

Episode 13

Legacy

NAUVOO

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NATHAN WRIGHT: One of the most remarkable aspects of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is its unique history. Throughout the world, great stories from faithful Church members have only added to that history. This program shares some of these incredible stories of faith, perseverance, hope and inspiration. You are listening to Legacy. I am your host, Nathan Wright. [END MUSIC]

In 1838, the Cherokee Nation was forced from its lands, and the people began their great trail of tears through western Illinois. That following year, another displaced people made their way to the area. Having been driven from the state of Missouri, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began to gather in the remains of the abandoned Fort Des Moines. Today, on a horseshoe bend of the Mississippi River sits the quaint Midwestern town of Nauvoo. Although it has been dubbed the Williamsburg of the Midwest, Nauvoo in its hay day rivaled Chicago in size. Joining me in studio today is Alex Smith. Alex is a volume editor with the Joseph Smith Papers project in the Church History Department. He was employed as a research historian with the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at BYU before moving with the project to the Church History Department in the fall of 2005. He is a coeditor of the second and third volumes in the three volume series of Joseph's journals and has been working on Nauvoo research topics for the past seven years. Alex, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to the show today.

ALEX SMITH: Thank you. I am pleased to be here.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Just give me a little background why Nauvoo is such an interesting thing to you. Why it is your thing?

ALEX SMITH: Well, part of that is a result of the work that I have been assigned, working with Joseph Smith's journals during the Nauvoo period. I have been forced to become acquainted with the primary sources for that time period, and I have just come to love the people, the place, the events, and really

what Nauvoo means to us in our history. I think it was a time of great significance, and I am always looking for new research topics along the lines of Nauvoo events.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Give us a little background on the area of Nauvoo, what it was before the Latter-day Saints arrived and maybe a little bit of what it became afterward.

ALEX SMITH: There is some debate as to how large the population of the peninsula was, on which Nauvoo stands today, but we do have some insights into the type of environment that the Saints moved into. When Joseph Smith was compiling the history of the Church, his rough draft notes for that, kept at the time by James Mullholland, tell an interesting story for the 11th of June, 1839 entry, that I think gives kind of a fun little picture about what the area looked like when the Saints first moved there. I will read briefly from the 11th June, 1839 entry. “Tuesday the 11th. I commenced dictating my history for my clerk, James Mullholland, to write. About this time, Elder Theodore Turley raised the first house built by the Saints in this place. When I made the purchase there were one stone house, three frame houses and two block houses, which constituted the whole city of Commerce. The place was literally a wilderness. The land was mostly covered with trees and bushes and much of it so wet that it was with the utmost difficulty a footman could get through and totally impassible for teams. Commerce was so unhealthy, very few could live there, but believing it might become a healthy place by the blessing of Heaven to the Saints, and no more eligible place presenting itself, I considered it wisdom to make an attempt to build up the city.” That is kind of a fun little scene there. Joseph describing, and he may be being conservative in the estimate of the number of dwellings and people that were living there at the time, but at the very least, showing little signs of life and activity in that area and quite the wilderness that the Saints would then have to clear to build a home there.

This is really what Commerce and Commerce City, the two settlements that were located on the peninsula, were described as. However, shortly after the Saints arrive, they began devising a plan for laying out a city similar to the ambitious plans they had had for Independence, Missouri and Far West and Adam-ondi-Ahman in Northern Missouri, a plat with square blocks that would be four acres each. From the development of the area during those first difficult years, especially as they are draining the swamp, to the mass exodus of the majority of the Saints from Nauvoo, you really have a story of continuous construction and development, so if a visitor would have come to Nauvoo at the time that the Saints were there, between 1839 and 1846, they would have just seen continuous

construction projects, really a hive of activity as new incoming Saints were ever entering the city and making homes for themselves.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Is there any sort of city modern in comparison we could make to how fast Nauvoo grew? I mean it must have happened very, very quickly.

ALEX SMITH: That is a good question. I don't know of another comparison in terms of the amount of time. Nauvoo was exceptional, I believe, in many ways in terms of how quickly it grew. If we consider that some estimates put about 100 structures on the peninsula on which Nauvoo resides when the Saints first moved there, and that within a matter of approximately six years, they had about 15,000 residents, according to a newspaper in 1846, at the time that many of the Saints are leaving. You go from 100 structures to estimates as high as 2400 structures in a matter of six years. I am not aware of any other locations that are really being built at that alarming rate, and in many ways very successfully with an economy that is in many ways different from other Western communities, largely self sustaining and with very little export business but significant import of goods. For them to be able have a thriving community with the number of Saints that are moving into the area and be able to, at least in some measure, accommodate all that increase in population in such a short time is quite remarkable.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So we have a little community of Commerce before they showed up. There had to have been some non Latter-day Saint people there, and then this big influx of people come. What happened to the non LDS people who where there?

ALEX SMITH: Certainly, a great question. Many of the nonmembers who lived in the area stayed. Some sold their land, but there continued to be at least a small non-Mormon presence in the City of Nauvoo and surrounding area throughout the history, and after the Saints leave Nauvoo, again you have many nonmembers and an influx of nonmembers after that time, but there were always nonmembers in Nauvoo, and relations seem to have been quite good. Of course, when the Saints first moved into Illinois, unlike the reception they had received in Missouri, they were in many ways being welcomed, largely because this was a huge group that was moving in, and so their political interests were being vied for. You know, one party set off against another trying to encourage the Mormons to vote for them. That ended up being a benefit for the Mormons as they tried to establish their City of Nauvoo. For instance, in particular, the passage of the city's

charter and act to incorporate the City of Nauvoo. When that was passed by Illinois's governor Thomas Carlin on the 16th of December, 1840, it went through quite easily and granting quite a few powers and rights to the city. This was largely a measure or an indication of the reception that the Saints were receiving. There was some real interest in making them happy when they were here. Oddly, of course, or I should say ironically, within a few years the relationships between the Saints and their neighbors would become very strained, eventually resulting in their being driven out once again of their homes.

NATHAN WRIGHT: I had never heard that they were so welcomed when they first came, because their relations were so strained by the end.

ALEX SMITH: Certainly, and part of this situation too was just a natural animosity between the citizens of Illinois and the citizens of Missouri, which played nicely for the Mormons. You know, much of the country despised what had happened to the Saints in Missouri and were really quite sympathetic to the plight of the Mormons and looked with disdain on how they had been treated in Missouri.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Let's move toward some life in Nauvoo. I think a lot of Latter-day Saints have ancestors who probably lived there and did all sorts of things that members of the day did. Can you tell us maybe what the day in the life of Nauvoo would be like?

ALEX SMITH: Certainly. Maybe I will try to approach that in terms of particular aspects of what life was like. To start with a less desirable one, if you look at mortality rates they were very high early on as the Saints moved in. It was, as Joseph described, a very swampy region until it was drained, and until the land was cleared and construction began to a large degree. During the first year or so, there were significant mortality rates and much due to the sicknesses that we would now, symptoms that we would now describe or attribute to malaria. It was a huge problem at the time.

William Huntington early on became the sexton of Nauvoo, and in his record detailing the causes of death in Nauvoo, the first entry is that of his mother on the 7th of July, 1839, less than a month after that Joseph Smith entry in the manuscript history of the Church, where he is describing the move to Commerce, but many of deaths that William Huntington categorized in his sexton's record are due to, well he terms them things like either fever or something we would now describe as malaria.

However, reports of how sickly the area was and the city was went quickly out. In some ways it discouraged either Saints or others from moving into the area, and so very public statements and messages were given by the First Presidency and others saying that, yes, there are health issues, but we will be quickly clearing this area and building up an area that will become beautiful. So, really you have the name of the city itself that they chose, Nauvoo. They chose the name early on, even though the name did not change from Commerce to Nauvoo until April of 1840. The name itself they chose early in a letter from the First Presidency that was published in the Millennial Star, they defined the term Nauvoo to mean, they wrote “The name of our city is of Hebrew origin and signifies a beautiful situation or place, carrying with it also the idea of rest.” So, in spite of the reports of an unhealthy environment, they were confident that with a lot of effort that they could quickly turn the location into one that would be very hospitable for life, and you certainly have a decline in the mortality rates as the Saints lived there a little bit longer.

Moving on to some other aspects of life, immigration was a huge and regular feature in the life of Nauvoo. Journal entries by various citizens are replete with references to riverboats landing at the Nauvoo House landing or the upper landing with hundreds of new immigrants from England, Canada, the east and providing housing and employment for all of these newcomers was a continual challenge and one that the leaders of the Church and community were always faced with. To give just a quick example, Bishop George Miller the following decade in a letter, a letter published in the newspaper at Northern Islander in the 16th August issue of 1855, wrote, speaking of Nauvoo, “The poor had to be cared for and labor created that they might at least earn part of their subsistence; there not being one in ten persons that could set themselves to work to earn those indispensable things for the comfort of their families.

So as families are moving in, jobs need to be provided for, residences for them to live in. You have people staying with friends and family until they can build their own accommodations. Really that constant growth and population is one of the major factors of daily life. Allied to that would be the land speculation and investment that went on, and there you have some competing business interest. For instance, there was a continual controversy or competition I should say between the lower flats near the river and up on the hill near the temple, and Joseph Smith, for instance, is regularly making statements in public sermons and discourses recommending that newcomers purchase land from the Church leaders and settle down in the flat area, while new buildings, businesses, hotels are constantly being built up on the hill near the temple. Some of those controversies end up even in large measure resulting in the martyrdom of the prophet and his brother.

Other things that are going on regularly, of course, Nauvoo was a temple city. Meaning, the Saints were there to stay. They were interested in long term habitation of the area. They did not see this as all indications they did not view this as a temporary place where they quickly get back to Zion and Independence, for instance. They intended to live here for some time, and one of the expectations that the Lord gave them was the building of a temple. Joseph Smith received a revelation on the 19th of January, 1841, that we now know as section 124 of the Doctrine and Covenants that specify that the temple would be built and also that the Nauvoo House would be built. Usually when we think of that revelation, we think of the Nauvoo Temple, but it really commands two buildings to be built. The Nauvoo House would be a hotel that visitors could come and stay in and also would provide a home for Joseph and his family, and the intent was even his posterity. So they really intended to be here for some time, but the building of those two buildings would also, to someone living in Nauvoo, have been a regular feature. I mean at one time or another, they are both under continual construction all the way up until 1846 with the departure of the majority of the Saints. Members of the Church were expected to labor very regularly, to donate days of labor, as well as financial donations to the temple and also to build up the Nauvoo House. So they would have been a prominent feature in someone's life and in their view of the city itself.

One aspect of Nauvoo life would be how they came about their information. Newspapers - they are regularly receiving newspapers from around the country, and the Illinois region as well, and they also are publishing their own papers. The Church has its official publication, "The Times and Seasons." That was first edited by Ebenezer Robinson, and the prophet's brother Don Carlos. Later the Twelve take over editorship and even with Joseph Smith himself being the general editor for some time and later turning over responsibility to John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff. That printed largely Church News, missionary reports, conference reports, reports of sermons, missionary assignments, and things like that. Then there was also the local paper, "The Wasp", later renamed "The Nauvoo Neighbor" when one of Joseph's correspondents recommended that maybe a little more kind and friendly name be given to the paper.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Less stinging for sure.

ALEX SMITH: Indeed, and that was edited by Joseph's brother William Smith, but that provided a more secular paper that could carry local and current events and political news and things like that. They were very interested in what was going on in the world around them. They created a literary society. They had designs for a library. We have reports when the Saints were

moving west, some inventories of what they took with them, and it is interesting to note the number of books and types of reading material that they would have, all sorts of law books and even very recent literature that was popular throughout the country.

Of course you have music and the arts being a prominent feature in their lives. William Clayton, who we frequently know as the author of the hymn “Come Come Ye Saints” was one of Joseph’s clerks for some time. He writes regularly in his journal of either attending a singing school or with the band, which would perform at social gatherings. One entry gives an example of his interest in these kinds of activities. On the 16th of April, 1843, he writes “Evening I attended singing school and assisted in passing the bylaws of the Nauvoo Music Association”, so even creating organizations for music. Plays were a feature of life. On the 24th of April in 1843 at the Masonic Hall in Nauvoo, the play Pizarro was presented, featuring as actors, among others, George A. Smith, Brigham Young, and Amasa Lyman, so even Church leaders getting involved in these types of activities. Of course for women in Nauvoo, you had the Relief Society that still exists today was created in Nauvoo, the 17th of March of 1842, was the date of organization, and it was known as the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. It was a very important organization then as now. Joseph Smith would often attend and gave discourses that Eliza R. Snow recorded. Also there was a short lived Young Men and Young Women Relief Society of Nauvoo that we hear a little bit less about. That one did not make it to the present. Anyway, all sorts of activities that people could take part in, in Nauvoo. I think that one of the interesting things about Nauvoo is that while earlier we have a story of the Saints being very quickly driven from one location to another from Jackson County Missouri up to the North in Caldwell and Daviess Counties, but in Nauvoo they are really there for a length of time. Six or seven years does not sound like a lot, considering how long the Church has been based in Salt Lake, but really that is quite a period of relative peace and tranquility and prosperity for the Saints. So kind of a shining horizon for the Saints there for awhile, of course, ultimately leading to the martyrdom and the expulsion of the main body of the Saints from Illinois, but for many years a happy and prosperous place, even though there were, of course, challenges and difficulties as well.

NATHAN WRIGHT: With the culture and arts being as prevalent as it was in Nauvoo, what type of educational opportunities existed for residents there?

ALEX SMITH: Most of the education would have been through self study. Joseph Smith, for instance, frequently in his journal you will find references to studying Hebrew or spending the day studying German or Greek. Many of the

Saints read, but there were schools for the children. There were plans to have a University of Nauvoo. Section 24 of the city's charter dealt with the creation of a university of the city of Nauvoo. Not a whole lot became of that, but at least we know there was a plan to provide a more formal education and training for people. Much of the education was through personal study and through social gatherings for schools, for courses of curriculum that would be intended for missionaries to prepare them to go out and preach the gospel, which included not only study of sacred topics, but also secular, prepare them in language training or in basics in the arts and sciences.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So they had an almost idyllic time here in Nauvoo for six years or so. They built it up to a place they loved, and they wanted to stay.

ALEX SMITH: I think they did love it and did intend to stay. If I gave the impression of idyllic, that may be a little strong. There were certainly challenges and difficulties, but I think in many ways, yes, a place of peace and particularly this notion, as the First Presidency described the name of this city. It was really intended as a place of rest after the difficulties that they had experienced in Ohio and Missouri.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Right, compared to what they had been, perhaps it was.

ALEX SMITH: Certainly.

NATHAN WRIGHT: They were finally forced out. We talk about when Johnson's army came to Salt Lake City and the Saints said, "If they come we will burn it to the ground." What was the feeling of the Saints as they left Nauvoo? Anything similar?

ALEX SMITH: I wish I knew what they felt. We have glimpses from their journals and correspondence and letters and things like that, that indicate that this was certainly a difficult time for them, as would be expected, but they tried, I believe, to make the most of the situation. Much of their land and residences were in fact sold. They at least tried to recoup some of the losses that they were receiving, often selling their property for less than half of its value, but at least trying to find some benefit from being driven out, but of course they had to leave much behind. Then, again a few of the

Saints did stay in the area, of course, Emma Smith and her immediate family. She remains, and we have other Saints who do as well, but for the large body.... By the time of the departure of the Saints, estimates of the population are 15,000 in 1846, and according to our calculations, approximately 10,000-11,000 left. So, really you are talking about a huge exodus from the city and area of almost all of the, at least a vast majority of the citizens, leaving much behind and then, of course, having a very difficult (for many of them) journey westward. At any rate, I don't know if that really answered the question. I think they were probably, well certainly, upset at being forced to leave once again, particularly having just completed their temple and starting to receive the sacred endowment ceremony that they had been looking forward to for so long, and knowing that once again they would be forced to leave that behind and start over again. I think when they first moved onto the peninsula they believed that they would be here for some time and viewed these large and long term construction projects as something they would be able to benefit from for some time. Being forced to leave that behind had to have been disturbing, but one of the real indicators of their faith is that so many did move, and they did it because of their beliefs. Ultimately, the reason that they moved to Illinois in the first place and later moved out of Illinois was because of their belief that that was the Lord's direction and intention for them. This constant struggle of building and then being forced to leave that behind.

NATHAN WRIGHT: As I understand it, as you describe, the main body of the Saints left in February of that year. Was there another exodus later on that year, September, or...?

ALEX SMITH: Yes, there were continual departures from Nauvoo. I mean in 1846 and even into 1847, you still have Saints leaving. There is certainly a mass exodus, but everyone had to work out their own ways of arranging for leaving things behind and for transportation and making their way out west. So it is a little more of an ongoing process than what we might think otherwise.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Was there, this is more of a personal question, such a thing as the Battle of Nauvoo?

ALEX SMITH: Tell me what you mean by that.

NATHAN WRIGHT: It is from a family record of Jane Johnston Black, and she said she and her sons were actually using cannons to fight off mobsters in September of that year. I was just wondering what historical voracity that has.

ALEX SMITH: Well with late Nauvoo and the exodus we move a little beyond the area that I have been working in. There are certainly hostilities between the Mormons and their nonmember neighbors following the martyrdom. And you have a period from the summer of 1844 into 1846 that when there are not armed conflicts, which that is less of a situation than it was when they were driven out of Northern Missouri, for instance, but even when there are not overt hostile actions taking place, you have a situation of continual strain. The Nauvoo Legion, for instance, being continually at the ready and mustering out to be ready to fend off people coming to drive them out, mobs coming to drive them. That becomes particularly an issue at the time of the trial of the murderers of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in 1845. You have really significant strains and even some bloodshed as a result of the animosity between the Saints and their more violent neighbors.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So are there any interesting archeological discoveries in Nauvoo in recent years that you would like to share with us?

ALEX SMITH: Well some recent survey work has been done. In fact, there is a project underway at the moment and earlier this year to use Sonar to try to determine where foundations of buildings, for instance, were in different parts of Nauvoo, and I should leave that discussion up to those who are involved with the project, but there have been, of course, ongoing attempts made to find out what Nauvoo was like at the time. Of course, for a visitor going the Nauvoo today, it is a very serene and tranquil place, a beautiful place, lots of grass, lots of park-like areas that probably would not have been what the saints at the time saw, but certainly provide a nice comfortable accommodation for visitors today, but there are also a lot of structures that are still there. A lot of reconstructions, as well as a lot of buildings that were there at the time of the Saints. As a Church ourselves, Nauvoo Restoration Inc. and the LDS Church's Missionary Department, for instance, have a number of properties, somewhere in the neighborhood of two dozen that they oversee the maintenance of and interpretation of when visitors come, and then of course The Community of Christ Church, formerly The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has some properties in Nauvoo as well, in many cases, some of my favorites, the most significant to Joseph Smith. The Community of Christ Church owns the reconstructed red brick store as well as Joseph Smith's own homes; the original log homestead house, the later Mansion House that he

lived in, the Nauvoo House that he intended to have as a dwelling but was never completed along the lines that he had intended, but Emma Smith's later husband, Lewis Bidamon, whom she married in December of 1847, eventually took the brick that was designed for the Nauvoo House Hotel and built a three-story home that was for sometime known as the Riverside Mansion for Emma and her family. Buildings like that still exist, including some artifacts in each one, so when visitors go there they can see what life was like at the time. Some of the LDS properties that are of particular interest to visitors are the Masonic Hall, the new Times and Seasons Printing Office, the blacksmith shop, the Jonathon Browning home and gun shop is a popular one, the blacksmith shop and post office and, of course, homes of Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young, John Taylor and others, significant places to visit, many wonderfully restored and presented to visitors today. Those sites are popular for visitors to go to so that they can see what life is like in many ways in a more personal way than they would have ever received from simply reading about it. There is a very real sense of place when you visit one of these Church historic sites. Along the lines of Church historic sites, I should mention that aside from historic temple square in Salt Lake City, Nauvoo is by far the most frequently visited that the Church owns.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So with Nauvoo's decades, almost centuries of history, this little six-year period that the Church was there we sort of feel like we own Nauvoo, and I guess in a sense we do. Can you give me a feeling of how residents after the Saints left and since that time have felt about our ownership of Nauvoo, if that is a good way to say it.

ALEX SMITH: Yes, recent studies have been done looking at, particularly, this question of the early years of Nauvoo after most of the Saints left. I feel that we always need to qualify that while the majority of the Saints are leaving, certainly, some remain behind, but studies have been done describing the area in the intervening years, and of course, recently with the dedication of the Nauvoo Temple and the construction of the new Nauvoo Temple on the same site that the temple formerly stood. We understand that there was some anxiety about building a temple there, that isn't this going to attract a lot of Mormons on their pilgrimages to the area, and of course it has altered the economy of the town that exists there today. I am sure there are those who feel kindly towards the Saints and those who don't. You probably have some of both, but I think what you mentioned a moment ago is absolutely true. Too many of us, when we hear the terminology Nauvoo we not only think of a geographic place, but we do think of a time. I mean this time that the Saints were there, almost to the exclusion of the rest of the history of the area and of the city, that Nauvoo is as much a period of Church history as it a place that the Saints lived for

some time. That is a fascinating indicator of the influence that the Saints had while they were there and how significant a portion of our history that was.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Is there anything else you would like to share with us, Alex, about your experience with Nauvoo and its history?

ALEX SMITH: Yes, one thing I would like to mention is that from a Church history perspective, Nauvoo is really a gold mine, both as a location and a time period. Prior to Nauvoo, there is a paucity of records that when we try to reconstruct events in Missouri and Ohio in many instances it is difficult because of the simple lack of documentation and sources that are contemporary. When we get to Nauvoo, we really have a huge shift in that. We have many records that still remain. It is a unique situation for virtually an entire city to up and move to a new location, but when the Saints came out to Salt Lake, they brought with them not only the Church records, but the local civil record, of course.

So we have here in the Church History Library, today, many of the records of Nauvoo, including the municipal court records, the mayor's court records, the city council minutes, things like this that provide a wonderful insight into what life was like in Nauvoo. In addition, of course, to the Church administrative records, the temple committee records, tithing records, Nauvoo House Association records, journals, correspondence and other sources that we have. It becomes a very rich period to study, simply because of the number of contemporary sources that we have. While the Saints were not there for very long, it was an imminently significant time period for the Church. Joseph Smith's revelations, the number of them dwindles a little bit, much of the organizational design of the Church had come about earlier, but we still have very important revelations like Sections 124, 125, 127, 128, 130 that are being received in Nauvoo. We have a far greater number of accounts of Joseph Smith's sermons, for instance in the Nauvoo period than we do earlier, so we can really get a feel for what he talked about in public and what his theological ideas were like. We have a far greater amount of correspondence for Nauvoo than we do for any of the previous years, so really it is a wonderful period to study, in that it gives us – there are numerous opportunities to study different topics in Nauvoo and really get a feel for what was ultimately a very significant and pivotal period in our Church's history.

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NATHAN WRIGHT: And as I understand it, those records are available to anybody who wants to come to the Church History Library.

ALEX SMITH: Indeed, the idea is that people will come and use those resources that are there.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Excellent. Talking today with Alex Smith, a volume editor with The Joseph Smith Papers Project in the Church History Department and lover of the history of Nauvoo. Thank you very much for being with us.

ALEX SMITH: Thank you.

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