

THE NAUVOO MORMON TEMPLE, the largest and finest building in the West at the time it was built, was destroyed in 1848, the victim of religious intolerance.

"I was in the Mormon Temple at Nauvoo and examined it. It was a large and splendid edifice—its grandeur and magnificence truly astonished me. It was erected on the top of the Mississippi bluff, which gave it a prospect that reached as far as the eye could extend over the country and up and down the river"—said John Reynolds in his "My Own Times," published in Belleville, Illinois, in 1855.

Today, in the State Park at Nauvoo is one stone from the Temple, the carved limestone cap from one column. It is 72 inches wide, 55 inches high, and 18 inches thick, and is estimated to weigh "from 20 to 30 hundred pounds." This is the one tangible remnant of the Nauvoo Temple. The Parochial School at Nauvoo is said to have utilized some of the stones taken from the ruins; they cannot be identified specifically.

Reliable information about the Nauvoo Temple has not been easy to acquire. Actually, there has been a good deal of misinformation written into the material about the Temple, and even the commonly accepted picture of the Temple, the one which has been published many times, is merely an artist or draftsman's concept of what he thought was the appearance of the structure. This is the picture we have used.

Mr. Joseph Fielding Smith, the Historian of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints in Salt Lake City, suggested as a source the book, "The House of the Lord," by Joseph Edward Talmage, one of the Twelve Apostles of the Church, published in 1912. No copy being available in Illinois, Doctor Robert Downs of the University of Illinois Library secured the book on inter-library loan from the Library of Congress, and the story was there, along with the clarification of a number of questions. Says Mr. Talmage:

"The Nauvoo Temple was constructed for the most part of a close-grained, light gray limestone, a material at once hard and durable, yet easily tooled, and therefore readily adapted to ornamental finish. The entire building was one hundred and twenty-eight feet by eighty-eight feet, and sixty-five feet high in the clear. The top of the spire was one hundred and sixty-five feet above the ground and bore the figure of a flying herald sounding a trumpet. The plan of construction was that of a solid and stable four-walled building, two and a half stories high, with a hexagonal tower at the front rising in four terraces and a dome. Over the front center door, and immediately beneath the base of the tower, appeared an inscription:

THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

Built by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Holiness to the Lord

"On the outside were thirty pilasters, nine on each side and six at each end. At its base each pilaster presented in hewn relief the crescent moon, and ended above in a capital of cut stone depicting the face of the sun allegorically featured, with a pair of hands holding horns. Above the capitals was a frieze or cornice in which appeared thirty star-stones."

The Nauvoo Temple was not the first one erected by the Church. The first was dedicated at Kirtland, Ohio, on March 27, 1836, but was abandoned in 1838 when the exodus to Missouri took place. A Temple site had been selected on August 3, 1831, at Independence, Missouri, by a pioneer group, but this site was abandoned before construction was started. The cornerstone for a Temple was laid on July 4, 1838, at Far West, Missouri, but before the foundation was completed, the members left for Illinois. The Nauvoo Temple was the second one actually completed, and here are the highlights of the tragic story of the second structure, as related by Mr. Talmage:

"After their expulsion from Missouri, the 'Mormon' refugees turned their faces toward the east, crossed the Mississippi and established themselves in and about the obscure village of Commerce, Hancock County, Illinois. The people demonstrated again their marvelous recuperative power, and without delay or hesitation set about establishing new homes and a Temple. By the early part of June, 1839, dwellings were in course of construction, and soon the hamlet was transformed into a city. To this new abiding place the Saints gave the name Nauvoo, which to them meant all that the name City Beautiful could convey. . . .

"The best and most suitable site within the limits of the city as planned was selected, purchased, and duly set apart as the Temple ground. The corner stones were laid April 6, 1841—the day on which the Church entered upon the twelfth year of its troubled yet progressive career. . . .

"The Nauvoo Temple was erected by the people, who contributed liberally both through tithes and freewill offerings of money and labor. Most of the work was done by men who tithed themselves as to time, and devoted their energies in the proportion of at least one day in ten to labor on the Temple.

"The work progressed slowly but without marked interruption; and this fact becomes surprising when the many unfavorable conditions are considered. The Saints had found but temporary respite from persecution; and as the Temple rose opposition increased. . . .

"On November 8, 1841, the font was ready for dedication, and the ceremony was performed by the Prophet himself. Thus, long before the Temple was finished, ordinance work was in progress within its precincts, the font being enclosed by temporary walls. . . .

"Beside the baptistry, other parts of the Temple were prepared for temporary occupancy while yet work on the walls was in progress, and on Sunday, October 30, 1842, a general assembly was convened therein. This is recorded as the first meeting held in the Temple.

"It was not permitted that Joseph Smith the prophet, nor Hyrum Smith, one-time counselor in the First Presidency and later Patriarch of the Church, should live to see the completion of the building. On the 27th of June, 1844, these men of God fell victims of the bullets of assassins, at Carthage, Illinois. Though heavy the blow and cruel the affliction suffered by the Saints in the martyrdom of their leaders, the work of the Church showed scarcely perceptible hindrance. Within two weeks after the dread event, construction on the Temple was resumed, and from that time till the completion the work was prosecuted with increased vigor and determination. . . .

"The somber clouds of persecution were gathering and thickening about the devoted people. Under counsel from their leaders the people prepared once again to leave their homes; and this time they resolved to go beyond the boundaries of civilization. A general exodus was imminent; and as early as February, 1846, this had begun. Most of the Saints, however remained for a short time; and with these the completion of the Temple was the main purpose and object of life. Though they knew the sacred edifice would soon be abandoned, they labored diligently to complete it, even to the smallest detail. . . .

"In the late hours of April 30, 1846, the Temple was privately, yet officially, dedicated, in the presence of such general authorities of the Church as could be convened. . . .

"The semi-private character of the dedication was due to the thought that possibly there would be interference in a public ceremony, so active was the spirit of intolerance and persecution. . . .

"The Saints had met the requirement made of them by the Lord in the building of another House to His name. Ordinance work continued a few months more, even though the exodus of the people was in progress. In September, 1846, the Nauvoo Temple was in the possession of the mob; and the people whose energy and substance, whose sweat and blood had been spent in its rearing, were driven into the wilderness or slain. For two years the once hallowed structure stood as an abandoned building; then on November 19, 1848, it fell a prey to the wanton act of an incendiary. After the conflagration, only blackened walls remained where once had stood so stately a sanctuary. Strange to say, an attempt was made by the Icarians, a local organization, to rebuild on the ruins, the professed intent being to provide for a school; but while the work was in its early stages a tornado demolished the greater part of the walls. This occurred on May 27, 1850. What remained of the Temple has been taken away as souvenirs or used as building material for other structures."

The Talmage book also cleared the matter of the picture that is usually used for the reproductions of the Temple. It is a drawing by a certain W. Murphy, with a copyright date of 1868. Mr. Smith sent us a copy of a daguerreotype made in 1846, and showing a side view of the building. Unfortunately, we received this too late for use; it shows a more attractive building than the one depicted by Mr. Murphy. The tower in the daguerreotype is significantly different; it is shorter, heavier, and decorated in better taste and proportion than that of the Murphy drawing. The building itself was constructed of much heavier blocks of stone than indicated by Mr. Murphy, and all building decoration was of better design than the Murphy concept.

The riverside village of Nauvoo is gradually being restored, and will become one of the most interesting historical and memorial items in all of the shrines of Illinois. What a tragedy that the Temple could not have been saved on its hilltop site.

The four blocks for the print and the type were of tulipwood and sugar pine for the underprinting. The printing, as usual, was by hand, using the Japanese method.

FRED AND BETTY TURNER

Christmas, 1956
Urbana
Illinois