

# STUDENT REVIEW





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ARTICLES:  
**BYU  
STUDENTS  
EXPLORE  
THEIR  
HERITAGE**

# FATHER ABRAHAM AND THE SMOOT DYNASTY

WRITTEN BY  
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*As the third-great-grandson of Abraham O. Smoot, the author of this article submits he is living proof BYU does not engage in nepotism as he is yet to receive a single dime in scholarship money on account of his roots.*

## ABRAHAM O. SMOOT

A popular story among us Smoots is one about an encounter between Abraham Smoot and Brigham Young. It began when Young called Smoot into his office one day with a new assignment to be fulfilled immediately.

Smoot, a wealthy businessman and former mayor of Salt Lake City, had established himself as a major local figure. His family, property and business were all located in the Valley; thus, it came as a shock when Young instructed him to move to Provo to become president of the Utah Stake and head of the board of trustees of the fledgling Brigham Young Academy.

With trepidation, Smoot explained that his life was anchored in Salt Lake and that it would be impossible to move to Provo.

As the story goes, Young responded with a stern growl only he could muster and, pounding his fists on his desk, bellowed, “Brother Smoot! You can go to Provo, or you can go to hell!” (Today any Smoots attending the University of Utah sometimes wear T-shirts at family reunions sporting a portrait of A. O., as he is affectionately called in the family, with the caption: “I’d rather go to hell.”)

Abraham Owen Smoot was born Feb. 17, 1805 in Owenton, KY. His mother converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1833 and he in 1835. A year after conversion, he was ordained an Elder and served as a missionary in the Southern states with Wilford Woodruff, David Patten and other prominent early LDS figures.

Later he would take up arms in the Missouri Mormon War in an effort to fight for his church and family.

Before migrating to Utah with the Mormons, Smoot entered a practice that, to this day, remains controversial. In 1845-46, he became a polygamist by marrying, in addition to his current wife Margaret Thompson McMeans, Sarah Gibbens and Emily Hill. Some

years later he would also marry Diana Caroline Eldredge, Anne Kirstine Mauritzen and Hannah Rogers.

When he did leave for Utah, he – being a Southerner – brought his two slaves.

During his lifetime, Smoot would sire 27 children and adopt three more, creating a lasting family dynasty. His descendants have appropriately given him the loving moniker “Father Abraham,” and today the name Smoot is nearly as ubiquitous along the Wasatch front as Romney, Young, Hinckley, Kimball or McConkie.

While living and working in Provo in compliance with Young’s directive, Smoot was elected mayor of the city. He also made significant personal financial contributions to ensure the survival of Brigham Young Academy. Upon his assumption of control of the board of trustees, the institution was teetering on total financial oblivion.

Thanks largely to Smoot’s sacrifice, which took a significant and lasting drain on his personal wealth, the academy survived and eventually grew into Brigham Young University. In gratitude for his sacrifice, BYU named its administration building after him where a small display honors his legacy. Smoot lived the rest of his life in Provo, where he died and was buried in 1895.

## REED SMOOT

But the story of the Smoot Dynasty does not end with Father Abraham. One of his many sons, Reed Smoot, was the center of a fiery controversy that launched the Church into national headlines.

Known today as the “Smoot Hearings,” this controversy sparked over Smoot’s position as an apostle at the time he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1902. As a result, Smoot faced a serious threat to losing his seat.

Five years earlier, Brigham Henry Roberts of the First Quorum of the Seventy was elected to the House of Representatives. Roberts, however, was stripped of his seat because he was a polygamist. Although Smoot was not a polygamist, fears of Smoot taking marching orders from Salt Lake, or of Smoot wishing to institute a Mormon theocracy, led to a bitter three-year set of Congressional hearings to determine whether Smoot was fit for office. Church leaders including President Joseph F. Smith and Apostles James Talmage and Francis Lyman, among others, were summoned before Congress to give testimony, and portions of the LDS endowment ceremony were re-enacted during the hearings to see if any anti-American subterfuge lurked in the secret rite.



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During this time the press tore into the Church and Smoot in what was arguably the first “Mormon Moment.”

Smoot eventually succeeded in securing his Senate seat against a tide of anti-Mormon sentiment. He served in the Senate from 1908-33. After losing his seat in 1933, Smoot continued his work for the Church as an apostle until his death in 1941.

Some of Smoot’s legislation is looked upon favorably, such as the 1916 bill he sponsored creating the Nation Park Service. Other legislation, such as the infamous Smoot-Hawley Tariff of 1930, is credited by some economic historians for not only severely exacerbating the Great Depression, but also for crippling the already tattered economy of Germany and arguably only helping to aid in Adolph Hitler’s rise to chancellor just three years later.

## TODAY

Looking at the life of my third-great-grandfather Abraham Smoot, whose middle name I share, and at his son, Reed Smoot, their loyalty and perseverance stand out to me most. Although neither of these men were perfect, what they accomplished inspires me and makes me proud to be a descendant of Father Abraham and a part of the Smoot Dynasty. ■