

Caleb Baldwin: Bold friend for the LDS Church

by Glen Rawson

Caleb was born September 2, 1791, in Nobletown, New York. As he matured, he was quiet and soft-spoken except when speaking in defense of his friends when he was known to have a “fiery tongue.” Caleb fought under Capt. Charles Parker in the War of 1812. He married Nancy, December 9, 1814. When Mormon missionaries passed through northern Ohio in late 1830, Caleb and his wife were baptized. Most know the story that when Julia Murdock passed away in 1831 that her newborn twins were given to Emma and Joseph Smith to raise, but what no one remembers is that it was Caleb and Nancy who cared for the three older children while their father, John, served as a missionary.

Later, when the saints experienced intense persecution in northern Missouri, Caleb was among able defenders in what was called the Battle of the Blue. He was captured and “was beaten almost to death by Missourians with hickory sticks,” the scars of which he carried for the rest of his life.

Caleb became a missionary, preaching the gospel fearlessly. Finally, in late 1838, he was living somewhere near Far West, Missouri. When the Mormon/Missouri War broke out, Caleb fought in defense of his people. When Far West fell, Caleb was among those arrested and charged with treason. He was brought before Judge Austin A. King to be arraigned. Caleb asked for a fair trial and then asked the judge what he was to do with his family who were being driven out of the state by the mob. Judge King’s answer was that if Caleb would renounce his religion and forsake Joseph Smith, he should be set free and protected. Caleb refused.

He was bound over as a prisoner along with Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Alexander McRae, Lyman Wight and Sidney Rigdon for next four months in Liberty Jail, Clay County, Missouri.

It was Caleb Baldwin, along with Alexander McRae, who scribed that letter dictated by the Prophet Joseph Smith to the church that would later become Doctrine and Covenants 121-123.

When Joseph and the other prisoners escaped Missouri, they fled to Quincy, Illinois. There, Joseph and the others found their families, but not Caleb. His family yet remained in Missouri. Caleb knew he was a wanted



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man in Missouri. If he went back and was captured, he would be imprisoned or killed. He went back for Nancy and the children and got them out safely.

In Nauvoo, Caleb helped build the Nauvoo Temple. On one occasion, the Prophet Joseph stood atop a barrel to preach to a gathered crowd. When the barrel began to teeter, Caleb rushed forward and Joseph put his hand on Caleb’s shoulder to steady himself.

That act symbolized the life and service of Caleb Baldwin. When the saints went west to the Rocky Mountains, Caleb was among the first. He was 57 years old when he made the journey and was called Father Baldwin. Though he held no high position, he often included in counsel with the leaders of the church. He arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in September of 1848, where he died just a few months later.

It is said that the name “Baldwin” is of Germanic origins and that Bald means bold and that Wine means friend or protector. Caleb Baldwin was indeed a bold friend, mostly and undeservedly, forgotten by history.

Caleb Baldwin: Prison Companion to Joseph Smith

by Justin R. Bray

Preliminary Hearing at Richmond

Baldwin was arrested and charged with “crimes of high treason,” including “murder, burglary, arson, robbery, and larceny,” and taken to Richmond, where he and sixty-three other Mormons were arraigned in a preliminary hearing, held from November 12–29 before Fifth District Circuit Court Judge Austin A. King.

Before the actual proceedings began, Caleb pleaded with Judge King “to grant him a fair trial at law, saying that with the result of such a trial he would be satisfied.”

He also asked what he should do about his family, who was being “driven out of Missouri in the cold inclement season to wander on the broad prairies . . . without proper means and suffering much fear because of the lawless mobbers.”

Judge King answered that if Baldwin would renounce his religion and forsake Joseph Smith he would be released and protected. Baldwin promptly rejected the offer.

Caleb Baldwin was sent to the Liberty Jail December 1, 1838, along with Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Alexander McCray and Lyman Wight.

The prisoners at Liberty Jail made two attempts to escape – the first in early February, and the second a month later in early March. After both attempts failed, Samuel Tillery, the jailor, was determined to chain the prisoners to the floor to prevent any further efforts to breakout. But Caleb would not be chained, and when Tillery came with the irons, Baldwin looked him in the eye and declared: “Tillery, if you put those chains on me I will kill you, so help me God!”

The jailor left without chaining the prisoners. Caleb’s fiery threat meant that his hands were free to scribe parts of one of Joseph Smith’s most significant letters, dictated by him on March 20. While Alexander McRae wrote most of the letter, including the passages that comprise Doctrine and Covenants Sections 121–123, Baldwin penned some of the Prophet’s most profound thoughts, including the following:

“The things of God are of deep import and time and experience and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, o man, if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation must



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stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse. He must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God than the vain imaginations of the human heart.”

Escape from Missouri

On April 6, 1839, the ninth anniversary of the Church, the Liberty Jail prisoners were transferred to Gallatin for what was expected to be their final hearing. The trial convened on April 9 before Judge Thomas C. Burch. However, two days into the hearing, the defense requisitioned Burch for a change of venue, which was granted, and the judge ordered the prisoners to be taken to Columbia to stand trial. However, on April 16, two days after beginning their journey, the officers and the guard escorting the Mormon men allowed them to escape.

Unfortunately for Baldwin, the day after making their getaway, he became separated from the other four. The other escapees looked for him, but gave up and moved on, thinking they would eventually cross paths as they made their way to the Illinois border. They found shelter for the night at the cabin of George Harris (or Harrison), a Latter-day Saint who had not left the state and was living near the Big Chariton River.

Hyrum wrote that the next morning, “to our astonishment Brother Baldwin came in he had traveled all night in the wilderness and providentially came to us.”

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Caleb crossed the Mississippi River into Illinois first, perhaps as a decoy before Joseph and the others ferried the river. Once across, Joseph Smith's youngest sister Lucy happened to see Caleb near the home where the Prophet's parents were living.

"There is Mr. Baldwin. My brothers—where are they?" young Lucy cried out.

"He told us [Lucy and Lucy Mack Smith] that Joseph and Hyrum were then crossing the river and would soon be in Quincy."

When Caleb arrived in Quincy, he discovered his wife and family were still in Missouri. Although he knew he could be apprehended if he went back to assist his family, he returned anyway for his family.

The Nauvoo Years

The Nauvoo years were relatively peaceful for Caleb and his family. We know, for example, that he assisted in the construction of the temple and participated in Church meetings and conferences. At one meeting where Joseph Smith was present and preaching, the Mormon leader stood on a barrel to raise himself over the crowd so all could see. However, while delivering his sermon, he lost his balance and began to teeter. Baldwin quickly took notice and unselfishly stepped in front, allowing Joseph to put his hand on Caleb's shoulders, like a crutch, to physically support him while he delivered the remainder of his remarks.

Beginning in December 1845, nearly a year and a half after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young began introducing the temple endowment among the general adult membership of the Church. Caleb and Nancy were among the first to receive their temple blessings in the Nauvoo Temple. The couple received their endowment on December 18, 1845, and returned to the temple on January 20, 1846, to be sealed.

In October 1845, nearly sixteen months after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, state militia troops came to Nauvoo to investigate the deaths of two men who were reported to have been murdered in the city. The troops searched the Masonic Hall, the Nauvoo House, the Mansion House stables and even the temple. Caleb, growing "tired of their imprudence and ill manners," may have retaliated in some fashion. When one

of the militia officers was discovered missing, Baldwin was taken into custody to account for the missing person; however, they "could get no pretext against him." A short while later, he was arrested again and examined as a witness in connection with any knowledge he had about the secret burial of the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum, but he refused to disclose any information about their whereabouts.

Migration West

It is not known exactly when the Baldwins left Nauvoo. They, like thousands of others, made their way to one of the scattered Mormon settlements in Iowa before making the final trek to the Great Salt Lake Valley. One account suggests Caleb and Nancy lay over between 1846–1848 at the Mt. Pisgah settlement in Ringgold County, Iowa, then came west in June 1848 in a company led by Heber C. Kimball, where he was appointed captain over a division of ten families. When Caleb Baldwin arrived with his company in the Salt Lake Valley on September 24, 1848, he was 57 years old. However, he did not enjoy a long life in his new mountain home. He died less than a year later on June 11, 1849 as a member of the Fifteenth Ward in Salt Lake City. President Brigham Young apparently thought highly of Baldwin, since he noted in his personal diary that Caleb "died of chill fever."

