

Eliza Penelope Thompson Coucher Griffin

Compiled from the book Joseph Lewis Thompson Family (compiled edited and parts written by William Howard Thompson, published by Dixie College, St. George, Utah, 1976) and from Saga of a Special Lady: Eliza Penelope Thompson Coucher Griffin (compiled by Dawna Nielsen, published by Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, Utah, November 1983). Some information was taken from the Utah Emigration file cards #298440 and #298442. Also, other sources are noted.

On the 29th of May 1840, in Birmingham, Warwick, England, Eliza was born to Joseph Lewis Thompson and Penelope Thompson. Her birth date is only known through family records and traditions. No actual record of her birth and christening has yet been found either in parish christenings or in civil registrations. Some family records list her as Eliza, while others list her as Eliza Penelope. There is no evidence she was christened Penelope. It is believed she or the family adopted this name later. Her sister Ann was also referred to as Penelope. The census records of 1841 and 1851 list her as only Eliza. Although both her parents had the surname of Thompson, they were not related. It is believed that her mother descended from the Norman people who came to England with William the Conqueror, and her father was believed to descend from native English stock.

Eliza was the third child of Joseph Lewis and Penelope Thompson Thompson. She had an older sister, Susannah, and an older brother, William. Between the years of 1842 and 1861, nine others joined the family: Joseph, Jane, Ann, Henry, John, James, Richard, Benjamin (lived nine months), and Samuel.

When Eliza was about six years old, the family moved to London, England. “[Eliza’s] father was a gold and silver smith (the birth certificate of a son Joseph lists him as a silver polisher) so the family moved where work was to be had at the best wages, so it seemed natural that in time they moved to London.” (LaVeda Eliza Williams, Eliza Penelope Thompson, typescript in possession of Wm. Howard Thompson, St. George, Utah.). “The family . . . lived near St. Paul’s Cathedral. What a wonderful inspiration this great cathedral must have been to every member of the family.” (Florence Griffin Malmberg, *The Life of Eliza Thompson Coucher Griffin*, typescript in possession of Wm. Howard Thompson, St. George, Utah.) While living in London, Eliza’s father was employed by the company of Aimes and Carter.

Eliza grew up during the early reign of Queen Victoria. When Victoria came to the throne, many reforms were introduced. Queen Victoria was the first to introduce schools established for the children of the working and lower classes. These schools were the first of their kind. Eliza and her brother William were sent to this school. They lived at the school and were sent out to work for the wealthy people to help pay for the schooling. This proved to be a blessing in the life of Eliza for she became very good in penmanship, reading, spelling and was an expert in arithmetic. The plan was for the older children to learn then return home and teach it to

the others. All her life Eliza lived up to this agreement. Wherever she went, she would teach. She also learned homemaking skills: to cook, sew, knit, and crochet.

Her granddaughter LaVeda writes, “[Eliza] became a very good writer, reader, and speller, also in arithmetic, and as long as I was privileged to know her, and that was from my earliest recollection until her death, no one could mix her up on the times tables. It was always a happy time when Grandma was with us. She could tell the most wonderful stories, and she’d have us children in spelling matches, also matches in the times tables and singing lessons.” (LaVeda Eliza Williams, op. cit.,) Florence, another granddaughter, also remembers her grandmother reading. She says, “I do know that she learned to read very well because one of my most distinct memories of her was the stories she used to read or tell to us in the evenings whenever she visited at our home. How we loved those stories” (Florence Griffin Malmberg, op. cit.).

In this large family love and fun were mingled with hard work and discipline. Eliza’s father had many talents. Somewhere he had been trained, or perhaps it was natural ability, but he excelled in music (had a beautiful tenor singing voice), drama, dancing, and boxing. He involved his family in these things. Traditions were established which have lived on through the generations. Many of his descendants also excelled in these talents.

In 1848 the Thompson family was visited by “Mormon” missionaries. The Thompsons listened to the missionaries’ message and pondered these new teachings: The true gospel of Jesus Christ had been restored! Revelation! Prophets! Apostles! Baptism by immersion! An angel flying in the midst of heaven having the everlasting gospel (Revelation 14:6-7)! The Book of Mormon: new scripture to complement the Bible! Something in the heart of these god-fearing people was stirred.

In 1851 Joseph was baptized. One by one his wife and children followed and joined the Church. (Eliza’s baptism date is recorded as October 22, 1859, in Providence, Rhode Island, she was 19 years old). The act of joining The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was one of sacrifice and courage. Joseph was dismissed from his work because of it. For a time it was necessary for him to travel from town to town seeking work wherever he could get it.

In the Spring of 1854, when Eliza was 14 years old, Joseph and four fellow workmen left England to help build, set up, and operate a silversmith factory in Providence, Rhode Island, for Gorham and Company. William H. Thompson says, “The decision to come to America was a very crucial one: a decision which was eventually to affect the lives of thousands of people – bringing great blessings to them; a decision which was probably made after much thought and prayer and with the approbation of our Father in Heaven. Thank God for the courage of these great ancestors.” Joseph came to America, leaving his wife and family behind. They were to join him when the money for their passage was raised. After one year, Susannah, William, Jane, and Ann joined their father, sailing on the ship *Robenia*.

Eliza, her mother, and the rest sailed six months later on the ship *Quickstep*. Shortly after the vessel set sail they were caught in a dense fog. It was possible to see only a short distance ahead. Suddenly there came into view another ship sailing crosswise to them and directly in their path. There was a collision and the other ship sank, everyone on board was drowned. The *Quickstep* was so badly damaged that the captain had to put into port for repairs. This detained

their arrival by several days. After nine weeks on the water they arrived in the New York harbor the day before Christmas 1855. After a year and a half of separation, one can only imagine the happiness and joy this reunion brought.

Gorham & Company became very successful. In *The Book of Rhode Island*, it states that “Since 1876 Gorham master craftsmen have won first honors in every international exposition in which they exhibited their masterpieces. Versailles, a Gorham pattern, is on permanent exhibition in Paris at the Louver.” Craftsmen like Joseph Lewis Thompson helped to establish this company which today stands among the country’s leading manufacturing establishments.

The Thompson family was in Providence for six and a half years. Eliza was now a young lady. We know little about how she spent her time during those years. However, since three children were born to the family, she no doubt stayed close to her mother, helping her all she could. Perhaps she had complete charge of the home, for her older sister and brother had married and Penelope was in poor health. We are sure that she spent time sharing her education with the family and others. Her granddaughter Florence says, “While in Providence, Eliza had knit nobbies and crocheted toboggans, skating caps and baby booties and jackets to sell to a firm there. With the money earned she helped to keep the family and save to come to Utah.”

The Thompson family had stayed close to the church and was active in the Providence Branch. The spirit of gathering seemed to be calling them to join with the Saints in the Mountain West. When they made the decision to do so, it took considerable planning and preparation.

In June 1862 they began the journey, first by railroad train to St. Joseph, Missouri, then by steamship up the Missouri River to Florence, (now North Omaha) Nebraska. They stayed in Florence only a few days while they purchased a covered wagon, four yokes of oxen, and supplies. It is of interest that the family remembers the names given to these oxen: Duke and Dan, Lion and Bay, Speck and Buck, and Balley and Brand. On July 24, 1862, the wheels of sixty-five wagons, belonging to the John R. Murdock Company, began their 1,000 mile journey to Salt Lake City, Utah. This was the second company John R. Murdock would bring to Utah.

Eliza and her sister Ann took turns carrying ten-month old Samuel because their mother was in poor health. One day Eliza stopped at a stream to wash the baby’s clothes, and the company went on. She was not frightened and thought she could catch up with them. When she was missed, two men came back for her; they scolded her and made her realize the danger in being separated from the wagon train. She never did it again.

During her spare time on the trek, Eliza made moccasins for the family to wear so they could save their shoes for when they arrived in Salt Lake City (Florence Griffin Malmberg, op. cit.).

The Thompson family experienced much discomfort during this overland journey as did most of the Saints; the dust, rain, tiring walk, mosquitoes, the endless prairie, the rugged mountains and the constant worry of rattlesnakes and Indians. Yet there were times of rejoicing and worship when hymns were sung, prayers were offered and testimonies given. They also had singing and dancing around the campfires in the evening to revive their spirits. Because of his ability as a dancer and singer, Joseph entered whole heartedly into these activities.

They arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on either September 27, 1862, bone-weary from their journey but happy to be with the Saints.

Shortly after their arrival Eliza met a young man also from England by the name of William Coucher (several spellings of this name appear in the records, Cocher, Coacher, Coatcher, Coucher). He had come to the Valley with the George Rowley Handcart Company that arrived September 4, 1859. William was 26 years old and was born October 14, 1833, at Plymouth, Devonshire, England. Their courtship was brief, in just a few weeks on November 1, 1862, Wilford Woodruff performed their marriage in the Endowment House.

William was one of those called by President Brigham Young in the October Conference of 1861 to help settle Utah's Dixie Mission (James G. Bleak, *Annals of the Southern Utah Mission*, typescript in Dixie College Library, St. George, Utah, p. 60). Eliza bid farewell to her parents who planned to settle north in Logan. The newlyweds traveled south, making their first home in Middleton. Eliza was not without family, for in the nearby settlement of St. George lived her brother William and her sister Jane.

On September 23, 1863, Eliza's first child was born. They named him Joseph William Coucher and lovingly called him "Jode". He was destined to be a help and a comfort to Eliza for the rest of her life.

The Coucher's moved from Middleton to the beautiful Pine Valley where they homesteaded on land there. William engaged in freighting and did very well. However, they suffered the same hardships and trials all pioneers were forced to bear in building up a new and rugged country (LaVeda Eliza Williams, *op. cit.*). William hauled timber from Pine Valley St. George to help build the Temple. William also hauled timber to Salt Lake City to be used to make the pipes in the famous Tabernacle Organ.

Three more children were born to Eliza and William: Margaret Isabel born December 22, 1866 (she only lived three days), Eliza born March 1, 1868, Horace (This name is spelled Horace, Horas, Horrice, and Horris in the records) born August 5, 1870.

"The Indians were sometimes hostile and at one time drove this little group from their homes and set fire to the houses. They had to move to a fort for a while. Then in less than two years when their homes were once again established, the dam at a nearby reservoir broke and their homes and possessions were destroyed by the flood" (Florence Griffin Malmberg, *op. cit.*).

After the flood one of the men in the group who was a former ship builder said that he would build a church in Pine Valley and it would be built so that if another flood came it would float. It was built in 1868.

Family tradition says that Eliza helped to cook for the men who worked on the church. "At one time the people of the settlement secured enough flour to make biscuits for the whole group. It was Eliza and two other ladies who made those biscuits. They were said to have tasted more delicious than the best cake" (Florence Griffin Malmberg, *op. cit.*).

Eliza had a sweet disposition, she was a good neighbor, a teacher, and she mixed well in a group and was a leader among her own sex. And though she was called to pass through many trying experiences she kept her faith. She knew she was helping to build a foundation for future

generations to build upon. One can almost hear her say “In faith we’ll rely on the arm of Jehovah to guide through these last days of trouble and gloom, and after the scourges and harvest are over, we’ll rise with the just when the Savior will come. Then all that was promised the Saints will be given and Christ and his people will ever be one.”

Sadness came all too soon to this little family. After only nine years of marriage Eliza became a widow. Her beloved William was on a freighting trip. He had lost the jack to his wagon and while greasing it one day the lifting was too heavy and he broke a blood vessel. Eliza nursed him as best she could but he passed away sometime in 1871. One can only imagine Eliza’s heartbreak and grief. William was buried somewhere in Southern Utah, however, a search for the grave of William Coucher has been unsuccessful.

William was a good man and a hard worker. We have found very little about him. The following was written by a granddaughter LaVeda as told to her by her father Jode Coucher. It gives us a feeling of his kindness and understanding.

“One experience father related: when he was small he went with his father on one of his trips to a nearby town. They encountered Indians along the route, so his father offered them groceries so they would not harm them.”

“Another time they were having their evening meal. They heard a noise out near the barns. They all hurried to the door and saw some Indians in the yard. They had shot an arrow through their favorite cow. This almost broke their hearts. His father said, “Well, they must be very hungry and needed food to do such a thing.”

With the death of her husband, Eliza was forced to make plans for her future. “Eliza’s health was not very good as she had a serious illness of chills and fever from which she never fully recovered” (Florence Griffin Malmberg, op, cit.). Her mother had died on December 10, 1865, and she longed to be with her father who had settled in Clarkston, Utah. Her father had written and asked her to come to Clarkston while he was still alive. She yielded to his request and made plans to leave Pine Valley. She put what she could in the wagon with her three children, the oldest just nine or ten years old, and made the trip from Pine Valley to Clarkston--some four hundred miles-- all by herself. She left behind the homestead, her friends, and two unmarked graves. “They said that she left Dixie with a fine team and good harness, but when she arrived in Clarkston, her brother Sam said that the only thing that could be called a harness was the horse collars. The lines were rope as were also the tugs, and even string was used to hold things on the team, which was one big horse and one small one. She had traded one thing then another to get food and provisions along the way. She never went back to see about what she had left behind.” (LaVeda Eliza Williams, op cit.).

Eliza found Clarkston a pleasant little settlement located on the mountains north and west of Logan. It had been more than ten years since she had seen her father and her family. They spent many hours exchanging experiences. Joseph and Penelope left Logan, where they had lived in a dugout, in 1865 to make a permanent home in the beautiful meadow lands of Clarkston. They too had experienced hunger, cold, trouble with Indians, and death. Penelope was the first person buried in the Clarkston cemetery. It was a tremendous adjustment for the entire family. Here was a man, a highly skilled silversmith, accustomed to life in big cities, trying to eke out a

living on a small farm. When asked if he didn't regret leaving his home and work to come to Utah, he replied, "I came here for the gospel, and the gospel is worth everything."

The story has been passed down through the family that Mr. Gorham wrote to Joseph Lewis asking him to come back to Rhode Island. Gorham wrote in his letter that he would give Joseph a house and lot and a job for himself and each of his boys as they got old enough to work. To this offer Joseph said, "If I cannot live here in Utah, I can die here."

Joseph married for a second time to a young girl by the name of Caroline Griffin. At the age of only twenty-two she took on the responsibilities of Joseph's five unmarried children. The conditions in Joseph's home soon improved. Caroline was loved by all. When Eliza arrived, she and Caroline became best of friends. The Griffins and Thompsons friendship and love were further cemented on May 19, 1873. Eliza became the plural wife of Caroline's father, William Griffin. Joseph Lewis took Caroline's widowed sister Theophenia as a second wife, also entering into polygamy. This appears to have been a double wedding. Caroline and Eliza playfully referred to each other as "Mother." Dawna Nielsen writes: "When I was first married I made a comment against polygamy to my grandmother Nellie Griffin Williams. With 'ruffled feathers' she let me know that those who practiced plural marriage in the correct way found a beautiful life together. I now realize what she said was true. In reviewing the lives of the Thompsons and Griffins, including the Coucher children, love did abound. One of the children said, 'We hardly knew which was our own mother or who were our own brothers and sisters.'"

William Griffin was born September 15, 1816, in Flyford Faville, Worcestershire, England. His first wife was named Mary Pitt. They had seven children. William was one of the first converts to the Mormon Church in England. He was only 22 years old and was baptized on June 17, 1838. The first missionaries came to England in 1837. He remained faithful in the church and brought his children up in the faith; however, he did not leave England to join the Saints in Utah until April 30, 1866. They crossed the Atlantic in a sailing ship named *John Bright*. They followed the usual route of the Mormon emigrants, railroad to the Missouri River, steamboat to Council Bluffs, Iowa. They were in the Thomas E. Rich's mule team company and arrived in Salt Lake City on September 4, 1866. They went immediately to Clarkston to be where their daughter Theophenia and her husband John Griffiths lived. Here he was so proud to be able to own land and property—something he wasn't able to do in England.

William provided Eliza with a home of her own. She was comfortable by pioneer standards. Their first child Penelope (Nellie) was born May 25, 1874.

Diphtheria, the dreaded disease, invaded the settlement. The three Coucher children came down with it and were very ill. Jode recovered, but Eliza was once again called to mourn. Little Eliza, age seven years, and Horace, age five years, passed away within days of each other. The family group sheet shows Horace's death June 30, 1875, and Eliza's death July 8, 1875. Mary Malmberg Thompson has a small note book which she says is in the handwriting of her mother Annie Henrietta Griffin Malmberg, with the following quote, "Eliza Cocher a child died April 1875, and Horris one week after."

Annie Henrietta Griffin was born August 12, 1876, and Henry Alfred Griffin was born October 29, 1878 or '79. When Henry was still a baby, William Griffin died on April 2, 1880.

Eliza was a widow again at the age of 40 years. Her father Joseph had passed away February 15, 1875.

Left alone to raise four children, Eliza had some very hard times ahead of her. Jode was 16 years of age and helped all he could; he was now the man of the house. Eliza hired herself out to do house work whenever she could. If people could not pay her money, she was glad to accept anything they could give her. She took pay in clothes, food, or anything that would help out. When the girls were old enough, they too worked out in other people's homes. One thing Eliza was able to rely on was her education. Many people in Clarkston hadn't been as lucky as Eliza was in gaining an education. People in Clarkston would come to her house in the evenings to learn to read, write and work arithmetic problems. Most of the time, she was paid with flour, beans, potatoes, and garden produce, etc.

Eliza had the opportunity to hear Martin Harris, one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, testify. He was living with his son in Clarkston. He was asked, "Brother Harris, do you believe the Book of Mormon to be true?" He answered, "No, I do not believe it, knowing supersedes belief. I know it is true. The angel showed us the plates and I heard the voice of God declare they were translated correctly."

Jode married Annie Myler November 17, 1886, they lived in Rigby, Idaho. Nellie and George J. Williams were married August 14, 1895; they lived in Malad, Idaho. Annie was married to John E. Malmberg June 3, 1898, in the Logan Temple; they made their home first in Clarkston and later in Logan.

Annie Myler Coucher died July 31, 1902, and Eliza and Henry went to live with Jode in Rigby so Eliza could keep house for him. Henry worked on Jode's farm until Jode married Sarah Elizabeth Finn, and Henry bought a farm of his own. Eliza then lived with Henry and kept house for him until he married Mary Elizabeth Richardson on September 2, 1908. After Henry and Mary married, Eliza spent much of her time visiting her other children, but home to her was always with Henry in Rigby, Idaho.

Eliza often visited with her married children. One granddaughter LaVeda Coucher said, "Grandmother Coucher spent some time in our home. I can still remember the loving touch of her hands when she would try to soothe and caress me after some misfortune." Victoria Griffin, the daughter of Henry and Mary Griffin recalls that Mary always said how much she loved and admired Eliza. Mary was so happy that Eliza could live with them so Mary could finally make Eliza's life easier. However, Mary regretted the fact that Eliza died so soon after Mary had this opportunity.

Eliza Coucher Griffin passed away May 3, 1909, at the home of her son Henry, in Rigby, Idaho. Her body was laid to rest in the Clarkston Cemetery beside the graves of her two children Eliza and Horace.

LaVeda Williams concludes her account of her grandmother's life by saying, "There are living now, one son, twenty-one grandchildren, fifty-eight great grand children, and a host of great great grandchildren so that her posterity numbers near three hundred."

Florence concludes by saying, “She had been a good wife and mother, a real pioneer, active in her church and community. She left a large posterity and her life’s history is a real inspiration to her descendants.”

Dawna Nielsen quotes from the pen of Rosannah Cannon as a final tribute to Eliza Penelope Thompson Coucher Griffin.

*Heroes were they this eager questing line,
Of men who perished in a cause divine,
Of women, fragile instruments of fate,
To usher in a new race, strong and straight.
A tribe of gallant leaders, still unbowed--
Of these am I--Why should I not be proud?*

The life of this special lady should inspire all her descendants and should be passed down through the generations that all may know from whence they came. May God bless her memory. May God bless her descendants for they have inherited her *tenacity*. May they think of Eliza as they too pass through the rough places along the road of life.