

Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, Maria Louise Cowdery Johnson, and Charles Johnson memorial (front side), Southwest City Cemetery, Southwest City, Missouri, October 8, 2006. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh

Separated from Oliver in Death: The Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Memorial Dedication

Alexander L. Baugh

In June 2003, while on a research trip to Missouri, Derle and Margene Thorpe, directors of the Liberty Jail LDS Visitors' Center, made arrangements for me to meet with Dr. Lorene E. (Burdick) Pollard, the oldest known living descendant of John Whitmer. I had actually met Lorene in September 1999 following the dedication of a memorial grave marker erected by the Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation in the cemetery in Kingston, Missouri, in honor of John and Sarah Jackson Whitmer. On that occasion Lorene represented the Whitmer family and gave some remarks about her illustrious early Mormon ancestors.

A short while later, my good friend Christopher T. Jones, an independent historian who had become a good friend to Lorene, talked to me more about her and encouraged me to get to know her better. "She's a fascinating woman to talk to," Chris remarked. "She's got some wonderful Whitmer family heirlooms and Mormon-related memorabilia. And besides, she knows a lot about the Whitmer clan, and you could learn a lot from her if you would take the time to visit her."

Four years later, I finally made it a point to do just that.

Derle and Margene Thorpe were called to be the directors of the Liberty Jail Visitors' Center in January 2003, and within a short time, they became friends to Lorene. Derle is also a relative of mine, so when I told them I was planning a visit to Missouri in June, I asked them if they would make arrangements for all of us to spend some time visiting Lorene.

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We spent a wonderful part of an afternoon conversing with Lorene at her home in Lathrop, Missouri. She talked about her Whitmer ancestors, her childhood, growing up in Caldwell County, and her conversion to the LDS Church. She also shared a number of the Whitmer family relics. It was a delightful occasion. Shortly before we were to leave she said to me. “Professor Baugh, there’s one thing I would like you to try to do for me sometime in the near future.”

“What’s that?” I said.

“Do you know where Oliver Cowdery’s wife, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, is buried?”

I said I knew that she was buried in Southwest City, Missouri, and I told her that I had also seen some photographs of her grave that appeared in an issue of the *Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation Newsletter* a few years earlier, but that was about all.¹



Original grave marker for Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery and Maria Louise Cowdery Johnson, Southwest City Cemetery, Southwest City, Missouri, October 8, 2006. The two women died two days apart from each other. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

“I’m not sure how much longer I’m going to be around,” she said, “but Elizabeth’s grave marker is in the Southwest Cemetery. It’s relatively obscure, and it’s deteriorating. Some local LDS members have placed a small make-shift plaque by her grave, but it would be nice to have something more fitting and more permanent. Before I leave this earth I would like to see a nice marker placed on her grave that would properly honor and eulogize her life.” Maria Louise Cowdery, Elizabeth’s and Oliver’s only daughter

who lived to maturity, and Maria’s husband Charles Johnson were also buried near Elizabeth which led us to discuss the idea that if we honored Elizabeth, perhaps some type of acknowledgement could also be included about Maria and Charles.

Lorene, knowing that I was on the board of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation (MHSF), asked me about the possibility of the Foundation spear-



Original Charles Johnson grave marker, October 8, 2006. Charles married Maria Louise Cowdery, daughter of Oliver and Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

heading the project. I told her that it sounded like a terrific project, and then I promised her I would do my best to make it happen. I subsequently proposed the project to the MHSF board. Tentative approval was given to try to secure funding, but no major plans were made. Meanwhile, each time I was in communication with Lorene, she would politely remind me about my promise.

In June 2006, I received a phone call from Becky C. Smith who lives in Orem, Utah, and has authored several guidebooks about early LDS Church historical sites. Over the years, during her visits to Missouri, Becky became acquainted with Lorene, and the two became friends. From that friend-

ship, Becky had learned of Lorene's desire that a marker be placed on Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery's grave.

In the course of our phone conversation I told Becky that BYU administrators had given approval for BYU's Religious Studies Center and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation to sponsor a symposium in November on Oliver Cowdery in commemoration of the two hundredth anniversary of his birth. "Well, if you're going to honor Oliver Cowdery this year, we need to honor Elizabeth too," Becky replied. "We need to erect the monument this year. And 'I'll help you.'" We even selected some possible dates for a dedication, and within a week or two we narrowed it down to Sunday, October 8, five days after Oliver's birthday (October 3).

During the next few weeks Becky made a number of phone calls. She called the sexton in charge of the Southwest City Cemetery, who sent her photographs of Elizabeth and Maria's grave (the two women are buried side-by-



Photograph showing the position of the original Charles Johnson grave marker (left), the new memorial (center), and the original Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery and Maria Louise Cowdery Johnson grave marker (right), Southwest City Cemetery, Southwest City, Missouri, October 8, 2006. Photograph courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.

side and share a common marker), as well as that of Maria's husband Charles, who is buried a few feet north of the two women. Although the memorial was intended to be for Elizabeth, since she was buried alongside Maria, and Charles was close by, we decided that the monument should include some information about all three. With this in mind, the sexton also gave approval for a monument to be placed between the graves of Elizabeth and Maria, and that of Charles.' After approval for the marker was secured, Becky contacted Premier Memorials, a monument company in Anderson, Missouri, and got price estimates. I called Chris Jones (Chris was appointed to the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation board in 2005), who said he would coordinate raising the funds for the project.

In composing the monument's inscription, it was important to ensure accuracy, especially regarding vital information (birth, marriage, and death). I solicited the help of Richard Lloyd Anderson, emeritus professor of Ancient Scripture at BYU and an expert on the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. I also consulted Annette Curtis, an independent historian in Independence, Missouri. Whitmer and Cowdery family histories give Elizabeth's date of birth as

January 22, 1815.² Her and Oliver's marriage date is well-documented. In fact their marriage certificate is on file in the recorder's office, Jackson County Annex Building, Independence, Missouri. The certificate, signed by Samuel C. Owens, the county clerk, indicates the couple was married in Kaw Township on December 18, 1832, by Parley P. Pratt.³ Elizabeth's death date is more problematic. Her headstone inscription gives her date of death as January 6, 1892. However, her obituary, which originally appeared in the *Southwest City Leader*, specifically states that she died on January 7. The obituary reads, "On Thursday morning Jan. 7th at 4 a.m., Mrs. Elizabeth Cowdery died at the home of Dr. Charles Johnson in this city."⁴ In reconciling the discrepancy one can conclude that Charles Johnson was present at Elizabeth's death, but since she died in the early morning hours of January 7, he may have remembered it being sometime during the evening of January 6. Later, when it came time for the inscription to be placed on the headstone, Charles may have remembered Elizabeth dying on the evening of January 6 rather than January 7. In short, the obituary probably gives the correct date.

Maria Louise (sometimes Louisa) Cowdery Johnson's birth date is usually given as August 11, 1835.⁵ However, the correct date is probably August 21, 1835. Interestingly, an entry in Joseph Smith's personal history is the source for this date. In his 1834-1836 history, under the title "Genealogy of Oliver Cowdery," the following entry appears: "Maria Cowdery was born in Kirtland, Geauga County, Ohio fifteen (15) minutes past 9 o'clock a.m. Friday, August 21, 1835."⁶ Significantly, the entry is recorded in the handwriting of her father, Oliver Cowdery, thereby adding additional veracity regarding its accuracy. Charles and Maria's marriage date, September 7, 1856, was taken from Mehling, *Cowdery-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, which information was supplied by Maria.⁷ Sadly, but significantly, Maria passed away just two days after her mother. The obituary reads: "On Saturday morning at 7:30 a.m., forty-eight hours after the death of her mother, . . . [Maria] Johnson passed away to . . . whence no terrestrial traveler ever returns."⁸ The original grave marker clearly indicates January 9, 1892 as the date of death. Since it is well documented that she died two days following her mother, this once again suggests that the January 6, 1892 death date on Maria's headstone is incorrect.

Less is known about the details of the birth of Charles Johnson. Mehling gives his birth year as June 24, 1826.⁹ But the 1900 census gives his date of birth as June 1825.¹⁰ It was assumed the census was the more accurate of the two records, so 1825 was the date selected as his birth year. The date of death was taken from his original headstone, which indicates he died on September 8, 1906.

On the basis of the above information, the following text was composed for the monument:

Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery

Born
January 22, 1815
Fayette, New York

Married
Oliver Cowdery
December 18, 1832
Kaw Township, Jackson County, Missouri

Died
January 7, 1892
Southwest City, Missouri

Maria Louise Cowdery Johnson

Born
August 21, 1835
Kirtland, Ohio

Married
Charles Johnson
September 7, 1856
Richmond, Missouri

Died
January 9, 1892
Southwest City, Missouri

Charles Johnson

Born
June 24, 1825
Yates County, New York

Died
September 8, 1906
Southwest City, Missouri

The inscription on the back side of the monument is inscribed as follows:

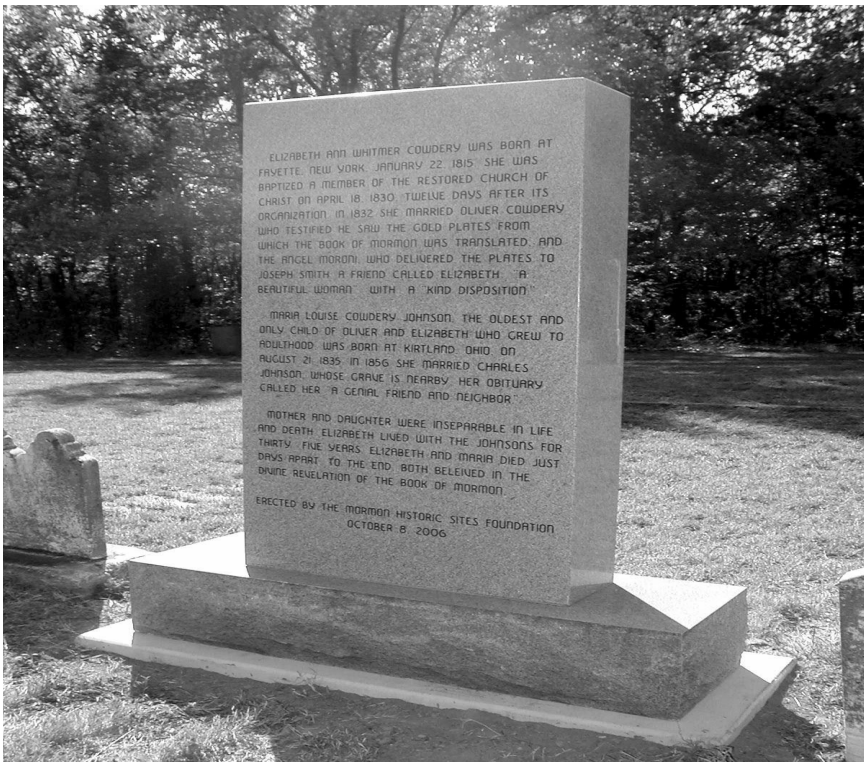
Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery was born at Fayette, New York, January 22, 1815. She was baptized a member of the restored Church of Christ on April 18, 1830,

twelve days after its organization. In 1832 she married Oliver Cowdery, who testified he saw the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, and the angel Moroni, who delivered the plates to Joseph Smith. A friend called Elizabeth “a beautiful woman” with a “kind disposition.”

Maria Louise Cowdery Johnson, the oldest and only child of Oliver and Elizabeth who grew to adulthood, was born at Kirtland, Ohio, on August 21, 1835. In 1856 she married Charles Johnson, whose grave is nearby. Her obituary called her “a genial friend and neighbor.”

Mother and daughter were inseparable in life and death. Elizabeth lived with the Johnsons for thirty-five years. Elizabeth and Maria died just days apart. To the end, both believed in the divine revelation of the Book of Mormon.

Erected by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation
October 8, 2006



Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, Maria Louise Cowdery Johnson, and Charles Johnson memorial (back side), Southwest City Cemetery, Southwest City, Missouri, October 8, 2006. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh

The dedication was presided over by David O. Stout, president of the Rogers Arkansas Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Music was provided by members of the Anderson Ward. Speakers included: Christopher T. Jones (Mormon Historic Sites Foundation board member), Lorene Pollard (Whitmer family descendant), Ronald E. Romig (Archivist, Community of Christ), William J. Curtis (Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation), Larry C. Porter (Emeritus Professor, Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University), and Alexander L. Baugh (Associate Professor, Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, and Mormon Historic Sites Foundation board member). Lorene Pollard unveiled the monument. President Stout offered the dedicatory prayer.¹¹

At the time of Elizabeth's death in 1892, circumstances probably prohibited her remains from being taken from Southwest City to Richmond for



Participants in the dedication of the Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, Maria Louise Cowdery Johnson, Charles Johnson memorial. L-R: Christopher T. Jones, Ronald E. Romig, Susan P. Tobek, Lorene E. Pollard, Alexander L. Baugh, David O. Stout, Betty L. Jones, Lisa Jones, William J. Curtis, Larry C. Porter, October 8, 2006. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

internment alongside her husband Oliver. Thus the two have remained physically separated in death. It is only fitting that in commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of Oliver's birth, Elizabeth also be remembered and properly honored. And in honoring Elizabeth, we also honor Oliver. Hopefully, the erection of the memorial to Elizabeth will bring the two a little closer to each other in death.

Notes

1. See Ronald E. Romig, "Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery Grave, Southwest City, Missouri," *Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation*, no. 14 (Summer 1997): 3-4.

2. See Mary Cleora Dear, *Two Hundred Thirty-Eight Years of the Whitmer Family, 1737-1976* (Richmond, Missouri: Beck Printing Company, 1976), 48; and Mary Bryant Alverson Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy: William Cowdery of Lynn, Massachusetts, 1630, and His Descendants* (n. p.: Allaben Genealogical Co. 1911), 173.

3. See Scott H. Faulring, "Early Marriages Performed by the Latter-day Saint Elders in Jackson County, Missouri, 1832-1834," *Mormon Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 197-210.

4. "Mother and Daughter Gone," *Liberty Tribune* (Liberty, Missouri), January 29, 1892, reprinted from the *Southwest City Leader*, publication date unknown. Dear also gives Maria's date of death as January 7, 1892. See Dear, *Two Hundred Thirty-Eight Years of the Whitmer Family*, 48.

5. See Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 173; and Dear, *Two Hundred Thirty-Eight Years of the Whitmer Family*, 48.

6. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989-1992), 1:19.

7. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 173.

8. "Mother and Daughter Gone," *Liberty Tribune* (Liberty, Missouri), January 29, 1892, reprinted from the *Southwest City Leader*, publication date unknown.

9. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 173.

10. The information for Charles Johnson in the 1900 U.S. Census reads: "Charles Johnson, head, June 1825, 74, widowed, New York, New York, Physician, with a house-keeper." U.S. Census, 1900, Missouri, McDonald County, Prairie Township, Southwest City, 118, ED 99, 1A. I acknowledge the assistance of Annette Curtis in providing this information.

11. As plans moved forward for the dedication of the monument to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, additional activities were planned to acknowledge the contributions made by the Peter Whitmer Sr. family to the early Church. Subsequently, a Whitmer family reunion was planned and held on Friday and Saturday, October 6-7, 2007, in Richmond, Missouri. Sean Foley, president of the Richmond Branch of the LDS Church, organized the two-day event. See Sheila Bridges, "Whitmer clan honors ancestors," *Church News* 76, no. 41 (October 14, 2006): 12. The write-up also included a brief account of the dedication of the memorial to Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery, Maria Louise Cowdery Johnson, and Charles Johnson. See also Annette Curtis, "Whitmer Family Celebration 2006," *Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation Newsletter*, no. 39 (June-December 2006): 3-10.