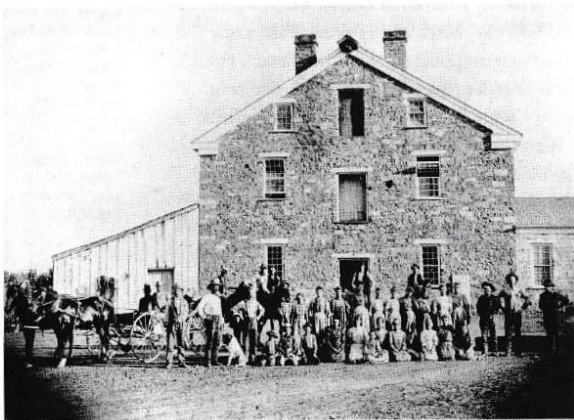


1847 *PIONEER* 1997
— sesquicentennial —

THE COTTON MISSION

BY JULIE A. DOCKSTADER



Washington Cotton Mill, ca. 1894. LDS Archives

Beloved Southland, dear to me,

My Dixie Home! My Dixie Home!

My heart in song I raise to thee,

My Dixie Home! My Dixie Home!

Land where my fathers toiled and died,

Once scorned of men, but now their pride,

I'll sing thy praises far and wide,

My Dixie Home! My Dixie Home!

SINKING PIONEER ROOTS IN RED EARTH

When Anthony W. Ivins wrote this song to the melody of "Maryland, My Maryland," he wasn't writing of pillared plantation houses or Southern belles with lace parasols. His "Beloved Southland" was about 300 miles southwest of Salt Lake City.¹ Ivins was one of the early Mormon settlers sent to southern Utah by Brigham Young during the 1850s and early 1860s to establish what came to be known as the "Cotton Mission."²

President Young had envisioned such an undertaking long before the seeds of "King Cotton" began germinating in what later became Utah's Washington County. As he and his band of Mormon pioneers entered the Salt Lake valley in July 1847, it was apparent to the man they called "the American Moses" that not only were they destitute of food—they were also threadbare, and they had no means of clothing the thousands of Saints who would soon pour into the Great Basin unless they were able to grow for themselves the cotton they would need for material.

But "King Cotton" needs sunny, fertile land for success, so in November 1849 the Southern Exploring Company, under the leadership of Parley P. Pratt, was sent south.³ On the last day of the year, Pratt stood on the rim of the Great Basin and looked over what would later become known as "Utah's Dixie." One has only to read his description of the sight to imagine the look on his face: "The great Wasatch range... here terminates in several abrupt promontories, the country southward opening to the view for at least 80 miles, and showing no signs of water or fertility... in short a country in ruins..."⁴

Despite this discouragement, the explorers camped Jan. 1, 1850, "along the Santa Clara Creek about two miles above where this creek joins with the Virgin River, very near the present towns of St. George and Santa Clara."⁵ A Feb. 7, 1850, report to the governor and legislature described the "beauty and mildness of the climate of that portion of country along the Virgin River and Santa Clara." The explorers who wallowed through snow to reach the

winter sunshine of Utah's Dixie never forgot the contrast between the two climates.

In the fall of 1852, the first Mormon settlement was established when a small company led by John D. Lee colonized Harmony, about 25 miles south of present-day Cedar City.⁶ Other small colonies followed.

Even though the early settlements were part of the Cotton Mission effort, however, the first cotton seeds planted in Utah's



St. George, ca. 1875, by C.R. Savage. LDS Archives

Dixie were not planted by farmers—they were planted by proselyting Mormon missionaries sent to teach the Indians, or "Lamanites." On April 14, 1854, several wagons pulled out of Salt Lake City to open the Southern Indian Mission. Subsequent missionaries followed later, and the Santa Clara colony was established.

Soon one of the missionaries, Jacob Hamblin, became ill and needed medicine and nourishing food. Augustus Hardy went north

1 Under Dixie Sun, A History of Washington County By Those Who Loved Their Forebears, Washington County Chapter of Daughters of Utah Pioneers, p. 22.

2 Biographical Encyclopedia, by Andrew Jensen, p. 311.

3 Under Dixie Sun, p. 61.

4 Ibid., p. 23.

5 "A Brief Historical Sketch of the St. George Temple from the Founding of the City to the Dedication of the Temple; with a Concentration on the Ground Breaking and Dedication Services," by William L. Riley, Jan. 4, 1968, p. 1.

6 The Immortal Pioneers, by Albert E. Miller, pp. 6-8.

7 Under Dixie Sun, p. 23; Our Pioneer Heritage, compiled by Kate B. Carter, published by Daughters of Utah Pioneers, vol. 13, p. 532.

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8 Under Dixie Sun, p. 24-25; Under Dixie Sun, p. 62.

9 Ibid. pp. 63-64.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 The Immortal Pioneers, p. 10.

13 Mountain West, "Dixie's Cotton Mission," by Lee Reay, 1980, vol. 6, no. 5, p. 15.

14 Under Dixie Sun, pp. 65-66.

15 Ibid.

to a settlement called Parowan to get supplies. While there, Brother Hardy visited Nancy Anderson, who was born and raised in the southern United States and who had with her a quart of cotton seed, which she gave to the missionary. The first cotton seed was planted on 100 acres of land near Santa Clara Creek. From this planting, two more quarts of seed were procured.

Such an undertaking was new to almost all of the missionaries. One of them recommended soaking the seed in new milk to aid germination, but none of the seed that was so treated matured. The rest of the seed resulted in about 100 plants that grew and produced 75 pounds of seed cotton. After it was ginned, Caroline Beck Knight, Marie Woodbury Haskell and other women carded, spun and wove the cotton into 30 yards of cloth. This was the beginning of cotton culture in Utah's Dixie, which eventually expanded into a string of settlements along the Virgin River.⁸

During the April 1857 general conference, the first "cotton missionaries" were called. Under the leadership of Robert Dockey Covington, 28 families and several young unmarried men arrived at the present site of Washington, Utah, on May 6, 1857. Many of these settlers were originally from the Southern states and were accustomed to raising cotton.

Not all of these missionaries agreed that cotton could be grown in this barren, desolate country. Some thought it a hoax. Others, however, thought the "soil was as good as that of Texas." The first year these cotton farmers realized only one-third of a crop and that, according to an early observer, was yellow in appearance. But what courage and optimism! The spring of 1858 found these cotton missionaries planting 130 acres into cotton and predicting a yield of 156,000 pounds.⁹

The years of 1855-'60 were experimental years for the Cotton Mission. George A. Smith, chairman of a territorial committee on cotton cultivation, visited the southern settlements during these

years and in a report to the Legislature Council of the Territory of Utah in 1859, he "recommended that cotton culture in Washington County be extended."¹⁰

In April 1861, the cannons of Fort Sumter, S.C.—roaring the outbreak of America's Civil War—underscored the need for self-reliance in the Great Basin. "This sudden outburst of hostilities abruptly cut commercial intercourse between the Northern states and the South. With this cessation of trade came a blockade of cotton traffic. Isolated as they were in the mountain vastness of their desert Zion, the Mormons realized they must supply their every need"—including cotton.¹¹

The following month, President Young himself toured the southern Utah settlements. During his visit, he viewed with favor a valley north of Tropic, "extending from the junction of the Santa Clara and Virgin, to the vermilion hills to the north." This valley was about three miles square. Brother Brigham was looking to establish a central city for the Cotton Mission.¹² While looking over the future site of St. George, President Young predicted, "There will yet be built between these volcanic ridges, a city, with spires, towers and steeples, with homes containing many inhabitants."¹³

The first of these "inhabitants" were called during the October 1861 general conference. Three hundred families were to settle a central city in Washington County. "This mission to Dixie required sacrifice; therefore, the leaders were careful in selecting the most 'sturdy character, courageous, thrifty, obedient, faithful and honest.' Many faltered, but many more were of the temperament of Wandle Mace, who, upon hearing his name called said, 'My feelings changed, and I not only felt willing, but anxious to respond to the call.'"¹⁴

Elder Erastus Snow, a member of the LDS Church's Quorum of Twelve Apostles, was one of the leaders of the cotton missionaries. "I feel to speak encouragingly to my brethren, so far as our removal from this to the southern part of the territory is con-

cerned," he told his fellow cotton missionaries. "I feel to go body and spirit with my heart and soul, and I sincerely hope that my brethren will endeavor to do the same."¹⁵

The name of this new city was to be St. George, after George A. Smith—known as the father of the Southern Utah settlements. Soon wagons rolled south accompanied by strains of "Dixie's Land," a popular tune of the day that had meaning to cotton missionaries because of its refrain about being "away down south" and "in the land of cotton." The cotton missionaries "didn't understand cotton culture, but they were willing and anxious to learn."¹⁶

On Dec. 1, 1861, the main body of settlers formed a camp about half a mile northeast of where the St. George Temple stands today. Committees were formed and plans for a city were made.¹⁷ At a mass meeting, the heads of families drew from a drum a card upon which was written a description and location of his assigned city lot. Arable farm land was apportioned the same way.¹⁸

Much has been written and said about the faith and backbone of those who settled this arid country—people like David H. and Wilhelmina Cannon. Upon receiving their land, David "drove his wagon up to a large mesquite bush, set the bed off under the shade, then with the running gears, went to the Santa Clara Creek and secured willows to make a shed. The family settled, ready for house-keeping, he could turn his attention to preparing land for crops, and to diverting the water of the spring to the lots of the now-established city. Then there was the digging of a canal to divert the water of the Rio Virgin, to cover the land in the south part of the valley; as the small streams of the valley would only provide water for gardens planted on the three-quarter-acre lots and for family use as culinary water."¹⁹

Life in these early days was stark and hard. For a time, Wilhelmina was discouraged over the dreary outlook. Encouraging her, David promised her the country would blossom as a rose. She replied, "If I could have but one flower I would be content."

In response, David hunted and found for her a Sego Lily, which "he brought to her with love. She felt comforted, and she lived many years in this land, learning to love it."²¹

The same thing could probably be said for many of those who settled St. George, as the early years saw great hardship and discouragement: "Too much praise cannot be given the people who built up that beautiful city in the midst of a barren desert... Dams built on the river were frequently washed out, especially during the severe floods of 1861-62... Later, a canal, 11 miles long, was built, taking out water on both sides of the river."²¹

But the faithful cotton missionaries pushed forward until the desert did indeed begin to blossom. St. George grew from 748 people in December 1861 to 1,142 in 1870 and 1,332 in 1880.²² Today, the St. George Tabernacle, dedicated in 1876, and the beautiful St. George Temple, dedicated in 1877, stand as monuments to the faith and determination of those who laid the foundations.²³

"St. George, founded by the cotton missionaries, became the center of Dixie, and the colonists were successful in producing sizable amounts of cotton..."

During the American Civil War the market demand for Utah cotton remained strong, but plans for a factory at Washington, near St. George, had barely been carried to completion in 1866 when the failing price of imported cotton from the East destroyed most of the demand for the local product.²⁴

While not achieving the success hoped for by the cotton missionaries, the factory "proved a great blessing to the people of southern Utah. It was a clearing house for the products of the area, performing the functions of merchandising and trade. It provided script as a basic medium of exchange at a time when money was almost non-existent. It was a symbol of unity, courage, and strength... The settlements established by the 'Cotton Mission' are alive and well today, growing and prospering."²⁵

16 Ibid.

17 *Encyclopedic History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, by Andrew Jensen, p. 726.

18 "Dixie's Cotton Mission," pp. 15-16.

19 *The Immortal Pioneers*, p. 31; *Under Dixie Sun*, p. 97-98.

20 Ibid.

21 *Encyclopedic History*, p. 726; *Under Dixie Sun*, p. 66.

22 "Belief and Behavior in a Mormon Town: Nineteenth-Century St. George, Utah, A Dissertation in American Civilization," by Larry Morgan Logue, p. 7.

23 *Under Dixie Sun*, p. 332; *Deseret News 1993-1994 Church Almanac*, pp. 331-332.

24 *Utah's History*, Richard D. Foll, general editor, p. 148.

25 "Dixie's Cotton Mission," p. 17.