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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. 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, with one face used for the address. The letter is transcribed here exactly as it was written.

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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 wer gratified to learn that you wer all well. I am sorry that he could not stop a little longer but it is well that he did not as things are a 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 be fore 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 profsed 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 innmyty 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 establishe 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 distroid in open day. An now commenced the War. The new party wer determined to make him suffer for this act of violence on their rights and Property they trie 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 trie
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Should any other cause to go in defense of Limite, otherwise by a disposition to kill any one who tries with their order by the law limits to defend the law at the amount of some thousands ready or some of their "to spread in blood and the same others in defense of them fight." The Governor established this in the city of Nauvoo under Marshall Law. At that time the Indian Law had formed agreements with a military Company for the protection of its lines. This is the first thing that I have known since I left the Nauvoo Cases, and I can assure you it was with a longer or different state. The Governor called a large force at Carthage, and took every way to prevent them from going away, which was in Smith going himself up for the rest with 13 that they were all paid, and put under duress, but they were all released but the towns. Joseph and Elder Smith put in the Carthage jail to answer to the charge of treason. The trial was to have come on Saturday at 10 a.m. in the morning the Governor went to Nauvoo with a body of men to get some U.S. men leaving a part of the jail to protect Smith, but it proved all too few for them. a body of men from Nauvoo rushed upon the jail and broke in the jail and took all of the letters. They were turned to day at Nauvoo. Now the
at Carthage wher 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 shoudering 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 Militury 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 altogteather 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 foud guilty and put under $500.00 bonds they wer all released but the two Smiths Joseph & Hi-ram they wer put in the Carthage Jail to await anothe 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 armes of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth." The Governor is at Carthage I have not learnd 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