

“We Have Ever Regarded Mr. Harris as an Honest Man”: An Erroneous Death Report and Obituary of Martin Harris

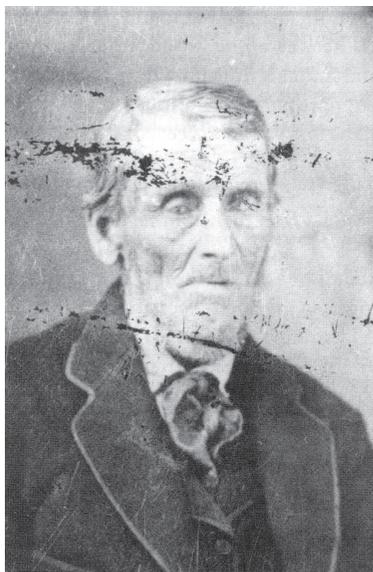
Kyle R. Walker

Because Martin Harris was one of the earliest adherents of Joseph Smith, and financier and witness of the Book of Mormon, his life has been one of interest since the very beginnings of Mormonism. Born on May 18, 1783, at East Town, New York, to Nathan Harris and Rhoda Lapham, the Harris family moved to Swift’s Landing (later renamed Palmyra), Ontario County, New York, when Martin was about ten years-old. After he grew to maturity, he married his cousin Lucy Harris in 1808. Martin was a successful farmer in the Palmyra vicinity, eventually acquiring some 320 acres of land, and he quickly became a key figure in the expanding town. He served in various capacities in the community, including as an overseer of highways, “Fence Viewer,” manager of the Ontario Agricultural Society, and a member of the revolutionaries’ relief committee.¹

While Martin was likely raised in the Quaker tradition, he apparently affiliated with a host of different religions while living in Palmyra, which included the Universalists, Restorationists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists.² Some early writers, critical toward Mormonism, appear to have exaggerated the rather capricious way that Harris accepted religions of his day. One account described Harris as “especially given to religious

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enthusiasm, new creeds, the more extravagant the better.”³ “He was naturally of a very visionary turn of mind on the subject of religion,” described another, “holding one sentiment but a short time.”⁴ These descriptions of Harris likely reflect the way Palmyra residents and others reconciled their own confusion about how someone as well respected as Harris could accept Joseph Smith’s claims, since Harris’s own account of his religious history was far “less extravagant,” as one contemporary historian described it.⁵ His acceptance of Mormonism confused neighbors, who collectively rejected Joseph Smith’s claims. As Palmyra native Pomeroy Tucker explained, “How to reconcile the act of Harris in signing his name to such a statement [of the Three Witnesses], in view of the character of honesty



Martin Harris, date unknown, circa 1870–1875.

which had always been conceded to him, could never be easily explained.”⁶ Well respected in the community where he grew to maturity and established his family, Harris’s acceptance of Joseph Smith was met with astonishment.

Harris was one of only a handful of supporters in the community where he and the Smith family resided. Countering the rather whimsical way critics of Mormonism described Harris, he was cautious to interview each member of the Smith family to ensure that their accounts corroborated Joseph Smith’s own story.⁷ From that time forward Harris became Joseph Smith’s strongest supporter outside the immediate Smith family. Initially, he provided financial and scribal support during the translation of the Book of Mormon. Later, Harris mortgaged his farm to provide sufficient security for the book’s printing.⁸ In the end, it would cost him his portion of his Palmyra farm and his marriage to Lucy, who left Martin when he migrated to Ohio in accord with Joseph Smith’s revelatory directive.⁹

The Erroneous Report

Though Martin Harris had separated himself from Mormonism for several years in the late 1830s, at the time this article appeared in July 1841, he had returned to fellowship in the Church, but still resided in Kirtland, Ohio.¹⁰

In 1841, rumors circulated throughout the country that he had been murdered because he was now preaching against Mormonism. Newspaper editors conjectured that the Mormons had been responsible for his demise. Apparently, someone had mistakenly written about Martin's death, and provided specific details about how the murder had transpired, Martin "having been shot through the head with a pistol." Alvah Strong, editor of the *Rochester Daily Democrat*, who had earlier worked in Palmyra and had known Harris personally, picked up on the report. Strong wrote about Martin's supposed death and added the biographical material contained in this report, subsequently reprinted in the *Christian Mirror*, published at Portland, Maine.¹¹ The editor of the *Christian Mirror* article indicated that Martin had been lecturing against Mormonism for some time previous. Again, this appears to have an erroneous report, and may have stemmed from Martin's earlier affiliation with an offshoot group at Kirtland, the Church of Christ, which had been formed at the time Martin initially left the Church several years earlier. The significance of the brief article has to do with several biographical details recounted by Strong, as well as providing an account of Martin's character. While Strong recounted his belief that Martin had been duped in his acceptance of Mormonism, he also described him as an "honest man" who, because of his integrity, would never knowingly delude others. Strong further recounted that while Martin was the recipient of numerous "scoffs and rebukes" because he supported Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, he noted that Martin had endured such persecution with "meekness becoming of a better cause."

The erroneous report of Harris's death was quickly corrected in the *Painesville Telegraph*, wherein the editor indicated that as of late June 1841, Harris was "alive and well, at his residence in Kirtland." The editor of the *Telegraph* sardonically wrote: "Harris is [now] a living witness of what shall be said of him after his death."¹² Martin would live for another thirty-four years, dying at Clarkston, Utah, on July 10, 1875, at age ninety-two.¹³

The Document

Martin Harris, the Ex-Mormon—The Rochester Democrat furnishes the annexed biographical notice of this unfortunate man, whose death we recently announced, in a letter from the vicinity of Nauvoo, the Mormon head-quarters. He abandoned the Mormons some time previously, and has been lecturing against them.¹⁴ He was found dead, two or three weeks since, having been shot through the head with a pistol. No doubt was entertained of his having been murdered.—J. Com.

We have ever regarded Mr. Harris as an honest man.¹⁵ We first became acquainted with him at Palmyra, in the spring of 1828, shortly after the plates from which the Book of Mormon is said to have been translated were found. At that time Jo. Smith had a mere handful of followers, most of whom were as destitute of character and intelligence as the "Prophet" himself. Mr. H. however, was an exception. Though

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Mr. Harris was the only man of wealth among the early Mormons, and many were the calls made upon his purse for the purpose of feeding Smith and fostering his humbug in its incipient stages. The heavier taxes to which he was at first subjected, were for two journies to Pennsylvania, by command of Smith, who was then in that State, and who had received, if we are to credit him, a revelation from the

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A few years after this, we saw Mr. Harris in Lyons, and found him as firm as ever in his belief in the purity of Mormonism, notwithstanding he had been fleeced of his good estate. He had just arrived from Liberty, Missouri, the then "Promised Land," and soon afterwards returned to that place.¹⁷ We have not seen him since, and had supposed until we saw the announcement of his death, and the cause of it conjectured, that he was still among the most zealous and conspicuous of Jo. Smith's followers.—But we were mistaken. Mr. Harris's native honesty had gained the mastery of his credulity. He had been so long a confidant of Smith and his leading associates, and had seen so much of their villainy, that he undoubtedly felt it a duty to expose them and their debasing doctrines. Hence his lectures against Mormonism in Illinois, and hence, too, his probable murder by some of that sect.

Mr. Harris was about 55 years of age. His first wife died in Palmyra some four years since, having refused to accompany him to the "Promised Land"—about a year after which time, he returned to Wayne county and married again.¹⁸

We have so often expressed our conviction of the humbuggery of Mormonism and the worthlessness of its propagators, that we need not do so at this time. We have merely to express the hope, that the authorities of Illinois [*sic*] may spare no pains or expense in ferreting out the murderers of Mr. Harris, and bringing them to merited punishment.¹⁹

Notes

1. Ronald W. Walker, "Martin Harris: Mormonism's Early Convert," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1986), 29–33; H. Michael Marquardt, "Martin Harris: The Kirtland Years, 1831–1870," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*

35, no. 3 (Fall 2002), 1; Dean C. Jesse, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jesse, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 412 (hereafter cited as *JSP*, J1).

2. Statement of G. W. Stoddard, November 28, 1833, in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), 261; Walker, “Martin Harris,” 33.

3. O[rasmus] Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1851), 215; Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 261.

4. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 13.

5. Walker, “Martin Harris,” 33.

6. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1867), 71.

7. Joel Tiffany, “Mormonism,” *Tiffany’s Monthly* 5 (May 1859): 169.

8. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, “For the Sum of Three Thousand Dollars,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005), 4–11, 66–67; Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (London: published for Orson Pratt by S. W. Richards, 1853), 112–13.

9. Though there is no record of their divorce, Martin and Lucy had separated when he departed to Kirtland to follow Joseph Smith. Lucy died in the summer of 1836. Marquardt, “Martin Harris,” 10. Black and Porter, “For the Sum of Three Thousand Dollars,” 9–10, also n. 38.

10. The *Times and Seasons* newspaper reported on May 22, 1841, that Martin was again serving on the high council at Kirtland. See “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 458; Marquardt, “Martin Harris,” 16.

11. “Martin Harris, The Mormon.,” *Rochester Daily Democrat* 9 (June 23, 1841): 2; Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 101–02.

12. “Martin Harris . . .” *Painesville Telegraph* 7, no. 26 (June 30, 1841): 3.

13. Madge Harris Tuckett and Belle Harris Wilson, *The Martin Harris Story: With Biographies of Emer Harris and Dennison Lott Harris* (Provo, UT: Press Publishing Ltd., 1983), 90.

14. Martin Harris left the Church during what has been termed the “Kirtland apostasy,” following the episode of the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Banking enterprise. During the last week of December 1837, Kirtland’s high council excommunicated Martin Harris, along with a number of other prominent leaders. John Smith to George A. Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, January 1, 1838, *Journal History of the Church, Church History Library*, Salt Lake City, Utah, as cited in Marquardt, “Martin Harris,” 12–13; *JSP*, J1, 243.

15. References to Harris’s honesty and integrity are numerous, and have been highlighted in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 101–04.

16. Lucy recorded that Martin gave Joseph \$50 before he journeyed to Harmony, Pennsylvania, in the fall of 1827. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 112–13. Lucy Harris also contributed \$28 to the publication of the Book of Mormon. Black and Porter, “For the Sum of Three Thousand Dollars,” 7. Besides mortgaging his farm and ultimately paying \$3,000 for the printing of the Book of Mormon, Harris also donated \$47 for the redemption of Zion in 1834. Black and Porter, “For the Sum of Three Thousand Dollars,” 11; *JSP*, J1, 43.

17. Michael Marquardt recounted that “during the years 1831–1837, Harris did not reside in Kirtland most of the time. Of the seven times he is known to have been absent, he visited Palmyra five times.” Martin traveled to Missouri in company with Joseph Smith in the summer of 1831, and had been part of Zion’s Camp in 1834. Marquardt, “Martin Harris,” 4–5, 8.

18. Lucy "Dolly" Harris died in Palmyra, New York, in the summer of 1836. *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 26 (July 1935): 108. Martin married Caroline Young (b. May 17, 1816), daughter of John Young and niece of Brigham Young. The two appear to have wed in Ohio, and not in New York as the editor recounted, and it was only about three to four months after Lucy's death. Application for Marriage License, November 1, 1836, Geauga County, Ohio.

19. "Martin Harris, the Ex-Mormon," *Christian Mirror* (Portland, ME) 19, no. 49 (July 8, 1841): 3.