

**The Knight Family:
Ever Faithful to the Prophet**
by William G. Hartley

Joseph Smith spied aged Joseph Knight hobbling down a Nauvoo street. He quickly overtook his long-time friend from New York and handed the elderly man his cane, insisting that Brother Knight keep it and pass it on to a descendant named Joseph.¹ Their friendship had lasted nearly twenty years, dating to before the time Joseph Smith had received the Book of Mormon plates.

After the Smiths, the Joseph and Polly Knight family may be the second family of the Restoration. The Knights knew Joseph Smith and accepted his claims before Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, or David Whitmer knew him. The Knights also stood by Joseph Smith more steadfastly than did the Three and the Eight Witnesses and even some of the Smiths. They became a special type of witness, a family witness of Joseph Smith's prophetic work.

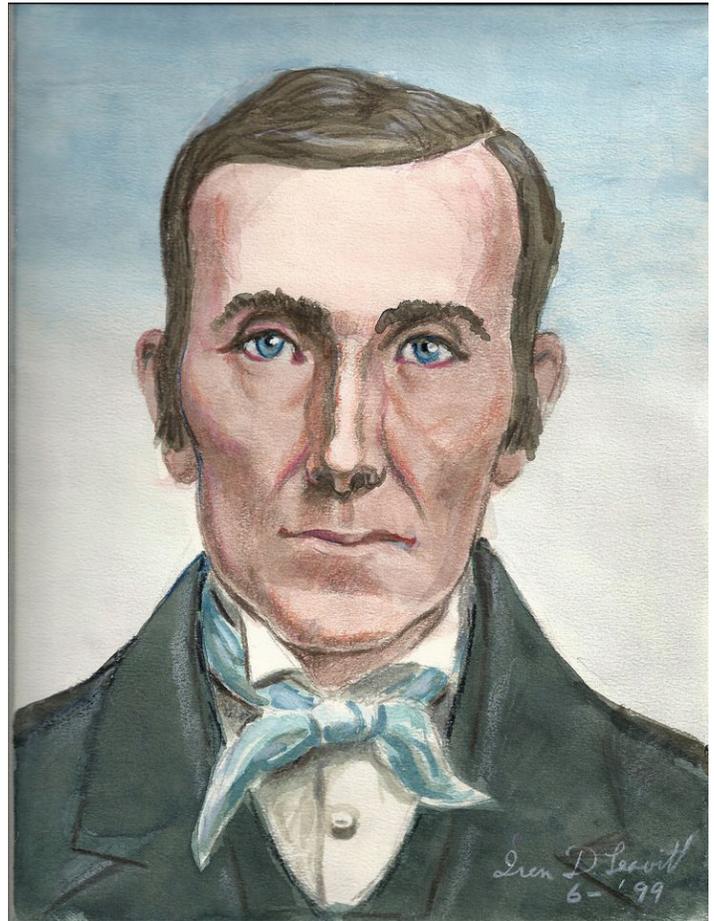
Joseph Smith's friendship with the Knights began when he was twenty years old. In late 1826, Joseph Smith became a hired hand for Joseph Knight, Sr., and others in the Colesville, New York, area—115 miles southeast of Palmyra by dirt road. Young Joseph did farm work and probably helped at the Knights' sawmill. He had experienced the First Vision six years before and had been meeting with Moroni for three years.

While helping the Knights, he bunked with Joseph Knight, Jr., who wrote that in November 1826 Joseph Smith "made known to us that he had seen a vision, that a personage had appeared to him, and told him where there was a gold book of ancient date buried, and that if he would follow the direction of the Angel, he could get it. We were told this in secret."²

Another son, Newel Knight, wrote that Joseph Smith visited them often and that they "were very deeply impressed with the truthfulness of his statements concerning the Plates of the Book of Mormon which had been shown him by an Angel of the Lord."³

Joseph Smith was then courting Emma Hale, a romance Father Knight assisted: "I paid him the money and I furnished him with a horse and cutter [sled] to go and see his girl."⁴ Joseph and Emma married shortly after that, on 18 January 1827, and moved to the Smith home near Palmyra.

When the time came for Joseph Smith to obtain



Newel Knight
1800-1847

the plates, Father Knight traveled to the Smith home, where the Prophet used his wagon to retrieve the plates. Late that night, after Joseph Smith had returned from his mission, he said to Brother Knight, "It is ten times better than I expected." According to Father Knight, the Prophet described the plates, though he "seemed to think more of the glasses or urim and thummim than he did of the plates. 'For' says he, 'I can see any thing. They are marvelous.'"

By early 1828, Joseph and Emma had moved to Emma's father's property, about thirty miles from the Knights. Joseph Smith found it impossible to both earn a living and translate the plates. The Smiths asked Father Knight for help. Although the Knights were "not in easy circumstances," Joseph Knight, Sr., gave the young man some goods: "some few things out of the store, a

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pair of shoes, and three dollars.” A few days later, Father Knight visited the couple and gave them some money to buy paper for the translation. Joseph Knight, Jr., recalled that, prior to Oliver Cowdery’s arrival, “Father and I often went to see him and carry him something to live upon.”

Mrs. Knight was not yet a believer, so in March 1828 her husband took her by sled to visit the Smiths. He wrote, “Joseph talked with us about his translating and some revelations he had received. And from that time my wife began to believe.”

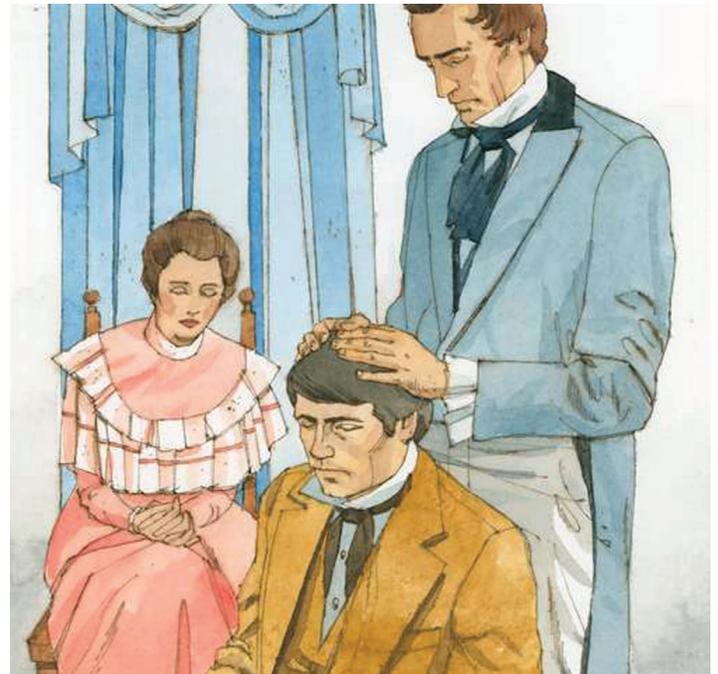
In early 1828, when Oliver Cowdery became Joseph Smith’s scribe, the two visited Father Knight, seeking provisions. Father Knight paid for and delivered a barrel of mackerel, about ten bushels of grain and six of potatoes, a pound of tea, and some lined paper for writing. The two rejoiced at the food and paper, and “then they went to work, and had provisions enough to last till the translation was done.”

Years later, Joseph Smith praised Father Knight for these items: they “enabled us to continue the work when otherwise we must have relinquished it for a season.”⁵ Joseph Knight, Sr., helped the world receive the Book of Mormon sooner. If the Prophet had had to work full-time to support his family, the translation might have taken years to complete.

In May 1829, Joseph Knight, Sr., desired to know what he should do regarding the divine work then unfolding. The Prophet inquired of the Lord and received a revelation instructing Father Knight to “seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion” (D&C 12:6) and to give heed with all his might to God’s word. This was the first of many revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants directed to the Knights.⁶

In early June 1829, Joseph and Oliver finished the work of translation on the Book of Mormon, and the Three Witnesses and then the Eight Witnesses were allowed to see the plates. Sadly, none were Knights, who lived quite a distance away. But on the day the Church was organized, one-third of the sixty people there were Knight relatives from Colesville.

Shortly thereafter, Joseph Smith went to Colesville to preach and hold meetings, probably because he knew that the Knights were ready to receive the gospel. While



**Joseph Smith blessing Newel Knight.
This was the first miracle performed in the
restored church. Many more were to follow.**

there, he challenged Newel Knight to pray vocally. In the attempt, Newel was attacked by an evil spirit that lifted him from the floor “and tossed him about most fearfully.” Neighbors gathered and then saw the Prophet command the devil in the name of Jesus Christ to depart. Newel felt great relief and gladly accepted baptism. (This exorcism was the first miracle performed in the restored church.)⁷ He became the first of more than sixty of the Knight clan to join the Church.

At the Church’s first conference on 9 June 1830 at the Whitmer’s, those attending experienced spiritual outpourings similar to those on the Day of Pentecost. Newel was one. He beheld a vision much like the one Stephen the Martyr saw: “I saw the heavens opened, I beheld the Lord Jesus Christ seated at the right hand of the Majesty on High, and it was made plain to my understanding that the time would come when I would be admitted into His presence, to enjoy His society for ever and ever.”

Despite local harassment, many Knight relatives were baptized on 28 June 1830. They included Father and Mother Knight, son Joseph, Newel’s wife Sally,

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daughter Esther and her husband William Stringham, and daughter Polly (named after her mother). Mother Knight was a Peck, and among the Peck relatives baptized were her brother Hezekiah and his wife Martha and her sister Esther and her husband Aaron Culver.⁸

Angry neighbors prevented the converts from being confirmed, and a constable arrested Joseph Smith. Father Knight, indignant, hired James Davidson and John Reid, neighboring farmers well versed in the law, to defend his friend. They did, and Joseph Smith was acquitted the following midnight.⁹

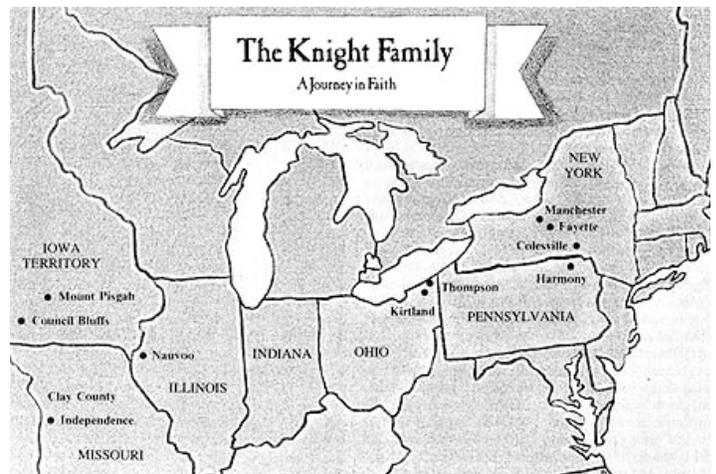
Joseph Knight, Jr., said that feelings in the neighborhood became heated: “That night our wagons were turned over and wood piled on them, and some sunk in the water, rails were piled against our doors, and chains sunk in the stream and a great deal of mischief done.”

Within hours after his acquittal, Joseph Smith was arrested again and tried in Colesville. Father Knight’s lawyer friends felt too fatigued to help, but his pleadings won them over. Mr. Reid said that Father Knight was “like the old patriarchs that followed the ark of God to the city of David.” Newel, called upon to testify, told the court that no, Joseph Smith had not cast a devil out of him, but that Joseph by God’s power had cast it out. Mr. Davidson and Mr. Reid picked apart the prosecution’s case and Joseph Smith was freed.¹⁰

In September 1830, Newel Knight and his sister Anna’s husband, Freeborn DeMille, attended the Church’s second conference, held at Fayette, New York.¹¹ Newel was ordained a priest, and Freeborn was baptized.

At Fayette, Newel Knight became the young prophet’s confidant during a crisis caused by Hyrum Page’s claim of receiving revelations for the Church through a peepstone. Newel wrote that Hyrum Page carried “quite a roll of papers full of these revelations,” which led many astray. Joseph Smith “was perplexed and scarcely knew how to meet this new exigency.” Sharing the same room, the two friends spent the greater part of the night in prayer. In response, Joseph received a revelation (see D&C 28) that spelled out the proper channels for revelation to reach the Church. Newel reported, “Brother Page and all ... present renounced the stone, ... much to our joy and satisfaction.”

After the meetings, Hyrum Smith was appointed



to preside over the Colesville Branch. He and Jerusha lived with and became good friends with Newel and Sally Knight. Later, Newel replaced Hyrum as branch president.

In December 1830, the Church was commanded to “assemble together at the Ohio.” (D&C 37:3.) Newel Knight said that this entailed the sacrifice of their property. Newel sold 60 acres, Freeborn DeMille 61 acres, Aaron Culver 100 acres, and Father Knight 140 acres, with “two Dwelling Houses, a good barn, and a fine orchard.” Led by Newel, sixty-two Knight kin moved to Ohio as part of the first gathering. Unlike other Church units, the Colesville Branch remained intact.

The family settled on Lemam Copley’s land near Painesville, Ohio, and became the first people in the Church in this dispensation to try to live an economic cooperative order. (See D&C 48; D&C 51.) But Lemam Copley soon withdrew his land and ordered the Saints off. Father Knight wrote, “We sold out what we Could But Copley took the advantage of us and we Could not git any thing for what we had done.” Newel Knight asked the Prophet for counsel, and in response Joseph Smith received a revelation directing the Knight clan to move once again, this time to Missouri. (See D&C 54.)

On 25 July 1832, Joseph Smith welcomed his Colesville friends to Missouri and directed them to settle twelve miles west of Independence. “We found the country to be Butiful rich and plesent and we made our selves as Comfortable as we Could,” Father Knight wrote.

The Knights eagerly pitched in to establish the area

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as a center place for Zion and for a great temple. When twelve men laid the first log as a foundation of Zion, five were Knight relatives. Newel Knight was one of seven who dedicated the Jackson County temple site. For the Knight clan, such ceremonies stirred hope of a great future, despite the tragedies among them. Mother Knight had been so sick on the trip from Ohio that Newel brought along lumber for her coffin. Her “greatest desire,” he wrote, was “to set her feet upon the land of Zion and to have her body interred” there. She became the first Saint buried in Missouri. That year, death claimed two more Knights—one of them Newel’s sister Esther, the other his uncle, Aaron Culver.

This outpost colony of the Church saw a busy year of building, fencing, and establishing homes while consecrating its properties to live cooperatively. When the Church formed a council of high priests to govern the stake in Missouri, Newel Knight became one of the council. He continued to be president of what was still called the Colesville Branch. Six Knight men also made labor pledges as part of plans to build the Independence Temple.

Father Knight remarried, to Phoebe Crosby Peck, his first wife’s widowed sister-in-law. Phoebe had four children of her own, and the couple had two more. Counting Phoebe’s four, they were the parents and step-parents of thirteen children.

In the last half of 1833, Missourians drove the Saints, including the Knight clan, from Jackson County. Mobbers shot Philo Dibble, whom Newel Knight saved from death through a remarkable priesthood blessing.¹² Fearing for their lives, the Knights braved the cold weather and rushed to the Missouri River ferries. Joseph Knight, Jr., told of women and children walking with bare feet on frozen ground. The Knights lost all their property, including a gristmill. Of that awful winter, Sally Knight’s sister, Emily Colburn Slade, recalled, “We lived in tents until winter set in, and did our cooking out in the wind and storms.”¹³

Suffering from poor food and shelter, many Saints became victims of fever and what was called ague (probably malaria). Sally was one of them. She gave birth to a son, who died, and then she died herself. “Truly she has fallen a martyr to the gospel,” her husband, Newel,



In 1833, Philo Dibble was shot by a mob. Newel Knight would save his life with a priesthood blessing.

eulogized.

In 1835, Newel traveled to Ohio to help build the temple and to receive temple blessings. At Kirtland, he boarded with his good friends Hyrum and Jerusha Smith. There he met and fell in love with Lydia Goldthwaite Bailey, whose belief in Joseph Smith was equal to his.

A few years previous, Lydia’s husband had deserted her, and both of her children had died, so her family sent her to Canada for a change of scenery. In late 1833, while staying with the Nickerson family, she heard Joseph Smith preach and saw his face “become white and a shining glow seemed to beam from every feature.”¹⁴ This witness of the Spirit converted her. She then moved to Kirtland. On 24 November 1835, Joseph Smith performed Newel and Lydia’s wedding at Hyrum Smith’s home. The ceremony was the first marriage performed by the Prophet.¹⁵

Newel took Lydia to Missouri—just in time to join

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the Mormon exodus from Clay County to Far West. When Joseph Smith also moved to Far West in 1838, Newel rejoiced to again hear the Prophet preach: “His words were meat and drink for us.”

Unfortunately, the strife that had beset the Church did not abate. The Knights in Far West were saddened to see several leading elders forsake the Church. The high council Newel Knight served on had to cut off the entire Missouri stake presidency, including David and John Witmer, two Book of Mormon witnesses. Oliver Cowdery also veered away.¹⁶ Missourians were also clashing again with the Saints, and once more in winter 1838–39, Church members surrendered homes and lands and became refugees. The Knight clan struggled across Missouri to Illinois.

Within a few months, the Knight and Peck families had moved to where Nauvoo would rise. They now included at least eleven family units—four headed by members of Father Knight’s generation, seven by Newel’s generation. They had passed the tests of loyalty the troubles at Kirtland and Missouri had thrown at them. Since converting nine years before, they had moved to five settlements, including the present one. (Notably, between 1831 and 1846, the Knights helped to pioneer no less than ten LDS settlements in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska.¹⁸) Unlike the Three Witnesses and other prominent leaders of the Church, their knees had not buckled. Despite suffering great losses of property, they did not turn against their religion. The family’s bill of damages for losses in Missouri alone reached \$16,000, or more than \$500,000 today.¹⁷

In Illinois, Newel Knight eagerly greeted the Prophet shortly after he arrived from his long incarceration in Missouri prisons. Newel described that meeting thus: “As soon as I could I went to see him, but I can never describe my feelings on meeting with him, and shaking hands with one whom I had so long and so dearly loved, his worth and his sufferings filled my heart with mingled emotions, while I beheld him and reflected upon the past, and yet saw him standing before me, in the full dignity of his holy calling, I could but raise my heart in silent but ardent prayer that he and his family and his aged parents may never be torn apart in like manner again.”

Once more, the Knights went to work building up the Church and a new city—Nauvoo, the “City of Joseph.” Newel served on the high council. He and Joseph Knight, Jr., built several gristmills. About the time the Prophet gave Father Knight the cane, the city council voted to give him a lot and built him a house. Still in use today, Knight Street memorializes Joseph Smith’s esteem for the Knights.

One day in January 1842, the Prophet listed in the Book of the Law of the Lord the names of those “faithful few” who had stood by him since the beginning of his ministry—“pure and holy friends, who are faithful, just, and true, and whose hearts fail not.” He included Father Knight: “My aged and beloved brother, Joseph Knight, Sen., 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. ... For fifteen years he has been faithful and true, and even-handed and exemplary, and virtuous and kind, never deviating to the right hand or to the left. Behold he is a righteous man, may God Almighty lengthen out the old man’s days. ... 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.”

The Prophet also recalled Father Knight’s sons, “Newel Knight and Joseph Knight, Jun., whose names I record ... with unspeakable delight, for they are my friends.”¹⁹

In Nauvoo, the Knight group faced and passed another great test of faith. The Prophet introduced several doctrines relating to the temple including the temple ceremonies and plural marriage, which some could not accept.²⁰ But the Knights received the teachings. They helped to finish the temple and then performed baptisms for the dead. By early 1846, more than twenty adults in the Knight families had received their temple endowments and sealings. Four of Father and Polly Knight’s children entered into plural marriage.

When Joseph and Hyrum Smith died, few mourned their passing more than the Knights. Newel’s heart broke, and he vented his sorrow in his journal: “O how I loved those men, and rejoiced under their teachings! it seems as if all is gone, and as if my very heart strings

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will break, and were it not for my beloved wife and dear children I feel as if I have nothing to live for. ... I pray God my Father that I may be reconciled to my lot, and live and die a faithful follower of the teachings of our Murdered Prophet and Patriarch.”

Following the martyrdom, the Knights passed still another severe test of loyalty. Unlike a number of others, they did not forsake the faith and follow false successors. They chose to follow the Quorum of the Twelve. All the relatives in Nauvoo (except perhaps Nahum, for whom we lack records) left the city to go westward. When ready to depart, Newel Knight “once more had the satisfaction of walking through the streets of the City of Joseph, and beholding the great works, he had so nobly reared before his martyrdom.” Once across the Mississippi River, Newel looked back a last time at the city: “My heart swelled, for I beheld at a glance, from the eminences where I stood, the noble works of Joseph the Prophet and Seer, and Hyrum his patriarch, with whom I had been acquainted, even from their boyhood, I knew their worth, and mourned their loss.”

While moving west with the exiled Saints, Newel died of exposure in northern Nebraska in January 1847. Father Knight died at Mount Pisgah, Iowa, a month later. The family, from the Church’s second year to its fourteenth, sacrificed some of its best blood for the gospel’s sake. Of Father Knight’s thirteen children and their spouses, six individuals died, one couple remains unaccounted for, and the remaining seventeen reached Utah.

The Knights are not silent witnesses of Joseph Smith and the restored gospel. Lydia wrote her life story. Newel kept an invaluable journal. Father Knight and Joseph, Jr., both penned their recollections. All four authors revered Joseph Smith.

The Knight families knew Joseph Smith in the earliest days, when he was accused of gold-digging and using peep stones. If Joseph Smith were a charlatan or disreputable money grubber as detractors charged, the large Knight clan would not have felt such deep trust in him. Their loyalty to him was based on firsthand, intimate knowledge, which stands today as a solid witness that the Prophet’s character, from when he was twenty to his death at thirty-eight, was righteous and good.

Critics of Joseph Smith have questioned his motives,

truthfulness, and divine claims. Defenders have argued that God used him to restore the true church to the earth. The debate and discussion should not ignore the faithful and solid Knight family, who remained loyal to the prophet longer than any other family. The Knights bear a powerful, persistent testimony that Joseph Smith was what he claimed to be.

The cane that Joseph Smith gave to Father Knight in Nauvoo continues to pass down the generations of Knights from one Joseph to another. It is just one memorial of the friendship and mutual faith Joseph Smith and the Joseph Knight family shared.

Family Chart

Children of Joseph Knight, Sr., and first wife, Polly Peck

- Nahum Knight (md. Thankfull)
- Esther Knight (md. William Stringham)
- Newel Knight (md. Sally Colburn and Lydia Goldthwaite)
- Anna Knight (md. Freeborn Demille)
- Joseph Knight, Jr. (md. Betsey Covert, Adeline Johnson, Abba Welden, and Mary Woolerton)
- Polly Knight (md. William Stringham)
- Elizabeth Knight (md. Joseph W. Johnson)

Children of Joseph Knight, Sr., and second wife, Phoebe Crosby Peck

- Hezekiah Peck (md. Jemima Smoot)
- Samantha Peck (md. Hosea Stout)
- Henrietta Peck (md. Thomas R. Rich)
- Sarah Jane Peck (md. Charles C. Rich)
- Ether Knight (md. Jane Terry)
- Charles C. Knight (died as a child)

Source:

William Hartley, “The Knight Family: Ever Faithful to the Prophet,” *Ensign* (January 1989).; and William Hartley, “The Knight Family: Part II,” *Liahona* (November 1989).