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Notes and Comments

PLATTING THE CITY BEAUTIFUL: A HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL GLIMPSE OF NAUVOO STREETS

Donald L. Enders

In the spring of 1839 the Latter-day Saints began arriving at their newly appointed gathering place on the Upper Mississippi. There they established Nauvoo, destined to become by December 1845 one of the two largest cities in Illinois.

Its design had been most influenced by the plat for the "City of Zion" at Independence, Missouri. Zion was to be one mile square, divided by wide streets into blocks of ten acres, which in turn would be subdivided into twenty equal lots. A home and outbuildings would be erected on each lot, with sufficient space for garden, fruit trees, and domestic animals. No specific provision was made for the location of industrial or commercial establishments. With farms clustered outside the city limits, Zion would be an agricultural community with the benefits of city life as well. As new converts gathered, the city would be enlarged until it reached predetermined proportions; other Zion communities would then be created as needed.

Nauvoo's site had been selected with an eye for immediate prosperity and eventual expansion. The river would bring in inhabitants and money, and the city would grow, covering the plain in the bend of the river, then the bluffs, and finally the prairie beyond.¹ By late summer of 1839 the Church had obtained most of the bottomland where the city of Nauvoo was already being built. Initial purchases from Hugh White, Isaac Galland, the Hotchkiss Syndicate, and William White had placed approximately 671 acres under Church ownership. The first official plat of Nauvoo, created 30 August 1839, included most of the acreage in those four acquisitions. A notable exception was the area encompassing most of Commerce City and that portion of old Commerce which had been acquired as part of the Hotchkiss purchase.

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¹Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 44.

Some of this area apparently never was subdivided to conform to the Nauvoo plat.

The city plat provided for blocks of four acres, each divided into four lots, a departure from the much larger Independence or Zion plan. Originally, the Nauvoo plat provided for only one home to a lot. Soon, however, as people began crowding into the city, one-house lots were subdivided until several homes and businesses could be found on many of the original sites. Although the city plat showed the whole area divided into streets and blocks, much of it was just a "paper" town which would have to wait for a multitude of settlers to make it a reality.²

Following the city's incorporation in February 1841, decisions of the Nauvoo City Council shed light on the rapid sprawl of the city north and east onto the bluffs and towards the prairie. To maintain an open and garden-like setting, homes were to be set back twenty-five feet from the streets, with shade and ornamental trees and shrubbery being encouraged for yard and sidewalk areas. Streets and walkways, like those of other planned communities of the day, were spacious; sidewalks eight feet wide were required for streets three rods wide (49.5 feet), and sidewalks ten feet wide were required for streets exceeding that width. The narrower walkways would have been adequate for all but three streets in Nauvoo—Main Street (82 feet), Water Street (64 feet), and Granger Street (widened to 65.5 feet in 1843).³

Being convinced the Church was in Illinois to stay, and seeing new converts gathering in great numbers to Nauvoo, some who held large tracts of land felt there were advantages in creating subdivisions to be taken into the city as "additions." Before becoming a part of the city, each new addition was required by the City Council to conform to the original Nauvoo plat. Such new acquisitions pushed Nauvoo's boundaries eastward, increasing the city, by 1846, to nearly four times its original area. Minutes of the City Council refer on occasion to resolutions calling for surveying and opening some of the streets already shown on the original plat, as well as opening new ones in those areas later annexed to the city.⁴

²David E. Miller, "Westward Migration of the Mormons," report submitted to the National Park Service, 1963, pp. 45-59.

³"Law and Ordinances of the City of Nauvoo: Streets and Alleys, January 30, 1843," *City Council Proceedings 1841-1845, Nauvoo, Illinois*, p. 152. Copy in possession of Nauvoo Restoration, Incorporated, Salt Lake City.

⁴"An Ordinance in Relation to the City Plot, March 1, 1841," *City Council Proceedings 1841-1845, Nauvoo, Illinois*, p. 11, Nauvoo Restoration, Inc.

Obviously, not all of the people who moved to Nauvoo settled in the area originally incorporated as the city of Nauvoo or in one of the subdivisions which later became a part of it. An examination of an 1846 map⁵ delineating Nauvoo's additions and subdivisions reveals extensive areas not so included. Many of the streets and blocks intended for these new additions were never developed beyond the drawing board, although most of the area not subdivided was used as farm land.⁶

The process of actually laying out the network of streets was slow work and never seemed to keep pace with the city's expansion. Petitions requesting the City Council to open new streets or extend existing ones were generally slow to be fulfilled because each new street of the approximately 75 miles of roadway constructed by the Mormons in Nauvoo required surveying and considerable grading (by horse-drawn scrapers and levelers), not to mention occasional bridging at streams and ground depressions.

The official opening of a street, of course, did not guarantee troublefree access to its users. Illinois' diverse weather and a heavy traffic of wagons, animals, and men were forever spoiling the streets' surfaces. When Josiah Quincy and Charles Francis Adams visited Nauvoo in May 1844, during a heavy rain, they found its streets "knee-deep in mud."⁷ This was not an uncommon condition. Even Nauvoo's busiest thoroughfares suffered. Parley Street, a main avenue connecting the prairie to the east with the heart of the community, was usually impassable between Durphy and Partridge streets, even for foot travellers, because of water draining south from the bluffs to the river. A petition to the City Council in March 1844 from Hyrum Smith and twenty-two others lamented the streets' "bad conditions" and asked for that "honorable body to take the same into consideration, and devise some means for improving the same."⁸

In spite of the need, Nauvoo City, probably for financial reasons, never launched an adequate street-improvement program. When weather or other conditions caused road damage, the City

⁵A Map of Nauvoo with All the Additions and the Towns of Commerce and Commerce City, compiled from the Records of Hancock County, by A. Cherill [1846]. By permission of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc.

⁶A Map of Nauvoo Additions and Subdivisions, transposed on Gustavus Hills 1842 Map. Prepared by Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., 1965.

⁷Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), p. 380.

⁸"Petition from Hyrum Smith and Twenty-two Others Requesting Street Improvements, March 8, 1844," *Streets*, Nauvoo Restoration, Incorporated, Index. Copy located at Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. Hereafter referred to as Church Archives.

Council attempted to alleviate the problem through volunteer work projects or by the labor of lawbreakers sentenced to do road work.⁹ Most often, however, individual citizens were expected to keep their walks and streets in repair.

Sources indicate roads were paved with gravel, and sidewalks were paved with gravel, brick, or stone. "Streets were indicated and then later properly surveyed," and, where necessary, fill was brought in and "gravel was hauled for the streets."¹⁰ Thomas L. Kane, who visited the abandoned city in September 1846, mentions walking along a "solitary street, no grass growing up in the paved ways."¹¹ Whether this means the "paved ways" were streets or sidewalks is not certain, but it does suggest that some paving was done in Nauvoo during the Mormon residency.

City Council minutes, city land records, and the city surveyor's requests for payment for completed street surveys give some insight into the city's growth pattern and street expansion. From the spring of 1839 through 1841, streets were opened in about 80 percent of the original plat, mostly in the southern part of town, which was the more populated and improved area. Streets which were convenient routes to the farm lands east of the developing city were also opened.

By the end of 1842, Nauvoo's population, augmented by a large influx of British converts, had swelled to nearly 38 percent above what it had been at the first of the year, bringing the community's total to approximately 4,500.¹² Most of the newcomers moved onto lands recently annexed by the city to the northeast, east, and southeast of the temple block. Streets extended into those areas were principally commercial routes, giving access to the wharfs along the river in the northwest part of town and to the budding business area on the south of the promontory. Over the next three years many less significant streets were graded and opened, giving a more completed appearance to the city.¹³

Planned as an ideal community where all could ponder the lat-

⁹For example, on one occasion two boys caught stealing chickens were sentenced to ten days' hard labor on the city streets; and, on another occasion, a young man, for abusing the police and for contempt of court, was sentenced to twenty days of the same labor. ("Minutes of the Mayor's Court, Nauvoo, Illinois, January 2, 1844," Church Archives; Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932-1951], 5:153.)

¹⁰T. Earl Pardoe, *Lorin Farr, Pioneer* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1953), p. 59.

¹¹*Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: Horace S. Eldredge, 1871), 13:114-15.

¹²James L. Kimball, Jr., "Nauvoo Population Study," in progress.

¹³"Minutes of the City Council of the City of Nauvoo, Illinois, 1841-1846," Church Archives.

ter-day gospel in surroundings of lovely buildings and broad avenues laid out in prescribed format and beautifully landscaped, Nauvoo had, by 1845, moved toward, as well as departed from, that ideal. Archaeological investigations conducted in Nauvoo between 1965 and 1976 by Nauvoo Restoration, Incorporated, have helped to clarify where the city adhered to and strayed from the physical arrangement envisioned by its founders.

First, a partial resurvey of Nauvoo by archaeologist J. C. Harrington confirmed that the original survey line of 1839, marking Nauvoo's east boundary, was plotted true north and that all streets, except one, ran parallel or at right angles to that line. The one exception was Water Street, which followed the riverbank from north to south along the city's west boundary.

Excavations at the homes of Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff, the *Times and Seasons* Complex, the Masonic Hall, and the Webb Blacksmith Shop revealed that the widths of the streets adjacent to those properties did not always conform to dimensions noted in the original plat. At four of these locations, remains of public walkways laid during the Mormon period were discovered. Without exception, the walks were included within the street boundaries. Thus, some streets were actually shy of their prescribed width by as many feet as the bordering walks were wide.¹⁴ Curbs were a definite demarcation line between street and walk. The curb at the Webb Blacksmith Shop was "formed of roughly shaped stones, about nine inches high and five inches thick . . . with the walk near the top and the gutter approximately level with the bottom."¹⁵ Walks excavated at the blacksmith shop and the Masonic Hall conformed to the city ordinance specifying sidewalk widths; some public walks excavated at other sites did not.¹⁶

Granger Street was a much-traveled street in the 1840s. It connected the southern part of the city with the major steamboat landing at the north. Residents living along the street in 1843 petitioned to have it widened. The City Council approved adding eight feet on both sides for the entire length of the street, thus moving original property lines back. Excavations at the Brigham

¹⁴Reports of excavations at the Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, Masonic Hall, *Times and Seasons* Complex, and Webb Blacksmith Shop sites, 1965-1976. By permission of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc.

¹⁵J. C. Harrington, *Archaeological Excavations at the Edwin D. Webb Site (127-4)* 1968, p. 18. By permission of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc.

¹⁶*Ibid.*; Dale L. Berge, *Archaeological Excavation of the Masonic Hall, Nauvoo, Illinois*, 1976, p. 6. By permission of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc.

Young home and the Webb Blacksmith Shop (which are diagonally across Granger Street from each other) unearthened walkways and other features which clearly defined Granger Street's pre-1843 width at 49.5 feet and its post-1843 width at 65.5 feet.¹⁷ Property boundaries were also altered on the east side of Brigham Young's property when permission was granted in 1843 to open a 16-foot-wide alley through the entire block. Remains of post holes for both the original east property lines and the alley line were located, the alley fence line quite clearly being of the Mormon era, for not long after the sale of the property by Brigham Young the former boundary was reestablished and the alley abandoned.¹⁸ Property boundaries were not always religiously adhered to. The digs at the *Times and Seasons* Complex¹⁹ and the Masonic Hall²⁰ revealed that buildings at both those sites extended over their property lines. The north building of the *Times and Seasons* Complex trespassed Main Street's right-of-way by three feet. Consequently, legal action forced a front entrance to the building's basement to be filled in to prevent any further encroachment on the street and walk.²¹

Archaeological excavations revealed the kinds of materials used in sidewalk and street construction and, to some degree, helped define the extent of their use. That Latter-day Saint Nauvoo had wooden walks has been a traditional concept;²² however, so far, no remains of this type of walkway have been unearthened. Instead, most walks were constructed of stone, brick and gravel. The use of such materials as paving for streets seems to have been limited.

During the fall of 1970, in conjunction with a sewer-digging project in Nauvoo, a large portion of Main Street was excavated,²³ allowing examination of a twelve-block long segment of the street in the busiest part of old Nauvoo, from Lumber Street north to Cutler Street. Excavation revealed that no uniform paving of the street was done in the 1839–1846 period; instead Main Street was used in a relatively unimproved condition during the Saints' stay in the city. Sand, brick fragments, chipped stone, nails and plaster

¹⁷J. C. Harrington, *Archaeological Excavations at the Brigham Young Site (126-2)*, 1965–1968, p. 79. By permission of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁹Virginia Harrington, *Report on the Excavations of the North Building Times and Seasons Complex*, 1968, p. 13. By permission of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc.

²⁰Berge, *Masonic Hall*, p. 3.

²¹Harrington, *Times and Seasons Complex*, p. 13.

²²*Nauvoo Independent*, 22 August 1884.

²³Donald L. Enders, "Archaeological Excavation of Old Main Street, Nauvoo, Illinois, 1970" (Salt Lake City, 1971), pp. 8–10.

embedded in the street surface indicated that, once graded, Main Street became a catchall for construction waste. Logically, the home and shop builder of the 1840s found the street a good place to deposit building rubble and soil from basements, for such proved very useful for filling the ever-recurring mudholes and ruts which plagued Nauvoo streets. Just a few feet south of the intersection of Main and Hotchkiss streets archaeologists unearthed a deposit of brick, plaster, chipped stone, and clay twenty-six feet long by fifteen feet wide and two to four inches thick. However, Main Street at this location was not as troubled by road damage as were other portions of the street and thus maintained a relatively well-defined road line. Profiles cut along the street in most other areas indicated that the surface of the road was constantly churned up by weather and traffic. Except for this one heavy concentration of building rubble, Main Street from Mulholland Street south had been surfaced with three to five inches of clay and sand. Chuckholes in the road's surface had been filled with stones, bricks, soil, gravel, or a mixture of whatever was handy. Main Street's road surface north of Mulholland Street was less affected by traffic and weather than it was south of that point, the street surface to the north being noticeably free of the churning and mixing characteristics of south Main.

In summary, the ideal Nauvoo was intended to be a well laid-out city of broad streets and walks, where finely crafted homes and shops would be built at prescribed distances from the streets. These avenues were to be laid out on a simple grid dividing the city into equal-sized blocks, on each of which a designated number of families would reside. However, the actual Nauvoo was too busy growing to adhere to this ideal: buildings encroached upon and even trespassed property lines. Some areas of the city were never aligned to conform to the original city plat, therefore leaving the network of roads disjointed. Blocks originally divided into four-acre lots were soon subdivided into even smaller parcels, and streets which had been planned to flow with people contemplating Nauvoo's beauty and the message of the latter-day gospel were frequently impassable, even for foot traffic.

Nauvoo, though planned as a city of Zion, had difficulties escaping the ways of the world; for a city which was not able to pave its streets with gravel, brick, or stone was obviously some time away from paving them with gold.