A Little Known Account of the Murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith

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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 1865.¹ 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 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 inimity 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 established 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 distroyed 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 Nauvoo and printed a paper called the Deserter. This was
more than the Prophet could bear to have a paper informing the conduct to the world was established in
the midst of his own city, or to allow the course was that Smith under the shadow Law caused
the Men to be killed in open day. In now
summoned the Army. The new party now demanded
to make him suffer for the act of violence on the
night. They tried to him, but to
secure him the Military Court, where he
was convicted. But the new party would demand to
make him suffer the highest of the Law. It
possible they knew that the Court of the City had
no right to discharge him. Smith on this the law
was determined must leave Nauvoo to be tried
in Carthage. Nauvoo was the last, no one of this time. Later
was a person. Until now, when after
the Law should have its course on Smith and any
man in this country except Mormons they returned
that Smith should be taken the constable and
brought to justice. There was a community and to re
the Governor the situation of things before
he arrived at Carthage all the Mormons went the
one forming a few and there were other places for
Nauvoo at the command of Smith the two men who
mean official to go. So far the neighbors

Shouldn't they have to go in defense of Limous
other than being a disruption to bring any or all
of Smith gave them order by the law
and this collected this Nauvoo to the
amount of some thousands ready or some of them
paid to murder in blood, for the true slayer
in defense of their Prophet. The Governor called
that his name Jack of Carthage, Smith put
the City of Nauvoo under Martial Law. Now this
time the Constables here had formed ourselves into
a Military Company for the protection of our law. But
this in the first thing that I have known since I
left the Nauvoo Band and I can assure you it was
with all kinds of different feelings. The Governor called
a large force at Carthage, and took very
in former days from going away, which now
in Smith giving himself up for trial with 18 it
they saw old and young and put under the
people. They were all released, but the law Limous Joseph
Bliss. They were put in the Carthage jail to
be taken to the charge of treason. The trial was to
have come on Saturday 25th in the mean time the
Governor went to Nauvoo with a body of men
to get some of his force leaving a part at the jail to
protect Limous, but he went all along for them, a
body of men from toward Nauvoo rising up on the
knee and broke in the jail and took little of the
Limous. They are buried to day at Nauvoo. Now this.

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Pages 2 and 3 of the four-page Bliss letter by courtesy of the Manuscripts Department at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.
at Carthage when the writ was issued. by this time matters were a coming to a serious point and that was wether the Law should have its carse on Smith or not every man in the County except Mormons wer determined to that Smith should be taken by the Constable and brought to justice there was a Commity sent to informe the Governour the situation of things before he arived 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 therby 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 Governour 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 Militerary Company for the protection of our place this is the first time that I have traind 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 foude guilty and put under $500.00 bonds they were all released but the two Smiths Joseph & Hiram 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 Governour went to Nauvoo to with a body of men to get some U.S. armes leaving a gard 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 learrnd what his course will be. We are all well as yet and the generale 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 of the Books that Cornelius sent. I hope that we shall see each other again Remember us to all friends

H. H. Bliss