

Mission to the Lamanites: Probable Route through Illinois, 1830



● Settlement

Chapter 1

Mission to the Lamanites

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1830–31

The story of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Illinois began with a revelation. In September 1830 at Fayette, New York, the Prophet Joseph Smith was inspired to call Oliver Cowdery to travel to the western edge of civilization, beyond the borders of Missouri, to preach the restored gospel to the Native Americans (see D&C 28:8). In subsequent revelations, Peter Whitmer Jr., Parley P. Pratt, and Ziba Peterson were appointed to go with him (see D&C 30:5; 32:1–3). These revelations came a few months after President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which proclaimed that all Native Americans living within the boundaries of the United States would be relocated west of Missouri into the area of present-day Kansas and Oklahoma.¹ The government had already begun implementing the act, so it was logical that the ultimate destination for these faithful missionaries would be the new Indian Territory located west of Missouri. These elders preached to Native Americans and others along the way, but their primary goal was to travel beyond the western boundaries of the United States to what Joseph Smith referred to as the “borders of the Lamanites.”² Their arduous journey covered approximately 1,500 miles. They were the first Latter-day Saints to set foot in Illinois.

This historic mission began in New York in October 1830, barely six months after the Church was organized. After a few days of travel, the elders met with a tribe of friendly Native Americans on the Cattaraugus Reservation

near Buffalo, New York. They preached to them for “part of a day” and were treated kindly. The missionaries left two copies of the Book of Mormon with them and then continued their journey to Ohio.³

Even though these elders were called primarily to teach Lamanites, they eagerly shared the message of the Restoration with anyone who showed interest along the way. For example, when they reached northeastern Ohio, they were in an area where Parley P. Pratt had lived about four years earlier. Elder Pratt was anxious to share the gospel with former friends and neighbors. When he arrived in Kirtland, Pratt specifically sought out Sidney Rigdon, his good friend and minister in the Reformed Baptist Church. The elders gave Rigdon a copy of the Book of Mormon and asked him to read it. Rigdon gave the missionaries permission to preach to his congregation. News of the Mormons quickly spread through the community. “The people thronged us night and day,” wrote Pratt, “insomuch that we had no time for rest and retirement. . . . Thousands flocked about us daily; some to be taught, some for curiosity, some to obey the gospel, and some to dispute or resist it.” As a result, within about three weeks the elders had baptized 127 people, including Sidney Rigdon.⁴ This was an extraordinary number of converts for the Church in its infancy. Some scholars state that these converts may have even doubled the entire population of the Church.⁵ Although the missionaries experienced remarkable success in the Kirtland area, they felt a need to continue their travels in order to get to



Teaching about the Book of Mormon, by Henry Inouye



Frederick G. Williams

Courtesy of Church Archives

Missouri before the onset of winter. One of their new converts, Frederick G. Williams, joined them as they continued their journey westward.⁶

In November they were among the Wyandot Indians near Sandusky, Ohio. The elders stayed there for several days and shared the important message of the Book of Mormon with them. The Wyandots were amiable and showed interest in this new religion. They even asked the missionaries to write and keep them informed about how well the tribes farther west received the message. The elders departed on friendly terms and made their way to Cincinnati.

Here they stayed for quite a few days “and preached to many people, but without much success.” Around December 20, they took a steamboat for St. Louis

down the Ohio River. However, after a few days of travel, the steamer was forced to stop because the river was “blocked with ice.”⁷ According to Parley P. Pratt, these elders left the steamboat at “the mouth of the Ohio” and continued their journey by foot. Several histories have erroneously referred to “the mouth of the Ohio” in 1830 as Cairo, Illinois. However, it was not officially named Cairo until 1839, nine years later.⁸

Missionaries in Illinois

When the missionaries went ashore, it was a historic moment; they became the first Latter-day Saints to enter Illinois. This would not have happened in 1830—so early in Church history—if the Ohio River had not frozen over. Originally the elders had planned to bypass Illinois and take a steamer from the Ohio River up the Mississippi River all the way to St. Louis, Missouri.⁹ However, due to inclement weather, they changed their plans. They had to travel by foot two hundred miles up the southwest corner of Illinois and then across the Mississippi River to St. Louis.¹⁰

Unfortunately, this phase of their journey coincided with one of the worst winters in the history of the Midwest, often referred to as the “Winter of the Deep Snow.”¹¹ The first storm began on December 20, the same day the missionaries left Cincinnati on a steamboat. “Cold rain began to fall . . . occasionally changing to snow or sleet, until the earth was saturated and frozen. . . . The

wildest imagination could not have dreamed that this first fall of snow was merely the overture to a winter of continuous storm.”¹² On December 30, a violent downpour unleashed its fury on the region. It was “bitter cold, a blinding, swirling blur of snow . . . combined to make this storm a thing to paralyze that prairie country.” One author described it as “a wonder, at first, then a terror . . . as it became a menace to life of men and animals.” The duration of the storm is not recorded. “In one sense it did not end at all; it merely changed in character, from time to time, for the next sixty days.”¹³

Several local histories in Illinois give descriptions of this exceptionally severe winter. *The History of White County, Illinois* explains, “It was definitely one of the hardest winters ever experienced here. Snow was deep, and a crust was formed upon its surface so strong a man could walk on it without breaking through.”¹⁴ *The History of Adams County, Illinois* tells of a man who lived on the Illinois River and “went a mile and a half from home on the morning the snow began to fall, to haul in some corn.” By the time he reached his destination, it was snowing so hard “it was almost impossible for any one to see or get about.” He stayed until evening, hoping the storm would subside. However, “it continued with increased fury, and by night was over eighteen inches deep, and still



falling.” Nevertheless, the man felt he must get back home to his wife and children, so he decided he would “climb on the back of his most gentle ox and ride him home.” Unfortunately the ox’s back was so slippery that he could not stay on it. In desperation, he “decided to wind the tail of the gentle ox firmly around his hand, and endeavor to follow [the ox] home.” Sadly, “before they went many rods he found it impossible to keep his feet.” So he simply hung onto the ox’s tail and made the animal “drag him the entire distance home.”¹⁵

Another local history publishes a somewhat disjointed but intriguing account given by a Pottawatomie Indian chief named Senogewone: “Big heap snow came early and no thaw until late spring. Snow, snow, snow everywhere. Blow into hollows and make all level. Deer could not travel. Indian wigwam all covered.” The chief continued: “Turkey got nothing to eat, prairie chicken starve, deer starve and die. Wolf not die, he run on top of snow crust, kill and eat plenty deer. Deer break through snow and no could run. Poor Indian hungry and almost starve.”¹⁶

The missionaries were obliged to make their way up the southwest corner of Illinois in the midst of these horrible weather conditions. Even though none of the elders wrote of their exact route, we assume that they took the most



Go into the Wilderness, by Robert T. Barrett

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direct and most traveled course. To give the reader a sense of what the missionaries might have encountered along the way, we will try to re-create the most probable route for their journey.

The elders most likely traveled along the mail route established twenty years earlier, in 1810. Southern Illinois was the most populous part of the state in 1830, but it was still rather sparsely settled. In at least one county of the region, the estimated population was less than four people per square mile.¹⁷ Therefore, the missionaries would have encountered a few villages and small towns along their way, but they were mostly walking along a rural course.

“The mouth of the Ohio [River]” was located on the southern tip of Alexander County, but the mail route cut through the northeast corner of the county, about twenty miles to the north. Therefore, in order to get to the mail route, the missionaries probably traveled through the settlement of Trinity (now Cache), a distance of about twelve miles from the mouth of the Ohio. From Trinity, they probably continued northward approximately eight or ten miles until they reached the mail route.¹⁸ During the first part of the trip, they traveled over open prairies with numerous creeks and muddy terrain. To their right, or to the east, was the Cache River, and beyond it, woodland. A few miles to the left was the Mississippi River. Thus they were somewhat exposed to the cold winds from the west.

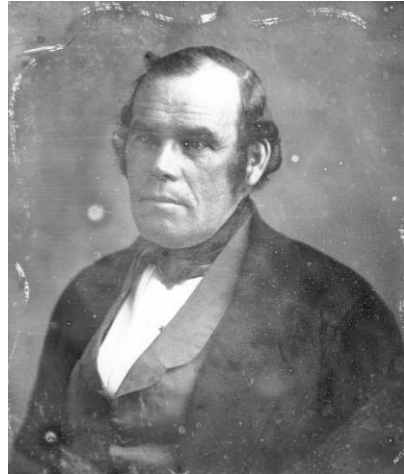
As they continued their journey northward from Trinity to the mail route, their trip became more difficult. Here the trail entered more rugged terrain, where hills were interlaced with sandstone, chert, and limestone formations. Soon the men came upon a large woodland that continued for about the next thirty miles (now part of the Shawnee National Forest). The trees sheltered the missionaries from the cold westerly winds. After walking in the forest for a few miles, they gratefully encountered the well-traveled mail route.

At about this same time, the missionaries entered Union County. Proceeding north along the mail route for another eight or ten miles, they came to Jonesborough, one of the most important villages in the region during that time, having been settled in 1803.¹⁹ The post office there had been established in 1823, evidence that this was a well-settled village.²⁰ This also was a logical place for them to find shelter for the night.

From Jonesborough, the mail route continued northwest for about twenty-five miles to Brownsville, near present-day Gorham in Jackson County. During this phase of the trip, the course became even more difficult, winding its way through deep, canyonlike ravines. To the east was a series of hills. If the weather had cleared, the elders could have seen Bald Knob, which is 1,030 feet above sea level. Bald Knob is part of a line of bluffs that cross southern Illinois from Grand Tower (Jackson County) on the west to “Cave-in-Rock” (Hardin County) on the east. This formation resulted from an ancient glacier that swept south, pushing deposits of limestone before it until it reached this area. To the north beyond the

bluffs are prairie lands, and to the south are alluvial flood planes of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.²¹

As the rocky trail descended, it gradually emerged from the thick forest. Thus the missionaries were west of the woodland again and were exposed for a second time to the piercing winds coming from the Mississippi River. A few miles before the trail reached Brownsville, it crossed the Muddy River and continued along the flood plains and bottoms of the Mississippi River. Flood plains such as these have many swamps and large open places called glades, which are devoid of trees and which often extend several miles beyond the banks of the river.²²



Parley P. Pratt

Courtesy of Church Archives

Soon the elders would have come to Brownsville. A post office had been established in Brownsville in 1817, and thus it was considered an old settlement.²³ Brownsville was described as “a raw, crude town and the majority of the houses were built of logs. . . . But, notwithstanding its crudity, it became one of the largest towns in the state, being exceeded in size only by Kaskaskia and Shawneetown. Of course, it must be remembered that neither of these towns were very large.” Brownsville’s population was probably between four and five hundred in 1834. “There were several business houses, carpenter shops, blacksmith and wagon-making shops, and also a tannery.”²⁴ Until the building of an extensive levee system along the Mississippi River, Brownsville was subject to periodic flooding, as were most communities along “the bottoms.” The principal population of Jackson County was concentrated “in and around Brownsville and along the Mississippi River south of the bluff road leading from Brownsville to Kaskaskia.” This was “probably the first road to be constructed in the county.”²⁵ The road was built on the bluffs, since the area known as the Upper Bottoms was to the west and was for the most part covered with ponds and lakes. The ridges between were covered with a dense growth of timber and long grass so thick that it was often extremely difficult to walk through.²⁶

The next major stopover would have been Kaskaskia, near present-day Chester in Randolph County, which was located about twenty-five miles to the northwest of Brownsville. Kaskaskia was, for a brief time, the capital of Illinois until the seat of government was moved to Vandalia in 1820. Eventually, Kaskaskia was washed away by the Mississippi River. Modern-day Kaskaskia is now located on the west side of the river.²⁷

The next village on the mail route was Prairie du Rocher, about twelve miles to the northwest in Randolph County. This little settlement, which was at the edge of the flood plains, had maintained a post office since 1821.²⁸ Here the mail route turned away from the Mississippi River and headed inland, almost due north, toward Waterloo. On the way to Waterloo, the missionaries probably would have passed by the village of New Design. (This community, which was established in the 1790s, changed its name to Burksville in 1912.)²⁹ A few miles north of New Design, the elders came upon the settlement of Waterloo, Monroe County, which established its post office in 1818.³⁰

The last major village along the mail route that the elders probably visited was Columbia, Monroe County. It seems likely that they reached Columbia when the worst of the snowstorms struck; Elder Pratt recorded, “We halted for a few days in Illinois, about twenty miles from St. Louis, on account of a dreadful storm of rain and snow, which lasted for a week or more, during which the snow fell in some places near three feet deep.”³¹ Elder Pratt does not give the name of the community where they stayed. However, it is probable that it was Columbia, since it was approximately twenty miles from St. Louis and was the most prominent village within that radius.

This unnamed location was where the restored gospel was first preached in Illinois. The only extant record of this historic event is a one-sentence entry in the *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*: “Although in the midst of strangers, we were kindly entertained, found many friends, and preached to large congregations in several neighborhoods.”³² Unfortunately, this brief statement abruptly ends Elder Pratt’s account of this episode, which leaves the reader wondering if any of the investigators in the area were serious about joining the Church.

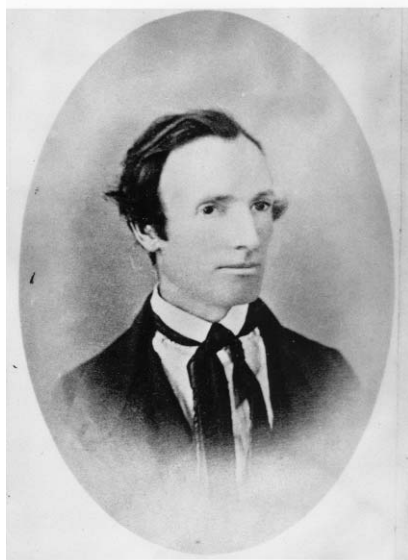
Missionaries in Missouri

Even though the weather allowed them to preach locally in Illinois, the prospects for crossing the Mississippi River to St. Louis were not good for several days. There is no record of exactly how or when the missionaries crossed the river. However, we do know that they renewed their journey “in the beginning of 1831” at which time they passed through St. Louis and St. Charles, Missouri.³³ Unfortunately, this last phase of their journey, through Missouri, was also taken up at a time of unrelenting cold weather, which contributed greatly to hazardous traveling conditions. The *Missouri Intelligencer* of Columbia for January 8, 1831, records, “We are informed that the snow in the upper countries of Missouri is 41 inches deep, and, what is very remarkable, the falling was accompanied by frequent and tremendous peals of thunder and vivid blue streaks of lightening. It was an awful scene, indeed.”³⁴

Nevertheless, these brave, faithful missionaries were determined to continue their journey, having been called by revelation to share the message of the

Book of Mormon with the descendants of its authors. Pratt's account is graphic, making it possible to envision their difficult journey: "We travelled on foot for three hundred miles through vast prairies and through trackless wilds of snow—no beaten road; houses few and far between; and the bleak northwest wind always blowing in our faces with a keenness which would almost take the skin off the face." He continued: "We travelled for whole days, from morning till night, without a house or fire, wading in snow to the knees at every step, and the cold so intense that the snow did not melt on the south side of the houses, even in the mid-day sun, for nearly six weeks. We carried on our backs our changes of clothing, several books, and corn bread and raw pork. We often ate our frozen bread and pork by the way, when the bread would be so frozen that we could not bite or penetrate any part of it but the outside crust."³⁵ After traveling about fifteen hundred miles, with "much fatigue and some suffering [the missionaries] all arrived in Independence, in the county of Jackson, on the extreme western frontiers of Missouri, and of the United States."³⁶

In order to support their missionary activities, Peter Whitmer Jr. and Ziba Peterson began working as tailors in the frontier village of Independence. In the meantime, their other three companions—Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, and Frederick G. Williams—crossed over the western border of Missouri into Indian Territory.³⁷ They spent several days preaching the gospel to the Delaware Indians, and their message was well received. However, their success



Oliver Cowdery

Courtesy of Church Archives



“stirred up the jealousy and envy of the Indian agents and sectarian missionaries to that degree that [the Mormons] were soon ordered out of the Indian country as disturbers of the peace; and even threatened with the military in case of non-compliance.”³⁸ This reaction abruptly ended the first Latter-day Saint mission to the Native Americans.

The missionaries returned to Independence, where they reunited with their companions, Peter Whitmer Jr. and Ziba Peterson. In February 1831, they selected Parley P. Pratt to return to the east and report on their mission.³⁹ The others remained in the Independence area until the Prophet Joseph Smith arrived in July 1831.⁴⁰ During the time they lived in Missouri, they preached the gospel to the white settlers with some success but never baptized any Native Americans.

Nevertheless, the mission to the Native Americans in 1830 to 1831 was truly one of the most significant episodes in early Church history. The 127 people that the elders baptized in the Kirtland, Ohio, area may have established in that community “the largest single group of Latter-day Saints on the earth at the time.”⁴¹ Several of these Ohio converts would become prominent leaders of the Church, including Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams. This mission also helped establish two great centers for the Church in the 1830s—Kirtland, Ohio, and Independence, Missouri.

Seemingly lost in all these lofty achievements, however, is the important fact that these missionaries also had the distinction of being the first Latter-day Saints to set foot in Illinois. In addition, they were the first to teach the restored gospel in that great state. Thus they were the Mormon pioneers for Illinois, paving the way for thousands to follow. During the 1830s, Illinois would become the great Mormon thoroughfare between the Church’s two official gathering places of Ohio and Missouri.

Notes

1. See Leland H. Gentry, “Light on the ‘Mission to the Lamanites,’” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 2 (1996–97): 227; and Warren A. Jennings, “The First Mormon Mission to the Indians,” *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Autumn 1971): 288.

2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:120.

3. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 47.

4. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 48.

5. See Jennings, “The First Mormon Mission to the Indians,” 289; and *Church History in the Fulness of Times* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 82.

6. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:125.

7. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 51.

8. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 51–52; see also James N. Adams, *Illinois Place Names*, ed. William E. Keller (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1989), 309, 446.

9. A number of Native Americans living in northern Illinois in 1830 had not yet relocated in present-day Kansas or Oklahoma. However, they were living so far to the north that they were not on the course to western Missouri that the missionaries were pursuing. The elders visited with Indians that happened to be on their route, but they did not divert from their path to seek out tribes that were not along their way.

10. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 51–52.

11. See Eleanor Atkinson, “The Winter of the Deep Snow,” *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* 14 (1909), 49–55. This article was reprinted in *The Prairie State*. The title was changed from “The Winter of the Deep Snow” to “The Year of the Deep Snow.” In this volume we quote from “The Year of the Deep Snow,” *The*

Prairie State: A Documentary History of Illinois, Colonial Years to 1860, ed. Roberts P. Sutton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 217–25.

12. Atkinson, “The Year of the Deep Snow,” 217–18.

13. Atkinson, “The Year of the Deep Snow,” 218.

14. *History of White County, Illinois* (Chicago: Inter-state Publishing Company, 1883), 285–86.

15. *The History of Adams County, Illinois* (Chicago: Murray, Williamson and Phelps, 1879), 271.

16. Jean L. Herath, *Indians and Pioneers: A Prelude to Plainfield, Illinois* (Hinckley, IL: Hinckley Review, 1975), 58.

17. George E. Parks, *History of Union County Illinois* (Anna, IL: G. E. Parks, 1984), 128.

18. The roads were maintained from the village of Trinity to the mail route and beyond to Jonesboro, Union County (see Parks, *History*, 164).

19. *Illinois Guide & Gazetteer* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), 321.

20. Adams, *Illinois Place Names*, 404.

21. Parks, *History*, 1.

22. *Historical Sketches of Jackson County, Illinois* (Carbondale, IL: E. Newsome, 1894), 14.

23. Adams, *Illinois Place Names*, 304.

24. Jackson County, *Illinois Formation and Early Settlement* (Murphysboro, IL: Jackson County Historical Society, 1894), 17.

25. Jackson County, *Illinois Formation and Early Settlement*, 19–20, 48.

26. *Historical Sketches of Jackson County Illinois*, 14–15.

27. Adams, *Illinois Place Names*, 406–7.

28. Adams, *Illinois Place Names*, 479.

29. Adams, *Illinois Place Names*, 307.

30. Adams, *Illinois Place Names*, 539.

31. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 52.

32. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 52.

33. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 52.

34. Atkinson, “The Year of the Deep Snow,” 224.

35. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 52.

36. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 52.

37. Jennings, “The First Mormon Mission to the Indians,” 291; also Pratt, *Autobiography*, 53.

38. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 57.

39. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 58.

40. See Andrew Jenson, *Latter-Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 1:248; also Leland H. Gentry, “Light on the ‘Mission to the Lamanites,’” 229.

41. See *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 66.