
Records Kept of Baptisms for the Dead

D&C 128:1–14

Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo to Quincy, Illinois, and as far away as Kirtland, Ohio, entered river waters to be baptized as proxy for departed loved ones. Aroet Hale wrote, “The Prophet set the pattern for the baptism of the dead. He went into the Mississippi River and baptized over 200. Then the apostles and other elders went into the river and continued the same ordinance. Hundreds were baptized there.”¹ Wilford Woodruff wrote,

Joseph Smith himself ... went into the Mississippi river one Sunday night after meeting, and baptized a hundred. I baptized another hundred. The next man, a few rods from me, baptized another hundred. We were strung up and down the Mississippi baptizing for our dead. ... Why did we do it? Because of the feeling of joy that we had, to think that we in the flesh could stand and redeem our dead. ... We attended to this ordinance without waiting to have a proper record made.²

To gather names of ancestors so that proxy baptism work could be performed for them, hundreds of letters were sent from Nauvoo to distant relatives asking for genealogical information about kindred dead. Jonah Ball wrote, “I want you to send me a list of fathers relations his parents & Uncles & their names, also Mothers. I am determined to do all I

¹ Aroet Hale Autobiography, typescript, 7–8, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

² Wilford Woodruff Journal, April 6, 1891. Church History Library.

can to redeem those I am permitted to.”³ Sally Carlisle Randall asked a relative to “write me the given names of all our connections that are dead as far back as grandfathers and grandmothers at any rate.” She then added, “I expect you will think this [baptism for the dead] is a strange doctrine but you will find it is true.”⁴

Historian M. Guy Bishop counted 6,818 baptismal ordinances completed in the year 1841 alone.

Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead, 1841

Sex of Proxy	Number	Percentage
Male	3,715	54.58
Female	3,027	44.39
Undetermined	76	1.11
Total	6,818	
Baptisms for the Opposite Sex	2,937	43.10

Relationship of Deceased to Proxy	Number	Percentage
Uncle/Aunt	1,667	24.45
Grandparent	1,580	23.17
Parent	1,015	14.89
Sibling	969	14.21
Cousin	714	10.47
In-law	251	3.68
Friend	203	2.98
Spouse	116	1.70

³ Jonah Ball letter to relatives, May 19, 1843 in M. Guy Bishop, “‘What Has Become of Our Fathers?’ Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1990), 93.

⁴ Sally Carlisle Randall letter to family, April 21, 1844, in Bishop, “What Has Become of Our Fathers?” 93–94.

Child	106	1.56
Niece/Nephew	92	0.35
Grandchild	16	0.23
Undetermined	89	1.31
Total	6,818	

The above statistics do not include those who were baptized for the dead but failed to record their proxy work or heed the Lord's directive to "let all the records be had in order, that they may be put in the archives of my holy temple, to be held in remembrance from generation to generation, saith the Lord of Hosts" (D&C 127:9). The Prophet Joseph admonished the Saints:

All persons baptized for the dead must have a recorder present, that he may be an eyewitness to record and testify of the truth and validity of his record. It will be necessary, in the Grand Council, that these things be testified to by competent witnesses. Therefore let the recording and witnessing of baptisms for the dead be carefully attended to from this time forth. If there is any lack, it may be at the expense of our friends; they may not come forth.⁵

Even with this injunction, problems of recording baptismal work still occurred. The work of baptizing for the dead in Nauvoo continued until January 1845. By this time 15,722 recorded baptisms for the dead had been performed.

⁵ History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843], 3 [addenda]. Joseph Smith Papers.