

## “That They Might Rest Where the Ashes of the Latter-day Saints Reposed”: The Far West, Missouri, Burial Ground

*Michael S. Riggs and Alexander L. Baugh*

Located in Mirabile Township in Caldwell County, Far West, Missouri, was a relatively short-lived Latter-day Saint community, existing from 1836 to 1839. Before Far West was established, Jackson County (situated south of the Missouri River) served as the main gathering place from 1831 to 1833. However, in late 1833, violence erupted between Jackson’s citizenry and the Mormons, resulting in their expulsion from the county<sup>1</sup> At the time of their removal, most Church members relocated to the north in Clay County, where the citizens were considerably more receptive than Jackson’s old-time settlers. However, Clay’s citizens never expected the Saints to remain in the county permanently, and by the early summer of 1836 continued immigration into the region led to increased tensions and threats of renewed hostilities. On June 29, a committee of citizen leaders drafted a lengthy petition requesting that the Latter-day Saints relocate, promising assistance in removing peaceably. To

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Michael S. Riggs (msrq39@gmail.com) works on the East Coast for AECOM (an environmental consulting firm) as a public historian and department manager. He holds a BS from the University of San Francisco, an MA in Religion from Park University, and he has done doctoral work at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He is a member of the Mormon History Association and a member and past president of the John Whitmer Historical Association (2001–02).

Alexander L. Baugh (alex\_baugh@byu.edu) is an Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University. He received his BS from Utah State University, and his MA and PhD degrees from Brigham Young University. He is a member of the Mormon History Association and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, and a member and past president of the John Whitmer Historical Association (2006–07). He also serves as editor of *Mormon Historical Studies*.

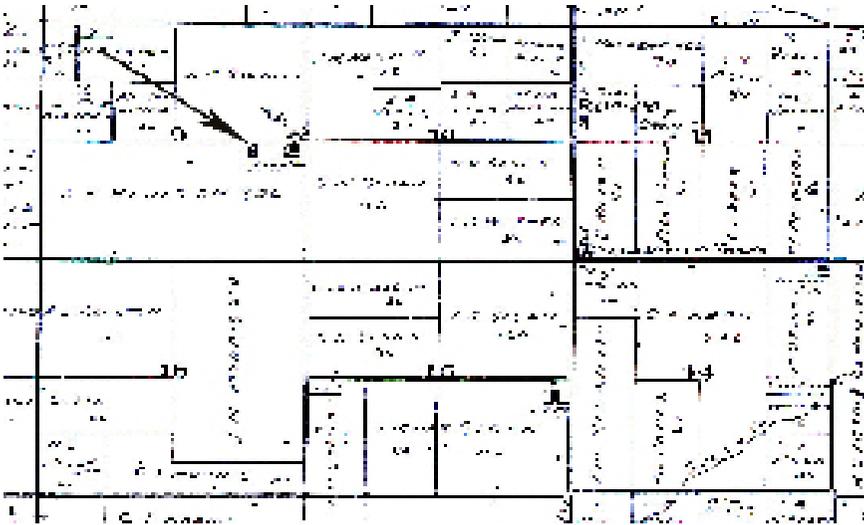
avoid conflict and “for the sake of friendship,” Church leaders agreed to look elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

As early as 1834, Mormon families had begun moving north and east from Clay into the more sparsely populated areas in Ray County. Still later, in March 1836, Missouri Church leaders began searching out possible sites for permanent settlement in some of the more uninhabited regions of that county. After making extensive explorations, on August 8, 1836, William W. Phelps and John Whitmer, two members of the Missouri presidency acting as agents in behalf of the Church, purchased a one-mile square plat (640 acres) situated near Shoal Creek as the main gathering place in Missouri. The site was subsequently named Far West.<sup>3</sup>

As Latter-day Saints began moving into Far West and the surrounding region, Missourians thought the Mormon problem might be solved if a separate county were created exclusively for them. Alexander W. Doniphan, Clay County’s representative to the state legislature and a Mormon sympathizer, spearheaded the bill. Passage of the measure came on December 29, 1836. The new county was named Caldwell in honor of Matthew Caldwell of Kentucky, a friend, Indian scout, and soldier who had served with Joseph Doniphan, father of Alexander W. Doniphan.<sup>4</sup>

For nearly three years, from 1836 to until 1839, Far West was the center of the religious and political activities of the Latter-day Saints in northern Missouri. During this period it was their primary gathering place, and by late 1838 it had become the largest settlement community north of the Missouri River.<sup>5</sup> With the creation of Caldwell County in December 1836, Far West was designated as the county seat.<sup>6</sup> Finally, for a period of exactly eleven months (March 14, 1838, to February 14, 1839), Far West was the official headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1836–1839, a substantial Mormon population, numbering at its height between 4,000–5,000, inhabited Far West and the surrounding region. During the three-year occupation, it is estimated that 200–300 deaths occurred. Most of the remains would have been buried at the Far West burial ground located in the southeast quarter of Section 9, in Mirabile Township, approximately one mile west and a half mile north of the center of Far West. The selection of a burial ground “outside” the square mile section of the original community demonstrates that the Latter-day Saints in Far West had adopted a newly established practice of creating a “rural cemetery”—one placed beyond the confines of the immediate population. Founded near Boston in 1831, the first rural cemetery was named Mount Auburn. The Far West burial ground, begun just five years later, thus became the first rural cemetery west of the Mississippi River.<sup>8</sup>



A portion of the plat map of Mirabile Township published in William P. Bullock, *Atlas of Caldwell County, Missouri* (St. Joseph, Missouri, 1897), 12. The Far West burial ground was located in the southeast quarter of Section 9 (see arrow). The Far West public square was located at the junction of Sections 10, 11, 14, and 15. Note the figure representing the “Old Mormon Temple” in the southwest quarter of Section 11, the site designated for the temple which was never completed.

The best-remembered persons buried in the Far West burial ground were Mormon Apostle David W. Patten and Gideon Carter, who were both killed at battle of Crooked River October 25, 1838. John Wycliffe Rigdon, son of Sidney Rigdon, a member of the First Presidency, remembered the solemn occasion:

The next day [following the battle] we buried both David Patten and Gideon Carter in military order. Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith and Sidney Rigdon rode at the head of the procession on horseback. Then came the martial band and after that the bodies of David Patten and Gideon Carter and then quite a little procession followed. After, we took them out to a little burying ground just outside the village [Far West] and there we buried them.<sup>9</sup>

Other notable individuals buried here include Lyman R. Sherman (called as an Apostle, but never ordained),<sup>10</sup> Lorain Stevens Page, wife of Apostle John E. Page,<sup>11</sup> and fourteen-year-old James G. Marsh, son of then senior Apostle Thomas B. Marsh.<sup>12</sup>

Ethan Barrow’s infant son, Ethan Jr., passed away in Far West. Barrow’s obvious zeal for his religion was strangely mixed with natural grief in the following revealing journal entry:



Photograph from the approximate location of the Far West burial ground situated about a mile west and a half-mile north of the Far West temple site, January 2003. The Far West temple site and the Community of Christ meetinghouse can be seen in the center of the photo. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

He [Ethan Barrows, Jr.] died on the 18th day of August, 1838, being five months and nine days of age. He was at this time our only child, the fondest hope of our earthly enjoyments. Although bereaved of the only repository of our future blessings to be handed down to future generations, we should not weep as ones having no hope, for short, though bitter, was his pain, and eternal is his joy. It appeared that he was taken from the evils to come [the Mormon War] and we were led to exclaim like one of old, The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.<sup>13</sup>

While most Latter-day Saints who died while living in settlements other than Far West were generally interred near where they resided, there were exceptions. Lyman O. Littlefield remembered that the remains of Eliza King-sley, a young Mormon woman residing in Liberty, Missouri, at the time of her death, were brought to Far West, a distance of more than forty miles, “that they might rest where the ashes of the Latter-day Saints reposed.”<sup>14</sup>

What happened to the Far West burial ground following the expulsion of the Mormons in 1839? In frontier settlements like Far West, circumstances did not always permit the marking of graves. Those that were marked were often

identified with wooden markers which eventually deteriorated. However, the primary reason for the demise of the burial ground was that following the departure of the Mormons the cemetery was simply abandoned. Lacking upkeep, even more permanent stone markers eventually broke and were subsequently removed.

Following the departure of the Mormons, the burial ground remained an identifiable feature of the Far West landscape until the late 1870s. Several reports by individuals who visited or lived in the area made occasional reference to the site. In October 1874, one visitor noted, "About a half mile west of town [Far West] is the Old Burying Ground of the Mormons. It is now located within the limits of a farm owned by Mr. Boulton. Here are some two or three hundred graves, all more or less obliterated, with scarcely an occasional rude headstone to mark the presence of a once sacredly guarded, but long forsaken and forgotten village of the dead."<sup>15</sup> In the late 1870s it was described as "more or less obliterated, with scarcely an occasional rude headstone to mark the presence of a once sacredly-guarded, but long-forsaken and forgotten village of the dead."

By the mid 1880s, the burial ground was being used for agricultural production. A county history states that the site "gradually fell into disuse and decay, and now (1886) is a corn field."<sup>17</sup> In 1897, an RLDS member writing from Far West wrote:

I visited the cemetery where over two hundred were buried. It is now a pasture field covered mostly with cockle burs. There were twenty-four acres in the original grounds, but all save one-fourth [sic] of an acre has been farmed, the grave stones being removed and used for fence chunks and other purposes. A protest was once made in the courts against such inhuman work . . . but the prosecuting officer winked at the effort, and it passed unnoticed. The surface of the unplowed spot is uneven, but no definite outlines of the graves can be discovered.<sup>18</sup>

Historian and author Pearl Wilcox interviewed a woman who as a young girl in the late 1890s remembered that she frequently "passed the burial ground when she attended the Oakland School" and "picked flowers in the abandoned cemetery, which was still fenced in." She also recalled that "a few scattered monuments still remained."<sup>19</sup> These accounts illustrate that while the Far West burial ground did not survive even forty years after the departure of the Mormons, knowledge of its location was never lost.

Some have viewed the eventual transformation of the property into agricultural use as a deliberate act of desecration by angry locals. However, the historic record indicates that the demise of the Far West burial ground was instead a "gradual" process and not an insult to the former LDS inhabitants. In fact, it would have been out of the ordinary for those who came after the Mormons to provide long-term upkeep on graves with which they had no direct

connection. Sadly, the very common problem of cemeteries falling into decay after years of neglect is mostly a function of the strength of the ties of the living toward their dead and proximity to their graves. The Mormon exodus from Missouri in 1839 sealed the fate of the Far West burial ground.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

1. The most complete examination of the Mormon experience in Jackson County, Missouri, from 1831 to 1833 is Warren Abner Jennings, "Zion is Fled: The Expulsion of the Mormons from Jackson County, Missouri" (PhD dissertation, University of Florida, 1962); see also Jennings, "The Expulsion of the Mormons From Jackson County," *Missouri Historical Review* 64 (October 1969): 41–63.

2. See "Minutes of a Public Meeting at Liberty," 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), 2:448–52 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*). See also Max H. Parkin, "Latter-day Saint Conflict in Clay County," in Arnold K. Garr and Clark V. Johnson, eds., *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Missouri* (Provo, Utah: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1994), 254–58.

3. *History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri* (St. Louis: National Historical Company, 1886), 120. For a historical overview of the Far West settlement see Clark V. Johnson, "Let Far West Be Holy and Consecrated," in Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black, eds., *The Prophet Joseph: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 226–45.

4. *History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri*, 103–05; see also *Laws of the State of Missouri, 1st Session*, 9th General Assembly, 1836–1837 (Jefferson City, Missouri: Jeffersonian Office, 1837), 46–47, 155, 188, 204.

5. An early published history of the county states: "At the time of the Mormon War [1838] the population of Far West was about 2,500, and it was the largest town in the state, north of the Missouri River." *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Caldwell County, Missouri* (Philadelphia: Edwards Brothers of Missouri, 1876), 5. At the same time the total population of Caldwell County was estimated to be around 5,000. See *History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri*, 118.

6. According to the *History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri*, a school house was constructed by the Mormons in the southwest quarter of the town, which schoolhouse was later moved to the public square in the town center and served as a school, church, town hall, and the county's first courthouse. *History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri*, 121. However, there is some evidence that the schoolhouse situated in the southwest part of town was not moved, and that a frame schoolhouse was constructed on the public square. Significantly, even after the Mormon exodus in 1839, Far West remained the county seat. "Far West continued to be the County Seat until 1842. But Far West was within a few miles of the western boundary of the County, which rendered it less accessible to the citizens of the eastern part than was desirable. So a law was passed in 1842, directing a change of [the] County Seat to a more central point. . . . The commissioners then selected the site of Kingston, which was so named after Austin A. King, then judge of our circuit court. In 1843, all the public offices and records were transferred from Far West to the new town." *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Caldwell County, Missouri*, 7, 9.

7. Joseph Smith left Kirtland, Ohio, on January 12, 1838, and arrived at Far West on March 14, where he took up permanent residence, thereby marking Far West as the Church's new headquarters. See *History of the Church*, 3:1, 8–9. Joseph Smith's arrest and incarceration in Liberty Jail during the winter of 1838–1839 left the leadership responsibilities of the Church upon Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Young's departure from Far West for Quincy, Illinois, on February 14, 1839, brought an end to Far West as the Mormon "capital." See *History of the Church*, 3:261.

8. Imitating Mount Auburn in Boston (actually Cambridge), the city of Rochester, New York, developed its own rural cemetery named "Mount Hope" following an organizational meeting of citizens in August 1836. This was exactly the same month and year William W. Phelps and John Whitmer acquired the property that would become the Far West burial ground. See David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 58. In addition to Phelps having probable knowledge of the establishment of Mount Auburn, Oliver Cowdery was in fact in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in August 1836. Based on his detailed accounts of other points of interest in and around Boston and Cambridge, Cowdery would have certainly had been informed about the new cemetery, as it was the city's huge tourist attraction. *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 1 (October 1836): 391–92. To demonstrate the likelihood of Cowdery having seen or at least heard about Mount Auburn Cemetery during his August 1836 trip to Cambridge, see Blanch Linden-Ward, "Strange but Genteel Pleasure Grounds: Tourist and Leisure Uses of Nineteenth-Century Rural Cemeteries," in Richard E. Meyer, ed., *Cemeteries & Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1992), 309.

9. John Wickliffe Rigdon, "The Life and Testimony of Sidney Rigdon," in Karl Keller, ed., "I Never Knew a Time When I Did Not Know Joseph Smith": A Son's Record of the Life and Testimony of Sidney Rigdon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1966): 32.

10. See Lyndon W. Cook, "Lyman Sherman—Man of God, Would-be Apostle," *BYU Studies* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 121–24; and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 217.

11. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 232–33. In addition to Lorain Page being buried at the Far West burial ground, it is highly probable that at least one son or daughter of John and Lorain Page is also buried here. Cook mentions the death of two Page children in Missouri. However, one of the two children died in Kirtland before the Page family moved to Missouri. See *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 1 (October 1836): 293. There is a small probability that a second Page child was buried in Far West if there was a third Page child not mentioned or cited by Cook.

12. *The Elders Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 48.

13. Ethan Burrows, "Journal of Ethan Burrows," *Journal of History* 15, no. 1 (1922): 46.

14. Lyman O. Littlefield, *Reminiscences of the Latter-day Saints* (Logan, Utah: The Utah Journal Co. Printers, 1888), 83.

15. *Daily Morning Herald* (St. Joseph, Missouri), January 1, 1875. In the article, the unnamed reporter indicates that he visited Far West "twelve or thirteen years" earlier, making it around 1862. The reporter again visited the site in early October 1874. It was on the occasion of this second or later visit that the reporter gives a more detailed description. A typescript of the article has been republished in the *Missouri Mormon Frontier Newsletter*, no. 28 (October 2001–March 2002), 12–19.

16. William F. Switzler, Switzler's *Illustrated History of Missouri from 1541–1877* (St. Louis: C. R. Barnes, 1879), 242.

17. *History of Caldwell and Livingston Counties, Missouri*, 122.

18. J. M. Terry to the editor of *Zion's Ensign*, *Zion's Ensign* 8, no. 42 (October 14, 1897): 3.

19. Pearl Wilcox, *The Latter Day Saints on the Missouri Frontier* (Independence, Missouri: Pearl Wilcox, 1972), 251. The information was taken by Wilcox from an interview with Pauline Barnes who was relating the experience of Mary Sloan.

20. Randall H. McGuire, "White American Attitudes Concerning Burials," *World Archaeological Bulletin*, no. 2 (1988): 43–44.

21. For a list of known and probable burials in the Far West burial ground see <http://www.farwesthistory.com/fwbg.htm>.