

Seeking a Refuge in the Desert, 1858, Part 1

by Jay M. Jones



Statue of Thomas L. Kane on the Utah State Capitol grounds. Photo by Jay Jones.

Thomas Kane passed through Iron County in February of 1858 on his way to help resolve a conflict between the United States government and the people of Utah.

Kane traveled from the east coast to Panama, crossed the isthmus, sailed to Los Angeles, endured the Old Spanish Trail to Iron County, then hurried on to Salt Lake City.

The previous year, U. S. President James Buchanan dispatched 2,000 troops to put down an alleged rebellion in Utah. The uncertainty and fear associated with the approaching army was part of the milieu surrounding the Mountain Meadows Massacre in September 1857, the tragic killing, led by the Cedar City militia, of 120 California-bound emigrants.

With the approach of spring and the pending advance of the army into Salt Lake, a major escalation of bloodshed seemed inevitable. Kane felt a duty to intervene.

The army was delayed in the fall of 1857 and wintered at Camp Scott, near Fort Bridger east of Salt Lake.

On 3 February 1858 news arrived in Salt Lake City that President Buchanan, in a speech to Congress, had recommended funding four additional regiments to be sent to Utah. General Winfield Scott was in California, intending to lead an army to Utah from the west or southwest.

According to Clifford L. Stott in his book “Search for Sanctuary: Brigham Young and the White Mountain Expedition”, Young’s position changed from open resistance to the army in the fall of 1857 to exploring other options in early 1858.

Young sent letters to bishops in Fillmore, Beaver, Parowan and Cedar City in February 1858: “. . . send out some old men and boys to the white and last mountains to the west of the settlements and find places where we can raise grain and hide up our families and stock in case of necessity. It is our wish to have the brethren go prepared with teams, seeds of various kinds and farming utensils so as to have grain raised at these places the present season. . . .”

John C. Fremont used the term “White Mountains” to refer to an unexplored area in the Great Basin interior that might collect enough snow to provide ample water for farming. Based on this unconfirmed information, Young would send exploring parties hoping to find locations to resettle those who would flee from Salt Lake.

Meanwhile, the seed of a better option began to sprout. On 25 February 1858 Thomas Kane arrived in Salt Lake City. He had come on his own volition as an independent third party, with a letter of introduction from President Buchanan, to try to find a peaceful resolution to the difficulties.

Kane needed no introduction to Brigham Young. He had met him twelve years before when Young and his people were refugees from Nauvoo, Illinois. While attempting to find ways to help the outcasts, Kane became seriously ill. He was nursed back to health in the refugee camp and developed lifelong friendships with Young and his followers.

Kane's father was a judge in Pennsylvania and had political connections to several influential government officials on the east coast, including President Buchanan. Thomas was in a good position to help facilitate peace.

Kane spent two weeks in Salt Lake conferring with Young, then went to the army at Camp Scott, arriving on March 12. He received a cold, even hostile reception from General Albert Sidney Johnston, who wanted to solve the issue militarily.

Traveling with the army was newly appointed Utah Governor Alfred Cumming, sent by President Buchanan to replace Brigham Young. Cumming was willing to listen to Kane. On March 24 he wrote to U. S. Secretary of State Lewis Cass of his intention to go to Salt Lake without army escort.

Meanwhile, Brigham Young continued with his plan to explore the "White Mountain" alternative. George W. Bean was appointed to lead the first expedition into that area. A rendezvous was held at Holden in Millard County on the 31st of March with a total of 100 men from throughout the territory, including twelve men from Parowan and sixteen from Cedar City.

On Sunday the 21st of March, Brigham Young announced the plan to evacuate Salt Lake City and move to the south. In a speech, he referred to the desolation of Sebastopol in Crimea during the Crimean War in 1855. The city had been under siege by the British for over a year. The Russian general defending Sebastopol recognized the futility of further resistance and burned the city to the ground, leaving nothing but ashes for the British conquerors.

If the U. S. army intended to make a hostile entry into Utah Territory, Salt Lake City would be burned to the ground. The inhabitants of the city would seek refuge in the desert oases far to the southwest.

By the first of April wagons from Salt Lake City were headed south to Provo and beyond. Soon a large number of people were camped throughout Utah County waiting for instructions on where to go from there. Brigham Young waited for word from the Bean expedition on suitable gathering places in the desert.

Feeling a need for a second expedition in search of a "White Mountain" sanctuary, Young issued a letter to William Dame of Parowan on 7 April 1858 instructing him to organize a company of 60 or 70 men to explore the territory west of Cedar City.

Preparations were soon made and the southern expedition left Iron Springs on April 26th.

During this time, Thomas Kane's efforts to bring a peaceful end to the crisis met with success. Governor Cumming, unescorted by troops, accompanied Kane to Salt Lake City and met with Young on April 13 and 14. He soon sent a dispatch to General Johnston declaring that "I have everywhere been accepted as governor."

A peace commission sent by President Buchanan arrived in Salt Lake City on June 7. A pardon to Utah officials was extended and accepted.

On the 26th of June, Johnston's army marched without incident through the mostly abandoned streets of Salt Lake City and established camp near the northwest shores of Utah Lake. Peace was assured and families began moving back to their homes in Salt Lake City and to the north.

Next week, Part 2 will detail some of the experiences of the Iron County contingents of the desert explorations into to the "White Mountains" in search of a place of refuge.