

Remembering the Mormons in Lee County, Iowa: Marking the Past in Montrose and Keokuk

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In 2001, Fred E. Woods, a professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University, took a five-month leave of absence from BYU to accept a research-teaching fellowship at the University of Missouri—St. Louis. At UMSL, Woods taught an honors course in nineteenth-century Mormon emigration history. During his time in the St. Louis area, he canvassed local and regional archives, searching for primary source information about the Mormon migration experience on the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. In addition, he traveled extensively throughout Missouri, Iowa, western Illinois, and western Kansas, conducting field research associated with Mormon outfitting posts in the early 1850s, including Council Bluffs, Iowa (1852); Keokuk, Iowa (1853); Westport, Missouri (1854); and Atchison, Kansas (1855).

It was at this time that Woods began to envision the idea of organizing several sesquicentennial (150th anniversary) commemorations associated with Mormon migration for the early 1850s. For example, the most tragic episode of Mormon migration on the Missouri occurred on 9 April 1852 near Lexington, Missouri, when the steamboat *Saluda*, en route to Council Bluffs, exploded. Of the 175 on board, estimates suggest that as many as a hundred passengers died, including about two dozen Latter-day Saints.¹ Recognizing the significance of the event, Woods conceived the idea of organizing a memorial ceremony to appropriately honor the victims (both Mormon and

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non-Mormon). He began meeting with Lexington's mayor, city officials, community leaders, and local historians and won theirs and the community's support for the project. He also solicited funding from the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation. However, what began as a memorial ceremony turned into four days of activities and commemorative events. From 6–9 April 2002, the entire community celebrated "Lexington Steamboat Days," with the highlight being a memorial service held in a small park that had been donated by the city to honor the *Saluda* victims. The service included the unveiling of a plaque containing information about the tragedy and a list of the names of those who died. In addition, a number of local townspeople turned out in period costume to take part in the filming of a documentary about the *Saluda* explosion. Finally, William G. Hartley, an associate professor of history and a member of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for LDS History at BYU, and Woods collaborated to produce a book for the occasion.²

At the same time plans were being made for the *Saluda* commemoration, Woods met with Kirk Brandenberger, executive director of the Keokuk Convention and Tourism Bureau, about the possibilities of holding a similar historic celebration to commemorate the 1853 encampment and outfitting of Mormon companies in that community. Woods was also introduced to Douglas Atterberg, a local historian with considerable expertise about the early history of Keokuk and Lee County, Iowa. Together, the two men put together the Lee County History Symposium, a two-day historical conference sponsored by the city. The conference, held on 27–28 June 2003, included the presentation of eleven historical papers, a parade (which included an appearance from the Nauvoo Brass Band), luncheons and dinners, entertainment, and the dedication of historical markers.³

The placement of three interpretive historical markers—two in Montrose and one in Keokuk—will enhance the on-site experience of visitors desiring to learn more about the early history of the Lee County area and the Mormon presence in the region. The Montrose markers were placed in Riverview Park, situated on the Mississippi waterfront opposite the river from Nauvoo. One marker describes the early history of the Montrose area, the establishment of Ft. Des Moines by the U. S. Army, and the use of the fort by the Mormons when they first arrived in 1839.⁴ The second marker provides a brief overview of the Mormon settlements in Lee County and the Latter-day Saint departure to the West in 1846.⁵

The Keokuk marker was placed in Triangle Park and provides a detailed description of the 1853 Mormon encampment. Significantly, the park is located in close proximity to the actual encampment site. Funding for the historical markers was provided by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation. The textual information was composed by Fred E. Woods, Douglas

Atterberg, and Alexander L. Baugh. Images and text from the markers are as follows:



Fort Des Moines, 1834–1837

Early settlers of Lee County believe that this location is where Marquette and Joliet landed in 1673. From here they made their only over-land exploration on the west bank of the Mississippi, finding villages of the Illini tribe. French Canadian trappers and traders were later known to have explored this region.

Recorded history begins here in 1799 when Louis Honore Tesson received a grant from the Spanish government of Louisiana and built a homestead and trading post a half mile south. Tesson chose this place because the Sac and Fox (who had displaced the Illini) had semipermanent dwellings to the north. When Zebulon Pike came up the river in 1805, Tesson interpreted for him and then faded away.

In 1824, Keokuk and other Sac and Fox chiefs were invited to Washington, D.C., for a treaty conference. The government designated the land between the Mississippi and the Des Moines Rivers to be the “Half-Breed Tract.” Following the Black Hawk War in 1832, Iowa was opened to permanent settlement by whites, and U.S. dragoons (the cavalry of the early 1800s) were called to establish a presence in Iowa. Tesson’s grant was chosen as the site for a temporary fort named Fort Des Moines.

As settlers moved in, the dragoons were not needed for peacekeeping; and, in 1837, they were transferred to Ft. Leavenworth. The government forbade selling the fort for any private use, but David and Edward Kilbourne set up a store on the fort grounds. They joined Isaac Galland and other land speculators in forging quit-claim deeds from the half-breeds, many of whom

had signed over their deeds.

The Kilbournes and a few others lived in and around the old fort, doing business with steamboat men and with the Sac and Fox. Inspired by wild roses that abounded on the bluff, they called their village Montrose. Amenities were few, but Galland entered into an agreement in 1837 with Thomas Gregg to publish a newspaper called the *Western Adventurer*, which was used to lure people to settle in Lee County.

In this same year, Erastus Snow wrote, "Moved my Mother in law into the old barracks at Montrose opposite Nauvoo and very soon every available cabin or room in the barracks were filled with the families of the Saints."

The Mormons learned that Isaac Galland purported to own the half-breed lands as well as a farm across the river near the village of Commerce. Israel Barlow put Galland in touch with other Mormon leaders wintering in Quincy. In April, following his release from Missouri authorities, Joseph Smith negotiated with Galland to purchase land on both the Iowa and Illinois sides.

Initially, Kilbourne was encouraged by an influx of people to whom he could merchandise, but he soon became at odds with Galland over purported land claims. He subsequently moved his storekeeping to Ft. Madison and in the 1850s moved to Keokuk and made his fortune as the builder and president of the Des Moines Valley Railroad. Galland moved to Keokuk and then sojourned in California for a time, but he returned to Ft. Madison and died there in 1858. Although poor at the time of his passing, he is remembered as the builder of Iowa's first schoolhouse.

When the 1840 census was taken, most of the heads of household around Montrose were Mormons, foremost among them Brigham Young. (Young himself was then serving as a missionary in England, but his family was residing in one of the barracks of the old fort.) Montrose Township was organized as a unit of government in 1841, and as Mormon migrants began to come to Nauvoo, some settled in Lee County. Population centers at Nashville and at Ambrosia, three miles west of Montrose, never were formalized as towns but were designated branches of the Church.

When the Mormons left Nauvoo in 1846, most of the residents of Montrose Township went west. Their farmsteads were largely taken by Kentuckians and Scandinavians. Montrose was chartered as a city and in 1857 was linked to Keokuk by the railroad. Montrose remained a river port where steamboat cargoes were lightened so vessels could pass over the rapids.

The old fort gradually disintegrated. When the dam at Keokuk was completed in 1913, the river level rose about twelve feet, and the shoreline receded about fifty yards. The original site of the fort is now covered by water.



Mormon Sojourn in Lee County, 1839–1846

In January 1839, Montrose had only a handful of residents but an abundance of ready-to-occupy housing. The barracks of the abandoned Ft. Des Moines had once quartered 180 soldiers but now provided shelter for several Mormon refugee families from Missouri, led by Israel Barlow.

Barlow took to Church leaders wintering in Quincy, Illinois, information about land available in Lee County, as well as the site that became Nauvoo. When Joseph Smith approved the purchase, most of the refugees then in Quincy moved north. Brigham Young, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff, all future presidents of the Church, were among those taking rooms in the barracks; Young and Woodruff were found there on the 1840 census.

Since land in Montrose itself could not be bought because of prolonged litigation over Tesson's grant, trustees for the Church had bought from Isaac Galland some twenty thousand acres stretching westward from the village. Joseph Smith crossed the river to look over the land. He said that a town for Mormons should be developed just west of Montrose and given the name Zarahemla, though no action was taken for two years.

The 1840 census did not delineate the village of Montrose and the township, but the population of the area was about a thousand. In October 1839, an "Iowa Stake" of the Church had been organized with Joseph Smith's uncle, John Smith, as president. As a stake, the Iowa dwellers were on an ecclesiastical par with Nauvoo.

In March 1841, Joseph Smith declared that it was now time to build up Zarahemla. In response, old Montrose settlers claimed the Mormon surveyors disrupted the village. The plat that resulted oriented Montrose streets for

an excellent view of the temple at Nauvoo. It seems to have been tacitly accepted but could not be put into legal effect until the Riddick heirs won their struggle for possession of the Tesson grant.

The Iowa Stake changed its name in August 1841 to the Zarahemla Stake, which included branches at the Ambrosia community west of Montrose, the Nashville community to the south, a handful of people at Keokuk (which then had a population of possibly 150), and the main branch called Zarahemla, consisting mostly of Montrose residents. Thirty houses may have been built at Zarahemla, but only one lot was recorded as sold, and no trace of the community remains.



*Douglas Atterberg speaking at the dedication of the historical markers at Riverside Park, Montrose, Iowa, 28 June 2003. Atterberg is a local historian.
Photograph courtesy of Fred E. Woods.*

Some Mormons were also Masons, and a lodge named “Rising Sun” was formed at Montrose, meeting in a small brick building just a hundred feet west of this marker. In August 1842, Joseph Smith participated in an installation ceremony at the lodge and declared that the Mormons would become a mighty people in the Rocky Mountains.

A few days later, Smith crossed again to Montrose, this time to avoid Missourians trying to implicate him in the assassination of Lilburn Boggs, who as governor had expelled the Mormons from Missouri.

Two years later, tension was growing in Hancock County, and rumors flew about the state militia marching on Nauvoo. Joseph and Hyrum Smith again crossed the river to hide at the home of William Jordan, up the creek valley from Nashville. Emma Smith sent a message urging them to return, as

the Nauvoo Saints' felt threatened by persecution. Doing so led to the untimely deaths at Carthage.

Most of the Mormons of Lee County followed the trail to Utah. Had they remained, they likely would have lost their farms and homes to the shareholders to whom the Supreme Court of Iowa Territory had awarded ownership of the Half-Breed Tract. A few families from "Canada West" (Ontario) remained on String Prairie in Des Moines Township.

Those who left Nauvoo in February made a temporary camp on Sugar Creek in the northeast quadrant of Des Moines Township and then blazed the trail to Utah. Some six hundred people still in Nauvoo in October 1846 fled a mob. Too poor to equip themselves and too hurried even to bring food, they managed to get to the Iowa shore a mile north of Montrose. A marker at Linger Longer Roadside Park tells their story.



Mormon Immigrants' Camp, 1853

On 1 April 1853, a steamboat docked at Keokuk and discharged some two hundred passengers, the first of twenty-five hundred Mormon immigrants who were to camp at Keokuk that spring, to earn money and to learn survival skills before taking the trail to Utah.

Keokuk was just beginning a boom. In the 1840s, Keokuk was an unimpressive village of fewer than five hundred. However, its town plat, a mile square, was filling rapidly. The platted streets were a grid, all running straight despite the roughness of the terrain. Much work was available to open and grade the streets, and the Mormon men were eager for the employment.

The camp nearly doubled the town's population, which was 3,256 by late 1852. The last week of March, Mormon agent Isaac C. Haight arrived



Robert S. Clark and Fred E. Woods at the dedication of the Mormon historical marker at Triangle Park, Keokuk, Iowa, 28 June 2003. Clark represented the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation for the occasion. Photography courtesy of Fred E. Woods.

at Keokuk to finalize plans, visiting several “principal men,” including Mayor Barnard Merriam and City Recorder William W. Belknap, who would later become President Grant’s secretary of war. The campground was located north of the city limits, stretching along the bluff on open-range pasture belonging to Charles Mason of Burlington, former chief justice of Iowa Territory.

Eight shiploads of Mormon immigrants sailed from Liverpool to New Orleans between January and May 1853. Steamboats transported them to St. Louis, where most paused before taking another boat to Keokuk. Three steamboats of the St. Louis and Keokuk Packet Company made twice-weekly scheduled runs. The first ship leaving Liverpool carried mostly Danes, but their ocean crossing took so long that a Mormon company of English folk were the first to arrive at Keokuk.

Some Keokuk housewives hired Mormon women to help with spring cleaning. The Danes busied themselves “turning trees into useful articles,” and a host of Mormon men graded the streets, “a most appreciated improvement.”

Among the immigrants was artist Frederick Piercy, who sketched scenes along the immigrants’ route, including “Camp at Keokuk,” which he described as picturesque, with a commanding view, in excellent order, with everyone busy. Some tradesmen, he said, found skilled work; others did the

grading. The extra money enabled many “little comforts” (though on the trail, many luxury items were to be jettisoned). Another immigrant said the camp was like a long street lined by wagons instead of houses, with plenty of wood and grass handy.

Keokukians provided such goods as leather used in harnesses and whips. Yet Haight had purchased wagons, canvas, and other needed items in St. Louis. The ideal grouping was ten people to a wagon, ten wagons to a company, but in all, some 360 wagons went on the trail, each needing a team of oxen.

A herd of eight hundred oxen was to be found near Boonville, Missouri, four hundred miles away by river but only two hundred miles overland. A crew of thirteen men was organized for a cattle drive. One of the crew was Appleton Milo Harmon, who had been part of the original 1846 exodus from Nauvoo. Harmon had been a missionary to England and was now returning. The drive took three weeks but successfully brought the herd to Jackoak Grove near Montrose and near the 1846 Sugar Creek campground.

On 20 June, the final wagons left. A few immigrants, Leonard Matless among them, chose to remain in Keokuk. William Folsom, for five years a building contractor in Keokuk, joined the immigrants, taking his family to Utah where he later became the general superintendent of the Manti Temple and where his daughter Amelia became a wife of Brigham Young.

The 1853 campground evolved into a prestigious neighborhood. By 1860, the town had swelled to 8,136 residents, with a mile-long, level Main Street busy with commerce.

One additional event associated with the Lee County History Symposium is worth mentioning. In 1853, while the LDS companies were preparing and outfitting for the trek west, Keokuk’s community leaders hired a number of Mormons to grade and plank the streets in the city. The men labored for over a month, making considerable improvements to Keokuk’s Main Street and other side roads. In 2003, a similar type of community service occurred. In making preparations to place the historical marker in Triangle Park, Fred E. Woods and David A. Gudgel, Keokuk’s mayor, visited the park to determine where the marker should go. While there, Mayor Gudgel apologized to Woods about the poor condition of the park’s road curbing. Immediately, Woods recognized that perhaps the Mormons might be able to help the community once again. He remarked to the mayor, “If the Mormons helped improve Keokuk’s roads in 1853, perhaps they could do it again in 2003.” Within minutes, Woods was on the phone to Kim R. Wilson, chairman of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation. Woods explained the situation, and Wilson approved the allotment of funds for the curbing. Later, Mayor Gudgel expressed his appreciation to the foundation:

On behalf of the citizens of the City of Keokuk, please allow me to express my sincere appreciation to your foundation.

As most of you are aware, Keokuk, Iowa, was recently involved in a very successful 150 year commemoration highlighting our proud relationship with the Latter Day Saints. One hundred and fifty years ago, on a site that is now called Triangle Park, camped hundreds of Latter Day Saints who prepared for the long journey to the west. While here, these citizens become an integral part of our town and through their hard and appreciated labors assisted Keokuk in road work which is still evident today.

Prior to the commemoration, the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation financially assisted our town in repairing curbs and gutters that surrounded our Triangle Park. I, for one, found this appreciated gesture to not only be ironic but symbolic of the civic compassion that once was felt by our Keokuk citizens afforded us by the Latter Day Saints. Therefore, it is my privilege to thank you for the much needed assistance.

As stated earlier, Keokuk has a proud heritage and kindred relationship with the Latter Day Saints. We surely intend to continue to foster this positive relationship and allow you the knowledge that you are always welcome to Keokuk, Iowa.⁶

The placement of the three permanent historical markers in Keokuk and Montrose offers a reminder to the local citizens of their community's historical past. In addition, it is hoped that visitors to Nauvoo and Hancock County, Illinois, will take the time to travel across the river to Lee County to reflect upon the early Mormon presence in that region.

Notes

1. See William G. Hartley, "Don't Go Aboard the *Saluda*!": William Dunbar, LDS Emigrants, and Disaster on the Missouri," *Mormon Historical Studies* 4, no. 1 (spring 2003): 57–58; see also 68, note 87.

2. See William G. Hartley and Fred E. Woods, *Explosion of the Steamboat Saluda* (Salt Lake City: Millennial Press, 2002).

3. Four papers presented at the symposium are included in this issue of *Mormon Historical Studies*. They are Fred E. Woods, "From Liverpool to Keokuk: The Mormon Maritime Migration Experience of 1853"; William G. Hartley, "LDS Emigration in 1853: The Keokuk Encampment and Outfitting Ten Wagon Trains for Utah"; L. Matthew Chatterley, "Frederick Piercy: English Artist on the American Plains"; and Susan Easton Black, "Esquire James Weston Woods: Legal Counsel to Joseph Smith."

4. In 1923, the Montrose Women's Civic Club placed a bronze marker embedded in a large stone in Montrose's Riverview Park, marking the site of the barracks well at Ft. Des Moines. The inscription reads: "This barracks well marks the first Fort Des Moines and was used by a detachment of dragoons stationed here Sept 25, 1834 to June 18, 1837. Montrose Womans [sic] Civic Club 1923." The marker is still in place and is clearly visible.

5. In 1996, the Iowa Mormon Trails Association placed two markers in Riverview Park. The Iowa Mormon Trails Association markers should not be confused with the two placed by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation in June 2003.

6. David A. Gudgel to the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, 11 July 2003, copy in the possession of the author.