A Short History of the University of the State of Deseret

By

The University of the State of Deseret:--The nucleus of a mighty orb, whose brilliant light ere long will level false systems and theories in the dust; whose officers are men of wisdom, intelligence, and truth...¹

This toast given in 1850 by Deseret University Board of Regent member W.W. Phelps, celebrated the hopes and ideals of early educators in the Territory of Utah for the future success of the newly conceived institution. The goals of the University were to instruct all people in the languages, arts, and sciences of all nations, while also serving as the "nucleus" of all schooling for the Territory. Orson Spencer reiterated the point on what was expected of the University when in his first circular as newly appointed Chancellor of the University of Deseret he wrote that whatever is valuable in physical laws, antiquities, and languages would be at the heart of the institution. Further, that those governments, socialities, and morals of all nations will be poured into the lap of the University. These lofty ideas may come across as almost arrogant on the part of the leaders for an institution in its initial stages; however, there was a reason for this optimism.

The enthusiasm surrounding the conception of the University of the State of
Deseret is not wholly without merit. Previous to arriving in Utah, the Mormon settlers
who founded the University of Deseret made their homes in Nauvoo, Illinois. Located on
the bed of the Mississippi river, Nauvoo became an impressive trading community with
substantial growth potential. In this setting the Mormons established a system of

¹ Toast given by W.W. Phelps, member of the Board of Regents, University of Deseret. Reported in the *Deseret News*, Aug. 10, 1850. L.D.S Historical Library.

Written by Orson Spencer, Chancellor of the University of Deseret. Taken from the Latter-day Saints' *Millennial Star*, article: Circular of the Chancellor of the University of the State of Deseret, Oct. 1, 1850. L.D.S. Historical Library.

schooling, with the University of the City of Nauvoo as its base, to be an overseer of the entire educational structure they had created. As its center, the University provided a solid foundation for the future growth of all schools throughout the city. However, the Mormons would be driven from Nauvoo before the University could realize its potential. The prospects for the development of education in Nauvoo no doubt led Mormons to believe that the same system could exist when they migrated to the Salt Lake Valley.

Although the early Mormons were hopeful that the University of Deseret would become the "brilliant light" illuminating all nations, they would quickly learn that this was an unreasonable expectation. The primary reasons for the difficulties were a shortage of qualified teachers, and a clear mismanagement of University resources. It would take the University 19 years to overcome these problems and become a resemblance of what the founders had anticipated.

It is the intention of this essay to show how the difficulties encountered at the inception of the University of Deseret nearly ended the haughty dreams of its founders. By looking at the established system of education in Nauvoo we will see what model of education was brought to Utah and why expectations were so high for the University of Deseret. We will then show how the absence of qualified teachers led to a change in the agenda for the University from a school based on higher education to a school for the development of teachers. Finally, we will see how the mismanagement of University funds left professors underpaid and the University lands abandoned. By so doing the University was devastated financially and wouldn't completely recover until 1869.

The history of the University of Deseret has its roots in early Latter-day Saint traditions. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nicknamed the Mormons after a book of their scriptures called the Book of Mormon, was founded by Joseph Smith on April 6, 1830 in the State of New York. The infant church promptly established a missionary program to preach the new religion and saw progressive growth. Because of the missionary success, particularly in Ohio, Joseph Smith saw fit to move the church from New York to Ohio where the members could gather themselves together in a large unified body. While there, the church continued its growth and new land was being searched out for the saints to make their homes.

In July of 1831 Joseph Smith found a suitable location in Missouri where it was hoped that the saints could inhabit and build a strong community. The growing membership of the church in Missouri, however, caused some concern from local citizens and State authorities who believed the Mormons were becoming too powerful of a political body. With irreconcilable differences evolving, the Mormons were expelled from Missouri, and migrated across the Mississippi river into Illinois, which provided a more stable environment for the church to develop.

The foundation for the development of the church included the education of its members. Joseph Smith identified education as being fundamental to the improvement and well-being of the church. In recorded revelations given to Joseph Smith in a book of commandments for the church, educational principles are taught. Teach ye diligently...that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, principle and doctrine; seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning and understanding, even by

study.³ The book of commandments cited is full of examples like these. Education was a fundamental principle of Mormon theology and when church members settled in Nauvoo, Illinois, they soon developed a system of education to accommodate this principle.

After the Mormons built the city of Nauvoo a system of schooling was established among a growing industrious town. An article from 1843, from the New Haven Herald gives us a sense of what Nauvoo was like. It reads that there wasn't a more industrious, moral, or well-ordered town in all the country. It tells us that 15,000 to 18,000 people inhabited the city with two-thirds of its citizens being Mormon. Lastly, it proclaims that education was not being neglected and that proper schools and teachers were being provided, in a town that promised to become a place of extensive business along the Mississippi River with four or five steamboats stopping there everyday. With the increasing population from this trading community, and with proper schools in place, the leaders of Nauvoo decided to create the University of the City of Nauvoo to be the center for all education throughout the city.

The city council may establish and organize an institution of learning within the limits of the city for the teaching of the arts, sciences, and learned professions to be called the 'University of the City of Nauvoo' which institution shall be under the control and management of a board of trustees, consisting of a chancellor, registrar, and twenty-three regents, which board shall thereafter be a body corporate and politic, with perpetual succession, by the name of the 'Chancellor and Regents of the University of the City of Nauvoo' and shall have full power to pass, ordain, establish, and execute all such laws and ordinances as they may consider necessary for the welfare and prosperity of said University, its officers and students: Provided, that said laws and ordinances shall not be repugnant to the Constitution of the United States or of this State and Provided, also that the trustees shall at all time be appointed by the city council and shall have all the powers and privileges for the advancement of the cause of

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Doctrine and Covenants 88:78-79, 188.

⁴ Article may be found in Joseph Smith's *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 6: 32-33.

education which appertain to the trustees of any other college or university of this state.⁵

In 1840 the Nauvoo Charter was passed into law and Section 24 as given above allowed for the establishment of the University of the City of Nauvoo. The idea of the University was to provide higher education for graduates of the primary (elementary schools) and common schools (high schools) throughout Nauvoo. The University offered a chance to obtain a diploma upon graduation and honorary degrees were given to establish credibility in the school for its instructors that were self-educated. The Chancellor and Regents once elected made up the leadership of the schooling system throughout Nauvoo.

John C. Bennett, the city's first mayor, and a Mormon, was elected to be the first Chancellor of the school. Bennett studied and taught medicine in Willoughby, Ohio, previous to relocating to Nauvoo. Prior to that he also helped establish Indiana University at New Albany where he served as President. Regents for the school were also elected to be a council to the Chancellor and would serve as instructors. Their backgrounds in education show a diversified group.

Orson Pratt was educated in Mathematics, English Literature, and Astronomy. He served numerous missions for the Mormon Church in Europe where he acquired an education on his own merit. Sidney Rigdon was also a self-educated man and taught Mormon History, Rhetoric, and Literature. Finally, Orson Spencer who had a rich educational background, attended Lenox Academy and Union College in Massachusetts where he studied law prior to entering Theological College in Hamilton, New York. The

Nauvoo Charter, Section 24. May be found in Joseph Smith's *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 4: 243-244.

mix of well-educated men and self-taught men is evident with all the Regents of the school. These men provided the nucleus of instruction for the University. With the organization of the Chancellor and Regents complete, classes began and were taught in local houses until a campus could be constructed. The campus however, would never be built due to a lack of funding and time.

The campus for the University never saw its completion. Financial concerns were the primary problem for the slow construction of buildings in Nauvoo and the campus buildings were no exception. Joseph Smith reports that in consequence of the impoverished condition of the Saints, the buildings that are being erected were progressing slowly, although they were moving ahead. He also noted that it was important for them to complete the buildings for the sake of furthering education. The Mormons however, would run out of time in Nauvoo before a campus could be completed. Had they been able to stay, it is very likely the school system with the University as its head would have survived. With the death of their leader Joseph Smith the city of Nauvoo and its University would never see its completion.

In 1844, Joseph Smith was murdered by a mob of men, mostly from Missouri, who had problems with the growth of the church, and suddenly the future of the Mormons, with their schools in Nauvoo were in peril. Just two months later Brigham Young, the presiding apostle in the church's hierarchy, became the new leader of the Mormon faithful. With growing tensions mounting in Nauvoo, and hoping to find seclusion from the perceived persecutions, the church decided in 1846 to abandon Nauvoo completely and migrate westward. Education would not be forgotten on this

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Smith, Joseph, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, selected and arranged by Joseph Fielding Smith, Pg. 186. Salt Lake City: Deserte Book Co., 1976.

journey, as the experiences in Nauvoo and its educational structure would provide the blue print for the organization of schooling in their new home.

When the Mormon pioneers entered the "Great Salt Lake Valley" in 1847 they renewed their previous efforts to establish a school system. Although economic hardships abounded, the Mormon pioneers did not abandon the church's commandments to acquire knowledge. When the government of the Territory of Deseret, (Which was referred to as a State) was organized into a political body with Brigham Young as its first governor, it quickly passed an act for the establishment of a University. This school charter was approved on Thursday Feb. 28, 1850 by the General Assembly for the State of Deseret, later becoming Utah, creating the University of Deseret, later to be renamed the University of Utah. The charter was similar to that of Nauvoo in that it vested the powers of the University in a Chancellor and a Board of Regents who were a body corporate to act and transact in the name of the institution, and do all things necessary to advance the prosperity of the University. Those appointed were also to be the professors of the University and were set up as guardians over schooling in Deseret.

Orson Spencer was named Chancellor and twelve Regents: Daniel Spencer, Orson Pratt, John M. Bernhisel, Samuel W. Richards, W.W. Phelps, Albert Carrington, William I. Appleby, Daniel H. Wells, Robert L. Campbell, Hosea Stout, Elias Smith, and Zerubabel Snow were appointed to oversee the operations of the University. With a few exceptions the Regents mostly had their background in the University of Nauvoo. John C. Bennett and Sidney Rigdon are a few of the Regents from Nauvoo that had a falling out

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⁷ The ordinance given by the General assembly for the State of Deseret can be found in the *Journal History of the L.D.S. Church*, Feb. 28, 1850, 1-2. L.D.S. Church Historical Library.

with the church after the death of Joseph Smith and didn't make the trip westward. As a consequence the number of Regents dropped from 23 in Nauvoo to 12 in Deseret. As mentioned earlier the backgrounds of those men that crossed the plains were mostly a mix of self-educated and well-educated men. With the Mormon hierarchy in place, the definition of what the University was to become unfolded.

The University of Deseret had a duel function. Just as in Nauvoo it was to be a place of learning and an overseer of the University branches, the parent schools and the common schools throughout the entire State. Section 4 of the Charter explains that the Regents had power to establish branches throughout the State.⁸ This was necessary as the means of traveling to one site for school was difficult, if not impossible, during this time. The railroad in 1870 would eventually cure this problem to some extent, but at its inception it was necessary for the University to operate as an extension program.

The main branch was located in "Great Salt Lake City" and became known as the "Parent School" because it was at the head of all the other branches. The parent school opened its doors on in November of 1850. The school was held at Mrs. Packs house, [Appendix 1] who was the wife of a former Regent in Nauvoo John Pack who was absent from Salt Lake. The branch was under the direction of Chancellor Spencer with the cost of attending set at 8 dollars, half in advance. The school was also open to ladies and gentlemen of all nations and religions who wanted to obtain knowledge.

⁸ Section 4 of the ordinance given by the General assembly for the State of Deseret can be found in the *Journal History of the L.D.S. Church*, Feb. 28, 1850, 1-2. L.D.S. Church Historical Library.

The parent school and its branches were to be places of higher education for any and all who sought wisdom. A proclamation to the world, by Orson Spencer tells us that instruction was given to the laboring class of every grade, religious faith, and political or social creed. He also reiterates that the University was destined to live and to flourish regardless of any challenges presented to it. Once again the ideals were set high for the prosperity of the school and Regent Campbell noted that many of the branches were in successful operation in teaching languages, but were lacking in the advancement of the Classics, History, Mathematics, and Literature. Without a good number of quality instructors for the school, it was determined by the Board of Regents to change the format of the institution.

The parent school would quickly revise its plan as a place for higher education and turn itself into an institution for the development of teachers. Brigham Young tells us that preparations are making for the establishment of a parent school, or school for qualifying teachers. After the first term ended at the Pack's home, the school was moved to the State House and scholars were sought to attend. In 1851 the Deseret News reported that the school would be moved from the Pack's home to the upper room of the State House to accommodate more students. The school was open for the admission of both male and female students and the cost was reduced to 5 dollars, half in advance. The hope of the tuition reduction was that scholars would focus on qualifying themselves

⁹ Written by Orson Spencer, Chancellor of the University of Deseret. Taken from the Latter-day Saints' *Millennial Star*, article: Circular of the Chancellor of the University of the State of Deseret, Oct. 1, 1850. L.D.S. Historical Library.

Robert L. Campbell, *Minutes of the Board of Regents*, Pg. 2, 1852-1853. University of Utah Archives.

¹¹ Brigham Young's fourth general epistle of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, found in the *Deseret News*, Sept. 28, 1850. L.D.S. Historical Library.

specifically as educators.¹² So as a means to entice more students to become instructors the price was reduced. This shows how desperate the Board was for quality professors. It was believed that when these scholars qualified themselves as instructors they would then provide a solid foundation to establish their idea of what an institution of higher learning should be. This took years to accomplish and the economic condition of the parent school provided another obstacle for its future success.

The economic situation at the time of the origin of the parent school was one of difficulty. The means to funding the school in its initial stages were dominated by State funding and donations. However, the State treasury that had previously promised \$5000.00 per Year according to section 11 of the Charter ¹³was empty and the provision was later repealed completely. ¹⁴ This left a gaping hole to be filled by private donations. The money that was received is shown in a ledger from the minutes of the Board of Regents. [Appendix 2] While money was scarce, what they did obtain was to be used for the needs of the University, yet oddly; a large sum of the funding was spent building a wall around the land allocated to the University. This wall would prove to be very costly to the budget of the early school system.

The building of the wall around the University lands was based on early encounters with Native Americans. The Mormon settlers were not alone when they

¹² Deseret News, Feb. 22, 1851. L.D.S. Historical Library.

¹³ Section 11 of an ordinance given by the General assembly for the State of Deseret. *Journal History of the L.D.S. Church*, Feb. 28, 1850, 1-2. L.D.S. Church Historical Library.

¹⁴ Campbell, Robert L. *Minutes of the Board of Regents*, Pg. 2. 1852-1853, University of Utah Archives.

reached the Salt Lake Valley. In fact, Native American tribes such as the Ute and Utah Lake Indian Tribes were already in place when the Mormon's arrived. Accommodations for land between the old and new settlers proved difficult, and there were confrontations between the Mormons and the Native Americans at the inception of the University of Deseret. In fact, on the very day the University was to be organized, the first presidency of the Mormon Church wrote a letter to Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt relating the history of events that winter. They stated that the Natives had been very hostile and killed many scores of the brethren's cattle. Also, the Natives threatened and shot at the brethren until self defense was required.¹⁵

Other similar confrontations with the Native Americans would escalate to the point that it was determined to enclose the entire city with a wall. The idea of building a city wall was prevalent throughout the movement of the Mormons from city to city as a means of fortification against their perceived enemies, which culminated with their expulsion from Missouri. So when conflicts arose with the Native Americans it was determined by the State Legislature to enclose the city with a wall.

The wall would be built about 12 feet high, with a ditch to be dug about six feet deep around it. This great city wall was never completed due to a lack of funds, but it is clear that the saints were trying to protect themselves against what they perceived as hostile Indians. For the most part it was the stealing of cattle and other produce that were the primary reasons for this defense. Brigham Young records that 17 Indians went into Red Butte Canyon and drove off four head of oxen, before the brethren could chase them away. When the University was granted land on the East bench of Salt Lake City to

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Letter written to Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt, written by the First Presidency of the L.D.S. Church. *Journal History of the L.D.S. Church*, Feb. 28, 1850, pg. 3. L.D.S. Historical Library.

construct a building for the University, it was decided by the Legislature and Board of Regents to first enclose the lands around it so it wouldn't be vandalized during the construction of the building. Brigham Young said:

The University land is now being fenced.... It is requisite that the University be completed, so that we may have blessings through that medium we cannot receive, except we do what is required of us. The first thing to be done is, to build the fence. ¹⁶

Unfortunately, the building of the wall came at the expense of the parent school and its professors.

There is strong evidence that not only did the parent school have a problem finding good instructors, but the professors that were there were grossly under paid, if paid at all. Regent Campbell explained that the school was not in good condition because its Professors sustained a considerable loss of time and means as a result of a failure to collect terms owed to them¹⁷. Previously, Orson Hyde in a conference report was adamant about compensating teachers. He reported:

My feelings are: endow your teachers with a liberal compensation and then they will spare no pains to educate...If you sustain the teachers, they will bless you in return; and that people that pays the schoolmaster well, are destined to prosper...¹⁸

Here we have a prominent member of the community explaining his views on the importance of compensating teachers in general, and yet the professors were clearly left with very little, or nothing for their labor. At the same time money that could have been

¹⁷ Campbell, Robert L. *Minutes of the Board of Regents*, Pg. 2. 1852-1853, University of Utah Archives.

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¹⁶ Deseret News, Feb. 22, 1851. L.D.S. Historical Library.

¹⁸ Conference address by Orson Hyde reported in the *Deseret News* Sept. 14, 1850. L.D.S. Historical Library.

used to pay the educators was being primarily spent on enclosing the University land. Even more unusual is that the wall being built was never completed.

It can be argued that the Regents may have been justified in building a wall around the University to secure their future buildings. The abandonment of that wall two years later however, is harder to comprehend. The building of the wall coincided, not only with the building of the aforementioned city wall, but also that of the Salt lake Temple. For the Mormons the Temple is a place of theological instruction which goes hand in hand with secular education. Its construction was to begin with a wall around the land similar to the city and University walls.

With State funding for the city and University walls lacking the only means of survival for both would be through donations. The construction of the Temple however, received all of its funding from the tithing of its members and it soon became apparent that both the city and University walls would run out of money. It is no accident that with the Temple's progression in 1852 the ending of the University wall was at hand.

While energy and money were being used to build the Temple wall, the Regents supervising the parent school left the area, as it was not uncommon at the time to send leaders of the Mormon Church on missions, which many times included visiting Universities around the nation to gather information of purchase books. Their departure proved too much for the survival of what remained of the wall as Regent Campbell reported that the wall already a half-mile long when abandoned saw the rest of the stone ready for use carried away by persons unknown. ¹⁹ The failure of the wall was

¹⁹ Campbell, Robert L. *Minutes of the Board of Regents*, Pg.1. 1852-1853, University of Utah Archives.

inexplicable given the time and money spent funding the project, which money could have been used to pay professors.

With the mismanagement of funds, underpaid professors, and the lack of qualified educators, the survival of the parent school was in doubt. The land on the east bench was completely abandoned and later taken by the federal government to build Fort Douglass. These problems prompted Brigham Young in 1852 to make a statement about education in Deseret. He reports that although it would appear that education is being neglected, the reality is that school houses for primary and common schools were still being constructed and great attention was being paid to them in particular. The parent school and the great idea of a University that would "illuminate all nations" however, were deserted. A board of Regents continued to supervise the common and primary schools and so the University lived on in name only, until 1869 when it was decided by the Legislature and Board of Regents to try once again to establish an institution of higher learning and continue under the name of the University of the State of Deseret.

The University of Deseret, the "brilliant light" that would confound all "false systems and theories", the "nucleus of a mighty orb" was an unsuccessful experiment of higher education at best. The previous experiences of education in Nauvoo were based on different conditions than those in Deseret. The economic conditions of Nauvoo made it a city with substantial growth potential, and although driven from their homes, it is likely a University could have been sustained there because they had enough educators to provide instruction. However, the move west proved costly as only a handful of professors from

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Governor Young's message to members of the Council, and Legislature of Utah. Reported in the *Deseret News*, Dec. 13, 1852.

Nauvoo migrated with the Saints. Therefore, the enthusiasm that surrounded the founders of the University at its inception, although arguably warranted, proved unproductive.

The lofty expectations of the University became unrealistic as qualified teachers were insufficient for an institution of higher education. The Board of Regents tried to accommodate this need by changing the agenda of the school from higher education to an institute to train educators known as the parent school. Although a seemingly good adjustment for the school, financial problems soon left professors with little income and the school suffered. Another adjustment to pay instructors was needed if the school was to survive.

Funding for the school was scarce and the money that was received, rather than going to pay for professors, instead went to building a wall around the lands designated for the University. The wall was built because of a perceived need by the Legislature and Regents to protect the land from Native American tribes. However, the wall would never be completed as the building of a city and temple wall took up all of the funding. The wall was left abandoned and the school was broke.

With the lack of qualified professors and the clear mismanagement of University funds the school continued in name only and all the attention shifted to primary and common schools with the University Board of Regents acting as supervisor. Clearly, this was not the University that the founders had envisioned; the "brilliant light" was dim, not to be relit until 1869.

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