

An Introduction

By S. George Ellsworth

The Founding Fathers of the United States wisely provided a political process by which westering Americans, taking up new lands, could become citizens in a sovereign state, created by Congress, equal to the other states. For pioneer settlers statehood became the essential political condition for the enjoyment of self-government in a federal union. That it took a half century and seven applications for the people of Utah to achieve statehood is a reflection of the contest between the Mormon pioneers holding fast to their unique institutions and practices and the American people insisting that Utah conform to typical American patterns of life. Prerequisites for statehood included a population of 60,000, a constitution republican in form, and local political, economic, and social institutions harmonious with the norms of American society. But Mormon practices often stood in contrast and opposition to those patterns.

When the Mormon people settled Utah in 1847, seeking asylum where they could enjoy basic freedoms, they established a complete unified society of their own design, in which there was no private ownership of natural resources but community management of land, water, and timber. Irrigation required cooperation. Various economic programs and industrial missions were instituted and supervised by church leadership with the aim of achieving self-sufficiency and independence from the outside world.

Unity also prevailed in the political arena. For elections church officers named the slate to be voted upon. There was only voting for the slate. There were no political parties until 1870. Self-government meant the employment of church leaders and organizations. For example, the church's High Council performed all civic functions in 1847. The state of Deseret followed American forms and functions, but its officers were top churchmen. Brigham Young was president of the church, governor of the territory, superintendent of Indian affairs, and governor of the state of Deseret. Church and state were united.

The most distinguishing and publicized feature of Mormon society was the practice of polygamy. Church leaders defended the practice as an expression of religious freedom. The Latter-day Saints had set for themselves the task of building a physical, political, and religious kingdom of God.

But westering Americans were also attracted to Utah, and there gradually emerged a non-Mormon population of significance. This population was diverse, consisting of merchants, soldiers, religious leaders and teachers, railroaders, miners, government employees, politicians, and bankers. Added to these was a group of disaffected Mormons. The federal employees were more radical in their anti-Mormonism, otherwise these groups were united by a distrust and opposition to Mormon ways. They championed American norms: political independence and freedom, capitalism, free enterprise, individualism, and competition. Some of the latecomers were frustrated at being excluded from full participation in political and economic life. Radicals in these groups and among the Mormons expressed little tolerance of each other.

In 1849 the Mormons applied to Congress for admission into the Union as the state of Deseret. But Congress created instead the Territory of Utah in 1850, with a governor, secretary, three judges appointed by the president of the United States, a legislature, and a delegate to Congress elected by the people. The first appointments included some Mormons, but thereafter all appointees were outsiders, non-Utahns, non-Mormons. This "foreign rule" was unacceptable to the Mormons, who saw no reason why they should not govern themselves. Accordingly they applied for statehood in 1849, 1856, 1862, 1872, 1882, and 1887, without success.

The major prohibiting issue was the Mormon practice of polygamy. The political future of Utah became tied to the polygamy issue when the Republicans inserted in their 1856 platform the promise to eliminate in the territories the "twin relics of barbarism"—slavery and polygamy. There would be no statehood for Utah as long as polygamy was practiced. When the Republicans were in power, in 1862, they passed the Anti-Bigamy Act, which was followed by the 1874 Poland Act, the 1882 Edmunds Act, and the 1887 Edmunds-Tucker Act. In test cases, the United States Supreme Court declared the acts constitutional.

The Edmunds-Tucker Act touched all the issues at dispute between Congress and the Mormons. The act prohibited the practice of polygamy and punished it with a fine of from \$500 to \$800 and imprisonment of up to five years. It dissolved the corporation of the church and directed the confiscation by the federal government of all church properties valued over a limit of \$50,000. The act also dealt with the separation of church and state and with courts, militia, education, elections, immigration, and woman suffrage. Utah women had been granted the franchise in 1870, but lost it now. The act was enforced by the U. S. marshal and a host of deputies.

Polygamists were hunted, caught, tried, fined, and imprisoned in the territorial penitentiary. To avoid arrest polygamists took to the "underground": another town, travel, a foreign mission. Some 1300 men were jailed for their violations.

Anticipating economic provisions of the act, the church leaders deeded church properties in secret trusts to proven individuals and church units. U. S. Marshall Frank H. Dyer nevertheless learned about them. He soon had acquired the properties he was after. From his poor management and other causes, the church came out of the experience tragically in debt.

The church's distress was compounded in the summer of 1890 when Idaho became a state in the Union with a constitution containing a test-oath law for voters: the law deprived Mormons of the right to vote or hold office. The United States Supreme Court declared the oath constitutional, and members of Congress talked of applying the law to Utah. The legislature of Arizona was considering it too.

By the late summer of 1890 the church faced the loss of its properties, of political rights, and of the privilege of using the Salt Lake Temple, soon to be ready for dedication. To "save the church," President Wilford Woodruff issued "The Manifesto," which stated the church was no longer teaching polygamy or permitting persons to begin the practice and that it was his advice to obey the law of the land. The October conference of the church sustained the president in this statement.

Once the church had declared an end to polygamy and the church's economic power was destroyed, there remained the political issue. Resolution soon followed. Under the direction of apostles like [John Henry Smith](#) and of others, between May and September of 1891, political meetings were held in towns of Utah, and the church-controlled [People's Party](#) was dissolved. Soon thereafter Republican clubs and Democratic clubs were formed. (The non-Mormon Liberal Party, distrustful, disbanded later.) When election returns demonstrated the successful local establishment of [national parties](#), which received fairly equal numbers of votes, and the diminishing of church influence, steps were taken toward statehood. Amnesty was granted and the franchise was restored to polygamists 4 January 1893, the House and Senate passed Delegate Joseph L. Rawlins' bill recommending statehood, and on 16 July 1894 President Cleveland [signed](#) the [Enabling Act](#) which authorized the people of Utah to elect delegates to a constitutional convention, write a constitution, and elect officers. At this point, polygamists were pardoned and their civil rights were restored. Confiscated personal properties were returned in January 1894, real estate not until June 1896. In November 1894 the people elected delegates to a constitutional convention.

The [constitutional convention](#) met in the City and County Building from 4 March to 8 May and produced the [state constitution](#). The document mandated the separation of church and state, forever prohibited the practice of polygamy, guaranteed perfect toleration of religious sentiment, and called for schools free from sectarian control. One-fourth of the convention time was spent debating [woman suffrage](#). B. H. Roberts led opposition to the provision, fearing its inclusion might keep Congress from approving the constitution. Notwithstanding, the suffrage measure passed 69 to 32.

At the November 1895 election the people ratified the constitution and elected persons to fill the new offices. The Utah Commission, which had examined election returns and certified results for several years, recommended statehood. These facts before him, President Cleveland signed the [Utah Statehood Proclamation](#), Saturday morning, 4 January 1896. The news was wired to Salt Lake City.

In Salt Lake City business was suspended. Crowds gathered, swarming the [streets](#), shouting, laughing, and shaking hands, all to the accompaniment of bells ringing, whistles blowing, and a [twenty-one gun salute](#) firing. [Ceremonies](#) inaugurating the new state government were held the next Monday, at noon, in the [Tabernacle](#). Former enemies stood together on the stand. Different groups were represented on the program.

The president's proclamation was read, and in his inaugural address, [Heber M. Wells](#), governor, called for the healing of old wounds. Everywhere it was "[congratulations](#)" and "let's live in peace."

For the people of Utah statehood meant full sovereignty, self-government in the highest sense. They could now select their own state officers, including judges for their courts; have a voice in the selection of presidents; and choose two United States senators and one representative of the state in Congress with voting power and political influence. With economic and political stability in Utah, capital and population would surely be drawn here.

For the greater benefits of statehood, requisite accommodations had been made. Statesmanship played an important role during those days. President Joseph F. Smith shepherded his people through the transition period between the old and the new. Peace came slowly. The editors of the Salt Lake Tribune and the Deseret News continued their feud until about 1917. Nevertheless, in all groups there were those anxious to live in peace and enjoy the privileges of economic freedom and self-rule. Gradually Mormons and non-Mormons adjusted to the new ways, exercised tolerance and respect, and locked arms for the work ahead.

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