

A MISSION TO THE SOUTH SEA ISLANDS*

By Inez Smith Davis

<http://www.centerplace.org/history/misc/soc/soc34.htm>

In the town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, was the commodious home of a Latter-day Saint by the name of Phillip Lewis. Here in July, 1843, might have been found four men, Addison Pratt, Benjamin Grouard, Noah Rogers, and Knowlton Hanks, Latter Day Saint missionaries bound for the islands of the sea. Passage had already been secured on board a Yankee whaler outbound for nowhere in particular. The boat was the "Timeoleon," and she had no schedule. She might be gone for years, but she would come back with sperm oil. Almost certainly she would, sometime in the next year or so, touch Tahiti. Captain Plasket wanted four hundred dollars to set the men down in Tahiti. Lewis paid three hundred dollars of the amount; and the remaining one hundred dollars, together with another eighty dollars for contingent expenses, was raised by the Saints of New Bedford, Salem, and Boston.

From the hour of its inception, the plan for carrying the gospel to the South Seas had gone rapidly forward. Twelve days from the date of their appointment, the missionaries were all set apart at a memorable meeting in the Presidency's office. Grouard and Pratt were ordained seventies at the same time, and Noah Rogers, already a seventy, was made president of the mission. The other member of the party was Knowlton F. Hanks. By June 1 they were off for New Bedford, visiting branches and conferences by the way.

Knowlton Hanks had been ailing for sometime, but Nauvoo had not been a healthful place, and his friends had talked of the benefits of a long sea voyage and the life-giving warmth of a winter in the tropics. He felt that once at sea his health would improve. The rough trip on the packet from New York to New Bedford had given him a deep-seated cold, which, together with the persistent cough he already had, was giving him serious trouble. Every few moments his body was wracked with coughing. Finally he suggested going to Boston where the members of the Quorum of Twelve would be in conference, and ask for administration.

Pratt never forgot that trip on the stagecoach with Hanks to Boston. The sick man had insisted on giving his seat inside the coach to a lady and taking a less comfortable one outside with Pratt. Terrible fits of coughing shook his emaciated frame, and in the periods of fatigue that followed them, Pratt feared his companion might never live to reach Boston. Supporting him in his arms, he prayed silently that they might safely reach their destination. But even the rites of the church failed to do very much. He begged them not to write to Nauvoo for fear he might be recalled. He wanted to go on, and if he must die, he said whimsically, let it be as near his mission field as possible.

All through July, August, and September the men waited. On the 9th of October, they were summoned to the boat. The blasphemous charities of the crew mingled with the prayers and farewells of the New England Saints who had gathered to see them off. It was an ungodly ship and a wicked crew, despaired of by even the zealous Addison Pratt, who wrote in his first letter home that he feared "there was little hope for them." The captain would have no prayers or sermons on board, and the missionaries had to content themselves with almost daily religious discussions. There were eight fellow passengers, not including the ship's mascot, an enormous land terrapin, captured on a previous voyage in the Galapagos Islands. There were Doctor

Winslow, his wife, their three children, and their Irish maid, and a Mr. and Mrs. Seth Lincoln, whom the missionaries properly characterized in their first letter to Nauvoo as "Baptists who might someday be Latter Day Saints."

The first few days were stormy, and Hanks stayed in his berth, but later came fair winds and a smooth sea, and he joined the group on deck, talking of home and the "new religion," and laughed, as they all did, watching little Charles and Lizzie Winslow ride the great terrapin about the deck. But not many days passed before he became so ill he could no longer leave the cabin. The time was divided into watches of three hours, each of the three men taking turn by the sickbed. Anxious hours passed into days and weeks; still he lingered, growing daily thinner and weaker. It was about evening on the second day of November that Pratt, watching by his side, felt the end was near and lengthened his watch another three hours. Finally he turned the watch over to another of the brethren, but two hours later was summoned hurriedly to the bedside to see Hanks fold his own hands upon his breast and pass away.

There was but one more service to be done. Silent for once were the oaths of the crew as all was made ready for the saddest duty known to seafaring folk. A plank was laid on the starboard gangway, a piece of canvas on it. The body, wrapped in a sheet, was placed there, an eighty-pound bag of sand at the feet, and the old sailmaker sewed up the canvas shroud that was to be its only coffin. "The top-gallant masts were furled, the courses hauled up, and the main and mizzen topsails were hove aback, the noble ship stopped her headway," says Pratt, "and lay in gentle motion, as if to witness the solemn scene." The American Flag hung at half-mast, and all stood uncovered while Noah Rogers offered prayer. Then the plank was gently tilted, and the canvas-covered body slipped feet foremost into the waves. The log book chronicled latitude 21 degrees 34 minutes north, longitude 26 degrees 11 minutes west of Greenwich.

So Knowlton Hanks, the first missionary to die abroad, left his three brethren to finish their mission alone. A bit of old sail had been his coffin, the deep sea his grave, and a line in a whaleman's yellowed logbook his only epitaph.

The course taken was a devious one, visiting in turn waters known to be good whaling grounds. The first port of call was at Cape Verde Islands for salt, then along the coast of Brazil to the whaling grounds near the coast of Trinidad. They then shaped their course for the Cape of Good Hope, then towards Cape Chatham, the southwest point of Australia. On March 8, 1844, they arrived off Cape Chatham, cruised along Bass Straits, but could not land immediately, so sailed off to the south of Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania).

On March 19, it commenced blowing in squalls of rain, sleet, and snow. On the 20th, as the weather lighted up between squalls, they could see the southwest point of what is now Tasmania. But the gale continued, increasing to a fury. Wind roared and whistled through the rigging, seas ran mountain high, crashing over the deck, but the sturdy old "Timeoleon" weathered the gale with only a few boards off the bulwarks, and the loss of two whale boats. Without attempting to land they shaped their course for the west point of New Zealand, a favorite resort for whalers. Here was not only sperm oil, but large settlements of English speaking people, beautiful climate, and productive soil. The missionaries listened to the alluring talk of the crew and determined to go ashore at New Zealand and start a mission there, instead of Tahiti.

To be at last free of the dirty whale ship--the decks slippery with blubber and blood, the smell of burning blubber and cracklings that lingered in the tropic air for weeks, a sickening odor, by

which sailors were wont to say they could scent a whaler twenty miles to windward--would be joy unspeakable! The missionaries got ready their luggage and prepared to disembark in New Zealand. But the weather continued stormy, until Captain Plasket, disgusted, bade good-by to New Zealand waters, without attempting to land, and sailed for Tahiti.

Thus the entire missionary destiny of a whole church was changed by equinoctial storms, head winds, and the decree of the rough master of a Yankee whaler!

For seven dreary months the passengers had walked the dingy decks of the old whaler with only a few hours ashore, and those few hours now months in the past.

What had once seemed an unusual and rather pleasant experience became a humdrum prison sentence to Noah Rogers and Addison Pratt. Life at sea was no novelty to Benjamin Grouard, for though he was but twenty-four years of age, he already had ten years' experience with the sea. He loved it.

Nearly a month had passed since they had seen land--the Three Kings off the northwest coast of New Zealand on the last day of March. The wind now blew fresh and fair, and the captain announced that he would land at the island of Heitaroa, three hundred miles south by west of Tahiti. Except for a few barrels of fish, he had taken no supplies since he left Cape Verde Islands, and Heitaroa was renowned among seamen for pigs and fruit. But on the last day of April, to his intense disappointment, they sighted Tubuai, an event not only unanticipated, but one which Captain Plasket had earnestly striven to avoid. He sent off a boat, on the long chance of being able to get supplies there, and found, to his surprise, he could get all he needed. Accordingly, the next day, May 1, 1844, a landing was made.

They were given a royal welcome, and as soon as the natives learned there were missionaries aboard, they began to plead with them to stay, for there had been no white missionaries on that island for many months. Addison Pratt at once agreed to remain with them. The captain and Doctor Winslow left gifts and supplies, and each in his own way sought to make the future pleasant for Pratt. The captain told the young native king, with mock sternness, that he was leaving them a missionary, but if he were not treated well the "Timeoleon" would return and take him away again. Doctor Winslow, an avowed free thinker, told Pratt that if he ever wanted to leave the island, he must feel free to draw on him for any amount necessary and consider it a gift if he were never able to repay! So the "Timeoleon" sailed away and left Addison Pratt, the first South Sea Island missionary, alone among strangers.

On May 14, Tahiti was sighted forty miles away, and the next day the "Timeoleon" anchored in the bay and had permission of the French Government to land. The island was in the midst of a revolution. The French had deposed Queen Pomare, and the natives were under arms some ten miles from Papeete. Doctor Winslow, after looking over the situation, reshipped his goods to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), but the Lincolns, Rogers, and Grouard decided to remain and make the best of it.

The first sermon was preached by Benjamin Grouard in the house of Kim the pilot, in Taunoa, his text from Isaiah 18: 1-3. Among his congregation were Mr. and Mrs. Seth Lincoln, his fellow passengers on the "Timeoleon" and three other Americans or Englishmen, who soon became the first fruits of the church in Tahiti. The latter three were a Mr. Richmond, William Jefferson, and John Hawkins the five being baptized in the order named. John Hawkins was baptized late in

September or early in October. In his ordination, he was promised that he would live to a good old age, and do a good work among the natives. He always remembered this promise, and although a day came when there was a price on his head "for taking up arms against the French," he had no fear of death; and after he came into the custody of the French and the hour approached for his execution, he, still thinking of his ordination promise, was sure he would have a long life. He was pardoned on the very day he was to die, and lived to fulfill the prophecy spoken over his head.¹

The Lincolns immediately opened their home to the missionaries. Friends were slowly made among the natives on account of the misrepresentations of the English missionaries, who spared no pains to avoid the elders and to teach the natives to do the same.

Just previous to John Hawkins' baptism in October, Noah Rogers decided to leave Grouard in charge of the small group of members in Tahiti and try his luck on other islands of the group. He went to the island of Huahine and sought out those of his own race. Nearly every white man on the island, he was told, kept either a gambling den or a saloon, except the missionary, and he would not even talk to Rogers. Here also Rogers found every door closed by the London Missionary Society, so he went on to another island and still another, always with the same result.

In the meantime Seth Lincoln had been ordained and placed in charge of the small group in Tahiti, and Grouard felt that he might safely visit Addison Pratt, who was still on the island of Tubuai and reporting wonderful success. Very early in the year, he accordingly went to Tubuai and found Pratt in excellent spirits and good form. In fact, he admitted that while he left Nauvoo weighing only one hundred and fifty-four pounds, "steelyards drawing two hundred pounds now would scarcely weigh him."

Pratt had a great story to tell. The first baptism was on July 6, 1844, his first convert being a shipbuilder on the island. This was followed on July 22, by nine more baptisms, and on July 29 a branch had been organized with eleven members. On August 5 Communion was administered for the first time, with fresh coconut water instead of wine.

Pratt had found an excellent home in Tubuai with one of the natives and his wife. All the royal family on that island had been baptized, and Pratt had the honor of marrying the young king (who was a widower) to his present queen. This royal alliance, however, had some drawbacks, for Pratt soon found himself the chief adviser of the king, a sort of unofficial, but none the less authoritative, prime minister. He was even wakened up at night at times to be consulted upon a crime wave of petty thievery on the other side of the island, or weightier matters of state having to do with foreign relations, notably the French Government and the London Missionary Society.

Sensing his unpopularity with the latter institution, Pratt avoided embarrassing entanglements with difficulty. In vain he sought to emphasize the fact that he was a minister and not a statesman; the natives could not be convinced that he was not the last court of appeal on all questions. Practically the whole island had joined the church. The shipbuilders were now nearly finished with their work, and they actually talked seriously of loading the whole branch on the vessel when she was finished and sailing away to Zion! They planned to go up the Columbia River and across the Rocky Mountains to Nauvoo.

Over a year had passed now. It was February, 1845, and not a letter since they left New Bedford. Ships called and sailed away, bringing no news from home, each departure leaving them lonelier than before. Finally a ship captain told them he had heard that Joseph Smith was dead and the church scattered.

"We do not believe it," wrote Addison Pratt, "but if one half of the church is dead, and the other half has denied the faith, I know the work is true, and by the help of God, I am determined to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth, the Lord giving me strength to do it."

But in spite of all his brave assurance, he admitted that just one letter from home would mean more to him than all the letters he had ever had in his life before. After the sun had set and before darkness fell, he often wandered away from his new friends to dream of those he had left at home. As he walked along the beach and thought of the seas that rolled between him and those he loved, he says the question came unbidden, "Has death made any inroads there?" But his only answer was the roar of the breakers on the reef.

In the meantime, Noah Rogers visited Moorea, Huahine, Raiatá, Bora-bora, Tahaa, and thence to Mote, one of the Harvey Islands, then to the island of Manga, where he found no missionary and offered to stay, but was shown letters bidding the natives to receive no missionaries or teachers unless they came with letters from the English missionaries at Tahiti. The natives understood that all who did not have these letters were pope havaare (lying Catholics), and had therefore passed a law that no white man should live among them. From there Rogers went to Rurutu, where he heard the same story. He was obliged to return to Tahiti without success.

Grouard had gone to the islands lying to the eastward and had not returned, but there was a letter from him saying that he was on Anaa, one of a chain of thirty or more low coral islands, where there were no vegetables, but plenty of coconuts, fish, and pigs. He wrote that he was happy in his work there and had baptized twenty of the leading men on that island and more were investigating.

Finally on July 3, 1846, Rogers took passage on the "Free Brother" (or "Three Brothers") for home, leaving Addison Pratt in charge of the mission. After a passage of one hundred and thirty days, he arrived in Nantucket on November 6, 1846, the first Latter Day Saint elder to circumnavigate the globe. He proceeded at once to Philadelphia, where he baptized two of the passengers whom he had converted on the trip over, and then went on to Nauvoo, arriving there December 29, just in time to join in the long westward trek of the Saints driven from Nauvoo. December in Nauvoo and the awful hardships of that terrible trip across Iowa in the dead of winter were too great a change from the tropical skies of Tahiti, and his was the first grave made by the "Mormon" pioneers at Mount Pisgah, although, sadly enough, it was not to be the last one.

Addison Pratt continued to labor in Tubuai and Tahiti until March 28, 1847, when he sailed from Papeete on the "Providence." Arriving in Salt Lake City, September 28, 1848, he united his destiny with the faction there. Benjamin Grouard loved the people of Anaa and the low islands. He continued to serve there, being in charge of the mission after the departure of Addison Pratt. He carried on alone, looking forward to reinforcements. In December, 1844, he had written his wife that he had engaged passage on a whaler, which had gone out to fill up, and would return home in ten months "if the Lord wills."²

But for some reason he was still on the islands, wandering and teaching from island to island. Wherever he went from village to village, he was followed by a group of eager natives. When he stopped to rest, he preached to them by the roadside and baptized as he went along. He not only preached, but taught them the duties of everyday life, helped them establish their boundary lines, drew up their business contracts, and taught them to do various kinds of manual work. He showed them the simplest methods of farming, helped the women to learn to cook, and taught the children to read and write. It had been years since he had seen any kind of money. His clothing wore out; he went barefoot, dressed in two simple garments, trousers and shirt. He ate the native food of the people among whom he labored, fish and coconuts. Any simple native hut was his home, and all his people obeyed his every wish as if it were law.

He went to Tubuai and built a schooner of eighty tons burden with not a penny in hand to buy any kind of material when he started it. He cut all the timber with his own hands, tumanu wood, whipsawed it and designed the vessel, and with the help of the natives completed it in eighteen months. "Home" was now the cabin of his little ship; he enjoyed it, for he had been a sailor since he was fourteen. His field of service was greatly increased for, commander of his own little boat, he was able to go from island to island as he desired until Pratt and four other elders returned from Salt Lake City on May 24, 1850. Doubts assailed Grouard when he heard the stories brought by those who had been with the faction in the West, but he guarded the truth zealously, so that when Apostle T. W. Smith visited the remnant in Anaa thirty years later, they knew only the purest principles of the gospel³ and the fact that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. Even the exacting T. W. Smith received them gladly on their original baptism. But long before that time (May 16, 1852), Grouard, Pratt, and the other missionaries had left the islands by the edict of the French Government, forbidden to longer carry on their work there.

Grouard met only disappointment on his return. Of that return he said later to D. S. Mills: "At last I was going home. Home, did I say? Good heavens, I had no home. I was alone in the world. Shipwrecked, worse than I was shipwrecked once upon an uninhabited island." With that shipwreck, Grouard's religious life abruptly ended. He never united with any faction of the church, but went to the gold fields of northern California, built up a comfortable fortune for himself, and made a good home in Santa Ana, where he died March 28, 1894.⁴

* Adapted from *The Cruise of the Timeoleon*, by the author; *Vision*, Volume 44.

1 "Events in the Life of Elder John Hawkins of Tahiti," by Joseph Burton, *Autumn Leaves*, Volume 16, page 396. John Hawkins was born at Maidstone, County of Kent, England, October 6, 1817. He left England June 20, 1837, arriving in "Van Diemens" Land, October 20. Left there February, 1840, for Tahiti, arriving there June 3, 1840.

2 *Times and Seasons*, Volume 6, page 980.

3 This was but natural, for from their arrival in the islands the first missionaries had insisted upon the polygamous chieftains being married to their first wives and abandoning the practice of polygamy before baptism, consequently new doctrine brought by Addison Pratt was a radical reversal of Grouard's teaching. For early teaching in regard to polygamy see "Events in the Life of Elder John Hawkins of Tahiti," by Joseph Burton, *Autumn Leaves*, Volume 16, page 546.

4 While in the Islands in 1846, Benjamin P. Grouard married a daughter of a high chief of Anaa. When he returned to the United States in 1852, he brought his wife and three sons and settled in San Bernardino, California. Homesickness and climate were too much for the island girl, and in 1853 she and the eldest and youngest sons returned to the islands, leaving the middle son, Frank, with the Addison Pratt family. The Pratts moved to Utah when Frank was five years old. Later he ran away from home, and became lost to his father, who believed him dead. Frank became a famous Indian scout under General George Crook. He and his father met again in Sheridan, Wyoming, in 1893, after a separation of thirty-seven years. "I would have known you among ten thousand," said father to son. See *Life and Adventures of Frank Grouard* by Joe DeBarthe, reprinted by the *Buffalo Bulletin*, Buffalo, Wyoming, 1894.