Missouri’s Impact on the Church
by Max H Parkin

The desire for Zion, that ideal society promised in ancient and modern scriptures, caused the energetic yet strained history of early Mormonism in Missouri.

Within one decade, the Mormons sought to establish a Zion society in three separate locations: Jackson County, 1831–33; Clay and neighboring counties, 1833–36; and Caldwell and other upper Missouri counties, 1836–39. (See map.) Joseph Smith, the greatest advocate of the Lord’s ideal society, visited Missouri frequently, gave personal counsel to the men he left in charge, and sent directions from Kirtland. The Church grew, but it never flourished. Instead, the Missouri story tells of personal growth and courage for many, of despair and unfaithfulness for others, and of frustration for all. Still, we cannot understand either the theology or the history of Mormonism without understanding the role of Missouri. The concept of Zion became a distinctive part of our doctrine, while the search for Zion led to this deeply felt chapter of our history.

Missionaries to Missouri

The story begins shortly after the organization of the Church in 1830. The exciting Book of Mormon teachings of Christ about a new Jerusalem—a city of Zion—that would be founded in America in the last day, created a spirit of expectancy. (See 3 Ne. 20:22; Ether 13:4.) The expectancy increased when the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that this city would be located in the west, upon “the border by the Lamanites,” and that the Saints would find refuge there from the tribulations preceding the Lord’s Second Coming. (See D&C 28:9.)

This revelation was given in Fayette, New York, in September 1830, five months after the Church was organized. A month later, four missionaries left for the western frontier to teach the Indians. This journey—made by Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Whitmer, Jr., and Ziba Peterson—was one of the most eventful and significant missions in the history of Mormonism. An important stopover on their route was in Ohio where Parley had formerly served with a Campbellite preacher of considerable ability and promise. His name was Sidney Rigdon.

“In two or three weeks from our arrival,” Parley wrote, “... we had baptized One hundred and twenty-seven souls, and this number soon increased to one thousand” (Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938, p. 48). One of their converts, Levi Hancock, gained there the faith that would later survive the rigors of Missouri and the Mormon Battalion: “It is the truth,” he remembers thinking. “I feel it.”

Another convert, Dr. Frederick G. Williams, joined the four missionaries and, late in November, they continued to Missouri, then the westernmost state in the union with “the border of the Lamanite” just west of the state line. At that time, popular thought saw it as the permanent limit to western expansion.

Long before the missionaries reached their destination, they were caught by the storms of a season
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The Saints came to Missouri to establish Zion

so violently cold and stormy that it became known as “the winter of the deep snow.” Peter Whitmer tells us their date of arrival: 13 January 1831. The next day, Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, and Frederick G. Williams went to the Indian encampments while Peterson and Whitmer sought employment in Independence as teachers and tailors.

These missionaries felt their responsibility keenly. They knew that the Lamanites would help build the future New Jerusalem; thus, they had to be redeemed from their fallen condition before the next step could be taken in the work of the last days. (See 3 Ne. 21:23.) These particular Lamanites happened to be Delawares and Shawnee. Under the government’s policy of relocating all Indian tribes out of the eastern states and assigning them lands west of Missouri, the Shawnee were south of the Kansas River, immediately west of Jackson County. Most of the tribe were already there, and the missionaries spent a short time among them before crossing the Kansas River to the Delawares who had just started gathering the previous fall, north of the Kansas River and about twenty miles west of Independence. About four hundred of them were camped at their new home under the protection of their aged Chief Kikthawandund, also known as William Anderson.

The chief had very negative feelings about Christian missionaries, but Oliver Cowdery persuaded him to call a council of his leading people. For several days, he taught them about the Book of Mormon but ran into opposition from three ministers among the neighboring Shawnee. A Methodist reverend, Richard Johnson, had opened a mission there the previous fall, and plans were developing for a Baptist mission under Reverend Johnston Lykins. Reverend Isaac McCoy, a well-known missionary and government surveyor, was also negotiating with the Shawnee for a mission school near their village.

Apparently the Mormons were the first to preach among the Delawares, but they had not yet petitioned the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in St. Louis for the
necessary license to travel on government lands. Thus, their opponents had an effective device to use against them; and McCoy’s son, John, who had helped him survey the Delaware reserve and nearby Fort Leavenworth, records that Indian agent Robert W. Cummings ordered the Mormons out of the area, backing up his order with the threat of military prison.4 Obediently, the missionaries withdrew; and Parley Pratt left the others to preach in Jackson County while he returned east to report to the Prophet. By the time he reached Kirtland, the Church branches from New York were also there.

Independence, the “center place”

One of the most important revelations given to the Church in Kirtland was the law of consecration and stewardship (see D&C 42) describing the system for building up Zion temporally. It thus became important to know the exact location of the New Jerusalem, information that the Lord had promised to reveal later. In the spring of 1831, Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, William W. Phelps, Edward Partridge, Sidney Gilbert, and others traveled to Jackson County to learn of Zion’s location so they could begin laying its temporal foundation.

Independence was then a raw frontier settlement, the final “ civilized” stop for Santa Fe traders. One of the elders in Joseph Smith’s party described the village as “a new town containing a court-house built of brick, two or three merchants’ stores and 15 or 20 dwelling houses, built mostly of logs hewed on both sides.”5 Both residents and visitors praised the country’s astonishing beauty and productivity. The famous writer Washington Irving passed through Independence the next year and wrote, “The soil is like that of a garden [and the] beauty of the forest exceeded anything that I have seen.”6

For the Latter-day Saints, however, both Jackson County’s newness and its fertility were secondary to its sacredness; for in July, the Lord spoke to the Prophet: “Behold, the place which is now called Independence is the center place; and a spot for the temple is lying westward, upon a lot which is not far from the court-house” (D&C 57:3). On 3 August, the Prophet and others met one-half mile west of the courthouse in the midst of a sixty-three acre tract later purchased by the Church and there he dedicated a site for the temple. Sidney Rigdon had dedicated Missouri the previous day as the promised place of refuge for the Saints. Bishop Partridge was to superintend the purchase and distribution of Church land in Zion; Sidney Gilbert was to establish a store; and W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery would open a printing office, publish the Church’s The Evening and Morning Star, and print the Book of Commandments containing the Prophet’s revelations. Then Joseph Smith returned to Kirtland where he supervised the developing Church for the next seven years.

“Gathering to Zion” immediately became a topic for Church leaders and missionaries. W. W. Phelps gave the Star a strong “last days” emphasis with articles in every issue about the new revelations, Enoch’s Zion, the Second Coming, or disasters that would befall a wicked world.

But more than a refuge against calamity, Zion was to
become headquarters for the millennial government of Christ, wrote Phelps. He identified it as "the mountain of the Lord’s house" prophesied by Isaiah, from which "shall go forth the law" (Evening and Morning Star, Jan. 1833, p. 1; Isa. 2:2–3). He printed Joseph Smith's revelations of Enoch (see Moses 6–8) including the prophecy that Enoch's righteous people would return and mingle with the Saints in Jackson County. Furthermore, the Ten Tribes of Israel would return with "their rich treasures" to the New Jerusalem where they would be "crowned with glory" (D&C 133:30, 32). Thus, the Saints gathering in Jackson County could rightfully feel the worth of their labors and the immense importance of that location.

**Settlement and conflict**

However; physical realities were working against these glorious ideals. Zion's success depended in large measure on the stability of the inspired economic system of consecration and stewardship, a system of voluntary covenants by which Church members contributed their property to the Church and were in turn provided with a stewardship by the bishop, usually in the form of land. Although Church leaders in the east tried to screen the "gatherers" for financial preparedness and moral worthiness, some of the Saints arrived in Missouri destitute, placing Bishop Partridge in a difficult position when he tried to supply them with land for which there were no funds available. Thus, disobedience and spiritual lethargy on the part of some Church members jeopardized the economic stability of the Lord’s program in Missouri.

Also, misunderstandings between Mormons and Missourians were bound to occur. Not all the Jackson County residents were rough frontiersmen who had come to this new state to escape religion, government, and education; many were sensitive to social order and sufficiently educated to direct commerce and government in the area. But almost universally, they were southerners, principally from Tennessee, Kentucky, and South Carolina. Bishop Partridge's daughter Emily noted they were "different in their customs and manner of speaking. ... In warm weather women went barefoot, and little boys from two to ten years old were running in the streets with nothing on but a tow shirt." A non-Mormon from the South, Alexander Majors, characterized the Mormons as “good citizens” but noticed that they “were clannish, traded together, worked together, and carried with them a melancholy look that one acquainted with them could tell a Mormon when he met him by the look upon his face"9

At first these differences were merely interesting, not sinister. Parley P. Pratt recorded that the Saints "lived in peace and quiet. ... On Sundays the people assembled to preach, pray, sing, and receive the ordinances of God. Other days all seemed busy in the various pursuits of industry. In short, there has seldom, if ever, been a happier people upon the earth than the Church of the Saints now were.” (Autobiography, p. 93.)

So initially, they prospered and grew. By the summer of 1833 the Mormons had established four settlements in Kaw township west of Independence and one in Blue township in and near the village at the temple-lot farm where Bishop Partridge was located. Their store, press, blacksmith shop, and gristmill served both them and the Gentile community. The Prophet's city plat, sent in late June, showed that the proposed city of Zion near Independence would center on a complex of twenty-four temples.

Unfortunately, it was already too late. Reverend Benton Pixley early in the year had written an anti-Mormon article that had created some disturbances. Then early in July, some nonmember citizens of Jackson County wrote a "secret constitution" protesting the Latter-day Saint belief in revelation, their poverty, their alleged interference with slavery, and their excessive zeal for the land, among other concerns. A Star editorial, warning free black members that a Missouri law forbade them to enter the state unless they carried a certificate of citizenship from another state, was interpreted as encouragement to blacks and the angry Missourians disregarded Phelps' clarification in an "extra."

On July 20, nearly five hundred Missourians met at the courthouse and issued an ultimatum that the Saints must leave the county by a designated time. The Mormon leaders refused and about fifty of the rougher citizens mobbed the printing office, scattered the contents in the street, demolished the building, and attacked the Church store. They assaulted Bishop Partridge in the public square, tore his clothes and tarred and feathered both him and Charles Allen, another member. Three days later, the mob met again and forced Church lead-
ers to sign an agreement that the Saints would leave the county by the following spring.

But even with the agreement, there was no truce. The Prophet Joseph counseled the Saints to remain; Missouri's Governor Daniel Dunklin advised the Mormons to go to court. When the mob leaders learned these plans, they turned to violence. On the night of 31 October, a mob attacked the Whitmer settlement in Kaw township, beat the men, damaged the homes, and terrorized the people. This incident triggered violence at other settlements against which the poorly armed Mormons tried to defend themselves. On 4 November during a second attack on the Whitmer settlement, two mobsters were killed, Mormon Andrew Barber was fatally wounded, and several others including Philo Dibble were seriously injured.

To prevent another battle next day near Bishop Partridge's home, where many Mormons had gathered for defense, the commander of Jackson County's state militia, Colonel Thomas L. Pitcher, asked both the Mormons and the mob to turn their weapons over to him. The Mormons did, but it was a trick. Bishop Partridge's counselor, John Corrill, wrote that the Colonel left the mob free “in full power to come upon us when they pleased” (Star, Jan. 1834, p. 5).

During the next few weeks, the mob ruthlessly drove, beat, looted, and scattered the Saints. A non-Mormon, John McCoy, wrote that the Latter-day Saints, never the aggressors, “were unjustly and outrageously maltreated by the original settlers,” pitifully driven from “their promised inheritance, their Zion, … [their] New Jerusalem.”

**Flight and Petition**

Most of the exiled Mormons traveled north across the Missouri River into Clay County, the next gathering place, although some fled south to Van Buren and others eastward to Lafayette and other counties. They
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spent the winter in rough huts, tents, abandoned slave quarters and other shanties. Cultivated Easterner Emily Austin, camping on the Missouri River bottoms in Clay County, wrote, “We lived in tents until winter set in, and did our cooking out in the wind and storms. Log heaps were our parlor stoves, and the cold, wet ground our velvet carpets, and the crying of little children our, piano forte.”12 Some, almost starving, slipped back to their Jackson County farms at the risk of their lives to glean wasted corn or round up scattered hogs.

Clay County citizens treated the exiles well, hiring them to cut wood, construct buildings, teach school, and work on their farms. One employer, Joseph Thorp, had no sympathy with their religion but praised the Mormons for their general character: “The Mormons, in the main were industrious, good workers, and gave general satisfaction to their employers, and could live on less than any people I ever knew. Their women could fix up a good palatable meal out of which a Gentile wife would not know how to commence to get half a dinner or breakfast.”13

Meanwhile, Joseph Smith received revelations reaffirming that Jackson County would still be the center place of Zion, that the suffering Saints should seek redress in the courts, from the governor, and eventually from the president of the United States (see D&C 101:70–71, 86–88). The Saints tried to follow these instructions but the first two cases progressed slowly: the jury was “composed exclusively” of mob members, according to a report in the sympathetic Missouri Intelligencer at Columbia on 8 March 1834. After months of delay and a change of venue to Ray County, the courts awarded Bishop Partridge an insulting civil judgment for the assault he suffered: one cent. W. W. Phelps’ suit for fifty thousand dollars to replace his press, building, and business was awarded $750.14

Governor Dunklin felt that he did not have authority to maintain a police force to protect the Mormons if they returned to Jackson County, but favored escorting them back to their lands with the state militia (History of the Church, 1:477–78). Since the Mormons obviously could not trust the Jackson County officers to protect them, Joseph Smith organized Zion’s Camp in the spring of 1834 to carry relief to the Saints, help them return to their lands, and protect them afterwards.

News that an army was coming sparked many outlandish stories; misinformed citizens sprang to arms in several western counties, and Governor Dunklin, fearing a bloody conflict, advised a compromise that would not include a return to Jackson County. A large mob collected to attack the small Mormon encampment, the Zion’s Camp “army,” where they waited near Fishing River, but a storm on the night of 19 June immobilized them. Joseph Smith, seeking shelter in a log Baptist chapel, stated, “God is in this storm” (History of the Church, 2:104n).

Next came a revelation to disband Zion’s Camp. The Prophet led the army to Mormon George Burkett’s farm on Rush Creek two miles east of Liberty, where cholera broke out on 24 June, taking the lives of thirteen Camp members and a number of local Saints.

That same summer, trouble erupted in Clay County as well. Still desiring to return to Jackson County, the Saints in Clay County welcomed members who arrived in response to calls from Church leaders and planned to cross the river within two years, in the fall of 1836, with sufficient strength to retake their lands. (See History of the Church, 2:145, 181–82.) This gathering was slow and orderly, but the influx inflamed the more unruly citizens. One non-Mormon farmer, Anderson Wilson, probably had a typical experience. “We thought of fitting [fighting],” he wrote to his family in North Carolina. “This was Cruel to fight a people who had not Broke the law & in this way we became excited. … I am sorry to Say that there were several outrages Committed on the night of [June] 28.”15

Two years before, in 1834, the Saints had petitioned President Andrew Jackson for help. President Jackson felt the situation was a state problem, not a federal one. Governor Dunklin told the Saints he was willing to invite federal intervention if more violence broke out. Bishop Partridge and others reminded the governor of this promise on 7 July 1836, but he broke it. “All I can say to you,” he wrote, “is that in the Republic, the vox populi [voice of the people] is the vox Dei [voice of God]” (History of the Church, 2:462). A June citizens’ meeting at Liberty had voted against the Mormons; they knew they must leave again.

Many of the revelations on government and law grew out of these troubled times. The Lord had already
instructed the Saints to use legal means, rather than force, in trying to attain their rights. The same revelation also established a far-reaching principle of government: “It is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another. “And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land” (D&C 101:79–80). Perhaps much of the Saints’ bondage could have been avoided had constitutional principles been properly applied. A revelation earlier that year concerning war, appropriate retaliation, and forgiveness, counseled the Saints to be patient in adversity, to have faith in the Lord’s justice, and to obey the land’s constitutional laws (see D&C 98:2–6).

Moreover, Oliver had written a political statement for the Church, now in the Doctrine and Covenants, declaring “that sedition and rebellion are unbecoming” members of the Church, that “freedom of conscience” was “sacred” but that “all men are bound to sustain and uphold [their] … governments” (D&C 134:5).

Resettlement in the northern counties

Understanding these principles, Church leaders in Clay County were willing to move elsewhere and had already looked at some sites on Shoal Creek in nearby northern Ray County. Alexander Doniphan, their lawyer in Jackson County, sponsored a bill in the legislature
organizing Caldwell and Daviess counties in the new region where the Saints could gather. The new governor, Lilburn W. Boggs, signed the bill on 29 December 1836, and the Saints began to purchase land.

W. W. Phelps and John Whitmer, counselors to Missouri stake president, David Whitmer, located their families in Far West, the Saints' principal town “in the midst of a prairie of very rich soil.” By 1838 Far West had over one hundred homes, two hotels, a printing house, and a large school.

Out of the approximately five thousand people in the area, only about a hundred were not Mormons. Politically defensive, the Saints held all county offices. Other settlements in Daviess and Carroll counties were also flourishing.

It was likewise a time of spiritual blessings. Far West had a temple site with the foundation excavated and cornerstones set. The Prophet Joseph had received the revelation on the law of tithing, and Missouri Saints voted to live the Word of Wisdom by not patronizing shops that sold liquor, tea, coffee, or tobacco. (See History of the Church, 2:482.) The Prophet Joseph, who had moved to Missouri in 1838, revealed that Adam-ondi-Ahman, an area four miles north of Gallatin in Daviess County along the Grand River, was the place where Adam had lived and where he would again “come to visit his people” and all prophets would report their stewardships to him in preparation for the Lord's millennial reign. (See D&C 116; D&C 107:53; Dan. 7:9–14; Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p. 157.) In the summer of 1838, the Mormon settlers at Adam-ondi-Ahman dedicated a temple site and founded a stake.

But conflict again broke out; and this time, internal dissensions were as serious as external persecution. Fresh from the apostasy and disruption at Kirtland, the Prophet and Sidney Rigdon arrived during the winter of 1838 to find echoing dissension in Missouri. First, the Far West stake presidency had lost the confidence of Church members by selling their land in Jackson County, among other things, and was replaced. In the spring, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were excommunicated along with some apostles. Worried about these disaffected leaders, Sidney Rigdon tried to weaken any attempt they might make to undermine Joseph Smith's influence by making a fiery oration at Far West on June 9. Known as the “salt sermon,” it compared the ex-communicated men to salt that had lost its savor; Sampson Avard, an elder in Far West, may have taken license from the address to organize a covert society called the Danites which engaged in activities that did much damage to the Church's reputation. (The name apparently came from Dan's patriarchal blessing that he would “judge his people” and “be a serpent by the way.” Gen. 49:16–17.)

An election sparked the first outbreaks of public violence. When William Penniston, a local candidate for the legislature, interfered with Mormon voters in Gallatin on election day in August, a knock-down battle erupted and the repercussions spread to Caldwell, Daviess, Carroll, and Ray Counties. In addition to raids where men were beaten, cattle killed or driven off, and buildings burned, there were several major confrontations. The Battle of Crooked River on October 24 left dead three Mormons, including Captain David W. Patten, an apostle and leader of the Mormon militia in Caldwell County. Exaggerated reports reaching Jefferson City alarmed Governor Boggs into issuing his well-known extermination order, authorizing General John B. Clark of the state militia to drive the Mormons from the state or wipe them out. That was on October 27. Three days later, an unauthorized militia mob under Colonel Thomas Jennings of Livingston County killed seventeen Mormons, including children, at Hawn's Mill on Shoal Creek.

On the next day, the authorized state militia arrived with several thousand troops at Far West, arrested Joseph, Hyrum, Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, and several others. The militia leader, General Samuel D. Lucas, was an old Mormon-fighter from Jackson County and he ordered the prisoners shot. Colonel Alexander Doniphan protested, “It is cold blooded murder. I will not obey your order” (History of the Church, 3:190n). Doniphan also threatened to hold Lucas responsible for the lives of the prisoners, so the Mormons were jailed in Richmond, Ray County. Later, the Prophet and some of the others were transferred to Liberty Jail where they spent the winter.

The legacy of Missouri

Leaderless, the Saints in Far West were mistreated and driven. One member, Albert P. Rockwood, wrote
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When William Penniston, a local candidate for the legislature, interfered with Mormon voters in Gallatin on election day in August, a knock-down battle erupted.
Many more perils would befall the Saints during the fall of 1838.

from Far West on 3 November 1838 that “more than 6,000 men have been in Far West in 1 week, with orders from the Governor to exterminate the Mormons. The Brethren are hunted as wild beasts & shot down. Several have been Shot in Sight of the City.” Later that month he wrote again: “All the Mormons in Caldwell and Davis Cos. have been taken captive unless we would deny the faith.” He concluded sorrowfully, “Those that deny … have gone clear.”¹⁸

Some of Missouri’s twelve thousand Saints lost faith in the cause of Zion, but most of them remained loyal to their prophet. At each stage of the accelerating persecution, some left but others realized that “after much tribulation come the blessings” (D&C 58:4). As early as 1833, huddled in temporary quarters on the Missouri River bottoms, W. W. Phelps had written: “It was right that we should be driven out of the land of Zion, that the rebellious might be sent away” (Star, Jan. 1834, p. 8).

Joseph Smith’s encouragement meant much to them during this time. Writing in the spring of 1839 to the Saints exiled in Illinois and Iowa, he showed unwavering conviction: “Hell may pour forth its rage like the burning lava of Mount Vesuvius, or of Etna, or of the most terrible of the burning mountains; and yet shall ‘Mormonism’ stand. … Truth is ‘Mormonism.’ God is the author of it. He is our shield.” (History of the Church, 3:297).

When the Prophet and the other prisoners escaped to Illinois, they wasted no time in founding another city of Zion—Nauvoo. Yet the site of the New Jerusalem in Jackson County still held its primacy as the “center place.” Many of Missouri’s lessons were bitter. For a generation yet to come, many Mormons felt strong resentment for the injustices of Missouri and its laws—even though the zeal of the Saints had precipitated many of their own problems. Many families were scarred emotionally by the loss of loved ones and the destruction of their hard-earned property; yet they had also learned the value of the gospel in their lives. Moreover, out of the Missouri experience came some of the greatest revelations given in this dispensation, the location of temples, and the establishment of a prophetic future yet to be fulfilled.

Notes
1. Levi W. Hancock, Autobiography, typescript, Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, p. 19.
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An unauthorized militia mob under Colonel Thomas Jennings of Livingston County killed seventeen Mormons, including children, at Hawn’s Mill on Shoal Creek, October 30, 1833.

3. Peter Whitmer, Jr., Whitmer’s Statement, 13 Dec. 1831, Church Archives.
8. Emily Dow Partridge Young Autobiography, Women’s Exponent, 1 Dec. 1884, p. 103.
12. Emily M. Austin, Mormonism or Life Among the Mormons (Madison: M. J. Cantwell, 1882), p. 72–73.
16. Elders’ Journal (Far West), July 1838, p. 34.

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