

John Workman

1789-1855

by Mary E. C. Workman

He was married to Lydia Bilyeu on March 11, 1809 in Overton County, Tennessee. As a young man of 19 and unattached, he left the Maryland home of his father, going first to the Kentucky country but soon continuing on to Overton County, Tennessee, where he became attached to the Bilyeu family. That he had known this family before coming to Tennessee is certain. They had gone through the same migratory stages as had the Workman family and shortly before this John's elder brother, Benjamin, had married Hannah Bilyeu.

While in Overton County, Peter Bilyeu and John Workman were among the signers of a petition of September 27, 1813 for a militia to protect the settlers from the indians. In 1814, John and his family moved to Kentucky and bought land in Nicholas County, just ten miles north of where his father, Jacob, had settled in Bourbon County, two years previously. By industry and economy the Workmans soon found themselves in good circumstances both in land and money. John built a fine home in Carlisle. The Workmans were very sincere in their religious beliefs belonging to the Tunkers or German Baptist church (like their cousins who were settling further up the Ohio river in Belmont and Knox Counties, Ohio).

John had a very comprehensive understanding of the teachings of Christ. He tried to show the other members of the church the better understanding of the scriptures. This led to arguments and contention among them, bringing the hatred and envy of the members of the church upon John and his family. For this reason John left Carlisle and went back to Overton County, Tennessee. Because of the bitterness in the community towards them over religious disputes it was impossible for John to sell his holdings in Carlisle so he abandoned them.

Back in Overton County, again, John bought much land and had slaves to work it. He laid his farm out in sections for the different kinds of farm crops; had his own grist mill, grocery store and flocks and herds. He attended but could not accept the popular interpretation so in due time he quit the church altogether. After that he carried on a distillery of whisky and brandy and got to drinking moderately himself.

In 1839 two Elders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came to Overton County and they had a hard time finding lodgings. They came to John Workman's door. As John had never turned a traveler from his door without food and rest these elders found a welcome in his home. The message they brought struck a familiar chord in the heart of John Workman. He brought out his compendium and found his classification of scriptures to be similar to the one the elders used. Their explanations were those he had tried to convey to the church members and for which they had cast him out and abused him and his family. On the July 22, 1840 John, his wife Lydia, and several of his children were baptized by Abram Owen Smoot and Julian Moses and were confirmed July 30th that year as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This step increased the hatred and persecutions by the local church and community. In 1843 he abandoned his vast holdings in Tennessee and emigrated to Nauvoo, where he could associate with those who had the same religious convictions that he cherished. Here he bought a farm four miles east of Nauvoo where he lived most of the time. Two of his sons had previously located in the city of Nauvoo.

In the summer of 1845, John had harvested a good wheat crop and threshed some of it.

One day in early evening he saw some of the farm homes of other saints in flames. He knew at once that this was the work of mobs whose fury had raged unabated since the Nauvoo charter had been repealed. He had a wagon there with boards across the running gears. John put what he could of the sacked wheat on this wagon and his family on top of the wheat and drove to Nauvoo for protection. The severe persecutions the saints suffered at this time proved too much for John's wife, Lydia, and she succumbed to the trials, dying in Nauvoo and was buried in the Nauvoo cemetery.

John passed through the trials incident to the expulsion of the saints from Nauvoo. This was the third time he had abandoned his earthly possessions for his spiritual convictions. He remained in the city of Nauvoo until the late spring of 1846 when he was driven into the wilderness with the saints. He joined his son, Jacob Lindsay at Mt. Pisgah, Iowa, where he had a temporary cabin. John remained there until 1851 when he emigrated to the Great Salt Lake Valley. In Salt Lake, he lived part of the time with his children and part of the time in the small home that Jacob had built for him on the lot Jacob had drawn at the time the city was laid out. John had left some of his family in Illinois, they having elected to stay there, but others had followed the course of the church and were with him in his devotion to the cause he had espoused. He labored with his own hands for a living and because of his beautiful penmanship had been given the assignment of being scribe to the church, spending most of his time transcribing patriarchal blessings and family histories.

His son Jacob L. Workman, writing of his father's death, said, "He continued his labor of transcribing blessings and family records until the spring of 1855 when his health became very poor. His affliction increasing upon him in spite of all our faith and prayers and all we could do. On the 14th of April, I could see that his days were numbered. I asked him if he wanted to die. He said that he would rather live, but if it was the Lord's will to take him he was ready. We had frequent talks upon the gospel of salvation. He remained in his rational mind until the evening of April 20th, when he went to sleep, but still continuing to breathe until 20 mins. to 5 a.m. the morning of April 21 he passed away surrounded by his family and friends.

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