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## Mormon Trail, The

William Hill

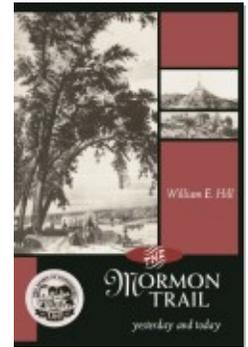
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# The Mormon Church, the Development of the Mormon Trail, and Mormon Migrations: 1803–1869

UNLIKE THE HISTORY OF THE OREGON, CALIFORNIA, AND SANTA FE Trails, the history and development of the Mormon Trail is a story of both the usage and improvement of previously identified routes and of the religious events that influenced the migration of Mormons west to Utah and the Great Basin.

## **1803**

President Thomas Jefferson purchased a vast tract of land west of the Mississippi River from the French government. This was the single largest peaceful expansion of the United States in its history. The lands included in the Louisiana Purchase contained most of the area through which the Mormons would later pass. However, the territory of Utah and the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, the future site of their new Zion, were not included in the purchase. They were located in Mexican territory.

## **1804–1806**

The exploration of the newly purchased Louisiana Territory was conducted by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. The route they used in their westward journey of exploration was centered in the northern part of the territory along the Missouri River Valley and into the area along the Pacific Coast west of the Rocky Mountains jointly claimed by the United States and Great Britain and commonly known as Oregon. It was the interest in the Oregon Territory and the fantastic stories of those

areas that ultimately resulted in the development of trapper and emigrant routes that the Mormons would later follow and improve.

### **1805**

The Prophet Joseph Smith was born on December 23 near Sharon, Vermont. He spent the first ten years of his life in a variety of places in or near the Green Mountains of New England. In 1816 his family moved to New York. Two other individuals, Brigham Young and Heber Kimball, were born in New England in 1801. All these men later played crucial leadership roles in the Mormon religion.

### **1812–13**

John Jacob Astor tried to expand his fur trading empire into the Oregon Territory. Although this attempt did not succeed, knowledge about the route west grew. A returning party of his “Astorians,” led by Robert Stuart, learned of the South Pass. However, because of Indians in the area at that time, the pass was not used. It took another twelve years before it was.

### **1820**

According to the accepted account, at age fourteen, Joseph had his First Vision of the Father and the Son in a grove of trees by his home near Manchester, New York. This was the beginning of his religious awakening and what, within the Mormon Church, is also considered to be the beginning of the restoration of the original Church of Jesus Christ, which he established when he lived upon the earth. Later, the angel Moroni visited Joseph and showed him where the golden plates were buried.

### **1820s**

During the next two decades the importance of fur trapping grew in the Rocky Mountains. Trappers and traders increased their knowledge of the lands in the Rockies and of the route from the Mississippi/Missouri rivers along the Platte River Valley. By the 1830s traffic increased along the river systems and general routes west were established.

### **1824**

William Henry Ashley began the practice of conducting a rendezvous. Most of the well-known mountain men were getting their start in the fur business. Men such as Jim Bridger, James Clyman, Joseph Reddeford Walker, Jedediah Smith, Thomas Fitzpatrick, and others were developing survival skills and learning about the area from the Mississippi/Missouri

Valley to the Rockies. Most of these mountain men later became associated with the development of the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California Trails. Some of them also came to be associated with sites and events on the Mormon Trail.

South Pass was rediscovered by trappers, and it became the regular route through the Rocky Mountains. Jedediah Smith, William Sublette, and James Clyman are believed to be some of the first to actually use the route.

Independence Rock was given its name as a result of visiting trappers, including Tom Fitzpatrick, who camped and celebrated Independence Day there. Some historians believe William Sublette named the rock in 1830. In 1841 Pierre DeSmet gave Independence Rock its name as the “Register of the Desert” because of the practice of passing emigrants and trappers who wrote or carved their names on the rock.

Jim Bridger was reported to have discovered the Great Salt Lake as a result of a bet with other trappers about the course of the Bear River. He supposedly floated down the river in a “bull boat” made of buffalo skins and entered the Great Salt Lake.

### **1827**

Joseph Smith began the translation of the golden plates into the Book of Mormon. It was finally finished in 1830. The Book of Mormon, called another testament of Jesus Christ, purports to be the history of God’s dealings with the inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere who were descendants of Joseph of the Bible.

Independence, Missouri, was established. The area soon became the major outfitting area for the Santa Fe Trail and by the 1840s was a major jumping-off site for the Oregon-and California-bound emigrants. Later some Mormon wagon companies also used the area.

### **1828**

Hiram Scott, a trapper, was left for dead by his companions. In 1829 William Sublette found a skeleton believed to be Scott’s. The large bluffs near where the bones were found were named after him. Scotts Bluff then served as a landmark along the Platte River and the emigrant trails in the area.

### **1830**

On April 6, Joseph Smith, along with five others, and (as they testified) under the direction of Jesus Christ, organized the Church of Christ, which, eight years later, became the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints (Mormon), in Fayette/Colesville, New York. This is also the site of his first arrest and persecution for his religious beliefs.

### **1831**

In January Joseph Smith received a revelation to move the church to Kirtland, Ohio. Smith started an extensive building program. Laying out broad streets on strict compass settings with large city lots, he transformed the small city to a center of Mormonism with its own temple. Later, in July, while visiting Independence, Missouri, he also received another revelation that Independence, Missouri, be designated as “the land of promise, and the place for the city of Zion.” Both areas served as centers for the Mormon Church from 1831–1837. Today, Independence is the headquarters of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

### **1832–35**

Captain Benjamin L. E. Bonneville, on a leave of absence from the military, led an expedition west to the Rocky Mountains. He hired Joseph Reddeford Walker, who explored a route to California and the region around the Great Salt Lake. In 1837 Washington Irving published Bonneville’s journals and maps, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West*. The book was very popular and sparked interest in the area.

### **1833–38**

In Missouri relations with non-Mormons deteriorated, forcing the Mormons to move around from place to place. The problem culminated when the Missouri government set forth its infamous “Extermination Order,” which stated that the Mormons must be expelled or exterminated.

### **1834**

Fort William was built near the mouth of the Laramie River where it meets the Platte River. Robert Campbell built the log fort. It was named for his partner, William Sublette, but the fort is commonly called Fort Laramie. This wooden structure was immortalized by Alfred J. Miller in 1837, when Sir William Drummond Stewart brought him along on his tour of the west to record in paintings his trip. The fort changed hands a number of times and was replaced with an adobe fort in 1841.

### **1836**

The Mormon settlement of Far West was established in northern Missouri. It briefly served as a major center for the Mormons.

### **1837–41**

Father Pierre Jean DeSmet helped establish a mission in the area known as Council Bluffs. Father DeSmet became one of the most famous, knowledgeable, and influential people of the West. He traveled back and forth from the Council Bluffs area to the west along what became a well-established route. His counsel was sought by emigrants and the government when dealing with Indians. Council Bluffs became one of the jumping-off places for the migrations west and was also known as Kanesville when the Mormons occupied the area (1846–1852).

### **1838**

In Ohio, relations with non-Mormons also worsened. On July 6, Joseph Smith was finally forced to move his followers in 58 wagons with 515 people west out of Ohio to the town/site of Far West, Missouri.

Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs issued the infamous order which called for the Mormons to be “exterminated or driven from the state if necessary for public peace.”

As conditions in Missouri continued to deteriorate, rumors spread and conflict erupted into fighting at the Battle of Crooked River in October, and then again at Haun’s Mill. Shortly thereafter, Joseph and his brother Hyrum Smith and several other Mormon leaders who did not participate in the battle surrendered to the authorities and were imprisoned at Liberty Jail. The rest of the Mormons were able to escape to Far West. Joseph and Hyrum Smith later escaped, too. They were forced once again to look for a new home, this time in Illinois.

### **1839**

Joseph Smith selected the site of a small, nearly forgotten hamlet of Commerce for the city of Zion, which he called “Nauvoo.” Nauvoo (claimed by Smith to come from a Hebrew word meaning “a beautiful plantation or place”) became the center of the Mormon Church. Within five years it had a population of nearly 20,000 and was one of the largest cities in the United States. The city and the Mormons received a special charter from the state legislature. Nauvoo was granted autonomy over a number of governmental functions, including taxes and courts, and it was even given the right to maintain its own independent militia, known as the Nauvoo Legion. It was here that the Nauvoo Temple was built. After the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and increased religious persecution, the Mormon exodus from Nauvoo began in 1846. Nauvoo is considered to be the beginning site of the Mormon Pioneer Trail.

## 1841

The old wooden Fort William on the Laramie River was replaced by the adobe fort called Fort John. However, like its predecessor, Fort John was also commonly called Fort Laramie. It is this Fort Laramie that was visited by the Mormon pioneers. The fort marks the place in the trail where the Mormons and other emigrants traveling on the north side of the Platte River forded to the south side and picked up the main Oregon Trail and followed it to Fort Bridger. It is also located at what is considered to be the western edge of the plains where the climb into the mountains commences.

The Bidwell-Bartleson Party, the first emigrant wagon company, left the Independence, Missouri, area for Oregon and California. They followed the main Oregon Trail until the party split into two groups at Sheep Rock near Soda Springs, Idaho. Father DeSmet, Thomas Fitzpatrick, and Joseph Meek served as their guides for part of the journey. One group headed for California and the other continued on to Oregon. The California-bound emigrants, the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, followed the Bear River south until it reached the Great Salt Lake, then they headed west around the north side of the lake, and finally south. They were forced to abandon some wagons in Utah and their remaining ones in Nevada, then continue by horseback into California. They were the first wagon company to traverse the area that later became the state of Utah.

## 1842–45

Captain John Charles Frémont left from Independence to explore the region to the South Pass and the Rocky (Wind River) Mountains. Charles Preuss served as his cartographer. Their work during this expedition and subsequent expeditions resulted in the publication of Frémont's reports to Congress and the publication of his large map showing the areas he explored. In 1843 Frémont explored the Great Salt Lake region. The areas shown on his maps include the land from Independence to Oregon and parts of California and back through Salt Lake Valley. It was these maps that Brigham Young and other Mormons had with them in 1847 when they left their Winter Quarters. (See also the map section for reproductions of some of the Frémont maps.)

## 1842

Emigrant wagon companies continued to head for Oregon. The general wagon route was becoming established. With the subsequent publication

of Frémont's first map showing the route to the South Pass, emigrants were more confident about their journey west.

Dr. Elijah White led a wagon company to Oregon. Lansford Hastings was a member of this group. He later wrote his infamous guidebook to Oregon and California, in which he proposed his cutoff route to California by heading southwest from Fort Bridger and across the Great Salt Lake Desert.

### **1842–43**

Jim Bridger and his partner Louis Vasquez built a trading post near the Black's Fork of the Green River. This site is where the Hastings Cutoff left the established Oregon-California Trail and headed southwest over the Wasatch Mountains to enter the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. The Mormons later purchased Fort Bridger and strengthened its fortification by building a stone fort.

### **1844**

Relations between the Mormons and non-Mormons continued to worsen in Missouri and Illinois. On June 27 Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed. They were in the Carthage Jail awaiting trial when a mob stormed the jail and shot them.

Brigham Young, as President of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, was sustained as leader of the Mormon Church.

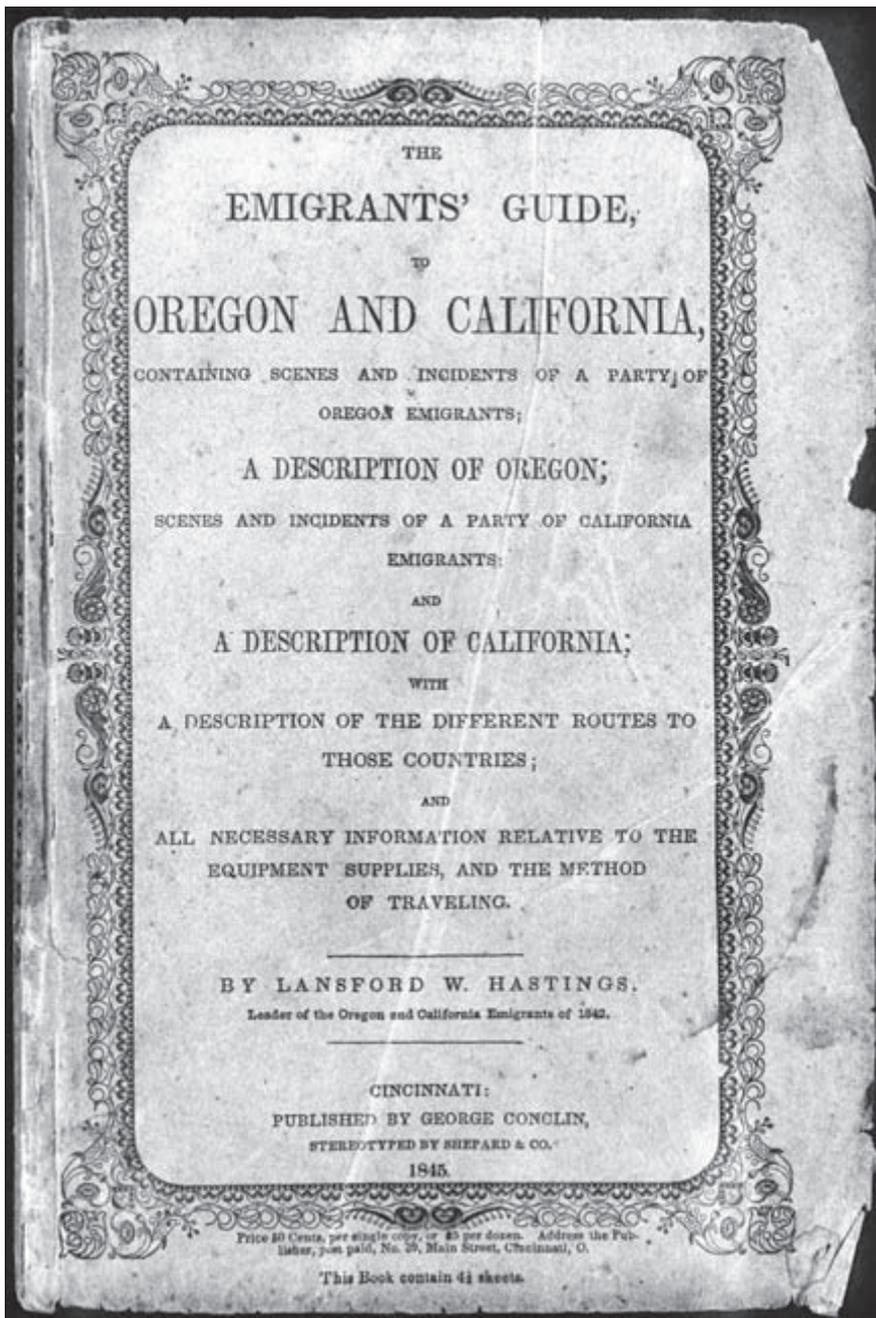
### **1845**

Under increasing pressure from the Gentiles and concern for the safety of the Mormons, Brigham Young agreed to leave Illinois "as soon as the grass grows and the water runs."

Lansford Hastings's guidebook, *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*, was published. It extolled the virtues of his cutoff to California. Mormon leaders read John Frémont's reports of his 1842 and 1843–44 explorations, Hastings's guide, and the earlier reports of Charles Wilkes and Benjamin Bonneville giving them much of the most recent information available about the West.

### **1846**

Increases in persecution forced an early exodus from Nauvoo. On February 4, the first Mormons were ferried across the Mississippi River to Montrose, Iowa, from where they traveled to Sugar Creek. Then, for a short time, the river froze over completely, making the passage out of Nauvoo easier. The exodus from Nauvoo across Iowa to Council Bluffs and across



THE COVER OF HASTINGS'S *THE EMIGRANTS' GUIDE TO OREGON AND CALIFORNIA*

the Missouri River to Winter Quarters represented the first stage of the Mormons' westward migration to their New Zion. The first group of Mormons under Brigham Young arrived on the Missouri River on June 14. On June 22, the first large group of wagons reached Council Bluffs, first called Miller's Hollow by the Mormons. The first segment of the Mormon Trail was now established. Consideration was being given to both California and the area of the Great Salt Lake as possible sites for their New Zion. Both were located on Mexican lands. Initially Young had planned to cover the distance from Nauvoo to the Rocky Mountains in one trip. However, it soon became apparent that that would be impossible. Through negotiations with both the government of the Territory of Iowa and the Pottawattamie and Omaha Indians, Brigham Young obtained permission to allow the Mormons to establish camps on Indian lands.

William Clayton wrote the famous Mormon hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints." This hymn symbolizes both the Mormons' hardships and their strengths.

Winter Quarters was established on the west bank of the Missouri River in Omaha Indian Territory. A town was laid out for approximately three to four thousand Saints in what is now Florence, a suburb of Omaha. Other Saints were strung out across Iowa in the way-stations such as Garden Grove and Mount Pisgah. The journey across Iowa was extremely difficult and the winter of 1846–47 was also very hard on the Mormons. Many died on their journey and more died during that terrible winter.

War with Mexico was declared. Areas in contention included what are now California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming.

Fighting continued to occur in Nauvoo. The last major group of Mormons was driven out in September.

The Mormon Battalion was formed by Mormons camped in the Kanesville area. Five hundred Mormons agreed to serve in the U.S. Army in the war against Mexico. They reported to Fort Leavenworth and then left from there for Mexico and California by way of the Santa Fe Trail. By agreement, much of the money paid to the battalion for a clothing allowance was given to the Mormon Church. It was then used to help finance the journey west for the rest of the Mormons to their new Zion in Utah. Many of the individuals who joined later played significant roles in the discovery of gold in California, in the opening of the Carson route on the California Trail, and in the development of Hensley's Salt Lake Cutoff north around the Great Salt Lake as another of the routes associated with the California Trail system.

The Donner-Reed party following Hastings's guidebook and advice headed southwest from Fort Bridger over the Hastings Cutoff. The route they used to cut over the Wasatch Mountains was later used by the Mormons' Pioneer Company in 1847. Their route became the last segment of the Mormon Trail to Salt Lake. Partially because of the delays caused in cutting the wagon route over the Wasatch, the Donner-Reed Party reached the Sierra Nevada late in the fall and were snowed in on the east side of the mountains. The story of that terrible winter and the death and devastation they faced is well documented in other books.

### 1847

The second phase in the development of the Mormon Trail began. There were to be two groups: first, a small exploring party, and then, the larger body of the Saints. On April 5, the vanguard party of the Mormons' Pioneer Company moved out of Winter Quarters. On June 21, east of Fort Bridger, Brigham Young and Jim Bridger discussed the nature of the area surrounding the Great Salt Lake. Brigham Young's journal records that Bridger stated that he would give one thousand dollars for the first bushel of corn grown in the Salt Lake Valley. On July 22, the exploring party of the Mormon Pioneers broke through the last major obstacle in Emigration Canyon and entered the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. On the 24th, Young's company came in full view of the Great Salt Lake. According to tradition, Brigham Young is reported to have declared, "This is the right place, move on!" and the second stage of the Mormon exodus from Nauvoo was completed. Thereafter, July 24 was celebrated by the Mormons as Pioneer Day. To this day, it is a state holiday in Utah.

The Mormons laid out Great Salt Lake City under Brigham Young's direction. Streets were built along a north-south grid and were wide enough for a wagon and team to turn around. New arrivals needing work were assigned to help build walls in and around the city. Camping areas in the city were set aside for newly arrived emigrants. Within a few years Salt Lake City, which had been the end of the Mormon Trail, developed into the hub, or crossroads, for the Great Basin. Major trails to California and throughout the Great Basin passed through or originated in Salt Lake City. The Hastings Cutoff continued west; Hensley's, or the Salt Lake, Cutoff headed north, and a connecting trail led southwest to join the Old Spanish Trail which went to southern California. These helped Salt Lake City to develop into an economic and social center in the West. Later, Benjamin Ferris, secretary of Utah Territory, called Salt Lake City the "half-way house between the eastern and western portions of the continent."



**STONE WALLS-Today**

This picture shows some of the original cobblestone walls that newly arriving Saints helped to

build. These old walls have been incorporated into a new wall in a park in downtown Salt Lake City.

### **1848**

War with Mexico was formally over. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. Utah was no longer part of Mexico but now part of the United States.

Samuel J. Hensley opened the Salt Lake Cutoff of the California Trail from Salt Lake to City of Rocks in present-day southern Idaho. The route was first opened to wagons by a party of Mormon Battalion veterans traveling east to Utah from California.

Seagulls saved the crops by descending upon the fields near Salt Lake City and consuming the grasshoppers, or Mormon locusts, that had been eating the plants.

### **1849**

The California Gold Rush started. Thousands of gold seekers flooded into Utah and Salt Lake City during the next few years on their way to the California gold fields. Once again relations between Mormons and Gentiles were sometimes tested. The influx of the argonauts, or gold

seekers, increased the demand on the Mormons' limited food and supplies. However, the sale of supplies and provisions brought in needed cash for the Mormons.

The Mormons organized the Provisional State of Deseret (honey bee) with Brigham Young as its governor. The area in the original petition to Congress was comprised of the Great Basin area, including Utah, Nevada, parts of Idaho, Oregon, Wyoming, New Mexico, Arizona, and a portion of southern California to the seacoast near San Diego.

### **1849–52**

Kanesville, Iowa, became the major jumping-off place for the Mormon migrations during this period.

### **1850**

The Provisional State of Deseret was broken up. The area was established as a United States Territory and was divided as part of the Compromise of 1850. Utah is a much smaller area than Deseret was. Brigham Young became the first Utah territorial governor.

The Golden Pass Road was opened up on July 4th as a toll road to bring emigrants into Salt Lake City. Parley Pratt had started exploring for a new route in 1848. At the junction of Echo and Weber canyons the new route turns south up the Weber River and then over to and down Parley's Canyon to Salt Lake City. The following year traffic over the new route was down. A number of factors caused this decline: Pratt sold the toll road to help finance his mission work; the new route was longer than the old route; the old route was free; and costs for its upkeep were high. The new route fell into disuse for a short time. However, by the early to mid-1860s, with its constant improvements, Parley's route finally replaced the old trail that had entered through Emigration Canyon as the main route into Salt Lake City. Today I-80 generally follows the Golden Pass Road's route.

The Mormon Church established its Perpetual Emigration Fund to help finance or provide loans to poor Mormons facilitating their migration to Salt Lake Valley. The success of this fund helped to bring thousands of Mormons to Salt Lake City who would not otherwise have been able to afford the journey, especially those new converts from Europe. The fund was finally abolished in 1887.

### **1853**

Keokuk, Iowa, became the main jumping-off point for the Mormons.

Construction on the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City began. It was completed and dedicated in 1893—forty years later.

Fort Supply was established for a variety of reasons by the Mormons a few miles southwest of Fort Bridger: It helped to extend Mormon influence into the Green River area; it provided a base for missionary functions to the Indians; and it was a means to control the ferries in the Green River area. Fort Supply served as another Mormon colony to grow food and to provide help and protection for the Mormon emigrants. This was evident during the time of the two handcart disasters of 1856. It could also serve as a first line of defense for Salt Lake City against future persecutors. In order to consolidate forces Brigham Young later ordered Fort Supply and Fort Bridger burned when fear grew about hostilities with the United States that had developed during the Utah War.

#### **1854**

Westport, Missouri, near Independence, served as the main outfitting site for Mormons who would follow the route often considered to be the Oregon Trail.

#### **1855**

Mormon Grove, near Atchinson, Kansas, became the jumping-off area for Mormon departures. Mormons purchased Fort Bridger and strengthened its defenses by constructing stone walls.

#### **1856–58**

Iowa City, Iowa, became the major outfitting point for Mormon emigrants bound for Salt Lake City. Iowa City was across the river from the western end of the railroad.

#### **1856–60**

A new method of transporting Mormon immigrants to Salt Lake City was developed. Handcarts were built and provided for newly arriving immigrants to use on their journey to Salt Lake City. During this period, ten handcart companies took about 3,000 Saints to Salt Lake City. Iowa City served as the starting point of the Mormon Trail. Most of the Mormon converts traveled by rail to Iowa City. The handcart journey began there.

Two major handcart disasters happened in 1856. Both companies got late starts, and both were hit by early and constantly stormy winter weather. Late in October, Captain James G. Willie's company was caught in a blizzard east of the South Pass. Seventy-seven members out of 404 died. Then, in November, 576 members of Handcart Company No. 4, led by Captain Edward Martin, were trapped by a blizzard a few miles west of Devil's Gate. By the time they were rescued, 145 members had died.

These were the worst disasters during the migration of 1841–69. The total loss of life experienced because of these two disasters was much worse than that experienced by the members of the Donner Party who lost 40 members after they were caught in the snow in the Sierras in 1846.

### **1857–59**

The so-called Mormon or Utah War caused tremendous strain between the Mormons and the Gentiles. President Buchanan replaced Brigham Young with Alfred Cumming as territorial governor and sent the U.S. Army, under command of Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston, into Utah to put down the so-called Mormon rebellion. With minor exceptions of harrassment (driving off horses and cattle, burning feed, grass, and wagons, etc.) there was no major fighting between the Mormons and the U.S. Army. It was during this time that the Mormons burned Fort Supply and Fort Bridger. The U.S. Army took over Fort Bridger and rebuilt it. Later the army established Camp Floyd 40 miles south of Salt Lake City. Thomas Kane, a man respected by the Mormons and the U.S. government helped to bring about a peaceful resolution of the problems.

### **1859–63**

Florence, Nebraska, site of the 1846 Winter Quarters, once again became the main outfitting area for Mormon emigrant companies.

### **1860–61**

The Pony Express was established. Part of its route was along portions of the Mormon, Oregon, and California Trails.

### **1861**

The Church established the use of “down-and-back” wagon trains to transport Mormons from the jumping-off towns along the Missouri River to Salt Lake City. Each ward of the Mormon Church was given the responsibility of providing wagons, teams, supplies, and/or drivers. Four wagon companies started east on April 23 to pick up the first Mormons at Florence, Nebraska. The first church sponsored wagon company departed Florence on May 29 and arrived in Salt Lake on August 16. For the next few years this church supported endeavor helped to bring thousands of Mormons to Utah who might not have been able to do so on their own.

### **1864–66**

The village of Wyoming, Nebraska, on the west bank of the Missouri River, northwest of Nebraska City, became the jumping-off place for the



**MORMON CAMP AT WYOMING, NEBRASKA—  
Savage, Nebraska State Historical Society**

This picture by Charles Savage shows a Mormon encampment at Wyoming, Nebraska, in

1866. This was one jumping-off site used by the Mormons during the years 1864–66.



**1,000 MILE TREE—Jackson, National Park Service**

Jackson photographed the construction of the railroad west during 1869. Here is a later painting showing the railroad through Weber Canyon, 1,000 miles west of Omaha. Once the

transcontinental railroad was completed, emigrants could travel west much faster and more easily. Subsequently, all the western trails fell into disuse.

Mormon migrations. The “down-and-back” wagon companies picked up the emigrants and brought them to Salt Lake City.

### **1867**

The Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, with its huge elliptical dome, was completed.

By then the Union Pacific Railroad had already crossed the Missouri River. The terminus was North Platte, Nebraska. Mormons took the railroad to there and then started their wagon trips west. By 1868 the railroad was in Laramie, Wyoming, and later that summer in Benton. Both towns briefly served as wagon outfitting areas.

### **1869**

The Union Pacific Railroad completed laying track and joined the Central Pacific at Promontory Summit on May 10. Mormons could now travel by rail to Utah. The railroad replaced the Mormon Trail, which had served them so faithfully.