

“Blessed Is the First Man Baptised in This Font”: Reuben McBride, First Proxy to Be Baptized for the Dead in the Nauvoo Temple

Alexander L. Baugh

On 15 August 1840, while preaching the funeral sermon of Seymour Brunson, Joseph Smith declared for the first time the doctrine that a Latter-day Saint could be baptized in behalf of a deceased individual. Although the Mormon leader intended that the practice of baptism for the dead be reserved for the temple, provisions were made for the ordinance to be performed outside the temple, temporarily. “For this ordinance belongeth to my house,” a revelation declared, “and cannot be acceptable to me, only in the days of your poverty, wherein ye are not able to build a house unto me” (D&C 124:29–30; see also vv. 31–34). Significantly, Mormons living in Nauvoo and other nearby settlements, and even as far away as Kirtland, Ohio, embraced the principle and performed hundreds of proxy baptisms in the Mississippi River and elsewhere.¹

The First Font in the Nauvoo Temple

The practice of baptism for the dead outside the temple was relatively short-lived. During a conference of the Church held on 3 October 1841, Joseph Smith announced, “There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinance can be attended to in the Lord’s House. . . . *For thus saith*

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*Bricked area showing the location of the Nauvoo Temple baptistry, 1998.
Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.*



Location of the Nauvoo Temple baptismal font and a remnant from the stone baptistry, June 1979. On 8 November 1841, a wooden font, carved by Elijah Fordham, was put into place in the basement area of the temple and dedicated by Joseph Smith. The wooden font was used from November 1841 until it was replaced with a stone font in August or September 1845. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

the Lord!"² At the time of this pronouncement, Elijah Fordham, a master craftsman, had already been engaged for several months in constructing and carving a large, oval-shaped wooden font to be used as a temporary baptistry until a more permanent stone structure could be made. Within a month after the Prophet's declaration, Fordham completed his work on the font. Soon thereafter, the basin-like structure was put into place in the unfinished and open-aired basement area of the temple's foundation.³

The First Temple Proxy Baptisms

Although temple construction was still in the beginning stages, the placement of the font within the building proper was enough to satisfy the Mormon leader's strict injunction that the ordinance "be attended to in the Lord's house." As evidence of Joseph Smith's approval, on 8 November 1841, he officially dedicated the baptistry. William Clayton, the Prophet's secretary, wrote, "On the 8th day of November 1841 the font was dedicated by president Joseph Smith at 5 o'clock in the evening." Clayton further noted, "After [the] dedication brother Reuben McBride was the first person baptized under the direction of the president. He was baptized by President B. Young."⁴ At the time, Reuben McBride resided in Kirtland, Ohio, but was in Nauvoo on Church business.⁵ Knowing that McBride would shortly return to Ohio (probably within a matter of a few days) and thereafter no longer be able to have the opportunity to perform proxy ordinances, Joseph Smith granted him the privilege of being the first person to be baptized for the dead in the new baptistry.⁶



*Reuben McBride, date unknown, ca. 1880s.
The photograph is displayed in the territorial
statehouse in Fillmore, Utah.*

The 1886 Reuben McBride Letter

A significant and interesting letter, written by Reuben McBride from

Fillmore, Utah, in 1886, sheds additional light concerning the first proxy temple baptisms:⁷

Fillmore Nov 1[st]/86

[Page 1st] Dear Sister Martha:⁸ I Received your kind and welcome letter Some time ago, but circumstances has been Such that hindered me till now the Subject you wrote upon is one of the greatest importance the first Work that I done for our Dead Relitives was done in Nauvoo I think in the fall of 42 but you know for you was there.⁹ Bro. Joseph Smith made a bee¹⁰ and had the Font in the Temple filled with water from the Wells.¹¹ He Said he, wished me to be Baptised in the Font before I went back to Ohio. we met. Joseph, Spoke and the Font [was] Dedicated and he Joseph Said Blessed is the first, man Baptised in this Font. Brigham Young Baptised me. I was Baptised Six times. Joseph took off his mantle and Wrapt it around me took me in his Carriage and, drove to your House He talked all the way goeing to your House and [end of page 1; pages 2 and 3 are missing]

The important elements of the letter are (1) Joseph Smith told Reuben McBride that Joseph wanted him to have the privilege of being the first person baptized in the Nauvoo Temple—the two men met and subsequently went to the temple so the ordinance could be performed; (2) the Prophet spoke and offered a dedicatory prayer; (3) Brigham Young was present and baptized McBride in behalf of six of McBride's deceased relatives; and (4) following the ceremony, Joseph drove McBride to the home of his sister.

Confusion Regarding When the First Temple Proxy Baptisms Were Performed

There has been some confusion regarding precisely when the first proxy baptisms in the Nauvoo Temple were actually performed. For example, Wilford Woodruff recorded the following entry in his journal under the date of 21 November 1841:

21st Sunday I met in Council with the Twelve at Elder B. Youngs. Then attended the general Assembly near the Temple. Heard a discours by Elder Taylor followed by President Hiram Smith. I then met the Twelve at B. Youngs untill 4 o'clock at which time we repaired to the Baptismal Font in the Temple for the purpose of Baptizing for the dead, for the remission of Sins & for healing. It was truly an interesting scene. It was the first FONT erected for this glorious purpose in this last dispensation. It was dedicated By President Joseph Smith & the Twelve for Baptizing for the Dead &c & *this was the first time the font had been prepared for the reception of candidates.*

On the sabbath a large Congregation assembled. Elders B Young and H C Kimball & J Taylor went forward & Baptized about 40 persons. Elder W Richards, G. A. Smith & myself assisted in confirming them.¹²

Dear Sister ^{Fillmore & Co. 1/10} Martha I received
 your kind and welcome letter
 some time ago, but circumstances
 has been such that hindered me till
 now the subject you wrote upon
 is one of the greatest importance
 the first work that I done for our
 dear relatives was done in Nauvoo
 I think in the fall of 46 but you know
 for you was there Bro Joseph Smith
 made a bee and had the font in the
 Temple filled with water from the
 wells he said he wished me to be
 baptised in the font before I went
 back to Ohio we met Joseph, Spake
 and the font ^{was} dedicated and he
 Joseph said blessed is the first man
 baptised in this font Brigham
 Young baptised me I was baptised
 six times Joseph took off his
 mantle and wrapt it around me
 took me in his carriage and drove
 to your house he talked all the
 way going to your house and

Reuben McBride letter to Martha McBride Knight Kimball.
 Photograph courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City.

Significantly, the entry in the *History of the Church* under the date of 21 November 1841 adds to the confusion: “The Twelve met in council at President Young’s, and at four o’clock, repaired to the baptismal font in the basement of the Temple. Elders Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and John Taylor baptized about forty persons for the dead. Elder Willard Richards, Wilford Woodruff and George A. Smith confirming. *These were the first baptisms for the dead in the font.*”¹³

How can Woodruff’s journal entry and the statement published in the *History of the Church*, both of which indicate that the first proxy baptisms performed in the Nauvoo Temple were performed on 21 November 1841, be reconciled with William Clayton’s statement, cited above, and Reuben McBride’s letter, indicating that the first baptisms were actually done nearly two weeks previously on 8 November 1841? Quite simply, the 8 November service was a *private* or somewhat informal function and therefore was attended by only a few people—the Prophet, Young, Clayton, McBride, and perhaps a few others. The font was in place, and McBride was in Nauvoo and about to return to Kirtland, so Joseph Smith used the occasion to dedicate the font and let McBride have the opportunity to be baptized. Significantly, no record of McBride’s proxy work appears in the Nauvoo Temple baptism registry, again suggesting that this occasion was an informal and perhaps even somewhat spontaneous ceremony.¹⁴ The baptismal service held nearly two weeks later, however, was the first *public* or *general* ceremony involving a number of Latter-day Saint leaders and members. Woodruff did not leave a record of the dedication of the font and of McBride’s proxy baptisms because Woodruff was simply unaware of the earlier meeting and service and therefore assumed that the 21 November date was the first baptismal service of its kind. The omission or error in the Prophet’s published history resulted from Church historians who, years later, failed to properly incorporate into the Prophet’s manuscript history Clayton’s record of the 8 November 1841 events and instead referred to Woodruff’s 21 November entry as the date of the first proxy baptisms.

Another issue that could be raised is why there was nearly a two-week lag between the time the font was dedicated and the date of the first general proxy baptism service. The *History of the Church* notes that the font was first placed in the uncovered basement area of the temple and thus was exposed to the elements. In light of these conditions, perhaps it was during the two-week period that the decision was made to enclose the font area by building a shed-like structure, thereby protecting both the baptistry and the participants. The frame building was not large, and the ceiling had to be built low enough so the timbers for the first floor could later be laid cross-wise above it.¹⁵ In short, while the font was ready on 8 November, leaders

and Church members waited until the font was enclosed before regular baptismal services in behalf of the dead were conducted.

Notes

1. For a more extensive examination of the initial beginnings of the doctrine and practice of baptism for the dead, see Alexander L. Baugh, "For This Ordinance Belongeth to My House': The Practice of Baptism for the Dead Outside the Nauvoo Temple," *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (spring 2002): 47–58.

2. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:426; emphasis added (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

3. A description of the font is found in Joseph Smith's published history:

"The baptismal font is situated in the center of the basement room, under the main hall of the Temple; it is constructed of pine timber, and put together of staves tongued and grooved, oval shaped, sixteen feet long east and west, and twelve feet wide, seven feet high from the foundation, the basin four feet deep, the moulding of the cap and base are formed of beautiful carved work in antique style. The sides are finished with panel work. A flight of stairs in the north and south sides lead up and down into the basin, guarding the side railing.

"The font stands upon twelve oxen, four on each side, and two at each end, their heads, shoulders, and fore legs projecting out from under the font; they are carved out of pine plank, glued together, and copied after the most beautiful five-year-old steer that could be found in the country, and they are an excellent striking likeness of the original; the horns were formed after the most perfect horn that could be procured.

"The oxen and ornamental mouldings of the font were carved by Elijah Fordham, from the city of New York, which occupied eight months time" (*History of the Church*, 4:446).

The wooden font was used beginning in November 1841 until June 1845, over three and a half years. In July 1845, the wooden font was removed and replaced with a stone structure. The stone font was in place by late August or early September. See Don F. Colvin, *Nauvoo Temple: A Story of Faith* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2002), 184–85.

4. William Clayton, *The Nauvoo Diaries and Writings of William Clayton, Private Secretary of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Part 1, The Nauvoo Temple History Journal*, ed. Fred C. Collier (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1990), 11; also cited in James B. Allen, *No Toil or Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 420. It is important to note that the entry in the Prophet's published history under this date has sometimes been interpreted to suggest that Brigham Young dedicated the font. The entry reads, "At five o'clock p.m., I attended the dedication of the baptismal font in the Lord's House. Brigham Young was spokesman" (*History of the Church*, 4:446). However, the Clayton entry makes the matter clear. Joseph dedicated the font; Brigham, as "spokesman," performed the ordinance.

5. In May 1841, Reuben McBride was sustained and ordained, along with Hiram Winters, as a counselor in the Kirtland bishopric to Thomas Burdick. See *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (1 July 1841): 458. Four months later, at the October 1841 general conference, a motion was passed giving McBride power of attorney and authorizing him to transact all Church-related business in Kirtland, replacing Oliver Granger, who had died. See *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 24 (15 October 1841): 579. Upon learning of his new legal

responsibilities, McBride apparently traveled from Kirtland to Nauvoo to receive instruction and to be provided with the necessary paperwork. A certificate granting McBride power of attorney was signed on 28 October 1841. See *Millennial Star* 18, no. 47 (22 November 1856): 741–42.5.

6. Andrew Jenson provided the following biographical information concerning Reuben McBride: "McBride, Reuben, a member of Zion's Camp, was born June 16, 1803, in Chester, Washington Co., N.Y., the son of Daniel and Abigail McBride. In 1833 (June 16) he married Ann Anderson, was baptized March 4, 1834, Joseph Smith the Prophet and Parley P. Pratt being honored guests at Bro. McBride's house on the day of his baptism and held a meeting, at which the Prophet called for volunteers to go up and redeem Zion. The new convert was one of the first to respond to the call, and he marched to Missouri with Zion's Camp. He returned to Kirtland, and upon the exodus of the saints from that place was left in charge of the Temple and other property there. He was the first man baptized for the dead in the Temple at Nauvoo, and came to Utah in 1850. He returned to Kirtland in the fall of 1851, and brought his family west, spending the winter of 1852 in Springville, Utah. He was called on a mission to England and crossed the Plains with the missionary handcart company in 1857; he returned in 1858, on account of the Johnston Army troubles, and later (in 1867) returned to England and labored as a missionary in the Nottingham Conference. From 1877 to 1824 [typographical error, probably 1884], he served as a member of the Millard Stake High Council, where his patience, and peaceful unassuming disposition made all who knew him his friends. He died Feb. 26, 1891, in Fillmore, Utah, survived by his wife and six children, three children having died previously. He left fifty grand-children and thirty great grand-children to revere his memory and emulate his faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. [Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 190

7. The original letter is part of the Marion Adaline Belnap Kerr Family Papers Collection in the LDS Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. McBride's capitalization, spelling, and punctuation have been retained. Only page one of what appears to be a four-page letter is cited. Pages two and three are missing. Page four is written on the backside of page one and contains family, genealogical, and sealing information. Included with the letter is a duplicate photocopy of page one containing a side inscription, "Courtesy Flora Belnap 1939." At the bottom of the page is the following: "Write as So[*o*]n as you get this God Bless you Good Bye your Brother [signed] Reuben McBride."

This inscription, although in the handwriting of McBride, is not on page one of the original and therefore appears to have been added later by someone (possibly Belnap) from a portion of the missing pages.

8. Martha McBride Knight Kimball, born 17 March 1805 in Chester, Orange County, New York. She married Vinson Knight, who died in Nauvoo on 31 July 1842. She was married for time to Heber C. Kimball on 26 January 1846 and was sealed to Joseph Smith at the same time. She died on 20 November 1901 in Hooper, Weber County, Utah. See Susan Easton Black, comp., *Membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1848*, 50 vols. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 29:925–26.

9. McBride gives the date of fall 1842, but the correct year is 1841. His statement that his sister Martha was "there" could be interpreted to mean that she was present at the time McBride was baptized in the Nauvoo Temple font. However, later in the letter, he indicates that following the baptism, Joseph Smith drove him to Martha's house, which suggests that she was not present. It appears that McBride was merely stating that

Martha was living in Nauvoo at the time the first temple proxy baptisms were performed, namely 1841.

10. Probably a bee block or hard piece of wood bolted to the side of the font, which facilitated putting the baptistry in place.

11. In the temple archaeological investigations conducted in the 1960s, two wells were discovered—one situated underneath the west vestibule (identified as Well A) and another situated approximately twenty feet east of the baptismal font (identified as Well B). The east well was the primary water supply for the font. See Virginia S. Huntington and J. C. Huntington, *Rediscovery of the Nauvoo Temple: Report on the Archeological Excavations* (Salt Lake City: Nauvoo Restoration, 1971), 29–32.

12. Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898*, Typescript, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–1984), 2:138–39, emphasis added.

13. *History of the Church*, 4:454, emphasis added.

14. Reuben's mother, Abigale Mead McBride, and his two brothers, John and Samuel, performed proxy baptisms in Nauvoo, but there is no record of Reuben's proxy work. See Susan Easton Black and Harvey Bischoff Black, *Annotated Record of Baptisms for the Dead, 1840–1845: Nauvoo, Hancock County, Illinois*, 7 vols. (Provo, Utah: Center for Family History and Genealogy, Brigham Young University, 2002), 4:2354–60, 2362–65.

15. *History of the Church*, 4:446.