

WOMEN'S LETTERS FROM NAUVOO

Richard Neitzel Holzappel

Nauvoo women communicated with absent husbands or family members and friends back home mainly through letters. Writing to her mother in New England, Sarah Hall Scott emphasized this phenomenon:

It is with mingled feelings of pain and pleasure that I attempt to address a few lines to you. Yea, it is a great grief to me when I think how far I am separated from you; but the reflection that although far distant, there is a way we can communicate our thoughts to each other.¹

Sarah Hall Scott discovered that she could convey her feelings in "a few lines." Yet resources were often scarce in Nauvoo. Paper, pen, and ink were usually in short supply. Added to this problem was one of time. Stealing a few moments from a busy day to write a letter was especially difficult for the women of Nauvoo.

The fact that many letters were started on one day and finished several days, sometimes weeks, later indicates the difficulty of finding time to complete a letter. Compounding this particular problem was the infrequency of mail service and the cost of sending letters. The amount for an individual letter was determined by the weight of paper sent and the distance the letter was to travel. Either the person sending the letter or the recipient had to pay postage. Many Nauvoo letters have postmarks other than Nauvoo, which indicates that some of the letters were paid for by the receiver or that a letter was given to a missionary who put it in the postal system at his final destination, in many cases several hundred miles closer to the intended recipient.

Nauvoo letters not only reveal the daily life of the women of Nauvoo but also preserve their feelings, hopes, and desires. Several Mormon women left precious letters full of insights to their lives. Many of the letters from Nauvoo are filled with personal testimony of the faith and courage of the women who gathered on the banks of the Mississippi River. The writers attempted to convey the truth of their lives to those far away from

them. With paper and pen in hand they attempted to make the reader understand what they experienced and what they were experiencing in their new home.

Sometimes, the euphoria manifested by recent converts was demonstrated in their letters home following their arrival. Ann Pitchforth described the City of the Saints with an overly simplistic view of this frontier community and increasingly important river city: "There is universal love among them. They are all kind to one another, and very few houses, indeed, have either locks or bolts. All leave everything outside their houses with the greatest of safety."

She did acknowledge, however, "Some bad people get here now and then, but the extremely plain, honest dealing of the people does not suit their chicanery, and they soon get found out and often leave the place."²

Hortensia Patrick was more realistic in a letter written to family members in Massachusetts: "I will not pretend to say that there is nothing improper done or said in this place, for I know there is and there must be where the people of God reside. But there is nothing going on here, that I consider to be wrong, that is upheld by the Church."³

Nauvoo letters expressed the conventions of nineteenth century letter writing, including such information as weather, politics, and social activities, but more importantly the state of health. Often letters were obituary notices.

When Joseph Smith left Nauvoo in late October 1839 for Washington, D.C., it was a time of great sickness in the new community of Saints. Many people brought their sick family members to Emma Smith's home for help. Joseph's secretary, James Mulholland, arrived and was nursed by Emma for five weeks. Emma wrote Joseph "His spirit left its suffering tenement for a better mansion than he had here."⁴

Sitting down at a small desk in a candle-lit room during a cold winter's day, widowed Sarah Mulholland began writing her brother-in-law and sister about the events of the preceding weeks in Nauvoo:

It is with feelings easier felt than described that I sit down to write a few lines to you. . . . We have had to part with our dear mother; what a heart-rending sight to stand and see such a tender and an affectionate mother pass through the dark valley of death. But it was not too trying as it might have been if she had not had such a glorious hope in the trying hour of death. The God she served owned her in the hour of death, and eased and softened every pain.

Sarah recounted how "the sweet spirit took its flight, without causing her to have a struggle or a groan." Her death "left a sweet smile on her blessed face." Sarah admitted to her sister Mary, "I miss Mother, the little dishes of butter . . . [do] not come now; no, no, Mother [is] gone."⁵

More than anything else, many letters from Nauvoo to non-Mormon family members and friends reveal an urgency for them to "gather with the Saints." The pleas from these women are sincere and filled with hope that their family members and friends will join them in Nauvoo to partake of the blessings of the Church.

Written more than a year after the assassinations of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Sally Murdock⁶ wrote a passionate letter inviting her family in New York to consider the Mormon message. She reveals her own feelings and experiences in the City of the Saints. Her son, Joseph Stacy⁷, added a few lines to his uncle and aunt and a poem about the Nauvoo Temple.

The letter is significantly different in some ways from earlier Nauvoo letters. The city had grown and the resources increased to make Nauvoo more than it had been in 1839-1841. Yet, the spiritual drama and extraordinary historical context of many Nauvoo letters is wonderfully demonstrated in this previously unpublished letter.⁸

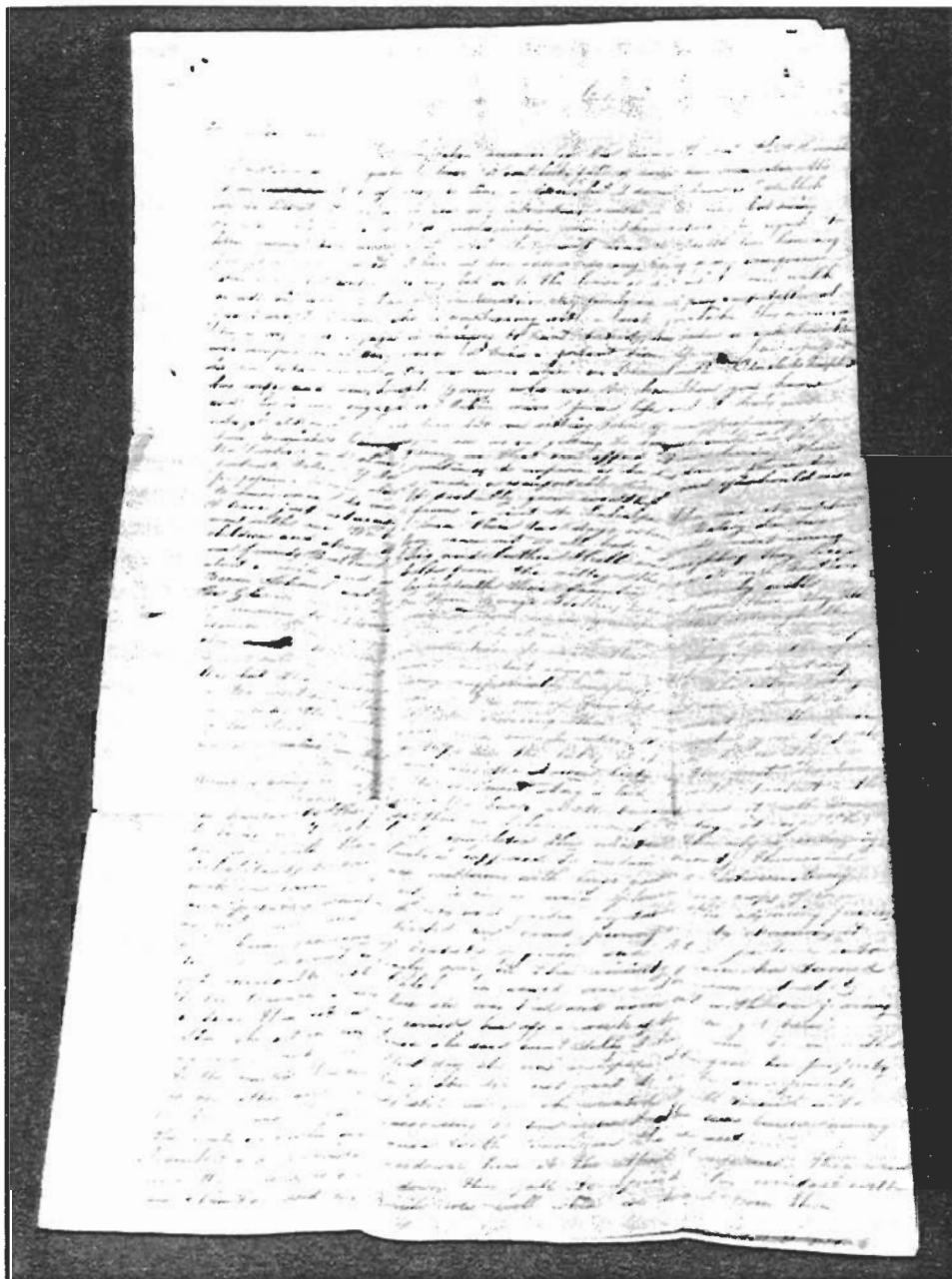
[Cover]
William Rhoads
East Hamilton
Madison Co
NY
[Postmark)

NAUVOO Aug 24 ILL
City of Joseph August 12th 1845
Respected Friends

I have taken possession of the mammoth sheet that Hannah brought, and as you requested to have it sent back, full of news, I have under taken the arduous task of writing so long a letter, but I do not know as I shall be able to fill it out. We received your very interesting epistle in due time but owing to indisposition and a habit of procrastination which I have contracted in regard to letter writing, I have neglected it until the present time[.] My health has been very poor this summer so that I have not been able to do any thing of any consequence still I am not confined to my bed or to the house so but what I can walk or ride out when I have an inclination[.] My family are all very comfortable at present except Eunice⁹ who is complaining with a sick head ache this morning[.] John¹⁰ is very much engaged in learning to paint portraits; his teacher is a Mr Vansickle who occupies one of my rooms; he takes a portrait from life and John copies it[.] he has taken several in this way among which are John Smith (Uncle to Joseph) his wife and son, Joseph Young who was to hamilton you know and he is now engaged in taking mine from life and it looks quite natural although he has had but one sitting[.] John is now preparing to take Eunice's likeness[.] You see we are getting to be fashionable as the the [sic] 'twelve' and almost every one that can afford it are having their portraits taken[.] If John continues to improve as he has done so far in his profession, he can always make a comfortable living and if he should arise to eminence he would probably grow wealthy[.]

I have just returned from a visit to Laharpe[.] John and Nymphus¹¹ went with me[.] We had been there two days when Betsey¹² her two children¹³ and Mary Wilsey came out[.] we all had a good visit among our friends[.] Brother Harris and brother Hall are neighbors[.] they live about a mile and a half from the village[.] they are all well[.] Brothers Bacon Schovel and Glazier with their families are usually well[.] Br Glazier received a letter from George Stebbins when I was there[.] they talk of moving to Nauvoo soon[.] You say in your epistle that although the Nauvoo House progresses but slowly it will be completed before the Temple[.] Now William you will have to recall that prophecy, for the cap stone is not only laid but almost the last shingle is nailed on, and not only this but the tower is rising majestically supported by attic story on the west end[.] The inside work is nearly finished and in a month or six weeks the saints will be receiving their endowment in the house of the Lord[.]

You will have time enough when this reaches you to pack up your valise an[d] take a trip over the lakes to Nauvoo to see the dedication of the temple and also the Queen City of the west[.] The Nauvoo House is going on rapidly[.] the basement story is laid up with stone, cut on the front side facing the river; the brick is all burned and it will soon be hauled to the house, there are laborers enough to lay it up[.] This building will probably be completed this winter[.] The city is enlarging daily and with the suburbs is supposed to contain twenty thousand inhabitants[.] the houses are scattering with large gardens between. Every nook and corner in the city is covered with flourishing crops of corn and potatoes wheat and oats and garden vegetables[.] The adjoining prairies are well fenced and cultivated and owned principally by Mormons[.] it will bring thousands of bushels of grain and other produce into the city[.] Harvest is nearly over in this vicinity[.] grain has turned out remarkably well[.] Caleb has raised over a thousand bushels[.] When Hannah arrived here she was tired and worn out with her journey[.] a fever then set in and carried her off a week after she got here[.] when she got in my house she said aunt Sally I have come to die with you and a week from that day she was a corpse[.] She gave her property to the temple[.] I asked her if she did not want to make some presents to her father and sisters[.] she said



Letter of Sally Stacy Murdock

no she wanted it all turned into the temple and it was don[e] according to her request[.] She was buried among the saints and she will arise with them in the resurrection[.]

Lambert and Celinda were down here at the April Conference[.] they were well[.] they talked of coming down

this fall to spend the winter with me[.] Newton and his family were well when we heard from them[.]

Tanner Green died on fryday [sic] the 25th of July after a short illness of five days[.] He was buried the following Sunday. the same day his wife was confined with a son[.] Sister Green has been bereaved of a husband and two children since she came to Nauvoo, surely the cup of her affliction is almost full if not quite[.] Alphonso¹⁴ has taken a farm within the boundary of the city a quarter of a mile from his house[.] he has twenty five acres of corn besides wheat oats and potatoes[.] Betsey is not very well[.] her visit tired her out. Eli Chase's wife is very sick of a fever but is not considered very dangerous[.] The rest of the family are well[.] The widow Wilsey's health is quite poor this summer[.] John was taken down with a fever a few days ago but is better now. Jacob has been sick all winter but is recovered[.] The Widow Partridge Jonathan and Charles are well[.] Mary's health is not very good, her baby is quite sick. indeed it is the sic[k]ly season now, and there are a great many complaining. August and September are the most unhealthy months in the year in this country[.] Brother Wilsey has been down to make us another visit, he continues single yet he calculates to move down in the fall, and as he expects Margaret will marry Charles Learned before long it will be highly necessary for him to be married himself, as Mary is not old enough to take the whole charge of his family although he says she is a smart little girl and does all of his cooking, while Margaret does the washing ironing and mending[.] Elizabeth was to have been married the day she died[.] She was buried in her wedding garments according to the request of Mr. Huggins, who lamented her death much. If you should come out into this country you would never be contented to go back and live on the barren hills of Hamilton again[.] The beautiful rolling prairies sprinkled with wild flowers charm the passing traveller as well as the sturdy occupant[.] When the plough turns over the soil it is fairly black with richness[.] The earth brings forth almost spontaneously, indeed a man can get rich in a short time if he attends to his business as he should do[.] The Suckers or old settlers of the State think it too much trouble to raise wheat[.] they sit down contentedly to their hog dodger and coffee which is an indispensable article on their table[.] The facts of the case are these, the old settlers of these western States seem to have lost that spirit of enterprise which their eastern brethren possess, and they are willing to sit down in ease and contentment within their log cabins while their intelligent enterprising and active Yankee neighbor flourishes like a green bay tree, surrounded

with all the comforts, conveniences, and even luxuries, of enlightned society, I suppose you would like to know how I feel by this time in regard to Mormonism[.] well, I will tell you My faith is stronger than ever in the truths of the everlasting gospel[.] The violent death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith only proves to me that they were called of God, and chosen to do a great and mighty work in the last days[.] The spirit of persecution and mobocracy which spilt the inocent blood of those men is the same spirit that actuated men in the days of Noah to revile him because he was doing the will of God[.] It is the same spirit that induced Cain to kill his brother because of his righteousness. the same spirit that killed the prophets, that Crucified the Saviour, that stoned Stephen, that martyred all of the apostles and it [is] the same spirit that now rages in the hearts of the children of men to drive the saints of God from the face of the earth and to root up and pull down the work of the Lord. but let me tell you Brother William they will never succeed, for they that are with us are stronger than those that are against us[.] This work will continue to roll forth and spread till the knowledge of God covers the earth as the waters do the great deep[.] We have only thirty quorums of seventies organized and they are constantly organizing new quorums every sabbath[.] There has been but few elders sent out since the death of the prophet but when the seventies receive their endeument they will go forth with power to all the nations kindreds tongues and people of the earth[.] Then the honest in heart or the house of Israel will be gathered out from the Gentiles and flee to Zion where there will be deliverance for every one that will not take up the sword against his neighbor must come to Zion for we will then be the only people (that will have peace in their borders), upon the face of the whole earth[.] Now William and Betsey I want you to sit down and reflect seriously upon these things and examine your own hearts and the scriptures, with prayer[.] Search the scriptures, the old prophets, find out whether every prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter, or in men's vain immaginations[.] Trust not in uninspired men's say so[.] Do not twist and turn and spiritualize the scriptures because Clark or any other uninspired man says so, but read for yourself, think for yourself, and know for yourself[.] How much have you grown in grace and the knowledge of the truth since you joined the Methodists? How long is it since your God ceased to take any notice of you or your religion[?] How often does your God speak to you by revelation and let you know his will concerning you, or let you know what is to come in the future or open the past to your understanding[?] How much have you learned about God, his order, and government his plan of salvation whereby he

means to save all who will be saved[?] Let me tell you this salvation in the kingdom of God is something different from what you think it is[.] It is something more to be prepared for it than to wear a long face and make a long prayer and a long confession in meeting[.] We Shall have something else to do if we are ever so happy as to get into the celestial kingdom of God besides sitting and looking at Jesus and singing ourselves away to everlasting bliss[.] Pretty amusement for rational inteligent creatures[.] I guess you will find if you ever get there that you have to work yes work. don't be scared[.] you will increase in wisdom and knowledge which is power and you will find that the Eternal God is a man of business, and that he has not many hours of relaxation, but is constantly engaged in enlarging his dominions, governing his subjects, punishing the rebellious, giving laws to the Universe, and learning himself. Do you suppose that a God like this is satisfied with the pride, corruption, hypocrisy, treachery, lying, vanity, and deceit, of the sectarian world? but I forbear I have been so engaged in preaching to you that I almost forgot to tell you that Joseph has worked forty days on the temple this summer besides carrying on twenty five acres on the prairie. our crops are first rate[.] Nymphus has grown to be quite a large boy and is able to help considerable about the farm[.] Joseph and Eunice John and Nymphus Alphonso and Betsey all join me in sending their best love to you all[.]

From Your Sister
Sally Murdock

To Wm and Betsey Rhoades

Respected Uncle and Aunt, it is with feelings of pleasure and satisfaction that I attempt to improve a few lesure moments in communicating my thought and feelings to you in writing. We received your EPISTLE of the 20th with greate joy and pleasure, and I feel to express my thanks for the kinde and friendly advice given Me in your last, in conjunction with My Brothers. We are all in usual health and make it our home at present with Mother. Last fall We Built us a good Brick House 20 by 35 it took about 40,000 brick and We got it inclosed and finished off and moved into it in December. Their is a celler under the whole house. It contains one good room 20 by 20 with a fire place and oven also a celer room 19 by 14 also 2 upper rooms which are finished and a good Chamber over the whole about 6 feet in highth from the floor to the eaves. Br Chapmen has built him a brick house about 14 by 20 and is still at work on the Temple and doing well. Since the above was written it has been announced in the Neighbor that the last shingel has been laid upon the roof of the Tempel. The roof is now completed. The

sash and window frames have been made ready and the Tempel of God may be considered Enclosed, While writing about the Tempel I will copy off a few lines of My own composing on the same. I do not pretend to be skilled in the rules of versification or to be a Poet but such as I have write I unto you-- let it be more or less-

- 1st The Tempel of God is rapidly building
The last stone was laid some two months ago
And soon 't,will be finished amid the rejoising
Of thousands and thousands of hearts here below
- 2nd The Tempel is built by divine revelation
From God to his Prophet while with us below
When finished 't,will be the surprise of the Nation
Who've witnessed the hardships the Saints undergo
- 3rd The Saints are awaiting with grate expectation
For the happy time to shortly arrive
When they'll be permitted to enter the Tempel
And recive their Endowment from under the Twelve
- 4th Then they'll go forth unto evry Nation
From Island to Island from Sea unto Sea
From People to People proclaiming salvation
And geather them up to a land that is free

I am must [sic] now draw my subject to a close by biding you all
farewell and desiring you to write to us as often as you can make
it convieniant.
J.S. Murdock

NOTES

1. Cited in Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Jeni Broberg Holzapfel, *Women of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1992), 48.

2. *Ibid.*, 40.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 43.

5. *Ibid.*, 74.

6. Sally Stacy Murdock was the widow of Joseph Murdock who died 9 October 1843/1844 in Nauvoo, Hancock, Illinois. See Susan Easton Black, comp., Mem-

bership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1848, (Provo, Utah: Religious Studiens Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), CDRom.

7. Born 6 June 1822, Hamilton, Madison, New York, Joseph was married to Eunice Sweet on 26 June 1842 in Albany, New York. See *ibid*.

8. Letter in private possession, courtesy of R.Q. Shupe, San Juan Capistrano, California.

9. Eunice Sweet Murdock, the wife of Joseph Stacy Murdock.

10. John D. Murdock, born 28 July 1825, Hamilton, Madison, New York. He married Mary Jane Norris, 25 January 1846, Nauvoo, Hancock, Illinois, after this letter was written, and died in Nauvoo in February

1846. See Susan Easton Black, Membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1848.

11. **Nymphus** Coridon Murdock, son of Sally and Joseph, was born 12 May 1833. Hamilton, Madison, New York. See *ibid*.

12. Betsey Murdock Green, daughter of Joseph and Sally, was born 6 May 1810, Hamilton, Madison, New York. She married Alphonzo Green 29 December 1838. See *ibid*.

13. Alva Alphonzo Green and Sarah Annadella Green. See *ibid*.

14. Alphonzo Green, born 8 July 1810, Brookfield, Madison, New York. He married Betsey Murdock 29 December 1838. See *ibid*.