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Testimony and Exhortation in Early Mormon Women’s Letters, 1831–1839

Janiece Johnson

Women composed a significant portion of the early converts who would follow Joseph Smith over hundreds of miles and through the fires of persecution. Lucy Mack Smith, Rebecca Williams, Phebe Peck, and Melissa Dodge represent well the dedication and testimony of such early Latter-day Saint women. Despite separation from loved ones and the dangers and difficulties they would face as Church members, religion was the guiding factor in their lives. These women testified of the value of their experiences and exhorted others to “give up all and follow your Lord” regardless of the trials that were required of them.¹

The early history of the Saints is one of transition: the spiritual transformation of individuals from an old lifestyle to a new, the theological development of the Church, and the actual physical movement of the Saints from one location to another. The history of the Saints and of Church leadership during the Church’s first ten years of existence are well chronicled, though the familiar narratives leave out many integral parts of the story. The manner in which the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been written is characteristic of the changing historiography of United States religious history in general. Only since the late 1960s have historians focused extensively on women’s documents and made concerted efforts to include women and others previously omitted in the historical tapestry.

¹ Phebe Crosby Peck to Anna Pratt, Independence, Missouri, August 10, 1832, photocopy, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

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While considerable historical scholarship has recently been directed toward the study of women after the organization of the Relief Society in 1842, many stories of the female members of the Church in the 1830s remain untold. No comprehensive attempt has been made to bring light to the women residing in this historical hollow.

This deficit in documentation is due to several problems. Extant collected records of women in America are sparse. Not only were there at times tendencies for women to neglect writing, but those who were literate often lacked the time and resources to commit their experiences to paper. As Hezibah Richards penned to a family member in 1838, “I must be brief for I expect both time and paper will fail me before I have said one half I wish.” Women’s organizations in the early Church lacked both the tenure and continuity necessary to insure that the significant role women performed was not overlooked. And it is only in the last decades that historical repositories have made an aggressive effort to acquire the documentation for women’s history. Two historians, Charles Sellers and Susan Juster, have used this absence of information to conclude that early Mormon women were few in number and short on influence or that Latter-day Saint leaders were misogynists. Seller and Juster suggest that women were generally dragged into Mormonism by their husbands and would not have united


4. Hepsy Richards to William Richards, Kirtland, January 22, 1838, typescript, Church Archives. Pen, ink, and paper were precious. In letter writing, often every last centimeter of space was utilized. At times this meant writing both horizontally and vertically to maximize writing space. See Carol Cornwall Madsen, In Their Own Words: Women and the Story of Nauvoo (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 93–95.
with the Mormons of their own volition. Such assumptions, in addition to the gap in research on early Mormon women, call for a more comprehensive examination of the existing records.

The letters presented here augment the recent historical trend to acknowledge the value of women's voices. They provide a glimpse into

5. Charles Sellers, a prominent Jacksonian historian, argues that unlike other religious movements of the time, Mormonism had more men than women because of a "widespread female reluctance" to accept the faith. According to Sellers, this demographic, in fact, "revers[ed] the usual female preponderance in religious movements." Sellers's analysis of Mormonism is not positive. For him, Joseph Smith was a "resourceful trickster" who utilized the church he established for his needs. Sellers's knowledge of Mormonism appears superficial. He utilized the example of Lucy Harris to demonstrate that women fought vigorously against Smith and his church and averred that women could not be baptized unless related to a male Saint. He asserted, "The writings of the most loyal [Mormon women] convey an undertone of resentment." Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 218–25. Sellers's sole named source for this analysis of Mormon women is an unpublished paper that cited Elizabeth B. Tanner and Eliza M. Partridge. My cursory reading of writings of both Tanner and Partridge does not discern a tone of resentment. Unlike Sellers's characterization, many Mormon women were the first in their families to join with Smith and endure harassment for their beliefs. See Janiece Lyn Johnson, "'Give It All Up and Follow Your Lord': Mormon Female Religiosity, 1831–1843" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2001).

Expressing views similar to Sellers's, Susan Juster, a historian at the University of Michigan, essentially likened Joseph Smith to the prophet Matthias, who preached that "woman is the capsheaf of the abomination of desolation—full of all devilry." Referring to the "intense misogyny displayed by many of these 'Old Testament Patriarchs,' "Juster assumed that because an organization was patriarchal it was also misogynistic. Susan Juster, "The Spirit and the Flesh: Gender, Language, and Sexuality in American Protestantism," in New Directions in American Religious History, ed. Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 351. In addition, in her book Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelism in Revolutionary New England (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 132, Juster suggests that the "overt misogyny" of Mormon patriarchs relegated Mormon women to secondary positions at church and in the home. However, evidence has not been produced from the writings of Mormon women that they felt like the object of male derision during Joseph Smith's lifetime, nor has misogyny been found in the Prophet's writings. In addition, the teachings of Mormon leaders demonstrate a reverence toward the exalted role of women. Mormon women generally reveal an understanding of, and a deference to, the patriarchal order. See Ileen Ann LeCheminant, "The Status of Women in the Philosophy of Mormonism from 1830 to 1845" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1942); Derr, Cannon, and Beecher, Women of Covenant, 1–20.

two central features of the religious experience of early Mormon women: testimony and belief. The women considered here believed the Book of Mormon and the new revelations given through Joseph Smith to be the word of God. They felt similar to Lehi, who, after tasting the sweetness of God's love, intensely desired to share it with others. Olive Boynton Hale, an early Latter-day Saint woman, wrote to her mother:

[You] think that my being called to pass through so many trials and afflictions might cause me to doubt the truth of the great work that is rolling through the earth with mighty power, which thousands are embracing, & rejoicing that they have been enabled to receive in these the last days, and I feel to rejoice with those that do rejoice in the latter day kingdom which I do know is the work of the Lord, and it will continue to roll on untill Christ Jesus our Lord will descend in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory, when the saints shall be caught up to meet him in the air. I pray this may be our happy lot.

These women testified of their experiences and knowledge and had faith that their human testimony would awaken that same yearning in their friends and families so that they too would gather with the Saints in Zion.

Despite the general paucity of sources for women's history overall, the archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints houses a significant collection of women's writings. The four early letters printed here are a part of that collection and indicate the value of contemporary documentation. While autobiographical reminiscences are helpful in recreating life experiences, they often lack the candor and spontaneity encountered in letters. Although the collection of women's writings is impressive, only a few of these describe the personal lives, emotions, and activities of early female Saints, these contemporary letters are particularly valuable in portraying women's perspectives in early Church history.

7. At Christ's Second Coming, the faithful alive on the earth will be "caught up" to meet him (1 Thes. 3:17; 4:17). The Latter-day Saint interpretation of the doctrine includes the return of Christ and his Saints to the newly cleansed earth to reign. This identifies some of the millennialist tendencies of the early Saints (D&C 88:96; 101:31; 109:75).


9. Christy Lee Best, Guide to Sources for Studies of Mormon Women in the Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976). A substantial amount of material has been added to the collection since this guide was published.
Besides providing important examples of women's writings, the letters provide insight into these women's religious experiences as the focal point of their lives. Religion took precedence over every other aspect of their lives, including money, social standing, geographical location, and even family. These women waded through waters of sacrifice to reach their goals. Rather than being merely followers, they believed on their own—at times dragging their husbands and families to Mormonism.

From the eloquent writing of Lucy Mack Smith to the unpolished, though poetic, articulation of Melissa Morgan Dodge, these letters show women with different levels of education and different experiences. The women shown here do not illustrate perfection. They were not without complaints, nor were they Pollyannish. They experienced supreme hardships and the frustration of the momentary loss of faith, but their overriding message remained. These four were stalwart in their convictions, dedicated to the Latter-day Saint course during ordeals as refugees in exile and many other struggles throughout their lifetimes.

Once in the fold, these independent and self-actuated women desired their familial intimates to join them, despite the trials they would surely encounter in hopes of happiness in this life and an ultimate eternal reward. As research continues to elucidate more shadows and complexities in American religious history, greater insight into the motivations and desires of those who embraced Mormonism will expand our understanding and appreciation of the faith.

The four letters printed here reflect a portion of the collection at Church Archives. My research has uncovered some forty letters written by women during the first decade of the Church. No doubt many others exist but are not available in archival collections. While the process of choosing letters for this document corner was unscientific, these four letters are representative of the diversity among early Mormon women's letters.

The original of each letter, with the exception of the Phebe Peck letter, is located in the Church Archives. The location of Phebe Peck's letter is unknown, though the Church Archives possesses a fine photocopy. Though faded, all of the original letters are in relatively good condition. Editorial marks added include carets < > to indicate insertions into the text by the authors themselves. Strikeouts are shown by strikeouts. Brackets [ ] indicate my textual clarifications. Minimal punctuation has been added for clarity.

These four letters capture insights into the lives of four distinctly different women. They were not extremists. They were satisfied with their circumstances, like many other women of the time, and did not move to
radically alter their female experience. But as their letters demonstrate, once they had felt of God’s love and the power of the restored gospel, they rejoiced and were compelled to share it with others (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Excerpt from Rebecca Williams’s 1834 letter to her father, Isaac Swain. Although Isaac had disowned Rebecca for joining the Church, Rebecca continued to share her testimony of the Restoration, Joseph Smith, and Jesus Christ in hope that her family would one day be converted to the truth. The full text of Rebecca’s letter is printed on pages 100–102.


11. Jeremy Mumford maintains that the Mormon attitude regarding gender was no different from that of other Americans but involved a different, more informal concept of evangelism for women. These letters are a prime example of informal warning. See Jeremy Mumford, “The Sexual Dynamics of ‘Warning’: Women, Men and the Mormon World Mission, 1830–1860,” senior essay in history, Yale College, May 13, 1992, Church Archives.
Letter of Lucy Mack Smith to Solomon and Ester Mack, 1831

Lucy Mack Smith experienced a broad spectrum of challenges and pleasures in her lifetime. The woman who became the mother of the Prophet Joseph had the personality and mental acuity to mold her individuality as a female member of the Church of Christ. Lucy Mack was born in July 1775 in Gilsum, New Hampshire. Because of the influence of Lucy's mother, the Macks' was a deeply religious home where the Bible and education were central. This religious emphasis and familial tradition produced children who tended to focus their lives spiritually. The Macks were believers in visions, healings, and miracles. The example of her mother and Lucy's own brush with death generated in Lucy a firm desire to provide a comparable spiritual environment in her home to teach her family to serve God.  

Lucy Mack met Joseph Smith Sr. in Tunbridge, Vermont, where she was visiting her brother. They were married in 1796. Joseph Smith Sr. was an inwardly religious man who, from his familial tradition, was suspicious of organized religion. But with the support of her husband, Lucy centered her life in spirituality and religion despite her lack of adherence to a particular church. She was introduced to the truths of the Restoration through her third son, Joseph, and though she was older than the other women included here, her testimony is strikingly similar. She adapted her stores of spiritual experience to encompass the new realities she discovered daily through the articulations of her son. She was officially united with the Church at her baptism in 1830 at the age of fifty-four. Lucy was unfailingly strong-willed, knowledgeable, and forthright in admonishing others and sharing her beliefs with those around her. She was also courageous. As a protective mother and an ardent believer in God, Lucy once professed to a Presbyterian deacon, “If you should stick


13. Although she convinced the Presbyterian minister in Palmyra to baptize her and three of her children, she specified she did not want to be baptized a member of that church. Bushman, Joseph Smith, 53, n. 32.
my flesh full of faggots, and even burn me at the stake, I would declare, as long as God should give me breath, that Joseph has got that Record, and that I know it to be true."  

A few months later, Lucy Smith led a group of eighty Saints to Kirtland in extremely harsh circumstances. Her company and at least one other were halted at Buffalo by ice on Lake Erie. Lucy felt the necessity to hurry on the journey, but the other leaders were inclined to wait until the ice broke up. After chiding those leaders about their lack of faith, Lucy and her company boarded their boat and watched the ice separated to allow their passage.

As the mother of the Prophet, Lucy was not immune to the privations suffered by the Saints throughout their experience. She was subjected to the trials of Kirtland, Missouri, and Nauvoo. In Nauvoo she lost her husband of fifty-four years, and within four years she also witnessed the passing of four of her five sons, two of whom were violently taken. Though she expressed her support of Brigham and the Twelve, she stayed in Nauvoo after the Saints left. She died in Nauvoo under the care of her daughter-in-law Emma in 1856, still consistent in her testimony of her son’s work.

In an 1831 letter to her brother Solomon Mack, written the year after her baptism, Lucy displays her knowledge and zeal regarding the latter-day work of God. The letter is a buff-colored folded sheet written on three sides in black ink that has faded to sienna brown. Lucy’s handwriting is petite and precise. Abounding in Book of Mormon vernacular, the letter testifies of Lucy’s beliefs and admonishes her brother and his family to come to the light of the restored gospel. Her writing sets the theme for this group of letters: taste the love of God and share it.


Waterloo\(^{18}\) January 6\(^{th}\) 1831

Dear Brother & Sister\(^{19}\)

Although we are at a great distance from each other and have not had the pleasure of seeing each other for many years,\(^{20}\) yet I feel a great anxiety in your welfare, and especially for the welfare of your souls; and you yourselves must know that it is a thing of the greatest importance to be prepared to meet our God in peace, for it is not long before he is to make his appearance on the earth with all the hosts of heaven for to take vengeance on the wicked & they that know not God.\(^{21}\) By searching the prophecies contained in the old testament we find it there prophesied that God will set his hand the second time to recover his people the house of Israel. He has now commenced this work: he hath sent forth a revelation in these last days; & this revelation is called the book of Mormon, it contains the fullness of the Gospel to the Gentiles, and is sent forth to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things God hath done for their fathers; that they may know of the covenants of the Lord & that they are not cast off forever, and also of the convincing of both Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the & Eternal God and manifests himself unto all nations; it also contains the history of a people which were led out of Jerusalem six hundred years before the coming of Christ in the flesh. God seeing the wickedness of the inhabitants of Jerusalem he sent out a


\(^{19}\) Solomon Mack (1773–1851) and Ester Hayward (1773–1844). Solomon was the youngest Mack brother, and Lucy the youngest sister. Two years separated them. Lucy was hesitant to include any details of his life in her history, reasoning that he was yet alive and could write his own history. Lucy Mack Smith, Biographical Sketches, 35.

\(^{20}\) Solomon Mack lived in Gilsum, New Hampshire, for most of his adult life. Since Gilsum is 286 miles east of Waterloo, Solomon’s siblings likely did not have much interaction with him. In her history, Lucy published an 1835 letter from her brother Jason to Solomon that also referred to the many years that had passed since they had seen each other. Lucy Mack Smith, Biographical Sketches, 52–53.

\(^{21}\) This period, as Grant Underwood has shown in The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), was a time of ardent millennial expectations for the Saints and Christians in general. Many believed the Second Coming of Christ was imminent or had already occurred. Surely the common usage of different variations of the phrase “I come quickly” throughout the new revelations added to these millennial expectations of the Saints. See Doctrine and Covenants 33:18; 34:12; 35:27; 36:8.
prophet named Lehi and commanded him to declare to the people that
unless they repented of their sins that the City would be destroyed but they
would not hear him but sought to take away his life, therefore the Lord
commanded him to take his family together with another man named Ish-
mael and his family and flee out of the City and they were led by the hand
of the Lord on to this continent, and they became very numerous and were
a people highly favored of the Lord, but there arose contentions among
them and the more wicked part of them being led by one of the sons of Lehi
named Laman arose up in rebellion against their brethren and would not
keep the commandments of God therefore he sent a curse upon them and
caused a dark skin to come over them and from Laman our Indians have
descended the more righteous part of them were led by another of the sons
of Lehi named Nephi he being a prophet of the Lord. I can not give you
much of an insight into these things but I write this that when you have an
opportunity of receiving one of the books that you may not reject [it] for
God has pronounced a curse upon all they who have an a chance to receive
it and will not for by it they will be judged at the last day. There are many
in these parts who profess to know God and to be his humble followers that
when this thing is offered them they say we have [2] bible enough and want
no more, but such are in the gaul of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity
and understand not the bible which they have, for all the holy prophets
speak plainly of the gathering of the house of Israel and the coming forth
of this work; and God says he will give us line upon line precept upon pre-
cept here a little and there a little: there are more nations than one and if
God would not reveal himself alike unto all nations he would be a partial
[God]: we need not suppose that we have all his words in our bible neither
need we think that because he has spoken once that he can not speak again.
Perhaps you will enquire how this revelation came forth, it has been hid up
in the earth fourteen hundred years, it was placed there by Moroni, one
of the Nephites, it was engraven upon plates which have the appearance of
gold, he being a prophet of the Lord, and seeing the wickedness of the
people and knowing that they must be destroyed, and also knowing that if
the plates fell into the hands of the Lamanites that they would destroy
them, for they sought to destroy all sacred writings therefore he hid them
up in the earth, having obtained a promise of the Lord that they should
come forth in his own due time unto the world, and I feel to thank my God
that he hath spared my life to see this day. Joseph after repenting of his sins
and humbling himself before God was visited by an holy Angel whose
countenance was as lightening and whose garments were white above all
whiteness and gave unto him com[m]andme[nts, page torn] which
inspired him from on high and gave unto him [power] by the means of which was before prepared that he should translate this this book, and by this this our eyes are opened that we can see the situation in which the world now stands [fig. 2] that the eyes of the whole world are blinded, that the churches have all become corrupted, yea every church upon the face of the earth that the Gospel of Christ is no where preached. This is the situation which the world is now in, and you can judge for yourselves if we did not need something more than the wisdom of men for to show us the right way. God seeing our situation had compassion upon us and has sent us this revelation that the stumbling block might be removed, that whosoever would might enter. He has now established his church upon the earth as it was in the days of the Apostles. He has now made a new and everlasting covenant with all that will hear his voice and enter he says they shall be gathered together into a land of promise and he himself will come and reign on earth with them a thousand years he is now sending forth his servants for to prune his viniard for the last time and wo be unto them that will not hear them. There are many who think hard when we tell them that the churches have all become corrupted, but the Lord God hath spoken it and who can deny his word; they are all lifted up

Fig. 2. Excerpt from Lucy Mack Smith’s 1831 letter to Solomon and Ester Mack. In this portion of the letter, Lucy recounts the Angel Moroni’s visit to her son. Lucy’s letter, written in petite and precise handwriting, contains many references to the Book of Mormon as well as her testimony of the restored gospel.

22. See Doctrine and Covenants 20:6–8; and History of the Church, 1:10–12.
23. In Joseph Smith’s 1832, 1838, and 1842 accounts of the First Vision, he focused on the corruption of all churches on the earth at that time. See History of the Church, 1:5–6; and Milton V. Backman Jr., Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 155–69.
in the pride of their hearts and think more of adorning their fine sanctuaries than they do of the poor and needy: the priests are going about preaching for money, and teaching false doctrines and leading men down to destruction by crying peace peace when the Lord himself hath not spoken it. When our Saviour was upon the earth he sent forth his disciples and commanded them to preach his Gospel and these signs he said should follow them that believed, in my name the[y] shall do many wonderful works they shall cast out devils, they shall take up serpents and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them, they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover.24 now where can we find these signs following they that call themselves preachers of the Gospel and why they do not follow; it surely must be because they do not believe and do not teach the true doctrine of Christ for God is the same yesterday today and forever and changeth not. We read that at the day of Pentacost people being pricked in their hearts began to cry saying men and brethren what shall we do and Peter being filled with the Holy Ghost stood up and said repent every one of you and be baptised in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ for a remission of your sins and you shall receive the Holy Ghost.25 [page torn] this promise was not to them alone for he goes on to say this [page torn, promise] is to you and to your children and to all [who] are afar off [page torn] as many as the Lord our God shall call: therefor the promise extends unto us if we will obey his commands. Peter did not tell them to go away and mourn over their sins we<k>ks and months and receive a remission of them and then come and be baptised, but he told them first to repent and be baptised and the promise was they should receive a remission of their sins and the gift of the Holy Ghost, and this is the Gospel of Christ, and his church is established in this place and also in the Ohio, there has been three hundred added to the church in the Ohio within a few weeks and ther are some added to this church almost daily,26 the work is spreading very fast. I must now close my letter by entreating you as one that feels for your souls to seek an interests in Christ and when you have an opportunity to receive this work do not reje<c>t it but read it and examine for yourselves I will now bid you farewell and I want you to some of you come here or write

24. See Mark 16:17–18.
immediately for we expect to go away to the Ohio early in the spring [1831] if you write this winter you may direct your letters to Waterloo Seneca County.

I want you to think seriously of these things for they are the truths of the Living God. Please to accept this from your Sister Lucy Smith [fig. 3].

Advertised
July 1
To be left at Keene [e] post office

Seneca Falls
N.Y. 8 Jany

Capt. Solomon Mack
Gilsum
New Hampshire

Fig. 3. Conclusion and signature of Lucy Mack Smith’s 1831 letter to Solomon and Ester Mack.

27. Lucy would lead a group of eighty to Kirtland in February or March of the same year. Lucy Mack Smith, Biographical Sketches, 172–84.
28. Keene, New Hampshire, is nine miles south of Gilsum.
29. Seneca Falls is five miles east of Waterloo.
30. In her 1853 history (written in 1845–46), Lucy mentions that Solomon was known as Captain “for at least twenty years.” Lucy Mack Smith, Biographical Sketches, 35.
Letter of Phebe Peck to Anna Pratt, 1832

In June 1830 amid the harassment of neighbors, a young widow, Phebe Peck, was baptized a member of the newly formed Church of Christ in a dammed river in Colesville, New York.31 Phebe Crosby was born in March 1800 to Elisha Crosby and Susan Lowell at Unadilla, Otsego County, New York. Phebe married Benjamin Peck in about 1819; they had five children together before his death in 1829.32 They lived in Bainbridge, New York, and after her husband was gone, Phebe maintained a close relationship with his extended family, who lived nearby. Benjamin's family comprised a good portion of those baptized with Phebe and became known as the Colesville Saints.33 They were persecuted from the time of their baptisms until the oppression reached an apex, and they left New York the following April.

Phebe left Colesville with the other Saints for Thompson, Ohio, which offered just a brief respite from their troubles and tribulations. The initial good will of Leman Copley, who invited the uprooted group to his farm to live, was short-lived. After Copley's disenchantment with the Church and the personal difficulties of the Colesville Saints, they were on the move again within a couple of months. With hopes of Zion fresh in their minds, they were some of the first Saints to settle in Jackson County, Missouri.


32. Hezekiah (1820–1859), Samantha (1821–1839), Henry (1823–died young), Henrietta (1823–1896), and Sarah Jane (1825–1893) were their children. Henry and Henrietta were twins.

33. Benjamin Peck’s two brothers, Hezekiah Peck (1782–1850) and Ezekiel Peck (1785–1850), and their families also joined with the Saints at Colesville. They were all baptized on June 29, 1830. Benjamin’s sister, Polly Peck Knight (1774–1831), had married Joseph Knight Sr., and the Pecks had become acquainted with Joseph Smith through Joseph Knight, who Joseph Smith called “a faithful old man.” “Records of Early Church Families,” Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine 26 (July 1935): 108–9.
The Colesville group was an integral part of the first emigration to Missouri. Phebe and her family were active members of the Kaw Township congregation, where she taught her children the principles of the gospel and supported her family as a tailoress. Then, after twelve years of providing for her family alone, Phebe married Joseph Knight Sr., following the death of his first wife, Polly Peck Knight, in 1831. Polly was a sister of Phebe’s first husband. Phebe and Joseph had two children together for a total of sixteen, though most of the children were already living away from home at the time of their marriage. Joseph was twenty-eight years Phebe’s senior.

Phebe experienced the expulsion of the Saints from Jackson County, the later difficulties in northern Missouri, the move to and life in Nauvoo, and the sorrow associated with the martyrdoms of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Joseph Knight Sr. died in 1847. After his death, Phebe married Cornelius P. Lott. Thereafter, Phebe spent her time with her children and their families until her death in 1849.

35. In his journal, Newel Knight described their union in this way: “My Father had married again after my Mothers death a widow Peck my Mothers Brothers widow with four small children he was now getting old & it seemed a hard struggle for him to get along.” Newel Knight, Autobiography and Journal, [51], Church Archives. In 1845, Phebe was to be sealed to Joseph Knight Sr. in the Nauvoo Temple, but she initially refused. She said that she cared for him but “did not love and honor him as her head and bosom companion.” They were separated for a season, but after some discussion with a Church leader, Phebe showed up at the temple the day of the scheduled sealing. Though there seemed to be no major difficulties between Phebe and her husband, tension seemed continually present between Phebe and Joseph’s older children. Newel Knight, Autobiography, [40, 111], Church Archives.
36. They were married at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, on March 30, 1847. There is no record of them living together. See, for example, “Records of Early Church Families,” 109.
37. The exact date of Phebe’s death is unknown. On May 6, 1849, from Andrew County, Missouri, Martha Long Peck, Phebe’s sister-in-law, wrote a letter to her son Reed in Corlandville, New York, telling him of Aunt Phebe’s death. She also mentioned the deaths of Joseph Knight Sr. and Newel Knight, both of whom had died two years previously. Martha Long Peck to Reed Peck, Church Archives. To further complicate the matter, Newel’s widow, Lydia Knight, wrote to Brigham Young from Pottawatomie County, Iowa, on May 28, 1849, explaining that she would not be heading west that season as “Mother Knight” claimed that the wagons and cattle, which were rightly Lydia’s, were given to the Riches (two of Phebe’s daughters married Rich brothers, Charles and Thomas). After Lydia’s inquiry into the matter, the property was given to her but not in time for her to go west that season. Brigham Young, Papers, Incoming Correspondence, Church Archives. Though Lydia’s letter was written after Martha’s,
Though the historical record does not supply us with many specific details of Phebe's life, her 1832 letter to Anna Pratt gives us what other records do not. It provides a detailed account of a time of reflection and relative peace in Zion. Her candor, as she shared her beliefs and her plain-spoken censure of and admonitions to her non-Mormon friends who had not accepted the message of the Restoration, evidences her devotion to the restored gospel. The photocopy of the Phebe Peck letter suggests that the original document was one folded sheet, 15" x 11", written on three sides in meticulous penmanship in dark ink.

Independence

May

August the 10 1832
Affectionate Sister

I received your letter Jan. 22 which gave me great pleasure. I esteemed it as a blessing to have the priveledge of hearing from you once more you must forgive my negligence in not writing before as I have been busily engaged in business but I shall now attempt to write you the sentiments of my heart in the fear of my God I can realize that I am seperated a great distance from you but yet my mind will often travel back to the place of your abode but Anna it is not because I wish myself back but it is because of the feelings I have for <you> and the rest of my relatives in that part of <the> world yes we are seperated by roling bellows of water but the Lord's

Lydia may have been writing about a past event that would lead one to believe that Phebe must have died by May 1849, since she is absent from any records farther west than Winter Quarters.

38. Phebe was most likely living in nearby Kaw Township at the time, though return letters would have to be directed to Independence. Hartley, Joseph Knight Family, 77; History of the Church, 1:196–206.

39. Anna Jones Pratt (ca. 1813–?), wife of Stephen B. Pratt (ca. 1810–?), was a relative of Phebe. Larry C. Porter, “‘Ye Shall Go to the Ohio’: Exodus of the New York Saints to Ohio, 1831,” in Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Ohio, ed. Milton V. Backman Jr. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Department of Church History and Doctrines, 1990), 8–9. It is possible that Anna was Phebe's sister, but because of a lack of information about the family of Elisha and Susan Crosby, the familial connection remains in question. Anna and Stephen B. are found in the 1840 and 1850 census for New York State, living in Bainbridge, Chenango County.

40. The location of the January 22 letter is unknown.

41. Census records show there were Pratts and Pecks in Chenango County, New York, throughout most of the nineteenth century.
Testimony and Exhortation in Early Mormon Women’s Letters  

protecting hand has been over us through all our travels and has brought us safely to this land where I shall spend the remainder of my days and if I ever see you again it will be upon this land and I will assure you it would be a joyful meeting to us all. I well remember the last time I saw you when I took my leave of you the sensations of my Heart at that time I think will never be forgotten by me although I did not know when I left that I should be called to come thus far and I presume it has been[n] that which has caused you to wonder but did you know as I know concerning our leaving Ohio you would not but you do not neither can I tell you but this much I can say that did you know of the things of God and receive the blessings that I have from the hand of the Lord you would not think it a hardship to come here for the Lord is revealing the mysteries of the heavenly Kingdom unto his Children and these blessings in your state of unbelief you can not enjoy but you may yet have the privilege if you have not entirely hardened your heart against these things and I would exhort you not to reject another call you have been called to repent of your sins and obey the gospel you have been convicted from time to time but you could not give up all for Christ and now I feel to say that if you do not give up all and follow your Lord and Master you will not be made worthy to partake of the Celestial glories in the kingdom of our God I hope you will think of things and ponder them in your Heart for they are of great worth unto the Children of Men. I must tell you the joyful news of the workings of the among the Children we have had the pleasing view of beholding eleven children from 8 years old to 14 go down into the water in obedience to the commands of God among whom was my

42. Phebe’s language depicts a very intimate relationship. Whether or not they were sisters, as relatives living in the same town, Anna and Phebe most likely had much interaction. Phebe was baptized on June 28, 1830, by Oliver Cowdery. There is no record of Anna being baptized, though she knew Joseph Smith in Bainbridge, New York, and originally planned to leave with the Colesville members. She “ran away” to get married to Stephen and did not go with the Saints. Harriet E. Shay statement, cited in Porter, “New York Saints to Ohio,” 8–9.

43. At the January 1831 conference in Fayette, New York, attended by Newel Knight and possibly others from Colesville, Joseph introduced the concept of gathering. Doctrine and Covenants sections 37 and 38 were given coincident with the conference and include the command to gather. After the conference, the Colesville Saints began to pack and attempted to sell their property in order to gather to Missouri. They left Thompson on June 28 and arrived in Jackson County on July 26. Hartley, They Are My Friends, 64, 66–68, 73, 74.

44. This closely relates to the revelation included in Doctrine and Covenants 6:7 and 42:61.
three oldest can we not rejoice in seeing the rising generation growing up in the knowledge of the Lord and I think by giving them good instructions they will grow up and be strong in faith they will arise and testify what the Lord has done for them in the presence of a congregation of people Hezekiah says he enjoys himself well he will take up his cross and pray in the family when asked My Children are all contented and I am very thankful for it Henrietta and Sarah express a great desire to see you I have not gone to keeping house as yet but I expect to next fall My health is tolerable good and also the health of all our friends I must draw to a close by requesting you to give my love to your Husband and Miss Pollard and all enquiring friends Phebe Peck write as soon as you receive this

Anna Pratt

A few lines to Sister Patty it is with a thankful Heart for the preservation of my life and the priviledge of writing to you that I desire to improve these moments I often think of you while in my lonely meditation and sometimes it will cause a deep sigh to burst forth from my bosom thinking that perhaps I never shall see you again while in this world and again I think I have forsaken all for Christ its blessing consolation that surpasses the grief on the other hand you must realize my sister that nothing but the mercies of God and his consoling spirit that has upheld me while passing through the trials of

45. Hezekiah, Samantha, and Henrietta Peck were 12, 10, and 9 years old respectively. Sarah Jane, her youngest, was 6 years old at the time of the letter.

46. Hezekiah was named after his uncle Hezekiah Peck. Though the commandment to "take up your cross, in which you must pray vocally" (D&C 23:6) was specifically directed at Joseph Knight Sr., Phebe demonstrates that its relevance to all Saints was established early on. See also Doctrine and Covenants 1:2, "the voice of the Lord is unto all men."

47. As Phebe seems concerned that her children are growing up in truth and light, it is interesting that just prior to this letter the Lord specifically mentioned in revelation that the children of Zion were growing up in wickedness (D&C 68).

48. Minerva Pollard (ca. 1797–?) is listed as living with the Pratts in the 1850 census. Her relationship to the family is unknown.

49. The Patty mentioned here may be Hezekiah Peck's wife, Martha Long Peck, who was known as Patty. However, she was in Independence, Missouri, with Phebe at the time of the letter's creation. As with Anna, Phebe demonstrates an intimate relationship with Patty.

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol41/iss1/10
parting with my near and dear friends\textsuperscript{50} and could you but see and believe as I do the way would be opened and you would come to this land and we should behold each other and rejoice in the things of God for this is A day of rejoicing and also a day of mourning\textsuperscript{51}[3]

We rejoice when we realize the wonderful works of our Heavenly Father and his dealings towards his children yes I rejoice in the commands and revelations that has been given in these last days\textsuperscript{52} and again I feel to mourn many times because of the unbelief of the Children of men I feel to rejoice with those that rejoice and to weep with those that weep.

Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon made us A visit last spring and we had many joyful meetings while they were here and we had many mysteries unfolded to our view which gave me great consolation\textsuperscript{53} we could view the condensation of God <in preparing> mansions of peace for his children and whose will not receive the fullness of the gospel and stand as valiant soldiers in the cause of Christ cannot dwell in the presence of the Father and <the> Son but there is a place prepared for all who do not receive but it is a place of <much> lesser glory then to dwell in the Celestial kingdom. I shall not attempt to say any farther concerning these things as they are now in print\textsuperscript{54} and ar[e] going forth to the world and you perhaps

\textsuperscript{50} Phebe had lived in Chenango County, New York, most of her life. Though the assurance that she was doing right in leaving with the Saints consoled her, it did not eliminate the difficulty of parting with friends and family. When she left in 1831, she did not know when she would again see them.

\textsuperscript{51} See Alma 28:12.

\textsuperscript{52} Before 1832, when the Church first attempted to print the revelations, Church members learned of the revelations as they were written down and passed around. Certain revelations were more popular and circulated more widely than others. Phebe refers to a number of the early revelations in her letter, demonstrating her desire to learn every new thing that had been revealed by the Lord. Daniel Ludlow, A Companion to Your Study of the Doctrine and Covenants, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 131; Robert J. Woodford, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants, Volumes I–III" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1974; reprinted on CD, Provo, Utah: The Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and BYU Studies, 2001), 14; Milton V. Backman Jr., The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 89, 92.

\textsuperscript{53} When this letter was written, the revelation we now know as Doctrine and Covenants section 76 had been published as "A Vision," Evening and Morning Star, July 1832, 10–11.

\textsuperscript{54} Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon visited Jackson County, Missouri, in April 1832. Present-day sections 82 and 83 of the Doctrine and Covenants were received during their stay. The decision to print the revelations in the original Book of
will have an opportunity of reading for your self and if you do I hope you will read with a care-ful and a prayerful heart for these things are worthy of notice and I desire that you may search into them for it is <that> which lends to our happiness in this world and in the world to come.

You perhaps would like to know something about my situation I can tell you I have plenty to eat drink and to wear and enjoy as good health as I did in Bainbridge we have good water and this is a delightful country we can raise <our> own cotton and flax and all things that the heart can wish Hezekiah is now at work with one of the Brothers in the church and has earned seven dollars in five weeks the rest of the Children live with me they often speak of their cousins in that place and wish me to send their best love to you and your children I must finish my letter but I would warmly requst you to write for my anxiety is great to hear from you please to give my respects to my Brothers and tell them not to forget that they have A sister in Missouri;55 I add no more. P Peck

Independence Mo.
Aug. 11th
Mr.
Stephen D Pratt

South Bainbridge56 Chenengo County
NY

Commandments as commanded by the Lord was made during the April conference, as recorded in section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

55. Though there are no sisters listed, Foster and Archibald Crosby were the brothers of Phebe, according to “Records of Early Church Families,” 108. There is a Foster Crosby in the New York 1830 census living in southeast Putnam County, New York (close to New York City). Archibald is not listed in that census.

56. South Bainbridge (present-day Afton) is approximately fifteen miles northeast of Colesville (present-day Ninevah, New York).
Letter of Rebecca Williams to Isaac Swain, 1834

Rebecca Swain, born in Loyalsock, Pennsylvania, in 1798, was the youngest of the nine children of Isaac Fisher Swain and Elizabeth Hall. Elizabeth died while Rebecca was young, and the family moved around the Northeast until they settled in Niagara County, New York, where her father remarried. When Rebecca was seventeen, she met Frederick Granger Williams, the tall, dark-eyed pilot of the ship on which Rebecca crossed Lake Ontario to visit her sister Sally Clark in Detroit. Frederick called often at the Clark home, and he and Rebecca were married in late 1815. Frederick and Rebecca and their four children moved around the great Western Reserve of Ohio before finally settling in Kirtland Mills, Ohio, in 1828 or 1829. There Frederick took up the practice of medicine. As Frederick worked, Rebecca aided him with patients and learned medical terms and treatments.

In fall 1830, Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Ziba Peterson, and Peter Whitmer Jr. stopped in Kirtland on their journey west. Rebecca and Frederick were members of Sidney Rigdon's Campbellite congregation in the community. Like many other followers of Rigdon, they listened with interest to the missionaries' message of Christ's restored Church, a new prophet—Joseph Smith—and a newly published record of ancient people in the Americas—the Book of Mormon. Rebecca and her four children attended all of the missionaries' private meetings, accompanied by her husband when his work schedule would permit. She was convinced of the

57. Isaac Swain (1759–1838) and Elizabeth Hall Swain (1755–1813). Most biographical information about Rebecca Swain used here comes from Lucy Ellen Williams Godfrey, Biographical Information on Rebecca S. Williams, ca. 1930 and 1935, Church Archives; and Nancy Clement Williams, Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams, Second Counselor to the Prophet Joseph Smith in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and His Wife Rebecca Swain Williams, Pioneer of 1849: Read Their True Story in the First Introduction—after 100 Years (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1951).

58. They were married in Wyandotte, Wayne County, Michigan. Frederick G. Williams, "Frederick Granger Williams of the First Presidency of the Church," BYU Studies 12, no. 3 (1972): 244.

59. Their children were Lovina Susan (1816–1847); Joseph Swain (1819–1838), an invalid and a major source of concern for Rebecca; Lucy Eliza (1821–?); and Ezra Granger (1823–1905). Frederick's medical services were a needed service on the Ohio frontier. He became very successful through much study and was soon visited by doctors from other parts of the country who wanted to learn from him.
truthfulness of Mormonism and was soon baptized. Frederick needed more convincing. He decided for a time to leave it alone but could not and was later baptized.  

Frederick was very enthused about his new religion, and the day after his baptism he left on a mission to Missouri with Oliver Cowdery. Although Frederick planned to return after three weeks, Rebecca did not see him for ten months. Between her husband’s calling in Joseph Smith’s First Presidency and his missionary efforts, for Rebecca the mission to Missouri would be the beginning of many long months of caring for her family without the aid of her husband. Rebecca’s youngest son, Ezra, was her support during Frederick’s absence and throughout the rest of Rebecca’s life.

With the missionary zeal of a new convert, Rebecca eagerly wrote to her father to inform him of her newfound faith. She was devastated when only a thin letter of response came back to her. Her news infuriated her father, and he insisted that she leave the Church. When she would not, he disowned her and vowed to cut off all communication with her.  

Evidence by the remnant of this 1834 letter to her half brothers and her father, the threat was only partially carried out. In her 1835 patriarchal blessing, Rebecca was promised, “In consequence of thy prayers and thy tears, thou shall yet prevail, and the Lord will give thee thy father’s family who are now far from the way of Salvation. But the Lord will make bare His arm and show mercy unto them IN MAKING THY HUSBAND A SAVIOR UNTO THEM.” She held hope for this throughout her life.

Frederick and Rebecca gave liberally of their time and means to the building up and protecting of the Church in Kirtland. Before Joseph and Emma Smith’s own home was finished in Kirtland, the Prophet and his wife lived across the street with Frederick and Rebecca. One day, as a mob came and surrounded the home, Rebecca astutely dressed Joseph in her bonnet and cloak, and he was able to leave the house and pass

60. There is some discrepancy as to their baptismal dates. There was either one day or several weeks between their baptisms. Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams*, 55. Godfrey, Biographical Information.

61. Even her letters to her brother John, to whom Rebecca was particularly close, were returned unopened. On the back of one of the returned letters, John wrote, “Father forbids me reading your letter or to write to you. Goodbye and Bless you always, your brother, John.” Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams*, 63. Despite her father’s actions, Rebecca’s eldest sister, Sarah Swain Clark, joined the Church in Michigan in 1832. Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams*, 63, 72.

62. As cited in Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams*, 89.
through the crowd to safety. In March 1832, Rebecca and Frederick spent a night removing tar from Joseph’s body after he was mobbed in Hiram, Ohio. Such help allowed Joseph to be ready to preach before a packed house the next morning.

According to historian Andrew Jenson, Frederick succumbed to “improper influences” during the difficulties in Kirtland in 1837.63 As a result, he was rejected as a counselor in the First Presidency at Far West, Missouri, in November 1837 and was excommunicated twice. During this time of strain, Rebecca remained stalwart in her defense of Joseph Smith and the Restored Church. Rumors of Frederick’s dissent reached her father, Isaac Swain, in Niagara, and he promptly wrote her a letter asking her to return home. When Rebecca’s reply arrived in September 1838 reaffirming her faith, Isaac lamented, “‘Not a word of repentance!’”64

Frederick was rebaptized and died in full fellowship in 1842 at Quincy, Illinois. Rebecca lived the rest of her life as a faithful member of the Church. She received temple ordinances at Nauvoo alongside her son Ezra. Shortly before the journey to Utah, she became a plural wife of Heber C. Kimball, though she was considered a wife in name only.65 She initially lived in Salt Lake City, helping her son, Ezra, with his medical practice, before moving to Mill Creek in Salt Lake County. She later helped colonize Utah’s Cache Valley with her children and grandchildren. Rebecca died of consumption at Smithfield, Utah, on September 25, 1861.

Rebecca’s 1834 letter to her father and stepbrothers, written while her husband was serving as Second Counselor to the Prophet, portrays a woman who feels and knows what she is witnessing. She greatly desired to see her family join the Church, a desire that provoked her to do whatever was in her power to bring it about. In the face of adversity she did not cower. Her strength and conviction are evident. All that remains of

64. Cited in Williams, Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams, 197. Rebecca was not aware of this event. One hundred years later, the descendants of Rebecca recovered an undated letter written to Rebecca by her half brother George relaying the episode. Williams, Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams, 197. The letter is currently housed in Church Archives.
65. Kimball did not provide food or shelter for Rebecca. She remained with her son Ezra’s family until her death. Kate B. Carter, Heber C. Kimball: His Wives and Family (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1967), 7; and Pioneer Women of Faith and Fortitude, 4:3394–95.
the letter is one buff-colored sheet, 7" x 12 7/16", written with chestnut ink, and is presumably the last page of the letter. Her elegant script flows with small flourishes.

he got on [h]is jo<ur>ney, I have been reading over your letter of May the 23 which I have read over again and again66 its gives me pain to here that your mind is so much disturbed about the Book of Mormon and the Star67 I feal <a>fraid my Father is in some degree getting into the same Spirit you charge the Editor with, as it regards the origen of the Book of Mormon their their is no disagreement in the Book betwin the Author and the witnisses68 the Book plan[ll]y shoes for it self Pa 547 and 548 and unto three shall [page torn] be shone shown by the power of God69 there is no con-[tra]diction, the plaits was found in the same manner that the Author sayses they was in the town of Manchester Ontario County I have heard the same story from several of the family and from the three witnisses them selves70 I heard them declair in publick meeting that they saw an Holly Angel come down from heaven and brought the plaits and laid them before their eyes and told them that those was the plaits that Joseph Smith was translation the Book of Mormon from they are men of good character and their word is belived [fig. 4] ware they are acquainted in eny thing excep[t] when they declair to this unbeliving Generation that they have seen an

66. The location of the May 23 letter is unknown, though its existence demonstrates that Isaac's threat to cut off Rebecca completely was not fully carried out.

67. It is probable that this is a reference to the nine letters of Ezra Booth that were published in the Ohio Star in 1831 and later in E. D. Howe's Mormonism Unvailed (Painesville, Ohio: By the author, 1834), 175–221. Although it is unknown how Rebecca's father and brothers obtained the letters, several New York newspapers had reprinted the articles.

68. In his third letter, Booth refutes the testimony of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris. In Booth's testimony, he tells of a commandment (revelation) that he read while on a mission in Missouri. The commandment told the witnesses to "see and hear those things by faith, and then they should testify to the world, as though they had seen and heard, as I see a man, and hear his voice." The argument became whether the witnesses saw and heard what they testified to or if it was their imagination. Howe, Mormonism Unvailed, 186–87.

69. Moroni prophesied of the Three Witnesses in Ether 2.

70. Joseph Smith, his family, and the Three Witnesses testified to the veracity of Smith's account throughout their lives.
Fig. 4. Excerpt from Rebecca William’s 1834 letter to Isaac Swain. In this passage, Rebecca bears her testimony of the Three Witnesses. Writing to her father, who rejected Mormonism, Rebecca testifies of the truth and desires her family to join in her belief.

angel of God and conversed with him my Father I hardly know what to say to you did you and Mother know the Circumstances as we do in relation to this work I am persuaded you would bele belive it, my heart morns for my relation acording to the flesh but all that I can do is to commend them to God praying that he would enliten your minds in the way of truth, there is one of our Brethren who expets to go to Canada soon71 I have talked with him about going to see you if he does I hope you will have a plesant visit with him as he his a man of information capable of teaching the Gospel as it is in Jesus my Dear Father do you belive that all the Churches are of the Lord the Lord has said by the mouth of [h]is Serva<n>t Joseph that this is the only Church upon the face of the whole earth with which the Lord was well pleased with, speaking unto the Churches collectively and not individualy for I the Lord can not look upon sin with the least degree of allowance nevertheless he that repenteth and doeth the commandments of the Lord shall be forgiven and he that repenteth not from him shall be taken even the [2] light which he hath received for my Spirit shall not always strive with man saith the Lord of hosts,72 as <so> than we see all that are pure in

72. Doctrine and Covenants 1:30–31, 33. In 1834, the revelation we know as section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants had been published as “Revelation Given Hiram, Ohio, November 1, 1831,” *Evening and Morning Star*, March 1833, 78.
heart the Lord will bless I want my Brothers to write to me 73 I pray the Lord to comfort you in your last day with his holy Spirit and may they be your best days 74 my Children join me in love to you I must close my letter to ever remember the instruction [unreadable] I have received from my beloved Father yours <in love> Re Williams

do write to us soon, I hope your mind will be composed concerning this work, be assured that we feel firm in the cause knowing that the Lord is at the helm and will turn and over turn tell all things shall be brought <to> pass and Israel shall again rejoice in the Lord.

Kirtland Mills 75
Jun 4

Rec’d June 12, 1834
Mr Isaac Swain

New York Ni Co 76

73. William and George Swain, to whom the letter is addressed, were stepbrothers to Rebecca. Their mother was Patience Dune, Rebecca’s father’s second wife. Her older brother John was particularly close to Rebecca as a child. See Godfrey, Biographical Information; and Williams, Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams, 12.

74. Isaac Swain lived another four years.

75. Kirtland was also called Kirtland Mills prior to, and throughout the stay of, the Saints. See Backman, The Heavens Resound, 37.

76. Youngstown is thirteen miles north of Niagara Falls and thirty-one miles north of Buffalo, New York. Niagara County, New York, is bordered on the north by Lake Ontario.
Letter of Melissa Dodge to William T. Morgan, 1839

Little documentary evidence survives to detail the story of Melissa Morgan Dodge's life. This letter to her brother, William T. Morgan, is the only writing of Melissa Dodge known to exist. The shadowy outline of her life story is found in family genealogical information and the records of her sons.

Melissa Morgan was born blind to Nathaniel Morgan and Mary Wheeler in Jefferson County, New York, on October 28, 1798. She was the oldest of four children. When she was twenty, she married Erastus Dodge in nearby Henderson. Melissa and Erastus were baptized after meeting Mormon missionaries in 1832. Their entrance into the Church was dramatic. Melissa's oldest son, Augustus, described the restoring of his mother's sight by David W. Patten and Warren Parrish at the time of her baptism. He also explained that his crippled left elbow was healed instantaneously as well.

Melissa bore fifteen children in her lifetime, ten before she had sight. Only seven of the fifteen matured to adulthood. The other eight died before their first birthdays, and several are listed as having the same birth and death date.

Melissa and her family moved to Kirtland in spring 1834. Erastus and Augustus worked on the Kirtland Temple, and undoubtedly Melissa also expended time in aiding those working on the temple and in the completion of the temple itself. The Dodges moved with the Saints from Kirtland to Missouri, arriving during the initial troubles in Clay County. They then settled in Caldwell County on Shoal Creek near Far West. At the surrender of Far West in October 1838, Erastus and Augustus were both held prisoner for eight or ten days. Once reunited, the Dodges were driven out of Missouri in the dead of winter and suffered much. They crossed the Mississippi River to Adams County, Illinois, where the family lived until they moved to Nauvoo. There they resided four blocks from the Prophet. Melissa's son Seth was a mason on the Nauvoo Temple, and the rest of the family also assisted in the construction of the temple and the Masonic

77. Information about Nathaniel and Mary's family is incomplete. The Ancestral File in the Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, identifies a daughter, Margaret (1799–?) and another of unknown name (1801–?). It does not include William as a son.

78. Biographical information about the Dodge family is found in Augustus Erastus Dodge, Mormon Biographical Sketches Collection, Church Archives; Augustus Erastus Dodge, Reminiscences, Church Archives; and Jenson, Biographical Encyclopedia, 1:742.
Hall. Erastus died in August 1843, and, after two years of widowhood, Melissa died in 1845.79

Though the view of Melissa's life is limited, the best glimpse we have of what is obviously her true motivation in life shines through this one personal record. While her poetic flourishes demonstrate her appreciation for the world she then saw around her, her rough articulation shows a lack of formal education. Likewise she demonstrates her knowledge of the scriptures and Joseph Smith's revelations. Melissa's life was an intense struggle, and she stood with those who were willing to sacrifice all for their beliefs.80 The Melissa Dodge letter is in excellent condition, one tan sheet 12" x 15" written on three folded sides with russet ink. Melissa's letter is written—almost scrawled—in bold and broad strokes.

June <the> 23 1839
Dear Brother and Sister81 With thankfull<ness> to the Lord We are yet alive and have this oppportunity of letting you no that We are in the land of the living We have bin drove from our home and we are now in Illinois in Adams County Whear We rented land82 Seth Works out83 he has 14 dollars a month Sally Works out this Somer and is a doing well84 the rest of the Children are at home85 all though We have bin <driven> by a Cruel mob

81. This letter is found in William T. Morgan, Correspondence, Church Archives. Morgan is listed as living in Henderson, New York, in the 1830 and 1840 censuses. Information is not available as to the identity of his wife.
82. The Dodge's lived near Far West from spring 1835 until late 1838. Adams County, Illinois, just south of Hancock County, was a place of refuge for many of the Saints after the expulsion from Missouri. Many used Adams County as a place of preparation before moving on to Nauvoo. See Susan E. Black and Richard E. Bennett, eds., A City of Refuge: Quincy, Illinois (Salt Lake City: Millennial, 2000.) With a branch of the Church at nearby Freedom, the Dodges were in the company of many fellow Saints. Stanley B. Kimball, "Nauvoo West: The Mormons of the Iowa Shore," BYU Studies 18, no. 2 (1978): 132–42.
83. Seth George Dodge (1821–1882), Melissa's oldest living son, was eighteen at the time the letter was written. Seth and Sally worked away from home.
84. Sally Morgan Dodge (1826–1877), Melissa's oldest daughter, was thirteen at this time.
85. With Sally and Seth gone, Melissa had five children to care for at home. By the time she wrote this letter, she had buried six children.
We can say like Paul we take the spoiling of our goods joyfully noing theay is a god in heaven Which Will <bring> them to judgment in his one [own] due time and the day [is] soon a coming When his Saints shall not be driven and harrist about by a Cruel mob but thanks be to my god the day is night [nigh] and the [h]our is neer When he Will take vengenc on all the ungodly and give his Children a reward a crown of righteousness While the Wicked must perish under his Wrath for theay have drive some from their homes and Some theay have kiled in a Shocking maner Some theay Whiped and Some theay put in prison but all this is to show that the Scripture Shall be fullfilled and the time dray nigh When the Son of man will Come to reine With his Saints\(^{86}\) for the time is Come that judgment must begin at the house of god\(^{87}\) and if it first begin at us What shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God if Righ[te]ous Scarcely be Saved Whear Shall the ungodly and Sinner appear though Wicked men and divels Strive to keep us from that land and from theer homes the Saints theay drive to try the Lords Comand We are Still determind [to] maintain the faith Wich once Was delivered to the Saints [2] and not fall away like Some have and deni <the> gospel of Christ\(^{88}\) theay are thoughs [those] that fel on Stonny ground Who When theay have h[e]ard the Word immediatly receive it with gladness and no root in them Selves and So endure but for a time afterward\(^{89}\) When affliction or persecutions ariseth for the Words Sake immediatley theay are offended but We are determind by the grace of God our lord and Savor Jesus Christ to <endure> in faith to [the] end that We may receive the Crone that is prepared for his Saints\(^{90}\) I prais my maker While I breath[e] if I am drove from place to place and serve the Lord for this I no he has no other Church Below I do feel to rejoice that it is as well With us as it is for god has bin our Sheald and buckler\(^{91}\) he has bin our Covet [cover] in the Storme When We Weare drove from Missouri in febary aCroast the preras [prairies] you must realise [fig. 3] your Self how you Wo[u]ld have felt to have bin drove from your home for nothing but for

86. See Doctrine and Covenants 43:29.
87. See Doctrine and Covenants 112:25.
88. The Lord repeatedly warned the Saints through revelation that "if thou art not aware, thou wilt fall" (see D&C 3:9). With ten to fifteen percent of members leaving the Church after the trials in Kirtland and with continuing problems with apostasy through the events in Missouri, the Saints were accustomed to apostasy by the time they reached Illinois. Backman, The Heavens Resound, 462.
89. See Mark 4:16.
90. See Doctrine and Covenants 78:15.
91. See Doctrine and Covenants 35:14.
Fig. 5. Excerpt from Melissa Dodge’s 1839 letter to William T. Morgan. In this portion of her letter, Melissa expresses gratitude to her Lord, who delivered her family from the Missouri mobs. Melissa’s letter shows great determination, faith, and hope in the face of adversity.

the religon of Jesus Christ in <the> dead of the Winter on the open preras [prairies] With your littles ones but thanks be to the Almigty god he has preserveve [preserved] us and has <kep> us from <the> hand of our Cruel enemies Who Was threatening our lives daly & if [I] Could See you and talk With you I could tell you all about it We Want to See you all or hear from you may god grant to give you his Spirit to enable you to See the thruth as it is in Christ Jesus that We may meet in the Celestel Kindom of god Whear parting is no more thear We Shall Sing our makers prais through out relms of endlis days 92 <We> Weant you Should Write and let us no Whear our Brothers and Sisters all are So We can Write to them to let them no that We are a live93 and Writ as so[o]n as you get this letter that I may hear from you once more for I cant express how I Want to see you all and talk With you and then I could tell you this from your Brother and Sister Erastus and Melissa Dodge

give our love all enquiring frends
Derect your <letters to> Adams County
Pa[y]son post office Illinois

92. Though Melissa’s handwriting and spelling are particularly crude in comparison to that of the other letters introduced in the article, Melissa’s style is the most poetic.
93. There were at least three generations of Morgans who lived in Jefferson County. There is little information available on the Dodge family.
I heard last Summer that father was dead94 thearefore I shant Said <not> much about him blessed are the dead that die in the Lord95 
Dont for git to let me no Whear you all are and Writ[e] immeatly that I may no Whear you all are and then I Will Write more particulars
I See the little birds With Eas[e] fly ove[r] the hils and lofty trees Could I but fly as Well as theay I [would] quicly Com and talk with the[e.]
Melissa Dodge

To Mr
William T Morgan
Of Henderson; CO.
Of Jefferson; NY

Payson Ill96
July 6

Over

Sandy Hill
Payson Illinois

94. Nathaniel Morgan (1772–) died sometime in the 1830s. He was in Henderson in 1830 for the New York state census.
96. Payson is located thirteen miles southeast of Quincy, Illinois.

Janiece Johnson (janiecejohnson@hotmail.com) will continue her academic career at Vanderbilt University in fall 2002. She received a B.A. in political science and an M.A. in American history from Brigham Young University. This documentary article is a selection from her master’s thesis, “Give It All Up and Follow Your Lord: Mormon Religiosity, 1831–1843” (Brigham Young University, 2001), which explores the themes of nineteen letters written by early Mormon women. As this is an ongoing research topic, the author requests the help of anyone who may have access to or knowledge of letters written by early women in the Church. If you have information about such documents, you may contact her at the email address listed above. The author would like to thank the staff at the Church Archives for their help and support in the research of this project.