

Zion Valley

The Mormon Origins of St. John, Kansas

by Gary R. Entz

After the 1844 death of the prophet Joseph Smith Jr., Brigham Young rallied to win the support of the governing Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and gain the presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Young succeeded Smith as head of the LDS Church, and his weighty decision to lead the Mormon faithful westward to the valley of the Great Salt Lake comprises a well-documented chapter in the history of the American West. Factions opposed to Young's leadership remained in the East, and historians are equally familiar with the groups that coalesced around Joseph Smith III in 1860 to found the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which subsequently established headquarters in Independence, Missouri. What remains a fertile field for historical inquiry, however, are the smaller dissenting restoration churches that separated from the two large church organizations in Salt Lake City and Independence.¹ One of these nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint groups saw a potential Zion in Kansas. In 1875 this group called for a gathering of the Saints in Stafford County and has retained a presence in the region ever since.

The Church of Jesus Christ (Bickertonite) incorporated in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1865, but the organization traces its historical and doctrinal roots to Joseph Smith and the 1830 founding of the Mormon Church. Upon succeeding Smith as head of the church in 1844, Brigham Young quickly

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1. Restoration theology stems from the belief that modern Christian denominations are based in false doctrines. The Latter-day Saint movement, therefore, represents a restoration of the Primitive Church as it existed in the days of the Apostles. For further information and an introduction to some dissenting groups, see Roger D. Launius and Linda Thather, eds., *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 1–17.



William Bickerton, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ in Stafford County.



Sidney Rigdon broke with Brigham Young to found the Church of Christ in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1845.

moved to eliminate all opposition to his still tenuous leadership position. First among those whom Young silenced was Sidney Rigdon. A key figure in the church since 1830, Rigdon had served as Smith's first counselor and held one of the oldest of the various claims to presidential succession within the church.² He was a practiced theologian and represented the greatest challenge to Young's legitimacy. Rigdon disapproved of polygamy and other doctrinal changes that had taken place within the church during the final years of Smith's life and believed that Young bore a measure of responsibility for their promulgation. Therefore, he denied Young's authority to lead the church and was among the first to be purged through excommunication. Exiled from the Mormon town of Nauvoo, Illinois, Rigdon led a small faction of like-minded dissenters to Pittsburgh and in 1845 organized his following into the Church of Christ.

Among the Pittsburgh-area converts whom Rigdon welcomed into his reorganization of Joseph Smith's church was thirty-year-old immigrant coal miner William Bickerton. Born in February 1815 in Northumberland, England, Bickerton immigrated in 1832 with his mother and siblings to the United States. A former Methodist with no formal education, Bickerton first heard

2. D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *Brigham Young University Studies* 16 (Winter 1976): 187; Danny L. Jorgensen, "Dissent and Schism in the Early Church: Explaining Mormon Fissiparousness," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Fall 1995): 34. For a complete biography of Sidney Rigdon, see F. Mark McKiernan, *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon, Religious Reformer, 1793–1876* (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1971); Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994).

Rigdon's Saints preach at Limetown, Pennsylvania, and enthusiastically embraced their interpretation of the restored gospel. He accepted ordination into the priesthood and later recalled, "I was confirmed, received the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, and was ordained an Elder shortly afterwards and set apart by washing and on-ointing [*sic*]." Bickerton sincerely believed that Rigdon "had the power of God," but his association with Joseph Smith's former first counselor was to be short-lived.³

Rigdon wanted to recreate the communitarian aspect of Mormonism in which he had played such a key role during the church's formative years in Kirtland, Ohio. Thus in 1846 he relocated the Church of Christ to a rural setting in Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley near Greencastle. Because he lacked Joseph Smith's charismatic authority and Brigham Young's administrative acumen, Rigdon's fledgling colony soon foundered in spiritual and financial disaster. Unable to meet their debts, in August 1847 the colonists lost their land, and the incipient church disintegrated. While nearly two hundred believers had participated in this short-lived Zion, Bickerton and a few others disagreed with the undertaking and declined to participate in Rigdon's colony. Bickerton rarely spoke ill of Rigdon or his project but in later years recalled, "at this same time we organized a school of the prophets, or solemn assemblies, and many things were revealed to us, showing things were going wrong. No one followed Sidney Rigdon from that Branch because we knew by the spirit that he was going wrong."⁴ Rigdon's Pittsburgh ministry effectively ended with his colony, but William Bickerton's had only just begun.

The collapse of Rigdon's church created a personal crisis for Bickerton. He was convinced in the validity of the *Book of Mormon*, yet having been introduced to the restored gospel through Rigdon he was equally certain that the Mormons following Young west to the proposed nation of Deseret in Utah's Great Basin had departed from the truth and were living in "adultery and lasciviousness." Bickerton therefore opened his home in West Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, as a resting place and source of comfort for many who had followed Rigdon. Rigdon's original followers soon dropped away, but by 1849 a modest band of self-taught converts had coalesced around Bickerton's leadership. Bickerton recalled that during this time Charles

3. Elder Frazier, one of Rigdon's adherents, formally baptized Bickerton and his wife, Doratha, into the church. J. S. Weeks, "A Letter," *St. John Sun*, August 4, 1887; William Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 1, Church of Jesus Christ, St. John, Kans.

4. Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 1.

Brown “gave the word of the Lord, that I was to be a prophet to lead this people. He anointed [*sic*] me with oil, and this pwople [*sic*] should go in and out and find pasture.”⁵

In May 1851 the small group agreed to meet with John Murray and David James Ross, two itinerant Mormon missionaries operating out of Council Bluffs, Iowa. The duo convinced Bickerton and nine others that their doctrinal dif-

ferences were reconcilable with the Utah Saints and helped them organize their West Elizabeth ministry into a branch of the LDS Church.⁶ This association lasted for less than a year, and in March 1852 Bickerton angrily separated his followers from Young’s church. “We . . . have left off all connection whatsoever with Brigham Young and the twelve whose headquarters or home is in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake,” he blasted, “because of their adultery and general wickedness.” Bickerton had known about polygamy prior to his brief affiliation with the Utah church. He did not, however, condone the practice in his West Elizabeth congregation and publicly severed all connections with Young before the church president’s public acknowledgment of plural marriage during an October conference in Salt Lake City. Ross and Murray may have misrepresented their church’s position on the religious doctrine, and Bickerton later asserted that they had “deceived” him. Nevertheless, in 1852 the Mormon leadership looked to solidify denominational support for the doctrine before publicly acknowledging the practice. Bickerton refused to endorse the tenet and announced that if polygamy were necessary to gain God’s favor, then he preferred God’s displeasure.⁷

Having severed his connections to the LDS Church, Bickerton was uncertain of what course to pursue. “I knew my calling was from Heaven,” he wrote in 1863, “and I also knew that a man cannot build up the Church of Christ without divine commandment from the Lord, for it would



The building housing Bickerton’s Church of Jesus Christ in West Elizabeth, Pennsylvania.

only be sectarianism, and man’s authority.” It was at this point that Bickerton experienced the first of several epiphanies that assured him of his calling and started him down the path that would lead to Kansas. “Because I lived true to God and his interests,” he recalled, “I was carried away in the spirit and placed on a high mountain with just room enough for me to stand.” The image was terrifying, and from this precarious position Bickerton understood that if he did not go forth and preach the restored gospel, God would cast him into the dreadful chasm below.⁸

Bickerton took his vision seriously and embarked upon his mission by preaching from the *Book of Mormon* wherever he could. He worked as a foreman in a coal mine, and his early ministry was directed toward immigrant mine laborers and other unskilled workers who shared his rural English mill-town background. However, feeling that his calling demanded that he reach beyond the restricted bowels of the mines, Bickerton began preaching out on the streets. When not laboring underground he held outdoor meetings in the marketplace, in public houses, on street corners, or at any available place where he could gather a crowd to listen. “The first meeting I held,” he recalled, “was beside the ferry, at a store house door. . . . I held these outdoor meetings and many were convinced and several were baptized.”⁹

The church remained a modest but vibrant establishment throughout its early years of existence. In 1857 Bickerton could count ninety-three followers, and the church began establishing branch congregations in Pittsburgh’s satellite mill towns in western Pennsylvania

5. *The Ensign: or a Light to Lighten the Gentiles* (Pittsburgh: Ferguson and Co., 1863), 5 (Historical Archives, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Independence, Mo., typescript); Bickerton, “Testimony, June 1903,” 9.

6. Victor Emanuel Bean, “Journals, 1884–1889,” 90, Historical Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

7. Quotation in William. H. Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ* (Monongahela, Pa.: Church of Jesus Christ, 1945), 6.

8. *The Ensign*, 5; “William Bickerton’s Letter,” *County Capital* (St. John), October 3, 1889.

9. Bickerton, “Testimony, June 1903,” 2.



Polygamy, practiced by this Mormon pioneer surrounded by his numerous wives, was abhorrent to Bickerton, who blasted it as adulterous and wicked.

Oak, Pennsylvania, as the Church of Jesus Christ. In 1865 they officially incorporated their church at Pittsburgh.¹¹

In 1866 discussions of sending missionaries to Indian Territory resumed, but no movement took place until April 1868 when Bickerton received a confirming vision that the time had come for the Saints to minister to the Lamanites. The church faithful collected the funds necessary to finance a mission, and on August 31 Bickerton, William Cadman Sr., and Benjamin Meadowcroft departed Pennsylvania for the Cherokee Nation. The Saints were aware that this mission represented only the initial step in a long-term restoration effort, so the three missionaries planned to examine the land and ascertain its suitability for settlement while ministering to the native peoples. Bickerton, Cadman, and Meadowcroft traveled west to Wyandotte, Kansas, and then south toward Indian Territory, arriving on September 6 in the border town of Chetopa in Labette County, Kansas.

and western Virginia. During that same year Elder Samuel Woolley, a traveling envoy from Salt Lake City, came to Pittsburgh and informed Bickerton of his official excommunication from the LDS Church. The caveat mattered little to the Pennsylvania Saints, and in 1859 a revelatory experience gave them confirmation that God had “raised up another like unto Joseph . . . and now I have called forth my servant William Bickerton to lead forth my people.”¹⁰ The body of Saints felt that God had affirmed their faith as other church members began experiencing the spiritual gifts of prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues. They firmly believed that through revelation the prophet’s mantle had passed directly from Joseph Smith to William Bickerton.

With the start of the Civil War in 1861 the church began experiencing a significant growth in membership. Bickerton’s followers interpreted the war as a fulfillment of Joseph Smith’s 1832 millennial vision and believed the battles would not end until “the coming of the Son of Man.” In November of that year an interpretation of tongues revealed that the time had come for the Saints to take an active role in the restoration of Israel by delivering the gospel to the Indian peoples (Lamanites) of America. Although church members believed this intervention was necessary to restore the true, apostolic church fully and inaugurate the millennium, mission work was not possible while the war raged in and around Indian Territory (present Oklahoma). Still, proselytizing efforts increased, and in 1862 the Saints formally organized their religious body in Green

With their prefatory objective of meeting with Lewis Downing, the newly elected principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, the apostles made their way to his home on the west bank of the Grand River. Downing had only recently reunited the tribal factions that had divided during the war and in 1868 was working to maintain Cherokee sovereignty in the face of the punitive Reconstruction Treaty of 1866. Thus, he had little time or patience for religious missionaries. He did meet with the trio, but Bickerton wrote that Downing “refused to receive us as God’s people on mission to the red man. I saw a black cloud come between him and me, which gave me to understand that when the time does come, we shall speak in their own language.” The usually dour Cadman was less optimistic for the future and observed that although Downing was courteous and pleasant, he “manifested that blind unbelief which is everywhere engendered by modern religion.” Downing permitted the missionaries to preach among the Chero-

10. “Revelation of W. W. Wagoner, December 11, 1859,” in William Bacon, *A Book of Record of the Revelations given unto the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints* (St. John, Kans.: Church of Jesus Christ, n.d.), 11. Bacon served as the church secretary during the organization’s formative years.

11. Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 32, 40–41; *The Ensign*, 10–11. Joseph Smith’s prophecy was later affirmed in *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1968), 130:12.

kees, but without his endorsement the mission could not succeed to the degree that Bickerton and his associates originally had hoped.¹²

The mission itself proved to be physically and financially exhausting. The three apostles had expended their entire allotment of funds after a month of ministering among the Cherokee, Creek, and Choctaw peoples. Moreover, unused to a bivouacking prairie life, Bickerton and Cadman overextended themselves and soon became too ill to continue. Out of money and strength, the two missionaries removed to Pleasant Hill, Missouri, to recuperate while Meadowcroft returned home to solicit the funds necessary to bring his fellow travelers back. He had no difficulties in fulfilling his obligations, and all three envoys were back in Pennsylvania in October 1868 to report on their accomplishments. Cadman delivered a favorable report on the land as a suitable location for establishing a religious colony but pessimistically reiterated an earlier dream from which he had predicted that their visit to Downing and the Cherokees "would be fruitless." Conversely, Bickerton understood that this mission had been only the beginning and that the three apostles succeeded in planting the seeds of the church among the Indian peoples. He later reminisced that he and his companions "had never spent a better day in the work of the Lord."¹³

After 1870 William Bickerton devoted himself exclusively to the work of the church. The Saints set him aside to visit among the various branches and to "preach the Gospel wherever . . . God may direct him." No longer laboring full time in the coal mines, in 1872 he volunteered to spend the remainder of his life preaching the gospel, asking only that the church reimburse him for his traveling expenses.¹⁴ The gravity of the Indian mission continued to weigh heavily on Bickerton, however, and in July 1872 he took the idea one step further. He proclaimed that the Saints must prepare to gather together near Indian Territory and establish a Stake of Zion

12. Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 5; William Cadman Sr., "Report on the Indian Territory Mission of 1868," in Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 52–57. For details on the Reconstruction Treaty of 1866, see Arrell Morgan Gibson, *The American Indian: Prehistory to the Present* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1980), 383–86. A narrative of the events surrounding Lewis Downing's election as principal chief can be found in Grace Steele Woodward, *The Cherokees* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 305–9.

13. Cadman, "Report on the Indian Territory Mission," 52–57, 61; Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 5.

14. Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 61–63.

in the West. Unlike Brigham Young's earlier exodus to Utah Territory, Bickerton was not seeking an escape from persecution in the East. Instead Bickerton wanted a western Zion because it would place his church headquarters in closer proximity to the greatest concentration of Indian tribes in the West and facilitate preparations for the coming millennium. Most church members confirmed that the gathering was the will of God and that the time had come to make arrangements for a move.¹⁵

In December 1872 Bickerton organized a committee of seven to study and report on the matter, but nothing substantial came from the group until news of a successful mission in eastern Kansas reinforced the Saints' interest in settling the West. In 1873 John Stevenson had traveled to the borders of Indian Territory to witness among the peoples living in southeastern Kansas. While there he reportedly manifested the spiritual gift of healing over the injured child of Lewis Beaston in Neosho County and over the injured child of George Shauver in Wilson County. These acts, along with a few subsequent demonstrations of faith in God's power to heal, convinced several families in the area to join the church. Stevenson returned to Pennsylvania in April 1874, and the details of his fruitful mission energized the church members to increase their efforts in the region. They resolved to send Stevenson back to Kansas and began collecting money to aid him in his missionary endeavors.¹⁶

Beyond encouraging funding for individual missionaries, news of Stevenson's accomplishments in Kansas accelerated Bickerton's drive to build a Stake of Zion in the West. Speaking for his committee at a July conference, he revealed that the place of the gathering would be somewhere along the border of the Cherokee Nation and that God would designate the exact place to representatives of the church sent out to examine the land. Bickerton experienced several visionary experiences regarding the gathering, and he disclosed that while he was at prayer the whole end of his house opened up to his view. He said that he looked upward and saw "a multitude of the ancient Fathers above my head looking down upon me. They were waiting for a movement of this Church, the gathering of the Saints and the establishment of Zion." At the head of this heavenly gathering was the patriarch Jacob, whom Bickerton recognized would serve as "a ministering spirit to the Church in bringing about the purpose of God." Cit-

15. *Ibid.*, 64.

16. *Ibid.*, 65, 67–69; "William Bickerton's Letter," *County Capital*, October 17, November 21, 1889.

ing the coming end times and the promised arrival of Elijah the prophet, Bickerton strongly affirmed the revealed word of the Lord. He said, "no man could receive greater Authority than I had received, it was from God Himself, and that Angels nor men could give anymore; Therefore go forward and accomplish that which I have commanded and I will be with you always to the end."¹⁷

Recollecting the experience many years later, Bickerton humbly explained, "I did not want to come myself, feeling weak in the line of education, but I was willing to do what God had for me to do." He traveled to West Virginia to visit with the Saints in Wheeling and inform them of his intention to relocate the church headquarters to Kansas. While studying a map of the state with his brother, Arthur Bickerton, in Wheeling, Bickerton "felt by the power of God when I touched the map that Stafford county was the place the Lord wanted me." He conveyed his choice of Stafford County at an October conference, and the church members confirmed the prophecy, resolving that "we . . . should not entangle ourselves in worldly affairs, but that we hold ourselves in readiness to gather to the place where the Lord may appoint." Following the resolution Bickerton revealed the word of God saying, "I have promised unto this people a Land, a good land, a glorious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." As the meeting closed, the secretaries of the branch congregations agreed to begin collecting freewill donations from the membership to help their church president make an exploratory trip to Kansas.¹⁸

Although Bickerton was confident that God had set Stafford County aside for the Saints, he realized that his own agricultural inexperience would limit his ability to select a suitable section of land on which to start out. Therefore, he wanted some of the newly converted Saints from Wilson County to accompany him to western Kansas and joined his mission to that of John Stevenson. In the late fall of 1874 Bickerton and Stevenson left Pennsylvania and journeyed to the town of Parsons in southeastern Kansas, where they invited their prairie brethren to join them in the gathering. The western members voiced no objections to their church president's proposal and appointed James Taylor and one other to accompany the Pennsylvania missionaries to Stafford County. Traveling on a springboard wagon, the four envoys headed west through the cattle

town of Wichita and continued to the largely unsettled and unorganized county of Stafford. The band arrived on a Saturday, and wary of predators on the open plains, they gathered buffalo bones to build a rude corral in which to spend the night. Arising on Sunday morning, Bickerton gazed upon the valley of Rattlesnake Creek and led his apostles about two miles south. He directed them "to the spot, or very near it, where our county seat was afterwards located and drove a stake in the ground which we named a stake of Zion, which afterwards was called Zion Valley." This was a solemn moment for a group believing that they were indeed standing on God's chosen site of the gathering. Bickerton related that "we stood up four of us, after we drove the stake, and asked the blessing of God upon the land, and prayed that the time would soon come that we should go to the Lamanites. This was the Sabbath morning about sunrise."¹⁹

Bickerton was certain that he had successfully located the divinely appointed site of the gathering and returned home to Pennsylvania in late 1874 with the good news. On January 2, 1875, the church convened a special conference to hear Bickerton relate what he had discovered in Kansas. While he assured his followers that they would find an abundant amount of high quality land surrounded by a healthful climate, he also conceded that it was "destitute of timber, and its mineral resources of course unknown, because unexplored." At the same time, however, "he positively stated that it was made known to him that it was the place of the gathering, which he then and there dedicated to that purpose." The body of Saints fully endorsed Bickerton's findings, which led Second Counselor William Cadman to comment: "the power and glory of God was wonderfully manifested in our midst, which we accepted as an evidence of the correctness of the conclusions then arrived at."²⁰

Despite the positive resolution, not all of the faithful felt assured in their prophet's determination to relocate the church headquarters to Kansas. Although he had sought and gained the support of the West Virginia Saints before heading west, Bickerton now found some of these members hesitant to accept what he believed to be the will of God. Their reservations stemmed from a rumor circulating about the Wheeling area that it was the church president's intent to start a polygamous branch of the LDS Church in

17. Quotation in Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 69–70. For the reference to Elijah, see Malachi 4; 3 Nephi 25, *Book of Mormon*, 3d ed. (Monongahela, Pa.: Church of Jesus Christ, 1970).

18. Quotation in Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 70. Bickerton's reference to "a land flowing with milk and honey" can be found in *Doctrine and Covenants*, 38:18.

19. *County Capital*, October 17, 1889; Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 11.

20. William Cadman Sr., "Memorial," December 26, 1875, in Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 74–75.

Kansas. Bickerton was unaware of his followers' apprehensions when he returned to West Virginia to discuss the gathering, and during a meeting at George Baker's home participating members surprised him when they hung their heads low in his presence. Speaking for the group, Eli Kendall stepped forward and said, "verily thus saith the Lord, this people will not do as they are doing in Salt Lake in their abominations." Bickerton remained as adamant as ever against plural marriage, and the suggestion that he intended to join or emulate the Utah Mormons came as a shock. Nevertheless, he managed to assuage his followers' fears and recalled, "the spirit of the Lord came down, and we had a general rejoicing conference in the orchard of Geo. Baker." Both Baker and Kendall set aside their suspicions and agreed to support and participate in the gathering.²¹

From this point forward Bickerton's plans to establish a Stake of Zion in Kansas advanced at a rapid pace. In February 1875 members of the Church of Jesus Christ organized the Zion Colonization Society and collectively pledged a total of twenty thousand dollars for an incorporation fund. Of this amount, Bickerton personally subscribed six thousand dollars based upon the presumed value of some Pennsylvania property he put up for sale. Bickerton served as president of the society, and in this capacity he issued a public announcement that the society's officers intended to help the membership find homesteads on a tract of land in Kansas in the early spring. Although this was explicitly a church movement, Bickerton and his followers saw fit to open the colonization society to all who wished to join and granted everyone equal rights in the proposed colony regardless of church affiliation. This overture was necessary since the church had members such as Jane Glackin, whose family wished to participate in the gathering but whose spouse, in this case Hugh Glackin, remained a lifelong communicant of the Catholic faith.²²

Despite the expressed willingness of most church members to support the planned colony, few of the mine laborers who made up the membership had anything substantial to give to the Zion Colonization Society. While many of the faithful made vocal commitments to the colonization fund, only a handful of the church's property-owning members followed their prophet's lead in selling or mortgaging their holdings. Nevertheless, Bickerton was



Bickerton and his followers believed their mission was to carry the gospel to the Lamanites in Indian Territory. In this sketch Mormon leader Joseph Smith preaches to a gathering of American Indians.

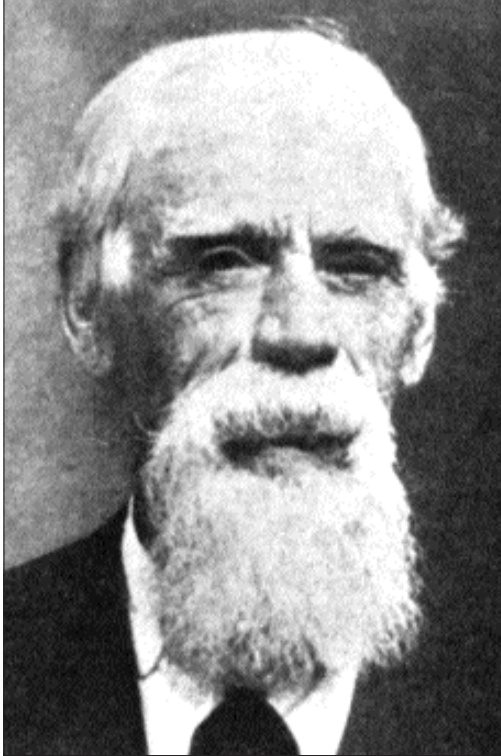
determined to attempt at complying with, as he said, "what we read about, having all things in common." Modeling his colony on Acts 3:44 and 4:32 and the Mormon United Order of Enoch, Bickerton directed that officers of the colonization society should help poorer members by making loans from the common fund at an interest rate not to exceed 6 percent. To maintain harmony the group banned swearing, drinking of intoxicants, and immoral acts in the proposed colony. Bickerton wanted a self-sufficient settlement where colonists would separate themselves from the evils of the materialist-driven market economy by collectively buying and shipping goods wholesale and to provide for their own needs through communal stores.²³

Although the majority of the church membership agreed to remain in the East and financially support the colony while Bickerton led the initial contingent to Kansas, a small minority within the organization disapproved of the selected locality and began voicing their opposition. Apostle James Louttit, recalled Bickerton, "declared that he

21. *County Capital*, October 17, 1889.

22. *Elizabeth (Pa.) Herald*, February 13, 1875; "Zion Colonization Society," *Monongahela Valley (Pa.) Republican*, February 18, 1875; "Bickerton's Letter," *County Capital*, November 14, 1889; Alexander J. Robinson, interview by author, April 6, 1998.

23. *St. John Weekly News*, August 16, 1889; Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 3; *County Capital*, November 14, 1889. For information about the United Order of Enoch, see Dean L. May, "One Heart and Mind: Communal Life and Values among the Mormons," in *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald E. Pitzer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 135-58.



Although harboring doubts about the Kansas mission, William Cadman supported Bickerton when others tried to sabotage his Zion Valley Colony.

would never come to this place and live in a cellar or cave in the ground as we did in the early days." Louttit and his faction represented a growing division within the church that objected to financing a colony and began to doubt the church president's revelations. They questioned the suitability of Kansas for settlement, and one of Bickerton's most persistent foibles was a continuous underestimation of the strength and bullheaded tenacity of his detractors' resistance. It was, however, largely because he held fast to his belief that the gathering was the will of God and that all doubters would see the light once Zion Valley became a harmonious heaven on earth. Therefore, he did little to assuage the concerns of men such as Louttit and pressed forward. By the end of February 1875 he was ready to leave for the West.²⁴

Events in western Kansas had not stood still while Bickerton was in Pennsylvania making preparations to lead his followers to their Stake of Zion in Stafford County. Since most of the land in Stafford had few settlers and remained unorganized, the county commissioners in the bordering districts of Barton to the north and Pawnee to the west and representatives from the unorganized Pratt to the south saw an opportunity to expand their own bailiwicks. Early in 1875 they petitioned the state legislature to obliterate their sparsely populated neighbor, and in March the legislators complied. Excepting two overlooked townships in the extreme southwestern corner of the former county,

24. Bickerton recalled that shortly after founding the colony, Louttit "almost lost all of his family. This, several Brothers and Sisters professed, was a judgement of God sent on him." Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 3.

Stafford disappeared from the map. The Church of Jesus Christ's planned Zion became part of Barton County and fell under the jurisdiction of Great Bend. While Bickerton may have remained unaware of these developments until his arrival in Kansas, the political changes had no immediate influence on his plans for the Zion Valley colony.²⁵

Although Bickerton had managed to sell only a portion of his property and had little more than twelve hundred dollars of his own money invested in the colonization society, he was unwilling to wait any longer. He handed control of three unsold houses over to a committee "to sell . . . and give it to the Church." He also held title to the sanctuary in West Elizabeth, which he gave to the church organization as a gift with the understanding that the church leaders remaining in the East would not sell it. Having taken care of his worldly concerns in Pennsylvania, Bickerton collected a devoted band of followers around him and departed on a route that retraced his earlier steps to Wilson County, Kansas. With the assistance of the Kansas Saints, Bickerton arranged to buy work oxen, horses, wagons, tools, and other essential supplies needed to get the colony off to a solid start. Joined by a few families from Wilson County, the core of approximately forty households left eastern Kansas in March for Zion Valley.²⁶

Few inhabitants lived in the territory surrounding Bickerton's planned colony, but it was not devoid of settlers. James Miskin, an English immigrant from Guernsey Island, came to western Kansas as a land surveyor after losing his job as a mechanic during the 1874 depression. After helping with the survey that divided Stafford County, he and his family took up a homestead approximately twenty-eight miles south of Great Bend near the Church of Jesus Christ's proposed Stake of Zion. In March 1875, as Bickerton's party traveled westward across the plains, news of the impending arrival of a Mormon colony swept through the region and to the Miskin household. Amelia Miskin recalled, "we heard a colony was on their way to locate from Pennsylvania, most of them being miners." While a band of coal miners caused no concern among the established settlers, their religious beliefs created a stir. "One of our neighbors came in great haste and excitement and told my husband that this colony was composed of Mormons, and that we as neighbors should meet them and prevent them from locating." The unnamed acquaintance informed the

25. William G. Cutler and A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), 2: 1270.

26. Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 3, 12; *County Capital*, November 14, 1889.

Miskins that “Mormons were a bad lot and had . . . to be driven from Missouri.”²⁷

Amelia Miskin thought little of her excitable neighbor and disdainfully remarked that he “was very profane, drank heavily at times, and scoffed at religion.” James Miskin was equally unimpressed and declared that they should let the Mormons come and “prove themselves first. Maybe they are better than we are.” Failing to arouse any encouragement from the Miskins, the agitator left and “rode all day and most of the next night, trying with no more success to recruit people to drive the Mormons away.” Nevertheless, the intensity of his opposition to the Saints led the Miskins to question what they knew of Mormons. James “said that for his part he knew nothing except that they believed in polygamy, and he did not think they had any religion.” Amelia disagreed and recalled that she had once read an article in *Harper’s Weekly* that said, the “Mormons have a hymn which begins, ‘We are not ashamed to own our God.’” However, she qualified this statement by asking “whether God is not ashamed to own them.” Since the couple admittedly knew little about the religious faith of the people headed their way, they decided to withhold judgment until meeting the group.²⁸

The first Saints arrived in five wagons on April 3, 1875, and Bickerton recalled it “was very rough weather and snowing. Many of the Brethren came from the East, and we lived in tent houses.” The Zion Valley group filed claims at the land office in Larned for homesteads three miles from the Miskin family along the banks of Rattlesnake Creek. Amelia Miskin, who yearned for the company of her gender, dejectedly recorded, “only two or three women had arrived as the men wanted to build before sending for their families.” She was twenty-eight miles “from a railroad or any store and my nearest neighbor live [sic] more than a mile away. If I ever experienced lonesomeness, it was when I was at night with just one baby girl.” The Saints, on the other hand, were enthusiastic and had no time for thoughts of loneliness while they started work on their colony. “We had good spiritual

27. Arthur R. Miskin and Amelia L. Moore Miskin, “Notes on Our Early Life,” (N.p.: n.d.), 2, Historical Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In addition to the Miskins, four families had homesteads in the area. They included the James Neeland, Joseph Washburn, and C. G. Ardrey households. A family named Carter comprised the final household. See Clelland Cole and Helen Malin Reuber, *No Cyclone Shall Destroy: The Story of St. John, Kansas* (Ardmore, Pa.: Dorrance and Co., 1981), 8.

28. Miskin and Miskin, “Notes on Our Early Life,” 2.

meetings,” Bickerton fondly remembered, “all members doing duty, no drinking or bad habits of any kind, and we could hear the prayers of the saints going up from each homestead.”²⁹

Additional settlers and family members reached the colony by means of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad station in Great Bend, and on May 17 the draft oxen that Bickerton had purchased in eastern Kansas arrived. While the colonists began breaking ground to plant their first crop, Bickerton made plans to turn their tent city into a more permanent form of existence and arranged to receive some building wood shipped in from Chicago. In need of provisions, James Miskin called on the settlement just as Bickerton and Kendall were preparing to travel to Great Bend for their lumber. The prophet invited his neighbor to ride with them and used the opportunity to share and explain his religious faith to the curious Miskin. Amelia related her husband’s experience with Bickerton. She recalled that the elderly man “said angels had visited the earth in this dispensation and he told James how their leader, Joseph Smith, had been visited by God the Father, and his Son, Jesus Christ, after seeking in prayer to know which church he should join.” Bickerton went on to tell Miskin “that God the Father, pointing to His Son, said, ‘Hear Him,’ and on making his request Joseph Smith was told to join none of them, as they had a form of godliness but denied the power.” Miskin had never heard this story before. The tale fascinated him, and he “promised to come hear them preach at the blacksmith’s home the next Sunday.”³⁰

Miskin participated in the services, and his wife related, “as far as he could judge it was all Bible doctrine.” After listening to the sermon and speaking with the church elders, Miskin expressed a sincere interest in learning more and borrowed a copy of the *Book of Mormon* to take home and read with his wife. Amelia embraced the book and felt that it was truly a work of divine inspiration. She recalled, “in reading the testimony of the eight witnesses and the three witnessed, I felt that it was not a book written from a mere man’s wisdom but an inspired book written by His guidance and teaching.” James and Amelia Miskin remained friendly with the Zion Valley colony and contin-

29. Bickerton, “Testimony, June 1903,” 12; Miskin and Miskin, “Notes on Our Early Life,” 2; *County Capital*, November 14, 1889.

30. The blacksmith was Jasper Davis. His dwelling was the first finished building in the colony. See *County Capital*, November 14, 1889; Miskin and Miskin, “Notes on Our Early Life,” 3; “Zion Valley,” *Great Bend Register*, July 27, 1876.

ued studying the *Book of Mormon* and inquiring into the Saints' religious beliefs. Their personal deliberations and discussions with the colonists soon convinced them that William Bickerton offered the true path to salvation. The Miskins became one of the first families in western Kansas to join the church and the settlement.³¹

Although his colony had not reached a firm enough footing to start sending missionaries to Indian Territory, Bickerton did not restrict his ministry to those who came to him voluntarily. The Saints issued an open invitation to settlers from the surrounding region to attend services with them and offered a welcome respite in a land with few neighborly diversions. They traveled to Great Bend as well as out-of-the-way locations to minister to people with little access to organized religious bodies. "The people of Great Bend were very kind to us," recollected Bickerton, "and showed it in various ways. We had preaching at Great Bend in the school house, also in other localities, and were treated well by all." With a promising start for the colony and success in proclaiming the restored gospel, Bickerton had every reason to see God's blessings over his endeavors.³²

In June 1875, however, fiscal conditions in Zion Valley abruptly took a turn for the worse. Earlier in April, as Bickerton was first settling in Kansas, the Saints remaining in Pennsylvania elected Benjamin Meadowcroft to preside over the eastern branches of the Church of Jesus Christ while Bickerton worked in Kansas to build up the western branch. In addition, the eastern members appointed William Cadman and James Louttit to serve as Meadowcroft's counselors. Meadowcroft had never voiced any previous opposition to Bickerton's authority, but Cadman had never hidden his pessimism about the Indian mission, and Louttit had been a vocal opponent of the chosen site of the gathering. In the late spring the three leaders sought to assuage any lingering doubts and dispatched John Neish, a member of the Zion Colonization Society's board of directors, to Zion Valley with the task of inspecting to colony and auditing the colonization society books. Bickerton had no reason to suspect any deceit from Neish and gave him a tour of the region plus full access to the colony records. After praising the land and assuring Bickerton that everything was in order, Neish returned to Pennsylvania and left the colonists to continue their work with no thoughts of trouble from home.³³

31. Miskin and Miskin, "Notes on Our Early Life," 3.

32. Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 12.

33. William Bickerton, "The Zion Valley Colony," *Monongahela Valley Republican*, January 4, 1877; Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 72.

Nevertheless once back in the East, Neish told the church leadership a different story. Cadman related that Neish declared Zion Valley was located in "a barren prairie, a county of sand hills, occasionally interspersed with narrow valleys, containing (with the sand) a slight admixture of soil." The soil he described as the "droppings of birds and buffaloes" that had "only accumulated within the last fifteen years since grass first began to grow in the region." Since Neish presumed that the settlers would rapidly exhaust the limited productiveness of the ground, he declared that it would take but a few years before the colony collapsed. By then, he continued, "the hapless inhabitants would be found in great destitution and want; and the country would revert to its natural and original state, comparable, apparently, only to the Sahara." Neish had no agricultural experience from which to speak, and his polemic against Zion Valley became a personal attack on William Bickerton, whom he accused as being guilty of financial and spiritual mismanagement. It would take several years' harvests before the colony could attain full self-sufficiency, and until that time Bickerton and his western followers were largely dependent upon support from their eastern brethren. However, Neish's tale of foreboding so shocked the church leadership that in June Meadowcroft, in his capacity as the colonization society treasurer, betrayed Bickerton's trust and severed all financial aid to the colony.³⁴

Without funding for supplies, the Zion Valley colonists faced a dilemma. Bickerton had invested most of the colony's capital in tools, animals, and lumber, and by his own reckoning he had but "nineteen dollars to get provisions for all." He borrowed money in Great Bend for some flour and then purchased a train ticket for Pennsylvania. Collecting samples of produce grown in the Barton County vicinity, Bickerton left on June 28 to find out what had gone wrong back home. What he found upon arrival was an argumentative church membership sharply divided over the question of the divinely appointed site of the gathering. Neish's canard had convinced Meadowcroft and Louttit that Bickerton had erred, while Cadman harbored doubts but stood by the church president's revelations. Bickerton was the focus of discontent, and his display of Kansas-grown corn, potatoes, onions, and beets did little to convince his doubters of the land's potential for productivity. Therefore, in the hope of saving the settlement and the mission to the Lamanites,

34. William Cadman Sr., "The Latter Day Saints and Zion Colony," *Elizabeth Herald*, November 25, 1876.

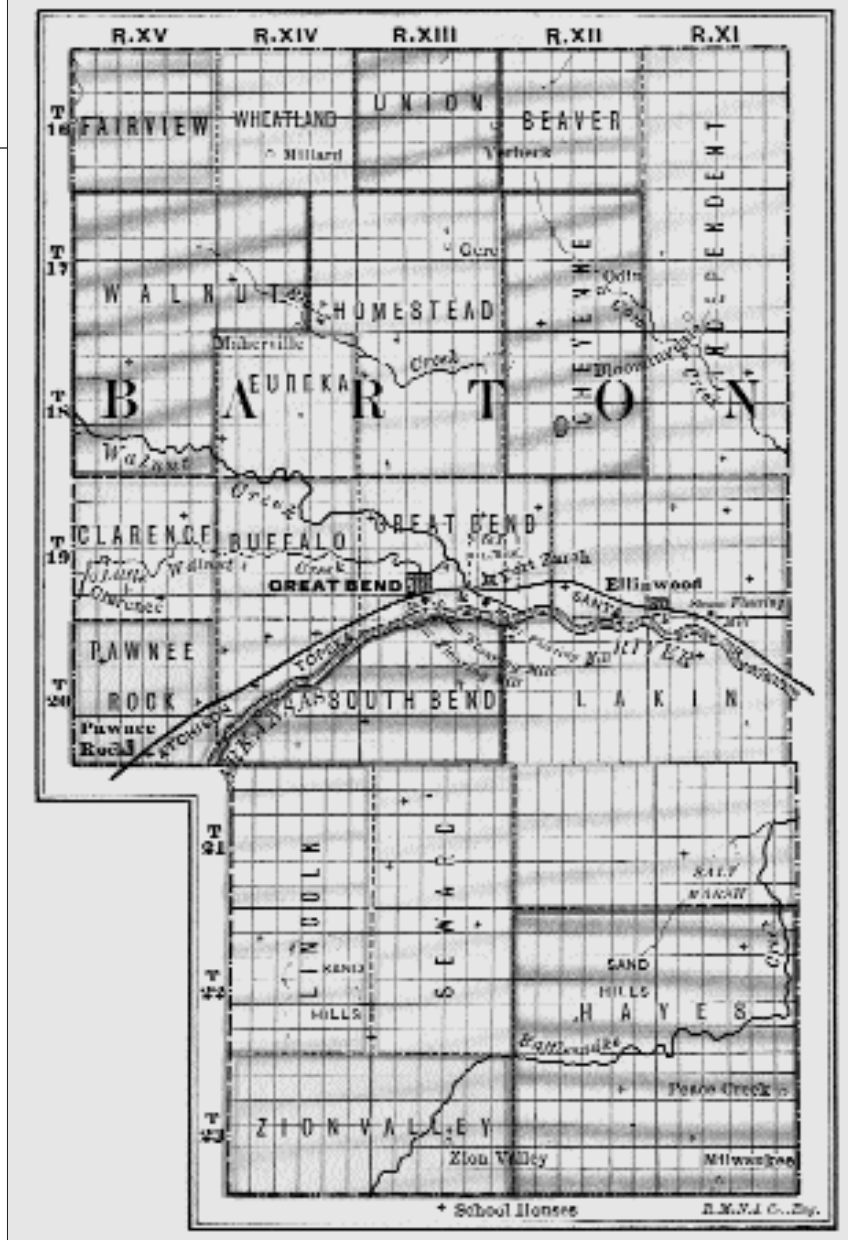
Bickerton announced that he “would no longer be responsible for the support of his colony” and resigned as president of the Zion Colonization Society. He asked the society’s board of directors to appoint another in his place.³⁵

Zion Valley had been struggling financially, but the difficulties were not due to any mismanagement on Bickerton’s part. The colonists had departed Pennsylvania in April with a common fund of twelve hundred dollars, most of which came directly from the sale of Bickerton’s personal property. Since settling in Kansas, the Saints had received a total of \$225 in monetary support from their eastern brethren. Bickerton used all of this money for lumber, tools, and provisions in the expectation that additional aid would be forthcoming either from the sale of his remaining property or from the goodwill donations of church members. He had withdrawn nothing for his personal profit, and Neish had contrived his contrary accusations for the sole purpose of discrediting the church president. Nevertheless, Bickerton remained resolute in his belief that Zion Valley was the divinely inspired site of the gathering and willingly accepted the board members’ appointment of William McDonald, formerly the corresponding secretary of the society, as colony superintendent. McDonald was aligned with the faction opposed to continuing the colony in Kansas, and his selection did not bode well for the colonists. Bickerton, however, was willing to turn control of the colony’s financial operations over to McDonald because his faith assured him that the power and glory of God would convince all doubters he had acted correctly. Therefore, accompanied by McDonald, Bickerton rejoined the Kansas Saints in July and gave his antagonists managerial control of the colony’s worldly operations.³⁶

Although he kept his designs to himself, McDonald had no intention of helping Zion Valley become a financial or spiritual success and was planning a furtive campaign to destroy the settlement. After arrival McDonald took immediate charge of the colony’s communal storehouse with its

35. Bickerton, “Testimony, June 1903,” 4; *Elizabeth Herald*, January 13, 1877; *County Capital*, November 14, 1889.

36. *Ibid.* Bickerton remained spiritual leader of the colony and president of the church.



This 1877 map of Barton County clearly pinpoints Zion Valley established along Rattlesnake Creek in present Stafford County.

meager supply of goods and provisions. He insisted that each family turn over all produce in its home to the common store after which he proceeded to deal out what he judged each household needed to survive and no more. Bickerton scornfully recalled that this policy “would have brought endless trouble, which never would be settled.” While McDonald’s storehouse program ultimately may have wrought unwanted complications, it paled in comparison with what followed. At the end of July, McDonald took charge of Zion Valley’s herd of seventy cattle as well as the colony’s cattle pens, horses, wagons, and unused lumber. With the aid of some collaborators, McDonald sold the colony’s common livestock and possessions, including the storehouse and provisions, at a public auction in Great



The town of St. John was officially established on the site of the Zion Valley Colony in 1879 and was named county seat of Stafford County.

Bend. He sent a small share of the proceeds back to each colonist in Zion Valley and then abandoned them to their fate. Everything happened so quickly that before the settlers fully realized what had befallen them, McDonald was back in Pennsylvania with most of the profits along with the lumber, cattle, and storehouse account books.³⁷

McDonald had been in Kansas less than a month, but the deleterious effects of his actions left Zion Valley without support and struggling for survival. "This was just about the breaking of the colony," recalled Bickerton. "Each family was forced to do the best it could, and had it not been for the buffalo bones" the colonists collected and sold in Larned "at six dollars per ton, we would have experienced much hard times" in the settlement. McDonald's actions had reduced the Kansas Saints to scavenging for the remnants of the former buffalo herds, while back east he and his collaborators pressed forward with their verbal attacks against the colony to ensure that no additional financial aid would be forthcoming.³⁸

The Zion Valley settlers desperately needed funding, and fearing the worst Bickerton rushed back to Pennsylvania to try to regain control of the properties he had entrusted to a church committee to sell. The church in the East was dividing, and while Bickerton saved his personal holdings, he found that his rivals had gained control of the West Elizabeth meetinghouse and had it advertised for

37. The seventy head of cattle had come from eastern Kansas and were a contribution from the Wilson County Saints. Before coming to Kansas, McDonald had been in charge of arranging transport for sending church members west. About McDonald's contribution in this area, Bickerton complained, "he sent a few worthless members, who were of no use in this country." Some were undoubtedly McDonald's collaborators, of whom one was Joseph Menzies, who fled the colony with McDonald and was cut off from the church in July 1876 for practicing "rascality." See Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 4; *Elizabeth Herald*, January 13, 1877.

38. Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 4.

sale. "When I was ready to come back," bemoaned Bickerton, the building "was auctioned off to the highest bidder." He made a bid hoping to stop the sale, but as soon as he returned to Kansas his antagonists sold the building anyway. Although Bickerton found this betrayal infuriating, he could do little about it

while his primary interest remained with the western colony. Peddling church estates for personal profit saddened Bickerton, and he reproached the men who sold the church sanctuary by stipulating, "if I had intended to make money out of it, I would have left it to my children."³⁹

Despite being isolated and impoverished while the eastern church factions struggled for control of the organization, Bickerton and the Zion Valley Saints held fast to their belief that they were obeying God's will in Kansas and refused to abandon the settlement. In the aftermath of McDonald's deception, however, none of the colonists advocated a return to a communal society with all things in common. "We each went ahead for ourselves and did the best we could," recalled Bickerton. McDonald had not gained control of everything during his brief tenure as superintendent, and the settlers still had their oxen plus a few teams of horses. Nevertheless, Bickerton reminisced how his followers were largely "miners from Pennsylvania and Ohio who knew very little about farming and as to working oxen we knew as little about them as they did of us." Later reports stated that they had managed to break and sow more than three hundred acres of ground by the first of October, but this was winter wheat that would not ripen before spring. The group's collective inexperience and isolation from the East meant that they had very little to hold them over during their first winter on the western plains. They survived the freezing temperatures by burning "corn stalks and buffalo chips," and admiring reporters later commented, the "winter did not check the ardor of these people." For his part, Bickerton understood

39. *Ibid.*, 10, 12; Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 86.

this trial to be a test of faith and interpreted his followers' hardships as "God's blessing to the Saints in Kansas."⁴⁰

While the Zion Valley Saints made preparations to endure the prairie winter, William Cadman worked to restore a sense of order among the eastern branches and bring the fractious members in line. At a December council meeting, Cadman presided over a fellowship that acknowledged the suffering taking place in Kansas and solemnly asserted "that any neglect on our part to reinforce them in their well meant exertions cannot possibly be attended with other than disastrous and ruinous results." The group reviewed McDonald and Neish's accusations against the colony and confessed that their reports "created with us an alarm of a general character for the welfare of Zion. They condemn the place appointed for the gathering (we believe without sufficient reasons), measuring it only by the standard of human comprehension."⁴¹

Cadman and the Pennsylvania Saints were torn over what course to take. While McDonald and Neish's negative assessment of the colony dismayed them, they questioned the agitators' spiritual faith and guarded their judgment. In the afternoon service following the council meeting, Cadman recalled, "we began to look to the Lord for consolation and comfort, and almost before we had time to call, the Lord answered and sent us a wonderful shower of divine glory." Three different members began speaking in tongues, and the fellowship interpreted the message to declare that Zion Valley was "a choice land, a good land, and that it was the place of the gathering; and that the Saints would gather to it, and none but the Saints." Furthermore, they stipulated, "there should be no speculation there, and that it was a spiritual gathering and not a temporal gathering." Believing that God had blessed their deliberations, Cadman proclaimed that the Saints should "for once obey the voice of revelation and place this people near the border of the Cherokee Nation." The church should work so that "the Deliverer may go out of Zion and turn ungodliness from Jacob; or else be candid and confess to all men that we do not believe in what we have been teaching these many years, namely the principles of immediate revelation."⁴²

In a direct appeal to Bickerton, Cadman sent the church president an account of the meeting. He assured the prophet "that you can depend upon this branch to sustain

the original position of the gathering; and, also, to raise considerable of a Spring emigration, provided you can furnish us with proper weapons of defence [*sic*]." To defend the settlement Cadman needed Bickerton to respond to the accusations by composing a comprehensive account of the colony for the church's January 1876 conference. "Express yourself firmly," pleaded Cadman, "on the quality of both land and water; and, also, describe climate, whether natural grasses are nutritious [*sic*]." Moreover, he wanted assurances that there was "material for making brick, and to what extent, and, in short, a general outlook of the prospect of building up a colony." More seriously, however, Cadman wanted Bickerton to refute Neish and McDonald's damning charge that he had been "led to that place by a Kansas brother who already had a claim." Once Bickerton had eliminated the materialist reasons for moving to Kansas, Cadman asked him to "give a truthful account of the spiritual condition of the colony, and express yourself concerning locality being appointed of God."⁴³

Cadman's admonishments and appeal to Bickerton created a temporary truce, and the Saints felt a restored sense of confidence in Zion Valley as the divinely appointed site of the gathering. Church members reinitiated the westward migration and began infusing the colony with fresh supplies. In February 1876 a local reporter in Pennsylvania observed the renewed enthusiasm and recorded that a "couple of familys [*sic*] left this place this morning for the Mormon colony, in Barton county, Kansas." This was just the beginning, and the journalist believed a "great many more families will go west to the colony as soon as they get the means to go with." He recognized that the settlement had room to grow and discerned the "colony is twenty miles from the railroad but the railroad company have promised to put them in a branch road as soon as they get settled."⁴⁴

Zion Valley once again began showing tentative signs of promise, and a small migration of individual family groups intent on joining the colony continued through March. By April, however, the question over the land's suitability for sustained agricultural production resurfaced. At a meeting held in Monongahela, Pennsylvania, the faction opposed to the colony seized upon the reports of a few unhappy settlers to renew the controversy and

40. *County Capital*, November 14, 1889; *Great Bend Register*, July 27, 1876; Bickerton, "Testimony, June 1903," 4.

41. Cadman, "Memorial," 75.

42. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

43. "Zion Valley," *Great Bend Register*, September 21, 1876; *Elizabeth Herald*, November 25, 1876.

44. Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 72; "West Elizabeth Letter," *Elizabeth Herald*, February 12, 1876; William Cadman, Sr., "The Zion Colony Matter," *Monongahela Valley Republican*, November 23, 1876.

disannul a church conference scheduled for July in Zion Valley. This was not a theological dispute, and their venal objective was to gain control over the organizational finances by severing Bickerton from church affairs. When they failed to gain a majority vote, Meadowcroft, Louttit, McDonald, and their collaborators angrily separated from the main body of the church and formed a rival organization in Coultersville, Pennsylvania.⁴⁵

This action had little immediate impact on Zion Valley, and a steady migration continued through the spring. The colonists in Kansas welcomed the new arrivals and looked forward to their future prospects. "Our Valley is filling up very fast," announced colonist and church secretary Thomas Taylor in May, and a "new house is built every few days. There have been about 20 persons settled here this week, and we are looking for about 30 persons from Wilson county, this State, this week." The settlement was showing enough promise that business leaders from Great Bend were considering expanding into the valley. "We have a blacksmith shop in running order," boasted Taylor, "and H. H. Kidder, of the Bend, talks of starting a branch store here. A good store will do a splendid business here." Taylor also pronounced that the colony's spring planting of wheat, corn, and oats looked well. Despite his exuberance, Taylor did not neglect Zion Valley's primary reason for being. He urged the readers of his column "to come down to one of our meetings and hear the Doctrine of Christ and his apostles preached by Inspiration and hear the gift of tongues and Interpretation of tongues, prophesy, &c., as on the day of Pentecost [*sic*]."⁴⁶

While Zion Valley continued its recovery, rival church factions persisted in arguing over its fate. Meadowcroft's adversarial Coultersville church declared in early July that Zion Valley had "busted" and that they held Bickerton personally accountable for all the money pledged to the colonization society since it was founded. The group knew that the colony was recovering, and Cadman pointed out that the rival faction's true goal was "to tear the colony asunder and establish another." Bickerton understood that the Coultersville group really wanted money and refused to countenance its negative statements or treat with "a few individuals who were trying to break down our church." Instead he denied any of the Coultersville delegates the right to participate in the late July Zion Valley conference and subsequently excom-

municated them from any future participation in church affairs.⁴⁷

Since the Zion Valley colonists as well as most of the church membership in the East remained loyal to Bickerton, the Coultersville delegates could do little beyond spit and fume, which they did vehemently. In September McDonald, speaking for the Coultersville faction, issued an announcement in Kansas that his group had excommunicated Bickerton. McDonald said that Bickerton was guilty of "the crimes specifically set forth of *superstition, idolatry* and *blasphemy*, and the church here and everywhere else is hereby warned to take notice of him hereafter as a teacher with the supreme contempt which the baseness of his conduct alone merits." Since McDonald's goal remained to squeeze whatever money he could out of Bickerton and the Zion Valley Colony, he issued a general appeal that he and John Neish were the sole authorized recipients of any money owed to the old Zion Colonization Society.⁴⁸

Both Thomas Taylor and Joseph Astin, the respective church secretaries for the western and eastern branches, denied the legitimacy of McDonald's actions and issued statements in support of Bickerton. Astin emphasized that the general church heartily endorsed "the actions of the Zion Valley Conference especially in their separating Wm. McDonald . . . [and] the suspension of John Neish as they have both rendered themselves unworthy of our consideration in any respect." He reaffirmed the eastern branch's support and recorded that the Pennsylvania Saints were "determined to work in unity with our Brethren in Zion's Valley and locate ourselves with them as soon as possible."⁴⁹

McDonald continued issuing accusations against William Bickerton and the Zion Valley Colony through the end of 1876, but whatever influence he may have had within the church and the settlers in Kansas departed with him when he helped form the rival Coultersville organization. A unified defense from Bickerton in Kansas and Cadman in Pennsylvania, along with letters of support from Judge E. L. Chapman in Great Bend, combined to relegate McDonald and his faction to irrelevancy. By the beginning of 1877 he and his followers had ceased their attempts to gain control over Zion Valley. Bickerton certainly considered the

45. Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 74–75.

46. Thomas Taylor, "Zion Valley," *Great Bend Register*, May 11, 1876.

47. *Monongahela Valley Republican*, November 23, 1876; *Elizabeth Herald*, November 25, December 2, 1876, January 13, 1877; Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 73.

48. *Great Bend Register*, July 27, 1876; William McDonald, "Communication," *Elizabeth Herald*, November 18, 1876.

49. *Great Bend Register*, September 21, 1876; "Minutes of the General Conference held at West Elizabeth Oct. 7th, 1876," *Great Bend Register*, November 9, 1876.

matter closed, and in January he announced that despite McDonald's efforts to destroy the colony, the colonists had almost one thousand acres of wheat planted for the spring harvest. "We also have had good health, good land and good meetings, and we invite all good Saints who want a good home to come to Zion, and enjoy the blessings of God—as we have them in our midst."⁵⁰

With the McDonald controversy behind them, the Zion Valley colonists looked forward to a prosperous future. The settlement was growing, and by April almost two hundred people, both Saints and gentiles, resided in the vicinity of the colony. A. J. Hoisington of Great Bend remarked, "with the energetic, industrious class of people who have located therein, [the colony] cannot fail in a few years to be a perfect garden." Hoisington was considering purchasing land in the region and had an interest in boosting the colony to potential merchants, so he emphasized that the colonists were "mostly 'Saints' or what the 'gentiles' call 'Mormons'—not the Brigham Young class. They are honest hard working people and strictly moral." The residents of this community, Hoisington assured his readers, earned a "living by the sweat of their brows and [were] not inclined to speculate or engage in merchandising." Bickerton expected more settlers to arrive during the coming year, and Hoisington agreed with the church president's spiritual and temporal expectations "that Zion Valley may be indeed to them all the 'Land of Promise.'"⁵¹

Hoisington and Bickerton had reason to be optimistic. Little animosity existed between the Saints and their gentile neighbors, and although nonchurch members such as James Harris would take advantage of the occasional opportunity to gather at the Zion Valley schoolhouse to hear a "Sermon by a Camelite [*sic*] against Mormonism," it caused no disruption. Settlers like Harris frequently shared chores with the Mormon colonists and occasionally attended services with them on Sundays.⁵² For Bickerton, howev-

50. Although it had little impact on Zion Valley's affairs, the published debate over the colony's land and finances became spirited at times. Judge E. L. Chapman's defense of Zion Valley appeared in "Communications," *Great Bend Register*, November 25, 1876. McDonald's response appeared in "Communications," *ibid.*, December 2, 1876. William Cadman's reply to McDonald's charges appeared as a series of letters in the *Monongahela Valley Republican*, November 23, 1876, the *Great Bend Register*, December 9, 1876, and the *Elizabeth Herald*, December 9, 1876. William Bickerton's answer appeared in the *Monongahela Valley Republican*, January 4, 1877, and the *Elizabeth Herald*, January 13, 1877.

51. A. J. Hoisington, "To Zion Valley," *Great Bend Register*, April 26, 1877.

52. The Campbellite preacher passed through Zion Valley on December 16, 1877. See James W. Harris, "Diary of James W. Harris. Zion Valley, Barton County, Kansas," 25, 31, (Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, typescript).

Catherine (Winebright) Beitler was one of many who moved to Zion Valley as the colony prospered and grew, especially in 1876–1877.

Mrs. Beitler and her husband, Jacob, were converts who came in 1877 from Wilson County.



er, signs of neighborly harmony and material progress were not enough when the spiritual progression of the church was the chief imperative. By 1877 Zion Valley had become the "largest and most influential" of all the Church of Jesus Christ's branch congregations, and Bickerton wanted this reflected in the church's organizational charter. The primary reason for founding the colony had been to make Zion Valley the central headquarters from which the group would send forth missionaries to Indian Territory. Bickerton took the first steps toward making this vision a reality, and in December he filed a charter with the Kansas secretary of state to reincorporate the Church of Jesus Christ, headquartered in Zion Valley, in accordance with Kansas state law.⁵³

Despite the new charter, what Zion Valley still lacked was a central house of worship. Since their arrival in 1875 the Saints had gathered for fellowship in individual homes, at the courthouse in Great Bend, or in regional schoolhouses. In January 1878 they looked to alleviate this deficiency and began soliciting the general population for donations to help construct a church building for the colony. Elder George Breckenridge visited Great Bend to court Barton County's leading businessmen and dignitaries for contributions, and by early February the colonists had collected eight hundred of the estimated two thousand dollars needed to complete the structure. Although less than half of what they needed, it was enough to start work on a frame building that interested observers believed would "be a credit to the flourishing colony in which it is

53. *Elizabeth Herald*, December 9, 1876; *Great Bend Register*, December 6, 1877.



Zion Valley Saints gathers inside their house of worship, the second church building, which was erected in 1899. William Bickerton is seated at the right rear, holding aloft the Bible and Book of Mormon.

ertheless, observers in Great Bend wryly pointed out that nearly everyone in the colony had “wheat on the brain” and looked forward to “unprecedented” harvests.⁵⁵

In June 1878, as a testament to their growing prosperity and faith, Bickerton issued a public memorial of the group’s beliefs, how they differed from the Utah Mormons, and warned his readers of the coming millennium. With this

located.” The church members began construction at a central location, “on a rise of ground, commanding a fine view of the valley,” and worked together on the project as time permitted.⁵⁴

Outside merchants started building in Zion Valley at the same time the Saints began work on their church, and with their arrival the settlement began to make the transition from religious colony to secular town. “Zion Valley is going to have a store,” proclaimed local newspaper editors. “Eight thousand feet of lumber is now on the ground and work upon the building will be commenced as soon as the weather will permit. A full stock of goods is at Larned waiting for completion of the building.” As the settlement started to boom a few of the colonists allowed their religious enthusiasm to give way to promotional zeal, and Joseph Astin wrote back to Pennsylvania, “people are coming here from all states of the Union and are astonished to find such a lovely place as this is.” With abundant land for growing crops and raising stock Astin openly wondered why anyone laboring back in the Pennsylvania coalfields “should linger and tarry, groveling for a bare, scanty living, when after 2 or 3 years in this place they might have enough to spare.” Astin wanted to assure the eastern Saints that religious concerns remained central to the colony and that “people are sending for us to go preach the everlasting gospel both east, west, north and south.” Nev-

duty complete, the Saints began putting the final touches on their new house of worship and started preparations for consecrating the building during their annual summer conference. With the help of a seven-hundred-dollar loan from Jacob Beitler, a convert from Wilson County, the colonists finished construction in early August. The building, which colonist David Carduff claimed could hold five hundred worshippers, was the centerpiece of the colony and quickly became a symbol of the colonists’ success in overcoming their earlier trials. Bickerton held formal dedication ceremonies in mid August, and his observances accentuated the Saints’ accomplishment in transforming their western plains’ valley into a promising community.⁵⁶

Zion Valley had grown far beyond the meager colony Bickerton had planted in the spring of 1875, and the colony’s material success began attracting additional gentile settlers to the region. Aware that the settlement lay near the center of what had been an autonomous Stafford County, many of these new residents joined with the Saints in an ambitious plan to form the Zion Valley Town Company and compose an appeal asking the state governor to reconstitute the old county bor-

54. “Zion Valley Notes,” *Stafford Citizen*, February 1, 1878; “Zion Valley Church,” *Great Bend Register*, February 7, 1878; *Great Bend Inland Tribune*, February 9, 1878. Plans for the church called for a structure “32 x 50 feet and 14 feet high.”

55. *Stafford Citizen*, February 15, 1878; *Great Bend Register*, February 21, 1878; Joseph Astin, “Latter Day Saints—The Monongahela Colony in Kansas,” *Monongahela Valley Republican*, February 21, 1878; *Stafford Citizen*, March 29, 1878; *Great Bend Register*, April 18, May 30, June 13, 1878.

56. “The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. A Memorial to All People,” *Great Bend Register*, June 20, 1878; Bickerton, “Testimony, June 1903,” 9; *Great Bend Register*, August 1, 22, 1878; *Great Bend Inland Tribune*, August 3, 1878.

ders with Zion Valley as the local seat of government. In the fall of 1878 the people living in the townships of old Stafford County began collecting signatures on a reorganization petition that they planned on submitting to the governor for his consideration. As the appeal circulated, observers in Great Bend disdainfully remarked “that a majority of the names are residents of Hays and Zion Valley townships, in this [Barton] county, and in and around the town of Stafford in Pratt County.” While pointing out that most petitioners lived in the eastern portion of the former Stafford County, the reporter insinuated that the northern tier of Stafford’s townships preferred to remain under Barton County’s jurisdiction. In truth districts such as Zion Valley were developing at a rapid pace, and the county commissioners in Great Bend did not relish the prospect of losing that growing tax base.⁵⁷

Despite Barton County protestations the plans moved forward. At a late February 1879 meeting of the Zion Valley Town Company secretary Thomas Taylor recorded that the main order of business had come to center on borrowing two hundred dollars for buying, surveying, and platting a forty-acre town site. The original object had been to purchase an appropriate amount of land from John Westwood’s claim, but Jacob Beitler, who represented the committee in charge of obtaining a loan, reported that no money was available for credit in Larned. Westwood subsequently balked at letting the company bargain for his land, so the group began casting about for a new location. Before settling on a permanent locale, however, the news came down from Topeka that their petition to reestablish Stafford County had succeeded. In April the Kansas State Supreme Court ruled that the 1875 legislative act dissolving Stafford had been unconstitutional. Therefore, except for three western townships that remained in Pawnee County, the court restored Stafford County to the bound-

57. “The Stafford County Petition,” *Great Bend Register*, November 28, 1878; Petition to Organize Stafford County, 1879, County Affairs, folder 10, Correspondence Received, John P. St. John Administration, Records of the Governor’s Office, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.



The third and present Church of Jesus Christ stands at Fifth and Exchange Streets in St. John. This structure is located on the lot where the first church was built in 1878. This spot is also the place where it is said Bickerton drove in his Stake of Zion in 1875.

aries it possessed prior to March 5, 1875. This ruling also heightened the pressure on Zion Valley to incorporate so its residents could compete with the town of Stafford and other communities for the county seat.⁵⁸

County residents considered all established communities as possible locations for the county seat, and citizens of the town of Stafford in the southeastern portion of the district represented Zion Valley’s stiffest competition. With its centralized location, however, Bickerton’s colony had a geographic advantage if it could obtain a land concession from one of the settlers. Having reorganized themselves as a joint stock company selling shares at five dollars apiece, the Zion Valley Town Company’s officers now had a capital stock of nearly two thousand dollars and approached Frederick Hawkins about obtaining a portion of his claim for the planned town. Hawkins owned the section upon which the Saints had built their church, and he agreed to sell the acreage surrounding the building to the town company for the sum of seven hundred dollars. Having secured the land, John Westwood, Jacob Beitler, C. S. Mace, George Breckenridge, Frederick Hawkins, and other town company members hurried to incorporate their organization. To curry the governor’s favor and enhance Zion Val-

58. Thomas Taylor, “Zion Valley,” *Great Bend Register*, March 6, 1879; “Stafford County,” *Great Bend Register*, May 1, 1879; *Great Bend Inland Tribune*, May 3, 1879.



This headstone, marking the final resting place of William Bickerton, stands in Fairview Park Cemetery in St. John. Bickerton died in 1905 at the age of ninety.

ley's chances for the county seat, however, member C. B. Weeks proposed that they eliminate the settlement's Mormon name. In honor of Kansas Governor John P. St. John, therefore, the members of the Zion Valley Town Company formally renamed their organization and their community St. John.⁵⁹

At a May 31 meeting held in the Zion Valley Church the town company formed a committee charged with nominating candidates for county offices and submitting the names to the governor with the request that he confirm their temporary appointment. The group reconvened a week later to formally establish the town of St. John in the center of the old colony. Their meeting marked the end of the independent, Mormon settlement of Zion Valley as the secular town of St. John took its place. The church building retained the old Zion Valley designation, but as the town became secularized, control of the community slipped out of the church members' hands. While the Saints had been enthusiastic advocates for an incorporated town and were equal participants in Zion Valley Town Company meetings, they had become a minority of the population. There was no conscious effort at discrimination, but the names the St. John Town Company sent to the governor for approval overwhelmingly represented the gentile population. At the beginning of July when Governor St. John or-

ganized Stafford County he appointed four gentiles to serve as the first county commissioners. He furthermore agreed to designate St. John as the temporary county seat with the stipulation that it would become permanent when a majority of county voters approved the selection.⁶⁰

Residents of the new town were ecstatic about their future prospects, and the Kelley brothers moved the general store they had constructed a year earlier four miles away to a lot on the new town site. Still, not all of the old colony settlers were able to share in the excitement. While the Saints and gentiles had been con-

centrating on organizing a town during the previous year, western Kansas's uncooperative climate took a decided turn for the worse. A severe drought that lasted from July 1878 through August 1879 ruined any chance of an abundant harvest to inaugurate the new town, and a few members of the church wrote back to their families in Pennsylvania that they were again having difficulties in meeting their financial obligations. Settlers who lived on the margins went bankrupt, and this included several families of Saints. James and Amelia Miskin, who had settled the area before Bickerton's arrival, lost their farm and moved to southeastern Kansas, where James found work as a mine laborer. Thomas Taylor likewise succumbed to the bleak harvest and decided to try his luck hunting for gold in Colorado. Regardless of the hardships, most members stayed with Bickerton and worked to promulgate the primary mission of the church.⁶¹

Although he had signed the county reorganization petition and was supportive of the new community, Bickerton remained aloof from the political affairs of town organizing. He resigned his position as Zion Valley postmaster and allowed the new St. John postmaster C. B. Weeks to move the small post office building from Bickerton's farm

60. "Stafford County," *Great Bend Register*, June 5, July 3, 1879; "Stafford County Mass Meeting," *Great Bend Inland Tribune*, June 7, 1879; "A New Town," *Stafford County Herald* (Stafford), June 20, 1879. St. John became the permanent county seat in April 1882.

61. Cole and Reuber, *No Cyclone Shall Destroy*, 8; Miskin and Miskin, "Notes on Our Early Life," 4; *Elizabeth Herald*, June 27, 1879; *St. John Advance*, July 31, 1880. Both the Taylor and Miskin families returned in 1880.

59. *Great Bend Inland Tribune*, May 17, 1879; *Great Bend Register*, May 8, 15, 22, 29, 1879; "History of St. John," *St. John Advance*, October 8, 1880.


to a lot on the town site. He led the Saints in prayers for rain during the drought season and after four years in Kansas was making preparations for being able to use his church as a base of operations for the Indian mission. As the recognized leader of the only organized religious body in town, however, Bickerton and his church became a target for people who resented the governor's choice of St. John for the county seat. The residents of the nearby towns of Newburg and Stafford, for instance, considered their neighbors to be little better than "a pack of thieves." Focusing their ire on the Saints, they believed that the citizens of St. John were "making desperate efforts to secure the permanent county seat. Our Mormon brethren have even gone so far as to offer a sacrifice for the people of Stafford county, and ask that their house of worship be made a Temple of Justice."⁶²

The allegations had no basis in fact, but at this point Bickerton was satisfied to let the town run its own course while he pushed forward his agenda for the Indian mission. He began making personal visits to the homes of all the Kansas Saints and asking them to lend their support for a planned 1880 mission, which would be the first formal delegation since Bickerton's 1868 foray into Indian Territory. Before this could happen, however, Bickerton would have to face the consequences of what Zion Valley had become. When William Cadman had given his support to Bickerton during the earlier controversy with William McDonald, he had been explicit that no speculation should take place in the colony and "that it was a spiritual gathering and not a temporal gathering." Cadman was displeased with the materialist speculation that accompanied the founding of St. John, and it would lead him to challenge Bickerton within the year.⁶³

At the end of 1879, however, the church's future in the new town of St. John looked bright. As a cooperative the



Next to Bickerton's headstone is this marker, citing him as the successor to Mormon leader Joseph Smith and the founder of St. John.

religious colony of Zion Valley colony failed, but the secular town of St. John that emerged to take its place was a resounding worldly success. In a little more than four years the settlement had gone from a struggling band of religious devotees huddling during an initial winter of deprivation to a newly prosperous town and the temporary, soon to be permanent, county seat of government. While the colony suffered during its first two years of existence, it never lost its moral center. The colonists firmly believed they were fulfilling the will of God in Kansas and identified with their chosen colony land in a way few groups could match. Nevertheless, success also brought a new set of difficulties, and as gentile settlers joined the Saints in Stafford County, the original colonists found themselves reduced to a subordinate group within the larger population. The development of a secular town and the rampant speculation that accompanied it proved disheartening to many church members who held that this was God's anointed ground and that none but the Saints should gather to Zion Valley. William Bickerton remained indifferent to political developments and concentrated on launching his long-sought Indian mission, but for others the gathering was the leading issue, and this would cause further troubles for the church. At the end of 1879, however, the Church of Jesus Christ was stable, prosperous, and at the heart of the new town of St. John. 

62. *Great Bend Register*, July 17, 1879; *Stafford County Herald*, August 6, 1879.

63. Cadman, *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, 75–76.