

Ensign » 1972 » June

The Iowa Trek of 1846: The Brigham Young Route from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters

By Stanley B. Kimball



Stanley B. Kimball, "The Iowa Trek of 1846: The Brigham Young Route from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters," *Ensign*, Jun 1972, 36

No odyssey in Mormon history surpasses the tragedy and triumph of the Mormon exodus (February to June 1846) from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Winter Quarters, Nebraska. Deaths and other tragedies were varied and numerous, resulting from such terrors as "black scurvy," cholera morbus, typhoid fever, "quick consumption" (tuberculosis), and maternal deaths, not to mention the weaknesses of human beings under stress. The triumph derived from the successful emigration of thousands of men, women, children, and livestock under such abominable conditions.

By contrast, the original pioneer company that went from Winter Quarters to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake (April to July 1847) did not suffer the death of one person or animal. Yet, in spite of the fact that many important "firsts" in Mormon history took place across Iowa, this first portion of the complete exodus is much less known than the second.

Along the Iowa trail not only were the basic skills of emigrating and colonizing learned, but several permanent camps were also established (camps 20, 25, and 38), the first recorded incident of blessing an animal took place (camp 5), the famous hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints" was composed (camp 14), the Mormon Battalion was mustered and organized (camps 25 and 36), and Brigham Young became president of the Church (camps 38 and 38A).

This part of the westward march was a learning period that greatly influenced Mormon history long afterward. The Saints had learned only the rudimentary lessons of emigration during the famous Zion's Camp march from Ohio to Missouri in 1834. The advanced training had to be learned between Nauvoo and Winter Quarters. The skills acquired in Iowa not only made the trek from Winter Quarters easier, but also set the pattern for building and colonizing Utah.

The fundamental organization of the trek was effected at Nauvoo, where about twenty-five men were appointed, each of whom was to take charge of selecting and transporting 100 families across the Rocky Mountains. Charles Shumway, the first person to cross the Mississippi River on February 4, was one of these captains. At Sugar Creek Camp (1) and at Richardson's Point Camp (6) this rough organization had been reworked and improved.

By the time of the Chariton River Camp (10), it was obvious that a general restructuring was necessary. Many of the original families had returned for various reasons to Nauvoo, and bad roads and weather had scattered many others.

At Chariton River, the remaining emigrants were regrouped into three companies, each with 100 families, which were subdivided into fifties and then tens. Each unit was led by a captain, the most important of which were the captains of the six fifties—Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Haws, John Taylor, and George Miller. William Clayton and Willard Richards were appointed camp clerk and historian respectively.

Brigham Young had originally planned to vacate Nauvoo when winter subsided and the grass was green. But anti-Mormon violence and perhaps the rumors that federal troops were coming up the Mississippi River when weather permitted forced the Saints' removal much earlier.

Before the advance parties left, unsold Church and private property was turned over to a group of trustees to dispose of as best they could. Otherwise, the people and everything that made Nauvoo something special eventually left the area. All across Iowa a special courier system maintained communication between the various companies and with Nauvoo.

Charting the 1846 trail across Iowa has proved to be a most difficult task, much more difficult than tracing the trail across Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah, because there are several "Mormon trails" in Iowa to be sorted out. Among the most important are the Missouri refugee trails of 1838, the later emigrant trails of 1852–53, and the handcart trails of 1856. Moreover, not only did the first six companies of fifty sometimes take slightly different routes, but the many companies that subsequently left Nauvoo throughout 1846 also created their own variants. There was a further scattering even within the individual camps because of the necessity of securing enough browse, grass, and water for the livestock.

For these and other reasons, this study is tentative and concentrates on the Brigham Young route.

Other factors make the Iowa portion difficult to chart. Iowa is a rather flat prairie state. Along the trail are no landmarks comparable to Chimney Rock, Independence Rock, Devil's Gate, or Emigration Canyon, which help fix the trail west from Winter Quarters.

The main topographic features across Iowa are rivers and creeks, all of which are subject to course changes or elimination either naturally or by the erection of man-made structures. Parts of Sugar Creek Camp (1), for example, were straightened recently to make it flow head-on beneath a highway bridge. Iowa topography was further altered when the prairie was drained for farming. In addition, prairie sod did not preserve wagon ruts as well as the harder terrain west of the Missouri River, and with over a century of intensive cultivation, most trail traces have been obliterated.

Another difficulty was that camp clerks and historians were just learning their jobs, and their records are not as helpful, accurate, or detailed as those kept from Winter Quarters on to Utah. William Clayton, for example, admitted that some of his dates were incorrect, and I have discovered at least one important mistake in another journal of the same period. It is probable that many other journals written at this time also recorded inaccuracies.

This study is based on research in archives and libraries in Iowa and Utah; on contemporary maps of Iowa; on the notes and tentative sketches of Church and Iowa historians; on the journals and publications of many of the original participants; on the manuscript histories of all contemporary wards and branches from Garden Grove to Winter Quarters; and on my own tracing of the trail by foot, car, and plane.

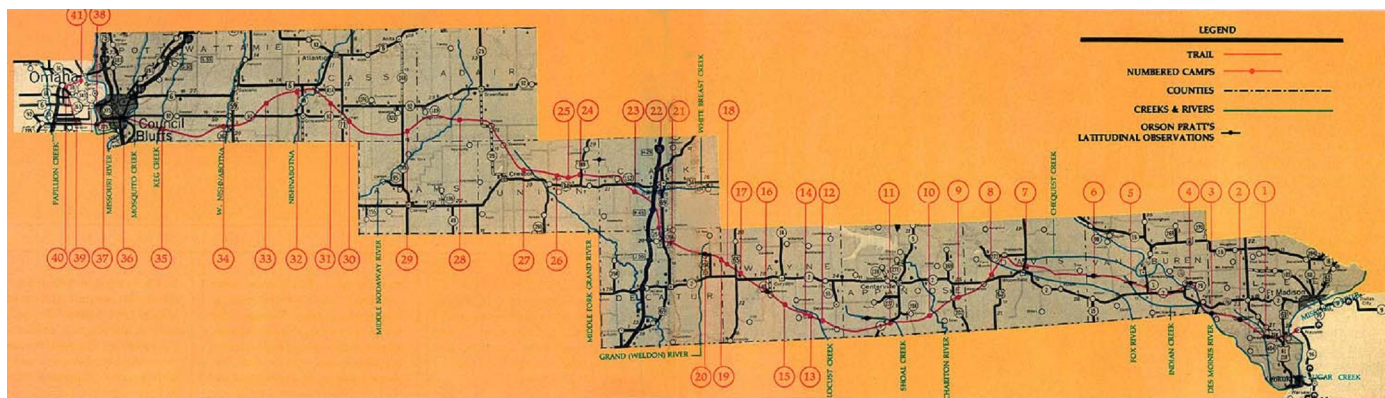
First the rivers and creeks mentioned in the sources were located on detailed (7.5 minute, 1:24,000) topographic maps. Then the ten latitudinal sightings taken by Orson Pratt were marked on these topographic maps, shown as red lines on the accompanying map. (It must be noted, however, that Pratt took very few of these sightings, that he was sometimes several miles away from the Brigham Young camp, and that he himself complained about the accuracy of his instruments.)

Next, certain known areas, such as the cemeteries at Mt. Pisgah and Winter Quarters, the community of Garden Grove, and Council Bluffs on the Missouri River, were marked. This data was then transferred to Iowa county maps.

After conflicting evidence was rationalized, the trail between these various points of reference was filled in as accurately as the sources would permit. It helped in reconstructing the trail to know that in 1846 there were some territorial "roads" as far west as Bloomfield, Davis County; that the pioneers would have followed slopes, ridges, and the best grades for their heavy wagons; that they needed water for themselves and their stock; and that they may have sometimes followed Indian trails.

The final step was to mark the trail on a 1971 official highway map of Iowa, which became the basis for the accompanying map.

Camp Sites Between Nauvoo and Winter Quarters*



[Click to View Larger Format](#)

1. Sugar Creek Camp (February 4–March 1, latitude 40 deg. 32 min.). This was the staging ground for the Camp of Israel. Brigham Young arrived here February 15, and others continued to arrive until the camp moved March 1. By that time there were about 500 wagons and approximately 5,000 Saints. The area was used as a first camp until at least the following October. Before the year was out, between nine and ten thousand emigrants left this camp for the West.

In February the weather was extremely harsh. The temperature went as low as twelve degrees below zero and usually hovered around twenty or thirty degrees above zero, causing much suffering as people huddled around great log fires. Nine children were born on one particular night in this camp. On February 25 the advance company of pioneers was dispatched to go ahead to prepare the roads.

Part of this extensive camp site may be viewed today north of where county road J72 crosses Sugar Creek, about five miles west of Montrose, in sections 2 and 11 of Des Moines Township.

Although it did not occur at Sugar Creek, there is one event that deserves to be mentioned in connection with this area. During the following October when the remnants of the Mormons were leaving Nauvoo and resting on the Iowa shore of the Mississippi River, flocks of exhausted quail began falling to the ground and were gathered for food by the destitute as manna from heaven.

2. Sugar Creek Camp Number 2 (March 1, latitude 40 deg. 34 min. 52 sec.). Brigham Young crossed Sugar Creek and proceeded northwest along the creek about five miles and camped in several inches of snow near county road J62, in section 20 of Charleston Township.

3. Lick Creek Camp (March 2, latitude 40 deg. 35 min. 51 sec.). This camp was just above the present town of Croton, on the west side of Lick Creek, one-half mile from its junction with the Des Moines River.

4. Reed's Creek Camp (March 3–4, latitude 40 deg. 42 min. 26 sec.). This fourth camp was three miles above Farmington in a ten-acre field near Reed's Creek, three quarters of a mile north of the Des Moines River, in section 15 of Bonaparte Township. Captain William Pitt's brass band gave a concert in Farmington that evening. There is a local tradition that some Mormons remained in the area, and some are buried two and one-half miles east of Bonaparte.

5. Indian Creek Camp (March 5–6, latitude 40 deg. 42 min. 51 sec.). On March 5 the camp forded the Des Moines River just below Bonaparte and made camp on the north bank of Indian Creek, just west of Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, near section 8 of Des Moines Township. Some time ago the Daughters of the American Revolution commemorated this crossing by erecting a marker one-quarter of a mile west of the Bonaparte bridge.

What apparently was the first example of the blessing of sick animals took place near this camp site on February 14 when William Hall's horse sickened with bloating and colic. Citing the prophet Joel, who said that in the last days the Lord would pour out his spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:28), some of the brethren laid hands on the animal and blessed it. Later it recovered. (This event took place more than two years earlier than the more famous similar incident regarding the ox of Mary Fielding Smith, which was blessed somewhere between the Platte and Sweetwater rivers in present-day Wyoming.)

6. Richardson's Point Camp (March 7–18, latitude 40 deg. 42 min. 56 sec.). Because of bad roads and rain, most of the camp remained here for nearly two weeks and improved their organization. The brass band played several times for goods and money in nearby Keosauqua. Also, the camp's artillery unit cached a supply of cannonballs in the area, a cache that may still be there.

Locating this campsite has been most difficult, but it seems to have been at what was later called Oak Point, on a branch of the Chequest Creek, about three miles west of the present town of Lebanon on county road J40, in section 32 of Chequest Township.

7. Evan's Camp (March 19). This camp was on the south side of Chequest Creek.

8. Davis County Camp (March 20, approximate latitude 40 deg. 42 min. 56 sec.). On this day the camp crossed the Fox River near present-day Drakesville and camped several miles beyond the river.

9. Coffman's Settlement Camp (March 21). This was several miles from the Chariton River.

10. Chariton River Camp (March 22–31). This site, one-half mile west of the Chariton River and a little southeast of present-day Sedan, near section 30 of Wells Township, was about 100 miles from Nauvoo. Since leaving Sugar Creek, the camp, on account of bad weather and sickness, had only averaged between three and four miles a day. It was here that the reorganization took place. On March 23 the ground was whitened with hail the size of peas.

11. Shoal Creek Camp (April 1–2, approximate latitude 40 deg. 40 min. 7 sec. and longitude 92 deg. 59 min. 15 sec.—the only longitudinal sighting taken by Pratt). The company camped one mile west of the east fork of Shoal Creek, near section 1 of Pleasant Township. About this time it was decided to bear more to the north, for the camp was then in the border area disputed by Iowa and Missouri. At that time, since the boundary was about

ten miles north of where it is today, some of the companies actually dipped into what was then Putnam County, Missouri. The sources indicate that when practical, some Mormons worked and traded in northern Missouri, in spite of their previous hardships in that state.

12. Hickory Grove Camp (April 3–5). This camp was about one mile east of the east fork of Locust Creek.

13. Locust Creek Camp Number 1 (April 6–12). This camp was on the middle fork of Locust Creek, and because of bad weather Brigham Young remained here a week. On April 6, the sixteenth anniversary of the organization of the Church was observed. It was here also that the important decision to build a more permanent camp on the Grand River (that is, at Garden Grove) was made.

14. Locust Creek Camp Number 2 (April 13–15). On April 13 the camp moved one-half mile west. It was here on April 15 that William Clayton wrote the words of the hymn “Come, Come, Ye Saints.” In his journal for that day all Clayton recorded was, “This morning I composed a new song—‘All is well.’” Despite a persistent rumor to the contrary, there is no evidence that Brigham Young commissioned this hymn to buoy up the suffering people.

At the present time it is impossible to pinpoint exactly where this hymn was composed, because the border of Iowa and Missouri was changed and disputed from 1816 to 1895. Much evidence, however, suggests it was probably composed about five miles southeast of Sewell, south of where county road J54 crosses Locust Creek.

15. Rolling Prairie Camp (April 16). This camp was one-half day’s journey from the previous one.

16. Pleasant Point Camp (April 17–20, approximate latitude 40 deg. 44 min. 7 sec.).

17. Camp Creek Camp (April 21).

18. Pleasant Grove Camp (April 22).

19. Muddy Creek Camp (April 23).

20. Garden Grove Camp (April 24–May 12, latitude 40 deg. 52 min.). Garden Grove, the “Magic City of the Woods,” was situated on the west bank of the east (Weldon) fork of the Grand River, in sections 27 and 34 of Garden Grove Township. It was about halfway across Iowa, 144 miles west of Nauvoo and 120 miles east of the Missouri River. Here a permanent camp was built for the benefit of those to follow. After Brigham Young moved on, others stayed behind to maintain it. A community by this name still exists on this old camp site on county road 204.

21. Hickory Thunder Camp (May 13–14).

22. Willow Bridge Camp (May 15).

23. White Breast Creek Camp (May 16).

24. Camp (May 17).

25. Mt. Pisgah (May 18–June 1). This camp was selected and named by Parley P. Pratt, who was reminded of the biblical Pisgah where Moses viewed the Promised Land ([Deut. 3:27](#)). At this second permanent camp, Brigham Young celebrated his forty-fifth birthday. The site was located on Potawatomi Indian lands, on the east bank of the middle fork of the Grand River, in section 8 of Jones Township. Mt. Pisgah was maintained as a camp until at least 1852 and at its height had over 2,000 inhabitants.

It was here that part of the Mormon Battalion was mustered during July. Here also Heber C. Kimball was informed that his barely finished mansion in Nauvoo had been sold for only thirty-five yoke of oxen, most of which were distributed among the needy exiles. Many of those who left Nauvoo after Brigham Young caught up with the camp at Mt. Pisgah.

Today there is little left of this camp but a cemetery, a monument to the hundreds who died there between 1846 and 1852, and a nine-acre park and picnic area. The cemetery is located in section 8 of Jones Township, on a county road a mile and a half north of U.S. highway 34 at Talmadge (ask locally for directions). Mt. Pisgah itself is a narrow ridge running northeast across section 8. Today the Chicago and Great Western Railroad tracks run parallel to this ridge. In 1929 the DAR placed a marker in this area to honor the first white settlement in Union County.

26. Grand River Camp (June 2). Brigham Young left here after the first company had already crossed the river, but he did not get far on the other side.

27. Camp (June 3). A camp was established on the west side of Grand River.

28. Broomberry Hill Camp (June 4). Seven miles west of this camp and two miles east of Bridgewater is a “Mormon” Lake commemorating the pioneers’ passing through here.

29. Shoal Creek Camp (June 5). Here the Saints found the Indian trail to Council Bluffs, part of which they probably followed.

30. Camp (June 6).**31. Pleasant Valley Camp (June 7).**

32. Camp (June 8). The camp crossed a branch of the Nishnabotna River and passed through a Potawatomi Indian village, the site of which is approximately two miles west of Lewis, on state highway 48.

33. Camp (June 9–10).**34. Nishnabotna River, West Fork Camp (June 11).****35. Keg Creek Camp (June 12).**

In the Council Bluffs and Winter Quarters area there were many camps, of which the following seven were important.

36. Mosquito Creek Camp (June 13, 1846–1852?). This site was on the bluffs near where state highway 375 crosses Mosquito Creek today. It was here that Captain James Allen of the U.S. Army found Brigham Young in July and requested 500 men to help in the war with Mexico. Also in this general area, the Mormon Battalion was assembled to begin its heroic march.

37. Council Point Camp (June 14, 1846–1852?). In addition to the camp at Mosquito Creek, a second camp was made on the flats near the Missouri River just north of Council Point, a straggling Potawatomi Indian trading area. Here the Mormons built a ferry to transport themselves across the river to the present-day site of Omaha. This camp and ferry were near the spot where highway 92 crosses the river, just west of Lake Manawa.

After Brigham Young crossed the Missouri River, this camp became headquarters for those who remained in Iowa. The high council, which had been appointed to take charge of the Iowa Saints, held its meetings here.

38. Kaneshville (July 17, 1846–Spring 1852). This site existed as a trading post and Indian settlement from the 1820s. In Mormon times it was first known as Miller's Hollow and eventually as Council Bluffs. On July 17, 1846, Henry W. Miller purchased this site. Later, the Mormons on both sides of the river who did not go west gravitated to this settlement, and during April conference in 1848 they changed the name to Kaneshville, in honor of their friend Colonel Thomas L. Kane.

The post office established here in March 1848 provided for several years the only postal service to the Mormons in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.

Here, during October 1848, Oliver Cowdery, one of the Three Witnesses, returned to the Church and was rebaptized. Elder Orson Hyde was appointed to preside over the Saints in Iowa (frequently referred to as the "Potawatomi lands"). While here he published a newspaper, the *Frontier Guardian*, from February 7, 1849, until February 20, 1852.

The heart of this settlement was along Indian Creek at about the intersection of Fourth Street and Broadway in present-day Council Bluffs. One of the most important events to take place here was in December 1847 when Brigham Young was sustained as the second president of the Church, and the First Presidency was reorganized with Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards as counselors to President Young.

Since the death of Joseph Smith in June 1844, Brigham Young had led the Church in the capacity of president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. On December 5, 1847, nine of the Twelve met at the home of Orson Hyde and effected the reorganization, an action that was ratified December 27 at a general conference of the Church at Kaneshville.

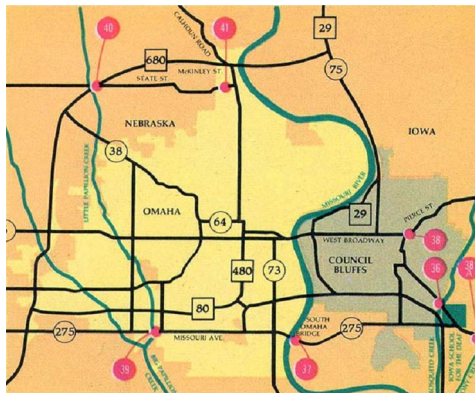
At that time Kaneshville was the largest body of Mormons in the United States. Only 1,000 to 1,200 Saints were in the Salt Lake Valley, and most of those from the old Winter Quarters area had removed to Kaneshville.

38A. Hyde Park. It is important to note that the home of Orson Hyde was not in Kaneshville proper. He lived at his own small settlement called "Hyde Park," a few miles south of Kaneshville on Pony Creek. His home probably stood near where U.S. highway 275 crosses Pony Creek, in section 16 of Lewis Township.

39. Cold Spring Camp, Omaha Nation (July-September). This was the first camp in what is today Nebraska. In July Brigham Young and others crossed the Missouri River on their ferry at Council Point, to explore the area for a winter quarters. The lateness of the season and the loss of 500 men to the army precluded crossing the Rocky Mountains that year. They camped about four miles west of the river at a cold spring near the confluence of Big and Little Papillion creeks. This would make this temporary camp approximately where highways 275 and 92 cross the Little Papillion Creek near Ralston, southwest of Omaha.

40. Cutler's Park Camp (August-December). The first suggested site for winter quarters was named after Alpheus Cutler, who selected it. It was located northwest of Omaha and north of Irvington, along the Little Papillion Creek, somewhere to the east of where Interstate 280 crosses this creek.

Although Colonel Kane first met Brigham Young at the Mosquito Creek Camp, it was here that he got to know the Mormons, suffered a severe attack of "bilious fever," and received a patriarchal blessing September 7, 1846. This camp proved to be of a temporary nature, however, for by late September a more suitable place to spend the winter had been located.



[Click to View Larger Format](#)

41. Winter Quarters (September 1846–July 1847). This extensive camp area, which was used through the following July, was about three miles closer to the river than Cutler's Park. The cemetery of this famous camp, where perhaps 600 are buried, is located north of Omaha in Florence, on the corner of State Street and Northridge Drive.

At the end of the year there were along the trail about 3,500 Mormons divided into twenty-two wards at Winter Quarters, over 200 across the Missouri River in Iowa, remnants at Nauvoo and in the Montrose area, and wards at Mt. Pisgah and Garden Grove. Other thousands were scattered in the United States and Canada, England, and the Society Islands. Altogether there were perhaps 50,000 Latter-day Saints by the end of 1846.

Hopefully, this study will generate more interest in and research on not only the trail across Iowa, but also the whole Iowa phase of Mormon history. The documentation for this map is available upon request, and it is suggested that various Latter-day Saint groups and other organizations along the trail develop and make use of some of the more interesting sites for Boy Scout, Aaronic Priesthood, and other outings.

[illustrations] Illustrated by Dale Kilbourn

[illustration] At Sugar Creek Camp (1), flocks of exhausted quail began falling to the ground and were gathered for food by the destitute Saints

[illustration] Potawatomi Indian village was near one of the Saints' camps (32)

[illustration] William Pitt's brass band gave a concert at Reed's Creek Camp (4)

[illustration] Mormon Battalion was assembled at Mosquito Creek Camp (36)

[illustration] Reorganization of the First Presidency took place at Kanesville (38)

[illustration] Winter Quarters (41) was scene of cemetery where some 600 Saints were buried on trek across plains to Rocky Mountains

Notes

* Orson Pratt's latitudinal sightings are given in parentheses. Most of these sightings were taken when he was traveling with Brigham Young. Those marked as approximate were taken some few miles distant from Brigham Young's camp.

Notes

A high councilor in the St. Louis (Missouri) Stake, Brother Kimball is also a council member of the Mormon History Association and historian for the Mormon Pioneer Trail Foundation. His research on Iowa has been used by the Lake Central Region of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation to prepare feasibility studies for the development of historic American trails and by the Iowa State Highway Commission in preparation for marking the trail across Iowa

highways.

[E-mail to a Friend](#)

Official Web site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
© 2010 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.