

## *Land Practices in Early Illinois: The Mormons in Nauvoo*

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When the Mormons settled in Illinois in 1839, they were keenly interested in land ownership and development. Much of that zeal sprang from their belief that Mormon leader Joseph Smith was a living prophet. In his capacity as leader and prophet, Smith had announced many revelations concerning not only his followers' spiritual needs, but their temporal needs as well.

Smith's rise to leadership had begun nearly two decades before his people established their Illinois base. As a boy of 15 in 1820, Smith declared that God and Jesus Christ had personally visited him. Over the next ten years, according to Smith, he was fitted to become the Prophet of the Last Dispensation through a series of other visions and visitations. Not only had heavenly messengers given him divine authority to establish Christ's restored church, according to Smith, but he had been given a new book of scripture, the *Book of Mormon*, equal in authority to the *Bible*. The *Book of Mormon* underscored many Americans' implicit belief that America was a land that was "choice above all other lands" (I Nephi 13:30). Mormons (more formally called Latter-Day Saints) were urged to acquire land and work it, not only to satisfy the Biblical charge to labor for one's food, but also to glorify God by the prudent use of earthly resources.

### **The First Move Westward**

Mormons' claims to divine power did not sit well with their neighbors. Under duress, the church moved from New York state to Kirtland, Ohio in the winter of 1830-1831. Many new converts were made there, but before long, opposition arose as well. As the years passed, Smith announced several revelations indicating that Missouri was the Mormon "Zion," and in 1837 the majority of his followers moved with him to the area in and near Jackson County in that state.

Opposition became intense there also; many non-Mormons were upset by the mistaken notion that Smith's revelations

directed the church to buy and control all of the land in the area. Resistance became violent; the governor even decreed the killing of Mormons legal. Smith was jailed, scores of church members (many of them women) were hunted down and murdered by mobs, and the remaining followers fled Missouri in the dead of winter. Starving and destitute, hundreds of Mormon refugees streamed across the Mississippi River into Quincy, Illinois and surrounding communities. There they were treated initially with kindness.

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### **Buying Land in Illinois**

In April of 1839 Smith escaped his Missouri captors and rejoined his followers in Quincy. Mormons who had arrived earlier and scouted the area recommended the purchase of the nearly abandoned town of Commerce, approximately fifty miles upriver. Smith accepted his followers' counsel and began negotiations, with Dr. Isaac Galland and a syndicate led by Horace Hotchkiss, to buy extensive holdings in Commerce and in the so-called Half-Breed Tract directly across the Mississippi in the Iowa Territory. Smith was named sole trustee for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and it was in the name of the church that the purchases were transacted.

Galland's claims to the 119,000 acre Half-Breed Tract were in litigation and therefore uncertain, but his claims, and those of the Hotchkiss group, to the land in Illinois were solid. On April 30, 1839 Smith and his land committee completed their first transaction, involving three parcels in Commerce proper. This land purchase, which included ferry rights and hotel privileges, became the nucleus area from which the community would grow.

The church also had a strong interest in the Iowa land. Smith's April 25, 1839 journal entry noted that he had "accompanied the committee to Iowa to select a location for the Saints [there]." A satisfactory site was found, and in the ensuing weeks an agreement was reached wherein "...the Church purchased the town of Nashville in Lee County, Iowa Territory, together with twenty thousand acres of land adjoining it." Though the price of the land was relatively high, the purchase terms were liberal. As Smith

later noted in his journal, owner Galland agreed to sell "about twenty thousand acres, lying between the Mississippi and Des Moines Rivers, at two dollars per acre, to be paid in twenty annual installments, without interest." The huge tract was apparently obtained with little or no downpayment required.

On the Illinois side of the river, more land was acquired via the Hotchkiss syndicate and through purchases from Galland and various other individuals. The land where the business district and Mormon temple site are located today was purchased on April 4, 1840 from Daniel H. Wells. Initial purchases by Smith and the committee included much bottom land which, while fertile, was close to the swamps. Attendant mosquito problems led to considerable sickness from what the settlers called *miasma*, but which actually was probably malaria.

### **A Beautiful Place, For a While**

Commerce's name became Nauvoo, a Hebrew term meaning "a beautiful place." The state granted a liberal charter, and Nauvoo experienced explosive growth. The plat of the city decreed that

each block should contain four lots of one acre each. Original plans called for only one home per lot, thereby allowing each owner room for a large garden and for raising animals. The original survey recorded 590 lots, and more were added as land was annexed to Nauvoo. As early as June of 1840, 250 houses had been built and more were under construction. Lots were priced at \$500 on average; none was to be sold for less than \$200 or more than \$800. This plan, designed to promote equitable treatment, would have kept the church solvent and the city prospering. But the price structure, particularly the \$800 limit on the most valuable lots, caused unforeseen problems.

Hard money became scarce as a result of the 1842 recession. Not only did the values of church holdings plummet, but a number of lots were provided without charge to Mormons arriving in Nauvoo with little or no money. This generosity, plus the tendency for multiple households within families to settle on prime lots (thereby using more valuable sites more intensively), took a heavy toll on church income. Newcomers also were reluctant to buy church-owned bottom land for fear of illness. These factors put the earlier land agreements in jeopardy.

Church leaders used innovative methods in trying to meet the obligations to sellers of land. Economic disaster was averted when Galland agreed to accept land titles that Mormons held in Missouri in exchange for the debt owed to him. Dealing with the Hotchkiss property was another matter, though. Hotchkiss had verbally agreed to exchange his holdings for land in the Atlantic states, but many affluent Mormons were slow to uproot themselves and move westward, and they were not eager to send hard money to help the church out of its fiscal crisis. Galland, who had since joined the Mormon church, was deputized to go east to sell some of the land holdings. He met with limited success, however, and the church soon was pressed for payment of the Hotchkiss bill. The land was finally saved for the church when Galland was able to effect the transfer of sufficient eastern lands at least to pay \$6,000 in interest that had accrued on the debt.

As time passed, Smith urged his followers, even those in nearby Iowa communities, to settle within Nauvoo. He did so to create a more cohesive unit from which to administer the church affairs, and to provide enough people to quash rumored plans by non-Mormons to invade the city. It certainly is not the case, however, that non-Mormons were barred from, or even unwelcome in, Nauvoo. Smith went out of his way to welcome “Gentiles” into the city, as long as they conducted themselves in an orderly way.

### **Deadly Trouble in the Prairie State**

By the summer of 1844, the city’s inhabitants numbered approximately 18,000. Booming Nauvoo was the second-largest city in Illinois; only Chicago was larger, and its population exceeded Nauvoo’s by only a few hundred people. But trouble was brewing. Hancock County residents were suspicious of the growing power and influence of the church, and were uneasy about Smith’s 5,000-man Nauvoo Legion. Mormons in outlying areas were attacked and their properties burned out, and there was increasing talk of an armed attack on the city itself.

Agitators such as Warsaw’s Thomas Sharp stirred anti-Mormon sentiment by publishing inflammatory editorials. The *Nauvoo Expositor*, a newspaper critical of church leaders, brought the situation to a flashpoint. After the first and only issue was printed, Smith, using his power as Nauvoo mayor, ordered the city marshal to destroy the press. A short time later Smith and his brother, Hyrum, were arrested by state officials for “treason against the state of Illinois” (though no evidence was presented to substantiate the charge), and the two men were held in the county jail at Carthage. On June 27, 1844 a mob stormed the jail and shot Joseph and Hyrum Smith to death.

Brigham Young took over as church leader. Non-Mormons, emboldened by leading Mormons’ reluctance to urge retaliation, gave the church members an ultimatum: leave Illinois or face an armed invasion of Nauvoo. The Mormons tried to sell their land before leaving the area, but could get little for it. The mob leaders who were forcing the departure felt that

by simply waiting until the Mormons left they could take control of Nauvoo and the adjacent church holdings with little financial outlay. Under increasing pressure, Young and many of the Latter-Day Saints left Illinois in the winter of 1846, crossing the Mississippi on thick ice created by a deep February freeze. The group went to Utah and there, through irrigation and hard work, “made the desert blossom as the rose.”

### **Some Remained, For a While**

Surprisingly, several church members, including Smith’s immediate family, stayed in Nauvoo. After Young’s contingent left for the west, the remaining Latter-Day Saints kept a low profile in order to blend with the non-Mormon populace. Smith’s widow, Emma, lived in Nauvoo’s hotel-like Mansion House, built as a result of an edict that Smith said was revealed to him in 1841. She later married a non-Mormon, but over time she became convinced that her eldest son by Smith, also named Joseph, was heir to his father’s leadership mantle. In 1860 a number of Emma’s family members and about 150 others held a conference at Amboy in north-central Illinois. The conferees chose Joseph Smith, the younger, as prophet and leader of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, to be headquartered in the nearby town of Plano. The group soon left Plano, however, to establish operations in the elder Joseph Smith’s promised land of Missouri.

Nauvoo today is a quiet town of about 1,000 residents. Piece by piece, the Salt Lake City-based LDS church and the Independence, Missouri-based RLDS church purchased much of the property in old Nauvoo. The groups have cooperated in restoring key buildings, including several original homes and shops. While most of the bottom land area now consists of well kept empty lots, the restored buildings that dot the landscape provide a pleasant reminder of the neat, thriving city that once flourished on a broad, grassy plain in western Illinois. ■

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