A Time for Change: Improving Salt Lake City, 1890-1925

J. Michael Hunter
Brigham Young University - Provo, mike_hunter@byu.edu

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PUBLISHER
Louis Pickett

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER
John W. Anderson

PRESIDENT-ELECT
Kent V. Lott

EDITOR & MAGAZINE DESIGNER
Susan Lofgren

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WEBSITE DESIGN
Patricia Schmuhl

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
3501 East 2920 South
Salt Lake City, Utah 84109
(801) 484–4441

E-mail: sonsofutahpioneers@actworld.com
Website: www.sonsofutahpioneers.org

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COVER ART
© Autumn, City Creek Canyon, by James T. Harwood, collection of Mark Peterson. All Rights Reserved.
The establishment of Salt Lake City was not typical of most city settlements. The people who founded the city in 1847 were Mormons, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They did not come as individuals, but as a well-organized, centrally directed group. This unusual founding resulted in centralized city planning that was unique in the establishment of frontier towns in the United States.

In 1847, Brigham Young and the members of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles present in the valley convened within the first few days after arriving in their covered wagons. Brigham selected a ground for his home between two forks of City Creek, and designated a 40-acre site for a new temple. From that religious center, the city was laid out in a grid of 10-acre blocks with 8 lots per block. Streets measured 8 rods wide with 20-foot sidewalks along each side. Houses were to rest 20 feet back from the sidewalk. Eventually canals would run along the streets, providing water for gardens and orchards. From the pulpit, Brigham Young and other Church leaders encouraged Latter-day Saints to beautify the city by planting trees and gardens. Visitors to the city in its
From 1872 until 1889, horses and mules pulled the city's streetcars. In 1880 an estimated 6,000 work animals left behind 60 tons of manure and 3,000 gallons of urine during a normal working day. Animal-powered transportation necessitated a large crew of street cleaners to follow in their tracks. Pictured above are the Salt Lake City's street cleaners to follow in their tracks. Picture dated 1872. The Latter-day Saints.

Some streets or already were paved even as late as the 1900s. By 1904, only 4.05 miles had been paved. To cross streets, residents used small bridges over irrigation ditches. Salt Lake streets were not only dirty, but dusty in summer and muddy in winter.

As the 1880s came to close, the city's well-ordered agrarian-residential design had become distorted by factories, shops, brothels, tap rooms, gambling houses, and pool halls. Pollution from factories, smelters, railroads, shops, and homes fouled the air and soiled carpets, drapes, and clothes. Garbage piled up in yards. Household wastes ran onto the ground and into open gutters. Privy vaults and cesspools overflowed and leaked. Salt Lake City had no sewer system, and ditches along both sides of all streets became overloaded with human, animal, and household wastes. The stagnant water contributed to the spread of diseases. The population suffered from periodic epidemics of tuberculosis, diphtheria, and smallpox. In 1880, the city reported that the water in a large percentage of the city's wells was contaminated and unfit for use. None of Salt Lake City's 275 miles of streets were paved, and the dust often filled pedestrian lungs and irritated eyes. Horses and mules left behind an estimated 60 tons of manure and 3,000 gallons of urine, and Salt Lake City had no program of regular street cleaning. People often left their dead animals lying in the streets to avoid the removal cost. While it was the city marshal's responsibility to see that the dead animals were quickly removed, decaying carcasses were often left lying by a curb for many days.

By 1890s, Salt Lakers were fed up with wallowing in dirt, drinking polluted water, and breathing foul air. In a hotly contested February 1889 city election, candidate George M. Scott became mayor of the troubled city. Born in New York in 1835, Scott migrated to California before settling in Salt Lake City in 1871. He owned and operated a successful hardware business. Scott was soon inundated with petitions for street, water, and sewer improvements. Scott perceived this as a public upsurge and worked with the city council to approve a massive urban improvement program.

The Scott administration did have some groundwork on which to begin. In 1880, Main Street received electric lights, and electric lighting options were offered throughout the city by the end of the 1880s. By 1884, the city had constructed enclosed water mains with a settling system. This system fed into hydrants rather than to user's homes. In 1889, Salt Lake City had inaugurated an electric street railway system for public transportation. This helped remove many animal-driven vehicles from the streets. By 1890, the city had five miles of sewer pipe. Scott also received some help from a number of civic and social movements that gained impetus during the 1890s. In 1893, the magnificent spectacle of the classic
When civic-mindedness began in Salt Lake City in 1890, the city had no paved streets. By 1925, Salt Lake City boasted 93 miles of paved streets and 440 miles of sidewalks.

Historical photos (22-24) © Utah State Historical Society.

In 1913, Salt Lake City organized the Civic Planning and Art Commission. While the mayor served as chair, the commission was made up of prominent citizens, representatives of women's organizations, business people, artists, and architects. The commission plunged into various civic improvement projects, and in 1914 improvement statistics jumped greatly over previous years. From the turn of the century to 1913, the city laid less than 10 miles of water mains.
In December 1909, a group of women and men met at the home of Colette and Clarence Allen to organize the Park and Playgrounds Association. By 1910 the city established its first playground for children and in the years following established playground improvements in Liberty and Pioneer parks (pictured below). By 1920, Salt Lake City had 13 public parks and an extensive year-round recreation program.

per year, constructed less than 6 miles of curb and gutter, and paved only a few miles of street per year. In 1914, the city constructed nearly 20 miles of water mains, built more than 14 miles of curb and gutter, paved more than 11 miles of street, and laid 13 miles of sewer lines (as additional 66 miles were laid in 1915). By 1916, Salt Lake City had 2.7 miles of water pipe per 1,000 residents, 2.56 miles of sewer pipe per 1,000 residents, and 4.5 miles of street per 1,000 residents.

When civic mindedness began in Salt Lake City in 1890, Salt Lake City had no paved streets. By 1925, Salt Lake City boasted 93 miles of paved streets, 440 miles of sidewalks, 1,522 light poles on the city streets, over 207 miles of curb and gutter, and over 332 miles of sewer line.

Between 1899 and 1925, Salt Lake City underwent sweeping changes. Civic-minded individuals pulled together to transform Salt Lake City into the economic and cultural center of the Intermountain West. Persistent lobbying by civic improvement groups and the city’s men’s and women’s clubs, led to changes in city government, which then acted to improve living conditions in the city. The city engineer worked tirelessly to meet the demands for improved streets, water quality, and sanitation. Most public health hazards were mitigated or eliminated. By 1925, Salt Lake City was a cleaner, healthier city than it had been 30 years earlier.

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Salt Lake City Engineering Department. Annual Report of the City Engineer. 1907-1920. L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

When the water shortage of the past year, we can understand more fully the problems the pioneers confronted as they tried to establish communities throughout the Salt Lake Valley and other western regions. Water is necessary for survival, and getting the water to particular areas was a problem for these early settlers.

Harnessing the water was another problem. I grew up in Virgin Valley, Nevada, where water was a scarce commodity, except during summer floods. When the snowpack in Southern Utah melted, the water would rush down the canyons, felling trees and dragging other debris. The current was forceful enough to break the dams that residents had built to harness water for irrigation. Citizens in my community and others like it then had to place new dams and repair irrigation ditches.

While we were in the British Isles on the DUP tour in September, the tour guides immersed us in the history of England and its landscape. We were able to bring a small amount of machinery west. Such was the case for the builders of the first mills in Utah, Charles Crisman, Archibald Gardner, John Neff, and Isaac Chase. Each of these men brought a wagon full of mill irons in 1847, and each put up a mill.

Since the irrigation system was so important, these builders had to find mill sites that would not interfere with irrigation. The mouth of City Creek Canyon was the location for the first grist mill in the Territory, built by Charles Crisman. Called a "chopping mill," it produced rough meal. Archibald Gardner, with his brother, Robert, built a mill near Warm Springs. The mill was built using "wooden pins and mortices" rather than nails. But the water did not flow swiftly enough to power the mill, so in 1849 the brothers moved it to Mill Creek. John Neff built the third mill, the first "white flour" mill in Utah. Isaac Chase built the fourth mill in the territory, a grist mill.

The Chase mill is perhaps the most famous of these early mills and has been upgraded over the years to preserve it and keep it functional. In 1933, after a seven-year effort by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers to secure caretaking rights to the mill, the Salt Lake City Council leased it to the group for $1 dollar per annum. The mill is standing in Liberty Park and visitors can tour it.

Guest Editorial

Early Pioneer Mills

By Mary A. Johnson President of DUP

In the early days, water in Utah's ditches and canals also turned the waterwheels that provided power for the mills, the linchpin for the production of food and building materials for the pioneers.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 65.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 47.