

James Weaver and Elizabeth Gill



A Family History

by Shelley Dawson Davies

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James and Elizabeth

A Long Road

From England to Utah



St. Mary's church at Bishop's Frome, Herefordshire.

James Weaver¹ was a man determined to improve himself. He may have started life as the son of a common laborer in Bishops Frome, a tight knot of humble houses bordering the Herefordshire's River Frome, but he somehow found the means to learn the highly skilled trade of a cordwainer² or shoemaker. He bid goodbye to his family sometime around the age of fourteen, when he committed to an apprenticeship that was to last seven years.

To successfully complete such an apprenticeship required perseverance, ambition and initiative. It was not only the precise techniques used in creating footwear that gave the cordwainer a higher status than many other craftsmen; his customers typically came from the prosperous, or "well-heeled" level of society who could afford custom made shoes and boots. Poor folk took their worn out or hand-me-down shoes to the cobbler, who by law could only makes repairs on existing footwear.

James learned to take measurements of a client's foot in order to whittle out a custom wooden last on which the shoes would be constructed. Once style choices were made by the client, he drew out the pattern pieces and cut the leather. Most of the construction and sewing could be done at his compact shoemaker's bench, a workstation that was combination stool and tool box where awls, marking wheels, knives, small hammers, linen cord and leather pieces could be stored.

Whether James packed up his portable bench and travelled the countryside as a journeyman at the end of his apprenticeship, or whether he set up shop in Staffordshire, he was in Brierley Hill by 1841, when he met twenty-one year old Elizabeth Gill.³ Brierley Hill, a "populous village containing many good shops and extensive coal, iron and glass works,"⁴ offered a variety of opportunities for making a living. Elizabeth's father, Benjamin,⁵ had been a laborer⁶ in one of the local trades for some time. All seven of the Gill children had been born and christened there in the same parish church at Kingswinford, where James and Elizabeth were married, two days after Christmas, 1841.⁷

The Gospel Truth

The Weavers did not remain long in Brierley Hill. James soon sought his fortune ten miles east in Smethwick, a suburb of the booming industrial city of Birmingham, where he set up shop from home in a room facing the street. It was there in Smethwick where James first encountered missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, men who had come from America preaching from a new book of scripture. James and Elizabeth may have already been seeking spiritual answers when they were taught about the restoration of the Lord's church, and as the missionaries testified of Christ, they knew the message was true. James and Elizabeth were baptized into the church together on 2 March, 1842.⁸

The gospel's good news received the same reception in James and Elizabeth's families as it did throughout England: some welcomed the idea of modern day revelation and *The Book of Mormon*, while many rejected the message outright. While none of Elizabeth's six brothers or sisters appear to have joined the church,⁹ the gospel found a warm welcome among James' siblings.¹⁰ His younger sister Mary¹¹ was baptized the same day as James and Elizabeth;¹² his brother John,¹³ sister Hannah¹⁴ and her husband John Ekins¹⁵ all became members five years later in November, 1847.¹⁶ James was anxious to share the gospel with his friends and neighbors, as well, inviting Dudley resident Edwin Smouth, "to go and hear the Latter-day Saints preach" in December, 1847, according to Edwin, who was baptized in 1848.¹⁷



A scene in Smethwick, Staffordshire.

Tens of thousands of people had joined the church by then, and the spirit of gathering was strong. Many members had already left to join the Saints in America by the time James and his family became members of the Birmingham Conference,¹⁸ and with every passing year the Weavers desire to immigrate grew. The call to “gather” was given at almost every Sunday service and encouraging reports of life in the Salt Lake Valley were regularly published in *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, along with detailed instructions on how to prepare for the long journey. Immigrants were organized into companies lead by returning missionaries who shepherded members through the challenges of crossing both an ocean and a continent. Of the Weaver family, John, Jane and Hannah were the first to leave Britain as part of such a group when they boarded the *Elvira Owen*, bound for New Orleans, in 1853.¹⁹ It would be another twelve years before James and Elizabeth found a way to make their own way to Zion.

Bonded by Adversity

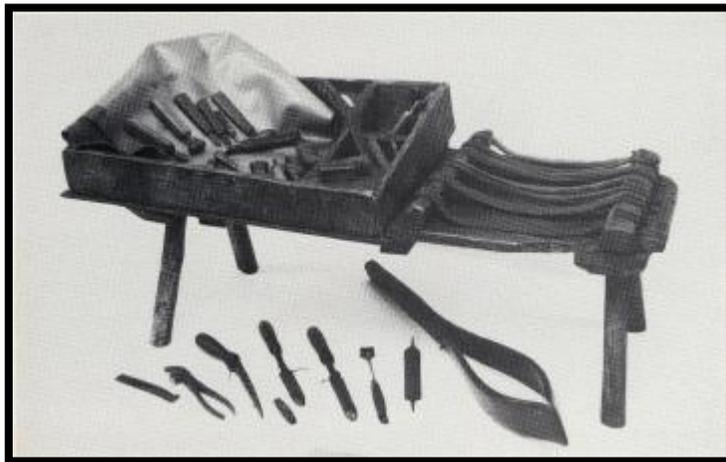
For the time being, the Weavers dedicated themselves to supporting both the local church in Smethwick and their growing family. Elizabeth was already pregnant with her first child when she was baptized; she and James gave the boy, born two days after Christmas, 1841, the name of Christopher.²⁰

The future looked brighter with the gospel and a new son in their lives, and Smethwick seemed a likely place to prosper. Not only was the town a mere four miles away from Birmingham, but its network of canals and railroads made for a vibrant community and profitable economy. Still, it was a challenge maintaining enough customers to

make a living wage. James filled ample orders for shoes to keep food on the table, but as more children were added to the family, he relocated every few years in a search of a more secure situation. It was difficult for Elizabeth to constantly pack up the household and move from one cramped living situation to the next, but she rose to the challenge, giving birth to seven more children over the twenty-three years her husband plied his trade in the industrial suburbs surrounding Birmingham.

The most charming of all the places the Weavers called home was the tiny village of Lugwardine,²¹ where the parish church kept town folk on time with its tower clock and “good peal of bells.”²² It was only a three mile walk into the larger town of Hereford, where weekly markets and trains “to all parts” could be found. The Weavers moved to Lugwardine after living six years in Smethwick, hoping to find their place in a smaller town, but eventually James found it necessary to relocate to Dudley, Worcestershire,²³ eight miles west of Birmingham.

Dudley, important for its markets and manufacturing, was the largest town in the Black Country, a heavily developed region known for the pollution generated by its many iron and coal industries. The town was surrounded on all sides by factories and mines, crisscrossed by road and railroads transporting the raw materials and finished goods that made Victorian Britain prosperous. There was plenty of work in the iron and brass foundries, cement works brickyards and breweries, and enough gentlemen of means to keep James busy at his cobbler’s bench for the next eight years. In the end, however, the Weavers came full circle, returning to once again to Smethwick.



A set of tools used by shoemakers in the nineteenth century.

The biggest trial of Elizabeth's life wasn't uprooting the family every few years: it was losing four of her nine children to death. She was forced to bury three little daughters and a son, all of them before they had reached their second birthday, and all of them in different towns.²⁴ As devastating as death was, each time Elizabeth and James walked away from a tiny grave, they took comfort in the resurrection's promise. Their testimony of the eternal family gave them enough courage to face the daily trials of caring for remainder of their children, always with the hope of becoming one with the Saints in Utah.

By the time the Weavers settled into their Dudley home, Christopher was old enough to practice a trade of his own. The extra cash he generated as a blacksmith²⁵ provided new opportunities for the family. Elizabeth, who could neither read nor write,²⁶ was delighted at having the means to educate her daughters Rose Hannah,²⁷ Louise,²⁸ Alice Maria²⁹ and Levenia³⁰ and she was able to set aside a few coins every week toward the future. The goal of immigration was finally becoming more than a dream.



The market place in Dudley, Worcestershire.



The Liverpool docks, where the Weavers left for America.

Bound for Zion

At the same time the Weavers were living in the outskirts of Birmingham, a wave of anti-Mormon persecution was rising, giving the family even more reason to leave England for the security of Zion. Demonstrations and riots fueled by a series of inflammatory lectures delivered around Birmingham by a bitter ex-Mormon resulted in the disruption of Sunday services, beatings and vandalism. Several chapels were ransacked by mobs who broke windows, light fixtures and benches. In one incident, a mob attacked while services were in session, forcing members “to flee for their lives by crawling through a small window in the back of the building.”³¹ Reports of these attacks coupled with consistent encouragement from church leaders to gather with the Saints strengthened the Weaver’s resolve. They were finally ready to leave their lives in England behind in the spring of 1865, joining with an LDS company of six-hundred immigrants departing for New York on the *Belle Wood*.³²

The month-long voyage across the sea was relatively uneventful, ending on the last day of May when the ship was towed into a Manhattan dock. It was the remainder of the journey that would be burdened with inconveniences and unexpected delays, beginning with a late departure by rail from New York City. When the company was “landed bag and baggage on the shore of the Missouri River” near Nebraska City,³³ they were forced to huddle in makeshift camps for two months waiting for wagons and oxen to be provided for the trek west. “Fearfully grand” thunderstorms drenched the immigrants almost daily, resulting in conditions that were “very muddy and disagreeable.”³⁴

Economic instability and high prices caused shortages of “every article needed for emigration”³⁵ and by the time cattle and wagons had been purchased and delivered, it was obvious not everyone would be able to complete the journey to Salt Lake that year. Priority in the trains was given to “the aged and females who are here without means.” The Weavers were among those asked to stay behind. “I do not think there has ever been a company of Saints come from Europe who have been more generally united and willing to obey counsel than this one,” wrote church leader William Shearman.³⁶



An early view of Nebraska City.

A Strange New Land

James and Elizabeth were determined to make the best of things. There was no market for custom made shoes and boots on the Nebraska prairie, so James learned to coax crops from the soil on a parcel of rented acreage outside of Sterling, forty-five miles west of Nebraska City.³⁷ With the help of Christopher, farming supported the Weaver family quite comfortably over the next nine years as the Weavers became part of the network supplying LDS wagon trains with grain and produce. During the peak of immigration season, almost any commodity could be sold in Nebraska City, Wyoming and other outfitting towns near the Missouri River, where hundreds of wagon trains moved back and forth between the Missouri and the Salt Lake Valley.

Fellowship among the Mormon community in Nebraska was kept up with Sunday meetings, quilting bees, weekly dances and other activities where members strengthened each other's faith and

friendships were formed. Some of those friendships blossomed into something more. Christopher was married to fellow *Belle Wood* passenger Ellen Jackson³⁸ in December, 1871.³⁹ Louise fell in love with Sterling native Charles Smith⁴⁰ the very same year. She and Charles set up housekeeping in town, where a year later they presented the Weavers with their first grandchild, Charlie,⁴¹ who was born 2 June, followed four months later by Chris and Ellen's child Emily.⁴²

The Weavers had put down roots in Nebraska, and they were only growing deeper with the addition of grandchildren to the family. The pioneering period of Mormon immigration had been over since 1869, when the completion of the transcontinental railroad made wagon trains obsolete. The entire overland journey could now be made in the comfort of a rail car. There was no longer any reason for the LDS support community to remain in the Midwest, and they were encouraged to join the rest of the Saints in Utah. For some, the call to once again sacrifice their homes seemed too much to ask, and they remained settled on the farms they had worked so hard to create.

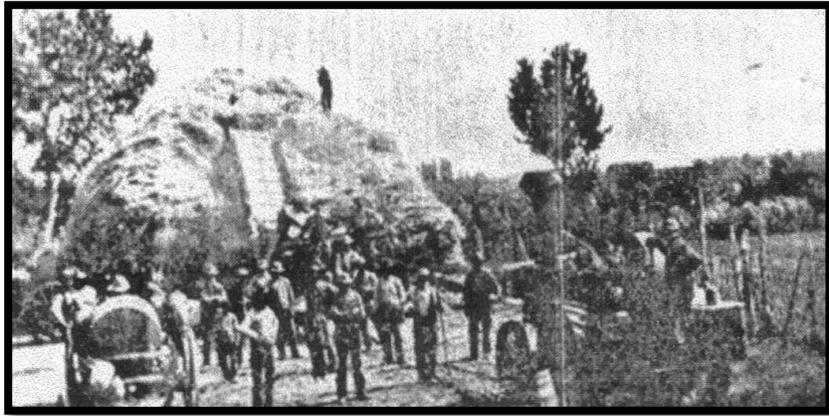
James and Elizabeth, however, were committed to making the final push. They had been faithful members of the church for over thirty years and had made it as far as Nebraska to be counted among the Saints. They weren't about to throw it all away now. Alice and Levenia hardly remembered living anywhere else, but they boarded the train west with their parents in 1874. Christopher and Ellen packed up their possessions along with little Emily and joined them.⁴³ Louisa and her family elected to remain behind.⁴⁴

Utah at Last

The thousand mile journey from Omaha, Nebraska, to Ogden, Utah, took fewer than eight days by rail in the mid-1870s. Although the wooden benches in the emigrant coaches seemed to become harder by the hour, complaints were muffled when passengers recalled the trials required crossing the plains by wagon only several years before. Besides, there was much to distract travelers from their discomforts as they gazed out at the rush of stunning scenery passing by their windows. The endless grass sea of the Great Plains gradually gave way to Wyoming's barren grazing lands before Utah's majestic mountains appeared on the horizon. The Weavers had never seen peaks like these, topped with snow even in early summer. Passing through the dramatic, narrow canyons only intensified their amazement as the valley opened up before them, with the Great Salt Lake shimmering in the distance. Their dream of joining the Saints in Zion had finally been realized after thirty years of struggle.

The Weavers were met at Ogden's Union Depot by James' brother John, who took the entire family home for a reunion. John and Jane's adobe home in Kaysville⁴⁵ was comfortable and welcoming, surrounded by well-established fields of wheat and barley. It wasn't difficult convincing James and Elizabeth to settle nearby. Christopher and Ellen, who had initially tried homesteading in Morgan County, joined the rest of the Weavers two years later, purchasing a farm in the northern part of town. Alice and Levenia both married in 1877⁴⁶ and moved to Ogden to raise families of their own.

James and Elizabeth spent the remainder of their years on their farm, enjoying the grandchildren when they came by to visit, marveling at how fast they were growing. Thoughts of the children they had lost were never far from their memories, however, and they resolved to join their family with the sealing power of temple ordinances. On a hot August day in 1879, James and Elizabeth were sealed as husband and wife in Salt Lake's endowment house.



This undated photograph show a harvest on the John and Jane Weaver farm not far from James and Elizabeth's home in Layton, Utah.

The Weavers were content to grow old in the shadow of the Wasatch Mountains, watching as the seasons slowly transformed their fields from green to gold. There was a rhythm to a farmer's life, and they had become accustomed to it. James gradually cut back on the acreage he planted as the years passed, but he wasn't willing to give farming up altogether. A man had to keep busy at something, and it might as well be bringing forth the fruits of the earth. Elizabeth's days were filled with the same tasks which had always been important in running a household, but by the spring of 1887, she noticed she wasn't up to doing chores with her characteristic efficiency. At the age of sixty-seven, Elizabeth was worn out. Her life quietly faded away on 24 June.⁴⁷

James lost interest in almost everything after burying his wife of forty-five years. He tried to keep busy in the kitchen garden out back as summer turned to fall, but rambled aimlessly around the empty farmhouse all winter. The children and grandchildren visited a little more now that he was alone, but even their presence wasn't enough to fill the void. He finally gave in to his own failing health and on a chilly day at the end of March, 1888, James passed away at the age of seventy-three.⁴⁸



James and Elizabeth lie side by side in the Kaysville City Cemetery, grave, 15-3-A-5.

ENDNOTES

¹ James Weaver (1815-1888), #KWVH-H95, www.familysearch.org where verification of all vital dates can be found. Also see family group sheets at www.DaviesDawsonHistory.weebly.com

² The term “cordwainer” comes from the word “cordovan,” a reddish leather produced in Spain. James Weaver household, 1861 England census, Dudley, Worcestershire, Class: RG Piece: 2058; Folio: 26; Page: 9; GSU roll: 542910. www.ancestry.com

³ Elizabeth (Gill) Weaver (1820-1887), #KWVH-H9I, www.familysearch.org.

⁴ William White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Staffordshire* (Sheffield, 1851), <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/STS/BrierleyHill/index.html>

⁵ Benjamin Gill (1794-), #LZLQ-47V, www.familysearch.org

⁶ James Weaver-Elizabeth Gill, certified copy of an entry of marriage, given at the General Register Office, London, application 9773H, on 12 December, 1980.

⁷ See www.familysearch.org

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Because no other information is available other than birthdates for all of Elizabeth’s siblings, it is assumed they did not join the church and remained in England after Elizabeth immigrated.

¹⁰ It is unclear whether Joseph’s older sister, Ann (Weaver) Merrick (1811-1842), #29CP-H71, joined the church before her death in December, 1842, but her daughter Harriett Ellen (Merrick) Ellis (1840-1909), #LC5G-LY5, did as she immigrated to Utah with her family in 1875. Out of James’ six siblings, only Eleanor or Ellen (Weaver) Walker (1821-), #29CP-H2W, did not join the church. www.familysearch.org

¹¹ Mary (Weaver) Jones (1818-1843), #KFBS-YQ3, www.familysearch.org

¹² Mary’s husband appears not to have joined. Mary did not have the opportunity to immigrate to America as she died the next year at the age of twenty-five.

¹³ John Weaver (1829-1903), #KWJS-9FZ, www.familysearch.org John’s wife Jane (Combe) Weaver (1827-1890), #KWJS-9F8, was probably baptized around the same time.

¹⁴ Hannah (Weaver) Ekins (1829-1916), #KWNR-XCL, www.familysearch.org

¹⁵ John Ekins (1829-1914), #KWJZ-NDF, www.familysearch.org

¹⁶ See www.familysearch.org

¹⁷ John F. C. Harrison, “The Popular History of Early Victorian Britain: A Mormon Contribution,” *Journal of Mormon History* (vol. 14, 1988), page 7. Edwin’s journal states the invitation to hear the missionaries came from “John Weaver, a master shoemaker.” He was probably referring to James Weaver, a master shoemaker living in Dudley in 1847, whose brother John, a farmer, was baptized in November, 1847.

¹⁸ The Birmingham Conference membership was just over three hundred in 1847, which included branches in Dudley, Great’s Green, West Bromwich, Oldbury, Allchurch, Woverhampton and Ashby Woods. See <http://ukldshistory.wordpress.com/>

¹⁹ Passenger list, *Elvira Owen*, Liverpool to New Orleans, 15 February-31 March, 1853, http://mormonmigration.lib.byu.edu/Search/showDetails/db:MM_MII/t:voyage/id:124/keywords:john+weaver

²⁰ Christopher Weaver (1842-1926), #KWZD-3PB, www.familysearch.org The name Christopher means “Christ bearer,” expressing the idea of carrying Christ in one’s heart. See “Christopher Weaver-Ellen Jackson family group sheet,” supplied 1979 by Richard Rex Dawson. This sheet offers only a generic list of materials consulted.

²¹ James Weaver household, 1861 England census, Dudley, Worcestershire, Class: RG Piece: 2058; Folio: 26; Page: 9; GSU roll: 542910. www.ancestry.com

²² *The National Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland* (1868), <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/HEF/Lugwardine/Gaz1868.html>

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- ²³ James Weaver household, 1861 England census, Dudley, Worcestershire, Class: RG Piece: 2058; Folio: 26; Page: 9; GSU roll: 542910.
- ²⁴ Mary Ann Weaver (1845-1846), #L87B-JJZ; Emma Weaver (1850-), #9V3J-4JZ; Caroline Sophia Clara Weaver (1856-1858), L87B-JJN; James Weaver (1865-1866), #187B-JJK, www.familysearch.org
- ²⁵ James Weaver household, 1861 England census, Dudley, Worcestershire, Class: RG Piece: 2058; Folio: 26; Page: 9; GSU roll: 542910, www.ancestry.com
- ²⁶ James Weaver-Elizabeth Gill, certified copy of an entry of marriage, given at the General Register Office, London, application 9773H, on 12 December, 1980. Elizabeth signed with her mark.
- ²⁷ Rose Hannah Weaver (1848-1868), #K4TP-779, www.familysearch.org
- ²⁸ Louise A. (Weaver) Smith (1852-1921), #LCTF-31V, www.familysearch.org
- ²⁹ Alice Maria (Weaver) Fenneyhough Todd (1854-1943), #LZDD-911, www.familysearch.org
- ³⁰ Levenia (Weaver) Snively Coles (1859-1942), #9V3J-4J2, www.familysearch.org See James Weaver household, 1861 England census, Dudley, Worcestershire, Class: RG Piece: 2058; Folio: 26; Page: 9; GSU roll: 542910.
- ³¹ Malcolm R. Thorp, "Sectarian Violence in Early Victorian Britain: The Mormon Experience, 1837-1860," <https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/api/datastream?publicationPid=uk-ac-man-scw:1m2204&datastreamId=POST-PEER-REVIEW-PUBLISHERS-DOCUMENT.PDF>
- ³² New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1957; year 1865, arrival, New York, United States, Microfilm Serial M237, roll M237-252, line 7, list number 444. www.ancestry.com. Only two members of the family, James and five-year old Levenia are shown on the passenger list. According to family tradition, Christopher was also on the *Belle Wood* in 1865, where he became acquainted with his future wife (see Shelley Dawson Davies, *William Jackson and Ann (Pearsall) Jackson* (self-published, 2015). It is assumed that the rest of the James Weaver family travelled together at the same time.
- ³³ The company camped at the trail head in Wyoming, Nebraska. Merlin Eastham Kearnl, "Autobiographical Sketch," http://mormonmigration.lib.byu.edu/Search/showDetails/db:MM_MII/t:account/id:139/keywords:belle+wood
- ³⁴ William H. Shearman, "Letter from the Belle Wood, 30 May, 1865," published in *The Latter-day Saint Millennial Star*, 24 June, 1865. http://mormonmigration.lib.byu.edu/Search/showDetails/db:MM_MII/t:account/id:144/keywords:ann+jackson
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ James Weaver household, 1870 U. S. census, Johnson County, Nebraska, town of Western. Roll: M593_830; Page: 98B; Image: 200; Family History Library Film: 552329. www.ancestry.com
- ³⁸ Ellen (Jackson) Weaver (1854-1931), #KWZD-3P1, www.familysearch.org
- ³⁹ "Christopher Weaver-Ellen Jackson family group sheet," supplied 1979 by Richard Rex Dawson.
- ⁴⁰ Charles Burns Smith (1840-1915), #LCTF-SBC, www.familysearch.org
- ⁴¹ Charles Colfax Smith (1872-1955), #97XN-Y7L, www.familysearch.org
- ⁴² Emily Rose Hannah (Weaver) Young (1872-1964), KWJF-5XB, www.familysearch.org
- ⁴³ No records were kept on immigrant arrivals after rail travel made wagon trains obsolete. It can be assumed the Weavers made the trip in 1874, as Christopher's second child was born in Morgan County, Utah, that year.
- ⁴⁴ Although www.familysearch.org documents Rose Hanna's death at the age of twenty, on 1 May, 1868, no location is given, but it is assumed she died while the Weavers were living in Nebraska.
- ⁴⁵ This area of Kaysville became the town of Layton in 1902.

⁴⁶ Alice married Joseph Todd (1844-1918), #K2HR-6HV. Levenia married George Snively (1836-1890), #LDQZ-3GQ, www.familysearch.org

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Weaver entry, grave 15-3-A-7. Utah Cemetery Inventory, Utah State Archives film #22801.

⁴⁸ James Weaver entry, grave 15-3-A-5 Utah Cemetery Inventory, Utah State Archives film #22081.

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This index lists the names of people related to James Weaver and Elizabeth (Gill) Weaver. Women are listed under both their maiden names (in parentheses) and married names [in brackets].

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