

Mountain Meadows Massacre

In September 1857, a branch of territorial militia in southern Utah composed entirely of Latter-day Saints, along with some American Indians they recruited, laid siege to a wagon train of emigrants traveling from Arkansas to California. The militiamen carried out a deliberate massacre, killing 120 men, women, and children in a valley known as Mountain Meadows. Only 17 small children—those believed to be too young to be able to tell what had happened there—were spared. This event is perhaps the most tragic episode in the history of the Church.

The arrival of the wagon train in Utah Territory occurred in the midst of a period of “reformation” within the Church. Concerned about spiritual complacency, Brigham Young and other Church leaders delivered a series of sermons in which they called the Saints to repent and renew their spiritual commitments.¹ At times during the reformation, Brigham Young, his counselor Jedediah M. Grant, and other leaders preached with fiery rhetoric, warning against the evils of sin and those who dissented from or opposed the Church.² Such preaching led to increased strain between the Latter-day Saints and their relative few neighbors in Utah, including federally appointed officials.

This tension intensified in early 1857 when United States president James Buchanan received reports from some of the federal officials in Utah alleging that Governor Brigham Young and the Latter-day Saints in the territory were rebelling against the authority of the federal government. A strongly worded memorial from the Utah legislature (composed predominantly of Latter-day Saints) to the federal government convinced federal officials the reports were true. President Buchanan decided to replace Brigham Young as governor and, in what became known as the Utah War, sent an army to Utah to escort his replacement.

Latter-day Saints feared that the oncoming army—some 1,500 troops, with more to follow—would renew the depredations of Missouri and Illinois and again drive the Saints from their homes. In addition, Parley P. Pratt, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was murdered in Arkansas in May 1857.³ News of the murder—as well as newspaper reports from the eastern United States that celebrated the crime—reached Utah weeks later. As these events unfolded, Brigham Young declared martial law in the territory, directed mission-



MOUNTAIN MEADOWS MASSACRE GRAVE SITE MEMORIAL

Built by and maintained by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints out of respect for those who died and were buried here and in the surrounding area following the massacre of 1857.

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aries and settlers in outlying areas to return to Utah, and guided preparations to resist the army. Defiant sermons given by President Young and other Church leaders, combined with the impending arrival of an army, helped create an environment of fear and suspicion in Utah.⁴

Emigrant families from Arkansas formed a caravan led by Alexander Fancher and John Baker. As the wagon train traveled through Salt Lake City, the emigrants clashed verbally with local Latter-day Saints over where they could graze their cattle. Some of the members of the wagon train became frustrated because they had difficulty purchasing much-needed grain and other supplies from local settlers, who had been instructed to save their grain as a wartime policy. Aggrieved, some of the emigrants threatened to join incoming troops in fighting against the Saints.⁵

Although some Saints ignored these threats, other local Church leaders and members in Cedar City, Utah, advocated violence. Isaac C. Haight, a stake president and militia leader, sent John D. Lee, a militia major, to lead an attack on the emigrant company. When the president reported the plan to his council, other leaders

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objected and requested that he call off the attack and instead send an express rider to Brigham Young in Salt Lake City for guidance. But the men Haight had sent to attack the emigrants carried out their plans before they received the order not to attack. The emigrants fought back, and a siege ensued.

Over the next few days, events escalated, and Latter-day Saint militiamen planned and carried out a massacre. They lured the emigrants from their circled wagons with a false flag of truce and, aided by Paiute Indians they had recruited, slaughtered them. Between the first attack and the final slaughter, 120 were killed. The express rider returned two days after the massacre. He carried a letter from Brigham Young telling local leaders to “not meddle” with the emigrants and to allow them to pass through southern Utah in peace.⁶ The militiamen sought to cover up the crime by placing the entire blame on local Paiutes, some of whom were also members of the Church.

Two Latter-day Saints were eventually excommunicated from the Church for their participation, and a grand jury that included Latter-day Saints indicted nine men. Only one participant, John D. Lee, was convicted and executed for the crime, which fueled false allegations that the massacre had been ordered by Brigham Young.⁷

In the early 2000s, the Church made diligent efforts to learn everything possible about the massacre. Historians in the Church History Department scoured archives throughout the United States for historical records; every Church record on the massacre was also opened to scrutiny. A resulting book published by Oxford Univer-

sity Press in 2008 by authors Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard concluded that while intemperate preaching about outsiders by Brigham Young, George A. Smith, and other leaders contributed to a climate of hostility, Young did not order the massacre. Rather, verbal confrontations between individuals in the wagon train and southern Utah settlers created great alarm, particularly within the context of the Utah War and other adversarial events. A series of tragic decisions by local Church leaders—who also held key civic and militia leadership roles in southern Utah—led to the massacre.⁸

In 1990, relatives of the Arkansas emigrants joined with representatives of the Paiute Nation, Latter-day Saint residents of southern Utah, and Church leaders in dedicating a memorial at Mountain Meadows. Rex E. Lee, president of Brigham Young University and descendant of John D. Lee, held hands with victims’ descendants and thanked them “for your Christian-like willingness to forgive.”⁹ On the 150th anniversary of the massacre, President Henry B. Eyring taught, “The gospel of Jesus Christ that we espouse, abhors the cold-blooded killing of men, women, and children. Indeed, it advocates peace and forgiveness. What was done here long ago by members of our Church represents a terrible and inexcusable departure from Christian teaching and conduct.”¹⁰

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Footnotes

1. Reformation of 1856–57. See also Paul H. Peterson, “The Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857: The Rhetoric and the Reality,” *Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 15 (1989), 59–87.
2. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:53–54; and Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:16–21.
3. On the murder of Parley P. Pratt, see Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 366–91; for the relationship of news of the murder and the massacre, see Richard E. Turley Jr., “The Murder of Parley P. Pratt and the Mountain Meadows Massacre,” in Gregory K. Armstrong, Matthew J. Grow, and Dennis J. Siler, eds., *Parley P. Pratt and the Making of Mormonism* (Norman, Oklahoma: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2011), 297–313.
4. Richard E. Turley Jr., “The Mountain Meadows Massacre,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 14–18).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Brigham Young letter to Isaac C. Haight, Sept. 10, 1857, *Letterbook*, vol. 3, 1857 August 15–1858 January 6, 827–28, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
7. Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 228–29.
8. Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*. Much has been written on the Mountain Meadows Massacre. A classic study is Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1950). See also Richard E. Turley Jr., “The Mountain Meadows Massacre,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 14–21; and *BYU Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2008), a special issue dedicated to the subject, available at byustudies.byu.edu.
9. Anne Marie Gardner, “Forgiveness Highlights Meadow Dedication,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1990, 16B.
10. Henry B. Eyring, “150th Anniversary of Mountain Meadows Massacre,” MormonNewsroom.org.

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Richard E. Turley Jr., “The Mountain Meadows Massacre,” *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 14–21.

“Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, topics.ChurchofJesus-Christ.org.

Bibliography

The following publications provide further information about this topic. By referring or linking you to these resources, we do not endorse or guarantee the content or the views of the authors.

Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Richard E. Turley Jr. and Ronald W. Walker, eds., *Mountain Meadows Massacre: The Andrew Jenson and David H. Morris Collections* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2009).

Richard E. Turley Jr., Janiece L. Johnson, and LaJean Purcell Carruth, eds., *Mountain Meadows Massacre: Collected Legal Papers*, 2 vols. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).

Siege, Murder, and Burials at the Emigrant’s Campsite

Members of the Arkansas wagon train set up camp at this site on Saturday, September 5, 1857. On Sunday they likely rested and gathered for a Christina worship service – a pattern they had followed throughout their journey.

The next morning they were attacked without warning. They pulled their wagons into a circle slightly larger than the fenced area where you are now. They chained the wagon wheels together and dug below each wheel to lower the wagon beds to the ground. This provided a shield against gunfire. They also dug a long defensive trench that served as a rifle pit. About 140 men, women, and children tried to take cover in the wagon circle, with many huddling together in the trench.

At least seven emigrants were killed here in the first attack. The emigrants repulsed the attackers, killing one and wounding two. Three or more other emigrants died here during the five-day siege that followed.

Each time firing resumed on the camp, the women and children could be heard screaming with fear. And

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with each attack, the emigrants put up a brave and determined defense. Not all the defenders were men. Survivor Milum Tackitt hold of his aunt Eloah Angeline Tackitt Jones valiantly joining the fight, grabbing a gun that had belonged ton one of the fallen men.

Throughout the siege, the emigrants were cut off from their water supply. Courageous men ran from the wagon circle to get water at the nearby spring. Despite heavy gunfire, some managed to fill their beackets and return to the circle. Two men once left to gather firewood, finished their task under gunfire, and returned unharmed.

Others bravely left the wagon circle. Stories about these men differ. Some accounts say that three or four young men left the safety of the camp and went northeast. They were mostly likely going to Cedar City to seek help. Only one of those young men made it back to the campsite alive. Another account tells of three other men, one of them with the last name Baker, escaping during the siege. They headed southwest, carrying a document that described the emigrants and what they had endured. All three were tracked down and murdered in the desert. The document they carried disappeared.

On the fifth day of the siege, attackers came to the camp. Under a white flag, they deceived the emigrants with a false promise of safe passage to Cedar City. The emigrants were almost out of ammunition. They needed water. The wounded required attention. Realizing that they could not endure much more, they surrendered. Grieving, they wrapped their dead in buffalo robes, buried them reverently, and walked away from the campsite. The were the last to leave, relying on their captors' promise to protect them and their families.

National Historic Landmark, Mountain Meadows Massacre Site 2 Gravesite Memorial

Execution at the Scene of the Crimes

In September 1874, a federal grand jury indicted nine Mormon militiamen for crimes related to the siege and massacre. Some of those men immediately went into hiding as fugitives from justice. About 50 other militiamen were involved in the massacre, along with an unknown number of Paiute Indians. Only one, John D. Lee, was brought to trial and convicted.

On March 23, 1877 almost 20 years after the massacre, federal officials took Lee to the scene of the crimes. Not far from this spot, he was executed by firing squad. He was buried in a cemetery about 120 miles from here.

National Historic Landmark, Mountain Meadows Massacre Site 2 Gravesite Memorial



John Doyle Lee



Execution of John D. Lee, March 23, 1877.
Lee is sitting on his coffin, left side of the picture.