

“Was it for Sins That We Have Done This”: Two Grave Marker Poems by John D. Lee

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In early June 1994, several of my family and friends organized a horse ride in the Pine Valley wilderness area and in the Kolob area of Zion’s National Park. We had arranged to stay on the Gordon Pace property at the eastern base of the Pine Valley wilderness area, in New Harmony, Utah, a small town of about two hundred residents, about twenty miles south of Cedar City on I-15 then west about four miles. Gordon Pace was the LDS bishop of the New Harmony Ward. His family members were early settlers in this community. According to Juanita Brooks, John D. Lee sold his New Harmony house and most of the farm to the Lemuel H. Redd family in September 1870, when Brigham Young asked him to move to the area east of Kanab.¹ This property was subsequently acquired by the Pace family.

Gordon directed us southwest across a stream and past fields and orchards to a high meadow area along Comanche Creek, which flows east from the Pine Valley wilderness area. Without first realizing it, we were camping on the New Harmony farm site of John D. Lee. According to Gordon, two frame homes and a brick home of John D. Lee were built in this area. None stands today, but the foundations can be seen, together with handmade adobe bricks

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in the vicinity. Our being on the Lee homestead site came dramatically to our attention when, on the early evening of our second day there, we discovered a small graveyard containing five visible grave markers. Two of these were prominent, upright sandstone markers, arranged vertically, side-by-side, with the etched printing facing west (Figure 1). Wilting flowers were at the two gravesites, presumably placed there the week before on Memorial Day. Our curiosity now increased as we examined the inscriptions on the two large markers.

On one was the following inscription in large capital letters, including the clearly visible names of two children (Figure 2). We dusted off the lower portion of the grave marker and moved sandy dirt and rocks near the base to read the full inscription. The original spelling is preserved:

IN MEMORY
OF
GEORGE ALBERT &
MARGARET A. LEE
BORN JANU 20th 1855
& JANU 3rd 1857
DIED BY THE FALL-
ING OF A WALL AT
HARMONY FEB 6th 1862

Below this inscription, smaller, lower-case words, which form the following verse, can be seen in Figure 2, with more of the text of the verse toward the base of the marker shown in Figure 3.

Bereaved of joy those of noble Birth
which God from Heaven has sent to Earth
For a blessing to his covenant Race
Alass they are gone, who'll fill their place
Was it for sins that we have done
Death snatched from us those little ones
Oh Lord our God we humbly Plead
To fill the rent Death has made
and keep us on the narrow way
that leads to that evental day
we our children will regain
through Faith in the Redeemer's Name²

J. D. LEE

The name "J. D. LEE," well below the level of the earth around the soft sandstone marker before the soil was moved away, can be made out below the last sentence (Figure 4).

Juanita Brooks describes the incident that took the lives of these two children with the collapse of the Fort Harmony Wall and their winter burial as follows:

Lee closed his journal for the year with the statement, "Through the week the storms still raging; prospects dark and gloomy; the Earth a sea of water and thus closes 1861." The next day's entry is equally eloquent. "Jany 1st., 1862 Begins with a storm. The face of the country is deluged with water. . . ."

Surely nothing like this had ever happened before. On the morning of January 31, they had their first glimpse of the sun for twenty-eight days, but before noon it was clouded again and snowing, piling to a depth of ten inches in the next two days. By now all the family was moved out of the fort except Sarah Caroline and her children. She insisted that, since the roof was off the second story and the rain had ceased, she was safe for a while longer. She did have four walls around her and a big fireplace, where they could keep warm, also two beds with dry bedding, and she dreaded to leave it when she had no other place of shelter. . . .

The children were in bed, five-year-old Margaret Ann beside her brother George Albert, just a year older than she, at the head. . . . Suddenly the mother had an impulse to get out and hurried all through the door in her first fear, without disturbing the two sleeping children. Whether it was already falling or whether the draft from the opening door made a difference, no one could guess, but the partition wall from the upper floor crashed, coming through the ceiling, the heavy weight killing the two children instantly. At least it seemed that they must have been instantly killed, for there were no cries except from those who had escaped and were calling for help. By the time anyone could get there with a light and remove the debris, there was no hope for the children.

This was truly a sad affair, even more so because both parents had known that they should leave the fort, and both had delayed because of the rigors of wet and cold to which the children must be exposed if they left the shelter and fire. Now the little bodies could hardly be buried properly, with the rain unceasing and the soggy graveyard in a location where it was almost impossible to dig a decent grave. . . . During a brief lull in the storm they gathered at the graveyard. A hymn was sung, a few words of comfort offered to the weeping mother, a dedicatory prayer, and then the mud was being pushed into the hole, plumping onto the boxes with a reverberation that reminded them of the wall which had snuffed out the young lives.³

The children died on February 6, 1862, four years and four months after the tragic incident at Mountain Meadows in which John D. Lee admitted participation.⁴ I cannot help but wonder from the touching phrase of the poem "was it for sins that we have done death snatched from us those little ones" whether he considered this part of God's punishment for that lamentable incident.

The second gravestone marked the resting place of Aggatha Ann Woolsey Lee, Lee's first wife, whom he married in 1833 in Illinois.⁵ She bore him eleven children, eight of whom outlived their father.⁶ Her grave marker, as shown in Figure 5, bears the following inscription, with the spelling preserved as on the grave marker:

IN MEMORY
OF
AGGATHEAN LEE
BORN JAN 18 1814
DIED JUNE 4 1866

Below this inscription, a verse follows, much of which can be seen in Figure 5, with more shown in Figure 6. Again the spelling has been preserved as etched in the sandstone grave marker.

She has gone to rest
The partner of my youth
Her spirit now is blest
With those that love the Truth
Before her spirit left its clay
She called her children near.
Then wisly unto them did say
Obey your Father dear
He'll never counsal you amiss
Through all your future lives
Then gave unto each one a kiss
Oh she's a mother and a wife⁷

J. D. LEE

Figure 7 clearly shows the name of the author of the verse, “J. D. LEE,” husband of Aggatha. Once again we had to push away the sandy dirt at the marker base to read the full inscription, a poetic expression of family love for a valiant pioneer woman by her husband. Her death occurred a little over four years after Caroline’s two children were killed and four years before John D. Lee moved his family from this New Harmony homestead. Brooks describes Aggatha’s passing as follows:

Aggatha had been failing for some time until by the spring of 1866 she was on her death bed with a lingering malignancy. . . .

Her suffering grew in intensity, and with it her desire to see her children and all the family. Perhaps if this wish could be granted, she could relax and die in peace. A horseman was sent to notify them all and call them home. . . .

She had lain in a state of semiconsciousness for several hours, but when the word came that the children had arrived, she aroused and seemed to revive. . . .

To each she gave a private word, commending the two little boys, Samuel and Ezra, into the care of her sister Rachel and their older brothers and sisters. Then to them all she gave the same advice.

“Honor your father and listen to his counsel. He is a man of God, and he will never lead you astray. Turn to him in your sickness and trouble, and stand by him in whatever he may be called to endure. . . .”

Three days more Aggatha lingered, though she did not speak again. At last she relaxed, her muscles losing the rigidity of suffering, and a faint smile settling on her face with the last exhalations of her breath. . . . It was just at midnight.

The funeral service must be held the next afternoon, for it was June and mortification had set in even before the breathing stopped. Some of the wives hardly got to bed at all, for the body must be washed and dressed; the burial clothes could be put on more easily now than later. For days the coffin boards had been ready, fitted, planned and measured. By daybreak they were put together, and others of the women were busy with the lining and decorating of the casket. . . .

Neighbors and friends all came to speak of the virtues of this sister who had been as a mother to them all, and whose children could in reality 'rise up and call her blessed.' She was buried in the cemetery beside little George and Margaret, where even today the cut stones mark their places."⁸

In the poem etched on the gravestone, John D. Lee refers to this advice Aggatha gave her children. Here also, one speculates whether her counsel to her children, "and stand by him in whatever he may be called to endure," was a prophetic insight into what was to happen to J. D. Lee. The three other gravestones mark the graves of John Lawson, and two other children. Gordon Pace indicated that tradition has it that other unmarked graves exist, possibly including Indians.

While we were camping in this beautiful country we visited the Mountain Meadows Massacre site and saw the new monument there, and we rode our horses along Timber Creek in Kolob Canyon of Zion's National Park. Juanita Brooks indicated that John D. Lee had earlier hidden in these red rocks from law enforcement officers seeking his arrest. It was from these heights among the red rocks that he reportedly picked his New Harmony homestead.

To my knowledge, these two poems have not previously been brought to the attention of the historical community or committed to archival records. John D. Lee was a remarkable pioneer and dedicated member of the Mormon faith. His biography documents a fascinating and remarkably productive life of amazing pioneering achievement, as well as his dedication to a staggeringly large family.⁹ He also maintained an undying loyalty to President Brigham Young, whom he considered his adopted father.¹⁰ Lee possessed an unflinching faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ which persisted through sadness and tragedy like that noted above, and through his loss of Church membership in 1870.¹¹ Although John D. Lee professed his innocence and never confessed publicly, he was the only Mountain Meadows Massacre participant to be convicted. He was executed by a firing squad on March 23, 1877, at the site of the massacre.¹² Lee's membership in the Church was reinstated on April 20, 1961, and the necessary proxy ordinances were performed in the Salt Lake Temple less than a month later on May 8-9.¹³

Notes

1. Juanita Brooks, *John Doyle Lee: Zealot, Pioneer Builder, Scapegoat* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1992), 288.
2. The underlined words in the verse were particularly difficult to make out but are thought to be accurate.
3. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 269-71.
4. Jaunita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 83.
5. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 26.
6. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 379.
7. The underlined word “near” was difficult to make out but is thought to be accurate.
8. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 273-76.
9. Lee had nineteen wives and sixty children. See Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 379-84.
10. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 265.
11. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 293-94.
12. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 366-67.
13. Brooks, *John Doyle Lee*, 376.



Figure 1. Grave markers of George Albert and Margaret A. Lee (left), and Aggatha Ann Woolsey Lee (right) in the small graveyard southwest of New Harmony, Utah, near the eastern base of the Pine Valley Mountains, 1994. Photograph by L. Douglas Smoot.



Figure 2. Close-up of the grave marker of George Albert and Margaret A. Lee, children of John D. and Aggatha Ann Woolsey Lee, 1994. Photograph by L. Douglas Smoot.



Figure 3. The verse inscription on the lower half of the grave marker of George Albert and Margaret A. Lee, 1994. Photograph by L. Douglas Smoot.



Figure 4. Close-up of the inscribed name of the verse author “J. D. Lee” at the very bottom of the grave marker of George Albert and Margaret A. Lee, originally below the soil level, 1994. Photograph by L. Douglas Smoot.



Figure 5. Close-up of the grave marker of Agatha Ann Lee (spelled AGGATHEAN on the marker), first wife of John D. Lee, 1994. Photograph by L. Douglas Smoot.

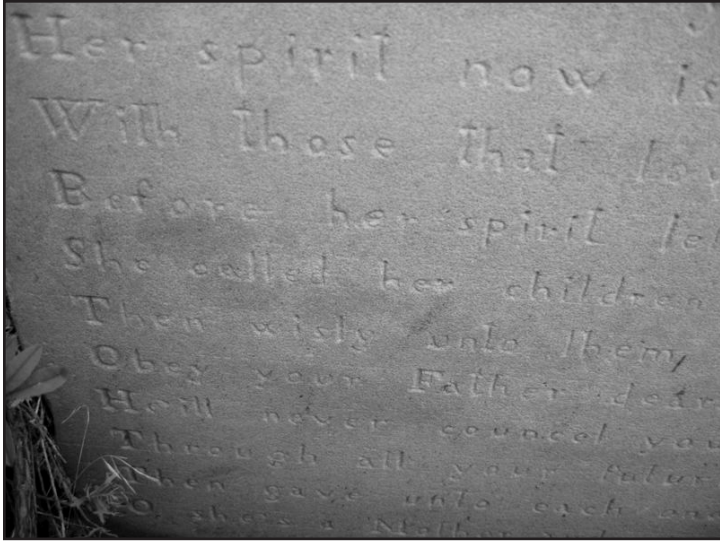


Figure 6. Part of the verse inscription on the lower portion of the grave marker of Agatha Ann Woolsey Lee, 1994. Photograph by L. Douglas Smoot.



Figure 7. Close-up of the inscribed name of the verse author "J. D. Lee" at the very bottom of Agatha Ann Woolsey Lee's grave marker, clearly visible at the base of the marker, 1994. Photograph by L. Douglas Smoot.

