

Death on a Thursday Afternoon: The Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith June 27, 1844



“Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in Carthage Jail,” Gary Smith, Museum of Church History and Art

On a sultry Thursday afternoon in 1844, an armed body of men rushed Carthage Jail in Hancock County, Illinois (the western frontier of the United States at the time). In a few minutes of “scuffling, shouts, and shots,” they killed the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Patriarch Hyrum Smith, President and Associate President of the Church (Davis Bitton, *The Martyrdom Remembered: A One-Hundred-Fifty-Year Perspective on the Assassination of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1994], xvi).

Latter-day Saints were shocked and stunned by the events of 27 June 1844. Although Joseph and Hyrum’s enemies may have felt justified in this extralegal act, other non-Mormons were horrified by these cold-blooded murders. Anti-Mormons in Hancock County were surprised by the national reaction that decried their cold, heartless, and calculated lawless act.

The events of 27 June continue to cast a long shadow upon the institutional memory of the Church and the Smith family’s personal story. It has been a day remembered, recalled, and discussed by scholars, historians, and members of the Church trying to understand what happened and, most importantly, why it happened.

Looking back at the martyrdom events from the perspective of the twenty-first century, we should not be altogether surprised that Joseph and Hyrum were martyred. The Prophet's ministry was punctuated with moments of scorn and ridicule (1820), harassment and opposition (1827–30), and persecution and prosecutions (1830–44), including imprisonment (1838–39). In Illinois, the Prophet and Patriarch faced their greatest threat: a combination of hostile outsiders and former insiders who were concerned about the growing number of Saints and the power and influence Joseph and Hyrum seemed to have among them.

When prominent dissidents published a vicious attack upon the Church and its leaders via the *Nauvoo Expositor*, Joseph Smith, as mayor, asked the city council to declare the paper a public nuisance. He, along with many others, feared the paper would further enrage the anti-Mormon population in western Illinois—possibly beginning a civil war in which the Latter-day Saints would certainly suffer.

Eventually, Joseph and Hyrum Smith, along with other members of the city council, were charged with riot for this action—one they felt was justified under a broad interpretation of the Nauvoo Charter. They were ordered to appear before the county official in Carthage, one of the centers of anti-Mormon activity. Joseph believed his enemies wanted him in Carthage, away from Nauvoo, to murder him and was unsure whether he would surrender, given the volatile situation existing in Hancock County. However, Joseph and Hyrum eventually decided to go to Carthage after Governor Ford gave them assurances that they would receive a fair trial and that he would ensure their safety while in Carthage.

Everyone seems to have known that Joseph and Hyrum, along with the members of the city council, would be set free. In Carthage, the entire group was released after posting a \$5,000 bail.

However, Joseph and Hyrum's enemies planned to keep them from going back to Nauvoo. Before the Prophet and Patriarch could leave Carthage, they were charged with a more serious crime, treason—a capital crime with no options for posting bail. As a result, through this legal maneuver, Joseph and Hyrum were detained in Carthage, giving their enemies the opportunity to assassinate them. Willard Richards and John Taylor, two of the Twelve, decided to stay with Joseph and Hyrum, even though they had not been charged with treason themselves.

During their incarceration, the party was moved to the jailor's bedroom on the second floor in the jail to make them more comfortable. They were in this second-floor room when the armed men attacked the jail.



The jailor's bedroom on the second floor of the Carthage Jail, photograph by Val Brinkerhoff, 2004

It was some time after five o'clock when a large band of men, with painted faces to hide their identities, swarmed the jail. No resistance was given from the guards. One group of men entered the main door of the sandstone building on the south side and began to rush up the stairs to where Joseph, Hyrum, Willard, and John being held.



The main entrance to the Carthage Jail, photograph by Val Brinkerhoff, 2004

Joseph, Hyrum, Willard, and John rushed to the door, flinging it shut in an attempt to prevent the armed body from entering. The landing soon filled with men bearing arms, some with fixed bayonets.



A view of the jailor's bedroom door (left), the second floor landing, and the stairway leading down to the front door, photograph by Val Brinkerhoff, 2004

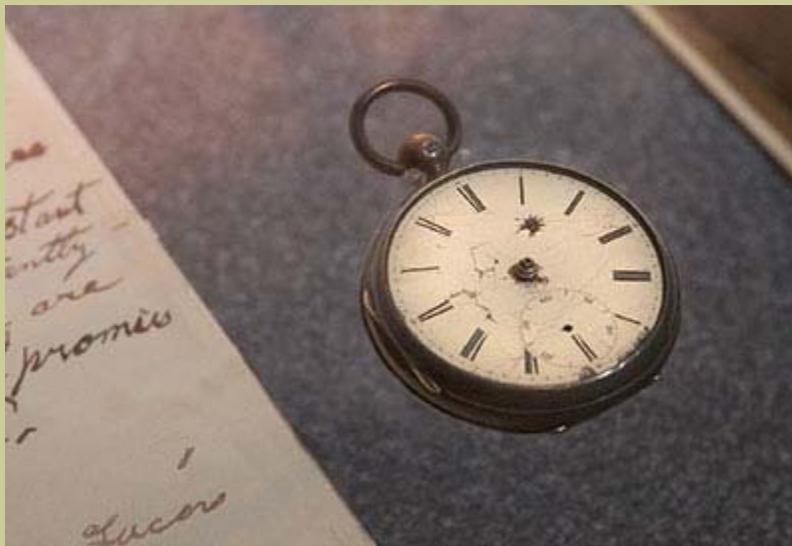


A bullet hole in the bedroom door of the jail, photograph by Val Brinkerhoff, 2004

At the time of the onslaught, the prisoners had only a couple of walking sticks and pistols to protect themselves. Hyrum was shot first. Joseph fired into the crowd through the open door, hoping to keep them at bay. However, there was only a moment of pause in the attack before it continued, increasing its deadly fire.



When the mob stormed Carthage Jail, Joseph was carrying a pepperbox pistol, and Hyrum was carrying a single-barrel pistol, photograph by Val Brinkerhoff, 2004

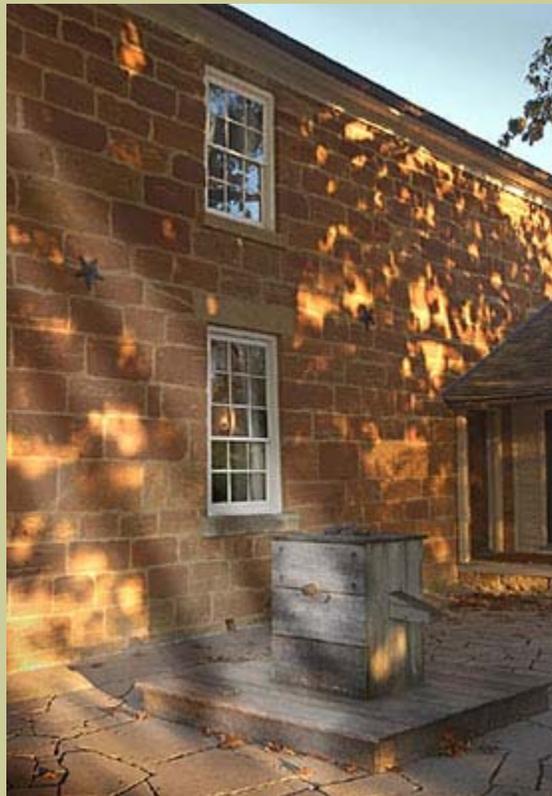


John Taylor's pocket watch, damaged during the attack on the jail in 1844, photograph by Val Brinkerhoff, 2004

During the melee, John Taylor attempted to escape through one of the bedroom's windows. He was hit and fell back inside the room.



View from second-floor window where Joseph Smith fell, photograph by Val Brinkerhoff, 2004



A view of Carthage Jail with a view of the reconstructed well below the second-floor window where Joseph and Hyrum were being held, photograph by Val Brinkerhoff, 2004

Joseph went to the same window—in what was most likely an attempt to draw fire away from his friends—and was shot. He fell through the window, exclaiming, “Oh Lord my God!”

As the Prophet fell to the ground, the armed party inside rushed back down the stairs and toward the well, where Joseph lay. He was dead; the deed was done. Someone then shouted, “The Mormons are coming!” causing the group to disperse quickly.

An eerie silence replaced the noise, gunshots, and yelling. Eventually, the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum were taken to the Hamilton House, a hotel where Joseph and Hyrum had met Governor Ford just a few nights before. Here, the mortal remains of the Prophet and Patriarch were cleaned and placed into rough oak caskets. On the following day, 28 June, Artois Hamilton, the owner of the Hamilton House, and Samuel H. Smith, Joseph and Hyrum’s younger brother, brought the bodies back to Nauvoo in two wagons.

Saints gathered along the road to pay respects to their fallen leaders as the wagons slowly made their way back to the people and the city both men loved so much. The wagons stopped outside the Mansion House, Joseph’s home. Final preparations were made for a public viewing, which was held on 29 June. Some ten thousand to twenty thousand people walked through the Mansion House to see Joseph and Hyrum before their burial.

