

# A Sentinel for the Saints: Thomas Leiper Kane and the Mormon Migration

*Mark Metzler Sawin*

Thomas Leiper Kane was not a Mormon, and yet it is arguable that no other man, with the exception of Brigham Young, was more responsible for protecting and securing the Saints during the tumultuous years following their evacuation of Nauvoo, Illinois. Kane secured governmental permission for the Saints to settle along the banks of the Missouri as they crossed the continent. He was instrumental in the formation of the Mormon Battalion and carried the order for its creation from Washington, D.C., to Fort Leavenworth, Missouri. He was a major organizer and contributor to Mormon fund-raising efforts among non-Mormons, and he served as the Saints' political advisor and legal counsel in the creation of the territorial government of Utah. When corrupt governmental appointees returned from the West, accusing Brigham Young of squandering funds and of polygamous practices, Kane put his political and personal reputation on the line to defend Young and secure his appointment as territorial governor. And, in 1858, it was Thomas Leiper Kane's sensitive and, at times, hard-nosed negotiation skills that created the environment and understanding that enabled a peaceful settlement to the Utah War.

When we look at the amazing feats that Kane accomplished on behalf of the LDS Church and when we consider the political and personal price he had to pay for these efforts, we are left with two basic questions: Why? and How? Why did a man who never joined the LDS Church risk his reputation, as well as his life, for its members' safety? And how did a man in his early twenties who held no office or political position accomplish so much? This

---

MARK METZLER SAWIN is currently working on his Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. His dissertation will be on the Kane family (John Kintzing Kane, Elisha Kent Kane, Margaret Fox [Kane], and Thomas Leiper Kane) and will focus on their use of religion, literature, and the press to influence political and public opinion

paper attempts to answer these questions by examining this very unique man and his relationship to the Mormon people.

On 13 May 1846, Thomas Leiper Kane attended an address given by Elder Jessie C. Little, a Mormon missionary speaking in Philadelphia. According to Kane's later accounts, Little was the first Mormon Kane ever met, and yet by the end of the meeting, Kane was ready to travel across the continent with the Saints.<sup>1</sup> To understand the "why" of our question, we must begin by understanding how one meeting could inspire Thomas Kane to rush across a continent to help a group of people he did not know. To answer this question, we must examine Kane's earlier life.

Thomas Kane was born on 27 January 1822, the second son of one of Philadelphia's most prominent families. During the thirty years before the Civil War, Thomas's father, John Kintzing Kane, was one of the most powerful members of the Democratic Party, a role he exercised quietly from his positions as attorney general of Pennsylvania and later judge of the U.S. District Court of Eastern Pennsylvania. The Kane family helped found several of Philadelphia's institutions, including Girard College, the Second Presbyterian Church, the Academy of Fine Arts, and the Musical Fund. John Kane also served as both a prominent Mason and president of the American Philosophical Society.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas's childhood was marked by not only an environment of political and social power but also by a sense of religious and social freedom. Members of the Kane family came from Quaker, Moravian, Roman Catholic, Dutch Reformed, Anglican, and Methodist backgrounds and included both Revolutionary rebels and staunch Tory loyalists. It seems this background endowed Kane with a sense of religious tolerance and an acceptance of divergent beliefs; such tolerance was the only way this passionate and politically active family could hold itself together.<sup>3</sup>

This sense of tolerance was further heightened by Thomas's education. At the age of eighteen, he completed college and traveled to England and France to continue his education and to recover from the constant physical ailments that plagued his childhood. He remained in Europe for several years and during that time became close friends with many Parisian intellectuals, including Auguste Comté whose philosophy of positivism abandoned theological and metaphysical differences, focusing instead on the sociological similarities of people. Kane embraced many of Comté's ideas, holding and expressing beliefs radical enough to cause the French police to raid his apartment on the grounds of suspected revolutionary activity.<sup>4</sup>

Though he contemplated expatriating, Thomas eventually returned to Philadelphia and in March 1846 was accepted into the Philadelphia Bar. Though a capable attorney, he did not adapt well to the lifestyle of a settled Philadelphia lawyer and soon began to languish under the idea of spending the rest of his life doing such work. He wrote his brother, Dr. Elisha Kent Kane, for



*Thomas Leiper Kane*  
courtesy of LDS Historical Dept., Archives

advice saying, “I am not well. . . . I am unhappy in mind. . . . What shall I now do! [?]”<sup>5</sup>

Like Thomas, Elisha too was often ill. Having spent much of his early adulthood suffering from rheumatic fever, Elisha had discovered that the best remedy for his ailment was activity and adventure—resting seemed only to make him sicker. Thomas tried to follow Elisha’s example of “health through activity” by joining the thousands of other young men who were volunteering for the Mexican-American War effort.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, he was turned away by the Army because of his frail constitution and poor health.

This must have been a difficult time in Kane's life, as he was filled with ideas of romantic adventure and yet was sickly and confined to the domestic life of a young lawyer. This situation was made more acute by the fact that his brother Elisha was living the life Thomas wanted to be living. Though only two years his elder, Elisha had already seen much of the world as assistant surgeon for Caleb Cushing's diplomatic mission to China. This long and circuitous mission, followed by a year of his own travels, allowed Elisha to explore much of the world. And unlike Thomas, Elisha was accepted into military service, thus providing him with yet another opportunity for adventure.

The history of Thomas's earlier life makes his response to Elder Little's plea seem less erratic—especially considering that the day of Little's address was the same day the United States finally declared war on Mexico. Thomas was hungry for adventure, and the Mormons' struggle to reach the West was a perfect opportunity for such a quest. Though Kane eventually became a strong supporter of the Mormons' rights to religious freedom, it would be inaccurate to say that this was what caused him to initially embrace their cause. Thomas wrote two letters to Elisha within four days of his first meeting with Elder Little, and these make his intentions perfectly clear.

As to [the] Mormon jaunt . . . They have given me letters of genuine strength . . . to Brigham Young and Orson Hyde and the other notabilities. I will see what few can. . . . If I judge aright, that which rules their minds at present, is the desire that I should do them justice and [tell] the world on my return, that they are not drunkards, horse thieves or adulterers as reputed.

Now I have this idea newly come to me. The Mormon party carry to California the first news of War with Mexico—and to the American settlers in the Sacramento valley. These itch for the signal to declare independence of the Mexicans. . . . At one time or other a government representative may be wanting. Who so fit for one as I?—above all if on the journey I shall have ingratiated myself with the disaffected Mormon army before it descends upon the plains, I could carry my commission quietly in my money belt, and, according to the promptings of occasion, be or be not the first U.S. Governor of the new territory of California. There would be no difficulty in obtaining me some sort of government agency of Polk if Father would only work for it—and any kind of a one would sell me a thousand dollars worth of my book.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas Kane was a bored and sickly twenty-four-year-old aristocrat who wanted fame, fortune, and adventure. The Mormons' struggle across the western frontier seemed a sure way to gain each of these.

But Kane's plans were soon subject to disappointment. When he reached Fort Leavenworth, he learned that the Mormons were not going to push on to the West immediately but were going to stay along the Missouri until the spring of 1847. This meant that his grand entrance into the Sacramento Valley and his dream of becoming territorial governor of California would never be. Though sorely disappointed, Kane was relieved by the fact that Fort Leavenworth's com-

manding officer, Colonel S. W. Kearney, offered him an officer's position with the Mormon Battalion. But this too fell through as Kane fell ill after a hard day's journey in excruciating heat. He returned to Fort Leavenworth disappointed and depressed. Despairingly, he wrote his brother Robert, "I often try to think whether my continued ill luck can be the result of my own fault. . . . I wonder I am so little tempted to suicide—God save me."<sup>8</sup>

But these disappointments caused a transformation in Kane. The next day, he wrote his mother:

Yesterday only I was in much pain at the abasement of my aspirations and the dazzling hopes of which I only have the secret. This morning my temper has undergone a happy change. . . . I am prepared for anything . . . [and] find a dull pleasure in the extreme of my humiliation—a blessed tendency of human kind that I have seen in much wronged wives—in a varying form in over devout sectionaries—and in other miserables.<sup>9</sup>

He explained that he was now content to simply execute the "unselfish objects" of his mission and thus soon set off to visit the Mormon camps where he was to secure "their fidelity to the United States."<sup>10</sup>

On this journey from Fort Leavenworth to the Mormon camps, Kane seems to have truly come to terms with his situation. The man who had planned on taking California by storm was now able literally to get down from his high horse. He wrote his sister Elizabeth of his attempt to protect himself during a downpour by crouching under the combined shelter of his horse's belly and his mother's umbrella—hardly the actions of a distinguished territorial governor.<sup>11</sup> This new humility is important in our understanding of Kane's reaction to the Mormon people.

He reached the camps on 7 July 1846 and, in the company of Elder H. G. Boyle, spent the next several days roaming from camp to camp, listening to stories of exile and hardship. He soon met and befriended this haggard group's leader, Brigham Young. Kane was greatly impressed with Young's obvious leadership abilities, but even more with the care and comfort he provided his followers. Kane's official duty was to determine the Mormons' character and intentions and report this to President Polk and Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft.<sup>12</sup> Before reaching the camps, Kane was skeptical of the Mormons' motivation for crossing the continent, but by the end of his first week among them, his attitude had changed. Elder Boyle noted in his journal that one evening he and Kane came across a man on his knees praying for God's guidance. When the man—unaware of their presence—finally rose and walked back to the camp, Boyle reported that Kane stood still for some moments and "sobbed like a child." When he could speak again, he said only, "I am satisfied: your people are solemnly and terribly in earnest."<sup>13</sup>

But what seems to have drawn Kane especially close to this group was the

care he received when in August he became desperately ill with the “bilious fever” that ravaged the camp that summer. On what he believed was his deathbed, he was tenderly nursed back to health by “an angel” named Lucy Ann who later died of the fever herself.<sup>14</sup> The attention the Saints gave him, a stranger, while six hundred of their own were dying, left Kane with a sense of awe. As he wrote later, that experience assured him that the Saints were “self sacrificing, humane, [and] decorous,” and he insisted that he “should hunt in vain through our Eastern States for any community of equal size, better entitled no matter how great its pretensions, to the name of Christian.”<sup>15</sup>

The final incident that seems to have sealed Kane’s affection for the Mormons was his visit to Nauvoo, Illinois—the beautiful city that the Mormons had built and then been driven from by an angry Illinois mob. Kane visited Nauvoo on his way back to Philadelphia and there witnessed a rowdy mob of ruffians “beastly intoxicated” and busily defiling the Mormon temple with their “filth and vomit.” Upon leaving the temple, he discovered the last of the Mormon refugees along the banks of the Mississippi. They were completely destitute and beginning their trek across the country with nothing but the clothes on their backs.<sup>16</sup>

By the time Kane reached Philadelphia in early October, the young man who had set out for adventure and self-gain was now a young crusader determined to right the injustices he had witnessed on his journey. This transformation explains the “why” of our initial question. The disappointments and suffering that Kane experienced on this trip seem to have changed him from a self-centered aristocrat to a self-sacrificing reformer who became deeply involved in the support of many disenfranchised groups—and, most particularly, with the Saints of the West.

Understanding why Kane felt called to help the Saints is only half the task, however. Explaining how Kane accomplished what he did is a bit more difficult, for the obvious answer—through political influence—is too simplistic. Given Kane’s family, he certainly had and used all the political channels he could to implement change. But Kane was trying to gain aid for a group that most of the country considered undesirable. In the twenty years before his contact with them, Mormons had been driven out of three states and had had their leaders murdered, their temples desecrated, and their land stripped from them without the government’s ever raising a hand to protect them. As many scholars have noted, the press, as well as the public opinion of the times, was staunchly anti-Mormon.<sup>17</sup> In this time of know-nothing politics and nativist sentiment, political influence, even from powerful sources, was not enough to gain governmental support for the Saints. Public opinion had to be changed. But how does one change public opinion? This is the question Thomas Kane had to answer.

As the Mormon Battalion marched off from the camps along the Missouri, Kane knew that only half the battle for the Saints’ security was won. The money

the Mormon Battalion would generate would do no good if it were not accompanied by permission for the rest of the Mormons to remain along the Missouri until their stores were replenished and their straggling members were reunited with the group. The first thing Kane did was to seek this permission through political influence.

Kane knew how the government worked, so he quickly set about building a strong case for the Mormons. He and Captain James Allen, who was to lead the Mormon Battalion, wrote and had signed agreements between the Pottawattomie and Mormons over the use of the land. To this Kane added both a statement from Allen as the Battalion's commanding officer and from Indian subagent R. B. Mitchell. Kane then took these letters and mailed them in a bundle to President Polk, adding his own statement as well.<sup>18</sup>

Once this official request was off, Kane immediately followed it with unofficial requests. He had Mitchell write another letter stating that the Mormons, and especially their leaders, were "civil, polite, and honest . . . [and] entirely patriotic."<sup>19</sup> He then had Brigham Young write a personal plea directly to President Polk, informing Polk of the Saints' intention to settle in Utah and assuring him that the Mormons were, despite their misuse in the past, still "children of the United States."<sup>20</sup> Along with these two personal letters, Kane sent a message to his powerful father, asking him to talk to Polk directly about the matter. Within a week, Judge Kane wrote back to his son saying, "I shall see him and take care that the thing is done. The form of course is immaterial; but in substance all shall be right."<sup>21</sup>

Were political influence all it took to assure the Mormons' residence on the Missouri, Kane would have accomplished this matter within a week. But it was not. Kane left the Mormon camps on 8 September thinking all was secure. But two days later, Kane learned from subagent Mitchell that the agreement between the United States and the Pottawattomie people had been ratified; and thus the Mormons' agreement with the Pottawattomie was invalidated, as they were no longer on Pottawattomie land but were on what was to be the new state of Iowa.<sup>22</sup>

By the time Kane arrived back in Philadelphia in October, everything political prestige could accomplish had been undone. Kane continued to use his influence to put pressure on politicians, but he also began a new campaign to gain support for the Mormons. Kane stopped being a lawyer and politician and became a press agent.

At this time, several eastern papers were running stories that accused the Mormon Battalion of being insubordinate. Kane knew that if such reports continued to run, any chance for political aid would be killed. So Kane began writing his own articles. An unsigned article denying all the charges against the Mormon Battalion appeared in the *Pennsylvanian* (Philadelphia's leading paper) in early October; and a few days later a letter appeared on the front page of the



*New York Tribune* stating that “the Mormon Battalion . . . has earned the highest approbation and good opinion on every account.”<sup>23</sup> Kane knew that the best way to sway the president was to sway public opinion. If public opinion was anti-Mormon, Polk would be chastised in the papers for supporting them. However, if public opinion could be changed to make people sympathize with the Mormons as an oppressed and wronged people, then the opposite would be true, thus making it politically dangerous for Polk not to agree to let them stay. These articles worked, for by the end of October, Polk agreed to let the Mormons stay for the winter.<sup>24</sup>

Though he was grateful for this success, Kane knew it was short lived. With their trek to the Salt Lake Valley beginning in the spring, Kane knew that the Mormons would need the land along the Missouri not just for one winter but for several years. To gain permission for an extended stay would be difficult, so Kane began an extensive publicity campaign aimed at doing nothing less than completely changing the nation’s opinion of Mormons. Elder Orson Spencer was in Philadelphia at this time and reported Kane’s efforts to the Saints:

Col. Kane . . . thinks that the best method of operating upon [Polk’s] Cabinet is through the press and the conversion of public opinion. . . . [He] says he has now succeeded in making such arrangements with the leading press and that he shall no longer be confined to “long shots” but open the battery for direct and close fire.<sup>25</sup>

This “close fire” consisted of three articles printed in two consecutive issues of the *Pennsylvanian*. The first two discussed Nauvoo and told how it had fallen into chaos ever since the Mormons had been forced to leave. They joked that even the governor of Illinois could not keep the ruffians from stealing his own sheep.<sup>26</sup> The third article was about the Mormon Battalion and reported that its members had received “very marked praise of their deportment as men and as soldiers.” This praise was followed by a passage that clearly illustrates the influence Kane had upon editorial staffs of the time:

A friend of ours, who has recently passed the summer months in the neighborhood of the camp of Mormon emigrants . . . has impressed us very deeply with a sense of the gross injustice which they have sustained from the bordermen of Illinois. . . . He speaks of thousands of men, women, and children, peaceable, industrious, and prospering, expelled without other cause of reproach, than the eccentricities of their religious faith. . . . One of the strange things that his account involves, is the want either of integrity or firmness in the newspapers of the West, from which public opinion has been forced to glean the materials for its judgment in the case. The truth, as we are assured, remains yet to be told; and woeful truth it is, most dishonoring to the American name.<sup>27</sup>

A week after this series of articles, Kane reported their effect to Young saying:



It was found next to impossible to do much for you before public opinion was corrected. . . . [I]t became incumbent on me to manufacture public opinion as soon as possible. . . . Tomorrow morning myself and scribe start for New York, and if I can have there, any portion of the same success which I have had in my own city, I will consider the brunt of the battle over if indeed victory be not at hand.<sup>28</sup>

On 16 December 1846, an article ran on the front page of the *New York Tribune*, taking up nearly an entire column and proclaiming in its headline “The Mormons—Their Persecutions, Sufferings and Destitution.” This long article began with a letter (most certainly from Kane) explaining to editor Horace Greeley the terrible atrocities that had taken place at Nauvoo. This letter was followed by a long section labeled “Remarks on the Above” in which an unnamed article from a “U.S. Gazette . . . from the Far West” gave testimony to the “virtues of the family—chastity, [and] affection” of the Mormons and describing the vicious ways in which they were raped, murdered, and thrown out of their community by an “army of reforming moralists.”<sup>29</sup>

These two long articles were accompanied by an editorial (presumably by Greeley) saying:

Our informant is very positive, from extensive personal observation that the Mormons are a virtuous, chaste, frugal, industrious, inoffensive people, and that the impulse of their persecutors has been that of sheer robbery, outrage and lust throughout. We care not whether this be so or not—we maintain their absolute right to protection [of] their own homes and hearths. . . . If the Mormons had faults, as alleged, they were at the worst better than their robbers and murderers. Eternal shame to Illinois for allowing them to be so tortured and ravaged!<sup>30</sup>

Over the next five years, Kane continued to use the press for the Mormons’ benefit. Using newspapers, he was able to affect public opinion strongly. In a letter to the Saints, Kane explained that his “usual course” was to put positive editorials in several “different seaboard newspapers” about every three months, thus keeping the Mormons continually cast in a positive light. By 1850, he felt that this “reiteration of the same points” was beginning to bore readers, so he wrote a long, sympathetic narrative of his travels to Winter Quarters and Nauvoo. After delivering it as an address before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in March of 1850, Kane had it published as a pamphlet entitled “The Mormons.” A copy of this persuasive narrative was sent to every member of Congress as well as to every newspaper editor in the East. This approach, Kane felt, would provide both lawmakers and editors with a “reliable case for defense” against the negative allegations that continually crossed their desks.<sup>31</sup>

These press tactics answer the “how” of our question. Thomas Kane’s use of eastern newspapers was successful in changing the public’s opinion about Mormons. In the years between 1846 and 1852, his articles, editorials, and addresses helped secure the Mormons’ settlements along the Missouri and in

Utah and contributed greatly to Mormon fund-raising efforts in the East.<sup>32</sup> They were also effective in discrediting negative reports about the Mormons and in securing Brigham Young as the territorial governor of Utah.<sup>33</sup> For some time, Kane was even able to dispel the explosive rumors of Brigham Young's polygamy. This issue, however, was what eventually ended Kane's ability to help the Mormons in the press. Just a few months before Young had Orson Pratt announce the Mormon practice of plural marriage, Kane had publicly given his word that Young was not polygamous. When Kane made his statement, he knew he was not telling the truth; but he felt denial of polygamy was the only way he could maintain public support for the Mormons. When Pratt's announcement reached the East, Kane was publicly humiliated and thus lost his ability to sway public opinion toward the Mormons.<sup>34</sup>

Though this event finished Kane's ability to help the Saints in the press, it did not end his relationship with them. During the next several years, he and Young remained friends, often exchanging letters of brotherly affection and faithful encouragement and support. And in 1857 when Buchanan sent troops to Utah to "correct" the Mormon problem, Kane quickly came to the aid of his old friends. Under his own volition, he traveled to Utah and there managed to arrange a peaceful settlement to a conflict that threatened to make the Saints religious refugees once again.

### Notes

1. Albert L. Zobell, *Sentinel in the East: A Biography of Thomas L. Kane* (Salt Lake City: Nicholas G. Morgan, 1965), 3-4, 15.

2. Henry Simpson, ed., *The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians, Now Deceased* (Philadelphia: William Brotherhead, 1859), 613-18; George W. Corner, *Doctor Kane of the Arctic Seas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 9-14.

3. William Elder, *Biography of Elisha Kent Kane* (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1857), 13-16; Corner, 14-16.

4. Zobell, 10-11.

5. Thomas Leiper Kane to Elisha Kent Kane, 16 May 1846, Kane Family Papers, American Philosophical Society.

6. Zobell, 10-11. For a good explanation of the sense of romantic adventure inspired by the Mexican-American War, see Robert Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

7. Thomas Leiper Kane to Elisha Kent Kane, 17 May 1846, Kane Family Papers, American Philosophical Society. The book referred to is a travel account Thomas hoped to write after his journey. At the time, such accounts were a popular and often lucrative genre.

8. Thomas Leiper Kane to Robert Patterson Kane, 2 July 1846, Kane Family Papers, American Philosophical Society.

9. Thomas Leiper Kane to John Kintzing Kane and Jane Leiper Kane, 3 July 1846, Kane Family Papers, American Philosophical Society.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Oscar Osburn Winther, ed., *A Friend of the Mormons: The Private Papers and*

---

*Diary of Thomas Leiper Kane* (San Francisco: Gelber-Lilienthal, Inc., 1937), 11-16.

12. Thomas Leiper Kane to John Kintzing Kane and Jane Leiper Kane, 3 July 1846, Kane Family Papers, American Philosophical Society.

13. Zobell, 15-16.

14. *Ibid.*, 20; Thomas L. Kane, *The Mormons. A Discourse Delivered Before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: March 26, 1850* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1850), 92.

15. Winther, 34.

16. This story is the subject of Thomas L. Kane's book, *The Mormons*.

17. For example, see Terryl Givens, *Viper on the Hearth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834-1914: Cartoons, Caricatures, and Illustrations* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983).

18. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 3:142-44.

19. Zobell, 23.

20. Roberts, 3:88-90.

21. Zobell, 19.

22. Roberts, 3:144-45.

23. "The Mormon Battalion," *New York Tribune*, 5 October 1846, 1.

24. Winther, 48-53.

25. Zobell, 28.

26. "Correspondence of the Pennsylvanian. St. Louis, Nov. 11, 1846," *Pennsylvanian*, 25 November 1846, 2.

27. "The Mormons," *Pennsylvanian*, 26 November 1846, 1.

28. Zobell, 29-30.

29. "The Mormons—Their Persecutions, Sufferings and Destitution" and "Remarks on the Above," *New York Tribune*, 16 October 1846, 1.

30. "The Mormons," *New York Tribune*, 16 October 1846, 2.

31. Zobell, 43-44.

32. For an account of Kane's efforts toward Mormon relief efforts, see Davis Bitton "American Philanthropy and Mormon Refugees, 1846-1849," *7 Journal of Mormon History*, 1980, 63-81.

33. Zobell, 69-70; Roberts, 3:543.

34. Zobell, 63-73.