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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. 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.

*Dr. Shipps is assistant professor of history and religious studies at Indiana University—Purdue University at Indianapolis, Ind., and was recently elected vice-president of the Mormon History Association.

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 were gratified to learn that you were 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 before 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 professed 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 outcry 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 were 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 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 new in Knoxs.

and printed a paper called the Constitution. This was

more than the Prophet could bear; he then a paper

proposing his conduct to the world was establishe in

in the midst of his own city to rule. The conse-1

was that Smith under the shadow Law caused

the men to be distroyed in open day. To now

summoned the law. The new party now develope

to make him suffer for the act of violence on the

nights and Royalty they tried to him, due to

justice but the Municipal Court where he

was discerbed but the new party was deharming to

make his suffer the height of the law. It is

possible they knew that the court of the city had

no right to discharge him. Smith on how the law

was determined must leave Knoxs to be tried at

Carthage. In the first trial, they were found by the time

another was convex to a serious point and that pre-1

ther Law should have to come on Smith and any

men in the county except Mormons being determined

that Smith should be taken the Constable and

brought to justice there was a company sent to in-1

the Governor the situation of things before

be arrived at Carthage all the Mormons was at

the constables four and three and other places for

Knoxs at the command of Smith. They took what

people official to go on to see the neighbors.

Shoulding their time to go in defense of himself

thereby having a disposition to kill any or all

of the Smiths gave them orders by the law Smith

called them. This followed at Carthage to the

amount of some thousand men or some of their

saw it on the road, they were in the same town of

defence of their Prophet. The Governor en-1

aished his troops at Carthage. Smith had

the city of Knoxs under Mason. Now of this

time the Cartes had formed a mad in a

military Company for the protection of its place

this is the after fact that I have's some time

1 left the Running-1 and I can assure you it was

with allegations of different people. The Governor called

1 a large force at Carthage and took every way to

prevent Smith from going away, which men in Smith

left himself up for total with 18 in

they subdue, all from gentle and put under 1000 hands

they wore all released but the two Smith Joseph

and Elder they were put in the Carthage jail to

bring to the charge of treason. The trial was to

have come on yesterday at 12 a.m. the mean two the

Governor went to Knoxs with a body of men to

get some new men having a part at the jail to

protect Smith but it was not sufficient for them and

a body of men were toward Mason rather after the

phone and broke in the jail and went into the

latent. They are bounded to pay at Knoxs. Now this
at Carthage when the writ was issued. By this time matters were coming to a serious point and that was whether the Law should have its case on Smith or not. Every man in the County except Mormons were determined to 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 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 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 as some of them said to "wade in blood up to their shoulder." In defense of their Prophet. The Governor 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 Military Company for the protection of our place this is the first time that I have trained since I left the Hamden Guards and I can assure you it was with altogether different feelings. The Governor collected a large force at Carthage and took every means 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 Smiths Joseph & Hi-ram they were put in the Carthage Jail to await another answer to the charge of Treason. The trial was to have come on yesterday at 12th in the mean time the Governor went to Nauvoo to 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 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 learnt what his course will be. We are all well as yet and the general 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