
Newel Knight

1800–1847

D&C 52:32; 54; 56:6–7; 72; 124:32

“Peace, prosperity and plenty, seemed to crown our labors,” wrote Newel of his life in Colesville, New York.¹ As the operator of a carding machine business and a gristmill, he was a leading man in his community. In 1826, when Joseph Smith took board and room with his father, Joseph Knight, Newel wrote, “I was particularly attached [to Joseph].” As to Joseph’s sharing with the Knight family his sacred experiences in Palmyra, Newel penned, “We 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.”²

When Joseph Smith visited with the Knight family in April 1830, he encouraged Newel to pray about the truths he heard. Newel attempted to pray aloud in the woods but was largely unsuccessful. When he returned to his home, his facial appearance and limbs were “distorted and twisted in every shape,” and his body was “caught up off the floor ... and tossed about most fearfully.” Believing that he had the devil in him, Newel pled with the Prophet Joseph to cast the devil out of him. “If you know that I can, it shall be done,” Joseph said. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Prophet commanded the devil to depart. After that horrific yet spiritual experience, as Newel lay resting, his body began to levitate: “I now began to feel a most pleasing sensation resting upon me, and immediately the visions of heaven were opened to my view. I felt myself attracted upward. ... I found that the

¹ “Newel Knight’s Journal,” in *Scraps of Biography* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 48; as published in *Classic Experiences and Adventures*.

² William G. Hartley, *They Are My Friends”: A History of the Joseph Knight Family, 1825–1850* (Provo, UT: Grandin Book, 1986), 19.

Spirit of the Lord had actually caught me up off the floor, and that my shoulder and head were pressing against the beams.”³

A month after these most unusual experiences, Newel was baptized in Colesville. At the first conference of the Church, held at the Peter Whitmer log home in Fayette, New York, he again had a spiritual experience and wrote, “I saw the heavens opened, I beheld the Lord Jesus Christ seated at the right hand of the Majesty on High.”⁴

In compliance with the revelation given to the Prophet Joseph to gather to Ohio, Newel and his extended family packed up their possessions and moved from New York to the wilderness of Ohio. For a short season, they settled on Leman Copley’s land in Thompson, Ohio. Due to difficulties that arose in Thompson, the Lord directed Newel and the other New York Saints to “flee the land, lest your enemies come upon you and take your journey ... into the regions westward, unto the land of Missouri, unto the borders of the Lamanites” (D&C 54:7–8).

In obedience to the divine directive, Newel led the Saints in Thompson to Jackson County, Missouri. There they faced extreme religious persecution. Newel and his family were forced to flee for their lives across the Missouri River to Clay County. In September 1834, Newel’s wife died. Of her, Newel wrote, “Truly she died a martyr to the gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. She was of a frail constitution, and the hardships and privations she had to endure were more than she could survive.”⁵

By May 1835 Newel had returned to Kirtland. There he took a romantic interest in Lydia Goldthwaite Bailey. Lydia refused his entreaties, as she viewed herself still married to Mr. Bailey, a man who had deserted her three years before. After much discussion on the matter, the Prophet Joseph Smith officiated at the marriage of Newel and Lydia on November 24, 1835.

A few years after their marriage, the Knights moved to Far West, Missouri. There they experienced great religious persecution. Newel wrote, “We calmly submitted to the numerous indignities heaped upon us. ... Our people made many concessions to the mob in the hope of pacifying them, but it was useless.”⁶ Newel and his family left Missouri and joined the Latter-day Saints in Illinois.

³ History, circa June–October 1839 [Draft 1], 20. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁴ Knight, “Newel Knight’s Journal,” 53.

⁵ Knight, “Newel Knight’s Journal,” 94.

⁶ Knight, “Newel Knight’s Journal,” 97.

In January 1843 the Prophet Joseph wrote of Newel and his brother Joseph Knight Jr: "Newel Knight and Joseph Knight, junior, whose names I record in the Book of the Law of the Lord with unspeakable delight, for they are my friends."⁷ Newel later penned his feelings for the Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum after the martyrdom: "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 will break, and were it not for my beloved wife and dear children I feel as if I have nothing to live for, and would rejoice to be with them in the Courts of Glory."⁸

Due to continuing mobocracy, Newel and his family joined other Latter-day Saints in crossing the Mississippi River and trekking across the Territory of Iowa. On January 1, 1847, sensing his death was near, Newel wrote, "I scarcely know why I am thus anxious, why this world appears so trifling, or the things of the world. I almost desire to leave this tenement of clay, that my spirit may soar aloft and no longer be held in bondage, yet my helpless family seem to need my protection."⁹ Newel died on January 11, 1847, at age forty-seven, leaving his widow Lydia with seven young children to rear. In her distress, Lydia wondered aloud why Newel had left her—

As she spoke, he stood by her side, with a lovely smile on 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."¹⁰

⁷ Reflections and Blessings, 16 and 23 August 1842, 179. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁸ Hartley, "They Are My Friends," 153–154.

⁹ Hartley, "They Are My Friends," 177.

¹⁰ Susa Young Gates, *Lydia Knight's History* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 71–72.