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## A LITTLE KNOWN ACCOUNT OF THE MURDERS OF JOSEPH AND HYRUM SMITH

Jan Shipps\*

A little known contemporary account of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith is contained in the following letter which was written by Mr. H. H. Bliss, a resident of La Harpe, Illinois, on the day following the murders at Carthage Jail. Bliss, whose name was included in an 1859 La Harpe business directory with the word "furniture" after it, was the town's postmaster from 1856 to 1865.<sup>1</sup> The letter was written to reassure his family back East that the situation in Hancock County was not as dangerous as published accounts might indicate. It was addressed to Mr. Franklin Bliss, Springfield, Massachusetts, and was mailed from La Harpe on 8 July 1844.

The letter was written in ink on both sides of a single sheet of inexpensive paper. It was folded as a quarto sheet would be, with one face used for the address. The letter is transcribed here exactly as it was written.

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<sup>1</sup>Edwin C. Warren, "La Harpe Township," Chapter 32 in *History of Hancock County, Illinois*, Sesquicentennial Ed. (published by Board of Supervisors of Hancock County, 1968), pp. 354-355.

The original is in the Ellison Manuscripts Collection in the Lilly Library at Indiana University. It was a gift from Mrs. Robert Spurrier Ellison of Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 1946. Dr. Elfrieda Lang, Curator of Manuscripts at the Library, helped with the preparation of this transcription, and her assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

La Harpe Jun 1844

Dear Brother

We received the package from home by Mr. Wilcox a short time since he arrived here safe. Yesterday was the first time that I have seen him since his return. We wer gratified to learn that you wer all well I am sorry that he could not stop a little longer but it is well that he did not as things are a going here. We are at this time in the midst of a great excitement and have been for ten days past Caused by the *Murder* of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet and his brother Hiram Smith. You will probably see an account of the whole proceedings in print be fore you get this but thinking you would be anxious to hear from us I will try to give you an account of the whole affair Early this Spring there was a new party arose among the Mormons they profsed to believe as they had before except in one point and that was that Smith was a fallen prophet they soon commenced publishing to the world Smiths conduct which caused a great inmyty to exist between the two parties. As soon as I heard the division among them I told our Mormon neighbors that Nauvoo would be to hot for them both but they would not believe it. The two parties continued to be more bitter against each other until at last the new party established a press in Nauvoo and printed a paper called the *Expositor* this was more than the Prophet could bear. to have a paper exposing his conduct to the world establishe in the midst of his own city was to cutting. the consequence was that Smith under the shadow of Law caused the Press to be distroid in open day. An now commenced the War. The new party wer determined to make him suffer for this act of violance on their rights and Property. they tride to bring him to justice but the Municipal Court where he was discharged but the new party was determined to make him suffer the penalty of the Law it is possible they knew that the Court of the City had no right to discharge him. Smith on the other hand was determined not leave Nauvoo to be tride

at last the new party established a press in Nauvoo and printed a paper called The Expositor. This was more than the Prophet could bear, to have a paper opposing his conduct to the world was established in the midst of his own city was too ugly. The consequence was that Smith under the shadow of Law caused the Men to be disarmed in open day. On noon commenced the "war". The new party was determined to make him suffer for this act of violence on their rights and Property. They tried to bring him to justice but the Municipal Court where he was discharged but the new party was determined to make him suffer the penalty of the Law if possible. They knew that the Court of the City had no right to discharge him. Smith on the other hand was determined not leave Nauvoo to be tried at Carthage where the writ was issued. By this time matters were coming to a serious point - and that was whether the Law should have its course on Smith or not - every man in the county except Mormons were determined that Smith should be taken by the Constable and brought to justice. There was a Committee sent to inform the Governor the situation of things before he arrived at Carthage all the Mormons with the exception of a few had <sup>left</sup> where and other places for Nauvoo at the command of Smith. This was what never expected to see. To see our old neighbors

shouldering their guns to go in defense of Smith thereby showing a disposition to kill any or all of us if Smith gave them orders. By this time Smith had collected his followers at Nauvoo to the amount of some thousands ready or some of them said "to make in blood keep the town stronger in defense of their Prophet". The Governor established his Head Quarters at Carthage. Smith put the City of Nauvoo under ~~Martial Law~~ <sup>Martial Law</sup>. At this time the Constable here had formed ourselves into a Military Company for the protection of our place. This is the first thing that I have learned since I left the Brandon-Baker and I can assure you it was with altogether different feelings. The Governor collected a large force at Carthage and took every measure to prevent Smith from getting away. which resulted in Smith giving himself up for trial with 18 others. They were all found guilty and put under \$500.00 bonds. They were all released but the two brothers Joseph & Eliram they were put in the Carthage Jail to ~~remain~~ <sup>remain</sup> ~~there~~ <sup>there</sup> to the charge of Treason. The trial was so have come on yesterday at 12 o'clock in the morning. The Governor went to Nauvoo with a body of men to get some U.S. arms leaving a guard at the jail to protect Smith but it was not sufficient for them. A body of men from toward Warsaw rushed up on the guard and broke in the jail and shot both of the Smiths. They are buried to day at Nauvoo. How this

at Carthage wher the writ was issued. by this time matters were a coming to a serious point and that was wether the *Law* should have its carse on Smith or not every man in the County except Mormons wer determined to that Smith should be taken by the Constable and brought to justice there was a Commity sent to informe the Governour the situation of things befor he arived at Carthage all the mormons with the excepsion of a few had left here and other places for Nauvoo at the command of Smith this was what we never expected to see. To see our old neighbours shouldering their Guns to go in defense of Smith therby showing a disposition to kill any or all of us if Smith gave them orders. By this time Smith had collected his followers at Nauvoo to the amount of some thousands ready as some of them said '*to wade in blood up to their shoulder*' in defense of their Prophet. The Governour established his Head Quarters at Carthage. Smith put the City of Nauvoo under *Marshall law*. by this time we Gentiles here had formed ourselves into a Milertary Company fo th protection of ou place this is the first time that I have traind since I left the Hamden Guards and I can assure you it was with altogeather diferent feelings. The Governor collected a large force at Carthage and took every means to prevent Smith from es geting away. which resulted in Smith giving himself up for trial with 18 others they were all foud guilty and put under \$500.00 bonds they wer all released but the two Smiths Joseph & Hiram they wer put in the Carthage Jail to await anothe answer to the charge of Treason the trial was to have come on yesterday at 12<sup>00</sup> in the mean time the Governour went to Nauvoo to with a body of men to get some U.S. armes leaving a gard at the jail to protect Smith but it was not sufficent for there was a body of men from toward Warsaw rushed upon the Gard and broke in the jail and shot both of the Smiths. they are buried to day at Nauvoo. How this matter will terminate no one can tell but that being "who rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth." The Governor is at Carthage I have not learnd what his course will be. We are all well as yet and the generale opinion is that the excitement will soon be over you must write as soon as convenient tell Mother not to be troubled about us Howard and Eliza think a heap of the Books that Cornelius sent I hope that we shall see each other again Remember us to all friends

H. H. Bliss