

# Mary Curtis (1765 - 1861)

## *A Pioneer story by Judith Parker*

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### ***Mary Curtis nee Bishop (1765 - 1861)***

This is a story of a woman of great stamina and character. Mary Bishop was born in England in 1765 and was a pioneer of Western Australia who arrived in the colony in March 1835 aged 70 years.

She married William Curtis on 29 September 1782 at St James, Westminster, London at 17 years of age. William worked as a carpenter. Their five children were born in London and when the children were very young, William died. In order to survive Mary sold his tools and used the money to open a shop in London.

Her son Anthony Barnabas Curtis, at the age of 12, joined the Royal Navy. In the early days of the settlement he visited Western Australia and seeing the potential of a new life for himself and his family, decided to settle in the new colony at Swan River. Upon his discharge he returned to the colony, working his passage as a steward on the *Medina* arriving on 6 July 1830. Through hard work, risk taking and foresight, he soon established himself as a ship owner and trader, a butcher, store owner and established the 'Stags Head Inn' at Fremantle. Later he went on to establish stores in Perth. He purchased the *Fanny* in 1835, the *Lady Stirling* in 1836, *Vixen* in 1840, *Black Swan* and built the *Water Witch*. A plaque in the footpath on St Georges Terrace in Perth acknowledges his achievements.

As his business prospered he sent for his mother Mary and young sister Susannah Poll (b 1812 London, d 1885 Fremantle) to come to the colony.

Mary and Susannah Poll travelled out from London in 1834 and after transferring to Anthony's ship, the *Fanny*, in Mauritius they arrived at Fremantle in March 1835. Imagine the courage of the elderly penniless lady to attempt the long, uncomfortable sea journey, and to contemplate a new life in this remote, uncivilised colony. However, as a widow, she was dependent on her son and without support could not survive in London.

Life in Fremantle was primitive. Mary lived in a house provided by her son Anthony. On the ship Mary and Susannah Poll had befriended Susannah Glindon (b 1815 England d 10 September 1856 Busselton) who was travelling alone. Upon arrival in Fremantle Mary continued to care for Susannah Glindon, arranging for her to stay at the Stags Head Inn. Anthony Curtis and Susannah were married on 2 June 1836 and had 4 children.

During the sea journey Mary's daughter, Susannah Poll, fell in love with a crew man Edward Back (b 1817 England, d 26 June 1886 Fremantle). Edward had met Anthony while in the Navy and like Anthony upon discharge decided to make his home in the new colony. Susannah and Edward were married on 29 March 1835 at Fremantle. Edward worked for Anthony at the Stags Head Inn, and as Captain sailing a number of Anthony's ships. Later he was appointed acting Harbour Master in 1842 and 1844 and pilot of Rottneest from 1846 to 1857.

Mary worked hard to establish the Church of England in the new colony and her name is noted on a petition calling for the appointment of a minister to the colony.

The sudden death of Anthony on 11 January 1853 and the mismanagement of his estate by his executors left Mary Curtis then aged 88 destitute and penniless once more. Her daughter-in-law Susannah Curtis (nee Glindon) moved to Busselton to live with her sister and to be near her daughter Amelia who lived at Wonnerup. Mary Curtis again faced great change. Her daughter

Susannah Poll lived on Rottnest Island with her husband Edward with their eight children in the small pilot's cottage and Mary went to live with them.

Conditions were very cramped in the house (the cottage is now known as Cottage K on Thompson's Bay). Captain Back requested that Mary Curtis be allowed to sleep in a small room at the side of Government House (now known as cottage F&L on Thompson's Bay) and that an allowance be given to him for her keep. On his behalf the Government Resident wrote to the Colonial Secretary on 5 May 1853.

*I beg to recommend to His Excellency the Governor that a small sum weekly or a daily ration should be allowed Mrs Curtis, mother of the late Anthony Curtis, now left destitute. She is upwards of 80 years of age and at present is supported by her son-in-law Mr Back, who with his large family can ill afford to do so. Mrs Curtis, I am informed with the sanction of His Excellency, occupies a small room at Government House, Rottnest and being a remarkably active person and very cleanly might give her services in keeping the house and furniture clean for the allowance.*

As a result 15 shillings per month was allowed to Captain Back for her keep. I wonder if Mary was the oldest cleaner to be employed by a Governor of Western Australia?

In 1857 Edward Back and his family returned to Fremantle and Mary lived with them until she died on 14 April 1861, 26 years after her arrival in the colony. She had seen the settlement at Fremantle develop from a primitive camp to a thriving town.

Mary Curtis was 96 when she died the oldest person in the colony. Her death was reported in the Perth Gazette; 'Her death was not caused by disease or decay but from shock occasioned when a portion of her dress caught on fire.' Her death certificate states 'accidentally burnt' and that she died at 5am 14 April in Fremantle.

She was buried in the Alma Street cemetery in Fremantle on 15 April 1861.

Her descendants would continue to live, work and contribute to the growth of Western Australia.

A strong courageous woman to the last – a truly remarkable pioneer. My children and grandchildren have inherited her genes and I hope her strength and courage - the legacy of a remarkable woman.

Written by Judith Parker - the wife of George Parker a descendant of Mary Curtis.

***Edited by Celebrate WA***