

Charles Curtis (1860-1936)

Metis Congressman, Senator, U.S. Vice-President

Charles Curtis was born at North Topeka, Kansas in 1860. He was the son of Orrin Curtis, a white man, and Ellen Pappen, a Kansa-Kaw Métisse.¹ He spent his early years living partly in the white and partly in the Native American community. Charles' mother died in 1863, about the time his father left to fight in the Civil War. Orrin remarried and divorced several times after her death. During the war he was court martialled for hanging three prisoners in his custody. He served a month of a one-year sentence in the Missouri State Penitentiary for this offence.

In any event, due to his unstable circumstances Charley first lived with his paternal grandparents then starting in 1865 (at age 5) with Louis and Julie Pappen, his maternal grandparents. Julie Gonville-Pappen received "Half-Breed Reservation No. Four" when the Kansa Indians took treaty. This land was located directly across the river from the Kansas capital. She and her husband ran a profitable ferry business there. It was Julie who encouraged her grandson, Charles Curtis, to continue his education. It is reported that he only spoke French and Kansa before attending school. He completed a law degree and went on to become a Congressman and Senator before he became Vice-President of the United States in the Hoover administration (1929-1933).

When a treaty was negotiated with the Kansa Indians on the Lower Missouri, in the 1840s, land was set aside separately for their Half-Breed relations near Topeka, Kansas.² Julie Gonville Pappen received "Half-Breed Reservation No. Four" under this arrangement. Charlie's mother, Ellen Curtis was the great-granddaughter of White Plume, a Kansa-Kaw Chief. White Plume's daughter had married Louis Gonville, a Metis French-Canadian fur trader, Julie; their daughter married Louis Pappen. Her sister Josette was married to Joseph Pappen. In 1840, the Pappen brothers began a ferry business. Travelers on the Oregon-California Trail in 1841-42 recall this ferry in their journals.

In 1865, Charlie's maternal grandparents, Louis Pappan³ and Julie Gonville⁴ left North Topeka to return to the Kaw Reservation at Council Grove, concerned that otherwise they might be excluded from future land settlements and compensation. After studying law with a Topeka attorney, Curtis was admitted to the bar in 1881. From 1885 to 1889 he was attorney for Shawnee County, Kansas, and from 1893 to 1907 he served in Congress as a Republican.

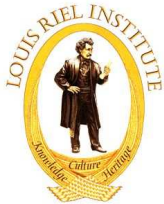
¹ Ellen was born in the Kansas Territory in 1840. She was a Osage/Potawatomie/French Metisse.

² The 23 "Half-Breed Tracts" as they were called, began on the eastern edge of the 1825 reservation and extended 23 miles east on the north bank of the Kansas River, from present day Topeka almost to Lawrence, Kansas.

³ Louis Pappen was a Metis born in 1815 at St. Louis Missouri, he French father and Potawatomie mother.

⁴ Julie Gonville b. March 16, 1818, was the daughter of Louis Gonville a Metis trader who arrived at Kawsmouth in 1870, and Hunt Jimmy, the daughter of White Plume, a Kaw chief who had signed the treaty of 1825.

In January 1907, Curtis was chosen by the state legislature to fill an unexpired term in the U. S. Senate. He was then elected for the 1907-1913 term. After being defeated for reelection in 1912, he won the nomination from Sen. Joseph L. Bristow in 1914 and was elected to three more terms. In 1928 he was elected vice president on the Republican ticket with Herbert Hoover as president, and he served until 1933. He died in Washington on Feb. 8, 1936.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute