

Making Friends in Missouri: Telling the Steamboat *Saluda* Story and Its Aftermath

Fred E. Woods

The infamous “Extermination Order” issued October 27, 1838, by Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs caused thousands of Latter-day Saints to flee the state and seek refuge in Illinois.¹ Throughout the harsh winter of 1838–39, many Latter-day Saint families traveled to Missouri’s eastern border (some 150 miles) in carts and wagons and on foot. While most crossed the Mississippi River by ferry at Quincy, some voyaged by riverboats from Richmond, Missouri, to the Quincy region in Illinois.²

This forced exodus deeply embittered the Mormons against Missourians, and ill feelings continued to fester long after the Saints had gathered to the Salt Lake Valley a decade later. Such resentment is evident through several Mormon emigrant accounts recorded during the mid-nineteenth century. Painful memories had been deeply etched by the injustices and cruel treatment at the hands of the western Missourian mobocrats during the 1830s.

Prophecies of Doom upon Missouri Mobocrats

Mormon narratives of the late 1840s and 1850s show that as the Saints witnessed bleached bones strewn across the overland trail heading west, their minds lingered on the memories of mobocracy and recollections of predictions of a just vengeance. Although the Prophet Joseph Smith had publicly prayed, “Have mercy, O Lord, upon the wicked mob, who have driven thy people, . . . if repentance is to be found,”³ he had also boldly warned, “Let the

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government of Missouri redress the wrongs she has done to the Saints, or let the curse follow them from generation to generation.”⁴

In the summer of 1850, Latter-day Saint emigrant Nelson Whipple Wheeler vividly described the fate of some of the mobocrats: “Many of the bodies of those jentiles were dug up and eaten by the wolves (which were most numerous in the Platt Country) . . . and their bodies lay to bleach on the Desert. this was a literal fulfillment of some of the predictions of the Prophet Joseph as vary many of these vary men ware the ones that had Driven the Saints from Missouri and murdered and plundered them thire.”⁵ James Madison Fisher, who crossed the plains during this same summer, recalled, “I will mention a prophasy of Joseph Smith the prophet he prophesied that the mosuri [Missouri] mobocrat bones would bleach upon the plains we saw many graves where the wolves had draged the bodies out they stunk along the road. We heard they were from Mosuri.”⁶

Attitudes Toward and Avoidance of Salt Lake City

The Mormons widely accepted the certainty of God’s awful wrath heaped upon the Missourians. Apparently this view deterred some Missourian migrants from coming to Salt Lake City as they headed west. For example, on July 2, 1849, James H. Humphreys of Hannibal, Missouri, wrote, “having some fear of going through Salt Lake on account of the ill feelings they the Mormans had against the Missourians, we concluded to take the Serblets [Sublette’s] Cut Off.”⁷ Perhaps Missourian migrants heard along the way the bleached-bones prophecies and reports like this one from Albert King Thurbur: “Arrived in G. S. [L.] City July 19 (1849). I was riding along the street I spoke to an aged man. Well, says he, we are glad to see you if you did not drive us out of Missouri, which was all Greek to me as I knew nothing of Mormons or their history.”⁸ That same year, Leonard Babcock worked in Salt Lake City for a few weeks before traveling on to Los Angeles. During his brief stay, Babcock received a firsthand account of the dark days of Missouri from a Mormon named James Hendricks, who had been severely wounded at the Battle of Crooked River. Babcock wrote, “Worked for a man Hendricks who was shot in the back of the neck . . . when Mormons was driven out of Mo. on Crooked River battle grounds.”⁹ Such reports no doubt influenced Babcock’s perception of the difficult relationship that still existed between some Mormon victims and their Missourian abusers. One Missourian who traveled to California the following year wrote, “I went north of Salt Lake City as the Mormons we[re] down on Missourians generally many Missouri trains got in trouble If their stock got in to the gardens or any fields they were fined heavily It was charged that the mormons would turn the cattle in on purpose to make

trouble I knew many emigrants that ware ruined and had to work their way to oregon or California.”¹⁰ Another emigrant recorded:

We arrived at Salt Lake in the early part of August [1849] and stopped nearby the settlements from Friday to Sunday. . . . There was a large circular canvass suspended in the form of a great tent under which the people had their meetings and in which Brigham Young preached the Sunday we were there. I was not feeling very well and did not attend the meeting. I was told that he said that there were people coming and skulking through that place on the way to California, who had taken part in driving them out of Missouri, and if he could catch them, he would send them to Hell Across Lots. There were some Missourians who became alarmed and started on as soon as possible.¹¹

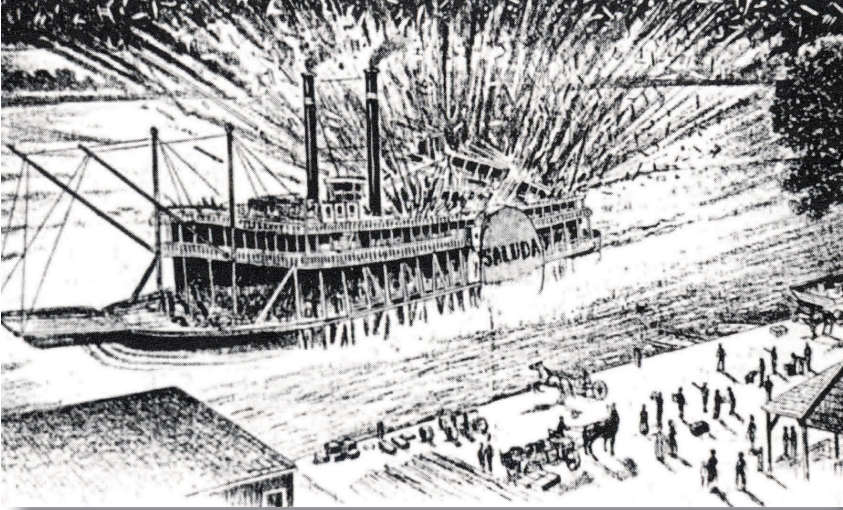
On July 24, 1850, Dan Carpenter wrote in his journal about the following Pioneer Day celebration in Salt Lake City:

The Mormons this day celledbrate the arrival of the first settlement of this valley 3 years ago by them. We are in a hearing of their cannons, by way of jollification. The whole valley comes to this city today and have a perfect jubilee. The music waggon for today is drawn by 14 horses, large and commodious. The Mormons curse the d - d ragged Emigrant Sons of Bitches from Mo. & Ill. Traveling through their country.¹²

Notwithstanding the resentment that seemed to pollute the migrant plains, Mormon converts (mostly from Europe and the eastern United States) continued to cross over Missouri borders by steam and rail during the next three decades.¹³ Knowing what Utah Mormons generally thought of passing migrant Missourians, what did the Mormon migrants encounter during this tumultuous period of the mid-nineteenth century when they crossed Missouri? What challenges did they face as they traversed this American Mesopotamia from the Mississippi to the Missouri River?

Passage Through Missouri

During the three decades after the extermination decree, there seems to be no evidence of the state of Missouri enforcing the infamous order. However, the Mormon emigrants did face a number of enemies or adversities of a different kind: disease (cholera and yellow fever), boiler explosions on Missouri River steamboats, danger from the Civil War, and an abundance of bad press. However, in the border cities of St. Louis, Westport, and St. Joseph, the Mormons were able to develop relationships, gain employment, and make useful trades; thus most of them were able to cross Missouri without incident and reach their promised land in the Salt Lake Valley. By 1869, the transcontinental railroad had been connected, and the Mormon pioneers were able to cross America’s heartland in a matter of days, instead of months.



Drawing of the explosion of *Saluda* by Buck Martin, *Kansas City Star*, 1964, courtesy Millennial Press.



Missouri River near Lexington, Missouri, approximate site of the *Saluda* disaster, 2003. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

Though it is true that most Mormons fled the state of Missouri at the time of the Extermination Order, some found refuge on the eastern edge of Missouri in the metropolis of St. Louis. This thriving city also served as an inland transmigration port for about 18,000 European Saints who crossed the Atlantic and traveled up the Mississippi during the years 1840 to 1855.¹⁴

During the winter and spring of 2001, my family moved temporarily to St. Louis, Missouri, as I had received a teaching and research fellowship for the Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. On the UMSL campus, I would teach a history course on Mormon migration through the Pierre LaCledé Honors College program. My class members came from different cities in Missouri and were a mixture of Latter-day Saints and students of varied faiths. Inasmuch as I was teaching about Mormon history and the students were aware of the extermination order, I wanted to research a historical topic that generated light instead of heat as I told the story of Latter-day Saint migration in Missouri. I discovered that topic in the captivating narrative of the steamboat *Saluda*.

The *Saluda* Explosion and Relief Rendered

In the early spring of 1852, the *Saluda* took a load of west-bound emigrants as well as Latter-day Saint converts (headed for Utah) up the Missouri River. By this time the old steamer was in rather poor condition, and the icy conditions at the Lexington Bend made maneuvering difficult. However, Captain Francis T. Belt told his crew and passengers that he would round the bend or blow the boat to hell—and he did just that.

In what some historians consider the worst steamboat disaster in Missouri River history, the *Saluda* blew her boilers on April 9 (Good Friday), 1852. Twenty-six Latter-day Saint emigrants were killed and many others injured at the river bend near Lexington, Missouri. However, the explosion seems to have had a silver lining: a Missouri act of compassion may have helped to atone for the acts of mobocracy in the 1830s. Lexington citizens quickly hastened to the scene and rendered aid as modern-day good Samaritans. Not only did they raise money to bury the Mormon dead, they also gathered funds to help the survivors continue their journey to Utah. The townspeople created an orphan fund, and some even adopted the destitute Mormon children.¹⁵

The Missourians in Lexington rallied their community to help the victims of the accident. Abraham Smoot, an eyewitness of the disaster and of the kindness demonstrated afterwards, noted, “I shall never forget the kindness of the citizens of Lexington in caring for the living and burying the dead. The Lord certainly inspired them to do all that sympathy and benevolence could suggest in aid of the afflicted. The city council set apart a piece of ground in which to

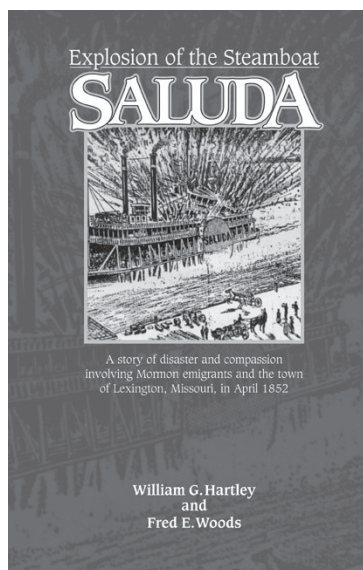
bury the Saints who had died, and William H. Russell, the great government freighter, and many other prominent citizens did all they could to comfort and help the afflicted survivors. Besides their devoted attentions, their contributions in aid of the Saints amounted to thousands of dollars.”¹⁶

Remembering the *Saluda* Story

This story was received with open arms by my students, and the semester finished well in late May 2001. On my final day in St. Louis (May 24), I made the following journal entry: “I believe the blessing I was given regarding this sojourn . . . has now been fulfilled. [I was told] . . . I would have the spirit of diplomacy in my work. . . . I have seen this come to pass inasmuch as doors have opened for a sesquicentennial commemoration for Latter-day Saint emigration in Lexington, Missouri (explosion of the *Saluda* steamboat for April 9, 2002).” One year later, the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation carried the following:

On April 12, 2002, the *Lexington News* reported that “the Lexington Historical Association held a crowded dedication ceremony at a memorial for victims of the *Saluda* explosion April 9. A large group that included descendants of the passengers of the *Saluda* gathered at the site . . . Michael Hutchings, of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, and Thomas Brailsford, who represents regional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints congregations, offered their appreciation to the city for its efforts to remember the victims. Mayor Tom Hayes presented copies of a proclamation honoring the sesquicentennial of the tragedy.”

This *Saluda* sesquicentennial commemoration was the highlight of the Lexington Steamboat Days, which were held April 6-9. On the final day of Lexington’s festivities, the commemoration recalled the tragic event of the explosion of the steamboat *Saluda* in which many were killed, including 26 Latter-day Saint emigrants who were traveling west on the Missouri River, bound for the Salt Lake Valley. The Mormon Historic Sites Foundation provided a generous contribution to create a beautiful plaque listing the names of all known victims. It was erected at a quaint little park specifically donated for the commemoration and is located at the intersection of 13th and Franklin Avenues. This historic site is also



William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda* (Salt Lake City, UT: Millennial Press, 2002).



Saluda Memorial dedication, April 9, 2002, Lexington, Missouri. L-r: JoAnna Woods, Fred E. Woods, William G. Hartley, Michael L. Hutchings, Martha Hutchings, Roger Slusher, Brant Neer, and Mayor Tom Hayes. Photograph courtesy of Fred E. Woods.

home to a bell which is from the same era as the bell which was blown from the *Saluda*. During the somber ceremony, several descendants of *Saluda* victims (including Hutchings) each took turns ringing the bell in remembrance of their lost loved ones.

This eventful commemoration was echoed through radio programs and Missouri newspapers and was even reported nationally by the Associated Press. Each report seemed to herald the kindness extended to the victims and their families by the efforts of the benevolent Missouri citizens of Lexington. . . .

An extension of this same kindness was demonstrated by present citizens of Lexington who wanted to pay respect to the descendants of the *Saluda* victims. A sweet mutual affection between them and the families of the victims prevailed throughout the festivities. BYU Mormon historians William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods wrote a book for the occasion, titled *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda* (Millennial Press), which they dedicated to the people of Lexington.

This moving story will be told on KBYU television this coming fall in a historical documentary which is currently being produced by Professor Woods.¹⁷

***Saluda* Documentary**

Filming of this documentary commenced during the week of the commemorative events, and I recorded the following in my journal in April 2002:

April 6 - Spent most of the morning helping [film director] Jack Cashill with the filming of a re-enactment of the *Saluda*. A group of Civil War re-enactors volunteered to help with this project and it went very well. In the afternoon, Jack filmed Bill Hartley, Mike Gillespie, Roger Slusher and myself with regards to the *Saluda* story. . . .

April 8 - This evening we went to a wonderful banquet at the Wentworth Academy [in Lexington]. I spoke, along with Bill Hartley and the Missouri State Historian. I felt the power of the Lord upon me as I told the *Saluda* story and thanked the Lexington people both then (1852) and now for their kindness. . . . It was a very special occasion.

April 9 - We had the *Saluda* commemoration program this morning. . . . Mayor Tom Hayes and other [Lexington] city officials were there and several of our new friends from Lexington. The hand of the Lord has been in this project from start to finish. I am so grateful for his goodness and for a prompting I had last April 10, 2001 to visit with city leaders about doing a commemoration for the *Saluda*.

Getting ready for the sesquicentennial commemoration also provided opportunities for Lexington citizens and Latter-day Saints to work together. For example, reflecting back on the efforts to prepare the ground and beautify Heritage Park for the *Saluda* memorial to be erected, Lexington resident Brant



Local Lexington residents participating as actors in the filming of the documentary *Fire and Redemption: The Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda*, 2003. Photograph courtesy Fred E. Woods.

Neer fondly remembers digging in the dirt with the local Mormon elders. He and his wife Michelle (owners of Welcome Home Realty in Lexington) led the way in pulling things together for the commemoration.

Two years later, in 2004, the documentary, titled *Fire and Redemption: The Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda*, was first shown on BYU Broadcasting. This production was largely funded by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation with in-kind resources donated by Brigham Young University. At this time I was serving in a dual role as a BYU professor of Church history and doctrine as well as the executive director of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation.

In June 2004 I traveled to both Liberty and Lexington to share the *Saluda* documentary. I was accompanied by Douglas L. Smoot, the great-grandson of Abraham Smoot. It was especially moving to see Douglas express his gratitude to the Lexington citizens for the compassionate service their community rendered at the time of the explosion. I recorded the following notes in my journal at that time:

June 13 - I went to Church with Mike Hutchings and his wife Martha. We also escorted Brant and Michelle Neer [two Lexington citizens who helped with the *Saluda* sesquicentennial commemoration who are not members of the LDS Church]. Mike, Elder [Douglas L.] Smoot and myself spoke in the Sunday school class on the *Saluda* and I felt full of the spirit as I testified to my dear friends the Neers. It was a special day. . . . In the evening we had our banquet. I was in seventh heaven as I had a chance to show the *Saluda* video, speak on the background behind its making and play a song I wrote for the good people of this little town. I sat in the back of the room watching these great folks and was full of joy to see the fulfillment of a wonderful project which the Lord inspired. It all began with a prompting I received on April 10, 2001, when I was a visiting professor in Lexington, Missouri.

Later in the evening, I went to the home of [Mayor] Tom Hayes and we then drove around for an hour or so visiting. He showed me his land development project by the river as well as taking me to his Church to meet some of his congregation. It was wonderful.

June 14 - I drove to the airport to go home this morning, but as I was pondering whether I should be leaving or not, I heard over the intercom that Delta airlines was looking for someone to come home later in the day at no extra cost. I felt like this was a direct signal that I was to stay and attend the dedication of a new bench [contributed through a service project by young women in a Kansas City stake] for the Heritage Park where the . . . *Saluda* plaque was. When I showed up at the last minute, I could tell Mayor Tom Hayes was touched to see me there. I was also asked to play my [*Saluda*] song on the guitar for the people assembled. I was also interviewed by the local newspaper and was able to tell our story. It was very special.

Building Bridges

After my appointment the following year as the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding at BYU, I decided the *Saluda* documentary was a great tool to use for building bridges in this new interfaith assignment. Therefore, I presented the film at a banquet in conjunction with a conference held September 8, 2006, in Jefferson City, Missouri. LDS Public Affairs was very involved in providing this conference, which was held on the thirtieth anniversary of Governor Christopher S. Bond's rescinding of the Extermination Order. The conference was titled "The Missouri Mormon Experience: From Conflict to Understanding." I was delighted that the audience erupted with applause as the documentary concluded.

The *Saluda* story has also generated acts of service by the Latter-day Saints in the Kansas City region, not far from Lexington. For example, for the past eight years, the young women of the Olathe Missouri Stake have provided service projects to the Lexington community. According to Annie Hamrick, one of the adult leaders, these activities have included providing benches for the Heritage Park Lexington Memorial, planting flowers and erecting a fence at the local cemetery, gathering books and videos for the Lexington Library, and serving as cleanup crews at the riverfront and the local Civil War site known as the Oliver Anderson House. I have also returned to the city over the past few years to give lectures and renew friendships. I was moved this past year when Mayor Tom Hayes gave me with a key to city of Lexington.

For several years I have talked about the *Saluda* story or shown the documentary in academic settings and communities from east to west in Missouri, including St. Louis, Columbia (at the University of Missouri), and most recently the Kansas City Public Library. In each setting I have found ready acceptance to move forward in relationships with the Latter-day Saints and the desire to hear less about the Extermination Order and more about ways we can pull together as a brotherhood.

I believe that one reason an LDS temple is being erected in Liberty, Missouri, is that the Latter-day Saints in western Missouri have embraced what Joseph Smith learned in a revelation received June 22, 1834, near Fishing River, Missouri, not far from the temple site and Independence. Here as the Zion's Camp experience came to a conclusion, and though the Mormon exiles were not yet to be restored to their homes in Jackson County, the revelation instructed: "And let all my people who dwell in the regions round about be very faithful, . . . and humble before me . . . [and] carefully gather together, as much in one region as can be, consistently with the feelings of the people; And behold, I will give you favor and grace in their eyes, that you may rest in peace and safety" (D&C 105:23–25).

Sharing the *Saluda* story has blessed my life in several ways as I have seen it help heal wounds and build bridges between Latter-day Saints and the citizens of Lexington as well as other people in the great state of Missouri whom I consider friends. It has been an honor to be involved with a team of people who understand the importance of looking for the common ground of compassion instead of the battleground of contention. It has also served as a model and a reminder of the Latin maxim “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things charity.”¹⁸

Notes

1. Among other things, the Extermination Order read, “The Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated and driven from the state, if necessary for the public good.” See Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd rev. ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1964), 3:175 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*). Concerning the meaning of the word “exterminate” in the early nineteenth century, historian Alexander L. Baugh wrote, “Contrary to popular belief by many Latter-day Saints and even some Mormon historians, the governor’s Extermination Order was not meant to give authorization to the state militia or its citizens to openly kill or eradicate the Latter-day Saint population. Although Boggs did not like the Mormons, he was not a butcher and did not condone the unnecessary taking of human life. In a report issued to the Missouri House of Representatives Boggs himself stated the order and call-up of troops was issued ‘to prevent the effusion of blood.’ Significantly, the first definition of the word *exterminate* as defined in Webster’s 1828 dictionary reads, ‘to drive from within the limits or borders.’ Given this definition, the order should probably be interpreted to read that ‘the Mormons must be exterminated [*or in other words*] driven from the State . . . for the public peace.’ Thus, Governor Boggs was calling for the removal of the Mormons by the militia, not their death sentence.” See Alexander L. Baugh, “The Mormons Must Be Treated As Enemies,” in Susan Easton Black and Andrew C. Skinner, eds., *Joseph: Exploring the Life and Ministry of the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), 292–93.

2. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 139.

3. This prayer was given in Kirtland, Ohio, on March 27, 1836, at the dedication of the House of the Lord in Kirtland. See D&C 109:50.

4. *History of the Church*, 5:211.

5. Nelson Whipple Wheeler, *Autobiography and Journal of Nelson Whipple Wheeler*, August 17, 1850, manuscript, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. The “Platt Country” refers to the region along the Platte River between modern-day Omaha, Nebraska, and Casper, Wyoming.

6. James Madison Fisher, *Reminiscences*, 9, manuscript, Church History Library. For the story of the Mormon emigrant experience passing through Missouri, see Fred E. Woods, “Between the Borders: Mormon Transmigration Through Missouri, 1838–1868,” in Thomas M. Spencer, ed., *The Missouri Mormon Experience* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 151–77.

7. James H. Humphreys, *Recollections*, 2, 5, manuscript, Hubert Howe Bancroft Library, University of California-Berkeley, Berkeley, California. See also Thomas Steed, *The*

Life of Thomas Steed from His Own Diary, 1826–1910 (n. p.: 1935), 15–16; and Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel 1847–1868, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/library/pioneercompanysearch>, accessed on January 1, 2011.

8. Albert King Thurber, Journal, 23, manuscript, Bancroft Library. This account also explains that shortly after the incident described in this passage, Thurber “left his company and joined the church, intending to remain.”

9. Leonard Babcock, Recollections, August 13, 1849, manuscript, Bancroft Library.

10. Isaac Julian Harvey, To California in 1850, Recollections, 45–46, manuscript, Bancroft Library. There appears to be some truth in Harvey’s statement, as evidenced by a Missouri reverend named Alvin Mussett, who in the summer of 1850 objected to the charge that his cattle had trampled the grain field of a local Saint. Mormon lawyer Hosea Stout noted that the angered minister “was fine[d] ten dollars & costs & to pay for the grain destroyed. He is a perfect specimen of the Missouri ministry.” See John D. Unruh Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1860*, paperback unabridged ed. (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 313–15; Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout, 1844–1861* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1964), 2:377, for the diary entries for the date of August 12, 1850.

11. Aylett R. Cotton, *Across the Plains to California in 1849 and After: An Autobiography*, 25, in *Recollections of Aylett R. Cotton*, typescript, Bancroft Library.

12. Dan Carpenter, Journal, July 24, 1850, manuscript, Church History Library.

13. In 1976, as part of the spirit of the bicentennial commemoration of the United States, the Extermination Order was officially rescinded by Missouri Governor Christopher S. Bond.

14. Fred E. Woods, “Gathering to Nauvoo: Mormon Immigration 1840–46,” *Nauvoo Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 50. See also Fred E. Woods and Thomas L. Farmer, *When the Saints Came Marching In: A History of the Latter-day Saints in St. Louis* (Orem, UT: Millennial Press, 2009) for a complete history on the Mormons in St. Louis.

15. William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda* (Salt Lake City, UT: Millennial Press, 2002), 43–53. See also William G. Hartley, “‘Don’t Go Aboard the *Saluda!*’: William Dunbar, LDS Emigrants, and Disaster on the Missouri,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2003):41-70; and William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, “Explosion of the Steamboat *Saluda*: Tragedy and Compassion at Lexington, Missouri, 1852,” *Missouri Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (July 2005): 281–305.

16. Andrew Jenson, “Fifty-sixth Company—*Kennebec*,” *The Contributor* 13, no. 9 (July 1892): 414.

17. Fred E. Woods, “Dedication of *Saluda* Memorial in Lexington, Missouri” in *Site and Scene: Mormon Historic Sites Foundation* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 5.

18. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Scribners, 1915), 6:650, explains that “this famous motto . . . is often falsely attributed to St. Augustin . . . but is of much later origin. . . . The authorship has recently been traced to RUPERTUS MELDENIUS, an otherwise unknown divine.”