

The Canes of the Martyrdom

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Steven G. Barnett

Shortly after the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1844, unusual mementos in his memory—wooden canes—were fashioned from the oak planks of the rough-hewn coffin in which the body was returned to Nauvoo. The history of these mementos—the Canes of the Martyrdom—is elusive, but some conclusions may be drawn from what little solid information can be found.

The canes themselves were given to a small group of the Prophet's friends. How many canes there were originally, to whom the canes were given, and how many of these canes exist today are matters of pure conjecture. We do know that Willard Richards, Heber C. Kimball, Dimick Huntington, Wilford Woodruff, and probably Brigham Young had such canes. Today, the only authenticated Martyrdom cane carved from the wood of the oak coffins at Carthage known to exist is that of Dimick Huntington. Perhaps those belonging to Heber C. Kimball and Perrigrine Sessions are also still in existence.¹

The Huntington Cane is 33 1/2" long, made from medium brown oak, with a hollowed knob handle containing a lock of Joseph Smith's hair. Originally, a piece of glass (from the viewing screen of the coffin in which Joseph Smith was laid in state)² covered the hole in the knob, having been affixed to a metal guard placed just inside the top of the cane, but this metal guard has since been broken. The glass is intact, however, still covering the hair it was meant to protect at the base of the knob's hollowed inside. Just below the knob, there is also a band of metal on the shaft, as well as a metal tip at the base of the cane.³

References to the Martyrdom canes appear rather frequently in LDS literature. In *Brigham Young* by M. R. Werner, we read:

The memory of the Prophet was perpetuated a few days later. The rough boards which had been used as temporary coffins were sawed in pieces and distributed among Joseph's and Hyrum's friends, who had canes made of them, each with a lock of the Prophet's hair set in the top. These canes are considered sacred relics today.⁴

Matthias F. Cowley, in his *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors*, says:

Before leaving Nauvoo, he paid a visit to Emma Smith to whose life he sought to bring consolation in the hour of her bereavement. She gave him a piece of oak for a staff. The oak had taken from Joseph Smith's coffin.

Apostle Cowley also speaks of President Woodruff's visit to Mary Fielding Smith, widow of Hyrum Smith, where he was given locks of the hair from the heads of Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Samuel H. Smith, and Don Carlos Smith. President Woodruff commented on the reason for collecting these relics:

I also obtained some hair of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. My purpose in getting it was that I might put a part of each of these collections in the knob of my staff as a relic of those noble men, the master spirits of the nineteenth century.⁵

Don Corbett also relates this story in his *Mary Fielding Smith: Daughter of Britain*.⁶

In the *Life of Heber C. Kimball* by Orson F. Whitney, Heber C. Kimball is quoted as testifying to the healing virtues of these canes:

How much would you give for even a cane that Father Abraham had used, or a coat or ring that the Savior had worn? The rough oak boxes in which the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum were brought from Carthage, were made into canes and other articles. I have a cane made from the plank of one of those boxes, so has Brother Brigham and a great many others, and we prize them highly and esteem them a great blessing. I want to carefully preserve my cane, and when I am done with it here I shall hand it down to my heir, with instructions to him to do the same. And the day will come when there will be multitudes who will be healed and blessed through the instrumentality of those canes, and the devil cannot overcome those who have them, in consequence of their faith and confidence in the virtues connected with them.

Further on in the same speech, Heber C. Kimball is quoted as saying:

In like manner I have sent my cane. Dr. Richards used to lay his old black cane on a person's head and that person has been healed through its instrumentality, by the power of God.⁷

John D. Lee's *Confessions* also refer to the cane-carving incident.⁸

Current editions of Parley P. Pratt's *Autobiography* carry an illustration of Willard Richards holding his cane.⁹ An enlarged version of the same collection of pictures of the Twelve Apostles under Brigham Young also appears in William Edwin Berrett's *The Restored Church*.¹⁰ Willard Richards's cane seems to be identical to the Huntington cane.

There were also some other canes made which have at times been mistaken for those made from the Carthage coffins. James Bird, a cabinet maker assigned to the project, fashioned three canes from the wood left over from the construction of the burial coffins of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. One of these was presented to Brigham Young, one to Heber C. Kimball, and the last retained by Mr. Bird. The Bird cane is a straight stick with an ivory handle that measures 4½" long. The cane itself is 32½" long with a 1" brass band at its tip. This cane is now preserved by the Bird family in California.¹¹ Members of the Kimball family claim that at one time

Heber C. Kimball had three canes connected to the Martyrdom. One of those three canes has been described as 34½" long of solid oak construction. The handle is a solid knob of 1", banded at its base by a brass ring. The tip of the cane is also brass capped. This is the cane the Kimball family feels was used by Heber C. Kimball for healing purposes, and it is owned by family members living in Salt Lake City.¹²

There is also a possibility that some bogus canes have been made which have been mistaken for those directly connected with the Martyrdom. William R. Hamilton, writing to S. H. B. Smith from Carthage, Illinois, on 18 March 1898, states:

Soon after the killing of the Smiths, Father had the bodies brought to our home, and rough pine coffins made in which they were placed. Those boards have furnished material for thousands of walking canes.

It is improbable that there was enough wood available from two coffins for "thousands of walking canes," and William Hamilton may have been joking as he referred to such claims. If not, he may simply have been in error, for he is the only source that gives any description of the coffin wood being other than oak. The Huntington cane is definitely oak, and Mr. Hamilton may have forgotten some of the facts over the intervening fifty-four years; he was a boy of fourteen at the time of these events.¹³

Some individuals have claimed that these canes have a hidden, dark meaning other than their sentimental and healing virtues. Raymond W. Taylor, in an unpublished article entitled "The Legend of the Friends of the Martyrs," suggests an oath of vengeance.¹⁴ In this theory, the canes were symbolic of the owner's oath of revenge against those who spilled the blood of the Prophet of God. However, the basis for such a belief appears to be purely circumstantial.

The Canes of the Martyrdom are a very real part of the Mormon heritage. Shrouded in mystery as they are, the canes stand as a testimony of the love the owners shared for the Prophet Joseph Smith and his work.

Steven G. Barnett is a collector of original historical documents.

1. An undated *Church News* article entitled "Story of the Cane—Discloses Saga of Pioneers" by Courtney Cottam who interviews Thomas Sessions, a son of Perrigrine Sessions, has been brought to the attention of the author. In this article Thomas Sessions states the following concerning the cane in his possession at that time: "The cane is hardwood. It is made from the wood of the same tree the planks for the prophet's coffin was made from" (photocopy of this article in collection of author).

2. Joseph Smith's body may have placed in as many as three different coffins in 1844. These would be the rough oak box he was placed in at Carthage, the outer coffin used while the body lay in state at the Mansion House (which was then filled with bags of sand and buried at the cemetery), and the coffin in which the body was buried

secretly in the basement of the Nauvoo House. Perhaps these precautions were taken to protect the bodies from any mutilation that may have been planned by the Prophet's enemies. (See B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6 vols. [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965], 2:293.)

3. Oliver Boardman Huntington Journal, MS, Book 18, pp. 62–64, Archives and Manuscripts Department, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo. Under the date of Monday, 8 March 1897, Huntington writes (original spelling and punctuation retained throughout this article):

I had with me a cane made of the rough box hastily nailed together into
body
which the Prophet Joseph Smiths ^ was placed after he was murdered and
brought to Nauvoo from Carthage.

In the top of the cane was a lock of his hair which was taken from his hed
his head
after he had been buried 7 months. My brother William took it off ^ as he
and my brother Dimick were moving the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum from
where they were first buried, in the cellar of the Nauvoo House, to the cellar
or pit under a little outhouse that was built exclusively for that purpose. The
glass over his face was broken and they saved some of that glass And a piece
of that glass covered the hair in the top of the cain, and then a piece of metal
with a round hole in the center was over the glass and hair

Through the hole in the metal (aluminum), the hair could be seen.

At the party on that evening the cane and its history became known and
was viewed, inspected, admired and handled by each individual, and was
constantly on the move until 12 o'clock at night. I was invited to give a his-
tory of the cane and of the burial and reburial of the bodies of Joseph and
Hyrum Smith, which I did. The cain came into my possession in this way.

It was my brother Dimicks cane in the first place. The whole box that
Josephs body was brought to Nauvoo in was sawed up into strips suitable to
make walking canes of and divided out among his special friends.

After the death of Dimick the cane became Allens, and he told me to
take and keep it until he called for it.

He died without calling for it at all.

4. M. R. Werner, *Brigham Young* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Co., 1925), p. 182.

5. Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1971), pp. 227–28. A more precise account of this event is found in Wilford Woodruff's diary under the date of 23 August 1844:

I met with the quorum of the Twelve in Council a little time or some of
them. I visited Emma Smith the widow of the prophet—she let me have a
peace of oak for a Staff [graphic omitted] out of the [graphic omitted] coffin
of the Prophet Joseph who has inhumanly martyred in Carthage All in com-
pany with the brother Hiram. Emma also let me have a Pair of gloves com-
posed of white cotton and Mrs [?] Woodruff—a pair Cotton handkerchief
both of which the Prophet wore, while living. We called upon Sister Mary
Smith widow of Hiram Smith the Patriarch. She gave us some hair from the
head of Joseph Smith, Hiram Smith, Samuel Smith, & Don Carlos Smith, all
brothers, of the same Parents I also obtained some hair of the quorum of the

Twelve Apostles in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints my object was in putting a portion of each in the top of my Staff as a relick of those noble men, master spirits of the nineteenth centaury, to hand down to my posterity. to deposit in the most Holy and Sacred place in the Holy temple of GOD on the consecrated Hill of Zion. (Wilford Woodruff Journal, 23 August 1844, Library—Archives of the Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church Office Building, Salt Lake City, Utah.)

6. Don C. Corbett, *Mary Fielding Smith: Daughter of Britain* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1970), p. 174.

7. Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), pp. 465–66. The discourse cited here was delivered on 15 March 1857. The complete text is found in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1855–1886; reprint ed., 1967), 4:292–95.

8. John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled: or the Life and Confessions of the late Mormon Bishop John D. Lee* (St. Louis, Mo.: Bryan, Brand & Co., 1877), p. 153. This passage states that “the remains of the Prophet and his brother were laid in a sepulcher made of stone. The rough boards, which once enclosed them, were sawed in pieces and distributed among their friends, many of whom had canes made of the pieces, with a lock of the hair of the Prophet set in the top of them, and those canes ate kept as sacred relics to this day.”

9. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1968), p. 407.

10. William Edwin Berrett, *The Restored Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1969), p. 269.

11. Correspondence of the Bird family with author, 18 November 1974 and 10 December 1974. This correspondence includes a photograph of the James Bird cane.

12. Correspondence of the Kimball family with author, 14 July 1974. Another cane belonging to Heber C. Kimball was embellished with a gold handle inscribed with “The Kingdom of God or Nothing—Heber C. Kimball.” This cane is also thought by the Kimball family to be related to the Martyrdom.

13. William R. Hamilton to S. H. B. Smith, 18 March 1898, photocopy in collection of author. William R. Hamilton's father, Artois Hamilton, was the owner of the Hamilton Hotel in Carthage, where much of the drama of Joseph Smith's last days took place.

14. Raymond W. Taylor, “Legend of the Friends of the Martyrs,” MS, 23 July 1970, collection of the author. Raymond W. Taylor is pictured holding the Huntington cane on p.208. Harry M. Beardsley claims that the canes served as a symbol of status: “Later, the wood was split into short lengths and distributed among the leaders of the Church. For many years walking-sticks made from the wood were recognized as emblems of rank and authority.” (Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* [Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co.: Riverside Press, 1931], p.370.)