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# “The Little Head Stones Became Monuments”

## Death in the Early Samoan Mission and the Creation of the Fagali’i Cemetery

*Reid L. Neilson and Scott D. Marianno*

When the call first went forth, Samoa was as far from people’s minds as the islands themselves are from the rest of the civilized world,” a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wrote from Apia in 1899. “Women were among the Gospel pioneers on these islands; what they endured, their trials and their hardships, even to parting with life itself, it is a story that today dims the eye with tears. Samoa has never been a happy home for our sisters.”<sup>1</sup>

Hardships, illness, and death were the unfortunate companions of many who pioneered missionary work in the far-off reaches of the world in the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Writing of stalwart South Pacific missionaries, historian Ruth R. Yeaman

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1. Hezekiah [Edwin Hezekiah Smart], Apia, Samoa, to the Editor of the *Young Woman’s Journal*, September 1899, published as “Our Girls,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 11 (March 1900): 125. To better appreciate the female missionary experience in late-nineteenth-century Samoa and Tonga (the early Samoan Mission), see Ruth R. Yeaman, “Women from Zion in the Samoan Mission: 1888–1900,” in *Proceedings, Eleventh Annual Conference, Mormon Pacific Historical Society, June 10–16, 1990* (n.p.: Mormon Pacific Historical Society, 1990), 54–80; and Carol C. Madsen, “Mormon Missionary Wives in Nineteenth Century Polynesia,” *Journal of Mormon History* 13 (1986–87): 61–85.

For the best histories of the Church in Samoa, see R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), chapters 21–24 (pp. 349–428); and R. Carl Harris, *Building the Kingdom in Samoa, 1888–2005: History, Personal Narratives, and Images Portraying Latter-day Saints’ Experiences in the Samoan Islands* (Heber City, Utah: By the author, 2006).

described the sacrifices they made: “All of them faced the difficulties of an environment and culture entirely foreign to them. Among the members of the group some faced the horror and hazards of civil war, some faced the fury of the hurricane seasons and other elements of the weather, some faced the death of children, one faced the death of a husband, and several sacrificed their own lives.”<sup>2</sup> During the first two decades of the Samoan Mission, at least twelve Latter-day Saints passed away in the mission, which forced the mission leaders and other missionaries to determine how best to bury and honor their dead. This article first reviews the history of LDS cemeteries as sacred spaces and then looks specifically at memorials created for deceased missionaries and their children in Samoa. These stones acted as memorials for survivors and left a lasting artifact of the lived religion of these early missionaries. As Tona Hangen notes, “Lived religion is the vibrant culture always thrumming below a church’s official radar, where improvisation, resistance, blending, and creativity are found in abundance.”<sup>3</sup> How LDS Church members created and revered sacred space abroad provides a rich field of study for scholars seeking to understand how religion is practiced at the periphery rather than the core of Mormon settlement. In Samoa particularly, as missionaries confronted the harsh realities of service abroad, they often adapted traditional Mormon expressions toward the dead to form a combination of American burial tradition, Mormon custom and belief, and local expediencies. The creation of sacred burial space at Fagali’i is one example of how Church members actually applied their religion in an international setting; missionaries interpreted Latter-day Saint cosmology and responded with improvised memorials to mourn and honor their dead.

### **Latter-day Saint Cemeteries and the Construction of Memory**

Geographer Richard H. Jackson notes of the historical value of burial grounds: “Each cemetery is an ever changing volume that records the history, values, and dream of a people and place, and each stone records the life of a real person—a person who lived and loved . . . and left behind memories that reverberate through succeeding generations.”<sup>4</sup>

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2. Yeaman, “Women from Zion in the Samoan Mission,” 73–74.

3. Tona J. Hangen, “Lived Religion among Mormons,” in *Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terry L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 209.

4. Richard H. Jackson, “Mormon Cemeteries: History in Stone,” in *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah’s Mormon Pioneers*, ed.

Indeed, created from stone is a cultural inscription that locates in time and place the beliefs, values, and culture of a people and even a nation. The very act of erecting a memorial involves the construction of a historical narrative; cemeteries, in short, reveal how a people remember and what or whom they remember.

The erection and preservation of memorials arguably approach formalized ritual in Latter-day Saint culture. From the Church's earliest days, its prophet instructed Church members on how to treat the dead. Joseph Smith advocated "the importance of being buried with the saints & their relatives in as much as we shall want to see our relatives first & shall rejoice to strike hands with our parents, children &c when rising from the tomb."<sup>5</sup> Proximity to family members during burial was one piece of Smith's maturing teachings on death and resurrection that by Nauvoo took on a more practical form. In addition, Smith was beginning to lay out a theology of adoption in conjunction with new temple ritual that expanded conventional notions of kinship. Inasmuch as converted Latter-day Saints were separated from biological family lines to gather in Mormon communities, they were welcomed into the family of God to experience salvation communally.<sup>6</sup> Latter-day Saints living on the banks of the Mississippi created their own cemetery ordered around a familial sense of community as a body of believers.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, the Saints at least partially moved away from their European ancestral roots and elected to bury their dead closer to the congregation of Saints rather than in their former communities or homelands. As Samuel Brown suggests, "The society Smith created, encompassing life and afterlife, provided his followers with the reassurance that despite their risky migrations into the frontier and the desertion of their extended families, they would not be buried alone."<sup>8</sup>

Yet, the Saints learned soon after the martyrdom of their prophet in 1844 that their stay in Nauvoo would only be temporary. The forced

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Ronald W. Walker and Doris R. Dant (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 405.

5. Quoted in Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 91.

6. Samuel M. Brown, "Early Mormon Adoption Theology and the Mechanics of Salvation," *Journal of Mormon History* 37 (Summer 2011): 3–52.

7. A public cemetery was located on Parley Street in Nauvoo beginning in 1842. See Lyndon W. Cook, *Nauvoo Deaths and Marriages, 1839–1845* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1994), viii.

8. Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, 94.

exodus out of the city in 1846 left the collective Church without a formal home and displaced many members into the Iowa wilderness. One of the more permanent camps of Saints was established in southern Iowa at what the settlers titled Mount Pisgah in 1846. A sacred reverence for the settlement was maintained almost from its creation, since it was aptly named after the mount from which Moses surveyed the promised land (see Deut. 34:1–4). Until 1852, when Mt. Pisgah was disbanded, many Saints seeking a safe haven in the West passed through en route to the Great Basin. This staging area became a place where passing Saints mourned the hundreds of fellow believers who did not live to see the Salt Lake Valley. With limited resources, the settlers established a makeshift pioneer cemetery to honor the dead. The six-year settlement might easily have been forgotten if not for the Mormon dead interred there. In 1886, the Church purchased the land on which the cemetery sat and later erected a memorial, which read in part, “This Monument Erected A.D. 1888, in memory of those members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who died in 1846, 1847, and 1848, during their exodus to seek a home beyond the Rocky Mountains.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, to Latter-day Saints four decades later, Mount Pisgah was deemed worth memorializing not just because of those who temporarily passed through, but because of those permanently interred there. The cemetery was sacred space, a monument to the “determination, stout hearts, endurance and religious fervor these Mormon people possessed.”<sup>10</sup>

The poor quality of materials used to erect grave markers contributed to the disappearance of the original Mt. Pisgah cemetery and the repetition of similar burial processes across the pioneer trail. Death was commonplace for pioneers making the trek across the plains to the Salt Lake Valley, especially in the early years of Mormon emigration, before advances in technology rendered the journey less formidable.<sup>11</sup> At best, those mourning their dead on the trail created roughly inscribed grave

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9. Richard L. Evans, “Mt. Pisgah Mormon Cemetery,” *Improvement Era* 40 (January 1937): 20–22.

10. Evans, “Mt. Pisgah Mormon Cemetery,” 20–22.

11. Melvin Bashore and H. Dennis Tolley estimate that 1,910 people died along the trail to the Salt Lake Valley from 1847 to 1868. Death was evenly distributed between males and females. These figures do not include the many who died at the multiple designated staging areas from which pioneer companies departed or deaths that occurred en route to the staging areas. Melvin L. Bashore and H. Dennis Tolley, “Mortality on the Mormon Trail, 1847–1868,”

markers of stone or wood. Others were forced to pile rocks on the resting place of their loved ones or to inter them in shallow, unmarked graves. The improvisational nature of pioneer memorials meant that the physical resting place of many of the Saints who perished seeking Zion quickly merged with the natural landscape, eroding the physical traces of human suffering. Without a precise geographical location to memorialize the individual dead on the trek west, the pioneer trail itself took on an added ritual dimension in the decades following large-scale Mormon emigration to the Great Basin. In the collective memory of Latter-day Saints, the trek experience and physical trail function as a sacred monument to the faith of the Saints who suffered. With the Mormon dead dispersed along the pioneer trail, the landscape retains sacred characteristics for later generations of Church members, many of whom treasure their pioneer heritage. As is the case for other religions, sacred space—or place—for Latter-day Saints sometimes developed from sites of communal suffering. Commemorations were held and monuments were erected to mark “disjunctures, time-places where history—in the mind of the rememberer—*should* have been different.”<sup>12</sup> For Mormons, the pioneer trail was a cultural inscription to tragic loss—to the unjustified loss of land and a prophet lost too soon in Nauvoo and to Saints prematurely lost while in search of a permanent refuge from persecution.

Mormon pioneers brought their communal values with them to the Rocky Mountains and almost immediately began to search for a place to inter their dead. An informal cemetery was established at Salt Lake City’s block 49, on 100 West between 300 South and 400 South, following the first burial in the Salt Lake Valley.<sup>13</sup> This pioneer cemetery housed many of the early deceased pioneers before it was determined that a more formal public burial ground should be established. In 1849, Church leaders set aside twenty acres for a public burial ground on the northeast bench overlooking the city, and, in early 1856, the Salt Lake City Council passed an ordinance requiring all citizens within city limits to inter their dead at the Public Burying Ground, or what became

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BYU Studies 53 (2014): 109–23. On the advancing railroad, see Stanley B. Kimball, “Sail and Rail Pioneers before 1869,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 2 (1995).

12. Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres, *Religion, Violence, Memory, and Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4.

13. Shane A. Baker, *At Rest in Zion: The Archaeology of Salt Lake City’s First Pioneer Cemetery* (Provo, Utah: Museum of Peoples and Cultures, Brigham Young University, 2011), 13–15.

the Salt Lake City Cemetery.<sup>14</sup> Utah Territory's first formal cemetery abandoned the rugged nature of pioneer memorials and was instead patterned after the unique gridlike organization of Latter-day Saint settlements, displaying a sense of permanence and planning.<sup>15</sup> The development of the Salt Lake City Cemetery also paralleled national trends in urban planning, which around mid-century, began to locate "rural" cemeteries, engineered like forested countrysides, on city peripheries.<sup>16</sup> Landscaped according to romanticized notions of English gardening techniques, the picturesque rural cemetery stood in contrast to the bustling, disorderly American urban center. According to one historian, the "rural cemetery movement reflected an anxious search for a sanctuary from the 'go a-head' spirit of the age."<sup>17</sup>

With formal cemeteries established, Latter-day Saints began in the latter half of the nineteenth century to develop a gravestone industry in the Salt Lake Valley that included the creation of more durable, ornate monuments. In the years following initial settlement, settlers in the Great Basin abandoned the makeshift wood and stone monuments characteristic of the pioneer trail and began to extract sandstone from local quarries for headstones. Stone carvers, some of whom worked on the Nauvoo Temple before emigrating to the West, contributed to the proliferation of custom gravestones, many of a European style, in the cemeteries of Salt Lake and surrounding settlements.<sup>18</sup> When they established the cemetery at Fagali'i, missionaries in Samoa relied on Latter-day Saint tradition and American burial culture, but also engaged in improvised and personal forms of religious expression to memorialize their dead.

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14. Baker, *At Rest in Zion*, 14–15.

15. Annette Stott, *Pioneer Cemeteries: Sculpture Gardens of the Old West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 56–57.

16. See Thomas Bender, "The 'Rural' Cemetery Movement: Urban Travail and the Appeal of Nature," *New England Quarterly* 47 (June 1974): 196–211; Blanche M. G. Linden, *Silent City on a Hill: Picturesque Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 141.

17. Bender, "'Rural' Cemetery Movement," 202.

18. Carol Edison, "Custom-made Gravestones in Early Salt Lake City: The Work of Four English Stonecarvers," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 56 (Fall 1988): 310–30.

## The Creation of the Cemetery in Fagali'i

The first Mormon missionary couples to Samoa were able to avoid much of the loss that other missionaries would incur after their departure. In October 1877, thirty-one-year-old Joseph Henry Dean<sup>19</sup> and his twenty-year-old wife, Florence Ridges Dean,<sup>20</sup> were called to the Hawaiian Mission and later officially opened the Samoan Mission in 1888, with Elder Dean serving as its president until 1890. Shortly after their arrival in Samoa, the Deans optimistically sent a letter to Church headquarters requesting another mission couple to assist them with the work. William Orme Lee<sup>21</sup> (age 25) and his wife, Louisa Calder Lee<sup>22</sup> (age 23), arrived in Samoa on October 10, 1888, with their infant daughter, Louisa. Nine months later, on July 24, 1890, Sister Lee gave birth to their son Henry Calder Lee. The Deans finished their mission to the South Pacific on August 16, 1890, with both of their mission-born children, Jasper (who was born in Hawaii in 1888) and Wilford (born in Samoa in June 1890) still living.

Elder Lee succeeded President Dean as leader of the fledgling Samoan Mission on August 16, 1890, and was delighted to learn that the First Presidency had called another young couple to serve with them in 1890. Joseph Harris Merrill<sup>23</sup> (age 22) and his wife, Katie Eliza Hale Merrill<sup>24</sup> (age 19) (fig. 1), were set apart as the third missionary couple assigned to the Samoan Mission, just months after their November 6, 1890, marriage in the Logan Temple. Initially, the First Presidency called

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19. "Joseph Henry Dean," on *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/joseph-henry-dean-1855> (accessed June 27, 2016).

20. "Florence Ridges Dean," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/florence-ridges-dean-1866> (accessed June 27, 2016).

21. "William Orme Lee," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/william-orme-lee-1862> (accessed June 24, 2016).

22. "Louisa Calder Lee," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/louisa-calder-lee-1864> (accessed June 24, 2016).

23. "Joseph Harris Merrill," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/joseph-harriss-merrill-1868> (accessed June 24, 2016).

24. "Katie Eliza Hale Merrill," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/katie-eliza-hale-merrill-1871> (accessed June 24, 2016); Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History, 1901–36), 3:683.



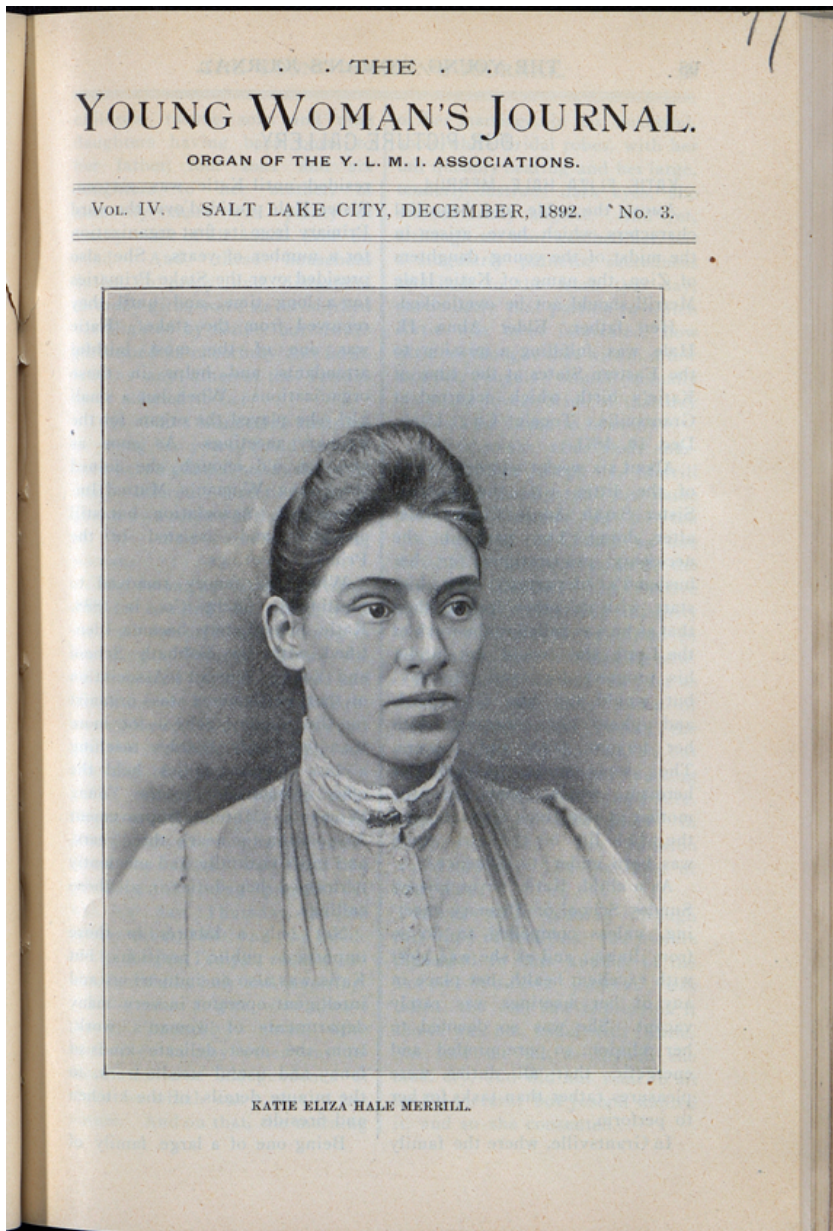


FIGURE 1. Katie Eliza Hale Merrill, pictured in the *Young Woman's Journal* (December 1892), along with an article about her life and service. Courtesy Church History Department.

only Joseph to Samoa, but quickly reconsidered and invited Joseph's young bride to travel with him. According to a friend of Katie Merrill, "This was a joyful piece of news for the young couple. Katie was now elated. Although repeatedly warned of the many and severe hardships to which she would unavoidably be subjected, she never lost courage but persistently clung to the assurance that the Lord never requires anything of His children that He does not give them power to accomplish."<sup>25</sup>

Despite the stated risks, the Samoan Mission had already successfully welcomed a new child. When the Merrills arrived in Samoa on March 23, 1891, the young and now pregnant couple may have confidently expected their experience to be no different. Sister Merrill, however, became seriously ill shortly after reaching Samoa and her own life and the life of her unborn baby were at risk.<sup>26</sup> Complications from her illness forced Katie Merrill into early childbirth on June 28, only three months after her arrival to Samoa, and she delivered a premature baby boy. "It was very small, but as perfect and pretty a baby as I ever saw," fellow missionary wife Sister Lee described. Shocked her new baby had survived childbirth, "Katie exclaimed, 'Thank the Lord! it is alive, and a boy; oh I am so glad! Do let me see it and kiss it?'"<sup>27</sup> The Merrills named their three-pound baby Joseph Aroet.

The Merrills' local doctor immediately spotted severe complications and knew the child would not survive but hesitated to inform Sister Merrill in her weakened state. The following afternoon, on June 29, 1891, little Joseph died. Sister Lee described the scene that followed:

I went to [Katie's] bed-side. She had told me repeatedly she had no pain but was so weak. Now when I went to her she asked for her husband, and said, "Oh Sister Lee, I am dying!" I called my husband to administer to her, rubbed her hands and feet, and sent for her husband who had gone out to try to control his feelings, after seeing his baby breathe its last. "Oh Katie," I said, "you are mistaken, surely you would not leave your poor husband!" She answered, "They have come for me, and I must go; I can't stop." After being administered to she revived, and

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25. L. L. Greene Richards, "Katie Eliza Hale Merrill," *Young Woman's Journal* 4 (December 1892): 100.

26. See Joseph H. Merrill, Journal, May 24, 27, 30, June 19, 1891, MS 4446, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. See also Joseph H. Merrill, Papers, 1890–1957, MS 9074, Church History Library.

27. Richards, "Katie Eliza Hale Merrill," 101.

said, "Administer again," which was done. Just then Joseph came in; she spoke to him, kissed him and said, "Good-by." She was dead, without a struggle. Death could not have been more peaceful.<sup>28</sup>

For the widower husband, the excitement surrounding his Samoan adventure and the gratitude that originated from his call to preach on behalf of the Church were now overwhelmed by solitude and sorrow. "At 1 o'clock I witnessed the death of our baby and at 3 o'clock God saw fit to take my dear wife. It is all I can bear," Elder Merrill journaled that day. "We left home so happy being called of God to the work of the Ministry, and now I am left alone, forsaken of God, bereft of all my earthly joys. I care not to live, but for others. Thus are my afflictions heaped upon me almost more than I am able to bear. I care not for Samoa. I care not for earthly pleasures. I care not to live."<sup>29</sup>

Sister Katie Merrill was the first missionary to die in the Samoan Mission, as well as the first female representative to pass away while serving a foreign mission for the Church. Even without the resources that would be available to him domestically in Utah, Elder Merrill still proceeded through a formal burial procedure for his departed loved ones. Shortly after Sister Merrill's death, Sister Lee washed and dressed baby Joseph for burial.<sup>30</sup> Sister Merrill was similarly prepared for burial and dressed in temple clothing according to Latter-day Saint custom.<sup>31</sup> With the consent of the owner of the neighboring German plantation, Joseph Merrill and his fellow missionaries created a small graveyard near the mission home overlooking the Pacific Ocean.<sup>32</sup> The proximity of the cemetery to the mission home was likely informed by longstanding European precedent of locating cemeteries on church grounds. The short distance from the mission home allowed missionaries to look after

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28. Richards, "Katie Eliza Hale Merrill," 101.

29. Merrill, Journal, June 29, 1891.

30. Richards, "Katie Eliza Hale Merrill," 101.

31. Merrill, Journal, June 29, 1891.

32. A German firm operated significant commercial plantations in Samoa, concentrated generally on the island of Upolu, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Eventually, Germany took a formal colonial stake in western Samoa beginning in 1900 after another Civil War in Samoa and a resolution concerning American and British colonial interests in the Western Pacific granted control over the territory to the Germans. Doug Munro and Stewart Firth, "German Labour Policy and the Partition of the Western Pacific: The View from Samoa," *The Journal of Pacific History* 25 (June 1990): 85–102.

and care for the headstones and, in the absence of significant Church land holdings in Samoa, provided a practical alternative to a public burial ground.

The missionaries buried Sister Merrill with her newborn cradled in her arms in a pine coffin purchased by Elder Merrill in Apia.<sup>33</sup> The burial site was located "on the brow of the hill (overlooking the sea) among the cocoanut trees, their heads turned toward home."<sup>34</sup> According to a letter from President Lee to the First Presidency, the grieving Elder Merrill chose the location because it was a "dry, elevated place" that would allow him to exhume and transport the remains of his loved ones home after his mission.<sup>35</sup> Despite these intentions, Joseph Merrill and his missionary companions went to work for the next month beautifying the site where Katie and Joseph were laid to rest. Elder Merrill procured pickets from Apia and dug post holes for the erection of a fence. He also created a wooden head and foot board and assigned a fellow missionary the task of painting the inscription. On August 8, with "all the work done" on the cemetery, Elder Merrill felt ready to resume his mission and "leave Fagalii for the first time."<sup>36</sup> Even with the unexpected nature of his wife's death and the temporary nature of his stay in Samoa, Elder Merrill gravitated toward formal American burial custom. His memorial to his wife and son included careful preparation of the burial place and the creation of a border that differentiated the site from the surrounding tropical landscape, marking its sacredness (fig. 2). This temporary beginning for the Fagali'i cemetery would eventually provide a more permanent resting place for several Latter-day Saint missionaries and their deceased infants in Samoa.

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33. Merrill, Journal, June 29, 1891.

34. Merrill, Journal, June 29, 1891.

35. "Died While on a Mission," *Millennial Star* 53 (August 31, 1891): 555. Joseph Merrill continued to proselyte in Polynesia, in both the Samoan and Tongan islands, until April 25, 1894. Before he departed for the United States, he followed through with his intentions to exhume the bodies of his family, and he eventually reburied them in the Smithfield City Cemetery, in Cache County, Utah. Elder Merrill returned as president of the Samoan Mission in 1901 and served about fifteen months until health issues forced his return to America in 1903. "Joseph Harris Merrill," *Early Mormon Missionaries*; Joseph H. Merrill in *Seventy-Third Annual Conference Report of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1903), 14–17.

36. Merrill, Journal, August 8, 1891.

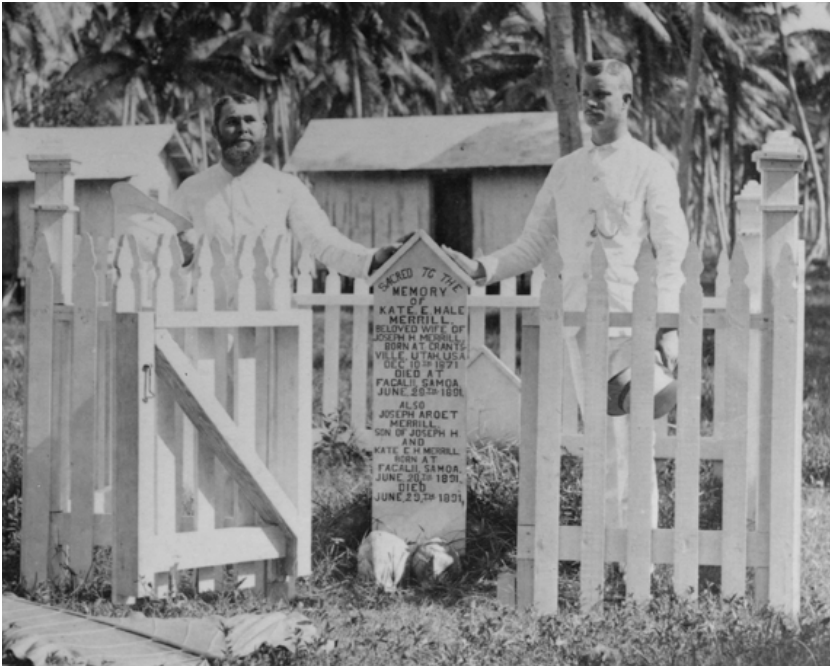


FIGURE 2. The gravesite of Katie Merrill and her son, Joseph Aroet Merrill, at Fagali'i cemetery, circa August 1891. *Left to right*: William Low and Joseph H. Merrill. Courtesy Church History Department, © Intellectual Reserve Inc.

In 1891, the First Presidency called Thomas and Sarah Hilton<sup>37</sup> as the fourth married couple to labor in the Samoan Mission. While the young couple lived in Salt Lake City, Sarah gave birth to their first child, Jeanette McMurrin, on September 10, 1891. Despite the couple's strained

37. "Sarah McMurrin Hilton," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/sarah-mcm-hilton-1871> (accessed June 24, 2016). See Sarah M. Hilton, Journals, 1892–1893, MS 13794, Church History Library; Sarah M. Hilton, Autobiography, MS 26801, Church History Library; "Thomas Heddock Hilton," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/thomas-heddock-hilton-1870> (accessed June 24, 2016). Sarah was born on April 8, 1871, in Salt Lake City, the daughter of Joseph McMurrin Jr. and Jeanette Irvine. Her future husband, Thomas, was born on December 6, 1870, in Salt Lake City, the son of David Hilton Jr. and Mary Ann Affleck. After a short courtship, the two eighteen-year-old sweethearts were married in the Logan Temple on December 4, 1889. Hilton, Autobiography, 1–2; Lalovi McMurrin Hilton, "A History of My Father—Thomas Heddock Hilton," 1, MS 28387, Church History Library.

financial circumstances and recent arrival, that November the Hiltons accepted the call to serve as a young missionary family in the South Pacific. In their formal acceptance letter to President Wilford Woodruff, Thomas wrote: "In reply to your notice of a call from almighty God for me to go to Samoa to proclaim the word of the Lord to the people, I say this; that myself and all pertaining to me feel willing to devote our lives or even sacrifice them if necessary doing the will of God."<sup>38</sup> Four months later, Thomas (age 21) and Sarah (age 20) were set apart as missionaries in Salt Lake City by Apostles John H. Smith and Abraham H. Cannon, respectively.

Sister Hilton wrote of their Pacific voyage: "The Samoan Islands . . . are as far from Hawaii as Hawaii is from San Francisco, California. That was the first time we'd been on the sea, and we were certainly seasick. We spent a whole day in Hawaii trying to find our land legs."<sup>39</sup> Their traveling companions to Samoa were Ransom Marion Stevens<sup>40</sup> (age 27) and Annie Dorthea Christensen Stevens<sup>41</sup> (age 28) from Fairview, Utah, the Samoan Mission's fifth married couple. The missionary families from Utah arrived in Apia, Samoa, on April 17, 1892, eager to preach the gospel. "We met with the natives, partook of their food, and then arranged for a room on one end of the big porch that ran around the house. Everything was so strange," Sarah Hilton reminisced of their new surroundings.<sup>42</sup>

But the tranquility and curiosity that marked the beginning of the couple's sojourn in Polynesia would soon be shattered. On June 4, 1892, about six weeks after the Hiltons arrived in the islands, their seven-month-old Jeanette died of a gastrointestinal disease.<sup>43</sup> The Hiltons

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38. Thomas H. Hilton to Wilford Woodruff, November 6, 1891, First Presidency Missionary Calls and Recommendations, 1877-1918, CR 1 168, Church History Library.

39. Hilton, *Autobiography*, 2-3.

40. "Ransom Marion Stevens," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/ransom-marion-stevens-1864> (accessed June 27, 2016).

41. "Annie Dorthea Christensen Stevens," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/annie-dorthea-christensen-stevens-1864> (accessed June 27, 2016). See also "Annie D. Christensen Stevens Palmer: Her Life and Her Samoan Mission," MS 9327, Church History Library.

42. Hilton, *Autobiography*, 3.

43. The cause of death according to reports was *cholera infantum*, a common term for a dangerous gastrointestinal disease that caused severe cramping, diarrhea, and vomiting among infants. "Utah News," *Millennial Star* 54

followed a similar burial process as Elder Merrill before them. Rather than choosing a separate burial site, the grieving parents elected to bury their child next to Sister Katie Merrill's grave on the hill behind the mission home.<sup>44</sup> The two headstones in the Fagali'i cemetery looked nearly identical with the painted inscription "Sacred to the Memory" serving as the header and the vital information of the deceased below.<sup>45</sup>

That fall, on September 21, the still-grieving Hiltons welcomed a new baby, Thomas Harold. With little medical resources available to them, Elder Hilton took on the role of midwife.<sup>46</sup> "He feared that he might lose both mother and baby, so he sent home for a doctor book and studied it. He became a fairly good doctor as well as a midwife," their son Lalovi recounted. "I heard my father tell how he had pleaded with the Lord to help him deliver the baby safely. He went to a sacred spot dedicated for secret prayer within a large banyan tree behind the mission home."<sup>47</sup> But again, death seemingly stalked the Hilton household: after a successful birth, their seventeen-month-old son died on March 17, 1894. Elder and Sister Hilton buried young Thomas next to his infant sister in the Fagali'i cemetery.

Falling into a tragic pattern, the Hiltons welcomed a third child that fall in Samoa. George Emmett, named after their current mission president George Emmett Browning, was born on October 12, 1894.<sup>48</sup> But like his sister and brother before him, little George too would die shortly after birth. He passed away on October 19 from lockjaw,

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(August 8, 1892): 511; Jacqueline H. Wolf, *Don't Kill Your Baby: Public Health and the Decline of Breastfeeding in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 48–50.

44. Hilton, *Autobiography*, 3.

45. A circa-1892 photo of the graves of Katie Eliza Hale Merrill and Jeanette McMurrin Hilton is available at [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) under the names of those individuals.

46. While females traditionally dominated the field of midwifery in America, males grew increasingly more common throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, midwives were generally being replaced by physicians who would supervise childbirth. Jane B. Donegan, *Women and Men Midwives: Medicine, Mortality, and Misogyny in Early America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), 110–96; Judy Barrett Litoff, *American Midwives: 1860 to the Present* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), 9–14.

47. Hilton, "History of My Father—Thomas Heddock Hilton," 1.

48. "George Emmett Browning," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/george-e-browning-1866> (accessed June 27, 2016).

"a climate disease that the natives say God Himself cannot cure," Sister Hilton remembered.<sup>49</sup> The Hiltons buried him beside his two siblings. By October 1894, the Fagali'i cemetery had expanded by three and now housed the majority of the Hilton family. The Hiltons still completed their original three-year mission assignment and served an additional four months. They departed from the Samoan Mission on March 27, 1895, never again to see their children's graves. "Although we had three lovely children, we had to leave them all buried in a beautiful spot overlooking the sea," Sarah Hilton reminisced. "We would have had to scrape the bones, and put them in a box to fit the largest bone, bringing them home in pieces if we had insisted on bringing them with us. There was no embalming them. So, we bid them 'Tofa' and left them in the hands of the Lord until the resurrection."<sup>50</sup>

The Hiltons not only lost three children while serving in the Samoan Mission, but also witnessed the death of their mission president, Ransom Stevens, on April 28, 1894. The Stevenses had arrived in Samoa with the Hiltons on April 17, 1892, and he had been the mission leader since November 5, 1893. President Stevens succumbed to typhoid fever and heart problems, leaving his wife, Annie, a widow in Polynesia. The grieving missionaries in Samoa buried their late president in the Fagali'i

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49. Hilton, *Autobiography*, 3.

50. Hilton, *Autobiography*, 3.

After returning from the Samoan Mission in 1895, Thomas and Sarah Hilton had seven more children—Lalovi McMurrin (1896–1980), Dora (1898–1900), Tannie (1899–1933), Josephine (1901–4), Joseph McMurrin (1907–55), Sarah (1909–88), and David Owen (1911–14), in addition to Jeanette, Thomas, and George whom they buried in the Fagali'i cemetery. Sadly, only four of their ten children lived to adulthood. The Hiltons lived for a time in Salt Lake City but then moved to the Mormon colonies in Chihuahua, Mexico, where they lived for nine years in the town of Colonia Dublan. But like other Latter-day Saints, they were driven from their home in 1912 during the violence of the Mexican Revolution. They eventually settled in Bountiful, Utah, and then moved to Ogden a few years later. As if Sarah had not suffered enough already in Samoa, her husband Thomas passed away in El Paso, Texas, on October 27, 1915, leaving her and her youngest sister, Josephine (whom Thomas had married as a post-Manifesto plural wife on March 4, 1902, in Mexico), as widows. Hilton, *Autobiography*, 3–5. Sarah would not pass away until November 7, 1947, in Salt Lake City at the age of seventy-six, due to congestive heart failure. "Utah, Salt Lake County Death Records, 1849–1949," on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org/search/colletion/1459704> (accessed June 23, 2016).



cemetery in the empty grave recently vacated by the exhumed bodies of Sister Katie Merrill and her newborn, Joseph.<sup>51</sup> Sister Stevens, who was then near the end of her own pregnancy, left for home on the next steamer on May 23, 1894. She arrived in Utah on June 11 and within hours gave birth to a boy, who died a few weeks later.<sup>52</sup> Elder Thomas Hilton succeeded Ransom Stevens as the Samoan Mission leader in the months that followed.

That fall, William Alfred Moody (age 24)<sup>53</sup> and his wife, Ella Adelia (age 20),<sup>54</sup> from Thatcher, Arizona, arrived in Samoa on November 2, 1894, only five months after they were married. “On the journey [to Samoa, Ella] was quite sick, in fact her health had not been good for a number of years, and she did not improve after arriving in the mission. She gave birth to a daughter May 3, 1895, and for two or three days she appeared to be progressing favorably, but then fever set in, which prevented her from obtaining sleep,” Assistant Church Historian Andrew Jenson wrote of Sister Moody’s health. “As a consequence she became delirious, her vitality began to ebb, and on the evening of May 24, 1895, she passed peacefully away at the mission house.”<sup>55</sup> Widower Elder Moody was brokenhearted as he buried his wife, and he described the Fagali’i cemetery in a way familiar to those who had mourned there before: “Upon a little rise in land facing the northern shore of Upolu, near Fagalii, in the midst of a cocoonut grove whose feathery fronds are ever swaying in the breezes, her body rests. The anguish of my heart, and the hopes buried beneath that coffin lid had better remain further untold.”<sup>56</sup> Still, he persevered as a missionary for another three years, his motherless daughter Hazel being watched over by friends in Samoa and

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51. Andrew Jenson, *Tales from the World Tour: The 1895–1897 Travel Writings of Mormon Historian Andrew Jenson*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Riley M. Moffat (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 142.

52. “God Bless Them Both,” *Deseret Weekly*, June 16, 1894, 814.

53. “William Alfred Moody,” on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/william-alfred-moody-1870> (accessed June 23, 2016). Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 2:195.

54. “Ella Adelia Moody,” on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/ella-adelia-moody-1874> (accessed June 23, 2016). Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 3:684.

55. Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 3:684.

56. William A. Moody, *Years in the Sheaf* (Salt Lake City: Granite Publishing, 1959), 61.

then relatives in Utah. One of the last things Elder Moody did before leaving Samoa on May 18, 1898, to be reunited with his daughter back home, was to spend two hours weeding and cleaning the graves of his wife and fellow Latter-day Saints in the Fagali'i cemetery.<sup>57</sup>

The first missionary burial in the Fagali'i cemetery in the twentieth century occurred in the spring of 1900. Edgar Thomas Roberts<sup>58</sup> (age 21) and Ida Luetta Child<sup>59</sup> (age 20) of Afton, Wyoming, arrived as newlyweds in Polynesia on December 23, 1897. The following summer, on August 18, 1898, they welcomed a son, Loi Edgar, into their family. A year later, on October 16, 1899, they added a daughter, Harriet Viola. "We as missionaries don't always have clear sailing, but we have many sacrifices to make and hard trials to pass through," Sister Roberts reminded herself and friends back home a few years into her service in Samoa. "But we know we are not without our reward."<sup>60</sup> Her realistic depiction of missionary service in Samoa became a predictor of hardships to come. According to the Samoan Mission record for March 3, 1900, "Little Loi died at the sanatorium at Apia in the morning, making another sad day in the history of the mission."<sup>61</sup> Elder and Sister Roberts buried Loi in the Fagali'i cemetery alongside the Hiltons' three children.<sup>62</sup> Just two years later, on May 18, 1902, a single missionary, Judson Bliss Tomlinson<sup>63</sup> (age 21) passed away from Bright's disease, a

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57. Moody, *Years in the Sheaf*, 99.

58. "Edgar Thomas Roberts," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/edgar-thomas-roberts-1876> (accessed June 27, 2016).

59. "Ida Luetta Child Roberts," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/ida-luetta-child-roberts-1877> (accessed June 27, 2016).

60. Ida Luetta Roberts, Star Valley, Wyoming, to the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association, May 19, 1899, published as "Our Girls," *Young Woman's Journal* 11 (March 1900): 127.

61. Samoan Mission Manuscript History and Historical Reports, March 3, 1900, LR 7852 2, Church History Library.

62. After finishing their mission, the couple departed for Wyoming, on June 15, 1900, with their remaining daughter. Tragically, the following winter Harriet also passed away on January 6, 1901. See Yeaman, "Women from Zion in the Samoan Mission," 61–64.

63. "Judson Bliss Tomlinson," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/judson-bliss-tomlinson-1878> (accessed June 27, 2016); Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 3:728.

kidney problem. He was also buried in the mission cemetery at Fagali'i. Occasionally, missionaries were buried outside of the Fagali'i cemetery in the first two decades of the mission's existence.<sup>64</sup>

The frequency of death in foreign missions and especially the South Pacific was striking to many observers. On November 13, 1892, Apostle and Church Historian Franklin D. Richards prepared a ledger of all missionary fatalities since the 1830 founding of the Church. His missionary "roll of honor" was printed in the *Deseret News* and reprinted, with editorial comment, in the *Millennial Star*.<sup>65</sup> By his count, at least sixty-seven adult missionaries lost their lives while in the service of the Church in the nineteenth century. Of the deaths for which particulars were known, over two-thirds occurred in foreign missions or while in transit to foreign missions.

Three years after Richards's prepared list, Andrew Jenson, an employee of the Church Historian's Office, toured the Samoan Mission. He arrived on Upolu on September 10, 1895, and was greeted at the Apia harbor by nearly a dozen Mormon missionaries, including Elder Moody.<sup>66</sup> Jenson spent the next several days at the mission home in Fagali'i, "culling historical data from the mission records" with the help of mission secretary, William G. Sears,<sup>67</sup> the Hiltons' future brother-in-law.<sup>68</sup> On his visit to

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64. George Edwin Morris arrived in Samoa on July 5, 1908, where he labored for four months on Upolu and then was assigned to proselyte on the island of Savaii. But Elder Morris suffered severe heat stroke while sailing to his new missionary outpost and was rushed back to the mission home on Upolu. He died five weeks later on December 12, 1908, and was buried in the government cemetery in Apia. "George Edwin Morris," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/george-edwin-morris-1887> (accessed June 27, 2016); Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 3:684.

65. "A Roll of Honor," *Deseret Weekly*, November 19, 1892, 692–93; "A Roll of Honor," *Millennial Star* 54 (December 5, 1892): 779–82; see also "List of Missionaries Who Have Died in the Field," CR 100 378, Church History Library.

66. Jenson, *Tales from the World Tour*, 139.

67. "William Gailey Sears," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/william-gailey-sears-1873> (accessed June 27, 2016).

68. Jenson, *Tales from the World Tour*, 142. Following his first mission to Samoa (1893–96), Sears married Agnes McMurrin, Sarah Hilton's sister. "Agnes M. Sears," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/agnes-m-sears-1873> (accessed June 27, 2016). He later served as president of the Samoan Mission (1899–1902 and 1934–36), with his wife. For Sister Sears's Samoan Mission years, see Agnes McMurrin, "History of the Life of Agnes M. Sears," 3–6, MS 28387, Church History Library.

the Fagali'i cemetery, the historian remarked, "I continued my labors of yesterday and also visited the private graveyard, located on a hill about three hundred yards southeast of the mission house, where the earthly remains of Elder Ransom M. Stevens, Sister Ella A. Moody, and three children of Elder Thomas H. Hilton and wife are deposited." Jenson then made a sobering observation on the cost of missionary work in the South Pacific: "Compared to time and number, the Samoan Mission history records more deaths among our missionaries than any other mission we have so far established as a church—one elder, two missionary sisters, and three children in seven years out of eighty missionaries who, since 1888, have been sent from Zion to labor in Samoa and Tonga."<sup>69</sup>

Death became an expected risk of missionary service in Samoa, but its commonness failed to alleviate the mourning process made worse by the vast distance between Utah and the Fagali'i cemetery. As cultural geographers have noted, "Mourning is an inherently spatial as well as temporal phenomenon, experienced in and expressed in/through corporeal and psychological spaces, virtual communities and physical sites of memorialisation."<sup>70</sup> The prospect of departing from the site of the final encounter with deceased loved ones disrupted the traditional mourning process for missionaries who, upon leaving the South Pacific, were unable to make repeated visits back to gravesites. Prior to Elder Moody's first departure from Samoa in May 1898, he returned to the Fagali'i cemetery to tend to the cemetery's grounds and bid farewell to his wife's grave for what he thought would be the final time. The re-separation from his wife's final earthly resting place stirred Moody to write a poetic remembrance that highlights the tension between earthly homeland and the sacred memorial space created abroad:

Cold in the earth while green trees grow above thee,  
 Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave;  
 Have I forgot, my love, to love thee?  
 Severed at last by time's all severing wave.

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69. Jenson, *Tales from the World Tour*, 142.

70. A. Maddrell, "Memory, Mourning and Landscape in the Scottish Mountains: Discourses of Wilderness, Gender and Entitlement in Online and Media Debates on Mountainside Memorials," in *Memory, Mourning, and Landscape*, ed. E. Anderson and others (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 123, quoted in Avril Maddrell and James D. Sidaway, *Deathscapes: Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning, and Remembrance* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 1.

Cold in the earth, darling, I must leave thee,  
From those green hills I wend my way alone,  
Return to my native land without thee,  
Where we had planned and thought to build a home.<sup>71</sup>

As quickly as missionaries found personal meaning and significance in the memorials erected at Fagali'i, they were forced to leave them behind.

At this juncture, grieving missionaries found ritual alternatives for mending their disrupted realities. In early 1908, Church leaders called William Moody (now 37) to return to and preside over the Samoan Mission.<sup>72</sup> He was set apart as mission president by Apostle Francis M. Lyman on February 21, 1908, and served faithfully in Samoa until August 25, 1910. On Moody's return steamer across the Pacific Ocean from Samoa, he wrote a thoughtful letter to the editors of the *Improvement Era*, which they reprinted for their readers in December 1910:

As one enters upon the highway of life, with the eye of faith he looks into the future. He sees his goal as a distant light might be seen through night's darkness, but what lies between him and his goal he sees not, and strive as he may he cannot clearly depict what the future holds for him. . . . He observes that the members of his community are gradually being harvested by that

Grim reaper called Death,  
Who, with his sickle keen,  
Mows down the ripened grain,  
And the flowers that grow between. Yet it seldom occurs to him that he might be harvested next, and so it transpires that whether his life be composed of trial, hardship and struggle, or whether he has easy access to that which his ambition leads him to achieve, there is wisdom in his not knowing what the future holds for him, thus causing him to live and work and develop by faith.<sup>73</sup>

Grieving missionaries cultivated an informal theology surrounding the death experience that mixed Latter-day Saint belief with personal expressions of faith. Moody's description highlighted the

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71. Moody, *Years in the Sheaf*, 99.

72. Following his earlier return to Arizona as a widower, Elder Moody eventually remarried, this time to Sarah E. Blake on May 17, 1899. His subsequent occupations included banker, merchant, probate judge, and county school superintendent. Jensen, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 2:195.

73. William A. Moody, "At Rest on the Hill Overlooking the Sea," *Improvement Era* 14 (December 1910): 113-14.

often-calamitous circumstances surrounding life in Samoa, where death was both unpredictable and extremely common. Yet, for Moody and many others who served in Samoa, the indiscriminate way in which death was handed out demanded simple faith and an unconditional devotion to duty as the only meaningful avenue for service abroad. Indeed, the lessons culled from the early decades of the Samoan Mission included a somber reality—hardships and death were central to the missionary experience, not just a byproduct of it. By Elder Moody's account, only as death stalked the immediate horizon could missionaries overcome their "physical self as to make it subject . . . pure and undefiled . . . to the will of God."<sup>74</sup> Joseph Merrill's carefully erected memorial to his wife functioned as a reminder to him to be "faithfull" despite "the toils of this life." "If I am only pure and faithfull untill the end of my days," Elder Merrill resolved, "[will I then live with her] through all eternity just as happy" as they were when they reached the shores of Samoa.<sup>75</sup>

Many deferred to God as the orchestrator of events in their lives and surrendered to his will. "We can not judge the workings of the Lord for he moves in a mysterious way," Elder Merrill concluded. While one served a divinely sanctioned mission to preach the gospel, it made more sense to transfer complete control of life and death over to God. According to Elder Merrill, "God took" his wife "because she was perfect."<sup>76</sup> In the face of a disordered and unpredictable reality, missionaries like the Merrills and the Hiltons elected to place their circumstances "in the hands of the Lord until the resurrection."<sup>77</sup> God in his perfect wisdom was able to sort out the eternal destiny of families fractured by tragedies while serving abroad.

Missionaries generally embraced rather than turned away from teachings on the plan of salvation when confronted with tragedy. In 1898, Clare W. Reid and Ethel Lowry Reid were expecting a child in the first year of their mission service in Samoa. The birth of their boy, Stuart,<sup>78</sup> took much of Ethel's strength, and Elder Reid, in a last effort to save her life, sent her home to Utah. Ethel, however, passed away upon reaching Provo, and the news of this tragedy did not reach Elder Reid until the next month. "There was only one thing to do" upon hearing of

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74. Moody, "At Rest on the Hill Overlooking the Sea," 115.

75. Merrill, *Journal*, June 29, 1891.

76. Merrill, *Journal*, June 29, 1891.

77. Hilton, *Autobiography*, 3.

78. Stuart (Stewart) Reid survived to return to Utah, where he died in 1916.

his wife's death, Elder Reid reported to his family and friends, and "that was to seek assurance from above that 'all was well.'" The grieving missionary, unable to bid a final farewell to his wife at her graveside, erected a makeshift memorial of pictures that would remind him of his "last farewell" to her. The photographs of Ethel's grave hung over his table where he could see them daily and served as a reminder that his wife was "in Paradise as plainly as" his family was "in Utah."<sup>79</sup> Even with the great distance between Samoa and his wife's grave in Utah, Elder Reid mourned her loss in ways similar to fellow missionaries who buried a family member within the confines of the Fagali'i cemetery.

Still, despite healing the grieving process with ritual, doctrine, and faith, the largely youthful missionaries struggled to process the earthly severance of still-developing relationships. Elder Moody admittedly "knew little about the justice and balance of God's eternal laws" at the time of his wife's death. The tutorial came quickly, and "with hopes shattered, plans frustrated," his "outlook appeared to be dark." Moving forward with his mission seemed like "a disloyalty to my wife," and for at least a year he "nursed a grievance against God for His dealings with me."<sup>80</sup> Not until he had a "vision" that "made all things pertaining to my wife's death clear to me" did Elder Moody feel right with God and able to continue faithfully serving out the remainder of his mission.<sup>81</sup> God had appointed his wife to die at that particular time, and when God was ready to "call [her] home . . . from the islands," there was nothing he could do about it.<sup>82</sup>

Elder Moody's return to Samoa in 1908 included a trip back to the Samoan cemetery where his wife's mortal remains were put to rest. "Just back of the little village of Fagalii, on the brow of the hill overlooking the sea, about seventy-five yards inland from the beach, just where the cocoanut-covered slope suddenly forms a declivity to the low, narrow strip of land which borders the sea, is the mission cemetery." Yet, upon reaching the familiar hill behind the mission home, he found the once carefully curated grounds in disrepair. The missionaries in Samoa responded with a revitalization effort that would make the cemetery a more permanent fixture on the landscape in Fagali'i. Elder Moody recorded, "The original picket fence, being decayed, has recently been

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79. Quoted in Yeaman, "Women from Zion in the Samoan Mission," 70–71.

80. Moody, *Years in the Sheaf*, 61.

81. Moody, *Years in the Sheaf*, 87.

82. Moody, *Years in the Sheaf*, 87.

replaced by a concrete wall; and modest, white marble plates, set in suitable cement blocks, mark the resting place of the mortal remains” of the missionaries and their children who died in the service of their Savior. “In making these improvements on the cemetery,” Elder Moody explained further, “it became necessary to cut down most of the beautiful trees and shrubbery which heretofore surrounded the graves, and were ever in bloom; but new shrubbery has been planted, and a new growth of beautiful foliage will soon spring up to adorn and again beautify that holy sanctuary.”<sup>83</sup>

The beautification efforts of missionaries in Samoa, to be sure, paralleled trends domestically to clean, care for, and preserve the atmosphere of municipal cemeteries so as to enable visitors to escape into nature to remember the departed. Elder Moody’s efforts to make the cemetery “as perfect as possible,” however, were overlaid with religious performance. The transformation of the Fagali’i cemetery monuments from wooden plaques to headstones carved in marble ensured that the monuments to loss and heartbreak in Samoa would survive the century and provide a “holy sanctuary” for visitors long after Elder Moody departed the islands. For Elder Moody and others in Fagali’i, visiting the cemetery was a ritual act, a “simple pilgrimage” to a “sacred spot.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, since its inception the Fagali’i cemetery moved from personal burial site for Katie Merrill and her child to mission cemetery, with the deaths of the Hilton children, to holy site. Inscribed in these built memorials for a later generation of visitors was the lived religion of those who preached, served, and sacrificed their lives in Samoa.

### **A Tribute from Elder David O. McKay**

In May 1921, Elder David O. McKay,<sup>85</sup> Hugh J. Cannon,<sup>86</sup> and Samoan Mission President John Quincy Adams<sup>87</sup> and his wife, Sister Thurza

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83. Moody, “At Rest on the Hill Overlooking the Sea,” 116–17, which contains photos of the renovated cemetery in 1910.

84. Moody, *Years in the Sheaf*, 171.

85. David O. McKay (1873–1970) was called to the apostleship in 1906 and subsequently oversaw the Church’s entire educational enterprise. McKay was serving as Church commissioner of education in 1920.

86. Hugh Jenne Cannon (1870–1931) presided over the Liberty Stake, the largest stake in the Salt Lake Valley. Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4:233, 507.

87. “John Quincy Adams,” on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/john-quincy-adams-1882> (accessed April 3, 2016).



Adams,<sup>88</sup> sat as passengers in an automobile destined for the Fagali'i cemetery outside of Apia, Samoa. McKay and Cannon were on official First Presidency business in the South Pacific, an unprecedented trip that included stops at Church outposts scattered across the Pacific basin frontier.<sup>89</sup> Prior to 1920, Apostles had visited only the Hawaiian and Japanese missions, despite a Mormon presence throughout the Pacific region since the 1840s.<sup>90</sup> The First Presidency had charged McKay to visit the Church's non-North American missions and congregations "to study their spiritual and, as far as possible, temporal needs, and to ascertain the effect of 'Mormonism' upon their lives."<sup>91</sup>

McKay's official business carried him to the islands of Japan, Hawaii, French Polynesia, New Zealand, and Fiji before he arrived with Cannon at the Apia, Samoa, harbor on May 10, 1921 (fig. 3).<sup>92</sup> Having an Apostle on Pacific island soil was a rarity, and meeting with members left McKay little time for sightseeing or personal business.<sup>93</sup> Yet on the evening of March 18, McKay took time to retrace the path of the grieving Hiltons, who had laid to rest their three children in the Fagali'i cemetery. By 1920, when McKay was preparing to embark on his tour of the Pacific, the now-widowed Sarah Hilton was living with her surviving children in the Fourth Ward in Ogden, Utah, and was concerned about the condition of her children's gravesites in Samoa. When she learned that McKay would be passing through the South Pacific in the months to come, she

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88. "Thurza A Tingey Adams," on *Early Mormon Missionaries*, <https://history.lds.org/missionary/individual/thurza-a-tingey-adams-1888> (accessed April 3, 2016).

89. For a narrative account of their visit to Samoa, see Hugh J. Cannon, *To the Peripheries of Mormonism: The Apostolic Around-the-World Journey of David O. McKay, 1920–1921*, ed. Reid L. Neilson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011), chapters 14–16.

90. For a historical and bibliographical survey of early Mormonism in the Pacific basin frontier, see Reid L. Neilson and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, "Nineteenth-Century Mormonism and the Pacific Basin Frontier: An Introduction," in *Proclamation to the People: Nineteenth-Century Mormonism and the Pacific Basin Frontier*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp and Reid L. Neilson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 3–20.

91. Hugh J. Cannon, "Around-the-World Travels of David O. McKay and Hugh J. Cannon," 1, ca. 1925, MS 7351, Church History Library.

92. Hugh J. Cannon, Journal, May 10, 1921, Hugh J. Cannon Papers, MS 28333, Church History Library.

93. Cannon, Journal, May 18, 1921.



FIGURE 3. *Left to right:* Mission President John Q. Adams, David O. McKay, and Hugh J. Cannon in traditional Samoan costumes, May 1921. Courtesy Church History Department, © Intellectual Reserve Inc.

begged him to personally check up on her children's final resting places. The Apostle promised he would do so.

McKay wrote a heartfelt letter to Sarah two weeks after his visit to the cemetery, which Sister Hilton received in Ogden on June 23 (fig. 4). He wrote:

June 3, 1921  
Mrs. Sarah M. Hilton,  
Ogden, Utah.

Dear Sister Hilton:

Just as the descending rays of the late afternoon sun touched the tops of the tall coconut tress [*sic*], Wednesday, May 18th, 1921, a party of five stood with bowed heads in front of the little Fagalii cemetery, in the midst of the old "German" plantation, a few miles out from Apia. Mr. O. F. Nelson, who remembers you and your husband with esteem, had driven us to the place in his spacious automobile.<sup>94</sup> The others in the party were Pres. Hugh J. Cannon, Pres. J. Q. Adams, Sister Thurza Adams, and I. We were there, as you will remember, in response to a promise I made you before I left home.

The graves and head stones are in a good state of preservation. That you may <feel> assured that the lettering is unimpaired, I reproduce herewith a copy I made as I stood two feet or more outside the stone wall surrounding the spot:

"Janette Hilton S. L. C., Utah. Born Sept. 10, 1891. Died June 4, 1892. Rest Darling Jennie"	"George Emmett Hilton Born Oct. 12, 1894 Died Oct. 19, 1894	"Thomas Harold Hilton Born Sept. 21, 1892 Died Mar. 17, 1894 "Rest on the Hillside Rest."
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As I looked at those three little graves, I tried to imagine the scenes through which you passed during your young motherhood here in old Samoa. As I did so, the little head stones became monuments not only to the little babes sleeping beneath them, but also to a mother's faith and devotion to the eternal principles of Truth and Life! Your three

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94. For more on Olaf Frederick Nelson (1883–1944), see Hugh Laracy, "Nelson, Olaf Frederick," from *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, available online at *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4n5/nelson-olaf-frederick> (accessed April 3, 2016). Nelson transported the party in a "Hupmobile," a model produced by the Hupp Motor Car Company—an early competitor of auto giants Ford and Chevrolet—which was headquartered in Detroit, Michigan. Cannon, *Journal*, May 18, 1921.

**SAMOAN MISSION**

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF  
LATTER-DAY SAINTS

BOX 29

APIA, SAMOA

June 3, 1921.

Mrs. Sarah M. Hilton,  
Ogden, Utah.

Dear Sister Hilton:

Just as the descending rays of the late afternoon sun touched the tops of the tall coconut trees, Wednesday May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1921, a party of five stood with bowed heads in front of the little Fagali Cemetery, in the midst of the old "Benman" plantation, a few miles out from Apia. Mr. O. F. Nelson, who remembers you and your husband with esteem had driven us to the place in his sparsely automobile. The others in the party were Pres. Hugh J. Cannon, Pres. J. J. Adams, Sister Thurza Adams, and I. We were there, as you will remember, in response to a promise I made you before I left home.

The graves and headstones are in a good state of preservation. That you may <sup>feel</sup> assured that the lettering is unimpaired, I reproduce here with a copy I made as I stood two feet or more outside the stone wall surrounding the spot:

"Janette Hilton  
S. S. C., Utah.  
Born Sept. 18, 1891.  
Died June 4, 1892.  
Rest  
"Darling Jennie"

"George Emmett Hilton  
Born Oct. 12, 1874  
Died Oct. 19, 1874  
"Peaceful Be Thy Slumber"

"Thomas Harold Hilton  
Born Sept. 21, 1892  
Died Mar. 17, 1894  
"Rest on the Hillside Rest,"

As I looked at those three little graves, I tried to imagine the scenes through which you passed during your young motherhood here in old Samoa. As I did so, the little headstones became monuments not only to the little babes sleeping beneath them, but also to a mother's faith and devotion to the eternal principles of Truth and Life! Your three little ones, Sister Hilton, in silence most eloquent and effective, have continued to carry on your noble missionary work begun nearly thirty years ago, and they will ~~so~~ continue as long as their are gentle hands to care for their last earthly resting place.

"By loving hands their dying eyes were closed,  
By loving hands their little limbs composed,  
By foreign hands their humble graves adorned,  
By strangers honored, and by strangers mourned;"

Samoa has blessed herself as well as honored us in the most wonderful reception, she has given us of the Lord's servants. Officials, Chiefs, non-members and members have all joined in the memorable welcome. Kindest personal regards,  
Sincerely yours,  
David McKay

FIGURE 4. Letter of David O. McKay to Sarah M. Hilton, June 3, 1921. Courtesy Church History Department, © Intellectual Reserve Inc.

Little Ones, Sister Hilton, in silence most eloquent and effective, have continued to carry on your noble missionary work of begun nearly thirty years ago, and they will so continue as long as their [*sic*] are gentle hands to care for their last earthly resting place.

“By loving hands their dying eyes were closéd,  
By loving hands their little limbs composéd,  
By foreign hands their humble graves adorned,  
By strangers honor’d, and by strangers mourned.”

Samoa has blessed herself as well as honored us in the most wonderful reception, she has given two of the Lord’s servants. Officials, chiefs, non-members and members have all joined in the memorable welcome.

Tofa soi fua!

Kindest personal regards,

Sincerely yours, David O. McKay<sup>95</sup>

In that visit, McKay acted on the First Presidency’s charge to study the imprint of Mormonism on the island of Samoa.<sup>96</sup> The visiting Apostle was tutored not just by his interactions with missionaries and the Samoan Saints, but by the weatherworn monuments that seemingly grew out of and alongside the vast tropical foliage—rock monuments of the sacrifice of the Hiltons and others like them who buried loved ones while serving the Church abroad.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **The Fagali’i Cemetery as “Monuments . . . to a Mother’s Faith”**

The process of shaping Latter-day Saint collective memory of the early Samoan Mission experience occurred throughout the twentieth century, especially as Latter-day Saints made pilgrimages to the Fagali’i cemetery. One pilgrim, David O. McKay, recognized the tragic events that preceded the burial of Sarah and Thomas’s three children in the cemetery. The entire scene moved McKay to imagine a young Sarah in her early twenties serving faithfully in a foreign land while bearing fully the challenges of child-rearing and childbirth. The monuments memorialized for McKay and the other visitors how early missionaries in Samoa internalized and lived out their religion. As if the memorials could preach a

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95. David O. McKay to Sarah M. Hilton, June 3, 1921, MS 13098, Church History Library. McKay’s original letter was gifted to the Church by Lucile LeBeau and Marney Zambrano of South Jordan, Utah, in 1991.

96. McKay to Hilton, June 3, 1921.

sermon in "silence most eloquent and effective," the Fagali'i cemetery carried moral lessons to modern visitors who walked the sacred site.

Subsequent journeys to the mission burial ground at Fagali'i transmitted and shaped the collective memories of the Samoan Mission experience for the next generation of missionaries and Saints.<sup>97</sup> The hardships, death, and mourning endured by early missionaries in Samoa were thoughtfully and now permanently inscribed in the landscape at Fagali'i. Beyond creating a holy place, the inscriptions bore witness of religion in practice far from the comforts of the Salt Lake Valley.

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97. Elder Loren C. Dunn reflected on the significance of the Fagali'i cemetery in general conference in 1975: "A price has been paid for the establishment of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the land of Samoa. It is interesting to note that much of that price was paid by little children. I suspect that there are many obscure cemeteries in many of the nations of the world similar to that little plot in Samoa. They are a mute witness to the trials and suffering that went into the beginnings of missionary work in this dispensation." Loren C. Dunn, "Faithful Laborers," *Ensign* 5 (May 1975): 26.