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Conclusion: Visitors to the Temple

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Conclusion

Visitors to the Temple

The Kirtland Temple is a remarkable structure when viewed in its time and place. Few buildings of this size and scale were built with such meager economic resources and such constant outside opposition. The temple is also unusual because of its construction techniques. The rubblework-and-stucco construction technique imported from Canada and the unusual design of two stacked main rooms with multiple pulpits and curtains set the temple apart from contemporaneous religious structures in the United States. Furthermore, the different craftsmen who worked on the building each left his mark. Jacob Bump's older design style, with its deep carving and its reliance on moldings formed with simple circular curves, represents the generation trained at the beginning of the nineteenth century. With Bump's departure, younger artisans such as Truman Angell took over and updated the interior details using newer carpenter's manuals. These stylistic changes in interior design provide a unique opportunity to study in one building the vernacular design practices of several decades.

Those who revere Joseph Smith as a prophet have always looked upon the Kirtland Temple with special reverence. One reason for this reverence is the numerous visitations from heavenly beings that have occurred in the temple. Mary Ann Winters recalls how such visitations made the temple more significant to her as a girl:

> After the close of one of the meetings, mother took me to the stand and showed me the place on the pulpit where the Savior had stood when He appeared to the Prophet, and where afterwards Moses and Elias came and delivered the keys for the gathering of the Saints (Israel), and the redemption of the dead.[1]

This simple action by mother and daughter demonstrates the temple's role as a kind of pilgrimage site in Mormon life, both during the Kirtland period and after. Early Mormon missionaries traveling to the eastern United

States and abroad would often stop in Kirtland to view the temple. Martin Harris led one such group during the time he possessed keys to the temple:

> In answer to our knock there came to the door of the cottage a poorly clad, emaciated little man, on whom the winter of life was weighing heavily. . . . After some time, however, the old man said, "You want to see the Temple, do you?" "Yes, indeed," I exclaimed, "If we may." "Well, I'll get the key." From that moment, Martin Harris, in spite of occasional outbursts, radiated with interest. He led us through the rooms of the Temple and explained how they were used. He pointed out the place of the School of the Prophets. He showed where the temple curtain had at one time hung. He related thrilling experiences in connection with the history of the sacred building.[2]

That the building itself left quite an impression on visitors is clear from this reminiscence: "Well do I remember the feelings of awe and wonder I experienced attending a Mormon service upon the first floor as the great white scrolls rose and fell."[3]

Not all residents of the area viewed these visits with enthusiasm. A rather disdainful area resident in 1842 stated that "many of that misguided people still linger around their former Zion, and look upon their first temple as an object of uncommon sanctity—hence it has become a kind of Mecca—to these miserable fanatics, and if any get in trouble they flee here for a refuge."[4] The attitude behind this statement seems to be a holdover from the controversies which swirled through Kirtland in 1837. The fact that relatively few worshipers and visitors came to the temple in the 1840s seems to have calmed the fears and resentment of area residents, and eventually the temple was accepted as part of the community. Some visitors, however, shared in this disdain for the group that produced the temple. On one occasion a

> man called to see the House of the Lord, in company with another gentleman. On entering the door they were politely invited, by the gentleman who had charge of the house, to take off their hats. One of them replied with the request unhesitatingly, while the other observed that he would not take off his hat nor bow to "Jo Smith," but that he had made "Jo" bow to him at a certain time. He was immediately informed by Elder Morey, the keeper of the house, that his first business was to leave, for when a man insulted Joseph Smith he, Brother Morey, was himself insulted. The man manifested much anger, but left the house.[5]

Other visitors were motivated purely by inquisitiveness and not by rancor. As part of "an equestrian party of eight," Lucia Goldsmith reports attending a service held in the temple while it was still under construction.[6] Many were doubtless anxious to see the prophet who had caused such a stir in the neighborhood. Similarly, James Ryder, who visited the temple in 1850 and set up a photography studio for a brief period, stated, "I visited the temple and explored it with much interest and curiosity."[7]

When the RLDS Church gained ownership of the Kirtland Temple, Bishop E. L. Kelly began giving informal tours. Although visitors were few, his wife Cassie reported that "they pay one usually," a welcome event given the great expense incurred in repairing the structure.[8] By 1888 the uproar over the issue of polygamy in Utah had captured the nation's eye; although the Reorganized Church had nothing to do with polygamy, the *Willoughby Independent* reported that the "Temple is daily receiving a large number of visitors."[9] Such was the popular interest that several businessmen offered the RLDS Church one hundred thousand dollars to purchase the temple, intending to dismantle it and re-erect it at the Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1892.[10] When the LDS Church discontinued the practice of polygamy, interest in the temple by the curious waned.

Visitors to the Kirtland Temple increased again when the RLDS Church instituted temple reunions. Later, the development of interstate highways (I-90 is only about three miles north of the temple) facilitated visits by individuals and tour groups on the way to other significant Mormon historical sites in upstate New York and Vermont. This influx eventually led in the 1960s to the establishment of a Visitors' Center and a regular program of guided tours of the temple. With the LDS Church's recent restoration of the Newel K. Whitney Store in Kirtland, the numbers of visitors to the Kirtland Temple will undoubtedly increase.

More than any other factor, the claim of its design's divine origins sets the Kirtland Temple apart from most nineteenth-century American structures, as American Protestantism has generally eschewed such close communication with deity. Although monetary difficulties are normal in building projects, the Saints' degree of economic sacrifice to build the Kirtland Temple, especially when faced with local opposition, seems almost absurd from the vantage point of late-twentieth-century American society. However, this sacrifice underscores the deep commitment the early Saints brought to the project. More than a record of the lives of the early Saints, the Kirtland Temple is a monument to a people's faith and commitment to their God. The Kirtland Temple's physical fabric communicates to us, living in a different century and different societal framework, the challenges, sacrifices, and faith of these early Saints.

Notes

[1]"Autobiographical Sketch of Mary Ann Stearns Winters," 3.

[2]Homer, "Passing of Martin Harris," 469.

[3]Tayer, undated newspaper clipping.

[4]La Moody to Postmaster. La Moody's reason for writing was the sighting of Orrin Porter Rockwell.

[5]*History of the Church*, 2:401.
[6]Goldsmith, "Rigdon, the First Mormon Elder."
[7]Ryder, *Voitlander and I*, 69.
[8]Cassie Kelley to E. L. Kelley, September 1 [and 6], 1885.
[9]*Willoughby Independent*, July 1888?.
[10]Launius, *Kirtland Temple*, 129.