

A History of the Rise of  
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day  
Saints  
in  
Missouri

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2008

*Anyone with historical information about the rise of the Church is invited to share that information by sending it to this website and it will be added. Thanks.*

**Sources: “Church Almanac”; Doctrine and Covenants; “The History of the Church”, B. H. Roberts, Deseret Book Co., 1964; Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling by Richard Lyman Bushman, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005; Wilford Woodruff, Bookcraft: 1964; The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, A Mormon Prophet, Signature Books; “Polygamy on the Pedernales” by Melvin C. Johnson, Utah State University Press 2006; Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Deseret Book Company, 1985; LDS Church News.**

*Note: Much has been written about Church history in Missouri and it is not the intent here to repeat what is known, but to assimilate significant events in easily readable chronology related to the efforts of taking the gospel into this important area of the United States.*

At the first Church Conference on 26 September 1830 Oliver Cowdery was called to begin the Church’s first mission west of New York State which would include seeking out the New Jerusalem location in Missouri, and to teach the Indians in the area about the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery would lead a group with Peter Whitmer Jr., Parley P. Pratt, and Ziba Peterson also going. Frederick G. Williams joined the group as they passed through Ohio.

The federal government was at that time removing eastern United States Indians and settling them in an area outside the western edge of Missouri. Later the area that would become Oklahoma became the primary place to settle the eastern Indians. This transfer of eastern Indians occurred primarily from 1817 to 1838.

On 13 January 1831 this missionary group arrived at St. Louis Missouri. From there they traveled on foot for 300 miles during bitter cold weather with only corn bread and raw pork to eat that was mostly frozen. They arrived in Independence Missouri.

Peter Whitmer, Jr. and Ziba Peterson stayed in Independence to work as tailors while the other two crossed the border into what would become Kansas to teach the Delaware Indians. Oliver Cowdery and Parley P. Pratt had some good success with the Delaware Indians before being ordered out by the U.S. Agent to the Delaware and Shawnee Indians for lack of permission to teach.

After returning to Independence from the Indian Territory the Cowdery led missionaries had some success and a few baptisms in the Missouri area.

After the June 1831 Church Conference in Kirtland Ohio a revelation to Joseph commanded fourteen pairs of Elders to go to Missouri. See D&C 52. This group included Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon. The missionary group now called was to designate the exact location of the city of Zion or New Jerusalem.

Joseph Smith left for Missouri from Ohio on 19 June 1831 and arrived in Independence during July 1831, which he found to be made up mostly of a rough crowd of traders and trappers. It was a very backward place. Edward Partridge was placed as leader of the Missouri Saints by his calling as a

Presiding Bishop. Sidney Gilbert was instructed to start a store and W. W. Phelps was to start a newspaper.

The Colesville New York Branch of the Church arrived in Independence at this time and purchased property and began building a house twelve miles west of Independence in Kaw Township. This group was made up primarily of the Joseph Knight family. They had moved to Missouri as a result of Lemon Copley deciding not to keep an earlier promise to share a large farm in Thompson Ohio with the Colesville people. See D&C 54 and 56.

Joseph Knight was for many years a great friend and defender of Joseph Smith and his mission. They met when Joseph Smith came to work for Joseph Knight in Colesville New York. It was Joseph Knight's horse and carriage that was used to retrieve the golden plates from the Hill Cumorah. After Joseph Smith's move to Harmony Pennsylvania Joseph Knight provided him with food and writing materials as he translated the Book of Mormon. He and his sons also helped Joseph move to Fayette New York to escape persecution. Joseph Knight died at Mt. Pisgah Iowa on 3 February 1847.

A revelation from the Lord soon confirmed that Independence, Jackson County, would be the center place and the land was dedicated to the Lord with Joseph placing the cornerstone for the temple at the northeast corner. See D&C 57.

On 5 November 1834 Wilford Woodruff was ordained a Priest at Adam-Ondi-Ahman and left to serve a mission to Arkansas and Tennessee on 13 November 1834 with Henry Brown as his companion. This required them to travel through Jackson County but they came through the County without much difficulty. In southern Missouri they also encountered former mobbers from Jackson County. A Minister of a Church intentionally gave them incorrect directions which caused them suffering. Once, a former mobber gave them a good breakfast but swore at them the entire time they were eating and as they left his home. At another place they preached to a room full of people at a tavern on a Sunday before moving into Arkansas.

Declining Priesthood instructions to go west with the Saints in 1847 Bishop **George Miller** traveled from Winter Quarters Nebraska into Indian Territory with Church members **Joseph Kilding** (Lucy Matilda Johnson), **Richard Hewitt**, their families and others including women and children. They intended to eventually go to Texas to see Brother Miller's son and perhaps stay. Most had familial ties to the Wight group. **John F. Miller**, George Miller's son, was with Wight in Texas and was married to Lyman Wight's daughter, Rosina.

They first traveled to an area just north of Kansas City Missouri called Plattenville looking for work but discovered that Church member **Alpheus Cutler** had already taken the work. Then learning that workers were needed in the Cherokee Nation they decided to go to that location. They arrived in Tahlequah, which was the capital of the Cherokee Nation, on 9 July 1847.

The St. Louis Stake was originally organized on 4 November 1854 (later dissolved) with **Milo Andrus** as the Stake President. **Orson Spencer (Catherine Curtis, Martha Knight)**, served as Stake

President for a time but died on 15 October 1855 from malaria, which may have been contracted by a visit to Oklahoma.

At a Conference in Salt Lake City on 8 April 1855 **Henry W. Miller (Mary Elmira Pond), Robert Petty, Washington N. Cook, John A. Richards and William A. Richey** were called to Indian Territory as missionaries.

Capt. **Jacob Croft's** Spavinaw Creek Mill became the Indian Mission headquarters after he met with missionaries from Utah. It was located on the Grand River in Cherokee Territory. Jacob Croft was a convert from Houston Texas and a former follower of Lyman Wight.

On 20 August 1855 Orson Spencer and **James McGaw** arrived at Croft's place from Mormon Grove in Kansas near Atchison.

President Henry W. Miller had been appointed President of the missionary group in Indian Territory and was likely called because of a recommendation by Elder **Orson Spencer**, who was the Supervisor of the Church in the Mississippi Valley. Elder Spencer resided in St. Louis and his companion was Elder James McGaw when he visited Oklahoma to examine the missionary potential. Elder Spencer's daughter, Aurelia S. Rogers, became the first General Primary President of the Church.

At a Missionary Conference in St. Louis on 6 October 1855 four Elders (**James Case, William Bricker, George Higginson and Henry Eyring**) were called to serve in Indian Territory. These Elders came from serving in the St. Louis Missouri Mission at the request of Indian Mission President **Henry W. Miller** to their Mission President, **James H. Hart**, through Elder Spencer. They arrived on 10 November 1855.

A **Brother Kiney** from St. Louis accompanied the missionaries to their assignment and then returned to St. Louis.

Also, during October Elders **James Case** and **William O. Flavell** from Keokuk Iowa were appointed to work in the southern portions of the Cherokee Nation. William O. Flavell came as far as Springfield Missouri, changed his mind, and returned to Keokuk Iowa.

On 26 June 56 Saints left for Utah from Indian Territory and were led by Jacob Croft who was appointed to his position by Elder Miller. Elder Miller accompanied the migrating group to Kansas City before leaving them. They had apparently gone northeast from their starting point to obtain an established road for travel and perhaps to obtain supplies. Lost cattle during the trip to Kansas City, was a continuing problem.

The former Patriarch of the Wight group, **Pierce Hawley**, refused to join the group to Utah although many of his family members did go to Utah and were later settled in Pine Valley northwest of St. George. Pierce Hawley remained bitter at Brigham Young for "stealing" the Wisconsin group's property which primarily was a covered boat, the "Maid of Iowa" that could have been used to travel from Wisconsin to Texas.

In Kansas City Elder Miller obtained a letter from President James H. Hart of the St. Louis Mission requesting that he visit St. Louis.

Elder Miller boarded a Steamer for St. Louis and while waiting to depart another steamer came by with **Almon W. Babbitt** on board, and they spoke for only a few moments in passing. Brother Babbitt had been elected a delegate to Congress from Utah but not permitted to take his seat. He would be killed by Indians in Nebraska during September 1856.

In St. Louis Elder Miller met with Apostle **Erastus Snow** and President Hart. He was given \$200 tithing money and \$23 from the Branch, which allowed him to purchase clothing for his missionaries.

During October 1900 the States of Missouri and Louisiana were taken from the Northern States Mission and added to the Southwestern States Mission. The Mission President at that time was **James G. Duffin**. Then on 26 December 1900 the Mission headquarters was moved from St. John Kansas (about 80 miles northwest of Wichita) to Kansas City Missouri at 140 Locust Street. The Church had now returned to Jackson County Missouri from which it was driven out in 1833.

President Duffin recommended to the First Presidency of the Church that members no longer be encouraged to migrate to the Stakes in the west or assemble in local colonies, as had previously been done. This idea was approved by the First Presidency with the new policy beginning in late 1901.

On 4 April 1904 Missouri became part of the Central States Mission, as the name was changed from the Southwestern States Mission while still located in Kansas City Missouri.

Also during April 1904 President Duffin purchased for the Church a property in Independence from **Maggie S. Swope** that included part of a property that had been purchased by Presiding Bishop **Edward Partridge** during 1831 and lost in the expulsion from Jackson County during 1833.

In October 1906 **Samuel O. Bennion** became the Mission President. He would serve in that position until April 1933.

The Central States Mission headquarters was moved to Independence Missouri in March 1907.

A new Chapel was constructed in Independence and dedicated on 22 November 1914 with a Mission home being built in Independence during 1917. Also, Zion's Printing and Publishing Company owned by the Church was incorporated in Missouri during 1907 and later began publishing missionary tracts and copies of the Book of Mormon in large numbers from Independence.

The Liberty Jail Monument was dedicated on 15 September 1963 by Elder Joseph Fielding Smith. President David O. McKay had intended to perform the dedication but was ill at the time.

## LDS Splinter Groups

- 1.) **James J. Strang** had been baptized in Nauvoo by Joseph Smith on 25 February 1844, ordained an Elder and instructed to create a Stake of the Church in Voree Wisconsin located near present day Burlington in extreme southeastern Wisconsin.

After Joseph's death in June 1844 he claimed to be Joseph's successor and continued leading his group in Voree until 1848 when he re-established the group on Beaver Island in Lake Michigan. James J. Strang produced a letter supposedly written and signed by Joseph Smith designating him as Joseph's successor after his death.

One individual who thought the letter might be legitimate, for a time, was Joseph's mother Lucy Mack Smith. Brigham Young ignored James J. Strang and his letter.

James J. Strang was shot by dissidents of his group on 16 June 1856 and died 9 July 1856. At one time it was said he had as many as 12,000 followers. Some small remnants of this group still exist today (2008).

- 2.) **Apostle Lyman Wight** rejected the leadership of Brigham Young and the Apostles during 1845 and led approximately 150 people from Wisconsin to Texas. They thought it was the will of Joseph Smith that the Church move to Texas.

The Wight group had left the Black River area of Wisconsin in the spring on flatboats, traveled for a time on the Black and Mississippi Rivers beginning 28 March 1845 to near Davenport, and then went overland from southern Iowa to Texas. They crossed into Texas during early November and wintered in Grayson County south of present day Lake Texoma before moving on in 1846 to a place just north of Austin.

Travel for this group included some death and much suffering. However, they were committed to obey Apostle Wight's every instruction. Polygamy was practiced by them.

Brigham Young sent **Samuel Bent** from Nauvoo to meet the group in Iowa in an attempt to divert them to Nauvoo to join the saints, without success.

Wight was aware of **Joseph Smith** sending an emissary, **Lucien Woodworth**, to Sam Houston during March 1844 to investigate the possibility of purchasing territory in the Republic of Texas to create a nation in southwest Texas as a buffer between Texas and Mexico. Joseph was an advocate of Texas coming into the United States.

Wight and Bishop **George Miller** were instructed to prepare to lead a group of Church members to Texas from the Wisconsin Pine area by Joseph Smith prior to Joseph's death in June 1844. This move would be done after the negotiations with Texas, was complete. Also, Wight was instructed by the Quorum of Twelve Apostles in August 1844, after Joseph's death, to prepare his group in Wisconsin to move to Texas the following year. **Brigham Young** made it clear however that only the Wisconsin group was instructed to do so.

The Pinery group in Wisconsin had been disbanded after Joseph's death but were instructed to return and left Nauvoo during September 1844 for Wisconsin.

Later that year these instructions were rescinded but there is confusion as to whether Wight received word of the change from the Quorum of Twelve or ignored them as he led his group from Wisconsin to Texas. On at least two different occasions a person representing the Church went to Texas and informed him he should end the Texas mission and move to Utah.

**William Clayton** accused Lyman Wight of encouraging the burning of the lumber at Nauvoo to be used in building the Temple. Wight felt the Temple completion was unnecessary after Joseph's death. This required Church leaders to establish protective guards around the Temple and the lumber.

Lyman Wight was older than Brigham, was an Apostle, a member of the Council of Fifty, had received his Second Anointing, and considered himself duly authorized to follow through with Joseph's instructions even after Joseph's death.

The Council of Fifty was a group of leaders, including some non-members, created by Joseph to find a solution to where the saints might settle and be out of the jurisdiction of the United States government.

Brigham taught that a man such as Lyman Wight had authority to build up a kingdom unto himself, but the leadership of the Church rested with the Quorum of Twelve Apostles as Joseph had instructed prior to his death.

Safety for the Church and its leaders in avoiding Texas became a key concern for the Twelve. Of course revelation from the Lord to Brigham and the Twelve was an overriding factor. Lyman Wight's almost continuous estrangement from Nauvoo and Church leadership likely played a part in his decision to go to Texas. Problems that developed with the Wight group in Texas such as Comanche Indian raids, Civil War disagreements, extreme weather, conflicts with locals and some with the U.S. Military are all issues that proved Brigham to be right in moving the Saints to Utah.

During 1858 and 1859 a majority of the remaining Lyman Wight followers in Texas relocated to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) for a time, including Lyman Wight's first wife. She had a letter from Sidney Rigdon criticizing the Church leadership in Utah, which prophesied only evil would come of them.

Lyman Wight had died in Texas northwest of San Antonio on 31 March 1858 while attempting to lead the remainder of his group to be united with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that would be founded in Amboy, Illinois on April 6, 1860 and later headquartered in Lamoni Iowa (1882) and Independence Missouri (1920) with Joseph Smith III as its President.

Complicating Wight's health problems was his apparent addiction to both alcohol and opium. Opium was an accepted drug and was taken for health problems at that time but was as expensive as gold. He was buried at Zodiac Texas.

Some of Lyman Wight's group went to California, some stayed in Texas and some went to Utah but a majority joined the RLDS Church movement. During the late 1890s the oldest son of Lyman Wight, Orange Lysander Wight, moved into the home of his daughter, Harriet Wight Earl in Pine Valley Utah and rejoined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This was likely a development Lyman could never have accepted while on this earth.

Missionaries in Indian Territory such as Henry Eyring preached to these people, Wight's followers, without success. A Strangite missionary named **Jacob Prindle** had also actively recruited the former Wight group members in Indian Territory.

Those who went to Utah were tithed and baptized upon arrival.

Lyman Wight's grandson, **Heman C. Smith**, and great-grandson, **Heman Hale Smith**, became Historians for the RLDS Church. Both defended Joseph Smith III's assertion that his father, Joseph Smith Jr., had not begun teaching the principle of polygamy but that Brigham Young had initiated it. During their tenures as historians some very important documents such as marriage records and journals that would have contradicted their stance seemed to be conveniently lost.

- 3.) **Alpheus Cutler** was the original leader of the Wisconsin Pineries project intended to supply wood during the construction boom in Nauvoo Illinois. He failed to recognize the leadership of Brigham Young and follow him to Utah.

His group first settled in the area of Fremont County Iowa during 1852. Some of his followers then joined the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when it was organized 6 April 1860 in Amboy Illinois. Cutler's plans to move his followers to Minnesota were derailed during 1864 when Cutler died. However his counselor Chauncey Whiting and Cutler's wife led a portion of the group to Otter Tail County in west central Minnesota during 1865.

Some others of their group arrived the next year. This group believed in the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon but did not accept polygamy. By 1900 it had essentially disappeared.

- 4.) **Joseph Smith III** was born 6 November 1832 and died during 1914 while living in Independence Missouri. An initial meeting of those promoting Joseph III as the Church President was held during June 1852 but 19 years old Joseph refused to lead the group at that time. However during 1859 he accepted his calling as Prophet and President and the group that would later become the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was formed on 6 April 1860 at Amboy Illinois.

During 1882 Church headquarters was moved to Lamoni Iowa. Joseph III moved to Independence during 1904 but it was after his death that Church headquarters was officially moved to Independence, Jackson County Missouri during 1920. A major attempt was made by Joseph Smith III to obtain the New Jerusalem Temple Lot in Independence for the RLDS Church during the early 1890s.

The RLDS group had obtained a quit claim for the entire 63 acres of land from Maria Louise Johnson who was **Oliver Cowdery's** daughter. They also felt that they would be recognized in any legal proceeding as the true successors to the original Church and filed for a legal hearing to justify their claims in August 1891 to take the property from a group that had obtained it earlier led by **Granville Hedrick**. Their legal attempt was denied by the courts.

The theory of patrilineal succession adopted by the RLDS Church continued until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when no male heir arose to take his father's place as President of the Church. About this time the importance of the Book of Mormon was downgraded, women were given the Priesthood (1984) and the Church built a temple and dedicated it to the pursuit of world peace while emphasizing world peace as an important motto. The verbal promotion of world peace versus the actions generated by priesthood authority and the influence of the Holy Ghost seems to be the resultant effect of losing both. During 2001 the RLDS Church was renamed the Community of Christ.

- 4.) **William Smith** was born 13 March 1811 and died 13 November 1893 in Osterdock, Clayton County, Iowa. He had served the Church as an Apostle while his brother Joseph was alive but was disfellowshipped on 6 October 1845 and excommunicated on 19 October 1845.

During 1845 he declared Brigham to be a Pontius Pilate and himself as Church President. William also accused Brigham of poisoning his brother Samuel so it would be easier for Brigham to proclaim himself Church President. He called for a gathering of the Saints at Lee County Illinois where the RLDS Church would be founded on 6 April 1860. However during 1860 he wrote to Brigham Young and proposed coming to Utah and joining the Saints there.

Shortly he became caught up in the Civil War and seemingly lost interest in going to Utah. His warming up to Brigham may have been a result of his not being called into a leadership position in the RLDS Church. He joined the RLDS Church during 1878.

- 5.) **Sidney Rigdon** was born 19 February 1793 and died in Friendship New York on 14 July 1876. At Joseph's death he proclaimed that no one could take Joseph's place as President and that he should become "Protector" or "Guardian" of the Church. He was supported in his stand by Nauvoo Stake President William Marks.

Sidney Rigdon had been Joseph's first Counselor at the time of Joseph's death but was essentially uninvolved in Church leadership at that time. After his proposal was not accepted by the membership of the Church he left Nauvoo "for his safety" and was excommunicated by the Church on 8 September 1844. He went back to Pittsburgh

Pennsylvania where he had been living and reorganized the First Presidency and Apostles of the Church among his followers during April 1845.

By 1847 most of his followers had deserted him likely because he seemed mentally unbalanced. As this group dissolved one of his followers named **William Bickerton** reorganized the Church into what became known as the Bickertonite group of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Sidney Rigdon moved to Friendship New York and later started “The Church of Jesus Christ of the Children of Zion” after communicating with former James J. Strang followers and had spokesman Stephen Post read his messages to his followers but the Church soon dissolved after his death.

- 6.) **Granville Hedrick** was baptized during 1843 and became Presiding Elder of the Branch at Crow Creek Illinois in April 1857. On 18 July 1863 under the direction of disaffected Apostle John E. Page he became leader of 4 Branches in Woodford County Illinois northeast of Peoria. John E. Page ordained him a Prophet, Seer and Revelator and joined the group himself. Thus they became known as the Hedrickites.

The name of the Church was “The Church of Christ” and they consider themselves a continuation of the original restoration from 1830. Granville Hedrick declared Joseph Smith a fallen prophet and claimed revelation from God during 1864 to lead his group to Independence Missouri to reclaim the Temple Lot. There was also influence exerted by **David Whitmer’s** claim that Joseph was a fallen prophet.

Approximately 60 members of the group arrived in Independence in 1867 and by 1877 had purchased 8 lots which included the northeast cornerstone of the Temple that was laid by Joseph Smith. In 1891-1894 they successfully defended their title to the property in a civil suit brought by the RLDS Church.

During 1929 an attempt was made to construct the Temple but it was abandoned because of economic constraints. They now consider themselves custodians of the property awaiting instruction from God. Since its inception this group has had four splinter groups break from it.

- 7.) **William Bickerton** took the lead of the Rigdon group as Sidney Rigdon relinquished it. Bickerton established a Branch of the Church during May 1851 at West Elizabeth Pennsylvania south of Pittsburgh.

At a conference on 9 July 1861 twelve members were called as Apostles of the Church. The Church was incorporated during June 1865 as the “Church of Jesus Christ of Green Oak Pennsylvania.” It is now incorporated in all of Pennsylvania as the “Church of Christ.”

Membership today (2008) is claimed to be 12,136 with nearly 3,000 living in the United States. There is a publishing house in Bridgewater Michigan that publishes copies of the Book of Mormon. The Church accepts the Book of Mormon and Bible as scripture but does not accept the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price. There is no paid ministry. Joseph Smith is not thought to be the choice seer predicted to come in the Book of Mormon

but that seer is thought to likely be a person of Native American heritage that will come later.

The Church does not accept plural marriage, plural Gods or baptism of the dead. Deaconesses (women) in the Church may prepare the Sacrament and revelation may be received by any individual member. They believe Sidney Rigdon was the rightful heir to leadership of the Church and Restoration after Joseph Smith's death. The glaring irony of this organization is their basing their existence and priesthood authority on a man (Sidney Rigdon) whom they would not follow.

**Jason Briggs** founded Branches of the Church in Eastern Wisconsin at Beloit and Waukesha. He initially followed James J. Strang but during the 1850s established his "New Organization" Church.

**Zenos Gurley** did not follow the Saints to Utah and in 1850 established a church he called the Yellowstone Branch in Lafayette County Wisconsin.

One thing all those who did not go to Utah apparently had in common was a desire to avoid the long and difficult trip that involved burying family members, the sacrifices necessary to create a civilized society in a wilderness and the missionary services required after being settled. Some were even willing to declare Joseph Smith a fallen prophet to justify their decision although history shows there have been very few, if any, fallen prophets. Those who labeled Joseph Smith a fallen prophet did it so flippantly that they were seemingly unaware of the consequences to themselves and to their future generations. To call Joseph Smith a fallen prophet would imply God was negligent in calling someone who would fail at such an important task as opening the last dispensation and restoring the gospel prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ. There was a great need for the influence of the Holy Ghost at this time because faith was severely tested.