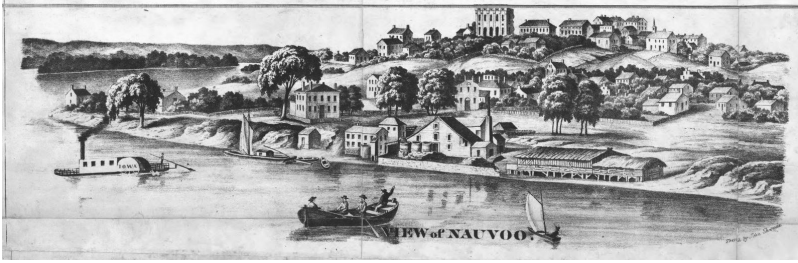


## A MONUMENT OF THE SAINTS' INDUSTRY

### The Nauvoo House and the Council of Fifty

Matthew C. Godfrey

In January 1841, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation that commanded members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to begin construction of two structures in Nauvoo, Illinois: a temple and what was designated as the Nauvoo House, a boardinghouse for travelers. At times, Joseph believed that completing the Nauvoo House was as important as finishing the temple—the spiritual center of Nauvoo—if not more so. However, delays in construction and an eventual emphasis on finishing the temple meant that the Nauvoo House was nowhere near completion at the time of Joseph's murder in June 1844. For a period of time thereafter, little was seemingly done on the house. In March 1845, however, the Council of Fifty took up the status of the Nauvoo House, and it became a periodic topic of discussion for the next several months as construction resumed. The story of these 1845 efforts has been ably told by historians using the records of the Nauvoo House Association, the journal of William Clayton, and the correspondence of George Miller, among other records.<sup>1</sup> However, minutes of the Council of Fifty flesh out the story, showing the role that the council played in generating support to resume construction on the building, as well as its role in supervising the efforts. The minutes demonstrate that the council had jurisdiction



This "View of Nauvoo" comes from an 1859 lithograph of a sketch by John Shroede. Detail from Map of Hancock County, Illinois (Holmes and Arnold, 1859). Courtesy of Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

over at least some of the Church's financial interests, a topic that deserves more consideration by historians.

## BEGINNINGS OF THE NAUVOO HOUSE

The January 1841 revelation directed the Church to construct the Nauvoo House as a "boarding house . . . for the boarding of strangers." The structure would "be a delightful habitation for man," the revelation continued, "and a resting place for the weary traveller." George Miller, Lyman Wight, John Snider, and Peter Haws were to serve as a committee overseeing construction of the house, which would be financed from the sale of stock at fifty dollars a share. The revelation directed several individuals, including Joseph Smith, to purchase stock in the house.<sup>2</sup> In February 1841, the Illinois state legislature passed an act that incorporated the Nauvoo House Association, setting forth the purposes of the house and providing authorization for the issuance of stock. The act also declared that Joseph Smith "and his heirs would hold a suite of rooms in perpetual succession" in the house because it would be built on his property, something which the revelation also allowed for.<sup>3</sup>

Under the authority of the act and the revelation, construction on the house began in 1841, and emissaries of the Church were sent to sell stock. The building, which was originally planned as an L-shaped structure with five floors, was seen, along with the temple, as an important component of Nauvoo. Just as the Saints needed to construct the temple to show their obedience to God, they felt that they were under a divine mandate to build

the Nauvoo House. Construction of the house also provided employment to many who converted to the Church in the British Isles and then emigrated to Nauvoo. Despite this labor force, and despite the importance that Joseph Smith placed on completing the structure, construction efforts were only sporadic from 1841 to 1844, in part because of work on the temple. Indeed, in March 1844, Smith asked that work on the Nauvoo House cease until the temple was completed: “We need the temple more than any thing Else.”<sup>4</sup> By the time of Joseph’s death in June 1844, only the ground floor’s walls were completed.<sup>5</sup>

## THE COUNCIL OF FIFTY AND THE NAUVOO HOUSE

In the months after Joseph Smith’s death, little, if anything, was done on the house as Church members tried to cope with the loss of their leader and decide who would take his place. A few months after Brigham Young and the Twelve Apostles assumed leadership in the fall of 1844, Young resumed meetings of the Council of Fifty—an organization Joseph Smith had established in March 1844 to govern the kingdom of God on the earth. One of the questions the council examined was whether to move forward with the completion of the Nauvoo House. On March 11, 1845, the council first addressed the subject. Brigham Young, who chaired the meeting, requested “that arrangements be made forthwith to put the works in operation,” but the minutes provide no further detail about these arrangements or what other considerations the council gave to the question.<sup>6</sup>

## IMPORTANCE OF COMPLETING CONSTRUCTION

More discussion occurred at the council’s March 18 meeting. Young explained that a revelation had commanded the Church to build the house, “and we have sent out men to fetch in the means to do it.” Because “the stone for the Temple are about cut, and we will have a host of hands without work,” Young believed it was an opportune time to resume construction on the Nauvoo House. Concerned that Church members in need of employment would abandon Nauvoo, Young proposed that they

be employed on the house and that the council emphasize to the Church “that if they don’t build that house they shall bear the curse of it.” Young himself felt strongly about completing the work, stating that “there are sacred records deposited in the foundation of that house and it is our duty to build the house and cover up those records.”<sup>7</sup> He proposed that shares of stock be sold at the April general conference and that George Miller, assisted by Newel K. Whitney, “call a meeting of the stockholders and enter into the work immediately.”<sup>8</sup>

After Young spoke, other council members conveyed their support of recommencing work. Heber C. Kimball noted that three subjects occupied “his whole mind and the minds of his brethren”: construction of the temple; the “western mission,” whereby men were to consult with American Indian tribes about potential alliances and gathering places; and the building of the Nauvoo House. Kimball believed that the Church had sufficient means to accomplish all three of these projects, claiming that he alone could raise ten thousand dollars for them. Like Young, Kimball also supported work on the Nauvoo House because of the employment opportunities it would provide, stating that he did not want to send Church members “away among the gentiles.” John Taylor believed that the Nauvoo House would make the Saints richer rather than poorer, even with monetary outlays that would need to be made. With this high level of support among the Council of Fifty, Orson Pratt moved that George Miller “settle up the books of the Nauvoo House Association, call a meeting of the Stockholders and appoint men to fill the place of the Trustees who are gone away.”<sup>9</sup> The motion passed unanimously.<sup>10</sup>

## SUPERVISORY ROLE

Miller, who had been serving as a trustee for the Nauvoo House since its inception, tried to carry out the council’s direction. On March 22, 1845, he reported to the council that “he had taken steps to call a meeting of the Stock Holders” for April 5, but that more needed to be done to ascertain “the amount of means belonging to the Nauvoo House.” One of the problems was that Lyman Wight had evidently lost a considerable number of stock certificates in 1843, leaving a question as to what certificates were actually still extant. To solve this problem, Miller proposed publishing a

notice requesting that stockholders “give account of the date and numbers of the certificate[s]” that they held and that those certificates lost by Wight then be invalidated. Miller also recommended that a building plan of the house be created and that “a bill of the lumber and other materials” necessary for construction be given to the council.<sup>11</sup>

Miller clearly regarded the Council of Fifty as taking a supervisory role over the Nauvoo House, and other council members evidently agreed. William W. Phelps and Orson Hyde, for example, recommended the formation of a committee of council members “to investigate the affairs of the Nauvoo House.” However, such a proposal—and apparently even Miller’s proposals—did not sit well with Lucien Woodworth, original architect of the Nauvoo House. Woodworth declared that the committee designated in the January 1841 revelation should be the one overseeing the house. Woodworth also believed that he should play a large role in the house’s construction, given that he had been appointed by the Nauvoo House committee “under the directions of president Joseph Smith to be the architect” of the building. In addition, Woodworth claimed that he had been “appointed to superintend the building of the house.” Indeed, Woodworth continued, he knew as much about the house “as any committee which can be appointed.”<sup>12</sup>

In the ensuing discussion, it became apparent that many members of the Council of Fifty were not aware of Woodworth’s extensive involvement with the house. However, even after considering Woodworth’s already existing role and what Miller had done and was doing on the house, council members still believed that more supervision from the Council of Fifty was necessary. A committee of Miller, Woodworth, Newel K. Whitney, William Clayton, and James Sloan (who was not a member of the council) was appointed to go through the financial papers of the Nauvoo House Association, and Woodworth was appointed to prepare a plan of the house to present to the council. Such tasks should be completed, the council voted, before the Church’s April general conference.<sup>13</sup>

On March 25, 1845, the committee appointed by the council reported on its findings regarding the Nauvoo House Association stock, including the total number of certificates that had been issued (2,377), how many of those had been sold (348), how many were missing (272), and how many

the trustees still held (1,773).<sup>14</sup> Because some certificates were missing, several council members advocated calling in the old stock and issuing new stock to prevent fraud, something that Peter Haws, one of the original trustees of the association, asserted Joseph Smith had told him to do. Joseph had even had new certificates printed for this purpose, Haws continued. Although there was much support among the council for this proposition, Brigham Young declared that he had spoken to Joseph Smith before his death about the issuance of new stock and that Young did not believe that it was necessary to do so “at present.” Instead, he recommended that the committee’s report be printed in the newspapers, including the dates of the missing certificates, thereby decreasing the chances of fraud.<sup>15</sup>

## THE SMITH FAMILY’S INTEREST

The council also examined the question of Joseph Smith’s interest in the Nauvoo House—an interest specified both in the revelation instructing the establishment of the house and in the charter of the Nauvoo House Association. Lucien Woodworth insisted that Joseph had “no claim in that house,” but Brigham Young stated unequivocally that “brother Joseph and his heirs have an interest in that house.” Young wanted the interest to be sold at auction, but he also declared that the Nauvoo House trustees should still deed to Joseph’s heirs “the suit[e] of rooms contemplated in the house” once the building was completed. Orson Pratt then moved that the administrator of Joseph’s estate—Joseph W. Coolidge, a member of the Council of Fifty—“be advised to advertise according to law the right title and interest of Joseph Smith in that house and that the Trustees for the church be advised to bid it off.” The motion passed, and the April 2, 1845, issue of the *Nauvoo Neighbor* contained a notice from Coolidge that an estate sale would be held on April 12, including the sale of “all the interest of Joseph Smith deceased in the Nauvoo House Association.”<sup>16</sup>

## STOCK AND TRUSTEES

On April 5, 1845, the stockholders of the Nauvoo House Association met. Presumably because so few stockholders were in attendance, the meeting adjourned until April 7 after being called to order. On that day, several

items of business were transacted, including the appointment of George A. Smith and Amasa Lyman as trustees in the association, replacing Lyman Wight and George Snider. Woodworth also displayed his plans for at least some parts of the building.<sup>17</sup> That afternoon, the Church met in general conference, and Young raised the subject of the Nauvoo House, asking that all those willing to purchase one share of stock in the house raise their hands. According to the minutes of the meeting, “there were so many hands uplifted that they could not possibly be counted.” Young then asked for a raise of hands of those willing to purchase two shares of stock, and “quite a large number of hands were shown.” When Young asked who was willing to complete the Nauvoo House, “every hand was raised in the congregation.” Young then informed the group that the books of the Nauvoo House Association “would be opened in the upper part of the brick store” on April 14.<sup>18</sup>

On April 15, George Miller conveyed to the Council of Fifty that the association’s trustees were “ready to go into active operation.” He wondered whether the trustees’ duties “should be investigated in this council.” After some discussion, the council voted that the trustees’ business should be under the supervision of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles rather than the Council of Fifty.<sup>19</sup> Despite this designation, at least some business pertaining to the Nauvoo House continued to come before the council. On May 6, 1845, for example, Miller raised a question about whom deeds for property given in exchange for stock in the house be made out to. The council voted that they should be made to the trustees-in-trust of the Church.<sup>20</sup>

After this decision, the Nauvoo House did not appear in the minutes of the Council of Fifty again until January 1846, when Church leaders were making preparations to depart Nauvoo. At that time, Brigham Young declared that he wanted to leave a group of men in Nauvoo to “finish the Temple and perhaps the Nauvoo House, for he believes they can both be finish’d as well as not and for his part he is willing to leave all his property to finish these two houses.” Later in this same meeting, Young stated that the completion of these two buildings would “stand as monuments of the industry of this people,” making it important that they were completed. The council agreed, voting unanimously that both the temple and the Nauvoo House be completed. Council members also responded with a

“universal no” to the question of whether the two buildings should be sold. Clearly, having been directed by revelation to complete these two buildings, Church members continued to believe it was a sacred duty to do so.<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Nauvoo House was never finished. By October 1845, Willard Richards reported that the walls now approached “nearly the third story above the basement,” but that may have been an exaggerated portrayal of the progress. Whatever the case, the house never came close to completion.<sup>22</sup> Regardless, the minutes of the Council of Fifty reemphasize what other records indicate: that construction of the building was considered a significant assignment from the Lord, akin to the establishment of the Nauvoo Temple. The minutes also provide a richer account of the role the council played in generating renewed interest in finishing the house in the spring of 1845. Had it not been for discussions in the council about the Nauvoo House, it is debatable whether the Saints would have recommenced their work. However, council members, including Brigham Young and others, considered it a sacred duty to finish the house. That deliberations about the house occurred in the Council of Fifty indicates that the council was responsible not just for examining and selecting a new gathering place for the Saints but for many of the temporal affairs of the Church. At a meeting on April 11, 1845, Young “def[ie]d any man to draw the line between the spiritual and temporal affairs in the kingdom of God” and then declared that every member of the Council of Fifty “has to do with every thing between earth and heaven or hell.”<sup>23</sup> The temporal needs of the Church were just as important as the spiritual needs, and, under Young’s leadership, the council exercised its authority over temporal matters as well as spiritual ones.

## NOTES

1. The most complete account of the Nauvoo House is Alex D. Smith, “Symbol of Mormonism: The Nauvoo Boarding House,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 35, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2015): 109–36.



2. Revelation, January 19, 1841 [D&C 124], josephsmithpapers.org; Smith, "Symbol of Mormonism," 115.
3. Smith, "Symbol of Mormonism," 115–16; Revelation, January 19, 1841 [D&C 124:56], josephsmithpapers.org.
4. Joseph Smith, Journal, March 4, 1844, in Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, vol. 3 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), 189 (hereafter *JSP*, J3); see also, Joseph Smith, Journal, March 7, 1844, in *JSP*, J3:193.
5. Smith, "Symbol of Mormonism," 117–29.
6. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 11, 1845, in Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Jeffrey D. Mahas, eds., *Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*, vol. 1 of the Administrative Records series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 321 (hereafter *JSP*, CFM).
7. Young was referring to items placed in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House on December 29, 1841, including the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Heber C. Kimball's journal, the January 1841 revelation commanding construction of the temple and the Nauvoo House, and published editions of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. Joseph Smith, Journal, December 29, 1841, in Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, vol. 2 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 19–20.
8. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 18, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:344.
9. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 18, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:345. Those who had "gone away" were evidently Lyman Wight and John Snider. Wight had been rejected from the Council of Fifty on February 4, 1845; there is little information about Snider during this time period. Both were replaced as trustees in the Nauvoo House Association on April 7, 1845. Council of Fifty, Minutes, February 4, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:226; Minutes, April 5–7, 1845, Nauvoo House Association Records, box 5, folder 16, CHL, MS 2375.
10. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 18, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:346.

## THE COUNCIL OF FIFTY

11. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:362.
12. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:363.
13. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:364–66.
14. “Report of a Committee appointed to examine the situation of the Stock of the Nauvoo House Association,” Nauvoo House Association Records, CHL.
15. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 25, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:381–84.
16. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 25, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:384–86; “Administrator’s Sale,” *Nauvoo Neighbor*, April 2, 1845. Although the notice was dated March 23, 1845, that may have been a mistake, given that this discussion in the Council of Fifty and its authorization of the sale did not occur until March 25.
17. Minutes, April 5–7, 1845, Nauvoo House Association Records, CHL.
18. “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 7 (April 15, 1845): 871.
19. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 15, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:431.
20. Council of Fifty, Minutes, May 6, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:442.
21. Council of Fifty, Minutes, January 11, 1846, in *JSP*, CFM:512, 519–20.
22. Willard Richards to R. C. Richards, October 15, 1845, in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, comp. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1960), 3:137–38; Smith, “Symbol of Mormonism,” 131n75.
23. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 11, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:401.