

# Curtis/Curtiss, Eli

## (1793–1871)

MICHAEL W. CAMPBELL

Michael W. Campbell, Ph.D., is North American Division Archives, Statistics, and Research director. Previously, he was professor of church history and systematic theology at Southwestern Adventist University. An ordained minister, he pastored in Colorado and Kansas. He is assistant editor of *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Review and Herald, 2013) and currently is co-editor of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Seventh-day Adventism*. He also taught at the Adventist International Institute for Advanced Studies (2013-18) and recently wrote the *Pocket Dictionary for Understanding Adventism* (Pacific Press, 2020).

Eli Curtis was a Millerite who initially sympathized with Bridegroom Adventists including James and Ellen White but who later became a spiritualist.

### Early Life

Eli, the only child of Job (1758-1821) and Elizabeth (1753-1844) Curtis(s), was born May 21, 1793, in Weston, Connecticut.<sup>1</sup> In 1822 Eli Curtis purchased a piece of property in Southfield Township, Oakland County, Michigan.<sup>2</sup> He married Sarah Jennings (1793-1872), and they had six children by 1816.<sup>3</sup> He built a home and was modestly prosperous. In 1840 he became convinced of the soon return of Christ and moved to New York City where he assisted in the publication of *The Midnight Cry*.<sup>4</sup>

### After the Great Disappointment

Samuel S. Snow (1806-1890) after the Great Disappointment used the parable of the Ten Virgins to explain the failure of Christ to come on October 22, 1844. He argued that the October 22 date (also known as the seventh-month message) had been correct. But, as in the parable, the bridegroom—Christ—had been delayed, and the door was “shut” for those who had rejected the Millerite message before October 22. Curtis shared with Snow a belief that Christ would literally return after the delay and that the chronology had been correct. At one point Curtis attended Snow’s meetings affirming the validity of the seventh-month message. Curtis gave a disclaimer



Eli Curtis

Photo courtesy of Michael W. Campbell (from Ancestry.com).

Enhanced and colorized by Kevin Morgan.

that he did not consider Snow infallible—and disagreed with Snow's claim that he was the prophet, Elijah. Yet, Curtis expressed appreciation for Snow's publication *The Jubilee Standard* and helped distribute remaining copies from his home in Brooklyn, New York after it ceased publication.<sup>5</sup> He recounted how Snow dealt with opposition:

Bro. S[now] has succeeded in *purging* out (to use Bro. S[now]'s. favorite phrase) *two* sets of *rebels* at different times. The first were a set of Spiritualizers who annoyed our meeting by their much talking and contrary views:—seeming to show a desire to break up our meetings. I was not sorry when they were *purged* out; but I felt grieved that physical power was so *readily* applied to eject the *rebels* from the room. The second set were not spiritualizers, but apparently they were about as detestable to Bro. S[now] for some of them professed a desire to keep all the commandments of Jesus, even to washing of feet; and all of them had the tenacity to differ from Bro. Snow on some point.<sup>6</sup>

On November 22, 1845, he wrote a letter to Enoch Jacobs expressing his appreciation for the *Day Star* and its fearless stand “for the whole truths of the Bible” and for all who were “not ashamed to keep all my blessed Lord’s commandments, even to washing one another’s feet.” He noted that the Adventists were an antitype of Gideon’s army because, before the Great Disappointment, they had been “a numerous band.” Now they were being tried as to whether they would “humble themselves” by washing “one another’s feet.”<sup>7</sup> He was deeply disappointed that Himes had come to New York to sell the plates for producing the 1843 chart.<sup>8</sup> For his part, Curtis believed in the shut door and continued to cling to his faith in “the literal, personal, and visible coming of Jesus” which he believed would take place in 1847.<sup>9</sup> In another letter he wrote of his confidence in Christ’s soon return:

I am astonished that any one that believed the Advent theory in '43, should now cast away their confidence. For we not only have the same unerring word of prophecy before us, but our blessed heavenly Father is continually renewing His promises to us by signs 'there's no mistaking' by any but sceptics.<sup>10</sup>

## Reprinting Ellen White's Visions

By 1846 Eli was selling Buchan's Hungarian Balsam of Life, one of the many 19<sup>th</sup> century patent medicines touted to cure tuberculosis and a host of other ills.<sup>11</sup> In 1847 Eli Curtis received at least “two communications” from the Whites in which she shared with him her early visions. He noted how “God has begun to pour out his spirit” through such revelations even while “Satan is at work . . . by imitation.” Even “the poor slave is not wholly left in darkness, but God is giving them a foresight of their deliverance . . . their yoke is to be broken, and their bondage have an end.” He praised the Lord for this “Special Revelation.”<sup>12</sup>

On April 21, 1847, Ellen White wrote a letter that was published in *A Word to the “Little Flock”* in which she publicly responded to his invitation to write to her in the *Day-Dawn*. While she noted that she agreed with him

on some points, “but on others we widely differ.” She noted that she agreed with him about two literal resurrections a millennium apart and that the new heavens and new earth will not appear until after the wicked dead are raised and destroyed at the end of this 1,000 years. In 1847 he began to publish *The Girdle of Truth and Advent Review*, which espoused views similar to the emerging Sabbatarian Adventists, James and Ellen White and Joseph Bates. He defended the validity of the tenth day of the seventh month (the October 22, 1844 date), but he argued that it did not make sense to call the earth the sanctuary, which he believed must be in heaven.<sup>13</sup>

In 1849 Eli published a pamphlet, *Signs, Preceding [sic] the Great Day of the Lord’s Coming, and Judgment*. In 1850 he briefly published another periodical called *The Sabbath Advocate*. Ellen White noted that although Eli Curtis “has published many of my visions” that she had “requested him not to publish them” anymore because she had “no faith in his course” due to his “inconsistent course for some time past.”<sup>14</sup> A close analysis of these early visions reveals that, in essence, Curtis re-printed Ellen White’s earliest vision almost verbatim except he added a brief explanation about the crown on Jesus’ head at His coming being “a crown within a crown.”<sup>15</sup> He also omitted two statements: “It was just as impossible for them to get on the path again and go to the City, as all the wicked world which God had rejected” and “Then it was that the synagogue of Satan knew that God had loved us who could wash one another’s feet, and salute the holy brethren with a holy kiss, and they worshipped at our feet.” Kevin Morgan has noted that Ellen White did not repeat the first statement in her later publications, although she did the latter statement. He suggests that Curtis, as he turned away from his Adventist convictions, might omit these statements if he no longer practiced foot washing or the holy kiss. Beyond this, there does not appear to be any changes to her wording. Ellen White was particularly concerned about his shift toward spiritualism, a movement that she viewed as subversive and evil.<sup>16</sup>

## Shift to Spiritualism

Soon thereafter Eli became a spiritualist medium.<sup>17</sup> By late 1850 he published a series of spiritualist tracts claiming spirit communications. These included *Wonderful Phenomena, Wonders of the Age: A Thrilling Narrative of the Facts Relating to the Dixboro Ghost* (1850) and *The Sharp Sword with Two Edges!—Truth from Heaven* (1851). In 1861 he published another periodical, *The Millennial Messenger*. Curtis combined his fluid views about revelation with his biblical and apocalyptic views but moved decidedly away from Ellen White and Sabbatarian Adventism.

On August 5, 1870, Eli Curtis purchased 5.15 acres for \$257.50 in Chauncey, Athens County, Ohio. The property, known as Koon’s spirit house, had made nationwide news.<sup>18</sup> Eli believed he was “commissioned by a spirit—signing the sacred name Jesus of Nazareth—to come to Ohio and locate a plat of land on which to commence the building of the City of the New Jerusalem.”<sup>19</sup> He purchased part of the Koon property to build this Spiritualist utopian community that he called the Morning Star Colony and began work on a tabernacle on a knoll that Curtis dubbed Mount Nebo.<sup>20</sup> But his efforts were thwarted first by the theft of \$2,500 and later death.

The Tabernacle was modeled on King Solomon's Temple, an eight-sided structure with a door and window on each side and a cupola on top. The sixty-foot Tabernacle was to be completed by Christmas 1871, but his wife died December 15. Eli himself passed away eleven days later, and the project was never completed.<sup>21</sup> The Michigan death index places his death in March 1872, and interment records date his death later. According to descendants, his body was moved from Ohio to Michigan for burial, which explains the discrepancy in dates.<sup>22</sup> The cause of death is listed as "spiritualism."<sup>23</sup> They are buried in the family plot in Franklin, Michigan.<sup>24</sup>

---

## SOURCES

Curtis, Eli. *Address [Poems]*. New York: Eli Curtis, 1861.

Curtis, Eli. *Address to the Church Militant: And Especially the Unregenerate*. New York: Published by the author, 1861.

Curtis, Eli. "Letter from Bro. Curtis, New York, Oct. 7, 1845." *The Day-Star*, October 18, 1845.

Curtis, Eli. "Letter from Bro. Curtis, New York, Nov. 22, 1845." *The Day-Star*, December 6, 1845.

Curtis, Eli. "Letter from Brother Curtis, New York, December 24, 1845." *The Day-Star*, January 10, 1846.

Curtis, Eli. *The Sharp Sword with Two Edges!—Truth from Heaven*. New York: Eli Curtis, 1851.

Curtis, Eli. *Signs, Preceding [sic] the Great Day of the Lord's Coming, and Judgment*. New York: John Hall, [1849].

Curtis, Eli. *Wonderful Phenomena, Wonders of the Age a Thrilling Narrative of the Facts Relating to the Dixboro Ghost*. New York: Curtis, 1850.

"Curtis, Eli." In *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013.

Numbers, Ronald L. *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008.

*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996.

White, James, ed. *A Word to the "Little Flock."* Gorham, ME: James White, 1847.

---

## NOTES

1. The Millerite Eli Curtis is sometimes confused with Eli Wooster Curtis (died June 26, 1871, at age 17), or Eli Turney Curtis (1837-1907). A careful check of genealogical sources can eliminate these sources. Special thanks to Kathleen Pyle for clarification on genealogical sources.
2. "Pioneer Society," *Detroit Free Press*, March 9, 1872, 1.
3. [https://www.werelate.org/wiki/Person:Sarah\\_Jennings\\_%2837%29](https://www.werelate.org/wiki/Person:Sarah_Jennings_%2837%29), accessed September 19, 2023.

4. *History of Oakland County, Michigan. With Illustrations Descriptive of its Scenery, Palatial Residences, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks, and Important Manufactories, from Original Sketches by Artists of the Highest Quality* (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1877), 267.
5. "The Jubilee Standard," *The Day-Star*, September 27, 1845, 35-36.
6. *Ibid.*, 36.
7. Eli Curtis, "Letter from Bro. Curtis, New York, Nov. 22, 1845," *The Day-Star*, December 6, 1845, 37.
8. *Ibid.*, 38.
9. Eli Curtis, "Letter from Brother Curtis, New York, December 24, 1845," *The Day-Star*, January 10, 1846, 20.
10. Eli Curtis, "Letter from Bro. Curtis, New York, Oct. 7, 1845," *The Day-Star*, October 18, 1845, 1.
11. See advertisement, *Litchfield [Connecticut] Enquirer*, October 15, 1846, 4.
12. See "P.S." in *The Girdle of Truth, and Advent Review* 1, no. 6 (January 20, 1848): 31.
13. "The Sanctuary," *Girdle of Truth and Advent Review* 1, no. 4 (January 6, 1848): 16.
14. See note in *The Present Truth*, May 1, 1850, 80.
15. I am indebted to Kevin Morgan for this insight. E-mail from Kevin Morgan to the author, September 19, 2023.
16. Ellen White comments twice: "It is well known by many of the brethren, that Eli Curtis has published many of my visions. ... I feel it my duty to say to the brethren that I have no faith in his course; and that he has published my visions contrary to my wishes, even after I had requested him not to publish them." E. G. White, "Eli Curtis," *Present Truth*, May 1850, 8). See also: "I wish to say to the brethren and sisters, that I have been much grieved with the strange course pursued by this man, in republishing my views, and sending them about in connection with worthless and foolish matter, such as the Dixboro Ghost, notwithstanding I have earnestly entreated him not to do so. I consider him void of judgment in spiritual things, blinded by the deceptions of the Enemy. I did my duty to him faithfully when I hoped he would turn from his singular course" (*Second Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald*, April 7, 1851, 64). For background on the Dixboro ghost, see: <https://dixboro.com/about-us/about-ghost/>, accessed September 20, 2023.
17. Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 190.
18. See description in "A Remarkable Deed," *Athens Messenger*, January 31, 1896.
19. "Spiritualism," *The Vinton Record*, November 25, 1871, 2.

20. Ibid.

21. For a description of the "Mount Nebo" experiment, see Sharon Hatfield, *Enchanted Ground: The Spirit Room of Jonathan Koons* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018); John B. Kachuba, *Ghosthunting Ohio: America's Haunted Road Trip* (Clerisy Press, 2018).

22. See "Michigan Deaths, 1867-1897," <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-DZZ9-4LV?i=1207>, accessed September 20, 2023.

23. Ibid.

24. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/202576076/sarah-curtis>, accessed September 19, 2023. According to descendants, the date of death listed (November 29, 1872) was actually the date of interment.

---

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000