

The Sting of *the Wasp*:
Early Nauvoo Newspaper—
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The *Wasp*, an early Mormon periodical, was one of many small newspapers striving to make a place and a name in an era called by many the “golden age” of American journalism. Newspapers were the popular of American reading materials in the 1840s; almost all growing frontier communities sought to establish a small press, and more populous areas often had a dozen or more. The boom of newspaper publishing throughout the country caused a jump from 800 such papers in 1830 to 1,400 in 1840.¹

The motives behind the eager interest shown by the common man for newspapers in the 1840s were social, political, religious, and literary. One author has suggested that 89 percent of the white population of the country was literate in 1840.² While this estimate seems high, it does indicate that a large percentage of U. S. citizens created a market for cheap newspapers.

The average newspaper in the less populous regions was not only edited but written almost entirely by the editor, who was often poorly educated. This was an era of democratic agitation in which the primacy of the newspaper was virtually unchallenged. Frequently the editor or his financial backer established a newspaper with the specific purpose of expressing or suppressing a definite political, religious, or social view. Vicious libel was common.

Financial problems also occurred frequently, and many of the small town newspapers went under in their enthusiasm to corner unique events and extend their circulation.

Purpose and Format

The first issue of the *Wasp* appeared on 16 April 1842. Its auditor and publisher was William Smith, youngest brother of Joseph Smith, Apostle in the Mormon church, and Nauvoo city councilman.

William had definite ideas about the direction his weekly should pursue. The *Wasp*, according to its editor, would combat “the shafts of slander . . . foul calumnies, and base misrepresentations” of some public presses, and seek to “convey correct information to the world and thereby disabuse the public mind as to the many slanders that are constantly perpetrated against us.”³ The choice of the name itself indicates that the *Wasp* would not hesitate to “sting” those who opposed the editor’s views, particularly

those distorting Mormonism and advocating hate and persecution against the rising city of the Saints. Nevertheless, while William was determined to provide a counterbalance to what he saw as an anti-Mormon crusade by other publications in the region, he was also concerned that he not appear too enthusiastic in his own efforts. “We shall always endeavor,” he added in the first edition, “to act upon the defensive with our opponents, not upon the offensive.”⁴

In addition, the *Wasp* was to be a “public journal,” ambitiously devoting its columns to the arts, sciences, literature, agriculture, trade, commerce, and the general news of the times, whether local, national, or international. This was to be done with the hope that it might be “subservient to the caused of humanity, justice, and truth.”⁵

The *Wasp* was not the only newspaper in Nauvoo. The *Times and Seasons* had been published since November of 1839. Taking note of this fact, William Smith observed in the first number that while “it is true the *Times and Seasons* is published in this place . . . it is being devoted exclusively to matters of religion and its size being quite limited, there can be no space found in its columns for the local and general news of the day.”⁶

Earlier attempts had also been made to publish a weekly similar to the *Wasp*. Don Carlos Smith, another brother to the Prophet Joseph Smith, had planned to publish a secular newspaper to be known as the *News* and, later, after that did not succeed, one to be known as the *Nauvoo Ensign and Zarahemla Standard*⁷ (the city of Zarahemla was to be established across the river from Nauvoo).⁸ The second attempt also failed when Don Carlos died in the summer of 1841.⁹

The *Wasp* was issued weekly on Saturdays until 1 February 1843, when it came out on Wednesdays, with some few exceptions (such as when paper shortages occurred), until 19 April 1843. The four pages of the *Wasp*, printed on 11 x 16 inch sheets, were divided into four columns; and on the front page below the symbolic heading was the inscription “Truth Crushed to Earth Will Rise Again—Bryant.” The printing offices were located “on the corner of Water and Bain Streets” in the same building which housed of the offices of the *Times and Seasons*. The cost of the weekly was announced as follows: “Terms: \$ 1.50 invariably in advance.”

Reflector of International, National, and Local News

Along with the purpose of disseminating the truth of Nauvoo to the world, the *Wasp* was established to bring the general news of the day from international, national, and local sources. Following similar practices of the times, the *Wasp* freely borrowed articles from other newspapers in the United States, including the *Warsaw Signal*, the *Plain Dealer*, *Newark Advocate*, *New York Herald*, and the *Times and Seasons*. News was also obtained from letters as well as overland and river travelers.

News from Europe was popular. The *Wasp* carried articles about European money markets, debates of the British Parliament, and items of social interest. One story in this last category, titled “Horrors of the English Collieries,” treated the inhuman burdens of young children who were

placed in the coal mines at the age of six years; they are obligated to crawl on their hands and knees in the mud; and even at the tender age named, they are worked from eleven to fourteen hours a day. They are excluded from light.¹⁰

The Prophet visited the offices of the *Wasp* from time to time and *Wasp* news items are mentioned in Joseph Smith’s history. One selection which received such notice was entitled “Awful Destruction of Life—Terrible Earthquake in the Island of St. Domingo.”¹¹

Most of the readers of the *Wasp* would have had great interest in national events, especially those dealing with U. S. expansion and politics. “For Oregon Territory” described the emigration of more than one thousand persons who planned to go to the Northwest, an area not yet U. S. territory.¹² Readers were kept up-to-date on continuing pitched battles with Mexico. The newspaper also published President Tyler’s proclamation—”Protest of the President”—criticizing the House of Representatives for passing a revenue bill.¹³

Local news amounted to nearly half the coverage on the four pages of each week’s *Wasp*.

Scientific discoveries and inventions were no doubt among the most popular features. The planned construction of a flying machine was detailed under the title “Aerial Navigation,” and Colt’s underwater submarine battery (a type of mine) was discussed.¹⁴ One article, reprinted from the *Philadelphia Ledger*, related the discovery of a “real” mermaid!

The present age exceeds all others in the extent and variety of its discoveries. . . . *The greatest discovery yet made has still to be announced, and it is left for us to make the fact public. We have seen a Mermaid! Start not and curl your lips with scorn—though concerning a fish, it is not a fish story. We have seen the tangible evidence exhibited to our senses of the existence of that monster hitherto deemed fabulous by all the learned. . . . not in the alluring garb and seductive form represented in the picture books . . . the mermaid we saw has none of these attractions, but is as ugly a little monster as was ever seen, resembling more in appearance about the upper part of the body a mummified monkey than an angelic fish. . . . This animal, fish, flesh, or whatever it may be, is about three feet long, and the lower part of the body is a perfectly formed fish. . . . It has perfectly formed breasts, arms, and hands, the latter resembling more the human hand more than a monkeys [sic], with white nails on the finger ends . . . the top [of the head] is bald, but the sides are covered with hair . . . like the well trained ringlets of some fair damsel. The cheeks, eyes and lips bear a semblance to humanity. . . . The animal is now in charge of a gentleman at Jones’ Hotel . . . though the owner has refused to exhibit it publicly.*¹⁵

Literary pieces and poetry were a must for every edition of the *Wasp*. Expository themes on the mind, the sexes, and the importance of motherhood were included along with serials and an occasional humorous article. Humorous items included “Lamentations of an Old Bachelor” or a little quip such this:

“Did you pull my nose *in earnest*, sir?”

“*Certainly* I did sir,”—(giving it another tweek.)

“It’s well for you—for I don’t allow any body to *joke* me in that way.”¹⁶

Poetry was contributed by national favorites or local renowns such as Eliza R. Snow and Gustavus Hill.

The *Wasp* constantly reminded that the Missouri persecutions were still fresh in the minds of the Saints and they would not tolerate this type of treatment again. The second editorial, for example, carried the heading “We Were Not the Aggressors” with another editorial titled “Unfair.”¹⁷ Other articles made an attempt to set straight the erroneous reports of Mormon provocations. One such story was “Great News from the Mormons: Battle No. One!!”¹⁸ which disclosed a purported raging battle between the Mormons and the anti-Mormons.

Little of a religious nature was in the *Wasp*. A passing word of Joseph Smith’s religious activities or legal battles, or an announcement of temple dues and construction progress appeared from time to time, but, for the most part, the *Wasp* left religious announcements to the *Times and Seasons*.

In an era when the telephone was nonexistent, a local newspaper was a valuable bulletin board. Emmy Smith used the pages of the *Wasp* to request hymns, and Joseph used it to communicate orders to members of the Nauvoo Legion and announce public military displays. The *Wasp* mentioned the names of political candidates and the results of elections. A weekly announcement of births and deaths was carried.

An ever-increasing amount of advertising and industrial growth was evident as merchants used the newspaper to market their goods. One could find in the *Wasp* advertisements for such things as window sash, “Ready Made Coffins,” hides and skins, book binding, smoking chimney repair (“No cure, no pay”), and Hiram Kimball’s request for the contracting of one million bricks.¹⁹ Produce and growing conditions were the topics of frequent reports.²⁰

Serious medical notices of that day would seem ludicrous now. Lozenges could be purchased for every ailment; and if one bought Dr. Chairman’s Worm Lozenges, he could be sure of “the only infallible Worm medicine ever discovered.”²¹ Dr. Brink’s services were advertised in this manner:

Dr. Brink is consulted in the most intricate and protracted cases of secret disease that require practical experience to insure success; every species and from of the disease must yield to his treatment . . . which is in all cases mild and soft. . . will treat the disease upon the principle of on cure no pay.²²

Unfortunately, Dr. Brink was later taken to court and convicted of malpractice.

Editorial Battles

Within a few weeks of the first issue of the *Wasp's* colorful career, William Smith locked his editorial column in directed battle with the *Warsaw Signal*, *Sangamo Journal*, and the *Quincy Whig*. While such feuds between editors are typical of frontier communities, few rivalries became as heated as the exchange between Thomas Sharp and William Smith.

Thomas C. Sharp edited the weekly *Warsaw Signal*, which was the successor to the *Western World*, founded by Daniel N. White in 1840. Warsaw was only a few miles from Nauvoo, and on at least one occasion Thomas Sharp apparently ventured to the growing Mormon town. Little is known of this particular visit, but Sharp is thought to have conversed with the Prophet and shared in a turkey dinner with him (William later referred to Sharp as the "turkey"). Thomas Sharp was unimpressed with Mormonism, and his early editorials took note of activities in Nauvoo but showed no open conflict with the Mormons. He soon fell into financial circumstances with his weekly, and the 12 April 1842 edition of the *Warsaw Signal* carried the announcement of the discontinuance of the newspaper. After reading the first edition of the *Wasp* a week later, however, he made a quick about-face, and in another week published another edition of the *Warsaw Signal*, which carried an article titled "Proposals for Continuing the *Warsaw Signal*."²³

Sharp's ire, which later led to a vicious and relentless editorial war, may have been raised early on by Joseph Smith's cancellation of his subscription of the *Warsaw Signal* in 1841 and the accompanying letter in which the Prophet stated:

Sir—You will discontinue my paper—its contents are calculated to pollute me, and to patronize the filthy sheet—that tissue of lies—that sink of iniquity—is disgraceful to any moral man. Yours with utter contempt,

JOSEPH SMITH.

P.S. Please publish the above in your contemptible paper.

J.S.²⁴

This letter was included in the *Signal* in a column prefaced "A New Revelation from Joe Smith." The Prophet's letter came in response to a column written by Sharp two weeks before which mentioned dissatisfaction among some of the new immigrants in Nauvoo.

Having felt the barbs of several of Sharp's columns months before the founding of the *Wasp*, William Smith began his regular attacks on Thomas Sharp from the *Wasp's* very first number. One of these articles, entitled "Nose-ology," attacked "Thom-ASS C. Sharp," asserting that "the length of

his snout is said to be in the exact proportion of seven to one compared with his intellectual faculties, having upon its *convex* surface well developed bumps." William continued by explaining that these bumps signified fourteen traits, the first being "Anti-Mormoniteness."²⁵

The weekly installments of this personal feud drew the attention of the neighboring *Peoria Register* and the *Sangamo Journal*, which, while initially criticizing the editorial battle, later joined the anti-Mormon bandwagon.

The *Sangamo Journal* had little to say about the Mormons until election time approached in July 1842, when it opened a full barrage claiming that the Mormon church was part of the Democratic political machine. The *Sangamo Journal* was strictly a Whig publication and motivated not so much by religious differences with the Mormons as by the political vote the Saints could wield. A five column spread was carried in the 8 July issue of the *Journal*, which "exposed" "The Mormon Plot and League, by which THOMAS FORD and JOHN MOORE hope to be elected Governor and Lieut. Governor of Illinois." Explaining the reason for the article, the editors proclaimed "it our duty to publish the documentary evidence . . . showing the dangerous nature of this corrupt and scandalous coalition."²⁶ To add weight to its viewpoint, the *Journal* proceeded to disclose the John C. Bennett letters and account of corruption in Nauvoo. The *Sangamo Journal* far exceeded the *Warsaw Signal* in its praise of Bennett, describing his "known character for fearlessness in a cause he knows to be right."²⁷ Striking back, William Smith published the *Wasp's* only extra, exposing John C. Bennett. Then in the following issue, William unleashed the bitterest comments of his *Wasp* career. In a column entitled "A Golden Iron Wedge Reward," he crisply stated:

Ran away from the State of Illinois, one *John C. Bennett* . . . recently a journeyman liar, slanderer and "discloser" for the Jack Ass of the *Sangamo Journal*. The said *Sangamo* [*sic*] Jack Ass having bargained with, or hired the said journeyman liar for a little state pap.²⁸

The *Quincy Whig* also drew fire from William Smith for its suggestion that the Mormons leave the state.

The editorial feud changed course only when William Smith resigned his job as editor as a result of his election to the state legislature in the fall of 1842. The history of Joseph Smith notes under the date of 10 December that "in this day's paper, William Smith gave his valedictory, resigning the editorship of *The Wasp* to Elder John Taylor."²⁹ Like William Smith, John Taylor had little respect for Thomas Sharp. Indeed, Elder Taylor had referred to the *Signal* editor as "a violent, unprincipled man."³⁰ But unlike his predecessor, John Taylor was to take a more conservative approach with the *Wasp*, no doubt hoping to lessen the ill feelings mounting against the Mormons in Illinois.

Meanwhile, the *Sangamo Journal* had changed its emphasis to current events of local interest and hardly mentioned the Mormons for another few months. No longer feeling the “sting” of the *Wasp*, Thomas Sharp turned the editorship and publication of the *Warsaw Signal* over to Thomas Gregg, who not only leaned toward a more friendly policy with the Mormons but also changed the name of the *Signal* to the *Warsaw Message*. This lessening of animosity was welcomed by the *Wasp*, which expressed the following in its 19 April 1843 issue:

We should judge from the following paragraph from the *Warsaw Message* that the editors of that paper are about taking a different course toward the citizens of this place than taken by the editor of the *Warsaw Signal*.³¹

This cessation of hostility was only dimmed for about a year, however, after which Thomas Sharp regained the *Warsaw* paper, renamed it the *Warsaw Signal*, and resumed his tirade against the Mormons. Sharp’s bitter resentment of the Saints eventually led him to advocate their extermination. His declaration, which appeared in the pages of the *Warsaw Signal*, asserted that

War and extermination is inevitable! CITIZENS ARISE, ONE and ALL!!!—Can you *stand* by, and suffer such INFERNAL DEVILS! to ROB men of their property RIGHTS, without avenging them. We have no time for comment, every man will make his own. LET IT BE MADE WITH POWDER AND BALL!³²

Change of Name and Philosophy

Although the *Wasp* had lost much of its “sting” with the resignation of William Smith, it endured in size and name until the completion of its first year of publication in April 1843. The suggestion for a change of name and policy for the *Wasp* came from James Arlington Bennett of New York. Mr. Bennett had practiced law and written some textbooks in New York and was a man of some wealth and influence.³³ He had on occasion corresponded with Joseph Smith and published letters in some New York papers championing the Mormon cause. In one of his letters to the Prophet, he wrote the following in reference to the *Wasp*: “I don’t like the name. Mildness should characterize everything that comes from Nauvoo; and even a name, as Peleg says in his ethics, has much influence on one side or the other.”³⁴ Joseph, perhaps worried by the aggressive nature of the *Wasp*, agreed to the change, and plans were announced to rename it the *Dove of the West* and publish it in the Mormon community of Keokuk, Iowa, across the Mississippi River from Nauvoo.³⁵ This plan was never implemented, however, and the *Wasp* continued under the less militant John Taylor until April of 1843. By March of 1843, Joseph Smith had selected the new name that the *Wasp* would receive in April. The Prophet’s history records the following: “Gave the following name to the *Wasp*,

enlarged as is contemplated—*The Nauvoo Neighbor*, our motto, ‘The Saints’ Singularity is Union, Liberty, Charity.’”³⁶

The *Nauvoo Neighbor* was to have not only a larger size but also a new philosophy. The prospectus of the *Neighbor* printed in advance stated that the *Wasp*, “partaking so much of the nature of the industrious bee, . . . has gathered honey from every flower, and its pages are now read with interest by a large and respectable number of subscribers.”³⁷ Indicating the course the new paper was to take, the *Nauvoo Neighbor*’s first editorial announced:

We now, according to promise, present our young friend before the world in his new dress and with his new name. . . . Relative to the course that we shall pursue, we shall endeavor to cultivate a friendly feeling towards all, and not interfere with the rights of others, either politically or religiously.³⁸

It is impossible for us who live 140 years after the advent of the *Wasp* to understand its full impact on Nauvoo and surrounding areas. To those not enthusiastic with the Mormon community and challenge, the *Wasp* may have been seen only in the manner described by this disgruntled contemporary: “For illiterate and vulgar abuse, and silly nonsense, [it] had seldom been excelled.”³⁹ To the Mormons and their friends, it was probably considered a necessary means of expounding Mormonism, countering defamation, and educating and informing a thriving frontier town. In any case, it was a colorful voice in a troubled land.

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1. Robert E. Riegel, *Young America 1830–1840* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), p. 409.

2. Harvey Wish, *Society and Thought in Early America*, 2 vols. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1950–52), 1:447

3. “Introductory,” *The Wasp*, 16 April 1842, [p. 2].

4. *Ibid.* Italics in all quoted material are found in the original.

5. William Smith, “Proposal for Publishing the *Wasp*,” *Wasp*, 16 April 1842, [p. 4].

6. “Introductory,” *Wasp*, 16 April 1842, [p. 2].

7. *Ibid.*

8. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932–51), 3:382; hereafter cited as *History of the Church*.

9. *Ibid.*, 4:393, 398–99.

10. *Wasp*, 16 June 1842, [p. 1].

11. *History of the Church*, 5:21; *Wasp*, 25 June 1842, [p. 1].

12. *Wasp*, 29 March 1843, [p. 1].

13. *Ibid.*, 14 January 1843, [p. 2].

14. *Ibid.*, 14 January 1843, [p. 2].

15. *Ibid.*, 27 August 1842, [p. 4].

16. *Ibid.*, 30 April 1842, [p. 3]; 11 June 1842, [p. 3].

17. *Ibid.*, 23 April 1842, [p. 2]; 22 October 1842, [p. 2].
18. *Ibid.*, 23 August 1842, [p. 2].
19. This notice appeared in numerous issues; see, for example, *ibid.*, 14 January 1843, [p. 3].
20. See, for example, the reports on crops, *ibid.*, 20 August 1842, [pp. 2,4].
21. *Ibid.*, 17 September 1842, [p. 3].
22. *Ibid.*, 2 July 1842, [p. 3].
23. *Warsaw Signal*, 27 April 1842, [p. 2].
24. *Ibid.*, 2 June 1841, [p. 2].
25. *Wasp*, 30 April, 1842, [p. 2].
26. *Sangamo Journal*, 8 July 1842, [p. 2].
27. *Ibid.*, 15 July 1847, [p. 2].
28. *Wasp*, 30 July 1842, [p. 2].
29. *History of the Church*, 5:204.
30. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6 vols. (1930; reprint ed., Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 2:219, n. 1.
31. *Wasp*, 19 April 1843, [p. 2].
32. *Warsaw Signal*, 12 June 1844, [p. 2]; see also Robert B. Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 308.
33. John J. Stewart, *Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Mercury Publishing Co., 1966), p. 166.
34. *History of the Church*, 5:114.
35. Stewart, *Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*, p. 166.
36. *History of the Church*, 5:304–5.
37. *Wasp*, 5 April 1843, [p. 1], and 19 April 1843, [p. 2].
38. *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 3 May 1843, [p. 2].
39. Thomas Gregg, *The Prophet of Palmyra* (New York: John B. Alden, Publisher, 1890), p. 179.