

Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett

Mary Elizabeth Knight was born in Gallatin Township, Clay County, Missouri, on June 16, 1836, the daughter of Joseph and Betsy Covert Knight. Her mother, Betsy Covert, was born in Cleveland, Ohio July 27, 1813. Of the sixteen children in the family, she was the only one to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She was characterized by Mary Elizabeth in an *Autobiographical Sketch* dictated to Laura Boley Francom as being “a stout hearted woman” who always encouraged her family and told them even during the hardships they were enduring that everything was alright. The Lord was with them, and they must say their prayers and everything would be alright. She died May 5, 1876.

Her father, Joseph Knight, Jr., born in 1806, was the fifth of seven children born to Joseph Knight, Sr., (born in 1772), the “Father Knight” of early church history, and Polly Peck (born two years later than her husband). His older brother Newel (1800), third child in the family, also figured prominently in the early history of the church. Other children were Nahum (1796), Esther (1798), Anna (1804), Polly (1811), and Elizabeth (1817). These children were contemporaries of Brigham Young, born Jun 1, 1801 in Whitingham, Vermont, less than ten miles west of the Knight’s Halifax, Windham County, Vermont home, and the Prophet Joseph Smith, born December 23, 1805 near Sharon, Vermont, seventy miles to the north. Years later they would meet in New York and figure prominently in the founding of the church. This area of Vermont is characterized by tree covered rounded mountains and beautiful mountain valleys with crystal clear streams. Hard winters and rocky ground presented challenges to early New Englanders who settled there.

Joseph Knight, Sr. believed in the young Prophet Joseph Smith and befriended him many times during the time he was translating the Book of Mormon. He provided him with fresh produce from his farm and needed transportation. It was his wagon that was involved in the “Barrel of Beans” episode. In an attempt to hide the golden plates while traveling, Joseph Smith had hidden them in the bottom of a barrel of beans, probably supplied by Joseph Knight. When the wagon was stopped by men harassing the prophet, in their search for the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was being translated, they were about to dump out the barrel of beans. The prophet protested at the prospect of wasting the beans, and proceeded to dip the beans out of the barrel with his cupped hands, putting them into another container, handfuls at a time. His willingness to empty the barrel in this fashion convinced the men the gold plates could not be there, so they told him he need not continue, and the plates were protected.

References to the Colesville Branch in the *Doctrine and Covenants* and *Church History* refer to the group of Saints led by Father Knight that emigrated from New York to Kirtland. The first attempt to live the law of consecration and stewardship took place in Thompson, Ohio, near Kirtland. Leman Copley at first was willing to share his farm, and Father Knight’s group settled there, building houses, repairing fences, and planting crops. After two months, Leman Copley rescinded his offer, leaving many Saints without a

home. Newel Knight and other elders went to the prophet Joseph. D. & C. 54 was the Lord's answer, saying that inasmuch as the law of stewardship and consecration "had been broken, even so it has become void and to none effect." As Karl Ricks Anderson, in his book *Joseph Smith's Kirtland* states, the members of the Colesville branch were told to join the saints gathering in Missouri. Joseph Knight Jr. recalled, "We had to leave his [Copley's] farm and pay sixty dollars damage for fitting up his houses and planting his ground." They left for Missouri on July 3, 1831. Leman Copley left the church and did much damage by testifying falsely against Joseph Smith in a lawsuit at Chardon, Ohio, in 1834, but later repented and confessed his wrongdoing, and was rebaptized in 1836.

A Short Sketch of the Life of Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett, of unknown origin, but obviously written around 1914, as it refers to Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett's being 78 years old, which was found among family records, states that "Sister Bassett's father sold a piece of property at Kirtland, the proceeds of which he gave to the Prophet."

The parents of Joseph Knight, Sr. were Benjamin and Sarah Crouch Knight. Benjamin was one of 129 soldiers in the Ockham, Massachusetts, militia during the Revolutionary War. In 1780 he moved his young family, including Joseph, to Marlborough in Vermont's southeast corner. At that time Vermont was a "reluctant republic", claiming independence from the British Crown, New York, and New Hampshire, who all had laid claim to the territory. At Marlborough, where his last three children were born, he farmed and built a sawmill. His son Joseph became a miller, as did his grandsons Newel and Joseph Jr.

Benjamin's first Puritan ancestor was Englishman John Knight, who arrived in Massachusetts by 1636 and lived in Watertown, Sudbury, Woburn, and Charlestown. He married Mary Bridge. Their son Samuel was married to Rachell Chase Knight. Their son Samuel, and Anna Eames Knight, were the parents of Benjamin Knight.

Mary Elizabeth Knight's grandmother, Polly Peck, was a fifth generation American from Pilgrim stock. From the original colony at Plymouth, Massachusetts, the Pilgrims spread westward, establishing a settlement near present Providence, Rhode Island, called Seekonk by the Indians. Plymouth leaders also sent settlers to build Rehoboth and Attleboro villages. Many Pecks are listed in Rehoboth records. Nicholas Peck and Rebekah Bosworth were Polly Peck's first American ancestors. Their son Hezekiah peck married Deborah Cooper, and their son, Hezekiah Peck, Jr., was the father of Captain Joseph Peck, who married Elizabeth Read. Polly Peck was their sixth of thirteen children.

As recorded in William Hartley's book *They Are My Friends, History of Joseph Knight*, "Polly's father gained fame in Vermont's history books for his militant role as "Captain Peck" in Vermont's thwarted 'New York Rebellion.' During the American Revolution, while the Pecks lived in Guilford in Windham County, Vermont declared itself a republic. New York, however, continued to claim parts of Vermont. Guilford was the only Vermont town where pro-New Yorkers dominated. Yorkers, needing military protection against Vermonters, in vain asked General Washington to bring artillery to

protect them. Then, in July of 1782, desperate Yorkers begged New York Governor Clinton for Military aid. He authorized the town to create six militia companies and appointed Joseph Peck to be captain of the 1st Guilford Company of the Cumberland County (New York) militia.

“To stop Yorkers’ military activity, Vermont sent militia under Ethan Allen, famous for Revolutionary War exploits with his Green Mountain Boys, to suppress Guilford rebels. In January, 1784, Allen’s men raided Captain Peck’s home. Five men went to the door. Elizabeth told them that her husband was not at home and she refused to say where he was. Frustrated, the troops plundered the house and carried off Captain Peck’s sword and other weapons.

“By October, 1782, after Vermonters had shot an innocent man, passions cooled. Twenty-six Guilfordites, including Captain Peck, ‘worn out with the one-sided contest and neglected by New York and by Congress,’ asked for and received pardons. Violence ceased, but land titles remained confused for many years afterwards.

“To compensate ‘Vermont sufferers’ for their losses, New York granted them an eight square-mile township in south-central New York, along the Unadilla and Susquehanna rivers. Captain Peck received 640 acres, and he moved there shortly after 1788 – the 1790 census lists Pecks as residents of Chemung Township in old Montgomery County.”

Polly stayed in Vermont when the family moved to New York, and married Joseph Knight in 1795. Early in their marriage they moved from Marlborough to Halifax in Windham County, Vermont. Both were children during the Revolutionary War.

They were among the first members to be baptized into the church, as the Knight family believed in the Prophet Joseph Smith even while he was still translating the Book of Mormon. They followed the Prophet to New York to Kirtland, and from there in 1831 joined the Saints gathering in Missouri. It was there on June 16, 1836 that Mary Elizabeth was born in Gallatin Township in Clay County, Missouri.

Her earliest recollection was when her baby sister Rhoda was born on March 14, 1839. She remembered that period of her life very vividly because they were driven from their home in Far West in 1839. She tells of the mob coming into their home and driving them out after promising that they could come back for their things. In her *Autobiographical Sketch*, she says, “They made us leave all and go – Mother and Father and three children – Martha, myself, and Rhoda. The baby was about three weeks old. Mother looked so pale and sorrowful. We had to leave everything we had.” She continues, “They drove us, frightening and killing off the stock.” They were driven across the Mississippi River. She remembers moving into a little log cabin across the road from Mrs. Leonard’s. From her she learned her ABC’s.

When she was about three years old, she remembers having sore eyes, and being administered to by Brother Richard Morgan. She recalls how good she felt when he rubbed his hands over her eyes and face. She knew she would be better.

They landed in Nauvoo in 1839. She continues, "Mother took us to the old bowery by the Temple, and while there we saw the Prophet Joseph Smith. Mother worshipped his name and taught us of him." Mention is made of making cheese, and she adds that two more children were born while the family lived in Nauvoo. While they were there, "Father got a chance to tend a mill in La Harpe." La Harpe is located a little more than twenty miles east and a little north of Nauvoo, in Hancock County. Her sketch also says, "Father moved on the Mississippi River and tended a mill for his brother." This would have been the mill owned by his older brother, Newel Knight. As mentioned earlier, both Joseph Knight Jr. and Newel Knight had carried on the tradition of milling which their father and grandfather, Benjamin Knight, had established.

Mary Elizabeth Knight was baptized in the Mississippi River when she was eight years old. Of life in Nauvoo, she said, "We lived a hard, poor life. The mob kept at us and wanted to drive us out... we lived close to the temple. The house had a basement and when the mob and fight was on, we were in the basement. Mother baked bread for the Army." She also mentions their helping fix missiles for the cannons. According to the *Short Sketch* mentioned earlier, "During the Battle of Nauvoo, Sister Bassett (and mother) and sisters Rhoda C. Moore and Martha A. Mills made the bags to hold the missiles (which consisted of scraps of iron) for the cannon."

Quoting further from the *Short Sketch*, "She was but nine years of age when the saints were driven out of their homes by the mob in the fall of the year. While waiting for the ferry boat to take them across the river, she remembers one of the mob seizing one of the saints who had returned for something and immersing him in the water, in the name of 'Old Joe Smith', saying that such would be the penalty for all that came back for anything. Brother Knight remained until the last company left, looking after the poor. He was acting bishop under Bishop Hunter, who went with the first company."

Once across the river near Montrose, Iowa, young Mary remembers in her *Autobiographical Sketch* that "We were hungry, with nothing much to eat." The *Short Sketch* tells that "They remained on the banks of the Mississippi until the teams came back after them. [They had no team of their own.] They were in an almost starving condition, and some were out searching for food (while others were sick and faint for the want of food), when the incident of the quails, which they considered a miracle, happened. The sky began to darken like a great black cloud, and hundreds of quail alighted in the camp, and were so tame that they could be easily picked up by the hand."

"After remaining about three weeks on the banks of the Mississippi they left for Winter Quarters, but on arriving at the banks of the Missouri, they found it frozen, so they could not ferry over, and the ice wasn't firm enough to hold up the wagons. They had to winter there, and they called the place Ferryville. There were no mills, and no way of grinding the corn, so they lived mostly on hulled corn." She said those days with so little to eat were "sad days". On the way from Nauvoo to Ferryville, Mary tells of a woman killed when oxen ran over her.

Of the trip to the west she mentions that Captain Thomas Johnson was the appointed leader. She says, "Brother Robert Campbell [was a] clerk in the church for years – had a young wife and baby. Both died and were buried in camp." When the Missouri River was free from ice in the spring they left for Winter Quarters. She says, "I remember when we were crossing the Missouri River, the oxen were on the ferry boat. The wagon was chained on the boat. We were afraid the oxen would stampede. Father had to tend to them and I was afraid he would get killed, and I prayed for the Lord to save him. Mother always encouraged us and helped us not to be fearful."

She said that while at Winter Quarters, when she would come home from school, all there was to eat "was a piece of dry corn bread, made of water, salt, and cornmeal. [How I] longed for white bread!" They stayed at Winter Quarters until the Saints left for the West. Her father and family went to Kanesville (now called Councils Bluffs), where they stayed until they earned an outfit to cross the plains. They left there the summer of 1850 with two teams consisting of one yoke of oxen and one yoke of cows.

In her *Autobiographical Sketch*, she says, "A man coming from Kanesville wanted to cross the plains with us. None wanted him, but he insisted. We all had all we could do. He said he would drive team or anything. We let him go [as our teamster]. He came to water [about which] the captain said, "Don't any of you drink this water!" It was green, slimy, and stagnant. This man was warm and thirsty. He didn't heed the warning. He drank and drank and was boasting it wouldn't hurt him. But he took sick that evening with cholera and was dead by morning."

Of her trip west, Mary said there were some deaths, but they were more afraid of Indians, although they did not see any. "All had measles in the wagon – Mother and all. Laying in the wagon, the hot sun pouring down on us, [we had] no water. How I suffered for a drink! We carried our water and it became scarce. [We] carried ours in a churn."

Of their evenings around the campfire, after the wagons were pulled into a circle, she said, "We used to sing and dance. [A] man played the fiddle. We would all gather around the campfire and enjoy life. On traveling, we had to get out and walk up hills. Two young girls walked ahead and got lost (was out all night). [They] had to sleep up in trees to keep away from wolves."

"[As we were] crossing the plains, a herd of buffalo came, but we turned off before they got to us. Who can say but the silent prayers offered from the burdened hearts in that string of martyrs didn't reach the Throne of Mercy and turn the herd from stampeding? [There were] one hundred wagons."

The *Short Sketch* includes the following: "there was one circumstance Sister Bassett still remembers, and that was the running away of an ox team, killing a lady by the name of Whitesides. She was buried on the plains, but the grief stricken husband returned to St. Louis with his children."

After three months on the plains, the Knight family arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on September 12, 1850. According to the *Short Sketch* “They located in the old fort, where there were a number of adobe houses with dirt roofs, surrounded by little gardens. Brigham Young had a house situated on the north bench which was considered quite fine for those days, and it was call the “White house’. They had very plain food to eat and very plain clothes to wear. Some fine dresses were made from dyed wagon covers.”

Family tradition says that Mary Elizabeth Knight worked for the family of Charles Henry Bassett and his wife Permelia Dayton before she became his second wife in March of 1853. According to the *Short Sketch*, “They were married in the old Council House by Orson Hyde. She is the mother of nine children, six of whom are still living [at the time of this writing]: Mary E. Rodeback, born in Salt Lake City June 9, 1854; Melvie A Glines, born July 28, 1861; W. H. Bassett, born March 14, 1858; Ernest K., born June 13, 1861; Ruby R. Ashworth, born May 13, 1871; and Lois K [Knight Bassett Gatrell], born April 13, 1879.

“She has great faith in the gospel and has many testimonies. The healing of her eyes, some years ago, she considers one of the greatest. An oculist told her that she would become totally blind with cataracts on both eyes, and would have to undergo an operation to recover her sight. She exercised a great deal of faith by prayer and working in the temple, and now, over 78 years of age, she is able to read.

“She was acquainted with Brigham Young – met him at socials and dances many times, her husband and father being intimately acquainted with him. She has heard Brigham Young prophesy and seen his prophecies fulfilled. “One sad incident of her life was the robbing of the grave of her seven month old baby boy. She recovered the clothes in the early sixties.”

Another source of sadness in her life was the forced separation from her husband because of the government’s treatment of polygamists. Charles Henry Bassett married five wives. After Mary Elizabeth Knight, he married Sarah Stageman, Manda M. Wright, and Millie Phippen. One of these ran off and left him. When the choice of one wife had to be made, he chose to stay with the younger wife, as he felt the younger family was in greater need of his support and guidance. From that time on he could not set foot on any portion of the lot where Mary Elizabeth’s home was located, or be seen with her.

From that point, the responsibility of caring for her children was hers alone. She always carried on as best she could with the same indomitable spirit and courage that marked her life. She remained true to her faith and testimony of the gospel, and the close relationship shared among members of the distaff side of the family continued many years after her death in the form of weekly gatherings, facetiously referred to as “hen parties”.

This history of the life of Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett is a compilation of facts and quotations from several sources. An effort has been made to put them into chronological sequence. Early ancestry is based on material found in William Hartley’s book *They Are*

my Friends, *A History of Joseph Knight,: Chapter 2: of Puritan and Pilgrim Cloth*, published by Grandin book Co. In it he refers to genealogy records in the Darrell Knight Family Archives (Salt Lake City), which closely parallel genealogy sheets in the Wallace and Gordon Gatrell families, based on research by family members and information from Lois Knight Bassett Gatrell, their mother, who was the youngest daughter of Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett. William Hartley has also gleaned material from the following three community histories: Alfred Sereno Hudson, *The History of Sudbury, Massachusetts, 1638 – 1889* (Town of Sudbury: 1889), pp. 26,75, 113, 145; Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town*, (New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 108, 113, 114, 210; and in the *History of Worcester County, Massachusetts, II* (Boston, Jewett and Company 1879). Powell's book shows John Knight was a wealthy land speculator in Watertown and Sudbury.

William Hartley also used and quoted from Richard LeBaron Bowen, *Early Rehoboth: Documented Historical Studies of Families and Events in This Plymouth Colony Township, I* (Rehoboth: Privately Printed, 1945), and David M. Lundlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791 – 1850* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 12 – 13. Captain Peck's role as a 'Yorker' in Guilford is detailed on dozens of pages in the *Official History of Guilford, Vermont, 1678 – 1961* (Guilford, Vermont: 1961). The quotations used in telling the rebellion story are from this book.

The author of a *Short Sketch of the Life of Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett* is unknown. It was copied from a handwritten document by Madene J Gatrell, wife of Gordon G Gatrell, son of Lois Knight Bassett Gatrell, youngest daughter of Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett, in 1992. As it mentions Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett as 78 years old at the time of the writing, it must have been written around 1914.

The *Autobiographical Sketch* by Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett was dictated to her neighbor and friend Laura Boley Francom, who recorded it in pencil on various newsprint sheets and some grocery list pages. Parts are incomplete, highly descriptive sentences, but other statements are abbreviated, no doubt to keep up as words were given. Towards the end it deteriorates into seemingly unrelated bits and pieces which are not included in this history. The envelope containing these loose sheets was given to Ruth B Gatrell, wife of Wallace B. Gatrell, oldest son of Lois Knight Bassett Gatrell, who was Mary Elizabeth Knight Bassett's youngest daughter, soon after her marriage to Wallace in 1945. A direct transcript was typed at that time by Ruth Gatrell. An effort has been made to merge the *Short Sketch* typed by Nadene with the *Autobiographical Sketch* in the possession of Ruth Gatrell.

From its position in the manuscript, it would appear that Captain Thomas Johnson was appointed to lead wagons from Nauvoo, but it is much more likely that he headed the wagon train when the Knights traveled west from Kanesville to Salt Lake City.

Another source of material is Karl Ricks Anderson's *Joseph Smith's Kirtland* (Deseret Book 1989) pp. 132 – 133, and personal conversations with Karl Ricks Anderson at Kirtland by Ruth Gatrell and her daughter Aleta Grandy.

The *Biography of Charles Henry Bassett* is a typewritten document of unknown origin that has been in the Gatrell family for years. Copies were made in 1992.

Last but not least, family tradition has helped fill a few gaps. It is hoped that this history will bring and increased appreciation for this undaunted pioneer and her contribution to the rich heritage that she has helped forge through her devout trust in the Lord, and the trials and hardships, as well as the happy times and great experiences that highlighted her life.

--- Ruth B. Gatrell

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