

## Fremont & The Mormon Years

Army officer and explorer, John C. Fremont visited the Las Vegas Valley on May 3, 1844. After he publicized it in his "Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains 1842 to Oregon and Northern California in 1843-44," the valley became better-known by European-American travelers. During his journey along the Old Spanish Trail, he collected geographical information, military intelligence, and made scientific observations of the environment and topography. He noted the excellent quality of the Las Vegas Valley springs. His report greatly enhanced the American public's understanding of the West, and helped establish the route of the upcoming Mormon Road for wagon freight traffic and emigration between Salt Lake and Los Angeles. During the years 1848-50 the majority of the traffic on the Old Spanish Trail related to the Gold Rush in California. As early as 1850, Mormon leaders were considering San Bernardino, California as a possible mission location. The main route between Salt Lake City and the Pacific Ocean became known as the "Mormon Corridor." The "Mormon Corridor" part of the Spanish Trail was the only road that remained open in winter, and the Mormons and their settlements were instrumental in its protection and development.

The history of the Las Vegas Mormon Fort began in 1855 when Brigham Young, the leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at Salt Lake City selected 30 men to establish a mission in the Las Vegas Valley. They left on April 10 and were told to go prepared to survive on what they could raise and fare as best as they could. The mission was the first settlement in the part of the New Mexico Territory which would later become the southern end of the state of Nevada. The Mormons' purpose here was to raise crops which would not grow in the colder Utah climate, convert the local Indians to Mormonism and instruct them in farming and hygiene, build a fort and settlement, establish a halfway station for protecting travelers on the Mormon Road between the Pacific and Salt Lake City (to establish a base for trade along the trail), set up a post office, and explore the country. Each man was given 2 ½ acres of land plus ¼ acre for a garden.

The journey took the men 30 days, with the last 55 miles through a waterless desert. William Bringham, president of the mission, arrived with most of the group at Las Vegas on June 14, 1855. The mission was temporarily named for Bringham because there was already a Las Vegas in the New Mexico Territory. The site chosen for the mission was four miles from the Las Vegas Springs and next to the Las Vegas Creek where the creek dropped over a bluff about 12 feet high. This drop provided the force to power a mill built by the settlers. The Las Vegas Mission consisted of an adobe wall enclosure measuring 150 feet square. Work soon began on the fort with fortifications on the southeast and northwest angles. A corral measuring 150 feet long and 132 feet wide was built on the north side of the fort according to the diary of one of the missionaries, John Steele. The walls were two feet thick through the bottom eight feet and one foot thick at the top. Later photographs show gun ports in the walls. Inside the fort, the mess houses provided defense for the east side. The men cleared the mesquite brush from the land below the fort, dug ditches, and laid out farmland. They labored in heavy woolen garments on days that sometimes reached 110 degrees; so the hot weather and winds made farming difficult and prevented a long work day. They planted a variety of crops such as corn, melons, and oats. Peas and beans were less successful. When the first winter came, a severe frost ruined the crops.

President Bringham often engaged in fiery preaching to improve the morale and performance of the men. Discontent grew not only over Bringham's harsh leadership as he punished the men for minor offenses, but also from the men's desires to be with their own families and continued misunderstandings between the Mormons and the Paiutes regarding individual and group property rights. Eleven missionaries secured permission to return to Utah on November 8, 1855. Others, also, would make trips back and forth from Las Vegas to Salt Lake at various times.

Post Office services were offered in January 1856 when the legal address of the "Bringhurst Post Office, Las Vegas County, New Mexico," was opened at the fort. The station was named for William Bringhurst, President of the Las Vegas Mission. Mail was a constant topic discussed in the letters between the missionaries and their families in Salt Lake. They received monthly deliveries.

A second call from Salt Lake City took place for additional missionaries to come to Las Vegas in February 24, 1856. This time, the men were allowed to bring their families. Thus 23 men and 14 women and 15 children came to the fort. Brigham Young sent a new directive to the fort, instructing missionaries to grow cotton, mine for lead, and to further advance the cause of religion. Because the families had to set up house, regulate the children and provide for family needs, the Mormon community built a school and selected two teachers. In August the first child--Zilpha Fuller, daughter of Elijah Fuller's third wife Ellen Fuller--was born at the fort. Ellen gave birth to her daughter in a wagon box. Life for the families was grueling as they endured dehydration and extreme temperatures.

After the discovery of lead by an American Indian on April 19, 1856, Brigham Young sent Nathaniel Jones to open a mine approximately 35 miles southwest of the fort at Potosi Mountain in the Spring Mountains. Some settlers remained at the fort while others tried mining. Young felt that the lead mining was important to make bullets for hunting and protection from a possible invasion. Unfortunately, the ore was of poor quality and the venture proved unprofitable. On May 22 Jones and his mining crew left for Utah, returning to Las Vegas in August. Jones and Bringhurst quarreled bitterly regarding authority over the mining mission. A second letter arrived from President Brigham Young on August 19 reconfirming Jones' authority over the mining mission and obliging Bringhurst to aid him in any way that he could. Dissension continued to grow over the leadership styles of Bringhurst, who was harsher, and Jones, who was more liberal.

After another trip to Utah, Jones returned in December with a letter from Young upholding him and releasing Bringhurst, who left the mission. The conflict demoralized the settlers, who desired to return to Utah. They were discouraged because of the uncertainty about whether they were going to have to stay or be allowed to go home, and also because of the uneasy feelings between them and the American Indians. On February 23, 1857, the missionaries received a letter from President Young informing them that they were free to close down the mission and return to Salt Lake. Dissension, lack of supplies, uncertainty about the mission leadership, social problems, and lack of good crop lands all contributed to the failure of the mission. On March 23 the exodus began, and by mid 1857 the mission was nearly deserted.

During this time the relationship between the federal government and the Mormons deteriorated. President James Buchanan threatened to send federal troops to Salt Lake. In mid 1857 due to the advance of the United States Army into Eastern Utah, Brigham Young called his followers from all points to defend the City of Saints against the Gentiles. In July President Buchanan removed Brigham Young as territorial governor and appointed a new non-Mormon governor, Alfred Cumming. The Mormons prepared for war and then allowed federal forces to enter the Mormon capital peacefully after negotiations involving the army and the church. In April 1858 the Utah War ended.

In 1858, Amasa Lyman led a small party from Salt Lake back to the fort to work at the mines. The mission continued until September 26, 1858 when a meeting was held and the decision was made to disband and return home. The fort was left to deteriorate. However short and rocky the mission's life was, it later helped pave the way for the settlement of southern Nevada. On March 2, 1861, President Buchanan signed An Act to Organize the Territory of Nevada. Nevada became the 36th state on October 31, 1864, thanks to the arrival of population due to the discovery of gold and silver in the Virginia City area, and because Republicans led by Abraham Lincoln wanted the state's support in elections and in Congress.

## Questions for Reading 1

1. How did John C. Fremont's expedition spur settlement in the area?
2. What were the motives behind the Mormon expansion from Utah to Las Vegas? Why did the Mormons select this particular site?
3. How was the fort built? What was the original layout of the fort? What was life like for those who lived there?
4. What was the mission of the Mormon settlers at Las Vegas? Did they succeed? Why or why not? Why did they dissolve the fort and return to Salt Lake City?

Reading 1 was compiled from Archeological Reconnaissance of the Las Vegas Mormon Fort (Las Vegas, Nevada: WESTEC Services, 1981); Michael Bowers, *The Sagebrush State: Nevada's History, Government and Politics* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1996); Karen B. Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1970); Robert Elston and Alvin McClain, *Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort: Historical and Archeological Perspectives* (Silver City, Nevada: Intermountain Research, 1993); James Hinds, *One Hundred and Twenty-five Years at Las Vegas' Old Fort: A Historic Structures Report of Las Vegas Fort and Ranch* (Las Vegas, Nevada, n.d.); Dean Heller, *Political History of Nevada, 1996* (Carson City: State of Nevada, 1997); *Las Vegas Fort: Old Values, New Meaning* (Clark County, Nevada: Preservation Association of Clark Co., October 1980); Martha Knack, *Boundaries Between: The Southern Paiutes, 1775-1995* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort Museum exhibits; Stanley Paher, *Las Vegas as It Began--As it Grew* (Las Vegas, Nevada: Nevada Publications, 1971); Fred E. Woods, *A Gamble in the Desert: The Mission in Las Vegas (1855-57)* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, 2005).