

A History of the Rise of  
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day  
Saints  
in  
Arkansas

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*Anyone with historical information about the rise of the Church is invited to share that information by sending it to this website and it will be added. Thanks.*

**Sources: Wilford Woodruff, Bookcraft: 1964; Wikipedia; The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, A Mormon Prophet, Signature Books; Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Deseret Book Company, 1985; LDS Church News; Individual personal journals.**

Elders Wilford Woodruff and Henry Brown (Elder Woodruff was not yet an Apostle) arrived as missionaries near present day Bentonville on 28 January 1835. There were very few residents in Arkansas at that time and some in northern Arkansas had moved there from Jackson County Missouri. They held their first meeting four days later and preached to an attentive congregation. Later they were confronted by an apostate member, Alexander Akeman who lived beside Petit Jean River. Akeman was a man who earlier endured severe persecution with his sons in Missouri, but later turned bitterly against the Church. However, Akeman died suddenly “as though struck by a thunderbolt from heaven” while following Elder Woodruff from Akeman’s house. Elder Woodruff preached his funeral sermon. This event, along with Woodruff’s teachings led to the baptism of a Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Hubbel, the first converts in Arkansas, on 22 February 1835. Elder Woodruff stated that he was aware of many mobbers who faced a sudden death.

Turning a cottonwood tree into a canoe Elders Woodruff and Brown set sail down the Arkansas River on 11 March 1835 intending to go to Memphis Tennessee. They had no provisions. After traveling 25 miles the first day they encountered a poor but friendly family on the river bank that fed them supper, put them up for the night, fed them a good breakfast and gave them Johnny cakes and pork to take with them on the trip.

The second day the Elders traveled about 50 miles and stopped at a tavern in a deserted town called Catron. The town was believed to have evil spirits by the natives. The Elders traveled to Little Rock the next day which was only a few cabins at the time. From here they took the old military road toward Memphis. Memphis was still 170 miles away through mud and water. On 24 March Elder Woodruff had a sharp pain in his knee and Elder Brown, who was anxious to get home to Kirtland left him sitting on a log in an alligator swamp. Elder Woodruff prayed, the Lord healed him and he arrived in Memphis on 27 March weary and hungry.

In 1838, Elder Abraham O. Smoot was called to a five-month mission to Arkansas where he preached frequently with varied results.

The year 1857 marked a tragic era in Church history in Arkansas. Elder Parley P. Pratt was murdered on 13 May 1857 about 5 miles north of Alma, Arkansas. He had just been acquitted by a court in Van Buren, Arkansas of charges pressed by Hector H. McLean, the husband of Eleanor who wished to move to Utah and become Parley P. Pratt’s wife. At the trial she testified that her husband frequently physically abused her. Disappointed with the verdict, McLean followed and assassinated the Apostle. McLean was never tried for the murder. On 2 April 2008 Crawford County Circuit Judge Gary Cottre gave the Pratt family permission to move Elder Parley P. Pratt's remains to Utah but no remains were found when the gravesite was unearthed. It was believed that the earth had swallowed up his casket and remains over the long many years since his burial.

Later during 1857, a party of primarily northern Arkansas immigrants heading, for California were killed by a group of Latter-day Saints and Indians in southern Utah at Mountain Meadows Utah a few miles west of Cedar City.

Negative feelings, and later the American Civil War, kept the Church from the area of Arkansas for a time.

After the War, the Church again sent missionaries to Arkansas in 1876. In 1877, Elders Henry G. Boyle and J.D.H. McAllister visited a member in Des Arc, Arkansas. By 1877, 27 families totaling 125 converts emigrated west. Through the 1880s, converts continued to join the main body of the saints in Utah.

A permanent presence of the church was established on May 30, 1890 when the first Latter-day Saints meetinghouse was built in White County, Arkansas. Benjamin Franklin Baker, an early influential convert, helped establish the Barney Branch (about 5 miles north of Enola, Arkansas) in 1914 with over 100 members. By 1930, three LDS Church Branches had been organized in Barney, El Dorado, and Little Rock with a total membership of 944.

During the early 1950s the Church attempted to purchase the gravesite of Apostle Parley P. Pratt north of Alma but the owner of the property would not sell to the Church. Edward (Ezz) Pierce who was a Church member from that area approached the farmer and convinced him to sell the property to the Church.

In September 1955 the Fayetteville Branch was created with Agriculture Professor Al Davis as Branch President and with members meeting in the Blue Room of the Student Union of the University of Arkansas.

During 1968 Harold (Hal) Pierce was the Branch President in Fayetteville while a student at the University when land for a new building was purchased on Zion Road. The name Zion came from a small Zion Baptist Church that was at the end of the dirt road. Property the Branch owned in Bentonville and Springdale was then sold. A building fund was started that included raising sweet potatoes for sale, picking grapes and pruning grape vineyards.

Some surnames of active members in the Fayetteville Branch during the late 1960s included Caspers, Rench, Bohn, Bednar (not David), Phipps, Winfrey, Robertson, Thompson, Summers, Centers, Osborne, Money, McBride, Green, Preston, Johnson, Johnston, Gottlin, Hunt, Florer, Ainsworth, Kunkel, Schwab, Gregory, Smith(2), Tucker, Imler, Rowland, Pierce, Shannon, Strage, and Jett. A missionary named Elder Art Bushman, later a long time resident of Edmond Oklahoma, served there during 1966. Another missionary was Elder Thompson whose father was a missionary in Ozark Arkansas during the 1940s.

On 10 November 1968 a new Sunday School group from Siloam Springs was organized. They initially met in a rented home in Siloam Springs and then moved to a storefront building in Gentry. A Missionary couple named Simpson was assigned to work with them.

During December 1968 the Ft. Smith Church voted to leave the Tulsa Stake and become part of the Central States Mission in preparation for forming their District of the Church.

During early 1969 the Ft. Smith District of the Church was created with Earl Carson as District President.

The first Arkansas Stake was created on June 1, 1969 in Little Rock. This was known at the time as the Arkansas Stake and later renamed to the Little Rock Arkansas Stake.

The first Institute of Religion building, adjacent to the University of Arkansas, was dedicated in the fall of 1999.

On 20-22 July 2006, over 1,000 Latter-day Saint teens from all 5 Stakes of the Church in Arkansas gathered for a 3-day multi-stake youth conference. Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and former associate dean of Graduate Studies in the College of Business Administration at the University of Arkansas spoke to the youth and encouraged them to live high moral standards.

Many Arkansas Church members helped with the clean up in Oklahoma after the devastating 3 May 1999 tornado that hit there.

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, several thousand Latter-day Saint volunteers, from a 7 State area (including Arkansas), went to Louisiana and Mississippi to aid the recovery. Many of them were taking time out from their employment to help anyone needing assistance regardless of faith.

Arkansas "Mormons" volunteered relief in their own area on several occasions including a 2 April 2006 Tornado Outbreak. In September 2008, Arkansas Latter-day Saints went to the Baton Rouge area to aid cleanup efforts following Hurricane Gustav.

==== Arkansas Membership History ====

|1930 || 944

|1980 || 9,878

|1990 || 13,753

|1999 || 20,077

|2007 || 25,296