

**Independence, Missouri, and the
Mormons, 1827-1833**

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T. Edgar Lyon

Money! Money! Money! Wordsworth wrote: “The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” Yet without the quest for money there would not have been an Independence, Missouri. Two economic factors were the primary cause of Independence coming into existence where and when it did.

The first of these was the Santa Fe trade. In the early 1800s pack trains moved westward from a number of starting points in Missouri and Texas to Spanish Santa Fe. An 1824 trader’s inventory indicated it was a flourishing market for

Cotton goods consisting of coarse and fine cambrics, calicoes, domestic shawls, handkerchiefs, steam-loomed shirtings and cotton hose; a few woolen goods consisting of super blues, stroudings, pelisse cloth and shawls, crepes, bombazettes; some light articles of cutlery, a silk shawl, and looking glasses¹

Spanish authorities levied high taxes on the American trades and at times imprisoned or fined them for illegal entry into the Spanish domains. But the trades came back to the United States with items of trade which more than offset the risks and inconveniences of the ventures. They returned with droves of jacks and jennets, horses and mules, but more important, gold and silver coins, and bullion. The United States at that time was a marginal producer of precious metals needed for its economy, and gold and silver were always in short supply. The Santa Fe trade tapped a seemingly endless source of these commodities.

The monetary unit of the Spanish domains was a *real*, a silver coin about the size of an American five-cent piece, equivalent to twelve-and-a-half cents in American money. For trade purposes, first between European nations and then extended to the Americas, Spain had minted a large silver *eight real* piece. The American dollar was the same size and value. When American trade with the Spanish colonies in the western hemisphere was opened, their “dollars” became interchangeable. Particularly after the Mississippi export trade in lumber, grain, livestock, and furs reached the Spanish possessions, there was a return flow of Spanish specie to the United States.

Due to the continued shortage of subsidiary coins minted by the government, ingenious Americans commenced making their own from the

Spanish dollars. In blacksmith and machine shops, on farms and in houses, the Spanish pieces of eight were cut in half. Americans gave the Spanish *reals* the nickname of “bits” so that a half of the Spanish dollar, as it was called, was worth four bits; these, when cut in half, were dubbed two-bit pieces worth twenty-five cents; in turn, when halved, they became one-bit pieces worth twelve-and-a-half cents; these, when cut in two, provided a coin worth six-and-a-quarter cents known as a pickayune.² These mutilated segments of Spanish pieces of eight were common coins in portions of western America during the first half of the nineteenth century. The Spanish trade was responsible for much of this coin supply in Missouri and adjoining states and territories.

The Mexican Revolution (1820–1821) and the Santa Fe Trade

After Mexico had ended Spanish rule and established itself as a republic, its customs officials became more lenient than their Spanish predecessors had been toward trade with the United States. Although taxes were levied on the trade and license fees were required, they were lower than those formerly required, and it became easier and more profitable to engage in the Santa Fe trade. In 1821 a resident of Franklin, Missouri, William Becknell by name, embarked on an enterprise which has caused Missouri historians to designate him as “The Father of the Santa Fe Trade.” On 1 September 1821 a group of men whom he had organized for a Santa Fe trading venture started with a few wagons and pack animals. On 30 January 1822 he was back at Franklin with a rich store of gold and silver. One man who had invested \$60.00 in trade goods received \$900.00 from his investment—a return profit of 1,500 percent in five months.

Such earnings spurred others to try their luck at the alluring trade. Becknell, with many recruits, led a second trading expedition later in the same year. Through his previous experience he was able to shorten the route, and using mostly wagons on this second journey he returned with a large amount of precious metals.

During 1822 a Mr. Marmaduke also left Missouri with twenty-one loaded wagons accompanied by a party of eighty-one people. Leaving in May, the party was back in Franklin County four months later with \$180,000.00 in gold and silver and \$10,000.00 in furs.

From that time onward for more than two decades the Santa Fe trade was a glamorous adventure—quick fortunes—unless one were killed by the Indians (as happened to Jedediah S. Smith) or died of thirst on the Cimmaron Desert. It was a challenging journey into a foreign country with a different language and culture. It has been estimated that his trade brought to the United States upwards of \$3,000,000.00 between 1827 and 1843.³ In 1845 the Santa Fe traders returned to Missouri with \$1,000,000.00 in gold,

silver, and woolen blankets, in addition to droves of horses, mules, jacks, and jennets, the latter playing an important part in establishing the famous Missouri mule industry.⁴ Returns were often 200 percent to 300 percent on the investment made for goods each trip, but later, as the market was somewhat satisfied, the profits lowered but continued to vary between 20 percent and 100 percent on a four-to-five-month journey.

The Mountain Fur Trade

At identically the same time the Santa Fe trade was growing, the second economic factor contributing to the growth of Independence was developing. It was the Missouri and Rocky Mountain fur trade. While not bringing to the United States the much needed gold and silver as was the case with the Spanish-American trade, still its monetary value was about equal. In 1806 when Lewis and Clark returned from their overland exploration to the Pacific, they reported meeting eleven bands of fur traders and trappers on the Missouri. In 1808 the Missouri Fur Company was organized. In 1822 William Ashley and Andrew Henry established an effective system of trapping and trading which soon became the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. The American and the Pacific Fur Companies were soon added to these organizations, and cargoes of furs and buffalo hides were shipped annually down the waterways coming from the mountains. John Dougherty estimated the value of furs brought to St. Louis between 1815 and 1839 as

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| Beaver skins | \$1,500,000.00 |
| Buffalo hides | 1,170,000.00 |
| Otter, deer, mink, muskrat, etc. | 1,080,000.00 |
| Total | \$3,750,000.00 ⁵ |

The Founding of Independence, Missouri

Perhaps the most pressing problems which both the Santa Fe trade and the fur traders faced was getting their trade goods as far westward as possible by water transportation and getting the results of their efforts to the Mississippi Valley markets where they could realize a profit on these goods. As a result, towns grew up along the Missouri, ever pressing westward as shallower draft boats were developed to navigate the river.

In 1827, just six years following Becknell's first Santa Fe trading experiment, a site was selected near the western border of the state of Missouri which steamboats could reach and where it was thought a permanent landing could be established. It was in the country of Jackson (much larger than the present county of that name) that a site was surveyed and named Independence. Soon a number of merchants settled there to supply goods to the

traders and farmers moving into the area. A one-story log courthouse was constructed and the town commenced to grow. The volume of trade, however, surpassed many larger towns farther downstream, and its potential for growth appeared to be unlimited.

The Coming of the Mormons

In the fourth year of Independence's existence—during the early months of 1831—four men representing a new religious group appeared on the ungraded, ungraveled streets of the thriving frontier town. They were missionaries sent by Joseph Smith, prophet and president of the recently restored church of Christ, to preach the gospel and bring the message of the Book of Mormon to Indians beyond the frontier of America. They had also been authorized to locate a favorable place for the members of their rapidly growing church to settle. The physical features and potential agricultural wealth of Jackson County appealed to them. Oliver Cowdery composed a letter, dated “May 7, 1831, Kaw Township, Jackson County, Missouri,” which one of the missionaries soon hurried eastward to Kirtland, Ohio, to deliver to Joseph Smith. In it Cowdery gave promising reports of the agricultural prospects of Jackson County, but made an adverse evaluation of the inhabitants:

The letter we received from you informed us that the opposition was great against you. Now, our beloved brethren, we verily believe that we also can rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer shame for His name; for almost the whole country, consisting of Universalists, Atheists, Deists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and other professed Christians, priests and people; with all the devils from the infernal pit are united, and foaming out their own shame [against us]. God forbid that I should bring a railing accusation against them, for vengeance belongeth to Him who is able to repay; and herein, brethren, we confide. . . .

We are well, bless the Lord; and preach the Gospel we will, if earth and hell oppose our way—for we dwell in the midst of scorpions. . . . Amen.⁶

In August 1831 Joseph Smith and other leading churchmen visited Independence where they participated in dedicating the land for the gathering of the Saints and ceremonially commenced building the first house in Kaw Township, a few miles west of Independence. They also dedicated a site upon which temples were to be erected. Soon hundreds of Saints settled in Jackson County, mostly on farms outside of Independence. They undertook to live a revealed form of religious communitarianism, referred to by them as *consecration* and *stewardship*. A mercantile firm was established to supply their needs and serve as the institution to dispose of the surplus commodities produced by the group. At Independence a printing shop was established to print a religious periodical for the Mormons. It was

also to produce text books for the free school which the community had established.

Less than two full years after the first Mormon settlers had arrived in Jackson County and commenced building their houses, fencing their lands, and tilling the soil, friction developed between the Mormon newcomers and the old settlers. Some of Oliver Cowdery's forebodings were becoming realities. The quick profits from the Santa Fe trade had lured many venturesome souls to Jackson County. Here was the last town westward one would encounter before reaching the Indian territory; thus Jackson County was a rendezvous for fugitives from justice in the states farther east. These people, as well as the business interests, public officials, farmers, and a few semi-professional preachers of the various Christian sects, were agreed that the Mormons were bringing a blight on the county. Three years earlier, a missionary of the American Home Missionary Society, sent to Jackson County to proselyte for the Presbyterian and Congregational faiths, had sent a letter to the national office describing the conditions and people he found in the county:

I take my pen in hand to improve the opportunity to report my peregrinations since I last wrote. Please be informed, that, according to mission Board instructions, I have penetrated many miles of wilderness and after many privations and suffering physical discomforts due to the variable inclemency of the weather, have at last reached the western border of our nation. What I have found here is anything but encouraging. The prospects for our evangelical work appear less likely here than any place I have seen in my westward journeyings. Such a godless place, filled with so many profane swearers, would be difficult to imagine. The majority of the people make a mild profession of Christian religion, but it is mere words, not manifested in Christian living.

There are a few so-called ministers of the Gospel hereabouts, but they are a sad lot of churchmen, untrained, uncouth, given to imbibing spiritous liquors, and indulging, as participants, in the gambling which accompanies horse-racing, and cock fighting.

There are many suspicious characters who headquarter here, but when intelligence arrives that a federal marshal is approaching this county, there is a hurried scurrying of many of this element to the Indian territory on the west side of the Missouri. As soon as the marshal returns down stream, this element is back in the saloons and other centers of sin. In this town, one soon learns not to make inquiry concerning the names nor home towns of this class of men. Apparently they are hiding something of their past of which they are not proud, and are also afraid of detection.

Christian Sabbath observance here appears to be unknown. It is a day for merchandising, jollity, drinking, gambling, and general anti-Christian conduct.

When the Santa Fe wagon trains return here, or pass through on their way eastward, there is a multiplication of sin beyond the usual amount.

There appears to be an over abundance of females here practicing the world's oldest profession. . . .

Gouging and more serious forms of violence are common. The sheriff has little support from the populace, except to prevent burglars breaking into the merchants' shops. He confided to me that the citizens do not care to have the lawless punished. . . .⁷

This protestant missionary's description indicates conditions which could become volatile if something ignited the tinder of dissatisfaction.

A revelation received by Joseph Smith at Independence on 7 August 1831 established a standard of conduct for the Saints who were gathering there. It outlined principles which required a strict Christian type of Sabbath observance characteristic of New England. Besides being commanded to attend church services, the Saints were enjoined to refrain from all work and to eat but the simplest of Sunday dinners, most of which could be prepared the previous day. The revelation indicated that the Saints should not mingle in the social and business activities which characterized the Sabbath practices of the old settlers of Jackson County (D&C 59).

Sources of Conflict

In July 1833 the tension manifested itself in public meetings, accusations, and then violence toward the Saints. The consensus of the old settlers was stated in five areas which they envisioned as the cause of conflict: (1) The Mormon people had a peculiar religion, which made them stand aloof from all other people in the county, as they did not participate in the contemporary community life. There was practically no social intercourse with them, hence there would be no leveling of their peculiarities through intermarriage or longer association together. (2) The Saints were accused of interfering with the settlers' black slaves, making them discontented by preaching a strange gospel to them. (3) the cultural mores of the Saints were not in harmony with those of the earlier inhabitants of the county, which were essentially Yankee in origin. The old settlers were mostly of southern backgrounds, with their roots in the slave culture. (4) The Mormons presented a political threat to the old settlers. Already 1200 of the 3500 inhabitants of the county were adherents of the new religion. More continued to arrive each month and it was openly boasted that thousands more were coming to settle in the county. By simple arithmetic a few hundred additional Mormons could have wrested political control from those who had established the city and county. (5) Economically the Mormons were a detriment to the city and county. They did not purchase goods from the local merchants, as they had no money, but traded among themselves at the Church storehouse. It was likely that this condition would continue to worsen as more Saints settled there. Some of the old settlers were selling

their property to the Mormons and moving away. This meant fewer and fewer customers in the stores, and future financial ruin.

Business conditions were deteriorating. In the spring of 1833, about two months before the friction developed into open conflict, the turbulent waters of the flooding Missouri destroyed the excellent Independence landing and shifted the channel of the river away from Independence. Farther upstream, a new town, Westport, was established, where a better landing was located. This city soon took over much of the Santa Fe trade and the fur trade. The business stagnation caused by this act of nature was blamed on the Mormons.

In July a meeting at Independence, attended by about five hundred Missourians, drew up these demands: (1) No additional Mormons were to settle in Jackson County. (2) Those then resident in the county were to sell their property as soon as they could and leave the vicinity. (3) The periodical, *The Evening* and *the Morning Star*, must cease publication. (4) All Mormon shops and the storehouse were to close as soon as possible.

The meeting then adjourned and the leaders presented their demands to the Mormon officials who refused to give an immediate answer, asking for time to study the impact of the proposals and to consider the problem of the large tracts of land which they had purchased. Angered by this refusal, the mob then wrecked the printing shop and threw the press in the river. Attempts were made by the Saints to sell, but with little success. Finally, on 23 July 1833, the Mormon leaders signed an agreement that half the Saints would leave by 1 January following and the remainder by 1 April 1834.

As this article had been made under duress, the Church leaders decided to appeal to Governor Dunklin, asking that the state protect them in their property and lives. In reply, Governor Dunklin suggested that the Saints employ lawyers and seek redress through the courts. Accordingly they hired lawyers, of whom Doniphan and Atchison were the most capable. Believing they had the support of the Governor, because of the sympathetic suggestions given in his letter, the Saints announced on 20 October 1833 their intention to remain and defend themselves while awaiting the outcome of court proceedings which had been instituted. Eleven days later the old settlers and many rowdies who had joined them attacked the Mormon settlement on the Big Blue, located a short distance from Independence. There they unroofed twelve houses, whipped men, and threatened women and children. The next day houses in Independence were stoned. A few days later a mob attacked other settlements and by November sixth and seventh the ferries were crowded with fleeing Saints seeking refuge in Clay County to the north.

For two days, November 6 and 7, 1833, the ferries were crowded with fleeing refugees, most of whom were in dire distress. . . . Husbands were

inquiring for their wives and women for their husbands, parents for children and children for parents. Some had the good fortune to escape with their family, household goods, and some provisions; while others knew not the fate of their friends and had lost all of their goods. The scene was indescribable. . . . By the close of the year not a Mormon was left in the county.⁸

Dr. Lyon, a longtime student of Church history, gives us some new insights into the events and the times in Independence, Missouri, in 1833. He is associate director of the LDS Institute of Religion at the University of Utah as well as research historian of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., and a member of the editorial board of *BYU Studies*.

1. E.G. Violette, *A History of Missouri* (New York, 1918), p. 196.
2. Violette, pp. 141–42.
3. Violette, p. 196.
4. E. C. McReynolds, *Missouri: A History of the Crossroads State* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1954), p. 99.
5. McReynolds, p. 115. McReynolds states that Ashley, Henry, Smith, Jackson and the Sublettes, over a period of a dozen years, brought furs to St. Louis valued at \$500,000.00 a year.
6. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City, 1949), 1:182–83.
7. Excerpted from the original in the files of the American Home Missionary Society in the Hammond Library of the Chicago Theological Seminary, Missouri File.
8. Violette, pp. 214–15.