

The Death of Annie John

By Randy Brown

In her autobiographical sketch written for the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Mary Wride John recalled the death of her child in these few words: "While crossing the plains our little babe grew quite sick and died on the 20th of August and was buried 12 miles west of Devils Gate. It caused us much grief." The Johns were recent emigrants from Wales and part of the Duncan train of 1861.

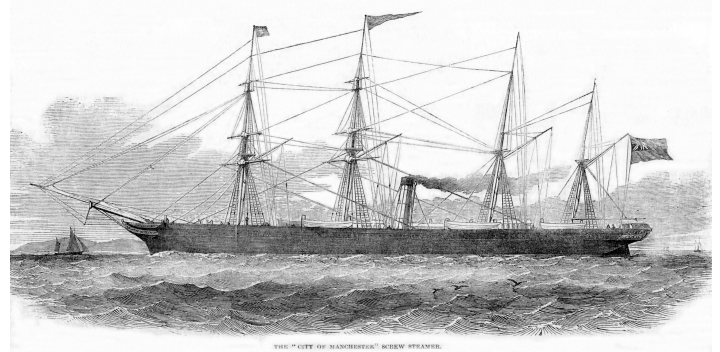
David John and Mary Jane Wride were natives of South Wales and were married in Cardiff, February 8, 1860. Born in 1833, David hailed from Little Newcastle, Pembrokeshire, while Mary was from Miskin Place, Glamorganshire, born Christmas Day, 1831. David John had been trained as a Baptist minister attending Haverfordwest Baptist College in Pembroke, and preaching at many Baptist churches in South Wales including his family's church, Beulah Chapel in Little Newcastle. He had been exposed to Mormon missionaries at the age of 15 and had wished to convert at that time, but was persuaded by his family and Mormon elders to wait until he was at least of age, 21 years, to make a final decision, one way or the other. Immersed in his studies, David John did not make the decision to become a Mormon until he was 25, and much to the sorrow of his family, he was baptized a Mormon in 1856. In his memoirs he remembered the day as, "Wednesday, at 5 P.M., being February 6th 1856, I was rebaptized by Elder Jno. Griffiths, in the tide of the sea, in the town of Haverfordwest, South Wales. At 7:30 P.M. of this date, I was confirmed by the Elders, at a meeting of the Saints. Within five minutes after my confirmation, the Holy Ghost fell upon me in a powerful manner. The house was filled, with the spirit of God. I heard a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the house, in which we sat. All in the house heard it. Thus, we received the same manifestation, in every particular, as was received on the day, of Pentecost. The gift of tongues were also conferred on many present, and one sister had an open vision. I prophesied by the Gift of the Holy Ghost, and afterwards bore my testimony to the Divinity of the work."

As might be expected, considering his education and experience as a minister, David John rose quickly in the church becoming a priest, elder, and finally president of the Flintshire conference all before the end of 1856. In January 1859, he was appointed president of the Nottingham, England, conference, and later pastor of three large English conferences, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, and Derbyshire. In the meantime, he courted and married Mary Jane Wride of Whitchurch, Wales. Mary had converted to Mormonism with several members of her family in 1857. While attending to church business in Nottingham, the couple had their first baby, Anne Jane John, born December 15, 1860. In January, 1861 David was released from his duties in England and given permission to immigrate with his family to Utah.

The David John family can be found at Graig House, the home of Mary's parents, in the Whitchurch, Wales,

census record of February, 1861. Whitchurch is now a northern suburb of Cardiff, and here the family is listed in the household of Mary's parents, Danson and Ann Wride with David's widowed mother, Mary, living next door with her brother, John Lewis. David and Mary John had returned home to South Wales to prepare for their journey to America. Also living at home was Mary's younger sister, 21-year-old Ann Wride, who would go to America with the David John family.

On April 11 David John and family, with two of Mary David's siblings, Barry and Ann Wride, left Cardiff for Liverpool where in five days they would embark for America aboard the SS Manchester. Just days before their departure, Barry Wride and Hannah Selman were married by Elder C. C. Rich. The Selmans were old friends of the Wride family from the Cardiff area. Also on board the Manchester was the Edwards family of North Wales. (The grave of four-year-old Leah Edwards was the subject of a story from a previous Wy. Chapter newsletter.) There were a total of 379 Mormon emigrants from Wales and England on the ship, skippered by Capt. Gustavus Trask. The voyage was uneventful, with but a few stormy days and much seasickness.



Little Annie John was just four months old when the family began their journey. It seems as if her health was not good from the start, and in his journal David made a point of mentioning an incident that seems to have annoyed him. On April 29 he wrote: "All except 2 of the emigrants enjoyed good health, the atmosphere too cold for the visitation of any fever to prey upon us. Still severe cold possessed many, among others my babe, Annie Jane, Born Dec 15/1860 in Nottingham, England (being my firstborn) being at this time 4 months and 14 days old. A young lady by the name of Mary Ann Thomas took her in her arms, up on deck, when I found her, her face and forehead were turned blue with the cold, water running freely from her eyes and nose. The cold settled on her lungs, which never left her." They reached New York on May 13. The next day David John registered his family at the emigration center at Castle Garden and gave as his occupation "Joyner," a type of carpenter, although there is no evidence that he ever practiced the trade.

Compared to most of the other emigrants who arrived on the Manchester, the John family contingent was well off so they were able to immediately take first class accommodations on the train from Jersey City to Quincy,

Illinois, arriving there on May 20. From Quincy they traveled by steamboat up the Mississippi to Hannibal and then the train to St. Joseph. From there, it was via steamboat again to Florence, the Mormon trail jumping off point, on the 24th. There they stayed for about a month in rented houses preparing for the overland journey to Salt Lake. David John and Barry Wride combined their yokes of oxen to one wagon, loaded with provisions and supplies for five persons and one baby. They joined the Homer Duncan company composed of 247 individuals and 47 wagons. It was called an independent company. In other words it was made up by people with the means of supplying their own wagons and supplies as opposed to the out and back church trains that brought the poorer emigrants to Utah.

The health of their baby continued to be of concern to David and Mary John. On the steamboat trip up the Missouri, David wrote that Annie was taken sick with "the lung fever," but became better before they reached Florence. She seemed to "gain on her health," as David put it during the month's stay in Florence.

Other than David almost drowning while trying to cross the N. Platte on horseback while herding the cattle, the trip was routine until they reached Devil's Gate on August 19. On this day David wrote: "My only child Annie Jane was sick all day[.] in the evening Elder Homer Duncan and myself administered to her[.] She seemed better for a time and enjoyed better rest than the 2 previous nights."

At 2 a.m. David was called to take his turn on guard duty. He was reluctant to go because of Annie's illness but deemed it his duty to go, so he did, leaving his wife and child asleep in the wagon, "seemingly enjoying a sweet sleep," as he put it. When he reached the cattle and relieved the guard, believing that all was well with no danger of Indians or of the cattle straying, he settled down to rest and soon fell asleep. Being of a mystical nature and a believer in visionary dreams, David wrote that as he slept his wife came to him smiling and all dressed in white. Identifying with his sick child, David rebuked her asking why she was so merry while he was in great pain. She replied that she was not aware that he was sick, but soon began weeping and said that she must go, that Annie Jane was quite sick and needed her. She left him "quite mournful."

At 6:00 David returned to camp and heard that during the night Annie had indeed been very ill, but at present seemed some better. Soon, however, as David wrote, "She appeared sick and in great pain. Her mouth was opened and her eyes stationary fixed to the heavens. At 8:30 A.M. She was growing sicker, she seemed to have spasms, the emigrants tried to console us saying she was teething that her gums troubled her; but my dream was before me so strong, till all my strength and faith was taken from me. She died in her mother's arms at 8:30 A.M. Many thought it was a fit, but in vain were thoughts, for it was death. She was 8 months and 5 days when she died." Barry Wride wrote, "She was laid out by some of the sisters and was

carried in a wagon to the next camping place 12 or 15 miles west." It rained heavily most of the day.

David continues in his journal: "One Bro. Turner Made my child a coffin, it was strong about 2 In. thick[.] it was plain not ornamental so how could we make any display in our poverty in the wilderness. Elder Benjamin Evans and Wm. Howells [and David P. Thomas] dug her grave. She was placed in her Coffin in the afternoon and placed in the wagon with her parents over night."

At seven the next morning, August 21, the funeral took place. David wrote: "Captain Homer Dunkin [Duncan] appointed 12 bearers of young men to convey her remains to their last resting place. Elder Charles W. Penrose preached the funeral sermon. She was buried at 7 A.M. on the side of a small hill, 600 yards East of high rock, and about the same distance South of "Sweet Water"[.] the grave is about 15 miles West of Devil's Gate. The river runs between two high rocks, nearly touching each other. This place is known as little "Devil's Gate [.]" We placed her name by the head of her grave, and heaped a pile of large stones on her grave to protect her body from wild beasts. We travelled 13 miles this day through wet and muddy roads and camped on the bank of "Sweetwater". It would be useless here to portray the feelings of parents in being compelled to leave their only child while in search of a spot where they could worship God unmolested."

Thomas Odell, the company clerk, also described the funeral service: "August 21st The body of Anne Jane John was placed in a coffin and buried at the foot of a bluff between two projecting points about twenty miles east of the second crossing of the Sweetwater. A pile of stones was placed on the grave and a board with the following inscription at the head: Anne Jane John, daughter of David and Mary John died August 20th 1861. Number of the brethren and sisters followed the body to the grave. Br. Penrose officiated. Camp rolled out at eight."

The general location of Annie John's grave can be easily identified today. Just over twelve miles west of Devil's Gate the river runs between high cliffs of rock, but at this point some distance and out of sight from the trail, the place David John called "Little Devil's Gate." Here is where the Duncan company camped on the afternoon of August 20, 1861. As Odell wrote, there are two projecting points of rocky cliff to the north of the trail, here a gigantic swale, with a hill leading up to the foot of the bluff. This place also fits David John's description of about 600 feet from the bluff and roughly the same distance from the river. Here is located the grave of Annie John, and even today a small pile of rocks can be found at the approximate site. Rocks on the ground move around over the years, kicked up by cattle and shifted by wind and rain, so the original pile of rocks has scattered, but many rocks remain nearby. Close by, someone has gathered a pile of pretty stones of quartz, agate, and petrified wood as if in honor of the dead child. Is this really Annie's grave? We'll never know, but without doubt she lies nearby.

There is some conflicting information on how far they traveled on August 20 after Annie had died that morning, but it must have been between twelve and thirteen miles, since there is no other place fitting the descriptions of Little Devil's Gate and the projecting rocky bluffs found nearby. The Sweetwater soon enters a fairly level area and does not pass between rock bluffs again until it reaches Three Crossings ten or twelve miles farther on.

The Duncan company suffered no other deaths on their trek to Salt Lake where they arrived September 13. The David John family eventually settled in Provo where they became prominent citizens. David continued with his work for the church for the rest of his life. In 1865 he took a second wife, Jane Cree, a recent emigrant from Nottingham, England. Perhaps they had met years before when David was a missionary in that town. With his two wives, David John became the father of twenty more children, but only ten survived to become adults, the last girl, Jennie, living until 1975. David John died in 1908, Mary Wride John in 1905.

In his pain, and perhaps to better remember his first born, David John penned the following verses.

The body long a prey
 To sickness and disease
 Did daily waste away
 'till death signed the release
 Now sleeps within its clay cold bed
 Among the long lamented dead
 and again,

This lovely bud, so young and fair
 Call'd hence by early doom
 Just came to show, how sweet a flower
 In Paradise would bloom.

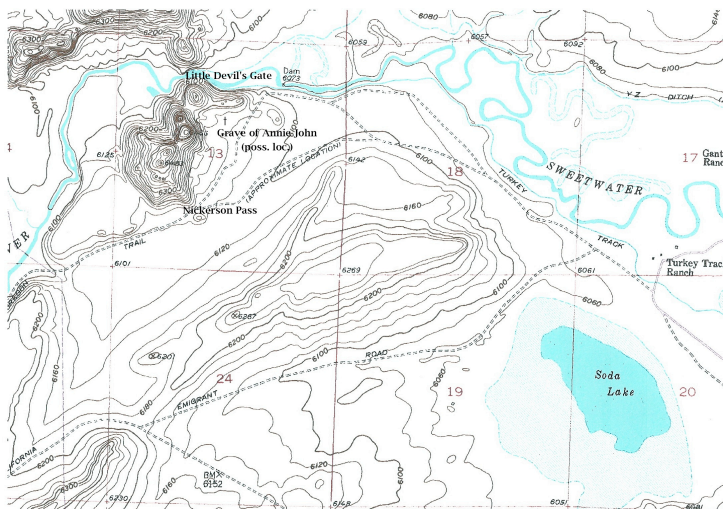


David John



Mary John

(both photos courtesy of Ron Dennis)



The Location of the Grave of Annie John



The Projecting Bluffs



The Grave of Annie John