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## Places

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Promises, Promises -- Of Earthly Power (last half)

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**River Mile 1328.6 —**  
**Nauvoo, Ill.**

Though prepared with the history of the settlement of Nauvoo, we feel apprehensive of our intrusion into the ruins of a city built with the guidance of *divine revelation*. We approach the Mormon past in scattered groups of twos and threes.

Old Nauvoo is a purposeful place — a neat, orderly, brick-tight yet oddly open historic town that was originally built with eyes set toward the future, toward spiritual glory, toward salvation and Mormon heaven. But it was also planned looking back over its shoulder towards the *world*. Besides his legions of religious followers, the Prophet Joseph Smith also led a military dragoon here. And Jonathan Browning, inventor of the automatic repeating rifle, was among the resident company of Saints.

In 1839, the exiled Smith purchased the town of Commerce, Ill., as a Mormon resettlement stake. Located at the head of the Des Moines rapids on the eastern shore of the Mississippi, Commerce was an unhealthy low-lying swampland. Trusting that “it might become a healthy place by the blessing of heaven to the Saints,” the Prophet renamed it Nauvoo, meaning “beautiful place,” and “considered it wisdom to attempt to build up a city” there.<sup>7</sup>

Ignoring local topography, Smith’s ambitious city plan was of an infinitely expandable grid of four-acre blocks each divided into one-acre lots. Buildings were sited at outside corners with block interiors reserved for household fields and gardens.

Having etched his vision for a New Jerusalem upon the eastern bank of the Mississippi, Smith commanded all Saints to gather at Nauvoo to cultivate a Garden of Eden and build the Heavenly Kingdom of the Mormon faith. New converts soon flooded the valley and by 1845, its swelling population of 15,000 surpassed that of much less saintly Chicago. With its rapidly expanding population and an advantageous location for exploiting riverboat traffic, Nauvoo seemed destined to become:

*a great Emporium of the West, the center of all centers . . . embracing all the intelligence of all nations, with industry, frugality, economy, virtue, and brotherly love unsurpassed in any age of the world . . . a suitable home for the Saints.*<sup>8</sup>

At the sacred center of this New Jerusalem stood the magnificent Nauvoo Temple. Set back upon a bluff that slowly rises 300 feet up from the river flats, its gleaming angel-topped tower smiled high above the lower settlement. The Temple, built as a labor of great love and sacrifice between 1840-1846, was burned by arsonists in 1848; a sudden tornado toppled its polished limestone walls in 1850. Today

the site is marked by a modestly landscaped park that contains an archaeological excavation of the Temple foundations, a few Temple stones and a scale model of the original building.

An exceptionally exuberant expression of the Mormon imagination, the now vanished Temple had been the largest and certainly most unusual building west of the Alleghenies and north of St. Louis. The itinerant painter Henry Lewis wrote approvingly of its curious architecture, “considering . . . that it is of no particular style it [does] not in the least offend the eye by its uniqueness.”<sup>9</sup> While the designated Temple architect was Elder William Weeks, disagreements over architectural taste were finally deferred to the Lord’s judgment as revealed through Joseph Smith: “I wish you to carry out my designs. I have seen in vision the splendid appearance of that building illuminated and will have it built according to the pattern shown me,” he commanded.<sup>10</sup>

The pattern shown him included a gleaming, four-story limestone structure about 88 feet wide, 128 feet long and 165 feet high to the tip of its white wooden tower. Large, round windows lit interiors of second-floor and attic-level offices. Ingeniously adapting arcane Masonic symbolism, the entire building was surrounded by 30 pilasters capped with smiling suns and support-

ed at the base by dozing moons. The entablature was banded with inverted five-point stars. Atop the tower a gilded angel Moroni held aloft the *sacred word* while blowing his shining golden trumpet. In the basement, 12 life-sized stone oxen with ears and horns of tin held up the heavy tub of Holy Baptism.

Amidst economic hardships and ever-increasing social pressures, work on the Temple provided the new community of Saints with a challenge of faith and a unifying public works project. Land, labor and material costs were financed through voluntary contribution. Mandatory tithes required all Church members to donate one of each 10 days labor or, “one-tenth of all that anyone possessed at the commencement of the building, and one-tenth part of all his increase from that time until completion of the same.”<sup>11</sup>

With virtually no other industry in Nauvoo and hundreds of Saints “called” to work as stone masons, carpenters, artisans and laborers, the Temple was the city’s largest employer. Families were enlisted to house and feed the work force; housewives knit socks and gloves. Progress on the Temple offered new converts a visible measure of their progress toward building the divinely sanctioned Mormon kingdom.

But Nauvoo was not a peaceable kingdom spread out below the benignly smiling Temple. Against objections from Smith, new commercial and residential development surrounded the Temple, competing with the older commercial center on the flats. Bluff-top acreage was cheaper and better drained than lowlands near the River. Smith complained ... *the upper part of the town has no right to rival those on the River. [H]ere, on the bank of the River, was where we first pitched our tents; here was where the first sick-*

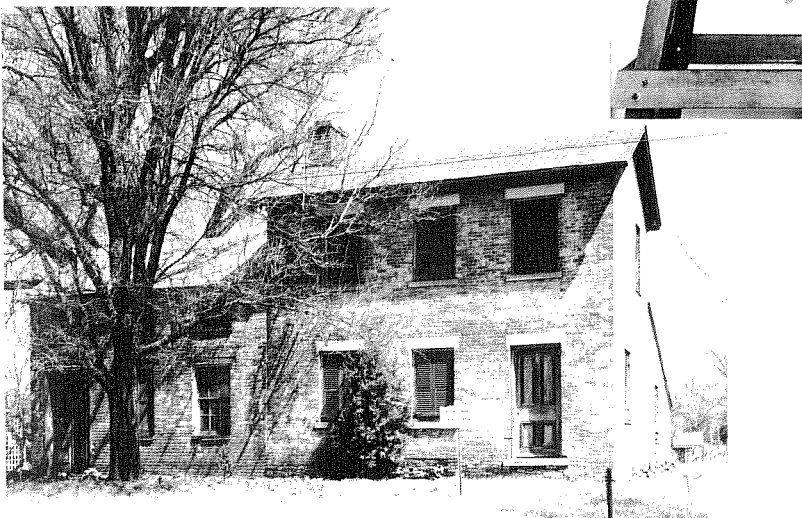
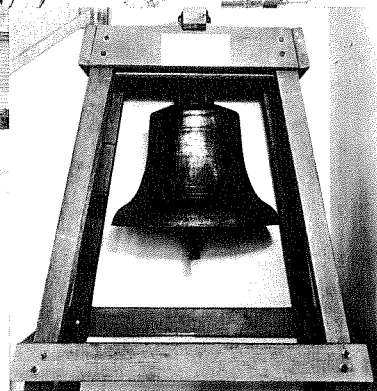
*ness and deaths occurred; here has been the greatest suffering in the city.*<sup>12</sup>

The Prophet's deep respect for historic precedent aside, he also shared business interests in the other great public building already begun in the lower section of the city. Once completed, the Nauvoo House would provide a grand hotel for visitors and a permanent residence for the Smith family. Although a speculative venture, this building had also been

ordained through divine revelations that listed private stockholders (including the Prophet himself).

Lucien Woodworth, hired as principal architect, designed a 75-room, three-story L-shaped building of red brick and limestone; each wing was about 120 feet long and 40 feet deep. But the palatial scale of Nauvoo House demanded too much from a community already overburdened by other commitments. The hotel was built only to the second floor when Brigham Young acknowledged the evident lack of

**Center:** Nauvoo Temple bell.  
**Clockwise from top left:** duplex house of Erastus F. Snow and Nathaniel Ashby, c. 1950; duplex house of Erastus F. Snow and Nathaniel Ashby; c. 1870; Joseph Smith mansion house; Jonathan Browning house.  
**Center photo** courtesy Utah State Historical Society.  
**Surrounding photos** courtesy Harold Allen.



communal enthusiasm for the project, suggesting, "I expect that the Saints are so anxious to work [on the Temple], and so ready to do right, that God has whispered to the Prophet, 'Build the Temple and let the Nauvoo House alone at present.'"13

Smith had insisted that in the eyes of the Lord, the Temple and Nauvoo House were of equal, not rival, importance and that, "both must be completed to secure the salvation of the Church."14 Yet their distinct sacred and secular functions, their separate financial structures and the topographic differences between their hilltop and river flat locations reflected serious divisions within the Mormon leadership and community.

To this volatile mix of internal social, economic, political and theological disputes was added a gradual rekindling of outside religious persecution that soon proved fatal to the Mormon experiment at

Nauvoo. Smith announced his candidacy for President of the U.S. in the spring of 1844. Shortly thereafter, the rumored doctrine of celestial marriage (polygamy) was publicly exposed when a rival Mormon faction challenged the Prophet's supreme authority in a published offer to reform the Church. Smith quickly reacted by confiscating the blasphemous papers and burning the printing press, for which he and his brother Hyrum were consequently arrested. While detained in jail in nearby Carthage, the men were assassinated by a furious anti-Mormon mob. Violence continued until a state legislative committee expelled the Saints, under new leadership by Young, from Illinois.

In an extraordinary demonstration of religious and communal fortitude, the Mormon faithful continued their work on the Temple while preparing for their westward exodus. Its

interior was never finished, but a dedication ceremony was held in April, 1846. Though Nauvoo was soon abandoned, the Prophet's vision of a Heavenly Kingdom was carried onward by the Saints to flower once again in the empty Utah desert. There, isolated from outside interference and applying the brutal lessons learned at Nauvoo, the Mormons built new empire that spread from Salt Lake City through the Great Basin.

Following the Mormon departure from Illinois, the abandoned city of Nauvoo was briefly occupied by a small communal sect of French Icarians. Swiss and German immigrants later settled permanently on the bluff top near the Temple site. Stones from the ruined Temple were retrieved for building wine cellars, houses, a few commercial buildings and a Catholic school, while vacant dwellings on the flat lands near the river fell victim to vandalism and decay.

As a small agricultural village of 1,100 residents where blue cheese and red wine are now the major local produce, Nauvoo is still a visibly divided town of lingering, if greatly diminished, tensions.

In the early 1960s, the Saints began returning to the river flats to re-purchase land and restore the old city. There the scattered remains of Smith's New Jerusalem have been resurrected as a modern-day Mecca for busloads of Mormon pilgrims. Two visitor centers are separately operated by the Church

**Nauvoo Temple as seen from the flats.**

**Photo courtesy LDS Historical Department.**

**Opposite page: Temple model on exhibit in Nauvoo.**

**Photo by Mary DeLaittre.**



of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (headquartered in Salt Lake City) and the Reorganized Church (headquartered in Independence, Mo.).

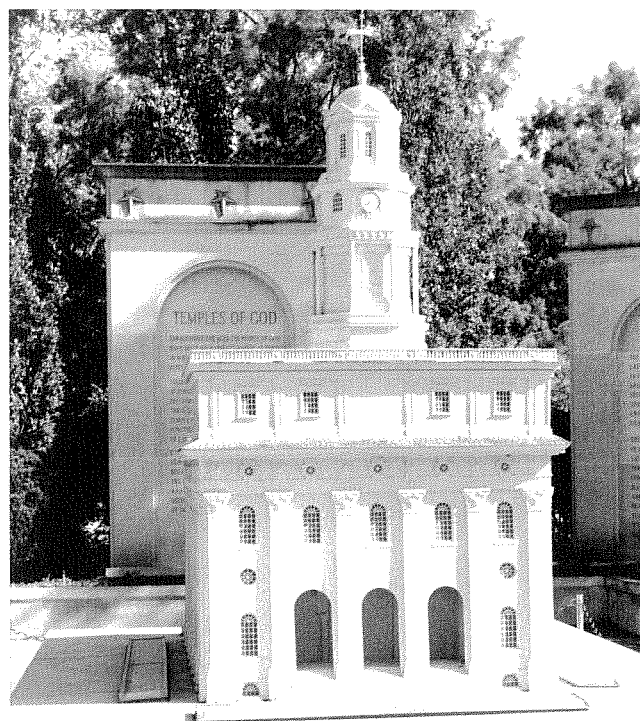
Outsiders to the faith may sense the silent rivalry between these sects during guided tours in which Mormon history and religious myth promiscuously mix in a poignant reminder of Nauvoo's inspired and troubled past. What survives as red brick evidence of the Heavenly Kingdom are generally its most substantial public halls and those houses and shops at one time owned or occupied by the earliest and most prominent citizens (some of these buildings have been reconstructed). The corner post locations of the houses and their generous wheat field lots still testify to the ambitious vision of the original plan for the city.

The impression that Nauvoo makes on a visitor today — despite the haunting openness of the nearly empty grid and the conspicuous absence of the unresurrected Temple — is similar to that described by a visitor in 1847:

*No one can visit Nauvoo and come away without the conviction that whatever rascality and crime there may have been among them, the body of the Mormons were an industrious and hard working and frugal people. In the history of the world there cannot be found such an instance of so rapid a rise of a city out of a wilderness — a city so well built, a territory so well cultivated.<sup>15</sup>*

**Date: 30 November 1990**  
**Location: Mississippi River Mile 1806.8 — Minneapolis**

Built on hopes and promises, both the *Power City* of Keokuk and the Heavenly Kingdom at Nauvoo suffered the hard disappointment of the *big idea* that ignores the limits of local circumstance and/or of human tolerance.



If the singularity of each vision finally became a source of failure, it also provided the generating force of intense commitment, pride and wonder. These are cities well-placed among the wild dreams of America. If this limits their usefulness as models for urban design today, both enterprises nevertheless represent accomplishments from which we can learn.

What impressed us most as visitors was the physical evidence of these extraordinary architectural and planning visions. Unable to establish themselves as permanent centers of urban life within the Mississippi river valley, each becomes part of our experience of America's urban history. The final mission for the members of our expedition is to

carry our discoveries from unfamiliar places like Keokuk and Nauvoo forward into our own still promising futures.

#### Notes

1. *Electric Power from the Mississippi: A Description of the Waterpower Development at Keokuk, Iowa* (Keokuk, Iowa: Mississippi River Power Company; Stone & Webster Management Association, 1913), p. 35.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

6. Philip V. Scarpino, *Great River: An Environmental History of the Upper Mississippi, 1890-1950* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1985), p. 56. This book provided a valuable resource regarding the background and consequences of the Keokuk project.

7. Joseph Smith quoted in Gordon B. Hinckley, *Truth Restored: A Short History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, 1979), pp. 60-61.

8. From the Nauvoo *Neighbor*, Oct. 23, 1843, quoted in Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), p. 117.

9. Henry Lewis quoted in *Making a Motion Picture in 1848: Henry Lewis' Journal of a Canoe Voyage from the Falls of St. Anthony to St. Louis* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1936), p. 51.

10. Joseph Smith quoted in Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 194.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

15. J. H. Backingham, "Illinois as Lincoln Knew It: A Boston Reporter's Record of a Trip in 1847" in Harry E. Pratt (ed.), *Papers in Illinois History and Transactions for the Year 1937* (Springfield, IL.: Illinois State Historical Society, 1938).

This article was prepared as a report from the Expedition of the Fourth Coast: Mississippi River, sponsored in summer 1990 by the Design Center for the American Urban Landscape at the University of Minnesota.