

THE NAYS IN PETERBOROUGH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

by

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Have you ever noticed when people start talking about their family history, listeners get this faraway stare, and their eyes start to glaze over, even though they still nod their head and say “uh huh?” Given that, I wonder why I’m here. I’d like to thank Ron Barney for the invitation to join him and Chad [Foulger] and stand before this august group. Telling you about my family history aside, I’m honored to be standing on New England soil, home of my last name.

Nay is a rather odd, relatively unusual name in central Utah where I grew up, especially among the hordes of Scandinavian and British surnames. The name is easy to spot on long lists, but it is frequently misspelled, misread, misfiled, misheard, mispronounced, and, it is the brunt of numerous jokes relating to horses. The word appears 96 times in scripture,¹ and you probably all know our family theme song from the LDS hymnal, “*Nay, Speak No Ill.*” When I put Nay in the search field on a CD of LDS history I got 114 hits. I was amazed, because the name rarely shows up in LDS sources. On closer inspection, 3 of those hits referred to family members; the other 111 hits were of “nay” votes in various church meetings.

My paper will discuss my Nay ancestors who helped settle the town of Peterborough, New

Hampshire, and how they embraced Mormonism there in the 1840s. They are: the immigrant ancestor, William McNee; his son, William Jr. It is with this generation that the name changed to Nay -- spelled N-A-Y. William Jr., had a son named John, and he had a son also named John. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to them as William Sr., William Jr., John Sr., and John Jr.

John Nay Jr. and his wife Thirza Angelina Hale, my third great grandparents, were baptized members of the LDS Church in August of 1841 in Peterborough, New Hampshire by Elder Eli Maginn.² It may seem John's conversion to Mormonism holds little importance to any except the Nay family. In the context of the growth of Mormonism, in Peterborough in particular, and New England in general, John's baptism illustrates the dynamics of early Mormon proselytizing in the area. To put John's baptism in context, it is necessary to discuss the background of his family and the religious climate of the time.

The Nay name came to the New World by way of William McNee. He was of Scottish descent but born in northern Ireland in 1711.³ Virtually nothing is known about William's life in Ireland other than his birth. He was probably born to Scottish lowlanders who were enticed to Ireland by the English Crown to help farm the vast plantations in the northern province of Ulster. These Scots, known variously as Scotch-Irish or Ulster Scots, were rigid Presbyterians who balked at the rules of the Church of England, their heavy tax burdens, and, they could only lease the land they worked. But, they were hardy souls who clearly understood their civil and religious rights, and sought prospects of new freedoms and great quantities of land in America.⁴ Thousands of Scotch-Irish migrated to the New World with hopes of worshiping their own way and owning their own land. Most settled in Pennsylvania, the Carolinas and New England. Circumstantial evidence points to

William McNee being part of a large group of Ulster Scots who landed in Boston about 1736.⁵

Peterborough, New Hampshire township, where the McNees eventually settled, measures 6 square miles, and was granted by King James I in 1606 to land speculators in the New World and became known as the Masonian Proprietorship.⁶ In 1721 a group of prominent Concord, Massachusetts citizens petitioned for part of this land “because they were thoroughly overcrowded and had no place to live in Concord,”⁷ which is about 50 miles southeast of Peterborough. The petition was granted to them in 1738.⁸

The first party to visit the area about 1739 was likely run off by Indians. About 1744, William McNee Sr., John Taggart and William Ritchie -- all Scotch-Irish -- went to stake their claim on this new land. There, “they cut a strip of land on the end of their lots, about twenty rods wide, cut the underbrush and girdled the large trees. When they returned a few years later with their families, this chopping had been burned, and was in good order for a crop of corn or rye. They had abundant crops the first year.”⁹ In the next ten years, between forty five and fifty families settled in the area -- again, all Ulster Scots. And for the next hundred years, four generations of McNees and Nays flourished in what is now Peterborough, New Hampshire.

While the religious aspect of life in Peterborough is the focus of this paper, let me briefly mention how the French and Indian War and the American Revolution affected the lives of these Scotch-Irish settlers. Both Britain and France were jockeying for possession and position in America, and the French eventually persuaded the Indians to join with them. This caused alarm all over New England. Another Scotch-Irish by the name of Robert Rogers recruited heavily in Peterborough for men to join

his fighting unit of Rangers, whose reputation and cunning against the Indians was, and likely still is, legendary in military history. In 1755, Peterborough had less than three hundred people, and thirty three of them joined Rogers Rangers -- more than 10% of the town. Young Robert McNee, William Sr.'s first child and William Jr.'s older brother left with the Rangers, headed for Fort William Henry near Lake George.¹⁰ Six Peterborough boys were killed March 13, 1758 in a gruesome battle with Indians -- one of them being young Robert McNee.¹¹

Seventeen years later, on the eve of the American Revolution, the alarm was sounded that the British were marching on Lexington, Massachusetts about 40 miles southeast of Peterborough.

Early in the morning of April 18, 1775, every able bodied man in Peterborough answered the call with what arms he owned and marched off to Lexington. Some had firearms with a meager supply of powder and ball; some of the guns were the old, heavy, clumsy Queen's arms; some were light French pieces, called "Fusees." Many of the guns had seen hard usage in the French and Indian War. Some men had pitchforks, some shillelaghs, and one ardent patriot was armed with his grain flail, declaring he would thrash the British if he could get near enough.¹² Upon reaching Groton they heard the Lexington fight was over and part of them turned about and went home, (you know, cows to milk, corn to plant). William Sr., and his sons William Jr., and James probably went to Lexington.

A month later, the Colony of New Hampshire sent out a chilling order to all the towns: "You are requested to desire all Males above 21 years of age (Lunaticks, Idiots, and Negroes excepted) to sign the following declaration:"

“We the Subscribers, do hereby solemnly engage, and promise we will to the utmost of our power, at the risque of our lives and fortunes, with arms, oppose the hostile proceedings of the British fleets and armies against the United American colonies.”¹³ Eighty four men of Peterborough, including William McNee Sr., and William Jr. boldly signed the oath on June 17, 1776.¹⁴

Having lost one son to war, we can only speculate what went through the hearts and minds of the McNee family. Nevertheless, William Jr. took up arms twice for the patriot’s cause -- once he marched to Saratoga and back; and a year later his New Hampshire regiment joined the Continental Army at Rhode Island.¹⁵

In many New England towns of the 17th and 18th centuries, incorporation as a town was contingent on the settlers meeting certain requirements of the proprietors. In the case of Peterborough, settlers were to make a survey for roads, and build bridges over the Contoocook River in the area. They also had to “settle@ a minister, provide him with salary, a house, land, a meeting house, and, pay him \$200 per annum for four years.”¹⁶ Their reward for meeting these conditions was deeds to their land.

When incorporation was granted to Peterborough in February of 1760, the settlers lost no time holding their first town meeting a month later. Among the first orders was selecting a committee of three men to invite ministers to preach in town. William McNee Sr. was one of the three on that committee.

The settlers in Peterborough were exclusively Ulster Scots, and it is likely many of them knew each other in Ireland. They were also strict Presbyterians. It is said of these Scotch-Irish: they “seemed to

have had a lasting effect upon American character. Calvinists all, it was unthinkable to them that a man's religious duty consisted only in occasional attendance at service or participation in set forms of ritual. Religion was a set of beliefs, but it was most particularly a quality of character that taught one a clear distinction between right and wrong, with no compromise allowed, and with a moral imperative to live by the distinction."¹⁷

The various tales about "settling" a minister in Peterborough are telling. For the first twenty years of the settlement, three different men supplied the pulpit for short periods of time.¹⁸ Obviously a preacher was difficult to come by in a frontier post such as Peterborough, as were supplies and the necessities of life required by the town to provide them.

After numerous attempts, the town finally succeeded in "settling" the Rev. John Morrison in 1766. His annual salary of \$45 would increase to \$50 per year if the congregation increased to 100 families. But Rev. Morrison lasted only five years in spite of having "more than ordinary talent."¹⁹ Some called Morrison "an unfortunate ministry for the town,"²⁰ while others called him "intemperate and licentious."²¹ In fact, "at some gathering, [he was drunk and behaving improperly, and] ... it was necessary to put Morrison to bed then and there ... done surreptitiously so that only three or four of the church members were aware of what had happened."²² A petition to the Provincial Legislature "prayed to be released from the support of Morrison"²³ [because of] "being guilty of ye gravest immoralities, such as Profane Swearing, Drunkenness, Lewdness, & etc."²⁴ A year later he retired the pulpit of his own accord.

The town went two years with local men preaching on Sundays. In 1778, Rev. David Annan was called to settle in Peterborough. He stayed 14 years, but they were not easy years. He had “respectable talents” but his deportment was wanting. He “attempted to extort from the town two 50-acre lots of land which he knew were ... no part of the contract the town made with him.”²⁵ He was also a bit of a lush and showed up several times “being intoxicated with spirituous liquors ... and behaved very unbecomingly.” The petition to the Provincial Council to be relieved of his services complained that Annan’s “conduct has been irregular, and unbecoming his station as a minister of the gospel.”²⁶ After Annan left town of his own accord, he turned traitor and joined the British Army in the waning days of the Revolution. Oh how the tongues must have wagged!

It is written: “The pestilent examples of these two men [Morrison and Annan] were enough to bring a blight on religion in any place; the chief wonder is that they were tolerated so long. A tithe of their immoralities would, ... put down the character of a minister almost below hope of redemption.”²⁷ Morrison was singled out as “thoroughly disreputable”²⁸ and Annan was termed “an unfortunate choice.”²⁹

For two years again, the pulpit was officially vacant but for the services of leading town fathers and an occasional visiting clergy. Two more men were called to the Peterborough pulpit, but declined. No reason was given, but little wonder, considering the activities of the two previous ministers.

Sundays in Peterborough were rigorous. Meetings lasted most of the day. Intermissions were held, and outside weather permitting, the men would gather to discuss the weather, the sermon, and

farming; women gathered separately to catch up on the latest news; the children usually ran wild. (Not much has changed, really.)

The town fathers regulated all matters concerning the church, including reverence therein, or lack thereof. In the second meeting house in town, benches were built with the seats attached by hinges. When the congregation stood to pray, the benches were turned up parallel with the backs. When prayer ended, the seats came down so the congregation could sit. After especially long, sonorous prayers, it was recorded that people, being eager to sit, let the seats down with a sound reminiscent of musket fire. This was unacceptable, and a resolution encouraging more reverence, especially when sitting in church was discussed at length in a town meeting.³⁰

Finally the Rev. Elijah Dunbar, Jr., a Congregationalist was called in 1799. The first two ministers had been orthodox Presbyterian, but that changed. Many conflicting reasons have been given as to why the town voted to change to Congregational worship. Many blamed the Revolution; others the outrageous deportment of their two previous ministers. Whatever the reasons, the town voted 61 to 12 in favor of Dunbar. His salary was to be \$400 per year.³¹ With the installation of Rev. Dunbar, Peterborough residents began worshiping in the Congregational form. There were a few diehards who still favored Presbyterianism, although they generally attended Dunbar's Congregational services. As a compromise, it was decided that communion be administered one Sunday a year in the Presbyterian form at the expense of the town.³²

Dunbar lasted 28 years. He kept careful notes of weddings and baptisms at which he officiated, and the funeral sermons he preached. He performed the marriage of John Nay Jr., and Thirza Angelina

Hale in May, 1833, as he had done for a host of other Nay cousins. He recorded the day of Deacon Wm McNee Jr.'s funeral: "Attended the funeral of Deacon William McNee and preached a sermon at his late dwelling house previous to his internment. Age 70. Many present."³³

In 1819, the Toleration Act abolished the power of towns and cities to tax citizens for the support the church.³⁴ This legislative act made way for a host of other denominations to move into town. By 1822, part of the congregation who had never been happy with Dunbar's liberal anti-Calvinistic tradition broke away and formed their own separate Presbyterian Society. In 1833 when the first Mormon missionaries passed through Peterborough, there were a variety of churches in town.

Both William Sr. and William Jr. served many years in town and church affairs. Their names appear almost with out a gap on petitions relating to both town and church. Both were elected Elder, and then Deacon of the church. In both cases they were referred to simply as Deacon McNee and Deacon Nay in civil and church records until their deaths.³⁵

The next generation on my direct line would be John Sr. In comparison, next to nothing is known about him. It appears he did not follow in his father and grandfather's footsteps. We begin to understand why when a small paragraph about him appears in the 1876 history of Peterborough. It reads:

[John Nay Sr.] "had the misfortune, in early life, to lose one of his legs by falling from a frame he was assisting in raising in Concord, Mass. He substituted a wooden leg of soft white pine, of his own manufacture, which answered a good purpose all his life. He learned the trade of cabinet-making after the accident. He was a man of great natural abilities, and but for his intemperate habits might

have attained to a high position in society. He became most thoroughly reformed before his death, and gave unmistakable evidence of the Christian character, in his humble, meek and loving spirit to all those around him.”³⁶

Given all this, it seems quite remarkable in the summer of 1841 that John Nay Jr. listened when a charismatic Mormon missionary, Elder Eli Maginn, began preaching Mormon doctrine. Maginn was “a lively, fascinating speaker with a wide knowledge of the Bible which he continually quoted. He was ready at any time to meet any clergyman or layman in a religious controversy. Elder Maginn’s message and magnetic personality, attracted people from far and near to his meetings in Peterborough.”³⁷ Various churches in town would not open their doors to the Mormons, so Maginn was forced to hold his meetings in a little hall on Main Street. “The meetings were so crowded that speakers were accustomed to stand at the windows and address the large crowds so those inside as well as outside could hear. Listeners came from all about. Four horse coaches came from the towns in the neighborhood, arousing unprecedented enthusiasm and, consequently, making many converts to Mormonism.”³⁸ It is probable that John Jr. and Thirza were there, listening. Between 120 and 140 people joined the LDS Church in the 1840s, largely due to Elder Maginn.³⁹

But for this pivotal moment in time, John Jr. would very likely have followed the course of his father and grandfathers, and lived out his life in New England. He didn’t know his great grandfather, William McNee Sr. who was one of the town’s first settlers; and, his grandfather, William McNee Jr. died when he was only seven. When John Jr. and family left Peterborough for Nauvoo in 1845, we don’t know what it cost him to leave in terms of emotional separation from his large, extended family. We do know he never returned.

A year later in 1846,⁴⁰ John Jr. and family left Nauvoo and crossed the Mississippi River into Iowa along with the George Gardner and Leonard Hill families -- all from Peterborough. The Gardner and Hill families suffered death and disease, but the Nays made it to Kanesville in one piece. They lived in Harris Grove, a small hamlet 10 miles northeast of Kanesville for 6 years, where John was Bishop of the LDS ward. When they left for Utah in 1852 in the Allen Weeks Company, John and family were accompanied by the George Washington Taggart family, also from Peterborough -- they were 2nd cousins actually. After arriving in Utah, the Nays lived at Cedar Fort, west of Utah Lake, where the last of their eight children was born. There in 1859, Thirza left John, but that is another story for another day. He remarried, fathered five more sons, moved to Pine Valley, then Circleville, and then Monroe, Utah, where he died in 1892.⁴¹

John Jr. left no autobiography or diary. However, from my ongoing research in Peterborough, and a larger history of him published in 2002, we know John remained firmly and faithfully planted in Mormonism. We could end the story here, but we are left to wonder. How much of the Presbyterian and Congregational tenets of his family found their way into his acceptance of Mormonism? We don't know. One telling remembrance of a great granddaughter gives a very tiny insight. He had a reputation for being very strict with his children. This granddaughter remembers her father, Myron, one of John's sons by his second wife, tell how "when he misbehaved in church, he received a corporal punishment from his father. . . [and] because his father was so strict, it soured him on the Church because he didn't believe that his father lived it."⁴² Maybe John was a strict disciplinarian; maybe he also had a fairly normal son going through a rebellious phase.

John Nay Jr., left a “Temple Record Book,” listing names of ancestors for whom he performed temple ordinances. John and his second wife, Lucy, lived about 35 miles north of the St. George Utah Temple when it was dedicated in 1877. Many times John and Lucy, accompanied by one or two of their sons, hitched up the wagon and drove from their Pine Valley home to St. George where, for several days at a time they worked in the Temple. John’s Temple Record Book indicates his family did proxy work for many of his New Hampshire ancestors. He even went so far as to have himself sealed in marriage by proxy to several then-deceased Peterborough women.⁴³

It is 2300 miles from Salt Lake City to Peterborough. The McNees, Taggarts and Ritchies all came from Ireland together; they lived and worshiped together, they intermarried each other. When some of them joined the LDS Church, they left town together, and crossed the plains together. At my work in Salt Lake City over the last 34 years I have met -- I believe by serendipity -- Lloyd Taggart of Cody, Wyoming; Jeanette Taggart Holmes of Danville, California; and John Ritchie of San Francisco. We are all members of the faith either by conversion or being raised in Mormon families, but direct descendants all of McNee, Taggart and Ritchie, who, 250 years ago went over the hill and set ax to tree in Peterborough, New Hampshire. 250 years later and 2300 miles away, the McNees, the Taggarts and the Ritchies, are still together, in a way. And in a way, I and my short surname have come home -- honored to be standing on New England soil.

1..search on www.lds.org (scriptures)

2. Circleville [Utah] Ward records his baptism as “August 1841.” on FHL film #25870. The St. George [Utah] 3rd Ward records list the date as “May 1841” on FHL microfilm #027336. Both wards list Eli P. Maginn as the one who performed the ordinance.

3. Inscriptions on Gravestones in the Two Cemeteries on the East Hill in Peterborough, New Hampshire, with the 1979 Addenda. Peterborough, NH: Peterborough Historical Society. c1979. pp 63-130.

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4. Nay, Joan, et al. "Introduction," in *The Nay Family in Utah and the West, A History of John Nay Jr., His Wives and Children*. Salt Lake City: privately published, 2002. p. 2
 5. Smith, Albert. *History of the Town of Peterborough, Hillsborough, New Hampshire*. Boston: Press of George H. Ellis, 1876. p. 36.
 6. Morison, George Abbot. *History of Peterborough New Hampshire, Book One-Narrative*. Rindge, New Hampshire, 1954. p. 24.
 7. Ibid p. 30
 8. Ibid.
 9. Smith, Albert. p. 40-41.
 10. Morison, vol. 1, p. 468. See also: Smith, Jonathan. *Peterborough New Hampshire in the American Revolution*. Peterborough, New Hampshire: Peterborough Historical Society, 1913. pp. 14, 21.
 11. Ibid. (For an additional account of the battle at Lake George, see: "A Battle Fought on Snow Shoes" by Mary Cochrane Rogers, a great great granddaughter of Major Robert Rodgers. Published by the Author in Derry, NH, 1917. FHL # 974.751 M2r.
 12. Holmes, Nathaniel. *Proceedings of the Sesqui-Centennial Celebration Held at Peterborough, N. H., Thursday, Oct. 24, 1889*. Peterborough, NH: Peterborough Transcript Office, 1890. Pp. 26. FHL microfilm #1033754 item 15.
 13. NH State Papers, vol. 8, pp. 204-05, 265.
 14. Ibid. Emphasis added.
 15. NH State Papers, vol. 15, pp 355-56.
 16. Petition of Peterborough, March, 1755. Photo copy of original from New Hampshire State Archives in my possession. Also in New Hampshire State Papers, vol. 13, pp. 189.
 17. Montgomery, Eric. *The Scotch-Irish and Ulster*. Belfast: Ulster-Scot Historical Society, 1965. pp. 7-8. FHL microfilm #6046957.
 18. Carll, Mrs. Robert F., et al (A Committee of the Church). *A Brief Historical Sketch of the First Church in Peterborough, 1752-1952*. Peterborough, NH: [by the Church Committee], 1953. pp. 2-3. (photo copy from NH Historical Society)
 19. Smith, Albert. p. 87.
 20. Smith, Albert. p. 86.

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21. Morison, George Abbot. vol. 1, p. 157.
 22. Ibid.
 23. Smith, Albert. p. 86.
 24. Ibid, p. 87.
 25. Ibid, p. 88.
 26. Ibid, p. 89.
 27. Lawrence, Robert F. New Hampshire Churches: Comprising Histories of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches in the State. n.p., Claremont Manufacturing Co., 1856. FHL microfiche #6046841, p. 240: Peterborough
 28. Carll, p. 3.
 29. Ibid, p. 4.
 30. Morison, George Abbot, vol. 1, pp. 150-52.
 31. Smith, Albert, p. 91.
 32. Lawrence, Robert F., p. 240.
 33. Dunbar, Rev. Elijah., Jr. "Reverend Elijah Dunbar Jr.'s Diary, 1799-1843." Copied by Israel Thorndike Hunt from the original manuscript diary in the possession of his daughter. (John Nay Jr., and Thirza Angelina Hale were married 28 May 1833 by Dunbar; Wm McNee Jr., died 13 Apr 1810.) FHL microfilm #15582, Item 5, p. 70.
 34. Carll p. 5.
 35. Carll, p. 18, as well as George Abbot Morison and Albert Smith's histories.
 36. Smith, Albert. part 2,p. 213. (Smith's history is divided into two parts: the history of the town, pages 1-356, and a second part "Genealogy and History of the Families," paged 1-375. This page reference is to the genealogies in part 2.)
 37. Morison, vol. 1, p. 187.
 38. Ibid.
 39. See general histories of Peterborough by Albert Smith, and by George Abbot Morison, as well as "Historical Sketches of Peterborough. New Hampshire, Portraying Events and Data Contributing to the History of the Town," published by the Peterborough [NH] Historical Society, 1938.

40. Stratton, Clifford J. A *George Bryant Gardner and Elizabeth Ann Bird*, @ in *Pioneer Stories*, pp. 46-51. manuscript. FHL film #1033690, item #11.

41. Nay, Joan. "*John Nay Jr., and Thirza Angelina Hale.*" Chapter 1 in "The Nay Family in Utah and the West A History of John Nay Jr., His Wives and His Children". Compiled by Joan Nay, et al. Privately published, Salt Lake City, 2003. pp. 9-25.

42. Madsen, Diane Coons, and Stacia Lynn Madsen. "*Myron Windslow Nay,*" Chapter 12, in "The Nay Family in Utah and the West, a History of John Nay Jr., His Wives and His Children" Compiled by Joan Nay et al. Privately published, Salt Lake City, 2002. p. 374.

43. John Nay Temple Book. Photo copy of original in my possession.