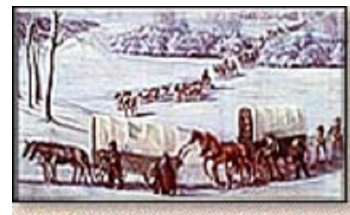


Location:

## Nauvoo, Illinois: 1839-1846

As the Latter-day Saints fled Missouri during the winter of 1838–1839, having been threatened by the governor of that state with extermination, they crossed into Illinois and settled in a swampy area along the Mississippi River that they named Nauvoo. Over the next few years, an estimated 16,000 Latter-day Saints took up residence in the city and its surrounding communities. It became one of the largest cities in Illinois at the time and an important commercial center on the upper Mississippi.



Many in the surrounding communities continued to harass the Latter-day Saints, and on 27 June 1844, a painted mob shot to death the Latter-day prophet, Joseph Smith, and his brother Hyrum. Despite the rapidly escalating tension in the area, the Latter-day Saints continued at great sacrifice to complete a temple in the city, even while they prepared for a mass exodus to the West. Between February and September 1846, most of the Latter-day Saints took up their march to the West, leaving their homes, their city, and their temple to the hands of those who had not built and the hearts of those who did not care.

Today Nauvoo is a significant historic district, with many of the buildings in the original townsite rebuilt or restored and open for the public to visit.

### Cities Abandoned

In all of United States history, few people have suffered for their religious

convictions as did the early Latter-day Saints. Because of the rapid growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and what many contemporary religionists viewed as the heretical doctrine of living prophets and modern revelation, many outsiders viewed Latter-day Saints with suspicion and contempt. During the first two decades of the Church's existence, Latter-day Saints repeatedly experienced the cycle of migration, settlement (including purchasing the lands they settled in), and expulsion. Within the span of 17 years, the fast-growing body of Latter-day Saints moved en masse from the Finger Lakes region of western New York state (1830-1831), to Kirtland, Ohio (1831-1838), Jackson County, Missouri (1831-1839) and Commerce/Nauvoo, Illinois (1839-1848), where their prophet, Joseph Smith, was murdered by a mob. In the dead of winter 1846, the Latter-day Saints once again abandoned their homes and began the long, hard trek to the Rocky Mountains, where they would at last find welcome refuge.

### **Extermination Order**

Following eight years of convergence and settlement by thousands of Latter-day Saint converts in northern Missouri, tensions with neighboring communities reached a climax. On 27 October 1838, Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs signed one of the most heinous documents in American history, his Mormon "extermination order," declaring, "The Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated, or driven from the State, if necessary for the public peace" (quoted in *History of the Church*, 3:175). This military directive called for the forced mid-winter exodus from Missouri of approximately 10,000 men, women and children from their own farms, homes, and lands.

On 25 June 1976, Missouri Governor Christopher S. Bond issued an executive order rescinding the Extermination Order, noting its legal invalidity and formally apologizing in behalf of the state of Missouri for the suffering it had caused the Latter-day Saints.

### **Nauvoo, Illinois: From Ecstasy to Exodus**

In all of Church history, perhaps nothing symbolizes the pragmatic nature of Latter-day Saint religion as does the city of Nauvoo. On the very hem of the western frontier, the Latter-day Saints drained the swamps, wrote an ambitious city charter, established a university, mounted a city militia, and built a temple.

To Nauvoo and its vicinity came the great majority of all Latter-day Saint converts for the next seven years, swelling the population to about 20,000 by 1846. At its height it rivaled Chicago as the largest city in the state. A vibrant, culturally eclectic place, it came to be known as "Nauvoo, the Beautiful."

## Death of Joseph Smith

The relative peace and prosperity of the Nauvoo period was short-lived. Political maneuvering for the "Mormon vote" at the state level had granted the municipality perhaps the most liberal city charter in the state, and Nauvoo was seen as both a political and economic threat by many in the older, neighboring communities. At the height of tensions, a local opposition newspaper called for mob action against the Saints, to which the city council responded by destroying the offending printing press. Amidst growing regional clamor for, once again, the Saints' extermination, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were jailed. On 27 June 1844, a mob stormed Carthage jail and shot the brothers to death in their prison cell.

## The American Exodus

Following the death of Joseph Smith in 1844, ire against the Saints rose rapidly. In 1845, the repeal of the Nauvoo City charter, which among other things granted the Latter-day Saints the right to keep a standing militia for their own protection, signaled the effective end of their sojourn in Illinois. These events, however, merely catalyzed a move contemplated by Church leaders for a number of years. As early as 1840 Joseph Smith had taught there was "a place of safety preparing for [the Saints] away towards the Rocky Mountains" (quoted in Ronald K. Esplin, "A Place Prepared": Joseph, Brigham and the Quest for Promised Refuge in the West," *Journal of Mormon History* vol.9 [1982], 90). By the fall of 1845, preparations for the exodus were well under way; the proposed departure date would be, in the words of Brigham Young, "as soon as the grass grows" (quoted in Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail*, [1964], 38) in the following spring. But the mobs wouldn't rest. On 4 February 1846, in the heart of a Midwestern winter so cold and bitter the Mississippi River froze over, the Latter-day Saints were driven from their homes and lands down a street which came to be known as the "Street of Tears" and into the unknown mystery of the western frontier.

## Religious Freedom

Although the body of Latter-day Saints grew rapidly, swelling the population of a number of frontier communities, the Saints were no theocratic usurpers: "We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may" (Articles of Faith 1:11). But as they gathered converts, they gathered enemies, leaving themselves, ultimately, no choice but departure. In a letter addressed to U.S. President James K. Polk in 1846, Brigham Young gave notice of the farewell:

"We would esteem a territorial government of our own as one of the richest boons of earth, and while we appreciate the Constitution of the United States

as the most precious among the nations, we feel that we had rather retreat to the deserts, islands or mountain caves than consent to be ruled by governors and judges whose hands are drenched in the blood of innocence and virtue, who delight in injustice and oppression." Thus, they walked (quoted in B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 3:89-90).

### **Value of the Exodus**

"For Brigham Young and his associates, the 1846 exodus from Nauvoo, far from being a disaster imposed by enemies, was foretold and foreordained—a key to understanding LDS history and a necessary prelude for greater things to come. From a later perspective too, scholars of the Mormon experience have come to see the exodus and colonization of the Great Basin as the single most important influence in molding the Latter-day Saints into a distinctive people" (Reed C. Durham Jr., "Westward Migration, Planning and Prophecy," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. [1992], 4:1563).

### **Mississippi River Crossing**

From February through September of 1846, thousands of Latter-day Saints abandoned Nauvoo, fleeing to the West in barges and ferries across the Mississippi River. Some of those who crossed in late February did so on ice, as the wide river froze solid in sub-zero temperatures. A number of diarists refer to the freezing as a miracle, even though, notes one commentator, "it was a miracle that nearly froze a couple of thousand Saints" (Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, 44). The majority, some 7,000 or more, left between March and May. By September only six or seven hundred remained in Nauvoo. Known as the "poor Saints," they were either physically or financially incapable of traveling west by themselves to join the main body of the Saints now near the western edge of Iowa. Mobs forced this last group from the city in mid-September, 1846, in what came to be known as "the battle of Nauvoo."

### **Iowa: Bitter Beginning**

Of the entire trek to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, it was the first 300 miles across Iowa that most tried the stamina and courage of the Latter-day Saint pioneers. Mere weeks into the journey—through sleet, blizzard, and mud—it became apparent to Brigham Young that his people would never reach the Rocky Mountains in the time or in the manner that most had hoped for. So throughout the spring of 1846, thousands of refugees trudged across the windswept Iowa prairies, preparing the way for those yet to come: building bridges, erecting cabins, planting and fencing crops. By mid-June, nearly 12,000 Saints were still scattered across Iowa. The Rocky Mountain entry would be postponed.



## Joseph Smith



"The place was literally a wilderness. The land was mostly covered with trees and bushes, and much of it was so wet that it was with the utmost difficulty that a footman could get through, and totally impossible for teams. Commerce was unhealthy, very few could live there; but believing that it might become a healthy place by the blessing of heaven to the saints, and no more eligible place presenting itself, I considered it wisdom to make an attempt to build up a city" (Joseph Smith quoted in B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 2:9).

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## Brigham Young

1846



In a letter addressed to U.S. President James K. Polk, Brigham Young gave notice of the Latter-day Saints' farewell:

"We would esteem a territorial government of our own as one of the richest boons of earth, and while we appreciate the Constitution of the United States as the most precious among the nations, we feel that we had rather retreat to the deserts, islands or mountain caves than consent to be ruled by governors and judges whose hands are drenched in the blood of innocence and virtue, who delight in injustice and oppression" (B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 3:89–90.)

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## Thomas Bullock



September 1846

"Dear Father,

"I have been shaking every day for the last month and can scarce write any—I received yours of Aug. 14 while shaking at ten or twelve knots an hour—and as you told me not to perform any impossibilities—I have hitherto found it an impossibility to sell my house and lot—but the very next morning I wrought [a] miracle, in giving it away for one hundred dollars. The only obstacle in the successful termination of my miracle is, I have not yet got the hay—you may rest assured I have done, and will do my best to come I have a very kind neighbor, who, as quick as he heard I had bargained for the disposal of my place, began to run it down, and has caused Mr. Bolander to waver about completing his purchase. May the Lord reward him for it, and a few other vagaries.

"I have also received yours of the 24th Aug—brought from the Trustees Office to the Temple & & & with the seal broken open—in order to find out the nature of our communications—I have written about seven letters to you—which I verily believe have been waylaid—and I was getting much disappointed in not receiving one reply—but I am very thankful for these two.

"Even my little boy says 'dadda I wish we were out of this country, for when I've done shaking I can get nothing to eat—we have all been 'shake, shake, shaking' more or less for the last five weeks. A fortnight ago, I, Henrietta, & Thomas Henry were not expected to live thro the day—I sent to the Trustees for something to cure us or we might be dead before the morrow—Heywood & Fulmer ordered Whitehead to come up & see us, & learn what I needed—but he has never been yet—and if it had not been for a little Charity—and Henrietta selling her clothes we should all have died of starvation—it will almost be a miracle if you see little Willard alive for he has fallen away dreadful this week—and if you was to see me and my family at this moment, you would say we had either been whitewashed or had risen out of our graves—we have not the least idea where our next meal is to come from. I do not write these things to harass your mind—but to tell you my situation, and to shew you that I am really desirous to come to you and again go at the history. At this moment my two eldest boys are shaking.

"Yesterday I exerted all my strength to go & see Benson, & Lucy. She went home about a fortnight ago sick. She is also confined to her bed with fever—Benson looks a skeleton—they subsist by selling their clothes for food—when he gets better, he talks of selling his cow and going down to New Orleans to obtain employment—he says it is impossible for him to get teams or food for his journey to the West—Ann is nearly dead, she is almost reduced to shadow—she first commenced with chills and fever, and is now afflicted with canker in her inside.

"John Rushton is Steam boating and I understand is very well his wife & child were well the last time we heard—Jane Hall is down at St. Louis—and I have just heard that Susannah Lippot started for St. Louis & expect she is there.

"Before I was taken sick—while hunting the oxen—I accidentally found out brother Longstrath's house. I called. Sister Nanny was very well. bro & sis Longstrath were down at St. Louis. I understood that you had written three letters to him and which were sent down to him—but there had been no reply.

"There have been a many Saints who were preparing as fast as they could to go to the west—who have gone to the grave. Many literally dying for want—whole families are sick—and not one to help the other—two or three dying in a house—great difficulty in getting coffins and then to be buried by strangers—there is not one house in this neighborhood, but there has been sickness in

it—there appears to me to be more sick now than when Nauvoo was crowded with Saints.

"In addition to all this, the Mob is within five miles—close to Wilcox house—about 5 or 600 Strong & with 8 cannon—those Saints who are well are in the woods this side of Joseph's farm—the Cannon were roaring about 5 P.M. yesterday but I have not yet heard of any casualties on our side.

"We should have crossed the River this day, sick as we are—to secure your Cattle & Waggon & my few cloths but cannot pay the Ferryman, the Mob threaten if they get in the city to kill man woman & child & they have invited men from all the counties to join them—promising them that they shall share in the plunder of the city. Rest assured I keep as strict a look out after your cattle as if they were my own—they cost 125.00 & Waggon 80. I have spent scores of days looking after them and shall bring all safe to you, if possible.

"I am in hopes that I shall cross the river in a few days and shall move on to Bonaparte where I shall have to stay for the flour that Mr. Bolander has promised me.

"There is another utter impossibility—and that is, to expect the Trustees to let me have two more yoke of oxen, or a fit out, (altho' both have been promised me) and that is the reason why I contracted to let Mr. Bolander have my property so very cheap.

"The South West Pillar of the Belfry was struck with the Lightning last Su[nday] [paper torn off] was done—some persons seem to be scared about it.

"Hyrum Smith's Widow &c &c crossed the River last Tuesday. & I have [paper torn off] has exchanged the Mansion for a Farm in Burlington—to which place she is [paper torn off]

"Henrietta joins me in love to you and yours—and we pray that [paper torn off]

"I remain Dear Father

"Your very affectionately

"Thomas Bullock

"Please tell William Cook Mitchell that his mother died last Tuesday morning 10 September 184[6]" (Thomas Bullock to Willard Richards, Sept. 1846, Brigham Young office files, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.)



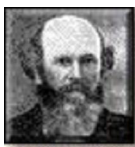
**Thomas L. Kane, Nauvoo**

"Here, among the docks and rushes, sheltered only by the darkness, without roof between them and the sky, I came upon a crowd of several hundred human creatures, whom my movements roused from uneasy slumber upon the ground. . . .

"Dreadful, indeed, was the suffering of these forsaken beings. Bowed and cramped by cold and sunburn, alternating as each weary day and night dragged on, they were, almost all of them, the crippled victims of disease. They were there because they had no homes, nor hospital, nor poor-house nor friends to offer them any. They could not satisfy the feeble cravings of their sick: they had not bread to quiet the fractious hunger cries of their children. Mothers and babes, daughters and grandparents, all of them alike, were bivouacked in tatters, wanting even covering to comfort those whom the sick shiver of fever was searching to the marrow.

"These were Mormons, famishing, in Lee county, Iowa, in the fourth week of the month of September, in the year of our Lord 1846. . . .

"They were, all told, not more than six hundred and forty persons who were thus lying on the river flats. But the Mormons in Nauvoo and its dependencies had been numbered the year before at over twenty thousand. Where were they? They had last been seen, carrying in mournful trains their sick and wounded, halt and blind, to disappear behind the western horizon, pursuing the phantom of another home" (Thomas L. Kane, *The Mormons: A Discourse Delivered Before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, March 26, 1850* [Family and Church History Department Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1850], microfilm, 8–11).

**Gilbert Belnap**

"The western shore of the Mississippi was covered with the canvass of the Saints, drawn over a wagon and well formed tent or the thread bare sheet stretched over a few poles covering the invalid form of the more unfortunate.

"Many is the time while keeping the watchmans post in the darkness of night when the rains descended as if the windows of heaven were open, have I wept over the distressed situation of the Saints. Towards the dim light of many and flickering lamps has directed my eyes to the crying of children, the restless movements of the aged and infirm, the mournfull groan of many a fevered brain, had made an impression on my mind that can never be forgotten" (Gilbert Belnap, Centennial Issue in Honor of Utah Pioneer Gilbert Belnap, 1850–1950, comp. Della A. Belnap, Historical Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d., 32).



*Juliet Courier*

Correspondent to the *Juliet Courier* describing Nauvoo (ca. June 1841)

"I have been at Nauvoo, on the Mississippi, in Hancock county, Illinois, and have seen the manner in which things are conducted among the Mormons. In the first place, I cannot help noticing the plain hospitality of the Prophet Smith, to all strangers visiting the town, aided as he is, in making the stranger comfortable by his excellent wife, a woman of superior ability. The people of the town appear to be honest and industrious, engaged in their usual vocations of building up a town, and making all things around them comfortable. On Sunday I attended one of their meetings, in front of the temple [they are] now building, and one of the largest buildings in the state. There could not have been less than 2,500 people present, and as well appearing as any number that could be found in this or any state. Mr. Smith preached in the morning, and one could have readily learned, then, the magic by which he had built up this society, because, as we say in Illinois, 'they believe in him,' and in his honesty. It has been a matter of astonishment to me, after seeing the Prophet, as he is called, Elder Rigdon, and many other gentlemanly men any one may see at Nauvoo, who will visit there—why it is, that so many professing christianity, and so many professing to reverence the sacred principles of our Constitution (which gives free religious toleration to all), have slandered and persecuted this sect of Christians" (Unknown correspondent for the *Juliet Courier* [ca. June 1841], as quoted in B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 2:82).

*The Odd Fellow newspaper (31 December 1845)*

"One of the most interesting, and it may be, remarkable events of our day, is the proposed removal of the Mormons from their city of Nauvoo, across the continent, to the Pacific. They will go, not as ordinary emigrants, but as a distinct people. . . . [Mormonism] has grown as no other sect has in the history of the world, and, so far from dying out, as it was predicted it would, with the death of the Smiths, it has grown more vigorously. . . . Next spring will witness their fitting. The Mormons propose going in bodies as large as can find sustenance, and the broad prairies of the West will be covered with their long processions of men, women, and children, their flocks, [and] their herds" ("The Mormon Heritage," *Odd Fellow*, 31 Dec. 1845, 108).

*Times and Seasons*

"To see such a large body of men, women and children, compelled by the inefficiency of the law, and potency of mobocracy, to leave a great city in the month of February, for the sake of the enjoyment of *pure religion*, fills the soul with astonishment, and gives the world a sample of fidelity and faith

The Pioneer Story/Trail Location/Nauvo...  
soul with astonishment, and gives the world a sample of beauty and truth,  
brilliant as the sun, and forcible as a tempest, and as enduring as eternity.

May God continue the spirit of fleeing from false freedom, and false dignity,  
till every Saint is removed to where he 'can sit under his own vine and fig tree'  
without having any to molest or make afraid. *Let us go—let us go*"  
("February," *Times and Seasons*, 1 Feb. 1846, 1114).

Journal photographs courtesy of Infobases, Inc.

Print: *Crossing the Mississippi on Ice* by C.C.A. Christensen

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