

THE MORRISITES

On 13 June 1862 a five-hundred-man posse positioned itself on the bluffs south of Kingston Fort in Weber County. Cannons ready to fire sat on two small ridges overlooking an estimated five hundred disciples of Joseph Morris who were housed within a makeshift enclosure. The Morrisite War, a short but unfortunate episode in Utah history, was about to begin. Participants on both sides, especially the two leaders, must have reflected on those events that had precipitated what was to be a violent confrontation.

Joseph Morris, prophet and leader of the Morrisites, was born in 1817 and joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when he was twenty-three years old while he was living in England. He married Mary Thorpe and brought her to America, where they resided in St. Louis for two years. Moving to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Joseph became the local Mormon congregation's branch president. Morris and his family immigrated to Utah in 1853 and resided for a time in Sanpete County, subsequently moving to Provo, and then Slaterville, before settling in the small community of South Weber.

He claimed to have received numerous spiritual manifestations, but it was in 1857 before he recorded his first official revelation. This revelation established Morris's prophetic calling, placing him at odds with the leadership of the Mormon Church, designated him as the seventh angel of the apocalypse, outlined ten steps to godhood, explained the doctrine of reincarnation, and proclaimed the "immediate" second coming of Christ. Morris also taught that Brigham Young was a fallen prophet and that no more Mormon missionaries should be sent into the world.

Gathering a few followers in Slaterville, Morris moved to South Weber, where he converted Mormon bishop Richard Cook. About two hundred former LDS Church members subsequently became disciples of Morris. In February 1861 Morris, Cook, and fifteen others were excommunicated from the Mormon Church by apostles John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff. On 6 April 1861 Joseph Morris organized a new church, headquartered in South Weber, and issued a proclamation that all of his followers should gather at Kingston Fort. Firmly believing that "Christ will come tomorrow," they held all things in common and, according to some authorities, even trampled some of their crops into the ground as evidence of their faith.

Because of their expectation of Christ's immediate return, the Morrisites were largely a consumer community; thus, by the spring of 1862, food was scarce. Latter-day Saints were counseled by their leaders to have no dealings with the Morrisites, which meant that the residents of Kingston Fort had to travel to Kaysville to have their wheat ground into flour. They aroused the wrath of Davis County Sheriff Lot Smith when his attempt to levy a tax was met by armed men and he was ordered out of the fort.

When William Jones, one of Morris's first converts, became dissatisfied and attempted to leave the community and take with him what was left of his consecrated property, he was detained along with two other men who possessed similar feelings. However, within a few days the three escaped with a yoke of cattle and a wagon. Pursued and captured, they were placed under guard in a small log cabin. When word reached Chief Justice of the Third District Court John F. Kenney that Joseph Morris was holding prisoners in violation of the law, he issued a writ of habeas corpus commanding that the prisoners be set free.

The Morrisites refused to receive the writ, insisting that they were no longer subject to the law. Robert T. Burton, deputy marshal, with a posse of about two hundred men (other soldiers were added in Davis and Weber counties as the posse moved north) was sent to capture Joseph Morris and other church leaders and bring them to Salt Lake City to stand trial.

Meanwhile, Morris had received additional revelations indicating that Christ would come and deliver his

followers just a few days after a spectacular pageant called "The Foreshadowing of the Kingdom of God Day," which was scheduled for 30 May 1862. Therefore Joseph Morris saw the appearance of the army in the middle of June as a certain sign that the time of the Second Coming was imminent. Upon arriving at the fort, Robert Burton instructed a Morrisite herdboyc to deliver a message to his leader requesting their surrender. After growing weary of the Morrisites' delay in responding to his demands, Burton ordered two warning shots to be fired to speed up the decision. The second ball struck the plowed ground in front of the settlement and ricocheted into the fort itself, killing and maiming as it went.

Joseph Morris immediately received a revelation of comfort and reassurance while some Morrisites returned the fire, killing Jared Smith of the posse. On the third day of the siege, as the Morrisites were in the process of surrendering, hostilities again broke out and Joseph Morris, his counselor John Banks, and a few others were killed. The rest, seeing their leaders dead, surrendered. The prisoners, numbering about ninety, were taken to Salt Lake City to stand trial before Judge Kenney. They were then placed under bond to appear at the next session of court. In March 1863 seven of the Morrisites were convicted of murder in the second degree, sixty-six were convicted of resistance, and two were acquitted. However, the new territorial governor, Stephen S. Hardy, pardoned all of them, and the Morrisites scattered into Idaho, California, Nevada, Montana, and other places to begin their lives anew. Seven years later, in the midst of an upsurge of anti-Mormonism, Robert T. Burton was tried for the murder of Mrs. Isabella Bowman, one of two Morrisite women killed during the surrender proceedings, but was acquitted. The Morrisite war was officially over.

See: C. LeRoy Anderson, *For Christ Will Come Tomorrow: The Saga of the Morrisites* (1981).

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