

Autobiography of Jane Elizabeth Manning James

Edited by James Goldberg and Veronica J. Anderson

The following transcription of Jane Manning James's autobiography is provided in light of the essays and reviews found in this issue on the recent film Jane and Emma, so that readers can examine a major primary source on which the filmmakers relied. A transcription of this autobiography was previously published by Quincy D. Newell.¹ The following transcription and annotation are taken from James Goldberg's "The Autobiography of Jane Manning James: Seven Decades of Faith and Devotion."² BYU Studies staff verified the transcription, added sections that had been omitted, and modified the annotation to fit our desired format. As in Goldberg's original transcription, the original spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and paragraphing have been modernized and standardized. Those wishing to see

1. See Quincy D. Newell, "The Autobiography and Interview of Jane Elizabeth Manning James," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 2 (2013): 251–70. For more of Newell's scholarship on James, see Quincy D. Newell, "What Jane Saw," in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Patrick Q. Mason (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016); Quincy D. Newell, "Jane James's Agency," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016); and Quincy D. Newell, "Narrating Jane: Telling the Story of an Early African American Mormon Woman" (lecture, Logan, Utah, Tabernacle, September 24, 2015), in *Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture Series* 21 (2015): 1–27, https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=arrington_lecture.

2. James Goldberg, "The Autobiography of Jane Manning James: Seven Decades of Faith and Devotion," *Church History*, December 11, 2013, <https://history.lds.org/article/jane-manning-james-life-sketch?lang=eng>.

*the images of the original document can do so freely through the Church History Library's online catalogue.*³

Introduction

The short autobiography of Jane Manning James gives us a snapshot of the incredible life of one of the first black members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁴ Jane dictated her life sketch to Elizabeth J. D. Roundy, a pioneer in family history efforts. We don't know exactly when this happened, but Jane's statement that Joseph F. Smith was Church President at the time suggests a date of 1901 or later. During her nearly seven decades of Church membership, Jane Manning James lived in the homes of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, survived the 1850 cricket crisis, and was baptized for ancestors in the Salt Lake temple after its dedication. She also raised ten children, helped her neighbors through difficult times, and shared her testimony of the gospel. Though she had experienced many different kinds of trials in her life, her faith remained strong.

Jane was born into a free black family in Connecticut in 1822. Though slavery was rare in Connecticut well before it was abolished under state law in 1848, conditions were difficult for the state's black inhabitants. Opportunities were limited and discrimination intense. Jane worked as a live-in servant from childhood, but her life story shows her strong sense of independence and deep longing for a fuller religious experience. She joined the Church in 1841 and was active in the faith until her death in 1908.

Like many early Latter-day Saints, Jane and her family longed to gather together with the main body of Saints to help build up Zion. In her life sketch, Jane described some of the common and unique trials they encountered on their journey to Nauvoo, Illinois, including sleeping in the cold, wounded feet, and persecution.

3. Jane Manning James, Autobiography, circa 1902, MS 4225, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE6369620.

4. An online database created by W. Paul Reeve at the University of Utah features biographical information, primary source documentation, and photographs for Jane Manning James as well as dozens of other early black Latter-day Saints. See *Century of Black Mormons*, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, <https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/welcome>.

When Jane and her family arrived in Nauvoo, they stayed with the family of Joseph and Emma Smith for the first few months. In the fall of 1843, the Smith family's home was a large house, known as the Mansion House, that also served as a hotel for visitors to Nauvoo. Going there provided the Manning family with a place to stay while they established themselves in the city and gave them an opportunity for personal interaction with the Prophet. Jane's account gives a valuable glimpse into Joseph and Emma's approach to hospitality. Jane lived at the Mansion House for several months.

Because the Nauvoo temple had not yet been completed, Joseph Smith conducted some early endowments at other locations including an upper room of the Mansion House. Jane remembered washing the Prophet's temple clothes and feeling a sense of reverence as she handled them. She also remembered discussing the gospel with four of Joseph Smith's plural wives—Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge, Maria Lawrence, and Sarah Lawrence—and having positive relationships with them, as well as with Lucy Mack Smith and Emma Smith.

Jane was in Nauvoo during a difficult period for the Saints. For Jane, 1844 began with a departure: when Ebenezer Robinson assumed management of the hotel portion of the Mansion House, she left to live with her mother. She apparently maintained personal ties with Joseph Smith, however, and asked his advice that summer on how to make it through the economically difficult times.

While the events of 1843 and 1844 take up the bulk of her life sketch, more than two-thirds of her life was spent in Salt Lake City. She and her family played important roles in the history of the area. Jane's short autobiography represents her life as she wanted it to be remembered: she told Sister Roundy that she wanted it "read at her funeral." Over a century after that funeral, the example of Jane Manning James continues to inspire Latter-day Saints, and her brief life sketch remains a precious link connecting Church members with the first generation of those who embraced the restored gospel.

Transcription

Biography of Jane E. Manning James, written from her own verbal statement and by her request. She also wishes it read at her funeral. By E. J. D. Roundy.

Written in the year 1893

When a child only six years old, I left my home and went to live with a family of white people; their names were Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Fitch.

They were aged people and quite wealthy, I was raised by their daughter. When about fourteen years old, I joined the Presbyterian Church. Yet I did not feel satisfied; it seemed to me there was something more that I was looking for. I had belonged to the Church about eighteen months when an elder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was traveling through our country [and] preached there. The pastor of the Presbyterian Church forbid me going to hear them—as he had heard I had expressed a desire to hear them—but nevertheless, I went on a Sunday and was fully convinced that it was the true gospel he presented and I must embrace it.

The following Sunday I was baptized and confirmed a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. About three weeks after, while kneeling at prayer, the gift of tongues came upon me and frightened the whole family who were in the next room.

One year after I was baptized I started for Nauvoo with my mother, Eliza Manning; my brothers, Isaac, Lewis, and Peter; my sisters Sarah Stebbings, and Angeline Manning; my brother-in-law Anthony Stebbings; Lucinda Manning, a sister-in-law and myself. Fall 1840.⁵

We started from Wilton, Connecticut, and traveled by canal to Buffalo, New York. We were to go to Columbus, Ohio, before our fares were to be collected, but they insisted on having the money at Buffalo and would not take us farther. So we left the boat and started on foot to travel a distance of over eight hundred miles.

We walked until our shoes were worn out, and our feet became sore and cracked open and bled until you could see the whole print of our feet with blood on the ground. We stopped and united in prayer to the Lord; we asked God the Eternal Father to heal our feet and our prayers were answered and our feet were healed forthwith.

When we arrived at Peoria, Illinois, the authorities threatened to put us in jail to get our free papers. We didn't know at first what he meant, for we had never been slaves, but he concluded to let us go, so we traveled on until we came to a river and as there was no bridge, we walked right into the stream. When we got to the middle, the water was up to our necks, but we got safely across. And then it became so dark we could hardly see our hands before us, but we could see a light in the distance, so we went toward it and found it was an old log cabin. Here we spent the night. [The] next day we walked for a considerable

5. The autobiography transcript dates this journey as taking place in 1840, but contemporary evidence indicates it happened in 1843.

distance and stayed that night in a forest, out in the open air. The frost fell on us so heavy that it was like a light fall of snow. We rose early and started on our way, walking through that frost with our bare feet, until the sun rose and melted it away. But we went on our way rejoicing, singing hymns, and thanking God for his infinite goodness and mercy to us in blessing us as he had, protecting us from all harm, answering our prayers and healing our feet.

In course of time we arrived at La Harpe, Illinois, about thirty miles from Nauvoo. At La Harpe we came to a place where there was a very sick child. We administered to it and the child was healed. I found after [that] the elders had before this given it up, as they did not think it could live.

We have now arrived to our destined haven of rest, the beautiful Nauvoo! Here we went through all kinds of hardship, trial, and rebuff, but we at last got to Brother Orson Spencer's.⁶ He directed us to the Prophet Joseph Smith's Mansion.⁷

When we found it, Sister Emma was standing in the door, and she kindly said, "Come in. Come in!" Brother Joseph said to some white sisters that was present, "Sisters, I want you to occupy this room this evening with some brothers and sisters that have just arrived." Brother Joseph placed the chairs around the room. Then he went and brought Sister Emma and Dr. [John M.] Bernhisel⁸ and introduced them to us.

Brother Joseph took a chair and sat down by me and said, "You have been the head of this little band, haven't you?" I answered, "Yes, sir!" He then said, "God bless you! Now I would like you to relate your

6. Orson Spencer had served a mission to Connecticut in April 1843 and may have become acquainted with the Manning family then. In Nauvoo, he served both as a university professor and as one of the town aldermen. "Spencer, Orson," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/person/orson-spencer>.

7. The Smith family moved into the Mansion House in August 1843, shortly before the Mannings arrived. Joseph Smith, *Journal*, [80] (August 31, 1843), in "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 3, 15 July 1843–29 February 1844," *Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-3-15-july-1843-29-february-1844/86>.

8. In 1843, John M. Bernhisel was a recent convert, Joseph Smith's physician, and a resident of the Mansion House. He later served as the first Latter-day Saint representative to the U.S. Congress and organized Utah's territorial library. "Bernhisel, John Milton," *Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/person/john-milton-bernhisel>.

experience in your travels.” I related to them all that I have above stated and a great deal more minutely, as many incidents has passed from my memory since then. Brother Joseph slapped Dr. Bernhisel on the knee and said, “What do you think of that, doctor: isn’t that faith?” The doctor said, “Well, I rather think it is. If it had have been me, I fear I should have backed out and returned to my home!” He then said, “God bless you. You are among friends now and you will be protected.” They sat and talked to us a while, gave us words of encouragement and good counsel.

We all stayed there one week; by that time all but myself had secured homes. Brother Joseph came in every morning to say good morning and ask how we were. During our trip I had lost all my clothes. They were all gone. My trunks were sent by canal to the care of Charles Wesley Wandell.⁹ One large trunk full of clothes of all descriptions, mostly new. On the morning that my folks all left to go to work, I looked at myself clothed in the only two pieces I possessed; I sat down and wept. Brother Joseph came into the room as usual and said, “Good morning. Why—not crying, [are you]?” “Yes sir,” [I said]. “The folks have all gone and got themselves homes, and I have got none.” He said, “Yes you have, you have a home right here if you want it. You musn’t cry. We dry up all tears here.” I said, “I have lost my trunk and all my clothes.” He asked how I had lost them; I told them I put them in care of Charles Wesley Wandell and paid him for them and he has lost them. Brother Joseph said, “Don’t cry, you shall have your trunk and clothes again.”

Brother Joseph went out and brought Sister Emma in and said, “Sister Emma, here is a girl that says she has no home. Haven’t you a home for her?” “Why yes, if she wants one.” He said, “She does,” and then he left us.

Sister Emma said, “What can you do?” I said, “I can wash, iron, cook, and do housework!” “Well,” she said, “when you are rested, you may do the washing, if you would just as soon do that.” I said, “I am not tired.” “Well,” she said, “you may commence your work in the morning.”

The next morning, she brought the clothes down in the basement to wash. Among the clothes, I found Brother Joseph’s robes. I looked at them and wondered. I had never seen any before, and I pondered over them and thought about them so earnestly that the Spirit made

9. Charles Wesley Wandell was a missionary who had served in the East and returned to Nauvoo before the end of 1843. Marjorie Newton, *Hero or Traitor: A Biographical Study of Charles Wesley Wandell* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing, 1992), 16.

manifest to me that they pertained to the new name that is given the Saints that the world knows not of. I didn't know when I washed them or when I put them out to dry.

Brother Joseph's four wives Emily Partridge, Eliza Partridge,¹⁰ [and] Maria and Sarah Lawrence and myself were sitting discussing Mormonism, and Sarah said, "What would you think if a man had more wives than one?" I said, "That is all right!" Maria said, "Well, we are all four Brother Joseph's wives!" I jumped up and clapped my hands and said, "That's good." Sarah said, "She is all right. Just listen, she believes it all now."

I had to pass through Mother Smith's room to get to mine. She would often stop me and talk to me. She told me all Brother Joseph's troubles and what he had suffered in publishing the Book of Mormon. One morning I met Brother Joseph coming out of his mother's room. He said, "Good morning," and shook hands with me. I went into his mother's room; she said, "Good morning; bring me that bundle from my bureau and sit down here." I did as she told me. She placed the bundle in my hands and said, "Handle this and then put in the top drawer of my bureau and lock it up." After I had done it, she said, "Sit down. Do you remember that I told you about the Urim and Thummim when I told you about the Book of Mormon?" I answered, "Yes, ma'am." She then told me I had just handled it. "You are not permitted to see it, but you have been permitted to handle it," [she said]. "You will live long after I am dead and gone and you can tell the Latter-day Saints that you was permitted to handle the Urim and Thumim."¹¹

Sister Emma asked me one day if I would like to be adopted to them as their child. I did not answer her. She said, "I will wait a while and let you consider it." She waited two weeks before she asked me again. When she did, I told her, "No, Ma'am!" because I did not understand or know

10. Eliza Partridge and Jane maintained a connection to each other years later in Utah, documented in Eliza's journal. Eliza Maria Partridge Lyman, Journal, February 1846–December 1885, 47, (April 25, 1849), MS 9546, Church History Library.

11. The bundle likely contained Joseph's seer stone, which had been used during the Book of Mormon translation process, rather than the interpreters which had accompanied the golden plates. Nineteenth-century members appear to have used the biblical phrase "Urim and Thummim" for both. "Joseph Smith as Revelator and Translator," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/intro/revelations-and-translations-series-introduction>; Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign* 45 (October 2015): 48–54.

what it meant. They were always good and kind to me, but I did not know my own mind. I did not comprehend.

Soon after they broke up the Mansion [House], and I went to my mother. There was not much work because of the persecutions, and I saw Brother Joseph and asked him if I should go to Burlington and take my sister Angeline with me. He said, “Yes, go, and be good girls, and remember your profession of faith in the everlasting gospel, and the Lord will bless you.” We went and stayed three weeks, then returned to Nauvoo. During this time Joseph and Hyrum were killed.

I shall never forget that time of agony and sorrow. I went to live in the family of Brother Brigham Young. I stayed there until he was ready to emigrate to this valley [Salt Lake Valley]. While I was at Brother Brigham’s, I married Isaac James. When Brother Brigham left Nauvoo, I went to live at Brother Calhoun’s.¹²

In the spring of 1846, I left Nauvoo to come to this great and glorious valley. We traveled as far as Winter Quarters. There we stayed until spring. At Keg Creek, my son Silas was born. In the spring of 1847 we started again on our way to this valley; we arrived here on the 22nd day of September, 1847, without any serious mishaps. The Lord’s blessing was with us and protected us all the way. The only thing that did occur worth relating was when our cattle stampeded. Some of them we never did find.

May 1848 my daughter Mary Ann was born.¹³ All of my children but two were born here in this valley. Their names are Silas, Sylvester,¹⁴ Mary Ann, Miriam, Ellen Madora, Jessie, Jerry, Boln, Isaac, Vilate; all of them are with their Heavenly Father except two, Sylvester and Ellen Madora. My children were all raised to men and women and all had families except two. My husband, Isaac James, worked for Brother Brigham, and we got along splendid, accumulating horses, cows, oxen, sheep, and chickens in abundance. I spun all the cloth for my family clothing for a

12. Possibly Reynolds Cahoon.

13. Mary Ann James was the first African-American child born in Utah. See “James, Mary Ann,” *Century of Black Mormons*, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/james-mary-ann#c=o&m=o&s=o&cv=o&xywh=-1985%2C-169%2C7592%2C3372>.

14. Usually spelled “Sylvester.” Records indicate that he served in the Nauvoo Legion in Utah. Henry J. Wolfinger, “A Test of Faith: Jane Elizabeth James and the Origin of the Utah Black Community” (unpublished manuscript, 1973), 2–3, 5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

year or two, and we were in a prosperous condition—until the grasshoppers and crickets came along, carrying destruction wherever they went, laying our crops to the ground, striping the trees of all their leaves and fruit, bringing poverty and desolation throughout this beautiful valley. It was not then as it is now. There were no trains running bringing fruits and vegetables from California or any other place. All our importing and exporting was done by the slow process of ox teams.

Oh how I suffered of cold and hunger, and the keenest of all was to hear my little ones crying for bread and I had none to give them; but in all, the Lord was with us and gave us grace and faith to stand it all.¹⁵ I have seen Brother Brigham, Brothers Taylor, Woodruff, and Snow rule this great work and pass on to their reward, and now [we have] Brother Joseph F. Smith. I hope the Lord will spare him—if 'tis his holy will—for many, many years to guide the gospel ship to a harbor of safety, and I know they will, if the people will only listen and obey the teachings of these good, great, and holy men. I have lived right here in Salt Lake City for fifty-two years, and I have had the privilege of going into the temple and being baptized for some of my dead.¹⁶

I am now over eighty years old,¹⁷ and I am nearly blind, which is a great trial to me. It is the greatest trial I have ever been called upon to bear, but I hope my eyesight will be spared to me, poor as it is, that I may be able to go to meeting and to the temple to do more work for my dead.

I am a widow. My husband, Isaac James, died in November 1891. I have seen my husband and all of my children but two laid away in the silent tomb. But the Lord protects me and takes good care of me in my helpless condition, and I want to say right here that my faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

15. Jane does not mention her work helping others during this difficult time, but Eliza Partridge's journal for 1849 recounts how Jane shared half her own flour with Eliza at a time when Eliza's family was destitute. Partridge Lyman, Journal, April 25, 1849.

16. Jane also sought permission to be endowed and sealed but was unable to do so because of the policy of the time. Jane Manning to John Taylor, December 27, 1803, Church History Library. Other black women were baptized for the dead in the temple during the priesthood restriction era, but temple endowments and sealings became available only through the 1978 revelation on priesthood. Jane's work was done by proxy following the revelation. "James, Jane Elizabeth Manning," *Century of Black Mormons*, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/james-jane-elizabeth-manning#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-1351%2C60%2C4761%2C2114>.

17. An insertion here reads, "Her brother Isaac said she was born in 1813."

Saints is as strong today, nay, it is, if possible, stronger than it was the day I was first baptized. I pay my tithes and offerings [and] keep the Word of Wisdom. I go to bed early and rise early. I try in my feeble way to set a good example to all.

I have had eighteen grandchildren, eight of them are living; also seven great-grandchildren. I live in my little home with my brother Isaac, who is good to me. We are the last two of my mother's family. I want him to stay there after me.

This is just a concise but true sketch of my life and experience.

Yours in truth,

Jane Elizabeth James

Jane Elizabeth James called on me to write this. It was her own statement, and she declared it was true. The only error, or you may call it evasion, was her reticence pertaining to one of her children. She stated in her brother's presence that all but two were born in the valley. One, Silas, was born on their way to the valley, but the other was born before she was baptized or soon after.

Patriarch John Smith read or heard her history read. He said that when she came to Nauvoo, she had a boy five or six years old. At any rate, he said that he was a good chunk of a boy and told me to find out about it; I could not get anything out of Jane, but her brother Isaac came to my house one day, and he said that the boy was Sylvester, that he was born in Connecticut at her mother's, that he was the child of a white man—a preacher—but he could not tell if he was the child of the Presbyterian or a Methodist preacher, that Jane was nearly eighteen or quite that old when the child was born, and [that] her mother kept the child, and Jane went back to the Fitch family, and then she heard the gospel and was baptized, and soon after she got her mother and the whole family to be baptized. Isaac said in a year or two after, they all started for Nauvoo, as Jane has stated in her sketch.

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