

JOHN NEEDHAM'S NAUVOO LETTER: 1843

Maurine Carr Ward

Leeds, Yorkshire, England was the birthplace of John Needham, born 1 April 1819 to James Needham and Mary Armitage. James was a well-respected businessman, as well as a prominent social figure. Later the family moved to Warrington, Lancashire, near Liverpool. There James enrolled his young son in a select school until he was fourteen years of age, at which time John was apprenticed for seven years in a large drapery emporium. After working only three years, the business was sold and John was given papers freeing him from his apprenticeship.

In 1837, John was working as a store clerk in Preston when he heard the restored gospel of Jesus Christ preached by Orson Hyde. Immediately, John believed. James Needham, upon hearing of his son's "folly," traveled to Preston and ordered John to accompany him back to Warrington. James then found work for his son in Manchester, but soon received word that John was not only mingling with the American preachers again, but was preaching alongside them. For the second time, James took John back to Warrington until he found new employment for him in Staffordshire. Mormon Apostle George A. Smith came to Staffordshire, and soon John was traveling with him. As an ordained elder in the church, John was a faithful missionary from 1838 to 1843, laboring in Staffordshire, Birmingham, Wales, Monmouthshire, and other places.

Finally, James Needham gave up trying to prevent John from pursuing his new-found religion, but did forbid him to have any contact with his mother, brothers, and sisters until he came to his senses and returned to his former belief. Mary, however, could not be as harsh as her husband, and occasionally sent John help as he traveled around without "purse or scrip."

For some reason, in 1842, James had a softening of his heart, and sent for John to come home. James then listened for the first time to his son's testimony. He offered

to outfit John with whatever he needed to emigrate to Nauvoo, Illinois, where he could join with the Latter-day Saints and the headquarters of the church.

John sailed from Liverpool in 1843. Although none of his family had fully accepted the church at this time, the following letter shows the love between John and his parents and the reconciliation after five years of bitterness. John had been promised by church leaders that his parents would be brought into the church through him acting in God's hands. Later, when James' financial circumstances changed, John sent money to bring his parents to America. Mary Needham died while traveling up the Mississippi, before she could see her son again. James arrived in Kanesville, Iowa where he was baptized by John.

John Needham emigrated to Utah in the spring of 1851 with his wife, Sarah Ann Booth; two children; his father, James; and his sister, Eliza. Sarah Ann gave birth to a third child on the banks of the Platte River. In Salt Lake City, John followed his early training in merchandising, opening a store in the Eighth Ward. Next he became a junior partner in the firm of Robbins and Needham, even traveling East to buy goods for his store and that of I. M. Homer and Company. He lost his investment when the two stores merged, and thus turned to farming in West Jordan, across the Jordan River. The mercantile business soon pulled him back and he went into a business venture with William C. Staines, called Staines, Needham and Company.

In the fall of 1860, John returned to England on a mission. When he returned three years later, he clerked for other business establishments and traveled to the East for goods again. When the Zion's Co-operative Mercantile Institution (ZCMI) opened, he became the manager of the clothing department, a position he held for many years.

After living in Salt Lake for nearly forty years, John Needham looked to Logan, Cache County, ninety miles to the north, hoping the move would bring better health and prosperity. By 1890, when he moved, John had lost his first wife, Sarah Ann; his second wife, Martha Milnes; and his son, Charles Albert. Accompanying him was his third wife, Martha Rose Turner. John suffered much illness during his later years in Logan. He died there on 14 June

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1901 and was buried in Salt Lake City.

CITY OF NAUVOO, FRIDAY, JULY 7TH, 1843

My Dear Father and Mother,--I sit down to write home; I have part of to-day to spare, so occupy it in so doing. As I wished you whilst in England to receive my letter from this place before fall, I see it high time to write. I could have done so before, but have stayed as long as I could, so as to give you all the information about this place that I can. *What I write shall be true and correct, as far as I have come to the knowledge of it and have received right information.* Before I commence, let me ask you all how do you do? But I shall have to stay some time before I can get that answered. With regard to myself, I have been on the mending way ever since I came here, for I was very unwell when I first landed in Nauvoo. But I commence.

Firstly, I would speak of the appearance of the place, the city of Nauvoo. We had a very trying time in coming up the river, and I suffered a good deal in sickness; we were about seventeen days in coming from New Orleans to Nauvoo: we came the trip in two boats; that is, we changed our boats at St. Louis, two hundred miles from Nauvoo or thereabouts. The appearance of the country, from St. Louis to Nauvoo, in a general way is more wild; the country on each side of the river is covered with large timber like a forest, but the land in a general way is high and very rich. There are a great many dwellings on the sides of the river but scattered apart. We came to several towns very prettily laid out between St. Louis and Nauvoo. The face of the country looked green and smiling; it is indeed a grand sight to sail up the river; from the mouth to Nauvoo is about fifteen hundred miles, and tongue cannot express the beauty of its windings and prospects on each side; no man of understanding can come up the Mississippi *without being filled with wonder and astonishment* at the vast extent of country, enough to sustain the world if cultivated.

But to proceed. When within five or six miles of this place, we heard the agreeable cry of "Nauvoo to be seen," the long-looked-for place; every eye was stretched towards the place, as you may be sure our eyes gazed with delight, but with astonishment, to see the great extent of it. The city seemed to rise gradually from the sea, with the houses much scattered, but over a great extent of ground; it has without any mistake, more so than any place we had seen before, a grand appearance. It looked very pretty from the river. Just where Nauvoo stands, the river turns in the shape of a horse

shoe, the river going three parts round the city. From rising ground in Nauvoo we have a splendid sight of the country on the other side of the river, which is very pleasant. The extent of the city is four miles, laid out in lots and streets in nice order; I mean that each house has a piece of land attached to it, either a quarter, half, or a whole acre of land, and some more, which makes the houses appear scattered. For two miles square the city is covered in that way, but in the centre, near the temple, they are quite close like other towns. If all the houses were put together as in other places, they would make a large place; I should think twice or thrice the size of Warrington; but you may judge yourselves from what extent it runs.

As I was to give mother every particular, whether it was all a wilderness or not, and whether they lived in houses as in England, or tents, I will endeavour to do so. This is a new place, not above four or five years old, so we must not expect a very large, or at least a grand place in so short a time; but any one that could have seen the place five years ago and see it now, would indeed be filled with wonder, to think that a few poor people could make such a difference in so short a time; but this I can see and say, that it bids fair to be one of the most beautiful places both for situation and other things, in America, or I may say, in the world; for I don't know what should hinder it, except we disobey the Lord and sin against him, and are scattered as the disobedient always were. From the diligence and enterprise of the people, buildings rise fast. When first they settled here, after being driven from their homes in Missouri, it was covered with trees like the forests in England; this had to be cleared by the people that settled here. The first comers had to contend with the most difficulties. They had to make shift with anything, and toil in the midst of suffering and hunger; nothing but distress seemed before them, although land at that time as well as provisions were cheap; but let us see, the timber had to be felled and cleared, houses had to be built, the land to be cultivated, which could not be done without much toil and suffering. The place, also, was very unhealthy, so that people would not settle there previous to the Saints coming; but as most were poor, they persevered, and what have they done for themselves that have persevered? Well, they have got a piece of land cultivated, a house built, a cow or more, pigs, poultry, &c., and all without money, perhaps, but not without suffering, and they now reap their reward in a measure.

The place is now different, *and we new comers* have not half the toil and trials that they had, but we are not

without them in a measure, I assure you, for it is still a new place, and there are many things to contend with. Land with them was cheaper, as a matter of course, than it is now, and now land keeps getting more in value as the place improves, I mean in the city; a few miles out it can be got as cheap as ever. All new comers, except they have a little money to buy them some land and build a house, which does not take much, have to contend with hardships; but how can it be otherwise, as the place is new, and most that come poor. We can't get money for labour, at least in a general way. Well, how do you get along, say you. Why a man gets work for land, brick, wood or stone, provisions, &c; well, in a year or two, or say more, he may pay for his land, get brick enough for a house and other things. He cultivates his own land and is then his own master, but *not without many pinches* in the time if he has a family. He then begins to see better days. This is the way the poor have to act here. Many, I know in this place, have now houses and lands, and they have told me how they have got them--it has been by trying for them; but how long, I say, might they stay in England before a poor man could have a good brick house over his head, and land, cows, &c. I say again, that all that come here will be tried in many ways that they would not be in an old country or settled place; but we look to the time not being far or a great way off, when we shall not be behind in any good thing or necessary of life, or any thing that will tend to our temporal good and comfort as well as spiritual.

The streets are not yet paved, but are in the rough, in dry weather pleasant, except a little dust, but in wet weather unpleasant; some streets are better than others. Two or three places in the city have a very business-like appearance with having different kinds of shops. We have a many good brick houses, and others are frame-wood and log houses. Some of the houses appear strange to a person who has been accustomed to live in a fine-built place, *but a great many are quite smart large brick houses*, which would look well in any city. I was quite surprised to find so many good brick-built houses. Brick houses, stone, and others, are building as fast as they can, and I see a great difference in the short time I have been here. It is a saying in Nauvoo, "they spring up like mushrooms." I did not know but that I should have had to live gipsy fashion, but I soon got a home. In a general way the houses have one good room below and a bed room, some have more. I thought to have sent a drawing of Nauvoo, but it would take more time than I can spare to do it justice, for it is a much larger place than I expected to find. Any person with a bit of land and house may be happy here, for it is very pleasant. There are many not Mormons who live here. Many have got themselves land

a few miles from the city, as the land is much cheaper than in Nauvoo.

I was on the prairies, that is land a few miles out of Nauvoo, like a field in England, but ten or twenty miles square, without timber, a few days ago, and was offered a house and eighty acres of land, fenced and cultivated, and a good title for L160; or he would sell forty acres at about 30s. An acre, but without the house. Land uncultivated may be got for 8s., 12s., 15s., and 20s. An acre; it depends upon the situation and the title. But the land at so low a price will want cultivating, and takes a year or two before it brings any return. Land in the city is as high as L200 an acre, but can be got for L10, or L20, and so on. We cannot keep dishonest men from creeping in our midst, for the place is open to all. Every person coming here must do the best he can for himself, and take heed to counsel given by those that seek their good; but if men will not fear God and act with honesty they must stand the consequences.

With regard to the labouring people here, we want some one with money to raise a manufactory or more; we then could employ many idle hands, and a many who go to the neighbouring states and towns. This is caused by the often flush of emigrants, both from the Eastern States and from England. It would be a great thing for this place to have manufactories of different kinds, but time and perseverance and faithfulness before the Lord, will bring a good deal about that will be for the good of the place. As to the people of Nauvoo, we have both good and bad as in all places; but taking them altogether, any one amongst us would say, we are a thriving, intelligent, and happy people, though passing through trials and sufferings from our enemies on account of our faith, but through grace we will conquer.

People that come to Nauvoo have to learn a great deal by experience that they cannot be taught away from here; and be assured that all that come here must not expect perfection nor a perfect place; but if people come with a pure motive to the glory of God, and not to get gain and live upon others, and care for no one but themselves, they had better stay away, for it is very likely they will stumble at something; but let them come as if they were coming to their father's house, to be taught in the ways of God, and sit under the voice of a prophet, which is of more value than gold; yea, let them be willing to suffer like Moses and say with one of old, "This people shall be my people, and their God my God." I tell you what, *if wheat and tares grow together any where, it is here*; but a day of sifting will come, and our trials are only to see what we will bear for

the truth. As to myself, I care not what it is so I can finish my course with joy and get a place in my Saviour's kingdom, for I know what I do know, and no man can cheat me out of it, and that is, *that the work is of God*. I just speak in this way because some have expected to find people perfect here; but I never taught it or expected to see it. They must have very weak minds who look for such things; what we have to do is to keep right ourselves.

With regard to my faith on the work, and Joseph Smith, and Hiram, and others, it is stronger than ever if it be possible, and before I came here all that knew me are aware it was not very weak. Joseph Smith is a great man, a man of principle, a straight forward man; no saintish long-faced fellow, but quite the reverse. Indeed some stumble because he is such a straight forward, plain spoken, cheerful man, but that makes me love him the more; but if people will stumble, let them, for such miserable notions a many have got with regard to religion, that he wants to cheat them out of it. I know what it is to pull long faces and to sigh and groan, *as you know*, but, thank the lord, I understand principle, and see my duty, and enjoy *His* spirit, which is not bondage, but liberty. I have seen and been in the company of Joseph, and heard him speak several times. I love him, and believe him to be a Prophet of God, and called to do a great work in these last days on the earth. He is in his place, but is a stumbling-block to thousands, as his Master, the Saviour, was before him in his day. His brother Hiram is a much milder man in his manners, more precise, a man of God, and has the confidence of the faithful. Their work is true, but surely it is a marvellous and strange work; but *it will stand though earth and hell agree to put it down*. There is one thing, his enemies have to acknowledge that *Joseph is no hypocrite*.

I will tell you of my enjoyment since I came here. Tuesday, the 4th of July was a great day in America; we had our enjoyments, but different to some, for we had the pleasure of seeing our Prophet amongst us, who had for some days been in the hands of his enemies. I must tell you how it was. A Rev. _____ came to Nauvoo, and preached in the Temple, by the leave of Joseph. He staid with him a few days, when Joseph returned with the Rev. _____ to his home, which is about 30 miles, I think, from Nauvoo, to see some of Mrs. Smith's friends, who live with this Divine. Joseph's enemies got to hear this, who are always thirsting for his blood, as they did the Prophets before him, and the Saviour. Two men from the State of Missouri, where they met with such cruelty some years back, got a false writ from the Governor to bring him to Missouri, to be tried for

treason. Just like the Saviour, he was taken by these men, who were armed with pistols, and threatened to shoot him if he made anything to do. He was taken and put in confinement; by this time the people in the town where he was, got to hear of it; two lawyers came to see him, but at first were not permitted to see him or speak to him. The former two men sought to get a conveyance and hurry him out of town, and from thence to Missouri, for by this time they had learned that the town was opposed to such unlawful doings as not to allow persons to speak to him. A number of the town's-people agreed to go and deliver Joseph out of their hands, even if they had to destroy Joseph's enemies. They soon saw the feeling of the people towards Joseph, and so altered in their manners, and Joseph had to beg the lives of his two enemies, or they would surely have been killed. What did Joseph do but get a writ served upon these men, who had taken him unlawfully, and with them came to Nauvoo. We had sent several hundreds of our soldiers to his help, if they began to be rough, and to assist him.

It was a fine sight to see them come into the town. We heard of their coming and sent our band of music and carriages and people. In the commencement of the train was Joseph and his wife, who was one that went to meet him, and Hiram his brother, with other noted men of the city, a great many ladies on horseback, with about 200 carriages following, and best of it, Joseph had got his two prisoners in the train. It was an affecting sight. The city was all alive to see our brother and friend; we shouted him welcome and shed tears of joy to see him again delivered from his enemies. The streets were crowded that he passed through; we took him home, his poor mother met him worn down with suffering and toil, and fell upon him and wept. Joseph looked worn out with toil, he spoke to us all and blessed us, and said he would address us in the Temple in the afternoon. I could not help but weep when I looked at the man and thought of his suffering for the truth. Joseph had been tried a few days ago by one of the state judges; he was tried at Nauvoo, but nothing could be proved against him, so he was set at liberty as he has been near sixty times before. The two men he brought with him are to be tried at Quincy, another city a short way from here. Whilst in Nauvoo Joseph returned good for evil to these men, for he had them at his house and fed them at his table, and his wife waited upon them, but they seemed as hardened as ever to Joseph.

As I was speaking before about the 4th of this month, I will now proceed. Two companies of our legion were on

duty at an early hour, to escort strangers to our meetings that came by the steamers. Our first meeting opened by half-past ten, by elder Hyde preaching; he gave a most beautiful address, scores of carriages were round the congregation listening to the discourse. It has been said from good authority that from twenty to thirty thousand were present, and I know a better looking company could not meet. In the afternoon, elder P. P. Pratt preached, and after him Joseph Smith spoke in his own defence. As several hundreds of people came up the river to Nauvoo to spend the day, whenever a boat came with a company, the band and legion brought them up to the meeting. I can't tell you my feelings on that and what I have felt other days; but I can say I rejoiced, I was happy, I enjoyed myself. Yes, these meetings and the communion of Saints, pay for all my suffering and toil. How thankful I am that I am here to be taught in the ways of God, and to enjoy such blessings. I must tell you all *I am very happy, and feel perfectly satisfied in what I have done*. There is only one thing that grieves me to any amount, and it is that I am so far from you and my brothers and sisters. There are some like myself alone, but most have some relations, still I live in hopes as I have always done since I came in the church; I hope to see you again, I was going to say here, but time will show; sometimes I fancy I

am not so far as I am from you all, for *we live in houses like those in England*, and I enjoy the society of those, or some of them at least, that I did in England. I still think of sister Griffith, and shall be glad to see her; I pray the Lord to bless her. Miss Munro is keeping a young ladies' school. Miss G. Would find plenty of agreeable company here, and people of good learning. Let me know all the news of England. I hear there has been a stir amongst you. My best love to Arthur, Eliza, Sophia, and James.

I remain, my dear father and mother, your very affectionate son,

JOHN NEEDHAM

NOTES

Information about John Needham was drawn from Orson F. Whitney's, *History of Utah* 4: 453-455; and Susan Easton Black's compilation, *Membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 1830-1848*.

John Needham's letter is taken from the *Millennial Star* 4 (October 1843): 87-90.