Cache Cave
Photograph by Scott C. Esplin.
On Monday, July 12, 1847, the main body of Mormon pioneers made their first camp in what is now known as the state of Utah. That evening, a few of the men walked a quarter mile to the east of camp to “a curious cave in the center of the [coarse] sandstone.” They named the cave Redden’s Cave, as Jackson Redden was the first of the company to observe it. Redden was a thirty-one-year-old former bodyguard of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Redden’s Cave, later known as Cache Cave, would become a notable landmark for the pioneers during the exodus from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley and, a decade later, an important rendezvous point during the Utah War. One early-nineteenth-century journalist wrote that the Mormons established Cache Cave as the frontier-day church. Using it as a place for prayer, sermons, and refuge, the cave was once dubbed the “first Mormon church in the west.” Cache Cave should be remembered by historians.

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and scholars as an integral piece of the Mormon Trail. From its vantage point off to the side and above the original trail, Cache Cave stands as a stalwart witness of the courage and faith of the thousands of individuals who crossed by it with eyes fixed toward the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

**Vanguard Company**

Many of the vanguard company made note of the cave in their journals. Each creates a picture in the mind of the reader. Read together, their descriptions form a detailed portrayal of the cave and its features. Orson Pratt described the cave in a journal entry dated July 12, 1847, with these words: “We encamped at the foot of a ledge of rocks on the right.” He described the cave as “fronting to the south and a little inclined from the perpendicular. The open resembles very much the doors attached to an outdoor cellar, being about eight feet high and 12 or 14 feet wide. . . . We went into this cave about 30 feet where the entrance became quite small, and so we did not feel disposed to penetrate it any further. On the outer side of the roof were several swallows nests.”

Under the same date, William Clayton’s journal describes “a cave in the rock about thirty feet long, fifteen feet wide and from four to six feet high. There are many martins at the entrance and on observing closely, can be seen myriads of small bugs.” Wilford Woodruff recorded, “At the back part of the cave are large wolf dens or those of other animals.”

Time for exploration was short lived on the trail; the vanguard company was not yet to its final destination. On Tuesday, July 13, President Brigham Young, who had stayed at the previous day’s camp at Coyote Creek due to Rocky Mountain spotted fever, sent Heber C. Kimball, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, on to the campsite below the cave with instruction. The company, which had split into two groups, was now to become three groups and subsequently remained that way for the rest of the journey. Pratt and
Erastus Snow were sent ahead to improve the Donner-Reed Trail into the valley. (The trail was named after the ill-fated group that just one year previous had been where the pioneers now stood.) Meanwhile the main portion of the group, headed by Willard Richards and George A. Smith, also members of the Quorum of the Twelve, would stay another day at Cache Cave. The third group was a rear guard, which stayed with Elder Kimball and President Young.7

On Wednesday, July 14, while the main company stayed at their camp near Cache Cave, Thomas Bullock, chief clerk for the vanguard company, went to explore the cave. He described it as thirty-six feet by twenty-four feet and about four to six feet high. He observed about fifty swallows’ nests near the roof of the cave. Referring to the cave in his journal as Swallows Cave, he said they found the nests to be swarming with bedbugs. Using the cave as an office for his duties as chief clerk, Bullock wrote that he “Sat in the Cave all day (with S. H. Goddard). Made another copy of ‘The Word and Will of The Lord’ [and] endorsed it ‘Thomas Bullock,’ according to President Young’s directions.”8

After starting their new community near the Great Salt Lake in the latter part of July, half the original company returned to Winter Quarters in Nebraska, where they had spent the previous winter. There they prepared to make another journey to the Salt Lake Valley the following year. In the fall of 1848, as Thomas Bullock was again traveling to the Salt Lake Valley, he recorded that they visited the cave. Referring to it as “his old office,” he noted that “some mischievous persons had broken down all the swallows nests, but left the bugs.”9

Perhaps to rest for a while, to enjoy one another’s company, or to take advantage of time in the shade, many men of the vanguard company took the time to carve their names on the walls of Cache Cave. Often, they engraved a date indicating the year of the engraving. Over the next two decades many others would follow their example. Each name carefully engraved in Cache Cave represents a life lived. Each
name came from the hand of a unique individual with family, friends, hopes, dreams, and fears of an unknown future.

**Before the Pioneers**

Information concerning the cave before the pioneers came into Utah is scarce. According to Clayton's journal, there is evidence that the cave had been used before the pioneers arrived. In his July 12, 1847, journal entry, Clayton wrote, “It is supposed from appearances that there is some property cached in the cave.” Because there are not dates attached to each name, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that some of the names engraved in the cave could be from that time. However, there is not a date on the walls that predates 1847.

The name “Redden’s Cave” likely passed out of existence when Clayton referred to the cave as “Cache Cave” in his *Emigrants Guide* published in St. Louis in 1848. It is unknown why Clayton gave the cave the name he did. The name might have been given to Clayton by Miles Goodyear, the first white settler of the Great Basin who met the pioneers on states and spent some time with them. Goodyear had built a fort along the Weber River, in present-day Ogden, Utah, about forty miles north of where the Saints would eventually settle. It is unknown whether Goodyear knew some history of the cave and shared it with the Saints, but it’s possible that he did.

**Formation and Shape**

Cache Cave is geologically unique because caves of its nature are common in limestone but rare in sandstone. Hundreds of years before the pioneers would explore its walls, Cache Cave was being formed by an underground stream, which emerged at the surface as a spring. Long before the days of wagons and handcarts, the spring was likely considerable in size. Centuries of erosion from the flow of the water eventually softened and then disintegrated the surrounding sandstone. As grain after grain of the sandstone fell into the stream and was carried
away, the cave grew in size. In time, the spring shrunk and receded back underground, leaving the dry sandstone cave into which the first Mormons would enter in July of 1847.  

Travelers often described the appearance of the cave in the journals. One traveler on his way to California described the cave as “small” and “oven-like shaped.” Sir Richard Burton, an explorer and author who visited Utah in 1860, described his viewing of the cave by writing, “Cache Cave is a dark, deep, natural tunnel in the rock.” Burton speculated that the cave had “sheltered many a hunter and trader from wild weather and wilder men.” Crossing to Utah in 1863, Elijah Larkin wrote, “This morning at daybreak I went with my boys & paid a Visit to Cache Cave[,] it was with some difficulty we assended the Mountain. The cave is in the shape of a large Bakers Oven & in the Centre a tall man can stand upright in it & it will hold as near as I can tell 50 persons comfortably & has altogether a singular appearance, & is about two thirds up the North West side of the Mountain.” A nineteenth-century newspaper stated that the round ceiling of the cave influenced the design of the Salt Lake Tabernacle with its umbrella-like roof. Despite a physical resemblance between the cave and the tabernacle, this is an unsubstantiated claim.

Names

Many early settlers traveling along the Oregon Trail had carved or used tar to write their names on Independence Rock in Wyoming. The Mormon pioneers undoubtedly saw what others had done, and some even participated in the tradition. Just a few hundred miles to the west, using these same methods, they wrote their names on the walls of Cache Cave.

Like Independence Rock, the sandstone walls of Cache Cave provided an ideal setting for the inscription of names and hence served well as a register of the emigrants who passed through. Thus Cache Cave was the venue for the first recorded names in Utah. Woodruff
Henry R. Smith

wrote, “The cave is composed of light colored and very soft sandstone and many of us cut our names on the walls.”

In 1931, Edgar M. Ledyard, president of the Utah Historical Landmarks Association, made three trips to the cave and took photographs and recorded the names inscribed on the walls. Wayne C. Grover, a writer for the *Deseret News* who would later become the third archivist of the United States, filled a full page of the newspaper with multiple articles about Ledyard’s findings at the cave. The newspaper article highlighted the association’s decision to erect a marker at the cave on July 12, 1931, exactly eighty-four years after the pioneers first found it. Among the names still visible in 1931 were William Henrie and John Eldredge, both members of the pioneer camp of 1847. The names of Elnathan Eldredge and Alanson Eldgredge, who came across in the Daniel Spencer and Ira Eldredge Company of 1847, and Judson Tolman, who entered the Salt Lake Valley with the Brigham Young company in 1848, were also still visible to Ledyard in 1931. Other pioneers who came to the valley in 1847, such as Jane Sherwood, Jonathan Campbell, Thomas Moore, Charlotte Baker, James Taylor, William Taylor, and Joseph White, may have also carved their names in the walls of Cache Cave and been recorded by Ledyard.

Inscribing a name on the wall of the cave continued until the railroad was completed in 1869 and the old immigration road was traveled much less. Dr. Thomas Flint, who came across the trail in 1853, wrote, “Camped in Echo Canyon, opposite Cache Cave, . . . in which many a traveler had inscribed his name and we did likewise.” George Beard, who came to Utah from England in 1868 with the John G. Holman Company, remembered Cache Cave in describing his journey. He remarked, “At that time the Mormon trail crossed Bear River, went past Yellow Creek and came into Echo Canyon at Cache Cave. Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff and many of the leaders scratched with a nail their names in the soft sandstone ledge in the cave and can be seen today.” Of the men Beard listed, only
Woodruff recorded that he had cut his name into the rock. If the other men had inscribed their names inside the cave, they were likely not visible to Ledyard in 1931. A journalist reporting on Ledyard’s work wrote, “One hundred and thirty-two Mormons carved their names in the soft sandstone of the walls and 30 more carved their names on the nearby cliffs.”

Besides the names inscribed on the walls, there are other names in the cave that have been preserved because they were written with tar. Emigrants would often carry tar in a bucket on the back of a wagon to grease wagon axles. At times the tar was used as a paint to write on rock or wood. The names written with tar on Independence Rock were eventually washed away by the elements decades ago, but the names in Cache Cave have been much more protected from weather and some are still slightly visible today. Years of wind erosion eventually cut the surrounding rock away from the names written in tar in Cache Cave, leaving the letters in a resilient outline for many years. In 1935, Andrew Jenson, then assistant Church historian, wrote, “Cache Cave is said to be the most accessible names rock in America and contains some very valuable and interesting signatures, all remarkably well preserved on account of being protected by the wind and rain.”

Unique Cache Cave Episodes

Utah’s first murder trial. Cache Cave was also the site of an interesting situation involving Howard Egan, a member of the original vanguard company, and James Monroe, a Mormon schoolteacher. In 1849, Howard Egan was sent by Brigham Young to guide a group to California. Upon return, he discovered that one of his wives, Tamson, had allegedly been seduced by Monroe and had given birth to an illegitimate child. Many months later, Egan found Monroe with a wagon train at Cache Cave, where he pulled him aside for a conversation. After the conversation, Egan shot and killed Monroe.
Egan was brought in to appear before the United States First District Court for the Territory of Utah with Elder George A. Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles acting as his lawyer. This was the first murder trial in Utah. Smith told the jury that Egan was not guilty because it was his opinion that the only law in respect to adultery which should govern in such an isolated place was “that the man who seduces his neighbor’s wife must die.” The jury deliberated for only fifteen minutes and returned with their verdict, not guilty. On March 6, 1852, the territorial legislature passed the Justifiable Homicide Act, which some thought to be a direct outcome of the Egan case.

**Final resting place.** Journals state that the campsite adjacent to Cache Cave became the final resting place for three individuals. In 1860, the *Deseret News* announced the arrival of the first handcart company led by Captain Daniel Robinson. In the announcement was the report that “a child of two years of age, son of William Robinson of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, died and was buried at Cache Cave.” And according to the 1863 journal of Elijah Larkin, when his company reached Cache Cave, an infant of a Sister Weeks “that had been born on the plains & had been sickly ever since died this morning & was buried at this place.”

Elizabeth Donnelly Maxwell, born in 1804, is the only adult known to be buried just outside Cache Cave. She joined the Church in Scotland in 1844, along with her husband, Ralph Maxwell Sr., and their four children. Ralph died in 1853, three years before the family would immigrate to America. The family traveled from Boston to Iowa by rail and then joined the Daniel D. McArthur handcart company of 1856. By the time the company reached Fort Bridger, Elizabeth was too sick to travel any further. The decision was made that her children would continue on to the valley. She said a tearful good-bye to each of her children and promised to see them in the spring. It is unknown if Elizabeth waited until spring, but at some point she decided to continue on to the valley. Sadly, her body could not handle the hardships
of the trail. Elizabeth died at the head of Echo Canyon and was buried at Cache Cave.  

**Utah War.** In the spring of 1857, U.S. president James Buchanan sent troops to Utah to quell what he thought was a Mormon rebellion. General Albert Sidney Johnston led 2,500 soldiers toward Utah to replace Brigham Young with a non-Mormon appointed governor. Hearing of the president’s plans, the Mormons prepared to defend themselves. The Nauvoo Legion was reorganized with Lt. General Daniel H. Wells, a member of the First Presidency, as their commander. For a few weeks in October 1857, Wells made Cache Cave his eastern headquarters, with messengers and spies, such as Orrin Porter Rockwell, using the cave as an express station.

By the end of spring 1858, tensions had been reduced dramatically and negotiations ended the conflict without a battle. In May of 1858, the second governor of the Utah Territory, Alfred Cumming, was escorted by Porter Rockwell across Mormon lines for the first time. Mormon officers had arranged for a banquet to meet the new governor. That evening, Cumming was a dinner guest of 150 officers of the Nauvoo Legion at Cache Cave. As the escort continued on to Echo Canyon, Mormon troops stood on both sides of the road to salute the new governor.

**Outlaw.** Cache Cave also played a part in the career of Isaac “Ike” Potter, an apostate Mormon outlaw who, with a band of Ute Indians, terrorized northern Utah settlements in the 1860s. In the spring of 1867, Stephan Nixon, one of the original settlers of Wanship, Utah, gave Potter an assignment to deliver forty-five sacks of grain to the army at Fort Bridger. Potter didn’t deliver. Instead, he stowed the grain in Cache Cave. Nixon, worried about the fate of his grain, filed suit for nondelivery and had another man go get the grain. Potter was ordered to pay a fine plus court costs. A month later, in August of 1867, Potter was killed in what witnesses say was an attempt to escape from the Coalville Jail.
1900s. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Cache Cave became a frequent stop for wards and other groups holding scouting activities and even Church services. They came to Cache Cave to learn of their history and to be inspired by it. Newspapers during that time often referred to the cave as “Utah’s most noted historical landmark”\(^{38}\) and “one of the greatest landmarks of the west.”\(^{39}\)

In the middle of the twentieth century, Cache Cave and the surrounding property were sold to private ownership. At present, the land is owned by the Fawcett family, who purchased the land in 1942. They primarily use the land for raising sheep. Cache Cave now sits unprotected and rarely visited. One hundred years ago, the average Latter-day Saint family living in Utah visited the cave, while for most of today’s Latter-day Saints, Cache Cave is an unfamiliar place.

**Conclusion**

Today, very few names are still completely visible in Cache Cave. It is likely that in time, the names inscribed on the walls of Cache Cave will wash away entirely and the cave’s place among Church history landmarks will continue to fade into the background. As the evidence of the engravings slowly disappears, the lives of the pioneers who rested, talked, and wrote there need not do so. The memories and stories of those that cut their names on the walls of the cave can be inscribed on the hearts and minds of today’s Latter-day Saints as the benefactors of such great sacrifices.

Trail historian Richard Bennett wrote the following about Wyoming’s Independence Rock: “A favorite stopping place for travelers of all political and religious persuasions, this natural monument still bears the rock-hewn inscriptions of the names of thousands of men, women, and children on their way west to new lands of hope and freedom. It remains a symbol of their endurance and of their commitment to America.”\(^{40}\) In a similar manner, Cache Cave still bears the rock-hewn inscriptions of the Mormon pioneers on their
CACHE CAVE

way to new lands of hope and freedom. Each name inscribed reminds modern Latter-day Saints that their pioneer forbearers were unique individuals with loved ones and hopes for a bright future. Though worn from over 150 years of weather, the names inscribed on the walls of Cache Cave are witnesses of commitment to leaders, families, and faith.

Notes

1. Journal of Orson Pratt, July 12, 1847, Journal History of the Church, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Journal accounts of Orson Pratt, William Clayton, Wilford Woodruff, and Thomas Bullock were taken from the Journal History of the Church, an excellent resource available at the Church Historical Department, compiled by former assistant Church historian Andrew Jenson. Many of the pioneer journal entries are also available at history.lds.org/overlandtravels. Andrew Jenson, Day to Day with the Utah Pioneers, 1847 (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Tribune, 1934), 99. In 1897, the Salt Lake Tribune published a series of 111 stories, each describing one of the 111 days of the 1847 Mormon trek west. The series was entitled Fifty Years Ago Today. Thirty-seven years later, in 1934, the Tribune reprinted the series, with revisions and additions, under the title Day by Day with the Utah Pioneers, 1847.


3. “Cache Cave First Mormon Church in the West,” Morgan County Newspaper, August 27, 1931, 5. Public interest in the cave was high in 1931 due to the work of Edgar M. Ledyard and the Utah Historical Landmarks Association.


13. Bennett, *We’ll Find the Place*, 221.


18. “Cache Cave First Mormon Church,” 5.

20. Bennett, *We'll Find the Place*, 367.

21. Grover, “Utah’s First Hotel Register.” Grover listed the inscriptions and partial inscriptions Ledyard recorded in the cave as follows: “W. Henrie; N. Montgomery; N. M. Mood . . . ; CL Miller, July, 1868; L. Helm; JS Follou . . . ; L Bunyon (or L Dunyon); JM Sherwood; H. Woouacoot; J Campbell; J Tolman; W Taylor; James Palmer, 1855; JR Hughes; RM Brain; TJ Dyer, June, 18 . . .; J Zimmerman, 1852; J Parry, 1866; CC Reynolds; DO Roberts; WJ Cross; Clifford Wright; Henry Yaw, 1850; C Vall . . ., Mich.; R Long; RH Hathaway; JW Parry, July 25, 1861; C Lincoln; J Wood, 1852; OH Berg 1866; JA Wells, July; H Nichols, 1865; C Clark 1868; AH Smith; KW Quarm 1862; AC Cook; M Miggott Iowa City; J Reddington, 1862; D Moore, 1868; MJ Duffy; PPP, 1861; JW Lambert; J Hecore; T.E. Moore; WT Hamilton; Louis Peterson; Alex M Cahon PA; JW Kimball; J Owen Oneil, MO, 1860; I.W. Parry, July 25, 1861; J. Kimball; James Quinney, July 12, ’52; M Langhorne; E Irwin, 1854; J Chirhall; JA Wells; D Oviatt, May 28, 1860; S Jefferson; R Johnson; E Sadh; William F. Kelly; J Farnsworth; EL Nathan Eldredge, 1847; J Judson; John H Frost; W Newell, May 20; TM Breen; RE Scott, 1850; JK Wiatt; J. Scott ’52 ’55 (or 53); W Handy; RM Meek; JH Caine; Vew L Burns; LA Kloek; Rebecca . . .; GO Watt; M Felt, July, 1850; B Eason; J Ward, 1852; WT Hamill; JA Wier (or Weer) June ’52; Jose M Hill; Joseph Hill, 1861; John Bennet; E Vahorn; E Holt; LS Will; Joseph Kimball; P Stout; John Gowans; C Baker; E Fowler; M Caldwell, May, 1868; HA Hubble; BF Kenney, 1861; John Lind; W Reynolds; . . . Reader, 1857; AW Stickney, 1871; GW Cohard; L. Barn?; B Larkin; HJ Grant (or HJ Grave); WN Farld; . . . Wickersham; JA Wieler; J Sand; William Kimball, 1861; Josiah Daniels; Stephen Bacon; Alice Harris, 1866; W. Sebasdian; AB Tyknor; BL (or BH) Boyd, 1854; TJ Devin, June 20, 1850; KP Dodge; I Todd; JR Hughes, RR, Wis; KO Fairfax, Ill.; Ward Moore; J Taylor; W Taylor; . . . Wilson; HN Ewhl; . . . White; T Wall; C Everett; A Brown Sept 10, 1875; M Soldridge, July 7, 1866; Flemming Hansen, 1868; EE Calvin, Dec. 1, 1851.”

22. Flint, *Diary of Dr. Thomas Flint*, 98.
24. “Cache Cave First Mormon Church in the West,” 5.
26. Clair T. Kilts, “A History of the Federal and Territorial Court Conflicts in Utah, 1851–1874” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1959). There is some dispute over the exact location of the murder. Kilts cites Hosea Stout’s account as the most credible source as to the location because he attended the trial. Stout wrote that it took place ten miles west of the Bear River, placing it directly in the area of Cache Cave.
34. Journal History of the Church, September 26, 1856.
38. Grover, “Utah’s First Hotel Register.”