

Brannan Before the *Brooklyn*

Will Bagley

The most prominent - and problematic - of all the men and women who came to California in 1846 on the ship *Brooklyn* was Samuel Brannan, leader of the expedition. Brannan went on to become one of the richest men in the state, and after he left the LDS church in 1849, he became Mormonism's most famous apostate. His intimate connection with the LDS church proved to be a problem in his later life, and he found it convenient to put as much distance between himself and his past as possible. Brannan periodically rewrote his personal history to match his changing situation, leaving behind a tangled web of evidence that has thoroughly confused historians. Several fictionalized biographies written in the 1940s and 1950s compounded the problem, and it is now impossible to find a Brannan life history that is not shot through with error.

Samuel Brannan was born on 2 March 1819, the fifth and last child of Thomas and Sarah Knox Emery Brannan, in Saco, Maine, a thriving coastal village fourteen miles southwest of Portland. His father was an emigrant from Waterford, Ireland. A widower, Thomas Brannan married Sarah Emery, the niece of Henry Knox, George Washington's secretary of war, in 1805. Thomas Brannan was sixty-



four when his youngest son was born, and was a reasonably prosperous farmer with an interest in progressive religion. Family tradition long painted him as "irritable, and hard drinking," and a victim of "bone fever" - rheumatism, but the dark picture traditionally painted of him is probably exaggerated. Samuel Brannan was very close to his older sister, Mary Ann, who converted to Mormonism in Boston in 1832 with her husband, Alexander Badlam.

In 1833 Brannan moved with the Badlams to Kirtland, Ohio, site of the first Mormon "gathering." Brannan apprenticed in the church's printing office, which published the *Evening and Morning Star* and the *Messenger and Advocate*. Editor Oliver Cowdery later referred to "my old apprentice, Samuel Brannan."

On his arrival in Hawaii, Brannan claimed that he had "resided for nearly three years in the family of Joseph Smith, Jr." Joseph Smith III recalled that his earliest recollections of "men, things, and events" at Kirtland included the young printer. The prophet's son recalled Brannan and Ebenezer Robinson were "either inmates of my Father's house or frequent visitors therein." Joseph Smith's journal noted on 14 December 1835, "To day Samuel Branum came to my house much afflicted with a swelling on his left arm which was occasioned by a bruise on his elbow. We had been called to pray for him and anoint him with oil, but his faith was not sufficient to effect a cure. My wife prepared a poultice of herbs and applied to it and he tarried with me over night."

By 1837 Brannan had ended his apprenticeship and joined “the mania of making fortunes without the worrying need of time, trouble or capital” that swept the United States. By all accounts, these “speculations” ended in disaster. “In the course of the five following years he visited most of the States in the Union,” working as a tramp printer, until he rejoined the Mormon church about 1842. During these wanderings, perhaps while editing a newspaper in Indianapolis, Brannan developed powerful connections in the Democratic party. By December of 1843, however, he was a missionary in southern Ohio.

Brannan continued his missionary work in New York in 1844. He married Ann Eliza Corwin that year (there is not shred of documentary evidence to support the story that he had earlier married and abandoned one Harriet Hatch in Ohio). Brannan was one of the “young Lions of Mormonism” on the east coast, and on 20 July 1844 he became publisher of the *Prophet*, the LDS newspaper in New York. Brannan was soon thoroughly embroiled in both Democratic party politics and Mormon church scandals. He was excommunicated in 1845, but the support of his boss, Parley P. Pratt, and a trip to Nauvoo brought him back into the LDS church. By the summer of 1845 he was deeply involved with adventurer Lansford Hastings, politician Amos Kendall, and entrepreneurs A. W. and A. G. Benson in a plot to conquer the Mexican province of California, a complicated scheme that helped spark the *Brooklyn* adventure.

Will Bagley has been working on a biography of Samuel Brannan for the last ten years. The Arthur H. Clark Company will publish his edition of *Scoundrel's Tale: The Samuel Brannan Papers* later this year as part of a new series, *Kingdom in the West: The Mormons and the American Frontier*. The *Journal of Mormon History* will publish his article, “‘Every Thing Is Favourable! And God Is On Our Side’: Samuel Brannan and the Conquest of California” in an upcoming issue. The article will contain source notes for the information presented here.

COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM YOU

“Thank you for sending me the first issue of the Ship *Brooklyn* Association newsletter. I just finished reading it. It has great format and is very informative. The number of descendants out there in the world somewhere is mind boggling. Consider how meaningful this organization can be in a multiplicity of ways as time goes by. The “Mayflower Organization” is a very powerful group and the number of passengers on board that ship were not nearly so numerous as the Latter-day Saints on the Brooklyn. They aren’t likely as prolific either.” **Joe Livingston.**

“We certainly want to take an active part in the Association. Since the California festivities we’ve tried to make info available to our known family members. As a young child, I visited the two Daniel Stark homes in Payson, Utah supposedly the day before they were razed. I’m trying to find the exact address of those homes. If you have any idea of someone who knows this info, please advise.” **Carol Gibson**

OH REMEMBER

We are blessed beyond measure by those who have gone before us. In this world full of the present, of immediate gratification, how we need to remember the past and be grateful for what we have. We need to thank those who made it possible for us to have what we have.

One purpose of the Association is to help our descendants remember. We need to remember the cause which brought the Brooklyn Saints to California. We need to remember their faith in the future. They had faith in us. We need to remember their sacrifices for the good of all their fellow beings on this earth. Their noble lives of sacrifice and hard work are worthy of emulation. We cannot honor them more than by trying to do as they did and by trying to become good as they were good. It is altogether fitting and appropriate that we should teach our children of them. We should gather all our families together and teach them so they, too, can remember. **Wade Fillmore**
