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Whitney Gallery of Western Art, Cody, Wyoming

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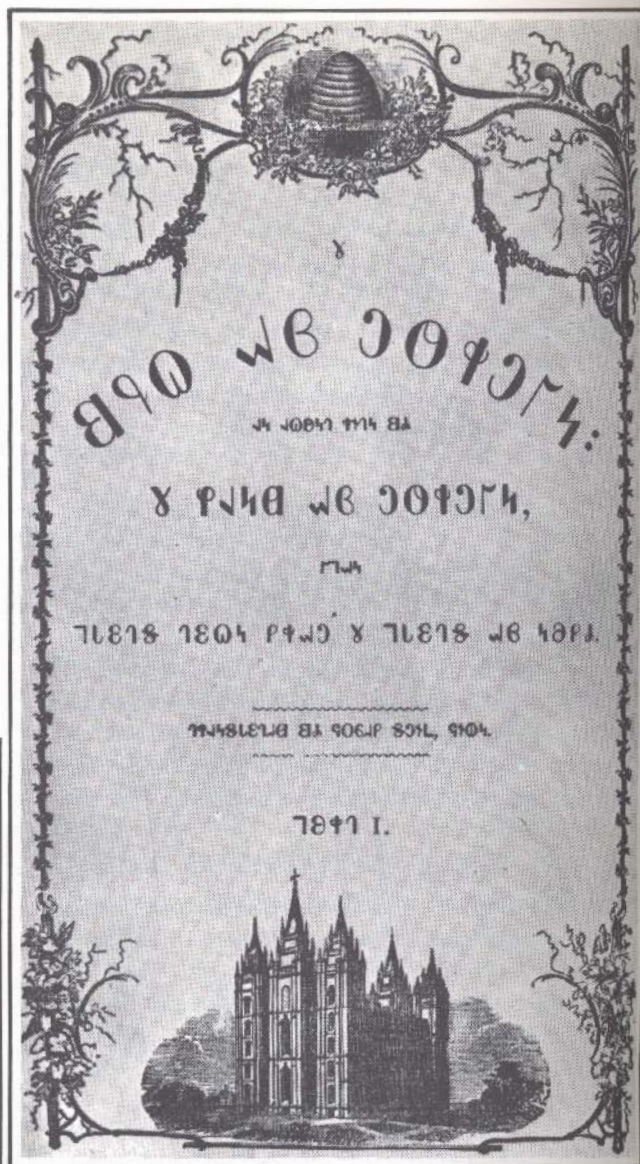


Articles appearing in this journal are regularly abstracted and indexed in HISTORICAL ABSTRACTS and AMERICAN HISTORY AND LIFE.





BRIGHAM YOUNG AS A YOUNG MAN
after a sketch



the hieroglyphic writing
system that plagued a
generation of students
and left a legacy of
distinctive accents

BRIGHAM YOUNG'S DESERET ALPHABET

by ELIZABETH COTTAM WALKER

Brigham Young had scarcely uttered his famous words, "This is the place," before Utah started its first school. Indeed, the wigwam which housed it was raised before the first Mormon had built his own cabin. This overriding interest in education, coupled with a growing need for universal communication, led to an experiment in a hieroglyphic phonetic alphabet which Brigham Young sponsored and stubbornly espoused from 1853 until his death in 1877.

While the original pioneers of Utah were almost entirely from New England, converts from many nations began coming in increasing numbers. This brought many problems, not the least of which was the tendency of foreign newcomers to isolate themselves according to their homeland. Germantown, Welshtown, Swedetown were all examples of small settlements which retained original customs and mother tongues. In many cases, the settlers were unable or unwilling to speak or write the English language.

The idea of a system of universally understood writing has always intrigued mankind, but to Brigham Young it was an early and persistent priority as the populace of his Zion took on an increasingly motley character. His persistence resulted in the Deseret Alphabet, translated into school texts and church documents which are collector's items today. For a generation of Mormon children, the alphabet meant agonizing over strange, monotonous, rounded characters. The phonetic rendering of some common word pronunciations mark a Mormon heritage to this day. For a generation of "Gentiles," the experiment meant one more attempt to keep the secrets of polygamy and other sinister Mormon practices from the outside world.

AT THE URGING of President Young in 1853, the regents of the University of Deseret — now the University of Utah — appointed a committee to undertake a study of the orthography involved in creating a new alphabet. Members included Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, and George D. Watt. A convert from England, Watt turned out to be chiefly responsible for the system, which emerged. Before the migration to Utah, Watt had been a reporter in the church offices at Nauvoo, Illinois, and was familiar with the Isaac Pitman system of shorthand as both practitioner and teacher.

Within a year the committee presented its first attempt — an alphabet of forty-one characters — based in part on Pitman's shorthand and in part on Watt's "stereographic" system. The alphabet puzzled many learned people, for it had decided Grecian and Ethiopic symbols, being in many ways much like the Ethiopic Wow.

The original forty-one characters, subjected to change and modification, eventually evolved into thirty-two letters or vocal sounds. The original alphabet had six long sounds with a short sound to correspond, four double and one aspirate, and twenty articulate sounds.

The characters were constructed simply, not at all like the more complete characters of a standard alphabet. The letters had uniform tops, with serifs lopped off to save wear and tear on the type. Each letter in the system had a fixed, unalterable sound, and each word was spelled according to its sound. Thus, *eight* became *at*, *face* became *fas*, *knife* became *nif*, and so on. All this was expected to have a double result: English-speaking people could write a foreign language with ease, while foreigners could converse, at least on paper, with Americans.

BRIGHAM YOUNG was elated with the results. In 1855, acting at the church leader's request, the Territorial Legislature appropriated \$2,500.00 for type casting. The order was given to a St. Louis foundry the next year with Parley P. Pratt supervising the molding.

With the outbreak of the troublesome Utah War, the project was delayed until 1857, when the type was set up in cases in the Council House in Salt Lake City. In the meantime, efforts to acquaint the people with the new

means of writing were pressed vigorously in all Mormon communities.

Eastern newspapers were skeptical, looking upon the strange alphabet as still another provocative challenge from the Mormon Church. They saw it as a new means of keeping the ukases of Brigham Young sealed from Gentile eyes, predicting ominously that even the pioneer Utah paper, the *Deseret News*, would be a "profound mystery to all but the initiated."

There was some rationale for this attitude, for Mormons still sought the privacy which they hoped would insulate them from more persecution. Moreover, at about this time, the great exposition of the mysteries of Masonry was taking place, and the alphabet, hopefully, could be a means of keeping Mormonism from a similar fate.

The *Deseret News*, however, waited until 1859 before it printed any material in the new manner, and then it was excerpts from the Book of Mormon, published over a period of six months. In 1860, the alphabet dropped from sight, perhaps due to the coming of the railroad the year before, bringing with it a fresh influx of outsiders.

This was not, however, the end of the experiment. Urged on by Brigham Young, who never gave up his dream of a universal communication, and a possible reflection of similar interests throughout the country, a sudden revival came in 1867. In 1868, at President Young's urging, the University of Deseret regents authorized \$10,000.00 to print textbooks for the territorial common schools. Superintendent of Public Instruction Robert L. Campbell, an ardent supporter of the system, kept the matter before the legislature.

Deseret First and Second Readers, small primers based on the McGuffey manuals, were printed in New York in 1868 and introduced in the schools. The First Reader had thirty-six pages of graded sentences and pictures, while the Second Reader, for older pupils, consisted of seventy-two pages.

Orson Pratt was authorized to rewrite the Book of Mormon in the hieroglyphic characters, and the Book of Nephi from it was brought out in large typefaces. Brigham Young kept his accounts with the symbols for about a year, and some of the paper bills of Utah Territory bore the inscription, "Holiness to the Lord," in the strange characters. President Young also introduced the system into the Sunday schools, aiming eventually to print "ten to a thousand" Biblical stories.

BY 1870, HOWEVER, it was all forgotten, the persistence of Brigham Young to no avail. A number of reasons for the failure of the alphabet may be advanced, aside from the influx of outsiders who challenged the absolute rule of the Mormon Church. The hieroglyphics were difficult to read, and the uniformity of the characters produced an unbelievably monotonous text.

The first pages of the first school books would, indeed, have discouraged the most intelligent and eager child. The first lessons contained such phrases as *I am in, As we go, On to it, I am.* The irksome sameness continued as the hapless student advanced: *I see a fly, May I get the fly? Yes, you may get it, but it will fly off, It bit the ox,* and so on.

The impossibility of this system of writing can be seen in such words as "when" —

h-woo-en, "she" — esh-e, and "will" — woo-i-l. Moreover, the several pronunciations given by people speaking different languages and dialects made an incomprehensible variation in "spelling."

Brigham Young's phonetic alphabet, although never heard of now except as a novelty of the past, is responsible for many of the pronunciations and colloquialisms typical of Utah. To people with a Utah or Mormon background, especially the older ones, such words as *corner, horse* and *Mormon* are still pronounced *carner, harse* and *Marmon*. Aside from archival and museum objects, this accent is really the only tangible remnant of Brigham Young's quarter century of persistence with his phonetic alphabet. The Saints he hoped to unite in common communication killed his expensive experiment with their almost total indifference to its intricate monotony.



ELIZABETH COTTAM WALKER, who describes herself as the original "stop and start" writer, knows whereof she speaks when she writes of early Utah history. Her grandfather, John Cottam, came to Utah somewhat by accident during the 1860's when his wagontrain bound for California joined a Mormon caravan. Cottam was one of the earliest furniture makers in Deseret, and his excellent craftsmanship may still be seen in the spiral staircase in the Salt Lake City Temple and some of the fine carpentry in the Tabernacle. As a member of one of the first French-Jewish families in the early community, he frequently acted as an interpreter for Brigham Young, reading and answering letters when they were written in a foreign language. It was this difficulty which gave rise to the Saints' attempt at language reform that Mrs. Walker writes of here. Although Cottam was a Mormon convert, his wife, Mrs. Walker's grandmother, was one of the few women in Utah to find divorce less objectionable than polygamy. Mrs. Walker who has two sons and eight grandchildren, keeps herself busy "writing, writing, writing," at her home in Salt Lake City. Indeed her experience has ranged from internationally published poetry to newspaper journalism, to short stories and novels, and even to para-normal behaviorial research.