

# The Utah War and the Mountain Meadows Massacre

## Growing Tension Led to the Utah War

Three years after the first Latter-day Saint pioneers reached the Salt Lake Valley, the United States government organized the Utah Territory and appointed Brigham Young as the first governor over the territory. In mid-1857, Latter-day Saint leaders heard rumors that the federal government might replace Brigham Young with a new governor of the Utah Territory, who would be backed by large numbers of federal troops. On July 24, 1857, President Brigham Young was with a group of Saints celebrating the 10th anniversary of their arrival in the Salt Lake Valley when he received confirmation of earlier news that an army was coming to Salt Lake City.

In previous years, disagreements and miscommunication had resulted in growing tension between the Latter-day Saints and officials of the United States government. The Saints wanted to be governed by leaders of their own choosing and had rejected federal appointees who did not share their values, some of whom were dishonest, corrupt, and immoral. Some of the federal officials believed that the Saints' actions and attitudes meant that they were in rebellion against the United States government.

United States President James Buchanan sent approximately 2,500 troops to Salt Lake City to accompany a new governor safely to Utah and to put down what he thought was a rebellion among the Saints. This decision was made without accurate information about the situation in Utah (see *Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual*, 2nd ed. [Church Educational System manual, 2003], 368–71).

## Preparing to Defend the Territory

In sermons to the Saints, President Young and other Church leaders described the coming troops as enemies. They feared that the troops might expel the Saints from Utah, as they had previously been driven from Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. President Young, who for years had asked the Saints to save grain, renewed his instructions so they would have food to eat if they needed to flee from the troops. As governor of the Utah Territory, he also directed the territory's militia to prepare to defend the territory.

## Conflict with the Emigrant Wagon Train

An emigrant wagon train traveling west from Arkansas to California entered Utah just as Latter-day Saints were preparing to defend the territory against the coming United States troops. Some members of the wagon train became frustrated because they had a difficult time purchasing much-needed

grain from the Saints, who had been instructed to save their grain. The emigrants also came into conflict with Saints who did not want the wagon train's large numbers of horses and cattle to consume food and water resources the Saints needed for their own animals.

Tensions erupted in Cedar City, the last settlement in Utah on the route to California. Confrontations occurred between some members of the wagon train and some of the Latter-day Saints. Some members of the wagon train threatened to join the incoming government troops against the Saints. Even though the captain of the wagon train rebuked his companions for making these threats, some Cedar City leaders and settlers viewed the emigrants as enemies. The wagon company left town only about an hour after arriving, but some of the settlers and leaders in Cedar City wanted to pursue and punish the men who had offended them.

## Escalating the Confrontation

Because these Saints did not resolve their conflict with the emigrants in the Lord's way, the situation became much more serious. Isaac Haight, the Cedar City mayor, militia major, and stake president, requested permission from the militia commander, who lived in the nearby settlement of Parowan, to call out the militia to confront the offenders from the wagon train. The militia commander, William Dame, a Church member, counseled Isaac Haight to ignore the emigrants' threats. Instead of yielding to this counsel, Isaac Haight and other Cedar City leaders decided to persuade some local Indians to attack the wagon train and steal their cattle as a way of punishing the emigrants. Isaac Haight asked John D. Lee, a local Church member and militia major, to lead this attack, and the two planned to blame Indians for the deed.

## Attack on the Emigrants

Isaac Haight presented the plan to attack the wagon train to a council of local leaders in the Church, community, and militia. Some council members strongly disagreed with the plan and asked Haight if he had consulted with President Brigham Young about the matter. Saying he had not, Haight agreed to send a messenger, James Haslam, to Salt Lake City with a letter explaining the situation and asking what should be done. However, because Salt Lake City is approximately 250 miles from Cedar City, it would require about a week of hard riding on horseback for the messenger to reach Salt Lake City and return to Cedar City with President Young's instructions.

Shortly before Isaac Haight sent his letter with the messenger, John D. Lee and a group of Indians attacked the emigrant camp at a place called the Mountain Meadows. Lee led the attack but concealed his identity so that it would appear that only the Indians were involved. Some of the emigrants were killed or wounded, and the remainder fought off their attackers, forcing Lee and the Indians to retreat. The emigrants quickly pulled their wagons into a tight circle, or corral, for protection. Two additional attacks followed during a five-day siege on the wagon train.

At one point, Cedar City militiamen became aware of two emigrant men who were outside the wagon corral. The militiamen fired on them, killing one. The other man escaped and brought news to the wagon camp that white men were involved in the attacks against them. Those who planned the attacks were now caught in their deception. If the emigrants were allowed to go on to California, news would spread that Latter-day Saints were responsible for the attack on the wagon train. The conspirators feared this news would bring negative consequences upon themselves and their people.

### The Mountain Meadows Massacre

In an attempt to prevent news from spreading that Latter-day Saints were involved in the attacks on the wagon train, Isaac Haight, John D. Lee, and other local Church and militia leaders made a plan to kill all the remaining emigrants except for small children. Enacting this plan, John D. Lee approached the emigrants and said the militia would protect them from further attacks by guiding them safely back to Cedar City. As the emigrants were walking toward Cedar City, the militiamen turned and fired on them. Some Indians recruited by the settlers rushed from hiding places to join the attack. Of approximately 140 emigrants who were part of the wagon train, only 17 small children were spared.

Two days after the massacre, James Haslam arrived in Cedar City with President Young's message of reply, instructing the local leaders to allow the wagon train to go in peace. "When Haight read Young's words, he sobbed like a child and could manage only the words, 'Too late, too late'" (Richard E. Turley Jr., "The Mountain Meadows Massacre," *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 20).

### Tragic Consequences

The Mountain Meadows Massacre not only resulted in the deaths of about 120 victims, but it also caused great suffering to the surviving children and other relatives of the victims. Some Latter-day Saints took in and cared for the emigrant

children who survived the massacre. In 1859, federal officials took custody of these children and returned them to relatives in Arkansas. Paiute Indians also suffered from being unjustly blamed for the crime.

### Church Leaders Learned of the Massacre

"Although Brigham Young and other Church leaders in Salt Lake City learned of the massacre soon after it happened, their understanding of the extent of the settlers' involvement and the terrible details of the crime came incrementally over time. In 1859 they released from their callings stake president Isaac Haight and other prominent Church leaders in Cedar City who had a role in the massacre. In 1870 they excommunicated Isaac Haight and John D. Lee from the Church.

"In 1874 a territorial grand jury indicted nine men for their role in the massacre. Most of them were eventually arrested, though only Lee was tried, convicted, and executed for the crime. Another indicted man turned state's evidence [voluntarily testified and gave evidence against the other defendants], and others spent many years running from the law. Other militiamen who carried out the massacre labored the rest of their lives under a horrible sense of guilt and recurring nightmares of what they had done and seen" (Richard E. Turley Jr., "The Mountain Meadows Massacre," *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 20).

### 150th Anniversary of the Mountain Meadows Massacre

President Henry B. Eyring of the First Presidency said:

"The responsibility for the [Mountain Meadows Massacre] lies with local leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the regions near Mountain Meadows who also held civic and military positions and with members of the Church acting under their direction....

". . . 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 [at the Mountain Meadows] long ago by members of our Church represents a terrible and inexcusable departure from Christian teaching and conduct. . . . No doubt Divine Justice will impose appropriate punishment upon those responsible for the massacre. . . .

". . . May the God of Heaven, whose sons and daughters we all are, bless us to honor those who died here by extending to one another the pure love and spirit of forgiveness which His Only Begotten Son personified" ("150th Anniversary of Mountain Meadows Massacre," Sept. 11, 2007, [mormonnewsroom.org/article/150th-anniversary-of-mountain-meadows-massacre](http://mormonnewsroom.org/article/150th-anniversary-of-mountain-meadows-massacre)).

