Militant Mormonism on the American Frontier

_That God would Damn them & give us pow[er] to Kill them_  
—Lyman Wight

Lyman Wight was born in 1796 to Levi and Susanna Wight in Fairfield, Connecticut. The future Missouri militia colonel served as a teenager in the War of 1812, and later he and his wife, born Harriet Benton, settled, by 1826, in the Western Reserve, Cuyahoga County, Ohio. They joined the communitarian movement of Sydney Rigdon,\(^1\) an ex-Baptist minister and convert of Alexander Campbell, in 1829. Wight founded a Rigdonite community styled “the Family,” a self-contained, common-stock economy based on New Testament principles of Christian primitivism, in which members shared all possession universally.

Wight wrote later that “the doctrines of the apostles” regarding having “all things in common” led him to enter, with eight others, “a covenant to make our interests as one as anciently.” The Family “prosecuted with great vigor” agricultural and mechanical interests, its

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1. Sydney Rigdon, a follower of the leading “blue light” minister Alexander Campbell, was second in influence only to Joseph Smith Jr. in early Mormonism. He influenced Mormon doctrines with his teachings on early apostolic Christianity, particularly concerning communitarianism and separatism. Rigdon became the First Counselor in the Quorum of the First Presidency to Joseph Smith. After Smith’s murder in 1844, the Twelve Apostles defeated Rigdon and others in a succession-crisis battle for the leadership of the Nauvoo church and directed the fate of a slight majority of those Latter-day Saints after Smith’s death. Richard S. Van Wagoner, author of *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess*, published in 1994, is Rigdon’s leading biographer.
members beginning “to feel as if the millennium was close at hand.” Later Wightite communities in Wisconsin and Texas were founded on common-stock foundations. About the time the Family prepared to combine with several other separatist groups at Mayfield, Ohio, intending to begin a communitarian farm and several mills, LDS missionaries, including Oliver Cowdery and Parley P. Pratt, brought the restoration message of Joseph Smith Jr. and the Mormon gospel to the Family. These Rigdonite and Wightite communitarians, 127 of them, converted en masse. Almost another thousand followed shortly, doubling the size of the church and eventually bringing Rigdon (who also converted) to a position only secondary to that of Joseph Smith Jr. Rigdon himself became one of Joseph Smith’s prime advisers, quickly reaching high positions in the growing church’s governing councils.

Smith came to know and trust Wight well, despite some initial reluctance. During the next thirteen years, Wight committed himself to Joseph Smith Jr. and Mormonism. As a mark of Joseph Smith’s growing awareness of Wight’s potential, the Mormon prophet ordained Wight in 1831 as the first high priest of the church. Wight then ordained Smith to the high priesthood.

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Lyman Wight matured as a charismatic champion during the initial ten years’ growth of organized Mormonism. A visionary, he claimed to have seen the Savior when he was ordained a high priest.\(^6\) Ordered to go to Missouri and provide a gathering place for other Mormons, he settled in Jackson County in November 1831. During a missionary trip to Cincinnati, Wight preached repeatedly in the courthouse, evangelizing “after the order of Melchisedek,” and baptized more than one hundred during his stay.\(^7\)

Lyman Wight’s first experience with anti-LDS persecutions occurred in Missouri. The Missouri “old settlers,” Southerners and defenders of slavery, drove Wight and his co-religionists from Jackson County into Clay County. Enraged at an article titled “The Free People of Color” in the LDS Evening and Morning Star, a mob destroyed the press and the editor’s home. The earlier settlers, according to Kenneth H. Winn, feared the Mormons’ growing numbers as a threat to their way of life, clashing in origin, sentiments, social behavior, politics, and religion. The Mormons originated mostly in New England, the upper Mid-Atlantic states, and the Western Reserve. The older inhabitants were outraged that the newcomers seemed to be encouraging free African Americans from the eastern states to immigrate to Missouri. Although the assumption was false, they were aware that the Mormons’ antislavery attitudes could create a majority culture change of rigid sectarianism antithetical to the Southern way. Little doubt exists that Mormon cultural attitudes influenced the conflict between the groups. Orange Lysander Wight (a son of Lyman Wight) later recalled that Mormons’ “fanatical” attitudes were partially responsible for the expulsion. Some believed “they were the Lord’s favored people,” and that all of the land “would all eventually belong to them.” According to the younger Wight, these feelings “exasperated the [non-Mormons] and they were ready to add to what they heard, and all the efforts of those of the saints—

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who could see the evil effects of the fanaticism—to reconcile the people of Jackson County proved in vain, thus, it went on from one thing to another until it ended in real persecution.” He concluded the Mormons were not strong enough to arbitrate the issue “by force of arms,” and “were conquered and driven from the county.”

Lyman Wight was one of the few to resist; one LDS church newspaper many years later described him as “a dread to his enemies and a terror to evil doers, and his life was often sought after.”

Lyman Wight, with Parley Pratt, carried messages from Missouri to Joseph Smith in Kirtland, Ohio. They next aided in providing men and provisions for Zion’s Camp by recruiting among the LDS in the northern sections of Illinois and into Michigan. In May and June, Pratt and Wight guided fourteen members from the Pontiac branch in St. Clair, Michigan, to Zion’s Camp on the Salt River in Missouri. The Pontiac group’s gear was barely sufficient (two light wagons, two span of horses, and a tent) for the trip. Besides Wight, several individuals in the party, including Samuel Bent, Meacham Curtis, Sophronia Curtis, and Lyman Curtis, participated in the Wightite trek from Wisconsin to Texas (1845–1846).

Although Zion’s Camp was a failure, foundering in a welter of dispiritedness and disease, Wight’s rise continued. He was appointed by Smith as general of the camp and second in command, and he also joined the Zion Stake High Council. As the members of Zion’s Camp were losing a battle to cholera, the war for Jackson County ended before it began. A new sanctuary had to be found, and political compromise with reality was the answer. Alexander Doniphan, a non-Mormon legislator and lawyer who had earlier befriended the religionists and deplored their removal from Jackson County, pushed through a measure in the Missouri legislature organizing Caldwell County as a home for the Mormons.

8. Reorganized History, 3:788; Orange Lysander Wight, “Recollections of Orange L. Wight, Son of Lyman Wight” (photocopy of typescript copy of manuscript, 1966), 7, LDS archives.
10. Reorganized History, 3:786; journal of the branch of the Church of Christ in Pontiac, Michigan, Huron branch, 1834 (handwritten manuscript), LDS archives; Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 100–101; see subject name listings in
Wight, commensurate with his growing leadership roles, returned to Ohio at Joseph Smith’s direction to receive a religious endowment in the Kirtland Temple. He later would receive new temple rites at Nauvoo, and be initiated into the doctrine of polygamy. Thomas G. Alexander has clarified major differences between the temple ceremonies of Kirtland in the 1830s and Nauvoo in the 1840s. The first was individual and charismatic, the second communal and dealt with salvation. The Kirtland ceremony centered on the gifts and influences of the Holy Ghost, relying on “the visitation of angelic beings” and “the infusion of Pentecostal gifts.” Thus the Kirtland ritual emphasized the recipient’s charismatic and spiritual regeneration.

On the other hand, the Nauvoo ritual involved the salvation of the participant and his familial dead. The Nauvoo participants “gained a more thorough understanding of the purpose of life and of Christ’s mission. They made further covenants committing themselves more fully to the work of God and Christ on earth and to the eternity of the family.” Participants stood proxy for deceased family members, being baptized and receiving the endowment for the dead in hope the family generations would be joined together after Judgment Day.  

Along with temple ritual, Joseph Smith also indoctrinated the Twelve in Mormonism’s ultimate secret, plural marriage or polygamy, at Nauvoo. They began marrying “plural wives and began solemnizing such marriages for others.” Wight continued both polygamy and temple ritualism in Texas. There he fused the endowments of Kirtland and Nauvoo and developed his own ritual of the endowment, washings, anointings, sealings, and baptism for time and eternity.

Wight attempted to influence LDS doctrine. Evil spirits, Wight thought, caused illness. Consequently, he believed strongly in faith
healing. In 1834, John Corrill charged Wight in a church council with teaching that “disease in this Church is of the devil, and that medicine administered to the sick is of the devil; for the sick in the Church ought to live by faith.” The church record notes Wight rather smugly “acknowledged that he had taught the doctrine, and rather believed it to be correct.” Joseph Smith decided “that it was not lawful to teach the Church that all disease is of the devil,” but “all who had faith to follow the doctrine were welcome to do so.”

Christian primitivism remained always a strong part of Wight’s beliefs. He supported religious communitarianism, considering church members’ private property to be economic assets for church use and never to be used for the needs or profit of the individual. When a church council tried certain leading Mormons, Wight remarked that all other offenses were minor in stature compared to the one that charged them with selling their lands in Jackson County for private profit. Their behavior, Wight stated, “was a hellish principle . . . and that they flatly denied the faith in so doing.”

Wight also believed the 1833 Book of Commandments, the first printed body of Joseph Smith Jr.’s revelations, was a higher law (or divine law) than the later work, the Doctrine and Covenants, which he believed to be a lower law (or human law). Church authorities advised him to repent of teaching such doctrine. This may be the same case in which D. W. Patten leveled a charge of false doctrine against Wight, of which the High Council found him guilty in 1837. If Patten’s charge related to Wight’s stated belief concerning the Book of Commandments, it was a serious one. Quinn notes that Wight was nearly excommunicated, the avoidance of which required his confession of repentance.

The Mormons’ removal from Jackson County did not resolve their religious differences with the old settlers. In June 1836, certain non-Mormons in Clay County repeated the old differences between

13. History of the Church, 2:147.
the two groups. They claimed too many Mormons were immigrating to the area, they were obtaining much of the local property, and they were stating that it was to be their heaven. Additionally, most Mormons were Easterners, “whose manners, habits, customs, and even dialect” separated the newcomers from the old settlers. Also, they did not own slaves and opposed slavery. And, finally, the Mormons supported the Indians, even to declaring “from the pulpit, that the Indians are a part of God’s chosen people, and are destined by heaven to inherit this land, in common with themselves.”

The leadership, including Lyman Wight, had begun to plan as early as 1834 to forcefully resist if their enemies came against them again. An irregular, paramilitary force, with as many as one thousand males, ages fourteen and over, was organized. Joseph Smith in his secret rank of “Barak Ale,” commanded the church’s armed forces. He confirmed Wight, supposedly in the presence of an angel, to the office of “Baneemy,” a senior leader of the holy army. These Danites included several of Wight’s future Texas followers, including Truman Brace and Joel S. Miles.

Wight’s religious and civic duties to church and state became confused. While he commanded the Mormon forces at Adam-ondi-Ahman and served as President John Smith’s counselor in the Stake Presidency there, he was also the colonel commanding the organized 56th Regiment of Missouri militia. Muddling further his ecclesiastical and secular duties, Wight ordained Joseph Smith into the Danites. Thus Wight commanded both the Missouri and Mormon armed forces of his region.

18. Lyman Wight, Medina River, to Cooper and Chidester, July 1855, Lyman Wight letterbook, RLDS archives; sworn statement of Gideon Carter to Brigham H. Roberts, 27 February 1894, LDS archives, 1; Reorganized History, 3:788; Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 337; also see Appendix A, “A Partial List,” 479–90 in The Mormon Hierarchy, for membership in the Danites. William G. Hartley, My Best for the Kingdom: History and Autobiography of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1993), 37, records that the Mormon militia was organized in 1837, with Lyman Wight as its colonel.
Lyman Wight did not separate his roles as a commander of both church and state troops, and had no difficulty in making his decision. Winn has written, “Wight positively itched for combat,” and his fighting attitude continued to improve Smith’s opinion of him. In June 1838, William Swartznell wrote that Wight’s sermons at Adam-ondi-Ahman in Daviess County called for military action against church enemies. He reportedly told some that Saint Peter’s cutting Caiphus’ servant’s ear “was a strong argument for war,” and because the laws of Missouri had not protected him, he “owed nothing to the laws.” He suffered “the rack” of persecution for seven years and now “God did not require him to endure more. . . . He would not yield to the laws of Missouri—he would sooner die and be buried.” Wight had chosen his religion over his country. Although Wight’s war speeches created unrealistic hopes among the Mormons, John Corrill thought local Mormons began to believe, and boast that their military arms could defeat Missouri’s militia and even the federal army.19

Danite John D. Lee wrote that Wight’s “war speech” made Lee believe, with others, that they would be indomitable against their enemies. Lee described a warlike Wight, standing by his horse and wearing a red bandana “wrapped around his neck, regular Indian fashion,” with open blouse and cutlass in hand, whose “address struck terror to his enemies, while it charged his brethren with enthusiastic zeal and forced them to believe they were invincible and bullet proof.” Corrill noted a year later that Wight often had boasted “in his discourses of what they would do if the mob did not let them alone,—they would fight, and they would die upon the ground, and they would not give up their rights, etc.; when, as yet, there was no mob. But this preaching inspired the Mormons with a fighting spirit, and some of the other citizens began to be stirred up to anger.” However, the killing of Daniel W. Patten, senior apostle of the Twelve and known to church members

19. Ibid. Hartley, My Best for the Kingdom, 132. Wight’s remarks can be found in William Swartzell, Mormonism Exposed, Being a Journal of Residence in Missouri from the 28th of May to the 20th of August, 1838 (Pekin, IL: privately printed, 1840), 13, 17, 32. Winn, Exiles in a Land of Liberty, 252n10, notes that Swartzell became opposed to Mormonism; Winn also reports that Swartzell’s statements concerning Wight’s temper are reflected in other writings of the period. Also see John Corrill, A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Jesus Latter-Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons) ([St. Louis?]: privately printed, 1839), 29.
as “Captain Fear Not,” at Crooked River returned many Mormons to their senses.\footnote{20}

Patten’s death, however, only enraged Lyman Wight. He deliberately chose his duty to his religious faith and paramilitary rank in the church’s armed forces over his militia commission and sworn duty to Missouri. Waging offensive warfare against his church’s enemy, and, thus, against the People and State of Missouri, Wight chose the path of sedition. He called out the Mormon militia and fell on his fellow Missourians.

Official LDS histories defend LDS militia operations as necessary for restoring order and suppressing mob violence. Other histories argue Mormon savagery incited the Missourians. Wight has been celebrated among the folk as a defender of helpless women and children who were being driven into the cold and ice; “he was no coward” for protecting the helpless. One story recalls an incident when several Missourians led by a preacher confronted him, wanting the return of land he had sold to the Mormons. Wight “jumped over the fence and caught hold of his bridle . . . and the man wilted which was no surprise for Lyman looked like he would tear him to pieces. [The preacher] agreed to be rather” quiet in his requests. There was no doubt Wight would use violence to protect his own.\footnote{21}

Stephen C. LeSueur, the historian of balance about the civil war and particularly the Danite organization, believes both that the Mormons share culpability for their troubles and that the Danites contributed to the blame. Further confusing the issue is the fact that Mormon militia units, including Wight and his troops, were acting subject to the state’s military authority when they marched into Daviess County, a stronghold of their foes. General H. G. Parks of the Missouri militia joined them the next day. Several Mormon homes had been burned, and the refugees, after traveling all night through the snow and over icy streams, struggled into the militia camp. The Mormon troops were inflamed. General Parks ordered Colonel Wight and others, on 18 October 1838, to act. The fighting, which caused


casualties on both sides, resulted in early Mormon victories, and the looting and burning of non-Mormon towns. According to LeSueur, Joseph Smith knew the offensive intent and acquisitive nature of his commanders’ military expeditions against the old settlers. The plunder from the various non-Mormon communities “were brought and distributed among the Saints” with Smith’s knowledge.\footnote{22}

The fight between Danite forces and state militia troops at Crooked River on 25 October 1838 escalated the struggle into outright civil war. D. Michael Quinn notes that the Mormons showed no reluctance in employing deadly force, but they did not match the Missourians’ inhumanity toward noncombatants, which included driving women and children before them. On the 28th, Lilburn W. Boggs, governor of Missouri, ordered that either the Mormons be “exterminated” or driven from the state. Two days later, a state militia unit attacked the Mormon settlement at Haun’s Mill. More than a dozen women and children were wounded as they fled from the mill. The militia then systematically slaughtered eighteen men and boys, two of whom were no older than ten. Some of the dead were mutilated.

Alexander Doniphan, lawyer and legislator, and friend of the Mormons during the Jackson County troubles, again came to their aid. After Joseph Smith Jr. and other Mormon leaders had surrendered, Doniphan, serving as a general officer with the state militia, received an order from General Samuel D. Lucas to summarily execute Smith and six others, including Lyman Wight. Wight, although later excommunicated from the church, still figures in Mormon folk

literature as a hero and defender of the faith because of his defense of Joseph Smith and the helpless among the church. Given the opportunity by General Moses Wilson to escape the firing squad if he would testify against Smith, Wight is supposed to have said, “Shoot and be damned.” General Doniphan refused to carry out the execution, risking punishment himself for disobeying orders. He wished “Colonel Wight” well before he marched his troops away. General Lucas, in light of General Doniphan’s courageous stand, backed down and the prisoners survived.23

Joseph Smith, Lyman Wight, and others remained in jail for several months, suffering hardships at the hands of the captors. The quality of food was rank, and its origin at times suspect. One guard at dinnertime supposedly asked Wight how he liked “Mormon beef,” the implication that the prisoners were eating human flesh.24 This suggestion reflects the hatred that continued to burn for several generations between Mormons and Missourians. Wight later wrote that while in jail, he assisted Joseph Smith Jr. to ordain one of his sons as his successor. According to Wight, Smith and he laid their hands on the young boy’s head, and Smith blessed the boy as his “successor when I depart.” Rebecca J. Ballantyne, in a sworn affidavit in 1908, testified that Wight had told her he had assisted Smith in ordaining Joseph Smith III. Joseph Smith III remembered that he had been ordained when his father was still in the Liberty, Missouri, jail. The question of apostolic versus patriarchal succession to Joseph Smith Jr.’s mantle of leadership has been one of the issues that divided the LDS and RLDS churches after 1860.25

Smith, Wight, and the others escaped from custody in 1839 and sought their fellow religionists in Illinois, where the church membership had moved. The Wild Ram emerged from the Missouri troubles

as a renowned and stalwart defender of the Mormon people. Joseph Smith Jr. esteemed him, and gave him increasing responsibility and position in church affairs. Wight again became a counselor to John Smith, this time in the High Council of Iowa. In 1841, Joseph Smith selected and ordained Wight a member of the Twelve. Smith, shortly before his death, made him a member of the select Council of Fifty, a secret organization of Smith’s trusted advisers who were organized in late winter of 1844 to find a secure location for the Mormons beyond American jurisdiction. Because age determined ranking in the Fifty, Wight, although the junior member of the Twelve, was senior to his fellow apostles in the Fifty, including Brigham Young. He also became a member of the Quorum of Anointed in 1844, another secret organization of the church’s elect.

These appointments brought Wight prominence, if not great power. The Twelve, according to Quinn, were evolving from a supervisory group responsible for missionary work into the second most powerful administrative body in the church. It was subordinate only to the Quorum of the First Presidency, which, from 1837–44, consisted of Joseph Smith Jr., his brother Hyrum Smith, and Sydney Rigdon. Well connected through his close friendships and shared struggles with the Smiths and Rigdon, and by his appointments in the Twelve, the Fifty, and the Anointed, Wight was well positioned for future challenges in the causes of the church.26

26. History of the Church, 1:176n; 3:289–90, 315, 420, 445–49; 4:341; 6:260–61, 356, 577; Willard Richards diary, 14 May 1844, LDS archives; D. Michael Quinn, “The Council of Fifty and Its Members, 1844–1945,” Brigham Young University Studies 20, no. 2 (Fall 1979): 196; Cannon and Cook, Far West Record, 295; Lyman Wight to Cooper and Chidester, July 1855; Lyman Wight to William Smith, 26 July 1849, Melchizedek and Aaronic Herald (Covington, KY), 1 (September 1849): 2 (photocopy), LDS archives; Lyman Wight, An Address by Way of an Abridged Account and Journal of My Life from February 1844 up to April 1848, with an Appeal to the Latter Day Saints, 3, 4, Iowa State Historical Society archives, Des Moines, IA. An Address is Wight’s defense of his Texas leadership, and defies the attempts of Brigham Young and the Twelve to control him. The document is annotated with the symbol “No. 183 A8” and inscribed with the notation “Read to the Branch at Zodiac on April 30, 1848. Endorsed on May 1, 1848 and G. Miller, J. Young, W. P. Eldridge, O. L. Wight, and S. Curtis appointed by committee to have it published.” Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 416n58, states that no sources are available to conclude that Wight used age as a basis for opposing Brigham Young, but this is contradicted in “Preston Thomas: His Life
Lyman Wight had scaled uncommon heights from common beginnings. Now almost forty-five, he had become an apostle in the Mormon church. The charismatic junior member of the Twelve had led hundreds into the new frontier faith of America. A close friend of Joseph Smith and Sydney Rigdon, the two most powerful leaders of the church, he was positioned close to the LDS center in part because of his devotion to, and willingness to suffer for, the Mormon gospel. Friends and foes alike were aware that he was literally willing to wage war for his faith. The years to come would reveal that Wight was not only ready to combat enemies outside the church, but also those inside it, as well, if he perceived them to be inimical to Mormonism and the posterity of Joseph Smith.

Wight’s apostolic duties brought both Mormonism and him to the Wisconsin wilds in 1841, and became the seed for the Texas colony. Lumber brought Mormons and Lyman Wight to Wisconsin. The Wightites’ journey to Texas by way of the northern frontier came about for two reasons. First, Nauvoo’s rapid growth demanded building materials for its material culture; second, Joseph Smith wanted a safe place for his people and his theocratic rule. A severe housing shortage had been the result of the dramatic increase in population. Along with the need for more private, public, and church buildings, problems also had been mounting with the area’s non-Mormons. Outside civil authority threatened Smith’s primacy. The citizens of Illinois earlier had welcomed the refugees as they fled across the Mississippi River, but soon changed their minds. Mormon theocracy, which both suborned civil authority to religious leadership and suppressed legal dissent, alienated growing numbers in and out of the church. The rumors of polygamy also fueled the flames of discord. Smith knew that he would have to move his people again. The question remained, where? Texas was a possible destination.27

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Douglas Wayne Larche and Michael Van Wagenen have studied Smith’s interest in Texas. Larche noted that if the election bid of Joseph Smith and Sydney Rigdon for the presidency and vice-presidency in 1844 failed, then the church would negotiate with the Republic of Texas to purchase some of its borderlands. There Smith could create a new nation and seek an alliance with the Republic against Mexico. Van Wagenen has significantly expanded Larche’s premise: “With his power weakening in Illinois and armed mobs at his gates, Smith looked outside the borders of the United States for both refuge and empire.” The Mormon prophet had been following the troubles of the Republic in Nauvoo’s “secular and religious newspapers.” Texas provided three possible alternatives to Smith’s problems. Smith’s presidential campaign platform in 1844 called for Texas annexation. He also requested authority from Congress “to raise a volunteer army to guard the Texas and Oregon frontiers.” Finally, Smith sent an emissary to “negotiate with Sam Houston to purchase the sparsely populated and highly contested southern and western regions of the Republic. In the borderlands,” Van Wagenen argued, “Smith planned to establish a theocratic nation that would serve as a buffer between Texas and Mexico. In this new Kingdom of God, Smith and his followers would be free to practice their peculiar religious beliefs from the interference of the United States.” But while Smith had been studying the Texas alternative, he had church, city, and citizens to manage.

In 1841, the church’s need for milled lumber in Nauvoo, the timber community in Wisconsin, and Apostle Lyman Wight and Bishop George Miller’s responsibility for it all became the genesis
of the Texas colony. A construction and building boom, according to LDS archivist Dennis Rowley, had exploded in Nauvoo due to church immigration, many converts coming from the British mission alone. Within a three-year period, Nauvoo had become one of Illinois’s largest cities, if not the largest. The need for housing, however, competed with the growing necessity for more church buildings. Smith and others, entranced at the idea of securing sufficient lumber for Nauvoo House, the Temple, and providing public works employment for new immigrants, decided to go into the sawmill business in the wilds of Wisconsin. Shared responsibility was delegated to Wight, Miller, Peter Haws, and Alpheus Cutler, members of the Nauvoo House Association and the Temple Committee.30

Along with the logging, getting the timber to the mill, turning it into lumber, then having to float it as huge log rafts several hundred miles down the Mississippi River to Nauvoo, Wight and Miller would have to recruit workers for the sawmill village, and transform the several frontier lumber fronts and the mill town into orthodox LDS communities. They successfully met the challenge. It would be difficult to understate the importance of the Wisconsin frontier experience in preparing Wight’s colonists for their future in the Texas borderlands. The truly terrible tribulations and difficulties of the Black River Pine Company developed a cadre of settlers ready for any challenge on the western frontier. The majority of Wightite colonists came from the Pine Company, which spent two distinct periods in Wisconsin—from late fall 1841 to June 1844, and from the fall of 1844 to the spring of 1845. The latter period completed the transformation of Wight’s followers into a distinctive faction opposed to Brigham Young and Utah Mormonism. They later would be described as “the Texas Epidemic” in LDS letters.

In September 1841, Peter Haws and Alpheus Cutler were sent to the Black River camps with supplies for nine months. Although the Pine Company became a thriving community with four sawmills along the Black River and a dozen logging camps in the pineries, the initial efforts were minimal and unsatisfactory. The results of the following summer and fall of 1842 were not much better: $3,000 in debt and a mill that was

not operating. Henry W. Miller, who had earlier owned an Illinois saw-mill with his family and two other families, was directed to go to Black River and take charge of the lumber and milling operations. Bishop George Miller would also go, with court documents to transfer the mills from Jacob Spaulding to church control, and to handle other business matters. Wight and Haws had other duties in the eastern states at that time, but were given instructions to go to Black River the following spring (1843) and supervise logging, milling, and rafting operations.

Bishop Miller, despite the squabbling, brought desperately needed business skills to the operation. He finished negotiations for the Spaulding mills by 22 December 1842. Affairs apparently went smoothly, although a later Wisconsin history suggests that the Mormon loggers began cutting timber on Spaulding’s land without permission, and he supposedly sent for assistance from Fort Crawford, located at Prairie de Chien. Miller realized Spaulding was going to fight, so the story goes, and offered to buy his outfit. For $20,000, the Mormons received the two sawmills on Town Creek, which empties into the Black River at the falls. Other buildings included two log cabins, a blacksmith shop, and a boarding house. Four satellite logging camps were soon established along the Black River: at the confluence of Wedges Creek with Mormon Riffles; at Ross’s Eddy, a mile south of Neillsville; at Weston Rapids, three miles farther north; and a final site near what is now Greenwood.  

The situation was difficult in the winters of 1842–43 and 1843–44. The Mormons were more than 120 miles from their base of supplies and provisions, and the work animals were on half-rations.  

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Disaster lurked—without the animals, the logging could not be done. George Miller wrote later that the men were “almost worn out with the incredible toil that” they “had just passed through, indeed they performed labors that are almost incredible to relate. . . . We were in the midst of a howling wilderness and the aspect of our affairs to some might seem forbidding.” Hunger stalked the loggers and their families that winter. The following winter brought a real threat of starvation to the men and their families. Miller remembered, “it was all we could do to keep our families from perishing for want of food.”

Successful operations began when Lyman Wight arrived in May 1843. An effective logging project was developed, and the sawmill and mill town grew into solid Wightite common-stock operations. Wight and Miller recruited more workers. Some came for the adventure of breaking in a new frontier, others for the honor of working on making lumber for the temple. Miller, however, was dissatisfied with and jealous of Wight. The bishop boasted in his memoirs that he made the mills profitable and had, that year of 1843, “sent to Nauvoo a large amount of hewed timber, and two hundred thousand feet of sawed timber.” Miller ignored Wight’s solid contribution to the community’s success. Allen Stout wrote in 1843, “[Lyman Wight] works like a slave as fat as he is.” Miller later alleged Wight suffered from “his indulgence in a habit that he was occasionally addicted to, his face and body very much bloated or swollen,” a reference to Wight’s lifelong fondness for alcohol. Miller’s accusation was nothing new; Wight had been facing accusations of public intoxication since 1838. A drinking spree of his in 1842 had canceled a deal for the purchase of a steamboat to bring the Mormons from Kirtland to Nauvoo. However, if he had been drinking heavily in Wisconsin, it apparently did not affect his work ethic. Wight was a functioning alcoholic. This was compounded later in Texas with opium use.

32. Miller, Correspondence of Bishop George Miller, 10, 11.
which he used for illness, a not uncommon habit on the frontier. Both contributed to his death in 1858.

The social and material culture of the colony began to stabilize during the winter of 1843–44. The nucleus of Wight’s colony in Texas began here. Several young men and women married and started families, including those of Allen and Elizabeth Stout, Spencer and Anna C. Wight Smith, John F. and Rosina Minerva Wight Miller, and Orange L. and Matilda Carter Wight. Only the Stouts did not go to Texas. Pierce Hawley and a “Brother Bird” (probably Phineas Bird, the family patriarch) were counselors to Bishop George Miller, and they comprised the local leadership for the sawmill community and logging camps. All three would become members of Wight’s Texas community. Other family names that appear in Wight’s Texas villages, as well as in Wisconsin, include Gaylord, Curtis, Jenkins, and Monseer (Moncur).34

Wight and Miller organized a common-stock economic order much like the earlier Rigdonite and Mormon communities in Ohio. Allen Stout described these affairs in a letter to family members. The bishopric (Miller, Hawley, and Bird) had “taken a schedule of every man’s property to make a general distribution.” Provisions were kept in a storehouse where individuals could draw necessities.

We have gone in to the whole law of God on Black River that is every man has given a schedule of his property to the bishop and we have all things common according to the law in the book of covenants. . . . Every man his own goods to do what he pleases with. . . . The thing is we are all on an equality eve man fars alike labours alike eats drinks ware alike but at the same time he lives to himself and what he has he has to himself and at his own controll. . . . I have bin thus particular because of the man falce reports gon out.

Stout invited his readers to come to Black River “if Benj Hoseas or uncle Jim Pace thinks they can go the caper of concecration and

equality we wish you to come by all means . . . the law of black river is that he will not work shal not eat.”

The material culture of the Black River community, by necessity, grew from its environment. Furniture was crafted from milled lumber rather than felled logs. Allen Stout, the community carpenter, described his home as “a frame house one story and a half high sixteen feet square with two loos floors and a petition [partition] and a most half sealed.” Before Stout and the others finished sealing the cracks in their walls, floors, and ceilings, the winter winds made the buildings drafty and chillingly uncomfortable, leading to influenza, colds, and pneumonia.

The settlement continued to grow in permanence, as men and boys drove herds of sheep, oxen, cattle, and milk cows to Black River in the fall of 1843 and the spring of 1844. The families prepared for the winter of 1843–44, growing potatoes, turnips, tomatoes, pumpkins, squash, and cabbages in the community gardens, as well as wheat in the larger fields. They took and preserved the bigger game animals (bear, deer, elk, and buffalo), and fished and netted the abundant resources of the nearby lakes and streams. With all that, the winter was still terrible. The snow was heavy, the cold intense, and because the church office, according to the younger Montague, had failed in delivering all of the necessary supplies to Black River, the families and crews had to ration food carefully. George Miller remembered a group of starving Menominee Indians who came to the camp. The Mormons voted unanimously to feed the Indians with their own limited supplies, and gave them flour and an ox.

The hunger caused terrible times. Men, women, and children suffered. Elmira Pond Miller, the wife of Henry W. Miller, wrote: “Before spring opened our provisions gave out and we had only potatoes and salt for several weeks. . . . The baby was only fourteen months old, but when the flour came he could not wait for it to be baked, but wanted a piece of dough.” Half-rations were issued. Levi

Lamoni Wight remembered eating what he called a “miserable article of bread.” One little boy was elated when, after several days without bread, he found a biscuit in a rat’s nest. The small child ran to tell his mother the wonderful news. She at first would not let him eat it, then, when the child broke into a torrent of hunger-induced tears, relented. Allen Stout recalled that in March, just as he was preparing to eat a cut from an ox that “had been dead three weeks,” a shipment of flour arrived, saving him from tainted meat. No one starved, yet no one ever forgot that terrible winter.

Despite the terrible winter, the northern mill operations continued to do well until a federal Indian agent interfered late in 1843, preventing the Mormons from contracting for timber stands on local Indian tribal lands. Cyrus Daniels and George Miller made a sixty-mile journey in snow and cold weather to treat with the Indians and the federal agent; discussions ended in hard feelings. Daniels was seriously frostbitten during the return journey to Black River. The Daniels-Miller troubles made the timber men realize that it was time to pursue other alternatives. Accordingly, on 18 February 1844, a committee at Black River, consisting of Lyman Wight, George Miller, Phineas R. Bird, Pierce Hawley, and John Young, wrote to Joseph Smith Jr. The letter first informed Smith that the lumber to be cut, between 1,500,000 and 2,000,000 feet by the end of the following July, would be “sufficient to finish the two houses [the Temple and Nauvoo House], which will accomplish the Mission on which we started to this country.” The second part complained that the federal Indian agent had been meddling with their attempts to secure tribal timberlands, and Wight et al. asked that Smith grant them and several local Indians permission to travel to the Republic of Texas and establish a gathering place for their people, free of interference from the United States government.

The Wight letter from Wisconsin requesting permission to go to Texas encouraged Joseph Smith to initiate a private plan he had

39. L. Wight, An Address, 2; Mills, “De Tal Palo Astillo,” 125, 126, 129–30; History of the Church, 6:255–60. The order of signatures would indicate that Miller was bishop, Bird and Hawley served as his counselors, John Young was the clerk to the bishopric, and Wight’s signature gave his imprimatur to the letter, thus making sure that Joseph Smith would give it his close attention.
been considering, to find a safe gathering place for his people. He created a handpicked Council of Fifty consisting of Mormons and a few friendly non-Mormons. They were charged with finding a gathering place outside the jurisdiction of the United States, where Smith could fuse the functions of government and church into a “theodemocracy.” Federal and state jurisdictions were severely hampering his attempts to do this at Nauvoo.

Growing issues not only existed between church members and outsiders, but also within the religion. First, LDS anti-democratic, anti-secular behavior was no secret in Illinois. One church newspaper trumpeted in March 1844 that it would not only “triumph over the state, but actually swallow it up.” Second, rumors of plural wives were causing vicious quarrels in and out of the church, turning members and quorums against one another, tearing religious unity to shreds, and opening the community of the faithful to assault by its enemies. Joseph Smith Jr. knew early in 1844 that his followers had to find a new location where he, the church, and its doctrines could be safe from outside interference. By March 1844, he had considered settling large church colonies in various locations outside of the United States, including the Republic of Texas, the Mexican possession of California, or the disputed territory of Oregon. On 14 March 1844, the Council of Fifty instructed Lucien Woodworth to go to Sam Houston and negotiate with the Republic of Texas for lands on which church members could settle. The Wisconsin lumber mission was designated the first group to go. Woodworth had returned to Nauvoo on 2 May 1844, and the next day he reported that President Sam Houston, with whom he had talked personally, was favorable but had to wait for approval by the Republic’s congress

40. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 121–22; *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, IL), 15 March 1844. Quinn noted the following sources—John Taylor revelation, 27 June 1882, Annie Taylor Hyde notebook, 64, LDS archives; and Fred C. Collier, comp., *Unpublished Revelations of the Prophets and Presidents of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Collier’s, 1981): 133. Apostles Lyman Wight and John Taylor, two weeks before Smith’s death, informed him in writing that he was “already President pro tem of the world” (Lyman Wight et al. to Joseph Smith, 19 June 1844, LDS archives). Quinn, in *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 321–22n106, notes that the official *History of the Church*, 7:139, dropped the passage by Wight et al. from the statement in which it was originally included.
later that fall. Three days later, the Council ordered Woodworth to return to Texas and complete the negotiations.⁴¹

Wight and Miller had been unaware of the Fifty’s existence, much less its plans, until April 1844, when they came from Wisconsin to attend the General Conference at Nauvoo. Shortly after their arrival, they were appointed to the Fifty. Several weeks before his death, Joseph Smith Jr. coached Wight on his duties concerning the Texas mission. He would lead it as soon as he finished the lumber season in Wisconsin, and Woodworth returned from Texas with a signed treaty between the Republic and the church. George Miller, in the meantime, would go to Henry Clay in Kentucky to intercede on the church’s behalf, while Wight went on a brief mission to the Atlantic states. Smith, according to Wight, then ordained him to be like Moses, leading “the armies of Israel to Zion . . . [to] lead the children of Israel out of Egypt.” Smith gave him “a white seer stone” to help him. The role and use of paranormal aids (such as a seer stone or peep stone) abounded in early Mormonism. Smith’s giving the seer

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⁴¹ Miller, Correspondence of Bishop George Miller, 20; Meacham Curtis to Joseph [Smith] III, 15 September 1884, RLDS archives; Reorganized History, 4:463; Quinn, The Mormon Hierarchy, 132–34; Journal History of the Church, 40:2 May 1844, 1. History of the Church, 6:255–57, 261–62, records that on 11 March 1844, Joseph Smith Jr. met with Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, John Taylor, George A. Smith, William W. Phelps, John M. Bernhisel, Lucien Woodworth, George Miller, Alexander Badlam, Peter Hawes, Erastus Snow, Reynolds Cahoon, Amos Fielding, Alpheus Cutler, Levi Richards, Newel K. Whitney, Lorenzo D. Wasson, and William Clayton at Nauvoo to consider the Wight-Miller letter. He organized a “special council,” the establishment of the Council of Fifty, to ponder whether or not the Mormons could “secure a resting place in the mountains, or some uninhabited region, where we can enjoy the liberty of conscience guaranteed us by the Constitution . . . [and] denied to us by the present authorities . . . .” This special council met “in the lodge room over Henry Miller’s house,” indicating the intimate and intricate relationships of the members in the ruling circles of the church (Journal History of the Church, 39:4 May 1844, 1). Joseph Fielding wrote, “I have attended the Grand Council, as I will call it. Elder Woodworth has returned from Texas. The prospect of our obtaining room to form a colony there is fair”; see the Joseph Fielding diary, 1843–46, as transcribed and edited by Andrew F. Ehat, “‘They might have known he was not a fallen prophet’—the Nauvoo Journal of Joseph Fielding,” Brigham Young University Studies 19, no. 2 (winter 1979): 141–66.
stone to Wight reflects the value the prophet placed on the apostle. Following another meeting of the Fifty, Joseph Smith, in the presence of Heber C. Kimball, further “instructed” Wight. The Wild Ram later wrote that this was “the last time I ever saw [Joseph Smith’s] face in the flesh. . . . I shook hands with him and bid him good bye.” The commitment to carry out his mission to Texas would drive Wight for the rest of his life.  