
Persecution in Jackson County

D&C 97: Introduction

In 1831 Independence, Missouri, was the “center place,” and Jackson County was a consecrated land for the gathering of the faithful. By 1833 an estimated 1,200 Saints had gathered to Jackson and organized themselves in small clusters throughout the county. They built homes, shops, mills, ferries, bridges, and more. Church leaders Algernon Sidney Gilbert and William W. Phelps established a storehouse and a printing office under the auspices of the United Firm. Construction of schools, even a school for the elders patterned after the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, was underway.

There was a growing spirit of optimism among the Saints but also jealousy and envy. The worst problem, however, was differences between the Saints and the Southern slaveholders in the county. Fears of Southern settlers in Independence, sparked by economic competition and threat of so many Northern non-slaveholders in town, led to hostilities.

By summer of 1833, old settlers were claiming “Mormonism” a strange and non-Christian religion. They looked for occasions to ridicule and intimidate Saints living among them. From Kirtland, the Prophet Joseph Smith counseled his followers to rise above retaliation and resolve to build New Jerusalem—a Zion-like community—despite outward challenges. Encouraged by his words, with resolute determination, Joseph’s followers clutched hammers, shovels, and spades and resolved anew to build the prophesied community.

Before long, a mob element in Independence rose up. Flames of hatred were ignited on July 20, 1833, when four to five hundred men devised a plan to rid Jackson County of Mormons: “No Mormon shall in the future move to or settle in this county, that those now

here, who shall give a definite pledge of their intention, within a reasonable time, to remove out of the county, shall be allowed to remain unmolested.”¹

Violence broke out. The W. W. Phelps printing press was destroyed, goods and produce in the Gilbert and Whitney store were tossed into the street, and homes were pillaged. Church leaders Charles Allen and Edward Partridge were tarred and feathered at the town square. Partridge wrote, “I bore my abuse with so much resignation and meekness, that it appeared to astound the multitude, who permitted me to retire in silence, many looking very solemn, their sympathies having been touched.”²

Three days following the scenes of hatred and abuse, “some five hundred [men], again came dashing to Independence bearing a red flag, and armed with rifles, pistols, dirks, whips and clubs ... and shouted, ‘We will rid Jackson County of the “Mormons,” peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must.’” To appease what was a hostile mob, leading elders “resolved to offer themselves as a ransom for the church” and agreed to leave Jackson County. The Saints were frightened by these events and wanted revenge and to sell their properties in Jackson.³

Joseph Smith received a revelation counseling the Saints that it was “not the will of the Lord for you to sell your lands in Zion, if means can possibly be procured for your sustenance without. Every exertion should be made to maintain the cause you have espoused.”⁴ He added,

Let your sufferings be what they may, it is better in the eyes of God that you should die, than that you should give up the land of Zion, the inheritances which you have purchased with your moneys; for every man that giveth not up his inheritance, though he should die, yet, when the Lord shall come, he shall stand upon it, and with Job, in his flesh he shall see God. Therefore, this is my counsel, that you retain your lands, even unto the uttermost.⁵

On October 20, 1833, the Saints publicly announced that “as a people they intended to defend their lands and homes” and that they had hired attorneys to process their grievances.⁶ Two weeks later, on November 5, 1833, well-armed men forced the Latter-

¹ B. H. Roberts, *Missouri Persecutions* (Salt Lake City, UT: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1900), 292.

² Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:391.

³ Roberts, *Missouri Persecutions*, 88.

⁴ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1977), 31.

⁵ Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 35–36.

⁶ Roberts, *Missouri Persecutions*, 77.

day Saints to surrender their arms and abandon their property.⁷ “All my property was scattered to the four winds, tools and all for pretended claims, where I owed not one cent justly,” wrote Levi Hancock.⁸ Joseph Knight attempted to preserve his property from pillage and destruction: “I submitted to the numerous indignities *heaped* upon us ... [and] made many concessions to the mob in hope of pacifying them, but it was useless.”⁹ Parley P. Pratt wrote,

My house was ... burned, and my fruit trees and improvements destroyed or plundered. In short, every member of the society was driven from the county, and fields of corn were ravaged and destroyed, stacks of wheat burned, household goods plundered, and improvements and every kind of property destroyed.¹⁰

The Saints fled from unrestrained mob violence in Jackson County across the Missouri River to Clay County. Without adequate shelter and food, many exiles became ill; others succumbed to death.

⁷ Roberts, *Missouri Persecutions*, 88.

⁸ Levi Ward Hancock Autobiography, typescript, 50. Church History Library.

⁹ Newell Knight, “Newell Knight’s Journal,” *Classic Experiences and Adventures* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1969), 97.

¹⁰ Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1938), 110.