JOHN NELSON LETTERS
FROM CALIFORNIA
1851 - 1853

Nebraska State Historical Society

Empire Cannion April 2nd 1851

My dearest sister Mary - I received your letter dated Oct. 3 last Sunday. It is the first letter I have received except the one carried by Joseph Hempe so you may know long looked for.

You requested me to write as soon as I could and tell you all about George's sickness. I shall atempt to gratify you as well as I can.

George was taken sick on sweet water about two hundred and fifty miles from Fort Larime or just about half way between that point and salt lake. The night before he was taken he sat up remarkable late writing in his journal book. The next morning he got up as usual went after the horses while I got breakfast. We eat breakfast and started. Thus far I think I heard no complaint. We had not proceeded far before he was taken with a violent purging which in a few hours caused the color to leave his cheek the flesh to leave his fingers and indeed his whole body was so changed that a stranger to have seen him before he was taken would not have known him. Cramps in his legs next came on. But ere this we had camped and a man was sent back after a doctor which we knew was not a great way behind. I pitched a tent which we found on the road and with two buffalo robes we got from the indians made him as comfortable as I could. The doctor now came and gave him a dose of medicine which done him a great deal of good. I sat up with him that night. The next day he was a great deal better. I prevailed on the doctor to stay that day, and George still continuing to be better until ten or such the next day. The doctor after giving some necessery directions left us. But although George was better he still refused to take any nourishment, cold water was the only thing he would have and that the doctor had forbid him, but we thought him now entirely out of danger and I laid down that night to take some rest. The next morning I was told that he got up during the night went out to the river and drank as much water as he saw fit. You may imagine how shocked I was at hearing this as I well knew it would be attended with dangerous consequences. And sure enough it was from this time his senses appeared to leave him. He would eat nothing and appeared to be perfectly stupid

only when roused by asking him a question which often had to be repeated two or three times before receiving the answer. Things went on this way for two days. I done all that I could to restore him to health but it is useless for me to tell you that. Our horses were suffering for want of grass and what was to be done. I was advised as George was getting no worse to try and move on. I concluded it would be the best way and the next morning I fixed a bed for him in the waggon. We drove very careful and reached strawberry creek about four o'clock here we camped for the night. And that night about dark I observed the hand of death upon him. I can not describe my feelings at this time hundreds of miles from home without a friend to council or assist. That night I watched over him, knowing it would be the last. He did not appear to be in much pain during the night. He spoke not a word. As I said before his mind appeared to be absent. About daybreak his breath became short. He made some motions with his hand and tried to speak but I could not make out what he said. Death came camly and his soul departed without a struggle.

I buried him as decently as circumstances would permit. I marked his grave with two boards wrote on the head one his name and where he was from.

We drove that day as far as the south pass where we found an express where I wrote to father.

I forgot to tell you that Benjamin was very sick at the same time that George was, and at the time George was buried was hardly able to get out of the waggon.

My prospects are pretty good, I have cleared seven hundred dollars and if I only have my health this summer I think there is no doubt of doing well.

I will send you some money as I can do so with safety. Remember me to little Nelson and tell him his uncle cares for him. My best respects to all the folks, Jack and Mary in particular and now my beloved sister good by.

John Nelson

Georgetown Cali Sept 23

A kind letter God bless
Uncle John for having 10
written it. Sept 18 1851

Mr John Nelson

Fairplay

Grant Co

Georgetown Sept. 18th, 1851

Father I believe I have not written you a letter since I have been in California, but you must not think because I have not written you that I had forgotten you; far from it. I think of you all in the day time and dream of you all at night, but enough of this. I promised in my last letter to Mary that I would write you a letter and tell you all about the country, that is, I will tell you all I know about it as well as I can.

You no doubt ere this have heard from the lips of returned Californians enough to satisfy you as to the general of this country so I shall not attempt that but tell about the mines. There was a time when a man could pick up gold in this country almost, but times are altered now. The cream is tooken. All the easiest of the diggings are worked out but California is not worked out yet. There will be good chance here for years yet. The country is abundant in gold and I thin if a man will (work with) industry and economy there is no danger but that he can make something after a while although the cannion or ravine diggings are pretty well worked out yet the rivers are yielding abundantly the damming companies are now under full sway and are generally successful especially on the middle fork of the American river. As I have worked there this summer, I can say more positive of it than the others. But it is not the damming companies alone that are doing well. There is excellent diggings in the banks. They are a new thing and so far have proved rich. They are supposed to be the old bed of the river where it has run under the mountain and caused it to slide and force the river to seek a new channel. Upon the tops of the hill too there has been good diggings struck in several places. But still there are hundreds of men that make nothing- and hard working too, while some lazy devils can make their pile in a short time. Wages are six dollars a day for common hands but a man that can drift can get ten dollars per day.

I am now at Georgetown but I have been working at Big Bar until last Thursday when I met with a slight accident which was the cause of my coming to this place.

I was drifting in a slide there and was caught under a

rock which bruised my shoulder and breast but I am now nearly well and I hope in a few days will be able to go to work again. I have had my health first rate this summer and so has Ben. He's now on Big Bar and has been with me all summer. Len Stone is at Elizabeth. Frank and Bill Clice big Noah George Keys and Sam Whiteside are a mile and a half above Big Bar working a river claim.

Write and let me know how you get on. I have not had a letter from you yet and only one half sheet from Margret, but let me know how you are doing and how the diggings is and if there is any chance to buy a good prospect. I send you a draft for a hundred dollars if you want it. By the by I have not heard from the draft I sent to Mary yet but I hope it is all right. Try and do the best you can and you have bad luck, let me know and I'll help you all I can and hold alone that which was sent but I have it there is no danger of that things only goes right.

Hoping you and the balance of the folks are all well. I subscribe my self your affectionate son

John Nelson

California, Jan. 25, 1853

To James Nelson,

Brother James I take my pen to write you another letter although it is a long time since I received any from home. I don't know hardly what to write anymore than I am in good health and hope you are enjoying the same blessings. I am now about 25 miles south of Georgetown in company with Ben and Thomas Thompson and a man by the name of John Peters. This winter has been very hard. There has been a great deal of snow and rain. Provisions have been very high so that it has been rather the most up the boys that came in this year. Flour has been fifty cents per pound in Georgetown, exactly one half higher than I ever knew it before. This is one reason why I left and went south. We can make three dollars a day here and provisions are more reasonable. I wish you had come out here although times are hard I believe you could make more than you can at home. I shall expect you next season although I don't want you to come unless you think it is for the best. If you do start across the plains, I will tell you what I think is the best way for you to come. Get hold of a chunk of a nag. You need not be very particular for anything almost will do if the grass is as good as it was last year. However if you can afford it you had better get a good one and hire your way, your provisions hauled. In this way you can get through independent of any one for if any thing should happen on the road that they couldn't haul your stuff, you could put what you want on your horse and go on. If you get a good chance you might buy your horse and make arrangements before you leave home, but if you can't, go on to the bluffs and fix out there. There is a good many men going to drive cattle across next year so by having a horse you might get a chance with some of them, but driving cattle in the dust is not very pleasant. But you may have to do as circumstances will permit. I mentioned in something about Ben. He talked some of coming out next season. If you can make arrangements with him he will do the thing that is right by you. The reason why I mention coming on to the bluffs is because there are always some scarce of ready money starting and some have to

sell their teams entirely. Thomas Thomson says he could have fitted out almost one-half cheaper if he had gone through to the bluffs with the money in his pocket.

If this goes straight you will get it about time to start and be sure you write and let me know what you intend doing. I should like to see you and Jackson out here very much. I really wish he would start with you. The night is growing late and I must close. I wonder why I don't get a letter from Saunderson, in fact I wish you would all take it in your heads to write me. Give my respects to all the folks and boy if you're not forgetting Jackson and Heeme James Jeffrey. Good night.

from your

brother

John

P. S. I have not had a letter from Mary for better than a year.