



The MORMONS in JOHNSTON'S Army

by Chad M. Orton

**'It Seemed the Best Way
for Me to Help**

My Struggling Parents' In late June 1858, soldiers from the United States Army entered a nearly deserted Salt Lake City. The few residents who remained were in hiding, ready to carry out Brigham Young's order to burn the town's homes and structures if the military disregarded its agreement to continue through the city before establishing its camp. Those with the Utah Expedition—better known as Johnston's Army—took in the scene with great interest, but few with greater interest than 17-year-old George Harrison and his 21-year-old brother Aaron. Unlike most with this army, these brothers didn't harbor feelings against the Mormons, or hope that their stay in Utah would be short-lived. They were Latter-day Saints themselves, and they had finally come "home."



The entrance of Johnston's Army into the Salt Lake Valley marked the end of the so-called Utah War, a nearly bloodless conflict that had its beginnings in disagreements between the Latter-day Saints and disgruntled non-Mormon territorial officials.¹ The army's arrival also marked the end of a long journey for at least four Latter-day Saints, one that began in England in 1856, and included time in the Martin Handcart Company.

In May 1856, a large company of saints under the direction of Edward Martin left England on the ship *Horizon*. George and Aaron Harrison were members of that company. Upon reaching Iowa City, the Martin Company discovered that the anticipated handcarts were not ready. After a considerable wait the company was able to start its trek to Utah in late July, only to encounter further delays as the unseasoned wood used to construct the handcart's wheels frequently failed.

When the Martin Company reached Winter Quarters, Neb., George and Aaron went swimming in a mosquito-infested pond.² Within a few days George was suffering from malaria-induced chills and fevers. By the time the company encountered the first frosts of fall, he was confined to one of the supply wagons. By the time it reached Ft. Laramie on 8 October 1856, rations had been cut, and the resulting lack of nourishment slowed George's recovery.

At Ft. Laramie, the company was able to purchase additional supplies, but was unable to secure all that was needed for the remainder of the journey. Consequently, on October 9, Aaron, the oldest of six children, joined the Army with the blessing of his parents and Captain Martin. Not only did his enlistment mean one less mouth to feed, but Aaron was able to receive a small advance on his rations to give to his family.

At least two other members of the handcart company, 34-year-old William Ashton and 22-year-old Samuel Blackburn, also enlisted at Ft. Laramie. Reportedly James Thomas and John Barlow also signed up, but they do not appear in Army records.³ West of Ft. Laramie, members of the Martin Company encountered the snows of winter and were ordered to lighten their loads to help hasten the march to the valley. At this point, George decided to leave the pioneer company. Acting on impulse, he hid in some willows one morning until after the company left.

"Why did I do this?" he later wrote. "Well, I was starving. I thought, if I thought anything clearly, that my family would be better off without me. I felt I might get back to my brother Aaron. At any rate I had acted. For a few minutes I stood weak and dazed, but determined not to follow the train any farther. What to do I hardly knew."⁴

George made his way to an Indian camp that the company had passed the previous day. Going to the nearest tepee, which was headed by a French trapper, the family took pity on this "white skeleton."⁵ When William Harrison came looking for his son, the trader convinced him that it was in George's best interest to remain and get his strength up rather than trying to finish the trip that fall.

The following summer, 1857, the trapper took George to Ft. Laramie. His reunion with Aaron was a happy one, for the latter had heard nothing from his family since they had left the previous year. When one of the doctors assigned to the Army heard George's story, he volunteered to help him get to Utah and arranged for George to be hired in the meantime as a cook's assistant.

Around this time, Johnston's Army passed by Ft. Laramie on its way to Utah. This military force had been ordered to the territory by President James Buchanan to put down a rumored Mormon rebellion and to serve as a posse comitatus for Alfred Cumming, who had been appointed to replace Brigham Young as governor.

Recalling previous persecution of the Latter-day Saints and uncertain as to why the Army was advancing on Utah, Brigham ordered the territory's residents to prepare for war and to employ tactics designed to slow the Army's advance, including the burning of needed forage and supplies. Through this strategy, the Utah Expedition was delayed from reaching the Salt Lake Valley that year and spent a cold winter at the burned-out remains of Ft. Bridger. While the Utah Expedition wintered at Ft. Bridger, the handcart pioneers-turned soldiers spent the winter of 1857-1858 at Ft. Laramie. In March 1858, they left for Bridger, part of a relief train bringing badly needed supplies to Johnston's Army.

Inasmuch as war seemed inevitable at this point, George was asked by a soldier, "Aren't you afraid that when we get to Utah we will kill your father and mother and the rest of the people there?" George confidently replied that there would be no fighting.⁶ George's prediction proved true. The stranded Army became an embarrassment for Buchanan, who finally dispatched peace commissioners to Utah. A negotiated settlement to the "Mormon Conflict" allowed the soldiers to peacefully enter the Salt Lake Valley.

When Johnston's Army left Ft. Bridger for Utah, George noted that it included both he and Company G, 6th Infantry, to which Aaron, Ashton, and Black-

The entrance of Johnston's Army into the Salt Lake Valley marked the end of the so-called Utah War, a nearly bloodless conflict that had its beginnings in disagreements between the Latter-day Saints and disgruntled non-Mormon territorial officials.



burn were assigned. "A joyous day it was for me when we started for the valley, and for Brother Aaron, too, since his company was to march along with us," recalled George. "Over the hills we went, across the rim of the Great Basin and down Echo Canyon. Again we had to climb over a high ridge of the Wasatch range. It was on top of this that I really saw the 'valley of the Mountains' of which we had sung way off in old England."⁷

From Salt Lake City Johnston's Army made its way to its new home west of Utah Lake: Camp Floyd. George remained at Camp Floyd until it was disbanded in April 1861 at the outbreak of the Civil War. He could have left sooner, but his job as a cook brought in a guaranteed wage and "seemed the best way for me to help my struggling parents."⁸

According to George, Aaron also remained at Camp Floyd until it closed, although Army records indicate that both he and Blackburn deserted prior to 1861. Little is known concerning their subsequent lives, except they both married and lived into the twentieth century. Ashton served his full five-year enlistment before being discharged in California in the fall of 1861. The only family man of the four, he had buried his wife and two daughters on the journey prior to enlisting. He also left three young daughters at Fort Laramie to continue on with the Martin Company. Following his discharge, he apparently went to England rather than returning to Utah. In 1888 the following notice appeared in the *Millennial Star*: "Elder William Ashton is very anxious to learn the address of any one, or all of his daughters, Betsy, Sarah, and Mary, who emigrated from Stockport, England, on the 18th of May, 1856. They crossed the plains in one of the 'Handcart Companies'."⁹ Only Sarah, who was 7 at the time of the Martin Company, was still living. He died in her hometown of Whitney, Idaho in 1891.



While there were many avowed anti-Mormons in Johnston's Army—such as Colonel Fritz-John Porter, who stated that he would have traded his southern plantation to be able to bomb Salt Lake City for 15 minutes—George noted that for the most part he was treated well during his time with the military.¹⁰ "The soldiers joked me a great deal about being a 'Mormon' boy, but they were pretty kind to me nevertheless."¹¹

For his part, George had earned their respect. One of the officers told George's father, "You can be proud of your son, Mr. Harrison. It is not many boys who could live in an army camp, keep straight and save all of his wages as he has done."¹² George settled in Springville, where he operated a hotel and became better known as "Beefsteak" Harrison. The nickname was a reference to the delicious steaks he served and his special method for cooking them.

Which, by the way, he learned while one of the Mormons in Johnston's Army.

Chad M. Orton is a freelance writer living in Provo, Utah.

1. The best account of the Utah War is Norman F. Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict, 1850-1859* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).
2. Detailed accounts of George's and Aaron's experiences are found in "Beef Steak Harrison," *Treasures of Pioneer History* 2 (1953): 105-114, Howard R. Driggs, *The Handcart Boy* (New York: Aladdin Books, 1952) and Howard R. Driggs, "Theirs was the Handcart Way to Zion," *The Instructor*, July 1956, 202-203.
3. Josiah Rogerson, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856," *Salt Lake Herald*, 3 November 1907; *Enlistment Registers of the U. S. Army, 1798-1914*.
4. "Beef Steak Harrison," 108.
5. Driggs, "Theirs was the Handcart Way to Zion," 202.
6. "Beef Steak Harrison," *Ibid.*, 112.
7. *Ibid.*, 113.
8. *Ibid.*, 113-114.
9. *Millennial Star*, 31 December 1888.
10. The Fritz-Porter reference is found in Donald R. Moorman and Gene A. Sessions, *Camp Floyd and the Mormons: The Utah War* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 49).
11. "Beef Steak Harrison," 112.
12. *Ibid.*, 113.

"Aren't you afraid that when we get to Utah we will kill your father and mother and the rest of the people there?"

"The soldiers joked me a great deal about being a 'Mormon' boy, but they were pretty kind to me nevertheless."

