

Historical Information

William Harrison Folsom: Pioneer Architect (1815-1901)

William Harrison Folsom was born 25 March 1815, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the third child of a carpenter. His ancestors were among the earliest settlers in New Hampshire, and both sides of the family included carpenters and owners of sawmills. He was baptized in the Niagara River in a hole cut



through twenty-eight inches of ice 17 Feb 1842.

He took his family to Nauvoo in 1843, worked on the temple, electioneered for Joseph Smith,

participated in the

Battle of Nauvoo, and was part of the poor camp that experienced the "miracle of the quail." His family found refuge in Farmington, where a group of drunken men hung him.

Fortunately, an acquaintance rescued him.

The family's next stop was Keokuk, where he worked two years. Leaving his family behind, he journeyed to the California gold fields in 1849 via the Isthmus of Panama. By 1852 his mining and construction activities netted him \$10,000 in cash and gold. He returned to his family, stopping at Hawaii, passing around Cape Horn, and passing through Philadelphia and Ohio.

Back in Keokuk, he divided his fortune with the friend who had paid the expenses of his voyage to California and invested his own share of the money in a grocery business. In 1854 Folsom sold his business and fitted himself out with three wagons to come west. He arrived at the Missouri River more than a week too late to join the last wagon train of the season, however, and took his family to Council Bluffs for the winter. He quickly found work

in the area, since Omaha across the river was experiencing a building boom as the new territorial capital of Nebraska. The situation was so favorable that Folsom stayed in Council Bluffs for the next six years, operating a successful construction business, including work on the territorial capitol in Omaha, Nebraska, and serving as branch president for the church.

In 1860, at the age of forty-five, William, together with his wife and six children, joined a wagon train led by Joseph W. Young, brother of Brigham Young. This well-organized company was the first to make the round-trip from Utah to the Missouri River and back again in a single season.

Truman O. Angell, the overworked church architect who had designed most of the principal buildings of the city, was in poor health. Consequently, Folsom was appointed assistant church architect within a few months of his arrival. His first work for the church was the preparation of plans for the Seventies Hall of Science, a building to be used for instructional meetings. He was then assigned to make plans for his first major building, the Salt Lake Theater. While most of the structures in the city had been built in a simplified Georgian or Federal style reminiscent of Nauvoo, the theater was a correct and handsomely proportioned example of the newer Greek Revival style. That the completed theater was impressive is confirmed by the reports of non-Mormon visitors of the period. Samuel Bowles who saw it in 1865 wrote, "It ranks, alike in capacity and elegance of structure and finish, along with the opera houses and academies of music in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Cincinnati."

Shortly after construction of the Salt Lake Theater was begun, Truman O. Angell's health declined to the point that he resigned as church architect,

recommending William Folsom as his successor. In the October conference of 1861, Folsom was officially sustained in this position. The following year he was ordained a high priest and sustained as a member of the High Council of the Salt Lake Stake. In this capacity he spoke frequently at church meetings. His standing among the leaders of the church was further enhanced in January 1863 when, with the marriage of his daughter Amelia to Brigham Young, he became a father-in-law to the Mormon leader who was fourteen years his senior. The same year, Folsom purchased two-and-one-half acres of land on the corner of South Temple and First West Streets [Block 78 on the Museum model. Also, where the Raddison Hotel is, east of the Salt Palace]. This lot was to be his home for much of the remainder of his life.

The foundations of the Salt Lake Temple had been buried in 1858. Folsom supervised the re-excavation of this stonework. Fears that the foundations were too weak to provide a permanent base for the huge building precipitated the decision to rebuild part of them before resuming construction. Folsom directed this and other work on the temple throughout the next five years.

In 1863 Brigham Young asked Folsom to prepare plans for a larger tabernacle. That April, Folsom and two of his sons stepped off the location of the new structure, and by June the building had been designed to the point where a detailed description could be published. This initial plan called for the arches to support a pointed roof with three octagon domes or ventilators on the ridge. After the preparation of the original design, the shape of the roof was altered to follow the curve of the arched supports. The sandstone piers that were to support the tabernacle

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William Harrison Folsom, cont.

were built first and allowed to settle for a year. Folsom's work on the building seems to have been limited to the preparation of general plans. [His later drawing is displayed on the south end of simulated roof structure in the Tabernacle exhibit.]

Only a few months after the commencement of the new tabernacle, preparations were made for the erection of a new city hall on First South just east of State Street. Folsom submitted plans for the new building in January 1864. Although similar in form to the existing Council House and courthouse designed earlier by Angell, the city hall demonstrated again Folsom's superior sense of proportion and his familiarity with more elaborate styles of architectural ornament. [The building, now across from the capitol building, houses the Utah Travel Council.]

His wife died in the summer of 1863, and he remarried in December of the same year. In 1864 he formed a partnership for contracting and building with George Romney. Truman O. Angell returned as church architect in April 1867, and William Folsom and Truman Angell, Jr., were sustained as his assistants.

Much of Folsom's attention in the next few years was directed toward private construction projects that included some of the more important buildings of the city. Folsom and Romney combined with Thomas Latimer and George Taylor to set up the first steam-driven planing mill in the valley. In 1873 he and Romney built a three-story brick building for the Dinwoodey Furniture Company. In association with Joseph Ridges, the builder of the tabernacle organ, Folsom designed and constructed one of the most famous residences in the city, the Gardo House.

In 1874 Folsom supervised the addition of a new wing to the Devereaux House and was chosen to be a counselor in the presidency of the Salt Lake Stake. In the fall of the same year, he was asked to go to St. George to direct the work on the temple there. In 1875 Folsom formed a partnership with Obed Taylor, a recently arrived architect from San Francisco, and began work on the handsome iron-fronted building for ZCMI. Folsom also worked on the Manti, Moroni, and Provo Tabernacles and drew plans for a theater in Provo and meetinghouses in Panguitch and

Mona.

He suffered from asthma from time to time, and during his years in Manti his health declined. However, he was able to continue his supervision of the Manti Temple to its completion in 1888 that same year, at a birthday celebration in his honor, Folsom sermonized his descendants and friends, encouraging them to be faithful to the church and expressing his own lifelong dedication to craftsmanship and perfection in his work despite the criticism of others. He also allowed that he did not expect to see another birthday.

As he predicted. Folsom quietly died at home the following year, only six days short of his eighty-sixth birthday. William Harrison Folsom's legacy to the people of Utah and the LDS Church was generous. His numerous descendants have included a number of architects. All of his remaining major buildings are listed on either the State Register or the National Register of Historic Places.

Excerpts from Paul L. Anderson, "William Harrison Folsom: Pioneer Architect (1815-1901)" *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 43:3 (Summer 1975), 240-259. Reprinted with permission, Craig Fuller, *Utah Historical Quarterly*.