

THOMAS AND ELIZABETH HIGGS:
1856 MORMON PIONEERS FROM IOWA

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

Between 1856 and 1860, some three thousand Latter-day Saints participated in the effort to immigrate to Zion through a streamlined transportation system—handcarts. Commencing in Iowa City—the furthestmost

railhead at the time—the handcart pioneers began their journey to the valleys of the Saints. Some painted their handcarts with such mottos as “Zion’s Express,” “Merry Mormons,” and “Truth Will Prevail.”



*Thomas and Elizabeth Higgs Family, ca. 1868. Courtesy of Roberta Barker, Salt Lake City, Utah.
Left to right: Brigham Thomas, Thomas (Zina Maria sitting), Annie Elizabeth (Wallace James standing in front) Elizabeth Stowe (Harriet Eliza lying on lap)*

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Latter-day Saint elders in Liverpool sometime in 1855.

Courtesy LDS Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah.

(Front Row) James Bond, Spicer Crandall, William C. Dunbar, James Ross, Daniel D. McArthur

(Middle Row) Edward Bunker, Chauncey Webb, Franklin D. Richards,

Daniel Spencer, Dan Jones, Edward Martin

(Back Row) Edmund Ellsworth, Joseph A. Young, William H. Kimball, George D. Grant,

James Ferguson, James A. Little, Philemon Merrill

Latter-day Saint elders meeting in Liverpool in 1855 discussed plans to utilize handcarts as a means of bringing some of the Saints to Zion during the next emigration season (1856). Mission President Richards, Counselor Spencer, and LDS Pastors Dunbar, Bunker, Webb, Martin, Ellsworth, Kimball, Grant and Ferguson, along with the other missionaries, played a significant role in the 1856 emigration from Iowa to Salt Lake City.

When these missionaries met in England, the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (established in 1849 to assist poor Mormon convert emigrants) was severely depleted with as much as \$150,000 in funds used for the exceptionally heavy emigration of 1855. Additionally the Saints on the Utah frontier were struggling to survive as the clouds of grasshoppers appeared in the valleys of Zion (the famine of 1855-56 was about to descend upon

them). To bring more of Europe's poor required a new, less-expensive system than the one that had been in operation. Church leaders decided to implement the handcart emigration because they believed "the cry of our poor brethren in foreign lands for deliverance is great, the hand of the oppressor is heavy upon them, and they have no other prospect on earth through which they can hope for assistance."¹

An almost-forgotten facet of the handcart drama is the movement of two wagon companies (Hunt and Hodgetts) with the late handcart companies (Willie and Martin) in 1856. The wagon companies supplied support and help to the struggling handcart companies. In fact, the Hodgetts wagon train members were among the last to enter the Salt Lake Valley in December 1856. Among the Hodgetts wagon company were Davenport, Iowa, residents Thomas and Elizabeth Stowe Higgs. Thomas and Elizabeth Higgs were converts of only a few weeks when they began their journey in the wagon company in the summer of 1856.

Thomas Higgs was born on 17 December 1822 at Welton, North Hampton, England. Elizabeth Stowe was born on 22 June 1824 at Alderminster, Warwickshire, England.

As a young boy of nine years of age, Thomas left Liverpool with his family to begin a new life in North America. The family members arrived in New York on the ship *Andes* on 7 May 1832 and soon made their way to Utica, Onieda County, New York. There Thomas met his future wife, Elizabeth Stowe Higgs.

When the Stowe family departed England is not known. However, Thomas married Elizabeth on 22 May 1844 in Utica. Their first child, William Wallace Higgs, was born on 15 August 1845 in Utica. A second child, Sarah Ann, was born on 9 March 1847 in the same community.

Tragedy, common during this period, struck the young family on 5 May 1848 when William and Sarah Higgs died. Thomas and Elizabeth's third child (the first to live to adulthood) was born on 1 February 1849. They named the baby girl Susannah, apparently after Thomas's mother. The 1850 census records on 17 August 1850 show the following about Thomas and Elizabeth: "City of Utica lists Thomas Higgs, 27 yrs., male, carpen-

ter, assets \$600.00, born in England, parents born in England; Elizabeth [Stowe] Higgs, 24 yrs., female, born in England, parents born in England; Susanna Higgs, 1 yr., female, born in New York, parents born in New York."²

Nearly a year later, another birth occurred in the family on 2 August 1851 when Sophia Louisa Higgs was born in Utica, New York. Two years later, on 28 December 1853, a fifth child was born to the union. They named their daughter Anna Elizabeth. Their joy was mixed with sadness, however, when Sophia died the following year in 1854.

Family tradition indicates that Thomas and Elizabeth and their two daughters moved to Davenport, Iowa in 1854.³ They left a close circle of family and friends and three children buried in Utica. However, some of their extended family members migrated to Scott County, Iowa, earlier. W. V. Carr (Elizabeth's brother-in-law) and Daniel Stowe (Elizabeth's brother). When Thomas and Elizabeth arrived, they were greeted by family members who made the move somewhat easier than it may have been if these family members had not already migrated westward from New York to the Mississippi River town. A year after their arrival, Elizabeth's mother, Ann Kite Stowe Williams, arrived in Davenport.⁴

Iowa became the twenty-ninth state on 28 December 1846, nearly a decade before the Higgs family arrived. By the mid-1850s, when the Higgs family arrived, Davenport was the "boom town" of eastern Iowa. The population increased from forty-five hundred in 1853 to eleven thousand in 1856. The prosperous city received its name from Col. George Davenport, a resident of Rock Island, Illinois, at its founding in 1837. The town lies on the north bank of the Mississippi River at the foot of the upper rapids of the river.⁵

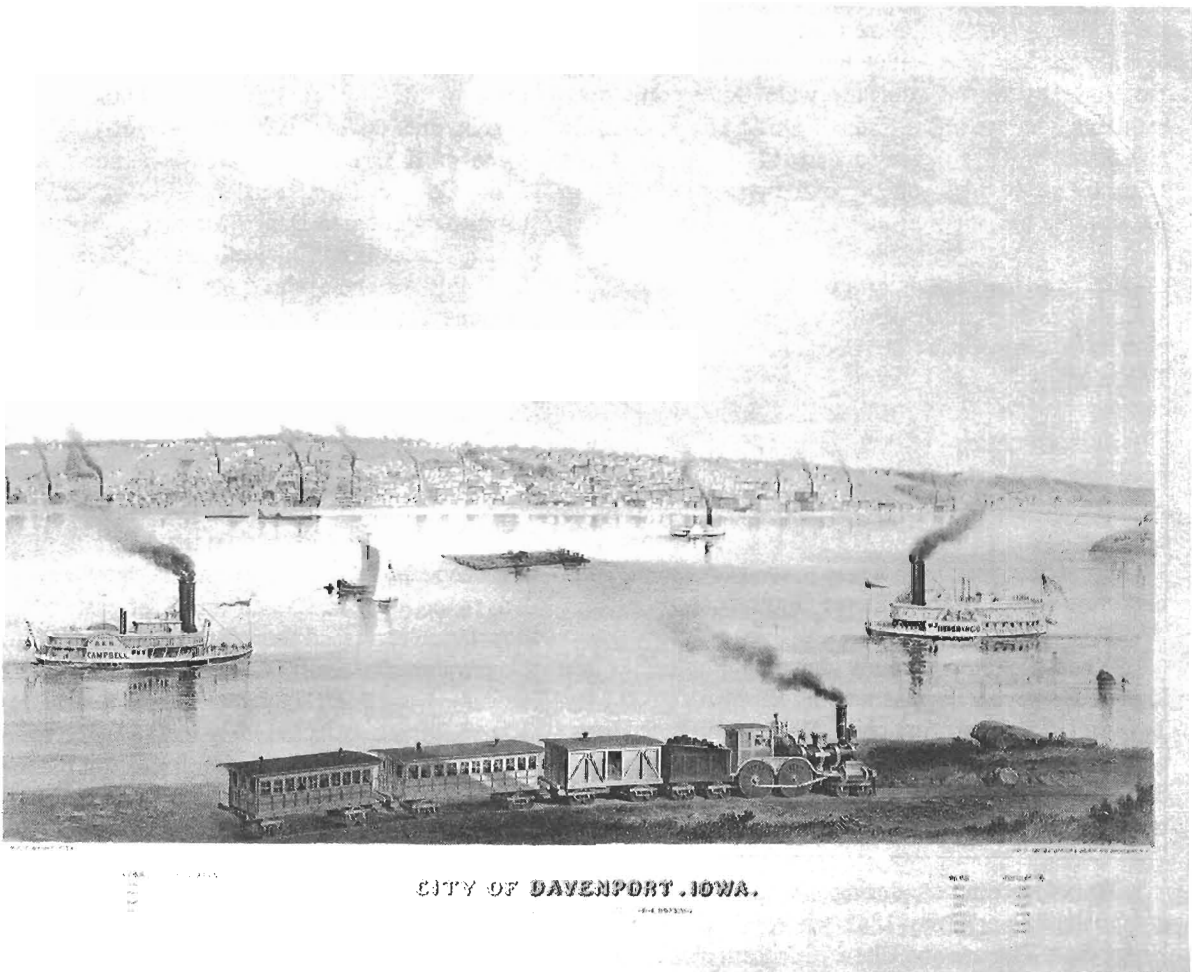
Iowa's native hardwood trees were not suitable for general building purposes, so the people looked to the pinery of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Logs were floated down the river to towns where sawmills could process the lumber. Davenport became an important commercial city primarily as a result of the lumber business.

Because Thomas Higgs was a skilled carpenter, he was able to find employment at Burnell, Gillet & Co.,

established in 1850.⁶ The lumber company was located on the corner of Scott and Front streets, and the site is still occupied by a lumber business today.⁷ A major part of the lumber enterprise of the city, Burnell, Gillet & Co. in the mid 1850s included a sawmill, sash, door, and blind factory, lath and shingle machines and two engines capable of a hundred horsepower. With capital of \$125,000, the company manufactured nearly six million feet of lumber, three million, and four million shingles at a total of \$160,000. The doors, sashes, and blinds produced another \$15,000 worth of business. The company employed some ninety hands.⁸

To augment the water transportation advantage of the thriving community, a steel road for steam engines moved its way toward the city from the east. The dream of a railway spanning the nation from the Atlantic sea-coast to the Mississippi River began to be fulfilled when the Chicago-Rock Island rail road reached the area on 22 February 1854. The Rock Island and Chicago Railroad terminated at Rock Island. A trip from New York by train took only three days, a far cry from the difficult land journey by wagon or foot.

The Mississippi and Missouri Railroad, another rail



Rufus Wright's painting of Davenport around 1858. Courtesy of Putnam Museum, Davenport, Iowa.
In 1856 the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad reached Iowa City, allowing the Latter-Saint emigrants to travel by train to the outfitting site. Once they passed over the Mississippi River at Rock Island, the train proceeded west through Davenport, reaching its terminus at Iowa City.

system, dreamed to move people and goods from the Mississippi River to Council Bluffs (some three hundred miles) as part of the urge to span the entire nation. The first division (some fifty-seven miles) from Davenport to Iowa City, the state's capital, was completed on 31 December 1854.

The two railroads were connected at Rock Island and Davenport by a bridge across the Mississippi. The 1,582-foot bridge was divided into five spans of 250 feet each. The bridge stood twenty-one feet above the high-water mark. The bridge also included a "draw" turn on a pier that was closed when railroad traffic reached the structure. Construction on the bridge commenced on 1 September 1854.

The Latter-day Saints made their way to the staging ground on the banks of Clear Creek near present-day Coralville. Many curious and interested persons arrived

in camp to listen and watch the handcart pioneers get ready for the long, hard march. Among them was Thomas Higgs. Apparently, his wife had become ill and had asked him to go down and find a Latter-day Saint elder to come and give her a blessing.⁹ Her brother, Daniel Stowe, joined the movement in 1834, followed by her mother, Anne Kite Stowe Williams, in 1841. Such family contact with the Church may explain Elizabeth's request.

An English convert on his way to Salt Lake City with a group of emigrants, Archer Walters, notes events at the campground on 19 May 1856—an important date in the lives of Thomas and Elizabeth Higgs:

Beautiful morning. Very warm. Camp meeting $\frac{1}{2}$ past 10. Open by singing. Prayer by Bro. Ellsworth. Bro. Van Cott introduced Bro. Spencer. He spoke short. Elder Ferguson was



Handcart Pioneers, ca. 1874. Courtesy of LDS Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City.

called to address the meeting. He spoke at some length. . . . Bro. McAllister sang a song "The Good Honest Heart" singing by the saints, "Upper California." Benediction by Elder Goodsall. Adjourned until ½ 1 o'clock. Very attentive. Bro. Bunker addressed the meeting."¹⁰

John D. T. McAllister, a returning missionary on his way from England to Salt Lake, adds:

Sunday 18th [May]. A.M. very many visitors in Camp. 10 ½ o. clock had meeting. Bro. Spencer spoke a short time. Brother Ferguson then preached on plurality of wives, adjourned for one hour. Half past one assembled again. Bros. Ellsworth, Bunker, and I addressed the multitude.¹¹

Apparently, this was a day of decision for Thomas because he was baptized in a stream near the camp by Elder Edward Bunker and confirmed by Elder William Walker while standing on the bank shortly after the meeting. Edward Bunker's autobiography notes his presence in Iowa during this period but does not mention the baptism.¹²

Daniel Spencer, another returning missionary, records: "Whilst at Iow[a] we Baptized Several person[s] . . . on[e] other family by the name of Higgs who accompenyed us on to S. Lak[e]."¹³ Family tradition notes: "At the mill [Burnell, Gillet & Co.] Thomas met a carpenter who converted him to Mormonism."¹⁴ Thomas's 1895 obituary adds: "A Scottish gentleman and a Latter-day Saint by the name of Edward Gillis was largely instrumental in his conversion to the Gospel of Christ."¹⁵ Thomas's baptism was the public acknowledgment of his inward conversion to the LDS faith and also signaled the beginning of a long journey from Davenport, Iowa, to the Manti, Utah, territory where he died in full faith with the Saints in 1895.

A few days later, another missionary in the group, John Van Cott, records in his journal:

Wednesday 21st Went over to Rock Island, succeeded in getting our freight over the river preparatory to putting on the cart. In the evening I baptized Elizabeth Higgs wife of Br.

Higgs, returned to the house and confirmed her. During my stay I was treated very kindly they rejoiced in the Privilege of having an Elder with them.¹⁶

Within weeks of her baptism, Elizabeth delivered her fifth child on 4 June 1856. They apparently named the baby boy after the father (Thomas) and gave him the last name of the Mormon prophet (Young) as a middle name. However, within a month, Thomas Young Higgs died less than a month later on 2 July 1856.

A few days later, area residents read a news report regarding the Mormon migration:

Mormons. Another company, consisting of some eight hundred persons, principally English, passed through town yesterday, en route for Utah. This train is from the city of London. There are about two hundred at the encampment, which is about two and one half miles from Iowa City. Last Sunday evening a difficulty arose between one of the men and one of the leaders, which resulted in producing disaffection in the camp, and a considerable number left, leaving behind them their deluded fellow Mormons and their Mormon faith, and denouncing the whole affair as a speculating scheme got up by those who take the responsibility of transporting them from England to Utah. It is a remarkable fact, that among the whole number of Mormons there encamped, not a German or an Irishman is to be found.¹⁷

Such reports did not dissuade the Higgs family members from continuing their own religious journey. Soon, the family (including Ann Kite Williams, Elizabeth's mother) made its way westward from Davenport. The exact date of this departure and whether they left eastern Iowa with a Mormon company is not known. As one family history states:

They started for the west. [Elizabeth] used a crutch for the first three hundred miles [across Iowa]. . . . Not far on the journey the oxen ran away causing an accident in which Mary Suzanna had her shoulder broken. Owing to the delay while the injured girl was attended to, they were asked to continue the journey with

the wagon company of Captain William B. Hodgetts.¹⁸

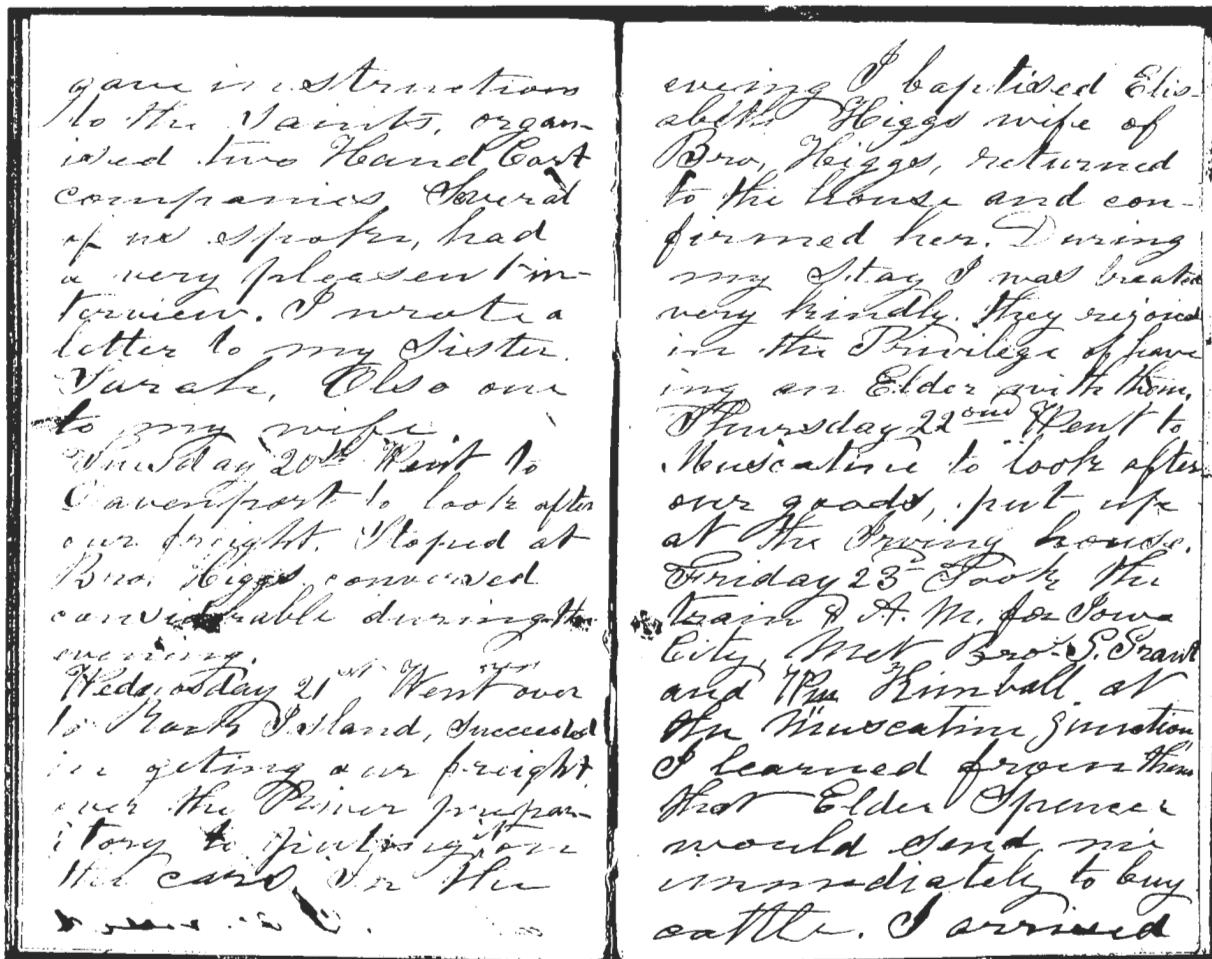
Apparently, they joined the Hodgetts wagon train at Florence, the Mormon staging ground at the Missouri River. The company of some 150 individuals, thirty-three wagons, eighty-four yoke of oxen, nineteen cows, and about two hundred fifty head of heifers and other loose cattle departed for Salt Lake City on 8 August.¹⁹

Later in the month, J. D. T. McAllister records:

(Wednesday) A.M. very busy in the Store and with the Camp. From this until the 5th of August, was so very buisy could not find time

to journalise. I then Started in Company with James Ferguson and Chauncey G. Webb. for Florence. Spent Some time with Captn John Hunts and Benjamin Hodgetts wagon Companies. and Captn Edwd Martins hand Cart Company it being the last of the Season. Exhorted them all to faithfulness. and Cheer'd them with the Songs of Zion.²⁰

The companies continued their march towards Utah—the Hodgetts company arrived in December 1856, just behind the Willie and Martin handcart companies. The “forgotten” wagon companies (Hunt and Hodgetts) played a critical role in the movement toward the Mormon Zion in 1856.



John Van Cott Diary, 21 May 1856. Courtesy of Harold B. Lee Library Archives, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

After a long and difficult journey, the Higgs family arrived in Salt Lake City. McAllister notes on 14 December 1856: "(Sunday) Met Several Saints that I knew who had just arrived in the valley they belonged to the two last wagon Companies of this years Emigrations."²¹ A few days later, the *Deseret News* reports:

Cap's. Hodgetts and Hunt's companies, with those who went to their relief, have been arriving within the past few days, and are now, Dec. 16, all in, except a few who will tarry at Fort Supply during the winter, and the small company previously mentioned as being stationed at the Devil's Gate. Bishop L. W. Hardy reports the new arrivals to be in fine spirits, notwithstanding their late hardships; and those who so liberally turned out to their relief report themselves ready to start out again, were it necessary. But few in the two rear companies were frosted, and of those only one or two severely. Bishop Hardy at once threw open his doors to the family in which were the ones most severely frosted, and under his judicious nursing, without amputation, they are rapidly recovering; though the one most frosted will, perhaps, be somewhat crippled in her feet. O world, what have you to say and do about the works coupled with faith manifested by those who have gladly faced winter on the Wasatch Mountains, to rescue fellow beings most of whom they had never seen? Or what about the rescued's being so joyous and so little injured amid such perils and

hardships? Or, again, what about that Spirit which causes so many to operate as one, upon the side of truth and humanity?²²

The last entry made by lead pencil in Captain John A. Hunt's camp journal (probably recording events for both wagon companies) reads: "The remainder of the Saints arrived in Great Salt Lake City today, the emigration being now completed."²³



*Elizabeth Stowe Higgs's Kettle, carried from Davenport, IA.
Courtesy of Lynn Wakefield, Provo, Utah.*

Decades later, in the 1950s, one of Thomas and Elizabeth's surviving daughters told her story of the trip from Davenport, Iowa, to the Salt Lake Valley. On her 102nd birthday, Mary Susanna Higgs Sleater recalled the events of her life. Reported in several newspapers at the time, the personal history was eventually reported and summarized in the third person in a publication of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers:

Mary Susanna Higgs Sleater was born February 11, 1849, in Utica, New York, to Thomas and Elizabeth Stowe Higgs, both of English descent. With her parents she arrived in Utah

December, 1856, after a hazardous journey of 5 ½ months. They had been frightened many times by herds of buffalo and at one place their wagon tipped over and run over and broke the shoulders of Mary Susanna, then a child of seven. There was no doctor, but they anointed the shoulders with oil and were able to continue the journey after one day's layover. Their first stopping place in the Valley, on that cold winter day, was the Council House, but they had a let-

ter of introduction to H. B. Clawson and were soon settled in two rooms of the Clawson home. . . . Her people had been well-to-do in the East, but her first Christmas stocking in Utah contained a piece of charcoal, a few sticks, a small potato, a small apple and way down in the toe one stick of candy.²⁴

Although we generally picture the 1856 emigration to the Mormon Zion in Utah as principle made-up of handcarts being pushed and pulled by European converts, many of their diaries, letters, and reminiscences reveal another view. First, the journey did not begin in the ports of Europe and Great Britain. Some converts to Mormonism gathered from North America, including Iowa residents, Thomas and Elizabeth Higgs, to the Promised Land in the Great Basin. Second, not all those coming to Zion in 1856 made their journey from the Iowa staging ground in handcart companies. The Higgs family, three generations, are representative of those who traveled in wagon companies to Zion. And as the *Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* notes on a winter day in December 1856:

The last part of Captain William B. Hodgett's train arrived in G.S.L. In the latter part of August were instructed to keep in the rear of Capt. James D. Willie's and Edward Martin's handcart companies, in case that the emigrant traveling in handcarts should become disabled and need what assistance teams could render them. It may be stated here that the two wagon trains led by Capt. Hodgett and John A. Hunt suffered as much from cold, snow and starvation as did the handcart companies mentioned.²⁵

NOTES

1. *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 18 (25 January 1856): 51-52.
2. U.S. Federal Census 1850 New York State.
3. Marchell Sleater Johnson, "Thomas Higgs," *Treasures of Pioneer History* 6 (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers), 66.
4. The *1856 Federal Census* notes that the Higgs family had lived in Davenport for two years when the census was taken, thus confirming family tradition; U.S. Federal Census 1856 Iowa State reports that she was sixty-five years of age, a widow, and a resident of Iowa for one year.
5. Summary based on Franc B. Wilkie, *Davenport Past and Present* (Davenport: House of Luse, Lane & Co., 1858).
6. *Directory of the City of Davenport for 1856-1857* (Davenport, 1856), 61.
7. Apparently, the present-day Mueller Lumber Company has occupied the site since 1868.
8. Wilkie, *Davenport Past and Present*, 266.
9. Family tradition as found in printed personal histories differ on the sequence of events. Some indicate that Thomas went to find the elders after he had been baptized and was ordained an "elder" and returned home to give his wife a priesthood blessing, as was the custom among the members of the LDS Church.
10. Archer Walters Journal, 18 May 1856, Archive Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as LDSCA.
11. John D. T. McAllister Journal, 18 May 1856, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library Archives, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; hereafter cited as BYU.
12. "Autobiography of Edward Bunker, 1822-1901," 15, BYU.
13. Daniel Spencer Journal 1856, LDSCA.
14. "Thomas Higgs History," unpublished family history by his sons, Brigham Thomas and Alpha Jedde Higgs, in possession of author.
15. *Deseret Evening News*, 24 May 1895.
16. John Van Cott Journal, 21 May 1856, BYU.
17. *Daily Iowa State Democrat*, 9 July 1856.

18. Johnson, "Thomas Higgs," *Treasures of Pioneer History*, 66-67.
19. "Church Emigration: Captain Hodgett's Wagon Train," LDSCA.
20. McAllister Journal, 4 June 1856.
21. *Ibid.*, 14 December 1856.
22. *Deseret News*, 17 December 1856.
23. Hunt and Hodgetts Wagon Companies "Official Camp Journal," 15 December 1856, LDSCA. This journal was apparently kept by a clerk in the Hunt Company; but during the last few days before their arrival to Salt Lake City, the Hunt and Hodgetts companies did find themselves near each other in the mountains east of the valley. Mel Bashore at the LDS Church Historical Department has done the most work on these two companies and provided some information reflected in this article.
24. Agnes Brunch, "Susanna—102 years," *Our Pioneer Heritage* 7 (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1964), 373.
25. Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 15 December 1856.

NATIVE AMERICANS

Leonora Cannon Taylor, found in Journal and papers of George John Taylor, LDS Archives

June 5, 1846 left Mount Pisgah crossed middle fork of [G]rand river went about 4 miles Amos Fielding stayed with us all night on his way to Nauvoo from B. Y. Camp the[y] were 27 miles ahead

6th Amos left on his way to England to buy what Provisions we shall need We went to travel down the ridge between the Ottawa and stream called one hundred and two . . . tonight one of the Pottawatamy Chiefs came to us on a lovely little poney[,] black as jet and dresed as fine as it could be, so was the chief[,] he gave him some biscutes and tobacco[,] he let the children ride on his poney[,] he said he lived 4 miles of[f][.]

June 12th . . . I was delighted to see the Indians, Squase, and papoces, all dressed up so smart[,] painted, feathers, beads, blankets, and everything fantastical the[y] could put on, there was a kickapoo present who talked a little English[,] a very good looking man and dressed in a large shawl[,] Nanny fell in love with him, his wigwam was 18 miles of[f][.] he said there was a very wide creek there which our brethern had made a temporary bridge over of logs[,] I dare not look at them cross least I should see them break through[,] I walkd over and found a party of Indians busily engaged playing cards[,] a chief came up to me and shook hands[,] very friendly[,] the[y] called the River Nishnibotney[,] it forked about that place[,] first was bridged here[,] where we forded it was wide and rapid[,] the Indians followed us in great number to the side of a hill where we camp[,] the[y] principally road on Poneys decorated in every possible way[,] there were Kickapoos, Pottawatamies and Ottawas[,] several Chiefs came to our tent but the[y] could understand very little that we said[,] there interpreter was at counsel Blufs for which we were very sorry[,] Mr. T[aylor] talked to several and answered there questions (which were very numerous) as well as possibly told our reasons for leaving our homes and wandering with our poor children in the wilderness[,] the squaws brough Salt to trade and green mustard and beads[,] the[y] wanted ribons and whiskey[,] we gave them some thing to eat and milk for there papposes[,] there was one a month old, a fat little thing swathed to its basked which [was] ornamented with yellow bows, the[y] all seemed much pleased[,] we staid with them severall hours[.]