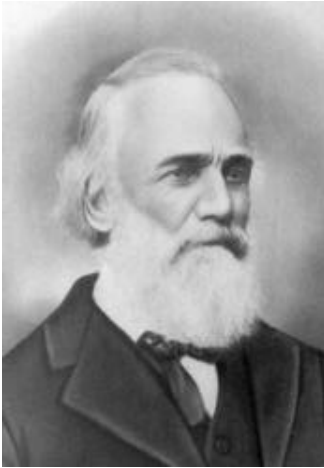


## **Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr. and Nancy Bean Decker<sup>i</sup>**



**Born:** 22 June 1817; Shawagunk Township, Ulster, New York, USA

**Died:** 13 April 1903; Parowan, Iron, Utah<sup>ii</sup>

**Married:** Nancy Bean Decker; 4 October 1848<sup>iii</sup>; Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah; (sealed in the Salt Lake Endowment House, 6 November 1852).

**Father:** Cornelius Johannes Decker

**Mother:** Gertrude Bruyn Decker



**Born:** 1826; Missouri

**Died:** 3 March 1903, in Parowan, Iron, Utah

**Married:** (1) Thomas J. Williams, 4 September 1842, Mendon, Adams, Illinois

(2) John D. Lee, in the Nauvoo Temple, 1845;  
divorce granted 1848

(3) Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr.; 4 October 1848; Salt Lake City, Salt Lake, Utah; (sealed in the Salt Lake Endowment House, 6 November 1852).

**Father:** James Bean

**Mother:** Elizabeth Lewis

### **Zechariah's Early Life and Conversion**

Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr., led a life characterized by the spirit of adventure, courage, and fortitude that sustained his Dutch, German and French-Huguenot ancestors who settled in the New England regions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Born on June 22, 1817, Zechariah was the second of eleven children in his family. His parents, Cornelius and Gertrude Decker, were farmers in the Shawangunk Township of upstate New York. From a young age Zechariah learned to work hard on his father's farm, and by the time he was ten years old he began hiring himself out as a laborer to earn extra money for his family. When he reached the age of eighteen, he and two of his brothers left New York and journeyed to Illinois where they continued to earn money by working as farm hands. Zechariah's older brother Johannes married the daughter of a family friend who lived nearby. Johannes and Zechariah both purchased property in Hancock County, near Nauvoo. According to land records of the time, Zechariah owned a total of almost 200 acres in the area.

Zechariah was introduced to Mormonism while working on the farm of the Yates family. One family history source indicates that he was given a Book of Mormon by Mr. Yates himself, (evidently the same Mr. Yates who became his brother Johannes' father-in-

law). Zechariah read the book and believed it was true. Sources also point to Zechariah's friendship with a neighbor named Lafayette Shepherd who had joined the LDS faith in Ohio as another likely catalyst for Zechariah's conversion to Mormonism. The two young men remained close friends throughout their lives. Church records show that Zechariah was baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints on April 8, 1840, by Simeon Carter.<sup>iv</sup>

Zechariah and his friend Lafayette journeyed to Nauvoo sometime after this and were there at the time of the Prophet Joseph Smith's martyrdom in 1844. They were also among those who were driven from Nauvoo during the winter of 1846. In the summer of that same year, Zechariah volunteered to join the Mormon Battalion, which was organized at Council Bluffs, Iowa, in response to a call issued by the U.S. government for military service. The United States had declared war on Mexico that spring, and sought the aid of the Mormon migrants in securing the territory of California against the Mexicans. Zechariah was mustered into Company A under the leadership of Captain Jefferson Hunt. Like other Battalion members, his journey across nearly two-thousand miles of desolate land was difficult and discouraging at times. Once, during a period of strict food rationing, some of the men in Zechariah's company came upon a herd of buffalo and were successful in killing a few for food. They were overjoyed with the prospect of a tasty meal as they prepared the meat. However, their superior officer intervened and commanded them to discard the food. He proceeded to point his bayonet at the men to ensure that they would comply with his authority. But Zechariah refused to be bullied. He continued eating and told the officer to go ahead and shoot if he wanted to. The officer backed down and left the men to retrieve their discarded portions and finish their meal.

After arriving in San Diego, California, the Battalion was dissolved and its members headed off in various directions. Zechariah joined with a group of men who went northward to find work. Several, including Zechariah, were employed by a man named John Sutter to construct a saw mill. When gold was discovered at the mill, Zechariah was fortunate to be able to cache in on the spoils. However, good fortune did not follow the group on their journey back to Utah. They were ambushed along the way and some of Zechariah's companions were killed.<sup>v</sup> Much of the group's gold had been stashed away during the confrontation, but was never found by those who returned to search for it. Zechariah was fortunate to escape the fray not only with his life, but also with a small bag of gold tucked under his belt. It is believed he gave \$15,000 worth of it to Brigham Young upon his return to Utah, a considerable sum in those days.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Nancy Bean's Story**

After Zechariah Decker arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, he resumed his acquaintance with a man named George Bean whom he had befriended in the Battalion and was soon introduced to George's sister, Nancy, by a mutual friend. She was 23 years old, had wavy black hair, and an engaging personality; he was handsome at age 32, with dark brown hair and gray eyes. They soon fell in love and were married in Salt Lake City on October 4, 1848.

Zechariah seemed a dream come true for Nancy, who had endured much heartache and difficulty in the previous six years of her life. The second child of James Bean and Elizabeth Lewis, Nancy been born in Missouri and raised in Illinois. Her mother was well-versed in the scriptures and had shared her knowledge with her children in her home. When Nancy was a teenager, the family was introduced to Mormonism, and soon they were baptized into the Church.

Only a year or two later, in 1842, Nancy married Thomas J. Williams, who was a local school teacher. They had a daughter named Mary Elizabeth who was born in August of the following year. The young family lived with Thomas's parents, who became increasingly hostile towards Nancy because of her religion. There are two versions of how Nancy was eventually forced to choose between her faith and her family. One story tells how Nancy awoke early in the morning and was startled to see her husband standing over her with a knife, demanding that she either renounce Mormonism or leave his home. Terrified, Nancy escaped out the window, leaving her baby behind. A second telling of the same story indicates that it was not Thomas, but her father-in-law who threatened Nancy and would not allow her to leave with little Mary. Nancy intended to return later and retrieve her child, but was unsuccessful in her endeavors.<sup>vii</sup> Sadly, she was not reunited with Mary until years later.<sup>viii</sup> However, Nancy was able to obtain a legal divorce from Thomas Williams thanks to the intervention of kind-hearted friends.

Under the principle of plural marriage, Nancy was then espoused to a man by the name of John D. Lee (whose name is known in connection with the Mountain Meadows Massacre) in 1845. She was sealed to him almost a year later, in January 1846 in the Nauvoo Temple, as his second wife. Nancy was extremely unhappy with Lee's treatment of her, which she felt was unjust and excessively controlling. She eventually took her baby, (who was first called Elizabeth and later renamed Cornelia ), and went to live with her parents during Lee's absence from home.<sup>ix</sup> He was extremely angry with her for leaving without his permission, and demanded that she return with him, but she refused. She remained with her parents as they journeyed across the plains to Utah. By 1848 she had obtained a temple divorce from Lee, and was therefore pleased to make the acquaintance of Zechariah Decker who treated her with love and respect.

### **Family Life**

The Deckers were called by Church leaders to help settle the town of Parowan in Iron County, Utah. Zechariah left Nancy and their new baby with her parents as he set out with the initial group of settlers to the area. After a fort had been erected he returned for Nancy and the children (Cornelia and Zechariah Jr.). In 1851, Zechariah became the town constable, and later helped to build a fort near the Sevier River as a defensive outpost against the Indians during the Black Hawk War of 1866. He was involved in the Little Creek Indian Raid, during which the Parowan settlers successfully recovered nearly 700 head of livestock that local Ute Indians had tried to drive off during the night. It was the last major skirmish the settlers had with the Utes. Not long after, however, their relations with the Navajos became increasingly problematic and several of the Parowan settlers lost all their livestock to thieves. Zechariah and his son, Zechariah,

Jr., (called Zach), had many adventures together over the years as they defended the livestock and lands of the Mormon settlers against Indian attacks.

The Deckers owned a lot in town on Main Street to the west of the public square. The lot's shape was long and narrow, extending all the way to the next block. (For this reason it was called a "string bean" lot). On that property they built a small adobe home with a pretty flower garden out front, grass on the side yard, and a barn in the back where Zechariah would store hay for the animals during the winter. In town the family was also given a portion of land in the public square to use for a garden. The Deckers planted a row of plum trees that became well-known as the "Decker plums." They had several kinds of apple trees, and currant and gooseberry bushes. They also raised a houseful of children over the years – twelve total, (including Cornelia from Nancy's marriage to John D. Lee) though sadly one baby girl died at the age of just two months (Gertrude, 1851).

The Deckers also farmed sixty-acres of property outside of town on which they raised hay, corn, and potatoes in addition to livestock. Zechariah's grandson, Alvin, remembered that "Grandpa took good care of his animals. . . . He saw to it that the livestock were fed and watered before the boys went in to the house for their own meals."<sup>x</sup> As Zechariah entered his forties, he began to suffer from rheumatism, and so depended heavily upon his seven sons to help him manage the farm and share in the workload.<sup>xi</sup>

Nancy was herself a hard-worker and resourceful homemaker. "Even in the lean years, when the grasshoppers took most of the crops, she managed to feed her large family so they never went hungry."<sup>xii</sup> She was a particularly noteworthy seamstress. She spun wool, wove it into "linsey woolsey" cloth for her family's clothes, made quilts, and improvised with what she had to make shoes for her little ones. It is written that she once asked a visitor to loan her his "store bought pants. . . . She ripped the seams, ironed them out and cut a pattern. Then she sewed them back together again – that was how she got a good pattern to make pants."<sup>xiii</sup> Nancy also served as a mid-wife to many women in the Parowan area, and was noted for her skillfulness. She taught her children how to read and spell from the time they were young.

In 1865 Zechariah was called by Apostle Erastus Snow to serve as one of the seven presidents of the 9<sup>th</sup> Quorum of Seventies. A few years later, when he was 52 years old, and his youngest child only a year, Zechariah was called by Church leaders to serve a mission in the Eastern States. Like many of his generation, he obediently left his family behind for two years while he preached the gospel to others far away. Not long after his return, in 1873, the community of Parowan entered into the United Order. For the next three years the Decker family joined their neighbors in a collaborative effort to have all their properties and resources in common with each other, with every family only taking what was needed. Until the Order was disbanded in 1876, Zechariah served as superintendent of the west field.

## **Hole-in-the-Rock**

Throughout their years of Church membership, Zechariah and Nancy had each demonstrated great commitment to their faith and obedience to their leaders, even when it led them down difficult paths. In 1879, their virtual roads of adversity became literal ones as they were called to journey to Southeastern Utah and be part of the San Juan Mission. But as always, they were willing to do what their Church leaders asked of them. Zechariah and five of his sons with their respective families undertook the adventure – Zechariah Jr. (whose family was ultimately on their way to Arizona), James, Cornelius, Nathaniel, and George (who was just 15 years old at the time). Nancy stayed at home with the younger children and made preparations to sell their property so she could join Zechariah later on. Zechariah hoped that the San Juan country would be a good place to raise a line of fine race horses, as he and his son Zach owned some blooded stallions that they took with them.

Not much is written about Zechariah's individual experiences on the journey to Bluff, but many dangerous and exciting events befell his sons and their families along the way that no doubt kept Zechariah, as the patriarch of the family, with plenty to do and worry about. For instance, while the pathway down the Hole-in-the-Rock was under construction, Zechariah Sr. became the proud grandfather of little Lena Deseret Decker, who was born in a wagon box in camp at Fifty-Mile Spring. He no doubt rejoiced at her safe arrival under less than optimal circumstances, just as he was surely relieved that another grandbaby of his arrived miraculously unharmed at the bottom of the Hole-in-the-Rock after the wagon he was sleeping in lost its brakes and plunged perilously down the rocky canyon. Happily, another grandchild was born only twelve days after the wagon company reached Bluff in the spring to Zechariah's son Nathaniel and his wife, Emma.<sup>xiv</sup>

Nevertheless, with the blessings that came along the way, so came the hardships and dangers. The nature of the journey itself must have been physically taxing on a man who was in his early sixties and suffered from chronic rheumatism. On several occasions, Zechariah, with the help of his son, Zach, defended his horses against Indian thieves just as they had been doing together for years back home in Parowan. And Zechariah Sr. probably could not help feeling anxious as he watched his younger son George, who was only fifteen years old, depart from the main body of pioneers and head back to Parowan alone. George had promised his mother he would be back by spring to help plant the crops, with all the delays the group had had along the way, he knew he could not postpone his return any longer. Zechariah offered young George his gun, which George refused it, knowing his father would have need of it.<sup>xv</sup> (Zechariah used to joke that his gun was his "second wife" simply "because he was never without it").<sup>xvi</sup> But had he known the degree of danger George would face attempting to re-cross the raging Colorado River, Zechariah might have thought otherwise about letting him go home alone.

Zechariah himself did not stay long in San Juan country. About eighteen months after leaving Parowan he returned there to stay. He was disappointed in the San Juan country and did not feel it was an area that would bring him the success in ranching or

farming that he had hoped for. Nancy, thankfully, had cancelled a pending sale on their property after hearing George's description of the San Juan region.

### **Final Years**

Prior to his involvement with the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition, Zechariah had owned two cabins in the mountains surrounding Parowan. One of these was destroyed by Indians while he was away, which was a particularly disappointing loss, as his copy of the *Journal of Discourses*, along with other special books, had been kept there. But his second cabin became a haven to him upon his return. He spent much of his time there resting, reading, and playing his harmonica in his later years.

Zechariah and Nancy lived a happy life together for over 53 years. They were both exemplary members of the Church who sacrificed much throughout their lives in support of what they believed was the true gospel of Jesus Christ. They left a legacy of faith with the choices and priorities they had adhered to, and in the manner in which they raised their large family. Nancy passed away on March 3, 1903; Zechariah died not long after on April 13, 1903.

*Researched and written for the Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation by:  
C.S.M. Jones LLC, Family Heritage Consulting.*

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<sup>i</sup> Zechariah’s name is also spelled Zachariah at times in various sources. The same is true of his son, Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Jr.

<sup>ii</sup> Discrepancies exist regarding when Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr., passed away. His headstone gives the date as April 13, 1903, but according to Bruce Decker, a descendant, written records of the Church list the year as 1904. Mr. Decker notes that Zechariah’s sons did not place a head stone on the grave for ten years after his death, and so were possibly mistaken in giving the year as 1903. [See Ione M. Bush, “Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Descendant of Jan Broersen Decker who lived in Shawangunk Township, Ulster County, New York,” (2002), 28, unpublished manuscript from the files of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, Utah].

<sup>iii</sup> The year of Zechariah and Nancy’s marriage is given as 1848 in some sources, and 1849 in others. It seems more likely that they were married in 1848, as their first child was born in March 1850. However, had they been married on October 4, 1848, they would have only known each other for about a month or less. Nancy’s family did not arrive in the Salt Lake Valley until September 4, 1848, and Zechariah would have arrived about that time too after being at Sutter’s Mill in California. [See Francine Decker Holt, “History of Zachariah Bruyn Decker, Sr. and Nancy Bean Decker,” 5, unpublished manuscript from the files of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, Utah; “Zechariah Bruyn Decker,” 3, unpublished manuscript from the files of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, Utah; Jesse Smith Decker, “A Short History of Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Jr. with Brief Sketches of His Parents: Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr., Nancy Bean Williams Lee Decker, His Wives: Emma Seraphine Smith Decker, Carolina Henriette Ernestina Closius Decker and Their Children With Group Sheets For Each Family of Three Decker Generations,” (1978), 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah].

<sup>iv</sup> Ione M. Bush, 1. Another source indicates family records have Zechariah’s baptism date as April 7, 1840. See Jesse Smith Decker, 2.

<sup>v</sup> Ashbel Haskell, father of Thales Haskell, was among those unlucky comrades who was killed in the ambush. Interestingly, Zechariah Decker and Thales Haskell were destined to cross paths over thirty years later as part of the settling of the San Juan. [See <http://www.hirf.org/history-bio-Haskell-T.asp>]

<sup>vi</sup> Francine Decker Holt, “Zachariah Bruyn Decker Sr. and Nancy Bean Decker,” 5.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>viii</sup> Two life histories of Nancy Bean Decker give conflicting reports of whether or not she and her first daughter, Mary Elizabeth, were ever reunited. Great-granddaughter Bonnie Trower Brantley writes that mother and daughter were never reunited. (See <http://trekholeintherock.blogspot.com/2010/01/decker-zachariah-bruyn-sr-and-george.html>). Authors Francine Decker Holt and Fern Ellis write that Mary Elizabeth made contact with Nancy’s family years later, and was sealed to Nancy and Zechariah Decker posthumously on January 29, 1915. [See Francine Decker Holt, “History of Zachariah Bruyn Decker Sr. and Nancy Bean Decker,” 6, and Fern Ellis, *Our Decker Forefathers*, 25].

<sup>ix</sup> Jesse Smith Decker, 3. This account states that it was Zechariah who renamed the toddler Cornelia after he and Nancy were married.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

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<sup>xi</sup> In a biography of Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Jr., Francine Decker Holt stated that Zechariah Sr. suffered from rheumatism. [See Francine Decker Holt, "History of Zachariah Bruyn Decker, Jr. and Emma Serphine Smith," 1, unpublished history from the files of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, UT]. According to another source, Zechariah's federal pension files state "that he was infected with poison ivy while marching with the Battalion. He later claimed this illness caused varicose veins in his leg which crippled him." [See "Zechariah Bruyn Decker," 4, unpublished manuscript from the files of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Salt Lake City, Utah. The unknown author of this source is possibly Fern Ellis. It is identical in much of its wording to the biography of Zechariah Bruyn Decker, Sr., given in *Our Decker Forefathers*. However, the biography in *Our Decker Forefathers* is longer and more detailed in some places].

<sup>xii</sup> Jesse Smith Decker, 7.

<sup>xiii</sup> Francine Decker Holt, 10.

<sup>xiv</sup> The Decker grandchildren born either en route to Bluff or shortly after arrival were: Lena Deseret (parents James Bean Decker and Anna Marie Mickelsen Decker) and Alvin Morris (parents Nathaniel Alvin Decker and Emma Morris). The baby who slept in the back of the wagon as it dangerously plunged down the Hole was Jesse Moroni Decker (parents Zechariah Bruyn Decker Jr. and Emma Serphine Smith Decker). See Fern Ellis, *Our Decker Forefathers*, 38, 43 and 45.

<sup>xv</sup> George William Decker, "Reminiscences of George W. Decker," in David E. Miller, *Hole in the Rock: An Epic in the Colonization of the Great American West*, 2 ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1966), 202.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ione M. Bush, 27.