

Joseph Smith's initial worry has not been clarified, although several writers have concluded that someone told him that Bennett was arranging his assassination. No evidence was presented then or later that even remotely implicated Bennett in any such plot, and Joseph Smith dined with Bennett the evening of the *Programma Militaire*—strange behavior if Smith really thought Bennett was trying to assassinate him. Nevertheless, Smith was concerned about Bennett.

On May 11 Smith and several others signed a statement to disfellowship Bennett. At the time, disfellowship was a temporary action that withheld membership privileges only until a person's case was resolved. This condition ceased when charges were dropped or when the accused was found guilty and excommunicated. The disfellowship notice was not given to Bennett at this time.

The Mayor's Resignation

On May 14 the city council passed an ordinance prohibiting brothels in the city. An eyewitness later claimed that Bennett had built one. The city council ordered it ripped down as a public nuisance. Lorenzo D. Wasson, Smith's nephew, reported that he had knowledge of "Bennett and his prostitutes."²⁷ Whatever Bennett's connection with the brothel, if any, it is unimaginable that it could have survived without the knowledge of the leaders of the church, yet no action was taken against it for at least a year. This inaction might have been due to a tacit acceptance, perhaps because the brothel was protected by Bennett, or it might have been an integral part of an emerging system of sexual experimentation then underway in Nauvoo, as Bennett later implied.

On May 17 Bennett resigned as mayor and voluntarily left the Mormon church. Joseph Smith penned a letter permitting Bennett to do so "with the best of feelings." Although the authenticity of this letter has never been questioned, it was not published in the Mormon press and does not appear in Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*. Quite the contrary, Smith wrote that "John C. Bennett having discovered that his whoredoms and abominations were fast coming to light, and that the indignation of an insulted and abused people were rising rapidly against him, thought best to make a virtue of necessity, and try to make it appear that he was innocent, by resigning his office of Mayor, which the council most gladly accepted."²⁸

At a special meeting of the city council held two days later, Joseph Smith was elected mayor, and Hyrum Smith was elected vice-mayor. According to Smith, "On account of the reports in circulation in the city this day, concerning the ex-Mayor, and to quiet the public mind, before the council closed, I

asked John C. Bennett if he had aught against me." Bennett arose and reported that he had "no difficulty with the heads of the church" and publicly avowed that anyone advancing the version that Joseph Smith had given him "authority to hold illicit intercourse with women" was a "liar in the face of God."²⁹

At the same meeting, the city council unanimously passed a "vote of thanks" to the ex-mayor: "Resolved by the city council of the City of Nauvoo, that this Council tender a vote of thanks to General John C. Bennett, for his great zeal in having good and wholesome laws adopted for the Government of this city; and for the faithful discharge of his duty while Mayor of the same."³⁰

No clarification for this remarkable sequence of events is to be found in the minutes of the city council meeting. Some writers later claimed (and others denied) that Bennett's confession was staged for public consumption. Others maintained that these affairs represented an arrangement Smith made to facilitate Bennett's withdrawal from the mayor's office. Had Bennett not withdrawn, however, he would easily have been ousted by the members of the city council loyal to Smith anyway. Bennett perhaps agreed to resign his position amicably in the hope that he might avoid a public confrontation with Smith. Bennett was a candidate for the Illinois House of Representatives, a position he clearly coveted, and he apparently believed that Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith would continue to support his candidacy.³¹ Disclosure of a rift with Joseph Smith would have promptly doomed any chance for his election.

As a result of this supposed arrangement, Smith got Bennett out of the mayor's office and out of the Mormon church. Bennett also signed a statement vowing that "he never was taught anything in the least contrary to the strictest principles of the Gospel, or of virtue, or of the laws of God, or man, under any circumstances, or upon any occasion either directly or indirectly, in word or deed, by Joseph Smith; and that he never knew the said Smith to countenance any improper conduct whatever, either in public or private; and that he never did teach to me in private that an illegal illicit intercourse with females was, under any circumstances, justifiable; and that I never knew him so to teach others."³²

The Nauvoo High Council Investigates

Bennett intended to remain in Nauvoo and hoped the time might come when he would regain "full confidence, and fellowship, and [his] former standing in the Church." His future conduct would warrant his restoration, he predicted. He was no Dr. Sampson Avard, he declared, referring to the leader of the Danites at Far West, Missouri, who had publicly denounced the Mormons after

being expelled from the church.³³ The Danites, also known as the Daughter of Zion, have been variously described as Joseph Smith's bodyguard or a band of Mormon enforcers who blindly followed Smith's orders. Whether the Danites continued to serve the same purposes after the Mormons left Missouri has been a matter of debate. According to Bennett, the Danites made the following oath upon entering:

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, I do solemnly obligate myself ever to regard the Prophet, and the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, as the Supreme Head of the Church on Earth, and to obey them in all things the same as the Supreme God; that I will stand by my brethren in danger or difficulty, and will uphold the Presidency, right or wrong; and that I will ever conceal, and never reveal, the secret purpose of this society, called Daughter of Zion. Should I ever do the same, I hold my life as the forfeiture, in a caldron of boiling oil.³⁴

During the week beginning May 20 the Nauvoo High Council, under the leadership of George W. Harris, examined charges against others, including Chauncey Higbee, an official in the Nauvoo Legion. George Miller charged Higbee with "unchaste and unvirtuous conduct with the widow Miller and others." Higbee pled not guilty and requested an adjournment because he was not ready for trial. The Nauvoo High Council decided to proceed to trial anyway and called three witnesses, who testified that Higbee "had seduced them and at different times been guilty of unchaste and unvirtuous conduct with them and taught the doctrine that it was right to have free intercourse with women if it was kept secret &c and also taught that Joseph Smith authorized him to practise these things &c." Hyrum Smith moved that Higbee be expelled from the church and that "the same be made publick through the medium of the 'Times and Seasons.'"³⁵

Joseph Smith persisted in his attacks on Bennett. According to him, Bennett was "a being totally destitute of common decency, and without any government over his passions." Bennett, he declared, was "busily engaged in the same wicked career, and continued until a knowledge of the same reached my ears." Bennett, he said, "admitted that it was true." To stop such behavior, Smith maintained he "publicly proclaimed against it, and had those females notified to appear before the proper officers that the whole subject might be investigated and thoroughly exposed."³⁶

On May 24 the Nauvoo High Council took the testimony of Sarah Miller, Margaret Nymans, and Matilda Nymans "relative to the charge against Chancy Higbee and others showing the manner of iniquity practised by them upon female virtue & the unhallowed means by which they accomplished

their desire." On the following day, George Miller charged Mrs. Catherine Fuller Warren with "unchaste and unvirtuous conduct with John C. Bennett and others." Warren confessed and gave "the names of several others who had been guilty of having unlawful intercourse with her." She said that they "taught the doctrine that it was right to have free intercourse with women and that the heads of the Church also taught and practised it." When she was informed that "the heads of the church did not believe nor practise such things she was willing to confess her sins and did repent before God for what she had done and desired earnestly that the Council would forgive her and covenanted that she would hence forth do so no more." Warren purportedly claimed to have had illicit sexual intercourse with William Smith, brother of Joseph Smith.³⁷

Presumably on the basis of these hearings, Bennett was accused of seducing Catherine Warren, Matilda Nymans, Nymans's sister Margaret, and several unidentified women. Bennett never denied the charges of adultery. On one occasion he reportedly admitted that he had sexual relations with six or seven women in Nauvoo. He confessed to William Law and others that "he had done wrong, that he would not deny, but he would deny that he had used Joseph Smith's name to accomplish his designs on any one."³⁸

Bennett claimed to have acquired transcripts of these Nauvoo High Council's interrogations, which he referred to as "inquisitions." These transcriptions were partially published in the *New York Herald*. Robert Foster, who attended Bennett's lectures in New York and who wrote about them in the *Wasp*, did not deny the accuracy of the *Herald's* account, nor did any subsequent Mormon source. Bennett's motive in referring to the transcripts in his public lectures was to prove that Joseph Smith engaged in the same activities that he did. Indeed, according to Bennett, Smith tried to seduce the very same women.³⁹

While the Nauvoo High Council's investigation was underway, Bennett prudently withdrew his name from consideration as a candidate for the Illinois House of Representatives. Bennett recommended that either Orson Pratt or Sidney Rigdon replace him as a candidate for the legislature.⁴⁰ Pratt and Rigdon declined to run. Subsequently William Smith ran and was elected.

On May 25 Joseph Smith gave Bennett the disfellowship notice, dated May 11, and threatened to publish it in the paper. Since Bennett had already withdrawn from the Mormon church with Joseph Smith's blessing, this incident is most peculiar. Hyrum Smith probably instigated it. According to Hyrum Smith's affidavit, when he became aware of Bennett's trespasses that the Nauvoo High Council had uncovered, he decided to prosecute Bennett "and bring him to justice." Bennett asked William Law and Brigham Young to in-

tervene with Hyrum Smith to see if there could be a reconciliation. Hyrum Smith ruled out a pardon because Bennett's crimes were so heinous, but he was willing to interview Bennett. According to Hyrum Smith, Bennett begged Smith "to forgive him, this once, and not prosecute him and expose him." Bennett admitted he was guilty and acknowledged "the crimes that were alleged against him; he seemed to be sorry that he had committed such acts, and wept much, and desired that it might not be made public, for it would ruin him forever." Hyrum Smith, however, "declined listening to his entreaties."⁴¹

When Bennett saw Joseph Smith, he purportedly asked for forgiveness, "weeping at the time." He also acknowledged his guilt to him and begged not to be exposed. Smith reportedly replied, "Doctor! why are you using my name to carry on your hellish wickedness? Have I ever taught you that fornication and adultery was right, or poligamy or any such practices?" Bennett said that Smith never did. Smith asked, "Did I ever teach you any thing that was not virtuous—that was iniquitous, either in public or private?" He responded that Smith never did. Smith asked, "Did you ever know anything unvirtuous or unrighteous in my conduct or actions at any time, either in public or in private?" Bennett said that Smith did not. Smith then asked if Bennett was willing to make an oath. Bennett agreed, proceeded into the office, and wrote the statement. After Bennett humbled himself and begged to be spared the publication of the disfellowship notice "for his mother's sake," the notice was withdrawn from the *Times and Seasons*.⁴² Interestingly, this statement, in which Bennett supposedly admitted his culpability under oath, was not released, nor was any explanation offered for not circulating it.

On the morning of May 26 Bennett met with sixty to one hundred of the Masonic brethren. According to Smith, Bennett "acknowledged his wicked and licentious conduct toward certain females in Nauvoo, and that he was worthy of the severest chastisement, and cried like a child, and begged that he might be spared, in any possible way; so deep was his apparent sense of his guilt and unfitness for respectable society; so deeply did he feign, or really feel contrition for the moment, that he was forgiven still." Joseph Smith pled for mercy for Bennett.⁴³ This seems curious, though perhaps this is consistent with Joseph Smith's pattern of forgiving sinners after public confession. Alternately, as others have speculated, Smith and Bennett might have come to agreement: if Bennett publicly confessed his sins, Smith would forgive him. Still others have suggested that Smith's reluctance to break with Bennett might have been based on his fear that Bennett would publicly reveal his knowledge about plural marriage and Joseph Smith.

On June 14 Bennett wrote a long letter to Simeon Francis disparaging a negative article on the Mormons that had appeared in the *Sangamo Journal*

four days earlier. The letter defended Joseph Smith and Mormonism and indicated that Bennett was satisfied with his life in Nauvoo. Francis refused to publish it, but it did appear in the *Wasp* on June 18. Meanwhile, however, Smith had published Bennett's disfellowship notice in the *Times and Seasons*.⁴⁴

One wonders why Smith acted against Bennett in mid-June and not earlier. Perhaps Smith expected or at least hoped that Bennett would leave Nauvoo quietly. When he failed to do so, Smith publicly censured him. Smith might have been emboldened to do so because of Bennett's submissive stance since mid-May. Bennett had meekly resigned as mayor; he had signed affidavits and statements exonerating Smith of all evil doing; he had publicly confessed his sins in the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge; he had agreed to resign his commission in the Nauvoo Legion; and he had otherwise publicly supported Mormonism. Smith might have believed that Bennett would again respond submissively. If this was Smith's logic, he was mistaken.

Bennett Departs Nauvoo

On June 18 Smith spoke out publicly against Bennett. According to Wilford Woodruff, Smith "spoke his mind in great plainness concerning the iniquity & wickedness of Gen. John Cook Bennet, & exposed him before the public." Smith's public attack produced a heated exchange with Bennett. As described in a private letter published in Burlington's *Hawk-Eye and Iowa Patriot*, "Some hard swearing passed between *these saints* during the quarrel." According to the unidentified author, Bennett threatened "to write a book for the purpose of exposing the rascality of this pretender to the spirit of prophecy." He might well have made other threats. Even though he had already voluntarily left, Bennett was excommunicated from the Mormon church on this day.⁴⁵

On June 21, 1842, Bennett abruptly left Nauvoo and headed for Springfield.⁴⁶ Bennett claimed that on the way he was

followed by Mr. O. P. Rockwell, a Danite, who on his arrival late in the night, made strict enquiries as to where I was—his ostensible business was *to put a letter in the post office!* but judge ye the *real design*. I was prepared for the gentleman and he approached me not; but another swift rider, Captain John D. Parker, another Danite, followed me to Springfield to *carry a letter to Dr. Helm*: but he had *another object*, and *you* may well suppose what it was. I told Captain Parker that I was aware of his object, but I feared him not. At Virginia, in Cass county, on my return, Parker met me again, and I called attention of the stage driver to him, who, thereupon, put two additional balls into his pistol, and then informed me he was ready for him or any other person having the same object in view.⁴⁷