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Article Title: Mormons, Nebraska and the Way West

Full Citation: A R Mortensen, "The Mormons, Nebraska and the Way West," *Nebraska History* 46 (1965): 259-272

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1965Mormons.pdf>

Date: 6/09/2016

Article Summary: Winter Quarters, Omaha, played a special role in the westward migration of the Mormons. There they rested and prepared for the final thousand-mile trek of their journey.

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#### Cataloging Information:

Names: Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Thomas L Kane, John D Lee, Polly Ann Workman, Nancy Bean, Louisa Free, Agatha Ann Woolsey, Franklin Dewey Richards, Jane Richards

Place Names: Palmyra, New York; Kirtland, Ohio; Independence, Missouri; Nauvoo, Illinois; Winter Quarters, Omaha, Nebraska; Great Salt Lake Valley, Utah

Keywords: Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Book of Mormon, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Mormon Battalion, Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Handcart Pioneers

# MORMONS, NEBRASKA AND THE WAY WEST

BY A. R. MORTENSEN

**T**HE Mormons and their religion are typically American, both in their origin and in their subsequent movement west.

The founder and the early leaders were primarily products of the rocky hills of New England. In many cases their ancestors had been among the first settlers in that part of the new world. Today it may not be politic nor in good taste to say so, but the background of this religious society is strictly white, protestant, and Anglo-Saxon, with a later and considerable infusion of Scandinavian and Germanic elements. Proselyting efforts of the church, for some reason or other, have had little results among the Latin or eastern nations of Europe. My own ancestry may be cited as a case in point. My mother's people were Yankees—Burnhams and Barnetts of English origin via Essex in Massachusetts. My paternal grandmother was the daughter of John D. Lee, a cousin to the more famous, or I might say less infamous, Lees of Virginia. The name I carry

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comes from a Danish grandfather, a convert and immigrant with the ill-fated Handcart Pioneers of 1856. Without supporting statistics it still would be safe to say that the average person of Mormon background would have a similar ancestry.

Aside from their origins, Mormons see themselves (and modern scholars likewise) as typically American in their democratic ideals in political, social, and religious matters. If their early leaders were autocratic, an argument can be made that their system of theocracy was necessary for survival in a hostile world. Moreover, both Joseph and Brigham spoke with the authority of God. If the later and present leaders speak the language of the urbanized and successful businessman and capitalist, this too is in the tradition of American free enterprise and opportunity. Then too, the doctrine and practice of the Gathering required, then and now, an obedient and well-organized social and religious society.

Central in the structure of Mormon theology, all worthy male adults are priests, and potentially kings and prophets in worlds to come. Again, in the doctrine of free agency, coupled with a belief in unlimited opportunity for advancement, both temporally and spiritually, in this world and the next, Mormonism spoke and speaks with the same voice as Sam Adams, Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and other philosophers of the American system of democracy. Moreover, the utopian, humanitarian, and communal characteristics of early Mormon society had their beginnings and roots in the very places and times of these movements in America in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Their very early movement into the territory drained by the Mississippi, the "Valley of Democracy" (Parrington called it), would have impressed de Tocqueville, "who discovered the poetry of America in this romance of a moving frontier, in the vision that led the pioneer on his conquering way westward, hewing at an interminable wilderness that was matched only by his ambitions." All this move-

ment too is in the mainstream of the romantic dream that is America.

The very word "Mormon" comes from the writings taken from the sacred plates dug out of the Hill Cumorah in upstate New York. And to the Mormons it is no catchphrase when they repeat over and over again, "America is a land choice above all other lands."

In addition to all their deep roots, the Mormons were in the vanguard and mainstream of America's westering in the middle of the nineteenth century and after. In this regard they have cut a wide swath in American history both in time and place in the last one hundred fifty years. If typical in their origins and their westward movement, yet their history in many respects has been unique, and as we said in an earlier study, "To most people the Mormons are still the dark side of the moon."

Mormon history then, both in time and space spans the continent from sea to sea. Joseph, the prophet, was born in Vermont as was his successor Brigham Young. When but a boy, Joseph's family moved into upstate New York. It was there, according to his story, that the gold plates were delivered up to him under the direction of an angel from heaven. It was there in Palmyra that the Book of Mormon, translated from these gold plates, was published. And it was there also that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was organized in 1830. Within a year, because of the persecutions of his neighbors, Smith led his followers westward into the Ohio country where they settled for a time at Kirtland, now near the city of Cleveland. Thus, the great westward trek began which was not to cease until the Mormons found refuge in the valley of the Great Salt Lake sixteen years later.

From Kirtland, Ohio, the Mormons moved into western Missouri and set up headquarters at Independence, Jackson County—which Joseph Smith revealed to his people as the Garden of Eden of ancient days. Here and in the neighboring region, the Mormons grew and prospered for a time.

But soon the "Missouri Pukes," to use the Mormons' own term, drove them out and they backtracked to the Mississippi. On the east bank of the river at the little town of Commerce, Smith founded the city of Nauvoo. For seven years the Mormons prospered mightily, and by 1846 Nauvoo had grown to more than twenty thousand, the biggest city in Illinois. In the meantime Joseph Smith was killed, Brigham Young fell heir to the leadership of the church, and pressure from their gentile neighbors forced the Mormons in that "year of decision" to begin once more their westward trekking. When one looks at the overall story of early Mormon history, an analogy can be made between them and the ancient Israelites. There are definite periods which could be labeled Genesis, Exodus, Wandering in the Wilderness, and finally the Arrival in the "Promised Land."

If 1846 was a year of decision for all America, it was doubly so for the Mormons. That year found the followers of Joseph, now the followers of Brigham, trekking through the mud of Iowa. It took some of them all spring and all summer to reach their pioneer jumping-off place. In June the vanguard finally reached the Potawatomi lands, the "misery bottoms," on the eastern shores of the Missouri, where with a mighty heave they crossed the river and went into camp at a place they called Winter Quarters. Here large numbers of them spent the winter of 1846-7. Most of the Mormons were still strung out across Iowa, a few had gone south into Missouri, and September was to arrive before the last stragglers were driven out of Nauvoo. Here on the Omaha lands, they girded up their loins, sent out a rallying cry to the scattered Saints in the East and overseas, and in the spring with the "pioneer company" as a scouting party started on the thousand-mile trek that did not end until they reached the valleys of the Rockies.

Palmyra, New York; Kirtland, Ohio; Independence and Far West, Missouri; Council Bluffs and Kanesville, Iowa; Winter Quarters, Omaha Nation, Nebraska; as they look back in their history, such places have taken on an aura of preciousness. The names of these places that nearly

span a continent ring clear and true in the minds of Mormons young and old. Winter Quarters, this place too is more or less sacred ground in Mormon history, memory, and folklore. My first thesis then is that the Mormons and their religion are typically American, both in their origin and subsequent history.

And so I come to my second thesis which is that the Missouri shore of Nebraska, and more particularly the Omaha, Florence, Winter Quarters, Summer Quarters area is a great watershed in Mormon history. If it is a dividing place in geography and time, it is more importantly a dividing place emotionally. Here for a season, however brief, the Mormons could rest and recruit their numbers and their strength in preparation for the unknown which lay ahead. With the Missouri River behind them, they could look back to persecutions, drivings, burnings, tarrings and featherings, murders, and even worse. In Kirtland, Independence, Far West, Nauvoo, and a hundred other places were homes which they had abandoned. Ahead lay a wild uncivilized and endless frontier, but they could face it with hope and the assurance that with strength and the proper leadership they could conquer it on their own terms. In their new home in the valleys of the Rockies, their hoped-for isolation was short-lived, but that is another story. On arrival in the valley Brigham Young had said, "Give me ten years and I ask no odds of my enemies." He had his ten years, but just barely, and that too is another story.

There are lesser places across Nebraska and Wyoming that conjure up memories in the minds of the Mormons: the North Platte, the Elkhorn, Chimney Rock, Scott's Bluff, Fort Laramie, the Sweetwater, South Pass, and Fort Bridger. But it is to the Winter Quarters—Omaha area that the pioneers of 1847 and after, as well as the present generation of Mormons, return in memory and in fact. It is here that their ancestors buried their dead in uncounted numbers—dead from disease, exhaustion, and just plain hunger.

It was at this recruiting place that the young aristo-

cratic Philadelphian, Thomas L. Kane, an emissary from President Polk, visited Brigham Young and the Mormons, helped recruit the Mormon Battalion, and helped secure permission for the Mormons to tarry on Indian lands. Several years later he described their situation on the banks of the Missouri:

This was the Head Quarters of the Mormon Camps of Israel. The miles of rich prairie, enclosed and sowed with the grain they could contrive to spare, and the houses, stacks, and cattle shelters, had the seeming of an entire county, with its people and improvements transplanted there unbroken. On a pretty plateau, overlooking the river, they built more than seven hundred houses in a single town, neatly laid out with highways and byways, and fortified with breast-work, stockade, and blockhouses. It had, too, its place of worship, "Tabernacle of the Congregation," and various large workshops, and mills and factories, provided with water power. . . . At the Omaha winter quarters, the Mormons sustained themselves through the heavy winter of 1846-1847. It was the severest of their trials. . . . This winter was the turning-point of the Mormons fortunes. Those who lived through it were spared to witness the gradual return of better times. And they now liken it to the passing of a dreary night, since which they have watched the coming of a steadily brightening day.<sup>1</sup>

John D. Lee had hardly set foot on the western side of the river when he was called by Brigham Young to take two companions and follow the Mormon Battalion to Santa Fe where he was to pick up the accumulated pay of the soldiers to be used in support of the emigration of the Saints to the West. His wives and children were camped in tents and wagons and winter would soon be on them, but Brigham had said, "Go, and God will protect you. I shall see that your families do not want." It was late November when Lee returned. He was amazed at the changes that had taken place. The camp of wagons and tents had become a city laid off in forty-one narrow blocks. There were more than six hundred houses and many dugouts while large numbers still lived in wagons and tents. In the encampment were nearly thirty-five hundred people, with many sick and many widows or wives whose husbands had gone off with the battalion or were away on missions. It

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<sup>1</sup> William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, *Among the Mormons* (New York, 1958), pp. 212-213.

was to be a hard winter, but few really knew how hard. For before it was over more than six hundred people would be buried in the graveyard on the hill.

By the beginning of December Lee had one cabin finished and by the end of the month three more, so that his wives and children would have warmth and shelter from the elements. While none of his wives died during that terrible winter, he did have domestic troubles caused by the adversity of the times and his long and frequent absences on trading expeditions for Brigham Young. Polly Ann Workman, a turbulent character in Lee's opinion, returned to Iowa in a huff. Nancy Bean could not quite make up her mind whether to stay with Lee or return to her own father's household, and she changed her position in this regard several times. Finally she returned for good to her father, with her baby daughter, Cornelia. Before finally emigrating to the mountains in the spring of 1848, she went to Lee to ask for the use of a cow. He replied that when "any of his women left him that he would milk his own cows, but that he had a writing of releasement for her at Dr. W. Richards' office." Louisa Free had also gone to live with her parents. At Summer Quarters even his first wife, Agatha Ann Woolsey, became upset at his marrying other wives and railed and scolded him.

In March 1847, Lee discovered that he was not to leave with the Pioneer Company for the mountains but was chosen, along with Isaac Morley and others, to look after Brigham's affairs and to farm at a location sixteen miles away at a place known as "Summer Quarters" or "Brigham's Farm." Here too trouble broke out with his neighbors and his co-workers, for Lee seemed a contentious soul and would never admit that he was in the wrong. But Lee had been sent by his adopted father, Brigham Young, to farm and to raise grain, corn, and other produce for the sustenance of the Saints. And farm he did with such effect that the emigration in the spring of 1848 was sustained with hundreds of bushels of "bread Corn" shelled, cleaned, and put into sacks or barrels.



On May 26, 1848, Lee with his five remaining loyal wives, four children, and seven wagons, turned his back on Winter Quarters for the last time, joined President Young's long train, and set out on the long trek to the valleys in the mountains.

For nearly two years Winter Quarters had been the headquarters of the church. In addition to the sufferings and problems of every kind endured during that time, many things of interest and of transcendent importance in both Nebraska and Mormon history took place. It is to be remembered that after the initial pioneer journey to the valley of the Great Salt Lake in the spring and summer of 1847, Brigham Young and his immediate counselors returned to the Missouri to supervise the removal of the main body of the people to Utah. Since the death of the prophet, Joseph Smith, Brigham had been acting as head of the church in his capacity as president of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles. Now with a new and permanent capital city established in the Great Salt Lake Valley, it was deemed desirable to reorganize the hierarchy of the church. At Winter Quarters on December 5, 1847, Brigham was chosen president of the church. For the next forty years, and until his death in 1877, he was to occupy that position.

If further disaster was to be averted in getting the main body of the Saints to Utah, organization of the highest order must be instituted. With this end in view and in this same month of December, Brigham and his counselors prepared and had printed a remarkable document. It was called: GENERAL EPISTLE FROM THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES, TO THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS ABROAD, DISPERSED THROUGHOUT THE EARTH. This epistle recounted the events which had transpired since the evacuation of Nauvoo in February the year before. It described the establishment of Winter Quarters and the conditions there. It told of the Mormon Battalion and of the experiences of the Pioneer Company in reaching and settling the Great Salt Lake Valley. It described the valley and the

new city being built. It addressed the Saints in the East and those still resident in the British Isles and other parts of Europe and advised them to emigrate to the United States and thence to Utah as soon as possible. In some detail it told the elders and local leaders to organize their people into companies for cooperative efforts in the migration. In great detail it gave instructions concerning the needs of a frontier society—animals, seeds, books, a printing press, domestic utensils, tools, and a multitude of items needed for the establishment of a culture in a barren land a thousand miles from the nearest civilization. It warned:

In compliance with the wishes of the sub-agents (Indian agents), we expect to vacate the Omaha lands in the spring. Gather yourselves together speedily, near to this place, on the east side of the Missouri River, and, if possible, be ready to start from hence by the first of May next, or as soon as grass is sufficiently grown, and go to the Great Salt Lake City.

In conclusion it said:

Come, then, ye Saints; come, then ye honorable men of the earth; come, then, ye wise, ye learned, ye rich, ye noble, according to the riches, and wisdom, and knowledge of the great Jehovah; from all nations, and kindreds, and kingdoms, and tongues, and people, and dialects on the face of the whole earth, and join the standard of Emmanuel, and help us to build up the Kingdom of God, and establish the principles of truth, life, and salvation, and you shall receive your reward among the sanctified, when the Lord Jesus Christ cometh to make up his jewels; and no power on earth or in hell can prevail against you. . . . Written at Winter Quarters, Omaha Nation, west bank of Missouri River, near Council Bluffs, North America, and signed December 23d, 1847, in behalf of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Brigham Young, President. Willard Richards, Clerk.

According to the great authority on the history of printing in America, Douglas C. McMurtrie, this document was not only written at Winter Quarters but was printed there sometime previous to this date. It thus constitutes the first printing done within the present limits of the state of Nebraska.

While copies of the epistle were distributed from Winter Quarters to the Saints throughout the United States, it was also reprinted at Liverpool for the benefit of the Euro-

pean Mormons. In its entirety it was a stirring document and must have served as a clarion call for a speedy gathering of the Saints to their new Zion.

Another event, which took place in this area, still remembered and celebrated in Utah is the recruitment of the Mormon Battalion for service in the Mexican War. The vanguard of Mormons had hardly reached the misery bottoms of Iowa and the sanctuary of the west bank of the river when emissaries from President Polk recruited the battalion, and the flower of Mormondom marched off to Leavenworth, Santa Fe, and the scene of hostilities in California. Among military men it is still remembered as the longest infantry march in history.

To exemplify the severe conditions under which the Mormon migration to the far West took place, the story in brief of a rather remarkable young woman is worthy of recounting. Many years later, as an old lady, Jane Richards told in an interview of the sufferings endured by her and her family on the muddy trail across Iowa and in the sanctuary of sorts afforded by their brief residence on the lands of the Omahas. While all the Saints were not subjected to the same deprivations, yet her story does epitomize the frightful conditions under which the Mormons existed during this lowest ebb in their long history. It is here extracted and summarized from Wallace Stegner's version in his recent book, *The Gathering of Zion*.

Franklin Dewey Richards was one of the bright young men of Mormondom. . . . He was from Berkshire County, Massachusetts, his wife Jane from New York State. . . . They both were representative of the better class of early Mormons. Both had a history of spitting blood; both credited the priesthood with making them well through faith. Jane had been baptized by her brother in midwinter, through a foot of ice, and from that time forth was troubled no more by the consumption.<sup>2</sup>

After four years of married life, broken by several missions, Franklin returned to Nauvoo where he managed to

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<sup>2</sup> Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion*, (New York, 1964) p. 85.

build a small, two-story house for Jane and his daughter Wealthy Lovisa.

They lived in it two months—Jane and Wealthy Lovisa downstairs, the second wife, Elizabeth McFate, upstairs. In May, unable to sell it, Franklin traded the house for two yoke of oxen and an old wagon, and they crossed the Mississippi to start west in the wake of the Twelve. Their outfit was minimal.<sup>3</sup>

Camping on the Iowa side for six weeks, their supplies dwindled, someone stole a yoke of oxen and they got only six miles before Franklin was called on a mission to England, to be gone at least a year. Incredible as it seems, Jane was eight months pregnant. Elizabeth, a girl of seventeen, was also pregnant and tubercular besides. In any event, Franklin obeyed counsel and went on his mission, and the family started on with a teamster named Farnsworth.

In place of the interminable cold rains that had afflicted the Camp of Israel, they had summer heat, violent storms, and the sickly season. From the first the Lord laid His heavy hand on them, testing them. Elizabeth had chills and fever. Wealthy Lovisa took sick with one of the ambiguous ailments that had already lined that road with graves. Their food was mainly milk and cornmeal. . . . With one poor team they made slow time, and when Jane was brought to bed with the pains of childbirth three weeks after Franklin's departure, they were still less than sixty miles from their starting point. The child she bore in a dreary rain lived an hour. Unable to get a fire going, and without decent food, they rested three days and went on, carrying the tiny wrapped corpse because Jane wanted it blessed and buried by the priesthood. Rain gave way to sun; across the prairies the intense muggy heat pressed on them until they panted, drenched and suffocating, under the wagonbows.

And more than merely heat, for if the story that Jane Richards later told was true, they would have shortly been driven out of the wagon by the gagging, loathsome, impossible stench of the little decaying corpse. It is hard to believe . . . but three weeks after its death they brought the baby into Mt. Pisgah where it was decently, but one would think hurriedly buried. . . .<sup>4</sup>

The two women and the little girl all ill, the driver put them in the wagon and they went on. Finally by incredibly

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p. 87.

good, or bad, luck they got to the Missouri and across it. In Cutler's Park they lived in their wagon. "On a night with Elizabeth screaming in delirium in the tent, Wealthy Lovisa died beside her mother in the wagon. Elizabeth, dwindling with tuberculosis and the compounded scurvy they called black cancer, would last until the following March."<sup>5</sup> For Franklin, in London, it would be months before he would hear of the deaths of his son, his daughter, and his second wife.

When Jane got her first letter from him in April, 1847, he had not yet learned of even the first death. At the moment of writing, he was tending his brother, ill with smallpox. So to the destruction of all her immediate family, Jane Richards was able to add worry about the health of her husband. . . . But by that time she was too numb to feel.<sup>6</sup>

Years later she recalled simply, "I only lived because I could not die."

Is it any wonder, in recalling the trail of blood and tears which their ancestors followed from the Mississippi across Iowa and from the Missouri to their mountain home, that present-day Mormons hold in near reverent memory those places along the way so drenched with blood in the long ago.

The great city of Omaha is built on the site of an important place in Mormon history and memory. For all during the pioneer period the road west across Nebraska witnessed the comings and goings of thousands of Saints. For supplies and to succor the needs of the pioneers, there was a great back-tracking along the road. For a whole generation this area was the jumping-off place for the Mormons in their last thousand-mile travel to the Far West. By 1869 and the completion of the Pacific railroad, more than 80,000 Saints had followed the Platte to the valley of the Great Salt Lake. In our own generation we still come back and feel at home.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p. 89.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.

And so, in capsule form, this has been the story of the brief sojourn of the Mormons on the lands of the friendly Potawatomi and the Omaha.



Marker at the Mormon Cemetery near Florence, Nebraska.