

# Amasa Miles Barton



**Born:** May 27, 1857, in Paragonah, Iron County, Utah

**Died:** June 16, 1887, in Rincon, San Juan County, Utah

**Married:** Harriet Parthenia “Feenie” Hyde

**Father:** Joseph Penn Barton

**Mother:** Eliza Anderson

## Parents and Childhood

Amasa’s mother, Eliza Anderson, was born into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Her parents joined the Church in Tennessee in 1841, when Eliza was six years old. Shortly after becoming members, her parents decided to gather with fellow Saints, and moved to Nauvoo. As a young girl, Eliza was acquainted with the Prophet Joseph Smith and “vividly remembered the event of the martyrdom of the Prophet and his brother Hyrum, and saw their bodies after they were prepared for burial.” (1)

Amasa’s mother crossed the plains to Utah with her parents and arrived in Parowan in October 1851. It was there that Eliza met Amasa’s father, Joseph Penn Barton. They fell in love and were married in Parowan on May 24, 1854. After their marriage, they moved to Paragonah. Amasa, the second of their five children, was born on May 27, 1857. (2)

## Mission and Marriage

Amasa Barton was called with numerous other saints to be part of the San Juan Mission. He accepted the call and set out to explore and colonize southern Utah and the Four Corners area. Eventually he settled in Bluff. It was there that he met his sweetheart, Harriett Parthenia Hyde, affectionately referred to as “Feenie.” Amasa and Feenie were married in Bluff in 1884.

## Life and Tragic Death in Rincon

Below is an excerpt from “Fort on the Firing Line” by Albert R. Lyman, published in the *Improvement Era* between October 1948 and March 1950:

Excerpt from Chapters 13 and 14:

“The store which William Hyde began at Rincone, ten miles down the river from Bluff, had been slowly growing in prosperity in spite of Erastus Snow's ban on isolated dwellings. Amasa Barton married William Hyde's daughter, Parthenia, and became interested in the store.

In 1885, Barton became the owner of the store; at least he became the manager and the clerk, and he moved there with his wife and child to attend to the business. In taking this dangerous step Barton was not acting in defiance of any standard set up for the safety of the colony. From becoming interested in a small way, he had assumed one obligation after another until it seemed only sane and sensible to go there and give his investment personal attention. Also he may have considered it no longer necessary for the people to huddle together, since they had seen fit to move out of the fort.

Barton was a man of unusual strength and energy, large and magnetic, a talented builder and mechanic, and just the kind of man to develop a new country. With untiring effort he built a neat, commodious home from the crooked logs he could find along the river, and he made an attractive store building, warehouse, blacksmith shop, and other substantial conveniences. He devised a treadmill in which he had a donkey lift water from the river for his well-kept garden. Rincon, in Spanish, means, "corner." This corner is formed by the right-angle junction of Comb Reef with the gorge of the San Juan River. It is the corner from which the travel-worn company from Hole-in-the-Rock had so much trouble getting out in the spring of 1880.

Barton's operations in this cliff-bound Rincone began to make the very name a suggestion of neatness and beauty, for at his artistic touch the junction presented a unique and pleasing contrast to the bald, gray cliffs all around. His store like others of its kind, ran a pawn business instead of a credit account. A Navajo could pawn a gun, saddle, or anything else at a stipulated value, and draw goods up to that limit. The pawn could be renewed with a stipulated deposit, but anything left after a given amount of time was forfeited. The system was rich with possibilities of unpleasant misunderstandings even with good Indians, but with bad Indians it was a handy leverage for all kinds of mischief.

A Navajo known as Old Eye, from having lost one eye when a flying gad struck him several years before, had worked often for Barton at Rincone, and had often looked longingly at the display of attractive goods in the store. When he went back to his little sheep herd in the reservation, he somehow evolved the wild notion of carrying the goods away from the store. This idea was no doubt inflamed, if not really suggested in the first place, by a certain young bully with a bad face, who was keen for the venture. Rincone was remote and unprotected, and they could get far away before anyone came after them. Better still, they could do it in such a way that they would seem to be justified. However, that robbery notion got such a hold on Old Eye, who had been a friend to Barton from the day of their first acquaintance, he planned with the young bully

to rob the store, and their plan looked neater in anticipation than it ever looked as a fact.

It was early one morning in May that the two Navajos came up from the river to Barton's place on the shelf and asked him to go with them into the store. Old Eye said he wanted to redeem some jewelry, which had been pawned there by his squaw. The bully accompanied him, and when they got in the store, Old Eye demanded the return of the jewelry, offering for it nothing as a renewal of the pawn but a broken pistol of small or doubtful value, which Barton refused. Precedent had given the store-man full right to refuse anything offered in exchange, but Old Eye was vitiated with eagerness for the robbery and had lost the good will of their former associations. Being in prearranged accord with his companion of the bad face, he objected hatefully to all of Barton's offers, while the young fellow waited silently for the situation to develop as planned.

Barton detected something very wrong, but he knew no fear, and he never became a victim to excitement. The disagreement was still but an unpleasant simmer when Mrs. Barton called him to breakfast, and the store man, following his custom took his two customers to eat with him. When they had satisfied their appetites, they returned with him to the store and renewed their contention where they had laid it down. Becoming aware that the trouble in the store was reaching a dangerously high pitch, Mrs. Barton went over and asked what she could do to help. She had recently become mother of her second child and was hardly fit to be out of bed, and her husband was annoyed that she should walk so far, so he assured her he was perfectly able to handle the situation, and he asked her to go back to the house. She returned as directed, but she still watched and listened, and she knew also by her keen instinct that something terrible was about to happen in the store.

Concealing a pistol under her apron, she went again - matters were even worse than she had expected, yet she knew the sight of that pistol would do no good unless she used it at once with deadly accuracy. She hesitated, and then ran back in desperation to the house where her mother, Mrs. Hyde, waited with the two small children. Barton had tried to put the two fellows out of the store, a task to which he was fully equal physically, but the bully, with treacherous preparation, had lassoed him around the neck, jerked him down on the counter, and was choking him to unconsciousness.

When the terrified women heard a shot, Mrs. Hyde ran to see what had happened. They had dragged Barton over the counter and into the doorway where he laid unconscious, face downward, and Old Eye jumped astride his back to hold him while the bully got a pistol into action.

The shot the women had heard had apparently gone wild, and the bully was in a state of great excitement. Mrs. Hyde's appearance upset him all the more, and raising the pistol quickly, he fired, missing his mark again, but hitting Old Eye near the heart. Old Eye jumped from Barton's back and ran round to the back of the store building where as subsequent events proved, he dropped dead.

Although the bully had slackened his rope to use the pistol, Barton had not recovered

from the choking to know he was free to move, or to realize what was going on. Seeing his terrible blunder, the bully thrust his pistol against Barton's head and fired, and was about to fire again when Mrs. Hyde pushed him away. At this he rushed around the store building to see what had happened to his one-eyed companion, and what he found made him more a fiend than before. Returning with frantic stride, he thrust the old lady roughly away, and shot the prostrate man again in the crown of the head.

The mischief was done! The report in the reservation would be like a blaze in the dry grass. The bully shouldered the body of his companion and staggered with it down from the shelf to a boat at the water's edge. Getting the corpse to the south side he dumped it on the sand and ran, to disappear in a grove of cottonwoods. He would of course report to his people that the Mormon store man had murdered Old Eye.

Old Cheepoots and other Piutes had watched the whole affair without taking any part, and to them, the desperate Mrs. Barton and her mother turned for help. With her two babies, the youngest little more than a week old, they were there alone at the mercy of the soon-to-be enraged nation of Navajos. Their nearest friends, very few in number, and with no power to meet a horde of furious savages, were up the river at Bluff, ten miles away - ten long miles over rocks and sand to her nearest friends, and indefinitely farther to any adequate help! It would take at least ten days to bring a force to protect her and the little town, which would now be equally in danger. Mrs. Barton gave Old Cheepoots fifteen dollars to ride like mad with a note to Bluff-to ride faster than he had ever ridden before. The old Indian took the money, sprang to the back of his cayuse, and vanished. The women got the other Piutes to help carry Barton to the house and lay him on a couch under a shed by the door. He was not dead; he seemed to be partly conscious, but the bullets entering the back of his head had lodged behind his eyes and made him blind.

The women gazed often in anguish of suspense at that boat across the river, and sent their despairing glance hopefully to the sand hills where Old Cheepoots had disappeared. But why begin looking there so soon? He couldn't yet have got a mile away and would be picking his way along the dangerous trail over the cliff above the river. Their fate was in his hands, hanging on his honor-Piute honor. Possibly that was an attribute of minus quantity. He had his money, and he might go as slowly as he pleased or not go at all, feeling sure that no one would be left at Rincone to accuse or blame him. Possibly his cayuse would fall headlong in its inordinate haste and break its legs among the big rocks. Possibly their fate was hanging on a race between that red-handed bully, and the best old Cheepoots could get out of his thin yellow pony. The old man might run his horse to death and still fail to have someone at Rincone before the women and babies would be butchered.

In one of their fearful glances at the boat and at the cottonwoods where the bully disappeared, they saw six tall Navajos coming with rapid stride. Their step suggested anger, violence. With but a passing glance at the prostrate body of Old Eye, they quickened their movements, piled into the boat, rowed with quick stroke of oar to the north bank and headed up the hill to the stricken home where the agonized women

waited. Could it be possible that help from Bluff was anywhere near to save them? No, thinking about it calmly, they knew the old man could be no more than halfway at best.

The six tall Navajos came up the hill, their guns in their hands, and straight towards the shed where the women bent over their prostrate protector. If the Navajos discovered that Barton was still alive, the best to be hoped for was that they would shoot him to death, even if they spared the rest of the family. Whispering frantically in her husband's ear, Mrs. Barton urged him to close his eyes and appear to be dead. He seemed lost to all that was going on around him, yet he closed his eyes and lay perfectly still while the six fierce men lined up over him, looking for any sign of life. The women watched in killing suspense-what if they should feel for his pulse! No, their pronounced superstition forbade them to touch the dead, and after leaning carefully over him and seeing no signs of life, they turned their ravening eyes on Mrs. Barton.

She was young and fair, and she tried with terrified eyes to read their intentions. "What do you want?" she asked in their language, hiding her emotions as best she could. "The store," one of them demanded, with a gesture meaning the key. She gave them the key and left them to take what they pleased. The robbery Old Eye had planned went forward wholesale while he lay sprawling on the sand where the bully had dropped him. The six men in eager haste carried the goods from the store in backloads to the boat, rowed them across in load after load, and stopped only when one of their vigilant sentinels warned them in a loud call that horsemen were approaching from Bluff.

Cheepoots had honored his trust with all diligence. Platte Lyman and Kumen Jones came loping over the sand hills where the old man had disappeared; reaching the store before it was thought possible they could have received the word. When Cheepoots rode his lathering cayuse into Bluff with Mrs. Barton's note, he found but six men in town, and by three in the afternoon all but one of the six had gone to Rincone, figuring that was the place of greatest danger. Somehow they clung to the belief that the town was immune to attack. Immune or not, Bluff that afternoon became terrible with forebodings.

Next day men came in from the camps, from the freight roads and other places in answer to the call of nightriders who told them of the danger. Everyone felt grave concern for what might happen. Then onto that stage of dreadful things pending, came a well-meaning actor, who threw the builders of the fort completely off their guard.

Amasa Barton lingered a week before he died, and in the first half of that time the men from Bluff kept fearful watch over him, and all the time they kept a vigilant eye on a mob of Navajos peeping from the cliff beyond the river. In the broad light of one of those May days, instead of in the nighttime, as the watchers had feared, they saw a man come straight down from that mob to the river, to the boat. He made no effort to keep out of sight; he rowed with deliberate stroke to the north side, and climbed to the shelf to where the weary watchers sat by the dying man.

It was Tom Holiday, one of the important chiefs who had been twice to Salt Lake City at

the invitation of Brigham Young and John Taylor to hear and subscribe to peace treaties between his people and the Mormons. Impressive in size, magnetic, and intelligent, he marched boldly up to the Barton home, gave them friendly greetings and asked what the trouble was all about. They told him what had happened, showed him the unconscious man, and assured him they had no desire for anything but peace, not the least preparation for anything but peace. "I have been telling my people you are our friends," he said. "I told them you have always been our friends. I told them to go home and let the matter pass. I shall go back and send them home." He returned to the boat and up to the hiding mob from which he came, and very soon it was apparent they had all gone away; none of them could be seen. The crisis seemed to be past.

When Barton died, his funeral was held in Bluff without fear of further trouble from the Navajos. Men returned to the freight road and the camps to take up their work where they had dropped it."

Amasa Miles Barton was a noble, brave man who lost his life in the self-less service of his family, his friends and his God.

*Researched and written for the Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation by:  
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1. *Our Pioneer Heritage*, Compiled by Kate B. Carter, Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Volume 6, page 509.
2. *History of the Iron County Mission*, Parowan, Utah, Compiled by Mrs. Luella Adams Dalton, page 237.
3. "The Fort on the Firing Line," *The Improvement Era*, October 1949, chapters 13 and 14.