

Sampson Avard and Danite Leadership (June – October 1838): A Reinterpretation

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In the fall of 1838, there was civil strife between the Mormons and their Missouri neighbors, now called the Mormon War. The cause of the conflict was that the Gentiles had heard of the existence of a secret order among the Saints called Sons of Dan (the “Danites”). These Danites had reportedly taken oaths to absolutely support the First Presidency of the Church and eliminate dissent in the Church. And later reports suggested that they planned to pillage surrounding Gentile communities, particularly in Daviess County.

After the Saints finally surrendered to the Missouri Militia in October 1838, the Prophet Joseph Smith was incarcerated in the Liberty Jail (in nearby Clay County), while awaiting a preliminary hearing on charges of treason and other crimes.¹ In jail, Smith had time to reflect on the situation of the Church. He knew that a number of the Saints had become disillusioned with his leadership and the Church itself. Some of them had already left it.² Joseph apparently

¹ For an account of the Liberty Imprisonment, see Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, B. H. Roberts [ed.] (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1948), 3:212-309, (covers the period November 28, 1838, through April 6, 1839). Or see the *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1896, 2:301-337. For an understanding of the method of the composition of the History [of Joseph Smith], see Dean C. Jessee, “The Writing of Joseph Smith’s History,” *BYU Studies*, 11 (Summer 1971): 469-473; Howard C. Searle, “Authorship of the History of Joseph Smith: A Review Essay,” *BYU Studies*, 21, 1 (1981):101-122.

² *History of the Church*, 3:167-168. John Taylor, of course, did honestly know nothing about the Danites. Luman Andros Shurtliff [Shurtliff] himself a Danite, stated that he dare not give a Danite signal with John Taylor present, since he knew Taylor was not a Danite. Luman Andros Shurtliff Diary, microfilm of holograph, LDS Archives. But, that does not mean there were no Danites. See Leland H. Gentry, “The Danite Band in 1838,” *BYU Studies*, 14, 4 (Summer 1974):421-450. For more on Marsh and Hyde’s apostasy and the reasons for it, see *History of the Church*, 3:171-172. The letter to Brother and Sister Abbott there referred to is actually preserved in Joseph Smith’s 1839 Letter Book, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 18. Marsh wrote: “I have left the Mormons & Joseph Smith Jr. for conscience sake, and that alone for I have come to the full conclusion that he is a very wicked man; notwithstanding that all my efforts to persuade myself to the Contra[ry]. I also am well convinced that he will not escape the just judgments of an offended God who pleads the cause of the innocent.” Hyde expressed similar thoughts. Marvin Hill said: “Hyde told Brigham Young afterward that it was the Danites that repelled him. ... We have no record of his saying that his testimony in his sworn affidavit

recognized that he needed a scapegoat to protect the reputation of the Church, particularly that of the First Presidency, from disrepute.

Smith found such a man in Sampson Avard, the one prominent Danite leader to testify against him in the Preliminary Hearing.³ In a letter to the Saints dated December 16, 1838, the Prophet argued that the entire responsibility for the Missouri debacle, lay not with himself or Sidney Rigdon (both of whom were then in jail) nor even the militant Danite Movement as a whole (for most of its members were probably still loyal), but rather with Avard. According to Smith, Avard alone had created the Danite order without either the knowledge or authorization of the First Presidency. Thus, Avard, as head of this secret abomination, had single-handedly disgraced Zion before the world.⁴

We may appreciate Joseph Smith's dilemma in this situation and some of us may even feel, as Joseph must have felt, that blaming Avard was absolutely necessary to save the Church and its leaders from final disaster at the very difficult time. But, it is impossible for those of us who are Mormon historians to continue to assert that Joseph's defense of his own behavior be treated as a serious historically verifiable account of the Danites. It is simply not believable or reasonable to declare that Sampson Avard was so extremely clever that

was a misrepresentation. ... Hyde's finest hour may have come when he broke with group pressures to protest Danite wrongs." [Marvin S. Hill, review of Orson Hyde by Howard H. Barron, in *BYU Studies*, 18, 4 (1978): 585-586]. Hyde's letter, however, states more than just opposition to Danites: "I have left the Church called Latter Day Saints for conscience sake, fully believing that God is not with them. And is not the mover of their schemes and projects." [Orson Hyde, Letter to the Abbotts, October 25, 1838]. For a different interpretation of March's behavior, which does not address Hyde at all, see Lyndon W. Cook, "'I Have Sinned Against Heaven, and Am Unworthy of Your Confidence, But I Cannot Live Without a Reconciliation': Thomas B. Marsh Returns to the Church," *BYU Studies*, 20, 4 (1980):389-400; and Richard Van Wagoner and Steve Walker, "The Return of Thomas B. Marsh," *Sunstone* 6, 4(1981):28-30. See also John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints, (Commonly Called Mormons); Including an Account of Their Doctrine and Disciplines; with the Reasons of the Author for Leaving the Church* (St. Louis: Printed for the Author, 1839). Reed Peck, *Reed Peck Manuscript* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., n. d.). Others could be cited.

³ Sampson Avard, testimony in *Senate Document 189* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., n. d.), 1-10, 21. Avard, in particular, was excommunicated from the Church with several others in Quincy, IL on 17 March, 1839. See *History of the Church*, 3:284.

⁴ Joseph Smith Letter Book, LDS Archives, 2:18. See Dean C. Jessee [ed.], *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), 380. In *History of the Church*, 3:221, Avard is singled out by Joseph as the leading teacher of the Danites and mentions other corrupt and designing characters as well, but Avard first. See also *History of the Church*, 3:179, where it says Avard formed "a secret combination by which he might rise [sic] a mighty conqueror, at the expense and overthrow of the Church." Avard bound them to secrecy and to secret oaths and "Thus Avard initiated members into his band." The same passage claims that Avard "would often affirm to his company that the principal men of the Church had put him forward as a spokesman, and a leader of this band, which he named Danites." And he held meetings and bound them by oaths and instructed them, *History of the Church*, 3:179-180. Every account of Danites in *History of the Church*, except the affidavit of Sidney Rigdon [3:453-454] stresses and magnifies the villainy of Avard and the greatness of his work as Danite founder-leader, but such accounts are simply and completely inaccurate.

he crated the Danite order without any assistance from the Presidency and in deep secret maintained their existence in Mormon Far West and Adam-ondi-Ahman for four months without the First Presidency ever suspecting or knowing a thing about it. There is too much evidence to the contrary, a portion of which shall serve as the focus of this study.

Reed Peck on Danite Leadership

Two of the most important pieces of evidence for reconstructing the order and function of the Danite Leadership are by Reed Peck. Peck was, by his own admission, a Danite officer (see chart), but he claimed to have dissented from the policies of the Band. Later, he left the Church entirely and prepared a manuscript called “Mormonism So-Called” which contained a list of Danite ranks for the higher leadership.⁵ This list flatly contradicts the December 16, 1838 Epistle of the Prophet from Liberty Jail in three important respects. First, Peck states that Sampson Avard was never the highest ranking officer in the Danite leadership. Second, he was not its sole founder. Third, Peck asserts that the Danites did not operate outside the knowledge and direction of the First Presidency.

Most important of all, the evidence that Peck gives in his manuscript enables us to reconstruct the chain of command of the Danite leadership for the first time, but General Officers and Field Officers. The Danites were commanded by the terrible brother of Gideon, Jared Carter, and its Captain, General Sampson Avard was Major General; C. P. Lott, Brigadier General; George W. Robinson, Colonel; “also a Lieut. Col. Maj. Secretary of War an Adjutant. Captains of fifties & Captains of tens and all these officers within the privates were to be under the presidency of the church and wholly subject to their commands.”⁶ Then in

⁵ Reed Peck, “Mormonism So-Called,” an uncompleted manuscript. Original believed to have been in the collection of the late Fawn M. Brodie. A Xerox copy of the manuscript is at Brigham Young University, Special Collection, Provo, Utah. For an easily available typescript edition of the manuscript see Reed Peck, *The Reed Peck Manuscript* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Modern Microfilm Co., n. d.), 11-12. An earlier and less accurate transcript was published by Lu J. Cake in 1899.

⁶ Peck Manuscript, 11. It would perhaps be helpful to say more about the concept of command here. In saying herein that the First Presidency was in command (with Joseph Smith personally directing the situation) as during the visit to Adam Black, the term “command” is simply being used in its normal military sense to include planning actions, directing movements and overseeing troops. It should not be taken in any other sense, but this alone is enough to establish Joseph’s personal responsibility for what transpired. This understanding of the word *command* is comparable to the way Caldwell County Militia Colonel George M. Hinkle viewed the subject [in his testimony at the Pre-trial Haring of Joseph Smith et al in *Senate Document 189*, 23. Command, then, implies that Danite military units informed the Prophet of developments as necessary, giving briefings of a military intelligence variety, and that Joseph used the information they gave him in planning. His plans were then issued, most likely as verbal orders [of either a general or specific nature] which were put in to effect by others. This is not to say Joseph could not be the victim of misinformation, as was the case when he was told that Mormons had been killed at

the “forepart” of July. Peck reports that Jared Carter, having complained to Joseph Smith about a Sermon of Sidney Rigdon, was removed from power and replaced by Elias Higbee.⁷

Some felt that Peck was less than a reliable source, because of his apostasy, but it is worthy of note that he also listed the Danite leadership on a second occasion under oath before Judge Austin A. King in November 1838, almost a year before he started work on the manuscript.⁸ There is only one discrepancy between the two accounts. In the court testimony, Peck listed C. P. Lott as Major General and Sampson Avard as Brigadier General. But in the Peck Manuscript, the order is reversed. For reasons that will become apparent further on, it is more likely that Peck gave the correct order in the courtroom under oath, which was also the earlier account.

At least three considerations support this conclusion. First, in both Peck’s court testimony and his manuscript, he gives the ranks in the same descending order: Captain General, Major General, Brigadier General. This is to say that he remembered the order while confusing the identity of the officers. Already, the problem is reduced to a scribal error. Second, it is natural to take Major General to be higher than Brigadier General as the practice of our military follows that order. Third, the Danite Constitution as testified by Sampson Avard, also shows that Captain General was the highest rank among the Danites:

Art, 8th, All officers shall be subject to the commands of the Captain General, given through the Secretary of War; and so all officers shall be subject to their superiors in rank, according to laws made for that purpose.⁹

In addition in 1806, Nemesio de Salcedo was Captain General of the Interior Provinces of Mexico, his area of responsibility including the present state of

Gallatin, but none were. Nor is it to say that he always commanded wisely. It may be, as well that he did not specifically order Lott and Avard to rough up Justice Black and that he never actually knew what they did before he came into the house. None of this, however, is inconsistent with the concept of military command.

⁷ Peck Manuscript, 11-12.

⁸ *Senate Document 189* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Modern Microfilm Co., n. d.), 17-21.

⁹ From the Testimony of Sampson Avard, *Senate Document 189*, 6. As Reed Peck’s testimony and all other testimony cited from *Senate Document 189*, Avard’s testimony was given before the Hon. Austin A. King. Judge of the Fifth Circuit of the State of Missouri at the Courthouse in Richmond, Mo., sometime on or after November 16, 1838. In addition to appearing in *Senate Document 189*, Avard’s testimony can be found in the holograph form as kept by the court clerks in the Joint Collection of the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection of the University of Missouri and the Missouri State Historical Society, Columbia, Missouri. Leland H. Gentry, “The Danite Band of 1838,” *BYU Studies*, 14, 4 (Summer):432. For a fuller treatment of Gentry on the subject of the Danites see “A History of the Latter-day Saints in Northern Missouri (1838-1839),” Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1966, particularly Chapter 9 entitled “The Danites.”

Texas.¹⁰ So the rank would not be unknown to our period.

So Sampson Avard was, according to Reed Peck, never the highest ranking officer of the Danite Band. He was only a Brigadier General (or, even if one follows the manuscript, at most Major General) never the Captain General. His superiors were Jared Carter, and later, Elias Higbee, the two Captain Generals, and Cornelius P. Lott, Major General. Avard, then, never was the final authority in the Danite Band. Therefore, Joseph Smith's December 16, 1838, letter from Liberty Jail was incorrect when it attributed to Avard sole responsibility for the crimes of the Danites. Avard's superiors obviously shared the responsibility.

Peck also states that, while Dr. Avard was a prominent Danite leader from the beginning, he was neither its sole founder nor the originator of its doctrines. One would have thought that, if he had been, he would have made himself Captain General and named the Danites after himself. But that was not what happened. The Peck Manuscript asserts that, at one point, early in their brief history, the Danites were called "the brother of Gideon."¹¹ This appellation was clearly intended to honor Jared Carter, the first Captain General of the Danite band, whose brother, Gideon H. Carter, was subsequently killed at Cooked River.¹² Such a name would have made absolutely no sense if Avard had been the sole founder and prime mover. After Carter's fall, the order was most generally referred to as "Daughter of Zion" or the "Sons of Dan," from which came the name "Danite."¹³

However, this does not mean Avard was an unimportant and insignificant Danite. For, the Reed Peck Manuscript also states that Sampson Avard was one of three founding members. The other two were Jared Carter, the first Captain General and George W. Robinson, Colonel. Robinson was Sidney Rigdon's Son-in-law, General Church Clerk and Recorder and Scribe for the "Scriptory Book of Joseph Smith J." and he may have been liaison between the Danites and the First Presidency at times.¹⁴ Avard clearly played a key role in the inner circles of the band from its inception. No history of the Danites could be written without his name beginning a central location. But equally clear, he did not play the only significant role, even in the very beginning.

Beyond the role of the Danite Generals, Peck addresses the role of the First Presidency. The First Presidency certainly never took the Danite oath, for the Danites existed to serve and support them. But Peck stated that Jared Carter

¹⁰ T. B. Abernethy, *The Burr Conspiracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 48-49.

¹¹ Reed Peck Manuscript, 11.

¹² For Gideon Hadden Carter, see Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook [eds.], *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1830-1844)* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1983), 253. See also Gentry, "Danite Band," 429.

¹³ Reed Peck Manuscript, 9-10.

¹⁴ *Far West Record*, 158-159. See also George W. Robinson, "The Scriptorium Book of Joseph Smith Jr. — President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints in all the World," *Far West* — April 12th 1838." Original in LDS Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.

was removed from office in the Danite band after complaining about Sidney Rigdon to Joseph Smith.¹⁵ For that to be true, the First Presidency had to have been aware of Carter's role in the Danites at that point in time (July 1838) to have had him removed. No other explanation suffices. In addition, a difficult passage in the "Scriptory Book of Joseph Smith Jr." may confirm the Presidency were not only aware of the Danites but perhaps, involved in their founding as well.

Thus far, according to the <revelator> order of Danites, we have a company of Danites in these times, to put to right physically that which is not right, and to cleanse the Church of verry great evils which hath hitherto existed among us inasmuch as they cannot be put to right m̄ by teachings & persuasyons, This company or a part of them exhibited on the fourth day of July. They came up to consecrate, by companies of tens, commanded by their captain over ten.¹⁶

All of this evidence may appear to historians as questionable. After all, a man could perjure himself under oath as well. But, the problem is that Peck does not seem to be lying. On two occasions, less than a year apart, once under oath, he gives us the same information, with only one minor discrepancy. And the Danite Constitution and the Scriptory Book seem to support him. But there is also additional evidence extant, which demonstrates, beyond a reasonable doubt, that Peck was telling the truth. The Danite leadership was mentioned in connection with two very important incidents during the summer of 1838: the July 4th celebration at Far West and the visit to Adam Black following the Election Day scuffle of August 6, 1838 in Daviess County, Missouri.

¹⁵ See Reed Peck Manuscript, 10-11. See also *Senate Document 189*, 17-21.

¹⁶ George W. Robinson, "The Scriptory Book of Joseph Smith Jr. — President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints in all the World," *Far West* — April 12th 1838," 61. Microfilm of holograph, LDS Archives. For this difficult to read passage (it has been crossed over by an unknown hand), see the transcription by H. Michael Marquardt in *Joseph Smith's 1838-39 Diaries* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, 1982). 14. With the exception of the word "Revelation" written above the line, which Marquardt read as "revel-r," in his reading is as good as we could expect for this passage. What Robinson meant when he scribbled in the word "Revelation" is not that clear. If Robinson meant that "according to the order of the Danites we have a company of Danites," he could simply been speaking of the existence of the Danite band [or could have meant the Danite Constitution was "the order of the Danites"]. However, if Robinson meant "according to the Revelation 'the order of the Danites' we have a company of Danites," then it is just possible that he meant Joseph Smith established the Danites by means of a lost revelation entitled "the order of the Danites." We do not know enough even to speculate further. This passage was found only in the "Scriptory Book." The scribes of "manuscript History of the Church," did not see fit to include this passage and the later printed edition of Joseph's History also does not have this passage either. But that increases the importance of this passage in the "Scriptory Book" as a primary witness.

July 4, 1838 Parade in Far West

On July 4, 1838, the Saints gathered in Far West for a celebration of Independence Day. That day the cornerstones of the Far West Temple were laid “agreeable to the commandments of the Lord unto us, given April 26, 1838.”¹⁷ A Liberty Pole was raised on the square in Far West.¹⁸ Sidney Rigdon delivered his well-known oration declaring the independence of the Saints from mobs and persecutions and vexatious lawsuits.¹⁹ There was also a parade.²⁰ An early list of the elements of this parade, printed in the Elders’ Journal for August 1838, demonstrates not only the power and prestige of the Danites on open display, but also the First Presidency in public association with them. In addition, it lists the Danite Leadership after the order of Peck’s manuscript:

The order of the day for the 4th of July, as directed by the committee of arrangements.

The committee of arrangements, which had been previously chosen, to make arrangements for the celebration of the 4th of July, and laying corner stones of the temple, reported the following which was strictly adhered to.

First, that President Joseph Smith Jr. be president of the day, Hyrum Smith vice president, and Sidney Rigdon orator.

Second that Reynolds Cahoon, be marshal of the day, and Col. George M. Hinkle and Major Jefferson Hunt, be assistant marshals.

Third, that George W. Robinson act as Colonel for the day; Philo Dibble, as Lieut. Colonel; Seymour Brunson as Major, and Reed Peck as Adjutant.

¹⁷ “Scriptory Book,” 46, (or Marquardt, 10). Compare History of the Church, 3:41.

¹⁸ For an account of the Liberty Pole and how it was afterwards hit by lightening, see Luman Andros Shirliff Journal, under date, microfilm of holograph, LDS Archives.

¹⁹ For the text of Sidney Rigdon’s July 4, 1838 address, see *History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1896), 2:157-167. The Reorganized Historians were following the text printed in Major Jefferson Hunt, *Mormon War* (St. Louis, MO: 1844), 167-180. The Reorganized Historians also had the following comments on the speech: “if it be granted that this speech is correctly reported by Hung [it is], the orator crossed the bounds of propriety and right in boasting, and bidding defiance to the mob; but he may be measurably excused when we consider how much persecution and oppression they had been subjected to; and how they had been driven from place to place, robbed, and despoiled of their homes, possessions, and sacred rights.” [Reorganized History, 2:158-161.] While sympathetic as we can be to any injustice, each person present must ask and answer the question whether or not such a person ought to be “measurably excused” at all.

²⁰ History of the Church, 3:41. The account of the July 4, 1838 affair from History of the Church is derived from *Elders’ Journal*, 1, 4 (August 1838): 69, not the “Scriptory Book.” George W. Robinson, however, did mention in the “Scriptory Book” the events of that day in similar fashion, particularly noting that he had commanded the regiment that day [“Scriptory Book,” July 4, see page 10, Michael Marquardt transcription].

Fourth, that Jared Carter, Sampson Avard, and Cornelius P. Lott, act as Generals, before whom, the military band shall pass in review.²¹

It is remarkable the degree of agreement between this list and the Peck Manuscript.

The Visit to Adam Black, J. P.

Further confirmation of this Danite chain of command and its functioning are extant in the accounts of the visit to Adam Black on August 8, 1838. There had been an Election Day riot at Gallatin on the 6th. One of the candidates felt his best chance of election was to prevent Adam-ondi-Ahman Mormons from voting at Gallatin.²² Fisticuffs resulted, but no deaths.

But, afterwards, an express was sent to Far West which exaggerated the nature of the incident and asked for assistance from Caldwell County [Mormons] against the Missourians.²³

This is what happened according to the “Scriptory Book:”

²¹ Elders’ Journal 1. 4 (August 1838): p. 69. Due credit must be given to Harold Schindler who noted first the importance of this account in the Elders’ Journal for “a clue to the table of organization within the Society.” See *Orrin Porter Rockwell: Man of God, Son of Thunder* (University of Utah Press, 2d ed., 1983), pp. 30-31. See also Stephen LeSueur, “The Mormon War: The Struggle to Maintain Civil Order in Northwestern Missouri in 1838,” M.A. Thesis, George Mason University, 1981, p. 159.

²² See *History of the Church* 3:56-58, It should be noted that this passage was not copied into “Manuscript History of the Church” until 15 Jan. 1845 or later, after the death of the Prophet. See Howard C. Searle, “Authorship of the History of Joseph Smith: A Review Essay,” *BYU Studies* 21, 1 (Winter 1981): 112. Searle’s article erroneously gives the date of this passage as 15 Jun 1845, but has it correct on p. 228 of his dissertation. See also Dean C. Jessee, *BYU Studies* 11, 4, p. 467 on this point as well.

²³ “Scriptory Book,” August 7, 1838. *History of the Church* 3:58-59. That expresses were used on this occasion, see William Swartzell, *Mormonism Exposed: Being a Journal of a Residence in Missouri From the 28th of May to the 20th of August 1838* (Pekin, Ohio: by the author, 1840), 28-29. Expresses were apparently fast communications by horse used by the Mormons of that day for communications of a most urgent nature. At least one source of information then that Joseph Smith had at his disposal when he decided to go into Daviess county following the Election Day affray was internal (within the Church itself). Joseph Smith’s own affidavit regarding this affair did not specifically state the source of his information regarding what had happened in Daviess County, but it does state that Sampson Avard brought the information in the express to Joseph. The Prophet, in consultation with Avard, then, made the decision to go to Adam-ondi-Ahman. This is precisely what is meant by the command. See Joseph Smith, Affidavit in *History of the Church* vol. 3, p. 70. That Joseph Smith was not averse to either military title or military leadership can be demonstrated, as well, from other periods of this personal history. In the march of Zion’s Camp from Kirtland Ohio to Clay County, Missouri in the year 1834, Joseph Smith was Commander-in-Chief and Lyman Wight, General. This almost precisely parallels the situation in Far West and Adam-ondi-Ahman in 1838. But, even then, his love of military titles, pomp, and command in no way left him. In Nauvoo, he was not only in charge of the Nauvoo Police, but Lt. General of the Nauvoo Legion, the highest ranking militia officer in the State of Illinois.

This morning an alarm came from Gallatin the County Seat of Davis County that during the Election on yesterday at that place some two or three of our brethren were killed in consequence of the Malilign-ts of the Missouri-ns, it was reported that the citizens of Daviess County who were opposed to our religion, did endeavor to prohibit the brethren from voting at the election in that place, and that the men who were killed were left upon the ground and not suffered to be interred.²⁴

Based upon the misinformation in this Express, the Prophet made a tragic miscalculation which Robinson recorded thus:

...under these considerations quite a number of us volunteered to go to the assistance of our brethren in that place accordingly some 15 or 20 men started from this place armed and equipt for our defense the brethreren [sic] from all parts of the County, followed after and continued to come and join us, and before we arrived at Col. Wights we had quite a large company Prest. Smith and Rigdon and H. Smith, all the first presidency, General Higbee Gen. Avarad myself and may others tedious to mention at this time or in this record were in the company, it was put upon me to take the commanding consequence of my holding the office of Colonel, whose duty it is to command one regiment, we marched without much intermission until we reached Col. Wights, however some of our small parties were attacked, I think on twice in going over, but, no serious injury done, we reached Col. Wights that same evening.²⁵

Here again, we see the names and ranks of the Danite leadership, to wit: "General Higbee Gen. Avarad myself [George W. Robinson] and many others too tedious to mention at this time or in this record." It is impossible that these men were operating under any other commission than Danite authority in this action. They held no commissions in the Missouri Militia.²⁶ And they were, more importantly, operating in the physical presence of the First Presidency, and, as seems quite likely, under their command.

This same evidence in the Scriptorium Book confirms Peck told the truth about the removal of Jared Carter from the office of Captain General. Since Carter was in command at the 4th of July Parade according to the Elders' Journal, but had

²⁴ "Scriptory Book," August 7, 1838. Michael Marquardt transcription, see p. 16.

²⁵ "Scriptory Book," August 7, 1838. See also Michael Marquardt transcription under date.

²⁶ The only men whom we have record of having held militia commissions during this period were (in Caldwell County) Lyman Wight and George M. Hinkle, both Colonels and Major Jefferson Hunt. So reference to these Generals obviously must be to Danite ranks since there is no record of any Mormon ever holding a higher rank than Colonel. See Leland H. Gentry, "A History of the Latter-day Saints in Northern Missouri: 1836-1839," 1966. See also Elders' Journal 1, 4 (August 1838), p. 69 for both Maj. Hunt and Col. Hinkle. See also Letter of George M. Hinkle to W.W. Phelps, August 1844, as reprinted in Pearl Wilcox, *The Latter Day Saints on the Missouri Frontier* (Independence, MO: 1972), pp. 346-349. See also Letter of Orange Lysander Wight, Bunkerville, Nevada, May 4, 1903 to Joseph I. Earl, p. 2 of photocopy or page 4 of typescript in Special Collections, Brigham Young University. Incidentally, what Wight claims that his father called out the militia to quell the Election Day Riot is undoubtedly erroneous.

been replaced by Elias Higbee by August 7 and 8 according to the “Scriptory Book,” we assume that Carter was replaced shortly after July 4, in the “fore part” of the month, precisely as Peck had placed it. Thus, it could well be that the “Sermon” that Carter complained to Joseph Smith regarding was actually Rigdon’s 4th of July speech.

But Joseph’s History of the Church, which borrowed from the “Scriptory Book” its account of this day, deleted all mention of the Danite leadership altogether.²⁷ Why the scribes of History of the Church, years later, dropped the ranks of Danite Generals Higbee and Avard (as well as George W. Robinson’s rank of Colonel) is no great mystery. What is a mystery, however, is the way we continue to insist that this obviously incorrect explanation is what actually transpired. For the “Scriptory Book” has demonstrated the truth of the matter: the Visit to Adam Black was a Danite operation under the control of the First Presidency.

Nor is the “Scriptory Book” the only extant witness to the role of the Danite leadership in the affairs following the Election Day Riot. William Swartzell, for a time, a Danite resident of Adam-ondi-Ahman bore eloquent testimony to the involvement of the Danites during the visit to Justice Black in these words:

This day an express arrived from Gallatin, in Daviess county, that the Missourian had raised a mob against the brethren, and killed two of them, and would not permit them to be buried. There was a great fight on the election ground in Gallatin. Trouble was began in real earnest — for stabbing with knives, throwing of stones, clubs, staves, &c., is the order of the day in every direction. Brother Butler knocked down and laid open, in a frightful manner, the skulls of several citizens, with a bludgeon. As soon as this news was known, and express was immediately sent to Far West, and 180 armed men arrived in Adam-on-Diammon, for the purpose of resisting an attack that was hourly expected.²⁸

The scene the next morning in Adam-ondi-Ahman was also described by Swartzell in some detail:

8th. The morning has come, and no mobs yet. About six o’clock in the morning every man appeared under arms. We all marched out upon the Prairie, where we formed a hollow square — the horsemen on one side, and the foot soldiers on the other, (the officers occupying the centre of the square). Brothers Smith, Rigdon, Cahoon, Eberly, White, Lot, and many other officers were all in uniform.²⁹

Once again, the evidence suggests that the First Presidency were in command. The Danite leadership again can be seen, although Higbee, perhaps unknown to Swartzell, was not listed. But Lot was undoubtedly Cornelius P.

²⁷ *History of the Church* 3: 56-58.

²⁸ Swartzell, August 7, 1838, pp. 28-29.

²⁹ Swartzell, August 8, 1838, p. 29.

Lott, Danite Major General and the man that Swartzell called “Eberly” was none other than Sampson Avard, since elsewhere, Swartzell referred to Eberly as “our Brigadier General” and he also had a tendency to confuse and misspell names.³⁰ In further support of this assumption, Swartzell stated that Eberly threatened Adam Black precisely in the fashion Avard elsewhere is alleged to have done.³¹ This further supports the idea that Avard was Brigadier General and not Major General as some accounts have it.

Since the Armies of Israel were as yet uncreated, the blame for the disastrous events of August 7-8, 1838, must be laid directly at the feet of those who were in command, the First Presidency and, under them, the Danite Generals.

Conclusion

To what extent, then, can Reed Peck’s list of Danite leadership be historically supported? Is there sound evidence in support of his version? There is indeed, in the account of the events of August 6-8 in the “Scriptory Book,” Swartzell and other sources, as well as in the description of the events of July 4, 1838, in the Elders’ Journal, as printed in the August, 1838 issue from Far West, Missouri. And, since the Danite Constitution, mentioned in Avard’s trial testimony, correctly gave the rank of Captain General as the highest ranking officer in the band, we have to regard its contents more seriously than in the past. Sampson Avard still must be highly regarded as one of the founding members of the Danite band and, as one of its highest ranking officers, a Brigadier General, if not the Major General.

In view of all this, the traditional view which began with Joseph Smith’s December 16, 1838, letter can no longer be maintained. Avard simply cannot be made a scapegoat for everything that happened. And the First Presidency, in the light of new evidence, must be viewed as taking a much more active role in the direction of the Danites than any of us would have believed heretofore. In at least two cases, they appear to have been publicly associated with, and, in one case commanding them.

Statements such as those in Joseph’s published History, which state or imply that Avard formed “a secret combination” of his own make, must, in the light of the evidence, be taken as historically inaccurate. The facts were

³⁰ Swartzell, August 8, 1838, pp. 29-30. Swartzell is clearly a good witness to whether or not Avard was Major General or, as he put it, Brigadier General. For more on Swartzell’s propensity for confusing and misspelling names see John E. Thompson, “Spring Hill and Adam-onid-Ahman: A Reconsideration of the Date of Doctrine and Covenants 116,” *Restoration* 3, 4 (October 1984): 1: 5-8; and John E. Thompson, “A Chronology of Danite Meetings in Adam-onid-Ahman Missouri: July to September 1838,” *Restoration* 4, 1 (January 1985): 11-15. Here, of course, “Eberly” should be “Avard” and “Lot” “Lott.”

³¹ Compare Swartzell, p. 30 with Affidavit of Joseph Smith reprinted in *History of the Church* 3: 70-72. See also the Affidavit prepared by Justice Adam Black reprinted in *History of the Church* 3: 64-65. Note that Adam Black states that Cornelius P. Lott was there also.

otherwise. The Danite order “of the apostate Avard, which died almost before it existed” can by no means be written off and forgotten nearly as easily as the Prophet wished. For Sampson Avard, while undeniably an important Danite officer, was still only third in the order of the Danite leadership of an organization of which he was not sole founder. Nor was the Danite band run totally outside the awareness or direction of the First Presidency as we have seen. Joseph Smith’s comments are erroneous and deliberately misleading, the attempts of a consummate ecclesiastical leader to save face by anointing a scapegoat. But serious history they are not.

The leadership of the Danite Band was Jared Carter, Captain General (removed from office after July 4 but before August 6), followed by Judge Elias Higbee afterwards; Cornelius P. Lott of Adam-ondi-Ahman, Major General; Sampson Avard, Brigadier General; and George W. Robinson, Colonel. In consultation with the First Presidency of the Church, these four men initiated the policies of the Danites and placed them in action. Beneath them were a number of other officers: among them Philo Dibble, Lieutenant Colonel; Seymour Brunson, Major; and Reed Peck, Adjutant. This list of the Danite Leadership thus makes a cautious beginning toward identifying the members of the Danite band as well as a fresh understanding of the nature of its order and function.