

Autobiography of Benjamin Ashby, 1828-1907

Covers the Period 1828-1847
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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN ASHBY

Desiring to leave my posterity some account of the kind dealing of the Lord, and of the remarkable manifestations of his power in healing the sick and his kind providence in answer to prayer which has been experienced and observed by me during a life which has been extended nearly three-fourths of a century. I undertake to pen these lines from memory.

I was born on the 19th of December 1828 in the town of Salem, Essex of Massachusetts, W.P.A. My father's name was Nathaniel Ashby and was a descendant from an ancestry who settled in America among the earliest immigrants, the names of whom as far as I have been able to collect are recorded at the end of these memoirs.

My mother's name was Susan Hammond, born in the town of Marblehead, Essex County, Massachusetts, and was a descendant of the early settlers of Maine. My father was a shoemaker by trade. His early life was a struggle with poverty as his father was a sea-faring man; and in the war of 1812 he sailed on the privatier, "The Little Adams." Of course the privation incident to those times was felt severely by those who were dependent on their babes alone for subsistence. At an early age he was apprenticed to learn the shoe-maker's trade and became a very quick workman. He worked thirteen years for one Sanford Simonds, for whom he made thirteen thousand pairs of shoes.

By his industry and economy he saved money and built a house in South Salem, where I was born and lived until I was fourteen years old. My earliest recollections go back to the time when I received my first pair of pants and how I cried because my mother took them off me to hand to a neighbor to make some for her boy.

The first instance that I remember when I received a direct answer to prayer was upon an occasion when I had had a quarrel with my sister and whether from

being punished for it or from sorrow, went to bed with my heart filled with grief and trouble and lay sobbing without being able to control myself. I got up and kneeling down by the bedside asked the Lord to let me go to sleep immediately, a spirit of calmness and quietude entered my heart; and I lay down in comfort. Of course, I had been taught the Lord's prayer and other children's prayers at my mother's side but this is the first time I realized what it meant to pray. The remembrance of it has given me confidence and faith in after life.

One day I was down by the river and there came paddling up the stream a lot of Indians in birchbark canoes. The men all climbed the piles of lumber. I thought to get out of the way so I ran home much frightened and was surprised that mother was not also alarmed as my impressions were that Indians were very dangerous visitors, probably a remnant of the terror that a former generation had transmitted to their children. They were a band of Penobscot Tribe from the state of Maine on a visit to their old hunting grounds and whom I have several times since seen upon their periodic visits.

The first school I attended was called the Infant School kept by Mrs. Thayer. Afterwards I went to another, kept by Mrs. Meservey, where I remember I arrived to the age of seven years. Then I attended another whose teacher's name was Mr. Kinney. Then I attended the public school under Mrs. William Leavett, where I continued until I was fourteen years old.

In the year 1839 or 1840 there came to Salem, Erastas Snow, preaching the gospel in its purity, as revealed to Joseph Smith. My father was not a member of any denomination but attended the Universalist Church of which my mother was a member because as I have often heard her say they preached the love of God for his children in contrast to the doctrines of the Orthodox churches that held to the everlasting punishment of all who did not embrace their peculiar dogmas. Father returned home one Sunday noon, saying he had been to hear a new religion preached by a Mormon in the Masonic Hall and seemed much interested in what he had heard preached he took down the Bible and began to read some of its passages to Mother. She being confined to her bed by the birth of my sister,

Mary Jane, in the afternoon and attended the meeting with father and continued to do so with the agreement that I was to attend the Sunday School, it being against mother's principles to allow her children to go from one meeting to another but inasmuch as father went she could not reasonably object. My mind soon became enlightened upon the plan of salvation. I firmly believed in the divinity and sacred character of the Book of Mormon which I read; a copy of which had been lent to father by Brother Snow.

One Sunday, there was some questions in the book from which we studied, concerning the ancient prophets with scriptural texts as answers and some questions that were to be answered by the pupil. One of these was "Is there any prophets in these days," which happened to come to me in turn. To the teacher's surprise, I answered, "Yes, sir." "False prophets I suppose you mean." "No sir, true ones." Who, pray, was his query. Joseph Smith was my answer. He made some reply and passed on to the next. I heard no more of it until about two weeks after when mother called me to her and asked me what I had been saying to my teacher about Joseph Smith. I told her what had occurred. I learned that this testimony had been talked of from the minister down through all that congregation. I was about twelve years old and this was the first time I had the privilege of bearing testimony to the work of God in the latter days.

Mother, as soon as she could go out, attended the meetings in the Masonic Hall and became convinced of the truth of the gospel. One Sunday morning father gave me some money and told me to go to Sexton and give up his pew and shortly after, he and mother were baptized into the church and though they had bore excellent characters all their days they were called crazy, and derided by relatives and friends.

We all continued to attend the meetings of the Saints and a large branch was organized. In December 1842 I was taken sick; mother sent for Brother Snow who came and laid hands upon me as there was to be a baptism the next day. I embraced the opportunity to be baptized. That night there was a great storm and though I had been sick all night and the streets were ankle deep in snow and

water I went to the pond, leaning upon the arm of Brother Nickerson, and was baptized and I was healed of my sickness. It cleared up and froze and in the evening I went two miles to a prayer meeting where I was confirmed by Brother Snow and while their hands was on my head, Brother Nickerson said, "Brother Benjamin, upon you we confer the gift of healing and of being healed." My experience through life will testify as to the fulfillment of this blessing given by a servant of God at my confirmation.

At an examination of the first classes of the schools of Salem and from the records kept through the year I received a certificate of my standing in the school which gave me the second rank for scholarships and the first rank for good conduct. I then left school and went to work with father shoemaking. I remember one day Brother Addison Pratt who was in Salem with Brother Gieward and Hanks on their way to the South Sea Islands called upon father and told him that he thought that he was able to help them to the extent of twenty-five dollars, to which he responded cheerfully, and while he was gone for the money, I contributed the small amount of twenty-five cents which was all the money I possessed and I do not think that I ever spent a quarter of a dollar that gave me as much satisfaction as that did.

In the meantime, Brother Snow who had been living in one of father's houses returned to Nauvoo and contracted for a house to be built and upon his return to Salem sold to father the lot adjoining his and sent out and had the contract doubled. Hence, building two houses alike separated only by a partition wall, it was a two story brick house situated near the corner of Parley and Hyde streets, two blocks north and one east of Joseph Smith's Mansion House. There was eleven children born to my parents in Salem. Robert the firstborn, died in infancy, the rest all lived to reach the valleys of the mountains and assist in the establishment of the commonwealth of Utah.

We left Salem the 14th of October [1843] going to Boston where we stopped a few days with mother's sister, Elizabeth Stuart, and with a large company from neighboring towns, took passage by railroad for Albany, only stopping one night

at Gloucester, thence we traveled by the Erie Canal to Buffalo. There was no railroad at this time across the state of New York. From Buffalo, we went by steamboat to Cleveland, Ohio; thence, by canal across the state of Ohio to Wheeling, near the head waters of the Ohio River, thence by steamboat down the Ohio to Cincinnati where we changed boats and continued down the Ohio and up the Mississippi to Nauvoo where we arrived on the 3 of November, 1843. My father and Brother John Grag rented a room in a stone house near the landing, for a few days and then we moved into a log house belonging to Joseph B. Noble where we lived until our house was finished, which we occupied about the last of January. Awhile upon our journey it was customary to get off the canal coast and walk on in advance, as it was only traveled as fast as a horse could walk and when there was a number of locks to pass it rendered the pace still slower. A lock is an enclosure where water is confined by gates and the boats raised or lowered from one level to another thus we were enabled to gain considerable upon the boat and the country through which we journeyed abounded in the finest of fruit and the people allowed us to gather as much as we desired.

One day while endeavoring to step onto the boat I missed my footing and fell into the water but was soon rescued by a young man. Some of the accidents in which my life was in jeopardy occurred while living in Salem. In the winter the harbor is usually frozen over for miles from the shore. One day while playing on the ice down the harbor the wind began to blow furiously so that I could not stand or walk on the slippery ice and it was with great difficulty that I was enabled to reach the shore with the help of a young man. Another time I was out on the ice with a companion and we both broke through the ice and were rescued by the men who were spearing eels.

While in Nauvoo I was living so near to Joseph Smith that I was enabled to see him in his daily life as well as in his public administrations though at this time his life was sought and considerable of his time was spent in seclusion to avoid his enemies. Like all boys I used to play in the streets. He once spoke to me, giving

me an invitation to make less noise. It was in front of his house and he was setting out in the porch talking to some gentleman and I presume, I disturbed them.

One day with my mother I visited his house, he was not in but we spent an interesting time with his mother. She exhibited the mummies from which the Book of Abraham was taken as well as the original papyrus on which it was written. We were not privileged to enjoy his society and instructions but a few months. I was present when he made his famous speech from the frame of a building in front of his house where he drew his sword with a declaration never to submit to mobs but to uphold law and order and liberty of conscience as long as God would give him life.

I was in my father's garden one morning, the memorable June 1844, when he [Joseph Smith] rode past on his way to Carthage. Never shall I forget the look of deep sorrow that covered his noble countenance--that was the last time I saw him alive. He was met on the way by an officer and posse with an order from the governor for the return of the state arms and he turned back to see the order complied with. On getting into town he called Brother J. B. Noble to accompany him and with his brother Hyrum. They turned off the road, leaving the company, and took a short cut across the hills. When alone, he asked Hyrum what the spirit indicated to him. He replied that he could get no satisfactory answer. Joseph then said, "Well, if they kill me, I shall die innocent and my blood will be required of this nation, this day" near as I remember was the testimony of Brother Joseph shortly before he died. In the afternoon he went to Carthage and to his martyrdom. I sat upon the steps of my father's house on the evening of the day that he was shot until twelve o'clock and never did I hear before such an uproar and noise that seemed to pervade the very atmosphere; dogs howling, mingled with confused noises as though all the legions of the damned were in commotion. Not dreaming of the tragedy that had been enacted that afternoon, I went to bed but at the dawn of morning the sad tale was brought to our ears and the grief and sorrow of a whole people cannot be pictured in language; for days, a man,

woman or child could not be met but they were in tears for the loss of their beloved leader. Soon the wagons containing the two brothers arrived in the city and passed down to the Mansion House where we visited and viewed their marred features as they lay in the hallowments of the grave.

Brother Willard Richards was the only one of the Twelve Apostles who was in Nauvoo. John Taylor, being wounded, remained in Carthage. Soon the Twelve began to return, also Sidney Rigdon, who endeavored to have himself elected as guardian of the Church and I was present when he made his silly and boastful speech about leading the Church. Back to Pittsburgh and [?] the nose of Queen Victoria, etc., etc. Too foolish to be worth remembering. I did not know Rigdon when he was in the spirit of his calling and cannot say what manner of man he was, but when I knew him he had lost the favor of God and he was as dry as sticks in his preaching.

I was in the congregation when the question of succession to the leadership of the church was [?] the people and I [?] and testify that the last time I was [?] the gestures and heard the sound of the voice of Joseph Smith, was when the form, voice and countenance of Brigham Young was transfigured before the congregation so that he appeared like Joseph Smith in every particular. The Lord showed the people that the mantle of Joseph had been bestowed upon Brigham. During this time, father was absent on a mission to the eastern states as also many elders and I had done some shoemaking and had peddled shoes that father had brought out when we emigrated. Father returned late in the fall and was laid up most of the winter with rheumatism.

About this time Benjamin and I commenced to get materials together to build a boat to sail on the Mississippi River, which we were induced to quit upon being informed by my mother that at a private meeting to which she had been invited, it was made known that I was in contemplation to leave Nauvoo for the west. So our project was abandoned.

The summer of 1845 was spent in working with father making shoes for Brother [?], Amos Davis, the [?] shoe and [?] Company, presided over by Brother

Mullener on the February 1845, father was ordained and became a member of the 15 Quorum of Seventies and I was ordained and organized with the 17th Quorum on 16 June 1845.

A call was made for laborers to dig a trench around the temple block to build a stone wall. I worked there in company with George Q. Cannon. I also worked on the Nauvoo House tending mason with brick. I joined the artillery company on the Nauvoo Legion. Soon the people began to leave Nauvoo. Previous to this, I had on the 6 of February 1846, received my endowments in the temple at Nauvoo. The river was soon frozen over and they crossed on the ice. At this time we had living with us some of the wives of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and Bishop Hunter, viz. Mrs. Powers, Harriett Cook, Susanna Wasm, Ruth Jane Giles.

As the spring neared to summer I became very much concerned about following the company who had departed on their journey into the wilds of the "Great American Desert" as it was styled upon the maps of the period of which I am writing. I began to call upon God to open the way that father might dispose of his property that we might have means to travel. There was a committee appointed to dispose of property which had been left by those who had already departed and father put his house into their hands to find a customer, which they did in a merchant with a stock of goods who offered four hundred dollars in goods at wholesale prices, the committee exchanging the goods for cattle and wagons. I had built a wagon box for it, all of which experience father had paid for in shoemaking. We were obliged to wait some weeks for the cattle when they came. Father and [I] went over the river to select and as we had no experience in horned stock Brother Phineas Young assisted us in the selection of them. We obtained six yoke of oxen, only two of which was broken to work. We drove our cattle to the camp on Sugar Creek and I was left to herd them. I lived with Mrs. Clark, mother-in-law of Brigham Young, son of Phineas Young.

Father returned to Nauvoo and fitted up two more wagons and with the cow we already owned obtained two more making three wagons, six yoke of oxen and three cows for the property which had cost him eleven hundred dollars three

years previous, and he was among the favored ones as many could not dispose of their property. But it was left just as it stood, a whole community robbed of their homes to become wanderers upon the wild western deserts of America. The frontiers of civilization was infested by a great many outlaws and it sometimes occurred that some of our oxen would be missing and found miles away from their range. One morning I started out to seek a yoke of oxen that was gone the night before. I did not know which way to go so, kneeling down in the tall grass I asked to be directed the way they had gone. Then rising, I stretched out my arm and turning round steadily until my hand points to the east when the impression of the spirit was that they were there. I then started in that direction through a grove of young timber on the other side of which was a swamp I took off my clothes and waded through the water and walked on for two miles or more when I see them in the distance. You may be sure that I did not forget to thank Father for his condescension in listening to the prayer of his humble servant. I may not remember all the incidents that made that summer remarkable in my life but time and again His providential care helped me to preserve our cattle, the loss of which would have been so disastrous. On one occasion one our brethren came across a yoke of them about eight or ten miles away from our camp and drove them home there and no reason why the oxen should stray away from the herd as the feed was plentiful around camp. As the summer advanced, the water in the creek dried up until there was only pools of stagnant water in the low places. From these pools we obtained our water for use. About the last of July I was taken sick and lay for weeks struggling for life against the poisonous malaria which my system was impregnated. Father and family moved over the river and gave me all the care possible under the circumstances. The absurd impressions made upon my mind in the delirium of the fever seemed as true as anything in real life. One night as I lay struggling with the sickness I felt that I was fast approaching the line dividing this life from the next sphere of existence and the desire to live came strong upon me. I began calling upon God in mighty prayer and endeavoring to exercise faith that I might be healed. About

midnight a change came over me and I knew that my prayer had been answered and from that time I began to recover.

Father was not acquainted with the management of cattle and Brother Young recommended Brother John Hill to him as a help. He was a Canadian and had left Nauvoo and camped on the bank of the river and was without team or wagon to move. He came up to our camp and engaged to handle our oxen for the use of a wagon and team to move to the camp of the Saints. He commenced to train our oxen and in a short time was able to use them.

One day a man came to camp looking for men to work on a thrasher. Brother Hill and father engaged with him and worked three days and then was taken sick. It became necessary to move to a more healthy location. On the day of the Nauvoo Battle amidst the distant sound of rattling musketry and the boom of cannon we took up the line of march for the distant camp on the Missouri River. I drove the lead team, Sister Hill drove mothers with father laying sick in the wagon, and Brother Hill brought up the rear. At night we could hear the sound of the bell and the bass drum from the tower of the temple where the mob were carousing after banishing from their pleasant homes, innocent men, women and children to perish in the wilderness among tribes of savage Indians. On the third day we arrived at the town of Bonaparte where there was a large flour mill here. By trading some cloth we laid in some flour and proceeded on six miles west.

The next morning one yoke of our oxen was gone and we camped here a week during which father yielded up his life a martyr to the cause of truth and the gospel as received in the last day. Mother had a few dollars and I went back to a sawmill and purchased some oak boards sufficient to make him a coffin which was made by Brother Hill and Father Taylor, father of John Taylor one of the presidents of the church. We buried him in a grove by the side of a little child of brother and sister Parmers.

The next day Brother Hill found the oxen about five or six miles away and we were troubled for many nights by our cattle getting loose though they were chained to trees. Soon we fell in company with Brother Hill's father and mother

and his brother Archibald and another man who had been over the route and knew the best camping places. We traveled in their company until we reached within a day's journey of Kaneshville where the axle of Brother Hill's wagon broke down and we stopped and made another which detained us a day.

The next day we started and when we came in sight of the Missouri River there was many roads leading off in different directions. Not knowing which to take, we stopped to consult when I looked up and saw a man walking up one of the roads. I told mother that I would run and ask this man and started to run to him. He was a short man like my father, and indeed he was dressed in a green jacket like father used to wear in Nauvoo. The last I saw of him he was apparently going down a depression which looked like it had been made by a run of water across the road. Mother hollered to me, "Where are you going Ben?" And I turned and said I going to ask this man and when I turned again there was no man in sight. I run on quite a distance thinking he had gone down the hill and though I went considerable distance farther than he was when I saw him last, the road was level was a floor with no depression in it I went back with the impression than he had got out of sight up the road, and though he looked like father it did not occur to my mind that my father was watching over us But I noticed that mother became very serious when I described the personage that I had seen after I returned to the wagon.

However, we took that road and arrived at Kaneshville about four o'clock. In a few days we crossed the river and camped near Lorenzo Young's, his Brother Joseph and Brigham living nearby, that night through an oversight mother left her candle burning and fell asleep, no doubt through the fatigue and care incident to the journey the candle set the cover of the wagon on fire and in the struggle to put it out her hands were badly burned as was also Joseph Young who was just returning from a council meeting. Here we paid a yoke of oxen to have a log house built sending the remainder to the winter herd on the rush buttons we soon consumed wheat flour we had brought with us. Among the articles paid to us for our house in Nauvoo was a quantity of smoked ham. I went to work at

shoemaking for a brother for which I received cornmeal. But sometimes the last cake was consumed before we knew where the next was coming from, but the Lord opened the way and we never went very hungry.

We were fortunate enough to have brought with us a sheet iron stove by which we were able to keep warm through that cold winter. There had been born to father in Nauvoo a boy whom they named John Jefford. During the winter mother married Joseph B. Noble and he took care of our cattle that we had kept at home; one yoke of old oxen. Towards spring the company of pioneers was organized and started to find a place to plant our feet and again commence to live in comfort. I went with Brother Noble and drove a team of three yoke of oxen down to Missouri to obtain provisions for the journey as he was going to follow the pioneers.

An instance that happened on this journey I will relate as it shows how God can bring deliverance through the weakest of us. After we had obtained our loading and was returned we left the town of Savanna about one o'clock in the afternoon. There was three wagons; first, John Lytle, then J. B. Noble with two yoke of cattle, then I brought up the rear with three yoke. About a mile from town we were overtaken by two men riding fine horses and carrying decanters of whiskey in their hands. They commenced their game by insulting Brother Noble but as he took no notice of them but drove along, they began to ride out to his oxen and drive them out of the road. I, having a long whip, stepped behind his wagon and struck the horse with the lash. He tried this a number of times and being foiled in his object got off his horse and planted himself in the road and succeeded in stopping the team. At this juncture there came a power upon me that seemed almighty. I was impelled to go to that man and drawing the butt of my whip commanded him to move out of the way or I would smash him into the earth. He looked into my eyes and commenced to humble and move backward until the road was again free and Brother Noble drove on. Thus the Lord made use of a boy to deliver his servant from the power of enemies. I knew by experience how "one could chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight."

After the companies had left, I joined with Brother Abraham Washburn in fencing, breaking up and planting some land. We planted considerable corn and buckwheat and garden where we raised turnips, cucumbers, beans, etc. I remember when the first fruits of our labor began to be gathered we had been over a year without green fruit or vegetables of any kind so it seemed that the first cucumbers that came to be eatable was the nicest thing that I ever tasted. In the fall we had sufficient to keep us through the winter, principally buckwheat and turnips. I gathered a quantity of hazel nuts which grew in abundance around Winter Quarters. My brothers herded cows through the summer and thus added to our comfort and Brother Washburn cut considerable hay for the winter. As winter came on we began to lay plans to get a fitout to go to the valley of the Great Salt Lake from which the pioneers had returned.