

James Clark Owens
7 July 1797 - January 1847
by Elaine Johnson

James was born to Benjamin and Barbara Owens in Dutchess, New York. His father died when James was young in 1809. He married Abigail Cordelia Burr 8 June 1816. Their first child was born in Onandaga county, New York, about 1817. His second child, Horace, wrote, "I . . . was born in the township of Mercer, Mercer, Penn. . . . My parents moved from there to the state of Ohio before I can remember." James and Abigail were living in Mercer during the 1820 census. They lived in Trumbull county, Ohio, for a few years. His daughter Caroline was born in the town of Warren in 1821. In 1828 another daughter was born in Mantua, Portage county.

James and his family were living in Nelson township, Portage, Ohio when James' son joined the Mormon church. James and his wife Abigail were baptized the following June 1831. They left Ohio for Missouri in early May 1832 and arrived in mid July. James settled on a farm about twelve miles from Independence on the Big Blue River, with the Colesville branch. The following winter he moved his family into Independence and started building a brick home near the church's printing press. His home had barely been completed and the scaffolding was still up the night the mob came to destroy the press. His daughter remembered climbing the scaffolding and watching the destruction below.

James was a mason and helped to build the barracks at Fort Leavenworth, on the Kansas side of the Missouri River. He was building a house and store for a prominent man in Independence, whose name was also Owens, and who was a leader in the mob. The mob marched past his house when they moved against the Mormons. The Saints were driven from town across the river into Liberty. James was with them but returned to get his family and was forced to stay to complete the job. The man pledged his life and property that neither James nor his family would be harmed. He lied.

When Zion's Camp came to aid the beleaguered Saints, the mob grew very excited and decided to act first. They came to James' house and tried to bribe him into betraying "old Joe Smith" but James told them no in very strong language. He could swear very "efficiently." They began throwing rocks and shouting. The door was burst in and struck his wife Abigail knocking her unconscious. After that day the Owens family suffered constant harassment. One night they came to get James and he barred the door against them while his wife ran out the back door for help. They broke down the door and James was badly hurt before rescue came. Twice when the mob was rioting they stopped before the Owens house and shouted threats before moving on. After the mason work was completed James had to hide from the mob several times.

Finally the mob lost the last of its tolerance. James received a note saying he would be killed and his house burned if he and his family were not out of the county in one week. The day he went to the river to arrange for the ferry, he was captured by one of the mob and compelled to go with him. Three times the man stopped to speak with other men and each time James kept walking and ducked into the bushes trying to escape. The third time he succeeded.

He built a home for his family in Liberty, Clay county in March 1835 but had to abandon it when the Saints were forced to move into Caldwell county. He built yet another home in Far West in the southwest quarter of the city. It also had to be left behind when the Saints were driven out of Missouri in 1839 under the threat of Governor Boggs' Extermination Order. During the trial of the prophet and the other prisoners, James was called to testify.

As they traveled across Missouri that winter they came upon a family named Powell. The man had a head injury caused by the mobs. His brains were oozing out but he carried his child while his wife led their cow with their possessions tied to its back. James gave them a ride in his wagon until others came along who had more room.

James signed the Missouri redress petition sent to the Congress of the United States. His signature appears on the same page as that of his oldest son. They chose to live in Payson, Adams county when they reached the safety of Illinois. In 1842 James and Abigail moved to land on the Cluff River about four miles from Nauvoo.

The Owens family left Illinois in 1846. They traveled with the other members of the church across Iowa. James left his family at Mt. Pisgah, north of Council Bluffs, and went elsewhere to work. As he was returning home, he got lost in a snow storm in Decatur county on the Iowa-Missouri border. He wandered half frozen for about fifteen days before he was found by men out in the woods feeding their hogs. They gave him coffee but he couldn't eat. He told them who his family was before he died. One of the men went to Council Bluffs with the news. Abigail paid him to bring the body back only to see him return and say he couldn't find the grave. There has been lingering suspicion that the enemies of the restoration had caught up with him at last.

James was a large man, but he moved and spoke briskly. He was known to swear occasionally. He was certainly a man of conviction with the courage to hold fast to his beliefs. James Jr. said he learned to love the prophet Joseph Smith because of the things he heard his father say about him.