William W. Phelps’s Service in Nauvoo as Joseph Smith’s Political Clerk

Bruce A. Van Orden

Praise to the man who commun’d with Jehovah,
Jesus anointed “that Prophet and Seer,”
Blessed to open the last dispensation;
Kings shall extol him, and nations revere.¹

William W. Phelps, one of Joseph Smith’s most intimate associates, wrote this stanza a month following the Prophet’s martyrdom. Phelps worked very closely with Joseph Smith during the Nauvoo period. He labored in several Church positions but served primarily as the Prophet’s political clerk during the apex of Joseph’s career. In this position, he was the Prophet’s second most important clerk.²

Background

William Wines Phelps, usually referred to as W. W. Phelps by himself and others, was born February 17, 1792, in Dover, Hanover Township, Morris County, New Jersey.³ In 1800 he moved with his parents to Homer Township, Onandaga County (Cortland County in 1808), New York, which had recently opened for settlement. After marrying Sally Waterman in 1815, W. W. began learning the printing and newspaper business. Virtually all newspapers of this period were essentially rooted in political partisanship and were the main campaigning vehicles for the various factions. His newspaper work trained him as both a political writer and participant.

In 1827 and 1828, he became a founding member of the Anti-Masonic movement in New York and served as the initial editor of the Anti-Masonic newspaper, the Lake Light, in Trumansburgh. In April 1828, God-fearing and zealous Phelps went to Canandaigua,

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William W. Phelps, Joseph Smith's political clerk

(ca. 1853, image reversed, Daguerreotype Collection, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)
the most prominent village in western New York at the time, to start the Anti-Masonic paper, the Ontario Phoenix. He moved his young family to Canandaigua and established himself in what he hoped would be a long, productive political and editing career.

Anti-Masonry erupted as a religious and quasi-political movement in upstate New York in 1827 in immediate reaction to the abduction of erstwhile Freemason William Morgan the previous year for writing an exposé of Masonry. However, anti-Masonic sentiment had been smoldering in the northeastern United States for years because of the widely perceived notion that Masons, who belonged to an elitist and secret fraternity, controlled virtually all political and law enforcement positions and that Masonry was a counterfeit religion. The Anti-Masonic movement also received much of its force from antislavery and temperance advocates. One of its chief objectives was to inject the common people and workmen into the state and national political system. To this end, the Anti-Masons conducted local political conventions throughout New York to select legislature candidates in order "to root out the privileged class." Their principal opponents were the national Democratic party, headed by presidential candidate Andrew Jackson, and the New York political clique, the Albany Regency, headed by Governor Martin Van Buren.

The new Anti-Masonic party met with immediate success in the legislative elections. Two experienced political professionals, Thurlow Weed and William Seward, seized control of the party in 1828 and undermined the evangelical zealots of the movement. By 1830 the Anti-Masonic party had spread to several states. In 1831 the fledgling party experimented with the nation's first presidential nominating convention in Baltimore. New York's Weed and Seward built on their Anti-Masonic constituency and formed the Whig party in 1834. Soon the national Whig party emerged, consisting of an unstable coalition of old-time Federalists, opportunistic Anti-Masons, staunch National Republicans, eastern capitalists and labor, conservative midwestern farmers, and southern merchants and planters. Henry Clay and Daniel Webster were their most prominent leaders and presidential candidates. Both Anti-Masonry and Whiggery contributed numerous ideas and precedents to the American political scene, but both also faded after a relatively short existence.

Because of his prominence in the Anti-Masonic movement, W. W. Phelps sought nomination as New York's lieutenant governor on the Anti-Masonic ticket in 1828 and 1830. His political career failed
to materialize, however, for he became acquainted with a new religious movement in his vicinity, a religion that soon claimed his loyalty.

As a newspaper editor in New York’s “Mormon Country,” Phelps was aware of most major events surrounding the rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He read the Book of Mormon as it came off E. B. Grandin’s press in March 1830 and became convinced that it contained the word of God. He sought out Joseph Smith in Fayette and was moved by the Prophet’s “godly account” of his heavenly experiences but not yet enough to give up his attachment to the Anti-Masonic movement.

Phelps’s Anti-Masonic colleagues became increasingly unsettled by his attraction to Mormonism. In April 1831, after most New York Saints had migrated to Ohio, two Canandaigua business men brought trumped-up charges of indebtedness against Phelps to keep him “from joining the Mormons.” After he was released from jail, Phelps resigned his editorship and prepared his family to move to Kirtland, Ohio, the new Church headquarters.

He arrived in Kirtland in mid-June, located Joseph Smith, and announced to the Prophet that he was ready to join the Church and “do the will of the Lord.” Accordingly, Joseph sought the Lord’s will concerning Phelps and learned that W. W. was “called and chosen” to the ministry. This call included an assignment to assist Oliver Cowdery with “the work of printing, and of selecting and writing books for schools in this church” (D&C 55:1, 4–5). The Prophet was pleased to find someone qualified to print the Church’s scriptures and other writings.

In the same revelation, the Lord commanded W. W. Phelps, though a new member, to be one of seven select brethren to accompany Joseph Smith to Missouri to locate the land of Zion—the assignment most occupying the Prophet’s attention that spring. As a member of that party, Phelps enthusiastically witnessed the dedication of the sacred temple lot in Independence, Missouri. He was assigned by revelation to “be planted in this place, and be established as a printer unto the church” (D&C 57:11). He would now be the Church’s chief printer and editor, and Oliver would assist him (D&C 57:13).

As soon as W. W. was able to move his family to Independence, he established the Church’s first printing office. Just as virtually all American political and religious movements in that day relied on newspapers to identify and promote their causes, the young Church of Christ, as it was first called, needed a forum to communicate and
establish its positions. Phelps met this need by starting two newspapers: the religious monthly, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, and the secular weekly, *Upper Missouri Advertiser*. His editorship of these papers made him one of the Church’s primary spokespersons.

Over the next few years, a period of overwhelming turmoil for the Saints in Missouri, Phelps served in many trusted capacities: member of the Missouri Stake presidency, writer of key doctrinal essays, and co-compiler of Joseph Smith’s revelations into the Doctrine and Covenants. Following the Saints’ expulsion from Jackson County, he also began to represent the Church in political and legal matters by writing letters, compiling petitions, and personally lobbying state officials in the Missouri state capital.

In 1836 Phelps helped arrange for the Saints to remove from Clay County to the “Mormon county” of Caldwell. Along with John Whitmer, he founded and laid out the settlement of Far West. Since Phelps and Whitmer used considerable Church funds in setting up Far West and acted independently of the Missouri High Council, Church leaders felt these men abused their power, so the council released them from their leadership posts in the Church in 1838. Consequently, Phelps joined a growing group of dissidents who tried throughout the remainder of the year to undercut the work of Joseph Smith and the First Presidency in northern Missouri. In the Richmond preliminary hearing in November 1838, Phelps’s testimony against Joseph Smith contributed to the Prophet’s lengthy incarceration in Liberty Jail. Phelps was officially excommunicated from the Church in March 1839.

Phelps moved his family to the Dayton, Ohio, area in 1839, just as Joseph Smith escaped his Missouri persecutors and founded the Saints' new gathering place in Nauvoo, Illinois. Phelps lost complete contact with the Church until Elders Orson Hyde and John E. Page of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles came to the Dayton area to proselyte. After seeing Phelps’s changed heart and impoverished conditions, these brethren wrote a letter to the First Presidency in Nauvoo pleading for clemency in behalf of Phelps: “He tells us verbally that he is willing to make any sacrifice to procure your fellowship, life not excepted.”⁹ W. W. Phelps wrote a pathetic letter to accompany the one from Elders Hyde and Page. “I am alive, and with the help of God I mean to live still,” he began. “I am as the prodigal son, though I never doubt[ed] or disbelieve[d] the fulness of the Gospel. I have been greatly abused and humbled.”¹⁰ After receiving the petitions and consulting with Sidney Rigdon and
Hyrum Smith, Joseph Smith wrote back to Phelps on July 22, 1840: “Believing your confession to be real and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal.”

Because of his impoverished circumstances, Phelps and his family were unable to move to Nauvoo immediately. But as soon as he arrived, he was put to work. Joseph Smith was pleased to recover his valued friend and advisor; the Nauvoo Saints also revived their respect for him as a prominent Church member. Due to Joseph Smith’s frank forgiveness of an erring, yet repentant brother, the Church reclaimed one of its most talented servants.

Nauvoo Service

The arrival of Phelps in Nauvoo was a godsend to Joseph Smith. Few projects in Nauvoo were more important to the Prophet than writing his and the Church’s official history. The project was proceeding slowly because two of Joseph’s trusted clerks who had started the project, James Mulholland and Robert B. Thompson, had died. Phelps’s journalistic and Church experience made him one of the most qualified persons to compile the Church’s history. “He was quite a singular man,” young Joseph Smith III wrote of Phelps. He was “spare of flesh, already sufficiently aged to wear spectacles, was methodical and studious in his habits, and not very prepossessing in appearance though of good brain and judgment. He was quite a voluminous writer.” Sometime in the forepart of 1842, Phelps commenced writing the history of the Church under Joseph Smith’s direction. But as the year unfolded, the Prophet spent much of his time evading government authorities who sought him on old Missouri charges. Apparently Phelps was essentially left to himself to compile and write the official history. Working through December of that year as an employee of the Church (as he had been before his disaffection), he recorded in the History of the Church the significant events that had occurred between October 31, 1830, and November 1, 1831. Phelps himself had been a key player in the historical events of that same period, a fact that naturally does not go unnoticed in the official history.

A new phase in the clerking career of W. W. Phelps began on December 21, 1842, when Willard Richards, trusted and loyal Apostle, was appointed Joseph Smith’s private secretary and historian. Until his death in 1854, Willard Richards superintended historical
compiling and writing in the Church. Phelps’s subsequent work on the history was as Richards’s assistant. Under Richards’s direction, the history progressed rapidly during 1843 and 1844.15

While Phelps continued to assist Richards from time to time on the history, Joseph Smith gradually assigned Phelps other clerking duties. One of these was to aid Joseph Smith in editing, printing, and publishing a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, which appeared in 1844. Soon, however, many of Phelps’s assignments became political in nature.

Along with several other close associates of the Prophet, W. W. Phelps filled various positions in the Nauvoo city government, under Joseph Smith as mayor. Following the municipal elections in February 1843, Mayor Smith and the new city council appointed numerous city officials, including W. W. Phelps as the mayor’s clerk and fire warden.16 He signed numerous documents in behalf of Mayor Joseph Smith and supervised the work of the fire department. In addition to helping Joseph with the executive branch of city government, Phelps also was designated “Clerk of the Mayor’s Court,” a court in which the mayor, Joseph Smith, also served as judge according to powers granted him by the liberal Nauvoo Charter.

Now that Phelps was closely connected with Nauvoo city affairs, Joseph Smith repeatedly drew upon his counsel when making city-related decisions.17 The Church and the city were constantly running into legal entanglements, and Joseph Smith was forced to study principles of the law, often doing so with Willard Richards and Phelps. On one occasion, the Prophet, exasperated at having to spend so much time with legal problems, declared to W. W. “that he should be a lawyer and understand law, and the time will come when I shall not need say to you, Thus and thus is the law, for you shall know it.”18 Several months after this conversation, Wilford Woodruff reported in his journal that in a special meeting Elder Phelps was called upon to speak concerning his “appointment” as a “lawgiver in Israel.”19 Phelps spent some of his time as Joseph Smith’s clerk studying the law and in subsequent official correspondence to government officials signed his name “W. W. Phelps, esq.” Joseph Smith also referred to him often as “Judge Phelps” or “Esquire Phelps.” Even many years later in Utah, Phelps continued to serve as a lawyer and a justice of the peace.

Phelps’s position as legal advisor soon evolved into full-time service as Joseph Smith’s political clerk—his most valuable service
in Nauvoo to the Prophet. During the congressional campaign in the summer of 1843, Joseph became considerably interested in state and national politics. He knew that friends in high places could make a substantial difference regarding his own personal safety, the fortunes of the Saints in Illinois, and their quest for redress of the Missouri grievances. Joseph drew on Phelps’s political and journalistic experience to compose political documents and letters to government officials.

Communicating in behalf of Joseph Smith with Governor Thomas Ford of Illinois became one of Phelps’s primary duties. From the fall of 1843 through Joseph’s death in June 1844, Phelps frequently visited the governor in Springfield or wrote him on such topics as procuring public arms for the Nauvoo Legion and answering charges against the Mormons from Illinois citizens.20

As the 1844 presidential campaign approached, Joseph Smith sent letters that Phelps had composed for him to each of the likely candidates: Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Lewis Cass, Richard M. Johnson, and Martin Van Buren. The letters asked each candidate what he would do regarding the treatment of the Mormons.21 When Clay and Calhoun separately responded, Joseph immediately asked Phelps to write further letters to the candidates in his behalf. Phelps also wrote many other letters under the name of the Prophet to individuals regarding the 1844 presidential election.22

By the end of January 1844, Joseph Smith and his close advisors, who included Phelps, had concluded from the unfavorable responses to these letters that the best political course was for Joseph to run as an independent candidate for the presidency of the United States.23 From this time on, Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps often consulted about campaign strategy. Campaigning in those years was primarily accomplished by circulating large volumes of printed documents. Joseph assigned Phelps to write these key documents and then to present them to the group of advisors for discussion, necessary rewording, and approval. By March 1844, this group of advisors was formed into the Council of Fifty. Phelps was one its leaders.

As political advisor and clerk, W. W. Phelps, in behalf of Joseph Smith, penned such significant documents as “General Joseph Smith’s Appeal to the Green Mountain Boys,” “General Smith’s Views on the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States,” “Pacific Innuendo,” and “A Friendly Hint to Missouri.”24 He also
assisted Willard Richards, Orson Hyde, and John Taylor in writing a "Proclamation to the Kings of the Earth."25

Although Phelps's service as a political writer was immense and often valuable, his writings were not flawless and might not have always been well received by the audiences they were meant to impress. Phelps's often ponderous composition, with sentences that seem to go on forever, is evident in the political documents he wrote for Joseph Smith. Like other verbose politicians and political journalists of the day, Phelps often employed unnecessarily obscure vocabulary and foreign phrases. His frequent use of sarcasm was a typical political device in that day. The following example, taken from Joseph Smith's political platform, entitled "General Smith's Views," demonstrates Phelps's stylistic devices:

Mr. Van Buren [one of the 1844 presidential candidates] said, in his inaugural address, that he went "into the presidential chair the inflexible and uncompromising opponent of every attempt, on the part of Congress, to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, against the wishes of the slave holding states; and also with a determination equally decided to resist the slightest interference with it in the states where it exists." Poor little Matty made his rhapsodical sweep with the fact before his eyes, that the state of New-York, his native state, had abolished slavery, without a struggle or a groan. Great God, how independent! From henceforth slavery is tolerated where it exists: constitution or no constitution; people or no people; right or wrong; vox Matti; vox Diaboli: "the voice of Matty"—"the voice of the devil;" and peradventure, his great "Sub-Treasury" scheme was a piece of the same mind: but the man and his measures have such a striking resemblance to the anecdote of the Welchman and his cart-tongue, that, when the constitution was so long that it allowed slavery at the capitol of a free people, it could not be cut off; but when it was short that it needed a Sub-Treasury, to save the fund of the nation it could be spliced! Oh, granny what a long tail our puss has got! As a Greek might say, hysteron proteron: the cart before the horse, but his mighty whisk through the great national fire, for the presidential chestnuts, 

burnt the locks of his glory with the blaze of his folly!26

A later Mormon historian, B. H. Roberts was not amused by Phelps's verbal antics: "The display of foreign phrases was doubtful the work of W. W. Phelps, who had some smattering knowledge of languages, which he was ever fond of displaying. . . . These displays of pedantry mar these documents, and are in no way germane to the subjects of which they treat, and are not really the work of President Smith."27

This political platform also reflects Phelps's entrenched political views he had gained from Anti-Masonry and Whiggery. It
advocated freeing the slaves, reforming the prison system, throwing out elitist politicians, giving the federal government power to protect minorities in their rights, and empowering the governments to promote trade and commerce. The document also mercilessly attacked Anti-Masonry's favorite nemesis, Martin Van Buren.28

Even though Phelps knew considerably more about national political issues than did Joseph Smith, in retrospect we may naturally wonder whether the Prophet was best served by having such a partisan as Phelps doing his political writing. Contemporary comments about these documents are sparse, so we may have no way of knowing.

In any event, this noteworthy, though certainly ponderous, platform was issued from the press on February 24, 1844. On the ensuing Sabbath day, a special prayer meeting was conducted in the Prophet's office, at which time petitions were offered to the Almighty that Joseph Smith's political views might be spread throughout the country. Later that week, copies were mailed to principal newspapers, the president, cabinet members, supreme court judges, senators, representatives, and numerous other important individuals.

However, not all of Phelps's associations with Joseph Smith in the last two years of the Prophet's life involved business or politics. The two, who had always cared about each other despite occasional differences, also enjoyed both friendly and religious experiences together. Phelps was so used to representing Joseph that he employed his favorite literary device, poetry, to promote the Prophet's image and doctrinal teachings. In early 1843, for example, Phelps dedicated a piece of verse to Joseph Smith and his glorious doctrines of the hereafter. This he entitled "Vade Mecum" or "Go with Me":

Go with me, will you go to the saints that have died,—
To the next, better world, where the righteous reside;
Where the angels and spirits in harmony be
In the joys of a vast paradise? Go with me.29

These words point to the Prophet's martyrdom that would occur a little over a year later. But in the meantime, Phelps would be directly involved with the events that lead to Joseph Smith's death.

On April 29, 1844, after some members of the Nauvoo City Council left the city to campaign for Joseph Smith in the East, Phelps and others were appointed to the council. As a council member, he played a key role in arranging for the destruction of the press of the
slanderous *Nauvoo Expositor* in June of that year. As a result, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Phelps as well as other city council members and Joseph Smith. Phelps accompanied the Prophet to Carthage. He listened to the recital of Joseph’s last dream and recorded it for posterity and even offered to die for Joseph Smith.

When the Prophet was slain, W. W. Phelps gave the funeral address. He aided Willard Richards in keeping calm in Nauvoo and refused to support Sidney Rigdon’s quest to become “Guardian of the Church.” Instead, on August 8, 1844, he eloquently pleaded with the Nauvoo Saints to support the Twelve Apostles, who he felt held the keys of the kingdom upon the earth. He continued to represent Joseph Smith by doing what he knew would be the Prophet’s will regarding the Church’s administration.

William W. Phelps labored diligently under the direction of the Twelve in Nauvoo and retained his status as one of the Church’s political advisors. He continued to assist with the writing of the official history and to write letters to political figures. When Brigham Young and the Council of the Twelve headed west with the “Camp of Israel,” Phelps stayed for several months in Nauvoo to help complete necessary business matters in behalf of the Church. In Salt Lake City, he remained on the Council of Fifty, helped draft the Constitution for the State of Deseret, and served on the Utah Territorial Legislature. He practiced law and served as a justice of the peace. He remained faithful to the Church and died in full fellowship in Salt Lake City in 1872.

William W. Phelps was one of the most important associates of the Prophet Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. He did not always please everybody, including Joseph, with all that he wrote or did. He made numerous mistakes. But he humbled himself when necessary and did much to build the kingdom. As long as Church members sing the hymn “Praise to the Man,” its author, W. W. Phelps, devoted assistant to that Prophet and Seer, should not be forgotten.
This version of the verses of "Praise to the Man," known earlier as "Martyr," is from *The Latter-Day Saints' Psalmody* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1889). The congregation would find the chorus on the next page.

The description on the book's title page indicates that the music was one of the "old and familiar tunes specially arranged for this work" by a committee consisting of G. Careless, E. Beesley, J. J. Daynes, E. Stephens, and T. C. Griggs. The psalmody was "gotten up under the approval of the late President John Taylor, and accepted by President Wilford Woodruff and Council."
NOTES


2. Joseph Smith’s most important clerk during the last two years of his life was Willard Richards, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The other two were William Clayton and Thomas Bullock. Joseph Smith employed other clerks as well. See Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1344.

3. I am writing a biography of William W. Phelps. Much of this paper is derived from this research.


15. Whereas the previous three writers of the “history”—James Mulholland, Robert B. Thompson, and William W. Phelps—had compiled 157 pages of manuscript among them (Phelps from page 75 to 157), Willard Richards wrote 655 pages of manuscript (covering the period of November 1, 1831, to August 5, 1838) from December 1842 to Joseph Smith’s death in June 1844. See Jessee, “The Writing of Joseph Smith’s History,” 441, 454–56.


17. See, for example, *HC* 5:290.


“General Smith’s Views,” which contains his political platform, to Joseph Smith himself and either credit or discredit him for the various views contained therein. Two recent examples are Marvin S. Hill, “Counter-revolution: The Mormon Reaction to the Coming of American Democracy,” Sunstone 13 (June 1989): 27, 30–31, and Senator Harry Reid of Nevada in “Public Service Began Early in LDS History,” Church News, August 5, 1989, 5. In reality, Joseph Smith relied heavily upon W. W. Phelps and his political knowledge and expertise in composing these documents. Of course, Joseph would have given input into these publications and, because he signed them, is ultimately responsible for what is contained in them.

25 HC 6:80. Since January 1841, Joseph Smith had wanted such a proclamation. By revelation Robert B. Thompson and John C. Bennett had been assigned to help write the proclamation (D&C 124:2–16). But Thompson died and Bennett apostatized. Apparently numerous attempts were made at writing this proclamation. A handwritten “proclamation” even exists in the Joseph Smith Collection in the Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, to which the date 1842 has been affixed. I do not know if a proclamation written by Richards, Hyde, Taylor, and Phelps exists. Eventually a proclamation written by Parley P. Pratt was issued in 1845.


27 HC 6:75n.


29 Times and Seasons 4 (February 1, 1843): 81. “Go with Me” elicited in the same newspaper “The Answer,” which is a poetic rendition of “The Vision,” or Doctrine and Covenants 76. Even though Joseph Smith is credited with this latter poetic effort, I strongly suspect that it was Phelps who wrote “The Answer” himself. After Joseph Smith’s death, Phelps altered and expanded “Go with Me,” made it into a rhyme, and gave it the new title “Come with Me.” See Times and Seasons 6 (January 15, 1845): 783.