

# The Historians Corner

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## A LETTER FROM BRIGHAM YOUNG AND DANIEL H. WELLS, 1857

(Editor's Note: In October 1963 the Western History Association held its annual conference in Salt Lake City. During the conference, a dinner meeting was held on the BYU Campus. In honor of the occasion, the BYU Library staff prepared a special brochure which reproduced a most important letter having to do with the so-called Utah War. For the special interest of readers of *BYU Studies*, we present here the explanation of the letter as prepared by the library staff, as well as the letter itself.)

### INTRODUCTION

On July 24, 1857, while the residents of the Territory of Utah gathered in Big Cottonwood Canyon to celebrate the decennial anniversary of the pioneers' entrance into Salt Lake Valley, a runner arrived with the news that an army was approaching Utah to quell what was understood in the East to be an outright rebellion. Brigham Young and his advisers began immediate plans for the defense of the Territory of Utah. Within the next few days men were sent to the more populous

settlements to inform the people of the urgency of the peril facing them. Instructions were sent to the more distant, out-lying settlements requesting that these locations be abandoned and that the colonists return to Utah. Two such settlements were San Bernardino, California, and Carson Valley, Nevada.

On September 7 Captain Stewart Van Vleit arrived in Salt Lake to "make necessary arrangements for receiving and provisioning the troops in Utah." Captain Van Vleit was evasive as to the purpose of the troops' being sent to Utah and completely ignored notifying Brigham Young of his release as the Governor of the Territory. After spending a week in the Territory, Captain Van Vleit left on September 14. His visit had done nothing to calm the fears of the Territory concerning the approaching army. On the following day, September 15, Brigham Young declared martial law and prepared to wage a defensive war.

In the letter accompanying the declaration of martial law, Brigham Young outlined the tactics he would employ against the army. His plan of defense was two-fold: first, harassment of the troops during the current year; and second, the establishment of a safe hiding place with impregnable entrances for the 1858 campaign. The first phase of this campaign was begun immediately. During the month of October, Lot Smith was able to hamper the troops sufficiently to force them to winter in Wyoming. This was done by a series of raids in which supplies were burned, cattle and oxen driven off, and the army harassed enough to slow them down without an actual shooting incident. Such strategic places as Ft. Bridger and surrounding areas were burned to hamper the army as much as possible. At the same time, the Nauvoo Legion was mobilized and fortifications were built in Echo Canyon in case of an impending invasion.

The second part of the plan, finding a secure hiding place for the Saints, was never actually completed. Several groups were sent out, such as the one headed by William H. Dame, who explored western Utah and eastern Nevada to find such a location; but no fortifications were built and there was no massive storage of food. However, when the army actually entered Salt Lake Valley, the people in the northern part of the state were evacuated to the south; and the northern area was made ready for immediate destruction. Perhaps the media-

tion accomplished by such men as Thomas L. Kane during the winter of 1857 made this second phase of the campaign unnecessary.

Of particular interest in the letter is the last paragraph which gives definite instructions concerning the treatment of those passing through Utah. Obviously Brigham Young had heard of the problems incurred by the passage of the Francher train through the territory and outlined what must be done to keep any incident from arising between the residents of Utah and the emigrant trains. He was particularly anxious that no word be forwarded from any section which would give credence to the idea that Utah was in a state of revolt. Also recorded in this paragraph was his injunction that friendship with the Indians be maintained so that the people would not have to contend with both any army from the East and an Indian uprising.

Philo Farnsworth, to whom this letter was addressed, was bishop of the Beaver Ward. It is likely that similar letters were sent to other ecclesiastical leaders in the south, outlining the same program. On almost identical letter written to William H. Dame was cited in the trial of John D. Lee and included in the Beaver Court records.

Daniel H. Wells, the second signer of the letter, was General of the Nauvoo Legion, and after the declaration of martial law became the military leader in the defense of Utah.

Great Salt Lake City, Sep. 14, 1857

Brother Philo Farnsworth  
Beaver Co.

Herewith you will receive the Governor's Proclamation declaring Martial law. You will probably not be called out this fall, but are required to continue to make ready for a big fight in another year. The plan of operations is supposed to be about these. In case the U.S. Government should send out an overpowering force we intend to desolate the Territory and conceal our families, stock, and all of our effects in the fastnesses of the mountains, where they will be safe, while the men waylay our enemies, attack them from ambush, stampede their animals, take the supply trains, cut off detachments and parties sent to Kanyons for wood, or on other service, to lay waste every thing that will burn—houses, fences,

trees, fields, grass, that they cannot find a particle of anything that will be of use to them, not even sticks to make a fire to cook their suppers, to waste away our enemies and lose none. This will be our mode of warfare. Thus you see the necessity of preparing; find secure places in the mountains where they cannot find us, or if they do where they cannot approach in any force, and there prepare for families by building some cabins, cacheing flour and grain. Flour should be ground in the latter part of winter, or early in the Spring in order to keep. Sow grain in your fields early as possible this fall so that the harvest of another year may come off before they can have time to get here. Conciliate the Indians and make them our fast friends.

In regard to letting people pass or repass or travel through the Territory, this applies to all strangers and suspected persons. Keep things perfectly quiet, and let all things be done peacefully, but with firmness, and let there be no excitement. Let the people be united in their feelings and faith as well as works, and keep alive the spirit of the Reformation, and in regard to saving the grain and provisions we say again let there be no waste. Save life always when it is possible. We do not wish to shed a drop of blood if it can be avoided. This course will give us great influence abroad.

We remain your brethren in the Gospel.

Brigham Young

Daniel H. Wells

## THE MORMONS AND THE DONNER PARTY

Eugene E. Campbell

A busload of tourists, enroute from San Francisco to Salt Lake City, had stopped at the large stone monument near Donner Lake that commemorates the tragic experience of the Donner Party a hundred years before. One member of the group, a Latter-day Saint, was astounded to hear the bus driver inform the tourists that this was the place where "the Mormons massacred the Donner Party!"

Realizing that the bus driver had been misinformed and was evidently confusing the Mountain Meadow Massacre with the Donner tragedy, the Mormon corrected him by declaring: "The