

The Voyage of the *Ellen Maria*, 1853

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The *Ellen Maria*, “a good-looking craft” in the eyes of one of her passengers,¹ lay quiet as a sleeping duck at Mosely Docks in Liverpool, England, in early January 1853. From a distance, the crosshatch pattern of her masts and yardarms blended with those of other sailing ships into a forest of bare horizontals and verticals reaching skyward along the banks of Mersey River. As a square-rigger packet out of the yard of Harrison Springer in Richmond, Maine, the *Ellen Maria* was of modest dimensions among the ships engaged in carrying converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints over the North Atlantic in that year.² Her rated tonnage of 768 was third to the lowest of the ten ships chartered. She would carry 332 Latter-day Saints in completing this, her third and last voyage.³

As with dinosaurs, sailing ships came in assorted shapes and sizes. Packets were built for speed, and “these strong and sturdy square riggers . . . were built to fight the seas.”⁴ Three naked tree trunks, or masts, to which the yards and sails were attached, were the basic superstructure. *Ellen Maria*’s hull from the bow to stern measured 150 feet, 9 inches; at the widest point her sides were 33 feet, 5 inches apart.⁵ If the vessel could have been set down in a corner of a football field with her stern on the goal line, her bow would barely have crossed the midfield stripe. She and a twin sister ship would have been comfortable side by side between the sideline and its hash mark.

While the ship herself was inert, the activity around and aboard her was abustle. Liverpool, at midcentury, was a hub of England’s maritime trade. Her docks were fed by an extensive network of railroads, stage roads, and canals. The flow of Latter-day Saint emigration had gathered considerable volume through the missionary work being conducted in western Europe, especially in the British Isles. Fawn M. Brodie declared, “In 1853 the Mormon missionary system in Great Britain was an astonishing force.”⁶ In order for the yearly emigration to reach Great Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, before the snows of early winter blocked the highlands of Wyoming, the voyages across the North Atlantic had to begin in the dead of winter. Railroad lines converged at Liverpool Station

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like the arteries of commerce which they were, disgorging passengers and their paraphernalia from the various "conferences" in England, then scurrying on their return trip. It must have been a very picturesque scene as the trains came smoking in, preceded by the shrill atonic warnings of the steam whistle, the audible signature ushered in by the age of steam, and chuffing to a standstill.

It was a time of excitement, eagerness, and mixed emotions, ranging from parting from friends, family, and lifelong attachments to village, town, or shire, to high anticipation in going to the new land, the new Zion, with her opportunities and new uncertainties ahead. Stowing luggage and other personal possessions, paying for passage, and getting berth assignments occupied the efforts of the passengers who were to embark on this voyage, and their agents. The Temperance Hotel at Number Three Manchester Street was a center of much of this activity.

In the interim before sailing, daily meetings were conducted at the Saints' Chapel, where speakers from among the missionaries assigned to Perpetual Emigration Fund duty prepared the emigrants for the journey.⁷ Warnings were frequently uttered against such evils as drinking brandy and falling into temptation along the way, especially in St. Louis.⁸ A principal topic of the season was the doctrine of celestial marriage, which had been announced the previous August in Great Salt Lake City at a special early conference, called to launch 107 missionaries to worldwide fields of labor.⁹ This was the first season to witness the ripple effect of that announcement in the lives of the emigrants now gathering in Liverpool. On 9 January, in the evening gathering at the chapel, Elder S. W. Richards

made some good remarks on the subject of Polygamy showing the wisdom of the Celestial Order and the evils of the present state of society followed by Elder Orson Spencer on the same subject in his usual plain and simple manner so that no one could gain say his word for he spoke by the Spirit. The house was crowded and sanctioned the address by a hearty Amen.¹⁰

The *Ellen Maria* had been scheduled for departure on 11 January, given fair wind. Stowing the ship continued on the tenth. As provisioning for the voyage proceeded, the ship settled ton by ton, inch by inch, until her keel drew nineteen feet of water. Ship carpenters were busily and noisily engaged in fitting out the steerage with additional bunk and baggage spaces for the voyage. Some of the converts, beginning to get the feel of the ship and their part in it, dined and slept on board for the first time. "The Saints were all merry and during the night some were singing and others joking. We slept several hours and rested well."

The work continued on the eleventh and twelfth, arranging the assorted trunks, boxes, and other luggage and lashing them in place. Departure was delayed still another day. As frequently happened at Mersey Docks, the vessel then became windbound because of the

prevailing westerlies.¹¹ The Saints entertained themselves by playing music and dancing. These weather conditions lasted for several days. The people became restive. On the fourteenth, Elder Moses Clawson, in charge of the emigrants for this voyage, gave orders for the Saints to organize themselves in a company “for the time being so that prayers might be offered up morning and evening.” A watch bill for the men was drawn up for the night hours, and a cooking schedule was set up which divided that function into three shifts daily, each being allotted two hours at the stoves. Elder Clawson took the final step in organizing the Saints when he called upon the available elders to be responsible for looking after the health and well-being of their fellow passengers, grouping them according to assigned spaces.¹²

This occurred on 16 January. The voyage began on the following day at 4:00 P.M. As they left the dock, “All the Saints on Board were up on deck waving their handkerchiefs” as they sang, “Yes, My Native Land, I Love Thee” and “The Shepherds Have Raised Their Sweet Warning Voices.”¹³ The vessel was warped from the dock and anchored half a mile downstream. The next morning, a steamer towed the *Ellen Maria* about sixteen miles into the Irish Sea, and the sails, after a few tentative puffs of air, flexed themselves for the first time and the wind took over for the duration of the voyage.

Initiation to the ways of the sea was not long in coming. High winds during the first night brought on general seasickness. The Welsh coast was sighted, but nobody seemed to care much about it. Nothing, however, can halt the beginnings of life. Sister Diggle gave birth to a baby girl in the afternoon of the twentieth, the first of five such occurrences on this voyage. Heavy weather continued. The Irish mountains passed quietly to starboard. Elder Clawson ordered gruel for the sick. He himself was probably the most susceptible person on board to *mal de mer*, as he reported later in his letter of 7 March to Samuel W. Richards, the Church agent in Liverpool: “I was, nearly the whole of the voyage, confined with sickness.”¹⁴

Thus the gallant little *Ellen Maria*, bearing her tight burden, sensitive to the forces that bound her, breasted the waves and the weather. Four days out, the diarist noted: “Fair wind and swift sailing. Passed every ship in sight. Most Beautiful night.” On the twenty-fourth they logged two hundred miles in twenty-four hours. Then the voyage became a trial. Stormy skies lay over their path, accompanied by the beat and roar of high winter winds, roughing the seas into mountainous and menacing threats to the safety of the vessel. Many of the elders met in the steerage and prayed for safety. High winds continued into the next day, the ship being tossed about like a cork. At the height of the storm, water got into the steerage, and the hatch had to be covered for a time. This left the passengers in darkness, breathing fetid air.

Nothing so intensifies our awareness of the passing moment as being caught up in the throes of nature on a rampage. As the *Ellen Maria* continued to struggle to keep from broaching and being swamped and swallowed whole by the moaning waters, the Saints and their possessions—the boxes and barrels, the satchels, trunks, and portmanteaus, every family treasure or trinket or tool they had brought for the new life—were being tossed or slammed about, the people rolling and skidding, banging into each other or coming up against the stanchions in such confusion as to defy description. There was no escape, no refuge, no retreat. Such a hectic, churning world was no fit place for a mother to bear her young. Maternity, however, chooses the time, not the place. In these extreme conditions, Sister Barnes gave birth to a baby boy. Mother and child both died during the night and were buried at sea the next day. Sewed into a counterpane, the bodies, following the rites of maritime commitment, were slipped into the water and tossed about for a while before slowly disappearing, a sobering sight to those on deck.

Provisions were given out on the twenty-eighth, the wind having lessened, the sea calm. Two marriages were performed on the thirtieth; sea and wind continued calm. Porpoises sporting in the water provided comic relief to the Saints between storms. Sister Kendall brought her baby girl into the world in the tight confinement of her quarters. The next night the wind blew a gale again, the ship making eight or nine knots, having logged two thousand miles in its first fortnight on the water. On 1 February, having passed the French coast and slipped between the Azores and the Spanish coast, the ship entered the Horse Latitudes, an east-west band of Atlantic water which stretches over two thousand miles along the thirtieth parallel of north latitude. It was a mainstream of travel, its easterly winds providing steady going when they weren't churning up a storm or dying down to a dead calm. The intervals between storm and calm, when the skies and wind were fair, were a veritable joyride, a cleansing of the body and the spirit, when the warmth of winter's sun was a balm to the skin, and the mind was free of the grip of fear. At such times *Ellen Maria* was a clipper ship, bearing her passengers along effortlessly, her sails rounded and taut, like matronly bosoms, filled with a benevolent and purposeful wind.

Sister Cornaby's autobiographical pen fills in some of the ocean's visual phenomena that entertained the Saints during these days:

The monster whale, now daily seen, sends forth a cloud of foam,
And dolphins in their rainbow hues, quite near the vessel come.
The flying fish amuse us, as in shoals they fly or leap,
And seem at home in air above, or in the wat'ry deep;
The nautilus spreads its little sail, and skims the briny wave,
In praise to the Creator, who their various instincts gave.¹⁵

Routines clicked along within the confines of the ship, from morning bugle to evening prayer. Such minuscule housekeeping as was possible in the steerage was attended to along with the three daily cooking shifts at the stoves. The social chatter and gossip, the care of the sick, the singing and the meetings, the frequent preachings, the random strains of musical instruments to catch the ear, even dancing when conditions allowed, all filled the hours and buoyed the spirits. The calming influence of the elders' guiding hand on board was ever present. When the breeze fell off and the ship was becalmed, the heat became oppressive. After such an interval, on 3 February, the brethren prayed for a change of wind, which soon occurred. Provisions were again issued, favoring winds quickened the ship's pace, now up to ten knots, now thirteen. After prayers on 4 February, all hands cleaned under their berths. A sailor fell from a mast to the deck suffering severe lacerations, but no broken bones. Two days later, in response to the sounding of the bugle, the Saints gathered in the steerage at three o'clock in the afternoon for their first sacrament meeting since leaving England.¹⁶ Heads were bowed as the words of the elder offering the prayer of blessing, along with the rustling of sails and the murmuring of waters brought by the fresh air from the hatchway, were heard, filling the Saints' hearts with peace and solemnity. Sister Diggle's baby girl was christened after the ship. Afterward, some of the Saints "took tea" together in a social gathering. The injured sailor was recovering and was able to take food.

The following day, 7 February, Sister Caroline Finn gave birth to a boy. The weather continued mild; in fact, it was now getting quite hot, the wind listless. When the wind freshened, some of the Saints were called upon to help make sail, and Elder Farmer was designated to see that the "places of convenience" were properly cleaned. On the eleventh, Brother Clawson was taken very sick. Sightings of traffic included a distress light at about 10:00 P.M., but the *Ellen Maria* could not get near. On the thirteenth, a vessel named *Coquet* approached and through a speaking trumpet requested provisions. It was eighty-five days out of England, bound for Charleston, South Carolina, and had experienced extended rough weather. The *Ellen Maria* had been out only twenty-seven days. The captain spared them two barrels of bread and one of pork.¹⁷

The weather turned cold the next day, and several of the passengers were ill. Those from Leicester, however, chose this occasion to host a social tea party. After evening prayers, the wind veered from the southeast and quickly picked up great force. Again, many feared for the safety of the vessel with following seas running very high, a most dreaded condition for the mariner. The storm raged, ripping some sails to shreds. The men turned to with the ship's company, hauling and pulling on the ropes to reef the sails. After the storm abated, the second mate remarked

that without the extra help, the ship and all in it “would have gone to hell.” Little four-year-old Albert Read, a victim of consumption, expired and was committed to the deep.

The wind continued fair, the weather very hot—typical Horse Latitudes sailing. On the fifteenth, diarist Farmer took his turn at the stoves. On the sixteenth, the wind picked up. Members of the Bradford conference entertained some of the elders at a tea party in the afterpart of the vessel. The following day, Brother Clawson arranged a dancing party on the quarterdeck, which lifted the spirits and eased the monotony. The course was now southwest by west, *Ellen Maria* making ten knots. On the afternoon of 18 February, a Friday, the ship was calculated at nine hundred miles from New Orleans, at a position 27°40′ north latitude and 72° west longitude, approaching the Bahamas. Water restrictions were lifted by Captain Whitmore. Some of the Saints were ailing and were administered to by the elders.

Ushered by a fine morning breeze and morning, Sister Rebbeck delivered a baby boy on 19 February. High winds roughened the sea the rest of the day, and the rolling motion of the ship brought a return engagement with seasickness. Two sails were in sight most of the time. At nine that night volunteers were called up again to assist the ship’s crew in handling the vessel. After the men turned in, half a dozen berths broke down, “and to hear the cries and the screams of the sisters and the crash of the wind it was one scene of confusion.” A northwest wind mounted and raged for a while on the twentieth, causing heavy seas but abating in midafternoon. The sea was calm again on the twenty-first, and the Saints enjoyed another dance, lasting until 8:00 P.M.

Tuesday morning, 22 February, was sunny and warm. Several vessels were in sight now; fourteen sails were counted. At 10:11 they made the first landfall since leaving the coasts of Europe, the famous Hole-in-the-Wall at the tip of Great Abaco Island (Island of Abaque) and were thrilled at the sight of houses. As the ship rounded the tip at the Hole, entering the Northwest Providence Channel, a radical change in the weather occurred, the forerunner of a “black northern.” The steady mild easterlies fell off quite suddenly, the skies clouded over, and the temperature dropped sharply as an Arctic air mass from the northwest rushed in as if to fill a vacuum.¹⁸ The ship was put about to ride out the storm, the amount of sail reduced to near zero, and the captain attempted to keep course in midchannel, away from the shallows of the Grand Bahama Bank.¹⁹

The morning of the twenty-third was a continuation of the wild weather of the night before. The call went out again for help on deck. The storm increased in intensity every hour; much of the canvas on the yardarms was ripped like paper. These were famous waters that were tossing the ship about. The Great Bahama Bank and the Little Bahama

Bank, between which they were buffeted, had been pirate havens a century before, due to the shallows and devious channels, which trapped and grounded pursuit.²⁰ Fear assailed the ship's company once more. They were now drifting over the Grand Bahama Bank, whose sandy bottom varied from six to thirty feet below the surface.²¹ To the *Ellen Maria*, now out of the channel and out of control, this presented a grave danger. The ship was in the greatest peril of the voyage. All sails were furled. The anchors were dropped, which steadied the vessel somewhat, but the rolling effect of the high seas was intensified by the shallow water and uneven bottom. The Saints huddled in the steerage and prayed constantly for their safety.

On the morning of the twenty-fourth, at 4:00 A.M., one anchor broke loose and was dragging, which set the ship to swinging and rolling violently once more. The other anchor followed suit at six o'clock. Capsizing seemed imminent. Captain Whitmore took whatever desperate actions were necessary in attempting to avert disaster, but nothing served to restore the buoyancy of the vessel. The heavy seas and shallow draft combined to keep the ship at a dangerous angle. Prayers were fervent that morning. Sister Hannah Cornaby recounts this terrible moment in these words:

We know that there is danger, yet there's potency in prayer,
 And in this trying moment, ask our Heavenly Father's care;
 Our spirits feel its soothing power, and patiently we wait,
 The few brief moments, which we know must soon decide our fate.
 The captain, for a moment, comes inside the cabin door,
 And in his face we read a look we never saw before;
 He gazes on the passengers, but utters not a word,
 Yet plainly then we learn our fate, altho' no sound is heard;
 My husband now comes in; his face looks pale, but calm;
 He sits down close beside me, takes our babe upon his arm;
 Then seeks, with tender loving words to know if I'm aware,
 Unless Jehovah's power prevents, death must be very near.
 We tell each other of our hope, beyond the reach of death,
 Which will not fail us, even though we should resign our breath,
 And though, perhaps, all human power is impotent to save,
 Our trust is stayed on Him who can control the wind and wave.
 The wind is hushed, the danger past, oh, how the tidings come,
 To all who now expect to meet a sudden watery tomb!
 Life comes to us instead of death; joy takes the place of grief,
 But how describe the feeling of the wonderful relief?
 The vessel righted, now her course again can be controlled,
 And with the morning light the distant coast we can behold.²²

Shortly afterward, the force of the storm was spent, and a fair wind restored navigation. As the skies cleared, the sails were loosed and filled, needed repairs or replacements effected, the anchors shipped, and by half past eight they were underway again as they slipped past the Bimini

Islands and entered the Florida Straits, fifty miles east of Miami. The captain could now employ "Bahamian pilotage" along the coast by keeping the blue water of the deep on his right and the green water of the shallows on his left.²³ The spectacular sunset that day was not lost on the Saints, as they were wafted along past a lighthouse and more land. Making ten knots in the sun the next morning quickened the pulses in the steerage: another landfall at 9:30—west Florida; land in sight all day. A wrecked vessel was sighted in the distance, having lost all of its masts and rigging. Since no distress signal was showing, the *Ellen Maria* passed by. The next morning, a sabbath, they sighted several sails as they entered the Gulf of Mexico. Elder Farmer and Elder Wadley celebrated by sporting about and dousing each other with salt water. The heading was northwest down the home stretch. Elder Clawson called a meeting on the quarterdeck at eleven. The Saints partook of the sacrament, and Elder Kendall spoke for an hour on the plurality of wives. Elder Clawson announced that he would give a lecture at seven o'clock that evening on the same subject. When the meeting convened, Elder Clawson spoke at great length. James Farmer noted, "With few exceptions the Saints appeared to be satisfied."

Monday the twenty-ninth found them "Sailing down the Gulph with a fair wind." About 5:00 P.M., a storm struck for an hour and a half, just to keep the Saints limbered up, and the various wards began taking inventory of their boxes and belongings preparatory to landing. By 1 March, several ships were in sight; at sundown they arrived at the Bar, the delta at the mouth of the Mississippi. The following day, many ships were in sight.²⁴ Several steamers were at work getting a ship off the sands. Death claimed its final victims for the voyage: little Jacob Broadhurst, two years old, and Sister Rebbeck, who left four small children. Both were interred.

On the morning of 3 March, two steamers, the *Ocean* and the *Hercules*, arrived at 4:30 to take *Ellen Maria* in tow. After churning up the waters for an hour and a half, they gave it up for the day. The following morning the steamers returned and with a fresh start got the ship under way, but rubbing bottom. If barnacles itch on the hull of a ship, *Ellen Maria* must have felt reborn at having them scraped from her bottom in this fashion. Brothers Welsh and Farmer went aboard the *Hercules* and bought some flour, plenty of oatmeal, and rice and biscuits. The *Ellen Maria* was towed as far as Pilot City, a way point along the 110 miles from the Bar to the port of New Orleans. Once she was anchored, the Saints rejoiced at seeing houses and trees and sensing the end of the long journey at sea. A doctor came aboard and examined the Saints; then a huckster came alongside with an oyster boat and did a good rushing business at twenty-four for a dollar. On the fifth, a fine morning again; it was cooking day. At 7:30, the *Anglo-Saxon* came alongside and took

the *Ellen Maria* and two other vessels in final tow up the delta. Beautiful plantation scenery on either side refreshed eyes weary of sun and sea. Brother Clawson advised, after prayers, that the Saints not go on deck, that many unfriendly people were on the vessels accompanying them. A watch was set for the men that night.

Sunday, 6 March, meeting was conducted on the quarterdeck at eleven o'clock. Baby Finn was blessed. The lush, subtropical scenery continued to captivate the interest of all. They landed at New Orleans at two o'clock in the morning on 7 March, the forty-seventh day out of Liverpool.

Thus did the voyage of the ship *Ellen Maria* finally come to its end. The larger story, of course, concerns the adventures of the passengers in the vessel. The conclusion of their journeys, most of which began in various parts of England, occurred some months afterward, on 11 October, when they trudged from the mouth of Emigration Canyon as the Cyrus Wheelock Company and were welcomed with customary congratulations by Brigham Young. The interval between arriving in New Orleans and leaving Keokuk, Iowa, on 1 June was spent in traveling, in smaller groups, at different times, by riverboat twelve hundred miles up the Mississippi to St. Louis, the first staging point. The second leg was made up several riverboat trips on up the Mississippi to Keokuk, which was the final staging area for the overland companies along the Mormon Trail in 1853. The several weeks between 7 March and 1 June were devoted to working in St. Louis or nearby for some, usually the men. But the spiritual bond which had been established in the beginning, and which was the reason for the journeying, was nurtured on a continuing basis with religious services and recreational activities which began aboard ship. The main effort during these weeks was the procurement of the livestock and paraphernalia essential to making up and equipping the several companies being organized for the journey. That in itself is another story among the many which were lived out during the years of the gathering, especially those before the iron horse entered the scene during the late 1860s.

NOTES

¹James Farmer, Diary, 8 January 1853, Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives). The chronology of the voyage is derived mainly from this source. Unless otherwise attributed, quotations throughout the narrative are taken from James Farmer's diary.

²Conway B. Sonne, *Saints on the Seas: A Maritime History of Mormon Migration, 1830-1890* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 49.

³*Ibid.*, 150.

⁴*Ibid.*, 51.

⁵Telephone conversation with Nathan Lipfert, Assistant Curator, Maine Maritime Museum, Bath, Maine, June 1984.

⁶Frederick Hawkins Piercy, *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley*, ed. Fawn M. Brodie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), xiii.

⁷Farmer, Diary, 9 January 1853; Sonne, *Saints on the Seas*, 31.

⁸Farmer, Diary, 9 January 1853.

⁹“Minutes of a Special Conference of the Elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Assembled in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, Aug. 28–29, 1852,” *Deseret News*, 18 September 1852.

¹⁰Farmer, Diary, 9 January 1853.

¹¹Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *Square Riggers on Schedule* (1905; reprint, Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1965), 237.

¹²By 1853, Mormon shipboard organization was well recognized for its effectiveness. As a rule, members were assigned to several groups, or wards, each with a leader, and given detailed instructions aimed at orderliness of quarters, cleanliness of person and of food preparation, protection of the women from abuse and disturbance, and regularity of cockcrow and curfew, all of which relieved much of the monotony and resulted in better health and spirits during the weeks at sea. A good summary of this program of self-government is given in Sonne, *Saints on the Seas*, 76–77, for the ship *Jersey*.

¹³John Isaac Hart, Diary, LDS Church Archives; Farmer, Diary, 17 January 1853.

¹⁴Moses Clawson to S. W. Richards, on arrival of the *Ellen Maria* at New Orleans, *Millennial Star* 15 (16 April 1853): 253.

¹⁵Hannah Cornaby, *Autobiography and Poems* (Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham and Co., 1881), 73.

¹⁶Farmer, Diary, 6 February 1853.

¹⁷Hannah Cornaby, recalling this event later (*Autobiography*, 74), wrote that “She was from Charleston, outward bound.” James Farmer’s version was accepted here as having been recorded at the time.

¹⁸For an account of weather conditions in the region, see Carleton Mitchell and B. Anthony Stewart, “The Bahamas, Isles of the Blue–Green Sea,” *National Geographic* 113 (February 1958): 147–203, especially 159.

¹⁹For orientation, see National Geographic Society map, “Close-Up USA: Florida,” 1973.

²⁰Mitchell and Stewart, “The Bahamas,” 147.

²¹Farmer reported five fathoms. John Isaac Hart, apparently referring to this same hazard, said, “at night we got into a very Dangers place we have only 1 foot and a half of water under the bottom of the vessel.”

²²Cornaby, *Autobiography*, 76–77.

²³See Mitchell and Stewart, “The Bahamas,” 153.

²⁴A few days later, on 14 March, Elder Appleton W. Harmon, passenger on the *Golgotha*, counted fifty-one sails at anchor off the Bar (Appleton W. Harmon, Diary, 14 March 1853, LDS Church Archives).