

Jacksonian scholar Robert Remini phrased it, it is not clear whether Joseph himself shared this view. Already, after all, he'd accomplished much more than anyone could have imagined when he'd incorporated his peculiar new church in Palmyra fourteen years earlier. Joseph took the presidential campaign quite seriously, in any case, dispatching 586 of his most capable and persuasive missionaries—including ten members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—to all twenty-six states and Wisconsin Territory in order to drum up support for his run at the nation's highest office.

An argument can be made that Joseph ran for president because he had come to believe that it was the only way his Saints were ever going to gain state protection from the terrible persecutions they had been subjected to wherever they had attempted to live. Having tried repeatedly, and failed on each occasion, to persuade elected officials that the government had both a moral and a legal obligation to protect the Mormons from the violent mobs that wanted to eradicate them, Joseph may have decided that his only recourse was to occupy the White House himself.

Joseph venerated the U.S. Constitution as a divinely inspired document. For years he had complained that political leaders were disregarding their sworn duty to safeguard the Mormons' constitutionally guaranteed freedom to worship without being subjected to harassment, and worse, at the hands of the religious majority. Yet in both word and deed, Joseph repeatedly demonstrated that he himself had little respect for the religious views of non-Mormons, and was unlikely to respect the constitutional rights of other faiths if he somehow won the presidency and were running the show.

The Mormons did not transform Nauvoo into a bustling hub of enterprise and godliness without first enduring serious setbacks. In 1839 and 1840, before the swamps were drained, epidemics of malaria and cholera swept through the settlement, killing hundreds of Saints, including the prophet's own father and one of his brothers. And the Missouri hostilities continued to plague Joseph and his followers long after they had been driven from that state.