



St. Thomas, Nevada: A History Uncovered

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“(Some one hundred and sixty years ago) ... Las Vegas was a failed experiment. Missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints built a fort in the Las Vegas Valley in 1855, but poor relationships with the Southern Paiute, crop failures, weather, and the Utah War led to its abandonment in 1857. The political, economic, and social locus of the area was sixty miles to the east, in St. Thomas, Nevada. Located on the Muddy River, St. Thomas sat on the only significant water source for a one-hundred-and-twenty-mile stretch of the Old Spanish Trail, and became the main town on the Mormon supply line that stretched from the Colorado River to St. George, Utah.”

– Dr. Aaron J. McArthur



Unidentified farmer in his field near St. Thomas. Courtesy Boulder City Museum.

The complete history of St. Thomas, Nevada is arduously entangled by an array of factors, most importantly, water. The town’s growth and survival was further influenced by indigenous culture, religious pursuit, farming, mining, roadways and railroads. The people of St. Thomas became as diverse as its influences—together, the community found itself in a revolving and relentless quest for survival. Ultimately, it would be water, the community’s very source of livelihood, that would inundate their dreams.

In his book, *St. Thomas, Nevada: A History Uncovered*, Dr. Aaron J. McArthur provides candid, insightful, honest, and exceptionally well-researched documentation on this community that has risen, more than once, from the depths of Lake Mead. The following is a brief overview comprised of excerpts from Dr. McArthur’s book, representing only a smattering of the rich history found in his pages.



Automobile traffic in St. Thomas. Courtesy Boulder City Museum.

“St. Thomas lies approximately sixty miles east of Las Vegas, Nevada, on the southern end of the Moapa Valley, which is close to the rim of the Great Basin. Surrounded by great aridity, the town site benefited from its proximity to the spring-fed Muddy River and the Virgin River. The area has little rainfall, searing heat in the summer, winds, and dust. Its official birthday was January 8, 1865, when Thomas Sassen Smith and his party of eleven men and three women arrived at the confluence of the Muddy and Virgin rivers and founded the town. Brigham Young (President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) established the town in part to secure Mormon self-sufficiency in the production of cotton.

Despite the low estimation that many whites had for the land, the Paiutes and their predecessors held the land in great regard, having inhabited the area for a millennium. The Paiute believed their god Tabuts placed them on the land, and that act of placement made the land sacred. The Paiute were not the first Native American group to make the area that became St. Thomas their home. In 1931 near the Colorado River, archaeologists discovered the bones of an ancient sloth in a cave over the remains of human presence—charcoal, flint, and bones. The bones of the sloth were approximately twenty thousand years old. The surrounding area contained further evidence of human habitation from eight thousand years ago.

Pueblo Grande de Nevada, also known as the Lost City, was the residence of a group of Pueblo Indians that lived in the area from about 100 AD to 1150 AD. Lost City residents grew corn, beans, squash, gourds, and cotton; gathered seeds, turquoise, and paint materials; and hunted. Archaeological exploration showed that they had large trade networks from the seashells found in the ruins. Given the evidence of extensive primitive salt mining, it is likely that salt was one of their main trade items. Hopi oral traditions suggest they are descended from people who lived on the Muddy. Some posit that drought, a stronger enemy, malaria, or yellow fever drove them from the area.

By the time Europeans found their way to the Moapa Valley, the Paiute had long made it their home. The Paiute found the land along the Muddy very amenable to their lifestyle. In addition to water, the

valley had other valuable resources. The Muddy had groves of the Desert Fan Palm, which the Paiute used for weaving baskets and bags, and for the construction of shelters. The area that became St. Thomas was very well suited to their agriculture, being generally level and close to the confluence of the Muddy and the Virgin Rivers, which provided irrigation water. Mormon leader Parley P. Pratt noted during his 1852 visit to the area that the Paiute were engaged in agriculture. He wrote that “sixty Muddy Indians in a state of nudity thronged the camp, bringing with them green corn, melons, and dressed skins in exchange for clothing.” Addison Pratt noted that there were, “...fine fields of wheat, corn and beans, above us that belonged to the Indians.” They “irrigated their lands from this stream and their field had the appearance of bearing a very heavy crop.” Joseph W. Young also reported on their farming practices. He said they planted their wheat in hills, one to two feet apart, and watered it often, but did not let the water stand and soak. He said this created large heads and full berries, so much so that he “never saw finer grain in [his] life.”

Establishing a Mormon community involved much more than just finding a promising spot of land. Site selection, who would settle, and often when they would travel to the site was all determined by leaders in Salt Lake City. After Brigham Young decided to create a settlement on the Muddy River, the ecclesiastical domination continued with the establishment, surveying, and peopling of St. Thomas, all of which conformed to eighteen years of Mormon settlement patterns in Deseret.

Once the Saints made it safely to the Valley (1865), they commenced establishing their settlement. As they lacked legal title to the land, they occupied it by squatter’s rights. With the exception of San Bernardino where they purchased the land their settlement was built on, this was standard practice throughout the entire Mormon domain.

While it was true that the Muddy did have water and arable land, there were significant disadvantages to living there, the weather being the chief among them. Summertime temperatures could top 120°. In the official history of the Muddy Mission, Assistant Church

Historian Andrew Jensen wrote (how) men working in the field would put fresh coffee grounds in a canteen and hang it on a bush. By noon, the coffee was ready. Schoolgirls would run until their feet hurt, throw down their bonnet or apron, and stand on it until their feet cooled. Adding to their discomfort were occasional outbreaks of malaria, influenza, whooping cough, and other maladies.

Producing enough food to survive was very important, but the main agricultural pursuit of the residents of St. Thomas was to produce cotton for the rest of the Saints in Utah. While it lacked the same economic importance to St. Thomas, salt was another very important commodity for the settlers. The salt mine was five miles from the town, but all land-bound traffic heading to the mine went through St. Thomas. It was a very valuable commodity for culinary, livestock, and mining uses. Everyone had free access to the mine and extracted their own salt.

St. Thomas may have been remote from the main body of the Saints along the Wasatch Front and in Dixie, but they discovered that they were anything but remote when it came to interactions with the federal and state governments. State boundary maneuvering from 1866 to 1870 between Arizona, Nevada, and Utah placed the town, at various times, in each state. On December 19, 1870, (it was) recorded that the boundary survey had been completed and that all the settlements on the Muddy were officially in Nevada. The total amount of (back) tax and cost for 1870 alone would have been about twelve thousand dollars in gold coin (which they did not have).

Because the Saints felt it was imperative to leave quickly to avoid prosecution by county officials, they were not able to take everything they might have otherwise. As the Saints left, there were miners and other opportunists that flocked to the valley to take up the land and improvements left by the departing Saints.

Even though the Church abandoned the area in 1871, the proximity of so many Latter-day Saints to such large tracts of relatively unused agricultural land almost guaranteed the Muddy would not be completely left to miners, drifters, and outlaws. Beginning in 1880, Mormons began to come back to the Muddy to settle, this time without the Church's planning and direction.

Since they were no longer required by authorities in Salt Lake City to focus their farming attention on cotton, they could grow a



Unidentified farmer irrigating his fields near St. Thomas. Courtesy Boulder City Museum.

more reasonable, and sustainable, range of agricultural products. Because they were also now free to associate with the Gentiles, they were also free to sell their produce to area miners, which proved a ready market.

The establishment of a school provided a more positive development for the town. In 1893, George B. Whitney moved to St. Thomas and took up the duties of schoolteacher. A few years later, Whitney moved the school to a boarded up tent. It was not until 1915 that St. Thomas had a dedicated school building.

Prospects for St. Thomas and the rest of the valley at the close of the nineteenth century were much brighter than they had been in 1871. The Nevada—Utah border was firmly established, and the population slowly began to climb. Once a basic level of security was established, some residents began to, in the finest tradition of western communities, boost the area.

By 1910, the population had risen to ninety-three, but it is the 1920 census that really shows that the town had recovered most of the population that it had lost half a century earlier. That year, the population of the town reached 170, about 75 percent of the peak 1868 population.



Departing residents paddle past Hannig's Ice Cream Parlor. Edwards Collection, UNLV Special Collections.

The Church's injunction against mining did not survive into the twentieth century. Many devout members of the Church engaged in mining with just as much zeal as their Gentile counterparts. Several of the residents of the town operated successful mining operations. Prospectors struck gold at the base of Granite Mountain, across the Virgin River from St. Thomas. Interestingly, residents of St. Thomas knew about the deposits at Gold Butte and Granite Mountain, but not being miners, they did not realize the true value of the deposits that were in their back yard.

The Paiute remained a constant presence in and around St. Thomas, though armed confrontations did not. Inez Gibson Waymire, daughter of Bishop Robert O. Gibson, claimed that not many Paiute actually lived on the reservation, but camped in tepees by the "Big Ditch." The Paiute men and women continued as a valuable source of labor.

Life in St. Thomas in the first two decades of the twentieth century was not always idyllic, but it was a close community nonetheless. Neighbors planted and harvested each other's fields and treated wagons and threshers as community property. The only town government was a school board. The town required no police or jail. All civic leadership was performed by church leaders. Residents united in the promotion of their town, excited by the advances made in transportation to and from St. Thomas."

What stands out in the work of Dr. McArthur's research is that the road to building St. Thomas was unlike most early settlements by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The town was abandoned by its settlers, "taken up by other people, and assigned new meanings."

In short, the history of St. Thomas between 1910 and the 1920's was that of a bustling frontier town. The Union Pacific railroad ran a line through the valley with St. Thomas as a terminus. The Arrowhead Trail, the first automobile road connecting Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, was built through the Valley of Fire to St. Thomas resulting in increased tourism. But when fire broke out and damaged the bridge across Virgin River, the road was moved to a more northern route across Mormon Mesa. Ultimately, the resilience of the community was to be dammed... literally.

Ken Clarke, a retired resident of Henderson, Nevada who wanders the desert exploring historic sites, offers this "watered down" version of St. Thomas' last days.

"The construction of Hoover Dam and the resulting rise in the waters of the Colorado River forced the abandonment of the town in 1938. Before the water got there, most of the buildings were knocked down, dismantled or moved. The orchards and many of the large shade trees were cut down so they wouldn't snag boats from the bottom of the lake.

Over the years, St. Thomas had been under 60 feet of water. Fast-forward to (2018) and nearly 15 years of drought, the opportunity now exists to explore a ghost town. Foundations, walls, and grated cisterns dot the site, along with numerous alkali-crusted trails branching in all directions."

Just prior to inundation, the original cemetery was relocated to higher ground in nearby Overton. On June 11, 1938, the water was quickly approaching what had already become a virtual ghost town. Leland "Rox" or "Rock" Whitmore and his wife were a few of the last holdouts. Whitmore was the postmaster, and spent the last day of the town's existence busily cancelling letters and postcards before loading their car with some 5000 pieces of mail, and driving out of town for the final time.

From his extensive research, Dr. McArthur wrote about the final day St. Thomas was to see light in 1938. His work surely has all but placed him there in time.

"When the sun rose on the Moapa Valley on June 12, it did not rise on St. Thomas, buried by water and progress; the town was no more. In the seventy-three years of the town's existence, it died twice. This time, however, its passing appeared permanent."

What remained of St. Thomas structurally had peered above the waterline twice since the Colorado River's water reached the town: first, in 1945, and again in 1963. Fully exposed now for a decade, the foundations and other remains are included in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area and protected by the National Park Service as a historic site.



Dismantling a house in St. Thomas. Edwards Collection, UNLV Special Collections.

TELL ME MORE!

For more information and to read the complete work by Dr. McArthur check out: *St. Thomas, Nevada A History Uncovered* by Aaron McArthur Forward by Harry Reid Published 2013 by University of Nevada Press. Also available on Amazon.

