

A LEGACY OF BLESSINGS: WILLIAM G. PERKINS, PIONEER AND PATRIARCH

Eugene H. Perkins and Waldo C. Perkins

William Gant (Gaunt) Perkins, a pioneer of 1848, enjoyed a close association with the prophets Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and with many early LDS apostles. These men prayed with him, broke bread with him, and slept in his bed. Truly, his noble character was molded by associating with these men.

William was born 11 January 1801 in Abbeville, South Carolina, the sixth son and eleventh of twelve children of Ute Perkins, a Revolutionary War veteran, and Sarah Gant Perkins. The large family moved to White County, Tennessee, in 1805, where William grew to manhood. He married Dicy Ray in White County on 12 February 1818. Here were born their two children, Martha (Patty) Randall Perkins and Levi McFadden Perkins. The family moved to Sangamon County, Illinois, in 1828; and, in 1829, William and his brother Absalom joined their father, Ute, in founding Perkins Settlement on Crooked Creek in Hancock County, Illinois. This village later became the Mormon community and stake of Ramus, later known as Macedonia.

In 1831, two Mormon missionaries, Solomon Hancock and Simeon Carter, on their way to Missouri in response to revelation (D&C 52) first preached the gospel to the Perkins families.¹ William exclaimed: "I never enjoyed such feelings as when I first heard the Gospel. Some Elders that were going to Missouri missed their way and had a meeting in our neighborhood. I was sure it was the word of God!"² Despite this positive reaction, none of the Perkins joined the Church at this time.

William and his nephew, Andrew H. Perkins, participated in the Black Hawk War of 1832.³ In 1834, his teenage son, Levi, died of unknown causes. Patty, his daughter, married William Job Perkins on 14 July 1835. William Job was the son of William's brother, Ephraim



William G. Perkins

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Brigham Young University*

Perkins, and Eda Job Perkins. Ephraim and Eda lived directly west of Fountain Green Township in neighboring Pilot Grove Township. Ephraim and Eda did not join The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; their son, William Job, was the only member of their family to

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join the Church.

Early in 1839, Joel Hills Johnson, a Mormon elder from Kirtland then living in Carthage, Illinois, came to Perkins Settlement and preached the gospel. William, his family, and many of the Perkins lineage joined the Church. The St. George High Priests Quorum minutes of 24 February 1866 preserves his conversion experience. The recorder reported:

Wm. G. Perkins said he hardly could tell how he felt as [he] regarded the gospel, the plan of salvation—he felt first rate—he knew it was from god—he had [a] testimony rooted and grounded in him. At the first sound of the gospel . . . he had a testimony and the Elders knew he had a testimony and rather insisted on [his] being baptized—he bought the Book of Mormon and read [it] and [received] testimony upon testimony of its truth and yet he required a greater testimony and god sent two angels in the shape of men clothed in robes and [they] had balances and the Bible and the Book of Mormon and [they] weighed the two books and they were the same heft.⁴

With the conversion of members of the Perkins families, the Merrill families, and others, the Crooked Creek Branch was organized, later becoming the Ramus Stake, both presided over by Joel H. Johnson.⁵ Absalom (William's brother) was a member of the high council, and William served as a counselor to Bishop William Wightman. Three Perkins men—Ute, the Revolutionary War veteran, and his sons, Absalom and William—provided most of the land on which the town of Ramus was laid out.⁶ Two hundred eighty-five acres were purchased by the Church at a price of \$9 per acre. These lots (four to an acre) were then sold to members of the Church at \$25 per lot. The stake was short lived, being discontinued 4 December 1841 when a member of the stake presidency and several high councilors were convicted of stealing, leading to their excommunication.

In September of 1842, the Ramus Branch met in a special conference under the direction of Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Amasa Lyman for the purpose of “starting Elders preaching for the contradiction of the slanderous reports” put in circulation by John C. Bennett. Among the thirty-four men called were four Perkins family members: William G., Andrew H. (son of

William's brother, Reuben), and Ute and William Lewis (sons of Absalom).⁷

Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, and members of the Twelve and their associates were frequent visitors in William and Dicy's home in Ramus. In their hospitable home, these visitors partook of the finest foods available and, on occasion, spent the night. When Joseph Smith received Sections 130 and 131 in April-May 1843 at Ramus, he and his entourage dined at William and Dicy's table.

In September 1843, John Smith, Joseph Smith's uncle, was sent to Ramus as presiding elder.⁸ In January 1844, John was called as a patriarch in the Church; and, before the month was over, William, Dicy, and twelve other members of the Perkins family received their patriarchal blessings from Father Smith.

On 11 March 1844, Father Ute Perkins passed away. He had settled on Crooked Creek in 1828 and was the oldest resident in Fountain Green Township, which consisted of rural farms and the two communities of Fountain Green and Ramus/Macedonia. Historically, the community of Fountain Green was founded in 1835 by Yankees Jabez Beebe and Stephen Ferris and was made up primarily of settlers from the northeastern United States. For five years, Fountain Green had served as the dominant settlement, being the economic, social, and political center of the township. However, in 1840, when the town of Ramus was laid out and the Ramus stake was established, with the ever-increasing Mormon population, Fountain Green soon lost its preeminent position. Marked by sharp religious differences, social interactions gradually disintegrated. One historian observed, “When old Ute Perkins died in April [actually March] social ties between the two towns snapped.”⁹ Perhaps of even greater significance in this breach was the Mormon block-voting practice in Hancock County, a practice that also controlled the political climate of the Fountain Green township. That is, while non-Mormon residents in the township could vote, they could make no difference at the polls. Three months after Ute's death, Joseph and Hyrum Smith were martyred, casting gloom over all the Saints.

In October 1844, Andrew H. Perkins, now a Hancock County commissioner, and William were among eighty-six high priests called to go abroad to the

congressional districts in the United States.¹⁰ These same two men were appointed in January of 1845 to collect funds to aid in the completion of the Nauvoo Temple.¹¹ Within a month, in Nauvoo, Brigham Young attended a council at President John Smith's on 18 February 1845 and ordained William G. as bishop of Macedonia and Andrew as his counselor.¹² In the fall, following the October conference, William and Andrew Perkins, with Isaac Clark, were assigned to sell houses, lots, and farms in the Macedonia area to prepare for the Mormon exodus.¹³ In early December, when the temple was opened to the general membership of the Church, William and Dicy became the first of several Perkins families, along with their in-laws, to be endowed in the Nauvoo Temple. They were endowed on 22 December 1845 and sealed as husband and wife on 24 January 1846.

William served on election commissions and as a justice of the peace (1845-46).¹⁴ His name appears on legal documents as late as mid-April 1846.¹⁵

As anti-Mormon persecution reached its peak in the fall of 1845, the Mormons agreed to leave the following spring. William, Dicy, and their relatives joined this general exodus, leaving Macedonia, Illinois, on 8 May 1846. They crossed Iowa and eventually settled at the Perkins Macedonia encampment on the banks of the West Nishnabotna River in Pottawattamie County.

A partial makeup of the Macedonia company, which was captained by Andrew H. Perkins and which crossed Iowa, can be established from the 14 February 1847 Macedonia Branch record "when they met at the home of Parks for the purpose of organizing a branch." Here, a list of the Saints is given. Undoubtedly, some of the families who crossed Iowa in this company of thirty-two wagons had, by this time, already established or settled among others of the various camps. For example, Absalom and Nancy and sons Ute and William Lewis and their families had left the Macedonia Perkins encampment before this time and had settled in a fertile valley a few miles away. Here, they established what would become the Pleasant Valley Branch over which Absalom would preside. In addition to the above three Perkins families, there were William G. and Dicy and, traveling with them, William Job and Martha (Patty) as well as Andrew H. (the captain of the company) and Jemima, and traveling with them Jemima's sister, Elizabeth, the widow of Ephraim Patillo Perkins

(Andrew H.'s deceased brother). Therefore, seven Perkins families comprising thirty-three members traveled across Iowa.

We can list with some certainty the adults in the following additional Macedonian families who went across Iowa in the Perkins Macedonia company: Amos W. Condit with six in his family; Rufus Forbush Sr. with five; John Crosby and wife; Peter Boice with four; Manley W. Green and wife; B. F. Taylor with five; William Watterson and wife; William R. Terry and wife; William Wall and wife; A. Benson and wife; and A. P. Chesley and wife. In addition, Sophronia A. Standage, Elizabeth Brown, and Nahum Ward are three adults listed in the February record. Younger children are not included in these numbers. It appears, then, that these eleven families, besides the single adults just mentioned and along with the Perkins families, made up this Macedonia company.

William G. was again called as a bishop, along with his nephews, Ute and Andrew H., and others, on 17 July 1846. They were specifically called to look after the families of the Mormon Battalion enlistees.¹⁶ William and Andrew were also called on 25 December 1847 to serve on the high council in Iowa.¹⁷

In the spring of 1848, William and his family began the arduous journey west in Brigham Young's first division, with William serving as captain of the fourth hundred. John D. Lee, who served under William as a captain of the first fifty, stated, "Captain Perkins is a mild spoken man, though candid and decided in his purposes." Lee also recorded that the little daughter of Wilson G. Perkins, William's nephew, was run over by a loaded wagon. "The fore wheel run over her breast and stomach and the hind wheel over her bouels. The child was taken up in a manner lifeless. She was administered to by Captain Wm. G Perki[n]s & Elder Miller & the Prayre of Faith through the Pouer of Priesthood Saved the child, for she rested almost free from Pain from that time on."¹⁸ The Wilson G. Perkins family had traveled from Grundy County, Missouri, to join the Saints at the Bluffs for the westward journey. The various members of William's company arrived in Great Salt Lake City between 20 and 24 September 1848.

William settled in the Thirteenth Ward. In February 1849, when the first bishops in the Salt Lake Valley were

called, President Brigham Young set William G. apart as the first bishop of the Seventh Ward, a position he held until 1856. At a general election on 12 March 1848, William was elected magistrate for the Seventh Ward,¹⁹ and on 9 January 1851 at the incorporation of Great Salt Lake, he was selected as one of eight city councilors.²⁰ Over the next few years, he served on committees that supervised city streets and public works.

In April 1853, William married, as a plural wife, forty-four-year-old Hannah Gold (Gould), an educated convert who had recently arrived from England. They had no children.

In 1861, William G. and his two nephews, William Job and Ute, and William's brother-in-law, John Vance, were called as missionaries to the Southern Utah Mission. In St. George, the Perkins family members built homes in a row on the east side of Main Street between 100 and 200 South. With the organization of the high priests quorum on 23 March 1862, William and John Vance were set apart as counselors to the president, William Fawcett.²¹ William served in this capacity until his death twenty-four years later.

William G. was ordained a patriarch by Brigham Young on 27 March 1870, the first ordained in the Southern Utah Mission. Over the next thirteen years, he gave 1,191 patriarchal blessings, which would become his legacy to future generations. These blessings were given not only in St. George but also in Salt Lake City when many of his relatives eagerly assembled for his visits.

Even before William was formally ordained a patriarch, the gift of prophecy rested upon him in mighty power. He blessed not only members of the Perkins families but also Heber J. Grant at age seven when Heber's mother, Rachel Ivins Grant, visited relatives in St. George in 1863.²² This prophetic blessing significantly promised Heber that he would begin his ministry very young. It also provided inspired guidance and direction until Heber received a formal patriarchal blessing from Patriarch John Rowberry on 12 March 1881 while serving as the new president of the Tooele Stake. In 1918, Heber J. Grant became president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Among others who received formal patriarchal blessings under William's hand is Anthony W. Ivins, who later became an apostle and eventually a counselor to president Grant. Elder Ivins commented:

I cannot forget the profound impression made on my mind by this blessing. I had taken little thought for the future and had not been as careful to seek the Lord and honor him as I should have been. I was impressed by the goodness and mercy of the Lord in promising such great blessings to one so unworthy as I and determined to reform and be more devoted to the Lord that I might be worthy to receive the blessings which the Lord through His servant had bestowed upon me.²³

An old friend from Macedonia, Illinois, John Lyman Smith, himself a patriarch and the son of the now-deceased John Smith, received a blessing on 30 September 1870. After giving John his blessing, William in turn received a blessing from John.

In the fall of 1872, Colonel Thomas L. Kane and his wife, Elizabeth Wood Kane, and two of their children accompanied President Brigham Young to St. George—hoping the warm Dixie winter would benefit Colonel Kane's failing health. William gave Colonel and Mrs. Kane patriarchal blessings on 11 February 1873. Mrs. Kane recorded in her journal:

Monday February 10, 1873. Ever since we came here, the old Patriarch of St. George, has been anxious to give us his blessing. He is the old man of eighty [actually seventy-two] whom I have so often seen dancing at the parties, dressed in homespun with a yellow neckerchief. He is wonderfully active for his years, thin and wiry, with bright black eyes and curly gray hair. He was at work in his garden this afternoon, and we stopped to speak to him, and much to K's [her husband, Colonel Thomas L. Kane] surprise I agreed to go to his house tomorrow and receive his blessing. He came so often to get us to fix a day, and when K. was ill would have come to his bedside.

I don't see what the harm is. I am sure it won't make a Mormon of me, and as I feel very kindly to the old

man, I mean to go and not hurt his feelings by another refusal.

Tuesday Feb. 11th. I let the children go off on horseback without telling them where I was going, this afternoon, because I felt "cheap", just as if I were going out to have my fortune told.

The Patriarch has a large garden, but a mite of an adobe house containing only two rooms. [The house is still standing but is being used as a garage and storeroom.] One of them must be the first wife's apartment, who is an invalid [Dicy Ray Perkins], a refined looking tidy old lady as thin as a spider web. The other room seemed to be the second wife's parlour, kitchen and bedroom. It was in the neatest order.

Mrs. Perkins, No 2, [Hannah Gold Perkins] received us very quietly and gave us seats. She is a plain motherly looking person about sixty: so commonplace and practical looking, that I could scarcely credit my ears when I heard her talking as she did afterwards... We took our seats, and K. began to be politely conversational, as if we were at a dentists, but the old man was perfectly silent, gazing at the fire, and Mrs. Perkins opening a large account book began taking down our names ages birthplaces, and seemed quite charmed when she found that she and I were born in the same suburb of Liverpool.

After sitting a time in silence the old man turned and explained that he had been praying. He always, he said, prayed that the spirit of the receiver should be influenced in harmony with his own and that he might be prepared to accept it.

Then he rose, went behind K's chair and stood up with his eyes closed, and his head slightly leaning forward; both hands placed on K's forehead. He then spoke; so slowly that his old wife was able to write each word down as he uttered it. I dared not look at K. who sat as if in the dentists' chair composed to his fate, though he gave as violent a start as if a nerve had been touched, at *one* passage.

The blessing was somewhat prophetic, and so far as it was did not coincide with one given K. long ago

by the old patriarch John Smith, [the prophet Joseph Smith's uncle who gave Colonel Kane a blessing on 7 September 1846] which has been curiously fulfilled so far, strange to say.

When the blessing was finished, the old wife read it over aloud to K., who was stiff as a poker, not being pleased with part of it . . .

The patriarch assured him however that he would like it better and better as the full meaning dawned upon him. . . .

After this the patriarch stood up and blessed me. . . .

It was nearly dark when we took our leave, the old pair bidding us farewell with tender solemnity.²⁴

Dicy, William's wife and soul mate of sixty-five years, passed away 18 April 1883. Dicy had been a pioneer midwife, delivering babies in Ramus/Macedonia, while crossing the plains in 1848, in Salt Lake City, and in the Southern Utah Mission. All of her adult life, her home had been open to everyone. Her companionship would be greatly missed by the aging patriarch.

William, apparently because of failing health, gave his last patriarchal blessing in August 1883. Three years later, on 17 November 1886, he died at age eighty-five. Tragically, he left no posterity.

His second wife, the gentle Hannah Gold Perkins, was active in temple work until her death seven years later. Her obituary reads: "Mrs. Perkins was a woman of refinement and education who gave up friends and luxury in England many years ago for the Gospels sake. . . . The deceased was in her eighty-sixth year."

A hallmark of patriarchal blessings given by William G. Perkins was the promises that could be realized by the recipients not only during mortality but also in the postmortal life. These promises, predicated upon faithfulness, often culminated in the opportunity to personally participate in the great millennial reign of the Savior. For the thousands of descendants who have read the blessings William gave their forebears, these blessings have provided treasures of insights about the special spiritual nature of their faithful, devoted, and respected

progenitors. This legacy of patriarchal blessings, which becomes richer with each succeeding generation, is his greatest contribution.

Notes

1. Hancock and Adams Families: Diaries, Journal and Life Sketches, *A Short Sketch of the Life of Solomon Hancock*, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
2. St. George, Utah, High Priests Quorum Minutes, 27 April 1878, LDS Church Historical Department and Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Archives).
3. *The Black Hawk War, 1831-1832, Vol. 1, Illinois Volunteers*, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
4. St. George, Utah, High Priests Quorum Minutes, 24 February 1866, LDS Archives.
5. Macedonia Branch Minute Book, 9 July 1840, 8, LDS Archives.
6. *Ibid.*, 15 July 1840, 9.
7. *Ibid.*, September 1842, 28.
8. *Ibid.*, September 1843, 35.
9. Susan Sessions Rugh, "Those Who Labor in the the Earth: The Families and Farms of Fountain Green, Illinois." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, March 1993, 145.
10. B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church*, 2nd ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932), 7:305-306 (hereafter cited as HC).
11. *Times and Seasons*, 15 January 1845, 6:780-81.
12. HC, 7:340.
13. *Journal History*, 8 October 1845, LDS Archives.
14. Hancock County, Illinois, Deed Records, vol. 19-0 (1845-1846), Family History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
15. *Ibid.*, vol. P (1846), 465.
16. Willard Richards Diary, 17 July 1846, Typescript Collection, LDS Archives.
17. *Ibid.*, 21 July 1846.
18. Robert Glass Cleland and Juanita Brooks, *A Mormon Chronicle: The Diaries of John D. Lee* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah, 1983), 1:34, 38.
19. *Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 12 March 1848, LDS Archives.
20. *Ibid.*, 9 January 1851.
21. St. George, Utah, High Priests Quorum Minute Book, LDS Archives.
22. Heber J. Grant, Blessing Book, pp. 47-49, Florence Grant Smith Collection, LDS Archives.
23. Anthony Woodward Ivins, Diary, 4 October 1871, 1:17-19, Anthony W. Ivins Collection, LDS Archives.
24. Norman R. Bowen and Mary Karen Bowen, "A Gentile Account of Life in Utah's Dixie, 1872-1873," *Elizabeth Kane's St. George Journal* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah, 1995), 162-67.