

Phineas Reeves and Melissa Coalman Bird

(Part 1)

History does not clearly record all the details of a person's life, and this is certainly true for Phineas Reeves Bird and his wife Melissa Coalman Bird (grandparents of our ancestor, Arthur L. Bird).

Phineas Reeves Bird was born on January 1 (or 29), 1802, in Flanders, Morris County, NJ. He was the first child born to Benjamin Freeman Bird and Maribah Reeves Bird.

The little family soon grew. Charles was born in 1803. and Samuel was born in 1805. By 1807 the family moved to nearby Roxbury, Morris County, NJ. By the time Phineas was seven years old (1809), the family had moved to Romulus, Seneca County, NY. In 1811 they were in Hector, Tompkins County, NY. In 1815 they lived in Southport, Tioga County, NY.

Phineas had eight brothers and three sisters. By the time the youngest—William—was born in 1823, Phineas was twenty-one years old and was already married to Melissa (or Millicent) Coalman, who had been born in 1801 in Massachusetts. (Researchers have found both names used for her, with variations in spelling.) Phineas and Melissa were living in Elmira, Chemung County, NY, when their oldest son, George Washington Bird, was born on October 13, 1823.

On April 2, 1825, another son, Charles Reeve Bird, was born in Elmira (much later he became the father of Arthur L. Bird). Benjamin Freeman Bird, named for his grandfather, was born on June 18, 1827.

The 1830 census reveals that Phineas resided at Southport, NY, near his father. His household of six consisted of one male between 20 and 30 (himself), one female between 20 and 30 (Melissa), one male between 5 and 10 (George W.), and three males under 5 (Charles, Benjamin, and an as-yet-unknown brother).

Phineas and Melissa had another son, Samuel, in 1833, also in New York. On February 13 of that same year, Phineas's mother Maribah died. His father remarried, and later Phineas had two more sisters and another brother from that union.

It is not known just when Phineas and Melissa Bird joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, but that decision determined their activities for the rest of their lives. Oral history says that they joined in late 1830 or early 1831 in Kirtland, OH, where they were living in a community of about one hundred people. The community, called "The Family," was led by Lyman Wight. It was experimenting with an all things common style of life—no one owning anything for himself, but rather sharing what he had with everyone else. No written documentation has been found to either substantiate or negate the oral history. Other researchers speculate that Phineas and Melissa joined the church in 1835, about the same time his father, Benjamin, became a member.

Oral history also places the Birds in Kirtland about 1834 helping to build the Kirtland Temple. Charles Reeve Bird told of helping to make the fluting or grooves in the columns inside the temple when he was a young boy. He said they drove a team which pulled a heavy tool along the length of the wooden column. Oral history also places them as participants at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in March 1836.

By 1838 the Phineas Bird family had moved to Daviess County, MO, where they built a house. But a year later they were driven from their home by mobs.

On January 29, 1839, Phineas signed a covenant agreeing to assist other church people who were forced to leave the state of Missouri but were unable to do so on their own. His father Benjamin and his brother Charles also signed the document (*RLDS Church History* 2:313-315;

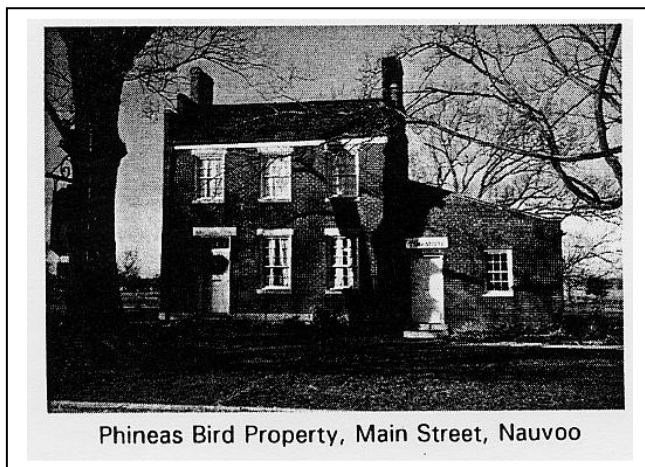
LDS Church History 3:250-254). One of those they assisted later wrote, “Father had a good Learn and wagon when we went to Missouri. lie lost everything and was helped out of Missouri by one of the brethren by the name of Bird” (Aroet Hale Autobiography typescript, BYIJ, p. 6).

Phineas took his family to Adams County, IL. On May 11, 1839, Phineas swore out a petition to the United States government requesting compensation for his losses due to mob action. The petition read:

“1838 The State of Masura Dr To Phineas ft Bird
 To mooving in the state one hundred and
 twenty \$120.00
 To bilding one hous in Davis and drove out by the Mob and abused by the mob \$225.00 To
 four hundred Dollars Cash lost by being
 Drove from Davis Countey \$400.00
 To gun taken lock lost and
 gun damag \$8.25
 1839 To moving out of the sState and being deprived of living in the State of
 Masura \$8,000.00
 To money Spent and time Lost in Moveing
 out of the State \$100.00
 ITotal damagesl \$8,853.25
 Clayton May II AD 1839

ISworn to before I. Douglas, i.P., Adams Co., IL, Ii May 1839.]”

(Clark V. Johnson, ed., *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833-1 838 Missouri Conflict*, p. 142: the original spelling and grammar were retained). Phineas never received any compensation for those losses.



Phineas Bird Property, Main Street, Nauvoo

In 1840 Phineas purchased a one-acre lot or, Main Street in the center of Nauvoo. Hancock County, IL. A nice brick home standing on that property has recently been restored. It currently is called the “Stoddard Tin Shop” IL is unclear whether Phineas built it or if it was built by Mr. Stoddard, who had purchased the property from Phineas in 1843. It is, however, difficult to Imagine that Phineas would have lived four years in a growing and bustling part of town without building a home—especially when we know that he had built a house in Daviess County, MO, in less than a year. No foundations for

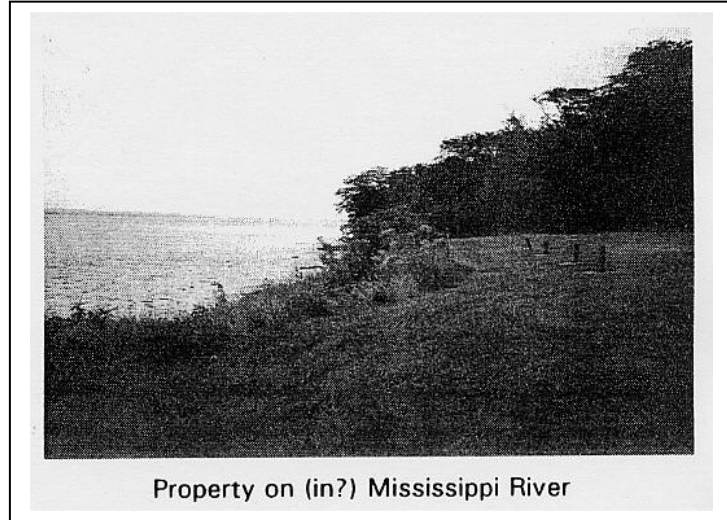
other buildings have been found on the property except for a small outbuilding and a well.

While in Nauvoo. Phineas also purchased lot I on block 40; and he acquired block 4, which is located right on the banks of the Mississippi River. (Much of the lot—if not all—is now under water because of the dam at Keokuk, IA.)

Phineas and Melissa were members of the Nauvoo First Ward (or area) of the church. In 1841 their youngest son, Richard, was born, and Phineas was ordained to the priesthood. His license reads, ‘This certifies that Phineas H. [sic.] Bird has been ordained a Deacon in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter

Day Saints and has this day received a License from under our hands. March 3. 1841 Joseph Smith ft. B. Thompson Clerk”

Phineas was ordained to the office of elder on May 16, 1842; James Sloan, Clerk, signed his Elders’ License.



(To be continued)

Phineas Reeves and Melissa Coalman Bird

(Part 2)

History does not clearly record all the details of a person’s life, and this is certainly true for Phineas Reeves Bird and his wife Melissa Coalman Bird (grandparents of our ancestor, Arthur L. Bird).

Phineas Reeves Bird was born on January 1 (or 29), 1802, in Flanders, Morris County, NJ. He was the first child born to Benjamin Freeman Bird and Maribah Reeves Bird.

Phineas and Melissa were living in Nauvoo, IL, in the early 1840’s. One of the main public works for the Latter Day Saints in the 1840’s was building the Nauvoo Temple. Many of the men covenanted to give every tenth day to working on the large building. Wood for the temple—as well as many other buildings—was cut in the vast pine forests of Wisconsin and floated down the Mississippi River to Nauvoo in huge rafts.

Church members had purchased several sawmills on the Black River in Wisconsin, the main one at Black River Falls. Those who lived and worked there practiced an “all-things-common” lifestyle. In 1842 George Bird, the oldest son of Phineas, worked in the Wisconsin “pineries.” His name is found several times in the pinery account book (Peter flaws, *Pinery Account Book, 1842*, LDS Church Archives).

In July, 1843, a company of about 150 people went to Wisconsin from Nauvoo. Joseph Smith, leader of the church, noted in his journal, “Friday, July 21st [1843]. This morning Bishop Miller, Lyman Wight, and a large company including families started on the *Maid of Iowa* for

the pinery in Wisconsin” (Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, p. 398). The Phineas Bird family moved to the pineries with that company.

Orange Wight, a son of Lyman Wight, recalled, “I was now called on a mission to go up the river five or six hundred miles to make lumber for the Nauvoo house and temple. There was a number of families to go, among which were one of the Bird family and the Hadfield family. Sister Bird wanted a girl to go with her as one of the family. I told her I knew of a girl that I thought

I could induce to go. She was over in Iowa, across the river. I went over in a skiff, found the girl, and she agreed to go at once.... We all boarded a steamboat and started for Black River, Wisconsin” (Orange Wight Autobiography typescript, BYU, p. 9).

The winter of 1843 and 1844 was evidently a very difficult one. Food was scarce: and men, women, and children spent days existing on half rations. For this as well as other reasons, the men in Wisconsin proposed moving to Texas to establish a mission to the Indians there—when their task of obtaining lumber in Wisconsin was completed. Letters to Joseph Smith proposing the move were dated February 15, 1844. and signed by Lyman Wight, George Miller, Phineas Bird, Pierce Hawley, and John Young. “Select Committee to write expressing the views of the branch of the Church at Black River Falls” (Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo, Kingdom on the Mississippi*. pp. 290-291).

Joseph Smith agreed to the proposal, and negotiations were begun for a large section of land on the Colorado River (F. Edward Butterworth, *Divine Origins of the Restoration*, p. 271). However, Joseph was killed by a mob in June of 1844, and the negotiations were put on hold.

Many of the Black River Company had returned to Nauvoo from Wisconsin in May of 1844 (Philip C. Wightman, *The Life and Contributions of Lyman Wight*, thesis manuscript, RLDS Library and Archives. p. 71). Undoubtedly the Bird family was among them because on July 31, 1844, both Phineas and Charles were in Nauvoo and received special blessings from John Smith, Patriarch. (Copies of the blessings are in my files—Diana Ludy.)

In August church leaders agreed that the members of the Black River Company could go to Texas. However, first they were to return to Wisconsin to dispose of their mills and other properties (Wightman, p. 78).

On March 28, 1845, the journey to Texas under the leadership of Lyman Wight began. On September 27, 1845, the Company was at Mound City, KS, where Phineas’s two oldest sons were married. George W. Bird married Eliza Curtis, and Charles Reeve Bird married Bernice Monroe (Heman C. Smith, “A Pioneer Colony,” *Autumn Leaves*, December, 1895, p. 532).

The company crossed the Red River at Old Preston, Grayson County, TX, on November 10, 1845. Over the next 13 years, they set up sawmills and gristmills and established a number of frontier communities, always selling out and moving on when the area became more populated. Phineas and his family continued to live “all things common” with the rest of the group, sharing in the fortunes and misfortunes alike.

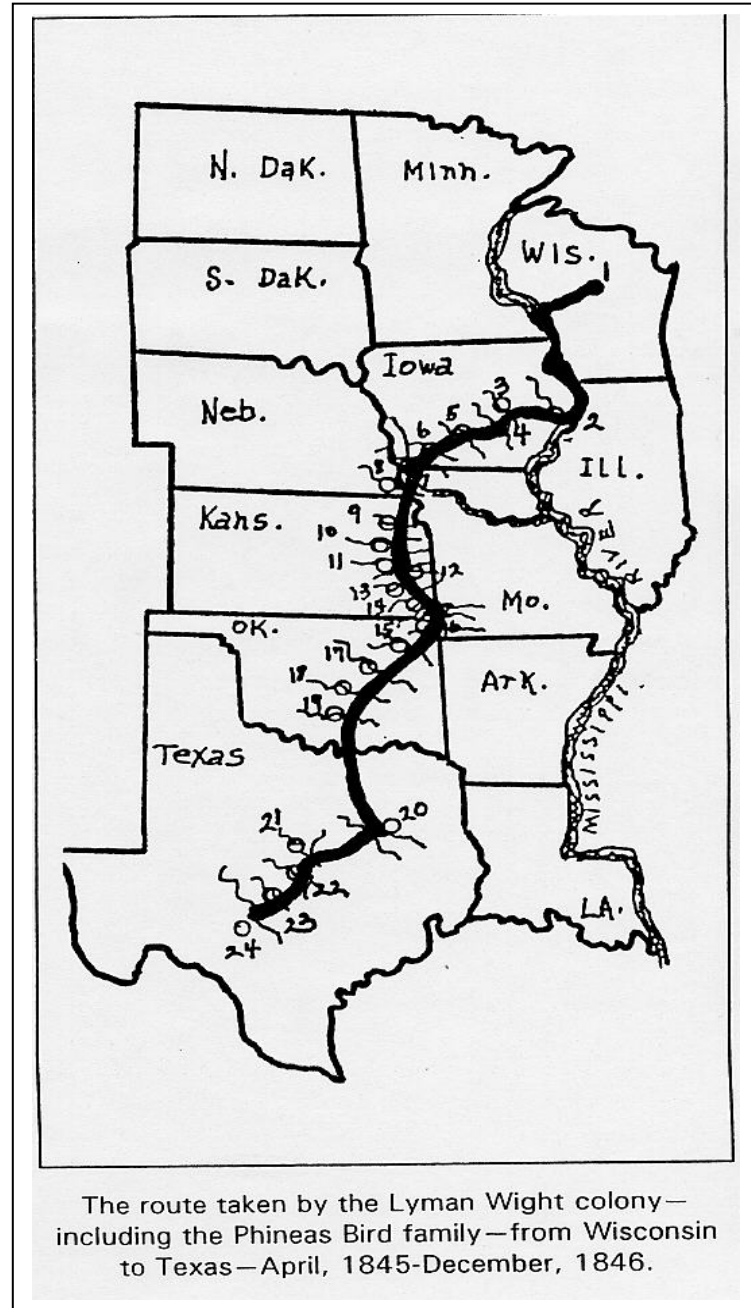
The *Galveston News* reported, “As far as we have been able to learn, these Mormons have proved themselves to be most excellent citizens of our State, and we are no doubt greatly indebted to the deceased leader [Lyman Wight] for the orderly conduct, sobriety, industry, and enterprise of his colony. Mr. Wight first came to Texas in November, 1845, and has been with his colony on our extreme frontier ever since, moving still farther west as settlements formed around him, thus always being the pioneer of advancing civilization, affording protection against

the Indians. He has been the first to settle five new counties and prepare the way for others. He has at different times built three extensive saw and grist mills” (Galveston News, 1858, quoted in *RLDS Church History* 3:36; *LDS Church History* 2:435).

On November 16, 1847, work was completed on the county jail at Austin. The company had contracted to build the jail for two thousand dollars (Heman C. Smith, p. 534). Oral history declares that the names of several Birds were on the cornerstone of this building, the men having used their stonemasonry skills in the work.

in fact, the 1850 census taken at Zodiac, Gillespie County, TX, lists Phineas Bird, age 48, as a stonemason. Polly (another name for Melissa?) Bird, age 49, birthplace Massachusetts, is listed as his wife. The Birds had two children living with them—the Sons of a close friend. Nearby lived two of their sons, George W. Bird and Benjamin F. Bird and their wives. Phineas and Melissa’s youngest son Richard, who was nine years old, is listed with Benjamin’s family. Samuel, Phineas and Melissa’s 17-year-old son, was living with his Uncle George and working as a farmer.

Several records state that Phineas Reeves Bird died July 25, 1850; documentation of that date is still being researched. Although we don’t know the exact place of death, it is assumed to be Zodiac (about four miles south of Fredericks-burgh) where the company remained until 1851. A small cemetery of about 30 souls was left behind when the company moved on (Heman C. Smith. pp. 534-535). The cause of Phineas’s death is unknown. It is also not known when Melissa died or where she is buried. Phineas and Melissa’s sons remained in Texas with the Wight colony.



The route taken by the Lyman Wight colony— including the Phineas Bird family—from Wisconsin to Texas—April, 1845-December, 1846.