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Chapter Four

“Nauvoo is no place for rational people”

There seems to be already the premonitory symptoms of a convulsion among them. Many are the spirits that hesitate not to manifest their disaffection and disloyalty to their prophet and leader.

Correspondent to the New York Tribune, August 27, 1843

When the results of the Sixth District congressional elections were published, “everything connected with the Mormons became political,” and marked the beginning of an uneasy alliance between Illinois Whigs and Democrats in opposition to Joseph Smith’s autocratic rule. Internal dissent at Nauvoo also threatened to hasten the downfall of the Mormon prophet.

William Law was not alone in his outspoken criticism of Hyrum’s political revelation and the deliberateness with which Joseph Smith had manipulated the Mormon vote to favor the Democrats. “The Mormons now have all the power, elect whom they please and have taken the entire government of the county into their own hands,” complained a Hancock resident. “They recently determined the election for Congressman by pretended revelations.” A young woman visiting Nauvoo agreed. “Our Gentile [non-Mormon] friends say that this falling of the prophetic mantle on to Hyrum is a political ruse,” she wrote to relatives in the northeast. “[W]hen Joseph was in the meshes of the law, he was assisted by some politicians of the Whig party, to whom he pledged himself in the coming elections. Now he wants the Democratic party to win, so Hyrum is of that party, and as it is revealed for him to vote, so go over all the Mormons like sheep following the bell sheep over a wall.”

Joseph Smith took the stand during the first Sunday meetings following the elections. He reproved the citizens of Nauvoo for their inappropriate behavior—young men “crowding onto the ladies’ seats on the meeting ground,” for “laughing

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and mocking during the meeting.” This conduct was intolerable, he insisted, and requested assistance from the city marshal in maintaining order. “The city is enlarging very fast,” he said. “We have many professedly learned men in this city, and the height of their knowledge is not to know enough to keep in their place.”

Walter Bagby, Hancock County’s non-Mormon tax assessor and collector, was singled out for scorn. Bagby, claimed the prophet, “exercised more despotic power over the inhabitants of the city than any despot of the eastern country over his serfs.” The two men had an altercation about two weeks before, when Bagby was in Nauvoo attending to county business. “He gave me some abusive language,” said the prophet, “taking up a stone to throw at me: I seized him by the throat to choke him off.”

And, just a week earlier, as Joseph toured the area “on the hill” above the city on election day, he was accosted by Old Father Perry, a Gentile resident of Nauvoo. “Why, you can’t vote in this precinct,” the man informed him. A constable took Joseph “by the collar” and told him to go away. “I was abused and regulated at the ground,” complained the prophet, “and there was not a man in the crowd to say, ‘This is Bro[ther] Joseph, or this is the Mayor.’”

He blamed the politicians for the deplorable state of affairs in the city. “All our wrongs have arisen under the power and authority of democracy [the Democrats] and I have sworn that this arm shall fall from my shoulder, and this tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth before I will vote for them, unless they make me satisfaction and I feel it sensibly.” He prepared to give the stand over to another speaker and then recalled he had “forgotten one thing.” “We have had certain [traitors] in this city who have been writing falsehoods to Missouri,” Joseph said. “There is a certain man in this city who has made a covenant to betray me and give me up and that too before Governor Carlin [of Illinois] commenced his persecutions. . . . This testimony I have from gentlemen from abroad whose names I do not wish to give.”

Joseph’s sword fell on Sidney Rigdon. A trusted counselor and confidant since 1830, Sidney was nonetheless plagued by poor health, brought on, at least partially, by head injuries suffered while being dragged by a horse as a young boy, a traumatic mobbing he and Joseph endured in 1832, and the weeks he spent incarcerated with the prophet in the damp and cold Liberty jail. Even so, Joseph struck hard. “In the name of the Lord,” he began, “I most solemnly proclaim the withdrawal of my fellowship from this man on the condition that the Judging be true and let the Saints proclaim it abroad that he will no longer be acknowledged as my counselor and all who feel to sanction my proceedings and views will manifest it by uplifted hands.” The vote was unanimous. Sidney was disfellowshiped; his license as an elder in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was revoked. Sidney moved quickly to clear his name and undo the damage inflicted by this arbitrary action.


5. Ibid., 531–32. Compare Smith, American Prophet’s Record, 405–06 [13 August 1843].

Two hundred of the Old Citizens assembled in Carthage on August 19, “to consult about the Mormons” and their growing influence in county politics. A “committee of six” drew up a list of concerns. The prophet had “most absolute contempt for the laws of man . . . [and] a most shameless disregard for all the forms and restraints of law,” the Old Citizens argued. Joseph Smith’s lawlessness, they believed, originated in a provision of the Nauvoo city charter that allowed the municipal court to issue writs of habeas corpus. Their main complaint was directed at this concern. The committee proposed a solution to halt Joseph Smith’s contemptuous behavior. “If the authorities of the State of Missouri shall make another demand for the body of Joseph Smith, and our Governor shall issue another warrant,” they would “stand ready at all times to serve the officer into whose hand such warrant may come . . . as a posse.” They also attacked the political question. “As it has been too common for several years past for politicians of both political parties, not only of this county, but likewise of the state, to go to Nauvoo and truckle to the heads of the Mormon clan for their influence, we pledge ourselves that we will not support any man of either party in future who shall thus debase himself.” The central corresponding committee at Carthage (which included Harmon T. Wilson and Walter Bagby), served as a “general committee of supervision” for anti-Mormon undertakings in the county. Precinct committees, of two members each, were established in Hancock’s smaller settlements.7

Former Illinois governor Thomas Carlin responded to Sidney Rigdon’s request for assistance on August 18. “It gives me pleasure to be perfectly able to disabuse you,” Carlin wrote. “I have not seen you to my recollection, nor had any correspondence with you until the present, since 1839 and in all the intercourse I have had with you, I have always looked upon you as one of the most devoted followers of Joseph Smith and one of the pillars of the Church of the Latter-day Saints. I never sought through the aid of any person to entrap Joseph Smith. A faithful discharge of my official duties was all that I attempted or desired.”8

The prophet read Governor Carlin’s letter to an open meeting of the Saints on the morning of August 27. Joseph was not satisfied. “The letter is one of the most

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8. Smith, American Prophet’s Record, 410–11 [27 August 1843].

Thomas Gregg of Warsaw, Illinois. Western Illinois University, Regional Archives.

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evasive things and carries with it a design to hide the truth,” he argued. “Has any man been concerned in a conspiracy to deliver Joseph Smith to Missouri? If so who?”

Sidney Rigdon rose to respond. “I never saw Governor Carlin but three times and never exchanged a word with any man living on this subject,” insisted Rigdon. “I ask your pardon for having done anything which should give a reason to make you think so.” No move was made to restore Rigdon’s status in the church. A special conference to hear the case was called for early October.9

David N. White disembarked at the Warsaw dock in late August. The scene had changed little since he had last visited the town in 1840. White was the former editor of Warsaw’s Western World newspaper, and met with his successor, Warsaw Message publisher Thomas Gregg, himself “a strong Whig,” who offered to take White to the Mormon city of Nauvoo. As the Whig editor of a major eastern newspaper (the Pittsburgh Gazette), White hoped to speak with the Mormon prophet about politics. White knew that “the Mormon vote had been given to the Locofoco member of Congress, thereby defeating Cyrus Walker, Esq, whig, who had defended ’Joe’ in several law suits with the Missourians.” He wanted to find out why Joseph had not supported someone who was widely regarded as a friend to the Mormons.

The editor and the prophet met a few days later. In the course of the interview Joseph acknowledged his close friendship with Mr. Walker, “and said he had voted for him, but would not interfere with his people in the matter. He said he had never asked the Lord anything about politics; if he had done so, the Lord would have told him what to do. The Lord,” Joseph Smith informed Mr. White, “has promised to give us wisdom, and when I lack wisdom I ask the Lord, and he tells me, and if he didn’t tell me, I would say he was a liar; that’s the way I feel. But I never asked him anything about politics. I am a Whig, and I am a Clay man. I am made of Clay, and I am tending to Clay, and I am going to vote for Henry Clay; that’s the way I feel.” Joseph laughed. “But I won’t interfere with my people, religiously, to affect their votes, though I might to elect Clay, for he ought to be president. I have sworn by the eternal gods—it’s no harm to swear by the gods, because there [are] none; if there is only one God, there can’t be gods, and it’s no harm to swear by nothing.” He laughed again, doubtless reflecting on the impact his bold (some would say blasphemous) theological pronouncement might have on readers of the Pittsburgh Gazette. Joseph repeated his provocative oath, extending its significance with a reference to Old Testament practice. “I have sworn by the eternal gods that I never will vote for a democrat again,” he continued, “and I intend to swear my children, putting their hands under the thigh, as Abraham swore Isaac, that they never will vote a democratic ticket in all their generations.” The Democrats, who for so long had depended upon the support of the Mormon electorate, had become an enemy to the Saints.

“It is the meanest, lowest party in all creation,” he said. “There is five-sixths of my people so led away by the euphonious term ‘democrat,’ that they will vote the Locofoco ticket. I am a democrat myself. I am a Washington democrat, a Jefferson democrat, a Jackson democrat, and I voted for Harrison [in 1840], and I am going to vote for Clay [in 1844].”

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Joseph clarified his deliberate play on the word “democrat.” “The Locofocos are no democrats,” he went on, “but the meanest, lowest, most tyrannical beings in the world. They opposed me in Missouri, and were going to shoot me for treason, and I have never committed any treason whatever.”

Following its initial publication in the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, the Joseph Smith interview was copied by numerous eastern newspapers. It was hoped the press exposure would keep Joseph from changing his mind about the Democrats, and about Henry Clay.10

Grand Master Meredith Helm presided over the convocation of the Grand Lodge of Illinois in early October. Freemasons from seventeen lodges throughout the state gathered in the third story of a brick building in Jacksonville, widely considered the finest in the city.

Freemasonry had its origins in the stone-cutting guilds of medieval Europe. To preserve the specialized knowledge of their craft and prevent infiltration by outsiders, lodges introduced passwords and secret handshakes. The first formal organization of nonworking (or “accepted”) masons dates to the seventeenth century. Stone, and the tools used to work it—such as the ubiquitous compass and square, both instruments of the builder—became allegories for the life of a moral individual. Initiates passed through a series of levels or degrees, the first three of which (belonging to what was often called the Blue Lodge) were: entered apprentice, fellowcraft, and master mason. At each stage a symbolic ritual drama was enacted which revealed ancient truths designed to restore within each brother an “inner light” of wisdom. Masons pledged themselves to secrecy in not revealing lodge ritual to the uninitiated. Penalties for divulging Masonic secrets were spelled out in graphic detail.

Freemasonry provided members with an extensive social network that had at its core a belief in God and the sacredness of oath keeping. In the nineteenth century it was widely believed that the origins of Freemasonry were ancient, extending back in time to King Solomon and the building of his temple. The order was thought to possess keys to early wisdom that had been lost to the world at large. Masons covenanted to assist members of the lodge who were in need and promised never to harm a fellow brother, his wife, or his family. Lodges were often dedicated to St. John the Baptist, who, according to tradition, was an ancient Christian patron of Freemasonry. June 24 was celebrated as his anniversary, a day commemorated by public lectures, picnics, and other activities.

Each state possessed a Grand Lodge, which granted authority to groups of individual Masons wishing to organize locally. The first step in the process was to apply for permission to assemble “Under Dispensation” before a permanent charter was granted to the local unit.

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10. David N. White [Warsaw, Illinois] to *Pittsburgh Gazette* 30 August 1843, in “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* 15 September 1843. Other publications of the letter include the *Western Star* (Lebanon, Ohio) 20 October 1843. An abbreviated version is included in Hallwas and Launius, *Cultures in Conflict*, 39–44. The fact that the Joseph Smith interview was published in full in Lebanon, Warren County, Ohio, is significant, as it was the home to several of the men who became key Ohio intermediaries in the Whig conspiracy against Joseph Smith—Thomas Corwin, John McLean, and Anthony Howard Dunlevy.
Brother Helm notified his fellow Masons that “the whole matter” of a Mormon Lodge “is again before the Grand Lodge.” He reviewed the beginnings of Mormon Freemasonry in Illinois. Helm reminded the gathering that Abraham Jonas, there present, had been elected Grand Master at the Second Grand Lodge of Illinois in April of 1840. The election had taken place in the very room they now occupied. That honor was no accident.\textsuperscript{11}

Jonas, an English Jew, came to the U.S. sometime before 1820 and in that year participated in the first Passover in the West, held together with his brother Joseph, a Cincinnati silversmith. In 1823 Abraham was initiated into Cincinnati’s Miami Lodge No. 46. He soon moved to Williamstown, Grant County, in northern Kentucky, where he became the founding master of Grant Lodge in 1827. Beginning in 1830 Jonas was successively elected Grand Junior Warden of the Kentucky Grand Lodge, Grand Senior Warden, Deputy Grand Master, and finally Grand Master from 1833–34, a feat never before accomplished nor since repeated. Jonas represented Grant County in the Kentucky legislature during this same period.

Shortly after his arrival in Illinois in 1838, Abraham moved his personal residence to the small town of Columbus, near the geographic center of Adams County. There he became the founding master of the Columbus Lodge. Since Illinois lacked a recognized Grand Lodge at that time, Jonas organized under a charter granted by the Grand Lodge of Missouri.\textsuperscript{12}

The renewed Masonic effort in Jacksonville in 1840 was in response to the disappearance of the First Grand Lodge of Illinois (established in 1824) during the anti-Masonic movement of the 1830s. In 1840 there were fewer than 150 Freemasons in Illinois, and just over 2,000 in the entire United States. To regain its former influence, the fraternity had to rebuild upon whatever foundation was available. Jonas was absent from Jacksonville at the time of his election, and was installed by proxy by Judge James Adams, one of the few Masons present at Illinois’s First Grand Lodge. Adams was elected to serve with Jonas in the office of Deputy Grand Master.\textsuperscript{13}

One of Abraham’s first moves as Grand Master was to curry Mormon favor, most likely at the urging of Judge Adams, who had been baptized a Mormon in 1836. Jonas easily positioned himself as an ally of the Latter-day Saints. He was, after all,

\textsuperscript{11} Carr, \textit{Freemasonry and Nauvoo}, 24. Hogan, \textit{Mormonism and Freemasonry: The Illinois Episode}.
a close associate of two prominent Mormon supporters—Orville Hickman Browning and Judge James Adams. Furthermore, Jonas was the brother-in-law of Joshua Seixas, Joseph Smith’s second Hebrew teacher in Kirtland, Ohio.14

John C. Bennett, an Ohio-born Freemason, recent convert to Mormonism and newly-elected mayor of Nauvoo, had been unsuccessful in finding a sponsor for the proposed Mormon Lodge there. Bennett had written to Quincy’s Bodley Lodge for endorsement. This was a deliberate tactical move on the part of the Mormon Freemasons. Under the 1840 Grand Lodge reorganization at Jacksonville, Bodley Lodge was “Lodge No. 1” in the state, a rank that gave Quincy’s lodge special prominence and voice within the fraternity. Bodley, however, declined Bennett’s request on grounds that Bennett and his fellow petitioners were unknown to them as Masons.

Grand Master Jonas overcame this hurdle by single-handedly issuing a dispensation for a Mormon Lodge in Nauvoo at the Illinois Grand Lodge in early October of 1841. Objections by the Bodley Lodge caused the approval to be withdrawn. Jonas next obliged Bennett by conveying (ten days after the close of the Illinois Grand Lodge) a dispensation for the Nauvoo Lodge under his hand and “private seal” on October 15, 1841. Jonas’s concession (accomplished through highly irregular means by having his own Columbus Lodge vouch for the Nauvoo petitioners as “worthy and fit Master Masons”) allowed the Nauvoo Lodge to operate Under Dispensation, “until the next annual session . . . of the Grand Lodge [of Illinois], and no longer.”

At the lodge’s first meeting, on December 29, 1841, John C. Bennett was installed as secretary under founding master George Miller. Instead of waiting for the October meeting of the Grand Lodge as was customary, the Nauvoo Lodge was formally installed on March 15, 1842. Jonas again broke with tradition and chose to make the installation a public ceremony, leading a “procession . . . to the grove, near the [Mormon] Temple,” then under construction. Joseph Smith officiated as grand chaplain.

Masonic brethren from seven states were present—Illinois, Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Maine, and Vermont. The two states that had been most active in establishing new lodges in the west, Kentucky and Missouri, were not represented at the Nauvoo installation. Their absence conveyed strong disapproval of Jonas’s great Masonic experiment at Nauvoo.15

During the evening meeting (“at early candle lighting”) Jonas gave the Nauvoo Lodge authority, “to receive the petitions of Joseph Smith, and Sidney Rigdon . . . [and] . . . confer the three several degrees of Ancient . . . Masonry on the said Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon — as speedily as the nature of the case will admit.” (Initiates typically progressed through the three degrees over a minimum of

two months.) Following a unanimous ballot, the men “were duly initiated Entered Apprentice Masons.” Next morning, at nine a.m., Joseph and Sidney were advanced to the Fellowcraft degree. At two p.m. Joseph became a master mason. Sidney was made a master mason at seven that evening.16

The Columbus Advocate (an Adams County newspaper sponsored by Abraham Jonas) afterwards published an anonymous letter to dispel any negative perceptions of the Latter-day Saints and the recent goings on at Nauvoo:

There was a Masonic celebration, and the Grand Master of the state was present for the purpose of publicly installing the officers of a new lodge. An immense number of persons assembled on the occasion, variously estimated from five to ten thousand persons, and never in my life did I witnesst [sic] a better-dressed or a more orderly and well-behaved assemblage: not a drunken or disorderly person to be seen, and the display of taste and beauty among the females could not well be surpassed anywhere.17

Jonas’s unorthodox procedures did not go unchallenged. The installation of the Nauvoo Lodge was witnessed by at least one brother from Quincy’s Bodley Lodge No. 1. When the Nauvoo Masons invited the Bodley Lodge to “participate with them in celebrating the anniversary of St. John, the 24th of June [1842],” the latter declined on grounds of insufficient funds and poor roads, further maintaining that “the peculiar characteristic of Masonry, that she has sent forth her pure flame of living light, before the world, [must remain] uncontaminated by political doings, and untinged by religious distinctions.”18

One of the chief reasons for Bodley Lodge’s unwillingness to support the Nauvoo Masons was the growing political strength of the Mormon electorate. They recognized that Jonas was attempting to gain favor with the Latter-day Saints by promoting Freemasonry among the very group that could benefit him the most at the polls. In addition to the 1,000-plus potential votes in Hancock County, there were significant numbers of Mormons who remained in Adams County even after Nauvoo became a gathering place for the Saints. Jonas also no doubt believed the Mormons could assist him in his campaign to make the town of Columbus capital of Adams County.

The “Friends of Quincy” and the “Friends of Columbus” sparred frequently in regional newspapers. Significantly, the “Friends of Quincy” committee opposed to moving the county’s capital to Columbus included J. T. Holmes, John Wood, and Hiram Rogers, all founding members of the Bodley Lodge in 1834. (Hiram Rogers was present at the 1840 organization of the Second Grand Lodge of Illinois and was passed

over in favor of Jonas for the position of grand master.) These were men of wealth and influence in the Quincy community, and Jonas’s effort to promote Columbus as the seat of Adams County was a direct threat to their economic well-being.

Beginning in January of 1842 a central mechanism in Jonas’s movement was the publication of a weekly newspaper, the earlier mentioned Columbus Advocate. Although his name does not appear as editor or publisher, it was known that Jonas supplied the printing press and wrote much of the editorial matter.19

It also came to light at this time that Dr. John C. Bennett, so instrumental in several Nauvoo ventures, having been expelled from his home lodge in Ohio, was not a Mason in good standing. Abraham Jonas wrote to George Miller on May 4, 1842, requesting an immediate investigation, adding that Bennett, “must be a very bad man, as certain occurrences have taken place between us—which I can only explain when I see you.” In a matter of weeks Bennett resigned his position as mayor of Nauvoo, was expelled from the lodge, excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and began publication of what he claimed would be a devastating exposure of Mormonism.

Poorly written, sensationalist in tone, and overtly self-serving, Bennett’s small volume, The history of the saints: or, An exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism, was never as influential as he had hoped. Nonetheless, it did bring before the public two chief concerns regarding the controversial doctrines and practices of the Mormons—the rise of polygamy and the planned establishment of a Mormon theocracy with Joseph at its head. Regarding the latter, Bennett promised his readers that “the documents that will hereafter be introduced, will clearly show the existence of a vast and deplausible scheme . . . for conquering the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, and of erecting upon the ruin of their present government a despotic military and religious empire, the head of which, as emperor and pope, was to be Joseph Smith, and his minister and viceroyys, the apostles, high-priests, elders, and bishops, of the Mormon church.” Bennett’s warning was blunted by its brashness; the promised documents were never produced. 20

Later that summer, as Bennett’s inflammatory letters were appearing in the Illinois press, the Bodley Lodge passed a resolution requesting the Illinois Grand Lodge investigate “by what authority the Grand Master [Jonas] initiated, passed and raised Messers Smith and Rigdon to the degree of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason, at one and the same time.” This rapid advancement was known as being made a “Mason at Sight.” Jonas’s action constituted the first documented instance of the practice in Illinois Masonic history.21


20. Abraham Jonas to George Miller, 4 May 1842, quoted in Smith, The Saintly Scoundrel, 76 (explain quote). Bennett was expelled from the Nauvoo Lodge on 8 August 1842. Hogan, Mormonism and Freemasonry, 282. Bennett’s letters were first published in the Sangamo Journal beginning 8 July 1842. Bennett’s The History of the Saints (empire quote, 5–6) appeared in October of that year. See Crawley, Descriptive Bibliography, 202.
Furthermore, initiation of more than one person at a time into the fraternal organization was specifically forbidden. Despite this, during the five months it had been in operation (between March 15 and August 11, 1842), the Nauvoo Lodge initiated 285 individuals into the fraternity and made 243 Master Masons. By late 1842, nearly two thirds of all the Freemasons in Illinois were members of a Mormon lodge. (Non-Mormon lodges in the state averaged fewer than thirty individuals.) It also became known that Joseph Smith had acted as a grand chaplain (a privilege that included sitting on the stand to the immediate right of the Grand Master) before he had become a Mason. These were serious breaches of Masonic protocol. The Bodley Lodge insisted that the “Grand Master of this State [Jonas] . . . suspend the authority which has been granted the Nauvoo Lodge by the Grand Master of this State.” Jonas would wait to act on this request until after the August elections.

Even with the growing Mormon-Masonic scandal, Jonas’s political gamble paid off. Elections for representatives in Illinois’s Thirteenth General Assembly were held August 1, 1842. In a field of twenty-one candidates vying for five seats in the legislature, Jonas ran third, with 1,297 votes, behind fellow Whig Orville Hickman Browning (with 1,937) and Democrat Almeron Wheat (with 1,620). This was a very respectable showing for someone who had lived in Adams County for only four years. Jonas waited until the election results were in, and on August 11, 1842, suspended the Nauvoo Lodge.

Upon hearing news of Jonas’s successful campaign, Kentucky senator and fellow Mason Henry Clay (himself a past grand master of the Kentucky Lodge) wrote to his old friend. “I am very glad to perceive from your election to the Legislature that you enjoy the same consideration which was entertained for you in Kentucky, and I hope you will never have any cause to repent your emigration. We however miss you very much. I anxiously hope that your opinions may prove correct of the ultimate political character of Illinois.” Indeed, Henry Clay anticipated that, with Jonas’s endorsement, the Mormons would support him in his 1844 presidential bid.

The third convocation of Illinois’s Second Grand Lodge met in Jacksonville, October 3–5, 1842. Jonas was succeeded as grand master by Dr. Meredith Helm of Springfield. A special committee was appointed to investigate the Nauvoo Lodge. As no irregularities were reported by the committee, the injunction suspending its work was lifted in early November.
In the fall of 1843, “The authority therein granted,” Grand Master Meredith Helm concluded, “now ceases, and the whole matter [of the Nauvoo Lodge] is again before the Grand Lodge, upon their application for a charter.” Helm recommended that the Nauvoo Lodge be divided into “at least four, if not more distinct Lodges.” This had been proposed by the Mormons somewhat earlier, “but as this application was made at a period very near to our annual meeting, I thought it proper to wait and refer the whole matter, as I now do, to the Grand Lodge.”

The Committee on Returns and Work took the matter under consideration. After examining the lodge records submitted for review, they “reported them fair, but recommended that the Grand Lodge should suspend the [Nauvoo Lodge] another year for fear there might be something wrong.” The committee also reported that they found “the work in some measure correct, but in many instances there appear[ed to be] irregularities and matters to your committee inexplicable.”

One member of the three-man committee was Brother Hiram N. Rogers, a founding member of Quincy’s Bodley Lodge in 1834 and a political adversary of Abraham Jonas.

Jonas, who as grand master was responsible for establishing the Nauvoo Lodge Under Dispensation in 1842, appeared before the committee and “made a flaming speech in behalf of the Nauvoo Lodge.” The records of the Nauvoo Lodge, Jonas asserted, “were the fairest books and papers that had been brought from any Lodge to the Grand Lodge . . . [and he] verily believed that if they were not Mormons, that Lodge would stand the highest of any Lodge that had come to that Grand Lodge.” Past grand master Jonas stood alone. Without the advocacy of Judge James Adams, who had died in early August, the Nauvoo Lodge had lost one of its most influential supporters. Probably for the first time in his political career Jonas’s convictions did not prevail. His support of the Mormons began to falter.

A representative from Nauvoo asked why the Quincy Lodge had been unwilling to recommend the Nauvoo Masons. The reason given was “an unacquaintance with [them] as Masons and other things.” Rogers insisted that “other things” did not mean Mormonism. The Mormon delegates then inquired what was the source of the “reliable information” supporting the injunction against the Nauvoo Lodge. It was finally acknowledged that the objection was received “from the Quincy Lodge, who got it from [Dr. John C.] Bennett.”

Abraham Jonas, of Columbus, Illinois, as grand master of the state of Illinois.


27. Hogan, Mormonism and Freemasonry, 281–82.
The delegates also learned that on September 29, less than a week before the Grand Lodge was scheduled to convene in Jacksonville, Quincy’s Bodley Lodge had passed two resolutions for its delegates to the convention. The first resolution was to examine “the propriety of granting a charter to Nauvoo Lodge,” then Under Dispensation. The second resolution stated, “From what we have seen and heard from sources to be relied on, that it would be unwise to grant a charter or continue the dispensation longer among that people,” meaning the Mormons, and instructed its delegates to vote against any such moves. With such strong political forces at work, the outcome was predetermined. The committee’s recommendation that the dispensation be revoked and their charter refused was adopted. The Mormon Lodge in Nauvoo was now clandestine.28

At the October conference in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith found himself in a difficult position. He explained to his followers the “supposed treacherous correspondence” that Sidnet Rigdon had exchanged with Ex-Governor Carlin. But this was as far as he was willing to compromise. Joseph Smith was disposed to allow Rigdon to “retain his station” on a single condition, that he “magnify his office, and walk and conduct himself in all honesty, righteousness, and integrity.” However, the prophet was not convinced this was possible “judging from their past intercourse” and maintained his lack of confidence in Rigdon’s “integrity and steadfastness.”29

In truth, Joseph was most concerned about Sidney’s opposition to plural marriage, a practice the prophet had been advocating for some time. One elder had recently returned to Nauvoo “from a two years’ mission in England, bringing with him a [new] wife and child, although he had left a wife and family here when he went away.” The first wife’s “husband and some others” eventually persuaded her that since the doctrine of the “plurality of wives is taught in the Bible, that Abraham, Jacob, Solomon, David, and indeed all the old prophets and good men, had several wives, and if right for them, it is right for the Latter Day Saints.” Joseph promoted polygamy as part of “the restoration of all things,” but took the practice one step further than the ancients by linking plural marriage to exaltation in the world to come. Husbands and multiple wives were “sealed” to one another for “time and eternity,” their heavenly reward predicated upon their righteousness in this life.30

At Nauvoo the doctrine (also called celestial marriage or spiritual wifeism) was taught in secret and was not generally known to the church membership. Negative reaction within Joseph’s own ranks (and the fact that polygamy was illegal under Illinois law) made open acknowledgment of the doctrine nearly impossible. Church leaders publicly condemned polygamy, claiming that any reports to the contrary were apostate or anti-Mormon attempts to discredit the Latter-day Saints. Joseph’s 1843 revelation on the subject would not be made public until 1852 and only added to the LDS Doctrine and Covenants in 1876.31

29. There are several different interpretations of this event. See Smith, History of the Church 6:47–49 (heavily edited).
Sidney Rigdon had a very personal reason for opposing “celestial marriage.” More than a year earlier, in April 1842, the prophet had attempted to take Sidney’s daughter, nineteen-year-old Nancy, as one of his plural wives. Joseph told Nancy he had an “affection for her for several years, and wished that she should be his . . . the Lord was well pleased with this matter . . . there was no sin in it whatever . . . but, if she had any scruples of conscience about the matter, he would marry her privately.” Nancy refused. Undaunted by her initial rejection, days later Joseph wrote a conciliatory letter. “That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another,” he insisted. Certainly, Joseph continued, “everything that God gives us is lawful and right; and it is proper that we should enjoy His gifts and blessings . . . Blessings offered, but rejected, are no longer blessings . . . Our Heavenly Father is more liberal in his views, and boundless in his mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive.” Again, Nancy rejected the prophet’s offer.

When the affair became public, Joseph at first denied he had propositioned his counselor’s daughter. Confronted with the letter, the prophet eventually acknowledged he had “approached Nancy Rigdon and asked her to become his spiritual wife.” Feeling betrayed by his longtime friend, Sidney resolved that Joseph Smith “could never be sealed to one of his daughters with his consent as he did not believe in the doctrine.” The rift between the two leaders would never fully mend.32

Contrary to the prophet’s wishes, the October 1843 conference voted to retain Rigdon as Joseph’s counselor. Sidney was supported by Joseph’s elder brother Hyrum, William Law (Joseph’s second counselor), William Marks (the Nauvoo stake president) and Almon W. Babbit (Joseph’s attorney). Still, Joseph was unmoved. “I have thrown him off my shoulders, and you have again put him on me. You may carry him, but I will not.”33

“I see by the newspapers that there has been a meeting of citizens at Carthage relative to the Mormons,” Horace R. Hotchkiss wrote to the prophet in late September. A New York City land speculator with significant commercial interests in Nauvoo, Hotchkiss was worried “that several severe resolutions have been passed condemning the conduct of the Mormons . . .”34

“In answer to your very candid inquiry and interest relative to our welfare, brevity will suffice,” Joseph replied in mid-October. To the prophet’s mind, “Unprincipled men and disappointed demagogues, with here and there an ‘untamed sucker’ [a Missourian], composed that disgraceful and disgracing as well as mobocratic assemblage,” which issued resolutions promising to fight against the Saints. “I feel proud to say that patriots and honest men generally frown upon such audacious proceedings as beneath the dignity of freemen. It is to be hoped that public opinion will continue to spurn such doings, and leave the actors to fester in their own shame.” Joseph assured Hotchkiss that the Latter-day Saints were victims, once more, of persecuted innocence, and that “with the blessings of Jehovah, we shall reap the reward of virtue and goodness.”35

33. Smith, History of the Church, 6:49.
Hotchkiss’ concerns about the viability of his investments in Nauvoo were shared by politicians who were apprehensive about the inconstancy of the Mormon electorate. Furthermore, even before the Whigs could hope to secure the Mormon vote, they had to establish unanimity within their own party ranks. There remained deep-seated animosities among the Whig frontrunners, with little certainty as to who would be nominated as the Whig candidate for president of the U.S. in 1844.