

**Finalizing Plans for the Trek  
West: Deliberations at Winter  
Quarters, 1846–1847**



# Finalizing Plans for the Trek West: Deliberations at Winter Quarters, 1846–1847

Richard E. Bennett

Those focusing only on Nauvoo difficulties and deliberations for the Mormon exodus to “Zion” have overlooked the intense planning sessions at Winter Quarters on the west side of the Missouri River during the winter of 1846–47. Nauvoo was left in haste long before the final details of the westward march had solidified. Due to the weather, disorganization, lack of preparation, and recurring arguments over leadership, the Mormon vanguard took more than four months to cross Iowa, only to be again delayed by the call for the Mormon Battalion. With the inevitable decision to winter at the Missouri in the Council Bluffs region, Church leaders found the time to catch their collective breath and more thoroughly prepare for the mountain trek. This article details the plans, arguments, and decisions of that winter of 1846–47. At stake was far more than mere route plans; rather, basic questions of leadership and authority were being tested.

## Introduction

While building their cabin city at Winter Quarters, skirmishing with Indians, sparring with agents, eking out a living, and coping with sickness and disease, Church authorities analyzed and reanalyzed their plans. In question was the spring departure of a pioneer company of yet unknown size and makeup, along some still-to-be-finalized overland trail, to some obscure resting place at the foot of the mountains, and eventually to “Zion” in some undetermined valley over the Rockies. The planning councils in which these issues were discussed were essentially extensions of earlier Nauvoo deliberations, for the leaders had always intended to reestablish the Church in the West. But their stay at the Missouri provided time and opportunity to restock their supplies; rethink their plans; confer with gentle traders, trappers, and missionaries who knew the West firsthand; obtain the best, most reliable maps; and formulate a deliberate, foolproof plan of action. Yet despite these advantages, until the eve of their exodus they did not agree on many details of their impending march and eventual destination. And if Brigham Young knew precisely where he was going when he and the advance party left in April 1847, it was the best-kept secret in camp.

Besides the trapper Peter Sarpy, who told what he knew of the prairie and mountain west, Brigham Young and his colleagues in the Quorum of the

Twelve conferred at length with Father Jean Pierre De Smet, who visited the settlements on 19 November 1846.<sup>1</sup> “They asked me a thousand questions about the regions I had explored,” De Smet later reported, “and the spot which I have just described to you [the Great Basin] pleased them greatly from the account I gave them of it.”<sup>2</sup> And they would talk to others.

The pioneers’ destination remained the same as a year before—some secluded valley in either the Great Basin or Bear River country. In all the official correspondence coming out of Winter Quarters between August 1846 and April 1847, references to an ultimate destination were consistent but guarded. In August 1846 Brigham told Colonel Thomas L. Kane “they were intending to settle in the Great Basin or Bear River valley.”<sup>3</sup> John D. Lee, who participated in the confidential conversation with Colonel Kane at Cutler’s Park, elaborated on Brigham’s comments:

With reference to our Settlements in the California’s—we do not intend going and [settling] the Majority of our People on the [coast] or near the Bay of Francisco—but intend Settling the grater part of our People in the great Basin Between the Mountains near the Bear River valley.<sup>4</sup>

In correspondence to President James K. Polk, “the Great Salt Lake or Bear River Valley” was plainly specified.<sup>5</sup> In September, Brigham again spoke of Bear River, the Great Basin, or some other favorable valley.<sup>6</sup> A Willard Richards letter to Colonel Kane in mid-February 1847 proves winter discussions did not affect the ultimate destination. “We have not changed our views relative to a location,” wrote the camp historian. “It must be somewhere in the Great Basin, we have no doubt.”<sup>7</sup>

But if their target remained consistent, the complex plans for getting there evolved through at least three subtly distinguishable stages of development. Such matters as the time of departure, the number of men, the route, the need for another farm or way station, the regulation of authority, camp organization, and other related concerns were in constant debate. How, not where, was the divisive issue.

### **September–November Preliminary Plan**

The first plan was to send across the mountains to the Great Basin or Bear River Valley a substantial number of able-bodied men who would plant extensive crops and erect substantial improvements and facilities. After a year or two they would return to bring back to the Great Basin area as many of the Missouri River encampments as possible. Central to the operation were the completion of the Winter Quarters mill far enough in advance to provide abundant seed, a very early departure, and a universal understanding and willingness among the families to surrender their sons and husbands and to remain a year or two longer at the Missouri.

Specifically, the proposed company was variously described as “a portion of our effective men,”<sup>8</sup> a “few hundred men”<sup>9</sup> and “all the able bodied brethren who possibly can.”<sup>10</sup> The company was to consist of carpenters, millwrights, fence-builders, and experienced farmers, who, after reaching their new home, would lay out a city, select a temple lot, sow extensive acreage, build permanent living quarters, erect mills, and in every possible way “prepare something tangible for our families and the Saints when they follow after.”<sup>11</sup> Apparently most of the party, if not all, would winter there. In short, the leaders envisioned a large work party of several hundred men who would accomplish far more than merely locate the site.

Also critical to the plan was reaching the destination in sufficient time to plant abundant summer crops and build extensively before winter. The leaders predicted reaching their chosen valley in a minimum of “six weeks,” certainly no later than 1 June.<sup>12</sup> To make it by that date they would have to leave “at the earliest moment,”<sup>13</sup> “say one month before grass grows,”<sup>14</sup> or, as finally defined, “by the first of March.”<sup>15</sup> Without families and excessive paraphernalia, the proposed company could leave early and travel quickly, a lesson Iowa taught them by hard experience. Following the route of the pathfinder James C. Frémont, they would travel up the North Platte to Fort Laramie, along the Springwater and through the South Pass.

Meanwhile, their families would remain at the Bluffs or “up and down the river and back in Iowa”<sup>16</sup> for “one or two years”<sup>17</sup> if forced to vacate Winter Quarters and then come en masse in “the spring of 1848.”<sup>18</sup> Bringing large numbers of families before reaping sustaining harvests would be potentially disastrous. Realizing the perennial objections of the faithful to being left behind, Brigham argued that “a year’s comfortable situation in any civilized community for women and children is far preferable to a year or two’s risque of starvation in the wilderness.”<sup>19</sup> Once the new settlement was secured, crops sowed, and adequate shelter provided, “then they will come to us, or we can come and bring them.”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, to lessen family fears and bolster confidence, Brigham related at a meeting of the “general council” or Council of Fifty in mid-November a dream which he had recently had “concerning the Rocky Mountains” and promised “that we should go in safety over the mountains, notwithstanding all the opposition and obstacles government officials and others might interpose.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Council of Fifty’s December Plan**

But the Council of Fifty had other ideas—dreams or no dreams. In a series of meetings in November and December, the Council of Fifty, reconvening officially for the first time since Nauvoo days, met to discuss “the organization of the camp of Israel and our contemplated journey.”<sup>22</sup> The

most important meetings were held in December. Assistant Presiding Bishop George Miller and James Emmett returned from the Ponca settlement on the day of Christmas Eve, having made the trip two or three times previously. The Council of Fifty assembled the following day, Christmas, at Willard Richards's octagonal cabin, starting at 4 P.M. Their deliberations lasted until ten that night, continued from 10 A.M. (with a break for lunch) until 9 P.M. the next day, and concluded at 6 P.M. Sunday, 27 December.<sup>23</sup> It is significant that Brigham Young and Willard Richards were quite ill at the time and attended only intermittently. George Miller later indicated that his ideas were not "wholly overlooked in their deliberations."<sup>24</sup> The plan that resulted superseded the preliminary plan of just a few weeks earlier.

Central to this approach was the establishment of a large farm or way station, like Mt. Pisgah or Garden Grove, in an isolated setting in Yellowstone country north of Fort Laramie. Planting spring crops at the foot of instead of across the mountains was safer than risking all on an over-the-mountain dash. Fewer men would be required since few large facilities were envisioned and only planting would be required at this temporary site, while more men could come on after spring. If successful at the Yellowstone, a small band might later go over the mountains, find the right valley, and at least make a tiny foothold and plant some fall crops. If the plan were successful on both counts, the bulk of the Church could be brought out in the spring of 1848 as originally decided. More cautious than the first, this second plan was a scheduling change, a guarantee for essential wilderness crops in the summer and fall of 1847; but the end result would be the same. Prompting this revision were the advice trappers were offering, the three hundred pounds of flour per man required, the failure of the mill to begin operating in time to supply the pioneers with sufficient seed grain, and a feeling that a way station farther west would be a healthier place to spend another summer than Winter Quarters.

The plan apparently stemmed from Bishop George Miller. Bishop Miller and James Emmett, from their conversations with local Indians and explorations up the Running Water River, were convinced that the spring expedition should travel west up the Running Water rather than the more southerly route along the North Platte. Writing as early as October, Bishop Miller had argued that his route was "the nearest and best rout to the pass in the mountains" and that it was "a level road all the way to Fort Laramie."<sup>25</sup> He sent Emmett and Butler to explore the river, and upon their return in December they reported it as a "good route." Joseph Holbrook called it "one of the best I ever saw for spring traveling."<sup>26</sup>

Then, in late November, Justin Grosclaude and a Mr. Cardinal strongly endorsed Miller's proposed route. They spoke favorably of at least a summer way station in the Yellowstone country near the forks of Tongue River

“just five or six days above Fort Laramie,” in present southeastern Montana, south of Miles City.<sup>27</sup> The two men, according to Horace K. Whitney, had settled in the area of “the Salt Lakes” for sixteen years. “They narrated [and] gave an account of the climate, etc. which was quite interesting indeed.”<sup>28</sup> Grosclaude, a trader for the American Fur Company, and Cardinal, an expert hunter and trapper, claimed a knowledge of most of the Indian languages and all the best trails to and over the Rockies. They offered “to pilot the camp over the mountains” the following spring for \$400. A noncommittal but interested Brigham Young listened carefully to their recommendations of establishing a summer farming station in the Tongue River area; he himself had introduced the subject of a way station in the foothills some weeks previously. As one of the clerks recorded, “Mr. ‘G.’ gave an interesting account of the sources of the Yellowstone and sketched with pencil a map of the country west of the Missouri and north of Puncah above the Yellow Stone.”<sup>29</sup> Because of his conversations with the two men, Brigham gave more serious consideration to Miller’s Running Water-Tongue River plan. “The thought occurred to us,” he said in a letter to Bishop Miller,

that perhaps Brothers Emmett and Butler might like to explore that country [Yellowstone] this winter to see if there was a chance for a good location or any other speculation in that vicinity to become familiar with routes. . . . We have written the thought, but have no particular council on the subject.<sup>30</sup>

Although Brigham was never overly enthusiastic about the Yellowstone proposal, before long Grosclaude’s suggestions had become the pioneers’ concrete plans.

By mid-December, after the November round of Council of Fifty meetings, Thomas Bullock and other assistant clerks dispatched letters describing “the route to our next intended location on the head waters of the Yellow Stone River.”<sup>31</sup> At a Sunday public meeting in Winter Quarters two days after Christmas, and immediately after the December meetings of the Council of Fifty, Orson Pratt described the way station plan, explaining the intention to

send out a pioneer company to get to the head waters of the Running Water by the time grass comes or before and be ready to go over the Black Hills [of present-day eastern Wyoming] & put in a crop of corn somewhere on this side of the mountains near the head of the Yellow Stone. He was followed by Woodruff & Benson approving of his views on the subject.<sup>32</sup>

Mary Richards, who also attended the meeting, noted that it was similarly contemplated that if time and energy permitted they would send out from the proposed Yellowstone winter quarters “a company across the mountains . . . to put in a crop of wheat in the fall.”<sup>33</sup>

Brigham, writing to Parley P. Pratt, Orson Hyde, and John Taylor, who were then about to depart from England and return home to the camps, indicated that after conferring with George Miller and others at Christmas-time the Council of Fifty had decided to send ahead two or three hundred men “as early as circumstances would possibly permit” to the Yellowstone River, “perhaps at the Fork of Tongue River,” to prepare a large summer crop for “some thousand or two of the saints, who should follow after them as soon as grazing would permit.”<sup>34</sup> All who did not go to the Yellowstone in either of the first two parties would “remain at this place and raise crops preparatory for emigration the following Spring.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve’s Plan**

Despite his tentative agreement with the Yellowstone plan and the words of support given by various members of the Twelve, Brigham never warmed up to it. After receiving more information and considering all the geographical and administrative matters concerned, he tendered a revision of the original plan, this time with the weight of divine approval behind it. Involved were far more than routes, rivers, and way stations; rather, the matter had become an issue of leadership and authority.

Brigham developed several objections. First of all, he did not like the direction the Yellowstone plan would take them. He saw in it a repeat of Miller’s Ponca settlement—a way station off the main line and north by hundreds of miles from where they were intending to go. Why risk living among other potentially hostile Sioux and Mandan Indian tribes for another winter? Why risk unnecessarily an uncertain crop in an unknown area away from trading posts and settlements? In short, why delay at all? Better to take the risks of getting over the mountains than to mire in the swamps of the Yellowstone.

Second, Brigham didn’t like what he was hearing about the Yellowstone. He gradually concluded that Grosclaude and Cardinal were influencing George Miller and the others the same way the Ponca Indians had done earlier—possibly for their own advantage. Joseph Holbrook, after returning from his explorations west with James Emmett, told Brigham that while the Running Water was a fairly direct route, the feed along the way was “entirely eat out” by large buffalo herds. More seriously, the Sioux Indians “expressed an unwillingness for us to pass through their country and make a large road as it would serve to drive off their Buffalo and other game.” The Ponca, confided Holbrook, “expressed the same opinions as the Sioux.”<sup>36</sup> If the warlike Sioux were concerned about a tiny exploration party, how would they react to large caravans? Besides, the Sioux were already a serious enough hazard to the settlements at the Missouri. To aggravate them further would be risking the lives of both the overlanders and the weakly defended settlers back at Winter Quarters.



What Logan Fontenelle described was equally unsettling, if not more so. Fontenelle was the interpreter to the Omaha Indians and a frequent visitor at Winter Quarters. A half-breed son of the mountain man Lucien B. Fontenelle, he possessed extensive knowledge of the Far West. Logan Fontenelle disagreed with Grosclaude and thought the Yellowstone plan unwise. "The soil about Tongue River is red and yellow clay and you cannot raise crops on it," he advised Willard Richards, Thomas Bullock, and Henry G. Sherwood in mid-December. "From the Ponca to the Oregon trail is a broken country—between the divides are swamps—the Creeks that run into the Running Water are not miry, but it is a rough Country. . . . Up the Running Water you will see trouble and may break your wagons. I would not undertake to go up that River." Instead, Fontenelle strongly recommended they pursue their original plan to follow the North Platte, which he described as "a level prairie and good sound road to the Mountains." He also spoke encouragingly about the "best soil" south of the Salt Lake.<sup>37</sup>

Another drawback to the Yellowstone plan was the increased hardship it would place on members of the Mormon Battalion. Brigham was keenly aware that after their discharge in the summer of 1847 many of the soldiers would be returning from the Pacific Coast to their families.<sup>38</sup> He therefore wanted a large number of Battalion families in the proposed summer train of one thousand or two thousand so that as few soldiers as possible would have to travel all the way back to the Missouri.<sup>39</sup> They had already marched enough at his insistence. The Yellowstone scheme would add several hundred more miles to the soldiers' march. Enough criticism had already been raised over the Battalion matter—why make it worse?

Third and of most importance, in addition to disliking the direction of travel and to receiving negative input about the Yellowstone plan, Brigham disliked the source from which the plan came. George Miller and his tagalong, James Emmett, represented an excessively independent spirit that had manifested itself before the exodus from Nauvoo, all across Iowa, at the Missouri, and most recently at the Ponca settlement. Their goals and perspectives were repeatedly at variance with Brigham's and the Twelve's. George Miller and others of the Council of Fifty, such as Lyman Wight, Brigham believed, were following the shadow of the deceased Joseph Smith, not the living Quorum of the Twelve, and were not really convinced that settling the Church in the Great Basin was of any merit. During the winter, Bishop Miller had disobeyed counsel by dealing with Missouri traders without clearance and had steadfastly refused to pool his funds with Orson Whitney's to buy at cheaper wholesale prices.

At a raucous meeting in Daniel Cahoon's cabin at Winter Quarters on 29 October, George Miller railed against Brigham's policies, shackles, and ambitions in the presence of Willard Richards. After their meeting had adjourned,

Brigham appeared at the door and took up the subject. He had been without and heard all that was said. He handled the case very ruff. He said that Miller and Emmett had a delusive spirit and any one that would follow them would go to hell etc. that they would sacrifice this people to aggrandize themselves or to get power . . . and that he would not clean up after him any longer. He said that they would yet apostatize.<sup>40</sup>

Brigham wanted to dispel once and for all any doubt that the Quorum of the Twelve was in command. Several of the pioneers in and out of camp, such as Peter Haws, George Miller, Lyman Wight, and Lucian J. Woodward, were clinging to the belief that the Council of Fifty was directing the migrations west and held supreme authority at least over temporal and political matters. Miller, Haws, Emmett, and Wight all felt they were equal trailblazers with Brigham as fellow members of the Council and would not willingly submit to his direction, particularly regarding non-Church affairs.

To take matters completely out of the hands of the Council of Fifty or any other similar group and to scotch the already approved Yellowstone plan would require a forceful declaration. On 11 January, Brigham told of another dream he had received the night before of Joseph Smith and his mother Lucy Mack Smith, reporting that he and Joseph “conversed freely about the best manner of organizing companies for emigration.”<sup>41</sup> Three days later, on Thursday, 14 January, Brigham presented his canonized revelation to the Church. Recorded today in the Doctrine and Covenants and received then as “The Word and Will of the Lord concerning the Camp of Israel in their journeyings to the West” (D&C 136:1), the document was a brilliant and well-timed statement, not because of what it said regarding the organization of companies (since they had already had companies of hundreds, fifties, and tens all across Iowa) but for what it declared concerning the source of final authority. Above all, it was a lecture on apostolic supremacy.

Given first to the Twelve on 14 January, to the High Council on 16 January, to the general priesthood quorum on Sunday, 17 January, and finally to the general membership on 19 January, “The Word and Will of the Lord” said many things but perhaps none more important than this—that the journey westward, its organization, its conduct, all must be “under the direction of the Twelve Apostles” (D&C 136:3).

For the first time since Joseph Smith, the faithful proclaimed, God had given direction. He had not left his people alone in the wilderness and he would not abandon them. And he had stated unequivocally who was in charge.<sup>42</sup> Though the revelation said nothing about the Saints’ final destination nor the feasibility of a way station—indeed leaving these matters entirely open—it did establish ultimate authority. The Twelve were in control—not the Council of Fifty, not the High Council, nor any other group. And the issue was not missed by those who participated in the meetings and procedures to ratify the revelation.

Brigham endeavored to show that the Apostles were following the will of Joseph Smith while others were pretenders. "The Church has been led by revelation just as much since the death of Joseph Smith as before," said Brigham on 17 January. "Joseph received his apostleship from Peter, and his brethren, and the present Apostles received their apostleship from Joseph, the first apostle, and Oliver Cowdery, the second apostle."<sup>43</sup>

Hosea Stout, aware of the tensions over conflicting claims to authority, recorded his impressions of the revelation.

This will put to silence the wild bickering and suggestions of those who are ever in the way and opposing the proper council. They will now have to come to this standard or come out in open rebellion to the Will of the Lord which will plainly manifest them to the people and then they can have no influence.<sup>44</sup>

The content of the revelation was delivered in person to the Ponca settlement in early February by Ezra Taft Benson, Erastus Snow, and Orrin Porter Rockwell. They relieved Bishop Miller of his command, told him he was wanted back at headquarters, and put the camp under Apostle Benson's jurisdiction.<sup>45</sup>

Shortly after reading Brigham's document, even though it did not necessarily forbid the Yellowstone scheme, George Miller came out in public opposition to the plan, to the authority of the Twelve, and to Brigham personally. "I was greatly disgusted at the bad composition and folly of this revelation," George Miller later recorded, "so disgusted that I was, from this time, determined to go with them no longer. . . . I must confess that I was broken down in spirit on account of the usurpation of those arrogant apostles and their oppressive measures."<sup>46</sup>

In a letter to Brigham on 17 March, George Miller stated his long-held but unexpressed objections to settling in the Great Basin where, he declared, "we would find it hard to sustain ourselves in food and raiment; and would, most likely bring on the thoroughfare where all the slime and filth, malcontents . . . from Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, etc., would pass near by us to the newly acquired Territory of California and Oregon." Better to find a location in some lonely valley in Oregon (probably the Genesis of the Yellowstone plan) or, better still, in the far Southwest "on the Camanshee [Comanche] lands, on the eastern side of the Cordilleras Mountains, so far south that we could grow cotton, and even sugar-cane." Such a colony (one very close to Lyman Wight's in southern Texas), he argued, could stand as a buffer state between warring Mexico and the United States. As a go-between, the Saints could effect a treaty by which "we could get sea-coast on the Gulph of Mexico, where we could land emigrants from the States of England, France, Germany, Norway, etc., in our own ports." He concluded with this parting, poignant testimony:

Although I am in poverty and rags, I am not unwilling to undertake to do any thing that this people persist in doing to build up this kingdom. I have been as a beast of burthen ever since I came into the church, and have never swerved in my actions, or feelings, to do with my might all things to push forward the cause of Zion, and am, and ever have been, willing to spend and be spent for the cause. I do not say this by way of boasting, but because of the frankness of my heart.<sup>47</sup>

His loss was keenly felt by many in camp even though they had disagreed with him. Joseph Fielding, brother-in-law of Hyrum Smith and a fellow member of the Council of the Fifty, said, "He was dear to me in the office he held, he was indeed a fine man, and I hope to see him again in our midst."<sup>48</sup>

However, both George Miller and James Emmett left the Church shortly thereafter. Miller went south to Texas in July 1847 and lived with Lyman Wight for a short time until he decided Wight was "an intoxicated no-good."<sup>49</sup> In October 1847 he traveled north to Voree, Wisconsin, and later to Beaver Island, Michigan, and took up with the followers of James J. Strang. Thrilled at having another former authority of Brigham's church join with him, Strang gave Miller prestige and such high-sounding titles as "Prince, Privy Councillor and General Chief in the Kingdom of God," though very little real authority.<sup>50</sup> After Strang's death in 1856, George Miller left Beaver Island and died soon afterwards in Marengo, Illinois.

The third plan, then, the Quorum of the Twelve plan, was more than a mere restatement on camp organization or direction. It pronounced in unambiguous terms once and for all the supremacy of the Quorum of the Twelve over not only spiritual but also temporal and political matters. It cost the Church the allegiance of some of its finest pioneers and frontiersmen who, in the end, probably ran aground as much over personality differences as purely ecclesiastical or doctrinal issues.

With the matter of authority finally settled, the Saints could now focus on the specifics of preparing for their departure. A confident Brigham Young, four days after announcing his revelation, stated "he had no more doubts nor fears of going to the mountains, and felt as much security as if he possessed the treasures of the east."<sup>51</sup> But at this point he had more confidence than answers. Who would go in the advance party? Was the Yellowstone still a viable option? How soon could they realistically start the trek given the need to reorganize all the camps? When would all the rest join the advance company? Many of these questions would not be answered until the eve of their journey.

Determining the makeup of the pioneer companies was a two-step affair and must be seen as part of a larger effort to organize all of the Mormon encampments at the Missouri. According to the revelation, all the Saints

had to be accommodated within a traveling organization whether or not they could leave in the spring or fall. Brigham wanted to put the camps on a standby basis, alert to the need of leaving as soon as possible. He would overlay the existing ecclesiastical structure with a traveling organization in order to constantly remind his followers that their stay was only temporary.

According to the revelation, three other companies besides Brigham's and Heber C. Kimball's were to be organized, and from these, the best-prepared, most able-bodied men would be selected to form the advance company. Each of the five companies would take an equal portion of widows, orphans, and Battalion families.<sup>52</sup> Brigham and Heber would divide the Winter Quarters population basically along family lines. Wilford Woodruff and Orson Pratt were to take the remnants of Winter Quarters before incorporating everyone at Mt. Pisgah and Garden Grove.<sup>53</sup> George A. Smith and Amasa Lyman were ordered to organize the east bank settlements. It took these Apostles five to six weeks to tour all the settlements; read the new revelation; choose captains of hundreds, fifties, and tens; and complete their preparations.<sup>54</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, meanwhile, reorganized the Ponca settlement.

Heber C. Kimball, excited at the response and anxious to get away, gave a valuable progress report on the reorganization and mobilizing efforts:

The union that now exist[s] in the camp of Isreal, which are now on the west side of the Missouri River, surpasses any since the Church was organized from the Quorum of the Twelve down through every organization of the Church. . . . We have now already organized somewhere between twelve and fifteen hundred men, and the Brethren on the east side of the river are flocking to the standards daily: There are many of those on the east side of the river that are in a scattered state, and have become rather cold and lifeless as it were, like unto a firebrand that is separated from the fire.<sup>55</sup>

Evidence indicates that there was initially some confusion over the inclusion of families in the early departing companies.<sup>56</sup> The earliest would leave in March, followed by a second caravan once grass had grown. This later company would consist of many of the Battalion families. Other companies would come on in intervals until 1 July. The rest would vacate the Missouri the following spring.

But the matter of who would go was inextricably part of another dilemma—where to go and how to get there. By the end of January, Brigham had reverted to taking the Platte route and advised his Ponca followers to convey that information to Grosclaude and Cardinal. "Say to them we have none but the best of feelings towards all good men, themselves particularly so far as we are acquainted."<sup>57</sup>

The way station plan, meanwhile, was tossed back and forth before a final decision was made on the eve of departure. By mid-February the

leaders were leaning heavily toward risking a nonstop, over-the-mountain thrust to the Great Basin with this one precaution: "Should our bread stuff fail for lack of means to procure, we will then be obliged to stop a part of the camp at the foot of the mountains and plant late crops."<sup>58</sup> In other words, they would reverse the order and priority of the Council of Fifty plan—put in a spring crop in the Basin first, and then, if required, plant fall crops at the foot of the mountains.

Arguing against the way station plan, Isaac Morley said it would dilute their efforts. "If there is a company here, a company at the mountains and a company across the mountains it is weakening our hands—the building [of] another city is [full] of trouble and expense." Willard Richards, at the same meeting and of the same mind as Isaac Morley, argued that "if we go 5 or 600 miles to put in a crop this spring, we are too late—we have to be particular in picking our location so as to irrigate the farm. You can plant two acres here to one there."<sup>59</sup> He concluded:

Will it not be better to leave the families here this season where they have houses to shelter them from the storms and other necessities prepared and let the pioneers go over the mountains and prepare the place, then return and bring the families over next season in perfect safety to the place of gathering without having to make and leave another stopping place for the devil.<sup>60</sup>

As Benjamin Clapp put it, we "may as well stick the stake this year, as three or four years hence."<sup>61</sup>

Though initially they had expected to leave by early March, a target date they surrendered with reluctance, Brigham conceded early in 1847 that it was "very uncertain whether the Pioneers will leave here before April."<sup>62</sup> The difficulty lay in the matter of provisions and seed grain, in whether the pioneers could gather necessary commodities in time. The failure of the Winter Quarters mill, which never operated all winter, aggravated matters. Obviously, large numbers of people could not be provided with either adequate flour or enough seed for large midway farms.

But while the mill's failure was a serious impediment, another equally complicating factor was the same problem of the year before—constant nagging from faithful families not to be left behind among the Indians in such a sickly place.<sup>63</sup> Some complained the advance party was taking most of the available foodstuffs with them, leaving the rest with a paucity of provisions until the first spring crops.<sup>64</sup> Others feared further outbreaks of disease and death, while not a few were uncomfortable at relinquishing so many more possible defenders at a time of escalated Indian thievery.

Brigham responded in his characteristic fashion by suggesting solutions while condemning wanton, aimless criticism. To the concern over provisions and the widespread feeling that a way station would at least provide food and refuge from sickness, leaders gave several answers. Willard

Richards argued that the purer, wholesome air of the mountain regions would prove fatal on an already unhealthy people unless accommodated gradually. "If we go in the sick state we now are in to the mountains, we should drop like the wind. If I don't want to kill my family, I won't take them too sudden to this purer atmosphere."<sup>65</sup> Ezra Taft Benson agreed, saying "I do not think this [Winter Quarters] is an unhealthy location. At least I would not be afraid to leave my family here."<sup>66</sup> With the coming of spring and vegetables, surely health would improve as the Saints rested from further travel and planted abundant crops.

To counter fears of Indian loitering and theft, the Twelve promised that the police force would be maintained and a large picket fence would be built along the exposed southern flank of the city. Every precaution would be taken to keep the city as safe as possible, though some of the cannons would have to go west with the later company.

And as to the anxiousness of Mormon Battalion wives and families to rejoin their loved ones, Brigham promised that every effort would be made to include them in the ensuing summer companies.<sup>67</sup>

The Twelve also argued that those left behind would have more than sufficient provisions. Brigham urged that every family in the city plant "a garden of their own" and that large "public fields" or farmlands be administered south of the city, with land apportioned not by price but by a personal pledge of improvement. Large, separate family farms were also envisioned for members of the Young, Kimball, and Richards adopted families.<sup>68</sup>

Despite all these assurances, some still complained. Believing that many were self-serving, Apostle Amasa Lyman was "perfectly well satisfied that the feelings of the people are at war with their interest."<sup>69</sup> Heber C. Kimball agreed, saying, "I have been chained up once and the Twelve are chained up again."<sup>70</sup> And Brigham, in terms reminiscent of those he used the summer before, put it most bluntly in a 21 March address:

You poor stinking curses, for you are cursed and the hand of the Lord shall be upon you and you shall go down to hell for murmuring and bickering. This people means to tie my hands continually as they did last year so that we can't go to the place of our destination. They are already coming to me saying can't you take me along? Don't leave me here, if you do I am afraid I shall die, this is such a sickly place. Well I say to them, die, who cares. If you have not faith to live here you will die over the mountains.<sup>71</sup>

This time Brigham would not be hindered.

Monday, 22 March, had for some time been targeted as the departure date, but the last minute elimination of the Yellowstone plan, delays because of unfinished work in organizing the camp according to "The Word and Will of the Lord," difficulties in gathering provisions, and the time required

to confront objections all forced a postponement.<sup>72</sup> Part of the change involved a major reduction in the size of the pioneer company from well over three hundred to less than half that number. A smaller company could move more quickly while leaving more crop growers and defenders back at Winter Quarters. Another target date, 1 April, also came and went. Finally on Saturday morning, 5 April, the first of Heber C. Kimball's company began rolling out of Winter Quarters. Others followed on Monday, and on 8 April, Horace K. Whitney and many General Authorities set out for the main rendezvous point at the Elkhorn ferry about fifteen miles west.<sup>73</sup>

But the sudden arrival of Parley P. Pratt from his mission to England forced another week's delay. Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson, Orson Pratt, Porter Rockwell, George A. Smith, Wilford Woodruff, and Willard Richards all returned on horseback to Winter Quarters on 12 April while the rest of the advance company were sent ahead to the Platte River to cross it before heavy rains intervened.<sup>74</sup>

Parley P. Pratt met in council with his fellow Apostles the evening of the twelfth and reported on his mission to England, the "demise" of Reuben Hedlock's "Joint Stockism," the perils of his journey, and Strangism's progress in England. He also indicated that John Taylor, hourly expected, was bearing the treasures of England with him—469 sovereigns of gold, representing tithes from the British Saints, and almost five hundred dollars' worth of astronomical and other instruments useful to the pioneers on their journey.<sup>75</sup>

The next day John Taylor did arrive by boat up the Missouri with the money and two sextants, two barometers, two artificial horizons, one circle of reflection, several thermometers, and a telescope.<sup>76</sup> Orson Pratt, the most scientific-minded of anyone in camp, would put such instruments to excellent use during the ensuing trek. The Twelve continued their deliberations, and many commendations and criticisms were expressed of the missionaries' work in England. At the same time, Brigham Young urged John Taylor and Parley P. Pratt to make every effort possible to join the advance party, but the two were more anxious to catch their breath and spend time with their families. Their refusal did not square well with Brigham and later became a source of irritation and complaint within the Quorum.<sup>77</sup>

It was decided that Brigham should have disposal of the British moneys. Meanwhile, Elders Pratt and Taylor were given responsibility for organizing—along the patterns set forth by "The Word and Will of the Lord"—the first emigration company and later smaller companies until 1 July. These later emigration companies were to bring five hundred pounds of breadstuff per person, enough to last eighteen months, in case the pioneer companies failed to reach their destination in time to put in fall crops.



There must be no repetition of the ill-fated Donner party. "In all cases," instructed Brigham, "the brethren must run their own risk for food, and not depend on the pioneers, or any company in advance for support."<sup>78</sup> After their departure, Orson Hyde, expected back later in the spring after visiting branches of the Church in the eastern states, would, as he had done in Nauvoo the preceding spring, be in charge of the rearguard Mormon settlements.

On 14 July, all but John Taylor and Parley P. Pratt returned to the Elkhorn, rejoining the pioneer company near the Platte River the following day. After the final organization and preparation of the company of 143 men and boys, three women, and two children—the amalgamation of leaders from all five companies—at 2 P.M. on Friday, 16 April, following months of planning, turmoil, and twisted expectations, Brigham Young and the Mormon pioneers headed west into history.<sup>79</sup>

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Richard E. Bennett is head of the Department of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. A book by the author on the Mormon trek West, tentatively titled "*And Should We Die*": *Mormons at the Missouri*, is forthcoming from the University of Oklahoma Press.

1. Peter Sarpy had been an employee of the American Fur Company for many years and knew the Missouri River as well as any man of his times. He owned property on both sides of the Missouri River and operated flourishing trading posts at Bellevue and at Council Point, across the river on the Iowa side just south of present-day Council Bluffs. He proved sympathetic to the Mormons, providing assistance in the building of ferries, offering fur contracts, and giving advice about the West.

2. Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J. 1801–1873*, 4 vols. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1905), 1:56. Lewis Clark Christian, in a recent dissertation on the factors contributing to the choice of the Salt Lake Valley as the eventual destination of the Mormon pioneers, questions De Smet's influence and the accuracy of his knowledge of the Great Basin area. (See Lewis Clark Christian, "A Study of the Mormon Westward Migration between February 1846 and July 1847 with Emphasis on and Evaluation of the Factors That Led to the Mormon Choice of Salt Lake Valley as the Site of Their Initial Colony" [Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1976]; see also Lewis Clark Christian, "Mormon Foreknowledge of the West," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21 [Fall 1981]: 403–16.)

De Smet later served as chaplain in the infamous Johnston's Army sent to destroy the Mormons in 1858. At the time, De Smet described the Mormons as "that terrible sect of modern fanatics, flying from civilization. . . [who] never ceased to defy the Government" (Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of De Smet*, 2:717–18).

3. Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 7 August 1846. The Journal History is a multivolume compendium of facts, extracts, journal entries, letters, clippings, and historical insertions of all kinds, documenting chronologically the history of the Church. It is freely available in the Search Room of the History Division Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

4. Journal of John D. Lee, 7 August 1846, LDS church Archives. There is some indication that their destination was private information, not known by most in camp and revealed to Thomas L. Kane only after he had the confidence and trust of Mormon leaders. Brigham had his reasons for confidentiality. Mormon Battalion enlistees might not look favorably at a one-thousand-mile march inland from their military destination on the Pacific Coast; he wished to keep the federal government guessing; and in case the Valley did not turn out as expected, changes could be made without others questioning his inspiration.

Eliza Maria Partridge Lyman expressed the popular sentiment while watching the departing pioneer wagons in early April. "They are going west to look for a location for the Latter-day Saints and have no idea where that is but trust that the Lord will lead them to the place" (Journal of Eliza Maria Partridge Lyman, 8 April 1847, LDS Church Archives).

5. Journal History, 9 August 1846.

6. See Brigham Young to the Nauvoo Trustees, 11 September 1846; and Brigham Young to Joseph A. Strattan, 12 September 1846, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Archives. Lewis C. Christian contends that the Bear River Valley mentioned referred to the one in present Wyoming rather than its counterpart in present northern Utah (see Christian, "Study of the Mormon Westward Migration," 223 and 238). However, most of the trappers spoke highly of the Cache Valley area of Utah, and Brigham might have had that area in mind.

7. Journal History, 15 February 1847. The only modification of their destination plans was the abandonment of any further serious consideration of locating a portion of the British Saints at Vancouver Island. While as late as August 1846, lip service had been given to the idea of British converts' reaching the Great Basin by the Vancouver water route rather than by the more costly overland crossing, it was probably never more than a poorly conceived economic alternative. Routing the Saints through Vancouver was no longer an alternative after the signing of the Oregon treaty in June 1846. Considering the need for consolidating their resources once in their mountain retreat, maintaining close communication and unity, and protecting themselves, I find it hard to believe the reference to the scheme was anything but a smoke screen to gain any possible British and American concessions.

8. Brigham Young to Joseph A. Strattan, 12 September 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

9. Journal History, 28 September 1846.

10. Brigham Young to the Nauvoo Trustees, 27 September 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

11. Journal History, 15 November 1846.

12. Minutes of the Winter Quarters High Council, 8 September 1846, LDS Church Archives.

13. Brigham Young to the Nauvoo Trustees, 11 September 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

14. *Ibid.*, 27 September 1846.

15. *Ibid.*, 14 November 1846; and Journal History, 15 November 1846.

16. Letter of Brigham Young to the Nauvoo Trustees, 27 September 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

17. See Hosea Stout, *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout, 1844-1866*, ed. Juanita Brooks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 9 September 1846, 1:192; and Journal History, 15 November 1846.

18. Journal History, 15 November 1846.

19. Brigham Young to the Nauvoo Trustees, 11 September 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

20. Brigham Young to Joseph Herring, 13 September 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

21. *Journal History*, 8 and 12 November 1846.

22. *Journal History*, 29 December 1846. Shortly before his death, Joseph Smith organized the Council of Fifty as a political advisory body. Two of its assignments were to assist in the election of Joseph as president of the United States and to advise on a future location of the Church. Some authors have argued that the Council of Fifty had far-sweeping powers to govern the Church, but this does not seem to be the case. Apostle George A. Smith at one time referred to it as “a debating society” (A Report, Orson Hyde, George A. Smith, and Ezra T. Benson to Brigham Young, 5 April 1849, Brigham Young Papers), though some of his colleagues, particularly those who disagreed with Brigham Young, saw the Council as a body of power almost equal to that of the Quorum of the Twelve. (For two sharply contrasting points of view, see Klaus Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* [Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967]; and D. Michael Quinn, “The Council of Fifty and Its Members, 1844 to 1945,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 20 [Winter 1980]: 163–97.)

23. See *Journal of Willard Richards*, 24–27 December 1846; and *Journal History*, 27 December 1846, LDS Church Archives. George Miller, a convert to Mormonism in early Nauvoo days, was a very capable and devoted follower of Joseph Smith. The Prophet eventually appointed him Assistant Presiding Bishop of the Church. Bishop Miller took a leading role in Council of Fifty proceedings and was Brigham’s main pathfinder while crossing Iowa. The Ponca settlement derived from George Miller’s decision to abandon his original assignment to establish a winter camp among the Pawnee Indians near the Loup Fork of the North Platte River. For various reasons, not the least of which were the advice of James Emmett to follow the invitation of the Ponca Indians and Miller’s desire to establish a community upon different economic principles than those Brigham Young was implementing at Winter Quarters, Bishop Miller and his company of almost four hundred souls moved north to the Ponca Indian villages on the Running Water River near its confluence with the Missouri River, about two hundred miles north of Winter Quarters.

24. *Northern Islander*, 20 September 1855.

25. Stout, *Diary of Hosea Stout*, 25 October 1846, 1:207.

26. Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 17 December 1846, LDS Church Archives; and Joseph Holbrook to Brigham Young, 7 December 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

27. Brigham Young to George Miller and Council, 25 November 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

28. *Journal of Horace K. Whitney*, 24 November 1846, LDS Church Archives.

29. *Journal History*, 24 November 1846. The valley of the Tongue and Powder rivers was a favorite wintering ground for trappers because of the abundance of game and pasture located there (Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 2 vols. [Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954], 2:766).

30. Brigham Young to George Miller and Council, 25 November 1846, Brigham Young Papers.

31. *Journal of Thomas Bullock*, 12 December 1846, LDS Church Archives. Bullock continued: “The Buffalo grass is fine & plenty on the head waters of the Yellow Stone—a stream strikes above the two forks of Tongue River—the winter sets in there about 1st Nov—& lasts till last of March—”

32. Stout, *Diary of Hosea Stout*, 27 December 1846, 1:221.
33. Journal of Mary H. P. Richards, 27 December 1846, LDS Church Archives.
34. Journal History, 7 January 1847.
35. Brigham Young to Hannah Stailey, 8 January 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
36. John Holbrook to Brigham Young, 7 December 1846, Brigham Young University.
37. See Journal of Thomas Bullock, 12 December 1846; and Journal History, 12 December 1846. Fontenelle also suggested that before departing they build a leather boat or "revenue cutter" to aid in fording swollen streams and rivers.
38. A detachment of the Battalion incapacitated by illness and weakened conditions, along with most of the women and children, had been sent north to Pueblo, Colorado. This contingent would also want to rejoin their families at the earliest moment.
39. Journal History, 25 and 29 January 1847.
40. Stout, *Diary of Hosea Stout*, 29 October 1846, 1:208.
41. Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 11 January 1847.
42. Almost everyone at Winter Quarters accepted the revelation without reservation. The Municipal High council's response was typical:

Reynolds Cahoon moved that the communication be received as the Word and will of God; seconded by Isaac Morley. Alanson Eldredge approved of the same: it was plain to his understanding. . . . Reynolds Cahoon said it was the voice of righteousness. Winslow Farr said it reminded him of the first reading of the Book of Mormon; he was perfectly satisfied and knew it was from the Lord. Cornelius P. Lott was perfectly satisfied. . . Geo. W. Harris was so well satisfied that he wanted all to say Amen, at once. Thomas Grover felt that it was the voice of the Spirit.

The vote passed unanimously. . . . Hosea Stout said if there is anything in "Mormonism" that is the voice of the Lord to the people, so is the word and will of the Lord.

Later in the day, the presiding council of Seventies similarly voted unanimously in support of it (Journal History, 14 and 16 January 1847).

43. *Ibid.*, 17 January 1847.
44. Stout, *Diary of Hosea Stout*, 14 January 1847, 1:227–29.
45. Journal History, 25, 29 and 30 January 1847.
46. H. W. Mills, "De Tal Palo Astilla," *Historical Society of Southern California Annual Publications* 10 (1917): 11–12.
47. George Miller to Brigham Young, 17 March 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
48. Journal of Joseph Fielding, Spring 1847, book 5, p. 126, LDS Church Archives.
49. Mills, "Palo," 143.
50. Unbound minute book of Strangite conferences held between July and October 1850, J. J. Strang Papers, Library-Archives, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Auditorium, Independence, Missouri (hereafter cited as RLDS Library-Archives). As late as 1854, Miller was urging Wight to abandon Texas and join Strang. "The more I reflect on the subject the more I am convinced that is would be to the best you could do under all the circumstances, both in a spiritual and temperal point of view" (George Miller to Lyman Wight, 19 January 1854, RLDS Library-Archives). Wight refused.
51. Journal History, 18 January 1847.
52. *Ibid.*, 18 and 25 January 1847.
53. See Journal of Wilford Woodruff, 15 and 18 February 1847; and Journal of Erastus Snow, early February 1847, both in LDS Church Archives.

54. Journal History, 12 and 15 February 1847.
55. See Heber C. Kimball to John M. Bernhisel, 17 February 1847; and Journal of Heber C. Kimball, 23 February 1847, LDS Church Archives.
56. The Twelve Apostles to Titus Billings, 25 March 1847, Brigham Young Papers; and Journal History, 25 March 1847.
57. Journal History, 29 January 1847. He went on to say he would “be pleased to have them accompany us,” although they never did.
58. *Ibid.*, 15 February 1847.
59. Minutes of a Meeting of the Twelve and Others, 6 March 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
60. John D. Lee, *Journals of John D. Lee*, ed. Charles Kelly (Salt Lake City: Western Printing Company, 1938), 6 March 1847, 109–11.
61. Minutes of the Twelve and Many of the High Council, 6 March 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
62. Brigham Young to Joseph A. Stratten, 22 January 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
63. Lee, *Journals of John D. Lee*, 6 March 1847, 108–10. One of the problems causing the delay in crossing Iowa was the cry of the faithful to remain with the Twelve regardless of how slow it would make them all. Brigham Young could escape his enemies with far greater ease than he could his followers.
64. Patty Sessions referred to “the scarcity of provisions at Winter Quarters and how hard it was even to get a little corn-meal” (Manuscript History of Winter Quarters, 15 April 1847, LDS Church Archives). Camp leaders were aware of the problem. To minimize demands on camp supplies, Brigham recommended only 100 pounds of provisions be taken per pioneer. As he had done back in Iowa, Joseph Young objected to the foolhardiness of the scheme and strongly suggested more ample supplies. The final company took with them closer to 300 pounds of provisions per person (Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 3 March 1847).
65. Minutes of a Meeting of the Twelve and Others, 6 March 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
66. Lee, *Journals of John D. Lee*, 6 March 1847, 109–11.
67. Minutes of a Meeting of the Twelve and Others, 6 March 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
68. *Ibid.* At the time, many of the leaders of the Church were practicing the “law of adoption” as understood by Brigham Young, a practice by which families were “sealed” to priesthood leaders through adoption to insure eternal priesthood blessings. (For more on the topic, see the author’s forthcoming book on the Mormon trek West; see also Gordon Irving, “The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830–1900,” *BYU Studies* 14 [Spring 1974]: 291–314.) The Law of Adoption was implemented in Winter Quarters on a large scale, but with mixed results. It was later abandoned.
69. Minutes of a Meeting of the Officers of Both Divisions, 22 March 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
70. Minutes of a Meeting of the Twelve, the High Council and Others, 22 March 1847, Brigham Young Papers.
71. Lee, *Journals of John D. Lee*, 21 March 1847, 129.
72. Journal of Horace K. Whitney, 22 and 23 March 1847.
73. Journal History, 8 April 1847.
74. Journal of Horace K. Whitney, 8 and 12 April 1847. See also Journal History, 12 April 1847; and Journal of Wilford Woodruff, 12–13 April 1847.

75. Journal of Erastus Snow, 7 and 8 April 1847. One wonders if Brigham Young had not purposely been delaying the departure until Parley P. Pratt and John Taylor's return. He must have known the funds and instruments were on their way.

76. Journal History, 13 April 1847. Besides these instruments, they had recently obtained several maps of Texas, Oregon, and California, including Frémont's, Mitchell's, and a most recent map from General Atchison (*ibid.*, 18 February, 27 March, and 4 April 1847).

77. Brigham said months later: "I told Bro. Parley if you go with us you will never be sorry for it but if you don't you will always be sorry for it. I tell you, they will lose more ground than they ever gained." Brigham wanted all the Twelve present not only to travel west with the advance party but also to discuss the creation of a First Presidency. He may have worried also about leaving John Taylor and Parley P. Pratt to manage affairs at Winter Quarters and to organize the emigration companies that would follow (Minutes of Miscellaneous Trustees Meeting, 17 November 1847, Brigham Young Papers; see also Stout, *Diary of Hosea Stout*, 26 November 1847, 1:289).

78. Brigham Young and the Council of the Twelve to the Brethren at Winter Quarters, Journal History, 16 April 1847.

79. Journal History, 16 April 1847. See Journal of Horace K. Whitney, 16 April 1847; and Journal of Erastus Snow, 16 April 1847. The above-mentioned journals disagree on the total number constituting the camp. The Whitney journal says only two women joined them; the Snow journal says three.