In Another Time
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Great Salt Lake Valley, “The Place”

First Few Years in “Deseret” Test Pioneers’ Mettle
1847–1850

When the main party of Mormon pioneers entered the Great Salt Lake Valley on July 22, 1847, two days ahead of their fever-stricken leader Brigham Young, they set about plowing, planting potatoes, and grazing their cattle and horses. Young, suffering from “mountain fever,” had lagged behind with several other wagons until he felt up to making the final drive from Emigration Canyon to the present site of the Salt Lake City and County Building in what would become “Great Salt Lake City of the Great Basin of North America.” And now it is, as it has always been, the 24th of July—the day Brigham Young reached the valley—that is celebrated as founder’s day. More than one wag has wondered aloud what would have become of those potatoes, if Young had not agreed that this was the place.

Most of the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were delighted to finally reach their new mountain home, while others had doubts. Of the three pioneer women who made the journey, Harriet Young, the eldest, said: “Weak and weary as I am, I would rather go a thousand miles farther than remain in such a forsaken place as this!” Ellen Kimball echoed her sentiments, while Harriet’s daughter, Clarissa D. Young, wife of Brigham, seemed satisfied. “My poor mother was almost brokenhearted; terribly disappointed because there were no trees. I don’t remember a tree that could be called a tree.”

Now the pioneers moved quickly; the first field was plowed and five acres turned. Potatoes were cut and planted and ditches dug for irrigation. “We gave the ground quite a soaking,” wrote Orson Pratt in his journal for July 24. (Early LDS records locate the plowed ground as bordered by 200 and 300 South between Main Street and 200 East.) It has been popularly accepted that this marked the birth of modern irrigation, and that may be true, although there were earlier examples of irrigation in the Southwest and it is just as likely that Miles Goodyear at his trading post in Ogden’s Hole had irrigated first in Utah. Goodyear was not alone at Fort Buenaventura; he had a partner, an English mountaineer named Wells who tended the fort while the younger man was off horse trading. Dale L. Morgan described Wells as Utah’s first agriculturist, a man with a green thumb who tended a goodly corn patch and vegetable garden as well as a herd of horses, some cattle, and a large flock of goats and sheep with Goodyear that summer. Where and how Goodyear acquired sheep remains a puzzle, but it is likely he trailed some up after one of his trips to Santa Fe.

Using engineering instruments brought from England, Pratt and Henry G. Sherwood began to survey the city plat during the first week of
Council Bluffs ferry on the Mormon Trail. Illustration by Frederick Piercy; LDS Church Archives.

Loup Fork ferry on the Mormon Trail. Illustration by Frederick Piercy; LDS Church Archives.
Cache Cave (Redden's Cave) near the head of Echo Canyon on the Mormon Trail. Photo by Harold Schindler.

Elk Horn River ferry on the Mormon Trail. Illustration by Frederick Percy; LDS Church Archives.
First glimpse of the Great Salt Lake Valley. Painting by H. L. A. Culmer; LDS Church Archives.

The “This Is the Place” monument overlooks Salt Lake City, crossroads of the West, founded by Brigham Young and his followers in 1847. Photo by Harold Schindler.
August. It was sufficiently accurate that the heart of Great Salt Lake City “has all its lines today as Pratt laid them out in 1847,” said J. Cecil Alter, first director of the Utah State Historical Society. Of primary concern in that initial survey was selection of a site for the proposed Mormon Temple. Alter studied Wilford Woodruff’s diary entry and noted the following account: “We walked from the north [pioneer] camp,” writes Woodruff, “to about the center between the two creeks [this would have brought them approximately to the site of the Kearns Building, or in the street in front of it, or possibly as far east as the Tribune building, Alter says], where President Young waved his hand and said: ‘Here is the forty acres for the temple; the city can be laid out perfectly square, north and south, east and west.’” However, when it came to actually laying out the design on the plat, four central city blocks seemed entirely too much ground, and the temple square was reduced to a quarter that size, a regular city block in relation to which all streets were to be named and numbered.

By the second week in August, the pioneers were well into building the adobe walls of the fort that would house the men remaining in the valley while Young and a return party went back for the rest of the Mormon camps at Council Bluffs and Winter Quarters. The company of Mississippi Saints and the Mormon Battalion sick detachment they had joined at Pueblo followed the pioneers into the valley on July 29. Mormon Battalion men were assigned ox teams and wagons as vanguard of the return company. Young and his apostles on horseback followed with thirty-six wagons two weeks later. They would rendezvous at Winter Quarters and lead the rest of the Mormons to the valley in late summer of 1848.

Those who stayed behind in Great Salt Lake City were left with little but their own devices to face the coming winter. Fortunately, it was mild. These first citizens of Great Salt Lake City proved their mettle time and again in the months and years to come. The wagon parties that had trailed the pioneers from Winter Quarters began streaming into the valley in late September 1847. In the next months, ten companies totaling 1,690 immigrants emerged from Emigration Canyon, overrunning the valley with 2,213 oxen, 887 cows, 124 horses, 358 sheep, 35 hogs, and 716 chickens. The
encampment now was a city on wheels, the wheels of 566 wagons, all dutifully recorded by Camp of Israel historian Thomas Bullock.

One can only wonder how Miles Goodyear, Jim Bridger, and Peg Leg Smith regarded this tumultuous disruption of their solitude. For Goodyear, the answer was to move. Captain James Brown returned from California in November with a saddlebag crammed with Spanish doubloons—back pay for members of the sick detachment of the Mormon Battalion. Brown was authorized by a LDS Church high council to buy Goodyear’s property if a fair price could be agreed upon. For $1,950, Fort Buenaventura and its improvements were sold to Brown, and Goodyear pulled out for California.

The influx of Mormons was almost disastrous. The meager gardens planted in such haste in late July—potatoes, buckwheat, and turnips, with some corn in tassel—lasted only “until the first company [of immigrants] came in and turned their cattle loose; they devoured crops that would have been ready to harvest in a few days,” anguished John Steele. Brigham Young returned in the autumn of 1848, leading even more church members. Three large divisions of wagon companies arrived in the valley in September and October, increasing the population to some five thousand. Young was in Great Salt Lake Valley to stay; he would never again journey east. The church leader now turned his efforts to building a mountain empire. During the winter, the valley Mormons managed to put up nearly twelve miles of fence, enclosing more than five thousand acres. Fall wheat was sown on two thousand acres, and plowing was continuous so long as the weather permitted. The haunting fear was that the crop would fail as many of the mountaineers had direly predicted.

March and April 1848 passed, and by May the grain promised a strong healthy growth, but the appearance of so much wheat attracted swarms of large black crickets; they descended on the fields, clumsily hopping a scant foot at a time, but with an appetite defying description. And they came, it seemed, by the millions, ravaging the wheat, turning yellow fields to ugly brown patches of ruin. Then followed what church members to this day describe as “the miracle.” From the islands in the Great Salt Lake came the California gulls to swoop down on these “black Philistines of the mountains,” the Mormon cricket (anabrus simplex hald), which Thomas L. Kane described as “wingless, dumpy, black swollen-headed, with bulging eyes in cases like goggles, mounted upon legs of steel wire and clock spring, and with a general appearance that justified the Mormons in comparing them to a cross of the spider and the buffalo.”

A cannibal by nature, the Mormon cricket has a voracious appetite, moving it to devour everything edible until nothing remains. It will feast comfortably on its own kind as easily as a shawl or sheet used to protect plants or vegetables. And they swarmed in clouds of “thousands of tons.” Then God sent the gulls—so said the Mormon pioneers. Flocks of birds came gliding in to feast on the crickets. They killed and ate until they were filled, then vomited and ate again. It was a loathsome time. Every morning for three weeks, the gulls sailed in and attacked the insects. Pile after pile of dead crickets littered the fields. The pioneers gathered the filthy mess in baskets, sun dried them, roasted them, and made them into a silage that lasted for months. Most of the crops were saved; in fact, the harvests of 1848 were generally excellent.

While life was hard for the settlers in Great Salt Lake Valley, some improvement was in the offing. In California, gold had been discovered at Sutter’s sawmill on the American River, and as word spread east the United States was about to experience its first full-blown gold rush. For adventurers in the States, there were but two ways to reach the diggings: by ship—around Cape Horn to San Francisco or across the isthmus of Panama by pack train and then by ship again to San Francisco—or overland on the Oregon-California Trail. The overland route would take many gold seekers, with a mind to trade, through the City of the Saints. California’s gold bonanza thus brought its own peculiar prosperity to the Mormons.

Meanwhile the political scene was changing almost as rapidly. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848, ended the war with Mexico; the southern boundary of Texas was set at the Rio Grande. Upper California and New Mexico were ceded to the United States for a payment of $15 million. Brigham Young and his followers, who had fled what they considered religious persecution in Illinois to settle in Mexican
First South in Great Salt Lake City looked like this to Captain Howard Stansbury during his 1850 visit. Utah State Historical Society.

territory, found themselves once again within American boundaries. Never one to waste time, Young issued a call for a convention to "all citizens of that part of Upper California lying east of the Sierra Nevada." The convention met in Great Salt Lake City on March 8, 9, and 10, 1849, and it was agreed to petition Congress for a territorial form of government. Meanwhile the convention adopted a constitution for a Provisional State of Deseret, pending action by Congress.

An election was conducted on March 12, and to no one’s surprise, since candidates were unopposed, Brigham Young was named governor; Willard Richards, secretary; Newell K. Whitney, treasurer; Heber C. Kimball, chief justice; John Taylor and N. K. Whitney, associate justices; Daniel H. Wells, attorney general; Horace S. Eldredge, marshal; Albert Carrington, assessor and tax collector; Joseph L. Heywood, surveyor of highways; and bishops of several Mormon wards were named magistrates. A military unit, the Nauvoo Legion, was organized with Daniel H. Wells as major general and Jedediah M. Grant and Horace S. Eldredge brigadiers.

When the petition to Congress was sent east in May, it was twenty-two feet long and bore 2,270 signatures. It sought a territory to be named Deseret to include all of the country between Oregon and Mexico and between the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada, plus a strip of the California seacoast. In July, the provisional government drafted another memorial, this one seeking outright statehood in preference to territorial status. It was this petition rather than the earlier memorial that ultimately was presented to Congress. But there were forces at work to thwart their efforts.

General John Wilson arrived in the city in August on his way to California. He claimed to be acting as an emissary of President Zachary Taylor to deal for Mormon cooperation in blocking proslavery factions. Young was asked to join with California (newly won in the war with Mexico) in forming a single large state. President Taylor believed, Wilson said, if such a huge land mass could be admitted to the Union leaving the question of slavery to its residents, it would offset the recent acquisition of Texas (a slave state) and thus ease the terrible possibility of a proslavery-antislavery fight. Wilson agreed to Brigham Young’s condition that California and Utah would be separated after two years and each would be an independent state. In return, Young would see that the Mormons dropped all petitions, memorials, and applications to Congress and concentrate solely on early admission of the State of Deseret.

In the end it was California that balked at tying itself to the Mormons and opted to pursue its own interests. Later, when Taylor was confronted in Washington with allegations of his “confidential deal,” he denied all. The fiasco was a crushing setback to Mormon plans, and Young never forgave the chief executive. Taylor had entrenched himself in the Mormons’ Hall of Infamy alongside notables such as President Martin Van Buren, who had agreed their cause was just, but could do nothing for them; Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs,
who told his citizens to exterminate them; and Illinois Governor Thomas Ford, who had promised the Carthage Greys would protect Joseph Smith. In a speech a year after Taylor’s death in office, Young said, “I know Zachary Taylor; he is dead and damned.” Lest he be misunderstood, the church leader later explained, “I love the government and the Constitution of the United States, but I do not love the damned rascals who administer the government.”

Such was the situation when word came of the California rebuff. When next Congress considered the Mormon petitions, it proclaimed the name “Deseret” to be repulsive, and instead approved the Territory of “Utah” on September 9, 1850. Celebration in Great Salt Lake City was enthusiastic; the territory had completed its first important step to becoming part and parcel of the United States of America. But the joy was in large measure premature, as Brigham Young was soon to discover. Utah politically was about to come face to face with the real world.