

A Family Witness of Joseph Smith

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Joseph Knight Sr.


was born in Massachusetts in 1772 and came to Colesville, New York, via Vermont. He and his wife, Polly Peck, both had a namesake child among their seven. The oldest son was Nahum, then came Esther, Newel, Anna, Joseph Jr., little Polly, and Elizabeth.

In 1826, the Knight family never suspected what tremendous effect the unmarried young man from Palmyra, whom they had just hired, would have on their lives. They employed Joseph Smith Jr. to help them mill and farm. But instead of being just their employee, he soon became their religious leader and guide. From their first acquaintance with him until his martyrdom less than two decades later, they were his followers, as loyal as any who converted during his lifetime. Through fourteen years of Joseph Smith's public ministry, he and the Knights were trusted friends and co-workers in the cause of the Restoration.

The Family as Witnesses

By the mouth of witnesses, the scriptures explain, the truth of God's word will be established. Several people became official witnesses of Joseph Smith's prophetic mission: the Smith family, the Three Witnesses, and the Eight Witnesses. Less spectacular, less official, less well-known, the Joseph Knight family became a special type of witness—a family witness—of Joseph Smith's work as prophet and restorer. The Knights believed him before David Whitmer or Oliver Cowdery ever heard of him and before Martin Harris believed. And the Knights stood by Joseph longer and more firmly than most of the official witnesses did.

Knight Colesville, New York, farm site photo by Kenneth R. Mays. Joseph Smith artwork by Liz Lemon Swindle.

A man with long, wavy, light brown hair is shown in profile, looking towards the left. He is wearing a dark brown coat over a white cravat and a dark vest. He holds two thick, old books in his hands. The background is a rural landscape with a wooden fence, green fields, and trees under a blue sky with light clouds.

*"Joseph Knight, Sen. . . .
has been faithful and true,
and even-handed and ex-
emplary, and virtuous and
kind, never deviating to the
right hand or the left. . . .
this man was a faithful man
in Israel; therefore his name
shall never be forgotten."*

—Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*,
Vol. 5, ch. 6, p. 124

The Knight family circle knew Joseph in the earliest days, when he was accused of gold-digging and using peep stones. But that did not cause them to lose their regard for him. When Joseph was tried in court on charges of defrauding people by treasure digging, Father Knight twice arranged for local attorneys to defend him. If Joseph Smith were a charlatan or disreputable money grubber, as his detractors charged, the large Knight family would have known it and would not have felt such trust in him. Their devotion to him, which was based on firsthand knowledge, stands today as a substantial witness of his good character.

The Knights helped Joseph Smith give the world the Book of Mormon. They provided food for Joseph and Emma while Joseph translated the gold plates. Parts of the original Book of Mormon manuscript were penned on foolscap paper the Knights brought to Joseph. Father Knight's wagon carried the gold plates from the Hill Cumorah.

The Knight and Smith families knew each other well. Father Knight stayed at the Smith's Manchester home. Joseph Smith was often a guest in Knight homes in Colesville, New York, and in Missouri. Hyrum, the Prophet's brother, boarded with Newel and Sally (Newel's first wife, who died in Missouri) at Colesville. In Kirtland, Newel and Lydia boarded separately with Hyrum and Jerusha, who hosted Newel and Lydia's wedding. Joseph Smith performed that wedding. Joseph Smith preached Polly Knight's funeral sermon. Father Smith, the Church patriarch, gave several Knights their patriarchal blessings. Joseph Smith's history records his joy when his path crossed those of Father Knight or his children, whom he calls his choice friends. Newel Knight's journals are full of expressions of love and admiration whenever he encountered Joseph Smith.

The Knights helped by providing food for Joseph and Emma while Joseph translated the gold plates.

Three Tests of Loyalty

The Knights passed through at least three trials that tested their loyalty to the Prophet. The first test centered on the Kirtland-Missouri difficulties, when major differences about Church economic policies and leadership questions caused the Whitmers and the Cowderys to lose confidence in Joseph Smith. The second came in Nauvoo, when the young Prophet introduced several "higher doctrines," including temple ceremonies and plural marriage, which alienated such important figures as First Presidency members Sidney Rigdon and William Law. The third test came after Joseph Smith's martyrdom, when the Saints were

Artwork by Paul Mann



asked to transfer their loyalties to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Brigham Young. This was something Nauvoo Stake President William Marks and several in the Smith family were unwilling to do. The large Knight family network survived these three tests remarkably well.

What of the Missouri persecutions? Sacrifices of lives and properties during the Missouri years did not shake their faith in Joseph Smith and the Restoration. They were forced from Jackson County by hostile citizenry in winter, and they were later pushed out of Clay County. State militia expelled them from Missouri altogether, a wintertime move again, in 1838–39. Family members suffered a combined loss of perhaps \$20,000-worth of land and property in Missouri (more than a quarter of a million dollars today). They buried six loved ones in Missouri. Despite the spiritual and mental anguish suffered during the eight years in Missouri, with three exceptions, they did not forsake their faith.

What of temple ceremonies and plural marriage? In Nauvoo, the family performed baptisms for the dead for their deceased relatives. In the Nauvoo Temple they received endowments and sealings in eternal marriages. The families of four of Father and Polly Knight's children entered polygamy: Newel's widow, Lydia; Anna DeMille; Joseph Knight Jr., and Elizabeth Knight Johnson. The families of two of his four stepchildren accepted polygamy: Hosea Stout (widower of stepdaughter Samantha Peck) and Sarah Jane and husband, Charles C. Rich. Also, Father Knight's sister, Molly Knight Slade, became a plural wife.

What of the leadership succession question after Joseph Smith's death? The Knights voted with their voices, their resources, their feet, and their wagons for the Twelve and Brigham Young as Joseph Smith's proper successors. Of Father Knight's children and their spouses, all who were living in Nauvoo as adults followed Brigham Young west. Most Nauvoo high council members supported Brigham Young, including Newel Knight, the most experienced stake officer then serving.

Contributors to the Restoration

None of the Knights became apostles or seventies or stake presidents. None were chosen to be

among the Three Witnesses or the Eight Witnesses of the gold plates. No Knights marched with Joseph Smith in Zion's Camp. The only proselytizing missionary the family produced during the Joseph Smith period was Newel, who preached during his journey to Kirtland in 1834–35. Yet Knight family members, individually and in groups or families, helped Joseph Smith and the cause of the Restoration in less spectacular ways. They participated in most of the key events that launched the Restoration. Some of them helped Joseph Smith bring forth the Book of Mormon. Some were at the Whitmer farm the day the Church was organized. Six helped to lay the first log in beginning the building of Zion in Jackson County. Family members helped build the Kirtland and Nauvoo Temples.

The family's most important proselytizing work was within their own family. Father Knight, Newel, and Joseph Jr. helped to convert more than sixty souls in their extended families: Knights, Culvers, Pecks, Coburns, Stringhams, DeMilles, and Slades. Then, when children and grandchildren came along, a clan of Knight-related believers added numbers and strength to the young Church. They gave the Church its first organized congregation, the Colesville Branch. Almost all of the sixty-plus members of the branch were related. By staying together during moves to Ohio and Missouri, the Colesville Branch—the Knight family—provided the Church a functioning unit of some permanence. When the first high priests were called, Newel Knight was among them. When the first stake was created in Missouri, Newel served in it as high councilor and branch president, Hezekiah Peck was one of the stake's first priests, and Ezekiel Peck one of its first teachers. Hezekiah Peck became a Nauvoo bishop and was a bishop during one stage of the trek west. Joseph Knight Jr. was ordained a bishop in Kanesville. Newel served on four high councils during twelve consecutive years. Several of the families' women were charter members in the Nauvoo Relief Society.

The first person in the Church to die in the cause of establishing Zion in Jackson County was Mother Polly Peck Knight. And Sally Knight, Newel's first wife, died in Clay County due to exposure

caused by persecutions. Some Knight relatives died "before their time" in Nauvoo.

Newel, a Nauvoo exile, died in upper Nebraska from wilderness hardships forced upon him because of his loyalty to the religious cause through terrible times. Father Knight died four months after being driven from Nauvoo by anti-Mormon vigilantes in September 1846. From the Church's second year until the martyrdom, the family lost some of its best blood for the sake of the gathering.

Various Knight relatives helped pioneer no fewer than ten Latter-day Saint settlements during seven major moves: Thompson in Ohio; Independence, Clay, and Far West settlements in Missouri; Nauvoo

Newel Knight, son of Joseph Knight

. . . and I had many serious conversations on the important subject of man's eternal salvation; we had got into the habit of praying much at our meetings and Newel had said he would try and take up his cross, and pray vocally during meeting; but when we again met together he rather excused himself. [Newel] made several attempts to pray, but could scarcely do so, feeling that he had not done his duty, but that he should have prayed in the presence of others. He began to feel uneasy, and continued to feel worse both in mind and body, until upon reaching his own house, his appearance was such as to alarm his wife very much. He requested her to go and bring me to him.

"I went, and found him suffering very much in his mind, and his body acted upon in a very strange manner. His visage and limbs were distorted and twisted in every shape and appearance possible to imagine; and finally he was caught up off the floor of the apartment and tossed about most fearfully. His situation was soon made know to his neighbors and relatives, and in a short time as many as eight or nine grown persons had got together to witness the scene. After he had thus suffered for a time, I succeeded in getting hold of him by the hand, when almost immediately he spoke to me, and with great earnestness requested of me, that I should cast the devil out of him, saying that he knew he was in him, and that he also knew that I could cast him out. I replied, if you know that I can, it shall be done, and then almost unconsciously I rebuked the devil, and



Artwork by Paul Mann

commanded him in the name of Jesus Christ to depart from him; when immediately Newel spoke out and said that he could see the devil leave him and vanish from his sight. This was the first miracle which has been done in this Church, or by any member of it, and it was done by God, and by the power of godliness; therefore let the honor and the praise, the dominion and the glory, be ascribed to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, forever and ever, Amen.

"The scene was now entirely changed, for as soon as the devil had departed from our friend, his countenance became natural, his distortion of body ceased, and almost immediately the Spirit of God descended upon him, and the visions of eternity were opened to his view. . . . As soon as consciousness returned, his bodily weakness was such that we were obliged to lay him upon his bed and wait upon him for some time." ❏

From Joseph Smith's history.

in Illinois; Garden Grove, Mt. Pisgah, and Kanesville in Iowa; and Winter Quarters and Ponca in Nebraska. Father Knight, Newel, and Joseph Jr. built about a dozen mills to help their fellow settlers.

The first marriage Joseph Smith performed in this dispensation by priesthood rather than by state authority was the marriage of Newel and Lydia Knight.

Several family members witnessed divine manifestations. The first miracle in the Church came when the Prophet Joseph Smith cast evil spirits out of Newel Knight. At a June 1830 conference, Newel beheld a vision of the Father and the Son. He and Lydia witnessed the gift of tongues and of heavenly fire during the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. Lydia and a DeMille child both saw the Holy Ghost imbue people with radiating light. Through faith in priesthood power and a handkerchief blessed by Joseph Smith, Lydia was healed. By insisting that elders give her child a blessing by the power of the priesthood, she demonstrated her faith in patriarch Joseph Smith Sr.'s promise that she would lose no children to death. Newel healed Philo Dibble, Aunt Electa Peck, and Aunt Patty Peck twice. Joseph Knight Jr. healed John Harris. After Newel died, he visited Lydia twice to comfort and strengthen her.

Only a few early converts were privileged to be the subjects of revelations that Joseph Smith received. But the Knight kin, as individuals and as the Colesville Branch, received divine attention in several revelations. Altogether, in more than a dozen revelations the Lord singled out the Knights and their circumstances.

The Joseph Knight Sr. family has made a valuable contribution to Latter-day Saint literature. Newel Knight's autobiography appeared in *Scraps of Biography*, which the Church published in the 1880s. Lydia's story, written with Susa Young Gates and Amelia Young for the "Noble Women's Lives" series, was published as *Lydia Knight's History* in 1883. Father Knight's history, penned apparently in the last half of the 1830s, was published in 1976 in *BYU Studies*. Newel's voluminous personal journals are in the Church Archives and offer one of the finest firsthand accounts of Mormonism's beginnings. Joseph Knight Jr.'s "Incidents of History," although brief, gives important details about

early Church history; it has been published. The writings of Father Knight, Lydia, Newel, and Joseph Jr. give not only history, but also four written witnesses of Joseph Smith. Each revered him.

Freeborn and Anna Knight DeMille's Defense of the Faith

From Manti, Utah, Freeborn and Anna Knight DeMille had written to Freeborn's brother Isaac and his wife, Sarah DeMille, in Saline, New York, urging them to investigate Mormon-



ism and to come west. Isaac DeMille answered, writing a letter critical of Mormonism, dated December 27, 1857. Freeborn and Anna answered Isaac's letter politely but with firm convictions. Their answer is dated June 29, 1858. In it they invited Isaac and Sarah to come west to escape a coming famine and war. In reply, Isaac and Sarah shared perceptions of Mormonism common to non-LDS people living in the East. They wondered how Freeborn and Anna could embrace a religion made disreputable by polygamy, avenging Danites, murders of emigrants, acts of treason and rebellion, and strange twists to biblical teachings.

In his answer, Freeborn, speaking for himself and Anna, calmly offered explanations. "I think you judge me very hard although I am not offended," Freeborn wrote. "You have condemned things you know nothing about." He reaffirmed what he had said previously, that "we as a people are the happiest people in the world, . . . we have been mobbed and robbed enough to stand in our own defense, now," referring to threats then posed by Johnston's Army, newly arrived in Utah Territory.

Isaac accused Freeborn of being deceived by Joseph Smith. Freeborn countered by reminding Isaac of firsthand contacts he (Freeborn) and Anna had had with the Prophet from the early New York days forward, so that their personal knowledge about Joseph Smith should merit more consideration than any anti-Mormon materials Isaac and Sarah were reading. "As for Joseph Smith being

a Prophet it makes no difference whether or not you believe it," Freeborn said. "We hear the same stories you tell about and a great many more about as foolish. Years ago we were acquainted with him in Broome County before he got the plates and afterward and know all about it."

Isaac's criticism that Mormons were guilty of rebellion against the government caused Freeborn to dig in his heels: "I would like to show you who has rebelled against the government; but it would take me all summer to write all I know about it. This people has been driven five times from their homes and their property by mob violence in violation of the laws of God and the laws of Humanity and the laws of the United States. Now just look at it, who rebelled against the government and who took the spoil?"

"You speak of a dark mystery," Freeborn concluded. "There is no dark mystery in Mormonism. It is all light and truth, eternal truth."

A Promised Posterity

Joseph Smith Sr., the Church patriarch, promised Newel and Lydia Knight several blessings, including a large posterity. To Newel, after losing his first wife, Sally, and one child, patriarch Joseph Smith Sr. promised that he should "yet raise up children" and "that thy name may not be blotted out from among men." To Lydia Knight, who had lost her only two children before she married Newel, Patriarch Smith promised she would be a mother "of many children" and would "have power to keep them from the power of the destroyer, and thy heart shall not be pained because of the loss of thy children, for the Lord shall watch over them and keep them." On several occasions, she exercised faith in that promise, thereby driving death from her children. The promise held, and Lydia raised eight children—the children promised to Newel—to adulthood. A large posterity came to her—eighty descendants during her lifetime alone.

In the early 1980s, the Mormon Pioneer Genealogy Society published a ranking of one hundred pioneer families with the largest number of descendants who submitted four-generation family group records to the LDS Genealogical Society. The Joseph Knight-Polly Peck family ranked fourteenth

largest on that list—one place ahead of the prolific Brigham Young family.

Promise of Necessities of Life

Father Joseph Knight's generosity towards Joseph Smith, which helped bring forth the Book of Mormon, did not go unrewarded. The Prophet promised him that the Knights would never want for necessities. As part of the fulfillment of this promise, the Prophet arranged for Father Knight to be given a residential lot and house in Nauvoo. Joseph Knight Jr.'s patriarchal blessing promised temporal comfort to him and "the blessings shall extend to thy children, and thy children's children, from generation to generation." Father Knight also gave Joseph Knight Jr. a blessing that promised that "thou shall be blessed with all the blessings for the comfort of life." Lydia Knight was promised "blessings of the earth and all things which thou needest for thy comfort." Family tradition asserts that the promise extends to any of Father Knight's descendants who remained faithful, that they would never want for the necessities of life, although prosperity would not come without work or worry or periods of hard times.

Lydia Knight's life after Newel's death is filled with occasions when, by exercising faith and determination, she was provided for without asking or was sent needed food or cattle feed—and even a cabin near Winter Quarters in 1847. Joseph Jr.'s son Miland became one of four top cattlemen in Utah. He set up an integrated meat company that bred cattle, owned cattle herds and ranches, slaughtered and packed meat, and sold it wholesale. Becoming very successful, he put his wealth into a new plant, but fire destroyed it while it was uninsured, and his wealth dissolved overnight. Some descendants believe Miland's success would have continued had he desired to use his wealth to help the Lord's kingdom. By the time he died, Miland had property enough to sustain his widow for the rest of her life but nothing more. Taking center stage during any discussions of prosperity among the Knight offspring is Jesse Knight, Newel and Lydia's son, whose wealth and philanthropy have become legendary in Utah and LDS history (*see page 29*).

Family Legacy of Belief

There are critics of Joseph Smith, many of them respectable and honorable people, who question his truthfulness and claims to receive revelations from God. Amid historical debates and religious discussions, the simple but solid Knight family network, who remained loyal to the Prophet longer than anyone but the Smith family, ought not to be ignored. They bear a quiet but adamant witness that their friend Joseph Smith was what he claimed to be.

Fulfillment of Joseph Smith's Prediction

In January 1842, Joseph Smith privately wrote his tribute to Father Knight and his loyal family

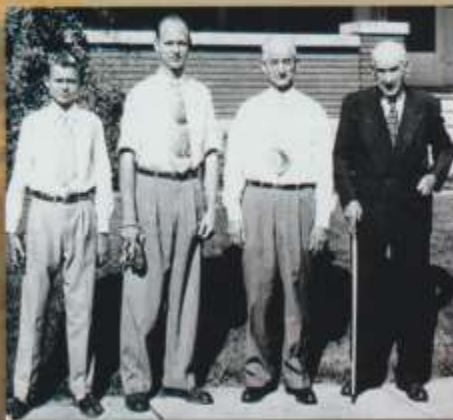
and then prophesied something which has come to pass. "It shall be said of him by the sons of Zion, while there is one of them remaining," the Prophet said of Father Knight, "that this man, was a faithful man in Israel." Because of Father Knight's faithfulness, Joseph additionally promised that "his name shall never be forgotten." His numerous posterity now living, the histories written by Father Knight, Newel, Lydia, and Joseph Knight Jr., and books and articles by historians help fulfill that promise one friend made to another so many years ago. ■

Excerpts from William G. Hartley, Stand By My Servant Joseph: Story of the Joseph Knight Family (Deseret Book, 2004).



Joseph Smith spotted his dear friend, Father Knight, hobbling down a Nauvoo street. Father Knight, an elderly man in his seventies, had been the prophet's friend for almost 20 years. Joseph stepped up to him, put his arm around him, pressed his elderly friend's gnarled fingers onto the top of his cane, and said, "Brother Knight, you need this cane more than I do." The prophet told Father Knight to keep the cane as long as he needed it, and then to pass it on to Knight descendants with the first name of Joseph.

Joseph Knight Sr.'s cane was presented to the Church History Library on May 29, 2009. Elder Marlin K. Jensen of the Seventy (former Church Historian and Recorder) received the cane from Jim Knight of Arizona, a spokesman for the Knight family descendants.



Nearly 100 Knight descendants were in attendance. ■

See <http://www.josephknightfamily.org/news/cane.html>

Pictured left to right, descendants who inherited the cane Joseph Robert, Joseph Adair, Joseph Byron, and Joseph Knight.

Artwork by Paul Mann. See photo at josephknightfamily.org