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Davis County people played key roles in BYU Jerusalem center

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Little did we know as we were boarding a Delta flight from Salt Lake City en route to Israel last month that seven days and some 9,000 miles later we'd discover that we hadn't quite left Davis County behind.

We found ourselves standing in front of a memorial in Haifa, Israel, honoring John Alexander Clark of Farmington. Clark — who lived in the 1890s — had no idea that he would play an integral part in bringing the BYU Jerusalem Center into existence nearly a century later.

As Paul Harvey would say, now the rest of the story.

In an effort to strengthen the relationship between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the State of Israel, in the late 1960s and 1970s the church sought a parcel of land suitable for building a center for a BYU educational program. The goal was to build a place where students could experience life in the Near East and the Holy Land. BYU and church leaders had spent years looking for property, but Israel made it virtually impossible for outsiders to purchase any part of their land.

In 1979, President Spencer W. Kimball was in Jerusalem to dedicate the Orson Hyde Memorial

Garden located on the hillside across from the Old City of Jerusalem, near the Garden of Gethsemane. He had asked Elder Jeffrey Holland (then Commissioner of the Church Education System), to show him some of the sites being considered for the center.

Kimball turned down one after another — until the group inspected one location on the opposite side of the hill from where the center would eventually be built. As Kimball and a few others walked to the other side, the Old City of Jerusalem came into full view. He paused, then said this was definitely the place.

It would still take a miracle — not just one but many — to bring about the actual construction of the center, however. There were obstacles at every turn.

The land in question was acquired by Israel as part of the Six-Day War in 1967. Because it was previously part of Jordan, it was in a type of “no man’s land.” There were even two Israeli groups that had first dibs on the property, but nothing was progressing to be able to build anything anyway.

Mayor Teddy Kollek of Jerusalem, who was a major proponent of the center, was receiving insurmountable pressure from all sides to prohibit the “Mormons” from building. But he supported it because, “I was fighting intolerance and obscurantism, and I won.”

Another hurdle was Israeli law that required any construction project to stop if workers discovered a tomb or even one bone of a skeleton. In

Jerusalem, a city that has been built, destroyed, then rebuilt again some 20 times, this was nearly impossible. Yet even though 400 pilings were driven down to bedrock to support the BYU structure, not one bone was found.

In addition, if any of the building permits or activities related to construction were found to be illegal, the project would be halted. Israeli authorities meticulously reviewed all the documents, after which the Attorney General announced, “everything the Mormons did pertaining to the legalities of the Jerusalem Center are valid.”

In still another challenge, students and faculty were totally forbidden to proselyte their religion in Israel.

Meanwhile, if there had been a moratorium declared (which was requested by numerous groups), if there had been a change in government, if there had been a serious accident, or if Holland had succumbed to outside pressures to sell the property, the project could have died. And the pressure on Holland had been enormous because he was given a blank check, with the instructions to fill in any amount in return for abandoning the project.

These, and many many more obstacles, dragged the approval process on for nearly four years. But all of it would have been in vain if it hadn't been for Elder Alexander Clark, the LDS missionary from Farmington.

One of the final requirements was that the church must find a physical presence in Israel prior to 1948, the date when Israel was given its independence by the United Nations.

Although it seemed highly improbable, somehow someone came up with – John Alexander Clark. Little did Clark know as he was studying the Arabic language as a missionary in the small Palestine town of Haifa, now Israel, that he would one day play a great role, even amid personal tragedy.

In 1895, he contracted smallpox, died and was buried on what would become Israeli soil. He,

along with another missionary, Adolf Haag, who had died in Israel two-and-a-half years earlier, became the local “presence” the church needed.

Due to these many circumstances, the BYU center was eventually built — with the pivotal help of Davis County residents: Alexander Clark of Farmington and Jeffrey Holland of Bountiful.

Read more: The Davis Clipper - Davis County people played key roles in BYU Jerusalem center