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Guðmundur Guðmundsson pictured with his goldsmith’s tools. He was trained as a goldsmith in Denmark, where he joined the Church.
Fire on Ice: The Conversion and Life of Guðmundur Guðmundsson

Fred E. Woods

In A.D. 1000, the Icelandic Parliament held their annual two-week summer session in Parliament’s Field, a remote area of southwest Iceland where they had convened each year since A.D. 930. In this lush plain, where lava cliffs bear witness of fire meeting ice, Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the entire Icelandic nation.\(^1\) The year 2000 marks the millennial anniversary of this event. It is also a year of reflection for Latter-day Saints, as the first LDS chapel in Iceland will be dedicated in the summer of 2000.

The first missionaries to preach the gospel in Iceland arrived as early as 1851. However, they met with stony opposition,\(^2\) and most of the Icelanders who joined the Church at that time immigrated to Utah. The Church’s early history in Iceland and the opposition that delayed its growth can be best understood by examining the story of Guðmundur Guðmundsson,\(^3\) one of Iceland’s first converts and missionaries.\(^4\)

Guðmundur Guðmundsson was born March 10, 1825, to Guðmundur Benediktsson and Guðrun Vigfúsdóttir on a farm at Ártun, in the Rangarvalla district of the Oddi Parish in Iceland. He was christened a Lutheran at his home on March 23, 1825.\(^5\) Guðmundur remembered his parents as “poor but devout and pious; my father especially was very pious and often reminded his children . . . to honor God. . . . We were ten sisters and brothers, and I was the youngest son.”\(^6\)

When Guðmundsson was ten years old, his parents moved. They left Guðmundur with his father’s friend Magnus Arnasson so that he would have the opportunity to get a good education and could study to become a silversmith under another family friend, Halldur Þórarson. In 1841 when Guðmundur received his confirmation, the parish priest recorded that the young man was “very capable, well-behaved, and very gifted.”\(^7\) In Ártun he found a friend, Þórarinn Halldísason Thorason, who would also join the Church and labor with Guðmundur as one of Iceland’s first missionaries.\(^8\)

Magnus Arnasson died in 1842, and Guðmundur moved in with Halldur Þórarson the silversmith. Guðmundur spent the next few years learning all he could from his trade master, and in 1845 he went to Denmark to study goldsmithing. After four years in Copenhagen, he passed his journeyman’s examination and worked for a while in Denmark.\(^9\)
Iceland’s sparsely populated Westmann Islands (Vestmannaeyjar). The first LDS missionaries to Iceland, Guðmundur Guðmundsson and Pórarinn Hafliðason Thorason, arrived in these islands in spring 1851. Many Icelandic converts to the Church came from this rocky island. Courtesy Byron Geslison.
While taking an evening stroll, Guðmundur saw a group of people listening to a preacher on a Copenhagen street corner. Before he came within range of the preacher’s call, Guðmundur heard an inner voice say, “What that man is saying is true; listen to him.” The preacher was a Mormon elder, Peter O. Hansen. Soon thereafter Guðmundur visited a Mormon meeting in Copenhagen. Later he reflected:

One Sabbath I went to hear those, so much mentioned and hated Mormons; it was then that I, for the first time, heard our highly beloved brother Erastus Snow. I soon had favour of the Lord to understand, and having sound judgment, and what is still more, the Lord giving me faith to receive it, I was baptized, in the most devoted sincerity and repentance, and I testify before God and men, that my heart became renewed.

About this same time, Guðmundur’s childhood friend, Þórarinn Hafliðason Thorason, who had come to Copenhagen to learn the trade of cabinet-making, also joined the Church. In the spring of 1851, Elder Erastus Snow ordained Þórarinn a priest and Guðmundur a teacher. According to Elder Snow, a third Icelander also joined the Church in Copenhagen about this time. In a letter to President Brigham Young dated July 10, 1851, Elder Snow noted, “In the spring three Icelanders who had embraced the faith in Copenhagen returned to their native land, with the Book of Mormon and pamphlets, two of whom I ordained and commanded them to labor among their people, as the Lord opened their way.

The missionaries arranged to go to Iceland on separate voyages—Þórarin went directly to the Westmann Islands, and Guðmundur followed shortly thereafter, arriving on May 12, and went to the Westmann Islands to deliver literature to Þórarin. Guðmundur then returned to his hometown, perhaps in hopes of teaching the gospel to his family. His reception was quite different from what he had expected—he had anticipated that all Icelanders would joyfully receive the glad tidings of the gospel as he had. He reported his disappointment:

I expected that every person would absolutely believe a message so desirable. . . . I had felt, that the fruit of the Gospel was more sweet and desirable
[than] any other fruit, and I wished first and foremost that my relatives would partake of it, but, Alas! Laman and Lemuel would not; I preached to my brothers and sisters, but they would not receive me, and my pious parents had died, and I felt myself left alone, like Elias of old in the cave; yet, a short time after, I found some friends that became were believing, and continued to be faithful, though the laws were hard against us, and so were the priests and the reports of the press. I was often rebuked and spit on and mocked, but I was full of the love of God. ... I did not feel the least anger or indignation against any being.16

Guðmundur soon returned to the Westmann Islands,17 and the young men continued to preach the gospel, but the local papers had already begun to publish false reports about the “Mormons.” Religious leaders warned the people not to listen to the missionaries, whom they called “false prophets, who had come to deceive their countrymen.”18

Apparently Guðmundur received a threat that he would be turned over to the law, so in a letter dated May 31, 1851, he appealed to the civil governor of Iceland:

I want, of simpleness of heart, to explain for your honor, as the highest authority over the people, my spiritual feelings, by making you aware of the effort now which is taken against my religious teaching, against not only me but also Almighty God and his Son’s law, and those Lutheran religious teachings which are built upon the Bible and not upon the teachings of man.

I know that I am detestable in the eyes of the world so I now offer only my testimony, believing rather that each and every one of the true believers would find the power to ask God, with a humble heart, to teach them of the truth, such spiritual seriousness being necessary, and would soften all, though they literally observe those holy writings which give salvation to each human who seeks God with a humble heart and is the way intended for both small and great.

And you would do well, O Great Leader, to consider that this is not from me only, but of thy God and because of the truth.

I trust in thy high calling to adopt not a course of evil, as I point out, O learned ones, and presume to allow my feelings to come to light, which are without objection according to the will of God.

May God work a holy work through you.

G. Guðmundsson19

However, a few days later, the Westmann Islands district sheriff, J. N. Abel, apparently launched greater problems for Guðmundur. On June 3, 1851, Abel also wrote a letter to the governor. Abel discussed the inherent dangers posed by the arrival of Mormonism to the islands and mentioned Guðmundsson, about whom the gentlemen of the islands seemed to be uneasy because of Guðmundur’s intelligence and character. The sheriff’s letter breathes a spirit of concern over the Mormons’ presence:
It is disturbing to know that this unholy teaching, in their book of epistles has gained a solid hold much more quickly than was expected... A goldsmith journeyman, Guðmundur Guðmundsson, came here 12 May and not in poverty, and had with him his faith's dogma translated into Icelandic, so I took measures to lay hold upon the information—in case he worked zealously and received a good following. The result is such that a certain poor man and his wife were rebaptized [from their church to the LDS Church] in the night between the 26th and 27th of May. Others who were preparing to be baptized were present at the ceremony and among them Loftur Jónsson, the parish clerk, mediator and member of parliament... I want to now ask you, in your high office—your honor—whether I ought to release him from the board of conciliation and replace him.²⁰

Apparently the poor man and his wife noted in Abel's letter were the missionaries' first converts, Benedikt Hansson and his wife, Ragnhildur Stefánsdóttir. As a result of these conversions and their preaching, the missionaries were summoned to appear before the Westmann Islands local authorities, and they were forbidden to preach or to try to obtain any more converts. The sheriff's letter had proved effectual.²¹ The missionaries had to act with greater caution and instruct interested parties in private.

Another blow to the work came when Pórarinn's wife, who was strongly opposed to her husband's conversion, burned his Mormon literature, and, according to Magnus Bjarnason (whom Pórarinn had introduced to the gospel), she "became desperate and threatened to drown herself." Therefore, Pórarinn ceased to do missionary work.²² Ironically, in December of the same year, it was not his distraught wife who drowned, but rather Pórarinn himself, in a fishing accident.

Guðmundur informed Copenhagen of this tragic event, noting that twenty-four people on the islands desired baptism and that they had no one there authorized to perform the ordinance. When Elder Erastus Snow heard this sad news, he recalled that while ordaining Guðmundur to the office of teacher, he had received a prompting to ordain him to the office of elder, but "he gave the inspiration no heed as the young man seemed so enthusiastic, while his companion (Bro. Thorason) seemed more sedate
The Westmann Islands are only about a thirty-minute boat ride off the southwest coast of Iceland, where Guðmundur Guðmundsson had grown up. During his mission, he traveled back and forth from the islands to the mainland. Pórarinn Haflíðason Thorason was married to a Westmann Islands native and spent his entire time as a missionary on the islands. Courtesy Byron Geslison.
and thoughtful." Elder Snow then needed to find the right elder to send to Iceland. Peter O. Hansen, who had baptized Guðmundur less than a year earlier, desired to serve as Guðmundur’s companion but was held back when passport officials learned of his designs. Almost two years passed before an elder was sent.

In the Copenhagen conference of April 1853, Elder Johan Lorentzen spoke of the blessings of God upon the Scandinavian people and mentioned Guðmundur Guðmundsson, who had remained faithful in spite of the severe persecutions he had faced alone on a far island. Lorentzen also expressed his desire to go to Iceland: “If it was the will of God the speaker desired, according to the call he had received, to go there [to Iceland] to preach the gospel and circulate tracts, and he hoped that God would soon make Iceland a fruitful field for the promulgation of the true work of Christ.” Before the meeting came to a close, he was sustained as president of the Icelandic Mission.

Guðmundur wrote the following report of Elder Lorentzen’s arrival in Iceland:

When Johan P. Lorenzen came to our island in 1853 I received him with an open heart and did all in my power to make his visit among us as pleasant as possible, but he could not do much by way of teaching the natives the principles of the gospel, for inhabitants of the Westman Islands could not understand Da[n]ish. Soon after his arrival we gathered our friends quietly together and we decided that we would proceed in single file by different roads to a certain private place which we had selected in a beautiful little round valley, surrounded by nature’s own mountain walls. In the midst of this most picturesque valley was found a small grassy plain, as level as a floor and containing something like 20 acres of land. We approached this place one at a time, in order to avoid being noticed by our opponents and persecutors. Here in nature’s pure embrace, with nothing but the blue canopy of heaven for our covering, we raised our hands and our voices “on high,” and prayed to the Father in the name of Jesus to bless and sanctify this lovely spot, surrounded by these romantic mountain walls. Then I was ordained an elder under the hands of Johan P. Lorenzen according to instructions which he had received from the president of the Scandinavian mission. We sang hymns, prayed and preached, and I translated Elder Lorenzen’s words into Icelandic. . . . [A]ll those who were present were subsequently baptized.

On June 19, 1853, Elder Lorentzen organized the first branch of the Church on the Westmann Islands, with Elder Guðmundsson as branch president. Lorentzen and Guðmundur labored together another year until Guðmundur returned to Denmark in 1854. He wrote of the difficulties he experienced during his mission to his homeland:

After having preached in Iceland from April 1851 until July 1854 for about 3 years and 6 months, and done the best I could, yet there were but few that received the Gospel; still I believe, there are many that will receive it in
future. . . I have prayed for them in the caves of the mountains, and in private rooms, I have shed tears. . . . The Lord has softened my heart. . . . I remember having praised him when I had to eat the heads of dried fish . . . I enjoyed that meal, I thanked the Lord, because he provided for me. 29

Guðmundur was planning to immigrate to Zion, but he decided to first serve a mission in Denmark, spending about eighteen months there as a missionary. While assigned to the city of Kalundborg, he was imprisoned for preaching the gospel and then conscripted into the Danish military:

I . . . was put in prison, for about 7 weeks, and when they could find no fault with me, except that I had baptized, and had preached the Gospel, I was justified in that respect, but I was charged to serve as a soldier for 4 years in the danish armee; I was conducted by the police to Copenhagen. . . . I had to put on the military attire, they gave me a big gun, a sabre. . . . I felt dreadful bad, in this position. 30

Because his health had suffered due to poor prison conditions, he found the military training extremely difficult. He was also a victim of ridicule and scorn for his religious beliefs. His health worsened, and he was placed in a hospital. After a rigorous period of over thirteen months in the military, he was finally discharged for poor health but not before he had preached the gospel to hospital roommates and had converted a corporal. 31

Concerning his release, Guðmundur wrote:

When I had been there [the hospital] for a long time, it was determined that I should be presented for the physicians and the General of the Battailion, that they might judge whether I was fit for the service or not; this happened the very day, when the Emigration was going to have a Conference before their journey to Zion. . . . They examined my breast with their instruments, and declared, that I, on account of weakness in the lungs was unfit for military service. They then gave me my passport and my own clothes, and I came to the Conference, to the astonishment of Every one, and I myself was astonished, because I knew that my lungs were as healthful as they could be. I knew it was the work of the Lord. . . . It was proposed, that I should go to Zion, . . . and I am now here, and it is just here as I want it to be. 32

Guðmundur joined a company of 522 souls who gathered in Liverpool to cross the Atlantic. Also sailing was the Niels Garff family from Sjaelland, whom Guðmundur had taught the gospel. Niels and his wife, Marie, 33 baptized March 31, 1855, had embarked from Copenhagen with their three sons and one daughter. 34

Concerning the journey to Zion, Guðmundur supplied few details: “I left Copenhagen April 18, 1857, crossed the Atlantic in the ship ‘Westmoreland’ and arrived in Salt Lake Valley September 13, 1857.” 35 In order to pay for his passage on the sea voyage, Guðmundur evidently worked as a cook on the ship, 36 but little else is known about his immigration experience.

The company of Saints left Liverpool under the direction of Matthias Cowley, who was assigned as the immigrants’ priesthood leader in
Liverpool. Six weeks later when they arrived in Philadelphia, Cowley wrote to Orson Pratt about the successful voyage. He reported that the Saints had been divided into four wards and had an organized routine of prayers and meetings, as well as times to arise and retire. A musical group had also been assigned to provide singing and dancing as they crossed the Atlantic. A noted event of the voyage was the birth of a baby boy to Marie and Niels Garff. They named him Decan Westmoreland Garff, after the captain of the ship and the vessel itself.

From Philadelphia the Saints continued their journey by train, traveling through Baltimore and Wheeling to Iowa City, the outfitting post for that year. From Iowa City, they journeyed to Florence, and from there the Garff family and Guðmundur continued west under the direction of their handcart company leader, Christian Christensen.

While crossing the plains, sickness struck the Garff family, and Niels Garff and his daughter died. Niels and Marie’s son Louis Garff recalled, “Two days journey out from Larmey [Fort Laramie] my Sister died, shortly after my Father died and was buried on the plains. The rest of our family barely escaped death, and arrived at the Grate Salt Lake City Sept. 13 1857.” However, just before Niels’s death, he made Guðmundur promise to take care of his wife and family. His dying words were, “I want her to go to Zion and be with God’s people.” Guðmundur promised, and true to his word, shortly after their arrival in Salt Lake City he married Marie Garff on October 4, 1857, and became a father to her children. Marie and Guðmundur had three sons together, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Not long after the new family was settled, the arrival of Johnston’s army caused them to leave their home in Salt Lake City and travel south. They established a home with the Icelandic community in Spanish Fork. However, less than two years later, they returned to Salt Lake City, where there were greater opportunities for goldsmithing.

Louis Garff recalled that about 1860 while they were living in the Salt Lake Second Ward, Guðmundur became involved, along with a number of Scandinavian Saints, with an apostate sect known as the Morrisites: “My step father became very much attached to their doctrin, The results was that he led my Mother and all the family save my oldest Brother Peter, to follow, and we sold out our home and effects in Salt Lake City and located at Weber.”

Guðmundur’s connection to this group did not go unnoticed. On July 8, 1861, John V. Long reported to President Brigham Young that Guðmundur and Marie Guðmundsson were among those who had “joined Joseph Morris at South Weber.” Guðmundur was very involved with the group and was listed as a member of the quorum of the twelve apostles of the Morrisite sect. However, by June 1862, the Morrisite community in Kingston Fort became fragmented when Morrisite leaders denied several dissidents the right to leave their compound and a posse of five hundred men forced the
group to disband. Many of the Morriseite followers were arrested, including Guðmundur, who was eventually convicted of resisting an officer and fined one hundred dollars. He and the others charged were later pardoned by Governor Stephen S. Harding.51

After the disbandment, as Louis Garff recalled, the family “moved to Farmanton [Farmington] where they lived but a few months. From there they moved to Camp Floyed or Fair Field, Utah Co. At this latter place we lived til about the year 1868.”52 Apparently Guðmundur hoped that this area, which was part of the main trail leading to California, would provide a business opportunity repairing watches and wagons. The business was not successful, and after seven years, Guðmundur’s expectations in Zion were yet unfulfilled.53

In 1868 the Guðmunssons sought special medical attention for Marie’s son Decan Westmoreland, who had been ill since his birth and was suffering from acute pain. They moved to Sacramento, California, where they had heard there was a doctor who was successfully operating on “gravel patients.”54 Louis Garff recalled this difficult time:

This time to Sacramento Calaforinia, where again Seven Doctors were employed to preform an opperation on brother Dicar. A stone the size of a hens Egg was taken from the bladder. After he getting well this time, or some time before in fact, my Sep [step] Father became insane [he evidently had a mental breakdown], and was taken to the Stockton [California] asylum. Several months he remained ill. But on returning to soundness of mind again, he was permitted to return to his family. About this time, or after having returned home, he fell into a transe, and remained in this peculiar state simi death for several hours[.]. On returning to his normal state, when life was again resumed, he declared that he had receved a diveine vision in which he was told that only Brigham Young, the Prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ, in Utah, could saved [sic] him and family. Mother also had a peculiar manifestation in which she saw a light, just at dusk, appering, going and coming 3 time and she was made to understand very plainly that she must go back to Utah with her husband and join the true church, which was now plainly shown.55

While Decan was convalescing, Marie and Guðmundur had time to reflect on their lives and felt something was missing. Guðmundur was having a difficult time finding employment and had grown despondent. At this time, he experienced his breakdown and recovery, and he and Marie received their individual manifestations. Marie began to pray fervently that a way would be opened for their return to Utah; Decan was not responding as well as they had hoped, and she wanted him to be blessed by the priesthood.56

Their lives soon took a dramatic change for the better when their son Abraham discovered what was probably between five and six thousand dollars hidden beneath the wooden floor of an abandoned sawmill—apparently the loot from an old stagecoach robbery. With the blessing of the local authorities, Guðmundur’s family kept the money, paid off Decan’s medical
bills, and returned to Utah in 1869 with renewed faith. The family settled at Draper, where, Louis Garff noted, "we were all baptized."

Following their rebaptism, Guðmundur and Marie made a trip to visit President Brigham Young. According to Marie, "the prophet put his arms around them and joyfully welcomed them back." Many years later, in a letter to Andrew Jenson regarding a short biography of Guðmundur, his son Isaac wrote, "He died in full faith of the Gospel. . . . Just give a little of his life's work omitting the little slip he made causing him so much sorrow in life."

The family lived in Draper for about two years, probably because Peter Garff (Marie's oldest son) had begun homesteading there. Guðmundur and Marie later moved with two of their sons (Abraham and Isaac) to Lehi, where in 1871 Guðmundur set up the first jewelry shop on West Main Street. Guðmundur spent most of the remaining years of his life there, working with precious metals. Plagued by poor health, Guðmundur Guðmundsson died on September 21, 1883, at age fifty-eight in Logan, Utah, where he was working temporarily while staying with one of his stepsons, Christian Garff. Christian wrote the following letter to his mother:

Dear Mother: It is with peculiar feelings I packed father's tools for the last time, as I have helped him do so many times in his moving around from place to place in the last twenty-five years, but I suppose all is as it should be and I am sure he is happy, then why should we not be. I think we are, in as much as we do our duty from day to day. . . . that when our day comes for departure we shall feel content and satisfied to go, even as he was.

Guðmundur's body, dressed in temple clothing, was shipped by train to Draper, and he was buried in the cemetery there. Toward the end of his life, Guðmundur, who had experienced both the fire of conversion and the ice of apostasy, expressed the peace that had ultimately come to him: "This is Zion, if Zion is in my heart. . . . I feel to keep to the rod of Iron, and I feel, that if I did all for the spreading of the Gospel, it would be nothing on my part. . . . I feel that all my heart is in this kingdom." Although there is no known written obituary and no gravestone at his burial place, Guðmundur Guðmundsson, as a pioneer of the gospel in Iceland, left his mark in the hearts of Icelandic Saints.
Fred E. Woods (fred_woods@byu.edu) has been Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University since 1998. He received a B.A. in psychology in 1981, an M.A. in international relations with an emphasis in Near Eastern Studies in 1985 from Brigham Young University, and a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern Studies in 1991 from the University of Utah. In 1999, Professor Woods was the research fellow for the Mariner’s Museum.


2. “Unfortunately, the reaction of the Icelanders to the revelation of the Mormons is by no means a patch of sunshine in the religious history of Iceland. . . . The Mormons who came here as missionaries were persecuted and reviled more than any other advocates of religious views in Iceland before or since,” Halldor Laxness, *Take of the Promised Land*, as quoted in Lavon Brunt Eyring, comp., “The Life History of Guðmundur Guðmundsson” (n.p., 1984), 60–61, L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

3. “Guðmundur Guðmundsson changed his name to Gudmund Gudmundsen after arriving in Utah.” Eyring, “History of Guðmundur Guðmundsson,” title page. He is also referred to in some accounts by the first name Gudmund; others use the surname Gudmundson. The author recognizes these variables and has chosen to use his proper Icelandic name of Guðmundur Guðmundsson.

4. In the summer of 2000, the Icelandic Association of Utah will erect a monument on the Westmann Islands to commemorate the first Icelandic converts to Mormonism. In Hofsós, Iceland, where the Icelandic Emigration Center is housed, a new building will also be dedicated that will feature a permanent exhibit telling the inspiring story of LDS Icelandic emigration to Zion (America) and the story of the reemergence of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Iceland since 1975.

5. Oddi Parrish Records, Lutheran Church, Rangarvalla District, Iceland. These records were provided by Sigriður Sigurðardóttir and Valgeir Sigurdsson, who are native Icelanders.


8. Eyring, “History of Guðmundur Guðmundsson,” 3, 6. Apparently Eyring estimated Guðmundur’s birth date as March 23, 1823, as it occurs under this date in the Copenhagen Branch membership records. However, Oddi Parish records indicate that Guðmundur was born on March 10, 1825, and his christening was on March 23, 1825. Johnsen notes that Þórarin also was born on March 10, 1825, which would make Þórarin and Guðmundur exactly the same age. Copenhagen Branch, Record of Members, holograph, microfilm, LDS Church Archives; Johnsen, “Þórarinn Hafliðason,” 114; Oddi Parrish Records.


11. Gudmundsson, “Autobiography,” [1]. Erastus Snow, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, was called at the October conference of 1849 to preside over the Scandinavian Mission. For a sketch of his life, see Jenson, “Erastus Snow,” in LDS Biographical Encyclopedia, 1:103–15. Copenhagen Branch membership records verify that Gudmundur was baptized on February 15, 1851, by Peter O. Hansen and was confirmed by Christian Christiansen the same day.


13. Pórarin was ordained a priest on March 10, 1851, and Gudmundur was ordained a teacher on April 18, 1851. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, 1850–55, microfilm, March 10 and April 18, 1851, LDS Church Archives.

14. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, July 10, 1851. The third convert was probably Jón Johannesson, who had also gone to Denmark to learn the art of goldsmithing. It is not known why he was not sent back to Iceland as a missionary, and little is known of his life in the Church. He apparently moved to Keflavík, and it is not known whether he kept his faith. LaNora Allred, “The Icelanders of Utah,” copy of typescript, 8–9, in author’s possession. Apparently, the missionaries used Peter O. Hansen’s Danish translation of the Book of Mormon. The translation may not have been quite finished by the time of their departure for the Westmann Islands. See Millennial Star 13 (March 15, 1851): 88. The “popular pamphlet” they used was En Sandheds-Røst (A Voice of Truth), which was printed in Copenhagen by October 1850. Peter O. Hansen had translated the pamphlet into Danish from the English version written by Erastus Snow. See Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, October 4, 1850. Magnus Bjarnason, who had lived with Pórarin Haflíðason for a year before he went to Copenhagen, stated:

[Pórarin] came to my house, introduced a conversation about religion, and present[ed] me with a little pamphlet entitled “En Sandheds Røst.” He also gave copies of the same pamphlet to a number of the other inhabitant[s] who were willing to receive them. As soon as I had read the little pamphlet, I believed in the doctrines it advocated and prayed to the Lord to give me an understanding about the truth. In the course of a month’s time I was converted to “Mormonism.” (Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1854, microfilm, LDS Church Archives)


19. The original letter is housed in the National Archives of Iceland in Reykjavík. A copy of it in its original Icelandic was provided by the archivist Björk Ingimundardóttir, and it was translated by Darron S. Allred.

20. Jón Gíslason, “Endurnýjun í vatni og hugsjónum nýrrar aldar. Nýr fórustumaður Mormóna kemur til Vestmannayeyja,” in part six of Sögur og Sagnir (n.p., n.d.), 11, translated for author by Darron S. Allred, copy in author’s possession. Gúðmundur had lived with Loftur Jónsson for a time. Jónsson had probably first heard about Mormonism and the arrival of Gúðmundur from Pórarinn. Loftur joined the LDS Church, immigrated to Spanish Fork in 1857, and returned to Iceland to serve a mission in 1873. He was later killed in an accident on September 9, 1874, near Palmyra, Utah. Eyering,

21. Jenson, “Scandinavian Mission: Iceland Conference,” 9. Elder John Thorgierson indicates that the baptism of this couple led to the charge for the missionaries to stop proselyting. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, April 1851. However, one documentary source notes that Benedikt and Ragnhildur emigrated to Copenhagen and were then baptized on December 10, 1852. In any case, apparently it was their conversion that sparked the opposition. This source further notes that the Hansson family immigrated to America in 1859, but Benedikt died in Omaha, Nebraska, on route to Utah. Ragnhildur was left to continue her journey with her two children (Ephraim and Mary), arriving in Utah in 1862. “Ragnhildur and Her Children,” in Our Pioneer Heritage, 7:492–93; Jean Mouser to David Ashby, email, February 29, 2000, copy in possession of author. After remaining in Salt Lake City for a time, the Hansson family moved to Spanish Fork and joined the community of other Icelandic Saints who had previously gathered there. The Vestmannaseyar Parish Registers, Iceland, substantiate the fact that they emigrated from the Westman Islands to Copenhagen in 1852 and further note that Benedikt was thirty-five years old and Ragnhildur thirty-seven years old at the time of their emigration. See Index to Persons Emigrating from Vestmannaseyar, Iceland to Copenhagen, Utah, Hafnarfjord, Reykjavik, Seydisfjordur, and America, from 1823–1913, extracted by John Y. Bearnson from Registers GS #12712, parts one and two, GS #12594, parts one and two for the Genealogical Society, [1970?], 13, 30, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.


23. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, April 1851. In her history of Guðmundur, his great-granddaughter states, “Anyone who knew Guðmsson well might have understood Erastus Snow’s hesitation. . . . He was capable of finding the humor in almost any situation.” Eyring, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 62.


25. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, April 10, 1853. Three days after the conference adjourned, President Willard Snow wrote a letter stating that he had appointed Elder John F. F. Dorius on a mission to Iceland during the previous conference in Copenhagen, but Dorius had been imprisoned in Norway along with several other elders. Therefore, Snow appointed Lorentzen to preside over the Icelandic mission and indicated that he was to sail to Iceland “as soon as navigation opens up the way.” Willard Snow to S. W. Richards, April 13, 1853, in Millennial Star 15 (May 14, 1853): 315.


28. According to the Vestmannaseyar Parish Records, Guðmundur left the Vestmann Islands for Copenhagen in 1854. See Index to Persons Emigrating, 11.


33. Marie Garff is sometimes referred to as Mary or Maria in the sources used for this article.
34. Louis Garff, Reminiscences of Louis Garff, 58, holograph, microfilm, LDS Church Archives. The ship manifest shows that the Garff family were among the 522 passengers on this spring voyage of the Westmoreland from Liverpool to Philadelphia. Niels is listed on the customs list as 46 years old, and Marie is listed as 36. The names and ages of the children at the time of embarkation were listed as Peter [Niels] age 6, Christen [Christian] age 5, Lauritz [Louis] age 2, and Trina [Josephine Patrina] age twenty-one months. “Report or Manifest of All the Passengers Taken on Board the Ship Westmoreland,” Balch Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, copy in possession of author. The names and ages appear to be correct, with the exception that Peter Garff was born February 17, 1843, and was therefore fourteen at the time of the voyage, not six. See Garff, Peter Niels Garff, x.

35. Garff, Peter Niels Garff, 15.


37. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission notes that the Saints arrived in Philadelphia on May 31, 1857, where they were received by Cannon. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, April 18, 1857. However, the Westmoreland Custom List for the port of Philadelphia gives the date as June 1, 1857.


40. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, April 18, 1857.

41. For details of the journey between the Copenhagen departure (April 18, 1857) and the arrival at Salt Lake City (September 13, 1857), see Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, April 18, 1857. For additional details of the journey with the Christian Christensen Company, see LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856–1860 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Spokane, Wash.: Arthur H. Clark, 1960), 157–64.

42. Garff, Peter Niels Garff, x.


45. Eyring, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 83, 93. See also Myrl Gudmundsen to Richard S. Van Wagoner, February 12, 1988, Lehi Public Library. According to records from the Endowment House in Salt Lake City, Marie was sealed to the deceased Niels Garff for eternity and married for time to Guðmundur on April 20, 1861. Garff, Peter Niels Garff, 16–17.


49. Journal History of the Church, July 8, 1861.


57. For details of this discovery, see Eyering, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 118–20; and Gudmundsen to Van Wagoner. Gudmundsen asserts that they consulted a friend who was a judge, while Eyering maintains that the money was turned into the mayor.

58. Garff, Reminiscences of Louis Garff, 60. The family was rebaptized on November 14, 1869, in Draper, Utah. Eyering, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 120.


63. Guðmundur passed his trade onto his sons Abraham and Isaac. When the boys matured, Guðmundur started an itinerant business of repairing watches and sometimes left his sons alone to run their jewelry store in Lehi. He advertised with circulars in the surrounding areas. Eyering, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 122.


65. According to one of Guðmundur’s granddaughters, Guðmundur appeared to her in his temple robes the night he died and adjusted one part of his clothing. After the casket had been shipped home, the family discovered that particular part of his clothing had not been put on properly. Eyering suggests that “God may have allowed this unusual occurrence to take place as a witness to Gudmundur’s posterity that his temple clothes and hence the gospel were of great importance to him and that he had died as a member in good-standing in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” Eyering, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 125–26.

66. On March 18, 2000, I met Ralph A. Trane (a grandson of Guðmundur) at the pioneer cemetery in Draper (Draper Corporation Cemetery). We had been trying to find the burial place of Guðmundur, and Ralph thought that he might be buried in Draper because some of the Garff family were buried there. We were delighted when the cemetery director, Scott Howell, searched his records and was able to identify the plot where Guðmundur was buried. In May 2000, Ralph and his family placed a marker on Guðmundur’s grave to honor him.