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Mormon Passage of George D. Watt

Ronald G. Watt

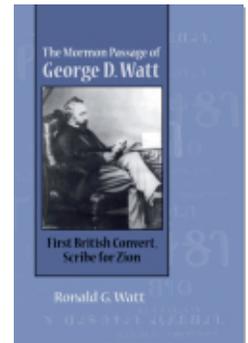
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DESERET ALPHABET

As all organized things, from a grain of sand to a world, is composed of a congregation of isolated atoms, so language is composed of an assemblage of simple, pure sounds. It has therefore occurred to me, very forcibly, that an alphabet should contain just as many letters as there are simple-pure atoms of sound.

George D. Watt to Brigham Young, August 21, 1854

It seems peculiar that Brigham Young and the Mormons, people involved in building a religious community in the American West, would create an orthographic reform movement to change the alphabet and the form of the written word. This initiative captivated George D. Watt for fifteen years. He was its instructor and phonetic expert. His skill and training were vital and needed.

Alphabetical reformers existed before and after Brigham Young. Benjamin Franklin, while serving as a diplomat in London, designed a new alphabet in 1768. He interested his friend Noah Webster, compiler of the dictionary, in orthographic reform. The greatest reformer of the nineteenth century was Sir Isaac Pitman, who published his findings in 1837. He devised a shorthand called phonography and a longhand cursive alphabet called phonotype. The world accepted his shorthand but not the longhand alphabet. In 1887 Dr. Ludwig L. Zamenhof, a Polish physician, published Esperanto, based on twenty-eight letters and sixteen grammar rules, with no exceptions.¹ Sometime after the formation of the Deseret Alphabet,

1. See “Esperanto, The International Language that Works!” available online at <http://>

Melville Dewey, the inventor of the Dewey Decimal System, favored a form of simplified spelling that he published early in the twentieth century.²

Young's quest to reform the English alphabet sprang from his desire to convert the entire world to a new gospel. Essentially he believed the Mormon people would be the catalyst to reform all aspects of life. Altering the means of communication could, as few other practical elements, effect a transformation in society. Watt became involved because of his knowledge of Pitman shorthand. Now for the first time, he had to expand his mind and become more fluid in thinking about letters and sounds. Also he learned how to work with a group interested in educating the youth of the territory: the Board of Regents of the University of Deseret.

George D. Watt spent more time with the Board of Regents than any other group during his life in Utah. He began this relationship in 1852 shortly after his return to Utah and then became the secretary for the board the following year. The legislature for the provisional State of Deseret passed an ordinance on February 28, 1850, that provided for a chancellor and twelve regents. The primary purpose of the board was to create a university. The University of Nauvoo was the model for the new one. Orson Spencer, who had been the chancellor of the University of Nauvoo, became the first chancellor of the University of Deseret. The university first started in a private house on November 11, 1850, and later moved to the Thirteenth Ward schoolhouse. The Board of Regents employed Dr. Cyrus Collins to prepare teachers in the elementary or common schools. Later, the board hired Orson Pratt to teach astronomy and math. By the second term, it had become coeducational and had forty students altogether. In March 1852, the legislature for what was now Utah Territory withdrew funding for the university, and it closed its doors.³ It did not revive as a school for students until 1867.

The board continued functioning, supervising education throughout Utah.⁴ It appointed a superintendent of common schools, Elias Smith, and a librarian, William Staines.⁵ An education system of sorts sprang up throughout Utah almost spontaneously. Shortly after the first wagon trains arrived, teachers began advertising for students, and classes were started for youth.

www.esperanto-usa.org/about_co.html, ELNA Home Page.

2. "Benjamin Franklin," available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Franklin; "Melville Louis Kossuth Dewey," available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melvil_Dewey.
3. Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2002), chap. 8; "The Parent School," *Deseret News*, February 8, 1851, 7: 223; also see John Clifton Moffitt, *The History of Public Education in Utah* (n.p., 1946), chap. 5.
4. See Sharon G. Pugsley, "The Board of Regents of the University of Utah, 1850-1920: Historical Development and Prosopography" (master's thesis, University of Utah, 1984).
5. Moffitt, *The History of Public Education in Utah*, 82, 375. The new territorial legislature legalized the acts of the provisional State of Deseret legislature on October 4, 1851.

Within a short time, many of the Mormon wards had also established schools. The Board of Regents felt that these schools should have some type of supervision, so the chancellor instructed the regents to visit them. George A. Smith, one of the regents, visited the Provo schools in December of that year.⁶

The board also guided the creation of the new alphabet. Watt had worked with a type of phonetic orthography since approximately 1840, when he had learned Pitman's phonographic shorthand with its forty different letters. He had taught shorthand and Pitman's longhand phonetic alphabet—phonotype—to Brigham Young and others in Nauvoo.

After the Mormons arrived in Great Salt Lake Valley, Young, leading a now-isolated and largely independent community, again became interested in revising the alphabet and assigned that task to the Board of Regents of the University of Deseret. Young, with his limited education, considered that English orthography was difficult and needed change.⁷ On March 20, 1850, W. W. Phelps, who was assigned to present an alphabet to the regents, explained his method of simplifying the language. His alphabetical symbols did not look like the Latin ones, and they were not related to Pitman shorthand. Phelps's alphabet pleased Young. However, because he had learned about Pitman's longhand alphabet—phonotype—years before from Watt, Young questioned why the Latin alphabet would not be acceptable if some letters that were not sounded were omitted. He also raised the question of using phonography. At its next meeting, the board agreed to study the problem more carefully before taking further action.⁸

Young released Watt from his mission early in 1851 so he could help with this needed reform. In November some board members spoke of errors in the present alphabet and desired a change so pupils might understand the system more rapidly. Near the end of December, Young and Watt discussed very briefly the Mormon leader's views on English orthography. Watt penned a one-page answer about the sounds of *C*, *S*, and *K*. He used several examples of words such as *sent* and *cent*, and *site*, *cite*, and *sight* to show similarities and differences. He felt that the letter *C* should be excluded from the alphabet. At the end of the letter, he wrote, "The experience and practice of many years, by thousands who write Phonography and read phonotypy, has not made them sensible of any inconsistency through this use

6. Ibid., 66, 118.

7. See Brigham Young, Journals, holographs, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives). Especially look at the first three journals before he arrived in Nauvoo, which are in his handwriting. The Nauvoo one was written by a clerk.

8. University of Deseret Board of Regents, meeting minutes, March–April 1850, holograph, LDS Church Archives. The board said that it wanted a simple and plain language and admired the beauty of Indian speech, which seemed that way to them. The discussion for the Deseret Alphabet centered on a written language, whereas the discussion about Indian languages focused on a spoken one. At times, though, Brigham Young intermixed written with spoken.

of those letters.” So resumed Watt’s process of teaching Young about the English language.⁹

During the April General Conference in 1852, Young spoke about education, focusing a portion of his sermon on reform of the English language. Using a typical Pitman argument, he stated that one letter should not have several pronunciations: “If there were one set of words to convey one set of ideas,” he stated, “it would put an end to the ambiguity which often mystifies the ideas given in the languages now spoken. Then when a great man delivered a lecture upon any subject, we could understand his words.”¹⁰

The revision process was slow. Little was done for months at a time because of the priorities of the agrarian society. The regents met a year later on April 12, 1853. Present were Brigham Young, Willard Richards, Jedediah M. Grant, chancellor-elect Orson Hyde, Albert Carrington, W. W. Phelps, John Taylor, George A. Smith, Ezra T. Benson, Wilford Woodruff, Franklin D. Richards, Lorenzo Snow, Erastus Snow, John Vance, who would be a regent in 1854, and George D. Watt. Not a member of the board, Watt was there because of the topic under discussion.¹¹ Brigham Young and Willard Richards, who also were not regents, had major roles in this reform. Watt now became associated with some of the most important and brightest people in Utah. He began an intellectual process that benefited him the rest of his life.

At the meeting on April 12, “Brother John Vance presented a new type of system of writing the consonants and vowels of his own discovery of the characters to those sounds commonly used in phonography.”¹² The following year, in a letter to Brigham Young, Watt discussed Vance’s “amalgamation principle,” which brought two sounds of some letters under one symbol.¹³ The board concluded that Vance’s system took half the amount of writing as contemporary English and double the amount of space as phonography. Because of the diversity of the board, the debate centered on either reducing the number of characters or having one letter for each sound. Those who wanted fewer characters sided with Vance. Because of his Pitman training, Watt could not endorse Vance’s new alphabet because it opposed all the

9. George D. Watt to Brigham Young, December 23, 1851, holograph, incoming correspondence, Young Papers.

10. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1854–86), 1:71.

11. Vance remains a mystery figure in the introduction of orthographic reform to Utah. He was very prominent in the beginning of the alphabet reform, but little is known about him. Born November 8, 1794, in Tennessee, he spent some of his early life in Illinois, where he was introduced to the Mormon Church, and he arrived in Utah with the Jedediah M. Grant company on October 2, 1847. He served as a bishop at Winter Quarters, a counselor to Bishop William G. Perkins of the Seventh Ward, a member of the high council, a school commissioner, and a justice of the peace.

12. University of Deseret Board of Regents, meeting minutes, April 12, 1853, holograph.

13. George D. Watt to Brigham Young, August 21, 1854, holograph, incoming correspondence, Young Papers.

rules of Pitman shorthand that stressed one sound for one letter, although he could listen to what Vance had to say and understand it. In his August 1854 letter to Young, Watt commented that Vance's alphabetic thinking was so prevalent among the board members that he had not had enough freedom to work on the alphabet. "I candidly confess that I never did like the present construction of the alphabet. I was not left as free as I could have wished to be in the construction of it: for you remember that Bro. Vanses amalgamation principle captivated the whole board, including myself."¹⁴

Young, however, was not convinced Pitman's phonotype was the answer. At the next board meeting on September 20, 1853, he said that phonography and a system of hieroglyphics would provide a good method of instruction for children. A month later, on October 27, the board, on a motion from Daniel H. Wells, appointed Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, and George D. Watt as a committee to present a new alphabet to the board. The committee worked diligently, and Watt dominated the discussions because of his phonetic training. Ten days later, Pratt, speaking for the group, presented an alphabet to the board, calling it "Pitman's phonographic alphabet in small letters." The new alphabet of forty characters, each with a distinct sound, was actually Pitman's phonotype.¹⁵

A few days later, the board elected Watt as the secretary and approved the Pitman forty-character phonotype alphabet. The members of the board began pronouncing each letter and practicing it on the blackboard. Watt was now fascinated by this new alphabet and diligently practiced it. He was sure that Pitman's phonotype would be selected for the orthographic reform.¹⁶ Then the board only accepted thirty-eight characters. The two letters left out were the ones for the *u* diphthong in *mule*, and the *oi* diphthong in *oil*. They also changed a number of characters or glyphs, but the alphabet was still Latin based and fairly easy to read.¹⁷

On November 24, 1853, an unknown author in the *Deseret News* editorialized that the debate on the new alphabet among the Board of Regents centered on whether to retain the old Latin alphabet and add a few characters for other sounds or to design a new set of alphabetical symbols. This article also indicated that the eventual reform would enable the apostles in Salt Lake City to speak so that every "nation and language will forthwith understand them," meaning perhaps that one written language ostensibly representing

14. Ibid.

15. Phonotype was written without capital letters, although it did have similar punctuation as the Latin alphabet. It also had all the sounds of Pitman shorthand and looked similar to the regular Latin alphabet. Since it was phonetic, it only included the letters that sounded and did not have double letters such as the *R* in *carried*.

16. George D. Watt, shorthand notes, holograph, George D. Watt Papers, LDS Church Archives. Pitman had devised this alphabet in 1837 and had even printed a Bible in it.

17. Kenneth R. Beesley, "The Deseret Alphabet in Unicode," photocopy in author's possession.

universal sounds would enable everyone to understand the published word.¹⁸

After reading this article, Willard Richards, who had only attended a few meetings because of illness, went to the meeting five days later. He was obviously disappointed with the committee's work. He complimented them on their attempt to establish a phonetic alphabet, but he emphasized that they should create all new letters, stating that the old characters jumbled with the new ones—Pitman's phonotype—would only confuse the learner. He was in favor of one letter for one sound. Orson Spencer, W. W. Phelps, and Jedediah Grant agreed. Watt, who had faced the overpowering Richards before, mentioned that the committee had been instructed to retain as many of the old alphabet letters as possible. Woodruff told the board that if it found fault with the committee's alphabet, it should present a better one. Near the end of the meeting, Young walked in and quickly grasped the importance of the discussion. He said that he did not see any difficulty in creating a new alphabet, thereby agreeing with Richards's suggestion. The inscription on the reverse side of the display sheet made by the alphabet-formulating committee reads, in Watt's handwriting and phonotype, "rejectad"—rejected.¹⁹

Young wanted to get more information from Richards, so he asked him what he felt about the new alphabet. Early in December Richards wrote back to him: "My answer is I like it well, because I believe the committee and Regency have done the best they could to the present time, and I think they have done much to promote a unity of sounds, whereby we can communicate our ideas without so much writing and printing as hitherto; and I feel that much credit is due to Bros. Vance and Watt, for their labors, and the blessings of heaven which have rested on them." Richards summarized, "Pitman has done much to help our reporters, and credit to whom credit is due, but he has not perfected an English or any other alphabet." He suggested that they use straight lines and circles in a variety of ways to devise a new alphabet. "Now Beloved Prest. excuse me for my plainness. If I have spoken amiss pardon me, for you know when I speak, I speak what God or the Devil gives me, there is no half heart about this boy, never was, and God grant there never may be."²⁰

The detailed Board of Regent's minutes end with the November 29 meeting. However, a short summary of later minutes provides some insight into what happened thereafter. Between November 22 and the end of December, the committee devised an alphabet completely different from the English one. Because of his knowledge of Pitman shorthand and the English alphabet, Watt became the major figure in revising the orthography,

18. "The Board of Regency," *Deseret News*, November 24, 1853, 87.

19. University of Deseret Board of Regents, meeting minutes, November 29, 1853. These minutes are written in phonotype.

20. Willard Richards to Brigham Young, December 8, 1853, holograph, incoming correspondence, Young Papers. Underlining is in original.

and he and probably Pratt worked that entire month on the alphabet. The summary minutes simply state, "From November 18 to December 22, the board labored and investigated the matter of a new alphabet diligently, then they adopted unanimously the alphabet presented by their committee. The same is now denominated the Deseret Alphabet."²¹ The symbols came from Watt's imagination, his knowledge of Pitman's phonography and phonotype, and perhaps some help from an ancient alphabet as shown in *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*.²²

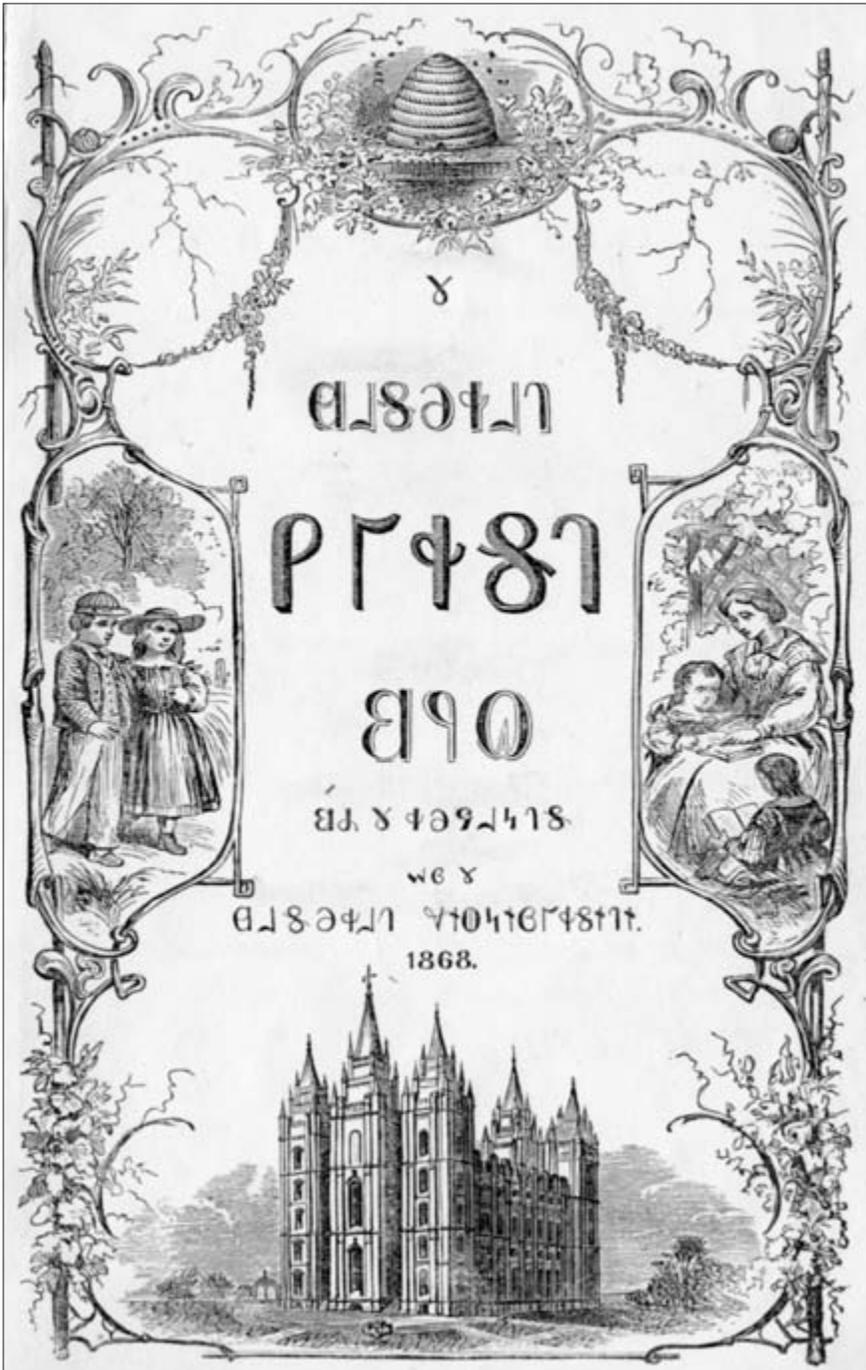
Many of the letters appear to be Latin with a different twist. The *O*, *W*, *S*, and *C* are definitely Latin, although the *C* is pronounced *che*, and the *S* has a *zhe* sound. The *E* is an upside-down, lowercase *E*. The symbol representing *OO* is an *O* with a line through it, which is also a phonotype letter. The *Y* appears to have an extra loop in it. The *B* is simply a backwards uppercase *B*. The *T* is a lowercase, upside down, and has no cross through it. The *D* is uppercase, backwards, and has an extra loop. The *G* or *J* is lowercase, the loop does not come together on the top, and the bottom of the letter has a straight line instead of a curve. With the *F*, Watt simply made a loop connecting the top quarter circle with the line and not extending it. The *S* is a fancy letter that connects the bottom to the top with a line. The *L* is lowercase with a half loop on the bottom. The *N* is stylized, and the *eng* sound is a backward *N*. The *P* is an *L* turned upside down and backward, and the *eth* sound is a capital *L*. The *H* looks like a 6 or a capital *G* with no extension on the line in the middle. The letter for *M* is a backward *C*.

Watt borrowed the *a*, *ah*, *aw*, *oo*, *ow*, *i*, *k*, *g*, *v*, uppercase *I*, and *the* symbols from Pitman's phonotype, although at times he turned them on their sides or put the loops in other places; sometimes different sounds were applied to some of the letters in the Deseret Alphabet. The short sounds of *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, *u*, and *oo* appear to be Pitman shorthand symbols. The resemblance is very strong because of the straight lines and the half curves that are prevalent in phonography. Watt used symbols that were different but still within his realm of experience to devise the alphabet. Thus, the alphabet Watt created was also what Richards wanted: an entirely new alphabet, one that did not resemble the old Latin alphabet in any way.²³ Also the new Deseret Alphabet only had printed letters, not cursive ones.

21. "Summary of Board of Regents Minutes," November 18–December 22, 1853, typescript, LDS Church Archives.

22. *Ibid.*

23. The difference between the Deseret alphabet and the Latin one brought about its death. The Saints could not recognize what the symbols meant, whereas phonotype was similar enough to the Latin alphabet to be recognizable. George D. Watt in a letter to Ben Pitman in 1864 said that "it was however discovered that it involved too great an expenditure of time and mental exertion to memorize the letters and unlearn that alphabet and its orthography"; Watt to Ben Pitman, March 21, 1864, shorthand, holograph, Watt Papers (transcribed by LaJean Carruth, 2005).



Title page of Deseret Alphabet first primer

Deseret Alphabet

<i>Long Sounds.</i>			Letter.	Name.	Sound.
			ᐁ	p	
ᐃ	e...as in	eat.	ᐃ	b	
ᐄ	a	ate.	ᐄ	t	
ᐅ	ah	art.	ᐅ	d	
ᐆ	aw	aught.	ᐆ	che as in	cheese.
ᐇ	o	oat.	ᐇ	g	
ᐈ	oo	ooze.	ᐈ	k	
<i>Short Sounds of the above.</i>			ᐉ	ga...as in	gate.
ᐊ	as in	it.	ᐊ	f	
ᐋ	"	et.	ᐋ	v	
ᐌ	"	at.	ᐌ	eth..as in	thigh.
ᐍ	"	ot.	ᐍ	the	thy
ᐎ	"	ut.	ᐎ	s	
ᐏ	"	book.	ᐏ	z	
<i>Double Sounds.</i>			ᐐ	esh..as in	flesh.
ᐑ	i...as in	ice.	ᐑ	zhe	vision.
ᐒ	ow	owl.	ᐒ	ur	burn.
ᐓ	ye		ᐓ	l	
ᐔ	woo		ᐔ	m	
ᐕ	h		ᐕ	n	
			ᐖ	eng.as in	length.

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On January 30, 1854, Parley P. Pratt, who had been on the committee with Watt, wrote to Orson Pratt, telling him, "We have invented a new alfabet for the English language." He then showed Orson examples of the letters, even some cursive ones. He excitedly stated, "This alfabet will write Spanish, Hebrew, Greek, and with the addition of a few more letters, all the languages of the earth. We shall put it out as a standard as soon as we get the type."²⁴ The *Deseret News* announced the new alphabet on January 19, 1854.²⁵ Willard Richards's poor health prevented him from attending another board meeting. His death in March 1854 finalized the formulation of the alphabet. Young, who greatly admired the fiery and tireless Richards, probably considered the alphabet to be his greatest monument.

The Board of Regents met periodically until the spring of 1854, when President Young ordered type to be made for the new characters for publishing; then the new type was exhibited to the board on a chart. The letters were probably made from wooden type.²⁶ For a while in 1854 and 1855, the board tried a forty-letter alphabet that appeared in W. W. Phelps's *Deseret Almanac*.²⁷ In April the board appointed John Taylor and Watt to act as a committee on pronunciation in preparation for the first reader. On June 6, 1854, Watt recorded the minutes of a valleywide bishops' meeting in cursive Deseret Alphabet.²⁸

After several months, Watt suggested to Brigham Young in August ways to improve the alphabet because "it is not the most expeditious method of writing and printing, but on the conterary it retards the hand in its onward course." Using a scientific argument, he continued, "As all organized things, from a grain of sand to a world, is composed of a congregation of isolated atoms, so language is composed of an assemblage of simple, pure sounds." He observed then that "an alphabet should contain just as many letters as there are simple-pure atoms of sound. . . . In my investigations I have tried to rid myself of all prepossessed opinions, and have arrayed my former views before the tribunal of an unbiased mind, seeking diligently for unaloyed truth."²⁹ He then proposed a new alphabet of thirty-three letters, showing examples written in cursive to Brigham Young. Using the first psalm as an example, he laid out the forty-letter 1854 Deseret Alphabet side by side with his proposed thirty-three-letter

24. Parley P. Pratt to Orson Pratt, January 30, 1854, holograph, Orson Pratt Correspondence, LDS Church Archives.

25. "Regents," *Deseret News*, January 19, 1854, 10.

26. Beesley, "The Deseret Alphabet in Unicode," 16–17.

27. See William W. Phelps, *Deseret Almanac for the Year 1855* (Salt Lake City: Arience Brewer, printer, 1855), 26.

28. "Bishops Meeting," June 6, 1854, holograph, Young Papers; George D. Watt to Brigham Young, June 6, 1854, holograph, incoming correspondence, Young Papers.

29. Watt to Brigham Young, August 21, 1854.

modification. He also added a sample of Pitman's phonotype.³⁰ Young did not approve the changes.

After the harvest, the Board of Regents convened again. In the November 29 meeting, there was a discussion of the alphabet. Young felt it should be taught to the youth. As to the Latin or English system of the alphabet, he said, "It is the old thing over and over, and it belongs to that class of beings spoken of that are always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." Jedediah Grant and Orson Hyde proposed that the teachers should learn it.³¹ Following up on that suggestion, the board held a meeting with some teachers in December. Watt discussed that in the present English orthography, one alphabetical symbol sometimes represented several sounds. He used many examples, but the lecture apparently bored most of the teachers.³² They were more interested in discussing English than in learning his alphabet. "The Board and the teachers," Watt said, "met according to appointment, but the mystic beauties of the English Grammar, and the higher branches of English literature that carry us aloft among the planets and fixed stars to wonder in sublime ignorance occupied the evening and the Deseret Alphabet was left like a distant sun to twinkle in the August shadows that were cast over it."³³

When the Board of Regents meetings recommenced a few months later, Young had decided that the alphabet needed to have public exposure. In a series of educational meetings of different societies, Young chose Watt to promote the Deseret Alphabet. First, he selected the Deseret Theological Institute, which convened on June 6, 1855, where Watt gave his lecture. He gave illustrations of the alphabet, showing its benefits, and told the attendees that "all great men who contemplated atoms, suns, moon began their education by studying the simple letters of an alphabet." He then demonstrated the way that the Deseret Alphabet simplified the language.³⁴

Depending on what was needed for these various groups, Watt could give one of two lectures. In the first, he discussed the principle of language and that some letters had more than one sound. To him words were vehicles "of ideas between man and man when they are within hearing of each other." He compared these elementary sounds: "as wind from the bellows is essential to the music of the organ, so language acts upon the throat in making the sounds of the human voice." He thought that each element of sound "should never have but one meaning or name and that name should be the vocal sound itself." To him the letters of "the Deseret Alphabet are all vowels, Why? because they are sounds which can be heard, and can be made

30. Ibid.

31. University of Deseret Board of Regents, meeting minutes, November 29, 1854, typescript.

32. George D. Watt, essay no. 1 on the Deseret Alphabet, holograph, Watt Papers.

33. University of Deseret Board of Regents, meeting minutes, December 16, 1854.

34. Watt, Essay no. 1 on the Deseret Alphabet.

without the will of another sound." He finished the lecture with the observation, "Hoping that I have made my ideas sufficiently clear to your understandings and with thanks for your kind attention I will take my seat."³⁵

In his second lecture, he showed the difference between the alphabetical sounds of the English alphabet and the Deseret Alphabet, where each sound represented a single letter. He quoted from Alexander John Ellis and Lindley Murray supporting his thesis. Ellis, an English philologist and music theorist, had done extensive work in the science of sound. Murray, born in Pennsylvania and a lawyer, was a grammarian. Watt probably had his book entitled the *English Reader*. This lecture was more complicated and needed greater explanation.³⁶

Continuing to promote the new alphabet in July, Watt introduced the subject at a meeting of the Deseret Typographical Association. The members discussed the topic and appointed Watt, W.W. Phelps, and James McKnight, one of the members of the association, to draft a resolution to present to the association. The next month Watt presented their resolution supporting the Deseret Alphabet and asking him to teach the association members. The resolution passed unanimously, and Watt announced he would begin his instructions on the following Thursday.³⁷

Presumably he returned the following Thursday to begin his class, although the newspaper did not mention it. He returned also in October 1854 to a meeting where Robert L. Campbell, who later became the territorial superintendent, read a lecture on the Deseret Alphabet. Between July and December 1854, Watt must have been busy teaching others, especially elementary teachers. On February 5, 1855, Barnum B. Messenger, who had been on the high council in Iowa, began to teach the clerks in the historian's office the new alphabet.³⁸ John B. Milner from Provo also taught it.³⁹

Sometime during the 1850s, Gustave Louis Edward Henriod, a young man who had been converted in France in 1851, helped Watt. He mentioned that most of the British converts were mechanics and laborers and not qualified teachers. However, he felt that Watt was one of those people who could teach. He wrote that Watt was one of the originators of the alphabet. "Bold, intelligent, untiring and persevering, he was well qualified to lead and teach the system," he concluded.⁴⁰

35. Ibid.

36. George D. Watt, essay no. 2 on the Deseret Alphabet, holograph, Watt Papers. The first page and the last page of this lecture are missing.

37. "Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," August 2, 1855, LDS Church Archives.

38. Historian's Office, Journal, February 5, 1855, Historian's Office records, LDS Church Archives.

39. "Journal History," March 11, 1855. See also Moffitt, *The History of Public Education in Utah*, 52-63.

40. "Biography of Gustave Louis Edward Henriod," photocopy of typescript, LDS Church Archives.

To promote the reformed alphabet, the Board of Regents needed to publish books in the new orthography. At the beginning of January 1856, the regents spent most of their time discussing publication of the new alphabet. The board appointed Watt, Wilford Woodruff, and Samuel W. Richards to prepare books and report at the next meeting. The committee spent the first day arranging the alphabet into syllables and words and writing them on paper to help with pronunciation.⁴¹ In February they began to prepare a course of spelling books. They also considered writing some of the Indian languages, especially Cherokee, into Deseret. At the next meeting, most of the discussion centered on publishing first- and second-grade readers. They also began to compose stories for the books, forty-eight lessons altogether.⁴²

Being a member of the committee, Watt contributed his writings to the book. He wrote at least ten essays on various subjects. His compositions show his thinking about the way his essays would benefit the children of Zion. They also displayed his knowledge of geography and history. His first lesson was “Cruelty to Insects Condemned,” where he described a boy who enjoyed pulling body parts off flies and crushing them to death. His teacher finally showed him under a microscope a very interesting and beautiful animal with “lively eyes encircled with silver hairs. . . . The whole body ornamented with plumes and decorations.” Finally, the teacher told the boy that it was “a poor fly which had been the victim of his wanton cruelty.”⁴³

In another essay, “The Noble Basket Maker,” the aristocrat father of a daughter made her nobleman suitor learn a trade—basket weaving—before he could marry her. They lived happily for a few years until wars in the Palatinate in Germany made them flee. The young nobleman then supported the whole family, including his father-in-law, by making baskets “and enjoyed the highest satisfaction of contributing, by his own industry, to the happiness of connections doubly endeared to him by their misfortunes.” Watt also wrote on “Tenderness to Mothers,” “Love between Brothers and Sisters,” and “Filial Love.” In the latter, he said, “Be grateful to thy father, for he gave thee life, and to thy mother, for she sustained thee . . . give ear to their admonition for it proceeds from love.” He also wrote on “Gratitude.”⁴⁴

One day Watt hastily wrote out another lesson in Deseret Alphabet. He entitled it, “A Chapter out of My Head in the Absence of the Bible.” He commented that human beings can know their physical, temporal world quite well, but the spiritual world or the afterlife is not entirely comprehensible, nor should it be: “When men fully understand the visible world, they

41. Samuel W. Richards, Journal, February 4, 5, 8, 1856, holograph, LDS Church Archives.

42. *Ibid.*, February 11, 13–16, 19, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28; March 11, 17, 1856.

43. “Lessons for the Deseret Reader Carefully Selected by G. D. Watt,” holograph, Watt Papers.

44. *Ibid.*

will then become acquainted with the laws and influences that will prepare them for the study of the world invisible.”⁴⁵

The committee met again the following week with the Board of Regents, who approved their work. The board appointed Daniel Wells, Albert Carrington, and William Willis to assist them in creating lessons. Wells later became a counselor in the First Presidency, Carrington was a clerk in the office, and Willis had recently returned from a mission to India. Willis and Woodruff became the main writers. The committee then began intensive work to finish the books. They wrote on such topics as pioneers, the Mormon Battalion, buffalo bullfights, grizzly bears, Utah Territory, and Salt Lake Valley.⁴⁶ As the editor, Watt made corrections on what was called the “Catechism.”⁴⁷

Early the next year Young asked Apostle Erastus Snow, who was in New York City on a mission, to have the alphabet type made and sent to Salt Lake City the following year.⁴⁸ Because Snow heard that the federal government was sending troops to Utah, he abandoned the project and came home as quickly as possible. In April Young asked Horace Eldredge in St. Louis to obtain printer’s type, which he did.⁴⁹ In October an unknown New York newspaper published a story about the Deseret Alphabet, which it called the Mormon alphabet, and then printed all of the forty letters, which had been sent by the type foundry in St. Louis. The newspaper did not know what the letters represented but felt that they would prevent others from knowing and understanding the Mormons.⁵⁰

After this early beginning and enthusiasm, very little happened on the alphabet in 1857 because of the expeditionary force that the U. S. Army sent to Utah to put down a supposed rebellion. Young and the Mormons had to use every resource possible to prevent the army from reaching Utah that fall. Sometime after the arranged truce, the Board of Regents, because of Watt’s diligence, came up with a manuscript edition of the first reader.⁵¹ Finally on November 29, 1858, the Board of Regents began meeting again. Brigham Young, D. H. Wells, Orson Hyde, Wilford Woodruff, George A.

45. George D. Watt, “A Chapter out of My Head in the Absence of the Bible,” holograph, Watt Papers.

46. “Deseret Alphabet,” *Deseret News*, vol. 5 (December 26, 1855): 331; Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898*, typescript, 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983–85) 5: 399. Draft articles for primer, Watt Papers.

47. Samuel W. Richards, *Journal*, February–March 1856.

48. Brigham Young to Erastus Snow, January 3, 1857, microfilm of holograph, Letterpress Copybooks, Young Papers.

49. Brigham Young to Horace Eldredge, April 1, 1857, microfilm of holograph, Letterpress Copybooks, Young Papers.

50. “A New Phase in New York Mormonism—the Deseret Alphabet,” unknown New York newspaper article, October 1857, CR 100 91 #7, Historian’s Office newspaper file, LDS Church Archives. On another page, a Missouri newspaper claims that the *Missouri Democrat* has printed an example of the alphabet.

51. George D. Watt, manuscript of first reader, 1858, holograph, Watt Papers. The reader was never published.

Smith, Joseph A. Young, and Watt began to revise the Deseret primer. Watt exhibited the Deseret characters on a large black chalkboard.⁵²

On a page in his 1858 shorthand notebook, Watt penned seven types of books that needed to be published to make the Deseret Alphabet successful in the Utah education system: first, a simple reader with a few lessons for beginners; second, a reader that had essays primarily on the “history and journeyings of the Saints [and] anecdotes such as Bros. Woodruff & Richards were getting up.” The third item was the Book of Mormon in the Deseret Alphabet in chapters and verses. The fourth was “Reader-Campbell’s Collection,” presumably Robert Lang Campbell’s lessons, which were more difficult essays. The fifth volume was an “Elocutionary or Rhetorical reader.” The sixth was a speller or “definer,” and the seventh, a small dictionary. With the publication of all of these books, the Deseret Alphabet would be ready for the children of Zion to learn—something that never happened.⁵³

Early in December, the Board of Regents met again. Watt gave a lecture on the Deseret Alphabet and read several lessons from the first schoolbook. The board then decided on the correct pronunciation of a word. When the regents took up the alphabet again in March of 1859, they considered what they should use for capital letters. Then Orson Pratt reported on the progress that he and Watt had made in copying the words of *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* into the Deseret Alphabet to create a speller and pronunciation guide.

At the following meeting, Chancellor Pratt told the regents he had abandoned writing the Deseret Alphabet dictionary because he did not have the time and his eyes did not allow him to do such close work. Robert L. Campbell considered the dictionary almost an impossible task and felt that Pratt and Watt should spend their time on juvenile readers and a concise speller. Later in the evening, Brigham Young suggested that the regents should publish a juvenile reader, a Book of Mormon, and a speller/dictionary. Furthermore, Young stated that Pratt and Watt should employ clerks and supervise them. The regents appointed a committee to find clerks.⁵⁴ Young hired young men to work on the dictionary, and in less than a month, Watt reported that President Young had dismissed all of them. Apparently

52. Historian’s Office, Journal, November 29, 1858. That same day Brigham Young wrote to Frederick Edward Schonfield that the Mormons had obtained the matrices, molds, punches, etc. for making the type and hoped that they would soon have a small book in print. In the same letter, he told Schonfield the main reason for constructing a new alphabet. He said, “It is believed, [that] it would represent every sound used and, in fact, [is] a step and partial return to a pure language which has been promised unto us in the latterday.” Young to Frederick Edward Schonfield, November 29, 1858, microfilm of holograph, Letterpress Copybooks, Young Papers.

53. George D. Watt, shorthand notes, 1858, holograph, Watt Papers. Actually the authors were successful in accomplishing the first three: they published a first- and second-grade reader and the Book of Mormon. These volumes did not come out until 1868 and 1869, however.

54. University of Deseret Board of Regents, meeting minutes, March 21, 1859.

Young was concerned about the funds to pay them, and perhaps they did not work as diligently as he wished. Young thought that creating the dictionary was women's work.⁵⁵

Early in June 1859, Marian J. Shelton, who had been preaching the Mormon gospel to the Hopi Indians, reported to Young about his mission. Young asked Watt to teach Shelton the Deseret Alphabet to see whether the Indian and Spanish languages were compatible with Deseret. After a short instruction period, Shelton assured President Young that both languages could be written in it.⁵⁶ Later, Shelton and a fellow missionary to the Hopis, Thales H. Haskell, began writing their missionary journals in Deseret. A few years earlier Watt had studied the Cherokee alphabet. He gained his knowledge from a volume of the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* that had been published in 1835 that he must have had in his possession.⁵⁷ He discovered that a Cherokee by the name of Guess (Sequoyah) had devised a written alphabet as early as 1821. Watt commented about this invention in a letter to the *Deseret News*, "The same principle of truth, eternal truth, was no doubt discovered by the ancients in the same way Guess discovered it. . . . Language is based upon but a few elementary sounds, and that marks appropriated to such would supply the means of writing them in all their combinations to make words." He thought that "the inconsistencies of English orthography are infinite."⁵⁸

The study and use of the new alphabet also spread into southern Utah. One gravestone in the Cedar City cemetery—the headstone of John T. Morris—was printed almost entirely in Deseret. Also the clerks in Parowan wrote their minutes in the new alphabet. Many people taught this new alphabet throughout Utah.⁵⁹

In this continual teaching process, Watt gave the clerks in the president's office a lesson on the Deseret Alphabet. Brigham Young also had the manuscript history of the church at the historian's office written in the alphabet. In 1859 Thomas Ellerbeck also began recording Brigham Young's "Financial Ledger C" in Deseret. That same year the board discovered the type made by the St. Louis firm in 1857, so articles could be printed. On February 16,

55. Historian's Office, Journal, April 18, 1859. There is no evidence that Young hired women to do the work.

56. "Journal History," June 4, 1859.

57. *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, vol. 2 (Boston: Bewick Company, 1836). Watt mistakenly called it the *American Magazine of Useful Knowledge*; the issue that he had was edited by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

58. "The Cherokee Alphabet," *Deseret News*, December 26, 1855, 3. Watt was incorrect when he said that Guess had invented the Cherokee alphabet. Sequoyah (1776–1843) invented it. Watt also mentions that there is an article about the Cherokee alphabet in the *American Annals of Education*. It was printed in Boston by Otis, Broaders, and Company in 1832 and later in 1838–39.

59. Larry Ray Wintersteen, "A History of the Deseret Alphabet" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1970), 44.

the *Deseret News* printed a text from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter five: the Sermon on the Mount. The newspapers printed similar Bible texts almost weekly until May 1860.⁶⁰ Young, however, did not like the type because it was too wide, and these articles eventually ended. In February 1860, Watt, already aware of the possibilities of transcribing Spanish and some Indian languages into Deseret, lectured on applying the alphabet to the “inhabitants of Oceania,” the people of the Pacific Ocean.⁶¹

Progress implementing the alphabet was encouraging. The Board of Regents and Watt had spread the word about the new alphabet throughout the territory. Many instructors had taught classes throughout Utah. The *Deseret News* had printed articles about and in the new alphabet. Without a published book, though, no real progress could occur. Watt had worked the hardest and longest on the alphabet, but very little had been accomplished. He must have felt frustrated.

In 1862 the new superintendent of schools for the territory, Robert L. Campbell, presented to Brigham Young a manuscript of a first reader for elementary students in the standard orthography. Young rejected it, saying, “He would not consent to have his type, ink or paper used to print such trash.”⁶² Even after Young’s negative reaction, Campbell must have thought the primer in the Latin alphabet was important, for it was published the following year.⁶³ It was not until 1864 that the Board of Regents met again to discuss the alphabet. On March 18, Young asked the regents to compare phonotype as now used for printing by Ben Pitman of Cincinnati with the Deseret characters. Ten days later, at the time designated as early candlelight, Watt and John V. Long, his fellow phonographic reporter, exhibited examples of Pitman’s phonotype and the Deseret Alphabet on a blackboard.⁶⁴ On behalf of the board, Watt wrote a letter to Pitman requesting a catalog containing the prices of fonts for phonotype. He received the catalogs, but by this time, the board had reversed itself and decided to continue with the Deseret Alphabet. Watt then wrote to Pitman, asking if his company could produce a good font for the alphabet or he could recommend another printing company.⁶⁵ Presumably Pitman replied that he

60. Kenneth R. Beesley, “Typesetting the Deseret Alphabet with Latex and Metafont,” unpublished paper, copy in author’s possession. The staff in the president’s office must have put the St. Louis type in a box when they moved during the Utah War; they did not unpack it until 1859.

61. Historian’s Office, Journal, February 20, 1860.

62. “Journal History,” May 22, 1862; see also Beesley, “Typesetting Deseret Alphabet with Latex and Metafont.

63. See *The Deseret Primer Containing Lessons for Juveniles* (Salt Lake City: Elias Smith, Publisher, 1863.) Thirty-four of the thirty-five lessons in this primer were also included in the Deseret first primer, published in the Deseret Alphabet in 1869.

64. University of Deseret Board of Regents, meeting minutes, March 28, 1864.

65. George D. Watt to Ben Pitman, March 21, May 3, 1864, shorthand, holograph, Watt Papers (transcribed by LaJean Carruth, 2005).

could not; neither did he know another place that could produce the fonts for the Deseret Alphabet. Two years later, in December 1866, Watt and George Q. Cannon, who later became a member of the First Presidency, reported to the Board of Regents during President Young's absence that he had talked about the possibility of using Pitman's alphabet because "he was unable to get punches and matrices for the Deseret Alphabet, that would make nice letters."⁶⁶

Young now had doubts about using the Deseret Alphabet. His mercurial mind reverted to phonotype. He knew that he could find the type for Pitman's longhand alphabet in either Cincinnati or Britain. He talked with the regents about the possibility of using phonotype instead of the Deseret Alphabet. These regents had been appointed by other territorial governors and felt no allegiance to Young, however, and rejected this proposal. Young, frustrated because he had not obtained any books printed in Deseret, persisted in promoting phonotype. In 1867 Watt went to England, and Young instructed him to obtain fonts and type. Watt was unsuccessful in acquiring any printing fonts from England but requested Ben Pitman of the Phonetic Institute of Cincinnati to send Young a catalog of prices. When Watt returned from his mission that same year, he found a pamphlet in New York entitled the *Standard Phonographic Visitor* by Andrew Graham and a copy of the *Phonetic Spelling Book*, which he sent to Young. Watt was sure that Graham's system was superior to Pitman's.⁶⁷

Robert L. Campbell then convinced Young that it was possible to print readers in Deseret characters. In one of Watt's last shorthand notebooks in 1868, he included four lines in cursive Deseret, interspersed with a few words in English script as if he was trying to recall how to spell some words in this written language that he had not used for some time.⁶⁸

In 1867 the University of Deseret revived and once again offered classes. On January 1, 1868, Watt began to teach phonography and the Deseret Alphabet in the Mercantile Department. He said, "The class, by application, in a few months could acquire with facility the corresponding style of phonography, and as reporters were scarce in the Territory, he hoped that quite a number then before him would qualify themselves to act as reporters."⁶⁹ Shortly after that, he became instrumental in starting a Phonographic Society.⁷⁰ John B. Milner taught in Utah Valley, and George Burgon, who had been on a mission to Britain a few years earlier, taught from Farmington to Willard. The *Deseret Evening News* reported that classes

66. Historian's Office, Journal, December 3, 1866.

67. George D. Watt to Brigham Young, June 25, 1867, holograph, incoming correspondence, Young Papers.

68. George D. Watt, shorthand notes, 1868, holograph, Watt Papers.

69. "Council House," *Semi-Weekly Telegraph*, January 2, 1868, 3.

70. "Journal History," January 27, 1868.

were also held in Cache Valley.⁷¹ Younger men, such as David W. Evans, began to take the art seriously.

Campbell continued to support revising English orthography. He spoke about it in his territorial school reports during the 1860s. He insisted that the Deseret Alphabet would bless the children of the territory.⁷² After Watt left Brigham Young's employ, the Board of Regents, because of Campbell's support, finally succeeded in publishing two small primers, the first part of the Book of Mormon, and eventually the entire Book of Mormon in Deseret Alphabet. Young officially announced these accomplishments from the pulpit of the new Tabernacle on October 8, 1869. Undoubtedly he felt a great relief. The children of Zion finally had a book to read, and his work, started in the 1840s with Watt's classes on Pitman shorthand, had finally come to fruition. These four volumes, however, were the only ones ever published in Deseret. Neither the church nor the university regents published the Bible, which was in manuscript form. Even the four volumes already published were never distributed and thus never used. In the next few years, the two greatest supporters of the alphabet died, Robert L. Campbell in 1872 and Brigham Young in 1877. His dream of a new alphabet died with him. No other church president had the idea of revising the English alphabet.

Watt's role in this attempt to invent a new orthography was essential. His phonographic training and the many classes he taught inspired the church leadership to think about revising the alphabet and giving one symbol to one sound. He first promoted phonotype, and then, after the Board of Regents rejected it, he devised new characters. He taught the new alphabet to many people. A willing advocate, he spent many hours writing primers, dictionaries, and spellers and showing how the words were pronounced. At one point, the knowledge of the Deseret Alphabet had spread from town to town. Without the published word, however, the church and educational leaders found it difficult to sustain this enthusiasm. The Deseret Alphabet was still part of Watt's life as late as 1868, the year he left the president's office. He had written many exercises for a juvenile reader years before, but Orson Pratt, who wrote up the final exercises, did not use the ones that Watt had worked on more than fifteen years earlier. The hopes of the Board of Regents in the 1850s for a new alphabet all came to naught, but it remained part of a sense of mission that Brigham Young and the Mormons had, only one aspect of their attempt to change the world.

71. *Deseret Evening News*, January 27, 1868, as quoted in Moffitt, *The History of Public Education in Utah*, 56.

72. Moffitt, *The History of Public Education in Utah*, 58–59.