Junius And Joseph

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Chapter Twenty

How Wide the Conspiracy?

Joseph Smith uttered the first four words of the Masonic distress cry as he fell from the second story window of Carthage jail. Yet none of the Masons in the mob surrounding the jail made any effort to come to his aid. That circumstance gave rise to the suspicion that there was a Masonic conspiracy to take his life, a claim voiced privately and in public by Joseph Smith’s successor, Brigham Young.

Brigham Young’s Masonic Plot

By the spring of 1844, Freemasonry had become a vital part of social and ritual life in Nauvoo. Joseph Smith firmly believed there was “similarity of priesthood in Masonry” and that Freemasonry had been “taken from the [ancient] priesthood but has become degenerated.” Masonic symbols, gestures, and penalties were reflected in the newly revealed Mormon temple ritual. Almost every church leader was a Mason and nearly two-thirds of all Freemasons in Illinois were Latter-day Saints. With the deaths of two of the most prominent Mormon Freemasons, however, the privileged position of the craft among Latter-day Saints took a drastic fall from which it never recovered.¹

The Times and Seasons issue of July 15, 1844, contained an editorial headed, “The Murder.” Its purpose was not to present a descriptive account of the Carthage incident (that had been done earlier in the month), but to put before the world once again the Mormon cry of persecuted innocence and to present Joseph and Hyrum as true martyrs for the cause of God. The editorial condemned the Freemasons for not preventing the murders when it was within their power to do so. Joseph had given the Masonic sign of distress when hanging in the window of the jail and yet none had come to his aid. This was not the first time Joseph had used his Masonic ties in order to extricate himself from a difficult situation. Following the prophet’s June 1843 arrest at Dixon, for example, a correspondent wrote from Nauvoo that “today, Joseph was brought home in triumph, having suffered a few days’ imprisonment in an old barn; from which he escaped, I am told, by giving some Masonic sign, before his friends arrived.”² Joseph’s experience at Carthage, however, ended, not in triumph, but tragedy. The Times and Seasons editorial of July 15, 1844, read, in part,

Leaving religion out of the case, where is the lover of his country, and his posterity, that does not condemn such an outrageous murder, and will not lend all his powers, energies and influence to bring the offenders to justice and judgment? Ever[n], that these two innocent men were confined in jail for a supposed crime, deprived of any weapons to defend themselves: had the pledged faith of the State of Illinois, by Gov. Ford, for their protection, and were then shot to death, while, with uplifted hands they gave such signs of distress as would have commanded the interposition and benevolence of Savages or Pagans. They were both Masons in good standing. Ye brethren of “the mystic tie” what think ye! Where is our good Master Joseph and Hyrum? Is there a pagan, heathen, or savage nation on the globe that would not be moved on this great occasion, as the trees of the forest are moved by a mighty wind? Joseph’s last exclamation was “O Lord my God!”

Readers of the Mormon newspaper, most of whom were members of the Nauvoo Lodge, would have readily understood the Masonic references in this passage. The “uplifted hands” was the Masonic distress signal, known to all indoctrinated Freemasons, here called “brethren of the mystic tie.” Any Mason witnessing such a sign, especially when supplemented by the words, “O Lord, my God, is there no help for the widow’s son?” was, by their sacred oath, required to offer assistance. The unwillingness of the Masons in the mob to come to Joseph and Hyrum’s aid branded them as even less than pagans, heathens, or savages, all unbelievers in Christ. Joseph Smith’s unheeded Masonic distress cry would echo throughout the Mormon and Masonic community for decades to come.3

There is little evidence that the Illinois Freemasons, as a body, were behind the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Furthermore, the Carthage and Warsaw Lodges had their charters recalled by the Illinois Grand Lodge as a consequence of the involvement of lodge members in illegal activities surrounding the Carthage incident, as well as their subsequent efforts to use the Craft to protect individuals from prosecution. (Significantly, though, the Quincy Lodge was not censured for its anti-Mormon stance.) It is true, nonetheless, that several of the men indicted for Joseph Smith’s murder attempted to benefit from the Masonic pledge of mutual protection in the months leading up to the 1845 trial.

Local Masonic lodges in Carthage and Warsaw were first organized at the very time the Nauvoo Mormon lodges were being placed under suspension. Hancock Lodge No. 20, in Carthage, was established under dispensation in 1842; its charter was granted the following year. Wesley Williams (brother of Archibald and cousin of Colonel Levi Williams) was one of its original members. The 1844 return for the Carthage Lodge lists Wesley Williams, Robert F. Smith, and Onias C. Skinner as Master Masons. All three men were active in the anti-Mormon movement.

The founding Worshipful Master of Warsaw Lodge No. 21 was Abraham I. Chittenden; their first meeting was held in early 1843. Among those who served with Chittenden were Mark Aldrich, treasurer, and Henry Stephens, secretary. Again, all three men were noted anti-Mormons. Following the October grand jury

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proceedings, Thomas Sharp and Levi Williams were initiated into the Warsaw Lodge. Jacob C. Davis and William H. Roosevelt were raised to the Master Mason degree. The “Chittenden boys” (William W. and E. F. Chittenden), both mentioned in October grand jury testimony, became Master Masons in January of 1845. George Rockwell was raised in late February; Levi Williams in March.4

The Mormons at Nauvoo watched the Masonic activity in Warsaw with no small interest. Orson Hyde addressed the high priests of Nauvoo in late April 1845. “I may be regarded as a treasonable, blasphemous character,” he said, “but I wanted to express my feelings. I want those murderers to know that their lies cannot always shield them; that although they join the fraternity of brethren,” that is, the Freemasons, “to save them from the just penalty of their crime, this cunning resort cannot rescue them from punishment. But it may possibly postpone it, and give it a chance to stand on interest till the Saints judge the world.” The Mormon political Kingdom of God was yet at hand. Punishment of the murderers would come at last.5

Although the Grand Lodge of Illinois was not pleased with the activities of its Hancock County brethren, there would be no official condemnation of the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, two of the most prominent Mormon Freemasons. Nonetheless, the charter of the Carthage Lodge was surrendered in late 1844 “on account of [the] Mormon difficulties.” It would not be rechartered until 1856. The Warsaw Lodge likewise lost its charter. Following the acquittal of Sharp, Williams, Davis, Aldrich, and Grover in 1845, however, the Grand Lodge received the Warsaw Lodge once again into its “affectionate confidence.” The justification for accepting the Warsaw Lodge was that “although the lodge erred, and greatly erred” by allowing the men to join the lodge (or become Master Masons) while under indictment, “the error was an error of the head and not of the heart . . . the men have been since tried by the laws of their country by a jury of their peers and acquitted.”6

Abraham Jonas, once Illinois’s most venerated Past Grand Master, also fell out of favor. Columbus Lodge No. 6 filed no returns in 1844 or 1845. In 1846 his lodge surrendered its charter. As a past grand master, Jonas was never officially censured for his role in the Carthage conspiracy but would remain forever relegated to the background of Illinois Masonic affairs.7

William Gano Goforth was less fortunate. Following his Masonic “work” in the clandestine Nauvoo Lodge in the spring of 1844, Goforth was censured by the Illinois Grand Lodge and expelled from the fraternity. Goforth joined the Mormon church at Nauvoo in early 1845 (he was baptized by Brigham Young), and followed the new prophet to Utah.8

In August 1860, Brigham Young, then in Salt Lake City, made a claim extending the charges of the 1844 Times and Seasons editorial. Brigham Young met with John Taylor, one of the two Carthage survivors, and several other members of the

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4. Carr, Freemasonry and Nauvoo, 32.
6. Carr, Freemasonry and Nauvoo, 35.
Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Wilford Woodruff recorded President Young’s comments on this occasion:

President Young said the people of the United States had sought our destruction and they had used every Exertion to perfect it. They have worked through the masonic institution to perfect it. Joseph & Hyrum Smith were Master Masons and they were put to death by masons or through there instigation and he gave the sign of distress & he was shot by masons while in the act. And there were delegates from the various lodges in the Union to see that he was put to death. I hope to live to see the day when I can have power to make them do right. They have got the blood of the prophets upon their heads & they have got to meet it.

Three separate claims are here being made about Masonic involvement in the Carthage conspiracy. First, that Joseph and Hyrum were “put to death by Masons or through their instigation.” Second, that Joseph “was shot by Masons while in the act” of giving the Masonic distress sign. Third, and most important, Brigham Young asserted that “there were delegates from the various lodges in the Union to see that he was put to death.” In other words, Brigham Young apparently believed there was a national Masonic conspiracy to take Joseph Smith’s life. Brigham Young’s final point, an obligation to avenge the “blood of the Prophets,” was the subject of the previous chapter.

However emphatic and authoritative his words may appear on the surface, Brigham Young’s 1860 statement is not evidence for a national Masonic conspiracy to murder Joseph Smith. At the time Brigham Young made his assertions, rumors were surfacing that an attempt would be made to establish a gentile Masonic lodge in Utah, to “try to get an influence with some here to lay a plan to try to murder me [Brigham Young] & the [other] leaders of the Church.” The Masonic threat was again in the air.

Nonetheless, it is true that Brigham Young had known for some time that representatives from throughout the Union met in Carthage on the night of June 26, 1844, (the day prior to the assassination of Joseph and Hyrum) and condemned the two incarcerated Smith brothers to death.

Carthage survivor Willard Richards died in 1854. His demise dealt a severe blow to the compilers of the Joseph Smith history. Requests were made of all remaining Carthage witnesses to record their observations in writing and forward them to the Church Historian’s Office in Salt Lake City. One of the respondents was one of Joseph Smith’s bodyguards, Stephen Markham, who in June of 1856 wrote a lengthy statement detailing events surrounding the final days of the prophet. Markham described the June 26, 1844, meeting of the Carthage Committee of Safety at the Hamilton Hotel, noting, “There were delegates in the meeting from every state in the Union except three.” Markham made no reference to Freemasons.

9. Woodruff, Journals 5:482 [19 August 1860].
10. Woodruff, Journals 5:483 [19 August 1860]. In all published histories known to the authors the meeting has been placed erroneously on the morning of the 27th of June. (See note 13, below.)
Brigham Young used Markham’s manuscript account (or the version published in the *Deseret News* as part of the Joseph Smith history) at least twice in public discourses delivered before the Saints in Utah. On February 10, 1860, several months before the aforementioned August meeting, President Young asked whether America’s national leaders knew of the plan to murder Joseph Smith. “Were they aware of it at the seat of government?” Without citing specific evidence, he answered in the affirmative. “I have no doubt,” he said, “they as well knew the plans for destroying the Prophet as did those in Carthage or in Warsaw, Illinois. It was planned by some of the leading men of the nation. I have said here once before, to the astonishment of many of our own countrymen, that there was a delegate from each State in the nation when Joseph was killed. These delegates held their council.” In 1867, Brigham Young would again assert, “The mob that collected at Carthage, Illinois, to commit that deed of blood contained a delegation representing every state in the Union. Each has received its blood stain.” Brigham’s numerical misrepresentation (“every state in the Union”) was no doubt affected to heighten the rhetorical impact of his remarks.12

John Taylor, badly injured in the assault on the jail, also responded to a request from the Church Historian’s Office for information about the martyrdom. Taylor’s version of events was completed in August 1856, in consultation with George A. Smith, while the two men were in the eastern United States. They worked together for more than a month, composing “entirely from memory, as we are without documents,” other than Ford’s *History of Illinois*. Taylor responded to assertions about a larger movement to murder the prophet, more than likely prompted by Markham’s letter which had been received by the Church Historian’s Office in June. The underlined passages (added by the authors) stress the caution that John Taylor exercised in assigning blame for the assassination.

It was rumored that a strong political party, numbering in its ranks many of the prominent men of the nation, were engaged in a plot for the overthrow of Joseph Smith, and that the Governor was of the party, and Sharp, Williams, Captain Smith and others were his accomplices, but whether this was the case or not I do not know. It is very certain that a strong political feeling existed against Joseph Smith, and I have reasons to believe that his letters to Henry Clay, were made use of by political parties opposed to Henry Clay, and were the means of that statesman’s defeat. Yet, if such a combination as the one referred to existed, I am not apprised of it.

Taylor intimates (“I have reasons to believe”) he had information concerning Clay’s 1844 presidential bid beyond that generally reported. In all likelihood Taylor’s source was Dr. John Bernhisel, another Carthage witness and Council of Fifty member, who in 1850 was a newly seated territorial representative from Deseret. In early 1850 Bernhisel wrote to Brigham Young of his introductory visits to Washington politicians. Henry Clay, he reported, though cordial, was “still writhing under the

infliction of a certain letter addressed to him by Pres. Joseph Smith in 1844," which had soundly condemned the elder statesman. Dr. Bernhisel was in Washington, D.C., at the time Smith and Taylor were writing and served as a valued resource for information concerning Joseph Smith's last days. Taylor’s remark, and Bernhisel’s confirmation, is one more indicator of the long-term impact of Joseph Smith’s 1844 presidential campaign. There is no suggestion that Taylor suspected Henry Clay (perhaps the most prominent Freemason in the United States at the time) of being behind the assassination of Joseph and Hyrum. Furthermore, Taylor does not identify the “strong political party” rumored to be behind the prophet’s death. Of the men mentioned in Taylor’s account, Governor Ford was a Democrat, Thomas Sharp was nominally Whig although effectively nonpartisan, while Levi Williams was a longtime supporter of Whig leader Henry Clay.13

Based upon the comments of John Taylor and Brigham Young, there was apparently no material evidence available to the First Presidency of the church concerning a nationwide Masonic plot to murder Joseph Smith. Brigham Young simply inserted Freemasons into his 1860 equation in order to strengthen his case against allowing the formation of a non-Mormon Masonic lodge in the Territory of Utah and discourage the growth of Gentile settlements in the region. Significantly, though, this conclusion does not diminish Stephen Markham’s statement that national representatives met at the Hamilton Hotel the night before the assault on Carthage jail, a point returned to in the final section of this chapter.

The Four Men at the Well

Brigham Young’s second claim, that Joseph Smith was “shot by Masons,” also requires clarification. Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin Hill (whose pivotal study, *The Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith*, was first published in 1975 and is still in print today) were unable to identify the men directly responsible for the murders. Not long after the volume was published, Dallin Oaks admitted that the book was an “incomplete history because we do not know who pulled the trigger or who participated in the murders.” Indeed, the two main surviving lists of the Carthage mob were compiled long after the event and were greatly influenced by

13. George A. Smith to Brigham Young, 19 September 1856, quoted in Jesse, “Return to Carthage,” 13. Their admission to a lack of documentary sources is especially significant. John Taylor, in Smith, *History of the Church* 7:116. Thomas Ford’s *History of Illinois* simply states that “a council of officers convened on the morning of the 27th of June.” (Ford, *History of Illinois*, in Smith, *History of the Church*, 7:16) Ford makes no mention of the secret tribunal he participated in at Hamilton Hotel in Carthage the evening before. Initially, *Times & Seasons* 5.12 (1 July 1844), 562–63 simply refers to “another consultation of the officers” on the morning of the 27th. Consequently, the tribunal, together with the Dr. Wall Southwick-Stephen Markham interchange, has been conflated with the “council of officers” and placed in the morning of the 27th in the Joseph Smith History (Journal History, 27 June 1844, 1) and in Smith, *History of the Church* 6:605–6. The erroneous chronology has been perpetuated in Leonard, *Nauvoo*, 388. A comment at the end of Markham’s 20 June 1856 letter to Wilford Woodruff concerning the secret tribunal, that “nothing more particularly passed through the day,” could refer only to the 26th of June and could not apply to the 27th. (See also Roberts, *Comprehensive History* 2:275 and Smith, *History of the Church* 7:16.) Jesse, “Return to Carthage,” 14 is uncertain about the significance of the discrepancy between the Joseph Smith History and Markham versions. John H. Bernhisel to Brigham Young, 21 March 1850, in Journal History, 21 March 1850, 2–6.
the grand jury indictments of the fall and events leading up to the 1845 trial of the accused assassins.\footnote{14}

Another reason the chief gunmen have not been identified with any degree of certainty is that the individuals actually engaged in the shooting deliberately obscured their identities; with one possible exception, they were not among those indicted for the crime. Furthermore, there were no surviving Mormon witnesses to record Joseph Smith’s demise. In the late afternoon of June 27, 1844, there were four Mormons in the upper room of the Carthage jail—Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, both of whom were killed, John Taylor, who was badly wounded and rolled under the bed to protect himself, and Willard Richards, who survived nearly unscathed save for a cut on his ear. Although Richards was the only Mormon left standing at the conclusion of the firefight, he was not in a position to have witnessed Joseph’s final moments.

Richards’s journal provides insight into the extent of his personal knowledge regarding what took place at shortly after five p.m. on June 27, 1844:

All [of us] sprang against the door. The balls whistled up the stairway and in an instant one came through the door. Joseph, Taylor, and Richards sprang to the left and Hyrum back in front of the door. [He] snapped his pistol, when a ball struck him in the left side of his nose. [He] fell back on the floor saying, “I am a dead man.” Joseph discharged his 6 shooters in the entry reaching round the door casing. Discharges continued [to] come in the room. 6 shooter missed fired 2 or 3 times. Taylor sprang to leap from the east window [and] was shot in the window.\footnote{15}

The entry stops abruptly mid-scene. From this point Taylor responds to being shot by rolling under the bed, bleeding but alive. Joseph, still in the room, heads for the window. The panel door is forced open by the assailants, trapping Richards in the corner of the room. While this action providentially saved his life, it also prevented him from witnessing what was taking place in the courtyard. This is in accord with the physical layout of the room and is confirmed by Dr. Barnes, the physician who attended John Taylor’s wounds. According to Barnes, Richards “stood next to the hinges of the door . . . so when they [the mob] crowded the door open it shut him up against the wall and he stood there and did not move till the affair was all over.”\footnote{16}

\footnote{14. Sheriff Jacob Backenstos’s list of “Those active in the massacre at Carthage” was compiled (contrary to many published assertions) in 1846 (Lundwall, \textit{Fate of the Persecutors}, 269–71, Smith, \textit{History of the Church} 7:142–45, Journal History, 29 June 1844, 2). Willard Richards also attempted to compile a “Listing of the mob at Carthage,” (Lundwall, \textit{Fate of the Persecutors}, 271, Smith, \textit{History of the Church} 7:146, Journal History, 29 June 1844, 2). The date of his compilation is uncertain. Richards incorrectly places several of the Nauvoo dissidents at the scene.}

\footnote{15. Willard Richards, Journal, 27 June 1844, quoted in \textit{Old Mormon Nauvoo}, 190.}

\footnote{16. Thomas Barnes to Miranda Barnes Haskett, 6 November 1897, in Mulder and Mortensen, \textit{Among the Mormons}, 151. Huntress, \textit{Murder}, 152–53. Lundwall, \textit{Fate of the Persecutors}, 220–23. Davis, \textit{Authentic Account}, concurs: “Dr. Richards, who was also in the same room with the deceased, escaped uninjured, by retreating at the first onset behind the door, and against the wall.” (p. 23) For an illustration of the interior of the jail showing Richards behind the door, see C. A. A. Christensen’s 1890 painting, “The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church,” BYU Art Museum.}
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Willard Richards’s semi-official recital of that fateful day in June, called “Two Minutes in Jail,” appeared in the Nauvoo Neighbor for July 24, 1844, and was reprinted in the August 1 issue of Times and Seasons. The relevant section reads:

Joseph attempted as the last resort, to leap the same window from whence Mr. Taylor [nearly] fell, when two balls pierced him from the door, and one entered his right breast from without, and he fell outward exclaiming, “O Lord my God!” As his feet went out of the window my head went in, the balls whistling all around. He fell on his left side a dead man. At this instant the cry was raised, “He’s leaped the window,” and the mob on the stairs ran out. I withdrew from the window, thinking it of no use to leap out on a hundred bayonets, then around General Smith’s body.17

In this version of events, Richards presents himself as taking a more active role during the prophet’s final moments than was actually the case. Indeed, it is difficult to envision how the wounded prophet could have fallen out of the window at the same time the corpulent Richards pulled himself back inside, all the while remaining unharmed.18

17. See also Willard Richards to Brigham Young, 30 June 1844, in Smith, History of the Church, 7:147. Note Willard Richards to Reuben Hedlock, 9 July 1844, LDS Archives, Turley, Selected Collections, 1.31, in which he acknowledges that Joseph was shot after he fell from the window.

Richards’s mention of Joseph’s distinctive injuries is more significant. More than likely Richards’s description (and chronology) of the wounds is based upon a post-mortem examination of the body of Joseph Smith, not his actual experience at the jail. On June 30, for instance, Richards wrote to Brigham Young, then still in the east, about Joseph’s murder. He described Joseph’s wounds: “Joseph received four bullets, one in right collar bone, one in right breast, and two others in his back, he leaped from the east window of the front room, and was dead in an instant.” For Richards, then, Joseph Smith was killed as he sat on the window ledge preparing to jump to the ground below. In time this would become the standard LDS view of the murder; the fatal act would be provided with additional moral force by asserting that Joseph’s jump from the window was a deliberate attempt on his part to draw attention away from the other men in the room.19

In any event, it was the bullet that struck Joseph in the right breast that delivered the fatal injury. The indictment prepared by United States Attorney William Elliott for the October 1844 term of Hancock County Circuit Court described Joseph’s mortal wound, “in and upon the right breast of him the said Joseph Smith a little below the right pap of him the said Joseph Smith one mortal wound of the depth of six inches and of the breadth of one inch of which said mortal wound he the said Joseph Smith, then and there instantly died.” One of the witnesses at the 1845 trial similarly testified that he “examined [Joseph’s] wounds. He was shot in the right breast, abdomen and left shoulder. Shot a little below the right pap . . . The wound in the breast was mortal, think it was made with a rifle ball.”20

In all probability, Joseph Smith was shot no more than once—in the thigh—while he remained in the upper room of the jail. His remaining wounds were inflicted by a four-man firing squad. The shot in his right breast, which would have proved fatal, was fired by John C. Elliott (no relation to U.S. Attorney Elliott), known to the Mormons of Nauvoo as a Warsaw-area schoolteacher. No one suspected that Elliott, infamous for his part in the December 1843 kidnapping of Daniel Avery, was an undercover deputy United States marshal from Ohio. Overlooked as a primary suspect during the grand jury proceedings in the fall of 1844 and seldom mentioned during the 1845 trial, Elliott’s role in the murder of Joseph Smith has gone almost unnoticed by later writers.

Through the early 1840s, John C. Elliott worked as a woodcutter contracting with landowners to harvest timber on unimproved land near Hamilton on the Great Miami River north of Cincinnati, Ohio. From 1842–43 he helped Cincinnatian Jacob Burnet settle a major logging claim in Burnet’s favor, leaving him indebted to the young Butler County woodsman. Burnet’s bond to John C. was reinforced by the fact that Elliott’s

19. John Taylor’s account in Doctrine and Covenants 135 has Joseph Smith shot in the window and falling dead to the ground below and then shot again after he was already a lifeless corpse. Gordon B. Hinckley’s Truth Restored (written before he was sustained as president of the church in 1995), indicates, “With bullets bursting through the door, Joseph sprang to the window. Three bullets struck him almost simultaneously, two coming from the door and one from the window. Dying, he fell from the open window, exclaiming, ‘O Lord, my God!’” (78–79). A similar view is presented in Fulness of Times, 283.

20. William Elliott indictment, October 1844, LDS Archives. Jonas Hobart 1845 trial testimony (Sharp, Trial, 2).
uncle, the Reverend Arthur W. Elliott, had been a major contributor to William Henry Harrison’s presidential campaign of 1840. (Burnet was Harrison’s campaign manager.) By mid-1843, however, the younger Elliott was unemployed; his bankruptcy claim (on a debt of $15.38) had been denied. Desperate for work, Elliott’s appointment as a deputy United States marshal was probably made at his uncle’s request.  

In mid-November of 1843, Elliott departed Hamilton by flatboat, caught a steamer in Cincinnati, and disembarked at the Warsaw dock a week later. (Is it coincidence that Elliott departed Ohio shortly after Henry Clay received Joseph Smith’s presidential inquiry?) Elliott boarded with Schrench Freeman of Green Plains, “about four miles and a half south of Warsaw.” His physical appearance was singular. Elliott looked to be a man of some twenty six or eight years; nearly five feet eight inches tall; stoutly built, and athletic. He had on a jeans coat, with large pearl buttons, which was united at the upper part of his breast in a careless manner. The pants were taken from casinett [sic] and were considerably tattered. This dress was covered by an overcoat, cut from a green Mackinaw blanket. When he doffed his white nutria hat, it disclosed a prominent forehead and a rather disordered head of black hair. His countenance was dark; his eyes were hazel and sunk to a considerable depth in his head, over which jutted out his heavy dark eyebrows, which a continual scowl knit closely together, giving him at once a savage and heartless look . . . he flourished a pearl handled dirk knife, which he plied with considerable dexterity in the cavity of his ample mouth, which filled the office of a tooth-pick.  

To make his sudden arrival in Green Plains appear less conspicuous, Elliott posed as a schoolmaster, no easy task for a woodsman more at home in the wilderness than among civil society. Although many suspected his occupation was hardly that of a teacher (more likely, “teaching the young . . . how to shoot,” said one), Elliott’s ties to Jacob Burnet, Hamilton, Ohio, and the 1844 Whig presidential race were never revealed publicly during his Illinois sojourn.

21. Cone, _Biographical and Historical Sketches_, 184. John C. Elliott’s 1842 deposition makes it clear that Elliott was personally acquainted with the Cincinnati businessman: “In August or Sept 1840 I called on Jacob Burnet to leace a part of the land spoken of and he replied that he had given the land to his sun William.” The details of the trial of Jacob Burnet vs. Hall and Lee are in Butler County Chancery Record, Vol. 8, 366–70 [June Term 1845]. John C. Elliott is not mentioned in the summary. All Butler County (Ohio) Records Center. “Rev. A. W. Elliott,” _Hamilton Telegraph_, 14 September 1848. _A History and Biographical Cyclopedia of Butler County, Ohio_, 365. Heizer, _Hamilton in the Making_, 307–8. “Application of John C. Elliott for the benefit of Insolvency,” 23 December 1842. (Butler County (Ohio) Records Center). See also Butler County Common Pleas Record, 20.394 [1842]. Case was “dismissed at the costs of the said applicant.” Deputy appointments were chiefly the result of the political spoils system. Note also Henry Clay to John Woods, 17 August 1842, quoted in _Papers of Henry Clay_ 9:760, and John McLean’s 1847 case, in which he permitted deputy U.S. marshals to cross state lines (Calhoun, _The Lawmen_, 62). Elliott’s presence in Illinois would not have been that unusual.

22. Elliott’s actual arrival in Warsaw and his precise mode of transportation is not recorded. His description is from “Examination of John C. Elliott,” _Nauvoo Neighbor_, 19 February 1845.

Elliott’s account of his involvement in the murder of Joseph Smith was preserved by an acquaintance, Stephen D. Cone, a Hamilton, Ohio, newspaperman and local historian. Cone included Elliott’s remarkable life story in his 1896 volume of biographical sketches of prominent individuals with ties to southwest Ohio. As if to ensure it would not be missed by even casual readers, Elliott’s entry is by far the longest, sandwiched between the lives of Ohio’s governors and congressmen.

Cone recorded that Elliott, as a deputy U.S. marshal, had responded to a “secret national call” to kill the Mormon leader after Smith withdrew support for existing political parties and “asserted that the government was to be conducted by Joe Smith, as the servant of God.” Prior to his departure from Ohio, Elliott was provided with a large bore long rifle made by a local Butler County gunsmith.

On the day of the attack, Elliott said he was “one of the advance assailants,” who, after overpowering the guard, entered the jail. Cone reported that “Joe Smith attempted to escape by jumping from the second story window and fell against the curb of an old fashioned well . . . while in a sitting position, the conspirators dispatched him with four rifle balls through the body. The rifle that John C. Elliott carried . . . was the largest bore in the attacking party. Upon examination of Smith’s body it was found that John C. Elliott had fired the fatal shot.” Elliott took the gun with him when he returned to Ohio in 1850. The rifle remained in the possession of a Hamilton, Ohio, family through the late 1890s. It has since disappeared.

Elliott’s highly placed political connections, together with his considerable native ability, enabled him to elude justice. Elliott remained in hiding for several years following the Carthage incident and only returned to his home near Hamilton, Ohio, in late 1849. During the 1850s Elliott served as Butler County deputy sheriff, Hamilton City marshal, and a deputy U.S. marshal for Ohio’s Southern District. It was in this last capacity that Elliott became one of the principal defendants in a fugitive slave case brought before the United States Supreme Court in 1857. At the outbreak of the Civil War, forty-four-year-old Elliott enlisted as a private in the Ohio Volunteers. Plagued by poor health throughout his military service, he died of a ruptured blood vessel during a company wrestling match in Taylorsville, Kentucky.

It remains unclear as to why Elliott—a backwoodsman from Hamilton, Ohio—would have been chosen to spearhead the assassination of the Mormon prophet in western Illinois. Certainly there were other men “perfectly devoid of fear” who would have served just as well. One potentially important fact in this regard is that Laomi Rigdon, brother of Mormon leader Sidney Rigdon, was a prominent physician from Hamilton, Ohio, and, moreover, a noted southwest Ohio Whig. (See Chapter One.) Furthermore, Anthony Howard Dunlevy, of Lebanon, Ohio, a legal partner of Supreme Court justice (and presidential hopeful) John McLean as well as Laomi and Sidney Rigdon’s brother-in-law, was in Hancock County at the time of Joseph Smith’s murder. Dunlevy’s presence in Illinois in June of 1844 makes absolutely no sense unless it had something to do with the demise of the Mormon prophet.

24. Cone, Biographical and Historical Sketches, 184–85, 188.
It should also be noted that Elliott was not the only person engaged in the murders at Carthage with ties to southwest Ohio. Late in life Warsaw militiaman William Chittenden, one of the “Chittenden boys” and an advance assailant at the jail, admitted he “was present when Smith, the Mormon prophet, was killed. He knew the men who fired the fatal shots—there were four of them.” The young Chittenden, coincidentally, was born and raised in Oxford, Ohio, where his father, Abraham, was the founding master of the Oxford Masonic Lodge. Oxford was just five miles from Darrtown, the boyhood home of John C. Elliott. Both would have been about 16–17 years old when the Chittenden family moved to the Illinois frontier in 1833. It is possible the two men knew each other as youths and renewed their acquaintance in Warsaw. True to the oath of silence sworn by the assailants, Chittenden named no names.26

At least two of the other men in the four-man firing squad can be identified with certainty. James Belton, a member of the Warsaw Rifle Company under Captain Jacob C. Davis, left Illinois shortly after the murder of Joseph Smith and made his home in Mount Airy, North Carolina. In 1898, when he was near death, Belton called a Methodist pastor to his bedside. “There is something I want to tell you, something I have had on my conscience a long time,” he said. “I am going to die, and I want to make a full confession before I pass on.” Significantly, Belton presents the identical scenario as put forward by Elliott and Cone, namely that the same men who entered the jail also formed the four-man firing squad near the well curb and were responsible for Joseph Smith’s death.

Belton admitted that he and “three other men murdered Joseph Smith in Carthage, Ill., in 1844.” About a dozen men met in Carthage the night before, he said, and “pledged that they would neither eat nor sleep until Smith was dead.” They had planned to murder Smith in jail, “but somehow the man escaped by jumping through a window . . . the blow stunned him so he lay on the ground until the four men,” including Belton, “ran around to where he was.” Once in position, the men shot the prophet propped against the well curb.27

William Vorhees was the third gunman at the well. Like Elliott and Belton, Vorhees participated in the initial assault on the jail but was wounded in the shoulder by Joseph Smith during the altercation on the second-story landing. Shortly after the murders Jeremiah Willey, a Mormon resident of Warsaw (who lived “on Mr. Pinchback’s Farm,” where the Warsaw militiamen regrouped following their assault on the jail) was told that Vorhees “shot [Joseph Smith] from outside of the prison.” After Joseph fell from the window, Vorhees turned the prophet over, cursed, and struck him as he lay against the well curb. “Vorus then left him,” the informant said,

26. Gregg, History of Hancock County, 659.
27. “Man Who Helped Kill Mormon Head In 1844 Confessed in Mount Airy,” Mount Airy News, 24 February 1927. This account concludes, somewhat inaccurately, “and one of the number shot him through the head and killed him.” An abbreviated version of Belton’s account consonant with the traditional LDS view of the murder relates that “as the Mormon leader leaped out of a window, [the mob] riddled his body with bullets.” (“Death Bed Story Reveals Murderer of Prophet,” Deseret News, 18 February 1927 and “Anachronisms, Et Cetera,” Saints’ Herald, 5 October 1946, 19). Belton’s militia service record can be found with Militia records, Chicago Historical Society. Lundwall, Fate of the Persecutors, 305–6, contains a mythical rendering of Belton’s later life.
after which “there were more guns fired at him.” Vorhees later received a “fine suit of broad cloth” from the people of Green Plains and Warsaw “for [his] bravery.” This version of events is confirmed by William Daniels’s July 4 affidavit and his grand jury testimony of October 1844 (before his account was “amplified” by Lyman O. Littlefield), in which he recalled that when Joseph “fell near the well” one of the men “went and raised him up” and cursed the prophet. “They then shot him.”

The identity of the fourth gunman is less certain. Two possible candidates stand out. One was Jacob C. Davis (mentioned above), a Democratic state legislator and captain of the Warsaw Rifle Company. Although Davis later claimed he had “finished” Joseph Smith, it is not certain if his remark was intended to refer to his personal involvement or simply to the actions of the men under his command (i.e. Belton). Certainly Davis’s position as the leader of a rifle company presupposes considerable skill with firearms. He would have been a logical choice to ensure that the job was done. If Davis was indeed one of the four gunmen at the well (and this is by no means certain), he was the only one who joined the Masonic fraternity; Davis was raised to the Master Mason degree following his indictment by the October 1844 grand jury.

Another candidate for the fourth man at the well is William N. Grover, captain of the Warsaw Cadets. Like Davis, he was indicted for the murder of Joseph Smith in the fall of 1844. During the 1845 trial, a witness (whose testimony would later be thrown out of court) claimed that Grover had said “he had killed Old Jo.” With the charges against Davis and Grover dropped for “lack of legal evidence,” the likelihood of establishing with any degree of certainty which of the two was indeed the fourth gunman at the well remains problematic.

Furthermore, as part of the effort to protect the men in the firing squad from discovery, several conspirators and their associates—before the 1845 trial, in perjured trial testimony, and even decades later—were insistent in their claims that Joseph Smith was not shot after he fell from the window. Others argued that if he was shot by the well, the “semi-barbarous” Missourians were to blame.

G. T. M. Davis, for example, wrote the following account of Joseph Smith’s last moments in his July 1844 pamphlet An Authentic Account of the Massacre of Joseph Smith:

Upon reaching the window and throwing aside the curtain, and perceiving unexpectedly, a large armed force in disguise at the end of the building, upon the ground, he exclaimed, “Oh! My God,” when a number of muskets were, with the rapidity of

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28. William Daniels, October 1844 grand jury testimony, P13, f41, Community of Christ, Archives (wounded in shoulder). Jeremiah Willey statement reporting a conversation with Henry Mathias on 27 June 1844, 13 August 1844. Each of these accounts provides a slightly different rendition of what Vorhees said to Joseph as he lay by the well. See also Turley, Victims.
29. Eliza Jane Graham, 1845 trial testimony (Sharp, Trial, 20).
30. On Jacob C. Davis, see Eliza Jane Graham, 1845 trial testimony (Sharp, Trial, 18–21). George Walker, 1845 trial testimony, said he “heard [Davis] say, he’d be d——d if he was going to kill men confined in prison.” (Sharp, Trial, 4). Which Davis is to be believed?
thought, discharged at the unfortunate wretch, five or six of which took effect. He fell head forward to the earth, and was dead, as I am informed by one who examined him immediately on falling, when he struck the ground. He was wounded in the breast by five or six different shots, either of which would, in all human probability, have proved fatal.

Later in the booklet Davis taunted his readers. “The expectations of the public, may possibly, anticipate a disclosure of the names of the persons connected with the destruction of the Smiths, and the extent to which the citizens, generally, were privy to the affair. To say that I do not know any who participated in the attack, would not be true. But the circumstances under which I came in possession of that knowledge, were of that nature, that no inducement on earth, could prompt, or coerce me, to divulge their names.”

During the 1845 trial, Thomas Dixon testified for the prosecution that he “did not see [Joseph] set up by the well curb. He set himself up. Did not see any strange miraculous light, or four men shoot Smith, or any one paralyzed.” Similarly, Thomas R. Griffiths, who years later discovered the June 27, 1844, coroner’s inquest, recalled that he “was eighteen years old when the Smiths were killed, and witnessed the tragedy, he being a member of the old Carthage Greys. He says Smith was not shot at after he fell from the jail window.”

One of the most influential articles on the murder of the Mormon prophet was written more than two decades after the event by John Hay, the son of Charles Hay, Warsaw militia surgeon and former Kentucky neighbor of Henry Clay. The younger Hay, who served as secretary to Abraham Lincoln and later became his biographer, was just seven years old at the time of Joseph Smith’s death. Following a visit to his hometown of Warsaw in 1869, where he interviewed some of the surviving assailants and examined trial documents in the Carthage courthouse, Hay composed his own version of events surrounding the death of the first Mormon prophet for the Boston literary magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*. Called “The Mormon Prophet’s Tragedy,” Hay’s description of Joseph’s final moments includes the scene at the well. “With his last dying energies he gathered himself up, and leaned in a sitting posture against the rude stone well-curb.” In place of the selectmen from the Warsaw militia, however, Hay inserts a “squad of Missourians who were standing by the fence.” These men “leveled their pieces at him, and, before they could see him again for the smoke they made, Joe Smith was dead.” Hay’s critical substitution of actors in this drama (keeping in mind that his effort was more on the level of popular literature than serious history) effectively deflected blame away from the actual participants in the assault on the jail, many of whom at the time of his writing were still living in Hancock County. Hay’s account also served to reinforce the popularly held belief that the Missourians were the prime movers behind the conspiracy to murder the Mormon prophet.35

In 1886 Jason H. Sherman, then an attorney in upstate New York, published his reminiscences. An acknowledged participant in the attack on Carthage jail, Sherman stressed, “But it is not true, as was sometimes reported, that his assailants leaned his body up against the curb and made it a target. * * *” (Asterisks, signifying missing words, are in the original.) Likewise, in 1890 Hancock historian Thomas Gregg (the same individual who in 1844 was campaigning for Henry Clay in Rock Island, Illinois,) disputed the claim that a firing squad shot the prophet as he was propped up by the well curb. “This, from reliable information, we believe was not the case.” Gregg’s unnamed source was identified only by his initials, J. H. S., “a highly intelligent gentleman who was a resident of Carthage at that time and well-known in the county.” That man was, of course, Jason H. Sherman. Even in their old age Sherman and Gregg were intent upon keeping the identity of the assailants a secret.36

At the end of the century, by which time most of the participants had passed away, the scene at the well could go unmentioned. William R. Hamilton, son of Artois Hamilton (the proprietor of Carthage’s main hotel), perhaps the youngest member of the Carthage Greys in 1844, and one of the last surviving eyewitnesses, concluded a 1902 recounting of events at Carthage with these telling words: “There are many facts and names of persons connected with that tragedy, which are now lost to the world—where it seems best to let them remain.” Hamilton’s account of the assassination makes no mention of a firing squad.37

Clay’s Men

“There is more truth whispered ‘round Hal, than your philosophy ever dreamed of;”

appended to “The Murders at Carthage,” Nauvoo Neighbor, October 30, 184438

"The Murders at Carthage” reported on the October indictments of nine Hancock County men for the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith the previous June. The cryptic epigram appended to the notice is a reference to Henry Clay, who, following his successful negotiations for the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, became popularly known as Prince Hal, named after a character in Shakespeare’s play Henry IV.

The unimaginable “truth” alluded to in this verse was recognition that Joseph Smith’s assassination was looked upon favorably by Clay and his political managers. Numerous editorials in the Mormon press chastised Henry Clay (and the Whigs generally) for not condemning the Carthage affair and insisting that the men

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37. William R. Hamilton to Foster Walker, 24 December 1902, Martin Collection, Regional Archives, Western Illinois University.
responsible be brought to justice. Notably, Clay himself never publicly commented on the death of his fellow presidential candidate, nor did he offer condolences to the Saints on their loss. Clay’s silence meant that he was willing to throw away the Mormon vote and with it the potential to carry the state of Illinois for the Whigs. With the presidential election just days away, this article strikes once more at the Whig leader, reminding its readers that the Latter-day Saints had little reason to trust Clay’s leadership and should support instead the Democratic candidate, James K. Polk.

Although some knew that the conspiracy to murder Joseph Smith went beyond the local level, few individuals, in Hancock County or elsewhere, had the whole picture. John C. Elliott, the main shooter at Carthage jail, for example, acknowledged that he went to western Illinois from Ohio in response to a “secret national call.” While it is likely that he knew who was responsible, Elliott failed to name the men behind the appeal. Joseph Smith’s bodyguard, Stephen Markham, recalled that when he broke up the secret tribunal being held at the Hamilton Hotel in Carthage the night before Joseph’s murder, the minutes book revealed “there were delegates in the meeting from every state in the Union except three.” Since the volume was in his possession only for a short time, Markham does not supply a list of those present. On the day of the assault, Hancock County Sheriff Minor R. Deming warned the governor that the Whigs were planning to take the life of Joseph Smith while he remained in jail. In the weeks following the assassination, Deming continued to insist (both privately and in public) that the Whigs were also behind the cover-up and protection of those engaged in the murder. Some months later, Mormon Almon C. Babbitt informed the Illinois legislature that the press used to publish the Nauvoo Expositor had been “established for political purposes by the Whigs.” Perhaps fearing possible repercussions if they spoke more freely, neither informant named names.

Because the men engaged in the conspiracy to murder Joseph Smith were careful to destroy any written documentation that might tie them to the crime, the task becomes that of identifying what significant linkages existed between the men involved in the murder of Joseph Smith and the Whig hierarchy in Illinois. The sociogram on the following page clarifies these relationships.

The sociogram highlights the fact that the major Illinois players engaged in the assassination conspiracy and cover-up—Abraham Jonas, Orville Hickman Browning, G. T. M. Davis, and John J. Hardin—had direct ties to Henry Clay as well as the Mormon leadership at Nauvoo, and were among Henry Clay’s chief political managers in the Illinois campaign.

Joseph Smith–Abraham Jonas–Henry Clay

Beginning with his rise to the position of grand master of the Kentucky Lodge in the 1820s and continuing through to his election to the Illinois state legislature in 1842, Abraham Jonas maintained a long-standing personal and political relationship with Henry Clay. Jonas was responsible for the successful establishment of a Mormon Masonic Lodge at Nauvoo and made Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon “masons at sight.” Three potential links to the murder conspiracy have been identified:

Link 1  Jonas was a member of the Whig Central Committee for Illinois’s Fifth District.
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Link 2: Jonas supplied the Nauvoo dissidents with the press used to print the *Expositor*. The publication and subsequent destruction of the *Expositor* press led directly to Joseph Smith’s death less than three weeks later.

Link 3: Jonas was delegated by Governor Thomas Ford to act as a liaison with the Mormons at Nauvoo following the murders.

Joseph Smith–Orville Hickman Browning–Henry Clay

O. H. Browning had a lengthy personal and professional relationship with Joseph Smith, John J. Hardin, and Archibald and Wesley Williams, cousins of militia leader Colonel Levi Williams. Browning’s cousin, Jonathan Browning, converted to Mormonism and became a prominent Nauvoo (and later Utah) gunsmith. At least four significant links have been identified:

Link 1: O. H. Browning targeted the Latter-day Saints as a potential Whig political asset and promoted efforts to obtain the Mormon vote for Henry Clay.

Link 2: O. H. Browning met secretly with Henry Clay in late July 1844.

Link 3: O. H. Browning (together with E. D. Baker) was responsible for ensuring that Levi Williams and Thomas Sharp were released from custody, even though the two men were charged with murder.

Link 4: O. H. Browning represented the men accused of the murder of Joseph Smith.

Browning reportedly withdrew his candidacy in the 1844 U.S. Senate race on account of poor health. Shortly after the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Browning departed (in late June or early July) for the Blue Lick Salt Springs of northern Kentucky in order to recuperate from his illness and remained there through early August. How much Browning’s Kentucky sojourn was for health reasons (the week-long journey from Illinois to Kentucky would have been perilous in itself) and how much was because of politics is hard to say. Certainly both objectives came into play.

While in Kentucky, Browning did his best to keep his presence from becoming public knowledge. Local newspapers, eager for news about the Mormon War, made no mention of his return. Furthermore, Browning’s presence at political rallies would have strengthened Henry Clay’s claims that he could win Illinois in November, yet Browning declined all invitations to address Whig gatherings.

Henry Clay visited the Blue Lick Springs, about a day’s journey northward from his Ashland estate near Lexington, in late July. The two men spoke privately for three hours. At the conclusion of the interview Browning wrote to his wife, Eliza, who had stayed behind in Illinois. “Mr. Clay, arrived here last evening,” Browning informed her on July 24. “I was introduced to him this morning. We took a walk after breakfast, and had a conversation of three hours. I was never more charmed with a man. So plain, so unaffectedly kind, so dignified, so unaustentatious, so simple in his manners and conversation, that he is irresistibly fascinating. When I was introduced to him he said, ‘Ah Mr. Browning, I am very happy to meet you. You are of Quincy, Ills. You were the Whig candidate for Congress there last year. I think you are the brother in law of Capt O’Bannon.’” Clay, Browning marveled, “seemed to know as much
about me as an old acquaintance.” Browning promised to visit Clay again the following week before returning to Illinois.

Precisely what the two Whigs discussed during their private meetings in July of 1844 is not known. With the exception of Browning’s letter to his wife, what written evidence there once was, if any, has long since disappeared. There can be no doubt, however, that the two men spoke about politics and the upcoming presidential election. At the very end of his July 1844 letter to Eliza, Browning commented that “the whigs are thoroughly awake in this state, and there is no doubt about Judge Owsley’s [August] election [to Kentucky’s governorship], tho his majority will not be as great as Mr. Clay’s [in November].” How much Henry Clay knew about the Illinois conspiracy to murder Joseph Smith can only be guessed at. It is certain, at the very least, that Clay was well informed of political events transpiring on the Illinois frontier. Browning’s comments during his visit to Kentucky are sufficient evidence of this, not to mention Clay’s decades-long friendship with Abraham Jonas, the part played by Clay’s stepnephew John J. Hardin in his 1844 presidential campaign, and Clay’s comment to Joseph Smith (in late 1843) that he had “viewed with lively interest the progress of the Latter-day Saints.”

Furthermore, Clay’s response to his receipt of G. T. M. Davis’s An Authentic Account of the Murder of Joseph Smith offers confirmation that he followed Davis’s advice that the Whigs should “pass the Mormons by sub silentio” to the letter. Clay marked his return correspondence to Davis “Private” and wrote simply, “I received your favor.” Clay had no desire to be linked with or even comment on the Mormon murders.

Joseph Smith–George T. M. Davis–Henry Clay

Davis was Henry Clay’s legal representative in Alton, Illinois, and a regular correspondent of John J. Hardin. At least four significant links can be identified:

**Link 1:** Davis managed the Illinois Whig newspaper campaign aimed at convincing Joseph Smith (and his followers) to vote Whig in the upcoming presidential election.

**Link 2:** Davis attended the Whig National Convention in Baltimore in May 1844, where he met with Horace Greeley and other national Whig leaders.

**Link 3:** Davis participated in a secret meeting of national political delegates at the Hamilton Hotel in Carthage, Illinois, on the night of June 26, 1844.

**Link 4:** Davis wrote his Authentic Account in an effort to disprove claims of Whig involvement in the murder of Joseph Smith, as well as to absolve Democratic

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governor Ford of any complicity in the affair. Copies of the booklet were sent to Henry Clay and Horace Greeley, among others.

Joseph Smith–John J. Hardin–Henry Clay
Hardin was Henry Clay’s stepnephew. Hardin and Henry Clay’s brother, Porter Clay, both resided in Jacksonville, Illinois.

Link 1: As the only Illinois Whig in the U.S. Congress from 1843 to 1845, Hardin organized and oversaw Henry Clay’s Illinois campaign.

Link 2: Hardin was present at the 1844 national Whig convention in Baltimore.

Link 3: Hardin was partly responsible for ensuring that Levi Williams and Thomas Sharp were released from custody even though the two men were charged with Joseph Smith’s murder.

Link 4: Hardin was delegated by Governor Thomas Ford to oversee military operations in Hancock County in the fall of 1844 and to negotiate the Mormon departure from the state in 1846.

Below the state-level managers were the local operatives, men who were directly engaged on the ground. Of that group, John C. Elliott and Levi Williams were by far the most important. Colonel Levi Williams orchestrated the main assault on the Carthage jail, and undercover Deputy U. S. Marshal Elliott was the leader of the men who actually stormed the jail and was at the head of the four-man firing squad that shot the Mormon prophet. Each drew upon the resources of Hancock County’s Anti-Mormon Party and the local militia organization. As far as is known at present, neither had a personal relationship with Henry Clay, although together they had significant ties to Illinois and Ohio Whig leaders:

Levi Williams–Abraham Jonas–Henry Clay
Levi Williams–Wesley Williams–O. H. Browning–Henry Clay
John C. Elliott–Jacob Burnet–Henry Clay
John C. Elliott–Levi Williams–Abraham Jonas–Henry Clay

From the perspective provided by these documented linkages, the initial decision to assassinate Joseph Smith was more than likely made by Whig political managers in Illinois, quite possibly at the suggestion of Abraham Jonas, O. H. Browning, or G. T. M. Davis. To what extent national Whig leaders, such as John J. Hardin, Jacob Burnet, or Henry Clay were aware of the Illinois plot to assassinate Joseph Smith remains an open question.

The sociogram does not assist in answering some additional questions about certain key players within the conspiracy. For example, based on available evidence, only two Democrats with state-level connections—Governor Thomas Ford and legislator Jacob C. Davis—are identified as having significant roles in the murders. It is quite likely that other prominent Democrats also assisted in the plan to kill Joseph Smith. For example, what did Thomas Benton, a Democrat from
Missouri and longtime Mormon opponent, have to do with the murder? Did Stephen A. Douglas, one-time friend of Joseph Smith, take an active part in the conspiracy? Their involvement, although suspected, remains unclear.41

What was Sidney Rigdon’s contribution to the assassination plot? Rigdon certainly had a motive (recall Joseph Smith’s infatuation with his daughter, Nancy) and he had opportunity. Rigdon was in a position to view the goings-on at Nauvoo at close range, and had all the necessary ties to the anti-Mormons of Hancock County as well as the Whig leadership in Ohio. (Keep in mind that Rigdon’s brother-in-law, Anthony Howard Dunlevy, was a legal partner of Judge John McLean, then presiding over the U.S. Circuit Court in Springfield, and was himself present in Hancock County at the time Joseph Smith was murdered.) Not to mention that Rigdon was Joseph Smith’s vice-presidential running mate. The disturbing fact that there is no record of Rigdon ever having made a campaign speech in support of Joseph Smith is telling. Barring the discovery of implicating documentation, however, Rigdon’s place in the larger drama must remain somewhere left of center stage. It cannot be forgotten that Rigdon’s mental health was very poor during this period, and the likelihood that he would be trusted with an insider’s knowledge of (and involvement in) the grand conspiracy is quite small.

Due to a lack of confirming documentary evidence, some potentially critical players are not included in the sociogram. What of Dr. William Gano Goforth, the Clay Whig who attended the state political convention in Nauvoo and later joined the Mormon church? Or William H. Roosevelt, the Warsaw Whig (and scion of the New York Roosevelt family) who was instrumental in spreading false rumors about the assault on the jail? Who were their primary contacts within the Whig organization? And what about Sylvester Emmons, non-Mormon editor of the Nauvoo Expositor? What was his relationship, if any, to the larger conspiracy?

And then there is the matter of Dr. Wall Southwick, who is perhaps the most enigmatic character in this entire drama. When “Dr. Southwick” first makes his appearance in our story he presents himself as the forlorn survivor of a steamboat collision, bereft of money and possessions. He writes to the prophet Joseph for assistance from Centerville, Kentucky, a few short miles from Henry Clay’s Ashland estate. Once in Illinois Southwick actively promotes Joseph Smith’s plans to establish a Mormon kingdom in Texas, gains valuable intelligence about military preparations against the Mormons, and becomes on intimate terms with Governor Ford. Southwick is present at the star chamber meeting in Carthage the night before the murders, retrieves the secretary’s minutes book detailing the proceedings (it was never passed on to Stephen Markham as promised), and in the weeks following attempts to quash William Daniel’s implicating testimony with the offer of a large cash bribe. Southwick then simply disappears. Since his name appears nowhere in the U.S. census records for 1840 or 1850 and is absent from available Southwick genealogies, it is

41. In 1846 Douglas wrote to John J. Hardin, who had already left for the Mexican War, “Let [Mormons] leave in peace.” Stephen A. Douglas to John J. Hardin, 2 May 1846, Hardin Papers, Chicago Historical Society, quoted in Cox, Hardin, 145. William Law recalled that Douglas was present at least one of the Hancock County anti-Mormon meetings in June of 1844. (Interview, in Cook, William Law, 126). This has not been confirmed.
uncertain if “Wall Southwick” is the name of an actual person. Was he, like John C. Elliott, working undercover? If so, for whom was he working? And what became of the incriminating and potentially explosive minutes book?42

In the end, the question confronting the reader of Junius and Joseph is whether the murder of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith was simply the outcome of circumstances and events that led inexorably and inevitably to his death or if his assassination was the result of an active conspiracy that extended well beyond the state of Illinois. The presence of undercover Deputy U.S. Marshal John C. Elliott at Carthage, together with the political meeting at the Hamilton Hotel in Carthage the night before the murders, attended by representatives from nearly every state in the Union, supports the view that Joseph Smith’s murder was a premeditated action motivated by forces (and individuals) far beyond the western Illinois prairie. Even so, the extent to which national political leaders (both Whig and Democrat) were directly engaged in the Carthage affair may never be known for certain.

42. On Southwick, see Van Wagenen, The Texas Republic, 47, 49, 50, 73, 97, note 40. Wall Southwick to Joseph Smith, 1 June 1844, in Warsaw Signal, 31 July 1844. Stephen Markham to Wilford Woodruff, 20 June 1856, LDS Archives. On Southwick’s offer of a bribe to Daniels to “clear out,” see Daniels’s cross-examination during the 1845 trial, in Sharp, Trial, 12-13.