

# Uncle John Smith, 1781–1854: Patriarchal Bridge

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JOHN SMITH, BROTHER OF JOSEPH SMITH, SR., and uncle of the Prophet Joseph Smith, was an unspectacular, though far from ordinary man. Amid the troubles and uncertainties following the June 1844 martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum, Uncle John provided a bridge of continuity for the office of Presiding Patriarch of the Church.

What kind of man was John Smith? His letters and journals display unusual literacy for his time and education and illustrate his unwavering faith in God and in the divine mission of the restored Church. Only once did he question a decision of Church leaders; most often he attributed early Church trials to members' lack of faith or unrighteousness. His most common plea was for the Lord's help in strengthening the saints.

John Smith was born at Derryfield, New Hampshire, 16 July 1781, the eighth of eleven children born to Asael and Mary Duty Smith. The only accounts of his early life appear to be two histories that he wrote for his sons, George A. (in July 1839) and John L. (in April 1851). They are almost identical in tone and content. Only when John Smith joined the Church did he begin to keep a journal, and by then he was fifty years old, married, and had three children.

He married Clarissa Lyman on 11 September 1815, and they lived in Potsdam, New York, where they became the parents of George Albert, Caroline, and John Lyman Smith. Another daughter, born in May 1816, died soon after birth. John and Clarissa were members of the First Congregational Church and according to their son, George A., they "spared no pains to impress my mind, from infancy, with the importance of living a life of obedience through the principles of the religion of heaven, which they taught me as well as they understood it" (Papers 1827).

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When George A. was nine years old he received a blow on his head, leaving him insensible for three weeks. He wrote, "my father being a man of faith, and believing that God will heal me, dismissed the physicians, and in a few weeks I recovered, although for many years I felt the effects of that blow" (Papers 1827).

In the fall of 1828, the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote to his grandfather Asael Smith that "the sword of vengeance of the Almighty hung over this generation, and that except they repented and obeyed the gospel, and turned from their wicked ways, humbling themselves before the Lord, it would fall upon the wicked and sweep them from the earth as with the bosom of destruction" (Papers 1828). At the time John Smith commented that "Joseph wrote like a prophet" (Papers 1828), and in 1832 he and Clarissa embraced Mormonism.

According to John's sister-in-law, Lucy Mack Smith (1853, 204), John was dying of consumption when he and Clarissa were baptized at Potsdam, 9 January 1832. George A. described the event:

My father had been for several years very feeble in health and for about six months previous to his baptism had not been able to visit his barn. The neighbors all believed that baptism would kill him. I cut the ice in the creek and broke a road for 40 rods through the crust of two feet of snow and the day was very cold. The neighbors looked on with astonishment expecting to see him die in the water, but his health continued improving from that moment (Papers 1832 [retrospective]).

Uncle John became involved in missionary work immediately, traveling many miles often in inclement weather and frequently facing ridicule and rejection. The miracle of his survival of such a rigorous physical and spiritual challenge could account in some measure for his lifetime of devotion and sacrifice.

Because of his total commitment to the gospel, Uncle John had no tolerance of anyone who might pollute or dilute the sacred mission of the Church. He was equally concerned with his own shortcomings. His journal is replete with entries such as, "O Lord keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins, cleans me from secret faults for Jesus sake" (25 Feb.) or "Lord forgive what thou hast seen amiss in poor unworthy me this day and give wisdom" (10 March). Occasionally he feared more for unworthy others, saying, "But O Lord while I would confess with shame before thee my unworthiness, I fear for him lest he turn back to the begerly elements of the world" (8 March). After speaking in Potsdam village, 29 March 1833, to what he termed "an indecent company," he observed in his journal, "but alas, it seems that God hath said they are joined to their idols Let them alone. O Lord God save some of them if not all from going down into the pit."

John Smith's mood lightened as he moved with his family to Kirtland. He refers to the "pleasant journey" (20 May) and of prospering en route, and arriving at Kirtland in good health and spirits, 25 May 1833. There he purchased twenty-seven acres and built a cabin. Brigham Young laid the floor of the cabin, perhaps beginning their long friendship.

Ten months later, 17 February 1834, Uncle John was called to the Kirtland High Council and soon became its chairman, a responsibility he took seri-

ously. During a High Council trial 23 August 1834, Sylvester Smith confessed that he had accused the Prophet both of “prophesying lies in the name of the Lord” and of abusing Sylvester’s character before the brethren. Despite Sylvester’s plea for forgiveness, Uncle John said he thought Sylvester should make public his confession in the *Star* (Journal History, 23 Aug. 1834). Again on 8 November 1835, Uncle John suggested that Isaac Hill, tried for lying and attempting to seduce a female, should make a public confession in the *Messenger and Advocate*. This time Sidney Rigdon argued against him, saying Uncle John had “spread darkness rather than light upon the subject.” Rigdon’s objections may have reflected a concern that John was perhaps undermining his authority and influence. Later, the Prophet, “labored with Uncle John and convinced him that he was wrong; and he made his confession” (HC 2:303).

On one occasion, however, John defended Jared Carter when the brethren found fault with Carter’s teachings. In this earlier High Council trial Uncle John said he thought Carter “did not express the feelings of his heart, so as to be understood, and perhaps his heart was not so hard as his words” (Journal History, 19 Sept. 1835).

John Smith’s faith was total. Even the death of his young nephew Jesse Smith 1 July 1834, while on a mission, did not shake him. John wrote to his brother Asael, Jesse’s father, on 12 August 1834 and referred to the “chastening which our Heavenly Father has seen fit in his wisdom to put upon you . . . therefore I feel a secret joy diffusing through my breast for the testimony my Heavenly Father has given that he loves you.” And when another nephew, Elias Smith, expressed resentment towards the Church, John wrote him a letter on 19 October 1834 that Elias kept all his life:

You say the things that you have seen and heard of late look like absurdities to you. Suppose you mean the Gospel which I have embraced of late . . . I tell you in the fear of God that these things are true as the Lord lives, and I would that you would search out these things for yourself, for I know that it is within your reach if you are willing to humble yourself before the Lord, as you must . . . or you cannot enter in the kingdom of God. It is because I love you and seek your best good that I tell you these things. . . . Now I advise that with candor and prayers, you will learn many things that you never thought of before and you will not have reason to complain of your benighted understanding. Your light would shine in darkness and unfold to you many mysteries which seem to trouble you now very much. If you will give heed to the council which you have heard you will have peace like a river and righteousness like an overflowing stream. Tell Amos the Lord prospers the church here and it increases in numbers. I repeat it—the Church of the Latter Day Saints will prosper in spite of wicked men and devils until it fills the whole earth . . . . The walls of the Lord’s house are nearly completed. The roof will go on next week.

In 1836 John accompanied his brother, Joseph Sr., on a mission to the branches of the Eastern states “to set them in order and confer on the brethren their patriarchal blessings” (HC 2:446). The trip apprenticed John for his future calling as Patriarch to the Church. The two were gone three months and traveled almost 2,400 miles, visiting branches in New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania as well as collecting money for the Kirtland

Temple. John wrote in his journal of Joseph, Sr., pronouncing blessings on several non-members, some of whom were baptized two days later (12 May 1836).

In the September 1837 Conference at Kirtland the Prophet Joseph Smith introduced his two counselors, Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, and named Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith, Sr., Hyrum Smith, and John Smith as assistant counselors. "These last four, together with the first three," he said, "are to be considered the heads of the Church" (HC 2:509). Later, in Salt Lake City, John would recall, "In Kirtland, Ohio, four brothers sat in the Patriarchal seat in the Temple, and I only of that number am left to tell the tale" (in G. Smith 1927, 85).<sup>1</sup>

During the troubled years 1837 and 1838, John Smith's letters to his son, George A., reveal again his concern for the purity and preservation of the Church. On 1 January 1838, he wrote:

I called the High Council together last week and laid before them the case of dissenters, 28 persons were, upon mature discussion ~~proceeded to cut them~~ off from the Church . . . We have cut off between 40 and 50 from the Church since you left. Thus you will see the Church has taken a mighty pruning and we think she will rise in the greatness of her strength, and I rejoice, for the Lord is good and He will cut his work short in righteousness . . . I will rejoice for the Lord will purify His Church (p. 2).

When mobs forced the saints to leave Kirtland early in 1838, Uncle John and his family left with few possessions. They had forty dollars to see them through what was to be a horrendous journey to Far West. Lame horses, shocking weather, bad roads, scarcity of food and shelter, only brought such comments from John as, "what the Lord will do with us I know not, altho he slay me I will trust in him . . ." (Journal, 23 April), "We neglect prayer and trust too much in our own wisdom" (9 May), "at evening heavy thunder with a powerful rain wet our clothing [and] bedding . . . but the Lord has preserved our health thus far" (16 May).

When they arrived at Far West two months later, 16 June 1838, the Prophet directed them to continue to Adam-ondi-Ahman. Uncle John, as stake president, was appointed to build up the settlement of saints. Initially optimistic, believing that "the promises of the Lord are sure" (Journal, 16 July 1838), his faith remained firm even when things began to deteriorate. He refers in his journal several times to Danite meetings and to the saints' need to defend themselves against wicked mobs. By November 1838, they were again out in the cold. John recorded that "200 families, many of them without means to help themselves, then were turned out of their houses and such scenes of suffering is not recorded in any land as were endured by the saints" (24 Oct. 1838). John himself was forced to sleep in the open and suffered frostbitten feet which troubled him for a long time.

When the Saints moved to Illinois, they faced troubles of a different kind. With summer came severe sickness and in September 1839 Uncle John refers

<sup>1</sup> The 25 May 1854 *Deseret News* obituary of John Smith makes no mention of his calling as a counselor to the prophet.

to "being given into the hands of Satan as much as was Job to be tried and I was very low. . . . Joseph and Hyrum and Bishop Knight came to see us and to know our situation . . . . One thing is worthy of note and will never be forgotten by me. Joseph took the shoes from his feet and gave to me rode home without any seeing our unhappy condition" (Journal, 21 Sept. 1839).

In December, concerned about the poor and needy and the Church's abandoning the Law of the Lord, he questioned for the first and only time the decisions of the brethren:

Pres. [Hyrum] Smith delivered a lengthy speech showing the folly of trying to keep the law of the Lord until Zion is redeemed. Returned home the next day, December 16, thinking that I would search prayerfully the Doctrine and Covenants and learn the will of the Lord concerning the consecration of property & taking care of the poor and needy, the widow etc. spend my time from this to the next meeting of the High Council to know my duty to the Church, how to organize in that oneness and equality that the Law of God requires that we may be the Lords people and for the life of me I can see no other way only in the honest consecration of property that we may be Stewards of the Lord according to his law (Journal, 15 Dec. 1839).

Three weeks later he reported meeting with President H. Smith and O. Granger and said they were "pleased with our resolution to observe the law of consecration but since that time they have seemed to operate against all our proceedings. The cause is unknown to me" (4 Jan. 1840). On 6 March 1840, he met with Joseph and Hyrum, who informed him, "thus saith the Lord, you need not observe the law of consecration until our case was decided in Congress" (Journal).

Later journal entries that year suggest that the pervasive sickness among the saints was brought on by a lack of righteousness. On Sunday, 29 November 1840, he observes, "There is a spirit of jealousy and evil surmising creeping in among the brethren which I greatly fear will be injurious to the cause of truth O Lord lead thy people in the paths of peace." On 17 December he pleads, "O Lord forgive the sins of thy people and bring those who have done foolishly to repentance" and on 20 December, "O Lord help them to repent and so indeed that thou mayest love them." In a 7 January 1841 letter to his son George A. he wrote, "it requires the patience of a Job and the wisdom of a Solomon and the perseverance and faithfulness of an Abraham to keep such order as ought to be in the Church of Christ." On 15 January he wrote in his journal, "Did something towards stoping drinking and dancing which has been practiced by certain ones in the Church to the shame of the Saints."

During these years in Illinois, John served as president of Zarahemla Stake in Nauvoo. But on 10 January 1844, the Prophet Joseph ordained him to be a patriarch. After the martyrdom, Brigham Young noted this ordination and suggested that either William Smith or Uncle John could rightfully succeed to the office of Patriarch to the Church. "It is their right. The right of the Patriarchal blessings belongs to Joseph's family . . . . Here is Uncle John, he has been ordained a patriarch" (HC 7:234, 241-42).

In the October 1844 conference Uncle John seconded and moved to the Church that “we uphold Brigham Young the President of the Quorum of the Twelve as one of the Twelve and First Presidency of the Church” (*Times and Seasons*, 1 Nov. 1844, p. 692). At this same conference, John Smith became president of the Nauvoo stake. Upon his return from the Eastern States mission, William Smith was ordained Patriarch to the Church 23 May 1845, only to be excommunicated less than five months later for “apostasy” and “for aspiring to the office of president” (Richards 1845; HC 7:458–59). Such a charge may have been well-founded, but it could also have resulted from William’s overt challenge to the Twelve’s authority over his own calling. Paul Edwards says of William:

Some assume he was power-hungry, others that he was an opportunist; yet he always held himself as regent, not king, and saw his eventual contribution as father-patriarch not president-prophet. His own needs and frustrations may have often overshadowed his contribution, but he did aid in the preservation not only of the organization, but the office (Edwards 1985, 139).

With the exodus from Nauvoo, the office of Patriarch, along with that of President, would remain vacant for the next two and one-half years.

Despite all the disruptions of moving, Uncle John was still a stickler for order. As captain of the first company of fifty, he ruffled a few feathers. Hosea Stout related on 4 February 1847:

Met in council this evening as usual . . . . The subject of the beef committee was taken up on the complaint of Father John Smith who was not satisfied with some things about it. The thing was talked out of ‘countenance’ and finally Pres’t Brigham Young moved to have the whole matter laid over till the first resurrection and then burn the papers the day before (in Brooks 1964, 1:235).

Later, in Salt Lake City, Patty Sessions told how Uncle John refused an invitation to her home because he suspected she was trying to get him to one of her unofficial Relief Society meetings. The occasion was, in fact, Patty’s birthday party.

Once in the Salt Lake valley, Uncle John was appointed president of the first stake, and when the brethren left to return to Winter Quarters, he assumed total responsibility. When a plague of crickets descended in 1848, Uncle John’s counselor, John R. Young, wanted a report sent to Brigham Young telling of the seriousness of the situation and urging him to stop all immigration to the valley. John Smith replied, “Brother John, the Lord led us here and He has not led us here to starve” (in Hilton 1972, 51).

While the brethren were at Winter Quarters in December 1847, they reorganized the Church “according to the original pattern with a First Presidency and a Patriarch” (General Epistle, 1848). Uncle John was named Presiding Patriarch. Wilford Woodruff noted in his journal on 27 December 1847, “We learned from President Young’s teaching that it was necessary to keep up a full organization of the Church through all time as far as could be. At least the three first Presidency quorum of the Twelve Seventies, and Patri-

arch over the whole Church &c so that the devil could take no Advantage of us.”

At the October 1848 general conference, Uncle John was released as president of the Salt Lake Stake and sustained as Patriarch over the whole church. On 1 January 1849 on their return from Winter Quarters Brigham Young and his counselors ordained him as “Presiding Officer over the Patriarchal Priesthood.” Later he commented in his journal on the welcome change in his responsibilities:

Since that time my burden has been lighter and I have been regaining my health since, but I find that I am about wore out with excessive labour. Although I have been faulted in some things while presiding in the valley my conscience is clear & I done the best I knew & I ask no mans forgiveness (1848, 63).

Three months later, John wrote to D. H. Miller giving an enthusiastic, detailed description of the Salt Lake valley and its amenities but then adding, “Some of our people have caught the fever & have gone to the gold diggings & it is said here probably not many of them will ever return which we hope may be the case” (13 July 1849). Yet Henry Bigler’s journal, a short time later, records how he had been called to go to the gold mines on behalf of John Smith:

Sun. Oct. 7, 1849. This afternoon I was informed that President Young had told Father John Smith that as he had been kicked and cuffed about and driven out of the United States because of his Religion and had become poor, it was His council that Father Smith fit out some person and send him to California or to the gold mines and get some treasures of the earth to make himself comfortable in his old age and the old gentleman has called on me to go, saying he could trust me.

Bigler, who had served with the Mormon Battalion and recently returned to Salt Lake City, had just finished building a little house. He had been at Sutter’s Fort when gold was discovered but had chosen to return to the valley. Sadly, he reflected: “I was not looking for any such mission. Indeed it had been President’s counsel not to go to the gold mines and those who went after such counsel . . . was looked upon as Jack Mormons . . . I could not help feeling sorrowful . . . I feel attached to this place and to this people, for they are my brethren and dear friends” (7 Oct. 1849).

Bigler obeyed the call but failed to obtain any “treasures of the earth” and had to sell some of his possessions to repay John Smith the expenses he had advanced.

Patriarch Smith did have many family obligations to meet. In Nauvoo he had been sealed for time to Mary Aiken, widow of his brother Silas, and he had continued to feel financially responsible for her family. Jesse N. Smith, son of Silas and Mary tells of being called on a mission to Parowan, along with his brother Silas:

We were soon under way and stopped for the night in Salt Lake City at Uncle John’s. He remarked that himself and brothers had always desired that one of their family should be educated . . . He wished me to remain and go to school at his expense here; he would see Pres. Young and have me excused from the mission to the south.

Although I greatly desired to get an education I preferred to go upon the mission, fearing also that the expense would be burdensome to him. When I acquainted him with my resolution he blessed each of us with a Patriarchal blessing (1953, 17).

Seven other women had also been sealed to John Smith at Nauvoo in January 1846, although these may have been marriages in name only. Two of these sealings were cancelled by order of Wilford Woodruff forty-eight years later, 16 March 1894. One cancellation was of a sealing on 25 January 1846 to Bathsheba W. Smith. (Born 3 May 1820 — evidently George A.'s wife. Perhaps this was an adoption [NTR].)<sup>2</sup>

In December 1850, Uncle John took in Bathsheba and her family when George A. left with his plural wife Zilpha to found a settlement in the south. Bathsheba wrote:

This was December 1850, the saddest day I had yet seen. Two days before my husband started south, I was out of wood and the house open and cold. Father Smith invited me and the children to live with his family until my house could be finished. This I gratefully accepted. We furnished our own provisions and I did work for the family . . . . Father, seeing that I had time to spare, asked me to record blessings that he gave . . . I wrote so much for him that I found myself earning quite a nice little sum each week (p. 29).

Later, following the death of Clarissa and seven weeks before his own death, John Smith married Mary Franky.

Uncle John gave 5,560 patriarchal blessings in the ten years he served as local and Church Patriarch, including one to non-member Colonel Thomas L. Kane, friend to the Church. People generally paid one dollar for his blessings and described them as "full of comfort, consolation, and inspired prophecies" (Cowley 1902, 46). However, in spite of the unspectacular nature of John Smith's character, his blessings at times reflected a capacity for high drama. A blessing given to his nephew Jesse N. Smith on 14 January 1845 when Jesse was eleven years old, reads:

and if thou wilt seek after knowledge and be sober minded thou shall be like Mormon of old and shall be a mighty man in the ministry and a mighty warrior. Thou shalt handle the sword of Laban with such power as to put ten thousand of thine enemies

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<sup>2</sup> The following information is included in the Nauvoo Temple Record:

15 January 1846, Mary Aiken [widow of John Smith's brother, Silas] sealed to John Smith for time and to Silas Smith for eternity, John Smith standing as proxy.

15 January 1846, Sarah M. Kingsley sealed to John Smith for time, and to Joseph Smith, Jr., for eternity, John Smith standing as proxy.

15 January 1846, Ann Carr and Miranda Jones were sealed to John Smith.

24 January 1846, Julia Hills, Asenath Hulbert, and Rebecca Smith were sealed to John Smith.

25 January 1846, Bathsheba W. Smith sealed to John Smith. [All but Mary Aikin and Bathsheba W. Smith were in their late fifties or early sixties.]

Two of the above-mentioned women — Mary Aiken and Julia Hills — were sealed to John for time at an earlier date by the prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. *The Journal of Jesse N. Smith* refers to a marriage between Mary Aiken and John Smith on 13 August 1843, with the prophet officiating (p. 7). Benjamin F. Johnson states, "My mother [Julia Hills] having finally separated from my father, by the suggestion or counsel of the Prophet, she accepted of and was sealed by him to Father John Smith" (1947, 20-21; see also Wright 1963, 159).



to flight with the help of thy Brother, thy name shall be terrible among thine enemies . . . . Thou shalt live to see Israel gathered from the four quarters of the earth, to see all the enemies of the Lord swept from off the face of the earth, the Earth cleansed from wickedness and the Saviour stand upon it (Jesse Smith 1953, 17).

Later, on 30 May 1852, Uncle John gave a patriarchal blessing to Benjamin Franklin Knowlton in which he promised, "Thou shalt be a mighty man in Israel and when the remnant of Jacob shall go through among the Gentiles or a lion amongst the flocks of sheep, you shall be captain over thousands, shall tread down and destroy, and none shall deliver them out of your hands" (Knowlton n.d., 152).

John Smith believed that the Smith family was of vital importance. In a blessing to his eldest son, George A., on 20 September 1853, he promised:

& all the inhabitants of the Earth shall know that the Lord did choose the Smith family to build up Zion & did by them lay the foundation of this Church which shall never be overthrown neither shall the name of the Smith family be blotted out under Heaven — I also seal upon you all the keys of the Patriarchal Priesthood that was ever sealed upon any man on Earth. I seal upon you wisdom to handle those keys in the best possible manner for the promotion & interest of the Kingdom of God (Papers).

Before John Smith had been called to be Presiding Patriarch of the Church, he had served as stake president at least five times, as well as a counselor to the prophet. Three poems were written in his honor, including one by Eliza R. Snow.<sup>3</sup> He was respected and obedient to every call. He posed no threat to anyone except those he saw as hindering the progress or well-being of the Church. In April 1853, he assisted the First Presidency in laying the southeast cornerstone of the Salt Lake Temple. He was the last Presiding Patriarch to serve on the Council of Fifty. He was the last Presiding Patriarch to be sustained immediately after the First Presidency in General Conference. (Subsequent patriarchs were sustained after the Quorum of the Twelve.)

John Smith died 23 May 1854. On his deathbed he asked his son, John Lyman, to convey a message to the brethren: "Father John Smith Patriarch does not wish the brethren who meet in the Council to pray for him to live for I know it is the will of the Lord to take me to himself when he pleases & I want him to do it in the best possible manner for my ease and comfort" (John Smith 1854).

His obituary noted that when he moved to his city lot from the Fort in February 1849, he was able for the first time in twenty-three years to cultivate a garden two years in succession. He was buried in that garden alongside his wife, Clarissa. Their daughter-in-law, Bathsheba, who later lived in their house, commented, "I have often been out in the night watering the trees and walking near the graves, for Father and Mother Smith were sleeping there; but I was not afraid for I knew them to be dear friends whether in the body or out of it" (1855, 32).

<sup>3</sup> The Eliza R. Snow poem appears in her diary in 1846. This was brought to my attention by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. The other two poems were written in Salt Lake City one by E. Howard and the other by John Lyon.

Stable and obedient, John Smith was the kind of man both Brigham Young and the Church needed at a crucial time. By acknowledging and accepting direction from Brigham Young, John removed the specter of patriarchal autonomy that William Smith had resurrected during the succession crisis. William's stubbornness may have saved the office of Patriarch to the Church, as Paul Edwards has suggested, but Uncle John assured it a more comfortable though diminished role in the Mormon hierarchy.

Certainly Brigham Young did not enjoy the same easy relationship with Uncle John's successor. In 1855, when young John Smith — Hyrum's eldest son — was called to the office, Brigham Young again faced some incompatibility with the Presiding Patriarch. By that time, however, President Young was strong enough to manage Hyrum's independent-minded son.

For Brigham Young, John Smith had indeed been the right man at the right time. Uncle John, or Father John Smith as some addressed him, had provided the necessary bridge of peace and predictability during a critical period of transition. The years that followed would see a re-emergence of the tensions and uncertainties that have accompanied the initially important office of Presiding Patriarch of the Church.

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