
Stephen Burnett

1813–1885

D&C 75:35, 80:1–2

Stephen was reared to manhood in Orange County, Ohio. In 1831, when Stephen was eighteen years old, John Murdock preached the message of the Restoration in his neighborhood. “I preached in great plainness to the people, and baptized three,” Elder Murdock wrote, “[including] Ste[ph]en Burnett.”¹ He also wrote,

I confirmed them by the laying on of hands, and the two last (one being Stephen) received the outpouring of the spirit so that their strength was taken from them. . . . [The next morning] Brother Ste[ph]en was carried away of the spirit, and said he must go to see his uncle Warren Thorp, and family, before he went home for so the spirit directed him. I went with him, and he bore testimony to them of the work, but they would not believe.²

Elder Murdock accompanied Stephen to the home of his parents—Sirenes and Jane Burnett— who invited them to stay for dinner. “Mr. Burnett asked me to give thanks,” Elder Murdock wrote. “While I was doing so, Brother Stephen was overcome with the spirit, so as to lose his strength. His father and mother sat in tears.”³

Through the missionary efforts of Elder Murdock in Orange County, about sixty converts entered baptismal waters in Stephen’s neighborhood. The newly baptized often met for worship services at the home of Sirenes and Jane Burnett. At the January 25, 1832, meeting

¹ John Murdock Journal, typescript, 8–9. L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

² John Murdock Journal, 8–9.

³ John Murdock Journal, 9.

in their home, Stephen was called to serve a mission with Ruggles Eames (see D&C 75:35). It is presumed the mission did not materialize, for two months later, in March 1832, Stephen was called to be the missionary companion of Eden Smith:

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Stephen Burnett: Go ye, go ye into the world and preach the gospel to every creature that cometh under the sound of your voice. And inasmuch as you desire a companion, I will give unto you my servant Eden Smith. (D&C 80:1–2)

Elder Smith wrote of taking a northern route on his missionary journey with Stephen Burnett and of their calling upon a Presbyterian priest. They told the priest about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the Restoration. The priest wanted “proof of the Book of Mormon and we cited him to the bible and he said he did not Receive that and we told the Cituation he was in and what he must do. [We] left him and went on our way.”⁴ The missionaries continued their journey north. In a Levi B. Wilder letter written in Dalton, New Hampshire, it states, “A small church was formed in this place in the July of 1833, consisting of 15 members brother Stephen Burnett was the first one that sounded the glad tidings of the everlasting gospel in this place.”⁵

By the time Stephen returned to his parental home in Ohio, he had not only lost his missionary zeal but had become disaffected from the Church. In 1837 he leagued himself with apostate Warren Parrish in opposition against the Prophet Joseph Smith, claiming that Joseph had departed from the true order of things by calling the church “The Church of the Latter-day Saints.” Stephen “rejected the Prophet and denounced those who adhered to him as heretics.”⁶

In the *Elders’ Journal*, Joseph Smith denounced Stephen Burnett as a “little ignorant blockhead”:

A little ignorant blockhead, by the name of Stephen Burnett, whose heart was so set on money, that he would at any time, sell his soul for fifty dollars, and then think he had made an excellent bargain; and who had got wearied of the restraints of religion, and could not bear to have his purse taxed . . . ran to Kirtland, got into the temple, and tried with all his powers to bring forth something, nobody knows what, nor did he know himself; . . . after some terrible gruntings, and finding nothing

⁴ Journal of Eden Smith (25 September 1831–21 August 1832), 5. Church History Library.

⁵ *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835).

⁶ B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 1:405.

coming but an abortion, rose up in his anger, proclaimed all revelation lies, and ran home to his daddy with all his might not leaving even an egg behind, and there sat down, and rejoiced in the great victory he had obtained, over the great God and all the holy angels, how he had discovered them liars and [impostors].⁷

The US Federal Census of 1850 shows Stephen still residing on his father's estate in Orange County, Ohio.⁸ He eventually moved from the estate to Vincennes, Indiana, where he died on February 14, 1885, at age seventy-one.

⁷ *Elders' Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838), 57, Document Transcript. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁸ US Federal Census, 1850.