The Judge Who Called Joseph Smith “My Son”

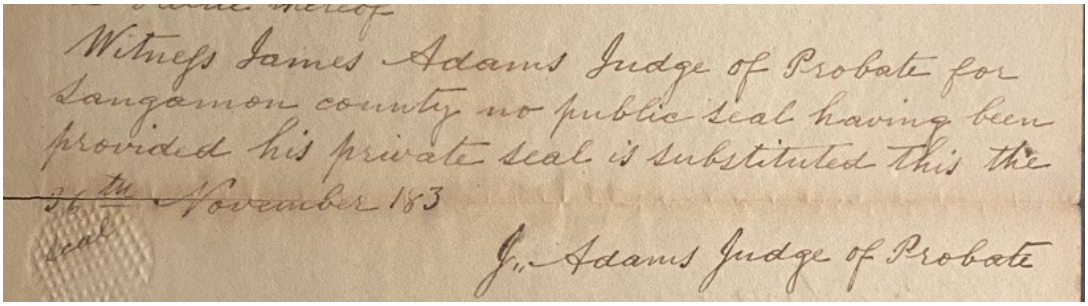
James Adams and the Probate Papers of John C Vance
An Abraham Lincoln Connection
Sangamon County Illinois 1835 to 1836

A clock valued at twelve dollars. A small lot of books at twenty-five cents. Beds, clothing, tools, and livestock: the appraisal of John C. Vance’s estate preserves the outline of a life after its owner was gone. The warrant that set this work in motion bears the signature of James Adams, judge of probate for Sangamon County.[3]

Years before he addressed Joseph Smith as “My Son,” Adams was already carrying the responsibilities of an Illinois public officer. He later offered Joseph practical help, opened his home to him, and entered the Nauvoo Endowment Company that formed the nucleus of the Quorum of the Anointed. Harriet Denton Adams belongs within that story of faith, family, and friendship.[2, 8, 10, 11]

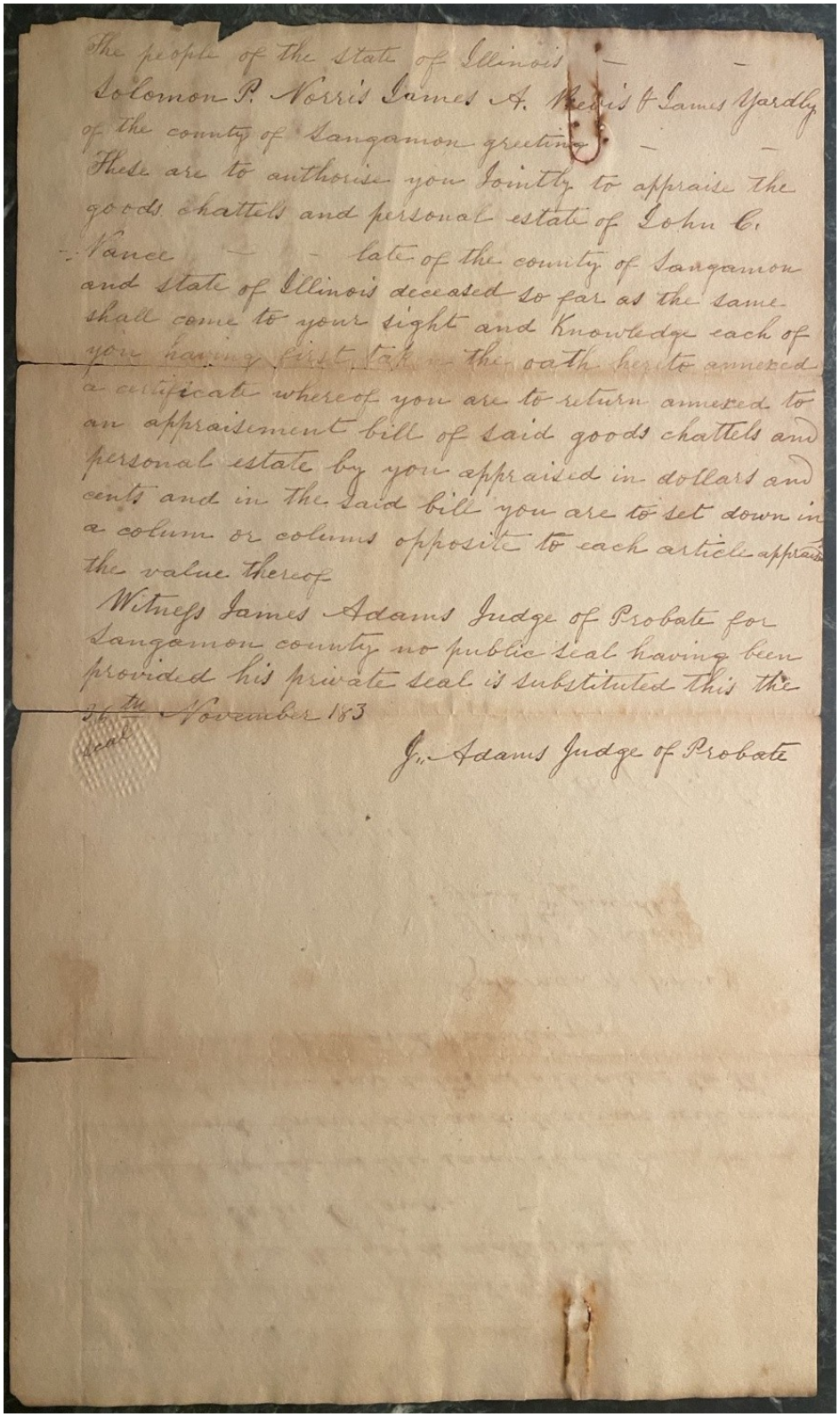
Highlights

- 1835 - James Adams authorizes the appraisal of John C. Vance’s estate.
- 1835 - Lincoln reports a John C. Vance’s death at New Salem, a strong probable match.
- 1839 - Adams introduces Joseph Smith to President Martin Van Buren by letter.
- 1841 - James supports the temple and receives a patriarchal license; Harriet receives a blessing.
- 1842 - James leads the Springfield branch and joins the Nauvoo Endowment Company.
- 1842 to 1843 - He offers fatherly counsel, hospitality, and surety for Joseph’s appearance.
- 1843 - James and Harriet are evidently sealed; James dies at Nauvoo in August.
- 1843 to 1844 - Harriet enters the Quorum of the Anointed and lives until August 1844.


Witness James Adams Judge of Probate for
Sangamon county no public seal having been
provided his private seal is substituted this the
26th November 183
seal
J. Adams Judge of Probate

Detail of Adams’s private seal and signature on the appraisal warrant. Photograph IMG_3596.

The warrant signed by James Adams


The people of the State of Illinois —
Solomon P. Norris James A. Norris & James Yardly
of the county of Sangamon greeting —
These are to authorise you Jointly to appraise the
goods chattels and personal estate of John C.
Vance — late of the county of Sangamon
and State of Illinois deceased so far as the same
shall come to your sight and knowledge each of
you having first taken the oath hereto annexed
a certificate whereof you are to return annexed to
an appraisement bill of said goods chattels and
personal estate by you appraised in dollars and
cents and in the said bill you are to set down in
a column or columns opposite to each article appraised
the value thereof
Witness James Adams Judge of Probate for
Sangamon county no public seal having been
provided his private seal is substituted this the
26th November 183
seal
J. Adams Judge of Probate

Document 1 front. Warrant appointing appraisers for John C. Vance's personal estate. November 183[5]; the day appears to be 26. Photograph IMG_3596. [3]

Transcription of the warrant

Line breaks follow the manuscript. Square brackets supply missing text or mark uncertain readings; spelling is retained. The final year digit is absent or unreadable. The December oath and January filing establish the 1835 to 1836 sequence.

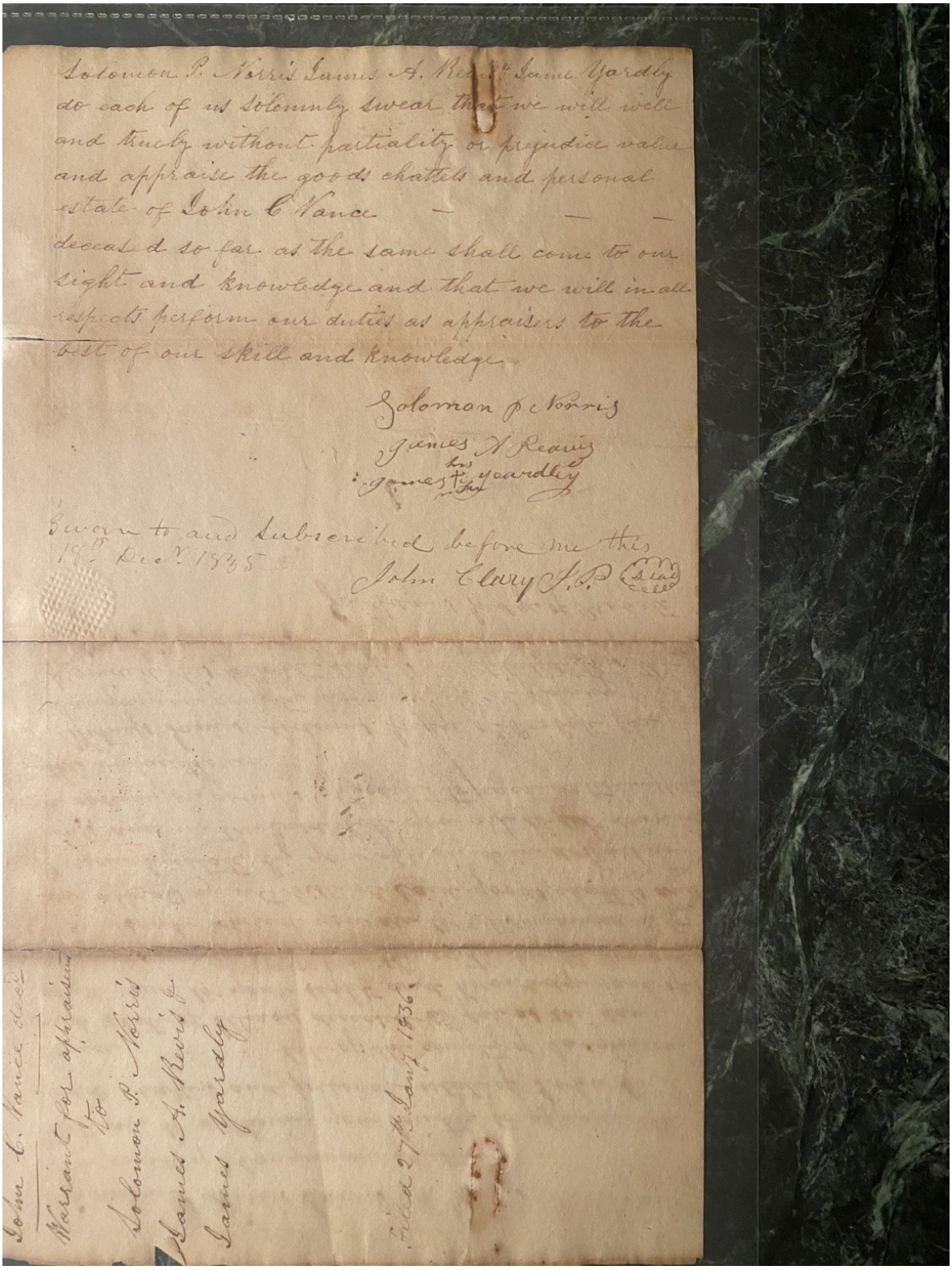
The people of the State of Illinois -
Solomon P. Norris James A. Revis & James Yardly
of the county of Sangamon greeting -
These are to authorise you Jointly to apraise the
goods chattels and personal estate of John C.
Vance late of the county of Sangamon
and state of Illinois deceased so far as the same
shall come to your sight and Knowledge each of
you having first taken the oath hereto annexed
a certificate whereof you are to return annexed to
an appraisement bill of said goods chattels and
personal estate by you appraised in dollars and
cents and in the said bill you are to set down in
a column or columns opposite to each article appraised
the value thereof
Witness James Adams Judge of Probate for
Sangamon county no public seal having been
provided his private seal is substituted this the
[26th?] November 183[5]
J. Adams Judge of Probate
[private seal]

What Adams is ordering

The three men are to identify the personal property that comes to their knowledge and assign a value to each article. They must swear the attached oath and return it with their appraisal. Adams signs as the authorizing judge; he does not sign the list of goods as an appraiser. The instruction concerns personal property and supplies no complete account of land, debts, heirs, or the estate’s final settlement.[3]

The surname written Revis here appears as Reavis in the appraiser’s clearer signature. Yardly and Yardley also vary across the papers. The transcript preserves those differences rather than silently standardizing them.

The oath and filing endorsement



Document 1 reverse. The appraisers' oath is upright; the docket at the foot runs across the sheet. Its separate transcription follows. Photograph IMG_3597. [3]

Transcription of the oath and docket

Solomon P. Norris James A. Revis & James Yardly
do each of us Solemnly swear that we will well
and truly without partiality or prejudice value
and appraise the goods chattels and personal
estate of John C Vance
deceased so far as the same shall come to our
sight and Knowledge and that we will in all
respects perform our duties as appraisers to the
best of our skill and knowledge

Solomon p Norris
James A Reavis
James [his + mark] yardley

Sworn to and subscribed before me this
18th Decr 1835
John Clary J.P. [seal]

Docket written across the lower part of the sheet

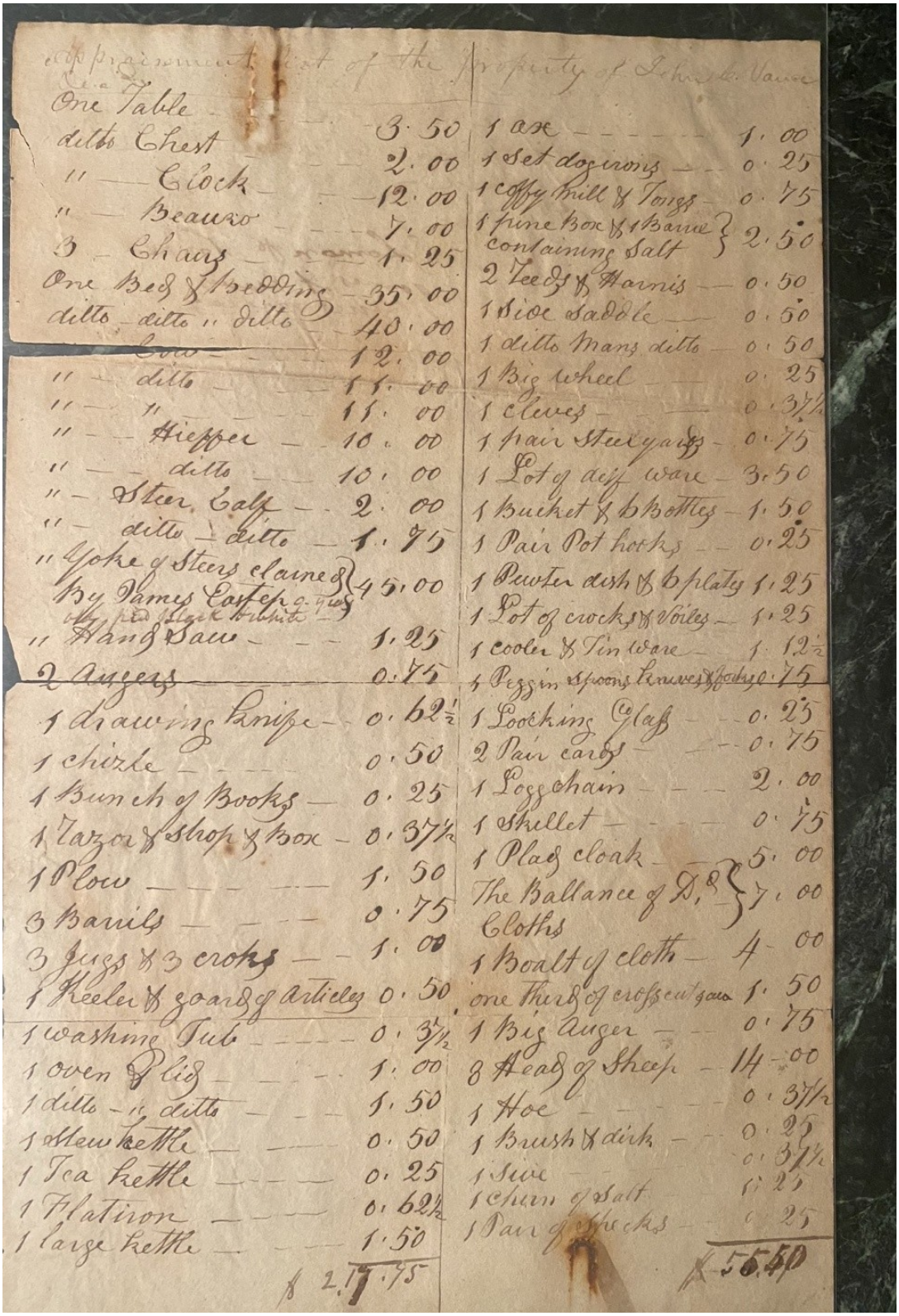
John C. Vance decd
Warrant for appraisement
to
Solomon P. Norris
James A. Revis &
James Yardly

Filed 27th Jany 1836.

An oath made the valuation a responsibility

The men promise to act “without partiality or prejudice.” Their obligation is limited to what comes within their sight and knowledge. John Clary’s certification records the taking of that oath, while the filing note records a later administrative step. None of these entries establishes that Adams personally knew Vance’s family.[3]

The appraisal of the personal estate



Document 2 front. Two columns of possessions and appraised values. The transcription preserves their order, presenting the left and right columns on the next two pages. Photograph IMG_3598. [3]

Transcription of the appraisal left column

Heading: “Appraisement bill of the property of John C. Vance / Dec^{d}.” Ditto marks are represented by double quotation marks. Values remain in the manuscript’s dollars and cents; 62½ cents is $0.625.

Article as written	Value
One Table	3.50
ditto Chest	2.00
" Clock	12.00
" Beauro	7.00
3 Chairs	1.25
One Bed & bedding	35.00
ditto ditto ditto	40.00
" Cow	12.00
" ditto	11.00
" "	11.00
" Hieffer	10.00
" ditto	10.00
" Steer Calf	2.00
" ditto ditto	1.75
" Yoke of Steers clamed by James Cafter [name uncertain]	45.00
" Hand Saw	1.25
2 Augers	0.75
1 drawing knife	0.62½
1 chisel	0.50
1 Bunch of Books	0.25
1 Razor & strop & Box	0.37½
1 Plow	1.50
3 Barrels	0.75
3 Jugs & 3 crocks	1.00
1 Reel & [gears?] & Articles	0.50
1 washing Tub	0.37½
1 oven & lid	1.00
1 ditto - " ditto	1.50
1 stew kettle	0.50
1 Tea Kettle	0.25
1 Flatiron	0.62½
1 large kettle	1.50

Written column total appears to be $217.75. A small interlineation beneath the claim to the steers is not securely legible. The claimant’s surname is uncertain.

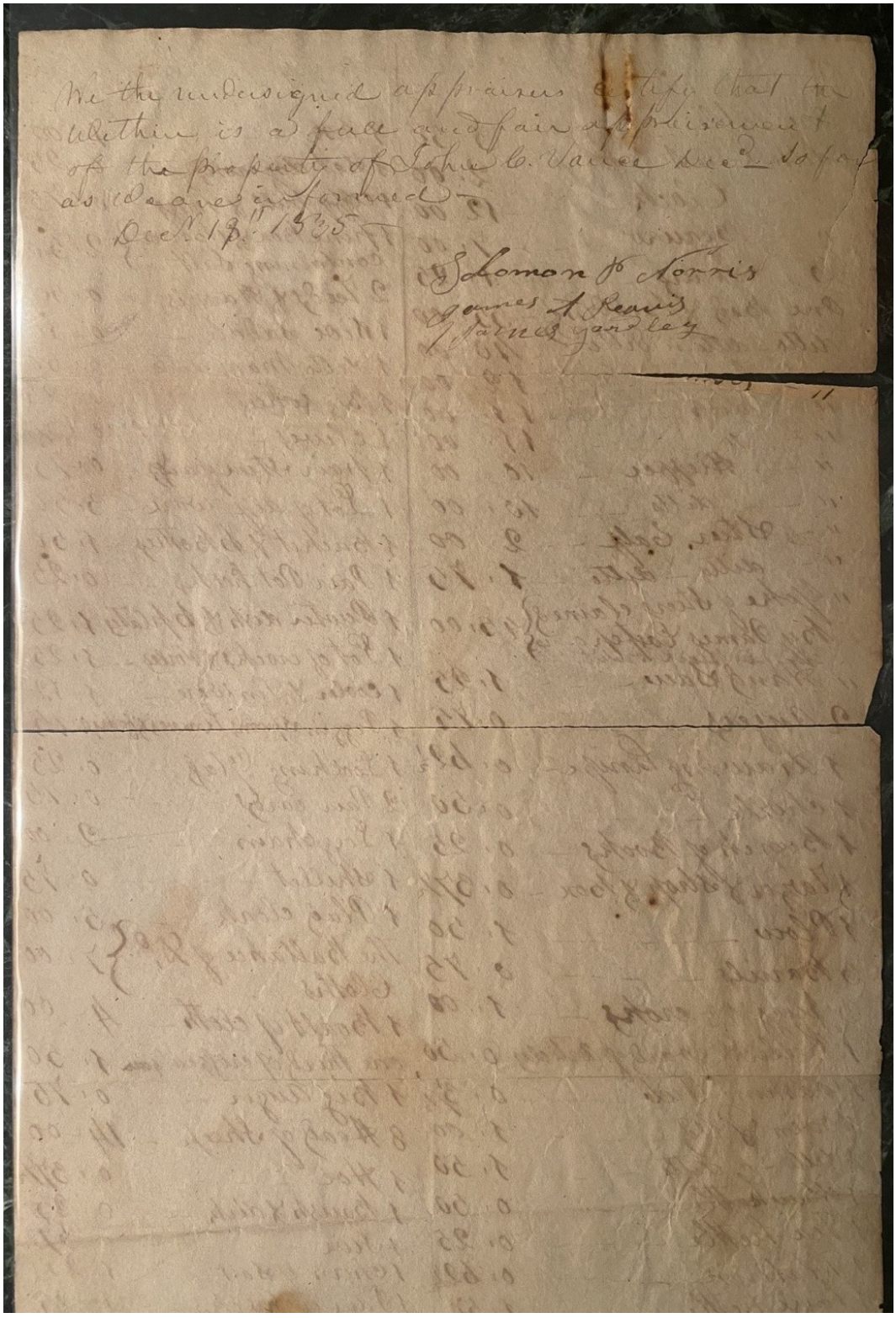
Transcription of the appraisal right column

Continuation of Document 2. Original spelling and entry order are retained. Descriptive words marked with a question mark remain uncertain.

Article as written	Value
1 axe	1.00
1 Set dogirons	0.25
1 coffy mill & Tongs	0.75
1 pine box & 1 Barrel containing Salt	2.50
2 Reeds & Harnis	0.50
1 Side Saddle	0.50
1 ditto Mans ditto	0.50
1 Big wheel	0.25
1 Clevis	0.37½
1 pair Steelyards	0.75
1 Lot of delf ware	3.50
1 Bucket & 6 Bottles	1.50
1 Pair Pot hooks	0.25
1 Pewter dish & 6 plates	1.25
1 Lot of crocks & viles	1.25
1 cooler & Tin ware	1.12½
4 Peggin Spoons knives & forks	0.75
1 Looking Glass	0.25
2 Pair cards	0.75
1 Logg chain	2.00
1 Skillet	0.75
1 Plad cloak	5.00
The Balance of D[?] Cloths	7.00
1 Boalt of cloth	4.00
one third of a crosscut saw	1.50
1 Big Auger	0.75
8 Head of Sheep	14.00
1 Hoe	0.37½
1 Brush & dish	0.25
1 Sive	0.37½
1 Churn of salt	1.25
1 Pair of [unclear]	0.25

Written column total appears to be $56.40, with overwritten or indistinct figures. The readable item amounts do not reconcile securely with the written totals; no corrected grand total is asserted.

The appraisers certify their return



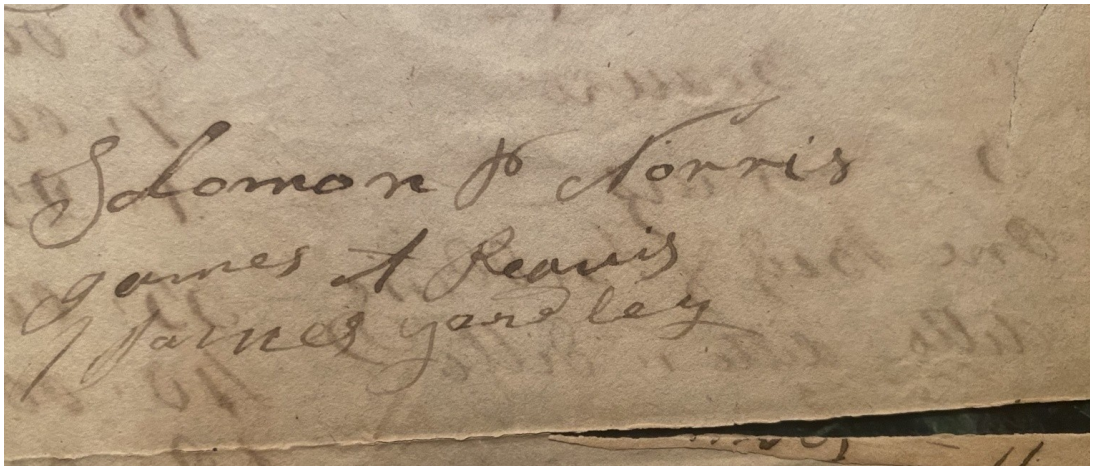
Document 2 reverse. The certificate is at the top; most of the other visible writing is show-through from the itemized face. Photograph IMG_3599. [3]

Transcription of the certificate

We the undersigned appraisers certify that the
Within is a full and fair appraisement
of the property of John C. Vance Dec^{d} so far
as it came informed [reading uncertain]
Dec^{r} 18th 1835

Solomon p Norris
James A Reavis
James yardley

The short fourth line is difficult to resolve in the photograph. Its reading is left uncertain rather than rewritten into a conventional legal formula. Yardley's name appears here without the explicit mark notation visible in the sworn oath.



Detail of the three appraisers' names on the certificate. Photograph IMG_3600.

Following the paper through the court

The papers preserve a sequence: Adams authorizes an appraisal in November; the appraisers swear their oath and date their certificate on 18 December 1835; the warrant is filed on 27 January 1836. The same three names recur, tying the appointment to the valuation and its return.[3]

The inventory is a valuation, not a sale account. Its figures express what the appraisers assigned to the articles, not proven auction proceeds or their original purchase prices. Nor does this group of papers establish who inherited the goods. The notation that someone claimed the steers is especially useful: even a list of seemingly ordinary property could contain an unresolved question about ownership.

A life in ordinary possessions

The clock is easy to notice. At twelve dollars it carried a much higher value than the little lot of books, but those twenty-five-cent books now invite a question the appraisers did not ask: what had Vance read? The list keeps the practical detail and leaves the personal answer open.[3]

Beds and bedding, a chest, a bureau, and three chairs give the inventory a domestic scale. A coffee mill, kettles, a skillet, plates, crocks, and bottles bring food and its preparation into view. The razor and strop, looking glass, cloak, and remaining clothes make the absence of the owner more immediate. We know the things were recorded; we do not know who watched the appraisal or how they felt about it.

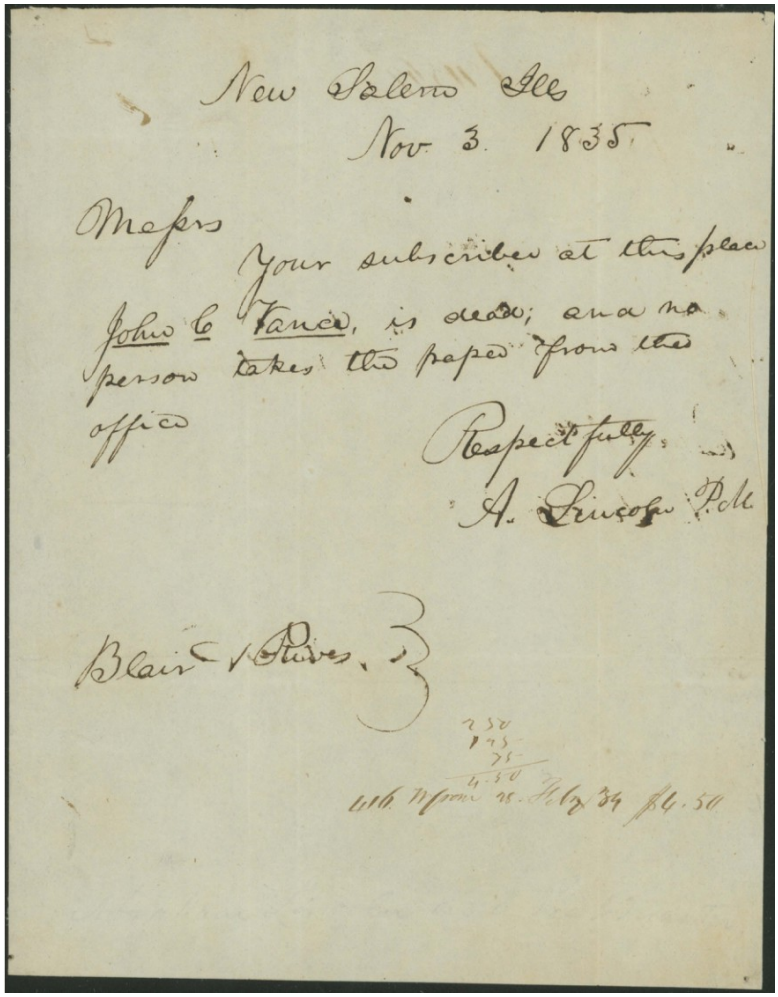
Selected entry	Appraised value
Clock	$12.00
Bunch of books	$0.25
Razor and strop and box	$0.375
Plow	$1.50
Plaid cloak	$5.00
Eight sheep	$14.00

These are valuations of particular used goods in one estate. They should not be treated as a general price list for 1835 or converted into a single modern purchasing-power figure.

The cattle, sheep, plow, axe, augers, chain, and share of a crosscut saw suggest a working rural household. The reeds and harness, wheel, reel, and cards also point toward equipment for textile work. These objects help explain daily labor; the list does not identify which member of the household used them.

For Adams, the task was to put such property into an accountable record. His own later letters would likewise move easily between consequential public affairs and ordinary household needs. A legal problem, a boat fitting, a sick wife, or three dollars for a child’s journey could all require his attention. The probate papers let us meet him doing the kind of practical work that preceded his friendship with Joseph Smith.

The subscriber whose newspaper went unclaimed


New Salem Ills
Nov 3. 1835

Mesrs

Your subscriber at this place John C Vance, is dead; and no person takes the paper from the office

Respectfully,
A. Lincoln P.M.

Blair & Rives.

Abraham Lincoln to Francis P. Blair Sr. and John C. Rives, 3 November 1835. Facsimile from the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, document D200056. [23]

On 3 November 1835, New Salem's postmaster Abraham Lincoln reported to newspaper publishers that "John C Vance, is dead." The matching name, county setting, and timing strongly suggest that this is the man whose estate Adams's warrant concerns. A matching probate-register entry remains the best way to secure the identification.[23]

The Lincoln Papers also identifies Vance as the farmer north of New Salem who lent Lincoln Kirkham's grammar, citing later histories. That recollection gives the inventory's books an added interest, but the phrase "1 Bunch of Books" supplies no titles. The borrowed grammar cannot be identified among them. [24]

Together, the papers offer two different traces of a death: a newspaper no longer collected at the post office, and property whose value had to be recorded. They do not show Lincoln participating in this probate proceeding or prove a personal friendship between Vance and Adams.

The neighborhood behind the names



Retrospective bird’s-eye view, New Salem, home of Abraham Lincoln 1831 to 1837, associated with Arthur L. Brown and R. J. Onstott. The map carries an approval dated 1909 and is not a drawing made in 1835. Library of Congress, 75693219; public-domain reproduction via Wikimedia Commons. [26]

The three appraisers were Solomon P. Norris, James A. Reavis, and James Yardley. Their repeated names are firmer evidence than a proposed extended family history. A later Menard County atlas names Solomon Norris and John and James Yardley among settlers who arrived in the Sandridge area in 1827. It also places John Clary among early settlers there. These are useful local matches, not proof of every identity or kinship.[3, 25]

Reavis’s fuller identity remains unresolved. His clearer signature supports Reavis as the preferred narrative spelling, while the warrant and docket look more like Revis. The oath identifies John Clary as a justice of the peace; linking him with a particular Clary biography requires more than sharing a name.

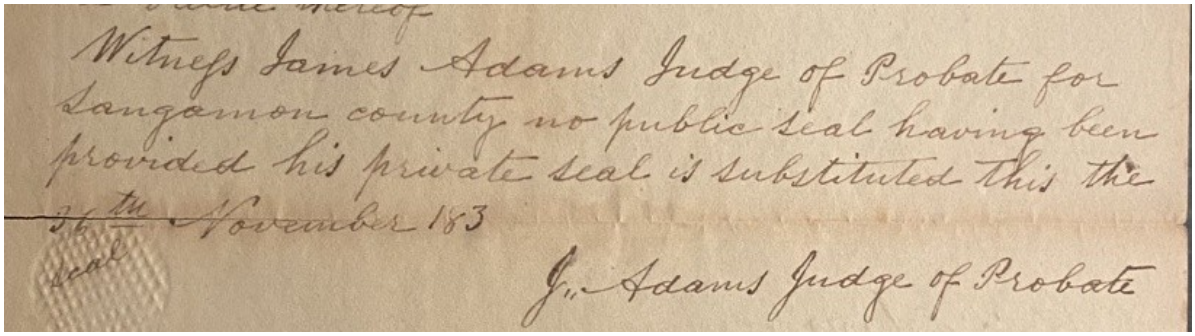
The papers establish an official association with Adams. They do not establish that Vance, Norris, Reavis, Yardley, or Clary belonged to the Latter-day Saint church, shared Adams’s later religious interests, or were his intimate friends. Their role in this story is the documented work of administering an estate in the community where he served.

The public life James brought to Nauvoo

James Adams had lived much of his life before he joined the Latter-day Saints. Born in Simsbury, Connecticut, on 24 January 1783, he had served in the War of 1812 and risen to brigadier general in the New York militia. “General Adams,” the title that follows him through the Nauvoo records, came from that earlier career.[2]

He and Harriet settled in Springfield in 1821. James practiced law, dealt in land, served as a justice of the peace, and held probate office. Probate work concerned wills, estates, and the practical consequences of death for families. Years of such work gave him experience with the documents and institutions on which a vulnerable community depended.[2, 21]

The Vance warrant gives that earlier career a date and an object. In late 1835, Adams was already entrusted with authorizing work that affected property left at death. The private seal substituted for a missing public one adds a tangible detail: the authority of the office was being exercised through a paper bearing his own name and seal.[3]



The warrant explicitly substitutes Adams’s private seal because no public seal had been provided. Photograph IMG_3596.

He also knew political conflict. In 1837, Abraham Lincoln publicly challenged his conduct in a Springfield property dispute. Adams’s standing should therefore be understood as substantial and contested. A man could possess useful connections and public experience without enjoying universal respect. That more complicated James is also the more believable one.[21]

His Masonic standing added another circle of acquaintances. He led Springfield Lodge in 1839 and became deputy grand master of Illinois in 1840. These were connections made before his closest association with Joseph. Joining the Saints brought an established public life into a new religious allegiance.[2]

This was the mature public man who would meet Joseph in the aftermath of the Missouri crisis. His usefulness lay in accumulated experience and acquaintances, accompanied by the complications of an already contested career. The probate document belongs to that life before his religious commitment became visible in the Nauvoo records.

A friend after Missouri

Joseph Smith’s journey through Springfield in November 1839 came only months after his escape from custody in Missouri. He had spent the preceding winter in Liberty Jail while Latter-day Saint families were forced from their homes. Many found refuge across the Mississippi at Quincy, Illinois. After rejoining his family in April, Joseph helped establish a new gathering place farther upriver, at the settlement that became Nauvoo.[1, 22]

The next task was to persuade the federal government to hear the Saints’ claims. Joseph set out for Washington with Sidney Rigdon and Elias Higbee. At Springfield, James Adams gave their mission something immediately useful: the endorsement of an established Illinois public man. The surviving letter is dated 9 November 1839.[1]

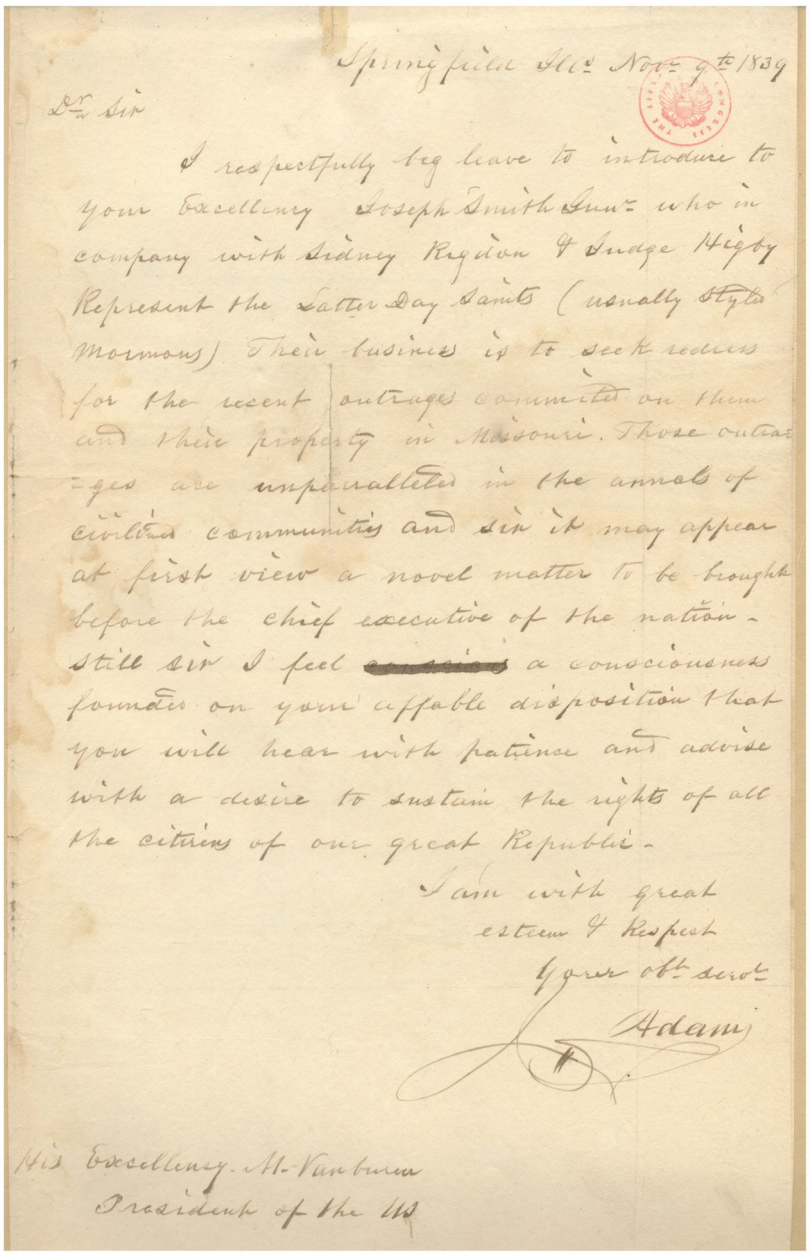


Henry Lewis, Quincy, Illinois, published 1854 to 1858. Saint Louis Art Museum, 147:1949, public domain. This later view evokes the refuge city of 1839; Springfield was the Adams family’s home.

James addressed his letter to President Martin Van Buren. He described the Missouri outrages as an affront to civilized society and asked the president to hear the petitioners patiently. He was willing to place his name behind people whose claims many officials preferred to avoid. His recommendation could not guarantee a favorable decision. It could help Joseph enter a political world James already knew.

A few months earlier, Joseph had been a prisoner. Now an established Illinois judge was asking the president to hear his cause. Adams’s importance begins with that specific act of advocacy.

The introduction that placed his name beside theirs



Springfield Ills Nov 9th 1839

Dr Sir

I respectfully beg leave to introduce to your Excellency Joseph Smith Junr who in company with Sidney Rigdon & Judge Higby Represent the Latter Day Saints (usually Styled Mormons) Their busines is to seek redress for the recent outrages committed on them and their property in Missouri. Those outrages are unparalleled in the annals of civilized communities and Sir it may appear at first view a novel matter to be brought before the chief executive of the nation - Still sir I feel [redacted] a consciousness founded on your affable disposition that you will hear with patience and advise with a desire to sustain the rights of all the citizens of our great Republic -

I am with great
esteem & Respect
Your obt servt
Adams

His Excellency M. Van Buren
President of the US

James Adams to President Martin Van Buren, 9 November 1839. Library of Congress; facsimile through the Joseph Smith Papers. [1]

“Their business is to seek redress for the recent outrages commited on them and their property in Missouri.”

The letter speaks the language of citizenship and public justice. Adams asks a president to hear injured Americans. This is an early example of the kind of support Joseph would repeatedly need: someone able to translate the Saints’ experience into terms a governor, lawyer, or judge could act upon.[1]

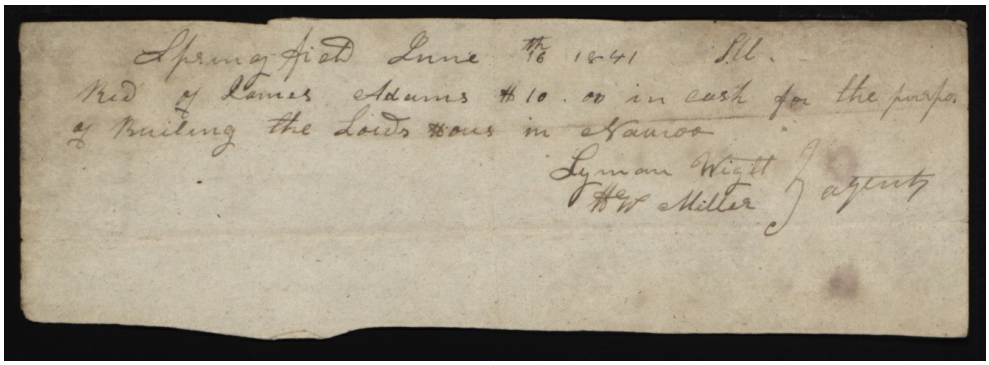
The letter establishes advocacy by November 1839. James’s exact baptismal date remains uncertain, but his willingness to assist is already clear. Before the records identify him in the Quorum of the Anointed at Nauvoo, they show him using his public standing on the Saints’ behalf.

Harriet and the household that joined

Harriet Denton was born at Goshen, New York, on 31 January 1787, to Harry and Elizabeth Denton. She married James about 1809. The couple had five children, four of whom lived beyond infancy: Lovenia, Charlotte, Lucien, and Vienna. Later evidence describes the grief of losing three daughters. This was a household with a long history of its own when it became connected with the Smith family.[4, 14]

James had been baptized by 1840 at Springfield. Harriet appears to have joined before 5 October 1841, when she received a patriarchal blessing, an individual religious blessing intended to offer guidance and promise. The exact baptismal dates and officiators remain unlocated. Her blessing gives us a firmer point of reference than simply borrowing James's conversion date.[2, 4]

The commitment soon appears in ordinary records. On 16 June 1841, Lyman Wight and Henry W. Miller acknowledged $10 from James for building the Lord's house at Nauvoo. The temple was intended to become the center of the Saints' sacred worship. A receipt for its construction shows the purpose of this particular gift with unusual clarity.[5]


Springfield June 16 1841 Ill.
Rec'd of James Adams $10.00 in cash for the purpo.
of building the Lords House in Nauvoo
Lyman Wight
H.W. Miller } agents

Receipt to James Adams, Springfield, 16 June 1841, acknowledging $10 cash for the Nauvoo Temple. Newel K. Whitney Papers, Brigham Young University; Joseph Smith Papers. [5]

Church responsibilities followed. Joseph signed James's patriarchal license on 18 July 1841; Hyrum Smith ordained him a high priest on 2 October. On 25 January 1842, the Springfield branch chose James as its president. A branch was a local congregation, and its president had responsibility for its religious life. These records show a new convert becoming someone other members trusted to lead.[6, 7]

Harriet's individual blessing supplies a dated point in her religious life. James's offices and letters are more numerous, but the couple's commitment was also a household history: a long marriage, children, illness, and loss would shape how their lives became intertwined with the Smith family. Her own participation becomes especially visible in the final year of the story.[4, 14, 18]

An invitation to the upper room

On 4 May 1842, James's name appears in a much smaller company. Joseph Smith's journal lists him with Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and other trusted associates in a day of priesthood instruction. This was the first administration of the Nauvoo endowment, a sequence of sacred instruction and covenants that would later be offered in the completed temple.[8]



Joseph Smith's Red Brick Store, photographed circa 1886 and attributed to B. H. Roberts. Church History Library; Joseph Smith Papers. The upper rooms were used for the May 1842 instruction; the photograph is much later.

The temple itself was still under construction. The new ceremonies began in rooms over Joseph's store. An ordinary commercial building thus became the setting for teachings he reserved, at first, for a very limited group. Adams's inclusion gives "trusted associate" a precise documentary meaning: Joseph admitted him to religious instruction at the heart of his developing temple program.

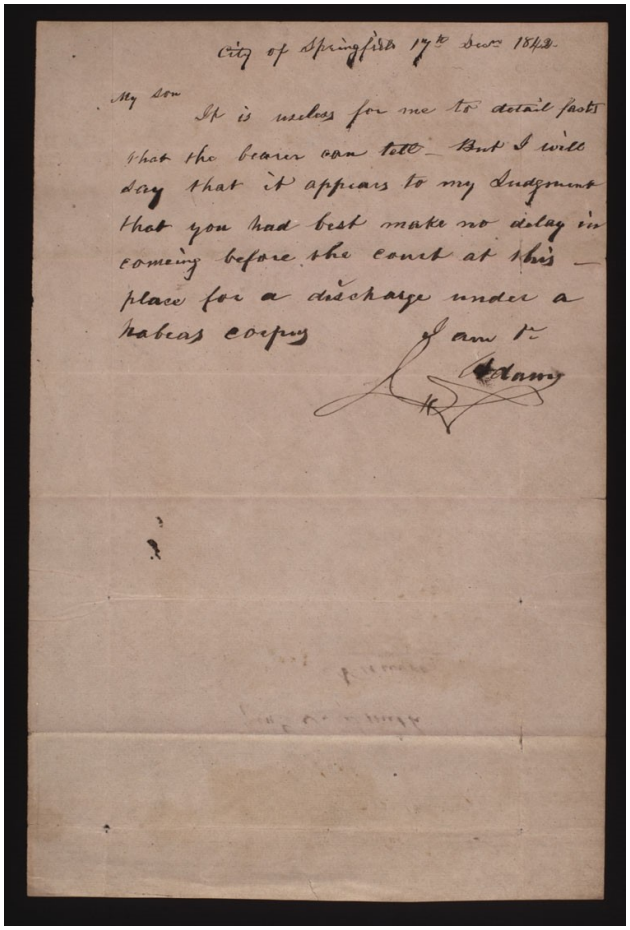
James returned to Springfield the following day. His usefulness did not depend on living constantly beside Joseph. He could remain connected to the state capital while taking part in the most confidential religious gatherings at Nauvoo.[8]

The first Nauvoo Endowment Company formed the nucleus of the Quorum of the Anointed. This group must be distinguished from the Council of Fifty, a political and administrative body organized on 11 March 1844. James died in August 1843 and could not have belonged to that later body.[8, 9]

My Son

By December 1842, the relationship had acquired a personal voice. Missouri authorities were again seeking Joseph's extradition, this time in connection with the shooting of former governor Lilburn W. Boggs. Joseph denied involvement. The immediate issue was whether officials could legally arrest and return him to Missouri.[10, 11]

James's letter of 17 December begins simply, "My Son." He urges Joseph to come to Springfield without delay and seek discharge through habeas corpus. That procedure required a court to examine whether a person's detention was lawful. It offered a practical way to challenge the arrest before Joseph was carried across the state line.


City of Springfield 17th Dec 1842.

My Son It is useless for me to detail facts that the bearer can tell But I will say that it appears to my Judgment that you had best make no delay in comeing before the court at this place for a discharge under a habeas corpus I am ye Adams

James Adams to Joseph Smith, 17 December 1842. Church History Library; Joseph Smith Papers. The salutation is visible near the top of the letter. [10]

"you had best make no delay in comeing before the court at this place"

The warmth and the urgency belong together. James writes as someone who can advise Joseph plainly and who wants him to act. The two-word greeting belongs to an affectionate relationship; the sentence that follows offers a way through an immediate danger.[10]

Experience at the service of a friend

A younger religious leader who had endured imprisonment needed more than sympathy from an older friend. James could help him recognize an available course of action, reach people who understood it, and move at the right time. The surviving December letter is brief because its bearer could explain the details. Its brevity is itself revealing: this was active business between people already in communication.[10]

Joseph arrived in Springfield on 30 December and lodged at Adams's home. The following day, James and Wilson Law each stood as a $2,000 surety for him. A surety promised financial responsibility for the person's appearance; it was not necessarily a cash payment. James's support now involved his house and his own legal obligation.[11]

Justin Butterfield served as Joseph's attorney before federal judge Nathaniel Pope. On 5 January 1843, Pope ruled that the extradition papers were legally insufficient and ordered Joseph discharged. The decision removed the immediate threat under that proceeding, although it could not guarantee freedom from future attempts.[11]

James should receive credit for the help the documents show. Butterfield argued the case; Pope decided it. Adams was the experienced local friend urging Joseph toward the court and helping him navigate the Springfield setting. His value lay partly in knowing what other people and institutions could do.

This is also where his maturity matters most. The difference in their ages did not make Joseph passive or James infallible. It allowed a relationship in which the older man could offer protective, fatherly counsel to someone whose religious authority he accepted. "My Son" gives that unusual combination a human scale.

Between Springfield and Nauvoo

Springfield and Nauvoo occupied different places in the Saints' lives. Nauvoo was the gathering city, the construction site, and the center of religious innovation. Springfield was the state capital, where political decisions and important legal proceedings could affect the community's freedom. James had experience in one place and growing commitments in the other.

His earlier public roles explain why his advice carried weight; the letters show him using that experience. By the beginning of 1843, the relationship had grown well beyond the recommendation he wrote in 1839. He was a congregational leader, a participant in Joseph's sacred instruction, a host, and a man willing to bind himself financially when Joseph's liberty was threatened.

James was also appointed a regent of the University of the City of Nauvoo in 1841. That position adds to the picture of a man drawn into the city's institutional plans, although an appointment alone does not tell us how much educational work he performed.[2]

A difficult journey and an enduring marriage

In spring 1843, grand plans depended on something as ordinary as the condition of a road. Writing on 27 April, James told Joseph that almost daily rain had made travel difficult even within the neighborhood. Harriet was very ill. He wanted to come to Nauvoo, but a long journey with a sick companion required better conditions.[4]

“I shall however be at Nauvoo as soon as it appears— even half way tolerable traveling”

The letter interrupts any easy story of uninterrupted advancement. James had obligations at home, a wife whose health worried him, and weather he could not control. Harriet appears here as someone whose condition shaped the couple’s decisions, not merely as a name beside a husband’s office.



Henry Lewis, Nauvoe, Illinois, published 1854 to 1858. Saint Louis Art Museum, 143:1949, public domain. A later representation of the river city and its temple, not the unfinished building of 1843.

By late May they were again part of the Nauvoo story. A journal entry for 28 May contains shorthand that editors interpret as indicating that Joseph and Emma Smith, and James and Harriet Adams, were sealed to their respective spouses. In Latter-day Saint belief, sealing extended marriage beyond death. Because the entry is compressed and its interpretation depends on surrounding evidence, “evidently sealed” remains the careful wording.[12]

For readers following Adams from the probate court, the shift is striking: a man whose office dealt with the worldly consequences of death was now participating in religious rites that promised family relationships beyond it. That is a connection between the documented parts of his life, not an explanation of private beliefs he did not record.

Land a steamboat and practical commitment

The next day, 29 May 1843, James and Harriet executed a deed to Joseph Smith as trustee for the Church. It described ten tracts totaling a nominal 1,760 acres. The recorded deed speaks of one dollar and of the couple's "love and good will" toward the Church. Read alone, that language appears to describe a very large gift.[13]

Another contemporary record changes the picture. Trustees Land Book B lists the same acreage as land bought from James Adams, valued at $2 an acre, or $3,520. It also records an arrangement for Adams to receive half of Joseph's share in a boat as part payment. The entry is crossed through, and the book does not by itself establish how every obligation was settled. Nevertheless, its commercial terms must be considered alongside the deed. The Joseph Smith Papers identifies the vessel as the steamboat Maid of Iowa.[13]

The devotional wording of the deed and the commercial terms of the ledger belong together. They establish a transaction involving religious commitment, land, and a business interest; they do not support treating the entire 1,760 acres as an outright donation. The crossed-through accounting also leaves the final settlement uncertain.[13]

The more complicated transaction still belongs in the story. River transportation mattered to a gathering community. The Maid of Iowa carried passengers and goods; its fortunes linked commerce with the movement of converts. James's June correspondence mentions sending a "mill for the boat," although the precise kind of mill is uncertain. His involvement was practical enough to include equipment as well as land and paper interests.[13, 14]

The smaller gifts that can be measured

The $10 cash receipt is unambiguous. A separate contribution list names "Judge Adams" with a $16 note on Stringham and an $8 order on Gladden Bishop; it also lists "James Adams $10.00 Cash." James is the strong identification for "Judge Adams," and the cash entry appears to correspond to the receipt. On that reading, the listed face value of his contributions was $34. The cash must not be counted twice.[5, 20]

A note and an order were promises or directions to pay, rather than cash already in the committee's hands. The list records their stated amounts; it does not prove that the full $24 was ultimately collected. The most precise summary is $10 cash documented, with probable additional paper contributions totaling $24 at face value.

The same attention to particulars that the Vance warrant demanded remains useful here. A cash gift, a promise to pay, and an exchange of assets are different acts. Adams's support for the Saints is substantial enough to be told in its documented forms, with both his religious purpose and his practical business involvement visible.

Three dollars for Jane

One of the most revealing papers is also one of the shortest. On 8 June 1843, James wrote from Springfield about the boat, then turned to a child. He enclosed three dollars for Jane Walker's expenses and asked that her brother Lorin bring her to Joseph's house so she could travel to Springfield.[14]

"and also enclose three dollars to be handed to Lorens sister Jane for expenses to this place"

Jane was eleven. Her mother had died, and members of the Church were helping care for the Walker children. In her later account, Jane explained that Joseph sent her to James and Harriet because the Adamses were lonely after the deaths of three daughters. The contemporary letter confirms the travel arrangement; her later recollection supplies its family meaning. It is important to keep those two kinds of evidence distinct.[14]

This small exchange opens another side of the relationship. James did not write only about courts or Church office. The Smith and Adams households were connected through care, bereavement, and the needs of a child. Three dollars for a journey can make that connection easier to grasp than a list of prominent names.

Harriet's own account of Jane's arrival does not survive in the evidence used here. The contemporary letter gives the practical arrangement, and Jane's later recollection gives its family meaning. A woman who had lost daughters became part of a plan to bring a motherless girl into the household. That connection deserves a place beside James's public offices.[14]

Responsibilities within the Quorum of the Anointed

James's confidential religious role included matters that later became controversial. Later testimony identifies him as officiating in Joseph Smith's plural-marriage ceremonies involving Emily and Eliza Partridge in May 1843. Editorial research also identifies a July 1843 plural sealing between James and Roxena Repsher. These episodes belong to the history of the Quorum of the Anointed; they should be distinguished from his marriage and evident eternal sealing to Harriet.[15]

The surviving evidence does not establish Harriet's understanding of, or response to, those arrangements. These episodes are kept distinct from James and Harriet's evident marital sealing and from the arrangement for Jane Walker. Membership in the Quorum of the Anointed placed the Adamses within a fellowship whose history included private responsibilities as well as public friendships.[12, 14, 15]

When the judge himself was mourned

On 7 August 1843, voters elected James probate judge of Hancock County, the county that included Nauvoo. Four days later, on 11 August, he died there at sixty. Joseph Smith’s journal and the contemporary obituary identify cholera. A new public responsibility had scarcely begun before his place in the community became an absence.[16]

Joseph attended the funeral on 16 August. The record does not show that he preached then. His surviving funeral discourse for James belongs to the Church’s October conference, nearly two months later. Keeping the occasions separate helps the reader follow the loss as people actually lived through it.[16, 17]

On 8 October, Harriet joined a prayer meeting at Joseph’s house. The journal’s names and ordinance wording were crossed through, but remain legible in the fuller transcription. “Sis— Adams” is identified by the editors as Harriet Denton Adams. The entry places her among those blessed, ordained, and anointed. Her participation in the Quorum of the Anointed is thus documented after James’s death.[18]

The following day Joseph spoke about the purpose of mortal life and the condition of the righteous dead. Willard Richards recorded him calling James “Patriarch adams” and placing him among the spirits of the just made perfect. The discourse presents a religious interpretation of death from within Joseph’s faith. It also shows that James’s loss remained present in the community’s worship.[17]

Harriet died at Springfield on 21 August 1844, according to the 1876 Sangamon County history. She therefore outlived Joseph and Hyrum Smith, killed on 27 June 1844. In little more than a year she had lost her husband and the religious leader with whom their household had become so closely connected. The surviving evidence examined here does not disclose how she responded to the resulting leadership crisis.[19]

Neither James nor Harriet lived to attend the completed Nauvoo Temple’s 1845–1846 ordinance season or to join the 1846 departure from the city. Their story belongs to the years when the temple was still a promise taking shape, and when Joseph was trying to give a displaced people institutions strong enough to endure.[8, 18, 19]

The account began with another man’s possessions awaiting appraisal. It ends with Adams’s death, Harriet’s continuing religious participation, and Joseph’s remembrance of his friend. The movement from public duty to personal loss belongs to the surviving records. At its center is a relationship expressed both in useful acts and in the greeting “My Son.”[3, 10, 17, 18]

Chronology of the documents and the friendship

Date	Event
24 January 1783	James Adams born in Simsbury Connecticut. [2]
31 January 1787	Harriet Denton born in Goshen New York. [4]
About 1809	James and Harriet marry. [4]
1821	The Adams family settles in Springfield. [2]
3 November 1835	Lincoln reports the death of a John C. Vance at New Salem. [23]
November 1835	Adams issues the Vance appraisal warrant; day apparently 26. [3]
18 December 1835	Appraisers swear their oath and date their certificate. [3]
27 January 1836	The warrant is docketed as filed. [3]
9 November 1839	Adams writes his introduction to President Van Buren. [1]
By 1840	James baptized at Springfield; exact date unresolved. [2]
16 June 1841	Ten-dollar cash gift for the Nauvoo Temple. [5]
18 July 1841	James receives a patriarchal license. [6]
2 and 5 October 1841	James ordained high priest; Harriet receives a blessing. [2, 4]
25 January 1842	Springfield branch chooses James as president. [7]
4 May 1842	James participates in the Nauvoo Endowment Company. [8]
17 December 1842	The letter to Joseph begins “My Son.” [10]
30 to 31 December 1842	Adams hosts Joseph and becomes a surety for his appearance. [11]
5 January 1843	Judge Pope discharges Joseph in the extradition proceeding. [11]
27 April 1843	James reports Harriet’s illness and difficult traveling conditions. [4]
28 to 30 May 1843	Evident marital sealing and the Church land transaction. [12, 13]
8 June 1843	James sends three dollars for Jane Walker’s travel. [14]
7 and 11 August 1843	Elected Hancock probate judge; dies four days later. [16]
8 to 9 October 1843	Harriet enters the Quorum of the Anointed; Joseph commemorates James. [17, 18]
21 August 1844	Harriet dies at Springfield according to the county history. [19]

Sources and research notes

Numbers in the narrative refer to these notes. The biographical account draws on the previously assembled documentary research; the probate photographs are transcribed for this edition. Contemporary documents, later recollections, and editorial identifications are distinguished. Electronic source links are active.

1 The introduction and the beginning of the relationship

James Adams, letter of introduction to Martin Van Buren, 9 November 1839, Library of Congress; Joseph Smith Papers, facsimile, transcript, and historical introduction. The introduction supplies the Springfield visit and the circumstances of Adams's advocacy. The original letter is the controlling evidence for his appeal.

Letter of 9 November 1839

2 James before and after conversion

Joseph Smith Papers, "Adams, James," biographical directory. Used for birth, early career, Springfield residence, Church affiliation by 1840, high-priest ordination, university appointment, Masonic offices, and death. Dates of probate service vary in later summaries; the narrative does not force them into a false single chronology.

James Adams biography

3 The probate photographs

James Adams, warrant to appraise the personal estate of John C. Vance, November 183[5]; oath and certificate dated 18 December 1835; docket filed 27 January 1836. Photographs IMG_3596 through IMG_3600. The first four photographs show the front and back of two sheets; the fifth is a signature detail. Day of warrant provisionally read 26. No missing year digit is silently supplied in the transcript. Personal-property list, not a will or final settlement. All conclusions about the handwriting are photographic readings.

4 Harriet and the April journey

James Adams to Joseph Smith, 27 April 1843, Joseph Smith Papers. Footnote 1 identifies Harriet's birthplace, parents, children, and 5 October 1841 patriarchal blessing, citing Patriarchal Blessings, 4:58–59. Her baptism before that blessing is an editorial inference. The original blessing was not independently examined for the underlying biographical research.

Letter of 27 April 1843

5 The definite temple gift

Lyman Wight and Henry W. Miller, receipt to James Adams, Springfield, 16 June 1841, Newel K. Whitney Papers, Brigham Young University. The wording specifies $10 cash for building the Lord's house in Nauvoo.

Receipt of 16 June 1841

6 Patriarchal license

License for James Adams, 18 July 1841, extract, Joseph Smith Papers. The certification says he had been received as a member and ordained a patriarch that day. This is a dated documentary anchor rather than a later estimate of the ordination year.

License of 18 July 1841

Sources on leadership and legal assistance

7 Springfield leadership

Abraham C. Hodge and Springfield, Illinois, branch to Joseph Smith, 25 January 1842, Joseph Smith Papers. The letter records the branch's selection of Adams as president. The narrative explains the office as congregational leadership without inventing a record of his daily administration.

Springfield branch letter

8 The first Nauvoo endowment

Joseph Smith journal, 4–5 May 1842, page 94, Joseph Smith Papers. The entry lists James among the participants and records his departure for Springfield on 5 May. Annotation identifies the 4 May instruction with the first Nauvoo endowment. This occurred before completion of the temple.

Journal for 4–5 May 1842

9 Council of Fifty chronology

Joseph Smith Papers, "Council of Fifty" topic and Administrative Records introduction: formal organization on 11 March 1844. James's death on 11 August 1843 excludes membership. The Quorum of the Anointed and Council of Fifty were distinct bodies.

Council of Fifty

10 The fatherly salutation and legal advice

James Adams to Joseph Smith, 17 December 1842, Joseph Smith Papers. "My Son" and the advice to seek a discharge by habeas corpus are in the contemporary letter. The narrative's interpretation of fatherly friendship rests principally on these words and the documented acts of assistance.

Letter of 17 December 1842

11 Hospitality, financial security, and the legal outcome

Joseph Smith Papers, Petition to Thomas Ford, 31 December 1842, historical introduction; Joseph Smith journal, 31 December 1842, book 1, page 23, note 70; and Introduction to Extradition of JS for Accessory to Assault. These document lodging at Adams's home, Adams and Wilson Law as sureties for $2,000 each, and Pope's 5 January discharge. The bond was a legal obligation, not a documented cash donation.

Springfield lodging • Journal and sureties • Extradition case

12 The May sealing

Joseph Smith journal, 28 May 1843, book 2, page [225], Joseph Smith Papers, especially note 457. Taylor shorthand reads "were married." The editors infer eternal marriage of Joseph and Emma and of James and Harriet from the surrounding evidence. No fuller contemporary account is known; the narrative therefore says "evidently sealed."

Journal for 28 May 1843

Sources on family property and remembrance

13 The land deed and the boat consideration

James and Harriet Denton Adams to Joseph Smith, 29 May 1843, recorded 12 June 1843, Hancock County Deed Record L, 261–262; Trustees Land Book B, 19; and Joseph Smith Papers, “Introduction to Steamboat Maid of Iowa.” The ledger’s Adams entry is crossed through. Its stated acreage and boat consideration require qualification of an outright-gift interpretation; they do not alone prove final settlement.

Recorded deed • Land book page 19 • Maid of Iowa introduction

14 Jane Walker and the June letter

James Adams to Joseph Smith, 8 June 1843, Joseph Smith Papers, with historical introduction and notes citing Jane Walker Smith’s later life sketch. The letter documents three dollars for Jane’s travel and proposed transport by Daniel Repsher. Jane later remembered a different escort. The family-loss explanation is retrospective, not a statement in the letter itself.

Letter of 8 June 1843

15 Plural marriage and confidential religious responsibilities

Joseph Smith Papers, Minutes and Discourses, 6–9 October 1843, page 331 and associated annotation; and the historical introduction to Adams’s 27 April 1843 letter, which discusses later evidence concerning the Partridge ceremonies. The report preserves the distinction between contemporary records and later testimony. No view is assigned to Harriet without evidence.

October conference record • April letter and annotation

16 Election and death

Joseph Smith Papers, James Adams biography; journal for 16 August 1843, book 3, page [58], note 105; and annotation to the 28 May journal. These cite the Hancock election returns and “Obituary for Gen. Judge Adams,” Times and Seasons, issue dated 1 August 1843, 4:287. The issue appeared after its nominal date. Contemporary evidence places his death at Nauvoo, despite conflicting later summaries.

Funeral attendance and death annotation

17 The October funeral discourse

Discourse, 9 October 1843, as reported by Willard Richards, page [121]; and Minutes and Discourses, 6 –9 October 1843, page 332, Joseph Smith Papers. Joseph attended the August funeral; the surviving funeral sermon was delivered in October. Harriet’s attendance the preceding evening may have prompted it, but that causal connection is not certain.

Richards report • Conference record

18 Harriet in the Quorum of the Anointed

Joseph Smith journal, 8 October 1843, book 3, page [120], note 235, Joseph Smith Papers. The names and ordinance wording are struck through but recoverable in the expanded transcript. The editors identify “Sis— Adams” as Harriet Denton Adams. The record supports her personal participation after James’s death.

Journal for 8 October 1843

Sources on the remaining identities and images

19 Harriet's death

John Carroll Power and S. A. Power, History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County, Illinois (1876), Adams family entry, page 76, consulted through the ILGenWeb transcription. It gives Harriet's death as 21 August 1844 at Springfield. The entry also contains conflicting birthplace and James death-place details, for which the closer documentary evidence in notes 2, 4, and 16 is preferred. A contemporary notice of Harriet's death remains a useful follow-up.

1876 Adams family entry

20 The additional paper contributions

Donations from James Smith and Other Illinois Saints, circa June 1841, page 3, Joseph Smith Papers. "Judge Adams" is strongly identifiable as James; $16 on Stringham and $8 on Gladden Bishop are face amounts. The $10 cash entry appears to be the same payment documented by the separate receipt. No collection of the paper at face value is established here.

Contribution list

21 A contested public reputation

Papers of Abraham Lincoln, "Adams, James," biographical directory and its references to the 1837 controversy. Used to acknowledge the property dispute and political setting, not to treat allegations as adjudicated facts. Its place-of-death statement conflicts with the contemporary Nauvoo evidence preferred in note 16.

Papers of Abraham Lincoln biography

22 Missouri, Quincy, and Nauvoo

Joseph Smith's 1839 history and correspondence, contextualized in the Joseph Smith Papers' introduction to Documents, Volume 7, and the November 1839 letter of introduction. Quincy is included as the Saints' place of refuge; the narrative makes no claim that James joined the Church or maintained his principal residence there.

Documents Volume 7 introduction

23 Lincoln and the death notice

Abraham Lincoln to Francis P. Blair Sr. and John C. Rives, 3 November 1835, Papers of Abraham Lincoln, D200056. The letter names John C. Vance and reports his death. The name, time, and county setting strongly support a match to the probate papers; the identity remains probable pending estate-register confirmation. The letter does not establish that Lincoln acted in this estate.

Lincoln letter and facsimile

24 The grammar recollection

Papers of Abraham Lincoln, "Vance, John C.," citing Benjamin P. Thomas, Lincoln's New Salem (1934), 48, and History of Menard and Mason Counties (1879), 252. A later historical account of borrowing a grammar, not a contemporary title list. The probate entry "Bunch of Books" cannot identify a particular volume.

Vance biographical entry

Local sources and illustration credits

25 The local names

Illustrated Atlas Map of Menard County Illinois (W. R. Brink, 1874), Sandridge Precinct, 18, as transcribed by Genealogy Trails. Lists Solomon Norris, John and James Yardley, and John Clary among early settlers. These are locality-based candidates; the atlas alone does not prove each signer’s identity or any religious connection. James A. Reavis remains unresolved.

Sandridge Precinct account

26 The retrospective New Salem view

New Salem, home of Abraham Lincoln 1831 to 1837, Arthur L. Brown and R. J. Onstott; Library of Congress 75693219, digital identifier g4104n.pm001760. The printed view carries an approval dated 1909. Its 1831 to 1837 label refers to the period represented, not the date when the image was drawn. Public-domain reproduction obtained through Wikimedia Commons.

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Photographic and documentary credits

Probate warrant, oath, inventory, certificate, and signature details: photographs IMG_3596 to IMG_3600. Rotations and outer-margin crops improve orientation and placement; handwriting and paper losses are unchanged.

Lincoln letter: Papers of Abraham Lincoln digital facsimile, D200056. The online record credits the Taper Collection, Lincoln Presidential Foundation.

Adams introduction of 9 November 1839: Library of Congress; image through the Joseph Smith Papers. Adams letter of 17 December 1842 and Red Brick Store photograph: Church History Library; Joseph Smith Papers.

Temple receipt of 16 June 1841: Newel K. Whitney Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Joseph Smith Papers.

Quincy and Nauvoo river views: Henry Lewis, published 1854 to 1858; Saint Louis Art Museum, 147:1949 and 143:1949, public domain. These later views are illustrative rather than eyewitness pictures of the events narrated.