

## WILLIAM HUNTINGTON: THE IOWA EXPERIENCE

*Ray L. Huntington*

One of the early stalwarts and devoted members of the kingdom is William Huntington. Much of his life parallels the early history of the LDS Church, beginning with his conversion in upstate New York, his ensuing moves to Kirtland, Ohio, Missouri, and Nauvoo, followed by his death in Mount Pisgah, Iowa, during the Church's exodus to the West in 1846. This paper will provide a brief background and early history of William Huntington along with a more-detailed account of his experiences in Iowa and Mount Pisgah.

### BACKGROUND AND EARLY HISTORY

William Huntington was born 28 March 1784 in New Grantham, Cheshire County, New Hampshire. At the age of twenty, he moved with his family to Watertown, New York, where he married Zina Baker in 1806. William and Zina raised a large family of nine children and apparently were devoted parents. From his journal entries, we learn that William was a farmer who experienced periods of both great prosperity and destitution.

In 1816, William informs us and his wife united themselves with the Presbyterian faith and "walked with them some fourteen years in good standing."<sup>1</sup> As a result of several doctrinal questions regarding Presbyterian theology and sincere prayer, the Lord revealed to him in 1832 that the Presbyterian faith was not the church that Christ had organized during his earthly ministry. Through a manifestation of the Spirit, William was told that "he should live to see the true church of Christ, having the gifts and graces as did the Church in Christ's day."<sup>2</sup> Following this remarkable experience, William says that "I felt it my duty to turn away" from the

Presbyterian faith.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, he devoted a great deal of time to Bible study to determine which church patterned itself after the New Testament church. Of this experience, his daughter, Zina Diantha, says:

I can remember my father sitting quietly perusing the Bible, determined to find the right way, his firm lips closed with the determination to succeed if success was possible. After many hours of study and reading, aided no doubt with hours of anxious prayer, father one day declared that none of the churches were right according to the way he read the Bible, for none of them had the organization peculiar to the primitive church. There were no prophets, no apostles, no spiritual gifts as were possessed by the ancient saints. Nothing could shake him from this belief, and the more he thought and conversed upon the matter, the plainer and simpler it seemed to be presented to his understanding.<sup>4</sup>

During this period of his life, William and Zina received a copy of the Book of Mormon from their neighbor, Joseph Wakefield, who had met the Prophet Joseph Smith. In the winter of 1832-33, William "read the Book of Mormon, believed it with all his heart and preached it almost every day to his neighbors and everybody he could see."<sup>5</sup> Both William and his wife were baptized in April 1835 by a Mormon named Dutcher. William's enthusiasm for his new-found faith was matched by that of Zina.

In the spring of 1836, Joseph Smith Sr. encouraged the Huntington family to move to Kirtland, Ohio. Soon

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thereafter, William sold his farm in Watertown, New York, and moved his family to Kirtland, Ohio. In his words, "In August, 1836, I sold my farms for \$3,500, which was \$1,000 less than its value, and in two months I disposed of my stock, produce, farming utensils, and closed all of my business."<sup>6</sup> In October 1836, he left New York in company with a large group of Saints under the direction of Orson Pratt and Luke S. Johnson. Once in Kirtland, William purchased forty acres of land and a two-story house from Jacob Bump for \$3,000. William later lost the farm because of the fraudulent dealings of Bump, whom William later referred to as a "dissipated, dishonest, dissenter."<sup>7</sup>

William Huntington was a charter member of the Kirtland Safety Society; and when the bank failed, William lost \$500. The bank failure, coupled with the loss of his farm, placed Huntington and his family in a state of extreme poverty. Of this destitute situation, William's son, Oliver, wrote, "[W]hen the bank went broke we were broken, and as poor as the best of Mormons; . . . we expected to become poor, but not quite so quick."<sup>8</sup>

Brigham Young described this time period in Kirtland as "a crisis, when earth and hell seemed leagued to overthrow the Prophet and Church of God. The knees of many of the strongest men in the Church faltered."<sup>9</sup> Despite the opposition and influence of the Kirtland apostates, William and his family remained steadfast and committed to the Church and its leaders. During the eighteen months Huntington lived in Kirtland, his home was used as a hiding place and refuge for Joseph Smith Sr. and his sons Hyrum, Samuel, and Carlos while they hid from the Kirtland apostates and enemies of the Church.

In July 1838, with the loan of two oxen and \$32, William moved his family to Missouri where he eventually settled in Adam-ondi-Ahman. Following the surrender of the Church in Far West and the surrounding Mormon communities, he was selected as a member of the committee to oversee the exodus of the poor and impoverished Saints to the state of Illinois. Consequently, he and his family were some of the last Saints to leave Missouri. Together with the body of the Church, William settled in Commerce (Nauvoo), Illinois. He comments, "After our arrival in Nauvoo, my family was blessed with good health and prosperity until the

24th of June, 1839. At that time my wife was taken sick with the chills and fever. She lived until the 8th of July and expired at the age of 53."<sup>10</sup>

Because illness had crippled his family, only two sons, John and William D., were able to attend the funeral of their mother, Zina. As a final tribute to his loving wife, William recorded in his journal that "through all our trials and scenes of affliction; by water, by land, in war in Missouri, in moving to this place, in her sickness to her death, she never murmured or complained."<sup>11</sup>

During the conference of October 1839, William was called to serve on the High Council of Nauvoo. As a member of the council, he helped to lay the cornerstone of the Nauvoo Temple. In 1840, he married Lydia Partridge, the widow of Edward Partridge, the first bishop of the Church.

#### EXODUS FROM NAUVOO TO MOUNT PISGAH

Before the Church's expulsion from Nauvoo, William was appointed a captain over one hundred in Amasa Lyman's company. On 9 February 1846, William recounted his experience of leaving his beloved Nauvoo:

I left my house in the City of Joseph at 12:00 p.m., together with my family. I crossed the Mississippi at 9:00 at night and stayed on the bank of the river by myself, having sent my family the same night to Father Tanners. I followed them the next day in company with my son John. We remained there one week; while at the same time the Church continued to cross the river day and night and have encamped six miles from the river on Sugar Creek. On Tuesday at 2:00 p.m. a terrible event transpired. One of the flat boats that was employed in carrying the Brethren across the river sprang a leak, with some 30 persons, consisting of men, women, and children, with one wagon, two yoke of oxen, two cows, and one calf. The boat sank and rested on a sand bar in five feet of water. The loading all floated in the river. One yoke of oxen was drowned, along with the calf. All the people were saved, with the remainder of the cattle. Much of the goods were lost.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of February, several thousand of the Saints were camped at Sugar Creek, Iowa, which was



*Sugar Creek, Iowa*

located about nine miles from Nauvoo. The weather was extremely cold and wet. During the time of 19-25 February, William reported that "a severe snow storm commenced and snowed 24 hours; very cold, snowed six inches deep; weather cold with some snow, the health of the people remains very good."<sup>13</sup>

On 1 March 1846, the order was given to leave Sugar Creek and begin the arduous journey across Iowa. Snow and rain had made the roads almost impassable. The move from Sugar Creek to the second rest camp at Richardson's Point was slow and tedious. On the sixth day following their departure from Sugar Creek, William says his company had "an extreme bad road on the bottom and up the bluff" such that "President John Smith turned over his wagon." William further says that the "damage was trifling, however, Sister Smith was slightly injured."<sup>14</sup> Later that night, William's company

"camped on the prairie, had no fire and ate a cold supper."<sup>15</sup>

Although William's family enjoyed good health during this time, many of the other Saints were not as fortunate. On 20 March, he wrote:

[A] son of Sidney Tanner, about eighteen months of age expired. This is the first death in Amasa Lyman's Company. There have been two other deaths; brother Edwin Little, a nephew of Brigham Young, and Sister Spencer, the wife of Orson Spencer, all have died while the camp has been here at Richardson's Point.<sup>16</sup>

Another trial the Saints encountered while crossing Eastern Iowa was the dwindling supply of food and provisions. Consequently, many of the men were forced to

look for work in the established areas of Iowa. William says that many of the men “were able to chop and split rails,” in return for corn for their animals, while the young boys were “husking corn by the job” and earned “dinner for husking a certain pile of corn.”<sup>17</sup> If work could not be found, then other means of obtaining provisions were utilized, such as trading horses for oxen. One such trading mission is described by William:

Myself and John Tanner left with five horses to trade them for Oxen. We traveled from Vanburen County north into Jefferson County, Iowa. I returned on Thursday evening having made no trade for my oxen. On my return at Chequest Creek I met with two men and proposals were made for a trade on the following day. Accordingly my son, John, and Nathan Tanner took my horses and went to affect a trade.<sup>18</sup>

Rain and snow continued to plague the Saints in Iowa throughout the months of March and early April in 1846. Journal comments, such as “continues to rain and snow through the day. . . the roads impassable,”<sup>19</sup> were frequent entries in William’s journal. His entry of April 6 is very descriptive of the weather and hardships faced by the Saints in Iowa:

Commenced to rain at 6:00 a.m. It rained all day. The South wind shifted into the West at 10:00 in the evening. Thundered and rained in torrents. The wind blew a gale . . . [I]t was with difficulty the brethren could hold their tents up. Brother Reece’s tent blew down. Doctor Reece’s horse got mired next to his wagon and chilled and died. We had a disagreeable night.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the ordeals generated by illness and harsh weather conditions in Iowa, many of the Saints’ faith and commitment to the Church’s leadership were also tested during this difficult period. One such trial involved those members who had deeded all their property to the Trustees of the Church (Quorum of the Twelve) as a result of the October 1845 conference held in Nauvoo. Consequently, the wagons and teams many of the Saints used in their exodus from Nauvoo were “public” wagons belonging to the Church.

Following a meeting at Brigham Young’s camp on

18 April 1846, those Saints using wagons and teams belonging to the Church were asked to relinquish them so they could either be used by the advance companies who were to press ahead or be returned to Nauvoo to provide transportation for the poor and destitute who were unable to leave with the main body. Brigham Young’s mandate was clearly an ordeal for William, who now had to surrender his only means of transportation and remain in one of the established settlements in eastern Iowa until a wagon and team could be made available. Commenting on this situation, William recorded on 18 April 1846:

A council [was] called to commence fitting a company for the [Rocky] mountains. All the teams put into the camp by individuals to help off [deeded to] the Church were called for. Orders were given by President Young for all wagons loaded with families drawn by public teams were to be unloaded and brought to him on Monday morning next. The families are to be helped up to the contemplated farm [an established settlement] and there be left until such times as they can fit themselves for the mountains. Here I have one of the most trying scenes I ever had had, as I have no team nor wagon here of my own. I expect on Monday morning to unload the wagon I have been using, put my goods on the ground and helped up to the stopping place [an established settlement, such as Garden Grove]; having agreed to [the] counsel previous to leaving Nauvoo, given a deed of my lot to the Trustees in order to fulfill my covenant made at the October conference. As also all the Church to do all we could to help the Church, therefore, I am now [doing] according to the President’s order to be left on the camp ground and me effects carred up to Grand River settlement [Garden Grove] and fit out myself.<sup>21</sup>

William also informs us that on 20 April 1846, “Brothers Lee Bybee and Mark Hall arrived from Nauvoo; came here for the express purpose to take back two of our wagons: mine and Henry’s. An arrangement was made to leave them.”<sup>22</sup>

William’s response to Brigham’s directive is an enduring testament of William’s commitment and faith to both the leaders of the Church and the God of Heaven.

His willingness to “give up” his wagon, despite the lack of assurances that another wagon would be made available to him in the immediate future, was done because of the sacred covenants he had made before leaving Nauvoo. Clearly, no hint of bitterness or disillusionment is evidenced in William’s journal entries associated with this situation.

As the Saints moved westward across Iowa, three settlements (Garden Grove, Mount Pisgah, and Council Bluffs) were established to enable the Saints to grow crops and build housing until sufficient preparations could be made to continue the journey westward. On Tuesday, 21 May, William Huntington was called to preside over the Mount Pisgah settlement. Charles Rich and Ezra T. Benson were called to serve as counselors. Regarding this event, William says:

A council [was held] of which I was appointed by the Church in council to preside over that portion of the Church that will stop here [Mount Pisgah]. I am to preside over spiritual as well as temporal things. Brothers Ezra T. Benson and Charles Rich are to act as presidents with me.<sup>23</sup>

Mount Pisgah is located about thirty miles northwest of Garden Grove on a narrow ridge running near the middle fork of the Grand River. The site for the settlement had originally been identified by Parley P. Pratt on 16 May. In his journal, Parley says:

Riding about three or four miles through beautiful prairies, I came suddenly to some round and sloping hills, grassy and crowned with beautiful groves of timber, while alternate open groves and forests seemed blended in all the beauty and harmony of an English park. While beneath and beyond, on the West, rolled a main branch of Grand River, with its rich bottoms of alternate forest and prairie. As I approached this lovely scenery several deer and wolves, being startled at the sight of me, abandoned the place and bounded away till lost from my sight amid the groves.

Being pleased and excited at the varied beauty before me, I cried out, “this is Mount Pisgah.” I returned to camp, with the report of having found the long sought river, and we soon

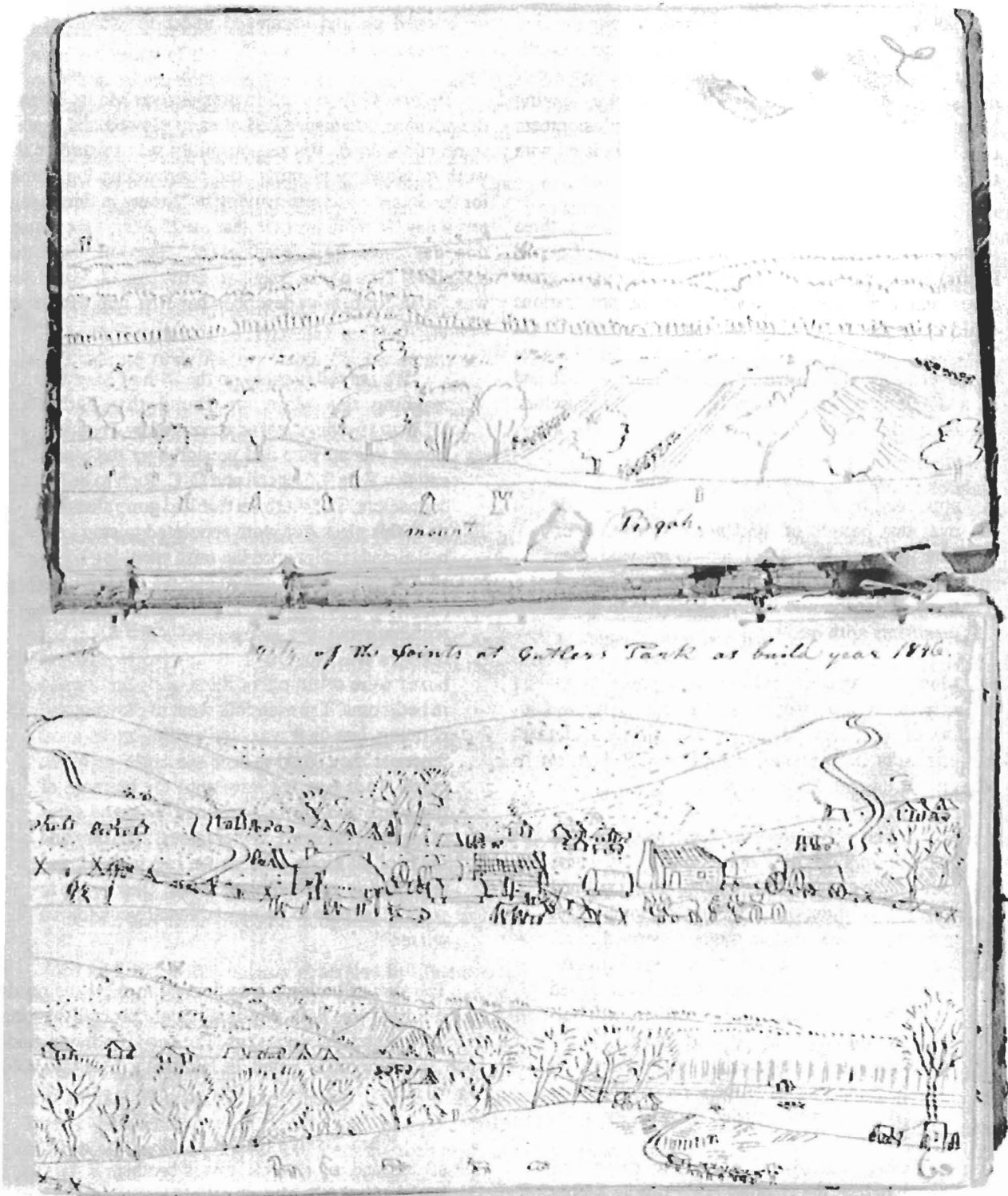
moved on and encamped under the shade of these beautiful groves.<sup>24</sup>

Before William’s call to preside over Mount Pisgah, the advance companies had already plowed and fenced some of the land. His responsibility was to further the work of plowing, planting, and constructing log homes for the Saints who were arriving in “twenty to thirty wagons a day.”<sup>25</sup> William says that on 23 May, “six houses this day have been commenced. Two of them for myself.”<sup>26</sup> One of the Saints to arrive on 24 May 1846 was Sarah Rich, who describes her first impressions of Mount Pisgah:

We arrived in camp on the 24th of May. On reaching this place we found that Father William Huntington was appointed by President Young to stop here and preside over the place, and that Ezra T. Benson and C. C. Rich to be his counselors. The brethren that had gone ahead of us to this place and were appointed to stop here had already commenced to raise small log houses. So we lived in our tent and wagon until our men could put up one log house and cover it with bark and dirt; and we had a dirt floor, but our tent was used as a room, also our wagon boxes were taken off of the wheels and turned in bedrooms. The men folk went to plowing and planting, late as it was, and putting up as good fences as they could to keep the cattle out of the crops. So it was not long until the brethren of this place had got in about one thousand acres of ground into grain, and potatoes, squashes and seeds of all kinds, such as we had with us, and they had it partly fenced when they went to work to prepare to fix up places to live in for the winter.<sup>27</sup>

The task of building a settlement to meet the needs of the Saints was both physically and spiritually taxing for William and his counselors. The need for divine guidance and support is noted in William’s 31 May 1846 journal entry:

[T]he Twelve and others, [including] myself and my council, this is brothers Ezra T. Benson and Charles C. Rich went onto the prairie some two miles north and pitched a tent. [We] clothes ourselves according to the order of



*Peter Hansen's drawing of Mount Pisgah from Heber C. Kimball Diary.  
Courtesy of LDS Church Archives*

the Priesthood and had for the first time a prayer meeting in which [we asked] for such things as we stood in need of.<sup>28</sup>

Many of the Saints arriving in Mount Pisgah were physically exhausted from their journey across eastern Iowa. Consequently, illness and death were frequently reported in journal entries. Zina, William Huntington's daughter, says:

Sickness was so prevalent, and deaths so frequent, that help enough could not be obtained to make coffins, and many of the dead were wrapped in their grave clothes and buried with split logs at the bottom of the grave and brush at the sides that being all that could be done for them by their mourning friends.<sup>29</sup>

Adding to this sad commentary, Sarah Rich describes the deaths of several individuals in Mount Pisgah:

Brother and Sister Judson and their daughter, are also buried there in one grave. The little girl was buried one day, and on the following her father and mother died. There were so many sick that they could not find well ones enough to bury them for four days, so they were laid in one grave. They left three small children; one died soon after, and the other two, Timothy and Mary Jane Judson, Mr. Rich and I took, and brought them to Salt Lake<sup>30</sup>

William also reported the presence of "much sickness in the camp . . . . [B]rother Rich and myself spend most of the time visiting the sick . . . . [A]gue, and fever and chill are the great difficulties the Saints have in Mt. Pisgah."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps as many as 150 Saints died in Mount Pisgah during the first six months of its existence.<sup>32</sup>

#### THE MORMON BATTALION

On 26 June 1846, William reported the visit of Captain James Allen, who had been assigned by Colonel Stephen W. Kearny to recruit and enlist Mormons for twelve months in the war between the United States and Mexico:

[T]his day a United States officer from Fort Leavinsworth arrived here with instructions

from Colonel Kearny, commanding officer. [He came with an] invitation from the President of the United States to enlist 500 Mormons to engage in war between the United States and Mexico. I was introduced to the gentleman and had a pleasant interview with him.<sup>33</sup>

Naturally, the Saints in Mount Pisgah were suspicious of the government's offer. William's journal entry clearly validates these feelings:

I called the Brethren together. Captain Allen delivered an address to the Brethren appropriate to his foolish errand. I followed him with an address by way of commendation or as the old proverb says: answering a fool according to his folly.<sup>34</sup>

Despite William's distrust, he kindly gave Captain Allen a letter of introduction to Brigham Young, who was then residing at Council Bluffs. On 6 July, Brigham Young arrived in Mount Pisgah and recommended support for Captain Allen's initiative. In a formal meeting with the Saints in Mount Pisgah on 7 July, William says that President Young "laid before the meeting [his desire] to raise 500 men to go to the Mexican war by way of Santa Fe."<sup>35</sup> William reported that Brigham's encouragement and support of Allen's call to serve "raised in all at this point about eighty men."<sup>36</sup>

William was not immune to the same illnesses that plagued the camp of Israel in Mount Pisgah. Physically weakened by the months of hardship endured since leaving Nauvoo and exhausted from the strenuous labors associated with his ecclesiastical calling, William died on 19 August 1846. In a letter to her brothers and sister, Zina, William's daughter, describes the events leading up to his death:

He was taken sick Monday but was on the stand with Brother Benson. Brother Benson was going to Boston on his business. The morning of the second he had a chill, took to his bed, he walked out three or four mornings in succession, but his chills grew harder, the next Wednesday he was into my room for the last time. Everything was done that could be done, but to no purpose. Brother Charles C. Rich was as kind as an own son, he was sick thirteen

days. I sat up five nights, we watched over him; the order met in a tent close by morning and evening to ask God to spare him, but it seemed that God had another calling for him, he had sinking spells, just as he did in May. He continued to sink every day, he said, "I cannot stand it long," but I could not give him up, therefore, I did not converse with him about dying. Tuesday eighteen chills came on about six in the evening. He had his senses all day, spoke to my babe and kissed it once, as he opened his eyes he said, "I have received the blessing of Jacob." He spoke of the weather, it being cloudy, after his chill came on he raised up on the pillow and spoke distinctly and said, "May my spirit be attended by the spirit of the Holy Ghost." He then laid himself down upon the pillow and sank into deep sleep, no more to wake, no more. I watched over him until morning. I this morning gave him up. He expired fifteen minutes before eleven o'clock a.m.

He was dressed in his priestly garb from head to foot, looked more like an angel than anything else. He was buried at two p.m. Brother Rich made some remarks. \_\_\_ sang a song and a prayer was made. I then was able to follow him to the grave. Sister Boss and I rode with the corps. O Dimick [William's son], it was a sad day to us all. Although we know he was prepared and has gone to rest, this comforts me and we know not how soon we may follow him to a work of spirits, and if we can have our work as well done as he it is all we want to ask although it leaves a great responsibility upon the children left to cling together the truth in righteousness and carry out his measures.<sup>37</sup>

In a tribute to his father, Oliver B. Huntington says:

In the hardest of trials and deepest troubles, I never heard him murmur or complain, with a seeming air of disregard to pain or suffering, God had empowered him and no has a right to judge him. William Huntington's saying was "swallow whatever the doctor give you, for is he does not know what will cure you, nobody does."<sup>38</sup>

Like many of the Saints who left Nauvoo to face the

uncertainties of Iowa and beyond, William Huntington's love and zeal for the Church and its leadership were not surpassed by anyone else. His gentle nature and quiet certitude made him a beloved leader to all who knew him.

#### NOTES

1. William Huntington, "Diary of William Huntington 1816-1846," Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1.

2. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saints Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: the author, 1922) 1:369.

3. Huntington.

4. Zina Diantha Huntington Young, "How I Gained My Testimony," *Young Woman's Journal* 4 (April 1892): 317, cited in Janet Peterson and Larene Gaunt, *Elect Ladies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 45.

5. Hoyt W. Brewster Jr., *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 258.

6. Huntington, 2.

7. Ibid.

8. Oliver Boardman Huntington, "History of Oliver Boardman Huntington, 1842-1900," typescript, LDS Archives, 27, cited in Janet Peterson and Larene Gaunt, *Elect Ladies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 48.

9. *Millennial Star*, 25:487.

10. Huntington, 10.

11. Ibid., 11.

12. Ibid., 46.

13. Ibid., 47.

14. Ibid., 48.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 50. Following Sugar Creek, Richardson's Point was the Saints' second rest camp. It was located about fifty-three miles from Nauvoo.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 49-50.



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20. Ibid., 52.
21. Ibid., 56.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 65.
24. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 342-43.
25. Ibid., 66.
26. Ibid.
27. Sarah DeArmon Pea Rich, "Autobiography of Sarah Rich, 1814-1893," typescript, Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 56-57.
28. Huntington, 66.
29. "History of Zina D. H. Young," typescript in possession of Oa Jacobs Cannon, p. 2, cited in Janet Peterson and Larene Gaunt, *Elect Ladies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 51.
30. Rich, 60-61.
31. Ibid., 76.
32. Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing, 1941), 546.
33. Huntington, 68.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 70.
36. Ibid.
37. "History of Zina D. H. Young," 8.
38. "History of Oliver Boardman Huntington, 1842-1900," typescript, LDS Archives, as quoted in Oa Jacobs Cannon, "The Life of Henry Bailey Jacobs."