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Abstract: This paper examines the underlying philosophy of local administration in the early Church and the details of how stakes, wards, and branches operated, focusing on the years 1830–1845.



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This Branch of the Church

The Early Development of Local Administration in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Part 1, The Emergent Church, 1830–1845

Brandon Plewe

It is easy for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to read the Doctrine and Covenants, or most basic histories of the Church, and assume that the Church has always operated like it operates today, if a bit simpler. By the mid-1830s, most significant local and general offices and titles of Church leadership that we recognize today were in place, and it is possible to interpret historical texts through a modern understanding. Occasional inconsistencies can be easily dismissed as the vagaries of frontier language.

On closer inspection, it becomes clear that Church administration has changed in almost every way, at both the general and local levels. For example, additional leadership offices, roles, and responsibilities were added as the Church grew larger and more complex. Even the core office of bishop changed in fundamental ways.¹ During the presidencies of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, there were very few established policies for local administration beyond the basic principles in the Doctrine and Covenants (especially in sections 20 and 107). These scriptures were interpreted and implemented in a variety of ways in different places at different times.

In 1877, President Brigham Young, in the final major act of his life, standardized the local administration of the Church, which has since been termed the Priesthood Reorganization of 1877.² First envisioned by

1. Dale Beecher, “The Office of Bishop,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 103–15.

2. William G. Hartley, “The Priesthood Reorganization of 1877: Brigham Young’s Last Achievement,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 1 (1979): 3–36.

Brigham during the St. George Temple dedication that April, he and the Twelve Apostles traveled across Utah territory, reorganizing wards, stakes, and quorums. In July, the First Presidency issued a circular to Church leaders that explained the new standard policy for how the local Church should be organized and operated.³ This precursor to the modern *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* was the first clear policy statement on Church administration since the mid-1830s and set forth a structure that is very similar to the way the Church is organized today:

- Stakes are regional groupings of congregations led by a presidency and high council, which should hold regular stake conferences.
- Wards are the primary type of congregation, presided over by a bishop. They hold weekly Sunday meetings and should have their own auxiliary organizations (Relief Society, Sunday School, Primary, Young Ladies' and Young Men's Mutual Improvement Associations).
- Branches are smaller congregations led by a presiding priesthood holder (preferably an elder) and structured more simply.
- Melchizedek and Aaronic Priesthood quorums are only organized at the ward and stake level.
- All of these organizations are expected to keep accurate records of membership, meetings, and finances.
- Congregations must be geographically bounded so that every member is assigned to a congregation.

At the beginning of 1877, many places were already operating in this fashion, but at least half of the towns in Utah Territory were organized in a variety of ways that changed significantly over time.

This variation led me to ask the question at the center of this project: "What was local Church administration like prior to the 1877 Reorganization?" How were the organizational structures, leadership roles, and guiding philosophy similar to the modern Church, and how were they different? How and why did they vary over time and space?

Past historians were generally aware of the lack of standards in pre-1877 local administration but typically brushed over it by saying

3. Brigham Young, John W. Young, and Daniel W. Wells, *Circular of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, July 11, 1877), <https://archive.org/details/circularoffirstp00unse>.

something to the effect of “things were odd then.” Exceptions to this trend include landmark works, such as Dale Beecher’s study of the changing role of bishops and William Hartley’s work on the priesthood in Nauvoo and the 1877 Reorganization.⁴ The research presented here builds on their foundation. Employing sources not earlier available, a more detailed historical-geographic analysis, and a fresh perspective, some of their findings are strengthened, some are clarified, and some are refuted. A significant challenge was to conscientiously set aside our modern assumptions and concepts of local church organization, such as those listed above, to analyze doctrines, policies, and practices as they were understood at the time.

Specifically, we studied the administrative history of every stake, ward, and branch that existed prior to 1877, focusing on the core areas of Church settlement (just over three hundred local units) rather than the outlying missions with their thousands of branches.⁵ The result is not a collection of general histories but an attempt to answer the following questions about each unit:

- How did the function and structure of each congregation change?
- How did the titles and roles of congregational leaders change?
- What terms were used to refer to the congregation and what did they mean?

As I compared these histories, several patterns emerged. In summary, the types of local units and leaders with which we are familiar today—wards, branches, stakes, bishops, and presidencies—emerged and gradually gained acceptance during this period. Indeed, the 1877 Reorganization was not an invention of a new system as much as it was a standardization of current best practices. Along the way, though, several very different types of units and leadership structures came and went, including some that were still present in 1877 and a few that survived into the twentieth century.

4. Beecher, “Office of Bishop”; Hartley, “Priesthood Reorganization of 1877”; William G. Hartley, “Nauvoo Stake, Priesthood Quorums, and the Church’s First Wards,” *BYU Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (1992): 57–80; William G. Hartley, “Brigham Young and Priesthood Work at the General and Local Levels,” in *Lion of the Lord: Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young*, ed. Susan E. Black and Larry C. Porter (Deseret Book, 1995), 338–70.

5. To learn more about the specific research that helped generate this article, visit <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>, which attempts to document the organization history of every unit of the Church that existed prior to 1930, almost eight thousand in total.

This work will appear in a series of four articles. This article covers the lifetime of Joseph Smith, including the remaining time in Nauvoo (1830–45). The second article will cover the early pioneer period in the Council Bluffs area and Deseret (1846–52). The third article will include a wide variety of practices that emerged during the 1850s. The fourth and final article will cover the maturing (but not standardized) practices of the 1860s and 1870s, culminating in the 1877 Reorganization.

Early Developments: 1830–1838

From the very beginning of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in April 1830, a major concern was how to organize local groups of members into congregations to ensure that each member was cared for, an imperative found both in the Book of Mormon (Moro. 6:4–5) and the founding “constitution” of the Church, the Articles and Covenants (now D&C 20:47, 83).⁶

The Branch or Church

The original form of congregation was called the *branch*. After the Church was organized, the members in New York met in three separate places: Manchester/Palmyra, Fayette, and Colesville. These were originally called *churches*, as set forth in the April 1830 Articles and Covenants of the Church (D&C 20:81): “the several churches, composing the Church of Christ.”⁷ Within a few months, missionaries organized several more in Ohio.

They were also called *branches* by October 1831,⁸ the term first appearing in scripture in December 1831 (D&C 72:23), although it was probably already common by then. The use of the synonym *church* continued for

6. Original text in “Revelation Book 1,” 55, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/39>; later published in *The Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 1 (June 1832): 1.

7. “Revelation Book 1,” 58–60 (Articles and Covenants [D&C 20]). The term “branch” also appears in that section (D&C 20:65–66), but these verses were added in 1834. Compare the text published in the June 1832 issue of *The Evening and Morning Star*, which matches the Book of Commandments and does not contain these verses, with the January 1835 Kirtland reprint, which is the current text in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. *Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 1 (June 1832, reprint January 1835): 4.

8. Minutes of a conference held in Hiram Portage County, Ohio, October 11, 1831, in “Minute Book 2,” 8, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-2/10>.

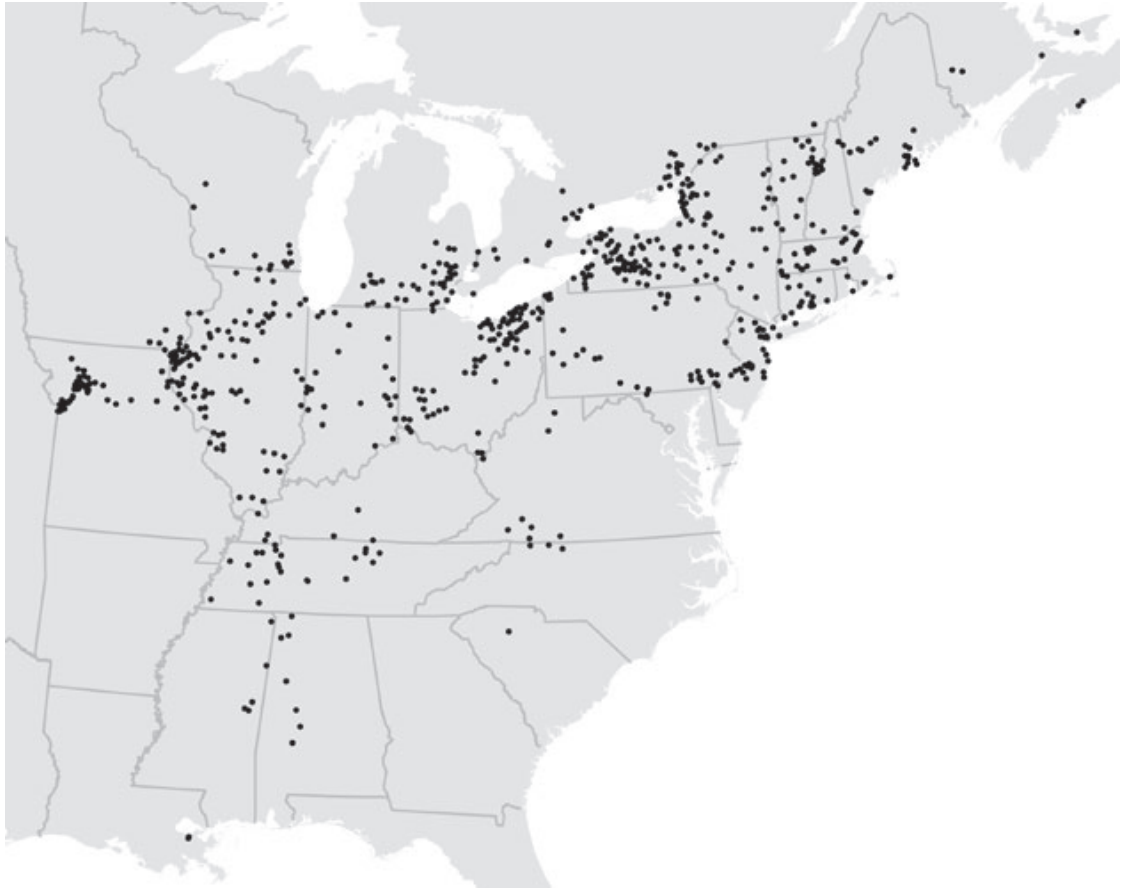


FIGURE 1. Branches in the United States and Canada, 1830–44. From *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History* (Brigham Young University Press, 2014), 41.

several years after this but largely faded out by 1834.⁹ This may have been due to confusion between the general “Church” and the local “church.”

During the 1830s, missionaries established hundreds of branches across the United States, Canada, and England (fig. 1), although most were short-lived as converts eventually gathered to Kirtland or Missouri.¹⁰ The average mission branch had ten to fifty members, a few priesthood holders, and a presiding elder (the title *president* was rare and typically appeared only in larger branches where he had counselors).

9. A fairly late example is the “Church” in Springfield, Pennsylvania, mentioned on February 20, 1834. “Minute Book 1,” 39, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-1/43>.

10. “The Church in the Kirtland-Missouri Era,” in *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Brandon S. Plewe, S. Kent Brown, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard H. Jackson, 2nd ed. (BYU Press, 2012), 36–37.

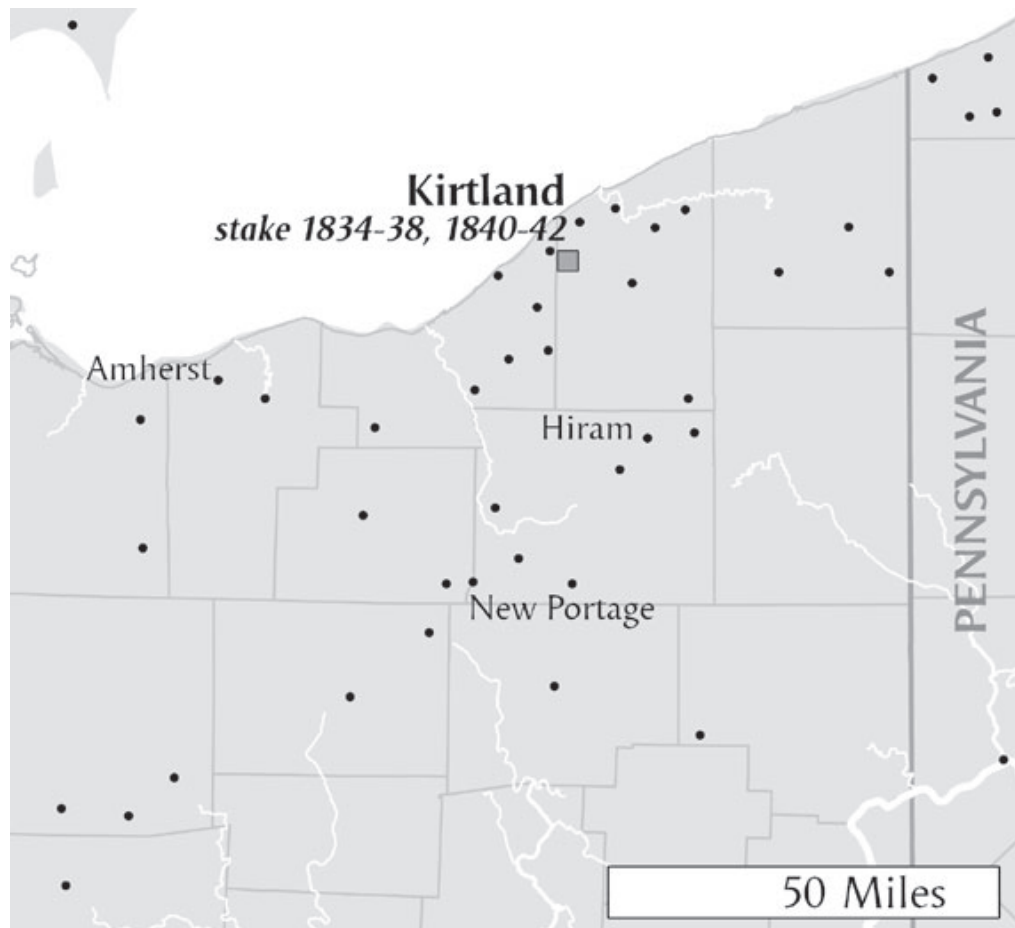


FIGURE 2. Likely branches in the Kirtland, Ohio, region. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

If there were no elders, a priest or teacher could be called to preside, as directed in the Articles and Covenants (D&C 20:44, 49, 56).

Surprisingly, it has been more difficult to determine where branches existed near the headquarters in Kirtland (fig. 2); members lived in dozens of locations, but fewer than ten locations have documentary evidence of a distinct church or branch organization.¹¹

The Local Bishop

A second development in local administration occurred when Newel K. Whitney was called as a bishop in Kirtland in December 1831 (D&C 72:8).

11. For example, in an elders meeting on September 12, 1831, “churches” are mentioned in Shalersville, Orange, and Warrensville, all within thirty miles of Kirtland. Minutes of a Conference held in Kirtland, Geauga County, Ohio, September 12, 1831, in “Minute Book 2,” 6.

Edward Partridge had been called as a bishop in February 1831 with a responsibility for the entire Church (D&C 41:9), but he had resettled in Missouri. Although neither was given a specific regional jurisdiction, Partridge and Whitney were informally operating at a stake level.¹² Stake-level “presiding bishops” would continue to be common until the 1877 Reorganization when they were officially eliminated.

Initially, the bishops were not general ecclesiastical leaders but focused solely on the temporal affairs of the Church, including managing the Law of Consecration (February 1831, D&C 42:31), real estate and caring for the poor and needy (November 1831, D&C 107:68), being a judge in civil disputes and disciplinary actions (August 1831, D&C 58:18, D&C 107:72–74), and presiding over the Aaronic Priesthood (November 1831, D&C 68:17, D&C 107:87–88).¹³

The Emergent Stake

The word *stake* was first mentioned in April 1832 (D&C 82:13–14) as a designation for the Kirtland area. Initially, *stake* was not clearly defined as a specific administrative organization but rather a place designated for the permanent gathering of the Saints (D&C 101:21). The term was a metaphor for a tent stake that helps hold up the ever-expanding tent for the House of Israel and was based on the imagery of Isaiah 54:1–2. From 1832 into the 1850s (and in some respects for several years thereafter), the notion of a stake was neither exclusively ecclesiastical nor regional. Instead, it was envisioned as a new city, with an inspired but typical grid-street layout centered on a landmark temple, with the Church as the predominant land developer, and governed by both a church organization run by the priesthood and a civilian municipal government. Perhaps we can call this notion the *stake-as-gathering-place*.

The meaning and practices of stakes and their officers emerged gradually over several years. When Joseph Smith was ordained as the “President of the High Priesthood” in January 1832, it is not clear to modern readers whether he became the President of the Church, the president of the Kirtland Stake, or the president of the new quorum of high priests.¹⁴

12. The title of *presiding bishop* would not appear until many years later. Modern histories have often referred to them as “general bishops,” but only “bishop” was used prior to 1877.

13. The subsequent evolution of these roles is discussed in depth in Beecher, “Office of Bishop.”

14. D&C 107:91 (November 1831) set forth the office in which Joseph Smith was sustained at the Amherst, Ohio conference on January 25, 1832. “Minutes, 26–27 April

To Joseph and his followers at the time, however, there was no need for a distinction. Even after the First Presidency was organized in March 1832, and was more fully explained by revelation in March 1833 (D&C 90), it still presided over both local and general matters.¹⁵

At first, Church business (both general and local) was conducted by Joseph Smith gathering an ad hoc collection of trusted priesthood holders.¹⁶ This advisory body was formalized when the high council was organized in February 1834 (D&C 102). As with the First Presidency, their authority initially had theoretical jurisdiction over the entire Church. This was clarified somewhat when the Quorum of Twelve Apostles was called in March 1835 as a “traveling high council” (D&C 107:36) with the same authority as the high council for branches outside of stakes. The Twelve theoretically limited the authority of the high councils in Kirtland and Missouri to their immediate vicinity, although meetings of the presidency and high council in Kirtland continued to conduct general Church business. The Twelve would not gain broader, general authority until late in the Nauvoo era.

The Church in Zion

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Saints in Jackson County, Missouri, were never organized as a stake per se.¹⁷ After all, it was the center place of Zion, the tent pole in the Isaiah metaphor, not a stake securing the edges. At the time, it was almost always called “The Church in Zion.” That said, the organization there essentially filled the role of a stake.

At first, Bishop Edward Partridge was the only titular authority, but his roles were limited. Business was conducted there in the same fashion as it was in Kirtland: Meetings were held with an ad hoc group of elders and high priests, and decisions were made by consensus. When

1832,” 24–25, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-26-27-april-1832/1>.

15. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (Deseret Book, 1971), 1:334; see also “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 334, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed January 16, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/340>.

16. “Minute Book 2,” 3–19.

17. The title “the center stake of Zion” was often used in later years when Church leaders contemplated the prophesied millennial regathering to Missouri. For example, *Sermon by Brigham Young, Delivered May 29th, 1847, to the Pioneers While They Were Crossing the Plains*, reported by William Clayton (n.p., n.d.), 12, <https://archive.org/details/sermonbybrighamy00youn/page/12/mode/2up>.

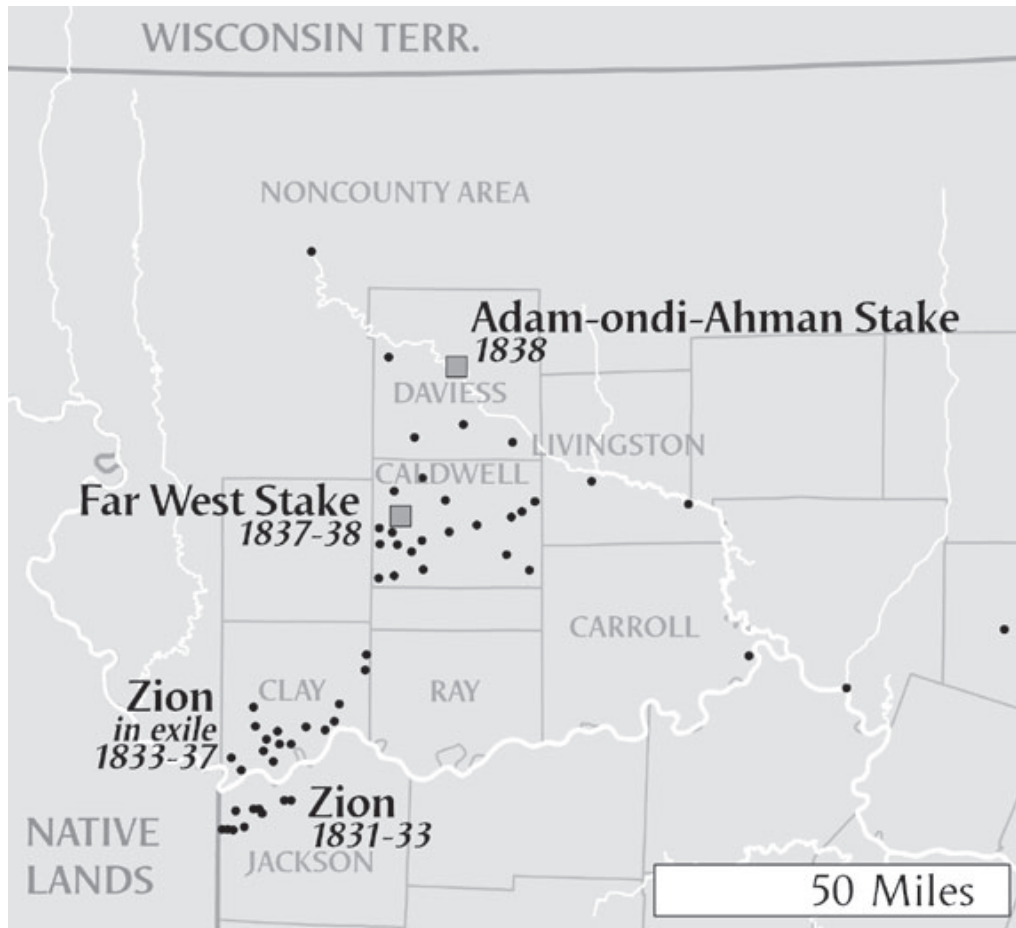


FIGURE 3. The Church in Zion, stakes, and branches in Missouri, 1831–38. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

Oliver Cowdery (the original Second Elder), John Whitmer, and W. W. Phelps arrived in January 1832 to publish the Book of Commandments, they took on a first-among-equals role in these meetings but did not officially preside.¹⁸ In September 1833, after Cowdery returned to Kirtland, Bishop Partridge was officially recognized as “the head of the Church of Zion at present,”¹⁹ the first time a bishop was given broad ecclesiastical authority.

Zion was organized into four branches in July 1832, the first clear indication of separate congregations within a central gathering place (fig. 3).²⁰ As the population grew, these were subdivided into ten branches in September 1833, each presided over by a high priest. It is unclear if these

18. “Minute Book 2,” 21–37.

19. “Minute Book 2,” 36.

20. “Minute Book 2,” 29.

branches ever functioned before the Saints were driven out of Jackson County within two months of their organization.²¹

The “Church in Zion” went into exile in Clay County and received a stake-like organization. In July 1834, David Whitmer was ordained the “President of the Church in Zion,” with counselors, a bishop, and a high council that mirrored the organization in Kirtland; however, Zion was never called a stake.²² Individual congregations appear to have been temporary and informal, although there is secondary evidence of a few organized branches.²³

The stake-like organization of Zion-in-exile continued after the Saints moved from Clay County to Caldwell County, until Whitmer and his counselors were removed from office in February 1838 (with the two senior Apostles, Thomas B. Marsh and David W. Patten, assuming the title of “Presidents pro tempore”).²⁴ In April 1838, the concept of Zion-in-exile ceased with the organization of the Far West Stake.²⁵ But even after this, Zion’s appellation as a stake is rare, with “the high council of Zion” still commonly used in their records.²⁶

More Stakes

The first clear callings of stake presidents occurred in 1838: When Joseph Smith left Kirtland in January, he appointed William Marks as president there with John Smith and Reynolds Cahoon as counselors; Marks served at least through July and likely until October 1838.²⁷ When Joseph Smith arrived in Missouri in April 1838, he authorized the Apostles to

21. “Minute Book 2,” 36.

22. “Minute Book 2,” 43–45.

23. For example, the Hulet Branch: “Minute Book 2,” 58.

24. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Committee of the Whole Church in Zion,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 44, <https://archive.org/details/EldersJournal18371838/page/n43/mode/2up>.

25. “Conference Minutes,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 47, <https://archive.org/details/EldersJournal18371838/page/n47/mode/2up>.

26. “Minute Book 2,” 132–155.

27. Marcellus Smith to George A. Smith, September 26, 1837, holograph, image 6 of “John Smith Letter, Kirtland, Ohio, 1838 January 1,” George A. Smith Papers 1834–1877, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4487c499-6a42-4c45-bb37-e92d4de1e93e/0/5>; Hepzibah Richards to Willard Richards, January 18–19, 1838, holograph, image 3, Willard Richards Journals and Papers, 1821–1854, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/106d974b-d7f3-4f0b-99ca-fc4c2cbeec7e/0/0>; Kirtland Camp, Journal, 1838 March–October, holograph, image 16, Kirtland Camp Constitution and Journal, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ee641835-dea0-4576-83f0-5659845714a5/1/15>.

continue as a presidency pro tempore of the new stake in Far West, a role they would continue to hold until the Church left Missouri and perhaps a first step in the Twelve's emergence as a body with greater authority than their original role. The stake at Adam-ondi-Ahman was organized in June 1838 with John Smith as president (having left Kirtland and its presidency in April), a high council, and an acting bishop.²⁸ In July 1838, William Marks was called to leave Kirtland and preside over Far West (D&C 117:10), but he did not go West until late in the year, by which time the Saints had been exiled to Quincy, Illinois.

Each early stake of Zion (Kirtland, Far West, and Adam-ondi-Ahman) included not only the central planned city but also nearby rural branches, which were envisioned to eventually grow and become their own stakes.²⁹ There may have been twenty or more such branches in northern Missouri (fig. 3), but no branch records have survived; there are only oblique references in journals and stake records.³⁰

A temple was proposed in Zion and each of the three stakes in Ohio and Missouri. Like Kirtland, temples included a large meetinghouse with offices for leaders, more like the later stake tabernacles (and modern stake centers) than the later temples.

The Outlying Church

Starting in 1835, the newly ordained Quorum of the Twelve Apostles established two more types of regional organization beyond the stakes. The first was the *conference*, a group of branches that met quarterly (in “conference”), established during the Apostles’ tour through western New York in May 1835.³¹ This was based on a reinterpretation of Doctrine and

28. A. Ripley, “Adam Ondi Ahman is situated . . .,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 60–61, <https://archive.org/details/EldersJournal18371838/page/n51/mode/2up>. Note that we have yet to find a source that gives either of these an official name; at best they are “the stake at X.”

29. For example, an 1838 policy statement says, “Each branch of the church, not yet organized into a stake.” Then a couple sentences later it says, “To the Clerk of the nearest stake, or to such as they [branches] may be attached.” George W. Robinson, “Notice,” in *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 62, <https://archive.org/details/EldersJournal18371838/page/n61/mode/2up>.

30. For example, “Minute Book 2,” 100–2; see also William Draper, Autobiography, 1881, holograph, 8 [image 9], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/775acd0d-43ec-4697-ae7f-be99af01d340/0/8>.

31. “Record of the Twelve, 14 February–28 August 1835,” 8, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 14, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/record-of-the-twelve-14-february-28-august-1835/14>.

Covenants 20:61, which originally referred to the general conference. It could also have been indirectly based on the conferences that were regional organizations in the Methodist Church.³²

The second regional organization, the *mission*, initially referred to a particular group of proselyting missionaries and their leaders in a specific area such as the British Mission of 1837.³³ The use of the term to refer to the entire church in the region, including the members and their branches, was informal and infrequent during this period, not becoming common until decades later. For example, in the official records of the British Mission, the collection of branches and members was almost always called “The Church in Great Britain and Ireland”; the same was true for “The Church in the Eastern United States” and elsewhere.³⁴ This phrasing precisely matches “The Church in Zion” in the previous section.

In summary, during the first eight years of the Church, local and general administration gradually evolved and diverged. Many innovations came by direct revelation, but some came by practical necessity or by trial and error. Much of the structure and policy governing local congregations was documented, such as in D&C 20 and 107, but there was plenty of room for interpretation. Even today, members apply scriptures such as these to modern structures and policies that differ significantly from their original intent or interpretation. The flexibility of these documents left room for debate over the details of Church policy and facilitated further evolution as new needs arose in Nauvoo and beyond.

32. The conference as a group of branches not in a stake was rebranded as a “district” in 1927, the term still in use today. J. E. T., “Districts and Conferences,” *Millennial Star* 89, no. 14 (April 7, 1927): 216, <https://archive.org/details/millennialstar8914eng/page/216/mode/2up>.

33. Willard Richards, Journal (Volume 1), 1836 December–1840 April), holograph, image 18, Willard Richards Journals and Papers, 1821–1854, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/53d252e7-a5a9-4e9e-b22b-ac6e1d12ea3d/0/17>.

34. For example, in an April 1855 conference of the St. Louis Stake, Erastus Snow was sustained as “President of the Church in the Western and Southern States.” “Saint Louis Stake (1854–1858), Historical Record, 1852–1856,” 246–47, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a627690d-69ef-4686-bc14-e90ac5a36c2b/0/0>. In another example, at the October 1850 British general conference, Franklin D. Richards expressed gratitude for Orson Pratt’s service as “the President of the Church in the British Islands.” “General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for Great Britain and Adjacent Countries,” *Millennial Star* 21, no. 12 (November 1, 1850), 323, <https://archive.org/details/MStarVol12/page/n327/mode/2up>.

The Nauvoo Era: 1839–1845

When thousands of Saints were driven from Missouri in the winter of 1838, Joseph Smith and other leaders were in prison,³⁵ and administrative organization was not a high priority. Families from Missouri scattered across southwestern Illinois and southeastern Iowa—wherever they could find shelter. In some of these places, branches already existed, such as Springfield,³⁶ Jacksonville,³⁷ and Crooked Creek (later Ramus/Macedonia).³⁸ Elsewhere, branches were organized during the winter of 1838–39 as some refugees purchased land, including Pittsfield³⁹ and Warsaw,⁴⁰ but most Saints spent the year in a scattered, unorganized state. Even the many members in Quincy, Illinois, the largest gathering place for the Missouri refugees, were more concerned with immediate needs, such as trying to free their Prophet, helping refugees, and regaining their lands in Missouri, rather than establishing any permanent organization.⁴¹

In late April 1839, Joseph and most of his fellow prisoners escaped their captors.⁴² Upon their arrival in Quincy, attention immediately shifted to finding a new gathering place. With the authorization of Joseph and the Church, the three existing bishops, acting in their temporal affairs capacity, purchased the failed town of Commerce, Illinois,

35. See William G. Hartley, “The Saints’ Forced Exodus from Missouri, 1839,” in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and the Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2010), 247–90.

36. Joel Hills Johnson, Autobiographical Sketch and Journal, 1835 August–1859 December, holograph, image 32, Joel Hills Johnson Papers, 1835–1882, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/07dfb8cc-63ac-4253-b97d-9a0d7a0c36d4/0/31>.

37. Leland R. Nelson, comp., *The Journal of Brigham: Brigham Young’s Own Story in His Own Words* (Council Press, 1980), 14.

38. “Extracts of Letters,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 5 (February 1836): 263, <https://archive.org/details/LDSMessengerAndAdvocate18341837/page/n262>.

39. Jesse N. Smith, Autobiographical Sketch, holograph, circa 1884, image 6, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/678711f4-22d8-4ee6-b249-6eb69484d98c/0/5>.

40. John Smith, “Journal of John Smith,” June 3, 1839, typescript, image 143, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4887b2b8-2d2a-4fcf-8a17-72c96710e0f3/0/142>.

41. Hartley, “Saints’ Forced Exodus,” 366–70.

42. Alex Baugh, “‘We Took a Change of Venue for the State of Illinois’: The Gallatin Hearing and the Escape of Joseph Smith and the Mormon Prisoners from Missouri, April 1839,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001): 66–67, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3720/>.

on April 30 and thousands of acres directly across the Mississippi River in Iowa during May.⁴³ Thousands of refugees began gathering to Commerce, which functioned as a branch with William Marks as president and Newel K. Whitney as bishop.⁴⁴ In the fall, a new city was surveyed next to Commerce named Nauvoo.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, several settlements were established in Iowa, with the largest being Nashville and Montrose.

Two Central Stakes

By the general conference on October 5, Nauvoo and southeastern Iowa were each ready to be appointed “a stake and a place of gathering for the Saints,” continuing the earlier meaning of *stake*. Two stake organizations were sustained, then fully organized in the following weeks.⁴⁶ The jurisdiction area of these two stakes varied, but generally, they claimed authority over as large an area as members were willing to recognize their authority, just as in Kirtland. The very first item of business for the Nauvoo high council concerned Harlow Redfield, a member in Pittsfield

43. “Bond, Hugh White to Alanson Ripley, 30 April 1839,” Hancock County Bonds and Mortgages, 1:31–32, entry 28, Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Press, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/bond-hugh-white-to-alanson-ripley-30-april-1839/1>; “Deed, Isaac and Elizabeth Wilcox Galland to George W. Robinson, 29 June 1839,” Hancock County Deeds, book G, 247–48, entries 3135–36, Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Press, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/deed-isaac-and-elizabeth-wilcox-galland-to-george-w-robinson-29-june-1839/1>; “Deed, Isaac and Elizabeth Wilcox Galland to Oliver Granger, 29 May 1839–A, as Recorded in Lee County, Iowa, Land Records,” 508–9, Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Press, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/deed-isaac-and-elizabeth-wilcox-galland-to-oliver-granger-29-may-1839-a-as-recorded-in-lee-county-iowa-land-records/1>.

44. “Minutes of a General Conference Held by the Church of the Latter Day Saints, at the Presbyterian Camp Ground near Quincy, Adams County, Illinois, on Saturday the 4th of May 1839,” holograph, image 6, Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, 1839–1877, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3ae7a00d-6f8f-4a31-bba7-a00199f3eb60/0/5>.

45. “A Plat of the Town of Nauvoo . . .,” microfilm of holograph, 37–39 [images 27–29] (recorded September 3, 1839), in Hancock County Plat Book 1, Family History Library, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSX8-B9JC-K>.

46. “Proceedings of the General Conference, held at Commerce, Hancock County, Illinois, on Saturday the 5th day of October, 1839,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 2 (December 1839): 30, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n45>; *History of the Church*, 4:12; Iowa Stake, Iowa Stake Record, 1839–1841, holograph, image 3, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/27cab0df-5f36-42f9-8f32-0d57f324401e/0/2>. At the conference, the eastern stake is called “Commerce,” but it begins to call itself “Nauvoo” by December.

who lived seventy miles to the south. This stretched the high council's jurisdiction across southwestern Illinois.⁴⁷ The high council also issued a letter in December instructing all Saints living west of Kirtland to gather to Nauvoo rather than Kirtland, thus claiming authority over a broad region.⁴⁸ In fact, this council simply referred to itself as the "High Council of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints" until January 1840 when it adds the restriction "of Nauvoo." Contemporary records show that it was very rarely called a stake after the day it was organized. That said, its activity was almost completely focused on the Saints in the city, and its authority elsewhere was tenuous.

The stake in Iowa also had regional jurisdiction by July 1840.⁴⁹ Like Nauvoo, it consisted of a central gathering city—initially at the new town of Nashville, then the planned city of Zarahemla near Montrose (D&C 125:3)—surrounded by several satellite branches across Lee County and one or two beyond the county, as itemized in the conference held on August 7, 1841.⁵⁰ It is also very rarely called a stake in its own records. Most often, it calls itself "this branch of the Church."⁵¹

The General Branch Ideal

The above reference reflects an emerging use of the term *branch* to refer (in a general sense) to any organized portion of the Church, regardless of particular administrative roles or structures. Although this usage would persist through the next twenty years, the Saints at the time never gave it a distinct name, and I have not found evidence of past historians discussing it, so I will call it a *general branch* to distinguish it from

47. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1839 October 20–1840 May 2, holograph, image 1 (October 20, 1839), Nauvoo Stake High Council Minutes, 1839 October–1845 October, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/51afec20-84fe-4da4-b423-7b8de8fb5422/0/0>.

48. H. G. Sherwood, "To the Saints Scattered Abroad, in the Region Westward from Kirtland Ohio," *Times and Seasons* 1 no. 2 (December 1839): 29, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasonsVol1/page/n43>.

49. Representatives of the high council are sent to visit branches in Nashville, Montrose, Ambrosia, and other areas. Iowa Stake, Iowa Stake Record, 1839–1841, July 18, 1840, holograph, 91 [image 29], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/27cab0df-5f36-42f9-8f32-0d57f324401e/0/28>.

50. Iowa Stake, Iowa Stake Record, 1839–1841, holograph, 101 [image 34], listing branches at Zarahemla (near Montrose), Siloam, Nashville, Ambrosia, Meham Settlement, Keokuk, Augusta, Van Buren Township in Lee County, and Chequest Creek in Van Buren County.

51. For example, Iowa Stake, Iowa Stake Record, 1839–1841, July 12, 1840, holograph, 90 [image 29].

a *congregational branch*. At the time, the formal phrase “branch of the Church” often implied this general meaning. Thus, a stake was a branch of the Church, a ward was a branch of the Church, a conference was a branch of the Church, and a branch was just a branch of the Church to which no more specific title applied.

The acknowledgement of this meaning of *branch* clears up hundreds of passages in historical documents that can be confusing to modern readers, such as a unit being called a “branch” and a “stake” in the same sentence.⁵² Previous scholars have often attributed this to a general vagueness of the terminology of the young church. But interpreted through the general branch concept, the use of *branch* is consistent, reflecting a widely understood meaning that has since fallen into disuse.

Having (congregational) branches of (regional) branches may seem confusing to today’s members, but it was consistent with the scriptural metaphors of the House of Israel as a grapevine or olive tree with branches, from which the word was taken (Jacob 5; Isa. 5) and with scriptures such as D&C 20:65. In use through at least the mid-1850s, the general use of “branch” was synonymous with what the Church now calls an *ecclesiastical unit*, a cumbersome technical term that is not commonly used by members today; unfortunately, we lack one simple term that collectively includes a ward, branch, stake, and mission.

This general branch concept engendered more than just a semantics of category hierarchy; it gave early Church members a sense of continuity between these different kinds of branches. A branch could start very small and simple with just a presiding elder. It could then add leaders as its growing membership needed—presidency counselors, bishopric, high council, patriarch, and priesthood quorums—gradually becoming a stake. If there happened to be smaller branches nearby, these leaders might have had jurisdiction over them. If the central city became very large, it might be subdivided into smaller subsidiary branches (that is, wards) with their own leadership. If the membership of a branch later decreased, such layers of leaders could be removed as needed or, if leaders departed, left vacant. But through any growth, wards and stakes were always branches of the Church. This *branch continuum* concept remained the ideal framework for local administration in the minds of Church leaders until it diminished in the 1850s.⁵³

52. For example, Jedediah M. Grant, in one of his final sermons in 1856, calls the Salt Lake Stake a “stake” twice and a “branch” five times. Jedediah M. Grant, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, 1855–86), 4:124–5 (October 26, 1856).

53. This change will be covered in the third article in this series.

The Rise and Fall of Congregational Stakes

The most notable example of fluidity between different types of branches at this time was what will be called herein a *congregational stake*, in which a single congregation was declared a stake and had at least some portion of the full stake leadership as found in Nauvoo and Iowa. These proliferated as it became clear that not all members were able or willing to move to Nauvoo. This was an important promotion for a settlement; status as a stake was not only a reward for a large membership but also a designation as a permanent place of gathering—a commitment by the Church to invest in the community’s success and potentially even the construction of a temple.

As Church leaders were getting ready to settle in Commerce, they learned that Kirtland was seeing an influx of converts from the Eastern states who were unable to move all the way to Illinois (or were uncertain as to the long-term prospects there). On May 6, 1839, Kirtland was authorized to reorganize as a stake under the presidency of Oliver Granger, but Granger was also tasked with resolving the complicated financial affairs of Joseph and the Church there. In keeping with the stake-as-place concept, Kirtland was redesignated as a permanent gathering place, especially for eastern Saints.⁵⁴ Granger eventually made it to Kirtland in 1840, but there are no records of him reorganizing the Kirtland stake. Granger performed his financial duties until his death in August 1841.

After the organization of the two stakes at the October 1839 Conference, William Draper (president of a branch at Pleasant Vale, 80 miles south of Nauvoo) asked Joseph what it would take to become a stake, to which the Prophet responded that “when the Branch reached the [number] of 100 he would then come and organize the Branch a stake of Zion.”⁵⁵ Within two weeks, Draper had built his branch to 112, and Hyrum Smith came and organized it as a stake.

The next summer, the Crooked Creek Branch east of Nauvoo requested permission for a stake from the First Presidency, and with their approval, one was organized on July 9, 1840, with Joel H. Johnston as president and William Wightman as bishop.⁵⁶ In the branch/stake records, it is clear that the stake was not considered complete until a city

54. “Minutes of a General Conference Held by the Church of the Latter Day Saints, at the Presbyterian Camp Ground near Quincy,” image 2.

55. William Draper, Autobiography, 1881, holograph, 22 [image 23], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/775acd0d-43ec-4697-ae7f-be99af01d340/0/22>.

56. Macedonia Branch, “A Record of the Churh [*sic*] of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Macedonia (also Called Ramus),” 1839–50, holograph, 8 [image 17], Church

site was selected and surveyed in late August; both the new town and stake adopted the name Ramus.⁵⁷ In addition to the central settlement, this stake, like those in Nauvoo and Iowa, had some jurisdiction over neighboring branches, such as LaHarpe.⁵⁸

Over the next year, several branches in southwestern Illinois became similarly large. By the October 1840 general conference, the Prophet felt it was time to significantly expand the gathering vision.

“The president called upon those persons who had any remarks to make respecting the location of Stakes that then was the opportunity of doing so. Bro Miller then rose and made a statement of the desire of a number of the brethren in Adams County in Mt Ephraim Branch to have a Stake appointed there and stated the advantages of the place for agricultural purposes. On motion, resolved that a Stake be appointed in Adams County at Mt Ephraim.”⁵⁹

This was probably Henry W. Miller, who presided over a branch surrounding his homestead near Payson, east of Quincy. Spurred by this request, a committee was appointed to determine other good locations for stakes, led by Hyrum Smith. Kirtland was again declared an intended stake, with Almon Babbitt (one of the committee members) as president and given a renewed authorization as a place for eastern members to gather.

Hyrum Smith was the obvious choice to act as head of the committee; he had recently been ordained associate president (D&C 124:95), and an 1838 revelation had declared that “no stake shall be appointed except by the first presidency.”⁶⁰ Two weeks later, Hyrum’s committee began the expansion effort, organizing several stakes southeast of Nauvoo (fig. 4).⁶¹ As far as the records indicate, a high council was not included in any of these organizations.

History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a7535ad2-bca8-443d-96ec-46099b50c272/0/16>. The high council was not organized until July 29.

57. “Ramus,” 45 [image 31] (recorded August 26, 1840), in Hancock County Plat Book 1.

58. Macedonia Branch, “Record of the Churh,” 16 [image 25].

59. “Minutes of the General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, [Nauvoo, Illinois,] October 3, 1840,” holograph, image 3, Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/268dddc2-c4de-4804-aee6-aef05c566e47/0/2>.

60. “Revelation, 12 January 1838-B,” Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-12-january-1838-b/1>.

61. *History of the Church*, 4:233–36; Hyrum Smith, Diary 1839 March–April, 1840 October, image 45–46, Church History Library, MS 2945, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/63b84c16-190e-4fa9-ba12-f272684cfe0b/0/44>.



FIGURE 4. Stakes and branches in the Nauvoo area, 1839–46. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

- October 23, 1840: Lima Stake/Branch, President Isaac Morley, Bishop Gardner Snow⁶²
- October 25: Quincy Stake, President Daniel Stanton, Bishop George W. Crouse
- October 27: Mt. Hope Stake (at Columbus), President Abel Lamb, Bishop Daniel A. Miller
- October 27: Freedom Stake (formerly Mt. Ephraim Branch near Payson), President Henry W. Miller, Bishop Matthew Leach
- November 1: Geneva Stake, President William Bosley, Bishop Gardner Clark
- November 5: Springfield Stake, President Edwin P. Merriam, Bishop Abraham Palmer⁶³

62. “The Church Record of the Lima Branch,” holograph, October 23, 1840, images 5–6, in James C. Snow Record Book, 1840–1851, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/97704266-7e00-464c-b7e4-10425583fbb4/0/0>. This record and Hyrum Smith’s journal both call it the Lima Branch at this time.

63. *History of the Church*, 4:233–36; Hyrum Smith, Diary, images 45–46.

An eleventh stake was organized February 29, 1841, when the Moroni Branch in the area near Perry, Pike County, reorganized itself as the Zoar Stake, with Levi Gifford as president, James Brown as bishop, and 110 members in the congregation.⁶⁴ It is not clear whether this last stake was authorized by the First Presidency or Hyrum Smith's committee as others had been, but it suggests that any branch with over one hundred members felt it was justified in becoming a stake.

The expansion even went into the East. Babbitt arrived in Kirtland by January 1841 as instructed, where he apparently found Oliver Granger confused about his standing based on the conference report.⁶⁵ Upon clarification from Joseph, Granger continued as the Church financial agent, but Babbitt assumed the ecclesiastical leadership. A stake organization was completed May 22 with Babbitt and a presidency, Thomas Burdick as bishop, but no mention of a high council.⁶⁶ On April 6, 1841, Hyrum Smith reorganized the Philadelphia Branch (214 members) with a full presidency and bishopric but no high council.⁶⁷ Nine days later, the New York City Branch (153 members) was also "more perfectly organized" with a presidency and bishopric by George W. Harris, "he having been specially appointed and authorized by President Hyrum Smith."⁶⁸ Although these two cities are never called stakes, this appears to be an intermediate almost-a-stake stage; for years afterward, New York and Philadelphia had a higher status than the surrounding branches.

Generally, new stakes consisted of a single congregation, although Kirtland may have included more. At the May 1841 Kirtland conference,

64. "A List of Names in Stake of Zoar, Brown County Illinois Organized Feb. 29, 1841," in Moroni Branch Record, 1841, holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9fc7b4e4-1f69-4cfc-bc75-39e47e116ea3/0/0>.

65. John and C. Smith to George A. Smith, January 7, 1841, holograph, image 43, in "John Smith letter, Ambrosia, Iowa 1841 January 7," George A. Smith Papers, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/839e8fa2-9d7c-4e36-9f5b-10d17be825ff/0/44>. Granger was insufficiently reporting his business and ecclesiastical activities to Joseph, who had heard a rumor that Granger had quit and was moving to Nauvoo, leading to Babbitt's call. "Letter to Oliver Granger, 26 January 1841," Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-oliver-granger-26-january-1841/1>.

66. W. W. Phelps, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 458, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n467>.

67. B. Winchester, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 14 (May 15, 1841): 412–13, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n421>.

68. L. R. Foster, *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 19 (August 2, 1841): 499, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n508>.

several nearby branches are mentioned in addition to the “Kirtland church,” but it does not state whether Kirtland was one of the branches in a regional stake or if it was the entire stake and the others just happened to attend the conference.⁶⁹ Subsequent conferences do not list any other branches.

In those stakes for which records have survived, there was a consistent division of labor among stake leaders. The presidency carried out the Melchizedek Priesthood duties set forth in scripture: conducting worship meetings, managing leaders of constituent branches, and ministering to the spiritual needs of members. The bishopric, denoted in scripture as the presidency of the local Aaronic Priesthood and its temporal ministry, managed tithing and Church property, and tended to the physical needs of the poor, sick, and widows with the help of adult Aaronic Priesthood holders.⁷⁰ The high council had a legislative and judicial role, making most policy and practical decisions (often with the presidency) and holding courts. In the stakes without a high council, the court responsibility generally fell to the bishopric. It should be noted that for both the bishop and the high council, these courts were convened to decide civil disputes (like a small claims court) at least as often as to discipline members for transgression—a pattern that lasted for many years until a civil judicial system was established in Utah.

The expansive gathering area established in these twelve stakes by early 1841 did not last long. The main issue was real estate. There were simply not enough Saints gathering with sufficient wealth to buy land and build up all these new settlements. Outlying Church towns such as Ramus and Zarahemla sold a few lots, mostly to members already living in the area. Joseph Smith was especially concerned with the massive debt the Church had incurred to purchase the land for Nauvoo. Lots were not being sold fast enough to make the mortgage payments. Also, the construction of the temple and the Nauvoo House (as commanded in D&C 124:22–23) was moving too slowly, and Joseph did not want a reprimand like the one he had received from the Lord for neglecting the Kirtland Temple (D&C 95), so he needed more laborers in Nauvoo.

69. W. W. Phelps, “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 458–59, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n467>.

70. In the earlier days of the Church, most Aaronic Priesthood holders were adult men. To learn more about this, see William G. Hartley, “From Men to Boys: LDS Aaronic Priesthood Offices, 1829–1996,” in *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (BYU Studies, 2010), 37–86.

Consequently, on May 24, 1841 (coincidentally, just two days after the Kirtland Stake was organized), the Prophet issued the following:

The First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, anxious to promote the prosperity of said church, feel it their duty to call upon the saints who reside out of this county, to make preparations to come in, without delay. This is important, and should be attended to by all who feel an interest in the prosperity of this the corner stone of Zion. Here the Temple must be raised, the University be built, and other edifices erected which are necessary for the great work of the last days; and which can only be done by a concentration of energy, and enterprise. Let it therefore be understood, that all the stakes, excepting those in this county, and in Lee county, Iowa, are discontinued, and the saints instructed to settle in this county as soon as circumstances will permit.⁷¹

Thus, all the stakes other than Nauvoo, Ramus, Lima, and Iowa were to be disorganized so the Saints could move to Nauvoo. However, this edict was generally implemented in a piecemeal fashion.

- Moroni: On May 22, 1841, its bishop was replaced by Priddy Meeks, but it is never mentioned again with this organization.⁷² In 1845, it was mentioned as a branch.⁷³
- Mt. Hope: As of June 1841, it still had a presidency and a bishopric, but one of its decisions was appealed to the jurisdiction of the Nauvoo high council, so it must have lost its sovereignty.⁷⁴ By the summer of 1843, it was merged with the neighboring New Liberty Branch.
- Springfield: The president and bishop left in the autumn of 1841 without reorganizing. On January 25, 1842, the members reorganized as a regular branch.⁷⁵

71. G. A. Smith, "To the Saints Abroad," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 15 (June 1, 1841): 434–35, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n443>.

72. "List of Names in Stake of Zoar, Brown County Illinois."

73. Quorum Record, 1844–1845, February 25, 1845, holograph, image 82, High Priests Quorum Record, 1844–1845, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3bee6eb3-d491-47ba-873c-f55723c0fe68/0/81>.

74. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1840 March 8–1842 May 20, holograph, 31, Nauvoo Stake High Council Minutes, 1839 October–1845 October, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/75eb5e4f-7d07-4136-807c-e16a3b03c11b/0/30>.

75. "Letter from Abraham C. Hodge and Springfield, Illinois, Branch, 25 January 1842," Church History Library, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-abraham-c-hodge-and-springfield-illinois-branch-25-january-1842/1>.

- Quincy: Though disorganized as a stake on January 29, 1842, Quincy was reorganized as a regular branch with a presiding elder.⁷⁶ It survived as a sizable branch at least through October 1844, when a new bishop was assigned to it.⁷⁷
- Freedom: On April 7, 1842, a branch decision was appealed to the Nauvoo high council, so it did not have its earlier sovereign status.⁷⁸
- Geneva: President William Bosley was called to serve a mission on October 7, 1841, and Bishop Gardner Clark moved from Geneva to Nauvoo on April 28, 1842, so the stake probably ceased to function around this time.⁷⁹
- Pleasant Vale: On May 8, 1842, in response to an appeal of a decision in this branch, the Nauvoo High Council declared it disorganized.⁸⁰
- Kirtland: President Almon Babbitt, who had zealously promoted the eastern gathering to Kirtland (in keeping with, if exaggerating, his 1840 instructions, but in opposition to Joseph's recent policy change to gather in Nauvoo), was disfellowshipped at the October 1841 general conference.⁸¹ Upon being notified of this, his counselors and Bishop Thomas Burdick asked for clarification on Kirtland's status.⁸² In a response on December 15, 1841, Joseph answered that even though the authorization for gathering as a stake was discontinued in May, Kirtland had permission to continue building.⁸³ At

76. Record Book 1840–1844, January 29, 1842, holograph, 23 [image 32], Quincy Branch Records Books, 1840–1848, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/bb7b0edd-3211-47cc-bbda-f2f7d5c3bf53/0/31>.

77. Wm. Clayton, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 20 (October 8, 1844): 696, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1685>.

78. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1840 March 8–1842 May 20, image 41.

79. Nauvoo 9th Ward, High Priests Minutes, 1844 November–1845 February, holograph, image 15, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9be9c56c-addf-4993-9144-5e5b4b1927c7/0/14>.

80. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1840 March 8–1842 May 20, image 44.

81. Elias Smith and Gustavus Bills, "Minutes of a Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Held in Nauvoo, Ill., Commencing Oct. 1st, 1841," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 24 (October 15, 1841): 577, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n586>.

82. "Letter from Lester Brooks and Others, 16 November 1841," Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-lester-brooks-and-others-16november-1841/1>.

83. "Journal, December 1841–December 1842," 31 (December 15, 1841), Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1841-december-1842/4>.

a conference there on October 28, 1842, presided over by Apostle Lyman Wight, Kirtland was reorganized as a branch (specifically not a stake) but retained a full presidency and bishopric.⁸⁴ At the next conference in April 1843, also presided over by Elder Wight, those Saints who were still loyal to the Church agreed to leave for Nauvoo.⁸⁵

- Philadelphia: President Benjamin Winchester was replaced in October 1842, and Bishop Jacob Syfritt was excommunicated in October 1843, by which time it had already been reduced to a simple branch.⁸⁶
- New York: At a November 1841 conference, there was still a full presidency and bishopric.⁸⁷ Bishop John M. Bernhisel moved to Nauvoo in May 1843, but it is unclear whether he was still serving as bishop.

So after the May 1841 proclamation, the dual presidency-bishopric administration in these congregations continued to function as before, but they were no longer called stakes, and at least those in Illinois became part of the jurisdiction of the Nauvoo Stake. It could be that the Nauvoo High Council was claiming authority as a general appellate authority, as Kirtland had been years earlier, but there were no appeals between October 1840 and May 1841 when the stakes were authorized. Also, the Kirtland case suggests that the Quorum of the Twelve had authority beyond the Nauvoo area. Then, as leaders left, each stake was either reorganized as a regular branch (only a presiding elder without counselors or bishopric) or drifted into unorganized obscurity.

Some of the stakes closer to Nauvoo also had difficulty sustaining their energy. For example, Ramus had issues with internal strife. On December 4, 1841, a conference was held with Hyrum Smith and four

84. Alexander Badlam, "Kirtland, October 28, 1842," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 3 (December 15, 1842): 39, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1018>.

85. Alexander Badlam and Thomas Kerk, "Conference Proceedings," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 18 (August 1, 1843): 282–84, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1261>.

86. Philadelphia Branch, Record Book, Community of Christ Library and Archive, typescript in MSS 2182, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; Maurine Carr Ward, "Philadelphia Pennsylvania Branch Membership: 1840–1854," *Mormon Historical Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 67–98, <https://ensignpeakfoundation.org/mormon-historical-studies-spring-2005-vol-6-no-1/>.

87. L. R. Foster, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842): 763, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n781>.

of the Twelve, at which Hyrum decided to discontinue the Ramus stake because “some had become so disaffected towards the remainder there seemed no possible chance of a union.”⁸⁸ Ramus was thus returned to branch status (and renamed Macedonia) after an existence of just seventeen months.

Despite its revelatory introduction, Zarahemla was not ultimately successful as a gathering place either. County records indicate that very few lots in the new city were officially sold,⁸⁹ and the Iowa Stake was demoted on January 6, 1842: “A conference of the branch of the Church . . . in Lee County Iowa . . . Resolved. That the High Council and Bishop and counsellors in this branch of the church be discontinued. Resolved that President John Smith continue to be the presiding elder of the branch of the church in this place.”⁹⁰

Another potential gathering place or stake in Hancock County was the new town of Warren; it was surveyed in the summer of 1841 on land the Church owned at the best steamboat landing site in the area.⁹¹ It was announced with great fanfare as a destination for British immigrants. Willard Richards was called to lead there, and at least one immigrant company arrived. However, the company had to stay in neighboring Warsaw, the epicenter of the “Anti-Mormon Society.” They were treated poorly, and the plan was abandoned in December.⁹²

Conversely, the Lima Stake continued longer than any others outside Nauvoo. In fact, while other outlying stakes and branches were disbanded, the Lima Stake was strengthened. Even though it was subordinated to

88. Macedonia Branch, Macedonia Branch Record, 1839–1850, holograph, 24 [image 33], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a7535ad2-bca8-443d-96ec-46099b50c272/0/32>.

89. David Pettegrew, Journal, 1840–1857, 1926–1930, holograph, 35 [image 43], David Pettegrew Family Collection, 1836–1883, 1926–1930, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/fd3e91a9-f25e-4f70-ae4f-539d1ca618fd/0/42>.

90. “Minutes of a Conference Held in Zarahemla, Jany 6th 1842,” holograph, image 2, Elias Smith Papers, 1834–1846, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ceb36342-5da8-49d6-b58e-e7328efa4227/0/1>.

91. “History Draft [1 January–31 December 1841],” 14 (August 19, 1841), Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-draft-1-january-31-december-1841/14>; B. Young, H. C. Kimball, O. Pratt, W. Richards, John Taylor, and G. A. Smith, “An Epistle of the Twelve to the Saints Scattered Abroad Among the Nations,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 21 (September 1, 1841): 520–21, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n529>.

92. “Journal, December 1841–December 1842,” 33 (December 13, 1841), Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1841-december-1842/5>.

the Nauvoo Council in 1841, just like all the other outlying stakes, it eventually gained an even more complete organization than before.⁹³ At a branch conference on June 11, 1843, not only were the presidency and bishopric sustained, but a new high council was added to the organization.⁹⁴ Also at this conference, plans were announced to build up a new Church city, soon surveyed and named Yelrome (essentially President Isaac Morley's surname in reverse), which also became the name of the branch.⁹⁵ In 1844, a high priests quorum of thirty-one members was organized, an organization usually reserved for stakes.⁹⁶ The Lima Stake even survived the loss of its president when Isaac Morley moved to Nauvoo in early 1845 and was replaced by Solomon Hancock. However, throughout this period it was almost exclusively called a branch, not a stake, and it is not clear how long a full stake-like organization operated beyond 1843. The branch was not fully abandoned until mobs attacked in the autumn of 1845.

The Near Comeback of Stakes

The expanded gathering ideal of the fall of 1840, which had been put on hold in 1841, gained new traction in 1844. At the April conference, Joseph Smith stated that “the whole of America is Zion,”⁹⁷ and more particularly, “I have rec[eived] inst[ruction] from [the] L[or]d that E[lde]rs shall build churches where ever they raise branches through the States then builds stakes—in the g[rea]t cities Boston &c there shall be stakes.”⁹⁸

93. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1840 March 8–1842 May 20, image 38 (February 4, 1842).

94. “Conference Minutes and Re-organization,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 19 (August 15, 1843): 303, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1281/mode/2up>; J. C. Snow, “Conference Minutes and Re-organization (Continued),” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 20 (September 1, 1843): 316, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1295>.

95. “Town of Yelrome,” 60 [image 39] (recorded April 24, 1844), in Hancock County Plat Book 1.

96. Williard Richard Notation, circa 1845, holograph, image 1, Joseph Smith History Documents 1839–1860, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/351b9741-ff27-494c-819b-7db7cb4f7cdf/0/0>.

97. “Discourse, 8 April 1844, as Reported by Willard Richards,” in *Documents, Volume 14: 1 January–15 May 1844*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Adam H. Petty, Jessica M. Nelson, and Spencer W. McBride, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2023), 356.

98. “Discourse, 8 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton,” 356.

To put this plan in motion, the Prophet called a series of elders to preside over the Church and the missionaries in each state,⁹⁹ essentially functioning like modern mission presidents (but not called such), with the added responsibility of promoting Joseph's campaign for president of the United States around the country. Many were serving in their new capacity when Joseph and Hyrum were murdered in June, whereupon most of them returned to Nauvoo to mourn and reorganize.

As further evidence of this emerging wider vision, the Council of Fifty discussed several exploration initiatives in the spring of 1844, such as creating a colony in Texas and missions to the American Indians in the Great Plains.¹⁰⁰ These initially had the goal of establishing additional settlements and gathering areas, not of leaving Nauvoo.

The martyrdom did not quell the expansion initiative. After Brigham Young and the Twelve had consolidated the Church in Nauvoo, the stake expansion plan was renewed at the October 1844 conference. Eighty-five high priests were called to various places in the United States. Brigham stated that their purpose was to permanently move with their families to their assigned districts to preside "and build up a stake as large as this."¹⁰¹ They wanted more stakes as large as Nauvoo. This is why high priests who could be stake presidents and bishops were needed, rather than the usual elders or seventies who served missions.

It is not certain how many of the called men and their families fulfilled their missions to the stakes-in-embryo, but several are documented.¹⁰² The system functioned especially well in the northeastern United States, where dozens of branches were organized into ten to twelve conferences led by the high priests, all under the auspices of an Apostle living in New York City (William Smith in 1844, Parley P. Pratt in early 1845, and Orson

99. W. Richards, "Special Conference," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 8 (April 15, 1844): 504–6, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasonsVol5/page/n211/mode/2up>. Among them, Kirtland President Lester Brooks is named a counselor in the presidency of Ohio.

100. "Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846, Volume 1, 10 March 1844–1 March 1845," Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/council-of-fifty-minutes-march-1844-january-1846-volume-1-10-march-1844-1-march-1845/1>.

101. Wm. Clayton, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Season* 5, no. 23 (December 15, 1844): 696, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasonsVol5/page/n479>.

102. For example, Abraham O. Smoot presided for several months in Alabama. A. O. Smoot, *Diary*, vol. 1, 1836–1846, A. O. Smoot Papers, Perry Special Collections, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/MMD/id/27268>.

Pratt in late 1845) and acting as a regional president.¹⁰³ The plan did not result in the creation of any stakes before all the presidents were called home in late 1845 to prepare for the exodus from Nauvoo (essentially ending the concerted missionary effort east of the Mississippi for the next fifty years). Despite the exodus, their efforts did have lasting effect. The greatest was in strengthening the succession claim of the Twelve, as missionaries for opposing claimants to prophetic authority (especially James J. Strang) also fanned out to recruit support for themselves in the branches. It has been estimated that only half of the 8,000–10,000 Saints who were scattered in branches across the United States in 1844 eventually made their way to Utah,¹⁰⁴ but the number would likely have been much lower if Brigham Young had kept his most ardent supporters in Nauvoo during the crisis.

Late in the Nauvoo Era (approximately 1845–1846) came two new stake-like organizations: the Northern Pine Expedition and the LaSalle Branch. The first, near Black River Falls, Wisconsin, provided lumber for the Nauvoo Temple, the Nauvoo House, and the city's rapidly multiplying residences. The operation was started in the autumn of 1842 and expanded from 1843 to 1845. It was never a large settlement and was likely never intended to be permanently established, thus not meeting the primary qualification to be a stake. However, it had a dual-leader organization much like the congregational stakes of 1840. This was likely a result of its abundance of leadership, including Apostle Lyman Wight (who served as president of the branch), Bishop George Miller, Nauvoo high councilor Alpheus Cutler, and former Freedom Stake President Henry W. Miller. During the winter of 1844–1845, Bishop Miller was in Nauvoo, presiding over the High Priests Quorum, so the full organization appears to have only existed during the winter of 1843–1844. However, it was a very tight-knit community; most of its members followed Wight to settle near Austin, Texas in 1845, with George Miller eventually joining them.¹⁰⁵

103. "Eastern States Mission, 1844–1845," in Plewe and others, *Mapping Mormonism*, 43. See also "The Church in the Kirtland-Missouri Era," in Plewe and others, *Mapping Mormonism*, 36–37.

104. Robin Jenson, "Gleaning the Harvest: Strangite Missionary Work, 1846–1850" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2005), 39, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1590&context=etd>.

105. In 1848, Wight, Miller, and others were excommunicated by Brigham Young's First Presidency in absentia. Miller soon left to join James J. Strang, but Wight and the rest of his colony formed their own church and even built a small temple; the colony evaporated after Wight's death in 1858. Melvin C. Johnson, *Polygamy on the Pedernales*:

The LaSalle Branch was organized after George P. Dykes baptized several dozen Norwegian immigrants who had settled southwest of Chicago near Ottawa in 1842.¹⁰⁶ As this branch grew, Joseph Smith and the Twelve saw it as a potential starting point for a mission to Scandinavia and a gathering place to settle the converts therefrom. On October 23, 1844, Brigham Young and other leaders met with the Norwegian Saints and reorganized them as the Norway Branch or Stake (depending on the source), with Dykes as president and local convert Reuben Miller as bishop.¹⁰⁷ In keeping with the stake ideal, a city was laid out for gathering and building up to a full stake organization.

However, the LaSalle endeavor was not long-lived. Being halfway between Nauvoo and the home of James J. Strang in Voree, Wisconsin, this stake was literally caught in the middle of the rivalry between the Twelve and its primary opponent. In late 1845, the branch set its stake aspirations aside and prepared to move West with the Twelve, but when Bishop Miller chose Strang in early 1846 (soon becoming his Voree Stake President), he was able to shift the loyalty of most of the branch. Strang held a conference in Ottawa in April that sustained him as a prophet,¹⁰⁸ but within a few months, Miller became disaffected with Strang and returned to the Twelve. Many of the Norwegian Saints reconverted with Miller and went West, including Canute Peterson, who would eventually serve as the president of the Scandinavian Mission and of the Sanpete Stake.¹⁰⁹

Lyman Wight's Mormon Villages in Antebellum Texas, 1845–1858 (Utah State University Press, 2006).

106. Geo. P. Dykes, "To the Editor of the Times & Seasons," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 13 (May 15, 1843): 195, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1173/mode/2up>.

107. Norway Branch, Minutes, 1847 July 18–1848 April 15, holograph, image 63, Winter Quarters Municipal High Council Records, 1846–1848, Church History Library, [https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/0ddc178b-8238-4ee7-aca4-b0dce74a6659/0/62; History of the Church, 7:312; Reuben Miller, James J. Strang, Weighed in the Balance of Truth, and Found Wanting](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/0ddc178b-8238-4ee7-aca4-b0dce74a6659/0/62;History%20of%20the%20Church,%207:312;Reuben%20Miller,%20James%20J.%20Strang,%20Weighed%20in%20the%20Balance%20of%20Truth,%20and%20Found%20Wanting%20(Burlington,%20W.T.,%201846),%201) (Burlington, W.T., 1846), 1, <https://archive.org/details/jamesjstrangweig00mill/page/n1/mode/2up>.

108. "Conference at the Norwegian Settlement," *Voree Herald* 1, no. 5 (May 1846): 3, <https://archive.org/details/VoreeHerald1846/page/n22>.

109. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Andrew Jenson History; Deseret News, 1901–36), 1:362, <https://archive.org/details/latterdaysaintbi01bjens/page/362>. Reuben Miller went on to serve as the bishop of the Mill Creek Ward in Salt Lake Valley for thirty years.

The Nauvoo Stake organization survived the death of Joseph Smith, with most of the leaders (high council, bishops, and outlying branch presidents) pledging their loyalty to the Twelve. A notable exception was stake president William Marks, who initially followed Sidney Rigdon, then James Strang, then helped start the New Organization (now Community of Christ).¹¹⁰ He was replaced at the October 1844 conference by John Smith, in his fourth stint as stake president.¹¹¹

The bishops and high council spent much of 1845 performing the less enjoyable parts of their callings, such as excommunicating members who chose not to follow the Twelve and fending off the self-styled anti-Mormons who were willing to do anything to drive the Saints out of the county. The high council met for the last time on October 18, 1845, after which the Church organization shifted into a mode of preparing for the exodus the following spring.

The Ward Appears (Sort of)

While the stakes and branches, led by presidents and bishops, continued the model of the Kirtland-Missouri Era, the major innovation in Nauvoo church administration was the *ward*. As the Saints began to regather to their new city in 1839, they now had three bishops: Edward Partridge (from Zion), Newel K. Whitney (from Kirtland), and Vinson Knight (from Adam-ondi-Ahman). As a priesthood office, bishop was considered an ordination for life. Today, that lifetime ordination is still in effect, but usually only appears as an honorific title by which ward members continue to call their previous bishops. In the nineteenth century it was very real; most bishops repeatedly served as bishops wherever they went, often for the rest of their lives.

When the Nauvoo Stake was organized in October 1839, the three bishops had the luxury of sharing the work of the Aaronic Priesthood, so they organized the settlement between them. In the large cities of the East, a ward was and still is a unit of city government: a neighborhood-size district used to localize both representative government and the provision of services. In Nauvoo, which was not yet organized with any municipal government, the presidency simply co-opted the term to serve a similar function in its ecclesiastical governance. Knight was

110. Cheryl L. Bruno and John S. Dinger, *Come Up Hither to Zion: William Marks and the Mormon Concept of Gathering* (Greg Kofford Books, 2024).

111. Wm. Clayton, "October Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 20 (November 1, 1844), 692, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasonsVol5/page/n475>.

given the “lower ward,” probably the area around Joseph Smith’s home near the river; Partridge took the “upper ward,” likely on the bluff behind the temple site; and Whitney had the “middle ward,” somewhere in between.¹¹²

After Edward Partridge died, George Miller was called in January 1841 (D&C 124:20–21). Sometime soon after this, Isaac Higbee was called as a fourth bishop. No direct record has been found that shows a corresponding redivision of the stake among the four bishops nor records of their day-to-day activities. A meeting on March 21, 1841, merely mentions “Bishops Whitney, Miller, Higbee, and Knight.”¹¹³ At this meeting, a single city-wide quorum was created for each office of the Aaronic Priesthood, but they divided their work by ward.¹¹⁴ At the April 1841 conference, the four bishops were sustained, each with two counselors, showing that there were likely four wards by this date.¹¹⁵

This corresponded with a parallel secular development. When the Nauvoo municipal government was chartered and a city council organized in February 1841, one of its first actions was to divide the new city into four municipal wards, as was common in other cities.¹¹⁶ The layout of these wards was likely unrelated to the earlier three Church wards. The municipal wards served a variety of purposes, such as the election of city councilors, police precincts, street maintenance, and animal control.

112. “Proceedings of the General Conference, held at Commerce, Hancock County, Illinois, on Saturday the 5th day of October, 1839,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 2 (December 1839): 30.

113. Secondary sources have given Higbee’s ordination date as either February 19, 1841, or February 29, 1842, and there is no primary source for the event. The latter date is not likely, as he is a bishop on March 21, 1841. Organization of Lesser Priesthood circa 1845, holograph, image 1, Joseph Smith History Documents, 1839–1860, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/70d6ab6c-ec9f-41fd-8a00-b5d3727227c5/0/0>.

114. “A Record of the Quorum of the Lesser Priesthood,” Minutes, 1841 March–1851 January, holograph, Presiding Bishopric Bishop’s Quorum Minutes, 1849–1851, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3664bcab-178a-4dd8-9409-912ee9135c13>.

115. George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Signature Books, 1995), 84–85 (April 6, 7, 8, 9, 1841).

116. “Records of the City Council of the city of Nauvoo,” Nauvoo City Council Proceedings, 1841 February–1845 February, holograph, 9–10 [image 52–53], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a67c7db2-98d3-43a7-9405-f37832f9c988/0/51>.



FIGURE 5. Wards in Nauvoo, 1841. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

The Church census, conducted in spring 1842, listed each family's ward but not their address; it lists four wards.¹¹⁷ However, comparing it with land records shows that the four bishop's wards were probably the same as the municipal wards in 1842 (with the exception that the bishop's wards extended beyond the city limits), as shown in figure 5.

This census listed almost 4,000 members of the Church in Nauvoo (including young children and some who had previously died in Nauvoo), divided roughly equally between the four wards. During the year, the population increased rapidly as Saints gathered in from outlying settlements and converts continued to immigrate from Britain. Soon, the growing stake needed a more manageable structure. At the regular meeting of the Nauvoo High Council on August 20, 1842, the following was enacted:

117. Nauvoo Stake, Nauvoo Stake Ward Census, 1842, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/2febcd71-25e6-470f-94c1-d1bcb53cdfca/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

2. Resolved that the City of Nauvoo be divided into ten wards, according to the division made by the “Temple Committee” and that there be a Bishop appointed over each ward, and, also that other Bishops be appointed over such districts immediately out of the city and adjoining thereto as shall be considered necessary.

3rd. Resolved, that Samuel H. Smith be appointed Bishop in the place of Bishop Vinson Knight dec.,¹¹⁸ also that Tarlton Lewis be appointed Bishop of the 4th Ward, John Murdock of the 5th Ward, Daniel Cairn of the 6th Ward, Jacob Foutz of the 8th Ward, Jonathan H. Hale of the 9th Ward, Hezekiah Peck of the 10th Ward, David Evans of the district South of the city called the 11th ward, Israel Calkins of the district East of the city and South of Knight Street, William W. Spencer of the district East of the city and North of Knight Street.¹¹⁹

The boundaries of the wards were not specified, and it appears that there was some resulting confusion. In December, the boundaries were clarified, as shown in figure 6.¹²⁰ Also, the initial division did not include assignments for the three existing bishops, and no bishops were assigned to four of the wards. By October 1842, Isaac Higbee was the bishop of the first, second, and third wards, presumably because the northern edge of the city, in which he lived, was only lightly populated.¹²¹ The Seventh Ward bishopric may have been vacant until December 4, when Newel K. Whitney was assigned to it. This left George Miller as the sole unassigned bishop, who by August was getting ready to lead the Northern Pine Expedition to Wisconsin.¹²²

Conversely, the city government continued to operate with the same four wards through 1845. In the past, it was sometimes assumed that the ecclesiastical and municipal wards of Nauvoo were identical and that the modern church ward emerged later.¹²³ But in fact, of the seven-year

118. Bishop Knight had died on July 31. The day after this meeting, the high council was informed that Samuel H. Smith could not serve as bishop, and he was apparently not replaced.

119. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1842 May 20–1843 February 19, holograph, 7, Nauvoo Stake High Council Minutes, 1839 October–1845 October, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/1a3b9e33-bf31-4e57-afb7-9aa73039034c/0/6>.

120. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1842 May 20–1843 February 19, 17.

121. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1842 May 20–1843 February 19, 14.

122. Allen J. Stout to Hosea Stout, September 10, 1843, typescript, image 5–7, in Allen J. Stout Letters, Wisconsin, to Hosea Stout, Nauvoo, Illinois, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/7bc69e67-56d9-4fff-8c95-a2c1d452fa08/0/4>.

123. William G. Hartley, “Nauvoo Stake, Priesthood Quorums, and the Church’s First Wards,” *BYU Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (1992): 73–77.



FIGURE 6. Nauvoo wards and bishops' homes in 1842. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

history of the Nauvoo wards, they only coincided with the municipal wards for seventeen months. The eleven wards of 1842 (thirteen if one counts the two bishop's "districts" east of the city) were thus the genesis of the modern ward.

That said, the modern ward had not yet emerged completely. These were not separate congregations; the members of each ward did not meet together on Sundays. Instead, the entire city typically met for worship services in a grove below the temple site, with the Aaronic Priesthood holders of each ward rotating the sacrament responsibilities. These wards were merely a vehicle to facilitate the bishop's work as established in Kirtland and Missouri, an organization that I will term a *semi-organized ward*. It had the following functions:¹²⁴

- The bishop directed the personal ministry of the Aaronic Priesthood holders in his ward (even though they were in stake-wide quorums), who were then called to care for each member (D&C 20:46–47).
- Tithing and other funds were collected and tracked by the bishop.
- The bishops (and deacons) built and managed church buildings, usually schools.
- The bishop took care of the poor and widows in his ward.
- The bishop was the judge in disciplinary actions, but his decisions could be appealed to the high council, and his jurisdiction over Melchizedek Priesthood holders was debatable.

In late 1844 and early 1845, as the population of the wards reached their peak, additional revisions occurred. Several wards organized their own high priest quorums. At least some wards began holding their own prayer meetings (often on Thursday evening); in some cases, these were held in different neighborhoods of the ward.¹²⁵ Edward Hunter, the bishop of the Fifth Ward in 1844, records a list of twenty "bishops" in his ward.¹²⁶ Without further explanation, or being mentioned in other ward

124. Hartley, "Nauvoo Stake," 61–63.

125. Nauvoo 5th Ward High Priests Minutes, 1844 December–1845 April, holograph, 29 [image 34], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/342f513f-eb5e-4c9a-b468-2f7bc2350cbc/0/33>.

126. Edward Hunter, Bishop's Record, 1844–1848, 1850–1856, 1865, holograph, 17 [image 7] (1844), Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/b8a29293-b2fc-436c-ab73-71b1204c9969/0/6>.

records, it is unclear what their role was, whether this was a widespread practice, or how long it lasted. Only a few of these bishops were high priests, which was required to be an ordained bishop. It is possible that these men were merely acting as bishops, a role usually assigned to a quorum of teachers, who were Aaronic Priesthood agents of the bishop who conducted ward business directly with ward members.

Conclusion

As the sojourn in Nauvoo ended in increasingly violent clashes with its neighbors, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had some elements of local organization that are familiar to twentieth-century Saints, such as a regional stake centered on a city and organized into wards. Beyond Nauvoo, hundreds of branches operated across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, with simpler organization and simpler regional administration. However, there appears to have been an underlying philosophy of local administration in the early Church that was quite different from today, especially the concepts of stake-as-gathering-place and the general branch, which produced many differences in the details of how stakes, wards, and branches operated compared to the modern Church.

These concepts and structures would further develop as the Church moved West between 1846 and 1851, a time of unique circumstances that bred unique organizational solutions, while retaining the same basic philosophy. That will be the focus of the next article.

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