"There is No Law in Georgia for Mormons": The Joseph Standing Murder Case of 1879

BY KEN DRIGGS

On a hot dusty July Sunday in 1879, Joseph Standing, a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), and a companion were abducted by a dozen armed men near the north Georgia hamlet of Varnell Station. Standing was brutally murdered but his companion was released unharmed to tell the tale. The killers were known in the community and within months three were brought to trial. But a Dalton jury made good on the mob’s boast that “there is no law in Georgia for Mormons.” The acquittals surprised no one.

The year 1879 was not a particularly good one for the Mormons. In January the Supreme Court ruled against them in the important religious freedom case of Reynolds v. United States. That decision threatened to bring on large-scale polygamy prosecutions under the federal Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862 and tended to excite sensationalist press attacks on Mormonism even more.1 There were bitter law suits over the estate of the

1The community is variously identified as Varnell Station, Varnell’s Station and Varnell. It appears on modern maps as Varnell. In the interest of consistency the author will use Varnell Station except where direct quotes use one of the other names. The author wishes to thank the Georgia State Archives in Atlanta, the Washington Public Library in Macon, Steve Sorensen of the LDS Archives and David P. Heighton of the LDS Genealogical Society in Salt Lake City, and especially his typist Leigh Ann Greene for their substantial contributions to this article.


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late Brigham Young, who died in 1877. Later in the year President Rutherford B. Hayes asked Congress to strip Mormons of all major rights of citizenship as a penalty for their support of polygamy, a step which Congress finally took in 1882. Public hostility toward the Mormons was ever escalating and the feelings which led to the murder of Standing were by no means limited to Georgia. Mormons were so unpopular in Missouri that they were expelled from the state after a bloody and violent range war in 1838. In 1844 Mormon founder Joseph Smith, Jr., and his brother Hyrum were murdered by a mob in Illinois and their followers forced to flee that state in 1847. In 1857-58 President James Buchanan ordered several thousand troops to occupy Utah Territory and put down a supposed Mormon rebellion.

In the South Mormon Apostle Parley P. Pratt was murdered in Arkansas in 1857. Mob violence was directed against Mormons in Alabama in 1878, and in North Carolina, Kentucky and Georgia in 1879. A second Mormon missionary was shot in north Georgia in 1883, an Alabama meeting house was burned in 1884, and later that year several people were killed when an armed mob led by a local minister attacked a Tennessee Mormon meeting house. Another missionary was murdered in Mississippi in 1888, a local Florida church leader was murdered in 1898, and a north Georgia meeting house was burned as late as 1912. The killing of Standing was not an isolated event in the Mormon southern experience.

As Edward L. Ayers has stated, "In a region that rejected outside ' meddling', even by its own government, the organized forces of Mormonism seemed a subversive nightmare. In the eyes of the rural white southerners whose communities the Mormons visited, the missionaries threatened to destroy through nefarious seduction just as strange blacks threatened to destroy by rape." This is exactly the atmosphere that led to the murder of Standing. The Mormons had their greatest missionary success in a poor rural mountainous area of Georgia which had one of the most active traditions of violence at the time.

The Southern States Mission officially began in 1834 with the efforts of Mormon Apostle David Patten in Tennessee. The first missionaries came to Georgia in 1844. As the Civil War appeared on the horizon missionaries withdrew from the South, taking as many converts as were willing to emigrate west. Mormon records indicate that they numbered in the thousands up to that point.

Missionaries returned as early as spring 1868. Preaching as they traveled, they described the times as "gloomy" but they were gaining converts. By 1869 small groups of these converts were again leaving Georgia for the Mormon Zion in Utah Territory. Rome, Georgia became a fertile field for the elders. They appeared there as early as 1868. Lorenzo Snow, a Mormon Apostle and later a church president, labored in Rome in December 1868. In May 1869 missionaries reported twenty-two converts in the Rome area in a single two week period.

It was 1875 before a formal church structure was organized. Seven elders were called to serve in the newly rejuvenated Southern States Mission at the October General Conference of the church in Salt Lake City. Standing and John Morgan were among them. The group reported to the newly appointed Mission president, Henry Boyle of Arizona, at the Mormon outpost

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2The Young estate litigation was sarcastically covered by most Georgia newspapers. For the final judicial resolution see Young v. Cannon, 2 Utah 560 (Utah Terr., 1879).

3James D. Richardson, A Compilation of Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1908 (New York, 1908), 7:559-60 and The Edmonds Act, ch. 47, 22 stat. 30 (1882).


7Manuscript History, Southern States Mission, 1832-1880 (hereinafter cited as MHSSM), October 11, 1834 and January 2, 1844. Available on microfilm at the LDS Historical Archives, Salt Lake City. The first Mormon missionary to visit Georgia is identified as Elder John Eldridge. Sessions, supra, 216.

8MHSSM, May 23, 1868. The entry refers to a letter published in Deseret News of the same date from missionaries Elder Jesse E. Murphy and Bishop W. C. Smoot. Ibid., May 19, 1869 and December 30, 1868.
Nothing could daunt him. He was thoroughly prepared upon all points of his faith, and he argued it everywhere."

By the mid-1870s letters from Mormon missionaries reported both bitter opposition and a steady trickle of converts in north Georgia. These letters frequently noted the extreme poverty of the people and the oppressive burden of taxes. Wages of 25 or 50 cents a day, poor harvests, the greed of speculators and bondholders, disease, severe weather, and bitter religious divisions among the Georgians were also cited as reasons why the Mormons found converts eager to emigrate to a new start in the West. Perhaps continuing bitterness over the Civil War made westward migration attractive. As observed by Standing in an 1878 letter: "A person travelling among the Southern people realizes that they have been whipped by the North, yet there is a feeling of enmity existing in their bosoms, which only needs a little breeze to inflame their passions to deeds of carnage and strife."

Non-Mormon newspaper accounts of their growing presence in north Georgia claimed converts were illiterate, "mostly poor and shiftless folks," who were drawn by stories of comfortable lives to be had in the Mormon Zion. Missionaries seemed to make few efforts in the cities, "appearing to shun the railroads and stick to the mountainous districts." Still, the Atlanta Constitution claimed no more than two hundred had emigrated west, the rest remaining in Georgia. Less impassioned local observers said missionaries did not preach polygamy and would not comment on it when asked. Mormon commentators on the period agreed that polygamy was not preached. Converts apparently became committed Mormons. As one contemporary observer wrote, "When they once became converted they are never reclaimed."14

12"Journal of Church History," January 20, 1877, p. 4; April 30, 1878, pp. 4; July 11, 1878, p. 5; October 28, 1878, pp. 5-6 (hereinafter cited as JCH), microfilm, LDS Historical Archives, Salt Lake City. See also MHSSM, October 11, 1877.
Born October 5, 1854, in Salt Lake City to James and Mary Standing, Joseph was twenty-six years old at the time of his death. He was of a "somewhat stout build," about 160 pounds, with light hair and a fair complexion. "He was noted for his agreeable manners, which are so engaging that he made friends everywhere." He was an able public speaker and a determined missionary for his church. A Georgia newspaper noted he had "great courage and ability." His mild and gentle disposition, maturity, and experience as a missionary were among the reasons he was assigned to an area of Georgia known to be hostile to Mormons. Some later noted that he was in frail health at the time of his Georgia mission.15

Georgia would be Standing's second missionary call in the South. In 1875-1876 he proselytized in Tennessee. His second call came in February 1878 when he was living in Hampton's Station, Utah. He organized the first branch of the Mormon church at Varnell Station late in 1878, ordaining convert Henry Huffaker to preside over the little congregation.16 By May 1879 he was set apart as president of the Georgia Conference of the Church. Standing's young companion was Rudger Clawson, son of pioneer Bishop Hiram Clawson. The younger Clawson was first called to serve in the Southern States Mission at the April 1879 General Conference of the Church. He was twenty-two years old. In January 1879 Standing had written that he had been preaching alone since the previous October. The usual Mormon custom was for missionaries to travel in pairs.


16Joseph Standing letter of January 2, 1879, as recorded in the JCH of that date and published in the Deseret News of January 15, 1879; Manassa, Conejos County, Colorado, "Old Cemetery Records, 1936-1939," original at LDS Genealogical Society Library, Salt Lake City; "The Mormon Feud," Atlanta Constitution, August 5, 1879. On February 28, 1879, a company of Mormon converts from Georgia and Alabama, under the charge of Morgan, arrived in Alamosa, Colorado, the end of the railroad line, then proceeded by wagon to settlements in Los Cerrillos. Andrew Jenson, Church Chronicle: A Record of Important Events (Salt Lake City, 1914), 103. See also JCH, October 28, 1878, Standing letter, pp. 5-6. Huffaker would later emigrate to Manna with his family and other Mormon converts from the South. By the time of Standing's murder at least one convert family of seven had emigrated from Varnell Station to Colorado, possibly led by Morgan in February 1879.

Clawson must have arrived at Varnell Station in April or May. Like Standing, Clawson was a Seventy in the church's lay priesthood structure.17

Clawson would later become something of a Mormon folk hero based on his surviving the mob that would murder Standing, and his fierce support for polygamy. In 1884 he would be one of the first people convicted of polygamy under the Edmunds Act. The U.S. Supreme Court later affirmed his conviction and four-year prison sentence, the longest ever imposed.

17MHSSM, December 20 and 31, 1875, May 31, April 9, 1879, February 22, 1878; JCH, April 1878, p. 2; January 2, 1879; and "In Brigham's Bosom," Atlanta Constitution, August 7, 1879.
on a Mormon polygamist. In 1898 he would be ordained a
Mormon Apostle, serving until his death in 1943.\textsuperscript{18}

Varnell Station in Whitfield County was a frequent stopping
place for Mormon missionaries. First known as Red Hill, it later
was given the name of an early railroad agent there, M. P. Var-
nell. A newspaper correspondent in 1875 described it as a com-
"munity of about 150 located beside the E.T.G. & V.R.R.\textsuperscript{19}

At first the missionaries encountered no opposition in the
area, but by late 1878 preachers of other faiths became alarmed
at the Mormon presence and made organized efforts to intimi-
date converts. Gradually intimidation escalated to violence.

The \textit{Atlanta Constitution} reported that the hard feelings
against Mormons at Varnell Station began in December 1878
"when two Methodist preachers and two or three Baptist
preachers who were residing at short distances from the place,
came in and commenced circulating false reports which usually
form the staple arguments of their tribe against 'Mormonism'
and incited that people to drive out the elders by violence."
The paper reported that in April one missionary, C. W. Hardy,
was surrounded by a mob "led by a Baptist deacon" and forced
to leave the county. Other missionaries were also attacked by
armed mobs, perhaps the same dozen men that would later
kidnap Standing and Clawson.\textsuperscript{20}

By June 1879 the Mormon missionaries were concerned
enough about their safety and the safety of their flocks that
Standing, acting as "President of the Georgia Conference"
of the church, wrote the governor for protection. On June 12
he wrote that members had been forced "to flee for their lives
as armed men to the number of forty or fifty have come out
against them," were forcing their way into homes searching for
missionaries, and that local officials refused any protection. He
asked the governor for "a word or line" encouraging local offi-
cials to uphold the law for the protection of Mormons. J. W.

\textsuperscript{18} Note his appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States in \textit{Clawson v. United
States}, 115 U. S. 143, 5 S. Ct. 593, 29 L. Ed. 657 (1885) and \textit{Clawson v. United States}
114 U.S. 477, 5 S. Ct. 499, 29 L. Ed. 179 (1885).

\textsuperscript{19} Kenneth R. Krakow, \textit{Georgia Place-Names} (Macon, 1975), 246 and "Letter From
Varnell Station," \textit{North Georgia Citizen} (Dalton), July 22, 1875.

\textsuperscript{20} "The Mormon Feud," \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, August 5, 1879.

Warren, a secretary to the governor responded nine days later
with a vague promise to "instruct the state prosecuting attorney
for that district to inquire into the matter." This exchange of
letters was widely reproduced after Standing's murder which
occurred within a month of Warren's response.\textsuperscript{21} Nothing in
Georgia state archival records suggests that any steps were ever
taken on the Mormons' behalf.

The last known letter from Standing is dated July 18 to a
Centerville, Utah, friend. Published in the \textit{Deseret News} after
the murder, the letter described summer heat, poor crops, the
pleasure of a visit to a family with a piano, and a local populace
prejudiced against Mormons. "How would you like it after hav-
ing preached to have two preachers get up and lie about you
shake their fists nearly in your face, and that before an audi-
ence of 150 people?" Standing wrote from Varnell Station.\textsuperscript{22}

Clawson recalled Standing telling him that he dreamed of
"going to Varnell's Station "when suddenly clouds of intense
blackness gathered overhead and all around me." He visited a
Mormon family in the community and found he was unwel-
come as they were influenced "by a sense of great fearfulness."
He awoke suddenly "without my being shown the end of
trouble." Clawson recalled that Standing was anxious and
aware of impending danger from the recounting of his dream
until his murder. Standing asked him to interpret the dream.
Standing was "fearful that something terrible was going to hap-
pen," but he did not know what it was. Clawson reported that
he also could not interpret the dream.\textsuperscript{23}

On Saturday, July 20, 1879, Standing and his new mission-
ary companion were walking across north Georgia to a church
conference at Rome. Standing decided to visit church members
in Varnell Station along the way, arriving on Saturday evening.
They proceeded straight to the member family's home. Claw-
son does not identify the family members they met other than

\textsuperscript{21} "The Last Letter from Elder Joseph Standing," \textit{Deseret News}, August 9, 1879.

\textsuperscript{22} Nicholson, \textit{ Martyrdom}, 13-16 and unpublished autobiography by Rudger Clawson,
pp. 15-19, typed original at LDS Archives.
to say they spoke with "J---." Perhaps this is Jane Elledge who would appear to be a central figure in the motivation for the murder.

The two found the family in a state of excitement and fear, warning the elders that there was a "bitter and murderous" mood against them in the neighborhood. Clawson recognized this turn of events as being "fulfillment of Joseph's dream." Even though it was already nine in the evening the family denied them shelter. Instead they were directed to the home of non-member Henry Holston some distance away. Leaving their satchels, the two missionaries walked to the Holston home where they found the family asleep. Awakening the family, they found them expecting trouble but Holston promised to defend the missionaries so long as they were under his roof. Standing remained fearful that night, confiding to Clawson "an intense horror of being whipped and more than once had declared that he would rather die than be subjected to such an indignity." Standing slept with an iron bar beside his bed as a ready weapon.

The next morning they returned to the Mormon household to gather their satchels and found the family still frightened. They again departed in the direction of the Holstons along a road "densely wooded on both sides." Suddenly they encountered a posse of twelve men, three mounted and the others on foot.24

The dozen men were apparently well known in the community and known to the two missionaries. They made no effort to disguise their identity.25 The posse seemed elated to have found the missionaries. They approached Standing and Clawson with weapons drawn, cursing them violently, and commanded the pair to follow them back down the road they had just traveled. Clawson pleaded with the agitated mob for tolerance. One reportedly replied: "The government of the United States is against you, and there is no law in Georgia for Mormons." If the missionaries did not move quickly enough for the mob they were struck with clubs or guns. Both were certain they were being led to their deaths.

24Nicholson, Martyrdom, 13-17.
25In Brigham's Bosom, Atlanta Constitution, August 7, 1879.
Twice the mob and their captives passed other travelers. One was a local man named Jonathan Owensby who enjoyed an unusual reputation in the community for truth and honesty. The other was young Mary Hamlin, the daughter of a Mormon family sent out to warn the elders that the mob was in the area. One of the mob knew her to be a Mormon and told her “You see we have got your brethren. As soon as we dispose of their case we purpose attending to you.” Three of the mob next left the main body to reconnoiter. The remaining nine and their captives continued a short distance to a secluded spring of clear water off the road. The two missionaries were soon addressed by mob member James Faucett, described as about sixty, mounted on a horse, and the obvious leader of the group. “I want you to understand that I am the captain of this party, and that if we ever find you in this part of the country we will hang you by the neck like dogs.”

Several contemporary accounts say the mob did not at first intend to kill anyone. Since the missionaries had ignored several earlier “words of warning and anonymous threats . . . telling them to stop their work or they would be forced to it,” the posse intended to capture them, beat them, and put them on a train out of the state. Clawson himself would later verify that this is what the leader of the posse told him.

Another hour passed with insults directed toward Mormons in general before the horsemen who had departed earlier returned. The order was given to “Follow us.” According to early accounts provided by Clawson, “It was at this juncture that Elder Standing, by some means, secured a pistol from one of the party, and thoughts of former threats of death and of the cruel torture to which they were about to be subjected running through his mind, he arose to his feet, and levelling the weapon at the horsemen, exclaimed: ‘Surrender!’ As quick as thought, one of the mob seated on the left of Elder Standing, arose and fired into his face. The ball entered just above the left eye, putting it out, and made its exit about an inch above on the forehead. He reeled twice and fell with scarcely a groan.”

A short time later Clawson told one reporter he thought he knew who fired the fatal shot—“an old man whose daughter espoused the polygamous faith”—but he was not certain, “as the deed was quickly and very unexpectedly, to him, accomplished.” With the passage of time Clawson and other Mormon writers would no longer recall that Standing had seized a pistol to protect himself and his companion. Some accounts have him attempting to bluff the mob into thinking he had a weapon, whereupon he is shot in cold blood. Clawson testified ambiguously at the trial.

Everyone stood, almost in unison. A member of the party pointed to Clawson and ordered “Shoot him.” Every weapon was turned on the young missionary and he believed he was about to die. Clawson collected himself in the moment he was given, pretended calm, and said “Shoot.” At this point the man who ordered Clawson be shot countermanded, shouting “Don’t shoot,” and all arms were lowered. Clawson cautiously approached Standing. One of the men in the party named Nations approached and proclaimed “This is terrible; that he should have killed himself in such a manner.” Clawson feigned agreement, then convinced the mob to let him go.

Clawson made his way to Holston’s, borrowed a horse, and rode to Catoosa Springs. There he telegraphed the news to Morgan in Salt Lake City. He also telegraphed Governor Alfred H. Colquitt: “Joseph Standing was shot and killed today, near Varnell’s, by a mob of ten or twelve men.” It had been a month since the governor’s secretary had pledged protection

29“A Mormon newspaper some years later identified Joseph Nations as the man who fired the fatal shot, “Joseph Standing’s Slayers,” Deseret News, August 7, 1879. See also “The Murder of Joseph Standing,” ibid., August 5, 1879.
28Clawson’s 1886 account recalls it that way. Nicholson, Martyrdom, 28-31. At the October trial Clawson testified that he moved to the mortally wounded Standing, found him still alive, and told the mob “It is a burning shame to leave a man to die in the woods in this manner. Either some of you must go for assistance that his body may be removed, and properly taken care of or let me go.” He was then allowed to leave.
29Told To Go Free,” Atlantic Constitution, October 28, 1879.
for the Mormons. A few accounts have Holston venturing to
the scene of the murder where he found Standing unconscious
but still alive. Some members of the mob remained in the area.
Holston tried to cover Standing from insects and the sun, then
left in search of help. Sometime after this Standing's body was
mutilated.

Clawson would later theorize that after Holston's departure
"the fiends incarnate" had emptied their weapons point blank
into the head and neck of the dying man. "It is likely . . . that
those men agreed to stand upon an undoubted common
ground in regard to the assassination of Joseph Standing, and
to make the obligation and understanding complete each actu-
ally fired into the person of the victim."31

Coroner A. L. Sutherland was quickly notified of the killing
and gathered up a jury to examine the body and murder scene
that same Sunday afternoon. After interviewing witnesses, in-
cluding Clawson, they reported:

We, the jury sitting upon inquest over the dead body of
Joseph Standing, having heard all the evidence in the premises
and having made examination of the dead body, find that the
deceased came to his death by gun and pistol shots, or both,
inflicted upon the head and neck of deceased, said wounds
consisting of twenty shots or more from guns or pistols in the hands
of David D. Nations, Jasper N. Nations, A. S. Smith, David
Smith, Benj. Clark, Wm. Nations, Andrew Bradley, James
Faucett, Hugh Blair, Joseph Nations, Jefferson Hunter and
Mack McClure; the jury do hereby recommend that the coroner
of said county do issue a warrant for the arrest of the above
named parties forthwith.32

To Clawson fell the difficult and unpleasant task of returning
the body to Utah. He reportedly told the coroner, "I feel
that the spirit of Elder Standing would never be satisfied to
have his body buried where he was murdered. He would prefer
it to be laid away in the land where his friends and kindred
dwell." The body was taken to the home of the "Good Samari-
tan," Henry Holston. Standing's remains were laid on a plank
in front of the home and washed by Clawson, no easy task
given its bloody and mutilated state. Curious neighbors and a
few triumphant Mormon-haters came to watch. Standing was
dressed in clean garments and covered with a sheet before
Clawson retired to the house. The final waking moments of the
evening were spent with the local sheriff who was attempting
to locate the killers. A metal casket and wagon were soon se-
cured. Clawson set out for rail connections to Utah. The wagon
driver, mindful that he was in the company of a hated Mormon,
felt the need to be armed in case another mob appeared.33

Clawson accompanied the body on the long train ride to
Salt Lake City. By July 31 he was in Denver where he was
interviewed by a reporter from the Denver Tribune. In that in-
terview Clawson is quoted as saying that Standing had grabbed
a Colt revolver of one of the ruffians when it was laid on a tree
stump at the spring. "Standing leveled the revolver at the group
and demanded them to remain quiet and listen to him or he
would shoot," but was almost immediately shot in the forehead
by a gang member. In the Denver interview Clawson is quoted
as saying he believed the church would maintain its Georgia
congregations but would probably "suspend" missionary effor-
ts. "The territory of the United States is large enough to
obviate the necessity of sacrificing personal safety in the work
of personal conversion."34

Within a week of the murder Morgan wrote a general letter
to missionaries and members in the South. "It is hoped that no act
of recrimination, on the part of any, either by word or
deed, will mar the hitherto bright record that the saints have
made in the mission," he wrote, saying that the assassins must
be left to the vengeance of the Lord. He urged missionaries to
continue their labors in the region. After much praise for the
dead elder, Morgan wrote "Those who are in a situation to do
so would do well to prepare to emigrate and gather where they
can be protected."35

31Nicholson, Martyrdon, 43-44.
32"The Murder of Joseph Standing," Deseret News, August 5, 1879; "The Dead
Mormon," Atlanta Constitution, July 25, 1879; and No headline, North Georgia Citizen,
July 24, 1879. See also "Sons of Ishmael," Atlanta Constitution, August 1, 1879.
33Nicholson, Martyrdon, 46-53.
34As quoted in "In Brigham's Bosom," Atlanta Constitution, August 7, 1879.
Shortly after the murder, the Constitution described it as "a cold and premeditated one, no cause having been given other than that the Mormons had made some converts and created some disturbances in families in the neighborhood." But north Georgia's Catoosa Courier rationalized the killing because "Mr. Standing's preaching and teaching have been of such an immoral character that the good citizens . . . could not stand any longer the bad influence that his preaching had upon the female portion of the neighborhood."

On the morning of Sunday, August 3, Standing was buried following a huge and emotional service in Salt Lake City. Services were held in the tabernacle on Temple Square, presided over by virtually the entire leadership of the Mormon church. The building was filled to overflowing with five to ten thousand people. Special arrangements had been made with the railroads to bring in mourners from all over Utah.

In a funeral sermon George Q. Cannon, Utah Territorial Delegate to Congress and a Counselor in the First Presidency of the church, predicted that the murderers would not be brought to justice for their crime. "Millions of our fellow countrymen believe there is no harm in taking the life of a Mormon missionary, and this feeling will discourage those who seek to avenge the blood of this latest martyr," Cannon said. John Taylor, senior Apostle and soon-to-be President of the church, followed with a defiant and angry sermon on the religious rights of the saints. "We will not suffer our rights to be interfered with. They are bestowed upon us by the Almighty, and we will exercise them in spite of all opposition," said Taylor.

The Mormons immediately sought help from the Georgia government to bring the murderers to justice. Executive minutes reflect that on August 5, 1879, two weeks after the killing, the governor authorized a five hundred dollar reward for the arrest and conviction of the murderers. Morgan and Clawson

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"In Brigham's Bosom," Atlanta Constitution, August 7, 1879.

later sarcastically noted that this "nominal reward . . . did not in the least endanger the treasury of the state" and that it was only pressure from "Elder Standing's friends" that brought any action.

Nonetheless, the offering of any reward for the capture of the killers was unpopular. The New York Herald noted, "And yet it is greatly to be doubted whether the worthy governor will get the offenders, no matter what reward he may offer, unless their faith in public opinion is so strong that they willingly surrender themselves expecting that no jury will think for a
moment of convicting them." The only other action by Governor Colquitt was on August 6, 1879, when he applied to the governor of Tennessee for the extradition of the defendants.

Word of the capture of three of the assassins reached Utah in mid-August. A passionate editorial in the Deseret News accompanied the announcement commented on both the Georgia and North Carolina violence against Mormons, attributing it to "Hell-inspired 'Christian' bigots" and "cowardly 'Christian' mobocrats." The journal demanded the right to free religious belief: "We claim the right to believe what seems true to us, and to promulgate it when ever we find opportunity. We freely accord the right to others. We do not ask it as a privilege; it is a right for which we will contend, to the full strength of our abilities, mental and physical." The editorial insisted that Mormon missionaries did not preach polygamy, but that even under the "absurd" Reynolds decision they had a right to do so.

Standing's murder seemed to bring out the worst instincts of some Georgia observers. At least one newspaper editor was bold enough to call for the authorities "to wage war" on the Mormons. The Sparta Ishmaelites went on to write:

It is the silliest sort of sentimental vomit to prate about Mormons being allowed "to worship" God under their own vines and fig-trees in Georgia. No true man believes that these moral lepers worship God at all; and it is perfectly monstrous that, instead of being driven out of the state because of their open and bitter and relentless attacks on all that is pure in society itself, they are to be protected by the strong arm of the law under the disgustingly absurd plea that "people must be allowed to worship God as they see proper." Every principle of reason and common sense points to the necessity of dealing with these children of the wicked one before they become strongly entrenched in our state.

In the months following the murder, the Atlanta Constitution covered events closely and editorialized that "the last exhibition of mob violence in Georgia, the killing of Joseph Standing, the Mormon, was absolutely and utterly without excuse, and should be condemned and punished." Nevertheless, their editors also loudly opposed Mormon "fanaticism," "the polygamic abomination," wrote that "Mormonism is detestable and not to be tolerated," called the missionaries "monstrous fanatics" who "infested" Georgia, with "the abominable doctrines of Mormonism." It cannot be said that the Constitution's accounts of the tragedy were unusually bigoted at a time when some other newspapers were openly applauding the murder.

However, the Constitution engaged in one rather explosive exception. A month after the murder the Constitution ran a page one story headlined "The Lustful Lou," purporting to reveal Standing's "character and the circumstances leading to his murder." The item ran without a byline, attributed only "special to the Constitution." The article painted a lurid tale of Standing moving across north Georgia deflowering virgins and other men's wives almost as a hobby. None of his supposed conquests were identified except Jane Elledge, the twenty-year-old daughter of a convert family in Varnell Station with whom Standing was supposedly living. The story claimed Standing impregnated her, murdered the newborn, impregnated her a second time, then packed the whole family off to "Mormon country" a few weeks before his own murder. The story also claims a daughter of one of the murderers also "met with her ruin by this man," but gives no further identification.

"As quoted in "Mormonism and the Remedy," Atlanta Constitution, August 23, 1879."
An earlier Constitution article claimed that Standing had “endangered the peace and integrity of many homes” but offered no details. At no point did the newspaper identify the accusers. One later Mormon account of the murder attributed to Clawson suggested that Constitution editors became remorseful for their tainted coverage. Commenting on stories about the dead man’s lax morals, another Georgia newspaper wrote “so far as the reports in regard to Standing’s immoral influence over his female converts is concerned I find no proof to support the rumor.”

But this article may have inadvertently revealed a motive for the murder that was not discussed in print elsewhere. Elizabeth Jane Elledge was probably a cousin of William, Joseph and David Nations, who lived near by. These brothers were most likely the three indicted members of the mob who were never captured nor brought to trial. They were probably Jane’s cousins.

Standing baptized the young woman’s mother in November 1878 and Jane in March 1879. Morgan baptized Jane’s father and brother in August 1879. In April 1879 Standing helped organize the Female Relief Society of the Varnell branch with Elizabeth Elledge as president. The family emigrated to the Mormon colony of Manassa, Colorado, in late 1879, possibly in a party that left from Chattanooga, Tennessee, in December. There Jane would marry Mormon Stephen A. Smith in 1882, giving birth to her first child in 1884. It is very likely that the mob’s abduction and murder of Standing was motivated by resentment over his part in converting the Elledge family to the LDS faith.

Existing historical records suggest the Constitution’s exposé on standing is without substantiation.

Today, local folklore holds that Standing’s missionary efforts broke up another family named Hamline (appearing as Hamblin in some records), which included trial witness Mary Hamline. A Hamline daughter married Joseph Kaneaster with seven children born of the union. The Hamlines and the wife of Kaneaster became Mormons and immigrated to Colorado, leaving Joseph in Georgia because he rejected Mormonism. Supposedly some members of the mob were related to Joseph Kaneaster.

With three of the killers in custody the trial promised to be emotional and sensational. “The Celebrated Mormon cases,” filled Dalton with curious crowds. Clawson himself had been required to post a two hundred dollar bond to insure his return to Georgia for the trial. Accompanied by Morgan, Clawson arrived several days early and testified before the grand jury. The fact that indictments were returned at all seems to have been a surprise. When the trial finally arrived “the courtroom was crowded to excess during each session.” There was real concern that the menacing public mood would so intimidate the jury that acquittals would be a foregone conclusion.

Morgan’s journal entries are brief and dismiss it as “a farce of a trial.” He recalled that a number of witnesses were subpoenaed but many were not produced “owing to the prejudices of the sheriff.” He went on to record: “Some 150 names were called before a jury could be obtained. The witnesses as a general thing testified inconsistently or biased their testimony for the defense, after a lengthy investigations [sic], which was bitterly in opposition to the truth a verdict of not guilty was rendered and the prisoners discharged.” Morgan recalls that the prisoners were successively charged with murder, assault and battery, and riot, all with the same not guilty verdict. He ob-

—\"The Mormon Feud,\" Atlanta Constitution, August 5, 1879; Nicholson, Martyrdom, 68-69; and \"The Mormon Murder,\" Macon Telegraph and Messenger, September 30, 1879.

—Dilligham H. Elledge and Elizabeth Nations Elledge Family Group Sheets, LDS Genealogical Library.

—\"ICB, June 2, 1879, p. 4; also reported in Deseret News of June 16, 1879; \"More Mormons For The West,\" North Georgia Citizen, December 4, 1879; and Stephen Augustus Smith and Elizabeth Jane Elledge Smith Family Group Sheets, LDS Genealogical Society Archives. It is also interesting that on July 24, 1879, the North Georgia Citizen reported the murder site as \"near Ellege’s Mill, in the upper portion of this (Whitfield) county.\"

—\"Correspondence with local historian Marcelle Coker White in possession of the author. Kaneaster and his second wife Nancy are buried in Smith’s Chapel graveyard about two miles from the site of the murder. The Hamlines and the Kaneaster children show up in 1880 census records of the Mormon colony at Manassa, Colorado.\"

—\"Dalton Letter,\" Daily Times (Chattanooga), October 24, 1879; \"The Standing Murder,\" Salt Lake Herald, November 5, 1879; and Nicholson, Martyrdom, 54-64.
served that "the bitter prejudice ruled the crowd and biased the court, jury and witnesses."91

Whitfield County Superior Court records indicate that by Thursday, October 16, 1879, the trials were set to proceed. Several material witnesses who had been subpoenaed failed to appear and warrants were issued for their arrest. They were Henry Holton, the "Good Samaritan" who sheltered the missionaries, Mary Hamline and Jonathan Owensby who had seen them in the custody of the mob, Luke Dernspsey, Dave Williams, and Thomas Nations. The trial proceeded that afternoon with Jasper Nations being prosecuted first. A jury was finally selected, about which Clawson observed, "When the panel of twelve men, supposed to be 'good and true,' was filled, a glance sufficed to create the impression that the box included a very hard-looking set."92

Superior Court Judge C. D. McCutchen,93 a seven-year veteran of the bench, presided over the trial. The cases were prosecuted by A. T. Hackett,94 assisted by Col. W. B. Moore, "an attorney of established ability," who had been retained by the Mormons. Morgan and Clawson later quoted Hackett as saying before the trial, "It will be impossible to reach conviction on account of the prejudice of the people."95

91John Morgan Journals, 1875-1892, entries for October 1879, microfilm, LDS Archives.
92Whitfield County Superior Court Note Books, October 16, 1879, p. 476. microfilm, Georgia State Archives. Witness Thomas Nations was the thirty-year-old uncle of Jane Elledge and brother of the accused William Nations and Joseph Nations. He was also the brother of Jane's mother, Elizabeth Nations Elledge. See Nations Family Group Sheet, LDS Genealogical Library. Whitfield County Superior Court Note Books for October 17, 1879 list the initial jury selected as: W. A. Lowry, John Y. S. Alberson, H. M. Swick, Thomas L. Wheeler, J. R. Ford, A. S. Henly, P. W. Wilson, P. E. Robinson, W. P. Schultz, M. A. Reed and L. P. Freeman, microfilm, Georgia State Archives. Nicholson, Martyrdom, 64.
93Cicero D. McCutchen was born on October 31, 1824, and died on March 17, 1898.
94Georgia State Archives records indicate that after serving two terms as a Confederate Georgia State senator in 1863-65, he was appointed as Cherokee Circuit Superior Court Judge on June 1, 1872. He served until retirement on December 31, 1880. He was approaching his 55th birthday at the time of the trial.
95Identified only as A. T. Hackett in the period newspaper accounts, his full name is Albert Torrence Hackett. Georgia State Archives records indicate he was Cherokee Circuit Solicitor General from 1872 until 1880 when he left the office to sit as a Georgia state senator for the second time. He was born on June 30, 1829, was fifty years old at the time of the murder trial, and died in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on March 29, 1911.

The defense was represented by Hon. W. H. Payne, of Catooza, and by Messrs. Johnson & McComy, and Shomate & Williamson, of the Dalton Bar." Williamson apparently devoted a lot of time to lobbying an Atlanta Constitution writer for more favorable publicity for his clients, going as far as to write suggested copy for the paper. He was much disappointed when Morgan and Clawson were also consulted by the writer.96

Clawson was the first and most important witness for Solicitor Hackett. The noisy courtroom came to a complete hush when he took the stand. One Georgia reporter described him as poised, well dressed, articulate and handsome. "No wonder the quiet quaint old-fashioned country folks of the region around about where the homicide was committed thought him dangerous."97 The direction of the defense strategy is best exemplified by one question directed to Clawson as the star state witness: "Are your parents living in the practice of polygamy and are you a polygamous child?" Clawson refused to answer. The jury's ears were repeatedly filled with accounts of the supposed immorality and sins of Mormons in general.

Clawson also recorded that a defense attorney asked him about statements made to the two missionaries before the shooting. The witness replied: "A member of the gang said: 'The government of the United States is against you and their [sic] is no law in Georgia for Mormons.' Judging from the manner in which this trial is being conducted I see no reason to question the correctness of his assertion." The commotion that followed his answer brought a brief recess. Holston, Hamline and Owensby followed him as prosecution witnesses. The only defense witnesses were the three defendants who apparently never denied the killing of Standing. Nonetheless, the jury returned a not guilty verdict on Nations. With that verdict, the prosecution dismissed the murder charges on Bradley and Blair.98

The remaining counts were tried on individual defendants with the same result. While some Mormon accounts suggest

97"Told To Go Free," Atlanta Constitution, October 28, 1879.
98Nicholson, Martyrdom, 70-73 and Whitfield County Superior Court Note Books for October 20, 1879, p. 484.
more than the murder and riot counts were tried, existing Whitfield County Superior Court records show only those two before the court. Those records indicate that on Thursday, October 23, 1879, the last charge of riot was dismissed against Nations, who had been the first tried on the murder count.69

Years later Clawson would recall that at the conclusion of the trial hostility in the community against Mormons in general, and Clawson in particular, ran very high. Clawson was warned of a scheme to have him arrested for perjury charges. He and Morgan left Dalton on the earliest train the next morning, returning west in a few days. First, Morgan telegraphed the not unexpected news to Utah: “The old, old story. Verdict, not guilty!”70

Shortly after the trial Morgan criticized the judge’s charge to the jury on a crucial point of law where he had instructed:

“That if two or more persons combine to do an unlawful act, not having as its object the destruction of human life, and in the commission of such an act, one of those engaged goes beyond the original purpose and intention, and commits a homicide in any of its degrees, he alone is guilty of the crime as principals or accessories.” Under such an instruction in order to convict the jury must have been convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that the individual defendant had intended to kill Standing himself, a difficult finding with over twenty bullet wounds in the body from a variety of weapons. Morgan believed this was contrary to Georgia law and virtually guaranteed acquittal of clearly guilty men. He was apparently correct in his belief that Judge McCutchen had either mistakenly or intentionally misapplied the law.81

The Atlanta Constitution, the Catoosa Courier and the Daily Times of Chattanooga, Tennessee, noted the verdicts. The Times reported the murder verdicts with the optimistic prediction that the defendants would be found guilty of riot. The Times would later denounce the Courier for applauding the not guilty verdicts. The Chattanooga newspaper would also run a bitter letter from Morgan written before the trials, denouncing the violence and asserting that Mormons did not want the death penalty for the three defendants. The main Mormon organ, the Deseret News, carried lengthy and sarcastic accounts of the trial and events surrounding it, mostly in the form of letters from Morgan and Clawson. Among the revealing headlines over their stories were “Murderers Encouraged,” “Georgia’s Guilt and Shame” and “Bad Law and Good—Georgia Christianity.”82


There were reports in non-Mormon journals shortly after Standing's murder that Georgia Mormons planned "an immediate exodus to Utah." A party of 125 did leave in December 1879 to emigrate to church settlements in Colorado, making a total of about 400 southern Mormons leaving that "season," but it did not represent an abandonment of the state. Missionaries continued to come to Georgia.  

Some days after the not guilty verdicts, Morgan and Clawson were interviewed in St. Louis by a newspaper reporter as they awaited a group of forty Virginia converts to escort further west. When asked if the Standing murder would "drive your missionaries from that state" they were quoted as responding: "Not at all. On the contrary it proved very beneficial towards our cause. It caused agitation, created comment, and the result is that we have double the number of converts throughout the southern states on account of that murder. Bullets and bayonets will never compel a people to relinquish a faith. Arguments alone will do so."  

On August 17, 1880, an Italian marble monument was erected over Standing's grave in the old Salt Lake City Cemetery. About fifteen feet tall when erected, the monument was paid for by contributions from the Young Men's Improvement Associations of the Salt Lake City Stake of the Mormon Church. Carved on the sides of the monument are the names of the twelve members of the mob, identified as his murderers, and the comment that "His (Standing's) murderers were indicted and two of them tried, the first upon a charge of murder and the other for riot. Through bigotry and prejudice both were acquitted. Evidence of guilt was not lacking, but as the assassins boasted, 'There is no law in Georgia for the Mormons.' A galvanized iron box was placed inside the monument containing copies of various news accounts of the murder and trial, photographs of Standing and Clawson, and other information on the erection of the monument.  

Today the monument is badly worn and the five foot obelisk that once rose from the top of the main base lies on the ground near other more modest headstones. Standing's name and the circumstances of his martyrdom are now little known to Georgians and Mormons alike.  

The Mormons are no longer the controversial people that drew such violent reactions from nineteenth-century Americans. In 1890 they officially abandoned polygamy under the most intense pressure from the federal government. It took

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64 "A Mormon Exodus From Georgia," Macon Telegraph and Messenger, August 21, 1879; "More Mormons For The West," North Georgia Citizen, December 4, 1879; and David Buice, "Excerpts from the Diary of Teancum William Heward, Early Mormon Missionary to Georgia," Georgia Historical Quarterly 64 (Fall 1980):317-25. The Buice article covers the experiences of a Mormon missionary who served in Georgia from the summer of 1859 until the winter of 1881, arriving at the time of the Standing murder.


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A Mormon Exodus From Georgia," Macon Telegraph and Messenger, August 21, 1879; "More Mormons For The West," North Georgia Citizen, December 4, 1879; and David Buice, "Excerpts from the Diary of Teancum William Heward, Early Mormon Missionary to Georgia," Georgia Historical Quarterly 64 (Fall 1980):317-25. The Buice article covers the experiences of a Mormon missionary who served in Georgia from the summer of 1859 until the winter of 1881, arriving at the time of the Standing murder.

almost a generation for the practice to completely die out within the main church community, but today it is perpetuated by fundamentalist splinter groups. The church also dismantled its controversial theocratic community life. Today the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is much closer to conservative Protestantism than the separate religious kingdom it was a hundred years ago.66

Dalton resident W. C. Puryear gave a small tract of land believed to contain the Standing murder site to the Mormon Church in the early 1950s. In April 1952 Mormon church President David O. McKay visited the plot to dedicate a small memorial park honoring Stading and Clawson. A stone monument with a bronze plaque briefly sets out the story.67
