

NAUVOO SAINTS IN THE NEWSPAPERS OF THE 1840s

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The purpose of this article is to provide a glimpse of the information published in newspaper articles chronicling the Church and its members during the Nauvoo years. Generally, the newspapers of that period circulated articles that were previously published in other newspapers. In addition, correspondents for a particular newspaper in one city often had their articles published in the newspapers of other communities. Explaining this practice George W. Givens wrote, "An important characteristic of newspapers of this time period is therefore the reprinting of articles from other papers. Most newspapers could not afford traveling reporters, so that was the only way to report news from outside the editor's own town."¹

Different descriptions and conclusions were printed throughout the United States. The reports were either glowing in praise of the efforts of the Saints in building the city of Nauvoo or very derogatory concerning those same efforts. I will present a few of these articles in a contrasting pattern of positive and negative perceptions.

The growth and beauty of the city of Nauvoo appeared as a theme of reports in 1843. A New York Newspaper, the *Weekly Argus*, published the following article on July 15, 1843:

THE CITY OF NAUVOO

Few, we suspect, are aware of the rapid growth and present condition of the city of Nauvoo, the Jerusalem of the Latter Day Saints. Notwithstanding but four years have elapsed since the Mormons first made a settlement there, it is estimated that it already numbers from 15,000 to 17,000 inhabitants; and

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accessions are daily made to the population from the Eastern states and from Europe.² The Burlington (Iowa) *Gazette*, from which we gather these facts, says:

"It is situated at one of the most beautiful points on the river, and is improving with a rapidity truly astonishing. Many of the houses are built in fine style, evincing wealth as well as taste. The Temple, which is destined to be the most magnificent structure in the West, is progressing rapidly, and will probably be completed in the course of the present and succeeding summer. Its style of architecture is entirely original--unlike any thing in the world, or in the history of the world--but is at the same time chaste and elegant. It is said to be the conception of the Prophet, Gen. Smith. It is being built by the voluntary labor of the members of the church, who devote a certain number of days in the year to the work. If the labor and materials were estimated at cash prices it is supposed that the building would cost something like a million of dollars."³

By means of such positive press, as in the above example, the citizens of the eastern states were informed that the Mormons were an industrious people. The Temple was often described in connection with reports on the city. As previously mentioned, not all of the reports were as positive as the one just cited. A little more than a year after the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, the September 29, 1845 issue of the *Salem Register* (Salem, Massachusetts) ran the following on its front page:

THE MORMONS. A correspondent of the *Rochester Democrat*, writing from St. Louis, Sept. 4, gives the following account of the Mormons at Nauvoo:

"The village of Galena is situated on Fever river, about 6 miles from the Mississippi, and now contains 5 or 6000 inhabitants. The navigation of the upper Mississippi, in consequence of low water is extremely hazardous. At this time there is not over 28 inches of water on the lower rapids, and all

rock bottom at that. These rapids lie between the famous city of Nauvoo and the village of Keokuk, which enabled our party to visit the Mormon city and Temple, while the freight of our boat was transferred into flat boats. We first made for the Temple, which is located about three-fourths of a mile from the river, on an elevation of about 150 ft. above the river. From a distance it has a magnificent appearance, but upon a close examination the work is anything but good. It is built of grey cut limestone, three stories high, including the basement, with common, plain columns, relieved by a sort of Grecian capital, sprinkled with Mormonism.⁴ The roof and gable ends are handsomely finished, with a good, suitable cornice. At the west end there is a beautiful tower, well proportioned, and built in a very substantial manner. The basement is to be divided into several rooms--the largest in the centre, containing an oval stone baptistery, supported by twelve cut stone bullocks or oxen, with their heads all fronting out towards the congregation--the asses with their faces fronting the bullocks. They have a marble front building, called a Masonic Lodge. A very large public house, (to be called the Nauvoo House) is now going up.

"There appears to be considerable sickness amongst them, and I must confess that a more God-forsaken people never appeared before me--the most squalid poverty I ever beheld. It baffles all description. Yet we found some amongst them that seemed of good spirit, and talked as though all the human family would come and join them--William Smith, brother of the famous Joe and Hiram, is now their High Priest⁵, and is to be, until Joe the Second comes of age. In the proper place, I omitted saying, that the temple is to be surrounded by an immense stone wall 15 or 20 feet high, which is now partly built, enclosing several acres of land. Many of the curious think the wall means fight, when finished. There are about 5,000 inhabitants in the city, with log huts and shanties, with now and then a respectable looking dwelling."⁶

In contrast with the previous article, the saints are depicted as "asses" rather than as industrious citizens donating their time. The same is true of the contrast in the description of the temple.

The purpose of the temple in Nauvoo was

misunderstood by some. A primary purpose of the temple, as asserted in print, was to serve as a fortress during a foretold siege of Nauvoo. The following are a sample of articles that wrote of the temple as a Mormon fortress:

THE MORMON TEMPLE.--This monster work in the far West is progressing and excites the wonder of all who look at it. Is it intended as a place of worship? It is said not. The people are to assemble *without* to worship; the saints alone are to enter within the "holy of holies." The *Warsaw Signal*⁷ insists upon it that the Temple has another object. It says:

"The Temple, in reality, however, is designed, in our opinion for fortification. It has regular port-holes, in the shape of round windows, in the second story, and is in every respect well situated for a fortification. The wall enclosing five or six acres around the building, is about four feet thick, which can be intended for no other purpose than defence (sic). The idea of its being intended merely as the foundation of an ornamental railing, as pretended by the Saints, is preposterous."⁸

Papers carried an article from the *St. Louis Reveille* in October of 1845 substantiating the intent of the Mormons to use their temple as the proposed fortress:

A correspondent of the *St. Louis Reveille* states that the Mormons were hauling grain and driving cattle into Nauvoo, expecting a siege; and he says:

"When the Mormons find themselves surrounded, they will retreat to the Temple, and then if they are routed, it will only be by the hardest fighting that the country has seen for many years. The Temple commands the country for miles around. The saints have 24 pieces of artillery, (12 pounders,) plenty of ammunition, and are now laying in a stock of provisions, by plundering the old settlers, which will keep famine off for months. If a siege is commenced, what will be the consequences it is impossible to foretell. The whole country may rise *en masse*, but can Nauvoo be subdued by a force, commanding as the Temple does so wide a range of country, and armed as the Mormons are with 24 pieces of heavy artillery, and 1,000 stand of revolving rifles, besides common arms to any amount!

"The Governor, it is said, will not interfere, and if so, there is no telling the result of present movements. The military of our city, who are so anxious for a brush with Mexico, had better take up their line of march for the Holy City, and try their steel and courage in the expected siege of Nauvoo."⁹

By contrast, however, an article from November 1845 offers a less inflammatory view of the temple. Instead, the readers of *The New York Weekly Tribune* were told of the beauty and magnitude of the nearly completed edifice:

Nauvoo is beautifully situated on a point of land formed in the Mississippi. We came in view of it full six miles below, and prominent above all stood forth, on an elevated piece of land, the celebrated Mormon Temple. The Vemple [sic] is really a splendid building, equal, I should think, to some of the very best churches in Boston. The steeple is round, and quite tall. The building is finished on the outside, and is built of granite. All around the Temple, just below the eaves, and at the same height [sic] at each end, are the faces of men carved in stone, about eight feet apart. I paced the building, and judge it 300 feet long, and 150 feet wide.¹⁰

The buildings of Nauvoo were not the only items of interest in the press. The Prophet Joseph also received space in print. Following a negative description of the city of Nauvoo and the temple being built there, a correspondent of the *New York Journal* who hailed from St. Louis wrote a physical description of Joseph Smith:

The prophet, *Joe*, is a beast. His head is twice as large aft as it is in the intellectual region--and he looks not unlike he might have sat for the portraits, (I beg pardon,) the statues of the oxen. He is about six feet in stature, clumsily and heavily put together, with a good deal of the loafer in his swagger, and much bar-room slang in his miserable attempt at wit. His eyes are large and bluish, his nose straight and pointed, and almost perpendicular to his face--his forehead is low and not much improved, because he bestows momentarily upon it, the labor of brushing back his long sandy hair, from his front and temple. He wears this latter ornament, parted transversely from ear to ear, quite long, both before and behind, and at a side view, so large are his occipital possessions that I could almost fancy him old Janus, with his two heads, resurrectionized from his antiquated dust, and

as the saying has it, "standing in the middle of the week, and looking both ways for Sunday."¹¹

This same article had earlier described the Nauvoo temple baptismal font as being "supported on the back of twelve white pine oxen--planted firmly in the ground, and for all the world look like so many horned frogs, as you may have seen them in Texas, creeping from beneath the shelter of a house."

This and other negative articles that were published may seem to be vicious attacks on the Saints. Undoubtedly, this is true in the case of the personal attack on Joseph Smith. However, the Saints were not innocent of similar attacks on the non-Mormons. A case in point is an article published by William Smith, Joseph Smith's brother. He was the editor of the Nauvoo *Wasp*, appropriately named with respect to the stinging attack he made on Thomas B. Sharp, the editor of the *Warsaw Signal*, an anti-Mormon newspaper. Thomas Sharp had an unusually large nose which William Smith took the opportunity to mock in the *Wasp* issue of April 30, 1842. Under the heading of "NOSE-ODOLOGY" William Smith wrote:

Just returned from the promontory of Noses, Thommass C. Sharp, the redoubtable editor of the *Warsaw Signal*, having made some very important discoveries in relation to the bumps on his far-famed proboscis. The length of his snout is said to be in the exact proportion of seven to one compared to his intellectual faculties.

As can be seen from these articles, an additional color needs to be added to those with which we paint pictures of the past with regard to the editorial spirit of the times. It is very difficult to have a correct picture of the past. Authors who rely on historical documents should recognize that publication does not mean more than that the articles reached print and may have been read by the people of the times. Indeed, many views may have been held that were not published. Members of the church also attempted to explain the views of the Saints in the newspapers of the day. They did not meet with the success which they desired. In the October, 1845 conference of the Church, John Taylor, apostle and editor of the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, commented that "the world doesn't wish any news from us, and we don't wish to urge it upon them."¹² Therefore, the articles are but a foggy window giving us a glimpse into the past, but add additional insight concerning opinions of those citizens who were contemporary with the Latter-day Saint

members. Through reading the conflicting and various views found in the press, current historians can sift, evaluate, and portray a more complete picture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 1990s as well as the 1840s.

NOTES

1. George W. Givens, *In Old Nauvoo*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 267.

2. The estimates concerning the population of Nauvoo may have included Latter-day Saints living outside of Nauvoo itself. See Janath Cannon, *Nauvoo Panorama*, (United States: Nauvoo Restoration Inc., 1991), 35, note 16.

3. *Weekly Argus*, 15 July, 1843, 221.

4. It seems probable that this is referring to the sun stones and possibly the moon and star stones on the outside of the temple at various levels.

5. "Brigham Young acknowledged William Smith's right to be the Presiding Patriarch of the Church at the October conference of the Church in 1844, and the apostles ordained William Presiding Patriarch to the Church on 24 May 1845. Within a few days, he started making such expansive claims about his powers as Presiding Patriarch that his fellow apostles wrote an article in *Times and Seasons*, explaining that since patriarchs were ordained by the apostles, a patriarch could not have authority superior to that of the apostles, and specifically that William Smith did not preside over the Church in any sense by virtue of his being the Presiding Patriarch." D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies*, 16 (winter 1976):203.

6. *Salem [Massachusetts] Register*, 29 September, 1845, 1.

7. An anti-Mormon newspaper edited by Thomas Sharp in Warsaw, Illinois, about 10 miles south of Nauvoo.

8. *Utica [New York] Daily Gazette*, 27 September, 1845, 2 and *New York Weekly Tribune*, 4 October, 1845, 2.

9. *Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] Argus*, 8 October, 1845, 2 and *Salem Register*, 9 October, 1845, 2.

10. *The New York Weekly Tribune*, 22 November, 1845, 7.

11. *The Hampshire Gazette*, 22 August, 1843, 1.

12. Brigham H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 1978, 7:473.