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Shaping BYU: The Presidential Administration and Legacy of Benjamin Cluff Jr.

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Benjamin Cluff Jr., 1893. Under the leadership of Benjamin Cluff, Brigham Young Academy became a Church-sponsored university dedicated to both spiritual edification and scholarly accomplishments. While Cluff has received less attention from historians than his predecessor and successors, his contributions played a significant role in shaping BYU. Courtesy L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
Virtually every student and alumnus of Brigham Young University has heard of Karl G. Maeser and his legendary circle of honor. Maeser is commonly identified as BYU’s first president. Actually he and his predecessor, Warren Dusenberry, served as the first and second principals of Brigham Young Academy, an elementary and secondary school with an associated Normal Department for training teachers. A stately building overlooking Utah Valley is named for Maeser, and his statue graces a walkway leading to the building. Far fewer students and alumni have heard of Maeser’s successor, Benjamin Cluff, the person who directed the institution as it developed collegiate programs and was designated as a university.1 If they have heard of Cluff at all, it is generally in connection with his abortive quest to visit Book of Mormon lands and find Nephite ruins, an episode that began with fanfare and high hopes but ended in embarrassment and adverse publicity for Cluff and the school. That episode has attracted disproportionate attention compared to Cluff’s more important contributions to BYU.2

Although his legacy is not well known, and although his successors George Brimhall and Franklin S. Harris have received more attention recently from historians, Benjamin Cluff was the father of Brigham Young University in many significant respects.3 Under his watch, the institution reoriented its educational approach and broadened its scope. As Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, authors of the university’s centennial history, acknowledge, “From the moment he attained a position of influence in the administration of the school he had an impact of lasting importance. . . . He was constant in his determination to lay a solid foundation of educational philosophies, policies, and practices upon which a
great university could be established.” Under Cluff’s leadership, Brigham Young Academy established a collegiate department, offered a full array of college courses, and awarded bachelor’s degrees. Cluff spearheaded the academy’s reincorporation as a Church-sponsored institution, ending its status as a proprietary academy of Brigham Young with ties to the Utah Stake. Cluff also successfully lobbied the Church Board of Education to rename the Provo academy Brigham Young University.

The university’s centennial history acknowledges Cluff’s “lasting importance” for BYU, but scholars have disagreed regarding the nature of Cluff’s leadership. Gary Bergera and Ron Priddis portray him as primarily an agent of secularization, insensitive to the workings of the Spirit. Cluff was “less preoccupied than Maeser with the effects of learning on religious

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My office in the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies overlooks the David O. McKay School of Education. I have a perfect view of a larger-than-life banner suspended each winter semester from the ceiling in the stairwell of the McKay Building. The banner displays a photograph of Benjamin Cluff surrounded by his colleagues; it commemorates Cluff’s contributions to teacher education at BYU. Aside from that banner, Cluff is largely forgotten on campus. My curiosity about him was sparked several years ago when I met Colleen Cluff Caputo. She shared with me typescript copies of some of Cluff’s journals along with other documents. With help from Jermaine Carroll and Dave Dixon, talented research assistants, I burrowed into Cluff’s correspondence and other manuscript materials in the university archives. The more that I read, the more I was convinced that Cluff profoundly influenced BYU’s orientation and identity and that his contributions had been underestimated or misunderstood. Moreover, I saw that his life encapsulated key tensions within the social and intellectual history of Latter-day Saints of his era. I treat those themes in this article.
commitment,” and he “represented the antithesis of what had been practiced at the academy under his predecessor,” they write. The authors of the university’s centennial history also contrast Maeser and Cluff: the authors acknowledge that “both were dedicated to the same religion” but characterized Maeser as the “spiritual architect” of BYU while emphasizing Cluff’s enthusiasm for educational training from the “gentile world” as opposed to Maeser’s preference for “a closed society.” Conversely, Thomas Alexander characterizes Cluff as an apologist who was not sufficiently levelheaded to please business-oriented Church leaders like Heber J. Grant. Cluff was “too idealistic and not secular enough,” having “substituted dreams of the discovery of Zarahemla and new golden plates for sound management practices.” A close reading of Cluff’s speeches, writings, and reports of his activities reveals that he viewed religion and scholarship as mutually supportive endeavors—a perspective that scholars have largely missed in their characterization of the man. Cluff was a religiously committed administrator and teacher with solid academic credentials who believed religious insights and divine guidance could produce superior scholarship, which in turn would enhance Mormonism’s reputation among influential elites. Thus, gospel insights and spiritual knowledge could advance scholarship while scholarly pursuits could advance the Church’s interests. This vision was one of Cluff’s landmark contributions to BYU. He was also a skilled, persuasive negotiator who secured significant support and concessions from the First Presidency for the Provo school.

Rise to Prominence

Cluff’s association with Brigham Young Academy began in 1877, just two years after Brigham Young established the school. Cluff traveled from his home in Coalville, Utah, to Provo and enrolled in the institution’s teacher training program, known as the Normal Department. After studying for a year, Cluff taught briefly in the academy’s elementary school but was interrupted when he left to serve a mission to Hawaii. After his mission, Cluff resumed his work at the academy in 1882, teaching language and reading in the Primary Department and math, composition, and bookkeeping to older students. In 1886, the academy board granted Cluff’s request for an unusual two-year leave of absence so he could study at the University of Michigan. Maeser endorsed Cluff’s request to President John Taylor, expressing confidence that Cluff “will maintain his integrity before God, in case you should permit him to go to some eastern College.” After requesting a priesthood blessing, Cluff was set apart to study in Michigan...
by Apostle John W. Taylor. Cluff departed in December, leaving his first wife, Mary, and daughter Fern with Mary’s parents in Provo until he could make arrangements for them to join him. He also left behind Harriet “Hattie” Cullimore Cluff, his plural wife he had recently married in the Logan Temple. Like most plural marriages being performed in this era, Cluff’s marriage to Harriet was performed privately and he and his plural wife had to live separately following their wedding to avoid detection and arrest by federal marshals. Cluff’s leave stretched to three and a half years, at the end of which he received a bachelor of science degree in June 1890. When he returned to Provo that summer, he was the only instructor at the academy with a university degree. Cluff began teaching in Provo in the fall. Knowing that Maeser would soon be released from his position as principal so that he could devote more time to his responsibilities as superintendent of Church schools, Cluff anticipated he would soon be made principal; he was the best-educated employee at the academy, and prominent Provo residents—including his father-in-law David John—had told him the president of the institution’s board of trustees, Abraham O. Smoot, intended to promote him.11
Cluff’s ideas and approaches, fresh from one of the nation’s top public universities, enthused older high school–level students at the academy, particularly “the Normals” who were training to be teachers. Drawing upon his University of Michigan training, Cluff developed and taught new courses in educational psychology. One of Cluff’s students that first year was Richard R. Lyman, who was elected president of the senior class. Lyman later recalled:

I, as a student, began work with him as a teacher the very fall that he began teaching in the B.Y.A. The innovations he introduced were numerous and important. He made the seniors class-conscious. Ours, the class of ’91, was the first class in the school to organize. He taught us how to conduct meetings. He gave us simple instructions concerning “rules of order”—. We published the “B.Y.A. Student” the first student paper published in the State of Utah, and we prepared and published also the first “Commencement Annual.” To the members of the Class of ’91, President Cluff was more than a teacher. He was an intimate friend and close confidential companion.

Not a prolific writer or dedicated researcher, Cluff offered students an appealing blend of educational psychology and common sense. When he spoke to members of the academy’s Polysophical Society, he emphasized mental discipline, or “attention,” as the “secret of success,” telling the students that “if the mind was allowed to wander and deviate from the path of the study in hand, the impressions would be faint and would soon vanish.”

Cluff soon alienated some of his fellow teachers with his talk of how the Provo institution could be made more progressive. He was a profoundly ambitious educator, eager to remake the world, and believed his colleagues “were sadly in ruts [and] the school was quite demoralized.” On September 20, just a handful of weeks into the fall classes, Maeser complained to George Reynolds, secretary of the Church Board of Education, about the “estrangement springing up between Brother Benjamin Cluff and some teachers in the Brigham Young Academy.” The two groups seemed to be on a “collision” course. Cluff sensed the estrangement extended to Maeser himself. Confronted with what he believed to be Maeser’s “rather antagonistic spirit,” Cluff determined to “be more assertive and positive” in pushing for change by going over Maeser’s head and appealing to the board of trustees. Despite Cluff’s apprehensions, Maeser was quite supportive of Cluff although he disliked the young man’s “impetuosity.” Cluff’s friends on the board, including President Abraham O. Smoot, endorsed his reform agenda, and on September 25 they appointed him...
assistant principal. Maeser urged the faculty to give Cluff “the same kind of courteous assistance” they had shown Maeser.18

In his new administrative position, Cluff promoted loyalty to the institution and school spirit. He instituted Founder’s Day, an annual celebration that included athletic contests, concerts, dances, and parades. Cluff divided the student body into classes based upon the year they would graduate and encouraged each class to choose their own motto, chants, and songs. Under his leadership the school selected white and blue as its colors.19

Cluff particularly used the board’s support and his new administrative authority to revitalize the academy’s teacher education program. A Provo journalist who visited in the fall of 1890 learned that Cluff envisioned a mutually supportive relationship between the school’s Primary and Normal departments. Cluff intended to make the Primary Department a “model primary department in every detail . . . from which the normal students [as observers and student teachers] can gain instruction.” In accord with the best educational science of the day, the primary classrooms were attractively decorated with flags, pictures, and pine boughs, “the object being to make the place appear as bright and pleasant as possible” for students. Based upon the progressive principle that students learned best by doing, Cluff encouraged teachers to involve their students in hands-on activities, such as creating sand relief maps to learn geography.20

Seven months into the school year, Maeser voiced his premonition that Cluff’s “pushing” and innovation might eclipse the academy’s spiritual “anchorage,” whereas Cluff believed progressive education complemented the school’s mission. Tensions between the headstrong Maeser and his equally determined assistant mounted when, in August 1891, Cluff offered to resign as assistant principal.21 The offer was likely a ruse designed to force the board of trustees to choose between him and Maeser; Cluff later explained, “Opposition on the part of the faculty and especially of Bro. Maeser became stronger, so I determined to bring matters to a focus. . . . On my request for a clearer understanding of my powers and duties, the presidency of the Church Wilford Woodruff, Geo. Q. Cannon and Jos. F. Smith met with the Board.”22 Rather than accepting Cluff’s resignation, the board announced that Cluff would soon replace the sixty-three-year-old Maeser.23 Woodruff recorded that the meeting lasted three hours and “settled the Difficulty with Brother Maeser and Cluff,” the compromise arrangement being that Maeser would continue as principal until the new academy building was completed and “then Br Maeser would withdraw & Cluff would be principal.”24
Financial Change and Academic Innovations

With his ascendancy assured, Cluff proceeded more aggressively in the autumn of 1891. He persuaded the First Presidency to subsidize the tuition of those studying to become teachers and to establish a permanent Normal Training School. On November 14, 1891, the school paper, The Normal, announced that thereafter students in the Normal School would be required to pay only a $17.50 admission fee during their first year and a fee of $5.00 in every subsequent year. Although the paper credited the First Presidency and the academy’s board of trustees with the subsidy, Cluff had negotiated the subvention. In hindsight, the concession was more significant than anyone realized at the time because it established a precedent for closer financial ties between the Church and the academy. That fall, Cluff also helped organize a student loan association, underwritten by school personnel and friends of the academy.

Cluff was inaugurated as principal on January 4, 1892, at the dedication of the new academy building. Although his duties would remain essentially the same over the next twelve years, his title would change two more times; in 1895, when the board of trustees designated each department head as a principal, they denominated Cluff as president of the faculty. On October 15, 1903, when the Church Board of Education renamed the academy Brigham Young University, Cluff became the university president.

As principal and president, Cluff worked assiduously to boost appropriations for the school, and he dramatically altered its future when he proposed that it become “a Church school,” meaning by this that the general Church would assume all of its debts and fund its programs. Although Cluff did not engineer this change single-handedly, he did advocate it persuasively. Early in 1896, Apostle Brigham Young Jr., who had replaced Abraham Smoot as president of the academy’s board of trustees, informed Cluff that “we may not look for aid from the Church financially for some time” because of the Church’s heavy indebtedness, exacerbated by the Panic of 1893 and the ensuing depression. The new policy would make the school almost entirely dependent upon donations from the Utah Stake and tuition payments. Cluff recalled, “One evening while returning from a walk down town and while studying deeply over the future of the Academy, the thought came to me like an inspiration. ‘Give the school to the Church.’” Inspiration or not, this was hardly a novel idea; Maeser had previously proposed it to Church authorities, but they had rejected the idea. This time Cluff and Reed Smoot, an influential Provo businessman, president of the Utah Stake, and member of the academy’s board of
trustees, met with the First Presidency and informed them that the academy was $80,000 in arrears and that creditors had sued to recover the debts. Cluff and Smoot warned that if the Church did not assume financial responsibility, Brigham Young’s vision and legacy in establishing the academy would “fail,” the academy buildings would “be wholly lost,” and the “beneficiaries” of the institution—Latter-day Saint young people—would lose significant opportunities for a faith-based education. Although Cluff and Smoot gave well-reasoned arguments, the First Presidency’s assent was remarkable given the Church’s heavy indebtedness and low tithing revenues. They agreed that “the BYA will pass entirely into the hands of the Church,” noted Maeser. The Church would assume all the school’s debts and “provide the necessary means to support and maintain” the institution. Cluff took pride in this successful petition, although he acknowledged that others had assisted him. He told a colleague in 1901, “If we had sat idly down, if we had not urged our rights at [Church] headquarters, the Academy would have been a little one-horse stake institution today.”

During his tenure as principal and president, Cluff presided over numerous innovations on campus, including the creation of student clubs and associations; the establishment of campus newsletters and newspapers; the adoption of a school song; the introduction of college yells and yell masters; and the creation of school track, baseball, football, and basketball teams. While Cluff presided over and in some cases actively supported these endeavors, he did not devise them. Nevertheless, he was severely criticized for permitting them. Elder Brigham Young Jr. strenuously objected to student athletic contests and college yells. Chants like “Ru, rah, ru, rah, ra, ’Cademy, ’Cademy, B.Y.A. Zip boom bah, Ya, ya, ya, ’Cademy, ’Cademy, rah, rah, rah” were “an abomination to my spirit,” Young complained. They transformed students into “a lot of hoodlums.” The Apostle was certain his father would have deplored such boisterous conduct, and he viewed it as a sign that the academy was “departing from the spirit of the founder.” Other influential Latter-day Saints strongly criticized football games, which at times degenerated into melees involving not only the players but also fans. George Goddard of the Sunday School Union protested that “football games [were] damaging to the respectability” of the institution and ran counter to “the religious tone that should always characterize every Latter-day Saint school.”

Cluff was more directly responsible for other developments, many of them related to academics. Prior to 1892, students rotated between classes every half hour. The thirty-minute periods allowed little time for pupils to consider the information being taught and created what Cluff called a
“state of mental congestion." The principal lengthened the class sessions to sixty minutes, affording more in-depth instruction.

The new principal took particular interest in teacher training because of his expertise in pedagogy and educational psychology, and he worked to improve and promote the Normal School. In addition to their coursework in educational psychology, educational theory, and history of education, trainees rotated through classes in the eight primary grades, spending an hour a day in the classroom as student teachers. One professor and two peers observed and critiqued the student teacher. A visitor in 1893 remarked, “I attended these exercises a number of days in succession and must confess that they seem admirably adapted to fit the teacher for his profession.” Reflecting his pride in the program, Cluff informed the visitor that graduates of the Normal program had proved “uniformly successful.”

Cluff worked to enhance the reputation and accreditation of the Normal School. During the 1899 legislative session, he spent the better part of two weeks lobbying legislators to approve a bill placing diplomas and teaching certificates from private schools on par with those from the University of Utah’s Normal School. Graduates of the state university’s Normal School were not required to pass a state test before certifying as teachers, whereas the government required BYU graduates to take the test. Administrators from the University of Utah strongly opposed the bill, fearing that it would detract from their own program.

In conjunction with the Deseret Sunday School Union, Cluff inaugurated a Normal Sunday School in 1892 as an extension of the Normal School, enabling the academy to broaden its service to the Church. This innovation reflected Cluff’s conviction that scholarly activity at Church schools could benefit Church members and programs generally. Representatives from ward and stake Sunday Schools were invited to participate and receive instruction and experience in teaching religious topics. Eighty-seven students enrolled in the first five-week Normal Sunday School course. In addition to studying their own specialized curriculum, ward and stake representatives were encouraged to attend other classes on the campus. The Sunday School Union advised attendees to take careful notes so that they could share their training with others at home. The Normal Sunday School meeting on Sunday mornings commenced with a forty-five-minute lecture on teaching methods, followed by opening exercises and a fifty-minute class. An age-appropriate curriculum focused upon scripture stories for young children, scripture reading assignments for intermediate students, and discussions of advanced theological works by Orson Pratt and others for high school students. In the first weeks of the
course, professional teachers modeled gospel teaching in the fifty-minute classes. Later in the course, advanced Normal students took a hand at teaching, experimenting with what they had observed and learned.41

Another academic innovation Cluff introduced as an auxiliary to the Normal School was an annual summer session for teachers from across the state. Cluff intended the session to “bring to Utah the best educators of the East and place them side by side with the best of our home talent.”42 The school could begin to acquire a national profile and win friends for the Church through this program, Cluff believed. Visitors would leave Provo having had prejudices dispelled and having been favorably impressed with Mormon teachers and students, while local teachers would have been introduced to the latest educational research regarding questions such as those posed by Dr. G. Stanley Hall in 1897: “What kind of surroundings, mental, moral and physical, can we give to bring the child to the most complete maturity?”43 Here again was evidence of Cluff’s conviction that academic excellence and secular knowledge could promote the interests and mission of the Church.

The academy hosted a small-scale experimental summer session with fifty-five participants in 1891, followed by its first full-fledged session with prominent guests in 1892, Cluff’s first year as principal. In recruiting guest lecturers, Cluff capitalized upon BYA’s location at the foot of the Wasatch Range, with exceptional opportunities for fishing, hiking, and camping in the mountains. That first year, he persuaded Francis W. Parker, Sarah Griswold, and Zonia Barber from the Cook County Normal School in Chicago to come to Provo. Nearly four hundred students signed up for the seminar with Parker, an internationally renowned expert in pedagogy.44

The following year, psychologist James Baldwin of the University of Texas participated. In his first presentation to about three hundred teachers, Baldwin delighted his audience with his humor. He claimed to have heard that in its frontier days Provo had been “a little rough,” much like his native Texas. In fact, Provo reportedly had been so wild that there had been a popular saying, “Provo, Texas, or hell.” So he said he was surprised to find Provo “a little nearer heaven than [any place] he had ever held a summer school before”—owing to the altitude.45

Touring eastern schools in 1893 and 1894, Cluff contacted many of the nation’s most eminent educators. Several of them subsequently came to Utah Valley as summer school lecturers, including Burk Hinsdale from the University of Michigan, G. Stanley Hall from Clark University, and William M. Davis from Harvard. Cluff was particularly pleased when
Hinsdale, who had once been “greatly prejudiced” against the Mormons, agreed to visit.\footnote{46}

**From BYA to BYU**

The new principal led out in promoting the identity of BYA as a collegiate institution empowered to confer undergraduate degrees—a significant and lasting legacy. Soon after he assumed control of the school in 1892, Cluff began teaching his own college-level courses. In the spring of 1893, the academy granted its first bachelor’s degrees in pedagogy. Cluff and his faculty acted on their own authority because some members of the Church Board of Education believed that BYA and other Church schools should confine themselves entirely to elementary and secondary education, sending any students who desired collegiate training to either a new Church university in Salt Lake City or to the University of Utah. Cluff rejected that limited mission and intended to establish BYA as “a normal college unsurpassed by any institution.”\footnote{47} He noted in his diary in December 1894:

> We are having some difficulty in regard to our conferring degrees. Bro. Talmage, now president of the U of Utah, seems determined to stop the growth of the Church Schools. The three schools, however, have now united (B.Y. Academy, B.Y. College and L.D.S. College), and will present a joint petition to the General Board for certain privileges due to all colleges. viz: the power to confer degrees.\footnote{48}

Although Cluff was not immediately successful, in 1896 the board at last permitted Cluff and his associates to establish a Collegiate Department. After completing four years of collegiate work, students could receive a bachelor’s degree with emphases in pedagogy, science, language and literature, or philosophy.\footnote{49}

In 1903, Cluff recommended to the Church Board of Education that the Collegiate Department be formally designated as a college “to express more fully the actual work being done.”\footnote{50} He had privately broached this idea as early as 1897.\footnote{51} When Cluff proposed the name Joseph Smith University, Anthon H. Lund of the First Presidency viewed the proposal as opportunistic and manipulative. “I told them in my mind there was not a better name than B. Y. Academy. Bro Cluff is a schemer!” he wrote. A shrewd promoter Cluff truly was, and a persistent one at that. Although the board refused to drop Brigham Young’s name from the institution, two weeks later Cluff was back with a second proposal and the endorsement of board members Reed Smoot and Wilson Dusenberry. Since the Church already had a Brigham Young College in Logan, how about a Brigham Young University in Provo? “The name Academy places the school in a bad
light,” Cluff told the board. Lund believed the proposal was “premature,” but despite his objection, the board approved the proposal with the stipulation that the new title would not commit the Church to greater appropriations for the school. In changing the institution’s name, the board set the Provo school on a markedly different course from that of a college; colleges were relatively small institutions where professors specialized in teaching and catered to younger students who needed an intellectually controlled, morally safe environment in which character could be nurtured. Universities were larger, freer institutions specializing in graduate and professional training, research, and untrammeled discourse. It was a lofty vision that would alternately challenge and inspire administrators, faculty, and trustees over the next century and beyond. “I hope their head will grow big enough for the hat,” Lund remarked.52

As an academy, college, or university, the school’s academic credibility hinged upon the quality of its faculty. When Cluff returned from Michigan to Provo in 1890, he was one of only fourteen teachers at the academy—about the same number as at the University of Deseret.53 Five years later, the number of faculty members had doubled. Most had earned their degrees in Provo, but nine held degrees from other institutions, and at least four others were studying elsewhere with Cluff’s encouragement. Cluff recruited Mormon scholars assiduously, capitalizing upon their religious loyalties and promising them blessings if they chose to work at the academy. Writing in 1896 to Frank Warren Smith, a chemist and physicist, Cluff expressed the academy’s “need of [a] better teaching force,” and especially a science teacher. “I am certain the Lord will bless you in your labors here, if you should see fit to come and work with us,” he continued, closing his letter with the phrase, “trusting that you will be guided by the spirit of the Lord in the choice of your labors.”54

When Cluff began his tenure as principal, few Mormons had studied at universities, and to make matters worse, the Church’s other colleges depended upon the same small pool of potential LDS faculty. Academy faculty members were paid with a combination of cash and tithing house scrip. This arrangement placed the Provo school at a comparative disadvantage in recruiting professors. For instance, Cluff tried to lure Harvard graduate John A. Widtsoe to Provo in 1894, but he was only able to offer him $600 in cash and $600 in scrip. Widtsoe was interested in teaching at the academy, but he needed cash to repay his educational debts. When Brigham Young College in Logan offered him a salary of $1,200 cash, Widtsoe moved to Logan.55

In order to boost the academic qualifications of his faculty in the short run, Cluff broke with tradition and hired non-Mormons. In 1894,
he hired his first gentile faculty member, Abby Calista Hale, a graduate of Clark College in Worcester, Massachusetts, and the niece of U.S. Senate Chaplain Edward Everett Hale. Although she never embraced Mormonism, she loved Utah, regarded Mormonism favorably, and later quipped that she was “not so very ‘non’” as some feared. Three years after he hired Hale, Cluff hired three more non-Mormons. When Wilford Woodruff questioned the propriety of having nonbelievers teach impressionable young Latter-day Saints at the academy, Cluff assured the prophet that such hires were temporary but necessary in order to safeguard academic standards and preserve the school’s legitimacy. He said he looked forward to the day when more Mormons would be thoroughly qualified to teach, and to that end he encouraged Latter-day Saints to pursue advanced degrees in the East. Cluff had set the example by taking leave to earn a master’s degree in pedagogy and mathematics at Michigan during the 1893 to 1894 academic year.

As Cluff hired a larger number of teachers, the academy expanded its course offerings. For instance, he enlisted John Hafen, who had studied art in Paris, to develop an art department. By 1903, the final year of Cluff’s administration, fifty-four faculty members worked at the academy, including seventeen professors with college degrees. They offered courses in history, economics, educational philosophy, English, theology, pedagogy, foreign languages, natural science, math, physics, law, domestic art, business, music, and drawing.

Cluff also left his mark on the academy by securing funds for modern, well-equipped instructional facilities. When Cluff returned to Provo in 1890, the academy operated in a converted warehouse. The foundation for a new academy building had been laid years earlier, but the project had stalled. Cluff spearheaded a successful campaign to complete the project. He later secured appropriations for additional buildings to house the Missionary Preparatory departments and the Collegiate Department. As principal, Cluff solicited funds for laboratories from prosperous families. In 1898, the Holt Laboratory of Physics and the Magleby Laboratory of Chemistry opened. Soon thereafter the Beckstead Laboratory of Mechanics and the Hinckley Laboratory of Natural Science were dedicated. Cluff also raised money and solicited book donations for the academy’s library. From 1893 to 1894, he purchased books in New York, Boston, and Chicago for the library. By May 1894, the library boasted 1,310 books and 1,806 pamphlets. Cluff also solicited funds from alumni. In 1892, he encouraged graduates to form an alumni association. Subsequently the association helped raise money for the Maeser memorial building.
Building Zion

In developing a collegiate program, establishing summer schools, hiring faculty, and raising funds for buildings and laboratories, Cluff believed, as had his predecessor Maeser, that he was building not only a school but also God’s kingdom. He expressed his spirituality and testimony through his work. He likened his efforts to those of previous generations of Mormons who had built Zion by establishing farms and communities. As he told a congregation in the Provo Tabernacle in 1892, “It seems to me the work of God is assuming another form. Heretofore the work has been of a physical nature. The soil has been subdued and now the work assumes a new form. Schools are being established in our midst . . . to give the young people an intellectual training, a thorough knowledge of the gospel.”63

Cluff felt certain that Mormonism was divinely destined to grow in converts, prestige, and power. The academy would play a role in that destiny by providing Latter-day Saints with a thorough knowledge of the gospel so that they could “prove from the Scripture the tenets of our faith.”64 Based upon personal experiences, Cluff was convinced that knowledge and logic enhanced the effectiveness of missionaries; when educated believers preached Mormonism, many outsiders were favorably impressed. Cluff often described his meeting with an elite group of easterners in which he had described for them “proofs” of the Book of Mormon, including the testimonies of the three and eight witnesses. After listening to Cluff’s reasoned defense of Mormonism, they “confessed that this was a most wonderful religion.”65 He fondly recounted another occasion when he explained Mormonism to a man who held a PhD from one of the nation’s leading graduate schools and to a Unitarian minister. One of the men, a Dr. Boulton, pronounced Mormonism “the most rational system of religion” he had ever heard.66 Cluff used these stories to show that the Church could transcend its reputation as a provincial, bizarre cult by having more educated, articulate proponents of Mormonism. Whereas Maeser distrusted academic innovation and sought to shelter students from the world’s influence, Cluff envisioned education at a Church school as a means of breaking down prejudices and winning friends for the Church.

To help prepare Mormons to discuss their religion convincingly, Cluff established training programs for prospective missionaries. In 1899, he proposed and the Church Board of Education approved a one-year course for missionaries at the academy focusing upon Mormon theology, religious history, and general academic skills.67

Cluff expected that the academy would advance the cause of Zion not only by training Sunday School teachers and missionaries but also
by teaching Latter-day Saints to apply gospel insights to their academic studies. Brigham Young had called for integration of gospel insights at the academy, but Cluff extended that charge in a new direction for the academy: Mormons had “the best system of education in the world” because of their religion and the direction of the Holy Ghost, Cluff believed.

He expected divine intervention in the work of Mormon academicians. With these inspired insights, Mormons could “become renowned for their scientific attainments.” From among the sons and daughters of the Latter-day Saints there will be found learned philosophers, great scholars, great statesmen, great men in every vocation in life,” he predicted. This in turn would “bring the attention of the learned to the gospel” and promote the Church’s missionary efforts.

In order to receive divine inspiration in their academic work, Cluff believed, the faculty and students needed to live their religion fully. In this he followed an emphasis pioneered by Maeser in response to directives from Brigham Young. As Cluff advised Charles E. Maw, a chemistry instructor, “We desire our teachers in the Academy to enter in upon their work in a spirit of a missionary and to stand in that attitude before the students and their fellow teachers. . . . We do not choose our teachers simply from a monetary or professional point of view, but also from the point of view of the spirit of the Gospel. If I did not think that you were a good Latter-day Saint, humble and prayerful, I would not have you in the Academy at any price.” In 1899, Cluff decided to encourage the faculty and students to reform. Many had been haphazard in their commitment to gospel principles such as the Word of Wisdom. Cluff invited everyone to participate in the reformation, although some refused. In November, he convened an evening faculty meeting for “those who were trying to live the lives of Latter Day Saints to the best of their ability.” There he encouraged the faculty to “live” their religion. Some complained that the commandments were burdens calculated to deprive them of life’s pleasures; Cluff countered that genuine happiness flowed from gospel living.

The faculty met again a few days later in a second meeting that lasted two and a half hours. Every member present spoke and “all were strengthened,” Cluff reported. He held a similar meeting with “all those students who desired to live their religion and were going to make a special effort to do so.” Between fifty and seventy-five attended. For students who would not live the gospel voluntarily, Cluff adopted a more coercive approach: he laid down the law in a devotional later that month. His talk about rules of conduct for students “caused considerable talk among the students, many of whom considered them severe and encroaching upon the rights of individuals.”
Ministering to Students

Although his overarching objectives for building the kingdom and the academy entailed dollars, buildings, curriculum, and creative initiatives, Cluff devoted a large amount of his time on the job to working with individual students in ministerial fashion. Previous studies of Cluff have largely overlooked this dimension of his work and the ways it reflected his faith. He routinely received letters from prospective students and their parents inquiring about room, board, and tuition, and his answers reflected his embrace of gospel principles including industry, faith, and charity. Fred Seaman, a twenty-one-year-old farm boy in Kane County, wrote to Cluff in 1895 pleading with the principal to “work in my behalf.” Seaman wanted to go to school, but his parents could not pay his room and board. “Is there any teachers that would take me and board and school me for what work I could do?” he asked. Cluff solicitously responded to such requests. In 1897, when Audrey Keeler wrote to him telling how much she wanted to study at the academy, Cluff replied that he “no doubt could get you a position” doing housework for someone in Provo in return for her room and board. “I feel quite certain as you are so anxious to go to school, that in some way arrangements could be made for your attendance, and if you have faith that you can go to school, you may come to Provo at your earliest convenience, and we will arrange in some way for you,” Cluff advised. Such responses dignified prospective students by according them respect.

Much like Audrey Keeler, William Boyle arrived in Provo fresh from the farm with insufficient money to pay for his expenses but “determined to attend the Academy.” Unsure of what to do, he knocked on Cluff’s door. Boyle recalled that he told Cluff, “I am going to go to school some way, even though I have but little money.” Cluff replied, “Well, young man, if you want to go to school that bad, I will tell you what I will do. If you will milk my cows and feed the hogs and cut wood for the stoves, you can board with us.” After he had made the offer, Cluff realized that he had no acceptable place at home for the boy to sleep, so he converted a small room near his office in the academy into a bedroom and study for Boyle. “Often as he would pass me in the hall or would meet me elsewhere, he would stop to enquire how I was getting along and ask if he could be of any assistance. He never let go of me,” Boyle fondly remembered.

Parents expected Cluff to act as a surrogate father for their children while they were away at school, and Cluff rose to the challenge. S. L. Brunson, whose sons were studying at the academy, wrote to the principal in 1895 asking him to “see that they study their religion [even] if they don’t
lurn \[sic\] anything else.”\(^79\) A week later Brunson again wrote, worried that his oldest boy was spending his evenings out on the town. The concerned father asked Cluff to “explain” to his son “what dultry \[sic; adultery\] is” and then to “see that he don’t go out nites.”\(^80\) Similarly, Issac Riddle wrote to Cluff worried about his son’s appetite for tobacco. Cluff replied, “We will do our best to have him avoid all bad habits, and overcome his weakness of smoking.”\(^81\)

In his role as a surrogate parent, Cluff sought to “teach the students the great principles of self-government, realizing that the highest point to be reached in discipline by young men or young ladies is the ability to govern and control themselves.” He trusted them—until they violated that trust. “The greatest liberty possible is . . . allowed the students until by some overt act they demonstrate that they are not able to use that liberty with wisdom and discretion,” Cluff explained.\(^82\) The principal came down hard on those who violated his trust. Margaret Maw, a primary school teacher who worked under Cluff, remembered him as “a wonderful disciplinarian.”\(^83\) When one young man fell behind in his studies, violated curfew, and was accused of moral “misdeeds,” Cluff instructed, “Students must understand that membership in the academy entails responsibility by its importance, and that among their responsibilities is good studentship and good moral conduct. When it is demonstrated that a young man has neither of these, his attendance should cease.”\(^84\) After a young woman was seen loitering about a saloon and then walking through town with a drunken man, she was expelled. She wrote to Cluff pleading for mercy. The student insisted she had not imbibed a single sip of alcohol, nor had she gone into the saloon. She had simply gone out walking with a man and on their way home he had stopped at a bar. She had waited outside for him and had then walked with him some more, but was that any reason to be expelled? Cluff expected her to avoid not only evil but also its appearance.\(^85\)

Students frequently dropped by Cluff’s office or home or wrote notes to him seeking counsel. One was too embarrassed to visit the principal, so she wrote to him requesting advice. She had been dating a young man with low standards, she explained, and she wanted to break off the relationship but didn’t know how to go about doing so. She wanted Cluff’s counsel.\(^86\)

Cluff’s involvement in students’ lives also extended to securing teaching jobs for graduates of the academy’s Normal School. Many graduates like Weston Vernon wrote to the president asking him to “please take steps to secure for me the first good \[underlined twice\] position you may hear about.”\(^87\) Cluff prided himself on his graduates, many of whom ranked among Utah’s best elementary and secondary school teachers. After interviewing Cluff, a journalist echoed his booster rhetoric and pride:
Everywhere in the Territory, and, indeed, in many towns of neighboring states and territories, one hears of the Brigham Young academy, the leading Mormon institution of secondary education.

Is there a young Elder who speaks particularly well; a man pushed far in advance of his years into responsible positions in political, social or business life; a youth here and there pointed to by fathers and mothers as a pattern? The odds are he will be named to you as having been a student of this famous institution.88

Absences and Conflicts

Although Cluff left his mark on the academy and its students in many laudable ways, he was not a flawless leader. He spent years of his tenure as principal and president away from the campus. Cluff felt justified in absenting himself for months or even years from Provo. He spent the 1893 to 1894 academic year in the East completing his MA degree and visiting schools in New England, New York, Canada, and Illinois. In 1896, complaints reached the First Presidency and Karl G. Maeser that Cluff “had been absent a great deal of the time” from the campus.89 From 1897 to 1898, Cluff accepted an invitation from United States Senator Frank Cannon to travel to Hawaii and investigate the views of native Hawaiians regarding the United States’ proposed annexation of the islands. Cluff seemed ideally suited for the assignment because of his acquaintance with Hawaiians and their language as a result of his missionary service. Then in April 1900, he capitalized upon his intellectual curiosity and wanderlust by embarking on a twenty-two-month expedition to Mexico and Central and South America in search of Book of Mormon ruins. “My whole desire in this expedition is to enrich the museum of the Academy with the splendid collection of specimens possible, and to gain some evidences of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” he wrote in his diary.90 He hoped to use the tools of the academy—exploration, research, and discovery—and the tools of the gospel—faith and divine inspiration—to impress and convince skeptics and critics of Mormonism.91

The time Cluff spent in Michigan earning a graduate degree was a wise investment for the school because he simultaneously acquired valuable knowledge and enhanced the academy’s prestige by obtaining an advanced degree. He encouraged other faculty to also leave Provo to obtain university degrees that would enhance the reputation and quality of the faculty.
But his other absences were unwise even though they involved noble causes; they deprived the academy of his leadership and jeopardized his relationship with many faculty and students. The fallout from one of those absences—Cluff’s expedition to Latin America—cast a long shadow over Cluff’s positive contributions to the academy even though the explorers returned with valuable specimens of flora and fauna for the school.

Cluff returned from south of the border in 1902 to find the community and the campus seething with rumors regarding his leadership and conduct on the expedition. Almost from its outset, the expedition had suffered from poor morale. Convinced that each member must live worthy of divine guidance in order for the expedition to succeed, Cluff responded to moral infractions as a martinet, and many in the party chafed under his iron hand. After visiting the expedition in Arizona, Heber J. Grant reported that the students were inexperienced, their behavior had been
“unbecoming,” and Cluff had exhibited “poor judgment.” President Lorenzo Snow instructed Joseph F. Smith and Seymour B. Young to travel south and advise Cluff “to either disband his expedition or reorganize it” on a smaller scale.

When rumors reached Salt Lake that Cluff intended to take Florence Reynolds, a teacher at the Mormon academy in Colonia Juarez, with him on the expedition, the First Presidency’s concerns escalated. George Q. Cannon said that if he had known about Cluff’s romantic attachments and “marital relations,” he would have “opposed his expedition.” Lorenzo Snow sent a telegram to Mexico stating essentially that “it was the unanimous [sic] opinion of the Prest. & Apostles that the expedition disband but if reasons exist which we do not know of that a part of the expedition proceed Cluff must assume the entire responsibility.” Cluff “felt sure the Expedition had been greatly misrepresented by someone” and refused to give up. Snow had stopped short of issuing an ultimatum, for which Cluff was grateful. “I thank God that I am permitted to go on,” he wrote to Brimhall, but many in Provo considered Cluff impetuous and unwise for continuing under the circumstances. As Brimhall informed Cluff six months after the expedition had departed, many at the academy had come to regard it as “a private enterprise” and were “not content with looking upon it as a school enterprise even.”

Cluff recorded after he returned that “there was in some prominent quarters a decided coldness. This was manifest among some members of the Board especially. Jesse Knight, a new member appointed during my absence; L . . . Hollbrook, counselor to [stake] Prest John and a new member, . . . W. H. Dusenberg [Dusenberry] and Reed Smoot. Among some members of the school also there was a decided coldness.” As Francis Kirkham recorded, some students who had grown fond of acting president George Brimhall had “qualm[s]” about seeing their “own beloved Brimhall supplanted by brother Cluff.”

Soon after the return, Cluff’s colleague and fellow traveler Walter Wolfe—a well-educated professor of history and Latin but also a mercurial convert with an appetite for liquor—formally accused him of acting dictatorially, extorting money, and embezzling funds. Wolfe insinuated also that Cluff “had taken a young wife” while in Mexico. Eventually Wolfe and Gordon Beckstead, who had served as Cluff’s counselor during the early part of the expedition, hammered out formal complaints against him. President Joseph F. Smith convened an investigation to review the charges against Cluff and, as it proceeded, Wolfe retracted some of his complaints. After the investigators learned that Wolfe had taken $100 from the expedition fund and had “gambled and drunk up the whole amount, having been
in a drunken state and sick from the effect for five days,” the majority of the investigators’ sentiments shifted in Cluff’s favor. At the end of thirteen hours of investigation, the panel exonerated Cluff and voted to renew his appointment as president for another year, but by a bare majority of four to three. The only board member from Provo who voted to retain Cluff was his father-in-law David John. Both the prophet and Apostle John Henry Smith voted in Cluff’s favor.

This was hardly the ringing vote of confidence in Provo Cluff had hoped for. To be sure, Cluff was pleased that “before the [school] year was out prominent students came to me to express their confidence, and to state that they had learned that Wolfe had lied to them.” But Cluff never regained the trust of the entire community and board. In the spring of 1903, when Cluff’s contract again came up for renewal, some members of the board plotted to replace Cluff with either Brimhall or another of their friends. Jesse Knight offered to pay the president’s salary from his fortune if the board would appoint Brimhall. When David John attended a board meeting and learned of their proposal, he was disgusted. “The prejudice of some of the Directors against Cluff was strong, but is [sic] was based in my judgement in un-righteousness,” he recorded. “They wanted some of their kindred, their pets, to be elected, and whether they were qualified or not, it seems would make no difference.”

Post-Manifesto Marriage and Resignation from BYU

Although David John identified self-interest as the dissatisfied board members’ primary motive, another important reason Cluff could never regain the trust of some in the community was that his actions on the expedition had not only offended some members of the party but were also potentially embarrassing to the Church and academy. In June 1900, Cluff had left the expedition in Thatcher, Arizona, and had proceeded on to Mexico seeking permission from the Mexican government for the party to cross the border. Cluff returned periodically to Arizona but was absent for most of June, July, and August. During that time, he kept company with Florence Reynolds, a woman who became his fiancée long after the Manifesto. Between the 1890 Manifesto and 1904, many prominent Mormons like Cluff and Reynolds became engaged and entered polygamous marriages. As Carmon Hardy has observed, “For many Mormons [after the Manifesto] . . . there was confusion as to what was and was not permissible” with regard to plural marriages. Some believed the Manifesto applied only to marriages performed in the United States; they crossed
the border into Canada or Mexico or sailed into international waters to marry beyond the jurisdiction of United States laws. Over two hundred polygamous marriages were contracted between 1890 and 1904; over sixty of them were performed by Apostles. Church leaders performed new plural marriages and publicly defended the principle in sermons, believing that plural marriage was divinely ordained and that the promised blessings for obedience remained in force.\textsuperscript{104} As Joseph F. Smith told a Senate investigating committee in 1904, the 1890 Manifesto “did not change our belief at all” regarding the sanctity and divine approval of plural marriage. Smith continued, “I believe that the principle [of plural marriage] is as correct a principle to-day as it was then [prior to the Manifesto].”\textsuperscript{105}

Although the exact date of Cluff’s marriage to Florence Reynolds is uncertain and several scenarios are possible, it seems most likely that Elder Seymour B. Young performed the marriage while he and Joseph F. Smith were visiting Cluff in Mexico in August 1900. Young recorded, “I was called to administer to and bless Sr Florence Reynolds Cluff in connection with her husband I gave her such a blessing as she will never forget. Neither will Bro Cluff forget.”\textsuperscript{106} Cluff’s daughter Fern recalled that her father later told her, “I want to tell you that Brother Joseph F. Smith told me that I could marry Aunt Florence.”\textsuperscript{107} Nine and a half months after Young’s blessing, Benjamin and Florence’s daughter Alice was born on May 31, 1901.\textsuperscript{108}

Cluff’s prominence, the fact that General Authorities had been involved in performing or at least blessing the marriage, the fact that Florence was the daughter of General Authority George Reynolds, and the fact that Wolfe was a mercurial man who might tell federal authorities what he knew about Cluff’s marriage placed the Church and the academy in a precarious position following his return from Mexico. This was ironic, given Cluff’s hope that the discoveries of his expedition would dispel prejudice against the Church. The problems were compounded when academy board member and Apostle Reed Smoot, who knew Cluff well, was elected to the Senate in January 1903. The Senate decided to investigate both Smoot and rumors of continued plural marriage within his Church before seating him.

As a member of the academy’s board of trustees at the time of Cluff’s wedding, Smoot could be more closely linked to Cluff’s marriage than to any other post-Manifesto union. Charles Mostyn Owen, an investigator hired by Protestant opponents of Smoot and the Mormons, was assembling a list of witnesses to testify before a Senate committee regarding post-Manifesto marriages. He had already tried to track down Wolfe, who was serving a mission in England but would return within a few months.\textsuperscript{109}
Aware that Cluff would likely be subpoenaed by the Senate committee and that Wolfe would likely testify against Cluff, members of the board of trustees encouraged the president to resign and move to southern Mexico, asking him essentially to place his career on the line for the good of the Church but stopping short of ordering him to resign. He was offered a position as superintendent of a rubber plantation being acquired by the Utah-Mexican Rubber Company, a recently organized firm presided over by his longtime friend and advocate, Apostle John Henry Smith, a member of the university’s board of trustees. The company offered Cluff a starting salary of $250 per month, $50 more than his current salary. In Tabasco, Cluff would be beyond the reach of the US government. He would also be able to continue his search for confirming evidence of the Book of Mormon. Eager to have him out of the way, board member and university benefactor Jesse Knight, a longtime friend and supporter of George Brimhall who hoped to see Brimhall promoted as president, pushed strongly for Cluff to resign. Board member Susa Young Gates wrote Cluff, advising him to accept the offer while reprimanding him for his ambition and poor judgment in continuing the expedition against the advice of Church leaders and marrying a third wife. She also played to his interest in building the kingdom. “Sister Gates has an idea that I am very ambitious, and very selfish, or at least that I have been but am better now. . . . Still she pays me some very nice compliments. She thinks I ought to go South, for there is a great work down there for me, and that I will be instrumental in building up colonies of our people,” Cluff recorded.  

Cluff weighed his options, praying and fasting about them, as his spiritual nature inclined him to do. After John Henry Smith offered him the position, Cluff asked Smith to seek the First Presidency’s advice in his behalf. Cognizant that Cluff’s marriage grew out of his commitment to Mormonism, they chose not to force him out. They replied that they trusted Cluff’s judgment and that “whatever he might think proper to do. . . would be agreeable to the Presidency.” On October 23, he listed the advantages and disadvantages of leaving BYU.

This is a good offer financially. It will also enable me to finish the work I began in the expedition, for I will be permitted to travel some, and I will have opportunities of studying the language and the people. It may also open up missionary labors among the natives there, and in this matter I am deeply interested. Still, on the other hand I have a good position here with $200.00 per month, good home, and have now the school back again in my control.

Roughly three weeks later, Cluff met with nine members of his faculty and told them he would probably be leaving Provo. Five days later, on November 17, he informed the University Executive Committee that he
intended to resign at the end of the year. On November 19, he addressed a letter to the First Presidency tendering his resignation so that he could accept the appointment with the Utah-Mexican Rubber Company.113

In recording the minutes of the meeting where Church leaders considered Cluff’s letter, George F. Gibbs indicated that Cluff submitted his resignation “believing it to be in harmony with the Holy Spirit that he do this, as it would enable him to finish the labors he had begun in the wouth [sic], and perhaps be the means of bringing the gospel to the seed of Lehi.” The First Presidency and eight other leaders considered the matter “quite fully” in connection with “the situation at Washington” involving Reed Smoot “as also the reports of Plural Marriages.” Then John Henry Smith moved and the group concurred that they accepted Cluff’s resignation “with our good will, best wishes and blessing.” With Cluff’s case fresh in his mind, President Smith then turned to the topic of plural marriages and said that “if members of our Church have entered into such alliances they have done it upon their own responsibility” and must be prepared to “abide the consequences.”114 Cluff formally submitted his resignation to the board of trustees on December 15. On January 5, 1904, he handed over his keys to the academy building to his successor George Brimhall—having served exactly twelve years at the helm.115

The next day Cluff traveled to the Salt Lake Temple where he received temple blessings with his wives Mary and Hattie, perhaps a sign that Church leaders recognized and appreciated his willingness to sacrifice his university post in the interests of the Church; he prized the temple blessings conferred upon him, recording, “This is one of the great events in my mortal life.”116 Cluff soon departed for Mexico and was south of the border by the time the Smoot hearings convened on January 16. He never regained his prominence within educational circles or within Mormondom.117 In this respect he somewhat resembled his counterpart, Joseph Marion Tanner, president of Brigham Young College in Logan. Deprived of his position at the college for his continued involvement in plural marriage, Tanner lived out the remainder of his life in relative obscurity in Canada. Tanner’s second wife, Annie, judged, “Because of his persistence in practicing polygamy, the time came when the Church had no use for [him].”118 Her words seem to fit Cluff’s case, too, at least in the sense that he became a public relations liability to the Church by virtue of his polygamous marriage. In both cases, the institutional Church was forced by public pressure to conform to national expectations. Similarly, Apostles John W. Taylor and Matthias F. Cowley were removed from the Quorum of the Twelve in a move that some General Authorities regarded as a “necessary sacrifice,”
and others were passed over for Church positions because their “appointment would bring trouble on the church.”

**Business Endeavors**

Unlike Tanner, who continued to write articles for Church magazines, Cluff abandoned the life of an educator, although he did look back fondly. Writing to Brimhall from Mexico in 1904, Cluff asked him to “kindly remember me to the faculty and the school” and indicated, “My heart is with you.” He added, though, that he had “chosen other work in which I am very interested.” Cluff threw himself into his new commercial pursuits. At one time all three of his wives lived in Tabasco, although his first wife, Mary, remained for only a year. While he superintended the rubber company, he also formed the Mexican Land and Sugar Company and tried to interest capitalists in purchasing 376,000 acres in Tabasco for a sugarcane or rubber plantation. He hoped to establish a colony of Latter-day Saints on the land. Unfortunately, the prospective investors soon lost interest and the project foundered. In 1908, Cluff wrote to Brimhall, informing him that his initial contract with the rubber company would soon expire. The furor in Congress over post-Manifesto plural marriage had blown over and Cluff could return to Zion if he wished. Brimhall tried to dissuade Cluff from signing on for a second stint south of the border, although he did not offer Cluff a university appointment if he returned. “I have never been uncertain as to the opportunities for making money in the locality of your present operations,” Brimhall told his friend and former associate. But he expressed his fear that Cluff would “break yourself down that you will not be able to enjoy the fruits of your strenuity.” Ultimately, Cluff disregarded his friend’s advice and signed on for another two years.

He did take a brief leave of absence and returned to Utah for a few weeks early in 1909, where he was hailed and honored in Provo and at BYU. As Brimhall’s guest, he traveled north with members of the state legislature to visit the State Agricultural College in Logan, stopping in Salt Lake on the way home to attend a fast meeting in the temple. A few days later he spoke at the invitation of stake president Joseph Keeler in the Provo Tabernacle. It was a church service, and Cluff emphasized the religious facets of his work, facets that he had frankly pushed aside because of the press of business in Mexico. He told the congregation that he had left Provo in order to “learn the language and study the ruins so abundant in [Mexico] and bearing such an important part upon the Book of Mormon history.” He described the social structure and customs of the inhabitants of Tabasco, reported that “their habits, customs and religious
traditions are opposed to progress and advancement,” and concluded that “it will take a greater power than man possesses to prepare this people to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Cluff was feted at the university. An editorial in the student paper praised Cluff for having “forgone the many comforts and advantages of civilized society” in order to be able to “collect ‘first hand’ invaluable data concerning the traditions and customs of the Indian” and certified, “We were glad to welcome him back into our midst again, and only regret that his stay could not have been longer.”

Shortly before his return to Mexico, Cluff summarized his business activities in Mexico and shared his enthusiasm for the rubber company’s financial prospects with a reporter. The company had planted one hundred thousand rubber trees on five thousand acres, along with twenty-one thousand banana trees, and the rubber trees would soon be sufficiently mature to tap for rubber sap. “With the trees planted and growing rapidly, the shipping facilities improving every year and the methods of harvesting rubber and preparing it for market becoming more practical and economical under Yankee ingenuity, the company has entirely passed through the period of anxiety which always attends the launching of a new enterprise . . . and its future is assured.”

A year later, Cluff again visited Utah on business, still sanguine about the rubber company’s prospects. When asked about revolutionary activity in Mexico, Cluff said he was confident that the Mexican government would preserve order and predicted that the United States would mobilize its forces if necessary to protect heavy American investments south of the border. He was whistling in the dark. A few months later, revolutionaries raided the rubber company’s plantation, driving off the horses and cattle. Cluff, his family members, and the other company officers holed up in an office building with walls thick enough to stop bullets. After twenty-four hours the rebels had not returned, but Cluff “decided that it was best for us to leave,” his daughter Fern recalled. On December 29, 1910, they boarded a ship bound for Texas. “So he came from Mexico . . . almost a poor man with just the money that he had in his safe,” Fern explained.

Back in Utah, Florence settled in Springville. The former university president searched for suitable work, but his long absence from academia and the cloud under which he had departed made a teaching appointment at the academy impractical. The best he could find was a job with the Consolidated Wagon and Machine Company in Salt Lake. His new position disappointed him. “I went to see him one day, and he was at a desk. I had seen him as president of the Brigham Young Academy. It was heartbreak ing to see him sitting at a little desk with a little book in front of him,”
reflected Fern. “He spoke three languages and was one of the best teachers in the whole world.”

Joseph F. Smith advised Cluff to swallow his ambition and stay in Utah where he could participate regularly in church meetings. But Cluff could not forget “some land he had seen” in Mexico. “He just couldn’t stand [the job in Salt Lake]. He couldn’t make a living the way he wanted to make it and at what he thought he deserved,” Fern explained. In May 1913, after persuading capitalists in Utah to back him, he returned to Tabasco with Florence, hoping to establish a new plantation and grow bananas. His first two wives, Mary and Hattie, refused to return, having grown disillusioned with Mexico and uncertain about Cluff’s ability to provide for them. When Cluff arrived, conditions were less stable than he had hoped; Mexico was engulfed in revolution, and bands of soldiers and thieves roamed the countryside, pillaging and raiding. When he reported the situation, his backers in Salt Lake withdrew their money. He chose, nevertheless, to stay. He cleared land and raised bananas, but guerrilla activity and raiding made his business unstable. In 1914, after revolutionists raided the plantation, Cluff and his family abandoned their land and fled to the town of Huimanguillo. Cluff established a small store and obtained contracts to supply representatives from American oil companies who were scoping out possibilities in the region. In 1917, though, Mexico adopted a new constitution. Article 27 authorized the government to expropriate land, water, and mineral rights and placed new constraints upon foreign businesses operating in the region. The oil companies withdrew and business prospects continued to deteriorate for Cluff. A decade after they had returned to Mexico, the Cluffs were desperately poor. Cluff was also in his mid-sixties. In 1924, he returned permanently to the United States. He and Florence, who had stayed by his side in Mexico, moved to California, where they invested the remains of her inheritance in a small fruit stand and grocery store in Redondo Beach. “Mother now began attending church, a blessing we had not had for a long time. My sister Elda, brother Benjamin and I were baptized on July 3, 1925,” recalled Cluff’s daughter Margaret. Few of the Cluffs’ customers knew that the man who waited on them had once presided over a university. The Cluffs operated their store until 1932 when Florence passed away and Cluff retired.

Cluff’s Legacy

Cut off from BYU by his choices, the Church’s political predicament, and his commercial ambitions, Cluff retained a lively interest in the university he had helped to create. But he could not hope to regain his stature
in Utah or Mormonism. As Lorenzo Snow had warned Church members in a statement published in 1900 in the Deseret News, “If, therefore, any member disobeys the law, either as to polygamy or unlawful cohabitation, he must bear his own burden.” The institutional Church could “not advise nor encourage any species of lawlessness.” For Cluff as a prominent Mormon, the consequences of plural marriage were heavy. After Cluff visited his sons Wilford Cyril and Joseph in Richfield in 1924, the town’s newspaper editor noted the irony that such a “noted educator” who had “probably touched the lives of more boys and girls and influenced them for good than falls to the lot of most men, educators and religious teachers included” had arrived and departed from town “unheralded and unsung” except by his relatives. Minimizing his own achievements as academy and university president, Cluff publicly repressed any bitterness he might have felt and praised the accomplishments of BYU president Franklin S. Harris, saying, “Neither George [Brimhall] nor I could have done what this new young man has done. We didn’t know enough.” When he received a special citation from the Alumni Association in 1947 at age ninety, he delighted in the honor and expressed his regrets that his health would not permit him to visit. He asked Eugene Roberts to “carry my best wishes to the Alumni Association, The President, and the Faculty of the University, and to the Student-body” for their “constant success.” Cluff’s health remained frail and he passed away on June 14, 1948, in Redondo Beach. Provo and Salt Lake newspapers reported his death. His funeral took place in his ward chapel in Redondo Beach, and he was buried in the LDS plot of the Inglewood Cemetery.

The controversy and opposition that dogged Cluff late in his administration, his sudden departure from the university, his business reversals, and his descent into penury seem ill-suited to the father of a thriving university. Universities supposedly facilitate upward mobility and progress not only for their students but also for their faculty and administrators. Unlike Maeser, who ended his career as superintendent of Church schools, Cluff faded from prominence. That disappointing story, too, is part of the legacy Cluff bestowed upon BYU. Perhaps the difficulty of telling that story fully is one reason it has been easier for BYU boosters to eulogize Maeser as the architect and first president of BYU.

Placed in perspective, though, there is much to admire in the arc of Cluff’s career, including his religious devotion to the principle of plural marriage at great cost to himself, his search to know God’s will when he was offered a position with the Utah-Mexican Rubber Company, and his dogged persistence in the face of business reversals beyond his control.
It is tempting to speculate about how Cluff’s career might have unfolded had he not undertaken the expedition to Latin America or married Florence Reynolds after the Manifesto. He might have enjoyed the security and stability that eluded him. Almost certainly the university would have thrived intellectually under his leadership and openness to innovation and progressive education. The possibilities of what might have been if a professionally trained, academically minded, independent president had been at the helm of BYU during the Progressive Era are intriguing.

The speculation is so intriguing because Cluff achieved so much between 1890 and 1903 at Brigham Young Academy and University. He created and nurtured college-level work at the institution, expanded the range of topics taught at the school, and designed a professionally sound teacher education program. He extended the reach and heightened the visibility of the institution through summer sessions and courses for Sunday School teachers and missionaries. He enlarged the size of the faculty, boosted its professionalism, encouraged prospective and current faculty to study at eastern universities, and raised funds for an impressive physical plant. His influence and efforts were crucial in placing the school on firm financial footing and shaping its primary identity as a university. Cluff regarded these activities as well as his interactions with students as his contribution to the kingdom of God. Although he was not a seminarian in the tradition of Karl G. Maeser, he was a man of faith who saw greater good than Maeser did in secular learning. He believed, along with many Christian theologians and social reformers of his era, that the sacred and the secular could be made to serve one another. Ultimately, that optimistic vision of the compatibility and harmony of the sacred and secular, inspiration and intellect, worthiness and rigor, significantly reoriented Brigham Young University.

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1. Under Maeser’s direction a handful of collegiate courses were offered as an experiment in math, language, and science during only the 1884 to 1885 school year. Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years, 4 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975–76), 1:167 n. 19.

2. The fullest treatment of the expedition in search of Zarahemla is Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:289–329. See also Benjamin Hemminger, “Forgotten


5. For another important treatment of Cluff’s contributions, see Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:378–81.


11. Eugene L. Roberts and Mrs. Eldon Reed Cluff, “Benjamin Cluff Jr., Scholar, Educational Administrator, and Explorer: Second Principal of the Brigham Young Academy and First President of Brigham Young University; A Study of the Life and Labors of One of Utah’s First School Administrators,” unpublished typescript (1947), 24, Perry Special Collections; Cluff, “Diaries,” October 17, 1886, 113; October 24, 1886, 113; December 20, 1886, 2; letter inserted under date of April 9, 1890, 38–41; Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:215.


16. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:216.


30. The Articles of Incorporation of Brigham Young Academy, July 18, 1896, in Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:536, 539.

31. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:245.

32. Articles of Incorporation in Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:536–37.


34. Roberts and Cluff, “Benjamin Cluff Jr.,” 67.

35. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:242, 283.

36. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:283.

37. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:261.


42. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:269.


46. Cluff, “Diaries,” June 8, 1890, 42; Christmas 1894, 46; “City and County Jottings,” Daily Enquirer, March 1, 1894; “Summer School,” Daily Enquirer, May 8, 1897; “Educators Meet,” Daily Enquirer, August 16, 1897; see also, “In the Summer School,” Daily Enquirer, June 8, 1895. The summer seminars made friends for Utah and the Mormons, as Cluff had hoped. Flora Cook, a visiting lecturer from Chicago, said, “I have been in Utah three weeks and have never received more kind and courteous treatment in my life.” “Brigham Young Summer School,” Deseret News, August 12, 1893. President Hall of Clark University said he was pleasantly “surprised and delighted” by his encounters with the much-maligned Latter-day Saints. “Instinct and Heredity,” Deseret News, August 28, 1897.
47. Wilkinson, *First One Hundred Years*, 1:259–60, 265.
48. Cluff, “Diaries,” Christmas 1894, 46; the typescript contains a probable typo, “vig.” For information on the Church university that operated in Salt Lake and the threats it posed to Brigham Young Academy, see Woodworth, “Refusing to Die,” 96–99, and Wilkinson, *First One Hundred Years*, 1:221–32.
49. Wilkinson, *First One Hundred Years*, 1:265.
51. Benjamin Cluff to Frank Warren Smith, August 18, 1897, Frank Warren Smith Papers, Perry Special Collections.
55. Wilkinson and Skousen, *School of Destiny*, 169–70; H. A. Anderson to Benjamin Cluff, March 15, 1894, Brigham Young University President’s Records, 1892–1903, Benjamin Cluff, Jr., Perry Special Collections.
56. Wilkinson, *First One Hundred Years*, 1:258–59; Roberts and Cluff, “Benjamin Cluff Jr.,” 89.
57. Abby Calista Hale to Benjamin Cluff, April 6, 1897, President’s Records.
58. Wilkinson, *First One Hundred Years*, 1:258.
60. Roberts and Cluff, “Benjamin Cluff Jr.,” 95–98.
61. Roberts and Cluff, “Benjamin Cluff Jr.,” 68–70.
72. Benjamin Cluff to Charles E. Maw, April 15, 1903, President’s Records.
75. “Editorial,” White and Blue, December 1, 1899, 30.
76. Fred Seaman to Benjamin Cluff, April 30, 1895, President’s Records.
77. Benjamin Cluff to Audrey Keeler, November 23, 1897, President’s Records.
78. Roberts and Cluff, “Benjamin Cluff Jr.,” 220.
79. S. L. Brunson to Benjamin Cluff, August 28, 1895, President’s Records.
80. S. L. Brunson to Benjamin Cluff, September 4, 1895, President’s Records.
81. Benjamin Cluff to Isaac Riddle, October 15, 1897, President’s Records.
82. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:279.
83. Roberts and Cluff, “Benjamin Cluff Jr.,” 52.
84. Benjamin Cluff to George Brimhall, October 24, 1893, President’s Records.
85. Lillie Metcalf to Benjamin Cluff, November 21, 1895, President’s Records.
86. Lulu Matthews to Benjamin Cluff, November 19, 1895, President’s Records.
87. Weston Vernon to Benjamin Cluff, July 11, 1895, President’s Records.
88. “Brigham Young Academs.,” Deseret News, April 8, 1893.
89. Karl G. Maeser to Benjamin Cluff, October 22, 1896, President’s Records.
91. Roberts and Cluff, “Benjamin Cluff Jr.,” 88, 101–65. For information on Cluff’s Hawaiian investigation see “Local and Other Matters,” Deseret News, March 5, 1898; “At Home and Abroad,” Deseret News, March 19, 1898; “How the Hawaiians Feel,” Deseret News, March 19, 1898; “Let Hawaii Come,” Deseret News, March 26, 1898; “He Canvassed Hawaii,” Salt Lake Tribune, March 14, 1898. On the Latin American expedition, see Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:289–329; Wilkinson and Skousen, School of Destiny, 151–62; Hemminger, “Forgotten Quest,” 20–28; and Taylor, Rocky Mountain Empire, 147–72. Although Cluff’s trips to Latin America and Hawaii deprived the academy of his leadership, at the outset, it appeared that the trips would benefit the Church. His service to the nation on a government investigation of annexationist sentiment in Hawaii might place him in the type of national limelight that he believed educated Mormons must occupy in order to dispel prejudice against the Mormons. And in traveling to Latin America, he endeavored to advance secular knowledge and Mormonism’s credibility by combining research and religion in a single endeavor. But he also staked his own reputation on the Latin American endeavor. When Anthony Ivins, Joseph F. Smith, and Seymour B. Young met with Cluff in northern Mexico in the summer of 1900 and advised discontinuing the expedition, Cluff reportedly told them that “if he returned now the expedition would be a failure & his reputation was worth to him [more] than his life. He would rather fail on the Isthmus or on the banks of the Magdalena River than turn back now.” Anthony W. Ivins, Diary, July [August] 1, 1900, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.
92. Journal History, July 19, 1900, Church History Library, microfilm copy in Perry Special Collections; Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:302, 307.
93. Ivins, Diary, July [August] 1, 1900; July 31, 1900.
94. Journal History, August 9, 1900; Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:309.
95. Ivins, Diary, July [August] 1, 1900; August 11, 1900.
96. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:311.
99. Wilkinson, First One Hundred Years, 1:371.


103. John, “Journal,” April 21, 22 and 23 and 24, 1903; Fern Cluff Ingram, interview by Leonard R. Grover, April 5, 1980, Salt Lake City, 6, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, LDS Polygamy Oral History Project, Perry Special Collections.


107. Ingram, interview, 6.

108. For Cluff’s marriage to Florence Reynolds, see Quinn, “LDS Church Authority,” 69–70, 86–88; Hardy, Solemn Covenant, 187; and Ingram, interview, 6. For the broader context of post-Manifesto plural marriage and substantial support for it within the Quorum of the Twelve, see also Alexander, Mormonism in Transition, 60–73. For the Smoot hearings, see Kathleen Flake, The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Harvard S. Heath, “The Reed Smoot Hearings: A Quest for Legitimacy,” Journal of Mormon History 33 (Summer 2007): 64 n. 175, agrees that Cluff married Reynolds but suggests that the marriage occurred “apparently in 1898.” An even earlier date, April 18, 1894, is recorded in family records compiled as part of the LDS Church’s family history site, FamilySearch, http://www.familysearch.org. Margaret Cluff Parson Edwards, “Florence Mary Reynolds,” 1, Perry Special Collections, identifies 1896 as the year her parents married. The International Genealogical Index shows Florence’s endowment date as April 18, 1894, but such an early wedding date does not square with Lorenzo Snow’s recollection in 1900 that Cluff had requested Snow’s permission to marry Reynolds.

Snow did not become prophet until late in 1898. Snow and Smith met with Cluff to discuss his relationship with Florence in October 1899, at which time Cluff assured him that they were not married. See Journal History, October 13, 1899. Journal History, August 9, 1900, records, “Elder Cluff’s marital relations were now freely discussed. It seemed that some time ago, but long since the issuance of the Manifesto, he, although already a married man, won the affections of one of his students, and diplomatically endeavored in a quiet way to convey the idea that he had married her, and this he did in hopes of having the marriage
ceremony performed secretly in the future. At least this is the supposition. This matter was brought to the attention of President Snow in the presence of Brother Cluff, when it was held by Professor Cluff that there was nothing wrong whatever in the relations between himself and the young lady, but he expressed the desire that the marriage ceremony could be performed.” Florence’s father, George Reynolds, testified that his daughter married Cluff sometime between December 1899 and 1901. See Quinn, “LDS Church Authority,” 87.

In the summer of 1899, Cluff went with his wife Mary and their children up into Little Cottonwood Canyon on an extended camping trip. His oldest daughter Fern, who was thirteen or fourteen at the time, intimated that Benjamin and Florence married that summer:

“One day he came walking over from Park City. There is a trail there and he walked over the mountains. He looked like a young man and he was all dolled up. He looked just like a bridegroom. We were so surprised. He had a straw hat on, and he looked gorgeous. He looked ten or twenty years younger than we had seen him last.

“My mother’s face went white as snow. She told us to go away. They never told us what was happening. My ears were opened because I suspected something, but I didn’t know what. . . . He came over and told Mother something. He took Mother in the tent. Mother made a great big scream, and what she did, I don’t know. She fainted or something, and Father said, “Mary, don’t be silly.” Now that was the way he comforted her! I didn’t know what it was. After awhile Mother came out. I didn’t find out what it was.” Ingram, interview, 5. It seems likely that the news that broke Mary’s heart was Cluff’s engagement to Florence.

In the fall of 1899, Cluff traveled with Reynolds to Mexico and apparently petitioned Anthony W. Ivins to marry Cluff and Reynolds. Possibly Ivins performed the wedding because thereafter Reynolds assumed the name of Cluff on Church records. But it is also possible that Ivins refused to do so without the prophet’s consent. Apparently Cluff’s request became the subject of a private conference in Salt Lake a few weeks or months later. Quinn surmises that the meeting was convened by Francis M. Lyman after Ivins related Cluff’s request to him. Apparently Joseph F. Smith disapproved of the meeting and reprimanded Ivins for divulging Cluff’s request to Lyman. In February 1900, Smith wrote to Ivins stating, “I know nothing about his [Cluff’s] domestic arrangements nor do I want to, the less I know about some things the better for me at least and perhaps for others concerned. I know that some things may have been done which are better left in oblivion as far as possible, and yet no censure would attach except in the eyes of the world, and my motto is and always has been to protect to the uttermost in my power the rights and the secrets, if secrets there may be, of my friends and the friends of the kingdom of God.” Joseph F. Smith to Anthony W. Ivins, February 6, 1900, Joseph F. Smith Letterpress Copybooks, available on Richard E. Turley Jr., ed., Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), vol. 1, DVD 30; Quinn, “LDS Church Authority,” 86–88.

109. Senate Committee, Proceedings, 34.


113. Cluff, “Diaries,” November 12, 1903, 72; November 17, 1903, 72–73; November 19, 1903, 73.
114. Journal History, November 19, 1903; White, Church, State, and Politics, 528.
115. White, Church, State, and Politics, 528, 530; Cluff, “Diaries,” January 1, 1904.
120. Benjamin Cluff to George Brimhall, October 12, 1904, Brigham Young University President’s Records, 1903–1921, George H. Brimhall, Perry Special Collections.
122. Benjamin Cluff to George Brimhall, January 2, 1908, Brimhall, President’s Records; George Brimhall to Benjamin Cluff, January 20, 1908, Brimhall, President’s Records.
125. “A Visit from President Cluff,” White and Blue, March 12, 1909, 132–33.
130. Ingram, interview, 11, 20.
132. Hardy, Solemn Covenant, 203, 188.
133. “Noted Educator Visits Richfield,” Richfield (Utah) Reaper, June 26, 1924.