

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

Sources: Church News of the Deseret News and Church Historical Department.

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. Hal Pierce

Joseph Smith, the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, met **Emma Hale**, his future wife, while working for **Josiah Stool** in Chenango County New York. Emma and her family lived in Harmony Pennsylvania nearby and Joseph lived with the **Issac Hale** family while working for Josiah Stool. Joseph also met **Joseph Knight** from Colesville, New York at that time and **Joseph Knight** became an extremely dedicated supporter of Joseph Smith and his work. Joseph Knight gave financial support and much encouragement to Joseph Smith and it was his wagon Joseph Smith used when he went to obtain the Golden Plates.

Joseph Knight and his sons also helped Joseph and Emma move to Fayette New York where the Book of Mormon translation was completed during June 1829 and where the Church was officially organized on April 6, 1830.

The Joseph Knight family moved to Kirtland Ohio with the Church, then to Jackson County Missouri, then to Illinois and was in the process of going west to Utah when the Patriarch of the family, Joseph, died in Iowa. This family became a great asset to the Church for many years. They took much of the brunt of the Missouri persecutions while there.

Joseph Smith moved into the Issac Hale home during the fall of 1827 after his marriage to Emma and lived in Harmony although they moved into a nearby cabin shortly after moving to Harmony, where most of the Book of Mormon was translated, and lived there when the priesthood was received and when the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon translation was lost after Martin Harris took them back to Palmyra, New York to show them to his wife. Joseph suffered immensely because of this experience of losing the translation.

Their first child, a boy named **Alvin**, was born in Harmony but had lost his life on the day he was born during the summer of 1828. Emma as well was near death for a time.

By June 1829 translation of the Book of Mormon had moved to the Peter Whitmer Sr. home in Fayette New York where **Oliver Cowdrey** was the scribe and

it was completed. Later Joseph moved to Kirtland Ohio during January/February 1831 arriving there on February 4th.

In the years of 1838 and 1839 missionaries **Lorenzo Barnes, Elisha Davis** and **Benjamin Winchester** baptized some people in Pennsylvania particularly around Philadelphia where Joseph Smith created the first Branch of the Church on 23 December 1839.

On January 25, 1840 Joseph Smith established a Branch at Brandywine in Chester County a short distance west of Philadelphia. Also, during 1840 Elder Benjamin Winchester began publishing "The Gospel Reflector," a Church publication.

During 1841 some saints in Pennsylvania moved to Nauvoo and **Jedediah M. Grant** was appointed the Presiding Elder of the Church in Philadelphia during April 1843.

A Church Conference was held in Philadelphia on August 31 and September 1, 1844 after Joseph Smith's death. At that Conference **William Smith** of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was chosen President of the Conference with **W. I. Appleby** as Clerk. Members were strongly encouraged to support the building of the Nauvoo temple with their tithings.

Names of some of those attending the Conference were: Jedidiah M. Grant, William Smith, **W. I. Appleby, E. Marshall, John Ewings, N. B. Halverson, Benjamin Winchester, W. Tross, G. Clarke, J. P. Smith, Wharton, Horner, McClane, and Peter Hess.**

At this time there were 334 members in the Philadelphia Branch but the Conference included New Jersey as well as Pennsylvania. There were 30 members in Recklesstown, New Jersey and 12 members in Bordentown, New Jersey at the time.

In 1845 the Eastern States Mission President **Jesse C. Little** encouraged members to gather with the Saints who were preparing to leave for the Rocky Mountains.

John Neff

John Neff became one of the most important converts to come from Pennsylvania. He was a miller in Lancaster Pennsylvania and was wealthy by the standards of his day. During 1846 he gave up his home and mill site in Pennsylvania and traveled to Nauvoo Illinois and then on to Winter Quarters Nebraska. That mill was eventually taken all the way to Mill Creek, Utah. He had 9 children and one of his sons, **Cyrus**, died at Winter Quarters, which is now named Florence Nebraska. He gave \$2500 to erect a flour mill at Winter Quarters and left one son, **Franklin**, there to run the mill which provided flour for the Saints who remained or came into the area in the coming months.

John Neff arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in the **Joseph B. Noble** Company of fifty on 5 October 1847 and spent the winter in what became known as the Old Fort.

1848-1849 was a mild winter that did not produce as much snow and runoff as desired. Millstones or burrs, was a quartz monzonite that came from Little Cottonwood Canyon. Others placed mills on City Creek but were only able to produce less desirable whole wheat flour.

Neff's mill produced the best and most desired white flour and some came from long distances to get their grain processed by him. He used a fine silk filter or bolting in his production. When whole wheat flour was produced the floor sweepings and shorts and bran were sold and eaten. Neff later converted to a turbine and his mill operated until the 1890s.

He charged 6 cents per pound for his flour or 10 % of the grain brought in for processing. Gold miners heading west sometimes offered him \$1 per pound of flour but he would not sell to them as he preferred to sell to local people because of their need and sometimes gave his flour to very needy people.

John Neff also created a road up what became known as Neff's Canyon for purposes of obtaining the logs needed for building. For a time he charged a toll for use of the road.

John Neff's property was initially claimed under "Squatter's Right" and later deeded to him under the United States Homestead Law.

John Neff's daughter, **Mary Ann**, married **Orrin Porter Rockwell**, the gunfighter, and for a time the couple lived with the John Neff family when Porter was in the area. At that time East Millcreek was considered the safest area in the Salt Lake Valley because no one dared challenge Porter Rockwell by coming into his area.

During 1850 **Thomas Kane**, a friend of the Church and a military Colonel from Pennsylvania, spoke to the Philadelphia Historical Society and influenced some to have a favorable opinion of the Mormons .

Beginning primarily in the 1850s there was an influx of some Church members into the Philadelphia area from Europe and Britain.

During late June 1857 **Karl and Anna Maeser** arrived in Philadelphia on a ship from England with a young son and an infant son that had died about the time they arrived. They could have easily made a good life for themselves in Pennsylvania or Virginia but they were dedicated to going to Zion. They joined a wagon train to Utah in 1860 after the threat of war in Utah subsided.

The Utah War or the Johnston Army invasion (1857/1858) brought about by a misguided President **James Buchanan** caused missionaries in the area to be called home. The Eastern States Mission was closed.

In 1882 the missionaries baptized **Emanuel Rock** and set him apart as a Branch President to serve what would become the new Fairview Branch.

In May 1886 a group of people, including **George Barnes**, who originally followed **Sidney Rigdon's** apostate group in Pennsylvania and later became followers of **William Bickerton** established Branches of the Church at Little Redstone after being taught by the missionaries. The Bickerton group was headquartered south of Pittsburgh.

During 1893 to 1900 the Eastern States Mission was reorganized with eastern and western Conferences of the Church established.

During 1904 the first meeting house of the church was built in Pennsylvania for the Fairview Branch at Waynesboro.

On 16 October 1960 the first Stake in Pennsylvania at Philadelphia was organized with **Bryant F. West** as the Stake President. The Pittsburgh Stake was created on 11 May 1969 with **William P. Cook** as the President.

On 17 September 2011 ground was broken for the Philadelphia Temple.

Apostates in Pennsylvania:

Sidney Rigdon (Phebe Brooks) was born 19 February 1793 in St. Clair Township, Allegheny Co., Pennsylvania and died in Friendship, Allegany Co., 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. 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.

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.