

# *A Brief History of Joseph Knight, Sr.*

By Kristine Hansen  
Fifth-Great Granddaughter of Joseph and Polly Knight

Joseph Knight, Sr., is the patriarch of a numerous posterity in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Historian William G. Hartley, author of *Stand by My Servant Joseph*, states that the first family of Mormonism is, of course, that of Joseph Smith, Sr., but “the title of second family should go to the extensive Joseph Knight family” because “Father Knight believed in Joseph’s mission even before the young man met the Whitmers or the Cowderys” (xiv). Not only did Father Knight offer material assistance to support the young prophet in bringing forth the Book of Mormon, but the extended family of Joseph Knight and his wife, Polly Peck Knight, formed most of the Colesville Branch, which made up about a third of the church’s entire membership in its first year. The large Knight and Peck families, with only two or three exceptions, remained faithful to their testimonies of the Gospel and loyal to the Prophet Joseph Smith, sacrificing their prosperous farms and the comforts of their homes in New York to follow him first to Ohio, then to Missouri, and then to Illinois. Three of Joseph and Polly Knight’s children then followed his successor, Brigham Young, to Utah (four had died before that time). Ether Knight, Joseph Knight’s son with his second wife, Phoebe, also migrated to Utah.

Joseph Knight was born about four years before the American Declaration of Independence, on November 3, 1772, at Ockham, Worcester County, Massachusetts. His mother was Sarah Crouch, and his father was Benjamin Knight, who fought in the American Revolution. Joseph’s first American ancestor was John Knight, Sr., who came from England in 1635 as part of a great migration of Puritans. In 1780, when Joseph was eight years old, his father moved the family from Massachusetts to Marlborough, Vermont. Joseph would have been 16 when George Washington became the first president of the United States in 1789. In 1795, at the age of 23, Joseph married Polly Peck in Windham, Windham County, Vermont. Like her husband, Polly descended from a long line of Yankee Puritans. She was the daughter of Joseph Peck and Elizabeth Read and the great-great-great granddaughter of Joseph and Rebecca Clark Peck, two of the Pilgrims who came to America on the *Mayflower* in 1620 and settled the Plymouth Bay Colony in Massachusetts. Polly’s parents moved from Massachusetts to Vermont in 1767, and Polly was born in Guilford, Vermont, in 1774. Her siblings Anna, Hezekiah, and Ezekiel were also born there, and each of them later joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Joseph and Polly Peck Knight started their married life in Marlborough, Vermont, but shortly after moved to Halifax, Vermont. Then in 1808, the Knights moved to Bainbridge, New York, where many of Polly’s family, including her father, had settled. By this time, Joseph and Polly already had five children: Nahum, born in 1796; Esther, in 1798; Newel, in 1800; Anna, in 1804; and Joseph Jr., in 1808. Three years later, in 1811, the family moved to Pickerel Pond, part of Colesville township in Broome County, New York, where Joseph established a farm, a gristmill, and a carding machine. Here were born to them daughters Polly, in 1811, and Elizabeth, in 1817.

Joseph Knight, Jr., described their home in the Colesville area as near the “Great Bend” of the Susquehanna River, where it flows south into Pennsylvania, then curves and flows north into New York again. Newel Knight recorded of his father that “he was not rich, yet he possessed enough of this world’s goods to secure to himself and his family, not only the necessities, but also the comforts of life. His family . . . he reared in a genteel and respectable manner and gave his children a good common school education. My father was a sober, honest man, generally respected and beloved by his neighbors and acquaintances. He did not belong to any religious sect, but was a believer in the Universalian doctrine.” This meant he believed in universal salvation of mankind, “that either eventually or immediately after death, everyone would enter a heavenly state, not remain permanently in hell” (Porter 39).

One of Joseph Knight’s neighbors in New York was Josiah Stowell, who in 1825 hired young Joseph Smith of Manchester, some 125 miles away, to work for him, digging for an old Spanish silver mine that Stowell believed was in the hills near Harmony, Pennsylvania. “Joseph dug away for a month,” says Porter, but soon realized there was nothing to be found, and he “prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it” (*History of the Church*, 1:17, quoted in Porter 39). It was during this period of time that Joseph Smith met his future wife, Emma Hale, and became acquainted with the Knight family. In November 1826, young Joseph Smith became a hired hand for Joseph Knight, working to help relieve the Smith family’s debts. Joseph Knight, Jr., recorded that his father thought the 21-year-old Smith “was the best hand he ever hired.” The whole Knight family liked him, and found him “a boy of truth.” Joseph Knight, Sr., provided Joseph with “a horse and cutter to go and see his girl [Emma] Down to Mr. Hails [Hales]” in Harmony, Pennsylvania, about 30 miles away (quoted in Porter, p. 40). While Emma was visiting the Stowell family, she agreed to marry Joseph in spite of her father’s objections. They eloped in January 1827.

Perhaps sensing that Father Knight and his son Joseph could be entrusted with the sacred knowledge that he had received heavenly visitations, Joseph Smith confided in them that “a personage had appeared to him and told him where there was a gold book of ancient date buried, and if he would follow the directions of the Angel, he would get it.” Both Joseph Knight, Sr., and his son Joseph believed these words; they may have been the first after Joseph Smith’s family to do so. They knew that each of the three previous Septembers young Smith had gone to the Hill Cumorah to keep his appointment with the angel Moroni but so far had returned empty-handed because the time was not yet right for him to receive the plates. In September 1827 when it was time for Joseph Smith to meet Moroni again, Joseph Knight purposely arranged his affairs so as to be at the Smith family residence near Manchester (Porter 40). Father Knight had driven there with a horse and carriage, and shortly after midnight on September 22, while Joseph Knight was sleeping, Joseph and Emma Smith hitched up Father Knight’s horse to his carriage and drove to the hill to receive the plates. When Joseph Knight arose later that morning, they had not yet returned. This is his record of what transpired:

In the morning I got up and my Horse and Carriage was gone. But after a while [Joseph Smith] Came home and he turned out the Horse. All Come into the house to Brackfirst [breakfast]. But no thing said about where they had Bin. After Brackfirst Joseph Caled me into the other Room and he set his foot on the Bed

and leaned his head on his hand and says, “Well I am Dissopinted.” “Well,” say I, “I am sorrey.” “Well,” says he, “I am grateley Dissopinted; it is ten times Better then I expected.”

With this bit of good-natured teasing from his young friend, Joseph Knight was one of the first to learn that the Prophet had acquired the plates, and the older gentleman (he was almost 55 at the time, one year younger than Joseph Smith, Sr.) may have been pleased to know he had unwittingly aided in the retrieval of the plates through the use of his horse and carriage.

About two months after Joseph Smith received the plates, he and Emma moved to her parents’ home in Harmony, Pennsylvania, to get away from persecution, curiosity about the plates, and efforts to steal them. They lived in a small house near her parents’ home about 30 miles from the Joseph Knight family. Joseph had not yet begun to translate the plates, but he spent a good deal of time studying them and becoming familiar with the Urim and Thummim he had received with them. Because of these activities, he could not provide for himself and Emma, who was expecting their first child. So Joseph decided in early 1828 to ask Father Knight for assistance. This is what Joseph Knight, Sr., recorded:

I was not in easy circumstances and I did not know what it might amount to, and my wife and family all against me about helping him. But I let him have some little provisions and some few things out of the store, a pair of shoes, and three dollars in money to help him a little. (quoted in Hartley 38)

These gifts must have helped Joseph and Emma get through a difficult time. Joseph began to translate a little, using Emma and her brother as scribes. In March 1828, Father Knight persuaded his wife to accompany him to visit the Smiths. He recorded that Joseph and Emma “were glad to see us. Joseph talked with us about his translating and some revelations he had received. And from that time my wife began to believe and continued a full believer until she died” (quoted in Hartley 46-47). After that, Martin Harris served for a time as Joseph’s scribe until he lost the 116 pages of manuscript. Then the plates were taken from Joseph for a season, and he had to humble himself and prepare again to receive and translate them.

The biggest part of the translation of the Book of Mormon was completed from April to June 1829 with Oliver Cowdery acting as scribe. Once again, in order to stay focused on the task, Joseph and Oliver went to ask Father Knight for material assistance. When they arrived at his home, he was away at Catskill, but when he returned, the Knight family told their father of Joseph and Oliver’s need. Father Knight recorded this:

I had engaged to go to Catskill again the next day, and I went again, and I bought a barrel of mackerel and some lined paper for writing. And when I came home I bought some nine or ten bushels of grain and five or six bushels potatoes and a pound of tea, and I went down to see him. And they were in want.

When Father Knight arrived with these provisions, Joseph and Oliver were out looking for work, but they found none. So when they returned home and found Father Knight

there with his bounty, “they were glad.” They were able to return to translating and “had provisions enough to last till the translation was done” (quoted in Hartley 49). Some of the surviving pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript are on lined paper, perhaps the very paper that Father Knight provided.

In March 1830, the Book of Mormon came off the Grandin press in Palmyra, and some of the Knights, including Joseph Sr., traveled there to see it. When the Prophet told him that a church must now be formed. Father Knight stayed in the area and probably attended the meeting, along with over 20 of his relatives, at the Whitmer farm on April 6, 1830, when the church was organized (see Hartley 59). Although none of the Knights were among the first official members of the church, and although neither Father Knight nor one of his sons was among the three or the eight witnesses of the Book of Mormon, Hartley says that “through commitment and loyalty rather than words during the next fifteen years, [the Knights] would become witnesses of another type: a family witness of Joseph Smith’s prophetic work” (53). Father Knight recorded that after the organizing meeting, Joseph Smith, Sr., and Martin Harris were baptized, and the young Prophet was so full of joy and gratitude that his emotions overflowed. He “would sob and cry and seemed to be so full that he could not live. . . . He was the most wrought upon that I ever saw any man. But his joy seemed to be full. I think he saw the great work he had begun and was desirous to carry it out” (quoted in Hartley 61). Father Knight did not then step forward to seek baptism himself because he had not read the Book of Mormon and he wanted to examine it a little more. “But,” he added, “I should have felt better if I had gone forward” (61).

Toward the end of June 1830, Joseph and Emma Smith traveled to Colesville, accompanied by Oliver Cowdery and John and David Whitmer. They planned a baptismal service for Sunday, June 27, and the day before they dammed a stream to form a pond for the baptisms. But during the night, a mob tore out the dam. Members of the mob also attended the public church service the next morning, after which they tried to talk members of the Knight family out of being baptized. One young woman, Emily Coburn, the sister of Newel Knight’s wife, Sally, was forcibly taken home against her will. But early the next morning, Oliver Cowdery baptized Joseph Knight, Sr., and a dozen of his immediate and extended family. The plan was to confirm them a couple of days later at an evening meeting, but angry neighbors again gathered, and they had Joseph Smith arrested for disorderly conduct and taken to Chenango County for trial. Father Knight employed two capable lawyers in the area, and they mounted a successful defense of Joseph Smith in the court at Bainbridge. No sooner was he acquitted, however, than he was arrested again by the constable from Broome County. Father Knight again sought to employ the two lawyers, but one of them, Mr. Reed, was tired and wanted to go home. However, Mr. Reed later said that “while Mr. Knight was pleading with me to go, a peculiar impression or thought struck my mind, that I must go and defend him for he [Joseph Smith] was the Lord’s anointed” (quoted in Hartley 81). So Reed and his fellow attorney went and again picked apart the prosecution’s arguments. Once again, Joseph was acquitted. The confirmations of the Colesville Saints took place nearly two months later in August. (Mr. Reed later became a member of the Church; he always held Joseph Knight in high regard.)

In September 1830, Joseph Smith received a revelation that the Saints were to gather into one place (see D&C 29:7-8), and in December it was revealed that Ohio was

to be the site (see D&C 37). Another revelation in January 1831 added that they would enter into a new economic system of sharing their wealth by consecrating their properties for the good of all and receiving a portion sufficient to sustain their families. The Colesville Saints were instructed to sell or rent their properties in New York and move to Ohio. All of the Knight family and their relatives began preparing to move. Father Knight and his wife and youngest daughter left early in January 1831, leaving their land to an attorney to sell. Their son Newel, as president of the Colesville branch, was left in charge of leading the others to Ohio in the spring. This group traveled by waterways, arriving in Kirtland in mid-May. The Colesville Saints then consecrated their wealth and were assigned to go to Thompson, Ohio, 25 miles away to settle on 700 acres of land owned by Lemam Copley, a former Shaker who had converted to the Church. The Knights and their relatives went to work building houses and fences and planting fields. A few weeks into this labor, however, Copley turned against the Church and decided to go back to his old religion. There were deep divisions about who owned what because Copley had refused to consecrate his land. Copley was then excommunicated, and in retaliation, he evicted the Knights and other saints from his property and demanded \$60 for damages. The “damages,” Joseph Knight, Jr., noted were “fitting up his houses and planting his ground” (quoted in Hartley 119).

Still branch president of the Colesville Saints, Newel Knight sought instruction from the Prophet, who received a revelation (see D&C 54) telling these members to go to Missouri, there to establish Zion. On June 28, 1831, they left Thompson, Ohio, and journeyed to Wellsville, Ohio, where they got on a boat to go down the Ohio River to the Mississippi. Then they went up the Mississippi by steamer some 130 miles to St. Louis. From there they traveled up the Missouri River to the small, rough frontier village of Independence, arriving July 26, 1831. The Prophet Joseph Smith, who had gone ahead of them, was there to meet them with Sidney Rigdon and others. The Prophet sent the Colesville Saints up the Big Blue River to Kaw township (now part of Kansas City, Missouri). Being from the forested eastern United States, the Knights and their relatives found the prairie landscape very different, with trees growing only along the watercourses; but the soil was rich, and they knew they could thrive here. They grew accustomed to their new neighbors, who were from the backwoods of Kentucky and Tennessee and had different ways of speaking and living; some of them owned slaves. They were only about ten miles from what was then the western border of the United States and the beginning of Indian territory; life was rugged and primitive in these new settlements.

Nevertheless, when they arrived, Joseph Smith told them of a grand new revelation he had received on July 20 (see D&C 57) that Independence, Missouri, was to be the new gathering place of Zion and the site of a new Jerusalem and temple. According to Hartley, the Colesville Saints (as they continued to be called) may not have understand this new concept of Zion very well, but they felt honored to be chosen. Some of the extended Knight family were additionally honored to be part of three significant events that took place in early August 1831. On August 2, twelve men—including Joseph Knight, Sr., and his relatives Aaron Culver, Hezekiah Peck, Ezekiel Peck, Freeborn DeMille, and William Stringham—carried a log and laid it down for the first Mormon building in the promised land. On August 2, Newel Knight participated in a special dedication ceremony a little west of Independence, where Joseph Smith laid a

cornerstone for the temple, and Sidney Rigdon dedicated the ground for the city of Zion. On August 4, the first conference in Zion was held, as 31 members gathered to hear Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon preach. All of these events portended a marvelous future for the new place they had come to just a few months after leaving their homes in New York.

But their joy was marred two days later by the death of Polly Peck Knight on August 6, 1832. She had been so unwell during their entire journey that Newel had at one point gone ashore and purchased lumber to build her a coffin. “She quietly fell asleep rejoicing in the New and Everlasting gospel and praising God that she had lived to see the land of Zion,” wrote Newel. She had achieved her “greatest desire,” which was “to set her feet upon the land of Zion and to have her body interred in that land” (quoted in Hartley 135). Joseph Smith preached her funeral sermon, saying that “a worthy member sleeps in Jesus till the resurrection” (quoted in Hartley 135). The family buried her, as Joseph Knight, Sr. recorded, in the woods,

[in] a spot chosen out by ourselves. I was along by where she was buried a few days after and I found the hogs had begun to root where she was buried. I being very unwell but I took my ax the next day and went and built a pen round it. It was the last I done for her. (quoted in Hartley 136)

That same year Esther Knight Stringham, the oldest daughter of Joseph and Polly Knight, died at the age of 33, leaving three children and her husband, William Stringham.

Father Knight lived with his three youngest children, Joseph, Jr., Polly and Elizabeth, who were all still unmarried. Joseph, Jr., married in March 1832. In April 1832, Joseph Smith came to Missouri and conducted a general conference. He took time to have a special meeting with the Colesville Branch at Kaw Township. Father Knight’s history records that the Prophet “called the Colesville Church to gather and sealed them up to Eternal Life. And this made some little feeling among others, but I think he knew best” (quoted in Hartley 144). Soon after this in July 1832, the priesthood leaders in Missouri divided the church into three branches. As more members moved to Missouri, some people who were not Knight relatives joined the Colesville Branch, over which Newel Knight still presided.

In a little over two years the Saints in Missouri grew to more than 1,000 and established several settlements in Jackson County. A number of revelations given in this time period indicate that the Lord called them to repentance for idleness, greed, envyings, strife, not rearing their children in righteousness, and other faults. Local leaders held solemn assemblies to hear confessions and recommit the Saints to living as a Zion people should. They responded and by the summer of 1833, there were five branches of the church, mills, a store, schools, and a printing press in operation. The Prophet felt they were ready to begin laying out the City of Zion and constructing the temple. He sent a drawing of the temple and a plat, or plan for laying out the blocks and streets of the city, which was meant to grow to somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 people.

But the Saints’ neighbors had other plans in mind. They were growing restive about the increasing Mormon presence—now about one-third of the population—for several reasons. First, the Mormons were mostly Yankees whereas most other Missourians were Southerners, and there was some immediate distrust on that account.

Second, the Mormons' religion seemed strange, with its talk about revelations and miracles, and the zeal with which they practiced it was threatening. Third, the Mormons spoke openly about being chosen by God to build a great city there. Fourth, the Mormons' communal economic ventures were a threat to the markets established by other Missourians. Finally, the potential for Mormons to dominate electoral politics was too big to ignore. In mid-July 1833, the Mormons found out about a secret document asserting that the Missourians had a natural right, if not a constitutional one, to deal with the "crisis" presented by the Mormon presence. This document was signed by government officials, including a constable, a judge, an attorney, a county clerk, and two justices of the peace. A week later, about 400 people met in Independence and concluded they must expel the Mormons—"peaceably if possible, 'forcibly if we must'" (Hartley 166). They proposed five resolutions to the Mormons: (1) no more Mormons should move to Jackson county; (2) those already there must pledge to leave as soon as possible; (3) the Mormons must stop publishing a newspaper; (4) Mormon leaders should direct their followers to comply; and (5) those who didn't comply would meet with harsh consequences (Hartley 167).

When Mormon leaders were not allowed any time at all to discuss these proposals with their people, they politely refused to comply, and the mobs began to persecute them. First, the printing press was destroyed. Then a blacksmith shop and Gilbert and Whitney's store were vandalized, and men were tarred and feathered. When the mob threatened again a few days later, the Mormon leaders signed an agreement that half their number would leave the county by Jan. 1, 1834, and the other half by April 1834. Although some abuses continued, the Saints' lives returned to almost normal, and they received still more instructions from Joseph Smith in Kirtland regarding the city of Zion and the temple. In fact, a document survives showing that in September 1833 Joseph Knight, Sr., and several of his relatives pledged to pay various sums of money for the building of the temple by Jan. 1, 1834. Father Knight and his son Newel each pledged \$100, a considerable sum (Hartley 172).

Father Knight must have felt great faith about the future, as in October 1833, at the age of 61, he married Phoebe Crosby Peck, his sister-in-law by marriage. She was the 33-year-old widow of Benjamin Peck, a brother of Father Knight's first wife, Polly. Phoebe had four children, and Father Knight still had his two youngest daughters living with him. (Two more children were born to Joseph and Phoebe Knight: a son, Ether, born in 1834; and a son, Charles, born in 1836, who died in 1839.) The Saints petitioned the governor, Daniel Dunklin, for protection against mobs, but he did nothing. By late October and early November, mobs were again harassing the Saints and destroying their property. On November 4, a mob captured the Saints' ferry on the Big Blue River, and a skirmish ensued when armed Mormons went there to confront the mob. Gunshots were exchanged; Andrew Barber was killed and Philo Dibble was shot in the abdomen. (Newel Knight later administered to Brother Dibble, and he was miraculously healed.) The next day Lieutenant Governor Lilburn Boggs ordered the militia to put down the Mormon "insurrection," and groups of armed men raided the Mormon settlements and ordered the people to leave. The Saints fled, most going north across the Missouri River into Clay County. Father Knight and his new wife and their children were among the refugees. They gave up thousands of dollars worth of property and went without needed belongings

to camp in tents along the river bottoms. Joseph Knight, Jr., stayed behind at his gristmill, grinding flour for the Saints until Dec. 1, 1833.

As they were encamped on the night of November 13, 1833, the annual Leonid meteor shower took place in the heavens above, and some Saints saw it as a sign that Christ's second coming was near at hand and that God would redeem Zion for them. But that hope was not fulfilled. Fortunately, the people of Clay County were more hospitable than those of Jackson County. The Mormons soon rented or homesteaded and bought land there and re-established farms and businesses. Newel Knight recorded that his father "was now getting old and it seemed a hard struggle for him to get along" (quoted in Hartley 191). In June 1834, Zion's Camp arrived in Missouri, a group of over 200 men and boys from Kirtland led by Joseph Smith, which had come to redeem Zion. But there Joseph Smith received a revelation that "mine elders should wait for a little season for the redemption of Zion" (see D&C 105: 6). So the Saints carried on, building up new homes in Clay County. In September 1834, Father Knight's daughter-in-law Sally, the wife of Newel, died after bearing a son who also died. Sally had been frail and sickly, and all of her children had died but one. Newel left his only surviving child, Samuel, with his sister-in-law and went to Kirtland. There he met and later married Lydia Goldthwaite Bailey.

By June 1836, the non-Mormon residents of Clay County began to fret about the large presence of Saints in their midst, their Yankee dialect and ways, their aversion to slavery, and their strange religious teachings—including that American Indians were part of God's chosen people. Once again, they wanted the Mormons to leave peaceably or be driven out. Governor Dunklin replied to the Saints' petitions that, in effect, it was useless to try to go against public sentiment, even if the law was on the Mormons' side. To avoid bloodshed, the Mormons agreed to leave, and the Missouri legislature created Caldwell County exclusively for Mormons. Most of the Knights again moved with 3,000 other Saints to start over. They built the city of Far West according to principles taught by Joseph Smith, using a grid of streets creating blocks with four houses per block. By mid 1838, they had eight stores, two hotels, and six blacksmith shops to serve all the farms on the rich prairie land. At first, Father Knight stayed in Clay County to run the gristmill that his sons had built. In 1837, he went to Far West, when his son Newel and his daughter Anna were able to move there, but he soon moved back to Clay County.

By spring 1838, the Saints in Kirtland had been told to leave Ohio and gather to Missouri, and Joseph and Emma Smith became residents of Far West, which now became the headquarters of the church. More than 1600 Latter-day Saints moved to Caldwell County, and a temple was planned for Far West. But then some Mormons began moving north of Caldwell County into Daviess County, where they began to build up Adam-ondi-Ahman. This angered anti-Mormons, who thought there was an unwritten agreement for Mormons to settle only in Caldwell County. Once again, they ordered the Mormons to leave peaceably or be forced out. By now the Saints thought they were too numerous and strong to be forced out, and they believed God would intervene in their behalf. They went ahead with dedicating the Far West temple site on July 4, 1838. Probably most of the extended Knight family were there that day, when Pres. Rigdon preached a fiery sermon saying that the Saints would not submit to unlawful oppression without retaliating. Pres. Rigdon unfortunately declared that if anyone troubled them in the future "it shall be between us and them a war of extermination" (quoted in Hartley 276). A month later, when some Mormons went into Gallatin, Missouri, in Daviess County to vote, they were

blocked by four dozen Missourians, and a fight broke out. Rumors spread, and angry Missourians began to harass Mormons in outlying areas, driving them from their homes, stealing their livestock, and taking their other property. Mormons and local county militias began to take to the field, and a Mormon militia was authorized by General Parks of Ray County to march against Missourians coming to Adam-on-di-Ahman.

After these events, Hartley says, “it’s impossible to sort out what was official militia action and what was vigilantism. . . . Retaliation spawned retaliation” (277). The only members of the extended Knight family who got involved in this fighting were Father Knight’s nephew Reed Peck and Hosea Stout, who had married Father Knight’s stepdaughter Samantha Peck. On October 27, 1838, Lilburn Boggs, who had become governor, issued his infamous Extermination Order. The Haun’s Mill Massacre occurred four days later just as a large army of Missourians was massing for an attack on Far West. To prevent bloodshed, Joseph Smith allowed himself to be taken into custody along with Sidney Rigdon, Lyman Wight, Parley Pratt, and George Robinson. These men avoided death because Missouri General Alexander Doniphan defied the order of his commanding officer to shoot them the next day. They languished in Liberty Jail for six months while the Latter-day Saints prepared for an exodus from Missouri. Far West became a refugee site, as Mormons streamed into the city from outlying areas, having lost their property. Over 5,000 people were now there, many of them moving in with families who had homes there, and others camping outdoors in the winter.

In January and especially during a period of good weather in February, many Saints began to leave for Illinois. The Knights left not as a group but as individual families, as they could afford to. Before Newel left, he “rode over to Clay County to attend to some business, and see my father” (quoted in Hartley 297). He went to see his father again soon after and “put means in his hands to carry him and family into the state of Illinois” (quoted in Hartley 298). Allen Stout, a brother of Hosea Stout, moved his own father to Quincy, Illinois, then went back to Far West to help others. Stout went on foot to Clay County “to see if I could help old Father Knight out.” He found the old man still tending the gristmill his son had built. After two weeks of effort, Stout found a man who would buy the Knight mill and 40 acres of land for \$30. He then helped Father Knight, his wife Phoebe, their two sons, Ether and Charles, and three stepchildren to get to Independence, where they got on a boat to St. Louis. From there, they went upriver to Quincy, Illinois (Hartley 302-303).

While in Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith instructed the Saints to estimate the amount of their losses in Missouri and file statements and affidavits. Joseph Smith later took petitions to President Martin Van Buren to seek redress for the Saints’ wrongs, but the government refused to help. The Knights’ losses amounted to about \$300,000. But once again, they were willing to start over in a new place. “Had their faith not been firmly anchored, nurtured by loyalty and belief in friend Joseph Smith,” says Hartley, “they could have found compelling reasons to leave the Church and go someplace else, perhaps back home to upstate New York. But the faith of the two dozen adults in the Knight family did not falter” with the exception of three: Reed Peck, who was excommunicated for his presumed and confused role in Joseph Smith’s arrest and imprisonment; Emily Coburn Slade, who had married into the family; and Benjamin Slade, who rejoined the Saints later (308-309).

At first Father Knight and his family were in the Quincy, Illinois, area, where his lastborn son, Charles, died on August 13, 1839, at the age of two. His stepdaughter, Samantha Peck Stout, died in November that year. Father Knight's daughter Anna and her husband, Freeborn DeMille, were in Quincy as well, where their nine-year-old son Oliver had a great spiritual experience at the time he was baptized and confirmed, receiving a witness of Joseph Smith's calling as a prophet. Here the DeMilles' daughter Mariah also met her future husband, Daniel Buckley Funk, a non-Mormon who subsequently joined the church in 1843. Except for Father Knight's oldest son, Nahum, and his wife, Thankful, who remained behind in Missouri, gradually all the living Knight children gathered in the new city of Nauvoo, where the street running just north of the temple site was named Knight Street, perhaps in honor of this valiant family. (Hartley says it could also have been named in honor of Vinson Knight, who was not a relative.)

Eventually, they all had homes in the city, with Father Knight living at the corner of Bain and Hotchkiss street, across the street from daughter Polly and her husband, William Stringham, who had married Polly after her sister Esther, William's first wife, died in Missouri. Three blocks away were son Joseph Jr. and his wife, Newel and Lydia Knight lived close to the river, not far from Joseph Smith. In 1842, Father Knight's youngest daughter married Joseph Johnson, and they lived near Newel. The DeMilles lived on Cutler Street, closer to the temple site. Here in Nauvoo, they all would have experienced firsthand many of the important events told about in Church history books: the chartering of the city, the organization of the Nauvoo Legion (some of the Knight family were members), the *Times and Seasons* newspaper, the establishment of the Masonic Lodge (Father Knight was a member), the organization of the Relief Society and the Church's first wards, the arrival of the first converts from the British Isles, the construction of the Seventies Hall, the construction of the temple, the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and finally another exodus, this one from Nauvoo to the Rocky Mountains in 1846. But for a brief period of years they had respite from mobs and could go about their lives in peace.

In January 1841, Joseph Smith received the revelation to build the Nauvoo Temple. For the next four years, the Saints labored unceasingly to erect the beautiful building, and the Knights must have been among those who gave time and means to build it. All able-bodied men were required to tithe a tenth of their time to help with construction, and children and women were supposed to donate a penny a week to buy materials. When the basement was finished, a wooden baptismal font was built in it where the Saints could do proxy baptisms for the dead, instead of doing them in the Mississippi River, which they had heretofore done. Records show that a number of Knights were proxies in baptisms for dead ancestors. This was also a time when Joseph Smith taught the Saints new and profound doctrines related to the temple, such as the eternality and materiality of spirits, ordinances for the dead, the true nature of God as an exalted man, the plurality of gods, and celestial marriage, including plural marriage. Church leaders taught that families should organize themselves to help each other spiritually and temporally and to identify their ancestors. Hartley says we don't know a great deal about the particulars of this movement to organize families, but it must have been very important to Newel Knight because his history is somewhat critical of his father for not leading very well in the effort to organize his family. At this time, in 1843, Joseph, Jr., was living and working away from Nauvoo in La Harpe, Illinois, where he

tended the mills of Stephen Markham. Joseph Jr. was experiencing poor health, and his brother Newel told Joseph's wife, Betsey, that if Joseph would return to Nauvoo, "it would be better for him and his health would improve." But he didn't, and "to my great sorrow," Newel said, "my father's family were not organized" (quoted in Hartley 327).

Perhaps Father Knight thought all the family members had to be in Nauvoo for this family organization to take place; perhaps he lacked the energy or the complete understanding to take on this task, as in 1842 he turned 70 years old, and he could no longer do much for himself and his wife. The lot and house where he lived in Nauvoo were given to him by Joseph Smith, who had promised him that the Knights would never want for necessities, since Father Knight had supplied Joseph Smith with food when their situations were reversed. The Relief Society records from this period indicate that Emma Smith once hired an unemployed man who desired work to plow and fence Father Knight's lot. The Relief Society paid the man \$22.60 in cash and commodities for his labor. The Knight children also supported their father and his wife Phoebe as best they could, Newel writing in 1845 that "it was a pleasure for me to supply his [Father Knight's] wants and add to his comforts" (quoted in Hartley 334). Newel and Joseph Knight, Jr., made their living mainly as millers, building and operating both sawmills and gristmills. The Church called on their milling expertise a good deal in the Nauvoo period. In 1843 Newel's sawmill cut pine logs from Wisconsin for the temple, and his gristmill made flour for the Saints.

In 1844, Father Knight's daughter Polly died, leaving her husband, William Stringham, a widower for the second time with children from both his wives to care for. Also in 1844, John Reed, the lawyer whom Father Knight had hired in 1830 to defend Joseph Smith against baseless charges in Colesville, visited Nauvoo. By then he had joined the Church. He gave a public address in which he said this about his old friend Joseph Knight, Sr.:

When I reflect upon our former friendship, Mr. chairman, and upon the scenes that he (i.e., Joseph Knight) has passed through in consequence of maladministration, mobocracy, and cruelty, I feel to lift up my voice to high heaven and pray God to bless the aged veteran, and that his silver locks may go down to the grave in peace, like a shock of corn fully ripe. (quoted in Hartley 342)

The Prophet Joseph Smith also held the aging Father Knight in high regard. Once in Nauvoo the prophet met the old man hobbling down the street and Joseph put his arm around him, then put his own cane into the old man's hands, saying, "Brother Knight, you need this cane more than I do." The Knight family tradition is that Joseph Smith encouraged Father Knight to hand the cane down in his family to a descendant named Joseph and to have him do the same. Joseph Knight, Jr., received the cane, and it was handed down from generation to generation until May 2009, when the descendants of Joseph Knight put the cane into the possession of the LDS Church History Department (Lloyd). Also, in 1842, Joseph Smith dictated these thoughts to his clerk William Clayton:

How good, and glorious, it has seemed to me to find pure and holy friends, who are faithful, just and true, and whose hearts fail not; and whose knees are

confirmed and do not falter; while they wait upon the Lord, in administering to my necessities. . . . These I have met in prosperity and they were my friends. I now meet them in adversity, and they are still my warmer friends. These love the God that I serve; they love the truths that I promulgate; they love those virtuous, and those holy doctrines that I cherish in my bosom with the warmest feelings of my heart; and with that zeal which cannot be denied. (quoted in Hartley 343-44)

Joseph added to this general praise of his friends these particular words praising Joseph Knight, Sr.:

While I contemplate the virtues and the good qualifications and characteristics of the faithful few, which I am now recording in the Book of the Law of the Lord, of such as have stood by me in every hour of peril for these fifteen long years past; say, for instance, my aged and beloved brother Joseph Knight Sr., who was among the number of the first to administer to my necessities, while I was laboring, in the commencement of the bringing forth of the work of the Lord, and of laying the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; for fifteen years he has been faithful and true, and even handed, and exemplary and virtuous, and kind, never deviating to the right hand nor to the left. Behold he is a righteous man. May God Almighty lengthen out the old mans days; and may his trembling, tortured and broken body be renewed, and the vigor of health turn upon him; if it be thy will, consistently, O God; and it shall be said of him by the sons of Zion, while there is one of them remaining; that this man was a faithful man in Israel; therefore his name shall never be forgotten. (quoted in Hartley 344-45)

In this same document, Joseph Smith praised Newel and Joseph Jr., saying, that he recorded their names “in the Book of the Law of the Lord, with unspeakable delight, for they are my friends” (quoted in Hartley 345).

The year 1844 also marked the beginning of growing anti-Mormon activities in Illinois. The hatred culminated in June with the assassination of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum at the Carthage Jail. The Knights, along with other residents of Nauvoo, were stunned by the loss of their friends, the beloved prophet and patriarch. They mourned their deaths, and the Knights were certainly present at the meeting on August 8, 1844, when Brigham Young—contradicting Sidney Rigdon, who claimed he should be the next president of the church—explained why the Quorum of the Twelve were the rightful leaders. Newel Knight and Oliver DeMille later wrote (as did others who were there) that they saw the mantle of Joseph resting upon Brigham Young as he spoke. Newel wrote, “He acted and spoke so much like the departed Joseph, that his words seemed to electrify the audience” (quoted in Hartley 353). Oliver wrote, “After talking about a minute, his voice changed to the voice of Joseph, his countenance and every appearance and mention was that of Joseph, and his language was so convincing and prophetic that it seemed to bring conviction to the hearts of all who were present” (quoted in Hartley 353). The Knight family all accepted Brigham Young’s leadership.

A year-long calm followed the martyrdom, during which the Saints worked to finish the temple and improve the city, which they now called the City of Joseph because

the state of Illinois revoked the charter of the city of Nauvoo and disbanded the Nauvoo Legion. During this time missionary work was intended to expand as well. All in the elders' quorum under the age of 35 were ordained seventies, and seventies quorums increased from 3 to 35 between 1844 and 1846. Seven Knight relatives became seventies, and Father Knight became a high priest. In December 1844, after Joseph Jr. returned to Nauvoo, Newel again prodded his father to organize the Knight family, and his father called a family meeting where Newel exhorted them to "be engaged in those things which are most necessary for our salvation" (quoted in Hartley 362). They seem to have been a close-knit but not a perfect family, and Newel did not believe that the meeting had done much good. The others were perhaps not quite as zealous as Newel and perhaps even resented Newel's efforts to admonish them.

Perhaps Newel's higher level of zeal and commitment resulted from the fact that in June 1830, while at Fayette, New York, he had seen a vision of the Father and the Son in their glory. As Joseph Smith recorded, Newel "had it made plain to his understanding that the time would come when he should be admitted into his presence to enjoy his society for ever and ever" (quoted in Hartley 72). Thus, Newel had a deep conviction and a sure knowledge of what awaited them if he and his family remained faithful. When Newel was in Kirtland after the death of his first wife, he had been privileged to labor in building the Kirtland Temple; he also attended glorious priesthood meetings in the unfinished building and had been a party to great outpourings of the Spirit; he received washings and anointings in the Kirtland Temple from Joseph Smith; and he attended the Kirtland Temple dedication. The other Knights had not had these experiences, and while they were certainly not bad or faithless people, they were perhaps not so anxiously engaged as Newel.

Later, hard feelings arose in the family as a result of a falling out between Newel and Joseph Jr. over Joseph's performance as an employee at Newel's mill. Joseph Sr. took the side of Joseph Jr. in this dispute, and Newel felt wronged by his father's action. Now the old man wanted to be the family patriarch and also to be in charge of the mill and tell Newel what to do, but Newel did not think it wise to let his father take charge as he would then be responsible for the debts that Newel had incurred. Newel dismissed his brother from the mill, and both Joseph Sr. and Joseph Jr. complained to others about it. The stake president finally became involved and advised Father Knight to let Newel manage his mill as he saw fit. Then in June 1845, Father Knight bestowed a birthright blessing on Joseph, who was younger than Newel. Newel was very much hurt by that, but the family seemed to carry on anyway, and Newel didn't hold a grudge. He seemed generally very willing to help his family members—and many others as well.

In May 1845, a ceremony was held for the laying of the Nauvoo Temple capstone, and the Saints began to use the temple for meetings, even though the interior was not completely finished. In December 1845, people began to receive temple ordinances in the Nauvoo Temple. By early February 1846, more than 5,000 Saints had received temple endowments; Newel was one of the ordinance workers. Most of the Knights obtained their endowment and had their marriages sealed at this time. Phoebe Knight was in a quandary about whether to be sealed to Father Knight or her first husband, Benjamin Peck. At a family meeting on February 1, 1845, Phoebe said that she wasn't sure she wanted to be sealed to Father Knight. She admitted she liked him and thought he had always treated her well, but she found his son Newel overbearing. She even went so far

as to say she planned to leave her aged second husband. So that Father Knight could at least be sealed to his deceased first wife, Polly, Newel drove four miles to get his sister Anna to act as proxy for her mother in the sealing. The temple would only be open a few more days, and he wanted to see this ordinance done.

When Newel and Anna came to the temple the next day to meet their father, they found him there with Phoebe. Phoebe had complained about Newel to the apostles, and one of them asked Newel to promise not to rule or oppress her. When Newel said he had never intended to do so and would not in the future, Phoebe was sealed to Father Knight and she also acted as proxy in his sealing to his first wife. The temple records from this period show that Nahum Knight, the eldest son of Joseph and Polly Knight, received his endowment by proxy—which suggests he had died in Missouri prior to 1846. Father Knight’s four children who were still living—Anna, Newel, Joseph, and Elizabeth—all received their endowments and were sealed to their spouses. William Stringham was sealed by proxy to his deceased second wife, Polly Knight, but the record does not indicate he was sealed to his first wife, Esther Knight.

The temple endowment and sealing ordinances must have been a comfort to the Knight family as they faced the uncertain ordeal of another move, this time away from Nauvoo to the distant Rocky Mountains. Brigham Young had wanted to wait until spring to begin the exodus, but he began moving the Saints out as early as February 4, 1846. None of the Knights went that early, however. Most of them left in the spring as originally planned, except for Joseph Knight, Jr., Hezekiah Peck, and Phoebe Peck Knight and her little son Ether, all of whom left with the last group of “Poor Saints” in the fall of 1846. Newel had hoped they could all travel as a group, but that did not work out. Newel had to pay some large debts before he could leave Nauvoo, and the others had to find the means to get wagons, teams, and supplies for the journey. In the end, only Freeborn and Anna Knight DeMille traveled with Newel and his family. The plan was for them to establish a temporary station in Iowa where they could plant some crops; then Newel would go back to Illinois to bring his aged father out. Newel kept an excellent journal during their trip. On the first night of the journey he recorded a long prayer to God, in which he pleaded,

Wilt thou remember in much mercy my aged father, give thy angels charge concerning him, until I shall see him gathered, with thy Saints, in a land of peace, where the wicked do not rule. And even then let thy gentle spirit guide, and thy holy angels guard him even down to the valley of death. And in the morning of the first resurrection, let him come forth, and be crowned, and receive an inheritance, with the sanctified. (quoted in Hartley 389)

Newel Knight’s family and the DeMilles struggled through mud and rain in Iowa, but finally reached one of the Mormon camps, Mt. Pisgah, on May 24. The DeMilles would stay there for three years before moving on. Newel did not return to Illinois as planned but was told to prepare to accompany Brigham Young in an 1846 vanguard trek to the west.

If this plan had worked out, Newel Knight would be honored today as one of the first to come into the Salt Lake Valley. But Brigham Young changed his mind after Newel and a company of wagons had rolled west for two weeks; Young sent word to

Newel and his company to halt where they were and prepare for winter. “Finding themselves in a dangerous zone due to Indian conflicts, they accepted an invitation from friendly Ponca Indian chiefs to detour north and establish winter quarters among the Poncas [in northern Nebraska]. In a log cabin fort called Camp Ponca, Newel Knight died that winter, never to see the Rocky Mountains” (Hartley 401). He probably died of pneumonia, and he left his wife Lydia pregnant and with seven other children to care for and bring to Utah alone. She was comforted, however, when Newel’s spirit appeared to her:

He stood by her side, with a lovely smile upon his face, and said, “Be calm; let not sorrow overcome you. It was necessary that I should go. I was needed behind the veil to represent the true condition of this camp and people. You cannot fully comprehend it now; but the time will come when you shall know why I left you and our little ones. Therefore, dry up your tears. Be patient. I will go before you and protect you in your journeyings. And you and your little ones shall never perish for lack of food. (quoted in Hartley 426)

Newel’s promises were fulfilled: All of the children survived, and Lydia died in 1884 in St. George, Utah, after performing more than 700 endowments for the dead.

Since Newel was not able to go back to Illinois and bring his father out, it is likely that daughter Elizabeth Knight Johnson and her family brought Father Knight to Mt. Pisgah, Iowa, in the early summer of 1846 because we know he did leave Nauvoo before his wife Phoebe left in the fall. In September 1846, Brigham Young sent Orville M. Allen back to Nauvoo to bring the last of the Saints to join the rest at Mt. Pisgah and Garden Grove, Iowa. These “Poor Saints” were stranded because of their lack of means to travel. They had camped on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, in Montrose, just across from Nauvoo, having been driven out of their homes. Among them were Phoebe, her twelve-year-old son Ether Knight, Joseph Knight Jr., his wife, Betsey, and their four daughters.

By this time Joseph Jr. was a bishop, and he continued to serve in that capacity on the trek to the interior of Iowa, helping to look after the widows and orphans. After many hardships, they arrived at Mt. Pisgah on November 4, 1846, the day after Joseph Knight Sr. turned 74 years old. Now Father Knight had his wife and all his living children around him except Newel. There they were to wait until such time as they had the means to start for the Salt Lake Valley. Although Father Knight did not live to make this final move to gather with the Saints, he did die with his face turned westward and full of faith in the Lord and his promises. He passed away on February 3, 1847, and was laid to rest in Mt. Pisgah, Iowa, where a tall stone obelisk is the only monument to him and the scores of others who died there.

Historian William G. Hartley has noted that “few responded better to the revelation (D&C 6:18) directed to Oliver Cowdery in April 1829 to ‘stand by my servant Joseph’ than did the Knight family” (484). He notes that the Knights stood by Joseph Smith more firmly and longer than most of the “official” witnesses did; thus, their loyalty and the steadiness of their commitment becomes a different kind of witness, a silent but eloquent testimony of their faith in the Prophet’s calling and teachings. They had the opportunity to observe Joseph Smith at very close range and to know him intimately, and they didn’t question his character or his teachings. Hartley suggests that the Knights

passed three important tests of loyalty. The first test came with the economic and political difficulties in Kirtland and Missouri, which led some to question Joseph Smith's leadership and the truthfulness of the revelations he received. The second came in Nauvoo when Joseph Smith introduced temple ordinances and plural marriage, which again alienated some, including leading figures in the Church. The third came with the martyrdom of the Prophet, when the Saints were asked to transfer their loyalties to the Twelve and particularly to the leadership of Brigham Young. This test was failed by leading members and even by members of the Prophet's family. But "the large Knight family network survived these three tests remarkably well," says Hartley (486), suggesting that their devotion was not just to Joseph Smith but came from their testimonies, which had been revealed to them by the Holy Ghost.

Perhaps this family's greatest contribution to the growth of the Church lay in the fact that when the first Knights believed, their immediate and extended family members followed suit. This close-knit family formed a solid nucleus to which new growth could be added. Their steadfastness contributed to a sturdy foundation for the restoration of the Lord's church in the latter days. They were willing to make the sacrifices the Lord demanded to refine their faith and prepare for greater blessings. Joseph Knight's own faithful life was emulated by his children. So long as the succeeding generations of his descendants remember him and honor him by living as he did, the Prophet Joseph Smith's promise will prove true: Joseph Knight's name will never be forgotten.

### Works Cited

- Hartley, William G. *Stand by My Servant Joseph: The Story of the Joseph Knight Family and the Restoration*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2003.
- Lloyd, R. Scott. "Joseph Knight Cane Presented to Church." *MormonTimes*.  
<[http://www.mormontimes.com/studies\\_doctrine/church\\_history/?id=9584](http://www.mormontimes.com/studies_doctrine/church_history/?id=9584)>.
- Porter, Larry. "The Joseph Knight Family." *Ensign* (October 1978): 39-45.

© Kristine Hansen  
PO Box 521  
Spring City, Utah 84662

***Descendants of Joseph Knight and others who read this history are welcome to cite it with appropriate credit given to Kristine Hansen and other sources used in the writing of this history.***

***Anyone who finds an error or an omission in this history that should be corrected is invited to contact Kristine Hansen directly.***