

In 1881, MATHIAS' sons NIELS and OLOF, ages 20 and 18, left Denmark to join their parents in Utah. BENGTA WHEELER says that MATHIAS moved that second year to nearby Logan, where he assisted in the building and painting of the Logan Temple. With team and wagon, she writes, he helped to haul rock to build the edifice (A. Nelson, 1).

In 1882, the last of MATHIAS' and BENGTA's living children left Denmark to join their parents in America. JENS (JAMES) CHRISTIAN and MARIANE (MARY ANN), his wife, left Copenhagen on August 28th. En route to America, on the North Sea, MARIANE gave birth to a son, JAMES JOSEPH NELSON, the first grandchild of MATHIAS and BENGTA - fitting that the first grandchild of these Viking descendants was born on the open sea. In that year alone, 11,000 Danish immigrants arrived in the United States.

During their first years in America, MATHIAS and BENGTA worked hard to complete the temple and provide for their family. They were likely grateful for their freedoms and opportunities this country offered them and their children.

However, in 1882, Congress passed the Edmunds Act, which declared Latter-day Saints "ineligible for public office." At General Conference that April, Church President John Taylor assured that the Saints would "contend inch by inch" for their liberties and rights as American citizens (Fulness, 427). Yet it is surprising that they had to, since Article VI of the Constitution clearly declared that "no religious test shall EVER be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

The following year, the poet Emma Lazarus wrote the poem "The New Colossus," based on the Statue of Liberty which was nearing completion in France for shipment to America:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glowed worldwide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
'Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cried she
With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

During May 17-19, 1884, in the midst of the national Constitutional turmoil over the right of a people to exercise their faith, while pending federal rulings threatened the disenfranchisement of the church, and Congress urged the confiscation of church properties, the Logan Temple was

dedicated, creating a temporary refuge of peace in the midst of the storm. (The only other functioning temple in the world at that time was in St. George - over three hundred miles away.)

The following Sunday, Elder George Q. Cannon spoke in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in praise of the dedication of men like MATHIAS who had sacrificed to complete the work on the Logan temple:

“As you know,” he said, “we have just returned from dedicating the Temple that has been completed at Logan....There has been great rejoicing over its completion, and those who have been engaged in it have labored very assiduously. They have been untiring in their efforts and exceedingly liberal in furnishing the necessary means to accomplish the great work.

It is very encouraging to think that, in the midst of the assaults which are being made upon Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the threats that are in circulation concerning us and our future fate, there is faith enough found in the midst of the people to pursue, without discouragement and without cessation, the great work which we feel that our Father has laid upon us.

...Had we been prompted by the ordinary faith of man, the hands of the people would have been weakened in this great work, and they would have hesitated in its performance. But no such feeling has been manifested or expressed. Undismayed and undiscouraged by all the surrounding circumstances, the people have pressed forward the work, and have now the joy and satisfaction of witnessing its completion. It seems as though in the performance of such labor there is a degree of faith required, an unusual degree; for if our views be correct, it is an important work of the great God, the building of temples by His direct command” (Journal of Discourses 24:166-167).

High praise for the self-sacrifice and faith of those like MATHIAS and BENGTA.

Ten days later, on June 4th, MATHIAS and BENGTA were sealed for time and all eternity in the newly-dedicated Logan Temple they had worked so hard to help build.

Early in 1885, an Idaho law signed by the governor “prohibited all Mormons from voting through the device of a ‘test oath.’ And yet the 1st Amendment had declared since 1791 that ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’”

What’s amazing are the alleged foundations of these anti-Mormon laws, in light of what we know today. At the time of Idaho’s ‘test oath,’ Utah and Wyoming were, and had been for the previous fifteen years, the only two territories or states on the whole continent which allowed women the right to vote. (Utah’s women had been granted voting rights as early as 1870.) Whereas in 1872, Susan B. Anthony was arrested and fined for voting (illegally) in Rochester, New York - a state which did not allow women the right to vote until 1917. Needless to say, the irony is a bit thick that the pretense for anti-Mormon laws was the allegation that Utah women were being kept in a ‘down-trodden’ and ‘degraded’ condition ‘by their husband-oppressors’ (Fulness, 426).

Not until 1920 was the 19th Amendment ratified, which guaranteed that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States by any state on account of sex.” Ironically, it took an amendment of the Constitution, lagging fully fifty years behind Utah’s example, for the rest of the nation to catch up and grant women the privilege of the ballot box.

On March 22nd, 1885, the U.S. Supreme Court annulled the ‘test oath,’ allowing a temporary respite. One week later, MATHIAS and BENGTA moved for the last time. “On March 1885, they moved to Preston, Idaho, and bought a farm between Preston and Glendale and lived on this farm the rest of [their] days” (A. Nelson, 1). It’s quite possible they waited for this Supreme Court ruling before moving into a state which threatened to deprive them of the right to vote.

One year later, on March 6, while the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty was being completed, LDS women in Salt Lake City held a mass meeting protesting the loss of their right to vote. Federal response was forthcoming, but not as requested. One year later, the Edmunds-Tucker Act was passed, requiring the women to testify against their husbands - and the right of women to vote in Utah was officially revoked by Federal imposition.

In order to free the women of Utah from their supposed oppression, the Federal Government’s solution was to deny them their right of representation - a puzzling paradox.

As the noose of legislation tightened around the Saints, and the apparent hypocrisy of the national situation increased, a boatload of over four hundred LDS immigrants arrived in New York Harbor in 1886. Under the shadow of the nearly-completed Statue, during the actual week of the Independence Day celebration of 1886, authorities attempted to detain two dozen of the ‘tired, poor, homeless, huddled masses’ because they had less than \$25 on them.

On October 28, 1886, the Statue of Liberty was finally dedicated in New York Harbor amidst great fanfare. Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away, scores of fathers lived in hiding in Utah territory, while federal marshals combed the countryside to apprehend them. The phrase ‘Mother of Exiles’ gained an unintended meaning, for this nation established a legacy over four decades long of driving peaceful citizens from their homes. This nation and its elected officials established upon the highest of principles by the Founding Fathers had first allowed, then condoned, and then officially sponsored persecution of the Church.

On July 25th 1887, one day after the 40th anniversary of the arrival in their refuge of the Salt Lake Valley, President John Taylor died in exile. In this same year of uncertainty and trial, thirteen-year-old TINA died of diphtheria. BENGTA WHEELER said, {GRANDMA and GRANDPA grieved a lot over this little girl’s passing away...They loved her very much” (A. Nelson, 2).

In 1889, the young man ANTHON LUND, who thirty years earlier had played such a large role in the teaching of MATHIAS and BENGTA, was ordained as an apostle.

In the following year, the Supreme Court reversed its earlier decision, and the ‘test oath’ was reinstated, in effect denying the Saints all rights of citizenship. For MATHIAS and BENGTA, this federal struggle was certainly a disappointing first impression of the nation which was supposed to be a land of promise.

Life had been hard for MATHIAS and BENGTA. They had suffered and toiled their whole lives long, yet there was no bitterness -no feeling that the world owed them anything. Their granddaughter BENGTA described them as “a happy couple.”

BENGTA WHEELER’s description of her grandparents MATHIAS and BENGTA is so vivid that we need no photograph to picture them:

“Grandmother was a small woman and a sweet kind person...Grandfather was a stern and honest man...They were a happy couple, and very good to each other...Grandma and Grandpa Nelson were always kind and sweet to us children...We children sure loved them both...They always went to church in a buggy, with one horse hooked to it, and after church would always come to our house for Sunday dinner....They were good Latter-day Saint people” (A. Nelson, 1-2).

Most of all, MATHIAS and BENGTA had done what was necessary for their family’s future. A quote from Kristian Hvidt helped me see more keenly and appreciate more deeply what these two have done in our behalf.

“No doubt these hard-working immigrants, who turned the United States into the world’s biggest granary, must have asked themselves a million times: Was it really worth it, this exchange of my Danish past of poverty with this American future of labor and toil? A Danish-American hymn has this answer to the question of why these pioneers kept struggling:

‘That others may harvest where we plowed
And be prosperous where we suffered.’\n(263)