

MARTHA BLACKHAM

Born: 22 March 1807 Heaton Norris, Stockport, England

Age: 49

Martin Handcart Company



Martha Robinson married Samuel Blackham Sr. when they were both 22 years old. They had seven children. Martha and her five children who came to Utah joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints between 1848 and 1852.¹ Samuel Blackham parted with his family some time before 1851. He died in a workhouse in March 1854 of smallpox. In 1850, Martha's 17-year-old son, William, died of "hematemesis." In 1852, her 17-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, died of meningitis. These two teenage children had worked in the factories and cotton mills of Manchester. Life must have been very difficult for Martha as a single mother at this time.

One experience that surely strengthened Martha occurred about the time of her baptism. Her daughter, Sarah, was extremely ill, and doctors did not expect her to live. She was given a priesthood blessing and was immediately healed.

Martha's two oldest sons, John and James, emigrated to Utah in 1855 and 1853, respectively. The other three children, Samuel (21), Sarah (16), and Thomas (14), came with Martha in 1856. They traveled with the assistance of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund.²



Samuel
Blackham

By the time the Martin company reached Fort Laramie on October 8, it became "apparent the late departure, limited food supply, and lack of warm clothing would threaten the company." (Curtis Allen) A few men from the Martin Company, including Samuel Blackham, enlisted in the army at Ft. Laramie,³ joining with Company G of the 6th United States Infantry. Samuel probably saw it as an opportunity to help his family, as he could earn money to send them when they reached Utah. "Often, when a regiment's ranks were depleted by desertions and other causes, the army offered cash and other inducements to enlistees. The new men also became eligible to draw on the commissary and sutler's stores against future pay." (Curtis Allen) So Samuel may have been able to provide some supplies to his family immediately. The Martin company began rationing their flour on October 16 and reduced their baggage from 17 pounds per person to 10 pounds on October 17. Many blankets and articles of clothing were discarded and burned in order to move the company more quickly toward anticipated rescue.

The winter storms began at the last crossing of the North Platte River on October 19. During the next few days, the Martin Company made very little progress and finally became stranded in deep snow. By October 27, they were almost entirely destitute of rations.⁴ The next day the first rescuers finally found them, giving them hope of reaching Salt Lake. Martha and her children all survived the next five grueling weeks, which included five frigid days and nights in Martin's Cove.

In Salt Lake, Brigham Young continued making calls for rescue long after the initial call on October 5. Many men were needed to keep the roads open over Big and Little Mountains and through Emigration Canyon. Hundreds were working there, keeping fires going every ¼ mile as the Martin Company came through. Martha's son, John, was with them.⁵

When John was preparing to leave Salt Lake City, his employer, Heber C. Kimball, met him and wanted to add to the provisions John had already gathered. He supplied him with clothing, food, two cook ovens, and two more men.⁶ Also with John was Cyrus Wheelock. Cyrus had already been out on the rescue for nine weeks. On November 25, when the Martin company was almost to Echo Canyon, Cyrus was sent on an express ride to Salt Lake to report needs and conditions. He then turned back on the trail to continue his assistance to the Martin company, and was with John Blackham when Martha, Sarah and Thomas came through:

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Brother Wheelock rode a horse and John was driving the wagon. When they reached the summit of “Big Little Mountain,” they saw smoke issuing from a distant grove of trees. At first sight they thought it was Indians, but upon going nearer they saw it was the ill-fated Martin Handcart Company. Brother Wheelock on his horse reached there first and heard Thomas cry out, “Here comes our Jack.” Never had there been a more happy reunion. Tears would flow from [John Blackham’s] eyes, as he would relate the story. He said, “Never have I received a more welcome greeting.” (John Blackham history)

John found that his mother had also been a rescuer during her trek. Traveling with Martha’s family was Thomas Wallwork and his 6-year-old son, William. Thomas died on an unknown date during the trek, and Martha had continued to look after little “Billy.” She brought him into Salt Lake with her and “took him to her heart.” Billy died from the effects of frozen feet in March 1857.

Martha’s family was sent to Nephi and spent the winter of 1856-57 there. Martha received her patriarchal blessing that winter from John Murdock, who had also participated in the last weeks of the rescue. (See John R. Murdock in rescuer section of *Tell My Story, Too*.)

After two years, Martha went faithfully with her children and grandchildren to settle Moroni, Utah. They first lived in dugouts along the San Pitch River bottom, where they endured the winter cold, little food and sometimes hostile Indians. Martha’s grandson, John Blackham Jr., was the first child born in this new settlement in August 1859. Sarah Blackham, who had married Charles Kemp, also brought Martha a new grandson in Moroni the following month.

Martha lived to be 81 years old. She died in Moroni on December 11, 1888. Her granddaughter wrote the following tribute:

Though we of this generation did not personally know grandmother Martha Robinson Blackham, we can read of her times, her life, and give gratitude for her faith and courage to accept the Gospel, leaving husband, friends and country, to come to this country. She endured the hardships of ocean travel, of the ill-fated Martin Handcart company—how did she and her children survive this ordeal—then to follow children to make the new settlement of Moroni, here suffering from lack of food, shelter, and threats from hostile Indians for many years. Praise her, live as she did, worthy to be called a “daughter of God.” (Frances Blackham Cunningham)

Sources: “A Worthy Daughter of God” by Frances Blackham Cunningham; Family History of John and Susannah Lees Blackham (unknown author); “John Blackham, Sr.” by Lorena Blackham Draper, “written under the direction of his living son, Alma and Mrs. Josiah Blackham”; familysearch.org; “William Ashton: Handcart Pioneer and Five-Year Foot Soldier,” by Curtis R. Allen; Wallwork family research of historians Craig and Laura Anderson, 2012; various other Blackham family histories in files of Jolene Allphin.

¹Martha was the first to be baptized on May 26, 1848. Her daughter, Sarah, was baptized at age 12 on December 6, 1852. Cyrus H. Wheelock baptized her. After his mission, Cyrus arrived in Salt Lake City on October 4, 1856. Three days later he was with the first group of rescuers to leave Salt Lake in search of the Martin company.

²Brigham Young wrote to the bishop of Moroni, “We will receive an ox from Sister Martha Blackham to apply on her indebtedness to the P. E. Company for her immigration, at such price as it may be appraised at when it reaches here. Should the ox be in condition for beef and you soon meet a good chance for sending it before it shrinks, it may be well to forward it at once, otherwise sister Blackham had better winter it and forward it in the Spring, for cattle, other than those fit for beef, are of no use to us until another season.” (Frances Cunningham)

³In the spring of 1857, the Cheyenne were upset about encroachments on their land by settlers and the army, and they began raiding immigrant trains and settlements. Company G of the 6th calvary served under Colonel Edwin Sumner in settling these difficulties. “During this expedition, the infantry suffered not only great fatigue but deprivation of food and shelter, ... requiring exhausting forced marches by the foot soldiers. ... The marches took them into what is now Southeastern Colorado, into central Kansas and on to Fort Leavenworth in northeastern Kansas. In Kansas, Company G was involved in the battle of Solomon’s Fork. ... Food ran short and ... at one point, the men were reduced to eating coyotes, skunks and buzzards. Many soldiers deserted, perhaps justifiably, including two recruits from the Martin Company, Aaron Harrison and Samuel Blackham. ... As the campaign ended, Company G was in the vicinity of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Available records of the Blackham families have no mention of Samuel’s military service.” (Curtis Allen) Samuel married Mary Ann Lamb, age 20, in 1859 or 1860. Their first baby was born in Pennsylvania, where Mary Ann had probably been living since 1853. They traveled to Utah in 1862. In 1870 they moved to Evanston, Wyoming, where they stayed.

⁴See Red Buttes meeting summary at beginning of the Martin Company section of *Tell My Story, Too*.

⁵James Blackham was living in Fillmore in 1856 and appears not to have gone on the rescue.

⁶“One of these was an old sea captain, who with President John Taylor, had converted the Blackhams to the gospel in England.” (Frances Cunningham)