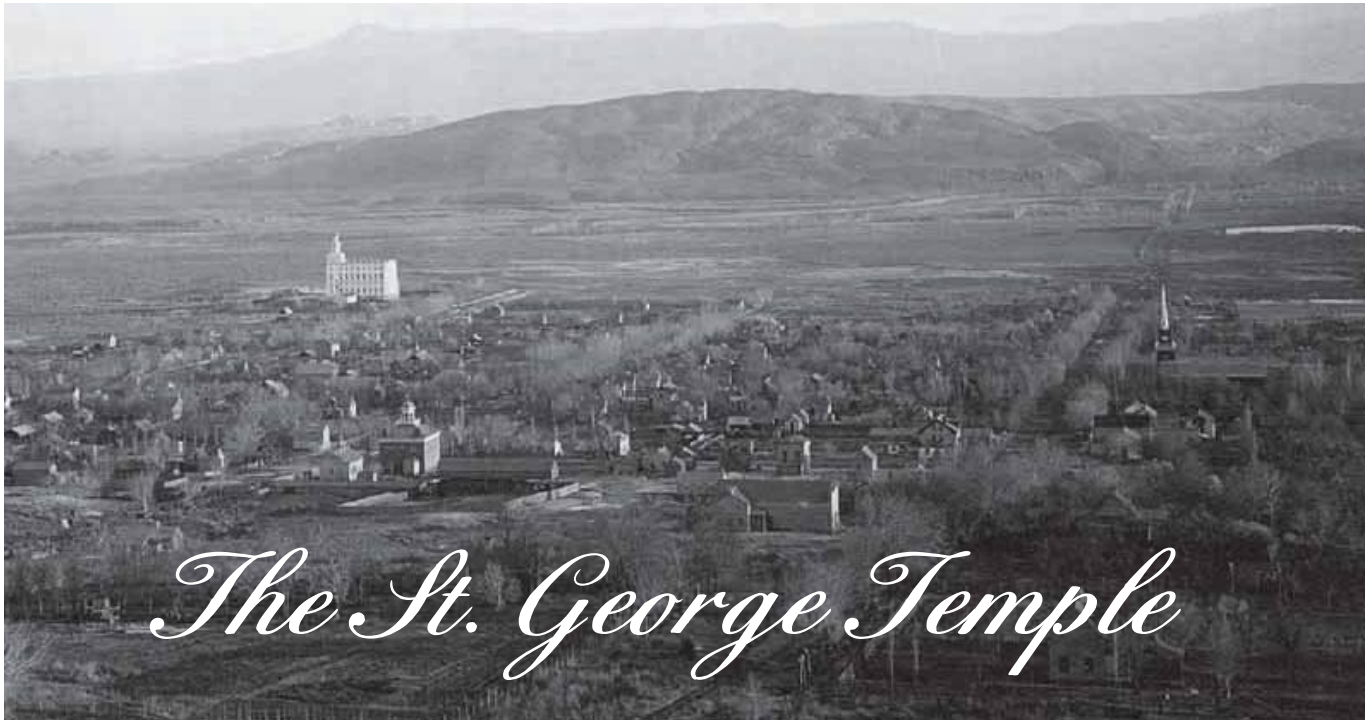


Tour Tip: All tours conclude at the Temple Visitors Center



The St. George Temple

By Douglas Alder

The natural beauty of St. George is breathtaking--with red hills immediately north of the city, black mesas on the east and west, and majestic peaks of Zion National Park in the distance

For all its natural visual appeal, the city's most stunning manmade feature is the St. George LDS Temple with its white walls set against the red hills and the green trees in the heart of downtown. In many ways it is the symbol of the city. In fact, for many years it was part of the city logo until some objected to a religious structure included in a secular masthead.

Why did the early members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ("the Mormons") build their first temple in the West in St. George? Clearly they wanted the first temple to be in Salt Lake City, but at the time the Church and the federal government were embroiled in an extended political battle, which included the presence of federal troops in the state's capital city. Church leaders could see that continued construction of the Salt Lake Temple could lead to confiscation, so they covered the foundation and postponed the project.

Church president Brigham Young was aging, but he was determined to see the completion of a temple in the West before his death. He wanted to be certain temple ceremonies, so essential to Latter-day Saints, would be performed in a permanent sacred place. He and other church leaders had completed a temple in Nauvoo, under the guidance of Joseph Smith, but it was only used for a few weeks before the Saints were forced to flee from their community and their temple. In the 1860s, they were looking for a site for the first temple in the west. Why not Logan or Provo where strong LDS communities were already established? Why St. George?

St. George was isolated, and the temple could be built inconspicuously. St. George was not on the federal government's "radar screen." The second factor was that residents had developed some excellent construction skills working on the St. George Tabernacle and the Cotton Factory in Washington. There was a corps of trained craftsmen available, and rock quarries and lumber mills had already been established. Another consideration was the Dixie colony's struggle with agriculture. Their irrigation system was continually threatened by floods so the community desperately needed the economic support these big construction projects afforded by importing capital and providing employment.

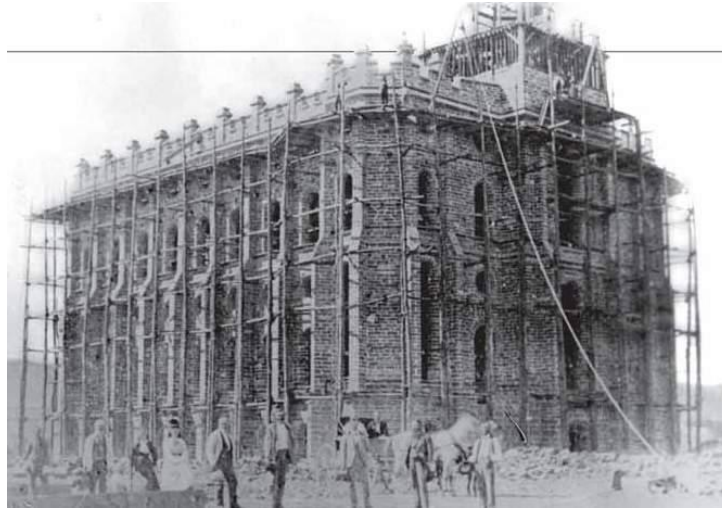
The next matter was to select a site. Erastus Snow and other local leaders had two locations in mind but when Brigham Young came to make the decision, he chose the present site instead. At the time, the temple site was considered "well out of town" and the locals were perplexed because the spot chosen by the president had a spring exactly where the building was to stand. They objected, but he instructed them to drain the spring. Despite the challenges, the site had an advantage. It was on a small hill elevating the building above other structures and could be seen from a great distance.

The story surrounding the construction of the St. George Temple is the stuff of fables. The first challenge was to dig a large area for the foundation, drain it and divert the spring water away from the building. That was the easy part. The ground was soaked to a depth of several feet. To make the ground solid enough to support the weight of the building, they placed thousands of rocks into the mud pounding them several feet into the ground.

Their pounder, used to drive the rocks down to solid ground, was an old cannon. A road was built up to the west black mesa (approximate location of the current St. George Airport); and for more than a year, freight wagons made hundreds of round trips to the temple site with basketball-sized lava rocks which were pounded over and over until they had solid ground.

The next step was to carve out huge blocks of lava rock, each approximately the size of a casket. The stones were too heavy to lift into the wagons so the laborers devised another way. They drove the wagons over the stones, dug holes underneath to chain the stones under the wagon, then lifted them a few inches

from the ground. Slowly they were transported down the hill and placed on the pounded stone bed to form the base for the walls of the temple.



For more than a year, freight wagons made hundreds of round trips to the temple site with basketball-sized lava rocks. They were pounded over and over with an old cannon until they had solid ground



The old Cannon used to pound the foundation stone for the Temple

All the while, quarrymen had been preparing sandstone blocks at the same location they had used for the materials to build the St. George Tabernacle (present-day Red Hills Golf Course). The temple's basement walls were built from lava stone. The sandstone blocks formed the remaining four stories which were always intended to be stuccoed and painted white.

The construction required huge amounts of lumber, for the structure and for

scaffolding, but that commodity was scarce. The Pine Valley mills could not provide enough, so a second source was developed at Mount Trumbull on the Arizona Strip. Again, roads had to be built and a crew sustained. It was a daunting task which often resulted in discouragement.

The temple was completed in seven years with 225 men working full time, assisted by contributions from people throughout the region to sustain them in their work. The building was dedicated in April 1877 just a few months prior to Brigham Young's death.

Today, a visitor center is open to the public with information, films, pictures and literature describing the church, its teachings and its history — and even pictures of the interior of the temple which is reserved for sacred ceremonies by worthy members. The cannon used to pound the rocks into a solid foundation is on display, and the quiet and sacred grounds are open to all. The St. George Temple is more than just a religious center. It is a monument to pioneer ingenuity and the continuing concept of community which thrives in Utah's Dixie. 🇺🇸