

Mormon Political Involvement in Ohio

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The Mormons in Kirtland, Ohio, like the saints in other Mormon centers during the formative years, were involved in politics. The Latter-day Saints in Ohio were neither recluses waiting for the millennium nor passivists ignoring political and social problems. Active Mormon political participation commenced in Kirtland, Geauga County, Ohio, as early as 1834. There the saints, who had strong political beliefs, enthusiastically expressed their views to the public and actively supported candidates of their choice. Some of these activities added to their trouble.

In fact, wherever the Mormons settled as a group, their political strength became a factor—a secondary if not a primary factor—in anti-Mormonism. For instance in Jackson County, Missouri, the mob objected to the probability of the Mormons gaining political power. “It requires no gift of prophecy,” wrote a member of the mob committee in 1833, “to tell that the day is not far distant when the civil government of the county will be in their hands; when the sheriff, the justices, and the county judges will be Mormon.”¹ After they were exiled from Jackson County, the Mormons gained political ascendancy over all the county offices in Caldwell County following its establishment by the Missouri legislature in 1836.² Later in Illinois the Church’s interests fostered Joseph

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¹From a statement by Robert Johnson, chairman of the mob committee, *History of the Church*, Vol. I, p. 397.

²Leland H. Gentry, *A History of the Latter-day Saints in Northern Missouri from 1836 to 1839* (Provo, Utah: LDS Church Schools, 1965), pp. 85, 86.

Smith's candidacy for the national presidency, only to have him die in 1844 prior to the election. Nevertheless, before the Prophet's death, he laid the ground work for the political kingdom of God on earth. The Council of Fifty—the kingdom's governing body—reportedly supervised the Mormon migration west to the Great Basin, where Brigham Young directed the political affairs of the Saints as the territorial governor from 1850 to 1858. After that Mormon political involvement continued when the Council of Fifty, separate from the Utah Territorial Government, continued as a phantom governmental body waiting for the day (as Governor Young reminded its members in 1863) when that body of men would "give laws to the nations of the earth."³ Moreover, Mormon interest in political issues has continued more or less down to our day.

ANDREW JACKSON AND MORMON POLITICAL VIEW

The Mormons in Ohio first showed interest in national politics when the Democratic president, Andrew Jackson, whom they supported, was forced to act on two vital issues of his administration—those of nullification and the Bank of the United States. In 1832, a year and one-half after Joseph Smith and the New York Mormons had arrived in Kirtland, President Jackson faced the problem of nullification which had been festering since his election; in 1828 Congress passed a protective tariff which proved detrimental to cotton-growing states in the South. The South Carolina Legislature, which took the lead in resisting the effects of the tariff, on November 24, 1832, declared that the federal tariff was invalid within its sovereign boundaries after February 1, 1833. The act of this legislature, if honored, would have given the states power to nullify federal laws to which they would not ascribe and thereby threaten the union of the states. Moreover, South Carolina threatened instant secession if the national government attempted to blockade Charleston harbor or to use force to collect the tax. President Jackson, an avid states righter, but one who opposed disunion, warned South Carolina against nullification and secession. "A high duty obliges me solemnly to announce that you cannot secede," he wrote. "Disunion by armed force is *treason*. Are you really ready to incur its guilt?" questioned the presi-

³"Journal History of the Church," January 19, 1863.

dent.⁴ Notwithstanding this sobering appeal, South Carolina refused to pay the federal tariff, so the president ordered Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie reinforced and revenue cutters dispatched to collect the duties if the federal custom officials were resisted.

South Carolina's threatened secession had relevance in Mormon escatology when it prompted a classical latter-day prophecy—ostensibly, the first reference Joseph Smith made to a national political issue. While the country was under the strain of the nullification problem, the Prophet Joseph Smith received the following revelation on Christmas Day, 1832:

Verily, thus saith the Lord concerning the wars that will shortly come to pass, beginning at the rebellion of South Carolina, which will eventually terminate in the death and misery of many souls;

And the time will come that war will be poured out upon all nations, beginning at this place.

For behold, the Southern States shall be divided against the Northern States. . . .⁵

The following month (with the problem still unsettled) a Church editor, W. W. Phelps, reported that "the dissolution of South Carolina from the Union," along with manifestations of other plagues and disasters, was evidence that the end was near.⁶ In time, Congress' graduated reduction of the tariff schedules placated South Carolina, and she did not secede. But twelve years later, the Prophet added a reinforcement to his prophecy of 1832 when he wrote:

I prophesy, in the name of the Lord God, that the commencement of the difficulties which will cause much bloodshed previous to the coming of the Son of Man will be in South Carolina.

It may probably arise through the slave question. *This a voice declared to me, while I was praying earnestly on the subject, December 25, 1832.*⁷ (Italics added.)

Besides nullification, President Jackson in his campaign of 1832, repudiated the Bank of the United States, the second

⁴Andrew Jackson, cited in Glydon G. Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), pp. 74, 75.

⁵*Doctrine and Covenants*, 87:1-3. For further consideration of Joseph Smith's reaction to the threatened secession and the revelation he received on the impending war see *History of the Church*, Vol. I, pp. 301, 302.

⁶*The Evening and Morning Star*, I, No. 8 (January, 1833), p. 62.

⁷*Doctrine and Covenants*, 130:12, 13.

vital issue of his administration. He argued that the Bank, if continued, would perpetrate an undesirable monopoly which would benefit foreign investors and the privileged American aristocracy. Since Jackson was the first president that came from the American common class, the fact that some of his policies engendered the rise of the common man came as no surprise. After Jackson's re-election, the government withdrew the deposits from the Bank, and the institution's charter was not renewed. This national issue may be the first with which the Latter-day Saints aligned themselves politically. Not only did the Mormons sympathize with the President in his anti-Bank views, but they also opposed the American aristocratic class identified politically with the Whig Party. These differences eventually erupted into political strife between the Mormons and the Whigs.

Some Mormons felt that the evils of the Old-World aristocracy would emerge in America in the form of federal privileges and monopolies under Whig sponsorship; such favors, they feared, would transform "the purest government . . . into the rankest aristocracy."⁸ The Mormons showed their displeasure toward excessive government restrictions not only by protesting against the national bank but also by campaigning against the Whig party. During the weeks before the Ohio state election of 1835, the Mormon political editor reported that the Whig candidates resorted to "great strife" in order

To corrupt and buy until they effect their object in defeating the people, and then impose upon them another monster in the shape of a national bank, or something else as bad or worse, and ensure ever after a free control of offices, credit and money to fatten their own ambition and corrupt the minds of the rising posterity, who, coming up under the guidance of these aristocrats, will think it a virtue to enslave the poor and rivet firmer and firmer the fetters of despotism upon all, to prevent the noble spirit of democracy from rearing its head in a land so famed, so exalted, so blessed!⁹

The Church political editor in Kirtland stated that it was the task of the Democrats, therefore, to defeat the Whigs at the forthcoming state election if the citizens wished to resist encumbering political controls. He added,

⁸*Messenger and Advocate*, III, No. 10 (July, 1837), p. 538.

⁹"The Election," *Northern Times*, I, No. 27 (October 2, 1835), n.p.

A remissness on the part of the democrats may, and indeed will, give the aristocracy their ticket in our legislature, thus subjecting us to whatever scheme of policy their avarice may invent, till we are loaded with shackles [sic] which we can never throw off, and the State disgraced with "life insurance trust companies," till our necks are sore, and we are subjected to live in the society of men who ride over us in gilded coaches, bought with money thus filched from the pockets of the farmers and mechanics!¹⁰

Such statements as "the citizens must burst the shackles of despotism" and "throw off the chains of federalism" continued to appear in the Church's political paper expressing its preference for minimum governmental restrictions.¹¹ Perhaps the most telling available statement that expressed Mormon disapproval of encroaching governmental powers was the following:

To a liberal spirit, a liberal policy, a liberal government, and free institutions, we owe our present safety and our future prosperity. Take from us these, and farewell to American liberty—deprive us of these, and adieu to our blood-bought freedom.¹²

In those days, the Mormon political position was a liberal one, and, unhesitatingly, the saints candidly acknowledged that they were "liberal, not only in a religious, but [also] in a political point of view"; accordingly, they believed a liberal political philosophy afforded a greater assurance of free governmental institutions.¹³

EFFORTS TOWARD A MORMON POLITICAL NEWSPAPER

The Mormons became involved in party politics, however, not only as a means of expressing their political views but also as an avenue to improve relations with their neighbors. This involvement seemed urgent. Since by the fall of 1833 Church members in both Geauga and Jackson Counties had suffered

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Northern Times*, I, No. 28 (October 9, 1835), n.p. Concerning this matter the *Times* further elaborated, "Our democratic friends must remember, that they are not to contest this war [i.e. the election] with swords and bayonets, but with their every vote, safely deposited in the ballot box, which if done, will reverberate in the ears of the federalists of all shapes, grades and descriptions, from Hartford Conventionists, to the factious and unprincipled new-fangled Whigs, louder than the artillery at Austerlitz or Waterloo!"

¹²*Northern Times*, I, No. 27 (October 2, 1835), n.p.

¹³*Messenger and Advocate*, II, No. 7 (April, 1836), p. 295.

considerable anti-Mormon abuse, Church leaders felt that conditions could be improved by establishing a political newspaper in Kirtland in support of the Jackson administration. Joseph Smith wrote from Kirtland to Bishop Partridge in Missouri concerning the matter:

The inhabitants of this country [Ohio] threaten our destruction, and we know not how soon they may be permitted to follow the example of the Missourians. . .

We expect shortly to publish a political paper weekly in favor of the present administration. The influential men of that party have offered a liberal patronage to us, and we hope to succeed, for thereby we can show the public the purity of our intention in supporting the government under which we live.¹⁴

By November Church leaders expected to draw a prospectus for their paper to be known as the *Democrat*. Their plans to publish it, however, did not materialize. This effort was the first of three attempts by the Church to establish a political journal in Kirtland favoring the Democrats. The next year another attempt failed after the printing of a few issues.¹⁵ Then, the following winter the Church editors improved the format of the previous paper and revived it under the title *Northern Times*. Its first issue appeared in February, 1835.

Since religion was thought to be alien to politics, Mormon support of the Democrats angered the Whig press in Geauga County. Therefore, two papers in the county—the *Chardon Spectator* and the *Painesville Telegraph*—editorialized against the Mormons on political issues with an occasional derisive reference to their religion. M. G. Lewis, Whig editor of the *Telegraph*, derogatorily noted the appearance of the *Northern Times*:

The Mormonites in this county, as if weary of the dull monotony of dreams and devotion, of visions and vexation—of profitless prophecies, and talking in *tongues*—have concluded to turn their attention to political matters. A paper entitled the *Northern Times* has made its appearance from

¹⁴Joseph Smith, Letter to Edward Partridge, December 5, 1833. Located in Joseph Smith's Kirtland Letter Book including letters from November 27, 1832, to August 4, 1835, in the Church Historian's Office.

¹⁵When the *Northern Times* appeared in February, 1835, the *Spectator* noted that it had previously appeared as "two little black half sheets, under the same title, just before our late [Fall, 1834] election." *Chardon Spectator and Geauga Gazette*, IV, No. 32 (February 28, 1835), n.p.

their press in Kirtland, bearing the name of O. Cowdery, one of their leaders and preachers, as Editor. The editor breaks forth with a flood of words, filling seven columns under his editorial head—pounces upon the dead carcass of the United States Bank with most Quizotic ferocity—talks about “WIGS”—praises the President—and says, the nomination of Van Buren “we STILL add, would meet our mind, and receive our warm support.” As the editor professes to have communication with the spirits of the invisible world, and certifies that he had seen an Angel, and “hefted” the golden plates of the Prophet, he will be a political anomaly, if not a *dangerous opponent*.¹⁶

Editor Alfred Phelps of the *Chardon Spectator* observed the first issue of the Mormon *Times* with similar ribald humor.¹⁷ Understandably, the two papers took swipes at the Mormon religion whenever they felt the political climate warranted it since the Mormons, as “magicians and soothsayers,” would be at the service of the Jacksonian cause, noted the *Telegraph*, and the *Northern Times* was reputedly at “the helm” of the Democratic Party in Geauga County, reported the *Spectator*.

Demonstrating interest in local and national politics, the Church’s political paper advocated the election of select national, state, and the county candidates. For example, when President Jackson’s second term approached its end, the Democratic Party selected a successor—Martin Van Buren, the vice-president. A whole year before the national election of 1836, the *Northern Times* supported Van Buren’s candidacy, and a running announcement for his nomination for president and Richard M. Johnson for vice-president was carried in the Church paper. When the election was held, however, Van Buren neither carried Geauga County nor the state of Ohio, but he did gain a majority of the votes in Kirtland.¹⁸

The Mormons were not only interested in supporting party politicians, but also in electing their own people to public

¹⁶*Painesville Telegraph*, VI, No. 35 (February 20, 1835), n.p. The editorship of *The Northern Times* was shared at different times between Oliver Cowdery and Frederick G. Williams. Cowdery apparently functioned as the first editor, but Joseph Sudweeks in his *Discontinued L.D.S. Periodicals* (BYU, 1955) credits Williams as editor in May, 1835. His claim seems to be justified because a statement in the *Warren News Letter* (Ohio) noted in June that Cowdery withdrew from the editorial department in favor of Williams filling the office. Actually, there may have been further changes since the available copies of the *Times* in October credits Williams as the publisher.

¹⁷*Chardon Spectator and Geauga Gazette*, IV, No. 32 (February 28, 1835), n.p.

¹⁸*Painesville Republican*, I, No. 3 (December 1, 1836), n.p.

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Kirtland, Oct. 9, 1835.

NATIONAL NOMINATION!!

FOR PRESIDENT,
MARTIN VAN BUREN,
OF NEW YORK.

FOR VICE PRESIDENT,
Richard M. Johnson,
OF KENTUCKY.

"Union, harmony, self-denial, concession,
—every thing for the cause, nothing for men,
—should be the watchword, and motto of the
democratic party."—*Benton's Letter.*

Appointment by the President.
GEORGE WASHINGTON MONTGOMERY
to be Consul for the Port of St. John's,
in the Island of Porto Rico, in the place
of Sidney Mason.

Abolition.

Several communications have been
sent to the Northern Times, for inser-
tion, in favor of anti-slavery—or the
abolition of slavery. To prevent any
misunderstanding on the subject, we
positively say, that we shall have no-
thing to do with the matter—we are
opposed to abolition, and whatever is
calculated to disturb the peace and har-
mony of our Constitution and country.
Abolition does hardly belong to law or
religion, politics or gospel, according to
our idea on the subject.

The Contest.

Next Tuesday decides, for one year,
and perhaps for many, the fate of our
State in point of political standing. The

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office. At first, naturally, their position was weak, but by 1835 they made a special effort to hold a majority of the Kirtland township offices. This caused the non-Mormon citizens "to rally and make an effort," wrote editor Lewis, "which by a small majority, saved the township from being governed by *revelation* for the year to come."¹⁹ Nevertheless, that same year Oliver Cowdery was elected to the state electoral convention for the national election of 1836; later, both he and Frederick G. Williams were elected justices of the peace in Kirtland.²⁰ By 1836 the Saints had undisputed control of the Kirtland township. This success brought the charge by the *Telegraph* that the Mormons gained their political ascendancy by mishandling the township ballots. "Thus it is that this clan of fanatics trample upon the laws of the land," wrote Asael Howe. "Their leaders are proud, haughty, overbearing, grasping at all wealth and political power within their reach." But when they "attempt to rob the people of this country of their political rights . . . it is time for the community to be alarmed," concluded the editor.²¹ He failed to give any evidence for his accusation and expressed chagrin that no other newspaper had reported the alleged balloting irregularity. Nevertheless, the citizens of the county continued to banter rumors about concerning Mormon political ambitions and achievements; one report circulated to the effect that the Mormons intended to control all county offices and elect a member from their own ranks to Congress.²² Doubtless, they would have done it if they could have, but their stay in Kirtland came to an end before such ambitious prospects were realized.

CAUSES OF UNFRIENDLY POLITICAL RELATIONS

Although the details as to the causes of trouble between the Mormons and their neighbors over political matters during the first few years of Mormonism in Ohio are not clear (it is not possible at present to reconstruct the events and neighborhood trivia that molded the setting), it is apparent that there existed an undercurrent of bad feeling between the two groups

¹⁹*Painesville Telegraph*, XIII, No. 43 (April 17, 1835), n.p.

²⁰*Painesville Republican*, I, No. 28 (May 25, 1837), n.p.

²¹*Painesville Telegraph*, IV, No. 4 (January 27, 1837), n.p.

²²E. D. Howe, *Autobiography and Recollections of a Pioneer Printer*, (Painesville) Telegraph Steam Printing House, 1878, p. 44.

because of politics from near the beginning. Before any official Mormon political involvement existed, Oliver Cowdery reported in 1833 that the Mormons in Kirtland were subjects of "abuse and calumny" over a circulation of their interpretation of the Constitution and policies of government. Such a condition prompted him to tell a friend in Painesville that the Saints were suffering under "false insinuations" of a party which cried "blood and murder." Cowdery asserted that these insinuations were drawn up by their political enemies "for no other reason than to feed the mind of the ignorant with falsehoods" in order "to ride into office" their own candidates and thereby control the Mormon citizens.²³ The Prophet, similarly, alluded to this undercurrent when he explained that the Church's decision to print its own political paper was to demonstrate to the public the "purity" of Mormon intention in "supporting the government under which they lived."²⁴ Possibly, the climate of suspicion, at first, was enhanced because of the autocratic nature of the religious government of the Latter-day Saints as evidenced in the fact that the *Western Courier* at Ravenna critically referred to the "Secret Bye Laws of the Mormons" while the *Telegraph* suggested that Mormon adherents who rejected those bye laws would be "expelled as heretics."²⁵ Similarly, the fact that the Mormons functioned as a potential political block also annoyed their adversaries. "Every man votes as directed by the prophet and his elders," reported one Kirtland non-Mormon citizen; others voiced similar complaints.²⁶ Of course, the decision of the Mormons to take partisan sides in favor of the Democrats, naturally, added to the discord.

Conditions grew worse until in 1835 the Mormons felt a need to give their political views wider circulation, to declare publicly their loyalty to the national government—not just to candidates—and to publish an official statement announcing human subserviency to man-made governments. "That our belief, with regard to earthly governments and laws in general may not be misunderstood," began the statement, "we have

²³Oliver Cowdery, letter to Horace Kingsbury, November 29, 1833.

²⁴Smith to Partridge, letter cited in footnote 14 above.

²⁵The *Western Courier* referred to the "Law of the Lord," *Doctrine and Covenants*, 42, cited in *Painesville Telegraph*, III, No. 13 (September 13, 1831), n.p.

²⁶*Painesville Telegraph*, XIII, No. 43 (April 17, 1835), n.p.

thought proper to present . . . our opinion concerning the same.”²⁷ This “Article on Government”—neither presented as revelation nor published as such—was presented to the Saints in conference in August, 1835, then placed in the first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*.

Before the conference of 1835, another source of agitation arose when the fact became known that “influential men” of the Democratic Party had promised the Mormons a “liberal patronage.” With Whig enmity aroused by President Jackson’s use of the spoils system, this report added fuel to the flame. Although the support the Mormons gave the Democratic Party did not benefit them in the form of patronage, political friend and foe viewed the prospect of such a possibility with revulsion. New York’s unfriendly *Evening Star* editorialized concerning alleged spoils promised the Mormons in return for their support:

Being, as his [Joseph Smith’s] disciples all are zealous advocates of General Jackson’s right to appoint his successor, they will of course be immense favorites at the white house; and we look every day to see some of them announced in the *Globe* as having been appointed to some lucrative station. Josy himself will probably have a “foreign mission,” and to speak sober truth, he is about as fit for such an appointment as some of those who have already been thus rewarded for their subserviency to the court favorite.²⁸

Moreover, the *Buffalo Whig* specifically asserted that Van Buren men had promised the Mormons the return of their Jackson County lands for their support in the election of 1836.²⁹ This report did not please loyal party members either, and the Democrats in Geauga County insisted that it was a “malignant slander” and a “base fabrication,” which they were “authorized” to deny.³⁰

Other political matters of a controversial nature occasionally involved the Mormons: the Saints at various times had a reputation of being pro-Masons, removalists, and anti-abolitionists. The presidential elections of 1832 and 1836 included participation of three parties in Ohio; besides the Democrats and the

²⁷*Messenger and Advocate*, I, No. 11 (August, 1835), p. 163.

²⁸*Evening Star* (New York), cited in *Painesville Telegraph*, New Series I, No. 35 (September 4, 1835), n.p.

²⁹*Buffalo Whig*, cited in *Painesville Republican*, I, No. 3 (December 1, 1836), n.p.

³⁰*Ibid.*

Whigs (which included the National Republican Party), the anti-Masonic Party was influential enough to establish a national ticket. The Western Reserve area of Ohio, inhabited principally by people geographically connected with anti-Masonic New York and Pennsylvania, was the stronghold of anti-freemasonry in Ohio. In the fall of 1830, representatives of anti-Masonry entrenched themselves into county offices in Ashtabula, Geauga, and Portage Counties. Since the mysterious death in 1826 of William Miller, a Masonic defector and anti-Masonic publisher, some anti-Masons could not look upon a Mormon-Mason coalition with warmth. Within weeks after the Saints first arrived in Ohio in 1831, E. D. Howe, early editor of the *Telegraph* and a leading anti-Masonic spokesman in Geauga County, became suspicious of a union between the Mormons and the Masons when some "zealous masons . . . beset Jo Smith for 'more light.'"³¹ Since a Masonic press in Palmyra, New York, had printed the Book of Mormon, editor Howe intended to uncover a disturbing resemblance between Masonry and Mormonism. He noted that "both systems pretended to have a very ancient origin, and to possess some wonderful secrets."³²

OTHER PAPERS DISAGREE WITH THE TELEGRAPH

Other papers in the Western Reserve, however, disagreed with editor Howe. For instance, Lewis L. Rice, editor of the *Ohio Star*, insisted that the Mormons were not friends of the Masons at all. "The Mormon Bible is anti-masonic," wrote the editor of the *Star*, "and it is a singular truth that every one of its followers, so far as we are able to ascertain, are anti-masons."³³ The *Gauga Gazette* entered the controversy by reporting that Church leader W. W. Phelps, who had been editor of the anti-Masonic *Phoenix* of Ontario, New York, before his conversion to Mormonism was "one of the most zealous, and self-styled, patriotic anti-masons of his day."³⁴ The *Gazette* stated further:

Here we see Mormonism walking in, close upon the steps of political anti-masonry! How far this is the case in

³¹*Painesville Telegraph*, II, No. 40 (March 22, 1831), n.p.

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ohio Star*, II, No. 12 (March 24, 1831), n.p.

³⁴*Gauga Gazette*, I, No. 25 (May 1, 1832), n.p.

this section, we are not positively informed. In the state of New York, most of the Mormons that we knew were first antis.³⁵

This explanation seemed plausible to the public, and the issue soon died. Though certain members had anti-Masonic sentiments, the Mormons officially neither opposed nor sanctioned the Masonic movement in Ohio; thereby the Church lost a potentially dangerous pro-Masonic identity.

Another controversy occurred when a group in Painesville elicited the support of the Latter-day Saints in a plan to remove the seat of Geauga county government from Chardon to Painesville. Residents of the county initiated the movement for economic reasons. Tortuous roads to Chardon; the county seat's inaccessibility to the harbor at Fair Port on Lake Erie (the main northern gateway to Geauga County); the indirectness of the route from northern communities to those of the south by way of Chardon, which discouraged travel throughout the county and adversely effected commerce and real estate values induced the removal action.³⁶ The Mormons bolstered the movement by sponsoring removalist meetings in Kirtland, by supporting it in the columns of the *Northern Times*, and by circulating handbills and newspaper extras.³⁷ The matter failed to gain sufficient backing, however, and in the summer of 1835, two months before it was defeated in the October election, the Mormons withdrew their support from it. This was done in favor of "other fish to fry," quipped the editor of the *Chardon Spectator*. Although the removal issue did not loom large in political matters, Mormon involvement by invitation in the affair lends support to the fact that the strength of the Latter-day Saint community was sought in political matters.

But some issues did loom large on the political horizon of that period: issues that solicited support—if possible, Mormon support. For instance, the decade of the 1830's brought increased dissension between the North and the South over the slavery problem. Even though there were only six Negro slaves in Ohio in 1830 (and by the same year only a few hundred free Negroes were in the eight counties of the Western Reserve), Cincinnati, a center for Negro immigration into the

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Painesville Telegraph*, I, No. 32 (August 14, 1835), n.p.

³⁷*Chardon Spectator*, V, No. 4 (August 14, 1835), n.p.

state, was the scene of a bloody three-day conflict over the Negro problem.³⁸ Abolition societies were being organized in the North, which were sowing seeds that thirty years later were to grow into the Civil War.

Members of these societies invited the Mormons to participate in the movement, but the Mormons turned them down. The Church political editor rejected repeated appeals to participate with the abolitionists:

Several communications have been sent to the *Northern Times*, for insertion, in favor of anti-slavery—or the abolition of slavery. To prevent any misunderstanding on the subject, we positively say, that we shall have nothing to do with the matter—we are opposed to abolition, and whatever is calculated to disturb the peace and harmony of our Constitution and country. Abolition does hardly belong to law or religion, politics or gospel, according to our idea on the subject.³⁹

Abolitionist lecturers traveled through the states of the North to enlist support for their cause. The Mormons made available a meeting house in Kirtland in 1836 to one itinerant Presbyterian abolitionist lecturer. At the meeting a few citizens courteously, but coldly, received the speaker, who presented his arguments “to nearly naked walls.”⁴⁰ Although a small group of Presbyterians finally supported the lecturer, other inhabitants of Kirtland generally rejected his appeals.

The abolition movement provoked additional concern in the Church, however, when some of the saints requested the Church withdraw fellowship from those members in the South who would not renounce slavery. The Church had enjoyed proselyting success in the Southern states, and a position against slavery would have been detrimental to missionary efforts in the South—notably in Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky—where the Mormons feared an outbreak of persecution similar to the Jackson County trouble. “For you will see,” wrote one Mormon, “that if madam rumor, with her thousand poisoned tongues, was once to set afloat the story that this society had come out in favor of the doctrines of Abolitionism, there would be no safety for one of us in the South.”⁴¹ The Prophet Joseph

³⁸Francis P. Weisenburger, *The Passing of the Frontier 1825-1850*, Vol. III of the *History of the State of Ohio*, ed. Carl Wittke, (6 vols., Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1941), p. 28.

³⁹*Northern Times*, I, No. 28 (October 9, 1835), n.p.

⁴⁰*Messenger and Advocate*, II, No. 7 (April, 1836), p. 289.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, (May, 1836), p. 313.

Smith sensed the precariousness of the situation and took measures to avoid trouble; he and other Church leaders during the spring of 1836 used the *Messenger and Advocate* to voice disapproval of the abolition movement. "I do not believe that the people of the North have any more right to say that the South shall not hold slaves, than the South have to say the North shall," he wrote.⁴² Though he taught that the slave master must treat his slaves "with kindness before God," he cited scriptural justification for slavery, maintaining that the Church would not withdraw fellowship from a member in consequence of his holding slaves.⁴³ Hence, the Church leader shunned another awkward political issue and avoided being entangled in the abolition movement.

POLITICS AND THE GREAT TRIAL

One of the most menacing and potentially dangerous events with an apparent political bearing which occurred with the Mormons in Ohio was a complaint by Grandison Newell, charging Joseph Smith with a conspiracy to assassinate him. Newell, a prosperous manufacturer who lived two miles from Kirtland in Mentor, had demonstrated contempt for the Latter-day Saints by participating in economic boycotts against Mormon workmen and merchants, by threatening a mob attack upon the Mormon community, and by hindering the missionary effort. Because the Mormons suffered from Newell's malevolence, they in return had little affection for the wealthy industrialist. In May 1837, at a time of national economic turbulence when Joseph's popularity even within the Church was beginning to decline, Newell disclosed his intention to prosecute Joseph for masterminding a conspiracy to kill him. To Sidney Rigdon, Newell wrote, "Your bosom associate is the impostor Smith, the impious fabricator of gold bibles—the blasphemous forger of revelations with which he swindles ignorant people out of their hard-earned property."⁴⁴ After expressing his hatred for the Mormon Prophet, Newell presented the heart of his complaint by accusing Joseph Smith of being an accessory to a conspiracy to take his life. To Rigdon he continued,

⁴²*Messenger and Advocate*, II, No. 7 (April, 1836), p. 289.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 291.

⁴⁴Grandison Newell, Letter to Sidney Rigdon, *Painesville Telegraph*, III, No. 21 (May 26, 1837), n.p.

Emboldened by success in his wicked schemes, he [Joseph Smith] hesitates not to use his authority as the revelator of the will of Heaven, to incite his followers to remove those who have opposed his treachery and fraud, by assassination. De-luded and frantic by his pretended revelation, that it was the will of God, that I should be destroyed, two of the saints of the latter day, by concert, and under the express direction of their prophet, this high priest of satan, meet in the night, at a little distance from my house, with loaded rifles, and pistols, with a determination to kill me. But as they drew near the spot where the bloody deed was to be performed, they trembled under the awful responsibility of committing murder, a little cool reflection in darkness and silence, broke the spell of the false prophet—they were restored to their right minds, and are now rejoicing that they were not left to the power of the devil and co-adjutor Smith, to stain their souls with a crime so horrible. While these scenes were planned by the prophet, and promises of great temporal and spiritual good lavished upon these two men, by him, to stimulate them to assassinate me in my own house, in the midst of my family, and in a moment when I was defenseless and suspecting no danger.⁴⁵

Newell's accusation was no idle threat. He registered a complaint with Justice Flint of Painesville, who issued a warrant for the arrest of the Mormon Prophet. Self-appointed individuals in Painesville who organized themselves into an unofficial committee proceeded to Kirtland to apprehend the Prophet and remove him to Painesville for trial. But the posse did not find Joseph in Kirtland. Believing the Mormons had concealed him, the committee demanded the leaders to surrender the Prophet to them. When convinced that Joseph was not in Kirtland, the committee members speculated that he would never return; nevertheless, before the month ended, Joseph returned to Kirtland, prepared his case, and traveled to Painesville accompanied by a sizable entourage of witnesses on Tuesday, May 30. Because the prosecution was not ready for him, the trial was postponed until the following Saturday to provide sufficient time for the state to secure evidence in the case. Then, on June 3, 1837, the trial—advertised as "THE STATE OF OHIO, vs. JOSEPH SMITH, JR. alias THE PROPHET"⁴⁶—was held in the Methodist chapel in Painesville before a crowd of anxious spectators highly anticipating the dis-

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Painesville Telegraph*, III, No. 23 (July 9, 1837), n.p.

closure of "the murderous projects of the modern prophet," as the press in Columbus (the state capital) reported the case.⁴⁷

At the trial, the court heard testimony regarding the charge that Joseph Smith had induced Solomon H. Denton and a Mr. Davis to shoot Grandison Newell in his house in Mentor. Although the alleged confederates had both been Mormons, Davis never wholly committed himself to the rules of the Mormon society and young Denton, who had resided in the Smith home since 1835 while working in the Church printing office, was excommunicated from the Church a few months prior to the June trials.⁴⁸ Other witnesses, including Orson Hyde, Newell K. Whitney, Luke S. Johnson, Warren Parrish, Sidney Rigdon, and Hyrum Smith, responded. Warren Parrish, perhaps the most hopeful witness for the prosecution, a former scribe of Joseph Smith's and a current officer in the Mormon Bank, was having trouble with the Church. Grandison Newell expected Parrish to give incriminating evidence against Joseph Smith, but he was visibly shaken—witnesses reported—when Parrish refused to incriminate his leader but instead testified that he had often heard the Mormon Prophet "exhort his people to do no violence."⁴⁹ If Parrish's testimony pleased the Prophet, not all of the testimonies eulogized him. But the editor of the *Republican*, Horace Steel, reported that the testimonies rather than being detrimental tended "to raise Joseph Smith in the estimation of men of candor."⁵⁰ Nevertheless while charging Joseph Smith a five hundred dollar bail bond and Rigdon, Hyde, and Denton fifty dollars bail each, Judge Flint ordered them to appear before the Court of Common Pleas the following week for further execution of the case.

The verdict at the second trial, which was held in the court house at Chardon, Friday, June 9, and presided over by Judge Humphery, came as a surprise to Newell. Insinuating that Grandison Newell's hatred for the Mormons induced the charges rather than the fear of assassination, Judge Humphrey acquitted the defendant.⁵¹ But unwilling to abandon the case,

⁴⁷*Ohio Statesman*, I, No. 1 (July 5, 1837), n.p.

⁴⁸*Painesville Telegraph*, III, No. 23 (June 9, 1837), n.p. See also *The Return* (Iowa), I, No. 7 (July, 1889), p. 104.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* See also *Elders' Journal*, I, No. 4 (August, 1838), p. 58.

⁵⁰*Ohio Statesman*, I, No. (July 5, 1837) cited the editor of the *Painesville Republican*.

⁵¹*Painesville Telegraph*, III, No. 26 (June 30, 1837), n.p.

the plaintiff carried it to the people in the pages of the *Telegraph* where he reviewed at length the evidence presented at the two trials. "Why did Orson Hyde testify that Smith told him that I ought to be put where the crows could not find me; that it would be no sin to kill me?" he asked.⁵² And he rehashed numerous other points in the case. After Newell's article appeared in the papers, the editor of the *Painesville Republican* posed some questions for Newell to answer: "Why was the trial held in Painesville before Justice Flint, unfriendly to the politics of the Mormons?" inquired the Democrat editor.⁵³ While accusing Newell with fabricating the murder charges not only to persecute the Mormons but also to receive any political advantage the trial would give, editor Steel of the *Republican* said,

Mr. Newell resides in Mentor, about seven miles from Painesville and within two miles of the Mormon settlement, where Joseph Smith, Jr. resides. In preferring his complaint against Smith—why did he depart from the common practice, and drag Mr. Smith and his witnesses through his own town a distance of nine miles from home, to Painesville, when there are two Justices of the Peace in Mentor, where he resides. . . . I asked again, why was Mr. Flint selected to sit in judgment in this case. Those who know the circumstances have reason to say, in answer to those questions, that it was done, first the more to harass the Mormons—secondly, that it was desirable to have it before a man favorable to the complainant's views—and *thirdly, that is was designed to have a political bearing, and the better to affect this object, one who has hitherto been one of the principal leaders of the opposition, was stationed in a conspicuous position during the trial for that purpose.*⁵⁴ (Italics mine.)

A year after the trial, hundreds of Mormons and most of their leaders had withdrawn from Kirtland and other Latter-day Saint centers in northeastern Ohio because of apostasy and mob threats resulting from several causes. The five years of refuge the Lord would have had the Saints enjoy in Kirtland turned into seven, and could have turned into an unlimited number—as the Prophet Joseph Smith thought it might—if reverses from within and from without the Church had not been the Mormon lot. In Kirtland the saints were highly inter-

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³*Painesville Republican*, I, No. 34 (July 6, 1837), n.p.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

ested in, but not fully occupied by, politics as they seemed to be in later years; yet their interest in secular political matters contributed to the turbulent Ohio period. But theological goals were paramount. While reviewing the history of ancient and modern governments before he left Kirtland in the spring of 1837, Wilford Woodruff thoughtfully journalized,

It is equally interesting to contemplate the day that is now at hand and hath already begun in fulfillment of ancient prophecy in bringing the church of Christ out of the wilderness in establishing Israel upon the lands by a Theocratical government in fulfillment of the covenants God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁵⁵

This theocratic government was always the preoccupation of the Latter-day Saints, and if a legitimate use of secular political influence could help them in setting up the godly kingdom, they were not adverse to employ its service.

⁵⁵“Wilford Woodruff Journal,” April 2, 1837.