

A View of Nauvoo

Richard G. Oman

Not only Mormons were interested in Nauvoo in the nineteenth century. Nauvoo was exotic. It was a relatively large city near the very edge of the American frontier. Nauvoo was the capital of a strange new American religion. The Mississippi River was the main water highway in the center of the continent, and Nauvoo occupied one of the most dramatic sites on the upper river. After the Mormons left, Nauvoo represented the romantic tragedy of a people forced to abandon their homes and flee into the wilderness in exile. All of these factors influenced the creation of works of art depicting the Mormon metropolis on the Mississippi.¹ Some of the resulting etchings and engravings were published in magazines of the day and separately as prints. The painting on the cover of this issue is one such piece.

This image was first published in *United States Illustrated* in 1854 or 1855. Hermann J. Meyer of New York City owned the copyright and probably commissioned the original work in order to publish it as an engraving. His intention tells us that the national curiosity about the Mormons was marketable.

This view is a mixture of the real and romanticized. Nauvoo is depicted from across the river in Iowa. The log cabin in the foreground reminds the viewer that Nauvoo is on the raw frontier. This fact accentuates the exotic nature of having a major town in such a frontier environment. On the river is a large river steamer representing the way many people first came to Nauvoo; the City of Joseph was probably the most interesting stop between St. Louis and St. Paul. The topography of the site is greatly romanticized. The hill is accentuated and the Flat, where most of the population lived, is greatly foreshortened. The actual size of the Temple in relationship to the entire city is also exaggerated. These exaggerations were not

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the result of poor draftsmanship. Rather they were conscious attempts to focus on the visual elements that made Nauvoo recognizable; the bend of the wide Mississippi, the high hill setting, and the Mormon temple.

The original work of art upon which this engraving is based was probably done between 1848 and 1850. On October 9, 1848, the Temple was burned. On May 27, 1850, a tornado struck the Temple and flattened the walls, leaving only the front of the structure standing. Here the roof and tower are gone, but a stone side wall remains. By the time that Frederick Piercy did his drawing of Nauvoo in 1853 the side walls had been flattened.²

NOTES

¹Seth Eastman (1808–75), an army officer on the western frontier, did many sketches along the upper Mississippi. Later he taught drawing and art at the West Point Military Academy. His superb 1848 drawing of Nauvoo is on permanent exhibit at the Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City.

²In the summer of 1853 the English convert Frederick Hawkins Piercy (1830–91) accompanied a company of Mormon emigrants from Liverpool to New Orleans, up the Mississippi to Nauvoo, and west along the Mormon Trail to Salt Lake City. His sketches were published in *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley* in 1855 in Liverpool. One of Piercy's most poignant engravings is the ruin of the Nauvoo Temple.