

The Development of the Joseph Smith Historic Center in Nauvoo

Kenneth E. Stobaugh

In an 1893 letter, Alexander Hale Smith, a son of Joseph and Emma Smith, informed E. L. Kelley, the Presiding Bishop of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, that the Nauvoo House was to be auctioned at an administrator's sale. Alexander wrote, "I haven't for years felt a particle of interest in the old place until of late. I feel we ought to take advantage of every opportunity to get a foot hold there again."¹ This letter is the earliest known indication of interest by leaders of the Reorganized Church in returning to Nauvoo.

Interest began to build, but not without problems. The RLDS church purchased the Nauvoo House and the city block where it is located from Charles Bidamon in 1909,² but later that year a Nauvoo bishop's representative wrote that he was having difficulty getting Charles Bidamon to vacate the premises.³ Soon thereafter the Nauvoo House was empty. In 1915 the Homestead was deeded to the church, and two years later the Mansion House was acquired from Alexander H. Smith's family.

These purchases were the beginning of what is known today as the Joseph Smith Historic Center. This historic center consists of the Homestead, Mansion House, Nauvoo House, Red Brick Store, and Visitor's Center. Additional historic structures owned by the RLDS church include the homes of Sidney Rigdon, William Marks, Aaron Johnson, Hiram Clark, the remaining south wing of the Masonic Hotel, and on Water Street an additional brick home whose builder and original owner are yet to be determined.

The first steps toward preserving the Mansion House, Homestead, and Nauvoo House came in 1918 at a cost of \$3,900. Bishop

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From left to right: the Joseph Smith Stable, the remaining section of the Nauvoo House, and the Joseph Smith Homestead as they appeared ca. 1900, when G. F. Gouley photographed them. The Homestead and Nauvoo House have since been restored by the RLDS church (Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).

Benjamin McGuire of the Presiding Bishopric outlined the work in a May 1918 letter to Nauvoo District Bishop George Lambert:

MANSION HOUSE: Chimneys to be rebuilt above roof. Fireplaces to be opened on ground floor. Roof to be reshingled, and gutters and spouting repaired where necessary. Sills, cornice, siding, window frames, sash, blinds and doors to be replaced where needed, and screens supplied. Clean up yard, fill in old cellar, and repair well. Raze and rebuild barn. Fence around premises not to be built at present. House to be painted white. New floor to be laid in all rooms first floor except dining room, to be decorated throughout, shades hung, electric lights and telephone installed.

HOMESTEAD: Place as now constructed to be rehabilitated, interior and exterior, using new material wherever necessary. South side of that part formerly a log building, which faces river, for the present to have clapboards removed so as to show logs and chinked up. If this is found to be impracticable it can later be finished the same as the other part of the exterior of the building. Building to be jacked up, leveled and plumbed, foundation repaired. Exterior painted white. Interior walls kalsomined.

NAUVOO HOUSE: Basement to be filled in. Wall extending to stone building formerly occupied as office of Judge Bidamon to be repaired, pointed and capped. This small stone building to remain and be repaired. Ground behind wall to be filled in, block graded and wall built along river front, or riprapped as may be found to be most practicable. Interior to be finished as suggested, floors laid and walls plastered where necessary and painted and kalsomined. Attic to be cleaned up. Wall in Northeast upper room not to be plastered but to remain as suggested.

The letter also requested that a suitable fence be erected around the Smith family cemetery.⁴

In 1939, the centennial year of the founding of Nauvoo, RLDS church leaders began making plans for further work on these properties. The objective was to “preserve the cultural, spiritual and religious atmosphere of Nauvoo,” by preserving the presently owned property, restoring the Homestead and Mansion House interiors to reflect the period, landscaping the grounds and placing a suitable memorial at the graves of the Martyrs. Church leaders also considered using the Nauvoo House as a visitors’ center.⁵

Public interest in Nauvoo was developing as well. In 1937 the state of Iowa completed marking the “Mormon Trail” from Montrose to Council Bluffs. By 1939 Illinois completed a twelve-mile scenic highway from Nauvoo south to Hamilton.⁶ Many advocated the development of a state park at Nauvoo. The Mormon Trail across Iowa is now part of a national historic trails system, the scenic

highway is a section of the National Great River Road stretching from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, and the 147-acre state park is used by over two hundred thousand people each year.

In 1940 the Homestead was wired for electricity. Eight blocks of hedge were planted, new sidewalks poured, and other landscaping done. Property contiguous to the Homestead and Mansion House was purchased, including the home of William Marks.⁷ The church leaders' hopes are expressed in a May 20, 1941, letter from Bishop C. A. Skinner to the Presiding Bishopric: "Every time I visit Nauvoo it gives me a broader vision of the possibilities there. No doubt, it will pay to work out a long time program for that place."⁸ Although some church leaders had an idea of what should be done at Nauvoo, additional preservation and restoration work on the buildings was effectively stopped by the outbreak of World War II. However, the efforts to "periodize" the Homestead and Mansion House through appropriate antique furnishings continued. A request made through the church publication, the *Saints' Herald*, invited members to donate furnishings that would fit into the period plan. Several responded by offering various items of furniture, some of which may be seen in the homes today.⁹

The work that brought the Homestead and Mansion House to their present condition began in 1953. The Homestead was raised and a new foundation built under it. The exterior logs were replaced, in order to restore "it as it was."¹⁰ By June 1956, the Homestead was ready to show, even though the furnishings were sparse in some rooms. In the log portion, the only piece of furniture was an old wing chair.

Work on restoring the Mansion House started in 1956. A wall next to the stairway on the first floor was removed. A doorway, evidently closed many years earlier, was opened from the hallway into the ladies' parlor. The current color scheme—white trim, beige siding, and slate grey shutters—was put into effect.¹¹ In 1957 the building was reopened to the public.

By this time the family supervising the restoration had purchased many valuable antiques for both the Homestead and Mansion House. Few antiques have been added in the years since. In addition, the small stone building on the north end of the Nauvoo House foundation was refurbished as an office and information center. The building was used for this purpose for over twenty years. During the 1950s, the RLDS church spent just over \$50,000 on Nauvoo historic properties.¹²

Less was done to the RLDS historic sites during the 1960s. This was the decade of the founding of Nauvoo Restoration Inc.—sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—and the beginning of its tremendous work to preserve a large area of old Nauvoo.

Interest in developing RLDS historic properties more professionally emerged in 1970. Dr. F. Mark McKiernan was employed to do historic research as well as to develop a master plan. Archaeological research began in 1970 with the excavation of the Joseph Smith livery stable at Hyde and Water streets. This research revealed that, as is sometimes the case, written documents must be understood in conjunction with archaeological evidence: Joseph Smith stated that the facility would accommodate seventy-five horses, while the archaeological evidence indicates that the building (which may have had connected corrals) would hold about twenty-five.¹³

Under the direction of Robert Bray of the University of Missouri-Columbia, archaeological work continued in 1971 near the Homestead.¹⁴ The objectives were to locate the remains of the log cabin known as the Summer Kitchen, which was also the first Nauvoo home of Joseph Smith, Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith, and to verify the location of the “secret” graves of Joseph and Hyrum. A 15' x 15' foundation was found a few feet northwest of the original block house. Artifacts on the grade of the foundation indicated that this was the foundation of the Summer Kitchen. The graves of the Martyrs had been discovered after a lengthy 1928 search; the purpose for the 1971 search was to rediscover the remains of the building described in the 1928 report. A standing brick wall was unearthed with a corner at each end.¹⁵ This discovery gave the location, size, and material of the basement where Joseph and Hyrum had been buried in 1844.

Archaeological work continued for several years. The “dig” in 1972 was at the site of the Red Brick Store. The next year’s excavations were at the site where Theodore Turley built his first log home and later a brick brewery. In 1974, the excavation was at the site of the home of Hyrum Smith. The crew moved to the northeast corner of Water and Bain streets in 1975 to determine if that was the location of the *Times and Seasons* building. That site proved to be the location not only of a frame 16' x 32' building where the *Times and Seasons* was published but also of the original brick building where the paper was printed beginning in 1839.¹⁶ Three summers were spent at the Mansion House, another at the site of the William Law house, and an additional one at the Homestead.

Three buildings have been built based on the resulting information. The first to be completed was the Homestead Summer Kitchen. Work on the kitchen started in 1973 and was carried out primarily by students in a historic sites intern program at the Joseph Smith Historic Center. They used nineteenth-century tools and methods as much as possible. By the end of that summer, they had the walls up and half the shingles nailed down. That fall a drawing by David Smith (son of Joseph Smith) came to light showing that the ridge pole of the new building had been constructed the wrong direction. The next summer students removed the top of the building and rebuilt it on its proper line. Chinking applied between the logs was a specially developed mixture of warmtone cement and Nauvoo clay; the mixture looks authentic and has lasted until this day.

As a gift in contemplation of the sesquicentennial of the church, eleven families contributed \$30,000 each so that the Joseph Smith General Store could be rebuilt. This building, known historically as the Red Brick Store, was reconstructed on archaeological information giving the size and the location of rooms as well as the location of stairways and supporting pillars. Pieces of plaster revealed the color of the various walls. Incidentally, it was known as the Red Brick Store because the inside of the first-floor merchandise room was painted a rich red color. The building was dedicated and opened to the public the spring of 1980.

The third building reconstructed was the martyry. This eight-foot-square log building is built on top of a reproduced brick cellar. The building, completed in 1988, helps visitors visualize the events connected with the burial of Joseph and Hyrum.

The last major construction project was a visitor's center. Opened in 1980, it contains two theaters, a museum shop, and a small museum area.

Concurrent with the physical development of RLDS historic Nauvoo was the development of the interpretive program. In the 1920s and 1930s, the guide staff was largely oriented to a missionary-selling, anti-Mormon stance. I have said, on reflection, that it seemed to me that when I was first assigned to Nauvoo in 1959 the purpose of the guide program was "to spoil some Mormons' vacations." For instance, a guide at the site of the graves of Emma, Joseph, and Hyrum would say something like, "We are now standing at the graves of Joseph and Hyrum and of Joseph's only wife, Emma." Now, however, both LDS and RLDS churches are more kindly toward each

other and strive to present historical information that is as accurate as possible.

A big step for the RLDS church toward the goal of eliminating the apologetic curtain that divided Nauvoo was the creation in 1973 of an intern program in historic interpretation. The program emphasizes Jacksonian America and church history. Interpreters are taught to be professionals. All instructional activities are designed to give students a better understanding of life in early Nauvoo. For example, students make soap, candles, and food items at the Summer Kitchen.

Good historic interpretation should create understanding.¹⁷ A restored historic house must be more than repaired plaster and paint. A restoration should also include the living image of the material culture and the spiritual lives of its former occupants, or the historic house is no more than a mausoleum. Thus there is an obligation on the part of historic site personnel to combine artifact and narrative. A good reflection of how the RLDS church understands these historic sites and intends to continue developing them is this concluding statement made in 1975 by then Apostle Reed Holmes:

Historic sites are a very tangible evidence of our history and a remarkable means for conveying the values and heartbeat of yesterday. We are concerned that those historic sites in our custody shall be cared for with an appropriate stewardship. We have come to understand . . . that these historic sites must not be considered as an opportunity to have a captive audience—as an opportunity to simply do our thing in apologetics for our faith, nor to consider them primarily evangelistic tools. Rather, we have come to feel that it is absolutely imperative that we provide there an authentic, genuine experience of the times, the people, and the values represented.¹⁸

NOTES

¹Alexander H. Smith to Bishop E. L. Kelley, May 31, 1893, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f47, RLDS Library-Archives, the Auditorium, Independence, Missouri.

²To Oscar E. Carlstrom, Illinois Attorney-General, March 29, 1926, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f62, RLDS Library-Archives.

³Kenneth Stobaugh notes from RLDS Presiding Bishopric Historic Properties Correspondence Files, copy of notes on file at the Joseph Smith Historic Center, Nauvoo, Illinois; hereafter cited as Stobaugh notes.

⁴Bishop Benjamin McGuire to Bishop George Lambert, May 1918, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f207, RLDS Library-Archives (original paragraphing modified).

⁵ "Progress and Development of General Church Property at Nauvoo," Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f214, RLDS Library-Archives.

⁶ Mormon Trail, 1939, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f213, RLDS Library-Archives; also Ward Christy to Presiding Bishopric, October 15, 1937, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f213, RLDS Library-Archives.

⁷ James Page to Bishop Clarence A. Skinner, July 16, 1940, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f213, RLDS Library-Archives; John Fitzsimmons to Bishop Clarence A. Skinner, August 19, 1940, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f216, RLDS Library-Archives; and G. Leslie DeLapp to Bishop Clarence A. Skinner, October 10, 1940, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f216, RLDS Library-Archives.

⁸ Bishop C. A. Skinner to the Presiding Bishopric, May 20, 1941, Nauvoo, Presiding Bishopric Papers, P54, f217, RLDS Library-Archives.

⁹ Historic Properties: Nauvoo Correspondence, Walter Johnson Papers, P67, f48, 49, RLDS Library-Archives.

¹⁰ Robert Fishburn to the Presiding Bishopric, 1954, in Stobaugh notes.

¹¹ Walter N. Johnson, "Restoration of Nauvoo Homes"; and Sidney C. Moore, Sr., "Our Experience at Nauvoo," *Saints' Herald* 105 (May 19, 1958): 461–63, 464.

¹² Stobaugh notes; and Edwin Robert Fishburn, "Come to Historic Nauvoo," *Saints' Herald* 105 (May 19, 1958): 465–67.

¹³ For the Prophet's reported statement on September 15, 1843, see Joseph Smith, Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:33. Robert T. Bray, *Archaeology at the Joseph Smith Stable, Southwest Corner Water and Carlin Streets, Nauvoo, Illinois* (Columbia: University of Missouri–Columbia, 1971), 17.

¹⁴ Robert T. Bray, *Archaeology at the Joseph Smith Homestead, Nauvoo, Illinois* (Columbia: University of Missouri–Columbia, 1972), 9.

¹⁵ Bray, *Archaeology at the Joseph Smith Homestead*, 69–70.

¹⁶ Robert T. Bray, *Times and Seasons, An Archaeological Perspective on Early Latter Day Saint Printing* (Columbia: University of Missouri–Columbia, 1975), 23–26, 57–59.

¹⁷ Thomas T. Alderson and Shirley Payne Lowe, *Interpretation of Historic Sites* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1976), 146.

¹⁸ *Restoration Trail Forum* 1 (February 1975): 6.