

# GOWER REMEMBERS

## Lieutenant Pierson Vivian Curtis

(1893-1961)



*“Mr. Pierson Curtis, son of Dr. Curtis, has joined the University Contingent. With Mr. J.E.J. Fox and Mr. Bert Tait, there are now three Rhodes Scholars of Newfoundland who have volunteered for the war. Mr. Gerald Berteau, son of the Auditor General, has gone with the Canadian Contingent. For the past ten years he has been in the Royal Canadian Dragoons, which is part of the regular army.” (Evening Telegram, October 06, 1914)*



Pierson Vivian Curtis was born in Grand Bank on April 25, 1893, the second of four children of Lillian Cordelia Black (1861-1944) and the Rev. Dr. Levi A. D. Curtis (1858-1942). The other children were Flora M. (b. 1890), Leslie R. (b. 1896) and Rhyna Gertrude (b. 1900). Levi Curtis was a Methodist clergyman who served in a number of pastoral charges, including St. Anthony, Bay Roberts, Grand Bank, Twillingate and Gower Street before accepting appointment as Superintendent of Methodist Day Schools in 1898.

Curtis began his schooling at the Methodist College in St. John's and he did not take long to begin winning prizes for excellence in his studies there. His name appears in *The Evening Telegram* for June 22, 1900, just two months after his seventh birthday, where he is singled out for being first in Spelling in Miss Dove's class, when the College prizes were awarded for the 1899-1900 school year. He continued to win awards in most of the years he attended the College: in 1902 he had the second highest average in Miss Badcock's class; in 1905 he had the fifth highest average in the country in the Council of Higher Education examinations; in 1906, 1908, 1909, and 1910 he won various scholarships with monetary values ranging from \$4.00 to \$25.00.

Academic prowess was not his only claim to fame while he attended the Methodist College. Curtis also demonstrated proficiency in athletic endeavours. In April 1910, he was elected Vice Captain of the Cochrane Athletic Association Football Team; later that year, on July 13, he placed third in the Rovers Athletic Club road race, a distance of two miles, 980 yards. The first place finisher in that race was Eric Robertson, who represented Great Britain in the Marathon at the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium.

Curtis graduated from the Methodist College in 1910, successfully completing the Matriculation examination offered to Newfoundland students by London University. That allowed him to enroll in Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where he spent two years studying general arts. On December 20, 1911, he was announced as the 1912 Rhodes Scholar for Newfoundland.

Oxford University was still some months away, however. First, Curtis completed his second year at Mount Allison, where it was reported he passed his 1911 Christmas examinations with honours and was at the top of the Junior Mathematics class. He returned to St. John's on June 06, 1912, and spent the summer with his family before leaving for Oxford. There he attended Queen's College, where he studied engineering. He came back to Newfoundland for a visit during the summer of 1913, arriving in St. John's on July 06, and arriving back in Glasgow on September 23.

His stay at Oxford University was interrupted by the declaration of war in Europe in August 1914. He was quick to enlist, not even waiting for the Newfoundland Regiment to arrive in England to do so. In September 1914, he enrolled in the Borders Regiment, where he was assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, which was formed in September 1914 and spent most of the war in India. Enlisting as a private, Curtis had achieved the rank of Lieutenant by the end of the war. He was not discharged until the Fall of 1919. Unfortunately, the files of the Borders Regiment were destroyed by German bombing of London during World War II, so there is no record of Curtis's activities while serving in India, although a brief statement in *The Evening Telegram* for January 02, 1920 indicates that *"The troops serving in India anticipated demobilization soon after the signing of the armistice, but the outbreak of the Afghan war rendered that impossible, and kept them on duty all through the broiling summer."*

Following his time in India, Curtis returned to England. In mid-December 1919, he boarded the SS *Tunisian* at Southampton for the return voyage to Newfoundland; he arrived in St. John's on December 27, 1919. The previous April, the Civil Re-establishment Committee, which was charged with helping returning soldiers, sailors and airmen reintegrate into the workplace and receive training in their chosen careers, opened an Engineering School in St. John's with Lt. John Blackall as the resident instructor. He was succeeded by A. H. Whitman, who later went to Canada. Curtis filled the instructor's position for a short time during February 1920, until a new permanent instructor was engaged.

Curtis remained in St. John's over the summer of 1920. On June 24, he was best man at his sister Flora's marriage to John Stuart Foster. Then in early September he left aboard the SS *Digby* for Liverpool, England, where he planned to "resume his studies at Oxford University, after a break of nearly six years." (*St. John's Daily News*, September 14, 1920) The article bearing this news also reported that since Curtis is "*an Imperial officer, his name remains on the reserve list, so that he is liable to be summoned to the forces of the Crown if at any time office[r]s are needed for service. His many friends will wish the gallant young officer abundant success at Oxford and in his future career.*"

The SS *Digby* arrived in Liverpool on September 18. Once he had disembarked, Curtis travelled overland to Oxford, where he spent the 1920-1921 at Queen's College, reading Mathematics and Engineering. He was subsequently awarded a BA and an MA in Engineering and Honours Modulations in Mathematics. He returned to Newfoundland in August on board the SS *Sachem*. His education was far from over, however. On September 27, 1921, he left St. John's on board the SS *Sapper* for Montreal, where he would spend the next two years at McGill University studying Electrical Engineering. He received a Bachelor of Science in that specialty in 1923.

After his graduation from McGill, Curtis was employed as an engineer at the newly-constructed power plant in Deer Lake. He was still there for the first four months of 1927: a passenger manifest for the SS *Silvia*, which arrived in New York from St. John's on May 05, 1927, records that he was living and working in Deer Lake.

May 05, 1927 marks the beginning of his life in the United States. On his petition for US citizenship in 1933, he states that he had been living in the United States from that date. Moreover, he appears in the 1930 US Census as living in Lynn, Massachusetts, where he was working as an electrical engineer. While living there, he met Doris Celley, who was from the town of Milford, only an hour's drive from Lynn. He brought her home to Newfoundland in the Fall of 1931, most likely to meet his

parents. They were married on December 26, 1932 in Cleveland, Ohio, where he had been living since May 24 of that year.

Curtis had declared his intention to become a US citizen, on October 16, 1930, at the Superior Court of Essex County in Salem, Massachusetts. He made formal petition for that status in Cleveland on July 12, 1933; naturalization was granted the following year.

In 1935, Curtis and his wife relocated to Mount Vernon, New York, where they resided at 445 Gramatan Avenue. He began working for Gibbs & Hill, a prominent electrical engineering firm located near Pennsylvania Station in New York City. He appears to have been employed there until his retirement, sometime in the 1950s.

Pierson Curtis died at Mount Vernon on January 1, 1961. All three of his siblings were still alive at the time of his death. His wife, Doris, outlived him by more than 36 years. She died at Chester, Orange County, New York, on September 30, 1997. She was 92 years old. They had no children.



Cap Badge of the Borders Regiment.



*On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately four to five years. On roughly every second Sunday through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, similar to this one, will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way, we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.*

*We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present, as we begin our 203rd year as a faith community.*

*If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and women please contact Bert Riggs at [briggs@mun.ca](mailto:briggs@mun.ca) or at 726-6169.*