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“It Seems That All Nature Mourns”
Sally Randall’s Response to the Murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith

Jordan Watkins and Steven C. Harper

Sally Carlisle was born in New Hampshire in 1805. She married James Randall, and they settled in Warsaw, New York, where they had two sons, George and Eli, and converted to Mormonism. They moved to Nauvoo in 1843. A collection of Sally’s letters addressed to friends and family has been preserved. The letter she wrote July 1, 1844, less than a week after the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, has a remarkable provenance (see sidebar).

Sally wrote to her “dear friends” in the East, explaining her perceptions regarding the Martyrdom, and thus provided one Latter-day Saint woman’s response to what she described as “one of the most horrible crimes committed that ever history recorded!”

The historical record is rich with such accounts, but Sally’s letter is remarkable for several reasons: in it we hear a believing woman’s voice, and in it we have captured a very early response to the tragedy, a raw and revealing reaction. Because Sally wrote so shortly after the event, historians can distinguish between what Saints in Nauvoo believed at the time of the Martyrdom and later traditions that characterize reminiscences composed years after the event took place. She clarifies that Saints in Nauvoo believed the city council’s decision to destroy the Expositor press was a catalyst for the antagonism leading to Joseph’s death. They faulted


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the governor of Illinois, Thomas Ford, for not protecting Joseph, and they believed that Joseph and Hyrum voluntarily suffered martyrdom to seal their testimonies with their blood. She even reports that Joseph foreshadowed his death by urging Saints to read chapter 6 of the book of Revelation. Sally’s letter has a remarkably detailed description of the Martyrdom itself. She corroborates the many historical accounts that describe the awful feelings experienced by the Saints and the faith and fortitude that characterized their response.


Sally Randall’s 1844 Letter

Nauvoo July the 1st 1844

Dear friends I take this opportunity to write to you to let you know that we are all as well as usual and hope these lines will find you enjoying the same blessing we have had a very wet season so far it is hard times especially for poor people I expect you will have heard of something of our trouble before you get this and will want to know the truth and I will write it as near as possible it has been about three weeks since the fuss begun in the first place thare <were> six or eight apostates cut off from the church and from that time the devil has been raging with all fury they got up a printing press and went to printing all manner of lies and abominations that could be thought of against the prophet and the heads of the Church and the City Council held a council and agreed it was a nuisance and ordered it destroyed and it was done we have been expecting the mob upon us ever since the governor was sent for by Joseph he came to Carthage the County seat about fifteen miles from here and thare he stoped the mob ware then gathered thare and the apostates with them I would like to give you all the proceedings of the governor but my pen would fail me he sent for Joseph and all that were concerned in destroying the press and said if they would come thare thay should be protected and have a trial according to law thay all gave themselves up and went but instead of having a trial thay were put in prison the governor then sent and took away the states armes and sent in a company of troops he said to protect us the prisoners ware all set at liberty except Joseph and his brother hiram and two of the twelve elder tailor and elder Richards and thursday the 27 of June the governor came to this town and said he had dispersed the mob from Carthage and the same day about 6 in the afternoon was one of the most horrible crimes comited that ever history recorded thare ware about one hundred and fifty of the mob made an attack upon the court house and the guard and went into the Jail and the first one thay shot was hiram he was killed dead on the spot elder tailor was badly wounded Joseph then jumped out of the window thay shot him I know not how many times the mob then fled as quick as possible thay were painted thare ware some crossed the river the

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5. This transcript is based on the photocopy James Nowa made of the original holograph while serving in the Northern States Mission. The transcript he made on his mission provided the basis for the portion of the letter that we no longer have. Randall’s spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar have been maintained. Her insertions are in angle brackets <like these>.

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James Nowa’s Account of Obtaining the Sally Randall Letter

In 1962, I was serving in the Northern States Mission, headquartered in Chicago. While my companion and I were tracting in the western suburbs of Chicago one day, we tracted out a sister member living in the ward boundaries. She said she had just received the Church magazine the Improvement Era, and it was not her family’s name on the mailing label. She did not recognize the person’s name, but the address was on the same street a block or so away. She gave us the magazine and we went to the address.

The person whose name was on the magazine invited us in. Unfortunately, I did not write down his name in my journal. Being nineteen at the time, I guess I didn’t think it was important. He told us his father used to live in Utah and was friendly with the Mormons but was not a member. To keep abreast of what was going on in the Church, he [the man’s father] had subscribed to the Church magazine. His father was a doctor and used to buy old trunks at estate sales. One of the trunks he purchased had Sally Randall’s original letter in it. We talked this man into letting us take the letter and make a photocopy of it. Unfortunately, the equipment at that time was not very good—hence the poor quality of the copy. The letter was also old, and the paper somewhat faded.

I can find only two of the three pages of the letter. I think that when I was being transferred around in the mission field I misplaced the last page, but the bulk of the letter is contained in the first two pages. I typed up a copy of the full three pages while I was in the mission field with the help of a member of the Church who was in the media, so the typed copy is accurate.
next morning and the paint was to be seen on them there was only eight men left to guard the Court house the governor left this place the same day about sundown and took his troops with him they got about four miles from here they met a man coming to fetch the sad news and took him back would not let him come so we did not get the news till the next morning if you can imagine yourselves how the apostles and saints felt when the Savior was crucified you can give some thing of a guess of how the Saints felt here when they heard that there prophet and patriarch were both dead and murdered by a lawles mob never has there been such a horiblll crime committed since the day Christ was crucified it seems that all nature mournes the earth is deprived of the two best men there was on it they have seald there testimony with there blood Joseph sent word to the church after he went to prison to read the 6 chapter of revelations and give particular notice from the 8 to the 12 verses I have no doubt but that he knew he should be killed when he gave himself up he told his wife when he left here he was going as a lamb to the slaughter and many other things give us reason to believe he knew what would befall him he gave himself up to die for the church that they might not be destroyed for it seamed all they wanted was to kill him and they have done it but I dont know as they will let us alone now but I hope they will be easy a little while they say there is nine more they are determined to have and when it will end I dont know if I ever have another opportunity I am not sorry I am here at this time I want you should write to me I have not had but one letter from you since I came here I have written you a long one this time give my respects to all inquiring friends I have been braiding some this summer but it is hard getting palm leaf I intend to braid straw I shall write no more at present

Sally Randall

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6. A rumor circulated that the enemies of Joseph and Hyrum would not be satisfied until eleven leading men of the Church were dead. Vilate Kimball feared, therefore, for her husband Heber's life. Sally's language here echoes Vilate's in a June 30 letter to Heber: "Every heart is filled with sorrow, and the very streets of Nauvoo seem to mourn. Where it will end the Lord only knows." Vilate Kimball to Heber C. Kimball, June 30, 1844, in Stanley B. Kimball, Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 108.
Jordan Watkins (gchild777@hotmail.com) received a BA in history from Brigham Young University and has been admitted to the MA program in history at Claremont Graduate University. He has presented papers at conferences held for the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association and the Mormon History Association.

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