



The Restored Cultural Hall in Nauvoo. Also known as the Masonic Hall, the Cultural Hall was the scene not only of theatricals and meetings of the Masonic Lodge, but also of court sessions and funerals. The hall is located on Main Street. 1991 photograph.

A Note on Nauvoo Theater

A little-known letter from Joseph Smith reflects his openness to professional drama in Nauvoo and his reluctance to interfere with the Saints' individual choices.

Noel A. Carmack

Drama was a favorite social event in the activities of the early Mormon village. Though Brigham Young was credited with cultivating theatrical affairs in territorial Utah, the inception of such entertainments took place much earlier, with Joseph Smith's endorsement.

Like many other Mississippi river towns, Nauvoo attracted a number of traveling shows, circus performers, and acting companies. Of the many social entertainments the Saints enjoyed in Nauvoo, drama appears to have been a favorite—even for the Prophet Joseph Smith. For instance, in July 1842 a group of actors performed in the upper room of Joseph Smith's red brick store. A brief entry in Joseph's journal on July 17 records the engagement: "At dusk, evening, a theatre in the store chamber; Mr. Chapman¹ and suite, actors."² The fact that Joseph attended the production is of interest because it indicates his approval of theater. This is the earliest known reference to professional actors making an appearance at Nauvoo. Regrettably, the diary gives no further elaboration in regard to Chapman or his group of strollers.

The inauguration of Mormon theatricals came during the spring of 1844, after the conversion of Thomas A. Lyne, a professional actor from Philadelphia.³ Lyne, acting on an appeal by his brother-in-law, George J. Adams, contributed his experience and talent for the benefit of the financially encumbered Prophet. Following the April conference, a playbill announcing a "Grand Moral Entertainment" in the Masonic Hall was distributed. Richard Sheridan's *Pizarro or The Death of Rolla* was to be performed on

April 24, 1844. According to the playbill, this production was intended “to aid in the discharge of a debt, against President Joseph Smith, contracted through the odious persecution of Missouri, and vexatious law suits.”⁴

Although heavy rains postponed the performance until April 26, the unfavorable weather did not inhibit Nauvoo citizens from enjoying the first of several productions under Lyne’s direction. The newspapers reported that even the Prophet appeared “highly gratified” by the participants and expressed “no small amusement” regarding their performance.⁵ The cast included Brigham Young as the high priest, Heber C. Kimball as Gomez, George A. Smith as the old blind man, Erastus Snow as Alonzo, and Amasa Lyman as Las Casas. A young Hiram Clawson was given a small part throwing down fire from the heavens.⁶

The positive reception of Lyne and his debut production of *Pizarro* prompted other plays to be presented through the remaining weeks in April and early May. These included *Damon and Pythias*, *Douglass*, *Therese or The Orphan of Geneva*, and *Idiot Witness*.⁷ As in the production of *Pizarro*, a number of notable figures took part. A few who made their acting debut were Jeremiah Hatch, John Fullmer, and William H. Folsom. Helen Mar Kimball, a young girl at Nauvoo who took the role of the countess in *The Orphan of Geneva*, later recalled, “There was some good acting done—some so life-like, that at times nearly the whole audience would be affected to tears. Joseph did not try to hide his feelings, but was seen to weep a number of times.”⁸

Perhaps it was this sentiment that resulted in carrying the productions further. On Saturday, May 11, Joseph recorded in his journal that he “had a conversation with Mr. Lyne on the theatre.”⁹ This conversation probably included a cordial plaudit from Joseph. But given Lyne’s responsive activity, the Prophet may have also proposed sending the dramatic group beyond the limits of Nauvoo. Soon after the discussion, Lyne and Adams organized the Nauvoo Dramatic Association, a small company of strollers who made appearances at port stops along the Mississippi River. Little is known concerning these appearances, but at least one performance was reported to have taken place in Burlington, Iowa.¹⁰

The productions were suspended, however, when libels mounted and threatened the safety of Joseph Smith and his followers. In the days leading up to the Prophet's incarceration and subsequent murder at Carthage, Lyne and Adams had little time to continue promoting the theatricals. Answering charges of treason for the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, the Prophet and other leading men agreed to surrender on June 23. Not only were Lyne and Adams named as witnesses for the defense,¹¹ but Lyne was also numbered among those who attended the Prophet on the road to Carthage the morning of June 24. When Joseph decided that it was not necessary that such a large retinue accompany him, Lyne and others were ordered to return to Nauvoo. "Right or wrong I would not go," Lyne recalled. "His life was all they wanted, not justice, knowing this would be the result."¹²

Immediately following the murders of Joseph and Hyrum, Lyne and Adams were dispatched with the charge to call home the Apostles laboring in the East. During their extended stay in New York and Boston, Lyne became openly critical of Adams and other local Church leaders. On October 26, 1844, Lyne was excommunicated for not sustaining Church authorities.¹³ In consequence, he remained dissociated from the Saints until he returned in 1862 to live among them and teach the stock company in Salt Lake City, Utah.

While Lyne was certainly the most impressive actor to make the Prophet's acquaintance, another can be added to the few who made efforts to bring theatricals to Nauvoo. A year previous to Lyne's tenure in Nauvoo, an itinerant actor named Lyman Powell¹⁴ petitioned Joseph Smith for permission to perform in the city. Although Powell's written request is not extant, Joseph's corresponding letter, as dictated to William Clayton, is found in the Newell K. Whitney Collection at Brigham Young University.¹⁵ This little-known letter, dated April 1, 1843, reveals not only Joseph's amenity toward theatrical amusements, but also his reluctance to interfere with the Saints' individual choices. The letter also serves to document an early attempt at professional theatricals among the Mormon community. Unfortunately, it is uncertain whether Mr. Powell ever made an appearance in Nauvoo, since such an engagement went unrecorded in contemporary diaries and newspapers.

The letter to Lyman Powell is printed below. Conjectural material and notation is enclosed in brackets. Original spelling, punctuation, and grammar are retained.

Nauvoo April 1st 1843

Sirs:

Your letter of the 20th Ult. has been received and duly considered. In answer to which I have only to say that so far as I am concerned I have not any objections to your visiting Nauvoo. The citizens of this place are a free people and [suspects ?] theatricals or anything else not repugnant to good order and decency can act as they think proper I do not wish to restrain nor interfere with their liberties it will be seen by an ordinance of the city Council passed July 5th 1842¹⁶ that full permission is granted to any public shows, theatricals or other public amusements of a [“]moral character” but immoral or indecent exhibitions are strictly prohibited as well as drunkenness. By the same ordinance the cost for license is left discrecionalary with the Mayor not however to exceed fifty dollars, and the recorders fee for writing the same one dollar

I have therefore no objection to you visiting our City. [*several words illegible*] of persecution but that is a matter which you probably understand consequently [*two lines faded and illegible*] much encouragement.

yours very resp[ectfully,] Joseph Smith
by Wm Clayton Scribe [p. 1]

Copy of a letter
to Lyman Powell
Galena [p. 2]

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NOTES

¹The personal name of “Mr. Chapman” cannot be determined from known records. It is likely, however, that Mr. Chapman was one of two surviving sons of

William Chapman, Sr., the founder of Chapman's *Floating Theatre*. After William Chapman's death (ca. 1839), his two sons, William B. and George C., along with his two daughters, Caroline and Theresa, continued their acting careers on the showboat and in the far West. See Philip Graham, *Showboats: The History of an American Institution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), 9-21; George D. Ford, *These Were the Actors: A Story of the Chapmans and the Drakes* (New York: Library Publishers, 1955), 115-31; Helen Throop Pratt, "Souvenirs of an Interesting Family," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 7 (1928): 282-85, 406; Wayne H. Claeren, "Pittsburgh and the First Showboat: A New Angle on the Chapmans," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 59 (April 1976): 231-39; *Daily Alta California*, November 9, 1857, 2; and *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 15, 1924, 11.

²Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949-50), 5:512 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*); Willard Richards to Brigham Young, July 19, 1843, Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives). Chapman's performances were reported to have taken place on July 15, 17, and 18. Evidently, Joseph Smith was in attendance on July 15 and 17 (see *History of the Church* 5:510).

³See John S. Lindsay, *The Mormons and the Theatre* (Salt Lake City: Century Printing, 1905); also, Carma de Jong Anderson, "Theater in Nauvoo, in a Milieu of Cultural Arts," (paper presented at the Nauvoo Sesquicentennial Symposium, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, September 21, 1989). Lyne's conversion is documented in Noel A. Carmack, "The Seven Ages of Thomas Lyne: A Tragedian among the Mormons," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 14 (1994), forthcoming.

⁴Stanley B. Kimball, "Discovery: Also Starring Brigham Young," *Ensign* 5 (October 1975): 51-52.

⁵*Warsaw Signal*, May 15, 1844, 3; and *St. Louis Daily Evening Gazette*, May 31, 1844, 2.

⁶Hiram Clawson, "Theatricals in Utah," *Minute Book* 2 (January 23, 1907): 57, Daughters of the Utah Pioneers Museum, Salt Lake City; and George Pyper, *The Romance of an Old Playhouse* (Salt Lake City: Seagull Press, 1928), 27-28.

⁷*History of the Church* 6:350, 361-62; "Nauvoo Theatre," *Nauvoo Neighbor* 1 (May 1, 1844): 2; and "Communications," *The Prophet* 1 (June 15, 1844): 2.

⁸Helen Mar Whitney, "Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo," *Woman's Exponent* 11 (November 15, 1882): 90.

⁹*History of the Church* 6:363; and Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (May 11, 1844), microfilm copy, LDS Church Archives.

¹⁰*Nauvoo Expositor* 1 (June 7, 1844): 3. The lists of passengers and goods shipped on the *Maid of Iowa* for May and June did not reveal any names associated with the Nauvoo Dramatic Association, suggesting that they traveled aboard another steamboat or were ferried across and traveled by horseback.

¹¹*History of the Church* 6:576, 596-609.

¹²T. A. Lyne, *A True and Descriptive Account of the Assassination of Joseph and Hiram Smith, the Mormon Prophet and Patriarch at Carthage, Illinois, June 27th, 1844* (New York: C. A. Calhoun, 1844), 6. See also Mary

Audentia Smith Anderson, ed., "The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith (1832-1914)," *Saints' Herald* 83 (February 25, 1936): 225.

¹³*The Prophet* 1 (November 2, 1844): 2.

¹⁴Although the author was unable to locate biographical information on Lyman Powell, it is possible that he was the same "Mr. Powell" who had been in partnership with Thomas Lyne at Chicago's Rialto Theatre in 1842. See J. H. McVicker, *The Theatre: Its Early Days in Chicago* (Chicago: Knight and Leonard, 1884), 48-49; Robert L. Sherman, *Chicago Stage: Its Records and Achievements, Volume One, 1834-1871* (Chicago: By the author, 1947), 67-77, 447.

¹⁵Newell K. Whitney Collection, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

¹⁶"An Ordinance in relation to public shows and exhibitions," *The Wasp* 1 (July 16, 1842): 4; Nauvoo City Council Minutes (July 5, 1842), LDS Church Archives. An almost identical ordinance had been enacted by the council on November 27, 1841 (see "An Ordinance in relation to hawkers, pedlars [*sic*], and public shows and exhibitions," *Times and Seasons* 3 [December 15, 1841]: 637).