

MARIA JACKSON NORMINGTON

Born: 1820 England

Age: 35

Martin Handcart Company

Maria was born in Haggate, England, on Christmas Day, December 25, 1820. She married Thomas Normington in England when she was 19 years old. When Thomas and Maria left England in 1856, they left behind the graves of their daughter, Jane Ann, and two sons, Joseph and Mathew Heber, who had previously died. The children who were with them were Lovinia (10), Mary Ellen (8), Hannah (6), Ephraim Robert (4), and Daniel (18 months). Maria also had two brothers with her on the journey, Robert and William Jackson, ages 46 and 43 respectively.

Maria was gifted with a beautiful singing voice and is said to have had a jolly and cheerful disposition. Her favorite song was "Come, Come Ye Saints" and it was a great comfort to sing as her family pushed and pulled their handcart.

Maria and the other pioneer women were well organized and would have dinner ready before camp was made for the night. From their carefully rationed flour they made biscuits along the way by mixing soda with a cup of sour milk, pouring it into the top of the flour sack, adding a pinch of salt and quickly shaping the biscuits which were cooked as soon as they stopped. However, the flour rations eventually had to be reduced from 1 pound to 12 ounces of flour per adult per day and later to 8 ounces and finally to 4 ounces. Clothing, blankets and other "extra" things that weighed down their carts were finally abandoned along the trail in order to hasten their march.

Maria lost three more children during her immigration to her Zion in the Rocky Mountains of Utah. Her little son, Daniel, died on August 12, 1856, as the family was about half-way between their starting point in Iowa City and their resupply and regrouping camp in Florence, Nebraska. They had only traveled about 150 miles of their 1,300-mile journey. Maria was permitted to ride a half-day in the wagon with her son's body until camp was made and he could be buried. Soon after this, Maria gave birth to a new baby who died or was possibly stillborn.¹

As the days became shorter and the nights colder, the Martin Company crossed and recrossed the Platte River many times through Nebraska Territory. On the morning of October 19th they faced the last crossing near what is today, Casper, Wyoming. The deep and wide and freezing cold river also introduced them to winter as the first storm arrived at this time. Josiah Rogerson of the Martin Company recorded: "The [last] crossing of the North Platte was fraught with more fatalities than any other incident of the entire journey. . . . More than a score or two of the young female members of our company waded the stream that in many places was waist deep and deeper, and if they unfortunately stepped off one of the smooth boulders, they found the water a foot deeper. Blocks of mushy snow and ice had to be dodged in many instances by the wader, with the sad information that the snow had already fallen farther up the Platte and its tributaries, through which we had to pass before reaching the Sweetwater [River]."

John Jacques of the Martin Company made this record of Oct. 19, 1856: "That was a bitter cold day. Winter came on all at once, and that was the first day of it. The river was wide, the current strong, the water exceedingly cold and up to the wagon beds in the deepest parts, and the bed of the river was covered with cobble stones. Some of the men carried some of the women over on their backs or in their arms, but others of the women tied up their skirts and waded through, like the heroines as they were, and as they had done through many other rivers and creeks. The company was barely over when snow, hail and sleet began to fall, accompanied by a piercing north wind . . . That was a nipping night, and it told on the oxen as well as the people."

It is not known whether Thomas brought his handcart across the N. Platte River or carried his wife and children across, but Thomas and his little son, Ephraim Robert, also soon died.² (Other family accounts indicate that Ephraim Robert was the child who died in August and Daniel died in Oct. or Nov.) Maria had now borne the grief of burying six of her children as well as her husband. In her weak and bereft condition, this amazing and faithful woman would yet assist in bringing forth a prophecy made in England before her emigration from that place.

The Jackson family had belonged to the same Nottingham Conference (White Chapel branch of the Church in London, England) as the Bleak and Webster families in the Martin Company. James G. Bleak had been the presiding Elder of this congregation for several years prior to their emigration. Shortly before leaving England, James presided at a meeting where a woman bore her testimony and spoke with the gift of tongues concerning the Bleak family. James was given the interpretation, but, as he said, “. . . refrained from speaking it.” However, another woman did arise and gave the interpretation as follows: “I, the Lord, am well pleased with the offering made by my servant Elder Bleak; and notwithstanding he shall see the angel of death laying waste on his right and on his left, on his front and on his rearward, yet he and his family shall gather to Zion in safety, and not one of them shall fall by the way.”³ Maria was at this meeting and was reportedly the woman who exercised the gift of tongues or the interpretation of tongues. Confidence in this prophecy would later sustain her and Elder Bleak. After restoring his son’s life through a Priesthood blessing, James Bleak wrote, “That word of the Lord, given by the gift of tongues, inspired a faith, an assurance, which prompted administrations and prayers in behalf of the child who was looked upon as dead by the scores present in that camp; and it is the father’s conviction that, if that promise had not been made the boy would have been given up as dead; and would have been laid with the hundreds of that company who were buried by the wayside in that trying journey.”⁴

Prior to this event, James Bleak had also been close to death. Unable to walk, his wife left him by the side of the trail one day. (This was a common practice for this large company, as they had to keep moving to make it to the next camp each day. Someone would then typically return to bring in those who had been left behind.) When Maria inquired as to the well-being of Brother Bleak and learned that he had been left behind, she and her brothers took a handcart back on the trail to bring him in to camp where she assisted in nursing him back to health. She stated that leaving him should not have been permitted because he had been promised in England by the gift of tongues that he should reach Zion in peace and safety.⁵

Maria’s great faith and determination finally caused her to give her meager rations to her three little girls and eat dirt in an attempt to satisfy her own hunger pains. She walked until her feet were so frozen and sore that she actually crawled along on her hands and knees. When her hands were so frozen she could no longer use them, she actually went on her knees and elbows. Overcome with hardship, starvation and grief, Maria slipped into unconsciousness and remembered nothing of the last part of her journey in the blessed rescue wagon sent by John Parker.⁶ John’s son, William, who was the driver of this wagon, took Maria and her daughters to the valley and later to his father’s home where they continued to be nursed back to health.⁷ Care had to be taken to not overeat, but it was still difficult not to continue to feel hungry all the time. “One night, after all had gone to bed, Mary Ellen, whose hunger was still not satisfied, stole into the kitchen in search of something more to eat. There, on the table, at one side of the room, was a large bowl of well-seasoned squash. Just as she had helped herself to a handful, the door opened suddenly and frightened her. Away she ran, jumped into bed and pulled the covers over her, holding the squash in her hand, the best she could. She waited – and listened. When all was quiet again and safe, she sat up quickly and ate the squash.”⁸

Maria married John Parker in 1857 and they had two children together. John and Maria were called on a mission to southern Utah to raise cotton and help to settle the town of Virgin. They left their comfortable homes again and moved their cattle and sheep to help build up and redeem a rough and desolate area. Maria's home was first a dugout and later a log house. She was thrifty and industrious, washing and scouring wool from their sheep, carding and dyeing it with dock roots or madder, then weaving it into cloth for their dresses and suits, which she also made.

John built the first flour mill and cotton gin in Virgin, organized the first cattle co-op and the first store. Maria was the storekeeper while her husband worked at his other jobs. She also supported him as the first Bishop there and president of the United Order.

Maria gave much service to the people of her community. Her family reports that she was never heard to censure anyone for her trials nor complain because her lot was hard. She was cheerful and faithful throughout her life and felt that the gospel of Jesus Christ, for which she had endured so much, was the most glorious of all blessings. Her family loved to hear her pray. She seemed to actually see and talk with her Father in Heaven as she expressed her gratitude and asked for the blessings they needed. She died in Virgin City, Utah, on March 19, 1881, at the age of 61.

Pictured l to r: Hannah Normington (Ott),
Lovenia Normington (Wright),
Mary Ellen Normington (Cook)

Pictured: Thomas Normington
Maria Jackson Normington (Parker)



1. Some have questioned whether or not Maria gave birth to another child during her immigration, reasoning that she did not have this child sealed to her and her husband, Thomas Normington, as she did their other children. The writings of Richard Parker (1859-1941), son of Maria Jackson Normington and John Parker, state: *"Thomas Normington [husband], a newborn baby, and two little boys died while on this journey, and mother came near to the door of death."* (As found in the book The Thomas Normington Family - Mormon Handcart Pioneers - Martin Handcart Company of 1856 by Stephan Rich McDonald and Karen B. Wright, pg. 54.) A second statement by Maria's granddaughter, Annie Hilton Bishop, written June 1929, also indicates another child: *"About this time the baby boy, one and a half years old, [Daniel] of Grandmother's died. She was permitted to ride one half day, with her dead child, until the company stopped and it could be buried. Soon after, a new baby was born to her which also died."* (Ibid. pg. 2)

2. a. *"One of the boys [Ephraim Robert or Daniel] cried for bread. Someone found him a small piece. He died with it between his teeth. Hannah, the youngest girl took it from his mouth and ate it."* ("The Life of My Father, John Parker", by daughter, Alice Parker Isom, McDonald and Wright, The Thomas Normington Family, Appendix 1, pg. 8) b. *"... four-year-old Robert [Ephraim Robert] became ill. Feeling his hot head and face, Maria placed him on the cart, covered him with a blanket, and tried to give him relief. His condition was worsening fast. He begged for a piece of biscuit. Maria asked Thomas to stop. She dug into the rations and found a small piece of bread which she tried to feed him. She laid it on his lips, but they remained closed, and she realized he was dying. Little Hannah, who had climbed up on the cart, reached over and snatched the bread from his lips and ate it. Maria was permitted to ride in one of the [provision] wagons for half a day with her dead child, until the company stopped, and he could be buried."* (History of John Parker by Ruth Winder Rogers, 1992, BYU Press, pg. 28-29) It is the opinion of the author, Jolene Allphin, that this story involving Hannah refers to the death of her brother, Daniel, and was in fact in August 1856, and that Ephraim Robert died in Oct. or Nov.

3. The Daily Herald Newspaper (Provo, Utah), March 16, 1977, by Lula Marie Hilton Henriksen of Lindon, Utah; "An Item of Hand Cart Experience" by James G. Bleak (signed "Scribo"), Juvenile Instructor Magazine 37, June 15, 1902, pgs. 365-367.)

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. All accounts written of Maria's life mention this. Following are three statements by those who knew her best:
a. *"Grandmother tried to eat the dirt to satisfy the pangs of hunger. She walked until her feet were so terribly frozen and sore, she could walk no more; then she crawled along on her hands and knees. When her hands were so frozen she could use them no more, she went on her knees and elbows. Even after many years, at the time of her death, there were great scars on her knees and elbows from this awful experience. Grandmother was so overcome with hardships, starvation, and grief that when the relief wagons came she was unconscious and almost out of her mind. She remembered nothing of the last part of the journey."* (McDonald and Wright, Annie H. Bishop [granddaughter], pg. 3) b. *"[Maria] many times tried to eat the soil of the earth to satisfy her longing for food. . . . her hands and her feet had become so badly frozen that she was compelled to crawl on her elbows and knees. Scars of this suffering she carried for many a day."* (Ibid., Mabel Cook [granddaughter], pg. 35-36) c. *"Her hands and feet were so badly frozen that she had to crawl on her elbows and knees on the frozen ground. She had great scars on her elbows and knees. Her feet were so badly frozen the toe nails came off."* (Ibid., Richard Parker, son, pg. 54)

7. *"Lovina, eleven, was taken into the home of Brother Alexander, Mary Ellen came to my sister Mary's. She was aged nine. The mother and Hannah, aged seven, were taken to the home of Brother Empey. Later Sister Normington and Hannah came to live with us and in 1857 father married the widow. It was a long time before Aunt Maria, as we always called her, fairly recovered."* ("The Life of My Father, John Parker", by daughter, Alice Parker Isom, McDonald and Wright, The Thomas Normington Family, Appendix 1, pg. 8)

8. "Mary Ellen Normington Cook" by daughter, Mabel Cook (McDonald and Wright, pg. 36)