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Mormon Trail, The

William Hill

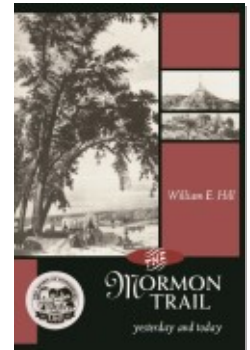
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Museums and Displays

FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO FURTHER INCREASE THEIR UNDERSTANDING and appreciation of the Mormon Trail experience, there are numerous historic sites that can be visited. Many of these are conveniently located along major highways; others are on smaller local roads. Most have museums or displays that help tell the story of the trail. Some sites are associated specifically with Mormon history, while others deal with the experiences of all emigrants. Many will require hours to view and appreciate, while others have only small interpretive signs to read. All, however, represent historic events, places, or scenes experienced or viewed by Mormons and recorded in their writings.

HISTORIC NAUVOO, ILLINOIS

This area is the natural place to start your journey back in time to the 1840s. Nauvoo had originally been built to be both the home and a showplace for the growing Mormon faith. While today it is not the home of the Mormon faith, much of it has been restored and reconstructed to its original luster. This has been accomplished by the work of both the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS).

Nauvoo was the center for the church from 1839–46. Here one can find the homes of many of the famous early Mormons: Joseph Smith's Homestead and Mansion House, Brigham Young's home, Heber C. Kimball's home, plus many homes of lesser-known Mormons. Along with these buildings one finds a wide variety of shops and businesses that were typical of towns and cities of the mid-1800s: the blacksmith and wagon shop, the carpenter's shop, the bakery, the printing office, the post office, plus many more. One can take tours of the buildings, and many of the shops have living history programs. On top of the hill, on

the grounds of the destroyed temple, there is a quiet park and a beautiful memorial. The graves of Joseph, Emma, and Hyrum Smith are also located in Nauvoo. Within the area are the Joseph Smith Historic Center (RLDS) and the Nauvoo Welcome Center (LDS). In addition to the tours and the displays and films within the visitor centers, there are also research facilities.

Historic Nauvoo is located in western Illinois on the east bank of the Mississippi River on State Highway 96, north of Hamilton.

CARTHAGE JAIL MUSEUM

This jail is the site of the murder and martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum on June 27, 1844. The jail has been restored to appear as it did in 1844. The small visitors center offers guided tours of the jail site.

The jail is located in the city of Carthage, Illinois, in western Illinois on U.S. Highway 136, about fourteen miles east of the Mississippi River. Nauvoo and Carthage should be seen together.

LOCUST CREEK CAMP SITE, IOWA

At present there is only a marker at this site. However, in terms of Mormon history, this is a significant site. It is where the words to the famous Mormon hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints" were written by William Clayton. This hymn soon became the "Mormon Marseillaise." (See Wayne County Museum.) The hymn is reprinted at the front of this book.

The marker is located at the Tharp Cemetery off the main highways, on local roads about fifteen miles southeast of Corydon, Iowa.

WAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM, CORYDON, IOWA

This fine county museum has a major display about the Mormon exodus from Nauvoo and across central Iowa. Here also is a display commemorating Clayton's writing of the Mormon hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints." In addition to these Mormon-related displays there are other fine ones about the early settlement and life in Iowa.

The museum is located on State Highway 2 in the town of Corydon, Iowa.

Between Corydon and Council Bluffs there are some additional markers concerning two of the permanent supply camps and communities set up to assist other Mormons on their exodus from Nauvoo. One of the communities and markers is at Garden Grove Town Park, Garden Grove, Iowa, on Highway 204. A second marker is at the Mt. Pisgah

Historic Site near the town of Thayer, Iowa, on U.S. Highway 34. Ruts of the Mormon Trail may be seen near the Mormon Trail Park near Bridgewater, Iowa, and also in a field at Cold Spring County Park.

**MORMON HANDCART PARK,
CORALVILLE (IOWA CITY), IOWA**

In the Iowa City area there are several markers dedicated to the handcart companies that left Iowa City in the 1850s. Iowa City was the end of the line for the railroad. Mormon immigrants from Europe and others who came by train from the East disembarked in Iowa City. It was in this area where the handcarts which were used by many of the Mormons on their journey west were constructed. Also in the vicinity is the small Heritage Museum. It has rotating displays depicting different aspects of the area's history.

Both the park and the museum are in Coralville, Iowa, off U.S. Highway 6.

FORT DES MOINES, DES MOINES, IOWA

The handcart companies crossing Iowa from Iowa City crossed the Des Moines River in Des Moines near the site of Fort Des Moines. The fort had been abandoned in 1846, but the ruins were still there when the Mormons crossed. Part of the old fort has been restored.

It is located near the intersection of Southwest First Street and Riverside Drive.

COUNCIL BLUFFS, IOWA

Within the area of Council Bluffs there are a number of sites related to Mormon history. This area was also known as Kaneshville. It was named after Colonel Thomas L. Kane, who used his influence to try to help the Mormons during their persecutions. In this area were a number of ferries which crossed the Missouri River. This was the site of the Kaneshville Tabernacle and the Grand Encampment, or the mustering in site for the Mormon Battalion, and some Mormon cemeteries from the exodus period can be found here.

Council Bluffs will also be the site of the new National Trails Center commemorating the significance of Kaneshville in the migrations west.

**WINTER QUARTERS,
OMAHA AREA, NEBRASKA**

This was the site that marked the end of the first portion of the Mormon Trail after leaving Nauvoo. Mormons ferried across the Missouri River

and established their winter camp here in the fall of 1846. This became the famous “Winter Quarters” and was used as mile zero, the starting point for William Clayton’s emigrant guide. Here is the new Mormon Trail Historic Center, the Mormon Mill, and the Mormon Pioneer Cemetery where many of the Mormons who died during the terrible winter of 1846–47 were buried. Displays include a reconstructed cabin and handcart. Today the cemetery’s setting is beautiful and serene, and the statue commemorating the hardships endured at Winter Quarters is very moving. The Mormon Ferry was located by the site of the present-day Mormon Bridge (I-680), which crosses the Missouri River. Cutler’s Park, another of the Mormon camps, is situated nearby. Unfortunately the mill is closed and deteriorating. The site has great potential as an educational and tourist attraction.

The new visitors center and cemetery are located in Florence, just south off I-680 before crossing the Mormon Bridge into Iowa. The Western Heritage Museum is also located in Omaha.

FORT LEAVENWORTH, LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, was established in 1827. It is still an active military post. Most of its history is not directly associated with the Mormon Trail. However, it served as the outfitting grounds for the Mormon Battalion in 1846. It was the assembly grounds for Colonel Stephen Kearny’s command that marched overland along the Santa Fe Trail and the Gila route to California during the Mexican War. Few buildings are left from that Mormon period. The great swale of the trail coming up the hill from the river landing, part of the wall from the stone blockhouse, the Rookery, and the parade grounds can still be seen. The museum covers the complete history of Fort Leavenworth.

The fort is located off U.S. Highway 73, just north of present-day Leavenworth, Kansas.

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI, AND KANSAS CITY AREA

Within the Independence, Missouri, area are a number of sites related to the emigrant trails and the Mormon religion that are well worth visiting. One major museum is the National Frontier Trails Center. While its focus is on the Oregon, California, and Santa Fe Trails, much of the content here relates to the Mormon Trail since for much of its length, it coincided with parts of the Oregon and California Trails. The headquarters for the Oregon-California Trails Association is also located here.

Independence was a center of Mormon activity in the mid-1800s, and today it is the headquarters for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The Temple and Auditorium are open for tours. The Mormon Visitor Center (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) focuses on the significance of the Missouri area in the history of the Mormon Church. There are numerous displays and programs available to visitors. There is also a Family History Center to assist people interested in researching their family genealogy. The historic Liberty Jail is located a few miles north of Independence.

Independence Square marks the beginning of the Oregon, California, and Santa Fe Trails and houses the Jackson County Historical Society and research archives. The mountain man Jim Bridger lived in Independence for a few years and is buried in the Mount Washington Cemetery. In addition to the items above there are many other historic sites, especially those related to President Harry S. Truman, who resided there.

There are very few major museums on the north side of the Platte dealing with the Mormon Trail. The Stuhr Museum is the exception.

STUHR MUSEUM OF THE PRAIRIE PIONEER, GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA

This is another fine museum at which visitors could spend many hours. The museum has a wide variety of exhibits and buildings that cover the whole range of the history of Nebraska, including the Plains Indians, the emigrants, early road ranches, towns, railroads, and farming. A Pawnee Indian lodge much like those noted by Mormons and other emigrants as they passed through Nebraska can be visited.

The museum is located four miles north of I-80, at the junction of U.S. Highways 34 and 281.

MORMON ISLAND STATE RECREATION AREA, GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA

Modern travelers can camp along the Platte River near where the earlier Mormon emigrants camped. There is a small display and reconstructed handcart in the park. The recreation area is just north of the I-80 interchange with U.S. 34 and 281.

Seventy miles west of Grand Island in Lexington is the Dawson County Museum. It includes displays about the westward migration along the Platte.

The following museums are found on the south side of the Platte, off the Mormon Trail itself, but are worthy of visits. Most are related to sites

that the Mormons on the north side of the Platte sometimes visited or looked for. All help to relate the story of the conditions on the journey west.

HASTINGS MUSEUM, HASTINGS, NEBRASKA

This museum is located away from the immediate vicinity of the trail but is another museum that has a lot to offer to the modern traveler trying to recapture earlier periods in history. Major displays focus on the American Indian, pioneer history, natural history, geology, early modes of transportation, firearms, and collectible Americana. In addition there is a discovery center for children, a planetarium, and a new IMAX theater. It offers something for everybody.

The museum is located in Hastings, 15 miles south of I-80 on U.S. Highway 281 at 14th Street.

FORT KEARNEY STATE HISTORICAL PARK AND MUSEUM, NEBRASKA

This fort is a Nebraska State Historic Park. It was constructed in 1848, the year after the first wave of Mormon emigrants. It was first named Fort Childs, but shortly was renamed Fort Kearny. Today one can visit its fine museum, as well as the reconstructed blacksmith shop, magazine, and stockade. It is also possible to relax in the shade of trees which were absent when the emigrants first went west. The Mormons who left the jumping-off places of Independence, Westport, Fort Leavenworth, St. Joseph, or Nebraska City would all have passed Fort Kearny.

The fort is located about seven miles southeast of Kearney on L50A, off State Route 44.

THE GREAT PLATTE RIVER ROAD ARCHWAY MONUMENT KEARNEY, NEBRASKA

This structure combines the graceful beauty of an arch with the look of a wooden western fort, and it is located right over I-80. For those traveling in Nebraska the monument is found almost midway across the state. The center has a theater and two floors of displays that focus on the history and importance of the Platte River valley. From the early period of Indian occupation until today the Platte River has played a crucial role in the history and cultures of the peoples who passed through or lived there.

The visitor can take a walking tour through the arch's continuous displays and experience the march of history, including the periods of Indian habitation, the mountain men, the Oregon pioneers, the gold-seeking California

argonauts, the Mormon wagon and handcart immigrants, the Pony Express, the building of the transcontinental railroad, and the construction of the Lincoln Highway and the modern interstate. State-of-the-art electronic and visual displays bring the whole westware experience to life.

The arch spans Interstate 80 near Kearney, Nebraska.

ASH HOLLOW, LEWELLEN, NEBRASKA

This Nebraska State Historic Park marks the site where the Oregon–California Trails came down off the plateau to travel along the valley of the North Platte River. Brigham Young sent some Mormons across the river from the north side to verify his location. Today visitors can see the scars on the hills where the emigrant wagons dropped down into Ash Hollow. The area was a favorite camping ground for emigrants because of its fine spring, which is still flowing. A small cemetery is also located there. The museum has fine displays about the geology of the area, the use of the area by Indians, and the emigrant period.

The park is located on U.S. Highway 26, south of Lewellen, just after crossing the North Platte River.

ANCIENT BLUFF RUINS SITE, NEBRASKA

There is only a marker at this site. These landforms were often recorded by the Mormons and others traveling on the north side of the North Platte River. The bluffs were often thought to look like the ruins of an old fortress.

The marker and bluffs are located on the north side of U.S. Highway 26 near Broadwater, Nebraska.

COURTHOUSE AND JAIL ROCKS AND CHIMNEY ROCK STATE HISTORIC SITE, NEBRASKA

Chimney Rock is the most recorded landmark on the western trails. The early Mormons saw both landmarks from the north side of the river. Many strained their eyes hoping to be the first to see these sites. At that time there were no trees along the Platte to block their view. Today there is an outstanding museum at Chimney Rock, telling the story of the westward migrations. There are a number of hands-on exhibits that are terrific for children. Chimney Rock is also a National Historic Landmark.

Both landmarks are off Highway 92 near Bridgeport, Nebraska. Courthouse and Jail Rock are five miles south and Chimney Rock about fifteen miles west.

**SCOTTS BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT
AND OREGON TRAIL MUSEUM,
GERING, NEBRASKA**

The travelers on the north side of the river did not pass through either Robidoux Pass or Mitchell Pass at Scotts Bluff. However, the landmark was on the horizon for a number of days as the Mormons moved along the river. The Oregon Trail Museum is located at Mitchell Pass, which became the main route of the Oregon–California Trail in the early 1850s. Earlier trappers and emigrants used Robidoux Pass a few miles further to the southwest. The museum uses many of William Henry Jackson’s paintings to tell the story of the migrations west. Visitors can walk in the path of the wagons that cut their way deep into the earth here. Some emigrants indicated they crossed the North Platte and climbed the bluff and had a spectacular view of the area. Today visitors may either walk or drive to the top of Scotts Bluff. The view today is still spectacular.

The museum is located on Highway 92 just west of Gering, Nebraska.

**REBECCA WINTERS’S GRAVE SITE,
SCOTTS BLUFF, NEBRASKA**

While hundreds of Mormons perished on their way to Salt Lake Valley, very few Mormon graves have been identified. This grave is marked by a bent iron wagon wheel. After the survey the railroad relocated its tracks a few yards so as not to disturb the gravesite.

The since relocated grave can be found three miles east of Scotts Bluff just off U.S. Highway 26, near the railroad tracks in a park with a historical marker.

**FORT LARAMIE NATIONAL HISTORIC
SITE, FORT LARAMIE, WYOMING**

The Mormon Trail crossed from the north side of the river to the south side, where it joined the main Oregon–California Trail. From here on emigrants to Oregon, California, or to Utah all traveled the same route. The first Fort Laramie, Fort William, was a wooden stockade fort, which had been replaced with an adobe fort, Fort John, when the Mormons first came through. The U.S. government soon replaced Fort John with its military structures. Today, it is the Fort Laramie of the military period that visitors see. This is an outstanding museum with many living history displays. The oldest structures are the restored Old Bedlam and the sutler’s store. Within a few miles of the fort are many miles of trail ruts and

swales as the Mormon–Oregon–California Trails traveled along the river.

The fort is located only three miles off U.S. Highway 26, west of the town of Fort Laramie.

REGISTER CLIFF AND OREGON TRAIL RUTS DISPLAY, GUERNSEY, WYOMING

In this area the wagons and handcarts were forced close to the cliffs and then over them. The wheels cut deeply into the ground and rocks, leaving dramatic evidence of the thousands who passed by here. Many people also wrote their names on the cliffs along the river. Today you can see some of their names and walk along the same route taken by those thousands of emigrants crossing the hill.

The sites are located at Guernsey, Wyoming, off U.S. Highway 26.

WYOMING PIONEER MEMORIAL MUSEUM, DOUGLAS, WYOMING

This is another fine example of a local community that has invested time and resources to develop an excellent museum. While its focus is not on the Mormon experience itself, one aspect is on the westward migrations. There are numerous other displays and fine exhibits which would be of interest to young and old—from the Indians to the range wars and to life in the early West—including guns, clothing, furniture, and many other items.

The museum is located in Douglas, off Center Street, in the Wyoming State Fairgrounds.

AYERS NATURAL BRIDGE PARK, WYOMING

This natural wonder was visited by many emigrants on their way west. There are no historic displays there, but there is a campground and picnic area. You may also wade in the stream, just as the pioneers did so many years ago. It provides a cool break and resting spot from the hot trail even today.

The park is located between Douglas and Casper, about five miles south of I-80 on Natural Bridge Road.

FORT CASPAR MUSEUM, CASPER, WYOMING

This is the site of the original Mormon Ferry established by Brigham Young in 1847. In 1849 another ferry was located a few miles down the

river. Louis Guinard built a trading post and then a bridge over the Platte here at the site of the original Mormon Ferry in 1859. The military was stationed there in 1861. It was originally called the Platte River Bridge Station, and the post was expanded. After Lieutenant Caspar Collins was killed in 1865, the post was renamed in his honor. The fort was abandoned in 1867. The reconstructed fort holds fine displays about the trails west and a full-scale model of the Mormon Ferry. Other sites related to the last crossings of the Platte are also nearby. The site of the 1849 ferry and Reshaw's bridge are both within Casper. To the southwest is Bessemer Bend or the Red Buttes, the last area where emigrants, both Mormons and Gentiles alike, crossed the North Platte.

The fort and site of the 1847 Mormon Ferry are located in Casper on Fort Caspar Road just before it crosses the North Platte River.

HISTORIC TRAILS INTERPRETIVE CENTER, CASPER, WYOMING

Another museum in the planning stage, scheduled for completion by the late 1990s, is the Historic Trails Interpretive Center. It will focus on the different trails that funneled through Casper: the Oregon-California, the Mormon, the Bozeman, and the Bridger Trails. It will also include material about the Overland and Pony Express Trails, both of which went through southern Wyoming.

Between Fort Caspar and Fort Bridger there are no museums relating to the Mormon migrations. However, there are a number of sites and landmarks that were important to their journey west. Many of these are in the Sweetwater River Valley as the trail heads for the South Pass and can be seen from the highway.

INDEPENDENCE ROCK, DEVIL'S GATE, MARTIN'S COVE, AND SPLIT ROCK, WYOMING

These sites are all within a few miles of each other. Independence Rock was a major camping area. The Sweetwater River provided a large supply of freshwater and grass. The highway rest stop and display allow visitors to walk over the trail and visit the rock Father Pierre DeSmet had called the "Great Register of the Desert." Many of the names carved by the emigrants who passed by can still be seen on the rock. For those who have the time and energy to climb the rock, the view is beautiful, but be extra careful not to destroy the emigrant carvings.

The view to the west from Independence Rock shows Devil's Gate, where the Sweetwater River cut through the granite hills. The emigrant

trail goes through a low spot to its south. The Mormon Handcart Visitors' Center is located past Devil's Gate. The center deals with both Devil's Gate and the disaster that hit Edward Martin's Handcart Company in freezing weather in 1856. Martin's Cove itself is about two miles west of Devil's Gate on the north side of the river. Looking further west one can see the famous Split Rock.

The visitors' center and displays are located off Highway 220.

Additional landmarks the emigrants saw and wrote about can be seen further west along Highway 220 and U.S. Highway 287. Stops can be made at Split Rock and at the Ice Slough. The site of James G. Willie's handcart disaster of 1856, involving another company caught unprotected by cold winter weather, is located many miles off the modern Highway 28 and is difficult to find.

SOUTH PASS, WYOMING

This is the great pass through which emigrant traffic was funneled. Yet the climb was gentle and the pass wide. It was not a cleft in the Rocky Mountains as some people thought. Many emigrants might not have realized that they were passing through it if they had not been told where they were. The display tells about the significance of the pass.

The interpretive site for the South Pass is about four miles west of the actual South Pass on the emigrant trail. It is located about forty-five miles southwest of Lander, Wyoming, on Highway 28. Looking back east at the pass one can easily see the green grass at Pacific Springs—the first water encountered flowing west to the Pacific. To visit the actual pass return east from the display area four and a half miles, turn south (right) onto a dirt road with a sign to the South Pass. Go about three miles and turn west (right) on the emigrant trail itself. Proceed one mile to the pass itself and the markers. Pacific Springs is two miles farther west on the rough road.

LOMBARD FERRY, WYOMING

This was the site of another Mormon ferry that was established by Brigham Young and the Mormon Pioneer Company in 1847. The Green River was, at times, a dangerous river to cross, and the Mormon ferry provided a safer passage for later arriving Mormons and other emigrants to use. Soon other non-Mormon ferries were established in the area. The display concerns the significance of this site.

The site is on the south side of the Green River where the Highway 28 bridge crosses the Green River.

CHURCH BUTTE, WYOMING

At present there is no display at the butte. The old marker has been vandalized. This landmark was sometimes referred to as Cathedral Rock, Solomon's Temple, or Castle Butte.

The butte is located on old U.S. Highway 30. Take the Church Butte exit from I-80 and head north and east about five miles on a rough gravel road.

FORT BRIDGER STATE HISTORIC SITE, FORT BRIDGER, WYOMING, AND FORT SUPPLY

Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez established their trading post here in 1842–43. Many of the buildings from the military period of Fort Bridger have been restored and are open. There is a fine museum in what was once the infantry barracks. The Mormons who arrived in 1847 saw Bridger's log fort. A replica of it has been reconstructed on the grounds. There visitors can step back into the time of the mountain men. Also on the grounds is a small portion of a wall of the Mormon Fort, built after the Mormons had purchased the fort from Bridger and Vasquez. Extensive archaeological work is being done in the area. There are changing living history displays.

The Fort Bridger Historic Site is located at the west end of the little town of Fort Bridger off I- 80.

Another site southwest of Fort Bridger is the site of Fort Supply. Today there is only a marker in the tall grass next to a country road. However, in the fields are the remnants of some of the posts of the fort. Brigham Young had this fort built to provide supplies for emigrating Mormons, but also to act as a first line of defense. Modern travelers would have to inquire locally about directions to its location.

The next major museums and sites are located in the city of Salt Lake itself. However, while traveling down Echo Canyon in Utah travelers will again experience the same canyon walls and sights as the Mormons when they traveled. Within the canyon are some of the remains of the earthworks built by the Mormons as protection during the so-called Mormon, or Utah, War of 1857. No battles were fought during this "war." It was more a war of nerves.

SALT LAKE CITY AREA, UTAH

As the Mormons broke out of Emigration Canyon they had their first full view of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake and their "promised land."

Salt Lake City has many sites related to the Mormon Trail and Mormon history in general. The “This is the Place” monument and its beautiful sculptures, the Pioneer Trail State Park and Old Deseret Village with its extensive living history exhibits, Temple Square with the Temple and Tabernacle, the headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the Museum of Church History and Art, the Beehive House, the Family History Library, the Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum, the Utah Historical Society Museum, and the Joseph Smith Memorial Building all deserve your time and attention in order to truly appreciate the Mormon Trail experience. Observe the layout of the city—its roads and parks even are related to early Mormon history. The city is basically laid out in a rectangular grid with streets wide enough for a wagon team to make a U-turn. Remnants of a low wall that surrounded the old city can still be seen. The Joseph Smith Memorial Building has an IMAX theater, showing a movie titled “Legacy,” which highlights Mormon history, including the persecution, the martyrdom, and the migrations. All these are but a few of the things to see.

From Salt Lake City the Mormons soon spread out to establish new communities throughout the Great Basin area and into part of California. They played a major role in developing new roads and trails in the area—but that is another story.

