

Nauvoo West: The Mormons of the Iowa Shore

Stanley B. Kimball

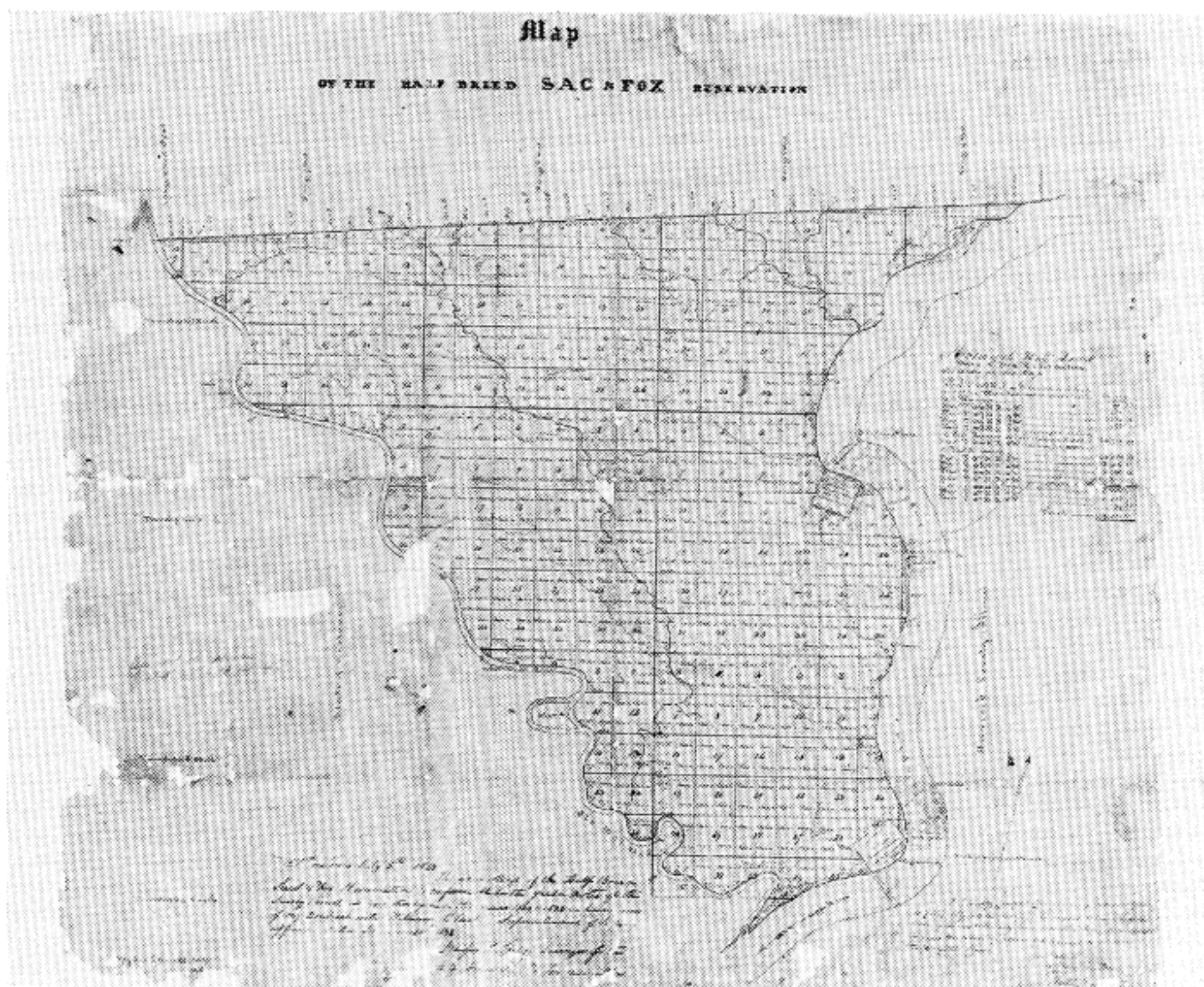
To date, interest in the Illinois period of Church history has focused largely on events within the corporate limits of the city of Nauvoo, but many Saints lived elsewhere in that general area. Eight short-lived stakes were organized in other Illinois communities: in Ramus (now Webster), Hancock County; at Lima, Quincy, Mount Hope (now Columbus), and Freedom (near Payson), Adams County; in Geneva, Morgan County; in Springfield, Sangamon County; and in Pleasant Vale (now New Canton), Pike County. There was also the longer-lasting Iowa or Zarahemla Stake immediately across the Mississippi River from Nauvoo in Lee County, Iowa.

In many ways the eastern part of Lee County may be considered as part of Greater Nauvoo. Land was purchased in both areas at the same time from the same person. Stakes were established in both places. Apostles and other Church leaders lived on both sides of the river for a season. Joseph Smith preached and visited in Lee County and on at least two occasions sought refuge there and on Dundie Island which lay close to the Iowa shore. A weekly newspaper titled the *Nauvoo Ensign and Zarahemla Standard* was projected, but never printed. The Mormons helped found Masonic lodges in Montrose and Keokuk. The settlements were connected by ferry and the Church met opposition in both places. The Sugar Creek camp and staging ground for the 1846 trek across Iowa lay seven miles west of the river and the September 1846 "Miracle of the Quails" took place on the Iowa shore.

Apparently the first Mormons in Lee County were Israel Barlow and about thirty others who fled there from Caldwell County, Missouri, during the fall and winter exodus of 1838-39. Most Missouri Mormons headed for the ferries at Quincy, Illinois, and Louisiana, Missouri, but some did not. In Lee County, Barlow was made welcome at Montrose. He was attracted to that community

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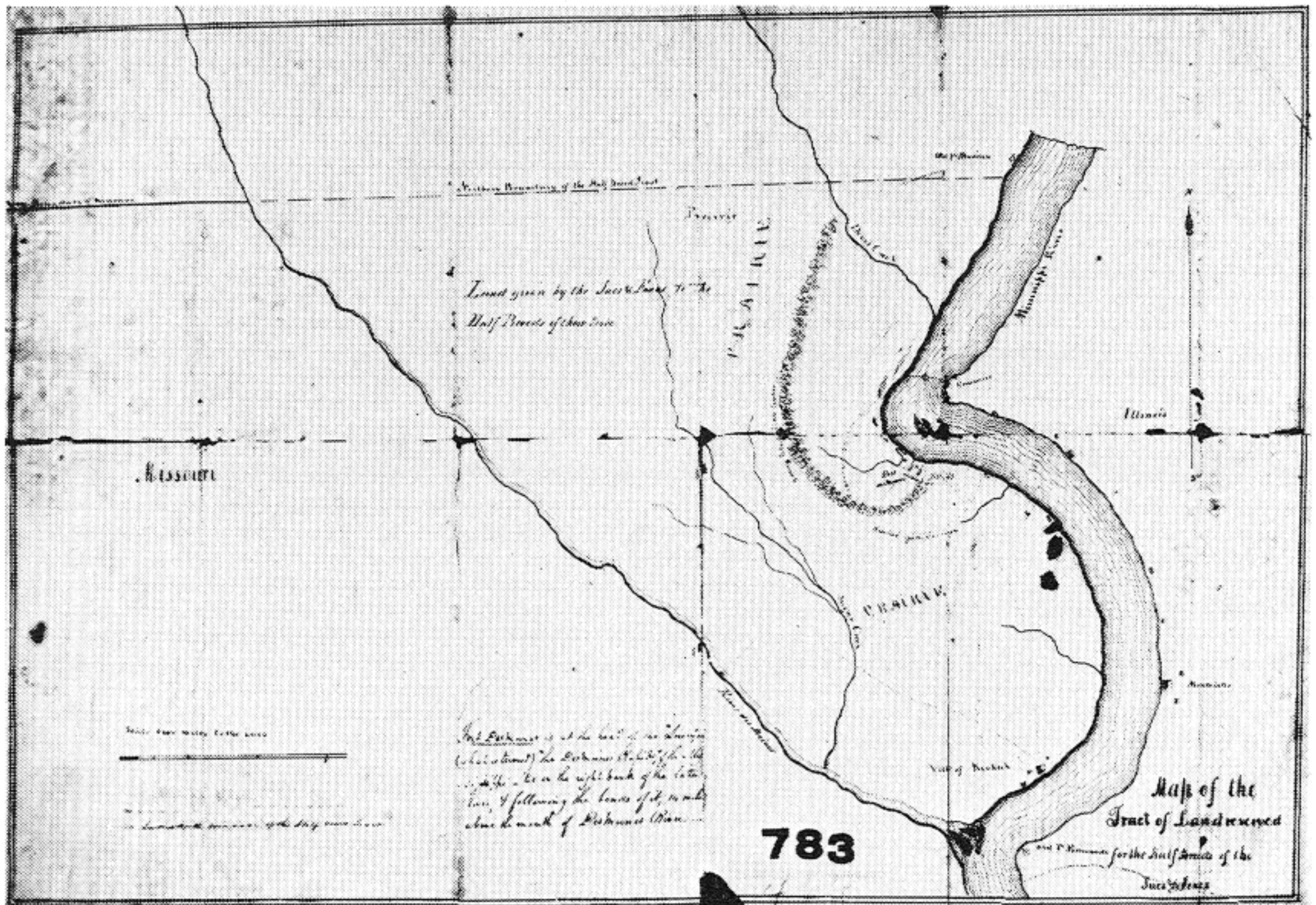
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Map of the Half Breed Sac and Fox Reservation, 1833.
 This map shows the one mile square village of Montrose, the village of Keokuk, the sites of Nashville, Sugar Creek, and the house of Captain James White at Commerce, Illinois. Courtesy National Archives.



Detail of the Map of the Half Breed Sac and Fox Reservation, 1833.
 This map shows more clearly the Captain James White house, Montrose, and the site of Nashville. Courtesy National Archives.



Map of the Tract of Land reserved for the Half Breeds of the Sacs & Foxes. This map clearly shows Commerce, Illinois, Fort Des Moines at Montrose, Sugar Creek, and Keokuk. Courtesy National Archives.

because of the abandoned Fort Des Moines which he figured could house forty or fifty refugee families.¹ Upon inquiry he found that the fort and most of the available land near Montrose was claimed by Isaac Galland, an eastern land speculator who had it up for sale. Galland had originally settled in Nashville, Lee County, in 1829, but was then living across the river at Commerce, Illinois, in the James White stone residence.

Barlow sought out Galland who made the Church an attractive offer of land on both sides of the river, including 20,000 acres in Iowa for \$2.00 an acre to be paid in twenty annual installments interest free. Sometime in January 1839, Barlow went south to Quincy to relay Galland's offer to the Church leaders who had gathered there awaiting Joseph Smith's release from jail in Liberty, Missouri. During February and March the offer was discussed by many including Brigham Young, Sidney Rigdon, William Marks, and Edward Partridge. A committee was sent to talk further with Galland and after Joseph escaped from Missouri in April, land was purchased in Illinois and Iowa during May and June. (Galland

¹See Ora H. Barlow, *The Israel Barlow Story* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1968), pp. 132-37.

joined the Church the following July and for a time acted as one of Joseph's business agents.)

The Iowa land to which Galland had quasi-title was part of the 119,000 acre Half-Breed Tract constituting that triangular part of Lee County south of Fort Madison between the Mississippi and Des Moines rivers. It was so named because in 1824 the enlightened Sac and Fox Indians had set it aside by treaty with the United States for the use of the half-breeds of their tribe who did not feel at home with either whites or Indians.

The site of Montrose had long been a center of this tract. The Sac and Fox Indians had maintained a trading post there since at least 1674 when Marquette and Joliet visited them. Subsequently the site developed into a Sac and Fox village. By 1832 a white man, James White, settled there and another settler, David W. Kilbourne, named it Mount of Roses, from the wild roses which covered the nearby bluffs—a name soon shortened to Montrose.

Two years later, in 1834, the United States established Fort Des Moines at Montrose to protect the rights of the half-breeds from encroaching whites who were moving illegally into the coveted area. Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny led a detachment of dragoons and a cavalry unit from Fort Leavenworth and erected a fort near the river.² According to some students, Nathaniel Boone (son of Daniel), E. V. Sumner, Winfield Scott, Jefferson Davis, and even Robert E. Lee served at Fort Des Moines.³

Since many Mormon families later lived in this fort a description of it is in order. Contemporary military records reveal that it was badly located and unhealthy, "less comfortable and of meaner appearance, than those occupied by any other portion of the army . . . and of a temporary character, hastily constructed and of round logs. . . ."⁴ At its height it housed 184 officers and men and 205 horses and mules. It was a U-shaped enclosure 425 feet wide by 675 feet deep facing the river. In addition to thirty-four 16 by 18 foot rooms arranged in rows along the back and sides, there were stables, corncribs, hayracks, supply rooms, a guardhouse, and a hospital.

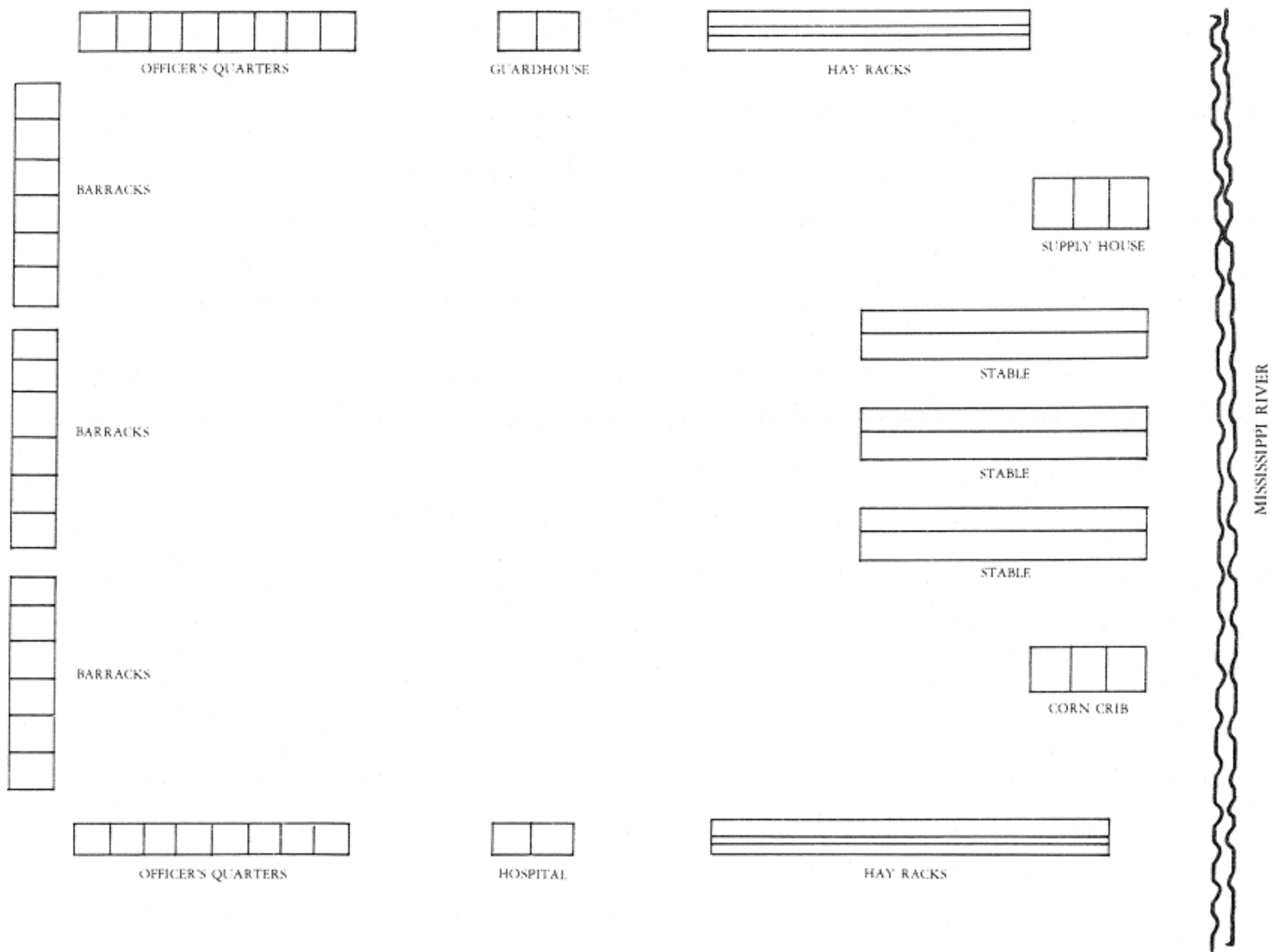
Within three years after the fort was built, however, most of the Indians and half-breeds had sold out to the whites and gone

²In passing it might be noted that it was this same Colonel Kearny who nine years later from Fort Leavenworth ordered Captain James Allen to find the Mormons on the Missouri River and recruit a battalion of 500 men.

³Edwin K. Sloat, "Iowa's First Fort Des Moines," *The Iowan* 3 (June-July 1955):48.

⁴"Fort Des Moines (No. 1), Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 3 (1897-99):353, 358.

PLAN OF FT. DES MOINES (based on the original plan in the National Archives)



west. In June 1837 the fort was abandoned and the troops were transferred back to Fort Leavenworth. The site of the old fort, now known as River Front Park, can be seen from present-day Nauvoo.

Despite Galland's questionable title to the Iowa land, the Mormons made at least two extensive purchases of thousands of acres. (The question of clear title grew out of the fact that the treaty which had turned the tract over to the half-breeds in the first place did not specify the number or names of those who had the right to sell at some future time and some half-breeds sold land to which they had no title. As a result many subsequent transactions came into dispute—a fact which troubled the Mormons.) Apparently the first Mormon purchase was on 24 June 1839 when the Church bought the undeveloped town site of Nashville (now Galland) and 20,000 surrounding acres located on the river three miles below Montrose. An additional 30,000 acres were purchased in and near Montrose and some individual Mormons acquired land in Keokuk, Ambrosia, and elsewhere in Lee County as well as in contiguous Des Moines and Van Buren counties.

Of these several Iowa communities, Montrose figures most prominently in LDS history. Mormon settlement there apparently

commenced in May 1839 (even before any formal land purchases) at which time Brigham Young (not being able to find suitable housing in Commerce) moved his family from Quincy into one of the barracks rooms of deserted Fort Des Moines. He was soon joined by the families of John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Orson Pratt, John Smith, Elijah Fordham, Joseph B. Noble, and others. This sudden influx of Mormon squatters alarmed some of the old settlers (some of whom were squatters themselves) who became antagonistic. Joseph B. Noble, for example, was ordered off a garden plot he cultivated and Kilbourne, who had laid out the town in 1837, became so hostile that he publicly insulted Joseph Smith and later conspired in an attempt to kidnap the Prophet.⁵

The old fort was the location of Joseph's well-known healing of Brigham Young and Elijah Fordham in July 1839.

He walked into the cabin where I was lying sick [Brigham later recorded] and commanded me, in the name of Jesus Christ, to arise and be made whole. I arose and was healed, and followed him and the brethren of the Twelve into the house of Elijah Fordham, who was supposed to be dying, by his family and friends. Joseph stepped to his bedside, took him by the hand and commanded him, in the name of Jesus Christ, to arise and be made whole. His voice was as the voice of God. Brother Fordham instantly leaped from his bed, called for his clothing and followed us into the street.⁶

By October of that same year there were so many Mormons in Lee County that a stake—one of the eleven pre-Utah stakes—was organized there. John Smith, an uncle of the Prophet and former president of the Adam-Ondi-Ahman Stake, was sustained as president. He called Reynolds Cahoon and Lyman Wight, who had served with him in Missouri, as counselors. Erastus Snow, Elijah Fordham, William Clayton, and Asahel Smith, among others, served on the high council, and Alanson Ripley was called as the bishop. (Membership was so small it was believed one bishop would suffice.) This stake soon became and remained, next to Nauvoo, the second most important stake and community of Mormons in the United States. This was especially true after 24 May

⁵See Stanley B. Kimball, "Missouri Mormon Manuscripts: Sources in Selected Societies," *BYU Studies* 14 (Summer 1974):474-77. Another peculiarly disgusting act of anti-Mormonism happened at Augusta, Van Buren County during January 1841 when two dapple-gray horses belonging to Joseph Smith were maimed. See *Times and Seasons*, 15 January 1841. The Burlington *Hawkeye and Iowa Patriot* of 21 January 1841 called the act an "Outrage . . . hardly [to] be tolerated among savages."

⁶Elden Jay Watson, ed., *Manuscript History of Brigham Young: 1801-1844* (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), p. 49. It was from these same quarters that Brigham Young left for his mission to England during September 1839. In 1840 Wilford Woodruff, while also on a mission in England, learned that his two-year-old daughter had died there.

1841 when Joseph Smith officially discontinued all other stakes except those in Nauvoo and in Lee County.⁷

The Iowa Stake, comprised of several small branches, was so widely scattered over three counties that President Smith claimed his job "require[d] the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, and the preservance and faithfulness of an Abraham to keep such order as ought to be in the Church of Christ. . . ."⁸

Montrose was the center of the stake and the high council met regularly in the home of Elijah Fordham. The council was strict and authoritarian. Among other things they voted to "come up to the law of tithing as far as circumstances would permit for the benefit of the poor." They decided to disfellowship anyone who sued other members for any old Missouri debts, and, in fact, to "uterly discard the practice of suing brethren at the law, and that such as do it, shall be disfellowshipped." They also voted to "disfellowship all brethren who should persist in keeping tippling shops in that branch of the Church."⁹

Apparently the council went so far as to try to reinstate the Law of Consecration for on 6 March 1840 Joseph Smith attended a meeting of the Iowa High Council and asked them to "desist from trying to keep it; and if persisted in, it would produce a perfect defeat of its object, and that he assumed the whole responsibility of not keeping it until proposed by himself."¹⁰

In March 1841 Joseph Smith received a revelation (Doctrine and Covenants 125) regarding the Iowa Stake. In it the Lord instructed the "Saints in the Territory of Iowa" to

build up a city unto my name upon the land opposite the city of Nauvoo, and let the name of Zarahemla be named upon it. And let all those who come from the east, and the west, and the north, and the south, that have desires to dwell therein, take up their inheritance in the same, as well as in the city of Nashville. . . . (D&C 125:3-4)

The earliest known reference to this Zarahemla is one of 2 July 1839 when Joseph Smith and a group went to Iowa to inspect a town site immediately west of Montrose, about a mile from the river, which Bishop Vinson Knight had purchased for the Church from Galland. At that time Joseph advised "that a

⁷Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1957), 4:362 (cited hereafter as *HC*).

⁸"Manuscript History of the Church in Iowa," 7 January 1841, Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁹*Ibid.*, 6 December 1839, 7 December 1839, 4 January 1840, and 7 February 1840.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 6 March 1840.

town be built there, and called Zarahemla.”¹¹ Little, however, was done to build a city until the March 1841 revelation, after which it soon became the largest Mormon community in Iowa.

Five months later, during an August 1841 conference under the direction of George A. Smith and John Taylor, the name of the Iowa Stake was changed to the Zarahemla Stake.¹² John Smith remained as president with David Pettigrew and Moses Nickerson as counselors. At that time the stake consisted of 750 members located in nine branches in Lee, Des Moines, and Van Buren counties, Iowa, and in Brown County, Illinois. These branches were as follows:

Zarahemla, Lee County, 326 members represented by Willard Snow. Although it was anticipated that Zarahemla would expand to include Montrose and become a sister city to Nauvoo, only about thirty small houses were ever built there. The site has since completely disappeared and the non-Mormon Montrose was built up in its stead.

Ambrosia, Lee County, 109 members represented by George W. Gee. What is left of this community is marked by a cluster of later homes about three miles west of the city limits of Montrose on county road J72, locally known as Ambrosia Lane. The Sugar Creek campsite of 1846 was in part of this scattered community.

Nashville, Lee County, 90 members represented by Elias Smith. Known today as Galland, it is located three miles south of Montrose on the river.

Mecham Settlement, Lee County (?), 65 members represented by Elias Smith. Its location is unknown, but it was probably named after Joseph Mecham.

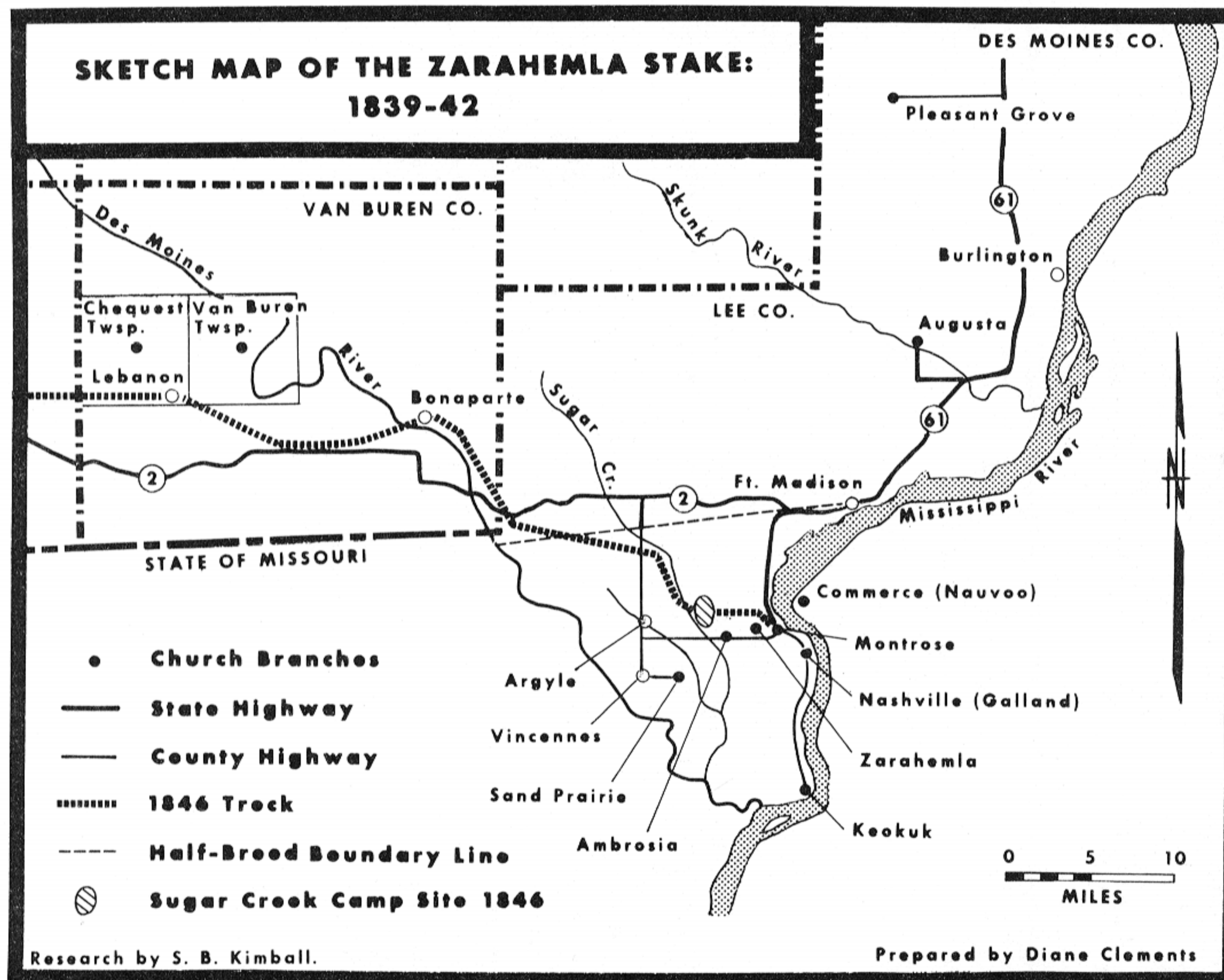
Keokuk, Lee County, 13 members represented by George W. Gee. This city of some 20,000 on the Mississippi is the county seat of Lee County.

Augusta, Des Moines County, 50 members represented by Willard Snow. This branch was located immediately across the Lee County line on the Skunk River. Augusta still exists. Some of the Saints settled on the south bank of the Skunk River in what for a time was called South Augusta.

Van Buren Township, Van Buren County, 11 members represented by John Lowry.

¹¹Ibid., 2 July 1839.

¹²Ibid., 7 and 9 August 1841.



Chequest Township, Van Buren County, 30 members represented by W. Baldwin.

Siloam, Brown County, Illinois, 67 members represented by "Brother Forrister." Siloam has been absorbed by the Siloam Springs State Park.¹³

There is some evidence that there was a small branch at Pleasant Grove, Van Buren County, and that some Mormons lived at Timothy Block and the Hawley Settlement, sites unknown today.¹⁴

One month following this conference, in September 1841, Joseph Smith accepted an invitation to review the Lee County Militia. This was the occasion for Kilbourne's public insult. Kilbourne told the militia it did not have to be reviewed by the Mormon Prophet and that Joseph was out of order for even showing up. Few paid attention to Kilbourne's harangue.

Five months after the encouraging Zarahemla conference, that stake was discontinued on 6 January 1842 and reduced to branch status with John Smith staying on as branch president. Thus the whole life of the first Iowa Stake was but twenty-seven months, five of which it was known by the name of Zarahemla. (No more stakes were organized in Iowa for over 124 years until the Cedar Rapids Iowa Stake was organized in 1966.)

The dissolution of the Zarahemla Stake and subsequent decline of the Church in Iowa was caused by the continuing ingathering of that time to strengthen Nauvoo. Thereafter we hear little of Church activities in Iowa although some branches struggled on for a while and at least one new branch was organized. (In 1854 at Sand Prairie, Lee County, there was a group of forty-nine members led by Arnold Potter.)¹⁵

On 6 August 1842, Joseph participated in the installation of the officers of the Rising Sun Lodge of Masons in Montrose. At this time he apparently uttered the famous prophecy that the Saints would become a mighty people in the Rocky Mountains.¹⁶ A few days later he returned secretly to Montrose to seek temporary asylum with his uncle, John Smith. Joseph was being hunted

¹³Siloam, about twenty-five miles east of Quincy, apparently at one time had been part of some stake in Adams County. After the dissolution of these stakes the members seem to have been, for awhile at least, transferred to the Zarahemla Stake. The *Times and Seasons* of 1 April 1841 refers to Siloam, Iowa, and there is a 17 July 1841 reference to "the Siloam branch of the Church in this [Lee] County." Miscellaneous Minutes of the Zarahemla Stake, 1840-41, George A. Smith Papers, University of Utah.

¹⁴"Manuscript History of the Church in Iowa," 18 July 1840.

¹⁵*Times and Seasons* 6 (15 March 1845). Sand Prairie no longer exists, but it was located east of Vincennes near a branch of the Sugar Creek.

¹⁶HC, 5:85.

by Missourians in connection with an attempted assassination of Lilburn W. Boggs, former governor of Missouri.

About two years later Joseph again fled to Montrose. During the night of 22 June 1844 he went to William Jordan's house, but the next day Emma sent a message entreating him to return. He did and took the road to martyrdom at Carthage.

Sixteen months after Joseph's death when anti-Mormon activities again broke out in Illinois, some Iowans followed suit. Anti-Mormon meetings were held in Montrose in October 1845, and the following month in Augusta to get rid of the few Mormons left in Lee and Des Moines counties.¹⁷ (Pressure was kept on the Mormons to leave even after the exodus commenced.)¹⁸

Lee County had one more important role to play in early Mormon history. During February 1846 on the banks of Sugar Creek seven miles west of the Mississippi River Brigham Young established the staging ground for the exodus from Nauvoo across Iowa. For the rest of that year thousands of Mormons camped temporarily on Sugar Creek. During October the dramatic "Miracle of the Quails" took place while about 640 destitute Saints, driven from Nauvoo by mob action, were camping on the Iowa river bottoms. On 9 October, flocks of quail, exhausted from a long flight, fell at the feet of the Saints and were gathered for food.

¹⁷Burlington, *Hawkeye and Iowa Patriot*, 16 and 23 October and 6 November 1845.

¹⁸During May 1846 a mass meeting was held in Montrose to determine how to get rid of the Mormons still in Lee County "who apparently have no intention of moving westward with their brethren." *Lee County Democrat*, 2 May 1846. Little can be learned from the Iowa press about Mormons in Iowa during the 1840s. Even the weeklies in Burlington, Fort Madison, Keosauqua, and Keokuk were so concerned with events in Illinois, especially Nauvoo, that they reported very little about the Mormons in their own state and neighborhood.