BY WILLIAM G. HARTLEY

Without warning on 30 June 1846, U.S. army recruiters from Fort Leavenworth (Kansas frontier) rode into the newly established camp of Latter-day Saints located at what is now Council Bluffs, Iowa, on the east bank of the Missouri River. These recruiters were looking for President Brigham Young to present the Church with an invitation from U.S. president James K. Polk to enlist a battalion to serve in the newly declared Mexican War.

Joining the recruiters on 11 July was Thomas L. Kane, a Philadelphia lawyer from a prominent family and a future lifelong friend and advocate for the Latter-day Saints. He described the encampment that spread out before his eyes:

"[The bottomlands] were crowded with covered carts and wagons; and each one of the Council Bluff hills opposite was crowned with its own great camp, gay with bright white canvas, and alive with the busy stir of swarming occupants. In the clear blue morning air, the smoke streamed up from more than a thousand cooking fires. Countless roads and bypaths checkered all manner of geometric figures on the hillsides. Herd boys were dozing upon the slopes; sheep and horses, cows and oxen, were feeding around them, and other herds in the luxuriant meadow of the then swollen river. From a single point I counted four thousand head of cattle in view at one time. As I approached the camps, it seemed to me the children there were to prove still more numerous."

Kane could not know then that he was witnessing the start of a seven-year occupation of that location, and that shortly these Saints would build a town there and name it Kanesville in his honor.

Soon the army recruiters found President Young. Enlisting in what became the Mormon Battalion were about 500 volunteers, more than one-fourth of the Saints' best manpower in the area. To enlist was a test of loyalty, for the men did not want to march 2,000 miles or leave behind their homeless families to fend for themselves. Yet on 16 July they formally enlisted. On the 18th they received counsel from President Young and had a farewell ball before marching south.

Far right: A steamboat unloads passengers at Kanesville.
Center: President Brigham Young encourages Latter-day Saints to enlist in the Mormon Battalion. Oval inset: Thomas L. Kane.

President Polk's call for a battalion to march to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and on to California was a government favor to the Church. In return for the battalion's service, the Church and its members would benefit from the soldiers' pay. But the call came at a very difficult time.

SETTLING IN (JUNE 1846–MAY 1847)

The encampment on the Missouri described by Kane had been set up in mid-June 1846. President Young's lead company from Nauvoo established Church headquarters on what the Saints called Redemption Hill on Mosquito Creek's north side about
A temporary outfitting post for Latter-day Saints going west, Kanesville played a vital role in Church history.
eight miles northeast of Sarpy’s post at Traders Point. They erected a bowery for meetings and socials. More and more Saints arrived from Nauvoo, creating an eight-mile-long “grand encampment.” On 29 June the Church’s newly built ferryboat started moving Saints across the Missouri River, some 5,000 total, to Nebraska campsites (which became known as Winter Quarters). Another 8,000 or more founded camps throughout southwestern Iowa on lands being vacated by the Pottawattamie, Ottawa, and Chippewa people.

As August 1846 waned, President Young gave up plans for the Saints to migrate to the Rocky Mountains that year. Facing a wait until the next spring, Saints on the Iowa side fanned out and established dozens of temporary cabin clusters by streams and groves within a 40-mile radius of present-day Council Bluffs. Daniel and Henry W. Miller founded Miller’s Hollow in what is now downtown Council Bluffs and held meetings in what once was an army blockhouse. Henry Miller served as a Latter-day Saint bishop there in what became known as the Blockhouse Branch. As family encampments sprang up in the area, some took on unique names such as Little Pigeon (Allred family) and Macedonia (Perkins family).

Elder Orson Hyde of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles settled into what came to be called Hyde Park. After establishing his home 10 miles southeast of Miller’s Hollow, he left in July 1846 with Elders John Taylor and Parley P. Pratt to give leadership to the Church in England. When he returned in May 1847, he found that President Young had gone west but left word for Elder Hyde to stay there and direct Church matters.

**RETURN OF THE MORMON BATTALION (JULY 1847)**

When their yearlong enlistment ended in July 1847, members of the Mormon Battalion returned by various routes to meet their families in Utah, on the Mormon Trail, or back in the Council Bluffs area.

Reddick Allred wrote of the joyous occasion of his return: “Dec. 19, 1847. I crossed the Missouri River and went 8 miles to Little Pigeon, Allred’s settlement, where I found my wife and daughter living with father—all well and overjoyed at the safe return of their soldier boy and husband. ... After we rested awhile, Prest. Young proclaimed a jubilee in the Log Tabernacle at Kanesville and invited the returned soldiers. As Br. Wm. Hyde and I were approaching, President Young said to Prest. Kimball and others (pointing to us), ‘These men were the salvation of this Church.’ We all had a free dance and enjoyed it very much.”

**THE LOG TABERNACLE**

President Young and others from Utah had returned temporarily to Winter Quarters by the fall of 1847. On 4 December, while trying to conduct an overcrowded conference on the Iowa side in the blockhouse, President Young proposed that a large log house be built in Miller’s Hollow for temporary use. He told the congregation not to be surprised if a city should be built there. Henry W. Miller and about 200 workmen immediately went to work, felling cottonwood trees, cutting them into logs, and fashioning them into a tabernacle—all within three weeks’ time. Miller’s workmen finished the large building just in time for the historic conference held 23–27 December, which some 1,000 Saints attended. On the 24th Elder Orson Pratt dedicated the tabernacle as a house of thanksgiving. On the 25th the congregation sustained 12 men as high councilors, giving them municipal power as well; approved that bishops’ courts serve as civil magistrates until Iowa extended its jurisdiction over that frontier area; and sustained two men to be marshals. Then on the 27th the conference dealt with a surprising and historic matter of major Church business—reconstituting the First Presidency, which had not been established since the Prophet Joseph Smith’s death.
REESTABLISHING A FIRST PRESIDENCY (DECEMBER 1847)

Earlier, on 5 December, nine of the Twelve had met at Elder Hyde’s home. Elder Hyde later reported, “The voice of God came from on high, and spake to the Council [saying] Let my servant Brigham step forth and receive the full power of the presiding Priesthood in my Church and kingdom.” He affirmed: “This was the voice of the Almighty unto us.... I am one that was present.... and did hear and feel the voice from heaven, and we were filled with the power of God.” It was moved and approved that President Brigham Young be sustained as President of the Church. They approved his choice of counselors: Elders Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards. Outside, people came to the Hydes’ door and knocked, worried because they felt houses shake and the ground tremble and thought there had been an earthquake. It was the Lord speaking to His leaders, Elder Hyde assured them. 5

At the December conference, without saying anything about the revelation, the Twelve put before the people the proposal that the First Presidency be reestablished, consisting of Elders Young, Kimball, and Richards. Voting by priesthood quorums in turn, attendees approved. “The spirit of the Lord... rested upon the people in a powerful manner,” President Young said later. “This is one of the happiest days of my life.... Nothing more has been done today than what I knew would be done when Joseph died.” After the vote he concluded, “The Lord’s will is my will all the time, as he dictates so I will perform.” His speech was followed by music of the band and Elder George A. Smith leading the Saints in shouting: “Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna to God and the Lamb. Amen! Amen! And Amen!”6

The First Presidency reorganization received a sustaining vote at the Church’s next annual conference held at Kanesville on 8 April 1848. At that point, some 10,000 Saints were in the Kanesville region compared to only 5,000 in Utah.7 Similar sustaining votes took place that August in England and in October in Salt Lake City. Orson Hyde, by seniority, became President of the Quorum of the Twelve. John Smith, brother of Joseph Smith Sr., became Presiding Patriarch in the Church.8

KANESVILLE TABERNACLE AS COMMUNITY CENTER

The log tabernacle served as Kanesville’s main meetinghouse. A Seventies Jubilee was held there on 16–21 January 1848. Latter-day Saints from both sides of the river enjoyed a six-day gathering for worshiping, preaching, celebrating, and dancing. Mornings featured talks by General Authorities; in the afternoons and evenings, dancing was interspersed with singing, band numbers, and other amusements. During the Jubilee, Saints signed two petitions. One urged the Iowa legislature to make the Pottawattamie tract a county, which happened later that year. The other encouraged the federal government to establish a post office in the area, which it did in March 1848, with the name of Kane.9

In April 1848, at a general conference held in the log tabernacle, Elder Hyde
proposed and the congregation approved that the settlement be renamed Kanesville, to honor Thomas L. Kane. Of Kane, Horace K. Whitney wrote, “This young man appears to be an instrument in the hands of the Lord to bring about our salvation at the present time.” Kane felt deep sympathy for the plight of the Latter-day Saint refugees. When he returned to the East, he served as an unofficial adviser to President Young. In 1850 he published a talk he had given to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, titling it “The Mormons.” Kane helped negotiate a peaceful settlement to the Saints to dismantle the tabernacle. Apparently, some of its logs were reused to help construct the Pigeon Creek Branch Tabernacle, whose exact location is unknown.

**Oliver Cowdery’s Return to the Church**

Oliver Cowdery, who with the Prophet Joseph Smith received the Aaronic Priesthood from John the Baptist and who was one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, fell out of fellowship with the Church in 1838. He never went to Nauvoo but became a lawyer in Tiffin, Ohio. Friends, especially brother-in-law Phineas Young (President Young’s brother), encouraged him to return to the fold. They succeeded.

Phineas Young accompanied Oliver, wife Elizabeth, and daughter Maria Cowdery from their home in Wisconsin to the bluffs. On Saturday afternoon, 21 October 1848, they arrived during a local conference. One report says Elder Orson Hyde, who was conducting the meeting, spotted Oliver, came down from the stand and embraced him, took him by the arm, and escorted him to the platform. Elder Hyde invited him to speak to the congregation of nearly 2,000 Saints. He said:

“Friends and Brethren, my name is Cowdery, Oliver Cowdery. In the early history of this church I stood identified with her, and one in her councils.” Then he bore testimony as one of the Three Witnesses: “I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph, as he translated it by the gift and power of God.” He stated, “I beheld with my eyes and handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was transcribed,” and testified, “That book is true.” He added, “I was present with Joseph, when an holy angel from God came down from heaven and conferred or restored, the Aaronic Priesthood,” and “I was present with Joseph when the Melchizedek Priesthood was conferred by the holy angels from God on high.”

On 30 October, he spent the evening talking with Elders Hyde and George A. Smith, and on 5 November he met with the high priests and the Pottawattamie High Council in the log tabernacle. “I wish to come humbly and be one in your midst,” he said. “I only wish to be identified with you; I am out of the church, I am not a member of the church. I wish to become a member of the church again. I wish to come in at the door. I know the door.” On 12 November Elder Hyde baptized Oliver Cowdery in Mosquito Creek. Brother Cowdery planned to go west the next year but did not, due to family situations and lack of means. He decided to wait another year, but then his health deteriorated and he died on 3 March 1850 in Missouri.


**ABANDONMENT OF WINTER QUARTERS (APRIL 1848)**

In April 1848 Winter Quarters closed down because the government would not allow the Saints to stay any longer on Indian lands. Residents able to go west to Utah did; in addition, about 3,000 moved eastward across the river to Kanesville and other communities in southwestern Iowa.

Despite constant departures of those going west, Kanesville actually grew in size because of new arrivals from the eastern United States and Europe. By March 1849, to help Church communications, a six-times-a-year mail service commenced between Kanesville and Salt Lake City. A “downtown” developed near the tabernacle. Businesses included a hotel, a tinsmith, doctors, lawyers, a tailor, and a blacksmith. A two-story building served as courthouse, concert hall, and school. An 1849 visitor described Kanesville as “a scrubby town of 80 to 100 log cabins.” By 1850 there were about 350 homes. The federal census that year tallied 5,058 residents in the Kanesville precinct, and Pottawattamie County was the sixth most populated in Iowa, with 7,828 residents. That fall and winter,
principal T. S. Rucker operated the Kanesville Academy, where children, for three dollars in tuition, were taught in “the usual branches of learning and science.” Now that Kanesville was the county seat, the Saints took an active part in Iowa politics, electing from their own ranks a county commission, judges, a prosecuting attorney, sheriff, clerks, and justices of the peace.

HUB FOR DOZENS OF SETTLEMENTS

Kanesville became a hub as the Saints made “heavy settlements in all directions on the good land that abounds in the country.” Nearly 90 of these settlements existed in southwestern Iowa between 1846 and 1852, bearing such names as Zabriskie Hollow, Upper Keg Creek, Harris Grove, and Carterville. Most were not villages or even hamlets but just a handful of settlers by a grove or stream. Although very small, many had a school, and some set up small water- or horse-powered gristmills. Most Saints farmed. The rich Iowa soil produced corn, potatoes, beans, turnips, and watermelons abundantly. In October 1851, Little Pigeon reported its farmers had grown a carrot weighing three and one-half pounds, a beet weighing seven pounds, and a six-and-a-half-pound radish. Farmers sold their surpluses in Kanesville to residents and to gold seekers heading west. Jonathan Browning, whose son John M. gained fame later as the world’s premier gunsmith, had a shop eight miles south of Kanesville. His advertisement in the local newspaper, the Frontier Guardian, on 4 April 1849 said he would manufacture to order “revolving rifles and pistols; also slide guns, from 5 to 25 shooters.” Just southwest of Kanesville, Church officials erected another tabernacle called the Welsh Tabernacle, about which records offer little information. We do know that a Fourth of July parade in 1850 escorted Elder Hyde to that tabernacle.

ELDER HYDE AS A LEADER

When President Young and others went back to Utah in the spring of 1848, Elder Hyde became the “Presiding Elder of the church East of the Rocky Mountains.” He was assisted ably by the high council, which usually met every other Saturday. In the Latter-day Saint settlements, bishops or branch presidents conducted Sunday meetings and cared for members’ physical and spiritual needs. For example, on 31 January 1847, the Winter Quarters Municipal High Council assigned Bishop Joseph Knight Jr. “to superintend and direct the cutting of timber on the East side of the river & see that it be not needlessly destroyed.” By the end of 1848, Kanesville authorities had some 40 branches to look after. Leaders sent high councilors, circuit riders, and other authorities to visit these places regularly.

Twice a year leaders conducted general conferences. These gatherings provided religious instruction and motivation and also gave members a chance to see friends from other branches. In promoting one conference, the Frontier Guardian, edited by Elder Hyde, reminded the members, “They can come with their teams and covered wagons, and bring their bread and dinner, and a bed or two; and the friends residing at and near this place should make preparations to entertain strangers from abroad.” In the fall of 1848 the high priests quorum held meetings on the first Sunday, the seventies on the third Sunday, with attendees coming from almost all of the nearby branches. In February 1851 the elders quorum was meeting regularly and, using a notice in the Frontier Guardian, invited all elders to join the quorum. In April 1851 the area’s conference was held “at the Grove.” Following Utah’s precedent set the year before, Saints in the North Pigeon Branch in 1850 celebrated Pioneer Day on the 24th of July with music, orations, and a talk by an 1847 pioneer.

THE POOR WHO COULDN’T GO WEST

Since Nauvoo, the Saints had worked actively to help their poor with the migration west. This resolve remained in place now that the Saints were on the Missouri River. On 3 December 1846 President Young ordained Joseph Knight Jr. a bishop and set him apart to officiate “on the east side of the river near the ferry” with the primary responsibility of caring for the poor. By January 1847, men in his ward were building houses for the Mormon Battalion “widows,” or wives left behind. “Br. Knight is as cunning as any other man at begging... for the poor,” a colleague noted. Although harvest season 1848 was a “general time of health, peace, prosperity and plenty with us
at the Bluffs," by year’s end there were more needy than the bishops could provide for. Elder Hyde informed President Heber C. Kimball in April 1849, "We have had our hands full to keep soul and body together among the poor." In June 1849 Elder Hyde complained that wealthier Saints were assisting the poor to reach Kanesville, then leaving them. "This is overburthening us here and if suffered to continue will destroy us… to see the poor flocking here, having nothing to help themselves with, and do not know how to make a hill of corn or potatoes, is not agreeable." In July 1849 Bishop Knight stepped down as local presiding bishop because of poor health. Bishop Isaac Clark succeeded him.

**STOPOVER FOR SAINTS HEADING WEST**

To go west by wagon and teams was not cheap. People had to obtain their own outfits or pay to go with someone else. President Hyde reported in 1850 that outfits that year cost about $600 each, equivalent in today’s dollars to about $13,000. It was not wise for any to head for Utah unless they had "team and wagon sufficient to come through without any assistance from the valley," the First Presidency instructed from Utah in June 1849. "And they should bring breadstuffs sufficient to last them a few months after their arrival." Given cost and distances, Saints by the hundreds stopped in the Kanesville area for a few days, weeks, months, or years, depending on needs. When the trail season for 1850 opened, the First Presidency urged Elder Hyde to "push the Saints to Zion and persuade all good brethren to come, who have a wheelbarrow, and faith enough to roll it over the mountains." It was a "duty devolving upon the Saints to gather to the Valley, as soon as circumstances will permit, to assist in building up Zion." 

**EUROPEAN EMIGRANTS**

Southwest of Kanesville, by a bend in the Missouri River, Saints built the Council Point settlement to serve as a landing place for steamboats. Between 1848 and 1852, more than 8,000 European Latter-day Saints disembarked at the landing, which became known as Emigrants’ Landing. They found shelter and jobs until they could round up outfits and supplies to go west.

**KANESVILLE CEMETERY**

With so many Saints living in the Kanesville vicinity or passing through for six years, it is probable that the burial ground on a hill north of the Council Bluffs business district contains more Latter-day Saint graves than does the Winter Quarters cemetery across the river. In today’s Fairview Cemetery, the high east end is where the Latter-day Saint graves were. No markers from the Kanesville period have survived. Hundreds of Saints were buried there.

When Mary McKenzie, age 34, died in Kanesville on 22 August 1850, her death prompted this poem to be published in the Frontier Guardian:

Mary sleep on and now take your rest,
May your swift spirit find ease and with the rest of the blest,
Your troubles were great and your labors too,
In serving the Lord since you left Nauvoo.

A Latter-day Saint visitor to the cemetery in 1876 said the Latter-day Saint section contained no carved headstones dating before 1850 because the elements had obliterated any inscriptions on earlier headstones.
MORMON SETTLEMENTS IN THE MIDDLE MISSOURI RIVER VALLEY

- Location of early Mormon settlements in southwest Iowa, 1846-1853

From 1847 to 1853, 31,600 Mormons migrated to Utah.

BYU Geography Department
FLOODED BY GOLD SEEKERS (1849)

In January 1848, gold was discovered in California, launching the famous stampede of gold seekers to California in 1849. For outfitting gold seekers, Kanesville vied for preeminence with St. Joseph and Independence. These men swarmed into Kanesville, practically buying out the Latter-day Saint settlements’ wagons, draw animals, supplies, and food. Shortages sent prices skyrocketing, benefiting sellers but pricing many Saints out of being able to afford to head west that famous first year of the gold rush. One estimate said that even with new ferries the Saints built in 1849, some 5,000 wagons of gold seekers in 1850 had to wait weeks for their turns to cross the river. Kanesville’s economy boomed.

Gold seekers brought into Kanesville a scene of vices and virtues. But some travelers heading west became exposed to the gospel and liked it. When the John Harris family reached Kanesville on their way to Oregon, they stopped near Bishop Joseph Knight’s place. John Harris was ill. Prompted that the Harrises needed help, Bishop Knight recruited another brother and visited them. They blessed the man, who was instantly healed. Impressed, the family converted and went to Utah with a Latter-day Saint wagon train.  


Kanesville’s primary reason for being was to help Saints get to Utah. From 1848 to 1852 an estimated 46 Latter-day Saint wagon trains left, involving about 2,900 wagons and more than 25,000 Latter-day Saints.

The Pottawattamie High Council vowed to “spare no pains to further, by all available means in their power, the emigration to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.” Elder Hyde reported on 12 June 1850, “We have attended the organization of 350 wagons of Salt Lake emigrants.” Because cholera was so rampant that year—reports said 60 Saints had died from it while crossing Nebraska—the branches in Pottawattamie County observed 14 July as a day of fasting and prayer.

STOPOVER FOR UTAHNS HEADING EAST

Kanesville was a transfer point for missionaries and Church leaders from the Utah Territory going east to “the States” or abroad to their fields of labor. The first band of missionaries ever sent out from Utah made a stopover in December 1849. Local Saints held “many parties and entertainments for us,” missionary Job Smith said, the proceeds paying for the missionaries’ passages to St. Louis.

CLOSING DOWN KANESVILLE AND IOWA LDS SETTLEMENTS (1852)

In April 1852, six years after Thomas L. Kane described the encampment that became Kanesville, the
following description of the same area appeared in the local newspaper: "It is a fine, flourishing town, and contains about 300 houses; 16 mercantile establishments; 2 drug stores; 2 printing offices; 5 hotels; 4 groceries; 2 jewelers shops; 1 harness maker; 8 wagon shops; 2 tinsmiths; 2 livery stables; 2 cabinet shops; 5 boot and shoe makers; 2 daguerrean rooms; 5 practical physicians; 9 attorneys at law; 1 gunsmith; 1 cooper; several ministers of different denominations; 3 barber shops; 4 bakeries; 1 mill; 7 blacksmith shops; and about 1,000 to 1,500 inhabitants." 

Kanesville had become a thriving community; thus many Saints were getting "too" comfortable. But Kanesville and its surrounding Latter-day Saint settlements were never meant to be permanent. They were only to serve as stopover and recruitment places. "Abandonment, not establishment, was the watchword." So, in an epistle dated 21 September 1851, the First Presidency instructed "all the Saints in Pottawattamie" to come to Utah the next season "and fail not. . . . What are you waiting for? Have you any good excuse for not coming? No! We wish you to evacuate Pottawattamie, and the States, and next fall be with us." Those who make the sacrifice "shall be blessed." In response, during 1852 the Saints pulled out of Kanesville and western Iowa and formed into a massive stream of emigrants flowing to Utah.

The next year, 1853, the locals renamed the city Council Bluffs. "The natural influx of Gentiles," a county history states, "so changed matters that its character as a Latter-day Saint community was lost forever. . . . Whether this change was morally beneficial is debatable. Under the old dispensation the saloon, gambling and bawdy house were not tolerated, but now blossomed out in full vigor, and . . . the city was what would now be called a wide-open town." 

Other outfitting places for Saints heading west replaced Kanesville in subsequent years, and wagon train migration continued until 1868. In today's Council Bluffs, several historic markers, along with the replicated log tabernacle and a main street called Kanesville Boulevard, remind us of the vital roles Kanesville once played in the epic story of the Saints' efforts to gather to Zion in the Rocky Mountains.

NOTES
4. See Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 4 Dec. 1847.
17. Winter Quarters, Municipal High Council Minutes, typescript, 31 Jan. 1847, Church Archives.
21. Winter Quarters Municipal High Council Minutes, 7 Jan. 1847, Church Archives.
22. Orson Hyde to Orson Pratt, 11 Dec. 1848, copied into Journal History of that date; Myrtle Hyde, Orson Hyde, 234-36.
23. Quoted in Myrtle Hyde, Orson Hyde, 234.
27. Frontier Guardian, 24 July 1850.
29. James A. Little, From Kirtland to Salt Lake City (1890), 254-55.
30. Bennett, Mormons at the Missouri, 222.
37. Bennett, Mormons at the Missouri, 215.
38. Frontier Guardian, 14 Nov. 1851.
40. History of Pottawattamie County, Iowa (1883), 1:10.

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