
Correspondence between William R. Hamilton and Samuel H. B. Smith Regarding the Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith

Kenneth W. Godfrey

On 10 March 1898, Samuel H. B. Smith¹ wrote a letter to William R. Hamilton, who resided in Carthage, Illinois. Samuel H. B. Smith is the son of Samuel H. Smith, the brother of Joseph Smith Jr. and Hyrum Smith. Hamilton, the only surviving witness in 1898 of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, is the son of Ortois Hamilton, owner of the Hamilton House Hotel in Carthage, Illinois. Both Joseph and Hyrum spent the night of 24 June 1844 in the Hamilton House, where Illinois Governor Thomas Ford and his entourage were also housed.

Following the murders of the Smith brothers, their bodies were taken from the Carthage Jail to the Hamilton Hotel where they were washed and prepared for their journey back to Nauvoo and burial. Samuel's team and wagon were used to convey the body of Joseph to the mourning saints in the City Beautiful.

Samuel H. B. Smith wanted Hamilton to tell him what he knew about the martyrdom, especially the activities of his father, Samuel H. Smith. Apparently, some people were asserting that Samuel ran away from the mob; and Samuel H. B. desired to vindicate his father's good name, validate his courage, and prove that "he did run into Carthage on a race horse in order to give assistance to his brothers, at the imminent [sic] risk of his own life."

On 18 March 1898, William R. Hamilton, almost fifty-four years after the murders had taken place, penned a letter to Samuel H. B. Smith, telling him things he still remembered about events in Carthage on 27 June 1844. Hamilton's letter is found in the Leonard J. Arrington Collection located in the Special Collections Library at Utah State University in Logan, Utah.²

KENNETH W. GODFREY taught in the LDS Church Educational System for thirty-seven years and is now retired. He served as president of the Mormon History Association and has had many articles published in periodicals devoted to Mormon history. He writes a weekly column in two of Cache Valley's newspapers.

Smith composed another letter to Hamilton on 13 April 1898 wherein he related some of his own memories as well as things his two older sisters had told him regarding his father's activities and the deaths of his two uncles. This letter, too, is found in the Leonard J. Arrington Collection. Hamilton's and Smith's missives follow. Spelling and punctuation have been preserved as in the original letters.

Carthage, Ill. March 18 1898

S. H. B. Smith Esq

Dear Sir

Yours of 10th hand to me a day or two ago. I hardly know what information you desire. therefore may not be able to give you satisfactory answer.

The events which transpired on June 27th 1844 were verry [sic] thoroughly impressed upon my mind and I do not remember the detales [sic] of the killing of Joseph & Hiram [sic] Smith as I have often seen published. and I was then 14 years old. and saw Joseph Smith fall out of the window.³ I was but a short distance from the Jail. and going towards it with both eyes open. and got amongst the mob before all had left.⁴ I went up to Smith and saw that he was dead. then was the first to go into the Jail & up the stairs where I found Hiram [sic] Smith streatched [sic] upon the floor dead. No one was in the room. Richards had taken Taylor into the cell department, and they were in there at that time.⁵ Soon after I went home. and just before sundown took all the county records in a wagon and took them some 8 miles into the Country east of Carthage for safe keeping.⁶ David E Head Dep Clerk having them in charge. I got home just at sunrise next morning. Soon after Samuel H Smith and three others⁷ came in a wagon—and in a short time the body of Joseph was put in their wagon. and the body of Hiram [sic] in Father's. and he and my brother John D. went to Nauvoo with them—returning late at night.⁸

Soon after the killing of the Smiths Father had the bodies brought to our house. and rough pine coffins made in which they were placed.⁹

“Those boards have furnished material for thousands of walking Canes”¹⁰

I knew your Father Sam H. Smith. but did not see him at Carthage the day the smiths were killed. Yet he might have been in the Evening after I went away

Mr Taylor was also taken care of by father until he was able to be taken home.¹¹

All I can say about the killing of the smiths in detale [sic]. “leaving out all causes of every description” is that on the 27th day of June 1844. at about 5. P.M. an armed mob of at least 100 men¹² surrounded the jail and killid [sic] Joseph and Hiram [sic] Smith. and wounded Mr Taylor.¹³ and after a form of an inquest¹⁴ had been held. their bodies were disposed of as above related. Should this not be Satisfactory or not the information you desire please write what you wish to know. My fathers name was Artois Hamilton and I know he had many friends at Nauvoo.

Yours truly

Wm R. Hamilton¹⁵

Smith composed another¹⁶ letter to Hamilton on 13 April 1898 wherein he related some of his own memories as well as things his two older sisters had told him regarding his father's activities and the deaths of his two uncles. He wanted to know if the jailor, George W. Stigall, was still living and if so how he could be contacted. Smith's letter follows.

April 13th 1898

Wm K. [R.] Hamilton esq

Dear Sir

Your favor of March the 18th was duly received, I appreciate very much the information you have furnished me, and if not asking too much would like to ask you if you know if the jailor George W. Stigall is still living & if so if you know his Post office address? I do not know whether or not he was a young man at the time¹⁷—John Taylor told me that Samuel H. Smith was the first man he saw after the shooting, and what I would like to find out is if Samuel H. Smith was the man that helped Willard Richards carry John Taylor into the cell,¹⁸ you say that when you “went up the stares [sic] you found Hyrum Smith stretched upon the floor” and no one was in the room at the time” now as Willard Richards & John Taylor were in the room at the time of the shooting perhaps Samuel H. Smith had gone into the cell along with Richards & Taylor.¹⁹ I have two sisters²⁰ that are older than I am and it has been related by the family more or less from the time of the tradigy [sic] up to the present time, that father assisted in conveying the bodies over to Hamilton’s Hotel and was there at the Hotel near midnight of June the 27th & signed a letter to Emma Smith, Joseph Smith’s wife, in conjunction with Willard Richards & John Taylor & postscrip [sic] of the same letter was signed by Governor Ford who had returned from Nauvoo where he had been making a speach [sic] to the people of Nauvoo.²¹ My object is to get evidence to prove that father did not run away from the mob, as has been stated by cirtian [sic] ones, but that he did run into Carthage on a race horse in order to give assistance to his brothers, at the iminent [sic] risk of his own life by the mob, I remember perfectly well seeing him ride away from our farm on this race horse, and hearing him relate the circumstances afterward Father had a span of horses & wagon & I presume it was his wagon that you refer to, that the body of Joseph Smith was put into, I presume that he rode out to his own farm as it was only some two or three miles out from Carthage and got his own team (some two or th[r]e[e] miles is my impression) father died a month & three days after his brothers & his brother William always claimed that there was foul play that caused his death [Letter is unsigned]

The missive of William K. Hamilton to Samuel H. B. Smith and Smith’s letter to Hamilton provide a glimpse into the Mormon past and shed light on one of the most tragic episodes in Latter-day Saint history.

Wm. H. Hamilton

Carthage, Ill. March 18 1898

S. H. F. Smith Esq

Dear Sir

Yours of 10th had to me a day or two ago. I hardly know what information you desire, therefore may not be able to give you satisfactory answer,

The events which transpired on June 27th 1844 were very thoroughly impressed upon my mind and I do not remember the details of the killing of Joseph & Hiram Smith as I have often seen published. and I was then 14 years old, and saw Joseph Smith fall out of the window. I was but a short distance from the Jail, and going towards it with both eyes open, and got amongst the mob before all had left. I went up to Smith and saw that he was dead. then was the first to go into the Jail & up the stairs where I found Hiram Smith stretched upon the floor dead. No one was in the room. Richards had taken Taylor into the cell department, and they were in there at that time. Soon after I went home, and just before sundown took all the county records in a wagon and took them some 8 miles into the Country east of Carthage for safe keeping. "David I Head Dep Clerk having them in charge. I got home just at sunrise next morning. Soon after Samuel H Smith and three others came in a wagon-- and in a short time the body of Joseph was put in their wagon, and the body of Hiram in Father's, and he and my brother John D. went to Nauvoo with them-- returning late at night,

Soon after the killing of the Smiths Father had the bodies brought to our house, and rough pine coffins made in which they were placed,

"those boards have furnished material for thousands of walking Cases"

I knew your Father Sam^l H. Smith, but did not see him at Carthage the day the Smiths were killed. Yet he might have been in the evening after I went away

Mr Taylor was also taken care of by father until he was able to be taken home.

*Letter is located in the Leonard J. Arrington collection,
Utah State University Special Collections,
Logan, Utah*

All I can say about the killing of the smiths in detail, "leaving out all causes of every description" is that on the 27th day of June 1844, at about 5. P. M. an armed mob of at least 100 men surrounded the jail and killed Joseph and Hiram Smith, and wounded Mr Taylor. and after a form of an inquest had been held, their bodies were disposed of as above related. Should this not be satisfactory or not the information you desire please write what you wish to know, My fathers name was Artois Hamilton and I know he had many friends at Nauvoo.

Yours truly

Wm R Hamilton

April 13th 1848

Mr. H. Hamilton Esq -

Dear Sir

Your favor of March
the 18th was duly received. I appreciate
very much the information you have furnished
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you if you know if the pious George W. Stigall
is still living & if so if you know his Post office
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man at the time - John Taylor told me that Samuel
Smith was the first man he saw after the shooting,
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was the man that helped William Richards carry John
Taylor into the cell, you say that when you went up
the stairs ~~you~~ you found Hyrum Smith stretched upon
the floor and no one was in the room at the time
now as Willard Richards & John Taylor were in the
room at the time of the shooting perhaps Samuel
H. Smith had gone into the cell along with Richards
& Taylor. I have two sisters that are older than I
am and it has been related by the family more or less
from the time of the tragedy up to the present time, that

Letter is located in the Leonard J. Arrington collection,
Utah State University Special Collections,
Logan, Utah

Father assisted in conveying the bodies over to
Hamilton's Hotel and was there at the Hotel near
midnight & from the 27th signed a letter to Emma
Smith, Joseph Smith's wife, in conjunction with his
brothers & John Taylor & postscript of the same int.
was signed by Governor Ford who had returned from
Seneca where he had been making a speech to the
people of Seneca, My object is to prove to
you that father did not run away from the scene
as has been stated by certain ones, but that he
did run into Carthage on a race horse in order to
give assistance to his brothers, at the imminent risk of
his own life by the mob, I remember perfectly well
seeing him ride away from our farm on this race
horse, and hearing him relate the circumstances afterward
Father had a span of horses & wagon & I presume it was
his wagon that you refer to, that the body of Joseph Smith
was put into, I presume that he rode out to his own farm
as it was only some two or three miles out from Carthage
and got his own team (some two or three miles is my impression)
Father died a month & three days after his brothers & his body
William Snyders claims that that was foul play that
caused his death

Notes

1. Samuel H. B. Smith was born 1 August 1838 in Shady Grove, Missouri. When his father died, he was only six years old. Samuel came to the Salt Lake Valley in 1848 in a company led by Brigham Young. He was a large man who had a strong athletic appearance. He pioneered in Minersville, Utah, and in the Bear Lake Valley where he assisted in the founding of St. Charles, Idaho. After serving a four-and-one-half-year mission in Great Britain, he also did missionary work in California. Samuel died 12 June 1914. See Dean Jarman, "The Life and Contributions of Samuel Harrison Smith," Masters Thesis, Brigham Young University, June 1961, 109–10.

2. Matthew C. Godfrey, a Ph.D. student at Washington State University who spent his 1999 summer cataloging the Leonard J. Arrington Collection, called my attention to this letter and the one that Samuel H. B. Smith wrote to Hamilton on 13 April 1898.

3. When he wrote about the martyrdom, Willard Richards said that Joseph was shot before falling from the window. William M. Daniels, in contrast, said that Joseph was not shot until after he had fallen from the window. Wm. Web, in a letter dated 14 October 1844, writes that Joseph was not shot until after he was set against the well. Thomas Dixon, an observer at the jail, said that "Joseph was shot before he fell from the window and after the fall raised himself against the well curb drew up one leg and stretched out the other and died immediately." See Dean C. Jessee, "Return to Carthage: Writing the History of Joseph Smith's Martyrdom," *Journal of Mormon History*, 8 (1981): 14–17.

4. Some martyrdom accounts state that after Joseph had been killed, some of the mob wanted to cut off his head but did not do so because someone cried, "The Mormons are coming!" which caused the men to disperse. See Sherman L. Fleek, "Death of a Prophet," *Mormon Heritage Magazine* (July/August, 1994): 1:32. Hamilton's letter seems to imply that the mob left in a more leisurely fashion. For a discussion of this matter, see Dean C. Jessee, "Return to Carthage: Writing the History of Joseph Smith's Martyrdom," *Journal of Mormon History*, 14–17.

5. John Taylor, on 27 June 1859, speaking in a conference of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, said, "I remember bro Hy requested me to sing a poor wa faring man of grief which I done he requested it the 2nd time I then saw a crowd of men with disfigured faces and come up to the door up stairs I made a rush to the door bro H and bro R got there first they leaned agst the door some one fired a gun thro the key hole he then walked a little distance a ball came thro the door and struck him in his face anor. thro the windows fired by the Carthage Grays He fell on his back and sd I am add man. . . .

"The next I noticed was bro R. go form the windo to the door towards some cells I sd. Dr. come and take me along He opened the door and dragged me along with 4 balls in I was in excruciating pain He put me in a cell and threw me under the mattress He sd is it possible Josh is dd praps they ma kill me Yo ma live and tell the story they retrd and found no one in the room and they absounded." "Minutes" of a conference held 27 June 1859 in Salt Lake City, talk given by John Taylor, minutes located in the Archives of the LDS Historical Department, Salt Lake City. Reproduced with punctuation and spelling as found in the minutes.

6. Many people in Carthage were fearful that the Nauvoo Legion might attack the town and destroy it. Perhaps most of the people left the city, and it appears that Hamilton was charged with preserving important city records. See "The Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith," written by Dan Jones on 20 January 1855, copy found in the LDS Historical Archives, Salt Lake City. See also Kenneth W. Godfrey, "Return to Carthage: The Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith Revisited," paper delivered at the Mormon History Association meetings, Carthage, Illinois, 1989.

7. Perhaps the others were James Wood and Jedediah M. Grant. See Kenneth W.

Godfrey, "A Time, A Season, When Murder Was in the Air: The Martyrdoms of Joseph and Hyrum Smith after 150 Years," *Mormon Heritage Magazine* (July/August 1994): 1:39.

8. Shortly after Joseph and Hyrum were killed, their thirty-six-year-old brother Samuel arrived at the jail. According to Dr. Thomas Barnes, Samuel carried the body of Joseph into the lower part of the jail where Barnes found it. Then, the bodies of both Joseph and Hyrum were taken by Willard Richards and Samuel to the Hamilton House where John Macomber washed them with hot water while General W. Douglas Knox and Major W. Bedell, aide-de-camp to Governor Ford, looked on. Bedell then laid out the two bodies. See Thomas Bullock, *Journal*, 17 April 1854, and report of Edward A. Bedell, 17 April 1854, located in LDS Church Historical Archives. After seeing that the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum were safe and then leaving them with Richards, Samuel returned to his farm, which was only two or three miles (some say eight miles) from Carthage where he obtained his team and the wagon used to transport Joseph's body to Nauvoo. According to Katherine Smith's reminiscences, she too arrived in Carthage the morning of 28 June 1844, saw her dead brothers, and accompanied the bodies back to Nauvoo with the others. See Reminiscences of Katherine Smith, copy in possession of Kenneth W. Godfrey, Logan, Utah. The film shown in the LDS Nauvoo Visitors Center shows both bodies in one wagon. This is an error, as Hamilton's letter shows.

9. Susan Easton Black informs us that "About 8:00 A.M. on Friday, 28 June, the remains of Joseph and Hyrum were placed in rough boxes, put into two wagons, and then covered with prairie hay, blankets, and bushes to protect them from the hot sun. A guard of eight soldiers was detached to escort the remains to Nauvoo, led by Samuel H. Smith and accompanied by Willard Richards. Between 2:30 and 3:00 P.M. the procession had reached Nauvoo." Susan Easton Black, "The Tomb of Joseph," *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies*, Provo, Utah, 2.

10. In the *History of the Church*, we read that when the bodies arrived in Nauvoo, they were taken from the boxes Hamilton told about and "were washed from head to foot by Dimick B. Huntington with the assistance of William Marks and William D. Huntington. Cotton soaked in camphor was put into each wound and the bodies laid out with fine plain drawers and shirt, white neckerchiefs, white cotton stockings and white shrouds." Gilbert Goldsmith was doorkeeper to keep intruders out. At 7 a.m. on Saturday, 29 June 1844, the bodies were put into coffins built by George Cannon. These coffins were covered with black velvet and fastened with brass nails. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Introduction and Notes by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912), 6:627. Some of the wood from the coffins used to transport the bodies from Carthage to Nauvoo was then used to make canes for Latter-day Saints, such as Wilford Woodruff. Hamilton exaggerates a bit when he says that thousands of walking canes were made from the coffins. The quotation marks that surround this sentence are found in the original letter.

11. The wounded John Taylor was taken by Willard Richards to the top of the stairs where Thomas L. Barnes removed a bullet from his hand with a dull penknife and a pair of carpenter's compasses. Then, he was transported to the Hamilton House where he was then able to get some sleep. His wife, Leonora, arrived from Nauvoo the afternoon of 28 June 1844 and brought Dr. Samuel Bennett with her. He extracted the bullet from Taylor's thigh. During the operation, Leonora went into an adjoining room and prayed. Taylor remained in Carthage until 2 July when he was brought home to Nauvoo. Leonora had been by his side much of the time. See Samuel W. Taylor, *The Kingdom or Nothing: The Life of John Taylor, Militant Mormon* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 94-95; Ivan J. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1967), 520.

12. Willard Richards, too, estimated that the mob numbered about one hundred

armed men. See *History of the Church*, 617.

13. Samuel W. Taylor, in his biography of John Taylor, writes, “He lay on a pile of straw from a jail mattress [actually the straw was on the floor of the jail cell into which he had been dragged by Willard Richards; the straw was there to provide a little comfort for the prisoners when they tried to rest] while a coroner’s jury assembled. When the name of Francis M. Higbee came up during the inquest, Taylor rose up, despite his wounds, and declared, ‘I want to swear my life against him!’” After the inquest, Samuel Taylor writes, “Willard Richards prevailed upon Taylor to go to the hotel, Richards had a hard time finding people to carry him there.” Samuel W. Taylor, *The Kingdom or Nothing*, 93–94. Ivan J. Barrett writes that before Samuel Smith arrived in Carthage, “Willard Richards carried John Taylor to the landing of the stairway [in the jail]. . . . While he lay there, a number of persons came, including Dr. Thomas L. Barnes, prison physician, who extracted the ball from his hand with a penknife and a pair of carpenter’s compasses, remarking Elder Taylor had nerves like the devil, to stand such surgical butchery.” Hamilton, owner of the hotel, assisted by Willard Richards, Samuel H. Smith, and others, removed John Taylor to the hotel. *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 517.

14. Hamilton seems to imply here that the inquest was not really an inquest inasmuch as those who conducted it were just going through the motions.

15. It is interesting that Hamilton’s letter makes no mention of efforts to behead Joseph Smith, nor does he write of a lightning flash that prevented the mutilation of the body. B. H. Roberts discounts the story, but others are not so inclined to dismiss it. For a thorough discussion of this matter, see Dean C. Jessee, “Return to Carthage: Writing the History of Joseph Smith’s Martyrdom,” *Journal of Mormon History* 8 (1981): 3–20.

16. The writer checked with the LDS Church Historical Department, the Brigham Young University Special Collections Library, and several prominent historians but was unable to locate the first missive that Smith sent to Hamilton. It is not a part of the Arrington Collection at Utah State University.

17. George W. Stigall, Hancock County jailer, had a wife and children living with him in the Carthage Jail at the time Joseph and Hyrum were killed. For more about Stigall, see Reed Blake, *24 Hours to Martyrdom* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973). John Taylor remembered that “Mr. George W. Stegale [sic], and his wife, manifested a disposition to make us as comfortable as they could; we ate at their table, which was well provided and of course, paid for it.” Kenneth W. Godfrey, “A Time, A Season, When Murder Was in the Air,” *Mormon Heritage Magazine*, 37.

18. Ivan J. Barrett says that Samuel and others removed John Taylor and the bodies of the martyrs to the Hamilton House. *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 517.

19. According to Willard Richards’ own account, Samuel H. Smith did not arrive at the jail until after Richards had moved Taylor to the top of the stairs.

20. Samuel H. B.’s older sisters are Susanna Bailey, born 27 October 1835 in Kirtland, Ohio, and Mary Bailey, born 27 March 1837 in Mentor, Ohio.

21. The *History of the Church* does not mention Samuel H. Smith as signing the letter—just Willard Richards and John Taylor.