

## Mormon Battalion Monument unveiled

By Cecily Markland

After years of concerted efforts, including changing the site and size of the monument, an impressive nine-foot bronze statue honoring the Mormon Battalion was unveiled in January.

On the 160th anniversary of the unit's march through the area around Yuma , more than 700 people gathered for the unveiling of the nearly half-ton bronze likeness of a battalion soldier.

The statue stands in Wet Wetlands Park in Yuma , on a bluff overlooking the Colorado River , near the spot where the battalion crossed in January 1847.

The larger-than-life-size statue, created by R.C. Merrill, portrays 2nd Lt. Philemon Merrill, who was a key member of the U.S. Army of the West. As adjutant of the Mormon Battalion, Merrill participated in the unit's arduous 1900-mile march from Council Bluffs , Iowa , to San Diego , Calif. The monument was erected to honor the contributions this military organization made to the westward expansion of the nation.

At the statue's base, a concrete pedestal embedded with 10 plaques shows a map of the march and rosters of the battalion's companies and commanders, as well as journal entries telling the history and difficulty of the march.

According to that history, the Mormon Battalion was a unit of the U.S. Army of the West, one of the four components of Army engaged in the Mexican War of 1845 to 1848. Commanded by General Stephan Watts Kearny, the U.S. Army of the West consisted of 18 companies, with a total of about 1,800 soldiers when President James Polk authorized an additional unit to be recruited mostly from displaced Mormon settlers encamped at Council Bluffs, Iowa.

The Mormon settlers there had been persecuted and driven from Nauvoo , Illinois . Though it meant they would be serving the

The unit was designated the Mormon Battalion and exists in the history of the Army as the only unit to be specifically comprised based on religious belief and named for that religion.

Today, the Mormon Battalion is credited with a major contribution to the settling of the West, as they founded and successfully navigated a vital route between the Santa Fe Trail and a southern route to California . This southern route was critical for the movement of settlers during the California gold rush of 1849.

One historian wrote, "The march symbolizes the very essence of the Mormon drama as a frontier epic, and proves more than anything else the men's loyalty, stamina, and sacrifice."

"The brave men of the Mormon Battalion essentially carved the roads which today are Interstate 8 and Interstate 10 in Arizona ," explains Yuma Mayor Larry Nelson, who is a member of the Yuma 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and of the U.S. Army of the West Mormon Battalion Foundation.

Bob Brown, vice president of the foundation, says the unveiling of the statue marks the end of a 10-year effort.

"We talked about doing a much smaller monument in the Yuma Crossing State Park ," Brother Brown shares. However, the interest grew, much of it fueled by the Mormon Battalion enactments the foundation staged for local Scout troops and other groups.

Funding for the monument came from private donations as well as the sale of limited-edition bronze maquettes and silver and gold coins with an embossing of the monument. More information, including a map to the monument and information about enactments or about purchasing commemorative items, can be found at [www.usarmyofthewest.org](http://www.usarmyofthewest.org).

government that had just expelled them from their homes, following a call to arms from Church President Brigham Young—and a promise that if they would enlist and would contribute their pay to help fund the Mormon trek across the plains, the Church would, in turn, support their families—nearly five companies of men enlisted.

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