

FIRST DRAFT

First settlement at Moab, Utah, was doomed by internal conflict, Natives

The first non-Native community in southeastern Utah, in the valley where Moab now sits, predated other white settlement in the area by 20 years. But it only lasted a few months.

The Elk Mountain Mission was established in 1855 at the behest of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints President Brigham Young. It was named for the Elk Mountains, now called the La Sals.

To reach the Moab Valley, the 1855 mission followed a route used in 1854 by a scouting party appointed by Young.

Headed by William Dresser Huntington, the 1854 party sought a location for a Mormon presence along the Old Spanish Trail in southeastern Utah.

The 13 scouts departed from Springville, Utah, in October 1854. They headed southeast to the Green River, then south to Grand (Colorado) River.

Huntington believed he had found the ideal spot for a new settlement. "There is a beautiful valley on the Grand River," he wrote of the Moab Valley in December 1854. "It has good soil, and grazing range, is very well timbered and watered and is about 50 miles from the Elk Mountains."

Huntington's crew camped there briefly, then continued south to the San Juan River and on to a Navajo village in today's Arizona.

They were guided by some friendly Sheberetch Utes — a small band that lived near the La Sal Mountains.

The scouting party returned home just before Christmas and Huntington reported to Brigham Young. As a result, Young issued a call for the Elk Mountain Mission, and 41 men joined.

Alfred Billings, age 29, was chosen as mission president, empowered to act as the military, civil and religious leader for the other 40 missionaries.

Oliver Huntington, William's brother, kept the official record of the Elk Mountain Mission, as well as a private journal in which he frequently criticized Billings.

The mission left Manti, Utah, on May 22, 1855, with 15 wagons, 65 oxen, 16 cows, 13 horses and other livestock. The group also had tools for farming, blacksmithing and building. They had abundant black powder, bullet lead and percussion caps — enough to trade and provide for their own weapons.

It took them six days to cross the fast-flowing Green River, using a wagon converted to a boat. Many of the reluctant oxen had to be tied to the boat and pulled across.

They reached the Grand River on June 10 and crossed with little difficulty.

Because it was late in the season, they were eager to plant crops. To that end, they dammed Mill Creek, which now runs through Moab, and they built two miles of irrigation ditch.

But fissures were already appearing. During a meeting June 17, many men objected to Billings' plan for a single, communal farming arrangement. Instead, they decided to divide into four separate groups, or "messes," each with its



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

This cabin, moved from its original location to this site near Moab City Hall, is believed to have been built by Randolph Stewart, the first bishop of Moab, 25 years after the Elk Mountain Mission was abandoned.



Alfred Billings, who led the ill-fated Elk Mountain Mission when he was just 29 years old.

own leadership.

Near the end of June, Billings decided to build the mission's fort a mile from the farming plots, further angering some mission members who wanted the fort close to their farm plots.

Even so, a wooden stockade was built, then four separate rock houses — one for each of the messes.

Near the end of June, the first Utes appeared, initially friendly and willing to be baptized as Mormons.

On June 30, Sheberetch Chief Quit-sub-soc-its, nicknamed St. John, arrived but was angry to find the Mormons building and planting in the valley. Billings appeased the chief by giving him a few gifts, and the Mormons began trading with the Utes at a brisk clip.

Throughout July, other large bands of Natives began arriving at the fort, curious and eager to trade. They came from all over western Colorado, Utah, and from Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

But not all the Natives were friendly. Chief St. John's brother told the Mormons they could not build a permanent fort in the valley, and another Ute said they must leave immediately.

St. John smoothed things over with the Utes, but tensions remained. Utes took some of the Mormon livestock and helped themselves to the settlers' gardens. To the Mormons, it was theft. To the Utes, simply part of the price the Mormons paid to occupy their land.

In the midst of this tension, Billings granted 19 members of the mission leave to visit their homes around Salt Lake. Only four would return.

On Aug. 31, Billings and five other men, accompanied by five Ute guides, headed south to trade with the Navajos.

They had a successful journey. But they apparently traded much of their ammunition to the Navajos, leaving themselves short. Also, the trip created more animosity



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

This monument, near Moab City Hall in Moab, Utah, honors the men involved in the 1855 Elk Mountain Mission. However, because the monument was moved from its original location near the Colorado River, the last sentence is no longer accurate.

with the Sheberetch Utes, who believed they had exclusive trading rights with the Mormons.

A week after Billings and the other traders returned, six more missionaries were allowed to go home to visit families, leaving only 16 members at the mission.

Four men decided to go hunting in the La Sal Mountains on Sept. 22, and Utes followed them. Two of the hunters were killed, although the reasons for the killings aren't clear.

On Sept. 23, while several men were moving livestock near the fort, one was shot by a Ute, and the others hastily carried him back to the fort. He died that night.

"At daylight the next morning the Indians began to gather round in great numbers," the Deseret News reported later. "The remaining 13 brethren, by the advice of some few Indians who were still friendly, took their horses and started for Manti, leaving their enemies quarreling over the cattle and the spoils in the fort."

They hurried north and camped at the Green River. Most arrived at Manti on Sept. 30.

After the mission was abandoned, Natives blocked other prospective settlers for decades. But by 1880, the Sheberetch Utes had disappeared, devastated by disease and warfare. The few remaining members are believed to have joined other Ute bands.

In the late 1870s, when the Utes were mostly gone, new settlers began moving into

the valley. One was an African-American named William Granstaff, who prospected in the area, lived at the abandoned Elk Mountain Mission fort and ran cattle in what's now called Granstaff Canyon.

About 1880, cabins were built in the community. One that still stands is believed to have been built by Randolph Stewart, the first Mormon bishop of Moab. But many non-Mormons settled in the area as well: cattlemen from Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and other parts of Utah, along with prospectors and merchants.

Albert Billings' leadership and his eagerness to trade with the Navajos while ignoring concerns of the Utes have been cited in explaining the failure of the Elk Mountain Mission.

"It was primarily for the Indian trade that the mission was left vulnerable and hopelessly undermanned," wrote authors Tom McCourt and Wade Allison. "A stronger, better and more duty-bound mission leader might have produced an entirely different end result."

Sources: "The Elk Mountain Mission," by Tom McCourt and Wade Allison; "A History of Grand County," by Richard A. Firmage; Historic Utah newspapers at <https://digitalnewspapers.org/>; "Elk Mountain Mission" monument and "The Old Log Cabin" plaque, both at 65 North, 200 East, Moab, Utah.

Bob Silbernagel's email is [bobsilbernagel@gmail.com](mailto:bobsilbernagel@gmail.com).

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