

The Road to Carthage Led West

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There was no one reason for the Mormon-Gentile difficulties in Illinois. In order to adequately determine each pretense relating to the perplexities of the situation, every individual would have to be interviewed in depth regarding his motives for acting as he did. Because the difficulties commenced one hundred and twenty-eight years ago and concluded seven years later, the task, even if desirable, is impossible. However, enough newspaper accounts were written, sufficient diaries and journals preserved, ample letters inscribed and official documents retained that some fairly accurate conclusions can be postulated. That Mormons and non-Mormons were unable to dwell in peace is due to a combination of many factors which, when clearly delineated, reveal that conflict was probably unavoidable, and perhaps inevitable. Those factors which brought about the arrest of Joseph Smith and his confinement in the jail at Carthage, two years later culminated in the expulsion of the Saints from Illinois and their migration to the Great Basin. Thus it will become apparent that even though geographically Carthage was east of Nauvoo the road to Carthage, at least for the Mormons, led west.

Illinois, like other frontier states, had a tradition of lawlessness, and extra-legal groups banding together for a common goal were not uncommon. Elijah P. Lovejoy, for example, in 1838, was taken from his home and killed by a band of men who found his opinions on slavery unacceptable.¹ Joseph Smith's views regarding the Nauvoo Charter, marriage, practical politics, economics and religious doctrine were offensive to many of the Illinois citizenry. The precedent having been established with the murder of Lovejoy, it was comparatively easy to collect a "mob," which delighted in punishing individuals thought to be skilled in circumventing the law.²

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¹John L. Harr, "Law and Lawlessness in the Lower Mississippi Valley," *Missouri Historical Quarterly* (April, 1962), p. 51.

²*Quincy Whig*, July 25, 1840.

Rumors that Nauvoo was the headquarters of a "den of thieves," the center of a counterfeiting ring, and a city filled with ruthless lawbreakers, led to outbreaks against the Saints living in settlements surrounding the Mormon stronghold. It is almost true to say that the Mormons were accused of committing every crime that occurred in Hancock County. Frequently, thieves were apprehended, and on at least two occasions these culprits confessed that they were Mormons acting under specific instructions from the presidency of the Church.³ Vigorous denials by Mormon leaders went unheeded for the most part, and people believed that the Church sanctioned theft if part of the booty were turned over for use in promoting the aims of that organization.⁴ In spite of instruction from the General Authorities condemning such conduct, other "Mormon" lawbreakers seem to have engaged in thievery, believing that such activities were justifiable if committed against Missourians.⁵ Gentiles frequently retaliated, increasing suffering on both sides. These eruptions resulted in Mormon opposition to such illegal Gentile activities producing even greater problems.⁶

The assault on the life of ex-Governor Boggs was used against the Saints; and the fact that the assailant was never apprehended played into the hands of those antagonistic toward the Church, enabling them to continually cast suspicion upon the character of Joseph Smith with little fear of contradiction. That the culprit was not captured also caused many individuals to seriously question the Prophet's moral character. Apparently a large number of people were convinced that he had ordered "the destroying angel" to attack Boggs in fulfillment of an alleged public prophecy which otherwise might not have come to pass. That Porter Rockwell, after al-

³B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), III, 114. *The Wasp*, March 29, 1843.

⁴H. M. Woodyard, John W. Ousby and others to Lilburn W. Boggs, July 24, 1840. Found in the Missouri Historical Society Library, Independence, Missouri. Charles P. Kane, "The Christian Church of Springfield, Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1907), p. 304. Journal of Wilford Woodruff, August 18, 1841. T. W. Nixon to Brigham Young, February 14, 1844, found in the unclassified letter file, Library of the Church Historian, Salt Lake City, Utah. Hereafter referred to as the ULF.

⁵George R. Gayler, "A Social, Economic and Political Study of the Mormons in Western Illinois, 1839-1846." (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Indiana, 1965), p. 52.

⁶*Millennial Star*, September 1842. *The Wasp*, July 31, 1840.

most eight months' imprisonment, could not be convicted even in a Missouri court for the most part went unnoticed, and law-abiding citizens, morally indignant because of the Prophet's supposed disregard for life, believed themselves ethically justified in actively working outside the law in an attempt to punish Joseph Smith.⁷

Newspaper articles written by men such as Thomas Sharp, editor of the *Warsaw Signal*, intensified public resentment against the Prophet and his people. Joseph Smith was said to be an unscrupulous, vile, deceiver of men. Attempts to capture and forcefully return him to Missouri caused the Mormon leader to extend the jurisdiction and power of the Nauvoo City Court, which gave rise to the accusation that he was using this judicial tribunal to circumvent legally constituted authority. The Saints believed that being tried in the Nauvoo municipal court was the only way he could receive a fair verdict and prevent designing men from taking his life. Thus, an institution, which was for the Mormons a symbol of American legal fairness, became in the eyes of many Gentiles an illegal method of frustrating justice.⁸

Americans were for the most part decidedly opposed to large standing armies. Thus, many citizens in Illinois viewed with abhorrence the growing might of the Nauvoo Legion. Each muster, parade, or mock battle caused speculation regarding the ultimate design of its leaders. Rumors accusing Joseph Smith of calculating an attack on Texas, Mexico, Missouri, and even the United States itself, were incessantly printed in newspapers and disseminated by word of mouth throughout the country.⁹ Some individuals believed the Nauvoo Legion would have to be destroyed before it had grown so strong that opposition to it would be unthinkable. Citizens living in Missouri were especially fearful that the Mormons

⁷*Missouri Reporter*, February 5, 1847. Journal of Wilford Woodruff, May 15, 1842. *Quincy Whig*, May 21, 1842. *Iowa Hawkeye*, May 26, 1842. *Native American Bulletin*, July 14, 1842. James H. Hunt, *A History of the Mormon War* (St. Louis: Ustich & Davis, 1844), p. 296. Monte B. McLaws, "The Attempted Assassination of Missouri's Ex-Governor, Lilburn W. Boggs," *Missouri Historical Review* (October 1965).

⁸James LeRoy Kimball, Jr., "A Study of the Nauvoo Charter 1840-1845," (Master's Thesis, University of Iowa, August 1966). *Lee County Democrat*, September 2, 1843; Josiah Lambourn to Brigham Young, January 28, 1845, ULF; *Bloomington Herald*, July 5, 1844.

⁹*Cillicothe Intelligencer*, July 1, 1843; *The Freeman*, July 23, 1842; *Lee County Democrat*, May 14, 1842.

would assault their homes and cities in retribution for the losses they had suffered in that state in 1837 and 1838. At least a few Missourians attempted and apparently succeeded in animating some Illinois citizens whom they united with in actively opposing The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁰

As Nauvoo expanded economically, cities surrounding the Mormon capital shrunk. Such mercantile centers as Warsaw, once a thriving riverport town, suffered in the midst of an economic depression which was believed to be aggravated by the commercial activities of Mormons in Nauvoo. The Saints were accused of promoting immigration, frequently resulting in poor converts arriving in the Mormon capital which tended to lower the economic level of Hancock County. They were also accused of promoting trade only with themselves and of striving to become a self-sufficient community that thought little about their nonmember neighbors. Published accounts, relative to building a dam across the Mississippi River, increased the jealousy of other communities and caused certain individuals to actively contend against the Saints.¹¹

Because of its rapid growth, both physically and economically, Nauvoo was considered by a number of observers to be the most prosperous community in Illinois. Its economic success was magnified when compared to depression-wrought cities in the remainder of the state. Yet many Church leaders, taking advantage of the new national bankruptcy law, declared themselves insolvent. That Joseph Smith allegedly transferred property to friends and almost all his remaining land to the Church caused considerable negative comment, and many people seemed certain that he was deliberately attempting to circumvent the spirit of the law and thus avoid the payment of legally contracted debts. Those holding mortgages or notes signed by Church leaders were wrought up in their feelings and demanded payment but were checked by the law. The Prophet and others justified themselves by contending they had lost land and property in Ohio and Missouri for which they had received no remuneration and argued that if the Missourians

¹⁰Joseph E. Arrington, "Destruction of the Mormon Temple at Nauvoo," *Journal of Illinois State Historical Society* (1947), p. 415. *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 10, 1844. *Logansport Telegraph*, July 30, 1842.

¹¹*Davenport Gazette*, June 15, 1842; *The Wasp*, February 6, 1842; *Times and Seasons*, February 1, 1841.

would pay the \$300,000 owed to the Saints, they would gladly pay their obligations; but since no one seemed ready to make reimbursement there was little they could do but declare themselves bankrupt. Still, many people seemed certain that somehow leaders of the Church were not as honorable as they might have been in meeting their financial obligations. One report even stated for fact that Joseph Smith had amassed a fortune of just short of a million dollars. With this kind of publicity circulating it is not difficult to see why economics was at the root of some of the Saints' problems in Illinois.¹²

Certain Mormon doctrines, not thought to be compatible with the American religious tradition, also caused conflict in Hancock County. Many Americans were trinitarian in their concept of God, though they frequently declared in their creeds that God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost were three persons in one substance; yet they were said to be not three gods but one God. It is true that a few Americans, such as Thomas Jefferson, believed this doctrine was a numerical impossibility; still most Christians were content to leave the complexities of the three-in-one doctrine for the theologians to unravel. Thus when Joseph Smith publicly preached the unusual plurality of gods doctrine and declared that God was once a man, many individuals thought his teachings blasphemous.¹³ This provided them with a moral justification for opposing the Mormon leader. Such doctrines as the gathering, scriptural authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the Hebraic chosen origin and quality of the American Indian (taught soon after the Black Hawk War), the secret nature of the temple ceremony, and the temple itself, all caused the various people to actively oppose the Saints. Even the Prophet's own followers found some of his teachings to be more than they could accept

¹²Joseph Smith to H. R. Hotchkiss, May 13, 1842, located in Illinois State Historical Society Library; Charles Ivins to Hyrum Smith, August 22, 1842, ULF; *Bloomington Herald*, December 10, 1841; *The Illinoian*, August 14, 1841.

¹³*The Western Atlas and Saturday Evening Gazette*, August 4, 1841; Henry Caswell, *Mormonism and Its Author* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1851), pp. 4-5; John Thomas, *Sketch of the Rise, Progress and Dispersion of the Mormons* (London: Arthor Hall and Company, 1849), p. 6; Henry Mayhew, *Life Among the Mormons* (New York: Hurst & Co., 1850), p. 376; B. G. Weidgill to Joseph Smith, May 29, 1844, ULF; Report of S. W. Richards to Brigham Young, February 10, 1845, ULF; Pastoral Letter of Bishop Chase, January 3, 1843, found in the Illinois State Historical Society Library, Springfield, Illinois.

and caused them, in part at least, to declare he was no longer a prophet of God.¹⁴

Because polygamy was unannounced yet practiced, credence was added to John C. Bennett's claims that spiritual wifery was practiced by the Saints. When others published accounts of the existence and practice of plural marriage in Nauvoo, even more suspicion was cast upon the Prophet's character. Men repeatedly charged the Mormon leader with attempting to seduce women in Nauvoo. Nancy Rigdon, Martha Brotherton, Robert Foster, William Law, and Francis Higbee published affidavits accusing Joseph Smith of engaging in immoral activities.¹⁵ Charges and counter-charges were publicly presented and people seem to have been led to conclude that where there was so much smoke, a genuine fire must be smoldering.

Joseph Smith was perhaps not as perceptive in the selection of friends and subordinate leaders as he might have been. At first, at least, a pretended friend, forceful leader and prominent citizen, John C. Bennett, for example, after his immoral activities were exposed, became a dedicated enemy, a vigorous antagonist, and an effective inciter of public sentiment. He accused Joseph Smith of being immoral and contended that he was no longer suitable to receive communication from God.

With the founding of Nauvoo a new group of men replacing the Whitmers, Oliver Cowdery, and Thomas B. Marsh became prominent in the Mormon hierarchy. Besides Bennett, William and Wilson Law, William Marks, Robert Foster and others influenced the Prophet and seemed to be the most eminent figures in the Mormon capital. They were strong-willed, active, energetic individuals who, after 1843, opposed Joseph and Hyrum in almost everything they attempted to do. In the spring of 1844 they came out in open, unreserved opposi-

¹⁴*The Painesville Telegraph*, September 13, 1841; *Fort Madison Courier*, November 13, 1841; *The People's Miscellany and Illinois Herald*, July 27, 1842; *The Western Atlas and Saturday Evening Gazette*, February 20, 1841.

¹⁵For information regarding plural marriage in Nauvoo see Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *The Historical Record*, VI, May 1887, 219; *The Warsaw Signal*, April 25, 1844; Benjamin F. Johnson to George S. Gibbs, July 1, 1911, copy in possession of the writer; Private Journal of Joseph L. Robinson, copy in possession of the writer; Martha Hall to her mother, June 16, 1844; Narrative of Mrs. Franklin D. Richards, found in Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California; Memories of Harriet Decker Young, found in Allen Gerber Collection, Brigham Young University; Diary of Eliza R. Snow, found in the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California; Diary of Mary N. Barzee Boyce, found in the Allen Gerber Collection, Brigham Young University Library.

tion to the Prophet's economic policies, his secret marriage system, his so-called dictatorial powers, and many of his more radical religious doctrines. Several of these men lectured against Mormonism and met with Mormon-haters, attempting to advance their own designs and to oppose those of the Prophet.¹⁶

Organizing together with others in Nauvoo until their group had a membership of approximately two hundred,¹⁷ these excommunicated leaders held their meetings and formulated plans to take the Prophet's life. That he was spared was largely due to the courage of the "nightwatch" who constantly guarded his home and person and to the loyalty displayed by two youths who attended the meetings of this group and reported its activities to Joseph Smith. Following their excommunication many of the "conspirators" organized together to form a new church actively attempting to win Mormon converts.

A large number of people believed the charges leveled against the Prophet by former members of the Mormon hierarchy and seemed to have become convinced that the Saints were a group of unlearned, licentious dupes, unable to think for themselves, following blindly a religious dictator who violated the separation of church and state, religious liberty, economic freedom, private property, and the sacred structure of society itself—the family. It is almost impossible to lay too much stress on the part these former Mormons played in arousing people against the leaders of the Church and actively engaging in anti-Mormon activities themselves.

Numbers alone dictated that the Saints would be a political power in Illinois. They used this puissance to elect their friends and vanquish their antagonists. Joseph Smith declared that he cared not a fig for Whig or Democrat, and served notice that Mormons would disregard party labels and cast their ballots for candidates who would actively encourage programs beneficial to the Mormon people.

The Whigs, by 1841, began to denounce the Saints and their leader publicly because aspirants who received the Mormon vote almost always seemed to wear the Democratic label. Re-

¹⁶Journal of William Clayton, no. 28, p. 18, original in the Library of the Church Historian, Salt Lake City, Utah; Document of D. B. Huntington, ULF; *Alton Telegraph and Democratic Review*, July 30, 1842; Dr. Robert Foster to Joseph Smith, July 16, 1842, ULF; *Davenport Gazette*, July 21, 1842.

¹⁷Horace Cummings, "Conspiracy in Nauvoo," *Contributor*; Diary of James Flanagan, August 1, 1843, original located in the Library of the Church Historian; *Iowa Standard*, October 19, 1843.

peatedly Whig newspapers denounced this attachment the Saints seemed to have for Democratic candidates and accused Mormon leaders of involving themselves in "unholy alliances" with that party. Finally Whig leaders met with anti-Mormon Democrats and others who disliked the Saints' political power, and within a few days the birth of the Anti-Mormon Party became a reality. Politics thereafter were largely conducted on the basis of a candidate's being for or against the Saints. Leaders of the Church attempted to minimize the growing number of Mormon voters and even made serious efforts to camouflage the baptism of two county commissioners. When anti-Mormon candidates for the most part defeated their pro-Mormon opponents in 1841, some observers believed Mormon political power had been greatly exaggerated. Yet immigration by August of 1842 augmented the Mormon population in Hancock County so that by voting solidly for the same candidates the Saints were able to dominate the politics of that region. After the death of Snyder, the Democratic candidate for governor, the Whigs charged that Judge Thomas Ford was not only the Democratic nominee for the state's highest office but the Mormon candidate as well. The Democrats retaliated by declaring that the Whig standard-bearer, Joseph Duncan, had sought for and failed to receive Mormon support, and this was the reason for the Whig outcry of supposed "righteous indignation." Duncan had obtained the services of Joseph Smith as his Nauvoo real estate agent in an attempt to garner the Mormon vote, causing Democratic leaders to accuse him of using unethical campaign practices. The "disclosures" of John C. Bennett probably caused Duncan to deliver a series of mildly anti-Mormon discourses toward the end of the campaign which probably cost him the support of many Saints. However, Judge Ford would have won the election without a single vote from a Latter-day Saint. Still, disgruntled Whigs and anti-Mormons in Hancock County seemed to have believed that the Saints were the source of all the political ills that could be imagined. Following the 1842 election the Anti-Mormon Party was formally revived, after suffering what was thought to be an untimely death subsequent to its success in the 1841 election. This party proved ultimately to be one of the most decisive forces in causing the death of the Mormon Prophet and the migration of large numbers of his followers to the Great Basin.

When Church leaders learned through a series of letters that the leading candidates for the presidency in 1844 would not seriously consider nor actively strive to achieve financial compensation for the Saints in payment for personal deprivations accrued while living in Missouri, Joseph Smith was sought out and nominated for the office of president of the United States. In collaboration with W. W. Phelps and John M. Bernhisel, he wrote a platform frequently referred to by Mormons as being one of the most statesman-like documents constructed since the farewell address of George Washington. Non-Mormons were not as complimentary, and the Prophet's "Views on the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States" was called by one newspaper reporter, "A conglomeration of hope mingled with fear that would agitate the whole nation and cause the earth to quake and the sea to heave beyond its bounds." Yet a careful examination of Joseph Smith's political thoughts reveals that it is difficult to demonstrate effectively that he was a uniquely different political theorist. For the most part his concept of government was not a "conglomeration of hope mingled with fear" nor was it "incomprehensible"; on the contrary, it represented the main current of early nineteenth-century American political thought. However, his platform, energetic campaign, and seeming earnestness in doing all he could to acquire the nation's highest office aroused the public against him. Meetings were convened, arguments presented, conclusions reached and individuals selected to prevent the Prophet from ever taking the oath of office, should he by some miracle be elected. It is highly probable that in spite of the determined efforts of "ordained" political campaigners, the Mormon leader would not have received a single electoral vote. That Mormons were aware of this is indicated by the careful examination of documents and instructions given to Lucian Woodworth (incorrectly referred to by Dr. Robert Bruce Flanders as being a non-Mormon), wherein he was to negotiate a treaty with Texas and Mexico for land between the two countries so that the Mormons could establish an independent nation of their own.¹⁸ Plans were also underway, should Woodworth fail, for a general migration to the West.

Antagonism toward the Mormon Prophet was further incited when it was correctly rumored, that he had been or-

¹⁸George Miller to the *Northern Islander*, June 27, 1855.

dained "King over the Immediate House of Israel" by the Council of Fifty.¹⁹ This action was wrongly interpreted by non-Mormons to mean that he was going to attempt to overthrow the United States government by force. In reality the Prophet was establishing a political organization that would remain in effect in a state of limbo until commanded by Christ to function as an aid in ushering in the millennial reign of the King of Kings. Still newspapers and tracts repeatedly charged that the Prophet conducted himself like a dictator and that his actions were not only treasonable but a violation of the constitutional principle that church and state should be disassociated. Thus, his kingly ordination only incensed the populace, and his untimely death became even more inevitable.

The Prophet's mayoral order, with the consent of the city council, to destroy the *Nauvoo Expositor* became the immediate excuse to stamp out his life. That he was opposed to freedom of the press was the moral justification for legal action against him and his brother. Even though the council's decision had precedence in United States and English legal history, as has been so effectively demonstrated by Dallin Oaks in terms of the historical situation in which it was rendered, the order to destroy this anti-Mormon newspaper was certainly a mistake. Thomas Ford ordered the Mormon leader to appear in Carthage for trial and gave personal assurance that he would be safe. But following his arrival in what was probably the predominant anti-Mormon city in the state, the governor found himself powerless to placate the mob that had gathered in the guise of the state militia. Ford traveled to Nauvoo, and before his return to the county seat the deed was done and the Mormon prophet was a memory that would grow and increase in significance with the passage of time.

Apparently the Prophet Joseph was convinced that belonging to the Masonic order might protect him from an experience similar to the one he had endured with his followers in Missouri. Yet, an overenthusiasm for the Masons caused members of that organization to engage behind the scenes in bringing about the death of the Mormon brothers. It is at least probable that Joseph Smith's last words, thought by some to be the first

¹⁹Diary of George A. Smith, May 9, 1844, copy in the Library of the Church Historian; document dated February 6, 1844, ULF; George Davies, *An Authentic Account of the Murder of Joseph Smith* (St. Louis: n.p., 1844); *The Expositor*, June 7, 1844.

part of the Masonic distress signal, were ignored by Masons in the "mob" that took his life because he had broken his Masonic vows. At the time of his death the Prophet was charged with initiating women into the Masonic order, with attempting to seduce Master Masons' wives and daughters and finally with imitating Masonic ritual in his own temple endowment. That he was innocent of most of these charges did little to stem the tide against him. Joseph Smith had not initiated women into the Masonic order, though he had given many Mormon women their endowments as part of the Mormon temple ceremony. The alleged seduction of Master Masons' wives and daughters stemmed from the practice of plural marriage; however, in each case a marriage ceremony was performed, thus rendering the Mason charges groundless. That part of the temple endowment which was similar to Masonic rights was defended by Joseph Smith, stating that a part of Masonic ritual was a corrupt or apostate form of the endowment. His cry, "Oh Lord my God," seems to have aroused no sympathy; and shortly after uttering this portion of the Masonic distress signal, he fell to the ground a dead man.²⁰

Perhaps in retrospect both Mormons and Gentiles were partly to blame for conflict which developed between them. The Mormons were sometimes boastful of their political and economic power. They frequently declared they were the chosen people of God, and tended to trade in a commercial way only with themselves, to promulgate a large army and to engage in a marriage system thought to be adulterous by the Gentiles. On the other side, the Gentiles blamed the Mormons for almost every crime committed in Hancock County, said Joseph Smith was a dictator, and believed themselves justified in opposing him without really waiting to determine the truth or falsity of the numerous accusations against him.

Because they believed the rumors regarding the Mormons, the Gentiles organized into anti-Mormon groups, passed reso-

²⁰S. H. Goodwin, *Mormonism and Masonry: A Utah Point of View* (Salt Lake City: Grand Lodge F. & A. M., 1925); Diary of Oliver B. Huntington, typed copy in Library of the Church Historian; Jack Adamson, "Treasure of the Widow's Son" (unpublished paper in possession of the writer); Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis Inc., 1945), pp. 11-12; Robert Glenn Cole, "Highlights of Illinois Masonry," *Masonic Gleanings* (Kable Printing Co., 1956), pp. 190-191; Handwritten copy of the proceedings of a meeting held in 1842 in Jacksonville, Illinois, by Henry Sherwood dated 1844, ULF.

lutions, petitioned the governor, and finally concluded to drive the Saints from the state. The Mormons, still mourning the loss of their Prophet, having almost completed the temple as a monument to their slain leader, met with Gentile leaders and agreed to leave Illinois without further bloodshed. Warrants pending for the arrest of Brigham Young and other leaders on charges of counterfeiting were among the reasons for the early departure of the Saints from the "city of Joseph" in February rather than in the spring as originally proposed.

A religious people that had entered Illinois in 1839, homeless, destitute, and sorrowing for loved ones left buried on the northern Missouri plains were once again in 1846, homeless, without sufficient food and grieving because of two silent graves containing the bodies of their founder-prophet and his patriarch-brother. Little did they realize the number of graves that would dot the trail from Iowa to the Great Basin and the conflict they would experience before peace was attained and their children became a respected part of American religious life in the twentieth century.