
Robert D. Foster

1811–1878

D&C 124:115–118

Robert was a justice of the peace, a physician, and a land speculator. He entered baptismal waters before moving to Commerce (later Nauvoo), Illinois. He was ordained an elder in October 1839 in Commerce. He rose to prominence among the Saints when he was asked to journey with the Prophet Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon to Washington, DC, to seek redress from government officials for wrongs suffered by the Saints in the state of Missouri. On the journey, the Prophet Joseph had occasion to reprove Robert for his conduct toward “certain females.”¹

Robert was later reprovved by the Nauvoo High Council for “lying, [and] slandering the authorities of the Church, profane swearing, etc.”² After a lengthy discussion, he was acquitted of all charges. Robert did not let the censure of a Prophet or charges brought before the high council stop him from making a positive difference in Nauvoo. He became a regent of the University of Nauvoo, a member of the Agricultural and Manufacturing Association, a surgeon-general of the Nauvoo Legion, and a magistrate in Hancock County.

On January 19, 1841, the Prophet Joseph received a revelation chastising Robert for his actions. The revelation also gave him specific instructions to fulfill:

If my servant Robert D. Foster will obey my voice, let him build a house for my servant Joseph, according to the contract which he has made with him, as the door shall be open to him from time to time.

¹ Smith, History of the Church, 6:440.

² Smith, History of the Church, 4:239, 250.

And let him repent of all his folly, and clothe himself with charity and cease to do evil, and lay aside all his hard speeches;

And pay stock also into the hands of the quorum of the Nauvoo House, for himself and for his generation after him, from generation to generation.

And hearken unto the counsel of my servants, ... and it shall be well with him forever and ever. Even so. Amen. (D&C 124:115–118)

Robert hearkened to the revelation and purchased stock in the Nauvoo House and assisted in the construction of that house. In the process, however, a financial issue arose between the Prophet Joseph and him. The Prophet wrote that he “settled with Dr. Robert D. Foster, and gave him a note to balance all demands.”³ Robert wrote,

If any man accuses me of exchanging Nauvoo stock for rags, &c., he is mistaken. I gave a thousand dollars to this house and fifty dollars to the Relief Society, and some to Fullmer to get stone to build Joseph a house, and I mean to build Joseph a house, and you (the Nauvoo House committee) may build this, and I will help you. I mean to profit by this.⁴

In spite of what was an amicable settlement, Robert continued to butt heads with the Prophet Joseph. In April 1844 Joseph Smith brought charges against him before the Nauvoo High Council “for unchristianlike conduct in general, for abusing my character privily, for throwing out slanderous insinuations against me, for conspiring against my peace and safety, for conspiring against my life, for conspiring against the peace of my family, and for lying.”⁵ Joseph said of Robert, “The skirts of my garments were free from his (Foster’s) blood, I had made the last overtures of peace to him, and then delivered him into the hands of God, and shook my garments against him as a testimony thereof.”⁶ On April 18, 1844, Robert was excommunicated for immorality and apostasy. In May 1844 he was court-martialed by officers of the Nauvoo Legion for “unofficer-like and unbecoming conduct.”⁷

³ History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843], 1501. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁴ Smith, History of the Church, 5:287.

⁵ Smith, History of the Church, 6:333.

⁶ History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844], 2025. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁷ Smith, History of the Church, 6:355.

Although Robert joined with conspirators to plot the death of Joseph Smith, he was reluctant to support the planned murder. Marshal John P. Greene testified that on May 27, 1844, Robert said to him, "For God's sake, don't suffer that man, Joseph Smith, to go out of doors, for if he steps outside of the door his blood will be spilt."⁸ On that same day Joseph Smith wrote, "Robert D. Foster told some of the brethren (with tears in his eyes) that there was evil determined against me; and that there were some persons who were determined I should not go out of Carthage alive."⁹

On June 7, 1844, the day the *Nauvoo Expositor* was printed, Robert expressed a desire to have a private interview with Joseph Smith. The Prophet refused, but as the two men spoke, Joseph put his hand on Robert's vest and asked, "What have you concealed there?"¹⁰ Robert confessed that it was a pistol.

Following the martyrdom of Joseph and his brother Hyrum Smith, Robert was charged and acquitted of their murder. In 1845 he conversed with Abraham Hodge and reportedly said,

I am the most miserable wretch that the sun shines upon. If I could recall eighteen months of my life I would be willing to sacrifice everything I have upon earth, my wife and child not excepted. I did love Joseph Smith more than any man that ever lived. If I had been present I would have stood between him and death.¹¹

To this Hodge replied, "You were an accessory to his murder." Robert said, "I know that, and I have not seen one moments peace since that time. I know that Mormonism is true, and the thought of meeting (Joseph and Hyrum) at the bar of God is more awful to me than anything else."¹²

By 1850 Robert was residing in Canandaigua, New York. By 1860 he had returned to Illinois and was living in Loda. He died in 1878 in Loda at age sixty-seven.

⁸ History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844], 133. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁹ History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844], 61.

¹⁰ George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), p. 484.

¹¹ Smith, *History of the Church*, 7:513.

¹² Smith, *History of the Church*, 7:513.