

# Benjamin Francis (1802-1849): Biography

**Note:** This biography was composed during June and July 2008, by W. Bart. Christenson, Jr., Provo, Utah, after compiling all of the information currently known about *Benjamin Francis*. A bibliography of sources appears at the end.

Without ever meeting or knowing a person during mortality, we can often get a good sense of him or her through the comments of trusted contemporaries. Such is the case with *Benjamin Francis*. Very little was actually written about him while he lived. But a single, meaningful statement, recorded at the time of his death from cholera, at the young age of 47, in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1849, speaks volumes:

*May 1st [St. Louis, Missouri] ...The deadly cholera is killing hosts here now. One dear and faithful elder died this morning, namely Benjamin Francis, leaving great sorrow behind him. It would be difficult to find anyone more faithful than he was during his life, and he died happy. His wife and family will come along with us...<sup>1</sup>*

And yet *Benjamin* grew up and lived his entire life on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean prior to the time of his death. What was he doing in St. Louis, in 1849? In this biography, we will examine his interesting story and find out.

From the Bishop's Transcripts of the Parish Church of Llanybydder, Carmarthenshire, Wales, we know that *Benjamin*, in company with his siblings, *David* and *Rachel*, was baptized or christened on 6 June 1802. (On this record, *Benjamin* is entered after *David*, probably indicating that *David* was his senior.) The parents are listed as *David Francis and his wife, Ruth*.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, according to the *Francis Family Record Book*, created and maintained by his eventual wife, *Margaret Evans Francis*, *Benjamin* was born in Llanybydder, as well, several months earlier, on 12 February 1802.<sup>3</sup>

Evidently, his mother's maiden name was *Ruth Enoch or Davies*<sup>4</sup>, but we have no further hard information at this time regarding other family members, his father's occupation, or details regarding his youth. However, we do know that *Benjamin* became a blacksmith and subsequently found his way to the village of Llanwenog, approximately 16 miles NW of Llanybydder, in the neighboring county of Cardigan Shire. Here he plied his trade, met and courted his future wife, *Margaret*, and raised his family. They married on 16 December 1828, in Llanwenog. *Margaret* was 28; *Benjamin* was 26. Interestingly, evidently literate, he signed his own name, rather than placing a customary X mark.<sup>5</sup>

From *Margaret's* family record book, we learn that the couple had eight children, three girls and five boys. *Nancy Evans Francis*, was born 29 May 1829, but died only 14 months later, on 29 July 1830. *David Evans Francis*, born 27 August 1830, died at age ten, on 10 October 1846, after being dragged  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile following a throw from the back of a "wild pony" he was riding. *Ann Evans Francis*, our direct relative, was born 26 May 1833. She was the only child to live into adulthood. She eventually married and bore 13 children of her own. Then came the five youngest children: *Daniel Evans Francis*, born 4 February 1835, who died at 14 months, on 4 May 1836; a

second *Daniel Evans Francis*, born 3 February 1837; *Margaret Evans Francis*, born 26 August 1839; *Benjamin Evans Francis*, born 25 October 1841; and *Francis Evans Francis*, who was born and died on the same day, 10 October 1844.<sup>6</sup> The family appears in the 1841 Welsh census for Llanwenog, Cardigan Shire.<sup>7</sup>

As to *Benjamin's* employment, there is not a lot of information that can be found about blacksmithing in Great Britain during the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, one author in an interesting research thesis wrote about the occupation as it existed in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, during colonial times.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the strong cultural bonds which linked America and Great Britain, one might reasonably postulate that similar conditions existed in the trade in rural Wales at the time, as well. Thus, the author begins his article by stating:

*During the colonial period rural, village, and city blacksmiths were as numerous and as necessary as automobile mechanics and electricians are in our day. Today when we think of blacksmiths, we think primarily in terms of a farrier, that is a person who is in the business of shoeing horses.... The blacksmith most likely manufactured the horseshoes, but evidence seems to indicate that he did very little shoeing himself. The citizens went to the blacksmith to buy the iron products which he manufactured and repaired such as household utensils, agricultural implements, tools, and hardware.*

Living in a small Welsh community as he did, it is more than likely that *Benjamin* was a village smith. It is also very probable that like his counterparts in rural Pennsylvania, perhaps he would have lived on a small farm and would have produced his own tools and implements, as well as the tools, implements and hardware required by his patrons.

Thus, in colonial America, and for a while thereafter during the late 1700's and into the mid 1800's, using forge, bellows, and hammer, a village smith manufactured his own bar-iron or wrought iron with which to work. Again quoting from the referenced article:

*The [iron] ore was melted in a furnace until the slag or impurities were separate. The heat was provided by charcoal which was made from wood in the abundant forests. The fire was fanned by a bellows or blowing tubs. The blooms or pigs were heated several times more, and between each heat the mass was hammered in order to remove impurities and form a more desirable shape. The size of the bar iron may have varied through the years, but [eventually, a standard size of the iron] was two inches wide and one inch thick. The blacksmiths reheated and cut these bars into strips and then bent, shaped and hammered them into the tools, implements and hardware for the community customers.*

A partial list of items which a village blacksmith might then have regularly produced would have included the following: household necessities (utensils, hinges, hasps, fireplace grates); farm implements (horseshoes, hoes, sickles, shovels, chains, curry combs, branding irons); wagon accessories (wagon wheels, carriage rings, iron for wagon bodies); sundry items (nails, axes, hammers, wedges, chisels); plus hundreds of other things. Often, the articles were embellished with decorative twists or unique designs.

But mighty changes were in the air when Benjamin plied his blacksmithing trade, namely: the Gospel was restored to the earth; and the Industrial Revolution, beginning in the late 1700's and lasting through the mid 1800's, was underway in the British Isles.

Because of significant resources of coal and iron, the necessary ingredients that fueled the grand metamorphosis from an agrarian to a mechanized society, Great Britain became the center for monumental changes during the Industrial Revolution. Thus, enabled by astounding new inventions and innovations such as the steam engine, the spinning Jenny, railroads, new type road surfaces, and new banking/commercial procedures, to name just a few, traditional home industries were replaced by machines and factories. This resulted in massive social readjustments. Old techniques became obsolete; new skills were required; unemployment ran rampant; new centers of industry developed; child labor and woman suffrage issues came to the fore; disease and malnutrition were common; social unrest was everywhere.<sup>9</sup>

Living in a rural part of Great Britain as they did, the *Francis* family was probably initially insulated from the changes which were radically affecting other parts of the country—like Manchester, in Lancaster Shire, where the textile industry had begun to flourish. Indeed, so important became the English textile industry in Lancaster Shire that the saying evolved: *Lancashire thread produces England's bread!* At the same time, Wales was important, too, being noted for its coal mines. Nearby Cardiff, through the *Butte* family's leadership, eventually became the world leader in this commodity.

However, reflecting further on the sweeping changes resulting from the Industrial Revolution, *Benjamin Francis's* village blacksmithing trade would also, in time, certainly have undergone significant alteration. As a consequence, his former all-around, multi-skilled village blacksmith status would eventually have been replaced by various specialized craftsmen such as: iron miners, foundry men, wagon makers, gunsmiths, farm implement makers, hardware specialists, anchor smiths, watchmakers, and so forth.

The Gospel was first preached in modern times in England in 1837 and later, beginning in 1840, in Wales. Church growth was remarkable.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in 1850, there were more members of the Church residing in Great Britain than in all of North America.<sup>11</sup> Thereafter, throughout the remainder of the 19th Century, some 65,000 converts, who joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles, immigrated to the United States to assist in the establishment of the New Zion. Moreover, as the eminent English author *Charles Dickens* once observed, some of these people were the *pick and flower of England*.<sup>12</sup>

To some people today, the rapidity and extent of these new religious conversions might seem astonishing. But considering the tenor of the times, it is not so surprising. As one author noted:

*Perhaps the greatest disruption of all was industrialization. Whereas the average life expectancy for laborers working the land was 38 years, that figure dropped to 19 years for the working classes in the mills. A young girl living in Utah once said to her grandmother, 'It must have been hard for you to give up every thing you had to join the Church and come here.' But the grandmother replied, 'Child, you don't understand. In Manchester we had nothing. Here we*

could have land.” (Effie Kelsey.) *The restoration of the gospel offered people a new world, not only eternally but temporally.*<sup>13</sup>

Hence, the advent of the Gospel in Great Britain coincided with the onset of the Industrial Revolution and was the precise time that so much hardship and poverty were being inflicted upon thousands of conscientious workers looking for a better way of life. It would seem, then, that with the Industrial Revolution the Lord had much more in mind than mere machinery and material goods.

South Wales was the most fertile area in Wales for new converts. And for the above mentioned reasons and perhaps others, as well, the *Francis* family must have been seeking new vistas. Consequently, we learn from *Margaret’s* little family record book that she, *Benjamin*, and their oldest living child, *Ann*, were baptized into the Church by *Thomas Jeremy*, in Llanwenog, on 19 December 1847. Confirmation took place on 23 December 1847.<sup>14</sup>

Then, in keeping with the counsel of the leading Brethren to immigrate to the United States in order to assist in building up the New Zion, fourteen months after joining the Church, in February 1849, the family prepared to immigrate to Zion with *Dan Jones* and his company of 249 Welsh Saints.

*In 1849, the ship ‘Troubadour’ departed from Swansea [Wales] to Liverpool [England]. Some 249 passengers then sailed on 25 February 1849 on the ‘Buena Vista’ from Liverpool. [They reached their] port of arrival, New Orleans [Louisiana], on 10 April 1849 [after 44 days on the water]. Also aboard the ‘Buena Vista’ with the Francis family during the lengthy passage were Thomas Jeremy and his family [age 34, farmer], most likely the same man who had baptized them in Llanwenog, plus the Treharne family.*<sup>15</sup>

*Thomas Jeremy*, in a subsequent letter to friends in Wales (Welsh Saints maintained close ties), as is reported in *The Life Story of Jane Treharne Ashton*, wrote the following:

*I recommend all those that will follow us to Zion to bring oatmeal with them. They will find this the best food when they are seasick. The best way for those that follow us to Zion to keep their health is to keep on deck as much as possible. This will be an advice that will benefit them at our expense.*<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, *Sarah Evans Jeremy*, *Thomas’s* wife, recorded her memories of the sea voyage and ensuing river travel. Extracts are found in this same life story, as follows:

*After seven weeks aboard the ‘Buena Vista,’ they ran out of oatmeal, bread, and water, and had to eat hardtack and drink water full of slime called ‘ropey water’. Their hearts were filled with joy as they saw the buildings of New Orleans outlined against the sky and two tug boats came and towed the big steamer into the harbor.*

[Then, on the river boat taking them further north, up the Mississippi River], *out of the 249 passengers aboard the ‘Highland Mar,’ one-third were stricken with the cholera while en-route from New Orleans to Council Bluffs [Pottawattamie County, Iowa, the eastern staging area for Saints migrating to Utah]. Men and women were lying on the deck, unable to help themselves*

*and no one able to do anything for them. Their tongues and mouths were parched with thirst, and they felt as if they were being consumed with fire... Coffins were made of rough boards and they were buried among the big timbers on the banks of the Missouri River [once the river boat left the Mississippi River and entered upon the Missouri River near St. Louis, to ply its way further west towards Iowa]. The cholera raged from New Orleans to Council Bluffs.*<sup>17</sup>

Historically, cholera appears to have been *originally endemic to the Indian subcontinent, with the Ganges River likely serving as a contamination reservoir*. Evidently, the disease then spread via land and sea trade routes to Russia, Western Europe, and thereafter to North America. The years 1829–1851 encompassed the *Second Cholera pandemic* in which Western Europe and North America suffered greatly. In fact, in 1849, at the time the Welsh immigrants arrived in New Orleans on the *Buena Vista*, the pandemic was spreading throughout the Mississippi River system. During that particular year, cholera took the lives of over 4,500 in St. Louis [10% of the city's population] and 3,000 in New Orleans. The disease then spread along the California and Oregon Trail as thousands were making their way further west, at the time of the Mormon Migration and California Gold Rush.<sup>18</sup>

*Widespread fear and panic would often result from any rumors that cholera was suspected to be in a given area. What caused the disease and what caused it to spread was unknown at the time... The most prevalent theory of the time held that the illness was caused and spread by vapors... During this epidemic the eating of potatoes and other vegetables also had come under suspicion...*

*The mortality for untreated cholera is around 50 percent... The disease is spread by fecal contamination... But in 1849, none of this was known.*

*It would be five more years before the spread of cholera by water supplies contaminated by sewage would be demonstrated [in 1854]... It would then be only another three years before Louis Pasteur would introduce the germ theory of disease in 1857... It wasn't until 1883, though, that the German physician, Robert Koch, discovered the *Vibrio cholerae* bacterium, and it wasn't until well into the twentieth century that effective treatment with intravenous fluids was developed.*<sup>19</sup>

The toll that this horrific disease took on the Welsh Saints and particularly on our own forebears in the *Buena Vista* Company is related by *Dan Jones* in a letter written from St. Louis, on 30 April/1 May 1849, to *William Phillips* in Wales, a part of which was previously quoted:

*May 1st—[Here, in St. Louis], we hired a steamer [the Mary] and moved to it yesterday to carry us to Council Bluffs, 900 miles up the Missouri River, for 16s. 8c each, half price for children between 4 and 14; and younger than that no charge; we can have a hundred pounds of luggage without paying, and we pay 2s. per hundred for the rest. We shall start from here tomorrow. We purchased our food here to get us to the valley. Also our stoves, iron to make wagons, clothes, arms, goods, etc., etc. To this point our journey has been as expensive as I noted in the Prophet [magazine]; and as far as I can tell the costs will be hardly any different from what I noted there. The deadly cholera is killing hosts here now. One dear and faithful elder died this morning, namely Benjamin Francis, leaving great sorrow behind him. It would be difficult to find anyone more faithful than he was during his life, and he died happy. His wife and family will come along with us... [Unfortunately, three other family members died afterwards, as well.]*<sup>20</sup>

In the aforementioned small bound family journal, *Margaret Evans Francis* dutifully recorded the deaths of her dear husband, as well as, shortly thereafter, three of her children:

*Benjamin Francis Senior died on Tuesday the 1st of May 1849 [age 47] at Saint Louis and was buried at Saint Louis on the same day. [To date, search for the gravesite has been unsuccessful.]*

*Daniel Evans Francis the son of Benjamin and Margaret Francis died on the 'Steamer Mary' on the 6th of May 1849 [age 12].*

*Margaret Evans Francis daughter of Benjamin and Margaret Francis died on the Missouri River on the 'Steamboat Mary' on the 7th day of May 1849 [age 9].*

*Benjamin Evans Francis Junior son of Benjamin and Margaret Francis died on the Missouri River on the 'Steamboat Mary' on the 8th of May 1849 [age 7].*<sup>21</sup>

Thus, only *Margaret* and her sole surviving child, *Ann*, remained to continue the family's intended journey to Utah, alone. Their inspiring stories are recorded elsewhere on this website.

*Benjamin* was but 49 years old when he departed mortality, and his burial site in St. Louis, Missouri, has not, as yet, been identified. To be sure, dying young, he did not accomplish all that he undoubtedly wished to accomplish in this life.

Nevertheless, he accomplished what was necessary: he qualified himself in an honorable profession; he found his mate, married and raised a family; he accepted the Gospel when it was preached to him; he repented and was baptized; he prepared himself for the Melchizedek Priesthood so that he could later be sealed to his eternal companion in the temple<sup>22</sup>; he did good, left a faithful legacy, and *died happy*. There is not much more that could be said about or expected of a fellow earthly-sojourner.

A colorful epitaph, which perhaps also describes *Benjamin*, was discovered on an old headstone marking the grave of a blacksmith in Wales:

*My sledge and hammer lay reclined,  
My bellows, too, have lost their wind,  
My fire's extinct, my forged decayed,  
And in the dust my vise is laid;  
My coal is spent, my iron gone,  
My nails are driven-my work is done.*<sup>23</sup>

---

## Bibliography

1. <http://welshmormonhistory.org/index.php?immigrants/view/890>. *Letter of Dan Jones to William Phillips, 30 April/1 May 1849, from St. Louis*. Published in "Udgorn Seion" (Zion's Trumpet), June 1849, p.123.

2. Baptism/christening entry, 1802, for *Benjamin Francis*: Bishop's Transcripts, Llanbydder) Parish, (Carmarthenshire), Wales, 1679-1892, GS#0105184 Item 3.
3. Birth entry for *Benjamin Francis*, from the small bound book of *Francis Family* dates and data: *Benjamin Francis, the son of David and Ruth Francis was born in Glandeaar, Llanbydder, Carmarthen Shire, South Wales, February 12th 1802.*
4. T.I.B. Card for *Benjamin Francis*, Logan Temple Records: Book: A; Page: 40; No.: 1554.
5. Marriage entry: Bishop's Transcripts, Llanwenog Parish, Wales, 1676-1892; 1828, p. 56; GS#0105183.
6. Compilation of entries found in the small bound book of the *Francis Family*, showing dates and data compiled and entered at the time of occurrence by *Margaret Evans Francis*. The book is currently in the possession of *Shannon Howells*, Salt Lake City, Utah. It is about 4 x 6 x 1 inches in size and was seen and handled by the compiler of this biography, Parts I-III.
7. <http://ancestry.com>. 1841 Wales Census: Source Citation: Class: *HO107*; Piece: *1375*; Book: *31*; Civil Parish: *Llanwenog*; County: *Cardiganshire*; Enumeration District: *3*; Folio: *37*; Page: *1*; Line: *1*; GSU roll: *464304*.
8. <http://www.horseshoe.cc/pennadutch/people/trades/blacksmith/smiths.htm>. Excerpted from *The Early Blacksmiths of Lancaster County, Elmer Z. Longenecker*, Community Historians Annual, Number 10, Dec. 1971.
9. [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761577952/industrial\\_revolution.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761577952/industrial_revolution.html)
10. *Truth Will Prevail, the Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles, 1837-1987*, Editors: *Bloxham, Moss, Porter*; 1987 by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.; a 462 page book prepared for the 150th anniversary of the introduction of the Church in Great Britain, containing multiple chapters, maps, illustrations, and an index; see pp. 236-237.
11. Op. cit.: *Truth Will Prevail, the Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ...*; see pp. x & 214.
12. Op. cit.: *Truth Will Prevail, the Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ...*; see p. xi.
13. Op. cit.: *Truth Will Prevail, the Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ...*; see p. 1.
14. Op. cit.: Compilation of entries found in the small bound book...;Part II.
15. <http://home.clara.net/tirbach/HelpPageBuenaVista.html>. Buena Vista and Hartley passenger lists. "In 1849 the ship *Troubadour* departed from Swansea to Liverpool; some 249 passengers then sailed on 25 Feb 1849 on the *Buena Vista* from Liverpool; port of arrival, New Orleans, on 10 of April 1849." Passenger list: "#165 Benjn. Francis, 46, Blacksmith; #166 Margaret Francis, 48; #167 Ann Francis, 16; #168 Dan Francis, 12; #169 Margaret Francis, 9; #170 Benjn. Francis, 7."

16. <http://welshmormonhistory.org/index.php?/resources>. *The Life Story of Jane Treharne Ashton*.
17. Op. cit.: <http://welshmormonhistory.org/index.php?/resources>. *The Life Story...*
18. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cholera>.
19. <http://www.galliagenealogy.org/cholera.htm>. *The 1849 Cholera Epidemic*, by Neil Elvick.
20. Op. cit.: <http://welshmormonhistory.org/index.php?/immigrants/view/890>. Letter of Dan Jones to William Phillips, 30 April/1 May 1849...
21. Op. cit.: Compilation of entries found in the small bound book...Parts II & III.
22. Marriage sealing entry for *Benjamin Francis* and *Margaret Evans*, 22 April 1857, found on the Endowment House T.I.B. card for *Margaret Evans (Francis)*: Book *B*; Page 8; No. 166.
23. [www.anvilmag.com/tributes/tribgb.htm](http://www.anvilmag.com/tributes/tribgb.htm).

---

[Website Home](#) | [Contact Me](#)

Copyright 2007 - 2008, W. Bart. Christenson, Jr.

Terms of Use: Material may be used for non-commercial purposes.

Please cite this source so readers can check back for updates.

All other rights reserved.