In Another Time

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Ho! for the Great Salt Lake

Mormons Give Up Livelihoods in a Rush for the Promised Land
1846–1847

By the middle of May [1846], it was estimated that 16,000 Mormons had crossed the Mississippi and taken up their line of march with their personal property, their wives and little ones, westward across the continent to Oregon or California; leaving behind them in Nauvoo a small remnant of a thousand souls, being those who were unable to sell their property, or, who having no property to sell, were unable to get away.

—Gov. Thomas Ford in History of Illinois

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, reacting to threats from Illinois citizens if it did not leave their state, began an exodus from Hancock County in February 1846—its ultimate destination neither Oregon nor California but the Great Salt Lake Valley.

Orson Pratt, a member of the church’s Council of Twelve Apostles, had in November 1845 sent a message to Mormons throughout the eastern and middle states, urging them to join the hegira as early in the spring as “grass would grow or water run.” Exhorted Pratt, “We do not want one saint to be left in the United States after that time. Let every branch in the east, west, north and south be determined to flee out of ‘Babylon,’ either by land or sea, as soon as then.” Those who could acquire teams during the winter were advised to go by land, but those who preferred to leave by boat were not dissuaded.

Illinois Mormons were surrendering their homes and property for pennies on the dollar after clashing with “old settlers” over church doctrine and political power and suffering the assassination of their two leading elders, the founding prophet Joseph Smith Jr. and his brother Hyrum, at the hands of a mob at Carthage Jail in June 1844. The threat of civil war between the Mormons and their enemies gradually eased but never quite vanished. Being forcibly expelled from Nauvoo, a city church members literally had lifted from swamplands, marked a bitter end to years of squabbling with their non-Mormon neighbors. With state militia eager to torch homes and oust them with musket and bayonet, there was little choice but to go.

As early as January 1845, church leaders were mulling the idea of sending a company to California to seek a suitable place of refuge for the church. (The Nauvoo Neighbor on January 29 printed a story reporting that Captain John C. Frémont had reached the Great Salt Lake in the fall of 1843 on his third western expedition.) In late August, the council agreed on the California expedition. But a week later they resolved, instead, to send fifteen hundred pioneers to Great Salt Lake Valley and began collecting information on immigration. What happened in that week to change plans so drastically has never really been resolved by historians. Prevailing opinion is that
Carthage Jail, Hancock County, Illinois, scene of the assassination of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. LDS Church Archives.

The Mormon exodus from Nauvoo. LDS Church Archives.
Mormon leaders distrusted Illinois Governor Thomas Ford, who strongly recommended the move. But the more likely explanation is Brigham Young’s unwavering insistence on settling in a location no one else coveted: Great Salt Lake Valley met the requirement in all respects.

By the third week in December, Franklin D. Richards was reading aloud to council members Frémont’s *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–44*, which gave an account of his travels to California and described in some detail the country around Great Salt Lake. A few days later, Parley P. Pratt was doing the same with Lansford W. Hastings’s recently published *Emigrants’ Guide, to Oregon and California*.

As part of his plan to plead the LDS Church’s case, Young and his counselors had written to President James K. Polk and every governor in the United States except those in Missouri and Illinois, seeking sanctuary for the Mormons or support of the church’s “Great Western Measure,” which sought to colonize Oregon or some location remote from the United States. Those who answered declined assistance; some urged the Mormons to move to Oregon, California, Nebraska, or Texas.

To borrow a phrase, the die was cast. February and March 1846 saw Mormons pouring across the Mississippi to the snow-crusted Iowa shore by the hundreds and by the thousands. They were preparing, not for a blind, wandering trek across the frontier, but for what would be a carefully planned and organized journey to a specific locale west of the Rockies, where they would settle and worship as they pleased, these first citizens-to-be of the Territory of Utah.

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Samuel Brannan, restored to favor after being disfellowshipped, took 238 men, women, and children of the LDS Church aboard the chartered vessel *Brooklyn* to sail from New York to Yerba Buena (San Francisco) by way of Cape Horn and the Sandwich Islands (today’s Hawaii). *Brooklyn* cleared the harbor on its southward voyage February 4, 1846.

Meanwhile, the first families began crossing the frozen Mississippi on that same frigid February day, with temperatures barely above zero. They began gathering for a camp at Sugar Creek in Iowa territory, about nine miles from Nauvoo. Nine babies were born that first freezing night at Sugar Creek, some in tents, others in wagons, in rain, sleet, and snow. Five hundred wagons formed the vanguard of the caravan rolling from that encampment ever south and west, reaching Council Bluffs in mid-June. But before Council Bluffs came camps at Richardson Point, Chariton River, Locust River, Garden Grove, and Mount Pisgah. It was at Chariton River that order and discipline were restored to the mass evacuation; the camp’s affairs were set in order and families organized into “hundreds” and “fifties” with captains over each. The whole was named Camp of Israel, with Brigham Young unanimously elected its president.

The camp settled in at Council Bluffs, while Young and his council planned the next move. But on June 26 at Mount Pisgah occurred an incident of great importance. U.S. Army Captain James Allen rode into that camp with *A Circular to the Mormons* explaining that Allen had been instructed by Colonel Stephen W. Kearny, commander of the Army of the West, to recruit five hundred volunteers from among the Mormon membership for service in the war against Mexico, declared the month before. Contrary to later remarks by Brigham Young that the federal government unfairly demanded volunteers during a desperate time for the Mormons, the recruiting call, in fact, had come in response to urgent pleas by church elder Jesse C. Little—acting on Young’s orders—for President Polk’s “assistance in moving the Saints to California” as part of Kearny’s army.

The volunteer battalion of Mormons was raised and marched out under Allen’s command to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where it was outfitted for what was to become, by some estimations, the longest infantry march in U.S. military history—twelve hundred miles along the Santa Fe Trail and beyond to San Diego. Before leaving the Camp of Israel, however, battalion members were instructed to tarry once they reached California until the mountain passes were free of snow before attempting to rejoin the main body of pioneers somewhere in the Great Salt Lake Valley “in one or two years.” And so the bone and sinew of the Mormon camp—five hundred of its best men—marched off to Fort Leavenworth. The Camp of Israel retrenched, settled in for the winter, and made plans for the pioneer advance party to strike out for the Great Basin.

In anticipation of a spring departure by a pioneer party, the main body of Mormons moved to the west bank of the Missouri River and began laying out a secure “Winter Quarters” camp of log cabins enclosed by a stockade. Upward of 1,000 houses were built on 820 lots within 41 blocks. Winter Quarters eventually became Florence, Nebraska, and today is within Omaha’s city limits.

Spring of 1847 found the pioneer company gathering at the Elkhorn River, a tributary of the Platte, ready for the trek west. Coincidentally, Parley P. Pratt and John Taylor, two apostles who had been on a Mormon Church mission to England, returned and joined the company in early April. Taylor had brought with him “scientific instruments” ordered by Brigham Young for use by the pioneers. On the evening of April 13, they unpacked “two sextants, one circle of reflection, two artificial horizons, two barometers, several thermometers, telescopes and so forth.” The pioneers also were furnished with maps of the route to Oregon and maps of Frémont’s route to California via the Great Salt Lake in 1843 and of his return in 1844 by way of southern California, the Mojave River, Las Vegas, the Rio Virgin, the Sevier River, Utah Lake, Spanish Fork Canyon, the Uintah River, and so on to Pueblo, Colorado, and the rest—further evidence of the knowledgeable planning and scope of the Mormon migration.

On the afternoon of April 16, the Pioneer Camp numbered 143 men, 3 women, and 2 children (down one man from the “twelve times twelve” originally called for, because Ellis Eames took sick on the 18th and returned to Winter Quarters). The women were Harriet Page Wheeler Young, wife of Brigham’s brother, Lorenzo D. Young; Clarissa Decker Young,
Mormons driven from Nauvoo. Illustration by C. B. Hancock; LDS Church Archives.

The Nauvoo Temple in ruins. Illustration by Frederick Piercy; LDS Church Archives.
Brigham's wife; and Ellen Sanders Kimball, wife of Heber C. Kimball. The children, Isaac Perry Decker and Lorenzo Sobieski Young, were those of Harriet Young. These and the men of the company would be the first citizens of Great Salt Lake City of the Great Basin of North America. There were 73 wagons in the camp, 93 horses, 52 mules, 66 oxen, 19 cows, 17 dogs, and a clutch of chickens. The travel organization of the pioneer company was completed with the naming of two captains of hundreds, Stephen Markham and A. P. Rockwood; captains of fifties, Tarlton Lewis, John Pack, and Shadrach Roundy; and captains of tens, Wilford Woodruff, Ezra T. Benson, Phineas H. Young, Luke Johnson, Stephen H. Goddard, Charles Shumway, James Case, Seth Taft, Howard Egan, Appleton Milo Harmon, John S. Higbee, Norton Jacob, John Brown, and Joseph Mathews. The company also included three slaves, Hark Lay, Green Flake, and Oscar Crosby, Utah's first black citizens.

On April 19 the camp moved out under the supervision of the various captains, covering twenty miles the first day on a line of march along the north side of the Platte. The south bank had by now become the Oregon Trail from Independence, Missouri, to the Willamette Valley. By 1847 it was a national wagon road as far west as Great Salt Lake because the Harlan-Young and Donner-Reed companies had pushed it through the year before. The trail went all the way to California by the Fort Hall route. The Mormon pioneers followed the north bank to Fort Laramie, at which time they crossed to the south side. They made it through Pawnee lands with minor abrasions.

In buffalo country the company hunters knocked down a meat supply, and in mid-May the pioneers noted the addition of an “odometer” to their wagon train. William Clayton, who was keeping a journal of the trek, had been frustrated in attempts to accurately estimate the distance traveled each day. He appealed to scientist-mathematician Orson Pratt to help him out. Pratt designed a device that would attach to a wagon wheel and would turn 360 revolutions in a mile, each mile then being ticked off on a small secondary gear. With Pratt’s design, Appleton Milo Harmon, a skillful carpenter, fashioned a model from wood, and it was mounted on one of Heber C. Kimball’s wagons that had the proper circumference wheel. From that day forth the pioneer trek was more accurately measured for the benefit of Mormon companies that followed. While not
unique, the Clayton-Pratt-Harmon odometer can be considered among the earliest uses of the device in overland travel.

Halting for two days at Fort Laramie to refit the wagon train, making needed blacksmith repairs and such, the pioneers learned that a Mississippi detachment of church members plus a sick detachment released from the Mormon Battalion were en route from Pueblo, in today’s Colorado, to join the main company and accompany it to the Great Salt Lake Valley. Young also received information that some two thousand wagons of immigrants were on the road west for Oregon and California and advance companies were but two days from Fort Laramie. That was enough to hurry the Mormon camp back on the trail.

Mid-June brought them to the upper Platte River crossing, where an advance work party of Mormons had prepared a ferry to take the pioneers over. Once across they would follow the Sweetwater River to South Pass, the saddle of land that separates the waters of the Pacific from the Atlantic, the passage over the Rocky Mountains to the western slope, 275 miles (by odometer) from Fort Laramie.

The pioneers now came in frequent contact with Oregon immigrants and occasional eastbound parties of trappers and mountaineers. At Pacific Springs west of the pass, they encountered noted mountain man Moses “Black” Harris, who gave them issues of the Oregon Spectator, the first newspaper published on the Pacific Coast, and a number of copies of the California Star published by Samuel Brannan, the Mormon elder who had taken the sailing ship Brooklyn to Yerba Buena the year before. Also at Pacific Springs was Thomas L. “Peg Leg” Smith, who operated a trading post on Bear River near Soda Springs, in present Idaho. Two days later, near present Farson, Wyoming, they met Jim Bridger, who suggested it was imprudent to bring a large population into the Great Basin until they were sure grain could be grown; the mountain man’s pessimism was such that he offered $1,000 for the first ear of corn raised in the valley “or the Utah Outlet,” which the Mormons would name the Jordan River.

At Green River on June 30, Samuel Brannan himself, direct from San Francisco, rode into the Camp of Israel. He gave the pioneers an account of the Brooklyn voyage and told of the Donner party disaster in which so many immigrants had succumbed in the Sierra Nevada to the elements and starvation. Brannan also attempted without success to persuade Young to lead the Mormons to California, rather than the Great Salt Lake Valley. About this time an advance company of the so-called Pueblo detachment (the sick and disabled) of the Mormon Battalion, caught up with the Camp of Israel.
Five days later, the pioneers had reached Fort Bridger, at which point they left the Oregon Trail and followed Lansford W. Hastings’s cutoff, which would lead them into Great Salt Lake Valley. They followed a route “dimly seen as only a few wagons [Harlan-Young and Donner-Reed] passed over it last season,” wrote Orson Pratt in his journal.

Then, on July 10, the Mormons met the red-haired mountain man Miles Goodyear guiding a small party making its way from the Bay of San Francisco to the States. Goodyear intended to meet the Oregon immigration and do some trading. He held a “considerable conversation” with the leading elders and downplayed the Salt Lake Valley as a place for the church. He told them of his “farm” in the “Bear River” Valley (today’s Fort Buenaventura in Ogden) and pointed out a trail to take them to the head of Red Fork (Echo Canyon). They parted with this “first white settler in Utah” for the moment, but the Mormons would have further dealings with the mountaineer once in the valley.

From Echo Canyon the wagon train followed the earlier Donner party trail to Main Canyon, East Canyon, and Big Mountain, then down a difficult descent to Little Mountain and into Emigration Canyon. From the summit of Big Mountain itself, Orson Pratt and John Brown “had a view of the valley for the first time.” On the early morning of July 22, Mormon journals report, an advance party comprising Pratt, Brown, George A. Smith, Erastus Snow, Orrin Porter Rockwell, Joseph Mathews, John Pack, J. G. Little, and another man, whose name was not recorded, entered the valley. That ninth man was Hark Lay, one of the black slaves. The main group reached the floor of the Great Salt Lake Valley later that day, while Brigham Young, who had contracted a type of “mountain fever,”

Samuel Brannan. LDS Church Archives.
remained behind with several wagons until he felt well enough to proceed.

On the morning of July 24, with Young bundled in Wilford Woodruff's easier-riding carriage, the last contingent moved to join the Camp of Israel. "President Young," Woodruff noted in his journal "expressed his full satisfaction in the appearance of the valley." That, in essence, was Brigham Young's seal of approval, his agreement that "this is the place."