In Another Time

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Statehood at Last

Amid Jubilation and Bunting
Utah Is Dubbed the Forty-Fifth State of the Union
1890–1897

In the decade preceding the turn of the century, Utah and its citizens experienced an easing of the suffocating pressure applied by the federal government in its crusade to smash Mormon plural marriage. That relaxation was a consequence of the Wilford Woodruff Manifesto discouraging the practice of polygamy in the LDS Church. The doctrine did not go gently, but it did go. It was a time in which President Benjamin Harrison also would issue a manifesto—his offered amnesty to polygamists. That same year, 1893, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints dedicated their Salt Lake Temple forty years after construction of the edifice began in Great Salt Lake City. And, of course, it was the decade in which Utah’s dream came true and its half-century struggle for statehood became reality.

Meanwhile, the territory was progressing in other directions as well. Public-school funding came wholly from local taxes until 1874, a scant revenue derived from taxing citizens who had little cash. In some cases, the taxes were paid in produce or livestock, and that did not permit building schoolhouses. There were still no high schools in Utah as late as 1884, but a comprehensive school law passed in 1890 by the legislature made all common schools free.

Sir Richard Burton, during his visit to Utah in 1860, had some colorfully cogent observations on Mormon education, which, he concluded, was “of course, peculiar.” The famous adventurer and linguist reflected that Utah’s climate “predisposes indolence.” Mormon youngsters, he allowed, had special qualities:

At 15, a boy can use a whip, an axe or a hoe—he does not like the plow—to perfection. He sits a bare-backed horse like a centaur, handles his bowie-knife skillfully, never misses a mark with his revolver and can probably dispose of half a bottle of whiskey. It is not an education I would commend to the generous youth of Paris and London, but it is admirably fitted to the exigencies of the [Utah] situation.

Mormons have discovered, or rather have been taught by their necessities as a working population in a [territory] barely 12 years old, that the time of school drudgery may profitably be abridged. A boy, they say, will learn all that his memory can carry during three hours of book work and the rest had far better be spent in air, exercise and handicraft.

Burton’s views notwithstanding, higher education strengthened its position during the decade. The University of Deseret, revived in 1867, struggled through to 1892, when its name was changed to the University of Utah, and it soon included schools of law, medicine, education, and mining. Brigham Young Academy had
been established in Provo in 1875 but would have to wait until 1903 to become Brigham Young University. The Presbyterian Church founded Salt Lake Collegiate Institute in 1875 (later to become Westminster College), while the Catholics established St. Mary’s Academy; and Utah Agriculture College was founded in Logan in 1888 as a product of a federal land grant act. As for mission schools, the Presbyterian Church established forty-nine in the territory, the Methodists forty-six, the Congregationalists thirty-eight, and the Baptists thirteen.

Utah’s population reached 210,779 by the 1890 census, and as the territory came in closer harmony with the national scene, 1891 saw Republican and Democratic Parties organized in Utah, while the Mormon People’s Party, which had so staunchly fought the Liberals, was dissolved. The Liberal Party would disband in 1893.

Once President Harrison had officially pardoned polygamists, the way was clear to press again for self-rule—work was begun on Utah’s seventh attempt at admission into the Union. Governor Caleb West, in his annual report to the secretary of interior for 1893, now strongly urged passage of an enabling act allowing Utahns to formulate a constitution; he also recommended the return of LDS Church property, which the Edmunds-Tucker Law had escheated. “There is left, neither reason nor excuse, in my judgment for taking from the Mormon Church and people their property, and it ought to be restored to them,” the governor said. West’s use of the word “escheated” was, in the eyes of many citizens, merely an available legal term to describe the act of outright confiscation. Nevertheless, the return of nearly a half-million dollars in personal property was more than welcome to an almost-bankrupt Mormon populace.

The year 1894 saw Utah’s legislature pass a law mandating an eight-hour working day in the territory. And in March 1895, the 107 members of Utah’s constitutional convention convened in the civil courtroom of the new Salt Lake City-County Building at Fourth South and State Streets. It was a diverse group indeed, those 107 delegates. Their task was arduous, especially since they were faced with addressing sensitive issues such as separation of church and state—a particularly prickly question in Utah—and woman suffrage. If nothing else, the delegates brought a wide range of experience to the job at hand. Several had served in previous...
constitutional conventions and were familiar with the infighting and political maneuvering that marked such events. The convention was steeped in talent. There were former legislators, mayors, county selectmen, county attorneys, probate judges, justices of the peace, lawyers, businessmen, merchants, manufacturers, and civic leaders by the score. Many had been active in the Mormon People’s Party and the Liberal Party.

Utah’s then twenty-seven counties all had a voice, and a sharp eye was peeled for potential problems such as water rights, the school system, a realistic homestead law, and collateral headaches. Blurred by a century of hindsight, the perspective of Article I, Section 4, a 134-word guarantee of religious liberty stricter than that found in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, became controversial in the 1990s, when it was argued the 1895 delegates overdrew the constitutional line between church and state. (In 1992, the paragraph was targeted for change in a failed effort by those who supported prayer in public meetings.) Yet it was framed by men who represented the extreme and mainstream factions of nineteenth-century society in Utah.

A unique situation existed in 1895 to ensure a less turbulent atmosphere for convention delegates. Recognizing that the Woodruff Manifesto indeed met conditions for admission to the Union, non-Mormons and their supportive newspaper voice, the Salt Lake Tribune, both opponents of polygamy and ecclesiastical control of politics, reached a delicate armistice with the LDS Church and came out for statehood. In this way, the national press was robbed of fodder to fuel antagonism over Utah’s latest try at self-rule.

With the adjournment of the convention on May 8, 1895, after sixty-six days of vigorous debate and compromise, preparations were made for election of state officers, and all the other requirements being met, President Grover Cleveland signed the proclamation declaring the admission of Utah into the Union on an equal footing with the original states “is now an accomplished fact!” The date was Saturday, January 4, 1896.

Salt Lake City exploded in celebration: cannons, bells, whistles, and general jubilation. Precisely at 9:13 A.M., the superintendent of Western Union Telegraph Company had rushed frantically from his Main Street office brandishing a double-barrel shotgun, the contents of which he discharged skyward in two resounding reports. A small boy, witnessing the unusual scene from a distance, dove for cover, assuming a holdup was in progress. Meanwhile, two blocks away, at 133 South West Temple, Benjamin Midgely was raising the first forty-five-star American flag over the Salt Lake Tribune building. Utah was a state in the Union at last!

As the news spread through the city, merchants began decorating their stores and buildings with national emblems, bunting, and flags. According to the Deseret News, George M. Scott and Cunningham & Company had installed temporary but effective steam whistles outside their respective

Salt Lake City, southeast view. Photo by C. R. Savage. LDS Church Archives.
In haste to salute Utah’s admission to the Union, workers reversed the flag between the east and west towers of the Salt Lake City LDS Temple. Businesses and blared their approbation. Workers hastily strung the Stars and Stripes between the east and west towers of the Salt Lake LDS Temple. And just before noon, a Utah National Guard artillery battery assembled at the capitol and fired a salute of twenty-one guns followed by ringing bells and hooting steam whistles; a half-dozen “bombs” boomed on a downtown street corner and rattled windows for half a block. All this amid enthusiastic cheering from the gathering throng of Utah celebrators. The Deseret News also noted that one Bill Bingley and his “shotgun brigade” kept things popping with repeated volleys opposite Browning Bros. store, while a youngster nearby joined with a vigorous toot on his tin horn.

On inaugural day, the following Monday, citizens crowded the Salt Lake Tabernacle for ceremonies that would invest the new state with its first slate of elected officers. Inside, the tabernacle dome was festooned with an American flag measuring 132 feet by 78 feet and made from 1,296 yards of bunting so weighty it took eight men to carry it. Through the cutout shape of the forty-fifth star, five 32-candlepower electric lights beamed downward on the audience.

The statehood proclamation was read by Joseph L. Rawlins, the territorial delegate who maneuvered the enabling act through Congress. Chief Justice Charles S. Zane administered the oath to the state officials, headed by Heber M. Wells, the new governor. Wells was the son of Daniel H. Wells, third mayor of Great Salt Lake City and commander of the Nauvoo Legion during the Utah War.

As historian Richard D. Poll remarked, Utah already had a larger population than five of her sister states; of its residents, eight of ten were
American born and nine of ten were Mormons. “Apart from approximately 3,000 Indians, mostly on reservations, the 571 Negroes and 768 Chinese counted in the 1895 territorial census were the largest racial minorities.” Few of the new state’s residents lived in cities, though the fifty thousand populating the capital enjoyed many of life’s urban amenities. Power and telephone lines prevailed in the downtown area; the city boasted a university and eight academies, a limited distribution of natural and manufactured gas, sixty-eight miles of street railway, three daily newspapers, three theaters and two businessmen’s clubs, a recently completed gravity sewage system with seven miles of mains, and the three-year-old resort Saltair, perched on piles in Great Salt Lake, further evidence of progress.

But as progress moved from the heart of town, it marched on unpaved streets. As Poll pointed out,

Twenty-seven years as a railroad center had brought Ogden 15,000 inhabitants, 10 miles of street railway, two academies, one of the first hydro-electric projects in the United States, and some of the most eventful Saturday nights to be found outside the mining camps.

Provo with only 400 students in its Brigham Young Academy and the Geneva steel plant not even dreamed of, was a quiet county seat with 6,000 people; its street railway was only six miles long, but it was steam-powered. Logan, with 5,000 inhabitants, was beginning to orient its life around its eight-year-old land-grant college.

As for the rest, the towns of Utah were either unpaved and unexciting farming centers, whose chief buildings revealed the industriousness and occasionally the artistic imagination of the pioneers, or unpaved and uninhabited mining camps, which might be gone tomorrow but were notoriously here today.

As Utah moved forward, the Uinta Forest Preserve, the first national forest in the state, was established in 1897, and the legislature created the Utah Art Institute to sponsor fine arts. The horizons for this spanking new forty-fifth state were bright and beckoning as the new century dawned.
The original Salt Palace in Salt Lake City. Photo by C. R. Savage; LDS Church Archives.