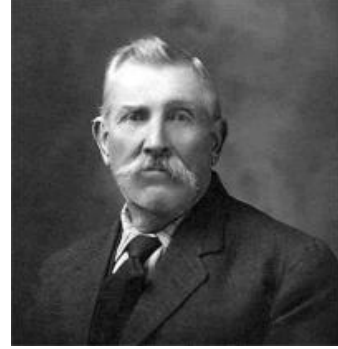


## Thomas Bowles



Age: 19  
Born: August 18, 1836, Calne, Wiltshire, England  
Willie handcart company

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When Thomas Bowles was ten years old, his schooling ended when he went to work in a button factory. One day while he was adjusting a belt on some machinery, his foot was caught and his leg badly broken. He was taken to a hospital where the bones were set by a doctor pulling on the leg while Thomas held on to the head of the bed. After this painful procedure, Thomas spent eleven weeks in the hospital.<sup>1</sup> The accident left Thomas with one leg shorter than the other, and he suffered from this lameness the rest of his life.

In 1846 or 1849, Thomas was baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The well-noted hospitality of the Bowles family had entertained Robert Nelson, Joseph Coleman, and William Salter.<sup>2</sup> Family histories name Elder Nelson and Elder Coleman as missionaries who shared the gospel with the Bowles family in England. It is not known for sure when Thomas's parents were baptized, but his younger brother Enoch was baptized in 1853.

In 1856, the Bowles family traveled from their home in Gloucester, England, to Liverpool, where they joined other Saints aboard the ship *Thornton*, under the leadership of returning missionary James G. Willie. The father, Edward Bowles, was 50 years old; the mother, Ann Bolton Bowles, was 54. Their two sons, Thomas and Enoch, were ages 19 and 11, respectively. Another son, William Bowles, age 22, was signed up to sail on the *Thornton* with the rest of the family, but for some reason decided not to go.<sup>3</sup>

For a week prior to his 20th birthday of August 18, 1856, Thomas and other members of the Willie handcart company repaired handcarts, resupplied their provisions, and readied themselves for the next 1,000 miles of their journey. Approximately 500 members of the Willie company had already traveled 300 miles from their first outfitting point in Iowa City, Iowa, to Florence, Nebraska Territory. Now a hundred of them had dropped out after they were given the option to not continue.

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<sup>1</sup> One family history indicates "Thomas lay eleven weeks on his back and was never turned over. In all, he spent twenty-one weeks in the hospital." (Flossie Bowles Sudweeks)

<sup>2</sup> William Salter is noted in one Bowles family history as a convert from the Bowles' hometown who was largely responsible for the Bowles family conversion. (Geneva D. Larsen, DUP submission) This appears to be William Salter, Jr., who was the same age as Thomas and perhaps his boyhood friend. William was the only member of his family to emigrate to Utah. He traveled in 1868 with the Simpson M. Molen wagon company.

<sup>3</sup> See British Mission Record for *Thornton* at:

<https://saintsbysea.lib.byu.edu/mii/passenger/14944?keywords=Bowles&scandinavia=on&europe=on&mii=on&netherlands=on&sweden=on>. William was Edward Bowles's son from his first marriage to Amelia Bird. Amelia died in 1835. Some family histories name "John" as the older Bowles son who "refused to leave England." This appears to be an error.

On August 12, 1856, the Bowles family "signed receipts for their conveyance from Iowa City to Florence"<sup>4</sup> and chose to continue to the Salt Lake Valley. They were part of a group of one hundred under returning missionary and sub-captain William Woodward. Captain Woodward had purchased 61 lbs. of "Hoop iron & some small fixies to fit up the hand-carts"<sup>5</sup> for the company. Fortunately for the Bowles family, when it was time to leave Florence, Woodward's hundred "received carts that had had skanes of hoop iron put on them."<sup>6</sup>

After nearly a week at Florence, fitting out for the trek across the plains, and hearing advice from various emigration agents, captains and sub-captains, the Bowles family was still firm in their commitment to continue their journey. On August 17, after the first day of only 6 miles travel from Florence, they had one more opportunity to change their minds. Subcaptain Millen Atwood spoke to the company, and "gave the Saints some good instruction relative to their present and future duties which he plainly told them must and should be performed and referring to his satisfaction at some grumblers having deserted from the ranks told the balance that those of them who might still feel double-minded had better do the same as this was about their last chance."<sup>7</sup> The next day Thomas Bowles turned 20 years old, and was on his way to a new home in Zion.

William Woodward, the sub-captain over a hundred which included the Bowles family, was a diligent record-keeper, writing in his personal journal daily and later keeping the Willie company journal. He recorded the names of those in his hundred, and how the five tent-groups of twenty people each were organized. The Bowles family tent-group was fortunate to be presided over by James Gardner, a man who was said to be one of the strongest and most reliable in the Willie company. The following is a list of names and ages of this group, as recorded by Woodward:

James Gardener (27), Hannah Gardener (27) and their four children: Mary Ann (7), Agnes E. (5), Frederick J. (4), and John (1); single men Richard F. Turner (67), John Roberts (41), William Jeffries (24), and Richard Hardwick (63); couples Joseph (34) and Amelia Meadows (40), and William and Catherine Halley [Hailey] (both 66); Mary Darney [Dorney] (65), widow, and her daughter, Hannah (25); and the Bowles family.<sup>8</sup>

Two of these older men of the Bowles's tent group died in the first few weeks out from Florence: William Hailey on September 13, and Richard Turner on September 15. (Richard was reportedly blind.) Thomas probably helped to dig their graves.

On October 15, the Willie company finally reached the Sweetwater River at Independence Rock. The company journal records their dire circumstances on this day:

Many of the company are sick & have to ride in the wagons. One beef heifer & one poor cow were killed this evening for the camp. Last evening a council & a meeting were held to take into consideration our provisions & the time it was considered we should have to

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<sup>4</sup> William Woodward journal, Aug. 12, 1856.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Aug. 14, 1856.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Aug. 16, 1856.

<sup>7</sup> Willie company journal, Aug. 17, 1856.

<sup>8</sup> *History of William Woodward*, 2nd edition 2005 (family compilation from notebooks, diaries, and papers of William Woodward, and interviews), 35-36.

make it last before we could depend upon supplies. It was unanimously agreed to reduce the rations of flour one fourth—the men then would get 10½ ozs. per day; women, & large children 9 ozs. per day; children 6 ozs. per day; & infants 3 ozs. per day each.<sup>9</sup>

The Bowles family struggled on the next day for about 11 miles with their shortened rations, arriving in camp on the Sweetwater River below today's Split Rock Overlook historic site. The roads had been hilly and sandy. A baby was born in camp and another one that had been born at the Iowa City camp died. George Curtis, age 64, died. John Roberts, age 41, from the Bowles's tent group, also succumbed to death. Roberts was among those recorded in the company journal as "failing in health." The journal also noted that "feed for the cattle [was] scarce."<sup>10</sup> This must have been a very distressing time for Thomas and his family to bury a third member of their tent.

Five days later, on October 21, the Willie company's rations were gone and the last member of Thomas's tent group died: Richard Hardwick, age 63. The snow was deep and the company could not move. Four people total had died that day, and five the previous day. Captain Willie and Joseph Elder had left this camp near Sixth Crossing of the Sweetwater on October 20, to search for the rescue wagons they knew were coming. Thankfully, they returned the next day, October 21. The company journal records:

Many children were crying for bread and the camp generally were destitute of food. A beef heifer was killed for the camp. Capt. Willie, Capt. [George D.] Grant, W[illiam] H. Kimball & others with 14 wagons with horse & mule teams arrived in camp with flour, onions & some clothing for the camp, this made the Saints feel well.<sup>11</sup>

It seems that Thomas was a young man of stamina and perseverance from everything he had already overcome in his life. His younger brother, Enoch, was sickly and had to be transported in the handcart. Perhaps because of Enoch's condition, his father, Edward, was finally put in charge of one of the provision wagons and its oxen. When provisions ran short for man and beast alike, one of the oxen died and was left beside the trail. "That night under cover of darkness and against Capt. Willie's rules, Thomas and one of his friends went back to the animal, took some of the edible parts and cooked and ate them on the spot. They were hungry."<sup>12</sup>

On October 23, as he was weakened from cold and hunger, Thomas sunk down onto the trail while crossing Rocky Ridge. He remembered hearing his father's voice tell him, "Thomas, you can't lie there, the wolves will eat you."<sup>13</sup> This same scenario played out in other families in the last four miles before the Willie company reached their camp at Rock Creek Hollow on October 23. The company had already traveled at least 10 miles contending with snow and wind and the rockiest part of the ridge.

"Elevation gain, deep snow, piercing winds, and the long distance combined to exact a terrible toll. Some people were on the trail for at least twenty hours, and the last of them

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<sup>9</sup> Willie company journal, Oct.15, 1856.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Oct. 16, 1856.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Oct. 21, 1856.

<sup>12</sup> "Thomas Bowles, handcart pioneer," Geneva D. Larsen, Daughters of Utah Pioneers history files, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1.

didn't arrive in camp until nearly dawn the next morning. Joseph Elder recorded: 'That was an awful day[,] many can never forget the scenes they witnessed that day[,] men[,] women[,] and children weakened down by cold and hunger[,] weeping[,] crying[,] and some even dying by the roadside[,] it was very late before we all got into camp[,] oh how my heart did quake and shudder at the awful scenes which surrounded me.' "<sup>14</sup>

Then, in the last four miles of the journey that day, the trail climbed to its highest elevation of 7,483 feet before reaching camp.<sup>15</sup> Families left loved ones behind so they could get to camp, set up tents and make fires, then return for the stragglers. Thomas finally aroused from his lethargy when it was "dark and quiet. He struggled to his feet and felt his way along the trail and soon saw a light which led him to camp."<sup>16</sup> Sadly, thirteen people died that day or during the night and were buried the next morning in a common grave at Rock Creek Hollow. Two more men died the following day and were buried nearby.

More rescuers began to arrive about a week after the Willie company left Rock Creek, and by the time the company reached the Fort Bridger area the first week of November, there were enough wagons that all could ride. Thomas may have considered taking the handcart all the way to the Salt Lake Valley for its usefulness, but he said, "I pulled our cart until we got to Fort Bridger, then I dumped the sad thing into the holler."<sup>17</sup>

Although hunger persisted for a time after reaching Salt Lake City, the handcart pioneers were advised to not eat too much too soon. Thomas said his mother would give him a very small piece of bread and when he looked at it, she said, "You needn't look at it, it is all that you will get."<sup>18</sup>

After they arrived in Salt Lake City, Thomas worked for a time for Bishop Brown of the 4th Ward. The Bowles family moved to Nephi shortly after it was first settled. On January 27, 1859, when Thomas was 23 years old, he hired a mule for \$5.00 and rode it to Manti, Utah. Here he was united in marriage to Susannah Washburn, who was 16 years old.

After the marriage, Thomas and his bride rode home to Nephi on the mule. They built a little home on the corner on 3rd North and 2nd East. This small house was built outside the fort walls, making it a much less safe place to live. The newlyweds' cabin had a dirt floor with a hollowed out space for a hearth and another hollowed out space next to it for a shelf. Here Thomas and Susannah sat for a table and chairs, as they had no furniture. A homemade piece of carpet hung as a covering in the doorway of the cabin.

For several years Thomas worked as a butcher, and as a freighter carrying merchandise, grain, and commodities to Salt Lake and other communities. He hauled logs for the Juab Stake Tabernacle.

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew D. Olsen and Jolene S. Allphin, " 'We Buried 13 Souls': Identifying the Willie Handcart Company's Campsite and Mass Grave after the Tragic Ordeal on Rocky Ridge," *Mormon Historical Studies*, Mormon Historic Sites Foundation (now Ensign Peak Foundation), Fall 2019, Vol. 20, No. 2, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. (This elevation between Strawberry Creek and Rock Creek is higher than the summit of the Rocky Ridge by nearly 200 feet and 71 feet higher than where the trail later crosses the Continental Divide at South Pass.)

<sup>16</sup> Geneva D. Larsen, 2. (Family histories indicate this event happened the night of Oct. 23, as 13 members of the company were buried the next day.)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>18</sup> "From England to Utah: a Handcart Heritage," (from "Sketch of the Life of Thomas by Virginia Bowles), 9.

Thomas was known for his braided whips and lariat ropes. He was an excellent gardener and was also well-known for his expertise in grafting trees. He was reportedly one of the largest land owners of his day. Thomas served in the church as a counselor to Bishop David Udall, and to David Cazier of the High Priest Quorum. He was a member of the first "Old Folks Committee" and carved the meat for their banquets for many years. Thomas played the drums and clappers in the first band organized in Nephi.

Thomas and Susannah were good friends to the Indians. An Indian woman gave birth to a child in their home. Their home was said to always be open to those who needed help. They adopted a little girl, Mary Jane Johnson, who was born in 1878. Thomas and Susannah's son, William Bowles, married Mary Viola Johnson, the daughter of Lorenzo Johnson and Emma James. Emma had also been in the Willie handcart company. Her father, William James, was one of the 13 buried in a common grave at Rock Creek. Thus, the James and Bowles families had many experiences that connected their generations.

Further connecting the generations, Thomas Bowles's descendants have served as missionaries at the historic handcart sites in Wyoming, as well as the Church trek site at Mosida, Utah.

Thomas and Enoch Bowles and their parents lived the rest of their lives in Nephi, Utah. Enoch lived to be 89 years old. Thomas died on March 1, 1928, also at the age of 89. At the time, he was survived by 22 grandchildren, 100 great-grandchildren, and five great-great-grandchildren.



Enoch Bowles



Edward Bowles

Biographical sketch written by Jolene Allphin for *Tell My Story, Too* collection, March 2022. See [tellyourstorytoo.com](http://tellyourstorytoo.com).

Sources: "From England to Utah: A Handcart Heritage. History of Isaac Bowles, Edward Bowles, Thomas Bowles, Thomas Edward Bowles, Louisa Bale and Sarah Miller," in files of Jolene S. Allphin, courtesy Mrs. Gary Brown, Taylorsville, Utah; "Enoch Bowles," obituary, Daughters of Utah Pioneers (DUP) history department; "History of Thomas Bowles," by Flossie Bowles Sudweeks, DUP history department; "Thomas Bowles: handcart pioneer," by Geneva D. Larsen, DUP history department; History of William Woodward 1833-1908, family history book in library of Jolene Allphin; British Mission Record for ship *Thornton*, p. 136, Church History Library; [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org).