When the City Was Commerce

A Fifty Five Dollar Lot and the Lives That Led Toward Carthage

Illustrated narrative and biographical companion

Highlights

- A June 1838 appraisal brings seven names together over one Commerce lot, before the Latter-day Saint gathering transformed the settlement.
- The land supplies a thread through changing town plats and a later assessment under Ethan Kimball; its 1838 owner remains unknown.
- The sheriff, his deputy, the clerk, and the clerk's son lead into elections, family relationships, and sharply different kinds of involvement in the Carthage crisis.

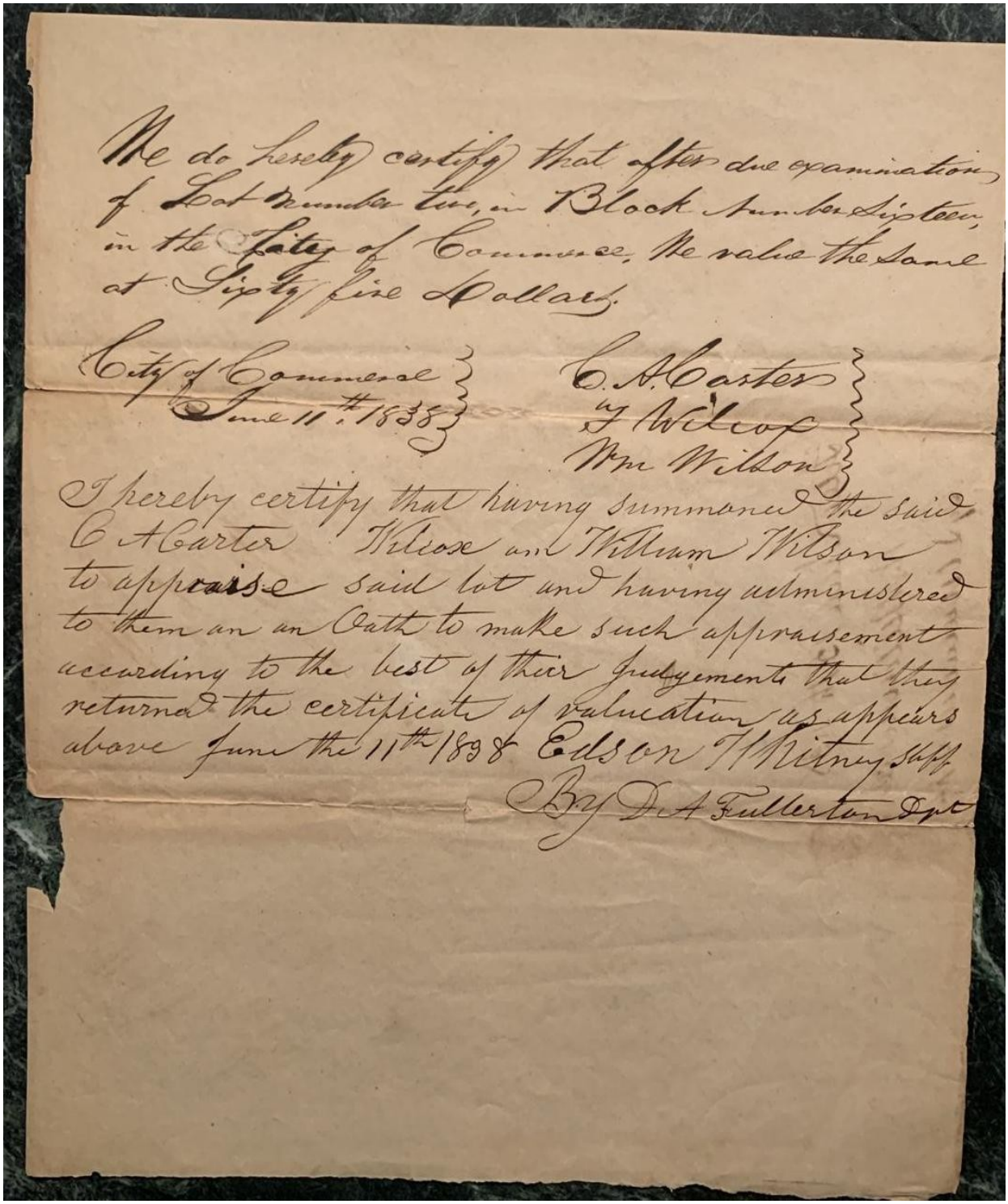
Fifty five dollars

Before Nauvoo became a gathering place, before its temple rose above the Mississippi, three men put a value on a small piece of Commerce. On June 11, 1838, C. A. Carter, F. Wilcox, and William Wilson examined Lot Two in Block Sixteen and agreed: fifty-five dollars. [1]

They left no description of a building, a garden, or a view from the ground. Even the owner's name is missing from the surviving paper. But they left their own names, and the county officers left theirs. Daniel A. Fullerton certified the proceeding under Sheriff Edson Whitney's name. Four days later, the paper was filed in Wesley Williams's office, with a deputy's endorsement read as that of his son, Samuel Otho Williams. [1, 19, 45]

For those men, it was a piece of county business. For us, it opens a way into the community that was already here: its land, its families, and the people who exercised authority before thousands of newcomers made Commerce part of a much larger story.

The original appraisal



We do hereby certify that after due examination of Lot Number two, in Block Number Sixteen, in the City of Commerce, We value the same at Sixty five Dollars.

City of Commerce
June 11th 1898

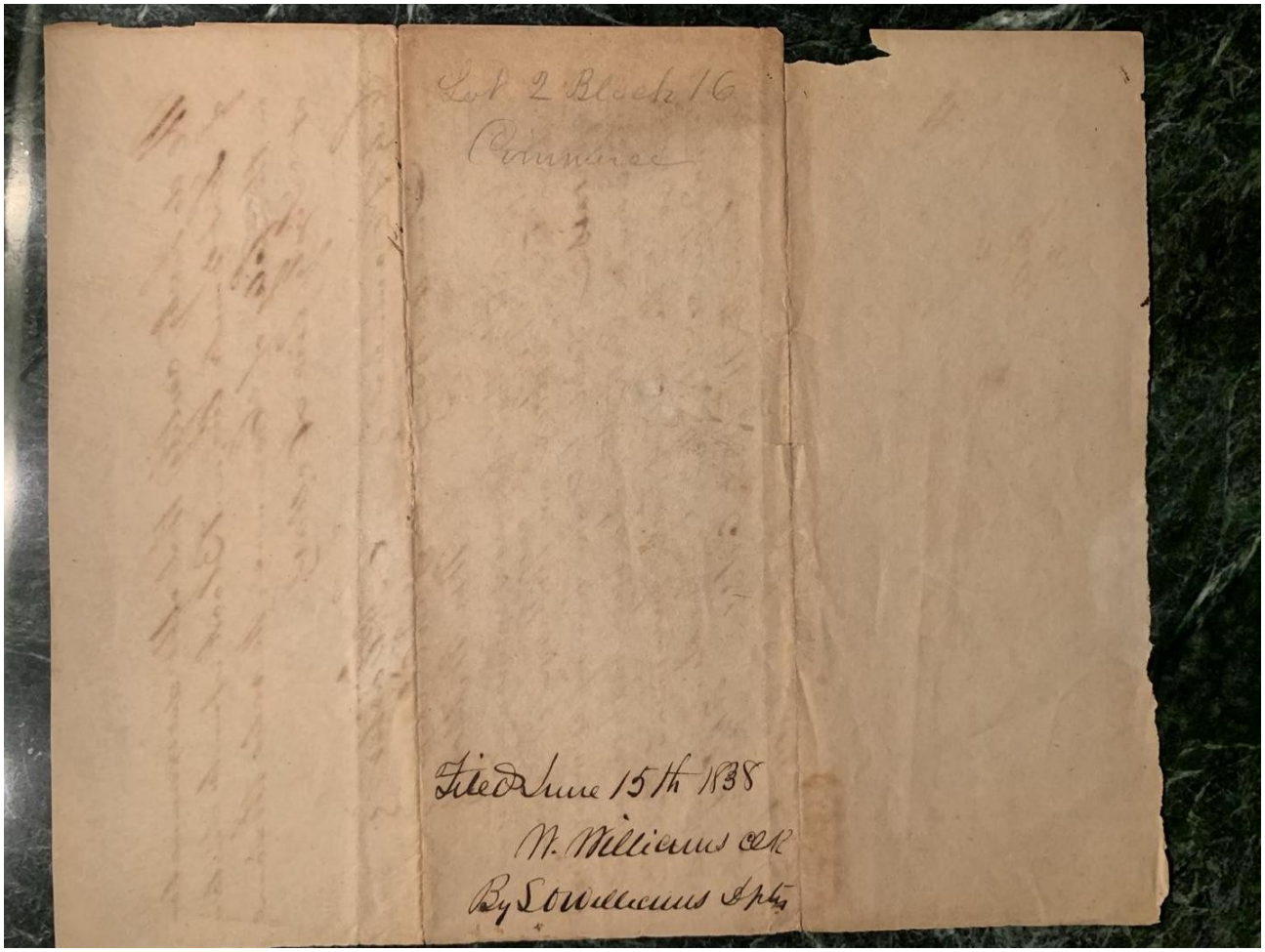
C. A. Carter
by Wilcox
Wm Wilson

I hereby certify that having summoned the said C A Carter Wilcox and William Wilson to appraise said lot and having administered to them an an Oath to make such appraisement according to the best of their Judgements that they returned the certificate of valuation as appears above June the 11th 1898 Edson F Whitney Sheff.

By D A Fullerton Dpt

Original recto, rotated upright. Source: David Larsen's supplied photograph IMG_0706.jpeg. The image retains the appraisal, certification, and signatures. [1]

The filing endorsement



Original verso, rotated upright. The ink endorsement records June 15, 1838; the pencil notation identifies Lot 2, Block 16, Commerce. Source: IMG_0707.jpeg. [1]

What the paper establishes

This is a certificate of appraisement accompanied by a sheriff's return and a filing endorsement. The return names Edson Whitney as sheriff and is executed by D. A. Fullerton as deputy. It says the appraisers were summoned and sworn. The reverse names W. Williams as clerk and carries a deputy's endorsement that appears to read S. O. Williams.

The surviving text supplies no caption, litigants, owner, writ, or reason for the valuation. A court-related property proceeding is a reasonable inference from the sheriff's return and filing, but neither a foreclosure nor a completed sale can yet be asserted. The $55 is an appraisal, not a demonstrated purchase price.

Working transcription

Line breaks are simplified; spelling and capitalization are retained where legible. Square brackets identify editorial readings or qualifications. The deputy clerk’s compressed name still requires comparison with other originals. [1]

We do hereby certify that after due examination
of Lot Number two, in Block Number Sixteen,
in the City of Commerce, We value the same
at Fifty five Dollars.

City of Commerce
June 11th 1838

C. A. Carter
F Wilcox
Wm Wilson

I hereby certify that having summoned the said
C A Carter Wilcox and William Wilson
to appraise said lot and having administered
to them an Oath to make such appraisement
according to the best of their Judgment, that they
returned the certificate of valuation as appears
above June the 11th 1838 Edson Whitney Shff
By D A Fullerton Dpt

Reverse

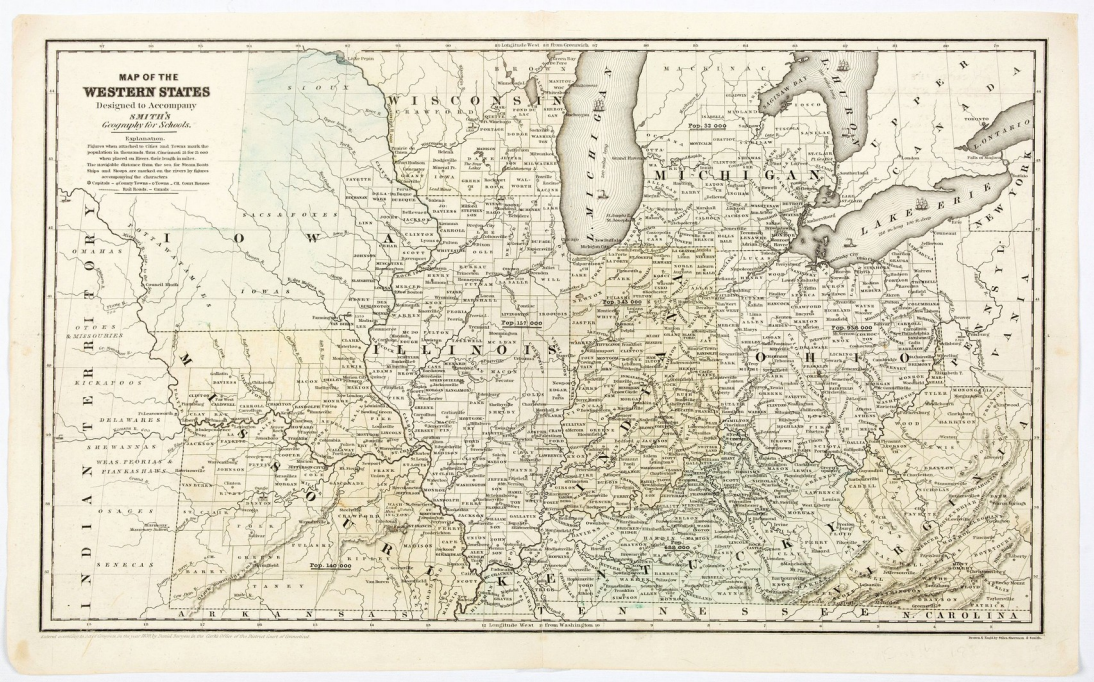
Lot 2 Block 16
Commerce [pencil]

Filed June 15th 1838
W. Williams clk
By S O Williams Dpty [reading of abbreviated name]

The opening initial of Wilcox’s signature is provisionally read F. Franklin Wilcox is a candidate identity, not an expanded name supplied by the manuscript. The certification repeats his surname without a clearly supplied given name.

A town already on the map

Commerce was not an empty place waiting to be named. Its town plat dated to May 1834, and a neighboring development, Commerce City, had been surveyed in April 1837. By the time Carter, Wilcox, and Wilson appraised their lot, the river settlement already had numbered blocks, property interests, and county offices to which residents could turn. The very precision of “Lot Number two, in Block Number Sixteen” assumes a town its officials knew how to find on paper. [1, 4]



Commerce appears on the Illinois bank of the Mississippi in this copy of Smith’s Map of the Western States. The sheet bears an 1839 copyright and is cataloged as 1839; that copyright alone does not establish a printing date. Source: Paulus Swaen, lot 46614. [48]

The map gives the settlement a place in the wider river country. The Mississippi runs through the lives that follow: people moved between its banks, acquired land in Illinois and Iowa, and conducted business in several towns. A change of residence across the water need not mean the end of an interest in Commerce.

The appraisal itself was brief but formal. Fullerton’s return says the men had been summoned and sworn to use their best judgment. Their fifty-five dollars was an official valuation. The missing case papers might explain why it was needed; this sheet does not tell us whether a debt, an execution, or some other proceeding lay behind it. We begin with the ground and the act of valuing it, without supplying an owner or a sale that the document does not name. [1]

The deputy who became sheriff

Edson Whitney belonged to a family already woven into the county's public life. His father, Luther, had held local offices in the region before Hancock County organized its own government. His sister Delia married Henry Nichols, an early county commissioner. Whitney himself won Hancock's first sheriff's election in 1829. By June 1838, his name on an official return represented years of local authority. [19, pp. 217–220]

Yet the handwriting at the end of this return records delegated work: "By D A Fullerton Dpt." Daniel A. Fullerton acted under Whitney's name. Later that same year, their positions changed. Gregg's election table gives Fullerton 393 votes for sheriff, Harmon T. Wilson 290, and Whitney 120. The deputy became the successful candidate against the sheriff he had served. [1, 19, p. 448; 45]

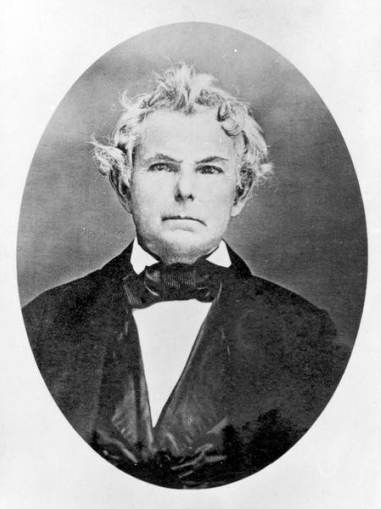
That is one of the small reversals preserved behind the appraisal. It shows a changing office, not a documented personal feud. Fullerton had already been elected coroner in 1836. His career was developing within the same county government whose business brought these men together. The William Wilson who appraised the lot cannot be identified with the candidate Harmon T. Wilson merely because they shared a surname. [19, p. 448]

In the clerk's office, authority also had a family dimension. Wesley Williams had come through the early government of Adams County before establishing himself in Hancock. His son Otho assisted him. The father's name and the deputy's endorsement on the reverse connect the paper to a working household as well as an office. Six years later, the son would write about armed men in Carthage's public square and the killing of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. In June 1838, the surviving record concerns a lot worth fifty-five dollars. [1, 19, 27]

Carter, Wilcox, and Wilson supplied the judgment on that value. Carter and Wilson remain the least recoverable lives on the sheet. We know what they did here; we do not yet know enough to place them securely in the county's later factions. The signature provisionally read as F. Wilcox offers a more promising path into the land and family connections of the river settlements.

The Wilcox and Galland connection

Franklin Wilcox is a plausible identification for the appraiser, although the signature has not been matched conclusively. A later biography places him at Commerce in 1838, and a contemporary assessment places property there under his full name by 1841. The identification matters because Franklin's sister Elizabeth married Isaac Galland, one of the men from whom Church representatives purchased land as the Saints began gathering in 1839. [16, 24, 43, 46]



Isaac Galland, photographed about 1850 by an unidentified photographer. Church History Library; image published by the Joseph Smith Papers. Galland married Elizabeth Wilcox in 1833. [43]

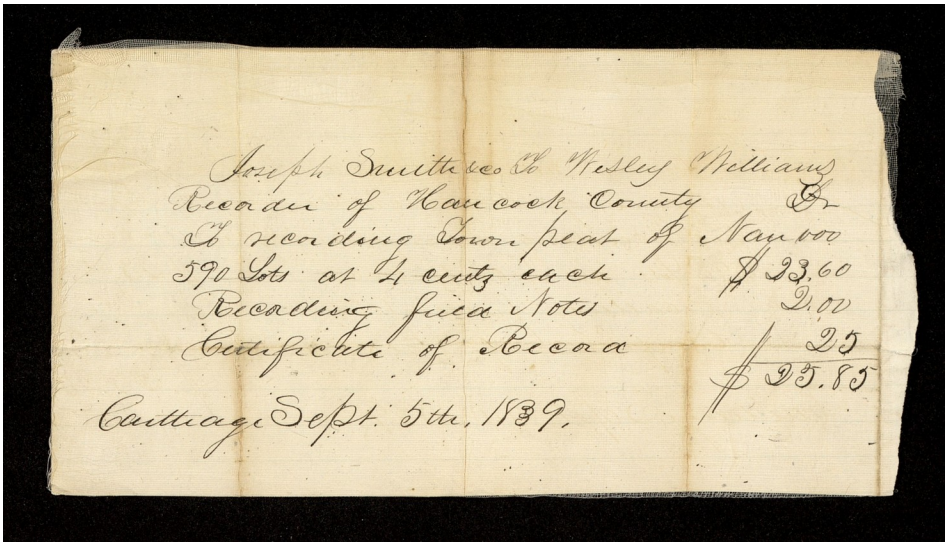
Franklin's life, as his later biographer told it, moved through teaching, farming, river trade, and storekeeping. He and his first wife, Maria, lost their house and possessions to a fire while they were attending church. They settled in Lee County, Iowa, in 1836, then lived at Commerce. Later came trade along the river and a store at Montrose. These movements place him in a family and business world extending across the Mississippi. [24]

Elizabeth belongs in that world in her own right. A June 1839 deed names her with Isaac as a party conveying property to George W. Robinson. Isaac was baptized by Joseph Smith that July and acted as a Church land agent before withdrawing from Church activity around 1842. The family connection therefore leads toward transactions and changing religious affiliations, not toward a single political position shared by everyone in the network. It also does not establish that Galland owned the appraised lot. [43, 44]

The newcomers and the old clerk

The gathering began less than a year after the appraisal. During the winter of 1838–1839, Latter-day Saint refugees driven from Missouri crossed into Illinois, many finding assistance around Quincy. Mosiah Lyman Hancock later remembered his family reaching Commerce on February 11, 1839, and camping beneath a cherry tree. His recollection gives the arrival a human scale: a family seeking a place to stop, before the larger settlement had taken shape. [2, 25]

On April 30, Church representatives made their first Commerce-area land purchases from Isaac Galland and Hugh White. Joseph Smith and his family moved there on May 10. More families followed during the spring and summer. These dates mark different stages of the gathering: an early family arrival, organized purchases, and the Smith household's move. The June 1838 appraisal precedes the April purchases by almost eleven months. [3, 26]



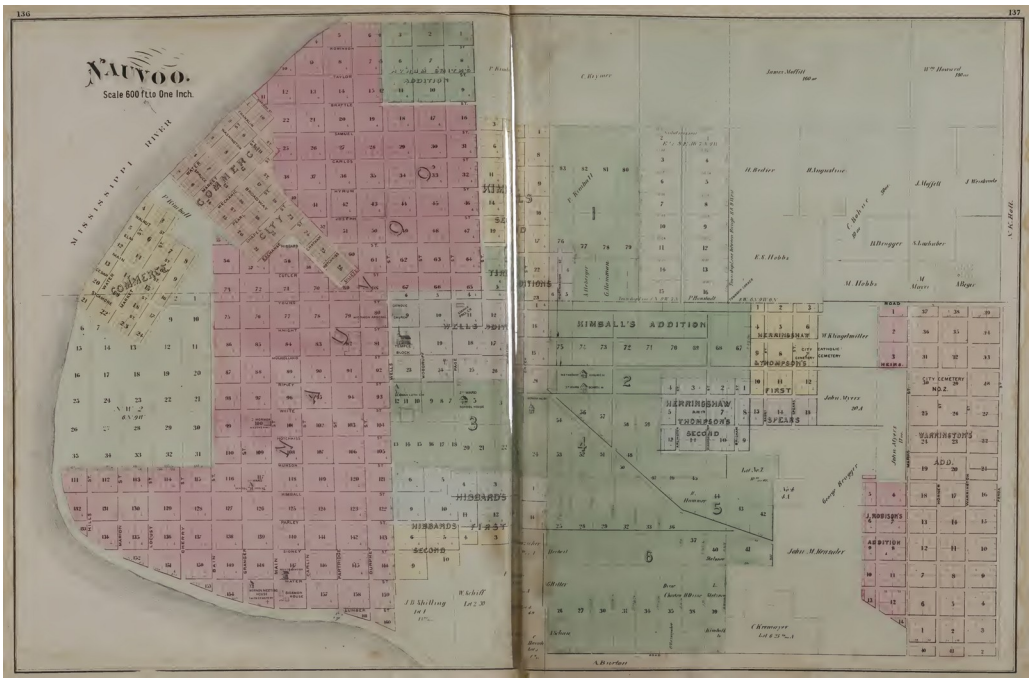
Wesley Williams's September 5, 1839 receipt for recording the Nauvoo plat. The Joseph Smith Papers identifies the handwriting as his. Church History Library. [5]

The expanding settlement still needed the old county offices. On September 5, 1839, Wesley Williams issued a receipt for recording 590 Nauvoo lots, along with field notes and a certificate. The total came to $25.85. The clerk whose office had filed this Commerce appraisal now recorded the new town's plan. [5]

That receipt is a particularly useful bridge between the two places. Commerce did not vanish from official life when Nauvoo appeared. Existing land descriptions and earlier transactions continued to matter, and the work of recording the new city passed through men who had been administering the county before the Saints arrived.

Finding the old town inside the new

The growing city inherited more than property owners. It inherited street lines. The older Commerce grid stood at an angle to the later Nauvoo survey, a visible reminder that these were developments with separate beginnings. In February 1841, a city council committee recommended extending the survey through the earlier Commerce and Commerce City plats to make the streets more regular. [4]

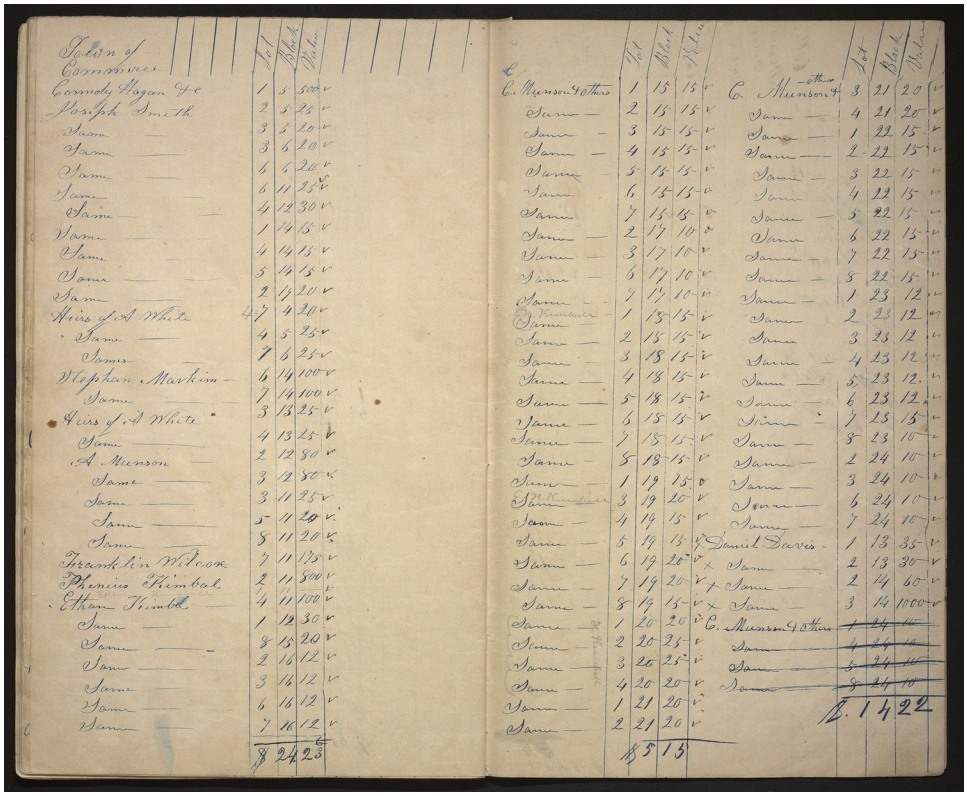


Andreas's 1874 Nauvoo plat, printed pages 136–137, still labels the older angled Commerce grid. This later map helps explain the overlapping towns; it does not by itself fix the 1838 parcel's boundaries. [49]

Here the little appraisal becomes useful again. Its lot and block numbers belong to that earlier landscape. Finding them requires keeping the separate plats in view; a later Nauvoo lot bearing the same numbers cannot simply be substituted.

A property list compiled about November 1841 through January 1842 offers a closer approach. One page retains the heading "Town of Commerce." Near its foot stands Franklin Wilcox's name beside Lot 7, Block 11, assessed at $175. Farther down, under Ethan Kimball—written "Ethan Kimbel"—appears Lot 2, Block 16, assessed at $12. The old town, a candidate appraiser, and the same parcel description come together again on one page. [46]

A later name beside the lot



The Commerce entries in the Nauvoo property list, manuscript pages [96]–[97]. Franklin Wilcox and the Kimball entries appear near the foot of the left page. Church History Library; Joseph Smith Papers. [46]

Ethan Kimball gives the land inquiry a person to follow. His assessment entry is the best later lead yet found for the appraised parcel. It does not carry us backward far enough to name the owner in June 1838, but it carries the story beyond an isolated valuation toward the property interests that remained within the enlarged city. [1, 46]

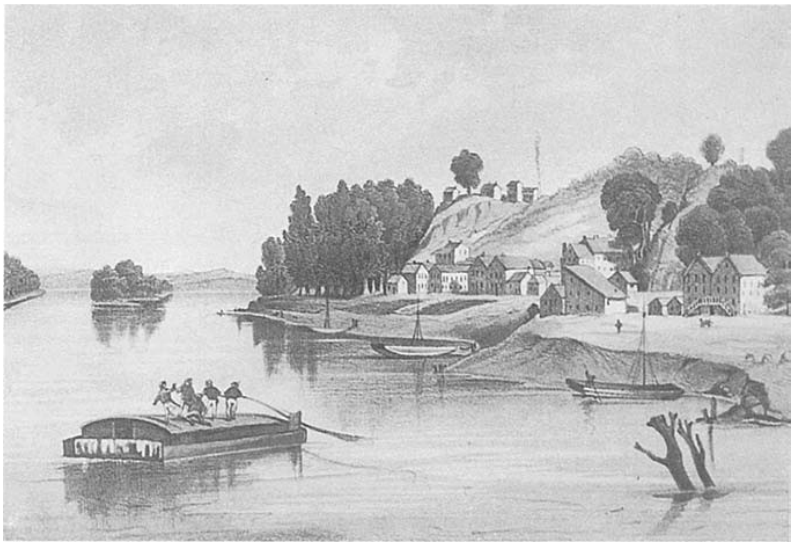
The two figures—fifty-five dollars in 1838 and twelve dollars in the later list—invite a dramatic explanation. The records do not yet support one. An appraisal and a tax assessment are different measures; neither entry is a documented sale price. Until deeds and the underlying court file connect them, we cannot tell a story of collapse, profit, or dispossession from those numbers.

What the page does show is continuity. The name Commerce still organized part of the assessor’s work inside Nauvoo. People could move, streets could be reconsidered, and a city could grow around the old blocks, while earlier property descriptions continued to shape its records.

Old officeholders in a changed county

By 1842, Whitney and Wesley Williams had entered a different kind of public partnership. They stood for the legislature on the anti-Mormon ticket. Both lost decisively: Whitney received 546 votes and Williams 502, while Thomas H. Owen received 1,603 and William Smith 1,459. Two men whose offices had served the county before Nauvoo now publicly identified themselves with organized opposition to the Saints. [18, 19]

Their defeat is a recorded event. Their private responses are harder to recover. We need not invent wounded pride to see that the relationship between the older officeholders and the growing Mormon community had become a political contest. Wesley's work recording the Nauvoo plat in 1839 and his candidacy in 1842 belong to the same life, but they tell us different things: the first records an official duty, the second a public political choice.



Warsaw on the Mississippi, after Henry Lewis, reproduced in black and white. The lithograph was published in the 1850s; this is a later river-town view, not a depiction of a particular opposition meeting. Image reproduced in Cultures in Conflict. [50]

On September 6, 1843, Whitney took the chair at an anti-Mormon meeting in Carthage. Its proceedings created a central committee and precinct committees. In Green Plains, Whitney was named with Levi Williams, with Whitney serving as precinct chairman. The old sheriff had become an organizer as well as a candidate. Levi was a separate man from Wesley and Otho; keeping those Williams identities clear is essential to following the events. [6]

The road toward Carthage

The September meeting sought renewed action from Missouri against Joseph Smith and requested that its president communicate with the governor there. Its resolutions also contemplated retaliation against the Mormon community if specified alleged threats were carried out and legal remedies failed. These were public commitments made by a meeting Whitney chaired. They reveal organized pressure and the threat of collective reprisal. They do not supply a surviving personal letter from Whitney, or evidence that he took part in the later assault. [6, 8]

A related letter does survive from his Green Plains associate. On December 30, 1843, Levi Williams and Harrison P. Crofford wrote to Missouri's governor, forwarding Joseph Smith's appeal to the Green Mountain Boys. They said a citizens' meeting had appointed them to send it. The connection between local organization and Missouri's government therefore had a documentary life beyond the resolutions, even though Whitney's own requested letter has not been found. [20]

As June 1844 approached, Wesley Williams was also writing about ordinary trouble close to home. On June 5 he told his son John, in a letter quoted by a later historian, "We had last night one of the most gloomy storms I ever witnessed." He described damaged mills, washed-out bridges, and anxiety over crops. The clerk and political candidate was also a father and a man with practical concerns about the country around him. [18, p. 172, note 60]

Within weeks, militia companies were mobilized at Carthage. George Bachman's later trial testimony identified Wesley Williams as commander of the rifle corps. Otho's own account placed him with the Carthage Greys. Father and son appear in the same crisis through different military connections; the evidence does not make Wesley commander of the Greys. [27–29]

Masonic membership adds another association to Wesley's life. Hancock Lodge No. 20's return for 1844, reproduced in an 1869 history, lists him as a Master Mason. The return includes information from after June 27 and does not establish when he joined. It belongs in his biography, but it cannot explain his conduct at Carthage by itself. [36]

For Fullerton, Carter, the appraisal's Wilson, and F. Wilcox, the present evidence supplies no comparable demonstration of participation in the attack. Their names remain part of the earlier transaction. The later story follows the evidence person by person.

The clerk’s son tells what happened

On June 27, 1844, Joseph and Hyrum Smith were murdered at Carthage Jail. Less than two weeks afterward, Samuel Otho Williams wrote to John Prickett. The deputy clerk who had helped handle county business now tried to explain a crisis in which he had been a participant. A complete published transcription of the letter preserves both his account of military events and the disruption of his household. [9, 27]

Otho called the Greys “our company.” He described forming the men into a hollow square to escort the Smith brothers, Governor Thomas Ford, and the brigadier general to the McDonough troops. His own telling includes hissing and groaning directed at the prisoners and his unsuccessful attempt to quiet his men. That admission gives the reader more than a general statement about hostility: it shows an officer describing a force he said he could not bring to order. [27, pp. 215–217]

For the fatal afternoon, his account separated the small jail guard from the larger force in town. He said the companies hurried toward the jail after the alarm and placed himself about one hundred fifty yards away when Joseph appeared at the window and fell. This is Otho’s explanation of his position and response. It must be read alongside other witnesses, not substituted for all of them. The full source comparison follows in the biographical companion. [27, p. 218]

Then the letter leaves military formations and returns to family. Otho said he walked eighteen miles through mud and water to Augusta after midnight. His family had gone to Rushville, and he reported bringing them home the day before he wrote. His postscript mentions his wife, a boy, and a girl, all well. Fear of retaliation had unsettled households beyond the jail itself. [27, pp. 218–219]

“What will be the result of the death of the Smiths I am entirely unable to say,” he wrote. [27, p. 219]

That uncertainty deserves to remain in the story. Otho did not write with knowledge of everything that would follow. He was explaining himself, reporting upheaval, and trying to describe the future from inside a frightened community. The quotation comes through a later published transcription with errors elsewhere in its names and weekdays; comparison with the original manuscript remains necessary.

What the little paper keeps

County business continued after the murders. On February 26, 1845, the Nauvoo Neighbor printed divorce notices naming David E. Head as clerk and Wesley Williams as deputy. The legal machinery still connected people across the county's divisions. The notices establish continuing work; they do not tell us that hostility had ended. [47]

Looking back from Carthage to the June 1838 appraisal, it is tempting to make every signature part of a single unfolding design. The paper preserves something more complicated. Fullerton's service under Whitney preceded an election in which he defeated him. Wesley's office recorded the new Nauvoo plat before he ran on an anti-Mormon ticket. The possible Wilcox identification leads to Galland, who sold land to Church representatives and then joined the Church. The later paths were neither identical nor fixed when the lot was valued.

The land remains the thread we can hold. Lot Two, Block Sixteen appears first with a value and a group of appraisers; a later assessment places that description under Ethan Kimball. Between those records, refugees arrived, property changed hands across the growing settlement, and Commerce became part of Nauvoo. The missing deed chain and court proceeding still prevent a complete account of this particular parcel. They do not erase what the surviving records let us see.

A reader can return to the original sheet now and recognize more than signatures. There is an experienced sheriff and the deputy who would replace him; a clerk and his son; three men trusted with the judgment of value, two still difficult to recover and one possibly connected by family to a major land seller. Their meeting place in the record is a modest lot. The lives reached from it into the making of Nauvoo and, for some of these men, into the county's bitterest conflict.

The paper still ends where the appraisers ended: fifty-five dollars. What has changed is how much of the world around that figure we can begin to recover.

A guide to the biographies that follow

The narrative draws on the documented connections without treating all seven men as members of one faction. The following biographies preserve fuller life histories, quotations, and source distinctions for reuse. Carter and William Wilson remain incompletely identified, and Franklin Wilcox remains a candidate for F. Wilcox. Daniel A. Fullerton's name follows David Larsen's confirmation. Bracketed references lead to the source list at the back.

Biographical companion

Edson Whitney

An early sheriff becomes an opposition organizer

Edson Whitney belonged to Hancock County's first generation of elected officials. Gregg's county history identifies him as a son of Luther Whitney and records his victory in the first sheriff's election: thirty-one votes against Alexander White's twenty-two. Those small totals evoke the scale of the county's beginnings. Whitney's authority developed within a community still constructing its courts, offices, and procedures. [19, pp. 217–218, 447]

Gregg places his later farm in Rocky Run Township, about nine miles below Warsaw, and describes him as a Whig. He reports that Whitney married a daughter of Charles Hill and was connected by marriage to Davis Hill. This supplies a family and geographic setting, but Gregg does not give his wife's first name in the passage. Precise vital dates and a fuller household history still require independent records. [19, p. 218]

Whitney's office in June 1838 is directly established by the appraisal. He was sheriff of Hancock County, whose jurisdiction included Commerce. Calling him "sheriff of Commerce" would make the office sound municipal. D. A. Fullerton signed the certification as his deputy. The distinction also prevents us from assuming Whitney personally administered the oath or physically attended the valuation. [1]

The sheriff's election later in 1838 changed the relationship visible on the appraisal. Gregg lists Daniel A. Fullerton with 393 votes, Harmon T. Wilson with 290, and Whitney with 120. Daniel, identified by David Larsen as the deputy on the appraisal, thus appears alongside Whitney in June and as his successful electoral competitor later that year. [19, p. 448; 45]

In 1842, Whitney and Wesley Williams both sought legislative seats on the anti-Mormon ticket and lost. By September 1843, Whitney was chairing the Carthage meeting and serving as chairman of the Green Plains precinct committee with Levi Williams. These are specific, documented forms of anti-Mormon activity: candidacy, presiding over an organizing meeting, and precinct leadership. [6, 18]

The request that he communicate with Missouri's governor should appear in his biography as an assigned task until the resulting correspondence is found. Likewise, his political partnership with Levi Williams establishes an organizational relationship; it does not demonstrate that Whitney participated in the assault at Carthage Jail. No dated lodge record or militia commission establishing his own pre-June 1844 service has been verified in this research.

Gregg reports that Whitney later moved with his family to Leavenworth, Kansas, and had died before the history appeared in 1880. The account gives approximate intervals rather than exact dates. That later migration opens a useful second stage of his life beyond the Illinois conflict. A BYU court-file catalog also identifies a May 7, 1842 affidavit in Alexander Neibaur v. Edson Whitney; its contents remain a separate research lead. [12, 19]

Whitney before the opposition meetings

A family already woven into county government

Edson Whitney did not enter public life alone. His father, Luther Whitney, had served in the region before Hancock County organized its own government. Gregg traces Luther from Vermont to Kentucky, then Missouri and the Illinois side of the Mississippi. He places him in Montebello Township, on early jury lists, in an Adams County commissionership in 1826, and in the office of justice of the peace. Edson and his brother Horace B. came into the county with him. The exact arrival year is not supplied. [19, pp. 219–220]

Marriage extended those connections. Edson's sister Delia married Henry Nichols, one of the first Hancock County commissioners. Nichols settled in Rocky Run, the same part of the county where Edson later farmed. Edson's own marriage into the Hill family linked him to another local household. These connections show how the sheriff belonged to an established circle of families and officeholders before Mormon settlement changed the county's population and politics. They do not establish common political views among all his relatives. [19, pp. 217–219]

This makes the 1838 appraisal a glimpse of an experienced official rather than a stranger briefly passing through Commerce. He had already held the sheriff's office over several terms. Yet the document also shows how authority was delegated: Fullerton performed the certification in Whitney's name. The paper connects the two offices and the three appraisers without proving that all five men stood together on the lot. [1, 19]

Finding the household behind the office

A transcribed 1850 census entry offers a promising later household: Edson Whitney, fifty, a Vermont-born merchant at Lima in Adams County, with real estate valued at $10,000. Martha, forty-four and born in Kentucky, appears with him, followed by Sarah and Willis Stith and several younger Whitneys. This is a candidate match, not yet a verified household for the sheriff. The original schedule and connecting records must be checked before Martha is identified as his wife or the younger people as his children. [40]

The distinction matters because another Edson Whitney, born in New York in 1831, appears frequently in online searches. He was a child when Hancock's sheriff certified this appraisal and cannot be the same man. The biography therefore does not borrow that man's Civil War service, wife, children, or death date.

What can presently be heard in his own voice

No personal letter by Whitney has yet been read for this project. The 1843 proceedings preserve the public language of the meeting he chaired, but their resolutions are collective statements. The 1838 sheriff's certification is likewise an official statement executed by his deputy. Both belong in his documentary record; neither should be rewritten as a private confession or personal reminiscence. His assigned correspondence with Missouri's governor and the Neibaur lawsuit remain the strongest identified avenues for recovering more individual language. [1, 6, 12]

Wesley Williams

The clerk whose work crossed the change to Nauvoo

Wesley Williams was born in Lincoln County, Kentucky, on March 24, 1792, and died at Fountain Green, Illinois, on May 12, 1870. His life carried him from Kentucky into the early government of western Illinois. The Joseph Smith Papers identifies him as a War of 1812 veteran, lawyer, postmaster, court clerk, and recorder. He married Elizabeth Ayers in 1816 and, after a divorce, Ruth Scobey in 1831. [13]

Gregg describes Wesley and his brothers Archibald and Robert as lawyers who came to Quincy in the 1820s. Wesley served as Adams County treasurer before moving into Hancock County at its organization. His work there included the clerkships of the county commissioners' and circuit courts, probate responsibilities, and later the Carthage postmastership. The picture is of an administrator whose work touched many ordinary encounters between residents and government. [19, pp. 218–219]

The original appraisal belongs to that administrative career. Its reverse records filing under W. Williams as clerk, with a deputy signing for him. Gregg explicitly identifies Samuel Otho Williams as Wesley's son and assistant in his official duties. That supplies a family relationship behind the paired offices, though the abbreviated signature on the original still benefits from comparison with known examples. [1, 19, p. 218]

Wesley also recorded part of Nauvoo's creation. His September 5, 1839 receipt concerns recording its plat. This was work that brought the new settlement into the existing county record system. Performing that duty does not tell us whether he welcomed or opposed the Saints at that date. The receipt and his later candidacy show different kinds of action at different moments in his career. [5]

By the August 1842 election, his opposition was publicly expressed through a legislative candidacy on the anti-Mormon ticket. He received 502 votes and was defeated. Whitney's simultaneous candidacy gives the narrative a documented connection between the clerk and sheriff named on the earlier appraisal. [18]

The later newspaper reproduction of the coroner's verdict lists Wesley among the jurors examining the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. This deserves a place in his biography with the source history attached. A juror's participation in recording a death must not be converted into participation in causing it. [22]

His family letters offer a broader view of his interests. The University of Illinois holds a typescript collection spanning 1839–1870. Its catalog describes farming, prices, Mormon affairs, Methodism, cholera, and family matters. It also records an obituary by his Masonic brethren. Reynolds's reproduction of Hancock Lodge No. 20's 1844 return now supplies a named lodge and lists Wesley as a Master Mason. The return does not supply his initiation date or prove membership before June 27. [36] The letters themselves remain to be examined. [14]

George Bachman's May 24, 1845 testimony supplies a more direct militia connection. In the modern transcription of George D. Watt's shorthand, Bachman identifies his unit as the rifle corps and says Wesley Williams had command. Onias Skinner's account also names Wesley as commander of Bachman's company, distinct from the Greys. This is attributed evidence of command during the crisis; it does not establish that Wesley fired on the prisoners or agreed to their murder. [28, 29]

Wesley Williams at home and at work

The sound of a storm before Carthage

On June 5, 1844, Wesley wrote from Carthage to his son John W. Williams in Kentucky. The subject was the weather and the damage it was doing to the country around him. A published extract preserves his words:

“We had last night one of the most gloomy storms I ever witnessed.” [18, p. 172, note 60]

The same extract describes prolonged lightning, thunder, rain, and hail. Williams discussed damaged mills, washed-out bridges, poor prospects for corn, and hope for the wheat crop. The letter opens a different view of the man who appears in election returns and militia testimony: a father reporting the condition of the place where he lived and worked. This passage is quoted through Susan Sessions Rugh’s article, which cites a typescript at Western Illinois University; the original letter has not been examined.

The storms belong to the setting of June 1844, but they should not be made into an explanation for the murders. Their value here is personal and practical. Roads, bridges, and harvests were part of Williams’s daily world, alongside the courthouse and the political struggle.

A clerk with business interests

The University of Illinois’s description of his family letters adds that Williams owned a gristmill and sawmill and was among Carthage’s early house builders. His offices later extended to nearby Elvaston. The letters address crops, prices, family news, Methodism, and the cholera outbreak at Warsaw in 1849. Several from that year concern a party he hired to seek California gold. These details come from the collection description; they are not quotations from letters already read. [14]

His work for Nauvoo can be seen more directly. The September 1839 receipt in his handwriting charges for recording 590 lots at four cents each, plus field notes and a certificate, totaling $25.85. Long before readers encounter him as an opposition candidate, they can watch him performing the county work that gave the new town a recorded form. The transaction demonstrates official business with Joseph Smith and his associates; it does not establish friendship or religious sympathy. [5]

Family ties that outlasted the crisis

Gregg names children including Samuel Otho, Wesley C., Isabel Spangler, and Kate, and identifies Isabel with Fountain Green. His account also records the divorce from Elizabeth Ayres and later marriage to Ruth Scobey. The children’s exact parentage should not be assigned between the two marriages without additional records. Wesley lived until 1870, long enough to see both the Mormon departure and the Civil War. [19, pp. 218–219]

His reusable biography now has three distinct voices and perspectives: his own brief account of the storm, his official recording work, and the descriptions left by later historians. The June 26, 1844 letter cited in Richard L. Saunders’s study is a further lead, not a text available for quotation here. [41]

Samuel Otho Williams

The deputy clerk who left a Carthage account

Samuel Otho Williams is the working identification for the deputy signing the reverse of the 1838 appraisal. His name should be expanded as Otho, not Arthur. Gregg identifies him as Wesley Williams's son, describes his assistance in the clerk's office, and says he briefly held the circuit clerkship by appointment. He also reports a marriage to a Miss Baldwin of Carthage. These details provide a family and occupational setting while leaving exact birth, marriage, and death dates to be verified. [1, 19, p. 218]

Court documents independently place S. Otho Williams in the same administrative world. The Joseph Smith Papers' calendar for Singley v. Rigdon includes his work in the proceedings. Other case records show him preparing documents in litigation involving Saints. Such routine work is useful evidence of employment and identity; the act of processing a lawsuit is not evidence of religious hostility. [11, 23]

His later role was more directly connected to the Carthage crisis. The published introduction to his July 10, 1844 letter identifies him as a second lieutenant in the Carthage militia. The letter was addressed to John Prickett and survives in the Chicago History Museum's Mormon Collection. A complete published transcription in Lundwall supplements Hampshire's extract. The manuscript itself still needs to be collated against these printed versions. [10, 21, 27]

Williams described a guard of six men and a sergeant, relieved roughly every three hours. He said an alarm sent the company toward the jail, where it arrived after the brothers had been killed. He also reported seeing Joseph at the window during the approach and alleged violence to his body after the fall. These are Williams's statements, including his account of what he saw and what he learned from others. His letter cannot be treated as independent confirmation of every incident it describes. [21, pp. 253–254]

The distinction matters because Williams was describing the conduct of his own company. The account is close in time to the killings, which makes it valuable, but it also presents the guards' actions in a defensive light. Analysis must ask where he placed himself, which events he claimed to witness, and which assertions depended on information received afterward.

An auction description gives a November 28, 1844 death date and repeats an accusation attributed to Sheriff Backenstos. Neither claim is accepted as settled here. The underlying death record and the complete accusing document are needed, including its date and context. Gregg's more general statement that Otho died a few years after marriage does not independently verify the auction's precise date. [15, 19]

No dated Masonic membership has yet been established for Otho. Wesley's Masonic obituary belongs to the father's record and cannot be transferred to the son. The strongest present foundation for Otho's biography is his clerical career, the documented father–son relationship, his militia identification, and his own account after Carthage.

Otho Williams in his own account

From the public square to the jail

The young man who handled county papers in the clerk's office later described soldiers pitching tents on Carthage's public square. In his July 10 letter, Williams called the Greys "our company." He portrayed their mobilization as a response to the destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor and a citizens' meeting demanding action. His language places him within that mobilized community; his accusations against the Saints remain his assertions. [27, pp. 215–216]

His account also describes a moment of direct command. Williams said he formed the Greys into a hollow square to escort the Smith brothers, Governor Thomas Ford, and the brigadier general to the McDonough troops. He then described his own men hissing and groaning at the prisoners and resisting orders. He claimed to have tried unsuccessfully to quiet them. That admission is important: even the company's own officer described a force whose hostility he could not control. [27, pp. 216–217]

For the fatal afternoon, Williams distinguished the small detail at the jail from the larger force in town. He described six guards and a sergeant at the jail, with relief about every three hours. After an alarm, he said, the companies formed and hurried from quarters roughly seven hundred yards away. He placed the approaching attackers much closer to the jail when the alarm sounded. These distances and timings explain the company's failure in his telling; they require corroboration. [27, p. 218]

Williams placed himself about one hundred fifty yards away when Joseph appeared at the window and fell. His description of the guards' exchange with the attackers is not explicitly presented as a conversation he heard at that distance. His claim that Joseph was shot and bayoneted after falling likewise needs an identified basis of knowledge. The narrative must preserve the difference between what he claimed to see and what he reported without explaining how he knew it. [27, p. 218]

A family leaves Carthage

The letter ends with the household rather than the battlefield. Williams said he left Carthage after midnight and walked eighteen miles through mud and water to Augusta. His family had gone to Rushville after the killings. He reported returning with them the day before writing, and described his wife, a boy, and a girl as well. Those details give the deputy clerk a family life beyond his public offices and show the fear of retaliation that followed the murders. Their experience does not establish the truth of the feared attack. [27, pp. 218–219]

This text comes through a problematic publication history. Lundwall's introduction begins with a report about a letter by a Colonel Williams, then prints a different identification supplied by the person who obtained the copy. The printed names include Samuel Ottis and Samuelson Ottis; other records identify the author as Samuel Otho. It also assigns Friday to the fatal events of Thursday, June 27. These errors must remain visible until the Chicago manuscript is checked. Neither the editor's framing nor the book's title is evidence of the author's guilt. [10, 27]

Otho Williams lets the letter become personal

The deputy clerk's July 10, 1844 letter is valuable because it does more than narrate an attack. Williams writes as a member of a military company, as a man trying to explain his conduct to someone he knows, and as a husband and father whose household has just fled Carthage. The letter's tone moves between public excitement and familiar conversation. [27]

An outcome he could not predict

After describing the killings and the town's evacuation, he admitted:

"What will be the result of the death of the Smiths I am entirely unable to say." [27, p. 219]

That sentence restores uncertainty to the moment. Readers know that the Saints would eventually leave Illinois. Williams, writing less than two weeks after the murders, did not describe that future as settled. He reported fear on both sides and the return of many Carthage residents, while offering his own judgments about what the Mormons might do next.

The family in the postscript

His postscript narrows the scene to his own household. His family had been sent to Rushville, about fifty miles away, and he said he had brought them back the day before writing. He reported a wife, a boy, and a girl, all well. His explanation for answering late was domestic as well as military: he had been occupied with their removal and return, and his company remained under orders. [27, p. 219]

Those details can be used without inventing names for the children. Gregg's later history identifies his wife only as a Miss Baldwin of Carthage. A marriage record and a household or probate record are still needed before the biography can confidently give her first name and identify their children. Gregg describes Otho's ability as a clerk and says that he briefly held the circuit clerkship by appointment. The original appraisal supplies an earlier example of the deputy's work under his father's name. [1, 19, p. 218]

A participant explaining himself

The letter should be allowed to speak, but it should also be read as an explanation offered by an interested participant. Williams acknowledges hostility among the Greys during the prisoners' escort, describes his attempt to control it, and later portrays the companies as hurrying toward the jail. His descriptions of what he personally saw must remain distinct from incidents he reports without identifying his source. [27]

The quoted sentence follows the published transcription in Lundwall. That printing contains errors in the author's name and in weekdays elsewhere in the letter. Until it is compared with the Chicago manuscript, the correct description is a quotation from a published transcription of Otho's letter. It is not a newly verified reading of his handwriting. This preserves his voice while making its route to the reader clear.

Comparing the accounts of Carthage

A reader should know where a witness stood and when the account was recorded. These sources overlap in subject but do not have interchangeable vantage points. The 1845 testimony is included as later evidence about June 1844, beyond the narrative's principal closing date.

Otho Williams to John Prickett July 10 1844

Williams describes mobilization, his command during an escort, the companies' approach to the jail, and the aftermath. The complete text presently available is a 1952 printed transcription with errors. It supports a detailed account of his own position and explanation, subject to manuscript comparison. [27]

Willard Richards journal June 27 1844

Richards was inside the room with the Smiths and John Taylor. His journal describes shots through the doorway, Hyrum falling, Joseph using a pistol, and Taylor being struck at the window. His close view of the room complements Williams's claimed outside view. It cannot independently verify Williams's orders, marching distance, or the honesty of the guard's resistance. [30]

George Bachman testimony May 24 1845

Bachman identifies his own unit as the rifle corps under Wesley Williams and says two incomplete companies remained. Skinner's account places the Greys ahead of Bachman's company on the way to the jail. This identifies distinct units and a command relationship; it is not testimony that Wesley killed either brother. [28, 29]

The coroner's verdict

The later newspaper reproduction lists Wesley among the jurors. This records a role in the inquiry, separate from the command described by Bachman. The reproduction's date and transmission should be explained rather than treating the newspaper image as the original signed verdict. [22]

What the comparison changes

The appraisal's father and son now have separately supported connections to the militia response: Wesley through trial testimony about the Riflemen, Otho through his account of the Greys and the published identification of his rank. Their shared surname does not merge them with Colonel Levi Williams, Whitney's Green Plains committee associate. An accusation against one Williams cannot be assigned to another without the full name and context.

The central historical problem is how a public promise of protection ended in murder. Otho's account acknowledges both a pledge to protect the prisoners and hostility within the protecting force. Bachman's testimony adds the second company. Together they sharpen the questions about command and response, but do not resolve individual criminal responsibility.

F Wilcox and the Franklin Wilcox candidate

A life on both sides of the Mississippi

The appraiser signs with an initial provisionally read as F. Franklin Wilcox is a plausible candidate because the Iowa legislative biography places him at Commerce in the relevant period. This is a geographic and chronological match, not a verified signature identification. The life described below belongs to Franklin Wilcox; its connection to the appraisal remains conditional. [1, 16]

Wilcox was born in Vermont on June 24, 1810, moved through Ohio, and settled in Lee County, Iowa, in 1836. His biographical file includes an 1888 county account that describes a purchase of land in the Half Breed Tract and a move to Commerce in the winter of 1838. The wording needs care: it does not, by itself, establish his presence there by June 11. The same account places his return to Lee County about 1841. [24]

The Mississippi was therefore part of his family's repeated movements. He later settled in Des Moines County and moved to Burlington. His public career included election to the Iowa legislature in 1861 and service as a justice of the peace. These later offices suggest a life in local affairs extending well beyond the years of the Nauvoo conflict, but they cannot identify the 1838 signature on their own. [16, 24]

The file also preserves family history: his first wife, Maria Johnson, died in 1844; he married Harriet Eliza Weeks in 1845. An obituary reports his death in Burlington on December 3, 1900, aged ninety. [24]

For the story of the appraisal, the return to Iowa around 1841 is especially significant. If this is the correct Wilcox, his later whereabouts must be established independently before connecting him to Hancock County's committees or militia in 1843–1844. A residence in Commerce at one stage of life does not show continuing participation in its political conflicts.

A useful comparison would be a deed or court document bearing Franklin's full name and signature, preferably from Commerce or Lee County between 1837 and 1841. That could test the initial, letter forms, residence, and associates against the appraisal. Until then, the reusable record should retain two entries: F. Wilcox, the confirmed appraiser, and Franklin Wilcox, the candidate biography.

One source discrepancy also needs preserving in the research file. A short account in the legislative compilation appears to attach Civil War service to Franklin, while the fuller county biography assigns that service to his son Henry. No military claim for the appraiser should be built on the compressed version without independent service records. No Masonic or anti-Mormon role has been established for the appraisal signer. [24]

Franklin Wilcox and the river country

The following expands the biography of the candidate Franklin Wilcox. It must remain conditional when used to explain the 1838 signer: neither the shared surname nor his documented residence near Commerce substitutes for a signature or transaction connecting him to this appraisal.

A connection to Isaac Galland

A fuller county-history sketch preserved in the Iowa legislative research file identifies Franklin's sister Elizabeth as the wife of Dr. Isaac Galland. If Franklin is the appraiser, that relationship would connect one of the men valuing the Commerce lot to a central figure in the land transactions that brought the Saints to the area. The kinship is reported by the later biography; it does not prove that Galland owned this lot or directed its valuation. [24, reproduced History of Des Moines County, pp. 270–271]

The same sketch follows Franklin from Vermont to Ohio as a child, back to Vermont after his father's death, and into schoolteaching at about nineteen. After marriage to Maria Johnson, he and his wife lived in Ohio; the account says their house and belongings burned while they were attending church. It then places them in Lee County, Iowa, in 1836 and at Commerce in 1838. These are retrospective biographical claims rather than a contemporary diary. [24]

A life that crossed the Mississippi repeatedly

His Commerce years formed part of a mobile life. The fuller sketch describes river trading between St. Louis and Cincinnati beginning in 1839, horseback journeys between Vermont and Iowa, and a store at Montrose after his return to Lee County in 1841. It also places him at Warsaw with his brother John R. in October 1841. These movements caution against treating a return to Iowa as the end of all his Illinois connections. They supply no evidence that he joined Hancock's anti-Mormon movement. [24, p. 271]

The account preserves a short description attributed to Wilcox of Black Hawk: "a perfect man physically." This is reported speech in a later biography, not a surviving statement in Wilcox's hand. The surrounding anecdote requires caution: its placement after the discussion of 1841 could mislead a reader, since Black Hawk had died in 1838. The story cannot be dated from its position in the paragraph. [24]

Public service and private losses

Maria died in 1844. Franklin married Harriet Eliza Weeks in 1845, and the later sketch describes their journey west by canal and river. Farming near Burlington gave way to residence in the city during the Civil War. Iowa's official legislative record dates his service in the Ninth General Assembly to January 13, 1862–January 10, 1864, after election in 1861. His later work included service as a justice of the peace and United States commissioner. [24, 42]

The family's Civil War service belongs to his sons, not automatically to Franklin. The fuller biography assigns Thirty-third Illinois Infantry service to Henry F. and First Iowa Cavalry service to Pliny, who died during the war. That fuller account corrects a misleading compressed biography in which a missing transition makes Henry's service appear to be his father's. Franklin died at Burlington on December 3, 1900. His long life can be narrated fully as the candidate's history, while the final identification of the Commerce appraiser remains open. [24, pp. 272–273]

The other appraisers and the deputy sheriff

C A Carter

C. A. Carter's secure biography begins with the June 11, 1838 appraisal. He joined Wilcox and William Wilson in valuing Lot 2, Block 16 at fifty-five dollars. His selection shows that the sheriff's office called upon his judgment for this transaction. It does not establish that he was an elected official, professional appraiser, landowner in the block, or political leader. [1]

No reliable expansion of his initials has emerged from the sources examined. The name must remain C. A. Carter until another record connects the initials, locality, associates, and signature. Deed witnesses, tax lists, and circuit court files offer the best next comparisons. Claims about his Masonry, militia service, or opposition activity would be premature while identity remains unsettled.

William Wilson

William Wilson is named in full in the certification and signs as Wm Wilson. This is more information than initials alone, but the common name creates a substantial risk of merging different men. Nothing in the appraisal identifies him as Harmon T. Wilson, who appears in later political records. Nor does it connect him with a particular Latter-day Saint of the same name. [1]

His documented act is the appraisal. The immediate biographical task is to find a William Wilson whose signature and local dealings connect with Carter, Wilcox, Fullerton, or this parcel in 1838. His political and fraternal associations remain open questions; their absence from the present record is not evidence that he had none.

Daniel A. Fullerton

Daniel A. Fullerton signed the appraisal return as deputy sheriff under Edson Whitney. David Larsen has confirmed the expansion of the manuscript's D. A. Fullerton to Daniel A. Fullerton. Gregg's election table records Daniel's election as coroner in 1836 and lists him first in the 1838 sheriff's race, with 393 votes, ahead of Harmon T. Wilson's 290 and Whitney's 120. The printed page has been checked against its scan. [1, 19, p. 448; 45]

The identification is accepted on the document owner's confirmation. An appointment, bond, or additional signed official record would further document his service, rather than serve as a prerequisite for using his full name. His birth, family, residence history, and later career remain to be established.

The sequence is a compelling small story within the larger one: a man serving under Whitney's name on a June appraisal appears as the successful candidate against him later that year. The returns establish an electoral contest, not a personal quarrel. No verified evidence presently attaches Fullerton to the anti-Mormon committee, a pre-1844 lodge, or the attack at Carthage. His later career remains to be traced.

The remaining questions about the land

The central unresolved questions are the exact original plat location, the owner in June 1838, and the court proceeding that required the appraisal. The later Ethan Kimball assessment is a strong lead, not a substitute for a chain of title. Hancock County Plat Book 1 identifies Commerce on pages 10–11, Commerce City on pages 26–27, and the early Nauvoo plat on pages 37–39. These should be compared before fixing the parcel on a modern map. [4, 5, 46]

What the Hotchkiss bond contributes

The August 12, 1839 bond describes a large tract in and around the earlier settlements and reserves specific lots already outside the sale. Its reservation list names blocks 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14; it does not name Block 16. That absence makes the bond worth testing against this parcel once its plat is identified. It does not prove ownership, resolve the 1838 proceeding, or supply a chain of title. [32]

The deed-record copy provides an exact follow-up location: Hancock County Deed Record, volume 12 G, page 299. The July 7, 1843 quitclaim associated with the Hotchkiss transaction must also be compared after the parcel is fixed. The story's ground is becoming clearer, but the original survey and the underlying court case remain essential. [32]

Signature comparisons remain especially important for F. Wilcox, Carter, and William Wilson. Searches for family, Masonic, military, and political records should attach to securely identified people. For Otho Williams, the original July 10, 1844 letter should be checked against the complete later printing. A named lodge entry or attributed allegation belongs in the record with its date and source, without converting association into responsibility for violence.

Reading the Commerce assessment

The original image preserves names that the website's displayed transcription leaves blank, including Phineas Kimball immediately below Franklin Wilcox. That row concerns Lot 2, Block 11, valued at $800; it must not be assigned to Wilcox merely because it follows his entry. The entry for the project's candidate parcel, Lot 2, Block 16, follows Ethan Kimball through a "Same" reference. [46]

The Joseph Smith Papers attributes the record to Lewis Robison and an unidentified scribe. These entries therefore document people and property; they are not samples of Wilcox's or Kimball's signatures. An authenticated autograph is still needed for the Wilcox comparison. [46]

Sources and research notes

Sources accessed October 9–10, 2026. Bracketed numbers identify the records used. Catalog leads and later reproductions are distinguished from original documents. The research preserves unresolved names and contested assertions so that later documents can be incorporated without silently changing the evidentiary basis of a biography.

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[2] Hallwas and Launius, Cultures in Conflict (1995), introduction to The Coming of the Mormons and The Lay of the Land, publisher-hosted excerpts. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nwhb

[3] Joseph Smith Papers, Journal, 1839, page 1, editorial notes on April 30 land acquisitions. https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1839/2

[4] Joseph Smith Papers, Report of Committee, February 5, 1841, introduction and plat references. https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/report-of-committee-5february-1841/1

[5] Joseph Smith Papers, Receipt from Wesley Williams, September 5, 1839. https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/receipt-from-wesley-williams-5-september-1839/1

[6] Joseph Smith Papers, History, volume E-1, addenda pages 4 and 7, September 6, 1843. Cites Great Meeting of Anti-Mormons, Warsaw Message, September 13, 1843, 1–2. Later manuscript transcription examined; original newspaper not yet collated. https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/427 and /430

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