

Do we know how many Latter-day Saints died between 1846 and 1869 in the migration to the Salt Lake Valley?

Response by Susan Easton Black, *associate dean of General Education and Honors at BYU and professor of Church History and Doctrine at BYU, with contributions from Melvin Bashore, Richard E. Bennett, Lyndia Carter, Marjorie Draper Conder, William G. Hartley, Gail G. Holmes, Lu Markham Jones, Michael N. Landon, Jennifer L. Lund, Norma B. Ricketts, and Fred E. Woods.*

No. A lack of recorded information prevents us from ever knowing exactly how many died. Nevertheless, a respect for the

Latter-day Saints who gathered to the Salt Lake Valley and those who died en route has motivated Latter-day Saint historians—past and present—to search available journals, newspapers, and other sources to estimate more accurately the number of deaths (see chart).

The first era of the migration, 1846-48, stands out in the overall 1846-69 time period as the era with the highest death rate and most prolonged suffering. After 1848 the death rate moderated, though many pioneers at times

still suffered accidents, disease, and deprivation. Further, for all who made the migration at any time before 1869 (when the transcontinental railroad was completed), traveling more than 1,000 miles across the American plains and Rocky Mountains was a major event in their lives. The long journey was filled with the natural fears of fatigue, possible illness, concern for food and water, questions about the durability of their wagons or handcarts or their domestic animals, the potential dangers of Indian attacks—indeed, all the fears that go with the unknown. Adding to these fears was the sorrow many felt as they left extended family members behind, most never to be seen again. Cross-country migration



was a very significant event in their lives, and it was long remembered by those who made it. In fact, journals suggest that the pioneers viewed their migration sufferings as a sacrifice for the Lord that they willingly made.

The first attempt to answer the question of how many Latter-day Saints died during the migration west was made by a remarkable assistant Church historian named Andrew Jenson. Nearly a century ago, he put his staff to work compiling data about each Latter-day Saint wagon company that came west between 1847 and 1869.

They scoured diaries, wagon train journals, and pioneer recollections then on file in the historian's office. Their massive research produced findings that were compiled into Church emigration files, some of which he published.¹ Based on sources then available, Brother Jenson estimated that about 6,000 LDS travelers died.² Since then, those estimates have continued to be used in Church history literature.

However, today we are attempting to provide updated death totals³ based on sources to which Brother Jenson did not have access. In our computer era, data from all sources, old and new, are being carefully extracted, input, and calculated. Research is still in process. But, based on new research, historians are reevaluating the death figure of 6,000, and many think that the number may be closer to 4,600.⁴

While it is impossible to know the exact number of LDS deaths among the 60,000 to 70,000⁵ Latter-day Saints who migrated to the Salt Lake Valley from 1846 to 1869, we do know something about the death count. Using 26 sources, Susan Easton Black compiled about 2,000 names of LDS pioneers who

The following chart shows LDS deaths estimated by historians currently researching this topic. The 1846-69 period has been broken into general groups.

Estimated Latter-day Saint Pioneer Deaths

Group	Low Estimate	High Estimate
Crossing Iowa (1846), including deaths at Montrose, Battle of Nauvoo, the Poor Camps, and the trek to the Missouri River	About 295 ^a	About 385 ^b
The 1846 voyage of the ship <i>Brooklyn</i> (New York to San Francisco and San Francisco to the Great Basin, 1847-57)	26 total: 11 at sea and 15 en route to the Great Basin ^c	
At Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and the nearly 90 Iowa settlements in the Middle Missouri Valley (1846-53)	About 800 ^d	About 1,100 ^e
Mormon Battalion	33 ^f	
Crossing the Atlantic or the Pacific ^g	About 670	About 700
At the St. Louis area (1848-52) ^h	Unknown. Incomplete records prevent us from estimating a high figure, but research is in progress using available records to determine the low estimate. One estimate puts the number at about 125. ¹	
On riverboats and trains (1848-69)	Unknown. Incomplete records prevent us from estimating a high figure, but research is in progress using available records to determine a low estimate. Among the known deaths are the 25 who died in the <i>Saluda</i> riverboat explosion. ¹	
In wagon trains from the Winter Quarters-Kanesville area to the Salt Lake Valley (1847-69) ^k	Unknown. Incomplete records prevent us from estimating a high figure, but research is in progress using available records to determine the low estimate. A 3.25 percent death rate ¹ would equal 1,950 for 60,000 pioneers or 2,275 deaths for 70,000 pioneers.	
10 handcart companies (1856-60) ^m	About 252	About 340 or more
Total:	About 4,200	About 5,000

These low and high estimates represent the possible extremes. Perhaps the actual number of deaths will fall somewhere between these extremes. In this model, the middle figure would be 4,600.

died in the migration to the Salt Lake Valley. These names appear on the Mormon Pioneer Memorial in Nauvoo, Illinois. Since records are incomplete, this list is only representative of the Saints who died on the trek. Thus, historians have had to estimate a death count based on existing records.

As we review pioneer death rates, it is important to note that

people of the time reported that Latter-day Saint pioneer death numbers were lower⁶ than the overall trail death rates, from 4 to 6 percent, for persons using the Oregon and California Trails. Yet LDS pioneer groups included many women, children, elderly, and disabled. Furthermore, after the European LDS emigration was in full swing, pioneer



The heaviest concentration of pioneer deaths at one place and time occurred at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and at the nearly 90 Iowa settlements in the Middle Missouri Valley between 1846 and 1853 when somewhere between 800 and 1,100 persons are thought to have died.

companies were disproportionately composed of people without experience in yoking or driving animals or other common trail skills. One writer commented that the LDS handcart companies would have "looked more like the population of the poor farm on a picnic than like pioneers about to cross the plains."⁷

For these reasons, LDS pioneers might have been expected to die in larger numbers than the usual Oregon or California Trail pioneer who was a young, healthy male from a farming background. But they apparently did not. LDS pioneers, who generally kept to themselves on the north side of the Platte River, were better organized, with better camp rules and cleanliness than other groups. Further, they

enjoyed the healing effects of priesthood blessings. It is known that the Saints fared better than others on the trail during the bad cholera years of 1849 and the early 1850s.⁸

The same favorable situation existed among Latter-day Saints who crossed the sea. While their privations were very real, the number of LDS deaths at sea were also lower than other groups. In fact, some sea captains preferred to take LDS groups because they were better organized and more cooperative. A few captains believed the Latter-day Saints were divinely protected.⁹

Indeed, Latter-day Saints did believe that they were divinely aided as a consequence of their obedience to "the Word and Will of the Lord" (D&C 136) which had been given to them through the prophet Brigham Young.

Nevertheless, two LDS trail death tragedies increased the generally lower LDS pioneer death rates: (1) the experience in the

Winter Quarters area, 1846-48; and (2) the tragedy of the Willie and the Martin Handcart Companies in 1856. Both tragedies were the result of harsh conditions and hasty eagerness to gather with the Saints in Zion.

The first tragedy and heaviest concentration of LDS deaths occurred as the Saints fled Nauvoo, Illinois, crossed Iowa, and settled temporarily in Winter Quarters, (then Indian territory, now Nebraska), and in nearly 90 southwestern Iowa settlements. Conditions under which the Saints lived in Winter Quarters and in the Iowa encampments were very harsh. The cold, windy winters of 1846-48, primitive living conditions, malaria, and scurvy resulted in hundreds of deaths.

The second tragedy occurred among the nearly 1,000 members of the Willie and the Martin Companies. Saints in these companies were eager to join the body of the Church in the Rocky Mountains, and they began their



journey knowing that it was late in the year and that bad weather was a possibility. Sixty-seven died in the Willie Company, and 135 to 200 died in the Martin Company.

After the 1846-48 era and the handcart rescues, as we look over the entire experience, LDS pioneers enjoyed a considerable measure of safety and peace that seemed to have been a result of their willingness to follow and obey their leaders. The order of LDS pioneer emigration as laid out in "the Word and Will of the Lord" included both organizational structure and a standard of spiritual unity that pioneers were expected to maintain. It was central to their success in the westward trek. Thus, in the end, this success seems to have had more to do with their willingness to obey and to sacrifice in following their leaders than it did with any external factors in their trek. •

Gospel topics: Church history, faith, migration to Salt Lake Valley, obedience, pioneers, sacrifice

NOTES FOR ARTICLE

1. Andrew Jenson compiled huge reference volumes called *Church Emigration*, on file in the LDS Historical Department Archives. He published a series of 22 detailed articles, almost monthly, called "Church Emigration," in the *Contributor*, volumes 12 and 13, 1891-92. Today, however, historians have more wagon and ship accounts available to them than did Brother Jenson.

2. Andrew Jenson, *Church Emigration*, page 1. It is important to remember the following when considering Brother Jenson's work: First, we are not sure how he determined the number 6,000. Known modern-day working tallies thus far must be stretched considerably to reach 6,000. Second, perhaps his figure of 6,000 includes deaths of people who stopped in Missouri or Iowa for long periods of time and died of natural causes while not really in transit.

3. Often journals and family records are the only source of migration deaths. If you have ancestors who died between 1846-69 as part of the migration to the Great Salt Lake Valley, please send their names, death dates, and death places to Susan Easton Black, 270K JSB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602-2600.

4. This figure is the average of historians' low estimate—4,200—and high estimate—5,000 (see chart). The traditional estimate of 6,000 also seems high for the following reasons: John D. Unruh Jr. puts the overall trail death rate for pioneering Americans at between 4 and 6 percent (see *The Plains Across* [1979], 408). Even taking the highest number of LDS pioneers—70,000—and multiplying it by the highest death rate—6 percent—the total would be 4,200, far below the traditional estimate.

5. *Faith in Every Footstep* CD-ROM, prepared by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (This estimate has been revised down from earlier estimates of 80,000 used by historians.)

6. Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion* (1964), 209-10. This point is supported from accounts written at the time of the migration, by both Latter-day Saints and others traveling west during the same time period.

7. Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 221.

8. Michael N. Landon, archivist in the Historical Department,

Archives Division, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

9. Conway B. Sonne, *Saints on the Seas: A Maritime History of Mormon Migration 1830-1890* (1983), 103.

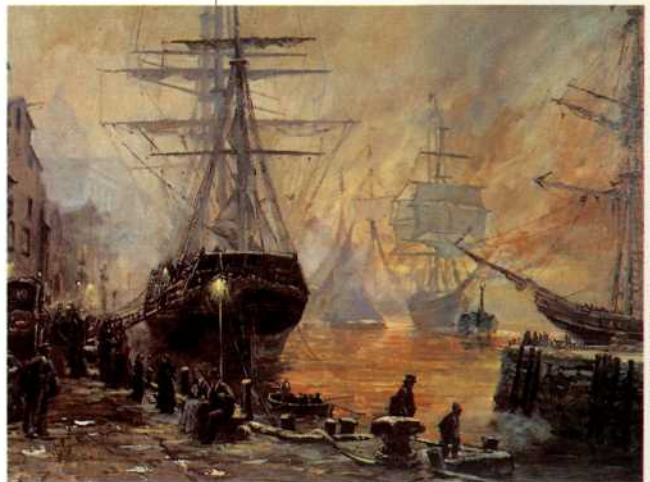
NOTES FOR CHART

a. Richard E. Bennett, author of *Mormons at the Missouri: "And Should We Die," 1846-1852*, and *We'll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846-1848*. Brother Bennett notes that there are no sexton records for Mount Pisgah, Garden Grove, or the many small groupings of pioneers stretching along the Iowa Trail. Private journals make repeated references to unusual numbers of deaths, indicating that people believed they were dying at a higher rate than they had back in Nauvoo. The Nauvoo death rate in 1843 was 3.2 percent, and in 1844 it was 2.5 percent.

Brother Bennett estimates the number of Iowa deaths in 1846-48 at about 85 in camps from Nauvoo to Garden Grove, about 95 in Garden Grove, and about 115 in Mount Pisgah.

b. Richard E. Bennett. Brother Bennett believes that further research will reveal that this estimate should be higher. He bases this belief on journal entries of several pioneers of the time who wrote that they had never seen their family members and fellow Latter-day Saints die at such a high rate. As John Pulsipher, one early pioneer, wrote of the scenes in Winter Quarters in the winter of 1847, "What the number was that died of scurvy I can't tell, but it far exceeded anything that I ever witnessed before."

c. Lu Markham Jones, advisory board member of the Ship *Brooklyn* Association, and chairman of their grave location search project. All 238 LDS passengers have been identified by name, and thanks to the help of many descendant family historians and genealogists we now know



Of the thousands of Latter-day Saints who crossed the ocean to America, it is thought that about 700 died.

EMBARCATION OF THE SAINTS AT LIVERPOOL IN 1851, BY KEN BAXTER

