

**A CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF THE NAUVOO LEGION:  
THE GENERAL RETURN FOR THE  
SECOND COHORT, 1843**  
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It is well-known that the Nauvoo Charter allowed for a city-controlled militia force, and that it was this force that non-Mormon residents of Hancock County, Illinois feared. However, a document discovered at Southern Utah University Special Collections suggests that the Legion may not have been the fighting force that it was perceived. The "General Return of the Second Cohort or Brigade of the Nauvoo Legion for the Year 1843" is a cross-tabular summation of the ranks and arms for half of the Legion, organized by regiment. In September, 1843, Legion commander Joseph Smith appointed W. W. Phelps, Henry Miller and Hosea Stout to ask the Governor for more arms.<sup>1</sup>

The Nauvoo Legion was divided into two Cohorts. A total of 1,751 men comprised the Second Cohort, divided into a General Staff and five regiments: the 1st Artillery, 2nd-4th Rifle, and 5th Infantry. Commanding the Cohort was a brigadier with a staff of ten, which included five chaplains, according to the *History of the Church*. The others were staff officers such as Quartermaster and Aides-de-camp (typically secretaries). Each regiment was under the direction of a Colonel, assisted by a Lieutenant Colonel and Major, and "Adjutant," Quartermaster Sergeant and Sergeant Major. Each also had six Captains, and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Lieutenants (except the 2nd Rifle, which inexplicably had five of each). The number of Sergeants and Corporals varied between regiments, for a total of 130 and 104, respectively. Nine pioneers and seven musicians were divided unevenly between four of the regiments, while two Surgeons occupied ranks in the General Staff and the 3rd Rifle. The commissioned officers totalled 159 men. Privates, the effective force, accounted for 1,342 of the total enumerated. The regiments in rank order contained 195; 257; 388; 230; and 272 men, respectively.

The Legion had received some state arms in 1842,<sup>2</sup> but compared to the number of troops involved, the arms listed are surprisingly sparse and suggest that the Nauvoo Legion was more an organized drill corps than a fighting force. Arms are divided into columns for muskets, rifles, swords, pairs of pistols, and "cannons & equipage." Though the headings sound impressive, the census numbers below them are surprising. Obviously, the cannons were enumerated in the arms of the 1st Artillery, which also carried the lion's share (two-thirds) of the swords listed. With the minor exception of six rifles listed in the 1st Artillery, only the Rifle companies carried rifles, though they were unevenly distributed. The 2nd and 3rd Rifle held 59 and 40 each and between them had four pistol pairs, while the 4th's 28 rifles were supplemented by a third (21) of the muskets. The 5th infantry shouldered muskets solely. Not a single weapon is listed for the general staff. The Second Cohort fielded merely 200 fireable arms (excluding the cannon); therefore no more than 11.5% of all the corps (excluding the unarmed General Staff) or 12.5% of only the non-commissioned officers and privates could have been armed with a chargeable weapon.

The "General Return" is certainly not an exhaustive report of Mormon arms.<sup>3</sup> Yet, if it is taken as a representation of Mormon strength, then even late into the Nauvoo period, the Mormons had not recovered from the losses in Missouri, or were not seriously concerned with arming themselves. Within a few months, as friction between Nauvoo residents and the rest of the county increased, the number of fieldable private arms undoubtedly increased. All public arms were surrendered back to state control by order of Governor Thomas Ford, when Joseph Smith was enroute to Carthage in June, 1844.<sup>4</sup> Thus at no time were the Mormons at Nauvoo really a military threat to the surrounding citizens.

## NOTES

1. *History of the Church* 6:31.

2. *History of the Church* 5:201. B. H. Roberts in a note states that these arms consisted of "three cannons, six pounders, and a few score of muskets, swords and pistols, which were furnished by the United States to Illinois. . . ." The provenance of the Legion musket at the LDS Church Museum of History and Art concurs with the history. No comment can be made on the number.

3. See *History of the Church* 7:12. Governor Ford later stated that Captain Singleton of Brown County had reported to him that "he called out the Legion for

inspections, and that upon two hours' notice two thousand of them assembled, all of them armed, and this after the public arms had been taken away from them. So it appears tht they had a sufficiency of private arms for any reasonable power." The accuracy of Ford's second-hand report should be questions, since "armed" might mean anything from clubs to rifles. Note also that two thousand is barely above the enumerated number of the Second Cohort alone. It may mean that Singleton inspected only the armed members of the Legion.

4. *History of the Church* 6:553-7. There could not have been many to collect. Smith's party arrived at Nauvoo at about 2:30 on Monday, June 24, 1844, and attended a meeting, afterwhich the arms were collected, finishing by 6:00 the same day.