

David H. Smith: A Son of the Prophet

F. Mark McKiernan

On 17 November 1844, nearly five months after the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Emma Smith bore a son whom she named David Hyrum. Though perhaps best-known in later life as a singer and poet, David Smith also did a number of paintings which have recently become available for study and publication, and which give insight into post-Mormon Nauvoo, the Smith family, the infant Reorganization, and most of all, into David Smith himself.

Of the few Mormons who remained in Nauvoo after the Mormon exodus from Nauvoo in 1846, perhaps the most notable were Emma Smith and her children. But the Nauvoo in which David grew up during the 1850s and 1860s was much different from that Kingdom on the Mississippi which his father had once dominated. He painted an incomplete Nauvoo—the ruins of the temple, the walls of the Nauvoo House, and the bend in the river showing the abandoned homes of the old town. He was interested in what had been his father's city; thus, his paintings are of Mormon Nauvoo rather than of the gentile community on the hill. The paintings are primitive, showing an almost photographic attention to detail, and depicting historical buildings, nature scenes, and David's friends.

David received the basic education common to the children of Nauvoo, and there is no evidence to suggest that he ever received any special training in either art or poetry. He did, however, show an early interest in artistic expression. In 1852, Julia Dixon wrote Emma to thank her for "your letter and in seeing those drawings of David's. God bless his little soul for remembering his absent sister."¹ While visiting Nauvoo in 1853 the artist Frederick Piercy commented that David was "of a mild studious disposition, and is passionately fond of drawing, seeming to be never so happy as

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¹Julia Dixon to Emma Bidamon, 25 March 1852, Galveston, Texas. The original is in the archives of the Church Historian of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Independence, Missouri.

when he has a pencil and paper in his hand.”² David differed from his brothers in talents and personality—while Alexander was regarded as one of the finest marksmen in Hancock County, David was known for his sensitive sketches of flowers and shells. He had a rich solo voice and was in constant demand to sing for the Saints; his brother Joseph’s speaking voice was unimpressive. But Joseph had a trained legal mind and was deliberate in his decisions as well as patient in achieving his goals where David was charismatic and compulsive. Early he showed signs of depression punctuated by brilliant flashes of creative productivity.

The influences of his family upon his writings are easy to document. For instance, the dedication of his small book of verse, *Hesperis*, reads:³

Dedication.
to
Emma,
A Most Noble and Devoted
Mother
Her Grateful Son Dedicates
This the Child of His Mind,
Wishing it more worthy
Her Memory

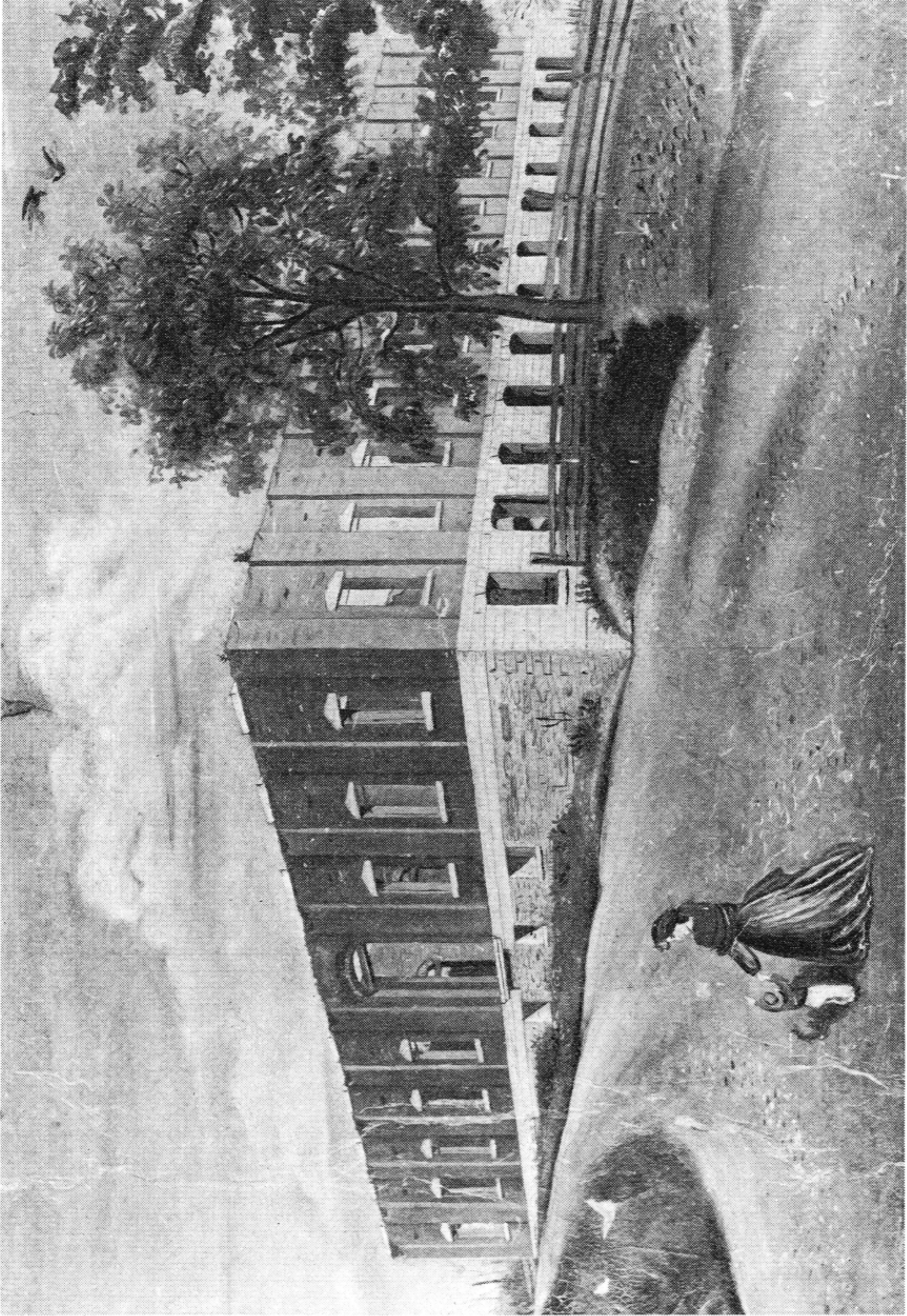
Emma had a great influence on all her children which shaped their lives and with them the course of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The sons of Joseph Smith, Jr., comprised the First Presidency of the Reorganization, David joining his brothers Joseph and Alexander in this calling.⁴ He was obviously aware of being both a son of the Prophet and the youngest of the Smith brothers, and clarified his position for the church in 1863 when he wrote:

Joseph is the Chosen Prophet
Well ordained in God’s clear sight
Should he lose by his transgression
Alexander has the right.

²Frederick Piercy, “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1853,” *Journal of History* 3 (1910):246.

³David H. Smith, *Hesperis, A Book of Poems* (Plano, Illinois: Herald Steam Book and Job Office, 1875). It is interesting that David’s mother was still alive when the volume was published, though the dedication reads as though she had died; Emma died four years later in 1879.

⁴David was ordained a priest in 3 March of 1863 and an elder seven months later. On 3 March 1873, he was called to the First Presidency of the Church. For additional information see Paul M. Edwards, “The Sweet Singer of Israel: David Hyrum Smith,” *BYU Studies* 12 (Winter 1972):171–84.



"The Nauvoo House," by David H. Smith. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual Department, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Joseph, Alexander, David
Three remaining pillars still
Like the three remaining columns
Of the Temple on the hill!

Joseph's star is full and shining
Alexander's more than mine;
Mine is just below the mountain
Bide its time and it will shine.

Joseph is the Chosen Prophet
Well ordained in God's clear sight
Should he lose by his transgression
Alexander has the right.⁵

David was greatly loved by the members of the church, who affectionately called him "The Sweet Singer of Israel."

In 1847 Emma married Louis Bidamon who provided her and her children with economic security. Joseph III wrote kindly of his stepfather,⁶ but David's writings reveal his disgust with Bidamon's drunkenness and foul language. The Major, as he was called, had a local reputation for both. David illustrated his displeasure in his poem, "Two Fates," which was written on 7 August 1865 at Nauvoo:

An old horse stood by the "grocery" door,
And a weary long time he had stood;
His line was half tied, he was aged and poor,
Yet, he would not depart though he could.

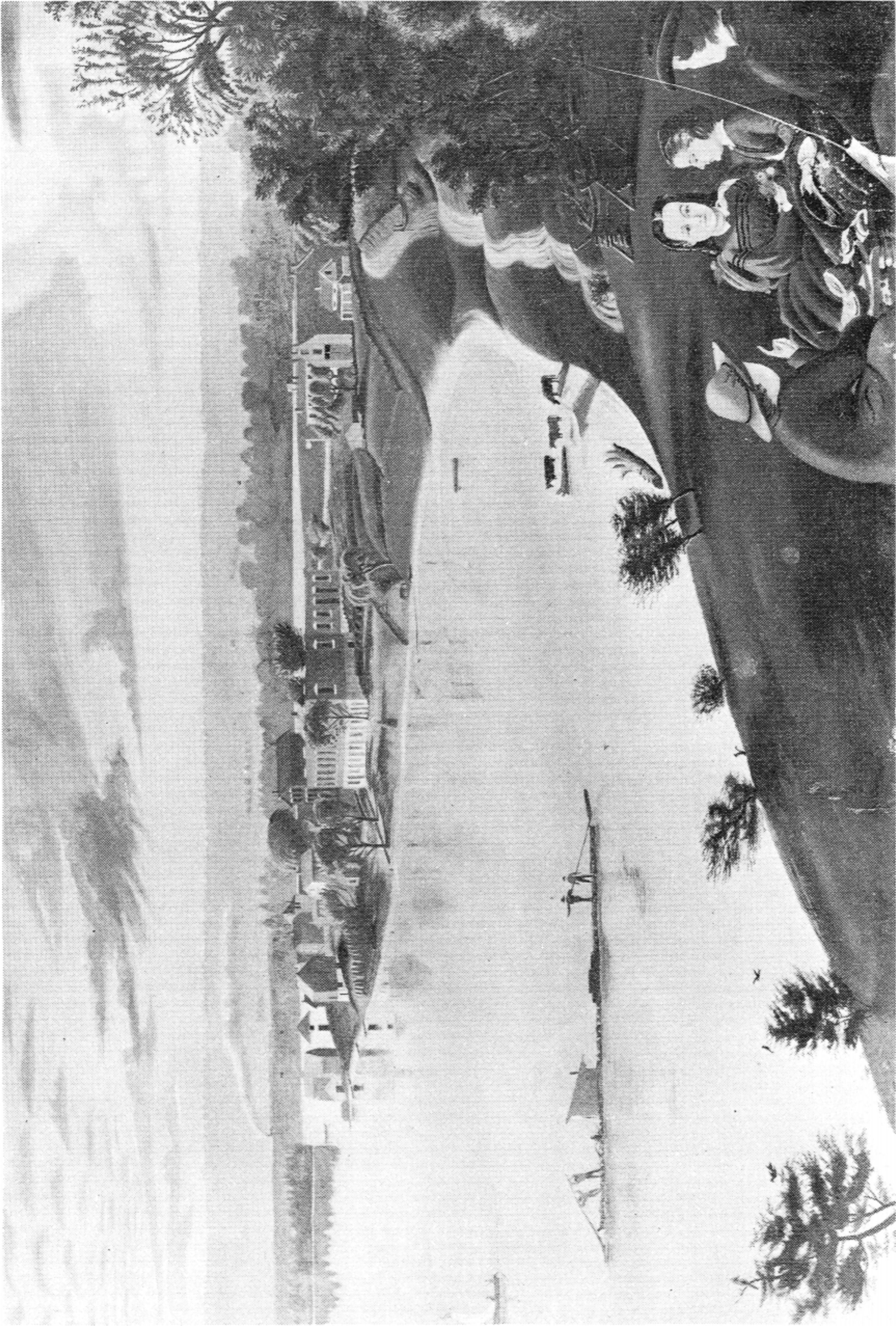
His master was in at the sloppy bar,
I felt sad for the weary old horse;
But felt as I looked at the two, by far
That the fate of the master was worse.

The dust was beat up like a scorching bed,
And the gadflies tormented him sore;
He was marked with blows, and he hung his head,
As he stood in the filth at the door;

But filthier far the words of the man
As he drained off the glass with a curse,
And hotter the fever that over him ran,
Than the sunshine that scorched the poor horse.

⁵Quoted in Paul M. Edwards, "The Sweet Singer of Israel: David Hyrum Smith," *Courage* 2 (Summer 1972):485.

⁶*Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, ed. Mary Audentia Smith Anderson (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1952), pp. 95, 96.



"Bend of the River," by David H. Smith. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual Department, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One bore in meek patience what heaven had willed,
Thus degraded, not by his own will;
The other with poison and blasphemy filled,
Cursed fate, and yet willed it so still.

I passed by the corner and went my way,
I felt sad for the poor old horse,
Yet, said to myself, "the best I can say,
Is, the fate of the master is worse."⁷

This is in marked contrast to his hymn about the father he never knew:

There's an unknown grave in a green lowly spot,
The form that it covers will ne'er be forgot.
Where haven trees spread and the wild locusts wave
Their fragrant white blooms over the unknown grave
Over the unknown grave.

And near by its side does the wild rabbit tread,
While over its bosom the wild thistles spread.
As if in their kindness to guard and to save
From man's foot-step intruding the unknown grave,
Guarding the unknown grave.

The heavens may weep and the thunders moan low,
Or the bright sun-shine and the soft breezes blow,
Unheeding the heart, one responsive and brave,
Of the one who sleeps there in the unknown grave,
Low in an unknown grave.

The prophet whose life was destroyed by his foes
Sleeps now where no hand may disturb his repose,
Till trumpets of God drown the notes of the wave
And we see him arise from his unknown grave,
God bless that unknown grave.

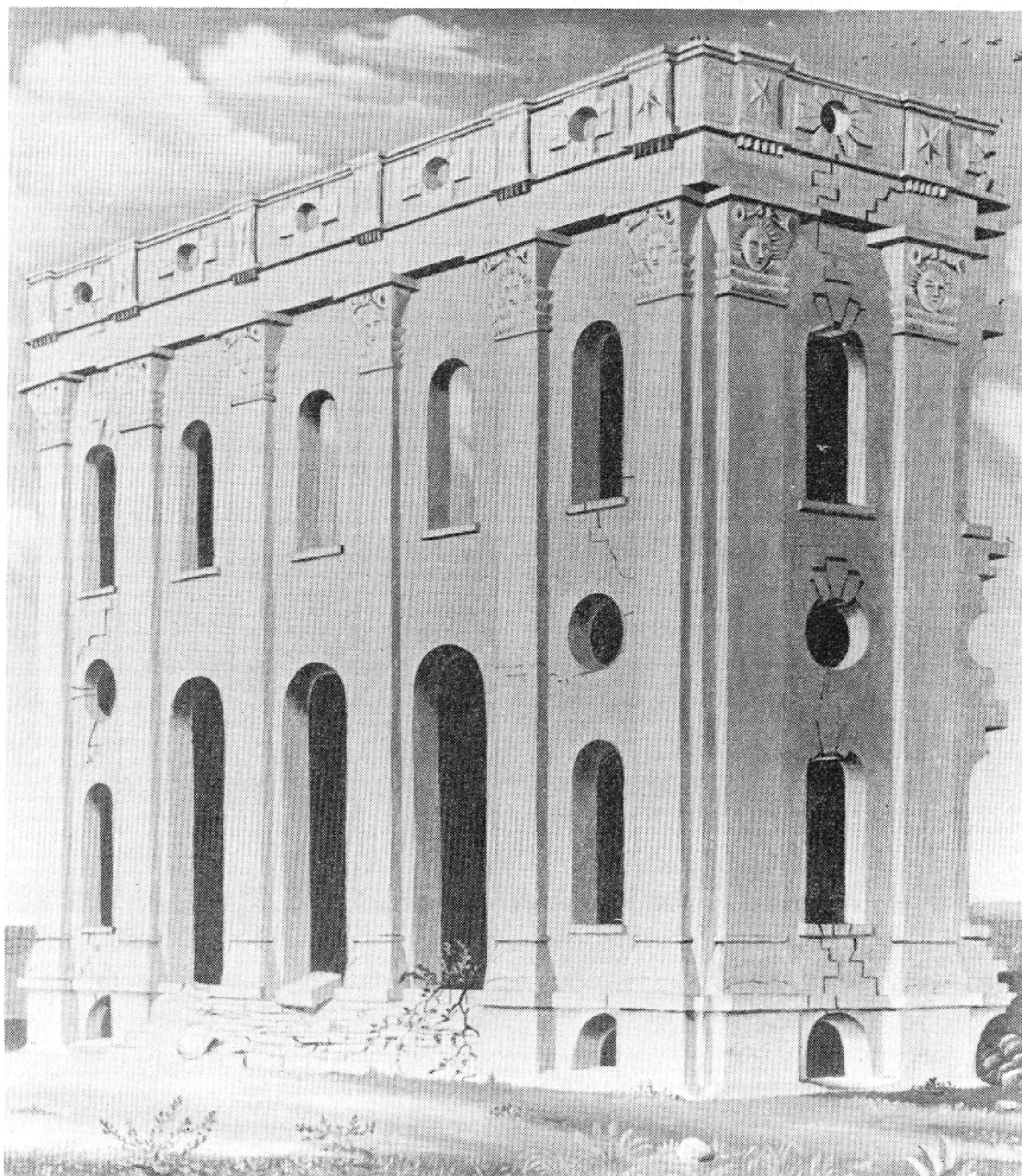
The love all embracing that never can end,
In death, as in life, knew him well as a friend,
The power of, Jesus the mighty to save
Will despoil of its treasure the unknown grave,
No more an unknown grave.⁸

The importance of being the seed of the Prophet was central to David's thinking, and this became more important after 1860 with the Reorganization.

David spent a great deal of time walking the semi-empty streets of Nauvoo and painting pictures of buildings that represented a glory that was past. He was fascinated by the ruins of the

⁷Smith, *Hesperis*, p. 36.

⁸"The Unknown Grave," framed and hanging typescript, Homestead, Nauvoo.



"Nauvoo Temple Ruins," by David H. Smith. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual Department, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Nauvoo House, the unfinished hotel which—begun as a joint stock venture in 1841—was intended to house the kings and princes of the world when they came to Nauvoo to learn of the gospel. It remained unroofed until 1869 when the Smith family remodeled it, and then it served as Emma's home until she died a decade later. "The Nauvoo House" is an oil painting of the unfinished building with Emma and David in the foreground. It is extremely accurate in such details as the formation of the limestone, number of windows, and the general physical setting. This attention to detail is also evident in his "Bend of the River" which illustrates the horseshoe bend in the Mississippi off the south end of Main Street. In the lower right-hand corner is a picnic scene which includes Emma, Rosalinde Newberry, and the artist in his round-brimmed hat with another young girl.⁹ David, like others before him, was fascinated by the remaining wall of the Nauvoo Temple which he also painted.¹⁰

Two of David's paintings have only recently been discovered at Nauvoo.¹¹ One, painted on ship's canvas, is described by a notation on the back as a scene from Hamlet. The woman in the picture clearly resembles David's wife Clara Hartshorn, whom he married 10 May 1870 at Sandwich, Illinois. The painting resembles several drawings in his sketchbook which are inferior to the quality of his earlier paintings.

The other canvas is a strange painting. It was possibly painted as an allegory from a plate in a Bible but with David's surroundings as the setting. His poetry indicates he was influenced by Bible illustrators.¹² It appeared that he sat by the Mississippi between the Nauvoo House and the Homestead using what he saw as a background. Centered in the painting is the Holy Family with everything that is common to it: Joseph, the Babe in swaddling clothes, and the Virgin, who once again resembles Clara. The Nauvoo House is in the right foreground, and over in the left corner are the picket fences of the Homestead. However, the most interesting thing about the picture is the face of the baby. When compared to the family's portrait of Joseph Smith, the Seer,

⁹Lynn E. Smith, grandson of David H., who has a vast collection of David H. Smith's manuscripts and paintings, identifies the unknown young girl as someone named "Emma." Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Lynn E. Smith, Independence, Missouri, 26 November 1974.

¹⁰Frederick Piercy also painted the ruins of the temple.

¹¹In August 1972, Milton Perry, curator of the Truman Museum in Independence, Missouri, and I found two David H. Smith paintings in the Mansion House. They were placed in the back of a closet and no one knew of their existence or background.

¹²Smith, *Hesperis*, p. 30.



"Scene from *Hamlet*," by David H. Smith. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual Department, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

the unmistakable and striking resemblance suggests that his painting is an allegorical representation of Joseph Smith, Jr., as the Savior of the World!

The quality of the painting and the fact that Clara appears in the picture would date it after his illness, which became serious after 1869. David was afflicted with a "Malady" which affected both his mind and body.¹³ His poetry reflects his illness and his inability to cope with a disease he could not understand. He wrote "Thoughts During Fever" while he was hospitalized in San Francisco in 1870.

I think of marble mansions, built in shade,
 with cool verandas, pillared, high and wide;
Where the fountains sparkle in the sunshine, made
 By streamlets creeping down the mountain side;
Through the high windows falls the cold, pale light,
 O'er carpets of soft buff, and darkest blue;
Shielded from dust with linen, clean and white
 Lie heaped cushions of a slately hue.
Between the trees, the green sward slopes away,
 Barred with the sunshine, with the shadows crossed;
Where leaves, like flitting fingers, deftly play
 A Melody, when by breezes tossed.
Small, starry flowers in those shades appear,
 Lifting their quiet eyes with looks of peace;
While faint perfumes upon the atmosphere,
 Are blessed with sweetness that bids sorrow cease.

I see the inmates on kind errands go,
 With quick firm steps of health and cheerful hope,
Or 'neath their finger's genial tasks do grow,
 Bringing no drop of bitter to their cup.¹⁴

Two years later his "I Am Not As I Was" brought home the realization of his decline.

I am not as I was, she said, and bowed,
 The frosts have been upon me; and the wind
Of this world's winter,—stormy, fierce and loud—
 Has touched my forehead roughly; and unkind
The will of fate has been. I once was proud,
 With a sweet pride, and pleasure filled my mind.

¹³There is a debate over the nature of David H. Smith's illness. See F. Mark McKiernan, "The Tragedy of David H. Smith," *Saints Herald*, December 1972, and Letters to the Editor, *Saints Herald*, January 1973.

¹⁴Smith, *Hesperis*, pp. 52, 53.



"Nativity Scene," by David H. Smith. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual Department, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Now I am broken; and the tresses, then
So free and flowing, wander now no more
In their old fashion, but seem dead; and when
I look into my mirror for the eyes of yore
Those of a stranger answer me. Ne'er again
Can I recall the light that shone before.

The fair brief morning of my life is passed;
Its wings of rainbow brightness were too swift;—
A change has crept over my soul at last;—
The clouds hang low that o'er my landscape drift;
The beauty and glory round me cast
By Youth's roseate dreams, begin to lift.

I strive to win again the pleasant thought;
The music only speaks in mournful tone;
The very flowers wear a shade, and nought
Can bring the halo that is gone;
And every company my soul hath sought,
Though crowds surround me, finds me still alone.

I turn unto my tasks with weary hands,
Grieving with sadness, knowing not the cause;
Before my face a desert path expands,
I will not falter in the toil, nor pause;
Only, my spirit somehow understands
The mournful truth—I am not what I was.¹⁵

After it was evident that the family could not longer care for him, David was committed to the Illinois Hospital for the Insane on 10 January 1877. He remained there until his death on 29 August 1904. He was buried in the Rose Hill Cemetery adjoining Joseph Smith III's Liberty Hall in Lamoni, Iowa.

The impact of David's creative genius is still found in Nauvoo. It was there that David expressed the love he found for the things around him. He discovered a secluded limestone waterfall overlooking the Mississippi a few miles downriver from his home, and wrote a poem, "The Woodland Path," about the place that has since become known as "David's Chamber."

Adown the Woodland path, at break of day, I love to roam,
To brush the dew drops from the fresh, green grass;
To hear the wild bird singing in his cool, and shady home,
And watch the painted moths and butterflies go past.
The minnows dart along the stream,
And in the golden sunlight gleam;
The distant hills are hazy like a dream;
And all is fair, adown the woodland path.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 3, 4.

In every nook some sight of beauty wakes a tender thought;
Some flower blooming by some old gray stone;
Or tiny bird's nest with abundant skill and labor wrought;
Or faithful shadow over shining water thrown.
The thickets darkly dense and still,
Where scarce the slender vine leave thrill,—
Unbend, O, brow! and sad heart, take thy fill
Of rest, beside the lonely woodland path.

O, bend above me, honeysuckle, blooming in the wood;
And breathe upon my face thou low, sad wind;
Whose gentle cadences will do my weary spirit good,
While care, and toil, a moment enter not my mind.
The forest brings to me a balm;
Its moving gives my soul a calm;
As if the Spirit of the great I Am,
Came to me, while I roam the woodland path.¹⁶

¹⁶Ibid., p. 22.