

Journalist Edmund Flagg's "Nauvoo Essay": A Narrative Based on 1840 and 1844 Visits to Nauvoo and an Interview with Joseph Smith

William G. Hartley

Whether the name of Joseph Smith is destined to retain the immortality of a Mahomet . . . remains for coming time to tell. . . . Every one knows the birthplace of the American Mahomet, hardly less than that of the Mahomet of Arabia; and the little inland town of Palmyra, in the State of new York, bids fair to become hardly less noted the world over for the nativity of one prophet, than is the famed city of Mecca for that of the other; although whether it will ever become the recipient of shrines and the gathering spot of pilgrims, futurity alone can determine. (Edmund Flagg, 1853)

When writing an essay about Nauvoo in late 1853 or early 1854, which was nationally published, journalist Edmund Flagg freely penned his passionate dislike of Mormonism. While doing so, as his words above indicate, he expressed worry about why Mormonism was able to delude so many people and gain so many adherents and wondered about Joseph Smith's ultimate place in history. In 2005, the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith's bicentennial, the Prophet's reputation as an important and influential American received strong media and institutional acceptance. Once regarded as ignorant, he is now considered by a number of scholars of American religious history, some reluctantly, that he was brilliant. Mormonism, long the subject of public and academic disparagement, has gained at least modest acceptance as an important force now in American society.¹

On the surface, it might seem strange to publish Mr. Flagg's overwhelmingly negative assessment of Joseph Smith's life and works. However, his essay, essentially unknown in most Mormon historical cir-

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cles, provides a fresh and useful perspective for reminding us how badly Mormonism and Joseph Smith especially were judged in those foundational years, thereby helping us appreciate recent trends toward more responsible treatments among scholars and media.

Edmund Flagg

In 1840, twenty-five-year-old Edmund Flagg visited Nauvoo, a city barely being constructed. Four years later, he visited Nauvoo again, stayed at the Mansion House, and talked extensively with Joseph Smith. Nine years after that, in 1853, he wrote his observations about Nauvoo for New York editor Charles A. Dana's two-volume descriptive book, *The United States Illustrated*, published in 1854.² (Dana was then an editor for the *New York Tribune*.)

Flagg's ten-page essay, "Nauvoo," is a firsthand description of Nauvoo as well as a rehash of prejudices then popular about the Mormons. Only rarely do today's readers find an article or book that uses some of the fine illustrations contained in Dana's *The United States Illustrated*. The book itself is an obscure and hard-to-find publication. Both the Brigham Young University and LDS Church Historical Department libraries do not have either of the two volumes in their holdings, nor do they have copies of Flagg's Nauvoo essay. This article is intended to introduce the reader to Flagg and reproduce the narrative account of his Nauvoo visits to make it more accessible to scholars of early Mormonism.

Edmund Flagg, born in Maine in 1815 and a graduate of Bowdoin College in 1835, taught briefly in Louisville, Kentucky. There, he contributed columns, including poetry, to the Louisville *Literary Newsletter*. In 1836, at age twenty, to rejuvenate his health, he took a journey into Missouri and Illinois, areas then termed the "Far West." He wrote letters about his travels, which were published in the *Louisiana Journal*. That summer, in or near Shelby County, Illinois, he encountered a traveler with a wagon and family, a "Mormonite" emigrant "heading for Mount Zion, Jackson, County," Missouri, "all agog for the promised land." The young man gave reasons for his faith, which explanations young Flagg considered "a chaotic fanfaronade of nonsense, absurdity, nay madness." Based on this "confused, disconnected mass of rubbish," Flagg penned a garbled explanation about Joe Smith, gold plates, "lost kings of Israel," a man named Mormon being a son of Lot's daughter, Christ being crucified where Adam was interred, and the Savior about to return, and he explained that those who refused to gather with the Mormons in

Missouri "would assuredly be cut off." Such ideas, he said, were a "specimen of a host of wild absurdities which fell from the lips of my Mormonite." Back home, Mr. Flagg revised his travel letters and published them in a book, *The Far West; Or, a Tour Beyond the Mountains* (1838), a book that is in Utah libraries. His initial "Mormonite" encounter comprises three pages in the book.³

In 1837 and 1838, Flagg read law in St. Louis and briefly edited the *St. Louis Daily Commercial Bulletin*. Early in 1839, he helped manage the *Louisville Newsletter*. Ill health forced him to resign, so he moved to Vicksburg, Mississippi, where he practiced law and worked with the *Vicksburg Whig*. His first visit to Nauvoo, in the fall of 1840, perhaps took place while he was moving from Louisville to Vicksburg. In Mississippi, he wrote two novels that were published in New York. In 1842–43, he edited the Marietta, Ohio, *Gazette* and in 1844–45 edited the *St. Louis Evening Gazette*. He was probably working for that newspaper when he revisited Nauvoo in June 1844, "during the unparalleled flood of that season." He arrived there "less than a fortnight" before Joseph Smith was killed. Flagg said he had a "long interview with the prophet, at his own house, a plain two-story structure of wood, at once tavern and grocery."

In 1848, Edmund Flagg was secretary to the U.S. minister to Berlin and spent two years in Europe. Next, he resumed his law practice in St. Louis, and later he was appointed the U.S. consul to the port of Venice for two years. He returned to St. Louis and wrote and published an illustrated, two-volume history and description of Venice. In 1853–54, he wrote the "Nauvoo" essay and other descriptions of western locations that he contributed to Dana's book, as noted above. He worked for the Department of State in the District of Columbia where he authored a four-volume *Report on All the Commercial Relations of the United States with all Foreign Nations*, published in 1857. From 1861–70, he was librarian of copyrights for the Department of Interior. He married Kate Adeline in 1862, a Virginian, and moved to Virginia in 1870, where he died in 1890. He was most noted for being a newspaperman, novelist, poet, and playwright.⁴

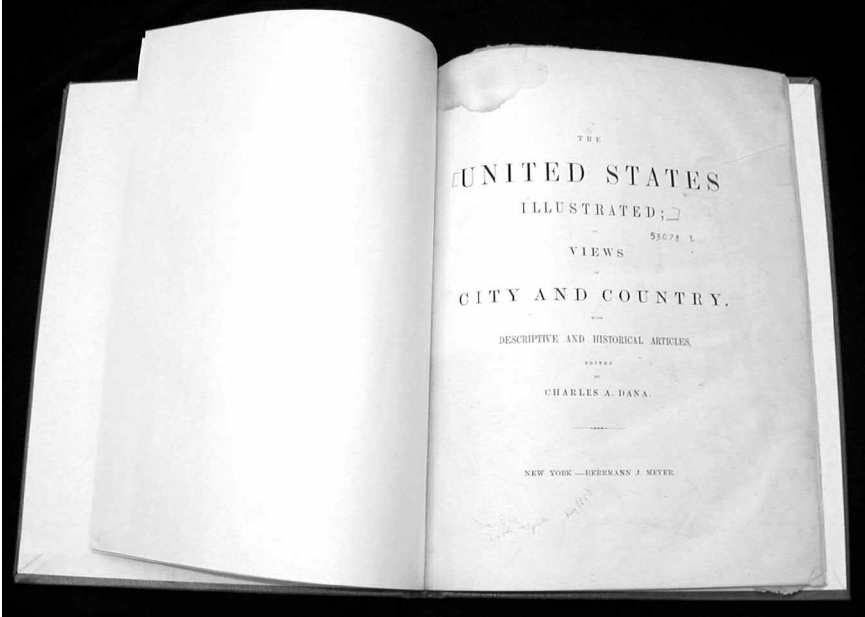
Edmund Flagg's Views about Mormonism, Joseph Smith, and Nauvoo

Edmund Flagg's "Nauvoo" essay, reprinted below, was written in late 1853 or early 1854.⁵ It draws upon his 1840 and 1844 observations while at Nauvoo and from what he read and heard about Mormonism up to

1853. The essay (1) gives an educated reporter's understandings and misunderstandings of Mormonism's beginnings and history; (2) captures prevailing (mostly negative) beliefs then popular about Mormonism, Joseph Smith, plural marriage, Brigham Young, and Utah; (3) provides a very detailed description of the Nauvoo Temple; (4) describes Nauvoo itself and calls the city unprogressive; (5) contains disparaging judgments about Joseph Smith based in small part on his interview with him; (6) comments on Nauvoo dissension he saw percolating just days before the martyrdom; (7) takes note of Lucy Mack Smith, the mummies, and what probably were the Kinderhook plates; (8) provides descriptions of Nauvoo after the Saints' evacuation; and (9) tells about the Icarian community operating in Nauvoo as of 1853.

Here, like trailers promoting and previewing a movie, are a handful of highlights (or "lowlights," as the case may be) from Edmund Flagg's essay to prepare the reader. For example, Flagg's disdain for things Mormon is apparent throughout his account. He acknowledged that the Nauvoo Temple was an imposing structure and wrote at length about its exterior and interior. His descriptions of the temple and its costs are surprisingly close to accurate. He erred when he twice said the temple architect, William Weeks, was a "Gentile," when, in fact, Weeks was a Latter-day Saint. Flagg pontificated that claims that the temple was "the most magnificent edifice in this land or any other" were "simply preposterous." "It was, in fact," he noted, "rather grotesque in its style than grand; and one hardly knew whether to laugh or to be solemn at its unique decorations." After the Icarians moved into Nauvoo, he observed that "a large school-house has been constructed of ruins of the Mormon temple."

Regarding the Nauvoo community, Flagg stated that Nauvoo houses "at first were constructed of wood, and many of them of logs, not less than a thousand being erected within three years; while, in imitation of the old French villages, each was surrounded by its own yard and garden." But he criticized Nauvoo's "singular structures, each isolated in its individual garden-lot—its broadcast aspect, sprinkled as were its houses over the vast slope—its silent and abandoned appearance, though it was thronged with population." He said that "the private residences were of the very plainest if not of the very meanest character." The Nauvoo community was not industrious, he said, and "the place rather vegetated than grew—remained stationary rather than flourished; while by the people of the neighboring villages the inhabitants were viewed with an odium, distrust, antipathy and contempt." Referring to Nauvoo's people, he told readers about "the sluggish, desperate, downcast looks of the men, and



Title page from Charles A. Dana, ed., The United States Illustrated in Views of City and Country with Descriptions and Historical Articles, 2 vols. (New York: H. J. Meyer, 1854). Edmund Flagg's essay, "Nauvoo," appears in volume 2 on pages 37–46. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

the care-worn, languid, shame-faced countenances of the women, while even the children seemed not to indulge in the noisy sports which befit their age."

He termed Mormonism a "deluded and unfortunate sect," and he shared a widely circulating belief that Joseph Smith plagiarized the Book of Mormon from a rumored (and missing) Solomon Spaulding manuscript; hence, it was "an imposture." He characterized Martin Harris as an honest farmer with "more acres than brains." Converts who flowed to Nauvoo from Great Britain, he suggested, "were probably quite as much converts to the new land of promise, as to the new faith."

Flagg's disdain for Joseph Smith seems intense. He termed the young Joseph Smith "by no means a good boy, or an intelligent boy," and the adult Joseph was even worse:

That a man like Joseph Smith, ignorant, shallow, feeble-minded, whose only talents were those of the pickpocket, the mountebank and the swindler—mere shrewdness and craft,—should ever, in the middle of a century which we are wont to imagine the most enlightened our world has yet known, and in the middle of a land equally

exalted in our estimate, have been able to originate and carry so successfully on such a stupendous and silly fraud as Mormonism, seems utterly incredible. It is, moreover, unspeakably humiliating.

Flagg's discussion of his interview with Joseph Smith reinforced his previous biases against him: "Low and shallow cunning alone seemed written on his sensual, silly, unintellectual face. A retreating forehead, prominent nose, small and irresolute eyes, unmeaning lips, bad teeth, and but few of them, an obese and ungainly figure, an almost feminine voice and a nervous timidity of manner—such were the more observable personal traits of the prophet as now recalled." While commenting on Joseph Smith's enemies within the Church, Flagg noted that "on the very day before the interview alluded to, there had been an *emeute* [uprising], and the prophet still wore a bandage on his hand, because of an injury sustained in wrenching a loaded pistol levelled at his head, from the grasp of a foe."

Joseph Smith's home where Mr. Flagg interviewed him—apparently the Mansion House—was "a plain two-story structure of wood, at once tavern and grocery." Joseph Smith, he said, was "dealing out sugar by the pound and whiskey by the glass." In a room adjoining the "bar-room" in the home, he saw "an Egyptian mummy, together with divers metallic plates covered with hieroglyphics, and connected by a ring, were exhibited by the prophet's mother, a very aged and infirm woman, who, poor old soul, with implicit faith, demonstrated their connexion with the revelations of her shameless son—at the charge of a quarter of a dollar a head."

Regarding Emma Smith after the martyrdom, he noted that "the widow of the Prophet Smith, with her son, a young man of twenty, yet resides there, both being decidedly opposed to Mormonism, and the former having again become a wife." Then, concerning Mormonism as of 1853, he gave a high (and incorrect) estimate of members: "The strange faith is now diffused over three continents, and is estimated to number converts by the hundreds of thousands—more than one-fourth of which have been furnished by Great Britain."

He was troubled by Mormonism's growth, as evidenced by the opening quote above, and wondered if Joseph Smith was a new Mohammed and if his birthplace (which he thought was Palmyra) might one day become a place of pilgrimage. When we consider the recent bicentennial commemorations associated with the anniversary of Joseph Smith's birth, the facts that some scholars now identify Mormonism as a New World religion and that the Book of Mormon is considered one the most

influential books produced in America, Flagg's troubled questions have received answers that would not be to his liking. Indeed, Palmyra and Joseph Smith's birthplace in Sharon, Vermont, have become the "recipient of shrines and the gathering spot of pilgrims." And Nauvoo, the focus of Mr. Flagg's essay, with its score of restored and replicated buildings, including a reconstruction of the original temple he described so well, perhaps is now *the Mecca*, the favorite pilgrimage place, of Mormonism.

As far as possible, the transcription below retains the published article's original spelling and punctuation. Page breaks are indicated in square brackets [] enclosing the next page's number.

"NAUVOO"

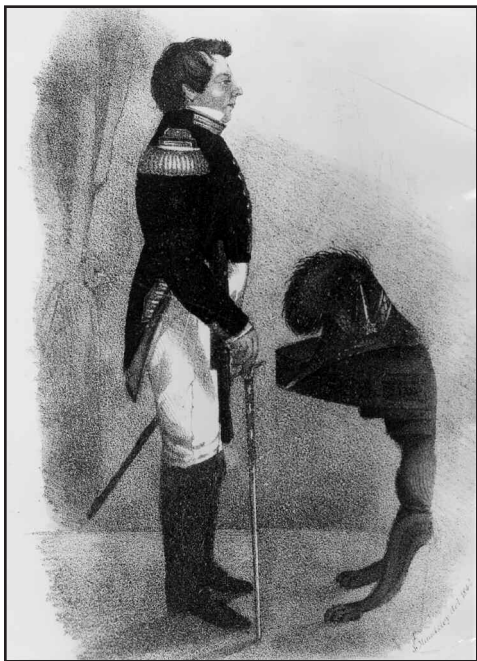
NAUVOO—"The City of Beauty!" This is surely no misnomer, if we regard only locality; for very few sites for a city are there on the banks of the great river, from its source to its mouth, more lovely or more desirable, than that of persecuted Nauvoo—the Mormon city, now no more.

From the eastern bank of the Mississippi, in the county of Hancock, State of Illinois, nearly two hundred miles above St. Louis, about a dozen miles above the foot of the Lower Rapids and the mouth of the Des Moines, and one hundred and twenty from the capital of the State, slopes gently into the stream a semi-alluvial point of land, sufficiently spacious for a populous city; while on the opposite bank, in the State of Iowa, rises the pleasant hamlet of Montrose. Such is the site of departed Nauvoo. Some twenty or thirty years ago, when this land first came into the market, it was entered at the government price by a Connecticut Yankee; but it seems never to have realized the sanguine anticipations which the loveliness of its site had inspired; and, indeed, the very existence of the spot seems to have been quite unknown, save to voyagers on the Upper Mississippi, until it arrested the eye of the Mormon Prophet, and was destined to a world-wide notoriety as the Medina, if not the Mecca of the Mormon faith. This renown was consequent on the Hegira, or rather on the Exodus of the Saints of the Latter Days, from Missouri in the mid winter of 1838, the second expulsion to which this deluded and unfortunate sect had been subjected. Of its origin, and rise, and growth, and history, every one knows. Whether the name of Joseph Smith is destined to retain the immortality of a Mahomet—of the Mahomet of the nineteenth century—remains for coming time to tell; but it is very certain that the faith of which he was founder, sealed by his blood as its first martyr, has found more proselytes within the first climacteric of its existence, and that too without the enforcement of the sword, [38] and beyond the limits of the continent of its birth, than did that of the imposter of Mecca, with all its carnal auxiliaries to aid its progress. Every one knows the birth place of the American Mahomet, hardly less than that of the Mahomet of Arabia; and the

little inland town of Palmyra, in the State of new York, bids fair to become hardly less noted the world over for the nativity of one prophet, than is the famed city of Mecca for that of the other; although whether it will ever become the recipient of shrines and the gathering spot of pilgrims, futurity alone can determine.

How Joseph Smith was one of several children of humble parents, born early in the present century—how he, as a boy, albeit by no means a good boy, or an intelligent boy, was favored with visions, and dreams, and revelations from the unseen world—how, at the age of eighteen years, in the month of September, 1823, it was announced to him by an angel, that, as the apostle and prophet of a purified faith, the records of the lost tribes of Israel, the aboriginal nations of America, were to be revealed to him graven on golden plates, buried on the summit of the Hill of Cumorah—how, four years later, in the month of September, 1827, the golden plates were in fact finally given him—how, meanwhile, he led a nomadic life, seeking after hidden treasures, and at length secured one in a young girl of New Harmony, whom he carried off and married—how, nearly at the same time, he secured another treasure in a manuscript novel, written by a pious clergyman of New Salem, in the State of Ohio, a dozen years before, purporting to have been transcribed from records buried in the earth by Moroni, son of Mormon—how that he then professed to commence the translation of the golden plates, which none but he ever saw, and how an honest farmer, with more acres than brains, was reduced to beggary by contributions for the publication of the Book of Mormon, which proved to be only the religious fiction of the village pastor, vilely interpolated—how, from only half a dozen disciples, including the prophet's father, two brothers and the victimized farmer, in the summer of 1830, a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, numbering five times as many persons, was formed at Manchester in New York, and how persecution at once began, and within a year, had swelled the number to a thousand converts—how Cowdrey, Vigdon and Pratt, became proselytes, and Kirtland, Ohio, became a rendezvous for the faithful, and a bank was established and broke, and Smith and Vigdon were tarred and feathered, and how, warned by special revelation, the whole host shortly after moved off to the western frontier to Mount Zion, the ancient Eden, near the town of Independence, in Jackson county, Missouri—how the saints had now increased in number to thousands, and their apostles to hundreds, and how persecution again arose, and many fled into an adjoining county, and many sought refuge at Kirtland—how, during four years, from 1834 to 1838, only maltreatment and misfortune were experienced, until at length expelled from Ohio and Missouri, the whole vast host sought refuge on the banks of the Mississippi, in Illinois; is not all this written in books, and is it not known as the concurrent history of the [39] present generation, by all who have read, or who have heard read the journals of the day? Yet, all this pertains to the primitive history of Nauvoo; for from all this did Nauvoo derive its origin.

The houses at first were constructed of wood, and many of them of logs, not less than a thousand being erected within three years; while, in imitation of the old French villages, each was surrounded by its own yard and garden. The population rapidly increased, until it reached some 15,000 or 20,000 souls, large numbers of the new proselytes being the fruit of the preaching of Mormon missionaries among the poorer classes, the small farmers, and the operatives of the manufacturing towns of Great Britain, who, oppressed at home, were probably quite as much converts to the new land of promise, as to the new faith. Of this thriving capital, Smith was prophet, priest and king—the mayor and the autocrat. He was, also, the chief publican, the chief store-keeper of the place; and



Lt. Gen. Joseph Smith. Painting is by
Sutcliffe Maudsley, ca 1842.
Photograph courtesy LDS Church Archives.

pleasantly varied his labors in preaching and baptizing, by dealing out sugar by the pound and whiskey by the glass. He was, also, generalissimo of all the army and navy of Mormonism, and very frequently reviewed the "Nauvoo Legion," surrounded by his staff of pretty girls in black velvet hats and habits, on spirited steeds, upon the broad plains of the vicinage. Occasionally, too, he started out on a missionary excursion, and preached, not altogether without effect, to the Iowa savages on the frontier. A temple was commenced likewise, on the most elevated spot in the place, and on a peculiar plan specially revealed to the prophet. With pomp and pageant, and strange ceremonial, the first stone was laid on the 6th day of April, 1841, and the edifice was five years in course of construction.

Its materials was a white and compact limestone, quarried near the city; its architect was a "Gentile" named Weeks; its order was a composite of Grecian, Roman and Egyptian, to which the word Mormon can alone do justice; its dimensions were one hundred and twenty-eight feet long, by eighty-eight wide, with walls sixty-five feet high, and a cupola one hundred and sixty-three feet above the ground. It was entered by three Roman portals, and lighted by numerous windows in the same style, between all of which were pilasters, ornamented at the base with an inverted crescent, and at the capital with a human head, sus-

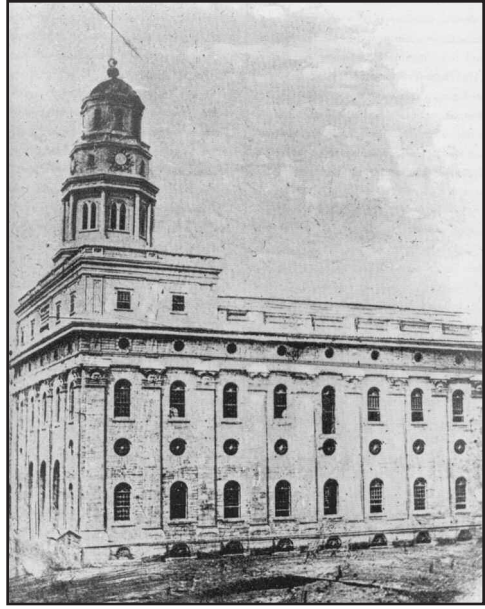
tained by two hands grasping a trumpet! It was two stories high with a basement, an attic, and an intermediate half-story between the first and the second. In the basement stood the Baptismal font, supported by twelve huge and solemn-looking oxen, of white limestone, with horns of fearful length; while around were twelve preparation rooms, and two others, smaller ones, for recording clerks. Ascending to the first floor by means of a double flight of stone stairs, you entered the great hall for worship, into which was poured a perfect flood of light from sixteen large windows, eight on either side. There was a galley for the choir, and three pulpits for the preachers, over which was read the inscription, "The Lord has beheld our sacrifice: come after us." The second floor was in all respects like the first, and between [40] the two ran two long narrow rooms for the elders, the entire depth of the edifice, lighted by eight circular windows each. The attic was made up of one large room and twelve small ones, also lighted by circular windows, and the doors secured by heavy locks, the design of which seems to have been never revealed. The edifice was calculated to seat three thousand persons. Two flights of stairs meeting at the base of the tower, conducted from the floor in the front portico of the edifice to the roof, which was designed as a public promenade for the town. The view from this spot was extensive and beautiful, while that from the lofty summit above was, if possible, yet more so—a limitless expanse of prairie, extending to the horizon on one side, and an equally limitless expanse of forest, rolling away towards the setting sun on the other, while the bright Mississippi glided like a thread of silver through its enamelled bank, and among its emerald islands, and went joyously sparkling over its rapids between.

The edifice was of massive construction—the stone walls being some six feet thick; and it seemed rather a fortress than a temple—a place of refuge rather than of worship. It was, doubtless, designed with an equal view to each. Every stone was laid by a Mormon; every person employed on it was a disciple of the faith save the architect; each man devoted a little of his time and of his substance to its construction; and it is estimated to have cost, at a fair valuation of labor and material, on its completion, nearly a million of dollars! It is certain that it was offered for sale in 1846 by the departing Mormons when completed, for \$200,000; and equally certain that it brought but the fourth part of that sum when purchased in 1848.

The tales with reference to this edifice have been ridiculous in their exaggeration. That it was an imposing structure is most true; but that it was "the most magnificent edifice in this land or any other," is simply preposterous. It was, in fact, rather grotesque in its style than grand; and one hardly knew whether to laugh or to be solemn at its unique decorations. There have been similar exaggerations as touching the population and the importance of the town itself. That its population rapidly increased is unquestionable, but at its maximum, it never exceeded twenty thousand souls; and, among many sedate and industrious people, there were, also, many worthless vagabonds, the outcasts

and offscourings of all other communities in the world. Public, or even private enterprise among them, seemed quite unknown; and the only exhibition of religious enterprise, was beheld in the construction of the massive fortalice which they called a temple. Other public edifices there were none; and the private residences were of the very plainest if not of the very meanest character. The municipal economy, policy and regulation, were altogether inefficient. Broad and unpaved country roads running at right angles, were dignified with the generic appellation of streets, though often unhonored with specified names. Manufacturing, mercantile, commercial and artistic industry, seemed utterly unknown. The whole population, so far as it was devoted to anything, seemed devoted to agriculture. The daily, almost [41] hourly steamers, navigating the upper Mississippi, passing the town, rarely stopped, save perchance to land a company of foreign immigrants, or of curious tourists; and the Landing, if such that might be termed, which Landing was none, presented a very different aspect from the Landings at all other places on the river.

Indeed, Nauvoo was a complete anomaly among Western towns. Its rambling streets—its singular structures, each isolated in its individual garden-lot—its broadcast aspect, sprinkled as were its houses over the vast slope—its silent and abandoned appearance, though it was thronged with population—the entire absence of enterprise, and the bustle of business and din of industry—the sluggish, desperate, downcast looks of the men, and the care-worn, languid, shame-faced countenances of the women, while even the children seemed not to indulge in the noisy sports which befit their age—these features and characteristics distinguished Nauvoo, first and last, from every other place. In population, such as it was, it increased more rapidly than its neighbors, and from very obvious causes; but in commercial, mercantile, manufacturing improvement, or even in agricultural importance, it could bear no comparison with the thriving towns all around it, with Hannibal, Quincy, Warsaw, Burlington, Bloomington, Davenport, Galena, to say nothing of those of the interior, more distance from



The Nauvoo Temple, in a Daguerreotype, ca. 1845. The photographer is unknown. Photograph courtesy LDS Church Archives.

navigable streams.

And, as the City of the Saints in the autumn of 1840, when first visited by the writer, at its very commencement, and as it was when again visited in the summer of 1844, at the very zenith of its prime, such, doubtless, would it always have continued. There were in the very elements of its existence and its society inherent vices, which must inevitably have checked enterprise and advancement in all those things, which, in the view of the age and the country, go to make up importance. It more resembled a sleepy old town in the heart of Germany or Italy, than one on the banks of the great artery of young and wide-awake America. It had no “spur to the sides of its intent”—no main-spring—no impelling- force—nothing to kindle and foster emulation and enterprise, while there was much to smother and to stifle both. It had all the drawbacks of the Quaker, the Shaker, or the Moravian communities, without their industry, their propriety, their unimpeachable morality. Cut off by selfish policy from all interest in or connexion with the whole world beside, its people cared no more for all the rest of the State of Illinois, of which it was a portion, than did all the rest of the State of Illinois care for them. Like the Miller of Mansfield—

“They cared for nobody, no, not they,

For nobody cared for them.”

Nobody, save, indeed, the candidate for office, who sought their thousand or two of votes, always thrown in a mass as dictated by the prophet. And these votes alone it was which gave them political importance. Emasculated by vicious habits—false morality—false religion—a false system of society and a false condition of things altogether—[42] the place rather vegetated than grew—remained stationary rather than flourished; while by the people of the neighboring villages the inhabitants were viewed with an odium, distrust, antipathy and contempt, which the Mormons failed not with usury to reciprocate.

As for the system of religious faith, though based on the Bible, and professing the cardinal doctrines of Christianity, upon it had been grafted most fatal and pernicious errors, and most abominable vices. How could it be otherwise with a man like Joe Smith as its high priest, and an imposture like the “Book of Mormon” for its Bible? What wonder that a degrading polygamy, under the name of “Spiritual wedlock,” followed hard on implicit reliance upon “special revelations” to a licentious prophet? That a man like Joseph Smith, ignorant, shallow, feeble-minded, whose only talents were those of the pickpocket, the mountebank and the swindler—mere shrewdness and craft,—should ever, in the middle of a century which we are wont to imagine the most enlightened our world has yet known, and in the middle of a land equally exalted in our estimate, have been able to originate and carry so successfully on such a stupendous and silly fraud as Mormonism, seems utterly incredible. It is, moreover, unspeakably humiliating. Let us refer no more to the impostures of earlier periods, and of other peoples and lands. What were the Crusades, with their dazzling splendors, pouring Europe on Asia—what the flaming fanaticism and the sweeping prose-

lytism and the fiery falchion of the false prophet, in an age of darkness, and among an almost pagan people, to this?

It was in the month of June, 1844, as already intimated, and during the unparalleled flood of that season, that the writer last visited Nauvoo.⁶ Half the country was under water; but the City of the Saints was high and dry—was founded in this regard, at least, “on a rock.” But this was its sole superiority. The place was now at the zenith of its power, population, prosperity, importance, if, indeed, it can be said ever to have possessed either of these recommendations. Yet its characteristic features were altogether such as have been outlined. In a long interview with the prophet, at his own house, a plain two-story structure of wood, at once tavern and grocery, was gathered the opinion of him already expressed. Low and shallow cunning alone seemed written on his sensual, silly, unintellectual face. A retreating forehead, prominent nose, small and irresolute eyes, unmeaning lips, bad teeth, and but few of them, an obese and ungainly figure, an almost feminine voice and a nervous timidity of manner—such were the more observable personal traits of the prophet as now recalled. Upon the walls of his bar-room hung a full length portrait of himself, as commander-in-chief of the military force of Nauvoo, in full regimentals; and a full representation likewise of the temple as completed, though then hardly ready for its roof. In an adjoining room, an Egyptian mummy, together with divers metallic plates covered with hieroglyphics, and connected by a ring, were exhibited by the prophet’s mother, [43] a very aged and infirm woman, who, poor old soul, with implicit faith, demonstrated their connexion with the revelations of her shameless son—at the charge of a quarter of a dollar a head. Here, also, were two young and handsome, and loosely clad females, a portion, probably, of that spiritual household which the prophet’s wife, Emma, had permitted him to introduce under her roof.

Internal discord had for some time, at this period, been raging at Nauvoo. External pressure being removed, internecine strife had begun. Long before this, Cowdrey, Rigdon and others of the prophet’s early disciples and fellow imposters had been denounced by him. To them, too, had come “special revelations,” and these revelations at times conflicted with those of their spiritual head. Revelation, for example, at times, designated fair women as their “spiritual wives,” who had already been designated, or who were about to be designated, as favored ones for the prophet’s own spiritual seraglio! There were many other causes of variance. At length a newspaper was started by Rigdon and others, in the very city of Nauvoo itself, exposing and denouncing the prophet’s abominable vices. This was bearding “the lion in his den, the Douglass in his hall.” By his order the press was broken up, and the conductors driven ignominiously from the place. On the very day before the interview alluded to, there had been an *emeute*, and the prophet still wore a bandage on his hand, because of an injury sustained in wrenching a loaded pistol levelled at his head, from the grasp of a foe. The malcontents fled to Carthage, the county town, and with warrants for

the arrest of Joseph and Hiram Smith, and of sixteen others who had demolished their press, returned with officers to Nauvoo. But no arrests were made. The law was resisted, and its ministers were driven off. The "power of the county" was ordered out to sustain the government, and the Nauvoo Legion was ordered out to uphold its prophet. Ford, the governor of Illinois, now personally appeared; and, on his promise of protection and justice, Joseph and Hiram Smith surrendered themselves, and were conducted to Carthage jail. But it was too late now to resist the tornado of popular fury. On the evening of the 27th of June, less than a fortnight after the interview of the writer with the prophet at Nauvoo, a band of armed men, disguised as negroes, rushed on the guard of the jail, drove them from their charge on peril of their lives, and, with repeated rifle-shots, dispatched both victims of their wrath and fled. They were never identified. There was, probably, little effort to identify them.

Thus perished the first martyrs to Mormonism. Its founder was its first victim. His successor was Brigham Young, who still remains the spiritual head of the church. Rigdon and his party fell into disgrace; but they went forth as preachers against the infamous orgies of Nauvoo, and the whole country was roused against the fanatics. Assaults on their settlements, destruction of their property, insults to the persons, incessant infringements with entire impunity on their rights, followed. Their "destiny," was as [44] "manifest" as was that of Israel in Egypt. Another Exodus, the third within nine years, was inevitable: and, in the midwinter of 1846, nearly two thousand Mormons, with their wives and little ones, their flocks and their herds, their oxen and wagons and household stuff, crossed the Mississippi on the ice, and, after a weary way through the wilderness, halted on the Indian frontier of Missouri, beyond Council Bluffs. The residue tarried to complete the temple. This was, at length accomplished, albeit the building of the same, was like unto the building of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem of old, when the builder grasped a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. Assaults were incessant, and far from bloodless. At length, completed, with barbaric pomp the temple was dedicated; over its portals was inscribed—"Holiness to the Lord." and the spot was abandoned forever! In the fall of 1848, on the night of October 9th, the edifice fell a sacrifice to the incendiary's torch; and in the spring of 1850, in the month of May, its massive walls were levelled by a hurricane with the soil.

In the autumn of 1846, the last Mormons were expelled by an armed force from the City of Beauty, and henceforth it was to be known by a new name and inhabited by a new people. In 1847, the exiles furnished a battalion for the Mexican war, and marched to Santa Fe. The same summer was commenced the settlement and City of Salt Lake, now the capital of the territory of Utah, established in 1850, of which Young was appointed Governor, and which now has a population of 30,000 souls, half enough to form a State, though the territory is capable of sustaining a million. The strange faith is now diffused over three continents, and is estimated to number converts by the hundreds of thousands—

more than one-fourth of which have been furnished by Great Britain.

The career of Brigham Young has been almost as eventful as was that of the Prophet himself. In the year 1830, after diverse movings and re-movings, we find him a tanner, in Ontario County, New York, where, having been converted by the "Book of Mormon," three years later joined the Prophet at Kirtland. In 1838 he migrated with the fraternity to Mount Zion, in Jackson County, Missouri, and thence accompanied them, a year later, to Nauvoo, where he dwelt for seven consecutive years. Driven thence in 1846 to the frontier of Missouri, he suffered his people, of whom he was not the chief, to enlist to the number of five hundred, on requisition of the United States, for the Mexican war. Early the ensuing April he commenced a weary pilgrimage of a thousand miles to the Great Salt Lake, which, with about a hundred and fifty men, he reached late in July. Immediately returning to the frontier for his family, in the spring of 1849 he again went out; and in 1850 was appointed by President Fillmore, Governor of the new Territory of Deseret.

For some years after the final abandonment of Nauvoo, in September, 1846, the City of Beauty presented the very picture of desolation. The whole site of the once populous [45] place now bristled with the chimnies of the dismantled houses, which remained as relics, only because they could not be easily removed. "The walls of Balclutha were desolate. The thistle shook there its lonely head; the moss whistled to the wind. The fox looked out from the windows; the rank grass of the wall waved round his head." Shattered casements, broken-down doors, overthrown closures, unweeded garden-plats, deserted streets, were the sad records of a persecuted race—the sure traces of sin, and sorrow, and suffering, and shame. But the fortress-temple still towered grandly over all, with its lofty spire, on its commanding site, a monument of fanaticism, imposture and blind belief.

But all this has passed away, and the City of Beauty of the Mormons is now the City of Equality of the Socialist. Nauvoo is now Icaria. Three years ago the celebrated Cabet, whose name appears amid events of the French Revolution of 1848, came to the United States, followed or preceded by some two or three hundred men, women and children, mostly of the laboring class, composing his community of Icarians. In his *expose* of causes for this immigration *en masse*, he assigns as chief a league between the government, the aristocracy and the clergy to persecute his people and himself. To emigrate to America and found a new Icaria in the wilderness was, therefore, resolved on; and the recent expulsion of another peculiar people presented a somewhat perilous refuge at Nauvoo. To civilize the desert, to create a State based on community of interest, to erect an asylum for the exiles of Europe, these are proclaimed the objects of the new Icaria; while "All for Each, and Each for All" is its motto. The land has been leased only, a tract of some five thousand acres in the State of Iowa having been purchased for a permanent home. Their principal structure is a large one of wood, two stories high and very long, in which many are lodged and all are fed.



Nauvoo Temple Block, photographed 4 May 1907 by George Edward Anderson. In the center of the picture is the two-story Icarian schoolhouse, built of Nauvoo Temple stones. Photograph courtesy LDS Church Archives.

The men are said to number nearly two hundred, with women about seventy, and the children forty or fifty, and all are, apparently, happy and content, especially the two latter classes. Their diet is exceedingly simple, consisting chiefly of soup and bread, which is partaken of twice a day by the whole community, summoned by a trumpet to the long pine tables on which the simple repast is spread. A press has been established, from which issue two weekly papers, one in the German language and one in the English, but none in the French; a large school-house has been constructed of ruins of the Mormon temple; a brewery, a distillery, a saw-mill, a grist-mill, a library, a theatre, a cabinet of physic and chemistry, and a small arsenal of hunting guns have been established, and some twenty acres of land have been put in cultivation for vegetables. Game is plentiful, and so are fish; and boats and nets have been constructed for the capture of the latter.

Icarianism is declared to be a mixture of individualism and communism. The lodgings are individual—each man lodging with his wife and family; but the boarding is common, and so is all the property; and each is fed, lodged and clothed from the com[46]mon fund, according to his necessities. All religious opinions are tolerated, fraternity and justice being deemed the sole essentials of Christianity, and happiness in a future state the destiny of all. Men and women labor alike in the workshop or in the field. The recreations are lectures, concerts, readings, dramatic performances and the like. Women enjoy the same social

rights as men, and have a voice in the general council, but no vote. Marriage is promoted, and the contract is declared inviolable, though, when proving insupportable, may be dissolved. Equality in education, as in food and everything else, is declared the right of all. The community provides for the helpless, old or young, and for the ill; health is secured rather by diet and mode of life than by medicine; and the physician is a public officer, responsible for the health of the community!

The President of Icaria, Cabet, to whom the world is indebted for this declaration of principles and purposes, is said to be a sincere, shrewd man, with more benevolence of heart than force of mind, greatly respected by his flock, among whom reign harmony and content. To enter the community application, examination, a probation of four months, a two-thirds vote of the Assembly, and a contribution of property, amounting to, at least, eighty dollars, to the general fund are required. To leave the community is it only necessary to give notice, and to receive one-half or four-fifths of the original contribution, according as the person was definitively or provisionally received, together with his bed, his wardrobe, and his utensils of labor. Expulsion, upon a vote of the Assembly, is the penalty prescribed for violation of the laws of the community; and the candidate for admission "must be temperate—must have no necessity for tobacco or strong drinks—must be decent in words and acts, must be industrious and prudent—must believe in Christianity—must be married, or must be engaged to become so."

The population of Nauvoo, at the present time, is said to be some three thousand persons. The widow of the Prophet Smith, with her son, a young man of twenty, yet resides there, both being decidedly opposed to Mormonism, and the former having again become a wife. Below the town, some thousands of Mormons encamped early the past summer, preparatory to migration to the City of Salt Lake.⁷ The site of the Temple is held by the Icarians, the western front of the structure looking down on the river and visible for miles around, alone remaining to mark the spot. The Methodists have here a church, and the Catholics a parish.

Notes

1. For example, see Jan Shippo, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (University of Illinois Press, 1985); Robert V. Remini, *Joseph Smith* (New York: Viking, 2002); Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005). In its July 2003 issue, *Book Magazine* listed the Book of Mormon as one of twenty books that have had the greatest influence on the history of the United States. In 1999, Lee Groberg's film documentary, *American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith* aired nationally on PBS. In 2005, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., hosted a day-long symposium about Joseph Smith. Finally, in 2005, the National Endowment for the Humanities funded a summer seminar about Joseph Smith directed by BYU's Smith

Institute for about a dozen scholars from throughout the United States.

2. Edmund Flagg, "Nauvoo," in Charles A. Dana, ed., *The United States Illustrated in Views of City and Country/with Descriptions and Historical Articles: Vol. 2, The West; or the States of the Mississippi Valley, and the Pacific* (New York: H. J. Meyer, 1854), 2:37–46. Although Dana's book contains many period illustrations, none, unfortunately, accompanies the Nauvoo essay.

3. Samuel Flagg, *The Far West; Or a Tour Beyond the Mountains* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1838); reprinted in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels 1748–1846*, 32 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906), 26:356–57. The Thwaites series, including Flagg's book, can be read online at the Library of Congress's Web site under "American Notes: Travels in America, 1750–1920."

4. See Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, 26:9–11.

5. That Mr. Flagg wrote the essay late in 1853 or early 1854 is shown by his statement in the last paragraph wherein he says that below Nauvoo, "some thousands of Mormons were encamped early the past summer, preparatory to migration to the City of Salt Lake." The "past summer" he refers to was 1853 when 1,548 Saints in 3,860 wagons and 10 wagon trains outfitted at Keokuk, some fifteen miles downriver from Nauvoo. See William G. Hartley, "LDS Emigration in 1852: The Keokuk Encampment and Outfitting Ten Wagon Trains for Utah," *Mormon Historical Studies* 4, no. 25 (Fall 2003): 43–76.

6. A few lines later, Flagg says his visit to Nauvoo took place "less than a fortnight" (two weeks) before Joseph Smith was killed. Joseph Smith's published history makes no mention of him, but on 9 June, a bit more than a fortnight before the murder, the history says that "At 2 p.m. several passengers of the steamer *Osprey* from St. Louis and Quincy arrived, and put up at the Mansion. I helped to carry in their trunks, and chatted with them in the bar-room." Very likely Flagg was among that group. See Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:431.

7. See note 5 above.