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THE ACCOUNT BOOKS OF THE AMOS DAVIS STORE AT COMMERCE, ILLINOIS

T. Edgar Lyon

During the summer of 1965, while working as research historian for Nauvoo Restoration, Incorporated, I located in the University of Chicago Library an old store ledger identified as an 1839 Illinois merchant's account book from Commerce. The cover was missing, as well as pages at the front and back of the book and several other pages. A quick perusal of the accounts indicated this was indeed a ledger from Commerce, Illinois, as I recognized a dozen or more names of pre-Mormon residents along with a score or more of Mormons who began to arrive there after May 1839.

Only two stores were known to have operated at Commerce. One of these was run for a short time by Hiram Kimball. In 1836 he had purchased a lot in Commerce, and the following year he secured a franchise to operate a mercantile business there. Some time in the fall of 1836 Amos Davis, like Kimball a native of Vermont, arrived at Commerce. During that winter he married Elvira Hibbard, daughter of one of the original land patentees in the area, and in February purchased two lots from Kimball. It is possible that Kimball, who by that time was getting involved in real estate transactions, was desirous of getting out of the mercantile business and may have employed Davis in his store. By April 1838, Davis had either purchased Kimball's mercantile business or had established his independent store, since he secured a license to operate a store and Kimball did not renew his license. Kimball appears as a customer, with a rather large account, in the 1839 ledger. It thus seemed quite conclusive that the record at Chicago was the ledger of the Amos Davis store.

Positive proof of this conclusion was possible by comparing the information in the ledger with entries in a leather-bound book in the Western Americana Division of the University of Utah Library, in Salt Lake City. On the spine of this book is the word "Journal," stamped in gold. Inked on the front cover is the name

T. Edgar Lyon was senior research historian for Nauvoo Restoration, Inc. This report for the Historians Comer was in preparation at the time of Dr. Lyon's recent death. The unfinished manuscript has been completed for publication by Glen M. Leonard, senior research historian with the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

of Amos Davis's store. This book contains daily sales information—both cash and credit—dating from 15 May 1839 to 18 October 1842. It is what was commonly spoken of as a “Day Book” or “Place Book.” Entries in such a book were customarily transferred regularly to a ledger, where accounts were maintained for steady customers. In the left margin of each page of the Day Book now at the University of Utah the bookkeeper entered an account number as he transferred the credit transactions to a ledger. Each item so numbered in the Day Book is found in the 1839 ledger at the corresponding page number. Furthermore, pages missing from the ledger can now be reconstructed using the Day Book located in Utah.

The University of Chicago Library obtained the Amos Davis Ledger when it purchased part of the Herbert S. Auerbach Collection offered for sale at the Parke-Bernet Galleries in 1947. Presumably, the University of Utah obtained its half of the financial pair from the same source.

One of the important insights available to the student of Nauvoo history through a study of the Day Book and ledger of the Amos Davis store at Commerce is a better understanding of the extent of settlement in that area. A description in Joseph Smith's *History of the Church* (3:375) identifies only six buildings within the confines of the town of Commerce and four outside the town, downstream, for more than a mile and a half—a total of ten buildings “in that vicinity.” It implies that these residents were living as isolated families in a virtual wilderness. This raises some serious questions, for ninety-five heads of families had credit accounts on Amos Davis's store ledger before the Mormons arrived there in 1839. Where did they live? If “the land was mostly covered with trees and bushes and much of it so wet that it was with the utmost difficulty a footman could get through and totally impossible for teams,” how could customers reach Davis's store?

We know that for nine years the weekly mail coach had been delivering mail from Carthage over the Carthage (sometimes referred to as the Macomb) Road, with no more difficulty than was usually experienced at that time in traveling muddy roads on the prairies. During the early part of 1839, before the arrival of the Mormons, dozens of farmers had been delivering wheat and corn to the store in Commerce in payment of their purchases, so there must have been farms operating within a reasonable distance and wagons hauling the products to the store and returning to the farms with the goods received in exchange.

The study of the Hancock County Deed Records of the Commerce vicinity by Rowena J. Miller (of Nauvoo, Inc.) makes it possible to locate most of the ten structures referred to in the *History*. These were scattered along the banks of the Mississippi for more than a mile and a half. That section was forest and thicket, as described in the *History*. But inland a quarter of a mile or less was farmland, some of which had been farmed by Indians for a half century before the first white settlers arrived at the Commerce site. It would have been difficult to walk and impossible to drive a team through the forests to get to the Davis store or post office, but not impossible to drive wagons northward to the Carthage Road and then westward to the town of Commerce on the banks of the river. The traditional description of the Commerce area along the river bank has erroneously led us to believe that those few homes were the entire settled part of the Nauvoo peninsula. An analysis of the Amos Davis account books and related records allows us to expand our horizon.