

# The Puppet King

The Meteoric Rise and Calculated Erasure of John C. Bennett in Mormon Nauvoo.





# Mormonism's Most Consequential Footnote

In less than two years—from his baptism in September 1840 to his excommunication in May 1842—John C. Bennett became one of the most powerful men in early Mormonism, second only to Joseph Smith himself. He was a mayor, a general, a university chancellor, and a member of the First Presidency.

**How did one man accumulate so much power so quickly? And why has official Church history worked so hard to erase him?**

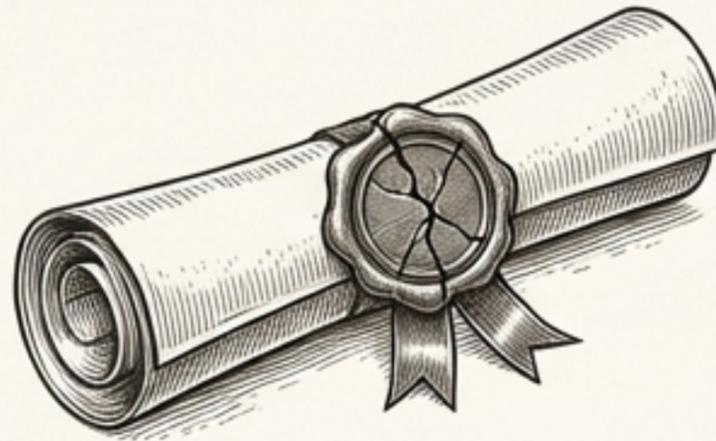
# The Accomplished Man Arrives

Before Mormonism, Bennett was already a man of many titles, and some questionable ethics.



## Religious Background

A Methodist preacher and affiliate of the Campbellite movement, where he first met Joseph Smith in 1832.



## Academic Fraud

Attempted to establish a university in Ohio. Though it was unsuccessful, he issued degrees from the non-existent institution.



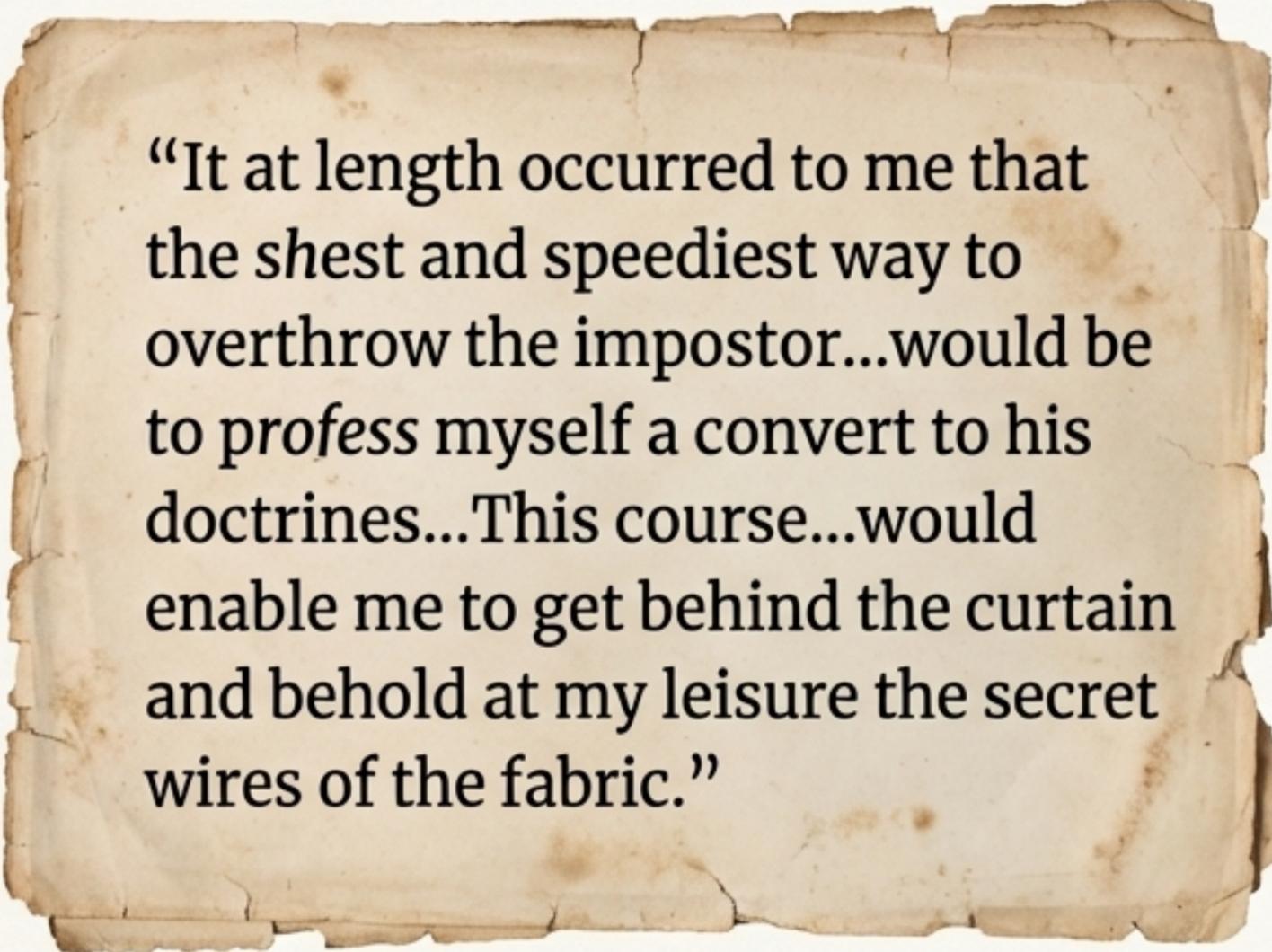
## Questionable Physician

Practiced medicine with a certificate but little formal schooling. Joseph Smith III later recalled Bennett nearly caused his death from blood loss during a tooth extraction. Emma Smith refused medicine he prescribed.

His biographer Andrew F. Smith noted plainly: Bennett “was not a good physician.”

# An Infiltrator's Confession or a Revisionist's Alibi?

In his 1842 exposé, *History of the Saints*, Bennett claimed he joined the Church with the secret intention of exposing it from within.



“It at length occurred to me that the *shest* and speediest way to overthrow the impostor...would be to *profess* myself a convert to his doctrines...This course...would enable me to get behind the curtain and behold at my leisure the secret wires of the fabric.”

**Analyst's Note:** While this frames him as a hero, his subsequent actions suggest this was likely a self-serving narrative crafted after his fall from grace. As one analyst noted, “if your intention really is to infiltrate Joseph Smith and expose him, he did one of the worst jobs you could possibly have done.”

# The Charter: Forging a Kingdom on the Mississippi

Bennett was instrumental in drafting and lobbying for the Nauvoo City Charter in 1840. The document granted the city unprecedented power.

- **Unchecked Power:** The principle of separation of powers was not built in. The Mayor presided over the city council (legislative) and served as Chief Justice of the court (judicial).



- **Passed Without Scrutiny:** Illinois Supreme Court Justice Thomas Ford reported the bill was rushed through the legislature and “was never read except by its title.”
- **A Criminal Haven:** The charter’s power to issue writs of *habeas corpus* protected Joseph Smith from extradition to Missouri. This attracted other criminals to Nauvoo seeking refuge from the law.

# One Man, All The Power

Grand Secretary,  
Nauvoo Masonic Lodge  
(Dec. 29, 1841)

Master in Chancery,  
Hancock County  
(May 6, 1841)

Assistant President,  
First Presidency  
(Apr. 7, 1841)

Major General, Nauvoo Legion  
(Feb. 4, 1841)

Chancellor, University of Nauvoo  
(Feb. 3, 1841)

Mayor of Nauvoo  
(Feb. 1, 1841)

In just over a year, Bennett was a top leader in Nauvoo's civic, academic, military, religious, judicial, and fraternal organizations. He was not an outsider; he was the ultimate insider, placed in power by Joseph Smith.

# The First Cracks in the Facade

While Bennett publicly publicly called for prohibiting “all bars, tippling houses, and dram shops,” his private behavior told a different story.



## The Brothel in Nauvoo:

- On May 14, 1842, the city council—the very body Bennett once led—passed an ordinance prohibiting brothels.
- An eyewitness later claimed Bennett had built a brothel that the council ordered “ripped down as a public nuisance.”

**Biographer’s Insight (Andrew Smith):** It is “unimaginable that it could have survived without the knowledge of the leaders of the church,” and it could have been “an integral part of the emerging system of sexual experimentation that then was underway in Nauvoo.”

# ‘One of the Mysteries of God’

Multiple women testified under oath that Bennett had attempted to seduce them. His methods reveal a pattern of leveraging religious authority for sexual gain.

*“He allegedly told women that illicit intercourse was “perfectly right” and “one of the mysteries of God which was to be revealed when the people was strong enough in the faith to bear such Mysteries.”*

He never denied the charges of adultery, admitting to relations with “six or seven women.” He only denied that he had used Joseph Smith’s name to do so—a claim that would become the central point of contention.



# A Secret Reckoning

**May 11, 1842:** Joseph Smith and other leaders sign a statement to privately disfellowship Bennett, but it is not released to the public. They want the problem handled quietly.

**May 17, 1842:** Bennett is confronted with the sworn testimony of the women he seduced.

## The Signed Statement

To avoid public ruin, Bennett signs a carefully worded statement, **declaring he had never been taught any illicit doctrines by Joseph Smith and had never “knew him to countenance any improper conduct whatsoever.”** This document was a legal shield for Smith.



# The King Takes the Throne

**The Resignation:** On the same day he signed the statement exonerating Smith (May 17, 1842), John C. Bennett formally resigned as Mayor of Nauvoo, citing “circumstances of a personal nature.”

**The Succession:** Just two days later, on May 19, the city council held a special meeting.

- Joseph Smith was elected Mayor.
- Hyrum Smith was elected Vice-Mayor.

**The Message:** Power in Nauvoo was consolidated directly into the hands of the Smith family. Any pretense of separation was gone.



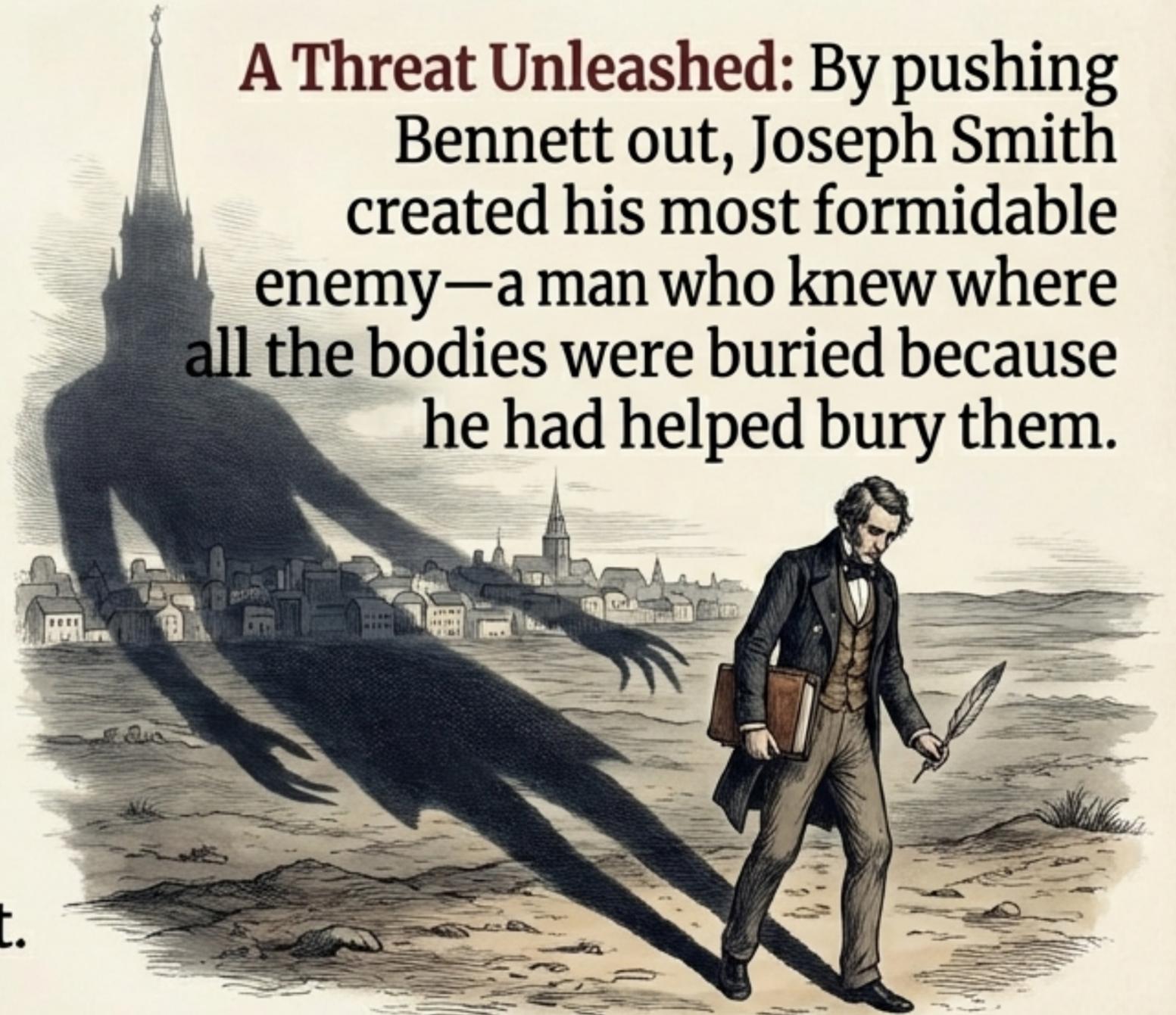


# ‘He Can’t Keep Getting Away With This’

**Political Ambitions Dashed:** Bennett had been a candidate for the Illinois House of Representatives, hoping for Smith’s continued support. The public excommunication ended his political career in the state.

**The Fall Guy:** Bennett was punished for a “spiritual wifery” system that mirrored Joseph Smith’s own secret practice of plural marriage. While Bennett’s version was unsanctioned, his exposure threatened to reveal the entire system. He became the perfect scapegoat.

**A Threat Unleashed:** By pushing Bennett out, Joseph Smith created his most formidable enemy—a man who knew where all the bodies were buried because he had helped bury them.



# Who Was the Puppet King?

Was John C. Bennett a master manipulator who exploited Joseph Smith's trust? Or was he a convenient tool, built up to serve a purpose and cast aside when his scandals became a liability and a mirror to the prophet's own secrets?



**\*\*The Legacy of Erasure\*\***: Bennett's story reveals the volatile nature of power in Nauvoo. His intimate knowledge of Smith's secrets—from the Nauvoo Charter to plural marriage—made him too dangerous to remember. He wasn't just excommunicated; he was erased.

The story of John C. Bennett is a case study in how history is written by the victors, and how the most inconvenient truths are often the first to be buried.