

Nauvoo's Whistling and Whittling Brigade

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Thurmon Dean Moody

After the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith on 27 June 1844, anti-Mormon violence subsided briefly as the mob element awaited the expected demise of the Church. When the Church did not fall, persecution resumed, officially taking the form of the repeal of the Nauvoo Charter. The Charter, approved by the Illinois Legislature in December 1840,¹ provided the citizens of Nauvoo with, among other things, the right to regulate their own police protection and to punish lawbreakers:

Sec. 13—The City Council shall have exclusive power within the city, by ordinance to license, regulate and restrain the keeping of ferries; to regulate the police of the city, to impose fines, forfeitures and penalties for the breach of any ordinance . . .

Sec. 27—The City Council shall have power to provide for the punishment of offenders, by imprisonment in the country or city jail, in all cases when such offenders shall fail to pay the fines and forfeitures which may be recovered against them.²

These provisions allowed the Mormons to protect themselves until the repeal of the Nauvoo Charter in January 1845, which left the city without a legal civil government,³ and police protection. Two representatives to the Illinois Legislature, Jacob B. Backenstos and A. W. Babbitt, alluded to this situation in speeches made before the Illinois House of Representatives in January 1845. Backenstos said:

Mr. Speaker, one very important reason in my mind why we should not repeal the city charter of Nauvoo is, that you strip the largest and most populous city in this State of all her police regulations. Why not amend the charter in all its objectionable features? Why not leave them power sufficient to maintain an efficient city organization⁴?

Babbitt is reported to have added:

Repeal the Charter of Nauvoo, prescribe her citizens by your public acts, and [you will] tolerate and encourage the demon of mob violence that surrounds this people, and is waiting to feast upon their destruction⁵. . .

Despite these pleas, the Charter was repealed and the citizens of Nauvoo were faced with the consequences.

In the ensuing months, the Mormons claimed that certain disreputable characters were indeed taking advantage of the situation. In his diary, William B. Pace wrote:

In the meantime the mob element exercised such an influence on the Governor and Legislature that they repealed the city Charter of Nauvoo, and left us without any city Government, or any means of controlling the rougher element, hence the town was soon over-run with all manner of ruffians from the mob camp around about⁶.

Wandle Mace gives us the following:

...They tried every means they could devise to bring trouble upon Nauvoo, frequently a party would land from a steamboat and come into the city, commit their deviltry, and return to the boat and leave again, well knowing we had no law to protect us since the city charter was taken away⁷.

Facing this uneasy state of affairs, the ecclesiastical leaders felt compelled to find some means of maintaining discipline in the city streets. Not wanting to resort to extra-legal activities and being aware that their priesthood authority did not apply to any but their own people, they sought an alternative solution. If some plan were not found, they would either have to live with the consequences or resort to their own mob rule—where power prevailed but trouble ensued.

The Life of the Whistling and Whittling Brigade

On 30 January 1845 a “General Council of the Authorities of the City and Church” met to decide how best to react to the repeal of the Charter. They first considered regaining the Charter by appealing the case to the Supreme Court. And if that failed, they proposed to obtain a tract of land and set up a “Territorial Government⁸.” Neither of these proposals was ever carried out.

On Sunday, 16 March 1845, Brigham Young called a meeting for the next evening to initiate a plan which he hoped would resolve the undesirable predicament in which the Mormons found themselves. He hinted at an ecclesiastical plan of action as he said:

Tomorrow evening we want the bishops at the Masonic Hall, and we will organize them according to our notion of things. We have no police; the legislature has repealed our charter, and we mean to have the “City of Joseph⁹” organized. The streets shall be kept dear; and the poor cared for¹⁰.

The plan which was settled upon at this meeting was one which was apparently conceived three days earlier by Hosea Stout—formerly Chief of Police under the Charter—and the “New Police¹¹.” Stout’s journal records:

March 14, Friday—Wrote at home till ten o’clock; went down in town, met with Major Bills—had some consertion [conversation] about military matters. At One o’clock went to a meeting of the New Police under Col. Markham¹² at the Masonic Hall—they were organizing into companies of ten with a Captain at the head of each company; but after discussion it was concluded to organize the whole community of Saints in this County into

Quorums of 12 Deacons and have a Bishop at their head, and they could thus administer in the Lesser offices of the Church and preserve order without a Charter, as the Legislature had taken away our Charter and deprived us of our Republican rights¹³. . . .

Although it appears that the New Police conceived this plan, Brigham Young proclaimed it as official Mormon practice at the 17 March meeting. Various accounts of this new organization differ in some respects, such as how many were organized into each company; yet there was total agreement that the purpose of the organization was two-fold: (1) “to take care of the poor¹⁴,” and (2) “to guard the city at night, to keep everything straight¹⁵.” Some of the accounts of this system read as follows:

. . . Mon. 24 [March¹⁶] The Na[u]voo City Charter having been repealed by the State Legislature, the citizens of Nauvoo were organized into a body known as Bishops and Deacons, in which organization I was appointed Bishop [he was 26 years old at the time]. Mon. 31. My quorum of Deacons were on duty tonight for the first time.¹⁷

About this time a meeting was called in the Muonic Hall for the purpose Brother Brigham said to organize for they have taken away our charter and we must resort to something. We must organize 12 men into a company with a bishop at their head and see if we cannot take care of the poor u they may come here from Warsaw and Carthage¹⁸.

This was my first real public service, at the age of fourteen and a half years; being large of stature and well equipped, I did my full share of duty for five days and nights. After this I did perform guard duty at nights all winter about the streets of Nauvoo¹⁹.

The bishops assisted by the deacons policed the city following the repeal of the Charter in December 1844. On each corner was a man from twelve to twenty years of age who watched all movements from sunset to dawn and reported any suspicious activity to the bishop, who promptly consulted the leaders and the Nauvoo Legion officials.²⁰

. . . The authorities organized the entire city into districts and appointed an officer over every ten men They were called Bishops and Deacons and had to guard the city at night, to keep every thing straight. This organization was kept up during the summer. I was appointed one of the bishops [also at age 26] and as I had a very large district assigned to me, I was allowed 13 men and we had to keep watch over the north part of the city one night each week, including the steamboat landing. Our weapons was a large hickory cane and a toothpick [a huge knife] the object of the knife to whittle Rascals out of town²¹.

As indicated in the last account, the deacons did have weapons. In her master’s thesis, Reh Halford supports David Moore’s account that the organization of bishops and deacons was indeed the source of the Whistling and Whittling Brigade:

To the deacons was delegated the obligation to “attend to all things needful and especially the watch.” Organized as Whistling and Whittling Brigades they patrolled the city²².

Paul D. Bailey gives a more detailed account:

The City of Joseph’s elders ingeniously met the increasing flood of Gentile undesirables by organizing the boy population into a “Whistling and Whittling Brigade.” Suspicious strangers immediately would be surrounded by groups of boys, armed with long-bladed jack-knives and sticks. Whichever way the suspect moved, the boys followed; whistling and whittling as they went. Not a question would they ask, not a question would they answer. They were too small to strike individually; too many to battle collectively. When they descended on a hapless stranger, they hugged his presence like vermin, until in exasperation he was glad to take hasty leave from the abode of the Saints²³.

From these sketches it appears that with the birth of the bishop and deacon organization the Whistling and Whittling Brigade also came into existence. There is some question, however, as to whether the idea for the brigade first originated with the Nauvoo bishop-deacon organization. One reference suggests that the brigade had been employed earlier in the Saints’ history to protect Joseph Smith, as Mosiah Hancock reports:

I joined the whistling and whittling band. In those days there was, now and then, a fop or dude who would go to a man’s shingle pile, and with his hat or cap cocked on one side, would sit and whittle and whistle. There was no law against that, but from what we could learn some of them were interested in taking the life of the Prophet. We kept a good watch, and were directed to keep an eye on the “Black Ducks.” We really tried to do our duty and we succeeded in bagging some game. I was about to give some instances, but forbear by saying, “In no case did I ever help to engage in whittling any one down to make them cross the great river unless they were known to be lurking around the Prophet’s premises quite late or to be seeking that which was none of their business²⁴.”

Hancock’s journal was written from memory many years after the events which he describes, and it is possible that he confused informal attempts to protect the Prophet before 1845 with the more highly organized Whistling and Whittling Brigade of a later time. A reading of an estimated eighty journals and diaries failed to offer any evidence of an organized band before 1845. A passage from John L. Smith’s journal may shed some further light on this problem:

Joseph [Smith] often visited us here, as officers were seeking to kidnap and take him to Missouri. He used to call and say, “Johnnie, now watch and if any strangers come, you whistle to me so I can slip into the cornfield²⁵. . . .”

While Johnnie Smith’s job was apparently not part of an organized effort, such random activities may have given others the idea of “clearing the streets” with the same methods.

Descriptions of the activities and organization of the brigade vary. Some accounts characterize the “whittlers” as being older. John D. Lee, for instance, described the brigade implying that he could have fit easily into its ranks when he was thirty-three years old, although he insists he “never took part in such low, dirty doings²⁶.” Wandle Mace records that the brigade was formed from the membership of the old police force rather than the deacons:

... our families were exposed to the rascals who on finding them unprotected by husbands and fathers would insult and abuse them, in consequence of such things the old police formed themselves into “Whittling” companies, and guarded the city from the rascals in this wise. When a stranger came into the city they would learn if the were upon legitimate business, if so they did not interfere with them, but if they had no legitimate business, the were then under the serveilance of the Whittlers who would flow [follow] wherever they went, whittling and whistling, they did not molest them in any way, not even talking to them but simply follow them, whittling and whistling as the went. . . .²⁷

Ephraim S. Green, one of those ousted from Nauvoo by the Whittlers, reported via a Thomas Sharp article in the *Warsaw Signal* that the brigade was composed of older men:

Mr. Sharp:—The last case of Whittling and Whistling a man out of the Holy City, came off yesterday evening. . . . Mr. Green having some business that called him to Nauvoo, was engaged transacting the same in the house of Edson Whipple, when a loud knock was heard at the door. . . .

Mts. Whipple shut the door and returned into the room where Mr. Green was engaged writing. The mob crowded around the door and windows, making the most discordant and hideous noises. At this stage in the proceedings Mr. Whipple was seen approaching the house. The ring-leader held a conversation with him, he appeared considerably agitated and upon going into the house told Mr. Green that he had better leave, as the mob was determined he should not stay. Mr. G. replied that if they wished it he would certainly go to save them from trouble; but previous to going would like to speak to Col. Markham, who appeared to be one of the principal leaders of the mob. . . . Having hastily made the necessary preparation he started to leave the City, followed by the mob, yelling, halooing, whistling, whittling to the great amusement of all the boys and dogs in town²⁸.

Other accounts point to the involvement of younger boys. William B. Pace wrote in his diary: “As we had not authority to arrest or protect the town, the boys resorted to whistling²⁹!” Hosea Stout also reports a younger age as he wrote of using his police authority in trying to stop the boys:

April 27th. Sunday—I went with my wife to meeting at the Stand, Elders Babbitt and Taylor preached. Old Father Cowles, one of Law’s apostates was there; a company of boys assembled to whistle him out of town, but I prevented them. I came home, and in the evening went to Police, on my way was informed that the “old man” had been whistled out immediately after meeting³⁰.

Historical works which refer to the Whistling and Whittling Brigade describe the participants as “boys,” “whittling boys,” “small boys,” and “whittling-whistling boys.”³¹

The plan of the Whistling and Whittling Brigade, as viewed thus far, seems to indicate a strategy of escorting undesirables, apostates, and “unfriendly” out of town. The brigade employed both harassment and “scare tactics,” as William B. Pace indicated in this vivid picture of their activities:

... Every boy generally could whistle and most of them had knives from ten to fourteen inches long, in scabbards, “a-la-bouy”, and when any of these fellows became boisterous, or showed any signs of meddling the boy discovered would draw his knife and commence whittleing and whistleing soon a crowd of his pals gathered, then they would surround the obnoxious element, be he large or small, many or few, and whistle and whittle in his direction and stick by him until he was out of town. . . .

This was rather an amusing process not a word was said but an unearthly whistle (and generally everyone had his own favorite tune) and an incessant whittling with those large knives was enough to strike terror to the hearts of the victims and he got out of town as quick as his legs could carry him.³²

In the 9 April 1845 issue of the *Warsaw Signal* we have recorded a rather graphic picture of the activities of the Whistling and Whittling Brigade which sums up the effects and the effectiveness of the group on undesirable outsiders.

On Sunday, 6 April 1845, Dr. John F. Charles of Warsaw came to the Mormon general conference in Nauvoo and was suspected of being an enemy to the Church. O. B. Huntington called him “a real Mormon eater,”³³ and Hosea Stout claimed that he was “taking notes for the ‘WARSAW SIGNAL’” and “pretended to be our friend but in reality he was a secret enemy lurking in our midst.” He was suspected of being there “that the Conference should be broke up³⁴” and he was charged with that offense by a “ruffian” who “told him that he was suspected for a spy—that they expected a mob was about to break up the conference and that he must leave the city³⁵.” When he didn’t respond to this invitation by the next forenoon, he was set upon by “a gang of ruffians, with bowie knives and dirks in their hands whittling sticks, whistling in chorus, and crying out ‘Carthage’ and ‘Warsaw’ and using taunting and insulting language, evidently for his annoyance³⁶.” Dr. Charles felt himself abused and “having found his way to the stand, where the leaders were sitting³⁷,” Dr. Charles “abruptly demanded to know if this people tolerated such things. Of which President Young satisfied him that they did not.”³⁸ This appeased Dr. Charles and he “hoped he would be no further annoyed.” Soon afterwards, he was again accosted by “the same escort of ruffians, . . . with their taunts and insults as before³⁹.” He quickly returned to make bitter complaints to President Young who is reported to have “quietly replied in the words of Martin Van-Buren when President of the United States,—to Joseph Smith. ‘Gentlemen your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you, the legislature has taken away our city charter, we have no laws, nor

power to protect you⁴⁰’ “Brigham Young then called Hosea Stout, and, in Stout’s words, “requested me to protect him from further insults, and ferret out the names of the boys who insulted him. I conducted him to the Mansion House. . . .⁴¹

Of this incident Dr. Charles said: “An officer appeared and told the scamps to desist. They said they were only whistling and they had a right to whistle.” Dr. Charles maintained that Brigham Young was later “compelled, either to acknowledge his agency in the matter, or to stop further annoyance; he, therefore, sent four of officers to escort Dr. C. and protect him from being insulted.”⁴² The *Warsaw Signal*, which had carried Dr. Charles’ report, finished its article by saying:

Brigham Young and the Mormon leaders were at the bottom of the whole proceeding against Dr. C.; but the cool and determined conduct of the latter, forced them to disclaim it. Had the ruffians believed Brigham Young sincere in his rebuke, they would not afterwards have dared to annoy him.⁴³

One week after Dr. Charles’ report appeared in the *Warsaw Signal*, John Taylor, editor of the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, answered the *Signal*’s charge that Brigham Young and other Mormon leaders had sanctioned these proceedings:

Only one complaint came before the conference, and that was, from the honorable Dr. Charles of Warsaw. It however, was not chargeable upon the conference. Some full grown boys, the leader probably from the State of Iowa, knowing there was *no charter* in Nauvoo, and knowing also, that there was no statute in Illinois, to suppress *whittling and whistling*, annoyed the doctor’s patience by this new exhibition of mental and physical recreation.

Such a novel school would have been attended to, *instantly*, but as Van Buren said, “though your cause is ever so just, we can do nothing for you; we have no power;” the legislature has “repealed our charter!”

A gentleman however, went and [politely] saw the doctor beyond the harm of *whistling whittling*⁴⁴.

Because of the differing accounts, it is difficult to clarify exactly where the brigade stood in relation to the official Church organization. On 14 April 1845, during the height of the brigade encounter⁴⁵, Brigham Young mentioned that,

The deacons have become very efficient looking after the welfare of the saints; every part of the city is watched with the strictest care, and whatever time of night the streets are traveled at the corner of every block a deacon is found attending his duty⁴⁶.

However, no mention of his direct and open endorsement of the “whistling” organization has been discovered. Brigham Young’s actions often seemed to condone the brigade, but, as the Dr. Charles incident made clear, he publicly implied that he was opposed to the brigade’s treatment

of the doctor. Obviously Brigham Young did support the bishop-deacon method of “watching and guarding” Nauvoo, but it was not as apparent that he was supportive of what appears to be its offshoot, the Whistling and Whittling Brigade.

Conclusion

History has recorded that there was indeed a Whistling and Whittling Brigade. The effects of the brigade’s actions were more complex than met the eyes of the participants, the supporters, the enemies, and the victims. A struggle was taking place over what the Mormons saw as an encroachment upon their peace and what their opponents saw as a peculiar religion infringing on their rights of citizenship. The Whistling Brigade played a very active role in the contentions on both sides and became a bit of propaganda for the anti-Mormons⁴⁷.

The brigade was a new experience in an attempt to achieve a coexistence that proved to be unattainable. In writing of the success of the Whistling and Whittling Brigade during its short lifespan, William B. Pace reflected the opinions expressed by many involved with the organization:

This lasted but a few weeks when it became apparent that to “go into Nauvoo men must mind their own business and not meddle with the people” or they would get whistled out⁴⁸.

However successful the brigade was in keeping the peace in the short run, it could not handle the violent mobs that were to come, and the Mormons were forced to evacuate Nauvoo the following spring.

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1. Thomas Greg, *History of Hancock County, Illinois*(Chicago: Chas. C. Chapman, 1880), p. 354.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 354–56.
3. William E. Berrett and Alma P. Burton, *Readings in L.D.S. Church History from Original Manuscripts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955), 2:45.
4. Heman C. Smith, ed., *Journal of History* (Lamoni, Iowa: The Board of Publication of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 914), 7:441.
5. Wandle Mace, *Journal*, 1809 1890, p. 170, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
6. William B. Pace, *Diary of William B. Pace and Biography of His Father, James Pace*, p. 7, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.
7. Mace *Journal*, p. 186.
8. Hosea Stout, *Diary of Hosea Stout, 1810–1899*, pp. 18A–19A, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.
9. See Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 7:394. Hereafter cited as *HC*.

10. HC 7:386–87.

11. The Church did have the police continue to meet, mostly as a guard for the temple, which was being constructed at the time. They did not function as the “old police” had under the Charter; hence the term “new police” They were more an ecclesiastically controlled guard, receiving little if any pay for their services.

12. Markham was a colonel in the Nauvoo Legion, not in the United States military.

13. Stout Diary, p. 34.

14. M. R. Hovey, compiler, *Biography of Joseph Grafton Hovey*, p. 29, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.

15. David Moore, *Compiled Writings of David Moore*, p. 29, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.

16. This date is one week later than that given in other accounts of the meeting, but it is undoubtedly the same meeting.

17. Samuel H. Rogers, *Journal*, p. 44, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.

18. Hovey, *Biography*, p. 29.

19. George W. Bean, *Autobiography of George W. Bean*, comp. Flora Bean Horne (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Co., 1945), p. 21.

20. Reta Latimer Halford, “Nauvoo—The City Beautiful” (Master’s thesis, University of Utah, 1945), p. 173.

21. Moore, *Compiled Writings*, p. 29.

22. Hartford, “Nauvoo,” p.316.

23. Paul Dayton Bailey, *For This My Glory*(Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1943), p. 155.

24. Mosiah Lyman Hancock, *The Life Story of Mosiah Lyman Hancock* (n.p., n.d.) p. 18.

25. John L. Smith, *Journal*, p. 4, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.

26. John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled* (St. Louis: M. E. Mason, 1891), p. 168.

27. Mace Diary, pp. 186–87.

28. *Warsaw Signal*, 23 April 1845, p. 2.

29. Pace Diary, p. 7.

30. Stout Diary, p. 49.

31. Andrew Jenson, ed., *The Historical Record, A Monthly Periodical*, vols. 5–9 (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson, 1886), p. 806; M. R. Werner, *Brigham Young* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925), p. 200; Ivan J. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1967), p. 533; Samuel W. Taylor, *Nightfall at Nauvoo*(New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 326–27.

32. Pace Diary, pp. 7–8.

33. Oliver B. Huntington, *Diary*, p. 566, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.

34. Stout Diary, pp. 44, 43.

35. *Warsaw Signal*, 9 April 1845, p. 2.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. Stout Diary, p. 44.

39. *Warsaw Signal*, 9 April 1845, p. 2.

40. Mace Diary, p. 187.

41. Stout Diary, p. 44.

42. *Warsaw Signal*, 9 April 1845, p. 2.

43. Ibid.
44. *The Nauvoo Neighbor*, 16 April 1845, p. 2.
45. Huntington Diary, p. 566; see also Pace Diary, pp. 7–8.
46. HC 7:399.
47. *Warsaw Signal*, 9 April 1845, p. 2.
48. Pace Diary, pp. 7–8.