

Summer at WINTER QUARTERS

How Mormon pioneers
founded the first city in Nebraska

STORY BY MATT MASICH PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER AMUNDSON

Mormon pioneers arrive at their new Nebraska home in the painting "Entering Winter Quarters" by Scott Snow. The settlement, built on land that became north Omaha, was bounded by high bluffs and drained by two creeks. The emigrants had to build a ferry to cross the Missouri River from Iowa.

MORMON PIONEERS founded Winter Quarters, the first city in Nebraska, at present-day north Omaha. Built as a refuge from the violent persecution they faced in Illinois, Winter Quarters marked a new chapter in their tribulations, as what was supposed to be a temporary stopping point became, for many, a final resting place.

Disease ravaged the Mormon settlement. So many people died along the banks of the Missouri River in 1846 that the gravediggers couldn't keep up. "You might see women sit in the open tents keeping the flies off their dead children, sometime after decomposition had set in," wrote Thomas Kane, a friend of Mormon leader Brigham Young.

Little remains of Winter Quarters today except its cemetery, filled with hundreds of graves whose headstones have long since crumbled away. However, these pioneers didn't die in vain. Their comrades' resolve was steeled during this time of suffering. It was from Winter Quarters that the Mormons launched the final stretch of the exodus to their Promised Land in Utah, a journey that more than 70,000 of their brethren would retrace in the years to come.

Nebraska very well could have been the place where the Mormon pioneers fell apart. Instead, it was the place where they came together.

WHEN BRIGHAM YOUNG set out with the first Mormon wagon train on their westward migration, their destination wasn't Nebraska or Utah. In fact, they didn't know where they were going; they just knew they didn't want to be in Nauvoo, Illinois.

The Mormons, adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, had settled in Nauvoo in 1840 under the leadership of the church's prophet and founder, Joseph Smith. Within a few years, Nauvoo had grown to 12,000 people, comprising most of the Mormon population at the time. By 1844, Smith had many followers, but many enemies. Neighboring non-Mormons disagreed with his new brand of Christianity, resented the

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power he amassed and took exception to his practice of plural marriage. Smith was arrested after ordering the destruction of the offices of a newspaper that criticized him. While Smith was in jail awaiting trial, an angry mob stormed the building, shooting and killing him.

With their prophet martyred, the Mormons were in turmoil. Brigham Young, a carpenter originally from Vermont, stepped into the leadership void. Young was one of Smith's earliest followers, and he was the head of the church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He and the rest of the Mormons realized that the animosity toward them did not end with Smith's death. They were justifiably afraid vigilantes would shoot them down in the streets of Nauvoo, or that the U.S. Army would be sent in against them.

Young started organizing their escape. He held a meeting in January 1846 to gauge his people's readiness to load all their possessions into wagons and set out at a moment's notice. He was aware, he wrote in his journal, that "evil is intended toward us," and that their safety depended on departing "before our enemies shall intercept and prevent our going."

The greatest anti-Mormon sentiment was reserved for the church's leaders, so Young reasoned that he and the rest of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles should leave first. They wanted to cross the plains, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and Nauvoo. Perhaps they would go to California, or Vancouver Island, or "some good valley in the neighborhood of the Rocky Mountains," Young wrote. Young's lead contingent, more than 3,000 strong, crossed the frozen Mississippi River into Iowa in February 1846. They were followed soon after by thousands more men, women and children, traveling in covered wagons and hoping to reach the Missouri River within three weeks. It would take them four months.

The spring unleashed torrential rain, which turned the Iowa roads – barely existent in good weather – into thick, impassable mud. Fevers broke out in the wagon train, and people started dying. Bereaved family members could only give their loved ones a quick burial before pressing forward. Despite such hardship, the pioneers' morale remained surprisingly



"Burial at Winter Quarters" by J. Leo Fairbanks captures a scene that played out hundreds of times during the Mormons' stay on the Missouri. The Mormon Pioneer Cemetery still exists, though the remaining headstones postdate Winter Quarters. Elder David Tervort demonstrates handcars in the Mormon Trail Center, adjacent to the Winter Quarters Temple.



high. It was on this brutal slog through Iowa that poet William Clayton wrote "Come, Come Ye Saints," which remains one of the most popular Mormon hymns. The lyrics speak to the emigrants' optimism in the face of relentless adversity:

And should we die before our journey's through,
Happy day! All is well!

We then are free from toil and sorrow,
too;

With the just we shall dwell!

YOUNG GOT HIS first glimpse of Nebraska on June 14, when the wagons reached the banks of the Missouri River near present-day Council Bluffs, Iowa. There he met Peter Sarpy, the French-American fur trader who had built outposts on both sides of the river. Sarpy's ferry was the only way to get across the river, but there was no way he could transport the thousands of Mormons who wanted to cross. The Mormons decided to camp on the Iowa side and build a ferry of their own.

With the summer already upon them, it seemed unlikely they could reach the Rocky Mountains before cold weather returned. Still, with rumors circulating that the Army might be coming to stop them from going any further west, Young wanted to put at least one more river between the Mormons and their persecutors. Complicating the matter was the fact

The timing of the Mormon exodus thrust them into international intrigue.

that the Nebraska side of the river was the territory of the Omaha and Otoe tribes, and the emigrants would need government permission if they were to stay there.

The Mormons were thinking primarily of their own troubles when they left Nauvoo, but the timing of their exodus thrust them into the thick of war and

international intrigue. While the Mormons were crossing Iowa, the United States declared war on Mexico. Simultaneously, the United States was teetering on the brink of war with Britain over control of the Pacific Northwest.

The U.S. government was worried about the influx of 10,000 Mormons into the frontier. Many Mormons were angry with the government for not protecting their constitutional right to practice their religion, and U.S. officials feared they might join up with one of the nation's enemies. In the sparsely populated West, the Mormons were a huge force that could potentially tip the scales in the international balance of power.

A solution to the Mormons' and the government's worries came about unexpectedly. Mormon envoy Jesse Little, who had been sent to the East Coast to drum up government support for the westward emigration, met Thomas Kane, a lawyer whose father was friends with President James K. Polk. Kane had read newspaper accounts of the harsh treatment the



are glad to have you come.” It seems the Indians felt a kind of kinship with these whites, as they all felt mistreated by the government. They were also more favorably disposed to the Mormons because the settlers did not intend to stay long.

August was spent cutting hay from prairie grasses – as much as 2,000 tons of it – to keep their cattle fed through the winter. Beef, bacon and cornmeal was about all the pioneers had to eat, and many had to use coffee grinders to turn the dried corn to meal. Young decided to build a grist mill, and he used his experience as a carpenter to oversee its construction. Though the internal workings are long gone, the exterior structure, now known as the Florence Mill, still stands in north Omaha’s Florence neighborhood.

Winter Quarters started out as a collection of tents and covered wagons, but it soon grew into a bona fide city. The original plans called for 41 blocks and 16 named streets. A bishop was in charge of each block, helping to manage

and take care of the people there. Buildings were erected using timber felled nearby, though some people made do with sod houses or even caves dug into the bluff. By the end of 1846, Winter Quarters had nearly 3,500 people living in 538 log cabins and 83 sod houses. The population later reached a peak of 4,000 in 800 total houses. When emigrant Hosea Stout moved into a crude shanty on Nov. 24, he wrote that it was the first time his 7-month-old child, born on the journey across Iowa, had ever been inside a house.

The citizens of Winter Quarters lived Spartan existences, but they were able to buy essentials shipped in from St. Louis – textiles, hardware and other goods – from Bishop Newel Whitney’s store. Many people tended cattle or worked in the mill, and there was even a small industry making baskets out of reeds. People usually bartered. One doctor who helped a pregnant woman was paid in bushels of turnips, buckwheat and beans.

AS WINTER ARRIVED, Young still hadn’t announced the final destination of their cross-continental trek, but the Mormon leader’s decision was made a bit easier with the late November arrival in Winter Quarters of Pierre-Jean De Smet, a French Catholic priest returning from missionary work in the Rocky Mountain West. De Smet had lots of information

became fast friends, and would remain close the rest of their lives. The Mormons named the settlement on the Iowa side of the river Kanessville in his honor.

Unfortunately, Kane contracted one of the fevers that continued to devastate the camp. He spent a month recovering, while all around him others suffered with similar illnesses. Kane heard mothers lamenting

Of the hundreds of recorded deaths at Winter Quarters, nearly half were infants age 2 or younger.

about the Great Basin and the Salt Lake Valley. “They asked me a thousand questions about the regions I had explored,” De Smet later wrote, and his description of the Salt Lake Valley “pleased them greatly from the account I gave them of it.”

Another visitor was Thomas Kane, the non-Mormon ally who had been so instrumental in securing their refuge at Winter Quarters. Kane and Young

over their dead children. One sick man’s pathetic groaning became so unbearable to listen to that Kane – to his shame – felt glad when the man died.

The malaria and other illnesses of the summer months gave way to diseases of malnutrition during the winter. Winter Quarters was particularly hard hit by a malady known as “black leg” or “black canker” – most likely scurvy brought on by the lack of fruits and vegetables in residents’ diets. Of the recorded deaths in Winter Quarters, nearly half were infants age 2 or younger. All told, about 600 of the Mormons lost their lives in Nebraska; between 10 and 15 percent of the pioneers who set out on the great exodus never made it past Winter Quarters. Even so, Kane was amazed by the Mormons’ resilience. “They could make sport and frolic of their trials, and often turn right sharp suffering into right round laughter against themselves,” he wrote.

As spring neared in 1847, Young prepared to lead an advance party to find their new home somewhere in the Great Basin. In April, 143 men set out on the trail. Meanwhile, the rest of the Mormons – about 4,000 in Nebraska and 7,000 across the river in Iowa – continued improving their settlements and waited for word on their next move.

When Young’s party reached the site of present-day Salt Lake City in July, he declared: “This is the place.” He returned to Winter Quarters in late 1847 to lead his people to their Promised Land. While he was back on the banks of the Missouri, he was elected president of the church – a role that had remained unfilled since Joseph Smith’s death.



Children read the names of emigrants who died at Winter Quarters. Brigham Young built the Florence Mill, at bottom left of the photo of the Mormon Pioneer Memorial Bridge.

Mormons had received. He wanted to help them, but he also wanted help the United States in its war against Mexico. Kane and Little came up with a proposal to pitch to the president: The Mormons would send some of their men as soldiers to help the war effort against the Mexican territory of California, and in exchange the United States would lend assistance to the Mormon exodus. The president agreed.

When Army recruiters showed up on the banks of the Missouri to gather what became known as the Mormon Battalion, many Mormons were aghast. Why should they fight for a country that treated them so poorly? Young, on the other hand, was delighted to help the Army – but he agreed to raise the 500-man battalion only after the government agreed to let his people settle for two years on Omaha and Otoe territory in Nebraska.

The Mormon Battalion brought countless benefits: The land deal gave the Mormons a place to stay; serving the nation in time of war was great for public

relations; the Army, instead of hindering the emigration, was now paying Mormon soldiers to go west; and much of the soldiers’ pay could be funneled back to their families to buy provisions.

NOT LONG AFTER the Mormon Battalion bid their families goodbye on July 21, the ferry across the Missouri started taking settlers and wagons across the river into Nebraska. Young’s initial plan was to wait until they had all crossed and then take the Great Platte River Road to Grand Island and spend the winter there. Gradually, Mormon leaders realized that their people were too exhausted to go further that year, and the spot on the bluffs near the river had good water and plenty of grass for their 10,000 head of cattle. They would winter on the Missouri at a place they named, simply enough, Winter Quarters.

The Mormons were on Omaha and Otoe land, but the tribes welcomed them. “We heard you are a good people,” Omaha Chief Big Elk said at a peace meeting. “We

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WINTER QUARTERS, THE de facto capital of the Mormon movement at a critical point in its history, was abandoned by the end of 1848. The outpost on the Iowa side remained occupied for another few years as a way station for the huge numbers of emigrants who followed. By the 1860s, the path Young forged across the plains was followed by more than 70,000 Mormon pioneers.

The Mormons moved on from Winter Quarters, but the trying experience there has remained an integral part of their lore. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints later returned to the area to build a temple and the Mormon Trail Center at Historic Winter Quarters, a museum where people can learn more about their journey. The most powerful reminder of the hard road they traveled is at the adjacent Mormon Pioneer Cemetery, where a large bronze sculpture depicts a mother and father gazing down in sorrow into the grave of their dead child.

Mormons continue to make pilgrimages to honor their forebears at Winter Quarters. At the Mormon Trail Center, Elder Dave Tervort of Utah told of his ancestors' sorrows on the road to Nebraska. Both parents in the pioneer family died on the way, as did several of the children. The family's 10-year-old son dragged his mother's body across the frozen Missouri on a makeshift sled to be buried in the Mormon Pioneer Cemetery. The extended family of the orphaned

children, who weren't Mormons, wanted the youngsters to return with them back East, but the children refused. Other Mormon families took them in, and they went on to thrive in Utah, where Tervort and his family remain to this day.

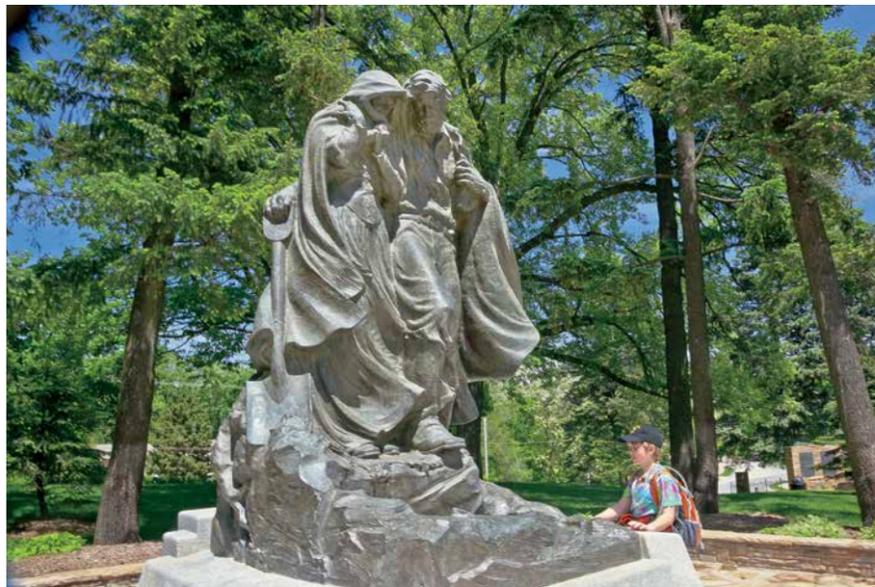
It's natural for Mormons to be proud of the sacrifices their pioneer ancestors made on their exodus, said Elder Jay Crandall, the Mormon Trail Center's director. However, he thinks mere reverence isn't the best way to honor their spirit.

"These pioneers would be grateful we are proud of them," Crandall said. "But the bottom line that we stress is that they would be happier if you did something with the opportunities they gave you, whether it's Mormon pioneers or other pioneers. Now it's your turn." ♣

The Mormon Trail Center at Historic Winter Quarters recounts the hardships Mormon pioneers overcame in Nebraska and on their journey west. The museum, which includes exhibits, artifacts and interpretive films, is free to the public and open daily 9 a.m.-9 p.m. The Mormon Pioneer Cemetery, Winter Quarters Nebraska Temple and Mormon Pioneer Memorial Bridge are all nearby.

Mormon Trail Center at Historic Winter Quarters
3215 State Street, Omaha, NE 68112
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