

John Lowe Butler

1808 - 1860

presented by Ronald W. Thurber, director of the Mormon Trail Center

(my great-great-grandfather)

(or my grandmother Caroline Butler Thurber's grandfather)

Note: The following material has been taken from William G. Hartley's "My Best For The Kingdom", history and autobiography of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman. It was published by Aspen Books, SLC Utah in 1993

John was born on April 8, 1808 in Warren County, Kentucky. His father James Butler was twenty-six years old,, his mother Charity Lowe twenty four. James and Charity were originally from North Carolina. They eventually had fourteen children, John was the fourth child. Assessor's records show that in 1831, his parents owned 389 acres, he obviously grew up as a farmer.

John reached adulthood against severe odds. At age seven, he had rheumatic fever, poor health followed. Then he had a severe infection in one leg, followed by "dropsy" in his left eye which was swollen shut for thirteen days. At age eighteen, the attacks were on his left side and his arm and leg began to shrink and fail him, it was possibly polio. He was so "reduced" that his mother would carry him from room to room. By age twenty, John had suffered twelve hard attacks of the "rheumatics" (probably arthritis), including several accidents. As he approached his twenty-second year, he "was getting better than ever I expected to be. I was able to labor at light work."

By age twenty-two, John stood six feet tall, but took a "second growth" five years later and grew an additional two inches. He grew "very stout" which physical strength, when linked to his independence of mind, religious conversion to Mormonism, and sense of duty, led to his receiving dangerous assignments for his religion. John met Caroline Farzine Skeen, and they were married on Feb. 3, 1831. John married "up", that is the Skeen family were plantation owners with numerous slaves. As a marriage present from Caroline's family, they received several slaves—who immediately were given their freedom by John and Caroline. The slave issue, and later the Mormon religion, continued to be a major problem between this newly married couple and the influential Skeen family.

John was raised a Methodist. In 1828 when he was twenty, there was a great revival among the different sects of all denominations, which caused great excitement. On march 1, 1835, word came during a Church meeting that two Mormon elders would preach that evening at the home of John's uncle, John Lowe. John decided to go and hear the strangers preach, prompting his Baptist friends to send two of their members along to "protect" him. The two elders were James Emmett and Peter Dustin. Emmett was a fellow Kentuckian, and was baptized a Mormon by Lyman Wight in 1831. Peter Dustin was from New Hampshire.

At the meeting, sitting between his Baptist escorts, John expected the elders to preach from the Mormon "golden bible." They did not. "To my astonishment they commenced preaching the first principles as set down in the New Testament." John "knew every word they said to be truth for I had the testimony of it." On March 9, 1835, eight days after the elders' first sermon, John and Caroline went to a nearby pond and were baptized by James Emmett.

Persecution started immediately, John and Caroline made long-range plans to leave the area and follow the saints to Missouri. They left in April of 1836. Caroline had to forsake her entire family network. The company's well-loaded wagons rolled north westward, crossing the Ohio River, moved across southern Illinois, and on to Missouri. John wrote:

“We bid our friends good bye, and started on our journey. It was about the first of April. We had three hundred miles to go before we reached Missouri. We traveled with ox teams. We had one yoke of cattle give out, and we had to get another yoke. We had pretty good traveling considering.”

Their destination was Clay County across from Independence. As new comers, they had plenty to hope for, and plenty to fear. Two years would leave more fears than hopes fulfilled. Persecution started immediately. The Butlers relocated in several upper Missouri locations about ten times. When Clay County citizens in 1836 ordered the Mormons out, the Butlers and the others knew this was a clear violation of their constitutional rights. They became victims because the civil authorities would not help them. By the summer of 1838 approximately 1,500 Saints had settled in Daviess County, then began spreading out into nearby locations. On August 6, when John and other Daviess County Saints went to Gallatin to vote in the county election, they expected merely to vote, not to be part of a fight that would mark the beginning of violence soon to escalate into what Missouri history books call the state's “Mormon War.”

Because John Butler was a key combatant in the election day brawl, his name is mentioned in many of those histories. With a seven-pound, yard-long, heart-of-oak timber, John literally clubbed his way into minor fame on August 6, 1838. Of some eighteen accounts of the election day battle, only his two and those by John D. Lee and Levi Stewart came from firsthand witnesses.

John Butler was a Danite and Militia Captain. An estimated three hundred to four hundred men belonged to Danite groups between June and November 1838. These units were created to perform public safety and military tasks, and their assignment shifted in response to the changing problems faced by the Saints. Danites operated similarly to how National Guard soldiers or civil defense units do in American communities today, providing manpower to assist in wartime efforts and in a range of community emergencies during peacetime.

The fortunes of the Butler family faded fast during the eight short weeks following John's election-day brawl. When the Saints finally lost what amounted to a civil war fought in three counties, John took flight, leaving his young family in Missouri, to avoid arrest. As long as he lived, he never forgot how disgruntled he felt on the night of November 2, 1838, when he made his escape from Far West. When Far West surrendered and the Mormon War ended, the Butler family could be grateful Captain Butler had not been injured or killed during his assignments as a militiaman and Danite.

By late January 1839, when legal protests against the expulsion order failed, Saints began forming a stream of evacuees that flowed for three months from Far West east toward the Mississippi River, mainly to Quincy, Illinois. With the help of the Abraham Smoot family, Caroline and the children

in February 1839 headed east for Quincy to meet up with John. The “Quincy Whig” reported that Saints were “coming in from all quarters” and that “for several days they have been crossing at this place, bringing with them the wreck of what they could save from their ruthless oppressors.” After the Butlers found safety in Quincy in March, they watched wave after wave of Mormon refugees flow into town during the next five weeks.

On May 19, 1839, The Seventies officers met in council at Quincy and gave approval for John and seven other to be ordained seventies, his field of missionary labor was the state of Illinois. His mission ended in January of 1840. By then Latter-day Saints were gathering thickly upriver at a river-bend townsite called Commerce, renamed Nauvoo by the Saints. After his mission, John visited Nauvoo to find a place to live. The Prophet Joseph Smith chose James Emmett and John Lowe Butler along with their families to serve a Mission to the Sioux Indians. Each family had five children, indications show that they served into present-day Minnesota.. They returned in October and reported on the final day of October general conference. Joseph Smith then again called James Emmett and John Butler to a second Sioux Mission, this time without their families.

After his second Sioux mission, John resided among his own people and, for the first time in four years, had a full farm season at home. For the good of the Butler family, he needed to stay home and work, earn, and produce. However, his body, strained by wilderness hardships, again was afflicted with “rheumatics” that would hamper his ability to labor.

In Nauvoo, the Butlers finally had an opportunity to feel “at home” for the first time since leaving Kentucky in 1836. Nauvoo land records show that John contracted to buy three land parcels, they settled on the northwest corner of Cutler and Page Streets, three blocks north and one block east of the temple site.

The Prophet Joseph Smith designated and ordained twelve Nauvoo Legion men to guard, protect, and defend him, and John Butler was one of these twelve. On the evening of June 22 1844, bodyguards John Butler, Alpheus Cutler, and Abraham Hodge joined Joseph in a meeting with his brother Hyrum, Willard Richards, John Taylor, W.W. Phelps, William Marks, Porter Rockwell, and others in the upper room of the Mansion House. Joseph read to these trusted men a letter from Governor Ford seeking Joseph’s surrender to civil authorities outside Nauvoo. When the meeting ended, Joseph privately talked to John and Hodge outside, where they planned an escape. Late that night Joseph, Hyrum, Willard Richards, and Porter Rockwell crossed to Iowa and hid. But by sunrise, word came to Joseph from Emma and others urging him to return. Reluctantly, Joseph dropped his plan to escape to the West and returned to Nauvoo. Very early Monday morning, June 25, Governor Ford sent orders for Joseph Smith to go to Carthage by 10:00 A.M. that day “without escort.” If Joseph did not comply, “Nauvoo would be destroyed and all the men, women and children that were in it. So after sunrise, Joseph and those among the eighteen charged with “riot” headed for Carthage, some twenty miles away. John, Abraham Hodge, and Henry Sherwood were three of Joseph’s bodyguards who rode with the group. The ensuing details are well know, as on Thursday afternoon, June 27 at 5:16 P.M., Joseph and Hyrum were murdered in Carthage Jail. Friday, a formal funeral cortege brought the bodies back. The next day, June 29, thousands moved solemnly through the

Mansion House to view the martyrs' bodies. That night John did not return to his home and apparently helped to secretly bury the body of Joseph Smith within the walls of the unfinished Nauvoo House.

Between the June 1844 martyrdom and the Mormon exodus from Nauvoo in 1846, the Butlers participated in four of six projects the Twelve tried to complete for Joseph Smith:

1. Complete the Nauvoo Temple
2. Commence proper ordinances in order for the Saints to receive their temple endowments.
3. Exploring companies needed to head into western America to find LDS settlement sites.
4. Missionaries had to be sent to foreign lands.
5. Missionaries had to be sent to tribes of American Indians
6. The doctrine and practice of plural marriage needed to be introduced selectively to trusted Saints

The Butlers headed into western wildernesses, lived and labored among Indians, received their temple endowments, and became a polygamous family.

John recorded that Caroline and her sister Charity Skeen “were both sealed to me before we left Nauvoo” on December 23, 1844. To be taught about celestial marriage and have a second wife sealed to him, John had to be a trusted insider in the eyes of the Twelve. He was one of but a few dozen men so selected. John, Caroline, and Charity became a polygamous family six years before plural marriage was publicly announced as an LDS practice.

In December, 1844, President Young secretly called the Butlers on a difficult mission. He asked John to take his family beyond Iowa's frontier settlements, overtake James Emmett's expedition up the Iowa River, and help lead them. A consensus among historians is that James Emmett was a “renegade,” his expedition an act of disobedience, and his followers “misled.” Reports had been coming down the Iowa River that some of the estimated 150 formed into 21 outfits in the Emmett party, who had been forced by their leader to place all their goods “in common”, were very lean on resources and were stealing from neighbors. That John Butler, Caroline, and Charity accepted this secret winter assignment from Brigham Young shows they possessed strong loyalty to the Church and a good deal of courage. With a heavily loaded wagon and a team of horses or oxen, John led his two wives and seven children, ranging in age from thirteen to one, along established roads through sparsely settled Iowa counties. They arrived at the Emmett camp on January 1, 1845. Upon arrival, they found Emmett's followers to be ill-equipped, short on food, and facing the coldest part of winter. Captain Emmett soon uprooted the camp and immediately pushed his people into the wilderness, in spite of hardships of winter weather. Following many misfortunes and near-starvation, they arrived at Fort Vermillion, now Vermillion South Dakota, on June 7 1845. It consisted of four or five log cabins, having been established in 1835 as a trading post by French fur traders.

The next day, James Emmett rode out of camp about fifteen miles to meet Sioux Indian chiefs who were drying buffalo meat. Seven Indians returned to the Saints camp bringing badly needed bales of dried buffalo meat as a present. One of the chiefs was named Henry, who was half Frenchman and had been educated at a Protestant school at St. Petersburg in present-day Minnesota. He could

speak and read English. In appreciation for this badly needed food, the Saints soon prepared a “thanksgiving” feast, and quoting James Holt’s journal:

“We made a feast for them giving them the best we had. Emmett handed the chief Henry the Book Of Mormon to read, and after he had read the preface and explained it to his comrades, they all gave a great shout for joy. They danced, sang, shouted, and had a joyful time. Emmett asked them why they were so happy. They told him that their great chief, who had died twenty years ago, had told them that the whites would bring them in this very year, the record of their forefathers. They had almost forgotten it until he had presented him this book. They felt to rejoice, because the words of their Prophet had come to pass.”

After a hard winter, John left his family at Camp Vermillion on October 3, 1845, and returned to Nauvoo by floating down the Missouri River to St. Louis and then booked passage on a Mississippi steamer up to Nauvoo. He then became even more aware of Church leaders orders to leave Nauvoo the following spring. Upon arrival he noticed that the impressive white stone temple looked nearly finished. A federal marshal arrived in Nauvoo on December 17 with writs for the arrest of the Twelve and Bishop George Miller. The next day, John was one of fourteen men chosen to be temple officiators, directed by Brigham Young. Work started earnestly, and continued into the beginning months of 1846. As accelerated plans for the exodus proceeded, John was in an awkward position—a man with no family to move and therefore able to assist someone needing help. John married again. On February 6, 1846, Sarah Lancaster was joined to him as his third wife by Brigham Young. John was then thirty-seven and Sarah thirty-nine. In March, Sarah’s mother, seventy-four-year-old Sarah Lancaster, was sealed to John as his fourth wife, a charitable priesthood act of sealing not meant to create a man-and-wife relationship. When John’s turn came to join the exodus from Nauvoo, younger Sarah accompanied him. But the older Sarah decided not to go west into the wilderness, instead she returned to Indiana to live the rest of her days with other of her children.

John left Nauvoo in March 1846, moving faster along the muddy trail to catch up with President Young. President Brigham Young wanted to send him to Camp Vermillion as soon as possible to help the Emmett Company coordinate its movements with the main migration of Saints. President Young immediately sent John Butler along with James Cummings on ahead to Camp Vermillion, leaving their families with the Camp of Israel. Their route took them to the Bluffs by way of Traders Point, making them the first Latter-day Saints from the Nauvoo exodus to traverse Iowa and reach the Missouri River. They arrived at Camp Vermillion on April 25 1846, John having been absent from his family for almost seven months.

After many preparations for pulling-up camp and moving back, the Saints in Camp Vermillion loaded their wagons and started their trek on May 5 to the Bluffs. Captain Butler’s train included 12 families, 59 wagons, 19 yoke of oxen, 1 mule, 1 horse, and 29 cows. They arrived on May 31 at Traders Point. During June 1846 the Butler family camped with Emmett company associates near the Missouri border, south of Council Bluffs, where men were able to work in nearby settlements.

In mid-June 1846, 114 miles west of the Missouri, Sioux Indians raided, sacked, and burned a Pawnee Indian village and a Presbyterian mission station a mile west of it (about eight miles

southwest of present-day Genoa, Nebraska). Bishop Miller's company was assigned to go to this station, salvage possessions, and haul them back to Bellevue. On July 6 Miller led thirty-two wagons which ferried across the Missouri, then Captain Butler on the West side merged his company of perhaps twenty wagons. With Bishop Miller in charge, then went on to Pawnee Village. While salvaging food, the whites were startled by the sudden appearance of several Ponca Indians, led by their Chief "Buffalo-Bulls-Two". They came along with seven braves to offer assurances of peace to the Pawnees. Evidently this area was a "war zone" among warring Indian tribes. The Poncas invited them to spend the winter in their protection by moving North to the Niobrara river area. With their wagons now fully loaded with the many supplies salvaged from Pawnee Village, in August the Butlers spent eleven hot days in a caravan of 160 to 175 wagons traversing barren and rough terrain on their trip North. They arrived on August 23. Excited Ponca Indians swarmed the white newcomers as most had never before seen white people, wagons, oxen, sheep, hens and pigs.

By mid-September 1846 workmen had staked out Fort Ponca, John and other men started to build cabins. Contact was made with the new Saint's community of Winter Quarters which was some 150 miles to the Southeast, carrying mail and trading for badly needed supplies. Fort Ponca soon was an outpost serving people committed to religion. After a fairly comfortable Winter, and following directions received from Brigham Young, the Ponca Saints departed for Winter Quarters on April 10 1847. They took ten days to arrive. Many of the families settled in various clusters on both sides of the Missouri, but the Butlers stayed at Winter Quarters. They would spend the first year here, then four years across the river in or near the emerging Mormon city of Kanesville. In 1848, Winter Quarters' two-year existence ended. Saints were required to leave the Omaha Indian lands. The "well-prepared" went west to Utah and the "less-prepared" crossed east into Iowa. The Butlers went to Iowa, and started farming. John stated:

"The folks all got ready to start. I was going too, but I had no provisions and scarcely any clothes, and Brother Brigham said to me, "I would not try to go this year, John L., but go over the river to Pottawattamie and make something to bring your family comfortably.""

Late in 1851 Latter-day Saints in the Kanesville area received orders to move west and totally vacate their Iowa settlements. "Gather to Zion," the Church's First Presidency admonished, "and fail not." Estimates say 10,000 Saints went west in 1852, nearly double any previous year's total, making it the largest emigration year in LDS history. A Utahan heading east against this heavy west-bound traffic estimated that he passed about 1,400 teams.

The Butlers collected near the Missouri's eastern edge at a staging ground jammed with wagons, oxen, horses, and Saints from "the States" and Europe waiting to be organized. Apostle Erastus Snow arrived in charge of twenty-eight Scandinavians he had sent from Denmark. These were the first converts from Scandinavia to immigrate to Utah. Elder Snow assigned the Butlers to Eli Kelsey's wagon company, one of the last LDS trains outfitted that year. It is estimated that the company included 100 people and fifty wagons, many which were hauling freight rather than

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passengers. Near the first of July 1852, the Butlers ferried their wagon across the Missouri and started their westerly course along the north side of the Platte River. Two-thirds of the distance across Nebraska, trail landscape changed from prairie grasses to barren plains with scattered rock

monuments like Chimney Rock and Scott's Bluff. They proceeded Northwest into Wyoming, gaining altitude, passed Fort Laramie, crossed the Platte, crossed the continental divide, bent southwest towards Great Salt Lake, passed Fort Bridger, then into the rugged Wasatch Mountains then into the Great Salt Lake valley. They arrived on October 15, 1852, the distance traveled was about 1,100 miles. Apostle Erastus Snow personally welcomed the Kelsey train, visited Captain Butler's group, and gathered his little Scandinavian flock to his home for their first meal in Zion.

When the Butlers reached downtown Great Salt Lake City, the LDS First Presidency was encouraging new arrivals to settle in Juab Valley, Fillmore, Iron County, and Tooele. To produce food and clothing for three adults and ten children (the offspring ranged in age from twenty-one to two), the Butlers needed a good-sized farm. John located his sister Lucy Butler Allred, who had reached Salt Lake City three years before. From her he learned about a new settlement called Palmyra, some sixty miles south of Salt Lake City, John staked out a farm site in this settlement. Then, leaving Caroline and the children in the relative safety of Salt Lake City, he and plural wife Sarah headed south to create some kind of start for the family.

That fall, more settlers arrived in this area including Albert King Thurber who, in July 1849, on his way to the California gold fields, had stopped for needed supplies in Salt Lake City and joined the Church.

Note: Through the marriages of descendants from both of these families (John's son Isaac Erin Thurber and Albert's granddaughter Caroline Butler) would be our grandparents.

By February 1853, John's first family joined him and Sarah in Palmyra. In April they trekked north to Salt Lake City to attend the Church's general conference and the special occasion for the laying of the Salt Lake Temple cornerstones. Back at home, they continued to struggle to make a living, John would take some opportunities to use his black smithing skills by leaving his family for periods of time and working at Fort Bridger Wyoming. Many immigrants heading to California had need of wagon repairs along the trail. On January 19, 1855, the Utah Territorial legislature granted the Palmyra-Fort Saint Luke settlement a city charter, allowing it to create a government and to be renamed "Spanish Fork".

In 1856, Utah Stake President James C. Snow visited Spanish Fork and appointed John as acting bishop. Very soon thereafter, President Brigham Young gave him a special blessing and made him a Bishop. Late in 1856 some 1,200 LDS emigrants in the Martin and Willie handcart companies and the Hunt and Hodgett wagon trains became trapped in western Wyoming by severe snowstorms. At President Brigham Young's request, Bishop Butler sent five wagons and teams with thirteen men from his ward in Spanish Fork to assist in the rescue. That same year, John chose Albert King Thurber as his new first counselor in the Bishopric.

The next few years saw many issues with local Indians, involvement with the threat of federal troops and the United States soldiers building Camp Floyd near their settlement. In 1856 John became a partner with Archibald Gardner, one of Salt Lake Valley's leading millers, and built the Gardner-Butler saw mill. They not only produced sawed lumber but also badly needed shingles for roofs.

With failing health, for John 1859 was his last full calendar year to live. By spring, he felt too ill to carry the full load as bishop, and under the direction of George A. Smith and Ezra T. Benson, he was replaced on May 8 1859. After a lingering illness, he died on April 10, 1860. He died relatively young, only two days past his fifty-second birthday. He left a sizeable family. Not counting the married children who had left home, John's household then numbered five wives, seven children, two divorced daughters living at home, and two grandchildren.

In reviewing his posterity, John had married eight wives. By three child-bearing wives John had fifteen children who themselves became parents. Had John lived to see their children, he could have counted 114 grandchildren, an average of ten children per pair of parents (one son had two sets of children by two wives). Five of John's seven daughters who became parents had twelve children or more. Of John's 114 grandchildren, 91 (80 percent) reached maturity. One grandchild, Caroline Butler Thurber, is my grandmother who lived to be 88 years old.

Only a small percentage of Mormons or anyone else who lived in the early nineteenth century wrote histories of their lives or kept diaries. John deserves great credit for his writings. He concluded his autobiography, and his life, with a personal testament affirming that he had given his best for his religion as follows:

“I fear that I have seen my best days, but I can say that I have done my best to help to roll forth the Kingdom of God.

I have seen and been through many trials and close places, and my family have suffered from want, and I have always felt to give God praise for all things which came unto us for our good.

And I can bear my testimony to this work, I know that it is the Kingdom of God for the Lord has blessed me with the knowledge thereof.

I have seen the sick healed under the power of the Priesthood.

I have seen the power of God displayed in many places.

And I have always felt to do my best in all things that I have had to do.

My prayer is that all of us who are in the Kingdom of God may be led to do what is right in the sight of God at all times, is the prayer of your humble servant. Amen

John Lowe Butler”