

Under Sail to Zion

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It was Saturday, June 6, 1840. A full-rigged packet ship, flying the American flag glided out of Liverpool harbor, bound for New York. Her hull was black with a white streak running the length of the vessel. Black squares painted on this white band would suggest gun turrets to any craft with hostile intentions. It is likely that the ship's fore-topsail bore a painted black ball, the emblem of the famous Black Ball Line.

The *Britannia*, captained by veteran shipmaster Enoch Cook, was typical of many packets of her time—except for one historic difference. She was carrying among her passengers the first organized emigrant company of Latter-day Saints. Elder John Moon presided over these 41 British converts. He had been appointed and set apart for this task by two members of the Quorum of the Twelve, Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball. Under their leadership, the missionaries in the British Isles had achieved remarkable success.

Elder Moon's pioneer company survived many perils and hardships. The 630-ton ship weathered three severe storms, and there was much sickness among the passengers. For 41 days, the small craft pitched and rolled across the Atlantic Ocean, and then the emigrants spent three additional days in quarantine before they landed, "safe and in a tolerable state of health," in New York, according to the report that went to President Brigham Young of the Council of the Twelve.

The Gathering

This voyage was the beginning of an epoch—a period when thousands of newly converted Latter-day Saints migrated from the Old World to Zion. These emigrants had answered the call of "the gathering"—a call that profoundly influenced the course of Church history.

In responding to the call, new converts left

their homes, families, and native lands for an unknown future in an untamed country. Between 1840 and 1890, at least 85,000 LDS emigrants braved the treacherous oceans and survived the dangers of wind, wave, and disease. Some 50,000 of them crossed the water in sailing vessels.

This religious impulse among believers was described by one LDS emigrant in these words: "I believed in the principle of the gathering and felt it my duty to go although it was a severe trial to leave my native land and the pleasing associations that I had formed there, but my heart was fixed." Thousands followed that same gospel star to Zion.

The Sailing Craft

From 1840 to 1868, virtually all LDS emigrants crossed the Atlantic and Pacific in sailing ships. There were 176 known voyages under canvas, of which 154 were made in full-rigged ships, and the remainder in barks and brigs. To clarify, the word ship, to a mariner, applies specifically to a craft with three or more masts, fitted with square sails that hang across the hull. A bark also has three or more masts, but the foremast and mainmast are fitted with square sails, and the mizzenmast with fore-and-aft sails that run lengthwise with the hull. A brig has two masts, both squarerigged.

The most important type of sailing vessel in which the LDS emigrants traveled was the packet ship, the workhorse of the passenger service. It has been said that the packet was born of necessity, because she had to withstand the violence of brutal seas and the stress imposed by hardcase masters who strove to keep a schedule under all conditions. Her crew were often called "packet rats" because of their dubious backgrounds.

Packet ships were sturdy, full-bodied, and somewhat tubby in appearance. In the era of

sail, the typical packet measured about 1,000 tons, a rough indicator of cargo-carrying capacity. In length, these ships averaged about 170 feet, and in breadth, about 35 feet. The largest sailing vessel to transport Latter-day Saints was the *Monarch of the Sea*. She measured 1,979 tons and was 223 feet long—
—not quite as long as a Boeing 747 airplane. In contrast with modern vessels, even this ship was relatively small.

Emigrants Organized

Church leaders were well aware of the hazards of an ocean crossing and had read the reports of emigrant ships sunk in the wrathful Atlantic. In fact, between 1847 and 1853, 59 such vessels were lost, with all who were on board. Knowing this, Church leaders chartered only the most seaworthy ships, and it is significant that in a 50 year period, not one LDS emigrant company was lost in the Atlantic. The only shipwreck that took Latter-day Saint lives occurred in the Pacific; the bark *Julia Ann* was lost, and five Church members died.

From the outset, LDS emigrants were uniquely organized. An early example was a meeting held on February 6, 1841, in Liverpool to organize 235 Saints prior to their sailing on the *Sheffield*. Shipmaster Richard K. Porter joined Brigham Young, John Taylor, and Willard Richards in the planning session. Hiram Clark was appointed president of the company, with six counselors to assist him, and he was given a special blessing.

Large companies were divided into wards, each with its own presidency. Aboard the *William Tapscott*, five English and Swiss wards occupied one side of the steerage quarters, and five Scandinavian wards the opposite side. Although nine languages were spoken aboard the ship, the 725 Saints had a successful and harmonious voyage.

Life between Decks

In the early years, emigrants supplied their own food. Later, maritime legislation required shipping lines to provide a daily ration. Few

emigrants could afford cabin fare, and sleeping accommodations in steerage were rude and usually overcrowded. For emigrants who traveled on ships that did not exceed two thousand tons, both space and privacy were very limited. During the time of the wind ships, despite improvements in conditions under successive British and American passenger acts, sea travel remained quite primitive.

The ship *Franklin*, for example, transported 413 Danish Saints from Hamburg to New York. These emigrants were quartered below deck. Their bunks “were so wide that three persons could easily have room in one of them side by side.” Rations included water and such staples as beef, pork, beans, and potatoes. There were eleven lanterns, five furnished by the emigrants and six by the ship. The emigrants hired an extra cook and assigned two men to assist him. During the crossing, measles, chicken pox, and other ailments claimed 48 lives (43 of them children), or 11 % of the company. Mortality was especially high among children.

In Liverpool, the Merseyside Maritime Museum has a mock-up of steerage quarters. It is a confined area with tiered bunks ranged along each side. A ladder or steep stairs provided the only exit, and during storms, the quarters were “hatched down” to prevent water from flooding the hold. The only light came from a few lamps hanging in strategic locations and shedding a dim yellow glow. The only sanitary facilities were buckets or chamber pots. Some later packets had water closets built on the main deck, but during severe storms—sometimes lasting for days—steerage passengers were hatched down and could not get to the deck. It is easy to imagine the resulting chaos and stench.

Being hatched down was often a terrifying experience. In his journal, William Clayton described the 1840 voyage of the *Black Ball* packet *North America*, with the second emigrant company. He noted a near-shipwreck on a rock, passengers suffering from seasickness, water shortage, abusive officers and crew, and a poignant account of

terror below. A little girl was so frightened by the pitching and rolling below deck that she lost her sanity and died two days later—possibly from claustrophobia and sheer fright.

Problems from Overcrowding

Overcrowding compounded the misery of seasickness, dysentery, cholera, and other diseases. Many emigrant companies exceeded 500 passengers. Between decks, these men, women, and children huddled together in a heaving, rocking craft, suffering in body and spirit. Even under the best conditions and discipline, the situation created a fertile environment for the spread of disease.

In 1861, during the first of her two emigrant passages, the *Monarch of the Sea* carried 955 Latter-day Saints. The passengers were housed on three decks. Families were berthed amidships, where there was somewhat more space, but single individuals were cramped uncomfortably together. The resourceful company president found a happy solution. He suggested that betrothed couples be married to relieve the imbalance. Many marriages were promptly solemnized, and the congestion eased.

In 1866, during her second voyage with emigrants, the German square-rigger *Humboldt* sailed from Hamburg to New York with 328 Saints aboard. According to Olof Jenson, a steerage passenger, their diet consisted largely of soup, potatoes, fish, bread, and hardtack biscuits. Huge iron pots “so large the cook could get inside” were used for cooking. No bread was baked, and the biscuits were “extremely hard and dry.” Potatoes were soggy and sour. Drinking water from the Elbe River was stored in wooden barrels. Burned black on the inside, the barrels turned the water as “black as coal.” Some water contained in large, rusted iron barrels changed to red.

Undoubtedly, Olof Jenson, who was ten at the time, was not the only boy ever to test his mettle with a bit of shipboard derring-do. He recalled climbing outside the ship, under the

bow where the anchor and chains hung, and riding for a time one day, watching as the vessel plowed through the water. “Had I slipped and fallen into the ocean,” he recorded, “no one would have known what had become of me.”

The Lonely Sea

For travelers under sail, fear of the ocean often submerged all other hardships. It was a well-founded fear. When winter gales or summer hurricanes raged, the ocean extracted a heavy toll. For example, in the fourteen months ending on December 31, 1841, some 557 vessels were reported wrecked, largely along the Atlantic Coast of the United States. Twenty-eight more were listed as missing. During this period, 650 lives were lost. Almost equal casualties were reported in British waters. North Atlantic Ocean packets, however, fared better than most craft, and even won a reputation for rescuing stricken ships.

To the emigrants, the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in all their vastness created feelings of awe, loneliness, and apprehension. Converts to the Church who had never been far from home soon found themselves at the mercy of varying winds and uncompromising waves. At night, lying in their berths, they could hear the creaking and straining noises of the ship, the flap of canvas, the wind whistling through the shrouds and rigging, and the shouting officers and crew scrambling on deck and aloft. Below deck, the emigrants’ little world was dark and confined. It was a discordant symphony of children’s crying, the retching and vomiting of the seasick, the muttering and groaning of despairing companions, and, above all, the waves crashing against the hull and over the deck.

Ships carrying LDS emigrants could not escape the pounding of the sea. Many reported shredded sails, serious leaks, and dismantled masts and rigging. Yet the safety record of these vessels was remarkable. Masters and passengers often attributed the safe voyages to the hand of Providence, and to the fact that the ships were usually

dedicated and blessed before embarking. Many of these vessels were eventually lost at sea, but not while transporting Latter-day Saints.

It was not just storms that endangered voyages. Sometimes ships were becalmed for days, creating water and food shortages.

In 1859, the British bark *Alacrity* encountered another hazard during her passage between South Africa and Boston—dense fog. Visibility was greatly restricted, and the Saints, in fear of shipwreck, fasted and prayed. The captain, unable to navigate by observing celestial bodies, climbed the mast to search for an opening in the enveloping fog. Suddenly the mist lifted long enough for him to see the Nantucket Shoals, off the Massachusetts coast, dead ahead. Just in time he was able to change course and avoid disaster.

Health and Safety

To combat disease, tedium, and discouragement, LDS emigrants established patterns of shipboard living. Scrupulous sanitation was emphasized, including frequent fumigation and sprinkling of lime (used as a bleaching powder) in living quarters. To promote health, leaders insisted that in warm and calm weather, everyone—sick and well—spend time on deck in the air and sunshine. Religious services, prayer meetings, entertainment events, games, instruction classes, reading, and needlework were helpful distractions. Aboard the *Jersey*, Frederick Piercy, a talented British artist, wrote that on warm and “charming” days, “groups assembled on the deck, and, sitting in the sunshine, told stories, sang songs, and cracked jokes by the hour together, and generally with a propriety most unexceptional.”

Among the notable passages was that of the clipper ship *Charles Buck*. In his journal, Richard Ballantyne, who presided over the company of 403 Saints, recorded incidents of life at sea. He first organized the emigrants into four wards and selected their officers. He then gave detailed instructions on sanitation

and cleanliness, moral conduct, and group activities. He blessed the sick, but also prescribed his remedies for dysentery, fevers, and other illnesses. On one occasion, he and Captain William W. Smalley sutured and dressed an eight-inch gash in the leg of a young girl.

Brother Ballantyne recorded the tragic loss of a seven-year-old boy who was playing near the rigging when a strong breeze sprang up and tightened the ropes. Caught in the lines, the child was thrown overboard. As horrified parents and passengers rushed to the rail, sailors lowered a boat and rowed desperately to the rescue. The boy surfaced for only a few seconds and then disappeared forever. To add to the sadness of the voyage, three other children were lost to disease and buried at sea.

As the voyage progressed, Richard Ballantyne found his duties varied and often burdensome. He performed two weddings, excommunicated two people, resolved disputes among the Saints, fostered peace between Latter-day Saints and other passengers, and coped with a sometimes-irascible master. Brother Ballantyne’s most serious problem was a food shortage caused by a failure to reload some supplies from another ship that had been previously chartered but had proved to be unseaworthy. Emigrants had to subsist for days on rations of oatmeal, rice, biscuits, and flour. Yet he kept the Saints busy during the 56-day passage to New Orleans at such tasks as sewing tents and wagon covers for the trek across the plains.

There was also an unexpected danger. Although piracy had been largely swept from the seas, it still posed an occasional threat to shipping. One afternoon, Captain Smalley sighted a strange craft stalking the *Charles Buck*. He grew suspicious and immediately ordered all passengers on deck—hundreds of them. This display of numerical strength apparently induced the captain of the other vessel to turn away.

Shipboard Conversions

Filled with the fire of conversion, LDS emigrants often took advantage of opportunities to preach the gospel to receptive officers, crew members, and other passengers. On two ships, their success was startling.

In 1851, the *Olympus* sailed from Liverpool with 245 Latter-day Saints aboard. The first three weeks brought pleasant sailing, except for the usual seasickness and a problem with a young man from whom evil spirits had to be exorcised. But then a raging storm struck. Hatches were battened down, and emigrants huddled in their dimly lit quarters below deck as the waves crashed against the ship and sent water down the hatchway.

Captain Horace A. Wilson sent his second mate to Elder William Howell, president of the emigrant company. “You go to the captain of the Mormons,” the master ordered, “and tell him from Captain Wilson that if the God of the Mormons can do anything to save this ship and the people, they had better be calling on him to do so, for we are now sinking at the rate of a foot an hour; and if the storm continues we shall all be at the bottom of the ocean before daylight.”

Lying in his bunk, Elder Howell sent a message telling Captain Wilson: “Our God will protect us.” Elder Howell summoned twelve men to join him in prayer. According to Wilson G. Nowers, as they were praying, the motion of the ship changed. The pitching and rolling eased, and the storm “suddenly abated.” The Saints and Captain Wilson attributed their deliverance to Providence.

After repairs were made, the skipper gave the Latter-day Saints permission to hold religious services for the entire ship. Members responded enthusiastically and preached to everyone who would listen. At first, a baptismal font was improvised from a large barrel, which could be entered via a ladder on deck; some time later, a platform was suspended from ropes and lowered into the

ocean, where more baptisms were performed. During the 54-day passage, 50 converts were baptized, including one before sailing and one after arrival at New Orleans.

Two years later, a similar experience was reported aboard the ship *International* commanded by Captain David Brown. Elder Christopher Arthur presided over 425 Saints and organized them into eight wards. During the long voyage to New Orleans, the emigrants and ship’s company developed an unusually good relationship. As a result, the elders preached freely and baptized 48 converts, including Captain Brown, his two mates, and 18 sailors.

An Era Ends

Over the years, conditions aboard emigrant ships varied widely. Accounts of voyages ranged from horror stories to tales of passages that seemed almost like pleasure cruises. The length of the crossings under canvas, averaging 54 days to New Orleans and 38 days to New York from Liverpool, contributed to disease and mortality. The longest passage times for LDS emigrants were 112 days from Calcutta to San Francisco by the square-rigger Frank Johnson and 177 days from New York to San Francisco by the ship *Brooklyn*.

Although LDS leaders established discipline and rules of hygiene, overcrowding and limited facilities complicated their efforts. At least half of the LDS emigrant companies reported one or more deaths. During a voyage of the ship *Berlin*, 28 Saints were buried at sea. On three other voyages, passenger manifests of the *John J. Boyd*, the *Franklin*, and the *Monarch of the Sea* listed unusually high death tolls as well: in each case, more than 40 emigrants. Likewise, there were births—well over a hundred recorded.

The last two passages in sailing ships probably represent the worst and best experiences of Latter-day Saint emigrants crossing the Atlantic.

In 1868, the ships Emerald Isle and Constitution arrived in New York City within a few days of each other. No emigrant company received such harsh treatment as did the Saints aboard the Emerald Isle, in sharp contrast with the experiences of Saints on the two previous voyages of that vessel that included Church members. Officers and crew were abusive, a mate molested a young woman, sailors threatened violence, and water became unfit to use. "It was a ghastly voyage," recalled N. P. Nielson, a Danish convert. There were no less than 37 deaths, and during quarantine in New York, 38 sick passengers were taken ashore.

On the voyage of the Constitution that same year, shipboard conditions were completely different. The Millennial Star noted that arrangements "were so nicely carried out and the faith of the company so great, that the doctor became dull and stupid." Aside from seasickness, the health of the company was unusually good.

Travel under sail was always difficult; however, in time, shipboard conditions improved. Yet some things were never overcome: overcrowding and its indignities, disease, and tedium. With some emigrant companies exceeding 800 people, the realities of squalid living often tested the stoutest hearts.

After 1868, things changed. A new age of travel by steamship provided increased comfort, speed, and safety to those pioneers on the sea who were headed toward Zion. Time has clouded the realities of travel by sailing ship. But even fading memories can recreate in the mind the howling winds, the mountainous waves, the pitching back and forth in partial darkness below decks, and all the other perils that brought forth fervent prayers from pioneer converts.

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