

The Short-Lived Mormon Encounter of Pennsylvania State University's First President: Six Letters from the Family of Evan Pugh

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Evan Pugh, the first president of Pennsylvania State University (called the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania at that time), had a brilliant early career in the field of agricultural science. Born in Oxford, Chester County, in southeastern Pennsylvania in 1829, Pugh went on to study in Europe at the Universities of Leipzig, Gottingen, and Heidelberg and in Paris. Pugh made his mark on the field of agricultural science with his research on the “assimilability of free nitrogen by vegetation.” The crowning event in his career was his appointment to the head of the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania at the age of thirty-one. Unfortunately, Pugh’s career was cut short by a combination of injuries sustained from a carriage accident and his exhausting workload. Evan Pugh died on 29 April 1864 at the age of thirty-six, ending the career of one of the most promising educators in the United States.¹

One item that is absent from Pugh’s biographies is his brief stint with Mormonism, as detailed by the following letters. Pugh apparently joined the Mormons in 1840 at the age of twelve and left for Nauvoo four years later. Pugh’s exodus prompted the letters from his family to a cousin, Achilles, living in Cincinnati. The final letter indicates that, to the relief of his family, Evan dropped out of Mormonism as a result of the turbulence in Nauvoo leading up to the assassination of Joseph Smith. Pugh then went to live with the cousin in Cincinnati before embarking on his academic career.

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Pugh's conversion was part of general Mormon success in the counties of Chester, where Pugh was from, and Lancaster, to the west. Most of the success in Chester County had been north of Oxford; the closest congregation seems to have been across the county line in Lancaster County near Little Britain. This was the town where both Joseph Sidwell and Jesse Mathews (mentioned by Jesse Pugh) were from. William Appleby, a missionary in the area, mentions a branch called the Hill Tavern Branch in the vicinity of Little Britain.²

The letters give a rare view into a common theme in Mormon history—the shock of a family over one of their member's conversion to and gathering with the Mormons. The Pughs were a wealthy Quaker family (their use of the “plain speech,” as reflected in *thee* and *thou*, is an indication of their Quakerism). Jesse Pugh, Evan's grandfather and author of two of the letters, was one of the wealthiest people in the area.³ A number of wealthy Quakers joined the Mormons in this area.⁴

Other than these details, the entirety of the story is contained in the letters. (I have found no information on either John B. Webster or the missionary named Clark.) Not only do the letters show a family's response to Mormon conversion but also they indicate just how extensive early Mormonism was with many, perhaps most, of its converts never making it to Utah. This story also makes one wonder just how many of these short-term converts there were in nineteenth-century America (and beyond) and what other contributions they may have made to the greater American society.

The first letter is by Jesse Pugh (Evan's grandfather); the second is by Adriana Pugh (Evan's aunt); and the last is a conglomeration of letters by Mary Pugh (Evan's mother), Susanna Pugh (Evan's sister), Jesse, and Adriana.

The writer's original spelling and punctuation have been retained throughout the letters. Carets < > indicate insertions by the writer, and brackets [] indicate editorial insertions.

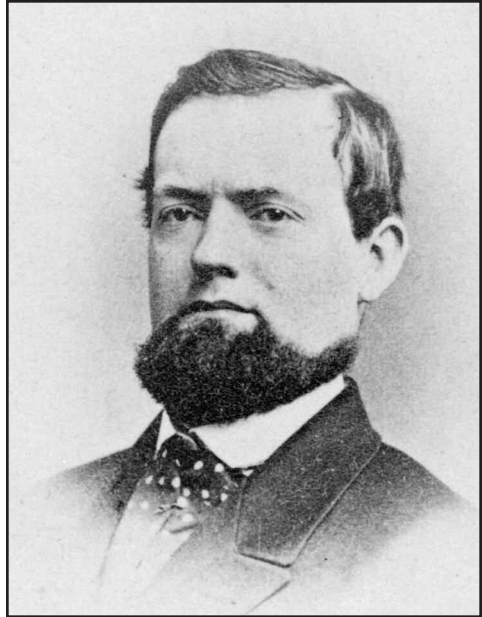
East Nottingham 4 mo 16 1844

Estemed nephew Achilles Pugh

I write to thee at this time under a troubled mind. on first day night the 14th Instant, Evan Son of Lewis Pugh deseased absconded, I took him and a sister of his Elizabeth by name at the time their father met the misfortune of falling in [portion of page missing] and injured him self so as not being capable of any business after [portion of page missing] I have had a man hired these 3 years past that has become [portion of page missing] morman and this Spring he left my service in order to [portion of page missing] out to Nauvoo when he left me he went with his wife and [portion of page missing] ldren to her father 8 or 10 miles distant up in Lancaster [portion of page missing] nty where there was 2 or 3 other families preparing to go and

[portion of page missing] ter day the started they propose going by public conveyance and were but a few miles from the railroad Evan was much taken with the Mormon preachers but I fondly hoped when John B Webster (that is the mans name) was gon out of the neighborhood Evans mormanism would subside but it seems it was not so, he is 16 years of age the 29 of 2nd Mo last I am greeved & disappointed for he was just coming to be of use to me and I paid the debt that his father Estate did not cover so that his mother and <four> children might have a home she is much concerned for him and will fret much his two sisters are older then himself and his brother younger 14 years old Enoch by name Thy acceptable letter dated the 28 of 3 month arrived at Oxford post office on the 4 Instant a quick passage I told John B Webster about the time he left here about the first of 4 mo that if the stoped in Cincinatti any time to call on thee and tell you that we were well and perhaps he will and if Evan is with him persuade him to stay he is a good schollar and very active in learning has a genius in some things but is like most of the name dont like hard work

I write this and will put it in the post office to day the post rider goes East and it will get to Philadelphia to morrow and I think if will reach thee some days before they will get there thee will please keep a look out acquaint some of thy friends to keep a look out. I understand there is a morman Preacher in company that has undertaken to pilot the company to Navoo there is a Jesse Mathews that has Money he sold a plantation got the price of it and is to assist the rest that have little <or none> John B Webster has not more than 100 dollars and Evan has but 9 or 10 dollars and very littl clothes but what he had on his going off was kept a profound secret none of his relatives knew or suspected any thing of <his going> Webster denied to me that he knew that Evan had any notion of going with him he is a raskel he was a boy I got in Baltimore when his was 10 or 11 year I was to learn him the Black Smith trade at that time my son Lewis was doing a good <business> and when John was at an age fit to go to the trade I intended to put John to Lewis but before Benjamin Campbell visited the shop and I put him to Campbell but John did not like the living at the table he thought it was not as good as he had been use to at my Table so he ran off between 17 & 18 years of age in a year or too he come back and proposed living with <me> but I would not employ him and Abner employed him and he has been working with us ever since and this is the <way> he has served me



Evan Pugh, First President of what is today Pennsylvania State University, date unknown. Photograph courtesy Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

in decoying my grand Son Evan Pugh I have no liking for Joe Smith and his morman breed I have read the morman Book it contains about 500 pages of the most absurd things I ever read and it is strange at this day of the enlightened world there could be such doctrines believed in I would set Joe Smith <down> and his [?] <as> cunning impostures but I dont wish to persecute them as the Missuriens did they badly treated them but what good deeds can slave holders do very little indeed Cassus m Clay³ had done one noble deed in freeing his slaves has thee published his speech & letters if Henry Clay will free his [?] 60 I will support him yet if he does it before the Election since I wrote the above I have been out in the field unloading a cart load of lime and in looking over what I had written I found several omissions and some bad spelling I expect thee often sees that in the communications that is addressed to you printers thee must Excuse all these faults

I wish thee to write to me soon whether <thee> gets an opportunity to see John B Webster & Evan or not John was ungratefull to me he might have gon and not of let Evan known as he was at such a distance out of the neighborhood. what appears to be the candid opinion of the thinking well informed people of your section of country respecting the mormans is it a thing that will last or do they think if will blow out in a short time It is pretended to be a miraculous thing in finding the golden leaf bible but every religion has its miricals that we read of and know not whether it is necessary for us to believe all those miricals in order to insure salvation that part and I will leave

There continually [are] new sects springing up and all prove their authority out of that Holy Book called the Bible for what they do & say. Archable Job a man that lived in Nottingham counted a wise man of his day I have seen him in my young day he was then old he served a member of Maryland legislature <several years> said on a time that the Bible was like the crooket limb of a tree a man could get a limb any where to sute himself out of it so I think the mormans find a great many limbs out of it to suit their porposes but I must stop but before I do I must tell thee that Rachel Leeke has broke up h[o]use keeping and has come to live with us she is not in good health her Husbands property is rented out he made no will the law will be the rule to settle the estate it will amount to 12 or 14 thousand Dollars her & his son Isaac administered on the Estate there is 5 children by a former wife two sons & 3 daughters Rachel has none Elizabeth has gon and left us we are all in middling health Amos' wife is in delicate health she brought me a grandson some time ago and has not had good health since the res[t] are in usual health and so is Abners family so is D Gatcheh family and the people in general are healthy Herring time is coming and we will do finely fair well and dont forget to write soon

Jesse Pugh

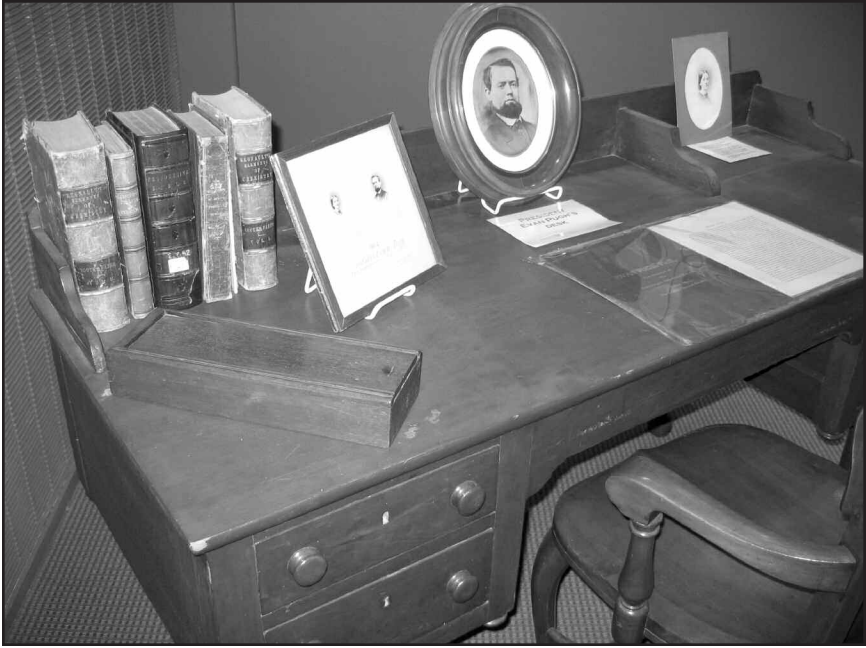
N B I was desired by Joseph Clark to enquire if thee knew any thing of his son Thomas Elwood Clark he is brother to John Millon Clark that thy paper is directed to

Nottingham 12th of 5th month 1844

My Dear Cousin

How often have I resolved and reresolved to write to thee every letter Father received I thought I would sit down and reply to it immediately—but still delayed it put it off—indeed I have felt myself very censurable for this very neglect I can assure thee it has not been for want of affection for thee as a Cousin—which I have ever maintained for thee since thy short sojourn with us so many years ago thee will scarcely believe me when I tell thee I never became acquainted with a cousin for

whose welfare I felt more anxiety than thine—thee felt disconsolate and unhappy at times I know for thee was unsettled and there was a sensitiveness in thy nature which everyone does not possess—but enough of this—I have every reason to believe thee happy in thy Home in thy dear little family which thee seldom fails to speak of in thy letters how we should love to see you all—I have frequently requested Father to remember us in his letters to thee and urge you to come see us—sometime ago thee mentioned a prospect you had of going to Virginia—I have ever since anticipated a visit from you both—for we should expect you to come this way—I also believe thee to be prospering in thy business indeed I fear thee is getting too deep in worldly concerns to visit thy friends—to much business to attend to—the more earthly treasure people have the harder it is for them to leave it even for a short time—and harder still for some to leave it altogether but perhaps there is not so much danger of thee and I becoming possessed of so much of that root of all evil as not to be willing to leave it I hope not at events but enough of on this strain at present—what urged me most even now to write is on poor Evans account, we received thy letter on the 7th of this inst it came <in a> very short time from fathers writing giving an account of thy interview with Evan & Webster we feel very gratefull for thy kindness although it had not the desired affects yet it was all we could have wished—with the exception of one thing that occurred to me after fathers letter was gone <which was> to request thee to urge him to stay with thee and learn the printing trade or if thee could not prevail on him to stay at present—to insist on his coming back to thee if he was not pleased with Nauvoo and learn the printing I thought perhaps that might take with him as he inclines to Books and he would be very lothe to return home immediately even if he was very much disappointed in the place—we do feel very much for him—notwithstanding the heavy charge Webster brings against us it only makes us pity poor Evan more, as it shows us plainer Johns deep perfidy—we believe now as we feared before they left everything was done by Webster to wean Evans affections from us which he completed prety affectually for the child behaved him self in such a manner at times for some time before he left that we had very little satisfaction with him—he appeared to have no more regard for Father than the rest of us indeed not so much I thought some times—There is a great deal of low cunning about Webster we think him a fit subject for Joe Smith in many respects—tho we always lived on good terms with him we had no confidence in his principles he would not stick to truth and for some time <we> believed him dishonest and eventually caught him in the act of stealing—but did not tell him of it and in a short time he proposed leaving and going to Nauvoo so we thought best to let him go quietly away—but after he left the neighborhood, I told Evan we knew John to be dishonest also that was the character of his mother as we were told to have an eye to her when she came to se[e] him for she would both drink and steal—I told him of it purposely to loose his confidence in John but it seems to no affect—this accounts for the low asteem his holds us in I can not recollect us having an unpleasant word with him for years—when he was sick he came to us for to be doctored we used the Thomsonian medicine⁶—his wife was sick I went to see her daily as a friend for weeks, took their child and kept it for them while sick—never had an unpleasant word with her either and thought we stood as high in estimation as could be wished Evan we have had almost from an infant he was as fine a promising boy as could be desired in almost every aspect altho possessed of a strong self will) from a little child he inclined to his book with a good capacity for leaning—he was making rapid progress in his studys at school—when the Mormon preacher came about and Webster took with them and got Evan in with him almost immediately it is now



*Evan Pugh's desk, on display in Pennsylvania State University's Special Collections.
Photograph by Paul P. Karawacki, 2005, with permission from Pennsylvania State University.*

almost 4 years since & they have both stuck to it ever since & turned against everyone that would not go with them—they could not make a single convert anywhere in the Neighborhood—we think they will make a preacher of Evan if he stays he appeared to be preparing himself for it had the Bible committed to memory almost from beginning to end he left a long letter for his mother to be given to her after he was gone—in which he gives his reasons for <leaving> home—he says it is because he choose to obey God rather than man—that the church to which he belongs is the only true church in Christendom—that it is better to endure a few yeas of misery here and enjoy peace hereafter then to enjoy riches and honour here disobeying God and in the end endure everlasting torment—and a great deal more—I should like thee to see it—he does not say a word in it like blaming anyone for his going away but says at the conclusion if the reports about Nauvoo are all true he will turn about and come home again—we took thy letter to his mother directly—she is very much abliged for thy kindness she says Evan never made a word of complaint to her of us not using him well—she urged him to go to a trade but he give her no satisfaction—she asked him shat he intended to do than—he said stay on with <us> he reckoned—I think she would be glad if thee could write to him and make the offer I have proposed we think it will be some consolation to him to have a stopping place with thee if he wishes to come home—I feel some times I would be willing if at liberty and had the means to go to Nauvoo & see how he is what way he is doing thee does not understand Evan about politicks—Abner takes no part what [?] in politics—has not voted for several years—Father & Amos are the & party are liberty

party mem—to Clay will receive no help from any of them thee does not like Burney is thee personally acquainted with Wm H Brisbane and James Boyle I think they are residents of Cincinnati—I feel a great regard for the character of both—but I have scralled my paper full and not half done—Father and I visited uncle Havells a few days ago they were well & desired a great deal of love to thee I would be glad to have a letter from thee sister R is with us she is very disconsolate indeed—sister E wrote home she is very happy in her new situation she is 15 miles away—sisters M and R desires [?] to her

from thy affectionate cousin Adriana

Nottingham 6th mo 20th 1844

Dear cousin

I received thy kind letter 6th 24th just one week after I received Evans from Nauvoo. I am very much pleased to hear that he has left Nauvoo and has got safe that far on his road home. I do not know what to say in respect to his learning to be a printer as thee does not give me much encouragement respecting it for very good reasons I think he had better come home and chose some other trade or farm for me in summer and go to school in winter. But I am willing to leave him to his own choise eather to stay with thee and learn to be a printer or to come home and chose his own employment here for I think it best for boys to chose their trades themselves if he choses to stay I will be satisfied for him to do so, and if he comes home he ought to get into some employment these to pay thee to pay thee for thy <kind> offices and to bear his expenses home as I have no money to send him at present. But he must write and let me know what he is going to do and if he wants money to come home now I will try to get it and sent it to him I am in hopes he has seen the vanity of mormon religeon and of going to Nauvoo which has been a very great trouble to me. I do not want him to have and correspondence with Webster for I and sure he never would have went away in the manner he did if it had not been by Websters persuasion

I am sorry to hear of your bad health for I know it must be very <trying> to both thee and they wife. We are all in tolerably good health at present.

Give my love to Elias Pugh and the rest of my friends there and accept for thyself and family my warmest wishes for your present and future happiness.

Mary Pugh

Dear Brother I am glad that thee has got away from Nauvoo and has got with relations and friends for I think Achilles has proved a very kind friend to thee in giving thee money to bring thee away from that miserable place we would all be glad to see thee Mother in particular. But if thee thinks thee can better thyself by staying there we will be satisfied for thee to do so. Achilles says printing is apt to make wild boys but I think that need not hinder thee from learning that trade for if thee has a mind to do that which is rite (which I think thee has) thee can do it and follow any honorable business to make thy living, but I want thee to use thy pleasure about staying. I want thee to be careful about the choise of thy company particular if thee staves in town and beware how thee meets with another Webster for it has been fully proven that he would both steal and tell falsehoods and to complete it all we are informed by Achillis letter he has taken to drink Sis is teaching school at Abners old house but has only 5 schollars Enoch is living at Granfather And I am at home with mother. Sis and I was at Newgarden just one week before we received they letter they were all <well> accept Granmother and she was not very well she seamed very

uneasy about thee and was afraid the would never return but I will have an opportunity next seventh day of sending her the joyful news that thee is at Cincinatti and with good friends I must conclude as I have just been copying Mothers letter and my own onto a large sheet of paper to leave for Granfather to write

Mother and Sister joins me in love to thee

Susanna H Pugh

6th mo 27 1844. Dear Nephew thy letter mailed the 15th came to Oxford the 23, we got it on the 25 Evans mother and sister had written to him in answer to his letter written and mailed at Nauvoo on the 6th 12 of 5 mo <last>. It remained with me to write in it what I thought proper to write I sent Enoch, Evans brother to the post office for the papers and he brought they letter giving Information that Evan has left Nauvoo and was with thee It was glad tidings to us all, and Especially to his mother and me I had often expressed my mind to Evan & John B Webster that Joe Smith was an impostur and the whole of the Mormon book was a fabrication but I said they ware badly treated by <the> Misurians. But little did I think I had a grandson that could become so infatuated by their preachers that were running all over the country preaching up their doctrine, and I am told by Joseph Sidwell that Clark the morman that conducted the company that Evan & Webster went out with is now back and preaching up for more volunteers in Little Britain Lancaster County Evan knows Joseph Sidwell he can tell thee who he is by Evans letter is appears there is hard times amongst many and they are leaving Nauvoo in order to obtain something to live on and the split that has taken place must shake the faith of many I think up on the whole Evan had better come home and take a fair start again I beleave his mother would rather he would come home too If he comes home I will use him as I have done I had concluded that after this Summer that he aught to go to a trade but the printing I had not thought of Amos Preston has a son that learned the printing trade he has been very unsteady running from place to place, and thee thy self dont altogether recommend it [?] I may tell Evan that I am geting along with my farming midling well I have 2 fields of grass cut and nearly in the barn if is dont rain this afternoon it will be all in the barn grass is lite and wheat will be lite in places oats will be good corn midling

Thy relations are well uncle David & Hannah are having a bout 2 seed them yesterday Achilles, thy uncle is not a Clay man he will vote the Liberty tract he thinks if he lives to beat the Election But Abner will not vote at all he goes with Garrison I hear it thundering and must stop and help to get the hay in and leave Adrianna to write out the paper fair well

Jesse Pugh

Well Bud I have felt anxious to write thee a long letter ever since thee left & the only thing which deterred me from it was not knowing where to direct—but perhaps now it is not particular about it immediately on the recit of thy letter from Navoo—thy mother Susan Sis & I each wrote thee a separate letter on a large sheet of paper & directed it as thee directed but thought best to not put it in the office tell the [?] mail arrived—which brought Achilles' letter—from what thee said at Nauvoo we had a hope thee next inteligence from thee would be from Cincinnati—we are all truly glad thee has got enough of Nauvoo—thoe has had a trying time I believe from my feelings concerning thee—but my dear child trials are for out good & we fail them right—particularly when we have been led astray which thee sees has been thy case—but I think thee both wise and fortunate in leaving the Place when thee did

for it seems to me there is greater trouble in store for <many of> the poor deluded inhabitants at that place than thee has had—It is needless to express the anxiety I have felt on they account when thee reflects seldom a night of thy life has been passed since they recollection till thee left except under our roof—I have watched over thee from early infancy—in sickness I have felt all the tenderness I thought a mother could feel—not a night last did we go to bed when thee was out but I got up some time in night <and went to thy chamber> to see if thee was safe in bed & I have seldom lain my head on my pillow for the night but my supplication we put up for thy ever lasting happiness and preservation I felt entirely satisfied with thy learning thee printing if thee likes it and thinks thee could withstand temptation—which I think thee could if thee felt resolved to do so—but if thee feels happiest to come home thee had better come—we will all be glad to see thee if thee could persuade Achillis & his wife to come home with thee we would be pleased indeed it might prove very beneficial to her health as well as his—I hope they will think about it and let us know they are coming in the next account we get I would say more but it is time this was gone to the office from thy aunt Adriana we desire our love to you all

Notes

1. *Biographical Sketch of Evan Pugh, Ph. D., F.C.S., First President of the Pennsylvania Agricultural College* (New York: Atlantic, 1903).

2. William Appleby, *Autobiography and Journal*, typescript, 131, LDS Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

3. Chester County Tax Records, East Nottingham Township, 1843, microfilm, Chester County Archives, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

4. Stephen J. Fleming, “An Examination of the Success of Early Mormonism in the Delaware Valley” (MA thesis, California State University, Stanislaus, 2003), 30–33, 78–80.

5. Cassius M. Clay was a Kentucky abolitionist. See Richard D. Sears, *The Kentucky Abolitionists in the Midst Slavery (1854–1864): Exiles for Freedom* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1993).

6. Also known as botanical medicine, a medicinal methodology based on herbal remedies founded by Samuel Thomson in the nineteenth century. See John S. Haller, *The People’s Doctors: Samuel Thomson and the American Botanical Movement, 1790–1860* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2000).

