



Community of Christ
Historic Sites Foundation

From Commerce to Nauvoo **Making Personal Connections to Our Shared Past**

My story and experience began on December 19, 1991, leaving Independence, Missouri to begin a new chapter in my life as Site Director of the Joseph Smith Historic Site in Nauvoo, Illinois. Having lost my companion of thirty-five years, I had settled in to re-discovering the church by reading the histories that were available. That was the basis of my preparation for the journey that was about to unfold.

As I crossed the Mississippi River at Quincy, Illinois, I noticed people playing on newly formed ice, the result of nature's cold blasts which quickly bring an end to navigation on the river. My mind immediately went to a scene which occurred in 1838. There were people crossing the river, walking ahead of their wagons and livestock. Through the tears, I saw Emma Smith walking with and holding her children while struggling with the elements. I also noticed people waiting on the shoreline for their arrival.

The thoughts of the horrific happenings of a peaceful endeavor to gather in Missouri gone wrong, the deaths in an attempt to protect families, followed by expulsion from their lands, the arrest of church leadership now incarcerated at Liberty Jail, were uppermost in their minds and hearts. What would happen now?

The people of Quincy took them in and provided such as they could to sustain them. Many remained in Quincy prior to heading toward Commerce, while others took leave of the group and found places to settle nearby. While traveling through Quincy, I passed by the Historic Mormon Migration Monument.

The news of the arrival of the Saints from Missouri travelled fast. A land agent from Commerce, Dr. Isaac Galland visited Quincy offering land available up north which could meet the present needs of this weary group. Also through a series of happenings, Joseph and others gained their freedom from Liberty Jail and arrived in Quincy bringing a temporary relief and joy to the gathering.

The trip I made north was the original trail taken by Joseph, along with other members of church leadership, to view the land in question. Today, the land that appears as farmland dotted with livestock was mostly barren with few settlers at that early time. The land under view was bordered by bluffs to the east and flat swampy ground westward to the river. A deal was reached and the saints began their move to their new home.



Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation

On the way, I stopped at David's Chamber, a waterfall which empties into the river just short of the flats. It is said that David Smith, Joseph's youngest son, painted his well known portrait of Nauvoo on the bend of the river here.

The only livable structure on the property was a block house built in 1803-1804. It may have been a trading post, or the home of an Indian Agent. It was a square-shaped home with a first and second floor. The Smith family took up residence there, approximately seventeen in all. Today this house is affectionately named "The Homestead." As I sat beside the home, I was overwhelmed by the emotion of a bygone era, remembering the great sickness that spread through the land shortly after the Saints arrived. Emma attempted to provide relief to the community by nursing members back to health. Her home was full and her yard covered by a gaggle of tents, young Joseph assisted where possible carrying water from the nearby well. It is said of the time, the men busied themselves building homes by day, and at night, burying those who had passed. The swampy land and other circumstances had brought dark clouds upon a hopeful people.

Subsequent additions to the house included a keeping room added by Joseph in 1840. The new room was used as a school classroom and the office of the president. Joseph III provided a sizeable addition when he occupied the house in the 1850s.

Adjacent to the Homestead is the "Summer Kitchen," used by the family during the summer months and later became the home of Joseph Smith Sr. and wife Lucy, for a brief period of time. The small building measures twelve foot square with a dirt floor, one window and one door. I have enjoyed many meals prepared by Doris and Daryl Lathrop, staff members who have demonstrated the skills of outdoor cooking for hundreds of summer visitors. Black beans and dirty rice, a hearty dish.

Diagonally across the street is the "Mansion House," finished and moved into by the Smith's in 1843. A family home, a hotel, and general gathering place for all with interest in this new settlement. It is said that Stephen Douglas came here to converse with Joseph. The Mansion House was the focal point for all. Here the leadership met often with men sharing their testimonies of their latest missionary experience. It was here that the women met with Emma and in concert produced a selection of hymns to be used during services. I have spent many hours here, cleaning, painting and reminiscing. I hear the sounds of children and the voices of those who came to be counseled and comforted. I hear the voice of Emma comforting her family as she struggled with the news of her husband's death. I feel the press of silence as mourners pass by the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum. I do not feel anger here, only a presence of spirit that was a constant companion of an "Elect Lady," destined to move forward and fulfill her calling as a child of God.



Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation

From the Mansion House one could go south to the “Nauvoo House,” partially constructed in 1841, and finished by Lewis Bidamon, Emma’s second husband. Lewis and Emma operated a hotel there called the “Riverside Mansion,” or “Riverside Hotel.” Emma passed away here in 1879. The Smith Family cemetery is just west of the Homestead. I have sat here on the cemetery benches provided for visitors and let the names and history of those interred here rise up to claim their space in this unfolding drama. For many of them, a heavy price was paid for their beliefs.

Just beyond the cemetery is the “Red Brick Store,” built in 1841, and reconstructed in 1971. Joseph was the proprietor. The store was the scene of many historic occurrences and was a constant gathering place for the Saints. The office of the president was on the second floor. Here under the hands of the Prophet Joseph and other church leaders, Young Joseph was blessed as his Father’s successor. The Women’s Relief Society was organized in this place in 1843. Public school was held here and a myriad of other activities, too many to note. As a teenager, young Joseph slept on a cot in the upper room to ensure the protection of the store inventory. One October evening, Joseph was awakened by outside noises. He looked out the front window and saw the Nauvoo Temple burning.

The transition of Commerce to Nauvoo did not come without considerable pain and suffering. It did come forth as a result of deliberate choices made by a host of persons who faithfully exhibited their trust in the one who called them forth. They came from near and afar. They still come. Years have passed, but the memories linger. Those inhabitants from a bygone era have left a legacy which is available to be claimed by us. What I found and experienced in Nauvoo has changed me, and for that I will be forever grateful.

I am indebted to many for touching my life during my ten years at the Nauvoo historic sites. I must name just a few. Alma Blair, a teacher extraordinaire, whose patience I tested many times; Alma Leeder, a father figure and mentor who loved me; Rick Savage and Chuck Tripp, workers that I tried to support as a left and right hand; and especially, Rosalyn Seaver, my secretary. Without her I would have been a failure. The senior staff, volunteers, and student interns continually provided love and joy that was uplifting and saving. There are others to numerous to mention.

My years at the historic sites are etched in my soul. I yearn for the pleasure they brought, the touch that changed my life, the peace that one experiences, the gift and legacy reaching from the past to offer hope. Indeed, the transition occurred. Commerce has faded into the past, and Nauvoo has evolved; and by the way, it is a beautiful city.

- Testimony from Don Albro, former Community of Christ Historic Sites Coordinator and Field Representative from Onset, Massachusetts