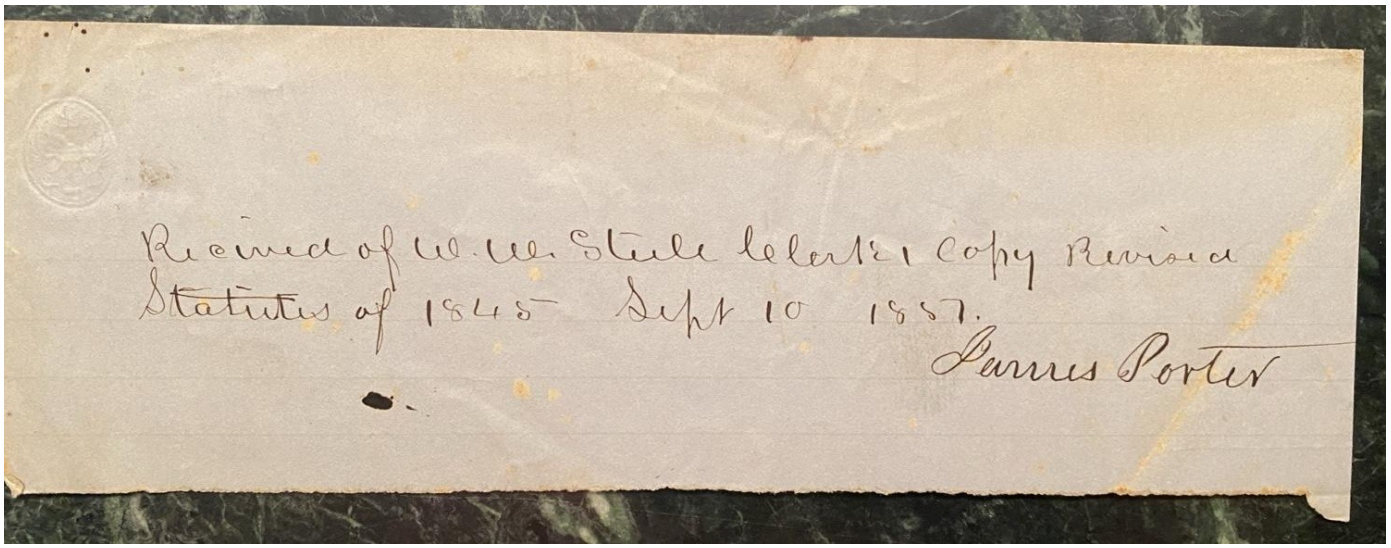
James Porter and the Alleged Poisoning of Nahum Bigelow

Conflict near Nauvoo and the Family of Brigham Young's Future Wives

A warning, a breakfast invitation, and a bitter cup of coffee: these were the things the Bigelow family would remember about Porter. The small receipt reproduced below preserves only his name and an ordinary transaction. James Porter had received a book of Illinois laws. If he was the man remembered by Mary Bigelow, that signature leads into a far more unsettling story. [3–4, 12]



The original receipt, rotated upright and cropped to the paper; the handwriting has not been retouched. [12]

Transcription

Received of W. W. Steele clerk 1 Copy Revised
Statutes of 1845 Sept 10 1857.
James Porter

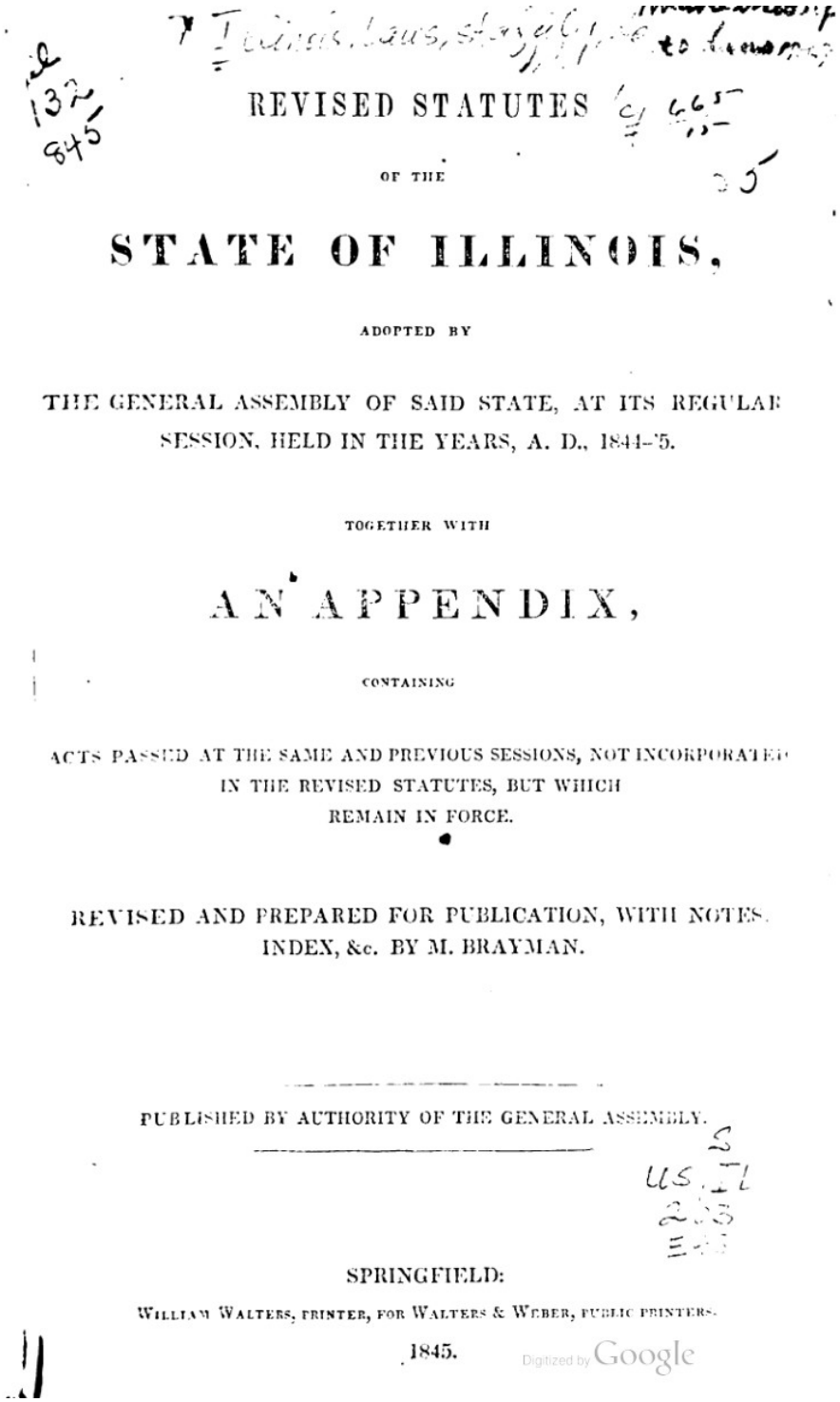
The final year digit is uncertain; 1857 is a provisional reading. The clerk's tenure raises 1851 as an alternative. See the evidence notes.

The Bigelows had come nearer Nauvoo to live among fellow believers. Within about two years, they were trying to save their crops while keeping their children out of danger. Porter appears in their recollections first as someone who brought a warning, and later as the man accused of poisoning Nahum. What happened between those remembered acts belongs to the story of a neighborhood being torn apart. [3–4]

This narrative explores the proposed identification of the receipt signer with Mary's Porter. The identification remains unproved, and the poisoning remains a family allegation. Detailed evidence notes follow the story.

The book behind the receipt

Porter acknowledged receiving one copy of the Revised Statutes of 1845. The volume's title page gives that brief entry a physical identity: Illinois's revised body of laws, prepared by Mason Brayman and printed in Springfield by William Walters for Walters & Weber. [13, 19]



REVISED STATUTES

OF THE

STATE OF ILLINOIS,

ADOPTED BY

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF SAID STATE, AT ITS REGULAR SESSION, HELD IN THE YEARS, A. D., 1844-'5.

TOGETHER WITH

AN APPENDIX,

CONTAINING

ACTS PASSED AT THE SAME AND PREVIOUS SESSIONS, NOT INCORPORATED IN THE REVISED STATUTES, BUT WHICH REMAIN IN FORCE.

REVISED AND PREPARED FOR PUBLICATION, WITH NOTES, INDEX, &c. BY M. BRAYMAN.

PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

SPRINGFIELD:

WILLIAM WALTERS, PRINTER, FOR WALTERS & WEBER, PUBLIC PRINTERS.

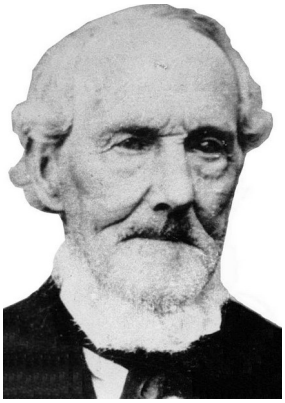
1845.

Digitized by Google

Title page of the 1845 edition. This is an illustrative copy of the edition named in the receipt, not a volume proven to have belonged to Porter. Scan: Duke Center for Firearms Law; a complete public-domain copy is also available from ETH-Bibliothek Zürich. [19]

The Bigelows and the Youngs

The threatened household near Nauvoo would become connected by marriage to Brigham Young—and by a granddaughter's writing to the history remembered by later generations.



Nahum Bigelow
1785–1851



Mary Gibbs Bigelow
1809–1888



Lucy Bigelow Young
1830–1905

Portrait identifications follow Eastern Illinois University (Nahum) and the Bigelow Society (Mary and Lucy). Original artists or photographers and dates are not supplied on those pages. Mary's surviving web image is especially small. [20–21]

Two daughters marry Brigham Young

Nahum and Mary's daughters Mary Jane and Lucy both married Brigham Young on March 20, 1847, at Winter Quarters. The marriages joined the family's story of threatened homes and flight from Illinois to the household of the leader directing the Saints' westward migration. [3, 9–10]

A granddaughter preserves the story

Lucy and Brigham's daughter Susa Young Gates (1856–1933), also known as Susie, was Nahum and Mary's granddaughter. A prolific author, editor, and genealogist, she founded the Young Woman's Journal and later helped establish the Relief Society Magazine. In 1891 she published "A Sketch of Nahum Bigelow" in the Juvenile Instructor. The family whose dangers she described was her mother's own. [3, 22]

Born after the Illinois events and after Nahum's death, Gates was preserving inherited family memories rather than recording an eyewitness experience. Her narrative is distinct from Mary Gibbs Bigelow's autobiographical recollections, published with editorial summaries by Maurine Carr Ward. Both inform this report, with their differences retained. [3–4, 22]

A home near Nauvoo

Before there was a bitter cup of coffee, there was a family trying to make a home. Nahum Bigelow brought to that effort the practical habits of a farmer and the restless curiosity of an inventor. Born in Vermont in 1785, he traveled as a young man with a peddler's pack. His granddaughter Susa Young Gates—the daughter of Brigham Young and Lucy Bigelow Young—remembered his large tool chest and his experiments with perpetual motion. The great invention eluded him; the tools were useful all the same. [1, 3]

Mary Gibbs was born in New York in 1809. She married Nahum in Lawrence County, Illinois, on December 12, 1826, when she was seventeen and he was forty-one. Their children grew up amid successive Illinois moves: Lucy was born in Coles County in 1830, and Daniel in Mercer County in March 1842. Long before the family crossed the plains, they knew what it meant to begin again. [1–3, 9]

Then missionaries brought a message that changed where the family hoped to belong. In Gates's telling, the Bible came out and religious discussion extended into evenings when the day's work had already left everyone tired. Mary accepted the teachings before Nahum was ready for baptism. He continued to hesitate; eventually he committed himself, and the assurance he associated with his confirmation stayed with him through the troubles ahead. Gates dates the family baptisms to April 29, 1839. [3]

Their new faith supplied both a community and a destination. By Gates's account, Nahum purchased a Hancock County farm in 1843. Young Asa went ahead to help break the prairie with oxen. From there the family could travel to Nauvoo for meetings, and Nahum could take produce into town as tithing. Religious belonging was worked into the same round of planting, harvesting, and hauling that kept the household alive. [3]

A small newspaper advertisement lets us see something of what they had made. The Nauvoo Neighbor offered Nahum's farm on Camp Creek near the La Harpe road: 120 acres, fifty improved, a frame house, and a barn. The notice appeared in March 1845 but bore an earlier date. Selling had been contemplated before the autumn violence; the advertisement does not tell us whether a sale followed. It does show a place with shelter, cultivated ground, and labor already invested. [5]

That investment would matter when the threats came. A family might reach safety in Nauvoo while its crops stood unharvested outside the city. Livestock still needed care. Each return to the farm would put someone back within reach of hostile neighbors. Leaving the house and abandoning the means of living were different decisions, and the Bigelows would be forced to make them again and again.

By the autumn of 1845, they had lived in the Hancock farm area for about two years. The refuge they had sought near their church was becoming a place from which they might have to flee. [3]

The Bigelows' trouble was part of a struggle over who would govern, who would enforce the law, and whether the Saints could remain in Hancock County. Nauvoo brought church leadership, municipal government, courts, and a militia into close association. Opponents challenged that concentration of authority, particularly the city court's use of its powers in arrests. A farmer did not have to hold office to feel the consequences. Membership in the church could place his household on one side of the growing divide. [18]

In June 1844, the Nauvoo City Council declared the hostile Nauvoo Expositor a nuisance, and Joseph Smith, acting as mayor, ordered its press destroyed. The action intensified opposition in Carthage and Warsaw. Later that month, on June 27, Joseph and Hyrum Smith were killed at Carthage Jail. Their deaths did not end the conflict. The church continued under apostolic leadership, and the struggle over its place in Hancock County continued with it. [16, 18]

During 1845, political defeat and physical danger increasingly converged. The legislature revoked Nauvoo's charter in January. In September, attackers burned homes and farm buildings in outlying Latter-

day Saint settlements. Families faced the loss of the very things that would sustain them through winter. Church leaders sent teams to bring endangered people and their goods into Nauvoo. [16–17]

The orders from Nauvoo reveal the practical urgency. On September 12, Brigham Young and Willard Richards instructed Solomon Hancock at Yelrome to remove women, children, and grain. Another appeal called for teams to carry the sick and the threatened to town. The instructions concerned other settlements, but they show the crisis in which the Bigelows' own movements between farm and city took place. Saving a harvest and saving a family had become parts of the same emergency. [17]

Nor did the county divide into two perfectly uniform camps. Some non-Mormons opposed the violence; civil and military officers attempted to restore order. Others demanded removal. By late September, church leaders had promised that the Saints would leave the following spring. The prospect before families such as the Bigelows was now departure from Illinois, with the work of survival still to be managed before they could go. [16]

On the Bigelow property, the dividing line ran through existing relationships. Mary remembered James Porter living on her husband's farm and bringing a warning of approaching violence. Later a Bigelow son boarded with the Porter family while returning for stock and crops. The two households continued to have practical dealings while the county around them grew more dangerous. [4]

A warning could be useful precisely because its bearer knew something the threatened household needed to know. In the family's remembered story, Porter initially occupied that position. Whatever the depth of their acquaintance, his name did not enter their account only as the name of an enemy.

At the Bigelow house, the county's struggle became a series of immediate decisions. Could the family stay another night? Could a sick father protect them? Who could safely go for help? Gates described Nahum suffering from ague and several children ill. Mary had to care for them while threats made the house itself unsafe. [3]

Her granddaughter's account places Mary at the center of the resistance. When armed men demanded that the family leave and threatened the house, Mary took up the fireplace tongs. The object belonged to the ordinary work of the hearth. In the remembered encounter it became something she could hold against men threatening her home. [3]

One frightening encounter, however, reached the newspapers at the time. On October 23, 1845, armed men arrived at Bigelow's house. They had come to protect the household, but their purpose was misunderstood. A lieutenant was shot. Captain James D. Morgan described the occurrence in a letter written the next day and published in the Quincy Whig on October 29; the Warsaw Signal also reported it. [6]

Gates later supplied the household's version: Nahum trying to hold the door, a stranger pressing to enter, and gunfire before the mistake was understood. In her account, the wounded officer remained at the house while Mary and the daughters helped care for him. In the space of a few moments, a man feared as an attacker had become a wounded protector in their care. [3, 6]

The episode exposes the danger of living where the distinction between help and harm could not be recognized quickly enough. It also complicates any simple division between Mormons and non-Mormons. Men from outside the family's religious community could arrive as protectors. A frightened householder could wound one of them while trying to defend his family.

Even the farm's water entered the family's account of danger. Gates tells of Asa noticing a green scum at the spring after the family had hidden in the cornfields. Water was set aside and another source used. She reported that an analysis found poison; no independent analysis has been recovered. This was a separate suspected poisoning, not the later breakfast episode. [3]

For a time Nahum withdrew to Nauvoo. Asa stayed to save what he could of the crops. Then, after recovering some strength, the father returned to help. Gates says he was warned against going, but went nevertheless. His work and his son were still there. [3]

What followed in her account was a change in the welcome he received. He encountered apparent kindness. Then came an invitation to breakfast.

An invitation to breakfast

Nahum accepted. In Gates's telling, he went to Porter's house and sat down to breakfast. He noticed that the coffee tasted bitter and said so. The objection was brushed aside with a laughing suggestion that the bitterness was in his own mouth. The meal ended, and Nahum returned home. [3]

Pain followed almost immediately. Gates described it deepening until the boy took his father back to Nauvoo. The man who had returned to help with the harvest now needed help himself. Her account remembers suffering so violent that those around him struggled to hold him, and repeated administrations by church elders before he began to improve. [3]

The threats at the house had been open. The alleged attack at breakfast depended on something else: Nahum accepting another household's hospitality. He had returned to help his son with the crops, and the welcome he encountered seemed, in Gates's telling, to offer relief from the hostility. The invitation took him across a familiar threshold. The illness sent him back to the city he had only recently left. [3]

Mary's published recollections add a further charge. An editorial summary says Porter later admitted that he had been bribed to poison Nahum. No separate confession or record identifying a payer has been found. If that report is accurate, it points beyond an isolated quarrel to someone else's involvement. [4]

The surrounding campaign against the Saints therefore belongs at the heart of the interpretation. Gates herself placed the episode within the persecution of her family. Their home had been threatened; their movements were shaped by fear; their future in Illinois was narrowing toward removal. An alleged attack on Nahum would have struck a household already struggling to remain together and preserve enough of its livelihood to leave. [3, 16–17]

The earlier warning remains the most disquieting part of Porter's place in the story. A man remembered as bringing useful notice of danger was now remembered as its source. The record does not tell us how that change came about, or whether the accusation was accurate. It leaves us with the family's account of reliance followed by betrayal, set within a campaign that was driving their fellow believers from the county.

For Nahum, as Gates told the story, the immediate question became whether he would live long enough to take his family west. Through the winter his hope was to see them settled with the church. Breakfast had become the turning point in a story that began with making a home and now centered on surviving to leave it. [3]

The road out of Illinois

The Bigelows did go west, but safety was not reached in a single journey. Gates remembered Nahum building a snug log house at Winter Quarters. His practical skill had work to do again. The family who had left an Illinois farm needed another roof while the larger migration took shape. [3]

Their children's lives began to diverge along that route, while two marriages brought the Bigelows into Brigham Young's family. At Winter Quarters on March 20, 1847, both Mary Jane and Lucy Bigelow became his plural wives. Nahum and Mary were now parents-in-law of the leader whose counsel their family had sought during the Illinois troubles. Lucy crossed the plains in 1848; her parents did not complete their journey until 1850. These connections did not erase the separations and hardships of migration. [3, 9–10]

The sisters' paths did not remain the same. Mary Jane later remarried; Lucy remained part of the Young family. Lucy and Brigham's daughter Susa, born in 1856, would grow up with both inheritances: the name of the church leader who directed the migration and the memories of the farming family that had struggled to survive near Nauvoo. Her 1891 account of Nahum made the Bigelows' experiences part of the written history of Brigham Young's descendants. [3, 9–10, 22]

On the trail in 1850, Nahum comes into view through records written at the time. A July letter by Edward Hunter and Robert Campbell lists Bigelowe among the families in their company. William Snow's diary

then records his arrival from Hunter's company on August 11 and his joining Snow's group on August 12. We can follow him moving between companies, still making his way toward the destination for which his family had waited. [7–8]

On September 22, the diary catches him in a smaller struggle. Another traveler had brought along an ox Nahum had left behind and demanded five dollars to return it. Nahum did not have the money and objected. The traveler drove the animal onward. After the great dangers remembered in Illinois, this was a plain difficulty of migration: a needed animal, a demand for payment, and too little cash. [8]

Snow's company reached Salt Lake City in early October. The Bigelows went to Farmington, north of the city. Nahum had reached Utah, but had little time there. He died on January 28, 1851, aged sixty-five. [1, 11]

For Gates, his arrival fulfilled the hope that had sustained him through the terrible winter in Illinois: he had lived to bring his family west. She associated his final suffering with the illness that began after breakfast at Porter's, although that medical connection cannot be independently established. Nahum's death came after the crossing, in the place where his family could begin again. [3]

Mary lived another thirty-seven years. Gates placed her in Provo after Nahum's death; her life ended at St. George on April 19, 1888. The children made homes across the West. Asa was later associated with Provo, Lavina with Heber City, and Hiram with southern Utah and Arizona. Lucy and Brigham's daughter Susa became the writer who carried her maternal family's story into print. [2–3]

The receipt preserves something much smaller: a name beneath an acknowledgment of a law book. If Mary's Porter and its signer were the same man, the paper brings that ordinary act into contact with a family's memory of warning, dependence, and alleged betrayal. It cannot tell us who poisoned a cup of coffee. It can lead us back to a household caught in the struggle over Nauvoo, where even recognizing whom to trust had become a matter of survival.

Notes on the document and the story

The narrative accepts the signature as authentic and explores the possibility that the signer was the Porter remembered by the Bigelows. That identity remains unproved. No dialogue, private thoughts, or scenes have been invented. Household episodes are attributed to the family accounts; numbered references identify the sources.

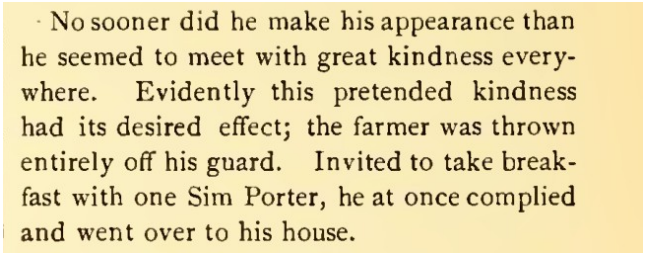
A receipt for laws

The paper acknowledges receipt of the Revised Statutes of Illinois (1845), distributed through public channels. It does not itself establish an office or connect its signer to the poisoning. W. W. Steele is documented as county clerk in 1849–1850; Claiborne Winston won that office in 1853 and appears as clerk in 1854. This makes 1851 a possible reading of the manuscript year, although its appearance suggests 1857. The transcript preserves the provisional reading. [12–14]

A James Porter appears as a defeated county-commissioner candidate in 1842, Durham supervisor in 1850, supervisor in 1854, Durham assessor in 1855, and recipient of an election-service payment in 1856. These entries supply a plausible civic setting. The receipt signer, officeholder, and man in Mary's account have not been conclusively united. [14]

The accusation and its limits

The poisoning rests on retrospective family accounts. Contemporary newspapers corroborate the October 1845 shooting and danger at the house, not poisoning. Ward's publication contains both autobiographical material and editorial summary; the reported bribery appears in the latter. No independent confession, payer, medical finding, or other documented conflict between this Hancock Porter and church members has been recovered. The wider conflict supplies context, not proof of his motive. [3–4, 6]



No sooner did he make his appearance than he seemed to meet with great kindness everywhere. Evidently this pretended kindness had its desired effect; the farmer was thrown entirely off his guard. Invited to take breakfast with one Sim Porter, he at once complied and went over to his house.

Gates's original 1891 printing, p. 344, reads "Sim Porter." Mary's published account uses James. Neither has been silently corrected. [3–4]

Dates, places, and further research

Gates and the Church database give April 29, 1839 for the parents' baptisms; Ward gives Mary April 1, 1838. Mercer County's Camp Creek setting is distinct from the later Hancock farm. Gates's 160 acres and the newspaper's 120-acre offering may describe different holdings. Gates's migration chronology is inconsistent; contemporary trail records establish 1850. [1–5, 7–8]

No securely identified Hancock comparison signature has been recovered. The best remaining targets are November 1856 election certifications and Durham's 1855 assessor certification, if preserved. The separate free-records research report retains the search details and namesake exclusions. [14–15]

Sources and further reading

Revised narrative • October 6, 2026. Public sources consulted without a fee. Bracketed references correspond to the entries below.

[1] Nahum Bigelow, Church History Biographical Database. Open source

[2] Mary Gibbs, Church History Biographical Database. Open source

[3] Susa Young Gates, “A Sketch of Nahum Bigelow,” Juvenile Instructor, April 15, May 1, May 15, and June 1, 1891. Original issue scans/OCR examined; retrospective family biography. Open source

[3a] May 1 installment. Open source

[3b] May 15 installment. Open source

[3c] June 1 installment, pp. 344–347: Porter, migration, death, descendants. Open source

[4] Maurine Carr Ward, “Autobiography of Mary Gibbs Bigelow,” Nauvoo Journal 6:1 (Spring 1994). Mixes excerpts and editorial summaries. Open source

[5] Nauvoo Neighbor, March 19, 1845, Bigelow farm advertisement. Open source

[6] Quincy Whig, October 29, 1845, p. 3, Morgan letter dated October 24; compare Warsaw Signal, October 29, p. 2. Original newspaper images examined in the Porter research. Open source

[7] Edward Hunter and Robert Campbell to Brigham Young, July 1850, public transcript. Open source

[8] William Snow journal, 1850, especially August 11–12 and September 22, public transcript. Open source

[9] Lucy Bigelow, Church History Biographical Database. Open source

[10] Mary Jane Bigelow, Church History Biographical Database. Open source

[11] William Snow/Joseph Young Company, Church History Biographical Database. Open source

[12] Original receipt, photograph IMG_3608.jpeg; reproduced and transcribed on page 1.

[13] Revised Statutes of Illinois (1845), ch. LXII, §§7–10, pp. 338–339; public-law book distribution. Open source

[14] Thomas Gregg, History of Hancock County (1880), election tables and Durham township, p. 927. Newspaper corroboration and limitations are documented in the companion James Porter Free Records Update, revised October 6, 2026, pp. 1–2, 6–9. Open source

[15] Illinois State Archives: Hancock County holdings, including Election Papers and Assessor’s Books. Open source

[16] Church History in the Fulness of Times, chapter 24: charter repeal, county violence, and departure agreement. Open source

[17] History of the Church, vol. 7, ch. 32: September 12, 1845 instructions and appeals to remove threatened families and grain. Open source

[18] Joseph Smith Papers: Documents, vol. 15, part 2 introduction; Statement, June 17, 1844, historical introduction. Expositor destruction and jurisdictional conflict. Open source

[19] Revised Statutes of the State of Illinois (Springfield: William Walters, 1845), title page. Illustrated scan: Duke Center for Firearms Law, https://firearmslaw.duke.edu/ (1845 Illinois Revised Statutes scan). Complete edition: ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Rar 38583, https://doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-81437 (Public Domain Mark).

[20] Eastern Illinois University, “Nahum Bigelow and the Mormon Conflict: Photographs,” portrait identified as Nahum Bigelow. https://www.eiu.edu/localite/nahumbigelowphotos.php

[21] Bigelow Society, Nahum Bigelow and Lucy Bigelow family pages, portraits labeled Mary Gibbs and Lucy Bigelow Young. https://0057c00.netsolhost.com/rod/nah61673.htm ; https://0057c00.netsolhost.com/rod/luc76733.htm . Reproduced as historical family illustrations; original image provenance is not specified by these pages.

[22] Church History Library, “Susa Young Gates Papers,” April 1, 2025. https://churchhistorylibrary.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/susa-young-gates-papers?lang=eng ; Church History Biographical Database, Susa Young Gates: https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/individual/susan-amelia-young-1856?lang=eng .