

The Mormon Trail

~ Traffic ~

The *Mormon Trail* stretched nearly 1,400 miles across prairies, sagebrush flats, and steep mountains. Each had its challenges for the early wagon trains and the later handcarts.

The trip across Iowa in early 1846 began in February. Since grass had not yet started, animals fed on limbs and bark of trees. Heavy rains turned the trail into mud which stuck to the wagon wheels, then froze at night.

The Mormons in flight called themselves the *Camp of Israel*. They camped in plain fields, crossed by creeks with willows on the banks.

The *Camp of Israel* became a well organized migration. They formed into companies of 100 families, each under a captain. Every wagon train was supported by the skills of artisans.

The *Pioneer Company* who set out in 1847 for the Salt Lake Valley consisted of 144 men and boys, 3 women, 2 children, 72 wagons, 93 horses, 52 mules, 66 oxen, 19 cows, and 17 dogs. They also took a leather ferryboat mounted on wheels. There was a captain assigned for every 10 Saints in the company. These 14 men were instructed to walk two abreast alongside or driving the wagons. The trip took 111 days during which they had no serious trouble with Indians. At Fort Caspar, the Mormons built a ferry across the last horse-shoe of the Platte River. In late June, they met Jim Bridger, one of the few white men who had seen the Salt Lake Valley.

They encountered animals on the prairie--buffalo, antelope, wolves, and birds.

The Mormon caravan of 1848 leaving Winter Quarters was made up of 560 wagons, leaving those who remained without means of transport. Brigham Young instructed them to build handcarts. During the next four years, more than 3000 of these carts were pulled over the 1030-mile trail to Salt Lake City. A 500-pound load could be carried, with a man in the shafts, and women and children pushing from behind. A cart could travel 30 miles in a day, more than double the distance averaged by a wagon train.

In the spring of 1849, the *Overland Trail* was thronged with gold-rushers. Many were too impatient to take the long *California Trail* by way of Fort Hall and Raft River. Instead they followed the Mormon roadway from Bridger's Fort to Salt Lake City, then on to southern California to be followed by a northern trek to the gold fields.

~ Features ~

After fleeing from Missouri in 1838-1839, Joseph Smith's followers purchase swamp land on the Illinois bank of the Mississippi River and build "Nauvoo the Beautiful." Growing fear of the Saints' political and economic strength, rumors of polygamy, and destruction of a newspaper published by dissenters, cause anti-Mormon sentiment. The 4000-member Nauvoo Legion, formed to protect the Mormon community, aggravate the citizens of Illinois. After the murders of Joseph and Hyrum Smith and two companions, the Mormons begin preparations to flee.

Refugee wagons leaving Nauvoo, Illinois, cross the icy Mississippi River on flatboats and entered Iowa. The Mormons had agreed to leave Illinois "as soon as grass grows and water runs." But due to increased tension between them and state officials, they began their exodus in February 1846.

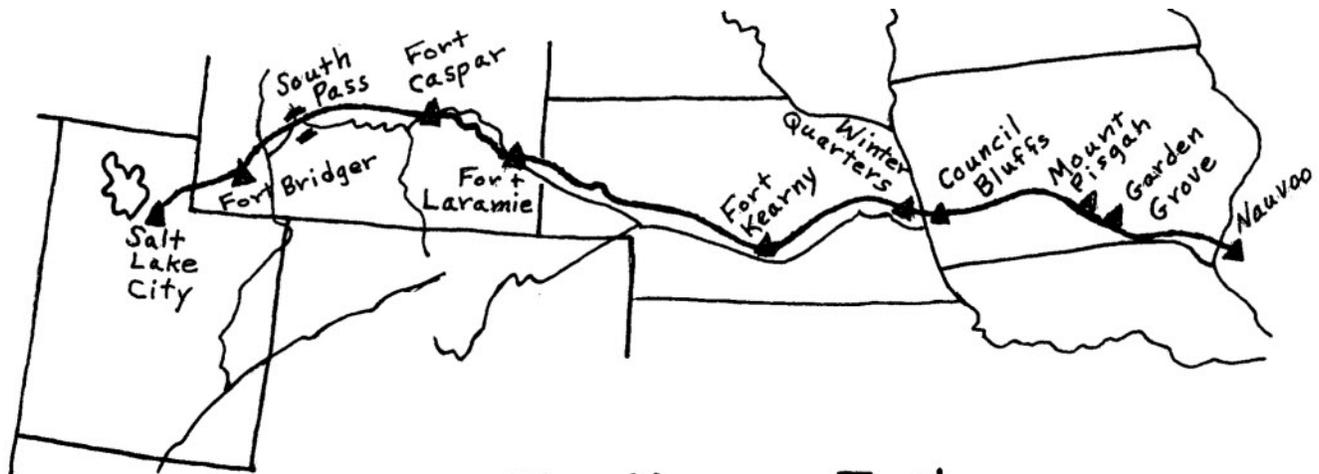
The refugees establish Winter Quarters on the Missouri River where a suburb of Omaha, Nebraska, now stands. While 3,483 Saints waited for spring, more than 600 perished here.

As spring 1847 approaches, approximately 10,000 Mormons are encamped on both sides of the Missouri River--at Winter Quarters, Mount Pisgah, Garden Grove, and Council Bluffs in Iowa or scattered along the Trail, working to raise money for the *Camp of Israel*.

Brigham Young and the Council of the Twelve organize the *Pioneer Company* to go ahead to mark the trail and lay the cornerstone of the new Zion in the valley of the Great Salt Lake. They measured mileage with a device mounted on a wagon wheel called a "roadometer." Near Fort Laramie, they are united with a party of Mormons who had wintered at Pueblo, Colorado.

During the period from 1846 to 1869, about 60,000 Mormon pioneers cross the prairies. They are from the existing American states and also from many European countries.

Handcart companies are first organized in 1856 by Brigham Young to move impoverished European converts westward from Iowa City. Winter catches two companies still on the trail, and 200 people die before a rescue party from Salt Lake City can reach them.



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~ Timeline ~ The Mormon Trail

- 1839 The city of Nauvoo, Illinois, is established by Mormon refugees near the site of the village called Commerce.
- 1844 Joseph and Hyrum Smith are murdered by militiamen in Carthage jail. Brigham Young, as President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, assumes leadership of the Mormon Church.
- 1845 To allay violence and night-riding, Brigham Young and the Twelve agree to leave Illinois "as soon as grass grows and water runs."
- 1846 In February, Charles Shumway takes the first refugees out of Nauvoo and across to Sugar Creek Camp on the Iowa side of the Mississippi River.
- 1846 In July, the Mormon Battalion, organized by Mormons on the Missouri, starts its march toward Fort Leavenworth and on to Santa Fe and the Pacific.
- 1846 Winter Quarters are established on the Missouri, at the site of modern Florence, Nebraska.
- 1847 In April the Pioneer Company starts westward from its rendezvous on the Elkhorn. In July, scouts for the Pioneer Company enter the Salt Lake Valley.
- 1847 On July 24, Brigham Young, ill with mountain fever, is brought into the Valley, and the selection of Salt Lake Valley as the site of the City of Zion is assured.

Route of the Mormon Trail

From Nauvoo, Illinois, the Saints crossed the Mississippi River into Iowa, and then moved across Iowa. Near Sewal, Iowa, they crossed Locust Creek. Their first real way station was at Garden Grove, where 170 men cleared 715 acres in three weeks, for the purpose of providing shelter for those coming behind. They did this all along the Trail.

Beyond Garden Grove lies Mount Pisgah. Here, between 1846 and 1852, as many as 800 died.

They crossed the Missouri River at Council Bluffs, setting up a new camp on Indian lands, at what is now the Omaha suburb of Florence, Nebraska. It became known as Winter Quarters.

When the Mormons reached Fort Kearny, they remained on the north bank of the Platte River. This is what distinguishes the *Mormon Trail* from the *Oregon and California Trails* in this portion. The latter ran along the south bank. The Mormons chose the north side partly to isolate themselves but more to avoid competing for grazing and campsites.