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Turning Type into Pi: The Destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor in Historical Context

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TURNING TYPE INTO PI: THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NAUVOO EXPOSITOR IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Craig L. Foster

Abstract: *The destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor has been portrayed as an event that stands out as a unique act where Joseph Smith and the Nauvoo City Council suppressed free speech. However, rather than being an anomaly, the destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor was historically and socially reflective of society in a volatile period in American history during which time several presses were destroyed and even editors attacked and killed.*

On Monday evening, June 10, 1844, the Nauvoo city marshal and approximately one hundred members of the Nauvoo Legion, acting as a *posse comitatus*, went to the premises of the *Nauvoo Expositor* where they “removed the press, scattered the type, and burned the remaining copies of the newspaper.”¹ This came after hours of meetings of the Nauvoo City Council on Saturday and Monday, which included intense discussion and reviewing English common law and the United States Constitution. The first and only issue of the *Nauvoo Expositor* was published on Friday, June 7, 1844. It can be reasonably described as an “opposition newspaper” accusing Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of a number of “odious traits” including “false swearing, lying, stealing, robbery, defrauding, polygamy, adultery, fornication, [and] blasphemy.”² The editors of the newspaper announced

1. “Nauvoo Expositor,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (website) <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/nauvoo-expositor>.

2. Stephen C. Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries* (Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 74. For a full text copy of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nauvoo_Expositor_1844_\(IA_NauvooExpositor1844\).pdf](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nauvoo_Expositor_1844_(IA_NauvooExpositor1844).pdf).

that their goal was “the unconditional repeal of the Nauvoo City Charter”³ and to “place Joseph Smith and his base accomplices in crime, before the world in their true character” as “gross, dark, loathsome, and cruel” people.⁴

This article will demonstrate how the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, rather than being an anomaly, was historically and socially reflective of American society during that volatile period of American history. Over a forty-year period of twenty years before and after the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, many presses were destroyed and editors attacked or killed. While practically unheard of in the twenty-first century, destruction of presses was much more common in the Jacksonian and Antebellum eras and in the first years of the Civil War.

Returning to that fateful Monday evening in 1844, the City Council declared the *Nauvoo Expositor* to be a public nuisance for “slandering the Municipality of the city” that would cause increased persecution and mobbing from Nauvoo’s anti-Mormon neighbors.⁵ Acting to protect the city and its residents, the City Council ordered the destruction of the press. The order was completed by City Marshal John P. Greene who reported, “The within-named press and type is destroyed and piled according to order, on this 10th of June, 1844, at about 8 o’clock p.m.”⁶

3. “Prospectus of the *Nauvoo Expositor*,” May 10, 1844, 1, also “Prospectus of the *Nauvoo Expositor*,” *Nauvoo Expositor*, June 7, 1844, 4.

4. Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds*, 74.

5. Ibid., 75, and Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 14–15. See also, “Why Did the Nauvoo City Council Order the Destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* Press?,” *KnoWhy* 626, Book of Mormon Central (website), January 7, 2022, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-did-the-nauvoo-city-council-order-the-destruction-of-the-nauvoo-expositor-press>, and Randal S. Chase, *Making Precious Things Plain*, vol. 5, Church History Study Guide, pt. 2, 1831–1844, (Washington, UT: Plain and Precious Publishing, 2012), 446. Chase states that the City Council reviewed English common law to justify their actions. In a review of Dallin H. Oaks’ “The Suppression of the *Nauvoo Expositor*,” [*Utah Law Review* 9 (Winter 1965): 862–905], Thomas Alexander summarizes Oaks’ conclusion that the Nauvoo City Council did not have the “right to abate the *Nauvoo Expositor* on the basis of its political and religious allegations, but on the charges of immorality, the city could have made a case. Precedents from Illinois courts and from Blackstone justified the abatement of nuisances without trial.” Thomas G. Alexander, “The Church and the Law,” *Dialogue* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 123.

6. J. P. Greene, notice issued from the headquarters of the Nauvoo Legion, June 10, 1844, as quoted in “History of Joseph Smith,” *Millennial Star* 24, no. 1 (January 4, 1862): 6, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Latter_Day_

The reference to type being *pied* meant that the type sorts were mixed and turned into a jumbled and confused mass. This meaning of *pie*, also written as *pye* and *pi*, was common enough to be defined in the 1828 edition of Webster's dictionary, where *pie* has the entry, "Printers' types mixed or unsorted,"⁷ and *pye* as "A confused mass; the state of printing types when the sorts are mixed."⁸ Like the edible noun *pie*, it may be related to the use of *pie* in describing various birds such as the magpie, where we may see "the various combinations of ingredients [used in making pie] being compared to objects randomly collected by a magpie."⁹

Charles A. Foster, one of the *Nauvoo Expositor's* publishers, in a letter to the *Warsaw [Illinois] Signal*, wrote about his press being destroyed and the type *pied*. He stated that "a company consisting of some 200 men, armed and equipped, with Muskets, Swords, Pistols, Bowie Knives, Sledge-Hammers, &c, assisted by a crowd of several hundred minions, who volunteered their services on the occasion, marching to the building, and breaking open the doors with a Sledge Hammer, commenced the work of destruction and desperation." He described how "They tumbled the press and materials into the street, and set fire to them, and demolished the machinery with sledge hammer."¹⁰

Saints_Millennial_Star/v18tAAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA6. See also Douglas O. Linder, "Better to Smash Than to Live: The Order to Destroy the Nauvoo Expositor," Famous Trials (website), University of Missouri — Kansas City, <https://famous-trials.com/carthage/1257-expositororder>.

7. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the American Language* (1828), s.v. "pie," <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/pie>.

8. Ibid., s.v. "pye," <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/pye>.

9. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd ed., rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1332, s.v. "pie," https://archive.org/details/oxforddictionary0000unse_z0z2/page/1332/mode/2up. There may also be a connection to the printing term "pica" which also means *magpie* in Latin. See Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v., "pie," n. 3, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/pie>, and *ibid.*, s.v. "pica," n. 1, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/pica>. Note that the Online Etymology Dictionary gives 1870 as the first known date of "pie" being used as a verb, though we can see it was clearly in use as a verb in 1844.

10. "Extra. The Time Is Come!," *Warsaw Signal*, June 11, 1844, 1 as published at *Uncle Dale's Readings in Early Mormon History* (website), *Warsaw Signal* (Message), January - June 1844 Articles, <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/IL/sign1844.htm#0611>. Oaks and Hill noted in *Carthage Conspiracy*, 57-58, that Thomas Sharp's *Warsaw Signal* was not profitable as a newspaper. Sharp had started, stopped, restarted, and again stopped the newspaper because of financial worries.

Condemnation of the destruction of the press was swift. Governor Thomas Ford of Illinois wrote Joseph Smith and stated, in part, “I now express to you my opinion that your conduct in the destruction of the press was a very gross outrage upon the laws and the liberties of the people.”¹¹ The *Quincy [Illinois] Whig* called the destruction a “HIGH-HANDED OUTRAGE” and explained that with the “Mormon attitude toward law and rights it is not surprising the Missourians were raised to madness and drove them from the state.”¹² Thomas C. Sharp in the *Warsaw Signal* called the City Council’s action an “Unparalleled Outrage” and provocatively announced “war and extermination is inevitable. Citizens ARISE ONE AND ALL.”¹³ The rumor mill appears to have been active during this time of trouble. In an article that appeared in the *Niles’ National Register* of Baltimore, not only was Joseph Smith arresting everyone who did not agree with him, “threats [had been] made by the Mormons to destroy the press of the *Warsaw Signal*, and to assassinate the editor.”¹⁴

Other newspapers reported the destruction of the press. The *New York Herald* reported the destruction and then editorialized, “These Nauvoo rulers have doffed their saintly robes, and have come out in their true characters of hellish fiends.”¹⁵ The *Litchfield [Connecticut] Enquirer* announced the destruction under the title of “Lynching at Nauvoo”; the *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.) called the action “lawless” and “reckless”; and the *Alexandria [Virginia] Gazette*, in an article titled “Outrage at Nauvoo,” stated that the “City Corporation have formally resolved themselves into a mob, and have destroyed the press and materials of the Nauvoo Expositor.”¹⁶

The destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* was described at the time as “unparalleled” and an “outrage,” and present-day critics have described

11. *History of The Church*, 6:534, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/online-chapters/volume-6-chapter-27/>.

12. “HIGH-HANDED OUTRAGE,” *Quincy Whig*, June 19, 1844, as reprinted in Oaks and Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy*, 15.

13. “Unparalleled Outrage at Nauvoo,” *Warsaw Signal*, 12 June 1844, 1, as quoted in Marvin S. Hill, “Carthage Conspiracy Reconsidered: A Second Look at the Murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 97, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 107.”

14. “Mormon War” *Niles’ National Register*, June 29, 1844, 6.

15. “Later from Nauvoo,” *New York Herald*, June 25, 1844, 1.

16. “Lynching at Nauvoo,” *Litchfield Enquirer*, July 4, 1844, 2; “Destruction of the ‘Nauvoo Expositor’ by Joseph Smith,” *National Intelligencer*, June 25, 1844, 3; and “Outrage at Nauvoo,” *Alexandria Gazette*, June 24, 1844, 3.

the event with similar outrage such as “the destruction of the Expositor is tantamount to an act of terror that should be denounced in any free society.”¹⁷

Extralegal Press Destruction in the Antebellum Era

Disdainful hyperbole may be understandable, but the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* was actually not an unheard of, unparalleled, outrageous, or illegal act at the time it took place. From roughly twenty years before until twenty years after the destruction of the press, violence was common amid political and social turmoil in the United States. Indeed, this was a time when “print culture [became] the special scapegoat of the decade. ... Presses throughout the union were wrecked ... as small-town printers were mobbed and their printing offices dismantled.”¹⁸

Print culture became the scapegoat in large part because of the 1835 American Anti-Slavery Society postal campaign aimed at certain southern civic and political leaders.¹⁹ This campaign met with resistance:

During the night of July 29, a shipment of mail sent by boat docked at the Charleston, South Carolina harbor. The mail was taken to the local post office and stored over night, before it would be sorted. That night a group named the “Lynch Men” stole the mail from the post office. The next night the “Lynch Men” paraded through the town with 2,000 other people and burned the mail.²⁰

Violence spread from there.

In 1836, Abraham Lincoln called mobbings “the every-day news of the times.”²¹ Lincoln also said that if “the vicious portion of [our] population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and

17. Meatowhirledpeas, “Joseph Smith’s destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor presses was an indefensible, illegal and unconstitutional act — members have been excommunicated for lesser offenses,” Reddit, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/6slltf/joseph_smiths_destruction_of_the_nauvoo_expositor/.

18. Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 348.

19. Ibid, 346–48.

20. The American Anti-Slavery Society and Philadelphia Females Anti-Slavery Society (website), <https://americanantislaverysociety.weebly.com/postal-campaign.html>.

21. Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, 349.

thousands, and burn churches, ravage and rob provision stores, throw printing-presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure and with impunity, depend upon it, this government cannot last.”²²

Myra Glenn observed that: “Anti-abolitionist riots were a regular occurrence in the antebellum United States. So too were riots against prostitution, gambling and drinking. ... Partisan politics and theatrical performances also sparked mob violence as did conflicts among different class, ethnic, religious, and racial groups.”²³ Such mobbing and violence was aimed at American newspapers and their editors. In fact, many editors expected violence. Cassius M. Clay, the editor of the emancipationist newspaper, *The True American*, “mounted two cannons in his newspaper office.”²⁴

Ironically, as explained by Professor Richard Kielbowicz at the University of Washington, most mobs believed that rather than ignoring the law with their protests, including violent action against newspapers and newspaper editors, they were exhibiting “a hypersensitivity to the law. Communities pointed to legal principles that supported the suppression of unwanted newspapers in their midst, and they followed a quasi-legislative or -judicial process in which lawyers and civil authorities” believed “communities should have some control over ideas disseminated in their midst.”²⁵

In nineteenth-century America, justifying the suppression of antislavery and other controversial newspapers, “mobs customarily branded the offending publication a ‘nuisance’ or ‘public nuisance.’” Nuisance law “was one of the most important public legal doctrines of

22. Abraham Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” in *Early Speeches 1832–1856: Including Legislative and Congressional Resolutions, Political Circulars, Notes, Etc.* (New York: Current Literature Publishing, 1907), 19, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Early_speeches_1832_1856_including_legis/ZrZAAQAAMAAJ?gbpv=1.

23. Myra C. Glenn, “Review: It’s a Riot! Mob Violence in Antebellum America,” *Reviews in American History* 27, no. 2 (June 1999): 210.

24. Abigail G. Mullen, “When the Pen Gives Way to the Sword: Editorial Violence in the Nineteenth Century,” in David B. Sachsman and Gregory A. Borchard, eds., *The Antebellum Press: Setting the Stage for Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 2019), quotation available at https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Antebellum_Press/zQSdDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22mounted+two+cannons+in+his+newspaper+office%22&pg=PT125&printsec=frontcover.

25. Richard B. Kielbowicz, “The Law and Mob Law in Attacks on Antislavery Newspapers, 1833–1860,” *Law and History Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 559–60.

nineteenth-century regulatory governance.”²⁶ Popular concepts of what defined public nuisance were used legally and extralegally to further causes.

Attacks on Editors

During the forty-year period under consideration, there were numerous examples of assaults against editors for one reason or another, many simply being that the attacker was insulted or offended by the editor. The following are a few examples.

- In 1828, E. J. Roberts, a New York City publisher, attacked a Mr. Noah, editor of the *Enquirer* with a “cow skin” (a small whip) over an insult.²⁷
- Reverend Amos Blanchard, editor of the *Cincinnati Journal*, was attacked by a man with a whip for the reverend’s editorial. A few years later the editor of the *Cincinnati News* announced that he was likely to be “extensively cowhided” in the course of the day.²⁸
- The editor of the *Gleaner* was assaulted by a man who believed he had been slandered. He was “considerably hurt” and the *Lowell [Massachusetts] Patriot* editorialized, “Dangerous times these, for newspaper editors and publishers.”²⁹
- The editor of a Memphis, Tennessee, newspaper was attacked by a local judge who believed he had been insulted. The fight resulted in canes and pistols on both sides. The editor ended up being shot in the hand.³⁰
- In 1848 the editor of the *Vicksburg [Mississippi] Sentinel* was killed in the street during a political quarrel. This was,

26. *Ibid.*, 574, 575. He continues, “Nineteenth-century definitions of nuisance continued to focus on ‘unwarrantable or unlawful use by a person of his own property, real or personal,’ according to H. G. Wood’s treatise on the subject. But the action also came to encompass ‘improper, indecent or unlawful personal conduct, working an obstruction of or injury to a right of another or of the public, and producing such material annoyance . . . that the law will presume a consequent damage.’”

27. *The Geneva Gazette, and General Advertiser*, July 2, 1828, 3.

28. “Cow-hiding a Clergyman,” *Delaware Gazette*, September 7, 1831, 1, and *Times-Picayune*, July 21, 1838, 2.

29. “Cowhided,” *New Hampshire Gazette*, June 6, 1843, 1, quoting from the *Lowell Patriot* article about the whipping.

30. “Serious Affray,” *The Arkansas Banner*, March 21, 1848, 3.

according to the *New York Herald*, the third or fourth editor of the *Vicksburg Sentinel* to be killed in a duel or street fight.³¹

- In 1851, *The Prairie Chieftain* (Monticello, Indiana) commented, “The average number of editors cowhided, for the last month or so, is about three and three quarters per week.”³²
- Orson Hyde was one of those editors cowhided by an angry reader. In 1852 he was in Weston, Missouri, where he was cowhided by a Robb Wilson of that town who claimed he had been slandered in the *Frontier Guardian*. By this point, Hyde had ceased editing the newspaper, which was published in Kanesville, Iowa.³³
- *New York Herald* editor James Gordon Bennett is said to have been “nine times publicly kicked, cuffed, caned, cowhided, and spit upon.”³⁴
- As the result of publishing an exposé of a gambling house in a nearby town, the editor and workers of the Scranton, Pennsylvania, *Morning Herald* were attacked and “severely handled” by a mob of men.³⁵
- In 1859, the editor of the *Nashville News* shot and killed the editor of *The Union and American* (Greeneville, Tennessee) over an editorial quarrel between the two.³⁶

Attacks on Printing Presses

Not only editors were attacked by angry people and mobs. In 1842, the printing office of the Lancaster, Ohio, *Eagle* was set on fire in the middle of the night. In reporting the loss, the *Ohio Democrat* described the paper as “a fearless champion of Democracy” that “could only be crushed by the incendiary’s torch.”³⁷ In 1844, the *Stamford [Connecticut] Advocate*

31. “An Editor Killed,” *New York Herald*, September 23, 1848, 2.

32. *The Prairie Chieftain*, January 28, 1851, 1.

33. *Northern Islander*, July 1, 1852, 3.

34. “Amenities of the Press,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 17, 1857, 2.

35. “Printing Office Mobbed,” *Cleveland Morning Leader*, April 27, 1860, 2 and *The Yazoo Democrat*, May 19, 1860, 2.

36. *The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, April 27, 1860, 3 and “Fatal Affray,” *The Jeffersonian*, (Stroudsburg Pennsylvania), November 24, 1859, 2.

37. “Printing Office Burned,” *The Ohio Democrat*, December 22, 1842, 3.

announced it was new and improved after having been destroyed by a mob.³⁸

Reasons for mobbing and destroying presses varied. These reasons ranged from the silly to the serious. In 1856 a Salem, Indiana, editor had his press destroyed by the “liquor men” of the town because he had applauded the women who “had been mobbing the liquor stores there.”³⁹ In 1841, the press of the *Rockford [Illinois] Star* was broken with the type scattered and pried “by a portion of the citizens of the vicinity.”⁴⁰ The cause of the attack on the press was “an article condemning the course of the volunteer companies in relation to the horse thieves.” While the newspaper had condemned the murder of the horse thieves by a vigilante posse, the enraged town’s people felt the newspaper had justified the horse thieves.⁴¹

This, like a number of other incidents, involved aspects of politics. For example, in 1840 the office of the *True American*, a Democrat paper in Paoli, Indiana, was broken into by unknown persons and the press broken and type scattered. The Whigs, one of the two major American political parties in the 1840s and 1850s, were blamed for the destruction.⁴² In 1846, an ex-Senator of the Ohio Legislature, unhappy with the editorials, entered the office of the *Eaton [Ohio] Democrat* and proceeded to break the press and destroy everything in the office. He then threw the cases and type into the street.⁴³ In 1848, the office of the *Louisville [Kentucky] Democrat* was broken into, “the power press broken to pieces, several forms knocked into pi, and a lot of papers set on fire, which would have burnt down the building had it not been immediately discovered.”⁴⁴

Such attacks also occurred against Republican newspapers. In 1859 the office of the Newport, Kentucky, *Free South Paper* was mobbed, and the type scattered in the street.⁴⁵ And politics extended beyond American political parties. In 1851, a mob in New Orleans destroyed a pro-Spanish press called *La Union*. They destroyed the presses, forms, and type but

38. *The Raleigh Register*, October 18, 1844, 3.

39. “Mob Law in Indiana,” *Richmond Dispatch*, May 3, 1856, 1.

40. “A Printing Office in Pi,” *The Mississippi Free Trader*, July 26, 1841, 2, and “That is the Way,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 28, 1841, 2. This case is explained in more detail later in the article.

41. *Ibid.*

42. “Desperation of Federal Whiggery,” *The Wabash Enquirer*, July 8, 1840, 3.

43. “Printing Office Destroyed,” *Easton Star*, March 24, 1846, 2.

44. “Infamous Outrage,” *New Albany Democrat*, June 29, 1848, 2.

45. *The Perry County Democrat*, November 3, 1859, 2.

were careful to not damage the building. They also refused to harm the family of the proprietor, who resided above the printing shop.⁴⁶

By far, the issue that was the cause of most cases of destruction of presses was slavery, with abolitionists suffering at the hands of pro-slavery mobs. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of anti-abolition violence was the 1837 murder of Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois. Although Lovejoy and his press were in a free state, his press was destroyed for the fourth time in the span of a year, and he was killed by “a party of citizens” led by men of “property and standing.”⁴⁷ Lovejoy’s press had been destroyed three times within a year previous to the final deadly attack. The third attack occurred while Lovejoy was trying to leave St. Louis, Missouri, for Alton, Illinois. In the last attack before Lovejoy departed St. Louis, the mob destroyed not only the press and printing materials but also destroyed his family’s belongings which had already been packed for shipping to Alton.⁴⁸

Another well-known abolitionist who suffered from attacks on his press was Cassius M. Clay, the Kentucky planter, politician, and later Ambassador to Russia who was outspokenly pro-abolition and was known to violently defend himself and his beliefs. In 1845, his *True American Press* was destroyed in Lexington, Kentucky, by a mob of sixty men. Clay packed up what was left of the press and materials and sent them to Cincinnati where the paper could continue printing in relative peace.⁴⁹

46. “The New Orleans Riot,” *North American*, September 1, 1851, 1.

47. “Destruction of a Press,” *New Bedford Gazette*, September 4, 1837, 2; “Mob at Alton, Illinois—The Rev. E. P. Lovejoy Killed, and His Abolition Press Destroyed,” *Columbian Register*, November 25, 1837, 2; and “Mobocracy and the Press,” *The Farmer’s Cabinet*, December 1, 1837, 3.

48. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *The End of American Lynching* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 185n52. See also, Ken Ellingwood, *First to Fall: Elijah Lovejoy and the Fight for a Free Press in the Age of Slavery* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2021), 2.

49. “C. M. Clay’s Press Destroyed!,” *Massachusetts Spy*, August 27, 1845, 3, and *Herald of the Times*, October 16, 1845, 2. Clay had several incidents where he was brutally attacked by foes. For examples of Clay’s violent nature in defending himself, see “The Clay and Turner Tragedy,” *Semi-Weekly Raleigh Register*, July 14, 1849; David Borgenicht and Turk Regan, “An Unstoppable Politician: Cassius M. Clay Makes His Attackers Suffer,” in *The Worst-Case Scenario Almanac: Politics* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008), 95.

During this forty-year time-period, presses were regularly attacked, mostly without punishment.⁵⁰ In Cincinnati, for example, a large meeting of citizens was convened in 1836 to address “what steps should be taken in reference to the publication of the *Philanthropist* the organ of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society. ... During these proceedings the civil authorities of the city appeared, by their silence, to acquiesce in this subversion of law and order,” the *Constantine [Michigan] Republican* reported. At the conclusion of the meeting, the press was destroyed by a mob.⁵¹

In Parkville, Missouri, in 1855, a mob gathered and passed resolutions declaring the *Industrial Luminary* to be a public nuisance. Approximately two hundred “citizens of Platte county ... destroyed the fixtures and threw the printing press into the Missouri river. The editors’ absence alone saved them from being tarred and feathered.”⁵² In fact, the mobbers had planned to tar and feather the editors and ride them on a rail. G. S. Park was out of town, but his partner, W. J. Patterson, was present. However, his wife clung to him and implored the mob to leave him alone. They relented.

Among the eight resolutions passed by the Parkville mob, the first was that the Parkville *Industrial Liminary* was declared a nuisance which should be abated. Also, the editors were declared traitors to the state and county. The editors were ordered not only out of the town and county, but apparently also Missouri and Kansas. The resolution said in part that the editors would be thrown into the Missouri River if found in the county three weeks from that time and, if they moved over to Kansas, “we pledge our honor as men, to follow and hang them wherever we can take them.”⁵³ They further pledged that “no person belonging to the Northern Methodist Church” would be allowed to preach in Platte County.⁵⁴

During the time of “bleeding Kansas” — a period of violence and guerilla warfare in Kansas between the pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers and forces that came into Kansas specifically for the purpose of getting control of the territory — several presses were either destroyed or

50. According to Kielbowicz, “The Law and Mob Law,” 569, there were at least twenty examples of mob action against antislavery newspapers. The actual number is probably higher as I found references to destroyed presses not included in the article’s list.

51. “The Cincinnati Mob,” *Constantine Republican*, August 24, 1836, 2 and “Items,” *South Branch Intelligencer*, August 6, 1836, 2.

52. “Mob Law in Missouri,” *The Hillsborough Recorder*, May 9, 1855, 2.

53. “Press Destroyed by a Missouri Mob,” *The New Orleans Bee*, April 28, 1855, 2.

54. Ibid.

their editors threatened. Two newspapers were destroyed in Lawrence, Kansas, where one office was “fired upon by a field piece” by a pro-slavery militia and the other shop was “mobbed, ransacked, and set on fire and burned to the ground.”⁵⁵ Another paper, as yet unnamed, was destroyed in Osawattomie, Kansas, and it hadn’t even begun publishing. The press and other equipment had just arrived in the town and was destroyed before ever being used. The press was destroyed during the general destruction of the town and the women were robbed of their rings and other jewelry by border ruffians.⁵⁶

These attacks against abolitionist presses continued up to the Civil War. As late as October 1859 an abolitionist newspaper was destroyed. Newport, Kentucky’s *Free South* was mobbed by pro-slavery men. The press was “broken, the form knocked into pi, and the type scattered in the street.” The editor’s daughters who were present when the attack was made on the printing shop and who usually set the type for the newspaper, were “grossly insulted” by mob members. It was reported that when mob members approached the printing shop, they told the editor “they considered the community unsafe where such a paper was tolerated, and so forth.”⁵⁷ During the war, “more than three dozen editors and publishers discovered that voicing dissenting opinion during wartime had outsized consequences. ... Extra-legal violence (or threats of violence) by mobs suppressed speech and often forced editors to take flight when their offices were ransacked and their printing presses were destroyed.”⁵⁸ In fact, just over a period of weeks in the summer of 1861, eleven newspapers were either suppressed or destroyed. Not only were presses destroyed, some editors, like Ambrose L. Kimball of Haverhill,

55. “Printing Offices Destroyed,” found in “A Record of Kansas Ruffianism,” *Weekly Hawkeye and Telegraph*, June 25, 1856, 1; also found in an article by the same title, *Bradford Reporter*, June 21, 1856, 1.

56. “More Border Ruffianism,” *Minnesota Weekly Times*, June 21, 1856, 4 and “The Last Bulletin from Kansas,” *The Weekly Pantagraph*, June 18, 1856, 2.

57. “More Free Speech,” *Western Reserve Chronicle*, November 2, 1859, 2, and “A Free Press Mobbed in Kentucky—Type Destroyed and Press Broken,” *Ohio State Journal*, November 1, 1859, 2.

58. Mary M. Cronin, “Acts of Disloyalty: Legal and Extralegal Restrictions on the Civil War-era Western Press,” Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression 2019 Abstracts, University of Tennessee Chattanooga, November 7–9, 2019, <https://www.utc.edu/arts-and-sciences/communication/west-chair/symposium-19th-century-press-civil-war-and-free-expression/2019-abstracts>.

Massachusetts, were punished by being tarred and feathered and ridden on a rail.⁵⁹

Destruction of Presses by Civil, Military, and Political Authorities

Threats, violence, and destruction were not just the acts of mobs and vigilante forces. It was also the result of acts by civil, military, and political authorities.

Extralegal Attacks on Presses by Authorities

Most of the incidents of press destruction were extralegal mob actions, unlike the Nauvoo City Council-ordered destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. Perhaps that's what differentiated the *Nauvoo Expositor* destruction from the numerous other presses destroyed during this time.

The difference between a government-ordered destruction as opposed to a mob-driven destruction is a significant factor and almost all examples of destruction of newspapers and presses were extralegal. There were, however, examples of public officials who resorted to extralegal destruction of presses. For example, in 1843 the premises of the *Juliet [Illinois] Signal*, a Whig paper, was "violently entered, and several portions of the press taken away and secreted" in an attempt to suppress publication of the paper until after the local election. One of the leaders of the mob was *Chicago Democrat* editor and Democratic candidate for Congress, John A. Wentworth, who was backed by the local Democrat political machine. He is best known among Latter-day Saints as the recipient of the 1842 Wentworth Letter written by Joseph Smith which included what we now know as The Articles of Faith.⁶⁰

John Wentworth was not alone as a candidate helping destroy a press. In 1859, Sylvanus B. Lowry was the Democratic candidate for Minnesota Lieutenant-Governor. This was a year after he had headed the mob that had destroyed the press of Mrs. Swisshelm's St. Paul

59. "History Telegrammized," *Grant County Herald*, September 18, 1861, 1 and "The Reward of Treason," *Holmes County Republican*, August 29, 1861, 3.

60. "A Press Destroyed," *Boston Courier*, July 17, 1843, 4, and "Outrage," *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, July 20, 1843, 2. Wentworth served in Congress, 1843–1851, 1853–1855 and 1865–1867. He also served two terms as mayor of Chicago, 1857–1858 and 1860. See "Wentworth, John," Biography, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/person/john-wentworth>.

abolitionist newspaper, *The St. Cloud Visitor*.⁶¹ On a more personal level, in 1836 a man who had previously “filled sundry offices of high trust and responsibility” entered the office of the *Ohio Observer* and proceeded to destroy the printing establishment “to prevent the publication of sundry resolutions, adopted at ‘a respectable meeting of citizens’ of Hudson [Ohio], in which he was ‘meentioned [sic] by name as having been guilty of licentious conduct.’”⁶²

In Maryland, a Mr. Claggett, Whig delegate to the Maryland House of Representatives and a slave holder, attempted to have the *Saturday Visitor*, a pro-abolition Baltimore newspaper, declared a public nuisance and be abated, removed, or destroyed.⁶³ In Richmond, a newspaper named *The Hornet* was attacked and the press destroyed. While there appears to have been no official order to have the press attacked, according to one article about the incident, all was done “in the presence of a police officer, who declined interfering.”⁶⁴ Despite the political and official influence of the previous examples, these could still be deemed extralegal.

Legal Attacks on Presses by Authorities

There are examples of civil, military, and political figures and entities officially ordering the silencing, suppression, abatement, or destruction of newspapers. For example, in the first months of the Civil War, five newspapers, four of them in St. Louis, were suppressed by military authorities.⁶⁵ These papers were deemed treasonous or a nuisance as a reason for being shut down.

One of the more colorful examples of actions ordered by government officials took place in 1835 during the little-known Toledo War, also known as the Michigan-Ohio War. This was a boundary dispute over a strip of land now known as the Toledo Strip. During Michigan’s petitioning for statehood in 1835, both the Territory of Michigan and the State of Ohio claimed this strip of land. In July 1835, the acting territorial governor, Stevens T. Mason, ordered the Monroe County, Michigan

61. “Border Ruffianism in Minnesota, Mrs. Swisshelm’s Press Destroyed,” *New York Tribune*, April 7, 1858, 5.

62. “Mobbing,” *The Corrector*, July 13, 1836, 3.

63. “Proposed Suppression of the Baltimore Saturday Visiter!” *The Liberator*, January 30, 1846, 2.

64. “Shameful,” *National Advocate*, January 1823, 2, emphasis added. While this incident was just a little out of the forty-year timeframe, I deemed it significant enough to discuss.

65. “The Reward of Treason,” *Holmes County Republican*, August 29, 1861, 3.

Territory, sheriff and a posse of about 250 men to proceed to Toledo to serve warrants on some individuals and take action against the local press which “had become obnoxious to the Michigan authorities” and was thus deemed a nuisance.⁶⁶

Members of the posse went to the printing office of the *Toledo Gazette*, split and knocked down the door to the office, and demolished the press and materials. The press equipment was broken and the type was scattered around the premises. After breaking up the press and arresting certain individuals, the posse retreated over the Michigan Territory border, leaving behind an angry Toledo populace.⁶⁷

Another example that is just a little out of the time being studied occurred in Richmond, Ray County, Missouri in 1866. The *Missouri Freeman*, “having published an article instigating the people to violence and resistance,” state authorities “sent a squad of militia to arrest the editor and destroy the press, which was done.”⁶⁸

Justification of Destroying Presses

Jacksonian and Antebellum society extralegal punishment of real and perceived threats to the peace of the community was not only allowed, but at times embraced in parts of the United States.

Historian Richard Maxwell Brown estimated that the 1830s and 1840s served as a high point for vigilantism in Illinois. Most Americans saw vigilante movements as essential for law and order in new frontier communities. Driven by the American values of “self-preservation, the right of revolution, and popular sovereignty,” elite citizens took the law into their own hands to restore or create social order.⁶⁹

The destruction of printing presses and turning type into pi was usually condemned by some editors and lauded by others, depending

66. “Ohio and Michigan—Renewed Hostilities,” *Indiana State Journal*, July 31, 1835, 2.

67. Ibid.

68. *The Daily Empire*, December 20, 1866, 2.

69. Jeffrey David Mahas, “‘I Intend to Get Up a Whistling School’: The Nauvoo Whistling and Whittling Movement, American Vigilante Tradition, and Mormon Theocratic Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 43 (October 2017): 40, discussing and quoting Richard Maxwell Brown, “The American Vigilante Tradition,” in *Violence in America: Historical & Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1979), 154, 156, 159, 166.

upon political and social persuasion. Thus, abolitionists decried the savagery of attacks against fellow abolitionists while slavery-supporting editors in not only the South but also Northern states either applauded such actions or remained conspicuously silent. This also was the pattern of Democrat and Whig publications in what could only be described as condoning such actions if they were on the editor's side and condemning them if they were not.

Vilifying Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints

If the extralegal destruction of annoying and troublesome printing presses was allowed and even lauded by other editors, presses, and communities, then why the overwhelming denunciation of the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*? How was this event different from a number of others throughout the country?

Like other presses at the time that were viewed as public nuisances and dangerous to the community, the *Nauvoo Expositor* was destroyed. Furthermore, while there are fewer examples of official action being taken against presses and their editors, examples nevertheless exist. So even there, Joseph Smith, the Nauvoo City Council, and other officials were not acting without precedent, nor were they the last example of such action. It appears they genuinely believed they were within their legal rights to destroy the press.

On June 27, 1854, John Taylor spoke in the Old Tabernacle in Salt Lake City about the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. In explaining what led to the martyrdom, he recounted a conversation he had with Thomas Ford after the murders. Ford told Taylor he was sorry they had destroyed the press. Taylor responded that "it was legal." They went back and forth, and Taylor asked, "Were we to be trampled upon? Is there a city in the union that ever did?" "No," Ford responded. "What were we to do then?" Ford then answered Taylor, "I would have got up a mob to destroy it and that would have cleared the city council."⁷⁰

Thomas Ford's comment about having a mob take care of destroying the *Nauvoo Expositor* apparently was based on his own personal experience with vigilante violence. In 1841, Ford was Circuit Judge for the Ogle County, Illinois, Circuit Court. At the time, Ogle County and environs were suffering from the Prairie Bandits, a group of horse thieves and rogues. Ford, frustrated with the horse thieves avoiding

70. LaJean P. Carruth and Mark L. Staker, "John Taylor's June 27, 1854, Account of the Martyrdom," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 3 (2011), 47, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4336&context=byusq>.

justice, suggested to Ogle County residents that they form a group of “regulators” to fight the thieves through vigilante action. Ultimately, several thieves were taken prisoner for a murder and an *ad hoc* trial was held. Two were found guilty of murder and executed with the hundred plus regulators acting as a firing squad.

Philander Knappen, editor of the *Rockford [Illinois] Star*, printed an editorial condemning lynch law and the actions of the regulators. “A few nights after this editorial appeared, the *Star*’s offices were sacked and the type broken up and scattered on the floor. Knappen decided that it would be best to exit the newspaper business in Rockford.”⁷¹ The *Cincinnati Gazette* and the *Virginia Free Press* both had articles talking about the destruction of the *Rockford Star*. The *Virginia Free Press* stated that the mob needed to silence the *Rockford Star* because it was focusing attention on the murders committed by the vigilantes.⁷² Because the *Rockford Star* had made the murders known, according to Gale, Ford presided over a series of rigged trials exonerating the over one hundred members of the regulators.⁷³

John Taylor, however, scorned Ford’s suggestion of falling back on extralegal justice rather than legal justice and quietly encouraging a mob to destroy the press. He explained to the listening audience,

We had honest integrity enough to maintain the truthfulness of law but the governor of [the] state [was] so afraid of what the people [would] say but let us get up a mob to destroy the damned thing. We knew we were right and did it. That was the belief we acted upon.⁷⁴

Although Taylor was sure of their legal authority to abate the newspaper (“abate” is used here in the legal sense of removing a nuisance), Dallin H. Oaks, while serving as a professor at the University of Chicago Law School, published a seminal article titled, “The Suppression of the *Nauvoo Expositor*,” in which he explained that the Nauvoo City Council did not have the “right to abate the *Nauvoo Expositor* on the basis of its political and religious allegations, but on the charges of immorality,

71. Neil Gale, “The Regulators and the Prairie Bandits: Vigilante Justice in the Illinois Rock River Valley,” Digital Research Library of Illinois History Journal, July 14, 2018, <https://drloihjournal.blogspot.com/2018/07/regulators-and-prairie-bandits-vigilante-justice-in-illinois-rock-river-valley.html>.

72. “The Illinois Murders,” *Virginia Free Press*, July 29, 1841, 2.

73. Gale, “The Regulators and the Prairie Bandits.”

74. Carruth and Staker, “John Taylor’s Account,” 47.

the city could have made a case.”⁷⁵ Oaks further argued that rather than taking the approach they did, Nauvoo authorities could probably have successfully pursued “prosecution for criminal libel for the attacks on the city officials or a prosecution for unlawful assembly for the paper’s efforts to incite violence” and that “both [would] have been feasible under Illinois laws then in effect.”⁷⁶

Furthermore, he explained that while the decision made by the Nauvoo City Council went against accepted law, the laws at the time were in flux in both interpretation and enforcement. Oaks wrote, “the available evidence demonstrates that the 19th-century interpretation of constitutional provisions like that of Illinois laid far more emphasis on the ‘responsibility’ of the press than on its ‘freedom.’” He continued, “The suppressionist attitude made itself felt in numerous criminal prosecutions against newspaper writers, editors, and publishers for various types of newspaper activity like the *Expositor*’s.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

This article does not seek to condone nor condemn the actions of Nauvoo officials in ordering and carrying out the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. Instead, it details that rather than being an aberration, the destruction of the press fit neatly into this volatile and violent time in American history. The facts demonstrate that the *Nauvoo Expositor* was only one of many newspapers similarly destroyed. Fortunately for them, the publishers and editors of the *Nauvoo Expositor* escaped the violent fate of those operating many other presses in that era.

While the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* fit into the social milieu of the time and Nauvoo officials believed they were acting within their rights, members of the Nauvoo City Council, those who destroyed the press, and Nauvoo citizens suffered the consequences of the City Council’s actions.⁷⁸ Right or wrong, Joseph and Hyrum Smith ultimately paid with their lives for destroying the *Nauvoo Expositor*, the Nauvoo City Charter was repealed by the state legislature (as the

75. Alexander, “The Church and the Law,” 123.

76. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Suppression of the *Nauvoo Expositor*,” *Utah Law Review* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1965): 896.

77. *Ibid.*, 895.

78. According to Oaks and Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy*, 201, eleven members of the LDS Church were indicted for riot in the destruction of the press. Of those, two were eventually arrested and brought to trial—Jesse P. Harmon and John Lytle—both Nauvoo law-enforcement officers. Eventually they were found not guilty.

publishers of the *Nauvoo Expositor* had desired), and the Saints were soon driven from Illinois.

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