Mormon-Indian Conflict During the Black Hawk War

Chelsea Kennett

Throughout the early nineteenth century a surge of religious revivalism in the United States resulted in the creation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. As this group moved west in search of territory they came into contact with a number of American Indian populations. At first they were receptive and respectful of these groups, often even converting them to their Christian-inspired faith. However, when land later became scarce, members of this church disregarded their previous acceptance of Indigenous people and violence often ensued with retaliation arising from both sides. This essay will examine the initial beliefs of the Latter-Day Saints concerning Indigenous Americans and provide examples of violence that outline the results of their hypocritical treatment of Indigenous peoples over time.

The Second Great Awakening resulted in religious revivalism and introduced numerous religious sects. In one geographical and temporal core of this awakening, New York, Joseph Smith Jr. established the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in 1830.1 Members of this church were informally known as “Mormons”. This religion generally accepted the Bible but rejected all other religions as false and embraced a book written by Smith called The Book of Mormon.2 Smith claimed to have translated the book from golden plates previously hidden in the earth for thousands of years and revealed to Smith by divine inspiration.3 Despite being murdered in a county jail only fourteen years later, Smith was able to amass tens of thousands of devout followers. He intended to establish a place called Zion for these followers to congregate, resulting in members moving west to Jackson County, Missouri, to build it. When violent altercations occurred between the Mormons and those who had previously settled in the area, Governor Lilburn Boggs issued Executive Order 44, stating that “the Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state.”4 Fearing for their lives they traveled from Missouri to Nauvoo, Illinois. Persecution drove the Mormons into various regions around the Mississippi River where they contacted numerous Indigenous peoples. The relationships between these groups often began as beneficial partnerships but land disputes caused them to become violent and assimilative.

The book of Genesis in the Bible refers to a group of people called the Israelites who were split into twelve tribes, one of which was the Tribe of Ephraim.5 Joseph Smith taught that this tribe traveled to the Americas from the Near East in 600 BCE and that the Book of Mormon contained a record of this migration.6 The Book of Mormon teaches that two rebellious brothers, Laman and Lemuel, who were

2 Joseph Smith-History 1:19 (Book of Mormon).
3 Joseph Smith-History 1:34.
6 Genesis 50:24-38 (Joseph Smith Translation). Joseph Smith claims to have been inspired by God to re-translate the King James Version of the Bible in order to restore truths which had been lost throughout its various translations. This version is
members of this tribe, broke from their ancestors and their descendants became known as Lamanites.  

The book further teaches that when the Lamanites disassociated themselves from their family they became evil and disobedient so God cursed them by darkening the colour of their skin. This suggested to the Mormons that the Indian people they met were actually descendants of the Lamanites.

In many cases the Mormons had positive relationships with the Indigenous groups they encountered. One of the church’s early Prophets, Brigham Young, testified that although the Indians were barbaric and savage in their ways, Mormons had no right to kill them. Young argued that Mormons should be kind to Indigenous peoples and teach them religion. Evidence suggests that the Pottowatomie in particular held great respect for the Mormons residing in their region. In a letter from the Pottowatomie to Smith they refer to him as “father” and ask him for advice on whether to sell their lands. In response Smith stated that he was pleased to regard them as his children, offered council and friendship, and advised them to keep their lands so that they and their children would have a place to prosper. Smith strongly argued that the American Indians were descendants of Ephraim and that all of the tribes of Israel would one day inherit the Americas as their “promised land”. However, this belief that Indigenous people had a right to their land was hypocritically denied as land became scarce and Mormons desired it for themselves. The U.S. government was infamously slow in their dealings with Indian treaties and often completely disregarded their rights and bought their land for much less than it was worth. There were thousands of incidents of recorded violence between armed forces of the federal government and Indigenous people. Although much less work has been done in investigating violence between Indians and Mormons, evidence suggests that there was similarly no shortage of bloodshed between these two peoples.

The Black Hawk War was not a result of one event but was the culmination of a series of events that included land disputes and the mutual agreement that Mormonism was incompatible with its Ute, Paiute, Navajo, and Apache enemies. The conflict began with the successful raids, led by Chief Black Hawk, on Mormon settlements through which thousands of cattle and horses were stolen for trade. The war lasted for seven and a half years, from 1865 to 1872, without interference from the federal government, likely because Mormons and the government were in contention as Brigham Young, the prophet who held office after the death of Smith, promoted isolationist policy and condoned the illegal institution of polygamy. Black Hawk likely assumed, correctly, that the Mormons would be unwilling


known as the Joseph Smith Translation (JST).

7 4 Nephi 1:38 (Book of Mormon).
8 2 Nephi 5:21.
13 Smith to Saxton, 4 January 1833.
16 Peterson, “Mormons, Indians, and Gentiles,” iii.
to ask the federal government for assistance at the cost of bureaucratic meddling in their affairs. These factors resulted in a war in the Utah region that was kept relatively secret for almost eight years. Throughout the war the Mormons colluded with the federal government to place the Ute on reserves, despite being displaced to the region after facing persecution themselves.

Historian R. Warren Metcalf has argued that the Black Hawk War was a phase in the cyclical process of both Mormons and the federal government expropriating indigenous lands and forcibly removing those who tried to resist. The events of the war were often connected through a long string of previous altercations, which resulted in resentment and continued animosity from both groups. The Thistle Valley Massacre is a prime example of the Ute’s hostile attitudes towards the Mormons because of continued land disputes. The Given family had recently moved to the Uintah Valley region and claimed a portion of land in Thistle Valley for themselves and their cattle. Local church leaders had warned the family that they may have chosen land which was vulnerable to attack by the Utes, but they reportedly claimed not to be fearful. The family consisted of John and his wife Eliza and four children aged nineteen, nine, five, and three. On the morning of May 26, 1865, fifteen Ute warriors surrounded their small hut while four entered and brutally murdered the family with guns and tomahawks.

This event occurred amid treaty talks aimed at putting the Ute people on a reservation in the Uintah Valley after they surrendered their other lands. The agreement proposed that the land was to be relinquished in exchange for annual payments as well as the establishment of saw mills, a manual labour school, and cattle to raise. When the treaty was initially signed, it seemed as though most Utes were pleased with the results of the trade; however, a problem arose when different tribal groups within the nation dissented. The land on which each tribe was situated was culturally and politically significant to them as their ancestors had lived there for as long as they could conceive. By moving, they not only lost their identity but were forced to become members “of the band owning the land to which they move[d].” Evidence also suggests that Mormons, including Brigham Young, assured the Utes that they would be able to remain on their traditional lands. The Utes likely blamed the Mormons directly for their misfortunes when these promises were not kept. This was the basis of the Ute-Mormon conflict and explains why the Ute reacted with extreme violence on many occasions. The Thistle Valley Massacre clearly demonstrates this: the Given family was attacked because they were perceived as illegal squatters on traditional land. The family’s Mormonism gave the Ute further reason to attack, as the Ute blamed the Latter-Day Saints in particular for the loss of their traditional lands and, by extension, their own identity.

The Circleville Massacre has been regarded as the single worst tragedy of the Black Hawk War. Unlike the previous conflict, this massacre resulted in the murder of Paiute men, women, and children. In the months leading to the massacre a large number of Paiutes and whites had been killed over land

18 Peterson, “Mormons, Indians, and Gentiles,” 90.
19 Peterson, “Mormons, Indians, and Gentiles,” 100.
21 Peterson, “Mormons, Indians, and Gentiles,” 111.
22 Peterson, “Mormons, Indians, and Gentiles,” 182.
disputes and thievery. By April 1866 frontier justice had become commonplace and whites felt that they could act without legal authority and without the fear of discipline.\textsuperscript{23} Circleville experienced a number of attacks throughout the year preceding the massacre and security had not improved by April.\textsuperscript{24} This constant fear and a lack of settler confidence in their own ability to protect themselves likely factored into the massacre. In response to recent killings, Mormons at Circleville requested that local Paiutes come to the town for questioning, and while many refused those that did come did so voluntarily. Men, women, and children volunteered. During the interviews, they were convinced to yield their weapons; however, one man attempted to escape and was immediately fired on. As a result, the group was placed under guard in the meetinghouse and a cellar. The men were bound.\textsuperscript{25} While awaiting orders from their superiors, some of the men freed themselves and attacked the guards in an escape attempt likely made possible because the guards did not understand the Paiute language. As a result they were able to speak freely as they helped untie one another and coordinated their attack. Nevertheless, the armed guards immediately fired on the group, killing all the Paiute men within minutes. Realizing that the surviving group of women and children would bring news of the brutal deaths to the other Paiutes, the Mormons decided to kill the remaining captives. One by one, the women and children, save the youngest four who were adopted by whites, were brought out of the cellar to have their throats slit. Historian Albert Winkler has suggested that their throats were slit to avoid inciting fear below as well as to not alert other Paiutes who might have heard the gunshots. It is estimated that eleven men were killed as well as sixteen women and children.\textsuperscript{26}

The two problems with this account concern the actions of the Mormons and Winkler's analysis. The Mormons' decision to kill the remaining Paiute women and children was an extreme lapse in judgment as the deaths would not simply go unnoticed by the remaining Paiutes; certainly, fewer deaths would have caused less trouble, as the Mormons' decision to also murder the innocent women and children would likely anger the Paiutes further. Finally, Winkler's analysis claiming that their decision to slit their throats was so that Paiutes in the distance would not hear the gunshots is not plausible as multiple gunshots had echoed just minutes before. As eleven men died in the gunfire, numerous shots were fired and anyone in the distance would have heard the shots, making throat slitting unnecessary. His other conclusion, that perhaps they slit their throats so as not to cause fear in those who were about to die is more likely; however, the panic would not have been difficult to control as the prisoners were women and children locked in a cell.

It is clear that land was a primary factor in Mormon disputes with Indigenous Americans. Just as the United States government slaughtered American Indians who would not give in to demands for land, the Mormons similarly disregarded Indigenous rights and killed them when they believed it was necessary. The Mormons hypocritically denied the Indians their “promised land” even after earlier insisting that they were God's chosen people, the Lamanites, and that they would inherit the Americas. Violence was also inflicted upon the Mormons because of their squatting on Indigenous land, as displayed

\textsuperscript{24} Winkler, “The Circleville Massacre,” 11.
\textsuperscript{25} Winkler, “The Circleville Massacre,” 16.
\textsuperscript{26} Winkler, “The Circleville Massacre,” 18.
by the Thistle Valley Massacre which resulted in the killing of a Mormon family who were seen as squatters by the Ute. The Mormons’ initial embrace of the “Lamanites” was overruled when they saw a threat to their own prosperity, resulting in an eight year war, fought in secret, causing many needless deaths among Mormons and indigenous peoples alike.
Kennett, “Mormon-Indian Conflict” 23

Bibliography


