



10-1-1993

## John C. Calhoun, Jr., Meets the Prophet Joseph Smith Shortly before the Departure for Carthage

Brian Q. Cannon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cannon, Brian Q. (1993) "John C. Calhoun, Jr., Meets the Prophet Joseph Smith Shortly before the Departure for Carthage," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 33 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol33/iss4/13>

This Document is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



**Mansion House, Nauvoo, Illinois.** John C. Calhoun, Jr., Patrick Calhoun, and others visited Joseph Smith, Jr., in the Mansion House, June 22, 1844, two days before Joseph left for Carthage. According to the visitors, the Mansion House was guarded by three hundred men. Photographed in 1930s. Courtesy of LDS Church Archives.

## John C. Calhoun, Jr., Meets the Prophet Joseph Smith Shortly before the Departure for Carthage

*One hundred fifty years ago, the Prophet Joseph Smith was martyred. A newly discovered letter tells of a visit with Joseph only hours before he left Nauvoo.*

Brian Q. Cannon

During his visit to Washington, D.C., in February 1840, Joseph Smith met with Senator John C. Calhoun, one of the nation's foremost statesmen. Smith was unimpressed with Calhoun, "whose conduct towards me very ill became his station."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, following Calhoun's decision to resign from the Senate in 1843 to contend for the Democratic presidential nomination, the Prophet wrote to the *South Carolinian* as well as to other contenders for the presidency, inquiring about each man's views regarding the government's responsibility toward the Mormons. Calhoun responded on December 2, and on January 2, 1844, Joseph Smith wrote a lengthy rejoinder to Calhoun's reply, exhorting him to "raise your mind above the narrow notion that the General Government ha[d] no power" to intervene in behalf of the Latter-day Saints.<sup>2</sup> This string of missives hardly endeared the senator and the Prophet to each other. It was the last time that the two corresponded, but it was not to be Joseph Smith's last contact with the Calhoun family.

On Saturday, June 22, 1844, the day that Governor Thomas Ford sent a dispatch to Nauvoo ordering Joseph and his colleagues to "submit yourselves to be arrested,"<sup>3</sup> the steamboat *Lancet* approached Nauvoo. Its passengers included two of John C. Calhoun's sons, Patrick, aged twenty-three, and John Caldwell Calhoun, Jr., aged twenty-one. An army officer and graduate of West Point who spent money freely, Patrick was en route to an assignment at

Fort Bent, seven hundred miles west of St. Louis, when he stopped in Nauvoo. He was accompanied by his younger brother, John, who had been forced to withdraw from his studies at the University of Virginia several months earlier because of a severe bout with consumption. Both hoped that the fresh air, sunshine, and a hearty diet of wild game would speed John's recovery.<sup>4</sup> The Calhoun brothers prevailed upon the captain of the boat to let them land that evening at Nauvoo, for they were "anxious to see the Prophet."

After a brief carriage ride around the wharf area of the young river town, the brothers arrived at the Mansion House, where Joseph was meeting in an upper room with trusted associates—including Hyrum Smith, Willard Richards, John Taylor, and John M. Bernhisel—to consider Joseph's options in the face of Governor Ford's demand for his surrender. The Prophet had ordered Reynolds Cahoon and Alpheus Cutler "to stand guard at the Mansion, and not to admit any stranger inside the house."<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding this order, the Calhouns finally convinced the marshal that they were not spies and were allowed walk past three hundred armed guards and enter the Mansion House. There they sought and obtained an audience with Joseph Smith, who interrupted his tense meeting for the occasion.

Joseph described to them his troubles and gave "an exposition of his faith," frequently calling himself "the Prophet." Joseph was absent long enough that John Taylor, exhausted after his visit to Carthage that day to speak with Governor Ford, retired to his home for the night.<sup>6</sup> After his interview, Joseph returned to the council room and completed a letter to Governor Ford which contained an oblique reference to his conversation with the Calhouns. Wrote Joseph, "We have been advised by legal and high-minded gentlemen from abroad, who came on the boat this evening, to lay our grievances before the Federal Government. . . . We shall leave the city forthwith to lay the facts before the General Government."<sup>7</sup> Joseph slipped out of Nauvoo before daybreak on June 23, bound for Iowa, but he returned to Nauvoo later in the day at the behest of Emma and others and traveled to Carthage on Monday, June 24, never to return.

A brief report of the Calhouns' interview with Joseph Smith is contained in the following letter from John to his younger

brother. It casts fresh light upon Joseph Smith's final hours in Nauvoo and his letter to Governor Ford. John Calhoun's letter, noticed by Professor Lynn D. Wardle of the J. Reuben Clark Law School, was published in 1990 by the University of South Carolina Press in volume 19 (1844) of *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*<sup>8</sup> and is reprinted here by permission.

This letter contains several interesting, new, or confirming details. It gives a vivid glimpse into life on the Mississippi River in 1844. The river was running very high, and steamboat captains were vengefully ramming each others' boats. Nauvoo, here praised as "the most beautiful [site] in the Western World," was a known attraction; and Joseph Smith was called "the Prophet," even by casual visitors. Three hundred armed men protected the Mansion House, where Joseph Smith lived and operated a hotel. Although suspicious at first that they were involved in espionage, Joseph admitted the visitors into his drawing room and openly explained his situation to them. Most impressive, in his final hours of extreme difficulty, Joseph preached the gospel and testified of his prophetic calling.

Following the martyrdom, Governor Ford asked U.S. secretary of war, William Wilkins, for military support. Calhoun's letter gives the specific number of troops that were requested and eventually denied—seven hundred. The letter also goes on to describe conditions among the Native Americans who lived in the area northwest of Nauvoo, and it particularly mentions the large fish and game that abounded in the region. These conditions characterized the pristine world that the Mormon pioneers would enter two years later as they began the exodus from Nauvoo and trekked across the plains to the Intermountain West.

John C. Calhoun, Jr. to [James Edward Calhoun, Pendleton]

Fort Des Moines July 19th 1844  
Sacks & Fox nation[,] Iowa Te[rrito]ry

My dear brother, We arrived here a few days ago, after a long journey of more than 2,500 miles by the route from Washington, during which time, we have seen every variety of climate, soil, vegetation, and society. I have not more than recovered from the fatigues of the journey, but still feel, that it would not be acting properly to delay longer, as I know, that you are all anxious to hear from us. Just before starting from St. Louis, I wrote to Sissy [Martha Cornelia Calhoun], and gave her a brief description of our trip up to that time, and therefore will not make a recapitulation, but will commence where I left off.

We left Saint Louis on the 21st of last month, after purchasing, ammunition, guns, two double barrells, two brace pistols, two bowie knives, three horses, & a servant.

The steamboat we left Saint Louis in, was the Lancet, a pleasure boat bound for St. Anthonys falls, we had a fine band of music on board, and a great many Creole ladies, some of whom were very beautiful, they danced once or twice, but we were so much fatigued that we could not take a part. The Mississippi was very full, higher by several feet than it was ever known before, by the oldest inhabitants, it was ten miles broad at St. Louis, which is situated 1,750 miles above the mouth, thus giving you some idea of the magnitude of the river.

The scenery on the upper Mississippi is truly picturesque, the part of the river called upper, begins above the mouth of the Missouri, where the river entirely changes its character, from a mud[d]y, it becomes a beautiful limpid stream, at this place, the shore rises to a great height, it is one solid wall of limestone, ranging from 3 to 4, and sometimes 500 feet high, the shore is the most beautiful on the Illinois side, in the ["County" *interlined*] of Calhoun. From this place, nothing of interest hapenned [*sic*] until we got to Quincy on the Illinois side, here, just a[s] we were going to land, a steamboat the El Dorado coming down the river, ran against us, breaking in the side of the vessel, and so disabling her, as to cause considerable delay, which gave us time to walk about the city, which is one of the neatest on the river, we found after our return to the boat, that the other boat, had purposely struck our boat, there being some bad feeling between the two Captains. From Quincy we started for Nauvoo, and arrived there after dark, it was the evening after the Governor [Thomas Ford] had sent to ar[r]est Joe Smith,<sup>9</sup> and the City in consequence in a great state of excitement, a large number of us

being anxious to see the Prophet, begged the Captain of the boat to wait two or three hours for us, and in a few minutes after, found ourselves in an omnibus,<sup>10</sup> rowling rapidly through water street,<sup>11</sup> and soon our horses were drawn up before the door of the Hotel,<sup>12</sup> kept by the Prophet himself, at first he thought we were spies sent by the Governor, so he kept 300 men armed round the house, and sent his Marshall to disperse us,<sup>13</sup> but upon telling him the purpose of our visit, he invited us to the drawingroom, where he soon joined us, he gave us a full description of his difficulties, and also an exposition of his faith, frequently calling himself the Prophet, in the course of conversation.

Nauvoo in Hebrew signifies the beautiful,<sup>14</sup> & in this case I think fully deserves the name, for its site is said to be the most beautiful in the Western World, it is on a level plain, extending back for 3 miles, and then rises into high bluffs. A few days after leaving Nauvoo, we arrived at Fort Madison Iowa Territory, where we remained 8 days, and spent a pleasant time, while there we received several invitations to parties, at one time we received a note signed the ladies of Fort Madison inviting us to a large Fair and party given by them. On the 3d of July we mounted our horses and started for this place, the distance from Madison here is 200 miles, which is all one Pra[i]rie, there being all together not more than 20 miles of timber, you cannot imagine how much the first pra[i]rie struck me, one has not an idea of the immensity of the Earth[']s surface until he sees one; from F[or]t Madison to this place there is a continual rise, at first gradual, then becoming very rowling. Soon after you ascend the sum[m]it of the bluffs of the river, you strike the timber, which after passing through a very narrow strip of timber you come to the edge of the first pra[i]rie which is generally flat, and extends for 30 miles without a rise, covered with grass about knee high, the effect is very singular at [“or over” *interlined*] the line of vision it looks like water and I frequently immagined I was approaching the ocean. We would have started for the far west before this, but after Joe was killed, the Governor made a requisition to the Gover[n]ment for 700 Dragoons, so we have to remain to see what orders come from the [“Sectary” *altered* to “Secatary”; of War<sup>15</sup>], in that case we will not start until 2 weeks at the lowest calculation. A day or two ago a boat arrived from below, which is the second ever been here, we took a sail up as far as the mouth of Beaver river, 8 miles above this, it is the first boat that has ever been above this. There are three tribes of Indians here, the Fox and Sacks & Ioways, the two former are very powerful, but the latter though now small, was once a very formidable tribe, the whole amount of the three tribes are 3,800, their boundary extends 30 miles below, and on the east, while on the west are the Sioux or Dahcotah’s, the most powerful tribe as far as numbers are concerned in the United States. The Indians here are quite wild, and not one of them can speak English, except good morning, which they say whether you meet them in the morning or

at night, when they drink each others health, they say How, they are in our rooms almost every day. I went with [Lt.] Pat[rick] Noble [Jr.] a few days ago to some of their vil[l]ages, we visited the village of Appenense, Kirkirk, Hardfish, and Kish-Kiikosh, the latter is a great brave & chief and his likeness you can see, among the celebrated ["Fox" *interlined*] Indians, he is successor of Black-Hawk, there are two sons of the latter chief here, they are very fine looking men, and considered brave. There is a great deal of game about 50 miles above, such as, bear, deer, Antelope, Bison, Elk, and a few wild horses, the Indians are daily coming in loaded down with meat, I saw an Elks horn a few days ago, measuring 7 ft. some inches in length; & before I forget it, I must tell you a *big* but true fish story—while at Madison, I saw a boy about your size, catch a blue-cat with a hook and line, weighing 65 pounds, and measuring 6 ft. in length, this is what I saw, now I will tell you what I heard, it was that cats are frequently cougth in the Mississippi, in weight 200 lbs., jacks are also cougth in length from 12 to 15 ft. Pat says you must remember him to his brothers and sisters, & tell them to write to him. I must conclude as my pen is bad and it is getting late.

Pady [Patrick Calhoun] & Pat send their love to you and Willy [William Lowndes Calhoun]. Give my love to *Kate* [Catherine Floride Townes] & Eugenia [Calhoun] & tell them, they must write to me. Direct your letters to St. Louis. I remain, your ever devoted brother, John C. Calhoun, Jr.

Brian Q. Cannon is Assistant Professor of History at Brigham Young University.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949–50), 4:80 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*). The descendent of Scotch-Irish settlers in South Carolina, Calhoun was one of the nation's foremost statesmen from his election to the Senate in 1810 until his death in 1850. Along with Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, Calhoun dominated the Senate. A member of the influential Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs during the War of 1812, Calhoun later served for eight years as secretary of war under James Monroe, as vice president from 1824 to 1832 under John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, and again as senator from 1832 to 1843, when he resigned to campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. It was in this season that Joseph Smith wrote to Calhoun regarding Calhoun's views of the Mormons. When it became clear that Calhoun would not win the Democratic nomination, he withdrew from the race and retired to his plantation in South Carolina, only to be appointed as secretary of state under John Tyler in 1844 and to return to the



Senate in 1845. Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun*, 3 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1944-51).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Smith's letter to John C. Calhoun, dated November 4, 1843, appears in *History of the Church* 6:64-65. Calhoun's response, dated December 2, 1843, is reprinted in *History of the Church* 6:155-56. Smith's rejoinder, dated January 2, 1844, is published in *History of the Church* 6:156-60.

<sup>3</sup> *History of the Church* 6:533-37.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., *The Calhoun Family and Thomas Green Clemson: The Decline of a Southern Patriarchy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 13, 26, 38, 41, 54, 68, 87.

<sup>5</sup> *History of the Church* 6:545 mentions only those two guards by name. Both men were guards in the Nauvoo Legion.

<sup>6</sup> B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor: Third President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1892), 125, indicates, "At this juncture the council was interrupted by the withdrawal of President Smith to give an interview to two gentlemen—one of whom was a son of John C. Calhoun—who had arrived at the Mansion and were anxious to meet with the Prophet." Samuel W. Taylor and Raymond W. Taylor, *The John Taylor Papers: Records of the Last Utah Pioneer*, 2 vols. (Redwood City, Calif.: Taylor Trust, 1984), 77, omit the names of the visitors but do quote part of John Taylor's account of the visit: "In the interim two gentlemen arrived . . . very anxious for an interview with Brother Joseph. They detained him for some time."

<sup>7</sup> *History of the Church* 6:540.

<sup>8</sup> Clyde N. Wilson, ed., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, 21 vols. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959-93), 19:397-99.

<sup>9</sup> Ford's letter was actually written on the afternoon of June 22, and Joseph Smith had received it on the evening of the twenty-second, shortly before the Calhouns arrived. John Taylor's account of the evening's events, as well as Joseph Smith's letter written at midnight on the twenty-second, confirm that Smith conversed with the Calhouns on June 22. See *History of the Church* 6:540, as well as Taylor and Taylor, *John Taylor Papers* 1:77, and Roberts, *Life of John Taylor*, 125.

<sup>10</sup> An omnibus was a horse-drawn carriage used for public conveyance. M. G. Lay, *Ways of the World: A History of the World's Roads and of the Vehicles That Used Them* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 1992), 129; and *The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1991), 76.

<sup>11</sup> Water Street ran from the wharf on the southwest side of Nauvoo east past the Mansion House to Robinson Street. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:516; and Glen M. Leonard, "Nauvoo," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:989.

<sup>12</sup> The hotel that Calhoun visited was the Mansion House. While waiting for the Nauvoo House to be completed, Joseph Smith added a wing to his home and opened the Mansion House as an inn in 1843. Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo, Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1965), 177, 190, 322.

<sup>13</sup> The city marshal was John Portineus Greene. *History of the Church* 6:448.

<sup>14</sup> Nauvoo was named “the beautiful” by Joseph Smith. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 182.

<sup>15</sup> William Wilkins was the United States secretary of war, 1844–45. William A. Degregorio, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* (New York: Barricade Books, 1993), 155.