

Transcending Time: Merle McCurdy's Moments and Momentum



Lifetime Achievements:

- Second Black Prosecutor in United States History
- In 1952, Merle appointed as an Assistant Cuyahoga County Prosecutor and was the first African American to work at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.
- In 1961, he was the first African American appointed as United States Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio by President John F. Kennedy, only the second African American to hold this position in the United States.
- The first African American to have a Great Lakes Ship named after him.

Serving Time, Marking Time

Merle McCurdy's great-great-grandfather, Nasa McCurdy, understood serving time and marking time as he worked to be manumitted in 1795 by Rachel Kennedy, the wife of his deceased owner David Kennedy. The Pennsylvania Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 stipulated that any person born before the law was passed remained enslaved for life, although a child born to an enslaved mother after March 1, 1780, was legally considered a free person. Born around 1755, twenty-five years before the 1780 Act, Nasa, who Rachel Kennedy and the records described as a mulatto, faced a lifetime of enslavement. As the years of his servitude wore

on, Nasa's character and work ethic, especially during the time of her husband's "insanity" as Rachel Kennedy described it, motivated her to grant him his freedom by manumission in March 1797.

The price of Nasa McCurdy's freedom? One shilling, which in 21 century money is worth less than one dollar! After his manumission, Nasa acquired property in Pennsylvania, married and raised his family there. He died on March 30, 1829.

Time to Live and Time for Freedom

Nasa McCurdy's son Nasa McCurdy, Jr., a skilled master carpenter, bought land near Zanesville, Ohio and throughout the 1840s, he continued the family tradition of fighting for freedom by becoming a conductor on the Underground Railroad from his home base in Ohio. After guiding many fugitive slaves to freedom on Canada over his Underground Railroad Route, Nasa McCurdy Jr. decided to settle permanently in Amherstburg, Ontario, a small Canadian town directly across the Detroit River from several Michigan Downriver communities including Ecorse, Wyandotte, and Trenton. Putting down roots, he married, raised a family, and continued his activism for freedom. He helped to establish the Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church in Amherstburg, which served as an important Underground Railroad terminal before and during the Civil War.



Contrary to widespread belief, the Underground Railroad did not slam on its metaphorical brakes at the beginning of the Civil War. It continued to operate throughout the War until the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in 1865, utilizing its clandestine network of safe houses and routes to help thousands of enslaved people escape. People seeking freedom sought out Union lines and as Civil War Contraband Camps sprang up across the South, the Underground Railroad adapted and expanded the anti-slavery efforts that it practiced for decades before the Civil War. Nasa McCurdy, Jr. married Permelia Bailey, born in Pennsylvania around 1822, and they had several children, including George Douglas McCurdy. In turn, George



Douglas
McCurdy
married
Mary
Almede
Thomas and
their oldest
son LeRoy
"Roy Nelson
McCurdy
married
Evelyn
Gertrude
Foster in

Amherstburg, Ontario on July 20, 1907.



Merle's parents Evelyn and Roy smilingly welcome their new circumstances from this photograph in the McCurdy archives at the Ashtabula Campus of Kent State University. The couple made even more changes in their lives. Another Kent State Archives photo records the time a bowtie spiffy Roy served as a cook on a Great Lakes freighter in Andrew Carnegie's ore fleet. His time as a Great Lakes sailor allowed him to explore the advantages of the port of Conneaut and he and Evelyn moved there in 1909.



Conneaut Time

Merle McCurdy was born in Conneaut in July 1912, the third of Roy and Evelyn Fosters three children, with a stillborn sister born in 1909, and his brother Foster born in 1910. Merle grew up on Sandusky Street in Conneaut, under the influence if not the physical presence of Andrew Carnegie who shaped Conneaut as a lasting example of his vertical integration policy by developing the city as a key link in his transporting iron ore from mine to dock to rail to steel mills. In 1898, Andrew Carnegie acquired over 5,000 acres of Conneaut harbor area and poured funds into state-of-the-art shipyard equipment, including financing George Hulett's invention and expanding his Great Lakes ore fleet. Both Roy McCurdy and his son Merle worked as cooks on ships in Andrew Carnegie's ore fleet which he sold to J.P. Morgan in 1901.

The McCurdy family made an impression on Conneaut life. Merle and his brother Foster attended Dean Avenue School (Foster, top row fourth student left to right, and Merle bottom row right). In his Sunday Paper News-Herald Local Story on January 3, 1988, Ashtabula Star Beacon writer-historian Carl Feather recorded the perspective of future Ashtabula Maritime Museum co-founder Duff Brace. Duff, who lived in the same Sandusky/16th Street neighborhood as the McCurdy's, recalled Merle as being "real smart in school," and a hard worker. Carl noted that part of Merle's work ethic involved being a newspaper boy for the Conneaut News-Herald.



04. 1910s: First Grade Class
Photo at Dean Ave School in Conneaut, Ohio

Another African American family, the Ruffin family, including Isiah, Rebecca, and Carolyn Ruffin, also resided in Conneaut during these years. Isiah Ruffin and his family members noted the excellent Conneaut teachers who introduced their students to the concepts of real brotherhood years before the era of nationally recognized civil rights. They also provided a support network for each other and carved out productive lives despite adversity.



As well as being “very smart” academically in his high school studies, Merle participated in school activities including Glee Club, the football team, Senior Boys Club, and track. He graduated from Conneaut High School in 1931.

The sixteen years between his graduation from Conneaut High School and his graduation from Case Western Reserve Law School were busy ones for Merle McCurdy.

While working as a bellhop at the Hollenden Hotel in Cleveland Merle met and fell in love with Rosetta “Rosie” Scott, one of the hotel’s elevator operators. Their courtship took some time, because every time he approached the elevator to talk to Rosie, she would disappear operating the elevator. Eventually his persistence prevailed and they married in 1937, and later became parents of two daughters, Myrna and Brenda. In January 1964, Merle

presented an elevator control from the Hollenden Hotel where they had met and fallen in love to Rosie as a 27th anniversary gift. Although the hotel was scheduled to be demolished, Merle used his ingenuity to snag the elevator control.

Merle McCurdy had dreamed of being a police officer, but instead he spent more than a year in a sanitarium recovering from tuberculosis. This ended his law enforcement dream. Merle turned his attention to other occupations. Following in his father Roy’s footsteps, for a brief time Merle worked as a cook on Great Lakes ore boats, a bellhop at the Hollenden Hotel, and in poolrooms and in the early 1940s, he sold real estate and operated an electric streetcar. He also enrolled in the Case Western Reserve Law School and worked his way through the program, graduating in 1947. He joined the Ohio Bar on July 31, 1947.



For Every Career, there is a Season

After law school and passing the Bar, Merle worked for Myron Huff, a friend he met while recovering from tuberculosis. Shortly after that, he formed a partnership with Norman Shelby Minor, a renowned Cleveland defense lawyer. As well as mentoring Merle McCurdy, Norman Minor trained Representative Louis Stokes and Carl Stokes, future Cleveland mayor, and the first African American in the country to be a mayor of a major city.

Merle continued to build his roster of impressive accomplishments. In 1952, he was appointed as an Assistant Cuyahoga County Prosecutor and was the first African American to work at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. In 1960, he earned the accolade of being appointed the county's first Public Defender.



In 1961, President John F. Kennedy appointed Merle as the United States Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio, making him the second African American in the United States to occupy the position. Federal Judge James C. Connell sworn Merle McCurdy in as U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio on October 6, 1961. Merle certainly knew that Judge Connell had also sent his brother Foster to jail for picketing his house during a Union labor dispute in the late 1940s.

In 1962 while he served as U.S. Attorney, Merle spoke to the audience at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Atlanta, Georgia. Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph D. Abernathy were among audience members who heard Merle discuss the significant accomplishments that African Americans had made and stress the importance of standing firm

and using their right to vote.

Throughout the 1960s, racial violence swirled across the United States, including Cleveland's Hough neighborhood riots. In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson appointed Merle McCurdy to serve on the Kerner Commission investigating the causes of the widespread racial violence in 1960s America. Merle took a leave of absence from his position as United States Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio to serve as General Counsel to the Kerner Commission and played a pivotal role in the Commission's conclusions.

In 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Merle McCurdy as America's first Consumer Counsel, announcing his appointment to the new position on March 20th. On Thursday April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., who Merle probably met during his career, was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. On Monday, May 6, 1968, Merle McCurdy collapsed at Cleveland's Hopkin's International Airport. He had addressed an NAACP meeting the previous evening and he and his wife Rosie were waiting to board a flight back to their home in Washington D.C. Merle McCurdy died at Southwest General Hospital at 4:25 p.m. of a brain aneurysm. He is buried at Highland Park Cemetery in Cleveland, near the golf course where he and his friend Gerald Gold played golf. Merle's brother Foster joined him there in 1978.

"To Everything There is a Season"



The life story of the ship William B. Dixon/Merle M. McCurdy parallels the times and the places of the lifetime of the man Merle M. McCurdy.

On August 27, 1910, the Great Lakes Engineering Works launched the ore carrier William B. Dickson at its Ecorse, Michigan facility. Ecorse, Michigan is one of the Downriver communities across the Detroit River from

Amherstburg, Ontario where the McCurdy family is one of the pillars of Amherstburg history. The Dickson was built for the Pittsburgh Steamship Company and named in honor of the first vice president of the U.S. Steel Corporation. William Dickson's daughter, Miss Emma Young Dickson of New York christened William B. Dickson, which measured six hundred feet, 58.2 feet in beam and 33.2 feet in depth. The Dickson was the second of three freighters built at the Ecorse yard for the Pittsburgh Steamship Company. William J. Olcott had been launched previously and William P. Palmer a few weeks later. Leroy McCurdy and his son Merle worked as cooks on Pittsburgh Steamship company ships.

The Dickson sailed for the Pittsburgh Steamship Company and US Steel until 1968 and after a time of idleness, the Kinsman Fleet bought the Kinsman and the William J. Olcott and refitted them both. In 1969, William B. Dickson was renamed Merle M. McCurdy. A news item from the Milwaukee Journal of December 3, 1968, detailed the transformation of William Dickson to the Merle McCurdy.

"The first Great Lakes ship believed to be named for a Negro is scheduled for service next summer. The Merle M. McCurdy, a 601-foot bulk carrier, is being reconditioned at a Lorain, Ohio, shipyard following its purchase by Kinsman Marine Transit Co., Vermilion, Ohio, from the United States Steel Corp.

One of Merle's friends, George M. Steinbrenner, future owner of the New York Yankees and then President of the American Ship Building Co., stated the following in announcing the naming of a ship for his fallen friend, the "Merle M. McCurdy", the first ship on the Great Lakes Fleet to be named for an African American:

"We feel this is a most appropriate gesture, and one of which the entire Great Lakes industry should be proud... This ship should serve to remind many people, that this ideal which McCurdy exemplified is in fact a real one and that ... it is our duty to see that such opportunities are always available regardless of race, creed, or color.

"McCurdy, who died of a heart attack last summer, was chairman of the United States Consumer Council in Washington, DC. An attorney, he had served as chief legal adviser to the national advisory commission on civil disorders (the Kerner commission) and as United States attorney in Cleveland.



"McCurdy's father and grandfather had been seamen on Great Lakes freighters. McCurdy himself financed his way through college and law school by working as a part-time seaman." Reporter James W. McCulla "

The Merle M. McCurdy in the Neebish Channel of the St. Mary's River, September 1980. Photo by Bob Campbell

The McCurdy sailed until November 1985 when she laid up in Buffalo. In December 1987, she departed Buffalo under tow of the tug Ohio for Ashtabula and eventually scraping. In the early

spring of 1988, there was great interest in preserving her woodwork and other parts, but on May 13, 1988, the Environmental Protective Agency received a court order to halt the scrapping of Merle M. McCurdy by Triad Salvage of Ashtabula because of asbestos around its pipes. The Columbia Iron & Metal Company of Cleveland applied to the Maritime Administration for permission to sell McCurdy to International Marine Salvage for scrapping at Port Colborne. By the fall of 1988, Merle M. McCurdy's physical form had disappeared.

But like her human counterpart, her physical absence and the passage of time did not erase her memory. The Steinbrenner and McCurdy names and legacies are still time traveling.

May 3, 2014, Ashtabula Star Beacon story by Warren Dillaway is one of the continuing incarnations of Merle M. McCurdy's agency,

Legacy, and Inspiration.



Warren Dillaway / Star Beacon

Brenda McCurdy Rhoads, daughter of Merle M. McCurdy who grew up in Conneaut and went on to become the second black Federal prosecutor in United States history, reads one of her father's speeches during a Law Day program at the Hubbard House Underground Railroad Museum on Friday May 2nd, 2014.

The Ashtabula County Bar Association celebration of the life of Merle M. McCurdy drew more than eighty people for a program of reflection on the role of law in the foundation of the country

and its importance for society. Attorney Richard Dana acted as emcee for the program, detailing Merle McCurdy's life, and its significance. Attorney Dana also explored the historical place that Ashtabula County lawyers earned in the Abolitionist Movement starting in the mid-1800s. "We (Ashtabula County lawyers) led the fight for abolition," he said of Ashtabula County Congressional representatives Joshua Giddings and Benjamin Wade."

He also explored the accomplishments of Clarence Darrow, who practiced law in Jefferson before he moved on to his Leopold and Loeb Chicago fame and the Scopes Monkey Trial in Tennessee. He talked Albion Tourgee of Conneaut who coined the term "colorblind" during a Supreme Court case.

Twenty-three members of the McCurdy family, from all over the United States and Canada, attended the event that featured a presentation to the family by retired United States Federal Judge Thomas Lambros.

Howard McCurdy, a former member of the Canadian Parliament, presented a detailed history of the McCurdy family, revealing that a significant percentage of the family resides in Canada and reached important positions in business, athletic, medicine, and politics. Most of the McCurdy's descended from emancipated slave Nasa McCurdy who lived, owned property, and died in Pennsylvania. Nasa McCurdy's son, Nasa McCurdy Jr. became a successful farmer and master carpenter and settled near Zanesville, Ohio. He worked as an important conductor in the Underground Railroad and finally moved to Amherstburg, Ontario where he became an important advocate for black people and civil rights.

Brenda McCurdy Rhoads, one of Merle McCurdy's two daughters, read a speech that her father made to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1962. "We have the mighty power of the ballot," he reminded his listeners in his speech.

Measuring Time, Honoring Historical Time, and People

All history is divided into timelines: Hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades centuries. Some people create their timelines backwards, others forward. Some pause them while others push them into dead ends. Merle McCurdy and his family faced the realities of their timelines and shaped them into productive, rewarding lives for their times.

On Time



By Kahlil Gibran

And an astronomer said, Master, what of Time? And he answered:

You would measure the measureless and the immeasurable.

You would adjust your conduct and even direct the course of your spirit according to hours and seasons.

Of time you would make a stream upon whose bank you would sit and watch its flowing.

Yet the timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness,

And knows that yesterday is but today's memory and tomorrow is today's dream. And that that which sings and contemplates in you is still dwelling within the bounds of that first moment which scattered the stars into space

Who among you does not feel that his power to love is boundless?

And yet who does not feel that very love, though boundless, encompassed within the centre of his being, and moving not from love thought to love thought, nor from love deeds to other love deeds?

And is not time even as love is, undivided and spaceless?

But if in your thought you must measure time into seasons, let each season encircle all the other seasons,

And let today embrace the past with remembrance and the future with longing.

Editor's Note: I normally do not include footnotes or bibliographies in my newsletter articles, but Merle McCurdy's story covers so many centuries and such important human stories that I thought one should be included . Kathy Warnes, Editor

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Amherstburg Freedom Museum is an excellent source to explore the history and contributions of the McCurdy family in Canada.

You tube Richard dana <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQAjjHgG72U>

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The Foster Family, Part 3., from Amherstburg to Ohio

Wisconsin Marine Historical Society

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