

HINGHAM TO HATLEY

Readers' Theater
The Leavitt Legacy
 By Anne O. Leavitt

MUSICAL NUMBER

As the congregation finishes singing America The Beautiful, the organ continues to play, softly, under.

NARRATOR:

In the beginning, God created America to be beautiful. But it would require the diligent striving of people of courage and valor to make her great.

Much that is significant in America's history unfolds in the story of families, who in the conduct of their seemingly ordinary lives, manifest the grand design of God.

As we look back upon the first two hundred years of the Leavitt family in America, we discover that these simple people who came seeking freedom were, in truth, an integral thread in the fabric of Divine design, in the establishment of the nation **destined to become a land choice above all other lands.**

They were people directed by a power higher than themselves, as they became participants in the settling of this land, in which the purposes of God could roll forth.

MUSIC OFF

God reveals his purposes through prophets. 600 years before the coming of Christ, a young Jerusalem-born prophet, a descendant of Joseph of Egypt, foresaw the establishment of America. In vision he saw that this land that would become a land choice above all other lands.

NEPHI:

I am Nephi, descendant of Joseph, "--yea even that Joseph who was the son of Jacob who was sold into Egypt, and who was preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he might preserve his father Jacob, and all his household from perishing with famine. And they were led out of the land of Egypt, by that same God who had preserved them." (1 Nephi 5:14-15.)

My father's family, also was preserved by the tender mercies of God, being led to this land, which is a land of promise, yea a land choice above all other lands.

And it came to pass that I beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon many multitudes of Gentiles; and they went forth out of captivity upon the many waters.

(Ref: 1 Nephi 13:13. Book of Mormon p 24.)

NARRATOR:

There were multitudes of gentiles on the European continent in 1628, and many kinds of captivity; social, physical and spiritual. Young John Levitt, one of the multitudes, chafed against his particular kind of captivity.

JOHN:

My name is John Levett. My village, in the heart of Yorkshire, was a pleasant place. But I was apprenticed to a tailor in the village, and something there was that **wrought upon my spirit**. I felt a craving to be free. I wasn't much suited to the cutting and the stitching and three years loomed long before my master would set me at liberty.

I craved the adventuresome life of my Uncle, Captain Christopher Levett. Now there was the life! My uncle, Christopher was the captain of his ship! Again and again he sailed **upon the many waters** to a new and open land.

I begged to go along. I was a big lad. I could be some help to him. Finally, he agreed. But no one was to know that I was on the ship, until we had sailed beyond the point of ever turning back.

It was a strange place, this new country, harsh and unpredictable. Savages roamed the land; the terrain not yet friendly to the cart or to the plow. But shortly, I obtained a property and began to make my way. (Pause) I wish that my father could have seen this land.

NEPHI:

“And I [Nephi] beheld the Spirit of the Lord, that it was upon the Gentiles and they did prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance---“ “---and it came to pass that I Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles who had gone forth out of captivity did humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the Lord was with them..” (1 Nephi 13:15,16. Book of Mormon p24.)

SARAH GILMAN:

My name is Sarah Gilman. I was so afraid that April day, when we boarded the ship *Diligence*, at Gravesend Harbor.

My father, Edward Gilman was confident that the power of the Lord would be with us and would keep us safe on the long voyage. My mother was very brave.

I tried to be as courageous as my older sister, Lydia, but I was frightened. My little brothers, Moses and John ran about the ship as though they'd always been at sea. But for me, the voyage was long and fearsome.

Sometimes storms drove back our ship, and we were fourteen weeks in the crossing. Sometimes people died and had to be buried in the black and raging water. But all nine of our family came safely.

We gave thanks. I knew we had been brought safely by the tender mercies of the Lord.

And what a strange, new place this was. People could have land just for going there and choosing it. But it was hard to make the land liveable. My father and my brothers were happy to see all the timber, and they set about making us snug before the winter came. We learned to eat the Indian corn that grew in the hills. There was game on the land and fish in the streams. We learned how to make our way.

JOHN LEVETT:

When I married Mary Lovet I was sure that providence had smiled on me forever. One by one, five children came: Hannah, John and Jeremiah, Samuel and Elizabeth. **We began to prosper in the land. We had obtained this land as an inheritance.**

Then my Mary died. Our hearts were broken, and for a time it seemed as though there wasn't any purpose in this bleak life now.

Then came a gift from God to us. Miss Sarah Gilman became my wife. She was young and pretty, but very strong. She came into our home, and life again held promise. More children came...eight of them. Israel, Moses, Josiah, and Nehemiah, Sarah, Mary, Hannah and Abigail.

NARRATOR:

The John Leavitt/Sarah Gilman union would produce men and women of uncommon character. They would become leaders in helping to build economic security in the budding society. Their posterity would become constitutional leaders and revolutionary participants. They began to lead the way in the expansion and development of New England. They explored the frontiers and helped to colonize the land. They became prominent landowners and town figures.

MOSES LEAVITT:

I am Moses Leavitt. I'm the second son of John and Sarah Leavitt. My parents gave me the name of my mother's youngest brother, Moses Gilman. And it was fitting that they should. My Gilman uncles were a great help to me when I came to Exeter. I was just 14. My brother Samuel was married and already becoming established here. When I left my parent's home, Nehemiah was only 8. He would come later. Israel and Josiah remained in Hingham and made their lives there.

Exeter was the place of promise. Sawmills were springing up along the rivers. Shipyards and blacksmith shops bustled with their business. The forests were rich with good timber and the market was brisk for ships masts and lumber for building. There was plenty for a young man to learn and opportunity on every side. I was so busy working and learning, that I didn't have time to do much courting. I was an old man of thirty when I first met Dorothy Dudley.

The Reverend Samuel Dudley was a friend to everyone. He was one of the most respected men in Exeter. We did business with him on the weekdays and listened to him preach to the congregation on the Sabbath.

I was not sure he would approve of my attention to his pretty 17-year-old daughter. But he was kind and welcomed me.

Dorothy and I married 16 October in 1681. The Reverend Samuel Dudley married us. She was 17 and I was 31. But what she lacked in years she made up in maturity and intelligence. She was beautiful and good and she made the perfect wife. Growing up in her father's household had prepared her for a husband involved in a great many things.

DOROTHY DUDLEY LEAVITT:

My father was pleased when I began to keep company with Moses Leavitt, for he was a good man. He was a natural leader, my father said, much like his own father Governor Thomas Dudley.

For me all the activities of my husband were a source of interest, but I was busy with the affairs of our household. Our children began to be born; one every two years, sometimes one every year. My father died before our first child, Moses, was born. I was sorry he didn't see our little Moses.

By the time all twelve of our children were born, I was 43. And oh my, those 25 years were filled with trials.

Timothy was only three when I had to take my three little boys and rush to the garrison house, while Moses went with the militia to the battle at Oyster River. From that time forth the troubles with the native people were a constant concern to us. There was a powder barrel at the door of the church and men carried rifles with them everywhere.

We thought of ourselves as Americans. But the English thought of us as colonists, and the colonies as theirs. Oh the trouble that caused us!

First there was the matter of the mast trees. The king's men would regularly come into OUR forests, choose the tallest and the straightest trees, declare them to belong to the King, mark them as his, and forbid us to cut them. In our own forests! On our own land! It was not to be tolerated. This was not England. This was America!

I wasn't too troubled with the mast tree problems. We had ways of handling that. But the Mason claims upon our lands, and the offense of the crown in sending Cranfield and his cronies to rule over us, brought us to consider open resistance, despite the danger to our safety. We sent our petition to the King. And we stayed upon our lands.

But for twenty-five years the issue languished in the courts. Our children were growing up and the peace we sought was illusive. While we prospered, we were never without a threat of some sort hanging over us.

We had hoped to see the world of our grandchildren free from oppression. But Dorothy died, and I grew old, and clouds gathered. I remember looking down upon Joseph and Mary's little Nathaniel and saying, "I hope his world will be free of conflict. I pray he will always live in peace and enjoy the blessing of a land of liberty."

JOSEPH LEAVITT:

My name is Joseph. I am the fourth of my father's seven sons. I am the sixth child of Moses and Dorothy Dudley Leavitt. I was born in March of 1699. Growing up in Exeter was a good time for me. Just as I reached the age of 7, the new schoolhouse was built, so I was sent to learn to read and write and to learn my numbers. After school we'd run to my Uncle Nehemiah's shipyard where plenty of adventure awaited us. My favorite cousins were Uncle Nehemiah's sons. The oldest, Nehemiah was nine years older and knew just everything. The triplets, Selah, Sealey and Joab were four years older and they were great friends too. Then Daniel was just two years older than I am and we were always together.

For me, just listening to the talk of the men around the shipyard, or watching the workers at the fiery forge was enough to keep me enthralled until our mother sent the girls to bring us home.

My Uncle Nehemiah taught me a thing or two. He showed me how important it is to produce something that is always in demand. Early on I learned to make the pipe staves and the barrel staves. When I was grown it was natural for me to focus on making the barrels that carried the goods on the ships that moved down the river to the sea and home again laden with goods.

But it was hard to tend to my own affairs. There was always the need to be watchful. The savages raided us without warning. From the time I learned to fire a gun and make the bullets, I was called into service in the militia. When I was 24 I went with Captain Ladd on the expedition to Lake Winnepisokee. My cousin, Nehemiah was pilot and my cousin Daniel was my comrade. There seemed to be one battle after another, and I felt it was my duty to go.

MARY WADLEIGH LEAVITT:

The Leavitts were our neighbors. Our pasture adjoined their pasture. My father, Captain Jonathan Wadleigh, was always associated with Mr. Moses Leavitt. They were partners in the sawmill on the falls. They were selectmen in the town. They were Deacons in the Church. Oh I had plenty of occasions to see Joseph. And I knew that we would one day marry. But he was always going off to fight in another battle, and he was busy on his land and in his shop. So I was 24 before finally we were wed. And then things didn't change much. He was still busy on the land and in the shop and he still went off to fight.

But the children came. First little Nathaniel and he was a joy to me. Then one after another until there were nine. We had eight sons and little Mary.

Joseph took up land in Deerfield and his father died and left him the piece in Exeter. When my father died he left his lands to us. Joseph bought land in Gilmanton. So our affairs were complicated, but we fared well and always had plenty for the children. And they grew so quickly.

But always the wars, and so often Joseph had to go to them. The French were always warring over the British possessions and we were loyal to Britain, though it sometimes seemed they weren't very loyal to us.

It was natural that our sons would go with him, but having my sons go into the fighting was almost worse than having Joseph go. I remember especially the affair at Fort Duquesne. Nathaniel and Lydia had married and Lydia was expecting her first child. How we anguished and prayed for their return.

JOSEPH:

We were loyal to England, but there came a time when some of us felt that we could no longer tolerate her treatment of us. We began to be divided among ourselves. Some clinging to our ties with our mother country, and others believing that we must break those ties.

The Continental Congress was meeting here in Exeter. We met in the Committee of Safety and discussed the matter earnestly and long. And then we made our determination. We sent a letter to the Congress that declared:

We will not conceal that many among us are disposed to conclude that the voice of God and Nature to us, since the late hostile design and conduct of Great Britain, is, that we are bound to look to our whole political affairs (Bell, pages 83-87).

The reply of the Congress came on the fourteenth of March 1776. We were instructed that we should

“immediately cause to be disarmed all persons within our midst who are notoriously disaffected toward the cause of America or who refuse to associate to defend by arms the United Colonies against the hostile attempts of the British fleets and armies.”

NATHANIEL:

My name is Nathaniel Leavitt. I am the fourth generation of my family in America. For nearly 150 years our people had spent their lives in the building of this country.

My great-grandfather, my grandfather and my father had all worked to establish this land. They cleared away the trees and built their houses from the logs. They plowed the cleared spaces and planted crops. They labored to make a home from wild country, all the while loyal to our mother England.

I myself fought for the crown against the French in 1755. With my father and others of our kin we marched with General Braddock into the ambush at Fort Duquesne. Only the courage of young General George Washington, saved the few of us who did survive.¹ Still we were loyal to the crown.

¹ The account of the ambush at Fort Duquesne under Gen. Braddock from World Book Encyclopedia, and the family history account of Washington's rescue of Nathaniel's group with a few troops, match so perfectly that it is an assumption I feel safe in making. (World Book Encyclopedia 1977)

As we felt the tightening grip of British rule, our kinsmen and our friends gathered often from Exeter to Hingham, to debate and to discuss. **Revolution began to conceive in our minds and in our hearts.**

The Continental Congress decreed that every man who had reached the age of twenty-one should sign the Association Test. It read:

“We the subscribers do hereby solemnly engage and promise that we will, to the utmost of our power, at the risk of our lives and fortunes, with arms oppose the hostile proceedings of the British fleets and armies against the United American Colonies”

Bell, pages 90-91).

My father, six of my brothers, our sons, and I all signed. Our course was set.

FIFE AND DRUM MUSIC BEGINS HERE, UNDER SPEAKER.

LYDIA SANBORN LEAVITT:

I am Lydia Sanborn Leavitt. In the end it became clear to us all. Liberty would require independence. On the 19th of April when the affair at Lexington and Concord was known, the bells were rung, drums beat to arms and by the middle of the forenoon one hundred and eight of our men left for battle. Fifteen by the name of Leavitt marched from Exeter that day. Nathaniel was among them and two of our sons, Joseph our eldest and Moses. Joseph was 21, but Moses was only 17.

Jeremiah stayed behind with me, but he would follow before the conflict was over. He was a comfort and a great help, for me and his eight younger brothers and sisters. Little Stephen died that year. He was just one year old.

MUSIC ENDS.

NEPHI:

“And I beheld that their mother Gentiles were gathered together upon the waters and upon the land also to battle against them. And I beheld that the power of God was with them, and also that the wrath of God was upon all those that were gathered together against them to battle.” (1 Nephi 13:17-18. Book of Mormon p 25.)

NATHANIEL:

I remember seeing Lydia standing in the dooryard, as the boys and I walked away toward Town Square. She was holding the baby with one arm and waving with the other. The children were gathered around her. I wondered if we would ever come back. I said to the boys: “Let us sing boys, sing out! So they can hear us and that will help them feel better.”

MALE DOUBLE TRIO:

The Tie That Binds (Old Protestant Hymn) Could use any hymn of the period.

NARRATOR:

Scores of “gentiles” named Leavitt and scores of their kinsmen named Dudley and Gilman, Wadleigh and Sanborn, Shannon and Rand, served in the Revolutionary War. They were both officers and enlisted men. Fathers and sons, uncles and cousins, fought side by side in the revolutionary cause. They fought, not knowing that they were the fulfillment of prophesy.

NEPHI:

“And I Nephi beheld that the Gentiles who had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God, out of the hands of all other nations.”

(I Nephi 13:19. Book of Mormon p 25.)

JEREMIAH:

I am Jeremiah Leavitt. I was sixteen years old when the war began. I was twenty-three when it ended. By the time the battles were over, we knew **we had been delivered by the power of God, out of the hands of all other nations.** The war had taken a terrible toll. We now needed the power of God to help us face the aftermath.

All families had suffered. The land had been ravaged and Exeter, no longer offered bright economic promise. Shipbuilding and the lumber industry diminished to almost nothing.

The center of government had moved to Concord.

My father learned that there was land with good timber just a little northward in Grantham, New Hampshire. He planned to move there, and five of my brothers decided to go too.

For me the world brightened when I met Sarah Shannon. In the War for Independence I was enlisted with the Chester Company. John Shannon was my comrade. We fought and slept side by side, and John always told me about his sister. When the war was over I met Sarah. She was a lovely Irish girl, with red hair and deep blue eyes. Forever after that the hardships were softened by Sarah.

I married Sarah Shannon the year after the war ended. I was twenty-four; she was 18. We stayed on in Chester for a time, near her family. We thought of joining my brothers and my parents at Grantham. But opportunities beckoned us toward the northern border. There was land there to be had for the taking. Land with rich, dark soil, ready to be cleared and planted. We prepared ourselves to make a new life, where a civilization was only beginning to form.

NARRATOR:

It was a decision that would have far-reaching effects upon the rest of time. It would separate one branch of the Leavitt family from their illustrious New England heritage. They would become a “branch broken off” from the main tree.

Little did Jeremiah and Sarah Shannon Leavitt realize, as they drove their wagons northward, that they carried themselves toward a destiny that would greatly alter the world of their posterity.

They were, without knowing it, creating a climate for a whole new heritage that would bear the imprint of the Leavitt family.

SARAH SHANNON:

I am Sarah Shannon Leavitt. By the time we were ready to make a permanent move to Lower Canada, we had seven children. Little John was only 2 years old. I held him in my arms for most of the journey. Jeremiah drove the first wagon and I sat alongside him as we wound our way along the rutted road. In some places there was hardly a trail through the forests. Our Weare was fifteen, a good boy, big enough to drive the second wagon. Little Jeremiah was three and Sarah two. They rode along with Weare. Nathaniel was 8, Josiah was 6 and Lydia, 4. Sometimes the little ones rode, but often they ran along with the other children in the company. They could easily run as fast as our burdened oxen.

It was a long journey. Every day, as we traveled through the forests, I realized more, how far we would be separated from our families and friends.

Settlements were springing up everywhere in Richelieu County, Quebec. We had taken land near Hatley, where farms were forming and cabins taking shape. We began the task of clearing our land and building a home. Jeremiah was glad for the help of our sons. Weare and Nathaniel and Josiah soon learned to wield an axe, and even the little ones helped with peeling the bark from the poles. I worked at planting a garden and caring for them all.

It was pleasant there that summer. We lived in the wagons placed at the edge of a little wood, until the cabin was finished. It was ready just in time, because on the 27th of September Rebecca was born and we were finally snug and settled inside. She was the first of three little girls, who came one after another. Rebecca in 1801, Betsy in November 1804, and little Hannah, was born on the day after Christmas in 1805.

Winters were hard. Even colder than New England. But thought our living was hard and required much of us, we learned to adapt and made our way. For almost twenty years life seemed good and full of promise. But our happiness was not to last. Very early in the new year Jeremiah suddenly took sick. We tried everything we knew to do. But he only grew weaker until, in 1817, he died, “in the 46th year of his age, in full assurance of a glorious resurrection.”²

NARRATOR:

For Sarah Shannon Leavitt, her ten children became both her lonely stewardship and her greatest resource. The boys were grown, her little girls now 15, 13, and 12. Each filled a part of the void, and the family grew and prospered.

² This date and the phrase come from Jeremiah II’s short autobiography contained in the minutes of the 16th Quorum of Seventies, Nauvoo, Illinois, 1844-1860 CHO #87556, p.111

One by one, the children married and established families of their own. Canada had been their home for more than twenty years when their father died. Now they intended that they would live out their lives in the green valleys of this beloved land.

But there was a dimension of their lives that remained unsettled. These were inherently religious people. They were people for whom truth mattered. The religious life in the eastern townships was much as it was in the New England States. A multiplicity of sects, each proclaiming the superiority of their doctrines. The Leavitts joined the Free Will Baptists, who worshipped in the Old North Church in Hatley. But questions remained unanswered and they often focused their family discussions on these questions. What is the relationship between God and man? What is the purpose of life? Where do we go from here?

Six generations earlier, their Gilman ancestors had left prosperous manor houses in Caston, England and fled to the forests to live and worship freely. In almost every line of their complex genealogy was a heritage of independent religious seeking. The Sanborns, the Wadleighs the Shannons and the Marstons, the Rands and Robies, all contributed to the believing blood that coursed through Leavitt veins.

In 1834, a young missionary traveled into the eastern townships area. He brought word of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the organization of His church as it had existed in former times. It was called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

SARAH SHANNON:

When the girls came to me, Charlotte and Hannah and Sarah and Rebecca, they came to tell me of the missionary and this new light that they had found. It had the ring of truth to me. Somehow I knew that it would change our lives and change the course of our family forever.

They brought this new scripture, The Book of Mormon to me. We read it together, day after day. It testified of Christ and taught his doctrines with clarity. It was easy to the understanding; beautiful in its simplicity; powerful in its promise.

Oh how we did discuss this thing. Evening after evening we gathered to read together and to talk about it. The women knew. But now it was important that their husbands and their children know. There was an important decision to be made. They all had farms and homes. By this time we had been Canadians for 35 years.

In the end, as Sarah said, there was nothing to do but to prepare ourselves to gather with the Saints. We knew that it was true. We set about making ready. We disposed of our lands and homes as best we could. We fitted out wagons, and assembled all we could to make the journey

In the early evening of July 19th, 1837, I walked alone to the cemetery behind the Old North Church. We were to leave the following day. I sat at the little mound that was Jeremiah's grave. I had come to bid goodbye to Jeremiah. Twenty years since we had placed him there. Now I knelt by his grave and looked out over the valley below. Then I told him that we were leaving this valley we had pioneered together. Somehow I felt a sense that Jeremiah knew, and that he approved. I walked back down the hill, in peace.

NARRATOR:

And so on July 20, 1837, a little wagon train slowly made its way from the beautiful, green valley. They moved along past the fields they had cleared and planted; looking back to the houses and barns they had built with the logs they had felled with their own strength. They turned their faces westward and began the 800-mile journey to Kirtland, Ohio. There, they were, indeed, taught and baptized. There they made the commitment that would bind them to their new faith through hardship and trial, sickness and death. There they set the course for the generations that would follow forever.

History records the perilous path of those early Latter-day Saints as they made their way toward their place of peace. The family of Jeremiah and Sarah Leavitt had become devoted Latter-day Saints. They trod the trail of tears from Kirtland, Ohio to Nauvoo Illinois, to Winter Quarters and Council Bluffs, Iowa. Along the way Sarah Shannon died. All five of her sons died. One daughter, Betsy, and several other children died. Her daughters and her grandsons who survived the long journey and reached their Zion in the valleys of the Rocky Mountains became the progenitors of a large posterity.

And they became Colonists of the great American West.

And so the colonizing tradition, that began in Hingham, extended into all New England, and northward into Canada, now spread across the land, and encircled America

From Hingham to Hatley and onward to the west, the Leavitt family became one of those families who, in the conduct of their seemingly ordinary lives, have helped to fulfill the purposes of God.

MUSICAL NUMBER:

Come come ye saints...sung by male double trio ---first and second verse--- Then the congregation coming in for the final two verses.