

The First Annual Junius F. Wells Award Presented to President Gordon B. Hinckley

Derek J. Tangren

On 11 May 2005, Gordon B. Hinckley, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was presented with the first annual Junius F. Wells Award for Outstanding Achievement in Preserving Church History. The event took place in the Wells Fargo Building banquet hall in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah.

Lloyd D. Newell, voice of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and *Music and the Spoken Word*, was the evening's emcee. The program included musical performances by Marshall McDonald, Peter Breinholt, Shawna Gottfredson, and Karen Hughes. A special video presentation, "Remembering Sacred Places," highlighting President Hinckley's contributions to Mormon history, was also shown. Remarks were given by Kim R. Wilson, chair of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, and by President Hinckley. The award banquet was attended by the First Presidency and by selected members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the First and Second Quorums of the Seventy, the Presiding Bishopric, and the Relief Society presidency. In addition, numerous civic and community leaders also attended to honor President Hinckley.¹

The inspiration for the evening began in 2004 when the members of the board of trustees of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation decided to establish an award to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions to LDS Church history and, more particularly, to historic sites associated with the Church. The board concluded that President Hinckley should be the first recipient of the award for his dedicated work

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in recognizing the importance of preserving numerous historic sites throughout the United States.

The award, a bust of Junius F. Wells, was crafted by well-known LDS sculptor Dee Jay Bawden. It rests on a stand made of a sugar maple tree taken from a tree near the birthplace of the Prophet Joseph Smith in Sharon, Vermont. The award also includes a granite base hewn from the same quarry in Barre, Vermont, from which the 38 1/2-foot Joseph Smith Monument obelisk was hewn and subsequently erected in 1905 by Junius F. Wells at the Solomon Mack farm to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Prophet. The inscription on the award reads as follows:

First Annual
Junius F. Wells
Award
Presented to
President Gordon B. Hinckley
for leadership and
unmatched contributions
to the preservation and commemoration of
Church historical sites
May 11, 2005
Mormon Historic Sites Foundation

Kim R. Wilson Remarks

Kim R. Wilson, representing the board of trustees of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, presented President Hinckley with the award and gave the following remarks:

Junius F. Wells is not precisely a household name in Church history. We hope you come to know him a bit by the biographical materials that have been provided in the program. If you wish to know a little more, we invite you to log onto our Web site for a little bit more information about this pioneer and about our focus on the preservation of sacred places.

We have prepared this award in his name. You see it before you. I would like to recognize the efforts of the sculptor, Dee Jay Bawden, who sculpted the likeness of Brother Wells and placed it upon this award. There is some significance to that which you see before you. The base is made of sugar maple that comes from property adjoining the Prophet's birthplace in Sharon, Vermont. The granite base on which it sits is from a quarry in which the obelisk monument at that location was hewn. Thank you, Brother Bawden, for your special efforts in creating this special award.



Kim R. Wilson, Chair of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, presenting President Gordon B. Hinckley with the Junius F. Wells Award, 11 May 2005. Photograph courtesy Mormon Historic Sites Foundation.

We hope that the film you have just seen has told in some small way of the contribution of President Hinckley to push forth historical preservation over the years. It can tell only a small part. We give thanks to Laura Hadley and her group from KSL TV, who very kindly put the film together and shared their thoughts.

For you who are in the Church history business, Elder Marlin K. Jensen particularly and others, you are not at risk of being out of business anytime soon. Church history is cumulative. I understand that there might have been some Church history made around the world today. It grows day by day, and certainly we benefit from the cumulative effect and definitely from the history—the long history—pertaining to preservation. There are places in this country and across the world that have been made sacred by the events that occurred there and by the response of those people involved—their faith, their courage, their obedience, and their sacrifice. We may learn many great things from that which they experienced and from how they reacted. That is the magic of the history of the Restoration in our time and of the rise of the Church.

We honor tonight President Hinckley for his special contribution of

preserving Church history and for making the results available to us. What better place to teach of the testimony of Joseph Smith than in the Sacred Grove? What better place to teach of the testimony of the Three Witnesses than in the woods behind the reconstructed cabin in Fayette where the Church was organized? What better place to teach of the plan of salvation and of the marvelous truths that have been restored than in that little upper room in the home in Hyrum where section 76 was revealed over many hours? What better place to teach of sacrifice than at Martin's Cove where the Martin Handcart Company and its participants paid such a tremendous price? What greater place to teach covenants of baptism and covenants pertaining to the restoration of the priesthood than along the banks of the Susquehanna? These are great places to teach about. What a blessing to be able to teach ourselves, our children, our grandchildren, and, as has been referred to, future numberless generations of people who will be blessed to learn about and have feelings toward these great places.

For that reason, we, the board of trustees of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, have felt for some time that we should like to take this moment to honor President Gordon B. Hinckley for his singular efforts in preserving the great history of the restoration, and we honor him for his passion. We are delighted, President Hinckley, at your vigor and at your health and strength that have been preserved to enable you accomplish such feats. I speak on behalf of the board of trustees of the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation and on behalf of each of you who are present and others whom you represent who have passion for historical preservation. And if I may be so presumptive to speak on behalf of generations unborn who will be blessed by your efforts, President Hinckley, we wish to present to you the Junius F. Wells Award for your preservation of Church history.

Gordon B. Hinckley Response

Following Kim Wilson's remarks, President Hinckley spoke about Junius F. Wells and his efforts to honor the Prophet Joseph Smith:

This is a great evening. I feel more like a piece of history than a conservator of history. I am really getting old, but I am grateful to have seen this day and what it signifies in terms of preserving those things which are so very, very important.

I suppose that my interest in this comes of the fact that my grandfather was a pioneer. He came as a young man across the plains, lost his wife when they were only a short time out, dug her grave, and buried her

somewhere in what is now Nebraska. He then picked up his infant child and brought her into this valley. My wife has a similar background.

Now tonight we honor Junius F. Wells. I want to talk about him just a little.

This is the Junius F. Wells award. I have no illusions about the fact that when we are gone it is not long before memories of us are gone with us. Very few people know very much about Junius Wells. He was really a very tremendous man in his own right. He was a son of Daniel H. Wells. Daniel H. Wells was really a very remarkable man. Daniel H. Wells was not a member of the Church when he lived in Nauvoo. Yet he was the second in command of the Nauvoo Legion and was also a Regent of the University of Nauvoo. Joseph Smith bequeathed in him great confidence, although Daniel was not a member of the Church. When the Saints moved west, Daniel Wells decided that he would come along. His wife would not go with him, and so he left his wife and son and came west on his own, joining the Church in 1848. He came to this valley.

He served for twenty years as second counselor to Brigham Young. Brigham Young used to say that Heber C. Kimball was his prophet and Daniel Wells was his statesman. And statesman he was. He occupied so very, very many positions in this community and in this state. Included was his service as president of the Manti Temple. He died in that capacity.

One of his sons was Junius F. Wells. Junius was really quite a remarkable man. Brigham Young asked Junius F. Wells to organize the YMMIA, the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association. That pioneer effort has continued to this very day. He was very young then, twenty-one years of age. He had gone on a mission to England when he was eighteen; then, he came home and did this thing.

When he was about fifty years of age, President Joseph F. Smith said to him, "You go back to Vermont and see if you can do something to honor the memory of the birth of the Prophet." So Junius F. Wells went back to Vermont, and he had a great and marvelous dream of what he could do. He first went to see a lawyer, a judge, and they worked on land titles and he was able to purchase about 283 acres, I think it was, of the old Solomon Mack homestead. Then, he traveled all over Vermont to find a piece of granite large enough for his purposes. He found at a quarry a piece of granite 46 feet long. It was a very choice piece of granite. It was dressed, cut, and finished into a great obelisk cut, 38 1/2 feet long, one foot for each year of the Prophet's life.

Now, how to get it to the Solomon Mack farm and how to get it standing upright. It was a tremendous task. They brought it on the rail-



*President Gordon B. Hinckley and President Thomas S. Monson
greet each other at the awards banquet, 11 May 2005.
Photograph courtesy Mormon Historic Sites Foundation.*

road to the South Royalton Station and then began the task of taking it up the hill three hundred feet on dirt roads to what they call Dairy Hill of the old Solomon Mack farm. They built a wagon with steel rims twenty inches wide and an eight-inch axle and loaded this huge piece of granite, 38 1/2 feet long, weighing forty tons. Then, they began to move. First with six horses, then twelve horses, then twenty horses, and twenty-two horses finally to pull that load up the hill. But they had to go through a field and it was swampy. They tried every way in the world to try to get some way to fill that swamp, but it was quicksand. Every rock they put in it and every piece of timber they put in it just sank to the bottom.

People said to Junius Wells, "What are you going to do?" He said, "I am going to pray." This was in the middle of December, and they were scheduled for the dedication on the 23rd of December, that was 1905, the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Prophet. So he pleaded with the Lord. He got on his knees in his hotel and pleaded with the Lord. He told Him he was stuck. He did not know what in the world he could do. During the night, the temperature, which had been very mild, dropped to less than thirty degrees, and when he awoke in the morning and went to the field, there it was a solid piece of ice. The horses were able to pull that monument right across the ice and up the hill. They rigged up a

device that put it up straight, and there it stands.

Joseph F. Smith went back with twenty-four of his associates and dedicated that monument, the 23rd of December 1905. Today, it stands there as pristine and beautiful, more so, than ever before I think because of the way that the grounds have been treated and the cottage has been dressed up, which was constructed also by Junius Wells, into a really magnificent and beautiful site. That is where it will stand as it enters the third century of its position there, on Dairy Hill, the Solomon Mack farm, where on the 23rd of December the Prophet Joseph Smith came into the world. Blessed be his memory, his great and tremendous effort in bringing forth that piece of history.

Junius lived to be quite old, worked in the historian's office, and never accumulated very much money. George H. Brimhall said at his funeral that he had met him on the street and he said, "I have just done my daily chore of reading to a blind woman." That became his daily chore in his old age. Thanks be to the Lord for such men as Junius F. Wells.

Now that was a very distinguished family, really. Out of the Daniel Wells family came the first governor of the state of Utah, Junius's brother, Heber M. Wells, and also Rulon S. Wells, who was a member of the First Council of the Seventy. I remember Rulon Wells quite well. I remember talking with him in the Church Administration Building. He was very hard of hearing, and I know about that! His family bought for him a hearing aid, and he wore it for two days. He gave it back to them and they said, "Why don't you wear it?" He said, "I have already heard too much of the kind of language I do not want to hear again."

Well that is the story of the Wells family, but I just want to read to you one very short statement. Said Daniel H. Wells these words which he passed on to his posterity, "It is interwoven into my character never to betray a friend, or a brother, my country, my religion, or my God." A great statement reflecting a marvelous and wonderful character. Thank you very much you wonderful people of this foundation. Carry on with the great work that you are doing. God bless you in your tremendous effort to preserve memories of the past, is my humble prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. For news reports of the award presentation, see Deborah Bulkeley and Carrie Moore, "History Group Honors Pres. Hinckley," *Deseret Morning News*, 12 May 2005, B3; and Shaun D. Stahle, "Preserving the Past," *Church News*, 21 May 2005, 5.

