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Benemérito de las Américas

The Beginning of a Unique Church School in Mexico

Barbara E. Morgan

In a bittersweet ceremony on January 29, 2013, Elder Daniel L. Johnson, a member of the Seventy and President of the Mexico Area, announced the transformation of Benemérito de las Américas, a Church-owned high school in Mexico City, into a missionary training center at the end of the school year.¹ To the emotional students and faculty at the meeting, Elders Russell M. Nelson and Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve explained the urgent need to provide additional facilities for missionary training in the wake of President Thomas S. Monson's announcement that minimum ages for missionary service were being lowered and the consequent upsurge in numbers.² While The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has owned and operated other schools, this school was unique in the expansive role it played in Mexican Church history. This "dramatic moment in Church history," as Elder Holland described it, was preceded by half a century of work by faithful, obedient, hardworking, sacrificing, and inspired people who made this day possible. This article highlights the significant policies, events, and people associated with the opening of the Church school Benemérito de las Américas, which became the "educational and cultural center for the Saints in Mexico."³

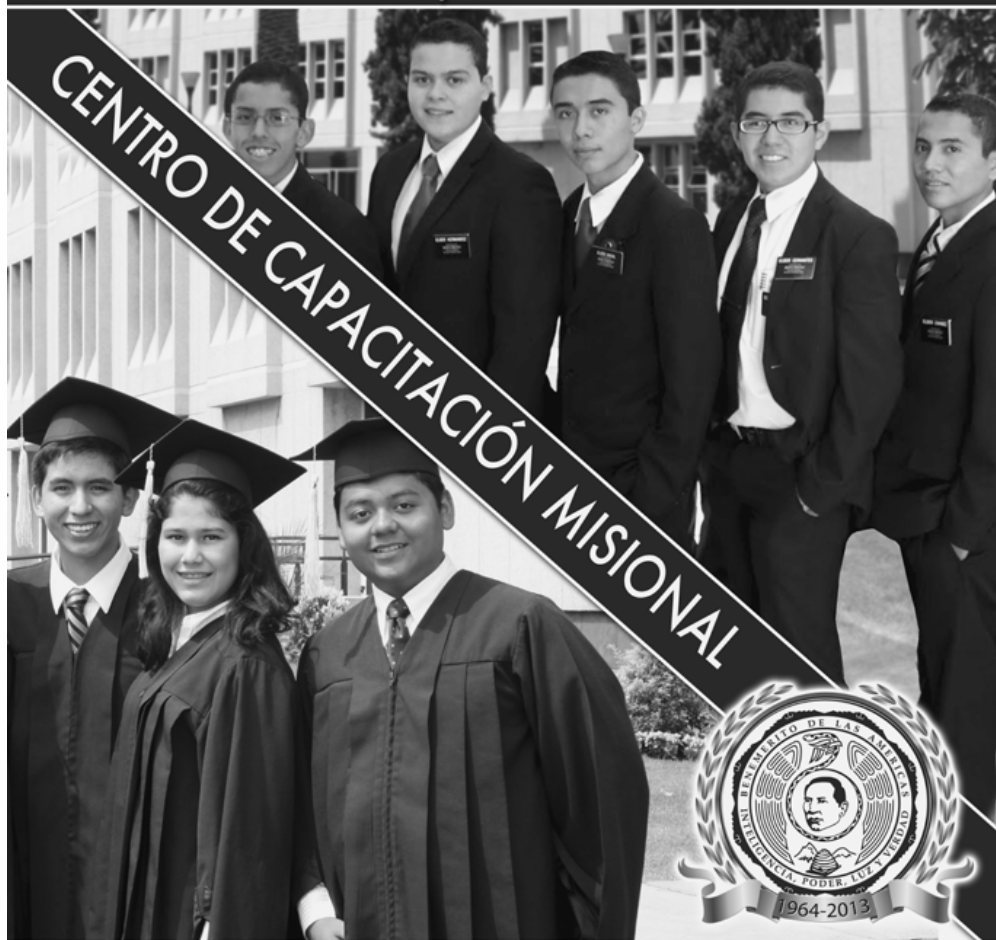
1. Paul Johnson, interview by author, March 6, 2013, Salt Lake City.

2. Russell M. Nelson and Jeffrey R. Holland, Remarks at Benemérito, January 29, 2013, transcript and video in author's possession.

3. Harvey L. Taylor, "The Story of LDS Church Schools," 1971, 2 vols., 2:14a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

He aquí, apresuraré mi obra en su tiempo.

D y C 88:73



Ayúdanos a conservar el espíritu y
disfruta la graduación del Benemérito

Banner at the last graduation ceremony at Benemérito school. The text reads, "Behold, I will hasten my work in its time. D&C 88:73. Missionary Training Center. Help us preserve the spirit and enjoy the graduation of Benemérito." Courtesy Benemérito administration.

Background of Religious Education in Mexico

The Church has put high priority on educating its members since its organization in 1830.⁴ Everywhere that Latter-day Saints established new communities on the American frontier, they established schools.⁵ When the Saints established new settlements, they immediately organized a school—held in the open air, in adobes, in homes, or wherever else important lessons could be taught.⁶ During the late nineteenth century, stakes throughout the Church established thirty-six “academies,” or high schools.⁷

The story of Latter-day Saint education in Mexico started with the early settlements that are now known as the Mormon colonies.⁸ A history reports that as the Mormon colonists were “ambitious to have the best for their children, schools became their first concern.”⁹ For example, shortly after arriving in Mexico in 1885, Annie Maria Woodbury Romney started a school in her home.¹⁰ Then, a new community building was built with the dual purpose of serving as a school and a church. In 1897, Juárez Stake Academy, a Church high school, officially commenced operation.¹¹ It and associated elementary schools provided badly needed education.

4. This summary borrows heavily from Clark V. Johnson’s “Mormon Education in Mexico: The Rise of the Sociedad Educativa y Cultural” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1976).

5. Milton L. Bennion, *Mormonism and Education* (Salt Lake City: The Department of Education of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), 40–49. In his book, Bennion provides a list of the early settlements and the schools they organized.

6. Herbert E. Bolton, “The Mormons in the Opening of the Great West,” *Deseret News*, October 24, 1925, as quoted in Johnson, “Mormon Education in Mexico,” 6.

7. Scott C. Esplin and Arnold K. Garr, “Church Academies,” in *Mapping Mormonism* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press), 126.

8. For more information on the Mormon colonies, see Nelle Spilsbury Hatch, *Colonia Juarez: An Intimate Account of a Mormon Village* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954); Thomas Cottam Romney, *Life Story of Miles P. Romney* (Independence, Mo.: Zion’s Printing and Publishing, 1948).

9. Albert Kenyon Wagner and Leona Farnsworth Wagner, *The Juarez Stake Academy, 1897–1997: The First One Hundred Years* (n.p., n.d.), 3.

10. See forthcoming chapter on Annie Maria Woodbury Romney by Barbara Morgan in *Women of Faith*, vol. 3, ed. Richard E. Turley Jr. and Brittany A. Chapman (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book).

11. Wagner and Wagner, *Juarez Stake Academy, 1897–1997*, 6. See also Ella Farnsworth Bentley, “Remembrances of Annie Maria Woodbury Romney,” unpublished manuscript, copy in author’s possession.

Barbara E. Morgan

A few years ago, I was surprised to find, in the middle of Mexico City, perhaps one of the best-kept secrets of the Church, Benemérito de las Américas. I was stunned not only by the faithful disciple scholars there, but also by how strongly I felt that this campus was a crucial part of the Latter-day Saint legacy of sacrifice, faith, obedience, and emphasis on education. During this and subsequent visits, I felt a responsibility to help gather and preserve the history of that sacred place and its people. The recent conversion of the school into an MTC has “hastened my work” and validated the school’s critical place in Church history. This article is foundational to a book I am currently writing on the history of Benémérito de las Américas.



I was pleased to be able to assist in an exhibition about Benemérito at the Education in Zion Gallery at BYU. The bilingual exhibition, *Hastening the Work: The Story of Benemerito*, showcases the school’s forty-nine-year history while illustrating the impact of education and the blessings that come from hard work and sacrifice. The exhibition will be open until October 4, 2014. Visit educationinzion.byu.edu and click on current exhibitions and *Hastening the Work* for more information.

After the turn of the century, one of the major obstacles to democracy for Mexico was the illiteracy of its citizens.¹² By 1924, recognizing its own lack of resources and seeming inability to provide adequate education, the government allowed private groups from other countries to educate the Mexican people under close supervision.¹³

12. See, for example, Charles W. Dabney, *A Study of Educational Conditions in Mexico* (Cincinnati: The Committee for the Study of Educational Conditions in Mexico, 1916), 92–93.

13. Articles 3 and 130 of the Mexican Constitution indicated that the federal government was in charge of education and forbade religious schools. George I.

Although the government recognized the benefit of the Juárez Stake's educational endeavors, the emphasis placed on American traditions and culture was of great concern. In 1942, an educational evaluator reported:

Although these schools have been in existence since 1885, a visitor can easily imagine himself in Kansas or Utah. And, while Spanish is taught in all grades, it creates nothing of an atmosphere. Some of the teachers were born in Mexico and they speak the Spanish language perfectly, nevertheless they fail to give the child much more of Mexico than his cousin receives from his Spanish class in Salt Lake City. Of the many cultural values which Mexico has to offer, few are entering into the education program in these schools. . . . All in all, they are giving a good American education to those who attend them.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the Church had already begun to spread beyond the colonies, and, once again, the need for education followed. This time, however, the needs were greatest among the Mexican natives.

Starting as early as 1915, Mexican Latter-day Saints began asking the Church to assist them with the education of their youth. In the 1930s, local members started hiring teachers to teach small groups of children.¹⁵ In 1944, recognizing the need to educate his own as well as other illiterate children, Bernabe Parra, a native Mexican and faithful Latter-day Saint, founded his own private school at San Marcos Tula (Hidalgo), about thirty miles northwest of Mexico City. By 1946, Arwell Pierce, president of the Mexican Mission, recognized the illiteracy of the members and joined Parra and others in pressing the need for more Church schools to the leaders in Utah. They approved contributions to Parra's school from Church funds, even though it was not officially a Church school.¹⁶ Later, when Claudius Bowman, a native of the Mormon colonies, served as

Sanchez, *Mexico, a Revolution by Education* (New York: Viking Press, 1936), 114–15. See also Johnson, "Mormon Education in Mexico," 13.

14. Henry L. Cain, "Report of the Juarez Stake School System," October 1, 1942, Mexico, cited in Johnson, "Mormon Education in Mexico," 51.

15. Casey P. Griffiths, "The Globalization of Latter-day Saint Education" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2012), 106.

16. F. LaMond Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1987), 186, states that the school was built and personally funded by Parra. Daniel Taylor stated that although Parra "may have used some of his personal money in getting it started," the Church, through the mission, financed the school. Daniel P. Taylor, interview by Gordon Irving, 1976, Atizqapan de Zaragoza, Mexico, 96, James Moyle Oral History Program, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

mission president, he began sending requests to Church headquarters for schools to assist the Mexican Saints. Being well acquainted with the Juárez Stake Academy, he recommended the Church build a duplicate school near Mexico City. Although President Bowman's suggestion did not come to fruition immediately, his proposal led to a greater awareness of the need for educating the Church's young members.¹⁷

Between the years 1946 and 1961, the Church expanded rapidly in Mexico—growing from approximately five thousand members to nearly twenty-five thousand.¹⁸ With the rising number of Church members—many of whom were illiterate—the need for increased education among them became more pronounced. No longer could this problem be ignored. During this time, a few primary schools were started by Church members, with limited official assistance from the Church.¹⁹ The experience these Church members had proved to be valuable as the Church developed more primary schools.

In 1957, Church President David O. McKay formed a committee to investigate the possibility of establishing Church-sponsored schools in Mexico. He named Elder Marion G. Romney of the Quorum of the Twelve as director of the committee, with Joseph T. Bentley, president of the Northern Mexican Mission, and Claudius Bowman as members.²⁰

17. Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, 187. Seeing little progress in the education of Mexico's members over the next decade, mission presidents Harvey H. Taylor and David S. Brown wrote letters to Harvey L. Taylor, who headed the Church's worldwide education system, suggesting that they be permitted to send top students from around Mexico to the colonies in order to receive the education available at Juárez Stake Academy.

18. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Facts and Statistics: Mexico," *Newsroom*, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/mexico> (accessed May 8, 2013).

19. Johnson, "Mormon Education in Mexico," 73–76.

20. Marion G. Romney and Joseph T. Bentley to President McKay and Counselors, December 9, 1959, folder 2, box 5, Joseph T. Bentley Papers, UA 878, Perry Special Collections: "Under date of October 11, 1957 you wrote a letter to us and the late President Claudius Bowman of the Mexican Mission in which you said: 'For some time past we have given consideration to the advisability of establishing a school in Mexico for the accommodation of our youth in that land. Thus far, however, no definite decision has been reached as to where such a school should be located, what the character of the school should be, and who would be expected to attend it. We would be pleased to have you brethren serve as a committee, with Brother Romney as chairman, to make a careful survey and study of the situation and submit to us your recommendations relative thereto.'" Prior to and following his call, Joseph T. Bentley served as the controller of the Church's Unified School System.

All three were raised in the colonies. These capable leaders ascertained the number of students, the buildings necessary, the legality of the Church operating educational facilities in Mexico, the political leanings of the government, and the available educational system in each area.

Assessing Needs and Foundational Planning

From 1957 to 1960, constant correspondence passed between ecclesiastical and educational leaders in Mexico and Utah. Leaders in Mexico included Daniel P. Taylor (director of Juárez Stake Academy and son of Harvey H. Taylor) and newly called mission presidents David S. Brown and Harvey H. Taylor. Education leaders in Utah included Ernest L. Wilkinson (chancellor over the Unified School System, later known as the Church Educational System, and president of Brigham Young University), as well as Harvey L. Taylor²¹ (the previous superintendent of schools in Mesa, Arizona) and Joseph T. Bentley. Correspondence with General Authorities primarily involved the First Presidency and Elder Romney.²²

Major concerns were the politics of the Mexican educational system,²³ the buying and owning of lands, and official recognition of the Church by

21. Due to the similarity of these names, a simple caution to not confuse the two. Harvey H. Taylor and Harvey L. Taylor were not related.

22. For a few examples: Joseph T. Bentley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, memorandum, June 19, 1958, folder 3, box 3, Bentley Papers; Joseph T. Bentley to Daniel P. Taylor, February 3, 1959, folder 3, box 3, Bentley Papers; Daniel P. Taylor to Harvey L. Taylor, February 16, 1959, folder 3, box 3, Bentley Papers; Ernest L. Wilkinson to Harvey L. Taylor, memorandum, January 13, 1959, folder 4, box 3, Bentley Papers.

23. In a memorandum on Mexico's schools, Joseph Bentley wrote that one of the two serious problems with regard to education in Mexico was the "Communist and atheistic influence in the schools." He quoted from *Fortune* magazine, "The Soviet investment in Mexico's old men has been for immediate operational purposes. Its major capital investment for the long term has been plowed through the years in the Mexican education system, students and teachers alike. Here the harvest has been bountiful. The school system is heavily infiltrated with Communist teachers and administrators (more than half the teachers in grade and high school by some Mexican estimates, are subject to Communist influence). Until recently both the faculty and the organized student life of the national University were largely dominated by the Communist apparatus. This was the reservoir of power from which the Communists drew their liveliest, boldest street demonstrators. During the pro-Castro riots in July of 1960, 1500 students poured into the streets to battle the police in front of the U.S. Embassy." Charles J. V. Murphy, "New Communist Patterns in Latin America," *Fortune* (October 1963): 106, quoted in Joseph Bentley, memorandum, October 23, 1963, folder 9, box 106, Bentley Papers.

the Mexican government.²⁴ Partially in reaction to the religious domination of the Catholic Church, the Mexican Constitution placed strict limits on all churches. The Mexican Constitution stated that no church may “acquire, hold or administer real property or hold mortgages thereon” and that places of public worship belong to the nation. It also stated that seminaries and schools “belonging to religious orders” constructed for the use of “teaching of any religious creed” were “property of the Nation.”²⁵ These legal issues remained important and would have to be dealt with in time.

Elder Romney and Joseph Bentley made critical observations and sent recommendations to the First Presidency regarding the Church’s educational activities in Mexico. First, Romney and Bentley agreed that the facilities necessary to run schools were not being provided adequately by the Mexican government and thus strongly encouraged the development of private education. Romney and Bentley’s report noted that approximately 50 percent of children between the ages of six and fourteen were illiterate and their needs were not being adequately met. The committee reported that “in 1950 some nine million Mexicans over six years of age could neither read nor write. It was ascertained during our tour of Mexico in 1958 that illiteracy was rising because the increase in population is greater than the advances in education.”²⁶

Second, the committee recommended that a number of primary schools be built in areas of large Church membership by fall 1960 in order to meet the need of the students. The committee also recommended that a high school, a junior college, and a normal school be built on land that the Church already owned in Mexico City. They knew from a 1958 complete survey of members in Latter-day Saint branches that there were 2,085 potential students (children born in the years 1947–54), and that the government was using any facility possible for the education of children.²⁷

24. See Johnson, “Mormon Education in Mexico,” 88–90, for Mexican LDS leaders’ reading of Articles 27 and 130 of the Constitution.

25. Constitution of Mexico, 1917, as translated in Johnson, “Mormon Education in Mexico,” 88–89.

26. Romney and Bentley to McKay and Counselors, December 9, 1959. President Claudius Bowman, president of the Mexican Mission, was killed in an auto accident on July 2, 1958, and apparently no one was called to replace him on the committee.

27. “In 1955 the Mexican government reported that, of a total of 6,833,771 children between six and fourteen years of age, only 3,936,028 received any schooling.” Romney and Bentley to McKay and Counselors, December 9, 1959.



Daniel Pierce Taylor, first superintendent of Church schools in Mexico, c. 1963. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito, in possession of Barbara E. Morgan.

Third, the committee suggested that Daniel Taylor be appointed as the superintendent of all Church schools in Mexico. They proposed that Kenyon Wagner be appointed as the new director for the Juárez Stake schools.²⁸

They anticipated that the proposed schools in Mexico City “could well form the nucleus of a center not only for Mexico, but for all the Latin American missions where priesthood manuals and materials for church auxiliaries could be prepared.” With the future expansion of the Church in mind, they continued, “We have a great work yet to do in these lands . . . developing our programs around the native cultures. Stories and illustrations for Mexico should be taken from Mexican history and from the lives of Mexican heroes such as Benito Juárez and Hidalgo. Our M.I.A. [Mutual Improvement Association] activities should feature Indian and Mexican dances, folk lore, and music.” In this same letter they noted that, by not having the center of the schools in the colonies, “our Mexican Saints can be encouraged to look to Mexico City rather than to the Juárez Stake Academy or the United States for their higher education.” They also indicated that the program would provide employment to many of the returned missionaries who were already

28. Romney and Bentley to McKay and Counselors, December 9, 1959.

serving as teachers without pay in the Church members' schools.²⁹ On January 21, 1960, the First Presidency approved the recommendations.³⁰ At this time, President Wilkinson was promoting the concept of junior colleges as feeders to Brigham Young University and took particular interest in this assignment—especially as it included the likelihood of a normal school.³¹

With his new assignment and the direction to “go to Mexico and organize schools wherever you feel it will be to the Church’s interest,” Daniel Taylor moved to Mexico City immediately and initiated his work as superintendent. By April, Taylor sent a letter to Wilkinson recommending, among other things, a legal organization of the Church schools in Mexico, to be kept separate from the Church schools in the colonies; the organization of an “Advisory Board in Mexico,” which would include the presidents of the missions and stakes and four or five other Church members with experience in Mexico and education; the opening of fourteen more primary schools; the commencement of construction for the secondary school in Mexico City on the Church-owned land, with other schools being built as needed; continued work by the superintendent of the Mexican Church schools³² to improve education all over Mexico; the continuing of the superintendent and educational leaders to build positive relations with the Mexican government leaders; and “that you, as administrator of the Unified Church School System, convey to the Board of Education of the Church and to the First Presidency the sincere thanks of the Church members in Mexico for this important step forward which in a very short time and for a comparatively low cost will strengthen the Church in Mexico beyond our fondest expectations.”³³

29. Romney and Bentley to McKay and Counselors, December 9, 1959; also quoted in Taylor, “Story of LDS Church Schools,” 2:10.

30. Romney and Bentley to McKay and Counselors, December 9, 1959; Taylor, “Story of LDS Church Schools,” 2:12.

31. For a discussion of Wilkinson’s ideas concerning junior colleges, see Ernest L. Wilkinson and Leonard J. Arrington, eds., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 3:138–75.

32. Here Taylor is referring to himself.

33. Daniel P. Taylor to Ernest L. Wilkinson, April 14, 1960, folder 2, box 5, Bentley Papers. See also Daniel P. Taylor to Ernest L. Wilkinson, March 23, 1960, folder 4, box 194, UA 1086, Ernest L. Wilkinson Presidential Papers, 1949–1975, Perry Special Collections.

As a result of these recommendations, Wilkinson appointed several prominent ecclesiastical and business leaders to form the Advisory Board for Schools in Mexico.³⁴ The board would meet regularly and make recommendations to the administrators of the Unified Church School System.³⁵ By November, this board, with Joseph Bentley and Harvey L. Taylor in attendance, determined that the Federal District would be the main hub for the schools and that a central campus would be built just north of Mexico City. The board also determined that the students would live in small cottages on campus, rather than large dormitories, in order to provide a family environment. House parents, local active Latter-day Saint couples, would create a homelike atmosphere through prayer, scripture study, chores, and other family activities, and would provide the youth with personal attention and mentoring. In addition, the board also agreed that the thirty-four acres of land south-east of Mexico City purchased during President Bowman's administration, known as Churubusco, was too small and that new property should be investigated.³⁶

The Purchase of “El Arbolillo”

The board's decision not to build the central campus on the Churubusco property resulted from a visit to Daniel Taylor by Ernest Wilkinson in early September 1960. Taylor explained, “I took him out to see that property and he said, “This is a beautiful piece of property, but I will not spend one penny here. It's too small. This is going to be a big school.” Ernest Wilkinson had vivid memories of his own previous experience

34. The Advisory Board for Schools in Mexico included the following: Harvey H. Taylor (mission president in Mexico City), chairman; Israel Ivins Bentley (recently appointed president of the Mexican North Mission), vice-chairman; Daniel P. Taylor (superintendent of Church schools in Mexico); Agricol Lozano (Church's attorney in Mexico); Bernabe Parra and Hector Travino (local members from Mexico); and Wilford Farnsworth (vice president of the National City Bank in Mexico), secretary. Joseph T. Bentley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, May 19, 1960, folder 2, box 5, Bentley Papers. Also see Minutes of Meeting, March 9, 1961, folder 2, box 5, Bentley Papers; and Notes, September 6, 1960, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers.

35. Minutes of Meeting, March 9, 1961, folder 2, box 5, Bentley Papers.

36. Minutes of the Mexican Education Council, November 30, 1960, folder 2, box 5, Bentley Papers. The Churubusco land later became a site of a stake center and other Church office buildings. Although at the time this was a tranquil area, it is now in a bustling district at the end of one of the city's major subway lines.

with Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.³⁷ In a letter written immediately upon the BYU president's return from Mexico, Joseph Bentley echoed Wilkinson's desire for a large school. He instructed Church education officials in Mexico to look for plots of at least 125 to 150 acres.³⁸ They in turn contacted Jose Maria Paricio, a real estate agent in Mexico City, and began the search for the appropriate land.³⁹

On September 15, Daniel Taylor, Harvey H. Taylor, and Wilford M. Farnsworth, who was also originally from the colonies, looked at three plots of land that were suggested in the northern part of the city.⁴⁰ The first was too expensive, and the next one was owned by a person not anxious to sell.⁴¹ But the third one seemed to meet all the criteria. Paricio had found this property one day as he was walking through a field of corn. He ran into Don Jose Goyeneche and asked if he knew of a piece of property around 200 acres for sale. Don Jose responded, "Yes, I'm the owner of this property right here, and it's for sale."⁴²

Don Jose Goyeneche and his wife, Dona, were from Spain and wanted to return home. They had no children and none of their family was interested in the lot. They wanted to sell everything, according to Daniel Taylor, "including the rusty nails."⁴³ There were a number of reasons this property, known as El Arbolillo (The Little Tree), was appealing.⁴⁴ First, it was large enough—110 hectares (272 acres).⁴⁵ Second, it was in the Federal District, which would allow its graduates to have preference in being admitted to the University of Mexico.⁴⁶ Third, it had water from its own wells. Fourth,

37. Daniel Taylor, interview by author, February 28, 2013, Highland, Utah.

38. Joseph T. Bentley to Daniel P. Taylor, September 7, 1960, folder 3, box 5, Bentley Papers. Johnson, "Mormon Education in Mexico," 133, has the wrong date for this letter.

39. Harvey H. Taylor, *The Life and Times of Harvey Hyrum Taylor, 1890–1972, an Autobiography*, comp. Daniel P. Taylor (Yorba Linda, Calif.: Shumway Family History Services, 1990), 254. For Harvey L. Taylor's point of view on the purchasing this property, see Johnson, "Mormon Education in Mexico," 134–39.

40. Daniel P. Taylor to Joseph T. Bentley, September 20, 1960, folder 3, box 5, Bentley Papers.

41. Daniel Taylor, interview, February 28, 2013.

42. Daniel Taylor, interview by Gordon Irving, 1976, 185.

43. Daniel Taylor, interview, February 28, 2013.

44. Daniel Taylor, interview by author, May 14, 2013, Highland, Utah. The name came from a small tree at an archeological site where workers gathered for lunch, and the name persisted as the area was developed into a ranch.

45. One hectare is 2.47 acres.

46. Daniel Taylor, interview, May 14, 2013.

it had a dairy and poultry farm, as well as a garden project, which would allow student employment.⁴⁷ “My attraction is based principally upon my awareness of the fact that our members are very poor,” Daniel Taylor wrote. He added, “If they are to attend our high school and junior college they will need to have projects on which they can work in order to earn their way. . . . Simultaneously it would provide the dormitories with much that they would need in order to feed the students.”⁴⁸

Although these reasons were good, the enthusiastic request for the purchase of the land was originally rejected by leaders in Utah. Bentley explained that while the proposal was presented to Elder Romney, it was initially denied due to concerns over the fact that the existing farm was losing money and would likely continue to do so.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Church leaders were concerned about the expense of this venture in light of other educational needs worldwide. Not all were equally enthusiastic about establishing more schools.⁵⁰

Shortly after, Elder Romney spoke with President McKay and discovered that the President, with his long-standing interest and professional experience in education, actually favored the purchase of this large piece of land.⁵¹ Furthermore, McKay had confidence in Harvey H. Taylor, a well-respected Church leader and Mexican citizen who was on good terms with Mexican government officials and had demonstrated prowess in purchasing land for the Church.⁵²

With this understanding, Ernest Wilkinson sent Joseph Bentley and Harvey L. Taylor to look at the land. They were impressed with what they saw and therefore recommended that it become the site of a “*centro escolar*,” which would include a *secundaria* (junior high), a *preparatoria* (high school), and a normal (teacher preparation) school. They also agreed with the concept of student employment: “We firmly believe that these young men and women should earn their own way

47. Daniel Taylor, interview, February 28, 2013.

48. Daniel P. Taylor to Joseph T. Bentley, September 20, 1960, folder 3, box 5, Bentley Papers.

49. Joseph T. Bentley to Daniel P. Taylor, September 28, 1960, folder 3, box 5, Bentley Papers.

50. Wilkinson and Arrington, *Brigham Young University*, 3:166–75. See also Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Church Board of Education, March 1, 1963, folder 7, box 53, David O. McKay Papers, MS 668, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

51. Daniel Taylor, interview, February 28, 2013.

52. Daniel Taylor, interview, February 28, 2013.

as far as possible so that they do not get the idea of having everything given to them.”⁵³ As a result, on December 31, 1960, Ernest L. Wilkinson responded in favor of the proposal to buy the land.⁵⁴

On January 4, 1961, the Church Board of Education in Utah gave permission to purchase the land for \$800,000 but did not yet give funding for the purchase.⁵⁵ Writing to Harvey H. Taylor to convey the decision of the Utah board, and recognizing also that the landowner gave them only sixty days to commit to a final decision, Joseph T. Bentley recommended, “We will have to get busy . . . in order to acquire this very attractive piece of property.”⁵⁶ By the end of March, Wilkinson requested funds from the Church Building Committee, stating, “We have an option for the purchase of this property which expires on April 7, 1961, and it is urgent, therefore, that we take steps to do something about it.”⁵⁷ On April 4, the Church Expenditures Committee authorized the transfer of \$805,000 for the purchase of the property. This letter was signed by David O. McKay, J. Reuben Clark Jr., and Henry D. Moyle, who composed the First Presidency.⁵⁸ With the backing of Ernest Wilkinson and the First Presidency, Harvey H. Taylor and Daniel P. Taylor went to work on the final price and purchasing of the land.

In describing this experience, Daniel Taylor stated, “Dad was a great trader. He had the good sense to know when things are right, when they’re just, whether they should come down some more or not. And if they needed to come down, he knew the tactics of getting it down.” Daniel explained that he and his father spent over a month negotiating with Goyeneche to get the price down from sixteen pesos per square meter to nine, and they eventually bought the cows for \$40,000.⁵⁹

53. Harvey L. Taylor and Joseph T. Bentley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, December 30, 1960, folder 3, box 5, Bentley Papers; Johnson, “Mormon Education in Mexico,” 124. See also Ernest L. Wilkinson to Elder Marion G. Romney, January 24, 1961, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers.

54. Ernest L. Wilkinson to Joseph T. Bentley, December 31, 1960, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers.

55. Minutes, January 4, 1961, folder 4, box 5, Bentley Papers; Joseph T. Bentley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, March 28, 1961, Bentley Papers; David O. McKay, J. Reuben Clark, and Henry D. Moyle to Ernest L. Wilkinson, April 6, 1961, folder 4, box 5, Bentley Papers; Johnson, “Mormon Education in Mexico,” 125.

56. Joseph T. Bentley to Harvey H. Taylor, February 22, 1961, folder 2, box 5, Bentley Papers.

57. Ernest L. Wilkinson to Mr. Harry E. McClure, March 31, 1961, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers.

58. McKay, Clark, and Moyle to Wilkinson, April 6, 1961.

59. Taylor, *Life and Times of Harvey Hyrum Taylor*.

“I suppose that we saved the Church right around ten million pesos by bringing him down as far as we could.”⁶⁰

There was yet another hurdle that needed to be overcome in order to buy the land. According to Mexican law, only a nonreligious legal entity could “take title to property.”⁶¹ Therefore, in May, Harvey H. and Daniel Taylor proposed creating a nonprofit “civil society,” or legal entity, La Sociedad Educativa y Cultural, S. C., for the purpose of purchasing the land.⁶² Because of Wilkinson’s extensive legal background, Church authorities asked him to evaluate the implications of this proposal. He concluded that “this organizational device was proposed and implemented at the suggestion of federal officials in Mexico City and other legal counsel in Mexico.” Even though “these buildings are called cultural centers and provide instruction, recreation, and all other cultural activities,” he pointed out, “the government is well aware of the religious services that are also held in these buildings.”⁶³ Although government officials knew this society was affiliated with the Latter-day Saints, he explained, it technically met the requirements of the “actual law as enforced in Mexico.” He added that “the official’s interpretation at the present time of the constitution is very liberal because of the great need of educational schooling facilities.”⁶⁴

60. Daniel Taylor, interview, February 28, 2013.

61. First Presidency proposal regarding the purchase of the dairy operation at El Arbolillo, May 2, 1961, folder 4, box 5, Bentley papers. For further clarification on this topic, see Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, 188–89, and Johnson, “Mormon Education in Mexico,” 109–11. See also President Ernest L. Wilkinson to President Moyle, March 28, 1960, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers, which explains the ability of the Church to use the Mutual Improvement Association in order to purchase property for the schools.

62. Daniel Taylor to Harvey L. Taylor and Joseph Bentley, May 16, 1961, folder 4, box 5, Bentley Papers. Daniel Taylor’s original proposal for the name was Asociación Educativa y Cultural. The term “sociedad” in Mexico often refers to a formally incorporated body, in this case for the purpose of the promotion of culture and education.

63. Ernest L. Wilkinson to President Henry D. Moyle, March 28, 1960, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers.

64. Ernest L. Wilkinson to Joseph T. Bentley, August 4, 1960, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers. For a more comprehensive explanation on the subject of Mexican property ownership and the LDS Church, see the translation and other materials regarding the Mexican Constitution, as well as the interpretation by Mexican officials and the LDS Church, including Harold W. Pratt’s “Notes on the Relations between the Mormon Church and the Mexican Government since Enforcement of the Religious Laws Contained in the Constitution of 1917,” in folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers. Also see Daniel Taylor,

On August 9, 1961, the society was finally organized and recognized by the Mexican government.⁶⁵ Daniel Taylor, as the superintendent of Church schools in Mexico, became the general manager of this new corporation. He hired the best legal firm in Mexico City—the one previously used by J. Reuben Clark Jr., who was a U.S. ambassador to Mexico and future member of the First Presidency of the Church.⁶⁶ Final transactions were made on August 16, 1961, and the Sociedad Educativa y Cultural became legal owners of El Arbolillo and all that came with it.⁶⁷ Ernest Wilkinson was unaware that the land was purchased with the understanding “that the owner of the land . . . should remain in possession of the same for a year.”⁶⁸

Developing the Plan for Benemérito

Although the property was purchased in August of 1961, the sellers were allowed to remain on their land for a year until they returned to Spain. Actual construction of the school did not take place until after the sellers moved out and when there was enough need, based on secondary Church student population, to move forward. Even before the final purchase of El Arbolillo, however, Joseph Bentley wrote a letter to Daniel Taylor on March 27, 1961, encouraging him to start planning the overall building projects.⁶⁹

Five months later, Harvey L. Taylor, Joseph Bentley, and Daniel Taylor met with a group at BYU who were responsible for physical facilities.

interview by Gordon Irving, 1976, 84, wherein he states, “President McKay would never allow anything to go on that had an appearance of illegality, . . . nor will the church do anything that’s outrightly illegal, but they will do those things which the government officials themselves tell them they should do in order to be able to operate in Mexico after they know the full story.”

65. Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Education for Mexican Schools, August 9, 1961, folder 5, box 5, Bentley Papers.

66. Joseph T. Bentley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, memorandum, May 24, 1961, C-5, F-4, Bentley Papers. The law firm was Bashom, Ringe and Correa. See Frank W. Fox, *J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), chs. 24–28.

67. Joseph Bentley to Elder Marion G. Romney, August 23, 1961, folder 6, box 5, Bentley Papers.

68. Ernest L. Wilkinson to Joseph T. Bentley, April 25, 1961, box 194, folder 4, Wilkinson Presidential Papers.

69. Joseph Bentley to Daniel Taylor, March 27, 1961, folder 2, box 5, Bentley Papers.

Together, they made some key decisions. They determined that approximately sixty acres of the land was to be used immediately for the central campus,⁷⁰ and it should be “functional, clean, but not excessive.” Due to safety and security issues, they determined that the entire campus would be surrounded by a wall, and that there would be only one entrance, secured with a guard station. Recognizing the need to be in compliance with and build relations with the Mexican government leaders and people, the board also decided that this campus should be “in complete harmony with the Mexican culture,” and that they would hire a “local Mexican architect to give the buildings their Mexican touch”⁷¹ so that El Arbolillo would “appear like a typical Mexican school.”⁷²

On January 28, 1962, Ernest Wilkinson, Harvey L. Taylor, and Joseph Bentley traveled to meet with the Advisory Board for Schools in Mexico. In addition to considering physical facilities, they gave attention to personnel matters. They proposed that Kenyon Wagner, current director of the Church’s academy in Colonia Juárez, be appointed part-time supervisor of the primary schools in the Mexico City area. He would continue his doctorate in education at the University of Mexico at night, in preparation for becoming the director of the schools at El Arbolillo.⁷³ They believed that a strong Latter-day Saint leader with training in teacher development was critical in this situation.⁷⁴ In late June, the executive committee approved this plan.⁷⁵

The executive committee’s timing on the approval was critical. Only a couple of months later, on September 1, Adolfo Lopez Mateo, president of Mexico, mentioned in his message to the nation the need for secondary schools and asked for help from anyone who could offer a solution. He announced that the enrollment in the secondary schools had increased

70. Daniel Taylor, interview, February 28, 2013. Daniel still has the original blueprint and negotiations in his possession.

71. Minutes of meeting held in the BYU physical plant conference room, September 26, 1961, C-5, F-6, Bentley Papers; Johnson, “Mormon Education in Mexico,” 145–46.

72. Daniel Taylor, telephone interview by author, April 23, 2013.

73. Minutes of the Meeting for the Council of the Church Schools in Mexico, January 28, 1962, folder 1, box 6, Bentley papers. See also Joseph T. Bentley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, October 23, 1962, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers.

74. Harvey L. Taylor and Joseph T. Bentley to David S. Brown, February 16, 1962, folder 1, box 6, Bentley Papers.

75. Minutes, folder 4, box 68, Bentley Papers.

by more than 65 percent over the last 45 months and admitted the inability of the government to reach this need. He reported that in the last year they had installed 33 secondary schools and expanded 15, and had employed 5,259 new teachers and 522 administrative personnel for secondary education. Still, thousands of youth were not receiving secondary education. "I repeat, the call of your country to the labor organizations, to the industrial forces, to the bankers and merchants, to the complete people of Mexico, the educational effort does not fall exclusively upon the State. Within the means of your possibilities, the patriotism of all citizens should participate in this great work."⁷⁶

With this statement included in the September 26 memorandum to the Advisory Board for Schools in Mexico, Daniel Taylor urged the board to "proceed now with the secondary part of our program."⁷⁷ He also shared a detailed two-year plan for the building of the school. He projected that the enrollments would be 350 primaria (elementary), 1,600 secundaria (junior high), 600 preparatoria (high school), 600 normal, and 200 normal superior (secondary and preparatory teacher training) students. The buildings would be used with maximum utility and would even offer night school.⁷⁸ By June 1963, preliminary blueprints of the buildings for the schools were prepared for approval.⁷⁹ In August, Bentley urged Wilkinson to seek approval from the executive committee to begin construction "as soon as plans are available."⁸⁰ By October, the executive committee in Utah accepted the plans, as did the Mexican government.⁸¹ Construction commenced with the groundbreaking the following month.

Groundbreaking

After years of research and after buying and preparing the land for the buildings on El Arbolillo, the groundbreaking for the first building was

76. Lopez Mateo, quoted in Daniel Taylor to Ernest L. Wilkinson, September 26, 1962, folder 2, box 6, Bentley Papers.

77. Taylor to Wilkinson, September 26, 1962.

78. Advisory Board of Education Minutes, September 1, 1962, folder 2, box 6, Bentley Papers.

79. Neff Taylor, Church Building Dept., June 11, 1963, folder 9, box 106, Bentley Papers.

80. Joseph T. Bentley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, August 21, 1963, folder 4, box 194, Wilkinson Presidential Papers.

81. Joseph T. Bentley to Bob Ruff, October 19, 1963; Joseph T. Bentley to Dan Taylor, October 23, 1963, folder 9, box 106, Bentley Papers.



Groundbreaking ceremony at Benemérito de las Américas, November 4, 1963. *Left to right:* Joseph T. Bentley, Ernest LeRoy Hatch (mission president), Agricol Lozano Herrera, and Elder Marion G. Romney. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito.

held on November 4, 1963, and Elder Marion G. Romney of the Quorum of the Twelve flew to Mexico City to personally supervise. “There was a spirit of great anticipation,” he recorded.⁸² In attendance were many Church members from Mexico City, including Primary children. Special guests included Church and educational leaders and Bernabe Parra, who was a member of the Advisory Board for Schools in Mexico and the one who had the vision two decades earlier of Church education in Mexico.⁸³ Kenyon Wagner, who would become the new school’s director,

82. A. Kenyon Wagner and Leona F. Wagner, *Historia del Centro Escolar Benemérito de las Américas, México D. F.* [Mexico City: El Centro, 1977], 15.

83. Special guests in addition to Bernabe Parra included LeRoy Hatch (newly called mission president and president of the Advisory Board for Schools in Mexico); Harold Brown (president of the Mexico City Stake and vice president of the board); Agricol Lozano; F. Burton Howard (representing the legal division at Church headquarters); Abraham Lozano (director of the El Arbolillo farm); Moises Rivera (member of the Council for El Arbolillo); Daniel P. Taylor; Joseph T. Bentley (representing BYU and the Unified School System); and A. Kenyon Wagner.

conducted the services. He introduced Daniel Taylor, the superintendent of Church schools in Mexico.⁸⁴

Taylor spoke of the earlier inhabitants of the area who had fought for control of the valley where the school would be located. “We are also at war,” he asserted, “fighting against ignorance, against superstition, and against the exploitation of man by man.”⁸⁵ Agricol Lozano, member of the Advisory Board for Schools in Mexico and attorney for the Sociedad Educativa y Cultural, S. C., then reminded those in attendance of their great heritage as descendants of Joseph of old and of the covenants the Lord made with the house of Israel, of which they were a remnant.

In his speech, Lozano announced the official name of the school, Centro Escolar Benemérito de las Américas (Benefactor of the Americas School), after Benito Juárez, a well-known national hero in Mexico.⁸⁶ Benemérito de las Américas was an honorific title originally given to Juárez by the government of the Republic of Columbia on May 1, 1865, and the title eventually caught on in all of Latin America. A Mexican of Native American ancestry, Benito Juárez was often referred to as the Abraham Lincoln of Mexico because of his work to bring equal rights to the country’s indigenous population.⁸⁷ Lozano explained that by adopting this name they were showing appreciation for their great ancestry and common heritage and were therefore giving honor to their “exemplary Founding Father,” Benito Juárez, “he who provided

84. Wagner and Wagner, *Historia del Centro Escolar Benemérito de las Américas*, 16.

85. Daniel Taylor, speech, Groundbreaking ceremony, Benemérito de las Américas, November 4, 1963, Church History Library.

86. The Advisory Board for Schools in Mexico determined that the school would be named after “outstanding Mexican civil servants independent of religious influence.” The board suggested Benito Juárez, one of the great Mexican Revolutionaries, for the Church’s main center, but this name was already used for the Church primary school in Ciudad Juárez and for many other schools throughout Mexico. There is a slight discrepancy in who first suggested the name “Benemérito de las Américas” for the school. Kenyon Wagner in *Historia del Centro Escolar Benemérito de las Américas*, says that he suggested it to Daniel Taylor. But Daniel Taylor recalled that Agricol Lozano suggested the name. Daniel Taylor, interview by author, April 25, 2013.

87. For more information on Benito Juárez, see Robert Ryal Miller, “Matias Romero: Mexican Minister to the United States during the Juárez-Maximilian Era,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 45 (May 1965): 228–45; and Ulick Ralph Burke, *A Life of Benito Juarez: Constitutional President of Mexico* (London: Remington, 1894).



Kenyon Wagner conducts at the groundbreaking ceremony for Benemérito on November 4, 1963. He is surrounded by Mexican children who attended one of the Church-owned elementary schools in the area. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito.

a universal treasure with his immortal words ‘Entre los individuos, como entre las naciones, el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz’ (“Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others brings peace”).⁸⁸ Furthermore, this name would set this school apart from Catholic schools typically named after saints. Following these discourses, elementary school children, joined by those in attendance, sang the Mexican national anthem.

The music and speakers set the stage for the discourse and prayer offered by Elder Marion G. Romney, who commenced his speech by recalling the days of his own childhood education in the Mexican Mormon colonies. He spoke of his love for Mexico and how this great country gave refuge to his ancestors when they were not able to have the liberty they desired in the United States. He encouraged the children to learn every word of the Mexican national anthem and to love not only the song but “to love Mexico.” He challenged the students to gain

88. Agricol Lozano, speech, Groundbreaking ceremony, Benemérito de las Américas, November 4, 1963, translation from Spanish by the author.

knowledge, reminded them that “the glory of God is intelligence,” and expressed his hope that “those who go through this school will afterwards become leaders in their communities, in their States and in the Republic.” He then prophesied, “This school for which we are breaking ground today is destined to become a great Spanish-speaking cultural center. Its influence will reach far beyond the valley of Mexico. . . . It will be felt in all of Latin America, including South America. Hundreds of thousands of people will come here. Going out from here, they will help the Nation build up its education, its culture and its spirituality.”

Following his discourse, he offered the groundbreaking prayer. In the prayer, he expressed gratitude for the Restoration, the spread of the gospel to Mexico, and the economic situation of the Church. He acknowledged that “the inhabitants of this land have in their veins the blood of Father Lehi; that they are therefore a chosen people.” He asked that the Spirit would be there during construction and that the buildings “may endure over the years to serve as places of learning.” He asked for a blessing upon all those who come here, both teachers and students.⁸⁹

School in Operation

Only three months later the first building was completed. On February 17, 1964, exactly 125 *secundaria* (junior high) students entered and began their studies at Benemérito. Three years later—as these students graduated from *secundaria*—the *preparatoria* (high school) was opened with an enrollment of ninety-six students. The students came from all over Mexico, the majority from the poor economic class. Most lived in cottages supervised by house parents who provided a family-like setting. Here they participated in group prayer and scripture study, and they attended seminary along with their secular classes. Through the years, many worked on campus in a variety of jobs to finance their own education. A campus stake was organized for high school students—a departure from the usual practice in the Church of organizing only college-age students in their own stakes. Benemérito students participated in a variety of extracurricular activities, including music, sports, academic, and civic clubs. The folkdance company particularly attracted widespread commendation.⁹⁰

89. Marion G. Romney, prayer, Groundbreaking ceremony, Benemérito de las Américas, November 4, 1963.

90. A forthcoming book by the author will describe the history and activities of Benemérito de las Américas.



Benemérito school complex seen from the air, showing fifty student houses completed during the year 1967–1968. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito.

The vision of Church leaders, however, reached beyond merely *educating* the students; the vision instead focused on *training* faithful Latter-day Saints to teach and influence children and youth throughout Latin America. Because of a surplus of primaria teachers in Mexico, government authorization of more normal schools was almost impossible to receive. In addition to instituting a day of fasting and prayer among students and faculty, Daniel Taylor worked tirelessly to build relationships with Mexican officials and prove that the Church's intentions were consistent with those of the Mexican government. As a result, the government granted permission to establish a normal school, provided there were adequate numbers of Church-owned primaria schools to employ the teachers upon their graduation. Thus, in 1967, there were 531 students enrolled in secundaria, 96 students in the first year of preparatoria, and 62 in the normal school. In 1968, primaria was also included. The largest number of students enrolled at one time at the Benemérito—including primaria, secundaria, preparatoria and normal school students—was 2,803, during the 1974–75 school year.⁹¹

91. Abraham Lopez to author, email, April 25, 2013.



First buildings at Benemérito, c. 1964. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito.

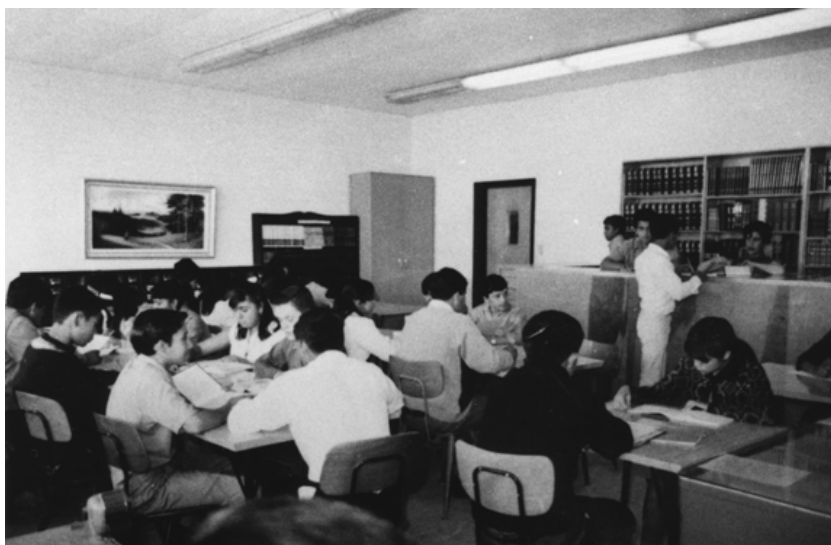
Even though the enrollment at Benemérito stayed consistent for the next decade, changes were afoot that would eventually transform the school into a unique preparatory school. In 1971, the Church adopted a policy to “not duplicate otherwise available” educational opportunities.⁹² By the 1980s, the Mexican government was providing more educational opportunities for most elementary and secondary students. Therefore, in 1984, all Church primary and secondary schools were phased out, including those at Benemérito. As a result of closing the primary schools, the normal school at Benemérito was also discontinued. Since 1985, Benemérito de las Américas has functioned solely as a preparatory (high) school. Over the next quarter of a century, enrollment gradually increased in the preparatoria school to over two thousand a year.

Following the announcement made by Elder Daniel Johnson on January 29, 2013, the entire school system at Benemérito was closed following its graduation ceremonies in June of 2013. It reopened on June 26, only a week later, to become the second-largest missionary training center in the world, serving missionaries from Canada, the

92. *Seek Learning Even by Study and Faith: Report for 1971 from Commissioner of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 1, M260 S451 1971, Church History Library. See also Casey Griffith, “Globalization,” 205–19.



Jorge Rojas speaks at the groundbreaking ceremony for the gymnasium/auditorium at Benemerito, 1967. Behind him, in the front row from left to right, are President Harold Brown, Elder Alvin R. Dyer, Agricol Lozano, and Director Kenyon Wagner. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito.



Students at work in the library at Benemérito, 1967. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito.



Students register for classes, c. 1967. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito.



Students and employees at work on the grounds of Benemérito, c. 1967. Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito.



Cultural celebration at the final graduation at Benemérito, recognizing the school's long history as a cultural center for Mexican Latter-day Saints. Photo by Esli Hernandez. Used by permission and in author's possession.

United States, Mexico, and throughout Latin America who are preparing to teach in Spanish.⁹³

Conclusion

Recounting the complete half-century history of this school is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that approximately twenty-three thousand students attended Benemérito.⁹⁴ Among the alumni are teachers, actors, lawyers, attorneys, doctors, and senators, as well as missionaries, mothers, fathers, bishops, stake presidents, mission presidents, temple presidents, and General Authorities.⁹⁵ Of the current

93. Carl Pratt, interview by author, February 22, 2013, Mexico City.

94. Lopez to author, email.

95. G. Arturo Limon D., *La Gratitud Es* (Brazil: s.n., 2004), 87–174; Mexico City Area Presidency, Daniel Johnson, Benjamin de Hoyos, Jose L. Alonso, interview by author, February 21, 2013, Mexico City, in author's possession. Survey done by Benemérito de las Américas, Abraham Lopez, vice director of Benemérito. Also Wagner and Wagner, *Historia del Centro Escolar Benemérito de las Américas*, 143–45; as of 1977, this lists one General Authority, twelve Regional Representatives, four Area Authorities, twenty-six mission presidents, and forty-three stake presidents as alumni of Benemérito, but no comprehensive survey has been completed to date.

stake presidents serving throughout Mexico, approximately 25 percent are Benemérito alumni, and since 2008, nearly 90 percent of all male graduates have served full-time missions.⁹⁶

Alfredo Miron's experience at Benemérito was typical of many students. When asked how the school affected his life, he responded: "I came from a poor family, with parents who were not active. I now have a wife whom I met at Benemérito. We have five children, all who attended Benemérito and are now all married in the temple and raising their own families. I worked for the Church Educational System for years, have served as a bishop, a stake president, a mission president and the Director of Benemérito. All of this is possible because of Benemérito."⁹⁷ Alfredo Miron was sustained as an Area Seventy in the April 2013 general conference.⁹⁸

Despite these accomplishments, the school had not realized all that Elder Marion G. Romney had envisioned at the groundbreaking. He spoke of hundreds of thousands coming, which at the previous rate would take centuries. But because of President Thomas S. Monson's October 2012 announcement reducing the age of missionaries worldwide, rather than having 600 high school graduates a year, the former Benemérito campus will have up to 1,200 missionary graduates a month.⁹⁹ These missionaries will be serving people beyond the borders of Mexico, throughout North, Central, and South America.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the numbers Elder Romney anticipated will be achieved at an accelerated pace.

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96. Abraham Lopez to author, email, February 20, 2013.

97. Alfredo Miron, interview by author, April 5, 2013, Highland, Utah.

98. "The Sustaining of Church Officers," *Ensign* 43 (May 2013): 27.

99. The Mexico City MTC can accommodate over a thousand missionaries at a time. As of 2013, training programs are two weeks long for native Spanish speakers and six weeks for non-Spanish speakers.

100. Carl Pratt, interview by author, February 19, 2013, Mexico City.