

## Icelandic Memorial Dedication

*David A. Ashby*

### The First Icelandic Memorial

On 2 August 1938, a monument to the first sixteen Icelandic pioneers in Utah was built on the corner of 800 East and 400 South (Canyon Road) in Spanish Fork, Utah. The monument, fashioned and patterned after a lighthouse, was dedicated by Andrew Jensen, assistant Church historian for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as part of an Iceland Days celebration. J. Victor Leifson and Eleanor B. Jarvis were co-chairmen for the project. Gesli Bearnson donated the land, and John K. Johnson designed the lighthouse monument, reflecting the seafaring background of the Icelanders.

The Icelandic Monument



*Original 1938 Iceland Memorial, Spanish Fork, Utah, 2005. The above monument was dedicated on 2 August 1938 by Assistant Church Historian Andrew Jensen. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.*

---

DAVID A. ASHBY is a past president of the Icelandic Association of Utah. Retired, he lives in Orem, Utah.

in Spanish Fork symbolizes the gathering of Utah Icelanders. The monument includes an inscription containing the names of the sixteen Icelandic pioneers who created the first permanent Icelandic settlement in North America at Spanish Fork, Utah. It was placed by the Western Icelanders of Utah with the help of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Icelandic Memorial in Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland**

On 30 June 2000, in Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland, a monument honoring the 410 emigrants from Iceland to Utah was dedicated by Elder William Rolfe Kerr, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The monument overlooks the North Atlantic Ocean and what is known there as “Mormon Pond”—the location where many early Mormon converts were baptized. On that occasion, the Icelandic Association of Utah placed the monument in memory of those who emigrated from Iceland to Utah from 1854–1914. The monument has a granite base with the names of the 410 emigrants on the two sides and a center pedestal that has inscribed on it “In memory of the Icelanders who heard the call to build Zion and immigrated to Utah from 1854 to 1914” and a verse from Ezekiel 20:34 in both English and Icelandic. Atop the center pedestal is an eight-foot sculpture, the “Messenger,” by Gary Price of Springville, Utah.

While documenting the events of the Icelandic Association of Utah in 2000, Brent Haymond and I discussed the possibilities of placing a monument in Spanish Fork, Utah, similar to the “Monument to the Emigrants” in Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland. One idea was to put the monument in the Spanish Fork Cemetery. A more acceptable idea was to include the monument as part of the existing Icelandic Monument in Spanish Fork.

As part of the Sesquicentennial Celebration of Icelanders in Utah, the Icelandic Association of Utah wanted to add the names of all the Icelandic immigrants to Utah near the Icelandic Monument in Spanish Fork, Utah, thus becoming a sister monument to the monument that is in Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland, only without the sculpture on top. Our purpose was to honor specifically all the original Icelanders who pioneered in Utah. We associated the purpose with President Gordon B. Hinckley’s words, “I am one who believes in commemorating great events of the past. When we do so we bring to life, as it were, men and women of history who did significant things of which we need reminding.”<sup>2</sup>

Michael Lee, owner of Michael Lee Design in Orem, Utah, agreed to donate the design of an expansion concept for the Icelandic monument



*Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, President of Iceland, and LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley at the dedication of the Icelandic Memorial in Spanish Fork, 25 June 2005.  
Photograph by Ethan Vincent.*

property in Spanish Fork. This design was the beginning of the Icelandic Memorial.

The new Icelandic Monument in Spanish Fork received a \$90,000 makeover in 2005, which was completed just in time for the sesquicentennial celebration held 23–26 June. The focal point remains the original Lighthouse Monument. However, additions to the memorial include the following: (1) a rock brought from the shores of Vestmannaeyjar where many of the emigrants were baptized, (2) eight bronze plaques describing the history of the Icelandic people in Utah and the history of the memorial (see Appendix A), and (3) a new granite monument to the immigrants, listing the names of over four hundred who traveled from Iceland to Utah before 1914. The designers improved the landscaping by making the memorial handicap accessible and by planning for new grass, flowerbeds, benches, and improved lighting.

In preparation for the June dedication, the Icelandic Association of Utah asked LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley to speak at a fireside that would take place as the conclusion of the sesquicentennial celebration of Icelanders in Utah on Sunday evening, the day after the monument dedication. His reply was that he wanted to be the one to dedicate the memorial, and he recommended that the association find



*Rock from Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland, 2005. The rock was brought from Vestmannaeyjar and is one of the major additions to the Icelandic Memorial. The plaque reads: "Many Icelandic converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were baptized on the shores of Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland, at what is called the 'Mormon Pond.' This rock was removed from those shores on May 6, 2005 and brought to Spanish Fork. It stands as a symbol of the commitment, courage, and sacrifice of those who left to their posterity a legacy of faith, perseverance, and endurance." Photograph by Derek J. Tangren.*

someone else to talk at the fireside. In addition to President Hinckley, Iceland's president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, also agreed to come to Utah to speak at the dedication services.

The nearly four thousand spectators who attended the dedication on 25 June 2005 were made up of western Icelanders—descendants of the Icelandic pioneers to Utah, their friends and neighbors, and over 120 Icelanders from the homeland. The guests from Iceland were made up of two groups. The first was a tour group of thirty-eight persons from the Icelandic National League (INL) led by Jónas Þór. The second group included fifty members of the Iceland Festival Choir from Selfoss, Iceland, and nineteen others traveling with them. Other Icelanders who were family and friends of Western Icelanders in Utah were also in attendance.

The Iceland Festival Choir sang at the dedication of the memorial.



*Icelandic Memorial, Spanish Fork, Utah, 2005. Eight bronze plaques were included as part of the renovations of the Icelandic Memorial. The plaques describe historical details relating to the conversion and emigration of the Icelandic Mormon converts and the history of the Icelandic Memorial. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.*

They also gave a free performance that evening at the historic Provo Tabernacle. The choir director, Keith Reed, is an American who is married to a native Icelander living in Iceland. Keith's sister, Kim Fiske, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints living in Oregon, was also in attendance. Kim helped coordinate the activities of the choir in Utah. During their stay, the choir stayed in private homes in Spanish Fork.

The dedication program for the Icelandic Memorial began with a taste of Icelandic weather. A summer cloudburst marked the beginning of the occasion. Wind bursts and showers greeted the audience as the program began, although the sun was shining through the storm clouds. With everyone exhibiting appropriate faith, the program moved forward—with the result that the skies cleared and the sun shone on the rest of the event.

In his greetings, President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson began with remarks about the weather. "Many of you might have wondered why at the beginning of this occasion there was this display of wind and storm,



*New monument now part of the Icelandic Memorial in Spanish Fork, Utah, 2005. The monument contains the names of over four hundred Mormon converts who emigrated from Iceland to Utah from 1854–1914. The left side of the monument lists the names in Icelandic, whereas the right side lists their names in English.*

*In June 2000, a similar “sister” monument was erected and dedicated in Vestmannaeyjer, Iceland. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.*

rain, showers, thunder, sunshine, and blue skies. For us in Iceland, that is no big surprise because the Almighty is every day putting on such a display of elements for our benefit—and sometimes to our regret, and therefore, those who came here 150 years ago would really have been at home for this occasion.”

In his remarks, President Hinckley spoke of the sacrifices made by the first Icelandic immigrants. “Think of it,” he said, “they traveled for ten long months to get here from Iceland to the valleys in the mountains. It was a better life than they had ever known. They were able to worship with those of their own faith.” The first emigrants left Iceland in 1854, arriving in Utah 7 September 1855. From that time until 1914, when the war broke out in Europe, more than four hundred Icelanders came to

Utah.”

President Hinckley also spoke to the descendants of the great immigrants from Iceland. “You who have descended from great and faithful forebears, with the blood of the Vikings in your veins, I express my appreciation for your strength and your goodness, your faith and your capacity. From those converts of early days has come a generation numbered in the thousands who are a credit to this nation as they honor the land of their forebears. I know of no other group in the Church which has kept, as you have done, the association of your homeland fathers with the land in which this generation now lives. It is a wonderful thing because it speaks of appreciation and love and respect for those who have gone before.”<sup>3</sup>

Many individuals, foundations, and companies donated time, talents, and material and financial support to make the new Icelandic Memorial a reality. The Icelandic Association of Utah extends particular appreciation to the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation for the generous support it provided.

### Appendix A—The Eight Icelandic Memorial Marker Inscriptions

Two natives of Iceland, Þórarinn Hafliðason and Guðmundur Guðmundsson, met two Mormon missionaries from Utah while studying in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1851. After careful investigation, they converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They returned to their homeland to share their newfound faith. In 1852 Þórarinn drowned at sea. Guðmundur carried on the proselyting activities. Many converts were baptized on the shore of Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland.

In 1854 Samúel Bjarnason and his wife, Margrét Gísladóttir, and a traveling companion, Helga Jónsdóttir, were the first converts to leave Iceland for Zion. They sailed from Iceland in November of 1854 to Liverpool, England, on the ship *James Nesmith*. From England, they continued on to New Orleans where they boarded a riverboat headed to St. Louis, Missouri. After passing through Mormon Grove, the group arrived in the Great Salt Lake Valley on September 7, 1855, 300 days after their departure from Iceland. Brigham Young, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, directed Samúel, Margrét, and Helga to settle in Spanish Fork, Utah. With a nucleus of 16 pioneers the first permanent Icelandic settlement in the United States was established in Spanish Fork.

Prior to 1869, Icelanders made their trip to Utah by sailing on ships, traveling in wagon trains and pulling handcarts. After that time, they traveled to Utah by steamship and train. Over 400 Icelanders immigrated to Utah from 1855 to 1914. Because the pioneers had very little money to help themselves or others, they found it necessary to work together as they settled in their new homes. In 1887 the Icelanders in Spanish Fork held their first Iceland Days celebration. Kate B. Carter wrote, “the Iceland people in Utah are said to have preserved the folk-lore and customs of their mother country more than any other nationality that pioneered to Utah.”

In 1887 the Icelandic members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints built a meeting house where they conducted church services in Icelandic because many of them found it difficult to learn English. In 1892 the Icelandic Lutherans of Spanish Fork built a small frame church where the sermons were taught in Icelandic and English. Runolfur Runolfsson, who had joined the LDS church in Iceland and immigrated to Spanish Fork, converted to Lutheranism after his arrival. He had been an ordained Lutheran minister in Iceland.

In 1938 a lighthouse monument honoring the Icelanders that settled in Utah was built on the east bench of Spanish Fork at 800 East and Canyon Road. Andrew Jensen, a historian for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, dedicated the monument on August 2, 1938, as part of the Iceland Days celebration. J. Victor Leifson and Eleanor B. Jarvis were co-chairs for the monument project. Gesli Bearnson donated the land and John K. Johnson designed the monument in the shape of a lighthouse, reflecting the seafaring background of the Icelanders. Fred Wilson built the original Viking ship on the monument.

The Centennial Celebration of the first Icelanders coming to Utah was held on June

15–17, 1955. Elder Henry D. Moyle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints opened the celebration as a keynote speaker during a religious service on Wednesday, June 15. The celebration included a parade and concluded on Friday, June 17, a national holiday in Iceland. The Iceland Association, in 2000, raised funds to build a monument in Vestmannaeyjar to honor their ancestors, along with an exhibit in Hofsós, Iceland.

Byron T. Geslison, his wife, Melva and their twin sons, David and Daniel, were called to Iceland in 1975 to renew the missionary effort of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When the Geslisons arrived in Iceland there were no missionary discussions or tracts in Icelandic. Byron had the voice of warning and truth, written by Thordur Didriksson in 1879, reprinted to use as a missionary tract. The Icelandic government officially recognized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on November 1, 1983.

In 1997 the centennial celebration of Iceland Days was held in Spanish Fork. Iceland's president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, and his wife, Guðrun Katrin Þorbergsdóttir, attended the event. President Grímsson was honored by Spanish Fork City as the Grand Marshall of the Fiesta Days Parade on July 24. President Grímsson and Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin, from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, spoke at a pioneer heritage fireside. The Icelandic Association of Utah was formed in 2000, as a non-profit corporation. A sesquicentennial celebration was held on June 23–26, 2005, 150 years after the first Icelanders arrived in Utah.

### **Appendix B—The Icelandic Memorial Dedication Program**

- Welcome and introduction by David A. Ashby, Icelandic Memorial Project Co-Chairman
- Presentation of the colors by Riley Bruce Hall, Eagle Scout
- Posting of the colors by the Utah National Guard and the Boy Scouts of America
- Presentation of a new Icelandic flag by Pall Einarsson, Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland
- Iceland National Anthem by the Iceland Festival Choir, Director, Keith Reed
- Presentation of a United States flag that flew over the nation's capital by Chris Cannon, U.S. Congressman for Utah
- The United States National Anthem by Stephen Brieholt.
- Opening Prayer, G. Everett Bearson, grandson of Samuel Bjarnason.
- Greetings, Dale Barney, Mayor of Spanish Fork, Utah and Gary R. Herbert, Lieutenant Governor, State of Utah.
- Remarks by Kristy Robertson, President, Icelandic Association of Utah and J. Brent Haymond, Consul of Iceland and Icelandic Memorial Project Co-Chairman.
- Musical Number, *Yes my Native Land I Love Thee* by The Utah Valley Children's Choir with Soloist Stephen Breinholt.

- Greetings from Iceland by Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, President, The Republic of Iceland.
- Musical Number, *Anthem of Peace* by The Utah Valley Children's Choir.
- Remarks and Dedicatory Prayer by Gordon B. Hinckley, President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Spellings of Icelandic names with their diacritical marks have been retained.

### Notes

1. The original monument inscription reads as follows:

First Settlement of Icelanders in the United States

Leif Eiriksson, an Icelander, discovered America in 1000 A.D. Eight centuries later 1855–1860 sixteen pioneers from Iceland established in Spanish Fork the first permanent Icelandic settlement in the United States. They were Samuel Bjarnason & wife Margret; Thordur Didriksson & wife Helga; Gudmundur Gudmundsson; Loftur Jonsson & wife Gudrun; Jon Jonsson & wife Anna; Gudrun Jonsdottir; Magnus Bjarnason & wife Thuridur; Vigdis Bjarnadottir (Holt); Gudny E. Hafliadason; Ragnhildur S. Hanson and Mary H. Sherwood.

Mt. Flonette Camp & the Icelandic Association

2. Gordon B. Hinckley, "A Declaration to the World," *BYU Studies* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 5.

3. For a news report of the dedication, see R. Scott Lloyd, "Icelandic Pioneers Honored by Memorial," *Church News* 75, no. 27 (2 July 2005): 3.

