Caroline Young Harris: The Kirtland Wife of Martin Harris

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Martin Harris, one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, died July 10, 1875, at the home of his son Martin Harris Jr. in Clarkston, Utah. His ninety-two years included experiences with angels and prophets. His faith allowed him to witness for himself the reality of the angel Moroni and the gold plates, and his financial support made the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon possible. Martin was preceded in death by his first wife, Lucy Harris, and was survived by his second wife, Caroline Young Harris. While many are familiar with Martin and his first wife, Lucy, few are familiar with his second wife, Caroline.

Martin married Lucy Harris on March 27, 1808, in Palmyra, New York. They raised a family of four children¹ and lived together as a family until 1831, when Lucy left Martin after he sold a portion of their farm to pay the printing cost for the Book of Mormon. After Lucy's death in 1836, Martin married Caroline Young, a niece of Brigham Young, on November 1, 1837. Seven children were born to Martin and Caroline. They lived in Kirtland until Caroline left Martin in 1856 to join her family and other Church members in Utah. Martin remained in Kirtland until 1870, when he moved West to again associate with his family and other Church members. Caroline lived in the same town as Martin and associated with him, but they never again lived together as husband and wife.

While Lucy and Caroline were both devoted to their family and loved Martin, they differed in their responses to the restored gospel. Lucy's active opposition to the Prophet Joseph Smith fostered her infamous reputation. In contrast, few have recognized or appreciated Caroline's quiet and patient faith in the restored gospel. It may be that accounts of the more volatile Lucy and the betterknown life of Martin Harris have overshadowed Caroline's contribution. It is the purpose of this article to provide some balance to the discussion of Martin Harris by shedding light on Caroline Young Harris.

Martin and Lucy Separate

Continual discord from 1827 to 1830 weakened Martin's first marriage. Lucy Harris became increasingly distressed about Martin's involvement with the Prophet Joseph Smith. His inability to calm Lucy's fears or to share with her the sacred nature of his experiences with the Prophet left her isolated and afraid. When she realized that Martin was going to sell a portion of the family farm to finance the printing of the Book of Mormon, she left Martin and moved into a home on her own property.² Martin then sold his land in April 1831 to pay for the printing of the Book of Mormon and left Palmyra to join Joseph and other Church members in Kirtland, Ohio. Martin and Lucy never divorced, and he continued to visit and provide financial support for Lucy and the children.³ Martin encouraged Lucy and the children to join him in Kirtland, but Lucy's attitude and failing health made this impossible.

In 1833 Lucy wrote a letter to E. D. Howe, a local author who collected testimonials from those opposed to the Prophet Joseph Smith. In her letter she described her troubled marriage.⁴ By this time Martin and Lucy had been separated for several years and Martin was living in Kirtland. Her report reflected the lingering bitterness she felt over the separation.

In August 1835 Martin received a blessing from Joseph Smith Sr. In this blessing Martin was promised that "if thou desirest it with all thy heart and art faithful, thou yet shall teach them [his family] even thy wife that she may be saved in the day of eternity, but if not they shall be removed from the earth."⁵ Harris family tradition claims that Martin acted upon this counsel and visited Lucy prior to her death.⁶ This occurred shortly after the dedication of the Kirtland Temple.⁷ What happened during this visit is unknown, but the later willingness of the children to live with their father suggests that some reconciliation may have taken place.⁸ Lucy died in the summer of 1836 at age forty-four. Upon her death the younger children joined their father in Kirtland. Lucy's burial site is unknown.⁹

Lucy's life was more complex than is typically represented in most historical accounts. Lucy and Martin loved each other and built a home for their family. Nevertheless, as time passed, Martin's commitment to the Prophet Joseph complicated their relationship. Their inability to resolve these differences eventually led to their separation. However, the fact that neither of them pursued a divorce may reveal their deepest feelings. While some observers have not judged Lucy kindly, the circumstances of her life invite a kinder interpretation.

Martin Marries Caroline Young

Caroline Young, the second wife of Martin Harris, was born May 17, 1816, in Hector, New York, to Theodocia Kimball and John Young, the elder brother of Brigham Young. After a thorough investigation of the Church, John accepted the gospel in 1833. The family then joined the Church and moved to Kirtland, Ohio. Caroline was seventeen years old at this time.

When young Caroline arrived in Kirtland, Martin held a position of community respect as one of the Three Witnesses. As a member of the Young family, also prominent in Kirtland, Caroline met and associated with Martin. She would have known of his standing in the community and his part in selecting her uncle Brigham Young as one of the first Apostles of the Church.

Three years later, when Caroline was twenty, Martin learned of the death of his wife, Lucy. It was after this that Martin approached Caroline with an offer of marriage. Little is known of their courtship other than that the wedding ceremony occurred on November 1, 1836.¹⁰ At the time of their marriage, Martin was fifty-three years old and Caroline was twenty.

Observers have pondered Caroline's motives for marrying a man thirty years her senior. One author described Caroline as an "attractive young woman, a member of one of the most prominent families in the church."¹¹ Another report indicated that Caroline suffered a childhood disease that left her face pockmarked, "leaving her beautiful face scarred so badly that she resolved never to marry."¹² "That may be one reason why she was willing to accept a suitor who was 33 years her senior."¹³ Caroline appears to have expressed her practical nature in her marriage to Martin. He was relatively wealthy and prominent and a recent widower. Whatever her reasons, Caroline recognized that Martin could provide a comfortable home for her as well as some prominence in the community. While the marriage between two people of such different ages may not have been a romantic ideal, it met Caroline's expectations as a potential wife and mother. Whether these reasons or others prompted Caroline's decision to marry Martin, she willingly accepted her role and was determined to build a successful marriage and family.

Martin and Caroline lived in a comfortable Kirtland home as respected members of the community. However, the spirit of apostasy that overwhelmed the Church in 1837 soon interrupted their peace. Caroline was dismayed when her husband as well as other leaders of the Church openly challenged the Prophet's leadership, saying "that he had lost confidence in Joseph Smith."14 Her world was shaken when in September 1837 the Prophet dismissed Martin from his position on the Kirtland High Council and in December of the same year subjected him to Church discipline.¹⁵ Caroline's beloved husband of almost two years was estranged from the Church that she loved. Then, to add to the emotions of the moment, she gave birth to her first son, Martin Harris Jr., in January 1838. Caroline again relied on her practical faith to make things work in the face of Martin's actions. After only two years of marriage, Caroline understood what difficulties her marriage presented, and she asserted her determination to make the marriage work.

Alone in Kirtland

During the next few years, Caroline remained in Kirtland with Martin while the body of the Church moved first to Far West, Missouri, and then to Nauvoo, Illinois. During this time Caroline remained faithful to the Church, while Martin was involved in various apostate causes. Caroline's encouragement may have prompted Martin to confess his sins and to request rebaptism as a member of the Church in 1842.¹⁶ However, to Caroline's disappointment, Martin's repentance did not appear sincere, since by 1844 he was again involved in apostate activities. During this time, three more children were born to Caroline and Martin: a daughter named Caroline, born in 1840; another daughter, Julia, in 1842; and a second son, John, in 1845. In 1846 Martin left Caroline to care for her young family alone when he accepted a mission call to England as a representative of the apostate James J. Strang. During Martin's absence Caroline remained faithful to the Church and patiently endured his apostasy.¹⁷

In 1847 Caroline's uncle Brigham Young led the Church West to the Great Salt Lake. She desired to join the exodus, but Martin refused, feeling that he, rather than Brigham Young, should lead the Church.¹⁸ Over the next few years, Caroline continued to encourage Martin to reconsider and join the Saints in the West. During this challenging time she gave birth to her fifth child, Sarah, in 1849, and during the next year lost her second child, Caroline, who died at age ten. The years between 1847 and 1853 were difficult ones for Caroline. Her friends and family had followed her uncle Brigham Young West, leaving her alone with an apostate husband whose attitude and advancing age left her to shoulder much of the responsibility of the family.

In the spring of 1853, missionary David B. Dille visited the Harris family in Kirtland. At this time Caroline was thirty-seven years old and Martin, seventy. He found Martin bitter toward the Church and opposed to the practice of plural marriage. After several hours of discussion, Martin's attitude softened, and he bore his witness of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and indicated his desire to travel to Salt Lake City.¹⁹ This pleased Caroline, who had consistently encouraged Martin to take their family West. Later that year, Caroline gave birth to their sixth child, Solomon Webster, bringing the number of living children to five.

Caroline Leaves for Utah

In the fall of 1854, missionaries traveling through Kirtland made a second visit to Martin. They described him as dissatisfied with his life and anxious for the Saints to return to Jackson County to build Zion. As in the previous interview, Caroline heard Martin express his desire to join the Saints in Salt Lake City.²⁰ However, she was disappointed as Martin again changed his mind and stubbornly refused to take his family to Salt Lake City.

Caroline was thirty-nine years old and expecting her seventh child when she decided to leave Martin and travel with her children to join her father's family in Salt Lake City. Her determination is evident because she left behind comfortable and prosperous circumstances.²¹ Little is known of the immediate events that led her to the final decision to leave Martin, but it was at this time that the family of her sister, Louise Littlefield, was preparing to leave for Utah. Caroline may have seen this as an opportunity to travel with family members who could provide the support she needed until she reached her father's home in Salt Lake City. Martin was very upset with her decision, feeling that Brigham Young had unfairly influenced her move West.²² In spite of Martin's feelings, she acted upon an opportunity to fulfill her dream to rejoin her family and the Church even if it meant leaving behind her husband of twenty years.

Caroline left Kirtland and traveled as far as Pottawattamie, Iowa, where she gave birth to her seventh child, Ida May, on May 27, 1856. During the next three years, Caroline stayed in Iowa near the family of her sister, Louise Littlefield. In June 1859 she left with her children and the Littlefields in the Horton D. Haight wagon company.²³ Records from the company provide a note regarding the challenges she faced crossing the plains. One member of the Haight company recorded in his journal on June 28, 1859, that Caroline began hemorrhaging and nearly died. The company stayed in camp for a day, anxious for her welfare. She then stayed behind under the care of the Littlefield family until she recovered sufficiently to rejoin the wagon train.²⁴

One month later Caroline saw the life of her son Martin Jr. threatened. A nearly nude man came into the camp and threatened to "stampede the cattle or kill someone in Haight's train if he didn't get back the clothes stolen from him."²⁵ Apparently, someone had ambushed him and robbed him of his personal effects. Assuming it was a member of the Haight company, he wildly demanded revenge. The Saints were puzzled but treated him kindly. Frustrated, the man threatened the group with his gun. All that is known of what

happened next is that "a shot was fired that could have proved fatal to Brother Martin Harris [Jr.], but he did not respond to the challenge."²⁶ There is no mention of how the matter was resolved. Finally, after four months of difficult travel, Caroline reached Salt Lake City on September 1, 1859.²⁷

Caroline Remarries

Upon her arrival in Salt Lake City, Caroline's father, John Young, welcomed her family into his home. Martin Jr. and his two brothers, John and Solomon, soon left Salt Lake City to live in Smithfield, Utah (Logan area). Caroline then met John C. Davis, an English convert who had lost his wife while crossing the plains. She agreed to marry him even though she was still married to Martin. Caroline must have considered the proposal with her characteristic practicality since she needed a husband to support her family. The decision also seemed reasonable since she had not heard from Martin for five years and would likely never see him again.

Caroline and John were married in her father's home by Caroline's brother-in-law, Lyman Littlefield, on January 16, 1860. The new couple made their home in Payson, a community in south Utah County. In February Caroline's daughter Julia married John's son, Elijah Davis. One month later, John and Caroline received their endowment and sealing in the Endowment House at the same time as Julia and Elijah.²⁸ After Julia's marriage, Caroline had only Ida, age four, to care for until the arrival of Caroline and John's first child. This infant, whom they named Joseph, died shortly after birth.

After the death of her son, Caroline faced another crisis when her husband argued with Brigham Young over a parcel of land. John threatened to leave the Church if the matter was not resolved in his favor. Caroline took the side of her uncle Brigham, resulting in her separation from John.²⁹ Caroline moved into a home in Salt Lake City³⁰ and again used Harris as her last name.³¹ During the next few years, Caroline and her son Martin Jr. corresponded with Martin and encouraged him to come West.³²

Caroline and Martin Meet in Salt Lake City

In December 1869 William Homer, a brother-in-law to Martin Jr., visited with Martin Harris in Kirtland. At this time Martin was

eighty-one years old, in reasonably good health, and was serving as a self-appointed guide for visitors to the abandoned Kirtland Temple. During his visit Homer toured the temple and listened to Martin's witness of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. During the tour Martin said to Homer, "I should like to see Caroline and the children, . . . but I cannot, I am too poor."³³ Homer reported this desire to Church leaders in Salt Lake City.

Edward Stevenson, a Church representative, next visited Martin Harris. He arranged Church funding to assist Martin to leave Kirtland and move to Salt Lake City. They traveled by train and arrived in Ogden, Utah, on August 30, 1870.³⁴ Local newspapers created considerable public attention by announcing Martin's arrival in Salt Lake City.³⁵ Caroline must have read about Martin's arrival and public welcome as a faithful witness to the Book of Mormon. Brigham Young personally greeted Martin, and they reconciled their old differences.³⁶ On September 17, 1870, Edward Stevenson rebaptized Martin, and on October 11 Martin received his temple endowment. At the age of eighty-eight, Martin had come home to live his remaining days with friends and family.

This turn of events placed Caroline in a difficult situation when Martin learned of her marriage and sealing to John Davis. "Here she was residing in the same general locality with two living husbands—separated from both but not divorced from either. What could she do to forestall an open scandal?"³⁷ A solution soon presented itself. While in Salt Lake City, Martin stayed with his grandniece Irinda C. McEwan. Since Caroline lived near by, she and the children met with Martin.³⁸ The only record of what happened during those meetings reported Martin's great joy in finally meeting his daughter Ida May.³⁹ One family historian suggested that Martin was disappointed to learn that his wife had been married and sealed to another man. Because of this, he refused to consider a full reconciliation with Caroline.⁴⁰

Caroline and Martin Move to Smithfield

Martin Jr. moved his father to his home in Smithfield, where he could care for him. Caroline also moved to Smithfield but lived in her own home near her son and Martin.⁴¹ While little is known regarding her relationship with Martin during their four years together in Smithfield, it is apparent that they had a congenial association.⁴² At that time Caroline was fifty-four, and Martin eighty-eight. Given Caroline's presence in the small community, it seems reasonable to assume that she was there to help her son care for the aging Martin. In 1874 Martin Jr. moved to Clarkston, Utah, a short distance from Smithfield, taking his father with him. Caroline remained in her home in Smithfield until after Martin's death.

Martin died at age ninety-two in his son's home in Clarkston on July 10, 1875. There is no record of Caroline's response, but after almost forty years of marriage, she must have felt the loss. Following Martin's death, Caroline suffered a stroke that left her unable to care for herself.⁴³ She remained in Smithfield until 1885, when her son decided to homestead in Lewisville, Idaho (near Idaho Falls). He moved his mother to his new home to provide the continued care she required. Caroline lived in Idaho with her son's family until her death January 19, 1888, at age seventy-two. Her family buried her in the Lewisville cemetery.

Final Thoughts

The second wife of Martin Harris has not received the attention she deserves. While many have written of Lucy's faults, few have described Caroline's strengths. Caroline's life of faith invites careful consideration, since few are aware of her life and contribution. The emphasis on Lucy's faults and her part in the early history of the Church has overshadowed the fact that Martin remarried after her death. Like Lucy, Caroline was married to Martin for twenty years before leaving him. Unlike Lucy, Caroline responded to Martin's pride with a long-suffering love. Lucy stubbornly opposed Martin's new faith, while Caroline patiently endured his apostasy. If Lucy is to blame for the breakdown in Martin's first marriage, it then seems reasonable to ascribe to Martin the responsibility for the failure of the second. The only common factor in both marriages was Martin, and the difference between the two experiences was the response of each of the wives to Martin. Lucy's distrust of the Prophet Joseph Smith contributed to her problems with Martin,

while Caroline's faith enabled her to endure patiently until she felt she had to leave Martin for the sake of her family.

More should be said of Caroline's heroism in enduring two decades of Martin's apostasy and her courageous trip West. Little is written of her patience and long-suffering necessitated by Martin's pride. Disappointed by his refusal to join the Saints in Salt Lake City, Caroline left Martin to join a wagon train West. She left several months pregnant and traveled West with her children. For the next three years, Caroline demonstrated great courage and determination before reaching her father's family in Salt Lake City. Her greatness is evident in her experiences on the trail that included the birth of her seventh child, reoccurring sickness, and the daily struggle to care for her young family.

Regarding Martin Harris, it is easier to find fault with him than to appreciate his goodness. The failure of Martin's marriage to Caroline does not change the validity of his witness. He saw the gold plates and personally witnessed the reality of the angel Moroni. Throughout his troubled life, he remained a consistent witness to these facts of the Restoration. His sacred calling as a witness of truth allows Martin's weaknesses and failings to be overlooked.

On February 20, 1962, William H. Homer reported to his bishop, Ben J. Ravsten, that the sealing of the Martin Harris family was complete. Descendants of Martin Harris had gathered in the Logan Temple to seal Martin, Lucy, Caroline, and all of their children.⁴⁴

NOTES

¹All Harris family history information found in this article is from Don K. Dalling, Martin Harris Family Group Records, Martin Harris Family Organization, Murray, UT, in author's possession.

²Martin consistently said that he had left Lucy for the gospel and that she had not left him (see Rhett S. James, *The Man Who Knew: The Early Years* [Cache Valley, UT: Martin Harris Pageant Committee, 1983], 162). This appears to be a rationalization on his part since Lucy initiated the separation by moving out of the family home.

³James, *The Man Who Knew*, 107.

⁴Lucy Harris, November 29, 1833, letter, in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, OH: Eber D. Howe, 1834), 254–57. In her letter, Lucy accused Martin of physical abuse and implied that he was unfaithful. While these accusations appear inconsistent with his character and are most likely untrue, they do illustrate her depth of feeling and possible desire to gain public sympathy.

⁵Quoted in Scott R. Shelton, "Martin Harris in Cache Valley" (master's thesis, Utah State University, 1986), 16. See also Madge H. Tuckett and Belle H. Wilson, *The Martin Harris Story* (Provo, UT: Vintage Books, 1983), 59.

⁶Shelton, "Martin Harris in Cache Valley," 16.

⁷Tuckett and Wilson, *The Martin Harris Story*, 60.

⁸James, *The Man Who Knew*, 154. In a report that appears to be in error, Thomas L. Cook wrote in his history of Palmyra that Martin returned to Palmyra to visit Lucy with his second wife, Caroline. After a short visit, they were reconciled and lived together for a time (see Thomas L. Cook, *Palmyra and Vicinity* [Palmyra, NY: Press of Palmyra Courier Journal, 1930], 206). While the error in detail of this report is obvious, it does support the general notion that Martin continued a supportive association with Lucy and likely visited her before her death. There is no evidence that he had married Caroline before Lucy's death and traveled with her to New York.

⁹Rhett S. James, "Lucy Harris: Toward a Compassionate Reinterpretation," *Nauvoo Journal* 9 (Spring 1997): 55. A letter from William W. Bean claims that Lucy was originally buried in the Durphey cemetery and later moved to the Palmyra cemetery. As quoted in Wayne C. Gunnell, "Martin Harris—Witness and Benefactor to the Book of Mormon" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1955), 119. Palmyra historian Deborah J. Ferrell indicates that there is no record of Lucy's grave being moved and it is most probable that she was originally interred in the Palmyra cemetery (correspondence, January 1999, in author's possession). The Palmyra New York Cemetery Interment Record indicates that two persons named Lucy Harris are buried in Section U, Lot 564 among other members of the Harris family. The graves are unmarked. It is not certain that either of these persons was the wife of Martin Harris (see City Cemetery Interment Record, Palmyra, New York).

¹⁰Dalling, Martin Harris Family Group Records, Martin Harris Family Organization, in author's possession.

¹¹William H. Homer Jr., "Life History of Caroline Young Harris," unpublished manuscript, in the possession of Don K. Dalling.

¹²Personal correspondence with Robert A. Ball, December 1, 1998, representative of the Martin Harris Family Organization, in author's possession.

¹³Dalling, November 1998, correspondence in author's possession.

¹⁴Letter of Thomas Colburn to Erastus Snow, May 2, 1855, quoted in Gunnell, "Martin Harris," 57. ¹⁵Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:229n8. Others disagree, claiming that Martin was disciplined, but not excommunicated. William H. Homer Jr., "The Passing of Martin Harris," *Improvement Era* (March 1926), 471.

¹⁶ Journal History (June 1, 1877): 1–2, in Tuckett and Wilson, *The Martin Harris Story*, 64.

¹⁷Ball correspondence, December 1, 1998.

¹⁸Homer, "Passing of Martin Harris," 469.

¹⁹"David B. Dillie Diary," as quoted in Gunnell, "Martin Harris," 56–57.

²⁰Letter of Thomas Colburn to Lorenzo Snow found in *Journal History* (May 2, 1855): 2, as in Gunnell, "Martin Harris," 57.

²¹Homer, "Life History of Caroline Young Harris," 2.

²²Ball correspondence, December 1, 1998.

²³Correspondence from James L. Kimball, February 23, 1999, Research Librarian, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in author's possession.

²⁴Horace S. Eldredge, "Crossing the Plains Narrative," Horace S. Eldredge Journal, from James L. Kimball, Church Historical Department. See also in the same collection, Frederick Kesler Papers, June 29.

²⁵Eldredge, "Crossing the Plains Narrative."

²⁶Eldredge, "Crossing the Plains Narrative."

²⁷"Second Wagon Train (Church Train) Captain Horton D. Haight," *Journal History* (September 1, 1859): 10.

²⁸Dalling correspondence, November 1998.

²⁹Ben J. Ravsten, *History of Clarkston: The Granary of Cache Valley, 1864–1964* (Logan, UT: B. J. and E. P. Ravsten, 1966), 172.

³⁰Tuckett and Wilson, *The Martin Harris Story*, 85–86.

³¹While Caroline and John were never divorced, Church leaders did cancel their sealing at the request of their descendants in September 1959 (see Ravsten, *History of Clarkston*, 173).

³²Ball corresponsence, December 1, 1998.

³³Homer, "The Passing of Martin Harris," 470.

³⁴Deseret Evening News, August 30, 1870, 3.

³⁵Deseret Evening News, August 31, 1870, 2.

³⁶Homer, "Publish It Upon the Mountains," 507.

³⁷Homer, in Shelton, "Martin Harris in Cache Valley," 29.

³⁸Tuckett and Wilson, Martin Harris Story, 85.

³⁹Letter of Helen Homer Parks, in Ravsten, *History of Clarkston*, 163.

⁴⁰Dalling correspondence, in Shelton, "Martin Harris in Cache Valley," 30.

⁴¹Helen Homer Parkes records that Caroline may have felt motivated to move because of the embarrassment she felt for being married to two living men at the same time. This prompted her to "discreetly and quietly seclude herself in Smithfield" because she preferred to live near Martin (Ravsten, *History of Clarkston*, 162). ⁴²James correspondence, January 11, 1999, noted that Martin and Caroline were united at the home of their son Martin Jr.

⁴³Correspondence from LaRue Pitts, International Society, Daughters of Utah Pioneers (Salt Lake City: December 1998); in author's possession.

⁴⁴Ravsten, *History of Clarkston*, 174.