Visitors to Historic Nauvoo, Illinois, cannot miss the imposing white limestone building that overlooks the historic site. That building is a temple, a reconstruction of a similar building that was erected in the 1840s. It is a potent reminder of the rich spiritual heritage of the builders of Nauvoo—members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Ironically, the free interpretive tours in the historic city include virtually no information about the temple. The LDS Church is making a concerted effort to fill this gap in their interpretive program.

From 1839 to 1846, Latter-day Saints transformed a swampland into a bustling city they named Nauvoo. At its peak, Nauvoo was home to some 12,000 residents, making it the second largest city in Illinois at the time. Many of those engaged in this transformation were religious refugees who had fled to Illinois to escape persecutions that had climaxed in what historians now call the Missouri Mormon War. Thousands of others were recent converts to the faith, primarily emigrants from Great Britain who desired to gather with their fellow Latter-day Saints. Following their prophet-leader, Joseph Smith, the devout Latter-day Saints of Nauvoo believed they were building a city worthy of God’s presence.

Central to this effort was the construction of a temple, where the Latter-day Saints would learn gospel principles and perform sacred rituals in which they would make covenants with God and one another. They had completed their first temple in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1836, and they had intended to build others in Missouri. But opposition in both places forced them to abandon their efforts. Even so, shortly after the Latter-day Saints arrived in the area that would soon become the city of Nauvoo, Joseph Smith announced that they would once again build a temple to their God. He selected a site atop a bluff overlooking the floodplain of the Mississippi River. Construction commenced in early 1841, with locally quarried limestone as the principal building material.

Unique to the temple’s design were thirty ornamented pilasters, evenly spaced along the exterior walls. Each pilaster had at its base a large stone on which a crescent moon was carved. Other large stones served as the pilasters’ capitals, each carved with a representation of the rising sun with a human-like face, above which were two trumpets. Above each sunstone capital was a stone on which was carved a single star. The inspiration for these pilasters was a passage in the biblical book of Revelation: “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” (Revelation 12:1). Joseph Smith taught that this imagery represented the latter-day Church of Christ, which would bring forth, like the dawning of a new day, the kingdom of God to the earth.
As the Latter-day Saints constructed different sections of the temple, they began to use those sections for various civic and religious purposes. In a sermon delivered in April 1842, Joseph Smith taught that “the Church is not fully organized, in its proper order, and cannot be, until the Temple is completed, where places will be provided for the administration of the ordinances of the Priesthood.” Among the ordinances (i.e., sacred rituals) introduced in Nauvoo were proxy baptisms for deceased relatives, commonly referred to by Latter-day Saints as “baptisms for the dead” in reference to the Apostle Paul's query to the early Christians in Corinth: “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:29). The ordinance is based on a belief in Jesus’s statement that “except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Soon after Joseph Smith began teaching the concept of baptisms for the dead, Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo began baptizing each other on behalf of their deceased ancestors, thereby offering salvation to those who had died without a knowledge of the gospel. First they performed these baptisms in the Mississippi River, but they soon moved to a specially constructed font in the unfinished basement of the Nauvoo Temple. Additional ordinances, such as marriage for eternity, were also introduced at this time. These ordinances followed a similar pattern—they were first taught and practiced in buildings other than the temple, and they were moved inside the temple once the structure was complete enough to accommodate them.

The temple was not yet completed when Joseph Smith was murdered by a hostile mob in June 1844. Despite the death of their leader, the Latter-day Saints continued to labor diligently to finish the temple, now under the direction of Brigham Young and other church leaders. They also continued to use it during its construction. But, as before, opposition ultimately forced them to evacuate Nauvoo in 1846. As the main body of Latter-day Saints fled west across the Mississippi River, beginning their long journey to what would become the state of Utah, they left behind their beloved temple, parts of which were still unfinished.

Agents for the church sold the temple in 1848. Soon thereafter, the temple’s interior was destroyed by an arson’s fire. Two years later, tornado-like winds toppled all but the western façade. Over the next several years, local builders salvaged the large blocks of limestone and repurposed them for use in structures throughout the region.

By the early twentieth century, an assortment of common residences, shops, and civic buildings stood on the city block where the temple once stood. All traces of the temple had disappeared. A new generation of Latter-day Saints, however, motivated by an interest in their religious heritage, began returning to visit Nauvoo. One such individual was a furrier from Utah named Wilford Wood (1893–1968), who, beginning in 1937, began acquiring portions of the Nauvoo Temple block and deeding the land to the LDS church. Wood believed the temple could one day be rebuilt in its original location and in its original splendor. Another advocate was Lane K. Newberry (1896–1961), an artist from Chicago and a descendant of Nauvoo pioneers. Although Newberry was not a Latter-day Saint, he also believed the LDS Church should rebuild the temple as part of a larger effort to restore the entire historic city.

The idea to reconstruct the temple also attracted the interest of state and federal government officials. Following the passage of the federal Historic Sites Act of 1935, which authorized a nationwide survey of historic and archaeological places, Nauvoo was quickly identified as a site of historical significance for both the nation and the state of Illinois. Indeed, a 1940 report by the National Park Service described Nauvoo as “an important part… in the opening up and development of the Far West” and recommended that the state of Illinois acquire all the land that was formerly part of the historic city and restore it as a cultural memorial. The Illinois House of Representatives adopted a resolution in April 1949, encouraging the reconstruction of the Nauvoo Temple. The new temple, the resolution stated, “would serve as a fitting memorial to the courageous band of pilgrims who here acquired the heroic determination to found a new state in the West . . . [and] add immeasurably to the attractiveness of historic Nauvoo and would create on the part of many Illinois citizens a new interest in the great movements which have played so prominent a role in the history of our State.” In January 1961, the National Park Service, acting on a newly authorized preservation plan, designated Nauvoo as one of the nation’s first National Historic Landmarks, explicitly recognizing the site’s “exceptional value in commemorating and illustrating the history of the United States.” With this designation, the federal government further encouraged the idea of restoring Nauvoo and its temple.

Even though state and federal officials expressed formal interest and support, it was the LDS Church that took significant steps during the 1950s and 60s toward fulfilling the restoration plans that had been envisioned for years. In 1951 the Church purchased a structure on the northwest corner of the temple block and converted it into an information bureau, staffed with guides who interpreted the temple site and the historic city for visitors. Additional transactions over the next decade ultimately led to the Church securing sole ownership of the entire temple block, cementing the site as the centerpiece of the LDS presence in Nauvoo.

At the same time, LDS Church leaders organized a nonprofit corporation called Nauvoo Restoration, Incorporated (NRI), to formalize restoration plans for the city. The group’s articles of incorporation, which established a five-man board of trustees, were signed in June 1962. From its beginning, NRI hoped to make Nauvoo the “Williamsburg of the Midwest.” The ties between NRI and Colonial Williamsburg were more than hypothetical. As early as 1962, NRI trustees appointed A. Edwin Kendrew, then the senior vice president of Colonial Williamsburg, as their advisory architect. Three years later, Kendrew was officially elected to NRI’s board of trustees. As a result, a great...
deal of NRI’s early restoration work was directly patterned after the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. As was customary at Colonial Williamsburg, NRI relied heavily on archaeological research in its restoration efforts. This was especially true for their ongoing investigations of the temple block. In December 1961, only months before NRI was formally organized, the LDS Church sponsored the first archaeological excavations on the temple block. Dr. Melvin L. Fowler of Southern Illinois University directed the placement of several exploratory backhoe trenches across the site. Workers soon encountered the large blocks of limestone in the historic Nauvoo Temple’s foundation. A full season of archaeological excavation was authorized for the following summer, during which archaeologists uncovered most of the major elements of the temple’s basement, including artifacts that filled more than 1,200 bags and cut temple stones that filled some 150 cardboard boxes. In spite of this initial success, the site lay untouched for the next four years.

Serious archaeological work on the temple site resumed in 1966, when NRI secured the services of noted historical archaeologist Jean Carl (J.C.) Harrington and his wife, Virginia, who was also an accomplished archaeologist. The previous year, J. C. Harrington had retired after a thirty-year career with the National Park Service, during which he had helped pioneer the field of historical archaeology in the United States. In Nauvoo the Harringtons found a project they felt was worth pursuing in their retirement years. From 1966 to 1969, they directed an ambitious archaeological program in Nauvoo, including the completion of the excavations at the temple site. In the end, they successfully revealed the original layout of the entire temple basement, as well as a number of significant artifacts and features associated with the large stone baptismal font that once sat in the temple’s basement. In the years following, the temple site was carefully landscaped to preserve the excavated remains and to interpret the archaeological site for the public.

Although all the excavations at the temple site were undertaken with the goal of restoring the Nauvoo Temple, that vision did not materialize until 1999, when LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley announced that the temple would be reconstructed thanks to “a very substantial contribution” of an LDS benefactor. Completed in 2002, the new Nauvoo Temple has an authentically reconstructed exterior, with an interior redesigned to accommodate modern Latter-day Saint worship. Situated in its original location, atop the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, a temple stands once again as the centerpiece of Historic Nauvoo.

The reconstruction of the Nauvoo Temple breathed new life into the historic site, reinforcing the need for Historic Nauvoo to be more accurate and relevant. The LDS Church has restored and reconstructed more than two dozen homes, shops, and civic buildings over the last sixty-five years, but much of this effort has been done in a piecemeal fashion, without the benefit of a comprehensive strategy or vision. Recognizing this deficiency, church officials recently completed a large-scale study of Historic Nauvoo, focusing on the site’s spatial, material, visual, and interpretive dimensions and its preservation and management.

Among the many findings of the study was the observation that present-day messaging and visitor experiences miss much of Nauvoo’s enduring spiritual legacy. Perhaps the most critical interpretive gap identified in the study concerns the Nauvoo Temple. Researchers observed that no current setting at Historic Nauvoo adequately interprets the history and significance of the temple. The lack of public interpretation of this significant structure is indeed striking, especially given the temple’s importance to Latter-day Saints, both historically and at present.

Virginia Harrington displaying stone from the original Nauvoo Temple baptismal font, 1969.
To help remedy this situation, researchers have identified a number of temple-related historic properties. The LDS Church is currently developing these properties to highlight the historical context of the temple and to interpret its sacred significance in the church. Some of the properties are nonexistent in the contemporary setting, while others have been previously restored or reconstructed but are currently used for non-historical purposes.

One example is the former home of William and Caroline Weeks. This one-story brick home is situated a short distance downhill from the reconstructed temple, to the northwest. William Weeks was the architect of the Nauvoo Temple and, as such, played a significant role in carrying out Joseph Smith’s vision for the edifice. Yet the Weeks home, refurbished by NRI in the 1970s and 80s, has been used for decades as a residence for interpretive guides. Preliminary studies of the home have shown that much of the original historic structure remains intact. As a result, the LDS Church plans to restore the property and use it as a space where visitors can learn about the history and design of the Nauvoo Temple.

Across the street to the south of the Weeks home is another historic property with great potential to help fill the interpretive gap concerning the temple. Today the site is a large field of turf grass. In the 1840s it was the property of William and Elizabeth Jones, who, along with hundreds of other Nauvoo citizens, played key roles in building the original temple. William, a skilled stone carver, helped shape the large blocks of limestone for the temple’s exterior walls. Elizabeth supported her husband and provided lodging, food, and clothing to others engaged in building the temple. Archaeologists and geologists from Brigham Young University recently completed surveys of the Jones property using ground-penetrating radar survey in Nauvoo. The reconstructed Nauvoo Temple sits on the hill behind.

Results of ground-penetrating radar survey at the Hunter site in Nauvoo, showing the buried foundations of the 1840s home.
penetrating radar (GPR), with the intent to visualize buried remains from the 1840s. Although the results reveal a great deal of ground disturbance, which likely destroyed any original historical features of the property, the LDS Church still plans to use the Jones site as a space to interpret the skilled craftsmanship, labor, and sacrifice of those who built the historic Nauvoo Temple.

The historic property of Edward and Hannah Hunter is a final example of a site that will help interpret the history and significance of the temple. In 1842, Joseph Smith was staying in the Hunter home when he wrote a letter to the Latter-day Saints concerning baptisms for the dead. This letter was later canonized in Latter-day Saint scripture (see Doctrine and Covenants, section 128). The Hunter home was once located a short distance to the south of the Jones property and on the same grassy hillside. A recent GPR survey revealed that the home’s foundation remains intact underground, as do other features possibly associated with the structure. These will be explored archaeologically in the near future in anticipation of using this space to interpret the religious function of the Nauvoo Temple, including the performance of ordinances such as baptisms for the dead.

Through these and similar efforts, the LDS Church will fill a significant interpretive gap in Historic Nauvoo. As a result, future visitors will have the opportunity to learn something about the design, construction, and function of the Nauvoo Temple, the centerpiece of the historic city.

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