



# John Watkins

## pioneer spotlight

English convert John Watkins exemplifies the thousands of early Saints who grasped the gospel abroad and sacrificed greatly to gather in Zion. Born on April 13, 1834, John was the third son of Thomas and Sarah Jordon Watkins.

John's life was a happy and normal one, perhaps even more blessed than many. The family was fairly well off, active in the Church of England, and friendly with their neighbors. John had a very fine voice and received musical training; he was also trained by his father as an architect and builder.

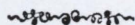
At an early age John became a soloist in the Cathedral and was so gifted that any song that was too difficult for other singers was automatically given to him. Consequently, before he had reached the age of 17, he had ruined his voice and had to give up singing.

In *John Watkins, A Brief History of the Pioneer*, written by his daughter Mary A. Schaefer, John is described as "quick, active,

and of good intelligence, making rapid advancement in everything he undertook to do. He assumed responsibilities beyond his years. Perhaps it is not surprising that at the early age of seventeen years he fell in love with Margaret Ackhurst. . . . His parents were very much opposed to him forming a serious attachment at that early age. John and Margaret were determined to have their own way, had their banns called in another village, where John's parents would not hear of them. When the time of announcement was over, they eloped and were married."

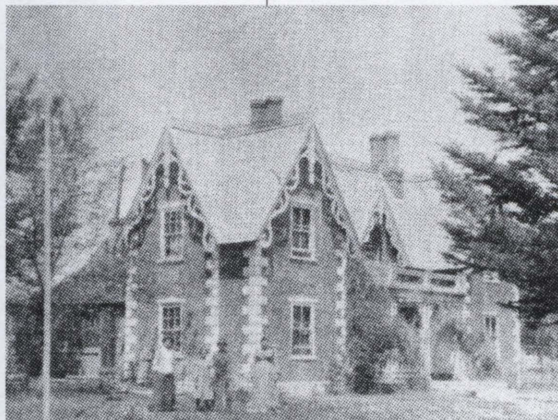
About the same time, John also heard of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At first bitter against the faith, John quickly changed his mind after hearing an elder preach. "After hearing the Elder once,

**John and his bride joined the Church, paying a dear price. John's mother declared she would rather bury her son than have him belong to the Mormon Church.**



*Above: Margaret Ackhurst Watkins, married John at Maidstone, Kent, England May 4, 1851.*

*Below: Home of 1870. John Watkins located the clay, made the brick, sawed out the sandstone blocks, and built this house—the first brick house ever in Wasatch County.*



his gospel sounded so reasonable that I went many times to hear him of my accord," he recalled later.

John and his bride joined the Church, paying a dear price. John's mother declared she would rather bury her son than have him belong to the Mormon Church. They never reconciled, and all letters and pictures sent her by John were burned unopened. (After his mother's death, John corresponded with his sister Jane, and she accepted the family pictures he sent her.)

What happened after John joined the Church is perhaps best told in his own words: "After being baptized and while being confirmed, the Elder prophesied on my head in the name of Jesus Christ, that I should want to gather with the Saints as bad as anybody ever did. I, being determined in my own mind not to go. . . but lo and behold, the spirit of gathering as foretold by Isaiah hundreds of years ago, rested upon me so strong that I prayed to the Lord fervently to open up the way for me to go under any conditions, for I was willing to pass through anything to gather with the Church. . . .

"So eager was I to go that I consented to cross the plains from the state of Iowa all the way to Salt Lake City pulling a handcart and hauling two little children, a son and daughter, who could not walk through the sand and snow all the way to Salt Lake. . . .

"I started on the fourth of May, 1856, on the good sail ship *Horizon* which was bound for Boston, North America; and after nearly five weeks, we landed safe in Boston. We then went by rail to Iowa.

"For some reason unknown to me we were delayed at the Iowa camp ground four or five weeks. . . . While waiting on the Iowan camp ground, the Lord revealed to me in a vision some of the fearful experiences that would result in the death of many souls.

"It seemed to me that the darkness began to fade and I saw myself in a room about sixteen foot square. I was in company with the gods who were considering what was to transpire on our journey of the hand-

cart company from Iowa to Salt Lake City. It was shown to me that so many were to die. But who were they to be?"

"There was an octagon shaped box placed in the center of the room, turned with a handle similar to many lotteries I have seen. Tickets were placed in this box, so many marked to die and so many marked to live. About six hundred souls were in the company and the tickets seemed to be about half of each kind. After being put in the box and mixed promiscuously together, each one of the company drew a ticket that would decide his fate. After seeing and realizing what the consequences were, they asked me if I was willing to go, seeing the risk was so great. The spirit of the gathering was still upon me; it had been filling my soul. My thoughts by day and my dreams at night were only how to get there, so I told them I was willing to take my chances with the rest."

So John and his young family, consisting of his wife and two children, joined the ill-fated Martin Handcart Company. John, in fact, was bugler for the company. His duty was to call the company up in the mornings to assemble for prayers, to call them for meetings, and to give the signals for starting on the trail, stopping at night, and retiring for bed. It was also his duty to ration the flour.

An estimated one-third of the Martin Handcart Company lost their lives in that trek west. John and his family, thankfully, were not among those. They suffered greatly and sacrificed deeply and made it to the Salt Lake Valley.

Shortly after arriving in the valley, John and his family moved further south to Provo. An architect and builder by trade, John soon found himself in great demand in this growing community. He led the community's first brass band, he worked on the Provo Tabernacle, and he planned and built the city's Opera House—the community center for concert, drama, opera, and dancing.

In the summer of 1865, John and his family, now consisting of three wives (he'd married Harriet Steel and Mary Ann Sawyer) and several children, left Provo, entering the Provo Canyon to play a key role in settling the area that would become known as Midway. John, who would serve as bishop in the area for many years, continued to set a grand example of sacrifice, obedience, and gratitude in this new community. ▼