



The Pioneers' First View of Salt Lake Valley by Utah artist Lewis A. Ramsey depicts Brigham Young's party on the south side of Emigration Canyon on July 24, 1847. Frontispiece in S. A. Kenner's *Utah As It Is* (1904).

From Emigration Canyon to City Creek: Pioneer Trail and Campsites in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847

BY W. RANDALL DIXON

THE CELEBRATION OF THE UTAH PIONEER SESQUICENTENNIAL in 1997 has brought again to the fore questions about the route of the Pioneer Trail followed by Brigham Young and the Pioneer Company in 1847. It is ironic that the stretch of trail that is perhaps the least well defined is that which is closest to Salt Lake City—the portion from the mouth of

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Emigration Canyon to the trail's end on City Creek in what is now downtown Salt Lake City.

The settlement of the Salt Lake Valley obliterated most of the evidence of the trails and campsites, so when interest in historic sites was kindled in later years, differences of opinion as to where events had transpired led to controversy and the misplacement of historical markers.

The study of records left by members of the Pioneer Company, coupled with an understanding of the original geography of the valley, makes it possible, even at this late date, to understand reasonably well the location of the trails and campsites of the founding year.

TRAIL OF JULY 22, 1847

In descending Emigration Canyon the Pioneer Company followed the "road" made by the Donner-Reed Party the year before. Finding the mouth of the canyon blocked by trees and rock outcroppings, the ill-fated emigrants chose to avoid these obstacles by climbing a steep hill, since known as Donner Hill, to the south of the canyon. Instead of following their example, the pioneers chose to take the time to clear a road through the dense growth along the creek rather than risk the steep incline of the hill.

This obstacle overcome, William Clayton described the entry into the valley, ". . . the brethren succeeded in cutting a pretty good road along the creek and the wagons proceeded on, taking near a southwest course. We found the last descent even but very rapid all the way."¹ Their route followed Emigration Creek, which runs in a southwesterly course down to the valley floor in a deep ravine. Albert Carrington's account of the descent mentioned the creek: ". . . as we proceed down [the] run [Emigration Creek] towards the lake, timber & brush give out . . . [we] passed on down run & camped."²

Historians studying this part of the trail have come to similar conclusions about its direction. In the Pioneer Centennial year of 1947, Preston Nibley wrote of the pioneers ". . . they then followed down Emigration Creek until they came to the banks of another stream, after having traveled five and one half miles in a southwesterly direction."³

¹ *William Clayton's Journal* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1921), p. 311. See entry for July 22, 1847.

² Amasa M. Lyman Journal, kept by Albert Carrington, July 22, 1847. Historical Department, Archives Division, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereinafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

³ Preston Nibley, *Exodus to Greatness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1947), p. 426.

Leland H. Creer, writing the same year, said that they

. . . entered the Valley of the Great Salt Lake not over the route identified today as the Emigrant Road (west north-westward along Fifth South Street) but over a route which turned southwestward over the bench, crossing Thirteenth East Street probably near the vicinity of the present Westminster College on Seventeenth South and extending westward until encampment was made near Fifth East, on the north bank of Parleys Creek.⁴

In 1951 Dale L. Morgan gave the most detailed account:

The Mormon wagons, in short, kept down the gulch of Emigration to a point immediately above the present Hogle Gardens Zoo, then to avoid a marsh in the bottoms, pulled up on the benchland to the south, roughly paralleling the present Wasatch Boulevard but a few yards below it to arrive at the bench at the intersection of Wasatch Boulevard and Michigan Avenue, the northeast extremity of the present Bonneville Golf Course. From this point they wound down the sloping plateau to camp on Parleys Creek, in the vicinity of present 5th East and 17th South streets.⁵

It is probable that, upon reaching the benchland, the pioneers rejoined the Donner-Reed Trail that they had been following until their detour around Donner Hill. David E. Miller made that conclusion in 1957 when he wrote:

. . . A careful reading of the various accounts leads me to the belief that, after cutting a new road through the mouth of Emigration Canyon, the expedition turned to the southwest near the present location of Hogle Zoo and followed the Donner tracks all the way to . . . where they camped on the evening of July 22.⁶

To sum up, the pioneers departed Emigration Canyon to the south of the creek, then followed its southwestern course into the valley to the vicinity of what is now Fifth East below Seventeenth South where the creek turned north. From that point the company continued west to the banks of what we know as Parley's Creek where they made camp.⁷

⁴ Leland H. Creer, *The Founding of an Empire* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1947), p. 295.

⁵ Dale L. Morgan, ed., "The Journal of James Frazier Reed," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 19 (1951): 205n.

⁶ David E. Miller, "The Donners Blazed the Mormon Trail," *Salt Lake Tribune Home Magazine*, August 25, 1957, p. 5. Thanks to Will Bagley for this reference. Morgan believed that the trails parted on the benchland with the Donner trail "swinging to the southwest, the Mormon road more to the west." Morgan, "James Frazier Reed," p. 206.

⁷ Also making these conclusions are "Entrance of the Vanguard of Utah Pioneers into the Salt Lake Valley," *Pioneer*, July-August 1953, pp. 28-51; Nicholas G. Morgan, "Original Pioneer Entrance into the Salt Lake Valley," *Treasures of Pioneer History*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1953), pp. 34-36; and Eugene E. Campbell, "The Mormon Migrations to Utah," in Richard D. Poll *et al.*, eds., *Utah's History* (Provo: BYU Press, 1984), p. 125.

CAMPSITE OF JULY 22, 1847

Thomas Bullock described the campsite in his journal: “. . . after wading thro thick grass for some distance, we found a place bare enough for a camping ground, the grass being only knee deep, but very thick; we camped on the banks of a beautiful little stream which was surrounded by very tall grass.”⁸ The location of this campsite was pinpointed in later years by one of the pioneer company, Charles A. Harper, who was interviewed by a *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter for the Utah Pioneer Jubilee in 1897: “He says there seems to be some difference of opinion as to where the pioneers camped in the valley. According to his statement, the company he was in arrived on July 22nd, and camp was made on the bed of Parley’s Creek, near the site of President Woodruff’s villa.” Harper was even more precise when he added a note to his original 1847 diary that the campsite was “nearly opposite Woodruff’s home.”⁹ Wilford Woodruff’s “villa” was located on his farm on the west side of Fifth East north of Seventeenth South. Parley’s Creek ran a short distance to the east.¹⁰

TRAIL OF JULY 23, 1847

On the morning of July 23 the company set out for its final destination which had been selected by Orson Pratt’s exploring group the previous day. Before moving north, however, “a backtrack about a mile” was made according to Thomas Bullock.¹¹ No mention was made of the reason for the backtrack, but it likely was done to avoid the marshes and tall grass where the waters of Parley’s, Emigration, and Red Butte creeks converged, creating an obstacle between the campground and their intended destination on what became known as City Creek. They backtracked probably to the vicinity of what is now Eleventh East below Seventeenth South, at the foot of the bench.

From that point, Bullock records that the company took “a strait road to a small Grove of Cotton Wood Trees on the banks of a beautiful stream.”¹² The route probably passed through today’s Liberty Park ending at approximately Third South and State streets.¹³

⁸ Thomas Bullock Journal, July 22, 1847, LDS Church Archives.

⁹ “Fifty Years Ago Today,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 30, July 22, 1897; *The Diary of Charles Alfred Harper* (n.p., 1971), p. 31.

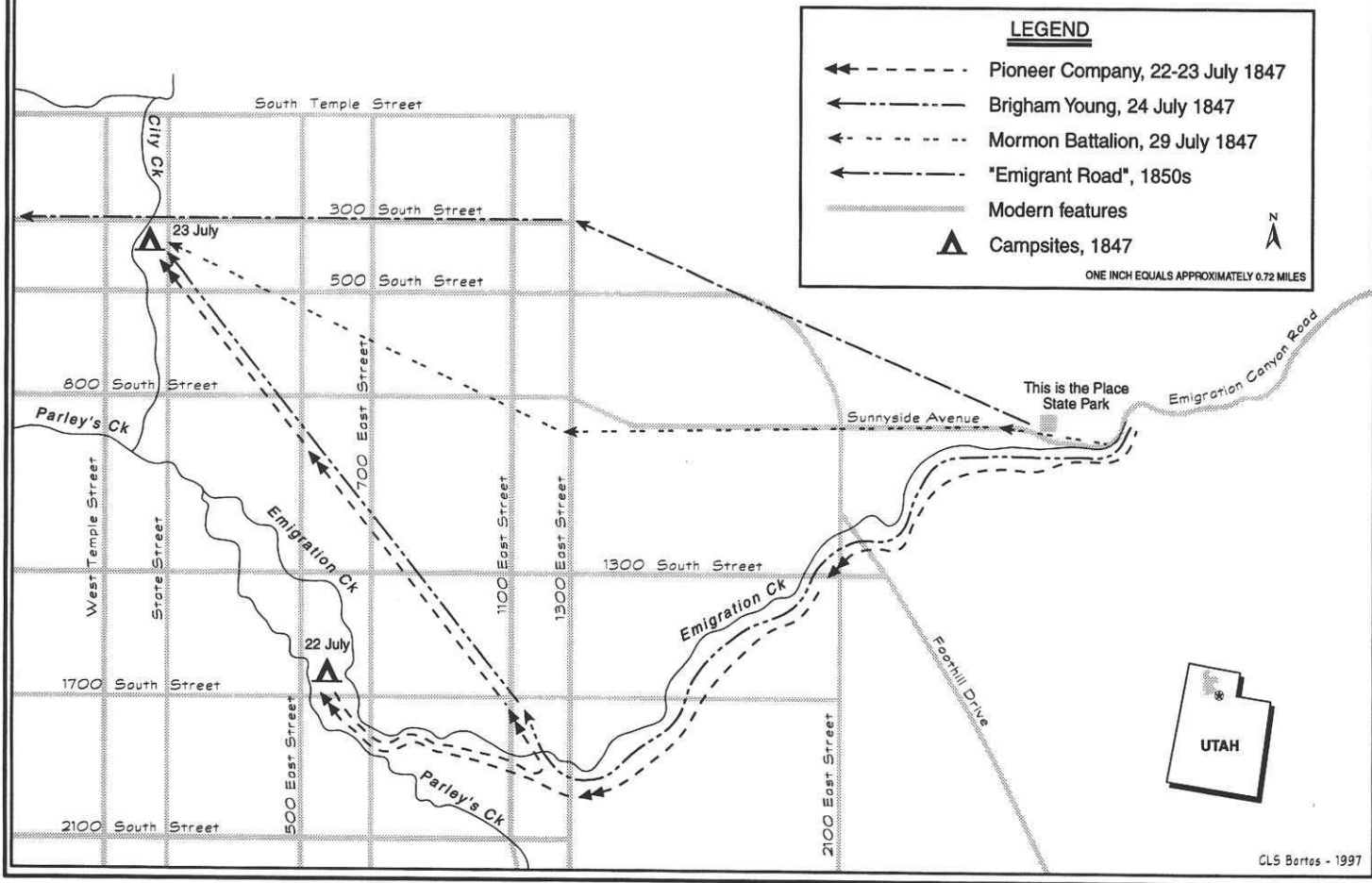
¹⁰ “Five Acre Lots in the Big Field” [1850s], Salt Lake County Recorder’s Office; copy in LDS Church Archives. Plat shows farming lots and stream courses.

¹¹ Bullock Journal, July 23, 1847.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Charles A. Harper mentions “moving up to the springs in what is now known as Liberty Park.” See “Fifty Years Ago Today,” May 30, 1897.

Pioneer Trails and Campsites in the Salt Lake Valley



CAMPSITE OF JULY 23, 1847

In 1880, at the Pioneer Day celebration in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, Erastus Snow discussed the July 23 campsite, putting it into the context of the city that had grown up around it. “. . . on the 23rd we made our camp on City Creek, below Emigration Street [Third South] . . . on the old channel of the creek; the creek divided just below this Temple Block, one branch running west and the other south. It was on the south branch of the creek we formed our camp. . . .”¹⁴

The south branch of City Creek, which Snow referred to, crossed Third South mid-block between Main and State streets.¹⁵ From this we can deduce that the campground was located on the eastern part of the city block bounded by Third and Fourth South and Main and State streets. While camped at this site the pioneers’ first efforts at settlement began.

When Salt Lake City was surveyed the campsite was divided into lots and distributed to settlers. City Creek’s south branch disappeared when its waters were united with the west branch in a channel down North Temple. With the disappearance of recognizable landmarks the location of the campsite shifted in public memory to the nearby Eighth Ward or Washington Square which, beginning in 1860, was the campground for incoming immigrant companies. When a monument commemorating the 1847 campground was erected for the Pioneer Centennial in 1947 it was placed there.¹⁶

ROUTE OF BRIGHAM YOUNG, JULY 24, 1847

On July 24 Brigham Young with the last of the Pioneer Company arrived in the valley. On leaving Emigration Canyon he stopped for a view of the valley below and uttered the immortal words, “This is the right place, drive on,” to Wilford Woodruff. It appears that Young’s group followed the trail of those who preceded them two days before. One member of the group, Howard Egan, gave a brief description of the route in his diary: “We then left the ravine [Emigration Canyon] and turned to the right and ascended a very steep pitch, where we beheld the great valley of the Salt Lake spreading out before us.”¹⁷

¹⁴ *The Utah Pioneers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1880), p. 46.

¹⁵ W. Randall Dixon, “Beautiful Troublesome City Creek,” *Pioneer*, Winter 1996, pp. 24–28.

¹⁶ *Treasures of Pioneer History*, vol. 2 (1953), p. 420.

¹⁷ *Pioneering the West, 1846–1878: Major Howard Egan’s Diary* (Richmond, Utah: Howard R. Egan Estate, 1917), p. 103.

Egan was describing leaving the canyon where it makes a sharp turn to the right, then making the steep climb to the bench on the south.

The diary of another member of the group, Heber C. Kimball, also described the entrance into the valley, "A little further we ascended a steep pitch, from whence we beheld the Great Valley of the Salt Lake spreading before us. . . . We found the balance of the road good and rapidly descending for several miles."¹⁸

Both accounts mention ascending a steep pitch on leaving the canyon. This would fit the description of the "hogback" which extends along the south side of the creek.¹⁹ The mention of a "road" suggests that an established route was being followed. It also seems unlikely that Wilford Woodruff with the ailing Young in his carriage, would have blazed a new trail.

Confirming this conclusion is an account by James A. Little based on the reminiscences of his uncle, Lorenzo Dow Young. Young had accompanied his brother Brigham Young into the valley on July 24. Little wrote:

A short distance below the mouth of Emigration Canyon is a slight elevation of the table land, generally designated, in the early days of Salt Lake City, as 'The Hog Back,' which hides the valley from the traveler until the top of it is reached. From this point the Pioneers had their first good view of the object of their tedious journey across the plains—the valley of the Great Salt Lake. President Young followed the wagon tracks of those who had preceded him a day or two before into the valley.²⁰

Little's account was supported in later years by historians Creer and Morgan. Wrote Creer: ". . . it is clear that President Young followed the original Pioneer road into the valley, which turned *to the south, not the north* at the mouth of Emigration Canyon. . . ."²¹ Morgan, after describing the July 22 trail running to the southwest added: "This, it should be noted, was also the route of Brigham Young two days later."²²

The conclusion reached by these historians is not, however, the prevailing view today.

In July 1921 the Mutual Improvement Association of the LDS church erected a concrete marker bearing the legend "This is the place" at a site north of the creek near the mouth of the canyon. According to the *Deseret News*, the marker and accompanying pageant "settled a long

¹⁸ Heber C. Kimball Journal, kept by William Clayton, July 24, 1847, LDS Church Archives.

¹⁹ A hogback is actually a formal, topographical term for a long, sharply crested ridge.

²⁰ James A. Little, "1847," *The Contributor*, vol. 4 (November 1882), p. 56.

²¹ Creer, *The Founding of an Empire*, p. 20n.

²² Morgan, "James Frazier Reed," p. 205n; David E. Miller, while accepting the southwest route of the July 22 group, believed that Brigham Young took a different route. Miller, "The Donners," p. 5.

argument as to just where President Brigham Young first designated the stopping place for the pioneer band.”²³

The site, called “Pioneer View,” was located for the MIA by William W. Riter, a prominent Utah businessman who, at age nine, arrived in the valley a few weeks after Brigham Young. Of Riter, the *Deseret News* stated: “No one living was better acquainted with the history of the early settlement of Salt Lake valley than he and no one could be more confidently relied upon to establish the exact location of the spot from which Brigham Young first looked out over the valley on July 24, 1847.”²⁴

In his speech at the marker’s dedication, Riter defended the choice against those who argued for its location to the south of the creek:

. . . a good many have claimed that they went over what is called the Hogback—this ridge right below here. If you will go down there and note how the hogback was originally, you will see that was absolutely impossible; but I am inclined to think that even if they could, no view of the valley could be had from that point. That passageway was cut through there, at various times from year to year; but originally it was absolutely impassable.²⁵

The erection of the “Pioneer View” marker seemed to settle the matter. When the present monument was erected for the Utah Pioneer Centennial in 1947 it was located not far from the 1921 marker.



“This Is the Place” marker erected by the MIA in July 1921 is still standing, hidden by brush from easy viewing, east of the elaborate 1947 monument. USHS collections.

²³ “Historic Spot Will Be Marked,” *Deseret News*, July 23, 1921.

²⁴ “Last Public Address of Utah Veteran,” *Deseret News*, January 17, 1922. The selection of the site was actually made some years earlier. See “Monument Site Was Carefully Selected,” *Church News*, April 5, 1947, p. 9. In 1917 a wooden marker was placed on the site. See John D. Giles, “Hike of 1917—Pioneer Trail,” *Improvement Era* 20, September 1917, pp. 987–93.

²⁵ W. W. Riter, “Correct Placing of the Monument, Pioneer View,” *Improvement Era* 24, September 1921, p. 973. Hereafter cited as Riter, “Monument.”

Those who disagreed about the site accepted the monument as symbolic. Dale L. Morgan, for example, commented, "The 'This Is the Place Monument' north of the gulch of Emigration serves to commemorate imposingly the historic circumstances of the Mormon arrival in Salt Lake Valley, but is not to be taken as marking the site where Brigham Young got his first sweeping view of the future home of the Saints."²⁶

TRAILS AFTER JULY 24, 1847

On July 27 Amasa M. Lyman, Sam Brannan, Rodney Badger, and Roswell Stevens rode into the valley, the first arrivals since Brigham Young's July 24 group. It is not known what route they took, but since they were on horseback they probably broke their own trail, taking a more direct route to the City Creek camp.

July 29 brought a large body of members of the Mormon Battalion and Mississippi Saints into the valley. It is clear that they did create a new trail. They crossed to the north side of the creek at the canyon's mouth then headed west, crossing Red Butte Creek and leaving the bench near present Ninth South and Thirteenth East streets. From there the trail turned northwest to the camp on City Creek.²⁷ It is likely that this same trail was taken by those returning to Winter Quarters, which William Clayton mentioned in his journal on August 17: "Started out at 8:10 and found the distance to the mouth of the canyon five miles, the difference arising from making a road across instead of following the first one."²⁸

This would also have been the route followed by the large pioneer companies that began arriving in September 1847. Most of the newcomers probably assumed that their trail was that which had been followed by their predecessors on July 22 and July 24. This may explain some of the later confusion on the matter of trails. Among those arriving in October 1847 was William W. Riter.

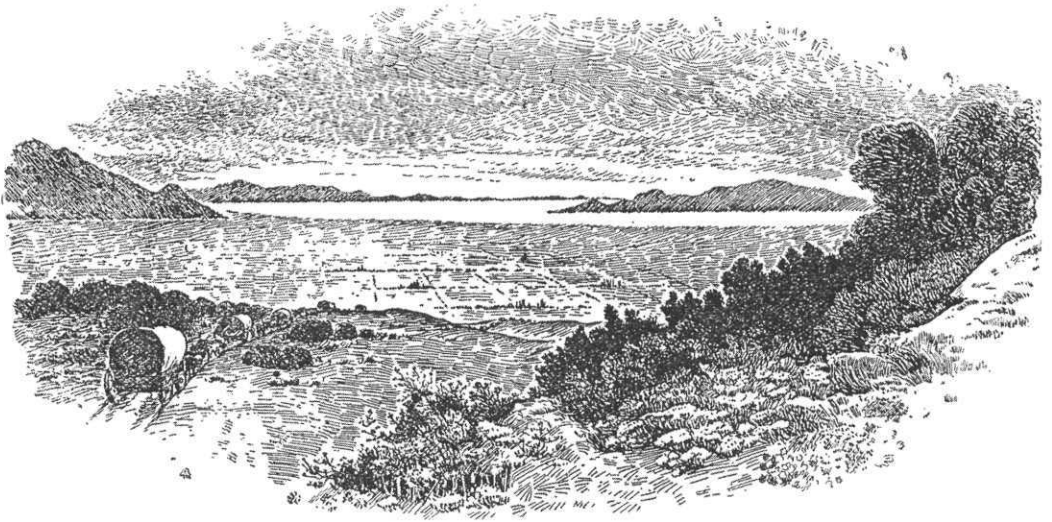
For the 1848 emigration, the route changed again. In order to avoid interference with the laying out of streets and lots, the road was moved to the north, descending from the bench at the head of Third South, therefore to be known for many years as Emigration Street.²⁹

²⁶ Morgan, "James Frazier Reed," p. 205.

²⁷ "Extracts from the Journal of John Steele," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 6 (1933): 17; "A Pioneer's Story," *Deseret News Pioneer Jubilee Edition*, July 24, 1897; Riter, "Monument," p. 73.

²⁸ William Clayton's Journal, p. 347.

²⁹ High Council Minutes, July 1, 8, 1848, as published in Kate B. Carter, comp., *Our Pioneer Heritage*, v. 17 (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1974), p. 111. These minutes describe plans to prepare an emigrant road for incoming travelers.



Artist Alfred Lambourne, who arrived in Utah in 1866, published his “first view” of the Salt Lake Valley in his book *The Pioneer Trail* (1913).

As we remember and honor Utah’s founders, it is important that their story be told as accurately as possible—avoiding the myths and legends that develop over time. The conclusion of a 1953 article about the trail in the *Sons of Utah Pioneers* magazine bears repeating: “It is important . . . that historic fact be adhered to and not embellished with unestablished tradition.”³⁰

³⁰ “Entrance of the Vanguard of the Utah Pioneers into the Salt Lake Valley,” *Pioneer*, July-August 1953, p. 51.