

“Pursue, Retake & Punish”: The 1857 Santa Clara Ambush

By ARDIS E. PARSHALL



On the evening of February 17, *Brigham Young, c. 1850.* 1857, four horsemen traveling through southern Utah made camp at the base of a steep bank of the Santa Clara River, a few miles beyond the Mountain Meadows.¹ They turned their horses loose to forage, ate their supper, laid out their bedding with a small fire at their feet, and went to sleep.

At four o'clock the next morning, the men were startled by a barrage of small-arms fire from the brush along the river. One of the campers, John Tobin, was hit by a shot that entered under his right eye, passing through his nose and lodging in his left cheekbone; this, with several lesser wounds, left him prostrate as his companions scrambled for the safety of darkness away from the campfire. Another man, imperfectly identified, was grazed in

Ardis E. Parshall is an independent researcher of Utah and Mormon history. She thanks the historians of the LDS Historical Department for their assistance and encouragement, and especially William P. MacKinnon for his mentoring and constant support. ©2004 Ardis E. Parshall

¹ The site now known as Tobin Wash joins the Santa Clara River one mile above present-day Gunlock.

the back of the neck; a third, John Williams, had two fingers shot off. The fourth, John C. Peltro, was uninjured; he later claimed to have returned fire, reporting that he heard the groan of a man he had hit. Most accounts simply state that the victims fled for their lives, leaving Tobin for dead in his bullet-riddled blankets.

The ambushed men lay hidden until daylight then crept back to their campsite. There they discovered that Tobin, although grievously wounded, was still alive. Seeking some clue to their attackers, they collected lead slugs fitting navy Colt revolvers and counted fifty-six holes in their bedding, examined boot prints and the tracks of eight shod horses, and became convinced that their assailants were white men. They found that their own horses had run off during the shooting, and although three of the men could have hiked out, they could not carry Tobin with them. With no choice but to stay in camp, the men settled down to wait for Tobin to die, or for someone to pass along the trail who could carry him out.

Responsibility for the attack on John Tobin and his companions has always been laid at the feet of the Mormons, presumably directed by Brigham Young, who was then governor, superintendent of Indian affairs, and titular head of the Nauvoo Legion, as well as president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Utah Indians are bold in asserting that the Piedes had nothing to do with it," later reported Indian Agent Garland Hurt. "There is no doubt but the attack was planned in this [Salt Lake] City, and that orders were sent from here to execute it," wrote a *New York Times* correspondent. Widely published apostate John Hyde asserted that "[t]he object of their enmity and this attempted assassination was Mr. Tobin." Historians have repeated these accusations without offering corroborative evidence beyond the original hearsay allegations.²

Given the covert, purposely anonymous character of most frontier violence, the lack of satisfactory documentation to confirm or disprove such charges is not surprising. Preserved in the immensely rich Brigham Young correspondence files, however, now freely accessible to scholars at the archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are key documents relating to the ambush on the Santa Clara. Those files include

² Garland Hurt to Jacob Forney, December 4, 1858, in U.S. Congress, Senate, 36th Cong. 1st sess. *Message of the President of the United States*. Ex. Doc. No. 42. *New York Times*, May 20, 1857. Accounts of the Santa Clara ambush include John Hyde, Jr., *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* (New York: W.P. Pettridge & Co., 1857), 106-7; Catherine Van Valkenburg Waite, *The Mormon Prophet and His Harem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1867), 193-94; "Achilles" [Samuel D. Surrine], *The Destroying Angels of Mormonism, or a sketch of the life of Orrin Porter Rockwell, the late Danite Chief* (San Francisco: Alta California Printing House c. 1879) 9-10; J.H. Beadle, *Life in Utah, or, The Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1870); John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled* (St. Louis: Scammell and Company, 1881), 273-74; Harold Schindler, *Orrin Porter Rockwell: man of God, son of Thunder* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1983), 288; Robert Kent Fielding, *The Unsolicited Chronicler: An Account of the Gunnison Massacre, Its Causes and Consequences* (Brookline, Mass.: Paradigm Publications, 1993), 359; Edward Leo Lyman, *San Bernardino: The Rise and Fall of a California Community* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 336-37; and Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 75.

instructions over Brigham Young's signature, the responses of leaders along the southern road, and even letters from victims, all crucial to understanding the 1857 incident. This article traces preliminary events and follows the story through the ambush and its aftermath, correcting oft-repeated misperceptions.³

In mid-October, 1856, two drifters named John G. Ambrose and Thomas Betts rode through early winter snows into Great Salt Lake City, one astride a horse and the other on a mule. The men's origins are largely unknown, although, given their sudden appearance in that inclement season with nothing but their mounts and the clothes on their backs, it is not unreasonable to suppose that their recent history included a hasty retreat from some western outpost or overland company.⁴

The pair stopped at the store of Hooper & Williams, an establishment owned by two pillars of the Mormon business community — “Captain” William H. Hooper and Mormon Battalion veteran Thomas S. Williams. There Ambrose traded his mare for five dollars in cash and forty dollars in store credit. That day and the next, Ambrose and Betts selected such necessities as boots, socks, soap, and toothbrushes. They bought spoons, plates, and a tin frying pan, basic gear that should have already been in the outfit of any man legitimately traveling in the West. Within a few days their attention turned to personal appearance: among their next purchases were hair oil, silk handkerchiefs, boot blacking, and a new hat with a ribbon.

The pair spent the next month building a reputation as honest businessmen settling in Utah as ranchers. They sold Betts's mule for one hundred dollars, but — contributing to their image as substantial citizens in no immediate need of cash — they accepted the buyer's note. They even managed to *lend* money to one Utah man, money they obtained through fraudulent dealings with others. The two men lived well, at the expense of local tradesmen to whom they incurred substantial debt.

Merchant H. Larkin Southworth was the first to insist that Ambrose and Betts settle their weeks-old account. Certainly, they reassured Southworth, tendering him a bag of gold dust. One of the men was leaving to investigate herd grounds in central Utah, but the other would redeem the collateral after taking possession of a cow owed to them in Ogden. The men flashed a glimpse of the gold in their leather bag, which they sealed inside a tin box and deposited with Southworth on November 19, 1856.

³ The Brigham Young Collection (hereafter “BYC”) has been available for many years to approved scholars at the archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter “LDS Archives”). Incoming correspondence was opened to the general public in 2001. Outgoing correspondence was released in 2003 in *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 74-DVD set (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002).

⁴ Salt Lake County Probate Court, Case Files, “People vs. Ambrose and Betts.” Utah State Archives. Utah Penitentiary, Warden's Office, Records, 1855-1894, Book 2 (Territorial prisoners), 9-10, LDS Archives. While there is no absolute proof that Ambrose and Betts are the two felons described in the correspondence presented below, this is the only case from July 1856 through February 1857 concerning criminal activity resulting in brief prison sentences ending by early February.

A few hours later, Southworth learned that Ambrose and Betts had obtained a carriage from Salt Lake City resident John Pack and had been seen driving out of town southward. Alarmed because neither was heading toward Ogden, Southworth opened the tin box and examined the leather bag more carefully. Its contents were worthless. Hastening to the office of Salt Lake County Probate Judge Elias Smith, Southworth swore out a complaint. Ambrose and Betts “had proceeded south ... under suspicious circumstances,” he said, and “they are now on their way to California or some other country with the intention to convert the carriage obtained from Mr. Pack to their own use.” Further, the two men “intended to swindle [Southworth] out of the amount due from them.” Smith issued an arrest warrant, and recently appointed Utah territorial marshal Alexander McRae set out in pursuit of the swindlers.

Ambrose and Betts would seem to have chosen an unlucky moment for fleecing the merchants of Salt Lake City. Utah was then in the thick of the Mormon Reformation, a period of religious revival and intensely emotional dedication to purifying Zion. Jedediah M. Grant, charismatic second counselor in the church’s governing First Presidency, formally launched the reformation on September 13, 1856. In multiple “soul-stirring addresses,” Grant called on the people to live their religion in minute detail, observe cleanliness in every sense, and set themselves, their families and communities in order. Of those who would not so conduct themselves, “let them be unto you as heathen men and publicans, and not numbered among the Saints.”⁵

For the next four months, coinciding with the arrival and double-dealing of Ambrose and Betts, “home missionaries” fanned out through the settlements, preaching repentance and warning of terrifying consequences for those who failed to forsake their sins. In Salt Lake City’s Nineteenth Ward, missionary William Willis “ad[d]ressed the Saints on various points of the celestial Law and ... in the strongest t[e]rms told them it must now be [k]ept or Death would be the penalty.” Brigham Young endorsed similar statements by noting, “I know when you hear my brethren telling about cutting people off from the earth that you consider it as strong doctrine, but it is to save them, not to destroy them.” Church members were subjected to detailed inquiry into possible misconduct. Dramatizing his teaching that God would withdraw the priesthood if the people did not repent, Brigham Young forbade the administration of the sacrament after mid-November, and during the months of December 1856 and January 1857

⁵ *Deseret News*, September 24, 1856. Thomas G. Alexander, “Wilford Woodruff and the Mormon Reformation of 1855-57,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Summer 1992): 25-39; Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets*, 49-52; David L. Bigler, *Forgotten Kingdom: The Mormon Theocracy in the American West, 1847-1896* (Spokane, Washington: Arthur H. Clark, 1998), 121-39; Eugene E. Campbell, *Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847-1869* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 181-200; Paul H. Peterson, “The Mormon Reformation of 1856-1857: The Rhetoric and the Reality,” *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (Summer 1989): 59-87.

the First Presidency retired from public view.⁶

Often overlooked in the reformation's fire and brimstone is the parallel track of mercy toward the penitent. According to Apostle Wilford Woodruff, Brigham Young promised the people that "if they would repent & turn from their sins from that hour all their sins should be forgiven them & not remembered against them No more forever." Such forgiveness, however, was contingent on maintaining new and better habits. Apostle Franklin D. Richards preached the consequences of backsliding: "If you see a man that will confess his sins, he should feel the impression upon him that that must be the last time; if he does not, he will inherit sorrow unto himself, and will not get off as easily as he has."⁷

The effects of the reformation were evident in a marked increase in tithes and attendance at church meetings, in the rebaptism of thousands (including the entire Territorial Legislature, as an official act of that body), and in a substantial number of newly contracted plural marriages. Success could also be measured by the plans of a certain class of people to leave Utah in the spring. Brigham Young summarized these indications of successful reformation in January 1857: "The reformation still continues ... Meetings are frequent and well attended. You may believe that it makes the 'Sinner in Zion afraid, and fearfulness seize the hypocrite,' and we trust it will be too warm for such characters to remain in our midst."⁸

It was onto this scene of religious fervor that Ambrose and Betts unwittingly entered in mid-October 1856. By November 24, when the marshal and his posse returned their prisoners to Judge Smith's courtroom, community intolerance for wrongdoing was reaching its most acute stage.

Smith ordered the accused held without bail. "[A] jury of twelve men were empannelled and sworn to try the case, who upon investigation found Ambrose and Betts guilty of larceny, and sentenced them to thirty days imprisonment in the penitentiary." The leniency of the sentence "surprised" Smith, "for from their own statements and admissions they were a set of notorious villains."⁹

⁶ 19th Ward, Record of Members, 1850-1856. Minutes, October 3, 1856. LDS Archives. *Deseret News*, October 1, 1856.

⁷ Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833-1898*, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 4:489. Historian's Office. History of the Church, 1839-ca. 1882, January 27, 1857.

⁸ Brigham Young to George A. Smith, January 3, 1857, BYC. Newspapers carried lurid reports of disaffected Mormons who, unhindered despite reported fears, left Utah in the spring of 1857:

"We have another arrival from Mormondom. An emigrant train, containing a large number of women and children - one hundred persons in all - has just reached this city [Lawrence, Kansas].... The members of this company are, or rather were, professors of the Mormon faith, but they fled from the holy land, partly to escape from the relentless tyranny of the BRIGHAM YOUNG oligarchy, and partly to improve their pecuniary affairs. When they left, there was great dissatisfaction among the Saints, and about a thousand persons abandoned Utah at the same time. Several trains departed for the States, and nearly four hundred started for Oregon. It was with difficulty that they escaped, and many threats were made that violence would be committed upon them if they attempted to leave the country. The large number of those who left is believed to have been their protection." *New York Times*, August 5, 1857.

⁹ Sarah C. Thomas, comp. 3 vols. *Elias Smith's Journal*. [1984?], November 24, 1856.

It was an expensive trial for the territory; costs were assessed to the felons and their property confiscated. The next morning warden Daniel Carn received Ambrose and Betts, among the first prisoners to be confined in the newly constructed adobe prison just beyond the southeastern limits of Salt Lake City.

With the exception of those immediately involved, Utahns paid no apparent attention to the trial and conviction of the two swindlers.¹⁰ Of more urgent concern was the October/November rescue of handcart emigrants stranded in Wyoming snows, and the December 1 death of Jedediah M. Grant. During that exceptionally hard winter, several Salt Lake City homes and the roof of the Bowery on the temple block collapsed under heavy snows. Bitter temperatures were deadly to stock on the ranges; to save a few animals, city dwellers fed cattle on their home lots, and Brigham Young ordered valuable horses brought from Fort Bridger to the milder ranges south of Utah Lake.¹¹

Before the handcart rescue eclipsed other work there, men had been sent to Fort Bridger to survey lands from which a Mormon posse had expelled mountaineer James Bridger in 1853. Among that party was John Tobin, likely assigned to the project because of his experience with the 1853 surveying party of U.S. Army Captain John W. Gunnison. Born in the port city of Dungarven, Ireland, on October 24, 1835, Tobin immigrated to the United States as a boy of fourteen. In 1851, not yet sixteen years old, Tobin enlisted at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for a five-year term in the U. S. Army; he came to Utah with Captain Robert M. Morris as escort to Gunnison, who was massacred with six members of his party by Pahvant Indians on October 26, 1853. Tobin converted to Mormonism while wintering in Salt Lake City with other survivors of that expedition.

When his duties took him to Oregon Territory in 1854, he opened a regular correspondence with Brigham Young and conducted a long-distance courtship of the governor's fifteen-year-old daughter Alice. Speaking for other Mormon converts in his company, Tobin assured his church leader that "My Brethren here manfully support their creed." The lonely young soldier looked back to Utah for friendship and approval: "I have been in expectation of hearing from Salt Lake this while back not having received an answer to my letters. I fancy they have been miscarried." "I would like to hear from Bro. Brig [Brigham Young, Jr.] or some of the young people. They all promised to write us (I mean the boys) when they should hear of our whereabouts."¹²

¹⁰ The matter is not mentioned in the *Deseret News*, of which Elias Smith was then associate editor; outgoing correspondence of Brigham Young, which often included summaries of local news; *Journal History*, the massive day-by-day chronology of church and Utah affairs; Historian's Office Journal, where gossip about civic affairs was sometimes recorded; nor in the manuscript History of the Church, LDS Archives.

¹¹ Brigham Young to Andrew Moffat, January 7, 1857, BYC.

¹² Lewis Robison to Brigham Young, October 18, 1856; Claudius V. Spencer to Brigham Young, November 12, 1856; John Tobin to Brigham Young, December 1, 1856, BYC. Thomas D. Brown, "Journal

When First Sergeant Tobin was discharged and returned to Salt Lake City in May 1856, many of their acquaintances expected John Tobin and Alice Young to marry. Tobin, however, began courting Sarah Jane Rich, eldest child of Apostle Charles C. Rich, a co-founder of the LDS community at San Bernardino where Rich lived, although Sarah Jane and her mother lived in Salt Lake City. Tobin's attentions were of such a character that Sarah Jane's mother felt obliged to admonish Tobin to be mindful of the seventeen-year-old girl's reputation. Telling him "I consider you the same as a member of my family," she clearly liked Tobin and encouraged his relationship with her daughter, "the favorite of her Father," but she asked him not to "think straining [strange] of her not calling at the office for it is not thought best for her to call there at present." She warned that "every Step of that dear girl is now watched both by friends and those that are not friends."¹³

Perhaps because of gossip concerning Tobin's attentions to Sarah Jane, Alice Young broke off her supposed engagement to Tobin. Much to the surprise of her friends, she became the third wife of Salt Lake City businessman Hiram B. Clawson on October 26, 1856.¹⁴

In turn, Tobin married Sarah Jane on December 29, 1856, albeit half-heartedly. That the couple had the blessing of Sarah Jane's father as well as her mother is shown by Rich's letter to Tobin from San Bernardino, "I was well pleased with your stay here [following Tobin's army discharge] and all I want is for you Both to Live [as] Saints and be saved here and here after," and his letter to Sarah Jane telling her "I was glad to hear that you was married[.] I trust you and your Husband will always be happy."¹⁵

of the Southern Indian Mission," October–November 1856, LDS Archives. Historian's Office Journal, November 11, 1856, LDS Archives. Missionary Department, Missionary Registers, 1860–1959, Book A, p. 1, LDS Archives. Affidavit of John Tobin, February 9, 1880, John Tobin Pension File, National Archives. John Tobin to Brigham Young, April 6, October 26, 1854, March 5, May 20, July 4, 1855 [date of receipt], September 13, 1855; John Tobin to Mary Ann Angell Young, August 5, 1855; Brigham Young to John Tobin, December 30, 1854, January 9, 1855, BYC.

¹³ *Deseret News*, May 28, 1856. Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, May 3, 1856; Sarah D. Rich to John Tobin, September 15, 1856, BYC.

¹⁴ Ellen Spencer Clawson to Ellen Pratt McGary, November 4, 1856, February 5, 1857; Ellen Pratt McGary to Ellen Spencer Clawson, January 8, 1857, in S. George Ellsworth, *Dear Ellen: Two Mormon Women and Their Letters* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1973). Although some of their friends believed Alice and Tobin to be engaged, others believed Alice was engaged to William Wright, then a missionary in Hawaii. Wright's correspondence to Brigham Young does imply an intimacy not common among young, unrelated missionaries: "Remember me to sister Young and the Family." William B. Wright to Brigham Young, May 14, 1857, BYC. If such an engagement did exist, it did not prevent Alice from "riding out with" Tobin. Leonora Cannon Taylor to Angus Cannon, May 31, 1856. John Taylor Collection, LDS Archives.

¹⁵ Charles C. Rich to Sarah Jane Tobin, February 8, 1857, Charles C. Rich Collection, LDS Archives. Ellen Spencer Clawson, February 5, hints at the gossip swirling around the couple: Not knowing of Rich's approval of the marriage but aware that Tobin had left Salt Lake City, Ellen asked, "[H]ow does Bro. Rich feel about Sarah Janes [sic] and did Mr Toban go that way, I mean to San Bernardino[?]" The perception that Tobin was less than enthusiastic about his marriage is based on his request for a bishop to marry the couple "as I feel bound to perform my word." John Tobin to Brigham Young, December 28, 1856, BYC. An earlier wedding date had been postponed: Rich "would have been much better Satisfied if you had married at the time first appointed." Charles C. Rich to John Tobin, January 8, 1857, Charles C. Rich Collection.

Notwithstanding these cordial sentiments, the marriage of John and Sarah Jane Tobin had a rocky beginning. The couple did not live together following their wedding. Brigham Young counseled Tobin to move into the Rich home or to establish a home for Sarah Jane elsewhere; in either case he should support Sarah Jane as a wife or have nothing more to do with her. His advice to Mrs. Rich was to enforce this counsel by barring Tobin's access to Sarah Jane if he failed to make a home for her.¹⁶

Instead of establishing a marital home, Tobin decided to rejoin the army in California. He left Salt Lake City for San Bernardino early in February 1857.

Another man taking the southern road to California after wintering in Salt Lake City was John C. Peltro. Styled as "Colonel" or "General," Peltro is usually described as a government surveyor engaged in locating a military road from Fort Laramie to Salt Lake City. This appears to be an inflation of his role.

In fact, Peltro was merely a transcontinental traveler who rode briefly with the surveying party as a matter of personal convenience. The newspaper notice of his arrival in Salt Lake City in mid-September 1856 calls him only "Mr." Peltro without a military title, and states that he "accompanied" a surveying party as far as Bridger's Pass in what is now southwestern Wyoming. That survey was led not by Peltro but by First Lieutenant Francis T. Bryan, U.S. Army Topographical Engineers, who, with his detachment, turned back to Laramie from Bridger's Pass, at which point Peltro separated from them to continue his journey west. Lieut. Bryan sent a copy of his new map to Governor Young by the hand of Peltro; this courtesy delivery is the extent of Peltro's known service to the government surveying party.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Ambrose and Betts served out their sentences and were released on Christmas Day 1856. They seem not to have appreciated the lightness of their punishment. Indeed, Betts had the temerity to call at Brigham Young's office on December 26, to dispute the charges against him. "I am one of the persons who was tryed in this City some five weeks ago for larceny and centenced to the Teratory Prison for thirty days and all my property taken from me, I have served out my time ... I want to lay the *true* statement of the Case before you[.]" Complained Betts, "I do not think

¹⁶ Brigham Young to Sarah D. Rich, Brigham Young to John Tobin, both January 20, 1857, BYC. Although living apart, Tobin and his bride had a child, Sarah Ellen, born September 14, 1857. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Ordinance Index* (electronic database), entry for Sarah Ellen Tobin. Named for both grandmothers, Sarah D. Pea Rich and Ellen McGrath Tobin, she was known as "Ella" throughout life.

¹⁷ *Deseret News*, September 17, 1856; *Los Angeles Star*, March 7, 1857. Mormon diarist Philip W. Hosking, en route from Texas to Salt Lake City, distinguished Peltro's status from that of Timothy Goodale. "A gentile named John C. Peltro came to our camp. He has an Irish servant, 2 pack mules and 2 horses. He solicited the privilege of traveling along with us to the Valley ... At 3 p.m. Mr. Peltro came up, accompanied by Mr. Timothy Goodale, the guide for the government troops, who were out on an exploring expedition." *Journal History*, September 17, 1856. That Peltro was not a U.S. Army officer may be inferred from the absence of his name from Francis B. Heitman, ed., *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903).

that I have had justice shown me.” The record does not indicate whether Betts received an audience. In any event, if he were not aware of it earlier, the history of the two felons was surely brought to Brigham Young’s attention by this direct appeal.¹⁸

Ambrose and Betts made efforts to leave the territory as soon as weather and their means permitted. By early February they had traveled as far as Garland Hurt’s Indian farm at Spanish Fork, sixty miles south of Salt Lake City. Brigham Young, despite heavy responsibilities to church and territory and his own recent illness, was well aware of their location and plans. On February 3, he wrote to Bishops Aaron Johnson at Springville, John L. Butler at Spanish Fork, and George W. Bradley at Nephi:

We learn of some noted persons congregating at the Indian farm on Spanish Fork with a view of going out with the mail south or some other time not far distant for California. In this crowd are two persons who have lately served out a short period in the Penitentiary in this Territory. We consider it wisdom to be on our guard in relation to our Stock and the Stock of our settlements generally, especially our horses now on the range near the south end of Utah Lake, lest they attempt to make a break upon them. ...What we wish of you is to have a few men on the look out and ready to act in case of emergency. It would be well to have them go out and make a short trip around to see that all things are right.

Presumably, if no theft occurred Ambrose and Betts were to pass on their way unhindered. But, “if any such thing as we have suggested should occur we shall regret to hear a favorable report; we do not expect there would be any prosecutions for false imprisonment or tale bearers left for witnesses.” Unambiguous if not explicit, these instructions left so little room for misinterpretation that Brigham Young closed his letter with the caution to “have a few men that can be trusted on hand, and make no noise about it and keep this letter safe. We write for your eye alone and to men that can be trusted.”¹⁹

There can be no doubt as to the letter’s authenticity. The retained copy of this letter, although unsigned, appears in correct date order in the bound letter books of Brigham Young’s office now preserved in LDS archives. Letters acknowledging its receipt were addressed to Brigham Young and are filed in his incoming correspondence. “[I]t is done as you requested,” wrote Aaron Johnson, a Nauvoo Legion brigadier as well as Springville’s bishop, immediately after assembling his town’s leadership to hear the letter read and satisfy themselves as to its authenticity. “Your letter dated Feb. 3rd. came to hand on the evening of the eleventh inst. And I have governed myself according to the instructions therein contained,” replied Bishop George W. Bradley from Nephi. Bradley’s letter had been delivered by the regular southbound mail, which left Salt Lake City on February 8, but

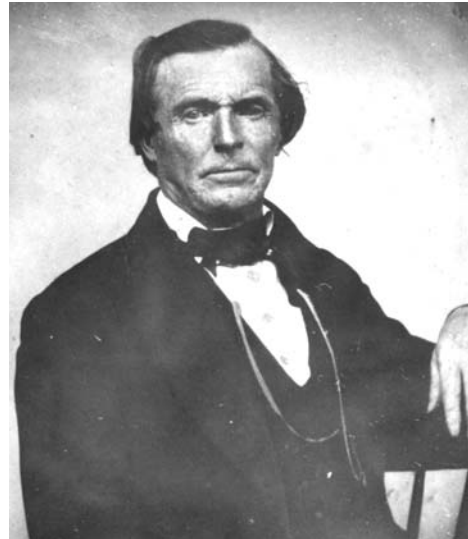
¹⁸ Thomas Betts to Brigham Young, December 26, 1856, BYC.

¹⁹ Brigham Young to Aaron Johnson, February 3, 1857, BYC. The typescript of this letter available in *Selected Collections* gives the line as *persecutions* for false imprisonment; my reading of the holographic original is *prosecutions*.

Johnson's letter was hand-delivered by Brigham Young, Jr.²⁰

Indian Agent Garland Hurt later wrote: "About the 3d of February last, two gentlemen, John Peltro and John Tobin, reached the Indian farm, on Spanish Fork, in company with several other persons, *en route* for California. ... [T]wo other persons (Brigham Young jr., son of *his excellency*, and a young man named [Stephen] Taylor) overtook them, and all remained over night at my house." During that evening, Tobin later claimed, Brigham Young, Jr., "called me aside ... He said John where are you going. I said I am aiding these emigrants to California ... He said John I am sorry to see you in such bad Company."²¹

Leaving Utah County, the two former prisoners, with Tobin, Peltro, and an



UTAH STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Elias Smith, Salt Lake City judge
who presided over the trial of
John G. Ambrose and Thomas
Betts.**

²⁰ Aaron Johnson to Brigham Young, February 4, 1857, BYC: J.M. Stewart to Editor, *Valley Tan*, August 24, 1859; George W. Bradley to Brigham Young, February 16, 1857, BYC.

More than two years after the Springville meeting, participant John M. Stewart retained an amazingly accurate memory of the February 3 letter's contents as he related them to the editor of the *Valley Tan*:

"After all had assembled, and were orderly seated, the Bishop stated the object of the meeting which was, that we might hear a letter which he had just received from President Young. He there read the letter, the purport of which was about this.

He, Brigham, had information that some suspicious characters were collecting at the "Indian Farm," on Spanish Fork, and he wished him (Bishop Johnson) to keep a good look out in that direction; to send some one there to reconnoiter and ascertain what was going on, and if they (those suspicious characters) should make a break, and be pursued, which he required; he 'would be sorry to hear a favorable report;' 'But,' said he, 'the better way is to lock the stable door before the horse is stolen.'

He then admonished the Bishop that he (the Bishop) understood those things, and would act accordingly, and 'keep this letter close,' or safe.

This letter was over Brigham's signature, in his own peculiarly rough hands [sic], which we all had the privilege of seeing."

The citizens of Springville clearly interpreted the February 3 letter as a general instruction applicable to all "suspicious characters," not merely to Ambrose and Betts, who were unknown to them and whom the letter did not name. On March 14, 1857, as William Parrish and his sons Beason and Orrin attempted to leave Springville under suspicious circumstances – under cover of darkness and leaving unpaid debts behind them – town leaders applied the orders they believed they had been given by the February 3 letter and attacked the party with firearms and knives. Although Orrin escaped, William and Beason Parrish and their guide, Gardner "Duff" Potter, were murdered. As Stewart's letter to the *Valley Tan* makes clear, the Parrish-Potter murders were a direct, although unintended, result of Brigham Young's letter of February 3. The most recent and detailed study of the Parrish-Potter murders is Polly Aird, "You Nasty Apostates, Clear Out": Reasons for Disaffection in the Late 1850s," *Journal of Mormon History* 30 (Fall 2004): 173-91

²¹ Garland Hurt to Jacob Forney, December 4, 1858, in *Message ... Deposition of John Tobin*, October 26-27, 1885, Pension File. Brigham Young protested "allowing the [Indian] farm to become a resort for stragglers, idle persons, loafers, who ... make the farm a stopping place," in a letter which, by its date, was clearly prompted by Brigham Young, Jr.'s report of his encounter with the Tobin company. Brigham Young to Garland Hurt, February 11, 1857, BYC.

unknown number of others, passed through the settlements of Juab and Millard counties closely watched by a populace who had been warned by their leaders “not to keep strag[g]lers” without bishops’ recommends, “for they will come to steal our horses.” South of Fillmore, the party was stopped by a posse on the pretext of having trotted their horses within town limits; they were allowed to proceed after the brands on their animals were carefully examined. They passed southward toward Iron County without further incident.²²

Following the same route five days later, the California-bound mail carried letters from Brigham Young dated February 6, 1857, and addressed to Lewis Brunson at Fillmore, William H. Dame at Parowan, and Isaac C. Haight at Cedar City. These letters, the retained copy of which appears over Brigham Young’s name, echoed the ominous language of the earlier instructions:

Be on the look out now, & have a few trusty men ready in case of need to pursue, retake & punish. We do not suppose there would be any prosecutions for false imprisonments, or tale bearers for witnesses. ... Make no noise of this matter, & keep this letter safe. We write for your eye alone, & to men that can be trusted.”²³

While more explicit in one respect (“pursue, retake & punish”), these letters were silent in another critical detail: Unlike the earlier letters, they did not state that a penalty was to be imposed only after the theft of stock.

The California-bound party had already passed Parowan by the time the February 6 letter reached William H. Dame, colonel of the Nauvoo Legion’s Iron County Brigade. Even absent a specific alert, Dame had closely observed the travelers but had seen no evidence of stolen animals. He assured Brigham Young that the saints stood ready to carry out his directives. “Tobin, Peltro and those from prison passed with seven or eight more a few days before the mail ... We could not discover any brand on their poor ponies, but was surprised to see them here. I received your letter by mail, & have prepared a few[. A] word any time is comforting[. W]e try to live so when your finger crooks, we move.”²⁴

²² Record of the Nephi Mass Quorum of Seventies, 1857-1859, photocopy, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. Deposition of John Tobin, October 26-27, 1885, Pension File.

²³ Brigham Young to Bishops & Presidents South, February 6, 1857, BYC. Alternatively, some might read “in case of need” here as the equivalent of “if any such thing ... should occur” in the earlier letter.

²⁴ William H. Dame to Brigham Young, February 17, 1857, BYC. Dame’s reference to the “crooking finger” was not a casual choice of words, but was a clear acknowledgment of the ominous signal he perceived in his instructions. While used metaphorically in Dame’s letter, hand gestures were a literal and deliberate accompaniment to Brigham Young’s speaking style. World traveler Richard F. Burton noted it in 1860 but considered it merely a New England affectation. Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1862), 261. In 1851, Utah Supreme Court Judge Perry E. Brocchus had considered it hostile, an impression Brigham Young confirmed in 1853. U.S. Congress, House 32d Cong., 1st sess. *Message from the President of the United States*, Ex. Doc. No. 25, 15. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1855), 1:186-87. T.B.H. Stenhouse, former intimate of Brigham Young, alleged that the “crooking finger” was an habitual warning: “Since that memorable day he had not infrequently warned the troublesome of the danger of crooking that finger, and it was no idle threat when he said: ‘Apostates, or men who never made any profession of religion, had better be careful how they come here, lest I should

The party continued from Parowan to Cedar City and on through Pinto. Somewhere beyond Parowan, where Dame numbered the travelers at eleven or twelve, the group divided into two camps. Most, including Ambrose and Betts, elected to wait for the mail carrier before continuing through southern



UTAH STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Utah and the dangerous deserts beyond; Tobin, Peltro, a man now known only as John Williams, and a fourth, now unknown man who may have been named Smith, chose to push ahead on their own. The company passed from Mountain Meadows, then a widely known and welcome oasis for travelers, to the Santa Clara River on February 17. The air was so chilly when they made camp by the side of the river that they decided to leave a fire burning all night.²⁵

The Santa Clara River near the ambush site.

bend my little finger.” T.B.H. Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints* (London: Ward Lock and Tyler, [1874]), 277. It is no doubt in this sense that Dame used the phrase in his February 17 letter.

Dame’s response begs the question of why a leader in southern Utah would see hostile intent in virtually the same words seen as chiefly cautionary by leaders in central Utah. There is no definitive study accounting for cultural differences between southern Utah and other parts of nineteenth century Mormondom. Juanita Brooks addresses the subject briefly in her chapter “Zealous South” in *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 31–59. While not particularly directed toward southern Utah, D. Michael Quinn sketches distinctions between Mormon experience at and distant from the church’s center in “LDS ‘Headquarters Culture’ and the Rest of Mormonism: Past and Present,” *Dialogue* 34, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2001), 135–64; 143–50 focuses on the nineteenth century. Charles S. Peterson, “A Mormon Town: One Man’s West,” *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1976), 3–12, examines ways in which geographical and social inwardness affected southern Utahns; contrasting conclusions are presented in W. Paul Reeve, “Mormons, Miners, and Southern Paiutes: Making Space on the Nineteenth-Century Western Frontier” (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 2002). The answer may include some mix of the cultural origins of southern Utahns; a sense of mission among those who responded to early calls to settle in the south; the numbers of those with personal memories of Missouri persecutions; differences between rural and urban values not unique to Utah, Mormonism, or the nineteenth century; and the tremendous authority that southern leaders held over isolated colonies without benefit of frequent association with Salt Lake leadership and other moderating influences.

²⁵ Among traveling groups composed by accidents of timing and route, convenience dictated mergers and divisions such as this one. This is vividly illustrated by the history of the Baker-Fancher families who followed the same road seven months later. Because others traveled with them at times, falling in and dropping out at will, fully identifying those who died in the Mountain Meadows massacre, or even assigning an accurate number, remains problematic. The division of the February party likely occurred beyond Pinto, perhaps as near to the ambush site as the Mountain Meadows. If Peltro started back “to procure assistance” after the attack as he would claim in his California interview (*Los Angeles Star*, March 7, 1857), the division must have been very recent: Peltro would have known that the mail was not far behind and that he would meet the carrier before he could reach Pinto. His backtracking makes sense only if he expected to encounter other travelers nearer to him than the mail carrier or the nearest settlement. The division also had to have been of such recent occurrence that those monitoring the company’s progress were unaware of the separation, and therefore ignorant of the absence of Ambrose and Betts from the Santa Clara ambush site.

Carrying the mail between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles was a demanding task requiring frontiersmen of the highest caliber. David Savage (based in Cedar City) and John Hunt (based in San Bernardino), both Mormons, were the men who most often relayed the mail in 1856-1857. One received the eastern mail with that originating in Salt Lake City and carried it to Los Angeles, returning with the California mail the following month; the other reversed that course. "The Indians were very hostile & it was thought to be as much as a mans life was worth to [go] through that region of the country but I escaped unharmed," wrote David Savage of his days as a mail carrier.²⁶

It was John Hunt who left Salt Lake City with the mail on February 8. Hunt was uncommonly experienced for a twenty-four-year-old. He had accompanied the Mormon Battalion on their 1846 march as far as New Mexico when he was barely into his teens, wintering at Pueblo and arriving in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. That fall he had gone to California, following much the same route later used by the mail. Hunt had carried the mail through southern Utah at least a dozen times before starting into the Santa Clara Canyon on February 19, 1857, accompanied by those travelers — including Ambrose and Betts — who had remained behind on the trail when Tobin and Peltro pushed ahead.

Tobin and his wounded companions had waited without medical attention for sixty hours before John Hunt arrived at the Santa Clara camp on the afternoon of February 19. Those capable of riding were provided with mounts, but the majority of their baggage and saddles had to be left behind.

The enlarged company, with Tobin presumably suffering prone in the mail wagon, pressed on. In the difficult Virgin River section of the route they met the California mail and a company returning north from the Mormon mission at Las Vegas. Missionary Lorenzo Brown noted, "When near the Virgin hill [we] met the mail ... with it there were 4 men who were fired at when on the Santa Clara & one Tobin man severely wounded in the nose[.]" The mission journalist at Las Vegas recorded their arrival there: "Monday 23rd Eastern mail with quite a company including A Mr Toban who had been shot on the road badly wounded but recovering apparently ar[r]ived at night ... Tuesday 24. The mail &c started on."²⁷

In an 1886 deposition recalling what Tobin had told her of the ambush, Sarah Jane Miller recalled a "Mr. Smith" as one of the men in the party. Possibly Smith or Williams was the Irish servant who was with Peltro when he entered Salt Lake City.

²⁶ David Savage, "Biography of David Savage," *Daily Journal of Kingston United Order*, LDS Archives, among undated biographies following entry of December 1, 1878. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A compilation of biographical sketches of prominent men and women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Co., 1920) 3:417, notes that John Hunt "carried the mail from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City two years (1856 and 1857)." He later served for twelve years as sheriff of Beaver County, Utah, and for thirty-two years as bishop of Snowflake, Arizona.

²⁷ Lorenzo Brown Journal, February 20, 1857, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. Las Vegas Mission, Record Book, February 23-24, 1857. LDS Archives.

As the mail party reached the California line and climbed the Cajon Pass, they encountered a snowstorm that detained them another day, delaying their entry into San Bernardino until 9:00 p.m., March 3, 1857. Tobin was carried to the house of Mormon Bishop William Crosby, where he finally received professional attention from Dr. Woodville M. Andrews, two weeks after being shot in the face. Peltro left immediately for Los Angeles where he would give a newspaper interview later that week, following which he disappeared from the known historical record. The further activities of Ambrose and Betts are likewise unknown.²⁸

The saints at San Bernardino hardly knew what to make of Tobin's unexpected appearance there. The mission diarist, when recording the coming of the mail, omitted any reference to the wounded men accompanying the mail carrier. Reports soon circulated that Tobin had apostatized. Even his father-in-law Charles Rich questioned his fidelity, in a letter to Brigham Young downplaying the seriousness of Tobin's wounds: "Tobin is here in the city[. H]e reciev[e]d a small shot about the size of a buck shot in his noze by his right eye ranging down toward the left Jaw[.] I think he will recover in a short time[. H]e speaks well of you and says he has not forsaken the church or Sarah Jane but I think different." Rich cited no reason for doubting Tobin's word. Perhaps he suspected that Tobin had fled Utah in response to the flames of the reformation, for he also noted:

I feel glad that the time has nearly arrived when I shall [leave] for our mountain home, where it is so warm in the medle [middle] of winter that some folks cannot endure the climate[. T]his place will reap an abundant Harvest of the Class that cannot stand the warm weather in Salt Lake[.] I am Glad to hear of the Progress of the reformation in the mountains and Pray that it may continue till the last evil may be forever forsaken.²⁹

Rumors that the attack had been prompted by Tobin's apostasy were soon circulating beyond San Bernardino. "There is some excitement below on the subject," wrote the mission diarist. "All Kinds of discouraging reports are raise[d]." Some were purportedly so convinced that Mormon assassins lurked nearby that they "rescued" Tobin from the home of Bishop Crosby: "To day a party of 4 Armed men came and took him to Los Angeles there being a report circulated desi[g]nedly that Porter Rockwell was in this vacinity and awaiting a chance to Kill Tobin." The diarist neglected to indicate whether Tobin went willingly.³⁰

²⁸ San Bernardino Branch (California, 1851-1857), Journal, 1851-1857, March 3 and 24, 1857, LDS Archives. *Los Angeles Star*, March 7, 1857. Dr. Andrews was a member of the opposition (non-Mormon) party, a party "almost exclusively composed of apostates." He spoke at their caucuses, "but was not as personal in his remarks" as others who "were vehement in their denunciation of Mormon rule." San Bernardino Branch Journal, April 25-26, May 3, 1856. No Peltro (or recognizable variant) appears in the 1860 census of California, nor in the earliest available Great Registers of California voters. Based on age and birthplace, Betts is evidently the T.W. Betts, miner, enumerated in the 1860 census at Placerville, El Dorado County, California; the miner John Ambros[e] who is enumerated at Mud Springs, El Dorado, California, is *not* the Ambrose of this story, and no more likely candidate has yet been identified.

²⁹ Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, March 11, 1857, BYC.

³⁰ San Bernardino Branch Journal, March 24, 1857, LDS Archives.

Orrin Porter Rockwell was in fact hundreds of miles away from San Bernardino, as Brigham Young mentioned to Charles C. Rich early in March: “[W]e have sent out ... the March mail [to the States] under charge of O.P. Rockwell & others.”³¹

Rockwell was not the only man to be suspected of the attempt on the lives of Tobin and his traveling companions. The Washington correspondent of the *New York Times* suggested that Colonel Robert T. Burton of the Nauvoo Legion was to blame; but since Burton lived in Salt Lake City with no responsibility for southern Utah, this charge is likely based on nothing more than the correspondent’s awareness of Burton’s military duties. Garland Hurt intimated that Brigham Young, Jr., was the assassin; this charge, too, is extremely unlikely if for no other reason than that it would have rendered letters to any of the central and southern Utah leaders unnecessary. John D. Lee purportedly accused southern Utah residents Joel White and John Willis of the crime; given the grossly inaccurate account of the ambush in his *Confessions*, no credence can be given to any of its details, including its accusation of White and Willis.³²

Isaac C. Haight of Cedar City, writing in March 1857 to the *Western Standard*, the Mormon newspaper published at San Francisco by missionary George Q. Cannon, claimed that the attackers had been Indians. Reporting an expedition that he had made in the week following the ambush, Haight wrote,

[W]e met some Indians who told us that some Americans had been fighting, and they saw one man that was shot in the forehead, and that there were some horses in the mountains; but the account was so vague I could pay no attention to it; however, when the mail came through from California, I learned that on the night of the 17th, a party composed of one Peltro, Tobin, a half breed Delaware Indian, and another man whose name I have not learned, were attacked, and Tobin was shot in the head, another had two of his fingers shot off, and they had lost their horses.

When I heard this, I was of the opinion that the Mapache Indians had been the depredators and had got their horses. Those Indians had made a break on the Pah Utes, about five miles below where those men were attacked, on the night of the 16th, and took some cattle, etc. Brothers Covert and Riley, with their families, were coming from the Los Vegas at this time. The Mapaches came to them on the Rio Virgin and stole a cow, then followed them up to the Santa Clara to attack the Pah Utes and revenge the death of one of their men who had been killed some time before; but brother Hamblin took the Pah Utes into the Fort and disappointed the Mapaches, and they probably came across this party, and being mad, made an attack on them, took their horses and then fled. Brother Jones and company came in last night, bringing two saddles they bought of the Indians.³³

³¹ Brigham Young to Charles C. Rich, March 5, 1857, BYC.

³² *New York Times*, June 11, 1857. Garland Hurt to Jacob Forney, December 4, 1858, in *Message ... Lee, Mormonism Unveiled*, 273-74; however, the account here is inaccurate in ways unlikely to be the work of Lee – e.g., dating the Santa Clara ambush as following the Mountain Meadows massacre – and may be an example of the additions Lee’s attorney/editor William Bishop is believed to have inserted into Lee’s confessions.

³³ Isaac C. Haight to George Q. Cannon, March 6, 1857, in *Western Standard*, April 24, 1857. Haight

This story of a “Mapache” raid is unsupportable for any number of reasons: Peltro, eyewitness to the physical evidence of the ambush, was convinced that his attackers were white men. Returning missionaries William S. Covert and William Riley, whom Haight places on the Virgin River one or two days before the attack, had passed that area a full week earlier and cannot have played the role Haight assigns them. Even Haight was so unpersuaded by this tale that he did not mention it in a February 24, 1857, report to Brigham Young — an omission which, had Haight truly believed the story of predatory Indians, would be incomprehensible in view of Brigham Young’s roles as superintendent of Indian affairs and as colonizer planning to send families to the area that season.³⁴

Barring the disclosure of some as-yet-undiscovered record, it is not possible to identify individual gunmen involved in the Santa Clara ambush. The best testimony is that they were whites, not Indians; Brigham Young’s letters of February 3 and 6, close monitoring of the party’s southward progress, and the southern leadership’s perception of a “crooking finger” all support a likely Mormon involvement in the ambush that is lacking for a random attack by any undocumented group of non-Mormon gunmen who might be imagined to have been coincidentally in the area for some unknown reason. Haight’s unconvincing attempt to credit the ambush to a mysterious party of marauding Indians, present-day knowledge of his later involvement with the Mountain Meadows massacre, and the location of the ambush within his jurisdiction suggest Haight’s potential involvement. Haight, however, has an apparently unimpeachable alibi in the diary of Rachel Lee, wife of John D. Lee, who placed Haight in Harmony while the ambush was occurring on the Santa Clara.³⁵ Whether Dame or Haight, who each received the February 6 letter, directed others to carry out the ambush; whether one of them communicated the contents of the letter to others who chose independently to carry out the ambush; or whether gunmen went to the site through some other cause, simply cannot be determined at present.

News of the Santa Clara ambush was carried to California by the wounded men themselves, and to Salt Lake City by the mail carrier. By May 1857, it had reached the East. Tobin “had been a ‘leetle’ too deeply ini-

was also in possession of horses belonging to the ambushed party, which Brigham Young directed to be forwarded to Tobin and Peltro in California. Brigham Young to Isaac C. Haight, April 4, 1857, BYC.

³⁴ Isaac C. Haight to Brigham Young, February 24, 1857, BYC. Las Vegas Mission, Record Book, February 2 and 18, 1857. Brown, Journal, February 18–28, 1857. The southbound mail passed the ambush site on February 19, and reached Las Vegas on February 23, requiring five days to travel from Tobin Wash to Las Vegas. Covert and Riley left Las Vegas at noon on February 2. Assuming they traveled at the same rate as the mail carrier — and there is no reason to suppose that men traveling with families and without heavy freight would have lingered on the deserts — they should have reached the ambush site by about February 7. Even Nathaniel V. Jones and Lorenzo Brown, who left Las Vegas on February 18, with teams that were “very heavy loaded & badly jaded,” who lost time to strayed stock and the request of an Indian band to help bury dead children, “passed ... the place where Tobin was wounded” in only ten days.

³⁵ Rachel A.W. Lee, Journal, February 18 and 23, 1857. LDS Archives.



UTAH STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Charles C. Rich, John Tobin's
father-in-law.**

tiated into the mysteries of Mormonism to be permitted to leave the country," New Yorkers were informed. Ohio readers learned that Tobin and Peltro "were well apprised of the aims and secrets of the Mormons, and therefore too dangerous to be allowed to emigrate." A Washington correspondent announced that someone "had been obliged to flee [from Utah] to save himself from the penalty consequent upon overhearing Brigham's order ... for the massacre of Tobin Peltro and party." The story was still current the following February when a correspondent for the *New York Times*, waiting out the winter with the U.S. Army near Fort Bridger in the

midst of the Utah War, identified Tobin as "an apostate Mormon" and hinted that Brigham Young, Jr., was responsible for the ambush.³⁶

Belying reports that Tobin's departure from Salt Lake City had been prompted by apostasy, and that his removal from San Bernardino had been motivated by an ongoing threat of Mormon assassination therefor, Tobin, clearly unafraid for his life, returned to Salt Lake City early in 1858. He had missed the September 1857 birth of his daughter Ella, but otherwise, Tobin resumed his life in Utah where he had left it. He assured Brigham Young that his feelings toward all the Young family were "those inspired by the kindness, and care shown by you, and yours," and flatly contradicted being the source of vile slander of Alice Young that had appeared in John Hyde's 1857 book about the Mormons.³⁷

By the fall of 1858, Tobin had leased property on the east side of Salt Lake City's Main Street, where he opened a saloon. His trafficking in liquor

³⁶ *New York Times*, May 20, 1857. *Jeffersonian Democrat*, June 3, 1857. *New York Times*, June 11, 1857, and February 4, 1858.

³⁷ Tobin had re-enlisted at San Francisco May 1, 1857, but was discharged October 31, 1857, due to physical disability. Tobin spent virtually his entire second enlistment in the military hospital at Fort Tejon, California, recovering from "wounds received prior to his enlistment[;] he has lost the sight of his left eye, & his right eye is materially affected," Certificate of Disability for Discharge, Pension File. John Tobin to Brigham Young, July 19, 1858, BYC. Hyde, *Mormonism*, 106-7, claims that Tobin refused to marry Alice Young upon "the most convincing proof that Miss Young had sacrificed her honor," citing Tobin as his source. Tobin insisted that he had met Hyde briefly only once in his life, and had not slandered Alice Young. John Tobin to Brigham Young, July 19, 1858, BYC.

did not bar him from access to Mormon leadership, however; Daniel H. Wells, Lieutenant General of the Nauvoo Legion and successor to Jedediah M. Grant in the church's First Presidency, recommended his Legion officers to "embrace the opportunity ... to qualify themselves for duty [offered by] Lt. John Tobin of the Lancers," who had "opened a school in this city for instruction in various branches of Cavalry manoeuvring, including the sabre drill." To improve his impaired eyesight and remove the slug he still carried in his cheekbone, Tobin underwent an operation; surgery was unsuccessful on both counts, but his eyes, which had become crossed following his injury, gradually assumed a more normal appearance. Tobin lived with his wife and daughter, filled his civil responsibilities, and conducted business. In all ways he appears to have created a place for himself in Utah with no social consequences for having left Utah in 1857, nor any concern for his safety.³⁸

That Tobin was still nominally associated with Mormonism is demonstrated by his call as a missionary to Scotland in 1860 under the presidency of Apostles Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich. From the beginning, Tobin's missionary conduct was appalling. He was so drunk on the morning of their departure that the missionary party left Salt Lake City without him. The hapless Tobin caught up with them the next day, just in time to meet Brigham Young returning from an inspection of his canyon mill. "[H]e had been informed of the drunken[n]ess of Tobin of the day previous and said he had no use for such men as missionaries ... [Tobin] came and talked with Prest Young and beg[g]ed the privilege of stil[l] going and proveing in doing so that he loved the truth and the Saints. ... [T]he Prest yielded to his entreaty." Tobin was appointed the company's sergeant of the guard but was soon replaced, "having resigned in consequence of some finding fault." Upon arrival in Britain, he complained that "the climate of Scotland is to[o] damp & cold" and that "the old *wound* troubles him very much." Lyman noted that after a year in the mission, "Tobin never in one single instance has asked for any information in reference to the principles of the gospel of which he was most profoundly ignorant."³⁹

³⁸ "Articles of Agreement with Hamilton Stuart," November 29, 1858; copy in the personal files of W. Randall Dixon, Salt Lake City. "Head Quarters, Nauvoo Legion," in *Journal History*, December 15, 1858. Tobin never rose above the rank of sergeant in the U.S. Army; whether the title of lieutenant was honorary or refers to a position in the Nauvoo Legion is unknown. Tobin, Sarah Jane and Ella are enumerated together in Salt Lake City's Nineteenth Ward, 1860 census. Tobin served as a juror in August 1859, *Deseret News*, August 30, 1859. He won permission from the City Council to develop a bathhouse at city-owned Warm Springs, City Council Minutes, July 4, 15, and 22, 1859; *Mountaineer*, September 3, 1859. He prosecuted and defended eviction cases, Salt Lake County Probate Court, Case Files, Utah State Archives, Series 373. Tobin was less than honest in business dealings with clerk/reporter George D. Watt from whom he leased property, George D. Watt to Brigham Young, draft, ca. 1864, George D. Watt Collection, LDS Archives. Several affidavits and depositions in his pension file detail Tobin's medical treatments.

³⁹ Amasa M. Lyman, Diary, July 23, 1863, Amasa M. Lyman Collection, LDS Archives. John Brown. Journal, in *Journal History*, June 7, 1860. Nathaniel V. Jones to Amasa M. Lyman, October 17, 1860, Amasa M. Lyman Collection. Tobin did participate in some missionary activity. For example, Duncan McNeil McAllister was "ordained to the office of Priest, by Elder John Tobin, December 9, 1860," *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*, 1:651.

Complaints about Tobin's behavior in July 1861 called Lyman and Rich to Glasgow, while George Q. Cannon went to Edinburgh to investigate there. Tobin freely admitted his habitual drunkenness, and reluctantly admitted adultery with a convert and soliciting a prostitute. Witnesses were found who testified to other acts of misbehavior. "[W]e then cut Elder John Tobin off the Church," wrote Rich. The excommunication was announced to the Glasgow saints, and Tobin "stated to the meeting that we had acted to him in a most uncharitable and cruel manner in his excommunication." The apostles responded with "some plain statements in reference to the circumstances." Recorded Rich that evening, "to Day has been a Day of sorrow to me ... I now Pray God to Deliver my Daughter Sarah Jane from his corrupt Grasp." When Tobin appeared for a walk with Rich the next morning, Rich noted, "I Don't think he feels half as Bad as I Do."⁴⁰

Rich was probably right. Tobin wrote to Sarah Jane on the day of his walk with Rich, accepting little responsibility for his actions but expressing unbounded confidence in the goodwill of Brigham Young:

I must break the melancholy intelligence by at once and without prevarication tell[ing] you that I have been "*cut-off*". For months I have been persecuted by the District President (Stuart) The entire affair has been a conspiracy – and has been concocted by Teasdale, Harrison & Stuart. Amasa would not hear my evidence (witnesses) He took the statements of women who are well known prostitutes – I gave way to Liquor under my exasperated wrongs acknowledged my fault *for Drinking* and appealed for Mercy but the charity of the Presidency was closed ...

Sarah Jane when I think of *the President* and his *former love, and kindness* to me, and feel that my *enemies* will cause him to blast from him any hope of *forgiveness* for me, *the grave* would be more welcome to me than life ... I would like you to see Bro Brigham – he is full of mercy if others are not, and say to him that I am doing as well as I know how.⁴¹

Brigham Young's response to the news of Tobin's excommunication was blunt: "[P]ublish him in the 'Star' as cut off from the church, for what he was cut off, and forbid any Elder in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints baptizing him, until he makes satisfaction."⁴²

Rich wrote to Sarah Jane, "adviseing her to leave him as he had committed Adultery," advice she followed immediately. Her petition for divorce was filed on September 3, 1861, and granted on September 14. Judge Elias Smith awarded custody of her daughter and some property to Sarah Jane and ordered the remainder of Tobin's Utah property placed in the hands of a receiver for the child's support. Clear title to that remaining property passed to the Rich family in 1863 when Charles C. Rich foreclosed a mortgage Tobin had executed before his mission.⁴³

⁴⁰ Charles C. Rich Diary, July 16–24, 1861. Amasa M. Lyman Diary, July 17–26, 1861. Amasa M. Lyman to George A. Smith, July 30, 1861, George A. Smith Papers, LDS Archives.

⁴¹ John Tobin to Sarah Jane Tobin, July 24, 1861, Charles C. Rich Collection.

⁴² Brigham Young to Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich, August 25, 1861, BYC. A notice had already been published in the *Millennial Star* of August 10, 1861, 508.

⁴³ Charles C. Rich Diary, July 26, 1861, Charles C. Rich Collection. Salt Lake County Probate Court, Case Files, "Sarah Jane Tobin vs. John Tobin." Utah State Archives, Series 373. Minute Entry, May 9, 1863,

Tobin did not return to Utah. He spent the Civil War years in New York and South Carolina as a civilian employee of the Quartermaster's Department. In 1862 he entered a common law marriage after his bride's priest learned of the earlier divorce and refused to marry them. The couple moved to St. Louis, where Tobin, by then virtually blind, called on military contacts for appointment as watchman in the post office building. Tobin abandoned his second wife on the eve of their sixth child's birth in 1873 and moved to Springfield, Illinois; there he married a third time and fathered two more children.

Tobin's history for this period reveals conflicting approaches to his Mormon past. On the one hand, he wrote to Brigham Young in 1868 seeking reconciliation; Brigham Young invited Tobin to contact the Mormon elder in St. Louis for counsel, advice Tobin did not follow. On the other hand, Tobin did not tell his second wife about his Mormon career; to her he characterized his presence in Utah as a military assignment, and his time in Europe as "traveling for his health." He owned a copy of Hyde's 1857 book from which his wife repeatedly read to him the account of his Santa Clara ambush.⁴⁴

John D. Lee was arrested in November 1874 to be tried for the 1857 massacre at Mountain Meadows. The sensation that followed proved a boon to John Tobin. Billed as "an Irish patriot and gallant American soldier," he gave interviews and lectures. Omitting any mention of his own Mormon ties, Tobin invented a mythical and anachronistic career: he had fled Ireland after participating in a failed republican revolution in 1848; having survived the Gunnison massacre, he was refused shelter and forced to winter outside Salt Lake City; learning of a massacre in progress at Mountain Meadows, he had led a cavalry charge to the rescue, arriving moments too late to save the emigrants. Recognizing superior military gifts following Tobin's heroic rescue of the handcart pioneers, Brigham Young had appointed him "instructor general" of all the Utah militias, honoring Tobin with a bedchamber next to the prophet's own, from which vantage point Tobin overheard innumerable dark plots. Volunteering to lead a party of gentiles out of the Territory, Tobin was tracked to the Santa Clara by Mormon assassins fearful of the secrets he carried; his companions had been murdered in the effort to silence Tobin.

In the midst of his celebrity, Tobin wrote repeatedly to Brigham Young, demanding the restoration of property "stolen" by Charles C. Rich. He threatened lawsuits and exposure of unspecified Mormon crime should his demands be refused, threats he renewed in 1882 to Brigham Young's successor, John Taylor.⁴⁵

Pension File. Sarah Jane was not long single; she married Salt Lake City mining speculator Thomas Rudolph Miller on December 21, 1861.

⁴⁴ Pension File. Brigham Young to John Tobin, September 29, 1868, BYC.

⁴⁵ *Daily Alta California*, March 3, and 13, 1875. *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 12, 1875, July 17, 1877. *New York Tribune*, July 13, 1877, *New York Times*, July 13 and 15, 1877, January 13, 1888, (in which Tobin claimed eighty acres in downtown Salt Lake City, valued at one million dollars exclusive of improvements). Brigham Young to John Tobin, September 29, 1868; John Tobin to Brigham Young, April 15 and 26, 1875, May 11 and 15, 1875; John Tobin to Daniel H. Wells, October 28, 1875, BYC. John Tobin to John Taylor, January 29, 1882, John Taylor Papers, LDS Archives.

In 1879 Tobin petitioned for a military pension on the grounds of his blindness. To qualify, he had to demonstrate that his disability was service-related — an almost impossible task after years of very public claims to being the victim of attempted Mormon assassination. The pension board interviewed witnesses throughout the country, including those Ella Tobin located in Utah in an effort to help the father she had never known. Tobin's application was repeatedly denied as having "not a shadow of merit." Then, abruptly, his pension was granted in March 1889, based on vague "new medical evidence." In light of overwhelming documentation to the contrary, and in view of Tobin's renewed lecturing about the ambush when his pension appeared hopeless, it seems likely that he was rewarded for being the presumed victim of Mormon violence during the height of anti-Mormon sentiment and legislation.⁴⁶

Tobin did not long enjoy his hard-won pension; he died of a stroke on September 12, 1889.

The American public readily numbered the Santa Clara ambush among Mormon crimes, never doubting that John Tobin was its target. Tobin's return to Utah within the year, however, convincingly demonstrates that he did not consider his life in danger at the hands of his fellow Mormons. Historians have repeated the 1857 assertions without explaining Tobin's puzzling return, and without suggesting a motive beyond Tobin's presumed apostasy. That motive does not survive an examination of the evidence: although his faithfulness to church and wife ultimately failed, his 1858 return to both disproves abandonment at that date.

Evidence that the California-bound travelers were watched because Ambrose and Betts were among them makes the attack on Tobin one of mistaken identity. That evidence is compelling: Brigham Young wrote letters on two occasions to six leaders warning of the drifters' presence and dictating a course of action. Officials along the route acknowledged those instructions and acted on them. While there can be no conclusive identification of individual gunmen, Mormon involvement in the ambush is credible when Ambrose and Betts, not Tobin, are identified as the target. Only an unexpected division of the California-bound party spared Ambrose and Betts. Only the merest luck spared the lives of the Tobin party under fierce and indiscriminate gunfire; clearly their attackers meant to kill them all, taking no prisoners and leaving no witnesses.

The Santa Clara ambush was not what Brigham Young intended, in that it was not two backsliding felons who were attacked in the dark. But the ambush was the result of events he set in motion. He directed subordinates to take extra-legal action under specified conditions, knowing that innocents might suffer with the guilty because no "tale bearers" were to be spared. If he did not intend Dame and Haight to read his instructions as they have been interpreted here, that reading is justified by the indirect

⁴⁶ Pension File. *Mobile (Georgia) Register*, February 25, 1887.

phrasing of his letters. If residents of southern Utah went beyond the mark in implementing his instructions, no effective chastisement occurred. All of the men to whom letters were sent retained their church, civil, and military positions as though nothing untoward had happened.

But something untoward *had* happened, with repercussions beyond the injuries and losses to Tobin and his companions. News of the attack spread quickly through the nation, heightening tensions on the eve of the Utah War. When the wounded victims were carried to San Bernardino, rumors flared that endangered the lives of Mormons living there. Lack of accountability following the Santa Clara ambush did nothing to allay a local impression that violence was a suitable response to perceived threat, an impression, which seemingly played a role at Mountain Meadows later that year. Most chilling to contemplate, survival of the Santa Clara victims and their public exposure of the attack may have strengthened a determination at Mountain Meadows to spare no competent witnesses.

An examination of *what* happened does not adequately explain *why* it happened. Why did Brigham Young issue his directives of February 3 and 6, 1857? Certainly Ambrose and Betts were undesirables who had been expensive visitors for Utah to host. But Utah had law enforcement officers, functioning courts, and jail facilities — all demonstrated by the handling of the felons' November offenses — without need of extra-legal activity.

Perhaps the answer lies in the fires of the reformation, burning their hottest through all the months Ambrose and Betts were in Utah. Communities and personal lives were to be set in order. Confession and restitution would bring forgiveness. In a sense, Ambrose and Betts had confessed their sins at trial: they were convicted in part “from their own statements and admissions.” They had made token restitution by their prison term and the confiscation of their property. They had received a measure of mercy in unexpectedly light sentences. So long as they did not repeat their crimes, they were to be free of further interference. But if they fell into old habits, they would “inherit sorrow” and “not get off as easily” as before. Had Ambrose and Betts indulged in further theft, their case would have so closely paralleled the backsliding condemned in countless reformation sermons that the instructions to “pursue, retake & punish” can be seen as implementing the penalty prescribed in those same sermons.⁴⁷

Such reasoning, incompatible with mainstream American philosophy, was

⁴⁷ This pattern was repeated in 1858 during the Utah War. A company of undesirables (army deserters, former civilian teamsters, and stranded emigrants) had wintered in northern Utah and was to be sent to California in the spring. Brigham Young directed a military leader to watch the company, guard against theft, escort them so far on the road that they could not return to steal from the settlements, “and warn all such parties that the discovery of thefts committed by them upon our people will be the signal of their destruction.” Brigham Young to Chauncey W. West, March 12, 1858, Nauvoo Legion (Utah), Adjutant General, Record 1851–1870, 256, LDS Archives. As with Ambrose and Betts, these persons had made themselves unwelcome; had received mercy (winter hospitality); could proceed peaceably so long as no crimes were committed; but were to be destroyed if they abused the people among whom they passed. No harm is known to have come to this party; several members appear on the 1860 census of California.

consistent and justified within the heterodoxy of nineteenth century Mormonism — a theocratic world view shared by a people separate and apart from the nation around them, deriving its law from sources greatly at variance with that nation's Protestant rationalism. The order to “pursue, retake & punish” admittedly violated the form of American law, but shared its spirit insofar as punishment was to be implemented only after guilt was ascertained. Theocracy, however, deteriorated to fanaticism on the Santa Clara that night, punishment being visited on the demonstrably innocent, absent evidence that anyone at all was guilty. Failure to hold anyone responsible for the Santa Clara ambush foreshadowed the silence to follow the Potter-Parrish murders in Springville the next month, the massacre at Mountain Meadows in September, the October bludgeoning death of Richard Yates in Echo Canyon, the murders of the Aiken party near Nephi in November — a catalog of bloodshed without accountability in the surreal year of 1857.

As John Tobin, John Peltro, and their companions made camp by the Santa Clara on February 17, Jack Baker, Alexander Fancher, and their families prepared in Harrison County, Arkansas, for their California emigration that summer. They would retrace the road taken by the February party, through the same communities governed by the same bishops and Nauvoo Legion officers. Their journey would end at Mountain Meadows, a few miles short of the Santa Clara on September 11, 1857.