MORMONISM

A HISTORICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

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militia force at Leavenworth, Kansas, for outfitting and training. The muster included more than 30 women—20 to work as laundresses—and more than 50 children.

Those who enlisted were given a uniform allowance and wages eventually totaling more than $71,000. Under the direction of Church officials, much of this money was used to buy food and supplies to support the rest of the Mormon migration.

The Battalion’s first commander, the recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel James Allen, died shortly after leaving Leavenworth. He was replaced temporarily by Lieutenant Andrew Jackson Smith. The Mormons, however, resented Smith’s strict adherence to military discipline. Once they reached Santa Fe, Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke arrived to take permanent command. Cooke proved to be well suited to leading the Mormons. Cooke sent a detachment of the sick, most of the women, and all of the children to Pueblo, Colorado, where they would spend the winter. Four of the women, wives of the officers, were allowed to stay.

On the journey from Santa Fe to San Diego, the Battalion fought only one battle, with wild bulls, near the San Pedro River in what would become Arizona. But they came close to fighting with Mexican troops outside Tucson on December 16, 1846. Inexplicably, the Mexican detachment temporarily left Tucson without firing a shot. Later that month, the Mormons also happened upon the aftermath of the Temecula Massacre. Their presence allowed the surviving Luiseno Indians to bury their dead unmolested.

After arriving in San Diego, California, on January 29, 1847, the Mormon Battalion occupied southern California. When their service ended, on July 16, 1847, about 80 men re-enlisted for an additional six months. Only 22 Mormons in the Battalion died, all from natural causes. Battalion members built roads and dug wells, and a few were part of the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill before they made their way to Utah or back to Iowa.  

—Bruce A. Crow

See also: Exodus from Nauvoo; Mormonism and Secular Government.

References


Mountain Meadows Massacre

In September 1857, dozens of local militiamen in southern Utah, aided by Paiute Indians, massacred some 120 California-bound emigrants in a highland valley called
the Mountain Meadows. This horrific crime, which came to be known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre, is arguably the worst incident in Latter-day Saint history and one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the American West.

Any attempt to comprehend the massacre requires understanding the conditions of the time. In 1857, an army of roughly 1,500 U.S. troops was marching toward Utah Territory to suppress what some saw as a rebellion there. At the same time, thousands of overland emigrants were also traveling west—most of them headed for California. Brigham Young, the territorial governor and Church president, and other Utah leaders preached with strong rhetoric against the enemy they perceived in the approaching army and sought the assistance of Indians in resisting the troops. Young and his advisors also instructed the Latter-day Saints in the Territory to prepare for possible war by saving ammunition and grain.

These wartime policies led to conflicts between Latter-day Saint settlers who were saving their resources and emigrants who were frustrated in their attempts to replenish supplies as they passed through the Territory. During a heated exchange that occurred in the southern Utah town of Cedar City, one emigrant man in a train made up mostly of Arkansans reportedly said something that led local people to claim he had helped kill Joseph Smith Jr., the Church’s founding prophet, 13 years earlier. Other emigrant men in the train purportedly threatened to join the incoming federal troops against the Mormons. None of the identified victims of the massacre are known to have been among Smith’s killers, however, and none would survive to tell his side of the story.

Whatever the emigrant men said, Alexander Fancher, captain of the wagon company, rebuked them on the spot, but, in the charged environment of 1857, Cedar City’s leaders took the travelers at their word. The town marshal tried to arrest some of the emigrants on charges of public intoxication and profanity but was forced to back down. Yet the agitated Cedar City leaders were not willing to let the
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matter go. Angry and fearful after a long history of what they viewed as religious persecution and now facing the prospect of war, they overreacted, convincing themselves that the emigrants were their enemies.

Isaac Haight, the mayor of Cedar City, a Church leader, and a major in the mili-
tia, sent an express dispatch to William Dame, the district militia commander and 
the local Church leader in nearby Parowan. The letter sought permission to use the 
militia to arrest the emigrants seen as offenders by the Utahns. After convening a 
council to discuss the matter, Dame denied the request. Still intent on chastening 
the emigrants, however, Cedar City authorities formulated a new plan. If they could 
not formally muster the militia, they would try persuading local Paiute Indians to 
give the Arkansas company “a brush,” attacking it in a canyon below Mountain 
Meadows, shooting some of its men, and stealing its cattle (Bishop, Mormonism 
Unveiled 219).

Needing someone to lead the attack, Haight chose John D. Lee, a militia major 
and a federally funded “Indian farmer” in the settlement of Fort Harmony. Lee 
and Haight had a long discussion in which Lee told Haight he believed the Indians 
might “kill all the party, women and children, as well as the men,” if incited to at-
tack (Bishop, Mormonism Unveiled 220). The two men agreed to move ahead with 
the attack, planning to lay the blame for it at the feet of the Indians. On the slippery 
slope that often leads to group violence, one bad decision led to another, until fi-
nally the men were willing to sanction the complete destruction of the emigrants.

The generally peaceful Paiutes were reluctant when told of the plan. But Cedar 
City’s leaders promised them plunder and assistance, convincing them that the 
emigrants were aligned with “enemy” troops who would kill Indians along with 
Mormon settlers.

On Sunday, September 6, Haight presented the plan to a council of local leaders. 
It was met with stunned resistance by some. When council members asked who 
had authorized the plans, Haight and his supporters acknowledged that they had 
acted independently. The council decided to send an express rider to Salt Lake City 
with a letter to Brigham Young asking what should be done before taking action 
against the emigrants.

But the next day, shortly before the express rider left with the letter, Lee led a 
premature attack on the emigrant camp at Mountain Meadows, rather than wait-
ing for the company to reach the canyon below. The assault killed several emi-
grants, and the remainder fought off their attackers, forcing a retreat. The emigrants 
quickly pulled their wagons into a tight circle, holing up inside the defensive corral. 
They also repelled two other attacks in what became a five-day siege.

Not all the emigrants were in camp during the initial assault. Two men were away 
gathering stray cattle. Early in the siege, two Cedar City Mormons discovered them 
a few miles outside the corral. The Cedar City men killed one of the emigrants, but
the other escaped on horseback to the wagon corral, bringing with him news that his companion’s killers were white men, not Indians.

The conspirators knew that if the surviving emigrants were freed and continued on to California, word would spread that Mormons had been involved in the attacks. An army was already approaching the Territory, and southern Utah leaders believed that if news of their role in the assault got out, it would result in retaliatory military action that would threaten their lives and the lives of their people.

On September 9, Haight and his associate Elias Morris again sought Dame’s permission to call out the militia. Dame held another council meeting in Parowan, and it was decided that men should be sent to help the beleaguered emigrants continue on their way in peace. Haight later lamented, “I would give a world if I had it, if we had abided by the deci[s]ion of the council” (Jenson, Notes).

Instead, when the meeting ended, Haight got Dame alone, sharing with him information he had apparently not shared with the council: the corralled emigrants knew that white men had been involved in the initial attacks. Haight also led Dame to believe that most of the emigrants had already died. This information caused Dame to rethink his earlier decision. Tragically, he gave in, and, when the conversation ended, Haight left feeling he had permission to use the militia against the emigrants.

Arriving back in Cedar City, Haight called out militia members to join others already waiting near the emigrant corral at the Mountain Meadows.

On Friday, September 11, Lee entered the emigrant wagon fort under a white flag and convinced the besieged emigrants to accept desperate terms. He said the militia would safely escort them back to Cedar City but that they must leave their possessions behind and give up their weapons, signaling their peaceful intentions to the Indians. The suspicious emigrants debated what to do but in the end accepted the terms, seeing no better alternative.

Pursuant to these terms, the emigrants put some of the youngest children and the wounded into two wagons, which left the wagon corral first, followed by women and children on foot. The men and older boys filed out last, with armed militia-men at their sides. The procession marched for a mile or so until, at a prearranged signal, militiamen turned and fired on the emigrant men and boys, while Indians rushed as directed from their hiding place to pursue the women and children. Militiamen with the two front-running wagons began murdering the wounded. Only 17 children, considered “too young to tell tales,” were spared (San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin, “Lee’s Last Confession” 7). Although some of the perpetrators, consistent with the original plan, tried to fix the blame for the massacre on Paiutes, participant Nephi Johnson later said that his fellow white militiamen did most of the killing.

Brigham Young’s express message of reply to Haight, dated September 10, arrived in Cedar City two days after the massacre. “In regard to emigration trains
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passing through our settlements,” Young wrote, “we must not interfere with them
untill they are first notified to keep away. You must not meddle with them. The In-
dians we expect will do as they please but you should try and preserve good feel-
ings with them. There are no other trains going south that I know of. If those who
are there will leave let them go in peace. While we should be on the alert, on hand
and always ready we should also possess ourselves in patience, preserving ourselves
and property ever remembering that God rules” (Young, 1857, 3:827–828).
When Haight read Young’s reply, he sobbed like a child and could manage only
to say, “Too late, too late” (Haslam, Letter 13).
In 1859, government officials retrieved the 17 spared children from the Utah
families who had adopted them and returned them to family members in Arkansas.
The massacre snuffed out some 120 lives and immeasurably affected the lives of
the surviving children and other relatives of the victims. More than a century and a
half later, the massacre remains a deeply painful subject for their descendants.
Although Brigham Young and other Church leaders in Salt Lake City learned of
the massacre soon after it happened, their understanding of the full details of the
terrible crime came incrementally over time. In 1859, they removed Isaac Haight
and other massacre participants from their positions of authority in the Church. In
1870, they excommunicated Haight and John D. Lee.
In 1874, a territorial grand jury indicted nine men for their roles in the massacre.
Most of these men were eventually arrested, though only Lee was tried, convicted,
and executed for the crime. Another indicted man turned state’s evidence, and oth-
ers spent years running from the law. Meanwhile, the Paiutes suffered unjustly as
others, including the white perpetrators, blamed them for the crime.
Since 1857, the Mountain Meadows Massacre has continued to cause pain and
controversy. Descendants and other relatives of the emigrants and the perpetrators
have joined efforts to memorialize the victims. These efforts have had the support
of Latter-day Saint leaders, officials of the state of Utah, and other parties. Members
of these groups continue to work toward healing and reconciliation.
—Richard E. Turley Jr.

See also: Conflict: 1869–1890; Exodus and Settlement: 1845–1869; Mormonism and Vi-
olence; Utah War; Young, Brigham.

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Nauvoo Legion

The Mormon military unit known as the Nauvoo Legion was of a divided nature. Lawfully organized under the 1840 charter granted to Nauvoo, it was a regular unit of the Illinois militia, subject to the governor's call in the event of public emergency. Concurrently, it was a Mormon defensive unit subject to the mayor of Nauvoo. Mormons viewed the Legion as a line of defense against the mob action they had faced in Missouri; their neighbors viewed the Legion as an offensive threat, a precursor to possible rebellion.

The Legion's chief activities were drilling, parading, and staging sham battles, all typical of 19th-century militias throughout the United States. However, when Mayor Joseph Smith Jr. declared martial law in June 1844, the Legion was called into defensive action, serving until the Nauvoo charter was revoked at the end of 1844.

The Nauvoo Legion was reformed in the Great Basin as Utah's territorial militia and saw action in several conflicts between white settlers and Indians. When Brigham Young forbade U.S. troops to enter Utah Territory in 1857, Legion action helped to force the Utah Expedition into winter quarters at Fort Bridger. The Legion also saw brief duty during the Civil War, guarding overland mail and telegraph lines.

In 1870, Utah's non-Mormon governor, professing doubts as to the loyalty of the Legion, outlawed its gathering, even to march in parades. The Legion was dis-