

“It is Thought They Will be Shot on the Grounds”: A Letter from Missourian Josiah Hendrick During the Mormon-Missouri Conflict

Kyle R. Walker

In the fall of 1838, the Mormon-Missouri conflict had reached its climax. In October, tensions between the two groups had increased as conflicts escalated and rumors of hostilities circulated throughout the state. Finally, on October 31, Joseph Smith and several other Mormon leaders reluctantly surrendered to Missouri authorities as state militia laid siege to the Mormon community of Far West.

The following letter, written by Josiah Hendrick, is dated November 7, 1838, just one week after Joseph Smith and other leaders were taken into custody by Missouri militia authorities at Far West. The letter was written from Dover, Lafayette County, Missouri. Lafayette County is situated in the western part of the state, directly east of Jackson County and immediately south of Clay County. Hendrick was probably a resident of Lafayette County. Twice in the letter he mentions that “our men” (i.e., men from Lafayette County) went to Far West, and twice he states that “our men” returned. The text also indicates he had some firsthand knowledge of some of the circumstances relating to the Mormons in Missouri during the period of the 1830s, again suggest-

KYLE R. WALKER (walkerkr@byui.edu) is a faculty member in the Counseling Center at Brigham Young University-Idaho, where he also teaches part-time in the Religion Department. He received his BS in Family Science, and his MS and PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy from Brigham Young University. His doctoral dissertation focuses on the family dynamics of the Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith family. He also is the editor of *United by Faith: The Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family* (American Fork: Covenant Communications, 2005).

ing he was a resident of the region.

Although Josiah Hendrick may have been a member of one of the companies of Missouri militia called up during the Mormon conflict, he does not specifically state it. Furthermore, his name does not appear on any existing militia lists. The 1850 U.S. Federal Census has him listed as living in Bloomington Township, Buchanan County, Missouri, and indicates he was born in Virginia, was twenty-nine years old, married, and had a two-year-old daughter. This would have made him between seventeen and eighteen years old at the time he wrote this letter and probably too young to be in the state militia.¹ The fact that he believed the Mormon leaders would be

executed also indicates he probably was not on the scene. Had he been actually present, he would have known that the Mormon prisoners had not been shot, but had been taken by Samuel D. Lucas, a major-general in the state militia from Jackson County, to Independence to await trial.² More likely, Hendrick is rehearsing some of the reports that had been circulating about the Mormon surrender.

The letter is significant for several reasons. First, Hendrick recounts the history of the Saints' stay in the state from a Missourian's perspective. He describes the Mormons as having a leader "by the name of Jo Smith [whom] they believe in as a Jesus Christ." He further describes how the Mormons had earlier been driven out of Jackson County due to the Saints' boasting that they would either convert the Missourians or take over the whole country. Most significantly, Hendrick recounts his interpretation of Boggs's extermination order just days after it was issued. He understood the order to mean that the

all in debt to the merchants and the
 traders and they cant get the money to
 pay them for all the price are so involved
 that they cant pay there credit and if
 creditors push them they will have to sell
 there property and there property wont bring
 any thing for cash it has no more worth
 writing to you only a little sketch about the
 war more I suppose you have heard something
 about them and have commenced telling you
 about them I will try and tell you all I know
 they have a man by the name of Jo Smith
 they believe in as a Jesus Christ and have
 heard and they had embarked themselves
 in a wild country on the north side of the
 River and had built a town they call paria
 they were settled in Jackson County but they
 got to making there boasts that if the people
 of this country did not join them they
 would take this upper part of Missouri and
 the Jackson boys could not stand there
 boasts and they drove them out of Jackson
 County and they settled in the place above

Letter of Josiah Hendrick to Frances H. Davis, November 7, 1838, page 2. Image courtesy of Larry and Sandi Faria, Independence, Missouri.

Missourians had permission to either “kill them” [the Mormons] or “drive them out of the state.” This is important in light of current interpretations of the order. Historian Alexander L. Baugh has recently noted that Boggs’s himself stated he issued the order “to prevent the effusion of blood,” and that the very definition of “exterminate” during that time period meant “to drive from within the limits or borders.” Baugh concludes, “Governor Boggs was calling for the removal of the Mormons by the militia, not their death.”³ However, it is significant that Hendrick, understood the order as giving authorization to kill Mormons. While Boggs’ desire may have been simply to remove the Mormons as opposed to killing them, at least some Missourians understood the order as giving them license to do both. Finally, the numerical figures associated with the surrender at Far West indicate that the number in the Missouri militia was in the vicinity of 2,300, while the number of Mormon defenders was 800.

As noted, the letter is dated November 7, 1838, and postmarked November 9. Hendricks addressed the letter to his mother, Frances H. Davis, who was living in Newstore, Buckingham County, Virginia.⁴ The original document is in the private manuscript collection of Larry and Sandi Faria, Independence, Missouri.

The Document

November 7th 1838

Dear Mother,

I Received your Letter a few day[s] ago which gave me a great deal of Pleasure to hear from you and all your family as well as uncle Johns and uncle Bens I received a Letter from uncle Johns wife some time ago which stated that he was agoing to move to Missouri But it seems that he has gave out [up?] the notion as he has rented mr Waltons place. you stated in your letter that there has Been a long drouth in your country and would not make half crops it has been the same case in Missouri But the drouth did not hurt the crops much for the ground is generally wet in this country the crops of corn is generally good corn is selling at one dollar per barrel now But it is thought that it will be 2 or 3 dollars before next sum[m]er pork 3 dollars wheat 62 ½ cts per Bushel⁵ you also said that times was hard in virginia But they cant Be as hard as they are hear for the People [p. 1] [are] all in debt to the merchants and other traders and they cant get the money to pay them for all the men are so in volved that they cant pay there creditors and if creditors push them they will have to sell there property and there property wont Bring any thing for cash I have no news worth writing to you only a little sketch about the Mormons I suppose you have heard something about them as I have commenced telling you about them I will try and tell you all I know they have a man By the name of Jo Smith they Believe in as a Jesus Christ as I have heard and they have embodied themselves in colwell [Caldwell] county on the north side of the mo [Missouri] River and have Built a town they call far west⁶ They first settled in Jackson County But they got to making there Brags that if the people of This

country did not Join them they would take this upper part of Missouri⁷ and the Jackson Boys could not stand Those Threats and they drove them out of Jackson County and they settled in the place above [p. 2] [page torn] Country [page torn] and went [page torn] and when they got to far west [missing word—the ?] formed to fight and the mormons gave up and our men came home and the mormons Broke out again and our men went again and the mormons gave up again and our men came home and in about three weak[s] they Began to Burn houses and farms [and] Drove the people from their homes and an Express was sent to the governor of The State and he gave orders to kill them or Drive them out of the state and our men went to far west and the mormons had fortified their Town and had 800 men well armed for fighting and our army had 2300 men in it But not so well equiped and the mormons thought it would not do to fight and they gave up their he[a]d men to our men and they themselves was to leave the state and our men have them all with their he[a]d officers Jo Smith, Rigdon, Lyman Wyght [Wight], Roberson [George W. Robinson] & It is thought they will be shot on the grounds I must conclude I bid you a dieu

Josiah Hendrick

Notes

1. Missouri state militia laws required every able-bodied male from age sixteen to forty-five participate in militia service unless exempted. See *Laws of a Public and General Nature of the District of Louisiana, Territory of Louisiana, Territory of Missouri, and State of Missouri, Up to the Year 1824* (Jefferson City: W. Lusk & Son, 1842), 1:42, 151.

2. On October 31, 1838, Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, Lyman Wight, and George W. Robinson surrendered to Samuel D. Lucas, near Goose Creek, about one mile south of Far West. The following day, November 1, Hyrum Smith and Amasa Lyman were arrested and taken into custody. That evening, Lucas conducted a military hearing and ordered that the Mormon prisoners be taken to the public square at Far West the following morning and be executed. However, Alexander W. Doniphan, a brigadier-general in the Clay County militia (and legal counsel to the Mormons) intervened, and refused to execute the order. On the morning of November 2, the Mormon prisoners were brought to Far West, where they were allowed to return to their homes to get some clothing and other necessities, and to say good-bye to their families. They were then brought to the public square, put into wagons, and taken to Independence, where they arrived on November 4. They remained in Independence until November 8, when they were transported to Richmond for a preliminary hearing before the judge of the circuit court, Austin A. King.

3. 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: Deseret Book, 2005), 292–93.

4. The town of New Store Village, Virginia, is no longer extant, but at one time it was located near present-day Farmville, between Richmond and Lynchburg and was an important stop on the stage coach road between these two cities during the first half of the nineteenth century.

5. Thomas B. Marsh also felt that crops in that area of Missouri were doing well. He wrote, “Crops in this upper country, are exceedingly flourishing this season. I think that the prospects for an abundant crop of corn, were never greater. Wheat is from fifty to seventy five cents per bushel, corn meal is sold in this place for 75 cents per bushel and will prob-

ably remain as high as that until the new corn is ripe, when it will probably be much lower, as we understand that contracts are making for corn at 20 cents per bushel; good bacon is from 6 to 8 dollars per hundred, and pickled pork about the same. I think that provisions of all kinds will soon be very plenty among us.” Thomas B. Marsh to Jedediah M. Grant, August 1838, in *The Elder’s Journal* (Far West, Missouri) 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 51–52.

6. The Saints began settling Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri, in the summer of 1836.

7. Residents of Jackson County indicated that they had been told regularly “that we, (the Gentiles,) of this country are to be cut off, and our lands appropriated by them [the Saints] for inheritances. Whether this is to be accomplished by the hand of the destroying angel, the judgments of God, or the arm or power, they are not fully agreed among themselves. . . . Some recent remarks in the Evening and Morning Star, their organ in this place . . . show plainly that many of this deluded and infatuated people have been taught to believe that our lands were to be won from us by the sword.” “Minutes of a Meeting of the Citizens of Jackson County, Missouri,” in Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:395–96.