

Anti-Mormon Violence



A Church Gathering. Courtesy: Jana Richman

From the first years of its existence, the Mormon Church sparked violent opposition from other Americans. This violence claimed many lives, including Mormon prophet Joseph Smith's, and eventually led to the Mormons seeking refuge outside the boundaries of the United States.

Opposition for Worldly Reasons

The hostility shown Mormons had many causes. Some of them were practical: Mormon settlers tended to arrive in a community in substantial numbers, and their ranks swelled as church leaders issued calls for "gatherings" of the faithful. Non-Mormons resented the economic competition the settlers brought; the rise in land costs; and the possibility that Mormons, voting as a bloc, would take control of local government. Missourians had the additional concern that Joseph Smith had declared their state the site of a "New Jerusalem" for his flock. If God had decreed the land to Mormons, where did that leave everyone else?

Opposition to Mormon Beliefs

Other opposition stemmed from Mormon doctrine. The church believed that the true church had been removed from the earth at the end of the Apostolic Age and that, as a result, all other Christian denominations (Protestant as well as Catholic) were not legitimate. Neither Joseph Smith nor the Mormon missionaries shied away from making these claims. The Mormon practice of polygamy, a part of church doctrine at the time that was publicly announced in 1852 but rumored much earlier, sparked accusations of sexual immorality and even white slavery from other Christians. Conversely, residents of Missouri, which had entered the Union as a slave state, resented the fact that Mormons did not endorse slavery and feared that a Mormon majority would abolish the practice. For many reasons, opposition to Mormons quickly grew violent.



C.C.A. Christensen, Tarring and Feathering the Prophet, ca. 1865, from the Mormon Panorama. Courtesy of Brigham Young University Museum of Art

Tar and Feathers

Just a few months after the Mormon Church was founded in 1830, Smith's preaching led to hostility from other clergymen and a charge of "being a disorderly person." He was acquitted but soon described an instruction he had received from God for the Mormons to migrate from New York to Ohio in 1831. There, in Kirtland, Smith received his first taste of mob violence. Residents resented the Mormons' growing power, feared the poverty of some recent arrivals would lead to "pauperism," and even worried that local Mormon converts would deed their property to the church rather than relatives. In late March 1832, a group of about 50 anti-Mormon agitators dragged Smith from his home and tarred and feathered him.

Shootings, Arson and Exile

Smith was undaunted by this assault. But other Mormons in Missouri would soon face even greater violence. In the summer of 1833, settlers in Jackson

County came under attack -- homes were shot up, haystacks set ablaze, and in July the Mormon printing press was destroyed. Autumn brought larger assaults, culminating in an attack on 200 Mormon cabins in November and the eviction of 1,200 Mormons, who fled across the Missouri River to safety in Clay County, where residents would shelter them for the next few years.

Extermination Decree

Meanwhile, allegations of impropriety had begun to surface around Smith in Kirtland, Ohio, many relating to his establishment of a bank. After the bank failed in the Panic of 1837, he abandoned Ohio for the northern Missouri counties of Caldwell and Daviess, which had been created for Mormon settlers forced to leave Clay County. Although these new counties were intended to provide safe haven, the calm was only temporary. Reacting to anti-Mormon harassment, church leader Sidney Rigdon gave an intemperate July 4th oration in which he spoke of a "war of extermination" between Mormons and their neighbors. When those neighbors tried to prevent Mormons from voting in the August state elections, a melee erupted, and soon groups of militia were roaming the countryside. In late October, Missouri governor Lilburn Boggs issued an official decree, declaring, "The Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State." Just a few days later, a mob attacked the Mormon community of Haun's Mill, slaughtering 17 people at close range. Joseph Smith was jailed, and the Mormon community once again had to take flight, settling in Illinois.

The Perfect Theocracy

In Illinois a familiar pattern repeated itself; the Mormons were initially welcomed, but relations broke down. Smith founded a city called Nauvoo on the banks of the Mississippi River. The Mormons built a dynamic and beautiful city, one that shortly rivaled Chicago in size. Smith received new revelations: Latter-day Saints could baptize the dead, and enter into celestial marriage, more commonly known as polygamy. After the first mayor was excommunicated for adultery, Joseph Smith became the community's mayor, chief justice, and head of the local militia, worrying other Mormons and outsiders alike about the concentration of power in the prophet's hands. Nauvoo looked like the perfect theocracy.

Fears of Mormon Dominance

In 1844 Smith declared his intention to run for president of the United States, further sparking people's fears about Mormon dominance. When a

local newspaper, the *Nauvoo Expositor*, criticized the Mormon doctrine of polygamy, Smith ordered it shut and the printing press smashed. The destruction of an American printing press, in the eyes of the public at that time, was a horrific act. Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested, and charged with inciting a riot. Local newspapers blazed with rhetoric; one urged citizens to "arise, one and all," and make their comments "with powder and ball." On June 27, a mob of some two hundred men took up the newspaper's invitation, shooting Smith and his brother to death in a local jail. Smith's murder, which went unpunished, convinced Mormons they would never have peace in America, and the group made plans to seek safety beyond the borders of the United States. In 1846 the Mormons' great migration began.