

Abraham O. Smoot and the *Saluda* Steamboat Explosion, 9 April 1852

L. Douglas Smoot

The following remarks were given by L. Douglas Smoot at the Lexington Historical Association banquet held in Lexington, Missouri, on 13 June 2004. Dr. Smoot is an emeritus professor of chemical engineering at Brigham Young University, where he also served as chair of the Chemical Engineering Department and dean of the College of Engineering and Technology. In 1986, he founded BYU's Advanced Combustion Engineering Research Center, one of the largest academic research centers in combustion, serving as its director until 1997. He is a world-wide consultant in combustion, energy, and propulsion and has consulted with over sixty companies and agencies in energy combustion and propulsion in the United States, Europe, and the Orient. As a researcher and scholar, he has presented or published over two hundred technical articles and four books on combustion. He has served on the governor's advisory board in science and technology for the state of Utah and was appointed by the U.S. Senate to serve on the scientific advisory council of the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment. Recently, he led the Brigham Young Academy Foundation's efforts to preserve the historic Brigham Young Academy Building in Provo, Utah.

It is a privilege for me to be here with you this evening, in commemoration of the tragic *Saluda* explosion at Lexington, Missouri, on 9 April 1852. First, a disclaimer—I am an engineering professor, not a professional historian. However, I have a great love for history and have authored or coauthored three historical books. BYU Professor Fred E. Woods, upon learning of my interest in history and my service as president of the Abraham Owen Smoot Family Organization (he being my great-grandfather), initially suggested I might consider being here this evening. As far as I can tell from my reading of the history surrounding the *Saluda* explosion, Abraham Owen Smoot was the LDS Church leader most closely associated with this tragedy. May I briefly share with you his history, his experiences in Missouri in 1837–39, and his involvement in the *Saluda* explosion.

Abraham Owen Smoot (or, more affectionately, A. O.) was a



Portrait of Abraham O. Smoot by Solomon Nunes Carvalho, 1854. Carvalho, an illustrator and painter of some renown, was a member of John C. Fremont's ill-fated 1853–54 overland expedition.

After Fremont's expedition was rescued by the Mormons at Parowan in early February 1854, Carvalho remained for a few months in the region.

It was during this time he made the painting of Smoot. In his memoirs he recorded that before leaving for California, "I painted several portraits in Great Salt Lake City; among them were two of

Gov. Brigham Young; one of Lieut. General [Daniel H.] Wells, Attorney General Seth Blair, Apostle [Wilford] Woodruff; Bishop [Abraham O.] Smoot, Col. Ferrimore Little and lady, Mrs. Wheelock, and several others." (Solomon Nunes Carvalho, *Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1954], 247). *The painting depicts Smoot about one year after the Saluda disaster. Photograph courtesy of Loretta D. Nixon.*

month of May had succeeded in organizing a company of about two hundred souls with about forty teams and started on our journey. The trip occupied

Southerner, born in Owenton, Kentucky, on 17 February 1815. Concerning his early days, he noted, "From my early childhood, almost from my infancy, I was afflicted with a lung disease and supposed it to be consumption. . . . When I was about nine years old, my death seemed so imminent that my burial clothes were made."¹ He survived, however, was converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1835 at the age of twenty, and made his way to Kirtland, Ohio. In January 1837, while in Kirtland, he received a blessing from Joseph Smith Sr., who promised him that "thou shalt be made whole from this hour. . . . Be faithful Brother and thou shalt have health and be blessed in thy labours. . . . Thou shalt have much persecution on earth, thy enemies will seek thy life but thou shalt be delivered out of their hands and return to Zion when thy labors in the Lord's vineyard are ended."²

In 1837, Joseph Smith asked A. O. to return to the Southern states to raise up a company of Church members to immigrate to Far West, Missouri, where other Church members were then congregating. He indicated, "I accordingly went South, and in the

month of May had succeeded in organizing a company of about two hundred souls with about forty teams and started on our journey. The trip occupied

about two months.”³ A. O. settled on a farm two miles south of Far West.

Peace prevailed over the next year with promising crops in the summer of 1838. However, by that summer, further hostilities between Missourians and the Mormons arose. A. O. noted in his journal: “It became a continual round [of] invasion from our enemies on every side from the 1st of August until the first day of November at which time we were compelled . . . to give up our arms and surrender.”⁴ These hostilities included the Battle of Crooked River, the Haun’s Mill Massacre, and the “Extermination Order” of Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs, which forced the Mormons to evacuate Missouri.

With martial law prevailing, his farm destroyed, his animals scattered or stolen, and Church leaders in Liberty Jail, A. O. was married in Far West by a Missouri justice to Margaret Thompson, which he said was proof “that I had not lost hope.”⁵ The Smoots left Missouri shortly after the marriage, in the dead of winter, heading east across northern Missouri with the John Butler family, arriving in Quincy, Illinois, on 1 March 1839. Margaret noted in her journal: “The sufferings and privations of this period of my life cannot be portrayed by mortal tongue.”⁶

By 1839, A. O. and Margaret settled in Nauvoo where they remained for the next seven years. In February 1846, they crossed the frozen Mississippi, heading to the West with the main body of the Mormon community. They arrived in the Salt Lake Valley eighteen months later in September of 1847. In Salt Lake City, A. O. became a prominent civic and business leader while continuing his Church leadership duties.

In early 1852, while he was serving a mission for the Church in England, A. O. received a letter from Elder Franklin D. Richards, directing A. O. to assist in the emigration of some Latter-day Saints from Great Britain. It was this assignment that led to his being in Lexington, Missouri, on 9 April 1852, since his specific assignment was to remove the Mormons who had sailed on the *Kennebec* and *Ellen Maria* “from the Missouri River to the Great Salt Lake City.”⁷ A. O. left Liverpool on 28 January 1852; and, after arriving in New York, he wrote to Margaret about the company’s ordeal crossing the Atlantic: “It would be impossible for me to describe the appearance of a . . . tempestuous sea which we had for seven successive days and nights without cessation. . . . The [ship’s] officers that had been to sea for some 21 and 25 years said that they had never saw so severe a storm before.”⁸

At St. Louis, A. O. acquired supplies for the Mormon companies and then made his way up the Missouri River toward Lexington. He arrived in Lexington on 8 April on the steamship *Isabel*, just behind the *Saluda*. Around 7:00 a.m. on the morning of 9 April, A. O. visited the Mormon passengers on the *Saluda*. While he was walking back to the *Isabel*, he heard and

felt the explosion. He recalled:

I saw the bodies of many of the unfortunate passengers and various parts of the boat flying in the air in every direction. Fortunately for the Saints on board, they were mostly on the deck of the boat and pretty well towards the stern, and they consequently fared better than those below, or on the forepart of the boat, which was blown entirely to pieces. . . . My own preservation I can only attribute to the providence of the Almighty, for if I had remained a moment on the wharf to see the boat start, as would have been very natural for a person to do, I would have been blown into eternity as those were who stood there.⁹

A. O. estimated seventy-five passengers were killed, whereas other estimates indicate that ninety to one hundred were killed. After the explosion, he noted:

I . . . had a very narrow escape on the occasion of the *Saluda* disaster. I had purchased the supplies for my company to make its overland journey with, except cattle, at St. Louis and had decided to go farther up the river to buy the stock, when Eli B. Kelsey came to me to consult me in regard to chartering the *Saluda* to convey an independent company of saints up the river. I went with him to examine the boat, and on finding that it was an old hulk of a freight boat, fitted up with a single engine, I strongly advised him against having anything to do with it. He seemed to be influenced in making choice of it entirely by fact he could get it cheaper than a better one; but in my opinion it seemed folly, for in addition to the danger of accident, the length of time likely to be occupied in making the journey would more than counterbalance what might be saved in the charge of the transit. However, he decided to charter it, and then both he and captain urged me strongly to take passage with them, offering to carry me free of cost if I would only go; but I could not feel satisfied to do so.¹⁰

A. O. remained in Lexington for ten days, during which time he observed the heroic and compassionate service rendered by the people of Lexington to the dead and injured. He wrote:

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.¹¹

Following the disaster, A. O. returned to St. Louis and then made his way to Atchison, Kansas, the last staging area before crossing the plains to the Salt Lake Valley. Here, he headed up a company of 230 Saints for the

journey to the West. At Atchison, a number of the group contracted cholera, including A. O. His illness lasted four weeks, during which time he lost seventy-five pounds and said that he “beheld myself in the jaws of death.”¹²

In 1868, A. O., who had settled in Salt Lake City with his family, was sent to Provo by Brigham Young to build up the Church. He subsequently became the first president of the Board of Trustees of the Brigham Young Academy, now Brigham Young University, in 1875. He died in 1895 at the age of eighty after living a valiant life of service and sacrifice. As has been briefly recounted, A. O.’s life was in danger on several occasions, but he lived to realize the promises made to him in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1837.

I am honored and pleased to donate to your Lexington Historical Association a copy of the book, *Abraham Owen Smoot, A Testament of His Life*, which recounts much of his history, and I extend my appreciation for the privilege of being with you on this occasion.

Notes

1. Loretta D. Nixon and L. Douglas Smoot, *Abraham Owen Smoot, A Testament of His Life* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1994), 57.

2. Abraham Owen Smoot Patriarchal Blessing, 23 January 1837, copy in the possession of L. Douglas Smoot. An excerpt from the blessing is given in Nixon and Smoot, *Abraham Owen Smoot*, 9; see also a photograph of the blessing on page 8.

3. Nixon and Smoot, *Abraham Owen Smoot*, 71.

4. Nixon and Smoot, *Abraham Owen Smoot*, 84.

5. Nixon and Smoot, *Abraham Owen Smoot*, 96–97.

6. Nixon and Smoot, *Abraham Owen Smoot*, 99.

7. Frankin D. Richards to Abraham O. Smoot, 17 January 1852, copy in the possession of L. Douglas Smoot.

8. Abraham O. Smoot to Margaret T. Smoot, 14 February 1852, copy in the possession of L. Douglas Smoot.

9. Abraham O. Smoot, “Early Experiences of A. O. Smoot,” in *Early Scenes in Church History: Eighth Book in the Faith-Promoting Series* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 27; see also William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda* (Salt Lake City: Millennial Press, 2002), 25–26, 33–34.

10. Smoot, “Early Experiences of A. O. Smoot,” 26–27; also Hartley and Woods, *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda*, 3–4.

11. Smoot, “Early Experiences of A. O. Smoot,” 27; also Hartley and Woods, *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda*, 53.

12. Abraham O. Smoot to Margaret T. Smoot, 7 July 1852, copy in the possession of L. Douglas Smoot; Smoot, “Early Experiences of A. O. Smoot,” 28; and Hartley and Woods, *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda*, 58.