



## Avard T. Fairbanks and the Winter Quarters Monument

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Article Summary: Completed in 1936, Fairbank's monument is perhaps one of America's most moving displays of public sculpture paying tribute to pioneers as they moved westward, often suffering great personal losses along the way.

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Photographs / Images: *A Tragedy of Winter Quarters* (2 views), Avard T Fairbanks, bas-relief listing the names of the deceased, entrance gate, memorial marker near the site of Winter Quarters, sorrowing figure on entrance gate, figure of resurrection on entrance gate, sacred area with bas-relief and *A Tragedy of Winter Quarters*



# AVARD T. FAIRBANKS AND THE WINTER QUARTERS MONUMENT

BY KENT AHRENS

Avard T. Fairbanks's Winter Quarters Monument in Nebraska stands as memorial to the nineteenth-century Mormon pioneers who did not survive the harsh travel West. During the winters of 1846-47 and 1847-48, more than six hundred members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints died in their encampment, called Winter Quarters, on the banks of the Missouri River near Omaha's present-day Florence neighborhood. These men, women, and children were among the large group of church members immigrating westward to the valley of the Great Salt Lake under the leadership of Brigham Young. Today, their burial ground—which also memorializes the six thousand Latter-day Saints who died enroute West between 1846 and the completion of the railroad in 1869—is commemorated by Fairbanks's beautifully executed sculptural program.

In 1830 Joseph Smith (1805-1844) established his first Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Seneca County, New York, with fewer than a dozen members. Within a few years church members established a large community in Kirtland, Ohio, near Cleveland. Unfortunately, Latter-day Saints communities were troubled by outside prejudice and Smith finally led his followers across the Mississippi River into Missouri. By 1839, however, they were again faced with the same difficulties, and Smith brought them back across the Mississippi into Illinois. They settled in Commerce and renamed it Nauvoo, or *beautiful place*, which is the anglicized spelling of traditional Hebrew and is referenced in Isaiah 52:27. A magnificent temple was built at Nauvoo and the community prospered, but prejudices against the church again emerged. A dramatic climax was reached in 1844 when Joseph Smith and

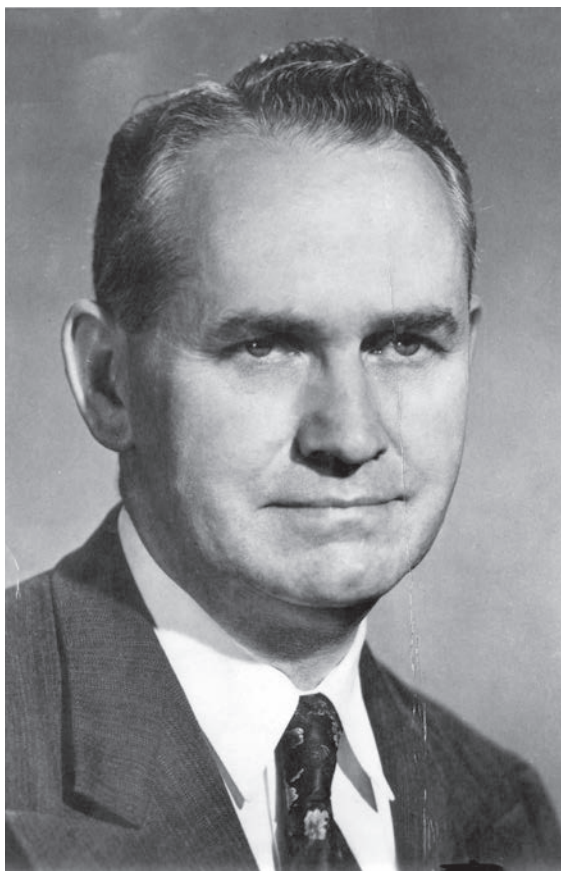
Figure 1, right: Fairbanks. *A Tragedy of Winter Quarters*, Winter Quarters Monument. 1936. Omaha, Nebraska. Author photo







**Figure 2: Avard T. Fairbanks.** Courtesy Dr. Eugene F. Fairbanks.



his brother Hyrum were imprisoned for treason, and while imprisoned were murdered.

Following the death of Joseph Smith, controversy developed among church leaders about who should succeed him. Brigham Young (1801-1877) assumed leadership as president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1844, although he was not ordained as the second president of the church until 1847. Young continued to face leadership controversy within the church and growing outside hostility against church members in Nauvoo. Therefore, in February 1846 Young led the first group of church members across the Mississippi toward the West; other members followed in groups called companies, or "camps of Israel." Travel was extremely difficult and many died on the way, but they finally reached Council Bluffs on the Iowa banks of the Missouri River in June 1846.

As Richard E. Bennett wrote, "The problems facing the Latter-day Saints in the wilderness, estimated by late June 1846 at between three and six thousand, were serious and complex. . . ."<sup>1</sup> The journey across Iowa had left them exhausted, supplies were rapidly depleted, and the heavy rains of March and April delayed their arrival at the Missouri River by weeks. Moreover, it was necessary

to construct a ferry to transport wagons across the river, a time-consuming operation. Young decided that it was too late in the season to push west into relatively unknown territory; instead the livestock should be attended and crops planted in order to continue the journey the following year. While the ferry was being constructed the Latter-day Saints retreated to higher ground in order to escape swampy water and mosquitoes.

From camp they could see the Pottawattamie Indian villages. In order to maintain good relations with the Indians, Young ordered no contact with them and that trading should be done collectively by camp leaders. (The tribes along the west bank of the Missouri were the Omaha, who in 1831 had ceded their land in Iowa, and the Otoe and Missouria, with the Pawnee farther west.) Young also worked to maintain good relations with the federal Indian agents for a number of reasons. He understood that there was a certain mistrust that the Latter-day Saints might join with Indians to fight the United States government, and that the federal agents kept the army at Fort Leavenworth informed of their movement. More importantly, Young needed permission to winter in Indian territory. After President James K. Polk declared war with Mexico in May 1846, officers from the Army of the West approached Young to request that a battalion of five hundred volunteers be formed to fight for the United States in California. Young made a good bargain: the army got its Mormon Battalion, and in exchange the Latter-day Saints were granted permission to establish winter camp on Indian land on both sides of the Missouri River.

The site of the future settlement of Florence, Nebraska, became known as Winter Quarters. Although a community of log cabins was built, many people lived in primitive mud huts. Young supervised construction of Florence Mill and they traded with friendly Native Americans, but despite this their diet was very limited to corn bread, salt bacon, and a little milk. By July 1846 nearly a third of the camp was down with fever, the source of which was mosquitoes in nearby swamps. Scurvy, tuberculosis, malaria, and unidentified fevers infested the camp. Before the settlement was finally abandoned, six hundred men, women, and children died. Several members of the Fairbanks family are among those buried at the Winter Quarters cemetery.

**The Fairbanks family in America** traces its history back to Jonathan and Grace Fairbank, who migrated from Yorkshire, England, and built their home in Dedham, Massachusetts;



**Figure 3: Fairbanks. Bas Relief Listing the Names of the Deceased, Winter Quarters Monument. 1936. Omaha, Nebraska.**  
Courtesy Dr. Eugene F. Fairbanks

the Fairbank House (ca. 1637-1641) is regarded as the oldest surviving timber-framed house from the colonies. In 1846 a descendant, John Boylston Fairbanks, was among the pioneers at Winter Quarters, and he buried his father and his wife's parents there. His son, John B. Fairbanks, born in 1855, became an artist of note, as did his two sons—J. Leo Fairbanks and Avard T. Fairbanks (1897-1987). Avard Fairbanks and his wife Maude had eight sons and two adopted daughters. His children distinguished themselves in the sciences, medicine, the arts and related cultural activities.

Although Avard Fairbanks's work has not received the scholarly attention it deserves, he was one of America's most accomplished twentieth-century sculptors in the Beaux Arts tradition. He was a precocious youth. When Avard was about twelve years old his father took him along to New York, where the boy studied for a time at the Art Students League under James Earle Fraser. In New York he also became acquainted with Hermon A. MacNeil, Gutzon Borglum, Phimister Proctor, and Anna V. Hyatt, among others.<sup>2</sup> By 1914 father and son had traveled to Paris, where Avard studied at the École

des Beaux Arts with Jean Antoine Injalbert, and at the Académie Colarossi and École de la Grande Chaumière. The outbreak of World War I terminated their sojourn, and they returned to Utah.

Back in America, Avard completed his high school education and continued with his sculpture. In 1915 his work was included in the Panama Pacific Exposition, and in 1920 he joined the faculty at the University of Oregon to teach sculpture. He remained on the faculty until 1928. However, he received a leave of absence from Oregon to take his BFA degree from Yale University, and in 1927 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to pursue creative sculpture in Europe and to study at the Scuola Fiorentina de Pittura in Florence. In Italy he completed a bronze honoring the *Archiconfraternita della Misericordia* and *The Pioneer Mothers Memorial* for Vancouver, Washington. While teaching at Seattle Institute of Arts in 1929, he completed the *91<sup>st</sup> Division Memorial*, Fort Lewis, Washington, which is regarded as one of his finest memorials.<sup>3</sup>

In 1929 Fairbanks joined the faculty of the University of Michigan, where he taught until 1947; during World War II he spent some time working



**Figure 4: Fairbanks and J. Leo Fairbanks. Entrance Gate, Winter Quarters Monument. 1936. Omaha, Nebraska.** Courtesy Dr. Eugene F. Fairbanks



for the automotive industry in Detroit. Among his contributions to industrial design were the ram for Dodge automobiles as well as radiator ornaments for the Plymouth and Hudson.<sup>4</sup> While at Michigan he earned a Ph.D. in anatomy.

#### **The Latter-day Saints burial**

ground seemed to have been all but forgotten until 1924 when the Daughters of the American Revolution marked it with a plain board inscription, which they replaced in 1932 with a bronze plaque.<sup>5</sup> (Areas of the cemetery continued to be used by the Florence community.) It was during his tenure at the University of Michigan that Fairbanks conceived and executed the sculptural program at Winter Quarters cemetery. On their drive back to Michigan from Utah, the Fairbanks family stopped in Nebraska, where they found the Winter Quarters cemetery all but forgotten and in a state of neglect. The visit, however, stimulated Avard Fairbanks's imagination. Family tradition mistakenly had it that John Fairbanks and his wife had also buried their first-born child at Winter Quarters. (The child had been buried at Nauvoo.) Fairbanks began to imagine the profound sorrow of a pioneer couple burying an

infant child in this bleak winter landscape before having to move on toward the West. This theme would evolve into the central figural groups at Winter Quarters cemetery.<sup>6</sup>

When he was not teaching in Michigan, Fairbanks would return to Utah, where he often presented demonstrations on sculptural techniques; he would build a model of clay and then tear it down to reuse the material. The subject of a mother and father burying their child, which became his presentation piece, was well received by audiences and gradually stimulated more and more attention. As interest grew, Fairbanks continued working out details on progressively larger models. Apparently it was a life-size version of the statue that attracted the attention of church authorities when it was exhibited in 1934 at the 1933-1934 Century of Progress International Exposition celebrating Chicago's centennial.<sup>7</sup>

Fairbanks proceeded with the project after receiving authorization from Heber J. Grant, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and from Omaha city commissioners.<sup>8</sup> A smaller version of the statue in plaster was shipped to New York City, where it was to be enlarged and



**Figure 5: Fairbanks.**  
**Memorial Marker near**  
**the Site of Winter Quarters,**  
**Winter Quarters Monument.**  
**1936. Omaha, Nebraska.**  
 Courtesy Dr. Eugene  
 F. Fairbanks

cast into bronze by Roman Bronze Works (figs. 1 and 9). Ralph Vanni, who was trained in Italy, did Fairbanks's plaster work. Fairbanks's eldest sons had assisted Vanni in preparing the plaster cast, and when Fairbanks went to New York to make finishing touches on the wax model he took them with him to see the work at Roman Bronze.

Back in Michigan, the sons again played an important part in the next phase of the project—preparation of a nineteen-foot, figured bas relief containing the names of those known to be buried in the cemetery (fig. 3). Incising each letter was a laborious process, especially since the names were listed alphabetically and the panel had to be altered every time another name was discovered. Space was left at either end of the panel in memory of those whose names were lost to history. This large panel was cast by Gorham Company Founders, which specialized in casting fine bas relief panels.

While Fairbanks was preparing the sculpture, David O. McKay and J. Reuben Clark, members of the church authority, traveled to Omaha in April 1936, where they signed a fifty-year lease with the stipulations that the church would landscape and beautify the grounds. They also selected the monument site

and reviewed plans for the landscaping, which was designed by Irvin T. Nelson of Salt Lake City, working in collaboration with the sculptor. The landscaping work was in progress by June 1936.<sup>9</sup>

As the project progressed, unidentified influential persons—no doubt church authorities and donors—requested an addition of inscriptions from poetic and scriptural sources. Fairbanks decided to put these inscriptions on bronze panels set in concrete surrounding the statue and bas relief. Due to time restrictions, Fairbanks had the panels cast by Paxton Mitchell Commercial Casters in Omaha. Since the firm's business was sand casting heavy industrial parts, they had no expertise in finishing bronze and applying the patina. Fairbanks and his sons undertook this work themselves.

Leo Fairbanks, Avard's older brother, taught sculpture at Oregon State College in Corvallis, and during summer vacation came east to assist in the project. Leo executed portions of the two panels flanking the entrance way to the cemetery, although their design was probably Avard's (fig. 4).<sup>10</sup>

A memorial marker identified the area with the inscription, "Winter Quarters Location of the



**Figure 6, left: Fairbanks and J. Leo Fairbanks. Sorrowing Figure, Entrance Gate, Winter Quarters Monument. 1936. Omaha, Nebraska.**

Courtesy Dr. Eugene F. Fairbanks

**Figure 7, right: Fairbanks and J. Leo Fairbanks. Figure of Resurrection, Entrance Gate, Winter Quarters Monument. 1936. Omaha, Nebraska.**

Courtesy Dr. Eugene F. Fairbanks



Camps of Israel. . . .” (fig. 5). The entrance gate to the cemetery is flanked by two masonry pillars with bronze female figures and inscriptions in relief, symbolizing sorrow and hope, respectively (figs. 6 and 7). One reads, “Pioneer Mormon Cemetery. In Loving Memory of the Six Thousand Devoted Pioneers Who Died on the Plains Between 1846-1869. The Bodies of Nearly Six Hundred of those Brave Souls Were Buried Within this Sacred Enclosure.” The other panel reads, in part, “I Am the Resurrection and the Life . . .,” followed by inscriptions from Alma, John, and Doctrine and Covenants.

The sacred area is slightly sunken and paved with Utah stone which radiates out from the bas relief. It contains the heroic statue of the couple burying their child and in front of it the nineteen-foot relief recording the names of the deceased (fig. 8). The statue, generally titled *A Tragedy of Winter Quarters*, rests on a granite pedestal of stone quarried in Utah. A bronze relief panel, which is set in the rear of the pedestal, reads in part, “That the Struggles the Sacrifices and the Sufferings of the Faithful Pioneers and the Cause They Represented Shall Never Be Forgotten this

Monument Is Gratefully Erected. . . .” Seen from the back, the dead knurled tree against the man’s great windswept cloak heightens the sense of cold and despair (fig. 9). The couple’s grief, of course, is more fully articulated from the frontal view. Although Fairbanks treated the figures with realistic detail, the emotional impact of the statue is not compromised. New graves were located during the excavation for the sculptural program. In his reminiscences, Fairbanks wished it to be remembered that when they excavated under the place where the sculpted child would be located, they unearthed the actual remains of an infant who is buried there. He said, “This is something which draws tears to one’s eyes to know there is a little child’s grave under the granite. . . .”

In the center of the large bas relief is a male figure symbolic of eternal life. The radiant beams surrounding him continue into the stonework design of the paved sacred area. Below his outstretched arms is inscribed, “Death and Burial in the Name of Israel.” Although the sculptural figures of the heroic couple burying their child are treated in then-contemporary dress, all other figural work is





rendered in quasi-classical draperies of a more abstract nature in keeping with their symbolic nature.

Some excitement was caused in Salt Lake City on September 17, 1936, when *The Deseret News* published a photograph of Fairbanks's *Tragedy of Winter Quarters*, which had been flown in that morning by airmail. When the Winter Quarters Monument was dedicated on September 20, two special night trains brought church members and other participants from Utah. The trains were greeted by the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, which hosted guests throughout the day. Among the dignitaries were Latter-day Saints President Heber J. Grant and six members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, plus the mayor of Omaha Dan Butler and president of the Union Pacific Railroad Carl R. Gray. Nebraska Governor Robert LeRoy "Roy" Cochran paid tribute to the Mormon pioneers in his address. It is said that more than a thousand people attended the

dedication. Richard L. Evans conducted a national broadcast of part of the dedication for NBC that was released through station WOW Omaha. Today's visitor might wish to begin at the Mormon Trail Center at Historic Winter Quarters.<sup>11</sup>

Fairbanks enjoyed a long and successful career both as a teacher and as a practicing sculptor. As the newly appointed dean in 1948 he organized the College of Fine Arts at the University of Utah, remaining there until 1965 when he was designated professor emeritus. He then spent two years as a resident sculptor at the University of North Dakota. When in 1954 Fairbanks received the prestigious Herbert Adams Memorial Medal and Citation for distinguished service to American sculpture from the National Sculpture Society, he remarked, "I have been a strong advocate of the expression of art at the university level. My work and tenure of office here attest this. However, universities, if they

**Figure 8: Fairbanks. Sacred Area, with Bas Relief and A Tragedy of Winter Quarters, Winter Quarters Monument. 1936. Omaha, Nebraska.**

Courtesy Dr. Eugene F. Fairbanks






**Figure 9: Fairbanks. A Tragedy of Winter Quarters, Winter Quarters Monument. 1936. Omaha, Nebraska.**

Courtesy Dr. Eugene F. Fairbanks

are to undertake this, must provide organized professional teaching on a par with the courses in law or medicine. . . . Now I speak of these things because I know this is one of the developments which will lead us to the Golden Age. And may I leave this with you? We do have an opportunity for new developments for a new Golden Age of culture. And I'm hoping we'll all have a great part to play in such an era. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Fairbanks's extensive *oeuvre* consists of secular and sacred work, ranging from the heroic *Lincoln*, the *Frontiersman* in Hawaii and *Pioneer Family* in North Dakota to *Mortal Moroni* and *Monument to the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon*, both of which stand in Utah. His first statue of the *Pony*

*Express Memorial Rider* is in Nevada, not Utah; in order to honor Fairbanks years after his death, the sculptor Robert Shure with the support of the Fairbanks family erected a large version of the Pony Express rider for Salt Lake City, *Pony Express Memorial Statue* (1998), at Pioneer Trail State Park.<sup>13</sup> Such work by Fairbanks as his *Lycurgus* brought him international recognition when it was placed in Sparta, Greece, and his visionary *Moroni* atop the Latter-day Saints Temple in suburban Maryland is an awe-inspiring sight.

Nevertheless—whether it was the family's personal historical connections to the cemetery at Florence, Nebraska, or the artist's own compassion—Fairbanks's Winter Quarters Monument is perhaps one of America's most moving displays of public sculpture paying tribute to pioneers as they moved westward, often suffering great personal losses along the way. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri: Winter Quarters, 1846-1852* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 46; Carl Carmer, "A Panorama of Mormon Life," *Art in America*, 3 (May-June 1970), 52-65, reproduces the large paintings by Carl Christian Anton Christensen (b. 1831 in Denmark) depicting significant incidences in the early history of the church. Also see John A. Widtsoe, "Winter Quarters: Is Immortalized in Stone," *The Improvement Era* (October 1936), 595-97.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Avard Fairbanks's son, Dr. Eugene F. Fairbanks, for generously sharing unpublished manuscript material and photographs. Dr. Fairbanks placed this material in various institutions associated with his father's art and teaching career. Eugene Fairbanks to Ahrens, Oct. 19, 1995, concerning Utah-born Cyrus E. Dallin, "... I recall meeting this illustrious sculptor in 1933 in Boston. My Father. . . as a boy sculptor and while studying in New York City in 1911, had received counseling and constructive criticism from Mr. Dallin, and considered him a fine friend. . . ." Dallin had executed the *Angel Moroni* atop the Temple at Salt Lake City: see Ahrens, *Cyrus E. Dallin: His Small Bronzes and Plasters* (Corning, New York, 1995), 32-36.

<sup>3</sup> For biographical sketches of Avard Fairbanks, see Eugene F. Fairbanks, *A Sculptor's Testimony in Bronze and Stone: The Sacred Sculpture of Avard T. Fairbanks* (Salt Lake City, 1994), 1-10; and "Creator of Heroic Monuments: Avard Fairbanks, Sculptor," *Artifact. A Regional Magazine of the Arts and Antiques*, 2 (July-August 1996): 20-22, which illustrates the Pioneer Mother Monument.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Fairbanks, *Artifact*, 21. For a discussion of automobile ornament design see Ahrens, *Small Bronzes by Harriet Whitney Frishmuth* (Athens, Ohio, 2001), 7.

<sup>5</sup> "New Monument Brings Recognition To Pioneers Buried At Winter Quarters," *The Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), Church Section, Sept. 12, 1936, 1, 8.



<sup>6</sup> Eugene Fairbanks's typed dictation reads, "The Winter Quarter's Monument was in all respects a family endeavour. . . . By tradition, we understood that a forebearer [sic], John Boylston Fairbanks, while enduring a meager existence with the Mormons at the Winter Quarters encampment in 1846, had with great grief, buried his Father, his wife's Mother and Father and his first child. . . . Although it was later shown that his first child was buried in Nauvoo, Illinois. Nevertheless, the thought of a Mother and Father burying their child, as so many had done, in the bleak windswept winter of a makeshift and temporary pioneer camp, inspired this great masterpiece of historic sculpture."

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Fairbanks, *Sculptor's Testimony*, 80-81.

<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, large commemorative sculpture projects are undertaken by sculptors after they have received a commission from a public or private entity, although no contracts have been located for Winter Quarters. Eugene Fairbanks wrote to Ahrens, June 4, 2014: ". . . My father insisted on contracts. He was not financially able to afford the many other large expenses of a monument, like bronze casting, landscape design and granite pedestals. I feel sure that there were separate contracts with a landscape architect for designs, and a monument company for the granite pedestals. All of the many people and organizations worked cooperatively to accomplish this outstanding monument. . . . When proposing a monument or major work of art, Avard Fairbanks would make small models and send photographs, without a contract, but once an agreement was achieved, a contract was agreed upon. . . . He may have agreed on prices that other professional sculptors would have rejected because of church affiliation and sentimental considerations, but he did expect to pursue agreements on contracts that were profitable."

<sup>9</sup> Clippings, "Winter Quarters Landscaping Planned. Cemetery Monument Selected To Symbolize Tragedy," and "Cemetery Landscaping Gets Started," *Deseret News*, Apr. 30, 1936, June 13, 1936; *Journal History*, 4, 9-10, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

<sup>10</sup> Avard Fairbanks's typed dictation reads, "Leo came East from Corvallis, Oregon during that summer and worked on the panels for the gates. These were very beautiful and inspiring panels."

<sup>11</sup> For information related to the dedication see: clippings, "Heber J. Grant to Lead Party of Officials," *Omaha Bee-News*, Sept. 18, 1936, and "Mormon Day Plans Drafted," *Evening World-Herald*, Sept. 18, 1936, *Journal History*, p. 7, and "Winter Quarters Memorial in the Mormon Pioneer Cemetery, Florence, Nebraska. . .," Church History Library; "Pioneer Monument, Leading Figures In Dedication Rites," also "Scenes As Church Leaders Leave For Winter Quarters Rites," and "Message From The First Presidency," *The Deseret News*, Church Section, Sept. 17, 19 and 26, 1936; "Winter Quarters Dedication Scenes," *The Improvement Era*, December 1936, 777; Eugene Fairbanks, *Sculptor's Testimony*, 84-95. Elder Dean B. Cleverly, Director, Mormon Trail Center at Historic Winter Quarters to Ahrens, May 16, 2014: "At the time the Winter Quarters Nebraska Temple was announced (1999), the city of Omaha transferred the cemetery to the Church. The Facilities Maintenance part of the Church maintains the cemetery and temple grounds. The land is now owned by the Church."

<sup>12</sup> Avard Fairbanks's address upon receipt of the Herbert Adams Memorial Medal and Citation, Minutes of the National Sculpture Society, Annual Meeting, Jan. 12, 1954. During his tenure at the University of Michigan, Fairbanks was a spokesman for the importance of the arts in higher education.

<sup>13</sup> "Pony Express Statue Fete Climaxed By Actual Ride," and "Hundreds Witness Unveiling of Pony Express Memorial Statue," *Tahoe Daily Tribune*, Mar. 17 and Apr. 3, 1963; Bill Harrah, Reno, Nevada, to Avard Fairbanks, Apr. 9, 1963; "XP Pony Express Statue Salt Lake City Ut," [www.xphomestation.com/utstatue.html](http://www.xphomestation.com/utstatue.html) (accessed June 20, 2014).

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*Kent Ahrens is an art historian whose writing about American painting and sculpture appears in various publications.*

