

"WE ARE A KINGDOM TO OURSELVES"

The Council of Fifty Minutes and the Mormon Exodus West

Richard E. Bennett

In June 2016 at the annual Mormon History Association conference, I participated on a panel discussion concerning the about-to-be-released Council of Fifty minutes. This remarkable resource has since been published and now forms part of the Administrative Records series of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. My comments at that time centered on how these minutes shed new light on a variety of topics. These topics included the political role of the Council of Fifty, the plans to unite with and convert the various tribes of Indians in the American West, the so-called “Western Mission,” the building of the Nauvoo Temple and more especially the Nauvoo House, and the Saints’ ultimate destination in the Rocky Mountains. I noted that in the minutes there was a definite shift in tone between the topics, designs, and purposes of this previously secret council during Joseph Smith’s lifetime and those covered during Brigham Young’s role as chairman. Under Joseph Smith, there was a good deal of talk about government, constitutions, and policies; under Brigham Young, the council had much more concrete discussion of plans and preparations for the pending exodus. After Joseph’s martyrdom and particularly following the revocation of the Nauvoo charter in January 1845, these minutes take on an air of greater urgency as the council engaged in more studious preparation than

before. No doubt this hastening was in light of growing persecution and the realization that the Latter-day Saints would have to vacate Nauvoo sooner than later and perhaps begin their exodus west as early as February 1, 1846. The purpose of this paper is to probe more deeply into the role that the Council of Fifty played in the planning and preparation for the exodus.

GENERAL PARAMETERS OF THE DESTINATION

As a student of the Mormon migrations west, I have long been of the opinion that when the Saints began leaving Nauvoo, Brigham Young and the Twelve Apostles, at that time the united leadership of the Church, did not have a precise destination in mind. They knew they were looking at the Rocky Mountains and possibly some good valley therein as possibilities, but their destination became clearer the further west they traveled.¹ While this is still partially true, the Council of Fifty minutes shed new light on the exodus, the preparations for it, the challenges the Saints would face, and what Church leaders were looking for in a new home. I discuss these topics below but especially how leaders zeroed in on the Great Salt Lake Valley as their primary destination, at least as a vantage point for later, more careful explorations of surrounding areas. Concluded Brigham Young in late 1845, “We have designed sending them somewhere near the Great Salt Lake and after we get there, in a little time we can work our way to the head of the California Bay.”²

The minutes shed more light on *what* they were looking for in a destination than precisely *where* they were heading. The size of the place they would settle in was a major factor in their thinking—it needed to be quite large. On behalf of the entire council, Orson Spencer wrote that the Saints were “willing to accept of any eligible location within any part of the Territory of the U. States” so long as it was large enough to accommodate at least 500,000 people. “A portion of Territory not less than 200 miles square would be none too great or roomy for the increase of the people arising in a period of 10 years judging from the analogy of 10 years that have gone by.”³ Such a statement reflects leaders’ combined optimism, largely borne out of the impressive success of the Twelve in their mission to Great Britain from 1838 to 1841, that the Church was destined for spectacular growth and that Nauvoo could never accommodate such swelling ranks of membership in the best of times. Seen in their deliberations was an optimism

that missionary work was going to become ever more successful and that, in short order, hundreds of thousands of people would be converted and emigrate to wherever the headquarters of the Church would be located. In reality, it would take at least sixty years to meet this threshold. Thus, the members of the Council of Fifty may have been overly optimistic in their rosy projections of Church growth, but they were thinking big—very big—and envisioned a new location, a new “kingdom” as some members of the council called it, that must accommodate such favorable anticipations.

SPACE FOR AMERICAN INDIAN ALLIES

This anticipated imminent spike in membership may also be attributed to their robust expectation of not merely making allies with the various Indian tribes in the West, but also of converting them in large numbers. Said chairman Brigham Young, “The object of this organization [the Council of Fifty] is to find a place where we can dwell in peace and lift up the standard of liberty. It is for the purpose of uniting the Lamanites, and sowing the seeds of the gospel among them. They will receive it en Masse.”⁴ The council firmly believed that the Lamanites were modern Israel and that the martyrdom signaled the definite end of the day of the Gentiles. The Lord’s Spirit was therefore about to effect a bounteous harvest of conversion upon the American Indians, fellow exiles in the West since at least Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830. Any movement west would of necessity bring the Saints into contact with many of these wounded and disenfranchised tribes and provide ample opportunities for preaching the gospel to them. Some members of the council therefore believed the exodus would result not only in finding a new place of settlement but also in a rich harvest of thousands of converted Native American peoples. Again, this proved an overly naive and optimistic prediction, and one that was somewhat characteristic of the unrealistic tone of much of the council’s deliberations.

There was more, however, to the Indian question than conversion. The minutes are replete with references to the possibility of the Saints aligning themselves with the tribes not merely to defend themselves but to wreak vengeance upon the nation that had so viciously turned upon them. Some on the council envisioned the tribes being instrumental in helping the Saints return to their New Jerusalem (Zion) in Independence, Missouri:

“We are Legislators, set here to legislate for the best means whereby the chosen seed shall return that they might go to Jerusalem and receive the statutes they once rejected. Zion is the place where the tribes shall return and bring a present to the Lord of Hosts.”⁵ Council member George Miller, a well-known scout of the Iowa Territory who knew many of the tribal leaders personally, believed that the leading object of their pending mission was “to unite the tribes from North to South,” for they “are ready to come forth and take hold of the matter in earnest.” He continued at another meeting, “Our object is to unite all the Indian tribes from north to south and west to the Pacific Ocean in one body and to include ourselves in the number. . . . This nation has severed us from them and we are a kingdom to ourselves; and if the crisis come we can make honorable reprisals, and have enough to carry us to the farthest corner of the earth. . . . He is in favor of immediate action, and don’t want to see the ship rot on the stocks, let us la[u]nch her and go to work in earnest.” Having formed these Native alliances, Brigham Young stated, the Saints will “come back and sweep Jackson County and build the Temple.”⁶

These kind of exaggerated, sometimes vitriolic statements lend credence to the “Lamanism” of Alpheus Cutler, who broke with the Church at Winter Quarters in 1848 in large measure because of what he felt was Brigham Young’s denunciation of the Indian plan of alliance. Cutler preached this doctrine of “Lamanism” openly on the east side of the Missouri River.⁷

The fact that Young later dismissed some of his own earlier predictions, let alone the talk of some other members of the council, underscores the need to read these minutes with caution. The council deliberated courses of action. It did not dictate them, and few binding resolutions were made. Members gave advice and insights, but they did not ultimately determine action. It was essentially a deliberative body of “legislators” and advisers that expressed all kinds of different and often contrasting opinions, with some members far more vocal—and hawkish—than others. This matter of Indian conversion is a case in point. By late 1847, Brigham Young had realized that mass Native American conversions were not happening and that their once-discussed alliance with the Indian tribes was an impossibility. To talk of such things at Winter Quarters was tantamount to declaring war

upon the United States and upon the state of Missouri. Thus what was said in the privacy of Council of Fifty meetings and what was decided upon during the exodus itself as the Saints moved west, were not always the same. Unlike the Quorum of the Twelve, the Council of Fifty did not exist as a separate governing body over the Church, although it is apparent that some apparently wished it would be.

DEFENSIBLE BORDERS AND A HEALTHY CLIMATE

Another consideration in selecting their destination was that it should be a place of safety whence they could not easily be dislodged. The Mormons had learned bitter lessons from their expulsions from both Jackson and Caldwell Counties in Missouri and now from Illinois, and it was uppermost in their minds that wherever they went, it be almost impregnable and unassailable militarily from without. Said Charles C. Rich, later apostle to Bear River country, "All we want is a place to gather the women and children and when they are safe there will be no difficulty in defending ourselves as we might see proper."⁸ Almon W. Babbitt, Esq., added, "It is wisdom to seek out a place with natural fortifications, where we can naturally defend ourselves."⁹ The conversion of thousands of Indians would bring greater safety still: "We would be glad to have the Indians put in possession of the arms," and "when the blow is to be struck, and our object is accomplished in effecting the union, the enemy will be scattered."¹⁰

Of equal importance in evaluating possible destinations was the matter of the Saints' health and well-being. Nauvoo had proven to be a sickly place, especially in its formative years. Despite all the fanfare of it being the "city beautiful," Joseph Smith once described it as "a deathly sickly hole" and while painting as bright a picture as possible in order to attract emigrants, admitted that "we have been keeping up appearances, and holding out inducements, to encourage emigration that we scarcely think justifiable in consequence of the mortality that almost invariably awaits those who come from far distant parts."¹¹ The truth is, the Latter-day Saints lost more lives to disease than to persecution! "If we can find a healthy country we will go there," Brigham Young said.¹²

DECIDING ON A DESTINATION

With these and other considerations in mind, what place would best fill the Saints' needs? A close look at the minutes indicates a progression of thinking, a gradual refinement in plans. It would appear that in the spring of 1845, Church leaders had more or less agreed upon Upper California. At that time, California was part of the expansive northern territory of Mexico sprawling all over much of the western part of today's United States, loosely governed and poorly understood. But to the Saints, it meant a place south of Oregon and likely on the coast. John Taylor even composed the favorite song of the council, titled "The Upper California" (sung to the tune of "The Rose That All Are Praising"), in celebration of the likelihood of their going there. Sung on numerous occasions and even later in the temple, its fourth verse was as follows:

We'll reign, we'll rule, & triumph & God shall be our king
 The plains, the hills & vallies, shall with Hosannas ring
 Our towers and temples there shall rise
Along the great Pacific Sea.
 In upper California, O thats the land for me.¹³

The advantages of settling on the coast were many. Said Brigham Young, "Our final object is to get on the sea coast where we can have the advantages of commercial navigation."¹⁴ The coast would be more fertile than inland, the climate more agreeable, and it would certainly be more conducive to emigration and to pursuing worldwide missionary work. John Taylor frowned on the idea of settling in the "barren deserts" of the interior. By building their city on the coasts, they could "carry the gospel to the other parts of the globe" more easily and efficiently.¹⁵ Erastus Snow agreed, "If we pitch upon California, and that seems to be the place where our feelings centre, we can take care of ourselves. He often heard the prophet speak of that country last spring. He was always opposed to the idea of seeking a location in the interior where we should be cut off from the advantages of communication by the seas."¹⁶

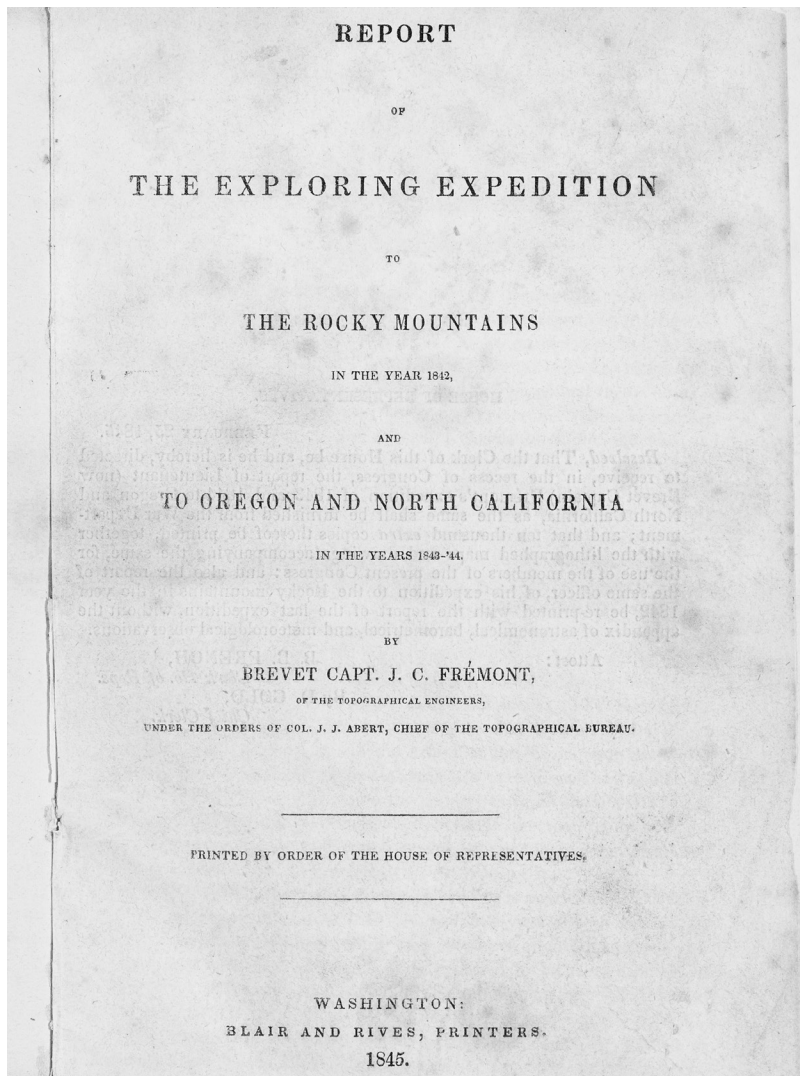
But by late summer of 1845, sentiments had certainly changed, with the council now favoring an interior valley destination, something they called "the Oregon expedition," likely in an effort to disguise their true intent. The reasons for the change are not easy to decipher. Orson Hyde, never a

proponent of leaving the United States in the first place, believed an interior valley within the United States to be their best option. "We could then make our own laws for our own [territorial] government and would be shielded by the constitution of the United States. . . . Should we go to California there is the same blood runs there as here and the same feelings of opposition to the truth would soon manifest themselves. We will find mobocrats there."¹⁷

Besides isolation, distance was also a factor. Why travel 2,100 miles if 1,500 miles would do? An obvious factor leaders considered was the preparation of their own families, wives, and children at a time of increasing persecution. Could the Latter-day Saints as a people make such an extended journey all the way to the coast?

Another pivotal consideration was the matter of Mormon livestock. The Mormons may have been money poor, but they were cattle rich. There would be tens of thousands of head of cattle in the pending exodus. Cornelius Lott, a member of the council and an excellent herdsman, was later put in charge of the Mormon livestock and played a critical role in the movement west of somewhere between ten thousand and thirty thousand head of cattle.¹⁸ The requirement to move so many cows, oxen, sheep, chickens, horses, and other farm animals influenced leaders' choice of routes and distances. Driving that many animals up and over the mountains would be a formidable task. The difference between the Great Salt Lake and the coast, for instance, was at least six hundred more miles of additional herding, no small consideration.

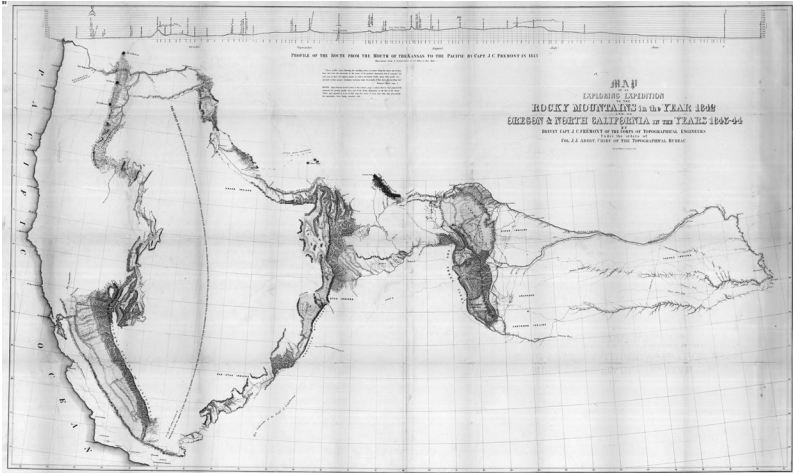
Another factor was undoubtedly the publication of John C. Frémont's report of his 1842 expedition to the Rocky Mountains and his 1843–44 exploration of Upper California and Oregon, which included surveying the area around the Great Salt Lake. This study, titled *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–'44*, was published in August 1845, but Orson Hyde had obtained an earlier version of it (reporting on only the 1842 expedition) as early as April 1844. "Judge [Stephen A.] D[ouglas] borrowed it of Mr. [Thomas Hart] B[enton] [Frémont's father-in-law]. I was not to tell any one in this city [where] I got it. The book is a most valuable document to any one contemplating a journey to Oregon."¹⁹ The *Nauvoo Neighbor* later recorded that "the Rocky Mountains are shown to



Title page of John C. Frémont's 1845 report. Courtesy of Church History Library.

be not the formidable barriers supposed. Capt. Fremont crossed them at four different places—instead of being desolate and impassable they are shown to have many excellent passes, of which the South pass is the finest, and to embosom beautiful valleys, rivers, and parks, with lakes and

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In evaluating possible destinations for a new Mormon settlement, Church leaders studied John C. Frémont's reports of his western expeditions. This map was published in John C. Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-'44* (Washington, DC: Blair and Rives, 1845). Courtesy of Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

mineral springs, rivalling and surpassing the most enchanting parts of the Alpine regions in Switzerland."²⁰ Thus the Saints were studying Frémont's maps at least a year and a half before their departure.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF PLANS

With all these considerations in mind, Brigham Young announced in one of the last meetings of the Council of Fifty in September 1845, "It has been proved that there is not much difficulty in sending people beyond the mountains. We have designed sending them somewhere near the Great Salt Lake and after we get there, in a little time we can work our way to the head of the California Bay, or the Bay of the St Francisco."²¹ Added Parley P. Pratt:

There is a good Wagon Road to California leading on from Independence Missouri. It follows the Platte, going in between the mountains, after which the roads fork, one going to California and the other to Oregon. At the place where the roads fork is the spot

where we have some notion of settling. The rout to San Francisco . . . would be about 2100 miles, but to the place where we calculate to go not more than 1500.²²

And in one of the council meetings held within a month of the departure of the first companies, Brigham Young said that their destination would be best located somewhere out of the United States but east of the coast, if not a permanent site then certainly one from which they could scout out other possibilities. “[My] mind is to go just beyond the Rocky mountains,” he said on January 11, 1846,

somewhere on the Mexican claim and the United States will have no business to come there and if they do we will treat them as enemies. We can make a stand somewhere on the vallies of the Bear River. . . . Whenever we get ourselves planted in that region of country we can send scouts to explore the whole country to the coast and seek out suitable places where we can locate and fortify ourselves so as to bid defiance to the enemy; and also where the Saints from the Eastern States and England could land and establish themselves.²³

And as to their intended route, they had long concluded the following: “In case of a removal . . . , Nauvoo is the place of general rendezvous,” said Orson Hyde.

Our course from thence would be westward through Iowa, bearing a little north, untill we come to the Missouri river, leaving the State of Missouri on the left, thence onward till we come to the Platte, thence up the north fork of the Platte to the mouth of [the] Sweet water River in Long. 107°45" W. and thence up said Sweet water river to the South pass of the Rocky Mountains about 11 hundred miles from Nauvoo, And from said South pass Lat 42° 28" north to the Umqua and Clamet valleys in Oregon bordering on California.²⁴

As to the time of their departure, the so-called “committee on foreign relations,” established back on March 4, 1845, and chaired by Samuel Bent, was initially charged with the planning and outfitting of the “Western Mission” or western expedition.²⁵ But as the time of the exodus drew near, the entire

Council of Fifty assumed responsibility for organizing their wholesale departure. While a concrete departure date was not mentioned for several months, as early as September 1845 they were thinking of a spring 1846 departure. By the beginning of 1846, there was talk of little else, even if it meant leaving in winter, which surprisingly held out certain benefits. "If there is an advance company to go and put in crops this spring," said Orson Pratt in January, "it will be necessary to start by the first of February for we cannot cross the mountains to Bear River in less than three months and we could not get there soon enough to put in spring crops unless we start quickly." John Taylor echoed Pratt's sentiments: "He approves of an early start. If we start in one month while the ground is hard and froze we could take extra grain, nearly enough to sustain our teams all the way." Phelps agreed: "If we can transplant this kingdom while the ground is frozen we shall accomplish a great thing."²⁶

And as to the makeup of the advance companies, Brigham Young said that the company captains should "use their influence to have as few women and children as possible, go with the first company, but let us go and prepare a place for them, so that they can follow in the spring." "The next thing is for every man of this council to select his fifty men who can be prepared to start immediately either night or day when the word is given." Fearing possible government intervention, Young said, "The government of the United States have laid plans to take the Twelve and some others of this council, and they calculate to send a regiment of troops to take them but we can go as fast as they can."²⁷

And so the time grew near, and the era of preparation was almost over. The spirit of departure permeated the penultimate meeting of the council, as evidenced by the following:

We want to go whether we are ready or not. "The Lord is going to find this nation something to do, besides hunt after the blood of the saints and innocent men. . . ."

He then called for the reports of the Captains of companies. . . .

Of the 25 companies of 100 families each now organizing, 20 companies by their captains made report, the sum total of said reports are as follows:

916 Horses, 639 Wagons, 18 Buggs [buggies], 227 Yoke of Oxen
251 Cows, 54 men and Guns, and 70 teams ready to start at one
hours notice.²⁸

CONCLUSION

In summary, I wish to emphasize three things that have impressed me as I have more carefully studied these minutes. The first is that the Council of Fifty was not a legislative or Church administrative body. Although the council did pass resolutions, they seemed not to have been binding, nor did the council determine ultimate Church policy. Likewise, the Council of Fifty did not attempt to define Church doctrines and beliefs. Deliberative in nature, it primarily gave counsel and advice.

A second contribution is that the minutes provide a glimpse into the character of Brigham Young, who would shortly be leading the exodus. When he became chairman of the council, he directed it not in a dictating or controlling manner, but in a way that invited participation. Everyone had a voice and expressed himself freely, doing so in an advisory capacity. Brigham Young was growing into his leadership roles, and any future biography of this great Mormon leader must take these minutes into serious consideration.

Finally, the minutes of the Council of Fifty are an important help to the study of the Mormon exodus. While they corroborate much of the best current research on the exodus, they nevertheless add valuable insights and perspectives. More was said about what they were looking for in a future destination than precisely where they were going. The spaciousness of their future Zion, health concerns, safety, and the role of the American Indians—these were their earlier considerations. But as time went by, and especially after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, there developed a tone of urgency and greater clarity in regard to their final destination, the organization of their departing companies, the concerns over their livestock, their intended route, their preparations, and the timing of their departure.

NOTES

1. “The fact remains that if he ever did anticipate it, Brigham Young referred to it in only vague, obscure generalities without ever specifying a timetable or particular place of settlement.” Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852: “And Should We Die . . .”* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 16.

2. Council of Fifty, Minutes, September 9, 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), 472 (hereafter *JSP*, CFM).
3. Council of Fifty, Minutes, February 4, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:243.
4. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:255.
5. William W. Phelps, in Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 4, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:286.
6. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 4 and 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:289, 355–56. Said Reynolds Cahoon, "It is a part of this mission to go from tribe to tribe and feel after their wise men and ordain presidents & set their own wise men up as councillors. . . . And if the enemies do not let us alone we will call out these men of the forest and they had better let us alone." Council of Fifty Minutes, March 4, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:284.
7. See the author's article "Lamanism, Lymanism, and Corn Fields," *Journal of Mormon History* 13 (1986–87): 44–59.
8. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:353.
9. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 11, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:307.
10. Charles C. Rich and Orson Hyde, in Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 11, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:408.
11. Joseph Smith to Horace Hotchkiss, August 25, 1841, josephsmithpapers.org. The mortality rate in Nauvoo in 1840 was thirty deaths per one thousand people. Evan Ivie and Douglas C. Heiner, "Deaths in Early Nauvoo, Illinois, 1839–1846, and in Winter Quarters, Nebraska, 1846–1848," *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 163–74.
12. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 11, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:309.
13. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 11, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:402, emphasis added. The song was later included in Latter-day Saint hymnals. Peter Crawley, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church, vol. 1, 1830 to 1847* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1997), 335.
14. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 18, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:328.
15. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:352.
16. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 22, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:354. A careful reading of the minutes downplays any assumed prophecy of Joseph Smith that the Saints would move to an interior valley of the Rocky Mountains.

17. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 18, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:329.
18. Gary S. Ford, "Cornelius P. Lott and His Contribution to the Temporal Salvation of the Latter-day Saint Pioneers through the Care of Livestock" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2005), 105.
19. Letter from Orson Hyde, April 26, 1844, in *JSP*, CFM:184. This first report of Frémont was titled *Report on an Exploration of the Country Lying between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, on the Line of the Kansas and Great Platte Rivers* (Washington: United States Senate, 1843).
20. "Capt. Fremont's Expedition," *Nauvoo Neighbor*, September 17, 1845, [1]; see Council of Fifty, Minutes, September 9, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:472. For a fine recent study of Frémont's expedition and its impact on Latter-day Saint leaders, see Alexander L. Baugh, "John C. Frémont's 1843–44 Western Expedition and Its Influence on Mormon Settlement in Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 254–69. Baugh argues that Frémont's study had "a profound influence on Brigham Young and the Church leadership and in their discussion to select the Wasatch region of northern Utah" as the main place for settlement. Baugh, "John C. Frémont's 1843–44 Western Expedition," 256.
21. Council of Fifty, Minutes, September 9, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:472
22. Council of Fifty, Minutes, September 9, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:475.
23. Council of Fifty, Minutes, January 11, 1846, in *JSP*, CFM:513–14.
24. Letter from Orson Hyde, April 26, 1844, in *JSP*, CFM:181–84.
25. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 11, 1845, in *JSP*, CFM:299. The Western Mission was an assignment given to Jonathan Dunham and others in the spring of 1845 to gain permission from relocated Indian tribes living in the middle Missouri River region to establish settlements in the area and to obtain their pledge to assist the Saints in exploring the western countries. See Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 514.
26. Council of Fifty, Minutes, January 11, 1846, in *JSP*, CFM:515, 517.
27. Council of Fifty, Minutes, January 11 and 13, 1846, in *JSP*, CFM:519, 525.
28. Council of Fifty, Minutes, January 13, 1846, in *JSP*, CFM:522–23. William Clayton recorded in his journal that on January 25 he met with the captains of the various companies to receive their final reports. *JSP*, CFM:550n32. The Saints began leaving Nauvoo just ten days later.