

**Life in Nauvoo, June 1844:
Vilate Kimball's Martyrdom
Letters**

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Ronald K. Esplin

Many of the known descriptions of the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith are either reminiscences or simply recitals of fact intended to record the event for posterity. While useful, they lack the spontaneity and emotional immediacy of letters written in the charged atmosphere of the time. These important qualities are evident in two letters from Vilate Kimball to her husband Apostle Heber C. Kimball, absent from Nauvoo during the fateful month of June 1844. Vilate's letters provide a detailed view of the emotional and confused atmosphere in Nauvoo during the two weeks leading up to the murders, as well as give an insight into the impact on the city of the event itself. Heber C. Kimball's journal provides a different viewpoint as he writes from afar of his concern for his family in Nauvoo, of his reaction to the first rumors of the tragic event, and finally of what Vilate's letters meant to him.

In 1844, after concluding to become a candidate for President of the United States, Joseph Smith sent out from Nauvoo hundreds of preaching and electioneering missionaries. These included some of the Twelve, who were also to seek Congressional redress for past wrongs to the Mormons. On 21 May 1844, Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young, and about forty others boarded the steamer *Osprey* to begin their journey to the Eastern States. Five days later, as they reached the foot of the Ohio Falls, Heber C. Kimball noted in his diary his concern for his family:

my dear Vilate how I would wish to speak a word of consolation to hur. Dear girl how much she suffers in hur mind. O my Father let peas enter hur brest. I ask it in the name of Jesus Christ thy Son Amen.¹

Other entries also reveal how difficult for him the separation was. On 6 June, after arriving in Washington, D.C., he noted that "when I see men and thare wives walking out two by two [from the Capitol] O that I had my dear Vilate with me, bless hur Heart Soul and body." Heber had left Vilate to care for their family of five children—four boys from one to thirteen years of age and sixteen-year-old Helen Mar. Their oldest child, William Henry Kimball, married to Mary Davenport, was also in Nauvoo and is mentioned in the letters. Because of his deep concern for his family, Heber prayed for them following a special pattern taught him by Joseph Smith:²

I clothed my self and offerd up the Sines of the Holy Preasthood and called one the name of the Lord. He hurd me fore my heart was mad comfortable. . . it was said my family was well.

Well might Heber have been concerned about his family in Nauvoo, for storm clouds were gathering there even as he and his associates departed. The press that printed the *Nauvoo Expositor*, which launched the series of events culminating in the assassination of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, was already in the city, and the grim work of the “opposite party” was already underway. Vilate began her letter Sunday, 9 June, while Heber was still in Washington. This was two days after the first and only number of the *Expositor* appeared, but the day before Joseph Smith and the city council, after careful deliberation, ordered the press destroyed as a public nuisance and saw that order carried out. The day following the destruction of the press, 11 June, Vilate commented on the event in a brief addition to her letter. From there, events moved swiftly as emotions mounted until by 20 June the Prophet Joseph resolved to send a letter asking the Twelve to return, a letter Vilate reported was never sent. Apostates and other enemies of the Church skillfully used the destruction of the *Expositor* to fan old hatreds and to take the law into their own hands. Convinced that they could not get a fair trial in the heated emotionalism of Hancock County, Joseph and Hyrum concluded to flee, and during the night of Saturday, 22 June, they crossed the river into Iowa. The events that followed were reported by Vilate when she finished her letter on 24 June.

One of the significant insights provided by this letter is Vilate’s view of the impact on the Church of the Prophet’s crossing to Iowa and what prompted his return. According to the traditional account, “It was the strong persuasions of Reynolds Cahoon, Lorenzo D. Wasson, and Hiram Kimball, who were carrying out Emma’s instructions, that induced Joseph and Hyrum to start back to Nauvoo.”³ Vilate’s letter shows that fear was widespread after Joseph left. If Emma felt deserted and her faith failed her, it was not without reason, and she was not alone. The letter reports Illinois Governor Thomas Ford’s threats that the city would remain “suspended on so many cags of powder” until Joseph gave himself up.

Nauvoo June 9th 1844.

My Dear Companion,⁴

It is one week yesterday since I closed a letter to you. Although I have not spoken to you for a week, yet you have not ben out of my mind many moments at a time when I was awake; and when I am a sleep I often dream about you. I dreamed last night of being in Victor at Nathaniels with you. I thought we were very happy. I hope this will prove a true dream. Nauvoo never was so lonesom since we lived here as it is now. I went to meeting last sunday for the first time since Conference. I was so home sick the moment I got there, I should have turned rite about and came home a foot if I had not

ben afraid it would make me sick. Joseph, Hiram, nor any of the twelve was there. Noah Packard preached and you may be sure I was glad when he got through. When I got home I found a man here from Fort Madison after a girl; Jennett went with him. His name is Webster, he said he was acquainted with you. I hope she will do well. The next day Backenstaunce from Carthage⁵ came after her, seemed disappointed that she was gone—this was monday last. I heard in the morning that Sarah⁶ was sick ahead the day before. I went over to Br Nobles⁷ to see if he would take his wife and I up to see her towards night. He said he would, and accordingly did. We found her much better. She had a turn of the nurves headake. I tried to have her come home with me, but she said she would wate till she felt better, then she would come and stay several days. I expect her this week.

Br. Nobles is very kind. He knows I am not able to walk much, he has invited me to ride with them several times. Yesterday he took his wife and I, down to Hibberds after cherries. They charged 10 cents a quart for what we brought home, but gave us what we wanted to eat. I bought 3 pints, and I believe I eat as many more, so I did not begrudge the money. I have had one mess of green peas. I bought 4 quarts at 4 cents a quart, when I got them shelled I had 3 gills. Thiss was paying dear for whistle, or the peas, but I do not begrudge myself any thing that I can eat now days, and I know that you dont nor never did. My health is very poor, my stumach loaths almost everything. I am so sick and faint that I cannot set up a good deal of the time. There is a cause for this, which cause you will no doubt rejoice in. A hint to you, is sufficient.⁸ William and Mary started for Ramus yesterday. I dont know whether they can get there on account of the bad roads and high water. The wether continues cold and wet. Br Whitney called here to day, said he had ben talking with Doctor Bernhisel.⁹ He thought the quorum had better get to gather and pray for the rain to be stayed, or we should all be sick.¹⁰

June 11th William and Mary got home yesterday. They went to her Fathers, but could not get to Ramus. The bridges are all washed away in every direction, so that there is no passing nor repassing. I am sorry, for I was in hopes he would get that cow. But I do not know as we shall want cows or anything els here much longer. Nauvoo was a scene of confusion last night, some hundred of the Brethren turned out and burned the printing press [the *Nauvoo Expositor*], and all the aparatus pertaining to the office of the opposite party. This was done by order of the City Council. They had only published one Paper, which is considered a public nucence. But I donot know whether it will be considered so in the eyes of the Law or not. They have sworn revenge, and no doubt they will have it.

June 24th My *Dear Dear* Husband, various have ben the scenes in Nauvoo since I commenced this letter, I should have sent it before now, but I have ben thrown into such confusion I knew not what to write. This is not all. The mails have not come regular, eather on account of bad roads and high water or less they are stoped by mobs. I have not had a letter from you since the one you wrote back by the Ospry. I know your anxiety to hear from us must be very great, as you will no doubt hear of our trouble by report. Nothing is to be heard of but mobs collecting on every side. The Laws and Fosters,¹¹ and most of the decenting [dissenting] party with their Families left here a day or two after their press was destroyed. They are sworn to have

Joseph and the city council, or exterminate us all. Between three and four thousand brethren have ben under arms here the past week. Expecting every day they would come, the brethren were calld in from all the branches round to help defend the city. Joseph sent word to the Governor if he and his staff would come here, he would abide their desision. But insted of his coming here, he went to carthage, and there walked arm and arm with Law and Foster, untill we have reason to feer he has cought their spirit. He sent thirty men in here dabefore yesterday to take Joseph and sent him a saucy letter, saying if these could not take him thousands could. He ordered the troops here to deliver up their arms, and dispers.

Yesterday morning (although it was sunday) was a scene of confusion. Joseph had fled and left word for the brethren to hang on to their arms and take care of themselves the best way they could. Some were tryed almost to death to think Joseph should leve them in the hour of danger. Hundreds have left the city since the fuss commenced. Most of the merchants on the hill have left. I have not felt frightened amid [it all] neither has my heart sunk within me, untill yesterday, when I heard Joseph [wrote] and sent word back for his family to follow him, and Br Whitneys family were packing up, not knowing but they would have to go, as he is one of the city council. For a little while I felt bad enough, but did not let any body know it, neither did I shed any tears. I felt a confidence in the Lord, that he would presurve us from the ravages of our enemies. We expected them here to day by thousands but before night yesterday things put on a different aspect.

Joseph went over the river out of the United States, and there stoped and composed his mind, and got the will of the Lord concerning him, and that was, that he should return and give himself up for trial. He sent a messenger imediately to Carthage to tell the Governor he would meet his staff at the big mound at eight oclock this morning in company with all that the ritt demanded. They have just passed by here, on their way thare. My heart said Lord bless those Dear men, and presurve them from those that thirst for their blood. Their giveing themselves up, is all that will save our city from destruction. The Governor wrote if they did not do so, our city was suspended upon so many cags of powder, and it needed only one spark to tulch them off, so you can see how he feels. What will be the fate of our dear Brethren the Lord only knows but I trust he will presurve them. If you were here, you would be sure to be in their midst. Thiss would increase my anxiety of cors.

Now I must tell you the fluctuation of mind I have had about going to met you. I saw Br Adams¹² a week ago last saturday. He told me he had ben detained so long here, that he had concluded to take his wife with him when he went. Said if Helen and I would go with them, he would agree to take us to you. Said he had no money but he was acquainted with the captains of the different boats, and he could go to Sincinato [Cincinnati] without money, and there he could get what he wanted. He calculated then to be here last friday and stay untill to morrow when we were to start on the Ospry. I saw no prospect of going at all unless I took up with his offer. I asked council of Br Whitney and others. They all advised me to go, so I went to making redy with all posable speed. But it was not three days before I heard they were agoing to write for the twelve to come amediately home. I saw Joseph passing by, and went out and asked him if it was so. He said yess, there was a prospect

of trouble and they wanted you here, and you would want to be here. He also said you promised to return immediately and fetch him that money.

I came in feeling so disappointed that I could not help but shed some tears about it. Br Richards¹³ soon came along and told me to cheer up, said he did not apprehend any danger. Said he, hold on a few days, we shall not write yet at any rate, so I took courage again, but it was only to meet another disappointment. He called her[e] last Friday. Told me he had just dispatched a messenger with letters to all the twelve to come immediately home, and fetch all the furs with them, that they could raise. This messenger was to take the first boat and go down to St Lewis before he mailed them, as it is no use to mail them here. I knew nothing but what they were gone, until Br Adams told me Saturday evening, that was all counteracted and the messenger did not go. They had concluded not to send for you, and said he, perhaps we shall go yet. That is the last I have seen of him. He preached here yesterday, and started for home last evening. I understand he has another mission appointed him. So I see no prospect of going east at present, although I never had stronger faith about any thing in my life. I have no desire to go and leave the children unless the excitement should wholly subside, which I do not believe it will at present.

[Upside down, first page] My page is full, and I can only say may the Lord God bless and preserve us all to meet again. I believe he will. The children all send love and glad wishes to their dear Father.

Sarah has been here and spent a week with me. She is usually well, and not much frightened. Justen Jonson is going to take this over the river and mail it for me, so fare well my dear.

V. Kimball

Concerned about leaving his family in a troubled Nauvoo, Heber had discussed with Vilate the possibility of her meeting him in the East, something they both wanted. Praying about this possibility on 7 June, Heber recorded that he got a "testimony that Congress would not do any thing for us at all, and that my wife would come to me in the East." He wrote Vilate of this, and she commented on it near the close of her next letter. It seems likely, however, that in his great desire to have Vilate with him, Heber mistook a general feeling of peace and reassurance about his family for specific confirmation that his desire to have her nearby would be granted. Three days later he again prayed and received a different impression:

O Lord bless my dear family and give them Health and peace. and let thy Servant Heber see them all in the flesh again. . . . I called on the Lord in the proper way. The answer was to me that Congress had not got it in their hearts to do the first thing for this people, also my Family were all well and that they all should be till I should return.

Heber and his brethren first heard of the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith on 9 July in Salem, Massachusetts. "The papers were full of News of the death of our Prophet," he noted. "I was not willen to believe it, for it

was to much to bare. . . . it struct me at the heart.” One of the reasons for disbelieving the rumors was that letters from home indicated that “up to the 19[th of June] Joseph was clean out of the Hands of the mob.”¹⁴ Finally in Baltimore on 12 July, after several unsettling days of bewildemlent, Heber and Lyman Wight concluded to ask the Lord the truth of the matter. For Heber the answer to that prayer lay with the arrival of Vilate’s letter.

Elder White [Wight] and my Self went in to our closet and offerd up the singhn [signs] and praied that we might get some definite news pertaining [to] the death of the Prophets. Toards night one of the Brethren went to the office and got one leter from my wife up to the 24 which day He gave Him self up in company with Hiyrum, [Willard] Richards and J Tailor three days before they ware killed. This leter satisfide us that the Brethren ware dead. O Lord what feelings we had.

The following day Heber and some of the others traveled to Philadelphia, where they read a letter from Kentucky “that gave us the pearticulers of the death of our brethren.” The next day was Sunday, and they “red the news to the saints. Great sorrow prevailed and [the branch members] agreed to dress in morning [mourning]. O Lord How can we part with our dear Br. O Lord save the Twelve.” Monday Jedediah Grant arrived after two weeks on the road, bringing much-desired information and no doubt relieving Heber about his family by reporting that in Nauvoo “things are composed.”

By 19 July Heber C. Kimball was back in Boston, where he “found Elder B Young, Hide [Orson Hyde], O Pratt, and W. Woodruff, and felt Sorrifull fore the Loss of our Prophet and Patriarch.” On that day they met in council, concluded to return to Nauvoo without delay, and prepared a letter for publication in the East

advising the Elders who have families in Nauvoo to go immediately to them & for all the authorities of the Church to assemble at Nauvoo for a council, by order of the quorum of the Twelve.¹⁵

Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young waited in Boston for Lyman Wight, who did not arrive until 23 July, and on the twenty-fourth, the same day that George J. Adams arrived with the following letter from Vilate, they left for Nauvoo.¹⁶ Vilate began this letter only six days after closing the previous one, but in the interim grief and fear settled over the city in the wake of the tragedy.

Nauvoo June 30th 1844

My Dear Dear Companion

Never before, did I take up my pen to address you under so trying circumstances as we are now placed, but as Br Adams the bearer of this can tell you more than I can write I shall not attempt to discribe the scene that we have passed through. God forbid that I should ever witness another like unto

it. I saw the lifeless corpses of our beloved brethren when they were brought to their almost distracted families. Yea I witnessed their tears, and groans, which was enough to rend the heart of an adamant. Every brother and sister that witnessed the scene fe[el]t deeply to sympathyze with them. Yea, every heart is filled with sorrow, and the very streets of Nauvoo seem to mourn. Whare it will end the Lord only knows.

We are kept awake night after night by the alarm of mobs. These apostates say, their damnation is sealed, their die is cast, their doom is fixed, and they are determined to do all in their power to have revenge. Law says he wants nine more, that was in his quorum. Some time I am afraid he will get them. I have no doubt but you are on[e]. What makes me fear, is from a circumstance that took place when the legion was first called out to defend the city. There was several Drums found with blood on, no one could account for it. They examined to see how many there was, they found tenn, and while they were examining the eleventh there came a large drop on that. Wm has seen them; he says with all the drums have ben used the blood is yet plain to be seen. He has got two if he gets the nine more it will make eleven.¹⁷ But I try to submit all things into the hands of God.

I have felt oposed to their sending for you to come home at present and did not know as they would untill brother Adams called here a few moments ago, and told me he should start in about too hours. If I wanted to write I must send it to the mation house within that time. So I have not time to say much, neither is it nesaceray as he can tell you all. My helth is geting better, the children are all well. I mailed a letter to you last monday directed to Baltimore. The letters you sent from Washington all came to gather last wedensday, and a paper. The mail has not ben in before for fore weeks. The letter you sent from Pitsburg I have never got. When I red your pressing invitation for me to meet you, and that you had got a witness that I should do so, I again took courage that some door would open that I should yet go. But Alass my hopes are all blasted. My constent prayer now is, for the Lord to presurve us all to meet again. I have no doubt but your life will be sought, but may the Lord give you wisdom, to escape their hands. My time is up to send this, so you must excuse me for I have writen in a great hurry and with a bad pen. The children all remember you in love. Now fare you well my love till we meet, which may the lord grant for his sons sake Amen.

Vilate Kimball

Heber remained disquieted about his family. His journey home was marked by sadness for the loss of his brethren and uneasiness over conditions in Nauvoo. "O Lord bless my dear Vilate and my dear children and all my friends", he wrote at one point as they hurriedly traveled homeward.¹⁸ The night before they arrived at Nauvoo, Heber "dremt of my wife. When we got to Burlington sevrel come on bord (the river steamer) that knew us. Landed at Nauvoo at dusk. Found my family all well."¹⁹

By 6 August Nauvoo was peaceful, at least temporarily, and for a time Vilate had no need to fear that Heber would follow Joseph and Hyrum to an early grave. The Saints, following the counsel of Willard Richards and

John Taylor, had not tried to avenge the tragedy by violence, and many of their enemies kept quiet in fear of an armed retribution that never came.

If the city was peaceful, it did lack direction, and the Twelve immediately set themselves to establish control and build on the foundation Joseph had left. While not without challenge, their leadership was vigorous and successful, and Heber and Vilate might long have remembered the peaceful interlude and prosperity of the next few months. Perhaps Heber himself recorded it best in a letter to William Smith just a few months later:

As regards matters here, all goes well. There never was more union in the Church then at the present time. . . . For the Saints here in the City of Nauvoo and in the regions round about have their confidence in the Twelve as a body, and in those that are placed to lead them. . . . And this is increasing daily to the astonishment and surprise of every one. For there is a spirit now existing in our meetings that a person can scarcely enter them before their is a spirit of love and union that overwhelms their minds, which draws tears of joy in floods from their eyes.²⁰

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1. Heber C. Kimball Diary, 26 May 1844, Heber C. Kimball Collection, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as Church Archives. Since all Heber C. Kimball quotations in the article are from his diary, where the text notes the date, no additional footnote will be provided. In some cases quotations have been edited according to the policy stated in footnote 4.

2. See Kimball Diary, 6, 7 June 1844. Beginning in 1842, Joseph Smith selected some of those men and women closest to him to meet in a quorum or group where he introduced temple ordinances and taught the priesthood order of prayer. This group served as a preparation for broader temple work, and after the completion of the Nauvoo Temple, as more members received endowments, this limited participation was expanded into a number of prayer circles. Such groups meeting in early Utah proved spiritually rewarding and provided close bonds of fellowship. During Joseph's lifetime, this select group met periodically to pray and receive instruction from the Prophet. Those like Heber C. Kimball, who had received those ordinances, had the right to call upon the Lord following the pattern that Joseph Smith taught them. This Heber did. Participants in this group enjoyed a special feeling of priesthood power and access to God. Meeting together they felt they could call down the blessings of heaven with authority. In this spirit it was suggested that the quorum meet to pray for a change in the weather, as Vilate recorded in her first letter. For further comments on prayer circles, see D. Michael Quinn, "Latter-day Saint Prayer Circles," *Brigham Young University Studies* 19 (Fall 1978):79–105.

3. Joseph Smith, Jr. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932–51), 6:552.

4. Spelling and grammar remain as in the original. Paragraphing, capitalization of proper and geographical names and the first word in each sentence, and some periods

to denote the end of sentences have been supplied to improve readability. Winslow Whitney Smith donated a photocopy of this letter to the Church Archives when originals of it and other Kimball documents were presented to Spencer W. Kimball, a descendant of Heber C. In his 1888 *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, Orson F. Whitney quoted from part of this letter, although with a few slight omissions and changes. Some sentences were rephrased, for example, for smoother literary style.

5. "Backenstauce" was Jacob C. Backenstos, an original "Jack-Mormon" or friendly non-Mormon who, as sheriff of Hancock County, risked his life to defend the Saints against unlawful mob actions.

6. It is probable that Sarah was Sarah Noon, second plural wife of Heber C. Kimball by whom he already had one child. See Stanley B. Kimball, "Heber C. Kimball and Family, The Nauvoo Years," *BYU Studies* 15 (Summer 1975):465, 467-68. Family group sheets indicate Sarah Noon Kimball was born 14 June 1801 and died 20 June 1868 in Utah. See also Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977, pp. 347, 355.

7. "Br Nobles" was Joseph B. Noble, a Nauvoo bishop and bodyguard of Joseph Smith.

8. Vilate is expecting. Brigham Willard Kimball was born in Nauvoo 29 January 1845.

9. "Br Whitney" was the prominent Bishop Newel Kimball Whitney, whose family was close to Joseph Smith and to the Kimballs. Dr. John Bernhisel, a politically active member of the Church, defended Joseph and the Church before civil officials. Both Whitney and Bernhisel belonged to the quorum described in footnote 2.

10. See fn. 2.

11. The Laws and Fosters, apostates, were leaders of the "opposite party." William Law, the foremost apostate, had served as a counselor to Joseph Smith, and his brother Wilson Law had been a general in the Nauvoo Legion. Along with Robert D. Foster and Charles A. Foster, the Law brothers and three others served as publishers of the *Expositor* and were well known as bitter enemies of Joseph Smith and the Church.

12. George J. Adams.

13. Willard Richards.

14. See Kimball Diary, 12 July 1844. He had received an earlier letter that Vilate mentions having written but that has not survived, as well as a letter from his plural wife Sarah.

15. Wilford Woodruff Diary, 18 July 1844, Wilford Woodruff Papers, Church Archives.

16. Heber recorded on the twenty-fourth that "Elder Adams Brought me two letter[s]. One from my wife June 30." That letter is available in photocopy in the Church Archives; original in private possession. Editing procedure is the same for the first letter, footnote 4.

17. Writing one day later than Vilate, Sally Randall also comments on the rumors that "there is nine more they are determined to have, and when it will end I dont know." See Sally Randall to Family, 1 July 1844, Church Archives.

18. 1 August 1844.

19. 6 August 1844.

20. Kimball to William Smith, 9 January 1845, William Smith Collection, Church Archives.