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Mountain Meadows group wants church out

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JENNIFER DOBNER - The Associated Press

Descendants of the 120-member Arkansas immigrant party slaughtered in southern Utah by pioneer Mormon settlers say their plea for federal stewardship of the Mountain Meadows mass grave site has been rejected by leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Phil Bolinger and Scott Fancher of the Arkansas-based Mountain Meadows Monument Foundation say they got the news June 6 in a telephone call from Elder Marlin Jensen, who oversees the church history department.

"He told us that President (Gordon B.) Hinckley had turned us down. He doesn't think it's in the best interests of the church to allow federal stewardship in the meadows," said Bolinger, the foundation president who is related to 30 of those killed. "That really bit me bad."

Jensen declined an interview, but confirmed through spokeswoman Kim Farah that the church will not pursue federal stewardship of the site. A similar request was also rejected in 1999.

Descendants want the site in the hands of a neutral third party because they believe the institutional church is complicit in the murders.

"It's not right for the people who had complicity to the killings to be the grave owner," said Bolinger, who discussed the issue with Jensen on April 25 in Salt Lake City.

"I asked him, 'How do you think the Kennedy family would feel if the Lee Harvey Oswald family had control of the Kennedy tomb?'"

History hangs the Sept. 11, 1857, event on southern Utah Mormon leaders and a small band of Paiute Indians, leaving the culpability of then-church president Brigham Young up for debate. An upcoming book from church historians takes the same position.

Headed to California, the wagon train led by Capt. Alexander Fancher and John Baker arrived in the Utah territory at the same time the federal government was mounting pressure on the LDS Church for its practice of polygamy and disregard for federal oversight.

They camped first near Salt Lake City and then headed south to the meadow, a well-known stopover on the old Spanish Trail. The immigrants were attacked and spent a week engaged in gun skirmishes before local Mormon Elder John D. Lee rode in on horseback with a white flag to negotiate their rescue.

Persuaded to walk single-file and unarmed from the valley, the immigrants were shot at close range, stabbed or beaten to death. Their bodies were not buried.

Seventeen children were spared, all of them under age 6 -- young enough, some said, not to remember or speak of what they saw. The youngsters were adopted by local families and later returned to their relatives in Arkansas.

Lee was tried, convicted and executed for the massacre 20 years later and is the only person ever held responsible.

Today, the Mountain Meadows monument site is a 2,500-acre parcel in a rolling scrub-pine and sagebrush valley about 35 miles northwest of St. George.

The land is a patchwork of public and private holdings, some of which was passed down through families from pioneer ancestors.

There are four known mass grave sites and two memorials -- the rock pyramid known as the Carleton Cairn on the valley floor and a memorial wall on Dan Sill Hill, which overlooks the valley and is inscribed with the known names of victims from the 29 different families on the wagon train.

The monument is already on the National Park Service's Register of Historic Places, but the designation doesn't guarantee public access or public input before construction or other site changes, foundation attorney Scott Fancher said.

Foundation members believe a higher designation, such as national monument status, would better protect the interests of all and salve the wounds of many Fancher party descendants, said Bolinger, of Hindsville, Ark.

"Federal stewardship of this grave site ... that's all it would take to put this to bed," he said.

The foundation has support for a higher designation from the Arkansas congressional delegation, but the LDS Church would have to donate the land to the U.S. Department of Interior for that effort to begin, Fancher said.

Federal oversight might also have prevented the Aug. 3, 1999, maintenance work on the cairn when a church crew accidentally unearthed the remains of at least 28 men, women and children. A forensic evaluation was begun, but cut short on an order from Utah's then-Gov. Mike Leavitt, a descendant of some who participated in the massacre.

At a dedication ceremony of the rebuilt cairn that September, Hinckley said the church carries a moral responsibility to remember the victims, but fell short of acknowledging church complicity to the crime.

Church leaders are committed to appropriately preserving the Mountain Meadows site, Farah said.

"The church has owned the monument site at Mountain Meadows for many years. The property is open to the public and considerable time and resources are allocated to ensure that the property is well-maintained, open to the public and that those who perished there are appropriately remembered," she said.

Farah also confirmed what Washington County recorder's office records show -- over the past few months, the church has increased its holdings in the meadow. Since March at least two families have deeded their property over to the church.

"The church intends to administer and maintain this property in like manner, thereby

preserving it from either residential or commercial development," said Farah.

Bolinger said the foundation, one of three descendant groups, shared concerns that residential development in fast-growing Washington County would damage the site. But he's rankled by the church's acquisition of more land and says he'll continue to push for federal stewardship.

"It's the highest honor we could pay these people," Bolinger said.

On the Net:1857massacre.com

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