

The Mormon Trail



Image of Trail Map

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or the Mormon Church was founded by a young man named Joseph Smith, Jr. in April 1830. Church members were severely persecuted and driven from New York, Ohio, Missouri, and ultimately Illinois. After Joseph Smith's murder in 1844, the Latter Day Saints or Mormons abandoned their homes in Nauvoo, IL in fear that mobs would soon come to destroy them.

The Mormons fled from Nauvoo on February 4, 1846 for fear of attack. The journey was bitter cold and miserable. It took them approximately four months to cross Iowa, due to severe weather and axle-deep mud. Ultimately, they crossed the Missouri River and settled an area on the Nebraska side, which they called Winter Quarters. Some of the pioneers stayed there for the winter of 1846, while others stopped at temporary camps outside of Winter Quarters. By the spring of 1847, almost 400 lives had been lost, largely due to inadequate provisions and exposure.

While crossing Iowa, the Mormons were entreated by the United States government to render assistance in the Mexican American War (1846-48). Following the council of Brigham Young, five hundred men assembled near Council Bluffs, Iowa and marched to San Diego, California. The Mormon Battalion left their loved ones on the plains and embarked on one of the longest military marches in American History. As Young predicted, the company was not involved in any battles, but rather helped develop cities in the west, like San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Some former battalion members were involved in the Sutter's Mill gold discovery. <http://omaha.org/trails/main.htm>

Having learned many lessons from the previous years hardships, Brigham Young led a vanguard group west from Winter Quarters on April 5, 1847. The first group numbered 148. However, 16,000 Mormons were to follow that year. After traversing over 1,000 miles across Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah the first group arrived in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake on July 24, 1847.

The Mormon migration west is unique for several reasons. First of all, unlike many other pioneers, the Mormons moved en masse in a highly organized fashion. Brigham Young compiled a document called "The Word and Will of the Lord." It outlined appropriate behavior for the journey and contained instructions about how the pioneers were to be organized into companies. (Hill 1996: 8) Mormons also made a point to build way stations and plant crops along the trail to assist those that would cross in the future. Another distinct feature of the Mormon migration was that most of the companies were largely comprised of women and children. (Hill 1996: 2)

Mormon pioneers contributed much to future westward travel. They built several ferries along the Platte, Elk Horn, and Loup rivers. In addition, William Clayton, part of the vanguard group of 1847, was responsible for developing a detailed guidebook to assist those wishing to travel to Utah in the future. (Hill 1996: 52) Also, while crossing Nebraska, William Clayton, Orson Pratt, and Appleton Harmon developed a mechanical device that counted wheel revolutions to determine distances. As one of Clayton's responsibilities was to keep track of mileage, this was a welcomed invention. (Hill 1996:56)

The Mormon Trail generally followed the north side of the Platte River approximately 425 miles to Fort Laramie, where the pioneers crossed the river and joined the Oregon Trail. They generally traveled on the north side of the Platte River in order to avoid conflicts with their former Missourian enemies. They followed the Oregon Trail 397 miles to Fort Bridger, at which point they picked up the trail of the Donner-Reed party. They followed this faint trail into the Great Salt Lake Valley. These last 116 miles were the most treacherous thanks to steep mountains climbs and rocky ridges. (The first group arrived on July 24, 1847) (Kimball 1988:49) While many think that the Mormon migration occurred in one swoop across the plains in 1847, in actuality, Mormons crossed the plains from various points over a twenty-three year span. The Mormon Trail from Ft. Kearney to Salt Lake City generally remained the same throughout its use. However, many variant routes existed for getting the Latter-Day Saints to Fort Kearney.

Of all of the westward pioneer movements, the Mormon handcart companies were one of the most unique. The entire carts were constructed almost exclusively of wood, making them less expensive to build and more simple to repair than wagons. In addition, the carts, being pulled by the pioneers, did not require costly oxen. The handcarts also maneuvered on the trail more readily than wagons. From 1856 to 1860, approximately 3,000 Mormons traveled in the handcart companies to Salt Lake City.

All but two of the ten handcart companies successfully arrived in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. Ignoring warnings given by Brigham Young, the eager members of the Martin and Willie companies departed from Winter Quarters late in the summer of

1856 and were caught in a snow storm near Casper, Wyoming. Over two hundred died from exposure and famine before rescuers arrived from Salt Lake City. Despite such loss, hundreds of handcarts rolled across the plains in the following years. (nps brochure of the Mormon Trail)

The jumping off point for heading to the valley of the Great Salt Lake moved from Winter Quarter's (Florence) to Wyoming, Nebraska from 1864 to 1867. This was the last alteration for starting for the Mormon Trail head to the west. The change was made presumably due to native uprisings on the Oregon Trail and an outbreak of cholera at Florence. Wyoming was a small port town just a few miles north of Nebraska City. The Mormons set up a way station and settlement on a hill outside of Wyoming. Most immigrants took a train from New York City to St. Joseph, MO, at which point they would take a boat up stream to Wyoming, NE. The immigrant companies consisted of Danish, Swiss, German, Dutch, French, Norwegian, Swedish, and English families. Wagons arrived each spring from Salt Lake City to pick up immigrant Saints and supplies. Between 1864 and 1867, approximately, 6500 immigrants departed from Wyoming destined for Salt Lake City, Utah. The trail from Wyoming generally followed the Nebraska City-Ft. Kearney Cut-off until reaching Fort Kearney, at which point the company rejoined the Mormon Trail on the north side of the Platte River. The Mormon outfitting station at Wyoming, NE fell into disuse after 1867, when railroad expansion allowed immigrants to travel further west by train. By 1869, the entire journey from New York City to Salt Lake City could be taken by rail, bringing an end to the large scale wagon migration across the plains. (Nebraska History Mag, Old Wyoming, Helen R. Williams.)

