

The New York LDS Historian

The Voyage of *The Ship Brooklyn*

by Scott Tiffany

New York City, February 4, 1846

“Brethren Awake! Be determined to get out of this evil nation by next spring,” came the cry from Orson Pratt on November 8, 1845, at American Hall in New York City. “We do not want one Saint to be left in the United States by that time . . . The church in this city [are to] move one and all, west of the Rocky Mountains between this and next season, either by land or water.”¹

Once again religious persecution had struck the Church center in Nauvoo, Illinois, and Church leaders were pleading with members on the East coast to flee. Heeding the call, most Saints chose the land route to go west, joining the famous trek from Nauvoo



California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona).²

Just after Christmas, 1845, twenty-seven-year-old Samuel Brannan, an ambitious organizer appointed by the Church, announced he had chartered the cargo ship Brooklyn, a “first class ship” and “a very fast sailor”. Though a modest in size, weighing about 450 tons, Brannan promised it would have every “convenience to make a family equally as comfortable as by their own fireside in Babylon”. The sea-faring Saints were reminded that “every thing that is useful here is useful there.”³

Fare for the trip was \$75 for adults and half that for children. The passengers packed agricultural and mechanical tools to equip at least 800 workers with

everything from ploughs, hoes, and shovels to glass, paper, a printing press, school books, and twine. John Horner, a school teacher, sold a small potato patch for \$5 to buy a gun for protection in the savage tenitory where he and his new bride were about to move.⁴

Meanwhile, Brannan and the ship’s captain, Abel W. Richardson, prepared the ship for sailing. The Church’s *Times and Seasons* reported that the Captain “bears the reputation of being one of the most skillful seamen that has ever sailed from [New York’s] port.” His ship’s reputation, however, varied. One passenger said it was “old and almost worn out” and “leased because she could be had cheap”. Another called it a “staunch tub of a whaler”. Only children could stand upright between the decks. Before the Brooklyn set sail, the passengers made many improvements, including the construction of thirty-two small staterooms with bunks.

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to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. But some could not afford wagons and supplies for the long walk west. Pooling their resources, they determined to rent a ship and make the journey by sea from New York City to Upper California (present-day

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Samuel Brannan in 1846

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The Brooklyn passengers consisted of about seventy men, sixty women, and one hundred children, plus a dozen non-Church members including the captain, crew, and a few business people. Like the Mayflower Pilgrims, the small group of Latter-day Saints were looking for religious freedom in a new land, though they fled from an America that had rejected them rather than looking to America for refuge. The Brooklyn's epic journey would be five times the length of the Mayflower's voyage.

The Departure

On Wednesday, February 4, 1846, the same day the first Saints left Nauvoo on the journey west, the Brooklyn set sail from New York City. Just four days out to sea, trouble began. The ship encountered a severe storm that Captain Richardson claimed was the worst he had ever seen. "Mountain-high" waves broke over the deck and pounded against the hull. Sent below decks, the passengers huddled together, "tossed about like feathers in a sack".

At one point, the captain found them crouched in the dark, singing loudly to drown out the storm. To prepare them for the worst,

Richardson told them: "My friends, there is a time in every man's life when it is fitting that he should prepare to die. That time has come to us and unless God interposes, we shall all go to the bottom." Although many were scared, one passenger replied, "Captain Richardson, we were sent to California and we shall get there."

When the storm passed, the damage was assessed. The only casualties were the milk cows, killed by the pitching of the ship. But two days later, baby Joseph Nichols died, and about the same time Jerusha Ensign buried both her husband and child in ocean graves. As

if in partial compensation, Sarah Burr gave birth to a son, aptly named John Atlantic Burr.

On March 3, the ship reached the equator, and the sails went limp. The confluence of northeast and southeast trade winds created a dead calm called the doldrums. For two days, the ship sat motionless in the muggy, oppressive heat. "The air seemed like it came out of a furnace," and it was so hot "the pitch was drawn out of the ship's seams". Finally the wind breathed life into the sails, and the ship moved into the full southeast trades and down toward the Cape.

One night, Phoebe Robbins saw somber men lower a small bundle into the sea, the tell-tale sign of an infant death. Days later, she did the same with first one and then another of her children. Three weeks after giving birth to John Atlantic, Sarah Burr lost her son Charles. Before the Brooklyn reached South America seven more were wrapped, weighted, and slipped over the rail.

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Sorrowful as the deaths were, the great challenge lay ahead: Cape Horn. Violent, unpredictable winds at the tip of South America, often accompanied by hail and sleet, had earned the Cape a reputation as the graveyard of the oceans. All knew "the supreme test of a bold seaman was going west around the Horn". Inching first south and then gradually west, the captain guided the ship toward safety. After four cloudy days, the sails caught wind strong enough to carry them beyond the Cape and north toward Valparaíso and badly needed supplies.

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By now, they had been at sea three months without touching land. "Drinking water grew thick and ropey with slime, so that it had to be strained between the teeth." Rats and cockroaches infested the supplies. But to their chagrin, as they approached Valparaiso and the promise of fresh food and water, a storm hit, driving them far out to sea.

During this second storm, Laura Goodwin, pregnant with her eighth child, lost her footing as the ship pitched in the wind and was thrown down a companionway. Going into premature labor, she died of complications, pleading with her family as she died not to be buried at sea.

Sailing the Pacific

On May 4, the ship approached Juan Fernandez, the island about 300 miles off the coast of Chile made famous by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Here the seeming bad luck of the storm turned into a boon. The voyagers got firewood and 18,000 gallons of fresh water at much lower prices than in Valparaiso. But with sad hearts they buried Laura Goodwin, hearing the first Latter-day Saint sermon preached in South America. After five days ashore, on May 9 the company set sail once more.

The next leg of the journey north toward the Sandwich Islands was "a dreamy, delightful period of unbroken sea voyaging". New hope shone for Phoebe Robbins who, after burying two sons at sea, gave birth to a daughter, named Georgiana Pacific Robbins.

Elsewhere things were not so peaceful. Four days after the Saints set sail from Juan Fernandez, the United States declared war on Mexico. Earlier rumors of war had prompted Brannan to order daily military drills and to keep guns loaded and mounted. As the Brooklyn approached the Honolulu harbor on June 20, the passengers saw the 44-gun war ship

Congress at anchor. Robert F. Stockton, commander of the battleship, boarded the Brooklyn and told the passengers of the war. Ironically, the Saints had left the United States to escape persecution, and now they found Honolulu occupied by the same government that had contributed to their persecution.

Commander Stockton welcomed them and encouraged them to move on to California in the name of the United

with sad hearts they buried Laura Goodwin, hearing the first Latter-day Saint sermon preached in South America.

States. But to help America establish authority over their new land "was a very wide departure from the original plans, if not in direct antagonism with their designs," and some passengers wanted to go to Oregon instead. Others talked of returning East. Finally, they decided to continue on to California, "hoping for the best but preparing for the worst".

Not knowing what to expect in California, hostile Mexicans or friendly Americans, the Saints began military drills on deck just after the Fourth of July. When they entered the harbor at Yerba Buena (later San Francisco) on July 31, a fog hovered over water hiding the shapes and outlines of this new home. Soon they made out a man-of-war anchored in the bay. It was American.

The arrival of the Brooklyn alarmed the American crew of the Portsmouth until they caught sight of women aboard the ship. Uniformed men, including Commander John B. Montgomery, rowed out and climbed aboard. His greeting was probably met with mixed emotion: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the honor to inform



The voyage of the Brooklyn

The Voyage of *The Ship Brooklyn*

you that you are in the United States of America”.

After five months and twenty-seven days and traveling 24,000 miles, the *Brooklyn* passenger were permitted to disembark and unload duty-free. A few families found vacant homes in the little village, some stayed in the customs house, and others pitched white tents in military fashion around the village square, today called Portsmouth Square after Montgomery's ship.

News of the Saints' overland and sea treks arrived long before they did. The U.S. consul in Monterey, California, received word from Boston that the Mormons would “kill you off and take possession of all your worldly gear”. But Commander Montgomery welcomed the Saints, providing military crews and boats to help unload the *Brooklyn*. Last unloaded were three beautiful brass cannons, “causing reflection about what might have been”.

Yerba Buena was renamed San Francisco in January, 1847, about the same time members of the Mormon Battalion arrived. The village was “very largely a Mormon town” at that time, with more than 500 members in the Bay area. It served as a way station for many years,

in 1853. Isaac Goodwin, husband of Laura, remarried and moved with his seven seafaring children to Utah where he introduced alfalfa and became mayor of Lehi. In time, about one-third of the *Brooklyn* Saints moved to Salt Lake City, many of them in 1857 when

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the honor to inform you that you are in the United States of America.”

helping missionaries and Saints on journeys between the Great Basin and the coast.

Sam Brannan especially thrived in San Francisco, though he drifted away from the Church. He opened a store at Sutter's Fort when gold first flickered in a pan. On May 11, 1848, he stood on Portsmouth Square to announce the discovery of gold, and his newspaper

help was needed to defend against Johnston's army.⁶

John Homer, the school teacher, still had his gun. He carried it for protection wherever he went but never used it. Finally, “seeing no one who wished to shoot me, I concluded my pistol was useless and traded it to a Spaniard for a yoke of oxen, the first animals I ever owned.” He and his wife Elizabeth launched what became a multi-million dollar farming enterprise and lived a faithful life in the Church.⁷

Spreading throughout the region, they opened the first local bank, post office, library, and the first public school in California.

Building San Francisco

In Yerba Buena, named for its “good herbs”, the Saints established industries and built houses. They became local craftsmen, tailors, bakers, surveyors, masons, carpenters, cobblers, and attorneys. Spreading throughout the region, they opened the first local bank, post office, library, and the first public school in California. Sam Brannan, who had worked on the *New York Messenger* and the *Prophet* for the Church in the East, established the first local newspaper, *The Star*.

announced the news to the East Coast. Cornering the supplies of food and equipment, he made a fortune on the 49ers who flooded into the city. He became one of California's richest men, though he lost his faith, his wife, and eventually his fortune.⁵

Other Saints remained faithful. Charles and Sarah Burr moved to Salt Lake City in 1848 (their son John Atlantic Burr later explored the Grand Canyon). Robert and Phoebe Robbins went back to New Jersey with their son and their daughter Georgiana Pacific, and then crossed overland to Salt Lake City

¹Times and Seasons, 1 Dec. 1845; Roberts, B.H. Comprehensive History of the Church, Vol. 3, Ch. 71, p. 39.

²Grateful acknowledgment is made to Lorin K. Hansen, whose excellent essay, “Voyage of the Brooklyn,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Theology 21:3, (Autumn 1988), is a major source for this article. Unless cited otherwise, direct quotations may be sourced in that essay.

³Times and Seasons, 1 Feb. 1846.

⁴Bay Area's First Farmer, Program for “150 Years in California” celebration June 26-Oct. 1, 1996.

⁵Roberts, B.H. Comprehensive History of the Church, Vol. 3, Ch. 71, p. 39.

⁶“Ship Brooklyn Passenger Gravesite Location Project,” The Ship Brooklyn Association. Vol. 2, Iss. 2 (Fall 1997).

⁷Bay Area's First Farmer, Program for “150 Years in California” celebration June 26-Oct. 1, 1996.