

A Note on the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute

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Kenneth W. Godfrey

Sometime in early January of 1844, at least seventy-four of Nauvoo's leading citizens met together for the expressed purpose of organizing a library and literary institute. A constitution, consisting of four articles and twenty-four by-laws, was unanimously adopted by those assembled. On 25 January 1844, Benjamin Winchester, Mormon publisher and pamphleteer, was chosen chairman of the institute and Charles A. Foster elected secretary.¹ Following this action seven trustees were elected and seven prominent Mormons selected to deliver lectures before the institute, including Sidney Rigdon, Orson Pratt, Orson Hyde, Orson Spencer and Benjamin Winchester, himself. We learn from subsequent minutes kept by Secretary Foster that Orson Hyde, Sidney Rigdon and Winchester did, on different occasions, deliver their lectures.

According to the by-laws, one method of obtaining stock in the institute was to donate books to the library. The secretary would then dutifully list under the name of each person the books contributed. Probably due to the lack of "hard cash" in Nauvoo most of those who belonged to the institute procured shares of stock by such donations. Thus from a perusal of the minutes we know the titles of over four hundred books held by the Nauvoo library. These titles provide the historian with an excellent source of studying and evaluating, to some extent at least, the intellectual climate of Nauvoo.

Of perhaps even greater importance is the fact that the Prophet Joseph Smith was a member of the institute, and the minutes provide for us a list of the books he contributed to the library. As far as this writer has been able to determine no historian or scholar has made a study of these books and the influence they may have had upon the Prophet's mind.

On 31 January 1844, the Prophet Joseph Smith contributed the following books to the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute:² *Review of Edwards On The Will*; *Life of Tecumseh*; *Whepleys Compend*; *Scotts Poetical Works*, in 5 vols; *Gillmores Lectures*; *Merrills Harmony*; *Epicureo*; *Krumanachers Works*; *Catholic Piety*; *Home Physician*; *Apochryphal Testament*; *Bruns' Travels*; *Reld & other Travels*; *Browns' Appeal*, gram; *Browns English Syntascope*; *Studies in Poetry & Prose*; *Old World & the New*, vol 1st; *Voyages & Travels of Ross Perry & others*; *Bennetts Book Keeping*, 2 copies; *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, by Stephens 2 Vo; *Stephens Travels in Central America*,

2 Vo; Mosheims *Church History*, 1 Vol; *Times & Seasons* 1 2 3 Vol and also Vol 1 & 2; Dicks *Philosophy; Millenium & other Poems*; Beaumonts *Experiments, Dictionary of the Holy Bible*; Parkers *Lectures on Universalism*; Landers *Discourse; Metropolitan*; Goodrich's *History of the United States*; Doddridges *Sermons; Catholic Manual*; Whelpleys *Compend*; Herveys *Meditations; Historie de Charles; Rollin*, 2 Vol; *Book of Mormon*.

Several questions could be asked regarding these and the other books donated to the library. For example, does the above list only represent the books Joseph Smith did not like to read and therefore gave them to the library? Are these books the source of some of the Prophet's intellectual ideas? If so which ones? Who was John Gray (the man who donated the largest number of books)? Who read such works as *Lectures on Witchcraft*; Thomas Spencer's *Memoirs; History of France*; John Locke, *On Understanding*; and the *Life of William Eaton*? Why were there so many grammar and foreign language books donated? Why were Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith the only leading ecclesiastical leaders who were members of the institute? What influence did this institute have on the cultural life of Nauvoo? How long did it last? (The last minutes are dated in March of 1844). These questions represent only a few of the queries raised by studying the minutes of the institute.

Thus this small but very important document found in the LDS Church Archives deserves the attention of Mormon scholars and hopefully this brief article will prove to be the catalyst which will motivate writers to devote some time to the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute.

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1. David J. Whittaker in his unpublished paper titled "To Further The Cause of Righteousness: The Life and Contributions of Benjamin Winchester, Early Mormon Missionary," referred to the minutes of The Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute in footnote 145, and first drew my attention to them.

2. Authors, Book Titles, and the order in which the books appear are exactly as they are given in the minutes of the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute.