

State of Deseret

The State of Deseret [1,2] was a proposed state of the United States, proposed in 1849 by settlers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. The provisional state existed for slightly over two years and was never recognized by the United States government. The name derives from the word for “honeybee” in the Book of Mormon.[3]

Petition for Statehood

When members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormon pioneers or Saints) settled in the Salt Lake Valley near the Great Salt Lake in 1847 (then part of Mexico), they wished to set up a government that would be recognized by the United States.

Initially, church president Brigham Young intended to apply for status as a territory, and sent John Milton Bernhisel to Washington, D.C., with the petition for territorial status. Realizing that California and New Mexico were applying for admission as states, Young changed his mind and decided to petition for statehood.

Realizing that they did not have time to follow the usual steps towards statehood, Young and a group of church elders formed a convention in Salt Lake City, where they quickly drafted and adopted a state constitution on March 6, 1849.[4][5] It was based on that of Iowa, where the Saints had temporarily settled. The state legislature had 17 senators and 35 representatives, all free white male citizens.[4] The state government also had a governor, a lieutenant governor, and a supreme court.[4] The state constitution was silent on the matter of slavery.[6][5] The state constitution went into effect on May 10.[4]

They sent the legislative records and constitution back to Iowa for printing, because no printing press existed in the Great Basin at the time. They then sent a second messenger with a copy of the state’s formal records and constitution to meet up with Bernhisel in Washington, D.C., and to petition for statehood rather than territorial status.

Territory of Deseret

The provisional state encompassed most of the territory that had been acquired from Mexico the previous year as the Mexican Cession.

The Territory of Deseret would have comprised



The Deseret Stone used in the construction of the Washington Monument. The stone was donated by the newly created Utah Territory in 1853 to represent the provisional State of Deseret. (Note history of the Washington Monument at the end of this article.)

roughly all the lands between the Sierra Nevada and the Rockies, and between the border with Mexico northward to include parts of the Oregon Territory, as well as the coast of California south of the Santa Monica Mountains (including the existing settlements of Los Angeles and San Diego). This included the entire watershed of the Colorado River (excluding the lands south of the border with Mexico), as well as the entire area of the Great Basin.

The proposal encompassed nearly all of present-day Utah and Nevada, large portions of California and Arizona, and parts of Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon.

The proposal was crafted specifically to avoid disputes that might arise from existing settlements of Euro-Americans.[7] At the time of its proposal, the existing population of the Deseret area, including Southern California, was sparse, since most of the California settlement had been in the northern gold rush areas not included in the provisional state. Likewise, the border with New Mexico did not reach the Rio Grande, in order to avoid becoming entangled in the existing disputes of the western border of Texas. Deseret also avoided encroaching on the fertile Willamette Valley of Oregon, which had been heavily traveled and settled since the 1840s.

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The Beehive symbol often associated with Deseret.

Moreover, the proposal encompassed lands largely known to be inhospitable for cultivation, thus avoiding conflict over the issue of the expansion of slavery.

The proposal for the state was considered by some to be too ambitious to succeed in Congress, even disregarding the controversy over the LDS Church practice of polygamy. Nevertheless, in 1849 U.S. President Zachary Taylor, eager to avoid disputes as much as possible, sent his agent John Wilson westward with a proposal to combine California and Deseret as a single state, which would have had the desirable effect of decreasing the number of free states entered into the Union, and thus preserving the balance of power in the Senate.

The California Constitutional Convention debates of 1849 mentioned the Mormons or Salt Lake a number of

times[8][9] along with the North–South conflict over extension of slavery. Advocates of smaller boundaries (such as 116° west or the crest of the Sierra Nevada) argued that the Mormons were unrepresented at the convention, culturally different, and applying for their own territorial government. They also argued that Salt Lake was too far away for a single government to be practical and that Congress would not agree to such a huge state. Those advocating retention of all of former Mexican Alta California, such as pro-slavery future Senator William M. Gwin, argued these were not real obstacles or could be solved later.

Establishment of Utah Territory

On September 9, 1850, as part of the Compromise of 1850, the Utah Territory was created by Act of Congress, encompassing a portion of the northern section of Deseret.[10] Congress decided that the question of whether slavery would be allowed in the territory would be decided by the territory's residents.[10]

On February 3, 1851, Brigham Young was inaugurated as the first governor of the Utah Territory. On April 4, 1851, the General Assembly of Deseret passed a resolution to dissolve the state. On October 4, 1851, the Utah territorial legislature voted to re-enact the laws and ordinances of the state of Deseret.

After the establishment of the Utah Territory, the Latter-day Saints did not relinquish the idea of a “State of Deseret”. From 1862 to 1870, a group of Church elders under Young’s leadership met as a shadow government after each session of the territorial legislature to ratify the new laws under the name of the “State of Deseret”. Attempts were made in 1856, 1862, and 1872 to write a new state constitution under that name, based on the new boundaries of the Utah Territory.

The idea of creating a “State of Deseret” began to fade away after the coming of the railroad, which opened the territory to many non-LDS settlers, particularly in the western areas of the territory. Young and the LDS Church supported the railroad, even taking members that were working on the Salt Lake Temple and reassigning them to work on the railroad. The driving of the golden spike just 66 miles from Salt Lake completed the first transcontinental railroad at Promontory Summit in 1869.

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The boundaries of the provisional State of Deseret (orange with black outline) as proposed in 1849. Modern state boundaries are underlaid for reference.

Government

Prior to the establishment of Utah Territory, in the absence of other authority, the provisional government of Deseret became the de facto government of the Great Basin. Three sessions of the General Assembly, a bicameral state legislature, were held. In 1850, the legislature appointed judges and established a criminal code. Taxes were established on property, and liquor and gambling was outlawed. The LDS Church was incorporated and a militia, based on the Nauvoo Legion, was formed.

The legislature initially formed six counties, which covered only inhabited valleys. These “valley counties” initially encompassed only a small portion of the area of Deseret and were expanded as settlement grew.[11]

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The Washington Monument

Construction on the Washington Monument did not begin until 1848, and the cornerstone was laid during ceremonies on the Fourth of July. In attendance were George Washington Parke Custis, Washington's step-grandson, as well as President James K. Polk and Congressman Abraham Lincoln. Financial and political difficulties plagued the project from the start and led to major architectural modifications, including the abandonment of the structure's grandiose base. Memorial stones for the interior were contributed by various states and numerous fraternal organizations. Pope Pius IX donated a stone from the Temple of Concord in Rome (though in 1854 members of the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party broke into the obelisk, stole the marker, and disposed of it in the Potomac River). Construction was halted at the outbreak of the Civil War with the obelisk standing only 152 feet tall.

After some preliminary discussion about tearing down the unfinished structure or changing its design, the Army Corps of Engineers assumed responsibility for its completion. Because it was impossible to find marble matching that used to construct the earlier portion, the color of the upper two-thirds of the monument is visibly different from that of the lower third.

Finally, some 36 years after construction began, the 3,300-pound capstone was set on the structure (December 6, 1884), and the Washington Monument was officially dedicated by President Chester Arthur during ceremonies on February 21, 1885. However, the monument was not opened to the public until October 9, 1888, following the installation of a steam elevator, which enabled visitors to reach the observation deck without walking up the monument's 897 steps. The modern elevator makes the ascent in about 60 seconds. Inserted in the interior walls are more than 190 carved stones presented by various individuals, cities, states, and foreign nations.

The Utah Territory was the only government entity that chose not to depict their official title on their dedicated stone, but rather chose the title "Deseret." This historical artifact at our nation's capitol, documents the desire of the early pioneers to govern themselves as the "State of Deseret" rather than the Territory of Utah.



The Washington Monument from the reflection pond with the U. S. Capitol in the background.



The Deseret Stone used in the construction of the Washington Monument. The stone was donated by the newly created Utah Territory in 1853 to represent the provisional State of Deseret.