



Contact: Megan van Frank, 801.359.9670 ext. 110
vanfrank@utahhumanities.org

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For Immediate Release (October 13, 2014)

Beehive Archive

Welcome to the Beehive Archive—your weekly bite-sized look at some of the most pivotal—and peculiar—events in Utah history. With all of the history and none of the dust, the Beehive Archive is a fun way to catch up on Utah's past. Beehive Archive is a production of the Utah Humanities Council, provided to local papers as a weekly feature article focusing on Utah history topics drawn from our award-winning radio series, which can be heard each week on KCPW and Utah Public Radio.

Christina McNeil Walked to Utah

How one young Scottish woman journeyed 4,536 miles to Utah as part of "the most remarkable travel experiment in the history of Western America."

Christina McNeil was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1831 into hard economic times. She began working in a factory when she was seven years old and lost her father at fifteen. Two years later, Christina joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a decision that would see her journey to another continent for a new life.

Christina's family did not embrace her newfound faith, so she went to live with Margaret Caldwell, a local widow and fellow convert. After years of saving, and with the help of the Church's Perpetual Emigration Fund, they were able to join a group of converts who sailed from Liverpool, England to the United States.

The Church's Perpetual Emigration Fund was created to support the travel of converts to Utah. Nearly 16,000 Europeans came between 1849 and 1855, first by boat, then by rail to Iowa, and finally to Utah by ox-drawn wagon. By the time Christina made her voyage in 1856, the Church had lowered the trip costs by providing handcarts that were drawn by migrants themselves.

Christina accompanied Margaret and four of her children in the Willie Handcart Company, traveling on foot the 1,350 miles from Iowa City to the Salt Lake Valley, pushing their belongings in a large, two-wheeled cart. The Willie Company left late in the season, ran low on supplies, and encountered harrowing weather. On that four-month trek, many succumbed to frigid temperatures and starvation.

Christina had an opportunity to spare herself that suffering when an army officer at a trading post tried to convince her to stay with him and forsake what he saw as a perilous and pointless endeavor. Instead, Christina remained true to her faith and purpose, and completed her journey to the Salt Lake Valley.

As one of nearly 3,000 men, women, and children who trekked west in ten handcart companies, Christina McNeil was part of what one historian called "the most remarkable travel experiment in the history of Western America."

Beehive Archive is a production of the Utah Humanities Council. Sources consulted in the creation of the Beehive Archive and past episodes may be found at www.utahhumanities.org/BeehiveArchive.htm. Namon Bills © Utah Humanities Council 2014.

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