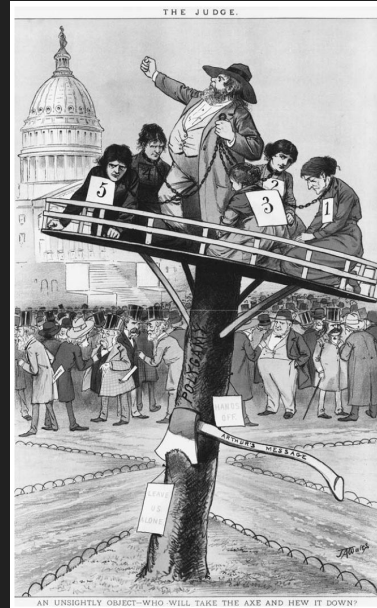


The Polygamy Question

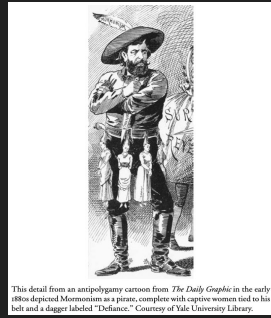
Izabella Shealy

Politically speaking, the practice of polygamy was deleterious to the goals of the Mormons, and nearly led to an existential threat to the Mormon community in the West. So then why did the Mormons announce the practice publicly?

Two factors - **physical distance**, and **the precedent of states' rights** in the United States were strong indications that the practice of polygamy would not be challenged. First, the physical experience of the Mormon pioneers, of leaving the United States and venturing into territory that was then Mexico, and for the first time living without threat of persecution cannot be underestimated. The liberty from the political center that this space lent was not just psychological, when Buchanan sent troops to the Rocky Mountain West, the space and the physical protection of the mountain range did protect the Mormons from bodily harm and federal intervention in their lives. Secondly, when the Mormon church formally acknowledged the practice of slavery, they had two hundred and thirty three years of the practice of American slavery, and thus respect for and observance of (colonies and then) states' rights as precedent.



Polygamy challenged ideas about gender, race, family, and societal structures in a 19th century America where the ground was rapidly shifting under the feet of its inhabitants. Within this context, it is critical that we understand 19th century America as a deeply diverse place, where many communities had a great deal of anxiety about the continuation of their ways of life. Between African Americans, Native Americans, immigrant groups from different countries and cultures, and a panoply of distinct religious groups sprouting up from the Second Great Awakening at the start of the century, 19th century America was rich with racial tension. This racial context is embedded in the story of polygamy, and at many points, racial dynamics crop up (between white people in the states and white Mormons) in unexpected ways.



This detail from an anti-polygamy cartoon from *The Daily Graphic* in the early 1850s depicts a Mormon as a pirate, complete with a pirate's coat and a dagger labeled "Defiance." Courtesy of Yale University Library.