

# Nauvoo: A River Town

Dennis Rowley

From its founding in 1839 until the main exodus of the Mormons under Brigham Young in 1846, Nauvoo, Illinois, was an integral part of the social, economic, and political fabric of the American frontier. Located on the Mississippi River midway between St. Louis, Missouri, and Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin—both outposts for fur trading companies—Nauvoo was conceived and born concurrent with the dying gasps of the American fur trade's golden era. It emerged on the American scene halfway between 1815 and 1860, the chronological bounds of a genuine "transportation revolution" in the United States which saw a national economy replace a "colonially oriented" one.<sup>1</sup> Nauvoo participated in those economic changes and enacted (or attempted to enact) some scenes in miniature from the national stage, such as the replacement of domestic with factory systems of manufacturing. Demographically, it was the wonder of its age and region. Fed by a steady stream of immigrants from the international missionary system of the Mormon Church, Nauvoo grew at an almost precarious rate.

Some historians have viewed Nauvoo in a narrow context, literally from its own streets and almost solely through the eyes of the Mormons, and have overlooked its preeminence as a *river town*. Badly needed is an objective history of Nauvoo written from a broader perspective, viewing it in the context of the region and nation of which it was an inherent part. This article hopes to contribute to that effort by examining the setting and impact of the Mississippi River on selected aspects of Nauvoo.

The Nauvoo setting has been associated most prominently with swampy lowlands and malarial fevers, not without good cause.<sup>2</sup> Sickness plagued the Mormons throughout their seven-year stay in Nauvoo and reached nearly epidemic proportions during the summer and fall of 1839. However, the total Nauvoo environ-

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<sup>1</sup>George R. Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution 1815-1860*, Volume 4, *The Economic History of the United States* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, David E. and Della S. Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph* (Salt Lake City and Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1974), p. 5; and Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), pp. 38-40, who is not as narrow in his focus.



ment in 1839 was much more complex, for the Mormons had located in the middle of a lively and rapidly-developing river commerce.

When Nauvoo was founded, the steamboat industry of the Mississippi Valley was at the threshold of its golden era.<sup>3</sup> The trade had come of age since the initial launching of the *New Orleans* in 1811 by Nicholas Roosevelt, of the firm of Fulton and Livingston. The *New Orleans* proved to the skeptics that a large craft could safely descend the falls of the Ohio River by completing the run from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. But the skeptics were sure that no steamboat would ever ascend the falls or similar obstacles on other rivers, such as the Lower and Upper Rapids of the Mississippi. In fact, many people doubted that the steamboats could move upstream against the current. The doubters failed to reckon with the power of the high-pressure steam engine (the *New Orleans* had a low-pressure engine capable of speeds of three miles per hour at best), which enabled the *Enterprise* to ascend the Mississippi and Ohio rivers at high water stage in 1814, and the *Washington* to complete the run from New Orleans to Louisville in 1817 in twenty-one days at low water stage. Both trips were landmarks in the development of steamboating on western rivers, but the latter was especially important in convincing westerners that steamboats could successfully navigate the rivers at low water stages.

Lack of settlement and natural obstacles such as the Des Moines Rapids impeded the pre-1825 development of steamboat traffic on the Upper Mississippi. The *Virginia* was the first steamboat to successfully ascend the Des Moines Rapids with a cargo, when it delivered a load of supplies to Fort Snelling in 1823. At that time, the Mississippi Valley north of St. Louis was a sparsely-settled wilderness, the only demand for steamboat traffic coming from the fur trappers, the military posts, and the nascent lead mining industry. By 1826, a half dozen boats had followed in the track of the *Virginia*, but it was not until the mid-1830s that steamboat commerce on the Upper Mississippi became a thriving enterprise. Prior to that time the sparse settlement and the competition of the established trade route with the eastern United

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<sup>3</sup>The information on the two paragraphs that follow is summarized from William J. Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi* (Iowa City, Iowa: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1968), pp. 1-90, and 204-26; and Herbert Quick and Edward Quick, *Mississippi Steamboatin': A History of Steamboating on the Mississippi and Its Tributaries* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1926), pp. 65-104.



States and Canada through Green Bay and Detroit eliminated the need for more than two boats per year above Galena, Illinois. With the removal of the Sac and Fox Indians west of the Mississippi after the Black Hawk War in 1832, and the establishment of the Wisconsin Territory in 1836, the first surge of a flood of immigrants began. From then on, the need for steamboats on the Upper Mississippi steadily increased, reaching a peak in the 1850s.

In the quarter century from 1823 to 1848, approximately 365 different steamboats worked the Upper Mississippi above Keokuk, Iowa, 200 of them in the lead trade. During that twenty-five year period, the lead boats made approximately 7,600 trips from the mines of Galena, Illinois; Dubuque, Iowa; and Lancaster, Wisconsin, to St. Louis.<sup>4</sup> Since the river was closed to navigation in the lead region for approximately five months of every year because of ice, the lead steamers averaged over 300 trips to St. Louis during the annual seven-month season. This means that an average of ten steamers a week passed by or stopped at Nauvoo during the spring, summer, and fall months.

In addition, the river was frequented by other steamers carrying furs, Indians, lumber, Indian annuities, military supplies, and soldiers.<sup>5</sup> Besides the steamboats, a wide variety of smaller craft plied the waters near Nauvoo while related shoreline activities went on simultaneously. Even before the Mormons arrived there was a ferryboat running between Montrose, Iowa, and Commerce, Illinois.<sup>6</sup> There was a steamboat landing at Commerce and probably a woodlot where the steamers replenished their supply of fuel, although the main woodlot for ascending steamers was on the Montrose side of the river, where the main channel was located. A lighterage business on the Iowa side of the river between Keokuk and Montrose helped steamboats ascend the eleven-mile long Des Moines Rapids, which began at Keokuk and ended at Montrose and Commerce. The steamboats unloaded all or part of their freight at Keokuk, and horse-drawn flatboats or "lighters" were used to transport the cargo over the rapids. The steamer, lightened of its load, and riding higher in the water, was able to ascend the rapids and reload at Montrose.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Statistics from Petersen, *Steamboating on the Upper Mississippi*, p. 220.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 107-96; 381-90.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1948), 4:9 (hereafter cited as *HC*).

<sup>7</sup>Donald L. Enders, "The Des Moines Rapids: A History of Its Adverse Effects on Mississippi River Traffic and Its Use as a Source of Water Power to 1860," (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1973), pp. 65-85.

Life on board the steamboats in the 1840s went on in a world apart from that of the shore. The finest, especially the rich, year-round boats of the lower Mississippi, were finer than anything on shore. They were lavishly decorated and painted, with lush furnishings, carpets, chandeliers, oil paintings, porcelain knobs, etc. Music, gaiety and excellent cuisine were abundant. The worst of the boats were floating slums or hellholes, carrying their sweaty, unwashed human cargo over the water to the accompaniment of abundant profanity, drunkenness, brawling, and thievery. Most passengers on the slum boats slept on deck, which was perpetually dirty, being exposed to the elements and the sparks and cinders from the smokestacks. By mid-1843, four or five steamboats a day stopped at Nauvoo. Their impact on the residents must have been enormous, but what it was is nearly incalculable today.

Overall, the sights, sounds, and odors of the river itself must have been impressive and memorable to Nauvoo's citizens: the sunset reflecting off the smooth surface of the water; the smell of fish in the air; the oppressive humidity in the summer months; the unbroken surface of miles of snow-covered ice; the sound of rain on the water; the happy laughter of children sliding on the ice in winter; the smell of catfish frying for the evening meal; the gentle lapping of the waves against the side of a ferryboat; the eerie sound of a steamboat bell or whistle in the distance; and the unearthly sounds of the great river shedding its winter ice. Add to this the pageantry of river traffic, and there existed a scene not easily forgotten by the adult or child who lived even a few years in the embrace of the river.

This setting had a major impact on the Mormon leaders in 1839 and 1840, and by the winter of 1840 a grand vision of Nauvoo as an economic, cultural, and spiritual center was taking shape. The Mississippi River was a vital element in the formulation of that vision and a major vehicle in its realization.

In July of 1840, Joseph Smith received three letters from John C. Bennett, a physician, who was serving as quartermaster-general of the state of Illinois. Bennett expressed concern over the treatment the Mormons had received in Missouri as well as his anxiety to join his fortune to theirs. He asked if Nauvoo were "to be the general point of concentration for the Mormon people."<sup>9</sup> Joseph's answer was cautious. While he had high praise for the commercial

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<sup>8</sup>Cancelled.

<sup>9</sup>HC, 4:172.



and growth potential of Nauvoo as the "principal location" of the Mormons, and while he invited "all the Saints, as well as all lovers of truth and correct principles to come to this place as fast as possible," he did not write with total confidence of their future in that location. It was their "intention," if "suffered to remain," to erect "some public buildings" in the spring. His tone was hopeful regarding the charter for a railroad from Warsaw to Nauvoo, "which, if carried into operation will be of incalculable advantage to this place, as steamboats can only ascend the rapids at a high stage of water."<sup>10</sup>

Two months later, in October 1840, Joseph Smith drew the elements of the vision of a future Nauvoo together for the first time in anything like an official communication. He wrote to the Council of Twelve Apostles in England that Nauvoo had "advantages for manufacturing and commercial purposes which but very few can boast of; and the establishing of cotton factories, foundries, potteries, etc., would be the means of bringing in wealth, and raising it to a very important elevation." He indicated that preparations had begun to construct a temple "for worship of our God in this place," and that a bill was pending before the Illinois legislature to charter the city of Nauvoo and to establish a "seminary of learning."<sup>11</sup> In addition to the excellent soil of the region, here, then, were the three basic ingredients for an economic, spiritual, and cultural center: an industrial complex, the temple, and a university. This was the answer to Bennett's question. Nauvoo was not going to be merely a point of concentration for the Mormons, but a great urban center, perhaps "one of the largest cities on the river, if not in the western world."<sup>12</sup> The river was vital to two of the Prophet's avowed goals: the industrial complex and the temple.

The more pragmatic and enterprising of the Mormons had begun to implement aspects of the vision before it was stated comprehensively by their prophet leader. In December 1839, the high council of Nauvoo voted to sustain Vinson Knight in cutting and providing 500 cords of steamboat wood.<sup>13</sup> Since many Nauvoo residents had been too sick and otherwise preoccupied to cut such wood in the spring of 1839, the fall and winter of that year repre-

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<sup>10</sup>HC, 4:177-78.

<sup>11</sup>HC, 4:228-29.

<sup>12</sup>HC, 4:178.

<sup>13</sup>Nauvoo High Council Minutes, 1839-45, 1 December 1839, Church Historical Department (hereafter cited as High Council).

sented their first real opportunity to realize a profit from the river traffic, and the Mormons were quick to seize upon it.

Because the river physically divided the Mormons in Illinois from those in Iowa, it forced them to take immediate action to insure quick, safe transport across the water. The high council moved quickly to establish Church control of the ferryboat running between Nauvoo and Montrose and the Church operated it until the exodus in 1846.<sup>14</sup> During three meetings in October 1838,<sup>15</sup> the high council went on record against unsafe, careless operation of the ferry by declaring that any person ferrying or carrying people or freight across the river "to the injury of said ferry" would be disfellowshipped. The council agreed to pay Vinson Knight \$150 for "that portion of the ferry owned on the Iowa side at Montrose as per charter,"<sup>16</sup> and they appointed D. C. Davis as ferrymaster during 1840 at a salary of \$30.00 a month. Although the total amount the Mormons realized from the operation of the ferry is unknown, it was apparently a steady source of revenue. Davis was to transmit the ferry tolls to the treasurer of the high council every Saturday so that proper records could be kept and the funds turned over to the council monthly. The council further stipulated that money from the sale of lots in Nauvoo was to be applied towards the repair of the horse boat. This could have had reference to one of the lighters or flatboats in operation on the Iowa shore, but more likely it referred to the ferryboat, since the council gave approval the following spring for purchasing some horses from George T. Harris "for the purpose of the ferryboat."<sup>17</sup> The main ferryboat (as opposed to hand-propelled skiffs and canoes) was propelled by two horses, "one on each side, working a treadmill, which furnished the power to turn the wheels and propel the boat."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>On 1 June 1843, Joseph Smith was licensed to operate a ferry. See *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 7 June 1843. See also *HC*, 4:416 and 421. This was probably a legal stamp of approval for operation of the *Maid of Iowa* as a ferry. It had been in operation since 12 May 1843 (*HC*, 5:386). Joseph Smith probably began this service because of the inability of the slower and smaller craft to satisfy the growing demand for regular crossings.

<sup>15</sup>High Council, 20, 21 and 27 October, 1839.

<sup>16</sup>This probably refers to the charter received by James White in 1833. See Enders, "The Des Moines Rapids," p. 29.

<sup>17</sup>High Council, 8 March 1840.

<sup>18</sup>The use of the term "ferry" in Mormon records is confusing. It definitely had reference in 1839 and 1843 to a skiff or rowboat propelled by an oarsman. (See *HC*, 4:9, and Henry Caswall, *City of the Mormons* [London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1843], p. 51ff., as cited in Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph*, p. 59.) It was applied to the *Maid of Iowa*, a full-sized steamboat and it was used, as indicated, to refer to a vessel propelled by horses. (See memories of Captain J. F. Daugherty of Keokuk, Iowa, who arrived in Nauvoo in 1841, and rode on the ferryboat, as published in the



In the spring of 1840, the high council appointed a committee of three consisting of the First Presidency to "superintend the affairs of the ferry," an indication of the importance they attached to its efficient and profitable operation.<sup>19</sup> The Church leaders were aware of the implications of having the ferry controlled by non-Mormons, especially in light of the continued persecution from Missourians and of the conflicts that arose over revenue from wharfage fees later. Consequently, they were careful to maintain legal, as well as physical, control. On 11 January 1845, the Nauvoo City Council authorized and licensed Brigham Young "to run a ferry across the Mississippi at Nauvoo in place of Joseph Smith, martyred."<sup>20</sup>

As a river town Nauvoo was a stopping place for steamboat pleasure excursions. Although they began in the 1830s, these excursions did not reach their heyday until the 1850s, but there were enough of them in the 1840s to have an impact on the economy and the social life of Nauvoo. The well-known artist George Catlin is credited with providing the impetus for the pleasure excursion by his favorable reaction to the beauties of the north country when he took a steamboat voyage up the Mississippi River to St. Paul in 1836.<sup>21</sup> As Catlin's fame grew and as the steamboats became increasingly lush and fast, the idea caught on. People, especially the rich and famous, began spending their vacation and leisure time on a pleasure cruise up the river. On board, they dined on the finest food and liquor and were entertained by bands, orchestras, and theatrical performers. At selected points on the river, they disembarked to tour and enjoy local sights, sounds, and points of interest.

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*Nauvoo Rustler*, 26 September 1916, and preserved in the Ida Blum Papers, Archives and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.) Cf. Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph*, p. 86, where he reads "house boat" in the original minutes of the high council rather than "horse" as I do. Horse boat seems to make more sense than house boat because of references to a horse boat in two separate but related instances, one already cited, and the other in an ordinance regulating tolls on the ferry passed by the Nauvoo City Council in 1843. Also, house boats were primarily a phenomenon of the Ohio and Lower Mississippi. (See Quick, *Mississippi Steamboatin'*, pp. 105-21.) Horses, cattle, other large animals and wagons cannot be ferried safely across a river in a skiff. A flatboat is required and one way to propel it is with horses, either through the use of a treadmill, a long rope attached to either end of the flatboat, or a pulley or turnstile, and a taut, stationary cable. Moreover, the Mormons could also have been referring to the lighters as ferries when they used the term "horse boat." Since horses were used to pull the lighters over the rapids, it would not be illogical to refer to "ferrying" cargo over the rapids in a horse boat.

<sup>19</sup>High Council, 15 May 1840.

<sup>20</sup>HC, 7:351.

<sup>21</sup>Petersen, *Steamboating*, pp. 248-95.

The Mormons and their burgeoning city of Nauvoo were certainly an attraction for the curious on the pleasure excursions. In January 1841, provision was made for those visitors when Joseph Smith announced a revelation from God in which he was instructed

...as pertaining to my boarding house which I have commanded you to build for the boarding of strangers, let it be built unto my name, and let my name be named upon it. . . . And let the name of that house be called Nauvoo House, and let it be a delightful habitation for man, and a resting place for the weary traveler, that he may contemplate the glory of Zion. . . .<sup>22</sup>

The revelation appointed George Miller, Lyman Wight, John Snider, and Peter Haws as a quorum for "the purpose of building that house." They were to "organize themselves," appoint a president, "form a constitution," and "receive stock for the building of that house" at not less than \$50.00 a share. No individual shareholder could invest more than \$15,000 and the revelation designated numerous individuals by name who were to purchase shares in the Nauvoo House.<sup>23</sup> One month later the four men complied with the specifications of the revelation by convincing the Illinois State Legislature to pass an act of incorporation for the Nauvoo House Association. The act authorized the four men named above to "erect and furnish a public house of entertainment, to be called the 'Nauvoo House,' " which "shall be kept for the accommodation of strangers, travelers, and all other persons who may resort therein for rest and refreshment." The life of the association was limited to twenty years, and "spiritous liquors of every description" were perpetually prohibited, "that such liquor shall never be vended as a beverage, or introduced into common use, in said house."<sup>24</sup> A curious and courageous turn of events, this latter provision, when one considers that most steamboat passengers and crews were accustomed to the free and bountiful use of "spiritous liquors" as a part of their daily fare.

Nauvoo House was never finished. It was one of the casualties of the all-out campaign to finish the temple before leaving for the Great Basin. While Nauvoo House was under construction and the Mormons still believed it would be finished, the needs of river travelers had to be met in other ways. At first, Joseph Smith pro-

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<sup>22</sup>HC, 4:279. See also Doctrine and Covenants 124:56-60.

<sup>23</sup>See D&C 124:62-145.

<sup>24</sup>HC, 4:301-302.



vided accommodations for visitors and travelers in his personal residence, the Mansion House. In time, however, as the number and frequency of visitors increased, he found this practice both burdensome and costly, since he apparently entertained many people at his own expense. On 15 September 1843, he announced that henceforth the Mansion House would be operated as a hotel in which he and his family would occupy three rooms as a personal residence. His announcement extolled the virtues of the Mansion House as providing the "best table accommodations in the city" and rendering "travelers more comfortable than any other place on the Upper Mississippi" with its "large and convenient" quarters. Near the Mansion House was a "large and commodious brick stable, . . . capable of accommodating seventy-five horses at one time, and storing the requisite amount of forage." Smith claimed the stable was "unsurpassed by any similar establishment in the State."<sup>25</sup> The existence of this stable is a good indication that not all of Nauvoo's visitors came from the river. Yet, a great many did, and it seems reasonable to suggest that Nauvoo House would not have been envisioned on such a grand scale and perhaps not envisioned at all, if Nauvoo had not been a river port of steadily growing population and importance, readily accessible to travelers and great and important people of the world.

The impact of the river on the economy of Nauvoo can also be seen in the attempts to construct a canal and a dam (see "A Dam for Nauvoo" in this issue), the development of a waterfront area to foster trade with the steamboats and the purchase and operation of a steamboat, the *Maid of Iowa*. There is not sufficient data to describe fully the many river-related businesses that were founded in Nauvoo from 1839 to 1846, but some details are apparent. Individual efforts to use the abundant waterpower to propel mills and other water-related business were unceasing and began shortly after the Mormons arrived. Earlier mention was made of the ferry and wood cut to sell to the steamboats in December of 1839. On 15 December of the same year, the high council gave approval for Messrs. Annis, Baseen, and Edmunds to build a water-powered sawmill adjacent to the city plat.<sup>26</sup> The three men apparently lost little time in building their mill, because it became a focal point of controversy when the city council

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<sup>25</sup>HC, 6:33.

<sup>26</sup>High Council, 15 December 1839. See also HC, 4:46; 5:272.

met in the spring of 1841 under the auspices of the Nauvoo Charter issued the previous fall.

In its initial meetings, the city council was concerned with the organization of the Nauvoo City plat, including proper alignment of present and future streets and with the control of the waterfront area by the city and the Church with a view toward its profitable operation. Apparently, the high council had either exceeded its authority or had acted without sufficient information, because Mr. Annis' sawmill illegally intruded into the land granted by the state charter for the operation of the ferry and the mill building itself was constructed too close to the street.<sup>27</sup> In order to move logs from the river into the mill, it was necessary to put them in the street. The prevailing sentiment in the city council favored the removal of the Annis Mill. The final decision in March 1841 did order the removal, but only after a serious controversy over the conflicting rights of Annis and the owner of the ferry as to where responsibility rested for the expense of the removal—with Annis, the city council, or the high council—and over whether the riverfront was public property.<sup>28</sup> The minutes of the city council are neither clear nor complete, but the evidence strongly supports the contentions that personal rights were overridden in an almost roughshod fashion in favor of the Church and the city.

There were suggestions that Annis move his mill to higher ground and operate it by steam power, which would have required the expense of a steam engine in addition to the expense of removal. Annis was finally forced to move the mill at his own expense. He later applied for permission to place the mill on an "outside butment," which probably meant moving it further out into the river. No clear final decision is indicated, but Joseph Smith was adamantly opposed to any petition infringing on the rights of the ferry.<sup>29</sup>

William and Wilson Law and Newel Knight also operated water-powered mills, but individual efforts were only part of the grand vision and were dependent to some extent upon the successful implementation of that vision as Mayor John C. Bennett outlined it in his inaugural address to the city council in February 1841. He called for the construction of a wing dam to divert part of the force of the current of the Mississippi River through a

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<sup>27</sup>Nauvoo City Council Minutes, 8 and 15 March 1841, Church Historical Department (hereafter cited as City Council).

<sup>28</sup>City Council, 15 March 1841.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 1 May 1841. See also footnote 18.



canal that the Mormons would dig. The two-mile-long canal was to run north and south down the middle of Main Street, which was to be eighty-two feet wide to accommodate the canal, shipping, wharves, and water-powered industry. The dam was to extend diagonally into the river until it connected with the island east of Montrose, thereby diverting most of the stream flow of the Mississippi that was not contained in the main channel, which ran west of the island along the Iowa shore. The city council appointed a committee with Joseph Smith as chairman to survey the route of the canal, but little progress was made because the survey showed Main Street lay on a formation of limestone.<sup>30</sup> Still the idea of a dam lingered on.

In the fall of that year, Benjamin B. Gates and David Higby, two non-Mormon businessmen, hired Edward Worth to construct a wing dam in the Mississippi River between Nashville and Keokuk on the Iowa shore.<sup>31</sup> The dam was completed in 1842 and used for a little over a year to operate a gristmill. Ice and the spring floods of 1843 destroyed both dam and mill. Joseph Smith and the other Mormons likely watched the construction process with intense interest. In December 1841, while the Worth Dam was under construction, the Prophet wrote to Pennsylvania convert Edward Hunter that Nauvoo had suffered from lack of steam engines and mills.<sup>32</sup> He encouraged Hunter to bring both to Nauvoo when he came.

Lack of funds was undoubtedly the main deterrent to beginning construction of the dam and canal during 1841–42. Interest remained high, however, for in the spring of 1842, the city council authorized Newel Knight, whose father had operated a mill in New York, to construct a wing dam and a gristmill.<sup>33</sup> Knight successfully completed both the dam and the mill and operated them for a number of years. On 14 May 1842, William and Wilson Law were granted similar privileges pertaining to constructing butments and piers for mills and shipping.<sup>34</sup>

On 23 November 1843, nearly three years after the decision to survey had been made, Joseph Smith gave the nearly-dormant project new impetus, as well as a slightly enlarged prospectus. He proposed that they petition the United States Congress to (1) con-

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<sup>30</sup>City Council, 8 February 1841, and *HC*, 4:297.

<sup>31</sup>Enders, "Des Moines Rapids," pp. 88–91.

<sup>32</sup>*HC*, 4:481–82.

<sup>33</sup>City Council, 9 April 1842.

<sup>34</sup>City Council, 14 May 1842.

<sup>35</sup>*HC*, 4:80.

struct a dam on the Mississippi to supply the city with adequate waterpower for its proposed industrial complex, and (2) dig a canal around the Des Moines Rapids.<sup>35</sup> Smith had a clerk draft plans for the dam and the city council passed a law authorizing Smith "and successors" to construct a dam, piers, breakwaters, docks, wharves, landings, and embankments and anything else necessary "for the purpose of propelling mills."<sup>36</sup> The act also authorized the operation of the proposed mills and wharves in exchange for fees and tolls as prescribed by city ordinance. However, the act did not appropriate funds for the project and little progress was made for another two years.

Early in 1845, under the shadow of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith and in the face of rising anti-Mormon sentiment in Illinois and Iowa, Brigham Young and other Church leaders attempted to inject some life into the nearly dead waterpower project. The site for the dam was purchased and dedicated with prayer, the Nauvoo Water Power Company was formed to oversee the construction process, shares were sold, the citizens of Nauvoo pledged 12,000 hours of labor, and construction was enthusiastically begun.<sup>37</sup> One month later the Council of the Twelve Apostles decided that the work on the dam should be postponed until the winter of 1846 in order to devote all available energies to completion of the temple prior to the contemplated exodus westward.<sup>38</sup> But with the approaching exodus it became impossible to think of building any project other than the temple and on 16 July 1845, only two months after the initial postponement, the Nauvoo Water Power Company sold the waterfront lots that had been reserved as the site for the dam.<sup>39</sup>

Failure to complete the dam and canal did not hinder the Mormons from actively engaging in the commerce of the river.

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<sup>35</sup>HC, 6:80. The first serious effort to remove the threat to navigation posed by the Des Moines Rapids was made by the United States government from 1836 to 1839 (see Enders, "The Des Moines Rapids," pp. 39-57). After two years of planning and surveying, a campaign was mounted to deepen and broaden the natural channel of the Mississippi River through the rapids. Under the leadership of Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, later to win fame in more soldierly pursuits, the Army Corps of Engineers removed over 2,000 tons of limestone from the bed of the rapids. The work was suspended in 1839 for lack of funds. Except for critics who maintained the work had left the rocks of the riverbed sharp and jagged and a peril to steamboats, it was generally conceded that the deepening of the channel improved navigation. However, flatboats and keelboats continued to supply lighterage service at low water or when the current was particularly strong.

<sup>36</sup>HC, 6:103 and 106.

<sup>37</sup>*Nauvoo Neighbor*, 5 and 12 March 1845. Brigham Young's Manuscript Journal, 28 March 1845, as cited in Enders, "The Des Moines Rapids," p. 125. *Journal History of the Church*, 11 and 17 February 1845.

<sup>38</sup>Enders, "Des Moines Rapids," p. 129.

<sup>39</sup>*Nauvoo Neighbor*, 16 July 1845.



The Nauvoo charter extended the city limits to the midpoint of the river,<sup>40</sup> an indication that Joseph Smith, the self-proclaimed author of the charter, foresaw the eventuality of a highly-developed and profitable waterfront area, requiring the jurisdiction of the city government. As Nauvoo grew it required the services of an increasing number of steamboats on a regular basis.<sup>41</sup> The boats brought the people that were swelling Nauvoo's population, and they brought a large segment of the supplies necessary for such a city to function. Steamboats, of course, required wharves and landings. The latter apparently multiplied at a rapid pace and were not always operated by Mormons, the city, or the Church.

As might have been expected, conflict ensued. On 5 March 1844, a special session of the City Council supported Mayor Smith in his insistence that wharfage fees would be paid to the city. Hyrum Kimball and a Mr. Morrison were telling steamboat captains that they did not need to pay the city fee because they (Kimball and Morrison) owned the land on which the wharves were built. The Prophet told Kimball and the city council that "he should see the ordinance executed; and if the boats did not pay, he should blow them up and those who upheld them in resisting the ordinances. . . ." The city council supported the mayor, contending that "no man has a right to build a wharf without leave from the city council."<sup>42</sup> Following this the council ordered the extension of Water Street from the riverbank next to Joseph Smith's residence to the extreme north end of the city, attempting thereby to gain more complete control over the wharfage facilities and accompanying fees.

An interesting aside on the wharfage conflict concerns an excerpt from a speech delivered on the occasion by Hyrum Smith:

Kimball and Morrison say they own the wharves; but the fact is, the city owns them, sixty-four feet from high water mark. From the printing office to the north limits of the city is public ground, as Water street runs along the beach, and the beach belongs to the city and not to individuals. . . . The maritime laws of the United States have ceded up the right to regulate all tools, wharfage, etc., to the respective corporations who have jurisdiction, and not to individuals. Our lawyers have read so little that they are ignorant of this: they have never stuck their noses into a book on maritime law in their lives, . . . Our city lawyers are fools to undertake to practice law

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<sup>40</sup>HC, 4:239.

<sup>41</sup>Five steamboats a day were stopping at Nauvoo during the navigation season in 1843. HC, 6:32.

<sup>42</sup>HC, 6:234-35.

when they know nothing about it. I want from this time forth every fool to stay at home and let the steamboats and captains alone. No vessel could land anywhere, if subject to individual laws. This corporation owns the streets of the city, and has as much right to tax the boats to make wharves as to tax citizens to make roads. Let every man in this city stay at home, and let the boat-captains, peace-officers, and everybody alone.<sup>43</sup>

What more pointed illustration of the impact of the river could be found than a Mormon leader reading and citing maritime law in 1844 in the midst of the American frontier, over 1,000 miles from the high seas.

The Mormon leaders were not concerned solely with the profits to be made from charging fees and tolls and providing services for steamboats owned by others. On 3 May 1843, Joseph Smith directed that arrangements be made to convert the *Maid of Iowa* into a ferryboat to operate between Nauvoo and Montrose.<sup>44</sup> Nine days later the transaction culminated in the Church purchasing half-interest in the steamboat.<sup>45</sup> Its services, however, were not restricted to ferryboat duty. Recent converts to Mormonism immigrating to the United States from Europe and England were brought up the river from New Orleans and St. Louis; supplies were transported to Nauvoo, including food for the laborers on the temple and other public buildings; supplies and personnel for work in the Wisconsin pineries were taken upriver; pleasure excursions were taken by Joseph Smith and many other Mormons; and church services were even held on the decks of the newly-acquired steamboat. The *Maid of Iowa* served the Mormons well for two years. On 9 April 1845, in the face of the impending westward exodus, Brigham Young ordered that the *Maid of Iowa* be sold "for what they could get for it."<sup>46</sup>

In December 1841, Joseph Smith stated that lumber had to be brought twenty miles, and "that many buildings had arisen and still more would have but for the lack of lumber and brick."<sup>47</sup> Shortage of timber for lumber and fuel is normally associated with the Great Plains beyond the hundredth meridian. However, by the fall of 1843, Nauvoo had grown from a village of a few dozen

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<sup>43</sup>HC, 6:238.

<sup>44</sup>HC, 5:380.

<sup>45</sup>HC, 5:386.

<sup>46</sup>HC, 7:395. Local legend in Nauvoo maintains that the *Maid of Iowa* or the *Iowa Twins*, as it was renamed by the Mormons, was caught in an ice jam off Dundy landing and wrecked. "The hull lay in the river until it rotted away." Ida Blum Papers, Archives and Manuscripts, BYU Library.

<sup>47</sup>Joseph Smith to Edward Hunter, 21 December 1841, HC, 4:481-82.



houses to a prospering community of several hundred buildings.<sup>48</sup> Most of them were whitewashed log cabins and the remainder frame and brick. Timber was needed for all of them, as well as for fuel and fencing, and had been a coveted commodity from the initial arrival of the Mormons in 1839.<sup>49</sup> The plans for the huge three-story temple and other large public buildings merely added to the pressures and demands for the already scarce and expensive commodity.

The Mormon leaders turned to the river and the pine country of Wisconsin to solve their lumber shortage problems. A company of men was sent to the upper reaches of the Black River in Wisconsin in the fall of 1841, where they purchased and successfully operated several mills.<sup>50</sup> The company was reinforced in 1843 and 1844 and contributed several large rafts of lumber, timber, and shingles to the construction effort in Nauvoo.<sup>51</sup> Using the river to bring lumber from Wisconsin saved the Mormons thousands of dollars. Lumber was expensive and the riverboats were their most economical means of acquiring it. Least expensive of all was to go to the source and cut their own and float them down the rivers, which they did. It is clear that without convenient and direct river access to the pineries as a ready source of inexpensive lumber, the temple and many other buildings would never have been completed by the time of the exodus.

While the temple itself was a part of the spiritual vision, its construction was an endeavor of the economic. For five years, 1841 to 1846, almost the entire length of their stay at Nauvoo, the Mormons worked on the temple. Except for some interior finish work, it was complete when they left Nauvoo in 1846, largely because of concentration of efforts on the temple and the postponement and abandonment of other projects. That it was completed as far as it was, was due in no small part to readily available river transportation.

The walls and foundation of the temple were constructed of locally-quarried limestone. The interior and the roof were of lumber, Wisconsin white pine and hardwoods. The glass for the windows was brought overland from Chicago and Detroit and the lead for framing the windows undoubtedly came from Galena on

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<sup>48</sup>Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph*, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup>High Council, 1839-1845. A number of legal suits occurred over thefts of rails and lumber. See, for example, High Council, 8 August 1840 and 4 July 1841.

<sup>50</sup>HC, 4:418.

<sup>51</sup>See, for example, HC, 4:418; 5:169-70, 386 and 397; 6:46 and 255-256; and 7:183 and 192.

a river steamer. On 1 February 1842, Joseph Smith referred to two stones for door sills that had just been "landed," an obvious reference to river transportation.<sup>52</sup> Finally, and perhaps more important than the building materials, which admittedly were vital, was the food to sustain the temple construction workers. In May 1844, food apparently began to run low and the *Maid of Iowa* was dispatched to Rock River to obtain a cargo of grain.<sup>53</sup> The boat returned in eleven days with 400 bushels of corn and 200 bushels of wheat, a speed and quantity that no land transportation available could have equalled. Such services enabled the work on the temple to go ahead on schedule and ultimately were instrumental in completing the building.

Steamboat wood, the ferry, the canal, the dam, the *Maid of Iowa*, and the Wisconsin pineries are but the most obvious examples of the impact of the river on the economy of Nauvoo. A deeper examination would include: consideration of land values on the riverfront versus those on the hill; a compilation of data on how many riverboat passengers and visitors came to Nauvoo annually; a study of the conflict with the established non-Mormon businessmen in Commerce, Montrose, Keokuk, and Warsaw, some of whom viewed the incoming Mormons as a distinct economic threat; and a study of the fluctuations in the economy brought on or encouraged by the fluctuations in the river from low water when few steamboats could safely navigate over the rapids, to high water and flooding, such as the flood of 1844, which destroyed much property in Nauvoo. Another question, not solely economic, worthy of consideration in a separate article, is the importance of the river in the demise of Nauvoo.

A further example of the river's impact lies in the rapid population growth of Nauvoo. Encouraged by the vision of Nauvoo as a great economic and spiritual center and facilitated by increasingly rapid river transportation, immigration pushed the population of Nauvoo upward almost perilously fast from 1841 to 1845.<sup>54</sup> Almost all of the early groups traveled overland from the east coast, but after 1840, except in seasons of low water, or ice, an increasing number of immigrants arrived by steamboat from New Orleans.

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<sup>52</sup>HC, 4:510. Obvious, yes, except the date was 1 February. The river did not normally thaw until March or April.

<sup>53</sup>HC, 6:350 and 376.

<sup>54</sup>Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph*, pp. 75-76.



It is tempting to ask if the rapid growth of Nauvoo's population would have been possible in the pre-steamboat era or if it had been a landlocked prairie town rather than a river town. One cannot respond conclusively. The driving force of the theology espoused by Joseph Smith cannot be underestimated and was surely the main factor precipitating the waves of immigration in the early 1840s, but, the economics of life must be given their just due. Joseph Smith indicated that most of the foreign converts were from among the poorer classes.<sup>55</sup> Parley P. Pratt wrote of the English converts, "I cannot hold them back, they would rather be slaves in America than starve in this country."<sup>56</sup> One could argue convincingly that Nauvoo's population would have increased rapidly because of the force of the gospel message, regardless of the city's location. However, other important factors in the rapid growth of Nauvoo from 1840-45 were: (1) cheap deck passage on the river steamers, (2) the speed of the steamers, and (3) the immigrant's dream of a great river metropolis where burgeoning industry and unlimited opportunity meant a job and a real home for him and his family.

Also, it is necessary to briefly consider the effect of the river on the average citizen of Nauvoo. Social life in Nauvoo was affected by the lively activities that took place on board the passing steamboats. Indians, gamblers, riverboat men, soldiers, bartenders, musicians, magicians, theatrical performers, roustabouts, and slaves, not to mention the members of the touring circus boats and the rich and famous of the pleasure-boat excursions, all left their imprint on the citizens of Nauvoo.<sup>57</sup> Steamboat races, for example, were a spectacle to excite young and old. The Mormons reacted to the river and its activities in a variety of ways. The *Times and Seasons* ran an editorial warning against the thieves and cutthroats of the river<sup>58</sup> and the Council of the Twelve warned prospective immigrants to steel themselves for the voyage up the river among the scum of the boats with their vile habits and language.<sup>59</sup> Hyrum Smith warned the Saints to keep the women away from the steamboat landing, undoubtedly because of the unrestrained profanity of the riverboat men.<sup>60</sup> However, the Saints provided fine

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<sup>55</sup>HC, 5:25.

<sup>56</sup>As cited in E. Cecil McGavin, *Nauvoo the Beautiful* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), p. 95.

<sup>57</sup>Petersen, *Steamboating*, pp. 107-391 and Quick, *Mississippi Steamboatin'*, pp. 231-52.

<sup>58</sup>*Times and Seasons* 3 (1 December 1841):615.

<sup>59</sup>HC, 4:463-67.

<sup>60</sup>Conference Address, 7 April 1842, HC, 4:585.

food and accommodations at the Mansion House and they used the *Maid of Iowa* on several occasions for private pleasure excursions complete with music and food.<sup>61</sup> And, the young and the young at heart, Joseph Smith included, enjoyed sliding on the river ice during the winter months.

Perhaps the most significant impact of the river, that on the mentality and outlook of the average Mormon, is almost impossible to document. The historian who ventures into this area is dealing with what we might call the river mystique. How does a great river affect a person who lives close to its banks for several years? A great student of the Mississippi River recorded an old-timer's memories of forty years on the river. "There is no sound in the world so filled with mystery and longing and unease as the sound at night of a river boat blowing for the landing—one long, two shorts, one long, two shorts. . . . The sound of the riverboats hangs inside your heart like a star."<sup>62</sup> One cannot help but wonder how many of the Mormons carried such a memory of the river with them to the deserts of the Great Basin.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Maureen Ursenbach, ed., "Eliza R. Snow's Nauvoo Journal," *BYU Studies* 15 (Summer 1975):405, entries for 9 May and 4 June 1843. See also *HC*, 5:384-85.

<sup>62</sup>Walter Havighurst, *Voices on the River: The Story of the Mississippi Waterways* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 3. See also, Ursenbach, "Eliza R. Snow's Nauvoo Journal," 12 April 1843, for an emotional description of the river.

<sup>63</sup>Earlier mention was made of the devastating seige of illness the Mormons experienced while at Nauvoo. While continuing to stress that it is a part of the Nauvoo setting that has been over-emphasized in the past, one must not forget that it is another solid indication of the river's impact. Along with the sound of steamboat bells and whistles in the night, many Mormons carried with them to the Great Basin the memory and physical effects of the shakes, fever, and cold chills of the ague and related fevers.

Also, this article may have conveyed the suggestion that the Mormons were new to river life. Of course, many of them were not, having known life on the Connecticut, the Ohio, the Missouri, the Grand, the Susquehanna and other rivers and canals. The point is that Nauvoo, Illinois, was a river town and a frontier town, as well as a Mormon town. It would have been a much different town had it not been on the river. At the risk of overstatement, this must be emphasized. The Mormons, despite the uniqueness of their religious experience and the tragedy of their treatment by many of their fellow frontiersmen, had a profoundly *American* experience during their Nauvoo years. They participated in the early glory of the short-lived Age of the Steamboat, a colorful page in the history of America and the opening of the West. They had a taste of a choice era, which was gone forever shortly thereafter, laid to rest by the Civil War and the coming of the railroad. They helped to bind the nation together and strengthen its East-West ties by supporting the steamboat, which itself was a binding influence between East and West (see Dayton, *Steamboat Days*, p. 359), and by journeying still further west, opening and maintaining important western trails and establishing the foundation for a strong western state that would later become an inseparable part of the national fiber.