



Winter Quarters, Nebraska, 1846-1848

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Full Citation: E. Widtsoe Shumway, "Winter Quarters, Nebraska, 1846-1848," *Nebraska History* 35 (1954): 115-125

Article Summary: Mormon wagon trains started west in 1846 from Nauvoo, Illinois. They halted near Omaha for the winter and built a temporary city with its own government. When the last of the Saints moved on in 1848, Winter Quarters stood abandoned until the town of Florence grew up on its site.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Brigham Young, Heber C Kimball

People Quoted: Eliza Lyman, John D Lee, H H Bancroft, B Young, Orson Hyde, Andrew Jensen, George A Smith

Place Names: Nauvoo, Illinois; Winter Quarters, Nebraska

Keywords: Brigham Young, Sarpy's (trading post), Florence Land Company

Photographs / Images: plan of Winter Quarters, 1846

WINTER QUARTERS, NEBRASKA, 1846-1848

BY E. WIDTSOE SHUMWAY

THE sharp, irregular bluffs of the slowly moving Missouri River appeared to extend refuge to the Mormons as their wagon trains queued to a halt in June of 1846. They had been driven from Nauvoo, Illinois in February of that year and had crossed over the icy plains of Iowa through all the vicissitudes of winter. With the coming of spring and their safe arrival at the Missouri, it was little wonder that the Saints were in high spirits despite their condition.

While camped on the Iowa side of the river, in the vicinity of Council Bluffs, the Mormons were called upon by the United States Government to furnish five hundred able-bodied men for the Mexican War. This depletion of the male population plus the lateness of the season contributed to the decision to stay at the Missouri until early spring of 1847 and then continue the journey west.¹

A townsite had to be located. On the west side of the river a growth of wild pea vines and rushes grew in rich profusion, which afforded fine winter pasturage for the thousands of animals in camp. Here, some five or six miles above the present city of Omaha, Nebraska, a site was chosen for the building of Winter Quarters. The land that

¹Andrew L. Neff, *History of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1940), pp. 64-66.

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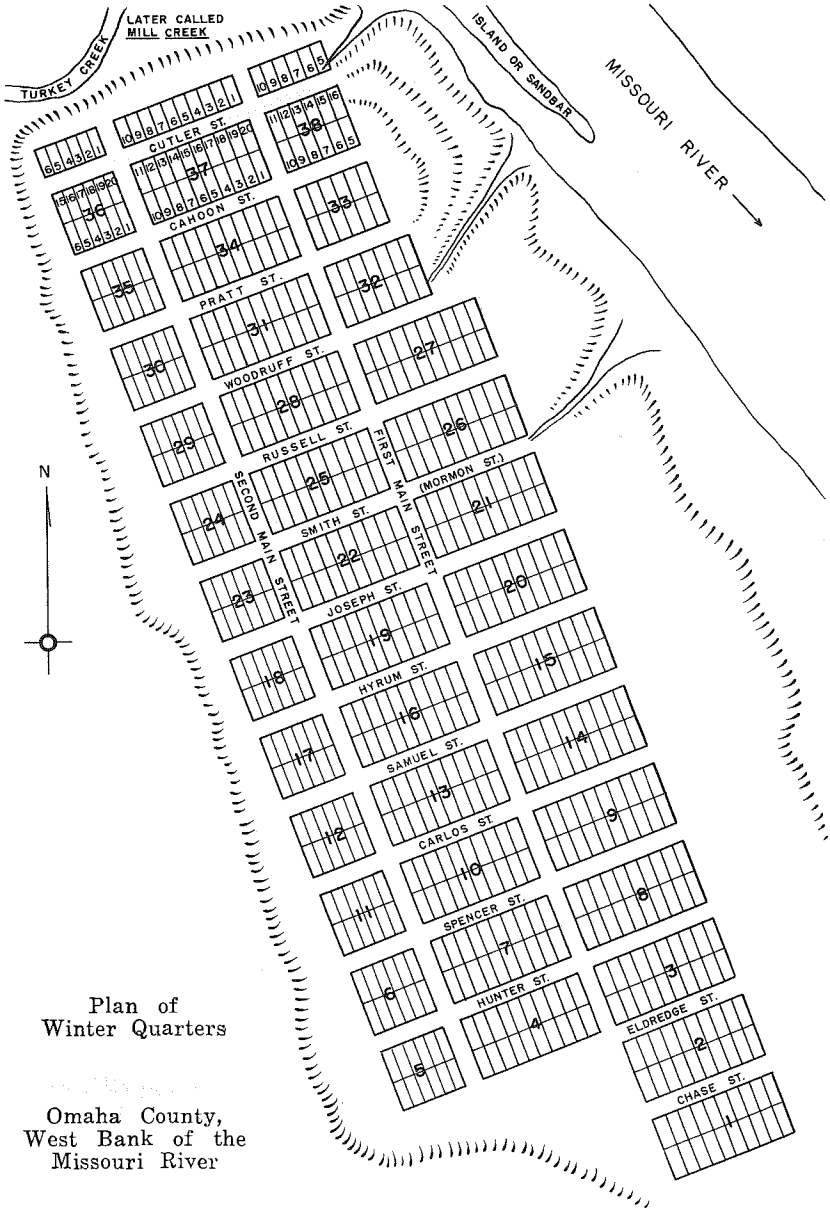
was to be occupied was beautiful, consisting of alternating stretches of prairie and woodlands, and cut into many parts by the streams that wound their way to the river. The great Missouri, meandering between the sharply cut bluffs, afforded stretches of scenery along its bottom lands that were unsurpassed in beauty. The town itself was to be located on a high plateau overlooking the river.²

No sooner had the people begun to arrive at Winter Quarters than a period of great activity ensued. This was to be a planned city. It was laid out in forty-one blocks and 820 lots. Streets and byways were regularly constructed, and the spacing of buildings properly supervised. Labor forces were organized. The men were divided into groups to build fences, houses, and bridges, to dig wells, split rails, clear land, plow, and plant. There was no place for the idler; indeed, idleness was considered just cause for disfellowship. The heavy air over the Missouri resounded with the sharp bite of the axe and the shouts of men. The lowlands where the cottonwood tree grows were full of men and teams cutting and drawing logs to the river for houses. Their industry was of a co-operative nature. Neighbor helped neighbor until each had a shelter over his head.

Homes were first to be planned and erected. Each full block was to contain twenty lots. Young proposed that the brethren build their homes on the outside of these blocks, leaving the inner area for yards and gardens. Five wells to a block were deemed sufficient and were so constructed.³ There were two types of dwellings that predominated: the log house and the dugout. Of the two, the log house became the chief type of shelter. These buildings were generally of logs from twelve to eighteen feet long made from oak and cottonwood timber. Many of the roofs were made by splitting oak timber into boards, called shakes, about three feet long and six inches wide, and kept in place by weights and poles. Other roofs were made of

²B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), III, 131-32.

³Andrew Jensen (compiler), "Winter Quarters," *Nebraska Settlements* (Salt Lake City: Historian's Office, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), October 18, 1846.



Plan of
Winter Quarters

Omaha County,
West Bank of the
Missouri River

Surveyed in the
Fall of 1846

willows, straw, and earth, about a foot thick. Most of the walls were daubed with clay, not only for the purpose of stopping the holes but to make the wall smooth in appearance. Many of these cabins had no floors, but the hard, foot-tamped ground was made to serve the purpose. The dugouts were situated on the sidehills and were constructed by the method the name implies. Using the earth as much as possible to perform the function of walls, these dugouts were usually roofed with straw and dirt supported by a ridgepole held up by two uprights in the center. The structure would be very similar in construction to our present potato storage bins.⁴

Both types of dwellings usually had a door made of shakes, with wooden hinges and string latches. When it came to household furnishings, a few had stoves, but the majority made their cooking facilities from clay and brick which they manufactured themselves. Other household items had to be constructed also, for many of these articles had been traded for food and equipment. These were relatively comfortable abodes except when a heavy storm arose and the water began to seep through the sod roofs. Eliza Lyman's diary, dated October 15, 1846, tells of her experience:

We have taken possession of our log house today. The first house my babe was ever in. I feel extremely thankful for the privilege of sitting by a fire where the wind cannot blow it in every direction and where I can warm one side without freezing the other. Our house is minus floor and many other comforts but the walls protect us from the wind if the sod roof does not from the rain.⁵

In a relatively short time a "miracle" city with pattern and form stood in the wilderness. John D. Lee wrote in his diary his impression of the fruits of their labors.

...I was astonished when I looked around and saw what serious enterprize and industry had brought to pass within 6 weeks past. A city of at least 400 houses

⁴*Ibid.*, December 31, 1846.

⁵Eliza Lyman, *Autobiography and Diary of Eliza Marie Part-ridge (Smith) Lyman*, (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1945), p. 27.

had been erected in that short space of time, through the ingenuity of the Saints.⁶

In three months time about seven hundred houses had been erected, and eventually in the spring of 1847 one thousand homes overlooked the Missouri.⁷

Raising homes was not the only kind of building activity. It was the aim of Brigham Young and the other presiding elders to devise continual means of employment for the three thousand persons throughout the dreary winter to come, lest idleness lead to unhappiness and discontent. Worthy and needful projects were thus embarked upon. The village was enclosed with a stockade. Some crude fortifications and a blockhouse were erected as precautions against the thieving Omaha and warlike Sioux Indians. A meeting house for council and public worship was built. It measured thirty-two feet by thirty-two feet, which was large enough for socials, dances, and other forms of recreation that were held periodically. Workshops of various kinds were added as the need arose. Down on the river could be seen the beginnings of a water-powered grist mill; it was under construction all winter and finished the following spring.⁸

A peculiar city government was established. It was of a theocratic nature with, of course, their Prophet and leader, Brigham Young, at the head of the organization. A high council was selected, which was in this case authorized to exercise the functions both of an ecclesiastical high council and also a civic or municipal council. The duties of this high council were to oversee and guard the conduct of the Saints and counsel them that the laws of God and good order might not be infringed upon.⁹

The city was then divided into thirteen wards; later it was increased to twenty-two. These wards were specified

⁶John D. Lee, *Journals of John D. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Western Printing Company, 1938), p. 17.

⁷E. Cecil McGavin, *The Mormon Pioneers* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1947), p. 135.

⁸Jensen, *op. cit.*, December 22, 1846.

Hosea Stout, "Diary of Hosea Stout," Ms. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University), III, 85.

⁹Roberts, *op. cit.*, III, 149-50.

areas, usually with from one hundred to three hundred inhabitants, that were presided over by a bishop and two councilors. The bishops were to look after both the spiritual and temporal welfare of the people, suggest industrial activities, look to the maintenance of sanitary conditions, care for the poor and sick, and, in general, to see that the Saints attended to their duties.

The community had self-imposed laws and regulations. These laws usually took the form of edicts or pronouncements from the councils of the wisest men. A city guard or police force was established. An independent mail service was organized to serve the various camps between Winter Quarters and Nauvoo. These and various other civic functions gave the settlement a look of permanence.¹⁰

A considerable amount of trade and commercial activity sprang up, for procuring food and supplies for such a large number of people was a major problem. There were two main sources from which the people could supply themselves: (1) trading posts, such as Sarpy's at Trader's Point; and (2) Missouri and Iowa settlements.

It seems that the trading posts were resorted to when buying in small amounts or when a family had cash to pay, for payment in cash was the usual means of carrying on business at these establishments. But lacking the cash needed to purchase at the trading posts, most of the Saints found it easier, or at least more expedient, to trade labor and personal belongings in Missouri and Iowa to the farmers and settlements in exchange for food and supplies. Prices varied with the season, but reports indicate that sugar by the barrel could be had for thirteen cents a pound; coffee, twelve and one-half cents a pound; salt, one dollar twenty-five cents a bushel; molasses, sixty-three to seventy-five cents per gallon; white beans, fifty cents a bushel; pork, from two to four cents a pound; corn, from twenty to fifty cents a bushel; wheat, from thirty-one to fifty cents a bushel; butter, ten cents a pound; and potatoes went from fifty cents to as high as one dollar per bushel.¹¹

¹⁰*Ibid.*, III, 131.

Stout, *op. cit.*, III, 6.

¹¹Lee, *op. cit.*, December 15, 1846; Stout, *op. cit.*, III, 42.

While the "city was a building" and trading activities were being carried on, other tasks and vocations required time and effort. Some of the Saints put in next year's crop; others herded the great droves of cattle, horses, and sheep in the rush bottoms. Furniture had to be made and clothing mended and remade. These duties and the endless repetition of daily tasks around the home kept the people actively engaged.

Village activity soon lost its feverish pitch and settled down to a more leisurely routine. The frost of fall was in the air, and winter lay just ahead. H. H. Bancroft, in words as picturesque as the lives of these pioneers, portrays a scene from their daily existence that strikes a nostalgic chord:

As evening approached, the tinkling of cattle bells announced the return of the men, when the women went forth to meet them, and welcome them back to their log hut and frugal meal. Then, a little later all sounds were hushed, save that on the still night arose the strains of the evening hymn and the murmur of the evening prayer, the day closing, as it had commenced, with a supplication for the blessing of the Almighty, and with heartfelt thanksgiving that He had been pleased to deliver His people from the hands of their persecutors.¹²

The winter of 1846-47 seemed to pass quickly despite the miserable cold that prevailed. It was not uncommon for the thermometer to register below zero degrees, and on January 17, 1847, a temperature of seventeen and one-half degrees below zero was recorded.¹³ However, the people were too busy in their preparation for the spring exodus to the West to allow the weather to interrupt making ready. The blacksmith's anvil filled the sharp winter air as wagon wheel bands were hammered out with hasty precision. Lumber was seasoned and prepared for building wagons. Farm tools and seed were purchased to serve in the new land. In February two large rawhide boats were fashioned to aid in crossing streams. Indeed, there was no idleness in the town but rather a spirit of anticipation that spurred the people on to industry and greater effort.

¹²H. H. Bancroft, *History of Utah* (San Francisco: Bancroft and Company, 1890), p. 250.

¹³Lee, *op. cit.*, January 17, 1847.

That the Great Basin of the Rocky Mountains was to be the goal of the Mormons is indicated by plans that were laid in December, 1846.¹⁴ Preparations were made with that object in mind. The people were organized into companies, and a general plan was introduced. A "pioneer company" was to precede the main body of the Saints early enough in the spring so that seed could be planted at their destination. This initial group was to make the trek to the Rocky Mountains and there prepare homes and crops for the coming of the rest of the people. Having reached their destination, some of the men and wagons were then to return to Winter Quarters to assist additional groups in their journey. By pursuing this system of co-operation, all the Saints, including the widows, the destitute, and the fatherless, could be assisted across the Plains without anyone, even the poorest, having cause to feel neglected.¹⁵

The details as to travel order and provisions were also determined. The same system for travel as previously used in their flight from Nauvoo was again instituted: groups of hundreds, fifties and tens, each presided over by a captain. Provisions and equipment required of the members of the "pioneer company" rather restricted the number who were to go with it. An eighteen months' supply of food was requisite; hence, only a relatively few who had the means could be among the first to go. Every man of this first company was also instructed to take "one bushel of seed corn, one bushel of potatoes, a half bushel of oats, and all the garden seeds that could be procured.[sic]"¹⁶ These supplies were to produce the crops needed to sustain the later companies of Saints.

By the first week of March, 1847, a group of volunteers made up mostly of young and able-bodied men were selected to constitute the "pioneer company." One hundred and forty-eight persons, including three women and two children, began assembling for the long journey. On

¹⁴"Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Office), March 8, 1846.

¹⁵Andrew Jensen (compiler), *Historical Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1882-1890), VIII, 875.

¹⁶William Clayton, "Journal of William Clayton," Ms. (L.D.S. Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), April 16, 1847.

Wednesday, April 7, 1847, when the first green began to appear upon the prairie, the wagons slowly found their position in the traveling order, and the epic journey began.¹⁷ Farewells were shouted, children ran alongside their fathers, and a crowd of the remaining Saints gathered in a group to wave a final goodbye. The great adventure was thus begun, and company after company were soon to follow these first pioneers.

Brigham Young wrote to the Saints at Winter Quarters when he was eleven days to the West. This letter fixed the destiny of the Nebraska settlement. An excerpt follows:

The business of the Saints at Winter Quarters is to journey west, until further instructions, and while some will have the means to go forward at the springing of the grass, others will have to stop and raise grain to carry with them; and while some will come here prepared, others will have to stop and prepare for their journey, and in either case all preparation and organization is for journeying, and not for permanent location at Winter Quarters.¹⁸

The admonition to leave for the mountains as soon as expediency allowed was readily observed by the anxious Saints. On June 5, 1847, a second company was formed and started west, and during 1847, eight others crossed the Plains.¹⁹

During the summer months of that year, the remaining people worked hard to raise enough food crops to sustain themselves in the journey to the mountains. Orson Hyde, one of the presiding elders at Winter Quarters, reported in a letter to the English Saints that crops were "surprisingly good. . . great. . . and extensive. The land fairly groans under the burthen of corn and other products that wave over its surface by the western breezes."²⁰

In the meantime, the "pioneer company" reached the Salt Lake Valley, and Brigham Young and a number of

¹⁷Jensen, "Winter Quarters," *op. cit.*, April 7, 1847.

¹⁸"Journal History," April 16, 1847.

Stout, *op. cit.*, III, 97.

¹⁹"Journal History," June 5, 1847.

Jensen, "Winter Quarters," *op. cit.*, p. 1.

²⁰*Millennial Star*, September 15, 1847. This paper is to be found in the L.D.S. Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah.

others, including most of the apostles, made the trip back to Winter Quarters in order to lead other groups to the mountains. This returning company arrived in the city Sunday, October 31, 1847. Shortly after their return, these church leaders decided to vacate Winter Quarters in the spring of 1848. A public meeting was held on November 15, 1847, at which Young outlined the future course for the Saints to follow. He referred to the healthy locality in the mountains and suggested that those who could not go West next spring should vacate Winter Quarters and return to the east side of the river.²¹

It seems that there had been some agitation on the part of the Indian agent during this time for the Saints to remove from the Indian lands. In order to promote friendly feelings and insure full co-operation, Young wrote Major Miller, the agent, the following letter:

Winter Quarters, Camp of Israel
Omaha Nation, November 19, 1847

Major Miller,
Dear Sir:

On our return to Winter Quarters from the mountains we received an intimation that it is the desire of the Government of the United States that the Latter-day Saints should vacate the lands on the Western side of the Missouri River, where we have taken up our temporary abode until a place can be found where we may be able to dwell in peace and safety.

Therefore, we drop you this line to request you would favor us with your views and opinions on the subject of our vacating our Winter Quarters on the Omaha lands and also of our moving such portion of our houses and fences which our people have cut and brought from the East side of the river, over the river again to the State of Iowa....

We remain, dear sir,
In behalf of the Council
Brigham Young
President

P.S. It is our anxious wish that the Omahas should have the benefit of our labors, and we feel that if the whites do not take possession of our vacated houses and farms immediately after our vacation, that the Sioux will come down and burn the houses and drive away the poor Omahas.²²

²¹"Journal History," October 31, 1847; November 8, 1847; November 14, 1847.

²²*Ibid.*, November 19, 1847.

Another item of interest occurred at this time. A general epistle was issued by the apostles to all members of the Church throughout the world. All of those Saints who had been driven from their homes were instructed to gather in the Salt Lake Valley. Others in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain were likewise counseled to gather as circumstances would permit. They were to bring with them seeds of every kind—"everything that grows upon the face of the whole earth that will please the eye, gladden the heart, or cheer the soul of man." They were also to bring the "best stock of beasts, birds, and fowl," and tools of every kind.²³

As the spring of 1848 approached, the people were gradually vacating Winter Quarters and moving to the east side of the river. Those who were planning to journey to the mountains were preparing with all dispatch for the trip. By the month of May preparations had been completed, and so on the 9th of that month the first company, led by Young, left for the mountains. This group consisted of 1,229 souls, 397 wagons, 74 horses, 19 mules, 1,275 oxen, 699 cows, 184 loose cattle, 411 sheep, 141 pigs, and additional fowl and animals.²⁴

Another company of 662 souls led by Heber C. Kimball left soon after. Those of the pioneers who failed to leave with these last two companies moved to the east side of the river. Winter Quarters was thus abandoned as the headquarters for future company preparations. The *Historical Record* produced by Andrew Jensen records the scene after the wagon trains departed:

After Presidents Young and Kimball's companies left Winter Quarters, the place presented a desolate aspect. A terrific thunderstorm passed over, accompanied by a hurricane, which tore wagon covers to shreds and whistled fearfully through the empty dwellings. A few straggling Indians camped in the vacated houses and subsisted upon the cattle which had died of poverty, and upon such other articles of food as they could pick up.²⁵

Apostle George A. Smith, writing from Kaneshville, the

²³*Ibid.*, December 23, 1847.

²⁴Jensen, *Historical Record*, p. 902.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 902-03.

new settlement of the Saints on the east side of the river, gave another description of the abandoned city as of October 20, 1848:

Winter Quarters looks pretty much as it did, except the roofs and floors which had been brought to this side of the river. The Indians visited it of late and feasted on the potatoes that grew in the old cellars, and also upon the Indian corn and the volunteer squash and such other vegetables as grew without culture... Winter Quarters afforded more flies and fleas than anything less than a star-gazer could well estimate.²⁶

Thus only skeletal remains stood to remind one of the past enterprise that occurred there. An occasional Indian was the only sign of life left in the once bustling city. Bleached canvas flapped unheard in the evening breeze. Tall grass and stalky weeds became the sole occupants of the streets.

In the year 1854, the Florence Land Company was organized to build up a city on the old site of Winter Quarters. The new city was founded and named Florence, Nebraska.²⁷ Two silent sentinels still stand to remind the new of the old. In the middle of town stands a huge, gnarled apple tree, supposedly planted by Brigham Young. And at the edge of town on the slope of a hill lies the old cemetery with nearly six hundred simple gravestones, standing askew amid the well-kept lawns. A "peculiar" people had lived and died here in the town of Winter Quarters.

²⁶"Journal History," October 20, 1848.

²⁷Andrew Jensen, "Florence, Nebraska," *Nebraska Settlements* (L.D.S. Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), p. 1.