

A Newly Discovered 1838 Wilford Woodruff Letter

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Robert H. Slover

In 1838 Wilford Woodruff was thirty-one years old and had been a member of the Church five years. He had already completed three missions, one to the Southern States and two to the Fox Islands. In August of that year he was in Scarborough, Maine, at his in-laws' home. He was on a mission leading a group of Saints from the Fox Islands to the headquarters of the Church in Far West, Missouri.¹

During the month, Wilford had time to give some thought and attention to his family, both his own and his parents'. His full brother, Azmon, had accepted the gospel the same time he had in 1833. Only a month earlier he had happily baptized his own father and mother and his half-sister, Eunice, in his native home of Farmington, Connecticut, and had organized a branch of the Church for them and the other converts there.² But there were others of the family for whom he was concerned. One of these was his half-brother, Asahel, with whom he had already shared spiritual experiences.

Asahel was not a member of the Church, and in that August of 1838, Wilford wrote a letter to him hoping to touch his spirit in such a way that he might be convinced of the truth. This letter gives us an interesting insight into the young man who some fifty years later would become the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³

Besides showing concern for his family, the letter demonstrates Wilford's deep spiritual insight and clear understanding of the will of the Lord concerning his people, and particularly concerning Wilford Woodruff. It gives his moving testimony of the divinity of the Church, the mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the recognition that each man must gain his own testimony through the influence of the Holy Ghost. It noted his hope that this influence would "enable me to reach the fountain of my brother's soul."

We know little about this half-brother, Asahel Hart Woodruff, to whom the letter was written. Born 11 April 1815 in Farmington, Connecticut, he was the second child of six born to Wilford's father, Aphek Woodruff, and his second wife, Azubah Hart. In 1838 Asahel was a twenty-three years old merchant living in Terre Haute, Indiana.⁴

As early as 1830 Asahel, then fifteen years old, was influenced by a religious revival and made a profession of religion to which he seemed devoted. Wilford, too, was concerned with religion, as he tells us,

I prayed night and day the Lord blest me with much of His spirit. These began to be the happiest days of my life. I felt that the sun, moon, and stars; the mountains, hills, and valleys; and that all creation were united in the praise of the Lord.⁵

Asahel and Wilford were baptized on the same day, 5 May 1831, by a Baptist minister who finally agreed to perform the baptism even though Wilford refused to join the Baptist church because it did not “harmonize with the apostolic church which our Savior established.”⁶

It is interesting to note that Wilford and Asahel also had other similar spiritual experiences. This is demonstrated in an incident in 1832. Wilford planned to go with his brother Azmon to western New York to buy a farm, but he said,

. . . The spirit that was upon me day and night said—“go to Rhode Island.” My mind was greatly exercised over the matter for I could not comprehend what it meant. I went to live with my brother Azmon until our departure for New York. After saluting him I said: “I wonder what the Lord wants of me in Rhode Island; the spirit of the Lord has rested upon me for two weeks and said ‘Go to Rhode Island.’” In about an hour after this my brother Asahel arrived on a visit. After shaking hands with him, almost the first words he spoke were: “I wonder what the Lord wants of me in Rhode Island! The spirit of the Lord has been upon me for two or three weeks and has told me to go to Rhode Island.” This caused us to marvel exceedingly. We had not seen each other for several months.⁷

But they did not go to Rhode Island. At Azmon’s insistence he and Wilford went to New York to buy their farm and Asahel went on west to Indiana. Later they learned that if they had gone to Rhode Island they would have met Elders Orson Hyde and Samuel H. Smith and could have heard the gospel from those powerful missionaries.

Asahel received Wilford’s letter in Terre Haute, and on 10 September 1838 sent a reply, making no mention of any effect Wilford’s powerful testimony and concern had had upon him, but letting Wilford know he was looking forward to seeing him.

Presumably Wilford received his brother’s letter for he did not leave Scarborough until 9 October. He wrote:

On the afternoon of the 9th of October we took leave of Father Carter and his family and started upon our journey of two thousand miles at this late season of the year, taking with me my wife, her nursing babe, to lead a company of fifty-three souls from Maine to Illinois. . . .⁸

After suffering hardship and sickness on the journey, the company arrived in the vicinity of Terre Haute the night of 11 December 1838, and Wilford looked forward to the long anticipated meeting with his brother the next day. But the meeting never took place, for on that night Wilford

learned of his brother's sudden death on 18 October 1838. His sorrow and disappointment at not being able to see his brother and try once again to reach him must have been great. He wrote:

The weather being very cold on the night of the 11th I stopped for the night at an inn. I there learned of the sudden death of my brother, Asahel H. Woodruff, a merchant of Terre Haute, Indiana. I had anticipated that the following day I should have a joyful meeting with this brother; instead of this, I had only the privilege of visiting his grave, in company with my wife and of examining a little into his business. I was offered the position of administrator of his affairs, but I was leading a company of Saints to Zion, and could not stop to attend to his temporal business. Strangers settled his affairs and took possession of his property; his relatives obtained nothing from his effects but a few trifling mementoes.⁹

* * *

O thou God of Israel who holds the destiny of men and at whose command goes forth the issues of life and death and by whose permission the sun sheds its beams to illuminate the earth and gladden the face of nature, I implore thy assistance to inspire my pen while I address my absent Brother. O deliver me from error, drive me from falsehood, and save me from folly, and by the power of truth enable me to reach the fountain of my Brother's soul.¹⁰

Scarborough Maine Aug 25 1838

My Dear Brother

Yours under date of Terre Haute July 22d 1838 is now before me, and Believe me Brother Asahel when I say that it hath caused the most peculiar and interesting sensations to vibrate my bosom of any production of your pen that hath fallen before my inspection. it hath brought many tears of joy from the fountain of my soul and filled my mind with hours of pleasing meditations. If you ask the cause of this, I answer because it hath unlocked the secrets of your soul and spread before me the furniture of your mind, which hitherto in a measure was hid from me like gold in its bed concealed from human view. With what deep interest we watch every movement of our friend when we are anxiously wishing and seeking their good especially when Eternal life is at stake, again what a privilege we enjoy to be permitted to unbosom our feelings to each other in confidence with our pen while separated thousands of miles by hills and dales. I feel thankful for such blessings. I think I can say in truth that I never attempted to write to you when I had more matters crowding into my mind that I wish to communicate than at this time. I feel that I need the art of comprehending a volume in a page in order to fully pour out my feelings before you. The interest of

your letter is so great, it contains such important questions, questions that involve Eternal consequences so much so that I cannot do justice to them on a sheet like this. There is many things I would like to say to you both in answer to your letter concerning you and myself and our friends of things past, present, and to come. I have long desired an intimate and unreserved correspondence with you. It is to late in the day to be reserved in our communications, the day is far spent the night is at hand. I believe a correspondence of this kind will be a benefit to us both. I have just returned to the bosom of my family from my last mission to the Fox Island and I have something like 10 late letters from my correspondents which I am about answering and as I have just filled a sheet to Sister Eunice I concluded also to direct one to you at this time. The day of trifles with me are past, our youthful days are gone and with them their folly, then let them sleep, and let us like men pass through the urgent events of the last dispensation and fullness of times, which is now rolling upon the earth. I was edified with your remarks concerning your following me in my ministry (with your mind) as I have traveled through the country. I rejoice that I have got a Brother who feels an interest in my welfare while I am the reproach of my enemies and at times the ridicule of my. . . .¹¹ I have endeavored to give you a correct account of my proceedings during my pergrinations untill I have at times feared it was dry and uninteresting to you, thinking that you might desire to learn more upon temporal matters than the cause in which I was engaged. while at the same time the interest of temporal and worthy concerns fled (in my mind) before the spiritual things of the Kingdom of God like the sable shades of night before the King of day. But I rejoice to learn that this hath not been the case but that you have continued to feel a deep interest in these matters and in my welfare, and as I learn this is the case I shall still continue to give you an account of my travels in the earth (which have just began) and inform you of the dealings of God with me and the sucess I meet with among the nations of the earth. I design dropping a few remarks here concerning my labours since I wrote you in Farmington. My visit was attended with more interest after I wrote than before. I preached several times at Father's house to the citizens of Farmington. Some of all classes attended and the Lord enabled me to set the truths of the everlasting gospel before the people and on the first day of July after setting forth the order of God I was blessed with the glorious privilege of leading our Father, Mother, and our only Sister,¹² aunt Anna Cosett, cousin Seth Woodruff and also a methodist class leader into the waters of Baptism in Farmington river while solemnity and good order pervaded the congregation. Who can contemplate such a scenery with insensibility or suppose that I could have administered this solemn ordinance of the house of the Lord on this occasion with feelings of an ordinary king. Had I room and opportunity I should be

glad to set before you this whole Scenery with all its appendiges attached to my last visit with my friends, but as I have not, suffice it to say it was the most interesting visit I ever enjoyed at a Father house. After Baptism I attended to the ordinance of confirmation or laying on of hands and in the evening I organized this small branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and communed with them. I ordained Brother Dwight Webster (the Methodist class leader) to the office of a priest. Cousin Betsy and Ann Cossett was present at these meetings, Betsy's mind seemed much interested in the same. I truly rejoiced to Behold our Sister Eunice independent in maintaining the cause of truth and of God. I had many a pleasant walk with this dear Sister while with them. I never before knew what it was to enjoy the unlimited and unreserved embraces of a Sisters love. We mingled our joys, tears, sympathies, and prayers together before a throne of grace, I would to God dear Brother that you might enjoy the same and even more it is your right, your privilege. But duty called me to take the parting hand with those dear friends. I did it in the morn of the third day of July with a firm Belief that time would not erase from my memory the recollection of those days. Nothing worthy of note transpired while on my journey to maine excepting while going from Boston to Portland by water the Steem Boat in which I sailed picked up the wreck of a Spanish Brig and towed her into ortland. She had been wrecked 10 days at Sea all her crew was on board no lives lost. After spending a few days with my family and friends in Scarborough (during which time we were blessed with the birth of a daughter on the 14th of July Mother and babe doing well)¹³ I took the parting hand with the friends to once more go to the Islands of the Sea. This mission was not so much to preach the gospel as it was to prepare the Saints to go out of Babylon and stand in Holy Places while judgments work in the earth. And by the assistance of God I accomplished my object in this thing in a good degree notwithstanding the malace and hatred of wicked men and devils. Although my enemies plotted for my destruction in secret chambers, threatened me with tar, feathers, and death, posted off a Sheriff at my beds: yet in spite of all their ungodly devices, I was enabled to assist in purchasing about fifteen hundred Dollars worth of horses, wagons harness and tents &c. to convey about fifty of the Saints to the land of Zion or City far west. This labour fell upon me in consequence of those Saints being Seamen and unacquainted in such matters. Thus you see my mission in this generation is diverse from the Sectarian priest with their high salaries. It is no small matter to have such a trust required at ones own hands, however. I was enabled to perform the task and return home without molestation from even my worst enemies. This camp of Saints will leave the Town of Camden on the Mainland the 10th day of Sept. Next month, we shall leave Father Carter's in Scarborough the 19th day of Sept. I shall lead this

company of which I have been speaking to the far west Missouri. I should rejoice to have our Sister and parents and other friends in Connecticut go with us to that land yourself not excepted, but I suppose I shall not be thus favored at present, we shall pass through Albay; We shall also pass through Terre Haute Ia¹⁴ where you reside and if you are at home I shall calculate to have an interview with you, it will probably be about the last of October as we shall have about 1500 miles to journey before we reach you. The only aggravation of such a visit might be that the time might be limited to an hour or a night in consequence of the care of the camp upon my saints. however I will be thankful for even a few hours interview with my Brother. I have so many things resting upon my mind that when I close I may find that I have not touched upon the most important parts of your letter. But as you have manifested such interest in my welfare and the cause in which I am engaged, I feel disposed at the time to lay before you my calling in life and that unreservedly so that you may have a view of the road in which I shall walk in this day and generation. My Dear Brother what I have done since I became a member of the Church of Latter Day Saints I have done for myself and not another. I have done it to with my eyes open and not shut. I have done it in Knowledge and not Ignorance, and I know before the living and true God that the cause in which I am engaged is eternal truth and the work of god and that it will stand while babylon falls to rise no more; it is the little stone cut out of the mountain without hands,¹⁵ it is the last covenant that God will make with Israel in pruning his vineyard for the last time and restoring unto them his Kingdom. If you ask how I know I answer by the word and spirit of God, by the open visions of heaven, and the revelations of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Ghost and the gifts and graces of the same that follow the believer. if we have the spirit of Christ and the comforter we may know of the doctrine whether it be of God. if we lack wisdom ask f God and we'll obtain it. I despise the principle of being dependent alone upon the testimony of Adam, Moses, Abram, Daniel, Paul, or Joseph or any other man for my knowledge of a God, and God despises it to. If I am a saint of God, let me unlock the battles of heaven, and rend the veil of Eternity, let me feel after God and see if I cannot find him when he is not vary¹⁶ far from every one of us, this dear Brother is my religion and privilege, and anything short of this is folly. Is God unchangeable, are not his ways equal, then where are our privileges compared with the ancient Saints. O my soul mourns over the unbelief of man, and the ignorance of the Earth. We talk of deception, and truly there is a world of it, and why should their not be, when their is a whole generation worshipping they know not what,¹⁷ whether a God without mouth, eyes, ears, body parts or passions as he does not reveale himself unto them, but their is no deception with the Saints in any age of the world who worships the living and true

God of revelation. You will say then that my assertions are no testimony¹⁸ to you or at least not satisfactory evidences of the truth of the work, and probably this is the reason why you say that my admissions are not satisfactory to you not being as explicit as you could wish. I answer I do not wish you to lean upon my testimony alone or any other mans for your knowledge of the work. Yet, if God sends a man in any age of the world by revelation to preach the gospel or deliver a message and any man rejects that testimony he is under condemnation. What is to be done then, I answer let a man go before God for himself and ask the Father in the name of Jesus Christ if these things are not so and he may have the witness for himself. And I now say unto you Brother Asahel never receive the work in which I am engaged because I say it is true. But humble yourself before God and covenant with him with full purpose of heart to walk in the light and truth when he shows it unto you then ask the Lord in the name of Jesus Christ if these things are not true and he will manifest the truth of it unto you by his spirit, but see that you do not grieve the spirit by rejecting the light when shown you, search the scriptures daily for in them you think you have eternal life and they are they which testify of all our doctrine, and if you receive no testimony or light upon the subject stand where you are untill you come before the bar of God. Then you shall know these things are true, thus to you own Master you must stand or fall. It is one of the greatest desires of my soul that you may see, understand, believe and imbrace the work. Brother I am sensible I have not taken a systematic course of citing you to passages of scripture in proof of all our doctrines as I have passed along from time to time but I am willing to do it as far as it is requested. Ask me any questions you please I will endeavor to answer them in mekness and humility for I feel a deep interest in the salvation of your soul and I beg the privilege of enjoying your society in a Celestial Kingdom. I said I write to show you the road in which I shall walk in this generation. When I first embraced this work (we profess to be led by revelation) I was ordained a teacher Jan. 2d 1834—and a priest Nov 5 1834. June 28 1835 I was ordained an Elder. May 31 1836, also a member of the Second Seventy. On the 3d of Jan. 1837 I was also ordained as a member of the first quorum of the Seventy Elders by revelation. And I have just received several lengthy letters from the Presidency in Zion in which I am informed there hath been some vary interesting and important revelations lately received of the Lord in which I am commanded in person to come immediately to that place via far west and also to take upon me the Bishopprick or Apostleship of one of the twelve which have fallen away and that I am to take the parting hand with the saints in Zion. And to leave this contenant in company with the other eleven on the 26 day of April next and to cross the mighty deep to visit other climes to bear the keys of this last kingdom befor the kings and princes of the nations

of the earth. Thus my Brother you see the path spread before me. I am ready to go, my heart and soul responds AMEN, I count not my life dear unto myself. Truly the Lord choses weak things. Brother Asahel be reconciled to my calling, be not troubled about me. I worship a God of Power, Knowledge, and revelation. And he is with me By day and night. When I am sick he heals me when I am cast down he comforts me. When my enemies are upon me he tells me of it and shows me the way to escape. He shows me by dreams, visions, and revelations all things that await me. I do not war as those that beat the air. I know in Whom I trust. Then Dear Brother go with us and you will say the half hath not been told you. The Lord hath had his eye upon you from your cradle. his unseen hand has mysteriously guided you from many dangers temporal and spiritual, your afflictions are governed for your good, then strive not against the providence of God. Keep his commandments and you shall one day understand the cause of ALL. Asahel H. Woodruff yours in the Love of God. Willford Woodruff.¹⁹

²⁰You will discover from my writings that I am about to go to the west consequently it would be improper for any of my friends to send any more letters to this eastern country to me. I was informed by Sister Eunice that you thought of visiting your friends in Connecticut this fall should this be the case I shall probably not see you as I pass through Terre Haute. I should be pleased to have you visit your friends in the east for they would all be happy to see you. I should also esteem it a great favor to have an interview with you but I would not wish you to defer your visit to the east on my account, for I know others wish to see you also. Should it so happen that I should not see you as I go west you will please direct your next communication to Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri. I wish you to answer your mind freely and ask me any questions you wish, and it will be with pleasure and cheerfulness that I shall endeavor to answer your every question according to the best of my abilities. I am sensible that there hath many things transpired with us as a people that may appear strange to one at a distance who has heard the report of these things, and not known the circumstances under which they have transpired. I should like to have you give the Book of Mormon and also the Doctrine and Covenants another reading and let it be accompanied with prayer before God that you may have a knowledge of their truths and while perusing those books consider the limited privilege of J. Smith Jr and then see if it appears rational that he or any other man could be the author of those things without the assistance of God. Again would the Son suffer any man to prosper to bring forth such a Book as the Doctrine and Covenants (even if he had power to do so) and then palm it upon the world for the revelations of God when they were his own make, judge ye. The 3d No. of the Elers Journal is now before the public printed in Missouri. I expect they will come regular and I trust you will

obtain them. so as to know something what is going on with us. I pray the Lord that you may yet see the cause of Jew and Gentile in its true light, and I hope yet before you die you will be an instrument in the hands of God of sounding the glad tidings of salvation to some of the house of Israel in this generation yourself. O what tidings this would be to my soul, far more glorious to me than to hear that my Brother had obtained the riches of China or Perue, or the honours of the East.²¹ I cannot yet believe that God hath bestowed upon you the mind you possess for *nought* and I trust it will yet be employed with all its forcible powers in a cause that will do honour to a Saint. I can't give it up, my vary soul shrinks at the idea, I am determin to plead with God for this desire of my heart to be granted while hope remains. But my paper is used up and my mind still pressed. The subject is as inexhaustible as the fountains of the Atlantic. Mrs. Woodruff remembers your complements with gratitudde and wishes to be remembered to you and ever share in your love and friendship. Excuses for poor paper and writing will not help you read this sheet.

Asahel H. Woodruff

Willford Woodruff

²²I am not so weak and unkind as for a moment to harbour the thought that anything in you letter is written in unkindness or hardness. Brother answer your feelings, speak plainly, it is your right and duty so to do, and if I have the Spirit of Christ I shall never be offended at your honest plainness. I say with yourself God forbid that we should be under the influence of Mormonism if it is not the work of God. I ask none of my friends to engage in it that have not the evidence and witness in and for themselves. I know the work to be of God and true for myself and not another and without this knowledge I never should have desired our father, Mother, Sister, and other friends to have engaged in it and if those of my friends who have not engaged in it do not find it to be the work of God they will be much troubled to find a work which is of God in this generation. You see Brother that I speak plain and pointed myself but bear with me in these things for I speak them all with the best of feelings under the consideration that I am accountable to God for all. I certainly have had a chance to know for myself whether the work be of God or the devil as five years experance with Joseph and the Church in all their councils etc must leave me without dubiety upon my mind. I have much I would like to say to you upon this subject which I must defer untill another time as you see I am in close quarters so farewell for the present. W.W.²³

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1. The events of this period of time, from the baptism of Wilford and his brother Azmon on 31 December 1833 by Elder Ezra Pulsipher up to the period of his sojourn at Scarborough, in August 1838, where the letter to his half-brother, Asahel, was written, are recorded in Mathias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors As Recorded in His Daily Journals* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1909), pp. 32–98. A little-known source on Wilford Woodruff's mission in Arkansas is an article written by Mark E. Petersen, "A Mormon in Arkansas," *Arkansas Gazette Magazine* 9, no. 14 (2 December 1934). Reprints of his article are available.

2. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff*, p. 91. This incident is also described in "Autobiography of Wilford Woodruff," *Tullidges Quarterly Magazine* 3, no. 1 (October 1838):22.

3. These letters were recently found by this writer in Canada among his mother-in-law's papers. She, Norma Woodruff Wood, apparently got the letters from her father, Asahel Hart Woodruff, who apparently got them from his father, President Wilford Woodruff. They were found among other pertinent President Woodruff materials.

4. Archibald F. Bennett, "The Lineage of Wilford Woodruff," *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 22 (April 1931):60. In the "Autobiography of Wilford Woodruff," in *Tullidges Quarterly Magazine*, the birth date of Asahel Hart is given as 11 April 1814, one year earlier than in the Archibald Bennett lineage article.

5. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff*, p. 27.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 30. See also "Autobiography of Wilford Woodruff," p. 2.

8. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff*, p. 95.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 98. See also "Autobiography of Wilford Woodruff," p. 25. It can be assumed that one of the "trifling mementoes" was this letter Asahel had received from his brother Wilford.

10. This appeal for God to guide his pen appears at the top of the first page of the letter in small print enclosed by a box of several lines closely drawn together. It is part of the letter and would have been read by his brother. Original spelling, punctuation, and capitalization have been retained.

11. In the letter this word is just a squiggle, so we have no indication who was ridiculing him.

12. Wilford Woodruff's full brothers were Azmon and Thompson. His half brothers and sisters were: Philo, Asahel Hart, Franklin, Newton, Julius, and Eunice.

13. Wilford emphasizes this event in the letter by printing the words in parenthesis whereas everything else in this portion of the letter is written in script.

14. The abbreviation for Indiana at that time was "Ia." On the letter Asahel sent in reply to Wilford's letter there is a stamped postmark bearing the words: "Terre Haute Ia Sept 11."

15. See Daniel 2:34–35.

16. Either for emphasis or clarity, "vary" is printed above the written word.

17. The seal on the letter has torn a small portion of the letter off where the last word of the phrase would be. It is assumed the phrase should read: "they know not *what*."

18. Beginning after the word "testimony," the writer resorts to very minute printing of his words to the end of the letter in order to get more on the remaining page. However, wishing to say more and to utilize every bit of paper he uses the folded portions of the back page also, resorting partly to script and partly to small printing.

19. Pres. Woodruff signs his name with two *I*'s—"Willford," throughout the letter and in the printed notation on the letter, presumably written by Wilford Woodruff at a later time. It reads: "Willford Woodruff's last letter written to Asahel before his death in reply to his of July 22, 1838."

20. Here begin the inserts on the reverse side of the last page. Before the first sentence which begins "you will . . ." is what looks like a notation, "P.3."

21. This word crowded in at the end of a line on the page is difficult to read. It appears to be "East."

22. Here Wilford Woodruff resorts to small printing again. This passage would have appeared across the back of the letter under the fold which was sealed down.

23. The letter is then folded, sealed, and addressed on the outside to "Mr. Asahel H. Woodruff, Terre Haute, Indiana." In the upper right hand corner is the number "25," indicating the postage fee paid. In the upper left hand corner is the notation, "scarborough Aug 29."