EARLY LIFE**

Frederick William Curtenius was born in New York City on September 30, 1806.<sup>1</sup> With a family heritage which was thoroughly imbued with military honor, it was no surprise that Mr. Curtenius one day should have launched himself on what proved to be a remarkable career of his own.

Both grandfathers of Mr. Curtenius were military men, and served with highest distinction in the Revolutionary War. His paternal grandfather was a merchant in New York when the war broke out. When he learned of the inability of the government to supply its army adequately, he sold his entire stock for \$16,000 and contributed the complete amount to the army for the purchase of necessary equipment.<sup>2</sup> It was later his privilege to give the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence in New York State on July 11, 1776. On this same day he led the "Sons of Freedom" in the famous dethronement of the equestrian statue of King George III. The lead fragments in this statue were afterwards sent to Connecticut, where they were molded into 10,000 musket balls for the ultimate use of the American army.<sup>3</sup> The maternal grandfather was a colonel in the 'great uprising'.

Our hero's father, General Peter Curtenius, commanded the New York State troops during the War of 1812. For a number of years later, he was marshall of the state, and in this capacity had the privilege of arresting Aaron Burr, then charged with treason. He subsequently was a prominent member of the state legislature and the intimate friend of many

<sup>1</sup>Portrait and Biographical Record of Kalamazoo..., Chicago, 1892, p. 1112.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Barrett, The Old Merchants of New York, New York, 1864, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

leading men and outstanding politicians of the day.<sup>1</sup>

General Peter Curtenius passed away in 1817, and since his mother had died even earlier, young Frederick W. Curtenius was left an orphan at eleven years of age.<sup>2</sup> No definite information seems to exist concerning his next few years, but it is highly probable that the young boy was taken in and cared for by one of his father's many close friends.

Five years later, when he was sixteen years old, Frederick Curtenius entered Hamilton College in Clinton, New York.<sup>3</sup> In the next year, 1823, there arose a situation which for the first time gave an indication of the noble, but somewhat stubborn character of Mr. Curtenius, which was destined to become quite famous in his later years. It seems that the Hamilton College faculty refused to give Curtenius a degree when he declined to surrender the names of some comrades of his who had reportedly erred in a few college pranks.<sup>4</sup> Inasmuch as he was only seventeen at the time, it is doubtful that he was in a position to receive a degree in the first place. Sixty years later, however, when Colonel Curtenius was 77 years old, the college reconsidered and sent the diploma in question - one week before the Colonel's death.<sup>5</sup>

He left Hamilton College, then, in 1823 and immediately took up the study of law.<sup>6</sup> His lust for law, however, was greatly diminished after three months of study, when young Curtenius evidently decided to begin a career which was more in keeping with his military heritage.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cyclopedia of Michigan: Historical and Biographical, New York, 1890, p. 290.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel W. Durant, History of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, Philadelphia, 1880, p. 27

<sup>4</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, January 1, 1937, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

SPANISH AMERICAN WAR ACTIVITIES

In 1824 Simon Bolivar, the South American patriot, was in the later stages of freeing his people from the Spanish yoke. Frederick Curtenius, ever-generous in his aid to the oppressed, must have sympathized deeply with the efforts of Bolivar. At eighteen at any rate he obtained credentials from the consul-general at New York, and in 1824 found himself the only passenger on a vessel embarking for South America loaded with ammunition for the South American Army.<sup>1</sup>

Upon his arrival in Granada, Curtenius was offered either a commission of midshipman in the navy or a lieutenant's commission in the army. Choosing the latter, he was commissioned a lieutenant in the New Granadan army, where he served with distinction and honor until the end of the war, even suffering from a slight chest wound.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to New York, Mr. Curtenius married Miss Elizabeth Fowler, a resident of New York, in 1826.<sup>3</sup> Joining the New York State militia, he was commissioned in 1831 colonel of a regiment composed of the citizens of Warren and Washington counties.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently tiring of his military life, Frederick Curtenius moved West and for a time was engaged in maritime activities on Lake Champlain, in Vermont.<sup>5</sup> Turning his abilities to the operation of a trading boat, he had accumulated \$110.00 by 1835, when he set out for the community of Bronson.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, February 23, 1947, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, February 23, 1947, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

Arriving in Kalamazoo when it was a mere hamlet, containing less than 300 inhabitants, Mr. Curtenius settled on a site near Grand Prairie and decided to try his hand at farming.<sup>1</sup> In 1835, he erected a simple but well built log cabin. Before 1840, however, he had replaced this with a more elaborate house of sturdy timber and a strong stone foundation.<sup>2</sup> All lumber used in the construction was cut on the property, which was rich timber area in those times. The name of Frederick W. Curtenius is included in a group who were later honored for "materially aiding in the opening of the wilderness here and for spreading its (the village) fame."<sup>3</sup> In 1842 he was honored with an appointment to the visiting board at West Point.<sup>4</sup>

It was during his earlier life in Kalamazoo that Mr. Curtenius had walked to town to pay his property taxes.<sup>5</sup> The interesting point here is that he was displaying his usual magnanimous character in not only paying his own taxes, but by becoming a sort of quasi public official in handling the tax matters for most of his neighbors.<sup>6</sup> This particular type of generosity on the part of Mr. Curtenius was to display itself many future times in the various civic affairs in which he would soon participate. By 1847, however, even his civic career had to be curtailed, for the Colonel was faced with another war.

<sup>1</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, August 24, 1946, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, Lansing, 1900, vol. I, p. 210.

<sup>4</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 278. (In 1842 Curtenius was also elected state senator on the Whig slate.)

<sup>5</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, January 1, 1937, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

**MEXICAN WAR ACTIVITIES.**

Mr. Curtenius received a commission of Captain in the United States Army on October 30, 1847.<sup>1</sup> Filling this position quite ably, Captain Curtenius recruited Company A of the First Michigan Infantry at Kalamazoo in preparation for the Mexican War. Mustered into the United States Service on November 19, 1847, the company of 101 men was ordered to report to Colonel Thomas B.W. Stockton, at Detroit, in charge of the regiment.<sup>2</sup>

On Christmas Day, 1847, the company left its Detroit barracks and departed with the rest of the regiment for New Orleans, Louisiana. Marching through mud and rain over almost impassable routes, the company reached Springfield, Ohio, two hundred miles from the starting point. From there it proceeded by train to Cincinnati, from whence it embarked on the steamer "Andrew Jackson" and in ten more days had reached New Orleans.<sup>3</sup>

For approximately a week Captain Curtenius' Company, together with the regiment, was encamped upon Jackson's old battle ground of 1815. During this time the regiment was inspected by General Zachary Taylor, in person, who had recently arrived from his famous campaign in Mexico. The veteran general complimented the regiment and "prophesied for it an honorable history."<sup>4</sup>

After sailing from New Orleans, the Company arrived at Vera Cruz, Mexico about the middle of January, 1848. After remaining outside the city's walls for three weeks, it received orders to proceed to Cordova,

<sup>1</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

a little town of about 10,000 inhabitants, located at the base of Orizaba, a lofty 17,000 foot, snow-capped mountain.<sup>1</sup>

On the journey to Cordova, the progress of the regiment was somewhat impeded by guerrilla troops, which had infested all public roads. However, after repulsing several light attacks, the regiment reached its destination, where it remained until the close of the war.<sup>2</sup>

On occasions, Company A was detailed for escort duty, which consisted chiefly of guarding supply trains employed between Vera Cruz and interior posts. With the exception of occasional attacks from guerrillas while on escort duty, the Company saw no actual war, since the heavy fighting was over even before it arrived in the country.<sup>3</sup>

In July, 1848, the regiment was ordered home, and after reaching Detroit, was mustered out of service July 18, 1848.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to Kalamazoo, Curtenius began to dabble in politics and by 1853 found himself elected a state senator from Michigan's twenty-first district.<sup>5</sup>

The year 1854 found Kalamazooans enjoying their Quarter Centennial celebration, on June 21. The Ladies Literary Association, in charge of the festivities, had prepared a "bountiful dinner providing for 300 persons."<sup>6</sup> Colonel Curtenius was selected to give the celebration's chief

<sup>1</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, June 16, 1929, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Quarter Centennial Celebration, edited by the Ladies Literary Association, Kalamazoo, 1855, p. 7.

address. It is this speech which offers the Colonel's true sentiments concerning Kalamazoo. In referring to the village he commented, "We speak of it as an inland settlement (still in its childhood), possessing as much native loveliness - claiming as much intelligence and refinement - giving evidence of as much taste, and having before it as auspicious a future as any other village of its age in the almost boundless west."<sup>1</sup>

As a politician, Curtenius could be equalled only as a military man; hence in 1855 the government of Michigan combined his two geniuses and appointed him Adjutant-General of the State.<sup>2</sup> In this capacity, Mr. Curtenius admirably performed his duties until 1861, when once again his government called upon his services in the face of another struggle.

<sup>1</sup>The Ladies Literary Association, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 278.

CIVIL WAR ACTIVITIES

It was at the outbreak of the Civil War when Mr. Curtenius received his highest rank in connection with the Army of the United States. The Sixth Regiment of Infantry, composed of companies recruited in villages neighboring Kalamazoo, was mustered into federal service August 20, 1861, with newly commissioned Colonel Curtenius at its head.<sup>1</sup> Showing a force of 944 officers and men in the command of Colonel Curtenius, the regiment left Kalamazoo for the Potomac August 30. Upon its arrival at Baltimore it was ordered into camp, where it lay in garrison for approximately six months.<sup>2</sup>

While at Baltimore there arrived a beautiful banner of regulation size, thoughtfully sent by the generous citizens of Kalamazoo to their friends in uniform. "On a blue field were fine decorations in gold letters and among the stars the single inscription, 'Do Your Duty'". The flag was formally presented to Colonel Curtenius, commanding. Carried through several battles in which the regiment took part, the flag was finally sent to Kalamazoo as a gift from the regiment to Colonel Curtenius after his resignation from the army.<sup>3</sup>

After taking part in a short but eventful expedition under General Lockwood to eliminate a rebel force attempting to fortify a point on the Potomac, the Sixth returned to Baltimore, arriving in December, having been absent about a month. Only a short time had passed when the regiment

<sup>1</sup>John Robertson, Michigan In the War, Lansing, 1882, p. 807.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

received another flag, this time from a group of the ladies of Baltimore. The 'handsome silk U.S. flag' was presented to the regiment in behalf of the donors by a prominent Baltimore lawyer, and "Colonel Curtenius gave the proper response."<sup>1</sup>

Leaving Baltimore in February, 1862, the Sixth took an active part in the campaign of General Benjamin F. Butler against New Orleans. By May, Colonel Curtenius and his regiment had been placed in charge of the U.S. Mint located there, being one of the first regiments to occupy New Orleans after its capture.<sup>2</sup>

Remaining in the city for twelve days, Colonel Curtenius was placed in charge of a brigade composed of his own and two western regiments which was ordered to Vicksburg for reconnaissance purposes. Accomplishing his mission, Colonel Curtenius and his force returned to Baton Rouge on May 29, 1862, and went into winter quarters at the barracks.<sup>3</sup>

During the next month a regrettable incident occurred, which led to Colonel Curtenius' resignation from the United States Army. A small group of slaves had taken refuge within the lines of the Colonel's regiment. His commanding officer, Brigadier General Thomas Williams, ordered Colonel Curtenius to return them to their owners.<sup>4</sup> Once again displaying his remarkable character, the Colonel refused, stating that

<sup>1</sup>Robertson, op. cit., p. 260.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 278.

he had not been commissioned by the State of Michigan to return slaves to their owners. The commanding general ordered his arrest, and Colonel Curtenius, feeling the great injustice of such treatment, resigned his command June 20, 1862, and returned home.<sup>1</sup> The State of Michigan fully sustained him in his action and the Colonel was given an honorable discharge.

With a rich background in military affairs and the high regard in which he was held by his superior officers, it is conceivable that the Colonel would have reached a very prominent position in the Federal armies, had it not been for this strange but seemingly unavoidable situation. It has been stated that General John A. Dix thought more of Colonel Curtenius than he did of any other regimental commander.<sup>2</sup>

As for the general who caused the Colonel's resignation by first ordering his arrest, all available information suggests that it was Brigadier General Thomas Williams, from Detroit, Michigan.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand all sources of data which include this incident suggest that the erring general, whose name is not mentioned, was rebuked by the State of Michigan. This seems highly improbable, since news traveled rather at the time, and Brigadier General Thomas Williams died heroically in battle at Baton Rouge on August 5, 1862, only a little more than a month after Colonel Curtenius' resignation.<sup>4</sup> It is quite probable that the

<sup>1</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, op. cit., p. 264.

<sup>3</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>4</sup>See the authorities cited in footnotes 2,3, and 4 on preceding page

offending general's name had been omitted by the War Department to ease what might have been an imbroglio caused by the untimely and heroic demise of the same general.

Returning to Kalamazoo in 1862, Colonel Curtenius, with his typical philanthropic nature, must have given freely in aiding the war effort. Surely even the physical presence of the Colonel in those trying times had a great stabilizing and reassuring effect on the village until the war's culmination in 1865.

Upon his return, at any rate, Curtenius in the same year assumed the duties of treasurer for the Michigan Asylum for the Insane, and continued to hold this position until 1879 when he resigned.<sup>1</sup> The Colonel resumed his political career in 1866, when he was elected president of the village of Kalamazoo.<sup>2</sup> By 1868 Curtenius once again found himself a Michigan State Senator, this time from Michigan's nineteenth district.<sup>3</sup>

President Grant, aware of the Colonel's keen abilities, appointed him collector of internal revenue for the fourth congressional district, which included seven counties of the state. Curtenius held this office for two years, 1868 and 1869, and when his term had expired he declined re-appointment. It is interesting to note that when he settled with the government his statement of the differences was reported not to exceed two cents - quite a remarkable record considering the fact that he had received and disbursed over one million dollars.<sup>4</sup>

Among his various ambitions, Mr. Curtenius must have had a desire to cultivate a talent in banking, for in 1866, in addition to his duties

<sup>1</sup>Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, Lansing, 1900, vol. XI, 18.

<sup>2</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, June 16, 1929, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, Lansing, 1900, vol. VII, 484.

as village president, he was elected president of the Kalamazoo City Bank, where he continued as president for the remaining 17 years of his life.<sup>1</sup>

His first wife, the former Elizabeth Fowler, died in 1867, leaving two children. The Colonel was remarried in 1868 to the daughter of J.P. Woodbury, Miss Kate Woodbury.<sup>2</sup>

July 4, 1876, found Kalamazoo patriotically enjoying the nation's centennial celebration. On this occasion Kalamazoo's executive committee, which headed the day's program, unanimously selected Colonel F.W. Curtenius to serve as president of the centennial celebration. The Colonel also acted as master of ceremonies for the program given at the court house, following a parade through the village.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Curtenius had his last political affiliations with Kalamazoo in 1877 and 1878, when he was elected, then re-elected to the village presidency.<sup>4</sup> At the age of 72, he continued his duties as a bank president but stepped out of the civic affairs to which he had contributed so much.

On the morning of July 13, 1883, Colonel Frederick William Curtenius quietly passed away at his South Rose Street residence. His death was a genuine shock to the entire village, and his passing was mourned by all who knew him. Mr. Curtenius had carried his later years remarkably well. With an "erect, vigorous form, his step, firm and elastic

<sup>1</sup>Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, Lansing, 1900, vol. VII, 485.

<sup>2</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>3</sup>Centennial Celebration at Kalamazoo, edited by The Executive Committee, Kalamazoo, July 4, 1876, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Kalamazoo Gazette, June 16, 1929, p. 12.

as that of early manhood, (one) would hardly suspect that he had passed his 'threescore and ten.'<sup>1</sup> He had been a prominent member of the Presbyterian Church.

His career in many respects is remarkable, and with justice he can be called a hero of three wars. The Colonel possessed a nature which was brave, honorable, true and loyal, not only to friends, state and nation, but ready to be of aid to anyone in need of assistance. It is fortunate for Kalamazoo that men of such conscientious character settled here in the beginning.

<sup>1</sup>Durant, op. cit., p. 278.

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- c. August 24, 1946
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