

A History of the Rise of  
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day  
Saints  
in  
TEXAS

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*Anyone with historical information about the rise of the Church is invited to share that information by sending it to this website and it will be added. Thanks.*

## Sources

Sources include, “Church History Library”; “A History of the Mormon Church in Texas, 1843-1906”, by Bonnie Means Durning; “Spencer W. Kimball”, by Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Bookcraft 1979; “Polygamy on the Pedernales” by Melvin C. Johnson, Utah State University Press 2006; and “Church Almanac.”

# EARLY TEXAS CHURCH HISTORY

Joseph Smith sent an emissary, Lucien Woodworth, to Sam Houston in Austin during March 1844 to investigate the possibility of purchasing territory in the Texas Republic to create a nation in southwest Texas as a buffer between Texas and Mexico and a place for the Church to exist unmolested. Brother Woodworth was likely the first Mormon in the Texas area.

Final negotiations were to be handled by Woodworth, George Miller, and Almon Babbitt but Joseph was martyred about one month after Woodworth’s return which ended negotiations.

The first Mormon group to enter Texas to live would have been the approximately 150 people led by Apostle Lyman Wight during 1845 as they journeyed to Texas from the Pinery area of Wisconsin. This group rejected the leadership of Brigham Young and the Apostles at Nauvoo in favor of what they thought, was the will of Joseph Smith to go to Texas.

The Wight group had left the Black River area of Wisconsin in the spring on flatboats, traveled for a time on the Black and Mississippi Rivers beginning 28 March 1845 to near Davenport, and then went overland from southern Iowa to Texas. They crossed into Texas during early November and wintered in Grayson County south of present day Lake Texoma before moving on in 1846 to a place just north of Austin.

Travel for this group included some death and much suffering. However, they were committed to obey Apostle Wight’s every instruction. Polygamy was practiced by them.

Brigham Young sent Samuel Bent from Nauvoo to meet the group in Iowa in an attempt to divert them to Nauvoo to join the Saints without success.

Wight and Bishop George Miller were instructed prepare to lead a group of Church members to Texas from the Wisconsin Pine area by Joseph Smith prior to

Joseph's death in June 1844. This move would be done after the negotiations with Texas, was complete. Also, Wight was instructed by the Quorum of Twelve Apostles in August 1844 to lead members to Wisconsin and establish a settlement and possibly prepare his group to move to Texas. Brigham Young made it clear however that only the Wisconsin group was instructed to do so. Bishop Miller was not a part of this second group and chose to remain in Nauvoo.

Later that year these instructions were rescinded but there is confusion as to whether Wight received word of the change from the Quorum of Twelve or ignored them as he led approximately 150 people from Wisconsin to Texas. On at least two different occasions a person representing the Church went to Texas and informed him he should end the Texas mission and move to Utah.

William Clayton accused Lyman Wight of encouraging the burning of the lumber at Nauvoo to be used in building the Temple. Wight felt the Temple completion was unnecessary after Joseph's death. This required Church leaders to establish protective guards around the Temple and the lumber.

Lyman Wight was older than Brigham, was an Apostle, a member of the Council of Fifty, had received his Second Anointing, and considered himself duly authorized to follow through with Joseph's instructions even after Joseph's death.

The Council of Fifty was a group of leaders, including some non-members, created by Joseph to find a solution to where the saints might settle and be out of the jurisdiction of the United States government.

Brigham taught that a man such as Lyman Wight had authority to build up a kingdom unto himself, but the leadership of the Church rested with the Quorum of Twelve Apostles as Joseph had instructed prior to his death.

Safety for the Church and its leaders in avoiding Texas became a key concern for the Twelve. Of course revelation from the Lord to Brigham and the Twelve was an overriding factor. Lyman Wight's almost continuous estrangement from Nauvoo and Church leadership likely played a part in his decision to go to Texas. Problems that developed with the Wight group in Texas such as Comanche Indian raids, Civil War disagreements, extreme weather, conflicts with locals and some potential conflicts with the U.S. Military are all issues that proved Brigham to be right in moving the Saints to Utah.

Two additional Apostles: John E. Page and William Smith also refused to follow Brigham and the majority of the Twelve. Ironically, these three Apostles, including Wight, were the only Apostles serving in the Council of Fifty.

Lyman Wight in Texas and William Smith in Kentucky developed a close alliance for a short time that helped promote the patrilineal form of succession of Church leadership that the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came to believe.

William Smith felt he should have been the true successor to his brother

Joseph and didn't appear threatened by young Joseph III who was still only 17 years old at the time. Wight seemed happy to promote anything that denigrated Brigham Young's leadership.

A great hypocrisy of this alliance was exposed when they exclaimed to the world that Brigham Young was teaching a principle of polygamy unlike them. In fact, both men had practiced and promoted polygamy.

The inevitable schism in this alliance occurred shortly after it began but the theory of patrilineal succession continued until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when no male heir arose to take his father's place as President of the RLDS Church.

About that time the RLDS Church was renamed the Community of Christ. The importance of the Book of Mormon was downgraded and the Church began emphasizing world peace as an important motto. The verbal promotion of world peace versus the actions generated by priesthood authority and the influence of the Holy Ghost seems to be the resultant effect of losing both the Priesthood and the Holy Ghost.

Lyman Wight's grandson, Heman C. Smith, and great-grandson, Heman Hale Smith, became Historians for the RLDS Church. Both defended Joseph Smith III's assertion that his father, Joseph Smith Jr., had not begun teaching the principle of polygamy but that Brigham Young had initiated it. During their tenures as historians some very important documents such as marriage records and journals that would have contradicted their stance seemed to be conveniently lost.

Declining Priesthood instructions to go west with the Saints in 1847 Bishop George Miller traveled from Winter Quarters Nebraska into Indian Territory with Church members Joseph Kilding (Lucy Matilda Johnson), Richard Hewitt, their families and others including women and children. They intended to eventually go to Texas to see Brother Miller's son and perhaps stay. Most had familial ties to the Wight group. John F. Miller, George Miller's son, was with Wight in Texas and was married to Lyman Wight's daughter, Rosina.

They first traveled to an area just north of Kansas City Missouri called Plattesville looking for work but discovered that Church member Alpheus Cutler had already taken the work. Then learning that workers were needed in the Cherokee Nation they decided to go to that location. They arrived in Tahlequah, which was the capital of the Cherokee Nation, on 9 July 1847.

After obtaining work Bishop Miller began teaching the restored gospel in his home at first and then in the Tahlequah courthouse.

Antagonism quickly followed with other religion's missionaries and Bishop Miller was forced to leave on 16 December 1847 and continue to Texas. Some stayed in the area to finish the work that was started. It is said that 3 brick houses built by Mormons are still in Tahlequah. After a very difficult trip with problems of diseased animals they were met on 30 January 1848 by Lyman Wight and his

wife, Harriet.

After agreements were reached on their living by the rules of the community they joined the Wight group at Zodiac which was the second settlement established by this group in Texas and was a short distance east of Fredericksburg, Texas. Miller later denied having agreed to the arrangement.

Bishop Miller was a prominent leader of the Church in Nauvoo under Joseph Smith but would not follow Brigham Young's leadership after Joseph's death. Miller originally chose not to join Lyman Wight, probably because of disagreements he had with Wight that once brought them to a fistfight in Nauvoo.

Bishop Miller and Apostle Wight were strong men accustomed to taking the lead and getting things done. Bishop Miller did not stay in Texas, partly because he could not abide the communal rules in the Wight society and partly because he was not accepted by the group, including members of his own family. Miller left the Wight group during the summer of 1848 and attempted to farm near Austin but was invited back into the group during February 1849.

He left for good a few months later and joined the James J. Strang group in Michigan during September 1850. Bishop George Miller died during 1856 in Illinois while on his way to California. James J. Strang was assassinated by some of his followers during 1856.

Miller was very effective in establishing roads and bridges as the pioneers traveled from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters Nebraska. However, once his group settled at Winter Quarters they kept themselves somewhat isolated from Brigham Young and most of the other pioneers. Bishop Miller's estranged wife, Sarah, died during 1848 in Texas.

Joseph Smith's death in June 1844 had created a need for a new Church leader. Brigham Young led the main body of Church members and the majority of the Apostles to what became Utah. The diaspora from Nauvoo created pretended leaders such as Sidney Rigdon in Pennsylvania, Lyman Wight in Texas, James J. Strang in Michigan, William Smith in Kentucky, Alpheus Cutler in Iowa, and Joseph Smith III in Iowa who later moved to Independence Missouri. There was a great need for the influence of the Holy Ghost at this time.

By 1855 Captain Jacob Croft who was a convert from Houston Texas had led a group of Lyman Wight followers on a trip to Utah but after hearing disparaging reports of conditions in Utah decided to settle in northeastern Indian Territory (Oklahoma) and build a gristmill on Spavinaw Creek. This location quickly became the new Mission headquarters for the new Indian Territory Mission as missionaries arrived from Utah in July 1855. It also became the location of the first Branch of the Church in Indian Territory.

During the summer of 1856 Jacob Croft led 56 people to Utah and was appointed leader of the group by Mission President Henry W. Miller. These

individuals were baptized and tithed upon coming into the Church once they arrived in Utah.

During 1858 and 1859 a majority of the remaining Lyman Wight followers in Texas relocated to Indian Territory for a time, including Lyman Wight's first wife. She had a letter from Sidney Rigdon criticizing the Church leadership in Utah, which prophesied only evil would come of them.

Lyman Wight had died in Texas northwest of San Antonio on 31 March 1858 while attempting to lead the remainder of his group to be united with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that would soon be founded and headquartered in Lamoni Iowa with Joseph Smith III as its President. Complicating Wight's health problems was his apparent addiction to both alcohol and opium. Opium was an accepted drug and was taken for health problems at that time but was as expensive as gold. He was buried at Zodiac Texas.

Mission President Henry Eyring preached to these people, Wight's followers, without success. A Strangite missionary named Jacob Prindle also actively recruited the former Wight group members in Indian Territory. During early 1897 the state of Texas was added to the Southwestern States mission with headquarters by this time at Manard in Oklahoma. Manard is a community about 7 miles east of present day Ft. Gibson Oklahoma.

Some of Lyman Wight's group went to California, some stayed in Texas and some went to Utah but a majority joined the RLDS Church movement. During the late 1890s the oldest son of Lyman Wight, Orange Lysander Wight, moved into the home of his daughter, Harriet Wight Earl in Pine Valley Utah and rejoined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This was likely a development that Lyman would have found very difficult to accept while on this earth.

In April 1887 Andrew Kimball became the President of the Indian Territory Mission with John A. Richards assisting him. President Kimball was free to return home and even be employed but was still in charge of the Mission.

When Andrew Kimball's missionary service ended in April 1897 he had 61 missionaries serving under him although for a time earlier he was the only missionary serving. He served 12 years as a missionary and President before being replaced by Elder William T. Jack.

On 29 March 1898 the Indian Territory Mission's name was changed to the Southwestern States Mission by the General Authorities of the Church. At the time of the name change there were 7 conferences in the mission. They were the Kansas Conference headed by James L. Nielson, the Oklahoma Conference headed by William T. Harper, The Cherokee Conference headed by Joseph J. Richardson, the East Arkansas Conference headed by John H. Peterson, the West Arkansas Conference headed by Frank L. Copening, the Lone Star Conference headed by Hyrum Andrus and the North Texas Conference headed by Joseph Coulam.

By 1898 the Southwestern States Mission was huge. It included the States of Kansas, Arkansas, and Texas as well as the Indian Territory that would become Oklahoma. The Mission was now headquartered at St. John Kansas and covered an area of 351,000 square miles with a population of over 6 million people. St. John is a community about 80 miles northwest of Wichita, and President Jack had moved the mission from Manard Oklahoma to St. John Kansas shortly after arriving in the mission.

The first sister missionaries began serving in the mission beginning 15 April 1898. Sister Belle Taylor Copenig who was the wife of the Chief Clerk in the mission office, Elder Frank L. Copenig, became the first sister missionary.

Sister Copenig served with Sister Ida M. Breckenridge and they were very successful going tracting from house to house, passing out tracts and holding gospel discussions in the area of St. John Kansas. Sister Copenig was originally from Juab Utah and returned home on 25 January 1899.

On 20 January 1899 a monthly paper called "Truth's Reflex" began publishing under the direction of President Jack. Subscription price was 25 cents per year and was published monthly.

In April 1900 President Jack was replaced by James G. Duffin.

During October 1900 the States of Missouri and Louisiana were taken from the Northern States Mission and added to the Southwestern States Mission. Then on 26 December 1900 the Mission headquarters was moved from St. John Kansas to Kansas City Missouri at 140 Locust Street. The Church had now returned to Jackson County Missouri from which it was driven out in 1833.

Possibly at this time small parts of Nebraska, Iowa and Illinois were added to the Mission.

President Duffin recommended to the First Presidency of the Church that members no longer be encouraged to migrate to the Stakes in the west or assemble in local colonies, as had previously been the case. This idea was quickly approved by the First Presidency with the new policy beginning in late 1901.

On 4 April 1904 Texas became part of the Central States Mission, as the name was changed from the Southwestern States Mission while still located in Kansas City Missouri.

Also during April 1904 President Duffin purchased for the Church a property in Independence from Maggie S. Swope that included part of a property that had been purchased by Bishop Edward Partridge during 1831 and lost in the expulsion from Missouri during 1833.

In October 1906 Samuel O. Bennion became the Mission President. He would serve in that position until April 1933.

The Central States Mission headquarters was moved to Independence Missouri in March 1907.

Between the years 1848 and 1853 the records show that seven Elders were assigned to proselytize in Texas. Of these Elders, the most instrumental in adding new members to the Church was Elder Preston Thomas, who received his first assignment to Texas on 10 October 1848. He was exceedingly depressed at having to leave his home in Illinois, on foot and alone, and without money or friends, but he soon found companions in Texas to compensate for his losses. Thus began a long and fruitful career of preaching the gospel to the people of Texas.

Later in the same year, Thomas A. Martindale and James McGaw of Salt Lake City were called to fill missions to the Lone Star State, the latter remaining in the state until he was released to go home in May, 1851. Brother McGaw returned to Texas, being in active service until 1854. Elder McGaw was later known to have worked with Elder Orson Spencer from St. Louis in the Mississippi valley area including Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma. Elder Martindale served some with Preston Thomas with the two visiting Lyman Wight's colony at Zodiac in December, 1848, and reported on the leader's illness and bitter feelings toward the Church authorities.

The Saints who accepted the gospel were organized to travel to Zion. The first exodus was in 1853. A small company of Texas Saints gathered and several members from New Orleans joined them en route.

The year 1855 was filled with many noteworthy activities for the missionaries in Texas. Elder Benjamin L. Clapp was laboring diligently in Freestone County with enough success to justify plans for an exodus some time during the year. There were now enough converts in the state to warrant some organization; consequently on April 8, 1855, Elder Clapp was instructed to organize the 'Texas Conference' and to become the president of the same when it was completed.

Brother T.E. Charlton recorded meeting a young Elder from Grimes County. Formerly Presbyterian, he and his family had joined the Church and he was now preaching the gospel to friends and neighbors in the surrounding area, having baptized seven up to that date.

On March 10, 1856, a Conference was once again held in Ellis County. Present were Elders Clapp, Homer Duncan, William Allen, Andrew Bigler, M. J.

Snedaker, John Ostler, William Moody, and Cooper. After sustaining the authorities of the Church, Brother Homer Duncan was named to preside over the Texas Conference as Elder Clapp was leaving shortly for Utah.

The Civil War temporally brought an end to missionary work in the South, but in 1875 elders once again labored in Texas. Henry G. Boyle and James Z. Stewart realized much success.

During 1877 two new Elders were assigned to serve in Texas. However little was accomplished until 1883, when Apostle George Teasdale and Elder Matthew Dalton arrived in Indian Territory as missionaries.

Few elders served in Texas from 1875 until 1893, when the Texas Conference was organized as a part of the Southern States Mission. They were only partially successful. The Saints had left before the Civil War and many of the people of Texas were too preoccupied with post-war problems to be interested in a new religion. In May, 1883, Elder Victor D. Cram of Kanab, Utah, left his home to labor in Texas. There he joined Brother Alma Harding, the only other missionary in the state. During the summer months the two traveled over seven hundred miles and held thirty-two meetings, stopping in August due to Elder Cram's poor health. Elder Cram reported that on his arrival there was but one family of Latter-day Saints in Texas. This family, referred to only as the Turnbow family, lived in Smith County, and often provided the elders with food and shelter.

The Texas Conference was opened as part of the Southern States mission on June 17, 1893, with Elder Alexander Campbell as President.

On July 6 and 7, 1895, the first conference since before the Civil War was held at the Grubb Settlement, Hopkins County. The twelve elders serving in Texas at the time met to receive instructions from the Church authorities and to report their progress in the mission field. Elder S. H. Wells, serving as clerk of the conference, wrote that all felt sure the Church would soon be well represented in the state for many people were showing great interest. He remarked on the wonderful treatment they had received from the people at the Grubb Settlement, especially J. W. M. Grubb, J. McKee, B. Willett, and W. J. Pruett. These four men with their wives had done all within their power to make the elders visit pleasant.

After two days in conference the missionaries were assigned to their fields of labor as follows:

A.S. Campbell and D. P. Overson assigned to Hopkins County, Sulphur Springs Post Office

H. W. Perry and C. S. Hall assigned to Wood County, Mineola Post Office.

Heber Anderson and S.R. Wilcock assigned to Van Zandt County Wells Point Post Office

A.C. Dalley and David Chidester assigned to Smith county Mineola post Office

M. O. Minter and R.R. Smith assigned to Fannin County, Honey Grove Post Office

S.H. Wells and Fred Smith assigned to Hunt County, Greenville Post Office

They would carry the doctrines of the Church to the designated areas until such time as another conference was called for their reassignment

Brother Wells recorded in his report that there were only three members of the Church in the Texas Conference, a Brother Thomas Tredway, his wife, and one other. Obviously, he was unaware of the presence of Brother William Jasper Lindsey, his wife, Mattie, and their children. Brother and Sister Lindsey, originally from Alabama, had found life difficult in Utah and Idaho and decided to move to Texas where they had relatives. Brother and Sister Lindsey and their five small children arrived in Calvert, Robertson County, Texas, on January 1, 1894. They settled across the county line near Maysfield, Milam County.

The statistical reports of 1894, 1895, and 1896 show a slow but steady growth in Church membership in Texas. The constant migration of Saints from one place to another makes it highly probable that the figures are not accurate, but they do give some idea of the increase in membership. The report of December 31, 1894, showed only two members with no recorded baptisms, marriages, births, or deaths.

A. C. Dalley, President of the Texas Conference, reported on December 31, 1896, that there were sixty-four members of the Church in Texas plus thirty-four

children under baptismal age. There were eighteen elders laboring full time throughout the state.

On January 1, 1897, Texas was transferred from the Southern States Mission to the Indian Territory Mission, which included all Indian Territory (Oklahoma), Kansas, and Arkansas, The Church leaders felt that Texas shared a closer geographical relationship with the Indian Territory than with the South, and it was primarily for this reason that the Lone Star State was reassigned.

Elder A. C. Dalley was named President of the Texas Conference, and the following missionaries were transferred from the Southern States Mission to the Indian Territory Mission:

Hyrum Andrus and John White assigned to Wimberley, Hayes County

Joseph Coulam and Frances Lee assigned to Gonzales, Gonzales County

Jens Hansen and Levi J. Taylor assigned in Jeddo, Bastrop County

Albert Harris and William H. Anderson assigned to Austin, Travis County

William H. Jardine and Authur V Lee assigned to Burnett, Burnett County

Orson P Nelson and J. L. Workman assigned to Lexington, Lee County (120)

A Conference took place in Delhi, Texas September 3-6, 1897.

Most of the traveling Elders in Texas were in attendance to receive encouragement and instructions from Brother William T. Jack, who had, in April, 1897, succeeded Andrew Kimball as President of the Indian Territory Mission. The last priesthood meeting of the conference was used to organize a new conference to be known as the North Texas Conference. Elder Joseph Coulam was appointed to preside.

On 29 March 1898, the name of the Indian Territory Mission was changed to Southwestern States Mission with the boundaries remaining unchanged and Elder W. T. Jack continuing as President.

The new North Texas Conference soon began to increase in membership. The people in the northern counties seemed more friendly and receptive of the

traveling missionaries than in the southern part of the state. Elder J. L. Workman reported that when the North Texas Conference met from April 29 to May 1, there were thirty Saints present. They had come to the eastern part of Rockwall County, walking, on horseback, and in wagons, from as far as twenty-five miles. The non-members of the county received the Mormons very cordially, providing for their needs while conference was in session. One of the groups present was a small band from Lane, Hunt County. Their exhibition of faith was rewarded, for on May 3, 1898, a branch of the Church was organized at Lane with Brother R. E. Roberts as presiding elder. Elder Workman further recorded that there were on May 15, 1898, thirteen members of the Church in Rockwall County, and that a Sunday school had been organized at Fate in that county.

The first Mormons to settle in Upshur County were John and James (Jim) Edgar and their families. The Edgar brothers became Latter Day Saint members while living in Andalusia, Alabama, and since there was no branch of the Church near their home, the missionaries advised them to move to Arizona where many of the Saints had gathered. This they did, but trouble plagued them from the beginning. They passed through Texas on their way back to Alabama, and decided to settle near Kelsey, in Upshur County in 1898.

The first elders to visit Kelsey were J. H. Perkins and Abel Alexander Moss. The only two families in the settlement were those of the Edgars. Missionary activity increased in the spring of 1900.

The first conference in the Kelsey vicinity was held at Pine Mills, Wood County in 1900. There were three wagons from Kelsey present, and the meetings were held in the Church of Christ building. During this gathering it was decided that Kelsey would be an ideal spot for a Mormon Colony.

A Mormon Colony was settled in 1900 with nine families. The first order of business was to organize the Church. On December 29, 1901, a branch was established by Elder Joseph A. Stewart Jr. and George W. Hammond. Brother William C. Harless was set apart as Branch President, with James C. Puckett as first counselor and Alanzo Cantrell as clerk.

Elder Abraham O. Woodruff of Quorum of the twelve visited Kelsey and assisted in laying out the town.

The fully organized Ward of the Church became a major part of the community.

Texas became part of the Central States Mission on 4 April 1904 as the Mission name was changed. Headquarters was in Kansas City, Missouri.

The Texas Mission was organized during 1931. Texas and Louisiana were combined during 1945 to form the Texas-Louisiana Mission and Texas was part of the Gulf States Mission from 1955 to 1960. During 1961 the new Texas Mission was formed and in 1974 it became the Texas Dallas Mission.