Incidents of discord between Latter-day Saints and their neighbors in Missouri from 1831 to 1839 are sometimes known as the Missouri War. In 1838 the tensions that had intermittently produced violence escalated into large-scale conflict that ended with the forced expulsion of the Latter-day Saints from the state.

The first Latter-day Saints entered Missouri in January 1831 as part of the Lamanite mission. These zealous missionaries soon drew the ire of both U.S. Indian agents and local clergy in Independence, the rough-hewn and sometimes disorderly seat of Jackson County and the head of the Santa Fe Trail. Joseph Smith arrived in July 1831. In August he selected a site for a temple and designated Jackson County as the location of the millennial Zion or New Jerusalem and as the gathering place for the Saints.

That summer more than one hundred Church members arrived in Jackson County from Kirtland, Ohio, and from other northern and eastern states; hundreds more soon followed. By the summer of 1833, more than a thousand were grouped into four settlements west of Independence, while others lived in the village itself.

Tension between the Latter-day Saints and their neighbors in frontier Jackson County mounted for several reasons.

First, marked cultural differences set them apart. With New England roots, most Saints valued congregational Sabbath worship, education of their children, and refined personal decorum. In contrast, many Jackson County residents had come to the Missouri frontier from other states precisely to avoid such interference in their lives. Many held no schools for their children, and Sunday cockfights attracted more people than church services did. Often hard drinking intensified violent frontier ways. In the opinion of non-LDS county resident John C. McCoy in the Kansas City Journal (Apr. 24, 1881, p. 9), such extreme differences in customs made the two groups “completely unfitted to live together in peace and friendship.”

Second, Missourians considered the Latter-day Saints strange and religiously unorthodox. Many LDS Church members aggressively articulated belief in revelation, prophets, the Book of Mormon, spiritual gifts, the Millennium, and the importance of gathering. Some went further and claimed Jackson County land as a sacred inheritance by divine appointment. Even David Whitmer, presiding elder of one branch, thought these boasts excited bitter jealousy. Articles on prophecy and doctrine published in the Church newspaper at Independence, the evening and the morning star, added to hard feelings. In addition, local Protestant clergy felt threatened by LDS missionary activity.

Third, because the Saints lived on Church lands and traded entirely with the Church store or blacksmith shops, some original settlers viewed them as economically exclusive, even un-American. Others accused LDS immigrants of pauperism when, because of diminished Church resources, they failed to obtain land.

A fourth volatile issue was the original settlers’ fear that Latter-day Saints might provoke battles with either slaves or Indians. They accused the Saints of slave tampering. As transplanted Southerners who valued their right to hold slaves, the settlers erroneously feared that the Saints intended to convert blacks or incite them to revolt. They also correctly asserted that the Latter-day Saints desired to convert Indians and, perhaps, ally themselves with the Indians.

Finally, Missourians feared that continued LDS in gathering would lead to loss of political control. “It requires no gift of prophecy,” stated a citizens’ committee, “to tell that the day is not far distant when the civil government of the county will be in their hands; when the sheriff, the justices, and the county judges will be Mormons” (HC 1:397). These monumental differences between the Latter-day Saints and the Missourians eventually led to violence.

Vandalism against LDS settlers first occurred in the spring of 1832. Coordinated aggression commenced
in July 1833, after the article “Free People of Color” appeared in the Evening and the Morning Star. Even though the article was written to curtail trouble, it so outraged local citizens that more than 400 met at the courthouse to demand that the Mormons leave. When the Latter-day Saints refused to negotiate away or abandon lands they legally owned, some citizens formed a mob and destroyed the press and printing house, ransacked the Mormon store, and violently accosted LDS leaders. Bishop Edward Partridge was beaten and tarred and feathered. Meeting three days later, the mob issued an ultimatum: One-half of the Mormons must leave by year’s end and the rest by April (1834).

Local Church leaders sought counsel from Joseph Smith at Kirtland and assistance from Missouri Governor Daniel Dunklin. The Prophet urged them to hold their ground, and the governor advised them to seek redress through the courts. They did both. They employed lawyers from Clay County, including Alexander W. Doniphan and David R. Atchison.

Determined to settle the matter decisively, the old settlers mobilized to drive the Mormons out. Renewed violence began on October 31, 1833, with an attack on the Whitmer Branch a few miles west of the Big Blue River, near Independence. The mob demolished houses, whipped the men, and terrorized the women and children. For a week, attacks, beatings, and depredations against the Saints continued. On November 4 a mob again attacked the Whitmer settlement, making its streets a battleground. Two Missourians and one defender died.

The following day men led by Lyman Wight arrived from the Prairie Branch, twelve miles west, to protect members threatened at Independence. Colonel Thomas L. Pitcher then called out the county militia to quell the mob and negotiate a truce with Wight. According to John Corrill, a Church officer at Independence, after the Saints surrendered their arms to the militia, the troops joined the mob in a general assault against them. Some county residents recoiled at this barbarism. John McCoy, whose father rode with the mob, later wrote in the Kansas City Journal (Jan. 18, 1885, p. 5) that the Mormons “were unjustly and outrageously maltreated.” But neither Colonel Pitcher nor Lieutenant Governor Lilburn W. Boggs, a resident of the county, interfered.

The terrified Saints fled Jackson County in disarray. Most went north, across the Missouri River, and sought refuge in Clay County, whose citizens were generally sympathetic and hospitable. Even there, however, these refugees endured a miserable winter without sufficient shelter, clothing, or food—either in extemporized camps along the river or above the bluffs in abandoned summer slave quarters. By spring, though, industry, better weather, and the aid of Clay County citizens improved their desperate condition.

After the Missouri governor promised militia assistance, about 200 Saints marched from Ohio to Missouri to escort the exiles back to their homes. This paramilitary relief party was known as Zion’s Camp. But reports of the camp’s coming mobilized anti-Mormons throughout Missouri’s western counties, and when it arrived in Missouri, it encountered hundreds of armed adversaries. The promised military assistance from the governor was not forthcoming, and the camp disbanded in June 1834 without crossing into Jackson County. The revelation disbanding Zion’s Camp declared that, because the Saints had not been blameless and must yet learn much, their anticipated Zion would not be redeemed for “many days” (D&C 105:2-10, 37).

All parties considered the Saints’ exile in Clay County to be temporary. Joseph Smith still hoped for the strength to return to Jackson County in the near future. But the Clay County old settlers, fearful of the flood of new LDS arrivals, grew impatient. On the night of June 28, 1836, a Clay County mob, determined to drive the
Mormons from the county, commenced to harass and beat them. The following day a convention of leading citizens entreated the Saints to leave the county before the mob struck further. Grateful for the refuge provided by Clay County citizens at a time of deep crisis, Church leaders agreed to move.

An uninhabited area north of Richmond became the new gathering place. Friends of the Saints, including state legislator Alexander W. Doniphan, guided the formation of a new “Mormon county” called Caldwell. By late 1836, with the county seat at Far West surrounded by other settlements, Latter-day Saints streamed into Caldwell County. In early 1838, after experiencing difficulties in Ohio, Joseph Smith arrived at Far West, and the settlement became Church headquarters. Many of the Ohio Saints soon followed. As LDS settlement extended into nearby Daviess and Carroll counties, competition with the old settlers resumed, eventually erupting into conflict.

Internal dissent, the aftermath of problems in Kirtland, also plagued the Church at Far West. Oliver Cowdery, the Missouri stake presidency (David Whitmer, William W. Phelps, and John Whitmer), and three apostles (Luke S. Johnson, Lyman E. Johnson, and William E. McLellin) were all excommunicated. Trying to prevent them from damaging the Church, Sidney Rigdon, a counselor to Joseph Smith, demanded in his June 19 “salt sermon” that the dissenters leave or be punished. Soon after, in a vigorous July 4 address, Rigdon declared the Church’s independence from “mobocracy.” These two sermons further incensed the public against expanding LDS influence.

Hostilities that began on August 8, 1838, election day, ended a few months later with the expulsion of the Latter-day Saints from the state. At Gallatin, county seat of Daviess County, a fight ensued when Mormons were prevented from voting. Joseph Smith quickly took measures to protect his people in Daviess County, but matters worsened. As false rumors of his efforts and of the election day battle reached surrounding counties, hundreds of self-appointed regulators congregated in Daviess, Caldwell, and Carroll counties. State militia commanded by Major General David R. Atchison worked to keep an uneasy peace.

Fearing that Latter-day Saints, reinforced regularly by new arrivals, would soon control their counties, non-Mormons determined to attack. On October 2, 1838, a mob laid siege to the LDS settlement of DeWitt in Carroll County. The Saints petitioned recently elected Governor Lilburn W. Boggs for protection, only to be told that they must take care of themselves. Atchison’s militia, weakened by mutiny and insubordination and lacking the firm support of the governor, failed to quell the mob. After ten days, the DeWitt Saints fled to Far West for safety; some in weakened condition died.

Faced with a heedless governor and an ineffective militia, Latter-day Saints reconsidered their long-standing position of passive defense. Concluding that without civil protection they had to protect themselves, in mid-October LDS leaders mobilized their own state-authorized militias in Caldwell and Daviess counties. These units actively confronted threatening mobs; there may also have been activity by units not strictly part of the militia (see Danites).

Raiders from Gallatin and Millport in Daviess County harassed the LDS community of Adam-on-di-Ahman. Throughout October both sides engaged in burning, stealing, and intimidation. While clearly acting first in self-defense, some Latter-day Saints nevertheless felt that military measures were excessive. In late October, Thomas B. Marsh and Orson Hyde, both apostles, signed affidavits critical of Mormon actions.

Hostilities escalated into outright warfare. Far West Militia Captain David W. Patten, an apostle, pursued a renegade band of Missouri militia overnight to the Crooked River in northern Ray County where, at dawn
on October 25, they clashed. Two died on the battlefield, one on each side, and two mortally wounded Saints died soon after, including Patten.

From the Battle of Crooked River, rumors of LDS aggression spread like wildfire. On the strength of these rumors, Governor Boggs issued his infamous Extermination Order on October 27, authorizing the state militia to drive all Mormons from Missouri or exterminate them. Three days later Colonel William O. Jennings launched an unprovoked attacked on an LDS settlement at Haun’s Mill, east of Far West, leaving seventeen men and boys dead (see Haun’s Mill Massacre). Survivors joined other refugees fleeing to Far West. On October 31, the militia under the command of Major General Samuel D. Lucas laid siege upon Far West.

To avoid bloodshed, Joseph Smith and others agreed to meet with militia leaders, who instead arrested them. A court-martial that evening summarily sentenced Joseph Smith and his associates to be shot, and Lucas ordered Brig. General Alexander Doniphan to execute them at dawn. Doniphan thought the order illegal and heroically refused to carry it out, declaring that he would bring to account anyone who tried to do it. After Far West defenders were disarmed, Missouri attackers committed numerous outrages against women and property; a number of men were shot and at least one was killed.

While Joseph Smith and some of the others were
jailed at Independence, in Richmond jail, and finally in Liberty Jail, the rest of the Latter-day Saints were forced from the state. That winter, under the leadership of Brigham Young, approximately 12,000 suffering Saints fled Missouri, most crossing the Mississippi River into Illinois at Quincy.

Joseph Smith and several others spent five months in jail awaiting trial for alleged murder, treason, arson, and other charges growing out of the fall violence and attempts at defense. For the Prophet, this imprisonment evoked a legacy of strength and revelations from heaven (see Doctrine and Covenants: Sections 121-123). A trial was never held. On April 15, 1839, while being transported on a change of venue to Boone County, Joseph and his brother Hyrum were allowed to escape to join Saints and their families in Illinois.

Bibliography


Historic Liberty Jail Site Guide

A number of issues led to conflict between the Saints and the old settlers and resulted in the forced expulsion of the Saints from Jackson County. These differences can be grouped into seven specific areas of tension:

Land. As the Saints moved to Jackson County, they were competing with other settlers for the same land in the frontier territory.

Politics. With an ever growing number of Church members immigrating into the county, the old settlers realized that the Saints would soon have a political majority in the county.

Slavery. Missouri was organized as a slave state. The majority of Saints were from free states.

Native Americans. The Saints looked upon the Native Americans as descendants of the people written about in the Book of Mormon and part of scattered Israel. The old settlers distrusted and feared the native inhabitants.

Religious beliefs. The beliefs of the Latter-day Saints and their view of revelation through a living prophet was thought, by the old settlers, to be contrary to the Bible.

Culture. The majority of the Latter-day Saints were from northern states. They differed in culture, habits, view of life, and lifestyles.

Attitude. As a result of their cooperative efforts and zeal for Zion, the Saints were viewed as clannish by many of the old settlers.


Missouri Land Rights

In 2005, as manager of the Legal and Business Series for the Joseph Smith Papers Project, Jeffrey N. Walker began exploring the 1830 legal and business dynamics of the Church in Missouri. Walker discovered a wealth of previously unknown legal documents. These documents give further insight regarding the importance that LAND played into the Missouri Conflict. For more information go to: www.byustudies.byu.edu and access Mormon Land Rights in Caldwell and Daviess Counties and the Mormon Conflict of 1838: New Findings and New Understandings.