

impossible for [ox] teams." But the place had a couple of mitigating attributes: it was all but uninhabited, and the owner was willing to sell acreage to the Saints on credit. A deal was struck, construction commenced with characteristic Mormon industriousness, and within five years more than fifteen thousand of the Lord's Elect were living in and around Nauvoo—ten times its current population—making it the second-largest municipality in Illinois. From nothing, the Saints created a city that rivaled Chicago.

Unlike Chicago, moreover, Nauvoo was no mere city; it was a theocratic principality, with Joseph at its head, possessing sovereign rights and powers unique not only in Illinois but in the entire nation. These special rights were granted in a highly unusual charter passed without fanfare by the Illinois General Assembly in December 1840—a time when the state was eager to attract hardworking settlers who would contribute to the economy and sympathy for the Mormons was running high because of their expulsion from Missouri.

As an unintended consequence, Illinois set Joseph up as de facto emperor of his own autonomous city-state. He had himself officially anointed "King, Priest, and Ruler over Israel on Earth." He commanded a well-armed and rigorously disciplined militia, the Nauvoo Legion, which boasted nearly half as many men as the entire American Army at the time, and then, eager for still more military power, he petitioned the U.S. Congress for authorization to establish a one-hundred-thousand-man fighting force under his personal control.

Congress thought better of granting this latter request, but Joseph was on a roll nevertheless. Which probably came as no surprise to the prophet, because he believed that his was the Lord's One True Church and he was being guided by the hand of God. Secure in this knowledge, and eager to extend his influence to the whole country, in January 1844 Joseph announced his candidacy for president of the United States.*

Although historians are in unanimous agreement that Joseph "had a snowball's chance in hell" of winning the November election, as the

* Joseph's opponents were the Whig candidate Henry Clay, Democrat James K. Polk, and James G. Birney of the Liberty party. In an extremely close election, Polk emerged as the winner with a 48.1 percent plurality, defeating Clay by a scant 38,367 votes.