

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

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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: Wilford Woodruff, Bookcraft: 1964; Father of a Prophet – Andrew Kimball by Edward L. Kimball, BYU Studies; The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, A Mormon Prophet, Signature Books; Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Deseret Book Company, 1985; LDS Church News; Church Almanac; Individual personal journals.

Elders **Wilford Woodruff** and **Henry Brown** (Elder Woodruff was not yet an Apostle) arrived as missionaries near present day Bentonville on 28 January 1835. There were very few residents in Arkansas at that time and some in northern Arkansas had moved there from Jackson County Missouri. They held their first meeting four days later and preached to an attentive congregation. Later they were confronted by an apostate member, **Alexander Akeman** who lived beside Petit Jean River. Akeman was a man who earlier endured severe persecution with his sons in Missouri, but later turned bitterly against the Church. However, Akeman died suddenly “as though struck by a thunderbolt from heaven” while following Elder Woodruff from Akeman’s house. Elder Woodruff preached his funeral sermon. This event, along with Woodruff’s teachings led to the baptism of a Mr. and Mrs. **Jonathan Hubbel**, the first converts in Arkansas, on 22 February 1835. Elder Woodruff stated that he was aware of many mobbers who faced a sudden death.

Turning a cottonwood tree into a canoe Elders Woodruff and Brown set sail down the Arkansas River on 11 March 1835 intending to go to Memphis Tennessee. They had no provisions. After traveling 25 miles the first day they encountered a poor but friendly family on the river bank that fed them supper, put them up for the night, fed them a good breakfast and gave them Johnny cakes and pork to take with them on the trip.

The second day the Elders traveled about 50 miles and stopped at a tavern in the deserted Village of Cadron. The town was believed to have evil spirits by the natives. The Elders traveled to Little Rock the next day which was only a few cabins at the time. From here they took the old military road toward Memphis. Memphis was still 170 miles away through mud and water.

Travel on this road to Memphis was long, cold and wet. They would have had a hard time finding high ground to rest or, any dry plant material to lie on. There were no houses for many miles.

On 24 March Elder Woodruff had a sharp pain in his knee and Elder Brown, who was anxious to get home to Kirtland, Ohio, left him sitting on a log in an alligator swamp. Elder Woodruff prayed, the Lord healed him and he arrived in Memphis on 27 March weary and hungry.

In 1838, **Elder Abraham O. Smoot** was called to a five-month mission to Arkansas where he preached frequently with varied results.

During October and November 1855 Elder **S. J. D. Spain** reported his successful activities in Mississippi County Arkansas to the St. Louis Luminary newspaper, a Church sponsored paper started by Elder **Erastus Snow**. Elder D. Spain reported success in working with a Methodist group in that area in

which he baptized 42 people which included Elder D. Spain's brother and the brother's family. Elder **Corbett** accompanied Elder D. Spain part of the time.

The year 1857 marked a tragic era in Church history in Arkansas. **Elder Parley P. Pratt** was murdered on 13 May 1857 about 5 miles north of Alma, Arkansas. He had just been acquitted by a court in Van Buren, Arkansas of charges pressed by **Hector H. McLean**, the husband of **Eleanor** who wished to move to Utah and become Parley P. Pratt's wife. At the trial she testified that her husband frequently physically abused her. Disappointed with the verdict, McLean followed and assassinated the Apostle. McLean was never tried for the murder.

On 2 April 2008 Crawford County Circuit Judge **Gary Cottle** gave the Pratt family permission to move Elder Parley P. Pratt's remains to Utah but no remains were found when the gravesite was unearthed. It was believed that the earth had swallowed up his casket and remains over the long many years since his burial.

Later during 1857, a party of primarily northern Arkansas immigrants heading, for California were killed by a group of Latter-day Saints and Indians in southern Utah at Mountain Meadows Utah a few miles west of Cedar City.

Negative feelings, and later the American Civil War, kept the Church from the area of Arkansas for a time.

After the War, the Church again sent missionaries to Arkansas in 1876. In 1877, Elders **Henry G. Boyle** and **J.D.H. McAllister** visited a member in Des Arc, Arkansas. During 1877, 27 families totaling 125 converts emigrated west. Through the 1880s, converts continued to join the main body of the saints in Utah. In 1897 Elder **J. H. Peterson** began teaching in the Central part of Arkansas near Batesville and Heber Springs and this led to conversions in March 1900 which included **Benjamin Franklin Baker** and his sister **Emoline Baker** in Faulkner County and the **Rowland William Perry** family, **Mary Chapelle** and **Martha White** in Marion County.

During 1895 Arkansas became part of the Indian Territory Mission whose President was **Andrew Kimball** (father of **Spencer W. Kimball**). The Mission was headquartered at Manard which was about 7 miles east of present day Ft. Gibson Oklahoma.

During January 1897 President Kimball visited Arkansas for the first time and endured some threats and some physical violence. He first visited Pollard in the extreme northeastern part of the State. His first public meeting was in the Hadley School house on January 15, 1897 with some young men being very noisy and trying to disrupt the meeting. Some missionaries with him included Elder Peterson, **Elder Larkin** and **Elder Kirkham**. Some of the members there included **Will Wheat**, **John Knight** and the **Farley family**. Going to the Farley home later President Kimball was struck several times with rocks without serious injury. He and John Knight walked into the crowd and called them cowards and President Kimball offered to fight any one of them but no one came forward.

A Grand Jury was formed in the community to find and punish those involved in the attack and harassment. **Leander Farley** later reported on those who had been involved and said two went to prison for theft, one lost everything in a fire, one died in an asylum and a Baptist Preacher involved died a very agonizing death. President Kimball then visited the town of Piggott and returned to Manard.

During April 1897 **William T. Jack** replaced President Kimball and soon moved Mission headquarters to St. John Kansas about 80 miles northwest of Wichita.

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

Sister Copening 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 Copening 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.

The Indian Territory Mission's name was changed on March 29, 1898 to the Southwestern States Mission. At that time the East Arkansas Conference of the Mission was led by John H. Peterson and the West Arkansas Conference was led by Frank L. Copening

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.

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 Arkansas became part of the Central States Mission, as the name was changed from the Southwestern States Mission while still headquartered 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 Presiding Bishop **Edward Partridge** during 1831 and lost in the expulsion from Jackson County during 1833.

In October 1906 **Samuel O. Bennion** became the Mission President. He would serve in that position until April 1933 when he was called to the First Quorum of the Seventy. However, he continued to lead the Mission until 1935.

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

A new Chapel was constructed in Independence and was dedicated on 22 November 1914 and a Mission home was built in Independence during 1917. Also, Zion's Printing and Publishing Company owned by the Church was incorporated in Missouri during 1907 and later began publishing missionary tracts and copies of the Book of Mormon in large numbers from Independence.

During 1876 the Pleasant Prairie Branch was established near Des Arc as the first Branch in Arkansas but the next year the entire Branch moved to Utah.

On May 30, 1890 the first Latter-day Saints meetinghouse in Arkansas was completed in White County, Arkansas which was east of Barney, which was in Faulkner County.

In the late 1880s **Benjamin Franklin Baker**, a devout Baptist, was working to repair a Faulkner County road on a very cold and rainy day when he encountered the Mormon missionaries and invited them to his house near Barney to get dry and warm. The night before he had a dream about trying to move a large white and glistening rock but was unable to because it kept moving. He later attributed the dream to Daniel 2:31-45 in the Old Testament.

After the missionaries were dried and fed they were invited to stay and teach them the gospel. Ben Baker accepted their teaching and the gospel immediately and his family soon followed. The missionaries stayed with the family for two to three days.

A church building was soon constructed in Barney on land donated by **Davis Baker** and by 1904 the church was growing rapidly but with much opposition and much preaching against the Mormons in local congregations. Once Davis Baker was told a mob was planning to come to his house and take the missionaries and he promised to meet them with a shotgun. The mob didn't arrive. Missionaries and Mormon school children sometimes had sticks and stones thrown at them.

Ben Baker served on the local school board and arranged to use the school building for a two day church conference. Dead rats, mud and manure was thrown on the floor of the school both nights before the meetings and were quietly cleaned by the members both times.

A school was established for the Mormon children with the missionaries teaching the school year round with some non-members attending during the summer.

Later the Barney church group obtained land and built a new building in 1914 and the group became a Branch at that time. Elders **John F. Smith** and **Alma Shore** were missionaries in the area at this time. Elders **H. R. Francom** and **F. W. Moody** supervised construction of the new building. Members helped bring building materials from Conway, 25 miles away over dirt and muddy roads with horse and mule teams. **Ron Spradlin** remembers working on this new building with his father **Lesley Spradlin**.

Apostle **James E. Talmage** and Mission President Samuel O. Bennion officiated at the dedication of the new building. The Barney area then became a gathering place or colony for some outlying Mormon families and numbers increased.

Ben Baker, Davis Baker's son, donated land for a Mormon Cemetery and Mrs. **Deborah Cox** was the first to be buried there. Three former Barney Branch Presidents were later buried there.

On 5 February 1915 after suffering a stroke Ben was expecting to die but dreamed he would live 15 more years. He opened his eyes and exclaimed he would not die, but died exactly 15 years later on 5 February 1930. He said he had young children at the time and did not want to leave the raising of the children to his wife.

During 1916 Davis Baker built a one room building on his farm at Mt. Nebo and some members attended there at what was called the Baker Branch. **James Clark Baker** served as the Branch President of this small group.

By 1930, three LDS Church Branches had been organized in Barney, El Dorado, and Little Rock with a total membership of 944. The first Little Rock and El Dorado Branches got new buildings during 1952, with Pine Bluff getting a building in 1954 and the Barney and Rolla Branches getting their first official building during 1956. About 1955 church land near Barney on Highway 107 was traded for the original church lot of land and a new church building was then built and dedicated 21 September 1956.

The Conway Branch was created in 1956 and the Searcy Branch was created in 1964.

Because of a decline in membership and leadership the Barney Branch was dissolved during May 1963 and members were assigned to attend in the Searcy and Conway Branches. The Conway Branch meeting house was dedicated 15 October 1957 and located at 2201 Washington Street. The Barney building was then sold to **Clara Baker McDonald Lowrey**, a daughter of Benjamin Franklin Baker.

During the early 1940s there were several families in the area of Ozark who had joined the Church and missionaries including Elder **Alvin Heaton** and Elder **Thompson** from Utah, and others, came to the area occasionally and held meetings at a one room school house on Union Ridge which was approximately 4 miles east of Ozark. The missionaries normally stayed with the **E. R. Pierce** family while in the area.



Shown above is the **E. R. and Lula Pierce** family near Ozark during the early 1940's. Elder Thompson is seated with Elder Heaton (both from Utah) taking the picture.

The gospel influence of this small family has now gone far through places such as Spain, Korea, Japan, Germany, Brazil, Canada and multiple States.

During the early 1950s the Church attempted to purchase the gravesite of Apostle Parley P. Pratt north of Alma but the owner of the property would not sell to the Church. Edward (Ezz) R. Pierce, a Church member from the area approached the farmer and convinced him to sell the property to the Church.

In September 1955 the Fayetteville Branch was created with Agriculture Professor **Al Davis** as Branch President and with members meeting in the Blue Room of the Student Union of the University of Arkansas. Later the group met in a small rented home near the University campus.

During 1968 Harold (Hal) Pierce was the Branch President in Fayetteville while a student at the University when land for a new building was purchased on Zion Road. The name Zion came from a small Zion Baptist Church that was at the end of the dirt road. Property the Branch owned in Bentonville and Springdale was then sold. A building fund was started that included raising sweet potatoes for sale, picking grapes and pruning grape vineyards.

Some surnames of active members in the Fayetteville Branch during the late 1960s included **Caspers, Rench, Bohn, Bednar** (not David), **Phipps, Winfrey, Robertson, Thompson, Summers, Centers, Osborne, Money, McBride, Green, Preston, Johnson, Johnston, Gottlin, Hunt, Florer, Ainsworth, Kunkel, Schwab, Gregory, Smith(2), Tucker, Imler, Rowland, Pierce, Shannon, Strage,** and **Jett**. A missionary named Elder **Art Bushman**, later a long time resident of Edmond Oklahoma and member of the Oklahoma City Temple Presidency, served there during 1966. Another missionary was **Elder Thompson** whose father was a missionary in Ozark Arkansas during the 1940s.

On 10 November 1968 a new Sunday school group from Siloam Springs was organized by Harold Pierce who was the Fayetteville Branch President. Bro. Robertson from the Fayetteville Branch accompanied him. They initially met in a rented storefront building in Gentry and later moved to a rented home in Siloam Springs. The **Thomas Tucker** family from Colcord Oklahoma was instrumental in getting the Siloam Springs group started. A Missionary couple named Simpson was assigned to work with them by President West of the Central States Mission.

During December 1968 the Ft. Smith Church voted to leave the Tulsa Stake and become part of the Central States Mission in preparation for forming their District of the Church.

During early 1969 the Ft. Smith District of the Church was created with **Earl Carson** as District President.

The first Arkansas Stake was created on June 1, 1969 in Little Rock with **Dean C. Andrew** as Stake President. This was known at the time as the Arkansas Stake and later renamed to the Little Rock Arkansas Stake. The Ft. Smith Stake was organized April 30, 1978 with **Arthur D. Browne** as the Stake President.

The first Institute of Religion building, adjacent to the University of Arkansas, was dedicated in the fall of 1999.

On 20-22 July 2006, over 1,000 Latter-day Saint teens from all 5 Stakes of the Church in Arkansas gathered for a 3-day multi-stake youth conference. Elder **David A. Bednar** of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and former associate dean of Graduate Studies in the College of Business Administration at the University of Arkansas spoke to the youth and encouraged them to live high moral standards.

Many Arkansas Church members helped with the cleanup in Oklahoma after the devastating 3 May 1999 tornado that hit there.

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, several thousand Latter-day Saint volunteers, from a 7 State area (including Arkansas), went to Louisiana and Mississippi to aid the recovery. Many of them were taking time out from their employment to help anyone needing assistance regardless of faith.

Arkansas "Mormons" volunteered relief in their own area on several occasions including a 2 April 2006 Tornado Outbreak. In September 2008, Arkansas Latter-day Saints went to the Baton Rouge area to aid cleanup efforts following Hurricane Gustav.

==== Arkansas Membership History ====

|1930 || 944

|1980 || 9,878

|1990 || 13,753

|1999 || 20,077

|2007 || 25,296