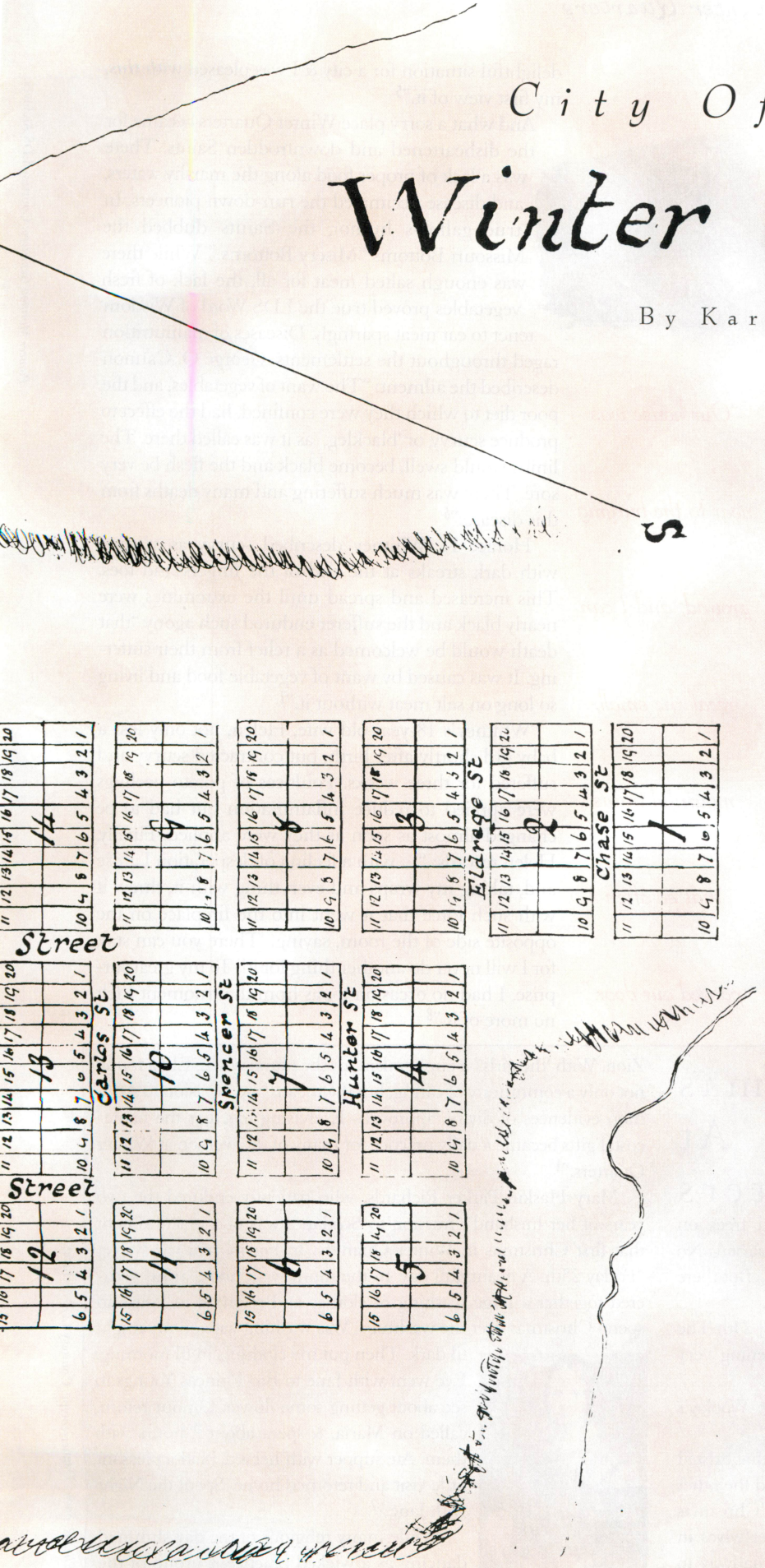
City Of Refuge

Winter Quarters

By Karen Boren



Plan of Winter Quarters, ca. 1846. Courtesy LDS Archives

There was no mercy extended to the mob-battered Mormons following the June 1844 murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith at Carthage Jail.

While Brigham Young first thought his people would be allowed to stay in Nauvoo until the following spring, by January of 1846 he learned otherwise. In his History of Illinois, Gov. Thomas Ford told how he spread rumors that the federal government would try to prevent the Mormons from heading west.

"But with a view to hasten their removal, they were made to believe that the President would order the regular army to Nauvoo as soon as the navigation opened in the spring," Gov. Ford wrote. "This had its intended effect; the Twelve, with about two thousand of their followers, immediately crossed the Mississippi before the breaking up of the ice."

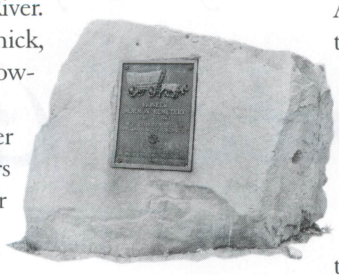
On Feb. 4, 1846, the wagons of Charles Shumway were ferried across the Mississippi to be the first to break the trail west. Brigham Young and most of his fellow apostles crossed on Feb. 15. The Mormon Moses had begun the exodus of the latter-day Camp of Israel.

And if the Mormon pioneers were the Camp of Israel, Winter Quarters was their City of Refuge, a safe haven where they could escape retribution and mobbing while preparing for their anticipated journey across the plains to their mountain home in the valleys of the Rockies. Whereas Moses had established the tradition of six cities of refuge where the ancient Israelites could claim sanctuary, Brigham Young established a cluster of settlements in hopes that his pioneering followers would be ready for the rigors of the trek west.

Knowing that no governmental hand would be extended to help the Saints, Brigham Young planned well for the latter-day exodus of the Camp of Israel. While on the plains of Iowa he wrote: "I propose that we proceed to the purchase (of lands) on Grand River, Iowa, and fence in a field of two miles square, build about 20 log cabins, plow some land and put in spring crops and thus spend our time until the weather settles; select men and families to take care of our improvements and the rest proceed westward… Then those who follow can tarry on Grand River or go on to the Missouri bottoms and other places where there will be plenty of feed for their cattle, and tarry through the winter…"[1]

Legal permission was secured from the Pottawattomie Indians to make winter encampment on their lands on the banks of the Missouri River. Legal documents were signed by Oh-be-te-ke-shick, Joseph La Trombois, Wash-e-ash-kak, Mack-e-etow-shuck and Indian Subagent R.B. Mitchell.[2]

In The Gathering of Zion, Wallace Stegner reports that following the exodus of the pioneers from Nauvoo, "...about 3,500 were in Winter Quarters and possibly twice that many more were scattered from Garden Grove to the east bank of the Missouri. (Superintendent Thomas H. Harvey of the Indian Bureau estimated 10,000 Mormons on both sides of the river in December, 1846)."[3]



Pioneer Mormon Cemetery. Courtesy LDS Archives.

"Our house was near to the burying ground, and I can recall the small, mournful trains that so often passed our door."

True to the type of the Cities of Refuge of Moses, there were a number of different locations where the Saints wintered. The main body of pioneers was in Winter Quarters (now Florence, Neb.), with the rest scattered in Cutler's Park, Kanesville (later called Council Bluffs), Ponca ("Running Water," where eventual apostate Bishop George Miller led a group), Garden Grove, Mt. Pisgah and Council Point.[4]

Brigham placed Winter Quarters three miles east of Cutler's Park on the west bank of the Missouri River. A city and stockade were laid out and 13 wards organized (which, in true Latter-day Saint fashion, soon had to be divided into 22 wards). The high council was both the ecclesiastical and municipal government.

Hosea Stout wrote his impressions of seeing Winter Quarters for the first time: "The city, for so it was laid out, was situated on a level flat on the second bluff from the river, and about 50 or 60 feet above the water and was quite narrow at the North End of the city...the city is one mile from South to North & bounded at each end by two brooks of good running water. The North brook is calculated to have a mill built on it with some 20 feet or more fall... This was a most beautiful and delightful situation for a city & I was pleased with this, my first view of it."[5]

And what a sorry place Winter Quarters became for the disheartened and downtrodden Saints. There was a lack of proper food along the marshy waters, and disease decimated the run-down pioneers. In true gallows humor, the Saints dubbed the Missouri Bottoms "Misery Bottoms." While there was enough salted meat for all, the lack of fresh vegetables proved true the LDS Word of Wisdom tenet to eat meat sparingly. Diseases of malnutrition raged throughout the settlements. George Q. Cannon described the ailment: "The want of vegetables, and the poor diet to which they were confined, had the effect to produce scurvy, or 'blackleg,' as it was called there. The limbs would swell, become black and the flesh be very sore. There was much suffering and many deaths from this disease."[6]

Horace K. Whitney described scurvy as starting with dark streaks at the end of the fingers and toes. This increased and spread until the extremities were nearly black and the sufferer endured such agony "that death would be welcomed as a relief from their suffering. It was caused by want of vegetable food and living so long on salt meat without it."[7]

Whitney's 18-year-old wife, Helen, not only lost a baby girl shortly after birth, but contracted scurvy and suffered for three weeks. Poultices of potato peelings were applied to reduce inflammation but had to be changed almost as soon as they were applied. Finally, Helen records: "...with a feeling of desperation I arose and, taking my wraps and everything with it, threw it with such force that it went into the fireplace on the opposite side of the room, saying, 'There you can stay, for I will never do another thing for it!' To my great surprise, I had no occasion to, as from that moment I felt no more of it."[8]

Christmas At Winter Quarters

There were no boughs of holly or gaily trimmed trees on December 25, 1846, in the cabins and tents of Winter Quarters. No visions of sugarplums, no bulging socks lining the hearth. But there was love, fellowship and the quiet peace of religious faith.

In Eliza R. Snow's diary, she records: "th. [December] 24th The day delightful—Sis. Green sent for me—spent the evening very interestingly with sis. Chase, Sessions & Markham.

"fr. 25th [Christmas Day] Spent the afternoon at br. Wooley's with the same com. As yesterday."

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher recounts the sisterhood that existed during that Christmas season between Eliza R. Snow and the other plural wives of the increasingly busy Brigham Young: "Christmas 1846 brought Eliza a joyous homecoming with her sister wives in Brigham Young's family as they waited out the winter halfway to Zion. With 'the girls,' a euphemism for the plural wives, Eliza found not only a community of caring, but the means and occasion to summon evidences of divine approval. Exercising together the pentecostal gifts became a daily practice for many of the women at Winter Quarters."[1]

Mary Haskin Parker Richards, who patiently endured the two years of her husband's mission to Scotland, was of a practical bent that first Christmas in Winter Quarters. In her journal she wrote: "Friday 25th. A beautyfull day. In the morn went home an[d] gethered together a large washing of clothes and retorned to Jane's to spend Christmas over the washtubs. Was washing with all my might til dark. Then put my cloth[e]s in til morning. Eve went with Jane to Bro Phineas Youngs to see about getting some flower. On our retorn, called on Maria, & spent about 2 hours with them. Ate supper with her &c. Had a pleasant little visit and retorned home. Spent the Night with Jane."[2]

Eliza R. Snow, Daguerreotype. Courtesy LDS Archives.

While many religions of the day shunned dancing as a wicked practice, a group of the

With the amount of sickness in the city, there is little wonder that midwife Patty Bartlett Sessions would carefully tuck one of her famous home remedies within the pages of her journal: "for bowel complaint take tea one spoonful of rubarb one forth corbnet soda one table spoonful brandy one tea spoonful pepermint essence half tea cup ful warm water take a table spoonful once an hour untill it opperates."[9]

Bartlett would "put to bed" the prospective mothers of Winter Quarters, carefully noting their husband's names and the usual $2 fee. On March 3, 1846, Patty recorded a birth to Brother Ezra Benson, who thriftily paid in installments: $1, 75 cents and 25 cents. Benson's plural wife, Alline, was also expecting. On May 1, Patty's journal read: "Brother Benson came over last night again. I went, found Alline sick. I came home, got some medicine, went back and stayed all night. At nine o'clock a.m. she had a son, William."[10]

Brigham Young's nephew, John Ray Young, was a child of 10 at Winter Quarters. He later wrote of it: "Our house was near to the burying ground, and I can recall the small, mournful trains that so often passed our door. I remember how poor and shameful our habitual diet was...and the scurvy was making such inroads among us that it looked as if all might be sleeping on the hill before spring."[11]

While the women sewed, cared for the sick and wove baskets of the river willows, the men were busy building a mill on the river. On Sept. 22, 1846, an $800 mill that would grind one barrel of flour per hour was launched. The site was Turkey Creek, close to the head of Main Street. Archibald Gardner signed a contract for hewn timber for the mill at $4.75 per hundred (the remodeled mill is the only building from Winter Quarters that still exists). The mill-building experience seemed to have been an apprenticeship for the mills Gardner would later build to support his many wives, the most famous of which today is at Gardner Village in West Jordan in the Salt Lake Valley.

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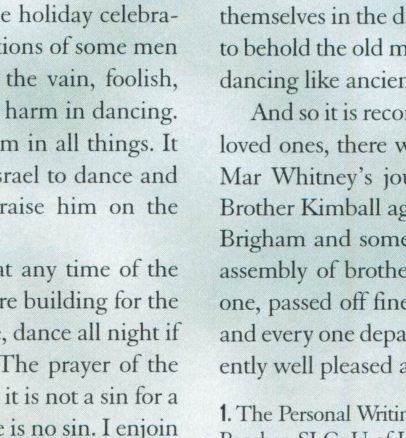

Gardner Mill, Winter Quarters. Courtesy LDS Archives.

While the Mormons called themselves "saints," the pioneers at Winter Quarters were as human as any people trying to live the laws of God. Captain of the guard Hosea Stout found two young men guilty of adultery and gave them 18 lashes. Eliza R. Snow indignantly recorded in her journal in Sept. of 1846: "I was taken sick on the last day of Aug. of a fever, which run nearly 40 days and terminated in the chills & fever. During this time, while suffering much in body, & lying as it were at the gate of death; with family discord, which I think proper to call hell, reigning all around me...a conversation took place between Col. M. & his wife of a most disgraceful nature; and the loud & fervent tones in which it was uttered must have made it quite public thro'out the Camp. Revenge and retaliation seemed the ruling spirits of each, & the pow'rs of darkness seem'd holding a jubilee around us."[12]

The trials of polygamy led Patty Bartlett Sessions to quietly record sorrow along with the roster of births. In his 1986 book, Winter Quarters, Conrey Bryson writes: "Comparatively late in life, Patty's husband had decided to observe the principle of plural marriage and had taken to wife a much younger woman than Patty; her name was Rosilla Cowen. In accordance with church policy, he had done so with Patty's consent. There is every indication that she welcomed Rosilla when she arrived with Peregrine [Patty's son] and his family on June 22, 1846. But there were troubles ahead... On July 11 Patty recorded: 'I eat my breakfast, but I am so full of grief there is no room for food, and I threw it up.' On the next day: 'I feel some better. He has promised to treat me well.'"

community's elders called "Silver Grays" planned dances at the Winter Quarters Council House. One such gathering was held on Christmas, with members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and other leaders invited to attend. As recorded in his manuscript history, Brigham Young added his approval to the holiday celebration: "Nothing will infringe more upon the traditions of some men than to dance. Infidels dance, also the wicked, the vain, foolish, giddy and those that know not God. There is no harm in dancing. The Lord said he wanted his saints to praise Him in all things. It was enjoined on Miriam and the daughters of Israel to dance and celebrate the name of the Almighty, and to praise him on the destruction of Pharaoh and his host.

"For some weeks past I could not wake up at any time of the night but I would hear the axe at work. Some were building for the destitute and the widow; and now my feelings are, dance all night if you desire to do so, for there is no harm in it. The prayer of the wicked is an abomination in the sight of God, but it is not a sin for a saint to pray; where there is no evil intended, there is no sin. I enjoin upon the Bishops that they gather the widow, the poor and the fatherless together and remember them in the festivities of Israel.

"Patriarch John Smith made some comforting remarks and exhorted the brethren and sisters to dance, sing and enjoy themselves the best way they could. The center of the floor was then cleared for the dance when the Silver Grays and spectacled dames enjoyed themselves in the dance; it was indeed an interesting and novel sight, to behold the old men and women, some nearly a hundred years old, dancing like ancient Israel."[3]

And so it is recorded that besides doing the wash and visiting with loved ones, there was indeed a Christmas celebration. From Helen Mar Whitney's journal of New Year's Eve, 1846: "This evening, Brother Kimball again gave up his room for the purpose of dancing. Brigham and some of his family were present, besides a numerous assembly of brothers and sisters. This evening, like the Christmas one, passed off finely under the direction of Orrin Porter Rockwell, and every one departed to their homes about one o'clock a.m., apparently well pleased and gratified with our scene of festivity."[4]

1. The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow, edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, SLC: U of U Press, 1995, p. 111 2. Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey and Jill Mulvay Derr, Women's Voices, SLC: Deseret Book, 1982 3. Conrey Bryson, Winter Quarters, SLC: Deseret Book, 1986, p. 86 4. Ibid., p. 85

Following Page: *Winter Quarters 1846-47*, by C.C.A. Christensen. Courtesy Norma Taggart estate.


1846-47.

Rosilla finally became so abusive to Patty that husband David hauled Rosilla's things to the river and she eventually went back to Nauvoo.[13]

Mary Haskin Parker Richards would spend two years at Winter Quarters while her husband Samuel served a mission to Scotland. On Dec. 20, 1846, she wrote in her journal about the blistering Brother Brigham gave the Saints: "In the morn got breakfast, washed the dishes, swept the Tent, washed me, changed my dress and sat down & commenced to write a [s]crap to put in my letter. In about ten minutes after the Temple Bell rung for meeting, got ready & went. Bro Brigham preached a sermon that I think will be long remembered by all who heard it. He began by speaking of several Evils existing in the Camp, such as, swearing, stealing, eveil speaking, &c. Said if they did not repent & leave of[f] their Eveil doings, The door of kn[o]wledge should be shut up against them, and they should be wasted by sickness, by Pestilance, and the Sword, and those who were found righteous among them, should be taken out of their midst, and they should perish with their dead. Said many [things] that were interessting."[14]

Council Bluffs, Iowa, by Frederick Piercy. Courtesy Utah State Historical Society

In this refuge from the storms of persecution, joy was waiting to be discovered by those with a will to find it. In a letter to her sister, pioneer Ursulia Hascall fairly rhapsodized her arrival at Winter Quarters: "I feel as if I narrowly escaped from Babylon with a mighty effort...there is no end to them black walnuts in abundance hundreds of bushels of grapes orchards of wild plumbs, fifty bushels in a place, you never saw anything better [to] make pies and preserves."[15]

The ever-positive Mary Haskin Parker Richards wrote to her missionary husband: "The place where we have settled for winter quarters is one of the most beautyfull flatts I ever see. it is about one mile square, the East side borders on the Mo River and most of the North & South. the West side is bounded with a ridge or bluff, from the top of which it decends graduley to the River...the scene is quite Romantic."[16]

The sounds of music rang through the Camp of Israel with William Pitt's band. William Clayton treasured his time playing with the band while he worried about his pregnant wife, Diantha, who was still in Nauvoo. His journal records this account for April 15, 1846: "This morning Ellen Kimball came to me and wished me much joy. She said Diantha has a son. I told her I was afraid it was not so, but she said Brother Pond has received a letter. I went over to Pond's and he read that she had a fine boy on the 30th ult., but she was very sick with ague and mumps. Truly I feel to rejoice at this intelligence, but feel sorry to hear of her sickness... In the evening, the band played and after we dismissed, the following persons retired in my tent to have a social christening, viz., William Pitt, Hutchinson, Smithies, Kay, Egan, Duzett, Redding, William Cahoon, James Clayton and Charles A. Terry and myself. We had a very pleasant time playing and singing until about twelve o'clock. We named him William Adrian Benoni Clayton... This morning, I composed a new song, 'All is Well.' I feel to thank my Heavenly Father for my boy, and pray that he will spare and preserve his life and that of his mother and so order that we may soon meet again."[17]

The pioneers quickly embraced Clayton's profound lyrics, enthusiastically singing about how "we'll make the air with music ring, shout praises to our God and King." No matter the discouragements or the losses, Clayton's soon-to-be-famous song reflected the joy to be found in singing and dancing. The pioneers would literally dance their way across the plains.

As one wagon train and then another loaded up and set off for the valley of the Great Salt Lake, Winter Quarters continued for a short time its role of refuge, gathering place and trailhead. In 1853, young Frederick Hawkins Piercy, an artist from Portsmouth, England, arrived at the desolate site of Winter Quarters on his way to Zion. Though relatives of his had joined the LDS Church, he was not Mormon and his Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley, printed in 1855, objectively sketched a pictorial history of the trek. Stegner records how Piercy toured Council Bluffs and then "he crossed to visit Winter Quarters and found that someone had just set fire to the last house remaining there. His view of the river, with the burning cabin in its lower right-hand corner and two wagons pulling out upper left, thus commemorates symbolically the end of one chapter of the Mormon story."[18]

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Karen Boren is a staff writer for the Deseret News in Salt Lake City.

1. Gustave O. Larsen, Prelude to the Kingdom, Marshall Jones Company, 1947, p. 62 2. B.H. Roberts, Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965, p. 143 3. Wallace Stegner, The Gathering of Zion, Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1964, p. 115 4. Russell R. Rich, Ensign to the Nations, Provo, Utah: BYU Publications, 1972, p. 89 5. "Camp of Israel: On the Pioneer Trail," compiled by David Crockett, LDS Church News, 28 September 1996, p. 13 6. George Q. Cannon, "History of the Church," The Juvenile Instructor, vol. xvii, p. 237 7. "Winter Quarters," p. 73 8. Ibid., p. 73-74 9. Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, Jill Mulvay Derr, Women's Voices, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982, p. 190 10. "Winter Quarters," p. 31 11. Conrey Bryson, Winter Quarters, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986 12. The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow, edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995, p. 144 13. "Winter Quarters" 14. Women's Voices, p. 170-171 15. The Gathering of Zion, p. 72 16. Church News, p. 13 17. Winter Quarters, p. 77 18. The Gathering of Zion, p. 217