The Danites Reconsidered: Were They Vigilantes or Just the Mormons' Version of the Elks Club?

Our knowledge and understanding of the Danites, the secret organization established in Far West, Missouri, in 1838, has changed considerably over the years. The organization was initially thought to be the creation of Sampson Avard, a Mormon apostate who allegedly invented false stories of Danite lawlessness to help convict Mormon leaders of crimes after the Mormon War. For many years, Mormon historians said the Danite organization existed only a short time—perhaps a week or two—and that Joseph Smith knew little, if anything at all, about the group's teachings and activities.

But historians such as Leland Gentry have shown that the Danites existed among the Mormons for several months, and that Smith approved their initial efforts to organize for self-defense against mobs. Gentry, however, asserts that Smith had nothing to do with the more controversial Danite teachings, which Gentry lays at Avard's feet.

My book, The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri, takes Gentry's thesis further, arguing that most of the Danite activities—such as threatening dissenters and pledging to obey church leaders, whether right or wrong—were sanctioned by the Mormon Prophet. I argue that the Danites were well known among the Mormons, who viewed the group as a positive influence in their community, and that many prominent Mormons joined the group.

Dean Jessee and David Whittaker take my argument and stand it on its head. They agree that the Danites were well known among the Mormons, but they argue that the group was a community service organization that helped to gather food, care for the sick, build homes, and defend the Saints. Jessee and Whittaker make their case by pointing to the letters of Albert F. Rockwood, a Mormon resident of Far West. "Throughout Rockwood's letters, Mormon millennial expectations are obvious, but nowhere is there the cutthroat secrecy that Avard later persuaded Judge Austin King and other non-Mormons there was," they wrote. "The illegal activities Avard testified to are also missing in the


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other known contemporary Mormon references to Danites."

My paper examines these two contrasting views: Were the Danites vigilantes, an extra-legal organization that fought against Mormonism's enemies within and without, or were they a nineteenth-century religious Elks Club that performed numerous community services among the Mormons?

Rather than present a complete history of the Danites, I am going to focus on a few key questions: What Danite activities do we know about? Were they primarily military in nature, as I contend, or were they community service oriented, as Jessee and Whittaker assert? While examining these activities, I will look at a second, related question: To what extent did Joseph Smith and the Mormon leadership approve of and even participate in these activities? Third, I will examine who joined the Danite organization. Finally, I will take up the question: What were the Danite teachings?

Before starting, I need to address a couple of issues. For many years, Mormon historians cited Joseph Smith's History of the Church as evidence that the prophet did not know about or approve of the Danites. In the History of the Church, Smith says Sampson Avard organized and directed the Danites. Smith also contends that the group had little influence among the Mormons and that Avard's schemes were "manfully rejected" by the Danite officers. Smith concluded: "When knowledge of Avard's rascality came to the Presidency of the Church, he was cut off from the Church, and every means proper used to destroy his influence." Because Smith's denial of complicity with the Danites is so explicit in this History of the Church passage, assertions to the contrary—that is, assertions that the prophet knew about the Danite activities—have been regarded as tantamount to calling him a liar.

Joseph Smith, however, did not write this passage. The statement was actually written by Morris Phelps, a Mormon resident of Caldwell County, but the statement was edited and inserted in the History of the Church as if written by Smith. In fact, neither Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, nor any of the prominent Mormon leaders in Missouri criticized or condemned the Danites in their writings or recorded statements. Consequently, Smith's own statements regarding the Danites do not contradict the evidence showing that he approved of the group's activities.

Nevertheless, I will not be arguing that Joseph Smith was the creator or mastermind behind the Danites. Nearly all sources—Mormons and dissenters—agree that Sampson Avard was the group's "teacher and active agent." What I am going to argue

7Morris Phelps, "Reminiscences," 3-5. Typescript, LDS Archives. The excerpt on the Danites in the History of the Church is almost identical to Phelps' description in his "Reminiscences." I believe the History of the Church passage was taken from Phelps, and not vice versa, because (1) Phelps includes other information about the Danites not included in the History of the Church; (2) Phelps' description of the officers' opposition to the Danites is consistent with his claim at the Richmond hearing that he was dissatisfied with Danite teachings (Document, 110, testimony of Morris Phelps); and (3) it was not uncommon for the History of the Church editors to take material from other sources and insert it in the history as if written by Joseph Smith.

8Document Containing The Correspondence, Orders, &C. In Relation To The Disturbances With The Mormons; And The Evidence Given Before The Hon. Austin A. King (Fayette, Mo.: Office of the Boon's Lick Democrat, 1841), 114, testimony of John Clemison. See also John Corrill, A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (St. Louis: For the Author, 1839; Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, n.d.), 31; Reed Peck, "The Reed Peck Manuscript" (Typescript, Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm,
is that the Danite activities were sanctioned by Joseph Smith, and in some cases he even led their efforts.

One final point. I will not try to determine whether the Danites were “good” or “bad.” Jessee and Whittaker refer to my interpretation of the Danites as a negative or “dark” interpretation, suggesting that if you accept this interpretation, then you believe the Danites were sinister, evil men and that the Mormons deserved expulsion. I do not see it in this light. The Danites were not killers, criminals, or bad people. They were reacting to a specific set of circumstances—years of persecution, for example—that led them to adopt certain extreme measures which, under different circumstances, they probably would have rejected. Joseph Smith’s support for the group is both logical and understandable; in fact, given the circumstances, it would be surprising if the prophet objected to a group of loyal followers like the Danites. Nevertheless, it is also true that some Mormons and nearly all Missourians disapproved of the Danites and viewed them as inimical to lawful, democratic society; but I contend that most Mormons viewed the group as a force for good within their community.

Let’s begin by looking at the first question: What Danite activities do we know about?

The Danites were organized in June 1838 as part of an effort to rid Far West of dissenters, including David Whitmer, John Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and others who were considered a threat to the church. Precisely when the Danites were formally established is unclear, but the organization emerged from secret meetings held by Mormons in mid-June to discuss what to do regarding dissenters. The developing Danite group held several meetings but did not act until after Sunday, June 17, when Sidney Rigdon preached what later became known as the Salt Sermon. In his sermon, Rigdon denounced the dissenters and accused them of seeking to overthrow the church and committing various crimes. If the salt has lost its savor, Rigdon said, it must be cast out and trodden under the feet of men. The next day, the chief dissenters received a letter warning them that the Mormons would no longer tolerate their presence in the community. Signing at the top of the letter was Sampson Avard, the leader of the Danites. Among the

eighty-two signatures that followed Avard's were those of Joseph's brother and counselor, Hyrum Smith, and several other church leaders. After describing the many offenses allegedly committed by the dissenters, the letter announced that the Mormons intended to drive them from the county. The threat of violence created the desired effect, and on June 19 the dissenters fled with their families to neighboring Ray County.

The evidence for these initial Danite activities comes primarily from Sampson Avard and from dissenters who opposed Avard and the Danite organization. Two of the dissenters, John Corrill and John Cleminson said they attended some of the initial Danite meetings. Corrill secretly warned the dissenters of the threatened Danite violence.

Were there any loyal Mormons who wrote about these events? Ebenezer Robinson, who signed the letter of warning to the dissenters, left an account of these events consistent with the dissenters' descriptions. George W. Robinson, the church recorder and a colonel in the Danite organization, wrote a contemporary account that tells of the dissenters' expulsion. George Robinson said that Cowdery, the Whitmers and other dissenters were "guilty of base iniquities" and refused to be dissuaded from their course of "seeking the lives of the First Presidency and to overthrow the Kingdom." Robinson did not mention the letter of warning, but he summarized Rigdon's Salt Sermon and described the dissenters' reaction: "These men took warning, and soon they were seen bounding over the prairie like the scape Goat to carry off[!] their own sins, we hav[e] not seen them since, their influence is gone, and they are in a miserable condition, so also it [is] with all who turn from the truth." Robinson's account here lends support to the dissenters' description of this episode.

Did Joseph Smith approve the expulsion of the dissenters? Before answering this question, I want to look at the next major event in which the Danites appeared: the Fourth of July celebration in Far West.

The Elders' Journal, a Mormon publication, reported that during the Fourth of July festivities, the three Danite generals, Jared Carter, Sampson Avard, and Cornelius P. Lott, were given seats of honor with the prophet on the reviewing stand. The lower-level Danite officers, including Col. George Robinson, were also honored participants in the procession. In addition, two officers in the Caldwell County militia, Col. George M. Hinkle and Maj. Jefferson Hunt, were mentioned as honorary participants. Robinson said he commanded the Mormon regiment that marched in the parade, which suggests that it was Danite soldiers—not the regular state militia—who marched in the celebration because Robinson was a colonel in the Danite organization. Thus, within two weeks after the group was organized, the Danite soldiers and their leaders were hon-

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1Peck, "Manuscript," 6-7; Corrill, History, p. 30; John Whitmer, "The Book of John Whitmer," 22; and Document, 103-107, 110, 114, 120, 139, testimonies of Sampson Avard, John Corrill, John Cleminson, Reed Peck, and John Whitmer.

2Ebenezer Robinson, "Items of Personal History," The Return I (October 1889) 145-147.

3Robinson, "The Scriptor Book of Joseph Smith Jr. President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints in All the World," 47. LDS Archives.

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12Robinson, "Scriptor Book," 47. Reed Peck wrote that Sidney Rigdon also said the dissenters were sent "bounding over the prairies" ("Manuscript," 9); while Robert Snodgrass testified at the Richmond hearing that Rigdon threatened to "set the Gideonites upon them [dissenters] and have them bounding over the plains" (quoted in James H. Hunt, Mormonism. Embracing the Origin, Rise and Progress of the Sect, With an Examination of the Book of Mormon; Also Their Troubles in Missouri, and Final Expulsion From the State (St. Louis: Printed by Usick & Davies, 1844), 217.

13Elders' Journal 1 (August 1838): 60.

ored participants in the Mormons’ Fourth of July celebration. Everyone knew they were Danites and their presence at the celebration was noted with only matter-of-fact passing by Robinson and the *Elders’ Journal*.

Now let’s address the question raised earlier: Did the prophet approve of the dissenters’ expulsion from Far West? There is no direct evidence from loyal Mormon sources that reveals one way or the other Joseph Smith’s opinion, but we do know that (1) his chief counselor, Sidney Rigdon, delivered the Salt Sermon; (2) his brother (and other counselor) Hyrum signed the letter warning the dissenters to leave; (3) the church recorder, Danite Col. George Robinson, described the expulsion as a righteous punishment of the wicked; and (4) just two weeks later, both Rigdon and the Danites played prominent roles at the Fourth of July celebration. If Joseph Smith didn’t know beforehand of the Danites’ plan to expel dissenters, it certainly appears that he endorsed it afterward.\(^{15}\) I have found no evidence to the contrary.

The Danite organization grew throughout the summer and fall of 1838. Three to four hundred Mormon men, maybe more, joined the band at Far West and at Adam-ondi-Ahman. Who were the Danites? Here are some of the names that can be obtained from loyal Mormon sources: Elias Higbee, a Caldwell County judge, was a Danite general; George W. Robinson was a colonel; Reynolds Cahoon, a counselor in the stake presidency at Adam-ondi-Ahman, was a captain. Other members of the Danite orga-
nization included Dimick Huntington, Anson B. Call, Allen J. Stout, Hosea Stout, Moses Clawson, John L. Butler, Cornelius P. Lott, Philo Dibble, Seymour Brunson, and Luman Shurtliff. These were stalwart Mormons. Lyman Wight reportedly was the top Danite leader at Adam-oni-Ahman, but this is not confirmed in a loyal Mormon source.

The next major event in which Danites played an important role is the August 6, 1838, Gallatin election battle. When a group of Missourians tried to prevent the Mormons from voting in Gallatin, a scuffle broke out and about half a dozen Missourians attacked one of the Mormons. John L. Butler, who had come to Gallatin to vote, said that when he saw his fellow Mormon in trouble, "The first thing that came to my mind was the covenant entered into by the Danites to the effect that they were to protect each other, etc., and I hollowed out to the top of my voice saying 'o yes, you Danites, here is a job for us.'"

When Butler gave the Danite signal of trouble, about ten more Mormons entered the fray. One of those Mormons, John D. Lee, reported in a separate account: "Captain Butler was then a stranger to me, and until I saw him give the Danite sign of distress, I had believed him to be one of the Missouri ruffians... Seeing the sign, I sprang to my feet and armed myself with one of the oak sticks. I did this because I was a Danite, and my oaths that I had taken required immediate action on my part, in support of the one giving the sign." Whether all the Mormon men who fought with Butler and Lee were Danites is not known, but the Mormons held their ground and dispersed the non-Mormons. The next day, news of the election battle reached Far West, where it was erroneously reported that two Mormons had been killed and that the Missourians would not allow them to be buried. The Mormons quickly organized a military expedition to Daviess County, which Reed Peck said consisted of about 150 Danite officers and soldiers, who marched under the leadership of Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon. Peck's assertion is supported by two loyal Mormons, George W. Robinson and Albert P. Rockwood.

Robinson said Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were in the expedition, as well as Gen. Higbee and Gen. Avard, and that he (Robinson) was given command of the Mormon regiment because he held the office of colonel. Higbee, Avard, and Robinson were all Danite officers, and Robinson specifically mentioned them by their Danite military titles. In Rockwood's account, he remarked matter-of-factly that Joseph Smith and Lyman Wight led the Mormon troops in Daviess County following the election battle.

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17An excellent summary of this event can be found in Reed C. Durham, "The Election Day Battle at Gallatin," BYU Studies 13 (Autumn 1972): 36-61.

18Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, August 6, 1838, Butler account.

19John D. Lee, Mormonism Unveiled: or The Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop John D. Lee (St. Louis, Bryan, Brand, & Co., 1877), 59.


22Jessee and Whittaker, 19.
These events have taken us only through early August 1838, several months before the conflict in northern Missouri would begin in earnest. Yet the Danite organization was already well established among the Mormons. Danite soldiers marched prominently in the Fourth of July celebration at Far West, while their generals were given honored positions on the reviewing stand; John Butler practised in the War in Davis County Missouri in the fall of 1838. The Danite soldiers did not attempt to hide their membership in the group, which was known to all Mormons. The Danites were a secret organization in the same way that the temple is secret. Everyone knows the temple exists

Reynolds Cahoon and wife. Photo from Shurtleff and Cahoon (Salt Lake City: Paragon Press, 1960).

felt comfortable giving the secret Danite sign calling on other members for help in Daviess County; and Joseph Smith felt confident leading the vigilante group to Adam-ondi-Ahman to protect Mormon settlers there. Other information from Mormons and dissenters tells us that during this period the Danites were holding meetings, bringing in new recruits, and organizing militia companies. The fact that both the Elders' Journal and George W. Robinson referred to the Danite leaders by their military titles suggests that the Danites took seriously their military function. Hosea Stout, a loyal Mormon and a member of the Danites, later recalled that the Nauvoo legion performed the “Danite evolutions of horsemanship as and what its purpose is, but only the practitioners know the secret signs, oaths, and teachings associated with the temple.

This leads to the last question: What were the Danite teachings? The dissenters

3Stout also wrote that the Nauvoo troops practiced “the old Missouri Danite drill.” See The Diary of Hosea Stout, 1:141, 197. Juanita Brooks, who edited Stout’s diary, states that the Danite evolutions of horsemanship were used in Southern Utah as part of parades and celebrations as late as the 1860s (1:141, n. 17).
claimed the Danites swore to support and protect each other, and to obey church leaders, whether right or wrong. Dissenters also said the Danites pledged to wipe out dissent within the church, and Danites would even kill their enemies, if so ordered by church leaders, to further the work of the kingdom. The Danites bound themselves together with secret oaths and signs, which they used to recognize each other and call for help in time of trouble, as Butler and Lee did at the election battle. At some point, Danite leaders also reportedly taught their men that the time had come to establish the Kingdom of God through military means, and that it was okay to lie, steal, and break any laws because the Kingdom of God was superior to civil governments and laws.

Can we find any evidence from loyal Mormon sources to support the dissenters' claims? There are small references and allusions to these Danite teachings in several Mormon sources, but the most detailed description is provided by Morris Phelps, who said he attended two Danite meetings. Phelps said Avard taught the Danites that (1) they should "stand by and protect one another in all things"; (2) they should swear to lies, if necessary, to protect one another; and (3) it was okay to plunder the Missourians, because the Lord had said "the riches of the Gentiles should be consecrated to my people." Phelps' description of Danite teachings, which he attributes entirely to Avard, is generally consistent with the dissenters' accounts.

Although the evidence shows that the Danites were well established and known to Joseph Smith, his relationship to the group is not entirely clear. As we have seen, Mormon sources place the prophet with the Danites at several public events, but these accounts provide few details regarding his interaction with the group or its leaders. Three Mormons, Lorenzo Dow Young, Morris Phelps, and Lyman Wight, later asserted that Smith immediately took action against Avard when he learned of Avard's teachings. Their assertions, however, are difficult to reconcile with evidence that the Danites operated freely throughout the summer and fall of 1838. The dissenters said the Danites were directed primarily by Avard and other Danite officers, and that Smith and his counselors attended only a few meetings. "The first presidency did not seem to have much to do with it at first," Corrill recalled regarding the Danite organization. "They would, however, go into their meetings occasionally and sanction their doings." Avard, in fact, may have invited the First Presidency to attend meetings to assure members that the group had church backing. Peck said that at a meeting he attended, Avard did not explain the Danite teachings to the presidency, but nevertheless the presidency blessed the Danite officers and "approved Avard's course in the society." Peck also said that George W. Robinson, a Danite colonel and the church recorder, informed him that the Danites were "under the instruction of the presidency." Cleminson testified that during a meeting he attended, the prophet endorsed the Danite teachings and pledged he would give the Mormon men "his head for a football" if...

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24See LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri*, 40-43.

25Morris Phelps, "Reminiscences," 3-5. See also his testimony in *Document*, 110.


27It's possible, as I argue later in this paper, that Joseph Smith was unaware of some extreme teachings that Avard introduced among the Danites at the end of the Mormon War. If true, Smith was objecting to specific teachings by Avard, but not to the general thrust of the Danite organization, which had existed for several months.


29"Document", 117, testimony of Reed Peck.

30Peck, "Manuscript," 34.
they were led into difficulty, saying "it is the will of God these things should be so."\textsuperscript{30}

And so this is my thesis: The Danites represented mainstream Mormonism, 1838. They were the men most loyal to Joseph Smith. They were vigilantes, and by that I mean they were not acting under the guise of legal authority. They organized into military companies with generals, colonels, and captains at their head, and sought to enforce religious values within the Mormon community and to protect Mormon lives and property from enemies outside the community. While their meetings were held in secret, they operated in the open, for all to see. This openness should not be surprising because, from the point of view of Joseph Smith and other Mormons, the Danites were a positive force in the Mormon community. The Danites were helping to cleanse and purify the church, which the Mormons deemed necessary to establish the Kingdom of God in Missouri. And when conflict erupted, the Danites were in the forefront of protecting the church against anti-Mormon mobs. Although the dissenters felt threatened by the Danites and objected to their presence, the prophet probably viewed these complaints as carping from the church's critics. Loyal Mormons had nothing to fear from the Danites.

My thesis, however, has not been universally embraced. Dean Jessee and David Whittaker concur with my assertion that the Danites were well known among the Mormons. But Jessee and Whittaker contend that I have misunderstood the nature and purpose of the Danites. Citing the journal of Albert P. Rockwood, they say the Danites were a community service group that was involved in all aspects of Mormon kingdom building, and that the Danites' military activities represented only one part of their overall function within the community. Jessee and Whittaker write: "Some groups of Danites were to build houses; others were to gather food or care for the sick, while still others were to help gather the scattered Saints into the community. There can be no doubt that Rockwood is describing the total activities of a covenant community that viewed itself in the same terms as ancient Israel. Working in groups, these Danites served the interests of the whole."\textsuperscript{31}

Jessee and Whittaker argue that Sampson Avard is largely responsible for the dark view of the Danites, which they say he invented when he testified at the Richmond hearing. Avard, realizing that the Missourians wanted evidence to convict Mormon leaders, gave them all they needed with his false story of treasonous Danite oaths and activities. Jessee and Whittaker contend that the dissenters who testified at the hearing seized upon Avard's falsehoods and then added lies of their own in order to discredit the prophet and the church. Jessee and Whittaker acknowledge that some Danite groups may have engaged in illegal activities, but they assert this was done by the "more radical fringe" of the Danites and represented an "aberration" from the group's true principles. Nevertheless, because the Missourians believed Avard, Jessee and Whittaker say that Joseph Smith subsequently denied any knowledge of the Danite activities, despite the fact that he and nearly all Mormons were acquainted with the Danites' good works.

Jessee and Whittaker thus bring us back full circle to the traditional Mormon interpretation: Joseph Smith had no knowledge of, nor did he approve of, the Danite teachings and activities described by Avard at the Richmond hearing.

There are several problems with the Jessee and Whittaker thesis. First, their thesis rests primarily on Albert P. Rockwood's journal account, which they have taken out of context. Here is the Rockwood passage on which they rely:

\textsuperscript{30}Document, 114, testimony of John Clemimson Corrill said Smith told the Danites that, "if the presidency led them astray, they [the Danites] might destroy them" (Document, p. 111, testimony of John Corrill).

\textsuperscript{31}Jessee and Whittaker, 13.
Far West is the headquarters of the Mormon war, the armies of Israel that were established by revelation from God are seen from my door every day with their Captains of 10 s. 50 s & 100. A portion of each Day is set apart for drill, after which they go to their several stations (VIZ.) 2 Companies of 10 s. are to provide the families with meal[,] 2 provide wood[,] 2 or 3 build cabbins, 1 company of 10 s. collect & prepare arms[,] Company provide me[as], 1 Company are spies, one Company are for express[,] 2 Companies are to gather the families that are scattered over the counties in the vicinity[,] 1 company to see to & provide for the sick, and the families of those that are on duty[,] Others are employed gathering provissions into the city, &c &c.

Those companies are called Danites because the Prophet Daniel has said they shall take the kingdom and possess it for ever. 32

Although it is true that Rockwood outlines a broad mission for the Danites here, these duties were assigned to the Danites as part of a Mormon war effort that had just begun.

The Rockwood passage was written October 22, during the height of the Mormon War. The evidence suggests that Rockwood was actually referring to a meeting in Far West that took place on October 20, just two days earlier. Several Mormons who testified at the Richmond hearing described this October 20 meeting in terms very similar to Rockwood's account. Their descriptions suggest that it was a Danite meeting because they say it was called by Sidney Rigdon and Sampson Avard, who gathered about 50 to 100 "true men" into a closely guarded schoolhouse. Rigdon and Avard told the Mormons present that they must prepare for all-out war, and so organized them for that purpose. Burr Riggs, one of those who attended the meeting, gave the following account:

At this meeting companies were chosen, some to procure wood for the town, and some to procure meal for the army at Far West, and also, for the families of those who were in the expedition to Daviess, and one company for spies.... [Sidney Rigdon] gave instructions to the spy company that they should go out to Richmond and surrounding country, to learn the movements of mobs. 33

Riggs and the other Mormons who testified said these specific companies were organized and their captains appointed at this meeting. These companies were not part of the original Danite organization, which had been organized four months earlier, but were created for the first time at the October 20 meeting. The new Danite responsibilities—gathering crops and supplies, tending to the sick, spying and carrying war messages—were tied directly to the war effort, not to general kingdom building.

Of the dozens of sources that describe the Danites, only one suggests that the Danite mission went beyond vigilante and defense-related activities. George Robinson recorded in July 1838 that the Danites "are up to consecrate by companies of tens," suggesting that the Danites may have played a role in implementing the new law of consecration. 34 But Robinson also associated this activity with the Danites' primary mission, which he said was "to put to right [physically] that which is not right, and to cleanse the Church of every great evil which hath hitherto existed among us inasmuch as they cannot be put to right by teachings & [persuasion]." 35 Robinson's statement is

32Document, 135, testimony of Burr Riggs. For other descriptions of this meeting, see Document, 124, 143, and 144, testimonies of W. W. Phelps, Benjamin Slade, and Addison F. Green. The meeting is also mentioned in Document, 58, affidavit of Thomas Marsh and Orson Hyde.


consistent with accounts by dissenters, who said the Danites enthusiastically endorsed the law of consecration and pressured other Mormons to do the same. Reed Peck, for example, said that after the law of consecration was introduced, Sidney Rigdon announced that the Mormons "would soon be called upon to consecrate their property and those who would not comply with the law of consecration should be delivered over to the brother Gideon," which was a reference to Jared Carter, then Captain General of the Danites and the brother of Gideon Carter.  

Similarly, John Corrill reported that "shortly after the Danites became organized, they set out to enforce the law of consecration, but this did not amount to much." Consequently, while Robinson's statement does indicate that the Danites tried to carve out for themselves a broader role in Mormon kingdom building, his description of that role supports the traditional interpretation of the group's purpose: To cleanse the church of malcontents and enforce orthodoxy. The Danites were regulators of internal conduct.

Another problem with the Jessee and Whittaker interpretation is its assertion that the negative view of the Danites was invented by Sampson Avard, whose testimony at the Richmond hearing, they said, "seems to have laid the foundation for all subsequent interpretations." Avard, however, was not the first person to claim the Danites engaged in illegal and threatening activities. Beginning in early September 1838 —more than two months before Avard testified—Mormon dissenters began providing details of the Danites to Missourians, who in turn sent the information to Governor Lilburn W. Boggs. Missouri newspapers also published some of these statements before the Richmond hear-

ing.  

On September 8, for example, John Sapp, a Mormon resident of Daviess County, signed an affidavit giving this description of the Danites:

There are betwixt eight and ten hundred [Mormon] men, well armed and equipped, who have taken an oath to support Joseph Smith and Lyman Wight, in opposition to the laws of the State of Missouri, ...which said men are called Danites; and I was a member of said body of Danites, and have taken the above oath.... I also say, the Danites aforesaid, are sworn to cowhide any person or persons, who may say aught against Joseph Smith and Lyman Wight, and if that will not prevent them from speaking about said Smith and Wight, then they are to assassinate them.  

As tensions reached a crescendo in late October, the Missourians were inundated with reports of the Danite teachings and activities. Just two days before the Crooked River battle, Thomas Burch, a non-Mormon resident of Ray County, wrote to Governor Boggs:

Mormon dissenters are daily flying to this county for refuge from the ferocity of the prophet Jo Smith, who, they say, threatens the lives of all Mormons who refuse to take up arms at his bidding or to do his commands. These dissenters (and they are numerous) all confirm the reports concerning the Danite Band, of which you have doubtless heard much.... The Danite Band, as I am informed by numbers of the most respectable Mormons (who are now dissenters) binds them to support the High Council of the Mormon Church and one another in all

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37Corrill, A Brief History, 46.

38Jessee and Whittaker, 14.

39The Richmond hearing began November 12 and lasted until November 29, 1838. Avard was the prosecution's first witness.

40Document, 17, affidavit of John Sapp. Sapp's affidavit was sent to the governor.
things, whether right or wrong, and that even by false swearing. 41 Two of the respectable Mormons to whom Burch referred were probably Apostles Thomas Marsh and Orson Hyde, who the next day signed an affidavit asserting that the Mormons "have among them a company consisting of all that are considered true Mormons, called the Danites, who have taken an oath to support the heads of the church in all things that they say or do, whether right or wrong." 42 The Marsh-Hyde affidavit was sent to the governor along with other letters affirming the existence of the Danites.

An abundance of contemporary evidence shows that the so-called dark view of the Danites was well known long before Avard's testimony at the Richmond hearing. In addition, these contemporaneous references to the Danites also support the claims of other Mormons and dissenters who said that the general nature of the Danites and their teachings were known to Missourians before the end of the war. For example, George A. Smith, the prophet's nephew, tells us that by mid-September the Danites were so well known that Missourians were asking Mormons questions about the secret band. 43 When the Mormon soldiers surrendered at Far West, some of the Missouri troops taunted them, shouting "you God damn Danites" and "charge, Danites, charge!" 44 Jessee and Whittaker suggest that without Avard, there would be no dark view of the Danites. This, however, is not true. If you tossed out Avard's testimony, you still would come up with pretty much the same interpretation of the Danites. The chief difference would be that Avard asserted that the First Presidency directed the Danites, while nearly everyone else—including the dissenters—considered Avard to be the group's leading agent. 45

In relying on Rockwood's account, Jessee and Whittaker also assert that they have uncovered the origin of the name "Danites." Dissenters said the organization was known at different times by different names, including (1) the "Brothers of Gideon" or

41 Document, 50.

42 Document, 58. For other reports by Missourians prior to the Richmond hearing, see the Missouri Argus, November 8, 1838 which reprints an October 20 letter from Ray County that describes the Danites; Document, 54, Austin A. King to the Governor, October 24, 1838, and reprinted in the Missouri Republican (St. Louis), November 2, 1838, the Jeffersonian Republican, November 3, 1838, and the Missouri Argus (St. Louis), November 8, 1838, and Document, 55, October 24, 1838 affidavit of Henry Marsh.

In addition, John Marsh, a Mormon dissenter, signed a September 1, 1838, statement asserting that there existed "a common feeling amongst them [the Mormons] amounting to a conspiracy to protect one another against the civil officers of the country, even if it should be attended with death"—but Marsh does not mention the Danites by name. Marsh's statement was sent to the governor and reprinted in the Booneslick Democrat and the Commercial Advertiser (Hannibal, Mo.), September 18, 1838. See also, Document, 15-16, D. Ashby and others to the Governor, September 1, 1838.


45 One could still argue that, while the dark view originated before Avard's testimony, Avard was simply repeating someone else's false story of Danite treachery. But the problem is that we have so many independent descriptions of this view that it stretches credulity to assert that all of these people could independently come up with the same false story. Likewise, I find it highly implausible that Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders would have no knowledge of this dark view when the Danite teachings were common knowledge—and a chief source of anxiety—among the non-Mormons in northwest Missouri.
“Gideonites,” apparently because the group was originally commanded by Jared Carter, whose brother was named Gideon; (2) the “Daughters of Zion,” a militant reference to Micah 4:13; and (3) the Danites. Corrill thought the latter name referred to the warrior tribe of Dan described in Judges 18. Rockwood, however, said the Mormon Army of Israel was called Dan “because the prophet Daniel said the Saints shall take the kingdom and possess it forever.” While Rockwood’s explanation is plausible, it should be noted that Joseph Smith agreed with Corrill’s interpretation. Citing the scripture Judges 18, Smith later said the Danites “was a term made use of by the brethren in Far West, and grew out of an expression I made use of when the brethren were preparing to defend themselves from the Missouri mob, in reference to the stealing of Maciah’s images.” Rockwood did not arrive in Missouri until September 1838, several months after the Danites were organized. Unlike Corrill and others who were present from the beginning, Rockwood may not have known that the organization went through several name changes, and he may have misunderstood how the name “Danites” was chosen.

One other important point deserves attention. Jesse and Whittaker argue that the contemporary Mormon accounts which mention the Danites do not describe any criminal activities or suggest that the group promulgated questionable teachings. Thus, Jesse and Whittaker conclude that stories about Danite oaths of secrecy, pledges to obey church leaders, and stealing from Missourians were the fabrications of Sampson Avard and the dissenter.

Their premise, however, is wrong. Mormon accounts do contain descriptions of criminal activities; it's just that Mormon writers do not label the activities as “illegal.”

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46Quoted in Jesse and Whittaker, 23. Rockwood considered the Army of Israel and the Danites to be the same organization.

47History of the Church 6:165, from the minutes of a January 3, 1844, Nauvoo City council meeting.

When George W. Robinson, for example, described the expulsion of the dissenters from Far West, he saw nothing illegal or amiss in the action. Robinson and other Mormons considered the expulsion to be necessary for the survival of the church. And so Robinson, who was a leading participant in the expulsion, described it in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner. But that doesn’t mean the action was harmless or even lawful. It is, in fact, illegal for one group of people to threaten the lives of and expel another group of people simply because they don’t like them.

Similarly, when Mormon leaders announced that they would not allow “vexatious” lawsuits to be issued against them, the Mormons considered this to be a necessary step to protect the church leadership from persecution. But again, this doesn’t mean the action was legal. John Clemenson, the Caldwell County clerk whose duty it was to process the lawsuits, considered the action illegal and was frightened by his leaders’ stance.

When Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon decided to send an expedition of soldiers to Daviess County in October 1838, they declared that Mormons who did not join the fight would have their property confiscated and given to Mormons who did fight. In addition, Smith and Rigdon instructed the Mormon soldiers to live off the land—that is, to steal from the Missourians—while they battled the mob in Daviess County. Mormons who objected, of course, were alarmed and felt threatened by the threats to take their
property. But Mormons who supported these measures defended the actions as necessary to protect lives and property.

There have been many debates whether the subsequent military expedition to Daviess County was a Danite operation or whether the Danites by this time had been supplanted by a new and distinct organization, the Army of Israel.11 Albert Rockwood considered the Danites and the Army of Israel to be one and the same, a view that is accepted by Jesse and Whittaker. This is probably true, but the more important point is that, regardless of whether the Mormon soldiers belonged to the Danites or to a separate Army of Israel, Joseph Smith was the leader of the expedition to Daviess County. Equally important, the burning and plundering of non-Mormon property was not the work of a small group of renegade Mormons or an aberration from Danite principles. It was the general policy of Mormon troops operating in Daviess County.

At least three separate Mormon companies engaged in the burning and plundering. On October 18, Apostle David W. Patten led a company of Mormon soldiers to Gallatin, where they burned and plundered the town. The next day, future Apostle Lyman Wight led a company that burned and sacked the town of Millport. Other companies of Mormon soldiers scoured the countryside for supplies, and Benjamin F. Johnson said his company burned the home of a suspected enemy. All this was performed with the knowledge and approval of Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders at Adam-ondi-Ahman, where the stolen cattle, crops, and goods were brought and distributed among the Saints.12 It was apparently at this time, by

the way, that Sampson Avard began teaching that the time had come for the “riches of the Gentiles” to be consecrated to the Saints. Again, it should be emphasized that the Mormons who described these actions did not consider themselves criminals or paint a dark picture of their activities.13 Nevertheless, burning and plundering were unlawful, as was the threat by Mormon leaders to confiscate the property of dissenters who would not join the expedition.

Here are my major conclusions. A multitude of evidence points to the fact that the Danites were a vigilante organization whose chief purpose was to enforce orthodoxy, drive out dissenters, and protect the church from mobs. The group’s essential purpose was established early on; it was not some late development or aberration introduced later by Avard. The main events I described involving the Danites—the expulsion of dissenters from Far West; the Fourth of July celebration; and the Danite expedition to Daviess County after the Gallatin election battle—all occurred by early August 1838, more than two months before the conflict erupted. During this period, Smith’s most loyal followers joined the band. While the degree of the prophet’s involvement is unclear, there can be no doubt that he knew and

mon Expulsion from Missouri,” BYU Studies 26 (Summer 1986):28-30. Anderson asserts that the burning by Mormon soldiers was not widespread or random, but was deliberately focused on Millport and Gallatin, where the Mormons destroyed about two dozen homes and business. Anderson also emphasizes that the plundering by Mormon soldiers at Millport, Gallatin, and other places in Daviess County was necessary to feed Mormon troops and Mormon families, and that Joseph Smith approved taking spoils to support the war effort, but not for personal enrichment.

11 See LeSueur, The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri, 125, n. 35, for a discussion of this issue.

12 See LeSueur, The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri, 112-128, for a detailed description of the Mormon expedition to Daviess County.

The Mormon military operations in Daviess County are also described in Richard L. Anderson, “Atchison’s Letters and the Causes of Mormon Expulsion from Missouri,” BYU Studies 26 (Summer 1986):28-30. Anderson asserts that the burning by Mormon soldiers was not widespread or random, but was deliberately focused on Millport and Gallatin, where the Mormons destroyed about two dozen homes and business. Anderson also emphasizes that the plundering by Mormon soldiers at Millport, Gallatin, and other places in Daviess County was necessary to feed Mormon troops and Mormon families, and that Joseph Smith approved taking spoils to support the war effort, but not for personal enrichment.

13 One of the Mormon soldiers, Benjamin F. Johnson, wrote: “It should not be supposed . . . that we were common robbers because we took by reprisal that with which to keep from starvation our women and children. Ours was a struggle for our lives and homes.” (Johnson, My Life's Review [Independence, Mo., Zion’s Printing and Publishing Company, 1947], 42-43).
approved of the group’s activities. He sometimes rode at their head. Jessee and Whittaker object to the characterization of the Danites as a “secretive, militaristic, extralegal organization.” But the Danites were, in fact, a secret organization in that they had secret signs and oaths that they swore not to reveal; they were “extralegal” in that they performed law enforcement functions but without legal sanction; and they were militaristic in that they aggressively drove dissenters from Far West. Jessee and Whittaker argue that the Danites were a kind of religious “Elks Club” that performed a broad range of community services; but the only direct evidence they point to is Albert Rockwood’s October 22 journal reference, which more likely is a reference to a Danite meeting that occurred two days earlier and is described in similar terms by several other Mormons. The purpose of that meeting was to prepare for war.

A key test of a hypothesis or theory is how well it explains the body of available evidence. I contend that my interpretation of the Danites, on the whole, can explain and help us to understand more of the participants’ statements and actions than can the Jessee and Whittaker interpretation. My theory, for example, is basically consistent with Mormon, non-Mormon, and dissenter accounts of the expulsion of the dissenters, the Fourth of July Celebration, the Gallatin election battle, and the Mormon expeditions to Daviess County in August and in October. My theory helps us to understand why the Missourians were so frightened of the Mormons, why they interpreted Mormon statements and actions as having illegal, aggressive intent, and perhaps even why Governor Boggs reacted so strongly (the governor was, after all, bombarded with numerous affidavits and letters describing Danite teachings and activities). I am not asserting that the Missourians’ actions were justified and that the Mormons deserved to be expelled; I am only asserting that my interpretation helps us understand why the Missourians acted as they did.

In addition, my interpretation helps us understand the dissenters’ motivations and actions. Jessee and Whittaker, in fact, have it exactly backwards when it comes to understanding the dissenters. John Corrill, Reed Peck, and others did not first decide to leave Mormonism, and then later made up lies about the Danites to justify their dissent; rather, it was their objections to the Danites which contributed to their dissent and subsequent disaffection from the church. Mormon historians will never understand the Missouri period if they do not understand why someone like John Corrill, who was an honorable and thoughtful man, abandoned Mormonism. (A historian can disagree with Corrill’s decision but still recognize as legitimate Corrill’s point of view.)

I said at the beginning of my paper that, contrary to what is widely believed, Joseph Smith never criticized the Danites. But the prophet, while in jail, did criticize Sampson Avard. Smith denounced Avard’s “false and pernicious” teachings, which the prophet said “the Presidency never knew were being taught in the Church by anybody until after they were made prisoners.” One can legitimately ask how I can reconcile this statement with my claim that Joseph Smith knew and approved the Danite teachings and activities.

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"History of the Church 3:231, The Prophet’s Letter to the Church, December 16, 1838. Smith later recommended that the Saints refrain from organizing any more groups like the Danites (History of the Church 3:303, The Prophet’s Epistle to the Church, March 25, 1839.) In his only other known statement regarding the Danites, Smith claimed that Avard’s testimony (at the Richmond hearing) linking the First Presidency with the Danite constitution was false, but the prophet did not deny any of the other accusations made by Avard and other witnesses concerning his association with the organization. See “Appeals to Supreme Court of Missouri,” Journal of History 9 (April 1916): 209, affidavit, March 15, 1839, signed by Joseph Smith, Jr., Alanson Ripley, Heber C. Kimball, William Huntington, and Joseph B. Noble.

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The answer is that, near the end of the Mormon War, Avard may have proposed some extreme measures for dealing with the church’s enemies. For example, it was probably during the Mormon’s October 15 expedition to Daviess County when Avard first promulgated the notion that the “riches of the Gentiles” should be consecrated to the Saints. Morris Phelps attributed this teaching to Avard, and several witnesses testifying at the Richmond hearing said the concept was widely discussed during the October 15 expedition. This would have been a perfect time for Avard to introduce this idea because Joseph Smith had just instructed the Mormon soldiers to live off the land. Similarly, Thomas Marsh said that Avard, in conversation with a group of Mormons during the October 20 meeting, proposed that the Danites poison the Missourians’ crops and then spread the word that the resulting pestilence was a judgment from God. John Corrill said this plan was known only to a half dozen Danite leaders, and that Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon later denied any connection with it. Consequently, it is possible that the prophet, who was away from Far West at the time and then was captured shortly after his return, did not learn about this and perhaps other radical measures proposed by Avard until the Richmond hearing. This theory does not conflict with the evidence showing that, for four months prior to the Mormons’ surrender, Smith endorsed the bulk of Danite teachings and activities.

Jessee and Whittaker’s fundamental objection to my interpretation of the Danites, I think, is found in their assertion that “LeSueur consistently maintains an interpretation of the Danites that places the major blame on Mormon leaders for their problems in Missouri.” They have misinterpreted my work.

My interpretation of the Danites helps us to understand why the dissenter’s acted as they did, why the Missourians acted as they did, and why the events unfolded as they did. But pointing out that the Danites acted aggressively and illegally is not the same as saying the Mormons were the primary cause of trouble. As a historian, I may conclude that the dissenter’s picture of the Danites was largely accurate, and from there I can follow the events to see how the Danite activities contributed to anti-Mormon hostility and to the Saints’ expulsion from Missouri. In this sense, the Mormons share some of the blame for their troubles. But how much blame—a little? half? the majority?—I can’t say. After all, many non-Mormons also joined vigilante groups and acted illegally in the conflict. It is easier to explain why the Mormon War occurred than it is to determine who was at fault.

56See LeSueur, The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri, 120.

7Document, affidavit of Thomas Marsh and Orson Hyde, October 24, 1838.

33Corrill, A Brief History, 32. Interestingly, Burr Riggs and W.W. Phelps said that Rigdon mentioned poisoning the mob at the October 20 meeting (Document, 135-136 and 124).

3Land Gentry makes a similar argument regarding the prophet’s knowledge of Avard’s teachings. Gentry says Joseph Smith approved the Danites as a self-defense organization against anti-Mormon mobs, but Gentry argues that Smith was unaware of the sinister Danite teachings that Avard tried to introduce into the group. “Not until the [Richmond] trial was in progress did Joseph Smith and his close associates become aware of the full extent of Avard’s work,” Gentry concluded (Gentry, “The Danite Band of 1838,” 450).

There is, however, an important difference between Gentry’s view and mine. I contend that the basic Danite tenets—secret oaths and signs, driving dissenters from the Mormon community, pledging to obey church leaders, pledging to assist fellow members—were established early in the group’s existence. These were not later developments introduced by Avard. Moreover, these teachings and activities were common knowledge among non-Mormons and Mormons, including Smith, before Avard testified at the hearing.

56Jesse and Whittaker, 12.