
Zarahemla, Iowa

D&C 125:3

On July 2, 1839, the Prophet Joseph Smith and other Latter-day Saint leaders crossed the Mississippi River to the Territory of Iowa to inspect land purchased by Church agent Vinson Knight from land speculator Isaac Galland. When the Prophet Joseph was about a mile west of Montrose, he advised that “a town be built there, and called Zarahemla.”¹ That was Joseph’s earliest-known reference to Zarahemla (the name of a land and a city in the Book of Mormon) as a settlement in Lee County, Iowa (see Omni 1:12–14).

In 1839 it appeared that the number of Latter-day Saint settlers in Zarahemla would rival the population of Montrose, Iowa. This never happened, however. There were only about thirty houses ever built in the township. Among those who built homes or resided in Zarahemla were Uncle John Smith, a patriarch, and newlyweds Elder George A. Smith and his wife Bathsheba Smith. Bathsheba wrote,

We started carpet-bag in hand, to go to his fathers [Uncle John Smith], who lived at Zarahemla, Iowa Territory, about a mile from the Mississippi river. Walked about a mile and a half to the river side. A skiff had just been pushed off, we hailed it, the owner came back took us in and rowed us across the river without charge. We were met by my husband’s brother John L. Smith with a horse and light wagon who conveyed us to his father’s. There we found a feast prepared for us, in partaking of which my husband’s father John Smith drank to our health, pronouncing the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob upon us. ... I was very happy and all of our relations on both sides were well pleased

¹ “Zarahemla, Iowa,” in Lyman D. Platt, *Early Branches of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 48. Church History Library.

with our marriage. After living at Father Smith's about a month, my husband rented a small log cabin close by and we moved in to it.²

The Zarahemla Stake was organized in 1839 with Uncle John Smith as president. The stake included about a dozen small communities in Iowa—Ambrosia, Augusta, Charleston, Fort Madison, Keokuk, Mecham, Montrose, Nashville, Norway, San Prairie, Van Buren, and Zarahemla.

In March 1841 Joseph Smith received a revelation at Nauvoo, Illinois, “concerning the saints in the Territory of Iowa” (D&C 125: Introduction). The Lord instructed the Iowa Saints to “build up a city unto my name upon the land opposite the city of Nauvoo, and let the name of Zarahemla be named upon it and let all those who come from the east, and the west, and the north, and the south, that have desires to dwell therein, take up their inheritance in the same” (D&C 125:3–4).

On August 8, 1841, a conference was held of the Zarahemla Stake. At the time there were 326 members in the entire stake. Five months later, on January 8, 1842, the Zarahemla Stake was discontinued. A branch of the church was organized in its stead, with John Smith as president. By 1843 most of the Latter-day Saints had abandoned their holdings in Zarahemla. After 1846 the settlement ceased to exist.

There is no trace of Zarahemla today, although locals share traditions about where the town borders may have been.

² Bathsheba Smith Diary. Church History Library.