

Early Mormon Culture: The First Temple in Kirtland, Ohio

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The Kirtland Temple is the largest physical artifact from the brief but formative Kirtland period of Mormon history. A study of the building fabric and the diaries of those who built it sheds light on the aspirations and challenges faced by the early Mormons.

Drawn to Ohio by the conversion of several hundred former Campbellites, Joseph Smith established the headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Western Reserve from 1831 through early 1838. The construction of the Temple (1833-36) was different from other meetinghouses of the Western Reserve. Built as an administrative and educational center in addition to housing worship services, it had two large congregational spaces one on top of the other, with offices located in the attic. The worship spaces have multiple pulpits which reflect the organization of the Mormon priesthood, further distinguishing the Temple from contemporary religious structures.

Conflict both in and out of the Mormon community was reflected in the building fabric of the Temple. The departure of "Zion's Camp," an armed group of men who marched to Missouri to aid Mormons driven from their homes in Jackson County, left only a handful of workers in Kirtland to work through the summer of 1834. Awkward design details present in the structure of the building were due in part the inability of the builder to coordinate the Temple construction with crude plans drawn up under Joseph Smith's direction, since the Mormon leader left Kirtland just a few weeks after the arrival of Artemus Millet, the mason who built the exterior walls. Design differences between the lower and upper halls are due to the disaffection from the Mormon community of Jacob Bump part way through construction. Distinct changes in style and form reflect the different age and pattern book usage of Truman Angell who finished upper hall after Bump's departure.

In some ways the Temple contributed to the exit of the Mormon community from Kirtland, as the heavy debt load incurred by Joseph Smith from its construction, as well as the debt load from land purchases to provide converts with places to live and farm, induced Smith to establish a banking society whose failure increased both dissention from within and persecution from without. Many of these conflicts were played out within the walls of the Temple, and death threats against Church leaders induced them to leave, with most Church members following in a matter of months.

The Kirtland Temple was built at a time of relative poverty among Church members. Not only did the few wealthy individuals in the community give all that they had, but poorer members worked long hours quarrying, sawing, and finishing the building. At times, workers slept on the scaffolding with firearms to protect the structure from threatened mob action. Despite all these obstacles, the Mormon community succeeded in building one of the largest buildings built during that decade in the Western Reserve.