

St. Louis and the Nauvoo Exodus: The Experience of the John Ellison Family

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Contrary to popular image, when some fourteen thousand Saints vacated the Nauvoo area during 1846, most did not end up at Winter Quarters.¹ Perhaps five thousand were at Winter Quarters, while that many and more wintered across the river in dozens of cluster settlements ringing what is now Council Bluffs, Iowa. Additional hundreds were in northern Nebraska at the Ponca Camp and inland in southern Iowa at Garden Grove and Mt. Pisgah.

Perhaps as many as fifteen hundred Saints spent that winter in St. Louis, most of whom were from the Nauvoo area and were seeking work and housing for the winter. Among the homeless Nauvooers who found refuge in St. Louis late in 1846 was a young couple, John and Alice Pilling Ellison. Their story illustrates quite well the St. Louis connection to the Nauvoo exodus story.²

John Ellison and Alice Pilling

Twelve days after LDS converts John Ellison and Alice Pilling married in England, they sailed to America. From New Orleans, they moved by riverboat up the Mississippi to St. Louis and then landed at Nauvoo about 6 May 1841. In Nauvoo, John labored as a mason on the Nauvoo Temple and Nauvoo House and became a Seventy. Alice joined the Female Relief Society. They lived on the bluffs three blocks south of the temple project. John's parents and eight sib-

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lings arrived from England in 1843. Father Matthew Ellison bought land nine miles east of Nauvoo in Rock Creek Township and farmed on eighty acres there.

The Exodus from Nauvoo

At the time of the 1846 exodus from Nauvoo, John and Alice had two children, both born in Nauvoo: Margaret Jane (1842) and John Ammon (1845).

Brigham Young's Camp of Israel, numbering two to three thousand, was the first wave of Saints to leave Nauvoo.³ They crossed the Mississippi River and headed west into Iowa in February and March 1846. This advance company was followed by the main migration from Nauvoo that occupied the spring months of April, May, and June.⁴ But John and Alice and the children stayed behind at Nauvoo through the summer. Best estimates are that fourteen thousand Latter-day Saints poured out of the Nauvoo area during 1846.⁵ Nauvoo, a mere seven years old, became mostly deserted—practically a ghost city. Wagon trains of Saints moved like a long snake followed by scores of tiny snakes across the breadth of Iowa, establishing or passing by or through way stations at Mt. Pisgah and Garden Grove. By June, the main Camp of Israel reached bluffs overlooking the swift Missouri River. By fall, they had crossed the river and created Winter Quarters at present Florence, Nebraska. Church leaders intended to relocate the Saints in the Rocky Mountains region the next year.⁶

Meanwhile, as summer waned, a few hundred stragglers remained behind in the Nauvoo area for various reasons—poor health, lack of money to buy an outfit of wagon and teams, legal or business complications, or family connections. John and Alice and their children did not join the exodus because of health problems. During September, anti-Mormon vigilantes, impatient for all Saints to be out, attacked the city. Outnumbered Mormon defenders surrendered after a brief skirmish called in LDS records the “Battle of Nauvoo.” Vigilantes occupied the city and pillaged, bullied, and finally forced the last Mormon residents out.⁷

A family story tells about Alice Ellison during those dangerous days. When mobbers tried to take Alice's cow, the story says, she armed herself with a long hickory stick that was about as hard as iron. “If you take my cow, I'll use this on you,” she warned. She knew how much her family needed that cow. The mob leader ordered: “Stand aside, men. A woman who has that much courage, let her take her cow.”⁸

At this time of crisis, John was too ill to move his wife and two small children across the river. He “was so sick he could only sit up a few minutes at a time.” He regretted that he “couldn't help defend the Saints.”⁹ His father, Matthew, came during the night with a wagon and took the family back to his home in Rock Creek Township. Matthew insisted that John stay there until he recovered. John became delirious from the bilious fever, which wracked his body for about thirteen weeks. Finally, in November 1846, John sold his house and lot

in Nauvoo—but only for half the price he had paid for it. As Illinois' last fading autumn leaves were falling, the couple bid farewell to the City of Joseph.

Winter was at the door, and John was not physically well. With wind, rain, and snow coming, it seemed foolish to try to cross Iowa or to live in rough conditions in Iowa, especially with small children. Their easiest and wisest course was southward, to St. Louis, where they could find housing, work, and friends. Father Matthew probably drove them to the Keokuk ferry, to Warsaw, or to Quincy and put them on a riverboat bound for St. Louis.¹⁰



John and Alice Pilling Ellison
Courtesy Gibbs Smith Publishing

John and Alice's departure physically split apart the newly planted American/Mormon trunk of the Ellison family tree. (Why John's parents and his eight siblings chose not to head west is not clear. The parents had bought eighty acres of land nine miles east of Nauvoo in 1843 and would not leave it. Most of the children married locally and lived nearby.) Both branches kept somewhat in contact by mail. After the transcontinental railroad linked Utah with the Midwest in 1869, Utah Ellisons visited Illinois relatives. Kinship and contact between these two branches of Matthew and Jane Ellison's family continues to this day.¹¹

Refugee Saints in St. Louis

John and Alice arrived in bustling St. Louis late in 1846. In spite of the Missouri government's 1838 "extermination order" against Latter-day Saints, St. Louis always served as "an oasis of tolerance and security" for them, including those who came there after Nauvoo was vacated. From 1846 to 1855, hundreds

of LDS immigrants from Europe came upriver via New Orleans and stayed a year or more in St. Louis to work until they could go west. A busy trade depot and river port, the city supported a population of sixty thousand when the Ellisons arrived. John found work in a printer's office, laboring as a pressman for the Union Printing Company until 1851.¹²

When the family reached St. Louis, John was then twenty-eight, Alice twenty-six, Margaret four, and John Ammon, one. At St. Louis, two new children joined the family and two were buried there. The births, deaths, and dates are¹³

18 August 1847	Death of John Ammon, age 2
4 March 1848	Birth of David Samuel
26 July 1849	Death of David Samuel, age 1
10 June 1850	Birth of Ephraim Peter

James Palmer, another Saint from Nauvoo, said that “many of our people came to Saint Louis.” For them, a branch of the Church was organized and soon had five hundred members. Branch President Joseph A. Stratton rented the Mechanics Institute where, Palmer said, “on the saboths we assembled in public worship and partook of our sacraments.”¹⁴ More and more Saints arrived from the Nauvoo area and from Europe. At a 31 January 1847 LDS conference, the first held after the Ellisons arrived, clerks calculated that 1,478 Saints lived in the St. Louis area. Two months later, the sole branch in the city was divided into six branches within the St. Louis District, and three more were added that year. Nathaniel H. Felt was district president.¹⁵ By September 1849, the district had mushroomed to include three to four thousand members, giving the Ellisons a good number of Saints with whom to associate. To accommodate the large number of members attending Sunday services, leaders rented the St. Louis Concert Hall on Market Street.¹⁶

Many St. Louis Saints, including the Ellisons, lived in what was for them one of the wickedest places they had ever seen on earth. James Palmer observed:

If we had wished to live after the manners and customs of the gentiles, . . . we had now the opportunity of doing so. We lived among a moneyed people. There were liquor shops at nearly every corner of the streets and houses of prostitution in abundance, for all the people wished to patronize them. And gambling houses a plenty. There was no lack what ever in this respect, every person was looking for his gain from his quarter—money first, religion last.¹⁷

The Mexican War and Gold Rush

Historic events enveloped the Ellisons in St. Louis. During 1846–47, the Mexican War excited St. Louis's populace. News announcing American victories triggered celebrations. Boats paraded, boys built bonfires at intersections and

street corners, and candles were lit and displayed “in nearly every window of the city.”¹⁸

In 1849, local businesses boomed when people flooded into St. Louis because of the California gold rush. From St. Louis, 58 “fine steamers” plied the Missouri River, 75 the upper Mississippi, 150 the Ohio, 28 the Illinois River, 28 the Tennessee River, and 100 the lower Mississippi. “Boats could not be built fast enough” to handle the flow of passengers and freight.¹⁹

The Great Fire of 1849

The “Great Fire of 1849” broke out by the river, where it destroyed twenty-three steamboats and then burned fifteen blocks of the business district.²⁰ James Palmer recalled the conflagration:

[A] terrible fire broke out on the levee among the steam boats which soon struck the city when in a short time front street appeared to be all on fire and the heat so terrible that the engines could not be effectively brought to bear upon it, and were used only to check its progress with but little effect, the fire fiend was doing his work bravely when visited the spot in the dead hour of the night the wind, driving the flames fearfully towards the heart of the city.²¹

In the fire’s aftermath, St. Louis businesses suffered until they could be rebuilt. “Thousands were thrown out of work.”²²

Killer Cholera Epidemic

In 1849, cholera gave St. Louis its second disaster in one year, and this one directly hit the Ellisons’ household. In the midst of the gold-rush boom, immigrants from Germany and Holland, where cholera was raging, carried the dreaded disease to New Orleans and then upriver. Early in 1849, St. Louis reported the beginnings of the plague:

The disease idled along until May, when it began to strike with triphammer blows reaching a peak in July, when 145 persons died in one grisly day and 722 in one week. By July 30th 4,547 cholera victims had been buried in the city since the first of the year.

The custom of tolling church bells for funerals was abandoned to ease the grief of those touched by the epidemic. The outbreak caused business to halt from May to August, except the grocery and grog shops.²³

St. Louis was hit harder than any city in the Union. The majority of victims were recent immigrants. One-third were children under age five. David Ellison, John and Alice’s little boy, was one of the child victims. He died on 26 July 1849 and was buried in the “strangers” section, or public section, of the Christ Church Episcopal Cemetery. Because the epidemic “nearly filled the existing city graveyards,” this cemetery was crammed with cholera victims that summer.²⁴

To die of cholera, as David did, was to suffer a terrible death. Asiatic cholera, or cholera morbus, was a highly contagious bacterial disease spread by food, water, and flies. It was a dreaded plague because it struck large numbers, attacked its victims quickly, and caused many deaths, and the doctors could do little for it. After the bacteria's incubation period of twelve to twenty-four hours, victims felt their intestinal tracts become inflamed and their bodies being poisoned. They suffered abrupt, excessive diarrhea that could purge three to four gallons in a day. Vomiting followed the diarrhea. The patient quickly dehydrated, the skin became cold and withered, and the face became drawn. Blood pressure fell, and the pulse became faint. Severe muscle cramps and intense thirst accompanied the increasing dehydration. Some victims then fell into a stupor or become comatose and died of shock. The disease ran its course rapidly in its victim within two to seven days.²⁵

The Saints constantly administered to their sick coreligionists during that sickly season. Many who tried to help became victims themselves.²⁶ "Nurses could not be hired to work where cholera set in," James Palmer recalled, and no one would drive the bodies to the cemeteries. Palmer, holding his breath, helped move the corpse of a victim. But then his aged mother began feeling ill and "in a few hours she was a dead corpse." He returned from burying her and another victim and then saw his brother-in-law, his sister, and her youngest child die. St. Louis, Palmer lamented, seemed like a "doomed city."²⁷ Another LDS cholera victim known by the Ellisons was Thomas Clayton, who had shared the Ellisons' property lot in Nauvoo.

Departures to Kaneshville, 1850-52

After losing both sons in St. Louis, John and Alice became the parents of a baby son, Ephraim Peter Ellison, born on 10 June 1850. At that time, LDS immigrants from England were pouring through St. Louis. On 17 June 1850, the LDS newspaper *Frontier Guardian*, published at Kaneshville, reported that more than a thousand immigrants had passed through St. Louis during a four-day period. Among the arrivals from England that spring were Alice's parents, John and Peggy Pilling, and children Richard, Mary Ann, and Joseph. The Pillings reunited with Alice and another daughter, Susannah Laycock. They did not meet Susannah's husband, however, because he had disappeared the year before during a trip downriver to New Orleans. Not until a century later did relatives finally learn that he had died of cholera and was buried at "Iowa Point" on 30 May 1849. The Pillings continued on to Kaneshville. They took with them Susannah's child, Elijah Laycock. The 1850 St. Louis census lists no Pillings but does show John, Alice, Margaret, and Ephraim Ellison.²⁸

The Ellisons decided to head west with LDS wagon companies in 1851. John bought two cows and two yoke of oxen and shipped these, along with a wagon, plow, and other tools, upriver to the Saints' outfitting camps at Kaneshville in care of Alice's uncle, Michael Pilling.²⁹ Before departing, the fam-

ily obtained Church membership certificates from St. Louis District President Thomas Wrigley. Alice's is dated 31 May 1851 and verifies that she was a member in good standing.³⁰ In June, the Ellisons headed for Kanesville on the steamboat *Isabell* up the Missouri River, hoping to arrive in time to join wagon parties outfitting there. Unfortunately, high water and driftwood detained them for three weeks at St. Joseph, Missouri. They saw logs and whole trees continually floating by, making the Missouri River unsafe for boats. Finally, aboard an open ferry boat in which torrential rains drenched them, they reached Council Point near Kanesville.³¹

Family sources say the Ellisons arrived too late to join the last wagon train that season—the final three trains left between 21 June and 7 July.³² However, historian Orson F. Whitney said they did not go west because they were “detained by sickness.”³³ They then resolved to spend fall, winter, and spring in the Kanesville area. Kanesville was a Mormon town created to replace Winter Quarters, Nebraska. From 1848 to 1852, Kanesville thrived as a way station and outfitting point for Mormons bound for Utah. Apostle Orson Hyde presided over Kanesville and about ninety small LDS satellite settlements. By 1850, a year before the Ellisons came, Kanesville had 350 houses, “principally of logs,” a large log tabernacle, and a two-story schoolhouse. By 1852, when the Ellisons left the area, Kanesville and vicinity held some five thousand residents.³⁴

John rented land about eight miles north and east of Kanesville in Pigeon Grove, a temporary gathering hamlet of LDS settlers. There he plowed, planted corn and potatoes, built a log cabin, and prepared for winter. Fortunately, he located the stock and tools he had sent the previous year. The family's two cows provided them milk and butter, and they ate much cornbread. John bought two pigs to help provide future food. Alice found her family, the Pillings, at Kanesville. Her brother Richard helped Apostle Orson Hyde build a printing office. Then, Richard and other men went up the Boyer River (into present Harrison County) to build sixty houses for poor Saints coming from the East and from Europe.³⁵

The John Ellison family went to Utah in 1852 in the Thomas C. D. Howell wagon train in 1852. They settled in Kaysville, Utah, in a section that later became Layton. Six decades later, E. P. Ellison, the boy born in St. Louis, was one of Mormonism's and Utah's leading businessmen.³⁶

Almost all published histories of the exodus from Nauvoo concentrate on Brigham Young's Camp of Israel experiences. However, a “wide-angle lense” is needed to bring into the exodus picture the movements of those who left the Nauvoo area not with the famous winter group but in the spring, summer, and fall departures and to view the many directions they went other than to Winter Quarters. Hundreds found winter refuge and made temporary stops in scores of other places, including St. Louis. Hopefully, this case study of the Ellisons demonstrates why research regarding the St. Louis aspect of the Nauvoo exodus is needed if the accurate, fuller picture is ever to be seen.

Notes

1. See my recent population calculations for Nauvoo and for the exodus in William G. Hartley, "The Pioneer Trek: Nauvoo to Winter Quarters," *The Ensign* (June 1997), 31, 42, and endnote 70, and in Hartley, "Gathering the Dispersed Nauvoo Saints, 1847–1852," *The Ensign* (July 1997), 12–29, particularly the chart on p. 15.

2. This article is adapted from Chapter 3 of my recent book, *To Build, to Create, to Produce: Ephraim P. Ellison's Life and Enterprises, 1850–1939* (Salt Lake City: Ellison Family Organization, 1997).

3. Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852, "And Should We Die . . ."* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), Chapters 1 and 2.

4. William G. Hartley, "Spring Exodus from Nauvoo: Act Two in the 1846 Mormon Evacuation Drama," in Susan Easton Black and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Iowa Mormon Trail* (Orem, Utah: Helix Publishing, 1997), 61–83.

5. See note 1 above.

6. Lewis Clark Christian, "Mormon Foreknowledge of the West," *BYU Studies* 21 (Fall 1981): 403–15, and Ronald K. Esplin, "'A Place Prepared': Joseph, Brigham, and the Quest for Promised Refuge in the West," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 34–58.

7. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 82–83.

8. Olive Lavinia Ellison Taylor, "Alice Pilling Ellison," typescript, Ellison Family Archives (cited hereafter as EFA), c/o Peter Ellison, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2–3.

9. Olive Lavinia Ellison Taylor, "John Ellison," typescript, EFA, 4.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Mary H. Seigfried, *Family History of Matthew and Jane Ellison and Descendants* (N.p.: Ellison Family Association, n.d.), copy in EFA. Both branches of the family attend Matthew and Jane Ellison family reunions. According to Seigfried (p. 27), the Ellison Family Association hosted the first such reunion in 1933. The eleventh annual reunion was held in Nauvoo in August 1943. See "Ellison Family Celebrates 100 Years in County," *The Carthage Republican*, 18 August 1943.

12. Stanley B. Kimball, "The Saints and St. Louis, 1831-1857: An Oasis of Tolerance and Security," *BYU Studies* 13 (Summer 1973): 489-519; Mattie A. Ellison Allred, "John Ellison," 1; J. H. Sloss, *The St. Louis Directory for 1848 . . .* (Charles and Hammond, 1848). Reference to Union Printing is in "John Ellison" sketch in Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1904), 4:399, and "John Ellison" in *Biographical Record of Salt Lake City and Vicinity* (Chicago: National Historical Record Company, 1902), 406.

13. Information about what caused John Ammon's death and where he was buried is lacking, as are details about David Samuel's birth.

14. James Palmer Reminiscences, Microfilm of Holograph, LDS Church Historical Department Archives (cited hereafter as LDS Archives), Salt Lake City, 80–81.

15. Kimball, "The Saints and St. Louis," 507.

16. *Ibid.*, 508. Kimball says that the Concert Hall was on the west side of Market Street between Second and Third streets.

17. James Palmer Reminiscences, 92.

18. Walter B. Stevens, *St. Louis, The Fourth City, 1764–1909* (St. Louis: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1909), 566.

19. *Ibid.*, 857.

20. Stevens, *St. Louis, The Fourth City*, 770.

21. James Palmer Reminiscences, 84.

22. James Neal Primm, *Lion in the Valley, St. Louis, Missouri* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Co., 1981), 174. An interesting Ellison footnote to this St. Louis fire is

that John and Alice's grandson, James Ellison, experienced an even worse city conflagration a half century later while serving an LDS mission in San Francisco during the famous earthquake and fires of 1906.

23. *Ibid.*, 162-63.

24. *Old Cemeteries, St. Louis County, Missouri*, II (St. Louis Genealogical Society, 1983). This book indicates that the Christ Church Episcopal Church was located east of California Street and south of Chouteau and that it and the graveyard are gone. In 1879, all graveyards closed. Most had already moved or been abandoned. Unless relatives arranged for reburials, the remains were reinterred in common graves and no records kept. Most existing St. Louis cemeteries have few records dating before 1870. The book lists David as being buried in Christ Church Episcopal Cemetery.

25. "Disease," in Howard R. Lamar, ed., *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977), 306; disease description is drawn from various "cholera" entries in standard encyclopedias.

26. Kimball, "The Saints and St. Louis," 508.

27. James Palmer Reminiscences, 96-98.

28. Maxine Pilling Rodgers, *Richard Pilling: A Family Heritage* (Red Deer, Alberta: The Author, 1980), 23; *Index of 1850 U.S. Census St. Louis and St. Louis County, Missouri* (St. Louis Genealogical Society, 1969).

29. Margaret Jane Ellison Taylor, "John Ellison," typescript, EFA, 2; see another version of same, filed as Mattie A. Ellison Allred, "John Ellison, 1818-1906," typescript, EFA, 1-2.

30. Evan M. Green Family Papers, folder 2, LDS Archives.

31. Susannah Ellison Robins, "Sketch of Life of John and Alice Ellison," typescript, 1930, EFA, 3; Margaret Jane Ellison Taylor, "John Ellison," 2.

32. John Ellison sketch in Siegfried, *Family History*, 5-8.

33. Whitney, *History of Utah*, 4:399.

34. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri*, 220-28.

35. Allred, "John Ellison," 2; Rodgers, *Richard Pilling, A Family Heritage*, 24; Margaret Jane Ellison Taylor, "John Ellison."

36. Hartley, *Ephraim P. Ellison's Life and Enterprises, 1850-1939*.