



Thomas Howells (1831-1883): Biography

Note: Seeking to bring together all that is known about Thomas Howells and his world, this treatise was compiled in February 2008, by W. Bart Christenson, Jr. A bibliography of sources appears at the end.

Thomas Howells (TPH) was a man with a divine promise and mission.

In a patriarchal blessing towards the end of his life, he was promised that he would *secure unto thyself an inheritance among the Fathers in Israel*. Moreover, *thy name shall be perpetuated on the earth and handed down to posterity from generation to generation and live in the memory of the Saints*.¹ As shall be presently shown, in order to fully realize this mission and assurances, he had already pursued a life of faith, work and courage.

Although it has now been established that Thomas descended from Welsh aristocracy, for several generations his more immediate progenitors had lived close to the land in the parish of Penderyn, Breconshire or Brecknockshire (now Powys County, since 1974), South Wales.²

Consequently, he was born in Penderyn, on 23 May 1831³, to John and Gwennlian Price Howell. His father was a farmer. He died 22 July 1840, when Thomas was not yet ten years old. This left a grieving widow, age 40, with six young children: Margaret, age 12; Thomas, age 9; Rees, age 7; Gwennlian, age 5; Jenkin, age 4; and Amelia, age 2.⁴

Thomas writes more about this trying time in his brief autobiographical sketch:

*She [his mother] continued in the farming business for several years after my father's death. [But] being that we were so young and it was unprofitable to keep servants, she sold all of the stock and implements of husbandry, and put the money in the bank; and we children had to seek employment besides farming.*⁵

Thomas evidently found work in the local [limestone] rock quarry, as is noted in his son John Francis Howells' (JFH) missionary journal, written some fifty years later at the time he first had opportunity to visit his father's birthplace:

We unhitched [in Penderyn]...at a public [inn] named the 'Red Lion.' The old gentleman that runs it was a widower, and [said] that he had been acquainted with father. His wife had nursed father when he was a babe. The old gentleman was pleased to see me, and cried bitterly when father's [name] was brought up, for he said that his wife had been very fond of father. We visited...the [limestone] rock quarry where father worked when he was a boy....The under manager of the quarry took us down to the churchyard and showed us grandfather John Howell's grave.⁶

Regarding Penderyn itself, in an interesting little booklet published in 1924, *History of Penderyn Parish*, by David Davies (80% in Welsh and 20% in English) the geological history of the area is found. Herein it is theorized that South Wales was formed by glacial activity; that Penderyn lies atop the outcroppings of three giant rock strata composed of sandstone, limestone and coal; and that as a result of this massive geologic activity, great faults persist in the strata below the surface—thus explaining the frequent disappearance of local rivers.⁷ Indeed, JFH described the unusual phenomenon in his journal:

Davis hired a trap [buggy] to take us up to the 'Cave' further up the dingle [a small, deep, wooded valley or dell]. The cave is a small one, and a small river runs in it about the size of City Creek [in Salt Lake City]....There is something wonderfully strange about the small river running through or into the cave. When the stream flows through the cave, the stream sinks and runs under a dry river bed, about 4 miles if I remember right, and then flows on the surface again.⁸

Thus, for the next near decade following his father's early death at age 46, Thomas must have worked in the limestone rock quarries in Penderyn, helping to support his widowed mother and five siblings. We know little else concerning this period of his life. However, the religious environment in the small community was rather restrictive. From the previously referenced 1924 booklet on Penderyn, we learn that compulsory attendance at church was enforced in Breconshire County, Wales, at the time:

Compulsion came in at the Reformation [during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I] in order to uphold the Protestant faith. Those who having no lawful excuse absented themselves from Church were in the time of Elizabeth fined 12d. Afterwards this penalty was changed to £20 per month, but exemptions were allowed in cases where there was no persistent obstinacy. However, the punishment of all persons over 16 years of age, who neglected to go to Church for one month, was very severe. The Toleration Act was passed in 1688, and provided that Protestant Dissenters should be exempted from all such penalties and permitted to attend their own place of worship.⁹

Therefore, it could be speculated that for these and other reasons, during his early teenage years while in preparation for his previously mentioned, designated mortal mission, all the time living in this strait-laced community, Thomas must have been regularly contemplating life's meaning and his purpose therein.

This is a reasonable supposition, since when he was 18 years old and heard the Gospel preached for the first time in Penderyn by two missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints, he elected to accept their message—the only one in his father’s family to do so—and was baptized by Elder John Davis, on 12 October 1849.¹⁰ However, as he returned home after the baptism, he received a very unpleasant welcome from his family.

In 1892, JFH recalled what he had learned about the event:

As I was gazing on the stone that marked the place where his bones [were] deposited [John Howell, TPH’s father/JFH’s grandfather] I thought of the night when father came home to his mother’s house [Gwenllian Price, then a widow with her six children, of whom TPH was the oldest son] in the village of Penderyn, in his wet clothes, where he had been to be baptized into the true fold of Christ. [I compared] the spirit that actuated his heart upon that occasion to the one that was in his mother’s and in her house when they found where he had been and what he had done.

Some of his brothers and sisters condemn him for that act to this day. But I am told that his mother’s heart was turned to him, or at least it was her heart’s desire to visit him before she died. But, for some reason, her desires weren’t granted her.¹¹

Furthermore, during JFH’s mission a half century following his father’s acceptance of the Gospel, he was able to spend significant time with his uncles and aunts, TPH’s siblings. By and large, they were accepting of him, especially his uncle Jenkin (who by this time had become a renowned master-printer and bookbinder in Aberdare, South Wales¹²), and his aunt Amelia. Nevertheless, none of them ever accepted the Gospel in its fullness during mortality. JFH, musing about the matter in his journal, noted the following about his uncle Jenkin:

I have had many serious thoughts running through my mind this day while conversing with Uncle [Jenkin] on his career as a boy, and I contrasted father’s life with that of his. One has been catering to the flattery and sophistry of men, while the other loved to dwell on the Plan of Salvation laid down by [The] One who holds the destiny of men and nations in His hands. They both had the same chance as far as receiving and rejecting is concerned. Father received it and withstood the attacks and abuses of the carnal world and the laughs and jeers of his own family—blinded to the fact that they are laughing at that which is approved by God, while that which they cherish as truth is an abomination in His sight. Father has gone to meet his God, clothed with the Priesthood of His Dear Son. I had a rather downcast feeling, and I retired to bed much earlier than usual.¹³

In order to gather with the Saints in Zion, but certainly having also suffered verbal abuse and social ostracism in the tight little Welsh community after his conversion to the Church, one year later, in the fall of 1850, Thomas, now age 19, determined to immigrate to America. It is clear that he was ambitious, enterprising, and unafraid of hard work, as he tells about the experiences surrounding his prolonged journey to finally reach Utah:

I sailed across the ocean on the ship ‘Joseph Badger’ and landed in New Orleans, and from thence up the Mississippi River in a steamboat and landed in St. Louis; and then I, in connection with another man, hired a team which took us and our luggage to Fravey [probably in the

vicinity of St. Louis, Missouri, where there were known to be a number of shaft mines harvesting clay and coal at the time ¹⁴] *where we remained through the winter, digging coal.*

*In March 1851, I engaged myself with a merchant to drive one of his teams across the plains to Salt Lake City. We started from Jackson County, Missouri, which place was first settled and built up by the Latter-day Saints, who were driven there because of their religion. After a tedious journey, and encountering many snow storms on the way, we reached Salt Lake City, June 6, 1851. I feel grateful to Almighty God for his protecting care, which has been over me since I left my native land, to the present time.*¹⁵

Continuing his story, and based upon personal knowledge as well as further information contained in his autobiography, a granddaughter, Evelyn Howells Nelson, wrote the following about Thomas, in March 1951:

*Immediately on arriving here [Salt lake City, Utah], he engaged himself to an adobe maker and started to learn the business. After a while, he bought a piece of land and carried on the adobe business by himself for a number of years. He then took up the mason trade, and became one of the chief masons and stonecutters in the temple block. He later built his home near the corner of South Temple and Sixth West, of adobe which he himself had made. This house stood until about the 1920's, when the ground was sold to the railroad. Further down the block on Sixth West, he built what would perhaps be called the forerunner of the modern day apartment house, about six or eight houses joined together and also made of adobe. This was known as Howells Row, and was in use until a few years ago.*¹⁶

And concerning Thomas's occupation as a stone mason and as a stonecutter on the Salt Lake Temple block, JFH recalled cutting stone there with his father, as a teenager.¹⁷

Just before his 21st birthday, Thomas reports that he *...was ordained a Seventy by James Furgeson, the 9th of April 1852, and assigned to the 23rd Quorum.*¹⁸ (Interestingly, James Ferguson, 1828-1863, the man who ordained Thomas a Seventy, was a very colorful character in his own right. He was a convert to the Church in Ireland, in 1842, who later served as a missionary, Mormon Battalion soldier, actor, newspaper-man, lawyer, Utah Attorney General, and as the first Sheriff of Salt Lake County.¹⁹)

Thomas tells us more of his life in Utah in his autobiographical sketch, as follows:

*I began to think that it was not good to be alone, consequently I began to look out amongst the young women for one that would suit my taste. I met with Ann Francis, who came from Cardiganshire, South Wales. I married her on the 12th day of October 1853 [he was 22 years old, and she was 20]. We went through the House of the Lord [Endowment House] August 21 [31], 1855, where we had our endowments and my wife was sealed unto me for time and eternity.*²⁰

Ann eventually bore Thomas 13 children (Thomas F., 19 Aug 1854; Margaret F., 6 Jan 1856; Eleanor F. 15 Sep 1857; Ann Elizabeth F., 8 Dec 1858; Judah F., 24 Apr 1860; Amelia F., 9 May 1862; Benjamin F., 9 Apr 1864; John F., 19 Jan 1866; David F., 22 Mar 1867; Daniel F., 22 Oct

1868; Margaret F., 13 Oct 1870; Loyal F., 9 Dec 1872; Mary F., 16 Mar 1874.) Nine survived into adulthood.²¹

Thomas then concludes his autobiography with two terse statements:

I was elected Junior Major of the 'Regiment Infantry Nauvoo Legion, Salt Lake District,' the 11th day of September 1869. [Age 38]

*I was called on a mission to Europe in April Conference 1870. [Age 39]*²²

Fortunately, however, other information exists to flesh out these concise historical notations. At the funeral of his son, John Francis Howells, 26 April 1944, some revealing insights about Thomas were noted by the speaker, James H. Moyle (1858-1946; Democratic Candidate for United States Senator from Utah, 1914; member of Democratic National Committee, 1920²³):

It may be of interest to some of you to say that something of the character of the father [TPH] is exhibited in an unusual way. I remember him when [I was] a little boy, when John was not much more than an infant and the father of the family was called away on a mission, notwithstanding that he left a large family. They were not all born then, I think. There were five splendid boys and four girls.

The father welcomed the mission, notwithstanding the condition that then prevailed and notwithstanding the fact that he was a hard working, industrious man. There was no disposition on his part to get away from the duties at home. But he was a most devoted Latter-day Saint, and when he was advocating the truth of the Gospel, he was happy. I remember well when he returned with distinction and great glory.



I say he was an outstanding man in that little community. One of the things that attracted me as a boy, and showed the respect in which he was held, was the fact that he was a Major in the Utah Militia, a leader of the old Nauvoo Legion, at a time when it was a real distinction to be honored in that organization. They had their training. The officers had fine uniforms. To see Brother Howells in his dignity was a picture to remember. He was a stalwart, straight man, and with his plumed hat, he was a real figure that attracted attention. I can see in his grandsons much of his stature and character. And so I could go on and relate much concerning this good family.

It arouses pride within me when I think of those people with whom I was reared. There were eight families on our block, and seven of the eight families were Welsh people. I grew up, though my father was English and mother American, I grew up as a Welsh boy, because I was so closely associated with these Welsh people. I know of their merit. No community in the world could be found in which there were people that could excel more in devotion to their fellowmen, their families, their faith and Deity, and to the Gospel of our Savior.

I have always felt and frequently expressed myself that I owed a debt of gratitude to that community of people, for I have never known their superiors. In a religious way and in a humble way, they invented in me my duty, that which has been imbedded in this Howells family, and has been characteristic of them all—the love of truth, the love of the Gospel, the love of Deity, the highest and the noblest of all conceptions that emanate man and woman. It has helped strengthen the course of my life. He, in this family who has dishonored the name, I am very happy to say, I know nothing about, and I have followed them quite closely.

You may think it strange that a man may leave his family to go abroad for two years or more without ample support for them. But, these people, each of them sacrificed home and the tenderness of their relations for their religion. They thought nothing of making such a sacrifice. Such was the case of Brother Howells. It is difficult for these grandchildren to realize how they lived. I know because I was there and made contact with them.

Brother Howells had a full city block with a good orchard, fine fertile soil, and he raised all the vegetables that the family needed. They were pitted away in the fall for the coming season. They had a cow and chickens and pigs, and in the early winter, the pork was salted down for the coming year. And Brother Howells knew and felt assured that his family would be alright, if for no other reason than he lived across the street from Bishop Pollard. No man was more devoted to those in need than he. And I know Brother Howells knew his family would be well provided for, if ever in need. Such were the conditions that existed in those days.

I wish I could present a picture of this man that would impress upon his posterity, the integrity, the devotion to truth that emanates from the finest kind of ancestry in this part of the world. And John was a worthy form of that noble sire....²⁴

Regarding his missionary labors overseas, Thomas was called to labor in South Wales among his own people. Although stalwart and true to his calling, in combating the deeply engrained traditions and prejudices of the centuries, he did not realize great success. Indeed, the bitter feelings occasioned by his own conversion two decades earlier still persisted and smoldered. In 1892, JFH reported the following incident in his journal:

I was introduced to the man and woman who run the pub [in Penderyn]. Their name was Jones, and they have no children. The woman was quite an aristocrat and appeared to be quite smart. They knew Uncle Rees and also Jenkin. Jones related the story of father and Rees when father was a missionary—about Rees going to kill him.²⁵

After serving as a missionary for two years, in 1872 Thomas returned to his wife and children in Utah, resuming his occupation as a stone mason and designated role of father/patriarch.

He and Ann had two more children (Loyal F. and Mary F.) following his return, but they both died as infants. Regrettably, Ann died two years later, as well. She died on May 30, 1874, at age 42, of *consumption* (a wasting away of the body, especially due to tuberculosis—or perhaps cancer, or other debilitating disease.) We have no other details concerning Ann’s demise. Nonetheless, the vacancy which her death created in Thomas’s life, left with nine young children to raise, a business to maintain, and a farm to run, was huge. He was now 43 years old. Interestingly, this was about the same age that his mother, Gwennllian Price Howell (already dead, on 1 June 1869) had become a widow in Wales, three decades earlier.

The grief-stricken family rallied to help support one another. The oldest living daughter, Eleanor, age 17, stepped in to help fill her absent mother’s place. She nobly undertook managing the domestic duties of the household and tried as best she could to assist in raising her seven younger, living siblings. She died at age 51, and never married. Ann’s mother, Margaret Evans Francis Jones (she lost Ann’s father when she was 49 years old, and had now remarried), also assisted; but by this time, she was in her mid 70’s. So, the younger children appeared to lack close, daily supervision following Ann’s death.

JFH was only 8 years old when his mother died. Evidently, his maternal grandmother stepped-in to help in his training. However, he did not always listen as he should have. Therefore, realizing problems in memorization while on his mission, he lamented in his journal at his disappointment for not having applied himself better during his earlier years, and *listened to my aged grandmother* [Margaret Evans Francis Jones].

*I have been thinking seriously today of the time and money that I have wasted in my youthful days—not taking council from those that had gone through the experience of youth before me. I thought that I knew it all, and went in a course that neither brought me knowledge or happiness. But, the past cannot be recalled. It has gone forever, and I will try and improve in the future.*²⁶

Even later in life, as well, in a letter to his eldest son, Edmund, JFH again recalls being rash as a young man and going against the counsel of his older siblings and grandmother. He accepted a job working in the roundhouse of the Utah Northern Railroad, in Butte Montana, where he contracted pneumonia and nearly died:

*I will here relate that I went to Butte against the wishes of my older brothers, who threatened to stop me as I was still underage. My old grandmother [Margaret Evans Francis] told me exactly what I could expect if I went. On my return home, she nursed me, and through her nursing and Grandfather Jones’ administrations [Thomas John Jones, Margaret Evans Francis’ 2nd husband], after many months, I regained my normal strength. Sometime afterwards, they both died....*²⁷

Yet again, while serving on his mission, he recalled dreams in which he conversed with his grandmother, still concerned with his eternal welfare. For example, he relates:

*I had a very sweet night’s rest. I dreamed that I was talking with my dear old grandmother....*²⁸

Thus, the now-motherless family experienced tough times following Ann’s death.

At age 48, on May 28th 1879 in Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, five years following his wife's passing, Thomas had his patriarchal blessing. Undoubtedly, he had been troubled with many familial concerns. In the blessing he received helpful assurance and direction:

Thy days and years shall be according to thy faith and the desires of thy heart. Be prudent. Listen to the promptings of the Spirit, and thy pathway shall be made clear and all stumbling blocks removed there from.

Thy Guardian Angel shall direct thy course and give thee power over evil and unclean spirits, and strength of body. Thou shalt see better days....The Lord hath heard thy petition.²⁹

One year later, he took his second wife, Agnes Chambers, a member of the Church from England. They were married and sealed in the Endowment House, in Salt Lake City, 24 June 1880. Thomas was 49 years old; Agnes was 20. Three children blessed their union: Ephraim, 7 May 1881 (who died in infancy); Arthur C., 2 October 1882; and Flora C., 2 February 1884.³⁰ In total, therefore, between his two wives, he fathered 16 children.

Thomas died 17 October 1883, only three years after this second marriage. He was 52. The death certificate states that he died of *inflam[ed] bowels*.³¹ We have no other information.

Although still a relatively young man at the time of his demise, he *was noted for his sterling character and was a devout Latter-day Saint....he had lived a rich, full life and had contributed much to the building of the new Zion in the mountains.*³²

As to realization of the designated life's role that was assured him in his patriarchal blessing, time has more than vindicated this divine promise. Within the ranks of his descendants are hundreds of loyal Church members, including high-ranking ecclesiastical officers and missionaries, successful business people, and scores of active contributors in various respected professions.

To be sure, as was promised him under inspiration, he has secured for himself eternally *an inheritance among the Fathers in Israel.*³³

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