Prologue

The rumor rolled through the town of St. Joseph, Missouri, like floodwaters, reaching the reporter’s ears around ten o’clock on the morning of April 3, 1882. He grabbed his notebook and ran onto the street, which was already saturated with the news, the sidewalks alive with disbeliefing chatter. Within a few minutes, he joined a river of people flowing uphill to the story’s source: a modest house on the corner of Thirteenth and Lafayette Streets, “a frame building, a story and a half high,” he wrote, “in a little grove of fruit trees.” He pushed his way through the crowd of gawkers and moved inside.1

He stepped straight into a strange and dreamlike scene: a little girl—a mere toddler—and a seven-year-old boy, standing silent and afraid in the kitchen; their slender, trembling mother, at once hateful, angry, and grieving, words tumbling out of her mouth in a blend of pleas and screams; and teeming strangers, reporters and onlookers, who crowded into her home. Next to the door in the front room was the center of this vortex: a man, “lying upon the floor cold in death,” the reporter wrote, “blood oozing from his wounds.”

The walls, the babble of words, the murmuring of the crowd suddenly stopped as two young men appeared. They stepped past the body, approached a town marshal who stood close by, and offered to surrender. They had killed this man, one of them declared, and now they expected their reward. The lawman looked at them in astonishment. “My God,” he said, “do you mean to tell us that this is Jesse James?”

“Yes,” the pair replied in unison.

“Those who were standing near,” the reporter wrote, “drew in their breaths in silence at the thought of being so near Jesse James, even if he was dead.”
Zion
1842-1860

Walk about Zion, and go round about her; tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces, that ye may tell it to the generation following.

—Psalm 48:12-13
CHAPTER ONE

The Preacher

In the blind man's memory, the river ran west. It was in the spring of 1846 when young Francis Parkman had first looked on the Missouri, and he had seen clearly that its wide and sluggish waters flowed east to the Mississippi. But when he closed his faltering eyes in a clinic on Staten Island in 1847 and began to dictate the story of his adventure of the previous year, he had already begun to think like the great historian he would soon become. As he scanned in his mind the lines of passengers and clots of wagons and piles of goods crowding the St. Louis levee, as he recalled the sound of steamboat paddles slapping and churning against the Missouri's current, he could see the life of the nation pulsing westward up the river like blood cells pouring through an artery. In the most important sense, the river ran west.  

Parkman did not record how he arrived in St. Louis from his home in Boston, but he undoubtedly spent most of his trip on the water. It was virtually his only choice. Most roads amounted to little more than muddy ravines—in Missouri, it was said that roads were worn, not made—and the first, pioneering railways had yet to cover much territory. So, whenever possible, Americans set out in schooners and square-rigged ships, paddle-wheeled steamboats, or mule-drawn canal barges. He might have taken a ship to New Orleans, then a riverboat north; or he could have sailed up the Hudson, been towed down the Erie Canal, then shipped through the Great Lakes before crossing to descend the Mississippi, or taking another canal to reach the mighty Ohio.  

North and south, east and west, these flowing highways met at the metropolis of St. Louis. One of Parkman's contemporaries, a farm woman named Elizabeth Carter, wrote that merchants swarmed in and out of the place "like bees." The water off the city's tightly packed levee presented a