



Lincoln Lore

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PRESIDENT LINCOLN, POLYGAMY, AND THE CIVIL WAR: THE CASE OF DAWSON AND DESERET (Cont.)

In fact, Dawson himself explained to President Abraham Lincoln in a letter on January 13, 1862, that "a further & a better reason [for vetoing was] not assigned—the fact that the evident purpose of this Convention was to put in operation a state government & if not admitted into the Union, to completely oust federal authority in this territory—a fact that will transpire ere the federal government is ready to meet it. . . ." On December 23, 1861, an assassination attempt took place in Dawson's very presence when a gunman fired five pistol shots at a federal judge named Crosby in the streets of Salt Lake City. The *Deseret News* apparently dismissed the incident by saying that Crosby hired a boy for half a dollar to fire at him. On December 24, 1861, Governor Dawson issued a proclamation offering a reward for the would-be assassin. The *Deseret News* carried both the veto message and the reward proclamation on December 25, 1861. Six days later Dawson left Salt Lake City never to return.

Why he left has not been satisfactorily explained. Dawson himself tried to explain it to Lincoln this way on January 13, 1862:

On leaving Great Salt Lake City on the 31st ult en route for home & Washington City I was followed by a band of Danites and twelve miles out, wantonly assaulted & beaten—the real cause of which may be found in the address of a committee prepared & delivered to a mass meeting in Salt Lake City called to take steps preparatory to calling a Convention for forming a Constitution & State Government.

The hostility of the people of the Utah Territory towards the federal authorities in general and towards Governor Dawson after his veto in particular may help explain the physical assault on Dawson's person, but it does not explain why he was "en route for home & Washington City" on December 31.

The customary explanation for Dawson's departure from Salt Lake City for Fort Bridger (from which point he addressed his letter of explanation to President Lincoln) is even more sensational. The telegraph carried news of it to Chi-

cago and Cincinnati newspapers late in January, 1862. Dawson's Fort Wayne newspaper first described it as "a difficulty . . . between Governor Dawson and some persons at Salt Lake City." Later the same paper printed the allegation that Dawson had "offered insult to a lady of the territory"; this, said the paper, was an "excuse" to get him out of the Territory.

In fact, no historian since has questioned the story. Carman and Luthin say Dawson departed when his "unwelcome gallantries toward a lady of the city became known." Mormon apologists like Matthias F. Cowley draw the incident in extreme terms:

John W. Dawson arrived early in December (1861) and delivered his message to the Legislature. He began a course of shameful debauchery. He insulted women until the widow of Thomas Williams drove him from her house with a fire shovel because of his vulgar abuse of her. On the last day of the year he left in the stage coach for the East, a known libertine and debauchee.

J.H. Beadle, whose book, *Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism*, is obviously critical of the Mormons, states that the Governor was involved in a discreditable affair "and in consequence of many threats precipitately fled the Territory." Neff accepts the judgment on the basis of the fact that both sympathetic and critical students of Mormon history agree on Dawson's personal (rather than political) reason for flight. Ray C. Colton's *Civil War in the Western Territories: Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), one of the more recent accounts, agrees that Dawson left "because of making indecent proposals to Mormon women" and states that he was flogged by ruffians led by a relative of one of the women. Three of the attackers were allegedly killed trying to escape, and the rest were tried and punished by law. Colton's account seems to be based on Orson F. Whitney's *History of Utah* (Salt Lake City, 1893). Although



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FIGURE 1. Brigham Young (from Orson Whitney's *History of Utah* [Salt Lake City, 1892])

at the time of publication not all of these sources could be located and examined, those available did not cite any court records, quote testimony from the trials, or cite newspaper accounts of the trials of the "ruffians," though surely any of these sources would have had some direct evidence about the reason for the assault. One source did cite the name of a person involved in the crime, and another alluded to the punishments meted out. These must surely have come from sources as close to the original event as newspapers, but, again, the citations were not available in the sources consulted before this article was written.

Curiously, Fort Wayne's Democratic newspaper revealed more Hoosier solidarity than it did partisan animosity. As late as February 8, 1862, at least two weeks after news of the assault and the reasons alleged by Mormon authorities had reached Chicago and Cincinnati newspapers, the *Fort Wayne Weekly Sentinel* stated that the *Deseret News* said that Dawson had been "beat in a cowardly manner, by a gang of thieves, who also robbed the other passengers"; this was hardly behavior completely consistent with the view that outraged honor led to the assault on Dawson. Nor did the *Sentinel* see fit in the future to hound the competing editor about the story. Surviving issues of the paper for this period are scattered (the next one following the February 8 issue is the March 1 issue), but a check of the papers through the spring of 1862 seems to indicate an agreement not to agitate Dawson's wounds.

Dawson's Weekly Times and Union, of course, assayed to defend its publisher and one-time editor. The article on January 29, 1862, was entitled "Explanation" and asserted that Dawson's "trouble," if there was any, came from Mormon political opposition to his veto. A week later, the paper's article, "Justice to the Absent" insisted that Dawson's departure was not hasty and that, in fact,

When he left home [Fort Wayne] it was his intention to return by the first of February, which fact was known to his friends and very generally understood in this community.

That his own private business required his presence here about that time, and that it was important he should return is well known to us.

The article promised an explanation when Dawson himself returned to clear the air. Fortunately, the files of Dawson's paper for this period are better than those for the Democratic paper. Dawson arrived in the city on February 13 (according to his daily paper), but there is no mention of him (and no explanation for the events in Utah) in the issues of February 19, 26, March 5, 19, 26, April 2, etc. A letter from Dawson about another matter appeared in August, and an article on November 5, 1862, said that "Mr. Dawson by reason of ill health has been for a long time unable to devote his personal attention to" the newspaper. If his health failed it was a surprise, for his daily paper reported his return by saying that he was "looking much better than we expected" and that "He will be at his post in a few days." Dawson could write a letter on another matter, but he could apparently offer no explanation. Mr. Dawson's case seems even weaker than that of his opponents.

Dawson's defense rested, then, on the assertion that he intended from the start to return to Fort Wayne by February 1, 1862. Incredibly, the newspaper did not bother to print or refer to an item in a previous issue supporting this contention. On November 20, 1861, Dawson's "Editorial Vaedictory" appeared in his paper:

Having been commissioned Governor of the Territory of Utah, and having accepted the office, it becomes necessary for me to proceed immediately to my new home. I shall therefore leave here to-morrow and though I shall have this paper carried on till the end of the daily volume (1st Feb. next) to-morrow ceases my active editorial duties. I shall, however, correspond with the paper until the period of my return, at the time above stated.

Despite Dawson's intention to make Utah his "home," he may well have intended from the start to return to Fort Wayne by the first of February. Would he, however, have left Salt Lake City precisely when he did, December 31, in order to be in Fort Wayne by the first of February? It is hard to determine for sure. Apparently the trip took between two and three weeks. A little over two weeks elapsed between Dawson's "Vale-

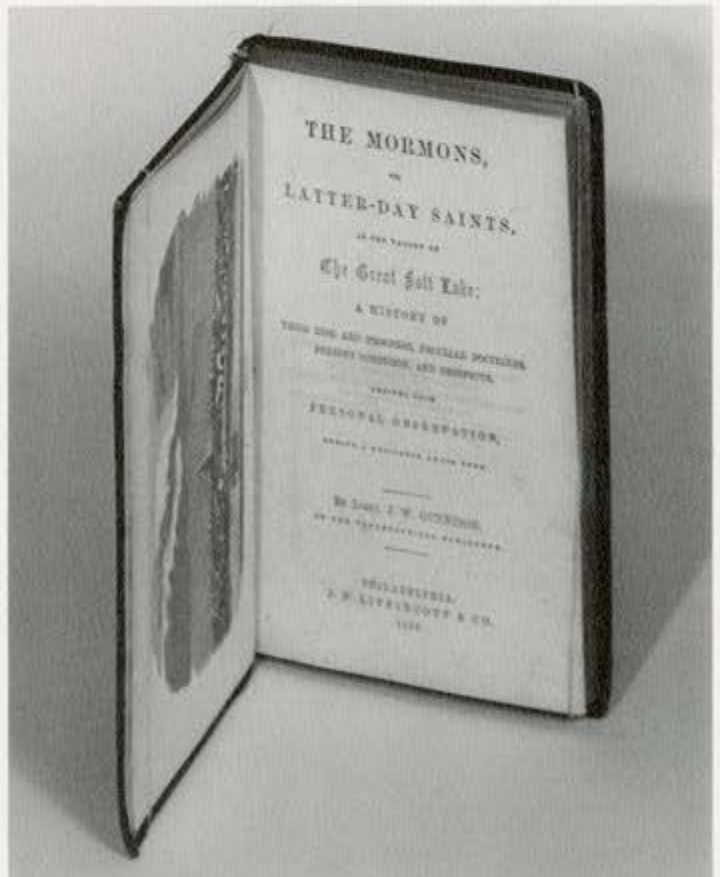
dictory" (November 20) and his appearance in Utah (December 6). A letter dated Utah, December 15, 1861, appeared in Dawson's Fort Wayne newspaper on January 8, 1862. The best guess is that Dawson left a week earlier than he had to in order to reach Fort Wayne by February 1.

I am greatly indebted to the Utah State Archives and Records Service in Salt Lake City for sending copies of their files on John Dawson. Among these materials is a letter from the acting Governor of the Territory, Frank Fuller, written January 9, 1862, answering a legislative committee's request for information about "the sudden, unceremonious, and unlooked for departure" of Dawson from Salt Lake City. Fuller replied with an "extract from a note received by me from that gentleman on the day of his departure." "My health is such," wrote Dawson, "that my return to Indiana for the time being, is imperatively demanded; hence I start this day." Fuller added that Dawson had told him "on the day of his arrival" that he intended "to return to Indiana at the close of the Legislative Session," but Dawson gave no reason for an earlier departure. The legislature was supposed to be in session for forty days. It convened on December 9, and it would have been in session well past the last day of December.

Dawson's note to Fuller about his health is the only reason he ever gave for his departure (he never said that he left Salt Lake City because of political hostility, only that he was beaten after leaving the city because of that hostility). He never explained his departure to President Abraham Lincoln or to the readers of his Fort Wayne newspaper. Nor did he ever attempt to counter in his newspaper the Mormons' allegations about his personal character. Dawson's silence is ominous.

Lincoln and Dawson's Case

Further clues to the truth of Dawson's story lie in the weak response he got from the Lincoln administration. Dawson's name is not to be found in the nine volumes of Lincoln's collected works. Dawson's letters in the Robert Todd Lincoln



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 FIGURE 2. President Lincoln borrowed this book from the Library of Congress about the time Dawson left for Utah.

Collection in the Library of Congress carry no endorsements on them. President Lincoln did not come to the rescue of his beleaguered territorial governor. Aside from the strong possibility that the sordid circumstances of his withdrawal precluded reinstatement, direct aid, or even a private vote of confidence, why did Lincoln ignore Dawson's plight?

For one thing, Dawson had not been very politic in his contacts with Lincoln. The President was used to having all kinds of unsought-for advice pressed upon him, but he could hardly have looked favorably upon Dawson's hasty jettisoning of Republican principle, and particularly of the principle on which Lincoln staked his career and on which he had depended to keep the Republicans from trying to woo his arch-rival Douglas in the late 1850's. Nor was it flattering to see Dawson curry favor with his own difficult constituency by pointing to inconsistencies in Republican policy in regard to the admission of new territories to the Union.

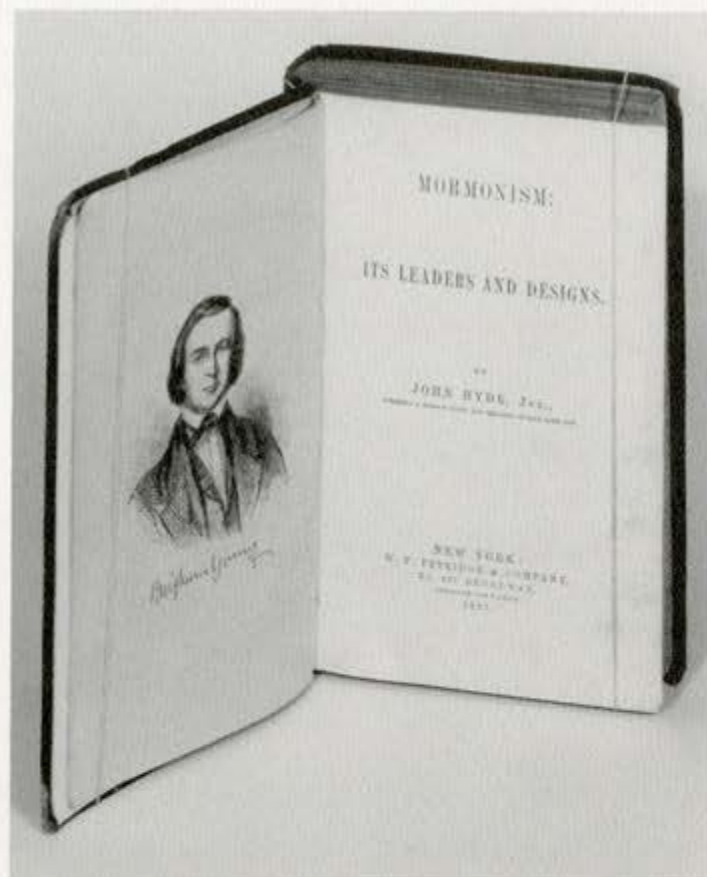
More important, although admittedly this is the judgment of hindsight, Dawson's advice was bad. His dire reports of Utah's disloyalty were not proved by the facts. In a letter written to Washington from Fort Bridger four days before his letter telling the authorities of his beating (but, curiously, written nine days *after* the beating despite his failure to mention it), Dawson urged the President to "take heed of affairs here, for everything is perilous, & growing daily worse." He tried to counteract other reports from federal authorities that the Territory was safe and loyal. "The report sent over the wires by Secretary [of the Territory, Frank] Fuller," wrote Dawson, "of the loyalty of this people was not warranted by the facts. . . ." Four days later Dawson scoffed, "And then talk about their loyalty[;] why such a thing is mythical—not a day passes but that disloyal sentiments are heard in the streets. . . ." More specifically, he told Lincoln,

The whole purpose of this people is to gain admission into the Union on an equal basis—& then the ulcer *polygamy* will have a sovereign protection which, while no other State nor this federal government can control, will be infecting every part of contiguous territory. . . . It must not be admitted till the foul ulcer is cured by a predominance of gentile [non-Mormon] population or by federal bayonets. . . .

Actually, Dawson's letter made him, rather than the Mormons, the enemy of the Union and the Constitution. This was a situation faced by opponents of the admission of Utah (at the time and for a long time to come, a heavy majority of the United States Congress) which the Mormons hoped to exploit. As one advocate of Utah statehood put it in the midst of the secession crisis of December, 1860, "I tell them [Congress] that we show our loyalty by trying to get in while others are trying to get out, notwithstanding our grievances, which are far greater than those of any of the Seceding States. . . ." This quotation seems to capture perfectly the spirit of Utah political opinion and, of course, indicates that Dawson was perhaps correct in regard to the *spirit* of Mormon opinion. Utah did want admission, not as a demonstration of loyalty to the cause of the government in Washington, but as a means to the cessation of federal control and (especially) federal threat to Utah's peculiar institution.

By July, 1862, this threat had become a reality because Congress passed (nearly unanimously), and Abraham Lincoln signed, a bill outlawing polygamy in the territories owned by the United States. Surely the Mormons could see the handwriting on the wall in 1861. The Republican party, which had rated polygamy on a par with slavery in 1856, had come to power in 1861. Nevertheless, the *spirit* of Utah's Unionism probably did not matter much to the beleaguered Republican President in 1861. Any Unionism must have looked good, and Lincoln certainly did not need any new fronts on which to fight his war. As long as Utah was maintaining loyalty, for whatever reason, communications with California were safe, and Lincoln did not see any reason to stir up trouble. As a practical matter of wartime fact, the Mormons got the better of the argument.

They did not, however, win the argument; that is, they did not gain entry into the Union. Doubtless Republican animosity towards Mormonism would have kept them out in any event, but the Congress had a telling argument anyhow. Utah's population was about 40,000. Other states had gained



early in 1863. After a subsequent conflict between Harding and other federal officials, on the one hand, and Utah's residents, on the other, Lincoln's appointments showed a particularly conciliatory policy. James Duane Doty, who had been Indian Superintendent in the Territory previously and who had therefore been a Utah resident for some time, became Governor. Amos Reed became Secretary. According to Neff, Reed's father, a lawyer in New York, had defended Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, in a famous legal case. Lincoln also appointed two Mormons to federal jobs; Jesse C. Little became United States Assessor, and Robert T. Burton became Collector of Internal Revenue for the Utah district. Such appointments met the major (openly stated) objection of the Mormons to territorial status. The resolutions of the mass meeting in Salt Lake City on January 6, 1862 (to which John Dawson had so strenuously objected), had complained of "the rigid policy of the President of the United States [in] persisting in appointing no resident or citizens of the Territory to any of the offices provided in its organic law, but continually selecting them from distant States,—men who have no interest in our welfare, in the prosperity of our Territory, who never identify their interest with us, who never build a house, a fence, or make any kind of improvement, but always rent houses and offices to serve out their time, receive their salaries, and then return to their homes in those distant states from whence they came, to use the means they thus acquired by making their homes and improvements away in some distant country." As early as April 28, 1862, again according to Neff's study (though the letter does not appear in Lincoln's collected works), Abraham Lincoln acknowledged political reality in the Territory by addressing an order to muster a company of volunteer cavalry directly to Brigham Young, President of the Mormon Church, and not to the federal authority in the Territory. In truth, President Lincoln followed Dawson's policy as it had been enunciated by Dawson prior to late December, 1861. In a letter addressed to his Fort Wayne newspaper and dated December 15, 1861, Governor Dawson outlined this practical policy for the federal government in regard to Utah:

... the immense advantage which this half way house between the Missouri river and the Pacific ocean has been, in feeding overland immigration and aiding in the settlement of California, and the value it is now to the great mail and telegraph enterprizes, make one feel, with all the alleged faults of this people, that they should be borne with in a spirit of toleration becoming a great and enlightened nation, and be fostered so long as they keep faith with the Constitution and the laws. Of these things no man who has not been among them here is competent to rightly speak and judge.

Another possible reason for the coolness of the Lincoln administration to the appeals of Governor Dawson lay in that ever-present determinant of action, politics. When Dawson sent his message before the Utah legislature to his Fort Wayne newspaper to be printed there, his covering letter mentioned his having heard "that a few of my enemies are straining a point to try to get my appointment rejected by the Senate of the United States—on account of some of my anti-abolition articles. . . ." Dawson knew of some such charges as early as December 12, 1861. On January 22, 1862, his Fort Wayne newspaper published an article entitled "Envious of His Success." The article explained that on "Friday last," an article entitled "The Governor of Utah," appearing "over the imposing *nom de plume* of 'VERITAS'" in the *Indianapolis Journal*, had attacked Dawson and urged the rejection by the United States Senate of his appointment as territorial governor. The gist of the letter, according to Dawson's editors, "seems to be, an attempt to prove that Governor Dawson is not a thorough-going, straight-out, ultra Republican, after the 'strictest sect of the Pharisees.'" Harding, Dawson's replacement, was noted for anti-slavery views.

The combination of forces and circumstances was enough to vanquish Dawson from the field of power within the Lincoln administration. His response was speedy. The issue of Dawson's *Weekly Times and Union* for March 19, 1862, carried this on its masthead:

For President in 1864,
General George B. McClellan
of Ohio.
For Vice President,
Gov. Wm. Sprague,
of Rhode Island

This abrupt change in a previously pro-Lincoln newspaper occurred over two years before the presidential election would take place and just a little over a month after Dawson's return to Fort Wayne. The timing is significant for another reason. Dawson's switch came a full six months before Lincoln announced his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation to the American public. Dawson's anti-abolition sentiments could hardly have smelled this development so far in advance. Winfred Harbison's "Lincoln and Indiana Republicans, 1861-1862" (*Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXIII [September, 1937]) cites Dawson's *Weekly Times and Union* as the first Indiana newspaper to defect from its previous support of the Republicans. Although Harbison says that Dawson "was one of the few conservative 'Unionists' who already felt that the President had gone too far on the emancipation question," it seems doubtful that any overt move by Lincoln elicited the response. It seems more likely that Dawson resented the opposition of the abolition faction in the Indiana Republican party to his quest for political office (or political vindication) from the Republican administration in Washington.

The case of Dawson and Deseret is not closed by this article; hopefully, it will be reopened. It is a significant chapter in the history of the Lincoln administration. A full explanation of the reasons for Dawson's sudden departure from Utah would illuminate the nature of Lincoln's views of Mormonism as well as the character of Lincoln's relationship to the Republican party in Indiana, always an important swing state in Republican political calculations. For these reasons and because of the sensational nature of the case itself, it deserves more attention that it has received to date.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation
FIGURE 4. John P. Usher