

150 years ago converts camped at Keokuk

*Lee County, Iowa,
marks historic events*

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Visitors to historic Nauvoo, Ill., coming south from St. Louis, Mo., often cross the Mississippi River into Illinois at the nearby city of Keokuk, Iowa, perhaps not fully realizing the significance to Church history that Keokuk bears in its own right.

In 1853 seven years after the Latter-day Saint exodus from Nauvoo, Keokuk had grown from a sleepy settlement in southeastern Iowa to a town of some 3,000. That year, it would be a major staging point for Latter-day Saint immigrants from Scandinavia and the British Isles bound for the Salt Lake Valley. It only remained so for a year, but that spring and summer more than 2,500 Mormons passed through the town, according to Fred E. Woods, professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU and co-author of an article in the winter 2002 edition of *The Annals of Iowa*, "The 1853 Mormon Migration through Keokuk."

That history will be observed, Friday and Saturday, June 27-28, as Keokuk celebrates the sesquicentennial of the encampment. Presented by the Keokuk Area Convention & Tourism Bureau, the event includes the Lee County (Iowa) History Symposium and the dedication of a markers in Keokuk and Montrose. The marker in Keokuk commemorates the area of the 1853 encampment at Triangle Park at the intersection of Grand Avenue and Orleans Street, and two in Montrose memorialize Church history events in that city.

Loren Horton, state senior historian emeritus of Iowa, will present the keynote address on Friday evening. Presenters at the Saturday event include Brother Woods; his co-author of the article, Douglas Atterberg; BYU Church history professors William G. Hartley and Susan Easton Black; and others.

Brother Woods, who has been working with dignitaries in Keokuk and Montrose under his auspices as executive director of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, sees a need for greater recognition of Church history across the river to the west from Nauvoo.

He noted that during the heyday of Nauvoo, the Church and its members



CAMPSITE Professional artist Frederick Piercy made this sketch of the 1853 Mormon encampment at Keokuk, Iowa, and included it in his book tracing the emigrant route from Liverpool, England, to Salt Lake City. Keokuk is located 12 miles south of Nauvoo, Ill.

actually owned more land in Montrose, on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, than the Nauvoo side, the result of a purchase from land speculator Isaac Galland, who sold the Church the townsite of Commerce, Ill., which became Nauvoo. The Zarahemla Stake of the Church was organized in Montrose.

It was in Montrose where the Prophet

Joseph Smith is reported to have uttered the prophecy that the Latter-day Saints would gather in the Rocky Mountains and there become a mighty people. Three future presidents of the Church — John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff and Brigham Young — lived in Montrose for a short time before taking up resi-

dence in Nauvoo. And Montrose was where some of the remaining Latter-day Saint exiles in 1846 — driven from Nauvoo but too poor to push on to the West — experienced the miracle wherein they were preserved from starvation when flocks of quail landed in their camp.

The cities of Keokuk and Montrose are cooperating in this month's observance. After the events in Keokuk, participants will proceed up the river road to Montrose where a commemorative marker will be dedicated in Riverview Park, along with the new Pioneer Trail Memorial at Linger Longer Park one mile up river from Montrose. Mayor David Gud-

gel of Keokuk and Mayor Ron Dinwiddie of Montrose have been involved in planning the observance, Brother Woods said. The Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, working with city officials, has made arrangements for the erection of the signs, he added.

In connection with the symposium, a page has been established on the Keokuk Area Convention & Tourism Bureau Web site which contains a link where users can access an alphabetical listing of the immigrants who came through Keokuk in 1853.

For more information on the celebration and symposium, see the Web site at www.keokuktourism.com or contact the bureau at 329 Main St., Keokuk, Iowa 52632; telephone 1-800-383-1219.

Keokuk's place in the history of Latter-day Saint emigration might be better understood in the context of a sequence of events. After the founding of Salt Lake City in 1847, emigrants came through Kaneshville (renamed Council Bluffs), Iowa, as the outfitting post. But in 1852, President Brigham Young instructed the saints to close down the semi-permanent settlement there and come on to the Salt Lake Valley. Thereafter, merchants in the city inflated the prices they charged passing emigrants, and Church officials decided they needed a new frontier outfitting post the following season. The Missouri River was deemed too treacherous for passage, as the previous year a boiler on the steamboat *Saluda* had exploded, killing more than two dozen Mormon converts among other passengers.

Keokuk, situated 12 miles south of Nau-

voo, was chosen as the staging point, even though it meant an extra 300 miles of overland travel across Iowa. In later years, immigrants would depart from such points as Westport, Mo.; Mormon Grove, Kan.; Iowa City, Iowa; and Florence (formerly Winter Quarters), Neb.; before the advent of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 made overland travel by covered wagon unnecessary.

Frederick Piercy, a professional artist and convert to the Church from Great Britain, sketched his view of the Mormon encampment at Keokuk and also provided this word picture: "The Camp was in excellent order, and the emigrants informed me that when the ground was not muddy they would as soon live in a tent as in a house. I saw few idlers — indeed, rather than remain unemployed until the trains moved off, those who could not get work in the town of Keokuk at their trades took advantage of the opportunity which [was] offered of working on the roads. By this means they saved what little money they possessed, and in many instances added to their stock, and were thus enabled to obtain many little comforts which they must otherwise have gone without. . . . Before leaving Keokuk I made the accompanying sketch of the Camp, showing the arrangement of the wagons and tents, which, with their white covers, looked extremely picturesque amidst the spring foliage of the country. (Frederick Piercy, *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake*, 59-60, quoted in Fred E. Woods and Douglas Atterberg, "Mormon Migration through Keokuk," *The Annals of Iowa*, p. 16.)

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