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and

E. Dale LeBaron (1966 Master's Thesis), *Benjamin Franklin Johnson: Colonizer, Public Servant, and Church Leader*

Benjamin Franklin Johnson was born July 28, 1818, in the town of Pomfret, Chatauqua County, New York. His parents were Ezekiel Johnson and Julia Hills who were from Massachusetts. His mother possessed "high religious veneration," and she taught him faith in God and the necessity of prayer, and took him and his older siblings to Sunday School and Presbyterian meetings. His father was hard-working and loved his family, but his use of alcohol broke "the bonds of union between our parents and . . . destroyed the happiness of their children." His parents had sixteen children, all but one reached adulthood. When he was four, Benjamin lost his 18-month-old brother, Elmer Wood, brought him "deep and lasting sorrow and grief, that through childhood often wet my pillow with tears and saddened my lonely hours." Like most families during this time, all their "support and home comforts were produced by [their] home industry" which means every family member was required to work hard every day. That requirement limited Benjamin's schooling, which was further hampered by "bashfulness and great susceptibility to slight or ridicule" and a desire support his older brother, Joseph's educational prowess by doing Joseph's chores for him. Further obstacles to his educational and other pursuits arose from Benjamin's general lack of physical health and stamina.

Around the time that Benjamin was eleven, news came to Pomfret from Palmyra, New York, 141 miles to the east, of Joseph Smith seeing an angel who informed him of a record of ancient Americans written on gold plates and his translation of this "new Bible." A year later, Benjamin's family received word from two of Benjamin's brothers who were in Amherst, Ohio, Joel and David, that they had received the message of four missionaries from New York and had joined the church established by Joseph Smith. That eventually led to all of the Johnson family excepting Ezekiel and those under age, including Benjamin, to commence a serious study of the Book of Mormon and eventual conversion although Benjamin wasn't actually baptized until later. The next two years saw the entire family relocate to Kirtland, Ohio.

When work on the Kirtland Temple was commenced in the summer of 1833, the lot fell to Joel, Benjamin, and their brother, David, to "burn" bricks for its construction. David worked especially hard in procuring wood with which to burn the brick, but "overtaxed his strength, took severe cold, and commenced bleeding at the lungs. He lingered for a few weeks in quick consumption, and died as he had lived a true Latter-day Saint." (The bricks proved to be less than adequate and the decision was made to construct the Temple exterior walls of rubble stone.) Joel was joined by another brother, Seth, and their brother-in-law Lyman Sherman in helping to lay the cornerstones of the Temple. Joel also procured a sawmill and eventually produced lumber for the Temple's interior. Benjamin was privileged to participate in some of the miraculous events that occurred in the Temple prior to its dedication and no doubt in the dedication itself. He

was also an eyewitness to the financial speculation and subsequent collapse of the Kirtland economy that followed the Temple completion and he and his family eventually joined with the latter-day saints who were forced to flee Kirtland owing to the persecution spawned by the widespread apostasy that accompanied the economic difficulties and head towards northern Missouri. During this outmigration, Benjamin experienced a miraculous improvement in his own health and became quite adept at caring for the needs of the sick in the company of fellow travelers.

Ill health of other family members slowed the Johnson family travels so that by the time they reached Far West, Missouri, persecution by mobs of avowed latter-day saint enemies had already commenced. Nevertheless, they were directed by the Prophet Joseph Smith to help settle Adam-ondi-Ahman and given the opportunity to select land for settling. Interestingly, Benjamin chose a location that he later learned from Joseph was the site where Adam gathered his righteous posterity prior to his passing. As the persecution continued, the saints were forced to leave what little possessions and food they had and gather together thus forcing them to face the mobs with little food or shelter. On one occasion, he was part of a raiding party looking for mob ammunition stores. They interrogated a few Missourians who denied any knowledge of ammunition storage, but they found some hidden in a nearby cornfield. While others saints were pillaging the Missourians' homes for food or other commodities, Benjamin wrote "I was doing my best to protect, as far as possible, the lives and comfort of the families who were dependent on getting away upon horseback. When the horses were brought up for their use, there was one animal with a side saddle, on which [a] young woman was to get away; but it was taken away by one Sloan. . . . It was too much for me, so I took the animal away from him by force, and put her upon it, and then got from another roll of homemade cloth and fastened it on behind her. While others were doing the burning and plunder, my mission was of mercy so far as duty would permit."

A few days later, when the tables were turned and Benjamin was taken prisoner and receiving rough treatment, he was shown mercy by those who were aware of his prior kindly efforts. Indeed, there were two members of the mob who consistently bore witness of Benjamin's honest and considerate character multiple times which saved him from certain death and led to his release. At that point, he spent several days wandering the snow-covered plains with scarcely the clothes on his back for protection but eventually found temporary refuge among other homeless saints who were given shelter by the fortunate few who had not lost their homes to mobocracy. He then pressed on toward Far West where most of the saints had been directed to gather and where he joined members of his family fleeing the state of Missouri in compliance with Governor Lilburn Boggs' infamous "extermination order."

Like thousands of other saints, Benjamin and his family found welcome refuge among the generous citizens of Quincy, Illinois. Some of his family remained there while he and other family members moved on to Springfield. He obtained employment there but gathered to Commerce (renamed Nauvoo) when he received word that the other Illinois saints were doing likewise. When he arrived, he found malarial fever rampant among the saints among whom he spent days caring for until he too was brought low by it. The Prophet Joseph Smith invited him to reside with him and encouraged him to marry 16-year-old Lucinda Harris whose family also resided there and with whom Benjamin had developed feelings for. Of his relationship with

Joseph Smith, Benjamin wrote, "The Prophet at this time sick with the fever, chose me his constant nurse and companion."

Benjamin was a witness of the miraculous healings performed among the saints. He wrote,

At this time, with so much sickness and death, a great fear began to prevail, with a desire in some to abandon Nauvoo, and with this feeling President Rigdon was greatly exercised, making grave complaints. The Prophet now arose in great power, shook off his own sickness, went to Brother Rigdon, rebuked his fearful and complaining spirit, and told him to repent or a scourge from the Lord awaited him. Those being sick he commanded to be healed, which they were. He then called for a skiff and crossed the river to Montrose, where he found Elijah Fordham, drawing apparently his last breath. By his command life returned and he arose and was at once made whole. The Prophet then visited Brother Noble and other places, full of the power of God, healing the sick, as has been heretofore written in his life, all of which with many other things I know to be true, for I was with him as a younger brother and companion much of the time.

Benjamin was called to join members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on their mission to England in 1840. However, a continual battle with fever prevented him from accompanying them and his call was transferred to the eastern states. Despite not fully recovering, he went on his mission and was quite successful. Unfortunately, he received word that Lucinda Harris had married someone else in his absence.

Following his mission, Benjamin did not return to Nauvoo immediately, but rather, chose to reside with his sister and her husband Almon Babbitt in Kirtland. There he met and married Melissa LeBaron. Although many saints were gathering to Kirtland, Benjamin recognized that the First Presidency of the Church was encouraging them to gather to Nauvoo and so he collected his wife and other family members including his father, and went west. When he saw the Prophet, he was assigned to act as a Church trustee in the town of Ramus, Illinois, and whenever Joseph came to Ramus, he stayed with Benjamin and his wife. Interestingly, two sections of the Doctrine and Covenants were recorded in their home.

In 1843, the Prophet taught him the principles of celestial and plural marriage after which Hyrum Smith sealed Melissa to him and Benjamin took a second wife. (He eventually became husband to seven.) Indeed, Benjamin became an even closer friend and confidant to Joseph. In many private settings, he told Benjamin that he was tired and looking forward to the relief from tribulation that only death could bring. When he and Hyrum were martyred, Benjamin joined with thousands of other saints in mourning their beloved Prophet. He wrote, "To attempt to delineate the feelings of woe and unutterable sorrow that swelled every heart too full for tears, I need not attempt. I stood up, dazed with grief, could groan but could not weep. The fountain of tears was dry! "Oh God! what will thy orphan church and people now do!" was the only feeling or thought, that now burst out in groans." However, one bright light in the darkness of the martyrdom was that it changed his father's heart who up to that point had opposed the Church.

Benjamin bore a strong testimony of the mantle of Church leadership falling on Brigham Young and the Twelve Apostles. With the return of the Twelve from missions,

a conference was assembled, and President Rigdon was called upon to put forth his claim before the people, which he did, and after closing his remarks, which were void of all power or influence, President Brigham Young arose and spoke. I saw him arise, but as soon as he spoke I jumped upon my feet, for in every possible degree it was Joseph's voice, and his person, in look, attitude, dress and appearance was Joseph himself, personified; and I knew in a moment the spirit and mantle of Joseph was upon him.

As the saints' attention turned to finishing the Temple in Nauvoo and to migrating west, Benjamin was now appointed one of the Captains of Fifty to organize a company to "prepare cooperatively for a journey to the west, by constructing wagons, procuring teams, tents and general outfit." Anti-Mormon leaders had agreed to allow the saints to leave in the spring of 1846 but further mob action forced them to leave in February. Benjamin and his family were among the earliest to leave and they joined the advance parties in Sugar Creek, Iowa to await other saints. The hasty retreat from Nauvoo precluded acquiring ample food supplies and the saints were forced to subsist on a regular diet of corn and beans, two foods that were very difficult for Benjamin's weakened digestive system to handle. He asked God to help him overcome this difficulty and was blessed to receive consistent nourishment from this restricted diet.

The advance camp of saints arrived in Garden Grove, Iowa, about one hundred fifty miles from Nauvoo, in late April. Benjamin's family was asked to remain there with a select group to plant crops, recruit teams and be ready for an onward march in the coming spring, and he consented to Brigham Young's request for his mules to be used by other saints who were moving on. While there, Benjamin rebelled against those appointed to preside in Garden Grove and started back for Nauvoo. He then characterized further health difficulties and harassment from mobs as result of his rebellion. Upon reaching Nauvoo, he met up with family members who had not left yet, humbled himself and then in the spring of 1847 he received a letter from the First Presidency requesting that he and his family be in Winter Quarters ready to head to the Rocky Mountains. He later wrote, "How small I then felt I shall never forget." His return to commitment to the Church was aided by a dream in which he was visited by the Prophet who "placed his mouth to my ear and told me to be comforted that he was still my friend and would not forget me."

Many of the advanced party that entered the Salt Lake Valley in July 1847 returned to Winter Quarters in October. Benjamin and his family joined with the Willard Richards company the following July and arrived in October. They used up most of their provisions in the trip and were greatly disappointed when they discovered that crickets had destroyed much of the crops the saints had previously planted upon arrival. Having no home, Benjamin commenced constructing the walls of an adobe dwelling but winter storms prevented him from adding a roof. Fortunately, Joseph Smith' uncle, John Smith, invited the Johnsons to live next to him in the Salt Lake fort in a 10 by 13 foot room.

Benjamin established two businesses in the Salt Lake Valley—a harness and saddlery shop and a drug store. He was paid with gold dust by the members of the Mormon Battalion who had

rejoined the saints but the gold was useless in the face of an overall food shortage. He also planted a garden which yielded little food so his family was forced to eat thistles, rawhide, and beef feet during the severe winter of 1848-49. The following summer saw salvation when gold seekers started arriving in Salt Lake enroute to California fulfilling a prophecy uttered by Heber C. Kimball six months earlier that goods would be sold in Salt Lake for prices cheaper than in New York city or Boston. Benjamin sold them saddles and rigging in exchange for flour, bacon, sugar, rice, soap, lead, and fine clothing.

Benjamin was given two civic responsibilities—membership in the provisional legislature and the rank of captain in the local militia. He was then elected to serve in the first Utah legislative council after the organization of the Utah territory in September 1850.

A year later Brigham Young invited Benjamin to accompany him as part of an exploration party into what is now Iron County. He later wrote of a life-changing experience that occurred while a member of the group

The second night out we camped at summit creek (Santaquin) in Utah County. It was the 1st of May, trees in full foliage and the grass was like a carpet studded with flowers, the broad smooth lands sloped delightfully away to the west mountain while here and there there were rose and willow patches. The morning sun upon a clear sky the air fragrant with spring odors and trees alive with singing birds it appeared to me as enchanted ground and I spoke of it as a place of beauty akin to paradise. President Young heard me and asked if I would like to settle a colony there and I said yes if he wished me to. He said he did and that I might commence my arrangements as soon as I returned. I felt a little taken back for I had never thought of leaving the city. I was getting a good run in the saddlery business and had the best drug store in the territory and was doing well. I owned the half block on which the Utah Central Depot now stands besides many other valuable lots in the city and a number of 5- and 10- acre lots in the fields adjoining the city yet the call had come and I could see providence in it. The more I thought upon the subject the more I became enthused with joy and pride that I had been deemed worthy of so important a call.

Benjamin was selected as Branch President and directed to select the families for this settlement. He sold his home in Salt Lake City to Almon Babbitt for \$700 and began constructing adobe buildings at Summit Creek. In the winter of 1851, Benjamin wrote to the Deseret News a report of his first year as a colonizer.

Dear Sirs: I noticed in your columns a wish to hear from all the new settlements for the benefit of your readers. In response I would say that our numbers though small are comfortably provided with houses and supplies for the winter. Seven houses and ten or twelve men compose the present strength of our little town which we call Summit City. It is situated on the summit between Utah and Juab Valleys about seventy miles from G.S.L. city. Its situation is picturesque and beautiful with an entire view of Utah Lake and Valley. Adjoining our town plat is a large tract of the best quality of farming lands. Our range for stock is the most superior and so situated it can never become scarce. We have not yet explored sufficiently to know what our resources will be for sawing timber,

but firewood fence poles and cabin logs are abundant. The water in our creek we have never known less than would be needed for sawing or grinding purposes and would be sufficient for from twenty to forty families for all farming purposes.

Benjamin built a home for his wife Harriet in Summit Creek and obtained a contract to deliver mail between Salt Lake City and Manti with stations at Summit Creek and Salt Creek (present day Nephi). He helped build up the latter community and built a house there for his wife Mary Ann.

In August 1852, he was called on a mission with seven others to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). While traveling with his companions as well as with missionaries called to other foreign lands, his horse became gravely ill.

I asked [the Lord] now to have mercy upon me and heal my horse and I commanded the disease to depart. I wept before the lord and asked him how I could go on without my horse. I got up feeling that I had done all I could and would now leave it in the hands of the Lord. I left the horse lying upon his side as I supposed to die but early the next morning I found him standing up eating and apparently well. I put him in the harness and he was sick no more. To me it was like raising a horse from the dead and I know the lord is just as able to heal a horse, ox, cow, or any other animal as he is to heal us his children and will do it if we do our duty.

After traveling to San Francisco, the missionaries worked to obtain funds for their trip then left January 1853. They arrived nearly three weeks later joining a mission that had been established there three years earlier. He was quite successful, held several leadership positions, and even helped the Hawaiian king put down a potential political insurrection during the two years he was there. Unfortunately, while serving in Hawaii, he learned of the deaths of his mother, his sister Delcena, and one of his daughters. He also learned of an Indian attack upon the settlement of Summit Creek during which his family had been driven from their burning home, their livestock and other property were destroyed while some men were killed and others were wounded. Therefore, when returning home, he found his family had moved to Payson.

Brigham Young counseled him to again colonize Summit Creek, a difficult assignment considering his poor financial condition. All of the buildings he had constructed prior to his mission had been destroyed by Indians and shortly after his return forty acres of wheat were consumed by locusts. He had to provide for thirty family members with no grain storage and no cash to speak of forcing him to sell a choice lot in Salt Lake City for \$120. He replanted his crops in June 1855, built corrals, put up a hay crop, constructed a cabin and commenced work on a stone fort. In a letter to the editor of the Deseret News on October 5, Benjamin solicited volunteers to rebuild Summit Creek.

As I am directed by proper authority to build a fort and replace the settlement formerly made at Summit creek in Utah County I wish through your columns to invite to our assistance some of the new immigration who are looking for a desirable location or those of your city who purpose to leave for a country residence those who are looking for a

good situation and understand the facilities by which we are surrounded will it appears to us require only the present welcome to determine them to become our neighbors.

He described its general location and tried to dispel that Summit Creek's higher elevation made it more susceptible to frost than other "positions."

Standing upon the site for our fort we have a full view of the Utah Lake and adjacent country of Provo City twenty miles distant and of Springville, Palmyra, and Payson, the latter being about six miles to the north of us. Many have supposed from the altitude of our position that we were more subject to frost than our neighbors but this is not the case for frost visits us from four to six weeks later than it does the lower lands consequently for growing fruits and vines we fancy it will not be excelled by any spot in the mountains.

He added an additional incentive by describing the fort that was to be built to provide protection from winter weather.

The plan for our fort was furnished by architect T. O. Angell as designed by President B. Young who pointed out the site for its location. It is to be two stories in height. the first story is to be built of stone and must be put up this fall in order to be our protection through the winter and cropping season in the spring.

Benjamin then described the type of skills and resources needed among participants in order to facilitate the restart.

It will not be difficult to accomplish this when each section finds a claimant with willing hands as materials are easy of access and some are already on the ground. Men and teams are needed, also a number of stone masons, a good carpenter and blacksmith—all of whom it is hoped will soon be ready to lend a hand before the present season is too far advanced. . . . Such are the conditions on which we should be happy to see some fifteen or twenty more of our brethren ready and earnest to engaged in developing the facilities of and in beautifying the already delightful situation for the future.

Ironically, crops were again destroyed by crickets and an early frost making it necessary to postpone restarting the settlement for another year.

In 1855, Benjamin was reelected to the Territorial Legislature meeting in Fillmore, Utah which allowed him to work closely with his brother, Joel, who was chaplain of the House and Almon Babbitt, his brother-in-law, who was Secretary of State.

1856 saw another crop destruction by crickets yet Benjamin had sufficient to care for his family and share with his fellow settlers.

What bread we had we dedicated to the Lord and we, Sarah Melissa and I, agreed together and told the Lord that so long as anything remained in those two sacks no one should go from us hungry and I felt that the Lord heard our words. As president of the settlement we had many calls from friends and travelers and all were supplied and

whenever we heard that any of our neighbors were without bread a share was taken to them.

In July 1857, news spread throughout territory that General Albert Sidney Johnston was leading an army of 2,500 to put down the supposed latter-day saint rebellion.

For such a measure there had been no occasion and the injustice of such a move upon an innocent people aroused every patriotic feeling and every army to repel the invasion from city, town, and hamlet. Citizens came forth armed for military service and were sent as scouts pickets or as a standing army to defend the mountain passes against their approach. Our men stampeded their stock, burnt the grass upon the range, and compelled the army to winter at Fort Bridger near Bear River.

Summit Creek had grown to 31 families and they met in a mass meeting in the small rock school house in order to draft a formal statement supporting the policy of President Brigham Young policy.

Resolved, that we as a people have suffered enough from the violence of mobs and soldiery stimulated by corrupt priests, lying editors, and disappointed politicians and that we will no longer bear such injustice and oppression.

Resolved, that our lives, property, and all our influence is pledged to repel all further aggression of the approach of an armed soldiery into our midst.

Resolved, that before our peaceful homes and our possessions shall be desecrated by our enemies our houses shall be burned and our pleasant homes desolated and we with our families will show to loathe the world by our patriotism and struggle for liberty. That their blood flows in our veins.

Resolved, that we consider the present administration totally corrupt and that President Buchanan by his official movements towards Utah has forfeited the confidence and respect of every patriotic citizen and that we do not hesitate to give to the world our disapprobation and protest to his feelings and designs towards us

The people in settlements north of Provo evacuated their homes and those from Ogden and some from Salt Lake City move in with the people of Summit Creek.

Contentions also arose from within the settlement. In 1865 the territorial legislature gave Benjamin range and timber rights from Spring Creek on the north to Juab County on the south, and from Salt Creek (Goshen) on the west to the mountains on the east. These rights were given for the establishing of herd grounds, building mills, opening canyon roads into the timber, and cutting the timber and was a normal procedure throughout the territory. Some became jealous and helped themselves to some of the timber and grazing lands. Benjamin as branch president instigated Church disciplinary procedures against some of these but this effort failed to prevent further problems. On one occasion Benjamin described that

When on a division of fence material of a public corral some portion belonging to me was claimed by one of my enemies I took a heavy post upon my shoulder . . . He in anger caught hold of it to take it from me as I was crossing a bridge and gave me a heavy surge

to send me and the post on to the rocks in the creek below which might have killed me had not Reece (an employee) seen his intention and saved me. I knew he had no regard for my life and so went at him with my fists to stamp my brand upon his face. This was the was the first and only time I ever used my fists upon a human being.

In the latter part of 1858 contention became so great that Apostles Orson Hyde and Franklin D. Richards were sent to deal with it. Benjamin wrote:

They called for a sustaining vote which was nearly unanimous but fourteen who voted to the contrary were called upon to state their reasons. This took most of the day and much of the night. The next day the first meeting was occupied by the testimonies of my friends with the privilege to me of making my statement of the case which I did in a brief and pointed manner after which Apostle Hyde called upon all of my accusers to repent at once and that they would give them but a few minutes in which to ask my forgiveness otherwise they should all be at once from the church. Father Morley had been deceived by their falsehoods and when the facts became ventilated and my real enemies exposed he came to me before the whole congregation said he had wronged me and upon our knees we wept together a mutual and eternal reunion of our hearts while the expression of others seemed only formal and their words of contrition to come only from their lips in the afternoon. Elder Hyde summed up the merits of the investigation and said it was always grievous to chastise or reprove presiding authorities but in this case it must be done for we find Brother Johnson in one grave fault and only one which is that he did not long since cut from the church all who have been his accusers.

For his benefit, Benjamin was released as branch president and William McBride called to preside over the settlement as Bishop.

There were several unexpected blessings that accompanied the coming of Johnston's Army. Without hay to feed his cattle, Benjamin began to cut and stack as much cane as possible. In mid-September he found that a large number of oxen had been sent by the army quartermaster to feed on his property. He complained by letter to General Johnston and while meeting with him, Benjamin was informed that the army wished to purchase his stacks of cane for which he received more payment than requested as well as a contract to deliver it. He used the proceeds to open a canyon road, build a sawmill, and obtained another contract to deliver lumber to the army at Camp Floyd.

The next few years in Summit Creek—now Santaquin—saw prosperity then poverty, contention then unity, and the loss of his first wife. Conditions didn't improve much despite a move to Spring Lake in 1862. Locusts continued to eat his crops, he suffered from ill health, and thieves stole his cattle.

1865 saw the commencement of the Black Hawk War. Despite some losses, Benjamin's relatively good relations with the Indians precluded the difficulties others experienced. He wrote:
They always came to me in their trouble or sickness for counsel or administrations or for food if they were hungry. Such was their faith that when they were sick if I would only as they would say talk to the Lord for them or give them a letter to recommend them as

good Indians they would become well at once. for years my counsel or requirement was law to them my influence growing out of honest, generous dealing with them.

During one meeting with Black Hawk, Benjamin acted in a way to increase the respect with which he was viewed.

In early fall of 1865 he came on horseback one afternoon with his squaw and with tomahawk in hand and in an imperious way demanded melons of which we had a nice patch near the house. I stood in front of him, looked him in the eyes and said I had no melons to give him, that he was a bad Indian, that he had stolen a mare from me and had shot some of my cattle on the range, that I did not like him, and that the good Indians as well as the [latter-day saints] knew him to be bad. He looked as though he would like to kill me as we stood together with the melons all around us. I turned from him and called his squaw who stood a little way off in her blanket. I shook hands with her, told her she looked like a good squaw, that I had heard nothing bad of her, and she should have as many melons as she wanted. So I filled her blanket with the best while he stood looking on in surprise and with an angry pleasure taking the melons. He turned as he went through the bars and said that I was a big and wise captain and that all the Indians like Johnson. He never after that made trouble in our immediate vicinity.

As hostilities continued, Benjamin tore down his log cabins and build a stockade for protecting his family and other Spring Lake residents.

He settle in Santaquin but found upon returning from a mission in Hawaii in 1855 that Indian troubles resulted in the loss of all his property. That difficulty was followed by five years of cricket and locust raids which significantly hampered crop production yet he was able to provide for his large family.

Salt Lake City, 1848.¹⁸ Moved to Summit Creek (later Santaquin), Utah Co., Utah Territory, 1851.¹⁹ Served in Utah territorial legislature, 1855–1867.²⁰ Delegate to constitutional convention, 1856, at Salt Lake City.²¹ Moved to Spring Lake, Utah Co., 1862.²² Moved to Tempe, Maricopa Co., Arizona Territory, 1882.²³ Moved to Colonia Díaz, Chihuahua, Mexico, 1890.²⁴ Moved to Mesa, Maricopa Co., 1892.²⁵ Died at Mesa.²⁶