

# The Changing Face of Faith: Out Migration of Neighborhood Churches as a Monitor of Urban Social Change

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Documenting the daily is difficult. Mothers save christening gowns not diapers. Men proudly mount wooden handled rifles rather than hand saws. Historic churches are carefully restored while tenement apartment buildings are destroyed. Utah's 19<sup>th</sup> c. Mormons were notorious record keepers, but usually they wrote down prophetic exhortations and directives, blessings and marriages, not news of labor union organization, Greek festivals or Buddhist weddings. These occurred in the neighborhood to the west of the Mormon stronghold on Main Street and seemed unimportant in the larger drama of religious kingdom building.

Yet the historian who reconstructs history using only the homogeneous history of the mainstream and ignores the diversity of the periphery misses the richness of the history of this place, of Salt Lake City. This is easy to do because so much physical evidence of diversity has been lost. Here, traces of former architectural and urban neighborhoods create a hybrid layering of spatial meanings. Yet social order was taught through this environment. Understanding their meanings requires a shift in view, new questions about linkages, the totality and the past, the present, and the future are related.

In preparation for the 2002 Olympics, Salt Lake City has undergone an intense period of growth and development. Increasingly, the westside neighborhood, locally called the Gateway, has been the focal point of the Mayor, entrepreneurs, community activists, and others for its potential economic benefit to the city. In this debate over the shape Gateway will take on in the future the past has been largely ignored.

## The Process of Change

Through the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the process of urbanization created profound changes in the nature of the city itself and the pattern of life. The accretion of an urban population was not the only factor that caused change but spatial regrouping, influenced by industrialization, technological change and social dynamics did as well. What resulted was the transformation of society. As was true of 19<sup>th</sup> century cities throughout American Salt Lake City increasingly became marked by specialization, variety, complexity, and regularity instead of the original simplicity and lack of differentiation that marked earlier community building efforts. Part of the increase in population which underlay these fundamental changes was due to immigration from abroad and from the American countryside drawn to Utah by the promise of economic opportunity.

As a result of this influx, parts of the city began to resemble a mosaic of immigrant neighborhoods and ethnic ghettos. As was true elsewhere, nationality groups tended to live in distinct areas of the city. Older ethnic groups tended to move elsewhere. According to one urban historian, there was an "assumption of ethnic 'clannishness' . . . Loyalty to the old country was associated with a reluctance of the immigrant to give allegiance to his adopted land—an unwillingness to become 'Americanized.'" For the most part, immigrant life was organized along lines of nationality, giving support to the perception of native born Americans that the 'new immigrant' represented a threat to established society.

Migration did not wipe away their histories or their cultural identities which greatly complicated the process of acculturation. According to Oscar Handlin, "They could not simply acquire fresh habits; they were tied to old ones which they had to adapt to novel conditions. This applied equally to language, ways of thought and worship and to patterns of family behavior."<sup>2</sup>

But their shared problems in important ways bound them together and formed a sort of social cement. Ethnic organizations sprang up to help newcomers acclimate to the new place. Without doubt the single most important organization the immigrants brought with them as they traveled from the old world to the new was their church. Moving to America did not require that they shed their religious beliefs and practices. Instead, churches gave immigrants the familiar in an overwhelmingly unfamiliar place. Moreover, for the most part, instead of joining native congregations they established their own. Churches were familiar places of worship but equally important they included integral elements of the way of life in their old homes.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century Salt Lake City was a city of immigrants. In fact, in 1880 more than one third of the total population was foreign born. Many of these were converts to the Mormon church from Great Britain, Scandinavia, and other countries in Western Europe. But during the last few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first two of the 20<sup>th</sup> new immigrant populations flooded this western town in search of jobs, opportunities and new lives. These included Chinese railroad workers, Irish laborers come from the East, Greeks and Italians who came to work in Utah mines. Many were from the Balkans, Mediterranean, Middle East, and Japan. They were a ready workforce, pushed out of their homes by a variety of forces—social dislocation, poverty, political unrest and pulled by the promise of work for the rapidly opening mines, mills, smelters and for the railroads.

After the turn of the century, immigrants came primarily from eastern and southern European and Asian countries and were part of the 20 million people who immigrated to America between 1880 and 1920. By 1910, the census recorded more than 2,000 Japanese, 3,100 Italians, 4,000 Greeks, and 3,500 Serbs and Austrians in Utah. Most likely these figures are low because census takers missed counting migrant workers or workers moving from place to place in search of new jobs. Although the world the immigrants confronted in Utah was strange and new in the same ways it was for those who stopped in New York City or Chicago—here because of the hegemony of the Mormon church and the dominant population of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and because of their religious beliefs, their ethnicity, and their economic status they were more truly outsiders.

Unlike their Mormon predecessors who established permanent roots, these immigrants came to Utah to stay only long enough to help their destitute parents and other relatives back home. As a group they were overwhelmingly male, young and single. They came to Utah to secure jobs, earn money to send home and make their fortunes. They worked primarily on the railroads, in the mines rather than on farms, although they were largely a peasant, agricultural class of immigrants. Most intended to stay only as long as it took them to make enough money to get a fresh start back home.

Beginning after the 1870s when the Rio Grande Railroad Depot and the Union Pacific Railroad Depots were located on Third West in downtown Salt Lake City, foreign born newcomers tended to locate near the rail yards and associated industries—here they could easily find jobs, locate near other immigrants from their homeland and find a place to worship with people of their own faith. Neighborhoods logically formed around business districts, where jobs existed.

When transportation options improved and when they could afford to, middle class families moved outside the neighborhood some distance away which vacated additional housing for continually arriving immigrants. Some suggest that this process, which occurred subtly and gradually over an extended period of time but which resulted in a significant turnover of population represented a substantial failed urban proletariat, a floating population drifting from place to place in search of work.<sup>3</sup>

In Salt Lake City a Japanese community sprang up along a two-block area of First South Street between West Temple and 300 West in the first two decades of the twentieth century. There, oriental specialty stores, restaurants, laundries, barbershops, fish markets, hotels and rooming houses, and produce stands provided the needs of the Japanese population. The Japanese language newspaper the *Rocky Mountain Times* documented the life of the Japanese community. Yozo Hashimoto was the earliest Japanese labor agent to supply workers for western industries. His nephew, Edward Daigoro started the E.D. Hashimoto Company at 163 West South Temple and played a key role in putting Japanese immigrants to work.<sup>4</sup>

The Japanese, like the Chinese, were the subjects of intense racial prejudice which created an icy wall between them and the mainstream Salt Lake City community. But life in Japan town was surprisingly rich. Social activities centered around the church. For the most part Buddhist, their community included a number of immigrants who had converted to Christianity in Japan. But many held membership in two religions. In 1918 the Japanese Church of Christ was established in Salt Lake City.<sup>5</sup>

Nearby, Greek town was first located between 400 and 600 West streets on West Second South. Here Greek boardinghouses, coffeehouses, saloons, grocery stores, and import stores sold exotic Greek favored products—octopus, Turkish tobacco, olive oil, goat cheese, liquers, figs, dates and Greek language newspapers. In 1911, there were more than 60 Greek businesses on these two blocks alone. There the Greeks found refuge from the prejudice they faced in other parts of town. There they could escape at least temporarily the displacement and malaise they felt in Mormon Utah. Greek town encircled the railyard and coffeehouses like the Parthenon, the Open Heart, and the Hellenic had padrones, most importantly Leonidas G. Skliris a man with immense power. Newcomers paid an initial fee of \$20, signed a contract and were told to trade at Greek businesses or they would lose their jobs. Agents of Skliris owned the businesses—meat, grocery, and clothing stores. They arrived, found temporary sanctuary in Greek Town and then were sent to Carbon County mines, Murray-Midvale smelters, Bingham Canyon mines, and north of Ogden for railroad work.

The church became the community center of Greek town and truly centered their lives—giving them a sense of identification, meaning, and social life. Their first church, a small, one-domed brick church, was dedicated on 29 October 1905 on Fourth South between Third and Fourth West. It served the Greeks, Serbians, Christian Albanians, and Russian people. “The men brought with them an ambivalence toward priests, but not to their religion.”<sup>6</sup>

The Greek church was an important part of the Greek community. “The immigrants were now assured of the Eastern Orthodox ceremonial rites of life and death. Bearded, long-haired priests, wearing black robes, glinting pectoral crosses, and tall black cylindrical hats, walked the streets of their Greek Town domain, performed the mysteries (sacraments), arbitrated disputes, and helped in matchmaking by writing letters to Greece for illiterate immigrants—although they were often barely literate themselves.”<sup>7</sup> In the mid-1920s, the present Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church at 279 South 300 West was built by the congregation. This elaborate two towered, onion domed brick church was the mother church for Greek immigrants in the intermountain west until churches were built in surrounding states. Archbishops and bishops, in robes and black veils, staffs of office in hand walked Salt Lake City hundreds of miles away from their homes. Priests traveled the territory from this center place to perform marriages, baptize children, and bury young men killed in industrial accidents.

## Observing the Process of Change

Tracking the movement of churches serves as a monitor of social evolution in this neighborhood and is a useful device for charting change and movement of immigrant populations. This research is confined to the westside neighborhood called Gateway because it was historically the literal gateway for immigrants who came to Salt Lake City on the railroads and entered the city from this starting point. The area includes approximately 650 acres, created by the intersections of I-15, Third West, North Temple, and Tenth South. The study begins in 1889 because this was the first year churches were documented on the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, the single most important source of information about the location and movement of these ecclesiastical structures. In combination with Polk Directories, Sanborn Maps provided information about size, structure, ownership and orientation of these buildings in relationship to other neighborhood structures. In addition, 1889 was the first year there was diversity in religious representation and churches other than Mormon ones appeared on the map. The study from that point continues in essentially twenty year increments until 1999.

The original locations of church buildings are indicated on the series of accompanying maps as well as the location to where they moved within the area. The first year studied, 1889 was just two decades after the coming of the railroad to Utah and the growing diversity of this western city's population. That year the First Baptist Church and the Presbyterian, "Westminster" churches served resident populations as well as residents of the other parts of the city. These churches served a primarily Anglo Saxon population, British, Irish and Scottish immigrants many of whom were men who stayed in Utah after coming there with Patrick Connor's troops in 1862. Their ethnicity, then, had more to do with their place of origin than the color of their skin or distinctive cultural lifestyles that set them apart from the Mormon population. They spoke English and shared a common history with many of the Mormon immigrants from the British Isles.

In 1911, there were four churches—Westminster moved to First West and Sixth South, more in the heart of the district; the First Baptist Church moved a half a block to the West. St. Patrick's Catholic Church was located on First South and Sixth West, and the Greek Orthodox Holy Trinity Church was first located at First South and 550 West in the center of Greek Town. Each appeared on the 1911 map.

Most of the ethnic neighborhoods began to break up in the late 1920s. By that time the United States Congress passed legislation which severely limited the number and type of people who could immigrate to the United States. Salt Lake City's immigrant population was no longer predominantly young and male but family based. Most of the earlier immigrants had not returned to their native lands, but instead had married, started their own families, and settled down to make a permanent life in their new homes. Eventually they left the mines and smelters and started their own new small businesses and professions and as they did moved eastward into more desirable neighborhoods throughout the city instead of ethnic enclaves in the industrial section of town.

Yet there were a total of nine churches in the neighborhood in 1921, two of which were Mormon meetinghouses, two Catholic—St. Patrick's moved further west and the "Italian and Mexican Catholic Church" was located at Fifth South and Fifth West. The Buddhist Temple first appears on a Sanborn map located at Third South and 250 West in Japanese Town that year, Holy Trinity in Greek Town, and the Japanese Church of Christ at Third West and First South. In addition, there were two Methodist congregations—the "West Side" and "Italian Mission" churches. Both were located west of Sixth West and between Second South and Fourth South, the area designated as "Little Italy." Increasingly these churches were used by non-resident populations who traveled some distance to come to worship.

In the 1940s both Methodist churches were closed down altogether but a third—Grace Methodist was built in its place at Eighth West and Third South. Holy Trinity had been rebuilt, this time on the corner of Fourth South and Third West. Two Mormon meetinghouses, the Japanese Church of Christ and a new congregation—the Church of God located at Eighth West and First South were still functioning. St. Patrick's moved out of the district. By the late 1940s, ethnic groups who had once lived together in self defined, recognizable communities were dispersed throughout suburban neighborhoods across the Salt Lake Valley.

In 1951 there were a total of ten churches in the area, which indicates that there was still a residential population as well as a peripheral population with a relationship to the district in terms of religious affiliation. Three of period churches fit into a category here designated as non-denominational—the Salt Lake Gospel Chapel on Fifth South and 250 West, the Mt. Zion Church of God at Third South and 650 West, and the Assembly of God at 600 West and 250 South. The Buddhist Temple, the Japanese Church of Christ, the two Mormon churches, Grace Methodist and Holy Trinity were all still active congregations. In 1971, the "Latin American Assembly of God" church was located at Eighth West and 250 South. The Assembly of God shut down.

In 1999 there are seven active churches in the neighborhood, which currently has only three percent residential structures, which have for the most part members who live outside the district. This is contrary to the tradition in Salt Lake City of geographical Mormon wards where neighbors attend churches in the immediate vicinity of their homes. There are no Mormon chapels in the area which means there is not a substantial enough local population of resident Mormons to justify a local church building. Although this is not true outside of Utah it is here. Therefore, this worship pattern is yet another feature that distinguishes these churches. They include the Spanish Church of God, the Salt Lake City Mission, which serves the homeless population, the Presbyterian Church of Utah, the Japanese Church of Christ and the Buddhist Temple, Holy Trinity, and Grace Methodist.

Since the 1950s most buildings in the ethnic neighborhoods have for the most part been demolished. Large parking lots completely replace what were once small family gardens, small tent

Slavic villages, or Greek coffeehouses. Little remains of the Italian section other than the Bertolini Building on 143 West and Second South. Nearly the entire Japanese section was torn down to build the Salt Palace, a sports arena and convention center. Each block has its own story of past and present realities.

The growth of the railroad industry was one of the primary generators of change in the neighborhood. These ethnic enclaves eventually reverted slowly to warehouses, industrial complexes and other transportation related entities. Several of the businesses which have stayed, some for longer than one hundred years, are related to the industrial, manufacturing, and distribution history of the city. In 1999, sixty-eight percent of the land in the district is classified as industrial and less than three percent residential.

## Conclusion

The term Gateway conjures up different images for different people—for some perhaps an inviting entrance into an interesting and intriguing place. To others an opportunity to experience something new, a welcome or new experience. The focus on this historic west side neighborhood as a “Gateway” provides a unique opportunity to recreate a vision of place and its relationship to the past, to investigate the positive and “opening” expansive aspects of Gateway to take down social or historical barriers—we can remember what we have chosen to forget.

In the effort to capture the essence of the past, new questions must be asked and new methodologies used. This study uses the movement of church buildings to mirror neighborhood change. As Salt Lake City’s immigrant population vacated its westside neighborhood it took with it its sacred space—leaving only a few poignant reminders of the rich cultural and ethnic history that existed before. The movement of churches helps record and reflect the changed nature of what was once an immigrant city and the process of homogenization that changed its social character.

For the people of a city to remember who they are they must consider the human element of the past, considering the unique and specific history that grounded their place. The blank parking lots and industrial complexes of the Gateway are a haunting reminder of what we have lost in the process of historical change.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Glaab, Charles N. and A. Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 126.
- <sup>2</sup> Handlin, Oscar, ed. *Immigration as a Factor in American History* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), 76.
- <sup>3</sup> Glaab, 129.
- <sup>4</sup> The Hashimoto Company furnished section gang workers to the Western Pacific and to the Denver and Rio Grande and supplied them with imported Japanese foods, rice and clothing. Payrolls were sent out through Daigoro; money orders mailed to the men’s families in Japan; credit extended; and numerous legal and governmental forms and applications, difficult for immigrants with limited education to understand, taken care of.
- <sup>5</sup> Other religious organizations with a small membership are: Church of World Messianity, and Seicho-No-Ie Salt Lake Shinto Soai Kai (“Home of Infinite Life, Wisdom and Abundance”) with precepts of healing similar to Christian Science. A Mormon Japanese ward is called Dai-Ichi (“Number One”) Branch. Besides these churches, every Christian faith counts Japanese members.
- <sup>6</sup> Papanikolas, Helen Z. “The Exiled Greeks,” *The Peoples of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Utah Historical Society, 1981), 415.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.