

ENSIGN

A photograph of two men in a field of tall sorghum plants. The man on the left is wearing a wide-brimmed orange hat and a light-colored shirt, and is holding a large bundle of harvested sorghum stalks. The man on the right is wearing a straw hat and a light-colored shirt, and is looking up at a stalk of sorghum. The field is dense with green and yellowing plants, and the background shows more trees and foliage.

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The LDS Legacy in Southwestern Iowa

The pioneers played a key role in the Middle Missouri Valley. Research shows how broad their influence was.

By Gail Geo. Holmes

Thirty years ago, you couldn't find even one LDS listing in the telephone directories of the Greater Omaha-Council Bluffs-Bellevue area. The Church itself had only three little branches that met in small buildings purchased from other churches or in government facilities on Offutt Air Force Base, Bellevue, Nebraska. Few non-LDS historians knew much about LDS history in the Middle Missouri Valley.

Today, things are much different. Council Bluffs, Iowa, recently named its rerouted main thoroughfare Kanesville Boulevard, in recognition of the name the Latter-day Saints first gave the settlement which, in 1853, became Council Bluffs. Both Council Bluffs and Omaha, Nebraska, have set aside public land at the sites of the Mormon Battalion Mustering Grounds and Cutler's Park for LDS historical markers. Busloads of school children visit Mormon Pioneer Cemetery and Information Center in north Omaha.

Why the dramatic change in interest? One reason may be that the Church has grown significantly in eastern Nebraska and in southwest Iowa. Today there are two stakes in Greater Omaha and one in nearby Lincoln. Tourist trade from Church members interested in their heritage has grown considerably. Then, too, more and more nonmembers are learning about the prodigious productivity of the Saints during their seven-year stay here, from 1846 to 1853.

Many are stunned to discover that the Saints built at least fifty-five widely separated communities and farmed as much as fifteen thousand acres in southwest Iowa alone.¹ One amazed Iowa official said at a Western Historic Trails Center meeting, "Can you imagine those Mormons building, in less than a month, a log tabernacle [in Kanesville] capable of holding a thousand people?" This year the University of Illinois Press has published a volume of pioneer emigrant reports noting that Kanesville/Council Bluffs was the principal jumping-off point for westward pioneers from the Missouri River, 1852 to 1866.²

French explorer-traders in the early 1700s and Spanish fur trappers and traders in the late 1700s recognized the importance of the area as a crossroads to the West. The Saints, coming nearly 150 years after the French started working the area, found a large French village there. LDS journals referred to Point aux poules as Trading Point.³ They said the village had several blocks of residences and at least three trading houses. Bellevue, just west across the Missouri River, consisted of about twelve cabins, a trade post, and a U.S. Indian Agency.

Not until the Saints entered the area, though, were any substantial settlements established. In the winter and spring of 1846, the Saints struggled across the raw prairies of Iowa in wagon trains.

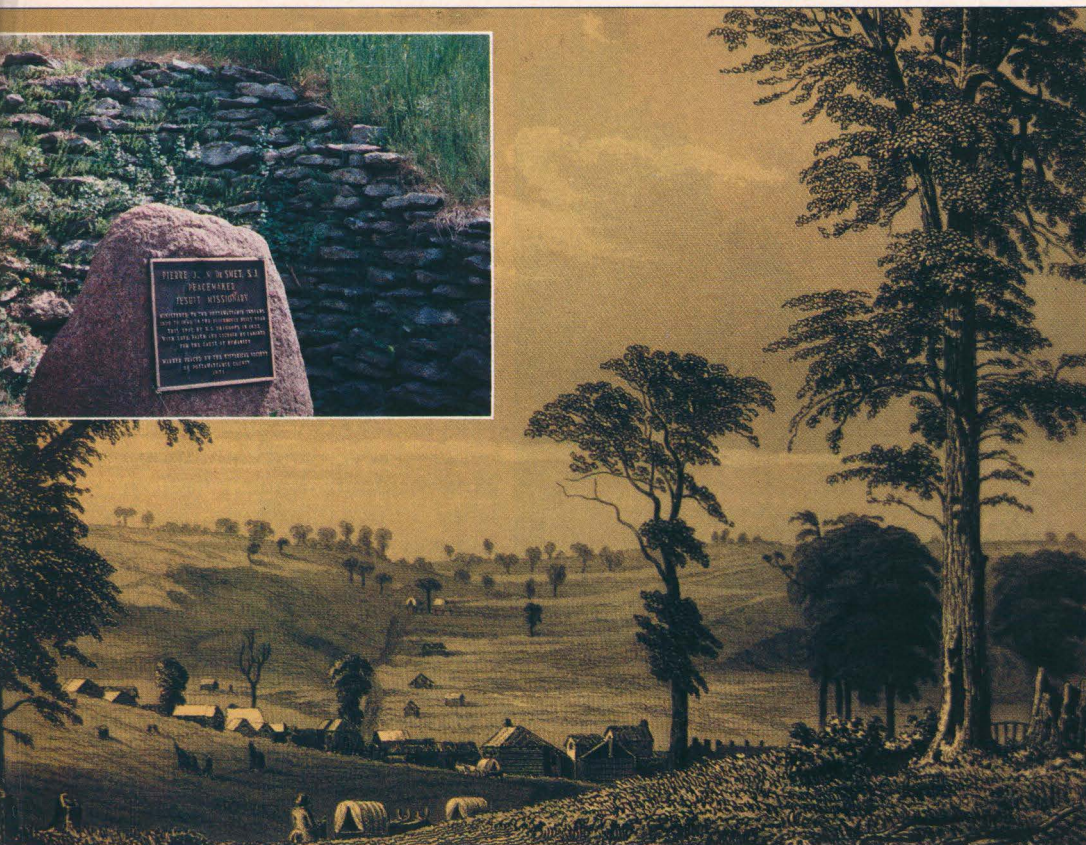
Coming through southwest Iowa, they built, on an average, one bridge per day.⁴ Of those bridges, Thomas L. Kane later said they were no ordinary bridges—they could bear heavy artillery.⁵ When the Saints reached the Missouri River 14 June 1846, they were in old Council Bluffs, a district that stretched roughly from present-day Fort Calhoun, Nebraska, to Greenwood, Iowa.

The Saints occupied five successive headquarters sites from 14 June 1846 to the spring of 1853: Grand Encampment, Cold Spring Camp, Cutler's Park, Winter Quarters, and Kanesville. (See accompanying map.) Grand Encampment was a catch basin for wagon trains completing their trek across Iowa. The later the wagon trains arrived, the farther east they camped. Hosea Stout observed that the wagon encampment stretched east about nine miles—almost to what today is Treynor, Iowa.⁶

Several important events occurred there. For example, Ezra Taft Benson (the current President's great-grandfather) was ordained an Apostle at Grand Encampment 16 July 1946.⁷ The Mormon Battalion—about 489 men⁸, with about 20 wives as laundresses and perhaps a dozen boys as officers' aides—was recruited there to serve in the War with Mexico.

The Middle Mormon Ferry was built three miles west, over the Missouri River. The settlers tested it during the night of 29 June 1846 by taking Nauvoo Legion arms and ammunition to the west bank. The ferry opened to public use July 1, carrying wagons and families across the river day and night, weather permitting. The wagons moved four miles west to a spring-fed lake and repeated the Grand Encampment parking pattern. The new site was called Cold Spring

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This engraving, circa 1850, shows the entrance to the LDS settlement of Kanesville, the principal jumping-off point for westward pioneers from the Missouri River from 1852 to 1866. Inset photo: Blockhouse marker at the end of East Pierce Street. This was the site of the Blockhouse Branch of the Church and the nucleus around which the community of Miller's Hollow—renamed Kanesville in 1848, then Council Bluffs in 1853—was built.

Camp. Meanwhile, on the east side of the river, thousands patiently waited at Grand Encampment for turns to use the ferry.

The huge numbers of refugees and their livestock rapidly exhausted the wood, water, and grass, however, and Grand Encampment began to break up as wagonmasters sought new campsites with uncontested access to those necessities. One wagonmaster, Bishop Henry W. Miller, took his wagon train near to what is today downtown Council Bluffs. One of his captains bought the old Blockhouse, built in 1837 by U.S. dragoons to protect the Pottawattamie Tribe against possible attacks by the Sauk and Dakota Sioux

Indians. Miller's Hollow grew up around the Blockhouse. The Blockhouse Branch of the Church got its name from that historic building. The town was renamed Kane in 1847, then Kanesville in 1848.

By about August 1, the Council of the Twelve decided to abandon plans to move west that year.⁹ They felt the Church would be safer if the vanguard remained by the Missouri River, ready to assist stragglers still striving to leave Nauvoo or the repair camps at Garden Grove and Mount Pisgah in south-central Iowa.

On August 6 and 7, the pioneers at Cold Spring Camp pulled down their tents, loaded their

goods and children into their oxdrawn wagons, and moved nine miles north to a site they called Cutler's Park. William Clayton wrote, "Heber's camp is formed in a kind of parallelogram, each wagon camped in a perfect line with the others. The square in the center is about twenty five rods [412.5 feet] long and fifteen rods [247.5 feet] wide."¹⁰ The Saints built a public square with a speakers' stand, benches, and leafy arborwork to protect the audiences from the hot summer sun.

The townspeople elected Alpheus Cutler as mayor and chose a city council of twelve. Those public officials hired police and fireguards at seventy-five cents a day,

assessing and collecting taxes to pay them. They also appointed committees to look after the most pressing needs of the encampment. By public vote in the square, the town passed an ordinance forbidding open fires. This was to keep smoke and sparks from the tents and wagons. William Clayton described how, when he arrived on a Friday and couldn't get all his chores done Saturday, he had to wait until Monday to build a sod fireplace and chimney before he could have a cooking fire.¹¹

By this time, jealousy had arisen between the Oto-Missouri Indians and the Omaha Tribe on the west side of the Missouri River. The Oto had lived in the area since about 1700; the Omaha, who outnumbered the Oto about 1300 to 930, had fled to Bellevue in 1845 because of Dakota Sioux attacks. Two delegations—one from each tribe—arrived at Cutler's

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Main entrance to Mormon Pioneer Cemetery, across the street from the Mormon Pioneer Information Center in Omaha, Nebraska. The cemetery lies about a quarter of a mile west of where the city of Winter Quarters was.

Park at the end of August to ask for compensation from the Saints for the use of the land.¹² The Saints offered schooling and other services and asked the tribes not to fight each other. Failing to get a clear promise from the Oto not to attack the Omaha over the question of land rights, the Saints moved, in September, three miles east to what is known as Winter Quarters.¹³

At the new site, the pioneers laid out streets wide enough for an ox-drawn wagon to turn around. They built log cabins twelve- to eighteen-feet long, sod houses, and dugouts, some of the structures half emerging from the hillsides. By March 1847, Winter Quarters' population had reached almost five thousand. Many more lived in many smaller, hastily constructed towns in southeast Iowa.

The infant mortality rate had been high during the summer of 1846, but it dropped in the winter. The sexton of the Winter Quarters Cemetery recorded 67 deaths among all

Replica of a typical cabin at Winter Quarters. The cabin and its accompanying historical signboard stand two hundred feet south of the Mormon Pioneer Information Center.



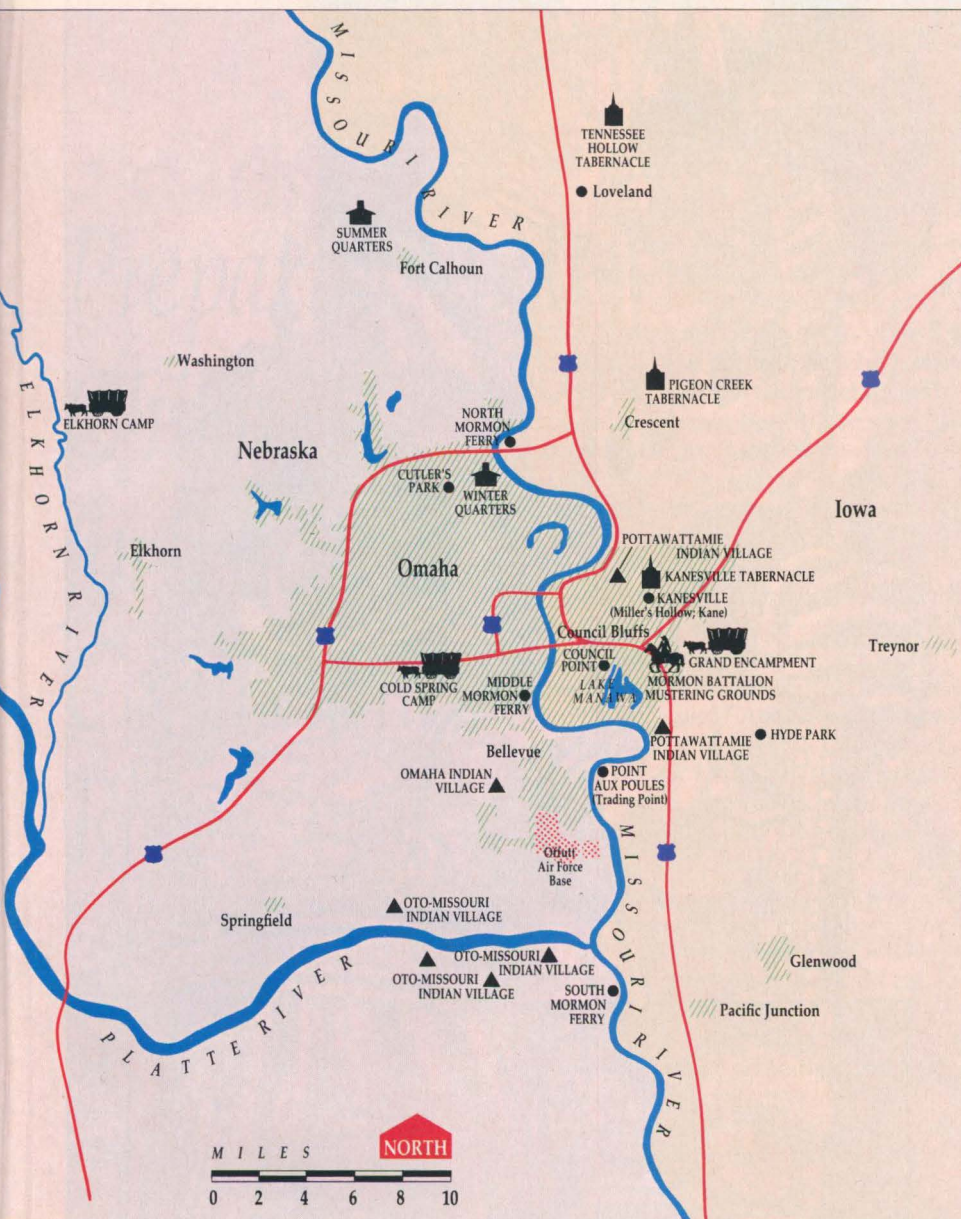
ages between 21 December 1846 and 20 March 1847.¹⁴ That figure compared favorably with the 160 who had died between 1 January and 1 April 1820 among 788 U.S. troops at Missouri Cantonment, just ten miles to the north.¹⁵

When the well-prepared went west from Winter Quarters to the Great Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and 1848, the less-prepared moved back to Iowa. Most went to Kanesville, and the city ballooned to between seven and eight thousand residents. Kanesville flourished for five more years, serving as a way station for pioneers and Gold Rushers passing through, until the last of the faithful Saints had left the city. Close to nine thousand Latter-day Saints also had disembarked from riverboats at Kanesville Landing, just west of Lake Manawa in present-day south Council Bluffs. They were going to Salt Lake City. That number is in addition to those who traveled by covered wagon.

A growing circle of historians realize the history of western Iowa and eastern Nebraska must be revised. More and more are coming to understand how crucial the Saints' Missouri Valley heroics were to the settlement of the American West. Sometimes we think of a huge gap in LDS settlements between Nauvoo and Salt Lake City. But en route to the Great Basin, the Saints built other important towns. Winter Quarters, Kanesville, and more than fifty other LDS communities were keys to the Saints' successful move west—planned and built under the inspired direction of scores of Church leaders, just as Nauvoo had been and as Salt Lake City would be. □

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News Story, *Frontier Guardian*, 5 September 1849:

"SATURDAY LAST was one of the happiest days of our life. To see three schools meet at the Tabernacle . . . and undergo a rigid examination, after forming into ranks about a quarter of a mile distant, and marching to the place after a splendid band of music, with beautiful banners . . . was gratifying beyond description. A fine dinner for about two hundred scholars was prepared in front of the Tabernacle, and also for the spectators. Several short but most happy orations were delivered; and then to hear some of their little misses but just out of their mothers' laps, walk into the dissection and analysis of the compound personal and relative pronouns without confusion or embarrassment, and then to hear a whole school sing off the names, boundaries and capitols of every country on the globe in regular time, was gratifying to the extreme." □

June 1846 entries.

5. Thomas L. Kane, "The Mormons, a Discourse Delivered before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 16 March 1850," in Albert Zobell, Jr., *Sentinel in the East* (Salt Lake City: Nicholas G. Morgan, 1965), Discourse appendix, p. 41.

6. Hosea Stout's journal, about 5 July 1846.

7. Journal History, 29 June and 16 July 1846.

8. Estimate based on microfilmed roster of first three companies of Mormon Battalion, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, and on company strength parameters specified for the battalion.

9. Letter from Council of the Twelve to Bishop George Miller at North Loop, 1 August 1846, instructing him to camp and prepare for winter.

10. William Clayton Journal, 7 August 1846, LDS Church Archives.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Journal History, 27 August 1846.

13. *Ibid.*, 22 September 1846.

14. Sexton's handwritten record of burials at Winter Quarters, LDS Church Archives.

15. Surgeon General's Report, 1 July 1820, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

NOTES

1. Andrew Jenson's report, Manuscript History of Iowa, 10 October 1848, does not include these communities: Allred's Branch (Little Pigeon?), Barney's Grove, Bertrand, Bethlehem, Big Grove, Bluff City (McOlney's?), Boyer, Brownell's Grove, Browning's, Carterville, Cooley's, Coonville, Davis Camp, Farmersville, Ferry Branch (Ferryville?), Harris Grove, Hyde Park, Indian Mill, Indian Town, Keg Creek, Kidd's Grove, Little Mosquito, Little Pigeon (Allred's Branch?), McCllellin's Camp, McOlney's (Bluff City?), Nishnabotna,

North Pigeon, Perkin's Camp, Pigeon Creek, Pigeon Grove, Plum Hollow, River Branch, Rockyford, Rushville, Shirt's Branch, Silver Creek, St. Francis (Trading Point), Tennessee Hollow, Union, Unionville, Upper Cag (Keg) Creek (North Keg Creek?), Welsh Camp, West Fork Boyer.

2. Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 3.

3. *Frontier Guardian* (Kanesville), 29 May 1850, p. 3; *Western Bugle* (Kanesville), 16 June 1852, p. 2; "William Clayton's Journal," *Deseret News*, 1921, p. 47.

4. Andrew Jenson, Journal History,