

Symposia on the Life of Wilford Woodruff

Kenneth R. Mays

The year 2007 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Wilford Woodruff, fourth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Born March 1, 1807, Woodruff is referred to by biographer Thomas G. Alexander as “arguably, the third most important figure in all of LDS church history.”¹ Whatever rank one may subscribe to him, Wilford Woodruff’s contributions to the Church are virtually incalculable—his journals number in the thousands of pages, his missionary travels (estimated to be more than 172,000 miles²), his leadership in completing and dedicating the Salt Lake Temple, his formal renouncing plural marriage and issuing the Manifesto, and his overall unwavering faith in the Restoration. Recognizing his significant contributions, the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation and the BYU Religious Studies Center considered it appropriate to honor Wilford Woodruff during 2007 by sponsoring two symposia about his life.

BYU Symposium and the Junius F. Wells Award Dinner

The first conference was held October 12, 2007, at the Conference Center on the campus of Brigham Young University. BYU Church History and Doctrine professors Alexander L. Baugh and Susan Easton Black co-chaired the event. Thomas G. Alexander, emeritus professor of history at Brigham Young University and author of *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature

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Books, 1991), offered the keynote address. Other scholars made presentations on various aspects of President Woodruff's life in subsequent concurrent sessions, including Alexander L. Baugh, Richard E. Bennett, Cynthia Doxey, Scott C. Esplin, Alonzo L. Gaskill, Steven C. Harper, Craig K. Manscill, Reid L. Neilson, Matthew O. Richardson, and Fred W. Woods, all professors in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. Also participating were W. Bruce Woodruff and Richard N. W. Lambert, descendants of Wilford Woodruff representing the Woodruff family organization.

Later that evening, the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation sponsored a dinner honoring Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Council of the Twelve for his work and role in preserving historical sites of The Church of Jesus Christ



Richard N. W. Lambert, vice-chairman of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, presents the Junius F. Wells award to Elder M. Russell Ballard, October 12, 2007. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.

of Latter-day Saints. A number of general Church leaders attended the event, including Elders L. Tom Perry and Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Council of the Twelve; Julie B. Beck, general president of the Relief Society; and Susan W. Tanner, general president of the Young Women. Following the dinner a video presentation was shown that highlighted the various historical projects Elder Ballard has been involved in including Ensign Peak, the restored village at



Louise Manning (center), present owner of home and property of John Benbow in Herefordshire, England, with Mormon Historic Sites Foundation board members Kenneth R. Mays (left) and Alexander L. Baugh (right) at the Junius F. Wells Award dinner, October 12, 2007. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.

Kirtland, Ohio, This is the Place Heritage Park, the Smith Family Cemetery adjacent to the Joseph Smith Homestead in Nauvoo, Illinois, two monuments erected to the ancestors of Joseph Smith in Topsfield, Massachusetts, and the 1997 Sesquicentennial Celebration of the 1847 pioneer trek to Utah. DVD copies of the presentation were subsequently given to family members and others. At the conclusion of the evening, board member Richard N. W. Lambert made the formal presentation of the Foundation's annual Junius F. Wells Award to Elder Ballard.

Louise Manning, a special guest from England, attended the event. Louise owns the home once owned by John Benbow in Herefordshire, England, in 1840. Benbow, a leader of the United Brethren, was converted to the Church through the missionary labors of Wilford Woodruff. Over the years, Louise has continually been very gracious to LDS groups who come to her home to see the former Benbow property. As expression of gratitude, board members of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation were pleased to act as hosts at this and several other activities while she was visiting Utah.³



Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut, November 2007. A second symposium commemorating the life of Wilford Woodruff was held in the Divinity School, on November 9–10, 2007. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.



BYU emeritus professor of history Thomas G. Alexander answers questions at the 2007 Wilford Woodruff Symposium, New Haven, Connecticut, November 9, 2007. Photograph by Kenneth R. Mays.



Left: Gravestone of Bulah Woodruff, mother of Wilford Woodruff, Farmington, Connecticut. Right: Yale Symposium participants and members of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation at the grave of Robert Mason, Simsbury Connecticut, November 10, 2007. Photographs by Kenneth R. Mays.

Yale Symposium

On November 9–10, one month following the conference at BYU, a second symposium on the life of Wilford Woodruff was held in Connecticut (the state of his birth) on the campus of the Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. Seth Paine, an LDS student at Yale Divinity School, and Kristie Guynn, a local Church member, played key roles in arranging and coordinating the events of the symposium. Speakers once again included Thomas G. Alexander as keynote, and six members in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at BYU. Attendees included local members of the Church, priesthood leaders, missionaries, and other interested individuals.⁴

While in Connecticut, the symposium presenters and members of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation visited some of the local sites connected to the early years of Wilford Woodruff in the areas of Farmington and Avon, west of present-day Hartford. This group was led by Earle L. Stone, an LDS member who lives in Connecticut and who has researched extensively Wilford Woodruff's life during his Connecticut years and the early history of the Church in Connecticut.⁵ Stone took the group to a number of sites associated with Wilford and the Woodruff family, including Wilford's birthplace, the graves of his mother, Bulah Thompson Woodruff, Eldad and Dinah Woodford Woodruff (Wilford's paternal grandparents), Lott and Anna Hart Thompson (Wilford's maternal grandparents); and Robert Mason, an elderly acquaintance of Wilford's from nearby Simsbury, Connecticut. "Old Prophet Mason," as he was called, told young Wilford of his belief in the need for apostles, prophets, vi-

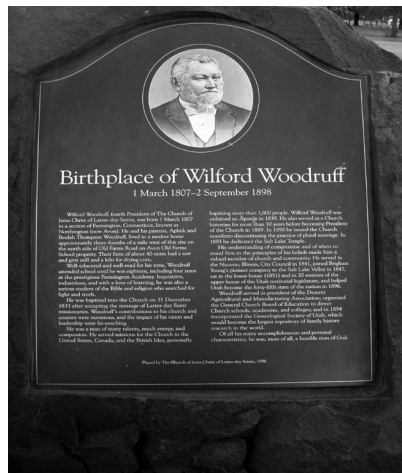
sions, dreams, and revelation, and that God would one day establish a church in which these things were found.⁶ Mason believed that even though he would not live long enough to find and embrace such a church, Wilford would. After his baptism into the restored Church of Christ, Wilford wrote to inform Mason that he had found the Church with its attendant gifts envisioned in his dream. However, Mason passed away before having the chance to be baptized. In 1998, Stone was also instrumental in the construction of a historical marker in a local park in Farmington, Connecticut commemorating Wilford Woodruff's birthplace. The text for the marker reads:

**Birthplace of Wilford Woodruff
1 March 1807–2 September 1898**

Wilford Woodruff, fourth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was born 1 March 1807 in a section of Farmington, Connecticut, known as Northington (now Avon). He and his parents, Aphek and Beulah Thompson Woodruff, lived in a modest home approximately three-fourths of a mile west of this site on the north side of Old Farms Road on Avon Old Farms School property. Their farm of about 40-acres had a saw and grist mill and a kiln for drying corn.

Well-educated and well-read for his time, Woodruff attended school until he was eighteen, including four years at the prestigious Farmington Academy. Inquisitive, industrious, and with a love of learning, he was also a serious student of the Bible and religion who searched for light and truth.

He was baptized into the Church on 31 December 1833 after accepting the message of Latter-day Saint missionaries. Woodruff's contributions to his church and country were numerous, and the impact of his vision and leadership were far-reaching.



Historical marker commemorating the birth of Wilford Woodruff, November 10, 2007.
Photographs by Alexander L. Baugh.

He was a man of many talents, much energy, and compassion. He served missions for the Church in the United States, Canada, and the British Isles, personally baptizing more than 1,800 people. Wilford Woodruff was ordained an Apostle in 1839. He also served as a Church historian for more than 30 years before becoming President of the Church in 1889. In 1890 he issued the Church manifesto discontinuing the practice of plural marriage. In 1893 he dedicated the Salt Lake Temple.

His understanding of compromise and of when to stand firm in the principles of his beliefs made him a valued member of church and community. He served in the Nauvoo, Illinois, City Council in 1841, joined Brigham Young's pioneer company to the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, sat in the lower house (1851) and in 20 sessions of the upper house of the Utah territorial legislature, and helped Utah become the forty-fifth state of the nation in 1896.

Woodruff served as president of the Deseret Agricultural and Manufacturing Association; organized the General Church Board of Education to direct Church schools, academies, and colleges; and in 1894 incorporated the Genealogical Society of Utah, which would become the largest repository of family history research in the world.

Of all his many accomplishments and personal characteristics, he was, most of all, a humble man of God.

Placed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998

The weekend's activities culminated with a fireside for local Latter-day Saints in the Hartford area. The featured speakers were MHSF board member, Richard Lambert, and W. Bruce Woodruff, both descendants of President Wilford Woodruff.

Notes

1. Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Heaven and Earth: the Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), dust jacket, inside back cover.

2. Russell R. Rich, *Ensign to the Nations: A History of the LDS Church from 1846 to 1972* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1972), 437.

3. See R. Scott Lloyd, "Scholars discuss Wilford Woodruff," *Church News* 77, no. 42 (October 20, 2007): 7, 10; and R. Scott Lloyd, "Elder Ballard given history award," *Church News* 77, no. 42 (October 20, 2007): 7.

4. See Kristie Guynn, "Bicentenary," *Church News* 77, no. 47 (November 24, 2007): 6.

5. See Earle L. Stone, "The Mormons in Connecticut, 1832–1952" (MD thesis, Central Connecticut State College, 1980).

6. Wilford Woodruff, *Leaves from My Journal* (Sandy, Utah: Leatherwood Press, reprint edition, 2005), 3–4.