

James Arlington Bennet and the Mormons

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Lyndon W. Cook

Of the three Bennetts who crossed paths with Joseph Smith during the Nauvoo period, the one who spelled his name with only one “t” has almost succeeded in escaping the attention of Mormon scholars.¹

Born in New York, James Arlington Bennet was proprietor and principal of the Arlington House, an educational institution on Long Island.² Usually remembered as Joseph Smith’s first choice as Vice-Presidential running mate in the 1844 Presidential election, Bennet began association with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through John C. Bennett about 1841. After several exchanges of correspondence, John C. Bennett was instrumental in appointing James Arlington Bennet inspector-general of the Nauvoo Legion on 12 April 1842, and ten days later he bestowed upon Bennet an honorary Doctor of Law degree from the University of Nauvoo.

An apparent unscrupulous opportunist, Bennet had fantasies which included fame as an author, governor of Illinois, general of the Nauvoo Legion, and successor to Joseph Smith.³

Bennet did join the Church in 1843, but his motives were not founded on faith. He later described his baptism as a mere “frolic in the clear blue ocean.”⁴ Joseph Smith’s friendly correspondence with Bennet seems to have stemmed from the New Yorker’s offer to use his influence in allaying public sentiment against the Mormon people.

In October 1845, when Bennet visited Nauvoo, he notified Church leaders of his intentions to “cross the Rocky Mountains” with the Saints. But after Brigham Young refused to appoint him head of the Nauvoo Legion, Bennet returned to New York. Still unable to leave Mormonism alone, Bennet corresponded with Brigham Young after the Mormon Exodus to the Salt Lake Valley. Bennet apparently envisioned a militarily strong Mormon empire which would demand respect and with which the powers of the world would have to reckon. Mormon leaders in Utah, however, paying little attention to Bennet, refused to reply.⁵

The following letter was written by James Arlington Bennet to Joseph Smith, III, within weeks after the latter assumed the presidency of the Reorganization. In the letter Bennet applauds young Joseph’s announcement, condemns plural marriage, offers his influence in building the new church, and proposes a general creed for the movement.

New York May 6, 1860⁶

My dear Joseph, the Son of my old friend I most sincerely assure you that your Manifesto⁷ pleases me extremely. Had the principles you announce been adopted & adhered to by Brigham Young & associates the Mormons would at this day and before this day have been a great people. When I went to Nauvoo some years since the only family of respectability I found then was that of your own mother.⁸ I was admitted in no where else excepting at the tavern & the residence of the late Dr. Richards.⁹

Your placing yourself at the head of the Mormon Reformation is a matter I approve of and in that position I think you will be supported by all mormons who love Christian doctrines and Christian practice founded on the Bible as well as the Book of Mormon, and who wish to avoid the curse & disgrace of the plurality of wives in a community like ours. The old Sects are fast going to the devil from hypocrisy & vice so a new people like the Mormons must take their place. The Jews have fallen, the Anabaptists have fallen, the Turks are fast going dying out, the pope & his dupes are fast disappearing before the progress of Society & intelligence of the age, and the other Sects are getting fouler every day so that a new dispensation is absolutely necessary for the good of mankind. But I have letters from your father the Prophet leaving me his mantle & his blessing just before his death. This mantle I can throw over you as his legitimate heir to the Spirit of Prophecy. I have the talisman¹⁰ in his head which seals this letter.

I am not aware what property you have in Nauvoo nor indeed do I know whether you live in Nauvoo, but if it were necessary & meet to form a nucleus around which the Saints might congregate I have 160 acres of land in Livingston County, Illinois most admirably located between the Grait R. Roads that I would give for the purpose.¹¹ Here immense Numbers of the Saints would repair from all parts of the U.S. including Utah. Where under your plan their respectability & power would soon be felt. Any quantity of land could be had on the high or Grand Prairie in the Mud Creek Settlement from which an Exodus might be made to a more appropriate place, whether in State or Territory. I think I could manage this business as the Trustees of Washington Cemetery in Kings County, Long Island have by deed agreed to pay me \$400,000 dollars for the land I sold them as cemetery ground within 4 miles of Brooklyn. You would then commence under auspicious which the Saints never before had and would have the best talent & learning among its members that Europe or America could afford. Should your excellent Mother be living give her my best respects as well as to all who would be your friends in this important movement.

1. I propose a pure self denying Religion.
2. Christian humility as set forth in the New Testament.
3. A new priesthood of Course to preach the doctrines of Peace.
4. A new dispensation & demonstration of power under God.
5. The Bible & Book of Mormon as the guides
6. Self reliance without interfering with other persons Creeds

The details of Course to be under consideration in futuro. I have no objection to the assumption that the world belongs to the Saints but they

must wait till they get it, and not prematurely attempt to violate the laws of the country in which they may reside untill they have power to make laws for themselves and others "Submit yourself to the powers that Be"

I expect a reply to this note.

Your friend

J.A. Bennet, Treasurer of the
Washington Cemetery, LI, NY.¹²

Note. President Buchanan has read all your fathers letters to me & returned them with a letter of thanks under Seal of the President of the U States. In the last of these letters your fathers prophetic mantle was given to me. Those letters will be subject to your inspection at any time.

Perhaps the publication of this note might serve your purpose in letting the Mormons know you will have sincere support in your Reformation of Mormon practice. I have little doubt that Utah will be deserted by large Numbers of those who despise polygamy and the despotism which rules there at this time.

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1. The other Bennetts were John Cook Bennett, mayor of Nauvoo, and James Gordon Bennett, editor and publisher of the *New York Herald*.

2. Bennett was born in New York in 1788. Although he informed Joseph Smith that he was born in Ireland and therefore was ineligible to be Vice-President of the United States, James Arlington Bennet was born after his parents immigrated to America in June 1788. (See 1850 Federal Census of New York and James Arlington Bennet to Willard Richards, 14 April 1844, Archives of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter referred to as Church Archives.)

3. Emma Smith, in 1870, referred to Bennet as the "old arch hypocrite" (see Emma Smith to Joseph Smith, III, 21 January 1870, Chicago Historical Society).

4. James Arlington Bennet to Joseph Smith, 24 October 1843, cited in *Times and Seasons* (1 November 1843), p. 371. Bennet wrote: "You are no doubt aware that I have had a most interesting visit from your most excellent and worthy friend President B. Young, with whom I have had a glorious frolic in the clear blue ocean; for most assuredly a frolick it was, without a moment's reflection or consideration." (Ibid.) Bennet was baptized by Brigham Young 30 August 1843, at Coney Island (See Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1932-1951], 5:556.)

5. Bennet letters to Brigham Young are in Church Archives.

6. The original, owned by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, is located in the Auditorium, Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri. Published by permission.

7. Announcement of intent in April 1860.

8. Emma Smith.

9. Willard Richards.

10. The reference of the talisman is possibly to a private seal made by Thomas Brown of New York from carnelian stone and set in gold. The seal was a likeness of the Prophet's head.

11. Land records of Livingston County, Illinois, do not confirm Bennet's contentions (Laura Leslie to Lyndon W. Cook, 12 December 1978).

12. Long Island, New York.