

Thomas L. Barnes: Coroner of Carthage

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During the latter part of the nineteenth century a one time Carthage, Illinois, physician, Thomas Langley Barnes, wrote two letters to his daughter which have recently come to light and which present some new, firsthand information about the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.¹

Barnes (1812-1901, son of Michael and Elizabeth West Barnes), one of the earliest settlers of Hancock County, lived at Carthage, the county seat, and married a young widow (Laurinda Burbank) there. He practiced medicine in the Carthage area (although he did not receive his M.D. from the University of Missouri until 1851), and had a good-sized practice, extending across the Mississippi to the Iowa shore. He served for a time (at least during 1845) also as a Justice of the Peace. Sometime later he moved to Ukiah, California, where he practiced medicine until he died.²

He was living in Carthage in 1839 and 1840 when the Saints were driven from Missouri. In his first letter he states:

I was well acquainted with the Smith family, Jo, Hiram and Bill. I believe I have seen the old patriac [Joseph Smith,

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¹The letters, to Mrs. Miranda Haskett, Ukiah, California, are dated November 1 and November 9, 1897. The original letters are now in the possession of Mrs. Donald E. Martin (a great-granddaughter of Barnes) of Santa Rosa, California. Copies are on file at the Huntington Library, Illinois State Historical Library, and at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. All but the final quotation from Barnes are taken from his letter.

²This information gleaned from Thomas Gregg, *History of Hancock Co., Illinois*, (Chicago, 1880) p. 688; correspondence with the Alumni Association of the University of Missouri; the Methodist Church, Ukiah, California; Mrs. Donald E. Martin of Santa Rosa, California, and the "Journal History," September 24, 1845 in the LDS Church Historian's Office.

Sr.], their father, as he was called. I knew Brigham Young, and most of the twelve apostils. I knew Sydney Rigdon, and I think I knew nearly all their prominent men. I was quite well acquainted with Daniel H. Wells, who joined them after they came to Nauvoo, and who came to be one of their prominent men. . . .

Although these letters reveal that he believed many of the malicious lies and rumors about the Mormons of that period, considering the general style and tone of contemporary anti-Mormon sentiment, Barnes was temperate and tried to be fair.³

He was both attending physician and probably the coroner after the mob attacked the Carthage jail and murdered Joseph and Hyrum. He remembered vividly this act of violence all his life, and most of what he writes about in his letters relates to this incident. He was most anxious to explain to his daughter Miranda that he had had nothing to do with the violence of that time and that he deplored it.

He first appears in Church history in connection with the destruction of the *Expositor* (an anti-Mormon newspaper published in Nauvoo) in June 1844. Barnes was one of several who on June 13 accompanied David Bettisworth, constable of Hancock County, to Nauvoo to aid in the arrest of Hyrum Smith, W.W. Phelps, John Taylor, and others for the destruction of the *Expositor*. By nine in the morning all those arrested were released by the Municipal Court of Nauvoo which drew its extraordinary powers from the unusually liberal Nauvoo City Charter. Later that day Barnes attended a mass meeting of the anti-Mormon citizens of Hancock County at Carthage and reported what had happened at Nauvoo.⁴

Five days later on June 18 it was alleged in an affidavit that Barnes "did not care for the Governor [Thomas Ford of Illinois], and had rather that the Governor would side with Smith; that they [the mob] were coming to Nauvoo with a sufficient force to take Smith; and if the people endeavored to prevent them, they should kill the people. . . ."⁵

³Frontier towns frequently became centers of refuge for various sorts of lawbreakers. It was the stealing of such elements in Missouri and Illinois who, claiming to be Mormons, brought much persecution to the Church.

⁴Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B.H. Roberts, Vol. 6 (Salt Lake City, 1950), pp. 460-61, 465.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 502-503. This affidavit, concerning threats of invasion from Missouri, was sworn before Aaron Johnson, a Justice of the Peace in Hancock County, by two Mormons, Cyrus Canfield and Gilbert Belknap.

About a week later Joseph Smith voluntarily went to Carthage on June 24 to face charges of treason against the state and people of Illinois. On the morning of June 25 Joseph and Hyrum surrendered themselves to Constable Bettisworth. Barnes says that he accompanied Bettisworth when the writs were served and spent some time in conversation with Joseph Smith. Possibly because of this personal visit with the Prophet he modified his radical feelings for, in relation to the murder of Joseph and Hyrum on the twenty-seventh, he condemns the "brave guards" who were supposed to have protected the prisoners. "They fired blank cartridges over the heads of the mob. . . . My impression is that they were equally guilty as any one of the mob."

His account of the attack is as follows:

It appears that one of the balls in the commencement of the attack passed through a panel of the door and hit Hiram in his neck which probably broke his neck. He fell back and died, as I was informed, instantly. When I went into the room shortly afterwards his head was laying against the wall on the other side of the room from the door.

The attacking party forced the door open and commenced firing at Smith . . . as he staggered across the floor to the opposite side of the room where there was a window. It is said that there he gave the hailing sign of the distress of a Mason, but that it did him no good. In the room behind him were armed men, furious men, with murder in their hearts. Before him around the well under the window there was a crowd of desperate men, as he was receiving shots from behind, which he could not stand, in desperation he leaped or rather fell out of the window near the well where he breathed his last.⁶ When I found him soon afterwards he was laying in the hall at the foot of the stairs where his blood had as I believe left indelable stains on the floor.

These tragic reminiscences, which at the time of the writing of the letter were more than fifty years old, continue with a reference to John Taylor:

Shall I not try to describe the wounds that Taylor received and got over them. Well let me tell you where we found him, I cannot impress on your mind of his appearance

⁶This firsthand account by a non-Mormon can well be used to cancel out the impression which Gregg strains to give that the mob's only purpose was "to take the prisoners and run them into Missouri." (Gregg, *History of Hancock Co.*, pp. 324-325.) Whether or not Joseph Smith actually gave the Masonic distress call, however, is very debatable.

as he appeared to us when we were taken to him by the jailer.

We found him in a pile of straw. It appeared that a straw bed had been emptied in the cell where he was when we found him. He was very much frightened as well as severely wounded. It took strong persuading of the jailer, as well as our positive assurance that we meant him no harm. . . . When we examined him we found that he had been hit by four balls. One ball had hit him in his forearm and passed down and lodged in the hand between the phalanges [a finger bone] of his third and fourth fingers. Another hit him on the left side of the pelvis cutting through the skin . . . leaving a superficial wound that you could lay your hand in. A third ball passed through his thigh lodging in his noties [lymph nodes of the groin?]. A fourth ball hit his watch which he had in the fob in his pantaloons, which I suppose the Mormons have today, to show the precise time that their *great leader* was killed.⁷

The wounds had bled quite freely, the blood had had time to coagulate, . . . he was a pitiful looking sight. We took the best care of him we could till he left us. He got well but never paid us for skill or good wishes.⁸

His story continues with the following information about Willard Richards:⁹

You want to know what has become of Richards. He was not hurt. You will ask how did it happen that his comrades [were] so badly treated and he came off without receiving any damage whatever. It was in this way as I suppose. I think he told me so. The four braced themselves against the door to keep the mob out. He stood next to the hinges of the door so when the door opened it would turn back against the wall . . . [shutting] him up against the wall and he stood there and did not move till the affair was all over, so that they did not see him.

After we were through with Taylor I went to Richards and said to him, Richards what does all this mean, who done it Said he, doctor I do not know, but I believe it was some

⁷This watch can be seen at the Bureau of Information on Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁸Compare this with Taylor's own account in B.H. Roberts, *Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City, 1892), p. 139. Sixty-eight years later when Raymond Taylor of Provo, Utah, a grandson of John Taylor, learned of this he wanted retroactively to correct this. The Barnes family wrote him that they had quit-claimed the bill to me. I then suggested that Raymond Taylor close the matter by sending me a check for \$1.00, which was done. (See *Church News*, Feb. 22, 1965.)

⁹See the oft reprinted account by Richards himself. Among other places it is reprinted in E. Cecil McGavin's *Nauvoo the Beautiful*, (Salt Lake City, 1946), pp. 132-133.

Missourians that came over and have killed brothers Joseph and Hiram and wounded bro Taylor. Said I to him, do you believe that, He said I do, says I, will you write that down and send it to Nauvoo. He said he would if he could find any person to take it. I told him if he would write it I would send it.¹⁰

Shortly thereafter, perhaps that same day, Barnes went to Nauvoo. After leaving Nauvoo he reported to the anti-Mormon forces that the Mormons were defending themselves. "The result was that [that] brave body of Mormon exterminators struck camp and in a short time they were making better time to leave Nauvoo behind than they were the day before to reach the Mormons."¹¹ Persecution did not cease, however, with the murder of Joseph and Hyrum. It continued to break out intermittently and the church leaders finally agreed to leave Illinois in the Spring of 1846. Still sporadic violence continued, so the less violent anti-Mormons of Carthage and vicinity called a public meeting for the evening of November 18, 1845 in the Court House for the purpose of "rejecting and deprecating such acts . . . and perpetrations" against the Mormons. Thomas L. Barnes was appointed secretary of the meeting. The following resolution was made and unanimously adopted:¹²

THE RESOLUTION:

Whereas we have learned that outrages have recently been committed against the Mormons in Hancock County, by burning the house of one and taking the life of another wherefore resolved.—that we the anti-Mormon citizens of Carthage and vicinity reject and deprecate such acts, that we look upon these perpetrators, whoever they may be, not only as criminals, but as our enemies, and will use our endeavors to bring them to justice.

Resolved—that we approve of the course of Major [William B.] Warren and those under his command [the

¹⁰The note was as follows: "Carthage Jail. 8 o'clock, 5 min., p.m., June 27. Joseph and Hyrum are dead. Taylor wounded, not badly. I am well. Our guard was forced as we believe, by a band of Missourians from 100 to 200. The job was done in an instant, and the party fled towards Nauvoo instantly. This is as I believe it. The citizens here are afraid of the 'Mormons' attacking them; I promise them no. W. Richards. N.B.—The citizens promise us protection. Alarm guns have been fired. John Taylor." See B.H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church . . .*, Vol. 2 (Salt Lake City, 1930), pp. 289-290.

¹¹Barnes' second letter, November 9.

¹²From the original resolution found among the Mayson Brayman papers at the Chicago Historical Society Library. Brayman was a lawyer appointed by Governor Ford to help arrange for the removal of the Mormons from Illinois.

Illinois Volunteers] in reference to the difficulties of this county, that we feel entirely satisfied to leave the management of the same solely with them; and will as the times exert our influence to prevent interference or interruption and aid them in preserving peace and good order in this community.

Resolved—that we prefer, and the history of our difficulties shows that we have ever preferred, to suffer wrong rather than become wrong doers; and that the public abroad would do great injustice to us, and to their own candor, to confound us with, or hold us in any way accountable for the violent acts of a few reckless individuals, such as civil commotions will always bring together for mischief.

Resolved—that inasmuch as the anti-Mormons of Hancock County have referred their grievances to the citizens of the surrounding counties, and they have resolved in a convention held in Carthage on the 1st and 2nd days of October last, that they will aid us in getting rid of the Mormons, and have fixed a time for their deportation [Spring 1846], and inasmuch as the Governor of the state has stationed a force here at our request to protect us and keep the peace till such time arrives; that it is the bounden duty of every anti-Mormon of this county, to keep the peace himself and to aid in seeing it kept by all, until the time fixed by said convention and the failure to do so on the part of any anti-Mormon is a breach of plighted faith to the citizens of surrounding counties, is an insult to the Commander and his forces stationed here and ought to be visited with its proper punishment.

Signed John W. Marsh
J.H. Sherman
O.C. Skinner

which report was unanimously adopted . . . a copy . . . furnished the Quincy papers and *Warsaw Signal* for publication.

Thomas L. Barnes, sec.

Elam S. Freeman, chairman

The mob elements did not completely keep this agreement and tension became so great that the Mormons were forced to commence their exodus in February 1846. The Carthage resolutions, however, were effective enough to give the saints a breathing spell and about ninety percent of them got out of the Nauvoo area before violence recommenced in July—violence which led to the Battle of Nauvoo in mid-September of that year.

Nothing more is known about Barnes' further involvement with the Mormons. As noted above, he later moved to Ukiah, California, attended the Methodist Church and practiced medicine there until he died in 1901.

These letters throw some valuable and interesting light on the greatest tragedy in Mormon history. Barnes' account of the murder should help set aside much of the material which has been written either to whitewash the murderers and the deed or to deprecate the Church.