

Paul DeBarthe and Michael S. Riggs, *Hawn's Mills Hamlet: A Phase III Archaeological Investigation* (Independence: John Whitmer Books, 2023), 204 pp. Illustrations, index. Paperback, \$29.95.

Reviewed by Alexander L. Baugh

In *Hawn's Mills Hamlet: A Phase III Archaeological Investigation*, Paul Debarthe and Michael S. Riggs discuss their findings following a five-year archaeological investigation from 2002–2006 of the Hawn's Mill settlement in eastern Caldwell County, Missouri; the site of a tragic massacre on 30 October 1838, where seventeen Mormons were killed and another fifteen wounded.

The title of the book is a bit puzzling. In the 1830s, the settlement was known as Hawn's Mill (singular), not Hawn's Mills (plural). In fact, the site was never known as *Hawn's Mills*, nor is it today. The authors obviously chose to title the book after the fact that Jacob Hawn, for whom the settlement was named, actually operated two mills at the site, something like a combination sawmill and a gristmill. That said, even though there were essentially two milling operations, the settlement has always been known as Hawn's Mill, not Hawn's Mills.

The authors set the stage by providing an overview of the Mormon experience in western Missouri, beginning with their initial occupation in Jackson County in 1831. By the summer of 1833, tensions between the Mormons and their non-Mormon neighbors led to several skirmishes between the two groups, eventually resulting in the forced expulsion of the Mormons from the county in late 1833. The displaced Mormons found temporary refuge from a friendlier element in Clay County, but by 1836, local residents began to push once again for the removal of the Mormons, only this time on more peaceful terms. A solution was found by the creation of Caldwell County in December 1836, as a designated area for the Mormons to settle. In Caldwell, the Mormons established a sizeable community at Far West and a number of other smaller settlements. However, tensions reignited in the summer and fall of 1838, sparked by renewed

aggressions against the Mormons, particularly those living outside Caldwell County (primarily Daviess and Carroll). The Mormons reacted to these aggressions by initiating their own counter-offensive in Daviess County that resulted in the forced evacuation by the Mormons of the non-Mormon “gentiles,” most of whom sought refuge in Livingston County to the east. Fired by retaliation, the displaced Daviess residents collaborated with the citizens in Livingston County to execute a deadly attack of revenge, not against their perpetrators but against an innocent group of Mormons who had gathered or were living in the vicinity of Hawn’s Mill, located within a few miles from the Caldwell-Livingston border (1–8). In the next few subsequent pages, the authors provide graphic descriptions by eyewitnesses and survivors of the brutal killings of Warren Smith and his son Sardius in the blacksmith shop that served as a garrison by the Mormons to defend the settlement (9–18).

The remainder of the book details the process and findings associated with the archaeological investigation at the settlement site. DeBarthe and Riggs, both trained, experienced archaeologists, supervised the field operations, site excavations, and the recovery of artifacts. Participants in the digs included students from Shawnee Mission East High School (Shawnee Mission, Kansas) and Johnson County Community College (Overland Park, Kansas), members of the Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation, and other interested volunteers. Research procedures included the use of subsurface ground-penetrating radar, tree ring examinations, metal detectors, and open excavations. Findings included earthenware, stoneware, lead fragments, glass fragments, metal objects (square nails, bolts, and screws), musket balls, and bone fragments (75–94). Significantly, artifacts discovered date as far back as the Middle Archaic and Middle Woodland periods (98–101, 128). The five-year project netted more than

2,100 artifacts, all of which were placed in the Community of Christ Library-Archives in Independence, Missouri, where they remain for further study (24).

One of the most significant aspects of the book, at least for historians, is the contribution by the authors in providing a general layout of the Hawn's Mill settlement as it likely would have appeared at the time of the Mormon occupation in 1838. The following description is worth citing in this review:

As we project ourselves back into the settlement of Hawn's Mills in the late 1830s, we see a hamlet divided by a small river called Shoal Creek. A scattering of houses can be found on the north side of the creek, with Jacob Hawn's house on the south just below a dam. The mill was on the north side of the river, requiring Hawn to cross the dam to the mill for his daily work. A wagon track from the south descended from what became known as Escape Hill, west and south of Hawn's house, to cross the shallow shoals of the creek below the dam. The millpond extended west, upstream to where a small stream entered Shoal Creek from the north.

Settlers claimed terraces for their homes all along the creek, each of them a quarter mile or so from the next, extending the influence of the hamlet with its dozen or so buildings. The millrace angled across the bend in the Creek providing an effective island for the gristmill. It occupied a foundation probably of one rod by two rods dimension or larger and likely stood three stories tall to accommodate the demands of refined milling.

A second crossing on planks near the west end of the pond provided foot traffic access to the other half of the hamlet. A log blacksmith shop situated near the mill facilitated construction and maintenance issues. Excavation for a well, some twelve feet deep near the house on the knoll, would have been evident at sunrise on that fateful day of October 30, 1838. (40–41)

The book includes a detailed map showing the approximate locations of the geographic features and structures noted in the description above (39).

An interesting discovery by the archaeological team was that of a small capital letter *N* in 6-point bourgeois font type at the site. The font matches the font type used in the press for publishing the *Elders' Journal* in Kirtland, Ohio. In 1838, the press was shipped from Kirtland, Ohio, to Far West, Missouri, by wagon, indicating the press passed through Hawn's Mill, where the small type-piece fell to the ground and became lost, only to be rediscovered during one of the

digs over a hundred and sixty years later. The authors note that this same press was later transported to Nauvoo, where it was used to publish the *Times and Seasons*, *The Wasp*, and *Nauvoo Neighbor* (55–59).

The excavation of the site designated by the team as “the residence on the knoll,” was particularly successful. The findings suggest the high probability that it was the site of the Charles Ross home. Ross occupied the home soon after the Mormons abandoned the settlement, and he later indicated that the dry well where the bodies of fourteen of the victims were interred was ten steps from the door of the house (likely the south door). The location of the home is significant because it not only helps to understand how the settlement was laid out, but it also serves as a benchmark and “offers a lead” as to the location of the burial site of the victims (63–64, 127).

DeBarthe and Riggs also conducted a comparative analysis of materials and data from their discoveries at Hawn’s Mill with information found in an unpublished 1982 archaeological report by BYU anthropology professor Ray Matheny and his associate D. Robert Carter of a cabin built by Lyman Wight in 1838 at Adam-ondi-Ahman. The findings from the site work conducted by Matheny and Carter of Wight’s cabin (a structure contemporary with the buildings at Hawn’s Mill), yielded valuable insights into the history and evolution at the mill settlement (110–25).

Despite the successes of the DeBarthe-Riggs investigation, conclusive evidence of the location of several of the settlement’s historical structures and features are still not known, particularly the blacksmith shop and the well containing the remains of the fourteen Mormon victims. And while the authors are mindful that their study was not complete, overall they believe the site holds potential for future exploration. In that vein, if an effort is undertaken to

locate the well (which they do not recommend), they suggest that once the site has been identified from the surface, if it is to be studied further, the archaeological investigation should approach the site from the side in order to leave the human remains undisturbed. They further recommend that the well's location remain unknown to the public, and also unmarked, to ensure that the site will not be disturbed (127–28).

A final section in the book is that of DeBarthe's field notes from the 2003–2005 digs, which are included in the appendix (130–82). However, no explanation is given regarding why the field notes from 2002 and 2006 were not included. Nonetheless, the notes will be especially helpful to those individuals who will conduct further investigations at the site.

Readers should understand that *Hawn's Mills Hamlet* is not a history of the Hawn's Mill settlement, nor the tragedy that occurred there. Ultimately, the book is an archaeological/anthropological examination of the cultural and societal conditions and the day-to-day lives of the people who lived at Hawn's Mill in the 1830s. With that knowledge, it is possible to appreciate to a greater degree who they were, what they did, and how they lived.

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