

Scholar discusses Joseph Smith's 1844 presidential election campaign

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Susan Easton Black, in lecture on U.S. presidential campaign of Joseph Smith, identifies Church leaders selected as campaigners, including Brigham Young, left, and the Prophet's brother, William Smith.

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In a season when election news is dominating the headlines, Susan Easton Black regaled a Church History Museum audience on Sept. 15 with an account of the Prophet Joseph Smith's U.S. presidential campaign of 172 years ago.

Sister Black, retired professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University, appeared with her husband, George Durrant, a retired

BYU professor and popular speaker and writer in his own right on gospel topics. He briefly greeted and entertained the audience before turning the rest of the time over to his wife.

The couple drew such a large crowd that organizers of this, the latest in the Evenings at the Museum Lecture Series, were obliged to set up extra seats on the stage to accommodate some of the audience members who were standing in the aisles or outside the doors of the museum's downstairs auditorium.

"I sure wish Joseph Smith were running [for president] in 2016," Sister Black exclaimed near the beginning of her remarks. "He'd get my vote."

When the Prophet ran for president in 1844, there were 26 states in the union and two major political parties: Whig and Democrat, Sister Black said by way of background.

Prominent national issues included manifest destiny — the belief that the United States should extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean — slavery and states' rights.

"An issue that was rearing its head was Mormonism," she said. "It will not rise to a bigger issue until the 1850s, but there was a concern about what had happened in Missouri and now with the Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo."

Presidential hopefuls included Henry Clay, the Whig candidate, and James K. Polk, the Democratic Party candidate who would ultimately prevail.

Illinois had been a battleground state in 1840 and the Latter-day Saints thought it might be again in 1844.

Unlike Church practice today, in those days, Joseph Smith, mayor of Nauvoo as well as president of the Church, would let his people know how he

intended to vote, and they would vote with him, Sister Black said. With Illinois being a battleground state, the Prophet felt he could name the next president, she said, and he wrote a letter to each of the presidential candidates asking each man whether he, if elected president, would help the Mormons get the lands back that they lost when they were driven from Missouri. Two responded, and neither would commit to that action.

In January 1844, at his red brick store in Nauvoo, Joseph called a political meeting of Church leaders. In the discussion, the idea emerged of putting forward a dark horse candidate whom the Latter-day Saints could vote for in good conscience. Apostle Willard Richards said he knew of only one man who, if elected, would do everything in his power to get the Missouri lands back for the Saints, and that man was “General Joseph Smith,” the title reflecting Joseph’s leadership of the Nauvoo Legion.

Sister Black outlined Joseph’s presidential platform, written mostly by W. W. Phelps. Elements included the following: restoring the lands of inheritance in Jackson County, Missouri, to the Latter-day Saints; reducing the size and pay of Congress; allowing Oregon, Texas, Mexico or Canada to join the United States; gradually eliminating slavery by compensating slave owners; standardizing national currency; reforming the jail system with imprisoned persons learning trades so they could contribute to society upon release.

Sister Black said that on March 11, 1844, Joseph Smith organized what would be called the Council of Fifty, a deliberative political body that included the leading Brethren of the Church and that, among other things, worked to promote the presidential candidacy of the Prophet. (The minutes of the Nauvoo-era Council of Fifty are soon to be released as part of the Joseph

Smith Papers; see an article about that publication in this issue of the *Church News*.)

Some 350 men volunteered to travel around the country to campaign for the Prophet's candidacy, Sister Black said. Ultimately the only two members of the Quorum of the Twelve left in Nauvoo were John Taylor and Willard Richards. They would ultimately be with Joseph and Hyrum Smith at Liberty Jail when the two brothers were assassinated by a mob.

Sister Black said on the same day Joseph decided to run for president, he wrote in his journal, "There is oratory enough in the church to carry me into the presidential chair on the first slide."

Months before missionaries were sent out to campaign for Joseph Smith, he also wrote, "When I look into the Eastern papers and see how popular I am, I am afraid I shall be president."

Newspaper clippings sent to Nauvoo reported rallies and conventions held in such locales as Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; and New York City.

But actions by disaffected Church members, including William Law, led to the publication of an opposition newspaper called the *Nauvoo Expositor*, which led to a chain of events ultimately resulting in the murders of Joseph and Hyrum at Carthage, Ill., thus putting an end to Joseph's candidacy for president.

Sister Black noted that the only other person to be shot and killed while running for president of the United States was Robert F. Kennedy, and that would not happen until 1968.

As an epilogue, she said that James K. Polk would win the election and, in furtherance of manifest destiny, would wage war with Mexico, a conflict that

would involve the Mormon Battalion, members of the Church en route west after the exodus from Nauvoo who were enlisted by the U.S. government.

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