

Mormon-Missouri War of 1838

The Mormon-Missouri War (also called the Mormon War or the Missouri War) was an armed conflict between the Latter-day Saints and other citizens of northern Missouri in the fall of 1838. The conflict expanded to involve state officials, including the governor, and resulted in the incarceration of Joseph Smith and the forced expulsion of the Saints from Missouri.

Religious, political, and social differences between Latter-day Saints and Missourians gave rise to tension from the earliest arrival of Latter-day Saints in Jackson County, Missouri, in 1831.¹ Vigilante threats and mob attacks forced the Saints from the county in 1833. Mormons relocated to neighboring counties to the north, where they continued to face hostility. In 1836, the state created Caldwell County exclusively for Mormon settlement, and opponents of the Church objected to any Latter-day Saint settlement outside this new county. But the Saints sought to exercise their constitutional right by establishing settlements in neighboring Carroll and Daviess Counties. By the time Joseph Smith left Ohio for the Mormon settlement of Far West, Missouri, in the summer of 1838, opposition to the Church's presence in Missouri had reached a critical point.²

On July 4, 1838, Sidney Rigdon warned that the Saints would no longer tolerate persecution or the denial of their rights as citizens of the United States. If mobs gathered, he thundered in a widely publicized oration, "it shall be between us and them a war of extermination." At the same time, he vowed that the Saints would not be the aggressors: "We will infringe on the rights of no people; but shall stand for our own until death."³ During this period, some Mormon men organized a vigilante group known as the Danites, who pledged to defend the Saints against further violence. Rumors of Danite activity persuaded some Missourians that the Mormons threatened violence against neighbors.⁴

On Election Day that year, the residents of Carroll County voted for the Mormons to leave the county. In nearby Daviess County, when voters prevented Mormons from entering the polls, a fight broke out. Fearing they would be expelled from the county by a local peace officer, Latter-day Saints asked him to sign a statement of impartiality. The officer later complained he had been intimidated into signing, and Joseph Smith and Lyman Wight were ordered to answer the complaint in court. The two refused the order until the court could assure their safety. Upset over perceived Mormon lawlessness, mobs again assembled against the Saints.

The Saints appealed to the government for protection, and some troops came to keep the peace. But a diplomatic resolution was interrupted when a mob destroyed a Mormon settlement at De Witt, Carroll County, forcing the Saints there to flee for their lives. The governor of Missouri, Lilburn W. Boggs, responded to a plea for help by saying the Saints and the Missourians must fight their own battles. As reports of mobs burning Mormon homes in other counties mounted, the Saints decided to fight back.

Armed fighting lasted two weeks. In mid-October, Mormons raided and burned homes and stores in Gallatin and Millport. At Crooked River, Mormon and Missouri militiamen skirmished, resulting in the deaths of one Missourian and two Mormons, including Apostle David W. Patten. In the wake of these outbursts, Governor Boggs, who had previously supported anti-Mormon

activities in Jackson County, issued what came to be known as the “extermination order,” which authorized the state militia to drive the Mormons from the state or exterminate them if necessary.⁵ The most horrific event of the war came a few days later on October 30, when a group of armed Missourians opened fire on Saints at Hawn’s Mill, killing and brutally dismembering 17 men and boys.⁶

The militia, under the command of Major General Samuel D. Lucas, laid siege to Far West on October 31. Lucas arrested Joseph Smith and a few other Mormon leaders and ordered their execution for the next day. Another general named Alexander Doniphan challenged the order, and Joseph and several others were incarcerated and ordered to stand trial on charges of treason and murder. Meanwhile, the main body of Latter-day Saints sought refuge in the neighboring state of Illinois.⁷

The Mormon-Missouri War marked the end of the Church’s early presence in Missouri. Joseph Smith’s vision of building a “Zion” community of righteous Saints became tied less to a geographical place and more to wherever Church members should gather.⁸ The war also resulted in the defection of important leaders. Thomas B. Marsh, Orson Hyde, and William W. Phelps each left the Church and returned years later, but leaders like John Corrill and George Hinkle never returned.⁹ After languishing in a cold, cramped jail during the winter of 1838–39, Joseph Smith, his brother Hyrum, and several others escaped with the help of a sympathetic guard while en route to another venue. Although difficult, the prison ordeal proved redemptive to Joseph, as profound revelations were given to him during his incarceration.¹⁰

Church Resources

“1838: The Year the Saints Were Driven Out of Missouri,” LDS.org.

“Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints,” Gospel Topics Essays, topics.lds.org.

Mark Ashurst-McGee, David W. Grua, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Brenden W. Rensink, and Alexander L. Baugh, eds., *Documents, Volume 6: February 1838–August 1839*. Vol. 6 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2017), xix–xxix.

Bibliography

The following publication provides further information about this topic. By referring or linking you to this resource, we do not endorse or guarantee the content or the views of the author.

Alexander L. Baugh, *A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000).

Notes

1. See Topic: Jackson County Violence.
2. See Topics: Opposition to the Early Church, Far West.
3. Sidney Rigdon, *Oration Delivered by Mr. S. Rigdon, On the 4th of July, 1838* (Far West, Missouri: Journal Office, 1838), 12; see also Topic: Dissent in the Church.

4. See Topic: Danites.
5. See Topics: Hawn's Mill Massacre, Extermination Order.
6. It is unlikely the attackers were aware of Governor Boggs's order at the time of the attack. See Alexander L. Baugh, "The Haun's Mill Massacre and the Extermination Order of Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs," *Mormon Historical Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 21–30.
7. See Topic: Liberty Jail.
8. See Topic: Zion/New Jerusalem.
9. See Topic: Dissent in the Church.
10. See Topic: Liberty Jail.