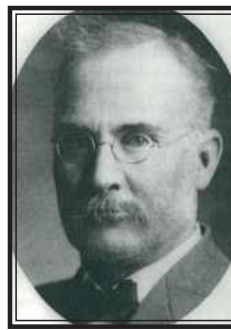


JOHN E. BITTON

Born: 12 April 1830 London, England

Age: 26

Martin Handcart Company



John and Sarah Wintle Bitton

John Evington Bitton hired out as a cabin boy on a sailing vessel at the age of thirteen. He later served as a seaman and during his seafaring life he sailed around the world three times. As the oldest son in a family of ten children, John saved his money and helped take care of his family as his father, William, was totally blind. He had also been a seaman, but due to an injury sustained at sea as a young man, he began to lose his eyesight.

John studied very diligently in order to better himself until he gained the position of second mate. His first voyage in this position was to India. Upon returning home he gave six hundred dollars to his parents. In 1848, his ship made port in California during the gold rush. John remained faithful to his Captain as many of the other shipmates deserted in order to search for gold. The grateful captain promoted John to first mate for his loyalty.

John's family heard the missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints while John was home in Great Yarmouth, England, between sailing trips around 1851. They all accepted the gospel and John was baptized in 1852. The family's former minister came to John's father and said, "William, you have been temporally blind and now you are spiritually blind as well!" Nevertheless, with John's assistance, his parents and sister, Harriet, emigrated in 1863.

On the 13th of May, 1856, John married his sweetheart, Sarah Susannah Wintle. Just twelve days later, the newlyweds sailed with over 800 other converts on the ship *Horizon* from Liverpool. They took John's sister, Jane (19), with them. (Sarah's family also emigrated to Utah later.)

When the Bittons arrived at the campground in Iowa City, they were put to work for about three weeks. John worked on handcarts and Sarah and Jane stayed busy sewing tents and making other preparations. The Martin handcart company pulled out of Iowa City on July 28, 1856, with the Willie handcart company about two weeks ahead of them, and the Hodgett and Hunt wagon companies close behind. These wagon companies would travel close to the Martin company the rest of the way, rendering assistance when they could and also suffering along with them.

After the company crossed the North Platte River for the last time on October 19, they became stranded due to bad weather, loss of cattle, reduced rations and loss of lives. The Platte River crossing took a terrible toll as ice cakes cut their legs and swift and cold water swept their feet from under them. The stronger of the men and women carried the others across, and many soon lost their lives from this terrible exposure. John seems to have been one with some strength left, as he assisted in burials. At one time he assisted in taking nine corpses on his handcart back down the trail for burial. The frozen ground could not be dug, so the bodies were only able to be covered with rocks and snow. Wolves exhumed the bodies as soon as John and the others left. Even knowing this would happen, Sarah tore up her wedding dress to make coverings for the dead. Although she was weak and expecting a baby, Sarah often helped to nurse and cheer others.

John and Sarah eventually moved to West Weber, living first in their wagon box and building a crude log home with dirt floors. The first church services held in West Weber were in this home. John built a larger and lovely home in 1875 which is still standing today, just north of the West Weber Church building. It is marked as a historical site.



Source: "John Evington and Sarah Susannah Wintle Bitton," chapter four of unknown book; interview with descendant, Brett Benson, Layton, Utah.