

Joseph Flitcroft Birch

Joseph Flitcroft Birch was born 13 August 1824 in Manchester, Lancashire, England. He was the fourth of five children of Thomas Birch and Mary Flitcroft.¹ At age four, he sold little cakes that his mother made. At age eight, he was employed by a textile mill to crawl under the machinery and clean out any excess material and grease. He worked twelve hours a day for 75 cents a week and board for himself.² He and his father joined the Mormon Church in 1838.³ In 1841, the family lived in Manchester, where the father was a joiner and the three oldest children, including Joseph, were involved in the cotton industry.⁴

On the 1851 census, Joseph was listed as a traveler, living with his mother and siblings in Manchester.⁵ He became a cabinetmaker.⁶ He married Dorothy Chambers on 27 May 1851 in the Manchester Cathedral.⁷ They had four daughters. His father died in 1854 and Joseph immigrated to America with his mother, wife and two daughters. They sailed from Liverpool to Philadelphia on the *Chimborazo*.⁸ They took the railroad to the Ohio River and followed the river down to St Louis, then up the Missouri River on a steam boat to Mormon Grove in Kansas.⁹ They crossed the plains to the Great Salt Lake Valley by ox team with the Richard Ballantyne Company in 1855. They lost one of their daughters who died on the way.¹⁰

The family settled in Session's Settlement [now Bountiful/Woods Cross]. Joseph made household furniture and traded it with his neighbors for provisions. The next year they moved to Provo, Utah, Utah Territory, where Joseph was employed by the government at Camp Floyd. He also continued his work as a cabinetmaker. When the US soldiers came, he was contracted to build their quarters at Camp Floyd. He employed twelve adobe makers. He also furnished the camp with hay and wood. He became a favorite with the officers.¹¹

When the Civil War broke out, the soldiers were called back east and told to sell everything and destroy their large arms and ammunitions. They sold Joseph their horse shoes, bacon, harnesses, picks, hatchets, and other items for bulk prices. It was from these transactions that Joseph made his start. He went into the merchandise business in Provo with a stock of goods worth \$75,000.¹² On the 1860 census, Joseph was a farmer, living with his wife and two children in Provo. He owned 2,000 acres of land.¹³ That year, his was missing a heifer calf, which was found in a haystack buried under several tons of hay. It was still alive after 27 days.¹⁴

¹ England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975; Utah Death Certificates, 1904-1964.

² Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his Life, at *Familysearch.org*; Joseph Flitcroft Birch 1828-1909 Autobiography, at *Familysearch.org*

³ How the Gospel Came to My Husband's Family by Blanche Estelle Baldwin, at *Familysearch.org*

⁴ England and Wales Census, 1841.

⁵ England and Wales Census, 1851.

⁶ Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*

⁷ England Marriages, 1538-1973.

⁸ Mormon Migration at *byu.edu*

⁹ Joseph Flitcroft Birch 1828-1909 Autobiography at *Familysearch.org*

¹⁰ Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847-1868.

¹¹ Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*; How the Gospel Came to My Husband's Family by Blanche Estelle Baldwin, at *Familysearch.org*; Joseph Flitcroft Birch 1828-1909 Autobiography at *Familysearch.org*; Obituary at *Familysearch.org*; *Deseret News*, 4 June 1856, p. 4.

¹² Joseph Flitcroft Birch 1828-1909 Autobiography at *Familysearch.org*; Obituary at *Familysearch.org*

¹³ United States Census, 1860.

¹⁴ *Deseret News*, 7 March 1860, p. 12.

In 1861, Joseph was called on a mission to settle and help develop the town of St George, Washington, Utah Territory. He sold out his interests in Provo at a great sacrifice and moved his family south.¹⁵ He travelled every fall to Salt Lake City to buy incoming cattle and wagons, from \$25,000 to 50,000 each year. He then exchanged them for grain in Sanpete County and then sold the grain to the troops at Camp Douglas that came from California.¹⁶

Joseph took a second wife, Mary Elizabeth Sylvester, in Salt Lake City in 1861. They eventually had thirteen children. Mary moved in with Dorothy and the family lived together in the same house in Washington City.¹⁷ In 1862, Erastus Snow suggested that a stone building be erected for educational and social purposes. The people had not even built their own houses, but they approved and \$2,000 was raised. Joseph was chosen for the building committee.¹⁸

Joseph made a freight trip to California in 1864. They had problems with Indians on the trip back home. The next year, he sent his assistant (and future son-in-law) to California. He brought back 400 oranges and a box of lemons. They were the first seen in the territory of Utah. Joseph sold them for \$40 a case. He also brought all the glass and nails to build a new home which was later sold to Brigham Young.¹⁹

In 1866, Joseph moved his family to Nephi and built a grist mill at the mouth of Salt Creek in Payson. He claimed to have made the first fine flour in Utah. He built a stone wall around the mill so the Indians could not enter.²⁰ A few years later they moved to Bellevue [now Pintura, Washington, Utah] and then to Leeds, Washington, Utah, where Joseph started a mercantile business, carrying food supplies. It was not financially successful, so after three years they moved back to Bellevue and onto a large vineyard.²¹

In 1868, Joseph was elected as a director of the Southern Utah Cooperative Mercantile Association and assistant to F. B. Woolley, the business agent.²² The next year, Brigham Young asked Joseph to manage the cotton factory in Washington. He entered into partnership with Brigham, took charge of the cotton factory and ran it for three years. On the 1870 census, he was living with his wife and children, and had 10,000 acres of land.²³ That year he went east to purchase additional machinery for the cotton and woolen factories. He also brought a gentleman of experience and skill to run the cotton mill.²⁴

Joseph owned a garden lot in St George. He hauled in 1,000 cart loads of sand and 2,000 of earth to make rich loam and fill up "the slough". The lot was under-drained in every direction to carry off the water. It was later sold to Mrs. Gates, who continued the beautiful gardens.²⁵ Joseph was a great

¹⁵ Obituary at *Familysearch.org*

¹⁶ Joseph Flitcroft Birch 1828-1909 Autobiography at *Familysearch.org*

¹⁷ Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*

¹⁸ "I Was Called to Dixie" The Virgin River Basin: Unique Experiences in Mormon Pioneering, p. 116.

¹⁹ How the Gospel Came to My Husband's Family by Blanche Estelle Baldwin, at *Familysearch.org*; Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*; Obituary at *Familysearch.org*; *Deseret News*, 26 April 1865, p. 7; Interview with Henry G Mathis, at *familysearch.org/patron/v2/TH-301-44425-251-76/dist.pdf?ctx=ArtCtxPublic*

²⁰ Obituary at *Familysearch.org*

²¹ Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*

²² *Deseret News*, 16 December 1868, p. 3.

²³ Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life, at *Familysearch.org*; Obituary at *Familysearch.org*; United States Census, 1870.

²⁴ *Deseret News*, 25 January 1871, p. 7; 6 July 1870, p. 8; 9 August 1871, p. 9.

²⁵ A Bird's-eye View of Erastus Snow's St. George, a lecture by Lowell C. Bennion, 2006.

student of history and could read anything. He became the legal advisor for St. George during the fifteen years he lived there. He introduced a bill in the Legislature for free public schools in Utah, the first of its kind in the state.²⁶

In 1873, Joseph served a church mission in England.²⁷ In 1877, he was appointed to take charge of the Mormon emigrants coming to Utah. He was elected to the Legislature by two counties, Washington County and Kane County. Afterwards, he went into the merchandise business in Leeds and Silver Reef. He operated *Birch's Bazaar* on upper Main Street in Leeds. It carried various family and mining supplies.²⁸ The 1879 Silver Reef business directory showed Joseph Birch & Company selling general merchandise, grain, wines, liquors and cigars in Leeds.²⁹

Joseph was involved in a shooting in 1878. George Boyd was a miner and law enforcement officer from Pioche, Nevada. He ran a saloon in Silver Reef and had a cabin on the land where the Leeds town hall now sits and a mining claim in Rocky Holler. He was well-known to the shady women in town and always had a pocket full of candy for the children.³⁰ Boyd had an argument with Joseph (possibly over a jumped claim or their dogs fighting) and threatened to kill him multiple times. Joseph even had Boyd arrested and under bond for nine months. One day, Boyd was drunk and took his loaded pistol over to Joseph's store, threatening to kill Joseph and abuse his daughter.³¹

Joseph heard him and came to the door of the store. Boyd fired his pistol and the bullet came within an inch of Joseph's head and hit the wall. Joseph retreated to the store office and shut the door. He shot twice through the two-inch pine door panel. One bullet hit Boyd between the eighth and ninth rib and lodged in his spine. Boyd died the next day and was buried by some drunken men. The respectful people refused to have anything to do with him, in fact his own brother refused to come to the funeral. He was buried in a low place in Silver Reef and later the wagon road went over his grave.³²

Birch gave himself up to the sheriff. The mine owners held a coroner's inquest and decided it was justifiable homicide. He was brought before the grand jury at the district court in Beaver. His plea was self-defense and he was acquitted. He mourned the rest of his life for his hasty deed, realizing he could have settled it peacefully.³³ By 1880, Joseph had retired as a merchant and was living with his wife and a daughter in Bellevue, Kane, Utah.³⁴ They moved to Monroe, Sevier, Utah Territory, where Joseph was involved in the Sevier Valley Railroad construction.³⁵ Eventually both families moved to Price and Joseph built a five-room lumber house with one room used for his store.³⁶

In 1883, Joseph helped Erastus Snow lay out the townsite of Price. Joseph also opened the first commissary [eating place] in Price to feed the men on the freight trains.³⁷ He charged 35 cents per

²⁶ Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*

²⁷ Early Mormon Missionaries.

²⁸ *Silver Reef Echo*, 24 February 1877, p. 1.

²⁹ Utah Directory and Gazetteer for 1879-1980, pp. 386-387.

³⁰ *Saga of Three Towns*, by Marietta M. Mariger, 1951, pp. 32-33.

³¹ Joseph Flitcroft Birch 1828-1909 Autobiography at *Familysearch.org*

³² Ibid.

³³ *Deseret News*, 24 July 1878, p. 1; *Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 July 1878, p. 1; *Saga of Three Towns*, by Marietta M. Mariger, pp. 32-33.

³⁴ United States Census, 1880.

³⁵ *Salt Lake Herald*, 8 April 1881, p. 3.

³⁶ Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*

³⁷ *News-Advocate* [Price, Utah], 17 June 1909, p. 8.

meal and his daughter helped with the cooking and serving. He also homesteaded a fifty-acre farm east of town. He closed his eating house in 1884 and moved onto the homestead. He didn't comply with the homestead laws and was claim-jumped by a Danishman. He moved his families to Castle Valley. He then bought land in Price and built a store. He drew up the bylaws for the new water supply company in Price. He was considered one of the foremost and energetic pioneers of the Price Valley. He was sought for his sound judgment and was often called upon for advice and medical help.³⁸

Joseph took a contract for the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad. He had two partners, one in charge of the railroad ties and merchandise and the other in charge of the grade. The merchandise partner moved the goods into Cottonwood Wash without Joseph's knowledge. When he found out, he told him to move them out of the wash, but the partner delayed doing so and a flood washed it all away. He lost \$20,000 in that flood and it crippled him financially.³⁹

When the railroad was completed to Price station, a quantity of giant powder was buried for safe keeping on Joseph's land, close by the station. Afterwards it was forgotten, and some outhouses were set up there. In 1886, the business transferred, and the new owner hired a man to move the outhouses. While using a pick to remove timbers, he struck the concealed keg of powder and it exploded, threw pieces 50-75 yards, tore the man's thumb from his right hand, and literally filled the front of his body with the copper shells of the cartridges. He was expected to eventually recover.⁴⁰

Joseph exchanged his property for a farm in American Fork and moved both families there in 1889.⁴¹ Dorothy stayed only a short time and then returned to Price to live with their daughter.⁴² Joseph started a real estate business in American Fork.⁴³ Dorothy died in 1896 in Price and was buried in the city cemetery.⁴⁴ On the 1900 census, Joseph was living with Mary and three daughters in American Fork.⁴⁵ He died 15 June 1909 at American Fork and was buried in the town cemetery.⁴⁶ Mary died in 1925 in Salt Lake City and was buried in the American Fork City Cemetery.⁴⁷

NOTE: There are many more stories about Joseph on Familysearch.org and a video about Joseph and the grasshopper plague in Utah Territory (see [youtube.com/watch?v=Xha1ab8iErl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xha1ab8iErl)).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Joseph Flitcroft Birch 1828-1909 Autobiography at *Familysearch.org*

⁴⁰ *Territorial Enquirer* [Provo, Utah], 16 November 1886, p. 3; *Deseret News*, 17 November 1886, p. 12; *The Utonian* [Beaver, Utah], 19 November 1886, p. 2.

⁴¹ Joseph Flitcroft Birch 1828-1909 Autobiography at *Familysearch.org*; Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*

⁴² Joseph Flitcroft Birch: Happenings in his life at *Familysearch.org*

⁴³ Utah Death Certificate, 1904-1964; *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, 20 June 1909, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Tombstone.

⁴⁵ United States Census, 1900.

⁴⁶ Utah Death Certificates, 1904-1964; Utah Deaths and Burials, 1888-1946; *Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, 20 June 1909, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Utah Death Certificates, 1904-1964.



Joseph Flitcroft Birch (image from *Familysearch.org*)

JOSEPH BIRCH,
DEALER IN
General Merchandise, Grain,
WINES, LIQUORS
AND CIGARS.
LEEDS, - UTAH.

Advertisement in the Silver Reef Business Directory, 1879-1880

Research by Elaine Young, Silver Reef Foundation historian, 2017
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