

## Curless, William

*Compiled by Alan Wallace, June 2018;*

William Curless was a physician in Dun Glen from late 1863 into 1866. He and one or two of his brothers also had a store in town. William Curless was born in Clermont County, Ohio, on January 23, 1822. His parents, Wright, Sr., and Rosanah, had eleven children, of which William was the oldest. The children were born in a steady procession in first Ohio and then, starting in 1837, Clinton County, Indiana. Williams' father was a farmer, and the boys worked on the farm as they got older. William attended Rush Medical College in Chicago in the late 1840s, but he was working on the family farm in 1850, medical degree notwithstanding. His mother died in 1857, and William and several younger siblings went to California in about 1859. They settled in Hamilton in Butte County, California. The 1860 census showed that his brother Byer owned a farm, and William and his two younger brothers (George and Wright, Jr.) were working on the farm along with Byer. Their youngest sister Mahala was living with them as well.

William heard about the growth of Humboldt County, saw the opportunity to practice medicine, and headed over to Humboldt County in late 1863. William bought a lot in Dun Glen and hung out his shingle, and the IRS taxed William in 1864 for his medical practice. The county taxed William for personal property in the 1863-1864 tax year and a lot and a house from the 1864-1865 tax year into 1868. The IRS also taxed the "Curliss Bros." as "retail dealers" in Dun Glen in 1864, so Wright, George, or both went to Dun Glen with William. Wright already was a druggist, and the brothers ran the other business, which likely was a combination of doctor's office and drug store.



William Curless

William kept the Dun Glen property into 1868, but he was a registered voter in Alta, northeast of Auburn, in 1866, along with his brother, George, who was a laborer. Considering how close the brothers were, Wright probably was there as well. The Central Pacific Railroad had hired William to be the railroad doctor during railroad construction through the area, and Alta and nearby Dutch Flat were staging areas for the work over the Sierra Nevada. The railroad wanted a doctor who could function in a remote location and on work-related injuries, and a physician from a remote mining camp fit the bill perfectly. William moved to Truckee once the railroad reached that point in the spring of 1868. William opened a store-front office on the main street of the new town (the building now houses a variety store). Wright was there as well and likely had his drug store in the same building (George, although not a registered voter, probably was with his brothers). Items in various California newspapers and later articles from the Truckee-Donner Historical Society (<http://www.truckeehistory.org/>) reported William treating various patients for injuries, maladies, and even gunshot wounds through the 1870s. In addition to working in

Truckee, he made house calls to Lake Tahoe, Donner Pass, and other places surrounding Truckee. He even received a United States patent for a "medical compound for treating rheumatism" in 1871.

William Curless kept busy with other activities. He was a trustee in the Ella Florence Gold & Silver Mining Company in 1872, and he oversaw a group that made soundings to determine depths in nearby Donner Lake in 1874. Most importantly, he married Lois Hamilton (born in Ohio in 1852 and thus much younger than him) in late July 1875. Lois was there with her parents for unknown reasons, but her father died about a week after the wedding. The couple soon had a daughter May who died four months later. Their son William arrived in 1877, followed by their second son Joseph in 1878.

Curless remained in Truckee as the Central Pacific's and town's main physician into the early 1900s. Northern California newspapers continued to mention his medical care into the 1890s, and he published a short article on "A case of dislocation of the spine in the *Surgical Journal* in 1895 (it also appeared in the *Railway Surgeon* journal). The only "blemish" on his record (when viewed with Twenty-first Century eyes) was when Truckee joined the anti-Chinese movement in town in 1886 and called them the "Chinese curse" in the *Truckee Republican*. William Curless worked as a doctor until he passed away on January 26, 1898, and he was buried in Truckee. Lois Curless died in Oakland in 1902 and was buried next to her husband.

Wright Curless remained in Truckee into the late 1870s and was in Cloverdale, Sonoma County, when he got married in 1879. He moved to Humboldt County in northwestern California in 1880. He worked as a farmer and then saloon keeper in Van Duzen until his death there in 1919. George W. Curless remained in Truckee into the late 1890s and then joined his brother in Van Duzen. He was a druggist at the time of the 1880 census in Truckee, probably having learned the profession from his two brothers, and that was his profession for the rest of his life. Like Wright, he died in 1919. Byer Curless, the brother who had the farm in Butte County in 1860, moved up to Humboldt County by 1871 and was living in Van Duzen in 1900 near his brothers. He probably was the impetus for Wright and then George to move to that part of the state.

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*Uploaded to Truckee-Donner Historical Society's website with author's permission, June 2018.*

Below are the sources this author used to prepare this biography.

## Curless, William

- Not in 1862 census.
- Not in HC papers (surprisingly). No surveys. Not in HC record books.
- 1864 IRS: William Curliss, Dun Glen, physician; also Curliss Bros., retail dealers, Dun Glen.
- Taxes: William Curless: 1864 early, personal property; 1864 early into 1866 Dun Glen lot; 1868, stone and adobe house between Williams' and Osborn's houses. Not in 1869, 1870 taxes
- From a family: William A. Curless, Jan. 23, 1822, Clermont Co. Ohio. Parents Wright Sopers (from NJ) and Rosanah Curless. Siblings: William the oldest; then Sarah 1825, Samuel 1827, Henry 1829, John 1831, all in Ohio; then Biar 1834 Jackson Co. Indiana, Arthur 1837 (died 1839), Charles 1839, Wright Sopers Jrs. 1842, George Washington, 1845, all in Clinton County Indiana; then Mahala 1848 Iowa. 1840 Clinton Indiana: just father listed. 1850 Jackson, Clinton County: father, William, and three younger brothers farmers, worth \$3500. Mother Mahala died in 1857. Father died in Wisconsin 1870. 1875 July 30: married Lois E. Hamilton (1852-1902). Son William born May 1877; son Joseph born Nov. 1878. 1880 Truckee as below. Died in Truckee January 26, 1898, buried at Sierra Mountains Cemetery, Truckee, Masonic section; find a grave lists Mary May Curless under children (see CA papers below, died at 4 months). Lois died in Oakland in April 1902, buried in Truckee.
  - Lois Hamilton, wife: born 1852, married Curless in 1875; father William died in Truckee in August 1875.
  - Brother Wright Sopers married in Cloverdale in 1879, then was in Humboldt Co. CA in 1880 until his 1919 death. Farmer in 1880.
  - Sister Mahala died in 1864 in Clinton Indiana.
  - Brother George Washington died in Humboldt County CA in 1919; brother Biar died there as well in 1911.
  - Little info in Jefferson Curless: Nevada County voter from 1871 into 1877.
  - Biar Curless was in El Dorado County in 1867 and then Humboldt County CA by 1871 and then stayed there.
- CA papers: 1861 May SDU: Dr. Wm. Curless, letter in Sacramento PO. 1866-12-5 Red Bluff Independent (from Dutch Flat Esquirer): Dr. Curless treated a patient in Alta. 1871 July SDU: fire at Truckee; losses included Dr. Curless' drug store, \$1500. 1871 August Pacific Rural Press: patent issued to Wm. Curless, Truckee, for medical compound for treating rheumatism. 1872 Oct SDU: Ella Florence G&SMC, CA & NV, incorporated, William Curless Trustee. 1873 Sept MDA: mention of Dr. Curless' store in Truckee. 1874 January SDU: Curless oversaw taking soundings in Donner Lake. 1874 Feb.: son born to wife of W.S. (Wright) Curless in Truckee. 1875 May SDU: daughter born in Truckee May 20; named May, died Sept. 29. 1877 May don born in Truckee May 17. Through 1870s, several mentions of him treating patients, largely accidents and a couple of gunshot wounds.
- 1860 Hamilton, Butte Co.: William Curlis, ~1822 Ohio, farmer; living with younger brother Byer and his family (two kids 4 and 2 born Iowa, so was in Iowa in 1858). Also there were much younger brothers W.S. ~1841, George W. ~1844, and sister M.A. ~1848, all Iowa. From family, this looks like Wright Sopers, George W., and Mahala.
- 1866 CA voter, Alta: William (physician) and George Washington (laborer).
- 1868 CA voter: Wright Sopers Curless, Truckee, druggist. William Carless, physician, Truckee.

- 1873 CA voter, Truckee, Nevada County: William Curless, ~1828 Ohio, physician; also Wright Sopers Curless, ~1845 Indiana, druggist, and Jefferson Curless, ~1829 NJ, teamster, Willow Valley.
- 1875 CA voter Truckee: William Curless as in 1873; also Jefferson Curless, ~1829 NJ, Willow Valley; no occupations.
- 1876, 1877 CA voter: William, Wright Soper, Jefferson as earlier; no occupations.
- 1880 Truckee: William Curless, ~1823 Ohio, doctor; married to Louise ~1852 Ohio; children William 3 and Joseph 1.
- 1892, 1896 Truckee voter: William Curless, ~1822 Ohio, physician.
- CPRR discussion group: For a historical Truckee, California medical project, I am seeking information about Dr. William Curless (23. Jan. 1823 - 26. Jan. 1898). He was a student at Rush Medical College in 1847 [this is in Chicago, started 1837]. In late 1860's, he came to Truckee as the first Central Pacific Railway physician-surgeon. He remained in Truckee as a CPRR and family practice physician-surgeon for the completion of his career and is buried in the Truckee Cemetery.
- See photo from the Truckee-Donner Historical Society in early people photos folder. Also from their site are several articles that briefly described Curless treating patients, both white and Chinese.
- Sierra Sun 2007-4-2, article on early doctors in Truckee by Gordon Richards. The doctors of the 1870s, such as Dr. Weed, Dr. Jones, Dr. Goss, and Dr. Curless, had just learned a variety of new surgery and antiseptic techniques in the recently completed Civil War. From then on through the early '20s, it seemed as if the railroad was at war on human bodies, mostly its own workers. It was so bad that in 1873 the Central Pacific studied moving its Sacramento hospital up to Truckee. At least once a railroader was injured he could count on decent medical care. The Central Pacific contracted with private doctors such as Dr. William Curless in Truckee to provide quick and competent care. Dr. Curless often made trips to Boca, Lake Tahoe, Donner Summit, or out into the isolated woods' camps to treat patients. The one health-sustaining staple that Truckee always had was drug stores, as many as three at one time. These so-called pharmacies were often owned by the doctors themselves. In Dr. Curless's case, his brother George ran the drug store for several decades in the 1870s to 1890s. You didn't need a prescription for most drugs. Hall's sarsaparilla, yellow dock and iodine of potassium were touted to cure neuralgia, scrofula, boils, gout, female weaknesses, cancers, rheumatic and mercurial pains, and all diseases arising from a disordered state of the blood or liver. George Curless stocked barrels of sulphur, bluestone, and chloride of lime to treat patient's ills.
- 1895, Surgical Journal (also in the Railway Surgeon): A case of dislocation of the spine, by Wm. Curless, M.D., Truckee, Cal. Describes how he treated and cured paralysis in patient after spine dislocation.
- Truckee Variety Store (modern; 10088 Donner Pass Road). One of the town's early doctors and his brother, the Curless brothers, operated a drug store at this location. Dr. William Curless would often receive patients here during the 1890s. The drug store remained for nearly forty years before being replaced by a saloon.
- From a bottle website: bottle from S. McCurdy's drugstore, which possibly succeeded Dr. Curless. McCurdy was a doctor on board steamers on the Pacific coast during the California gold

rush. Curless was not only a doctor of a similar nature, but he was on board the SS Central America when it sank in 1857 carrying \$3 million worth of gold.