

# Scotts Bluff

National Monument  
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## The Rebecca Winters Story

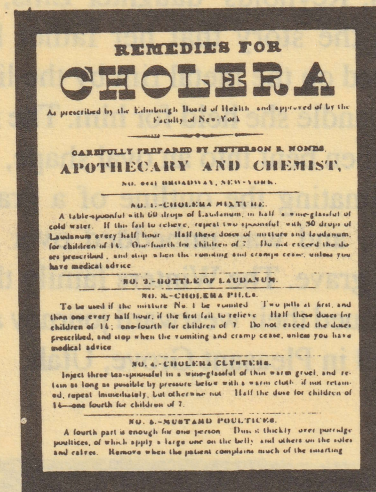


Seven miles from Scotts Bluff National Monument lies a solitary grave. This site marks the final resting place of Rebecca Winters, who died of cholera on August 15, 1852. Rebecca Winters was only one of thousands of people who succumbed to disease as they made their way west on the overland trails, but her grave is one of so very few that were marked and which remain identifiable today.

The normal practice for emigrants making their way west was to hide the graves of loved ones who died

religious beliefs they endured severe persecutions at the hands of non-believers.

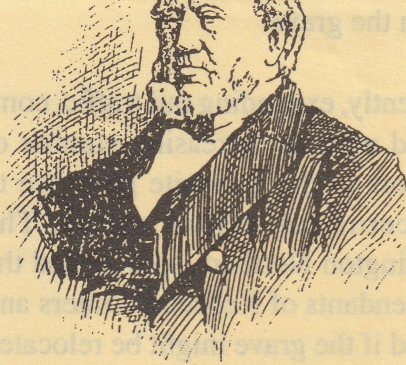
The Winters family was forced to relocate several times, making new homes in Ohio, Illinois and Iowa. In an effort to escape these persecutions, in June of 1852 they joined with other Mormons in making the great exodus to Utah. Unfortunately, somewhere along the Platte Valley, several people





during the journey. Often graves were dug directly in the roadway and after the burial, wagons were driven over it to obscure all signs of it. This was not done out of a callous disregard for the deceased, but to reduce the likelihood that the grave might be disturbed by wild animals.

From what we know of Rebecca Winter, the fact that her grave was marked is not surprising. By all accounts she was a warm and caring person, deeply committed to her faith and her family. She was born in the state of New York in 1802, the daughter of Gideon Burdick, a Revolutionary War veteran. She and her husband Hiram, were early members of the Mormon Church, being baptized into that faith in June of 1833. As a result of their



*Brigham Young*

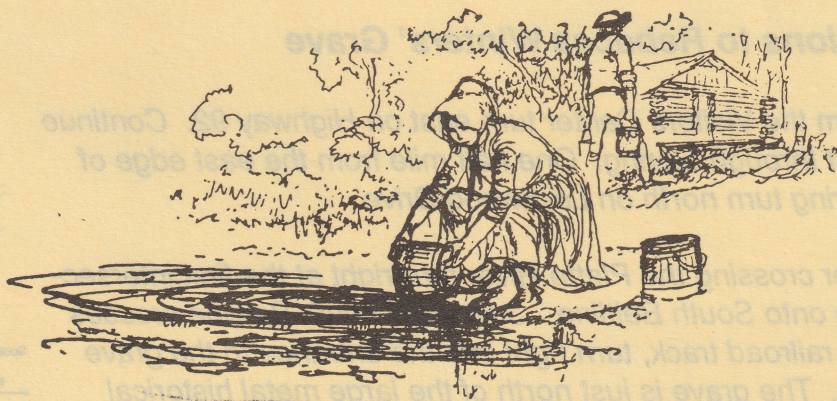
in their party contracted cholera. This was an especially deadly disease that is believed to have killed thousands of emigrants.

*Despite such claims, there was no effective treatment for cholera.*

Sadly, Rebecca Winters was among those who fell victim to disease. Her husband and a close friend by the name of William Reynolds had the painful task of seeing to her burial, and their special efforts speak volumes to the affection they had for Rebecca. First they dug an unusually deep grave. Then they placed a layer of wooden planks, apparently retrieved from abandoned wagons, on the bottom of the grave.



*Displaced by threats of violence, many Mormons journey to the West.*

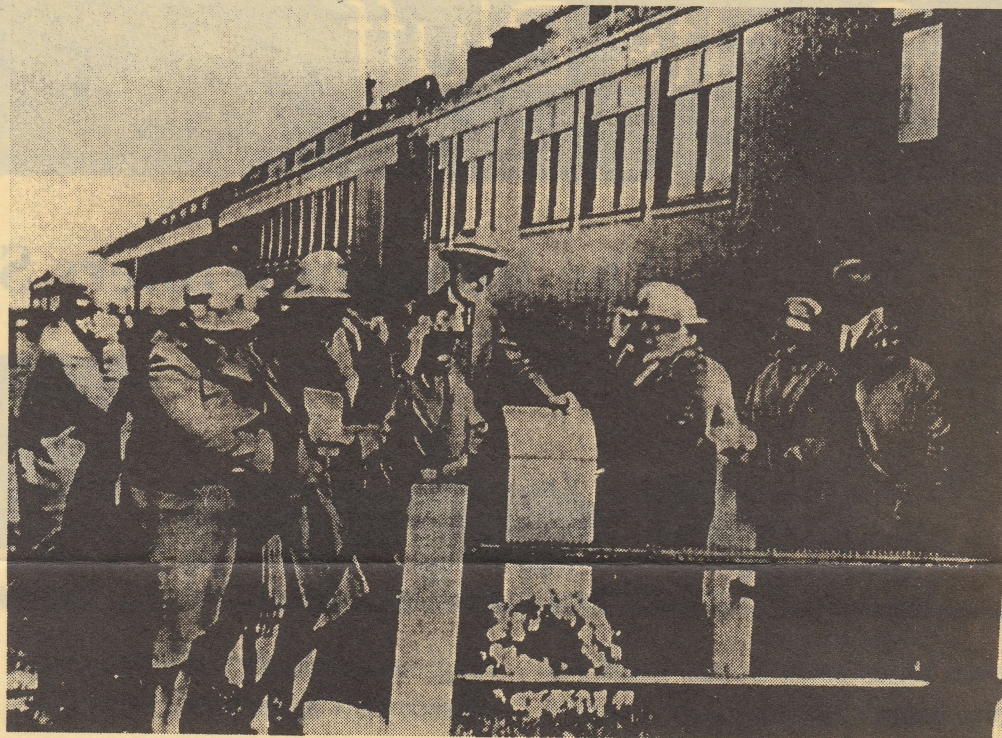


*For emigrants on the overland trails, the greatest danger was something they couldn't even see. Carried by bacteria in tainted water, cholera killed thousands of people.*



The story is told that her friends and family could not bear the thought of dirt touching her. However, there was not enough wood to build a coffin, so Rebecca's body carefully wrapped in blankets and then placed in the grave and a second layer of planks was placed over the body. The grave was then filled in. Undoubtedly a tearful burial service was held as the earthly remains of Rebecca Winters were laid to rest.

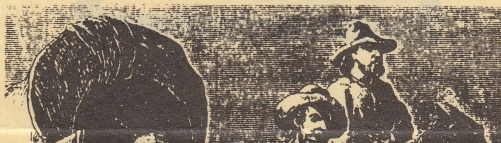
As a final token of his friendship, William Reynolds took a metal wheel rim and chiseled the following words, "Rebecca Winters, Age 50". In later years, Reynolds' daughter Ellis, related the story that her father had worked on the metal rim by the light of a candle she held for him. The rim was then bent into an oval shape, approximating the outline of a gravestone, and was imbedded over the fresh grave. The Winters family then continued their westward journey and settled in Pleasant Grove, Utah.



*In 1920 a ceremony dedicating a stone memorial at Rebecca Winters' grave was held. The train in the background shows how close the grave used to be to the tracks.*

rediscovery of the grave in 1899 when surveyors for the Burlington Northern railroad found it. For years, the story has persisted that out of respect for this grave, the route of the railroad tracks was altered to preserve the site. Whether or not this story is true, the tracks were laid only a few feet

a few hours, the digging by a team of archaeologists from the Nebraska State Historical Society revealed human skeletal remains. Soon the complete skeleton was unearthed, a testimony to the care taken in its burial so long ago.







from the grave.

Recently, expanding rail traffic, combined with an increasing number of visitors to the gravesite gave rise to concerns for visitor safety. The Burlington Northern approached the descendants of Rebecca Winters and asked if the grave might be relocated in a safer, more easily accessible location. After some deliberation, the Winters family approved of the plan.

On September 5, 1995, the exhumation began, with 65 members of the Winters family in attendance. Within

The new site selected for Rebecca Winters' new grave is only 400 yards away just off Highway 26, and on October 14, 1995, the pioneer woman's remains, now in a mahogany casket, were once again laid to rest. 125 of her descendants attended the reburial, including her 16 year-old great-great-granddaughter - also named Rebecca Winters. Also in attendance was the great-granddaughter of William Reynolds - the man who had chiseled the metal marker at the original burial, 143 years before.

**Heartbroken by Rebecca Winters' death, her family had to continue their journey to Utah.**

It was this metal memorial, which withstood decades of weathering and countless prairie fires, that led to the

## Directions to Rebecca Winters' Grave

- 1) From the Visitors Center turn east on Highway 92. Continue east through Gering. One half mile from the east edge of Gering turn north on Lockwood Drive.
- 2) After crossing the Platte River turn right at the first intersection onto South Beltline. Just after South Beltline crosses the railroad track, turn right into the entrance to the grave site. The grave is just north of the large metal historical marker. River

