George T. M. Davis

Whig editor, political intermediary, and witness to the Nauvoo crisis

Highlights of a life intertwined with the Latter-day Saints

George Turnbull Moore Davis (1810–1888) moved through the newspaper offices, political circles, and troubled towns surrounding Joseph and Hyrum Smith's final days. His writings reveal a man who courted Mormon votes, anticipated violence, and helped shape the public account of the murders.

1841–1843 | A partisan newspaperman
Associated with the Alton Telegraph as an editor by 1841; engaged as corresponding editor for the presidential contest in November 1843.

29 December 1843 | Seeking the Mormon vote
Privately told Congressman John J. Hardin that careful handling by Whig newspapers could win Latter-day Saint support for Henry Clay.

26 June 1844 | A warning before the murders
Observed the Smith brothers at Carthage and dispatched a warning that they might be killed without trial.

27 June 1844 | Between Nauvoo and Warsaw
Accompanied Governor Thomas Ford to Nauvoo, then traveled to Warsaw to gather news and reassure families fearing retaliation.

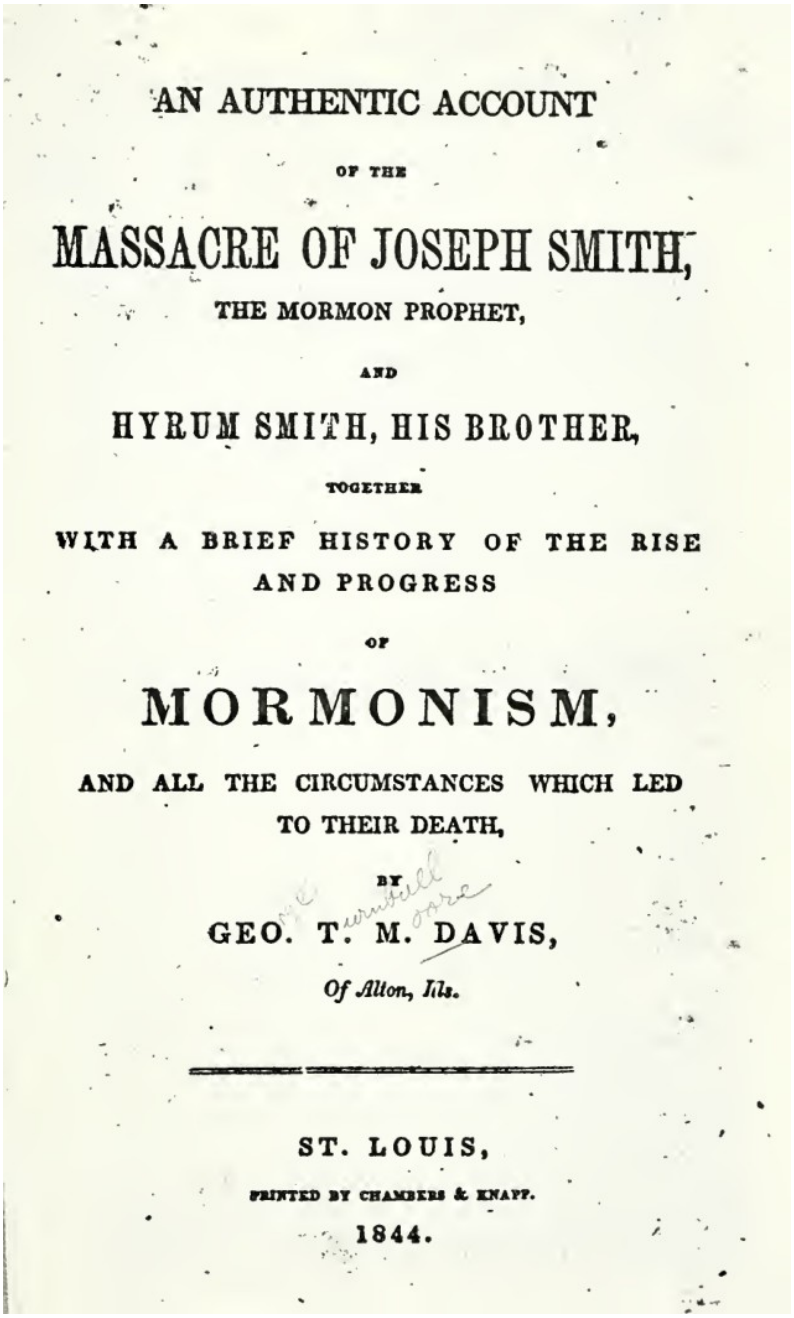
30 June 1844 | A proposal to protect Nauvoo
Urged Ford to bring in troops from distant districts to prevent an exterminating attack on the Saints and preserve peace.

Summer 1844 | Author of an influential account
Published An Authentic Account of the Massacre, preserving valuable information while withholding participants' names.

9 August 1844 | Pressure over prosecutions
Warned Ford that arrests could bring bloodshed and political retaliation; Ford's later-published reply rejected the pressure.

Sources: Davis, An Authentic Account (1844); Davis–Ford correspondence, The Prophet, 21 December 1844, p. 1; Wicks and Foister, Junius and Joseph, pp. 66–69, 78–79; Papers of Abraham Lincoln, Davis biography. These highlights establish access and intervention, not proof that Davis planned the murders.

Davis’s 1844 pamphlet



AN AUTHENTIC ACCOUNT

OF THE

MASSACRE OF JOSEPH SMITH,

THE MORMON PROPHET,

AND

HYRUM SMITH, HIS BROTHER,

TOGETHER

WITH A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RISE AND PROGRESS

OF

MORMONISM,

AND ALL THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH LED TO THEIR DEATH,

BY

GEO. T. M. DAVIS,

Of Alton, Ills.

ST. LOUIS,

PRINTED BY CHAMBERS & KNAPP.

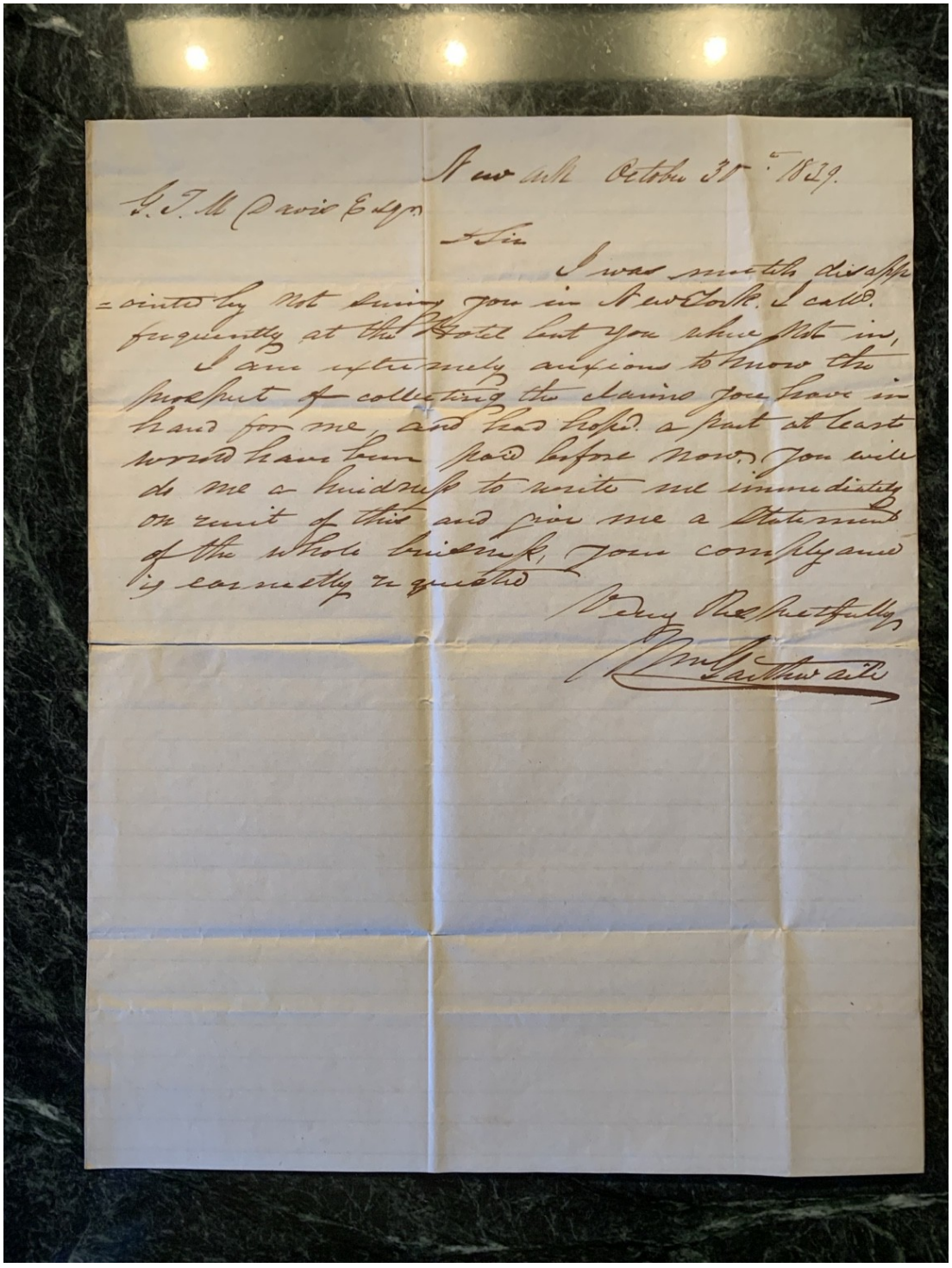
1844.

Title page of George T. M. Davis, An Authentic Account of the Massacre of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, and Hyrum Smith, His Brother (St. Louis: Chambers & Knapp, 1844). Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Lovejoy Library; Internet Archive, authenticaccount00davi, scan leaf 8. The digitized copy is a photocopy; marks and defects belong to that copy.

The title promises both a narrative of the killings and an explanation of the circumstances preceding them. That combination makes the pamphlet indispensable—and partisan. Davis preserved evidence while arguing about blame, public order, and the political meaning of the murders.

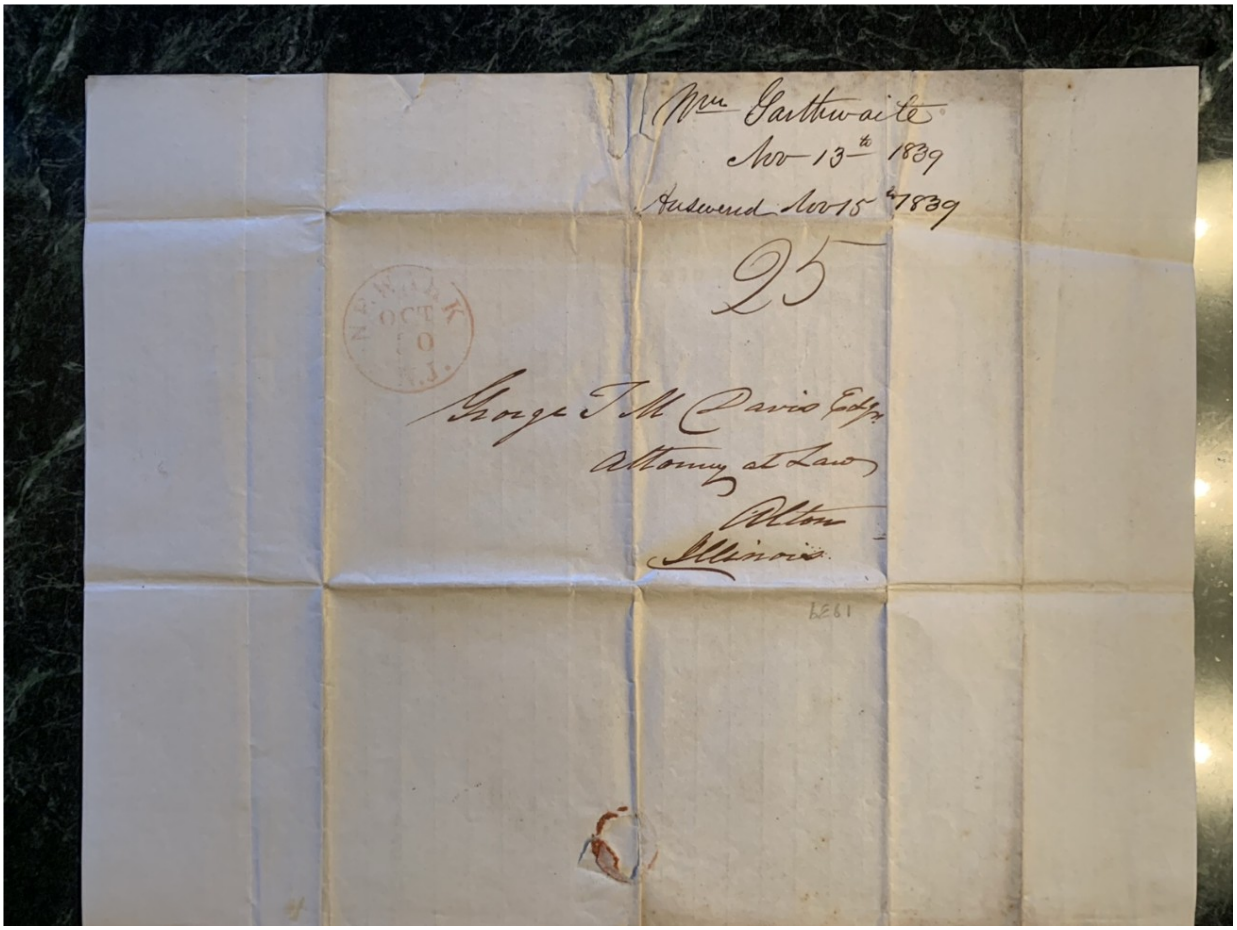
Full scan: https://archive.org/details/authenticaccount00davi

The letter to George T. M. Davis



William Garthwaite to George T. M. Davis, New York, 3 October 1839. Letter side. Original photograph supplied for this project.

The letter: address panel and docketing



Reverse of the same letter, addressed to George T. M. Davis at Alton, Illinois. Original photograph supplied for this project; displayed with the address upright.

George T. M. Davis and the Murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith

Expanded illustrated narrative and correspondence

Prepared for the George T. M. Davis Attorney Project • 1 October 2026

The narrative below retains the earlier biographical account and adds dated evidence about Davis's journalism, political correspondence, and efforts to influence the response to Carthage. The correspondence section provides selected archival excerpts and the complete published Davis–Ford exchange.

A Man Waiting for News

Near midnight on 27 June 1844, George T. M. Davis was moving down the Mississippi River in a hired skiff toward Warsaw, Illinois. Earlier that day he had stood in Nauvoo and heard Governor Thomas Ford address the Latter-day Saints. Now, miles downstream, Davis had heard the report of a cannon from the direction of Warsaw. To him it sounded like a signal. Something had happened at Carthage, and he believed he already knew what it was.

The journey placed Davis at the edge of one of the most consequential acts of political and religious violence in nineteenth-century America. At approximately five o'clock that afternoon, an armed body of men had attacked the jail at Carthage. Hyrum Smith was killed inside. Joseph Smith was shot as he fell from an upper window and was then surrounded below. By the time Davis heard the cannon, the brothers were dead, the attackers were dispersing, and communities throughout Hancock County were preparing for retaliation.

Davis did not arrive as an innocent traveler who had stumbled upon unexpected news. The evening before, while at Carthage, he had written a dispatch warning that a desperate attempt might be made to punish the Smith brothers without trial. He told his editor that no one should be surprised to hear of their destruction by the populace. He later emphasized that he had written this warning roughly twenty-eight hours before the assault.

That prediction is the first fact that makes Davis important. The second is that after the murders he admitted knowing the identities of some of the men involved. The third is that he chose not to reveal them. Between those points—prediction, knowledge, and silence—lies the difficult story of Davis's place in the crisis.

Who Was George T M Davis

George Turnbull Moore Davis was thirty-four years old in 1844. He was already a lawyer, newspaper editor, Whig organizer, and practiced political intermediary. He was born at Malta

on 24 May 1810 while his father, George Davis, served as an American consul in the Mediterranean world. His mother was Ann Tucker Pennock Davis. When George was seven, he was sent to school in New York. After his father's death, his uncle Matthew L. Davis took responsibility for his education.

Matthew was not an ordinary guardian. He was a political writer, newspaper man, and confidant and biographer of Aaron Burr. Under his influence, young George learned that law, print, personal relationships, and political power were rarely separate worlds. George first intended to study medicine, then worked in a Syracuse mercantile house operated by relatives. In April 1828 he married Susan Minerva Webb. He later read law, entered the New York bar in July 1832, and moved to Alton, Illinois, that September.

At Alton, Davis formed a legal partnership with John M. Krum. Their practice handled debts, land, collections, bankruptcy, and commercial disputes across southern Illinois. The 1839 letter from William Garthwaite that began this project belongs to that world. Garthwaite expected Davis to collect outstanding claims and was anxious for an accounting. The letter does not presently establish a Mormon connection, but it shows Davis operating in an interstate legal and financial network several years before the Carthage crisis.

Davis also entered the newspaper and political worlds. He became associated with the Alton Telegraph, turned it into an influential Whig paper, and wrote political correspondence under the name "Virginius." He learned to gather information, cultivate officeholders, influence public opinion, and communicate news quickly. Those skills help explain both his access in June 1844 and the speed with which he converted the murders into a pamphlet for a national readership.

His legal career had already placed him near violence and public controversy. Surviving accounts identify Davis as counsel, with Alfred Cowles, in litigation arising from the killing of abolitionist editor Elijah P. Lovejoy at Alton. That earlier episode did not make Davis an opponent of mob violence in any simple modern sense, but it gave him direct experience with the way local grievances, partisan journalism, armed citizens, and legal institutions could converge around a killing.

The editor's craft and the Whig campaign

Davis's newspaper work gave him more than a public platform. It offered access to sources, control over what reached readers, and a means of proving his usefulness to party leaders. The Papers of Abraham Lincoln dates his editorship of the Alton Telegraph to 1841. A separate milestone came on 25 November 1843, when John Bailhache announced Davis's appointment as corresponding editor for the presidential campaign. The two dates describe different stages of the association. [1–2]

Davis's own letter of 9 August 1844 exposes the practical power of an editor. He told Ford that he had excluded several hostile communications from publication because he believed them

unmerited. One alleged that Ford had known the Smiths would be killed. Davis thus acted as both recipient of damaging information and gatekeeper over its circulation. His support for the governor could be useful precisely because Davis wrote from the opposing party. [3]

Bailhache's 20 January 1840 letter to Davis, excerpted later in this report, places their association within an older campaign network. Journalism, personal allegiance, and electioneering were intertwined. The newspaper title "Democratic Review" should not be taken as evidence that this was a Democratic-party organ: in the period at issue, Bailhache and Davis promoted the Whig cause. [2]

[1] Papers of Abraham Lincoln, "Davis, George T. M." [2] Wicks and Foister, Junius and Joseph, pp. 66–69 and notes 15–17, citing the Telegraph notice and Bailhache correspondence. [3] Davis to Ford, 9 August 1844, published in The Prophet, 21 December 1844, p. 1.

Mormons Whigs and the Illinois Balance of Power

By 1844 the Latter-day Saints at Nauvoo had become a formidable voting body. Illinois politicians courted their support and feared the consequences when that support shifted. Joseph Smith was not merely a religious leader. He was mayor of Nauvoo, lieutenant general of the Nauvoo Legion, a presidential candidate, and the central figure in a city whose charter and institutions seemed to outsiders to place unusual powers in Mormon hands.

Davis watched these developments as a Whig editor and political operative. The surviving evidence does not show that he was Joseph Smith's personal lawyer, private correspondent, or close friend. Their relationship was political and observational. Davis followed the Mormon vote, moved among Whig leaders who sought Mormon support, and knew men on both sides of the growing Hancock County conflict.

This distinction matters. Davis's proximity did not arise from intimacy with Joseph Smith. It arose from his place in Illinois politics. He knew editors, lawyers, militia officers, merchants, and officeholders. He could move between Alton, Springfield, Carthage, Nauvoo, Warsaw, Quincy, St. Louis, and national Whig circles. When the Nauvoo crisis reached its climax, Davis was positioned to observe it, interpret it, and carry its story outward.

Private strategy: winning votes without public praise

On 29 December 1843, Davis wrote Congressman John J. Hardin about Whig organization and the coming presidential election. In the same letter he assessed Mormon anger toward Democrats and urged restraint by Whig newspapers. His clearest statement was: "I feel now more confident than ever that we can carry the Mormon vote for Mr. Clay if the Whig papers will only act circumspectly and [not] to go to praising them too quick." The bracketed word is supplied in the published quotation. [4]

This is unusually revealing evidence of political calculation. Davis thought editorial tone could make Mormon support attainable. He did not propose a sudden public conversion to friendship; he wanted a carefully managed silence while dissatisfaction with Democrats

worked to the Whigs' advantage. His request that the matter remain private further distinguishes the letter from a public campaign appeal. This interpretation follows the words of the letter; it does not establish that Clay directed the tactic. [4]

The same correspondence discusses raising money for campaign literature and obtaining a German-language account of Clay's life and policies. Those details show the routine machinery surrounding the Mormon-vote strategy: subscriptions, printing, distribution, language-specific outreach, and coordination with a congressman. The Saints were one constituency in a larger campaign. [4]

The Latter-day Saints also exercised political agency. Joseph Smith asked presidential aspirants what they would do about the Saints' grievances. Clay's reply of 15 November 1843 expressed sympathy but refused pledges to a particular group. Smith's public response of 13 May 1844 rejected the answer as inadequate. Their exchange shows a failed negotiation over protection and redress, not simply a bloc waiting for party instructions. [5]

After the murders, the argument over votes continued. Davis's 9 August letter reported accusations that Ford's Warsaw address had been designed to secure Joseph P. Hoge's election. Those are accusations in a partisan exchange, not demonstrated motives. Ford denied them. Yet his reply acknowledged telling Orson Spencer that peace would be promoted if the Saints refrained from voting or divided their votes between the parties. Ford added that he had given no advice. The tension is striking: a governor's assurance of political neutrality accompanied an expressed preference that a threatened minority dilute its electoral strength. [3]

These letters warrant a sharper account of political pressure than the original narrative supplied. Davis's private strategy treated Mormon votes as a prize; Ford's explanation treated their unified exercise as a danger to peace. Neither document, by itself, proves an agreement among national leaders to kill Joseph Smith.

[4] Davis to John J. Hardin, 29 December 1843, Hardin Papers, Chicago Historical Society, quoted in Wicks and Foister, pp. 69, 78–79. [5] Joseph Smith Papers, Clay to Smith, 15 November 1843, and Smith to Clay, 13 May 1844. Source links and selected texts follow.

The Road to Carthage

The immediate crisis began after dissenters from Joseph Smith established the Nauvoo Expositor. The newspaper's first and only issue accused Smith of religious, political, and personal abuses. Acting under the direction of the Nauvoo City Council, the city marshal destroyed the press. That act gave Smith's opponents a powerful legal and political grievance. Charges followed, militia forces gathered, and Governor Ford traveled to Hancock County in an attempt to prevent civil war.

Joseph and Hyrum Smith eventually submitted to arrest and were taken to Carthage. They first faced proceedings connected with the destruction of the press and were then charged with treason. On 26 June, Davis was present in the crowded Carthage courthouse and personally

watched the brothers appear. He identified the lawyers on both sides and later described the atmosphere in town as charged with threats and expectations of violence.

Davis was not merely reconstructing that atmosphere years later. He wrote about it while the crisis was unfolding. His dispatch from Carthage at eight o'clock on the evening of 26 June warned that a desperate attempt would probably be made to punish the Smiths summarily. The dispatch is crucial because it fixes his expectation before the murders, not after them.

A prediction, however, is not the same as proof of participation. Threats were circulating openly. Men in Carthage spoke recklessly. The hostility of parts of the militia was visible. Davis could have reached his conclusion from the public atmosphere, private conversations, or both. Later accounts place him close to Colonel Enoch C. March when March allegedly predicted Joseph Smith's death. Some modern reconstructions suggest that Davis may have had access to a private meeting in Carthage on 26 June. His location and knowledge make that possible, but no surviving attendance list or contemporary confession proves he was in such a room.

The responsible conclusion is narrower and stronger: Davis had access to people who knew what was being discussed, and he believed the danger was immediate enough to put his prediction in writing.

Twenty Seven June

On the morning of 27 June, Governor Ford decided to travel from Carthage to Nauvoo. He took part of the militia with him but left the Smith brothers behind under guard at the jail. The Carthage Greys, whose hostility toward the prisoners was widely recognized, formed a central part of that guard. Ford later defended his decisions, but the choice became one of the most disputed acts of the crisis.

Davis accompanied Ford's party to Nauvoo. There he heard the governor address the Saints. Ford denounced the destruction of the Expositor press, warned the people against resistance, and attempted to assure them that the law would be enforced. Davis was therefore not at the jail when the assault occurred. His importance lies elsewhere: he had been at Carthage before the murders, went to Nauvoo with the governor while the prisoners remained behind, and then moved rapidly toward Warsaw as the news spread.

Davis left Nauvoo with Colonel Enoch C. March of Alton. March was no incidental companion. He was a merchant, former Black Hawk War quartermaster general, transportation figure, and regional political intermediary. The two crossed the Mississippi and traveled by wagon toward Keokuk, hoping to catch the packet Boreas. Poor roads delayed them, and they reached Keokuk around half past ten that night, after the steamer had departed.

Then came the cannon report from Warsaw. Davis interpreted it as a signal of triumph. He hired a skiff and two rowers and traveled roughly five miles downriver. This decision reveals the journalist and political investigator in him. Rather than remain at Keokuk and wait for

ordinary reports, he went directly toward the center of the anti-Mormon community to learn what had happened.

Midnight at Warsaw

Davis reached Warsaw around midnight. Men who had returned from the direction of Carthage supplied the news: Joseph and Hyrum Smith had been killed. The town was preparing for the consequences. Families crossed the river into Missouri, while armed men made defensive preparations against an expected Mormon attack.

Among the men Davis encountered was George Rockwell, a Warsaw merchant, druggist, and postmaster. Rockwell had also carried an order from Governor Ford for state arms. He was later named by Jacob B. Backenstos among Warsaw figures alleged to have been leaders or active participants in the anti-Mormon movement surrounding the murders. That later accusation does not prove that Rockwell entered the jail or fired a weapon. It does show that he occupied a meaningful position within Warsaw's political and military network.

At Rockwell's request, Davis addressed the displaced families. Only hours earlier he had been in Nauvoo. He told the refugees that the Saints appeared overcome with grief and were unlikely to launch an immediate attack. His words helped calm people who expected violent retaliation.

The scene captures the complexity of Davis's position. He was trusted enough by a leading Warsaw man to address frightened anti-Mormon families. Yet the reassurance he offered came from his direct observation of the Mormon community at Nauvoo. He was moving information between two hostile worlds. He was not neutral, but neither was he behaving as a man who wanted the killings to ignite a general war.

Afterward Davis boarded the Boreas and reached Quincy around daylight. His reports continued. The sequence of dispatches—from Carthage on 26 June, Warsaw near midnight on the twenty-seventh, Quincy early on the twenty-eighth, and Warsaw again later that day—allows his knowledge to be followed almost hour by hour.

A proposal against extermination

The letter Davis wrote Ford on 30 June deserves a prominent place beside the darker evidence. He urged the governor to assemble 2,500 to 3,000 men from districts distant from the excitement, encamp them near Nauvoo, and disband the local forces. He explicitly described the danger as a "war of extermination" against the Mormons. The proposed force would protect both Nauvoo and other Hancock County residents. [3]

This does not erase his later obstruction of prosecutions. It establishes that opposition to Mormonism could coexist with a concrete proposal to protect Mormon lives. Read together,

the June and August letters expose the difference between preventing further communal violence and pursuing accountability for killings already committed.

What Davis Knew

Within weeks Davis published An Authentic Account of the Massacre of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, and Hyrum Smith, His Brother. The forty-seven-page pamphlet was printed at St. Louis by Chambers and Knapp and appears to have circulated by August 1844. It was one of the earliest extended narratives of the murders.

Davis presented himself as a reporter correcting exaggeration. He promised facts he had personally witnessed or obtained from sources he considered authentic. Yet his work was never neutral. He wrote disparagingly of Joseph Smith and Mormonism, rehearsed the grievances of the Hancock County opposition, and defended Governor Ford against the gravest accusations. At the same time, he described the jail attack as illegal and refused to treat murder as a legitimate substitute for trial.

The most revealing passage concerned the attackers. Davis acknowledged that it would be untrue for him to claim that he knew none of the participants. He then said that the circumstances under which he obtained his information prevented him from revealing their names, regardless of inducement or coercion.

That was not the language of a distant observer repeating rumors. Davis was announcing that he possessed protected knowledge. He did not explain whether it came from a participant, an eyewitness, a militia officer, or a political confidant. He also stated that much of the non-Mormon population of Hancock County knew of a determination that the Smiths should not leave the jail alive. His language suggested a broad climate of expectation rather than a conspiracy confined to a handful of gunmen.

Davis also had access to a written statement given confidentially to Governor Ford by a purported eyewitness. Ford allowed him to read it. Davis summarized the reported plan by which part of the Warsaw force separated and moved toward Carthage, but he withheld identifying names. The original enclosure has not been located in the remotely accessible records. Until it is found, it is impossible to know precisely what Davis omitted or altered.

Silence and Political Intervention

Davis did more than publish an account. His correspondence with Governor Ford shows that he entered the political struggle over what should happen next. In an August letter, Davis advised against prosecutions and warned that defendants might implicate Ford. He referred to additional intelligence that he did not disclose publicly. In a reply prepared but initially withheld and later published, Ford rejected the suggestion that he had arranged or knowingly permitted the murders and countered that political pressure was being used against him.

This exchange places Davis beyond the role of historian. He was trying to influence official action. His advice may have reflected several motives at once: fear of renewed civil conflict, protection of associates, skepticism that Hancock County juries would convict, party calculation, or a belief that prosecutions would expose wider political responsibility without producing justice. The documents establish the intervention; they do not allow one motive to be selected with certainty.

Davis apparently did not testify in the 1845 prosecution of Thomas Sharp, Levi Williams, Jacob C. Davis, Mark Aldrich, and William N. Grover. No remotely located subpoena, witness list, or trial account places him on the stand. His refusal to identify participants and his advice against arrests help explain why prosecutors may not have treated him as a cooperative witness. That explanation is reasonable, but it remains an inference rather than a documented statement of prosecutorial strategy.

Was Davis Part of the Plot

This is the question toward which nearly every reader will be drawn, and it must be answered with discipline. The surviving record establishes Davis's proximity, forewarning, political relationships, confidential knowledge, and later silence. Those facts are significant. They justify close scrutiny. They do not establish that he joined a murder conspiracy.

Davis's 26 June prediction could indicate inside knowledge, but it could also reflect the openly threatening atmosphere at Carthage. His friendship with March and access to Buckmaster, Ford, Sharp, Skinner, Rockwell, and others brought him close to men who knew more than they said publicly, but association is not participation. His refusal to name attackers protected guilty men, yet nineteenth-century journalists and political intermediaries often guarded sources even when those sources confessed discreditable acts.

The proposed secret meeting presents the same problem. Later testimony and recollections indicate that groups of officers and citizens discussed what would happen to the Smiths. Davis's movements make attendance possible. His pamphlet contains details that may have come from such deliberations. But the pamphlet does not say he attended, and no reliable contemporary list places him there. This report therefore treats his attendance as possible, not established.

The strongest defensible formulation is this: Davis stood within the circle of information surrounding the plot, even though the evidence does not place him within the circle that authorized or carried it out. He knew enough beforehand to predict violence and enough afterward to protect individual participants. Whether he learned the operational details before the attack or only after it remains unresolved.

A Pamphlet with Two Purposes

Davis's pamphlet attempted two things at once. It condemned the killing as unlawful, but it also explained why many non-Mormons in Hancock County believed that ordinary legal remedies had failed. To modern readers those purposes may appear contradictory. To Davis they were probably connected. He wished to separate condemnation of the murder from vindication of the political grievances that produced the crisis.

That position allowed him to defend Governor Ford while avoiding a defense of the actual shooting. It also allowed him to speak to Whig leaders beyond Illinois. Henry Clay acknowledged receiving a copy in late August, and reports indicate that Davis also sent the pamphlet to Horace Greeley. This was selective political distribution. No publisher's ledger or reliable print-run figure has been found, so the full size of its audience remains unknown.

The pamphlet should therefore be read as evidence as well as argument. It preserves Davis's movements, predictions, and access to contemporary reports. At the same time, it arranges those facts to protect certain people and emphasize certain grievances. Its silences are part of its meaning. Davis told readers that he knew names, then made his refusal to provide them a public principle.

Comparing the evidence with Junius and Joseph

Robert S. Wicks and Fred R. Foister's Junius and Joseph (2005) connects the Carthage crisis to the presidential campaign and argues for a political conspiracy extending beyond local assailants. Its discussion of Davis supplies valuable correspondence and research leads. Susan Sessions Rugh's review welcomes the wider political setting but questions the strength of the national-conspiracy case. [6]

The correspondence supports three conclusions directly: Davis worked to secure votes for Clay; he controlled politically useful information; and he warned Ford against a course that would prosecute suspected murderers. The further proposition that Clay, Hardin, or Davis authorized the attack requires evidence of agreement or direction. The excerpts reproduced here supply no such order. Political motive, access to powerful people, and efforts to protect suspects are consequential facts, but they are not interchangeable with proof of advance authorization.

A useful comparison is Davis's 20 February 1849 letter to Abraham Lincoln. Seeking appointments for allies, Davis explicitly offered future political service in return. The letter illustrates his continuing role as an intermediary who cultivated reciprocal obligations. It belongs to a later patronage contest and supplies no evidence that Lincoln participated in the events of 1844. [7]

[6] Wicks and Foister, Junius and Joseph, especially chapters 16 and 20; Susan Sessions Rugh, review, BYU Studies 45, no. 4 (2006). [7] Papers of Abraham Lincoln, document D233612.

Memory Changes the Story

Decades later, Davis revisited the crisis in his autobiography. The later narrative is useful, but it cannot be allowed to replace the sources written in 1844. Memory had softened some conflicts and organized the episode into a more coherent story. The contemporaneous dispatches and pamphlet preserve tensions that the retrospective account tends to smooth away.

The contemporary dispatches, the June and August correspondence, and the summer pamphlet should be read together. They preserve both Davis's fresh knowledge and the political consequences he was weighing. The posthumous autobiography belongs last: valuable for reflection, but vulnerable to memory and self-presentation.

The Larger Life

Carthage did not end Davis's public career. During the Mexican War he helped recruit Illinois volunteers, served on the staffs of Generals James Shields and John A. Quitman, and became Quitman's military and civil secretary after the capture of Mexico City. Officers of the New York Regiment presented him with elaborate silver spurs in recognition of his assistance. He returned to Alton in late 1847 with an expanded national network.

In 1850 Davis served as chief clerk in the military bureau of the General Land Office and then as chief clerk in the War Department. His wife Susan died in Washington that November, and Davis resigned. He moved to Louisville, edited the Courier, and in 1852 married Eunice Pomeroy Day. His daughter Henrietta married the promoter George Francis Train, linking the family to the railroad and reform worlds.

Davis later settled in New York and entered railroad-supply, locomotive, commission, and finance enterprises. His papers connect him with Thomas C. Durant and the business networks that built western railroads. In 1860 the census valued his real property at twenty thousand dollars and his personal estate at ten thousand dollars, evidence of substantial prosperity.

His political relationships continued. Davis corresponded with Abraham Lincoln over appointments and party influence in 1849, urged action during the secession crisis as a representative of the New York Union Defence Committee in 1861, and remained in contact with Lincoln-era political figures during the Civil War. He died in New York on 19 December 1888.

The later career helps explain the man who appeared at Carthage. Davis was comfortable around generals, governors, editors, lawyers, businessmen, and presidents. He made himself useful by gathering information, connecting people, and translating private knowledge into public influence. Those were the same abilities he displayed during the final days of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.

The Meaning of Davis's Role

George T. M. Davis matters because he occupied a position from which several versions of the crisis became visible at once. He saw the prisoners in Carthage, traveled with the governor to Nauvoo, listened to the Saints, hurried toward Warsaw, spoke to anti-Mormon refugees, interviewed returning men, read a confidential account, and carried the story into print. Few surviving narrators moved through so many parts of the landscape in so little time.

His account cannot be accepted uncritically. He disliked Mormonism, shared many of the opposition's political assumptions, protected sources, and sought to influence Ford. Nor should it be dismissed merely because it was partisan. Partisans often stand closest to the events they describe. The historian's task is to separate observation from advocacy, contemporary statement from later memory, and supported inference from accusation.

What remains is a portrait of a politically skilled man caught between condemnation and protection. Davis believed the murders were unlawful. He also believed the non-Mormon grievances deserved a national hearing. He tried to protect Governor Ford, discouraged prosecutions, and refused to identify attackers. At the same time, he calmed Warsaw refugees by reporting that Nauvoo was grieving rather than mobilizing for revenge. His conduct does not fit neatly into the categories of friend or enemy, witness or participant, defender or accuser.

The evidence permits a firm final judgment only within defined limits. Davis anticipated violence and placed that expectation in writing. He acquired confidential knowledge of the murderers and the operation. He withheld names and intervened politically afterward. He helped shape the earliest printed memory of the deaths. But the record presently available does not prove that he planned, authorized, or physically joined the assault on Carthage Jail.

That conclusion is not evasive. It is the point at which the evidence becomes most historically revealing. Davis's story shows that the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith was surrounded by a much larger community of knowledge—men who predicted, discussed, understood, excused, feared, reported, or concealed what was happening. Davis belonged to that wider circle. His pamphlet opened a window into it while deliberately leaving some of its faces in shadow.

Questions Still Open

The most important remaining evidence is not likely to appear through another general internet search. The Missouri Historical Society holds the George Turnbull Moore Davis Papers, collection A0363. Its roughly one hundred items include a Davis and Krum letterbook and an attorney's register extending from 1839 through 1845. That register may identify the clients, cases, journeys, and associates behind Davis's public life and may finally connect William Garthwaite's letter to a specific transaction.

Other priorities include the smaller Davis correspondence group at the University of Illinois; the original or microfilm image of the 6 July 1844 Alton Telegraph; the papers of John J. Hardin, John Bailhache, and Thomas Ford; Ford's missing confidential eyewitness enclosure; and Alton Masonic records. These sources may refine the account. They may reveal new relationships. Until then, the narrative should remain candid about what is known and what is not.

Selected Source Guide

The following sources identify the principal evidence underlying the narrative. Detailed references for the additions and correspondence appear after the documentary section.

George T. M. Davis. An Authentic Account of the Massacre of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet and Hyrum Smith His Brother. St. Louis: Chambers and Knapp, 1844.

Alton Telegraph. Davis dispatches dated 26–28 June 1844, printed 6 July 1844. Text substantially recovered through later quotation and transcription; complete issue image still sought.

Davis and Ford correspondence. Davis letter of 9 August 1844, Ford's response, and later newspaper republications concerning prosecutions and responsibility.

George T. M. Davis. Autobiographical recollections published posthumously in 1891. Used after, and compared against, the 1844 evidence.

Missouri Historical Society. George Turnbull Moore Davis Papers A0363, 1832–1843, including Davis and Krum letterbook and attorney's register extending through 1845. https://mohistory.mobiusconsortium.org/repositories/2/resources/475

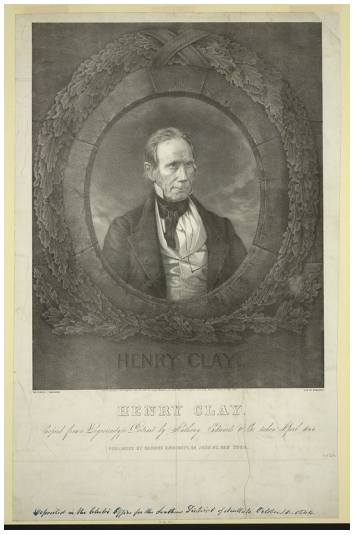
Papers of Abraham Lincoln. George T. M. Davis biographical record and surviving Davis correspondence. https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/persons/DA14987

Joseph Smith Papers. Legal, journal, administrative, and biographical materials relating to the Nauvoo crisis, Carthage proceedings, and deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. https://www.josephsmithpapers.org

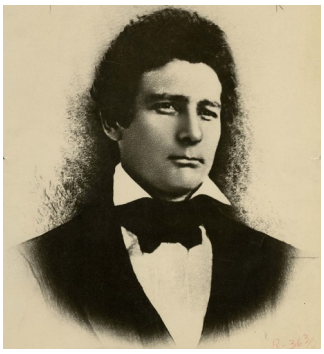
University of Iowa. Levi O. Leonard Papers, including Davis, Durant, locomotive, commission, and railroad materials. https://www.lib.uiowa.edu/scua/msc/tomsc200/msc159/msc159.htm

User artifact. William Garthwaite to George T. M. Davis, New York, 3 October 1839, holographic letter and integral address panel.

Three political figures in Davis's correspondence



Henry Clay. Whig presidential candidate whose success Davis sought. Lithograph after an April 1844 daguerreotype; Library of Congress, item 2009633655.



John J. Hardin. Illinois congressman and recipient of Davis's private campaign letters. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum; Wikimedia Commons, "John J. Hardin.jpg."



Thomas Ford. Illinois governor and recipient of Davis's letters concerning protection, blame, and prosecution. Portrait published in the Illinois Blue Book (1899); Wikimedia Commons, "Thomas Ford (cropped).png."

Correspondence: campaign strategy and political influence

The following extracts reproduce nineteenth-century texts as quoted in the cited editions. Separate blocks are separate excerpts, not continuous letters. Ellipses and square brackets within the Hardin excerpts follow the published quotations. These extracts are not complete manuscript transcriptions.

John Bailhache to Davis ● 20 January 1840

“warmly attached to Gen. Harrison—whom I have personally known for upwards of a quarter of a century—and I flatter myself competent to defend and support him during the ensuing campaign.”

Bailhache Papers, repository identified in Wicks and Foister as Illinois Historical Society, Springfield; Junius and Joseph, p. 67, note 16. This passage establishes the political character of the editorial network before the 1844 campaign.

Davis to John J. Hardin ● 29 December 1843

“We have instructed our congressional central committees that they must raise at least twenty five dollars in each of their districts to be transmitted to you for Junius tracts and other publications for general distribution”

“If a life of Mr. Clay with the leading views of his public policy gotten up in a succinct form is printed in German … we will order and pay for at least a thousand copies.”

“not to come out and fluff the Mormons but rather to pass them bye sub silentio”

“This however is between ourselves”

“I feel now more confident than ever that we can carry the Mormon vote for Mr. Clay if the Whig papers will only act circumspectly and [not] to go to praising them too quick. The Mormons themselves do not require this.”

John J. Hardin Papers, Chicago Historical Society (now Chicago History Museum); excerpts quoted in Wicks and Foister, pp. 69, 78–79. The short “fluff” passage concerns Davis’s advice to the Sangamo Journal editor. The Latin phrase means passing them over in silence. The printed source supplies [not].

Davis to John J. Hardin ● 24 November 1844

“For the last three weeks I have suffered mentally more than human tongue can describe … Suffered, that Mr. Clay should be sacrificed by a ruthless band of foreigners.”

“The great and important question now is, what are we as a party to do?”

“Our friends need checking and a few letters from prominent men in whom they have confidence, would prevent their taking steps which in the end may prove destructive of us as a party.”

These excerpts reveal Davis's distress after Clay's defeat and his continued reliance on prominent party leaders. The reference to "foreigners" expresses Davis's prejudice and political blame; it does not establish that he meant only Mormon immigrants, that their votes were unlawful, or that they decided the election.

Hardin Papers; quoted in Wicks and Foister, pp. 227–228, 272.

Davis to Abraham Lincoln ● 20 February 1849

"To me personally it will be a great favor, and if you can confer it, the day may roll round when I can be of the most essential service to you."

"By giving your assistance to Mr Ramsay, you can lay me under obligations to you that I never can forget or will fail to reciprocate."

Papers of Abraham Lincoln, D233612. The requests concerned Benjamin Bond's proposed appointment as marshal and C. G. Ramsay's as postmaster. These are later examples of Davis's political methods, not evidence about the murders. https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/documents/D233612

The published Davis–Ford exchange

The next image precedes the reading text so the printed source can be compared with the correspondence. The Prophet, a Latter-day Saint newspaper in New York, reprinted the exchange on 21 December 1844 from the Illinois State Register. Its introductory notice says Ford's reply had been prepared but not sent, on his friends' advice, and was now being published.



THE PROPHET.

DEVOTED TO THE DISSEMINATION OF TRUTH; MORAL, RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL, AND SCIENTIFIC.

Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the Prophets—Amos, 3; 7.

S. BRANNAN, ED

S. BRANNAN PUB.

VOL. I.—NO. XXXI. NEW-YORK, SATURDAY MORNING, DEC. 21. 1844. $1 PER AN. SINGLE COPIES 3 CTS

'THE PROPHET' IS PUBLISHED EVERY SATURDAY BY S. BRANNAN.

A Correspondence between George T. M. Davis of Alton, and Gov. Ford of Springfield, Ill., on the Assassination of Joseph and Hyram Smith, at Carthage, Hancock Co., Ill., on the 27th day of June, 1844.

GEORGE T. M. DAVIS.

Some weeks since the State Register charged that the Hancock people had promised this gentleman to write a threatening letter to the Governor, informing him that if he encouraged prosecutions against the murderers of the Smiths, the persons accused would implicate him in the murder. This statement has been denied by Mr. Davis, and has called for the publication of the letter. Here it is No one could doubt but that it was written at the instance of the Hancock people. It bears internal evidence of the fact.

We also publish another letter to the Governor advising him to call out the militia when they were not needed. Let this letter stand side by side by some of the paragraphs of Davis, censuring the Governor for calling out the Militia, when needed.

The Governor's letter in answer was prepared at the time it bears date; but by the advice of his friends he did not send it. It is now given to the public as a correction of the many misrepresentations contained in Mr. Davis' letter to him.

QUINCY, June 30, 1844.

To his Excellency, Thomas Ford, Governor.

DEAR SIR:—Fully appreciating the embarrassing situation in which you are placed, by the information derived from the seat of War this morning, that a design exists among a portion of the militia whom you had relied upon to aid in maintaining the majesty and supremacy of the law, to wage a war of extermination against the Mormons, it is only from a desire to aid and support you at this trying crisis, that I have presumed to offer you any suggestions as to the course best adapted to preserve peace and save the State from the disgrace of a mob.

From the personal knowledge I possess, I am convinced that a war of extermination can only be guarded against, by your selecting a body of from 2500 to 3000 men most distant from the seat of excitement, ordering their encampment within four or five miles from Nauvoo, and then issuing a proclamation disbanding the forces in the immediate neighborhood, and giving all persons inclined to mob the Mormons notice, that no attack can only be made upon them through a body of our citizens who are determined under any emergency to uphold the law and maintain the peace. This force thus located would in my humble judgment have the double tendency of protecting the citizens of Hancock from any contemplated attack from the Mormons, while at the same time it would secure the Mormons against the merciless violence of an excited populace bent upon extermination.

I repeat that my only apology for venturing to offer any advice is from a desire to aid you to the utmost of my ability in the honorable, determined, and fearless course you are taking to preserve the peace of the citizens of Illinois and to secure the supremacy of the law. With sentiments of respect I am

Your ob't servant.

G. T. M. DAVIS.

QUINCY, August 9, 1844.

DEAR SIR:—Yes are well aware of the relation I bear towards you in regard to the late Mormon difficulties and the position I have occupied before the public. You cannot be otherwise than satisfied that from the previous relations existing between us, my motives could not have been otherwise than pure in sustaining you in the course you had taken. For doing this I was assailed privately as well as publicly by many of my political friends, and the enmity of some of them has not been appeased to this day. Conscious however, of the rectitude of my motives, I pursued the even tenor of the course which I had marked out, and have continued to pursue that course which I deemed proper, unawed and unsiffluenced by either the frowns or smiles of friend or foe. My desire still is to sustain your cause if I can, and be found in no case disposed to show that you have been influenced by political motives. You have doubtless been aware that your last address to the citizens of Warsaw, has given great displeasure to many who have heretofore sustained you, and that they charge it was dictated purely by a desire to secure the election of Hoge. This has been openly charged here by your political friends from Hancock as well as your opponents. Up to the time I left home, I had excluded several severe communications against you because I believed them unmerited. One of them went if crossconclusively to prove that you knew of the design of the citizens to take the lives of the Smiths. It was based upon a statement made by Col. Brockman, not only to Col. March of Alton, but to one or two other of our citizens. Col. Backman stated that on your way to Nauvoo, you and he talked the matter over, and both agreed that the Smiths would be killed during your absence, and that it was his suggestions to you, to leave the wagons a few miles out of Nauvoo, so that you and your escort could get that far out of the way before the news could reach Nauvoo of the killing of the Smiths. If this statement of Brockman's is correct, your implication in the matter is fixed, and the only object I have in view in imparting this matter to you, arises from what has occurred since I have been in this place this time. Some fifteen or twenty citizens of Hancock county have been here attending the land sales. Some one informed them that you had prepared a list of names to be presented to the Grand Jury, with a list of witnesses to procure their indictment and conviction. Some of them have stated publicly that if that was the course you intended to pursue, they would show beyond a doubt that you know all about it. Among the testimony they have collected is that of Sharp.—He told me himself, on yesterday morning, that on the morning of the day the Smiths were killed, he called upon you at your room and told you that the people intended to take the law into their own hands, and that you replied to him, they must not do it or attempt it while you was at Carthage, that you had come there to sustain the law, not to witness its violation. They are also in possession of the fact, that two different individuals have stated Col. Deming on the same morning long before breakfast, state to you that these was going to be an attempt made to rescue the Smiths out of jail and visit summary punishment upon them, but that it was the Whigs that intended to do it.

There is a good deal more I have learned here which it is useless for me to commit to paper, all of which is generally of the same character as above related. Now my only object in writing to you is that if there is any one sustained before the public in this unfortunate affair. And the best way I can serve you is to state to you facts with in my knowledge, that you may act with a full view of all the circumstances before you. What course you may pursue after you get out of a renewal of excitement in Hancock county I cannot see. If indictments are gotten up against the Mormons and attempts are made to arrest them, a scene of bloodshed and massacre will ensue, unequalled during the settlement of this republic. They will, as a matter of course, justify themselves as far as they can in the eyes of the world, and they will signify you in the eyes of the world, and they will signify you to prove a complete and perfect scoundrel on your part of all that transpired. I have spoken very plainly, but not more so than I am want to do—plainly, but not more so than I am want to do—And I feel as if in communicating upon matters of this kind the one with the other with the most candor should be exercised. There can be no doubt that these existence of Hancock as a body of men determined to stand or fall together. They are creating a strong sympathy in their favor throughout this State, as well as Missouri and the Territory, and an attempt to execute them would be attended with the most disastrous consequences.

I cannot see what you have individually to gain in urging their prosecution and conviction. Surely the vengeance of the Mormons against them is keen enough, Without having it whetted by any other interference. And it is only dictated by a personal friend and foe to take a course against you in Hancock, which to say the least of it, will give your adversaries an advantage over you which they do not now possess. I hope you will pardon the freedom I have taken in writing to you, when I assure you it is from the same motives that has induced me thus to address you. I am in communicating these facts to you, but if in error, it is one of the head and not of the heart. Far be it from me to advise you what course you ought to take. Such is not my design. I feel as if I had discharged my duty by words you as a citizen, when I state what has come to my knowledge as above delineated—and your future course must be directed by your own superior judgment and experience.

Yours very respectfully,

GEO. T. M. DAVIS.

His Excellency Thomas Ford, Springfield Illinois.

Springfield, Aug 23, 1844.

DEAR SIR.—Upon my arrival at home a few days since, your letter of the 9th instant was presented to me; and I am happy to say that I can make a most satisfactory answer. As the conductor of a public Journal, at one time, you thought it to be your duty to abuse me in a gross manner in your paper. I find no fault on that account. I am an advocate for the freedom of the press; although I regret its licentiousness, as such would greatly prefer licentiousness, to such restraints as would prevent the truth from being spoken. The great inconveniences and danger, however, of this licentiousness is, that the people never know what to believe, or from what source which they see in the newspapers. The public press cries wolf, wolf, so often when there is no danger that it will not be regarded when it ought to be believed.

Your course however, in relation to the Mormon war, (as it has been called,) gave me a very high satisfaction. I was perfectly conscious of the most upright motives, in all that I did myself; and it was with great pleasure, that I witnessed the candor and fairness of your course with reference to mine. It redeemed you in my estimation, and created the impression on my humble mind, that your former abuse of me, was the result of erroneous information which you had received, and which, unhappily, one political opponent too easily believes of another.

As to the statements in your letter now under consideration, I have the happiness to assure you with truth that political views, never invaded my mind, from the beginning of the Mormon difficulties. I would have been very glad indeed, if the Mormons had refrained from voting at the last election. I always foresaw, that if they did vote, it would cause jealousy, for the Democratic ticket, and that I was his suggestions to you, to leave power to keep the peace, and enforce the laws in their part of the country, would be greatly impaired, as I fear now, it will be. Therefore I have very anxiously endeavored, on all occasions, to prevent those difficulties from taking a party turn, I have seen but three of the influential Mormons, since the death of the Smiths. Ye two of them who were before, I said nothing on the subject of politics. To Orson Spencer, who was the third, I must do myself the justice to say, that I clearly and frequently expressed my opinion that the peace of their people would be promoted, if the Mormons would refrain from voting, or at least divide their votes about equally between the two great political parties. I however told him, as I ought to have done, that I had no advice to give on the subject, one way or the other.

I have the most indubitable testimony that my letter to the people of Warsaw people had no effect whatever in inducing the Mormons to vote for Hoge That letter was not sent by me, nor by my knowledge, authority or direction to Nauvoo, as has been asserted. At the time it was written, I had information upon which I relied, that about seventy-five or one hundred idle loafers, were encamping at Warsaw in a state of riot, drunkenness and debauchery, gaming, theatreing and boasting, what they would do with the Mormons. They were keeping up an agitation so to surprise, and I was further informed that some of the citizens of the town, who desired the restoration of peace and security, were heartily sick and tired of their silly and vain glorious doings. It seemed to me then, that the dispersion of this disorderly rabble, was all that was necessary to restore quiet; and it was for this purpose that the so much complained of letter was written, and for no other. I left Quincy before all the numbers, which I had directed, were printed. and charged Mr. Thompson, the editor of the Herald, to send them to Warsaw and not one of them to Nauvoo. That the agitators at Warsaw, should have started the story, that I had sent them to a great exultance to Nauvoo to influence the election, ought not to surprise you. No one knows better than you do, as you have repeatedly acknowledged to me, the system prevailing at that time and before, in Hancock, of spreading false reports, for the purpose of agitation and excitement. You know when we were there together, that nothing was more common on the truth; in fact, that the truth could not even get across one of the streets of Carthage without being adulterated by a mixture of falsehood. The Warsaw people expected to have to stand a trial for the murder of the Smiths, and their policy manifestly was, to earn the sympathy, and claim the protection of one of the great political parties in the country.—They could not have hit upon a more ungenerous mode of effecting their purpose, than that of holding out the idea, that they were about to be sacrificed, to an intrigue of the Democrats. This report being believed, rallied the whole Whig party in their favor; and will most probably be the means of saving some of them from a conviction, for one of the most cowardly murders on record. It is to be hoped that the Whig party from a sense of decency; and as being that which, in pontfession, lays such lond and high claims to the lovers of "law and order," will henceforth disdain to make themselves the victims of so shallow a trick.

If I am correctly informed, the Mormons were induced to vote, at the last election by two considerations, the one either of which had any connexion with me or my conduct in any particular. The first was, that their opponents had held a convention and nominated a ticket which they called the "anti-Mormon ticket." At this time the Mormons had no candidates, and their leading men were in favor of having none. But the appearance of a ticket, brought out upon the ground one of their leaders, arrived from Pittsburgh.—He insisted upon their voting; and finally persuaded them, that if they did not vote the repeal would go abroad; and be believed throughout the world, that the Mormons had dispersed and abandoned their religion, and that their city had been deserted and broken up; and these reports would seem to be sanctioned by the fact that no votes had been given in Nauvoo. These considerations appear to have had weight enough with the Mormons to induce them to vote. With their sufficiency or insufficiency, I have nothing to do whatever.

As to their particular motive in voting for Mr Hoge, I am misinformed; except that they had voted for him at the previous election, and I have heard that he had been polite and attentive to them as a part of his constituents, in sending them documents and the like. I have also heard that Mr. Sweet the Whig candidate had visited every other place but Nauvoo, and had also declared himself against them. Under these circumstances, it is wonderful that the Mormons should vote against him without any special reasons on my part to induce them to do so?

When the Legislature convenes, I am perfectly willing that the Whigs should investigate this charge, and will abide by their decision; although I have no idea that the Whigs themselves will insist on it after the Presidential election. I have reason to believe that most of the Whig leaders already know it to be false. But according to the ideas of morality, which too frequently characterize the leaders of parties, they do not wish to lose the benefit of it, pending this important election. As to the other matters, I am perfectly certain that Col. Buckmaster never made any such statement as is contained in your letter.—He would not have done so, with truth. And I am equally certain that I made no such statements to Sharp, as he represents. It ought not to surprise you, that he should endeavor to excuse his part in a disgraceful murder, by pretending some authority for his conduct At a proper time, a fair narrative of this whole business will be laid before the public. I will content myself at present by simply stating that Sharp made a speech to the troops of Warsaw, to induce them to murder the Smiths In that speech he expressly stated that the Governor was opposed to them, in their measures, and had refused to do them justice.

He further stated, that the murder must be perpetrated, whilst the Governor was at Nauvoo; that the Mormons would suppose that the Governor had planned it, and would murder him by way of retaliation; that this last murder would create a great excitement in the State, and cause a great many people to turn out and assist them, in driving off the Mormons. On this important occasion, when endeavoring to persuade them to do a desperate deed, and when the sanction of high authority would have been so much to his purpose, he never intimated any knowledge or consent on my part either expressed or implied; but expressly stated that I was opposed to their measures, and had refused to do them justice. And when it was further urged, that they ought to be in a hurry to commit the act, for fear I would get back from Nauvoo, the leader of the band said, "damn the Governor, if he attempts to interfere, we will kill him also;" and all the band said "amen."

I think I very well understand, the meaning and intent of this charge, which the Warsaw people bring against me, of conniving at these murders. They think to frighten me by false charges, threatened to be supported by perjury, from doing a sacred duty. I regard it as a sacred duty, for me to implicate me in their guilt, if I cause the matter to be investigated.

Under those circumstances, I would regard as pusillanimous in the extreme, and I myself as pusillanimous in the extreme, and I would be so regarded justly, by the whole world, if I did not make the more haste, in setting proceedings afoot against them. No one knows better than yourself the reasons for the delay which has already occurred.

You know that sometime ago, I made application to the President of the U. S., through Col. Kearney, for a detachment of the United States army, to be stationed in Hancock county. during those proceedings, I have but very lately heard the result of that application, and then there is nothing to delay me in what I ought to do. In the course of next month I expect will be done.

I had nearly forgotten to say that what was reported to you, as having been said by Gen and Deming is totally false. I do not remember to have heard him say a word about either Whig or Democrat during his whole command, on that difficult and trying occasion.

I am respectfully

Your obedient servant.

THOMAS FORD.

GEORGE T. M. DAVIS, Esq., Alton, Ill

CHESTERFIELD TOWNSHIP, N. J. Dec. 4th 1844.

DR. BRANNAN.

As time rolls along performing its accustomed revolutions, every day brings with it something new, and every season some interesting information. We see changes in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; inundations of the seas; whole towns submerged, and the Lava gathering to Pahoion. O ye Gentiles! treating all these things with indifference, and your destruction near at hand. For saith the Lord "he will make a full end of all nations when he gathers Jacob" Jer. 46, 28 v. But these are the full fulfilment of prophecies uttered by holy men of God ten thousand moons ago, as the Holy Spirit from the celestial throne rested upon them in mighty power, while wrapped in the heavenly visions of the great "I AM," contemplated and viewed with heavenly grandeur things that would transpire through the vists of future ages. And not only ancient, but modern prophets have gazed upon the same, and predicted things that the Church of Christ would have to travel through in this our day. And as one thing from the Elders abroad apportaining to the cause of Zion will be a benefit realized by the Saints at home, I, as one, being desirous (without egotism) to assist in accelerating the Gospel car, and of tearing down the kingdom of Satan, wish to say a few words for the consolation of the Saints scattered abroad (Those that are left) have nothing to fear from apostates or wicked men; because they will have the spirit of Christ, and that searcheth all things. That we have already received many testimonies of the present year hundreds of miles proclaiming the truth of the gospel in the Son of Peace. I have travelled the mountains, and in the rough and rugged Scotland Mountains, Pine Plains, and along the sea shore of New Jersey I have begin. and about fifty persons, and left many more believing; but on account of persecution, and the ability rules of patience, and aspiring hope, and have been off branches, (members) they hesitated for a more convenient season. But perhaps such fearful ones are as well out of the Church as in; God is going to have a tried people, and soldiers of the Cross that are not afraid to die.

I have had two debates; one with a Lanzite, and the other with a non-professor, who had dissected Methodism; but the consequence was, sight were begotten at the place where the debate was held, and five at another; and a Branch of the Church organized. To God the eternal Father, through Israel's unshortening shepherd be all the glory. Calls for preaching are heard on every side. The people are astonished at the success of our cause, and bigots tremble under the sound of the everlasting Gospel, and the testimony that is borne by the Elders of Israel under the power of the Holy Priesthood, dictated by the spirit of Elijah's God. They thought, no doubt, that when religious bigotry, fanaticism, political demagogery, and foul mobocracy with the minions of darkness combined in one consolidated phalanx, and murdered in cold blood the ancientest of the Lord, the Prophet and Patriarch of the Church of Christ, that it was done,—Mormonism (so called) would now turn from its pristine beauty to the sere and yellow leaf. Vain imaginations! for in the cause like the one we are engaged in, whose condoctor is God, and so supporting as the theme of eternity, should be overcame by wicked men and devils!

To establish this Church has cost some of the best blood of the nineteenth century. And O ye rulers and people! ye have got to atone for it in the day of retributive justice. Oh America! the land of my birth—thy soil is drenched as it were with the blood of Saints and Prophets, and martyred innocence for the cause of Christ, and in defence of the principles of eternal truths. Why is it thus? "They were not of the world, therefore it hated them." But if the world persecutes how much more apostates? I heard one J. H. Newton, a Higdonite, last fall a few evenings since at Deer Haven (N. J. and such a heterogeneous mass of conflicting arguments and opinions, such a compound of nonsense, absurdity, and apostleship as the translations contained in the Book of Covenants, I never before heard, but the tiends of abuse heaped upon the heads of the Twelve, comparing Nauvoo to hell,—casting reflections and defamations upon the character of the dead, etc. etc. Poor man, thought I, how thou art fallen! But he was very careful not to inform his hearers that he had enlisted in the army, and been ordained a king and colonel in the same regiment, to fight the visionary battles of their head. I took notes of his discourse, and informed the congregation that I would reply to him on the morrow evening, and gave him an invitation to attend; but he declined, and the next morning quite early he took his way for parts unknown.—He can do but little here in Jersey, except to gather up the chaff and tares and fuel to be burned for the burning. The Branches I have visited, viz., Bordentown, Recklestown, Vincent Town, Tabernacle, Town Hiver, &c., are all firm, with a determination of upholding the Twelve, completing the Temple, and carrying out the principles laid down by Br. Joseph, according to the commandments given unto him. Therefore, ye Missouri mongrels, your warfare against those whom God hath appointed to lead his church and people, bring persecution upon the Saints of the Most High, gather together the nations of the earth,—ye kings, prophets, colonels and pay-masters generand in the army of Org, (thy might I know) and come up against Mount Zion, encompass the camp of the Saints—but remember the fate from Heaven; remember Dathan and Core. You may laugh and slander in vain, God has yet some faithful enclosement left, who are ever on the watch Tower looking out for the enemy, and can detect him, let him come in any direction, or under what garb he may. And let me say to all who are trying to oppose the great work of God begun, you might as well try to stop the course of the bright king of day, who arises in the east and pursues his journey to the west; or to heel down the throne of the Eternal King, as to exert your influence to impede the cause of the Church of Christ in the accomplishment of the great designs of the Almighty,—you cannot do it, because God, Angels and men are engaged in it; it is ordained by the arm of the Great Jehovah, to weapon that it shall prosper. All obloquy, misrepresentation, murder, persecution, mobocracy and ephemeral tales will fail and neither beneath the power of eternal truth and the Church of Christ, and be no more heard or seen forever.—In fact, what do they all amount to now? The answer is positive and definite—nothing! Fourteen years manifestation, I think ought to be sufficient; therefore let not the Saints be cast down, but lift up your hands and rejoice—trusting in the guardian care of Christ our King, and in the efficient and balmy breezes of his love, and the exhilerating, renovating, soul-inspiring, and elevating influences of his holy spirit. I for one, by the help of God, (and I crave it in the name of the Son of the virgin) am determined to uphold the Twelve as the leaders of the Church, by my faith and prayers, to assist in rolling forth the Kingdom of God, the building up of Zion, rearing the Temple, gathering Israel home, and fulfilling the commandments given unto us by our much lamented and martyred Prophet. Fellow laborers in the cause of our Redeemer, I would say.

Rise and stand firm courage take—
No'er mind spectators baneful ire;
But glory when chained to the stake,
And shout for victory in the fire.

Our cause is just, we'll onward go
To preach the word and tell the story;
We soon shall triumph o'er our foes,
And go to dwell with Christ in glory.

I expect to be at Key Port, also on Staten Island next week, as I have been requested to come there, and perhaps I may come and see you in New York. I shall endeavor (as I have done) to get all the subscribers I can to your invaluable

The Prophet, vol. 1, no. 31 (21 December 1844), p. 1. The Davis–Ford correspondence occupies the opening columns. BYU Studies digital edition and facsimile. This is The Prophet, not the Alton Telegraph.

Reading transcription of the published letters

The text follows the BYU Studies transcription of The Prophet's printed exchange. Paragraphs and line breaks are arranged for reading; page-and-column markers are omitted. Spelling and bracketed editorial readings are retained from that edition. This is a transcription of a newspaper publication, not a diplomatic transcription of the original handwritten letters.

The newspaper prints Ford's date as 23 August 1844. Junius and Joseph cites the reply as 26 August 1844 (pp. 213–215). The date printed in the reproduced newspaper is retained here; the discrepancy requires comparison with the earlier publication or manuscript.

Davis to Ford ● 30 June 1844

QUINCY, June 30, 1844.

To his Excellency, Thomas Ford, Governor.

DEAR SIR:—Fully appreciating the embarrassing situation in which you are placed, by the information derived from the seat of War this morning, that a design exists among a portion of the militia whom you had relied upon to aid in maintaining the majesty and supremacy of the law, to wage a war of extermination against the Mormons, it is only from a desire to aid and support you at this trying crisis, that I have presumed to offer you any suggestions as to the course best adapted to preserve peace and save the State from the disgrace of a mob.

From the personal knowledge I possess, I am convinced that a war of extermination can only be guarded against, by your selecting a body of 2500 to 3000 men most distant from the seat of excitement, ordering their encampment within four or five miles from Nauvoo, and then issuing a proclamation disbanding the forces in the immediate neighborhood, and giving all persons inclined to mob the Mormons notice, that an attack can only be made upon them through a body of our citizens who are determined under any emergency to uphold the law and maintain the peace. This force thus located would in my humble judgment have the double tendency of protecting the citizens of Hancock from any contemplated attack from the Mormons, while at the same time it would secure the Mormons against the merciless violence of an excited populace bent upon extermination.

I repeat that my only apology for venturing to offer any advice is from a desire to aid you in the utmost of my ability in the honorable, determined, and fearless course you are taking to preserve the peace of the citizens of Illinois and to secure the supremacy of the law. With sentiments of respect I am

Your ob't servant.

G. T. M. DAVIS.

Davis to Ford ● 9 August 1844

QUINCY, August 9, 1844.

Dear Sir.—You are well aware of the relation I bear towards you in regard to the late Mormon difficulties and the position I have occupied before the public. You cannot be otherwise than satisfied that from the previous relations existing between us, my motives could not have been otherwise than pure in sustaining you in the course you have taken. For doing this I was assailed privately as well as publicly by many of my political friends, and the enmity of some of them has not been appeased to this day. Conscious however, of the rectitude of my motives, I pursued and have continued to pursue that course which I deemed proper, unawed and uninfluenced by either the frowns or smiles of friend or foe. My desire still is to sustain your cause if I can, and proof is not adduced to show that you have been influenced by political motives. You have doubtless been aware that your last address to the citizens of Warsaw, has given great displeasure to many who have heretofore sustained you, and that they charge it was dictated purely be a desire to secure the election of Hoge. This has been openly charged here by your political friends from Hancock as well as your opponents. Up to the time I left home, I have excluded several severe communications against you because I believed them unmerited. One of them went if true conclusively to prove that you knew of the design of the citizens to take the lives of the Smiths. It was based upon a statement made by Col. Buckmaster, not only to Col. March of Alton, but to one or two other of our citizens. Col. Buckmaster stated that on your way to Nauvoo, you and he talked the matter over, and both agreed that the Smiths would be killed during your absence, and that it was his suggestions to you, to leave the wagons a few miles out of Nauvoo, so that you and your escort could get that far out of the way before the news could reach Nauvoo of the killing of the Smiths. If this statement of Buckmaster's is correct, your implication in the matter is fixed, and the only object I have in view in imparting this matter to you, arises from what has occurred since I have been in this place this time. Some fifteen or twenty citizens of Hancock county have been here attending the land sales. Some one informed them that you had prepared a list of names to be presented to the Grand Jury, with a list of witnesses to procure their indictment and conviction. Some of them have stated publicly that if that was the course you intended to pursue, they would show beyond doubt that you knew all about it. Among the testimony they have collected is that of Sharp—He told me himself, on yesterday morning, that on the morning of the day the Smiths were killed, he called upon you at your room and told you that the people intended to take the law into their own hands, and that you replied to him, they must not do it or attempt it while you was at Carthage, that you had come there to sustain the law, not to witness its violation. They are also in possession of the fact, that two different individuals heard Col. Deming on the same morning long before breakfast, state to you that there was going to be an attempt made to rescue the Smiths out of jail and visit summary punishment upon them, but that it was the Whigs that intended to do it.

There is a good deal more I have learned here which it is useless for me to commit to paper, but which is generally of the same character as above related. Now my only object in writing to you is that of a desire to see you sustained before the public in this unfortunate affair. And the best way I can serve you is to state to you facts within my knowledge, that you may act

with a full view of all the circumstances before you. What possible good can grow out of a renewal of excitement in Hancock county I cannot see. If indictments are gotten up against these men, and attempts are made to arrest them, a scene of blood-shed and massacre will ensue, unequaled during the existence of this republic. They will, as a matter of course, justify themselves as far as they can in the eyes of the world, and they will attempt to prove a complete and perfect scienter on your part of all that transpired. I have spoken very plainly, but not more so than I am wont to do.—And I feel as if in communicating upon matters of this kind the one with the other, the utmost candor should be exercised. There can be no doubt that these citizens of Hancock as a body are determined to stand or fall together. They are creating a strong sympathy in their favor throughout this State, as well as Missouri and the Territory, and an attempt to execute them would be attended with the most disastrous consequences. I cannot see what you have individually to gain in urging their prosecution and conviction, surely the vengeance of the Mormons against them is keen enough, without having it whetted by any other interference. And it is only driving political friend and foe to take a course against you in Hancock, which to say the least of it, will give your adversaries an advantage over you which they do not now possess. I hope you will pardon the freedom I have taken in writing to you, when I assure you it is from the same motives that has induced me thus to detain you. I may err in communication these facts to you, but if in error, it is one of the head and not of the heart. Far be it from me to advise you what course you ought to take. Such is not my design. I feel as if I had discharged my duty towards you as a citizen, when I state what has come to my knowledge as above delienated [delineated].—Your future course must be directed by your own superior judgment and experience.

Yours very respectfully,

GEO. T. M. DAVIS.

His Excellency Thomas Ford, Springfield Illinois.

Ford to Davis • dated 23 August 1844 in this printing

Springfield, Aug. 23, 1844.

DEAR SIR:—Upon my arrival at home a few days since, your letter of the 9th instant was presented to me; and I am happy to say that I can make a most satisfactory answer. As the conductor of a public Journal, at one time, you thought it to be your duty to abuse me a great deal in your paper. I find no fault on that account. I am an advocate for the freedom of the press; although I regret its licentiousness, yet would I greatly prefer licentiousness, to such restraints as would prevent the truth from being laid before the people. The great inconvenience and danger, however, of this licentiousness is, that the people never know how much to believe, of that which they see in the newspapers. The public press cries wolf, wolf, so often when there is no danger, that it will not be regarded when it ought to be believed.

Your course however, in relation to the Mormon war, (as it has been called,) gave me a very high satisfaction. I was perfectly conscious of the most upright motives, in all that I did myself; and it was with great pleasure, that I witnessed the candor and fairness of your course with reference to mine. It redeemed you in my estimation, and created the impression on my humble mind, that your former abuse of me, was the result of erroneous information which you had received, and which, unhappily, one political opponent too easily believes of another.

As to the statements in your letter now under consideration, I have the happiness to assure you with truth that political views, never invaded my mind, from the beginning of the Mormon difficulties. I would have been very glad indeed, if the Mormons had refrained from voting at the last election. I always foresaw, that if they did vote, and more especially, for the Democratic ticket, my power to keep the peace, and enforce the laws in their part of the country, would be greatly impaired, as I fear now, it will be. Therefore I have very anxiously endeavored, on all occasions, to prevent these difficulties from taking a party turn, I have seen but three of the influential Mormons, since the death of the Smiths. To two of them who were ladies, I said nothing on the subject of politics. To Orson Spencer, who was the third, I must do myself the justice to say, that I clearly and frequently expressed my opinion that the peace of their people would be promoted, if the Mormons would refrain from voting, or at least divide their votes about equally between the two great political parties. I however told him, as I ought to have done, that I had no advice to give on the subject, one way or the other.

I have the most indubitable testimony that my letter to the people of Warsaw people had no effect whatever in inducing the Mormons to vote for Hoge. That letter was not sent by me, nor by my knowledge, authority or direction to Nauvoo, as has been asserted. At the time it was written, I had information upon which I relied, that about seventy-five or one hundred idle loafers, were encamping at Warsaw in a state of riot, drunkenness and debauchery, training, threatening and boasting, what they would do with the Mormons. They were keeping up an agitation to no purpose, and I was further informed that most of the citizens of the town, who desired the restoration of peace and security, were heartily sick and tired of their silly and vain-glorious doings. It seemed to me then, that the dispersion of this disorderly rabble, was all that was necessary to restore quiet; and it was for this purpose that the so much complained of letter was written, and for no other. I left Quincy before all the numbers, which I had directed, were printed: and charged Mr. Thompson, the editor of the Herald, to send them to Warsaw and not one of them to any other place. He informed me that he did send them to Warsaw and not one of them to Nauvoo. That the agitators at Warsaw, should have started the story, that I had sent them in great abundance to Nauvoo to influence the election, ought not to surprise you. No one knows better than you do, as you have repeatedly acknowledged to me, the system prevailing at that time and before, in Hancock, of spreading false reports, for the purpose of agitation and excitement. You know when we were there together, that nothing could be relied on as the truth; in fact, that the truth could not even get across one of the streets of Carthage without being adulterated by a mixture of falsehood. The Warsaw people expected to have to stand a trial for the murder of the Smiths, and their policy

manifestly was, to earn the sympathy, and claim the protection of one of the great political parties in the county.—They could not have hit upon a more ungenerous mode of effecting their purpose, than that of boldly asserting, as they did, that they were about to be sacrificed, to an intrigue of the Democrats. This report being believed, rallied the whole Whig party in their favor; and will most probably be the means of saving some of them from a conviction, for one of the most cowardly murders on record. It is to be hoped that the Whig party from a sence [sense] of decency; and as being that which, in proffession [profession], lays such loud and high claims to the lovers of "law and order," will hesitate, before they make themselves the victims of so shallow a trick.

If I am correctly informed, the Mormons were induced to vote, at the last election by two considerations, neither of which had any connexion [connection] with me or my conduct in any particular. The first was, that their opponents had held a convention, and nominated a ticket which they called the "anti-Mormon ticket." At this time the Mormons had no candidates, and their leading men were in favor of having none. But the appearance of a ticket, brought out upon the principles of professed hostility and extermination, seemed to their minds to compel them to vote in self-defence [self-defense]. About this time also Sidney Rigdon then one of their leaders, arrived from Pittsburgh.—He insisted upon their voting; and finally persuaded them, that if they did not vote the report would go abroad; and be believed throughout the world, that the Mormons had dispersed and abandoned their religion, and that their city had been desected [dissected] and broken up; and these reports would seem to be sanctioned by the fact that no votes had been given in Nauvoo. These considerations appear to have had weight enough with the Mormons to induce them to vote. With their sufficiency or insufficiency, I have nothing to do whatever.

As to their particular motive in voting for Mr. Hoge, I am uninformed; except that they had voted for him at the previous election, and I have heard that he had been polite and attentive to them as a part of his constituents, in sending them documents and the like. I have also heard that Mr. Sweet the Whig candidate had visited every other place but Nauvoo, and had also declared himself against them. Under these circumstances, is it wonderful that the Mormons should vote against him without any special HOCUS POCUS on my part to induce them to do so?

When the Legislature convenes, I am perfectly willing that the Whigs should investigate this charge, and will abide by their decision; although I have no idea that the Whigs themselves will insist on it after the Presidential election. I have reason to believe that most of the Whig leaders already know it to be false. But according to the ideas of morality which too frequently characterize [characterize] the leaders of parties, they do not wish to lose the benefit of it, pending this important election. As to the other matters, I am perfectly certain that Col. Buckmaster never made any such statement as is contained in your letter.—He could not have done so, with truth. And I am equally certain that I made no such statements to Sharp, as he represents. It ought not to surprise you, that he should endeavor to excuse his part in a

disgraceful murder, by pretending some authority for his conduct. At a proper time, a fair narrative of this whole business will be laid before the public. I will content myself at present by simply stating that Sharp made a speech to the troops of Warsaw. to induce them to murder the Smiths. In that speech he expressly stated that the Governor was opposed to them, in their measures, and had refused to do them justice. He further stated, that the murder must be perpetrated, whilst the Governor was at Nauvoo; that the Mormons would suppose that the Governor had planned it, and would murder him by way of retalliation [retaliation]; that this last murder would create a great excitemnnt [excitement] in the State, and cause a great many people to turn out and assitst [assist] them, in driving off the Mormons. On this important occasion, when endeavoring to persuade them to do a desperate deed, and when the sanction of high authority would have been so much to his purpose, he never intimated any knowledge or consent on my part either expressed or implied; but expressly stated that I was opposed to their measures, and had refused to do them justice. And when it was further urged, that they ought to be in a hurry to commit the act, for fear I would get back from Nauvoo, the leader of the band said, “damn the Governor, if he attempts to interfere, we will kill him also;” and all the band said “amen.”

I think I very well understand, the meaning and intent of this charge, which the Warsaw people bring against me, of conniving at those murders. They think to frighten me by false charges, threatened to be supported by perjury, from doing a sacred duty. I regard it as a threat on their part to implicate me in their guilt, if I cause the matter to be investigated.

Under those circumstances, I would regard myself as pusilanimous [pusillanimous] in the extreme, and I would be so regarded justly, by the whole world, if I did not make the more haste, in setting proceedings afoot against them. No one knows better than yourself the reasons for the delay which has already occurred.

You know that sometime ago, I made application to the President of the U. S., through Col. Kearney, for a detachment of the United States army, to be stationed in Hancock county during those proceedings, I have but very lately heard the result of that application, and now there is nothing any longer to delay me in what I ought to do. In the course of next mon[t]h something will be done.

I had nearly forgotten to say that what was reported to you, as having been said by General Deming is totally false. I do not remember to have heard him say a word about either Whig or Democrat during his whole command, on that difficult and trying occasion.

I am respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

THOMAS FORD.

GEORGE T. M. DAVIS, Esq., Alton, Ill.

Source: https://byustudies.byu.edu/online-book/the-prophet-newspaper/december-21-1844-volume-1-number-31-142

Source notes and further documentary leads

1. Davis biography

Papers of Abraham Lincoln, “Davis, George T. M.” Dates his Alton editorship to 1841; later journalism and public career. https://papersofabrahamlincoln.org/persons/DA14987

2. Junius and Joseph

Robert S. Wicks and Fred R. Foister, Junius and Joseph: Presidential Politics and the Assassination of the First Mormon Prophet (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005). Especially pp. 66–69, 78–79, 210–215, 227–228, 267–272. Correct authorship: Wicks and Foister, not D. Michael Quinn. https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress_pubs/42/

3. Davis–Ford correspondence

The Prophet (New York), 21 December 1844, vol. 1, no. 31, p. 1, reprinting the Illinois State Register. Published letters: Davis to Ford, 30 June and 9 August 1844; Ford’s reply, dated 23 August in this printing. BYU Studies transcription and scan, link above.

4. Hardin correspondence

Davis to John J. Hardin, 29 December 1843 and 24 November 1844. Hardin Papers, Chicago Historical Society, as cited and excerpted by Wicks and Foister. The excerpts here should be compared with complete manuscripts before preparing a critical edition.

5. Clay and Joseph Smith

Henry Clay to Joseph Smith, 15 November 1843: https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-henry-clay-15-november-1843/1 ; Joseph Smith to Clay, 13 May 1844: https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-henry-clay-13-may-1844/1

6. Critical review

Susan Sessions Rugh, review of Junius and Joseph, BYU Studies 45, no. 4 (2006), beginning p. 162. https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/junius-and-joseph-presidential-politics-and-the-assassination-of-the-first-mormon-prophet

7. Later patronage letter

Davis to Abraham Lincoln, 20 February 1849, Papers of Abraham Lincoln, D233612, linked above.

8. Clay correspondence to obtain in full

Davis to Henry Clay, 18 March 1843, The Papers of Henry Clay, vol. 9, p. 806; Clay to Davis, 31 August 1844, vol. 10, pp. 107–108. Wicks and Foister cite these items for the personal relationship and pamphlet exchange. No complete transcript is presented here.

9. Greeley presentation copy

Wicks and Foister, p. 210, note 23, identifies a Yale Beinecke copy of Davis's pamphlet inscribed to Horace Greeley and dated 21 August 1844. The cited inscription is evidence of circulation to a major Whig editor; it is not evidence that Greeley approved the pamphlet or participated in the murders.

10. Newspaper issue and portrait leads

The Alton Telegraph and Democratic Review was published under that title from 1841 to 1850. The Illinois Newspaper Project records 1840s holdings in several repositories; freely digitized issues listed there begin in 1849. The 25 November 1843 notice and 6 July 1844 dispatch issue remain priorities for original-page comparison. Wicks and Foister reproduce a Davis portrait on p. 66, credited to the Alton Telegraph.
https://www.library.illinois.edu/inp/results_full_public_wp.php?oclc=08786453

Illustration credits

Pamphlet title page: Lovejoy Library, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, via Internet Archive; public-domain 1844 publication.

Henry Clay: Library of Congress, item 2009633655, 1844 print after Anthony, Edwards & Co. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009633655/

John J. Hardin: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, via https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_J._Hardin.jpg . Historical public-domain portrait; the embedded old caption gives an incorrect February 27 death date. Hardin died at Buena Vista on February 23, 1847.

Thomas Ford: State of Illinois, Illinois Blue Book (1899), via https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Ford_(cropped).png . Public-domain portrait.

The Prophet: BYU Studies facsimile of the public-domain 21 December 1844 issue. Full scan supplied by the digital edition.