

# Rebecca Swain Williams: STEADFAST & IMMOVABLE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICHARD HULL

*Despite her family's hostility toward the Church, this early convert remained faithful and devoted to the work.*

**By Janiece Lyn Johnson**

In June 1834 a young mother who was faced with being disinherited by her father wrote a bold and moving letter sharing her conviction of the Restoration. Although she must have known her prospects of changing his mind were dim, Rebecca Swain Williams nevertheless stood firm despite the impending consequences. She declared to her father, Isaac, that the Book of Mormon and the Church were true, just as the Prophet Joseph Smith described, and that she had heard the Three Witnesses “declare in public meeting that they saw a Holy Angel come down from heaven and [bring] the plates, and la[y] them before their eyes.”<sup>1</sup>

Rebecca’s testimony is moving not just for the power it demonstrates but also because of her unshakable testimony and indomitable will. Despite her father’s rejection and the fact that her husband, Frederick G. Williams,

became disaffected from the Church for a time, Rebecca never allowed her faith to waver. Tireless and unyielding, Rebecca stands as an example to us today of how we can remain firm and steadfast in the face of life’s greatest challenges, even when those closest to us may reject our faith and spurn us.

## **Conversion to the Church**

Born in Pennsylvania, USA, in 1798, Rebecca Swain was the youngest of 10 children.<sup>2</sup> When she was about nine, her family moved to Niagara, near the United States–Canada border. They were close enough to Fort Niagra that they could hear the gunfire when the fort was attacked during the War of 1812. Even as a young girl Rebecca showed her fearlessness. Once, while traveling alone through the woods, she met a bear face-to-face on the trail. Having a parasol in her hand, she opened and closed it several times

in the bear’s face, and it ran away.<sup>3</sup>

When Rebecca was 17, she crossed Lake Ontario to visit her sister in Detroit. On the voyage she met the tall, dark-eyed pilot of the ship, Frederick Granger Williams. Their frequent visits quickly transformed affection into love, and the two were married in late 1815. The Williamses moved around the great Western Reserve of Ohio, USA, before finally settling in Kirtland around 1828. Her husband took up the practice of medicine and became rather well known for his abilities, and Rebecca learned to help him with procedures. Together they had four children.

In the fall of 1830, the first Mormon missionaries arrived in Kirtland. Rebecca listened to them with interest and attended all of the missionaries’ meetings; she even brought her children. Frederick attended as often as his medical practice would allow. The two would study, discuss, and learn together, but Frederick was less certain in his



commitment. Meanwhile Rebecca became convinced of the truthfulness of the gospel.

A family biographer later described Rebecca as a kind of Eve in the Garden of Eden: she was “the first to see the necessity” to step into full fellowship in the gospel covenant.<sup>4</sup> She was baptized in October 1830.

Frederick still vacillated. Sometimes he wanted to leave the Church alone but in the end could not because he felt drawn back to that sacred, new book of scripture: the Book of Mormon. As the Spirit worked in him, he recognized the truthfulness of the gospel and followed Rebecca’s example by being baptized.

### **Dedicated Service**

As the Church quickly became central to Frederick and Rebecca’s lives, the impact on their family was immediate. Frederick was ordained an elder right after his baptism and confirmation. The very next day, he enthusiastically accepted an assignment to leave within a few weeks to serve a mission with Oliver Cowdery. They anticipated the mission would last three weeks; in reality it became a 10-month trip to Missouri. His long absence from home was the first of many such periods for Rebecca. Because of Frederick’s missionary efforts and his calling into the First Presidency, he was frequently away. Rebecca, like many early Mormon women, spent long months tending their home and raising their children without the help of her husband.

Despite the work, Rebecca continued faithful and served willingly. The Prophet Joseph Smith and his family lodged in the Williamses' home for a time when the Smiths first moved to Kirtland. Rebecca proved loyal to the Prophet and his family as she cared for them through trying times. Once a mob came and surrounded the home looking for Joseph. Rebecca disguised Joseph in her bonnet and cloak. Joseph was able to leave the house and pass through the crowd to safety.

In March of 1832, Rebecca again provided invaluable aid to the Prophet when a mob burst into the John Johnson farm in Hiram, Ohio, and brutally assaulted Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon. After beating Sidney senseless and attempting to pour poison down Joseph's throat, the mob tarred and feathered the Prophet. When Emma Smith saw her husband, she thought the tar was blood and fainted.<sup>5</sup> Rebecca and Frederick spent that night peeling tar from Joseph's bleeding and torn body and caring for the Smith children. Their succor was helpful, as Joseph found the strength to preach the next morning.

### Sharing the Gospel with Conviction

One of Rebecca's most abiding hopes was that her family, her father in particular, would accept the restored gospel and receive the joyous blessings of the faith. She had, like Lehi, tasted of the love of God and wanted to share it with those closest to her (see 1 Nephi 8:12). With that in mind, Rebecca eagerly wrote to her family about her

conversion and testimony and the great joy she felt as a member of the Church.

However, Rebecca's conversion infuriated her father. In his terse response he demanded that she leave the Church. But Rebecca would not be swayed. She responded, as a family historian describes, that "she was more firm than ever in her conviction of the truth of Mormon doctrines" and included her own powerful testimony.<sup>6</sup> To her sorrow this letter did not produce the results she had hoped for. Her father threatened to disown her and vowed to cut off all communication with her if she did not leave the Church.

Still, Rebecca did not yield and continued her efforts to share the gospel. In 1834 she wrote another letter—the only one to survive—to her father, revealing the depth of her faith and the pain she felt that he refused to accept anything of the Mormons.

Her father had read newspaper reports attacking the Church, particularly with regard to the Book of Mormon and the testimony of the Three Witnesses, and tried to dissuade Rebecca on these accounts.

"It gives me pain to hear that your mind is so much disturbed about the Book of Mormon," she wrote. Quoting scripture from the Book of Mormon and from Joseph Smith's new revelations, Rebecca shared her witness of the Book of Mormon. She also explained that the book prophesied of the selection of three witnesses to it. As evidence, she quoted the ancient prophet Ether, who said that "in the mouth of

three witnesses" would the truth of the book "be established" (Ether 5:4).<sup>7</sup>

Rebecca then described how she had personally seen the Three Witnesses—David Whitmer, Martin Harris, and Oliver Cowdery—and heard them testify of having seen an angel and the gold plates. After defending their testimonies and character, she urged her father to further investigate the work. For, she wrote to her father, should "you and mother know the circumstances as we do in relation to this work, I am persuaded you would believe it."<sup>8</sup>

Echoing Moroni's promise at the end of the Book of Mormon, Rebecca pled that her family would ask God if "he would enlighten [their] minds in the way of truth." And then she planned to send a missionary "capable of teaching the Gospel as it is in Jesus," to further help them.<sup>9</sup> In the end her father would have nothing to do with it.

Even her letters to her brother John—to whom Rebecca was particularly close—were returned unopened. On the back of one of the returned letters, John wrote, "Father forbids me read your letter, or to write to you. Goodbye and God bless you always. Your brother, John."<sup>10</sup>

However, Rebecca's missionary efforts were successful with her eldest sister, Sarah Swain Clark. Sarah joined the Church in Michigan in 1832. Sarah's daughters also joined the Church and were faithful throughout their lives.



## Faithful to the End

No matter the heartache and pain Rebecca felt from her father's choices, she still loved him. She wrote: "My heart mourns for my relations according to the flesh. . . . I pray the Lord to comfort you in your last day with his Holy Spirit and may they be your best days. . . . I hope your mind will be composed concerning this work. Be assured that we feel firm in the cause knowing that the Lord is at the helm."<sup>11</sup>

Rebecca had to contend not only with her father's disbelief but also with problems in her husband's commitment to the faith. During 1837 and 1838, her husband, Frederick, then a member of the First Presidency, was repeatedly at odds with other Church leaders. He even left the Church for a time and was excommunicated.

However, not long after, Frederick humbled himself, rejoined the Church, and died in full fellowship. We do not have a record of Rebecca's feelings at the time, but she would not regret her allegiance with

the Saints and remained committed.

When rumors of Frederick's dissent reached Rebecca's father in New York, Isaac hoped that Rebecca would renounce the faith as well. However, Rebecca sent him a letter that demonstrated her continued fidelity. After reading her response, Isaac slowly shook his head and said, "Not one word of repentance."<sup>12</sup>

Rebecca remained stalwart in her defense of Joseph Smith and the restored Church. And in spite of the sacrifices caused by choosing the Church over her father, Rebecca continued to honor him. She valued what her father had taught her, and she expressed her love and gratitude for him. She closed her 1834 letter noting that she would "ever remember the instruction . . . I have received from my beloved Father."<sup>13</sup>

In 1839 Rebecca's father died. Just three years later she lost her husband. Despite these painful difficulties, Rebecca's faith and courage endured. When the Saints trekked

west to Utah, she traveled with her son Ezra's family and drove her own team. She later took charge of a farm on Mill Creek. When the Salt Lake Tabernacle was completed and the Saints were asked to donate what they could, she gave a set of silver spoons to be used in making trays for the sacrament table. And finally in 1860, though she was very frail, when President Brigham Young called upon her family to settle in remote Cache Valley, Utah, she willingly relocated once more—again driving her own team.

Rebecca died in Smithfield, Utah, on September 25, 1861. She stayed true to her beliefs, her knowledge of truth, and what she had experienced. She remained "steadfast and immovable" to the end (Mosiah 5:15). ■

*Spelling and punctuation modernized.*

## NOTES

1. Rebecca Swain Williams to Isaac Fischer Swain, June 4, 1834, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
2. Biographical information comes from Nancy Clement Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams . . . and His Wife Rebecca Swain Williams: Read Their True Story in the First Introduction—after 100 Years* (1951); and Frederick G. Williams, "Frederick Granger Williams of the First Presidency of the Church," *BYU Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1972): 243–61.
3. Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams*, 5.
4. Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams*, 55.
5. *History of the Church*, 1:263.
6. Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams*, 63.
7. See also Rebecca Williams letter of June 4, 1834.
8. Rebecca Williams letter of June 4, 1834.
9. Rebecca Williams letter of June 4, 1834.
10. In Williams, *Meet Dr. Frederick Granger Williams*, 63.
11. Rebecca Williams letter of June 4, 1834.
12. George Swain letter, Mar. 17, 1839, typescript, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
13. Rebecca Williams letter of June 4, 1834.

