

“A Banner is Unfurled”: Mormonism’s Ensign Peak

Ronald W. Walker

TO THE NORTH OF SALT LAKE CITY, two or three miles from famed Temple Square, an odd, knob-shaped promontory rises above the community of Saint and gentile. Since pioneer times, it has been called Ensign Peak. Not quite a mountain but more than a hill, the “Peak” has been important to Mormon history. The early settlers believed God had used it to reveal the place for their new city, and they laid out Zion under its slope. For them, Ensign Peak was a symbol for some of their major beliefs, which they celebrated in poetry, song, sermon, and ritual. For the present generation, the “Peak” can also be important. Though we have largely forgotten its original meaning, it now serves a new purpose. Through its prism, we see a past culture: Our progenitors’ mixed civil and theocratic loyalties, their literalness, their sense of mission, and above all their eagerness to rally to the sound of the millennial trumpet.¹

The story of the “Peak,” or at least some of the ideas that came to surround it, began with the Mormon church’s first years. Calling Joseph Smith to the prophetic office in 1823, the angel Moroni quoted several biblical texts that predicted a latter-day “Mount Zion” and the setting up of an “ensign,” or banner, that would summon God’s dispersed people to a place of gathering (JS-H 1:36-61).² Smith understood that these and other

1. A current LDS Melchizedek priesthood lesson manual, *Come Unto the Father in the Name of Jesus*, has a discussion titled “An Ensign for the Nations.” Gone from the lesson are the literal, nineteenth-century images of Ensign Peak and a physical flag, replaced by the broad, figurative symbolism used in the present time. Some of the themes of this essay were given in a preliminary survey by D. Michael Quinn, “The Flag of the Kingdom of God,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 14 (Autumn 1973): 105-14. Joel Pulliam, a student assistant, helped research several sections of the following narrative. I am also indebted to John M. Hartvigsen, a scholar of Utah’s various flags, for a critique of this article, which provided much useful information.

2. Moroni cited passages in Joel 2:32 and Isaiah 11:9-12 that contained these images.

biblical prophecies pertained to his mission, and they came to play a major role in the new church. Wrote Mormon poet and apostle Parley P. Pratt in the first issue of the *British Millennial Star*: "The morning breaks, the shadows flee, Lo! Zion's standard is unfurled!" In short, the mission of the new religion was to proclaim the new age and mark a rallying point where the righteous might gather.³

Other Christian millennial churches had a history of declaring such things, but without the literal-mindedness of the Mormons. Though Smith revealed western Missouri to be the center place of the new Zion, there is evidence that he and other LDS leaders began to look wistfully to the American West soon after the church's organization in 1830, perhaps because of the region's scripture-fulfilling mountains.⁴ There, a literal ensign might be proclaimed on a literal "Mount Zion."

There was another strain to this literalness. In April 1842 Smith revealed the need to set up an earthly "Kingdom of God," and he followed this revelation by organizing the shadowy "Council of Fifty" three years later. The Mormons were contingency-planning for the apocalypse. Believing their movement foretold an imminent second coming, they wished to be ready as events unfolded. During the Council of Fifty's first meetings in March and April 1844, the Mormon prophet urged the exploration of the American West. In this region the Saints would make a settlement and raise "a standard and ensign of truth for the nations of the earth."⁵

Part of the prophet's reason to go west lay in the growing conflict about him. Already the church had been driven from New York, Ohio, and Missouri, and as events in the Mormon capital of Nauvoo, Illinois, darkened in June 1844, Smith crossed the Mississippi River intending to go to

3. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, ed. Parley P. Pratt, Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938), 264-65. The poem has become a favorite LDS hymn. For other expressions of Mormon "new age" expectation and gathering, see D&C 64:42; 105:39; and 113:6. For examples of how these themes were used in the church's polemical literature and sermons, see *Latter-day Saint Messenger and Advocate*, 2 Oct. 1835, 203-204; *The Orson Pratt Journals*, comp. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: Elden Jay Watson, 1975), 30, 52, 69, 70, which detail the early preaching texts of Parley Pratt's brother, Orson Pratt.

4. Lewis Clark Christian, "Mormon Foreknowledge of the West," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21 (Fall 1981): 403-15; Ronald K. Esplin, "'A Place Prepared': Joseph, Brigham and the Quest for Promised Refuge in the West," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 85-111; and Ronald W. Walker, "Seeking the 'Remnant': The Native American During the Joseph Smith Period," *Journal of Mormon History* 19 (Spring 1993): 1-33.

5. This is a retrospective statement on Smith's purposes. See George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1991), 158, for the date 1 March 1845. The historical writing on the Council of Fifty is checked, but the most recent survey which downplays its role in practical events is in D. Michael Quinn, "The Council of Fifty and Its Members," *Brigham University Studies* 20 (Winter 1980): 163-97.

the Rocky Mountains. Several hours before his departure, he asked his followers to make a sixteen-foot emblematic flag "for the nations," apparently hoping to take a Mormon, scripture-fulfilling banner with him on his journey. However after less than a day on the Iowa side of the river, he returned to Nauvoo and began his fateful journey to Carthage. The day prior to Smith's death, not fully understanding his danger, Nauvoo citizens responded to his earlier wish and began preparation of a flag of white cloth. The flag, said one of the Saints later, was not intended for Nauvoo. Smith undoubtedly meant the banner to be a tangible symbol of a restored latter-day Kingdom in the mountainous West.⁶

Smith's blend of Mormon millennialism, the American West, and a "flag of the Kingdom" had a powerful effect on Brigham Young, who came to lead the main body of Mormons after the Carthage assassination. In early 1845, Young had the Council of Fifty ratify the goal of a literal western Kingdom with a raised "ensign and standard of liberty for the nations."⁷ But there was a problem. Smith had not specified the precise spot for the Saints' settlement, nor had he given a blueprint for finishing the flag.⁸ Prior to his death, the field of white cloth had only been partly cut.

The new Mormon leaders did their best to overcome these difficulties. From Washington, D.C., Elder Orson Hyde learned of the recently printed report of John C. Frémont's Great Basin exploring ("a most valuable document to any one contemplating a journey to Oregon") and Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas franked a copy to his Mormon friends in Nauvoo. LDS leaders also reviewed Lansford Hastings's travel guide to California.⁹ Clearly, the topic was much studied. "Elder Heber C. Kimball and I . . . examined maps with reference to selecting a location for the saints west of the Rocky Mountains," Young's diary summarized. The two leaders also read various accounts of the region written by trappers and other travelers.¹⁰

6. Council Meeting, 26 Feb. 1847, Thomas Bullock minutes, archives, historical department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter LDS archives). Also see *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1950), 6:528 (hereafter HC). The origin of the latter reference is uncertain, as the entry does not appear in Smith's diary.

7. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle* (1 Mar. 1845), 158.

8. Council Meeting, 26 Feb. 1847.

9. LDS historians have suggested that the peripatetic Hastings talked with LDS leaders in Nauvoo about their western migration, but that circumstance seems unlikely. See Will Bagley, "Every Thing Is Possible: The Plot to Conquer California," 6, privately circulated.

10. Orson Hyde to the Council of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 26 Apr. 1844, 5, Joseph Smith papers, fd. 6, bx. 3, LDS archives; HC (20, 27, and 31 Dec. 1845) 7:548, 755, 558.

Elder George A. Smith wove an heroic tapestry about these preparations in an 1869 sermon. After Joseph Smith's death when "every trouble and calamity" seemed to beset the Saints, Brigham Young sought the Lord to know where to go. According to Elder Smith, Young after fasting and praying daily on the topic "had a vision of Joseph Smith, who showed him the mountain that we now call Ensign Peak, immediately north of Salt Lake City, and there was an ensign fell upon that peak, and Joseph said, 'Build under the point where the colors fall and you will prosper and have peace.'"11

Young's official papers fail to document such a spiritual experience. Yet there is abundant contemporary evidence that Young's mind was full of such ideas. Several weeks before the Nauvoo exodus, John D. Lee's diary had Young saying, "the Prophets would never be verified unless the House of the Lord be reared in the Tops of the Mountains & the Proud Banner of Liberty wave over the valleys that are within the Mountains." This flag would mark the place of gathering. To these concepts, Young added a startling addendum: "I know where the spot is & I [kn]ow how to make this Flag."¹²

Two months later as the residents of Nauvoo began their evacuation from the city, a sermon of Elder Orson Hyde once more carried these themes—the ideas of "flag," a sacred location in the West, and Joseph Smith. In what may have been a veiled reference to Young's dream as related by George A. Smith, Hyde spoke of Joseph Smith's continuing direction of the church. "Joseph is as much our President as he ever was," Hyde was quoted in the spotty minutes of the time. "Suppose he had appeared to the 12 & held a flag waving it & saying go Westward — & s[aid] when I drop that flag — stop."¹³

These themes continued during the Mormon migration. When Samuel Brannan and his *Brooklyn* company sailed from the East to California in 1846, they apparently took with them an emblematic banner of their own design. "The standard which you took with you," Elder Hyde later advised Brannan, "do not exhibit, till the council of the church have approved it."¹⁴

11. George A. Smith, 20 June 1869, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: Latter-day Saint Book Depot, 1853-86), 13:85 (hereafter *JD*). Smith's sermon was not off-the-cuff sermonizing. A half dozen Congressional dignitaries were in the congregation, including Samuel Hooper, chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, and the church historian undoubtedly intended to present LDS official history. See Junius F. Wells, "Brigham Young's Prevision of Salt Lake Valley," *Deseret News, The Christmas News Section*, 20 Dec. 1924, 17.

12. John D. Lee journal, 13 Jan. 1846, LDS archives.

13. Bullock's Minutes of Meetings, 3 Mar. 1846, LDS archives.

14. Orson Hyde to Brannan, 5 Sept. 1846, Samuel L. Brannan correspondence, LDS archives. I am indebted to Will Bagley for calling this letter to my attention.

At a Winter Quarters council in November, Young told associates of another dream about the West which had revealed to him "many beautiful [but barren] hills" and "valleys skirted with timber &c."¹⁵

Three months later the minutes of one of Young's council meetings began with an unusual entry: "A PIECE OF RUSSIA IS WANTED." "Russia" was a kind of leather that might be used in making a long-wearing flag—or perhaps the reference was to "Russian crush," a strong unbleached linen fabric.¹⁶ But whether leather, linen, silk, or some other durable material, Mormon leaders agreed that the time had come to prepare the flag that Joseph Smith had first talked about and that it should be made of the "best stuff in the Eastern markets." Young wanted it larger than Smith's design. "What of a fl[ag] 16 feet by 8 feet on a mountain 5 mi[les] off?" he asked. "I think 90 by 30 [feet] better." Perhaps the banner could be hoisted on an hundred-foot tower with pulleys. Young also urged the colors of red, white, and blue for the flag's field, with purple and scarlet for the insignia, though the layout of the entire design was uncertain. To gain added inspiration about how it might be made, Heber C. Kimball, Young's counselor, suggested the men "dream about it." When completed, the large flag would be placed on a mountain rising above "a perfect Sea of Water."¹⁷

By any measure, the discussion was extraordinary. It meant that before leaving Winter Quarters, Mormon leaders had already decided to fly a huge flag on a mountain rising above a yet to be settled valley. The act, they seemed to say, was integral to their mission. That evening Young and his council dispatched Elder Jedediah M. Grant east with an authorizing letter. Grant was told to visit "various Sea ports" to secure material for a flag not less than 35 by 15 feet. "The Lord's Servants have need of a little means to accomplish a great work," the letter implored, hoping that donations to fund the project might be forthcoming. The final product should be "an ornament to the cause for which it is intended," the letter insisted, "an honor to the Union," and "a praise to the Saints."¹⁸ While no

15. Willard Richards diary, 7 Nov. 1846, LDS archives.

16. Many of the best flags of the period were made of bunting, a loose-woven but durable cotton or wool composition. When using the term "Russia," pioneer leaders apparently were struggling to find the proper term for flag material.

17. Council Meeting, 26 Feb. 1847, Thomas Bullock minutes. During the previous week, the severely ill Young had a near-death, out-of-body experience. "I actually went into Eternity last Wednesday week, & came back again," Young reported. During this episode, Young said he spoke with Joseph Smith, who gave him instructions. The incident apparently rekindled Young's interest in a future ensign to be flown in the West, as the topic immediately surfaced in his discussions. See Willard Richards diary, 23 and 28 Feb. 1847.

18. Willard Richards [For the Twelve] to Jedediah M. Grant, 26 Feb. 1847, Draft Letter Book, Brigham Young papers, LDS archives. Earlier in the day, church leaders suggested

contemporary documents tell of Grant's mission, he apparently was successful. It was later reported that during his short mission he secured materials for "making a flag, which for several years floated over 'the land of the free and the homes of the blest' in Salt Lake City and was familiarly known as 'the mammoth flag.'"¹⁹

From the outset, Mormons understood that their flag might be seen as unpatriotic or even seditious. Young therefore proposed the banner be flown subordinate to the American flag and inscribed with the non-political motto: "Religious Toleration."²⁰ But whatever the arrangement, the Mormon flag implied a new kind of society, perhaps even a new, yet-to-be realized, millennial nation-state. Certainly, Mormons hoped to establish a government different than the American secular ideal. In an important sermon delivered on his way west, Young gave his view of what the soon-to-be-organized LDS community would be like. All people would be protected in their rights and no one forced to accept Mormonism, Young maintained. But all citizens, Mormon and non-Mormon alike, would be required to "acknowledge the name of God and His Priesthood" and accept the reign of Jesus Christ. In turn, the Saints would keep the "celestial," or highest, law of righteousness. This will be the rule, Young concluded, "The Kingdom of God and His Laws and Judgment in the man Christ." And on this rule of behavior "would be [flown] a flag of every nation under heaven," inviting all people everywhere "to come unto Zion."²¹

Wilford Woodruff, who recorded Young's sermon in his diary, understood these words were not meant as an allegory. After all, Young had invoked the code words for the Saints' hoped-for millennial government ("The Kingdom of God and His Laws and Judgment"). In this spirit of an explicit, theocratic Kingdom, Woodruff drew in his diary a fanciful pennant-like drawing of what a possible "flag of all the nations" might look like.²²

Young's remarks—recognizing the legitimacy of the American flag while at the same time declaring the coming Kingdom of God—provide a clue to understanding the debate that later centered around Utah's Ensign

the letter be sent to Orson Hyde, who was then in the East. But apparently after more mature consideration, Mormon leaders concluded the matter required the attention of a special representative.

19. Andrew Jenson's *Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: By Andrew Jenson, 1888), 1:59. Susan Grant, Jedediah's daughter, also gave the same result. See her statement in Carter E. Grant, "Robbed by Wolves," *Relief Society Magazine* 15 (July 1928): 358.

20. Council Meeting, 26 Feb. 1847, Thomas Bullock minutes.

21. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle* (29 May 1847), 189-90; Wilford Woodruff diary, LDS archives, for the same date.

22. Wilford Woodruff diary, 29 May 1847.

Peak and to explaining several larger issues of Utah history as well. Mormons had left their homes in the midwest deeply alienated from *Americans* but clinging to an idealized *Americanism*. They believed that they, and citizens like them, would ultimately preserve the Republic and in the process transfer American ideals and American symbols, such as the country's flag, to the coming millennial Kingdom. The American flag was not to be abandoned or placed aside.

Young's sermon, and Woodruff's reaction to it, also showed how vague the Mormons were about the design of their flag, despite church leader's earlier reported statements to the contrary. Before entering the Great Basin and certainly after, Mormons considered rectangular flags and pennants, discussed white flags and multi-colored flags, and used a variety of names like "Flag of Liberty," "Flag of the Kingdom," "Deseret Flag," "mammoth flag," and Young's latest "flag of all the nations" to describe them. Obviously, more important than the shape, design, or name was the banner's symbolism, which carried the message of a place of gathering and the setting up of a newly restored righteous Kingdom in the West. This ambiguity was in keeping with the times. During the first half of the nineteenth century and beyond, even the American flag was subject to much variation and local design. A standardized version of the "Stars and Stripes" was a relatively modern circumstance.

Wilford Woodruff summarized the Mormon notion of a "gathering ensign" in a moment of reverie before heading west. Writing in his diary at the close of the year, 1846, he examined his life and hopes. "I pray my Heavenly Father to lengthen out my days to behold the House of God stand upon the tops of the Mountains," he penned, "and to see the Standard of Liberty reared up as an ensign to the nations to come unto to serve the Lord of Hosts."²³ Woodruff no doubt spoke for the entire pioneer company in uniting together the themes of the gathering, temple building, the West, and a literal and symbolic "Standard of Liberty."

As the pioneer party traveled into the Great Plains, led by Young and the other main leaders, members were anxious about where they were going. Where was the gospel flag to be lifted? While leaders had bandied about such places as Oregon, California, Texas, and Vancouver Island, by 1846 they had fixed their eyes on the Great Basin interior, most specifically the Bear River, Salt Lake, or Utah Lake valleys. Each of these valleys answered the requirements of Young's earlier statements about settling in the West's "beautiful" but "barren" hills or his still more revealing passage of placing the gospel flag above a "perfect Sea of water." But during the

23. Woodruff diary, appendix following the entry of 31 Dec. 1846. Woodruff had voiced these themes earlier, saying that the Twelve must go to the "Mountains & lift up the standard of Zion" (22 June 1846).

final stage of the trip, Young had still not named the precise place. As he told his brother, Lorenzo, who was worried by Brigham's poor health and his failure to declare a destination: "Brother Lorenzo, when we reach the end of our journey I shall know it; AND I DON'T KNOW IT."²⁴

Several of the pioneers thought Young's indecision lay with his inner or spiritual seeking. "Brigham Young did not tell us whither he was leading us," said one. "Perhaps he did not know it himself. He confined himself to telling us that God, in a vision, had caused him to see the spot where we were to stop."²⁵ Churchman Erastus Snow, also along on the pioneer trip, gave the same report. "Said the Prophet Brigham [to the camp]—'I have seen it [the promised location], I have seen it, in vision, and when my natural eyes behold it, I shall know it.'"²⁶

Young was looking for Ensign Peak, or at least this is what Mormon believers would later claim. After visiting Utah in 1866 and interviewing Brigham Young, British author and critic William Hepworth Dixon said that this was the report he had heard from the prophet himself. "Brigham Young tells me," he wrote,

that when coming over the mountains, in search of a new home for his people, he saw in a vision of the night, an angel standing on a conical hill, pointing to a spot of ground on which the new Temple must be built. Coming down into this basin of Salt Lake, he first sought for the cone which he had seen in his dream; and when he had found it, he noticed a stream of fresh hill-water flowing at its base, which he called the City Creek.²⁷

If Young failed to record such a "vision of the night" in his own records, there is evidence of his spiritual groping about where to settle. By early July 1847, perhaps as the result of their interview with mountaineer Jim Bridger, Young and the Mormon leadership increasingly looked on the Salt Lake Valley as the place for their settlement. But Young wanted confirmation. His own diary tells of his first view of the valley from Big Mountain. Turning the carriage in which he was riding to see the vista to the west, he

24. Quoted in Wells, "Brigham Young's Prevision of the Salt Lake Valley," 58.

25. Quoted in Vicomte d'Hausonville, *One Day in Utah: A Literary French Nobleman's Views on the Mormon Question*, trans. Leo Haefeli (Ogden, UT: Ogden Herald Publishing Co., 1883), 16.

26. Erastus Snow, 14 Sept. 1873, *JD* 16:207.

27. William Hepworth Dixon, *New America*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, Publishers, 1867), 1:186-87. Another traveler, perhaps relying on Hepworth Dixon or possibly on his own interview with Young, told basically the same story. See Joseph Alexander von Hubner, *A Ramble Round the World*, 2 vols., trans. Lady Herbert (London: Macmillan and Co., 1874), 140, 142.

felt "the spirit of light" resting on him and hovering "over the valley." "I felt that there the Saints would find protection and safety."²⁸

Coming into the valley, he may have looked to the west-northwest, to the mushroom incline of Ensign Peak. "I knew this [was the right] spot as soon as I saw it, up there on the Table ground," he insisted several days later, apparently referring to his descent down the east valley bench.²⁹ His first plans in the new settlement included the mount. "I want to go there," he supposedly said.³⁰ Despite a fatigue caused by his "mountain fever," on his third day in the valley (the second being the Sabbath) Young led a reconnaissance to the top of the "Peak." Its members included the functioning but still yet to be formally organized "First Presidency," Young and counselors Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards, who were joined by apostles Ezra T. Benson, George A. Smith, and Wilford Woodruff, and church secretaries Albert Carrington and William Clayton. A ninth member, Lorenzo Dow Young, joined the party en route. Of the leading LDS authorities then in the valley, only Apostle Orson Pratt, unaccountably, was not enrolled.³¹

While several participants recorded the event, Woodruff's diary gave the fullest detail. We "went North of the Camp about 5 miles," the young apostle wrote, "& we all went onto the top of A high Peak in the edge of the Mountain which we considered A good place to raise An ensign upon which we named ensign Peak or Hill. I was the first person that Ascended this Hill. Brother Young was vary weary in clim[b]ing the Peak[,] he being feble. We then desended to the flat." Clayton agreed that the trip required "hard toil," the horses getting only two-thirds of the way to the summit.³²

28. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1846-1847*, ed. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: By the Editor, 1971), 23 July 1847, 564.

29. Norton Jacob diary, 28 July 1847, LDS archives.

30. George A. Smith, 20 June 1869, *JD* 13:86. Clayton made the same point: "We passed or began to ascend the mountains, [the] President signifying a wish to ascend a high peak to the north of us" (Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle* [26 July 1847], 368).

31. Woodruff said that when the party first was formed in the morning, it had ten members. Clayton, however, listed only eight names leaving camp for the trip to the Peak later in the day, Lorenzo Young joining the group as it went north. If Woodruff's figure is correct, the group included Pratt, who may have been inadvertently left out of Clayton's listing. Woodruff diary, 26 July 1847; Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle* (26 July 1847), 367-68. The other apostle in the Basin was Amasa Lyman, temporarily out of the valley assisting the incoming "Pueblo" detachment of the Mormon Battalion. See Erastus Snow diary, 28 July 1849, LDS archives.

32. Woodruff diary; Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle* (26 July 1847), 368. For other accounts, often brief to the point of having few additional details, *Brigham Young Manuscript History*, 565; Heber C. Kimball memoranda, LDS archives; and Albert Carrington, "History of George Albert Smith," Ms. 5829, fd. 4, bx. 1, LDS archives. All entries are for the date 26 July 1847.

What took place on the top is unclear. To be sure, the men used the promontory (and Kimball's spy glass) to survey the region, which confirmed their earlier judgment of the valley. "They appeared delighted with the view of the surrounding country," said one of the settlers who heard the explorers' report later in the day.³³ More than satisfying curiosity, Young and the other church leaders used the vantage to lay out the future city. From the time Mormons entered the area, the prospective site for their new community had steadily moved up the valley to the north, and now Young finished the process. From Ensign Peak he apparently decided to build the center-piece of the new city, the Mormon temple, on land directly at the edge of the slope of the mountain. Literally, Isaiah's prophesied "Mountain of the Lord's House" would be put at Ensign Peak's feet.

Did the expedition unfurl a flag? The idea was clearly on the men's mind. According to Woodruff, the hikers concluded the hill was a "A good place to raise An ensign," and named it accordingly. These acts have led later Utahns to conclude that either the Mormons took a flag of their own to the top of the summit or that they raised an American flag on the "Peak," claiming the Mexican lands of the Great Basin for the American Republic. The latter became a persistent, local tradition, preserved by countless Independence and Pioneer Day orations, the insistence of several historical writers, and even a mural placed within the Utah State capitol rotunda.³⁴

There is not enough historical evidence to make either case. One nineteenth-century LDS opponent wrote a highly colored account alleging that Young and his associates had flown a blue and white "Flag of Deseret" on 26 July 1847, a claim that a recent historian treated as a possibility. But neither writer produced validating evidence.³⁵ Nor is an American flag

33. Howard Egan, *Pioneering the West: 1846 to 1878*, ed. William M. Egan (Richmond, UT: Howard R. Egan Estate, 1917), 108.

34. The most prominent twentieth-century proponent of the Ensign Peak American flag-raising was Susa Young Gates, intent on preserving the patriotic honor of her father. See for instance her *Brigham Young: Patriot, Pioneer, Prophet. An Address Delivered Over Radio Station KSL, Saturday, 1 June 1929* (Salt Lake City: Np, 1929), 10-11. The capitol dome panel was a 1933-35 Works Progress Administration project done by artists Lee Greene Richards, Waldo Midgley, Gordon Cope, and Henry Rasmussen. The tradition was crisply challenged by B. H. Roberts, "The 'Mormons' and the United States Flag," *Improvement Era* 25 (Nov. 1921): 3-7; B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930) 3:270-78; and Andrew Jensen, "Public Pulse," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 1 Aug. 1931, 4.

35. Don Maguire journal, Second Narrative (July 1877 to June 1878), 21, typescript, Utah State Historical Society; Charles Kelly and Hoffman Birney, *Holy Murder; The Story of Porter Rockwell* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 93-94; and Quinn, "Flag of the Kingdom," 111-12. There is no record of the pioneer camp having such an emblem in their possession when leaving Winter Quarters, though Brannan might have later provided the company with one. Travelling eastward from California, Brannan met the

raising any more likely. While Young carried his personal American flag to Winter Quarters, when going to the Great Basin he apparently left it behind for the second wave of pioneers to bring. "If there was a United States flag in the pioneer company," recalled one of the travelers, "I never saw it or heard of it." What he did remember rebutted the claim. Without a "real" American banner in the camp, during the group's 1847 Independence Day celebration on the Wyoming plains George A. Smith put a makeshift flag of his own manufacture on the end of his wagon tongue.³⁶

There is a third possibility. Rather than using a "Flag of the Kingdom" or an American flag, perhaps the pioneer expedition made do with what they had. William C. A. Smoot, then a twenty-year-old member of the camp, recalled the morning Mormon leaders set out on their expedition. According to Smoot, the symbol of the hill was already known. As the party went north, Heber C. Kimball explained to bystanders, "We will some day hoist an ensign here." Later, Smoot tried to follow movements on the summit. "While they were up there looking around they went through some motions that we could not see from where we were, nor know what they meant. They formed a circle, seven or eight of them. But I could not tell what they were doing. Finally they came down in the evening."³⁷ Possibly the men had united in a Mormon prayer circle.

Later, Smoot asserted they were doing more. "They hoisted a sort of a flag on Ensign peak," Smoot reported. "Not a flag, but a handkerchief belonging to Heber C. Kimball, one of those yellow bandanna kind."³⁸ Smoot's remarks, made sixty years after the event, appeared to confirm a report published a year or two earlier by the *Salt Lake Tribune*. The newspaper said that Kimball himself had told of the incident. He had made an improvised flag from "a great yellow bandanna decorated with black spots," which he tied to Willard Richards's walking cane and then waved aloft. The act was symbolic. Said Kimball: The mount with its provisional flag signified the ensign to which "the oppressed of the world should flee for refuge."³⁹

Kimball's flag waving was an impulsive act, a foreshadowing of what might be. Two days later, 28 July 1847, meeting with the pioneers on what would become "Temple Square," church leaders still spoke of the "Peak" and its flag in the future tense. According to one contemporary account,

advance company at the Green River and could have brought the *Brooklyn Saints'* special flag with him.

36. Letter of William C. A. Smoot, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 27 Mar. 1910, 12, c1-2.

37. William C. A. Smoot, "Remarks at the American Party Banquet," 18 Mar. 1910, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 2, c6.

38. Smoot, "Remarks at the American Party Banquet," 2, c6.

39. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 19 Nov. 1908.

Young promised: "We shall [yet] erect the Standard of Freedom."⁴⁰ Lewis Barney's narrative was similar. Written many years later and perhaps embellishing some of the detail, Barney remembered Young looking to the north and proclaiming, "Up yound[er] is Ensign peak Where the ensign to all the nations wil[ll] be raised." According to Barney, Young said he had seen Ensign Peak "many times" in vision as well as seeing "thousands of people geathered" below it," and knew the Saints' new location, once he had arrived, as well as his "old home and farm in the States."⁴¹

Although the historical record gives few details, a flag raising apparently took place sometime during the next several months. Eighty years after the event, it was claimed that Erastus Snow and two other men had been reportedly asked by Young to oversee the flag hoisting and declare the land an American possession. But Snow said nothing of the sort in his journal.⁴² Harrison Sperry, an 1847 pioneer who arrived some weeks after the first party, left a more convincing witness. "Although the [American] government was at war with Mexico," Sperry testified, "we placed the flag of our country on Ensign Peak—I have seen that flag raised myself—and declared this American soil."⁴³ Equally spare but persuasive was the memoir of John P. Wriston, a Mormon Battalion member, who entered the valley shortly after the first Ensign Peak "explorers" had made their reconnaissance. "I helped to rais[e] the United States flag on Encine Peak," he declared. "I feel to Rejoice at having the Privelage of Seeing the flag raised that was spoken of by Isai[a]h the Prophet."⁴⁴

Obviously the Mormons retained their affection for their national colors. "We were not told to hate the flag," remembered one of the pioneers. "We were not taught to hate the government of the United States, for which our forefathers fought and died."⁴⁵ Within a week after the Mormons' arrival in Utah, the discharged "Pueblo" company of the Mormon Battalion

40. Jacob diary, 28 July 1847.

41. Lewis Barney, autobiography and diary, 1878-83, 40, LDS archives. This tradition was preserved also by H. Spenle, "The 'Temple Block,' Salt Lake City," *Scientific American* 66 (6 Feb. 1892): 83. According to Spenle, "upon the arrival of the Mormons in Salt Lake Valley, in 1847, Brigham Young, looking toward Ensign Peak, marked the site with his cane, saying: 'This is the place to stay; this is the spot I have seen in vision.'"

42. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 24 July 1931, 1; Erastus Snow diary, July-Aug. 1847, LDS archives.

43. *Deseret News*, 14 Aug. 1920, sec. 4, vii, c2.

44. John P. Wriston, "The Book of the Pioneers," 344, unpublished miscellany collected by the Utah Semi-Centennial Commission, 1897, Utah State Historical Society. Susa Young Gates also cited the testimony of her cousin, the 1847 pioneer John R. Young. See the preliminary draft of her Brigham Young biography, fd. 2, bx. 9, Susa Young Gates papers, microfilm, LDS archives. Wriston said that he got to the valley as early as 26 July, but most of the Pueblo soldiers did not arrive until several days later.

45. William C. A. Smoot, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 Mar. 1910, 2, c6.

brought an American banner into the community, which was probably followed a month or two later by Young's.⁴⁶ In late 1847 one of these was placed on the settlement's high "liberty pole," prompting Mormons to later claim that, there, they had flown the first civilian-flown American flag in the Great Basin.⁴⁷ But the Ensign Peak episode may have come first. Fifty years after the event, a *Deseret News* editorial claimed that a company of pioneers had unfurled the American flag on the peak a scant three weeks after the Mormons' first arrival.⁴⁸

For Wriston the Star Spangled Banner answered Isaiah's prophecy. Mormon leaders may have had a different view. The American flag conveyed their patriotism and embodied what they believed were the best of human ideals, but their kingdom flag promised Christ's climactic coming reign. Both were important, and each likely were hoisted at different times on the "Peak," the latter's turn probably coming in 1849. At dawn, 22 July of that year, President Young, six apostles, three presidents of the Quorum of Seventies, and one or two others climbed the "Peak" and consecrated it for "the erection of a standard thereon [and for] a place of prayer." Later the same morning, they conferred the ordinance of LDS endowment on Addison Pratt, already called to a South Seas proselyting mission.⁴⁹

In part, the general authorities of the church were preparing for Utah's first "Pioneer Day," honoring the coming of the first settlers, and apparently hoped to fly a distinctive Mormon flag as part of the festivities. Two days after the leaders' trek, Iowan Charles Darwin, visiting Salt Lake City at the time, heard rumors that the Mormons planned to lift a banner on "ensign mountain" for the occasion, and almost certainly they did so, though neither Darwin's diary nor any other journal of the time recorded the event.⁵⁰

46. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 19 Nov. 1908, 4, C7; Thomas L. Kane to Millard Fillmore, 11 July 1851, copy in "Correspondence Between Thomas L. Kane and Brigham Young and Other Church Authorities, 1846-1878," Brigham Young papers, LDS archives. Kane believed Young's flag was the first in the territory, though probably the battalion's banner had precedence. For a more extended treatment, see Roberts, "'Mormons' and the United States Flag," 3-7.

47. *Speech of Hon. W. H. Hooper, of Utah, Delivered in the House of Representatives, February 25, 1869*, broadside (Salt Lake City: *Deseret News*, 1869), 2. Also see statement of Eliza R. Snow, in Roberts, "'Mormons' and the United States Flag," 3.

48. *Journal History*, 24 July 1847, apparently quoting the *Deseret News* of the same date. Microfilm runs of the newspaper fail to provide a complete issue for this date and therefore it is impossible to confirm the editorial's exact date and pagination.

49. Franklin D. Richards diary, 21 July 1849, LDS archives; "Manuscript History of the Church," 21 July 1849, LDS archives. The tradition of other LDS endowments being performed on the "Peak" is preserved in such sources as *Deseret News*, 24 July 1897, 9, C2.

50. Darwin journal, 24 July 1849; Franklin Langworthy, *Scenery of the Plains*,

By all accounts, this celebration, conducted at the base of Ensign Peak and continuing its symbolism—was impressive. Parades, banners, decorations, music, and dinner—each done on a scale meant to convey saga. The California emigrants passing through the territory looked on with some doubt: Could the preparations be finished on time? (“The Saints will prove them to be bad calculators,” vowed one enthusiastic Mormon.⁵¹) According to one observer the dining tables had a gargantuan, accumulated length of over one and a half miles. Such Bunyanesque size was necessary for the more than 4,000 or 5,000 expected for dinner.⁵²

To these arrangements, there was the need to complete a “liberty pole,” meant to surpass anything previous in the basin. Six cross beams were put in position next to the excavated hole and guy ropes readied. Shortly after 7:00 p.m., 200 men carried the 104-foot pole to its position, and with President Young personally giving directions, the pillar was slowly lifted into place. By 9:00 p.m. the job was finished.⁵³

The largeness of the task, and the minuteness of the Mormons’ account, suggest the importance the people gave their project. Such gauges must be used, for the Saints themselves—always fearful of being misunderstood—said little about what was actually taking place. Already that evening Young’s large American flag, once mounted on the Nauvoo temple, was placed at the east side of the “Bowery,” the pioneer meeting area. It was apparently placed there again the day of the celebration. But Young’s personal attention lay elsewhere. In the early morning hours before the jubilee began, Young tried to complete work at the new liberty pole, which then became the object of another flag-raising. Young described the exercise: “At half past seven (a.m.) a large national flag measuring sixty-five feet in length was unfurled at the top of the liberty pole, which is one hundred feet high, and was saluted with the firing of six guns, the ringing of the Nauvoo bell and spirit-stirring airs from the band.”⁵⁴

The euphemistically-called “national flag” was not the “stars and stripes,” reported one of the California argonauts, but a banner with at least one star, which was set off by a field of blue and white strips.⁵⁵ Another

Mountains and Mines, ed. Paul C. Phillips (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932), 79-80; and Thomas Bullock, “Report of Proceedings,” 24 July 1849, “Minutes of Meetings, 1845-1856,” LDS archives.

51. Thomas Bullock, memorandum, 23 July 1849, “Minutes of Meetings, 1845-1856,” LDS archives.

52. Wilford Woodruff diary, 24 July 1849. Woodruff thought as many as 7,000 attended the dinner.

53. Thomas Bullock, memorandum, 23 July 1849, “Minutes of Meetings, 1845-1856,” LDS archives.

54. “Manuscript History of the Church,” 24 July 1849.

55. Charles Benjamin Darwin, “Journal of a Trip Across the Plains from Council

California emigrant labelled it for what it was, the Flag of Deseret, christened after the peculiar name that Mormons first used for their new land.⁵⁶ Perhaps this was the "mammoth flag," which Young and his council had discussed in February 1847 and which Jedediah Grant had been commissioned to secure.

This mixing of national and theocratic symbols carried on through the day. During the celebration, the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution were read. The American flag was brandished. But it was a smaller version of the Flag of Deseret that led the parade, and worried non-Mormons heard what they thought was a public reading of a constitution of Deseret and perhaps even a declaration of Deseret's independence. In the latter instance, they were surely mistaken. Less than a week before, the Mormons had completed their formal preparations for applying for U.S. statehood.⁵⁷

There was another thing that must have roused questions about Mormon loyalty. Four times during the festival, either in recitation or in song, Parley P. Pratt's poem, "The Mountain Standard," was presented. Its stanzas, probably written in celebration of the raising of the Mormon flag on the "Peak" above, tied together the Saints' "ensign" with their sacred mission and their sacred geography.⁵⁸

Lo! the Gentile chain is broken;
Freedom's banner waves on high;
List, ye nations! by this token
Know that your redemption's nigh.

See, on yonder distant mountain,
Zion's standard wide unfurled,
Far above Missouri's fountain,
Lo! it waves for all the world.⁵⁹

Bluffs, Iowa, to San Francisco," 24 July 1849, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. This configuration of the "national" or Deseret flag may have become the most popular. Rumor claimed that it was flown at Brigham Young's funeral and placed in his casket and that it was used during the church's fifty-year jubilee. Kelly and Birney, *Holy Murder*, 93-94; John D. T. McAllister diary, 6 Apr. 1880. The flag is given a rendering in Quinn, "Flag of the Kingdom of God," 113.

56. Langworthy, *Scenery of the Plains, Mountains and Mines*, 80.

57. "Manuscript History of the Church," 18 July 1849.

58. Darwin journal, 24 July 1849; Langworthy, *Scenery of the Plains, Mountains and Mines*, 79-80; and Thomas Bullock, "Report of Proceedings," 24 July 1849, "Minutes of Meetings, 1845-1856," LDS archives.

59. The poem is quoted in B. H. Roberts, "The 'Mormons' and the United States Flag," 6-7, and is cited in "History of the Church," 24 July 1849, LDS archives. For a

Mormons used Pratt's verses, sung as a hymn, throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, especially during Pioneer Day celebrations.⁶⁰

The 1849 celebration showed how delicately Mormons were poised between the secular and religious—and between the present and the millennial future. Onlookers, while pleased with the July 1849 spectacle, were confused. The settlers had not only used their own rituals and symbols during the day, but had bitterly condemned their past treatment in the east. Concluded one emigrant: The Mormons were greatly alienated from Americans in the east and bore close watching. Another was harsher. To him the Utahns were “upstart traitors” and their leaders reckless “desperados.” He was delighted when a gale sent the new liberty pole and its flag crashing into the dust. A fitting omen for Mormon pretension, he thought.⁶¹

Young probably had several reasons for holding the grand festival. Among them was the need to act out, in yet another detail, their scriptural pageant. Benjamin Brown, Mormon missionary and pamphleteer, cited biblical prophecy when cataloging the events required at the hands of God's latter-day people: They were to usher in the “stupendous gathering.” They were to raise an ensign on the mountains to which the people might come. On the “same elevated position” the Lord's house must be built. Finally, before the culmination a feast of “fat things was to be made for all people.”⁶² Perhaps Young's jubilee was meant to fulfill scripture and provide yet another sign to identify the Lord's chosen.

Whatever the original motivation, Pioneer Day became an annual fixture in Salt Lake City and in many Utah communities. At first Mormons celebrated as they did in 1849. Salt Lake City's 1850 rites once more displayed a large (and non-described) flag on Temple Square's liberty pole, and during the proceeding the citizens gave the toast: “The Flag of Deseret:

slightly different version, see Oliver B. Huntington, *Diary and Reminiscences*, 67, LDS archives.

60. George Careless, et. al., *The Latter-day Saints' Psalmody* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Co., 1889), #227. The hymn was reprinted into the twentieth century.

61. Darwin journal, 24 July 1849; Langworthy, *Scenery of the Plains, Mountains and Mines*, 80. If the travellers of the time were confused, it is by no means clear that the Mormons themselves had worked out the meaning of their various flags. George Henry Preble, *Our Flag* (Albany: John Munsell, 1872), 16, quoted Young as denying the existence of a distinctive, territorial flag: “We have no territorial flag, our flag is that of the nation, the stars and stripes.” Did Young see the Deseret Flag as simply another local variation of the American flag, so common during the time? Was the American flag, or a variation of it, to be the flag of the Kingdom? Or more likely did Young understand that the unique “flag of nations” waited for the millennial moment?

62. Benjamin Brown, *Testimonies for the Truth: A Record of Manifestations of the Power of God* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 29.

May it continue to wave over a free and happy people, and never be tarnished by an act of cruelty and oppression." In turn, Eliza R. Snow's verse, "The National Anthem," forced a "response from every heart" in the large congregation. "The white-crested Eagle" had fled to the mountains, said Snow, and had set the stage for an important gospel drama: "Lo! an Ensign of Peace on the tops of the mountains—/ A Banner! a Banner is wide unfurl'd:/ Hark! the heralds are sounding a loud proclamation—/ Hear, hear the glad message go forth to the world."⁶³

These themes would continue. During the 1851 celebration settlers flew the American and Deseret emblems from the same staff. In 1856 the citizens of Ogden had a "mammoth" Flag of Deseret. Even church members as far distant as present-day Wyoming insisted on a Pioneer Day celebration that featured a pioneer flag. Their 14-by-6-foot canvass had the star of Deseret in the upper corner with a spreadeagle to its right (recalling Snow's poetical "white-crested" image). Below were the words: "O GOD, SAVE ISRAEL," and still further the beehive symbol and the additional words, "WE'LL NEVER GIVE UP THE SHIP." The reverse was similarly filled with prolix figures and words.⁶⁴

There were simpler flags as well. During the Salt Lake City harvest celebration of 1848, a white flag devoid of any decoration was flown, but which nevertheless carried its own symbol. "Our flag was not stained with any national devis[e]," explained one of the citizens, "but it was pure and white."⁶⁵ Such a white flag inspired Parley P. Pratt to write another poem, once more coupling the flag-symbol with Zion's mountain. Written in 1856, "The Standard of Zion" told the Saints to gaze on "yon mountain's proud height" where the ensign of Zion was "exultingly streaming."⁶⁶

Early Mormon convert Joel Hills Johnson wrote the most enduring verse about the "Peak" and its banner. Dangerously ill during the winter of 1852-53, Johnson by his own account felt an overwhelming urge to write. The impulse seemed like "fire in my bones," he later said, preventing him

63. *Deseret News*, 3 Aug. 1850, C1, C2; 10 Aug. 1850, 65, C2-3. Snow's verse was republished and given its name in Eliza R. Snow, *Poems, Religious, Historical, and Political* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1856), 265-66. Snow returned to the theme several times later. For instance, her "Anniversary Song for the Pioneer," *ibid*, 203, contained the lines:

Zion's Banner—Freedom's Ensign,
Broad and gloriously unfurl'd,
Waves amid the Rocky Mountains—
Heavenly beacon to the world.

64. *Journal History*, 24 July 1854, 24 July 1855, and 24 July 1856, LDS archives.

65. Levi Jackman diary, 10 Aug. 1848, LDS archives.

66. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 395.

from resting.⁶⁷ The result was a large sheaf of devotional poems, including a dozen devoted to Zion's "Holy Hill" and its literal and symbolic ensign. The most famous, "Deseret," became the LDS anthem, "High on the Mountain Top."

High on the mountain top a banner is unfurled.
 Ye Nations, now look up; It waves to all the world.
 In Deseret's sweet, peaceful land,
 On Zion's mount behold it stand!

For God remembers still His promise made of old
 That he on Zion's hill Truth's standard would unfold!
 Her light should there attract the gaze
 Of all the world in latter days.

His house shall there be reared, His glory to display,
 And people shall be heard in distant lands to say:
 We'll now go up and serve the Lord,
 Obey his truth and learn his word.

For there we shall be taught the law that will go forth,
 With truth and wisdom fraught, to govern all the earth.
 Forever there his ways we'll tread,
 And save ourselves with all our dead.⁶⁸

By the mid-1850s Ensign Peak, both as site and symbol, had gained a place in local ritual. In the next several decades, it also became a fixture in Mormon lore, which was impossible to disentangle, then or now, from what had actually taken place in 1847. In telling the Ensign Peak story, Mormon poets were not the only transcribers. Some American and European travelers were also drawn to the legends of the "Peak," and Temple Square preachers added their words as well.

John W. Gunnison, the U.S. government surveyor who wintered in the valley, 1849-50, understood the Saints still intended to build a massive symbol of their gathering. "To the north of Temple Block, and close by, towers up and overlooks the Temple City, the 'Ensign Mound,'" Gunnison wrote.

67. Joel Hills Johnson, *reminiscences and journals, 1835-82*, Feb. 1853, LDS archives.

68. The current Mormon hymnal gives four of the six verses penned by Johnson. For the original, see "Zion's Songster, Or the Songs of Joel, Book Third," 19 Feb. 1853, 376, Joel Hills Johnson papers, LDS archives.

It terminates the great spur, and is conspicuous in approaching the city, from every quarter. On this mountain peak there is soon to be unfurled the most magnificent flag ever thrown to the breeze, constructed out [of] the banner flags of all peoples. Joined in symbolical unity, "the flag of all nations" shall wave about the sacred temple; then shall they verify the decree given by the Prophet Isaiah.⁶⁹

Gunnison's account gave the millennial meaning to the peak when it and its several flags would proclaim the radical mission of the restored gospel and the coming new earthly order. But as the nineteenth century wore on, Mormons increasingly used their sacred hill to look backward, not forward. The symbol of Ensign Peak celebrated past achievement—the pioneers—instead of heralding a new society. The spirit of Mormonism was changing.

The focus of the newer statements was almost entirely on Young's vision. Thus famed British adventurer Richard Burton spoke of the angel President Young had seen. It was "Mr. Joseph Smith," Burton reported. Smith had appeared to his successor and "pointed out to him the position of the New Temple, which after Zion had 'got up into the high mountain,' was to console the Saints for the loss of Nauvoo the Beautiful."⁷⁰ The role of the angel Smith was also reported in the travel report of William Minturn.⁷¹

Some visitors had the Mormons telling the story differently. Instead of (or perhaps in addition to) an angel, these accounts reported Young had seen an ensign descend on the cone-shaped mount. This is what had impelled the church leader during the pioneer journey and given the mount its name. "As the dreamer surveyed the scene," recounted the *San Francisco Overland Monthly*, "the heavens above the mountain were opened, and a mighty Star-Spangled Banner appeared; it floated through the air with stately grace until it alighted on the mountain-top, when a voice from heaven spoke in our dear Anglo-Saxon tongue: 'Build your city at the foot of this mountain, and you shall have prosperity and rest.'"⁷² The sermons

69. John W. Gunnison, *The Mormons or Latter-Day Saints* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1852), 33-34. Gunnison gave the scriptural text as Isaiah 2:18, 25. A contemporary journal repeated Gunnison's narrative. "The Mormons in Utah," *Bentley's Miscellany* 38 (1855): 70, said: "To the north of the temple-site rises above the city the 'Hill of the Banner,' visible for a very long distance. On this hill will be speedily unfurled 'the most splendid flag that ever fluttered in the breeze'—a flag made out of the colours of all nations, as a symbol of the future perfect union of mankind in faith and love."

70. Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), 243-44.

71. William Minturn, *Travels West* (London: Samuel Tinsley, 1877), 153.

72. Quoted in the *Millennial Star* 32 (13 Dec. 1870): 785.

of Mormon general authorities George A. Smith and Joseph F. Smith also told of a descending “ensign” but gave no details.⁷³

Other Mormons believed Young’s spiritual eye had seen a divine “ark” or “tent” falling on the mount. “This is the place where I, in vision, saw the ark of the Lord resting,” Apostle Erastus Snow quoted Young as saying. “This is the place whereon we will plant the soles of our feet, and where the Lord will place his name amongst his people.”⁷⁴ The verse of John R. Young, the president’s nephew, used the same image: “I have seen this land in vision, I saw the tent come down/ And rest upon the summit, of yonder rising ground./ There, we will build a Temple, a resting place for God,/ And His spirit will quicken, the hill and valley sod.”⁷⁵

There were still other shadings and emanations. The “Peak,” said other visitors, was the Mormons’ “Mount of Prophecy.”⁷⁶ It was where Young had “wrestled” with the Lord.⁷⁷ In turn, English versifier Henry Buss returned to the theme that the hill had determined Zion’s location.

The vale here viewed from top of Ensign-peak—
 (A prom’nent rock)—the Mormons this allege,
 The signal was, which Brigham had to seek
 As resting place—so the Almighty pledge.
 After a thousand miles of prairie, rock,
 Vast rivers, Indians, and of toils severe;
 Pursued by murder, pillage, and the shock
 Of storm and want, the Mormons settled here.⁷⁸

By the 1880s, thirty years after the coming of the Mormons to Utah, Ensign Peak had become both fact and legend. Fortunately, each of these gave the same basic rendering: By embodying LDS prophetic scripture and

73. George A. Smith, 20 June 1869, *JD* 13:85; Joseph F. Smith, 3 Dec. 1882, *JD* 24:156.

74. Erastus Snow, 14 Sept. 1873, *JD* 16:207. Some have argued that the phrase “This is the place” first originated with an 1880 Wilford Woodruff speech during the fifty-year jubilee celebration. But the phrase, as seen from the above source, was current at least seven years before—and probably much earlier. Also see Lewis Barney’s retrospective account, “Autobiography and Diary, 1878-1883,” 40, which also used the famous words.

75. John R. Young, scrapbook, 1928-30, LDS archives, punctuation added. For a variation on the same theme, see Erastus Snow, 14 Sept. 1873, *JD* 16:207.

76. Stanley Wood, *Over the Range to the Golden Gate: A Complete Tourist’s Guide* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons, Publishers, 1889), 60; Caroline H. Dall, *My First Holiday; or, Letters Home From Colorado, Utah, and California* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1881), 83.

77. George A. Crofutt, *Crofutt’s New Overland Tourist: Volume. 1: 1878-79* (Chicago: Illinois, 1878), 123-24.

78. Henry Buss, *Wanderings in the West, During the Year 1870* (London: Printed for Private Circulation by Thomas Danks, 1871), 153.

Joseph Smith's early plans for western settlement, Ensign Peak played a role in early Mormon and Utah history. Perhaps it was its unusual form or its place at the head of the Salt Lake Valley. Or perhaps, as believers might say, it was the reality of providence's hand. Whatever the reason, during the settlement of Utah the "Peak" helped to satisfy Young's inner striving and confirmed the decision to make Utah's Wasatch Front Zion's headquarters. Later the mount, in ritual and lore, charted Mormonism's nineteenth-century spirit.

The Mormons were re-enacting patterns as ancient as humankind itself. As religious people had done for millennia, they used symbols such as Ensign Peak to consecrate their new land, reminding themselves and generations to follow of their sacred purpose.⁷⁹ But they were doing more than settling and claiming a new land. They knew that they were actors, not just observers. In God's latter-day drama, they were bringing in Christ's millennial reign.

79. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 18-20.