

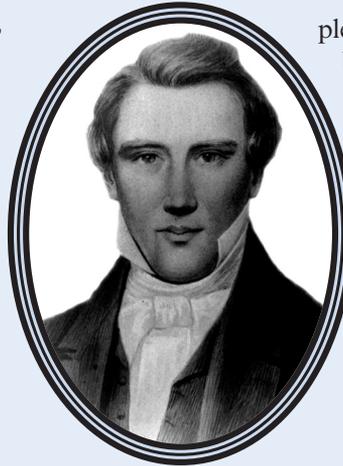
Binding People Together in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

By James Thornock

I have never been happier than on January 3, 2015—the day I was married in the Houston Texas Temple. This place remains in my memory as an edifice to my marriage and to The Lord. Many thousand members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have had the opportunity to worship here, however, that was not always the case because Houston did not have a temple until August of 2000. Temples are vital to the worship of the Latter-day Saints, but with only 150 around the world, they are not always nearby. To qualify for a temple, a city must reach a certain level of membership and church attendance. As a result, the Houston Church needed to grow substantially following the arrival of the first “Mormon” around 1918 before a temple could be constructed.

The story of the Church in Texas began with the founders of the religion as well as the state of Texas. Just before his death in 1844, church organizer Joseph Smith sent a representative to Sam Houston to negotiate for a tract of land where the Latter-day Saints could establish a settlement. The proposal for all church members to settle in Houston was called the “Texas Plan.” Although Sam Houston was on board, it never came to fruition because the Prophet Joseph was martyred by an angry mob in Carthage, Illinois, before completing the deal.

The Church struggled to maintain its identity under the absence of its recently lost prophet and might have gone through with the deal had the early leaders acted more quickly. It chose instead to complete the tem-



Founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith.

ple in Nauvoo, Illinois, where the Church was based at the time. This temple was critical because it was the members’ only way of providing salvation for their ancestors. During this time of crisis, church leaders concentrated their efforts on keeping the Church together, thus preventing the immediate move to Texas. The next time Latter-day Saints came in contact with the city of Houston was approximately 1918.¹

From the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830, members were encouraged to immigrate to the location of the church’s main body, which began in Palmyra, New York, but later included Kirtland, Ohio; Nauvoo, Illinois; Winter Quarters, Nebraska; Independence, Missouri; and finally Salt Lake City, Utah.² During

this time of transition, Joseph Smith and his counselors encouraged recently converted members to go to Utah. As more and more people converted, however, it became less practical to send them to Utah and made more sense

for them to stay where they were and create their own colonies. The saints who came to Houston were not typically members who moved from the main body of the Church in Utah but rather the natives of Mississippi and Alabama who had converted to the faith and relocated to Houston for employment. Although missionary efforts started

Before the Houston Texas Temple was dedicated in 2000, the nearest temple was located in Dallas. Temples host a number of sacred ordinances such as baptisms for the dead, Endowments, and Marriage sealings.

Photo courtesy of Uriah 923, wikicommons.





Chuck and Georgie Wilson, the last remaining members of the original Katy Branch still living in the Katy area.

Photo courtesy of author.

in Mississippi and Alabama, soon missionaries were called to preach in Texas.³

Elder John K. Nicholson of Salt Lake City headed the first mission that focused on the “Texas Conference” on June 10, 1894. The Prophet Spencer W. Kimball called twelve elders (missionaries) to preach the gospel under Elder Nicholson who then preached and baptized throughout Texas. The first Harris County converts were baptized into the faith in June of 1897. By 1901 the faithful were organized in several settlements. As the Church grew it changed its organization and called Texas missionaries to set up congregations.⁴

The Church established its first congregation in Houston on December 5, 1921. The Houston members met in a small house donated to the organization by Mrs. Gussie Farmer. That first building was later renovated and officially dedicated for the purpose of worship on November 19, 1933, by which time some 2,600 church members called the Houston area home. The Church’s Houston Branch covered the entire region during the early twentieth century, eventually splitting multiple times into smaller areas with more members in each congregation, a common practice in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁵

Whenever a congregation or ward reaches more than 500 members, it can be split, and the larger the ward becomes, the more likely it will be divided into two congregations. A smaller congregation is called a branch. This process of growth and reorganization is key to the feeling members have in the church organization. Although there are over 15 million members worldwide, each ward and branch is focused on individual family units, as well as their familiarity with each other. Whenever the con-

gregation becomes too big for recognition, it is split to maintain that intimate spirit and be more accessible for the members. A stake is organized with a minimum of five congregations, either wards or branches, with a maximum of sixteen. Stakes also split when they approach or arrive at sixteen.⁶

By 1953 the Church had organized the Houston Texas Stake composed of fifteen local wards and branches in the forty-eight-county region. This advancement gave the smaller or less prominent areas of Houston the opportunity to have their own congregation, resulting in far shorter commutes to church for Sunday services and other activities during the week.

One such area was the town of Katy, Texas. After the conversion of many souls to the faith, the Katy members organized and became part of the Katy Branch. The branch’s story is one of people who attended, served, taught, and grew up together in the church in a spirit of love. Katy church members first attended the Melbourne Ward in Houston, which is still located on Melbourne Street just north of the 610 North Loop. For each meeting and several times on Sunday, the members made the long journey to church. Many members took their lunch so they did not have to go home in between meetings.⁷

Two of these first church members were Georgina and Doyle “Chuck” Wilson. They originally hailed from California but had settled in an apartment right off of Avenue D in Katy in 1973.

Although the Church was experiencing growth and prosperity in Houston, outlying areas like Katy suffered from persecution, and did not have adequate membership to form their own branch. The opposition to the Church was violent at times, but usually manifested in name calling and looking down on church members. Being a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints meant sacrificing at least some social standing, especially in the Church’s early days. Not long after the Wilsons’ arrival, long-time member Joe Bright knocked on their front door and said, “We’re starting a branch in Katy proper and we need you.” At that time, Katy had few members and all were needed to form the branch. They started with only six families, making more of a church “group” than an organization.⁸

In 1973 the Houston Texas Stake presidency organized the Katy Branch of the Houston Texas Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Branch president Aubrey Chudleigh led the little group in all of its meetings. Georgie recalls that Chudleigh was extremely kind, and so was his wife Sharon. The Chudleighs did not live in Houston or in Katy, however, but closer to Waller, Texas. The couple willingly gave much of their life in the service of the young branch, even though they had to travel quite far to get to any meetings or to visit other members.⁹

The church family worshipped in several locations, including Katy High School and the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) Hall. Later the first convert to the Church in Katy donated a duplex off of Shetland Lane and 1st

Street, in what is now known as Old Katy, to be renovated. Quickly walls came crashing down and a new room in the center was created to serve as the social center of the building, which it did for several years. It hosted sacrament meetings on Sunday, dances on Friday nights, and other activities from Boy Scouts meetings to potluck feasts.¹⁰

On October 4, 1977, the five-day Katy Branch conference commenced. Branch or ward conferences occurred annually and included many speakers and congregants. Katy had grown to 125 church members, up from the six families it had five years earlier. These faithful members had looked forward to a day when they could meet in their own building, but strict attendance standards had to be met before it could be constructed. Church headquarters in Salt Lake City required attendees to come to church frequently to justify the expense of a new building in the area. At the conference, local church leaders showed a mock-up of what the long-awaited building would look like. The members were elated. Today church organizations usually design and build their churches quickly by using various contractors, but this Katy building at 1928 Drexel Drive was built with care by the people who later worshiped there for years to come.¹¹



Church members built the Drexel Building from the ground up.

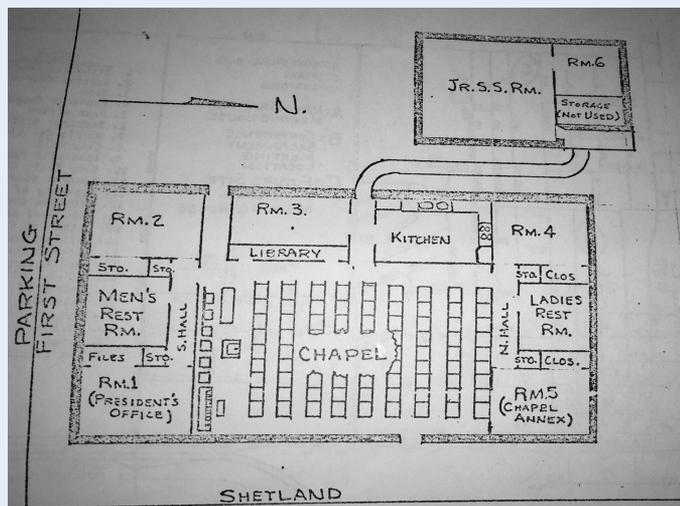
Photo courtesy of Google Street View.

empty buildings lies a greater story of development—the development of the individual. This is the most important thing to understand from the story and can be most fruitfully found in Georgie’s tone, which is hard to capture on paper. Her voice exuded great fondness over those days. She spoke for a while about cleaning up the cigarette butts and rearranging the room. To many this might not seem like an important part of history, but it was to her. At greater length she told a story of the microphone that they had when the saints met in the renovated duplex. While in a usually solemn meeting, the microphone picked up a CB radio signal and a trucker’s voice blared out something like, “Breaker 1-9, this is the Bandit. You got a smokey on your tail.” Georgie said, “There was no way to avoid this type of thing.” This story excites the imagination, and begs the question, what was it like to have attended and worshiped in the church in those early days?¹³

Georgie remembers the days started out like any other Texas Sunday mornings. It was likely hot and humid. Church members dressed not to impress their fellow man but to show God that they were serious. After donning their Sunday best they drove or walked to the church. After arriving thirty minutes to an hour early, they swept away cigarette butts in the VFW Hall, shuffled the chairs around, moved tables, and talked to the other members who came a little bit later.¹⁴

When the meeting began, President Chudleigh or one of his counselors stood at the old microphone, welcomed everyone to the meeting, and announced any activities for the week. Chuck Wilson then led the small group in song, while the president’s wife, Sharon, accompanied them on the old, out-of-tune piano. After a few verses, the priesthood brethren, in silence, passed the bread and water, which church members ate and drank in symbolic remembrance of Jesus Christ and his payment for their sins. Members lowered their heads and said a quick, silent prayer to Heavenly Father, muttering their regrets for the past week and their desire to do better in the next. Once the sacrament was passed, an assigned brother or sister from the small group spoke using scriptures, the words of the prophets, and their own words to bring home the gospel message to which they were assigned.

Each meeting ended with a hymn such as “Praise to the Man,” “We Thank thee O God for a Prophet,” or



The floorplan of the original meeting place where church members hosted all activities for the Katy Branch. Photo courtesy of author.

Construction on the building commenced December 10, 1977. Twenty-three months after the groundbreaking and eleven months after completion, the church was dedicated.¹² In time and through heavy use of that building, the Katy Branch became the Katy Ward, and then split into two parts. Time and time again the wards were split, until eventually the area had enough congregations to form the Katy Stake. Groundbreaking for the Katy Stake Center was held on September 12, 1992.

Of the six original families who started the Katy Church, only Chuck and Georgie Wilson remain in Katy. Other original members have followed jobs to other places or died leaving only their legacy. Beyond the facts, dates, and

“Onward Christian Soldiers.” After the tattered hymnals were lowered to their seats, a brother or sister closed with a prayer on behalf of everyone. These supplications often included gratitude for blessings they felt as well as the needs of all members. They often prayed for rain, growth of the small branch, and the needs of individual members. It was a small but tight-knit group. The members stayed and talked after the meeting before returning home.

After a good lunch, church members returned in the afternoon for “Sunday school.” Initially they only had one class, which met together, but as their numbers grew the class split. Although the same people attended this meeting as the earlier one, the format differed. The sacrament meeting had two to four speakers who addressed the group in monologue style. Sunday school, on the other hand, followed the format of a traditional classroom with a teacher, questions, answers, and participation from the whole body of believers. Here any question was welcomed, and the best answers known were given. Typical topics included faith, repentance, baptism by immersion, eternal marriage, eternal families, the word of wisdom (the code of health for Latter-day Saints), and the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Everyone could contribute, learn, and excel together.¹⁵

During the week the church held youth activities as well as Relief Society meetings for the women. When the youth met, the young boys focused on Boy Scouts activities, and the girls concentrated on Young Women’s values within the Church. The Relief Society, formed by the Church in 1842, is the largest and oldest women’s organization in the world. The women engaged in “enrichment meetings” that focused primarily on how to incorporate the gospel into their lives, particularly through service. All of these activities created opportunities for people to experience what the Church and The Lord had to offer them. As converts flocked to the Church in Katy and Houston, church leadership in Salt Lake City took notice.¹⁶

The highest blessings in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints come to those who attend the temple to be “Endowed from on High” and to become sealed to their companion “For time and all Eternity.” Unfortunately for the Houston region’s church members, the closest location to receive those blessings was in Dallas.¹⁷ Karen Hursman recounted that some members made the journey to Dallas once a month when they rented a bus and left at 4:00 a.m. to spend the day worshipping there on a Saturday. While these long trips offered an option for some, many did not have the time or perhaps the bus fare to make the long journey.¹⁸

Devout saints had always yearned for a temple, and before long the activity in the Houston area, as well as some persuasion on the part of church leaders, secured a temple for Houston. The Church broke ground for the Houston Texas Temple on June 13, 1998. In just a little over two years, the temple construction was completed. As is customary before a temple opens for worship, the Church hosted an open house for the general public, which was held August 5-19, 2000. The president of the Church,

Gordon B. Hinckley, dedicated the temple on August 26, 2000. After dedication only members who meet certain standards of worthiness may enter. The temple is the culmination of all religious acts and is a most sacred place.¹⁹



Author James Thornock and his wife Laura celebrate their “sealing” at the Houston Texas Temple.

My experience with the temple has been not only sacred but also joyful. I remember many days of worship there, where I communed with my Father in Heaven and eventually took part in the church’s highest ordinance, the “Sealing Ordinance.” I was “sealed” for time and for all eternity to my wife Laura Jane Thornock. President Steward, who was at one time a president of the Katy Stake, performed the sealing. I had this opportunity because of the toil and dedication of members like Chuck and Georgie Wilson, who represent thousands of church members who built places of worship, and provided inspiration for the future. Without them I could not have this wonderful experience in this city that I call home. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will continue to provide these opportunities to Houstonians for generations to come. Opportunities that will bind people together, and to their Father in Heaven, as they have bound me. 🌀

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