



Type: Book Chapter

The Context of the Kirtland Temple

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Source: *The First Mormon Temple: Design, Construction, and Historic Context of the Kirtland Temple*

Publisher: Provo, UT; Brigham Young University Press, 1997

Page(s): 1-5



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Courtesy RLDS Church Archives.

1-1. Southeast view, Kirtland Temple, ca. 1885.

Chapter 1

The Context of the Kirtland Temple

The Church of Christ, established by Joseph Smith in 1830, created a religious movement that has grown to almost ten million people. These individuals have created their own culture and traditions, which have in turn necessitated the creation of new architectural traditions. The House of the Lord in Kirtland, Ohio, more commonly referred to as the Kirtland Temple, is the first major permanent structure for worship built by the Mormons. It served as a direct pattern for the next five Mormon temples and strongly influenced numerous meetinghouses and tabernacles. Any study of Mormon building practices must start with the Kirtland Temple, and any study of the temple must begin with the circumstances surrounding its inception in the newly settled lands west of the Appalachian Mountains.

The Western Reserve

In the early 1830s, northeastern Ohio was a natural destination for Americans seeking prosperity. Rocky soil and short growing seasons had pushed many New Englanders west in search of better farming opportunities. In the eighteenth century, the state of Connecticut claimed the northeastern portion of Ohio, making it a magnet for settlement. Political control of this so-called Western Reserve of Connecticut was relinquished for the right to profit from the sale of the land, and New England investors sold parcels primarily to other New Englanders seeking better farmland.

In addition to a gentler topography, richer soil, and milder climate, northeast Ohio had excellent transportation connections with major eastern markets. Lake Erie provided steamship transport to Buffalo, where items could be transferred to canal boats navigating the Erie Canal, open since 1825, and shipped to New York City and ports beyond.¹ Fairport Harbor, twelve miles to the north of Kirtland, was an especially important transportation node because high bluffs made it the last good anchorage until the



1-2. Map of the Kirtland area.

city of Cleveland, situated at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River. The Cuyahoga itself formed the first leg of the Ohio Canal, which after 1832 connected Lake Erie with the Ohio River and the entire Mississippi River system. Thus, Ohio farmers had the enviable position of having access to markets in both New York and New Orleans via inexpensive river transportation. Land speculators were not unaware of these natural advantages. By the 1830s, land prices in the Kirtland area were soaring, a fact that was to have a significant influence on the future of Mormonism and the Kirtland Temple.

The Saints in Kirtland

The arrival of Mormonism in Kirtland and the construction of its first temple seem more a matter of chance than design. Joseph Smith's family left New England along with hundreds of other farm families after 1816, the disastrous "year without a summer," which saw snow in June and a crop-killing frost in July. Settling in the township of Farmington, which later became Manchester, New York, the Smith family purchased land on credit and commenced the arduous (and ultimately unsuccessful) task of making the payments. Here the teenaged Joseph Smith related to his family and fellow townspeople his reception of divine communications.

The ridicule one might expect from such a pronouncement became harassment after Joseph announced he possessed golden plates obtained from a heavenly messenger. The constant harraying by individuals and groups seeking to steal the plates forced him to move to his in-laws' house in Harmony, Pennsylvania, to continue his translating work. After the publication of the Book of Mormon and Joseph's return to New York, arrests on false charges of disorderly conduct drained both his time and money. Since Joseph's father had lost his farm the year before, there was little to keep the Smith family in upstate New York.

A Christian primitivist movement in Mentor, Ohio, just north of Kirtland, paved the way for Joseph Smith's move to the Western Reserve. This movement, led by the charismatic Sidney Rigdon, had been allied with the Campbellites, later known as the Disciples of Christ. News of the new religion that purported to restore Christ's ancient church struck a familiar chord with Rigdon and this congregation. In October–November 1830, about 130 members of Rigdon's group in Kirtland were converted to the church Joseph headed. In December, Rigdon himself traveled to New York to meet with Joseph and stayed with the Smith family for a few weeks. Later that month, Joseph Smith received a revelation commanding him to move, along with his followers, to Ohio (D&C 37:1, 3).

Ohio was never intended as a permanent settling place for the Saints.² The missionaries who had converted Sidney Rigdon were actually on their way further west to Missouri to proselyte among Native Americans. Joseph Smith and close associates followed this initial contact with the extreme western frontier with a journey to Independence, Missouri, in July 1831. A revelation received during this visit designated Jackson County, Missouri, as the land "appointed and consecrated for the gathering of the saints" (see D&C 57:1–4). Church leaders dedicated a site for a temple, and Joseph was instructed to purchase land for future settlement. Accordingly, a group of Saints settled at Independence and founded what they believed would be the New Jerusalem and City of Zion.

This ambitious beginning, however, was soon thwarted. One problem was the slow development of the United Firm, the communitarian economic organization of the early Saints who pooled their resources and then received back individual "stewardships" proportionate to each family's needs. As converts without personal resources moved to Independence and applied for entrance into the communitarian organization, community resources were stretched. Later prospective emigrants to Missouri had to obtain certificates from local leaders, who could then regulate both numbers and economic resources of applicants. Thus, growth of the Church in the Missouri area slowed during 1831 and 1832, and construction of the intended temple was postponed.

Another serious impediment to developing the City of Zion in Independence was opposition by established Missourians. Most Missourians were southerners who firmly believed in slavery, while the majority of Mormons were northerners who opposed slavery. Given the combination of the United Firm (which provided direct competition with established Missourian businesses) and the threat of a sizable antislavery voting bloc, the Missourians perceived the new immigrants as a challenge to their way of life. This, together with the Mormons' active solicitation of converts, created a volatile situation that began to spark in April 1833, when Missourians met to discuss the "Mormon Problem." By the end of July, the situation had deteriorated until mob violence ruled the area. Mormon settlers were expelled from Jackson County by November of that year.

As a result of all these factors, the temple in Independence, for which plans and specifications were sent to Missouri on June 25, 1833, was never built. Any hope of building a temple on the lot dedicated by Joseph Smith (seen as a precursor of the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of a New Jerusalem) would have to wait until the Saints could establish themselves once again in Independence.

While persecutions raged in Missouri, Kirtland remained the primary center of the Church. Economic control of the United Firm was in Kirtland, and Church growth continued there when it waned in Missouri. Most significantly, Joseph Smith himself resided in Kirtland. These social and political conditions combined to make Kirtland the location of the first temple built by the Mormons.

The Builders of the Kirtland Temple

Kirtland's population of newly settled converts influenced the construction of the temple. Most of the temple's builders were self-reliant craftsmen used to making do with materials at hand. No trained architect was involved with its design, and experienced builders were summoned only after plans for the structure had been completed. The few skilled joiners and masons in the group relied on the same architectural pattern books and vernacular aesthetics used by other craftsmen along the frontier. However, the temple's unusual arrangement of two main congregational spaces required nonstandard solutions in lighting and circulation. These nonstandard regions of the building tell us a great deal about the skill level of the artisans who built it.

The challenges and struggles faced by these workers are recorded in a large number of diaries and letters, which provide thorough documentation unusual for most frontier American structures. These sources about the

Kirtland Temple aid in our understanding the social dynamics of the early Mormon community. For example, events surrounding the establishment of the new religion required some of the designers and supervising craftsmen to leave the building site. Consequently, the Kirtland Temple displays several different building traditions and the mark of various builders. The magnitude of the project taxed the community both economically and technologically, and a high degree of personal sacrifice and group organization was required to complete it. A study of the temple's physical building fabric indicates how some of these obstacles were overcome, namely, what was purchased, what had to be made by hand, what had to be substituted, and what individual members of the Church contributed. Yet the motivation of the workers was not merely professional pride, but was primarily the belief that the Saints were literally building a house where God could dwell with them. Their efforts, recorded in the fabric of this building, represent the very best they could produce.

Notes

¹See "Tolls Reduced," *Painesville Telegraph*, March 29, 1833, 3.

²In a revelation given September 11, 1831, the Lord stated, "For I, the Lord, will to retain a strong hold in the land of Kirtland, for the space of five years, in the which I will not overthrow the wicked, that thereby I may save some" (D&C 64:21).