

Malta Memories: Stories from the Heart

Mary L.N. Curtis, Malta's First Woman Supervisor

By Teri Gay, Historian
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In honor of Women's History Month, I would like to profile Mary L. N. Curtis, Malta's first (and only – to date) elected woman Town Supervisor. Did you know that Malta had a *woman* Supervisor? In fact, did you know that there have been *two* women Supervisors in Malta? In addition to Mary Curtis, who was elected in 1925 and served until 1931, our town was led by Ruth Cleveland in the year 1965, serving out the remainder of her husband Charles Cleveland's term, after his death. Mrs. Cleveland, now in her nineties, still resides in Malta today.

Shortly after becoming Historian a few years ago, I came upon a listing of former Town Supervisors and was fascinated by the name *Mary L.N. Curtis (1925 – 1931)* on the roster. My curiosity led me to investigate files and books in the Historian's Office for more about her, but I was confounded by the lack of information. Other priorities kept me from my quest to inquire further into who I imagined to be a smart and independent woman who served as Supervisor here just *eight* years after women earned the right to vote in New York State and *five* years after the enfranchisement of women in the United States. Images of an early twentieth-century suffragette and a strong-willed country woman blended in my mind as I conjured up "Supervisor Mary L.N. Curtis." How was she elected? Why did she run for Supervisor? What did she stand for? What were her accomplishments while in office? What kind of a leader was she? What was her life like? Did she have a family? I had so many questions....in fact, more *questions* than I came to have *answers*....

Historians are always inquiring and asking. Seldom do we learn everything to be able to wrap the "stories of old" into nice, neat packages so we can write and tell what we have learned. Nonetheless, to share what we have uncovered – and to encourage further investigation - is in itself a goal, and a reward, of doing what we do. As such, I will simply relay here the few things I have discovered along the way in my search for clues about Mary L.N. Curtis.

"Mrs. Curtis," as she was often referred to in Town Board minutes during her tenure, was elected to the position of Malta Town Supervisor in 1925 and served until 1931. An examination of the minute books from her years in that post reveals a well-run, efficient Town Board – responsibly allocating monies for road work and equipment, appointing residents to the town Board of Health (Mary also served on this board), "inspecting the

dirt roads,” taking stock of abandoned roads, and deciding upon fees for “public entertainment” (carnivals and civic shows). Mrs. Curtis served with Town Board members A.W. Selch, C.E. Worden, W. D. Rowley F.G. Selch, and G. Rogers during the years of her service. (These gentlemen were all Justices as well.) H. Barber was the first Town Clerk to serve with Mrs. Curtis, followed by Lewis Brown.

A small folded paper found recently among the treasures of the Historian’s Office gave me a chill -- a note, written in pencil in Mary Curtis’ own hand, that read: “*Malta, N.Y. Aug 3/27 – Rec’d from A.W. Selch J.P. Fifty dollars in fines from C.P. Caufield, Fred L. Caufield, Albert Blake, John Harrington, and Harry Blake charged with public intoxication on July 25th 1927. – Mary L.N. Curtis, Supervisor.*” I felt a sense of awe to be holding that piece of stationery, which had been held by her, as she performed one of her duties as town leader. History really came alive for me at that moment.

With only tidbits of information being gleaned from my research, I nevertheless was captivated by Malta’s first woman Supervisor. I sought out the help of Round Lake Historian Bill Ryan, who spent a morning with me pouring over old Lot Books and clippings, trying, along with me, to piece together the puzzle that Mrs. Curtis presented. My inquiry also took me to the Malta Town Clerk’s Office, where Flo Sickels kindly uncovered and transcribed minutes from the Town Board meetings of Supervisor Curtis, dating from 1925. It was a thrill to read the accounts of those meetings as I imagined Mary at the helm, directing the business of the town, in the persona of a true New Woman of the Modern Era – right here in Malta, New York.

One of the first clues I found about the personal life of Mary Curtis was a photograph on page 91 of previous Historian Ruth Roerig’s book, *Images of America: Malta*. On the top of the page is a picture of a horrific automobile accident in 1909. The caption reads: “*Dr. Pierson C. Curtis, age forty-five, was killed in an accident that occurred on Labor Day, September 6, 1909, at the Golf Links Crossing on Goldfoot Road in Round Lake. Dr. Pierson C. Curtis was a well-known physician in Round Lake, where he had practiced for nearly twenty-five years. He was a graduate of Albany Medical College in the class of 1884. The collision occurred when the Hudson River Valley Railway Car. No. 125 traveling northbound from Round Lake hit the automobile broadside at the Golf Links Crossing on Goldfoot Road.*” Bill Ryan showed me the newspaper clipping which reported on the incident, and there was notice of a passenger, Mrs. Clarence Silvernail of Rochester, being killed as well – and there was also this mention: “*Mrs. Curtis, wife of the physician, and Miss Marion White, of Richmond Hills, NY, were injured.*” Three photographs in the accompanying file show the incredible damage to the car and the train.

A Resolution passed by the Round Lake Association on September 8, 1909 (two days following the accident) honors Dr. Curtis and extols his years as member of the Association, his efforts to “advance the best interests of [the Round Lake Community],” and for being “invariably courteous, sympathetic, genial, and true” as a “physician, friend, and neighbor.” In mourning the loss of Dr. Curtis, the Association ordered that “public office and buildings be closed and kept closed as far as possible on Friday,

September 10, 1909, the day set for the funeral of Dr. Curtis” and that “all business upon the grounds of the Association be suspended during the hours of the funeral service.” It also noted that a copy of the Resolution be presented to the “bereaved wife.”

Can we speculate that the “bereaved wife” – living in grief after the death of her beloved husband – found a calling in the years following? A call to public service? A call to serve her friends and neighbors – as a continuation to the many civic-minded endeavors that she and her doctor husband had once jointly performed?

Although we can never really know what was in the mind of Mary L.N. Curtis, her life as a doctor’s wife became greatly changed in the decades following the tragic car crash. During their married life, Pierson and Mary and their family (research reveals a son, Oliver) lived on Burlington Avenue in the village of Round Lake, in the large two-story house with the second-floor sunroom porch which is still extant today (across from LakeRidge Restaurant). A booklet compiled by the Women’s Round Lake Improvement Society in August 1968 for the Centennial celebration describes the opening of the All Saints Episcopal Church in 1892, and states: “*Mary L.N. Curtis, wife of Dr. Pierson C. Curtis, a physician then living in Round Lake, with many friends, raised money to make the building possible.*” Clearly, Mrs. Curtis was devoted to her community and to being a leader in the development of religious institutions and social progress. Thirty years later, she would be on her way to becoming Supervisor of her town. What a remarkable woman!

My search continues for more about the life and times of Mary L.N. Curtis. In an era when women were cutting their political teeth in the early organizations that advocated for women’s issues and equal rights, our “Mrs. Curtis” was already setting the example of a modern-day woman leader. The first decades of the twentieth century were witness to enormous social changes and advancements by the feminine gender in the United States. As we learn more about Mary Curtis, let us pause for a moment - during this month of honoring women – and celebrate Malta’s first elected woman Supervisor and her legacy. Even in the 1920’s, Malta was setting precedents – and having “firsts” – and we continue to set those examples today. If you are like me, your mind will be captivated by the heartwarming story of this amazing woman from the village of Round Lake whose life survived tragedy and who went on to make history in our town of Malta.