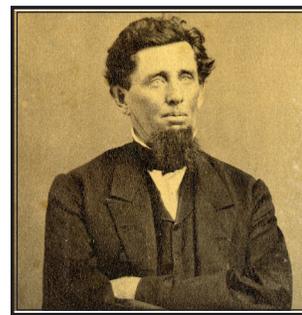


SETH MILLINGTON BLAIR

Born: 14 March 1819 in Pike County, Missouri

Age: 37

Rescuer



Seth Blair grew up along the banks of the Mississippi River in Tennessee where he “learned to be a woodsman and love the frontier with his boyhood companion, Ben McCulloch,¹ and likely, Davy Crockett’s sons.”²

In 1837, Blair helped move his father’s family to Texas, where he learned much about pioneering as well as the practice of law. In 1849, Brigham Young sent Elder Preston Thomas to Texas to encourage the former Apostle, Lyman Wight, to return to the Church. When Wight refused, Elder Thomas spent his time seeking out new converts to the LDS faith, one of whom was Seth Blair. Seth was baptized two weeks after hearing the gospel message and began making preparations to gather with the Saints in Kanesville, Iowa. He sold his law practice and his property. His wife, Cornelia Jane, was not converted at that time, but named a newborn son Preston, after Elder Thomas. Jane was baptized along the pioneer trail two months later.

In 1850, Seth was unanimously elected as the Pottawattamie County prosecuting attorney. Later that year, the Blair family arrived in Salt Lake City, where Seth was appointed U.S. Attorney for the Territory of Utah by President Millard Fillmore.

Two short years after arriving in Utah, Seth’s first wife, Cornelia Jane, died along with her 8th baby in childbirth. Seth’s world was shattered. He quit writing in his diary for three months. When he picked up his pen again, he recorded: Today December 1st 1852 I take my penn in hand to record the most mellancholly bereftment that has ever fell to my lot and one that I feel the keen anguish oft in the innermost recesses of my Soul[.] One that time nor eternity can never obliterate. One that is fresh in my mind today as the day that it transpired[.] one that has left an aching void that cannot be filled by no mortal save her who it pleased Our Heavenly Father to take from me. ... She denied herself many comforts of life to add to my happiness[.] Of her I can say that her jealousy was ever dormant. She bore her griefs & sorrows at her own expense. ... She called her little children around her dying bed & asked them all to be good children. She spoke to her female friends around her & said she would see Bro. Joseph Smith the Prohett & Bishop Whitney & would tell them how their wives were. In death she was as composed as a summer evening. She retained her senses to her last moment.

On what would have been Jane’s 33rd birthday, “in commemoration of the day,” Seth invited the “Presidency, Twelve Apostles, Presidents of the Seventies, Presiding Bishops and other friends and heads of the church [to] a dinner and it was said to be the best and finest dinner ever seen in the gaps of the mountains at which all seemed merry and happy and felt to sing and praise the Lord and bless me, His servant, ... and all pertaining unto me and for which I feel grateful.”

Seth was called to serve a mission in Texas in 1854. He was able to visit his mother and brothers who still living near Victoria, Texas, during this time. He was very successful as a missionary, and on March 20, 1855, he began the journey home to Salt Lake City with 89 Texas converts. A cholera epidemic claimed the lives of 30 of these people. Seth wrote: Sunday June 23rd 10 A.M. Today I take pen in hand to record mellancholy facts as well as other more pleasing ones. ... The cholera made its appearance in our camp on the night of Monday the 17th & in the first 24 hours we lost 12 or 13 & up to this time I presume we have not lost less than 20 & at least the 5th of our whole strength. The camp presenting for the last 4 days a cholera hospital. Such a scene as neither pen can portray or tongue describe. father & mother taken & both buried in one grave or side by side leaving crying children scattered over the camp while the shrieking crys & hollow groans of men & women wear heard on every side with the cry for help from the grave diggers whose toil was incessant[.] seemingly night & day untill a guard can hardly be had or a watch kept through the night of men who may be called well true[.] Oh God[.] dreadful seems our fate or providence & all I can add is I feel that Thee doeth all things well.

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In September of 1856, Brigham Young called Seth to direct an exploration mission across the west desert to determine if a new wagon road to Carson, Nevada, could be found. During the trip, he noted “The desert was the most disagreeable place to cross I think I ever travelled over.” After returning to Salt Lake, Seth was called out again, this time to participate in the rescue of the handcart companies. The Willie handcart company journal records meeting him on November 4th at Bear River “with 3 ox wagons” loaded with supplies. Seth’s record gives us a small glimpse into some things pertaining to the rescue:

October conference 1856 was one of unusual interest being the first conference after the Hand Cart System had been tested. ... Although [the Willie and Martin Companies] sustained much harm from the lateness of the season[,] having started from the Missouri river as late as August 17, the last company of handcarts not arriving until November 30[,] Many of the last two companies under Capt Willy and Martin perishing from cold and fatigue[,] The people here [are] having to go back to the Platte river to assist the last company and to Fort Bridger and beyond Capt. Willy’s company[,] and myself went out with teams and waggons to assist them in and hundreds of others did the same thing[,] among whom were some elders that have just arrived from foreign missions, only remaining home two or three days before they left again for the plains.

Dec 3. Yet some of this year’s emigration (400)³ are out in the mountains with some 60 wagons and teams from the valleys have gone to assist them. Great is the drawback of the people from the cause, but another season it will not occur, as our immigration will start earlier and thus avoid these misfortunes.

When Seth Blair died in 1875, the *Deseret News* reported that he was “a brave man and well known from Dan to Beersheba” (Bear Lake to Dixie) and called him the “Patriarch of the Utah Bar.”⁴ His pioneering spirit and activities were felt in law, freighting, manufacturing, preaching, merchandising, legislation, militarism, journalism, ferrying, canal building, iron works, and family life. He orchestrated and led the “Echo Canyon expedition” during the Utah War.⁵ The same *Deseret News* article recalls his service as a Major in the famous Texas Rangers with Sam Houston, who was a United States Senator in Washington, D.C., and refers to a letter Blair wrote to Houston as being one of the means of resolving the Utah War (also known as the “Contractors War”). Excerpts from Blair’s diary and quotes from letters he wrote during this time shed light on what this 1875 *Deseret News* article was recognizing:

November 11, 1857: My opinion of the present move of the Government of the U.S. against us is that it has originated in the false & malicious spirit of bigotry. ... Constitutionally it is illegal & unwarranted to send a force to quarter & menace peaceable citizens of the general government to condemn unheard her citizens & threaten death & Hell to all who subscribe to the faith of the Latter-day Saints.

November 24, 1857: Wrote Genl Sam Houston Senator from Texas & late the Commanding Chief & President of the Republic of Texas[,] read the same to Bro. Geo. A. Smith & W. Woodruff of the Twelve & Bro. Geo. A. Historian proffered to have it copied & retain a copy in the church historians office.

In this letter to Sam Houston, Blair wrote:

I am induced to write you at this time from the peculiar circumstances that I find myself surrounded with, in common with the citizens of my unhappy country, and especially of the citizens of Utah; for in my heart I believe you the only Senator who sits in the Congress of the United States who dares to lift up his voice in opposition to public opinion, and I write to inform you most truly the feelings of the citizens of Utah. ... You no doubt ask, then, in your mind, what the issue will be. I will candidly answer for you. ... Have we a hope of withstanding the force of the most powerful nation on earth, with a handful of men [who] will only act in the defense, and on the improved system of guerilla warfare[?] How improved? Ask the United States officers what they found at Fort Bridger?⁶ ... We believe the Administration are not authorized by the national Congress to take this step. ... Should Colonel Johnston attempt it, he certainly will be beaten. ... Will the Administration send out a sufficient force to awe or whip the Mormons into the faith and doctrines of the Free Soiler or Black Republican, pro-Slavery, abolition or native American, or force us to subscribe to the Catholic faith[?] ... They must limit ... not less than 45,000 or 50,000, I presume, which will drain the treasury and accomplish but one object—the dissolution of the Union and eternal infamy and disgrace on the

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American arms. ... I beseech you, then, as one who loves the Union and who despises the life that would tamely submit to a tyrannical rule, to raise your voice to stop the bigoted crusade of the Administration against Governor Young and this people, and ask Congress to countermand the exterminating orders of the administration.

This letter was eventually printed in several journals or newspapers throughout the Union as a means to communicate the Mormon's position about their pending battle with U.S. troops.

On February 25, 1858, the *Congressional Globe* reported Senator Sam Houston's remarks on the Senate floor concerning the ensuing Utah War, after receiving Blair's letter:

I received the other day from a very intelligent Mormon whom I knew in Texas, and a very respectable man he was, once I believe the United States district attorney for Utah, a letter of seven pages. In that letter he takes a comprehensive view of this subject. He protests most solemnly that there never would have been the least hostility to the authorities of the United States if the President had sent respectable men there. He says that Governor Brigham Young has been anxious to get rid of the cares of the office [of Territorial Governor], and would freely have surrendered it and acknowledged the authority of the United States; but that men have gone there, who have made threats that they would hang them, and even threats of a character that renders them more sensitive in relation to their families, and that they expect nothing but rapine and destruction to ensue on the advent of those troops if they should ever arrive there. ... As for troops to conquer the Mormons, fifty thousand would be inefficient. ... If war begins, the very moment one single drop of blood is drawn, it will be the signal of extermination. ... If they do not advance ... we may have peace.

As a result, two official "Peace Commissioners" were immediately dispatched by President Buchanan to help settle the Utah War. They were Ben McCulloch, Seth Blair's boyhood friend from Tennessee, and Lazarus W. Powell of Kentucky. Arriving in Salt Lake City in early June, McCulloch immediately asked to speak with Seth Blair. He had to be sent for by Daniel Wells, as Seth had moved his family to Fillmore in the great exodus of the people from Brigham City to Lehi in what was known as the "Move South."⁷ In Wells' letter requesting Blair to come to Salt Lake City, he wrote:

Provo City

June 9th/58

Major Seth M Blair,

Dear Brother,

Maj. McCullough of Texas of the Peace Commission is at G.S.L. City in connection with Gov. Powell, and has expressed a wish to see you. If you can make it convenient to come to the city for that purpose[,] an interview would probably be gratifying to you as well as him and may result in good. The Major feels that his time will not admit of his going so far as Fillmore City to visit you.

All is well and may the Lord bless you and help Israel to triumph over all their enemies.

I remain as ever your Brother in the Gospel of Christ.

Daniel H. Wells

After Blair met with the peace commissioners and army officials, the troops were allowed to enter the valley. On June 27, Blair was sent by Brigham Young to meet with the army officials with the following results:

A delegation of Mormons, headed by Seth Blair, appeared at the Jordan Bridge and requested a meeting with General Johnston. ... Blair instructed the commander that the needs of the army would be better served in Cache Valley or some other point at a distance from Salt Lake City. The unsettled calm exploded, for Colonel Smith interpreted the statement as a request for a negotiated withdrawal of the expedition from the territory. His mind clouded by despair and exhaustion, the colonel warned Blair that the Mormons were in no position to bargain. Furthermore, as far as the army was concerned, it 'would like to see every damned Mormon hung by the neck.' Sensing something dangerous in the wind, Blair lost no time in leaving the conference to report the incident to Brigham Young. The next day, on June 28, 1858, Blair and others met in Provo with McCulloch. McCulloch told Blair that 'Gov. Young had the best material for composing an independent government that he had ever seen and that Brigham was hardly a second to Christ or Mohammed.'⁸

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Two days later the army found and disassembled a \$1,500 saw mill that had been built by Seth Blair, George A. Smith and Elijah Thomas, located on Bingham's Creek, and used it for firewood. Seth Blair continued to negotiate peace between Utah Territory and the U.S. Government for some time. An excerpt from Blair's diary summarized the Utah War events:

Thus has terminated one of the most unjust[,] unconstitutional crusades of egotism & folly that has ever marked the course of a President of the U.S. against any portion of her citizens & brot about thro letter writers[,] who for lucid gain wrote⁹ for speculators & thro their money the press was influenced to publish their libels & by the combined influences & outside pressure was made to bear on the imbecile old man who sits as Chief Magistrate of this once great happy & prosperous nation in a civil war that would have cost its nationality!

Seth Blair continued to play a prominent role in the history of the State of Utah as well as LDS Church. Perhaps the most important tribute was given him, likely by his daughter, Ellen, as this entry ended Seth Blair's diary: "[I was] called upon to mourn the loss of one of the most affectionate kind & devoted fathers that has pleased God to give unto children. After a lingering illness of nearly six months he departed this life."

¹McCulloch was one of the two peace commissioners sent to Utah by President James Buchanan to settle the Utah War.

²Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from "Seth M. Blair: March 14, 1819 - March 17, 1875," unpublished paper by John B. Bond, in files of Jolene Allphin, used by permission of John B. Bond. Bond's paper is significantly documented and has an extensive bibliography.

³This is a reference to the approximately 400 members of the Hodgetts and Hunt wagon companies still to be brought in to the Salt Lake Valley. On Sunday, November 30, the day the Martin handcart company arrived in the Valley, Brigham Young issued yet another stirring rescue call from the pulpit: "We still have about 400 more brethren and sisters who are yet beyond Fort Bridger, probably near Green river. . . . The two wagon companies still out we are sending for . . . We do not calculate to have the winter blast stop us; it cannot stop the Mormon Elders, for they have faith, wisdom and courage; they can perform that which no other men on the earth can perform." ("Remarks," *Deseret News*, 10 Dec. 1856, 320)

⁴*Deseret News*, March 18, 1875.

⁵Seth was a Major in the Nauvoo Legion and was ordered out with his 207 men to defend Echo Canyon as the U.S. Troops neared Utah Territory in 1857. On September 27, 1857, Major Blair left Salt Lake City in command of 60 men, heading toward Echo Canyon to make preparations to stop the U.S. troops from advancing. Blair was the architect of the defense in Echo Canyon, but the U.S. Army felt it was of little consequence at that time, as reported in a San Francisco newspaper: "In the Army, the facilities of the Mormons for defence against the troops is a topic of general mirth, and expecially the defences of Echo Canon, understood to have been planned by Major S.M. Blair—a brave and determined man beyond all doubt—a superior Indian fighter, but a perfect babe in military knowledge, when the enemy to be dealt with is composed of American troops, under officers famed for military service, knowledge and skill." The U.S. Army would soon learn otherwise.

⁶Brigham Young ordered the burning of Ft. Bridger and nearby Ft. Supply just before the U.S. Army reached that point in November 1857. See Lewis Robison's rescuer biography in Allphin, *Tell My Story, Too*. Robison was the owner of the fort at the time, having purchased it from Jim Bridger.

⁷This was a significant event on the heels of the 1856 handcart immigration, as the inhabitants of the Salt Lake Valley abandoned their homes, many moving into dugouts to wait out the settlement of the Utah War. Their homes were at ready to be burned, rather than allowing the army to come through to possess or pillage them, or threaten their families.

⁸Quoted from Moorman, Donald R. with Gene A. Sessions. *Camp Floyd and the Mormons*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, p. 51, in Bond, "Seth M. Blair," 16.

⁹In 1859, Seth Blair, Hosea Stout and James Ferguson published *The Mountaineer*, a newspaper to counteract the "rough and rowdy newspaper the gentiles were publishing at Camp Floyd called the *Valley Tan*. For months this rag had published insults about the Mormons and sent copy back East for all to read about." The *Deseret News* let most of the insults go unchallenged, but *The Mountaineer* challenged all of the *Valley Tan's* accusations. Blair was the main editor of *The Mountaineer* for one year until he moved to Logan, Utah. The *Valley Tan* was soon abolished and Blair's mission succeeded.