

The Missouri Context of Antebellum
Mormonism and Its Legacy of Violence

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The Mormon Church's sojourn in northwestern Missouri in the 1830s is an interesting story but not a happy one. It reflects poorly at one point or another on virtually all of the actors involved.

Yet despite its troubles in Missouri, Mormonism has since become America's most successful indigenous religion. As of May 2007, the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claimed nearly thirteen million adherents worldwide. Its smaller sibling, the Community of Christ, which has its headquarters in Independence, Missouri, claims an additional quarter of a million. Many thousands of these church members, of course, live peacefully in the very region their nineteenth-century forebears experienced such trouble.

It is a commonplace that history is written by the winners. The vanquished are described as deserving their fate, or their concerns or claims are marginalized or forgotten. Surely those who regarded Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt as heroes have had a more influential voice than those who championed Jefferson Davis and Herbert Hoover.

But generally speaking, it is the losers in historic strife who have the longer memories, especially if they are "a people." Most Americans remember that the United States saved England and Europe's "bacon" in World War II, and then again, afterwards, with the Marshall Plan. Fewer Americans are aware that the United States sent troops to help overturn the Mexican Revolution in 1914 and the Russian Revolution between 1918 and 1920. Even fewer Americans remember that the CIA organized the coup that put the shah of Iran on the throne in 1953 or arranged for the democratically elected Guatemalan

government to be overthrown in 1954. However, the Mexicans, the Russians, the Iranians, and the Guatemalans all remember. African-Americans still carry a consciousness and personal sense of injury about slavery that mystifies some whites, even as some prideful white southerners continue to uphold the “Lost Cause,” calling the Confederate flag an emblem of heritage, not racism.

In this framework, the unhappy transit of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is unusual. Mormon Church members unsurprisingly have the stronger knowledge of the history than do non-church members who live in Missouri. Every Mormon schoolchild of faithful parents knows the part the state played in the divine drama of the early church. It is hard to forget that the governor of a state ordered the banishment or extermination of your ancestors, or that the founder of your church was ordered shot by a Missouri firing squad, a sentence commuted at the last minute only to leave him to languish in jail without a trial. Dozens of church members, however, died in Missouri and nearly all lost their property.¹

At the same time, the Mormons have proven the historical winners—both as a successful people and in the writing of this chapter in American history—at least mostly so. Initially church members interpreted what happened to them in Missouri as religious persecution, pure and simple. For some Mormons that remains the interpretation. But if bigotry is the answer, we need to understand why. Reducing the problem to evil’s opposition to God’s chosen people is not a satisfactory answer for historians. Beginning about forty years ago, many church scholars have attempted, often with great insight, to discuss these matters in a more sophisticated fashion. Since then a veritable army of historians have numbered the hairs on the prophet Joseph Smith’s head and performed a study on his words during the 1830s, but few have looked at the church through the eyes of those who opposed its settlement in Missouri. Non-Mormon historians largely have not taken it up as an academic problem, nor is there a constituency of non-Mormon descendants clamoring for an explanation of the governor’s “extermination order” or the massacre at the Mormon settlement known as Haun’s Mill.²

If we really want to understand why Mormons and western Missourians hated each other in the 1830s and continued to fear and distrust each other into the twentieth century, we must reach deeper into the non-Mormon culture of the era and bring a more sophisticated understanding of Mormonism into that environment. Let me offer some ideas on approaching the task.

Here is Joseph Smith’s classic observation about Missourians as the Mormons encountered them in 1831: The Mormons, he said, “coming from a highly cultivated society in the east” naturally observed “the degradations, leanness of intellect, ferocity, and jealousy of a people that were nearly a cen-

tury behind the times,” and “roamed about without the benefit of civilization, refinement and religion.” The Saints found the Missourians’ habits repugnant. Relatively abstemious in their own behavior, the Mormons recoiled from their neighbors’ addictions to horse racing, gambling, drinking, and swearing. Another Mormon leader, W. W. Phelps, observed in an account he sent to a New York newspaper in late 1831 that the southerners who had settled the area held to “customs, manners, modes of living and a climate entirely different from the northerners, and they hate Yankees worse than snakes, because they cheated them or speculated on their credulity with so many Connecticut clocks and New England notions. The people are proverbially idle or lazy, and mostly ignorant; reckoning nobody their equal to themselves in many respects, and as it is a slave holding state, [and] Japheth will make Canaan serve him.”³

Both Smith and Phelps were trying to explain and win sympathy for their troubles from non-Mormons back east, but they were not making things up. Here is how a nineteenth-century Clay County historian described the area’s first state senator in 1826: “The successful candidate in 1826 was Martin Palmer . . . who lived on Fishing River . . . Palmer was a ‘statesman’ somewhat of the David Crockett species, uneducated, illiterate and uncultivated, but possessing natural good sense, a considerable amount of shrewdness, and an acquaintanceship with the ways of the world.”⁴

“Uneducated,” “illiterate,” and “uncultivated”: One man’s degraded intellect, living a hundred years behind the time, was another’s Davy Crockett, one of nature’s noblemen. When the Mormons encountered them, these “old settlers,” as they were called, had lived in the region less than ten years. Many of these immigrants had, in fact, come about the same time as the Saints. European and American settlement in what was to become Missouri in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century clung to the Mississippi River. But by the conclusion of the War of 1812, the Indian menace to interior migration had ended. The agriculturally rich Missouri River bottomland that stretched across central Missouri to the territory’s western boundary proved a magnet for land-hungry settlers, culminating in the land rush of 1819. This settlement, which began in Howard, Saline, and Boone Counties, worked its way west, reaching the western counties in the 1820s: the legislature formed Lafayette County in 1820, Clay County in 1822, and Jackson County in 1826. By 1830, Lafayette had a population of 2,912; Clay had a population of 5,338; and Jackson 2,823. As small as these numbers seem to us today, the population was growing very fast.⁵

Most of the immigrants to the western Missouri River valley came from the Upper South—Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The endless parade of caravans flowing along the central-west ribbon across the state

led the famed Baptist missionary, John Mason Peck, to declare, “Kentucky and Tennessee were breaking up and moving to the ‘Far West,’” as the area was then known.⁶

Initially, living conditions on the western frontier were quite primitive.⁷ Most settlers began as subsistence farmers, raising swine for cash and living in single-room log houses. Within a decade, however, the cabins had been replaced by white frame houses for most, brick homes for the wealthy. Late-comers to the region often took up tenant farming, which was recognized as a temporary condition in this economically mobile region and bore no social stigma.

These new immigrants, thus, were not hunters, trappers, or, except at the very beginning, mere subsistence farmers. They did not come as squatters to escape the growing civilization back east. Rather, they were enthralled by a single-minded pursuit of economic gain. By the early 1830s, many had made the switch from subsistence to commercial farming. As immigrants from the Upper South, they tried to duplicate the agriculture of their home states—sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Cotton growing, for example, was a notable failure, while tobacco and hemp growing proved successful. During the early years of settlement, the region’s farmers shipped their produce to New Orleans for national and international distribution. As time passed, however, St. Louis became their end destination and the region’s economic future in the years before the Civil War became firmly linked to that economically booming city.

Emulating the agriculture of the Upper South brought other consequences. Tobacco and hemp growing was hard, dirty, labor-intensive work that fueled the demand for slaves. When the Mormons met Missourians in the 1830s, few of the old settlers owned slaves but they aspired to, much as most Americans aspire today to owning their own home, a car, and other attributes of economic success. Slave ownership both served as such a symbol and promised greater wealth. The Missouri River counties stretching from Boone County to Jackson County (Columbia to Kansas City) at the state border would become the state’s “Black Belt,” with African American slaves making up about 24 percent of the population by 1850.

Yet as rooted as slavery became, it rarely approached the scale found on the large plantations of the Deep South; typically slaveowners held only a few slaves and they worked alongside them in the fields. By 1850, Jackson County’s slave population had reached 21 percent; in Clay County it had reached 27 percent; in Lafayette County it had reached 34 percent, the highest of any Missouri county.

Eventually those from the Upper South who moved into the western Missouri River Valley proved economically successful, the region becoming the

most prosperous agricultural area in the state. But when the Mormons started moving in the 1830s, they had just begun setting down the rudiments of political or social organization.

This essay began with the unflattering characterizations of Missourians by the Mormon prophet and William Phelps. The Missourians, for their part, had no higher respect for the Saints. In 1833, one anti-Mormon spokesman declared that “each successive autumn and spring pours forth its swarm of Mormons among us, with a gradual falling of the character of those who compose them.” Samuel D. Lucas, a rabid Mormon-hater who would hound the church throughout the decade, was more rhetorically violent, terming the Saints a “mass of human corruption” and a “tribe of human locusts” who “from their pestilent hive in Ohio and New York” threatened to “scorch and wither a goodly portion of Missouri.” One anti-Mormon manifesto claimed that if the Saints “had been respectable citizens in society and thus [religiously] deluded, they would have been entitled to our pity rather than to our contempt and hatred; but from their appearance, from their manners, and from their conduct since coming among us, we have every reason to fear that, with but very few exceptions, they were the very dregs of that society from which they came, lazy, idle, and vicious.”⁸ It has a familiar ring. Note that, like the Mormons, these writers have in mind an audience beyond their own community and are trying to explain their hostility to the church.

The basic outline of what happened when the Mormons settled in Missouri is well-known: the violent expulsion from Jackson County in 1833, the expulsion from Clay County in 1834, the creation of Caldwell County as an Indian-style reservation for Mormons in 1836, and finally the Mormon War, in which Governor Lilburn Boggs, a citizen of Jackson County, issued his famous extermination order expelling church members from the state in 1838.⁹

Historians have explored the effect of the church’s violent transit across Missouri, from the psychological effect on the Saints to more practical matters, like the subsequent creation of the Nauvoo Legion in Illinois.¹⁰ I would assert that the effect of the Mormon War cut two ways. Most historians of Missouri have treated the Mormon period in the state’s history as a brief, if queer interlude, in which some peculiar-thinking northeasterners got chased out of the region. Then traditional patterns resumed and the Mormons left scarcely a ripple upon the pond of the state’s history.

I do not believe this is true. Western Missouri was largely populated by young men in the 1830s. Governor Boggs was the old man of the group at forty-one when he first encountered the church as a merchant in Independence. Samuel Lucas was thirty-four when he took up active leadership against the church. When Alexander Doniphan and David Rice Atchison served as lawyers for the church after the Jackson County expulsion, they were

twenty-five and twenty-six years old. When future governor Austin King presided over Joseph Smith's 1838 state "treason" hearing, he was thirty-six. These are the famous names, already the leaders in their communities. The rank and file who followed them were even younger.¹¹

The Mormon War framed the thinking of an entire generation of young men in western Missouri, and helped frame it for violence. Governor Boggs's aggressive appetites apparently unsated by the Mormon conflict, he massed Missouri troops in 1839 to fight against the Iowa militia in the so-called Honey War, a state border dispute. More significantly, while Missourians supported the Mexican-American War in 1846, no part of the state furnished more troops and had a greater war spirit than western Missouri. Indeed, Alexander Doniphan became a national hero for his leadership of these soldiers.¹²

When "free-soilers" began flocking into Kansas territory in the 1850s, western Missourians described them as degraded New England fanatics. Missourians, of course, had no monopoly on denouncing antislavery men as insurrectionary scum, but the sectional strife prefigured in the Mormon War was reenacted as thousands of western Missourians, known as "border ruffians"—many of them Mexican War veterans—organized themselves into mobs, flocked into Kansas to cast pro-slavery votes, and physically intimidated northern settlers. Their leader was U.S. Senator David Rice Atchison. In 1854 he wrote Jefferson Davis, "We are organizing to meet their organization. We will be compelled to shoot, burn & hang, but the thing will soon be over. We intend to 'Mormanise' the Abolitionists."¹³

The brutal violence born in western Missouri continued through the Civil War, most infamously manifesting itself in the massacre of two hundred unsuspecting men and boys in Lawrence, Kansas, in August 1863 during an attack by western Missourian guerrillas. The border troubles that afflicted Kansas and Missouri left an angry legacy, which, like the Mormon War, lasted well into the twentieth century.

The violent tradition continued into the early 1880s, symbolized best by Jesse James, a psychopathic thug originally romanticized as the Confederate guerrilla who refused to surrender.¹⁴ Through him and his lesser imitators, Missouri earned the unenviable national nickname of the "Robber State." Violence and political strife marked western Missouri for a full half century, with only occasional respites.

I am not arguing that persecuting the Mormons led to the Lawrence massacre or to Jesse James. There were many causes involved. Geography had a lot to do with it. Kansas is located on Missouri's western border, not Georgia's, to cite only one factor. But I am suggesting that the Missouri reaction to Mormonism worked as a poison pill, giving western Missourians a psychological framework, a language, and a behavior to deal with those whom they

opposed. Were it not for the national events that led to the Mexican War or "Bleeding Kansas," these behaviors might have been muted or died out. Instead they strengthened the cultural violence found in the 1838 Mormon War. And violence once committed leaves a legacy not easily undone—a legacy often fraught with tragic consequences for generations to come.

Notes

1. There are no reliable figures for the number of Mormons who died in the Mormon War; estimates range from about thirty to one hundred (a surely exaggerated figure). Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 633.

2. Thomas G. Alexander, "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19 (1986): 25–49. In my own writing, I have made some attempt to see both sides of the Missouri conflict. Though I am not a church member, I still tended to see these events through Mormon sources and thus through Mormon eyes. Many non-church sources concerning the conflict have yet to be unearthed. See Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 85–105, 129–51, and a subsequent essay on Mormon dissenter John Corroll, "'Such Republicanism as This': John Corroll's Rejection of Prophetic Rule," in Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher, eds., *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 45–75.

3. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1978), 1: 189. The Mormon critique of their first neighbors in Missouri, as well as the "old settlers" critique of the Mormons that follows, is adapted in part from a broader discussion found in Winn, *Exiles*, 85–105, and *Evening and Morning Star*, January 1834.

4. *History of Clay and Platte Counties, Missouri, From the Most Authentic Official and Private Sources . . .* (St. Louis, 1885), 109.

5. *Abstract of the Returns of the Fifth Census* (1830).

6. John Mason Peck, *Forty Years of Pioneer Life* (Philadelphia, 1864), 146.

7. My social portrait of the central western region of Missouri is indebted to R. Douglas Hurt, *Agriculture and Slavery in Missouri's Little Dixie* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992).

8. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1: 396; Samuel Lucas, "Jackson County," in *Gazetteer of the State of Missouri*, comp. Alphonso Wetmore (St. Louis, 1837), 96, 9; Smith, *History of the Church*, 1: 375.

9. The best general account of the "Mormon War" in Missouri is Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987); for the concept of Caldwell County as an "Indian-style reservation" for the Saints, see Roger Launius, *Alexander William Doniphan: Portrait of a Missouri Moderate* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 40. Stephen Aron interestingly notes the similarity of Boggs's extermination order to the method in which "troublesome" Indians had been removed from the state—leave or face annihilation. Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006), 237; see also Winn, *Exiles*, 85–105, 129–51.

10. Winn, *Exiles*, 162.

11. Biographies of many of the major figures involved in the Mormon War—Lilburn Boggs, Alexander Doniphan, David Rice Atchison, and Austin King, among other figures—are profiled in Christensen et al., *The Dictionary of Missouri Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999). Actually, the Mormon settlers were just as young. Joseph Smith himself was only twenty-six when he called for the gathering of a new Zion on the far western Missouri frontier. See Marvin S. Hill, “The Rise of Mormonism in the Burned-Over District: Another View,” *New York History* 61 (1980): 426–27; Winn, *Exiles*, 46–47.

12. Launius, *Doniphan*, chapters 4–9.

13. For a discussion of the anxiety felt by western Missourians about free-soil immigrants to Kansas Territory (especially New Englanders) and the violence it subsequently provoked, see Nicole Echteson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004). See also Aron, *American Confluence*, 238. Historian Adam Arenson quotes William Walker, a Tennessee native, as telling David Rice Atchison in 1854 that “Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky ought to send their hardy sons out to claim their rights and maintain them too, [otherwise] the filth, scum, and offscourings of the East and Europe” would “pollute our fair land, to dictate to us a government, to preach Abolitionism and dig underground Rail Roads” (Adam Arenson, *The Cultural Civil War: St. Louis and the Failures of Manifest Destiny* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming]). Atchison is quoted in William E. Parrish, *David Rice Atchison of Missouri: Border Politician* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1961), 164.

14. Using Jesse James and his family as his foil, T. J. Stiles brilliantly traces Missouri’s disordered antebellum culture through the Civil War and into the violent behavior for which James became famed. See T. J. Stiles, *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).