

Historic Nathaniel H. Felt Home Dedicated in Salem, Massachusetts

Jonathan C. Felt

Nathaniel Henry Felt lived an abundant and fruitful life of service to his family, community, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although he is not a famous LDS figure, he is an example of someone willing to sacrifice everything for the cause he loved most.

Felt was born at Salem, Massachusetts, on 6 February 1816 to Nathaniel and Hannah Reeves Felt. At the age of seven, the senior Felt died, leaving the family in dire financial circumstances that prohibited young Nathaniel from obtaining advanced schooling. Instead, at the age of fifteen, he became an apprentice to a tailor in the town of Lynn, Massachusetts. Six years later, he purchased an existing mercantile business that manufactured clothing and sold imported textiles to the local community. Nathaniel and his brother John enlarged this enterprise to include both the African and Chinese trade, employing up to twenty hired hands. By the age of twenty-six, he was living in one of Salem's finest, all-brick homes with a handsome double parlor.

In 1843, Nathaniel Felt joined the Church of Jesus Christ and presided over the LDS branch in Salem. He also became closely associated with Brigham Young when Young visited the Salem area in 1844. Heber C. Kimball and Orson Pratt also frequented Felt's home. Felt eventually made his own mark on the Restoration. In 1845, he and his family left Salem to join with the main body of the Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo. In 1847, ill health caused him to postpone his overland journey to the Salt Lake Valley, so he and his family moved to St. Louis, where for three years he presided over the Latter-day Saints who had temporarily located there.

After arriving in Salt Lake in 1850, he was called to be a traveling bishop. In 1851, he was elected as an alderman for Salt Lake City and also was elected to the House of Representatives in the first territorial legislature. He subsequently served three missions for the Church—the first to the Eastern States (1854–56), then to Great Britain where he assisted with the publication of the *Millennial Star* and later presided over the London district (1865–67), followed by a second mission to the Eastern States where he labored primarily in his native state of Massachusetts (1869–70). In 1873, he contracted a severe illness from which he never fully recovered. He died 27 January 1887 at the age of seventy.¹

As a young Felt descendent, I grew up with only a vague idea about our first ancestral member of the LDS Church. As a boy, I asked my father what the greater Felt family was like. He said, “Felt is a good, honest name.” Not fully satisfied, I found my family’s pedigree chart and learned for the first time about my relationship to Nathaniel H. Felt. I started asking such questions as Where did he live? and What kind of person was he?

When I was seventeen, I persuaded my parents to drive the family from Layton, Utah, to Salem, Massachusetts, for a family pilgrimage. But my inexperienced mind could not yet pinpoint anything specific about Nathaniel H. Felt. Sixteen years later, I traveled again to Salem. By this time, I was prepared to do a better job at fact-finding. On this occasion, with the help of a librarian from the Essex Institute, I discovered the “stately home” of Nathaniel Felt—the home he left behind when he moved to Nauvoo, Illinois, shortly after the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Significantly, I also discovered two priceless relics—a patent that Nathaniel Felt secured from England in the 1860s for the waterproofing of leather and a fourth-edition 1842 Book of Mormon with Nathaniel’s name scrolled on the title page. I was also introduced to an architectural historian who was conducting a study of the former Felt home. In 1992, I actually tried to buy the house, but moving it proved to be much too daunting and expensive.

In 2001–2002, the Peabody Essex Museum decided not to tear down the home that had long served as a departmental office but to move the house from its original location on Liberty Street to Charter Street. As a result, an adjacent new museum addition and the new Axelrod Garden Walkway situates the 1840 home in a more visible and attractive location. It was about this same time that my personal involvement in Salem was reawakened by Debra Benvie, a local LDS Church member; John R. Grimes of the Peabody Essex Museum; and Dr. Fred E. Woods of BYU and executive director of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation. Through their direct efforts, the house was preserved, and a fully operational branch of the Family History Library system of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints exists today inside

the James Duncan Phillips Library on the museum's campus. Debra Benvie has been the main driving force behind our efforts. Future plans for the house could include an expansion of family history services and other proposed uses.

On 16 October 2004, a few Latter-day Saints in the Salem area joined with city officials and representatives of the Peabody Essex Museum to dedicate a plaque at the Nathaniel H. Felt home. During the plaque ceremony, Salem Mayor Stanley J. Usovicz told an audience gathered at the Phillips Library of the Peabody Essex Museum that Nathaniel H. Felt was a man who "followed his beliefs . . . and this is what has made America great." Kim R. Wilson, chairman of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, referred to Doctrine and Covenants 111 and said Salem's treasure was its people.

The inscription on the plaque reads:

Home of Nathaniel H. Felt

This house, formerly located at 10 Liberty Street, was once the home of Mormon pioneer and local church leader Nathaniel Henry Felt (1816–1887).

Born and raised in Salem, Nathaniel and his brother John ran a tailoring business at 217 Essex Street. In 1839, he married Eliza Ann Preston, also of Salem. In 1843, they joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and along with 120 new converts, began a small branch of the Church in Salem. Because of Nathaniel's position as branch president, this house became an important Mormon meeting place.

In the late spring of 1844, Brigham Young sent his fourteen-year-old daughter Vilate to live with the Felt family while she attended finishing school in Salem. Later that summer, Brigham Young visited Salem several times while campaigning for Joseph Smith (LDS Church founder), a U.S. presidential candidate. It was on one of these visits to the area that Brigham Young and local Church members first heard news of Smith's murder at Carthage, Illinois, on June 27, 1844.

One year later, Nathaniel Felt, his family, and Vilate Young left from this house to embark on the arduous journey west, eventually settling in what would become Salt Lake City, Utah. There, Nathaniel became a highly respected member of the community, with a public career that included service as Salt Lake City alderman and Utah Territorial representative.

Plaque donated by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation
and the Nathaniel H. Felt Family Association

Notes

1. See Andrew Jenson, "Nathaniel Henry Felt," *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1914), 2:380–83.



*Nathaniel H. Felt home, Salem, Massachusetts, 2004. Felt joined the LDS Church in 1843 and presided over the LDS branch in Salem. The house became an important meeting place for the Latter-day Saints in the area.
Photograph by Jonathan C. Felt.*



*Jonathan C. Felt (left), and Kim R. Wilson (right) holding the plaque placed by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation on the Nathaniel H. Felt home, Salem, Massachusetts, 16 October 2004. The home is owned by the Peabody Essex Museum.
Photograph by Jonathan C. Felt.*