

How Large Was the Population of Nauvoo?

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Susan Easton Black

Various estimates have been given by many historians for the population of Nauvoo from 1839 to 1846. Admittedly, demographic descriptions of that era are riddled with statistical inadequacies, yet while these difficulties have been recognized by historians, they have not been resolved to the extent possible through research.

While historians all agree that the population of Nauvoo rapidly increased between 1839 and 1846, they either describe this growth with undocumented figures, avoid mentioning any concrete figures, or cast doubt on the figures they have cited. For example, Robert Flanders simply states, "The population of Illinois trebled during each decade between 1820–1840 and doubled between 1840 and 1850."¹ When describing the LDS population, he quotes others: "The Mormons reported a population of ten thousand by late 1842; Thomas Ford in his *History of Illinois* wrote that there were by the end of the year sixteen thousand Mormons altogether in Hancock County."² On another occasion, he quotes from an October 1843 issue of *The Nauvoo Neighbor*, in which Nauvoo is designated "the great emporium of the West, the center of all centers . . . a population of 15,000 souls congregated from the four quarters of the globe."³

Two other historians, David Miller and Della Miller, accurately assert that "when the Mormons first arrived there in the spring of 1839, approximately 100 persons occupied the whole peninsula. By 1845 the official Illinois census showed that the city had grown to nearly 12,000." But they offer the caveat that "most contemporary

accounts (both Mormon and non-Mormon) regularly over-estimated the population, sometimes stretching the figure up to more than 20,000.”⁴ The Millers mistakenly cite the January 7, 1846, issue of the *Warsaw Signal*, which they interpret as saying that the population of Nauvoo was 22,599 (the *Signal* was actually reporting on all of Hancock County).⁵

Church historian B. H. Roberts left room for a range of population sizes: “Early in 1843 [Nauvoo’s] population was variously computed from twelve to sixteen thousand.”⁶ Later he concludes, “When the exodus of the Saints was enforced, Nauvoo had a population variously estimated from twelve to twenty thousand.”⁷ Roberts’s overestimation is even further exceeded by the Illinois Department of Conservation, which announced that “Nauvoo was Illinois’ largest city with a population of 27,000” in 1844.⁸

As Nauvoo’s Mormon era is recalled by historians, one is left wondering if more precise and informative statistics about Nauvoo’s population from 1839 to 1846 can be found. Since numbers range from 12,000 to 27,000, a need for greater accuracy is evident.

Due to the highly transient nature of Nauvoo’s population from 1839 to 1846, a precise yearly count of its residents is nearly impossible. An approximation was once made by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Esquire Butterfield asked the Prophet in January 1843 “to prophesy how many inhabitants would come to Nauvoo.” Joseph replied, “I will not tell how many inhabitants would come to Nauvoo; but when I went to Commerce, I told the people I would build up a city, and the old inhabitants replied ‘We will be damned if you can.’ So I prophesied that I would build up a city, and the inhabitants prophesied that I could not; and we have now about 12,000 inhabitants.”⁹

The census records of the 1840s fill out the picture somewhat. For example, the 1840 Hancock County census recorded 2,450 people as residents of the Nauvoo Precinct.¹⁰ The Church leadership conducted a Nauvoo census in 1842 indicating under 4,000 people living in approximately eight to nine hundred households.¹¹ In 1845 the Illinois State census counted 11,000

people living within the Nauvoo city limits, and that number was confirmed by another account that year placing the city of Nauvoo at 11,036 inhabitants.¹²

Numerous records of Nauvoo's history from 1839 to 1846 have long been available to historians. The documents also generally corroborate these population figures. Several years ago, the Church compiled a cumulative list of the Latter-day Saints who, at any time, had been residents of Nauvoo. That list contains the names of 12,642 Nauvoo citizens. In addition, information on those who attended four Nauvoo wards and early Relief Society meetings has also been preserved. The records of those who vicariously performed baptisms for the dead in the Nauvoo Temple and those who received their endowments and were sealed to their spouses are found in the Nauvoo Temple Endowment Register from December 10, 1845, to February 7, 1846. Moreover, Nauvoo tax records exist for each year (although they are incomplete for 1844), and Nauvoo property lists have also survived.¹³ As journals, branch records, ship lists, ordinance data, and parish records are searched, increased data provides a more comprehensive, objective, and believable basis for accounting.

From over one thousand sources,¹⁴ I recently compiled a fifty-volume work entitled *The Membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1848*.¹⁵ It acknowledges, highlights, and reconstructs the contribution and commitment of a total of 23,200 known people who were members of the Church at any time during the years from 1830 to 1848.

A synthesis of all these noncensus data indicates that the population of Nauvoo grew from 100 in 1839 to about 4,000 in 1842, rose to about 12,000 in 1844, and stood at around 11,000 in 1845. Births, deaths, immigration, apostasy, transiency, and many other factors present in frontier river towns like Nauvoo, of course, make it difficult to pin down this moving target, but these numbers are based on the best available demographic information and should replace the older assumed or previously estimated population figures for Nauvoo.

NOTES

¹Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1975), 16.

²Flanders, *Nauvoo*, 56; Illinois governor Thomas Ford actually placed the population of Nauvoo at “about 15,000 . . . scattered over about six square miles,” not at 16,000; see his *History of Illinois, from Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs; New York: Ivison and Phinney, 1854), 403.

³Flanders, *Nauvoo*, 176–77.

⁴David E. Miller and Della S. Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Peregrine Smith, 1974), 5.

⁵Miller and Miller, *Nauvoo*, 75.

⁶B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930), 2:179.

⁷Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church* 3:23.

⁸*Illinois Department of Conservation: Life and Land Together* (Springville, Ill.: State of Illinois, issued by Land and Historic Sites, n.d.).

⁹Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 5:232.

¹⁰United States Federal Census, 1840.

¹¹1842 Church Census of Nauvoo, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

¹²Illinois State Census, 1845; *Times and Seasons* 6 (November 15, 1845): 1031; and Glen M. Leonard and T. Edgar Lyon, “The Nauvoo Years,” *Ensign* 9 (September 1979): 12.

¹³Nauvoo City Records, LDS Church Archives, and Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

¹⁴Sources included journals, biographies, historical records, periodicals, minutes, census records, ship lists, Church records, land records, rosters, cemetery records, tax and property lists, dissertations, civil records, and genealogical records. Information on each member is divided into four sections: vital statistics, Church ordinances, temple ordinances, and biographical information.

¹⁵Susan Easton Black, *The Membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1830–1848*, 50 vols. (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1990). This work was compiled at the invitation of Earl Olsen, director of the Church Historical Department, in 1982. James Rosenvall and his colleagues at Brigham Young University developed a computer program to store, index, search, and analyze this data.