

The Martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith

Opposition to the Prophet and the Church

By June 1844, animosity against the Church had greatly intensified. Some citizens in Illinois were discussing driving the Saints from the state, while others were plotting to kill the Prophet. Some of those who were conspiring against the Prophet and the Church were former members of the Church who had apostatized. On June 7, 1844, William Law, who had served as Second Counselor in the First Presidency, and other apostates printed the first issue of a newspaper called the *Nauvoo Expositor*. In an attempt to inflame the public against the Prophet and the Church, these men used this newspaper to slander Joseph Smith and other Church leaders. Joseph Smith, acting as the mayor of Nauvoo, and the majority of the Nauvoo city council recognized that the inflammatory newspaper would lead to mob violence against the city. They declared the newspaper a public nuisance and ordered that the *Nauvoo Expositor* press be destroyed.

Joseph and Hyrum Are Falsely Charged

“As a result of the [destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*] by the mayor and city council, Illinois authorities brought an unfounded charge of riot against the Prophet, his brother Hyrum, and other Nauvoo city officials. The governor of Illinois, Thomas Ford, ordered the men to stand trial in Carthage, Illinois, the county seat, and promised them protection. Joseph knew that if he went to Carthage, his life would be in great danger from the mobs who were threatening him.

“Believing that the mobs wanted only them, Joseph and Hyrum decided to leave for the West to preserve their lives. On June 23, they crossed the Mississippi River, but later that day, brethren from Nauvoo found the Prophet and told him that troops would invade the city if he did not surrender to the authorities in Carthage. This the Prophet agreed to do, hoping to appease both government officials and the mobs. On June 24, Joseph and Hyrum Smith bade farewell to their families and rode with other Nauvoo city officials toward Carthage, voluntarily surrendering themselves to county officials in Carthage the next day. After the brothers had been released on bail for the initial charge, they were falsely charged with treason against the state of Illinois, arrested, and imprisoned in Carthage Jail to await a hearing. Elders John Taylor and Willard Richards, the only members of the Twelve who were not then serving missions, voluntarily joined them” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* [2007], 529–30).

Martyrdom at Carthage Jail

During the day on June 27, 1844, a visitor had given Joseph a revolver. As the mob tried to enter the room where the Prophet and the other men were held, Hyrum was shot to death, acting in defense of everyone in the room. Joseph sprang to the door and reached around the doorframe to shoot the pistol into the hall. Only three of the six chambers fired, wounding several members of the mob. The mob then forced their guns through the half-closed door, and John Taylor tried to beat the barrels of their guns back with a walking stick.

As the conflict at the doorway increased, John Taylor tried to escape the room through a window. As he attempted to leap out of the window, he was shot in the thigh from the doorway and was also shot by someone outside. He fell to the floor, and while attempting to get under the bed next to the window, he was severely wounded by three more shots. Meanwhile, as guns came through the doorway, Willard Richards began striking them with a cane.

Joseph Smith then decided to try to escape through the same window. As Willard Richards continued to deflect the mob at the door, the Prophet leaped to the open window. As he did so, he was struck by bullets from both inside and outside the jail. He fell out of the window, exclaiming, “O Lord, my God!” and landed on the ground below. The members of the mob who were inside the jail rushed outside to assure themselves that Joseph was dead. Although there were no members of the Church on their way to Carthage, someone yelled, “The Mormons are coming!” and the entire mob fled.

Tributes to the Prophet Joseph Smith

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said:



“Men who knew Joseph best and stood closest to him in Church leadership loved and sustained him as a prophet. His brother Hyrum chose to die at his side. John Taylor, also with him when he was murdered, said: ‘I testify before God, angels, and men, that he was a good, honorable, virtuous man . . . —that his private and public character was unimpeachable—and that he lived and died as a man of God’ (*The Gospel Kingdom* [1987], 355; see also D&C 135:3). Brigham Young declared: ‘I do not think that a man lives on the earth that knew [Joseph Smith] any better than I did; and I am bold to say that, Jesus Christ excepted, no better man ever lived or does live upon this earth’ [*Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe (1954), 459]” (“Joseph, the Man and the Prophet,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 73).

