

Elijah Thomas

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Elijah Thomas was born 22 January 1815¹ in West Rockingham, Richmond, North Carolina. He was the fourth of ten children of Henry Thomas and Ester Thomas (his parents were second cousins to each other). The family lived in Richmond, North Carolina² until 1833, when his mother died. His father moved the family to Noxubee, Mississippi; in 1840 he was living there with his brother.³

He took military training from his boyhood until nearly 30 years of age. He was a big man over six feet tall⁴ and a naturally gifted orator.⁵ His family was baptized into the Mormon Church in 1844⁶ and moved to Nauvoo, Illinois. Elijah was called on a mission to North and South Carolina; on his return he worked building carriages and wagons. The family moved westward in 1846.⁷

Elijah, his cousin and his brother-in-law volunteered for the Mormon Battalion during the Mexican War.⁸ Five hundred men enlisted under Colonel Allen in July 1846 to serve for one year. They marched from Mt Pisgah to Fort Leavenworth, arriving February 1847. Elijah wrote, "Remaining at that place until April, I made it a practice to pray privately every morning after the battalion services and sometime during the latter month at one of these devotions I received a remarkable vision wherein it was shown to me that our company of men, when discharged, would find a gold mine which would be the means of gathering Saints from the sea coast to the valley of the Great Salt Lake, and effect other purposes of a great and revolutionary character."⁹

Elijah was a private in Company C of the Mormon Battalion Iowa Volunteers.¹⁰ He became disabled with fistula and piles associated with "exposure and hardship from the march from Fort Leavenworth to the Colorado"¹¹ and rode in the hospital wagon from Arkansas River to Santa Fe.¹²

After their discharge in July 1847, they headed towards the Salt Lake Valley, when those without family were asked to return to the west coast to obtain supplies that would be scarce in the Valley. Forty-two men returned and sought employment. Elijah and two others obtained a contract with Captain John Sutter to build a mill, canal, dam, saw mill and tan-yard. In January 1848, the foreman and nine of the company working on the saw mill say a few grains of gold in the race. Panning commenced up river, and two men found an abundance of gold fifteen miles upriver. He wrote, "The rumor of this discovery reaching the Mormon company which had arrived in San Francisco in the ship Brooklyn, thirteen barges were chartered, and 200 persons conveyed in them up the Sacramento and American Fork rivers to the site of the new diggings, to a place subsequently named Mormon Island, where they all commenced taking out gold."¹³

¹ Utah Death Certificates, 1904-1964.

² United States Census, 1820, 1830.

³ United States Census, 1840.

⁴ Old Mormon Musket, by Thomas James Maxwell.

⁵ Elijah Thomas, by Douglas Reed Hunt.

⁶ Membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1848.

⁷ Elijah Thomas Sr., by Sybil Corry.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Letter dictated by Elijah Thomas, age 83, of Leeds; in *Deseret Evening News*, 21 March 1898, p. 9.

¹⁰ Members of the Mormon Battalion.

¹¹ *Familysearch.org*

¹² Elijah Thomas, by Douglas Reed Hunt.

¹³ Letter dictated by Elijah Thomas, age 83, of Leeds; in *Deseret Evening News*, 21 March 1898, p. 9.

Elijah met Mercy Day Hooker Narrimore in San Francisco, where she had a mercantile business where the battalion members shopped. Mercy had come to California with her husband and son in the Mormon immigrant group on the ship *Brooklyn*. She was widowed on the voyage but had brought enough goods to open her own store in Yerba Buena, California.¹⁴ Elijah began helping her and they soon married. He was 33 and she was 46, with a 12-year old son.¹⁵ Elijah had no suitable clothes for the wedding and Mercy gave him a suit that belonged to her first husband.¹⁶ They stocked up on bolts of material for the journey to Utah but when they got to the gold fields they found the material so much in demand that they traded their wagon load of cloth for a fifty-pound sack of gold nuggets, which was much easier to transport.¹⁷ They had one child together.

Elijah was captain of the camp for twenty-two families of *Brooklyn* Saints and some members of the battalion. In October 1848, they crossed the Sierras and desert to the Great Salt Lake with oxen and mules drawing wagons; it took 65 days.¹⁸ Upon their arrival, he built the biggest house in Salt Lake City for \$4,000, and started the first mercantile business.¹⁹ In 1850, he was a merchant living in Great Salt Lake, Great Salt Lake County, Utah Territory, with his wife and two children.

Elijah bought ten lots on Main Street in Salt Lake City, but Brigham Young chastised him for speculating on real estate. He then sold them for whatever he could get. Some were sold on credit and he never received the price, and was soon poor again.²⁰ In 1851, he married Ann Hayward, who had a young niece in her care.²¹ They had four children together.

The next year Elijah and five other men were called on a mission to British Guiana.²² President Young instructed them to preach the gospel and look for seeds and plants that could be adapted to Utah's soil.²³ The missionaries traveled to Brazil, Jamaica, Barbados, and ended up in New York.²⁴ Elijah organized a company to travel to Salt Lake, crossing the plains his second time.²⁵ When he arrived, he engaged in the manufacture of castor oil and soap, from the beans he had brought from Brazil.²⁶

In 1857, Elijah married Harriet Johnson (niece to his first wife); they had seven children.²⁷ In 1860, he was called on a mission to collect money and preach the gospel in the east. On his return, he led another company west to Salt Lake City.²⁸ In 1860, he was living in Great Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah Territory; with his three wives and five children.²⁹

In 1861, he served another mission to Tennessee and Alabama.³⁰ He again crossed the plains on his return, with the David H. Cannon company.³¹ Then during the October General Conference of the

¹⁴ Elijah Thomas: The Rest of the Story, by Ann Woodward Candioto; *Familysearch.org*

¹⁵ Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847-1868.

¹⁶ Elijah Thomas Sr., by Sybil Corry.

¹⁷ The Ship Brooklyn Story, Vol 2, by Richard H. Bullock.

¹⁸ Letter dictated by Elijah Thomas, age 83, of Leeds; in *Deseret Evening News*, 21 March 1898, p. 9.

¹⁹ Elijah Thomas, by Douglas Reed Hunt.

²⁰ Old Mormon Musket, by Thomas James Maxwell.

²¹ Elijah Thomas Sr., by Sybil Corry.

²² *Deseret Evening News*, 20 October 1906, p. 3.

²³ Elijah Thomas Sr., by Thomas James Maxwell.

²⁴ The Mormon Question: Being a Speech of Vice-president Schuyler Colfax at Salt Lake City; A Reply Thereto by Elder John Taylor and a Letter of Vice-president Colfax, 1870, p. 36; *Church News*.

²⁵ Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847-1868.

²⁶ *The Mountaineer* [Salt Lake City], 5 November 1859, p. 2.

²⁷ *Familysearch.org*

²⁸ Elijah Thomas, by Douglas Reed Hunt.

²⁹ United States Census, 1860.

³⁰ The Ship Brooklyn Story, Vol 2, by Richard H. Bullock; *Deseret Evening News*, 20 October 1906, p. 3.

³¹ Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847-1868.

Church in 1866, Brigham Young called 165 men to move south to strengthen the church's southern communities.³² Elijah was assigned to set up a castor bean processing plant³³ to make castor oil. He built a home in Leeds on 31 South Main Street.³⁴ He had a field of hay, a garden and a few cows. He also planted an orchard and vineyard.³⁵ On the 1870 census, Elijah is a castor oil manufacturer living in St George, Utah Territory, with his third wife and six children.³⁶

Castor beans were the perfect crop for southern Utah, as they required no irrigation. Ripened seeds were laid out on canvas to dry, then beaten with a large stick to thresh them and winnowed by tossing them in the wind. The beans were crushed by machine and sacked in burlap. They were steamed in the sacks using a six-foot square boiler with a copper bottom and wooden slats to keep them out of the water. They were cooked for six or seven hours. While hot, they were placed in the press, one sack at a time. The press was a large metal box with two holes in the bottom. A large heavy top was placed on the sack and screwed down with a sweep, usually by hand. As the screw tightened, first water and then oil ran out the bottom. The oil was caught in five-gallon cans. The leftover meal was dried and used as fuel for future boilings. The oil was used for medicinal purposes and thickened for lubricating oil.³⁷

Elijah was hunting his horses one day when a thunderstorm drove him to take shelter under a pinion tree. Suddenly, an inspiration or presentiment struck him. He felt a certainty he was standing over millions of dollars' worth of precious minerals. Prospectors laughed at his dreams. They scoffed that minerals were never found in sandstone. But Grandfather was convinced his hunch was right and began prospecting.³⁸

In 1874, Elijah was visited by John Ferris, who had been working in the stone quarry for the St George Temple. Ferris wrote, "We took a ramble up on to Quail Creek, north of Harrisburg, and in returning back we went up on the great white reef... we came to a crevice of copper stain ... we dug on it and opened up about a foot vein of ore of that class"³⁹ (more of his story can be found in *Silver, Sinners, and Saints*, by Proctor and Silas, 1991, pp. 35-37). It was only a hundred feet from the tree which had protected Elijah.⁴⁰

Elijah sent a sample of horn silver to the Walker Brothers, who were Salt Lake City bankers, and they dispatched William T Barbee, Thomas McNally, and Ed Maynard to the area.⁴¹ As the news spread, a California company came out and jumped his claim. In 1876, an "armed force under [Charles] Hoffman took forcible possession of Thomas' locations and forbid him on the ground on penalty of death".⁴²

Elijah filed suit in district court against the jumpers. Hoffman argued Elijah had not worked his assessment. They bribed one of his friends to swear to the statement; his friend sold him out for \$2,000.⁴³ Charles offered Elijah \$100,000 out of court settlement, but Elijah held out for \$300,000. An

³² *Deseret Evening News*, 20 October 1906, p. 3.

³³ *Salt Lake Herald*, 25 December 1891, p. 26.

³⁴ Elijah Thomas Sr., by Sybil Corry.

³⁵ Elijah Thomas Sr., by Thomas James Maxwell

³⁶ United States Census, 1870.

³⁷ *Heart Throbs of the West*, Kate B. Carter, Vol.3, p.221.

³⁸ *Old Mormon Musket*, by Thomas James Maxwell.

³⁹ *Salt Lake Tribune*, 27 June 1899, p. 6; 1 February 1904, p. 6; John's 1920 letter to the editor of *Mines and Methods*, found in *Silver, Sinners and Saints*, by Proctor and Shirts, 1991, p. 35.

⁴⁰ *Old Mormon Musket*, by Thomas James Maxwell.

⁴¹ *Utah: A Guide to the State*, 1941 p. 301.

⁴² *The Mining Review*, 30 June 1903.

⁴³ *Old Mormon Musket*, by Thomas James Maxwell.

injunction was filed, and Elijah could not raise the money to cover his legal fees. When statute of limitations expired, the jumpers won the claim.⁴⁴ The jumpers sold the claim for \$30,000 but soon it soon produced more than that amount in one month.⁴⁵ The loss of the mine did not mean nearly as much to Elijah as the fact that his friends and his brothers in the church, testified against him.⁴⁶

Mark A. Pendleton called Elijah “excitable and visionary” and tells of a practical joke played on Elijah by Will Harris. Elijah was working a spot with his pick, and Will hid behind a nearby boulder and cedar tree. Will called out “Elijah, Elijah” and Thomas looked up. Seeing no one, he went back to work. Will then intoned, “Elijah, my son.” Thomas dropped his pick, took off his hat, and replied reverently, “Father, what is Thy will?” Will replied, “The time is not yet come.” At that point, Elijah shouldered his pick and shovel and went home, never returning to the prospective area, for the time had not yet come.⁴⁷

After losing the claim, he took a contract for timber hauling to Silver Reef mine.⁴⁸ In 1880, Elijah was a farmer living in Leeds with his wife Ann. In 1887, he filed for and received an Army pension of \$8 per month. In 1894, his pension was increased to \$12 per month.⁴⁹ On the 1900 census, he was still living with Ann in Leeds. Elijah died 14 October 1906 in St George, Washington, Utah, at his daughter’s house, of “general debility, gradually failed”. He was listed as a liquor merchant on his death certificate.⁵⁰



(Image from *The Ship Brooklyn Story*, Vol 2, by Richard H. Bullock).



(Image from *Familysearch.org*)

⁴⁴ Silver, Sinners and Saints, by Proctor and Shirts, 1991, pp. 37, 39, 44.

⁴⁵ Saga of Three Towns, by Marietta Mariger, p. 88.

⁴⁶ Elijah Thomas Sr, by Thomas James Maxwell.

⁴⁷ Silver Reef Personalities Legends, by Mark A. Pendleton, 1940, pp. 4B-5B.

⁴⁸ Elijah Thomas Sr, by Sybil Corry.

⁴⁹ US Mexican War Pension Index, 1887-1926; United States Mormon Battalion Pension Applications.

⁵⁰ Utah Death and Military Death Certificates, 1904-1961.



Elijah Thomas' home in Leeds, Utah (Image from *Familysearch.org*)

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(Image from *The Mountaineer*, 29 October 1859, p. 3)



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Research by Elaine Young, Silver Reef Foundation historian, 2017
Please email eyoung@youngzones.org for additions and corrections