

IV

City of the Great Salt Lake,

July 18, 1849.¹⁸

My dear Friend:—I have been laying at this famous city nearly two days, and although I have often thought of you yet I have had too much on hand to write, and as we start out this afternoon, I can devote but little time to you. I arrived a[t] St. Joseph, the point of our debarkation, on the 7th April, and found the company with whom I am emigrating in camp, about 10 miles distant; and we started on our long, tedious, toilsome journey, on the 10th of the month. Although I journeyed nearly two weeks in the midst of the cholera, yet I escaped untouched, and have enjoyed very fine health since I started on this journey.—My constitution is robust and vigorous, and I have an appetite like a shark, but I can assure you that it has been obtained by great hardship and fatigue. Do not, for God's sake, ever start, or let your friends start, on this route. It is attended with inconceivable hardship and difficulties, and it is far preferable to go around the Cape, (if you cannot go across the Isthmus), or even to go by way of China. We have an ox and a horse team, but they have had it so hard in drawing our provisions and baggage, that we have performed the whole distance on foot, averaging about 20 miles per day, besides the extra travel on account of hunting, getting lost from the train, &c. Our oxen have performed well, and would do much better than horses or mules if their feet did not get sore. The road has been, for the purpose of better description, divided into three sections to this place: 1st, from St. Jo. to Ft. Laramie, 600 miles; 2d, from Ft. Laramie to the South Pass, and from the South Pass to the City. The first section of the road is over a vast tract of prairie, or Plains as it is called, covered with beautiful, clean grass, and destitute of timber and almost all other kinds of vegetation. These plains are composed of a marl and clayey soil, with a beautiful rolling surface, and the road is the best you ever saw. This marl and clay packs, and is equal to the plank road east of your city. There are a few bad places in crossing streams or deep ravines, but not more difficult than you would find in the States upon improved streets. These plains extend 300 miles to Fort Laramie, Kearney, or Childs, on the Platte or Nebraska River.¹⁹ This place consists of about a dozen small houses, built of prairie sods, and has nothing the appearance of a fortification. Our route then lay up the South bank of the Platte 300 miles, to Ft. Laramie. The Platte

18. Reprinted from the *Rochester* [N. Y.] *Daily Advertiser*, October 16, 1849, by courtesy of the Rochester Public Library. The *Advertiser* says by way of preface: "We are indebted to the politeness of Col. Noble, of this city, for the privilege of publishing the following letter, received by him from James E. Squire, Esq., who left this city for California last spring, by the overland route. The letter will be read with interest by the friends and acquaintances of Mr. Squire, more especially as a rumor was current some time after he left, that he had died of cholera. He is undoubtedly ere this in the gold regions, as his letter bears date of July 18. This is the first letter we have seen from any of our citizens who have taken the western overland route."

19. For a short time after its establishment in 1848, Fort Kearny was called Fort Childs.

River is a miserable, dirty, shallow stream, from 1½ to 2 miles in width; but it has a noble valley of from 6 to 12 miles in width, perfectly level, destitute of timber, and bounded on either side by high gravel and marl bluffs or hills. (The wind has blown my ink down, and I must finish with pencil.) These bluffs have been washed or worn away in places, leaving isolated mounds or peaks, resembling architectural structures; and a fertile imagination can discover churches, towers, castles, or any other structure it chooses. Among these fantastical formations are Court-House Bluffs and Chimney Rock—the former about 6 miles south of the road. It is 700 or 800 hundred [sic] feet in length from east to west, and probably 300 or 400 wide and 250 feet high, and there are terraces worn around so that it resembles very well a Court-House, with cupola [cupola], roof, &c. I went to it and ascended to the top. It appeared to be only one or two miles from the road, but we found it 8, the way we went. It is only from 2 to 8 feet wide on top, and some 200 or 300 long. It is composed of marl and sand, and so hard as to form a kind of rock, and is capped with a kind of lime-stone, which probably has preserved it from the action of the elements. Chimney Rock, which is some 35 or 40 miles above, resembles precisely a tunnel set upon the large end. It is some 450 feet in height, and probably covers some 20 or 30 rods from the main Bluff, and corresponds with it precisely in geological formation. It is of about the same consistency as Court-House Bluff.

At Scott's Bluffs, some nineteen miles beyond, we begin to come into a region saturated with alkali more or less, in many places the ground is white with this alkaline efflorescence. There is some little plains [timber?] upon the islands and banks of the Platte, but as a general thing the country is entirely destitute of timber. In Fort Laramie is a single isolated building, about 200 feet square, and 20 high, with bastions at the corners. It is built with *adobes*, or Spanish unburnt brick. It was dull and desolate here, and we remained only one half day. From Laramie to the South Pass, a distance of 300 miles, the country is mountainous and of volcanic formation. We passed from Laramie to the north branch of the Platte, about 80 miles, over the black hills, or mountains, a spur of the Rocky Mountains. This road was good for a mountain road, but in many places steep and rough. We passed up the Platte some way, and then crossed over in nearly a south direction to the Sweet Water River. The celebrated Independence Rock is situated upon the north bank where the road comes to this river. I could discover nothing remarkable in its appearance. It is from 80 to 100 rods long, 40 or 60 feet high, and 6 to 8 rods wide, and slopes from the base to the top, so that you can walk up almost any where. It is composed of a very coarse granite, which resembles the round hard head of the east. The Sweet Water River is about as wide and deep as the Genesee. It has a beautiful valley of from 3 to 10 miles in width, which is bounded on either side by the Sweet Water Mountains, very high ranges of the Rocky Mountains. These mountains are composed of the same materials as Independence Rock, and not a particle of vegetation upon them. The "Devil's Gate," five miles from Independence Rock, is a curi-

osity. It is a gorge where the Sweet Water passes through. It is 60 to 80 rods through, 60 to 100 feet wide, and from 400 to 600 feet high. The water runs through pretty rapidly and makes a great noise. Above this a few miles is what is called the Ice Swamp. It is a kind of ravine, extending from the river in a south-westerly direction to the mountains; the bottom is soft, and upon digging through the turf, which is a kind of peat, about a foot and a half, you come to as pure and perfect ice as you ever saw, varying from two inches to six in thickness. The soil is a thick, soft mud beneath. It was a warm day when we were there, and I saw a great many sick emigrants on the road afterwards, from the effects of eating the ice. I did not eat much, as I thought it had a sort of saline or alkaline taste, and inasmuch as I had suffered two days of pretty severe sickness some way back from the effects of alkaline water.²⁰ The Sweet Water runs from the South Pass in nearly an easterly course. We followed up the valley to within 10 or 12 miles of the Pass. After we left the Sweet Water, we ascended some pretty high hills, and from the rarity and coldness of the atmosphere, we realized that we were at a great elevation [7,550 feet]. The country from here to the Pass is sandy and gravelly, covered with good grass, and has nothing the appearance of a mountainous country. The hills on either side are gently sloping, and not high. We did not realize that we had passed the ridge which separates the waters of the Atlantic from those of the Pacific, until we came to what is called Pacific Spring, and a stream, about three miles beyond, where the waters run west.

From the Pass to Fort Binjet [Bridger] 170 miles, our course lay about southwest, and our route seemed to be through a great basin formed by the Rocky Mountains on the east, Wind River Mountains on the north, the Utah [Uinta] Mountains on the south, and the ridge which divides the waters of the Great Salt Lake from those of the Colorado. This basin is traversed by the Colorado [Green] and its numerous branches, and is interspersed with hills, which have a round water-washed base, and perfectly level on top, like a truncated cone. These hills are of uniform height, but there [are] three or four classes of them in height. Ft. Busser [Bridger] is situated upon Harney's [Hams?] or Black's fork, a branch of the Colorado, upon a little island in that creek. The valley around this Fort is quite low and wet. There is some cotton wood timber around the Fort, and an abundance of Pine 20 or 30 miles south, toward the Utah Mountains. From here to that place is about 170 miles, and is over the most mountainous country of our whole journey. We ascended the ridge which separates the waters of the Salt Lake from Ft. Busser [Bridger], and from here we passed through mountain gorges or Canons as they are here called, until we came to the valley of this Lake, with the exception of passing over two or three mountain ridges which were higher over than the South Pass. There was generally a stream

20. These remarks about the Ice Swamp constituted a great novelty for the newspapers of 1849, and were widely reprinted. The "ice swamp" soon disappeared after the livestock of the Forty-niners stripped away the protecting cover of grass.

of water running through these canons, and the bottom of them being only from two to six rods wide, the roads were very crooked and bad. The mountains through here are rocky, composed of agglomerated sand and gravel, pebbles and stones of a red[d]ish color. In many places these rocky cliffs were from three to six thousand feet above us. We descended from one of these canyons directly into the valley of the Salt Lake, about three miles south east of the city. There is a kind of table land or bank about three miles in width, sloping from the base of the mountains to the valley. The city is situated immediately under this bank, and extends three miles west towards the Utah outlet [Jordan River], and is three miles north and south. The city is entirely fenced around, and is laid out in ten acre blocks, which are subdivided into lots of $1\frac{1}{2}$ [$1\frac{1}{4}$] acres each. These lots are not all built upon, but the land is entirely cultivated. There are probably 500 houses, one story high, and small, and either built of logs or *adobes*. In looking over it from the mountains, it resembles a settlement of Irishmen around some public works—however, every one is neat, comfortable, and in perfect order. The citizens are orderly, well disposed, civil and intelligent. The streets are good, wide, and have generally a stream of water running down each side, coming from their irrigating works.

The whole of the improved land is irrigated by the water coming from these caverns [canyons] in the mountains. There is, I presume, 20 miles of ditch around and in the city for this purpose. The water is very pure, and conducted to every acre of ground in the city. They are just cutting wheat; it is a tolerable crop, pretty short straw but well filled. There are farms some distance from here that are said to raise from 30 to 36 bushels to the acre. Vegetation of all kinds is very thrifty and luxuriant, but still they cannot raise anything here without irrigation.

They have had no rain here since spring, and it is intolerably hot. All vegetation that is not irrigated is parched and dried up, except upon the low and valley land, which produces very good and abundant grass. The valley from the south end of the lake is from 20 to 30 miles in width, and extends south from 60 to 80 miles, at which distance the range of vision is bounded by mountains. The whole valley and lake is bounded by lofty mountains, which are now covered with snow. We have been in sight of snow for more than 500 miles. The Salt Lake is 22 miles from here, in a north westerly direction, and the water is scarcely discernable, although we can see a high rocky island [Antelope Island] in it. There is a remarkable spring about one mile north of the city, which is sulphurous, and at least 110 degrees of temperature, and is the most luxurious bathing in a cold time I ever saw. I cannot indulge more in description; I would like to give you a full narration of our journey thus far, as it is full of interest; but time will not allow. With the exception of the alkaline sickness and about two days of mountain fever, my health has been perfect. This mountain fever has been very prevalent among the emigrants since we struck the green or Colorado river.

There are probably 500 teams on this route, and not less than 20,000 persons. We are quite in advance of the main part of the emigrants—not over 1,500 [a] head

of us. We hear that there is great distress behind on account of lack of food, and sickness among the emigrants. The emigrants and cattle are dying by thousands; the cholera is in the rear of the train. It followed us about 300 miles, since which time we have not seen a case. Game has been abundant, principally elk, buffalo and antelope. I can tell you some long and interesting yarns about buffalo and antelope hunting, and will some time when we are in the back room of a saloon in Rochester—some time when I have more leisure than at present. We hear very favorable and flattering accounts from the gold regions by the Mormons.

Yours &c., J[AMES]. E. S[QUIRE].

V

[Great Salt Lake City
July, 1849]²¹

The settlement at the point from which I am now writing was commenced in the month of July, 1847, the second anniversary of which will be celebrated by them on the 24th of the present month. The valley in which the city is located is on the east side of the Lake, and is about twenty-five miles wide, and completely shut in by high mountains, the Utah and Bear River ranges being the principal.²² From the spot where I am now writing I can see the tops of them reaching almost to the clouds, covered with perpetual snow. The city contains about 9,000 inhabitants, and is laid out in squares, the streets running at right angles with each other. These squares are fenced in by one fence running around the whole; the squares are divided into wards, and the wards into blocks, and the blocks into lots—each lot contains one acre and one-fourth of land.

The possession of these was given by drawing lots, in this way: tickets were got up with numbers on them, and put into a hat together, and then drawn out, each man taking the lot bearing the number of his ticket. The houses are built of *adobes*, or sun-burnt brick; they are small, but present a neat and cleanly appearance. The entrance to the valley is over a very rough and mountainous gorge in the mountains, through which the road runs, and at the foot of which the city is situated. The Lake, which is a great curiosity, is 21 miles from the city; the water is a great deal saltier than sea-water, and is so buoyant that a man can float on it without any difficulty whatever. Salt is so plentiful about the shore that it is shoveled up by wagon loads like sand, and drawn to the city. It is coarse and clear, and is very clean. Fine salt is obtained by boiling the water, which yields

21. Reprinted from the Kanesville, Iowa, *Frontier Guardian*, February 20, 1850. This letter had evidently been going the rounds of the press; the prefatory remarks run as follows: "In the *Auburn* [N. Y.] *Daily Advertiser* of Wednesday we find a letter from an adventurer who had reached the Mormon City of the Salt Lake on his way to California, and writes as follows of that newly-found community."

22. The term "Bear River Mountains" was used in 1849 as applying to the whole mountain mass between the upper and the lower Bear River valleys, the southern reaches of which are now designated as the Wasatch Mountains. "Utah Mountains," although applied also to the Uintas, seems to have been used by Forty-niners to designate the range called by the Mormons the West Mountains, but known today by their Indian name, the Oquirrh Mountains.

one third [one-fourth] fine salt. There are boiling springs a few miles from here; also, sulphur and alkali springs, from which good saleratus is obtained.

The country is settled by farmers for forty miles north and south.²³ They are now engaged in harvesting their wheat, which is yielding an abundant crop. They are very strict in enforcing their penalties—punishing each crime according to its enormity, making the thief return four-fold, and pay so much into the public treasury by working on the roads. The Government is composed of a High Council, the President taking the head; they enact laws, try offences, and make suggestions for the good of the community, and all such laws and suggestions are declared from the pulpit every Sunday. Their money consists of treasury notes, which are issued for coin and gold-dust placed on deposit. Arrangements are being made for coining this dust, and establishing a currency of their own.²⁴ Large quantities of gold dust has been brought into the Settlement by discharged soldiers [members of the Mormon Battalion], and those who have gone from there for the purpose of digging, so that all the reports we heard there are confirmed here by those who have been and returned loaded with gold.

The public improvements are carried on by a fund which is raised by every-one giving one-tenth of his yearly earnings for that purpose. They are building a council house of stone—a large, substantial edifice. In that way they also intend to build a temple soon. They are expending large sums on the roads over the mountain, and are projecting a new road across the desert to the south of the lake to California.²⁵ They are an industrious, hospitable people, and have the means within themselves to become rich and powerful.

VI

Great Salt Lake City
Aug. 7, 1849²⁶

Dear Brother.—Since writing to you last from fort Bridger at which place I separated from Doct. Brown, who took the rout to Fort Hall, I with two other waggons came in to this Salt Lake City. We had good roads for a few days after we left Fort Bridger, plenty of grass & water. On the fourth day we traveled through the Snake & Eutaws Indians, their numerous wigwams in the vallye and their countless horses and poneys alongside of the mountains was an interesting sight. Yet not one could be bought or traded of them. The two last days travel before we got here, we had the worst roads we passed over on the whole trip. We traveled up a narrow kenyon crossing a rough dry [?] creek every half hour

23. During the spring of 1849 the first colonizing mission had gone south 45 miles to Fort Utah, the future Provo. Brownville, as Ogden for the moment was being called, some 35 miles north, was occupied by Mormon colonists in January, 1848.

24. The Saints were about to coin their own gold pieces; and they had had a gold-backed currency since the preceding January.

25. This letter is the only indication that has so far come to light that the Mormons ever projected a road south of Great Salt Lake as an improvement on the Hastings Cutoff.

26. Previously unpublished, this letter from Beeson Townsend to his brother, Benjamin Franklin Townsend, St. Louis, Missouri, is printed by courtesy of the California State Library and the permission of Mrs. Eugene Howard, Howardstown, Kentucky, grand-niece of the writer.