

Education Pioneer

John Morgan founded Morgan Commercial College, which taught many prominent early day Utahns

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By Dennis Lythgoe Deseret News staff writer

His male students included Heber J. Grant, Orson F. Whitney, Mathias Cowley, J. Golden Kimball, James H. Moyle, Joseph T. Kingsbury and Brigham H. Roberts.

Some of the women at his school were Ruth May Fox, Dora Stringham Ashley, Minerva Hinckley, Lelia Tuckett Freeze and Mattie Bailey.

John Morgan, a pioneer of early Utah education, brought these and numerous other Utah students under his wing at Salt Lake City's Morgan Commercial College.

Morgan, who was born in 1842 in Indiana, farmed until the age of 20, then enlisted in the Union army, where he served honorably until the end of the Civil War.

Afterward, he moved to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and enrolled as a student in Eastman's Commercial College. After graduation, he accepted a contract to drive a herd of Texas longhorn beef cattle from Kansas City to Salt Lake City.

The Great American Desert appealed to Morgan, so he stayed, operating his college first out of the old Deseret Museum Building, then relocating to the southwest corner of Richards and South Temple.

The college included Utah's first free public library and reading room.

Because interest in a business education was keen, Morgan soon had so many students he was forced to move to a more spacious two-story building at 257 S. Main.

When Morgan married one of his students, 16-year-old Helen Melvina ("Mellie") Groesbeck, her father gave them a block of land as a wedding present. So in 1869, Morgan built a new college at 144 W. 100 South.

The college thrived from 1867 until 1874, when it closed due to intense competition from the University of Deseret, soon to become the University of Utah.

Although founded before Morgan College in 1850, the University of Deseret initially struggled, then took a 16-year hiatus until Morgan College's success inspired its comeback.

At its peak, Morgan College had 700 students, compared with the University of Deseret's meager 200. As principal, Morgan freely spread such pithy words of wisdom as: "Do not allow the long winter evenings before you to be thrown away; or worse, do



Morgan College as it looked when it occupied the site of the new American Stores tower

not allow yourself to be drawn into the company of the vicious, within the walls of drinking saloons and billiard halls."

When Morgan College was founded, there were no other schools in the territory offering education above the elementary grades. When the college first opened, the subjects taught were bookkeeping, grammar, spelling, mental and practical arithmetic, commercial and international law and business correspondence.

Although not a member of the LDS

Church, Morgan lived in the home of LDS Bishop Joseph L. Heywood of the 17th Ward. Some of the leading citizens of the territory were uneasy that many young LDS men and women were attending a school administered by a non-Mormon.

These concerns were alleviated in November 1867, when Morgan was baptized into the LDS Church.

Besides Morgan himself, Morgan College had seven teachers, whose teaching methods were highly practical. It took a student from six months to two years to complete a course of study.

Periodically, eminent businessmen, bankers, lawyers and merchants gave lectures to the students.

The college maintained miniature grocery stores, dry goods stores, brokerage houses and a bank to enable students to dabble in business life. If a student wanted to operate a grocery store, he did so, buying merchandise at wholesale and selling it at retail.

After the college closed, Morgan served in the territorial Legislature, then as an LDS missionary and later as president of the Southern States Mission.

Finally, he spent 10 years as a member of the LDS Church's Council of Seventy. He died unexpectedly at the premature age of 52, after suffering for several weeks with typhoid-malaria.

On May 8, 1959, the eloquent and charismatic Morgan was honored by his son, Nicholas G. Morgan Sr., when a Vermont granite monument to his memory and to that of Morgan College was unveiled at 257 S. Main in front of S.H. Kress Co.

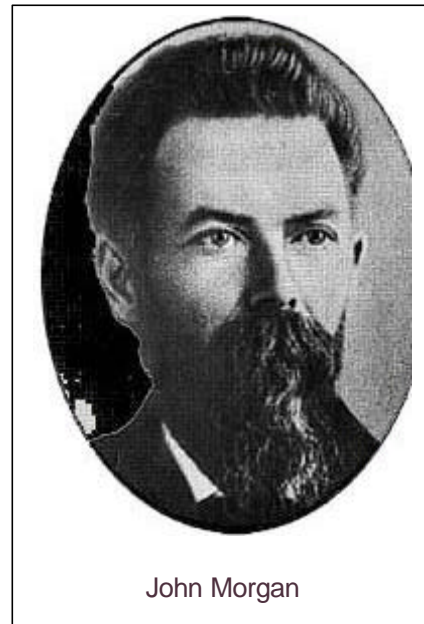
A fountain adorned each side, and on top of the monument was a bust of Morgan, sculpted by Ortho Fairbanks.

Two bronze plaques were embedded in the base, one showing a picture of the historic institution, the first commercial college west of the Mississippi, and the other recounting its brief history.

Karen Matthews, a granddaughter of John Morgan, remembers a day several years ago when she noticed Morgan's head had disappeared from the monument.

"I was very upset. I called the mayor and asked 'Where is the bust of John Morgan?'"

No one knew.



John Morgan

About a year later, Matthews' cousin, Bud Morgan, got a call from someone who said he had the bust. He said a friend had picked it up at a garage sale, then gave it to him when he moved to California.

Sure enough, family members recovered the bust, in surprisingly good shape, from a home on the Avenues.

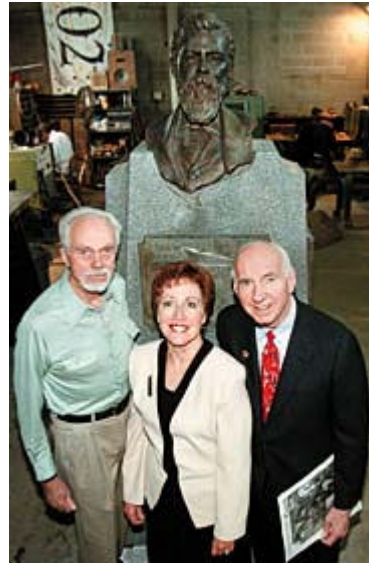
Although the Morgan family made certain the head was fastened more securely, the monument had to be removed during the recent construction of the American Stores Building.

So Matthews is planning the return of the monument to its rightful home on Sept. 12, with most of the students' names permanently etched into it.

"I thought it would be fun for people to know if their ancestors went to the commercial college," says Matthews.

Ortho Fairbanks has redesigned the monument, with a marble base. He replaced the fountains on either side with a young male student and a young female student.

As John Morgan once said, "A school room without order is a public nuisance.



Sculptor Ortho Fairbanks, left, Karen Matthews and John Morgan stand in front of refurbished Morgan College monument, which will be placed in front of the American Stores building in the 300 block of Main Street