

RONALD W. WALKER

RICHARD E. TURLEY JR.

GLEN M. LEONARD

MASSACRE

AT MOUNTAIN MEADOWS



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TO THE VICTIMS

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Preface

ON SEPTEMBER 11, 1857, Mormon settlers in southern Utah used a false flag of truce to lull a group of California-bound emigrants from their circled wagons and then slaughter them. When the killing was over, more than one hundred butchered bodies lay strewn across a half-mile stretch of an upland meadow. Most of the victims were women and children.

The perpetrators were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, aided by Indians. What did the terrible atrocity say about the killers? What did it say about their church and its leaders? Did early Mormonism possess a violent strain so deep and volcanic that it erupted without warning? And what did the Mountain Meadows Massacre say about religion generally? A modern age wants to know whether people might be better off without their religious beliefs.

While these questions can only be partly answered by any book, they are the themes of our story. The massacre “is a ghost which will not be laid,” said historian Juanita Brooks before publishing her path-breaking study, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, in 1950. “Again and again, year after year, it stalks abroad to cast its shadow across some history, or to haunt the pages of some novel. Even books to which it is not natural, either from point of time or location, reach out a long arm and draw it in...until it has been made the most important episode in the history of the state [of Utah], eclipsing every achievement and staining every accomplishment.”¹

Brooks may have exaggerated to make her point, but the stream of articles and books goes on—recently expanded by television programs,

films, and websites. The past fifteen years have seen a flood of new materials on the subject. And more are on their way. If Brooks thought her book would exorcize the demons, she was wrong.

Why then *our* book? During the past two decades, descendants of both emigrants and perpetrators have worked together at times to memorialize the victims. These efforts have had the support of leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, officials of the state of Utah, and other institutions and individuals. Among the products of this cooperation have been the construction of two memorials at the massacre site and the placing of plaques commemorating the Arkansas emigrants. In 1990, at dedication ceremonies for the first of the recent memorials, relatives of the victims joined hands with Brigham Young University president Rex E. Lee—a descendant of one of the most prominent participants in the massacre—in a gesture of forgiveness and conciliation.² He suggested that in the future the Meadows should symbolize for those now living “not only tragedy and grief, but also human dignity, mutual understanding, [and] a willingness to look forward and not back.”³

One participant in this ceremony, Judge Roger V. Logan Jr. of Harrison, Arkansas—who could count some twenty victims and five survivors among his relatives—later reminded the public that there had to be some important looking back. “While great strides have been made in recent years,” Logan said, “until the church shows more candor about what its historians actually know about the event, true reconciliation will be elusive.”⁴ That much seems sure: Only complete and honest evaluation of the tragedy can bring the trust necessary for lasting good will. Only then can there be catharsis.

Thoroughness and candor have been our ideals in writing this book, but with so many minds already made up about the role and guilt of participants, we are sure to disappoint some readers. We have done our best to go where the evidence led us, which meant changing some of our early opinions. We hope our readers will have the same spirit of discovery—even if our findings might run against their previously accepted ideas.

We began our book at the end of 2001 with the decision that ours would not be primarily a response to prior historical writing—to the arguments or conclusions of any previous author. Rather, we would take a fresh approach based upon every primary source we could find. That goal sent colleagues from the Family and Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Brigham Young University to every promising archive in the country,

at times as they went about other duties. It also resulted in a careful search for materials in the church's history library and archives, as well as in the archives of the First Presidency, the church's highest governing body. Church leaders supported our book by providing full and open disclosure.

The result of our searches has been a rich body of historical material. Local and genealogical sources yielded new information about the emigrants who were killed. Regional and national newspapers proved to be an important source on immigration, the Utah War, and conditions in Utah Territory during the summer of 1857. The extensive collections of church and militia records housed in the Family and Church History Department and elsewhere allowed us to reconstruct an almost daily record of events for the six weeks leading up to the massacre.

Among the most significant discoveries in the church's collections were the field notes of assistant church historian Andrew Jenson, who collected several reminiscent accounts of the massacre in 1892. This discovery, in turn, led to the full collection of Jenson materials in the First Presidency's archives. In this collection, massacre insiders told what happened, at times defensively but in some cases with self-incriminating honesty. The nineteenth-century historian Orson F. Whitney had used these materials in his *History of Utah*, but perhaps because he did not cite sources, his work did not get into the historical mainstream.⁵ Scholars of the massacre were unaware of its importance or chose to ignore it.

When Jenson went to southern Utah to gather this material, the First Presidency gave him a letter asking church members to cooperate. "There is an opinion prevailing that all the light that can be obtained [on the massacre] has not been thrown upon it," the letter read. "We are anxious to learn all that we can upon this subject, not necessarily for publication, but that the Church may have the details in its possession for the vindication of innocent parties, and that the world may know, when the time comes, the true facts connected with it."⁶ Today, more than a century later, we are the beneficiaries of this foresight, though Jenson did not enjoy his experience. "I... have been successful in getting the desired information for the First Presidency," he wrote in his diary, "but it has been an unpleasant business. The information that I received made me suffer mentally and deprived me of my sleep at nights; and I felt tired and fatigued, both mentally and physically when I returned home."⁷ It was a reaction that we, as authors, have come to appreciate.

Our interest in primary sources led us to investigate one of the mainstays of previous writing. A close comparison of John D. Lee's journals, letters, and statements with his posthumously published *Mormonism Unveiled* convinced us that the book's account of the massacre could not always be depended upon. Almost certainly Lee's editor or publisher—perhaps both—introduced details into the memoir. We disregarded this source when the cumulative effect of other sources contradicted it.

We also sensed anomalies in the transcripts of John D. Lee's two trials. As we wrote, LaJean Purcell Carruth—a rare specialist in transcribing nineteenth-century shorthand—worked to complete a new transcript of the trials from original shorthand records in the church's archives and at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. She found that many passages of the nineteenth-century transcripts did not accurately reflect the original shorthand record of the trials. Carruth also discovered important shorthand passages never previously transcribed.

The collection of material for our book became an embarrassment of riches. We concluded, reluctantly, that too much information existed for a single book. Besides, two narrative themes emerged. One dealt with the story of the massacre and the other with its aftermath—one with *crime* and the other with *punishment*. This first volume tells only the first half of the story, leaving the second half to another day. An exception is the epilogue, in which we touch briefly on the second half of the story to conclude this volume.

Some may find our book to be a quiet one. In keeping with our decision to rely on primary documents, we have avoided the temptation to argue with previous authors, except at critical points when we concluded readers might want to know the reasons for our interpretation—and these discussions are usually confined to the endnotes. We wanted the story itself to remain in the foreground.

Our choice of style or presentation entered into this decision. We believed the best way to present our information was by narrating it, largely forgoing topical or critical analysis. This decision, more than observing a current historical fashion, was meant to appeal to a larger audience than just scholars.

Broadly speaking, since historians and others began to tell the story of the massacre, they have followed three main approaches. The first two are poles apart. One approach portrays the perpetrators as good people and the victims as evil ones who committed outrages during their travel through central and southern Utah. Some descendants

of the perpetrators and several Mormon historians have adopted this approach because it seems, on the surface, to excuse or soften what happened. The second approach looks at the innocence of the emigrants and the evil of their killers, who at best are described as followers of misguided religion. Some relatives of the emigrant families, church critics, and many non-Mormons have found this position attractive.

Readers of our book will find little sympathy for either of these two approaches. Each overlooks how complex human beings can be—good and evil, after all, are widely shared human traits. Nor do these approaches recognize how diverse the two groups were. Moreover, each of the two polarized explanations breaks down logically. Nothing that the emigrants purportedly did comes close to justifying their murder. Their wagon company was made up mostly of young families traveling through the territory in pursuit of their dreams. The leading men and women among them had been substantial citizens in their Arkansas communities and promised to make their mark in California. Likewise, most of the killers led exemplary lives before and after the massacre. Except for their experiences during a single, nightmarish week in September 1857, most of them were ordinary humans with little to distinguish them from other nineteenth-century frontiersmen. Some in fact would have been pillars in any community.

The third main approach to understanding the massacre attempts to navigate between the extremes of the other two. This approach is partly a commonsense recognition that both victims and perpetrators were decent but imperfect people whose paths crossed in a moment of history that resulted in a terrible tragedy. Brooks's 1950 book had this insight, and it is one reason we admire her work, though new information now permits a more complete and accurate telling of the massacre.

This third approach, however, leads to a troubling question: How could basically good people commit such a terrible atrocity? There are no easy answers, but the professional literature dealing with nineteenth-century American violence offers a starting point. In the early to mid-1800s, the United States could be a violent place, particularly for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. The period from 1830 to 1860 has been called "The Turbulent Era," and indeed it was for many Mormons.⁸ These men and women experienced violence in Missouri and Illinois, and when a U.S. army marched toward Utah Territory in 1857—the year of the massacre—they believed they were about to become victims again. One of the bitter ironies of Mormon history is

that some of the people who had long deplored the injustice of extra-legal violence became its perpetrators. In carrying out the Mountain Meadows Massacre, they followed a familiar step-by-step pattern used by vigilantes elsewhere.

Scholars who have investigated violence in many cultures provide other insights based on group psychology. Episodes of violence often begin when one people classify another as “the other,” stripping them of any humanity and mentally transforming them into enemies. Once this process of devaluing and demonizing occurs, stereotypes take over, rumors circulate, and pressure builds to conform to group action against the perceived threat. Those classified as the enemy are often seen as the transgressors, even as steps are being taken against them. When these tinderbox conditions exist, a single incident, small or ordinary in usual circumstances, may spark great violence ending in atrocity.⁹

The literature suggests other elements are often present when “good people” do terrible things. Usually there is an atmosphere of authority and obedience, which allows errant leaders to trump the moral instincts of their followers. Atrocities also occur when followers do not have clear messages about what is expected of them—when their culture or messages from headquarters leave local leaders wondering what they should do. Poverty increases the likelihood of problems by raising concerns about survival.¹⁰ The conditions for mass killing—demonizing, authority, obedience, peer pressure, ambiguity, fear, and deprivation—all were present in southern Utah in 1857.

These concepts of American extralegal violence and the group psychology common in religious and ethnic violence color much of our thinking and writing. We are too much believers in institutional and personal responsibility, however, to leave the massacre to historical patterns or models. We believe errors were made by U.S. president James Buchanan, Brigham Young and other Mormon leaders, some of the Arkansas emigrants, some Paiutes, and most of all by settlers in southern Utah who set aside principles of their faith to commit an atrocity. At each point along the chain of acts and decisions—especially in Iron and Washington Counties—a single personal choice or policy might have brought a different result. Those who acted as they did bear a responsibility—some a great deal more than others—though we as authors know the presumption of judging past events without having lived in them.

We also acknowledge an element of the unknowable. A citizen who did not take part in the killing but lived in southern Utah in 1857 later

told his son: “You would not understand if I told you. You know nothing about the spirit of the times.... You don’t understand and you can’t understand.”¹¹

For too long, writing about the massacre has been characterized by a spirit of charge and countercharge. These frames of reference usually center on personalities and conspiracies: What was the role of John D. Lee? Did church authorities unfairly magnify his crimes? Was Brigham Young guilty of secretly ordering the massacre? Which of the southern Utah leaders was most responsible? These questions, we believe, are best answered by telling the story and letting events speak for themselves.

It is for this reason that much of our book deals with the final days before the mass killing. We hope that readers will see not scapegoats but a complex event in which many people and forces had a role.

Readers should know our rules of navigation. One, we give priority to the documents closest in time, distance, and person to the events. Two, we believe that most testimony about the massacre—whether Mormon or non-Mormon—contains a great deal of truth, except at times when men and women speak of their own roles or those of close associates and family members. Generally, the problem is omission. Of the admonition to “tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth,” many statements fail the first clause but honor the second. Three, for important points in our narrative, we have sought confirmation from multiple witnesses while also searching for witnesses with differing viewpoints. Four, chronology and sequence are keys to our understanding, another reason so much of our book is devoted to the telling of daily events. It is here that the causes of the massacre become most clear. Five, we think context is the historian’s best friend. Readers of our book must expect passages about setting and personality—knowing, too, that for every paragraph in the text, three or four often ended up on the cutting-room floor. Finally, our method has been to compare relevant documents to seek consistent details and general patterns. Above all else, we look for the weight of evidence, understanding that, inevitably, some pieces of evidence will prove to be anomalous.

The institutions with which we have been professionally associated—Brigham Young University and the Family and Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—were generous in supporting this book, both in allowing us professional time to research and write, and in funding the work of colleagues and research assistants who helped with the project. Throughout, we were given the freedom to make our own judgments and have retained full

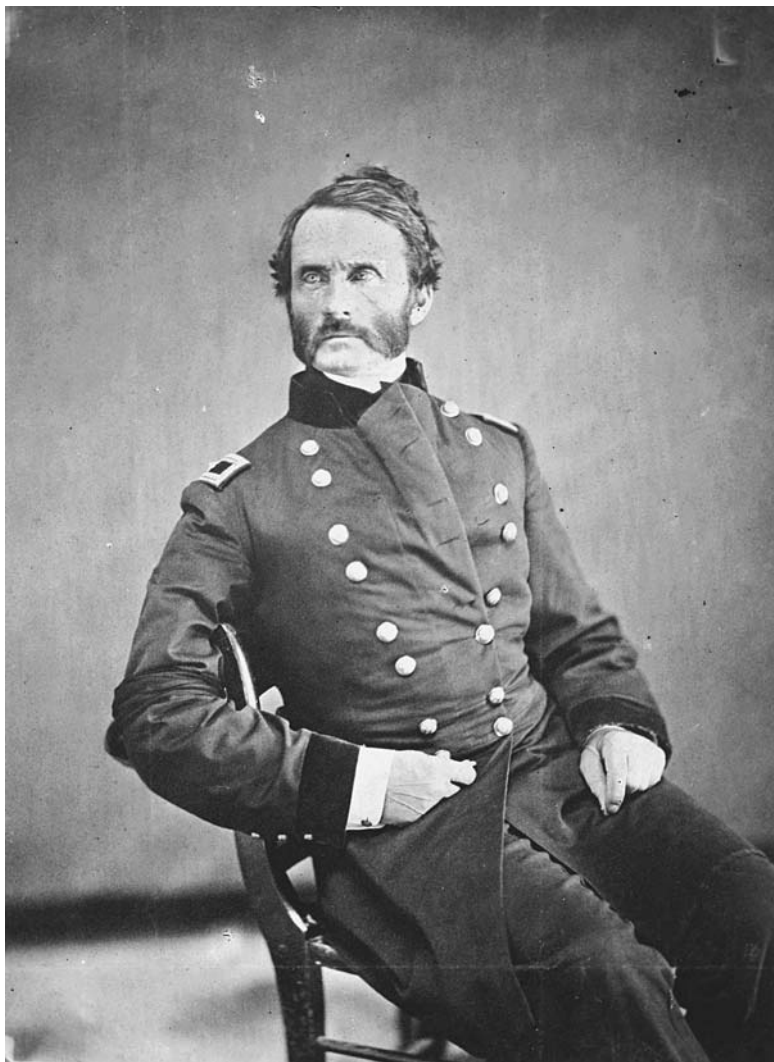
editorial control over our manuscript—all the more remarkable given the sensitivity of our topic. To the institutions and the many men and women who have contributed to our book, we extend the usual disclaimer. As authors, we alone are responsible for the book's contents.

Ronald W. Walker

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Glen M. Leonard

MASSACRE AT MOUNTAIN MEADOWS



JAMES HENRY CARLETON. *Courtesy Library of Congress.*

PROLOGUE

A Picture of Human Suffering

Mountain Meadows, May 1859

IN APRIL 1859, Brevet Major James Henry Carleton received the orders that would mark his place in Utah history. He and his First Dragoons were to escort Maj. Henry Prince, U.S. Army paymaster, on the first leg of his journey from California's Fort Tejon to northern Utah's Camp Floyd.¹ But that was not all. "When I left Los Angeles," Carleton later explained, "General [N. S.] Clarke, commanding the department of California, directed me to bury the bones of the victims of that terrible massacre" at the Mountain Meadows in southern Utah.²

A three-week march through the Mojave Desert and up the lip of the Great Basin brought Carleton and his men to the Meadows in mid May. The necklike valley, about a mile and a half wide and six miles long, lay a cool mile above sea level, hedged on every side by low-rising hills. "Pathfinder" John C. Frémont had called it "*las Vegas de Santa Clara*"—the Meadows of Santa Clara—when heading east from California during his 1844 exploring expedition. The place was "rich in bunch grass, and fresh with numerous springs of clear water, all refreshing and delightful to look upon," Frémont reported.³ Nearly a decade after Frémont's expedition, a California-bound emigrant wrote admiringly of rich, waving grass and numerous rills, adding, "These vegas are called by the Mormons, Mountain Meadows."⁴ Just days before Carleton's

arrival, U.S. Indian superintendent Jacob Forney called the Meadows “the most extraordinary formation west of the Rocky Mountains.”⁵

Yet more striking to Carleton’s eyes than the natural beauty of the place was the carnage that now defiled it. “The scene of the massacre, even at this late day,” he wrote, “was horrible to look upon. Women’s hair in detached locks, and in masses, hung to the sage bushes, and was strewn over the ground in many places. Parts of little children’s dresses, and of female costume, dangled from the shrubbery, or lay scattered about. And among these, here and there, on every hand . . . there gleamed, bleached white by the weather, the skulls and other bones of those who had suffered.”⁶

Despite repeated attempts to lay to rest the remains of the victims, their bones—like the truth—refused to stay buried.

Superintendent Forney and his company were the first of an influx of federal officers who toured the site in 1859, and each tried to do something about the remains. In April, Forney’s men spent two or three hours burying—not much more than a gesture.⁷ When troops from Camp Floyd arrived in early May to rendezvous with paymaster Prince, they too had buried bones.⁸

Still the work was not done. On May 20 Major Carleton and his men scoured the ground for fragments of bodies. Jacob Hamblin, a Mormon who lived at the north end of the Meadows, helped by showing troops where he had interred remains the previous summer. Hamblin had counted 120 victims then. From this spot and from ravines and clumps of sagebrush, Carleton reported, “I gathered many of the disjointed bones of thirty-two persons. The number could easily be told by the number of pairs of shoulder blades, and of lower jaws, skulls and parts of skulls.”⁹ A Mormon who witnessed the work said Carleton’s “wagon was loaded with bones.”¹⁰ “A glance into the wagon,” said Carleton, “revealed a sight which can never be forgotten.”¹¹

The wagon’s grim load was taken to the slaughtered emigrants’ old encampment on the south end of the Meadows, where two other bodies were found in a nearby ravine. Carleton put the bones in the earth and built a cone-shaped cairn of stones over the mass grave. The monument was some sixteen feet in diameter and twelve feet high. Rising another dozen feet from the stones was a heavy cross hewn from red cedarwood. On the horizontal plank of the cross, the troopers wrote the inscription:

VENGEANCE IS MINE: I WILL REPAY SAITH THE LORD.

On a slab of stone set against the northern side of the monument, the men cut the words,

HERE
120 MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN,
WERE MASSACRED IN COLD BLOOD,
IN SEPT., 1857.
THEY WERE FROM ARKANSAS.¹²

Finally, a monument marked the victims' final resting place. But Carleton meant the monument to be more than a mausoleum. He meant it to shame the Mormons.

Driven by what he had seen, Carleton "endeavored to learn the circumstances" surrounding the massacre. He began penning a report from his camp near the spot where twenty months earlier the emigrants battled for their lives from their wagon corral before filing out under a false promise of protection.¹³

"The idea," Carleton wrote, "of the melancholy procession of that great number of women and children—followed at a distance by their husbands and brothers—after all their suffering, their watching, their anxiety, and grief, for so many gloomy days and dismal nights at the *corral*, thus moving slowly and sadly on up to the point where the Mormons and Indians lay in wait to murder them; these doomed and unhappy people, literally going to their own funeral; the chill shadows of night closing darkly around them, sad precursors of the approaching shadows of a deeper night; brings to the mind a picture of human suffering and wretchedness on the one hand, and of human treachery and ferocity upon the other."¹⁴

Carleton's words stumbled over themselves in fury. "I would to God," he wrote to Clarke's assistant adjutant general after returning to California, "that General Clarke with an adequate force, and with his hands unfettered by red tape, could have the management of those *damned* Mormons just one summer, and that 'I could be there to see.' Major, it is no use to talk or split hairs about that accursed race. All fine spun nonsense about their rights as citizens, and all knotty questions about Constitutional Rights should be solved with the sword. Self preservation, the *first* law, demands that this set of ruffians *go out* from amongst us as a people.... Give them one year, no more; and if after that they pollute our soil by their presence make literally *Children of the Mist* of them."¹⁵

He was not the first or last to curse the Mormons.

CHAPTER ONE

Exiles from Freedom

New York to the Iowa Plains, 1830–1846

THE MORMONS KNEW they were “peculiar” people. They had no prepared liturgies, no starched clerical collars, and no purchased pews. They accepted new scripture, including the Book of Mormon, and considered their church “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth”—the only one with God’s authority. They gathered themselves into their own communities, where their leaders preached that they should be one people—unified—and in those days that went for their politics, too. For them, social, political, and religious issues mingled as easily as they did for Puritans in seventeenth-century New England.¹

The Mormons saw themselves as Christian, but in a different way. They rejected some popular concepts about God, such as Trinitarianism, and accepted living prophets and apostles like those in the Old and New Testaments. For a time, they also practiced polygamy, much to the scandal of other Americans. Just as Christianity emerged from Judaism as a new covenant with God, Mormons considered themselves part of a new dispensation—a “new and everlasting covenant.” They were creating what one modern scholar has called “a new religious tradition.”²

Their church was organized in upstate New York in 1830 by twenty-four-year-old prophet Joseph Smith, who translated old

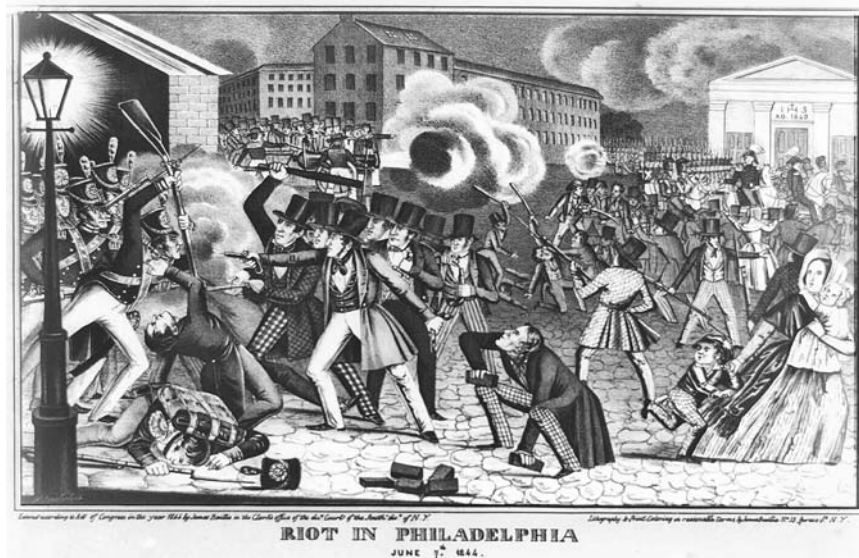
scriptural records and issued new revelations.³ Smith also spoke of the “last days,” which eventually became part of the church’s formal name, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Its members called themselves Latter-day Saints, or just Saints, and outsiders began calling them Mormons. “We rejoice that the time is at hand when, the wicked who will not repent will be swept from the earth with the besom of destruction and the earth become an inheritance for the poor and the meek,” Smith wrote. “And we are led to . . . mingle our prayers with those saints that have suffered the like treatment before us, whose souls are under the altar crying to the Lord for vengeance upon those that dwell upon the earth.”⁴

Smith’s words showed how close the last days were to him, as well as God’s justice, which often was about separating those who accepted the new message from those who did not.⁵ This kind of thinking—believers versus nonbelievers or “gentiles,” as the Mormons termed them—followed a pattern. The categories of “good–evil, pious–hypocrite, elect–damned” were part of the early history of Christianity, and indeed they exist among many religious groups.⁶ Such categories, however, sometimes get believers into trouble since nonbelievers do not like being declared on the opposite side of truth.

The Mormons’ unusual beliefs and practices brought them opposition beginning in New York and Pennsylvania and continuing during the church’s sojourn in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally the Rocky Mountains.

The Mormons saw their troubles as religious persecution, but the violence they experienced was also a reflection of American culture at that time. The belief that citizens had the right to take the law into their own hands to protest unjust conditions existed in colonial America, where citizens violently defied British rule and finally overthrew it. By the time of Joseph Smith, the traditional “right of riot” was also being used against individuals and groups.⁷ The people had so often heard “that all power, government, and authority of right belong to them,” wrote a contemporary critic of American conditions, “that they occasionally mistake the true limit of that sovereignty, and undertake to exercise despotic powers.”⁸

American cities had “labor riots, election riots, anti-abolitionist riots, anti-Negro riots, [and] anti-Catholic riots,” wrote Richard Maxwell Brown, a leading historian of violence. Rural America likewise had its roughnecks, bushwhackers, and night riders, who put down anybody they strongly disliked. This “continuous and often intense violence” was frequently aimed at unpopular minorities, whether



RIOT IN PHILADELPHIA. *Courtesy Library of Congress.*

racial, ethnic, or religious.⁹ Some Americans reacted even to verbal slights with quick tempers, swift blows, and deadly duels that the law seemed unable to control.¹⁰

Contributing to the problem was poor law enforcement. During America's colonial era, sheriffs and constables did their best to uphold peace, aided by local militias. But by the mid-1800s this system could not keep pace with the rising violence that came with growing populations. Some cities reacted by establishing professional police forces, but other Americans simply chose to maintain order by taking the law into their own hands.¹¹

In March 1832 an Ohio mob, led by what Joseph Smith described as religious rivals, kidnapped him and stretched him for castration. The vigilantes “concluded not to kill [or deform] me, but pound and scratch me well, tear off[f] my shirt and drawers and leave me naked,” Smith said. The men smeared hot tar on Smith's skin and coated him in feathers before leaving him writhing on the frozen ground with injuries that afflicted him the rest of his life.¹²

The next year, Missourians who opposed Mormons moving into their state reflected their views in a formal document signed by hundreds of Jackson County citizens. They were determined “to rid our society” of the Mormons, “‘peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must,’” the manifesto said.

It is more than two years since the first of these fanatics, or knaves... made their first appearance amongst us,...pretending...to receive communications and revelations direct from heaven; to heal the sick by laying on hands; and in short, to perform all the wonder working miracles wrought by the inspired apostles and prophets of old.

...They have been daily increasing in numbers, and...were of the very dregs of that society from which they came,...for...they brought into our county little or no property...their conduct here stamps their characters in their true colors. More than a year since, it was ascertained that they had been tampering with our slaves...in a late number of the Star, published in Independence by the leaders of the sect, there is an article inviting free negroes and mulattoes from other States to become mormons and remove and settle among us...

They declare openly that their God hath given them this county of land, and that sooner or later they must and will have possession of our lands for an inheritance...we believe it a duty we owe ourselves, to our wives and children, to the cause of public morals, to remove them from among us...

...We, therefore, agree, that [if] after timely warning, and receiving an adequate compensation for what little property they cannot take with them, they refuse to leave us in peace, as they found us, we agree to use such means as may be sufficient to remove them.¹³

Among the document's signers were several of the community's leading men, including R. W. Cummins, a local Indian agent who earlier stopped Mormon missionaries from preaching to native peoples across the border in Indian territory—a man whose name would later raise fears among those Saints who thought he had been appointed governor of Utah.¹⁴

The Jackson County manifesto embraced many of the cultural, economic, religious, social, and psychological issues present when two religious or cultural groups oppose each other. Most of the Saints in western Missouri were northerners whose values clashed with the southerners who made up much of the state's population. The Mormons' religious tenets, their belief that Jackson County was their promised land, and their growing political and economic power angered many Missourians. Rising sectional tension over slavery was another factor, though the Mormons' radical abolitionism and moral threats to Missouri society were little more than wild rumors.¹⁵ Claiming the right of self-preservation, Missourians began driving the Saints from their communities—beating them, destroying their homes, and threatening those who dared stay behind.¹⁶

During this period of violence, the Saints worried whether they should fight to defend themselves. In August 1833 Joseph Smith received a revelation telling his followers to “renounce war and proclaim peace.” This document told them not to respond to their enemies till after the third or fourth provocation, and then after raising “a standard of peace.” Even then, those who chose not to fight would be “rewarded for th[eir] righteousness.”¹⁷ Likewise, the Book of Mormon repeatedly cautioned that men should fight only defensive or just wars.¹⁸ “So tenacious were they for the precepts of the gospel,” wrote one man present during the Jackson County violence, that “up to this time the Mormons had not so much as lifted a finger, even in their own defence.”¹⁹

Mormon apostle Parley P. Pratt summed up his experience when his people were driven from Jackson County in November 1833. “All my provisions for the winter were destroyed or stolen, and my grain left growing on the ground for my enemies to harvest. My house was afterwards burned, and my fruit trees and improvements destroyed or plundered.” Other Mormons also suffered. “In short, every member of the society was driven from the county, and fields of corn were ravaged and destroyed; stacks of wheat burned, household goods plundered, and improvements and every kind of property destroyed,” Pratt recounted. “One of this banditti afterwards boasted . . . that, according to their own account of the matter, the number of houses burned was two hundred and three.”²⁰

After being displaced yet again in 1836, the Saints relocated to a sparsely settled part of the state, where Caldwell County was created for them by state legislators. As they grew in number and spread beyond its borders, however, anti-Mormon violence broke out again.²¹ In many cases, those who attacked the Mormons were aided by local militia and civil officers, who cited established tradition and even patriotism as their authority. It “was Cruel to fight a people who had not Broke the law,” admitted one Missouri vigilante who took part. Still, he said, “altho we are trampling on our law and Constitution . . . we Cant Help it . . . while we possessed the Spirit of 76.”²²

The Saints appealed to Missouri governor Daniel Dunklin to protect their constitutional rights. “Public sentiment,” he replied, “may become paramount law; and . . . it is useless to run counter to it . . . In this Republic, the *vox populi* is the *vox Dei*” (the voice of the people is the voice of God).²³

The majority could take the law into its own hands with impunity, but when minorities employed the same approach or tried to fight back,

it usually backfired. In 1836, after repeated acts of extralegal violence against the Saints, Smith decided it was time to take a stand. He proposed that his people covenant that “if any more of our brethren are slain or driven from their lands in Missouri by the mob that we will give ourselves no rest until we are avenged of our enemies to the uttermost.” The congregation replied with a resounding “hosanna and Amen.”²⁴

Another Mormon leader, Sidney Rigdon, used the majority’s concept of *vox populi* in telling dissenters to leave the Saints’ communities. “When a county, or body of people have individuals among them with whom they do not wish to associate,” said Rigdon, “and a public expression is taken against their remaining among them and such individuals do not remove, it is the principle of republicanism itself that gives that community a right to expel them forcibly.”²⁵

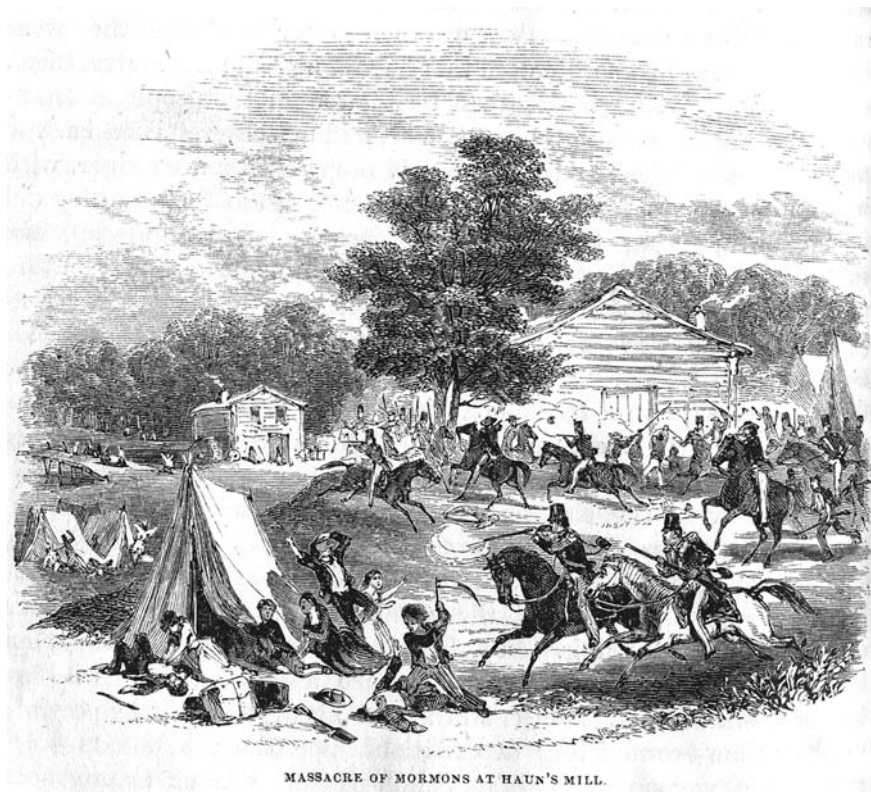
An Independence Day speech by Rigdon in 1838 set off the final storm. He spoke of the Mormons’ patriotism and insisted they would “infringe on the rights of no people.” But Missourians remembered only Rigdon’s defiant final words to any “mob” that dared come against the Saints. “We take God and all the holy angels to witness this day, that we warn all men in the name of Jesus Christ, to come on us no more forever. . . . And that mob that comes on us to disturb us; it shall be between us and them a war of extermination, for we will follow them, till the last drop of their blood is spilled, or else they will have to exterminate us; for we will carry the seat of war to their own houses, and their own families, and one party or the other shall be utterly destroyed.”²⁶

About a month later, a riot broke out at a Daviess County polling place. Several Mormons, including recent convert John D. Lee, used sticks, boards, or whatever else they could find to fight off Missourians who attacked them when they tried to exercise their right to vote. Lee believed God was with him as he fought. “Like Sampson, when leaning against the pillar,” he recounted, “I felt the power of God nerve my arm for the fray.”²⁷

Exaggerated reports of the riot and other skirmishes led to virtual civil war. Some of the Saints, including Lee, responded to Missouri vigilantes by forming bands called “Danites” that made preemptive strikes against vigilante targets, answering violence with violence.²⁸ Smith, who at first sanctioned the Mormon response, later recoiled at Danite excesses.²⁹ Even then, one historian concluded, “Mormon marauding against non-Mormon Missourians in 1838 was mild by comparison with the brutality of the anti-Mormon militias.”³⁰

After attempting to defend themselves or strike back, the Saints were soon overwhelmed by even greater anti-Mormon violence.³¹ On October 27, 1838, Missouri governor Lilburn W. Boggs ordered that the Mormons be “exterminated or driven from the state.” He called out thousands of state militiamen to enforce his order.³² During this final wave of Missouri violence—and even before receiving Boggs’s order—rogue militiamen attacked the Latter-day Saint settlement of Haun’s Mill. The militia killed seventeen Mormon men and boys and wounded fourteen people, including a woman and a seven-year-old boy. One ten-year-old child was dragged from his hiding place and shot point blank in the head as he begged for his life.³³

Soon Missouri militiamen arrested and imprisoned Smith, Rigdon, and other church leaders and forced Mormons to give up their arms and leave the state.³⁴ While the Saints never made a full accounting of their casualties, their various reports listed rape, gunshot wounds,



MASSACRE OF MORMONS AT HAUN’S MILL. *Charles Mackay, The Mormons, or Latter-day Saints (London, 1851.)*

beatings, exposure, and dozens of resulting deaths.³⁵ Before they could leave, some were forced at bayonet point to sign deeds surrendering their land. Their losses of real and personal property ran into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, which Missourians took as wages of war.³⁶ When the violence ended, as many as eight thousand Latter-day Saints fled to Illinois, some in the distress of winter.³⁷ For them, Missouri and Missourians became bywords.

As his people suffered, Smith languished for months in a Missouri prison dungeon. He felt the futility of the Saints' trying to seek justice on their own. "We can not do any thing only stand still and see the Salvation of God," he wrote. "He must do his own work or it must fall to the ground we must not take it in our hands to avenge our wrongs Vengeance is mine saith the Lord and I will repay." As for his own safety, Smith wrote, "I shall stand unto death God being my helper."³⁸

After Smith fled captivity in Missouri, the Saints established their headquarters at Nauvoo, Illinois, where they experienced a few years of peace. But soon the same cycle began again: a cultural clash between themselves and their neighbors, rumors leading to attacks, vigilantes claiming the right of majority rule and self-preservation, and Mormons attempting to defend themselves or strike back before being overwhelmed in a still larger wave of violence.³⁹ Tensions grew after Smith and his followers organized their own state-sanctioned militia, the Nauvoo Legion, to defend themselves and also used the Nauvoo city council and courts to protect Smith from Missouri's repeated attempts to extradite him.⁴⁰

Some Illinoisans felt the Mormon prophet was setting up a theocratic kingdom that would infringe upon their rights. "Let us stand by each other, and each others rights," declared one anti-Mormon newspaper. "Let us watch the Mormons, expose their usurpations, and oppressions, check their arrogance by determined resistance to their overbearing course, and if at last, we are driven to arms, let it be the result of an inevitable necessity."⁴¹

Emotions boiled over in June 1844 when Mormons, under color of law, destroyed the press of an opposition newspaper, the *Nauvoo Expositor*. "We have only to state, that this is sufficient!" proclaimed an editorial in the neighboring community of Warsaw. "War and extermination is inevitable! CITIZENS ARISE, ONE and ALL!!!—Can you *stand* by, and suffer such INFERNAL DEVILS! to ROB men of their property and RIGHTS, without avenging them. We have no time for comment, every man will make his own. LET IT BE MADE WITH POWDER AND BALL!"⁴²

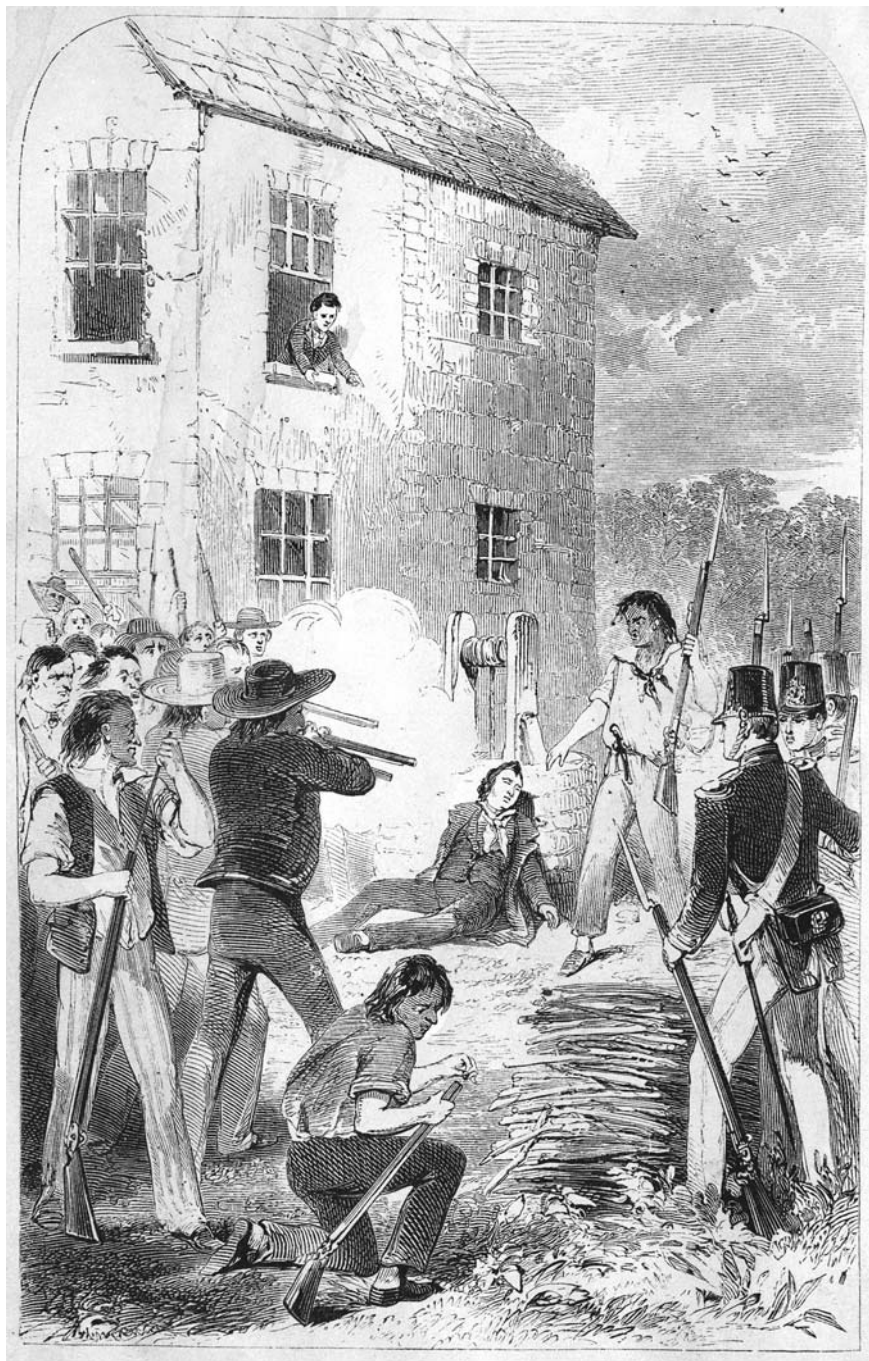
Before giving himself up for arrest on charges stemming from the paper's destruction, Smith acquiesced to his fate. "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter," he said, "but I am calm as a summer's morning."⁴³ Within days, a mob that included state militiamen, their faces blackened in disguise, murdered Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum at Carthage Jail, about twenty miles from Nauvoo. To Mormons, the death of their beloved leaders shook heaven and earth. "Their *innocent blood*, with the innocent blood of all the martyrs under the altar that John [the Revelator] saw, will cry unto the Lord of Hosts, till he avenges that blood on the Earth," wrote John Taylor, a newspaperman and future church president. His eyewitness account of the murders would become a part of Mormon scripture.⁴⁴

Immediately after the murders, many Carthage citizens fled, fearing a Mormon attack. "The people of the county are greatly excited, and fear the Mormons will come out and take vengeance," Mormon apostle Willard Richards wrote to Nauvoo from Carthage. "I have pledged my word the Mormons will stay at home...and no violence will be on their part, and say to my brethren in Nauvoo, in the name of the Lord—be still."⁴⁵

Instead of retaliating, thousands of Latter-day Saints gathered in Nauvoo to await the arrival of their martyred prophets' bodies. "The day that [the bodies of] Joseph and Hyrum were brought from Carthage to Nauvoo it was judged by men...that there was more than five barrels of tears shed," Mormon apostle Brigham Young wrote. "I cannot bare to think enny thing about it."⁴⁶ The church's newspaper recorded that the "vast assemblage...with one united voice resolved to trust to the law for a remedy of such a high handed assassination, and when that failed to call upon God to avenge us of our wrongs!"⁴⁷

When the trial of the Smiths' killers ended without convictions, the Saints contained their outrage, falling back on the moderation of their scriptures and their past experience. Instead of taking vengeance into their own hands, they began in their public meetings and temple assemblies to call on God to avenge the blood of the prophets.⁴⁸ In doing so, they echoed a passage in the New Testament book of Revelation. "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God," the apostle John wrote. "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"⁴⁹

In the face of continued violence, the Saints just moved on. "We could fight our way clear," a Latter-day Saint editorial said at the



DEATH OF JOSEPH SMITH. *Charles Mackay, The Mormons, or Latter-day Saints (London, 1851).*

time. But “we will suffer wrong rather than do wrong... The Gospel whispers peace.”⁵⁰

Like Missouri governor Boggs, Illinois governor Thomas Ford wanted the Mormons out of his state, although his memoir, *History of Illinois*, was full of hand-wringing over how it was done. Ford said that even after the Mormons agreed to leave and most had crossed the Mississippi River, “the anti-Mormons were no less anxious” to expel those who remained behind. The final scene in Nauvoo began when vigilantes, again styling themselves as state militiamen, began a cannon assault on the city.⁵¹

The “siege of Nauvoo” lasted only a few days. When it was over, vigilantes forced the remaining Saints from their homes and across the Mississippi, violating earlier agreements. “Many of them were taken from sick beds, hurried into the boats, and driven away by the armed ruffians now exercising the power of government,” Governor Ford said. “The best they could do was to erect their tents on the banks of the river and there remain to take their chance of perishing by hunger or by prevailing sickness. In this condition the sick, without shelter, food, nourishment, or medicines, died by scores.”⁵²

Even before the siege of Nauvoo, the Saints were looking to the West where they might have their own version of majority rule—where they could “live in peace and not be hunted down like the wild deer on the mountains.”⁵³ They were believers in the “Manifest Destiny” thinking of their time—that Americans had the self-evident right to the American West.⁵⁴

Brigham Young, the senior apostle at Joseph Smith’s death, would lead the westward exodus. Young was born on June 1, 1801, at Whitingham, Vermont, the ninth of eleven children in a struggling household. Shortly before his third birthday, the Young family moved to upstate New York, where their economic challenges continued. Young remembered working in summer and winter, ill clad, “with insufficient food until my stomach would ache.”⁵⁵ Chopped logs and planted fields became his curriculum. His most continuous days of formal schooling, by his own account, were eleven—and that did not come until after his twenty-second birthday. His mother died when he was fourteen, and his father, though having the virtues of integrity, work, and love for his children, was as stern as the Yankee countryside. With him it was “a word and a blow,” Young remembered, “but the blow came first.” Young was on his own at age sixteen, making his living as a laborer and craftsman.⁵⁶

Young, like Smith, was a product of western New York’s “burned-over district,” where religious emotion flowed easily.⁵⁷ Although spending



BRIGHAM YOUNG, CA. 1849.
*Courtesy LDS Church History
Library.*

“many anxious hours” studying the “Episcopalians, Presbyterians, New Lights, Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Wesleyan and Reformed Methodists,” Young found little comfort.⁵⁸ His first religious profession was Methodism, but he joined the denomination without much conviction.⁵⁹ By his late twenties, he was, by his own admission, “cast down, gloomy,” “everything wearing... a dreary aspect.” During these years, he remembered despising the world and “the poor miserable devils” that ruled it. “I hated them with a perfect hatred,” he said.⁶⁰

His Mormon baptism gave him a cause and lifted him out of his depression. Within seven months after his conversion, Young had raised up a dozen Mormon congregations in New York and surrounding states. His religious feeling, like the hero in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, was “life, life, eternal life.”⁶¹

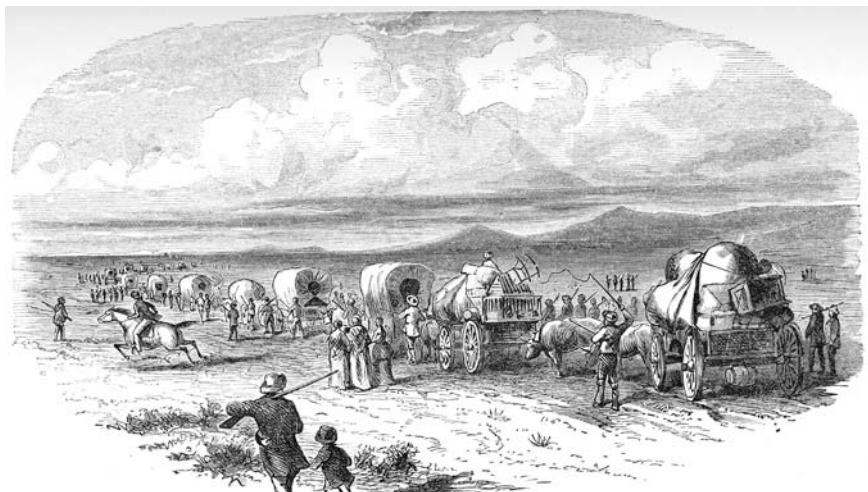
Young’s quick temper and pungent speech may have been the reason some church members shook their heads when he was called into the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1835. Seeing only the unpolished exterior, one man compared him to a half-sweet, half-sour apple and called his selection a “disgrace to the House of Israel.”⁶² Yet Young’s

prayers and other devotions were as fervent as any man's. Visitors to his office later compared him to a retiring New England farmer or London alderman—so different from the strong-armed image that others fashioned upon him.⁶³ Thomas L. Kane, a Philadelphia lawyer and politician who became his lifelong friend, described him as “an eccentric great man.”⁶⁴ He stood about five feet ten inches, had blue-grey eyes, a light complexion, and a strong mouth. “His lips came together like the jaws of a bear trap,” remembered one man.⁶⁵

When Young became the Mormons' leader, he already had a record of accomplishment. As Joseph Smith fled Ohio in 1838, Young helped raise funds to aid him in his journey. During the Missouri expulsion when Smith lay in prison, Young organized the Saints' evacuation and, despite heavy odds, kept the church together. From 1839 to 1841, he led the Latter-day Saint apostles in a proselyting mission to Great Britain. They and those who followed them had such success that for the rest of the nineteenth century, nearly half of church members were Britishers or their sons and daughters.⁶⁶

After Smith's death, as Young looked for a future home for the Saints, everything seemed “pleasant ahead but dark to look back.”⁶⁷ He wanted to find a place requiring enough hard labor to discourage too many outsiders from joining the Saints as co-settlers, but with enough resources for a hardscrabble “Zion”—as the Saints would call their home.⁶⁸ Mormon leaders looked at the semiarid region lying between the Sierra Nevadas and the Rocky Mountains that explorer John C. Frémont called the Great Basin. On the Basin's eastern border lay the Salt Lake Valley, which reportedly had fertile land requiring irrigation for small-plot agriculture. The mountains were another virtue. The high peaks and deep canyons would provide natural defenses if needed.⁶⁹

The Mormons were still on the Iowa plains, the worst of their journey, when the U.S. government requested five hundred volunteers of them for the Mexican War. Young had hoped for such an opportunity and complied by recruiting the “Mormon Battalion.”⁷⁰ Suddenly, the likely expansion of the American Republic into the Mexican-owned Great Basin forced the Saints to consider their future relations with American civil leaders and magistrates. Writing to U.S. president James K. Polk from the Omaha nation, Young explained that although the Saints respected the American Constitution and would regard their own U.S. territorial government “as one of the richest boons of earth,” his people would “rather retreat to the deserts, Islands or mountain caves th[a]n consent to be ruled by governors & judges...who delight in injustices & oppressions.”⁷¹



THE PIONEERS.

PIONEER WAGON TRAIN. *T. B. H. Stenhouse, The Rocky Mountain Saints* (London, 1874).

In writing to Polk, Young was looking over his shoulder to the past tragedies of Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, where state and local officers had often been his people's enemies. Would the future hold more of the past?

As the Saints were preparing to head west, they still tasted the bitterness of their American experience. "We owe the United States nothing," John Taylor wrote in an editorial. "We go out by force, as exiles from freedom. The government and people owe us millions for the destruction of life and property in Missouri and in Illinois. The blood of our best men stains the land, and the ashes of our property will preserve it till God comes out of his hiding place, and gives this nation a hotter portion than he did Sodom and Gomorrah. 'When they cease to spoil they shall be spoiled,' for the Lord hath spoken it."⁷²

Taylor's quoted scripture came from Isaiah, used by the Jews many centuries before to create their own identity as exiles.⁷³

CHAPTER TWO

Peals of Thunder

Utah, 1847–1857

THE VANGUARD COMPANY of Mormon pioneers arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in the latter part of July 1847. It was the beginning of the largest mass migration by a single group in nineteenth-century America.¹ But moving west did not end the Mormons' troubles.

At first, the federal government met the Latter-day Saints half way in their desire for self-government. In 1851 President Millard Fillmore appointed Brigham Young governor and superintendent of Indian affairs for Utah Territory. Washington split its other six territorial appointees among Mormons and non-Mormons, and the division between wary partisans virtually assured a clash.² The outside appointees were hardly in Utah before they left, taking the territory's congressional appropriation of twenty-four thousand dollars with them. The "runaways" announced the Mormons had not received them properly and were guilty of "malicious sedition," which reflected the deeply held feelings on both sides. The affair became a national cause célèbre.³

There were other incidents as well. In 1853 Pahvant Indians in central Utah killed U.S. Army Capt. John W. Gunnison and seven members of his party who were surveying a possible route for a railroad to the Pacific. The following year, Washington ordered Lt. Col. Edward J. Steptoe and his command to aid Utah officials in bringing

the killers to justice. When the case came to trial, a local jury dismissed the charges against some of the Indians and found three others guilty only of manslaughter. The jury believed the main ringleaders were still at large and that the crime had been an act of retributive justice for the killing of a Pahvant leader by Missouri emigrants going to California. It was also true the settlers did not want to provoke the usually friendly Pahvants. But critics reacted strongly to the verdict. They believed the Mormons had not upheld the nation's military honor, and rumors spread that Mormons and Indians were conspiring behind the federal government's back.⁴

In December 1854 a soldier sparked a row between Steptoe's men, some Mormons, and local police. Two days later, on Christmas Day, tensions between soldiers and citizens erupted into a "regular melee" that injured men on both sides, including eighteen-year-old Brigham Young Jr. The soldiers' efforts to woo Mormon women also offended local sensibilities. One officer tried to seduce a daughter-in-law of Brigham Young whose husband was absent on a preaching mission. When the army left, perhaps as many as one hundred Mormon women went with them. "Everybody has got one except the Colonel and Major," boasted one soldier. "The Doctor has got three—mother and two daughters. The mother cooks for him and the daughters sleep with him."⁵ The incident outraged and embarrassed the Mormons, hardening their resolve not to have troops stationed near their communities.⁶

The Mormons and the federally appointed judges had one running battle after another, which, if they had not been so serious, were almost comic in their tone. After a local man was acquitted in federal court, the presiding judge, W. W. Drummond, reportedly threatened him, and a Mormon-controlled grand jury in turn indicted Drummond and his servant for assault "with intent to kill." The purpose of the trial, according to one participant, was to show Drummond "in his proper light."⁷ Later, rowdies broke into the law library of federal judge George P. Stiles, a Mormon who had been excommunicated for "immoral conduct." The vandals burned his law firm's books and papers in a privy.⁸

The local people also had conflicts with other U.S. appointees—surveyors and Indian agents—as well as with ex-Mormons and gentile merchants, a class of men Young would eventually dub "the Clique."⁹ These men, whose power would grow during Utah's territorial years, were united by their strong opposition to Mormonism, by their ambitions for political and economic influence in the territory, and

often by their Eastern ties. After the American Civil War, this breed of men would be recognized for their virtues and vices, and branded with the pejorative titles of “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags.”¹⁰

The conflicts mocked Mormon hopes for a quiet society in Utah. “The United States Judges are not here as kings or Monarchs,” Young protested, “but as servants of the people.” Recalling how American society had treated the Saints in Missouri and Illinois, he added, “If I Come here & act the tyrant . . . you ought to kick me out and all officers ought to be served in the same way.”¹¹ Young had similar anathemas for the federal surveyors, whose work, he believed, was sloppy and fraudulent.¹²

W. M. F. Magraw, who lived briefly in Utah, had another reason to be upset with the Mormons. Local settlers had outbid him and his partners for a federal contract to transport mail between Independence, Missouri, and Salt Lake City.¹³ Writing to President Franklin Pierce in October 1856, Magraw claimed there was “no vestige of law and order” in the territory and that the “so-styled ecclesiastical organization” was “despotic, dangerous and damnable.”¹⁴

Two reasons explain the strong words that passed on both sides—besides the obvious clash of self-interest and personalities. Two rival kingdoms or cultures were opposing each other. On one hand, the Mormons were still determined to create a religious commonwealth. During the first days of their settlement, they spoke of a “land of promise held in reserve by the hand of God” that fulfilled the promises of Isaiah.¹⁵ Other sermons insisted on the need for a strict Christian purity—Sabbath-keeping, honesty, and the need for “order” and “righteousness.” Outsiders willing to obey the new standard would be accepted, but others should go elsewhere.¹⁶ As a symbol of their new society, members of the first pioneer party in the Salt Lake Valley were rebaptized and reconfirmed members of the church. “We had, as it were, entered a new world and wished to renew our covenants and commence in newness of life,” explained one of the men.¹⁷

The settlers called their new community “Deseret,” a Book of Mormon name that was also meant to set it apart as the Kingdom of God—a religious and political government, which, when fully established, might prepare for Christ’s coming reign. “All other governments are illegal and unauthorized,” said a Mormon theoretical tract. “Any people attempting to govern themselves by laws of their own making, and by officers of their own appointment, are in direct rebellion against the kingdom of God.”¹⁸

The Saints felt the ideals of religious theocracy most strongly during the first years of their settlement or in times of uncertainty when they thought the millennial days were close by. Their on-and-off hopes were not well received, as most Americans in the mid-nineteenth century considered theocracy an already-turned page from John Winthrop's Massachusetts Bay colony two hundred years before.

Another reason for the clashes in Utah was the American territorial system. The famed Northwest Ordinance of 1787 required settlers to gain self-government and statehood through a step-by-step process that could be slow, particularly in the American Southwest. Territories were virtual colonies—not unlike the colonies under British rule before the American Revolution—and citizens were denied “the rights to self-government that most white males elsewhere took for granted.” The result in one western territory after another was the same: squabbles between the local people and the men Washington sent west—and the feeling that the federal government was “an obtrusive presence.”¹⁹ Even the best appointees often lacked the one quality westerners demanded: Their loyalties must be focused on the local welfare, not on Washington or their own careers.²⁰

Like others, the Saints latched on to a popular constitutional theory of the time. Hoping to quiet the rising storm in Washington over expanding slavery in the territories, politicians like presidential candidates Lewis Cass and Stephen A. Douglas took the idea of neighborhood majority rule and applied it to the western territories, calling their proposal “squatter” or “popular” sovereignty. They argued “that a community was ready for self-government from the moment it was first settled,” and majorities in the territories—not the U.S. Congress—should have the final say about local conditions.²¹

The Saints had come west hoping for local control, and popular sovereignty fit their aspirations perfectly. If power lay with the local people in a territory, Utah had a right to establish its theocracy and polygamy.²² Historian Howard Lamar remarked how ordinary so much of the Saints' behavior was. The doctrines of the church were “not at war with the optimistic, perfectionist, comfort-seeking society of Jacksonian America,” he wrote. But Lamar also noticed something different was going on in Utah, too, at least in degree. “What was missing was a single voice of dissent, an opposition, an evidence of popular elections.” And by 1857, some outsiders thought conditions in Utah were out of control. “A federal court had been disrupted,” official records were rumored to have been seized and burned, “and public officials could honestly report that they had been unable to

perform their duties. Every single function the federal government was responsible for in a territory, outside of tax collection and defense, had been defied.”²³

For Young, confident in his religious and political authority, the exodus of bothersome federal authorities was a virtue. “Their number & quality [are] diminishing & becoming beautifully less,” he wrote.²⁴ During the 1850s, as many as sixteen federal officers left their positions in the territory in “frustration, fright, or both.”²⁵ While each of the territories surrounding Utah had a history of conflicts with Washington’s appointees, none rivaled Utah’s in number or overall drama.²⁶

The strong Mormon response may well have been a sign of inward distress. By the mid-1850s, Mormon leaders believed their kingdom was not going well. The harvest of converts in America and Great Britain had fallen off. The Saints faced bad weather, insect plagues, poor crops, and near famine. Young sensed a spiritual lethargy among his people, perhaps because of their decade-long focus on pioneering but also because of the growing number of apostates and dissenters. Many immigrants to Zion were proving to be indigestible chaff.²⁷ To Young, Mormons were not living up to the standard of their mission.²⁸

Church leaders tried several cures, including an invitation for members to look inward and make token pledges of their property to the Lord. But less than half of Utah’s families made “consecrations” to the church.²⁹ A “home missionary” program was established in the hope that systematic preaching might stir “the people to repentance and a remembrance of their first love”—the gospel.³⁰ When these programs failed to achieve full reform, Young called for sterner measures. “Instead of . . . smooth, beautiful, sweet . . . silk-velvet-lipped preaching,” he said, the people needed “sermons like peals of thunder.”³¹

Young had precedents for his preaching. “A revival of religion in New England meant a time when that deep spiritual undercurrent of thought and emotion with regard to the future life . . . exhaled and steamed up into the atmosphere which pervaded all things,” wrote Harriet Beecher Stowe.³² The Mormons, so much like the Puritans, had such a campaign when camped on the plains during their westward migration, and their Book of Mormon chronicled the many times when ancient American prophets were able to bring people back to their religious devotion by strong preaching.³³

These earlier revivals became patterns for the famed Mormon Reformation of 1856–57. “There are sins that men commit,” Young preached at the beginning, “for which they cannot receive forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come, and if they had their

eyes open to see their true condition, they would be perfectly willing to have their blood spilt upon the ground, that the smoke thereof might ascend to heaven as an offering for their sins.”³⁴ Sometimes the reformation sermons about “blood atonement” threatened more than “peals of thunder.” “The time has been in Israel under the law of God,” Young said, “that if a man was found guilty of adultery, he must have his blood shed, and that [time] is near at hand.”³⁵

The reform shook mightily. For a time, church leaders suspended the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and Young remained in seclusion—signs that it was no longer business as usual in Utah. “Teachers” were dispatched into homes to “catechize” members about their sins, and in one part of southern Utah, local church authorities told the teachers to search church members’ private boxes and drawers to “see that every thing is clean and pure.”³⁶ One member remembered that the teachers’ intrusion could be a “fearful ordeal,” resulting in embarrassment and false confessions.³⁷

As the enthusiasm grew, the language of some church leaders became especially harsh, particularly beyond Salt Lake City where distance seemed to magnify the revival. In several communities, gangs of zealots—usually young men led both by a spirit of adventure and religious excess—engaged in acts of intimidation: “hellish murderous conduct,” said one victim.³⁸ Their assaults were aimed at those considered of weak faith or apostate, or even those who might speak against their activity.³⁹ In Cedar City in the southern part of the territory, church leaders spoke of clear lines of judgment—of “blood sucking gentiles,” pruning the “bitter branches” of disbelief, and the need to obey strictly “those who are over us.”⁴⁰

Perhaps a majority of the Saints, believing themselves in spiritual jeopardy, searched their souls and bettered their lives. Church meetings became more frequent and better attended. Items previously taken “in hours of darkness” were returned.⁴¹ Tithing and other church donations increased, as did polygamous marriages, another measure of Mormon observance at the time. Every Saint wishing to be considered a Saint received the sin-washing ordinance of rebaptism, part of the reformation’s mercy when Young and the church seemed willing to forgive the gravest sin if only men and women would try to do right.⁴²

The reformation was extraordinary, and nothing in Mormon history had been like it—or would be. From Young’s perspective, the reformation accomplished a great deal of good, though the tough talk about blood atonement and dissenters must have helped create a climate of violence in the territory, especially among those who chose to

QUESTIONS

TO BE ASKED THE

LATTER DAY SAINTS.

Have you committed murder, by shedding innocent blood, or consenting thereto?

Have you betrayed your brethren or sisters in anything?

Have you committed adultery, by having any connection with a woman that was not your wife, or a man that was not your husband?

Have you taken and made use of property not your own, without the consent of the owner?

Have you cut hay where you had no right to, or turned your animals into another person's grain or field, without his knowledge and consent?

Have you lied about or maliciously misrepresented any person or thing?

Have you borrowed anything that you have not returned, or paid for?

Have you borne false witness against your neighbor?

Have you taken the name of the Deity in vain?

Have you coveted anything not your own?

Have you been intoxicated with strong drink?

Have you found lost property and not returned it to the owner, or used all diligence to do so?

Have you branded an animal that you did not know to be your own?

Have you taken another's horse or mule from the range and rode it, without the owner's consent?

Have you fulfilled your promises in paying your debts, or run into debt without prospect of paying?

Have you taken water to irrigate with, when it belonged to another person at the time you used it?

Do you pay your tithing promptly?

Do you teach your family the gospel of salvation?

Do you speak against your brethren, or against any principle taught us in the Bible, Book of Mormon, Book of Doctrine and Covenants, Revelations given through Joseph Smith the Prophet and the Presidency of the Church as now organized?

Do you pray in your family night and morning and attend to secret prayer?

Do you wash your body and have your family do so, as often as health and cleanliness require and circumstances will permit?

Do you labor six days and rest, or go to the house of worship, on the seventh?

Do you and your family attend Ward meetings?

Do you preside over your household as a servant of God, and is your family subject to you?

Have you labored diligently and earned faithfully the wages paid you by your employers?

Do you oppress the hireling in his wages?

Have you taken up and converted any stray animal to your own use, or in any manner appropriated one to your benefit, without accounting therefor to the proper authorities?

In answer to the above questions, let all men and women confess to the persons they have injured and make restitution or satisfaction. And when catechising the people, the Bishops, Teachers, Missionaries and other officers in the Church are not at liberty to pry into sins that are between a person and his or her God, but let such persons confess to the proper authority, that the adversary may not have an opportunity to take advantage of human weaknesses, and thereby destroy souls.

take license from it. As the revival proceeded, church leaders in Salt Lake City began cautioning local leaders not to go beyond the preaching of righteousness.⁴³ Still later, word was sent to southern Utah to “keep things perfectly quiet and let all things be done peacefully but with firmness and let there be no excitement. Let the people be united in their feelings and faith as well as works and keep alive the spirit of the Reformation.”⁴⁴

In the summer of 1856—shortly before the reformation’s crescendo—Young sent Mormon apostles John Taylor and George A. Smith to the nation’s capital with petitions for statehood.⁴⁵ Becoming a state would mean Utah could end its squabbles with territorial appointees. But Sen. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, an old acquaintance and former legislative representative of the Saints, and Utah’s territorial delegate, John M. Bernhisel, both advised that the political winds then blowing made it an unfavorable time to push for statehood.⁴⁶

Irrked at the prospect of continued colonial rule, in January 1857 the Utah legislature drafted strongly worded memorials asserting “the right to have a voice in the selection of our rulers.”⁴⁷ Young told Smith and Bernhisel that a new batch of unfit federal appointees would be turned out “as fast as they come let the consequences be what they may.” The Saints were “determined to claim the right of having a voice



JAMES BUCHANAN. *Matthew Brady, Courtesy Library of Congress.*

in the selection of our officers,” Young said.⁴⁸ Following instructions, Bernhisel met with newly elected U.S. president James Buchanan and, a few days later, presented the memorials to Jacob Thompson, the secretary of interior. The last interview did not go well. Thompson called Utahns’ demand for territorial officers of their own liking and their promise to send away any others a virtual “declaration of war.” “When you tell a man that he *must* do a thing,” Thompson lectured, “it excites in him a feeling to resist.” If the Mormons “got into trouble with the General Government,” Thompson believed, it would be their own fault.⁴⁹

The Mormon memorials did not come close to the firebrand language of many Southern “states’ righters” before the Civil War.⁵⁰ They did, however, come at a dangerous time. “These petitions and the cabinet’s reaction to them were fateful,” historian William P. MacKinnon wrote, pointing also to letters that came into the government’s hands within two days of the memorials.⁵¹ The first was from Judge Drummond, complaining that Brigham Young and the Mormons maintained a virtual reign of terror. Drawing on the Stiles incident, he claimed the Mormons had burned the papers, dockets, and law books of the Utah Territorial Supreme Court, a charge that later proved untrue. Drummond also reported that Young, “more traitorous than ever,” was responsible for the Gunnison killings and the death of Territorial Secretary Almon W. Babbitt, recently slain by Cheyenne raiders in Nebraska Territory. Drummond’s letter appeared in the *New York Herald* on March 20, the day after the administration received it.⁵² On the day of its publication, Utah’s chief justice, John F. Kinney—who was visiting Washington—presented the U.S. attorney general similar letters from himself and Utah surveyor general David H. Burr, both urging that a U.S. military force be sent to Utah. Thus “within two weeks of taking office, James Buchanan and his cabinet had a collection of stunning new inputs on Utah affairs from the territory’s truculent legislative assembly, its chief justice, an associate supreme court justice, and the surveyor general,” wrote MacKinnon.⁵³

Soon many American newspapers were responding sharply to what was going on. A letter published under the name “Veratus” in the April 29, 1857, *American Journal* made the outlandish claim that one hundred thousand Mormons were poised to fight the U.S. government, aided by two hundred thousand “spies and emissaries” and three hundred thousand “savage” Indian allies. Veratus demanded that five thousand U.S. troops be sent to Utah to put down the supposed threat.⁵⁴ The *New York Tribune* told its readers that Utah was full of espionage, rape, robbery,