

# *Connections to the Past*

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The program now calls for greetings by the president. Just what is really expected, however, is far from clear. One experienced president gave this sage advice to a new president about the role he should play at a commencement. “Think of yourself as the body at an Irish wake,” he said. “Your presence is necessary in order to have the party, but no one really expects you to say too much.” With that in mind, I would like to provide just a bit of context for today’s event.

The first graduation from this institution came at a time before it was a university. Brigham Young Academy, as it was then known, was formally established in 1875. For its first three decades it was more a combination grammar and secondary school than a university. At the end of the school’s first year, in 1876, the record indicates that “none of [the] students [had] advanced beyond the fifth reader level of grammar school,”<sup>1</sup> so no one graduated. The first group to graduate from the Academy came a year later in June 1877, when two women and one man received diplomas recognizing their completion of the teacher preparation program.<sup>2</sup> There is no record that any formal ceremony was held.

The first “collegiate diploma” was given four years later in 1881 to an exceptional student who had graduated from the high school a year earlier; his name was James E. Talmage.<sup>3</sup> Talmage was so bright and accomplished that, for a short period of time, he was both a student and a teacher at the school.<sup>4</sup>

Things have changed a bit since that time. We no longer check to see if any of our students have gone beyond the fifth reader level of grammar school before we schedule a graduation ceremony, and no high school diplomas are given out. Moreover, we honor a lot more than three students. Today we will recognize more than 5,000 students who will receive bachelor’s degrees, nearly 700 who will receive master’s degrees, and 185 who will receive doctoral degrees. We have come a long way since those early years.

At the same time, we are more closely linked to the seemingly distant past than we may realize. As I mentioned, the first person

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*Kevin J Worthen was president of Brigham Young University when this commencement address was given on 23 April 2015.*

to receive a collegiate degree from what is now BYU was James E. Talmage, who went on to become a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The oldest graduating student this year (who is seventy years old and who I congratulate today), was born more than a decade after Elder Talmage died in 1933. So I am certain that none of our graduates here today ever met the first recipient of a BYU college degree. Yet there is a direct connection between Elder Talmage and many of today's graduates.

During his time as an educator, Elder Talmage personally mentored a bright young student named J. Reuben Clark Jr. As most of you know, J. Reuben Clark Jr. eventually became a member of the First Presidency of the Church. President Clark credited much of his success in life to the mentoring he received from Elder Talmage.<sup>5</sup> Recognizing the profound impact such mentoring had had on him, President Clark reached out to bright young people in his sphere of influence to personally mentor them. Among that select group was Harold B. Lee, a future president of the Church. Following the same pattern, President Lee personally mentored a brilliant scholar and young Church leader named Neal A. Maxwell, another future member of the Quorum of the Twelve. Elder Maxwell in turn personally mentored a number of those whom he identified as potential leaders in the kingdom, including an incredibly bright young medical scholar named Cecil O. Samuelson, who I am confident has had a personal impact on many of the graduates here today and who I know has had a profound influence on me.

From Talmage to Clark to Lee to Maxwell to Samuelson and then to you and me—five direct links and we are back to the beginning of this institution, connected to the very first person to have received a college diploma from BYU.

But the connection to the past goes beyond mere mentoring genealogy. While many things have changed since the days when James E. Talmage was a student here, the core purpose and focus of this institution have remained the same. During his second year at the Academy, when he was just fifteen years old, Talmage enrolled in the newly formed Normal Department, organized to prepare teachers.<sup>6</sup> Talmage kept notes of the lectures given to the department that year by Karl G. Maeser. A line from the notes of the first lecture states:

*Education boasts of having the highest . . . aim of any avocation in life. The whole range has but one object and purpose, which is to bring us nearer the platform of our God. This object was set forth and pointed out by Christ himself: "Be ye perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect." This should be a teacher's watchword.<sup>7</sup>*

That same aim—"to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life"<sup>8</sup>—remains the principal purpose of this university today, as the first line of our mission statement makes clear. It is a quest that will continue long after you leave this university, and indeed long after you have left this mortal existence. But it is the most important quest in which you will engage. May your education here and your use of that education to serve others in the future be productively employed to that end is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. In Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Provo: BYU Press, 1975–76), 1:102; citing *Utah Enquirer*, 23 May 1890.

2. The first three graduates in 1877 were Anna Kristina "Teenie" Smoot, Samuel D. Moore, and Caroline Ameilia "Caddie" Daniels (later Mills); see Alice Louise Reynolds, "History of the Brigham Young University,"

*The Banyan* (Provo: Student Body of Brigham Young University, 1920), 10; see also Brigham Young High School History, [byhigh.org/History/1920History/Thru1920.html](http://byhigh.org/History/1920History/Thru1920.html).

3. Appendix 13, *First One Hundred Years*, 1:577; see also [abc.eznettools.net/D300015/X329586/History/Presidents/UofU/Talmage-JamesE.html](http://abc.eznettools.net/D300015/X329586/History/Presidents/UofU/Talmage-JamesE.html).

4. See appendix 14, *First One Hundred Years*, 1:588.

5. I am indebted to President Cecil O. Samuelson for filling in the rest of this mentoring genealogy; see J. Reuben Clark Law Society “Shared Keynote Address and Discussion: Cecil O. Samuelson and Michael K.

Young,” 19 February 2010, [jrcls.org/news/item.php?id=39](http://jrcls.org/news/item.php?id=39).

6. See Jeffrey D. Keith, “A Well-Graded Plan for a University” (unpublished manuscript, 2015), 3.

7. Karl G. Maeser, first lecture in James E. Talmage, “Normal Notes” (unpublished manuscript, 1878–1879), original handwritten notes in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 7; quoted in Keith, “Well-Graded Plan,” 4.

8. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 1.