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The Day Joseph Smith Was Killed

A Carthage Woman's Perspective

Alex D. Smith

Joseph and Hyrum Smith were killed on June 27, 1844, in the recently constructed jail in Carthage, Illinois. Years later, local resident Amanda Benton Smith recorded her own account of the events of that day.¹ Twenty-eight years old and a mother of six, Amanda was the wife of Carthage Grey captain Robert F. Smith—the militia officer responsible for protecting the Latter-day Saint prisoners and defending the town.² In her reminiscence, Amanda describes learning of the Smiths' deaths and draws a vivid picture of the vacant Hancock County seat as local citizens fled to the countryside in anticipation of the Latter-day Saints' retaliation, which never came.

An alternative viewpoint articulated with courage and even a little humor is not the only contribution of Amanda's account. If accurate, her sketch suggests that the leader of the Carthage Greys may not have been complicit in the attack on the jail. According to Amanda's narrative, her husband, Robert, expressed alarm and concern at the fate of the Smith brothers. If Robert had been aware of the plans to murder

1. "A Short Sketch of the Trials of Mrs. R. F. Smith at the Killing of the Smiths, the Mormons Prophet," holograph manuscript in the handwriting of Amanda B. Smith, fifteen pages, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois.

2. Amanda Benton Smith (June 9, 1816–January 9, 1892) was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to John and Mary Ann Benton. She was married to Robert Frederick Smith (August 2, 1806–April 25, 1893), who served in the Union army in the Civil War as a Brevet Brigadier General. Amanda and Robert are buried in the Oakwood Cemetery in Hamilton, Illinois.

Joseph Smith, he did not preemptively warn his own family to leave the town as so many of their neighbors had done. Amanda's "short sketch" helps contextualize the Smiths' murders by providing a perspective less frequently considered in traditional Latter-day Saint narratives of the tragic day. In describing the "almost constant terror of the Mormons" she had felt for years, her anxiety over her husband's welfare, and her desires to protect her family, Amanda gives voice to those Hancock County non-Latter-day Saints who were not involved in the deaths of the Church's prophet and patriarch. Like the Latter-day Saints in nearby Nauvoo, Amanda felt threatened by her neighbors and sought to protect her own interests. Her story helps capture the emotions shared by Church members and non-Church members alike during the tense summer of 1844.

A separate piece of paper accompanying the manuscript contains the following typed note (spacing errors in original):

Mrs. R. F. Smith's Story.

The enclosed manuscript is one written in her own hand by Mrs. Robt. Smith, wife of Captain Robert F. Smith, commander of the Carthage Grays, telling of her "trials" on the day Joseph and Hiram Smith were killed by the mob at the Carthage jail. The Smiths at that time lived on the place we know as "Cottonwood" on Gospel Four Corners, our present home place to which Father and Mother moved in 1864.

The Baird place mentioned was later the T. C. Miller farm. Capt. Miller was father of Mrs. Laura Noyes. Mrs. Gene Baird was grand mother, and her son, James was father of Robt. and Alex Baird. The Metcalf place, also sec. 29, Carthage T[ownshi]p. Well-known family.

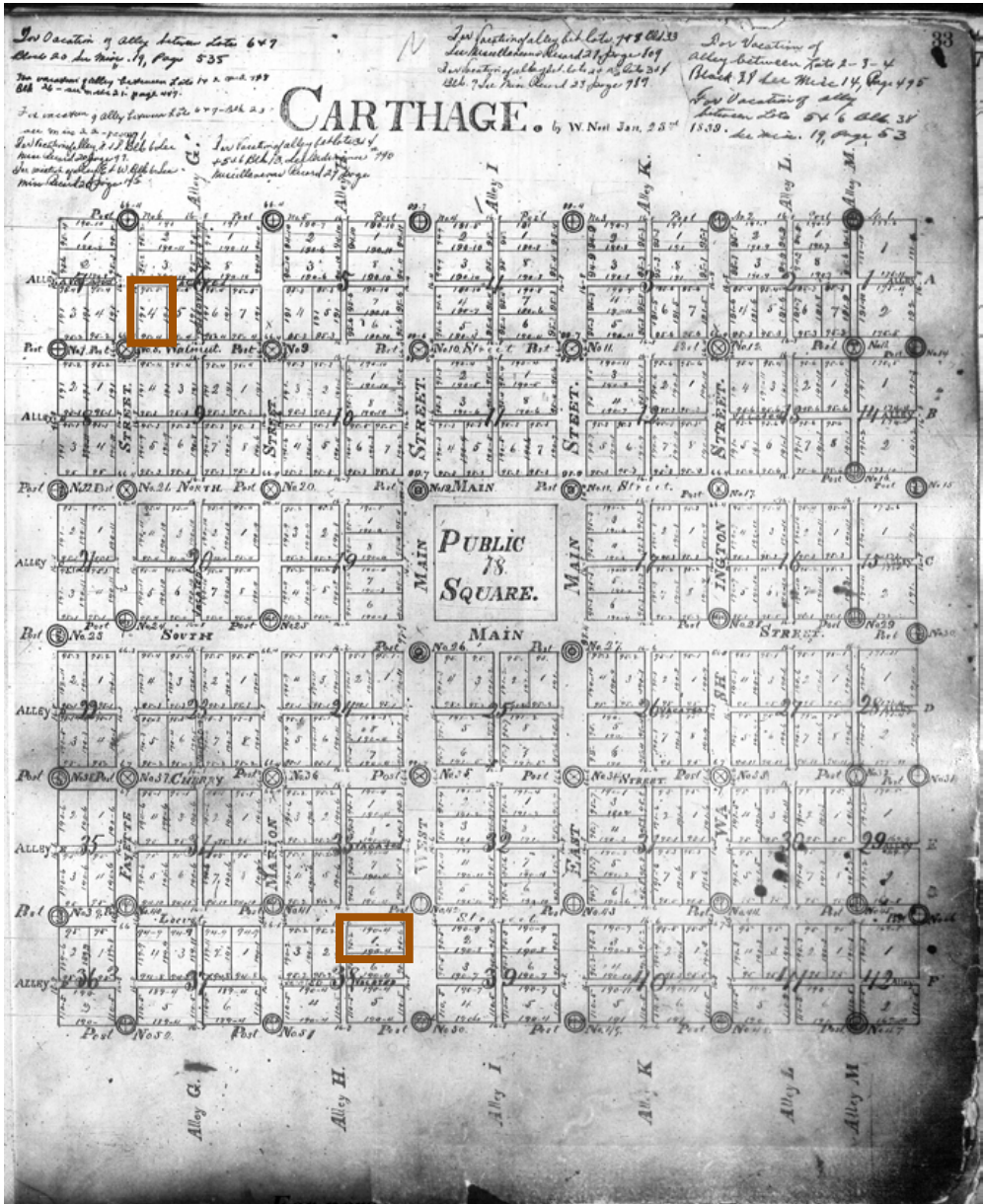
This is a very valuable manuscript, new and unpublished history of the Mormon episode. It shows the terror of the Carthage people, also that Capt. Smith himself believed it possible the Mormons would rise against the Gentile inhabitants. This manuscript was given to me by a member of the Smith family.

Abigail Davidson. Dec. 1936

Document Transcription

A short sketch of the trials of Mrs. R.F. Smith at the Killing of the Smiths. The Mormans Prophet

They were killed on the 27th of June 1844 that day I was unusually depressed and out of sorts had been liveing in almost constant ~~dred~~ terror of the Mormans for years and never knew from day to day and hardly from one hour to another, what dreadful catastrophe would happen and when the runner reached me. about half past two P. M. that a mob had collected on the prarie ~~some~~ a few miles out and were on the road to Carthage. Some thought they were Mormans comeing to liberate the Smiths from jail and and would destroy the town & and every thing in it my neighbors began to make preperations to leave their homes with their families and the part of town where I lived was soon entirely deserted but myself. my husband was Captain of the Captain of the Carthage Greys. he had not been at home a single night for two weeks. he with [p. 1] his men had been keeping gard of the town day and night all that time. every thing seemed so gloomy at home, but I thought I would not give way to my feelings. so I dressed my six little children in clean frocks and put the baby in his little wagon and sent them to visit a friend of mine just one block away. an hour or so after I had sent them away. I heard the firing of many guns. I got up from my chair to go to the front door but was powerless to move for a minute or so. When I became concious there was a Morman girl, who lived in the neighborhood, standing in the door. I was holding on to the back of my chair and she was ringing her hands and saying "Oh my God." Mrs Smith they are shooting the men down at the Jail and throwing them out of the window.["] I soon [p. 2] collected my senses. and my first thought was of my absent children and I started to bring them home. by that time the mob had scattered and were all over the town. I met one of them but did not know him as he was disguised. but he knew me and told me what had occured, that was the first I knew of the truth, who had been killed &c. I got my little children together and went back home hopeing I might find my husband there. but was disapointed. there was not a soul stiring in that part of the town, then I started down to the head quarters, on the square as it was called, to inquire for my husband. the officer of in command there told me that my husband had been ordered by Gov. Ford to guard the town, and



Amanda Smith's home was located on the southwest corner of Locust and West Main streets (bottom box) in Carthage, Illinois. According to her description of the events of June 27, 1844, she was able to hear from her home the shots fired at Carthage jail, located on the northeast corner of Walnut and Fayette streets (top box). 1839 plat of Carthage, Hancock Co., Illinois, Plat Books, 1836–1938, vol. 1, microfilm 954,774, U.S. and Canada Record Collection, Family History Library, Salt Lake City.

that I would find him down at the jail. I went there but had not the courage to enter the building, so sent a little boy [p. 3] who was standing there, in to tell Captain Smith that his wife was out side and would like to see him. I was getting very anxious, as it was getting twards evening, to know our fate for the comeing night My husband came to me. but was full of trouble and worry at over the terrible ending of the prisoners and did not have many comforting words for his wife and children. he told me that his duties were such that ~~that~~ it was impossible for him to leave there. and for me to go back home and he would send word to a friend up in town that had a team and wagon to call for us and take us to the house of an old friend about four miles out in the country. the friend came with his team soon after I got home so I had no time to get supper for my children but started at once. I felt as tho' I would [p. 4] never want food for myself, again.

There was another family in the wagon and some of their household goods which made quite a heavy load as well as a crowded one. they intended stoping at a place a mile nearer town than I was going to. Mrs. Baird a widow & her son lived there, and on quite a high hill. There was a creek at the foot of the hill and the rise was quite steep just as we got across the creek the wagon broke down and could not be repaired at that time and place. we could do nothing else but get out and walk up the hill to Mrs Bairds. I was not much acquainted with her, but the lady who started to go there was and we all got a very cool reception, she said she did not see why folks did not stay at home like she did. she also said her Jimmie had slept on the floor three nights befor we got there. I told her that I did not go there to stay. but intended to go to the next [p. 5] farm house. she told me it was a mile and a half to go the main road. but only one half mile to go across & and a good "coo" path all the way. by that time the sun had set and the full Moon had arrisen I once more started with my <six> little children for Mrs Metcalfs. where I knew. if I could only get there my whole family would be welcome My eldest child. Emma was a little over eight years old and the youngest of the six was only fifteen months old and had to be carried. we walked and stumbled across a large field and finely came to a wide creek which I knew nothing about nor where to find a the crossing. the children were getting very tired and sleepy and hungry. it was a study for me to know how we were to get across the creek. finely I took helped Emma across by steping on tall grass and flags that grew from one side to the other. and oftain would step into [p. 6] holes over shoe top in water.

After helping and carrying each child across separately we had quite a <long> steep hill to climb. my children were so worn out with fatigue and hunger that they fell down often and wanted to go to sleep right there. it was long after their usual hour of going to bed we were all in such a helpless plight I felt as though I could not <go> much farther myself. after walking slowly and almost driving the children along we got to the top of the hill it was a very clear moonlight night and in the distance I could see the house. every thing seemed so still and not a sound of any thing to be heard. for the first time. through all the trouble. I felt afraid but could not tell why. We finely reached the house and found it deserted but the latch string was out. for any friend who hapened along the first thing I did after entering the house was to kindle a fire. wood and [p. 7] kindling was left on the hearth of the large fire place. and fire covered over so that it was an easy matter to start a blaze I then took a survey of the place and found a broad trundle bed in bed room & and a bedstead all in order in liveing room the first thing was to prepair my little ones for bed. there was not a dry stitch of clothing on one of them. the dew was very heavy & the grass in some places higher than their heads. we were all as wet as if we had been diped in the river I could not find dry clothes to put on them so had to put them to bed with out any. and they were all asleep in a short time. I began to look around for a dress for myself. but could not find a garment of any kind. but a coars heavy shirt that Mrs Metcalf had just finished for her fifteen year old son I took off my dress and put that on. then [p. 8] I made a rousing fire and hung all the childrens wet clothing around it to dry. I was very nervious and frightened all the time I was in the house. I began to realize all at once that I had a severe headach and was sick enough to die I thought. I layed down on the side of the bed but before I could compose myself. I heard a dog bark and shortly Mr Metcalf and our family Doctor. Doctor Evens. came in. we were made more than welcome by Mr Metcalf. they had traveled a long distance and were very hungry & wanted to know if I could get them something to eat. There was nothing prepared for an emergency of that kind. could not finde any thing in the pantry but corn meal & a large panful of sour cream I stired up a corn cake as soon as I could & put it to bake & made a pot of coffee & set the table. by that time I was [p. 9] to[o] sick to stand up another minute the Dr. made me lie down again & he and Mr. Metcalf finished getting their supper &c. There being no time peice of any kind I did not know what time of night it was but think it must have been

near midnight After they finished their supper they got me all stired up <again> by saying they were going to town I beged so hard for to go with them but it was all in vane soon after they left, Refuges from town kept comeing in till the house was full and all brought word of what terrible revenge the Mormans were going to take on the Carthage people for killing the Smiths. they were frightened and beleaved all the stories they heard and surely there never was a more exciteing time. In about an hour after the Dr and Mr. Metcalf went to town Dr Evens came back in great hast with his horse [p. 10] buggy and said he wanted three of my children to take to Augusta. and that my husband would be there for me and the rest of the children in half an hour I hesitated about getting the children ready for their clothes were not near dry yet and I told the Dr. I could not put damp clothes on them for fear of makeing them sick he did not stop to discuss the question at all but told an other person to hand him out three of the children and they were only partly dressed. Two little boys & my second daughter Louisa. one of the little boys had no pants on at all the Dr stoped at the next house & got a quilt to wrap the children in. he took them safely through to Augusta in that plight. a near & dear friend of mine took them in and cared for them. till she had an opportunity to send them home again. Soon after [p. 11] the Dr. left a big wagon drove up filled full of household goods Women and children. the gentlemen members of the tribe were walking and carrying their fire arms when I saw how crowded the wagon was I did not want to go, I was so near worn out, I told my husband I would about as soon die right there as to go any further but I had to go and myself & and my three youngest children were helped up on an already overloaded wagon and to make matters worse for me there was a very old lady lying on a bed near where I was sitting and she had several fits and seemed to suffer greatly but none of her people seemed to pay her any attention but I witnessed it all and I expect I suffered more than she did. After we had traveled a mile or so it began to get daylight and after traveling a few miles further we stoped and got breakfast camp fashion. after [p. 12] breakfast we started again on our journey hoping to reach Augusta by noon. but after traveling several miles we discovered one of the horses was lame and about to give out. we were near crooked creek which was full of water and quite a steep hill on the other side. while the men were discusing whether we had better try to cross the creek and up the hill with the lame horse an old resident that onced lived in Carthage came along and said he lived near by and insisted that we should go to his

house and stay untill we could find out if it was nessary to go further on. I was sure he was a good friend in need and was glad that his kind invitation was accepted when we got to the house we found many old acquaintances and neighbors some from Carthage and some from other places. they were very buisy getting dinner [p. 13] I asked one who belonged to the house if I could get have a quiet room where I could lie down with out being disturbed for a while. and the lady took me to a cool pleasant room and done all she could for my comfort. I was so exausted I could have slept on a rock pile but felt so thankful that I could have a quiet once more I slept till after three P. M. then got up arrainget my toilet the best I could under the circumstances. kind friends in the mean time took care of my children. I was invited to the dining room and after takeing a good cup of coffee & other refreshments I soon began to feel more like myself. while talking to some of the ladies I saw they kept smileing & were very much amused at something about me and at last they broke out in one voice "Mrs Smith do tell us what kind of a garment you have on". and to [p. 14] my utter astonishment I still had that boys shirt on that I put on while trying to dry my dress and in the hurry an[d] confusion of getting ready to start. I put my dress on & for got to t[a]ke³ off the shirt. I must have been a comical looking sight indeed & and when I come to think of it at this late date. I wonder how I got my dress fastened over it.

About five P. M. of the same day a messenger from Carthage brought us word that every thing was quiet and that the dead bodies of the Smiths had been taken to Nauvoo. there were only a few people in town and they did not apprehend any danger at that time from the Mormans My husband and two other gentlemen hired a team and Carriage and we went back to Carthage that night it was several days before the children that went to agusta got home the little girl enjoyed it so much she wanted to know how soon we were going again. [p. [15]]⁴

Alex D. Smith is a historian with the Joseph Smith Papers in the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He has coedited six volumes in the Journals and Documents series and is currently editing the Nauvoo journals of William Clayton.

3. TEXT: Supplied character is missing due to a hole in the manuscript page.

4. TEXT: Page number here is supplied since corner of leaf is missing.