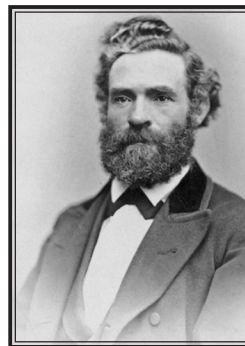


## THOMAS DURHAM

Born: 2 May 1828 Oldham, England

Age: 28

Martin Handcart Company



Thomas Durham, well-known in Utah for his talent in music, was also a very athletic young man, excelling in running broad jump and similar events. No doubt his father influenced him to stay away from smoking which was very popular at the time, as he told Thomas that “if the Lord had intended that men should smoke tobacco that he would have provided a little chimney somewhere on the anatomy to take care of the smoke.” (All quotes are from Thomas’s son, Alfred Durham.)

Thomas’s family moved to Stalybridge, England, when the children were young. Here, Thomas received as much education as the family could afford and a very liberal education in music with a beloved teacher, Mr. John Farrington. Thomas was also “apprenticed out in his youth, as was the custom, to learn . . . woodturning, and he applied this knowledge for some time in turning the spools for one of the big cotton factories in Manchester.”

As a young man, Thomas came in contact with the elders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He “never doubted its truth” but took his time to “fully satisfy himself before taking the final step . . . when he became of age, being baptized [in] 1850.” For four years prior to Thomas’s baptism, he served as the choir leader of the branch. For the next six years he served also as the branch clerk and president. At age 21 he married Mary Morton, also a member of the Church.

Elder Cyrus H. Wheelock was one of the Elders who frequently visited the Durham home. Prior to the Durhams’ emigration in 1856, Elder Wheelock gave Thomas a blessing and told him, “You will go to Zion but it will be as by the skin of your teeth; and when you get there the Angels of Heaven will sing to you and give you music as you sleep, and you will be able to write it and sing it in the Temples of our God.” (Cyrus wrote the words to Hymn 319, “Ye Elders of Israel”.) Thomas’s parents pleaded with him not to leave England for this new religion which they did not accept, but in May of 1856, Thomas boarded the ship *Horizon*, bound for America and Zion.

From Iowa City and westward, Thomas and Mary and Mary’s sister, Eliza Morton, shared a handcart with one other woman and traveled with the last handcart company of 1856 under Captain Edward Martin. Before leaving Florence, Nebraska, some of Thomas’s friends there tried to persuade him to remain over until the next season, but Thomas felt urgency to get to Zion and did not want to wait another year.

“They trudged along, making but few miles per day, and wearily making their camp at night. The men had to take turns herding the few cattle they had along on the few wagons that carried a portion of the supplies, this task coming about every other night. Snow fell early . . . and the suffering from this time on was too terrible to be described. Father says that he waded rivers and streams day after day with the ice floating down and cutting his bare limbs until they would bleed, making sometimes several trips back and forth, carrying women and children on his back and then dragging into camp, making a fire and drying his scanty clothing out, so he could be ready for the ordeal another day. The food became scarce, and they were compelled to be rationed down to four ounces of flour per day for a time . . . Father said they would mix the pound of flour with a little water each morning, bake the mixture, cut it in four parts, for his group, and that was their supply until the next morning. The snow fell in such quantities that they were compelled to leave much of their personal clothing and effects, in order to make any headway at all . . . He relates that many times he has gone out after reaching camp, and found men who had given up, practically frozen to death, and weary of it all, and has literally dragged them into camp, warmed and revived them and thus saved their lives. He helped bury many in shallow graves, . . . as many as fourteen in a single grave at one time.”

Elder Cyrus Wheelock, returning from England with other missionaries, passed the emigrants on the plains. When he reached Salt Lake, he loaded up with other rescuers and headed

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back east to help the late companies. With these rescuers' help, Thomas, Mary, and Eliza arrived in Salt Lake on November 30, 1856. After only a few days recuperation, they were sent south to settle in Parowan, where they arrived on Friday, December 12. That Sunday, Thomas was asked to lead the choir, which he did until his death in 1909. Combined with his service in England, this was over 62 years.

Thomas and Mary were unable to have any children. In 1860, Thomas married Mary Mitchell, widow of William Mitchell. One daughter was born to them. In 1867, he married Caroline Mortensen, a Danish girl who had also emigrated in 1856 with her family in the Willie handcart company. Thomas and Caroline had ten children, among whom was Alfred M. Durham, the composer and arranger of much Church and pioneer music. Alfred wrote of his father:

“His home life was an exceptionally happy one. The families were united, living under the same roof, agreeing almost perfectly, the other members of the family taking as much interest in my mother’s children as though we were their very own. This came about as a result of father’s impartiality and the tact he used in ministering family affairs, governing in the spirit of love and having companions who worked in perfect harmony with him in the home.”

Of his step-mother, Mary Morton Durham, Alfred wrote that “She was a woman of ability and refinement and a wife and companion of whom any man could be proud.” Mary wrote the words to the hymn “Sweet Is the Peace the Gospel Brings.” (See Hymn 14, *LDS Hymnbook*) Alfred composed the music to this beloved hymn.

Thomas’s life is summed up in the following excerpts from Alfred’s writings:

“Father made his livelihood from manual labor most of his life being engaged as . . . manager of a carpenter shop which employed a number of men in the making of all kinds of furniture from native wood which was plentiful in the mountains nearby. . . . this carpenter shop . . . supplied most of Southern Utah. . . . All the coffins used for burials were also made here according to measurement and besides making coffins he furnished the music and was often the speaker at the funerals. . . . [He] chaired County Fair committees [and] was honored with numerous ecclesiastical positions [including] Patriarch. . . . Scarcely a week passed but what one or more people . . . stayed at our home. The family were friend makers and splendid entertainers. There always seemed to be room to make two or three extra beds and to provide good wholesome meals . . . many of the general authorities of the church used to make our home their home when attending quarterly conferences . . . he organized the harmonic society, an organization which produced high class secular music in the form of concerts and programs . . . and which developed a love for the better in music . . . [Twice] he [brought] his choir to Salt Lake City to sing at the General Conference of the church, the company traveling in wagons the 250 miles distance to so participate. . . . He and his choir also furnished the music for the dedicatory services of the St. George Temple in April 1877 . . . Father was one who keenly sensed appropriateness in the selection of music for the various occasions, whether for religious or secular affairs, making choice of those numbers which were strictly in keeping with . . . sermons delivered or the program at hand.”

Thomas loved gardening—his flower and vegetable gardens being noted for their abundance, variety, neatness and beauty. He regularly communicated with the USDA, trying new plant varieties as they were developed. He was a voluntary weather observer for a number of years and appointed to be in charge of the U.S. experiment farm in the Parowan valley.

“Perhaps his greatest spiritual experiences were in fulfillment of Elder Wheelock’s prediction about receiving Heavenly music in his dreams. This manifestation came to him not only once, but on several occasions, and true to the blessing, he wrote these numbers and sang them himself in two temples . . . One of these [was] known as the ‘Nephite Lamentation’ . . . [This melody was often used to sing *O My Father*, hymn 292 in *LDS Hymnbook*.]

“He had an abiding faith in the mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and gave life of unselfish service in the interest of the restored gospel and the people among whom he labored . . . He was kindly disposed, had a keen sense of humor, . . . [and] enjoyed a good time as long as he lived.”

Thomas enjoyed good health up until a few days before he died. On March 4, 1909, he got up and dressed and then passed peacefully away a few hours later.

Sources: Mortensen and Durham family histories in files of Jolene Allphin; Daughters of Utah Pioneers histories in Salt Lake City DUP Museum and Parowan DUP Museum; Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel website.