

*Ronald W. Walker*

8



SIX DAYS IN AUGUST:  
BRIGHAM YOUNG AND THE  
SUCCESSION CRISIS OF 1844

EVERY Latter-day Saint knows the importance of the six days in August 1844 when Brigham Young and the Twelve Apostles were sustained at Nauvoo as Joseph Smith's successors. Yet no narrative has a daily summary of what went on using the rich documents compiled at the time or the growing body of historical literature on the topic. Such a day-by-day approach yields new understanding. We learn, for example, the uncertainty of the times. *Crisis* is a strong word, but it comes close to describing events surrounding the succession. During these days, the Church might have taken several paths or, with the passing months, fractured beyond remedy. As we look at the different positions leading men and women took on what the Church should be, we also learn more about early Mormonism and its leaders. Joseph Smith's recent revelations about plural or eternal marriage, the temporal kingdom of

---

*Ronald W. Walker is a professional historian living in Salt Lake City.*

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

God, the endowment, and the apostolic keys were important issues in the succession. And no leader was more important than Brigham Young, whose religious experience and leadership were crucial. In particular, Young's earlier religious experience at Peterborough, New Hampshire, had a major role in the events that unfolded.

## SIDNEY RIGDON

On Saturday, August 3, 1844, Sidney Rigdon arrived in Nauvoo, the Church headquarters, located on the big bend of the Mississippi just above the Des Moines rapids. "Few, if any, locations along this mighty river can compare with Nauvoo," said one man who had made the circuit from St. Paul to New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> The city sat on a promontory that rose to the east. It was known for its religion but also for its work and workers. However, grief, uncertainty, and hard economic times had wrung from the Latter-day Saints much of their bustle.<sup>2</sup> Six weeks earlier, a black-faced mob had killed Joseph and Hyrum Smith, the brothers who served as Prophet and Patriarch. What lay ahead for the Saints, and who would be the new shepherd? Was there a future for them and their religion?

Some looked to fifty-three-year-old Rigdon to lead the Saints. He had credentials. He had been with the Church almost from the beginning. For the past eleven years, he had served as Joseph Smith's First Counselor in the First Presidency, the Church's highest quorum. He had helped to shape events and played a role in them, even joining in some of Smith's visions.<sup>3</sup> Few could match his words once he stood behind a speaker's stand. His words flowed with natural eloquence, seldom as friends might talk, but with storm and stir. He was a preacher's preacher, full of history and learned scripture references. One of his fortes was the last days.<sup>4</sup>

Rigdon had been gone from the city for a month and a half. In the middle of June, nine days before his death, Joseph and other well-wishers had walked Sidney to the Nauvoo quay, not far from where Rigdon kept a public house for river travelers.<sup>5</sup> Rigdon had a new duty: Joseph wanted him to raise up a branch of Saints at Pittsburgh. About forty converts were already

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

there, and perhaps Rigdon could make it an important center. With Rigdon was his son-in-law, Ebenezer Robinson, who had been asked to begin a new Latter-day Saint newspaper. “He is a good man,” Robinson remembered Smith saying of his counselor as they walked down to the river, “and I love him better than I ever loved him in all my life, for my heart is entwined around him with chords that can never be broken.”<sup>6</sup>

There was another reason for Rigdon’s Pittsburgh mission. Joseph Smith was a candidate for the United States presidency and had chosen Rigdon as a running mate. Law and reason said that the two men should come from different states and even different parts of the country. Smith’s motives for his improbable electioneering are unclear to this very day. Did he wish to awaken the country to Mormonism and to its past grievances? Neighbors had mistreated the Saints from the beginning. Or was the campaign a part of Smith’s millennial expectation—some kind of step or sign of the last days? Whatever the reason, the political campaign was neither a stunt nor a “symbolic gesture,” one historian concluded. Smith was serious. During the April 1844 general conference, 244 volunteered to be campaigners, and by April 15 the number had risen to 337.<sup>7</sup> By summer the best of the Latter-day Saint talent was barnstorming through the United States to support Smith’s candidacy.<sup>8</sup>

Rigdon arrived in Pittsburgh on June 28, the day after the murder of the Smith brothers, and spoke to the local people several times before rumors of the assassination began to catch up with him. George J. Adams, the official Nauvoo courier, was asked to carry the news but failed to complete his mission.<sup>9</sup> But within a week, Elder Jedediah M. Grant sent Rigdon an “Extra” edition of the *Nauvoo Neighbor* announcing the murders, and followed up with a personal visit. At last, Rigdon’s reluctance to believe reports of Smith’s death gave way to “stern reality.”<sup>10</sup> Rigdon was soon doing what he knew best: he was preaching on “Mr. Broadhurst’s green, and directed the whole tide and strength of his eloquence to extol and eulogize Joseph Smith, and also the city and people of Nauvoo.”<sup>11</sup>

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

At first Rigdon said that he wanted to work on postassassination events with members of the Quorum of Twelve of Apostles. Two of the Apostles had been in the same room at Carthage, Illinois, when the Smith brothers had been killed, and they remained in Nauvoo. Elder John Taylor, editor of the *Times and Seasons*, received in a “savage manner” four balls, while Elder Willard Richards, Smith’s secretary, had miraculously escaped with only a forehead wound from a bullet graze (see D&C 135). The rest of the Apostles were out preaching and electioneering. Parley P. Pratt and George A. Smith were in the Midwest, while seven were in the eastern states: Orson Hyde, Heber C. Kimball, Orson Pratt, William Smith, Lyman Wight, and Wilford Woodruff, as well as Brigham Young, the Apostles’ president and leader. Elder John E. Page was in Pittsburgh with Rigdon.

Rigdon asked Jedediah Grant, who was going east, to invite the Apostles to come to Pittsburgh as they returned to Nauvoo. He wanted to hold a council.<sup>12</sup> Young and the Apostles in the Boston area declined. They wanted to return to Nauvoo “immediately,” they explained in a letter, and believed the route through the Great Lakes was quicker and safer. The Smith murders had not cooled the fierce anti-Mormonism in the Midwest. Moreover, it was the desire of the Twelve, the Apostles’ letter continued, that Rigdon and Page should meet them at Nauvoo, and “after we had rested and mourned for our martyred brethren, we would sit down together and hold a council on the very ground where sleeps the ashes of our deceased friends.”<sup>13</sup> The careful words of both Rigdon and Young had a subtext: each of the men wanted to control the succession, and the issues of the location of the meeting and who would organize it were important.

Once Rigdon got Young’s letter, Rigdon hurried to Nauvoo.<sup>14</sup> William Marks, president of the Nauvoo Stake, may have sent him a letter encouraging him to come quickly.<sup>15</sup> Rigdon would also claim that religious visions and revelations had summoned him, including, as one historian later wrote, the “voice of Joseph Smith.”<sup>16</sup>

When Rigdon arrived in Nauvoo, there were four Apostles in town. Elders Richards and Taylor had been joined by Parley P. Pratt and George A.

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

Smith, the men closest to headquarters when the killings took place. Pratt immediately sought out Rigdon, who was crowded by the handshaking of well-meaning friends. “You are busy today,” Pratt told Rigdon. “We will not interrupt you today, but tomorrow morning the few of the Twelve who are here will want to meet with you, and sit down in council together.”<sup>17</sup> The two men agreed to meet the following morning at 8:00 a.m.—Sunday—at the home of John Taylor, who was still convalescing and bedridden.

The appointment came and went—without Rigdon. The Apostles sent Pratt to find out why. Pratt found Rigdon talking to a Nauvoo outsider not very far from Taylor’s home. As near as Pratt could tell, the conversation was rather aimless, but Rigdon refused to be pulled away. Rigdon and Pratt had known each other from their pre-Mormon days in Ohio’s Western Reserve when the two men were ministers in the Primitive Christian movement of Barton W. Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell (which became one wing of today’s Church of Christ). Pratt had introduced Rigdon to Mormonism. “Well, well! Brother Pratt,” Rigdon finally said, “I must go with you now without delay.” But as the two men started toward Taylor’s home, there was another excuse. A large crowd was gathering to worship at 10:00 a.m., and Rigdon claimed he had to preach. A meeting between Rigdon and the Apostles would have to wait. The Apostles were left to “do their own counselling,” Pratt said sourly. He felt that Rigdon had avoided their meeting, and he felt misused.<sup>18</sup>

Some said that as many as six thousand Saints were at the meeting grounds east of the rising temple that Sunday. Many knew that Rigdon had arrived in town and wanted to hear what he had to say. He chose as his text a verse from the ancient prophet Isaiah, “my ways [are] higher than your ways” (Isaiah 55:9). He wanted to prepare the Saints for something new. He told them of an extraordinary vision he had received in the upper room of his Pittsburgh lodging. He announced that he “was the identical man that the ancient Prophets had sung about, wrote and rejoiced over; and that he was sent to do the identical work that had been the theme of all the Prophets in every preceeding generation.”<sup>19</sup> Again, he turned to Isaiah’s poetry:

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

“The Lord shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria,” he quoted (Isaiah 7:18). He gave these words apocalyptic meaning. The day would come when he would see “one hundred tons of metal per second thrown at the enemies of God, and that the blood would be to the horses bridles.” At that time, Rigdon “expected to walk into the palace of Queen Victoria and lead her out by the nose.”<sup>20</sup>

The report of Rigdon’s sermon was preserved by his rivals and no doubt did not reflect his humor or the full meaning of his words. But one claim was clear. He wanted to be Joseph’s successor, or as he phrased it, the Church’s “guardian.” He had seen Joseph in the heavens, he said, and he, Rigdon, held the “keys of this dispensation.” He would stand as a “god” to the people, like Moses, and he would preserve the Church as Joseph “had begun it.”<sup>21</sup> These last words seemed to indicate Rigdon’s willingness to go back to the first teachings of Smith, whose ministry had been progressive and unfolding.

The argument was part of his claim for succession. According to Rigdon, the death of Joseph Smith had not dissolved the First Presidency. As the last surviving member of this group, Rigdon should be the new leader. After all, one of Joseph Smith’s revelations described Rigdon (and another counselor) as “equal” with Smith in “holding the keys of this last kingdom. . . . And this shall be your business and mission in all your lives, to preside in council and set in order all the affairs of this church and kingdom” (D&C 90:6, 16). Still another revelation had made Rigdon the Prophet’s “spokesman” (D&C 100:9–11), and in 1841, Rigdon had been ordained to the office of “Prophet, Seer and Revelator”—the series of titles reserved for the Church’s most important leaders.<sup>22</sup>

That afternoon, after his dramatic speech, Rigdon and his allies made another move. As Elder Charles C. Rich preached in the worship meeting, he was interrupted by President Marks with a surprising announcement. Marks declared that on Thursday morning, August 8, President Rigdon would hold a “special meeting” of the Saints to consider his claims. Rigdon

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

wanted the succession question settled in four days. Such a meeting had been on the lips of the Nauvoo Saints since the death of the Smith brothers, only the assumption had been that the Twelve Apostles would conduct the meeting, not Rigdon.<sup>23</sup>

After Rigdon's forenoon address, the Apostles continued to hope for a meeting with Rigdon, but Marks's announcement showed that events were moving rapidly and might spin out of control. Rigdon and Marks had consulted neither with the Apostles nor with the local high council of elders, who normally might help decide on a special meeting—nor with Rich, who served as Marks's counselor. Pratt, who apparently was in the afternoon congregation, tried to challenge Marks. Weren't Brigham Young and the other Apostles expected to return to Nauvoo soon, he asked, perhaps within several days or even hours? Shouldn't a special meeting wait for their arrival? Marks replied that Rigdon actually wanted the special meeting to take place on Tuesday. Marks had granted two extra days and was unwilling to go further. Rigdon had family matters in Pittsburgh that required his immediate attention, Marks explained.<sup>24</sup>

By evening, William Clayton, one of Joseph Smith's personal secretaries and a close friend, was upset. Both Bishop Newel K. Whitney and Charles C. Rich had come to his home with news and questions. "It seems a plot [has been] laid for the saints to take advantage of their situation," Clayton wrote in his diary.<sup>25</sup>

The best that the Apostles could do was to meet with Rigdon the following day. They arrived in force—Parley P. Pratt, Willard Richards, and George A. Smith, and, if one source is to be believed, the ailing John Taylor. With them was Bishop Whitney and Elder Amasa Lyman, whom Smith had chosen to be his counselor, though the Saints never had the chance to sustain him formally. Everyone agreed to meet that evening at Elder Taylor's home.<sup>26</sup>

On Monday evening, whether because of his excitable personality or perhaps by strategy, Rigdon paced furiously before the Church leaders. The local political situation was out of control, he warned. The coming election might bring into office anti-Mormons who might further hurt the Saints.

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

“You lack a great leader,” he said. “You want a head, and unless you unite upon that head you’re blown to the four winds, the anti-Mormons will carry the election—a guardian must be appointed.”<sup>27</sup>

The Apostles and their friends were not convinced. They continued to ask Rigdon to put off any meeting of the Saints until the Apostles arrived from the eastern missions.<sup>28</sup> But the only thing that they could wring from Rigdon was the promise that the coming meeting on Thursday would be a “prayer meeting” for discussion, an “interchange of thought and feeling . . . [to] warm up each other’s hearts.” It would not be a business meeting to make binding decisions.<sup>29</sup>

On Tuesday, August 6, at 2:30 p.m., Rigdon once again sermonized. The audience and the occasion is unclear, but he seemed to continue to be agreeable. He spoke of mobs coming upon Nauvoo and remembered old Missouri difficulties. These events no longer were a context for his claims to leadership, however. He insisted that he wanted no office “in the kingdom of god,” even if it were offered. Instead, he would rather be a “constable upon earth” than a priestly king.<sup>30</sup> Things seemed to be settling down.

That evening, Brigham Young and four other Apostles—Elders Kimball, Orson Pratt, Wight, and Woodruff—came down the river on the steamboat *St. Croix*. The name of the vessel was apt: Rigdon and Young with their respective parties were on a mission that would determine the future of the Church. Two days before landing, Elder Kimball, Young’s closest friend, had a dream of a natural-looking Joseph Smith. Smith was preaching to a large congregation, Kimball reported, and when morning came and Kimball woke, he told his friends that he believed he understood what the dream meant. Joseph had “laid the foundation for a great work and it was now for us to build upon it.”<sup>31</sup> The dream was meant to remind the Apostles of their own leadership claims.

The Apostles had done just as they told Rigdon they would do, only their trip to Nauvoo took longer than they at first had hoped. While still in the East, Elder Young wanted as many of the Apostles as possible at Nauvoo when the succession would be decided, and he had waited a week



*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

in Boston for a straggling Elder Wight. The Apostles joined together in upstate New York and went by railroad to Buffalo, where they secured passage on Lake Erie to Cleveland and then to Detroit. They continued on the lake route to Chicago. The company of fellow passengers was not congenial. Elder Woodruff complained of the passengers' "prejudice" and "nonsens[e] and folly." He noted that they "wish to speak evil of us while we walk uprightly."<sup>32</sup> The 160-mile leg across Illinois was a grueling forty-eight hours as their coach stopped only for food, fresh teams, and to pry themselves and other wagons from the mud. At one point, a heavily loaded wagon belonging to Norwegian immigrants was bogged in the mire, and the Norwegians were whipping and bawling at their oxen. According to one account, Young looked over the situation, stepped from the coach, and coaxed the animals in a language unknown to either the Norwegians or the Americans. Then a light touch of the whip got the calmed animals to lift the wagon, and the Norwegians went ahead with their journey—to "the surprise and amusement of the passengers" in the coach.<sup>33</sup>

The last 120 miles downriver from Galena to Nauvoo were pleasant because of the Apostles' excitement to return home. The men had been gone for more than three months and longed for the last bend of the river that would reveal their city and their families. "We were hailed with Joy by all the Citizens we met," remembered Elder Woodruff, when they stepped from the wharf near Nauvoo's landmark, "the upper stonehouse." Despite their happiness, Woodruff felt something else. "When we landed in the City," he reported in his diary, "there was a deep gloom [that] seemed to rest over the City of Nauvoo which we never experi[en]ced before."<sup>34</sup> The place was a deposit of not only grief and sorrow but also fear of the future.

BRIGHAM YOUNG

Brigham Young had no idea events would turn so badly when he left Nauvoo on May 21. From Nauvoo, he took a side trip to Kirtland, Ohio, where Mormonism had first really begun to mold him. Kirtland was also the place where he began his friendship with Joseph Smith, which became the

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

lodestone for the rest of Young's life. Young visited the old sites in Kirtland and preached in the temple, trying to breathe new life into the old disciples who had let the Church go on without them. He found them "dead and cold to the things of God." Continuing his trip, Young visited his brother, John Young, and also his sister, Nancy Kent, who lived in Chester, Ohio. He then headed for Boston, the center of his operations for the next several months.<sup>35</sup> Joseph Smith had given him the duty of drawing up the fields of labor for all the missionaries involved in the political campaign. He had chosen Boston for himself.<sup>36</sup>

Young was now forty-three years old, and the spring in his step for long preaching tours was not what it had once been. Just outside of Kirtland while waiting for an eastbound boat, he had confessed as much in a letter to his wife Mary Ann, who was back home in Nauvoo. "I feele lonsom," he began his letter. "O that I had you with me this somer I think I should be happy. Well I am now [happy] because I am in my cauling and duing my duty, but [the] older I grow the more I desire to stay at my own home insted of traveling."

Once at Albany, New York, he continued his writing. He had not gotten much sleep on his way east and was "perty well tired out," he said. "Last night I felt for sometime as though I had got to get a new const[it]jution or [I would] not last long. How I due want to see you and [the children]. Kiss them for me and kiss Luny [Luna] twice or mor. Tel hir it is for me. Give my love to all the famely. I nead not menshion names. . . . Don't you want for eney thing. You can borrow monney to get what you want. . . . After taking a grate share of my love to your self then deal it out to others as you plese."<sup>37</sup>

Once in Boston, his routine included the familiar duties of traveling and preaching. "We have Baptized a good many since we left," he wrote in still another letter.<sup>38</sup> Whenever possible, he went to Salem to visit his daughter Vilate, who was being schooled there. And there were the demands of the political campaign. The famed Boston Melodeon Concert Hall on Washington Street held one Latter-day Saint rally, which was supposed to elect delegates to the upcoming Baltimore Convention. The meeting began

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

promisingly. The seats were crowded and the business going forward when Abigail Folsom, a feminist and abolitionist, staged a protest. Rowdies in the galley continued the uproar. Soon the meeting was broken up and had to be adjourned until the next day to the green at Bunker Hill.<sup>39</sup>

These were the perils of Latter-day Saints on the campaign circuit. Several days later, Young had the chance to look back on events. Elder Erastus Snow was at the speaker's stand delivering one of his long sermons, and Young, sitting in an alcove, had a chance to write to Willard Richards in Nauvoo. He wanted Richards to stop in on his family and speak words of comfort to them. He reported favorably on William Smith and Lyman Wight, with whom he had never before had the opportunity to serve. Wight "is a great, good, noble-hearted man," he wrote. "I love my brethren more and more."

Many of his words to Richards were about the campaign trail, and he wrote with irony, "I should suppose that there is an election about to take place or the Prophet had offered himself for some office in the United States, for of all the howlings of Devils and Devil[s] whelps." The rumors were thick. "Sometimes the Mormons are all killed; sometimes they are half killed, and sometimes the blood is knee deep in Nauvoo. Sometimes old Joe, as they call him is taken by the mob and carried to Missouri, sometimes he is gone to Washington, sometimes he has runaway, given up to the authorities, etc. etc. One might suppose him to be a sectarian God, without body, parts or passions—his center everywhere and his circumference no where." If Young thought Smith's election prospects were dim, he did not acknowledge it. "We shall do all we can [with the campaign]," he told Richards, "and leave the event with God."<sup>40</sup>

There was a terrible irony working. Young's letter to Richards was written on July 8, a week and a half *after* the assassinations. Several days before their deaths and with events closing in on them, Joseph and Hyrum Smith had written a plaintive letter asking Young and other Church leaders to return to Nauvoo and help in this moment of great crisis.<sup>41</sup> But the mail was not getting through—in either direction.

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

In the next day or two, Young heard other rumors about the deaths of the Smiths, which he again dismissed.<sup>42</sup> Traveling with Orson Pratt, Young went on Church business to out-of-the-way Peterborough, New Hampshire, a few miles north of the Massachusetts border. His sermon there suggested that he might be coming to grips that some of these awful rumors. “The death of one or a dozen could not destroy the priesthood,” he told the local Saints, “nor hinder the work of the Lord from spreading throughout all nations.”<sup>43</sup>

The ambiguity ended on July 16. Young and Pratt were leaning back in their chairs at Brother Bement’s house in Peterborough when a letter arrived from Nauvoo telling of the killings. Later in the day, Elder Woodruff’s letter with the same news arrived. “I felt then as I never felt bef[ore],” Young later said. There were no tears but an awful, paralyzing headache. “My head felt as tho my head [would] crack.” His thoughts went everywhere. Had Joseph and Hyrum taken the keys or the authority of the Church with them?

At last, his despair lifted “like a clap,” he said. The answer came to him like revelation: “The keys of the kingdom [are] here.” He brought his hand to his knee to make the point.<sup>44</sup> He later confessed that the idea of assuming Joseph’s office had never occurred to him.<sup>45</sup> It had been an interesting psychological study, resisting reality until he could resist it no longer—followed by an emotional and religious outburst of feeling.

There was another meaning to Young’s revelation. It showed that the Church’s procedures for succession were by no means clear, even to the leading Apostle. Young, of course, had been present during those almost daily private council meetings with Smith earlier in the year. During these councils, Smith had laid out the endowment or temple rituals step-by-step, the capstone of his revelation. He concluded with what should have been a portentous warning: “Brethren, the Lord bids me hasten the work in which we are engaged. . . . Some important scene is near to take place. It may be that my enemies will kill me, and in case they should, and the keys and power which rest on me not be imparted to you, they will be lost from the Earth.” Joseph and Hyrum Smith then anointed the Apostles and other

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

men who were present in the room, after which Joseph paced before them and dramatically pushed back upon his shoulders the collar of the coat he was wearing. “I roll the burden and responsibility of leading this church off from my shoulders on to yours,” he said. “Now, round up your shoulders and stand under it like men; for the Lord is going to let me rest a while.”<sup>46</sup>

This event, now known in Church history as the “last charge,” was memorialized by several of the men who were present, but perhaps most significantly by an unpublished and unsigned statement that currently resides in the Church History Library. “Joseph Smith did declare that he had conferred upon the Twelve every key and every power that he ever held himself before God,” the statement said. “This our testimony we expect to meet in a coming day when all parties will know that we have told the truth and have not lied, so help us God.”<sup>47</sup> For Young, the last charge was a final act in a series of events. “Joseph more than one score of times told . . . [the apostles] both in private and in public, that he rolled the Kingdom on to their shoulders,” Young would later say.<sup>48</sup> Joseph’s conferral of authority included priesthood keys of authority but also a fullness of the endowment ritual, “everything necessary for the salvation of man.”<sup>49</sup>

Young and a majority of the other Apostles had been present during these occasions and heard Joseph’s words. But their hopes and wishes, like those of Jesus’ disciples before Calvary, did not permit them to accept the last charge at face value. Only the actual killings, months later, made Joseph Smith’s warning clear.<sup>50</sup>

But Young’s religious experience at Peterborough was more certain, especially as the days wore on and he continued to feel religiously prompted. He was convinced that he, as President of the Twelve, had authority to lead the Church, or to at least name Joseph’s successor. He also believed that at some point a new First Presidency of three men would be required, though he was willing to let that issue rest for the moment.<sup>51</sup> And he hoped that a general assembly of the Saints would give its approval to the succession. One of Joseph’s revelations declared such a gathering to be the highest authority in the Church—the collective inspiration of leaders and members (D&C 107:32).<sup>52</sup>

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

The day after hearing of the Smith brothers' deaths, Young hurried from Peterborough to Boston. That night he shared a room with Elder Woodruff at Sister Voice's home. Young slept in the bed while Woodruff, who was grieving the Prophet's death, slept in a large chair and did his best to shield his convulsive tears.<sup>53</sup> Young's grief, in contrast, was clear-eyed and determined. On July 18, he held a council with the Apostles who could be quickly gathered together in the East. The result was a letter that the Church's eastern newspaper, the *Prophet*, soon published. The Apostles told Church leaders to head quickly to Nauvoo for the general council.<sup>54</sup> That evening Young briefly preached. He tried to cheer the local Saints: "When God sends a man to do a work all the devils in hell cannot kill him untill he gets through his work. So with Joseph[,] He prepared all things[,] gave the keys to men on the earth[,] and said[,] I may be soon taken from you."<sup>55</sup> He was already using the last charge as a text.

## DECIDING THE SUCCESSION

On Wednesday, August 7—the fifth day of the succession crisis—the Apostles spent much of the day huddled in conference at John Taylor's house. They held two meetings early in the day. It was the first time that a legal quorum of seven or more Apostles gathered since Carthage—and they actually had not met since months before that because of their missions. Richards had been the Saints' "principal counselor" during the previous five anxious weeks, answering "calls and inquiries" by the hundreds.<sup>56</sup> Before the others returned, he had been the only healthy Apostle in Nauvoo. He knew the Church's business as well as anyone in the city and had a reputation for good judgment and good works.

People may have deferred to Richards for another reason. Less than two weeks after the killings, Richards, in the course of his usual correspondence, signed one preacher's license as "Clerk and *acting President*." Other preaching licenses reportedly had a still more interesting signature. An entry in the historical record of these licenses explained, "From the murder of President Joseph Smith to this Date [September 2, 1844] licenses were signed

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

‘*Twelve Apostles, President.*’” This last piece of evidence was confirmed by the Church’s official chronological history.<sup>57</sup> Since these materials were written weeks and even years after the succession controversy and may represent a later view of events, they require some skepticism. On the other hand, they may also suggest that Richards, early on, was asserting the leadership claims of a united Quorum of the Twelve and some people were accepting them.

It is unfortunate that someone who attended the meetings held on Wednesday did not leave a record of the issues discussed. These two meetings had to be among the most important during the succession crisis. For one thing, the newly arrived Apostles had to be brought up to date. There had been difficulties in Nauvoo from the first week of the murders. “The greatest danger that now threatens us is dissensions and strifes amongst the Church,” William Clayton had written on July 6. Clayton reported that the Saints were discussing four or five possible successors to Smith in his twin offices as Church President and trustee-in-trust.<sup>58</sup> Clayton regrettably did not identify these men, though they may have included Rigdon and Young as well as William Marks and Samuel Smith, another of the Smith brothers.

The office of trustee-in-trust, which managed the Church’s property, posed a serious problem. Someone had to receive property and pay the bills for the temple, which meant an immediate appointment. More explosive was the conduct of Emma Smith, the Prophet’s widow, who was determined that the family’s property should not be swallowed by the Church’s claims—Joseph had mixed personal and official accounts and many of his debts were unresolved. Emma opposed the stopgap idea of having Clayton serve until the Apostles returned, and during July repeatedly inserted herself into the trustee-in-trust issue.<sup>59</sup> Her feelings were deep. She accused such opponents as Richards of not treating her “right” and warned if they should “trample upon her,” she would “look to herself”—lawyers were obviously on her mind. By the middle of July, she threatened that she “would do the church all the injury” she could if a new trustee-in-trust were appointed without her approval. Her choice, apparently, was Marks, whose views on Church policy and doctrine more closely agreed with her own. Clayton,

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

in the middle of controversy, despaired. Bills were coming due, and Lucy Mack Smith, the Prophet's mother, was also restive.<sup>60</sup> Clayton felt that a public disturbance over Smith's estate and the trustee would bring clamoring creditors and a costly settlement. With proper management, however, there was enough "to pay the debts and plenty left for other uses."<sup>61</sup>

There were other topics that the Twelve must have discussed in their Wednesday meetings. Some were crucial to the future of Mormonism. Did the Smith family have a special claim to the Church's leadership? For several months Joseph and Hyrum Smith had been acting closely together, and Hyrum, as the Church's Assistant President and Patriarch, had the authority to carry on had he survived Carthage.<sup>62</sup> The Old Testament and the Book of Mormon were full of examples of prophetic primogeniture—passing a prophet's mantle of leadership to a son or perhaps to a family member. For the moment, this question of family succession was not pressing. Joseph Smith's brother, Samuel Smith, had died on July 30, and Joseph Smith's sons were young. Another brother, William Smith, was erratic, and no one saw him as a serious candidate.

There were underground issues, too. Historian Ronald K. Esplin has argued that Nauvoo in early 1844 had been a city of secrets. During the several years before his death, Joseph Smith had introduced a breathtaking array of new doctrines and practices: "The plurality of gods, new temple ordinances, new theocratic practices, and even plural marriage." This "Nauvoo 'package'" was known unevenly among the Saints, according to Esplin. The result were insider Saints who possessed a "private *gnosis*," while the majority of Church members were either unaware or not fully informed.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to new doctrines, Smith had also created three new organizations. The first was the Female Relief Society. This organization was publicly known and open to the women living in Nauvoo, though most of its members were drawn from the city's leading women. The two other organizations were semisecret. The Council of Fifty sought to redress past wrongs, increase the Church's political influence, and expand Mormonism's borders into the American West. The Council of Fifty also was a contingency plan



*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

for the last days when earthly governments would fall at Christ's Second Coming and a new religious and political order would be necessary. While some historians have suggested that this new council was not much more than a symbol, the weight of inconclusive evidence suggests that Joseph Smith was serious about his political outreach. His 1844 political campaign and the later Mormon settlement in the Great Basin were not speculative patterns or decorations.<sup>64</sup>

The second semisecret group was Joseph Smith's prayer circle. Known in furtive references in diaries and minutes as the "Holy Order," the "Quorum of the Anointed," the "First Quorum," or still more often as the "Quorum" or "Council," this group was making Church decisions in July along with Richards.<sup>65</sup> He was a member of the group and influenced many of its decisions, but not without some tension and hurt feelings along the way.<sup>66</sup>

Like the Council of Fifty, the Quorum of the Anointed began in 1842 and two years later was meeting weekly and sometimes daily.<sup>67</sup> Members were the first initiates of the empowering "ancient order of things," or the endowment, that later was introduced in the Nauvoo Temple. By the summer of 1844, membership was limited to about sixty-five specially devoted men and women. These anointed members met in special priesthood robes, discussed the matters of the kingdom, and offered special prayers. Their July devotions were fervent. According to Brigham Young, a few of the select group met twice "every day . . . to offer up the signs and pray to our heavenly father to deliver his people." It had been the "cord which bound the people together."<sup>68</sup> Some of their soulful petitions were pleas to return the Apostles back to the city.<sup>69</sup>

Many of Smith's new teachings went against the grain of commonplace or sectarian Christian tradition—and the views of conservative Saints. But within this circle, the Prophet felt at ease.<sup>70</sup> "Brother Joseph feels as well as I Ever see him," wrote Heber C. Kimball to Parley P. Pratt in 1842. "One reason is he has got a Small company, that he feels safe in thare ha[n]ds. And that is not all, he can open his bosom to[o] and feel him Self safe."<sup>71</sup> The groups who knew of Smith's advanced teaching were the Twelve Apostles, the Council of Fifty, and the Anointed Quorum, as well some of the officers

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

of the Relief Society. Sometimes their meetings merged into a single assembly—an informal fusion of the three or four groups—and as a result there were disorderly lines of authority. The March 1844 meeting in which Smith gave his last charge almost certainly was such an example. On that occasion, there had been an assembly of about sixty men—probably a meeting of the Council of Fifty and the Twelve Apostles with others.<sup>72</sup> Altogether, there were probably no more than one hundred such select disciples in Nauvoo, and perhaps only one member in twenty knew about them.<sup>73</sup> But these few members held in their bosom knowledge of the explosive ideas of plural marriage and the temporal kingdom.<sup>74</sup>

Understandably, Smith's last agenda had little space on the public stage. But privately it gave context to the events surrounding the succession. The succession of 1844 was not simply about appointing a man or group of men to lead the Church. Rather, it was about what kind of Church would survive. When Marks was being pushed for the position of trustee-in-trust, Bishop Whitney objected. He remembered Marks's past association with William Law and Emma Smith, both of whom had a recent history of opposing Joseph Smith and the Twelve. "If Marks is appointed Trustee our spiritual blessings will be destroyed inasmuch as he is not favorable to the most important matters," Whitney told Clayton, referring to the temple ordinances. Moreover, Whitney believed the office of trustee was inseparably tied to the Presidency. One office entailed the other, and that combination put Joseph Smith's last teachings in jeopardy. Whitney favored the appointment of Samuel Smith before Samuel died.<sup>75</sup>

As the events leading to Joseph Smith's death closed in on Joseph in June, he seemed to retreat from some of his advanced teachings. According to D. Michael Quinn, immediately before he went to Carthage, Smith turned his back on polygamy, the endowment, and the Council of Fifty.<sup>76</sup> Whether the retreat was meant to be temporary or permanent, or whether the steps were expedient or heartfelt, the most likely conclusion was that Smith was stabilizing Nauvoo while privately holding firmly to his teachings. His closest disciples accepted this view. But the possibility of

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

a turnabout gave comfort to Emma Smith and Marks during the succession crisis. A rumor circulated through Nauvoo on August 7 claiming that Rigdon had cemented his alliance with Marks by offering him the office of Patriarch, while Rigdon would become the Church's President.<sup>77</sup> Emma Smith could be expected to lend her quiet support. Still more likely, these people never worked out an agenda of offices or goals. They were united vaguely by their lack of belief in Joseph Smith's last teachings and probably never organized themselves into a formal group or opposition.

The Apostles concluded their meetings on August 7 with a decision: a general assembly would be convened within the week on Tuesday, August 13, at 10:00 a.m. They intended to put forward their claims and follow it with a formal, ratifying vote.<sup>78</sup> For the Apostles, there was no turning back. Most had accepted plural marriage at great emotional and psychological cost. Their days of fervent councils with the founding Prophet were at odds with a pre-Nauvoo program and a pre-Nauvoo Church. The idea of Joseph Smith conducting a fallen ministry was out of the question.

The Apostles made two other decisions. They wanted a semipublic airing of Rigdon's claims and scheduled a meeting at Nauvoo's still uncompleted Seventies Hall later in the day. Rigdon would have the opportunity of speaking before the Church's local and general leaders. The Apostles also agreed to meet the following morning, August 8, for another private meeting.

Minutes and reports of the 4:00 p.m. meeting at the Seventies Hall are incomplete, but it is possible to reconstruct what took place. Rigdon once more put forward his claims and gave more detail about the vision he revealed earlier about putting the Church in order. It was not an "open vision," he explained, but a stirring that had come to his mind—a continuation of what Joseph Smith and he had experienced in their vision revealing the three degrees of heaven.<sup>79</sup> His future calling, Rigdon said, was to build up the Church for Joseph, because all future blessings must come through Joseph. He was again asserting his position as Joseph Smith's councilor and spokesman. Elder Wilford Woodruff probably spoke for his fellow Apostles

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

with a curt dismissal. “A long story,” Woodruff said, and a “second class vision.”<sup>80</sup>

William Clayton, who attended the meeting, said that Brigham Young concluded with a few blunt sentences that had his characteristic sting. He did not care who led the Church, he told the Church leaders; even old Ann Lee would do if that was the mind of God. (Ann Lee had helped found the Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, or Shakers, a century before.) But on the question of who would manage the succession, there was no compromise. Young alone held “the keys and the means of knowing the mind of God,” he said.<sup>81</sup> On these grounds, Young did not accept Rigdon’s claims.

Young’s claim was extraordinary. During the last years of Joseph Smith’s life, Smith had increasingly turned to Young. He was the first to receive his full endowment, and Smith later allowed him to perform the endowment ceremonies in his absence. Young was given many other prominent duties as he became one of Smith’s closest collaborators.<sup>82</sup> But the last charge had not singled Young out—Smith had spoken expansively about most members of the Twelve and some members of the Council of Fifty having the full blessings of the endowment or patriarchal power. Still more important, Smith recognized the Apostles’ special priesthood authority, and one of his revelations described the Twelve (along with other quorums) as forming a group “equal in authority and power” to the First Presidency (D&C 187:24). But this revelation described the Apostles’ collective power and said nothing about their president being a special revelator. Nor did Young use this revelation as a source for his authority. The one thing that seemed to give Young assurance in the early days of August was his Peterborough experience, though he did not say a word about it.

By Thursday, August 8, events were finally coming to a climax. The Apostles had scheduled their private meeting for 9:00 a.m. Rigdon’s prayer meeting was to take place an hour later, though there was a great deal of confusion about it. Some Saints recalled that Rigdon had pledged that the gathering would be an informal worship session like most midweek meetings at the time. Still others claimed that Rigdon had shifted back and forth

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

about the meeting and at last called it off.<sup>83</sup> One thing appears certain: the Apostles did not think Rigdon's meeting would be important enough for them to attend.

What happened was happenstance—one of those imponderables that intrude into human affairs that men and women often call chance, fortune, luck—or providence. The Apostles gathered at Richards's office, but Young did not show up. Several years later when his colleagues reminded him of his error, Young was disbelieving. "Does any of you know of my making an appointment & not being there?" he bristled. "I don't own to that & if such an item goes into the history [of the Church] I'd tear it out if written in [a] book of Gold." But a recollection came after this outburst. "By talking about it, I begin to recollect it."<sup>84</sup> Young, in fact, had missed a meeting. The exhaustion of the past month had caught up with him.

By midmorning, Young saw people streaming into the grove where the Saints held their public meetings and must have known it was Rigdon's prayer meeting. Young decided to go although the meeting had already started. Apparently no Church minutes survive, and probably none were taken. What does exist are several dozen reminiscences describing events that took place. Helen Mar Whitney, Heber C. Kimball's daughter, remembered a large multitude, half of whom were standing.<sup>85</sup> People were concerned about the succession. A stiff wind was blowing, which tossed Rigdon's words back upon him. In order to go on speaking, he stepped out into the congregation and stood on a wagon bed either opposite to the speaker's stand or to one side. Before he was through, he spoke for an hour and a half.<sup>86</sup>

One narrative of the event emphasized its drama, and it may be true. As Rigdon was concluding and about to call for a vote, Young stepped to the speaker's stand, and his sudden appearance must have been electrifying.<sup>87</sup> The people had not seen him for almost four months, and many were unaware he had returned. At first he was not in the angle of their vision, and they turned at the sound of his voice. "I did not ask . . . if I might speak," Young remembered. "I just spoke as I did."<sup>88</sup>

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

“I will manage this voting for Elder Rigdon,” Young said. “He does not preside here. This child [Young himself] will manage this flock for a season.”<sup>89</sup> Young complained of “a hurrying Spirit” and spoke of “the true Organization of the Church,” which required a formal voting by the people in a special seating arrangement. Anxious to forestall a morning vote, he on the spot announced such a meeting for 2:00 p.m. the same day. After hearing Rigdon, he was unwilling to wait for the coming week.<sup>90</sup>

“Who of the Apostles defended this Kingdom when Sidney was going to lead this people to hell?” he would later ask rhetorically. “I magnified my calling and scarce a man stood by me to brunt the battle.”<sup>91</sup> In fact, his confused fellow Apostles remained at Richards’s office until they came looking for him just as he was ending his brief remarks.<sup>92</sup> Woodruff gave his reading of the situation: “In consequence of some excitement among the People and a disposition by some spirits to try to divide the Church, it was thought best to attend to the business of the Church in the afternoon.”<sup>93</sup>

What would have happened had Young not taken charge at the grove that morning? Would the people have voted to sustain Rigdon? Today it is easy to dismiss Rigdon because the flow of history makes past events seem inevitable. However, historical records and recent scholarship suggest that many Saints were uncertain about who should be their new leader and the question of succession was fluid.<sup>94</sup> James Blakesley, a Church member who lived a few miles up the river at Rock Island, Illinois, wrote of the confusion: “The church is left without an earthly head, unless the promise of the Lord shall be fulfilled, which saith, that if he removed Joseph, he would appoint another in his stead. But as this has not yet been done, what is the church to do? Now sir, if I have been correctly informed, some of the members of the church at Nauvoo, want Stephen Markham for their head, and others Sidney Rigdon, and others President Marks, and others Little Joseph [Joseph Smith’s son], and others B. Young, and some others P. P. Pratt, and if they can all have their choice, we shall soon have a multiplicity of church[es] of Latter Day Saints.”<sup>95</sup> Still another view was that of Ezra T. Benson, who at the time of Smith’s death was in New Jersey campaigning. “The question

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

arose by Bro[ther] Pack [his companion] who will now lead the Church,” Benson later wrote. “I told [him] I did not know but I knew who would lead me and that would be the twelve apostles.”<sup>96</sup> Benson would later become a member of that body.

Rigdon’s claims were not easily put aside. He still held many Church titles and was easily among the most accomplished of the Saints. His pulpit voice remained strong. Rigdon spoke “with all the eloquence possible for a man to have,” recalled George Romney, who was in the congregation. His remarks left “quite an impression,” said Maria Wealthy Wilcox. Latter-day Saint stalwart Benjamin F. Johnson’s account had the overtone of apology. “I sat in the assembly near President Rigdon, closely attentive to his appeal,” Johnson said. “And was, perhaps, to a degree, forgetful of what I knew to be the rights and duties of the apostleship.”<sup>97</sup>

Events were moving rapidly. At the Apostles’ meeting, Elder Kimball, probably acting on a decision made the previous day, instructed Clayton to pay Emma Smith \$1000 to quiet the simmering trustee-in-trust matter. Together with Richards and Kimball, he delivered the money and assured her of the “good feelings of the Twelve towards her. She seemed humble and more kind.”<sup>98</sup>

The afternoon general assembly meeting started forty-five minutes late. No doubt much hurrying was needed to get everyone in place. Rigdon and Young and at least seven members of the Twelve were on the stand, and apparently also Marks and his high council. The high priests were seated nearby to the right. Seventies had the front seats, and the Aaronic Priesthood the rear seats. Elders were to the right of the seventies, and the sisters were on the left. Around this formal assembly were other Saints, many standing.<sup>99</sup> The wind continued to blow. The congregation included perhaps six thousand or more. The meeting was what Latter-day Saints later called a solemn assembly, the Church’s highest authority on matters of teaching and doctrine.

Young looked at the people and tried to take their pulse.<sup>100</sup> While grieving and a bit uncertain, they also appeared hopeful. They were sheep

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

without their shepherd, he said to himself. When Young spoke to the people, he tried to catch this spirit. He began by likening the congregation to the days of King Benjamin, the Book of Mormon prophet who blessed his people before his death (see Mosiah 2–4). “We have all done the best we could,” he said encouragingly. Without Joseph Smith, the Saints would now have to walk “by faith and not by sight.” He did not like doing Church business so soon after the murders. If he could have had his way, he would have postponed the assembly for more mourning. “I feel to want to weep for 30 days—& then rise up & tell the people what the Lord wants with them.” But Rigdon had forced his hand.

No shorthand reporter was present during the assembly, and surviving records preserve only sporadic phrases and sentences. But it is clear that Young wanted everyone to understand the order of the Church and the authority of the Apostles. “The Twelve [were] appointed by the finger of the Almighty,” he insisted. They were “an independent body” that held “the keys of the Kingdom to all the whole world so help me God.” Together, they were the Church’s new “first presidency.” The congregation might choose Rigdon or another man, but such an action “would sever all.” “You can’t put any one at the head of the 12 again.” And Young wanted the people to remember his own service. Had he ever faltered? Along the way, Young’s remarks, or perhaps those of some of the speakers who followed him, flatly challenged Rigdon’s standing. He had lost his position as “prophet, seer, and revelator” due to “unfaithfulness.”<sup>101</sup>

Young’s speech had humor, anecdotes, and some bite directed at his opponents. But it also taught, blessed, and uplifted. Young remembered his feeling. As he began to speak, he felt “compass[s]ion” and a “swol[l]en” heart for the Saints. “The power of the Holy G[h]ost even the spirit of the Prophets” seemed to rest upon him. It had been a difficult speech to deliver: It was “a long and laboras [laborious] talk of a bout two [h]ours in the open air with the wind blowing.”<sup>102</sup>

Usually Young’s sermons flowed from one idea to the next to the next. This address, however, lacked order. “For the life of me,” said one of Young’s



*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

critics, Bishop George Miller. “I could not see any point in the course of his remarks other than a wish to overturn Sidney Rigdon’s pretensions.” Everything seemed “anarchy and boisterous confusion.”<sup>103</sup> The independent-minded Miller had earlier shown a willingness to go against the Apostles, and nothing he now heard turned him from his course.<sup>104</sup> The criticism of Latter-day Saint historian Elder B. H. Roberts was more thoughtful. Roberts wondered why Young had not given a more scriptural defense. Neither Young nor others who spoke on Thursday afternoon, Roberts believed, offered a discussion of the “relationship of the respective presiding councils.”<sup>105</sup> Roberts wanted a defense based upon Joseph Smith’s revelation on Church government, now published as section 107 in the Doctrine and Covenants.

There was a good reason why Young spoke as he did. When section 107 was given in 1835, few regarded it as a blueprint for the Apostles’ succession—or for that matter, that the revelation established the Twelve as the Church’s second most important quorum.<sup>106</sup> These ideas came during the early years at Nauvoo when Joseph Smith for the first time made the Apostles his right-hand men.<sup>107</sup> It was during these years that Smith had given them the full endowment and the commission to lead out in his absence. These last teachings were private and wrapped around sensitive issues such as plural marriage, theocracy, and the endowment ordinances, which, if known, might have turned some men and women in the congregation against Young and the Apostles. In short, there were many things that Young did not say because they were neither appropriate nor timely.

Elder Amasa Lyman spoke later in the meeting. He wanted the people to know that he had no special claims because he had served as Joseph Smith’s recent (but unsustainable) counselor. Lyman’s remarks were aimed at Rigdon. When it finally came time for Rigdon to defend his claims, he asked Elder W. W. Phelps to speak in his behalf—Rigdon’s hour-and-a-half morning speech had worn him out. The choice of Phelps was a disaster. Phelps stunningly defended the Twelve, as did the popular Parley P. Pratt a few moments later.

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

After so much confusion and hand-wringing during the past six days, the matter ended rather easily. Looking back, the reasons appear clear. There really was no viable alternative to the Twelve. From the Church's early days at Kirtland, Rigdon had been brilliant but unsteady, which biographer Richard S. Van Wagoner suggested was the result of a manic-depressive illness that grew more serious with age.<sup>108</sup> In Kirtland, he had once declared that God's keys no longer rested with Joseph Smith or perhaps even in the Church. Smith swiftly removed him from his office as counselor, but Rigdon, after repenting "like Peter of old and after a little suffering by the buffeting of Satan," was restored.<sup>109</sup> Rigdon's experiences in Missouri in the late 1830s brought episodic bouts of malaria and still more depression. Rigdon's illness was so severe by the time he settled at Nauvoo there were times that he did not function. At the Church's October 1843 conference, Joseph Smith suggested that Rigdon might step down, and Smith appears to have questioned his loyalty. But the conference (and eventually Smith himself) hoped that Rigdon might do better, and Rigdon continued to be sustained as First Counselor.<sup>110</sup>

While those who saw Rigdon up close during the first week of August knew that his moods and behavior seesawed, neither insiders nor outsiders understood the nature and extent of his illness. In contrast, there was the strong figure of Brigham Young. His experience at Peterborough increased his already high self-confidence. He felt driven. The events of succession were a time when the "power of the priesthood sat upon me," he later said. It was a time when he could "sling mountains."<sup>111</sup>

The people felt it too. The sensation began when Young spoke at Rigdon's prayer meeting and continued in the afternoon and even through several months after. William Burton, a missionary returning to Nauvoo in the spring of 1845, was surprised. The places of Joseph and Hyrum Smith had been taken "by others much better than I once was supposed," he wrote in his diary. "The spirit of Joseph appeared to rest upon Brigham."<sup>112</sup> For many Saints, Young and the Twelve held and personified Joseph Smith's last doctrines. Said one Saint, "The twelve have been ordained[,] sealed and

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

anointed[,] in fine have received all the Power necessary to preside.” It was a matter of ordination—and more.

The idea that Young had been transformed (or transfigured) by the spirit of Joseph Smith became one of the great traditions of Latter-day Saint history. The story has been told many times and with many variations. A recent compilation has more than one hundred testimonies, fifty-seven of them firsthand, and many written by men of women of ability and reputation. For some, the confirmation had been a “feeling” or “spiritual witness” that they had felt during one of those long meetings of August 8 or in the days that came later. This version often used the word *mantle* to describe what they had seen—the symbolic cloak of the Old Testament prophet Elijah falling upon his successor Elisha. “It was evident to the Saints that the mantle of Joseph had fallen upon [Young],” said Wilford Woodruff less than a year later, and “the road that he pointed out could be seen so plainly.”<sup>113</sup>

Within a decade, the Saints were building upon these memories and describing the event with many details. When Young first rose to speak, it was said, he had cleared his voice just like Joseph Smith used to do. Others said that Young’s gestures and voice were Smith’s, or perhaps it was the manner of Young’s reasoning or the expression on his face that seemed so remarkable. Still others claimed to have seen the “tall, straight and portly form of the Prophet Joseph Smith.” Young’s body had grown larger before their spiritual eyes.<sup>114</sup> “If you had had your eyes shut, you would have thought it was the Prophet,” said one man.<sup>115</sup> These memories were remarkable for their detail and their number, and they are hard to put aside.

Some skeptical historians have a different view. “When 8 August 1844 is stripped of emotional overlay, there is not a shred of irrefutable contemporary evidence to support the occurrence of a mystical event either in the morning or afternoon gatherings of that day,” writes Van Wagoner. “A more likely scenario was that it was the force of Young’s commanding presence, his well-timed arrival at the morning meeting, and perhaps a bit of theatrical mimicry.”<sup>116</sup>

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

Young himself never made any special claims about his transfiguration beyond saying that on August 8 he had felt the Holy Ghost and the spirit of the prophets.<sup>117</sup> He recognized as well as any modern social scientist the power of memory to transform events and give memories details and meaning. He sat through several recitals of the event in later years without giving them his approval. It was enough for him, and many of his closest associates too, that the solemn assembly had worked God's will. Whatever else happened on that afternoon—the mysteries of spiritual feeling and experiences can only be narrated but not verified by the historian—the people had been drawn together and for the moment had assurance. “The church was of one h[e]art and one mind,” Young said of the events, which, after all, was miracle enough.<sup>118</sup> Many years later, President Woodruff wrote that this highly celebrated day in August 1844 and Brigham Young's role in the succession became the “pivot” on which the rest of Latter-day Saint history turned—and he was right.<sup>119</sup>

## NOTES

1. O. F. Berry, “The Mormon Settlement in Illinois,” in *Papers in Illinois History and Transactions: Illinois State Historical Society* (Springville, IL: Illinois State Journal, 1906), 91.
2. Statement of George Edmunds, a longtime settler, in Berry, “Mormon Settlement in Illinois,” 97. For want and hard economic times, see William Huntington, “Reminiscences and Journal, April 1841–August 1846,” July 8 and 11, 1844, 16, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
3. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), ix.
4. “Veritas to James G. Bennett,” *New York Herald*, February 19, 1842.
5. J. Wickliffe Rigdon, “Life of Sidney Rigdon,” 178–79, Church History Library. *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde, Delivered Before the High Priest's Quorum, in Nauvoo, April 27th, 1845* (City of Joseph, IL: John Taylor, 1845), 27.

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

6. *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Pittsburgh), December 6, 1844, 4, in Richard S. Van Wagoner, "The Making of a Mormon Myth: The 1844 Transfiguration of Brigham Young," *Dialogue* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 4.
7. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1801–1844*, comp. Elden Jay Watson (Salt Lake City: by the compiler, 1969), 165; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 119, 145; Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 339; Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:325, 335–40.
8. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 119, 145; see also Leonard, *Nauvoo*, 339.
9. Willard Richards, statement, in Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, July 2, 1844, 7:249, Church History Library, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc1/v1/seg13.htm>; Willard Richards, certificate, about July 2, 1844, Willard Richards Papers, Church History Library, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, [http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc31/MS 1490/b3f1-14/seg5.htm](http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc31/MS%201490/b3f1-14/seg5.htm).
10. Jedediah M. Grant, *A Collection of Facts, Relative to the Course Taken by Elder Sidney Rigdon . . .* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking & Guilbert, 1844), 16.
11. *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde*, 11.
12. Grant, *Collection of Facts*, 17.
13. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, September 8, 1844, Church History Library, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc18/CR%20100%20318/b1f1-38/seg13.htm>.
14. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, September 8, 1844.
15. David B. Clark, "Sidney Rigdon's Rights of Succession," *Restoration*, April 6, 1987, 9.
16. Van Wagoner, "Making of a Mormon Myth," 5; see also Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982), 197.

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

17. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, September 8, 1844.
18. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, September 8, 1844; *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde*, 11–12.
19. Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, August 4, 1844, 7: addenda, p. 10; also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc1/v7/seg17.htm>.
20. Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, August 4, 1844, 7: addenda, p. 10.
21. William Clayton, *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1991), 140; Huntington, "Reminiscences and Journal," July 14 to August 4, 1844, 17–18.
22. Notice, *Times and Seasons*, June 1, 1841, 431.
23. Huntington, "Reminiscences and Journal," July 8 and 11, 1844, and July 14 to August 1, 1844, 16–18.
24. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, September 8, 1844; *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde*, 12–13.
25. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 140.
26. Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, August 5, 1844, 7:294, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc1/v7/seg16.htm>.
27. Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, August 5, 1844, 7: addenda, p. 10.
28. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 140.
29. Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, August 5, 1844, 7:294.
30. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, April 6, 1844, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc18/CR%20100%20318/b1f1-38/seg10.htm>.
31. Wilford Woodruff, journal, August 6, 1844, Wilford Woodruff Journal and Papers, 1831–1898, Church History Library.
32. Woodruff, journal, July 30, 1844.

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

33. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, August 3, 1844, 7:293, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc1/v7/seg15.htm>.
34. Woodruff, journal, August 6, 1844.
35. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, May 21, 1844, to June 30, 1844, 167–69.
36. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, May 10 and 15, 1844, 165.
37. Brigham Young to Mary Ann Young, June 12, 1844, original in possession of Dr. Wade Stephens, Bradenton, Florida, in Dean C. Jessee, "Brigham Young's Family: Part I, 1824–1845," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 326.
38. Brigham Young to Willard Richards, July 8, 1844, Willard Richards Papers, Church History Library, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc31/MS%201490/b3f15-23/seg29.htm>.
39. Woodruff, journal, July 1, 1844.
40. Brigham Young to Willard Richards, July 8, 1844; spelling and punctuation standardized.
41. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 6:486–87, 519.
42. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, July 9, 1844, 170.
43. Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, August 14, 1844, 7:266–67; Brigham Young, journal, July 14, 1844, Brigham Young Office Files, 1832–1878, Church History Library; Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, July 9 and 14, 1844, Church History Library.
44. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, February 12, 1849, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc18/CR%20100%20318/b2f1-20/seg12.htm>; *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, July 16, 1844, 170–71; Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, July 16, 1844, 272–73, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc1/v7/seg14.htm>, also Church Historian's Office, journal, June 22, 1863, 27:81–82, Church History Library, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc17/b3v26-27/seg55.htm>.

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

45. Brigham Young, "Remarks Before a Family Gathering," December 25, 1857, Brigham Young Papers, Church History Library.
46. Declaration of the Twelve, about 1844, in "The Work of God Rolls Forward," <http://josephsmith.net/josephsmith/v/index.jsp?vnextoid=e8b5fe1347df1010VgnVCM1000001f5e340aRCRD&vnextfmt=tab3>; spelling standardized.
47. Declaration of the Twelve, about 1844; see also Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, September 8, 1844.
48. Brigham Young, discourse, October 7, 1866, in Brigham Young, *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young, Volume 4: 1862–1867*, ed. Richard S. Van Wagoner (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009), 4:2379.
49. Samuel W. Richards to Franklin D. Richards, August 23, 1844, quoting Elder Orson Hyde, Church History Library.
50. Orson Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 13:180; Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:164. Andrew F. Ehat summarizes, "The full meaning of this meeting [when the last charge was given] at first escaped all those who attended it and only after the Martyrdom was it appreciated" ("Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances," 96).
51. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, December 5, 1847; see also Brigham Young to Orson Spencer, January 23, 1848, Brigham Young Papers. Describing the establishment of the First Presidency consisting of Young, Kimball, and Richards, Young wrote, "Nothing more has been done to day than what I knew would be done when Joseph died."
52. B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930), 2:416; see also Doctrine and Covenants 20:65.
53. Woodruff, journal, July 17, 1844.
54. Journal History, July 18, 1844, quoting the *Prophet*.
55. Woodruff, journal, July 18, 1844.
56. Church Historian's Office, History of the Church, August 6, 1844, 7: addenda, p. 10. Examples of this correspondence may be found in the Willard Richards Papers, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, [http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc31/MS 1490/contents.htm](http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc31/MS%201490/contents.htm).



*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

57. General Church Recorder, Far West and Nauvoo Elders' Certificates, Church History Library; emphasis added. Smith, *History of the Church*, 7:212–13.
58. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 137.
59. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 137–39.
60. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 139; Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances," 13.
61. James B. Allen, "One Man's Nauvoo: William Clayton's Experience in Mormon Illinois," *Journal of Mormon History* 6 (1979): 57–58n57.
62. Leonard, *Nauvoo*, 428.
63. Ronald K. Esplin, "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve: A Succession of Continuity," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 304–6.
64. The topic of the Council of Fifty has elicited much scholarly attention. The authoritative secondary sources are Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1967); D. Michael Quinn, "The Council of Fifty and its Members, 1844 to 1845," *BYU Studies* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 163–97; and Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, especially 120–34, 137–41, and 196–97.
65. Allen, "One Man's Nauvoo," 47; Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, eds., *Joseph Smith's Quorum of the Anointed, 1842–1845: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005), 80–82.
66. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 137–39.
67. Quinn, "Meetings and Initiations of the Anointed Quorum (Holy Order), 1842–45," appendix 4, in *Mormon Hierarchy*, 491–519; Anderson and Bergera, eds., *Joseph Smith's Quorum of the Anointed*, 80–82.
68. Allen, "One Man's Nauvoo," 47, 48n29.
69. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, October 8, 1848, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc18/CR%20100%20318/b2f1-20/seg10.htm>.
70. This is the argument of Esplin, in "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve," 303.
71. Heber C. Kimball to Parley P. Pratt, June 17, 1842, Parley P. Pratt Papers, Church History Library.

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

72. Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:180; Ehat, “Joseph Smith’s Introduction of Temple Ordinances,” 93.
73. In *Mormon Hierarchy*, 170, Quinn suggested that 5 percent of the Saints knew about these practices.
74. Todd Compton, foreword, in Anderson and Bergera, *Joseph Smith’s Quorum of the Anointed*, ix–xii.
75. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 138.
76. Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 145–48.
77. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 141.
78. Woodruff, journal, August 7, 1844.
79. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 141. The vision that Rigdon mentions is recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 76.
80. Woodruff, journal, August 7, 1844.
81. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 141.
82. Ehat, “Joseph Smith’s Introduction of Temple Ordinances,” 112–13, 118, 121, 147.
83. Church Historian’s Office, General Church Minutes, December 5, 1847.
84. Church Historian’s Office, General Church Minutes, December 5, 1847.
85. Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes in Nauvoo after the Martyrdom of the Prophet and Patriarch,” *Woman’s Exponent*, February 1, 1883, 130. Van Wagoner notes that the multitude was of more than five thousand Saints (“Making of a Mormon Myth,” 9).
86. Van Wagoner, “Making of a Mormon Myth,” 9.
87. *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde*, 13–14. See also Van Wagoner, “Making of a Mormon Myth,” 9.
88. Church Historian’s Office, General Church Minutes, December 5, 1847.
89. Jacob Hamblin statement as cited in Lynne Watkins Jorgensen and *BYU Studies* staff, “The Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Passes to Brother Brigham: A Collective Spiritual Witness,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 4 (1996–97): 162.
90. Joseph Fielding, in Andrew F. Ehat, “‘They Might Have Known That He Was Not a Fallen Prophet’: The Nauvoo Journal of Joseph Fielding,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 2 (Winter 1979): 155.
91. Church Historian’s Office, General Church Minutes, October 8, 1848.

*Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844*

92. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, December 5, 1847.
93. Woodruff, journal, August 8, 1844.
94. Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 143–85.
95. James Blakesley to Jacob Scott, August 16, 1844, in Heman C. Smith, "Succession in the Presidency," *Journal of History* 2, no. 1 (January 1909): 3–4. Blakesley wrote before learning of the meetings on August 8.
96. Ezra Taft Benson, "A Brief History of Ezra Taft Benson Written by Himself," in Church Historian's Office, *Histories of the Twelve, 1856–1858*, Church History Library.
97. These memories are respectively those of George Romney and Maria Wealthy Wilcox, as well as Johnson. They are printed in Jorgensen and *BYU Studies* staff, "Mantle of the Prophet," 174, 178, and 167.
98. Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle*, 142.
99. Church Historian's Office, General Church Minutes, August 8, 1844, also found in *Selected Collections from the Archives*, <http://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/CD%20Volume%201/Disc18/CR%20100%20318/b1f1-38/seg12.htm>. There are four copies of proceedings, and each has unique details.
100. In addition to the four summaries of the August 8 afternoon meeting in the Church History Library, Wilford Woodruff left an account in his diary. My narrative is a reconstruction based upon these five sources.
101. Huntington, "Reminiscences and Journal," August 8, 1844, 18.
102. Brigham Young, journal, August 8, 1844, Church History Library. While parts of the diary were written by secretaries, these sentences, significantly, were written in Young's own hand. See Dean C. Jessee, "The Writings of Brigham Young," *Western Historical Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (July 1873): 284.
103. H. W. Mills, "De Tal Palo Tal Astilla," *Historical Society of Southern California: Annual Publications* 10, no. 3 (1917): 135.
104. William Huntington, "Reminiscences and Journal," July 8 and 14, and August 4, 1844, 17–18.
105. B. H. Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period 2: Apostolic Interregnum*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1932), 7:234n.
106. Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 156–60.

## A FIRM FOUNDATION

107. Esplin, “Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve,” 308–12.
108. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, viii.
109. Joseph Smith to W. W. Phelps, July 31, 1832, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 273.
110. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 323–24.
111. Church Historian’s Office, General Church Minutes, December 25, 1857.
112. Cited in Jorgensen and *BYU Studies* staff, “Mantle of the Prophet,” 135.
113. Wilford Woodruff, “To the Officers and Members,” *Millennial Star*, February 1845, 138.
114. Jorgensen and *BYU Studies* staff, “Mantle of the Prophet,” 167. For more accounts of the mantle of Joseph, see Jorgensen’s full article.
115. Rachel Ridgeway Ivins, cited in Jorgensen and *BYU Studies* staff, “Mantle of the Prophet Joseph,” 167.
116. Van Wagoner, “Making of a Mormon Myth,” 21; see also Reid L. Harper, “The Mantle of Joseph: Creation of a Mormon Miracle,” *Journal of Mormon History* 22, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 35–71.
117. Brigham Young, journal, August 8, 1844, Church History Library.
118. Sermon, December 25, 1847, Church minutes.
119. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:81.