

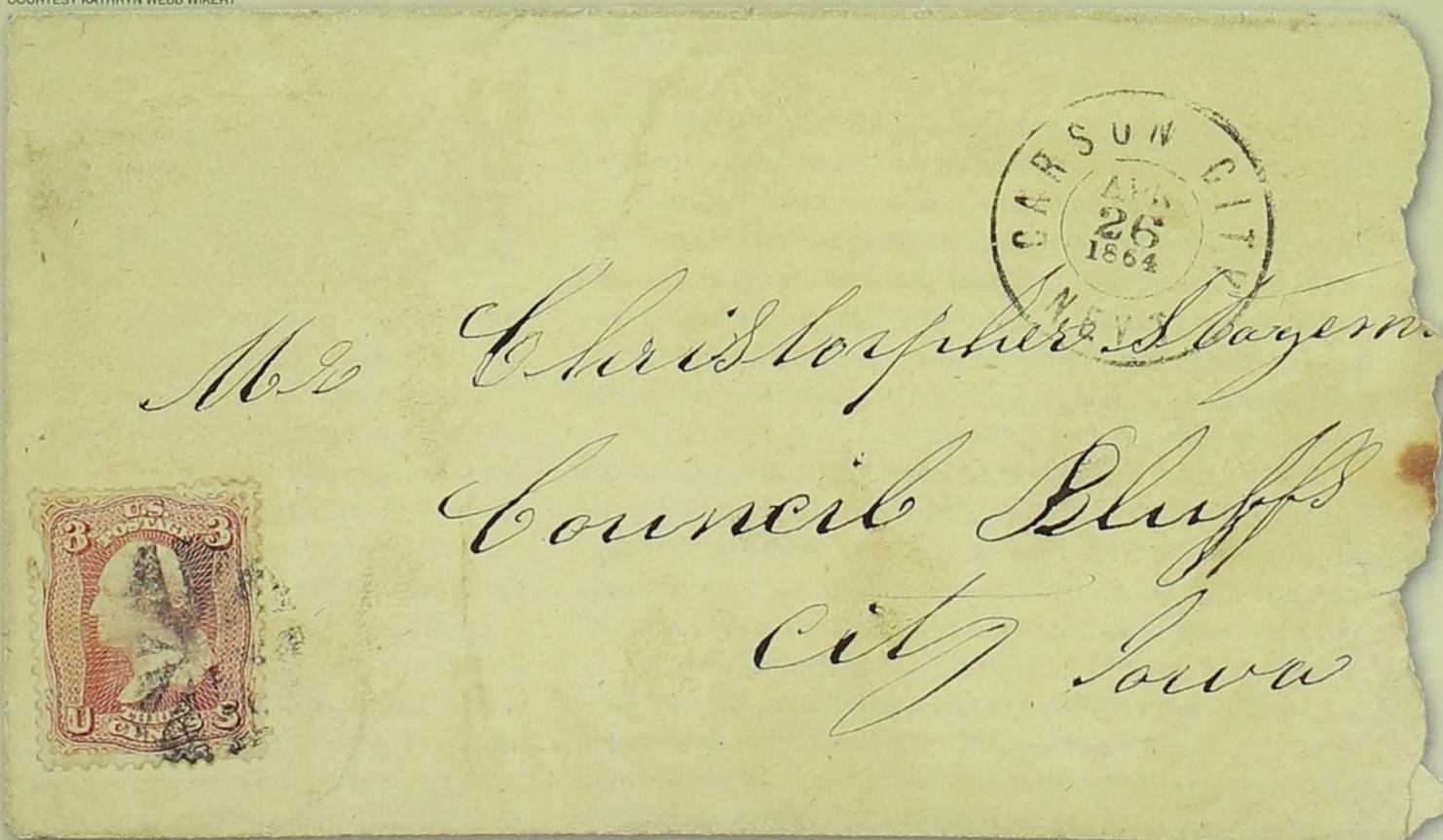
THE WEST exerted a mighty pull on Iowans in the mid-19th century, attracting them with tales of adventure and promises of new beginnings, enticing them from their homes.

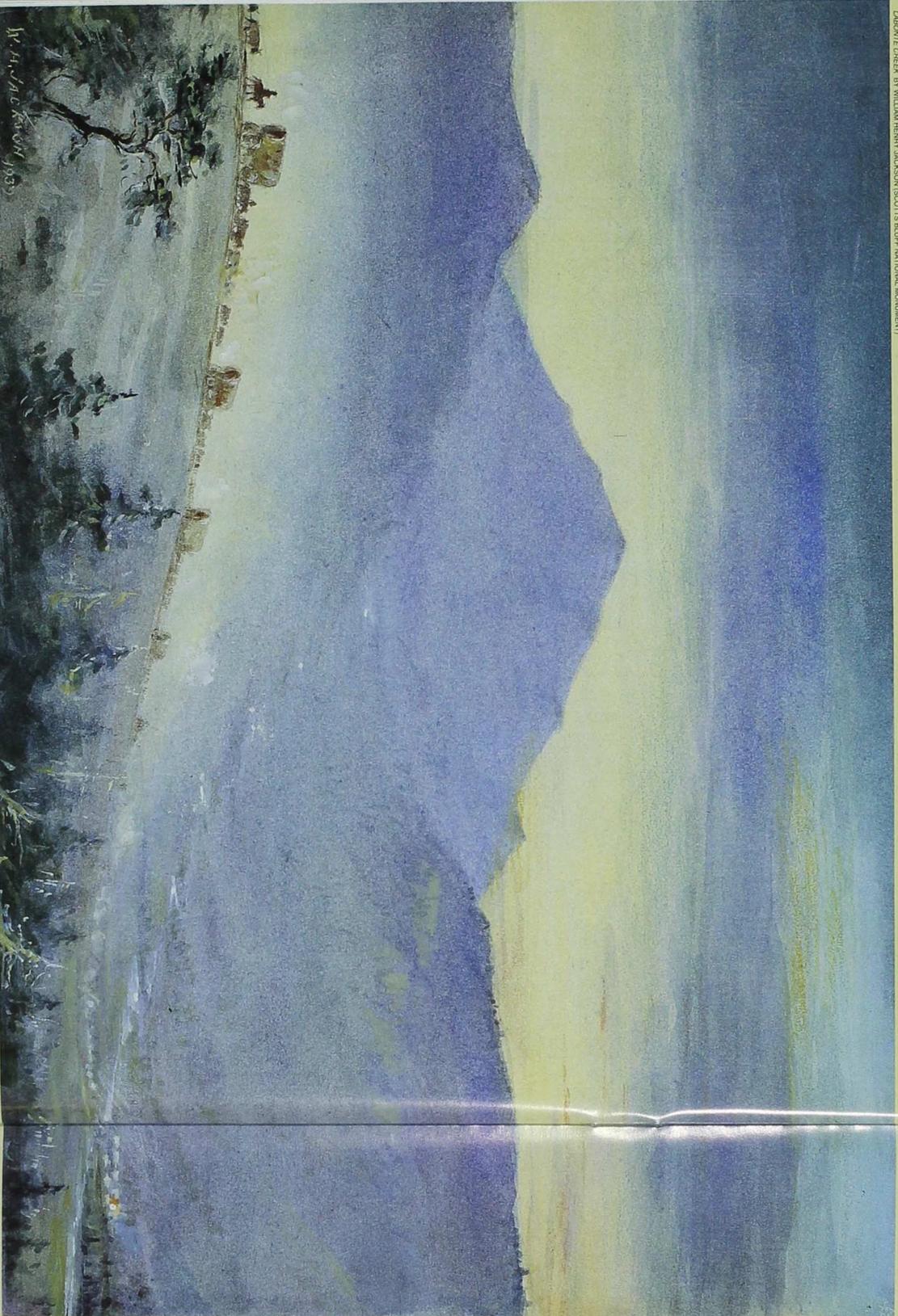
Home to siblings Sarah, John, and James Stageman, from their various points on the western trails, was a distant log cabin in Pottawattamie County, Iowa. There lived Christopher and Mary Stageman, their parents, the center of their affections and the recipients of their heartfelt letters for one long decade.

Home had not always been this cabin along Mosquito Creek; the Stagemans, like so many Americans on the move in the 19th century, were not yet rooted to one place. Christopher and Mary and their five children—Sarah, Harriet, John, James, and Mary Ann—arrived in America in 1840 from England, where Christopher had worked in livery and as a farrier on an estate near Carlisle. For eleven years the family farmed in the close-knit community of Fair Hill, Maryland.

In 1851, the Stageman family joined the westward movement of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, though only the eldest child, 23-year-old Sarah, had been baptized Mormon. Perhaps Christopher intended to build a mill in the new Mormon territory; a decade earlier he had brought with him from England the detailed diagrams of a gristmill. Sons John, now 20, and James, 17, were no doubt feeling the pull of the West, and perhaps daughters Mary Ann and Harriet were as well.

COURTESY KATHRYN WEBB WIKERT





# Home to Iowa

## Letters from the western trails

Text and transcriptions by Kathryn Webb Wickett

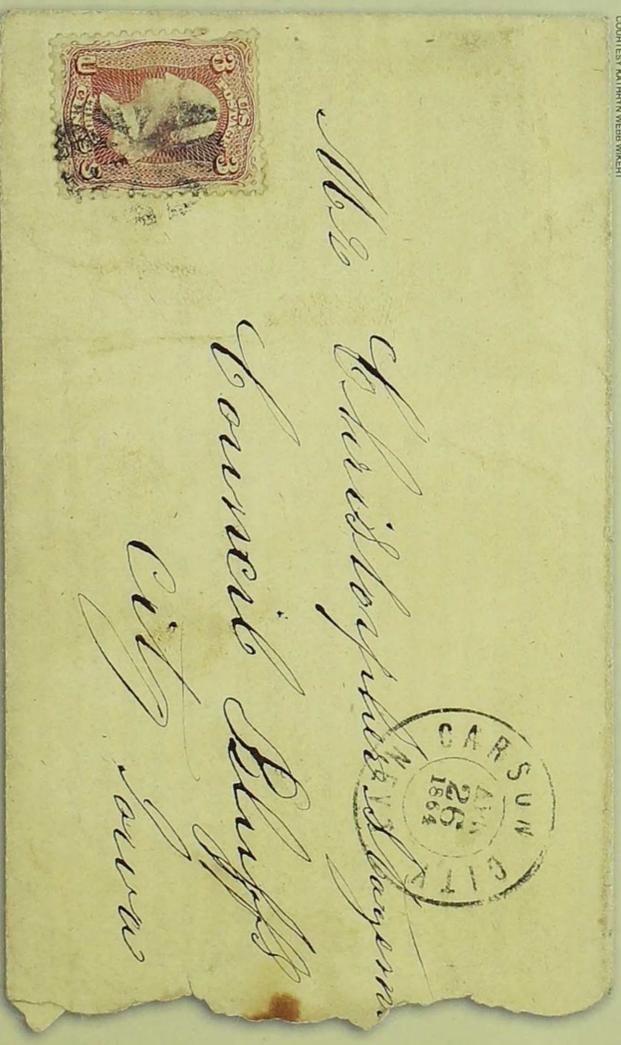
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COURTESY/KATHRYN WEBB WICKETT





Traveling with a group of Mormon families, the Stagemans came by steamboat up the Missouri River to Wray's Landing at Kaneshville, the center of the Mormon settlements along the western edge of Iowa. Kaneshville (soon to be renamed Council Bluffs) served as the last major staging area for Mormons headed to their Zion, the Great Salt Lake Valley, and as an outfitting point for gold rushers headed to California and other emigrants headed to Oregon.

These vast movements of people were pouring through Kaneshville, buying food and supplies for the long westward trek. By June of 1851, some 4,500 wagons and 22,000 head of horses, mules, oxen, and cows had passed through town already that year. This level of migration would continue for another two years.

Disillusioned with Mormon practices, Christopher and Mary Stageman chose to remain in Iowa, purchasing 160 acres three miles east of Kaneshville. The Iowa soil promised abundant crops, and the Missouri valley

**Kaneshville (later renamed Council Bluffs) attracted Mormons, gold rushers, and other westward travelers buying provisions and crossing the wide Missouri River in the late 1840s and early 1850s.**

was rich in wildlife. The seven Stagemans settled in.

Within the year, 22-year-old Harriet married Francis Stine and moved to Pleasant Valley, a Mormon settlement just south of Kaneshville. By the next summer, Sarah had joined one of the last wagon trains for the Salt Lake Valley. Sarah's commitment to the Mormon faith had not faltered, and by going on ahead, she hoped to lead the way for the rest of her family.

Having Sarah leave Iowa, knowing they might never see her again, must have been heartbreaking for Christopher and Mary, especially in light of their disenchantment with Mormon practices and their realization of the rugged journey facing their daughter.

Heartbreak again washed over them in the fall of

1852. While Christopher was back east settling the sale of his Maryland farm, daughter Harriet died unexpectedly. "The shock that I felt I cannot describe," he wrote to wife Mary, "and what I felt at the time I cannot explain. — The very story the people in Philadelphia kept from me, I was told [in Fair Hill]. — They meant to have broken it out to me by degrees, when I returned, and then I should have been prepared."

Christopher and Mary Stageman were not done saying goodbye to their children. In the fall of 1853, John headed west. He would make good, he surely told his parents. He would visit Sarah. He would write home.

Thus began another great migratory movement—this time, of letters, tucked into envelopes and sent back east to the Stageman home on Mosquito Creek. Over the next several years, Christopher and Mary would receive numerous letters from their children out west, carefully unfolding the thin pages, studying them in the dim light of winter or the glare of summer, then refolding them, putting them in a safe place.

The habit continued for a century and a half. Five generations of Stagemans preserved the treasured letters in a weathered wooden box. The letters bring to light the affections and obligations of family, the push and pull of human relationships, the struggles between a child's definition of success and a parent's of duty.

The forces that pulled the Stagemans over the Missouri and into the West worked on multitudes of Americans. Those who went west often sent letters to those they left behind, but not all of them were as emotionally honest as those written by the Stageman children to their parents in western Iowa.

**When John Stageman writes to his parents in March 1854, he is visiting his sister Sarah, but he does not reveal in the letter that she has become the third wife in a polygamous marriage. Instead, other news fills the letter—his plans to head farther west, the high costs of food, and, for his younger brother, James, descriptions of an Indian raid (the Native Americans in Utah Territory were suffering from the encroachment of the Mormons onto their traditional hunting and food-gathering areas). John also suggests his parents talk with local storekeeper and former Council Bluffs mayor Cornelius Voorhis regarding their new son-in-law, Charles Bassett.**

*[Great Salt Lake Valley] March the 14 1854*

My dear parents

It is with pleasure that I take up my pen to inform you that I received your letter and I was rejoiced to

here from you . . . Sarah received one from you and one from Maryan when I received this I thought you had forgot me but I think different now for you sent me a good letter I had got very home sick to here from you . . . I am in the valley of the grate salt lake and I have been in this valley over seven months and have not made one cent. I wold come back this spring if I could for I know that I could do best their but I expect to leave this valley on the 20 day of april for California trusting in god for protection praying that god will keep me from all harm I wold have gone before but Sarah was not married and I did not like to leave her but now she is married to charls basset and she [h]as got a good home and she is well satisfied. He is well of[f] and he is a nice man If you want to know about him ask vories in Kanessville.

I shal not stay over a year if I can get away and I would like it first rate if father would buy me a little place cloce by his. I think I shall be able to pay for it again I come back.

James I must now tell you something about my silf I live about 20 miles from the city I have spent a grate deal of money in this valley every thing is dear since but a man as to work for 1 dollar per day flour is 6 dollars per hudred wheat is 2 dollars a bushel potatos is 1 dollar per bushell coffee is 40 cents a pound sugar the same tobaco one dollar a plug leather is 75 a pound for a pair of shose that you could buy for 80 cents we have to pay 4 dollars but if a man as a start and go to farming he can do very well for he can rase from 40 to 50 bushels of weat per acre and every thing els acodingly but he [h]as to pay . . . [a] tenth of all he possess and all he rases

. . . James you told [me] to tell you something about the Indians. There [They] are very bad about to weaks a go they Stole a bout 1 hudred and fifty head of cattle and about 40 men put after them an[d] they will slay them all and that will rase [h]ell among the indeans the mormens are all forted up it will keep them all the time gading [guarding] the indeans if I was to stay in the valley thed [they'd] send me off to preach to the nations of the earth they would give me any thing if I would stay but I have other things to find

James I send a few lines to lisebel garner tell her that I was glad to here from [her] I got the bracelet she sent to me and I was glad of it. I intend to keep it to remember her by and tell her that I will not get married till I come back and if she is not married it will be her and me for it there is plenty of girls in this valley and they would be glad to marry me but they cannot comit James I have pade to dear for my w[h]irl I would give every hair on my head if I could



see father and mother and James and maryann and frank and lenard but it [is] all to no use but I must do the best I can . . . james all I have to say to you and every young man if you know when you ar well of[f] stay where you are . . . I bid you good by for I am going [on] a long jorney you need not answer this letter

Here I go good by good by  
my heart is ful I have to cry

John Stageman

April the 18 1854

G S L [Great Salt Lake]

My dear parents I take my pen at this time to inform you that Sarah received a letter from James and Sarah red it to me and I was glad to [h]eare from you . . .

I thought as my brother in law [Charles Bassett] was going to cainesville I would send a few lines to you to tell you that I start for california monday next and you need not answer this letter James you said

**The Great Salt Lake Valley became Sarah Stageman Bassett's new home, but the Mormom refuge was only a stopover for her brother John in 1854.**

you was going to sea but you take a brothers advice and stay at home for traveling is not wat it is cut up to be If I was home again I would never leave for it is a dogs life to live . . .

John Stageman

**N**ow Sarah writes her parents, trying to explain her feelings, still hoping they will come west. Her longing will be a frequent theme.

Great Salt Lake City Sunday May 7th 54

My dear Mother

I sit down this day to write a few lines to you it gives me the greatest of pleasure I can assure you

Ah! But a far greater pleasure were you only here that I could converse to you the same. Oh! My dear Mother never before since I left you have I shed tears to see you until now. Last fall when John came in I was quite unwell & could have given anything to have seen you & many times besides . . . I can truly realize there is no care like a mother's. No my dear Mother I was aware of that before I left home I counted the loss most absurdly — but I was truly convinced this was the work of the Most High God — & truly it is — & you were disposed not to believe it — & I thought I must be up & a doing — opening the way for you — though thorney be my path . . .

. . . O if I could only think for one moment you were coming this fall to spend the winter happy should I be. I could wait patiently for you, until then. Ah! I know too well it is not the case — I am writing thus to you — but perhaps you have turned your back upon me on account of my situation . . .

If my husband was at home I should not feel as I do — but I should have that same desire to see you — But he is not here — & you are not here . . . I know it is all Mormonism — & the greater the trial the greater the crown.

. . . John has gone to California . . . When you send any more letters pray for them to whom you send — & they will be sure to come safe . . . I hope you have seen Mr Bassett before this time. I trust you will continue to write to me — will you?

The spring is rather backward here — we have had quite a severe winter. We have had quite a covering of snow this morning — it is quite cold at present. The gardens though look quite nice. I was at a ball in april when we had asparagus, lettuce, radishes, green cucumbers etc etc.

I pray my Heavenly Father & My God to bless you continually & direct & control all your doings by his unseen hand at all times, for your best good.

. . . I would send my likeness now but I am so thin you would be astonished — thinner than when Charles left.

Sarah Bassett

Father — what a pleasure you would afford me would you write me a few lines if they were but a few

**H**aving arrived in California, John writes from Gold Springs and Columbia, in the southern mining region. Vast amounts of gold had been discovered there the previous year—though John still wonders if he could make more as a plasterer. Mail from California to Iowa now takes about five weeks; John will write often.

*Gold Spring [California] Aug 2nd 1854*

Dear Father

. . . I arrived here the 10th day of July — had a hard time crossing the plains — I am mining doing midling well & enjoy good health — I would wrote sooner but had not an opportunity as I was so buisy in getting things arranged for mining — Tell James not to come to California — Tell him if he wants to lead a dogs life to come but if he knows wen he is well off to remain where he is as it is a mighty hard country. I expect if nothing happens to be at home in 12 or 15 months as there is no chance for any one except mining & the country is dug over [so] that it is very hard to make much — You must excuse the short letter as the Mail is about closing — I will write more soon — Write as soon as you get this

Yours Affectionately  
John Stageman . . .

*Columbia [California] November 24th 1854*

Dear parents

I feel thankfull that I enjoy this opportunity of embracing you with these few lines. I have not herd from you since I have been in California and I would like to here from you dear parents — I have enjoyed good health. I have got a good claim at present and am a doing verry well but I think I will leave California before long weather I make any thing or not if god spairs my life for it is the wickedest place I ever saw and I tell you that a man can make more in the States than he can here for the digings is not so good as they are cract up to be — I have not herd from Sarah since I left her. I cannot get a answer from her and you must send me word about her but I advise you all never to go to salt lake for yo[u] will not like the ways of the people . . .

please excuse this spelling and writing for I have worcd very hard . . .

John Stageman . . .

*[Columbia, California] Febuary th 3 1855*

My Dear Brother [James]

. . . I was glad to here from you but I was sorry to here that my dear mother was sick . . . James I am out of a claim at this present time — you wanted to know wether I was saving any money or not. James it is [h]ard work for any man to save money at this presant time for the digins is about run out — i ham not saving much — i could save a little if i would work at my trade but i did not com to california to work at it. i cam to mine to make my pile or nothing but it is a slim chance at present.



[Published at the WIDE WEST OFFICE, 181 Clay Street, San Francisco.]

**RIVER MINING.**

February the 3<sup>rd</sup> 1855

My Dear Brother

I received your letter January the 20<sup>th</sup> 1855  
 and I was glad to here from you but I was sorry to  
 here that my dear mother was sick I pray to God  
 that mother may be restored to good health a gain  
 I hope that those few lines may find you as they live  
 we that is in good health James I am out of a claim  
 at this present time you wanted to know wether I was  
 saving any money or not James it is ard work for any  
 man to save money at this present time for the  
 wages is about run out i have not saving much  
 i could save a little if i would work at my trade  
 but i did not com to california to work at it  
 i came to mine to make my pile or nothing but it is

John enclosed in this letter two "small speciments of gold wich I dug up with my one hands one for you and the other for mary ann" and then added: "the large peace for James." To his mother and father he promised a present when he came home.

I feel glad to here that you are getting a long so fast with your farming James i want you to send me how times is in iowa and if I was to com home wether I could get work at my trade or not california is a hard place Their is more shooting and robbing and hanging than any other place i ever saw . . .

James you wanted to know wether there is any pretty gals here or not i will till that there is not their is plenty pretty wimen in this contry from all contrys but they are bad ones . . .

I send my cind [kind] respects to you all praying that the god of heaven may bless and prosper you all is the prayer of your obedient son and brother

John Stageman . . .

*Great Salt Lake City March 55*

My dear brother [James]

. . . I was very glad to hear that you were all well & doing well. You say something about a blue eyed daughter. You never told me whose it was, but I judged it must be Mary Anns by the name I was truly glad to learn she was doing well. I hope it does not give her the trouble mine does for my boy has cried day & night ever since it was born, for more than four months now, that I am almost worn out & I am trying to teach school, & have been ever since my babe was three weeks old.

My husband has gone on a mission & I have got to do something if it is but a little, faith & hope sustains me, it is all Mormonism. You say John wonders why I have not written to him, but I say he need not It is only two months ago since he wrote to me for the first time, & I answered his letter the same or the next day I got his. I wondered whether he was dead or alive, & so you may tell John that I was the one to think it strange. I hope you will excuse my short letter I am improving the time while my boy is taking a nap. You wonder what makes him cry, it is the cholic he is well otherwize . . . Write offten it does me good to hear from you

This is from your  
Affectionate Sister  
Sarah S. Bassett

*California June the 22 1855*

My dear brother [James]

. . . you talk of going a way but James I would advise you to stay at home for there is nothing to be made in travling I know i have not made any thing since i left home James you want me to come home but i cannot at present for i have bad luck i suppose you herd of adams and cos bank bre[a]king I lost a

good many dollars in their bank I put it in their for safe keeping and i lost it James I have seen a grate many city a[nd] town since I left home. If God spare my life till I com home I can tell you some grate yarns about my travling James I have lost about 15 hundred dollar in adams and the river together and I must redeem it a gain if I can before I come home . . .

John Stageman

*Great Salt Lake City July 30th 1855*

My dear parents, James & Mary Ann

I sit down to write you, a line or two. Excuse me for not writing the two last mails. I have been so very unwell this summer, & my babe sometimes is very fretful, & I have to teach school to get along & so you may judge the opportunity I have to write, but I suppose if I did not write to you you would never to me. But did you only know how much good it does me to hear from you all you would write every mail. I received a letter from James two mails ago & it was very welcome. I was glad to hear you were all well & doing well. But how happy should I feel to have you all here. Oh! Come now when you can, the time is very fast approaching when you will want to come & cannot. This is the only place of savety. This is a very dry summer. I do not believe that we have had any rain since the first of April. Pleas tell me when Mary Ann's babe was born, tell her to write & James also. I am expecting charles home every day now & I shall be glad when he comes, truly so . . . My dear little [son] is just beginning to grow, he has always been very puny & sickly. Oh how he would love to see you, will he ever come, come, do come & see him. It will be worth your trip. He is a very great comfort to me . . .

Sarah S. Bassett

*[Columbia, California] February the 12 1856*

My dear brother [James]

. . . last July I went to Snake gulch to mine that is a cros the river me and four more found som good digins and we campt under a tree I worked nearly 2 month and I took sick and was not able to work and I went to Columbia and their I stayed that a docktor to see me every day and that run away with my money for they will not look at a man for les than five dollars I had no loveing mother to bring me a cup of tea nor no brother and sister to talk with but [was] all a lone I was sick nere 5 months and then my money run out and then my friends was whole gone and I was obliged to go to the hosespittle and their I am at this present tim[e]. i am very well tended to and thank god I am getting better and I hope with the blessings

of god will be able to go to work in too or three weeks

James I have give up all hope of making a pile I have made up my mind if I get well agane to save money a nuff to come to the States for it is no use of me to try to save money. I can make money anewhere but can not save it something turns up that it must go.

James, California is a poor place for a man in good helth let alone sick there is thousands that is worken for their board . . .

John Stageman

**T**o soothe his restlessness, James, the second youngest Stageman, travels by steamboat and rail to the family's old home back east. From there, he writes of visiting old friends and justifies the trip's costs. In his wanderlust, he even mentions going to Italy.

*Fair hill [Maryland] April 30th 56*

My Dear parents

. . . I do not grudge a cent I have spent in this trip I say to every young man go out & se the world & then you will [know] somthing about it you may stay to home till the day of judgment & not [know] any thing at last . . . [Stayed] in our old home & it brings back to my memory the days of my childhood . . .

James Stageman . . .

*Fair hill [Maryland] may 4th 1856*

My Dear Sister [Mary Ann]

. . . [I am] among the kindest of frends . . . I make my home at mr phillips I expect to go to work to morow if I am well for him if nothing hapens i shall work til I get a leter from home then I think I shal go to itley to se the wondrs their mary ann be not trubled about me for the same god that portect you can pertect the lone wandres on the sea I am poor but I trust not for saken by him who luls the universe the intructions of my dear parents are not lost on me & I will try to prove myself worthy . . . remember [me] kindly to all my aquaintence tel them I have to rome if I could be placed at home just as I was before I left & five hundred dolers to boot I would not exchange for what I have lerned I say to all go out & se the world & lern somthing I am not home sick but I would like to se you all again once more of corse that is natral . . .

James Stageman

*Great Salt Lake June 29th 56*

My dear parents,

I embrace the present opportunity of writing a few lines to you, to inform you I am still among the

living, & my dear boy also, & he is well. I am far from being so. I should have written to you last mail, but I was just moving to a new residence I am living alone with my boy. This is a world of ups and downs please excuse my writing much. My ink is so miserable I cannot write with it . . . I hope [Mary Ann] is better. Please send me word the day of the month she was married, & when her first child was born & when this one I presume from what James says she has got another by this time, & is beating me It is a year ago last Christmas since I heard from John . . .

May the Lord bless you all

From your affectionate daughter

Sarah S. Bassett

*Columbia [California] July the 1 1856*

My dear father

My dear father I feel thankful that I enjoy this opportunity of embracing you with a few lines to let you know that I am in the land of the living and in pretty good helth thank god . . . you say you would like me to come home but I cannot possibly before next spring . . . i should have come home when I herd that james had left you if it had not been for that spell of sickness . . . James talked of coming to California but I told him to stay where he is or else go home, for times is very hard here there is thousands working hard for their grub we have had a very dry winter and water is very scarce and every thing has been very high but they are not so high now as they have ben . . . please father rite soon and let me know how you all are . . . please send me all the news you can . . .

John Stageman

*Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 9th 1856*

My Dear parents . . . I am sory to think I have ca[u]sed you so much wory but if you will keep up your curige a few weaks I shall soon be home if god spairs my life and then I shall not lieve you til death parts us & I hope I shall be improved by my jounry anuf to repay you for your sorow I loved [you] at first but I love you fore times as much now father I have lerned more in this trip than I could in 7 years at home I was in hope you could get along with out me . . .

James Stageman

*Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 27th 1856*

Dear Brother [in-law Leonard]

. . . [This is] wat I am going to do I will tel you but I dont want you to talk it over So that every body gets to heir it I was thinking of [buying] a french [cavalry] stalion the pretyest horse you ever saw & if

HUTCHINGS' PANORAMIC SCENES. — CROSSING THE PLAINS.



EMIGRANT TRAIN PASSING WIND RIVER MOUNTAINS



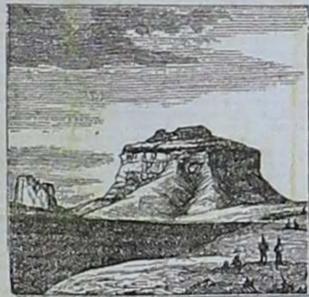
SIoux INDIANS



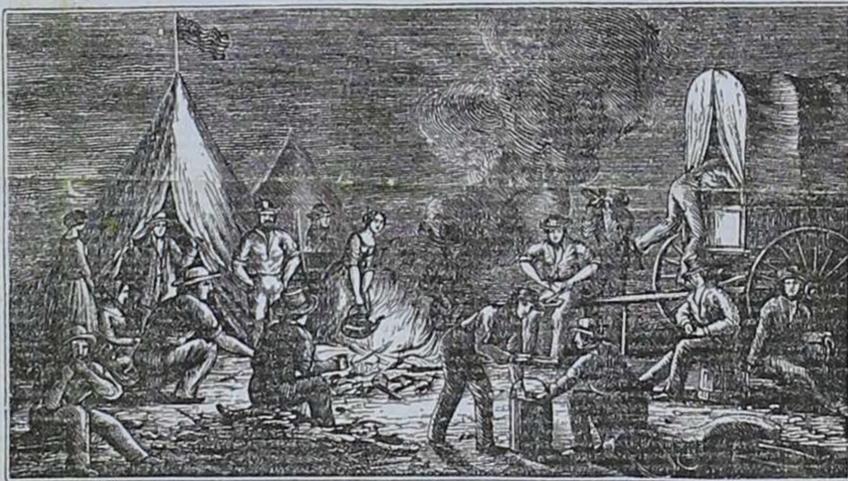
INDIANS CHASING BUFFALOES, SCOTT'S BLUFFS



STUCK FAST



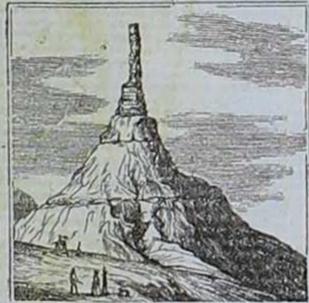
COURT-HOUSE ROCK



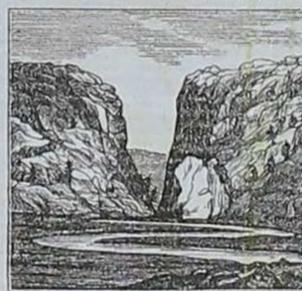
FIRST NIGHT ON THE PLAINS



MOUTH OF ASH HOLLOW



CHIMNEY ROCK



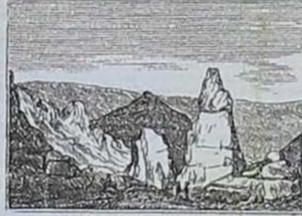
DEVIL'S GATE



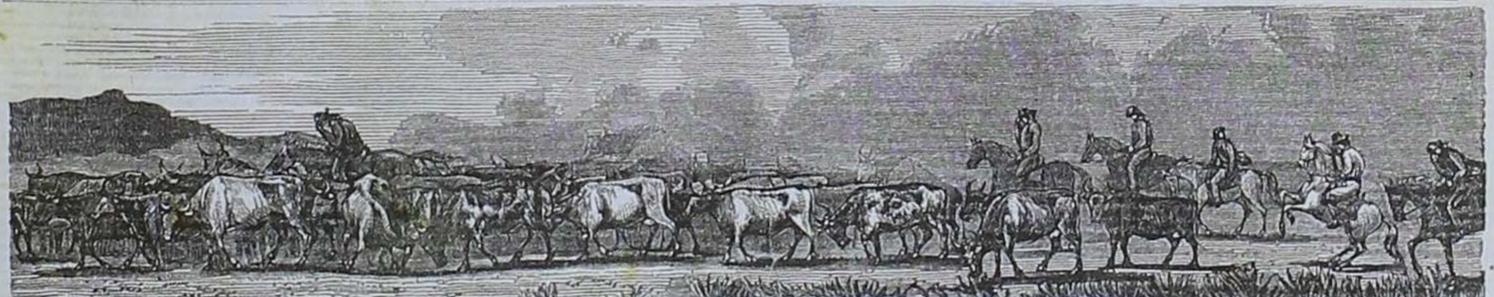
LARAMIE PEAK



SCENE ON THE DESERT



CASTLE ROCK



DRIVING STOCK ACROSS THE PLAINS

Published by J. M. HUTCHINGS, Placerville. Copyright secured.]

[Views drawn from Nature in 1853. by George H. Baker.]

(SUN PRINT)

Though John writes candidly of his failures on the goldfields and discourages James from leaving the safety of home, his letter to his younger brother on June 22, 1855, is on writing paper bearing illustrations of western scenery, travel, and adventure.

I can buy im will fetch him out & [stable] him for [mares] this next spring . . .

James Stageman

*Fair Hill [Maryland] Aug 29th 1856*

My Dear parents

. . . you must not expect any more leters from me from this place for I have the poorest luck at geting answers over here in my life . . . you must excuse this for I have rote so much letters that I am tired . . .

James Stageman

*Iowa October 6 1856*

My Dear Son [James]

It is with pleasue I write to you I am glad you are all well as it leaves us the same I have sent you the enclosed which I hope you will recive to bring you home to us again, I have put it under the Care of Mr Phillips . . .

I Remain Your Affectionate  
Mother & Father  
Christopher Stageman

**T**he \$50 from James's father reaches Maryland on November 4, but James had already left for Iowa a month earlier. After seven months in the East, he is again farming the home place with his parents. In 1856/57, Council Bluffs experiences the most severe winter yet recorded, followed in the next fall by economic panic and depression. Council Bluffs suffers along with the rest of the country, with banks collapsing.

Meanwhile, in California, fire has leveled Columbia. John has just recovered from jaundice, perhaps from hepatitis, and bilious fever, which affected his digestive tract. Now 28, John is feeling his years.

*[Columbia, California] February the 14 1858*

My dear brother [James]

. . . I told you that i was going to work for the new water company but i could not stand it so I did not work long. we have had a grate fire in Columbia since I rote to you it burned the city all down slick and clean it burned dogs rosted hogs and burned 9 men and scorched several others So i went to work at my trade and made some money and then i went off a prospecten and I took the yellow jander and i let them run on me for some time and the boys told me if i did not do something for them they would kill me so i went to town and doctored for them and got well and . . . worked 5 days and then i took the bilious fever and it was very bad I lay for 4 weeks and I got well agane and I feel first rate

i [am] working in a [quartz] mill at present i am getting small pay but it is more than a grate many is getting wages is very low and every thing else is very high so it is bad for the laborer i get 50 dollars pr month the quarts mill is a mill to grind rock . . . it is called the mother of gold because there is more or less in the rock for hundred of feet deep.

James you say if i do not come home next spring you will come out here but take my advice . . . californa is a bad place. i will come as soon as i can. i think you ought to get married and settle for life for i never expect to get married for i am getting old and loosening my teeth . . . give my cind love to all inquirey friends . . .

John Stageman

*Columbia [California] July th 1 1858*

My dear brother [James]

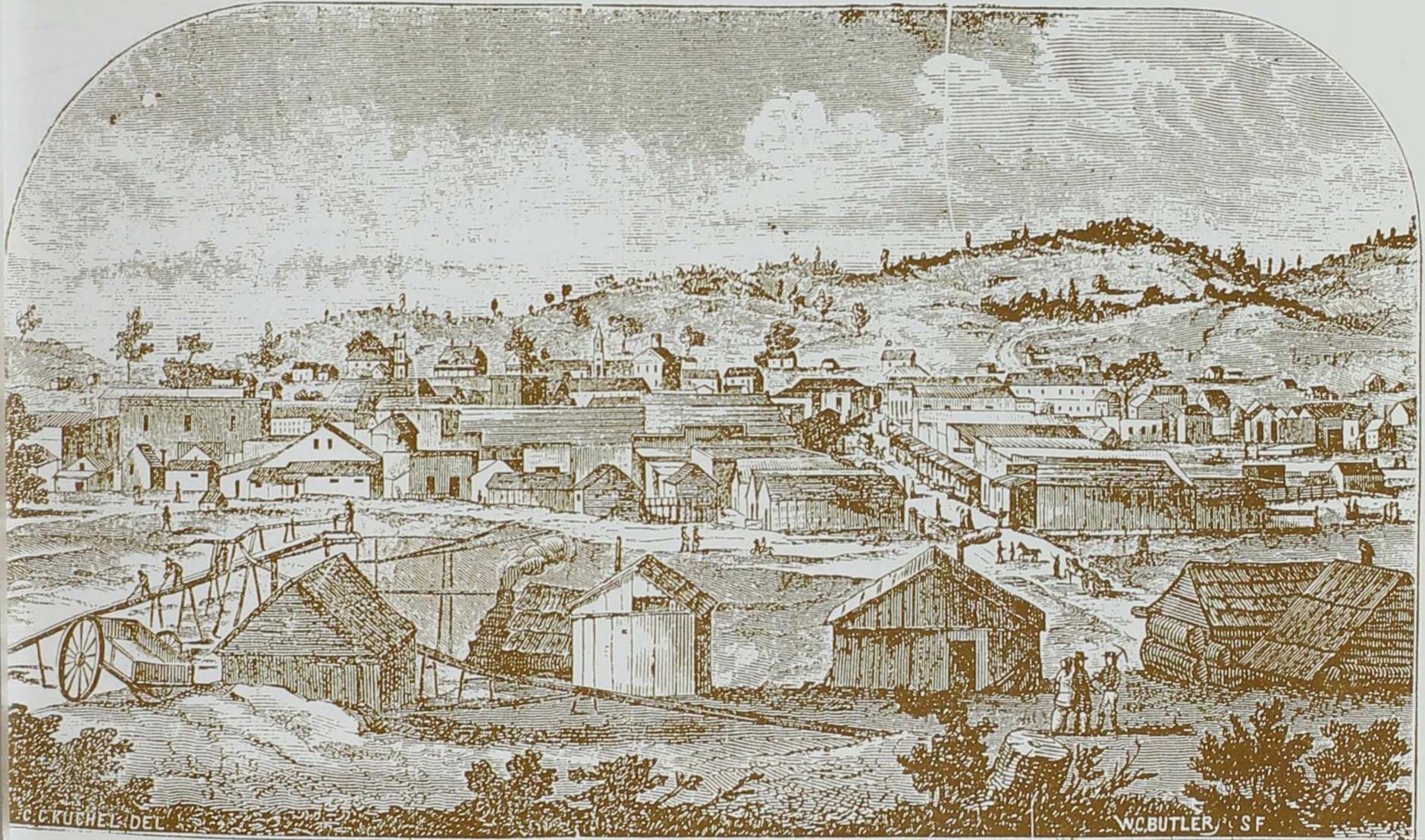
It is with pleasure that [I] embrace this oportunity of answering your letter . . . i was very sorry to here that mother was lame and not abel to walk without crutches James I thought your letter was verry cool you said I did not tell you to answer the other letter that I rote to you. I had forgot it but I will not forget this. Please answer this letter and send me all the news that you can. I was verry glad to receive them papers wich you sent me. The last time I rote to you I was in the [quartz] mill but I left it I am mining for my self . . . James California is nerely deserted and I think I will desert it to I have a strong notion to travel about 15 hundred miles up north for me to come home is imposible I have not much money and to come home without money I will not do it for I have bean out here most 5 years and spent my best days and I must make a rase before I come home if god will

. . . [If] I had known 5 years ago what I know now I would not have come to California . . .

John Stageman

**F**our years after his brother's departure for Utah and California, James finally achieves his dream of going west—though not very far west. Driving his small herd of cattle, he joins his friend, Chester Risley, on his ranch in Cedar County in the northeast corner of Nebraska Territory. Earlier in a letter to James, Risley had boasted of fast-growing corn, fine-looking beans, and potatoes "as Large as my Fist." Risley also instructed James to bring "carpenter tools to fix the dore and window a straw tick some Blankets to lye under some flour and sutch things." Clearly excited to be out west, James takes up his pen and writes home.

COURTESY KATHRYN WEBB WIKERT



**Columbia, California, in 1856. With a county population of 30,000, the city had dozens of stores and businesses. The greatest profits lay not in mining for gold, but in storekeeping and other services that catered to California's miners and their needs.**

*St James [Nebraska Territory] Oct 28th 1858*

Dear Parents

[I am] writing a few lines to you to let you [know] of our safe arivel to our western home we found every thing all right we just got heir in the right time for it has rained every day since our arivel we have got our fier place bilt and it draws like blasis we have a heap of work to do in a short space of time every thing up side down and winter cuming on Jet [Chet] has ben trubled with the rumits [rheumatism] we kill any amount of chickens and ducks and . . . we live like pigs in the clover . . .

From your undutiful Son  
James Stageman

I forget to tel you of our trip up we were just eight days on the rode the first Sunday out it rained like blasis . . . the young catel drove first rate after we got them of[f] their range . . . pleas send me som post stamps and I will pay you . . .

**F**or Sarah and the other Latter-day Saints, the year 1859 is an eventful one in the Salt Lake Valley. U.S. President James Buchanan sends Col. Albert Sidney

**Johnson's army to Utah to quell concerns about Mormon activity. At the order of Brigham Young, Salt Lake City residents evacuate to the south around Utah Lake.**

*Lake City [Utah Territory] Feb. 28th 1859*

My dear Sister

'Tis but an hour or two since I received a few lines from you . . . I was wondering but a day or two ago if I ever again should hear from any of you . . . I am very sorry to hear that mother is so afflicted, you never told the cause of her lameness Give my kind love to her, & to father & tell them I should be so happy to see them. Tell them they had better start this spring & come here They will be obliged to come before long & that for provisions there is going to be a famine throughout the nations, & we are preparing for it here, & there is going to be wars, & great distress of nations, & you all (now mark my words) with the rest will soon say, I wish I were in Zion for that is the only place of safety. The prophecys are fast fulfilling. I am a Mormon still, firm as ever, though I have met with a great many ups & downs since I left you tongue could not tell. But I know the Lord has blessed me and does bless me every day. Now for the times —

[t]here is plenty of stir here since the soldiers came, everything is bringing a good price & money has been very plentiful. Clothing is very high indeed. My husband has gone to California after merchandise I expect him back in April he started the first of last month I am living in Lake City 30 miles south of Salt Lake City.

I have written to John several times. I cannot think why he does not write to me. how long has James been gone how lonesome father and mother must be, I do wish they were here. Tell them Charles Henry says he would like to see them. He sends his love to you all, he is now learning to write & he is writing on a piece of paper to send to you, it is only about three months or a little over since he commenced to learn his letters & he can now read first rate, it would astonish you to hear him. By the time he is five years old I think he will be able to write to you a letter if he keeps his health he is a smart boy, but he is small, & delicate at present . . .

. . . Sarah Bassett

*Columbia [California] May the 1 1859*

Dear father and mother as I have not herd from James for so long I think he must have left you and gone to the gold mines and I think it my duty to rite to you and inform you that I am alive and well at present . . . if James has not gone to the mines tell him to rite to me an send me all the particklers. it is very dull in california . . . the mines are worked out father I have had a dogs life for six years and I am tired of it I have not made any thing. I have tried hard but it was [no] go i have been sick a grate deel in this contry I think if nothing happens I will make a brake for new orleans this fall I think I can do better at home . . .

John Stageman . . .

**A**n unexplained gap of two years exists in the collection of Stageman letters. Now aged 69 and 72, Christopher and Mary are in poor health. James, ranching and mining in Colorado Territory, anguishes over how to assist them and writes to his brother-in-law Leonard Buckminster.

*Denver City Jan 30th 1861*

Dear brother

I was glad to heir from you but sorey to heir that father and mother were in such bad circumstances Bill Smith told me that father and mother were failing fast so I had made up my mind to cum home let the sacrifice be what it would my promice to mother

must be kept if god spairs thairs and my life a few weaks longer I hope that you will see that they sufer for neither help nor the comforts of life til I cum and I will make it all right

I shal be obliged to leive my ranch with chet for I cannot sel it for aney thing I have had som of my catle stole and it cums pretty near breaking me up tel father & mother keep up their curige a little while longer an I wil be with them

. . . James Stageman . . .

*Runing Creak [near Pike's Peak, Colorado] April 1st 1861*

Dear parents

. . . I have not herd a word from you for seven months so I have cum to the conclusion that you have entirely forgotten me It is different with me you are my first and last thoughts

. . . I am still living on running creak I expect to farm this summer we ar building a new house to live in it is 26 ft by 17 to be to storys high times ar very hard heir at present but I hope they will get beter soon we have had a very fine winter heir I have been out in the montains nearly all winter hunting with out any shelter whatever the depes snow is fifteen inches our catel do first rate with out hay

I hope you are getting along as well with out me in your farming arangements as you did when I wis to home if I had the money you should never do another days [work] as long as you lived with out at your plesure I have tryed my best time and again to send you the money that I owed you but I could not get it but I will send to you as soon as I can

. . . I feel anxious about you scarcely anight pases lest I dream of you and home you may think I am home sick but it is not so.

If you wer well and young I should not want to cum home for years yet But lenard wrote you wer a lone with no one to help you

I must bring my leter to close hoping god will protect and spair your lives til I see you again is the prayer of your afectnect son.

James Stageman

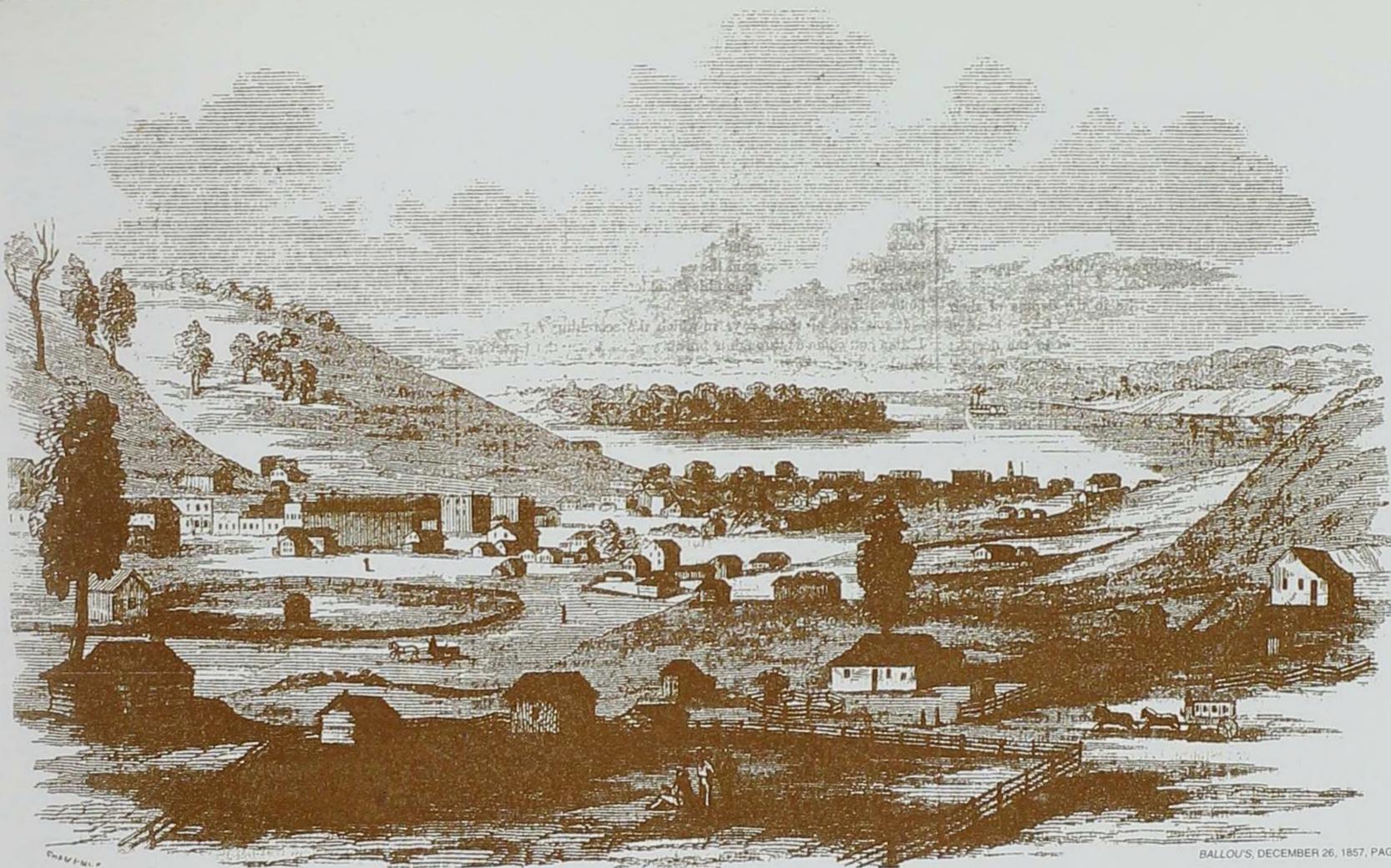
*Running Creek [Colorado] June the 10th 1861*

Dear brother[-in-law Leonard]

It is so long since I have herd from you that I think you ar all ded or have forgotten me for I have not herd a word from you since erly last fall . . .

I have not much time to write pleas give my love to father and mother mary an and the children and all enquiring frends

James Stageman . . .



**Council Bluffs in 1857 boasted of a population of 3,500, heavy steamboat trade, and promises of railroads.**

**B**y the fall of 1861, John has abandoned mining to work for a regular wage in the building trades. Commenting on Sarah's divorce (in 1859), he seems resigned to his own lot.

*Sacramento [California] November the 16 1861*

Dear brother[-in-law Leonard]

I take my pen in hand to inform you that I am in the land of the living . . . I have been traveling all summer . . . and have not made a cent and I have come to the conclusion that traveling will not pay and I am in the city of Sacramento now and shall remain as long as I am in the state please god I am making 18 Dollars per week I am working at painting and roofing I could make a grate deal more if I would carry on business for my self but I have not quite confidence enough in my self. Leonard if I where [were] married and settled down I could make money in this city but I shall never marry till I see Council [Council] bluffs city but you cannot expect me to come till I get money enough to bring me there I suppose times is very dull there at present

you tell me that James is settled down in pikespeak. I think he [h]as settled in a poor country but if he likes it that is all that he requires . . .

I was glad to here from Sarah but was sorry to here that she was living alone and that she [h]as left

her husband may god bless her I thought when she got married to baset she would not live long with him it is cuereou [curious] how we are scattered around this world but it is gods will.

. . . Tell father that I long to see them agane I suppose they thot I am single and nothing to kep me here but fortune has went against me or I would have ben home long ago in '55 I lost a good deel of money, more than they have any idea of and I have been trying to make it again but it is no use. Fortune goes against me and I am contented to be poor . . .

I am keeping batchelors hall cooking my own grub but it is my intentions to come home as so[o]n as I can sell the rifle I shold like to see them again if it is god will I shold like to se the old stomping grond again . . .

John Stageman

**J**ames leaves Colorado Territory in 1862, returning home to Iowa out of concern for his parents' health. Meanwhile, John continues to lament his struggle to save sufficient money to return home, a plight common to thousands of gold rushers in California.

*Sacramento Cali June the 30, 1862*

Der brother [James]

. . . i am still in Sacramento city working at painting I make my 21 dollars every week and still i canot save any thing money will not prosper with me i never get a dollar without working hard for it

I do not know ware it goes. i do not drink any



Once miners exhausted streambed and placer deposits of gold, they set aside their individual tools and turned to costlier technologies—hydraulic mining (above) and quartz mining. Both required tremendous amounts of water, so water companies were organized, investors were found, and systems of dams, reservoirs, canals, and flumes were built. Aiming high-pressured water hoses at a hillside loosened tons of gravel each hour, which fell into sluices where it was washed. Quartz mining required drilling into a vein of quartz, bringing the rock to the surface, breaking the rock in stamp mills, and then washing it for the gold. Large companies operated the quartz mines, selling shares to investors and hiring wage labor.

thing stronger than water. James I am coming home this fall or in the spring if god is willing i hate to come home in the fall for this climate is so diferant from yours that i am a feared that i will get the runaticks [rheumatism] but I never was contented in this contry and I shall endeaver to leave it if poseble.

i send you my likeness and you can see wether i have altered or no. i have went through as much [as] any man in the country and have s[t]ood it as well as any . . . i hope you have done better a great deel than I have i can make money ware any other man can but I canot save it that is the grate point i [c]ame very nere being rich in this country once but luck was against me an I lost it I do not want to be rich but I shold like now to prosper a little better . . . I rote to father about 6 weeks ago but I sopose father did not get it yet I told him about the grate flood that we had

in the country this winter it like to sweep every thing before it it knoct our little city into a cock hat that [is why] my painting is so floureshing this summer . . .

James what is your opinion about this war they must have have som very hot times in the States . . . I wish it was ended times would be ten times better in the States than they are here . . .

John Stageman

**I**n 1863, James again heads west. He visits Sarah in Salt Lake City before settling in Carson City, Nevada, to mine with Council Bluffs friends John and Tommy Ritter. In early 1864, James and John reunite for the first time in ten years and discuss returning home together that fall—though James is unwilling to borrow funds, as he did in Maryland, to return to Iowa.

Carson City [Nevada] Feber 15th 1864

Dear Parents

... I have not herd a word from home since I left ... me the poor wanderer It can't be that out of sight out of mind no I will never think that

I have received thre leters from John since I came heir ... he is cuming over to see me in the spring he wants to go to Reas River [in central Nevada] ... I would give more for a leter from home than you could imadgen

if you want any money Just Say So I can Send you sum any time you Shall never want while I have a doler If I [know] It. I would Send you a check in this leter, but I don't [know] wether you are alive or not

Dear mother I want you to keep a girl all the time get lissey if you can and if you cant get her get sum on[e] else keep a girl if you dont you must never expect to see me again for I Shall be very angry and father I would be very glad if you would keep a man to help you farm your place and keep it from going to weads so much and wen you answer this letter I will send you a hundrd dolers to comence with

I am doing prety at present chopping wood and mining together any thing that turns up I can make from \$75 to a hundred dolers per month chopping wood three dolers 50 cents per day mining [and] tuniling george and tomy riter ar doing well they have not had a leter from home Since i came heir they want to [know] if they ar forgotten to ...

James Stageman

Carson city [Nevada] April 24th 1864

My dear parents

... I had the plesure last Sunday of meating with long absent Brother [John] I knowed him on sight but he did not know me he is well and sends his kind love to you both he is going to work in virginia city this sumer so we can see each other frequently he longs to see you both again before he dies

I got a few lines from Orsen Stoker the other day he said father was sick abed I was sorry to heir that but I hope he is well again I wrote you a letter some time ago and told you to write and I would send you some money to get along with so you need not work so hard but it seams that you have all forgotten me I did not com out heir with the intention of making a rase and enjoying it my self, but to shair it with you and try to make you happy and comfortabel the balence of your days I live hard and work hard for that purpose and nothing else you are all the world to me If you die before I get back Iowa will never [know] me agin John wants me to come home with

him in the fall but I told him I went home once dependent and it shall be the last time I would go through fire and water to serve you but to have it sed I came for your property is to much for my hart to bair when god knows it is not so ...

I have ben out heir allmost a year and have not herd a word from home yet ...

So goodbye for the present Father and Mother get som one to write for you ...

... your afectnect son

James Stageman

**The final letter in this saga is from James, now 31. He has received sad news and writes openly of his feelings. Considering possible routes back to Iowa, he wants to see Sarah before returning home.**

Carson City [Nevada] July 17th 64

Dear Brother[-in-law Leonard]

I received your kind leter on the 15th and was glad to heir from you I thought you had forgotten me I did not get your leter containing fathers death I herd it through Sarah She saw it in the papers It made me feel sory to think how he lived and died when he might have lived so happy if he had been more conformabel to the ways of the cuntrey I should have [been] so glad to have taken care of him in his old days but he always thought I wanted to cheat him. I did not want to cheat any body much les him

It dun me good to heir that mother was so well I hope God will spair our lives to see each other yet once more ...

I think I shall start [home] about the first of October I would flote around by new york if it was not for the sake of seeing Sarah She would be so disepointed ... John could not stand it in this cuntry He had to go back to calefornia. I shall pay him a visit before I cum home. I want to fetch him along if I can

You must please excuse this for my hands ar so hard and sore I cant do beter I have chopped about 400 cords of wood since new years besides mining I never loose a day without I am obliged to and it is using me up mighty fast I feel very old ... may god bless you all is the prayer of your Brother

James Stageman ...

THE CONFLICT of old ways and new ideas was never resolved between James and his father. James was willing to take risks; Christopher probably urged caution. Already nearly 60 when he first came to Iowa, perhaps

Christopher no longer wanted change of any magnitude.

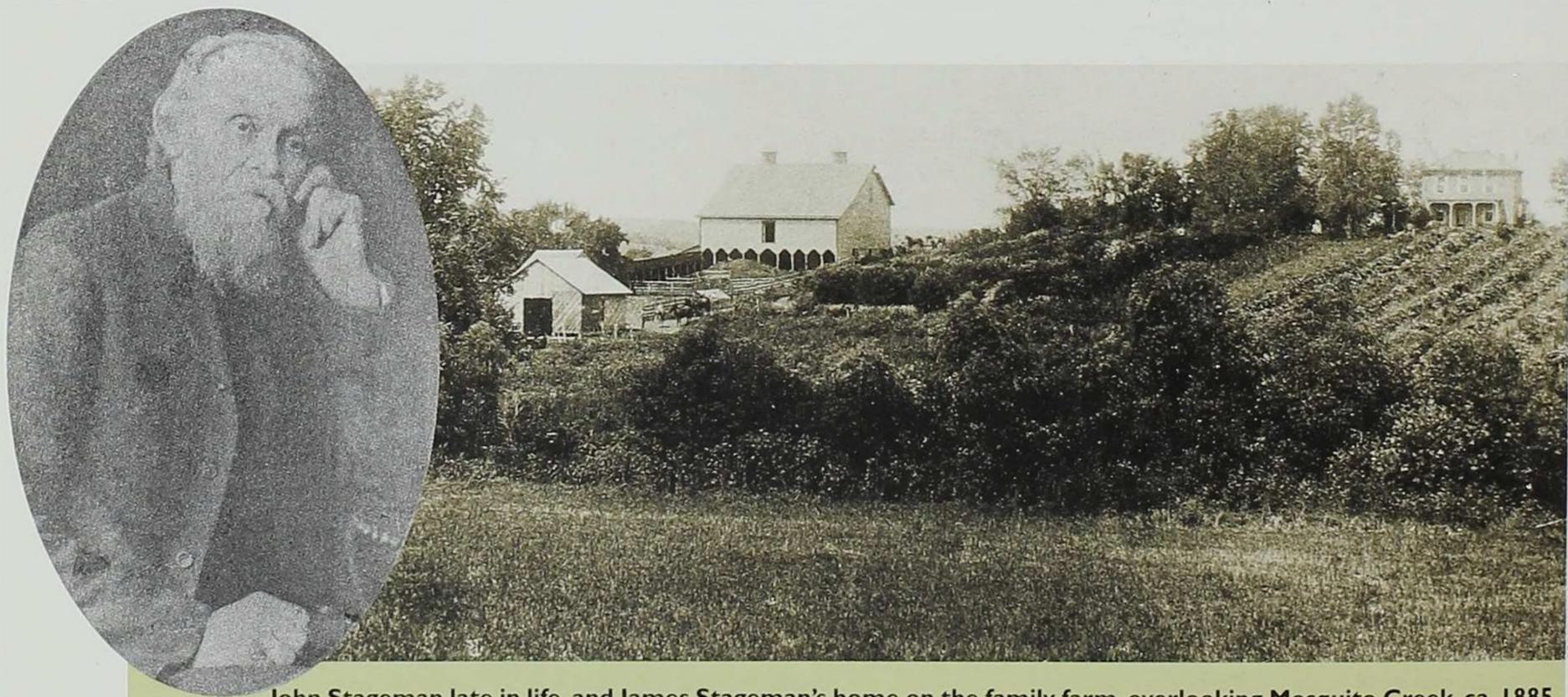
James's route home probably took him first to San Francisco, then by steamship to Nicaragua. According to family lore, he stitched his money into a vest for safe-keeping and never took it off, despite the steamy heat of crossing Lake Managua. Whether he took a steamer to New Orleans and then upriver to Iowa, or the sea route to New York and train to Iowa, is uncertain.

John returned to Iowa about the same time, and it is likely that the two brothers traveled home together. Now confident in his trade, John became a house builder in Council Bluffs. He married Eliza Sutherland and with her raised five children.

Sarah resided in Salt Lake City the remainder of her long life, her place of death only a few blocks from Temple Square. She is buried in the Salt Lake Cemetery on a hillside overlooking the Great Salt Lake Valley she loved so dearly.

James married Mary Williams and they shared their home that first year with James's mother until her death in 1865. James realized his dream of owning beautiful horses by raising and selling Percherons. The young couple settled into farming, reaping profits from the black gold of Iowa, its deep and fertile soil. They planted an orchard and a vineyard on the family farm and sold fruits and vegetables at the Omaha farmers market. About 1884, James and Mary constructed a large home for their family of nine children, with bricks made and fired on the farm. The house stands on a hill above Mosquito Creek and the site of the log cabin that the seven Stagemans first knew as their Iowa home. ❖

*Kathryn Webb Wikert teaches talented and gifted children in the Southeast Polk Community School District and is the great-great-granddaughter of Christopher and Mary Stageman.*



**John Stageman late in life, and James Stageman's home on the family farm, overlooking Mosquito Creek, ca. 1885.**

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

For this presentation of the Stageman letters, the original spelling and punctuation have been retained, with occasional interpolations in brackets for clarification and ease of reading. Ellipses indicate deletions. The letters are in the possession of the author. An unpublished manuscript by Mary Ellen Klopping Ryan, "James Christopher Stageman Memoirs of Western Life (1890-1930)," recorded from first-person narratives, 1948-1955, was useful, as was Steve Bulman, "Images of Cumbria—Wigton Parish," <http://www.stevebulmanf9.co.uk/cumbria/wigtonf.html>, Feb. 23, 2001. Access to the Stageman farm abstract was provided by the present owner of the home and farm, Arlene Tiarks of Council Bluffs.

Secondary sources on California and its gold rush include: Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); John F. Burns, *Sacramento: Gold Rush Legacy, Metropolitan Destiny: An Illustrated History of Sacramento* (Carlsbad, CA: Heritage Media Corp., 1999); David L. Durham, *California Geographic Names* (Colovis, CA: Word Dancer Press, 1998); Bonita M. Cassel, *Columbia: A History of "The Gem of the Southern Mines"* (Arroyo Grande, CA: Bear Flag Books, 1995); *Miners & Business Men's Directory for ... Citizens of Tuolumne ...* (Columbia, CA, 1856; rep. 1976). An interview with Floyd D. P. Oydegaard, of Columbia Booksellers & Stationers, Columbia, CA, on March 18, 2002, was helpful.

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