

Before the *Arabia* Sank: Mormon Passengers up the Missouri in 1856

Gregory L. Hawley and William G. Hartley

Researchers of LDS history have two compelling reasons to visit the *Arabia* Steamboat Museum in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. One, the huge quantity of recently recovered cargo from the sunken *Arabia*, displayed there, is an incredible American “Pompeii” for the year 1856. Also, after the salvage work and the opening of the museum, we have discovered LDS linkage to the *Arabia*. Weeks before sinking, the *Arabia* carried two large companies of Latter-day Saints upriver to join LDS handcart and wagon companies that rolled west that ill-fated year. The two companies’ stories are just coming to light, much like the *Arabia*’s cargo was brought to the surface a decade ago.

An 1856 Time Capsule

On 5 September 1856, the sidewheeler *Arabia* left the Kansas City wharf, steamed but a few miles up the muddy Missouri, rammed a floating tree trunk section, and sank. None of the 130 passengers (no Mormons were aboard that we know of) lost their lives, but about two hundred tons of valuable store goods, destined for mercantile stores upriver, went down with the boat. The *Arabia* not only sank but also disappeared. During thirteen decades, treasure hunters searched the Missouri River bottoms in vain to locate the wreck. After the Missouri had covered her victim with mud and silt, she slowly moved her channel year by year, leaving the *Arabia* behind. Finally, in 1988, the Hawley family of Kansas City located it buried forty-five feet deep and a half mile from the Missouri River—beneath a Kansas farm field!

GREGORY L. HAWLEY is coowner of the *Arabia* Steamboat Museum. He can be reached at the museum at 400 Grand Boulevard, Kansas City, MO 64106, phone 816-471-1856, fax 816-471-1616. WILLIAM G. HARTLEY is an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University and research historian with the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History.



The Great White Arabia
Illustration by Gary Lucy, courtesy of Greg Hawley



Excavation site beneath a Kansas corn field.
Courtesy of Greg Hawley

Excited by their discovery, the Hawleys organized their own salvaging operation. They started excavating on 13 November 1988 and continued for four months, until 1 February 1989. Down deep, they had to fend off and pump out rivers of ground water, sand, and silt. They uncovered part of the paddle wheels and the main deck. They salvaged a twelve-foot section of the hull, the boilers, one engine, and the anchor. They brought up hundreds of wooden boxes and barrels. They had to free dry many items to prevent disintegration when the items were exposed to air. By salvaging, cleaning, sorting, selecting, and displaying, they now own the largest collection of pre-Civil War artifacts in the world.

The *Arabia* Steamship Museum opened in downtown Kansas City in 1991 in the historic City Market at 400 Grand Boulevard. The museum's promotional literature does not exaggerate when it says the museum displays "remarkably well-preserved bounty" that serves as "a virtual time capsule" of products sold in everyday stores in 1856. "The *Arabia* provides an opportunity for historians to examine frontier life as a snapshot in time—to document settler life through the products they used."¹ For Mormon history researchers studying Mormon life in the 1850s, the displayed items are a "must see." Among the types of objects salvaged are:

Clothing Items: 125 pairs of India rubber overshoes; more than 4,000 leather boots and shoes—from three-inch long children's shoes to knee-high gentlemen's boots; 150 full leather hides; shoes with brass eyelets; men's pants; 65 bolts of fabric, including silk; brass and porcelain buttons; beads; fur coats; colored shoelaces; and women's ready-to-wear sweaters.

Household Items: 2000 items of China, including Wedgewood and Ironstone; dishware; silverware; bowls; jars; irons; needles and pins; pocket knives; guns; writing pens; wooden matches; perfume; cigars; medical supplies; hammers; shovels; nails; and other tools.

Food Items: pickles, catsup, pie fillings, oysters, peppercorns, cheese, champagne, and coffee beans.

Because thousands of Latter-day Saints reached Nauvoo and outfitting posts for the West by traveling part way on river steamboats, the *Arabia* display provides us firsthand knowledge about one of the actual boats they traveled on. Visitors see a full-size replica of the *Arabia's* main deck, complete with the actual boilers, engine, and anchor. A full-size paddlewheel turns slowly in a pool of water at the museum's entrance. Documents are displayed that tell, among other facts, which stores (by name) had ordered the merchandise that sank with the *Arabia*.

For Latter-day Saints, then, the *Arabia* museum is an excellent window for seeing how people in that historic year of 1856 dressed and ate, what tools they owned, how they furnished their homes, what household products they used,

and what the riverboats were like upon which they traveled. Therefore, if only for its “time capsule” value, the museum offers an informative experience for those who are serious students of LDS history.

But an extra reward is discovering a direct connection between LDS immigrants and the *Arabia*—piecing together the story of the two LDS companies she carried in that historic year.²



Pie fruit: gooseberries, apples, blackberries, light and dark cherries
Photo by Greg Hawley

The *Arabia*'s Career

The legend of “the Great White *Arabia*” began in 1853 in Brownsville, Pennsylvania, at the Pringle Boat-Building Company. Located on the banks of the Monogahela River, the Pringle boatyard built steamboats for clients as far away as California and South America. The *Arabia* was a sidewheel steamer of average size for America’s western rivers. She measured 171 feet in length and 54 wide and possessed a 220-ton cargo capacity. For her first two years, the *Arabia* plied both the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Then, in 1855, she began serving towns up and down the Missouri River.

Perhaps the *Arabia*'s name came from a saying, common among rivermen back then, that “a steamboat built properly can float on the sands of Arabia.” By that definition, the *Arabia* proved late in 1855 that she was indeed “built properly” because on 30 October, the *Missouri Daily Democrat* reported the “River so

low that navigation of Missouri not occurring” and then two days later announced that “For the Missouri—the fine steamer *Arabia*, Capt. Shaw, will leave today for Brunswick and way places.”

Upriver merchants and their customers depended on the *Arabia* and other steamers for winter stocks of goods. Late in 1855, a merchant in Atchison, Kansas, posted this notice in the local newspaper:³

The Last Arrival. We have just received, per steamer *Arabia* and Lewis Burnes, our Fall Stock of Assorted Merchandise, Embracing almost every article in the line of dry goods, groceries, hardware, queensware, hats, caps, boots, shoes, clothing, &c., &c. Which added to our former stock, renders our assortment more general than that of any house in the place. All which will be sold extremely low for cash only. L. Burnes & Bro's, Atchison, Nov. 13, '55.

Riverboats hauled freight but also passengers short distances and long. The *Arabia* made numerous trips up the Missouri as far as present-day Pierre, South Dakota. Destinations varied, as did the passengers, who included common travelers, soldiers, gun-smuggling abolitionists, and businessmen—and Mormon immigrants.



Photo by Maurine Carr Ward

Passenger Conditions Aboard Steamboats

Riverboat passengers traveled in one of two classes: cabin or deck. Cabin was high class; deck was low class. Cabin passengers tended to see themselves as

aristocratic compared to the deck travelers, whom they considered socially inferior. Cabin passengers paid a higher fare so they could lodge and dine in convenience and comfort above the main deck. Space was plentiful, food was abundant, and amenities rivaled those of a grand hotel. Cabin passengers enjoyed large staterooms with doors that opened outside to the promenade deck or inward to the adjoining saloon. The saloon was the showpiece of the boat. There, passengers dined on savory meals served on fine china and lingered to socialize while sipping brandy. A 5 May 1852 menu from the steamboat *Clara*, which shuttled between St. Louis and St. Joseph, illustrates the fine food cabin passengers enjoyed on Missouri River steamboats:⁴

Soup: "Calf Head" Soup		
Boiled Meat:		
Ham		Lamb
Corn Beef		Chicken
Mutton with Butter Sauce		Tongue
Cod Fish "ala" Rain Egg Sauce		
Roast Meat:		
Beef and Gravy Sauce		
Veal and Savory Sauce		
Pork and Chicken with Ketchup Sauce		
Turkey		
Pig and Liver Sauce		
Venison		
Mutton with Chili Sauce		
Side Dishes:		
Breast of Mutton		Smothered
Beef Heart		Larduo
Calf Head		Ala Mode
Pork Ragout		Onion Sauce
Braized Lamb		Herb Sauce
Relishes:		
Horse Radish, Cold Slaugh and Pickles.		
Vegetables of the Season		
Pastry and Desserts:		
Sargo Pudding	Blanc Mange	Gooseberry Pie
Rhubarb Pie	Cranberry Pie	Currant Pie
Pound Cake	Fruit Cake	Almonds
Raisins	Figs	Prunes
Wine List at the Bar		
Liquors, various kinds of:		
Madeira	Catawba	Claret
Sherry	Port	Hock
Champagnes	Malt Liquors	Ale
Port		

In 1855, George W. Withers, a cabin passenger on the *Arabia*, wrote a description of his accommodations:⁵

Persons desiring to take a trip per steamer upon the Missouri River, either up or down would do well to meet the *Arabia*. We would strongly recommend her for speed and comfort. The table is supplied with all the luxuries desired and everything fixed up in a most elegant style. We were on this boat two weeks and became acquainted with all the officers and most of the crew; and assure you that the person and property of passengers is perfectly safe on board.

By contrast, deck passengers paid inexpensive fares in return for space on a white pine deck that served as bed, chair, and table. They shared deck space with animals, crew, and cargo and had to endure discomforting heat from the boilers and constant noise from the engines. A tiny glimpse of deck conditions on an Ohio River steamer appeared in the *Louisville Journal* on 21 May 1849:

Boats have passed here, within whose narrow decks from three to five hundred human beings have been densely stowed or packed. The filth and stench on such boats are almost insupportable. The food used is of the most unwholesome kind, and the atmosphere which is breathed is impure in the extreme. Under such circumstances, nothing but disease and death can rightfully be expected.

By 1856, deck conditions had improved somewhat. Travel on river steamers was not speedy and was hampered by river levels, weather, debris, fuel stops, and delays in port towns. To go from St. Louis upriver to Kansas City usually took seven days. Although travelers endured a good share of discomfort and boredom, they did witness passing scenes of beauty and curiosity along the shores and in the river.



*Friburg Ironstone
China, imported from
England*

*Photo by
Maurine Carr Ward*

Mormons and St. Louis

For fifteen years before the *Arabia* sank, St. Louis had been an important stopover city for Latter-day Saints heading to Nauvoo or to the West.⁶ Most were European immigrant- converts who had newly disembarked downriver at New Orleans and who came up the Mississippi on river steamers. In 1855, some three thousand Saints lived temporarily in St. Louis, waiting for income and opportunities to outfit and go west. They belonged to a temporary stake operating there. In 1854 and 1855, Church leaders published a Mormon newspaper, the *St. Louis Luminary*.⁷

During the winter of 1855–56, hundreds of Saints in St. Louis made final plans to go by riverboats up to the new LDS outfitting camp at Florence, Nebraska Territory, just north of Omaha City. During that winter, bad weather and poor trade put many Saints in St. Louis out of work, making it very difficult or impossible to raise travel money needed to head west.

One Mormon in St. Louis who would become an *Arabia* passenger in June 1856 was William Morrison. As soon as he was baptized in 1851 in England in the Thames River, he wrote, “I long for citizenship in Zion, the metropolis of God’s kingdom.” He arrived in St. Louis in 1854 and found employment at the Marine Railway Docks. Two of his children died and were buried in “the Holy Ghost burying ground” in St. Louis. When a stake was created in November 1854, Morrison became a high councilman. A daughter born early in 1855 died that year. Early in 1856, the “stormy season” caused widespread unemployment and put Morrison out of work: “done no carpenter work these last 16 to 20 days,” he wrote. On 5 April, he suffered another employment setback: “Men have struck for wages affecting for the present my prospects Zionward.”⁸

Early in 1856, word came from LDS Church President Brigham Young that Saints with limited means should join handcart companies being tried for the first time that season. He wanted the St. Louis congregations to form, fund, and send west a handcart company. Leaders voted to create such a company, but the plan was never carried out.⁹ On 10 March, more than a hundred LDS converts from Scandinavia arrived in St. Louis, who, like William Morrison, would become passengers on the *Arabia* in June. They were among 437 Scandinavian Saints who had arrived in New York on 16 February aboard the *John J. Boyd*.¹⁰

Soon after these Scandinavians arrived, St. Louis Stake leaders held an emigration preparation meeting on 20 March. They announced the outfitting place was Florence, Nebraska Territory, rather than the previous year’s site at Mormon Grove, Kansas. They said they needed to find out how many Saints planned to go by ox team and how many by handcarts. “Those who take hold of the hand carts, are those who have faith in this work,” one postulated.¹¹ But no handcart company formed at St. Louis, although several who went upriver, including twenty Italians, joined the Ellsworth Handcart Company at Florence, and at least one family from St. Louis joined the Willie Handcart Company.¹²

On 6 April at a St. Louis Stake conference, eight elders were released to go west: Thomas Harris, James S. Cantwell, Joseph Sheppard, Samuel J. Lees, Joseph Jones, George Gardiner, John Banks (of Cincinnati), and Haden W. Church. Four, and probably more, would reach Florence on the *Arabia*.¹³

1856 LDS Handcart and Wagon Companies

In 1856, nearly four thousand LDS immigrants moved west in five handcart companies and six major wagon trains. Because of the Martin and Willie handcart tragedies, it is often overlooked that about 40 percent of the Saints headed west that year in wagon trains. Assistant LDS Church Historian Andrew Jensen, when writing about 1856 LDS migration, observed that “A large proportion” of that year’s emigrants, “principally those who had resided temporarily in St. Louis, Mo., and other places, came up the Missouri River to this point [Florence], thus saving the overland travel through Iowa.”¹⁴

Five handcart companies and two wagon trains outfitted at Iowa City, three wagon companies at Florence, and one at Mormon Grove, Kansas. Current research is revising our widely accepted totals of vehicles and people by identifying dropouts, additions, and shifts from one company to another. Based on Willie Company expert Don Smith’s latest calculations, the 1856 LDS companies, their **estimated** numbers, and dates when they left Florence (**not** Iowa City) are as follows:¹⁵

LDS Companies: Type and Captain	Left Florence, Nebraska	People	Wagons	Handcarts	Arrived Salt Lake City
Wagons: Philemon Merrill	6/5–6	200	50		8/13–18
Wagons: Canute Peterson	6/27	320	60		9/16–23
Wagons: John Banks	7/09	300	60		9/22–10/5
Handcarts: Edmund Ellsworth*	7/20	271	5	54	9/26
Handcarts: Daniel McArthur*	7/24	203	4	48	9/26
Handcarts: Edward Bunker*	7/30	270	5	54	10/02
Abraham O. Smoot**	8/10	88	42		11/09
Handcarts: James G. Willie*	8/16, 17	439	11	87	11/09
Handcarts: Edward Martin*	8/25	576	8	146	11/30
Wagons: William Hodgett*	8/29	150	33		12/10
Wagons: Dan Jones/John Hunt*	8/31	244	54		12/10–15

*Outfitted at Iowa City

**Left Mormon Grove, Kansas

Of these eleven companies, Captain John Banks’ company, mostly British Saints, was the “St. Louis Company.” Most of its members reached Florence aboard the *Arabia* under Elder Banks’ leadership.¹⁶ Captain Canute Peterson’s company contained more than 250 Scandinavian Saints, most of whom reached New York aboard the *John J. Boyd* and stopped briefly in St. Louis. Until our

Arabia-LDS research, LDS Church records had set the Peterson Company's departure date from Florence at about 10 June; however, our research puts the date at 27 June. Likewise, the previous date given for the Banks Company's departure from Florence, 26 or 27 June, needs to be corrected to no earlier than 9 July. The Hunt and Hodgett wagon trains ended up traveling with, assisting, and getting caught in the Wyoming snows with the Martin and Willie Handcart Companies.

Also, three small wagon companies from the South (not listed on the chart) intercepted the Mormon Trail in Nebraska and followed it west. Benjamin Matthews left Mississippi with six families and arrived in Salt Lake City on 19 July. The Preston Thomas Company left from Matagorda Bay, Texas, with thirty-four people and eight wagons and arrived in Salt Lake City on 17 September.



Photo by Greg Hawley

The Jacob Croft Company of fifteen wagons and fifty-eight people left Kansas City sometime in May and arrived in Salt Lake City on 11 October.

The Arabia's First LDS Company, 2–14 June 1856

Saints in St. Louis began heading for the outfitting grounds at Florence in May. On 22 May, upwards of two hundred Saints, mostly Danes, left on the steamer *Admiral*.¹⁷

In May and June of 1856, the *St. Louis Missouri Republican* repeatedly published advertisements for the *Arabia*, soliciting cargo and passengers. One ad said the boat would leave on Friday, 30 May, at 10 a.m. for Lexington, Kansas City, Ft. Leavenworth,

Weston, Parlemo, St. Joseph, Iowa Point, Council Bluffs, and Sioux City. For freight and passage, the ad said, “apply on board.” It listed J. W. Terrell as the boat master. Ads a day or two after an original ad made clear that announced departures happened only if enough cargo or passengers warranted it and that the *Arabia* did not always depart on the day or time first announced.

LDS emigration agents booked the *Arabia* for two trips up the Missouri to Florence. That voyage normally would take about ten days. The first company, which included 170 or more Saints, boarded the *Arabia* in time to depart on 2 June. In this company were Englishman William Morrison and his wife, Mary Margaret, ending their two-year stay in St. Louis. On board, too, was a family named Rampton. Henry Rampton and wife Caroline, Mormon converts in England, reached New Orleans on 2 May 1854 and immediately traveled up the Mississippi on the steamer *Josiah Lawrence* to St. Louis. Six weeks later, she died and was buried in the Wesleyan Cemetery. Henry remarried, to Frances Dinwoody. Their son, Henry James Rampton, was born on 4 November 1855. “We started on the 2nd of June, 1856,” Henry Rampton noted, and “arrived at Florence on the 14th of the same month.” Henry’s diary dates for us that voyage of the *Arabia*.¹⁸ (Henry and Frances became the great-grandparents of Utah’s three-term governor, 1965–77, Calvin L. Rampton.)

John Banks served as the company president, with counselors Haden Church and Thomas Harris. (Banks would captain the wagon train many of these Saints traveled in.) William Morrison was appointed to preside over the lower part of the *Arabia* and “to hold fellowship meetings morning and evening.” A Brother Ellis served as his counselor.¹⁹

On 8 June, six days from St. Louis, the *Arabia* landed at the Kansas City levee for a brief stop. The *Kansas City Enterprise* reported with sarcasm that the *Arabia* carried “heavy freight for Council Bluffs, consisting chiefly of Mormons destined for the land where sorrow and affliction never enters—nothing but adoration for Brigham Young.”²⁰ Resuming its journey, just below Atchison, Kansas, the *Arabia* paddled past the *Polar Star* that was headed down river. Among *Polar Star* passengers were LDS missionaries from Utah, including Apostles Ezra T. Benson, Erastus Snow, Orson Pratt, and George A. Smith. When the boats passed, passengers crowded the decks to watch. “We met the steamer ‘Arabia’ about 3 o’clock with a company of saints from St. Louis,” missionary James Ure noted. “Some of them recognised the brethren of the Twelve on board the ‘Polar Star’ and saluted them with several hearty cheers.”²¹

The best passenger account of this trip was written many years later by Hyrum Weech, who was ten at the time of the voyage.²² Before his family left St. Louis, he said, they bought a yoke of steers, clothing, and provisions. The wagon train they would travel in from Florence was actually organized in St. Louis. People wanting to be in that wagon train paid money to Church agents to buy for them oxen and wagons in St. Louis, to be shipped upriver to the outfitting camp:

A train was fitting out in St. Louis, Missouri. The means to buy cattle was sent in and cattle and wagons were to be shipped to Florence, Nebraska. We took passage with the St. Louis Saints on a steamboat going up the Missouri River to Florence. There were six in the family, besides our mother, as my oldest sister Sarah, had married a William Betts in August 1853, and they were intending to follow us the next year. With my brother and his wife, there were nine of us to go in one wagon.²³

For ten-year-old Weech, the trip up the dangerous, mighty Missouri River was an adventure:

We left St. Louis in June and had a hazardous journey up the river as there were so many sand bars and snags. The river changed its channel often in flood time, cutting through strips of timber, breaking the trees off from their roots and leaving snags. If the boat ran into them it was likely to pierce the side or bottom of the boat and sink it, so the captain had to be very cautious and it made the journey slow.²⁴

Weech's account shows that he and his family were deck passengers, not cabin-class travelers. Among the Saints on the *Arabia* was a brass band. During many evenings, it performed on the hurricane, or promenade, deck, entertaining the passengers. Weech liked the music of the band, which was much more enjoyable than the roaring engine noise he endured at night:

But we enjoyed the trip very much as we had a brass band in the company and they would go up on the hurricane deck [promenade or upper deck] of the boat and play very often in the evenings until bedtime. My brother, Lorenzo and I, slept in the engine room, and the noise was annoying until we got used to it. We had no accidents and arrived safely at Florence, Nebraska, about the middle of June.²⁵

Mormon Charles South, who had arrived in Florence on 30 May on another boat, recorded in his journal the *Arabia's* arrival on 14 June but did not name her: "There was a Steam Boat Arrived hear from St. Louis with one hundred and Seventy Saints on board about thirty Waggons."²⁶ On 18 June, the *Council Bluffs Chronotype* reported the *Arabia's* arrival on the 14th: "Arrived. The Steamer Arabia arrived at our landing on Saturday last [14th], with a large amount of freight for our merchants and 200 Mormon passengers en-route for Salt Lake."

Mary Margaret Morrison recalled that "we remained in camp at Omaha, living in tents, waiting for the company to get ready."²⁷ Hyrum Weech, who was ten years old at the time, said that the Saints "went into camp a short distance from the town, which was a small place at that time, and awaited the arrival of the wagons and the cattle which were expected in a few days but which did not occur for some time." LDS herdsmen had to drive those cattle overland from Missouri. Drover Joseph B. Elder said they delivered the cattle on 19 June at Florence.²⁸

"The cattle came at last," Weech said, "and we were very glad, for we wanted to begin the journey." Observer Charles South recorded that on 18 June

“about one hundred yoke of Catel Arrived in Florence and we had a meeting.” At this meeting, “the brass band played two tunes and the third Company [Banks Company] was organised. The St. Louis Company of Saints and Bro Banks is Chose Captain that fifty and Bro Wadsworth Chosen Marshall.”²⁹ Also there, preparing to start before the Banks Company, was the Canute Peterson Company.

Weech, assigned to the Banks Company, recalled that “the cattle were unbroken and we had a time breaking them in, teaching them to go the right, by saying, ‘gee,’ and to come to the left, when we said, ‘haw,’ and to stop, when we said, ‘whoa.’ We drove them loose from the wagon with only the yoke on for a few days.”³⁰

Scandinavian Saints from the *Arabia* joined the Canute Peterson Company, as did others, including the Morrissions. William Morrison said that they left Florence on 26 June in a train composed mostly of Danes. His wife noted that “We were sixty wagons in all.”³¹ The Peterson Company reached Great Salt Lake City between 16–23 September.

The John Banks Company of St. Louis Saints moved out from Florence on 4 July, but only a few miles. Passenger Weech said that “on the Fourth of July, our captain, John Banks, decided to make a start and go to a spring about five miles out. So the train started in the

afternoon.” The Ramptons’ history says they stayed at Florence until 6 July and then started west.³² It is clear, however, that the Banks Company waited for the next load of Saints to arrive aboard the *Arabia* on 7 July; and while encamped a few miles from Florence, some members paid visits to Florence. They left for good on 9 July, or perhaps the 10th.



Photo by Greg Hawley

While waiting, the St. Louis Saints' band, the ones who had performed aboard the *Arabia*, participated in a joint concert. When the Ellsworth Handcart Company pulled into Florence on 8 July at 5 p.m., among its members was a brass band from Birmingham, England.³³ Although members of the Birmingham brass band were "but young performers," one observer said "they played really very well."³⁴ So, at or near Florence, before the Banks Company pulled out, "the brass band from the Hand Cart company united with the St. Louis Band, and played to the great delight of the trains."³⁵ The Banks Company left ten days before the Ellsworth handcarters did (but the handcart brigade overtook and passed the Banks Company at Pacific Springs, Wyoming, on 13 September).³⁶



*Some tinware still had legible prices written in ink.
Photo by Greg Hawley*

The *Arabia*'s Second LDS Company, 27 June–7 July

The *Arabia*, after unloading its Mormon passengers at Florence, returned downriver to St. Louis. There, it took aboard the second company of Saints, numbering between 100 and 150, and started upriver again on 27 June. James Sherlock Cantwell's recollection provides the only account of this LDS company: "I took my passage for Florence, or Old Winter Quarters, on the Steamboat *Arabia*, on Friday the 27th of June 1856," he said. "At about 3 o'clock PM we moved into the river."³⁷

Cantwell had cause to worry, however, because “my wife, and son Francis R. and daughters Ellen, Mary Ann & Elizabeth C. was left behind. She called to see a friend and delayed too long till the boat started.” His family did catch up with the *Arabia*, however, three days later. “She took the rail road to Lexington and came on board on Monday night [June 30] at 12 ocl^k.”³⁸

Cantwell was born in Ireland on 24 November 1813.³⁹ His wife was Elizabeth Cotteral Hamer. They had two children, James, age thirteen, and Ellen, seven. Cantwell, one of the elders released from LDS Church duties in St. Louis in April, received a leadership calling during the *Arabia*’s journey:

When I was appointed to come up the river I was placed president over the company of our people on the *Arabia*. I organized captains of tens, as follows, Thomas Columbus⁴⁰ Armstrong, Henry William Ertley, John Jones, E Edwards, and John Wybrowⁿ.

Cantwell summarized the voyage in one sentence: “After a very pleasant trip of about nine days we arrived in Florence July 7th.”

This second LDS company carried by the *Arabia* joined the waiting John Banks wagon train, and within two days, they were headed west.⁴¹ Cantwell, however, stayed in Florence to work for about five weeks and then joined his wagon outfit to the Willie Handcart Company in late August.⁴² (To help the Willie Company, Joseph B. Elder and other herdsman brought more cattle to Florence, arriving on 6 August.)⁴³

These two journeys by LDS companies on the *Arabia* can be summarized as follows:

The *Arabia* carried a company of 170 Latter-day Saints, many of them from England, on a voyage from St. Louis to Florence, Nebraska Territory, from 2 June to 14 June 1856. The company included a brass band that performed on the hurricane deck during many evenings. These Saints went west in the John Banks and Canute Peterson wagon trains.

The *Arabia* returned to St. Louis, where it picked up another company of some 100–150 LDS immigrants. This group left on 27 June and reached Florence on 7 July. Most of these Saints went west in the John Banks wagon train. One family, the Cantwells, joined its wagon to the ill-fated Willie Handcart Company.

The *Arabia*’s Last Run

On 30 August 1856, the *Arabia* left St. Louis for its last time. “The Steamer *Arabia*, Capt. Terril will leave for all points on the Missouri River between St. Joseph and Sioux City today at 4:00 P.M.,” the *St. Louis Missouri Republican* routinely announced that day. “Mr. Boyd is clerk on the *Arabia*. Passengers will find everything to their liking on board.”

Carrying 130 passengers and 220 tons of new merchandise for stores upriver, the *Arabia* reached Kansas City in seven days. On 5 September, her fatal day,

she unloaded freight at Westport Landing and then, in late afternoon, continued upriver. Approaching Parkville, Missouri, she slammed into a walnut tree lying just beneath the river's surface. Like a spear, the tree punctured the *Arabia's* three-inch-thick oak hull and penetrated ten feet, scattering cargo in all directions. Within seconds, the boat tilted to the larboard (left) side, and water flowed over the main deck. Passenger Able D. Kirk wrote an account of the sinking, the only firsthand account found so far:⁴⁴

I had just been married near Peoria, Illinois, and was on my way to Nebraska with my bride. . . . We embarked on the boat in St. Louis and had been on the water about ten days. The boat was heavily loaded with freight but did not have a large number of passengers. One evening when many of the passengers were at supper the boat struck a snag. We felt the shock and at once the boat started sinking. There was a wild scene on board. The boat went down till the water came over the deck, and the boat keeled over on one side. The chairs and stools were tumbled about and many of the children nearly fell into the water. Several of the men on board seized the life boat and started for the shore, but they came back and the women and children were put in the boat. They called for a small man to go with the boat and I was small and I got aboard. The river bank at the point where we landed had been caving off and was very steep. I climbed out and pulled the women ashore. Horses and wagons came down from Parkville and took us to the hotel there that night. Many of the trunks and valises were taken off the boat and stacked up in the woods near the river. That night they were broken open by thieves, and all the valuables were taken out. We were taken on the steamboat, *James A. Lucus*, and when we were aboard, all that could be seen of our boat was the top of the pilot house. That sank out of sight in a short time.

"Arabia Sunk" reads a small headline on page seven in the *Kansas City Enterprise* on 6 September 1856. The text beneath the headline says the *Arabia*, bound for Council Bluffs, struck a snag about a mile below Parkville the previous night and sank to the boiler deck. Boat and cargo were a "total loss."

Losses caused by the sinking were far beyond the replacement costs for sunken merchandise. Crewmen were out of jobs. Passengers lost belongings to the river or to thieves. For upriver merchants, the destruction of two hundred tons of food, winter clothing, and hardware caused serious losses of business and income. In the following months, insurance companies spent thousands of dollars repaying merchants for missing freight and the *Arabia's* owners for part of the boat's value.

One box salvaged in 1988 gives the *Arabia* yet another Mormon connection. The box, containing 150 pounds of lead type for a printing press, is addressed to "Thompson and Butts, Council Bluffs Iowa." The Thompson is Charles Blancher Thompson, who converted to Mormonism in 1835, was an active elder until Joseph Smith's death, and then disaffected from the Church.⁴⁵ He briefly followed James J. Strang and then set up his own off-shoot group. With his few dozen followers, he established a communitarian settlement called

“Preparation,” north of Council Bluffs, and published a religious newspaper and tracts.⁴⁶ In August 1856, Thompson and a Mr. Butts launched a political paper at Council Bluffs, *The Nucleus and Democratic Echo*. Just days after the first issue, the *Arabia* sank and took with her the box of type Thompson had ordered, apparently to improve his printing capabilities.⁴⁷ (When Thompson’s colony broke apart in 1858, he returned to St. Louis and eventually moved to Philadelphia.⁴⁸)

Soon after the *Arabia* sank, rumors spread that four hundred barrels of Kentucky’s finest bourbon whiskey went down with her. Dreams of finding such an enticing liquid treasure made the *Arabia* a legend. In local taverns, in barber shops, and at aristocratic events, treasure hunters and dreamers spun magical tales of the unforgettable Great White *Arabia*.⁴⁹



Photo by Maurine Carr Ward

After the *Arabia* disappeared, the Missouri River slowly shifted a half mile northeastward, leaving the wreck behind, buried in deep mud. That mud dried and in time became farmable bottomland. When found, the *Arabia* was forty-five feet beneath farmland in Wyandotte County, Kansas.

Although under dry land, the *Arabia* actually was encased in water. The water table, or aquifer, stretches between the bluffs underneath those bottomlands. Seasonal rainfall and river levels determine its depth; but in normal years, it flows approximately six to eight feet below ground level. The presence of water gives underground sand a fluid nature that makes digging difficult. In 1988, excavators had to overcome the water table problem to reach the *Arabia*



*Pistols, rifles, shotguns, bullet molds, ramrods, nipples, percussion caps, lead shot, and brass powder flasks.
Photo by Greg Hawley*



*250 rubber shoes discovered aboard the Arabia
were made by Ford Rubber Co. and Goodyears Shoe Company.
Photo by Greg Hawley*

and salvage her long-buried treasures.

Three fascinating stories greet visitors to the *Arabia* Steamboat Museum. The first is the exciting story of finding, excavating, and salvaging the boat. The second is the account of the boat's tragic sinking and losses. The third is the visual story the salvaged objects tell about everyday life in 1856. Soon, however, the Hawleys will add a fourth story, one telling about the *Arabia*'s busy life before she sank. Our findings here about the LDS companies that the *Arabia* transported upriver in June and July 1856 provide an excellent case study to incorporate into the *Arabia*'s life story.

Technological changes pushed the steamboat into oblivion, ending forever the great age of river steamers. No longer does the cry "Steamboat-a-comin!" echo daily through the streets of communities hugging river shores. During that exciting period of heavy river traffic when the river queens transported merchandise and passengers upriver and down, an estimated four hundred of them sank in the Missouri River.⁵⁰ Like the *Arabia*, many of those sunken riverboats apparently are cradled by rich farmland in the Missouri River basin. When it comes to salvaging lost riverboats and their histories, "digging up the past" becomes a literal, not a figurative, expression.

Notes

1. 1997 museum brochure.

2. Readers might be interested in the following two books about the *Arabia*: (1) Gregory L. Hawley, *Treasure in a Cornfield: The Discovery and Excavation of the Steamboat Arabia* (Kansas City, Missouri: Paddle Wheel Publishing, 1998). This book details the daily progress of the discovery and excavation in story and pictures. Some of the pictures show fabrics, threads, and buttons in bright reds, yellows, and blues, countering the notion that the early frontier clothing was dull and drab. Other pictures, showing the large wells carrying water from the site and the actual excavation process, are fascinating. (2) David C. Hawley, *The Treasures of the Steamboat Arabia* (Kansas City, Missouri: n.p., 1995). This book is in a "coffee-table" book format and contains mostly pictures. Both books can be obtained from the *Arabia* Steamboat Museum, 400 Grand Boulevard, Kansas City, MO 64106, phone 816-471-1856, fax 816-471-1616.

3. Atchison, Kansas, *Squatter Sovereign*, 27 November 1855.

4. Steamboat *Clara* menu, copy at Missouri State Historical Society, Columbia, Missouri.

5. George W. Withers' comments in *Richfield Enterprise* (25 May 1855). He was editor of that newspaper.

6. Regarding LDS emigrants' use of U.S. river steamers, see Chapter 5, "Queens of the Rivers," in Conway B. Sonne, *Saints on the Seas: A Maritime History of Mormon Migration, 1830–1890* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 88–111 and endnotes, pp. 185–86, and Stanley B. Kimball, "Sail and Rail Pioneers before 1869," *BYU Studies* 35, No. 2 (1995), 6–42.

7. Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Co., 1941), 735.

8. Diary of William Morrison, 1820–89, typescript, LDS Church Archives, MS 1645, entries for 13 July 1851; 26 August, 28 July, and 14 November 1854; 17 January

and 8 November 1855; February entries and 5 April 1856.

9. St. Louis Conference Minutes, 7 May 1852–17 May 1856, holograph, LDS Archives, ward reports on 9 and 19 January 1856.

10. Andrew Jenson, "Church Emigration: Crossing the Plains in 1856," *The Contributor* 13 (18 December 1892), 65.

11. St. Louis Stake, Minutes, 20 March 1856.

12. John Oakley Journal, LDS Archives, entry for 17 July 1856.

13. St. Louis Stake, Minutes, 6 April 1856.

14. Jenson, "Church Emigration," *The Contributor* 13 (18 December 1892), 65.

15. Standard numbers are found in LDS Church Historical Department, "Pioneer Companies That Crossed the Plains, 1847–1868," in *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997–1998 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1996), 172. Don Smith of Pullman, Washington, is carefully tracking additions and subtractions to the companies as they crossed Iowa and when they reached Florence, and this chart contains his best calculations as of 11 October 1998.

16. Jenson, "Church Emigration," *The Contributor* 13 (18 December 1892), 66.

17. J. H. Hart to John Taylor, 25 May 1856, published in *The Mormon* (7 June 1856), 2.

18. Henry Rampton's diary is excerpted in "The Mormons in St. Louis," *Our Pioneer Heritage* 5 (1962), 467–71. The original Henry Rampton Diary (1853–81) is at the Special Collections Library at the University of Utah.

19. Morrison Diary, 12 June 1856.

20. *Kansas City Enterprise*, 14 June 1856.

21. James Ure Journal as copied in *Journal History*, 8 June 1856. These missionaries, headed for Europe and "the States," had left Great Salt Lake City on 22 April as part of a wagon company captained by Abraham O. Smoot.

22. "Autobiography of Hyrum Weech," in *Our Pioneer Parents: Autobiography of Hyrum Weech* (Hollywood, California: Lee Printing Co., n.d.).

23. *Ibid.*, 2.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. Charles South Diary, 1856–65, microfilm of holograph, LDS Church Archives.

27. Mary Margaret Forquhar Cruickshank Morrison Autobiographical Sketch, *Our Pioneer Heritage* 12 (1969), 82.

28. *Journals of Joseph B. Elder, 1835–1897* (Salt Lake City: Virginia S. Pendleton, 1978), 12–18.

29. Charles South Diary, 18 June 1856.

30. Weech, 2.

31. Mary Margaret Morrison Autobiographical Sketch, 82.

32. Henry Rampton Diary, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 5 (1962), 467–68.

33. The first handcart company "is accompanied with a brass band," said William Woodward in a letter he wrote from Iowa City to John Taylor, dated 19 June 1856 and copied in *The Mormon* (28 June 1856), 2.

34. J. H. Latey to John Taylor, 14 August 1856, published in *The Mormon* (30 August 1856), 2. That members of the band were young men who played well is mentioned in LDS Church, "Church Emigration," Book II: 1849–1857, typescript, LDS Church Archives.

35. *Council Bluffs Bugle*, 22 July 1856, reprinted in *The Mormon*, 9 August 1856, p. 2., col. 5. The *Bugle* report said the John Banks Company arrived at the Elk Horn on 10 July in fine spirits and good health. They appeared to be having a good time on the "Horn," the reporter noted, and then mentioned the two bands playing together, as

though the combined concert took place at the Elk Horn. Not so. The Ellsworth Company left Florence on the 20th so did not reach the Elk Horn until 21 July. Their clerk said the Banks Company left Florence ten days before they did. Hence, the concert had to take place on 7 or 8 July at or near Florence.

36. Andrew Galloway journal account of the Ellsworth Handcart Company copied in Journal History entry for 26 September 1856. The journal entry dated 13 September mentions the ten-day lead time the Banks train had, as do several sources in Utah after the Ellsworth Company arrived there. (No mention is made that the two bands did another joint concert when the two companies met at Pacific Springs.)

37. Blair R. Holmes, ed., *The Journal of James Sherlock Cantwell*, bound typescript, 1973, copy in Lee Library, BYU, 36–37.

38. They probably rode on the Missouri Northern and Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad, according to Dr. Stanley B. Kimball in e-mail to the author, 29 September 1998, copy in author's *Arabia* file.

39. Lynne Slater Turner, *Emigrating Journals of the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies and the Hunt and Hodgett Wagon Trains* (n.p.: Lynne S. Turner, 1996), 62.

40. Cantwell, 37. Cantwell mentions E. Edwards. Possibly this is Edward William Edwards who left St. Louis in the spring of 1856 and went west in the Ellsworth Company. One sketch of him says he left from Iowa City, but that might be an assumption by an author who did not know that Edwards could have joined the Ellsworth group at Florence. See "The Mormons in St. Louis," *Our Pioneer Heritage* 5 (1962), 471.

41. Twenty Italians from St. Louis, who might have been in this second *Arabia* company of Saints, joined the Ellsworth Handcart Company when it left Florence 20 July. See John Oakley Journal, LDS Archives, entry for 17 July 1856.

42. At Florence, the Cantwells camped near the church office. James cut cord wood and cut and hauled timber. *Journal of James Sherlock Cantwell*, 37.

43. *Journals of Joseph B. Elder, 1835–1897* (Salt Lake City: Virginia S. Pendleton, 1978), 12–18. Elder joined the Willie Handcart Company a day after it left Florence on 16 August, as a wagon driver.

44. David C. Hawley, *The Treasures of the Steamboat Arabia* (Kansas City, Missouri: n.p., 1995), 16.

45. While a believing Saint, Thompson published *Evidence in Proof of the Book of Mormon* in 1841 in Batavia, New York. Discussions of Thompson are found in C. R. Marks, "History of Monona County," *Annals of Iowa* 7, No. 5, 3rd series (April 1906), 321–46 (the Butts and Thompson newspaper reference is on p. 337); Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Restoration Research, 1990), 51–53; and "The Baneemyites," in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press reprint, 1965), 2:437–38.

46. In January 1848, while living in St. Louis and doing tailoring work, Thompson received a revelation and felt called to prepare for the "redemption of Zion." He claimed to be Ephraim born again among the Gentiles and "Baneemy, patriarch of Zion." That year, he self-published in St. Louis a tract called *The Voice of Him!! That Crieth in the Wilderness, Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord!!* He gained a small group of converts, started a School of Preparation, and became the group's chief teacher. In January 1849, he began publishing quarterly or sporadically until September 1855 a small magazine called *Zion's Harbinger and Baneemy's Organ*. (See Chad J. Flake, *A Mormon Bibliography, 1830–1930* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1978), 803. In September 1853, he directed some fifty or sixty followers to Monona County, Iowa, north of Council Bluffs, where they established a communitarian colony he named "Preparation." He moved a new printing press there and published with it *Preparation News* and *Ephraim's Messenger* in 1855 and

1856. Thompson enforced strict rules among his followers, based on his prophetic authority. He named his group the Congregation of Jehovah's Presbytery of Zion. See Shields, *Divergent Paths*, 51–53.

47. Marks, "Monona County," 337. Within a year, Thompson published a 208-page tract, *Law and Covenants of Israel; Written to Ephraim from Jehovah, the Mighty God of Jacob: Ephraim and Baneemy's Proclamation* (Preparation, Iowa: Zion's Presbytery, 1857). A copy is in the LDS Historical Department Library.

48. About October 1858, Thompson's followers ran him out of town. Their pooled properties were tied up in a court battle settled by the Iowa Supreme Court in 1867. Thompson returned to St. Louis and by 1879 was in Philadelphia. He was still there as of 1892 when a city directory listed him as "Reverend." See Shields, *Divergent Paths*, 51–53.

49. James F. Scheer and Adrian Sorrels, "Oldest Hooch in Kansas," *Time Magazine* (1952), 53, 69, 70. This article clearly deals with the *Arabia* but mistakenly calls it the *Francis N. Aubrey*, a name not found in lists of Missouri river steamers.

50. Frederick Way Jr., comp., *Way's Packet Directory, 1848–1983* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, 1983). The volume was published with the assistance of the Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen.