

John B. Walker

Richard W. Walker, second great grandson

Following the Walker lineage back, we meet John B. Walker, a quite remarkable and honorable man who, along with his beloved wife Elizabeth, played a significant role in the early establishment of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the emigration of the Saints to the West, and the settlement of the Utah Territory. Looking at his family history and early life, we see that John B. Walker was well prepared for his later work.

Mississippi

John Beauchamp Walker was born in 1814 to Ephraim and Mary Beauchamp Walker. Ephraim was the son of Thomas and Sophia Walker of Somerset County, Maryland, and Thomas was the son of Thomas and Elizabeth Walker, who owned a plantation in that county during colonial times. Mary Beauchamp (pronounced BEECH-um; also boh-SHAHM) was a descendent of Edmund Beauchamp, who immigrated to Maryland from England about 1665. Edmund's father John Beauchamp was a successful businessman in London and one of the primary financiers of the Mayflower and the Plymouth Company. Edmund's wife, Sarah Dixon, came from a family of Quakers that in 1649 sailed from London to America, seeking religious freedom.

Ephraim Walker left his roots in Maryland in the 1790s and migrated to Georgia with a group of relatives. He and his wife Mary moved several times afterwards, as if in search of their own promised land, which led them to Kentucky, Illinois, Alabama, and Tennessee before the family finally settled in Tishomingo County, Mississippi, about 1835. The Walkers were very much pioneers, with the skills and self-reliance it takes to turn wild prairie and forest into habitable farmland.

It was while the family was living in Livingston County, Kentucky, that John B. Walker was born on March 24, 1814. John was the eighth of nine children. He met Elizabeth Ann Brown, daughter of Daniel and Sylvia Winsett Brown, in Alabama, and they were married in 1835. Their first child, Mary Jane, was born the following year in Mississippi. There, in the early 1830s, Indian hunting land given up by the Chickasaws was made available for settling, and the Walkers took advantage of the opportunity. In living much of his life in such close proximity to the Indians on the southwestern frontier of the United States, John B. Walker developed a familiarity with their ways and languages.

Sadly, daughter Mary Jane died in 1840 at the age of four. John and Elizabeth's second daughter, Sarah Elizabeth, was born in Mississippi in 1838.

The Ephraim and Mary Walker family carried an unwavering faith in God with them in their migrations. They were devout Methodists and helped found and support churches wherever they went. A relative wrote that John's father died "at the advanced age of nearly 90 years, but full of faith and hope of a blessed immortality," that before his death Ephraim "was in almost daily communication with the angels," and that "he and his wife had lived and walked with God for three score years and ten, and he preaching and teaching the Gospel to sinners." Several of John's brothers also devoted their lives to the ministry. But John's faith would lead him down a different path.

Two Mormon missionaries, Jesse D. Hunter and Benjamin L. Clapp, came to their county in 1838, sharing their message of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. Of the Walkers there, only John and Elizabeth were willing to listen to them. Elizabeth was baptized into the Church early in 1839, and John was baptized later, on November 26, 1839, by Elder Hunter. He was ordained an elder in the Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in December. John and Elizabeth must have been quite impressed with the missionaries and the message they brought, for they would later name their first son, Jesse Hunter Walker, after one of them. On August 2, 1840, John B. Walker began a short mission himself, in company with Elder M. M. Sanders.

Illinois

Not surprisingly, John's brothers were quite unhappy with his conversion. One of them was so angry he threatened to organize a mob to run John out of the county. John B. Walker and his small family left Mississippi in 1840 for Illinois, spent a few months in Clinton County with relatives, and then joined the Saints in Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1841.

In 1844, during the April General Conference of the Church, John B. Walker was ordained a seventy, as a member of the 8th Quorum. He was called to serve another short mission, back to Mississippi. His mission was not only to "preach the truth in righteousness," but to also hold conferences and seek electors for the Prophet Joseph Smith's political campaign.

John was well respected and was asked by some to perform their marriages. He was an able blacksmith and wheelwright and offered his skills and labor in the construction of the Nauvoo Temple. The Walkers owned a lot on the block just east of the temple site. When the rite of baptism for the dead was established in the Church, John and Elizabeth did not hesitate to perform the ordinances for their departed relatives. John B. Walker was baptized for his grandparents Thomas and Sophia Walker on September 15, 1843. As soon as the temple was completed enough to perform endowment ceremonies, John and Elizabeth were quick to take the opportunity and had their endowments on January 7, 1846.

As we know, the early Saints of the Church suffered continual persecution, even after Joseph and Hyrum Smith were martyred in 1844. In 1846 it got to the point where the members in Nauvoo were forced to leave their beautiful city and sacred temple. Apparently, John and Elizabeth Walker did not leave quickly enough for the mob, and their house and all that was in it was burned to the ground.

Along with most the rest of the Saints, John B. Walker and his family, after plodding west across Iowa, spent the winter of 1846–47 in Winter Quarters, Nebraska. John and Elizabeth now had three children. Jesse Hunter and John Taylor were born in Illinois, in Clinton County in 1841 and Nauvoo in 1845, respectively. Their fifth child, Joseph E., was born at Winter Quarters in early 1847, but sadly the baby soon died of illness in those harsh conditions.

After spending the winter in Nebraska, the Saints moved back east across the Missouri River to Iowa while Church President Brigham Young took a company west to scout a permanent place where the Saints could live in peace. Over the next five years, as many of the Saints migrated west to the Salt Lake Valley, John B. Walker and his family remained in Pottawattamie County, Iowa, near Kanesville (Council Bluffs). John's services as a blacksmith and wheelwright were in great demand, and he helped many of the pioneers prepare their wagons and animals for the long journey west.

John B. Walker received his patriarchal blessing from Patriarch Isaac Morley on April 15, 1848, in which he was blessed that "upon thee and thy posterity after thee shall the Priesthood rest." He was told that "there is much for thee to do in this last dispensation" and that he would see "Israel gathered from her long dispersion."

While in Pottawattamie County, Iowa, three more children came into the family—Margaret Ann in 1848, William Albert in 1850, and James Ephraim in 1852.

Emigration West

Finally, in 1852, Church leaders called all the Saints remaining in the east to “migrate to the Valleys of the Mountains.” They were organized into groups, or companies, of about 250 people each, and captains were appointed to lead these companies across the Great Plains. John B. Walker was called as the captain of the Fourteenth Company of 1852. As *Treasures of Pioneer History* explains, “these men were selected because of the qualities of leadership, their undaunted courage, and their ability to meet successfully the problems which confronted them each day in their dealings with their own people and the strangers they might meet along the way.” Ezra T. Benson spoke to the captains at a conference on April 7, giving them counsel that they should “be active and encourage their companies.”

John B. Walker’s company began gathering near the Missouri River in late June, and once all were assembled and prepared, this group of 250 intrepid souls began their migration, leaving their camp on July 5. Their slow, three-month journey by wagon, horseback, and on foot, accompanied by cattle, oxen, sheep, and horses, would take them across the plains of Nebraska along the North Platte River, through Indian lands, across the high, barren deserts of Wyoming, over the continental divide, across the Green River, down into the Utah Territory, and over the steep Wasatch mountains—in all, a distance of some one thousand miles.

One traveler, George A. Hicks, wrote, “We were a company of devoted Christians, having prayer morning and evening.” Another member of the company, Sarah Southworth Burbank, described their routine: “At night we had to guard the oxen so [the Indians] would not steal them. We chained the cattle to the wheels of the wagons. The bugle was sounded in the morning and all the camp called together for prayer. The cows were yoked with the oxen, and we traveled many miles before getting water and wood. When we came to a stream, we would wash our clothes and dry them on the grass, for we might not get a place again for fifty or a hundred miles. We gathered dried dung, or buffalo chips, to make a fire to cook our food.” Blacksmiths and wheelwrights like John B. Walker were kept busy keeping the wagons in good repair.

The pioneers endured their share of hardships. Not long after setting out, cholera struck the camp and tragically took the lives of several of the members. One of these was Abby Burbank, who, as Sarah Burbank related, was “buried without a coffin by the Platte River, along with others. We had to go in the morning, never to see their graves again.” Another woman was killed when the oxen stampeded, throwing her out of the wagon. Many women gave birth during the journey, but, as Sarah further wrote, “the company was not hindered in their march, as they would move on the next morning, making quite a hardship for the women.”

And there were marriages that took place, one being between this Sarah Southworth and Daniel Burbank, whose wife had died. She recorded, “Captain Walker . . . married us one evening. The bugle called the camp together to witness our marriage. We had cedar torch lights instead of candles.”

Indians were a constant threat. As one man went out to hunt buffalo, he was captured by “a hundred Indians.” The company thought that they would never see him again, but the Indians did finally give him up in exchange for flour, sugar, and coffee.

Because of the scarcity of grass for the livestock, the pioneers decided to spread out, traveling in smaller groups of ten families. As a result, they reached their final camp, the Salt Lake Valley, on various days in early October, some arriving as early as 2nd and some as late as the 7th. One man, Henry Emery, well summed up the feelings of the Saints after they reached their new home. Though food and necessities were scarce, he said, “we never sat down to eat without potatoes and salt, or something else, and we were content, knowing we were gathered with the people of God for the purpose of serving Him, which we hope to do with all our heart from this time henceforth and forever.”

Grantsville

In September 1852 President Brigham Young in Salt Lake City received a letter from a small group of settlers who had set up homes on the west side of the Tooele Valley, about 40 miles west of Salt Lake City, requesting that families be sent to help strengthen their little settlement. These pioneers were greatly outnumbered by hungry Indians in the area and felt unsafe with only the few men they had. Men like John B. Walker were just what they needed. Soon after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, the Walkers, along with a few other families, were sent to make their home in the settlement, which came to be called Grantsville.

The growing community of Grantsville consisted primarily, or perhaps entirely, of members of the Church, who were one in their faith in God and their purpose of building up a community of Zion. “John B. Walker,” it was said, “was a religious man and very active in the Church.” Leaders organized a branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Grantsville, with Thomas H. Clark presiding and John B. Walker and William A. Martindale as counselors.

The destitute Gosiute Indians who lived in the area were often a problem for the pioneers. But within only a few months of settling in Grantsville, in answer to the prayers of the Saints, John B. Walker and a man named William Lee were able to learn the local Indian language well enough to converse with the Indians and help maintain peace between them and the pioneers. Some were astonished at their “gift of tongues.” One reporter for the Salt Lake City *Deseret News* submitted the following, which was printed in the April 30, 1853, issue:

The branch at Grantsville is presided over by Bro. Thomas Clark, who seems to be a good and faithful man of God, with his counselors Bros. Walker and Martindale, through whose influence the branch seems to be in a healthy condition and to enjoy the blessings of the Spirit with its attendant blessings of gifts of Tongues, etc., as promised by the Savior.

There are some 25 or 30 families in Grantsville, mostly of last fall's emigration. . . . Their soil, timber, grass, and other conveniences is not excelled in the mountains, with the exception of their exposed situation to the various tribes of Indians on the western range of the Wasatch Mountains, which Indians, we believe, should be guarded against very prudently indeed, and to which we would call your attention.

The prophecy . . . in regard to the Gift of Tongues has been fulfilled in said branch, for Bro. Walker and Lee have the gift of the Utah tongue, and have preached (and did while I was there) to the Indians in their own tongue, and to the conviction of all present of their knowledge of what was said to them.

In 1854, following direction from Church leaders, the people of Grantsville built a thick wall around the center of their town for protection against the Indians. A local militia unit was also organized. John B. Walker was elected by the citizens as captain of Company B of the Tooele Military District on May 29, 1854, a position made official with Governor Brigham Young's signature on March 9, 1855.

But Indians weren't the only problem the Saints of Grantsville were faced with. Their efforts to grow sufficient food for their needs were frustrated at times by hailstorms that smashed their grain, and more often by grasshoppers and crickets that devoured their crops. During the summer of 1855 so much of their grain was lost to the insects that the people nearly starved the following winter. It took constant vigilance, and some miraculous assistance from flocks of gulls, to preserve even a small part of their precious wheat. Food was so scarce that winter that the people were forced to eat whatever wild plants they could find that were the slightest bit edible.

In September 1854, John and Elizabeth Walker made a trip to Salt Lake City where they had their temple sealing ordinance done in the Endowment House on September 6. The last child of John B. and Elizabeth Walker, Selina Mesanile, was born in Grantsville in 1855.

In 1855 John B. Walker fell ill with what they called “consumption”—tuberculosis. His condition gradually got worse during the harsh winter of 1855–56 until finally, on March 10, 1856, at the age of 41, he passed away, leaving a wife and seven children, the youngest barely one year old. Captain Walker was given a military funeral the following day, which was described thus: “Emanuel Bagley and James McBride played the funeral march. The funeral procession marched through the east gate of the fort and on west and out the west gate. John B. Walker was the first man to be buried in the Grantsville Cemetery.”

Because John B. Walker lived only a few years after arriving in Utah, and his family soon moved away from Grantsville, he has been largely forgotten. But John B. Walker should be remembered and honored for the great leader he was, for the untiring service he gave, for his unwavering faithfulness, and for the foundation he laid for future generations.

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