

Linda King Newell, Feminist Scholar of Mormon History, Dies at 82, Feb. 23, 2023

Her work exploring the idea of female subservience within the church won acclaim. But it also led to her being blacklisted by Mormon leaders.



Linda King Newell in 1985. She argued that Mormon women had once held significant power, but that they were sidelined as the church became more bureaucratic.via Newell family

Linda King Newell, whose pioneering work on the history of women in the Mormon faith won her acclaim as the leading feminist scholar in her field, but also led leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to

blacklist her for undermining traditional views about the religion's founding era, died on Feb. 12 at a hospice facility in Salt Lake City. She was 82.

Her husband, L. Jackson Newell, confirmed the death.

Mrs. Newell was one of several feminist Mormon scholars who, beginning in the 1970s, questioned the received history of their faith, asking how and why women came to be seen as second-class members of a patriarchal institution. Her writings frequently put her at odds with church leaders, but her mastery of the archives and persuasive writing style won her admirers among Mormons and non-Mormons alike.

"She was the boldest Mormon feminist historian of the late 20th century," Joanna Brooks, a professor of American studies at San Diego State University, said in a phone interview.

Mrs. Newell was best known for her book "Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet's Wife, 'Elect Lady,' Polygamy's Foe," published in 1984 and written with Valeen Tippetts Avery, a historian at Northern Arizona University.

Emma Smith, the first wife of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, had long been demeaned by scholars and church leaders as either passive and long-suffering or vindictive and shrewish — that is, if they paid attention to her at all: "Mormon Enigma" was the first full biography of her in more than 100 years.

Mrs. Newell and Dr. Avery presented a very different Emma Smith: a person who helped guide her husband until his murder in 1844, and who later advised their oldest son, Joseph Smith III, as he established his own branch of Mormonism, today known as the Community of Christ.

"Emma Smith was far more than an appendage and helpmate to prominent men," the authors wrote. "She was also a capable, articulate and influential individual in her own right who profoundly affected the development of the religion with which she was associated."

They also revealed that Joseph Smith, contrary to church teachings at the time, had in fact been a prolific polygamist, despite Emma's vocal protestations. After years of denial, [the church conceded in 2014](#) that Mr. Smith had indeed had as many as 40 wives.

"Mormon Enigma" sold some 30,000 copies and won several awards, including the interpretive history prize from the Mormon History Association. But church leaders damned it for deviating from the accepted story line, and they barred either author from speaking about Mormon history on church property or at any church-related event.

"On the one hand, the book is placing Emma Smith as a heroine in the Mormon story, someone who's expressing agency and is an activist," Benjamin Park, a historian at Sam Houston State University in Texas, said in a phone interview. "And on the other hand, it is taking Joseph Smith down a bit and is presenting him not in the best light."

The ban made national news, and, after Mrs. Newell complained, it was quietly lifted. But other elements of the blacklist remained, including a ban on citing the two authors' work in any material published under church auspices.

Even before "Mormon Enigma" appeared, Mrs. Newell was well known as a fearless feminist, willing to question church orthodoxy with deeply researched, clearly argued history.

She was part of the so-called Wednesday Group, a loose collection of women historians that met every Wednesday in Salt Lake City, not far from the home of Brigham Young, the Mormon leader who had succeeded Joseph Smith and led hundreds of his coreligionists to the Great Basin in the mid-19th century.

If there was a single thread running through Mrs. Newell's work, it was the argument that Mormon women had once held significant power and influence as healers and prayer leaders, but that they had been sidelined through the 20th century as the church became more bureaucratic and

hierarchical, and the history of their contributions had been systematically erased.

“From the 1950s to the early 1980s, equal citizenship for women in the kingdom seems to have been replaced with the glorification of manhood,” she wrote in [a 1985 essay in Dialogue](#), a journal of Mormon thought. “Anything traditionally considered ‘male’ in the church has come to be attached exclusively to the priesthood.”



Mrs. Newell, left, with Valeen Tippetts Avery shortly before their book, “Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet’s Wife, ‘Elect Lady,’ Polygamy’s Foe,” was published in 1984.via Newell family

Linda King was born on Jan. 16, 1941, in Richfield, Utah, about 150 miles south of Salt Lake City, and grew up in nearby Fillmore. Her father, Foisy Earl King, was a mechanic for the Bureau of Land Management, and her mother, Pearl (Davies) King, was a homemaker.

She had a rough childhood — her parents were poor and struggled with alcoholism — but she found support and stability within Fillmore’s Mormon community. She won a scholarship to the College of Southern Utah (now Southern Utah University), and graduated from Utah State University in 1963 with a degree in art and education.

A 1962 college trip to New York City and Washington, her first time outside Utah, opened her to the wider world. She attended Broadway plays and, in

Washington, met President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson.

She married Mr. Newell in 1963. Along with him, she is survived by her daughters, Christine, Jennifer and Heather Newell; her son, Eric; 12 grandchildren; and her sister, Charlene King Kotoku.

Mrs. Newell taught special education and continued her art studies before becoming a freelance historian in 1975.

Her work placed her outside what was then the mainstream of Mormon historical research, and that, combined with her lack of formal training as a historian, meant that she had no real chance of earning an academic teaching position, even after the success of "Mormon Enigma."

Between 1982 and 1987 she and her husband, a dean and professor at the University of Utah, edited [Dialogue](#), which had been founded by progressive-minded Mormons in 1966. Under their guidance, the journal greatly expanded its subscriber base and editorial scope; it continues to thrive today as the leading venue for Mormon thought outside the church itself.

She later served as the president of two leading Mormon scholarly organizations, the John Whitmer Historical Association and the Mormon History Association. She was an editor at the University of Utah Press and the director of special projects at Deep Springs College in California, where her husband served as president from 1995 to 2004.

The couple returned to Salt Lake City after that, and Mrs. Newell turned to nonprofit work. She was a founding member of the Gun Violence Prevention Center of Utah.

She also helped found [Zion Canyon Mesa](#), a humanities center near Zion National Park. In her honor, one of its buildings is called the Linda King Newell House of Grand Dreams.