

**The Legacy**  
**By: Lois Groshong**

One of the reasons that I enjoy researching the homes that Historic Restorations has the opportunity to become involved in, is the stories/lives that the buildings hold from the people who lived within their walls; real people and real history.

George William Curtis was born into a family of privilege in Massachusetts in 1824 and lived for 68 years as a champion for social justice. Mr. Curtis home in Staten Island, New York was brimming with literary illuminates. Horace Greeley was a familiar house guest. Many of the transcendental community were close friends to the Curtis household. Imagine, chatting over cocktails and eating ladyfingers and cucumber sandwiches in the formal sitting room, with the likes of Henry W. Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Charles Dana, John Dwight, Elizabeth Peabody, the Channing Brothers; William and Henry, William Ellery and Theodore Parker. Brooks Farm, near Roxbury Massachusetts was also a place for the American intellectuals to visit, to work in the communal fields and share the seeds of reform planted in the fertile ground that flourished and bloomed. Social action was born from this world traveler and abolitionist, William Curtis.

Today some would call William Curtis and "elitist". William Curtis was one of the founders of the Staten Island Unitarian Church as well as serving as Chair to Staten Island's Republican party in 1860, the party that elected President Lincoln. Is the label an "elitist" an accurate description? Someone who was in his heart of hearts a humanitarian with a desire to serve others as well as create a better world for everyone?

The Curtis House, built in 1853, originally sat on an acre and a half lot, with a small brook rolling by, just forty feet from the side door. This mid-eighteenth century Victorian featured six fireplaces, high dentil details below the roof line, six over six, double hung windows large enough to stand in, as long as you are under six feet tall, stately columns hold the tongue and grooved ceiling above the wrap-a-round porch. Stepping inside the front door, see, the tile floor entrance, leading to the Grand Staircase. Sitting rooms were located on either side of this main hall. Following the narrowing hall to the left is the Dining room. To the right is a small enclosed porch to catch the children's wet, muddy shoes and toys. The back of this house is filled with kitchen and pantry, used to feed the growing family and entertain with the flair the Victorians are known for. Elegant soirées, where the fashionable sipped sherry and talked about the last European holiday that they enjoyed.

Time has encroached on the property that had at one time been owned by the Curtis family. Today the house stands as a corner lot, just behind a row of trees and flowering bushes. The original carriage house remains at a slight distance from the "new" garage but is not part of the deed anymore. Some time in the latter half of the 20th Century the owners, at the time, decided to have the wood siding covered with aluminum siding. This house has been called a Mansion and a Cottage, what it is; is the "Kings X" a time out if you will. The safe place for its occupants to relax, restore and allows them to be their real selves, sheltering it's occupants within it's walls for the past one hundred and fifty three years. Currently it is home to a loving family. Willing to repair the "modern maintenance free" idea that was pushed on the American homeowners since the end of World War II. All of the exterior decorative trim was removed to make the aluminum siding contractors job easier, to just make square corners around the windows, and doors. The shutters and the dentil was removed altogether. The homeowners have pictures that had been taken early in the twentieth century that showed much of the original details. Historic Restorations was able to recreate the character defining features and put them back where they belong.

Liberty Under the Law: a speech given to the New England society of the City of New York . December 22, 1876.

"The Puritan Principle is simply individual freedom. From that springs religious liberty, and political equality. The free State, the free Church, the free School - are the triple armor of American Nationality, of American Security." The will of the people, subject to law, guides our national character. This is the course America's founding fathers set. Today the discussion is still relevant.

Living in our capitalistic society, each of us, are possessed with a strong sense of self entitlement. We must remember to believe in the worthiness of the others that inhabit this planet, as we search for the meaning to life, questioning and experimenting. Is it as easy as just being a good person, and the rest will follow? Or are we intended to live our lives as a contributor to the Greater good of human kind? Every social movement leads to another level of conscience. The abolitionist movement made way for the social welfare reform goals in the next generation. Post Civil War conscience. Unsentimental Reformer - the life of Josephine Shaw Lowell, by Joan Waugh. Josephine was the sister of George W. Curtis and the mother of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. \*Colonel Shaw lead the Fifty fourth Massachusetts Infantry, the African American soldiers who fought for the Union during the Civil War. Colonel Shaw died with his men in South Carolina in July 1863, while pushing a charge on Fort Wagner in the Charleston Harbor. Colonel Shaw and the men of the Fifty forth infantry from Massachusetts have been immortalized in the movie "Glory".

A family that believed America could be a classless society, "A peaceful solution that left private property intact and still promise to do justice to labor, through a redistribution of wealth," whose actions spoke as clearly as their words. Are these values for today? There is a lot of loud talk about "values", morality remains timeless as a universal sense of moral obligation - unchanging even as our level of existence moves from basic survival and earning a living evolves into creating a more desirable world, for all of us. . Is or should our "values" be seated in benevolence - without recognition. To be good for goodness sake.

The family living in the house today is a typical American picture as we think, if you are only looking at current statistics. A young teen age boy with a "tween" little sister, a mother who's main job is to raise the kids and the father who provides the income and shares the rearing of his kids. What you may not realize - with just a casual glance is that this energetic family loves history, and the opportunity to become involved in reenactment drama. They are as comfortable wearing 19th Century clothes as they are wearing 21st Century attire. They spend their week ends acting out snips of history. Each family member

has a role to play in these productions. Stories are told of situations concerning the house they live in, as well as stories about the people who lived in what was the Dutch Colony of the Hudson Valley, New York.

As the political editor of "Harper's Weekly" George Curtis was highly influential in shaping public opinion. Curtis contributed to "Harper's Monthly" under the title of "The Easy Chair". Essays on topics of social and literary interest. In 1871 President Grant commissioned Mr. Curtis to reform the civil service. His report was the foundation of every effort since made for the purification and regulation of social service and for the destruction of political patronage. He was one of the original members of the Board of Education for what would become New York City and an advocate for educational reforms. There is a high school not far from his home that is named for George William Curtis.

Josephine Shaw Lowell, engaged with early working class woman activists, Leonora O'Reilly and Alice Woolbridge. Drawing all woman into the idea of responsibility and political action. Responsibility: in our; free market society. business owners must pay their workers and their vendors a fair price - not the lowest price. Vendors must learn to charge a fair price for their materials/goods sold. We as the workers and consumers must learn to purchase products that are sold at a fair price. "Fair price" should be a model of the best way to grow the middle class and the economy. Reinvest into the business' 80 % of the "real" profit. The idea that business owners deserve to have as much, as they want, of the money that a company earns, is ludicrous. Sure watch your bottom line, but remember that we are all in this together. Give the ability to the worker to afford to buy our products. Win-Win. A thought! The consumer bears great responsibility to not demand that products be so cheap that workers are not able to sustain themselves on the salaries they earn. Truth is also recognized that the necessities of life are to be earned by honest hard work, and not by gambling and cheating - on Wall Street or Main Street.

William Curtis's most well known book is, Prue and I, written in 1856. Much of the writings are about the domestic life of Mr. and Mrs. Curtis. There is a portion that is completely and purposely written as, what I would call, a dream sequence. This flight of fantasy is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's Alice, Through the Looking Glass, written in 1871 as a sequel to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 1866. Fantasy incorporated into people and places giving a "fresh view to ordinary circumstances. Titbottom's Glasses, is a story whose main character is a lonely, dowdy accountant. Friend to the Curtis household. Mr. Titbottom was presented the special optical gift from his grandfather while he was still a young boy. The "visions" he saw through the lens unsettled him so much that he rarely wore them. As an aging man the allure of the glasses beckoned, once again. The world as viewed with the spectacles on allowed Titbottom to see the people and the world around him in "reality", good or bad. The façade people projected for appearance sake melted away. Mr. Titbottom reconciled the ambivalent feelings the spectacles created in him and decided to not wear the glasses. He had seen the world and wanted to remember the visions that gave him pleasure, true beauty and kindness while wearing the glasses - and to forget the ugly and self-indulgent scenarios apparent around him presented by people who thought that they were undiscovered.

In a few weeks Historic Restorations will receive the custom made reproduction hardware for the louvered shutters that were created in our shop. This is the last step in the front façade repair/rebuild. The house is not completely undone from the previous "modernizations", but the family is committed to doing their very best to bring back the original design intent. The young man of the house has stated that he has his own ideas for the house and its preservation - when it is his.

History is all around us. We are all a part of the history of this country, living history, and built history both deserve our respect and our protection. I have made the decision to remove my "spectacles" and view the world as I want it to be. Should you call me naive? Not at all. I believe that America can be the country that our fore fathers dreamed of, a country full of purpose, people full of hope. Knowing that at the base of our ideology is sustainability that is reflected in our very buildings. Beauty that is classic and function that has intellectual substance. We should not "settle" for any less and if someone asks us why not, our reply should be, "because I am worth it." I believe that we would all be better for it.

What was the central theme to George William Curtis life? Intelligence and simplicity and kindness, freedom from vulgar show, love of honor and nobility in ordinary lives. This is from John White Chadwick who wrote about his friend in the Harper's Black & White Series. William Winter, a life long friend of George William Curtis, spoke these words at the funeral for his friend, "A contemplative philosopher who viewed the world saddened by human littleness yet not disappointed in mankind." I believe that it is not too late for mankind's enlightenment; it is our legacy.

#### Reference Resources

- 1) Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
- 2) Prue and I, George William Curtis
- 3) The Puritan Principle, George William Curtis
- 4) Blue Eyed Child of Fortune - University of Georgia Press
- 5) Unsentimental Reformer - The Life of Josephine Shaw Lowell by Joan Waugh
- 6) William Winter, Eulogy for George William Curtis
- 7) Harper's Black & White Series, John White Chadwick
- 8) Staten Island Historical Society

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