

John Mills Born: 1816

Died: 1857

Located in the oldest historic section of the city cemetery in Sacramento, California is a group of graves that lie unmarked. The grave of John Mills is one of them. On November 1st, 1857 several Irishmen were working together near the mines. John was soldering when an errant spark ignited some flammable material nearby and there was a large dynamite explosion. He was one of the men who were killed. I can't tell when I first became interested in this man who was my Great Great Grandfather but after visiting his last resting place I was determined to know more. My research uncovered missing dates, mixed up names, and lots of confusion. Drawing from the ancestor files at the Daughter of Utah Pioneers Museum I located valuable alternative sources for facts and comments. Other material collected over the past four years came from newspaper clippings and primary source data at the Church's Family History Center. The following is an attempt to 'sort out' some of the events surrounding his life.

Diane Wheeler

John Mills was born on January 14, 1816 in the city of Belfast, Antrim County, Ireland. His father Thomas Mills was a middle class tradesman who owned a Tin-smith business in that town. He had a mixed heritage, being part Irish and part Manx, meaning some of his ancestors were from the Isle of Man. Thomas Mills married Alice McDonald (born: 1788-Ireland) about 1814 when he was 30 years of age. John recalled his mother, Alice, as 'a healthy woman who was seldom sick.' However she died suddenly from 'a dreadful nose bleed' one night leaving her husband and young son behind. Thomas then married Jane Gill in 1820 and to that union several other children were born including William Gill Mills (1822), Anthony Mills and other brothers and sisters. His brother William recalls a time as youngsters when he and John were left at home alone one day to get their own lunch, and John decided to make an apple dumpling, their favorite dessert/But John ate all the apples out of the middle during the process of making it!²

While growing up John received a good education. He could read well and loved music and he played both the violin and clarinet. In his adult years he played in a brass band. He took time to memorize beautiful pieces from the classics that he enjoyed, and he taught his children the value of memorizing parts of the scriptures in order to impress upon their minds for all time that 'they had found the one and only true Church.' He also tested their knowledge of good literature stressing his desire that they fill their minds with choice and good thoughts and the need to remember where they were to be found for future reference. "It is more important to remember the author than to remember the title and forget the author." John Mills remained an avid reader all his life counting good books among his treasures.

¹ William Gill Mills was a pioneer author of two LDS hymns-"*Arise Oh Glorious Zion*" and "*We'll sing the Songs of Zion*". He was baptized by his half-brother, John Mills, on 25 Dec. 1841-Isle of Man.

² *Biography of Elizabeth Mills*, by Nora Mills Barber, p 243.

As he grew to manhood John followed the vocation of his father becoming a skilled tin and copper smith. He married Elizabeth Hall (1836) and they moved to the Isle of Man where some of John's relatives were located. [It is interesting to note that the Manx people living on that island class themselves as a distinct culture apart from English, Irish, Scotch, and Welsh.] Their first child was a girl whom they named Mary Jane Mills-born on March 19th, 1837 in the capitol city of Douglas. Their second daughter, Elizabeth Mills, was born on March 7,1837. She had reddish brown hair and blue-gray eyes. A third child, Thomas Mills, was born not long before they emigrated to the United States on November 6,1841.

It was while they were living in Douglas in 1840 that Elder John Taylor first preached the glad tidings of the restored gospel to a small group of people.³ The missionaries rented quarters in Douglas with Solomon Pitchforth, a prosperous Jewish businessman, who became sympathetic to their work. Elder Taylor attracted much attention stirring up considerable interest. On September 22, 1840 John Mills was among the first group to be baptized and Elizabeth soon followed. Later the missionaries rented the Wellington market Hall, a place capable of seating about 1,000 people for their meetings. Excitement in and around Douglas prompted a number of articles to be written in the local *Liberal* and the *Manx Sun* decrying the new religion. A letter to the editor of the *Manx Liberal* noted: "I feel rather surprised and chagrined that the modern delusion, viz. 'Mormonism,' should have made such rapid strides in this town, hitherto considered exempt... O! Mr. Editor! I quake for the consequence; such a wholesale conversion to Mormonism was never before witnessed in any town or country. What will become of our society? ...What makes the case worse is, that a rumor is prevalent that all these pious men are to be baptized! That is... duly immersed in the salt water of Douglas Bay, by that abominable creature, Taylor!...immersion! (My hand shakes while I write) and in winter, too!" (*Sunday, Oct 31,1840*).

Despite the opposition Elder Taylor was able to organize a branch of the Church in Douglas. We find from the church records that John Mills, a teacher, served as branch clerk to the Presiding Elder, John Barnes when it was first organized. This was in December of 1840. Two months later there were seventy members of the church living on the Isle of Man.

John Taylor encouraged the new members to immigrate to America and gather in Zion. He told Elizabeth Mills she wouldn't need her pretty blue and white cups and saucers when she came to America, yet she she brought them anyway. (A large platter has been handed down to the eldest daughters in the family for years.) The Mills family sailed from Ireland to Liverpool Monday, 27 July 1840. They stopped in Kent to visit Elizabeth's parents and family and bid them all farewell. Unfortunately when her family discovered they had become Mormons the Mills were no longer welcome. Other families traveling with the Mills were the Abbots, Kanes, Cannons, Kelleys, and the Quails. The anxious group commenced their journey boarding the ship *Rochester*, and saying 'goodbye' to the British Isles. On their sea voyage across the Atlantic they endured a great storm and were frightened by a perilous experience in which, Elizabeth was actually washed overboard from a swell and had to be rescued by a brave crew member. The rough and sever weather caused them to drift off course delaying their passage 12 weeks.

³ History of the Church 4: pp. 234-235; *Church News*, Sept-10,1995.

With relief they docked at New Orleans and climbed aboard the steamer. *The Mermaid*, which took them up to the mouth of the Ohio River and the city Nauvoo. Elder Taylor had arrived shortly before this group of immigrants. We read, "On Thursday July 1, 1841, Elders Young, Kimball, and Taylor arrived at Nauvoo, after an interesting mission to England. The accounts of their mission are highly satisfactory."⁴ Elder Taylor greeted the Mills and others and the family ate their first meal at his home in that town.

The Mills family became acquainted with the prophet Joseph Smith and his family and the other leading saints. Settling in a small house on the outskirts of the village they worked industriously to make a home in their new country. Elizabeth was a fine seamstress who supplemented their income with her stitch work and embroidery. John practiced his trade as tin-smith working part time on the Nauvoo Temple being commissioned to make the horns and hoofs and ears for the twelve oxen that supported on their backs the baptismal fount in the temple. His daughter explained how she watched this process. "My father was given a horn and a hoof and ear of the oxen taken from the Kirkland Temple. He made, using these for a pattern, a separate mold for each horn, ear, and hoof. Then he melted the pewter and poured it into these molds. He then took them to the temple and soldered them onto the oxen, which formed a complete circle, with their heads toward the outer rim, and their tails on the inner part of the circle, with the baptismal fount resting on their backs...! wasn't old enough to be baptized in the temple before it was destroyed by mobs, but I remember the teaching of my father and his explanation of what baptism by immersion by one having authority from God himself, really meant."⁵

A fourth child, William Mills, was born in 1843 while they lived in Nauvoo bringing much satisfaction to the family. Active in the church, John defended the Prophet Joseph Smith and preached of his divine calling to restore the gospel. After the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith all the saints grieved but they did not cease work on the Nauvoo. John continued to walk up the hill to complete his commissioned task on the baptismal fount. Cruel mobs taunted and threatened the workers. Nevertheless they finished all they could. Working anxiously, more than a thousand persons were able to receive their endowed ordinances in the Nauvoo Temple before being forced to flee. John and Elizabeth Mills were endowed on the 13th of December in 1845 at the hand of Brigham Young. The Nauvoo Temple Records indicate their sealing was solemnized on 6 February, 1846 at 4:55.⁶

Forced to leave Nauvoo John Mills journeyed with his family to Fort Madison along with other saints. Here in Iowa Alice Mills was born in 1846. Later the family moved again to Drakesville, Iowa where John was engaged making telegraph wires. A fifth child, Martha Mills was born on January 8, 1850 during their residence there. The Mills family then moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa. It was while they were traveling en route to Council Bluffs on June 22nd, 1851 that Thomas, age 10, was bitten by a rattle snake and died.⁷

⁴ *History of the Church.*

⁵ *Biography of Elizabeth Mills Whitaker*, by Nora Barber, p 245.

⁶ Record? of Sealings in the Nauvoo Temple-1846. Book B, p.18-witnesses John Page, William Redfield.

⁷ His death was reported in *The Frontier Guardian*, Aug. 22, 1851.

[Side note]...The greatest fear of the pioneers crossing the plains was that they would die from 1) buffalo stampedes, 2) Indian attacks, or 3) starvation. But, in fact, very few were killed in this fashion. Instead snake bites and disease were the real killers.⁸

The family was to remain in Council Bluffs for two years. Here the older girls were able to attend school. Council Bluffs, Pottawattamie County, Iowa, was originally founded by Mormons as *Kanesville* in 1846. It is on the east bank of the Missouri River opposite Omaha, Nebraska. After evacuation from Winter Quarters, Nebraska many who didn't head west recrossed the Missouri River and located in Council Bluffs. John worked hard at various jobs to provide for his family and accumulate the necessary provisions for a trip west. Sickness and disease were common foes for the pioneers and once again the Mills family was called upon to fortify their faith when William, age 9 in 1853⁹ died from diphtheria. This was a terrible grief to endure.

After selling most of their furniture and china the family was able to purchase two wagons, two yoke of oxen and two cows, plus bedding and the necessary provisions for their final trek westward. In the spring of 1853 all saints planning to emigrate that season gathered at Six Mile Grove. They were then organized into companies of fifty wagons with a captain in charge of each. Captain David Wilkin was in charge of the company in which John Mills and his daughter, Elizabeth were to travel. They left Six-mile Grove on June 1st, 1853.¹⁰ The other company in which Mrs. Elizabeth Mills, Alice Mills and Martha Mills were assigned followed on June 9th. Their group was part of an independent Company led by Daniel A. Miller and John W. Cooley which followed the first one on June 9th from the same point. Most of the wagons were overcrowded and many of the pioneers were compelled to walk part of the way.

After traveling many weeks on the plains the company began to see signs of recent Indian movement. Elizabeth's account follows. "In one place we found the body of a white man who had been killed by them, his limb had been cut off and crossed on his body. Our captain said that this was the sign the Indians were angry. He ordered all the men to stay at the head of their oxen and not unyoke them.. When it became necessary for us to camp, each wagon was chained to the wagon wheel in front of it and they formed a large circle of wagons. We traveled all night sometimes, to evade the Indians.

One night some Indians stampeded our cattle and stole 16 horses and a whole herd of cows. The men went after the horses and cows that were driven into the hills but they didn't recover any of them. I went to help tend some of the children in another wagon while the women were busy. Without warning a band of twenty or more young Indian braves on horseback rode through our camp screaming and yelling, upsetting the kettles of food and snatching whatever pleased them. They were waving tomahawks and knives to frighten the women and children."

⁸ *History of the Church.*

⁹ Two different accounts state 'Mountain Fever' was the cause of Williams death...while others say cholera, or diphtheria.-It was most likely the latter.

¹⁰ *A Journal History for 1853*, pages 4, & 5, copied from Linforth's Guide /.Church Historical Department.

Elizabeth continues..."I told the children to lie down flat in the wagon bed and not make any noise but one little one started shrieking. One of the Indians heard her and came to the back of the wagon. As he reached in I became very angry and so I bit his hand. I twisted around and snatched up the oxbow by my feet and cracked him across the knuckles. Instead of going away he called me 'Brave" and snatched me from the wagon onto his horse."

John Mills and the other men soon rode back into camp and were told of Elizabeth's capture. With Captain Wilken and the other men he rode out to the Indian camp and offered blankets, and food, and his gold watch for Elizabeth's release. The Indians also asked for sugar and flour and meat before they were satisfied and willing to trade me back. "For days afterward the Indians trailed us at a distance, so no wagon was allowed to lag behind."" And thus they continued their trek across the plains with the others 'experiencing the hardships and joys incident to pioneer life.'

Elder Isaac C. Haight returning to Salt Lake City with reports of the season's emigrations passed the two companion companies traveling about four miles apart near the Bear River. He noted that "they traveled from Fort Laramie on the north side of the North Platte rather than on the south as most other groups did and from Fort Bridger they went to the right of Bridget's Butte and not to the left, as the other pioneers had done." (Captain Wilkin may have chosen the alternate side of the rivers because forage and grass was better.) In his journal Brother Haight recorded the company rosters and marked their arrival date as-September 9th. 1853.¹²

The Mills family settled into a small adobe house located in the Seventh Ward. To provide for his family John again worked at tin-smithing while Elizabeth began making shawls and taking in sewing jobs. Elizabeth recalled, "We sold beautiful shawls, linen, and lace for a few pounds of flour...Plenty of money and we couldn't buy a bit to eat. There wasn't a dust of flour and milk." It was a difficult time for them all. When John couldn't get enough money tin-smithing he would take "garden sass" and "soft soap." (?) Because the living was so very meager John Mills decided he could better provide for his family by working in the California Gold fields for a time. Therefore he joined with a group of men heading to northern California in the spring of 1856 intending to return the next season.

His fellow Irishmen who worked alongside John met the same fate that day. While soldering, sparks ignited some powder from a nearby magazine and they met a tragic death away from friends and family. When the sad news of his death reached Salt Lake his wife, Elizabeth carried the news to William Gill Mills, John's brother who had recently arrived. The following poem was written by William as a tribute to his brother...

*No table marks his narrow home;
That mortals may his virtues know;
But there's a power around his tomb
And angels guard the dust below.*

¹¹ Biography of Elizabeth Mills Whitaker. by Nora Whitaker Miles, 1986

¹² Journal History, Aug. 1853, (copied from Linforth's Guide to route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley. p 85-108.

*For Zion 's cause and Zion's head His noblest
impulse was awake, And though a stranger's
grave his bed, Forgive him for his virtues
sake.*

*Sealed by the Priesthood of our God Within
the temple's sacred shrine, He 'll rise
triumphant from the sod and in immortal glory
shine. "*

Elizabeth Mills Whitaker recalled some of her father's wise counsel to his children.
Quoting him:

"Never waste time."

"Never be ashamed of your religion."

"Remember the author of a good book before the title."

"We are put on earth to learn to overcome faults and failings and to make
ourselves fit to live with Him."¹³

Written by a Great Great Granddaughter of John Mills...

Diane Folsom Smurthwaite Wheeler
Farmington, UT July 2002

¹³ Elizabeth's recollections of her father transcribed by a Great Granddaughter, Elaine C. Hepworth.