The Prophet and other leaders of the Church left Kirtland in January 1838. Most other members followed later in the year. There was no decision to abandon Kirtland, but clearly the focal point of the Church was switching to northern Missouri. Perhaps a few members recalled the revelation given in 1831: “I, the Lord, will to retain a strong hold in the land of Kirtland, for the space of five years” (D&C 64:21). By early 1838 the years of Kirtland’s glory had passed. The members in northern Missouri were already establishing new headquarters—Far West. Other scattered Saints in the United States and Canada were preparing to gather there. Latter-day Saints were eager to find a season of peace after the disastrous year of apostasy in 1837.

Request for Mormons to Leave Clay County

Following their expulsion from Jackson County in late 1833, the Missouri Saints lived in relative peace with the original inhabitants of Clay County. But the leaders of the Church never intended this arrangement to be permanent; they consistently petitioned government authorities for assistance to reenter Jackson County and regain their property, but all their attempts proved futile. Meanwhile, Latter-day Saints continued to arrive, reinforcing the fear among Clay County residents that the Mormon settlements would become permanent.

Realizing these concerns, Bishop Edward Partridge and William W. Phelps went on two exploring expeditions in the spring of 1836 hoping to find potential sites for Mormon settlements in northern Missouri, a region commonly referred to as the “Far West.” Most of this territory was prairie, covered by tall grass, with timber only along the streams and rivers. At that time only forested land was considered good for settlement. W. W. Phelps reported that “nearly every skirt of timber to the state line on the north … has some one in it.” But the brethren found an uninhabited area in northern Ray County along Shoal Creek, although they feared there was not enough timber available to support a large population.1 Nevertheless, the brethren began purchasing land in the Shoal Creek area on 3 May.

On 29 June 1836 a mass meeting was held in the Clay County courthouse in Liberty to discuss objections to the Mormons remaining in the area. Some were concerned that the “crisis” would erupt into a civil war. Opponents gave five reasons for their objection to the Saints: (1) They were poor. (2) Their religious differences stirred up prejudice. (3) Their Eastern customs and dialect were alien to the Missourians. (4) They opposed slavery. (5) They believed the Indians were God’s chosen people destined to inherit the land of Missouri with them. The citizens also reminded the Mormons of their pledge to leave the county and suggested that they consider moving to Wisconsin in the slave-free North, where there were many areas suitable for settlement. These Clay County leaders promised to control any violence toward the Mormons until they could leave the area.2

Confident that they would soon begin moving to Shoal Creek, Church leaders found no objection to the petition for a covenant of peace and called a public meeting on 1 July to draft a reply. Resolutions were passed expressing the Saints’ gratitude for the kindness the citizens of Clay County had extended to the Saints.

The Church in Northern Missouri, 1836–38

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Time Line

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and their desire for a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Leaders pledged to lead the Saints out of the county and to halt the tide of immigration. The following day Clay County leaders accepted the reply and began forming committees to help the Saints in their move.3

In Ohio the First Presidency, having learned of these developments, wrote separate letters to leaders of the Church and to the Clay County committee. They urged members of the Church to preserve the peace but not to settle in Wisconsin. They informed the Clay County committee that they had advised the Saints to avoid bloodshed and to move from the county.

On 7 July the Church leaders in Missouri wrote Governor Daniel Dunklin of their intentions to move to the sixteen hundred acres they had purchased in northern Ray County and requested his assistance in breaking up potential mobs. In 1836 the “Mormon problem” was not as prominent in Missouri politics as it had been in 1833–34; and since it was an election year the governor was less inclined to help the Saints. Moreover, many voters in Ray County opposed the move of the Saints into their county, even the uninhabited northern prairies. Governor Dunklin replied on 18 July that, while he sympathized with the plight of the Saints, “public sentiment may become paramount law; and when one man or society of men become so obnoxious to that sentiment as to determine the people to be rid of him or them, it is useless to run counter to it.

“… The consequences will be the same … unless you can, by your conduct and arguments, convince them [the people of Missouri] of your innocence. If you cannot do this, all I can say to you is that in this Republic the vox populi is the vox Dei [the voice of the people is the voice of God].”4

Creation of Caldwell County and Founding of Far West

Conditions for the Saints were critical. Without assurance of protection from the governor and with hostility in both Clay and Ray Counties, the stake presidency and the high council met in an emergency session on 25 July. To complicate matters further, the brethren had just learned that approximately one hundred families of immigrating Saints were camped on the Crooked River in lower Ray County. Many of them were ill, and “desti-
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Alexander W. Doniphan (1808–87) was born in Kentucky. At age eighteen he graduated from Augusta College in Kentucky. Later he studied law and passed the requirements to practice law in Ohio and Missouri.

He married Elizabeth Jane Thornton on 21 December 1837, and they had two sons, who both died in their youth. Alexander W. Doniphan died in Richmond, Missouri, and was buried in Liberty, which had been his home for many years.

poured into Caldwell County, where they constructed log houses and prepared the soil for spring planting. Thomas Marsh and Elisha Groves returned early in 1837 from their fund-raising mission in Kentucky and Tennessee and turned $1450 over to W. W. Phelps and John Whitmer, counselors in the stake presidency, since President David Whitmer was in Ohio. The counselors used the money to buy more land, but they purchased it in their own names and then sold it to the Saints at a small profit, which they retained. Several members of the Church immediately protested, and some of the high council complained that the counselors were also making decisions regarding Far West without consulting them. At a series of meetings in Far West in April, these brethren acknowledged their wrongs, and reconciliation was achieved. It was decided that Bishop Edward Partridge, acting with the counsel of the stake presidency, the high council, and two Apostles who were in Missouri—Thomas B. Marsh and David Patten—would distribute the lands.

A month later, however, Phelps and Whitmer again offended the high council and the Apostles with further attempts to profit from land deals. When the Prophet learned of this conflict, he sought and obtained guidance from the Lord and was told, “Verily thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph—my servants John Whitmer and William W. Phelps have done those things which are not pleasing in my sight, therefore if they repent not they shall be removed out of their places.” Nevertheless, this conflict continued until November 1837.

A conference in Kirtland on 17 September 1837 resolved to send Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon to Missouri to seek other locations for stakes of Zion “so that the poor may have a place of refuge.” Also in response to the conference, Bishop Newel K. Whitney sent a letter on 18 September to branches of the Church scattered throughout the United States asking them to send tithing in gold and silver for the relief of Kirtland and the building of Zion in Missouri.

The Prophet and several other brethren arrived in Far West early in November and spent approximately ten days there holding meetings. It was determined that there were resources and space in northern Missouri for the gathering of the Saints, and a committee was chosen to locate sites for new stakes. Joseph decided to postpone the building of a temple in Far West until he received further direction from the Lord, but the size of Far West was enlarged from one square mile to two. The problems associated with the activities of the stake presidency in Missouri were temporarily resolved, and the stake presidency were sustained in their callings. At a conference of elders held 7 November 1837 in Far West, Frederick G. Williams was rejected as second counselor in the First Presidency and Hyrum Smith was sustained in his place.

During the winter new discord arose between the
stake presidency and the high council in Missouri. Oliver Cowdery and Frederick G. Williams, who had been out of harmony with the Prophet in Kirtland, had now moved to Far West and, together with the stake presidency, decided to sell some Church lands in Jackson County held in their names. Selling lands in Zion violated the Lord’s direction that the Saints should continue to hold claim upon their lands in Jackson County (see D&C 101:99).

Early in February 1838 the high council tried John Whitmer and W. W. Phelps for misusing Church funds and David Whitmer for willfully breaking the Word of Wisdom. Despite some feeling that the high council was not authorized to try the presidency, a majority voted to reject them, and a resolution to this effect was sent to the branches and accepted by the Saints. When the presidency claimed that the trial was illegal and that they had not been present to defend themselves, the high council was convinced that they were “endeavoring to palm themselves off upon the Church, as her Presidents” after they had been properly removed.8 Therefore, on 10 February the high council, with the assistance of two Apostles, excommunicated W. W. Phelps and John Whitmer and sustained Thomas B. Marsh and David W. Patten as acting presidents until the expected arrival of Joseph Smith. Additional action against David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Lyman Johnson, an Apostle who had joined the dissenters, was postponed pending the Prophet’s arrival.

In a letter to Joseph Smith, Elder Marsh explained, “Had we not taken the above measures, we think that nothing could have prevented a rebellion against the whole high council and bishop; so great was the disaffection against the presidents, that the people began to be jealous, that the whole authorities were inclined to uphold these men in wickedness, and in a little time the church, undoubtedly, would have gone, every man to his own way, like sheep without a shepherd.”9

The Prophet settles in Far West

The Prophet Joseph was still in Ohio; news of persecution and the unsettled state of the Church in Missouri disheartened him. On 12 January 1838, he received a revelation explaining that only the First Presidency could form a stake.10 This revelation meant the creation of the Far West stake was invalid. Hence, he went to Missouri not only to escape his enemies, but to set the Church in Far West in order. The journey was difficult, but when Joseph and Emma, who was six months pregnant, arrived in Missouri in March, many Saints met them to accompany them to Far West. Eight miles from town another eager escort gladdened their hearts. After so many difficulties in the East, the Prophet was encouraged by the support of the Missouri Saints, and they were equally glad to have him settle among them.

While in Far West, Joseph approved the removal of the stake presidency. By the end of March he was optimistic about the unity in Far West, despite the arrival of several letters from Kirtland apostates, which spread falsehood among a few. Joseph wrote back to Kirtland that “peace and love prevail throughout; in a word, heaven smiles upon the Saints in Caldwell.”11 Two days before April general conference they were heartened when Sidney Rigdon and his party arrived after a long and difficult journey.

At the conference the Prophet called the three senior members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—Thomas B. Marsh, David W. Patten, and Brigham Young—as the new stake presidency in Missouri. This, however, was only a temporary solution. Nine days later he received a revelation instructing Elder Patten to arrange his affairs so that he and others of the Twelve could leave in the spring of 1839 for a new mission abroad (see D&C 114). In a later session, David Patten
reviewed the status of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, not all of whom were in Missouri. He commended six of his brethren as being “men of God. … He spoke somewhat doubtful of William Smith, … William E. McLellin, Luke S. Johnson, Lyman E. Johnson, and John F. Boynton, as being men whom he could not recommend to the conference.” It became apparent that four of the men would have to be replaced. During the sessions on 7–8 April, additional action was taken to put the Church in Missouri in order.

After the conference the new stake presidency dealt with the cases of former leaders who had apostatized. They wrote to John Whitmer, who had been both the Church historian and a member of the stake presidency in Missouri, asking him to give his historical notes and writings to the Church. He did not comply. Only recently has his history been published in its entirety.

A much more serious matter was the case of Oliver Cowdery. He was charged by the high council for persecuting Church leaders with vexatious lawsuits, seeking to destroy the character of Joseph Smith, not abiding ecclesiastical authority in temporal affairs, selling lands in Jackson County, and leaving his calling as Assistant President of the Church to turn to the practice of law. Oliver refused to appear before the council, but he answered by letter. He denied the Church’s right to dictate how he should conduct his life and asked that his fellowship with the Church be ended. The high council excommunicated him 12 April 1838. He spent a decade outside the Church but later humbly submitted himself for rebaptism in October 1848 in Kanesville, Iowa.

The high council also excommunicated David Whitmer, another of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, on charges of usurping too much authority, writing letters of dissension to apostates, and breaking the Word of Wisdom. David never returned to the Church, although to his death he maintained his testimony that he saw the angel and the gold plates. Lyman Johnson of the Twelve was also excommunicated at the same time. Even though excommunicating such former stalwarts was painful, Church leaders felt it was necessary to cleanse the Church.

Due to persecution the Elders’ Journal was published only twice in 1837 in Kirtland, Ohio. It was then moved to Far West, Missouri, where it was also published twice. The last issue was August 1838.

The Prophet spent the next three weeks visiting with the Saints in Caldwell County and teaching them principles of the gospel. He also instructed the brethren to establish stakes in the surrounding regions. This was to be done so “that the gathering together upon the land of Zion, and upon her stakes, may be for a defense, and for a refuge from the storm, and from wrath when it shall be poured out without mixture upon the whole earth” (v. 6).

The Prophet spent the next three weeks visiting with the Saints in Caldwell County and teaching them principles of the gospel. Then, with the assistance of Sidney Rigdon, he embarked on the ambitious project of writing the history of the Church from its beginning. The history written by John Whitmer, the first Church
Historian, had been incomplete and, in any event, was now unavailable. The history of Joseph Smith and the early events of the Restoration now found in the Pearl of Great Price were a product of this project begun in April 1838.

Expansion in Northern Missouri

Having set the affairs of the Church in order in Caldwell County, the Prophet Joseph Smith turned his attention to locating places of settlement for the Saints in Ohio and other eastern states who would come to Missouri in the spring and summer of 1838. In 1837 a few Latter-day Saints had settled north of Caldwell County in the newly created county of Daviess. They did so in accordance with the gentleman’s agreement that they obtain permission from the “Gentile” inhabitants to settle. The most prominent Mormon to settle in Daviess County was Lyman Wight, who founded Wight’s Settlement on a beautiful hillside overlooking the Grand River.

In mid-May 1838, Joseph Smith and others headed northward on an exploring expedition. When they reached Wight’s Ferry on the Grand River, the Prophet directed the laying out of a city at that location. He also received a revelation that this was the site of Adam-ondi-Ahman. In 1835 the Lord revealed that three years before Adam died he had called his righteous posterity together “into the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman, and there bestowed upon them his last blessing” (D&C 107:53; see also 78:15–16). Orson Pratt said the name means “Valley of God, where Adam dwelt. It is in the original language spoken by Adam.” Adam-ondi-Ahman will yet be the location of a very important meeting for selected righteous people to greet the Savior. In the words of the revelation, “It is the place where Adam shall come to visit his people, or the Ancient of Days shall sit, as spoken of by Daniel the prophet” (D&C 116:1). This knowledge so thrilled the brethren that plans were discussed to create a stake at Adam-ondi-Ahman.

The explorers sought out other sites for settlement along the heavily timbered and navigable Grand River. With the explorations finished, Joseph Smith returned to Far West, realizing that Emma was soon to deliver another child. She gave birth to a son on 2 June 1838. They named him Alexander Hale Smith.

Before long Joseph was back in Adam-ondi-Ahman surveying the new city and building houses. He designated the community as a gathering place for the Kirtland Saints still in Ohio or en route to Missouri. When his uncle John Smith and family arrived in Far West, the Prophet counseled him to settle in Adam-ondi-Ahman. A conference was held on 28 June in the community, affectionately nicknamed “Di-Ahman,” and John Smith was sustained as the president of the stake, with Reynolds Cahoon and Lyman Wight as his counselors. A high council was also organized. Vinson Knight was called as acting bishop until the arrival of Bishop Newel K. Whitney from Kirtland (see D&C 117:11).

Latter-day Saint immigrants poured into Adam-ondi-Ahman throughout the summer of 1838. They considered themselves greatly blessed to live in the land where Adam dwelt. An article in the August issue of the Elders’ Journal portrays their excitement:

“The immense immigration … encourages the Saints, and induces us to believe that God is about to bring to pass his strange acts, of which he has spoken by his ancient Prophets.

“The immense growth of corn and other produce, this season … has not to our knowledge, had a parallel in this generation; and if the Lord should continue to bless, as he has now set his hand to do, there must soon be a surplus.” Indeed, a plentiful harvest that fall helped provide for the impoverished members of the Kirtland Camp when they arrived in Missouri and settled in Adam-ondi-Ahman in early October.

About the time Adam-ondi-Ahman was being settled the Saints also began to establish themselves in DeWitt, located in Carroll County near where the Grand River entered the Missouri River. This benefited the Church because the members established a steamboat landing that immigrants could move to from the other LDS settlements. John Murdock and George M. Hinkle, members of the Far West high council, were authorized to purchase property in DeWitt and begin a settlement. DeWitt grew rapidly. A housing shortage developed in the fall when a large group of Saints from Canada arrived, making the Mormon city of DeWitt largely a tent city.

By far the most prosperous of the Latter-day Saint
The Church in Northern Missouri, 1836–38

communities was Far West. By the summer of 1838 the population of Caldwell County approached five thousand, and over half of them lived in Far West proper. The Saints built “150 homes, four dry goods stores, three family grocery stores, several blacksmith shops, two hotels, a printing shop, and a large schoolhouse that doubled as a church and courthouse.”

The Saints were busy planting crops and building log houses, but they paused to worship and study the gospel. Twenty-four-year-old Sarah Rich was a new bride when she and her husband, Charles, settled in a “cozy and happy” log house four miles from Far West, “religion being first with us in all things,” she declared. Each Sunday they rode horseback to town to attend meetings, “often listening to the Prophet Joseph Smith preach and instruct the people, a privilege we both appreciated very much.”

During the summer of 1838 the Prophet turned to the important matters of filling the vacancies in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He reaffirmed their responsibilities and counseled the Saints on the financing of the Lord’s kingdom. There was great sadness in the Church over the loss of four of the original Twelve. Elizabeth Barlow reflected, “We all felt more sorrowful at seeing Apostles leave the Church than we did over our trials and persecutions.”

Despite the grief, Joseph Smith began replacing these four Apostles and preparing the Twelve for their assignment to take the gospel to the world. In the fall of 1837, prior to his visit to Far West, he sent word to John Taylor, a stalwart convert from Toronto, of his future call to the apostleship. At the time Elder Taylor was not presented before the membership of the Church for a sustaining vote. The following July the Prophet prayed, “Show unto us thy will O Lord concerning the Twelve.” The revelation that followed had a profound impact on the history of the Church. First the Lord directed that “men be appointed to supply the place of those who are fallen” (D&C 118:1). John Taylor, John E. Page, Wilford Woodruff, and Willard Richards were called.

As a missionary in Canada for two years, Elder John E. Page had traveled more than five thousand miles and baptized over six hundred converts. When this revelation was given, he was en route to Missouri with a company of Canadian Saints. They arrived in DeWitt in October. Elders Taylor and Page were ordained Apostles 19 December 1838 in Far West by Brigham Young.
and Heber C. Kimball. Elder Woodruff was a missionary in Maine when he received his call in a letter. He led a group of New England converts toward Missouri, but the Saints were driven from the state before they arrived, so he settled them in Illinois. Wilford Woodruff was ordained an Apostle in Far West on 26 April 1839 when he accompanied other members of the Twelve there to fulfill the commandment that the Twelve were to take up their mission to England from Far West (see D&C 118:4–5). Elder Richards was serving as a missionary and priesthood leader in Great Britain and was not ordained until members of the Twelve arrived there in 1840.

The revelation concerning the Twelve also instructed Thomas B. Marsh to continue publishing the Lord’s word (in the Elders’ Journal ) in Far West and directed the others to preach “in all lowliness of heart, in meekness and humility, and long-suffering” (v. 3). The Lord further charged the Twelve to prepare to depart 26 April 1839 from Far West “to go over the great waters, and there promulgate my gospel” (v. 4).

On the day the revelation to the Twelve was given, Joseph Smith also read two revelations concerning Church revenue to the Saints. With the Church deeply mired in economic difficulties, the Prophet had sought clarification on how the law of consecration should be applied. The Lord modified the original law given in 1831 when he replied:

“I require all their surplus property to be put into the hands of the bishop of my church in Zion,
“For the building of mine house, and for the laying of the foundation of Zion and for the priesthood, and for the debts of the Presidency of my Church.
“And this shall be the beginning of the tithing of my people.
“And after that, those who have thus been tithed shall pay one-tenth of all their interest [income] annually; and this shall be a standing law unto them forever” (D&C 119:1–4). The second revelation assigned a committee of General Authorities the responsibility of expending the tithes (see D&C 120).

Although the Saints in northern Missouri were optimistic, there was reason for apprehension. The Saints, having endured persecution and malcontent for seven years, were understandably impatient with dissenters who resided in Far West. These dissenters harassed them with lawsuits and condemned Church leaders. In June, Sidney Rigdon burst forth in a heated oration commonly referred to as the Salt Sermon. He drew his text from the scripture, “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, … it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men” (Matthew 5:13). The implication was that the dissenters should be cast out from among the Saints.

Soon afterward an unauthorized document appeared, addressed to Oliver Cowdery, David and John Whitmer, W. W. Phelps, and Lyman E. Johnson, the leading dissenters. The document was signed by eighty-four Church members, and it pointedly ordered the apostates to leave the county or face serious consequences. The sermon and letter had the desired effect; the dissenters fled in haste and were soon followed by their families. This extreme behavior on the part of a few horrified some people in the Church, and mur-

Sidney Rigdon’s Salt Sermon was directed toward dissenters of the Church.
muring arose. Most unfortunately, it also reinforced the growing anti-Mormon hostility in northern Missouri.

Also contributing to the conflict with the Gentiles was Sampson Avard’s formation of an underground society called the Danites. This was an oath-bound group with secret identification and warning signs. Avard convinced his followers that they operated with the approval of the Presidency of the Church and that they were authorized to avenge themselves against the Church’s enemies by robbery, lying, and murder if necessary. Danite depredations, both real and imagined, intensified hostilities and gave Missouri officials a reason to indict Joseph Smith and other leaders for crimes against the state.

Sidney Rigdon’s Independence Day speech in 1838 added more fuel to the Mormon-Gentile conflict. As the Saints in Far West celebrated the nation’s birthday and laid the cornerstones of the temple, Sidney Rigdon’s oratory whipped them into high emotion. He thundered out the Saints’ own declaration of independence from any further mob violence or illegal activity. He warned potential mobs that the Church would no longer meekly bear persecution but would defend itself to the death. “It shall be between us and them a war of extermination, for we will follow them, till the last drop of their blood is spilled, or else they will have to exterminate us.”22 Copies of this inflammatory speech were imprudently published and circulated. Some copies reached the hands of Missouri officials and eventually provided the basis for charges of treason and violence against the Saints.23

Thus the stage was set for the frightful conflict and terrible loss of life and property that followed. The Saints would have to pass through still more of the “refiner’s fire” before they could find peace.

Endnotes
1. In History of the Church, 2:445.
4. In History of the Church, 2:462.
6. History of the Church, 2:511.
7. In History of the Church, 2:516.
8. In History of the Church, 3:7.
10. See “The Scriptory Book of Joseph Smith,” LDS Historical Department, Salt Lake City, pp. 52–53.
11. History of the Church, 3:11.
22. Oration Delivered by Mr. S. Rigdon on the 4th of July 1838 (Far West: Journal Office, 1838), LDS Historical Department, Salt Lake City, p. 12.