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Editor's Introduction

In past decades Mormon scholars have intensified efforts to learn everything possible on the setting and events of the early Restoration. In its Spring 1970 issue, *BYU Studies* published an earlier collection of articles focusing on the New York backgrounds and treating, among other topics, Joseph Smith's reputation among his Palmyra neighbors, the translation of the Book of Mormon, and the early impact of the Church. In his editorial introduction, guest editor Truman G. Madsen expressed a sense of having "opened some territory" and suggested that additional studies were needed of such areas as Joseph Smith's involvement with the Stowell silver-mining venture, of his early legal trials, and of Smith family activities in the years from 1823 to 1827. Study of this formative period has steadily continued. During the last fifteen years, in addition to work appearing elsewhere, *BYU Studies* has published articles on Joseph Smith's 1826 trial (Winter 1972), the archaeology of the Peter Whitmer farm (Winter 1973), Joseph Knight's recollections of Joseph Smith (Autumn 1976), and the pre-translation events that the Hofmann "Anthon transcript" claimed to illuminate (Summer 1980).

A surge of interest in Mormon origins was stimulated when LDS officials made public what were assumed to be authentic letters associating the pre-Mormon Joseph Smith with searching for treasure by means of seer stones and hazel wands: one dated 18 June 1825 purportedly from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell, the other dated 23 October 1830 purportedly from Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps. Texts were printed in the LDS *Church News* in the spring of 1985, and much debate followed among Latter-day Saint scholars, the national press, and the anti-Mormon publicity mills. As this issue of *BYU Studies* goes to press in late April 1986, court hearings continue on the violent events involving key persons in the acquisition of the previously mentioned letters and also on charges of document fraud. But no matter what the legal verdict on the treasure letters released last year, the underlying historical issues deserve close study com-
mensurate with the extensive publicity given the problem of Mormon origins.

Since history is the ongoing evaluation of the meaning of records, it may expand with new discoveries or retract its base if sources prove unreliable. History also discloses parallels, often not the result of borrowing but of reflecting the common aspirations of humanity and the uniqueness of personal experience.

BYU Studies here presents a special issue collecting Mormon scholarship on the mythic folk religion and money digging that surrounded the Smith family in early New York years. Dean C. Jessee reviews the discovery and information made available to scholars on the 1825 letter of Joseph Smith and the 1830 letter of Martin Harris. Next, Ronald W. Walker offers a survey of the extensive tradition that lies behind the folk-magic practices alluded to in the letters, followed by an essay expressing a more personal response to the implications. Marvin S. Hill probes the range of supernaturalism around the Prophet and also the larger religious context of his reaction to it. And Richard L. Anderson moves to the question of whether Joseph Smith was involved in searching for treasure after Book of Mormon translation.

We present these essays, not as the final word on the questions of early Mormon history, but as contributions from different points of view within the range of faithful Latter-day Saint historical scholarship, contributions to our understanding of Joseph Smith in the context of his own time. For it is only by coming to understand the ways in which the Prophet of the Restoration was a man of his own time and place that we can hope to gain an appreciation of the extent to which he transcended those conditions.
New Documents and Mormon Beginnings

Dean C. Jessee

Proclaiming that the preparatory work for the second coming of Christ was about to commence and that the gospel in its fulness was to be preached to all nations to prepare a people for the millennial reign, the Prophet Joseph Smith and his associates recorded that significant events took place in western New York in the 1820s to inaugurate this new era—events in which divine messengers communicated with men on earth as in biblical times. With their religion rooted in these historical realities, Latter-day Saints have shown more than casual interest in their past—particularly those formative years of the 1820s. Every scrap of information dealing with that early period is read with care.

For those who study the beginnings of Mormonism, contemporary sources are few. Most of what is known of the seminal events prior to 1830 has come from recollections and secondhand reports. Few documents written at the time pertain to the First Vision, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the restoration of the priesthood. This is due largely to the fact that the record-keeping enterprise of Mormonism did not begin until the organization of the Church in 1830.

The work of retrieving and preserving the sources of early Mormon history effectively commenced in 1832 when Joseph Smith's scribe, Frederick G. Williams, began copying letters and documents into a record book. However, only four items in this early volume are dated prior to the Church's organization. Until a few years ago, available original sources pertaining to the pre-1830 decade included little more than two manuscripts of the Book of Mormon; an 1829 deed by which Joseph Smith obtained a plot of ground from his father-in-law in Harmony, Pennsylvania; a reproduction of "caractors" evidently copied from the Book of Mormon plates in 1828; and an agreement between Martin Harris and Joseph Smith, Sr., for selling copies of the Book of Mormon. Within the last five
years, several other early manuscripts have surfaced. These include an 1828 transcript of characters believed to have been copied from the Book of Mormon plates and carried by Martin Harris to eastern linguists; an 1829 letter of Lucy Mack Smith showing the involvement of the Smith family with the Book of Mormon more than a year before the book was published; an 1829 agreement signed by Joseph Smith, Martin Harris, and E. B. Grandin for publication of the Book of Mormon; and two documents deeding Martin Harris land to Thomas Lakey. More recently, two additional manuscripts have been found that pertain to the early period of Mormonism: an 1825 letter claimed to have been by Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell and an 1830 letter purportedly written by Martin Harris to William W. Phelps. These documents have evoked considerable interest primarily because they deal with phenomena foreign to our present experience, and heretofore only obliquely mentioned in Mormon history.

As often occurs with new information which may not fit comfortably into one's world view, these documents have raised challenging questions—questions in this case about Joseph Smith's involvement in occult or mystical activities and its impact upon traditional understanding. But before we consider content, the starting point for discussion must begin with the sources themselves. The primary purpose of this article is to examine these new documents as a foundation upon which investigation can intelligently proceed.

JOSEPH SMITH'S 1825 LETTER TO JOSIAH STOWELL

In 1825, Josiah Stowell, a well-to-do southern New York farmer, living near South Bainbridge in Chenango County, organized a group of men to locate an old Spanish mine believed to be in the area of Harmony, Pennsylvania, and believed to contain coined money and bars or ingots of gold or silver. Having heard of Joseph Smith as a "famous seer of lost or hidden treasure," Josiah Stowell hired the young man from Palmyra, New York, to assist in the location of the mine.\(^2\) Isaac Hale, who later became Joseph Smith's father-in-law, recalled that he first met Joseph in November 1825. Isaac wrote that Joseph Smith was employed by a group of "money diggers," that Joseph could locate treasure by looking in a stone placed in his hat, and that Joseph, his father, and several others boarded at the Hale residence in Harmony while they were employed looking for the mine.\(^3\) In the 1838 History of the Church, Joseph confirmed that he had worked for Josiah Stowell, adding that after a
short time he had persuaded Stowell to discontinue his search. Beyond this, little is said in the History about the incident, or about Joseph's involvement in locating lost objects or treasure.

As early as 1983, copies of an 18 June 1825 letter purportedly written by Joseph Smith from Canandaigua, New York, to Josiah Stowell at Harmony, Pennsylvania, began circulating in the Mormon community. According to one account, the letter was obtained in the East by Salt Lake City collector Mark Hofmann, authenticated by the noted New York manuscript dealer Charles Hamilton, and sold to the LDS church. Focusing upon Stowell's search for the Pennsylvania mine, the letter indicates previous contact between him and the Smith family and reveals Joseph Smith's expertise in locating hidden treasure, suggesting a reason why Stowell went so far from the site of his digging to get Joseph's help.

Canandagua June 18th 1825

Dear Sir

My Father has shown me your letter informing him and me of your Success in locating the mine as you Suppos but we are of the oppinion that since you cannot dig more untill you first discover if any valuables remain you know the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit and if such is discovered so also is the treasure so do this take a hasel stick one yard long being new Cut and cleave it Just in the middle and lay it asunder on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick may look one right against the other one inch distant and if there is treasure after a while you shall see them draw and Join together again of themselves let me know how it is Since you were here I have almost decided to accept your offer and if you can make it convenient to come this way I shall be ready to accompany you if nothing happens more than I know of I am very respectfully

Joseph Smith Jr

Mr Josiah Stowell

Harmony Pa

The letter is written on a single sheet of unlined paper that measures 8 1/4" x 11 1/4". The address side of the letter contains the circular, red, Canandaigua handstamp in use at the time, and the handwritten number 12 1/2 is the designated amount for sending a single page letter between 80 and 150 miles in 1825, which would include the distance between Canandaigua, New York, and Harmony, Pennsylvania (see photo reproduction on p. 417).
Written in Joseph Smith's nineteenth year, this letter, if authentic, is the earliest known holograph produced by him and shows writing skill on a par with anything he later wrote. The handwriting, spelling, grammar, and punctuation compare favorably with other Joseph Smith writings. The even flow of the letter and the common understanding that Joseph was incapable of writing very coherently due to a lack of education raise the question as to whether the wording of the letter is that of Joseph, Jr., or his father, who, as a schoolteacher, may have been more articulate than his son. A comparison of prose of the two men and a study of the autograph writings known to be the Prophet's suggest that the document could well have been produced by the younger Joseph. The personal pronouns used in the letter and the use of certain connectives—typical of young Joseph's style—bear this out.

Although late in her life Emma Smith said that Joseph "could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter," her statement was made in response to a question about the authorship of the Book of Mormon and in that context is more clearly a rhetorical defense of its divine origin than a precise statement of Joseph's writing ability. His personal writings do not portray the illiterate frontiersman some have perceived. A significant aspect of the letter is that at this early age Joseph appears to be widely known and respected for his ability as a seer and has a confident command of the situation presented to him.

MARTIN HARRIS'S 23 OCTOBER 1830 LETTER TO WILLIAM W. PHELPS

The second item for consideration here is the Martin Harris letter to William W. Phelps, dated 23 October 1830. The letter is dated six months after the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and seven months after the publication of the Book of Mormon, in which Harris's signature appears as a witness.

In 1830, Martin Harris was forty-seven years old and had lived in Palmyra, New York, thirty-eight of those years. During that time he had served in positions of civic trust and had, by his hard work and industry, become a man of substance. He had been several years an overseer of highways and was a veteran of the War of 1812. But his association with Joseph Smith had battered his reputation in the community and impaired his domestic relationship with his wife. In 1829 he guaranteed payment for the publication of the Book of Mormon and eventually was forced to sell 151 acres of his land when
proceeds from other sources did not materialize to pay the printing debt. When Harris left Palmyra, it became a source of bewilderment to his prejudiced townsmen that he would abandon one of the best farms in the area to follow what they perceived as a deception and hoax. Furthermore, when the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, Martin Harris’s name appeared with two other witnesses testifying that an angel had showed them the plates which contained the record, that they had seen the engravings thereon, and that they heard the voice of God declare it was true—an experience they described as “marvellous.” However, when the Latter-day Saints left Ohio in 1838, Martin Harris remained behind. He did not rejoin the Saints for more than thirty years, arriving in Utah in 1870 at the age of eighty-seven, where he spent his last five years.  

At first, Harris approached the Book of Mormon through the eyes of a skeptic and sought in several ways to verify Joseph Smith’s claims. But following his experience as a witness, his reaction to the book was one of absolute assurance, even though his attachment for the Saints was less than consistent. Repeatedly throughout his life, Martin Harris testified of his experience as a witness to the Book of Mormon, and several times he related his understanding of its origin. John A. Clark, a resident of Palmyra in the late 1820s, wrote in a later recollection that Martin Harris came to his house in the fall of 1827 and told him he believed “an important epoch had arrived—that a great flood of light was about to burst upon the world, and that the scene of divine manifestation was to be immediately around us.” By way of explanation, according to Clark, Harris said that “a Golden Bible had recently been dug from the earth”; that “an angel of God” had appeared to Joseph Smith in a dream and showed him “where it had been deposited for thousands of years . . . [:] that there had been a revelation made to [Joseph Smith] by which he had discovered this sacred deposit, and two transparent stones, through which, as a sort of spectacles, he could read the Bible”; and that it contained information which “would settle all religious controversies and speedily bring on the glorious millennium.”  

In 1829, while seeking a printer for the Book of Mormon, Martin Harris, in what is probably the earliest account of the circumstances in which the Book of Mormon originated, told a Rochester, New York, editor that Joseph Smith had been visited “by the spirit of the almighty in a dream, and informed that in a certain hill in that town was deposited a Golden Bible, containing an ancient record of
divine origin." According to the report, Harris added that "after a third visit from the same spirit in a dream, [Joseph] proceeded to the spot, removed the earth, and there found the bible, together with a large pair of spectacles." 10

Orsamus Turner, another Palmyra resident, in his 1851 History recalled Martin Harris as "an honest worthy citizen" but given to "religious enthusiasm." According to Turner, several local citizens remembered Harris's version of the discovery of the Book of Mormon that "the Prophet Joseph, was directed by an angel where to find, by excavation... the gold plates; and was compelled by the angel, much against his will, to be the interpreter of the sacred record." 11

Finally, in an 1859 interview Martin Harris said that upon hearing the rumors circulating about the gold plates he questioned members of the Smith family separately to see if their stories agreed and found that they did. He finally met Joseph Smith, took him aside, and asked about the plates. Joseph told Harris that "an angel had appeared to him, and told him it was God's work" and that "the plates must be translated, printed and sent before the world." But Martin Harris remained skeptical, unless "the Lord will show me that it is his work." Later that day, after praying to God "to show me concerning these things," his petition was answered. God "then showed me that it was his work, and that it was designed to bring in the fullness of his gospel to the gentiles to fulfill his word. ... He showed this to me by the still small voice spoken in the soul. Then I was satisfied that it was the Lord's work." Martin Harris noted further that opposition soon threatened Joseph with mob violence, whereupon he gave Joseph money to pay his debts and move to his father-in-law's place in Pennsylvania. 12

In light of statements in which Martin Harris related events connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in the more traditional framework familiar to Latter-day Saints, some readers of the 1830 Harris letter have wondered how authentic it could be, considering how it seems to differ from what he said elsewhere, both before and after 1830. Others have speculated as to how much of the account is based upon conversations with Joseph Smith, Jr., how much on statements of Joseph Smith, Sr., and how much was influenced by neighborhood rumor or folk culture. Let us first consider the document itself:
Dear Sir

Your letter of yesterday is received & I hasten to answer as fully as I can — Joseph Smith Jr first come to my notice in the year 1824 in the summer of that year I contracted with his father to build a fence on my property in the corse of that work I approch Joseph & ask how it is in a half day you put up what requires your father & 2 brothers a full day working together he says I have not been with out assistance but can not say more only you better find out the next day I take the older Smith by the arm & he says Joseph can see any thing he wishes by looking at a stone Joseph often sees Spirits here with great kettles of coin money it was Spirits who brought up rock because Joseph made no attempt on their money I latter dream I converse with spirits which let me count their money when I wake I have in my hand a dollar coin which I take for a sign Joseph discribes what I seen in every particlar says he the spirits are greived so I through back the dollar In the fall of the year 1827 I hear Joseph found a gold bible I take Joseph aside & he says it is true I found it 4 years ago with my stone but only just got it because of the enchantment the old spirit come to me 3 times in the same dream & says dig up the gold but when I take it up the next morning the spirit transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole & struck me 3 times & held the treasure & would not let me have it because I lay it down to cover over the hole when the spirit says do not lay it down Joseph says when can I have it the spirit says one year from to day if you obay me look to the stone after a few days he looks the spirit says bring your brother Alvin Joseph says he is dead shall I bring what remains but the spirit is gone Joseph goes to get the gold bible but the spirit says you did not bring your brother you can not have it look to the stone Joseph looks but can not see who to bring the spirit says I tricked you again look to the stone Joseph looks & sees his wife on the 22d day of Sept 1827 they get the gold bible I give Joseph $50 to move him [p. 1] down to Pa Joseph says when you visit me I will give you a sign he gives me some hieroglyphics I take them to Utica Albany & New York in the last place Dr Mitchel gives me a introduction to Professor Anthon says he they are short hand Egyptian the same what was used in anciant times bring me the old book & I will translate says I it is made of precious gold & is sealed from from view says he I can not read a sealed book — Joseph found some giant silver specticles with the plates he puts them in a old hat & in the darkness reads the words & in this way it is all translated & written down — about the middle of June 1829 Joseph takes me together with Oliver Cowdrey & David Whitmer to have a view of the plates our names are appended to the book of Mormon which I had printed with my own money — space & time both prevent me from writing more at present if there is any thing further you wish to inquire I shall attend to it

Yours Respectfully

W W Phelps Esq

Martin Harris
The letter was addressed to William W. Phelps, the thirty-eight-year-old printer and editor of the Ontario Phoenix at Canandaigua, New York. The circumstances that called forth the Harris letter are not known, except that it was written in response to an inquiry by Phelps. The Harris letter apparently appealed to Phelps—less than three months after receiving it, he wrote to a prominent friend stating that he was acquainted with several persons connected with the Book of Mormon, including Martin Harris; that Harris had declared to him “upon his soul’s salvation that the book is true”; and that he, Phelps, had read and investigated the book and found it to be authentic.\(^3\)

While traveling to Palmyra on 30 April 1831 to further investigate the Book of Mormon, Phelps was arrested and imprisoned at Lyons, New York, ostensibly for a small debt but actually “for the purpose, as I was informed, of ‘keeping me from joining the Mormons.’” Although Phelps was unable to join the infant church until 10 June 1831, he wrote that his heart was with the new movement from the time he first became acquainted with the Book of Mormon. After his baptism, W. W. Phelps served as editor and publisher of the Church’s newspaper, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, wrote several hymns still sung today, was an ardent missionary, and was an active Latter-day Saint at the time of his death in Utah in 1872.\(^4\)

The Harris letter was obtained in 1983 by Lyn Jacobs, a Salt Lake City manuscript collector. Prior to that the letter had been in the possession of Elwyn Doubleday, a dealer in rare postal memorabilia, at Alton Bay, New Hampshire. According to Doubleday, the Harris letter was very probably a part of a large collection of New York handstamped letters he obtained in 1982. In January 1984 the letter was purchased by Salt Lake City businessman Steven Christensen and in April 1985 was given by him to the LDS church.

The unusual content of the letter, and the prospect of its being the most extensive Martin Harris holograph known to the time of its discovery, convinced Christensen to have it carefully examined by competent authorities to determine its authenticity. To accomplish this he sent the letter to Kenneth W. Rendell, a Newton, Massachusetts, autograph collector. During the course of investigation, the letter was submitted to specialists for tests of specific physical properties such as paper and ink. Noted forensic specialist Albert Lyter, after testing the ink, stated, “There is no evidence to suggest that the examined document was prepared at other than during the stated
time period." And Rendell concluded, "There is no indication that this letter is a forgery."13 (The text of these reports on the tests conducted in 1985 is reproduced on pp. 422–24.) In connection with these tests, and other observations, the following information is relevant:

1. The letter, which measures 8 13/16" x 11 9/16", is written on both sides of a single sheet of machine-lined paper and, if authentic, would be among the earliest samples of machine-lined paper. Tests show the paper to be consistent with other samples of the time period. According to Rendell, there is a possibility it was manufactured at the Nathaniel Rochester paper mill, built in 1810 at Dansville, New York, near Palmyra. (See photo reproductions on pp. 418–20.)

2. The type of ink used to write the letter was determined by chemical testing. Minute samples of the ink were removed from the letter and observed by microscope under the effect of chemical reagents. The ink was determined to be of the iron-gall type in wide use at the date appearing on the letter.

3. Before envelopes came into common use about 1845, letters were sent by folding the written sheet into a small size, secured with a wax seal, then addressed and stamped with a handstamp on the outside surface. Opening a letter would often leave a small hole or tear (caused by the breaking of the seal) and creases made by the original folds. The wax seal which produced the hole in the paper when the Harris letter was opened and the missing paper that had adhered to the wax match perfectly.

4. The double line oval Palmyra handstamped postmark on the Harris letter matches in size, color, and wording the postmark on letters mailed at Palmyra, New York, between 1829 and 1834.

5. The number 6 on the address panel, designating the six-cent cost for sending the letter, agrees with the zone rate in effect in 1830 for sending a single sheet a distance of not more than thirty miles. The 6 is written in a different color ink than the rest of the letter (see photo reproduction on p. 421).

While the foregoing observations show the Harris letter to be consistent with other writings of the time period, and illustrate a number of technical requirements necessary if one were to try to duplicate a letter written in 1830, they do not prove Harris's authorship. The question of authorship ultimately rests upon an analysis of the handwriting.

A search of Harris papers produces three manuscripts bearing his name, each written and signed in a different hand. These are the 1830
letter being considered here, a 4 September 1846 power of attorney written at Kirtland, Ohio, and a 13 August 1855 letter to Brigham Young, also dated at Kirtland. A comparison of these writings with fourteen known Harris signatures, spanning the years from 1829, when he was forty-six years old, to 1873, when he was in his ninetieth year, point to the 1830 Harris letter as the authentic Martin Harris (see signatures on p. 425). Nine of the signatures come from the period of his life prior to 1860, after which date his writing shows deterioration possibly due to illness or age.

Because similarities can be found in all handwriting of the same language and time period, it is the unique, habitual differences that provide the identifiers of a person’s writing. For conclusive results, a substantial amount of known handwriting is desirable as a standard by which to measure a questioned document. However, unique peculiarities in limited samples are informative. In the case of Martin Harris, only eight letters of the alphabet are represented in his signature, but his writing of them reveals peculiar characteristics also found in the text of the 1830 letter to Phelps—characteristics that are not found in the other two manuscripts. One of these is his lowercase r, which he frequently wrote almost like a v.

A handwriting comparison of the Harris letter is not limited to the samples of his signature alone. Accompanying one of his autographs are the additional words “Palmyra County of Wayne.” If these few additional words were written by Harris, they reveal further similarities to the text of the 1830 letter and indicate that Harris signed his name in the same style as his normally written prose.

Beyond this, additional writing appearing to be that of Martin Harris has recently come to light in an 1829 Book of Common Prayer that once belonged to his father Nathan Harris. Besides the signature of Nathan Harris and the date 1833 in the front of the book, a blank page contains the lines, “If this book should wander and you this book should find please to kindly remember that what you hold is mine.” Although the entry is unsigned, this writing is in the same hand as the 1830 Martin Harris letter. Significantly, the origin of the prayer book can be traced to the Harris family. The volume was purchased, along with an 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, by Deseret Book Company in June 1973 from an LDS church member who had obtained it from a non-Mormon descendant of Martin Harris’s brother Emer, living in California. In September 1985 the book was sold by Deseret Book Company to Mark Hofmann, and in
October was obtained by the LDS Church Historical Department. Whether or not the inscription was in the book at the time the Harris family owned it has been questioned.

Neither the Martin Harris 1846 power of attorney nor the 1855 letter to Brigham Young compares favorably with the Harris signatures and other writing, whereas the 1830 letter to Phelps does. Another indication the 1855 letter is not the authentic Harris writing is the misspelling of his name—“Martain.” While Harris was not a flawless speller, in existing matching signatures he never misspelled his own name.

On the basis of information available at the time of the initial testing, evidence seemed to favor authenticity of the Harris letter.

Public objections to the Harris and Smith letters have clouded perceptions of the letters and include statements that are untrue and misleading.21 Ronald Vern Jackson has questioned the two letters on the basis of their handwriting.22 He reasons that Harris, who was born in 1783, must have learned to write in the last decade of the eighteenth century, that handwriting styles changed drastically from place to place and decade to decade, that the 1830 letter differs from writings produced by people educated in the 1790s, and therefore that the 1830 letter could not have been written by one who had learned to write in the 1790s. Jackson claims that certain letters of the alphabet in the 1830 Harris letter are inconsistent with writing of the time period in which the letter was written. He argues that the I and J are indistinguishable in authentic 1830 writings but are clearly different in the 1830 letter. He adds that the double s in the 1830 letter could not have been made by someone who learned to write in the 1790s. On the grounds set forth here, practically everything written in Joseph Smith’s time is suspect. The characteristics Jackson states were not found in writings of the 1790s are in many writings of that period but are not limited to that time.

Jackson further maintains that the spelling in the 1830 letter is far too accurate to be Martin Harris’s and that the capital I used in the 1830 letter “differs too much to have come from Harris’s pen.” But where is the authentic Harris handwriting for making these conclusions?

To complete his case, Jackson maintains that the size of the Harris letter leads him to believe that the paper upon which it was written was a blank page torn out of “an old county history” and soaked in water containing ashes or coal dust to give the appearance of age. But this speculation is made without his study of the original.
Typical of Jackson’s rationale is his statement that “after having read more than 12,000 reels of micro-filmed data of pure 1850 documents” he finds the so-called Harris letter is highly unusual “for ‘every’ hump and bump, for every letter in the words with no scrunching of letters together.”

Jackson also claims that Joseph Smith did not write, dictate, or sign the 1825 letter. Having discovered supposed handwriting differences in the 1825 letter compared with other Joseph Smith writings produced from nine to nineteen years later and in a variety of situations, Jackson concludes that the letter is a fraud. However, since no one writes with typewriter precision, it is not difficult to find variations in Joseph Smith’s writing, especially over a period of time and among materials produced under various circumstances. One sees, for example, that in documents accepted as genuine, Joseph Smith wrote the letter s in almost every conceivable way. Consequently, to find different forms of the letter s in his writings is no proof of multiple authorship. In his assessment of Joseph Smith’s writing, Jackson focuses upon a few random differences but then fails to consider the Smith individualities, some of which alone, and all of which in combination, establish the unique handwriting profile that is Joseph Smith’s. It is on this basis that the authenticity of the 1825 letter must be determined.

Another objector to the Harris letter focuses upon differences of literary style between the 1830 letter and other Martin Harris writings. 23 Claiming to have made a careful comparison of sentence structure, rhetoric, grammatical usage, word frequency, and content of the 1830 letter with “known” Harris writings, Rhett Stephens James has argued that the 1830 letter could not have been produced by Martin Harris. The “known” Harris communications used by James to establish the style base for comparing the 1830 letter are (1) Harris’s report of his 1828 visit to Charles Anthon as recorded in Joseph Smith’s History of the Church; (2) the handwritten 13 August 1855 letter of Martin Harris to Brigham Young; (3) an interview of Martin Harris by Joel Tiffany in January 1859, published in Tiffany’s MONTHLY; (4 and 5) two letters of Martin Harris to Hanna B. Emerson, the first dated 23 November 1870, and the second dated January 1871, as published in The True Latter Day Saints’ Herald; and (6) a handwritten letter of Martin Harris to Walter Conrad dated 13 January 1873. 24 James states that based on literary style alone these writings could not have been written by the same person who wrote the 1830 letter.
Style analysis is an attempt to reduce uncertainty about authorship of an unknown writing by comparing its properties with information obtained from writings whose authorship is known. However, as Elinore Partridge has noted, “A stylistic analysis, even an objective, statistical analysis, is not as certain a means of establishing authorship as handwriting.”25 While successful work has been done in author attribution by comparing literary style, not every situation lends itself to this procedure. When Frederick Mosteller and David Wallace undertook to determine the authorship of several anonymous Federalist papers, the issue was plainly identified and the components for the study clearly defined. The question was whether Alexander Hamilton or James Madison wrote twelve disputed Federalist papers. There were sufficient known writings of both men produced about the same time and on the same general subject as the questioned material to allow Mosteller and Wallace to find vocabulary and syntactic evidence that distinguished each author. On the basis of their work they were able to conclude with high probability that Madison was the author of the disputed papers.26

In the case of Martin Harris it is doubtful that sufficient genuine Harris writings exist—and they certainly do not exist for the time period in question—to make a valid stylistic comparison with the 1830 letter. James’s work, therefore, is unconvincing on several grounds. For instance, he states that “known” Harris writings average thirty words per sentence as contrasted to thirteen words per sentence in the 1830 letter. The problem here is that none of the “known” Harris writings were actually penned by Harris. His “known” works exist only in a published form or in the hand of someone who wrote for Harris: the style and the punctuation, therefore, cannot be identified as Harris’s. Furthermore, the 1830 letter itself has no punctuation. What James measures as thirteen- and thirty-word sentences are actually his own creation (by providing punctuation), on the one hand, and that of scribes and editors writing or publishing for Harris, on the other.

In 1963, A. Q. Morton used sentence length and computer wordprint analysis to show that the Apostle Paul wrote only five of the fourteen epistles attributed to him in the New Testament, and that the remaining letters were written by at least five other people.27 But the eminent linguist Gustav Herdan questioned Morton’s work on his failure to define what he meant by sentences when none of the epistles were available as punctuated by the Apostle. Herdan pointed
out that the absence of original punctuation introduced an uncertainty that made sentence length almost impossible as a test for determining authorship. 28 John Ellison also challenged Morton’s work on the grounds that the computer wordprint could not take into consideration changes in a writer’s attitude that might affect his literary style over a period of time. To illustrate his point, Ellison noted that computers are no more competent than the people who program them. He suggested that by using wordprints to compare the Declaration of Independence with letters of Thomas Jefferson to his wife in June 1776 it could be shown that Jefferson did not write the Declaration or that someone else named Tom was corresponding with Mrs. Jefferson. Furthermore, Ellison, using Morton’s variables in a computerized noncontextual wordprint analysis of Morton’s essays, found that Morton’s own work was written by several different people. Ellison concluded that there are wide limits of tolerance that must be built into such literary studies. 29

In the Harris case, James clearly places more trust in stylistic analysis than the procedure will allow—even if we had a reliable corpus of Harris material for comparison. To assume that every individual habitually uses language in a characteristic way which is unique and that by identifying the characteristics a trained eye can create a stylistic register for any person may not be realistic. Studies have shown that a person’s style can change with time and situation. In an article on the use of literary style to determine authorship in forensic situations, Richard Bailey cited three examples from the prose of Patty Hearst—one from a diary she kept during a tour of Europe, another from a university examination, and a third from a transcript of a recorded conversation with a childhood friend. The samples differed drastically in style, ranging from simple, choppy, unplanned conversation to fluent, complex composition. Bailey’s conclusion was that without some knowledge of their provenance it would be very difficult to attribute these samples to the same author. While a person’s fingerprints do not change, his writing style often does. 30

Even if the materials in question accurately reflected Harris’s style, another difficulty in making a reliable stylistic comparison of Martin Harris’s other “writings” with the 1830 letter is the problem of the diversity of the material. One would hardly expect the report, an interview, and four letters written in a variety of settings over a forty-five-year period to compare favorably with an 1830 letter
written in an entirely different context. Using the literary style of heretofore available Harris-related sources as a standard to measure the authorship of the 1830 letter presents the same problem that a stylistic comparison of Joseph Smith’s published and dictated works with his holograph writings would produce—the problem of comparing the real Joseph Smith with a version of Joseph filtered through the minds of scribes, ghostwriters, and editors, and the problem of comparing writings created over a long period in a wide variety of situations and varying degrees of concentration.

Rhett James observes that the frequent use of the construction “says he—says I,” as Harris reports conversations between himself and others in the 1830 letter, argues against the authenticity of the letter because similar usage is not found in the other Harris letters. James does not seem to realize that the “says he—says I” usage is absent from other Harris letters because Harris was not reporting dialogue in those writings. The only time a person would use such a construction would be in reporting conversation. We should not expect every form of Harris’s grammatical usage to appear in every sample of his writing. James acknowledges that the “says” usage appears twice in the Tiffany interview but adds that it is impossible to know whether this is Tiffany’s editorial work or Harris’s prose. If so, would it not also be impossible to know whether the other differences he finds between the “known” Harris material and the 1830 letter are not also due to scribal or editorial tampering?

In comparing the 1870 Emerson letter to the 1859 Tiffany interview, James observes that the “fire” of Harris’s rhetoric is missing from the 1859 document, which he explains on the grounds that 1858 was a “sad year” for Harris, who was experiencing a psychological low at that time. Again, if psychological disturbance can explain the stylistic difference in this case, why can’t it also explain differences in the 1830 letter?

Clearly, with the diversity of the available sources, the absence of a body of Harris holographs, the small amount of total material available, and the limitations in methodology, an accurate stylistic analysis of Martin Harris’s literary expression cannot yet be made.

Beyond a consideration of the physical properties, the handwriting, and the literary style of the Smith–Harris letters, the question of authenticity also requires a look at content. Our experience with the study of history shows that questions often arise in proportion to the difficulty of assimilating new ideas. As new information challenges
cherished and long-standing preconceptions, strong feelings may produce voluntary blindness. Hence it is necessary to properly evaluate the new data in order that we do not uncritically accept new information on the one hand or allow our preconceptions to blind us and thus keep us from accepting new information on the other hand. Lessons from the past have taught the value of resisting simple answers.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the recently acquired Smith and Harris letters for Latter-day Saints is Joseph Smith’s probable involvement in the “folk religion” or “mystical” elements of his time. The description by Martin Harris of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, using the idiom of contemporary folk magic, for example, seems unfamiliar and foreign to twentieth-century minds. Nonetheless, though LDS readers may be inclined to reject the Smith–Harris letters because they are unfamiliar with the context and terminology, the issues the letters raise are not new, nor are they irreconcilable.

Even if the Smith–Harris letters should prove spurious, substantial other early Mormon sources focus on the issues raised—issues one observer described as Joseph Smith’s “supernatural power.” A. W. Benton in 1831 wrote that for years prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon Joseph Smith “was about the country in the character of a glass-looker; pretending, by means of a certain stone, or glass, which he put in a hat, to be able to discover lost goods, hidden treasures, mines of gold and silver.”31 An acquaintance of the Smiths in Palmyra was quoted in 1833 as saying that the Smith family held their son Joseph “in high estimation on account of some supernatural power,” which power he received “through the medium of a stone of peculiar quality.”32 Joseph’s brother-in-law heard him say that “his [Smith’s] gift in seeing with a stone and hat, was a gift from God”; and John A. Clark said that Joseph Smith, Sr., claimed for his son “a sort of second sight, a power to look into the depths of the earth, and discover where its precious treasures were hid.” He added that on their digging excursions young Joseph was usually the guide.33 Joel Tiffany, on the basis of interviewing Martin Harris, observed that Joseph, Jr., belonged to a company of money diggers and that Joseph “was the seer. He had a stone, in which, when it was placed in a hat, and his face buried therein, so as to exclude the light, he could see as a clairvoyant.”34 And Charles Marshall, reporting testimony at Joseph Smith’s 1826 Bainbridge trial, said that Joseph testified that
he "had a certain stone which he had occasionally looked at to determine where hidden treasures in the bowels of the earth were" and that he had also "frequently ascertained in that way where lost property was of various kinds." Testifying at the same trial, Josiah Stowell said that Joseph had "looked" for him on three occasions—for buried money, gold, and a salt spring—and added that before Joseph ever came to Bainbridge he had described the Stowell house and outbuildings through his stone. Twice during the trial Stowell mentioned his "implicit faith in the prisoner's skill."35 According to another report of the trial, Joseph Smith described his finding of a stone in his youth, and upon looking in it he discovered that "time, & place & distance were annihilated; that all intervening obstacles were removed & that he possessed one of the attributes of Deity, an All Seeing Eye." And Joseph, Sr., testified of his son's "wonderful triumphs as a seer" and described "very many instances of his finding hidden & stolen goods," stating that he and his son were both "mortified that this wonderful power which God had so miraculously given him should be used only in search of filthy lucre, or its equivalent," and that his "constant prayer to his Heavenly Father was to manifest His will concerning this marvelous power."36

Motivated by abundant sources and a humanistic viewpoint, Fawn Brodie, in her 1945 biography of Joseph Smith, developed the thesis that Joseph Smith's claim as a prophet evolved wholly from a background of magic.37 Others since that time have followed this theme, assuming that if it could be shown that Joseph was a money digger he could not have been religiously sincere. However, as Marvin Hill has noted, this conclusion rests upon "twentieth-century rationalistic assumptions, not on the nineteenth-century situation," for many acknowledged religious people of Joseph Smith's day were engaged in that activity. Hill also draws attention to David Whitmer's statement that while Joseph was using his stone he remained humble and sincere, and only later grew worldly—the reverse of the evolution some tend to see as they move from the "old spirit" to the "angel."38

While we need to acknowledge and understand the folk religion in which Joseph Smith participated, we need not accept twentieth-century secular interpretations of what it means. Indeed, initial study suggests that the more we learn about this phenomenon the better we
will see how these folkways were an integral part of the faith and religion of his age, and of others as well. Whatever observers may have perceived in Joseph Smith, he remains the primary witness to the events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. His story, and that of his family, both as revealed in the early documents and in their later numerous testimonies, cannot be ignored. If his History lacks detailed discussion of early events, it must be remembered that he wrote at a time when antagonism was strong, no doubt motivating him to omit things he might have included in a less hostile setting. Furthermore, the nature of his experience certainly was such as to preclude a rational explanation. He told a Nauvoo audience just before his death, “You don’t know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it: I shall never undertake it. I don’t blame you for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself.”

Nonetheless, the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s other accomplishments remain historical realities to be reckoned with, and his accounts of them, though brief, contain precise detail and sincerely expressed feelings which cannot be ignored.

If the Harris letter should prove authentic, any use of it with respect to the origin of the Book of Mormon must consider its deviation from other sources by Harris which portray the Joseph Smith story of the angel Moroni. But even taking the letter at face value, neither the writer nor its recipient seemed to perceive its message as out of the ordinary, or as inconsistent with biblical understanding. That readers in our time do probably tells more about our mind-set and unfamiliarity with the treasure and digging culture that produced the letter than anything else.

The discussion of treasure digging in the context of Mormon beginnings, as introduced by Fawn Brodie and Marvin Hill and continued more recently by Richard Bushman and Jan Shipps, will no doubt receive further attention in the wake of the Smith and Harris letters until there is, to use B. H. Roberts’s phrase, “a profounder and broader view” of Joseph Smith’s life and mission.

NOTES

1Joseph Smith, Jr., “Church History,” Times and Seasons 3 (1 March 1842): 707.
3Statement of Isaac Hale, 20 March 1834, cited in Eber D. Howe, Mormonism Unveiled (Painesville, Ohio: Published by Author, 1834), 262–63.
New Documents and Mormon Beginnings

1Joseph Smith, History of the Church, A–1, pp. 7–8, MS, Library–Archives of the Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives.


5On Martin Harris, see Richard L. Anderson, Investigating the Book of Mormon Witness (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1981), chaps. 7, 8; also Andrew Jenson, Latter-Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia 1 (Salt Lake City: Published by Author, 1901): 272–76. The statement of the witnesses is in "The Testimony of Three Witnesses," Book of Mormon (Palmyra, N.Y.: E. B. Grandin, 1830), [589].

6The Mormons, or, Knavery Exposed (Frankford, Pa.: E. G. Lee; and Philadelphia: George Webber and Wm. Fenimore, 1841), 8–10.

7Golden Bible," Gem (Rochester, N.Y.), 5 September 1829.


13See photograph on p. 246.

14See photograph on p. 247.

15See photograph on p. 240.

16See photograph on pp. 428.

17See photograph on p. 248.


19Statement of Ronald Vern Jackson, 17 May 1985, 4 pp., typescript; Ronald Vern Jackson to President Gordon B. Hinckley, 23 May 1985.


21The report to Anthon is found in Joseph Smith, History of the Church, A–1, p. 9; the letter to Brigham Young is in the LDS Church Archives; Tiffany's interview is published in his "Mormonism—No. II.," 163–70; the Emerson letters are in True Latter Day Saints' Herald 22 (15 October 1873): 630; the letter of Martin Harris to Walter Conrad, published in the Ensign (November 1982): 97–99, is owned by Brent Ashworth, Provo, Utah.


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BYU Studies


Anthony Kenny confirms Bailey, noting that "differences between letters, diaries and oral confessions by the same person are likely to be much greater than those between two persons writing in the same mode of composition." He adds, "However the discipline [of stylometrics] may develop in the future it cannot be said that there is as yet such a thing as a stylistic fingerprint: a method of individual style which is as reliable as a fingerprint as a criterion of personal identification.

"What would a stylistic fingerprint be? It would [have] to be . . . a constant feature of an author's writing, as fingerprints remain the same throughout life, and it would have to be unique to him and shared by no other writer. At the present time no one knows whether there are such features of style as not enough data have been collected. Constancy is not too difficult to test and may in some cases have been proved: uniqueness is quite another matter. . . . So there can be no definitive test of authorship."


1 Abram W. Benton, "Mormonites," Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate (Utica, N.Y.) 2 (9 April 1831): 120.

2 Statement of Joseph Capron, 8 November 1833, as cited in Howe, Mormonism Unsealed, 258–60.

3 Statement of Alvah Hale, 1834, in ibid., 268; Mormons, or, Knavery Exposed, 9.


6 Purple, Reminiscences, 8–9.


9 Joseph Smith discourse, Nauvoo, Illinois, 7 April 1844, as reported by Willard Richards and Thomas Bullock, MS, LDS Church Archives.

At a conference in Ohio in 1831, Hyrum Smith "thought it best that the information of the coming forth of the book of Mormon be related by Joseph himself to the Elders present." To which Joseph responded that "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon, & also . . . That it was not expedient for him to relate these things." (Minutes of a general conference held at Orange, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, 25 October 1831, as cited in Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon Cook, eds., Far West Record [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983], 23).


Canandaigua June 18th 1825

Dear Sir,

My Father has shown me your letter informing him and me of your success in locating the mine as you suppose but we are of the opinion that since you cannot ascertain any particulars you should not dig more until you first discover if any valuable remain you know the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit and if such is discovered so also is the treasure so do this take a sharp stick one yard long and sharpen both ends and clear it of any dust or mud or dirt on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick may look one right against the other one inch distant and if there is treasure after a while you shall do this draw and join together again of themselves let me know how it is since you were here I have almost decided to accept your offer and if you can make it convenient to come this way I shall be ready to accompany you if nothing happens more than I know of I am very respectfully

Joseph Smith Jr.

(Courtesy of LDS Church Archives)

Letter purportedly written by Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell, Canandaigua, New York, 18 June 1825
To Sir

Your letter of yesterday is received, and I hasten to answer as fully as I can. Joseph Smith jr. first came to my notice in the year 1824, in the summer of that year I contracted with his father to build a fence on my property in the days of that work. I spoke to Joseph jr. and he said he it is in a half day you put up, but what becomes your father & I brother in a full day working together he says I have not been with out assistance but can not say more only you better judge over the next days. I take the help Smith bag the same. Dr. Smith can see in the things he wishes, by looking at a stone, Joseph often says faith keep with great kindness of his money, it was Joseph who brought up much because Joseph made an attempt on these having a letter because I converse with Joseph which let me found these money when I awake I have in my hand a dollar coin which take for a sign Joseph dislikes what I do in every particular days as the spirit was pressed to E through back the dollar. In the fall of the year 1829 I have Joseph found a gold Bible. Take Joseph while to be days it is true I found it 4 years ago with my tomes but only just got it because of the enchantment. The old spirit came to me 3 times in the same dream 2 days dig up the gold but when I take it up the next morning the spirit transformd itself, was a white skeleton on the bottom of the hole. I strained one 3 times & held the treasure I would not let me have it because I lay it down to come over the hole when the spirit says do not lay the down. Joseph says when can I have it the spirit says one gold to day if you buy one look to the stone after 7 days he looks the spirit says bring your gold, Joseph says he is about shall I bring what money but the spirit is your Joseph goes to get the gold table but the spirit says you are not loving your brother you can not take it back to the stone Joseph looks but cannot see why it being the spirit I looked you again look to the stone Joseph does & I can see my left on the 22. day of Sept. 1829. They got the gold Bible of your Joseph $50 to some kind.

Courtesy of LDS Church Archives

Letter purportedly written by Martin Harris to William W. Phelps, Palmyra, New York, 23 October 1830
down to the Joseph days when you went and I will give you a sign to know the angel handwriting I take them to Naca Albany & New York in the last place to Whetzel give me an introduction to Professor Morton says he they are brought back Egypton the same what they used in ancient times bring me the old book & I will transcribe days & it is made of precious gold & is sealed from from view days or I cannot read a sealed book—Joseph found some giant oiling specifically with the plates he found them in an old hat & in the darkening room the words & in this way it is all translated & written down—about the middle of June 1834 Joseph takes me together with Heber Cowdery & David Whitmer to have a view of the plates & who sends are appended to the book of Mormon which I had painted with my own writing & space & turns each document over from writing second it happened if there is anything further you wish to inquire I shall attend to it yours respectfully Austin Bushnell

N. W. Phelps Esq.

N. W. Phelps Esq.

Lancaster, N.Y.
Church Egypton the same what was used times bring me the old book & I will tum

is made of precious gold & is sealed journ-

ys so I can not read a sealed book—

Some giant silver spectacles with the plates in a old hat & in the duchness vaults the words

it is all translated & written down—about

of June 1829 Joseph takes me together with

J. David Whitmer to have a view of the plates

be appended to the book of Mormon which I

with my own money—space & time both

from writing more at present if there is any

good to inquire I shall attend to it

Yours Respectfully

[Signature]
Envelope of 1830 Harris to Phelps letter
March 20, 1985

Mr. Mark Hofmann
2219 Marie Ave.
Salt Lake City, UT 84109

Dear Mark:

In accordance with your request, I have examined the original letter purported to be in the handwriting of Martin Harris, dated from Palmyra October, 29, 1830.

The letter was examined under ultra-violet light, and the ink floresced in accordance with other inks of this period. The paper itself had a florescence consistent with the period.

I examined the fact that the letter is written on machine-ruled paper, and found that paper of this type was prevalent in upstate New York at the time. In fact, we located a similar, although not identical, paper in the New York State Library in Albany. In 1819, Nathaniel Rochester established in Dansville, New York, near Palmyra, a paper mill which we know by 1835 was producing machine-ruled paper. It is entirely reasonable to believe that the paper of this Harris letter was manufactured at that plant.

I examined the seal tear and the missing paper which had adhered to the wax, located on the integral leaf, and find that they match perfectly. I also examined the folds in the paper and determined that the writing was put on the paper before it was folded. The quality of the line of writing, and the rate of absorption of the ink, are consistent with ink which has been placed on recently manufactured paper.

The postmark on the letter matches another from the same town, at the same time. The "r" in Palmyra was compared and measures precisely with the second postmark example. The overall size of the postmark is also consistent, as is the width of the outer circle with the other example.

Kenneth W. Rendell, analysis of 1830 Martin Harris letter, 20 March 1985 on which historians relied
There were no examples of the handwriting of Martin Harris with which to compare the body of the letter, however, I examined it for consistency of style and any traces that might indicate that it was forged. I found none.

The signature on the letter is consistent with three other known examples of Harris's signature. The original was examined very closely under a microscope for any signs of tracing, and no signs were found.

It is my conclusion, based upon all of this evidence, as well as the ink and paper tests undertaken independently of me, that there is no indication that this letter is a forgery.
February 13, 1985

Steven F. Christensen
324 South State Street
Fifth Floor
Salt Lake City, UT 84111

RE: Martin Harris Letter

REPORT OF LABORATORY EXAMINATION

A physical and chemical examination was performed on the above referenced document with the following results.

1. All tests for the presence of coloring material in the written line were negative.

2. Examination results are consistent with the ink being of the "Iron Gall" type. This ink was in widespread use at the date appearing on the document.

3. Examination results compare favorably with those of documents from this same time period.

Conclusions: There is no evidence to suggest that the examined document was prepared at other than during the stated time period.

Albert H. Lyter III
Forensic Chemist

AHL/rel
Cert. Mail #P 527 632 905

Albert H. Lyter III, report of ink analysis of 1830 Martin Harris letter,
13 February 1985
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Signatures of Martin Harris. The signature on the Harris letter to Phelps is no. 6.
Kirtland, Sept 21st, 1846

From all men by this present, that I, Martin Harris, am about to leave this continent and expect to go to Europe and remain there one year or more. I have entrusted Jacob Bump and Florence Harris my lawful agents to transact all my business in my name and to conduct my personal property in the township of Kirtland and for the benefit of my family and the Church of Christ, of which I am a member, it is quite certain that the said Jacob Bump and Florence Harris is held there agency for at least one year and if I do not return within one year that they have agency to carry on until my return. And I have the foregoing by these presents deliver to the said Bump & Harris all the cattle - sheep, grain, hay, farm utensils, farm implements for the use above mentioned with the right to work or lease my farm as my agents shall think proper.

I just said, day and year above

Martin Harris

Courtesy of the Harold B. Lee Library Archives

Martin Harris, Power of Attorney, Kirtland, Ohio, 4 September 1846
Kirtland, Ohio, Aug. 13, 1835

Respected Friend Brigham Young, 

I send you a copy of a Proclamation as you will discover by reading it given by Moses Elias, Elias, and John—You no doubt will Bro. Joseph a copy of the same. I am under the command of the Lord to send you the Proclamation. May the Lord and Commanders of the Proclamation may go to all the world. This is done you will share the kine of God and help to rule over the house of humanity. Your friends and relations. Send all my respects to you and all that are bound by the ties of love and friendship. I remain as ever a friend to truth and righteousness. 

Martin Harris.

NB we would be glad to hear from you. Suppose you write us a letter.

Martin Harris.
If this book should wonder and you this book should find, please to kindly remember that what you hold is mine.

Purported Martin Harris writing from unidentified book. Copy in possession of author.

A page from The Book of Common Prayer according to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America Together with the Psalter (New York, 1830, 371 pp.; and Hymns of the Protestant Episcopal Church (Philadelphia, 1829), 48 pp., bound as one volume, belonging to Nathan Harris, father of Martin Harris. The front of the book contains the signature “Nathan Harris” and “Kirtland, Ohio, 1833.” The lines photographed here match the handwriting of the 1830 letter purportedly written by Martin Harris. They are written on the last page of the book.
The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting

Ronald W. Walker

He carried a magic divining-rod,
A miraculous crystal stone
By which in the darkened crown of his hat
He could fix a spot unknown.
—Leo Leonard Twinem, “A Ballad of Old Pocock [Vermont]” (1929)

There is . . . only one way of understanding a cultural phenomenon which is alien to one’s own ideological pattern, and that is to place oneself at its very centre and from there to track down all the values that radiate from it.
—Mircea Eliade, The Forge and the Crucible (1956), 11

Toute vue des choses qui n’est pas étrange est fausse.
—Paul Valery, as quoted in Hamlet’s Mill, 1

I

The following essay was originally written for a general scholarly audience. Even though it is now being published in a Latter-day Saint context I have chosen to retain its detached tone, reserving a more personal response for another essay which also appears in this issue of BYU Studies. I chose such a tone, not so much because of my intended audience, but because I wished to understand treasure digging as a cultural phenomenon, not just as a recurring theme in Mormon historical writing. Past writers who have dealt with Mormon money digging have usually written in a polemical and even combative manner. As a result, in the hundred and fifty years that writers have attacked and defended Joseph Smith’s alleged treasure hunting we have not learned much about the topic itself. My hope in writing this essay was to place money digging at center stage, free from partisan debate, and thereby establish an understandable context for the
Smith family's involvement with the activity. Their actual role, of course, is yet to be examined in detail.

I wish to make another point explicit. Nothing in my study should be taken as suggesting that Joseph Smith was merely a product of his folk culture environment. No English or American village adept ever produced a Book of Mormon. None produced a Vision of Moses, the Olive Leaf, the Three Degrees of Glory, or such magisterial ideas as sections 93 and 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants. At every major point in his career, there were second and third witnesses for Joseph Smith's work. And when he died, he left a church that dwarfed anything that might have been built by a run-of-the-mill village holy man. Some may see this success as simply the work of a "religious genius." My own conviction is that Joseph was a religious genius because of an active and guiding Providence.

Nevertheless, as we come to understand the New England folk culture more fully, we may find that it was not an inappropriate precursor to the Restoration. It is already apparent that this culture tended to be anti-traditional church in orientation. It strongly embraced the idea of personal revelation and the ministry of spirits. At least some of its practitioners believed in a kind of premortal existence, "dispensationalism," and the restoration of ancient texts. For many of its adherents, it seems to have functioned as a visionary and exciting, though not formal, religion. One of the major insights in the field of religious studies during the past decade is the realization that religious faith has been defined too narrowly. By examining what the people actually were doing and believing, we have come to understand that there was, existing side by side with such movements as Episcopalianism or Presbyterianism or Lutheranism, sometimes intermixing with them, an informal people's religion that held the attention of the common man or woman.

II

From colonial times to at least the Age of Jackson, Americans dug for magical treasure. There were hundreds and probably thousands of these "money diggers," all seeking troves of fabled coins, mines, jewels, and other valued prizes. They worked from the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi hinterlands and in a few localities heaped up tailings that rivaled those of the later forty-niners. Yet, for all this prodigious toil, their "finds" were as rare as Merlin's transmuted gold. What made them persist? Relying on an immemorial
but now forgotten world view, the money diggers placed faith in conjuring, elemental spirits, thrice-spoken dreams, seeric gifts, and enchanted treasure that could slip and rumble through the earth as easily as a fish moving through the deep. The modern age will probably never fully understand the diggers' strange compound of treasure seeking, religious feeling, and intense psychological devotion to an old but fading way of life. Theirs was another world which we can speak of but hardly enter.¹

Many of the themes of American digging appear much earlier in mankind's primal myths. For example, in Egypt, where "most of the magic . . . of the [subsequent] world may be found," is told the story of Setnau Khaem-Uast. After offering an appropriate incantation, Setnau found an invaluable book deposited within a cavern. The prize was originally buried in a box, which in turn contained a series of smaller receptacles. The last, a golden box, was guarded by a swarm of serpents and scorpions. The hero killed the last snake three times.² The Greeks, in turn, had their own treasure stories, which told of a winged griffin protecting treasure, Jason wrestling the golden fleece from the guarding dragon, and Heracles dispatching a snake to obtain the three golden apples.³

Tales of treasure also interested the Semites. They spoke of hidden golden plates and other valuable texts buried in places like a cave, mountain, iron box, or under Solomon's throne. One treasure was protected by Qatmir, a guarding dog.⁴ None of these reports, however, matched the extravagance of the Qumran community's "Copper Scroll." Apparently a catalogue of Judaean treasure lore, this early Christian era scroll listed sixty hidden deposits with precious metal weighing two hundred tons altogether.⁵ Some of these ideas may have influenced Arabic culture. "The Rassad," wrote R. Campbell Thompson, "is generally the guardian of some treasure, and may take the form of a man, colt, cock, or chicken with young; he haunts almost all caves. . . . The idea that devils are guardians of enormous treasure is very prevalent among the Arabs."⁶

Clearly, the ideas of hidden but guarded treasure, with their secondary and accompanying motifs of ancient texts, animals, boxes, devils, caves, gold, incantations, mountains, and even the ratifying number three, were an ancient bequest. Later they became a part of the central beliefs of Indo-European folk culture.⁷ For the European, buried treasure might be found in barrows and treasure chambers within a mountain. Or it could be deposited near a wayside cross, close to one's home, or under the ruins of a fallen castle or abbey. The
treasure itself, the people realized, was active. It might rise or fall, grow or multiply, and after seven years (some said a hundred years were necessary) "blossom" or "sun" itself near the earth's surface. At such times, particularly during a full moon, the treasure became "will o' the wisp," giving off a bluish flame and therefore especially susceptible to recovery.8

But getting the treasure was always difficult and harrowing. If not recovered quickly, the trove sank into the earth's depths until its next far-in-the-future "blooming." Further, the digger might have to outwit the man-like elemental spirits. According to some lore, the salamander, after forging minerals in the earth's fiery furnace, entrusted his newly made ore to his brother spirits, the sylphs, nymphs, and especially the underground gnomes, who then safeguarded it for humankind's general good.9 More common, however, were tales involving the devil, who moved treasures about maliciously to prevent their discovery and created distracting spectres to impede digging. For example, he might transform himself into a frightening toad, rooster, dog, bear, snake, or dragon. He could present the digger with a false vision of his burning home or village. Or, more imaginatively, he might dress himself in a bizarre red and green costume and ride either a glowing wagon wheel or a trundling barrel. If such things did not scare the seeker from his booty, they invariably caused him to break the taboo of silence, which ended any chance of success.10

Faced with these obstacles, the European treasure seeker tried to narrow the odds. To facilitate his search, he listened carefully to the treasure dreams of a pure or innocent youth, who it was believed had special powers to discern and recover the subterranean bounty. "Earth mirrors," seer stones, or divining rods crafted from hazel or mistletoe were also thought to be useful searching tools.11 Many seekers used a magic manual like The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses to secure astrological information, gain a listing of suitable psalms for magic prowess, and learn important prayer and conjuring formulae. The latter was especially important. Treasure seekers and magical practitioners in general tried to "bind to their service, and imprison in a ring, a mirror, or a stone, some fairy, sylph, or salamander, and compel it to appear when called, and render answers to such questions as the viewer should propose."12 During the medieval period, the elemental spirits, commonly known as "familiars," were viewed as the easiest to conjure, a task often left to a preadolescent youth, a cleric, or a professional scryer.13
The popularity of treasure digging in Europe is difficult to assess. Certainly the practice was geographically widespread. Money diggers were at work from Iceland to Russia and from Scandinavia to the southern Mediterranean. Germany and especially Hungary had reputations for digging.\textsuperscript{14} In England the practice made “hill digger” a common epithet and brought a series of statutory prohibitions. Yet court officials such as John Dee (Queen Elizabeth’s physician) or Goodwin Wharton (a seventeenth-century Lord of the Admiralty) sought buried treasure, and as late as the twentieth century hazel rods were frequently used to probe for lead and coal veins in northern England.\textsuperscript{15} Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Walter Scott, Edvard Grieg, Henrik Ibsen, and especially the Germans Goethe and E. T. A. Hoffmann used treasure images in their works. Perhaps as telling, treasure-hunting motifs lodged themselves in popular culture. Everyday folk brandished mistletoe, carried their will-o’-the-wisp jack o’lanterns, told their children about money pots under the rainbow, and read to them of Snow White’s troubles with the wicked queen’s magic mirror and of the friendly treasure mountain gnomes who rescued her.

At the beginning of the modern era, then, there existed a mature lore of hidden wealth, and some of it was probably not chimera. Both German and English miners claimed that divining rods aided their search for minerals, and the hope of finding treasure beneath a barrow, wayside cross, ruin, or in one of the ubiquitous caches of the countryside was not entirely without foundation.\textsuperscript{16} Yet the reality of actual treasure hardly explains the power and tenacity of the treasure myth. “Finds” were never commensurate with actual digging and were more a matter of accidental discovery than conscious magical enterprise. Even the discovery of mines, allegedly the most successful of the diggers’ pursuits, evoked skepticism and lacked documented results.\textsuperscript{17}

Why did such a nonrational practice persist? While wealth seeking and adventure doubtless played a role, Europeans were as susceptible to the old cultural patterns as the early Semites, Greeks, and Romans. Since at least Neolithic times, the ideas of treasure, capricious spirits, religious quest, and a Mother-Earth who matured precious ores within her hallowed womb have persisted. Like medieval miners who purified themselves with fasting, meditation, prayers, and acts of worship, many treasure hunters saw themselves as working close to the sacred presence.\textsuperscript{18} Such religious feeling made their practices tenacious and enduring.
Moreover, treasure digging fit into the prevailing magical-religious culture of the time. Some areas in England, for instance, may have had as many "wise men" and "wise women" as ordained ministers, and they likely commanded as wide a clientele. Drawing their name from the Christian magi, these seers or masters of the arcane claimed not only to locate buried treasure but also to heal the sick, foretell the future, find lost articles, establish criminality, and in some cases perform services that scholars increasingly conclude were religious in character. Their "summoning of celestial beings was a religious rite," concludes Keith Thomas, "in which prayer played an essential part, and where piety and purity of life were deemed essential... At this level the practice of magic became a holy quest: the search for knowledge, not by study and research, but by revelation."19 Some adepts added preachments to their ceremonials, speaking of the lost patriarchal powers of Adam, Enoch, Noah, Joseph, and Solomon, which they saw themselves as preserving.20

Most Old World magical practitioners warmly rejected any league with the powers of darkness. Their craft was beneficium, the white art, which opposed devilish compacts, consorting with demons, and the works of evil witches. For example, Egyptian Secrets, a chapbook (purportedly by Albertus Magnus) that circulated among the German peasantry and later among the Pennsylvania Dutch, advertised itself as an antidote to the "machinations of bad and malicious people" whose sorcery blighted personal happiness, marriages, and on occasion entire villages. To disregard its prescriptions was to "defy the will of God" and risk "eternal punishment and grim damnation."21 In a similar vein, The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses freely invoked both biblical images and the cabalistic names of deity.22 In sum, many European adepts were like the Elizabethan John Dee, who told Emperor Rudolph II that, finding no man nor book had adequate truth, he had resorted to the medium of his shew stone and the ministry of holy angels. But his conjuring, he insisted, had never passed the bounds of acceptable and enlightened Christianity.23 No doubt he saw his magical paraphernalia as no more opposed to religion than the Egyptian divining cup of Joseph, the supernatural rods of Moses and Aaron, or the Urim and Thummim of the High Priest.24

Neither Dee nor present-day scholars have been able to draw a distinct line between "the white arts" and religion. Certainly the old nineteenth-century categories, which Pejoratively saw magic as primal, practical, and manipulative, and religion as enlightened,
ethereal, and supplicatory, have failed to bear up under recent structural–functional or phenomenological analysis. With a wide range of practices present in all religious movements, including early Christianity itself, scholars have assumed a more tolerant and flexible view.  

III

In retrospect, it was inevitable that treasure digging should persist in Europe and later come to the New World. So deeply ingrained were the traditional folk ideas of hidden and shifting treasure, underground spirits, divination, astrology, and the earth’s role in making and perfecting minerals that the practice must have sailed to America with Jamestown’s Sarah Constant, Goodspeed, and Discovery. These myths were part of a significant but now largely forgotten belief system which had the strengths of tradition, religion, and even an informal authority structure based on the widespread wise adepts. It offered the folk an alternative or accompanying belief to the remote and at times emotionally sterile dogmas of formal religion. In the American environment, this traditional culture of the people, of which money digging was a part, would prosper for many years. Then it quickly faded, becoming a matter of opprobrium which the collective consciousness of the new society sought to purge from memory.

Bereft of the old European treasure landmarks and the ancient Celtic, Roman, and German races that supposedly placed wealth within them, the early American settlers found new “realities” to justify their renewed money digging. Borrowing on the old lore, the treasure hunters focused on ruins, mounds, caves, or even geological chasms and fissures, which some thought to have been created by the convulsions at the time of Christ’s crucifixion.  

The remains of French fortifications brought fifty diggers to Crown Point near Lake Champlain, while others excavated around Chimney Island in the St. Lawrence River channel fifty miles northeast of Ogdensburg, New York. Rumors of hidden Hessian and British booty, in turn, brought diggers to the Saratoga, New York, battlefield.

Glacial drumlins which rose barrow-like from the upstate New York landscape were also attractions. One of these, the starkly dramatic, one-hundred-and-fifty-foot-high Mormon Hill, or “Cumorah,” as Mormons called it, was the site of treasure digging both before and after Joseph Smith’s receiving of his golden plates.
Diggers also worked the rampart-crowned Carantouan or Spanish Hill, rising in solitary isolation above the Susquehanna plain near Elmira, New York. Some believed that Carantouan, like Mormon Hill, was a man-made earthen shell that concealed a treasure cavern. Others spoke of the hill's buried wealth, reportedly left by Spanish explorers, Captain Kidd, or perhaps "a prehistoric race as wealthy as the Aztecs." 28

The cave motif was not restricted to "treasure mountains" like Mormon Hill and Carantouan. Perhaps reflecting the popular Masonic legend of Solomon's many-arched subterranean vault, there were accounts of treasure caves in Vermont's Green Mountains, the Adirondacks, near present-day Rochester, and above the Susquehanna River in northern Pennsylvania. 30 The image also survived in good-natured folklore. According to Henry van Hoevenberg, an early twentieth-century raconteur, while still a young man he found an Algonquin parchment telling of a cave that could be seen only in the light of a full August moon. Finding and entering the grotto, van Hoevenberg stuffed his pockets "with wampum and gold and great treasure" until met by a huge and menacing Indian. Though he escaped with a few valuables, the incident left him, according to his story, with "two broken legs, three broken ribs, and one broken arm." 31

The identity of those burying treasure greatly varied. Encouraged by the area's mysterious mounds and a romantic delight with the antique, some posited the existence of an ancient American race. Gentle and honest Tim Allen, a Rochester seer, told of pygmy miners who buried their treasure in upstate New York to keep it from invading giants. 32 In Chautauqua County, New York, near the Pennsylvania border, several adepts confirmed the presence of a "fabulous buried treasure" left by some "highly cultivated and wealthy" Celtic Indians prior to their destruction by barbaric hordes from the north. A group of communitarian Spiritualists, who supposedly spent $20,000 digging at the site, had their own revelation about the "Kiantonian" people. They were, the Spiritualists confirmed, none other than the progenitors of the Aztecs. 33 Such notions were apparently widespread. The Palmyra neighbors of Joseph Smith claimed that his family spoke of "large gold bars and silver plates" hidden within the caverns of the region's prehistoric man-made mounds. 34

However, none of the treasure-burying peoples figured as strongly in the lore as two ever-present images, the Spaniard and the
pirate. Spain and her colonies fascinated the average English settler, and Spanish themes, influenced undoubtedly by Potosí and the Spanish Main, became stock features of the remarkably consistent treasure tales.\textsuperscript{35} One of the most detailed stories told of the aged Spaniard DeGrau, who in 1800 suddenly appeared near present-day Bristol, Vermont, and began digging. Eventually the settlers persuaded him to reveal his secret. As a youth he had been part of a successful Spanish mining expedition that had concealed a hoard of silver within a Green Mountain cave. Now as the surviving member of the party, he had come to reclaim his wealth. Unfortunately, neither DeGrau nor several generations of hunters who ravished Vermont’s “Hell’s Half Acre” found anything besides a strange-looking vessel that some believed was left by the Spanish troop.\textsuperscript{36}

The theme of treasure-burying Spanish miners or explorers became a folklore staple. In Vermont, at least twenty towns claimed a returning old Spaniard who failed to find his hidden silver specie.\textsuperscript{37} At Pennsylvania’s Big Bend of the Susquehanna River, diggers also looked for treasure left by a company of Spaniards, supposedly coined silver sealed within an inevitable cave.\textsuperscript{38} With some varying detail, the same chronicle later appeared in Tennessee, Missouri, and even Oregon.\textsuperscript{39}

The pirate myth was probably stronger. While having roots in England, the idea of hidden pirate treasure flowered in America.\textsuperscript{40} The booty of Captain Low, Harry Main, Thomas Veale, or simply rumored buccaneers plying Lake Ontario, each appeared in the lore.\textsuperscript{41} But two names dominated.

The first was the notorious “Blackbeard,” the criminally insane Edward Teach, whose forty-gun \textit{Queen Anne’s Revenge} preyed on Carolina and Virginia shipping after the War of Spanish Succession in 1713.\textsuperscript{42} The Blackbeard legend centered around colonial Philadelphia and the south Atlantic Coast. Believed to have frequented the city’s waterfront taverns and to have had “friends . . . lodged among us every where,” Blackbeard was thought to have buried money and plate both in Philadelphia and in nearby secluded riverside locations. When a few treasure pots were apparently found in the city’s household cellars and the discovery of others was rumored, the idea of buried pirate wealth became “much the expectation and talk of the times.”\textsuperscript{43} Benjamin Franklin reported that not only were such ideas “mighty prevalent,” but money digging itself was widespread: “You can hardly walk half a Mile out of Town on any Side,” he wrote, “without observing several Pits dug with that Design, and perhaps
some lately opened. Men, otherwise of very good Sense, have been drawn into this Practice. . . . There seems to be some peculiar Charm in the conceit of finding money.”

The second name was that of William Kidd. Commissioned as a privateer in 1696 to rid the Indian Ocean of corsairs, “Captain Kidd” was soon rumored to be a pirate himself and was hung for murder five years later at London’s Execution Dock. Before his capture in Boston, he had sailed the Atlantic Coast and buried on Gardiner’s Island, New York, a hoard worth fourteen thousand pounds, which authorities later reclaimed. These facts were expanded to fill America’s most extravagant treasure legend. Men searched from Key West to Halifax for the rest of Captain Kidd’s “unfound” treasury. In the northern states alone, excavations were made in New York at Coney Island, Gardiner’s Island, and New York City; in Massachusetts at Nantucket, Cape Cod, and in the marshes behind Boston; in Connecticut at Stratford Point, Wethersfield, and Clarke’s Island in the Connecticut River; and at such diverse places as South Kingstown, Rhode Island; Weare, New Hampshire; and Penobscot Bay, Maine.

The digging was at times both unlikely and vigorous. Despite living seventy miles up the Hudson River at Green County, New York, young Thurlow Weed remembered embarking on a Kidd treasure expedition which his elders had promised would yield “golden results.” Indeed, according to Harold Thompson, there was “not a County on Hudson’s River, not an islet in the Sound but has its whispers and hopes of buried treasure, all planted by Kidd on those few nights when he hovered between Block Island and Gardiner’s.” Even landlocked Vermont had at least three towns that claimed Kidd treasure. And when diggers believed themselves close to a discovery, the result was prodigious. According to one assessment, Penobscot Bay had enough dirt from treasure digging to bank and fill a twenty-mile railroad grade, while some New England beaches were left like scarred and disfigured mining districts.

While much of this money digging may have been nonmagical, other hunters relied heavily on the old lore. For instance, a skilled wise man or diviner was often employed. As in Europe, these white magic practitioners conjured spirits, cast horoscopes, blessed amulets, foretold the future, discovered missing persons and lost property, and blessed the ill with cabalistic charms and sometimes by the “laying on of hands.” Some were thought endowed with “the spirit of truth, prophecy, or the power of speaking in tongues.”
These American adepts were a diffuse lot, including girls, boys, women, and men. Young Sally Chase found lost articles and treasure in the Palmyra, New York, neighborhood.\textsuperscript{51} Seven-year-old Eli Yarnall began his seeric career when in his own house he suddenly laughed at the idea of his father running down a distant mountain chasing a dropped whiskey jug. On returning home, his father confirmed the boy’s “second sight.”\textsuperscript{52} John Greenleaf Whittier, whose New England heritage and rural nativity were probably representative of conditions elsewhere, told of a black “wise woman” who received “hundreds of anxious inquirers”; of the “grave” and “thoughtful” healer whose New England clients petitioned him both by mail and in person; and of the Quaker conjuror Bantum, who, on receiving a request, placed his huge, iron-rimmed spectacles on his face, opened his strange, black-lettered “conjuring book,” and after a few moments of meditation, gave the required answers.\textsuperscript{53}

Of the scores of adepts that appear in reminiscent accounts and local histories, some left an enduring mark on history. Some suspected that Dr. Robert Child, a wealthy Puritan skilled “in mineralogy and metallurgy” and given to the “searching for mines,” was a wizard. Child led the first movement to secure liberty of conscience in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{54} The German Pietist Johannes Kelpius founded on the outskirts of Philadelphia his “Chapter of Perfection,” a religious brotherhood that mixed alchemy, astrology, the hermetic arts, and money digging with millennial Rosicrucianism. After his death, Kelpius’s influence continued in the communitarian Ephrata settlement and in a series of magic practitioners who mirrored his own interests.\textsuperscript{55} The youthful Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of Mormonism, honed his spiritual gifts by finding lost articles, foretelling the future, blessing crops, and digging for treasure.\textsuperscript{56} Then there was the far-famed Moll Pitcher (1738–1813), whose name became an American watchword. For more than fifty years, she followed the seeric precedent given her by her grandfather and advised the thousands who entered her Lynn, Massachusetts, cottage. “Many a Vessel has been deserted by its Crew, and waited idly at the Wharves, for Weeks, in Consequence of her unlucky Predictions,” noted a contemporary. “To her came the Rich and the Poor—the Wise and the Ignorant—the Accomplished and the Vulgar.”\textsuperscript{57}

The adepts often played a major role in money digging. The two men who in 1827 sought neatly boxed Spanish dollars below the old pier at New London, Connecticut, were directed by an elderly wise woman. Seeking pirate treasure in Maine, three men imported from
Connecticut a "far-famed and wonderfully skillful rodsman" to assist them. In turn, the treasure-hungry farmers of Rose, New York, sought the help of a "medium," while the 1825 expedition to the Susquehanna hills began with a "peeper" named Odle, whose power of "seeing under ground" piqued William Hale's interest. Moreover, the longtime diggers around Bristol, Vermont, made use of expert advice. They consulted a series of "prophets," including two women, an "old Frenchman" east of the mountains, and finally a conjuror who promised that by removing a few rocks and "shunning the solid ledge" the long-sought cave might be entered. Indeed, one Bristol seer even assayed the value of the Bristol treasure at $3,100,000 and a few cents.\(^{58}\)

The first role of the adept was to aid in finding the treasure. Often this involved confirming a rumor or dream, the two primary sources of treasure stories. The latter was especially frequent. Of the fifty treasure sites that Silas Hamilton, a devoted treasure seeker from Whitingham, Vermont, logged in his journal, over twenty owed their origin to a dream experienced by one of Hamilton's contemporaries. At least one dream was given three times.\(^{59}\) Drawn from the prevailing biblical and secondary magical culture, both dreams and the ratifying number \textit{three} became an important stimulus to digging.\(^{60}\) Thus when Deacon Bascom, an early New Hampshire settler, dreamed three times of a silver treasure deposited under a stone, he found the stone but eventually refused to recover the treasure for fear that it might corrupt his children.\(^{61}\) Those who believed old Mrs. Talmage's thrice-occurring dream were less wise. According to upstate New York lore, the three men who set out to recover the treasure were never seen again.\(^{62}\) The number \textit{three} also played a role in proper ritual. When another dream revealed the position of the lost Oneida treasure, the hunter arrived on the site, but failing to turn around the prescribed three times before picking the treasure up, he lost his opportunity.\(^{63}\)

Continuing the long-standing European tradition, if rumors and dreams failed to mark the specific location of the treasure an adept's divining rod was often used. Like their Old World counterparts, these were usually freshly grown, Y-shaped twigs about eighteen inches to two feet long. They were taken from apple, beech, cherry, or more commonly hazel trees, although such objects as whalebone or brass and iron wire were also employed.\(^{64}\) Conflicting lore suggested that the rod's ceremonial cutting should be on the first night of
The Christmas, Twelfth Night, at Tuesday’s new moon, or during the St. John’s Day celebration of the summer solstice.65

“One who does not believe in . . . [the rod] cannot believe in God,” claimed an ardent rodsman, “for I call on him to make her successful, when I cuts her, and so she must be true.”66 In truth, the cutting ritual was filled with religious imagery. One prescribed formula required the supplicant to use the three “highest” cabalistic names of deity incanted three times.67 Another clothed its words with traditional Christian phrasing:

I conjure thee, one summer long [old], hazel rod, by the power of God, by the obedience of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, God and Mary’s own son, who died on the cross, and by the power of God, by the truth of God arose from the dead; God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, who art the very truth thyself, that thou showest me where silver and gold is hidden.68

Interpreting biblical passages to their advantage, some adepts saw themselves as having canonical sanction and called their instrument “Jacob’s rod” after the patriarch’s use of mystical rods while breeding Laban’s cattle.69

Since a rod’s wide-ranging power might include healing, answering religious questions, determining a suspect’s criminality, or discovering lost articles, salt licks, underground water channels, and subterranean minerals, some rods were impregnated with nails of “gold, silver, iron, copper, lead, tin, and an amalgram” to heighten their sensitivity to buried treasure. Then, whether the tool was so adorned or not, the practitioner grasped it in his hand, palms facing up, and walked across the suspected treasure terrain, waiting for the rod to twist itself downward.70 Occasionally there was some variation of procedure. One adept poised a straight rod on his forefinger, expecting the lure of gold or silver to destroy its equilibrium. The Joseph Smith letter to Josiah Stowell counseled the treasure seeker to cleave the hazel stick lengthwise. When laid parallel one inch apart over a prospective site, the two parts would “draw and Join together again of themselves” if actual treasure were present.71

Peter Oliver, the future Massachusetts chief justice, found that the divining rod “exceeded what I had heard.” It could “locate a single Dollar under ground, at 60 or 70 feet Distance; & to a Quantity of Silver at a Miles Distance.”72 With the device’s “water-witching” ability increasingly appreciated, Oliver’s opinion was widely shared. “From north to south, from east to west,” claimed an
early nineteenth-century observer, "the divining rod has its advocates. Men in various callings, men above the reach of mean arts, men of the soundest judgment, of large information, and of the most exemplary lives, do not disown the art."73

A second treasure-finding device used by some adepts was the "peep" or "seer" stone, whose acclaimed gifts excelled even those of the divining rod. Such stones seemed to be everywhere and were of every possible description. A Rochester, New York, practitioner found his stone lying in a road. The "dazzling splendor" of this three- or four-inch piece of quartz caused him to fall down insensible.74 Joseph Smith's various stones reportedly included a smooth, grey, egg-shaped rock found in a neighbor's well, a second which he reportedly dug up near Lake Erie after espying it in his neighbor's stone, and still others collected from the Mississippi River sands near Nauvoo, Illinois.75 Edwin Rushton exhumed his "beautiful Seer Stone, clear as crystal" after dreaming of it three times.76 Others used unearthed Indian charms which were identified by a hole punctured at one end of the stone.77 Indeed there were green, yellow, white, and "speckled" stones, opaque and polished stones, and round and oblong stones. Their only common quality was their "unusual" or "peculiar" nature.78 Borrowing on a long-standing German tradition, some American adepts even used mirrors.79

Practitioners were literally "seers," that is, lookers into the stone. An eyewitness described the process: "Tim placed the diamond—for so we must term the [seer] stone—in his cap, put the cap over his face in such a manner as to exclude every particle of light, and after a long and steady 'view,' moved the cap slowly away from his face, his gaze still fixed on the stone."80 With most village seers requiring that the light be secluded, this stone-in-the-hat procedure was standard. By this method, an adept could see within the stone crystal a helpful spirit or the precise locality of the underground treasure.81

Having determined the treasure site, the seeker still had much to do. "The Astrologers, with whom the Country swarms at this Time," noted Benjamin Franklin, "are often consulted about the critical Times for Digging, the Methods of laying the Spirit, and the like Whimseys, which renders them very necessary to and very much caress'd by the poor deluded Money-hunters."82

To assist their clients, adepts taught the proper times and seasons (most believed that treasure digging prospered during the summer months from midnight until sunrise), the correct position of
the zodiacal seven planets (for instance, a full moon was thought best), and the influence of the directional points of the compass (many adepts faced east while performing their ceremonials). Sol-stices, equinoxes, and special days such as Shrove Tuesday, Good Friday, and St. John's Eve also played a role. None of this was unique to money digging. Until the middle of the nineteenth century and beyond, Americans typically consulted their ever-present almanac to plant crops, shear sheep, butcher livestock, burn weeds and bushes, and even to wean their children. All such daily tasks must be done by seasonal and astrological routines that had descended from time immemorial. (It is interesting to note that despite his slighting remarks about money digging, Benjamin Franklin published one of the most popular almanacs in colonial America.)

While finding the right moment to dig was important, the need to circumvent the treasure's guardian was crucial. Like its Old World antecedents, the American treasure keeper might be demonic or divine. Or it could be a cat, dog, snake, or some other protecting animal. But generally the American treasure guardian was a murdered youth or man whose body had been left with the buried valuables to ensure their protection. Guardian Indians were a frequent motif, while a murdered pirate (often a black man because they were believed to be "the most honest") protected Captain Kidd's many troves. Whatever their form, they were bound to be clever, and, if surviving folklore can be credited, they were fearsome as well. They might appear on a black horse carrying their own head in their lap. Or they might blow blue flames skyward as a warning to encroaching diggers.

The guardian had two main defenses. First, he might excite the diggers to break the necessary silence. A treasure hunter on Maine's Jewell's Island, for instance, saw a sow and her litter issue from the excavation. Somehow he maintained his quiet until the animal bit his leg and forced him to exclaim, "Damn!" Then, according to the story, "the pigs vanished, the hole filled up, and the treasure trovers found themselves sitting on the ledge . . . with the incoming tide lapping their feet." Other tales were colorful variations on the same theme. As a digger was about to lift the treasure rock that sat atop the deposit, his crowbar slipped on a companion's foot. His consequent profanity brought a blazing, twenty-foot flame that prevented further digging. While such lore persisted into the twentieth century and lost nothing in the telling, few contemporary accounts were
without the diggers’ failure to maintain silence, which invariably resulted in the loss of the sought-for prize.

Second, the guardian could move the treasure about. In one repetitious account after another, the diggers claimed to have found their coin-laden chest only to see or hear it rumble away. A dream and a divining rod located a treasure site for a “respectable gentleman” living in Tunbridge, Vermont. After his men excavated a fifteen-foot square hole seven or eight feet deep (six pumps were required to keep the water out), the treasure box proved to be a disappointment. “There is not ten dollars apiece,” protested one of the company. But with silence broken, the chest moved through the mud and was never seen again.89 In another incident, remembered years later, Martin Harris and Porter Rockwell, early Mormon converts, broke off a piece of a chest’s lid before the box slid noisily away. This fragment from the chest was cherished as a relic for years.90 On other expeditions, some diggers even claimed to see the ground rise and fall as the treasure moved away from them.91

Probably no firsthand treasure account rivaled John Nutt’s colorfully told story of a Rochester, New York, dig. Guided by Hiram Morre, a learned treasure hunter of unknown origins, a group climbed Cobb’s Hill. Nutt “tried the ground” with his “magic spear,” a pointed iron rod about seven feet long. Apparently striking the top of a box, he pierced the obstruction, and as he moved the rod about he heard the distinct rattle of coins. The treasure hunters then moved quickly:

Having speared the treasure it was his duty to hold the spear firm while his comrades dug the box out. Not a word was spoken but picks and shovels flew fast, and a great hole was dug. The spear and box sank deeper [but] ... finally the box remained firm. Then the men reached and uncovered it: the box danced about, [and as] the men seized it ... one remarked—“we’ve got it at last.” Instantly the box was wrenched from their hands and the party heard it move, rattling, away into the hill some thirty feet or more. The night was clear and starlit but a great wind suddenly lifted all the men out of the pit and blew them helter-skelter in a heap in the corner of a fence some distance to the south-east. The hole dug that night can still be seen.92

The manual Egyptian Secrets had a remedy for these enchantments. With the treasure rising nearly to ground level at the sun’s apogee, clever diggers might construct a trench outside and below the chest and approach it from underneath. Such a plan, however, ran the risk of injuring the digger if the peripatetic chest moved down-
ward and fell upon him.93 Other hunters used magic circles to break the treasure’s charm. From antiquity, men had used circles in their devotions,94 and magicians particularly came to regard circles as “certain fortresses” against demons.95 Money diggers agreed. They encircled their pits to “keep the devil out” and to protect themselves from the treasure guardian’s machinations.96

The ritual of the treasure circle was complex. Usually an adept made two circles (in some cases three). The larger one, sometimes as wide as fifty yards in diameter, shielded workers from evil influence while the smaller was apparently intended to prevent the treasure from moving. According to a Vermont formula, nine steel spikes besmeared with fresh hen’s blood and hog dung were placed at locations on both circles, with four reserved for the cardinal points of the compass and another placed at the center directly above the prize. Another adept who practiced in New England and later the Ohio River Valley also used nine nails. As he walked around the circle reading Raphael’s exorcism of the devil from the Apocrypha, companions dropped the nails at equal distances from the center.97

Swords, sacrifices, and the Bible also were used. The common European pattern placed the adept at the center of the treasure circle, sword or wand in hand, where he observed planetary positions and propitiated the treasure demons with Old Testament sacrifices.98 Some of this practice apparently continued in America. The expedition that young Thurlow Weed participated in sacrificed a black cat.99 Diggers in Vermont and Pennsylvania reportedly killed dogs at treasure sites, while in Jefferson and Ontario counties, New York, they scandalized some of their neighbors by immolating sheep.100 As the sole exception to the rule of silence, the officiator invoked the treasure demons by name and sometimes read from the scriptures and the hymnal or intoned a prayer from the often-used *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*.101

IV

As with most folkways, the full depth and extent of this activity can only be surmised. Yet, money digging, with its fascination with ancient races, mysterious Spaniards and pirates, seers, magical rods and stones, and of course enchanted treasure, was clearly more than a passing or isolated phenomenon. In some areas the practice especially prospered. Philadelphia, for instance, earned the reputation as a money-digging center early in the eighteenth century.102 There,
“great Numbers of honest Artificers and labouring People . . . voluntarily endure abundance of Fatigue in a fruitless Search after Imaginary hidden Treasure,” complained Franklin in 1729. “They wander thro’ the Woods and Bushes by Day, to discover the Marks and Signs; [and] at Midnight they repair to the hopeful Spot with Spades and Pickaxes.”

Such activity inspired Thomas Forrest’s satirical drama, The Disappointment, or, the Force of Credulity (1767). Written in part “to put a stop (if possible) to the foolish and pernicious practice of searching after supposed hidden treasure,” the play might have become the first American-written drama staged by an American professional company. Instead, it never opened. Richard Swan, a prominent Philadelphia hatter whose money digging the play satirized, reportedly warned that if the drama were performed it “might begin a Comedy,” but “he would make it end in a Tragedy.” While The Disappointment burlesqued many money-digging ideas and practices, a modern critic believed that Swan and his friends were perhaps too sensitive in their opposition. The play’s money-digging “dupes are not fools,” he observed; “they are merely typical.”

The Dutch community on the lower Hudson shared the money-digging excitement. Washington Irving remembered a boyhood filled with “pirates, ghosts, smugglers, and buried money.” He placed these tales and traditions in The Money-Diggers (1825), the best fictional compendium of treasure lore of the time. On three successive nights, Wolfert Webber, “a worthy burgher” and scion of one of New Amsterdam’s first settlers, dreamt of buried treasure. Since “a dream, three times repeated, was never known to lie,” Webber assumed that his fortune was made. However, to ensure his success, he obtained the help of Dr. Knipperhausen, a “high German doctor” with a reputation for astrology, alchemy, and divination. Arriving at the treasure site, the two men with their several companions divined the chest’s precise location, drew a protecting circle, and read Latin and German conjurations. But with spades striking against the treasure chest, Webber predictably uttered a silence-breaking exclamation which quickly produced the pirate guardian’s “grim visage” and a train of threatening demons. Irving’s summary statement was noncommittal: “Whether any treasure was ever actually buried at that place . . . or whether it still remains there under the guardianship of gnomes and spirits until it shall be properly sought for, is all matter of conjecture.”
New England also was a center for digging. The treasure catalogue of Silas Hamilton, a longtime Massachusetts citizen before his move to Vermont, listed the rumors of his old neighborhood. Of the forty-one locations that can now be identified, Massachusetts had twenty-eight sites, Connecticut eight, and New York three. Probably reflecting the prevailing pirate craze, about half lay close to the sea or a navigable river, the Boston–Salem area alone having nine. But central Massachusetts was also reputed to be rich in treasure. There, in a vertical belt running parallel to the Connecticut River, Hamilton noted over fifteen locations, though interior regions sometimes contained mines rather than the more easily accessible chests, tankards, and hogsheads of coin that characterized the coastal areas.\(^\text{106}\)

Vermont’s embrace of the cunning arts probably exceeded any other region. While Massachusetts and Connecticut "permit no witch to live," wrote poet John G. C. Brainard,

With more of hardihood and less of grace,
Vermont receives the sisters gray and lean,
Allows each witch her airy broomstick race,
O’er mighty rocks and mountains dark with green,
Where tempests wake their voice, and torrents roar between.\(^\text{107}\)

Many Green Mountain men agreed. Judge Daniel Pierce Thompson, whose melodramatic *May Martin, or the Money Diggers* (1835) passed through at least fifty editions, observed that money-digging seers with the "faculty of discovering things hidden or unknown to them . . . prevailed to some extent in many parts of this country. Nor has this alleged faculty [in 1852] by any means wholly ceased."\(^\text{108}\) The editor of the Montpelier *Watchman* was more enthusiastic. "We do not hesitate to declare our belief that digging for money is the most certain way of obtaining it."\(^\text{109}\)

The Vermont money-digging region lay along the spine of the Green Mountains. Within this area, twenty-seven towns or a tenth of Vermont’s communities dug for treasure, with rural areas also joining the pursuit.\(^\text{110}\) Here money digging was "very common" and was considered an "honorable and profitable" employment. Indeed, the *Watchman* claimed it could name "at least five hundred respectable men, who do, in the simplicity and sincerity of their hearts, verily believe that immense treasures lie concealed in the Green Mountains, many of whom have been industriously and perseveringly engaged in digging it up."\(^\text{111}\)
As Vermont's early nineteenth-century emigration swept into upstate New York, the money-digging frenzy came with it. "Such superstition was frequent in the new settlements," one of James Fenimore Cooper's characters in *The Pioneers* (1823) acknowledged. There were in fact reports of treasure hunting in northern New York in Herkimer, Jefferson, Monroe, Onondaga, Ontario, and Wayne counties and in the southern part of the state in Broome, Chenango, Otsego, Schoharie, and Tioga counties. Some digging was intensive. Guy Markham recalled that "nearly every hill and gully" in Rush township was searched for gold. The Palmyra *Reflector* labeled the New York money hunting "mania": "Men and women without distinction of age or sex became marvellous[ly] wise in the occult sciences, many dreamed, and others saw visions disclosing to them, deep in the bowels of the earth, rich and shining treasures." 

V

Generalizing about America's diggers for wealth is difficult. Evidence is limited and impressionistic, generally hostile, and heavily drawn from the limited perspectives of folklore, literature, and local histories written long after the fact. Yet, whether on the Atlantic seaboard or in the lake country of New York, the diggers shared several tendencies. Clearly, they came from a representative social spectrum. Franklin described those in Philadelphia as honest craftsmen and laborers, while Forrest's satire was aimed at several money-digging tradesmen. A similar pattern prevailed in Vermont. Silas Hamilton was a leading land and office holder of Whitingham, Vermont. The Nathaniel Wood family, celebrated diggers in Middletown, Vermont, had "some of the best minds the town ever had" and enjoyed the reputation of "upbuilding" any community in which they resided. The upstate New York diggers were undoubtedly agrarian, probably no different in social profile from their neighborhood at large.

The treasure hunters had a penchant for organization. Probably most digging was an informal neighborhood affair, but occasionally expeditions and "companies" were organized for specific purposes. The Smith Company sought treasure in Wayne and Ontario counties, while the rival Rochester Company tried to wrest from Joseph Smith his golden plates. There were even more ambitious enterprises. A seer's vision of buried West Indian gold stimulated Yankee enterpris-
ers to form a company, while in 1825 northern Pennsylvania diggers formally agreed to share their profits with the widow of Oliver Harper, a wealthy man who had reportedly invested two thousand dollars in the initial stages of the venture.119 However, the Bristol, Vermont, dig was probably one the largest capitalized projects. Promising local investors a hundred dollars for every dollar invested, a Canadian entrepreneur and treasure hunter, Simeon Corser, raised and spent ten thousand dollars at the “Hell’s Half-Acre” diggings.120 None of this apparently was exceptional. According to Charles Skinner, some money-digging promoters secured salaries as officers of digging companies and thereby gained “the only tangible results [that ever came] from such enterprises.”121

The diggers’ motives were mixed. A major concern, of course, was the securing of wealth. Rumors constantly circulated about a hunter’s smiling fortune which excited still others to further digging. Joseph Smith’s family reportedly found such miscellaneous objects as a cannon ball, a cache of gold watches, and according to the viewpoint of some of their neighbors, the golden plates which produced the Book of Mormon.122 The town of Rochester talked about Tim Allen’s discovery of several golden wedges.123 Vermont’s rumors were more bold. One determined Vermont digger supposedly found enough wealth to build a house for himself and construct a roadside inn, while another was claimed to have unearthed fifty thousand dollars.124

These reports, however, were the exception to the general rule. The prize was almost always lost due to the lack of proper technique, misfortune, or insufficient personal sanctification. “The popular view of the treasure hunter,” observed a historian of the Vermont diggings, “is that he is not a praiseworthy industrious type but rather is the kind of person who expects something for nothing. This is a half truth. For while the treasure hunter, the supreme optimist, may hope for large and immediate rewards, as indeed do most of the rest of us, in actuality the ratio of hard work to compensation among these individuals must be one of the most lopsided in labor history.”125

As in Europe, American money digging obviously involved more than the quest for wealth. Its Old Testament images and ceremonial rituals were appealing, while at a deeper level of human consciousness, its “caves,” “circles,” “dreams,” “gold,” and “sacrifices” were the kind of universal symbols that Carl G. Jung described as profoundly religious archetypes.126 Occasionally this other-worldly content of treasure hunting became explicit. In 1800
Nathaniel Wood, a lapsed Congregational minister from Norwich, Connecticut, formed a congregation at Middletown, Vermont, which used the divining rod for religious purposes. Wood’s rodsmen dug for treasure to finance the New Jerusalem. They also used their hazel rods in church meetings as revelatory devices to prove the need for angelic messengers, the Pauline spiritual gifts, modern-day temple building, the gathering of Israel from the prevailing gentile culture, the restoration of Primitive Christianity, and a millennialism that was scheduled to climax on 14 January 1801. When the excitement of that day came and passed, Wood and many of his followers moved to Jefferson County, New York.\footnote{127}

Upstate New York saw a similar mingling of treasure hunting with traditional religion. Using an eighteen-year-old minister’s son for their adept, the money diggers at Rose, Wayne County, New York, held “mystic meetings” prior to their digs, employed a week-long prayer vigil, and pledged a part of their treasure for charitable purposes. However, their repeated failures to find buried money caused dissension and produced a “church” court during which the minister and his son summoned the spirits of several biblical prophets. The affair disintegrated when the spirit of “Samuel the Prophet” finally confessed to being a devilish impostor.\footnote{128}

Mormonism was also born within an upstate New York matrix that combined New England folk culture with traditional religion. Joseph Smith’s family and many of his early New York converts were both treasure diggers and fervent religionists. But there is evidence that the Smiths were not always comfortable mixing the two. At young Joseph’s 1826 money-digging trial, his father was reported to have claimed that “both he and his son were mortified that this wonderful [seeric] power which God had so miraculously given . . . [to Joseph Smith, Jr.] should be used only in search of filthy lucre.” Instead of looking for mere “earthly treasures,” Joseph Smith, Sr., “trusted that the Son of Righteousness would some day illumine the heart of the boy, and enable him to see His will concerning him.”\footnote{129}

Probably the quality which most distinguished the American treasure digger was his acceptance of the old cultural system that rapidly was passing into obsolescence. Almost from the founding of America’s first settlements, many community leaders rejected money digging. Seventeenth-century Puritan clerics such as Cotton Mather and John Hale called the wise men “devils’ priests and prophets” and their practices “witchcraft.”\footnote{130} Following European practice, the
clergy's long-standing opposition was given the force of law. A New York statute, for example, enjoined "all jugglers, and all persons pretending to have skill in physiognomy, palmistry, or like crafty science, or pretending to tell fortunes, or to discover where lost goods may be found." While observed lightly or more often in the breach (Joseph Smith was tried at least once for his money digging but was apparently neither fined nor imprisoned), such laws and the clerical animosity that lay behind them created in the minds of many educated men and women a dark and unsavory image of money digging that often became caricature.

American literature reinforced this tendency. While admitting a local adept's "singularly correct hits" and confessing a qualified belief in paranormal phenomena, Daniel Thompson nevertheless drew his May Martin money-digging characters in tones of fraud and criminality. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Peter Goldthwaite's Treasure" told the story of a deranged digger whose obsessive search for hidden treasures caused him to dismantle his own home, and the seers in Solomon Spaulding's The Manuscript Found, a romance written in the early nineteenth century but not published until 1886, were unqualifiedly evil. Whether in the poetry of John G. C. Brainard, the humorous sketches of Washington Irving, or the satires of Franklin and Forrest, the result was uniformly the same. Though money digging, like any human endeavor, offered much to scorn and even to pity, the belles-lettres of the period conveyed the prevailing values of the intellectual elite by treating the money digger in overblown and often unjustified images.

With educated Americans increasingly arrayed against them, money diggers displayed remarkable tenacity. While seventeenth-century records are sparse and at best suggestive, ample evidence exists that many nineteenth-century Americans dug for treasure. The practice was particularly strong in such areas as Vermont and upstate New York, where severe social dislocation, rapid cultural change, and religious experimentation seemed to give the old culture an extended life. Indeed, in ways that are yet to be explored, money digging may have influenced two of the nineteenth century's major social and religious movements, Mormonism and Spiritualism. Its touch on American society was not light.

Folklorist Harry Hyatt observed that "treasure hunting is something more than monetary value—it is a part of eternal hope, a mystical quest, the satisfaction of an unfulfilled dream." Magical treasure hunting was something more. It was part of the culture and
religion of the folk. For people who were untutored in the emerging new science, it helped to give their everyday life meaning. Theirs was "the higher and hidden" truth, a blend of humankind's deep myths and Christian ideas, the old way that eventually faltered before the onslaught of modern science and the triumph of a new world view.

NOTES


12Sir Walter Scott, Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1831), 128–29, 295. Goethe inserted a direct petition to the elemental spirits in the famous conjuring scene of Faust, 1. iii:
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First, to encounter the beast,
The Words of the Four be addressed:
Salamander, shine glorious!
Wave, Undine, as hidden!
Sylph, be thou hidden!
Gnome, be laborious!
Who knows not their sense
(These elements),—
Their properties
And power not sees,—
No mastery he inherits
Over the Spirits.


14Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 234–35.


16Eliade, Forge and the Crucible, especially 56. Both Eliade and C. G. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy (2d. ed., trans. R. F. C. Hull [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968]), argue a similar thesis for alchemy. In their view the alchemist’s gold seeking was often subordinated to inward religious purification in a rite that was essentially nonrational.


19Albertus Magnus, Egyptian Secrets; or, White and Black Art for Man and Beast (N.p. [1880?]), iii–iv. The formulae for neutralizing the black arts were themselves grim. For instance, when illicitly charmed by a temptress, "such a person must put a pair of shoes on, and walk therein until his feet perspire, but must walk fast, so that the feet do not smell badly; then take off the right shoe, drink some beer or wine out of this shoe, and he will from that moment lose all affection for her” (ibid., 55).


21Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 269. Dee’s contemporary Sir Walter Raleigh also believed in a compound of magic and religion. "Magic,” he argued, "is the art of worshipping God” (ibid., 268–69).

22Gen. 44:5–15 (Joseph); Ex. 4:20, 14:16, 17:5 (Moses); Ex. 7:9–12, 15, 20, 8:5, 16–18 (Aaron); Ex. 28:30 and Lev. 8:8 (Uriah and Thummim).


Pomeroy Tucker, Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1867), 34; Orasmus Turner, History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase and Morris' Reserve (Rochester, N.Y.: William Alling, 1851), 216; Edward Stevenson, Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet, and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: By the Author, 1895), 13; The Visitor, or Monthly Instructor, for 1841 (London: Religious Tract Society, 1841), 63; Ole A. Jensen, "Testimony Given to Ole A. Jensen by Martin Harris," July 1875, p. 3, Library–Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).


Harold W. Thompson, Body, Boots, and Britches (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1940), 300–301.

Harris, "Myths of Oonda," 12–13, 18–19.


The Spanish impact on American literary culture is usually treated as beginning in the first decades of the nineteenth century, but, if money digging is an accurate gauge, its influence on the everyday American must have begun much earlier (see Stanley T. Williams, The Spanish Background of American Literature, 2 vols. [New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1955], 1:3, 23, 36). The English–American fascination is also documented by the repeated issuing of Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World. This exposé of alleged Spanish cruelty and depravity received editions in 1648, 1655, 1677, 1699, 1702, 1711, and an American printing in 1758.

Harvey, Money Diggers; Gee, "Money Diggings of Pocock," 302–8; Stephen Greene, "Money Diggers," Vermont Life 24 (Autumn 1969): 46–51. As late as 1934, there was digging at the Bristol site.


Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII," Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate (1835), 201; and Lucy Mack Smith, Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet . . . (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 91n.

Skinner, Myths and Legends of Our Own Land, 2:290–93.

For instance, treasure was sought in the house formerly owned by Sir Francis Drake (see Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 317–18).


Benjamin Franklin, "The Busy-Body, No. 8," 27 March 1729, reprinted in the Papers of Benjamin Franklin, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), 1:137. According to marginal notes of the manuscript, a portion of the article was written by "Breitnal." As a youth, Franklin himself was enough taken with the Blackbeard myth to have composed and published a sailors' song celebrating Blackbeard's capture (see Watson, Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, 2:211–12).


Harold W. Thompson, Body, Boots, and Britches, 20.


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13Ibid., 85.


15While many of the sources that describe young Joseph Smith’s money digging carry unmistakable bias and give the details of widespread folk practices he himself may not have used, they are too numerous and diverse in origin to be dismissed out of hand as anti-Mormon untruths. For a sampling of the many that could be cited, see Howe, Mormonism Unsealed; Deming, Naked Truths about Mormonism, 2; Emily Blackman, History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, & Haffelfinger, 1873), 577–82; Statement of Joseph Smith, Sr., in W. D. Purple, “Joseph Smith, the Originator of Mormonism,” Chenango (New York) Union, 2 May 1877; History of Seneca Co. New York ... (Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1876), 129; “A Document Discovered,” Utah Christian Advocate 2 (January 1886): 1.


19According to the article “Three,” Mann, Myth & Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural, ed. Richard Cavendish, 24 vols. (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1970), 21:2832, “Medieval Christian numerologists remarked on various uses of 3 as a number of completeness in the New Testament, including the 3 gifts of the magi to the infant Jesus, the 3 temptations in the wilderness, the 3 denials of Christ by Peter, the 3 falls on the road to Golgotha, the 3 days between Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, and the 3 appearances of the risen Christ to his disciples. These could all be taken as foreshadowings or reflections of the Trinity.” These scriptural examples hardly suggest how deeply involved the ratiifying number three is in many aspects of Western life—including its common use in nursery rhymes, the legislative requirement to read and pass prospective laws three times, and of course the idiom, “The third time is the charm.” The three-dream motif is also preserved in twentieth-century Pennsylvania Dutch folklore (see “Dutch Folk-Beliefs,” Pennsylvania Dutchman 5 [June 1953]: 12).


66Albertus Magnus, *Egyptian Secrets*, 76.
67Gen. 30:37–43. While the dowsing techniques of the European and American rodsman seemingly began in the late Middle Ages, many claimed that such passages as Hosea 4:12; Ps. 125:3; Num. 17, 20:9–11; and Ez. 21:21 gave them sanction (*Jacob’s Rod*, trans. T. W. [N. p.]).
71Silliman, “Divining Rod,” 203.
72Harris, “Myths of Ononda,” 27.
73For a sampling of the sometimes incongruous sources dealing with Joseph Smith’s stones, see Statement of Brigham Young, Thomas Bullock Minures, 30 September 1855, Thomas Bullock Papers, LDS Church Archives; Statement of Brigham Young, 11 September 1859, in Wilford Woodruff’s *Journal*, 1833–1898, 9 vols., ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–85), 5:382–83; Statement of W. R. Hine, in Deming, *Naked Truths about Mormonism*, January 1885, 2; Purple, “Joseph Smith, the Originator of Mormonism.”
74[Edward Rushton], “Testimony of Seer Stone Finding, Nauvoo,” untitled and undated typescript, LDS Church Archives.
78Harris, “Myths of Ononda,” 11.
80Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 1:137–38.
86Webb, “Witches in the Cooper Country,” 19. For other examples of the need to maintain silence, see Hurley, “Buried Treasure Tales in America,” 203.
87*Ontario Repository and Messenger*, 9 February 1825, and *Wayne Sentinel*, 16 February 1825. The accounts were originally printed in the *Window* (Vermont) *Journal*, 17 January 1825.
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...
beings, would on a succeeding night return to their toil, not in the least doubting that success would eventually attend their labors.

Mineral rods and balls, (as they were called by the impostor who made use of them,) were supposed to be infallible guides to these sources of wealth—"peep stones" or pebbles, taken promiscuously from the brook or field, were placed in a hat or other situation excluded from the light, when some wizard or witch (for these performances were not confined to either sex) applied their eyes, and nearly starting their balls from their sockets, declared they saw all the wonders of nature, including of course, ample stores of silver and gold.


16Skinner, Myths and Legends of Our Own Land, 2:276.


18Harris, "Myths of Ononda," 16.

19Montpelier (Vermont) Watchman, as quoted in the Susquehanna Register, 10 August 1827.


22Frisbie, History of Middletown, Vermont, 43–60. See also Elmer J. Culp, "Early Vermont Roots of Mormonism," unpublished paper based on an address at the Pawlett Historical Society, 6 February 1980, copy in possession of author; Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, 3:810–18; H. P. Smith and W. S. Rann, eds., History of Rutland County, Vermont (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason & Co., Publishers, 1886), 654–60; Oakes, Genealogical and Family History of the County of Jefferson, New York, 1:607 ff. There is circumstantial evidence that the relatives of several early Mormon converts, including William Cowdery, the father of Mormon leader, Oliver Cowdery, had at least a passing acquaintance with the Wood episode.

23McIntosh, History of Wayne County, 155–56; Gowsles, ed., Landmarks of Wayne County, 411–12; Laurence A. Johnson, "The Money Diggers" of Rose," New York Folklore Quarterly 13 (Autumn 1957): 215–17. This activity may have had a relationship to the pentecostal "Neversweats" of Rose (see Alfred S. Roe, Rose Neighborhood Sketches, Wayne County, New York [Worcester, Mass.: By the Author, 1893], 180).

24Quoted in Purple, "Joseph Smith, the Originator of Mormonism."


27See Purple, "Joseph Smith, the Originator of Mormonism." This reflects the general legal precedent beginning centuries earlier in England (Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 245–46, 461).

28Daniel P. Thompson, May Martin, 46–47n.


In culturally isolated areas money digging continued on a limited basis even into the twentieth century (see Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjunction-Witchcraft-Rootwork: Beliefs Accepted by Many Negros and White Persons, These Being Orally Recorded among Blacks and Whites* (Hannibal, Mo.: Western Publishing, 1970).

Ibid., 111.
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Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer

Ronald W. Walker

My diary tells how things began. At 9:00 A.M. on 18 January 1984, I arrived at the home of Leonard Arrington, director of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History and, more to the point, my supervisor. He had telephoned the day before and asked that I come by. As I entered his living room, Leonard showed me rather matter-of-factly a copy of a recently found document, which I found unsettling. "At face value," I wrote that evening in my journal, "it is explosive. It is a letter from Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps, [written in] 1830, describing the early origins of the Church in spiritualistic or cabalistic terms. It confirms several other documents that have been recently found, indicating the 'treasure-hunting' activity of Joseph Smith prior to the organization of the Church. These 'finds,' "I wrote, "will require a re-examination and rewriting of our origins."

During my interview, I learned that Steven F. Christensen, a Salt Lake City businessman, had quietly purchased the letter and was now asking for my help to prepare the document for publication. Accordingly, I later met with Steve and discussed the project with him. Then after thinking the matter over for a day or two, I told him I would take part in the project. Eventually, Dean Jessee, my Smith Institute colleague, and Brent Metcalfe, then an employee of Mr. Christensen, joined in the initial stages of research.

Thus began my intellectual and spiritual journey with Joseph Smith, the Palmyra Seer. Of course, I had known him before. He had been woven in the warp and woof of my Cedar Rapids, Iowa, childhood, when Sunday School lessons and "testimonies" in our small branch declared his ministry. Later while serving a Southern States mission, I had acquired my own fervor, which my subsequent church service matured and increased. But never previously had I scrutinized the Prophet. I had never submitted him to that careful, microscopic autopsy that historians must practice on their subjects.
While first holding the Harris letter in my hands in Mr. Christensen's office, I sensed such a detailed study would be required. If the letter were authentic, I believed it would require all the old Joseph Smith sources to be re-read. New sources, I thought, should be searched for. Perhaps innovative methods of analysis would be required.

My journey with Joseph has now taken two years. Perhaps it is time to pause and search for meanings and suggest possible new directions. Were my first excited feelings about historical revisionism justified? How do some of our recently found or re-found sources fit into the larger body of evidence, and what are some of their implications? Needless to say, answers to these ambitious questions will be partial and tentative, and I offer nothing here but a private view.

At the outset I admit our task has not been easy. At first, there were angry and sometimes petulant letters and phone calls that severely reminded me of my human frailty. Well-meaning friends and relatives conveyed a similar message. Tragedy overtook our work when a series of Salt Lake City bombings injured one and killed two others, including Mr. Christensen himself. According to the initial theorizing of local law enforcement and public media sources, these murders were believed connected to the now celebrated Martin Harris letter. Through all this, I confess to having deeply troubled feelings. Added to the tragic loss of a friend, there was the need to ask hard questions of my personal faith. The Martin Harris letter and its companion piece, Joseph Smith's 1825 letter to Josiah Stowell, speak of a strange world of guardian spirits, magical hazel rods, thrice-occurring dreams, seer stones, and even a white salamander. This is not the stereotypical fare of an average Salt Lake City testimony meeting.

The letters have stirred excited comment. Some have asked if we have at last the key for understanding Joseph Smith. Will Christian magic and the occult unravel the man who has been described as an "enigma wrapped within an enigma" and who claimed shortly before his death that "no man knows my history"? Some privately have gone further. They speak of the old intellectual moorings of Mormonism being adrift. Are not the new findings, they ask, the opposite of our old way of understanding Mormon things?

While pursuing my study, I have often reminded myself that religious truths do not change. Our interpretation of them may change. Or our understanding of how they have been wrought in
time and space may change. But truth is constant, and my faith is that Mormonism is its repository. However, my caution regarding the documents springs from something more than personal belief. In matters like this, there is always a second step. As quieter perspectives inevitably settle in, the breathless "antithesis" gives way to a more sedate "synthesis." During this second phase, what once seemed so revolutionary is reconciled and merged with the still valid legacies of the past. To illustrate, our understanding of Joseph Smith's encounters with Moroni will not be insightful if we focus narrowly on Martin Harris's "trickster spirit" and forget the several contemporaneous statements, including Harris's own, that speak of Cumorah's "angel." These apparent conflicts must be weighed, somehow harmonized, and molded into a new, more complex understanding.

Because of new documents and similarly minded sources which our traditional histories have ignored, we shall eventually draw a new portrait of Joseph and his work. Such a view will doubtless preserve the integrity of Mormonism. It will draw insights from both untraditional and traditional sources. And the result will be fresh. Those who assert that we do not need to rethink some elements of our past are wrong. Equally true, those who claim that the new documents bring intellectual chaos and require radical changes are also certainly mistaken. We need to pursue the commonsense middle ground.

While it is too early to suggest precisely what the new Joseph Smith synthesis will be, there are four dimensions or insights that now seem compelling. First, Mormon scholarship will come to terms with the folk culture of the time. The question before scholars is no longer if Joseph and his family participated in the cunning arts, but the degree and meaning of their activity. Richard Bushman's fine new survey of the period, Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism, has already tacitly made this point. But if the "new" documents prove to be authentic, they will probably take us further than even Bushman's study suggests. The Joseph Smith letter to Josiah Stowell places the Smith family in the money-digging business—and this in the words and handwriting of Joseph Smith himself. The Martin Harris letter, in turn, is as suggestive. Harris places the founding events of Mormonism in a folk—religious context and claims Joseph Smith as his source.

However, the question of whether the Smith family participated in money digging and magic does not rely on the recently found letters. The weight of evidence, with or without them, falls on the
affirmative side of the question. For instance, we have the Hurl-
but—Howe affidavits, which since 1834 have asserted that the Smiths
were involved with money digging.1 The same story also emerges
from other eyewitnesses, including the less negatively biased inter-
views gathered by RLDS churchman William H. Kelley.2 Nor are
these collections our only affidavits. The anti-Mormon and non-Mor-
mon witnesses represent too many viewpoints and their accounts
were given in too many circumstances to be dismissed merely as
trumped-up misrepresentations designed to discredit Joseph Smith
and Mormonism.

Certain pieces of evidence are especially telling. There is, for
example, “Uncle” Jesse Smith’s acrid-spirited 1829 letter to Hyrum
Smith. The letter suggests that Joseph, Sr., possessed a magical rod,
left “the land of Vermont” to pursue “golden gods,” and, most
significantly, practiced “necromancy.” Chapter VII of the Book of
Commandments, in turn, promises Oliver Cowdery a revelatory “rod
of nature,” perhaps similar to the Vermont divining rods that once
may have attracted his father, William. Joseph Knight, one of the
Church’s first converts, told a stylized story of Mormon origins
similar in spirit and often similar in detail to Martin Harris’s letter.
Finally, there are the statements of the Smiths themselves. Lucy
Mack Smith’s honest narrative insists that the family never halted
their grinding labor simply to “win the faculty of Abrac,” draw
“magic circles[,] or [pursue] sooth saying.” Lucy claimed the Smiths
“never during our lives suffered one important interest to swallow up
every other obligation.” The father did more than hint about the
family’s interest in the magical arts. At young Joseph’s 1826 money-
digging trial, Joseph, Sr., insisted that “both he and his son were
mortified that this wonderful power which God had so miraculously
given . . . [Joseph, Jr.] should be used only in search of filthy lucre,
or its equivalent in earthly treasures.”3

Of course, we will not learn too much about Joseph by merely
documenting his money digging or by treating it as an epithet. That
was the mistake of several post-World War II scholars. Fawn M.
Brodie’s No Man Knows My History, for instance, produced a portrait
of many hues, but her “Joseph Smith” was ultimately a caricature.
One of Brodie’s troubles was that she did not try to understand the
culture from which Joseph and the early Mormon converts came, a
failing, unhappily, that several of her Mormon detractors shared. As
a result, she saw the Smiths as a neighborhood “peculiarity” and
transformed their religious fervor and folk customs into chicanery
and fraud. In her interpretation, Joseph became a skilled confidence man who stumbled onto religion.

This brings us to the second meaning of our current search to understand Mormon origins. Contrary to Brodie’s view, our untraditional money-digging documents help to reveal that Joseph and his early converts were part of a broad but now virtually defunct culture whose meaning is basic to our process of historical reconstruction. With the importance of this culture in mind, I wrote “The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting,” the preceding paper in this issue of BYU Studies. In my research, I found that during the lifetime of Joseph Smith an ancient set of beliefs coexisted with the rising tide of Enlightenment culture. The old Weltanschauung accepted the reality of digging for buried treasure, but its cultural tentacles were actually far more extensive. Some of its believers practiced alchemy, astrology, herbalism, or even “white magic,” which its adepts or seers claimed to be a beneficent storehouse of humankind’s proven nostrums. Others claimed to be preserving the higher and mystical biblical truths, especially those drawn from the Old Testament, that the established religions had abandoned or ignored. The wide-ranging interests of these seers and the degree to which they addressed the everyday needs and concerns of the folk actually made them, in some periods (for example, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England), nearly as numerous and influential as the established clergy. There were scores of these men and women (often they were boys and girls) still quietly practicing their arts in America when Joseph Smith was born.

The role of this culture in America should not be exaggerated. While some influential early Americans, such as John Wentworth, Jr., were attracted to it, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Enlightenment rationalism dominated most educated circles. Thus by Joseph Smith’s time, the old ways persisted largely as a people’s movement, often in cultural backwaters like New England’s hill country, German Pennsylavnia, or the emerging frontier areas of the Old Northwest.

Did this old culture influence young Joseph? While a rigorous weighing of evidence is yet to be undertaken, there are abundant clues that it did. Besides the magic and money-digging sources already cited, neighbors often recalled the boy’s spiritualistic activity. He blessed crops, found lost articles, predicted future events or prophesied—the classic labor of an Old Testament-oriented village seer. Moreover, by using divining rods and seer stones, he employed
the adepts' common techniques. If the several accounts of his 1826 trial can be trusted, Joseph himself admitted as much. "He has occasionally been in the habit of looking through this stone to find lost property for 3 years," one report has him saying, "but of late had pretty much given it up on account of injuring his Health, especially his eyes."

Undoubtedly, the Smiths' New York penury exacted relentless labor and prevented the wholesale money digging that some Palmyra neighbors later charged young Joseph with. But on occasion, the spiritually gifted boy apparently followed the enthusiasm of his father and searched for treasure. Even more likely, he sought lost articles and perhaps foretold the future. And when the young Prophet proclaimed his Restoration mission, there were many believers who came from this same culture. Early converts such as Jared Carter, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, Hiram Page, and the Whitmers possibly saw Joseph as acting within the tradition of a village wise man or seer. When he set aside the informal, unstructured, charismatic, and visionary religion of the early 1830s for his larger, worldwide mission, these men left the Church in disappointment.

Elements of Joseph Smith's boyhood culture, then, explain a great deal. We now understand the context and content of many sources that traditional LDS scholars have previously dismissed out of hand. As a result, the process of synthesizing Mormon and non-Mormon materials can proceed at a quickened pace. In addition, we see that the Smiths were not the idiosyncratic folks many neighbors and later historians have claimed. An understanding of the culture also helps us to decipher early nineteenth-century conversion and apostasy patterns. None of this should be too surprising. As R. Laurence Moore has observed, "No historical belief or activity can be wholly deviant with respect to the age in which it appeared. Everything, after all, is a product of its cultural milieu and, therefore, has some more or less normal meaning within the culture." The growth and early success of Mormonism provide prima facie evidence that the movement was not the aberration some have suggested.

The third insight of our study has already been suggested. The documents that have emerged in recent years provide a context for harmonizing many of the seemingly ill-fitting facts of Joseph's early religious life. From Abner Cole to Fawn Brodie to several recent authors, historians have struggled with the apparent paradox of the Smiths' unquestioned religious feeling and their money digging. Mormon believers, in turn, have asked themselves how Joseph's
youthful epiphanies can be reconciled with his Palmyra search for lost articles or his scouring the Susquehanna River headwaters for salt, silver, and other valuables.

If authentic, the Martin Harris letter suggests that some of these difficulties are the result of imposing modern values on the past. Certainly Harris and other early converts found no incongruity between religion and scrying. The latter was often overlaid with religiosity. Prayers, fasting, and acts of Old Testament sacrifice often accompanied the search for buried wealth. Joseph himself reportedly employed devotional rituals when searching for wealth and led a digging company that claimed that treasure could not be unearthed “except by faith.” Elsewhere, as with Vermont’s celebrated “Woodscrape” incident or in a Wayne County, New York, congregation, treasure hunting, the use of divining rods or seer stones, and formal religious worship were interrelated.

Martin Harris personified this mixture of religion and the old culture. By his own account, prior to accepting Joseph Smith’s religious mission he was “taught of the Spirit” in 1818 to reject Trinitarian creeds and consequently became a seeker. Neighbors recalled his attraction to a series of churches, though he apparently failed to affiliate with any, and the great extent of his Bible reading and memorization. Yet, despite these rather traditional religious interests, there is evidence that Harris understood and accepted the prevailing money-digging lore, ascribed sacred significance to at least one of the Palmyra neighborhood digs, and may have dug for treasure himself at sites that included Cumorah, or “Mormon Hill.”

The 1830 letter purportedly written by Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps may show how these interests merged. While as early as 1829 Martin Harris told the story of Joseph Smith’s recovery of the gold plates in terms more familiar to us, when writing to Phelps he chose to relate these same events in the people’s lore and idiom. Oracular dreams, seeric divination, or the ratifying or sanctifying of events by three-fold repetition—certainly biblical as well as common money-digging themes—were merged with such esoteric ideas from the old culture as enchanted treasure, guardian spirits, and taunting salamanders. Clearly, in Martin Harris’s mind, there was no dichotomy between religion, as we now define it, and elements of his inherited culture.

While current evidence is impressionistic, it is likely that many other first-generation Mormons similarly failed to distinguish care-
fully between their personal culture and the divine voice. In addition to those already suggested, such converts as Alva Beaman, Joseph Knight, Orrin P. Rockwell, and Brigham Young probably knew and approved of Joseph’s earlier activity. As suggested previously, some of these men were predisposed to follow him because he first appeared in the familiar folk role of village seer. But they also believed that Providence had given Joseph a special role. “The gift of seeing was a natural gift,” President Brigham Young later taught. “There are thousands in the world who are natural born Seers, but when the Lord selected Joseph Smith to be his vice-regent and mouthpiece upon the earth in this dispensation, he saw that he would be faithful and honor his calling.”\

As with any other people at any moment of time, the first Latter-day Saints (including Joseph Smith himself) required some time and effort to separate religious truth from their own sincerely held, culture-derived ideas, some of which today appear unfounded or irrational. “It may be admitted that some of . . . [the Prophet’s ancestors] believed in fortune telling, in warlocks and witches,” Elder B. H. Roberts observed. “To have been incredulous in such matters in that age and locality, would have stamped them [as being] abnormal.” But in addition to the folk elements, there were from the beginning transcendental religious moments, which men like Hiram Page found irrefutable. Page, who used a seer stone and may have dug for money, left organized Mormonism but could not forget the past. In 1847, Hiram Page wrote:

To say that a man of Joseph’s ability, who at that time did not know how to pronounce the word, Nephi, could write a book of six hundred pages, as correct as the book of Mormon, without supernatural power, and to say that those holy Angels who came and showed themselves to me as I was walking through the field, to confirm me in the work of the Lord of the last days—three of whom came to me afterwards and sang an hymn in their own pure language {would be an injustice}; yea, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt, to deny these testimonies, with too many others to mention here.”

While the personal and the divine clearly mixed in the lives of early Mormon converts, they nevertheless believed the heavenly voice was unmistakable.

A fourth dimension of our study involves the historical setting of early Mormonism. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, upstate New York was, to borrow Carl Carmer’s phrase, “a broad psychic highway, a thoroughfare of the occult.” Rachel Baker
amazed neighbors by preaching in her sleep. Jemima Wilkinson announced herself as the reincarnated "Publick Universal Friend." The rappings of the Fox sisters, whose home was less than thirty miles from Palmyra, provided the impetus for American spiritualism. The area was known for its "isms."

The causes of this frantic activity were complex, but one factor may help to explain the conditions surrounding early Mormonism. Upstate New York society was young and its people were uprooted. While some settlers were German, most came from New England and particularly from flint-hard Vermont. Like the Smith family, many of these immigrants entered New York totally dispossessed of former possessions, status, and even respectability. Perhaps still more difficult, many carried with them the old folk culture that "modern" New Yorkers ridiculed and rejected. According to recent sociological analysis, during such painful moments of social and psychological dislocation people become more receptive to supernatural experience and to new religion. They seek assurance and solace, not in the old religions which their personal alienation rejects, but in fresh psychic and religious experiences. They seek a new, satisfying, and visionary faith.

What I am proposing is not so much an argument as an hypothesis, and I am aware that some pieces do not fit smoothly together (Martin Harris, described by several of his neighbors as being religious, honest, but also given to a belief in phantoms and the supernatural, was a prosperous second-generation New Yorker). Yet there is enough truth in my model to suggest yet another reason why occult themes and activities surrounded Mormonism's birth. These phenomena were part of a natural process that accompanies the beginning of any great religious tradition. If Carl Jung had been aware of early Mormonism's money-digging motifs, he surely would have celebrated them as inevitable religious archetypes—the kind that have repeatedly emerged from men's souls at moments of "great religious crisis" and preparatory to the coming of prophets and reformers. For those who are uncomfortable with Jung's peculiar psychological formulations, there is a plenitude of historical examples. In periods of distress and disorientation, supernatural phenomena and the rise of new religions have repeatedly joined hands, whether (just to select a few examples) at the time of Augustus and Jesus, during the English Interregnum, in Third World society after the Second World War, or, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, during our present era of supposed sophistication.
My comments probably require a caution. There will be those who will mistake my suggestions as historical or psychological determinism or as an attempt to reshape Mormonism into "just another religion." It is true that Joseph Smith found himself at an ideal time and place to proclaim a new faith. Further, the factors working on him (and within him) were similar to those of other religious reformers. But these facts need not be given a secular interpretation. Believing Mormons will see Joseph's environment as providential. They will remain unbothered by yet another confirmation that God often proceeds naturally within the natural order. The conditions were ripe for the Restoration, and Joseph was ripe to lead out.

I began by speaking of a personal journey with Joseph Smith and of the need for a new understanding or synthesis of his work. When I started my study, Joseph seemed remote, undimensional, enigmatic, and, most perplexing, without the growth and tension that usually accompany religious wonder and seeking. That unfortunate and too common view is a legacy of our hagiographic tradition, which insists that Joseph sprang full grown while still a youth. I now see him differently. I see a spiritually gifted boy, born and reared within a culture that valued and nurtured such things. I see a youthful Joseph whose foibles were balanced by his religious striving and who, contrary to his historical detractors, was unsullied by any pattern of calculating deceit. Coming to understand his divine call (certainly the topic of another paper), he set aside or minimized those portions of his cultural inheritance that conflicted with his work. "I had seen a vision," said Joseph; "I knew it, and I knew that God knew it," and this knowledge gave him the confidence to engage in a godly work. Finally, there are Joseph's unusual contrasts. Early contemporaries saw him as rough-hewn, and from our perspective his early life and some of his attitudes were certainly shaped by his impoverished and untutored condition. Yet this same lad produced such complex and other-worldly texts as the Vision of Moses and especially the Book of Mormon. His greatest contrast, however, lay in his personal growth. With Providence's intervention, he transformed himself from "Joseph, the Palmyra Seer," who likely understood his early religious experiences in one way, to the mature "Joseph, the Mormon Prophet," who saw them in quite a different light.

Latter-day Saints are not the only people with money-digging stories, and I wish to conclude with one from Jewish lore. Martin Buber's Khasidischen Bucher contains a tale of Rabbi Eisik of Cracow,
who set out on a journey of his own. The pious rabbi had dreamed three times of treasure buried beneath a Czechoslovakian bridge. Hastening to Prague, Rabbi Eiszik found his bridge, but sentinels were posted day and night. Seeking his opportunity, the rabbi loitered nearby. Finally he was questioned by the captain of the guard, who forced from him a confession. "Really, poor man," said he, "have you worn out your shoes coming all this way simply because of a dream?" But, strangely, the guard also had had a dream. His told of great wealth buried behind a stove in the house of Eiszik, a Cracow rabbi. But the captain, being a "rational" man, placed no stock in it. Without revealing his identity, our Polish rabbi excused himself and returned home to unearth the treasure that ended his poverty.22

There certainly is aparable here. We have spoken about our changing view of Joseph Smith's youth. We have talked about his money digging, the Smiths' folk culture that was so different from our own, Joseph's mixing of personal and divine concepts within the context of his religious experience, and the historical and psychological setting that makes the Latter-day prophet's youth understandable. Confronted by such fare and by the unusual documents that have prompted it, and lacking the suppleness and poetic insight that the interpretation of religious experience requires, some may contemplate their own distant journey—a journey that will take them from their spiritual hearth. In time, they may come to realize that, after all, their treasure lay buried in a familiar, dusty corner behind the stove.

NOTES

1E. D. Howe, Mormonism Unveiled (Painesville, Ohio: Published by Author, 1834).
4The sources that deal with Joseph's early spiritualistic activity are generally unsympathetic if not hostile. See, for example, Emily M. Austin, Mormonism: or Life among the Mormons (Madison, Wis.: M. J. Canwell, 1882), 51–33; Emily C. Blackman, History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: Claxton, Ramsen, and Haffelfinger, 1873), 580; Howe, Mormonism Unveiled, 11–12; Orasmus Turner, History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase and Morris' Reserve (Rochester, N.Y.: William Alling, 1851), 216; S. F. Anderick's affidavit in Naked Truths about Mormonism, January 1888, 2; Pomeroy Tucker, Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1867), 19–20; Oronota (New York) Herald, 18 January 1900, as cited in Larry C. Porter and Jan Shipp, eds., 'The Colesville, New York; 'Exodus' Seen from Two Documentary

1Utah Christian Advocate 2 (January 1886): 1.


3Purple, Chenango (New York) Union, 2 May 1877.


5"Testimony of Martin Harris," 4 September 1870, LDS Church Archives.


7Joel Tiffany, "Mormonism," Tiffany's Monthly 5 (May 1859): 46–51, 119–21, 163–70; Wallace Miner, "Statement," M. Wilford Poulson Collection, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; and Ole A. Jensen, "Testimony as to the Divinity of the Book of Mormon" [Interview with Martin Harris], July 1875, 1, LDS Church Archives. While they are many years after the fact, the Miner and Jensen accounts receive additional weight from Brigham Young, Journal of Discourses (17 June 1877), 19:57. Harris was apparently one of Rockwell's companions.


11Hiram Page to William E. McLellin, 30 May 1847; printed in Ensign of Liberty 1 (January 1848): 63. For a discussion of Page's see new stone and money digging, see Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 26 September 1830, LDS Church Archives; and Howe, Mormonism Unailed, 215.


17Joseph Smith—History 1:25.

Money-Digging Folklore and the Beginnings of Mormonism: An Interpretive Suggestion

Marvin S. Hill

From the time that Obadiah Dogberry sought to discredit the religious claims of Mormonism by charging that the movement began as a money-digging speculation without religious aspects, anti-Mormons have used this argument against Latter-day Saint claims of unique authority and Christian restoration. LDS church historians have responded over the years with accounts which minimize or deny any money-digging connections. Both sides have seemingly assumed, until very recently, that if Joseph Smith believed in and practiced magic to find buried treasure then his story of the inspired discovery of the plates of the Book of Mormon may be suspect.

Needless to say, the recent appearance of two letters with gold-digging implications gave new life to the discussion of Mormon origins in these terms. (The texts of both letters are reproduced in full elsewhere in this issue of BYU Studies.) In the first letter, purportedly written by Joseph Smith in 1825 to Josiah Stowell, Joseph advises Stowell on the best way to go about recovering valuables from a mine, saying:

You cannot dig more untill you first discover if any valluables remain you know the treasure must be guarded by some clever spirit and if such is discovered so also is the treasure so do this take a hasel stick one yard long being new Cut and cleave it Just in the middle and lay it asunder on the mine so that both inner parts of the stick may look one right against the other one inch distant and if there is treasure after a while you shall see them draw and Join together again of themselves.

The second letter, attributed to Martin Harris, written in 1830 to W. W. Phelps, associates Joseph Smith with stone-gazing to discover treasure and links the discovery of the gold plates to the activities of an "old spirit" who "transfigured himself from a white salamander."
The Church released the text of both letters within a two-week period, beginning 29 April 1985. Commenting on the Harris letter, President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "There is no evidence the letter is forged." But he cautioned, "There is no certainty that Harris wrote the letter." He further said, however, that even if the letter was authentic it would not reflect upon the divine origin of the Church—a viewpoint with which I agree.  

Yet recent developments in the Salt Lake City bombings, and the subsequent preliminary hearing of Mark Hofmann as murderer and fraudulent documents dealer, have raised questions as to the authenticity of these letters which he located. Handwriting expert Kenneth Rendell stated in a television interview that he thought several of the documents found by Hofmann in the last five years show signs of forgery, including the 1825 letter to Josiah Stowell. Rendell said he could still find no evidence that the so-called salamander letter attributed to Martin Harris is a forgery. An FBI laboratory report was also said to find no evidence of forgery. Despite this, Rendell was quoted as saying that since other Hofmann discoveries seem to be forgeries we cannot discount the possibility that the salamander letter is as well. Rendell’s affirmation has brought a reaction by other experts contending that some of Hofmann’s earlier discoveries are not forgeries at all. All of which has left the public, and some historians too, confused as to which, if either, of the money-digging letters can be considered authentic.

Nonetheless, it is the argument of this paper that in large part the question of the 1825 and 1830 letters’ authenticity is not crucial since there is enough evidence from other sources that the issue of the relationship between Mormonism and magic is still with us. For one thing, the evidence that Joseph Smith was tried in court as a money digger in 1826 is considerable, and, for another, there are several Mormon sources which establish an integral relationship between the folklore of magic and some traditional accounts of Mormon origins.

In recent years scholars have altered our understanding of popular religion in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries to such an extent that our perception of what magic meant to the common man has taken on an entirely new cast. Keith Thomas, in a pioneering study he calls Religion and the Decline of Magic, traces the widespread belief in the magical arts by aristocratic counts and common men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. Thomas says that in the medieval church objects such as the sacramental wafer and church relics were thought to have divine
power. Although the Reformation involved a deliberate attempt to take such magical elements out of religion, thus abandoning the effort to endow physical objects with supernatural qualities through consecration and exorcism, many miraculous elements still endured in Protestantism. Protestants anointed the sick with oil and fasted and prayed, believing that these religious rituals would bring control over men and nature through divine intervention. Further, those problems for which the magical remedies were used were still there—the fluctuations of nature, the hazards of fire, famine and flood, the dangers of plague and other diseases. These were considered works of divine Providence and subject to divine supplication. Without Catholic priests to counsel and forewarn, and to invoke divine intercession, the average Englishman felt deprived and looked to those outside the church for safeguards against calamity. In the seventeenth century many consulted witches and wizards, wise men, and conjurers who could heal with a touch, summon heavenly personages, find lost articles, interpret dreams, and predict the uncertain future. Thus religion and magic drew upon the same human need for security and offered to help offset the misfortunes of life. Thomas maintains, however, that in time true religion triumphed over magic, that religion came to mean more than earthly health and wealth, that it encompassed a comprehensive world view and promise of future life which magic never entailed.

Jon Butler counters Thomas, however, in his "Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600—1760," first by arguing that magic was carried to America and flourished in the colonies at least until 1720, and also by maintaining that Thomas employs too narrow a definition of religion and is consequently wrong in distinguishing it from magic. Religion, Butler says, should be seen as a resort to supernatural powers or supernatural beings to determine the course of human events. In this light there can be no clear line drawn between it and magic. Both seek the well-being of the believer by invoking supernatural intervention. Butler finds much evidence of the occult in the popular almanacs published in the colonies but says magic was on the wane after 1700 as occult publications imported from England were curtailed and colonial governments tended to enforce laws against occult practices. Just how magic could wane if it was indistinguishable from religion Butler does not explain.

In an article published in a recent anthology on the occult in America, Butler modifies his position on one point, contending that
he had ended his story of magic in America too soon, that while alchemy and Rosicrucianism subsided by 1760, magic among black slaves continued into the nineteenth century, as did rodsmanship and to some extent witchcraft among the general public. Butler says that "occult practices existed in all the major regions of the country, and in all social classes" into the 1850s. 

Ron Walker's essay in this journal supports Butler in this latter contention. Walker shows that magic flourished among the common man, especially in New England, western New York, and Ohio, where Mormonism had its inception. To those students of Mormonism familiar with E. D. Howe's testimonies and with Obadiah Dogberry's accounts of widespread money digging, this is not surprising. But Walker documents what Dogberry had only asserted. Walker's descriptions match at several points certain details of the coming of Moroni as told by Joseph Smith, his family and friends, and raise questions which historians are already wrestling with as to what influence the money-digging lore may have had upon the Mormon Prophet.

It may be helpful, to begin with, to gain some feeling for the actual money-digging stories as they were told by countless wise men in early nineteenth-century America. The following story relates of a certain "Commodore" who acquired a brand new divining rod in 1828 and set upon a number of excursions in Ohio above the outlet of Muskingum. His adventures began when he ran into some Indians who appeared with a deer skin filled with lead, which they had taken from under a flat stone. The Commodore journeyed up a creek, but when it forked he had to consult his rod to discern the proper route. Some followers were amazed at his powers. As the group moved on, they found a cluster of flat stones:

The largest, and one the next in size, had a number of curious characters, or "Harlogriiffs", as "the Commodore" called them in relating the story, cut on their faces. The most of them were much weather-worn and indistinct. What they imported no one knew. The history of their origin was equally obscure, as they had been found there when this part of the country was first settled, about the year 1773. The surveyor then said he should like to know by what people they had been erected but did not suppose that would ever be discovered. Much elated with his success so far, the old man [the Commodore] replied, "If anybody can do it, I can, and will consult the rod in this matter." . . . It was thought he did it in sincerity, and a confident belief in the virtue of the rod; which he supposed must be induced wth {sic} some supernatural power. . . . Having uncovered
his bald head, he raised the talisman before him, and looking reverently upwards, administered in a solemn tone the usual form of an oath; directing it to tell him the truth to such questions as whether the French, the Spaniards, the English, the Dutch, the Romans, and several other nations, had erected them; to all which the rod remained immovable. Finally he asked if it was the Welsh. To this it gave a gentle nod, which the rodsman knew from former trials meant yes.

A few years after this curious adventure, the great mound near the mouth of Grove Creek, was opened and carefully explored. Amongst many other singular relics of that ancient people who erected it, was found in one of the vaults, a small flat stone, covered on one side with characters and letters of the old Saxon and Welsh languages.

The surveyor asked how long ago the mounds had been erected. The Commodore consulted his rod, which answered:

"fifteen hundred years before the discovery of America by Columbus;" which is probably about the actual time of the building of the earthworks in the valley of the Ohio.

Continuing with the story, the narrator said the Commodore heard of a pot of silver and gold buried in a mound under a flat stone along the river by miners who were harassed by Indians. On one of his voyages downriver at night he decided to try for the money, using his rod in the prescribed manner. Sometime later,

he returned, in a very ill humor, and reported that he found the mound very readily, and after digging a few feet he came to the flat stone over the pot, when Steel [an associate] involuntarily cried out, "By the Lord we have got it!" when instantly, with a low rumbling sound, it settled down out of sight. It is said such searches must always be conducted in silence, as the sound of the human voice irritates the evil spirit who has charge of hidden treasures, and they vanish away. 13

This story was not published until 1850, and in no way influenced Joseph Smith, but it does reflect the tone and style of the money-digging lore, and also much of the content. One can see in the story certain common themes which appear in traditional Mormon accounts—Indians, gold, flat stones, magic instruments for discovery, deciphering of hieroglyphics, pre-Columbian Americans, and treasures that get away because the guardian spirit was displeased that the prescribed procedures were not followed.

When E. D. Howe published his collection of Mormon money-digging stories in 1834 he presented evidence that Joseph Smith believed in such a magical world. Howe published the testimony of
Willard Chase, a neighbor of the Smiths who said that Joseph Smith, Sr., related to him the following account:

Some years ago, a spirit had appeared to Joseph his son, in a vision, and informed him that in a certain place there was a record on plates of gold. . . . On the 22d of September, he must repair to the place where was deposited this manuscript, dressed in black clothes, and riding a black horse with a switch tail, and demand the book in a certain name, and after obtaining it, he must go directly away, and neither lay it down nor look behind him. . . . He repaired to the place of deposit and demanded the book, which was in a stone box . . . and raising it up, took out the book of gold; but fearing some one might discover where he got it, he laid it down to place back the top stone, as he found it; and turning around, to his surprise there was no book in sight. He again opened the box, and in it saw the book, and attempted to take it out, but was hindered. He saw in the box something like a toad, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and struck him on the side of his head . . . . After recovering from his fright, he enquired why he could not obtain the plates; to which the spirit made reply, because you have not obeyed your orders. He then enquired when he could have them, and was answered thus: come one year from this day, and bring with you your oldest brother, and you shall have them. . . . Before the expiration of the year, his oldest brother died. . . . On the 22d of September, he arose early in the morning . . . and, together with his wife, repaired to the hill . . . . He then observed that if it had not been for that stone . . . he would not have obtained the book. 14

Chase's account, and others collected by Howe, have been discredited by some Mormon writers because of Doctor Philastus Hurlbut's obvious attempt in collecting these stories for Howe to find testimony against the Mormons in Ohio, and also because they seem to include in each testimony common phrases which suggest a single person may have composed them. 15 Also it has been argued that the many stories of money digging by the Smiths seem contradictory in detail. 16 But the Howe evidence may be too easily disregarded, for Joseph Knight's "Manuscript History," written by the Prophet's early friend and convert in Harmony, Pennsylvania, relates the discovery of the plates in terms quite similar to Chase's. According to Knight, Joseph Smith

went and found the place and opened it and found a plane Box. He uncovered it and found the Book and took it out and laid [it] Down By his side and thot he would Cover the place over again thinking [sic] there might be something else here. But he was told to take the Book and go right away . . . . He thot he would look in the place again and see if it had not got Back again. . . . And he opened the Box and Behold the Book was there. He took hold of it to take it out again and Behold he
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Could not stur the Book . . . He exclaimed "why cant I stur this Book?"
And he was answerd, "you have not Done rite; you should have took the Book
and a gone right away. You cant have it now." Joseph says, "when can I
have it?" The answer was the 22nt Day of September next if you Bring the
right person with you. Joseph says, "who is the right Person?" The
answer was "your oldest Brother."

But before September Came his oldest Brother Died. Then he was
Disapinted and did not [k]now what to do. But when the 22nt Day of
September Came he went to the place and the personage appeard and
told him he Could not have it now. But the 22nt Day of September nex
he mite have the Book if he Brot with him the right person. Joseph
says, "who is the right Person?" The answer was you will know. Then he
looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale.

Chase's recollection of what Joseph Smith, Sr., told him and the
history by Knight both have a folklore tone to them. They both relate
that Joseph must secure the plates on a certain day, 22 September;
that he must take the book and "go directly away"; that for disobeying
the orders he was prevented from obtaining the book; that the
book appeared, disappeared, and reappeared after he violated orders
by laying it down; that he subsequently had to bring the right person
with him to secure the record, first his brother and then his wife; and
that a stone or glass was effective in helping him secure the record at
last.

That the Chase account appears in a collection of testimonials
published by an anti-Mormon while the Knight narrative comes from
a faithful Latter-day Saint whose statement was not published until
very recently suggests that the anti-Mormon material cannot be
lightly dismissed because of its origin. The anti-Mormon statements
have to be checked against what is admitted by the Mormons
themselves. Willard Chase very likely heard his story from Joseph
Smith, Sr., as he reported. This is further evidenced by an independent
account published by Fayette Lapham in 1870 of an earlier
interview with Joseph Smith, Sr., as to the origin of the golden
plates. This report corresponds closely in some respects to what
Knight and Chase recounted. It is lengthy but deserves full treat-
ment.

He then told his father that, in his dream, a very large and tall man
appeared to him, dressed in an ancient suit of clothes, and the clothes
were bloody. And the man said to him that there was a valuable
treasure, buried many years since, and not far from that place; and that
he had now arrived for it to be brought to light, for the benefit of the
world at large; and, if he would strictly follow his directions, he would
direct him to the place where it was deposited, in such a manner that
he could obtain it. He then said to him, that he would have to get a
certain coverlid, which he described, and an old-fashioned suit of
clothes, of the same color, and a napkin to put the treasure in; and go
to a certain tree, not far distant, and when there, he would see other
objects that he would take or keep in range and follow, until he was
directed to stop, and there he would find the treasure that he was in
pursuit of; and when he had obtained it, he must not lay it down until he
placed it in the napkin. "And," says Smith, "in the course of a year, I
succeeded in finding all the articles, as directed; and one dark night,
Joseph mounted his horse, and, aided by some 'supernatural' light, he
succeeded in finding the starting point and the objects in range."
Following these, . . . he proceeded on foot, keeping the range in
view, until he arrived at a large boulder, of several tons weight, when
he was immediately impressed with the idea that the object of his
pursuit was under that rock. Feeling around the edge, he found that
the under side was flat. Being a stout man, and aided by some
super-natural power, he succeeded in turning the rock upon its edge,
and under it he found a square block of masonry, in the centre of which
were the articles referred to by the man seen in the dream. Taking up
the first article, he saw others below: lying down the first, he endeav-
ored to secure the others; but, before he could get hold of them, the one
he had taken up slid back to the place he had taken it from, and to his great
surprise and terror, the rock immediately fell back to its former place,
neasily crushing him in its descent. His first thought was that he had
not properly secured the rock when it was turned up, and accordingly he
again tried to lift it, but now in vain: he next tried with the aid of levers,
but still without success. While thus engaged, he felt something strike
him on the breast, which was repeated the third time, always with
increased force, the last such as it lay him upon his back. As he lay
there, he looked up and saw the same large man that had appeared in his
dream, dressed in the same clothes. He said to him that, when the
treasure was deposited there, he was sworn to take charge of and
protect that property, until the time should arrive for it to be exhib-
ited to the world of mankind; and, in order to prevent his making an
improper disclosure, he was murdered or slain on the spot, and the
treasure had been under his charge ever since. He said to him that he
had not followed his directions; and, in consequence of laying the article down
before putting it in the napkin, he could not have the article now; but
that if he would come again, one year from that time, he could then
have them. The year passed . . . but he went to the place of deposit,
where the same man appeared again, and said he had not been punctual in following his directions, and, in consequence, he could not
have the article yet. Joseph asked when he could have them; and the
answer was, "Come in one year from this time, and bring your oldest brother
with you; then you may have them." During that year, it so happened
that his oldest brother died; but, at the end of the year, Joseph repaired to
the place again, and was told by the man who still guarded the
treasure, that, inasmuch as he could not bring his oldest brother, he
could not have the treasure yet; but there would be another person appointed to come with him in one year from that time, when he could have it. Joseph asked, "How shall I know the person?" and was told that the person would be known to him at sight. During that year, Joseph went to the town of Harmony, in the State of Pennsylvania. . . . While there, he fell in company with a young woman; and, when he first saw her, he was satisfied that she was the person appointed to go with him to get the treasure he had so often failed to secure. 

The italicized sentences highlight those places where the Knight, Chase, and Lapham accounts correspond. They make it likely that a common source is involved, probably members of the Smith family. These sources raise questions similar to those that the salamander letter raised. Why is the story being told in a money-digging format? Apparently the language and concepts of magic were familiar and acceptable to the Smith family and their friends.

Lucy Mack Smith herself relates some of the Joseph Smith story in the same way her husband and Joseph Knight did. Lucy says that the angel told Joseph he might try to secure the plates on 22 September. When he visited the site where the plates were buried, he supposed that he would be able to take them home.

But said the divine messenger you must take them into your hands and go straight to the house without delay and put them immediately and lock them up accordingly when the time arrived he went to the place appointed and removed the moss and grass from the surface of the rock and then prayed up the flat stone . . . he then discovered the plates laying on 4 pillars in the inside of the box he put forth his hand and took them up but when he lifted them from their place the thought flashed across his mind that there might be something more in the box that would be a benefit to him in a pecuniary point of view in the excitement of the moment he laid the record down in order to cover up the box lest some one should come along and take away whatever else might be deposited there When he turned again to take up the record it was gone but where he knew not . . . He kneeled down & asked the Lord why it was . . . The angel appeared to him and told him that he had not done as he was commanded in that he laid the record down in order to secure some imaginary treasure that remain[ed] after some further conversation Joseph was then permitted to raise the stone again and there he beheld the plates the same as before He reached forth his hand to take them but was thrown on to the ground when he recovered . . . the angel was gone and he arose and went to the house.

In Lucy's version Joseph had to take the plates immediately and not delay; he removed the flat stone, found the plates in a box, laid the record down and found it had disappeared when he turned back to
get them; the angel told him this was because he had not done right; afterward he looked again and the plates had reappeared. When he tried to take them he was manhandled by the angel.

There are elements here very similar to the money-digging folklore outlined by Ron Walker in this journal. There is the use of the stone or glass; there is the jealous guardian of the treasure who will not allow the hunter to obtain the treasure without following explicit instructions and who uses physical force to impose his will. There is the disappearing and reappearing treasure, the necessity of bringing a suitable person before the treasure can be obtained, and the necessity of a pure motive devoid of greed.

In evaluating the significance of these parallels, we must not forget that the early Saints did not deny their involvement with money digging nor their faith in the powers behind the money-digging arts. Joseph Smith himself never denied his participation, although he did minimize its significance once he became founder of the Church. 20 He told the elders in 1841 that everyone should have a seer stone, so that he still believed in its special powers and that those who were faithful would have the ability to use it. 21 Joseph Smith, Sr., boasted of his knowledge of the magical arts to a small group in Kirtland, 22 while Lucy Mack Smith admitted the entire family's participation in treasure hunting by magical means in the unpublished manuscript of her history:

Let not my reader suppose that because I shall pursue another topic for a season that we stopt our labor and went at trying to win the faculty of Abrac drawing magic circles or sooth saying to the neglect of all kinds of business we never during our lives suffered one important interest to swallow up every other obligation but whilst we worked with our hands we endeavored to remmember the service of & the welfare of our souls. 23

There exists a good deal of additional evidence that many early Mormons believed in magical practices and powers and that they found these to be a support of their religious faith. Joseph Smith told Oliver Cowdery in an early revelation in April 1829 that his gift of "working with the rod was of divine origin." Joseph said, "Behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands, for it is the work of God." 24 The early Saints, including Oliver Cowdery, seem to have had no difficulty believing this revelation because they believed in the medium of stones and hazel rods themselves. Different witnesses testify that the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated—and
perhaps discovered—by means of a stone.\textsuperscript{25} David Whitmer said he began to doubt some of Joseph Smith’s revelations when the Prophet stopped receiving them through his stone.\textsuperscript{26} When Hiram Page received revelations through a similar medium, he threatened to draw away Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmers.\textsuperscript{27} Brigham Young said in 1857 that “Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist priests and deacons” sent for a conjurer to find the plates after Joseph Smith brought them home and that the conjurer “\textit{knew where those plates were hid}.”\textsuperscript{28} Lucy Mack Smith claimed that Sally Chase could see “many wonderful things” in her glass, including where the plates were hidden. Lucy also wrote that while Joseph was trying to get a chest made he hid the plates and that Willard Chase and several others “sent for a conjurer to come 60 miles to divine the place where the record was deposited by magic art we were apprehensive that the plates were taken out and secreted somewhere and we were somewhat uneasy least they might like moses who was hid in the bulrushes be discovered by our enemies.”\textsuperscript{29} Martin Harris in an interview published in 1859 recalled how Joseph Smith had located with his stone a pin Martin had dropped in straw and repeated a tale told by Samuel Lawrence, whose name was linked with Joseph Smith’s in the Joseph Knight narrative, that a man eight or nine feet tall harrassed the money diggers and forced them to give up their quest for treasure. Martin Harris still attested to the sincerity of the money-digging group, whom he said had worked with Joseph Smith and his father in Palmyra and other places.\textsuperscript{30} Clearly these early Saints believed that magical powers existed and that others besides Joseph Smith possessed them. All of this is too much evidence to simply brush aside or ignore.

In the light of the accumulating evidence of a strong influence of magic upon the early Mormons, it is vitally important that serious historians should not overreact. There is always the danger of reverting to the enormous distortion of an Obediah Dogberry or a Fawn Brodie and concluding that Mormonism could not initially have been a legitimate religious movement. I would suggest that Mormonism was at the beginning a religious movement fundamentally rooted in a reaction against religious pluralism and that this explains how the money-digging activities fit. Belief in money digging in this context is not central but in part a by-product of anti-pluralism. This insight requires explanation.

Joseph Smith made it clear in his 1838 personal history that he was put off by the revivals because the many churches competed for
converts afterward. Joseph said he could not tell who was right and who was wrong.\footnote{31} Deciding who was right in the early nineteenth century had become more and more difficult because of the growing multiplicity of sects. Joseph Smith had a conversion experience at age fourteen but then had a lengthy period of indifference.\footnote{32} When his mother and other members of the family joined the Presbyterians at the revival in 1824, Joseph would not join as he could feel nothing.\footnote{33} If Oliver Cowdery is correct, one of Joseph's dilemmas was whether to believe at all, which could be a harrowing experience for a young man in a predominantly believing family and culture.\footnote{34}

Peter Berger argues persuasively in two of his major works, \textit{The Sacred Canopy} and \textit{The Heretical Perspective}, that secularism was a by-product of multiplicity, religious and otherwise. He maintains that the modern world of religious impotence emerged rapidly after the Reformation as the church undertook to control less and less of the affairs of everyday life. The modern world, says Berger, is fraught with choices: where to live, how and where to work, where to worship, what to believe, who to have as friends, and so on. He argues that such choices did not exist in the medieval world, that society was staid, and supported and sustained a unified world with accompanying religious world view. Berger suggests, however, that Protestantism facilitated the process of secularization by playing down miracles, magic, sacraments, and ceremonies, and by exerting less and less control over everyday life. Protestants stressed that man's access to God comes not through priestly intervention but by means of a personal encounter with God during a coveted conversion experience.\footnote{35} At this point, Berger and Thomas, cited earlier in this paper, agree that Protestantism left the believer bereft of the ceremonial supports of faith. If, as Berger says, the Protestant could depend only upon the conversion experience for support within the church, it would make it doubly hard for those Americans outside the churches who had no such faith-confirming experience. Conversion never came to many, and this left them devoid of contact with the divine. Others found themselves so confused by so many contradictory religious claims that they were not certain where or whether God was made manifest.

If conversion caused Joseph Smith difficulty, as has been shown, other early Mormons had similar difficulties. George A. Smith reported that after attending many revivals he was the only one of his group who was not converted, and he was sealed up to damnation by the Congregationalists.\footnote{36} Willard Richards had a similar experi-
ence.  

Warren Foote went to Methodist camp meetings but only "to see them jump and hear them shout and sing and when they all got to praying, shouting and singing at once it was fun to me to hear them." For Foote, God was not in the revivals. Lewis Barney said that he had decided "Religion of every kind was a hoax And that none was right and that all preachers of religion were hypochrits, that they preached for money and popularity." Martin Harris reported that before he became a Mormon "the Spirit told me that I might just as well Plunge myself into the water as to have Any of the Sects Baptize me." George Laub, about nineteen years of age, said he attended Methodist meetings and sat on the mourners' bench "to pray to have my sines forgiven. I Sought with earnest but all in vein to me. I did this in three Evenings in Succesion but found noe deleverence. The Third Evening the priest told me to beleave I had it and then I would have it. I told him I could not beleav that I had a thing when I knew that it was not So. I said if this is relegeon there is none for me."  

Such people as these had to find the power of God elsewhere than in the religious organizations they saw about them. John Sherer, a minister who lived at Colesville in 1830 and knew some of the Mormon converts there, said that "all professing Christians who do not adhere to their [the Mormon] system, they consider as formalists, having the form of godliness, but denying the power." Here was a fundamental issue to the Mormons who repudiated the existing institutions. If God's power was not manifest by miracles and magic, many early Latter-day Saints feared that the churches were man-made and that a secular world view might be right.  

Priddy Meeks, writing in Parowan, Utah, in 1879, explained what money digging and magic stones meant to some early Latter-day Saints. He said, "A seer's stone appears to me to be the connecting link between the visible and invisible worlds." For him it was a means whereby the miraculous power of God, which was missing among the sects, could be discerned. Thus it is evident that the powers of the stone bolstered the faith of Joseph Smith during his time of alienation toward the churches, for stones and hazel rods sometimes worked in marvelous fashion. When they did not, there was a ready-made answer for failure. Priddy Meeks warned, "It is not safe to depend on peepstones in any case where evil spirits have the power to put false appearances before them while looking in a peepstone. If evil spirits will not interfere the verdict will be as true as preaching." For Priddy Meeks these experiences were a source of the verification of the reality of an unseen world. Meeks cites Hyrum
Smith to this effect: "The Patriarch, Hiram Smith, the brother of the Prophet Joseph Smith, held the same idea, but stated that our faith was not strong enough to overcome the evil influences that might interfere, but seemed to think that time would come."46 The peepstone might become an instrument of divine favor if its user had sufficient faith. In the minds of those like Hyrum Smith and Priddy Meeks, revealed religion and magic served similar purposes. They were reassuring evidence of the power of God. We must be aware of this mind-set if we are to avoid misreading the significance of the money-digging sources.

NOTES

Marvin S. Hill is a professor of history at Brigham Young University. He writes, "I am indebted to Ronald W. Walker for allowing me to read his paper prior to publication in this journal and for several helpful suggestions during the research and writing of this paper."

3See the Palmyra Reflector, 6 January 1831 through 19 March 1831, for Obediah Dogberry's six articles which develop the money-digging thesis. E. D. Howe, editor of the Painesville, Ohio, Telegraph, was an early advocate of the thesis and used it in his Mormonism Unsealed (Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834). A recent example of the use of the money-digging thesis by anti-Mormons is Jerald and Sandra Tanner's "Salamandergate," in the June 1985 issue of their Salt Lake City Messenger, no. 37.

4B. H. Roberts, the most widely read LDS historian of early Mormonism, skirted the money-digging issue, placing great emphasis on how hardworking the Smith family was and affirming that if they were hardworking they had little time for money digging (see his Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 6 vols. [reprint; Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1965], 1:42–43). Richard L. Anderson, writing in 1970, also played down the money-digging issue, holding that those who made money-digging allegations were not well informed. He quotes William Smith, younger brother of the Prophet, that "my statement on the subject is that the charges are false" (see "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," BYU Studies 10 [Spring 1970]: 283–314). William, who was not always candid on other matters, may have been putting the family's best foot forward on this topic (ibid., 15).

5For example, Hugh W. Nibley says that the "most damming charge against Joseph Smith is that he was a money digger." After reviewing contradictory testimony, Nibley concludes, "If Joseph Smith is to be condemned, I fear it must be on far better evidence than this" (The Myth Makers [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961], 91–190, especially 91, 190).

6Church News, 28 April 1985, 6. President Hinckley said, "The letter has nothing to do with the authenticity of the Church." He argued that the "real test of the faith which both Martin Harris and W. W. Phelps had in Joseph Smith and his work is found in their lives."

7For an account of the charges of fraud against Hofmann, see "Records Allegate Hofmann Sold Forged Documents," Salt Lake Tribune, 7 February 1986, A–1.

8Rendell's discrediting of the documents discovered by Hofmann first occurred on a Salt Lake City television station but was repeated to the Salt Lake Tribune, 7 February 1986, A–2.

9Among others, James Dibowski, former director of the U.S. Postal Crime Laboratory in Cincinnati, spoke for the authenticity of the blessing by Joseph Smith of his son, Joseph III, to succeed him (see Provo Herald, 12 February 1986, 14).

10See my "Joseph Smith and the 1826 Trial: New Evidence and New Difficulties," BYU Studies 12 (Winter 1972): 223–35. There can be little doubt that a trial took place, although we have conflicting reports as to the charges, who testified, and the verdict. In light of the forgery charges in connection with early Mormon sources, it would be well if the bills of cost discovered by Rev. Wesley Walters were submitted for testing as to authenticity, a point I urged in the above mentioned piece.

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12 Several papers dealt with this topic at the Sunstone Symposium in August 1985 in Salt Lake City.


14 Howe, Mormonism Unveiled, 240–48; emphasis added.


16 Nibley, Myth Makers, 91–190.

17 Dean Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," BYU Studies 17 (Autumn 1976): 31; emphasis added.

18 Historical Magazine (1870), 305–9; emphasis added.

19 Lucy Mack Smith, History, MS, Library–Archives, Historical Division, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives); emphasis added.

20 Elder's Journal (July 1836), 43. To the question "was not Jo Smith a money digger?" the editor, Joseph himself, said, "Yes, but it was never a very profitable job to him, as he only got fourteen dollars a month for it."


22 James Colin Brewer, Very Important! To the Mormon Money Diggers (Springfield, Ill., 1843), 2–4. Joseph Smith, Sr., is quoted as saying, "I know more about money digging than any man in this generation for I have been in the business more than thirty years."

23 Lucy Mack Smith, History, MS.

24The Book of Commandments (Zion, Mo.: W. W. Phelps & Co., 1833), 19.

25 Hosea Stout indicates that Brigham Young said the plates were found by means of a seer stone (Juanita Brooks, ed., On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964], 2:593). David Whitmer said, "God gave to an unlearned boy, Joseph Smith, the gift to translate it by means of a STONE" (Address to All Believers in Christ [Richmond, Mo., 1887], 6). Emma Smith said the plates were translated with a seer stone in a hat, and Michael Morse, an eyewitness, reported similarly (see Saints' Herald 35 [19 May 1888]: 310, and 26 [15 June 1879]: 190–91).

26 In his Address to All Believers, 31–32, David Whitmer lamented that Joseph Smith gave up use of the seer stone after finishing the translation of the plates. He made a large point of the fact that later revelations did not come through the stone and claimed that these revelations where Joseph was "mouthpiece" contradicted the scriptures.

27 Ibid., 32. David Whitmer notes that Hiram Page prophesied that the stars would fall a few days before it happened on 13 November 1833. Joseph Smith in his history indicates that Page received two revelations on church government and that the "Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery were believing much in the things set forth by this stone" (see Joseph Smith, History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. [reprint; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1971], 1:110). However, David Whitmer said, "None of them pretended to dictate for the church." Whitmer admitted that although "Oliver and I never thought much about them [Page's revelations]. We talked of them, and thought they might be from God, or might be from Satan" (see Whitmer's letter of 9 December 1886 in the Saints' Herald 34 [5 February 1887]: 90).


29 Lucy Mack Smith, History, MS.

30 Tiffany's Monthly (1859), 163–70.

31 Joseph Smith, History, 1:9.

32 In his earliest history, written in 1832, Joseph said, "I fell into transgression and sinned in many things which brought wound upon my soul" (see Milton Backman, Joseph Smith's First Vision [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971], 157).


34 Oliver Cowdery said that on the eve of Joseph's first vision the all-important question was "if a Supreme Being did exist . . . that he was accepted of him" (Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate 1 [February 1835]: 78).


37 Claire Noall, Intimate Disciple (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1957), 65, 69, 71.

38 Autobiography of Warren F. Foote, 4, LDS Church Archives.

39 Journal of Lewis Barney, 16, LDS Church Archives.
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Mrtin Harris's statement, dictated to a scribe and dated 4 September 1870, is in the LDS Church Archives.

42. John Sherer to Absolem Peters, correspondence secretary of the American Home Missionary Society, 18 November 1830, AHMS Collection, Amistead Research Center, New Orleans.

43. On this point James Turner argues that Evangelical Protestants surrendered all belief in a God who intervenes in nature contrary to natural law. As he put it, "church leaders swallowed the Deist conception of a natural-law God." This was obviously devastating to many members of the lower class in America who wanted strong evidence that a personal God controlled the universe and acted to their personal benefit. (See Turner's Without God, Without Creed: Origins of Unbelief in America [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1985].)


45. For an insightful discussion of how water witching is sometimes effective and seems so even to educated farmers today, see Evon Vogt and Ray Hyman, Water Witching USA (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 191–213.

The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching

Richard Lloyd Anderson

Joseph Smith turned twenty-one at the end of 1826 and the following year began adult responsibilities as he married and set up his small farm. Contemporary records are available after that time, since he obtained the plates late in 1827 and recorded revelations in 1828. In 1829 there are written revelations, important letters, the surviving Book of Mormon manuscript, and newspaper articles on the new faith. Before these years there is a kind of prehistory, a term normally applied to early cultures without written sources. Such a term could be misused, for the Prophet’s recollections of youthful religious experiences are early and impressive in detail. Yet the analogy of prehistory is useful in areas not later noted, for his teen years have few contemporary documents and thus invite speculation.

The past year intensified the study of the Prophet’s early life because of the release of two “treasure letters” seeming to illuminate the pre-Book of Mormon period. But the coming year and more will be needed to clarify charges of fraud against the main dealer associated with these manuscripts. The questionable letter of Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell in 1825 has a “clever spirit” guarding a treasure hoard.¹ The questionable 1830 letter from Martin Harris to William W. Phelps claims that Joseph spoke of a salamander and “old spirit” at the hill in 1827, though Joseph’s real experience could be obscured by such a singular secondhand report.² Publicity on these documents has stimulated research and reevaluation, some of it asserting a lifelong interest of the Prophet in paranormal discovery of riches. This paper examines the basis of such claims after 1827 and finds them wanting.

Most sources on Joseph Smith’s early treasure digging are historically flawed because of late recollection, extreme bias, or remote hearsay. But there are some early correlations in Mormon and non-Mormon versions of the 1825 excavations of Josiah Stowell and the 1826 trial of Joseph Smith. Most researchers will not contest young
Joseph's treasure involvement then, but some are confident that Joseph never abandoned mystic methods for finding buried wealth. Their argument rests mainly on two Doctrine and Covenants revelations plus a newly found revelation sold by the same dealer whose early treasure letters are legally suspect. The purported revelation of 1838 contains treasure language with close parallels in the Old Testament, Joseph Smith's blessings, and revelations to the Church. This problematic Missouri document raises the question of several meanings of treasure in the Prophet's pre-Nauvoo language. Moreover, Joseph's published history of that time furnishes a deceptive reference to buried treasure in Missouri, a reference which is important to clarify.

The length of this paper is justified by the importance of the subject and the attention it has recently attracted. This study collects available references relevant to Joseph's mature views on treasure digging. But each Joseph Smith source must be examined in careful context, for mere verbal associations can gloss over historical realities. There may be distinctly different applications of such catchwords as treasure, earth, or rod. Before we look closely at the main Joseph Smith documents that include such terms, his public reactions to the first exposure attempts will be studied for clues to his own perspectives. In Ohio the Prophet and his chief spokesman Oliver Cowdery established an official position downgrading the New York money-digging practices. This study probes whether the Prophet's private views and acts are consistent with that self-definition. The concluding sections come back to Joseph's youthful environment and early revelations with the theme of transition. Every phase of this study strongly discloses the seriousness of a mission transcending the false starts of Joseph Smith's teens.

PUBLISHED STATEMENTS

Reevaluation can be overreaction. Thus, the supposed treasure letters have caused some to reinstate the 1833 Palmyra-Manchester affidavits as accurate recollections. So a review of why these affidavits are tainted is important, and that old story will be told here with some new material. And another critical purpose is served, for Joseph Smith's and Oliver Cowdery's responses can be understood only in terms of particular charges of the affidavits. These are tempting but dangerous to use; since they claim too much to be credible, selection from them is generally a subjective exercise. Therefore, the Prophet's
early life must be synthesized mainly from later autobiographical summaries, a pattern he shares with numerous public figures who came up from obscurity. If Joseph later underplayed his youthful involvement in treasure digging (by admitting imperfections without giving details), it is equally obvious that the intense denunciations from the most negative neighbors are grossly overdone.

Such exaggerations are historical satire, not history, as if an estimate of Lincoln could be based on the crude cartoons of the opposition press. The 1833 affidavits labeled the Smith family as lazy, though detailed family history proves the contrary, backed up by sixty acres of cleared land with improvements. The warnings of a New York historian about the affidavits' overstated claims for this major issue remain a wholesome caution to historians reexamining the early sources on the Prophet:

Every circumstance seems to invalidate the obviously prejudiced testimonial of unsympathetic neighbors (collected by one hostile individual whose style of composition stereotypes the language of numerous witnesses) that the Smiths were either squatters or shiftless "frontier drifters." Many an honest and industrious farmer followed their identical experience, pursued by bad luck or poor judgment, and sought a new fling at fortune farther west. No doubt the Smiths, like many of their fellows, wasted valuable time hunting gold at the proper turn of the moon. One of the potent sources of Joseph's local ill repute may well have been the jealousy of other persons who failed to discover golden plates in the glacial sands of the drumlins.³

Since the 1833 statements miss the mark on laziness, they demand similar caution on money digging. The Prophet described working on a treasure project but did not say that he actively directed others where to dig. Thus this author earlier admitted the possibility of "aggressive treasure seeking" on the part of the Smith family but left the question open: "If it took place, they participated in a passing cultural phenomenon, shared widely by people of known honesty."⁴ A year after that statement appeared, the reimbursement of costs was discovered in an 1826 misdemeanor case against Joseph Smith involving treasure digging. Oliver Cowdery had noted such a trial before 1827, saying Joseph was "honorably acquitted" after being charged "as a disorderly person . . . before the authorities of the county."⁵ When the constable's billings for such a hearing were discovered in 1971, the trial date and amounts corresponded to the published summary testimony, suggesting its authenticity. But fairness to Joseph Smith is another question, since these sketchy notes
were quite clearly taken by a skeptic who indulged in mild ridicule of the youth's claims. In this framework Joseph is reported as admitting

that he had a certain stone, which he had occasionally looked at to determine where hidden treasures... were... and had looked for Mr. Stowell several times... that at Palmyra... he had frequently ascertained in that way where lost property was... that he has occasionally been in the habit of looking through this stone to find lost property for three years, but of late had pretty much given it up... that he did not solicit business of this kind, and had always rather declined having anything to do with this business. 6

In an 1859 interview, Martin Harris recalled that Joseph could find a lost object through his stone and that the older Smith men were involved in a money-digging company. Both Joseph and his mother refute treasure-searching accusations without total denials, and Lucy Mack Smith comments that Josiah Stowell came from Pennsylvania to enlist Joseph's help in his excavations because he heard the youth "possessed certain keys by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye." 7 Yet the extent of such activity is hard to reconstruct, so these particularized reports certainly do not validate all the tall stories of anti-Mormon folklore or the extensive hearsay in county histories.

Responsible investigation will not jump from Harris and the Stowell involvement to the neighborhood certificates. It should first ask how Joseph Smith answered the 1833 certificates. Indeed, he spoke not only of their content but of the character, motivation, and methods of the man who gathered them, Doctor (his given name) Philastus Hurlbut. Mormon histories easily prove Hurlbut's bias and impeach his motives, but unpublished sources also verify the defects noted by virtually every person who mentioned him. Ironically, his own character appears to be worse than the worst he gathered about Joseph Smith. 8

Joseph's journal notes Hurlbut's appearance in Kirtland as a new member on 13 March 1833, when the Prophet "conversed with him considerably about the Book of Mormon." 9 Within the week, Hurlbut was ordained an elder and returned to the mission field to preach. But three months later he was tried by "the Bishop's Council of High Priests in a charge of unchristian conduct with the female sex," and he was granted an appeal to the Kirtland higher council, then presided over by Joseph Smith. His "liberal confession" moved the court to mercy: "This council decided that the Bishop's Council decided correctly before, and that Bro. H's crime was sufficient to cut
him off from the Church, but on his confession, he was restored.” Two days later the decision was reversed when evidence surfaced “that Bro. D. P. H. said that he had deceived Joseph Smith, God, or the Spirit by which he is actuated, etc.” But Hurlbut insisted on the last word. E. D. Howe was then editor of the Telegraph, which he had earlier founded in Painesville, Ohio, a dozen miles from Mormon Kirtland. He remembered Hurlbut’s next moves:

In 1833 and 34... many leading citizens of Kirtland and Geauga Co. employed and defrayed the expenses of Doctor Philastus Hurlbut... and sent him to Palmyra, N. Y. and Penn. to obtain affidavits showing the bad character of the Mormon Smith Family. Hurlbut returned to Ohio and lectured about the county on the origins of Mormonism and the Book of Mormon. I heard him lecture in Painesville. He finally came to me to have this evidence he had obtained published. I bargained to pay him in books.

Since Hurlbut’s support came from those who sought to expose Joseph Smith, a balanced picture would not be expected. The Prophet was apprehensive even before Hurlbut gathered his New York evidence. Hurlbut had been “expelled from the Church for lewd and adulterous conduct, and to spite us he is lying in a wonderful manner, and the people are running after him and giving him money to break down Mormonism.” His New York affidavits were gathered in November and December 1833, and his employers were happy with the result. Early the following year they advertised that they had “employed D. P. Hurlbut” and that his evidence proved that Solomon Spaulding really wrote the Book of Mormon and that Joseph Smith could now be stripped “of all claims to the character of an honest man.”

Joseph Smith soon took successful legal action against Hurlbut’s physical threats, but the point here is the Prophet’s response to the negative testimonials. The First Presidency warned Missouri leaders that unreliable material was circulating:

Doctor Hurlbut, an apostate elder from this Church, has been to the state of New York and gathered up all the ridiculous stories that could be invented, and some affidavits respecting the character of Bro. Joseph and the Smith family, and exhibited them to numerous congregations in Chagrin, Kirtland, Mentor, and Painesville, and fired the minds of the people with much indignation against Bro. Joseph and the Church.

These first Mormon reactions were defensive but not blanket denials. They are traceable to Joseph Smith or Oliver Cowdery, who
as a schoolteacher had lived with the Smiths in New York before assisting in Book of Mormon translation. Neither Joseph nor Oliver denied treasure digging, but both said there was serious defamation. Oliver Cowdery, who managed the Church newspaper in Kirtland, claimed that a hostile community had used Hurlbut, fostering "every foolish report that ignorance could believe, or malice could invent." He also noted the known credibility gap, pointing out that reliable materials would have been collected by "a more respectable agent." 15 Joseph Smith was sarcastic about the man with "Doctor" as a mere personal name: "A doctor not of physic but of falsehood." 16 Even Hurlbut’s publisher, E. D. Howe, painted an unfavorable picture of the man. He later commented, "Hurlbut was always an unreliable fellow," and on another occasion he characterized Hurlbut in these terms: "He was good sized, fine looking, full of gab but illiterate, and had lectured on many subjects." 17

Editor Howe added long histories of the Book of Mormon and Mormonism, and by October 1834 his copy was ready. 18 On 28 November, he advertised that Mormonism Unvailed was "just published" and contained the truth about "the Mormonite imposition." 19 Joseph Smith reacted quickly, publishing an overview of his early life in the December issue of the Church newspaper. He answered the Hurlbut—Howe affidavits by mentioning his "accusers" and explaining his youth. Oliver Cowdery had begun printing installments on the New York history of the Prophet in October, but in December he specifically mentioned the need of accurate information "to convince the public of the incorrectness of those scurrilous reports which have inundated our land." 20 Joseph Smith’s statement admitted an imperfect past but not serious sins—what he outlined was "all, and the worst, that my accusers can substantiate against my moral character." His remarks specifically applied to his "residence" in the Palmyra area from "the age of ten . . . until I was twenty-one"—the years from 1816, when the family arrived in New York, to 1827, when Joseph married, obtained the plates, and moved from his parents’ home:

During this time, as is common to most or all youths, I fell into many vices and follies. But as my accusers are and have been forward to accuse me of being guilty of gross and outrageous violations of the peace and good order of the community, I take the occasion to remark that . . . I have not, neither can it be sustained in truth, been guilty of wronging or injuring any man or society of men. And those imperfections to which I allude, and for which I have often had occasion to
lament, were a light and too often vain mind, exhibiting a foolish and trifling conversation.\textsuperscript{21}

This answer takes shape in the light of the affidavits. "Trifling conversation" is the key, which has nothing to do with speech, for "conversation" in the King James Bible is action or pattern of life.\textsuperscript{22} So Joseph Smith really confesses "foolish and trivial actions," though in the religious language of another generation. For instance, the Prophet earlier wrote of the Church member's obligation of "a godly walk and conversation" (D&C 20:69), strict synonyms. Indeed, in his answer to Howe he went on to talk of "this public confession of my former uncircumspect walk, and unchaste conversation," reiterative phrases meaning "improper activity."\textsuperscript{23}

So what activity was the Prophet confessing? The affidavits are the guide, for the repeated charges were threefold: the Smiths were a "lying and indolent set of men" and "the general employment of the family was digging for money."\textsuperscript{24} Lying, laziness, and money digging are woven into the Hurlbut affidavits. In 1834, Joseph Smith stressed that he had not injured the community, which most obviously denies lying. We know historically that neither he nor his family were guilty of indolence or laziness.\textsuperscript{25} So the major charge left is money digging, which certainly fits Joseph Smith's acknowledgment of "trifling conversation," meaning "trivial activity." Such general language could fit other youthful "follies" as well, but money digging is the glaringly visible charge not expressly challenged.\textsuperscript{26}

Oliver Cowdery's account of Joseph Smith's early history continued regularly for ten months after the issue containing the Prophet's answer to the affidavits. The closing installment suggests finality, since it covers an unusually long time and concludes with gratitude that "thousands" now believe and are members of the Church.\textsuperscript{27} Here Oliver surveyed the period 1823 to 1827 discussed in Hurlbut's interviews, the later teens that Joseph spoke about. And these final comments complete his "purpose" stated right after Howe's book appeared—to combat the slanderous "reports" with a "correct account."\textsuperscript{28} Joseph Smith's response to Howe had only been general. But Oliver was more specific, even mentioning Joseph Smith's trial and acquittal on the charge of being a "disorderly person" sometime "previous to his obtaining the records of the Nephites."\textsuperscript{29} As already mentioned, notations of fees in this case have surfaced, along with later recollections about it. There is also a "record," a highly condensed selection of Joseph's testimony. Even if contemporary, it is far
from a balanced statement of his words in court or of his religious views. But the point here is the basic credibility of Cowdery's survey of Joseph's 1823–27 personal life, since Oliver includes this charge relating to pre-Mormon money digging, one not even in the Hurlbut–Howe affidavits.

Oliver Cowdery responds to each of the charges most repeated in the affidavits: laziness, lying, and money digging. He introduces his rebuttals "in consequence of certain false and slanderous reports which have been circulated," for "by some he is said to have been a lazy, idle, vicious, profligate fellow." Cowdery's refutation rests on his own experience with Joseph's personal and moral "merits" and the "many persons with whom I have been intimately acquainted." Regarding laziness and lying, persons of "unequable integrity... agree in saying that he was an honest, upright, virtuous, and faithfully industrious young man." Repeating his rebuttal, Oliver adds, "I have been told by those for whom he has labored, that he was a young man of truth and industrious habits." Since the whole Smith family was included in Hurlbut's salvos, Oliver Cowdery also defends their honesty and industry, admitting their poverty and reverses, which he had shared from the time he entered their home as the neighborhood schoolteacher in 1828.

Oliver named the affidavit of Isaac Hale, found in the "productions of those who have sought to destroy the validity of the Book of Mormon," along with "certain statements of some others of the inhabitants of that section of the country." These are pointed references to Howe's printing of the Susquehanna Valley affidavits, including that of Joseph's father-in-law, who claimed that Joseph sought treasure through a seer stone for Josiah Stowell. Oliver skirts this issue, claiming exaggeration: because of that project Joseph was "accused of digging down all, or nearly so, the mountains of Susquehanna, or causing others to do it by some art of necromancy." Here Joseph's apologist does exactly what Joseph had done earlier—he vigorously contradicts the claims of dishonesty and indolence but does not specifically deny treasure hunting. Indeed, Oliver goes into some detail on Stowell's Spanish mine but then trails off with the hint that there is more that could be told: "This, I believe, is the substance, so far as my memory serves, though I shall not pledge my veracity for the correctness of the account as I have given." Oliver thus avoids a full history of how Joseph's group was "excavating the earth in pursuit of this treasure." But his point is that detail is irrelevant—Joseph is now "worthy of the appellation of a seer and a
prophet of the Lord,” even though he is “a man subject to passion like other men, beset with infirmities and encompassed with weaknesses.”

This sentence brings the evidence full circle, for Oliver is really paraphrasing what Joseph said about himself in the pre-1827 years. Both stress that the real issue is not what Joseph Smith was, but what he became. Both talk of Joseph’s earlier questionable pursuits and equate them with “imperfections” and “weaknesses.” Both tacitly admit Joseph’s money digging as a past, irrelevant activity. This public position continued through the Prophet’s career in Nauvoo, when John Taylor vigorously criticized such practices by the Brewster group, whose young spiritual leader claimed rival revelations. John Taylor was accountable to Joseph Smith in his public statements, and the Prophet allowed the following criticisms to stand without comment:

This said Brewster is a minor but has professed for several years to have the gift of seeing and looking through or into a stone, and has thought that he has discovered money hid in the ground in Kirtland, Ohio. His father and some of our weak brethren, who perhaps have had some confidence in the ridiculous stories that are propagated concerning Joseph Smith about money digging, have assisted him in his foolish plans, for which they were dealt with by the Church. They were at that time suspended, and would have been cut off from the Church if they had not promised to desist from their ridiculous and pernicious ways.

Young Brewster soon published an answer, angrily aiming at his real enemy: “I have good reason to believe it was written by Joseph Smith, or at least by his directions.” Then he counterclaimed that the Prophet’s father and Alva Beaman were the principal movers in getting him “to discover and obtain the treasures which are hid in the earth.” In fact, Brewster claimed to have been blessed by the elder Smith for the above purpose, although this might not be more than a patriarchal blessing, since similar wording appears in a number of blessings of Joseph Smith, Sr., in surviving Mormon journals. Such language is not always literal, however, and Brewster’s one-sided account may be as flawed here as it is at other places. For instance, he represents himself as hypocritically condemned for money digging by the Kirtland High Council, which included some others that had engaged in the practice. But that misstates the real issue of his Kirtland trial and the Nauvoo public criticism, which started by warning the Church against Brewster’s 1842 publication of his
revelations. The information about money digging was added to portray Brewster's unreliability. Kirtland High Council minutes have nothing on digging but state false revelation as his overriding fault, just as it was in Illinois:

The charge was for giving heed to revelations said to be translated from the Book of Mormon by Collin Brewster, he entering into a written covenant different from the Articles and Covenants of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, and following a vain and delusive spirit. 36

John Taylor had exposed Brewster's false revelations and incidentally had condemned his Kirtland money digging. Brewster's answer sidestepped the larger issue of becoming counter-prophet but named others as encouraging money digging at Kirtland. He sought to tar the Prophet with the same brush by sarcastically noting Joseph's trip to Salem for treasure, an incident next to be discussed. But, though attacking the Prophet, Brewster does not implicate Joseph in continuing the mystic searches of early New York. He does accuse Joseph Smith, Sr., and John Smith of encouraging these practices. Yet those two presided over the Kirtland higher council when Brewster was humbled. Since his motive is to blacken them, the truth of his charges is not clear. That cannot be decided here, if at all, but at most Brewster's claims would mean that New York money digging continued with some Mormons in Kirtland. Except for Salem, Brewster only involves the Prophet in retrospective hints, threatening in his pamphlet to give "the history of the money diggers from the beginning," an apparent reference to his mention of Father Smith's conversations about "New York, where the money digging business was carried on to a great extent by the Smith family."

The same format is followed by an early Ohio dissenter, Ezra Booth. Disillusioned by human weakness and the idea of Missouri as Zion, in 1831 he ridiculed his Mormon experiences:

It passes for a current fact in the Mormonite Church, that there are immense treasures in the earth, especially in those places in the State of New York from which many of the Mormonites emigrated last spring. And when they become sufficiently purified, these treasures are to be poured into the lap of their church. And then, to use their own language, they are to be the richest people in the world. These treasures were discovered several years since by means of the dark glass, the same with which Smith says he translated most of the Book of Mormon. Several of those persons, together with Smith, who were formerly unsuccessfully engaged in digging and searching for these treasures, now reside in this county, and from them I received this information. 37
Booth also stops short of implicating Joseph Smith in continued belief in treasure digging. Booth published his letters to expose a false prophet, but he merely recites continued commitment of some New York Mormons, not any Joseph Smith example. So Booth’s exposés in Ohio and Brewster’s in Illinois suggest that many private convictions about money digging did not die suddenly. But the lack of direct accusation of Joseph Smith is striking. Booth and Brewster were but two of a dozen important figures who became disenchanted and sought to rationalize their positions by written exposés of the Prophet. These were generally articulate men who sought their self-interest or who thought their views on doctrine or church management were superior to the Prophet’s. These apostasies occurred not only during the Ohio but also during the Missouri and Illinois periods. So far their handbooks of Joseph Smith’s weaknesses have anticipated whatever has been said on that question for the obvious reason that they knew their subject firsthand. This negative literature turns out to be an important control on how to assess the Prophet’s connection with treasure digging. And these exposures mention only pre-Mormon New York searches and the special trip to Salem in 1836. As just discussed, the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery essentially admitted the former, and Joseph Smith sources also include the Salem incident and verify its purpose. Since the Mormon founder’s life is so well illuminated by hostile contemporaries, faithful journals, and detailed personal records, further treasure involvement is not likely beyond early New York and the Salem trip.

THE SALEM VISIT IN CONTEXT

Why did Joseph Smith go to Salem in 1836? The answer is more complex than is generally known. The negative version was given by James C. Brewster seven years later. Stung by John Taylor’s criticism of money digging, Brewster accused Joseph Smith of being the real source and struck back: “If he has a good memory, he will remember the house that was rented in the city of Boston, with the expectation of finding a large sum of money buried in or near the cellar.” The Boston inaccuracy hints that Brewster’s information was not as direct as that of Ebeneezer Robinson, who gives his source as the Prophet’s brother, with whom he worked in the Kirtland printing office. Brewster’s summary and Robinson’s negative recollection are the points of beginning, to be corrected by details now available in other historical sources. Since an overview is helpful at the outset,
Robinson’s entire narrative of the incident is spliced together here from his memoirs a half-century later:

A brother in the Church, by the name of Burgess, had come to Kirtland and stated that a large amount of money had been secreted in the cellar of a certain house in Salem, Massachusetts, which had belonged to a widow, and he thought he was the only person living who had knowledge of it, or to the location of the house. We saw the brother Burgess, but Don Carlos Smith told us with regard to the hidden treasure. His statement was credited by the brethren, and steps were taken to try and secure the treasure, of which we will speak more fully in another place. . . .

We soon learned that four of the leading men of the Church had been to Salem, Massachusetts in search of the hidden treasure spoken of by Brother Burgess, viz.: Joseph Smith, Jr., Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon and Oliver Cowdery. . . .

We were informed that Brother Burgess met them in Salem, evidently according to appointment, but time had wrought such a change that he could not for a certainty point out the house and soon left. They, however, found a house which they felt was the right one, and hired it. It is needless to say they failed to find that treasure or the other gold and silver spoken of in the revelation. 38

The Prophet visited a city of past glory and lingering prosperity. That year a patriotic editor observed that “from 1790 to 1800 . . . has always been considered the golden age of Salem.” 39 By 1836, docks that had once received the goods of the world were being redeveloped. 40 Fortunes had been made, and rumors of secret wealth had some basis. In 1838, Hawthorne published “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure,” a story of searching for a trunk of money in a Salem house. The author sketched an exciting find with the twist that it turned out to be devalued Continental paper. Hawthorne’s plot began with looking for “an immense hoard of the precious metals which was said to exist somewhere in the cellar or walls, or under the floors, in some concealed closet, or other out-of-the-way nook of the house.” 41

Joseph Smith went to Salem on a similar rumor, perhaps no more specific than this. Brewster was indefinite—“buried in or near the cellar.” But Robinson says only that it was “secreted in the cellar of a certain house in Salem.” 42 So Joseph Smith went east in search of treasure, not necessarily to dig for it. Since neither source is firsthand, the details are not necessarily trustworthy. We shall later see variance with the 1836 evidence on one event.

Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Oliver Cowdery left for New York and the Boston area on 25 July 1836. Ebeneezer
Robinson was sarcastic in hindsight, but any journey must be judged by its prospects at the outset. What is the difference between disreputable money digging and a reasonable mining venture? Only the projected probability of success. On this scale, the justification for going to Salem was proportional to the reliability of information. Were the leaders too eager to believe that a providential find would relieve their heavy personal debts and the related debts of the Church? They talked to a man who claimed to have definite information on a likely city. Any guidebook at that time would have said something about "the commercial prosperity of the place during the . . . active trade with the East Indies and China, some years ago." Indeed, Joseph Smith had family knowledge of such a hoard, for right after the Salem "golden age" his father's agent had embezzled the profits of his ginseng shipment to China. Before the swindler left for Canada, Lucy's brother had been shown the proceeds that really belonged to Joseph's parents—a "trunk of silver and gold." In the year the Prophet visited Salem, a local newspaper still listed "wealth" as one of the city's characteristics. On arrival, Oliver Cowdery verified his expectations: "The inhabitants as I learned are generally wealthy, and the almost entire business of the place is commercial."

The month was now August. The Mormon leaders had quickly traveled to New York on Lake Erie, the Erie Canal, and the Hudson. After a short stay in commercial Manhattan, they took the Providence ferry and Boston railroad, arriving in the area the afternoon of 5 August. Robinson suggests that their Kirtland informant preceded them: "We were informed that Brother Burgess met them in Salem, evidently according to appointment, but time had wrought such a change that he could not for certainty point out the house, and soon left." Did Burgess meet them on arrival? Doctrine and Covenants 111 was given the day after the visitors came to the area. Its mood either is prophetic of Burgess's ineptitude or reflects the frustration of the letdown. This revelation repeatedly emphasizes that the treasure they came to seek is not the treasure they would get. Thus they were not necessarily promised the riches they expected.

This Salem message has been called a false prophecy because its promised wealth was never received. But the definition of riches came in doublets, a scriptural pattern of restating one idea in two aspects. The Salem instruction has this striking parallel:
Concern not yourselves about your debts, 
for I will give you power to pay them 
(D&C 111:5).

Concern not yourselves about Zion, 
for I will deal mercifully with her 
(D&C 111:6).

Such similar phrasing suggests that paying debts and the welfare of Zion were but different forms of the same hope. In fact, the Prophet typically linked them in public statements and in private prayers. Another set of paired phrases relates to this debt—Zion promise:

I have much treasure in this city for you 
for the benefit of Zion 
(D&C 111:2a).

and many people in this city, whom I will gather out in due time for the benefit of Zion through your instrumentality 
(D&C 111:2b).

In this literary parallel, "gather" correlates with "treasure," which in the first half of the revelation is equated with "gold and silver" (D&C 111:4). This verse says that Salem's "much treasure" and "many people" will each contribute to the same cause—"the benefit of Zion." These similarities of wording and style strongly point to an equivalence of idea—the gathering of the converts is at the same time a gathering of their resources. This conclusion is reinforced by placement of "in due time" alongside promises of conversions and wealth: (1) there are "many people in this city, whom I will gather out in due time" (D&C 111:2); (2) "this city" and "its wealth" will be given over to Church leaders "in due time" (D&C 111:4). This chronological match also associates the wealth of Salem with conversions from Salem.

These stylistic pointers are verified by other revelations and by the realities of Church finance at that time. Needing strategic non-Mormon land, Presidents Smith, Cowdery, and Williams had prayed in 1834 "that the Lord would send faithful Saints to purchase their farms that this stake may be strengthened and its borders enlarged." Church programs at Kirtland heavily depended on special donations from early 1830s converts such as John Tanner and Vienna Jacques. Although its unique circumstances tend to isolate the Salem revelation as a special case, it continues a distinct theme in the early Doctrine and Covenants. In the 1831 apocalyptic language of gathering, enlightened Israel would "bring forth their rich treasures" to Zion (D&C 133:30). And in 1835 came the phrasing that the Lord would "consecrate of the riches of those who embrace my
gospel” to the poor, and by implication to the full needs of the Church (D&C 42:39). So Salem’s gathering “for the benefit of Zion” had clear economic overtones. In the light of Joseph’s earlier revelations on gathering, Salem exemplifies the spiritual and material developments that the Prophet saw synoptically and ultimately: “as fast as ye are able to receive them” (D&C 111:11). Joseph was a developer of programs, for right after the Salem trip the Kirktland Bank was organized. But a year after the bank’s 1837 failure came the successful system of tithing, based on contribution of convert surplus and regular proportionate giving (D&C 119:1–5).

Thus, the Salem revelation is attuned to the reality of increasing numbers and expanding Church economy. Six years after the Prophet’s visit, Erastus Snow raised up a Salem branch of 100 before a number migrated to build Nauvoo and its temple. These included resourceful pioneers Howard Eagan and Nathaniel Ashby, whose Illinois brick home stands as evidence of savings transferred from Salem to Nauvoo. If the 1836 revelation rebuked the leaders for their “follies” in coming for treasure, the actual wording is more positive: “I, the Lord your God, am not displeased with your coming this journey, notwithstanding your follies” (D&C 111:1). There was a New York business phase, to be discussed shortly, so the trip as a whole may have been prudent, with the “follies” being too-eager hopes for an easy find. Or Joseph Smith may have used follies in his normal sense of personal transgressions without negative judgment on the Salem visit. According to Robinson, the lead was represented as a solid one, only to vanish on their arrival at Salem. If so, fault lay more on Burgess than the Mormon Presidency. Like David Whitmer, ex-Mormon Robinson wanted an infallible prophet, not merely a responsible leader receiving revelation in the midst of real struggle. So Robinson’s facts are broader than his personal explanation of them.

Did the Mormon leaders gain control of the treasure house? Brewster claimed that it was “rented” and hinted at digging. Similarly, Robinson wrote, “They, however, found a house which they felt was the right one, and hired it.” But two weeks after their arrival, Joseph wrote Emma from Salem that they had no immediate hope of getting possession:

Bro. Hymro is about to start for home before the rest of us, which seems wisdom in God, as our business here can not be determined as soon as we would wish to have it. . . . With regard to the great object of our mission, you will be anxious to know. We have found the house
since Bro. Burgess left us, very luckily and providentially, as we had
one spell been most discouraged. The house is occupied, and it will
require much care and patience to rent or buy it. 54

Hyrum left with this letter, apparently feeling that he could not
wait longer, and the rest soon came to the same conclusion. Six days
after Joseph wrote Emma, a Salem newspaper updated the stories of
Latter-day Saint preaching:

Mr. Rigdon, the Mormon preacher, who introduced himself at our
Lyceum last week, has since left the city, with his three or four
associates. It is said they retain possession of the tenement leased by
them in Union Street, and intend to return to this city next spring. 55

This report that the Mormons had “since left the city” was printed on
25 August. Oliver Cowdery wrote a letter with a Boston dateline the
day before—24 August. 56 On that date, the Boston Daily Times re-
ported that Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were present in Boston,
meeting “the day before yesterday,” which would be 22 August. 57 So
the move of the Prophet, Sidney, and Oliver came within a few days
after Joseph’s letter to Emma on 19 August. As quoted, Joseph said
that access to the building was not likely then: “The house is
occupied, and it will require much care and patience to rent or buy
it.” So present evidence contradicts Robinson and Brewster on hiring
the house and searching for treasure in it. The editor reporting the
move knew of only one residence in the two-and-a-half weeks they
were in Salem: “They retain possession of the tenement leased by
them in Union Street.” Indeed, “tenement” is normally an apart-
ment, not a whole building—a further indication that they probably
failed to gain possession of the “house” mentioned in Joseph’s let-
ter. 58

But the leaders’ activities in the East had broader scope. There
were public speeches in Salem and Boston by eloquent Sidney
Rigdon, leadership conferences with Apostles Brigham Young and
Lyman E. Johnson, needed recreation, and much instructive sight-
seeing in Boston and New York. 59 This is a reminder that busy
people often make trips for more than one reason. The overriding
problem of Kirtland in late 1836 was paying for the temple and
maintaining credit and cash flow in stores and land operations. Early
in the following year, Sidney Rigdon explained publicly that approx-
imately $13,000 was outstanding on the temple—evidently for
purchase of supplies and wages paid by goods charged on accounts. 60
Large creditors included New York wholesalers, so personal negotia-
tions of the First Presidency there are highly probable. They must have given some time either to maintaining good relations in existing accounts or establishing new ones. The Salem journey should be called an eastern journey, for there was first a week in New York City, then two weeks in Salem, and about a week in Boston afterward.

Did these Church leaders stake all on a Salem find? They returned in early September, and in just two months had a finished "constitution" for a Mormon bank; the "constitution" was adopted in a formal organization meeting on 2 November. Advance planning for this step was necessary, and such is hinted in Cowdery's shipboard letter written right after an intense week in New York's business district: "There is money yet in Wall Street, and 'Draper, Underwood,' and others ready to help incorporated bodies to plates and dies, to make more." Therefore, on their way to Salem the First Presidency seriously investigated the banking business as a means of capitalizing Church debts. Two engraving firms are mentioned here, and on his return Oliver Cowdery "was delegated to Philadelphia to procure plates for the institution." His mention of the "Underwood" firm in New York suggests that some tentative arrangement was then made for the bank notes, for its Philadelphia branch later supplied them.

Cowdery's reference to "money yet in Wall Street" may also mean that lending agents were contacted. But at a minimum, his mention of printing plates for "incorporated bodies" shows that the First Presidency was issuing the first publicity on the bank on the way to Salem—in Cowdery's letter of 4 August. They returned to Kirtland in early September and some six weeks later opened their books, with the first purchase of stock recorded on 18 October.

Thus Salem was really incidental to more substantial attempts to restructure Church debts by (1) creating immediate capital through Mormon banking; (2) establishing credit or extending due dates of wholesalers' accounts; (3) meeting short-term needs through new loans; (4) insuring long-term resources through regularized contributions of converts and members. This journey investigated and announced the first program, and the Salem revelation shows continued thought given to the last one. It is probable some of the time in New York was devoted to the second program, with a suggestion of the third in Cowdery's reference to Wall Street money. Responsible managers have contingency plans, and good investors spread the risk. Since Joseph's Salem visit is one of multiple eastern goals, his phrase
to Emma on the "great object of our mission" perhaps refers only to its Salem phase.

This 1836 trip remains the only known treasure quest of the Prophet after beginning the Book of Mormon translation. But pre-1827 efforts are strikingly different. Salem represents searching for wealth, but the important question is what kind of searching? In the Salem incident, inside information came from an informant claiming knowledge of a location, not from a paranormal process through a stone or a rod. The patterns described in the 1826 trial are not repeated in Joseph Smith's later pursuit of a New England hoard. Some assume similarities in these two episodes, but differences loom larger. Not every speculative venture is money digging. It is superficial to verbally equate treasure in 1826 with treasure in 1836 without distinguishing the mystical context of the former from the practical context of the latter.

MISSOURI PROBLEMS AND SCRIPTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Although Missouri was designated for the Mormon gathering since 1831, Kirtland was a more natural geographical center of the Church for a time. But the collapse of Kirtland precipitated Joseph Smith's move to Missouri at the beginning of 1838. His exploration for settlement there produced a trivial incident that has been overused in the past year's preoccupation with treasure sources. The Prophet's printed history mentions riding by an early earthwork, and these words are put in his mouth: "These mounds were probably erected by the aborigines of the land, to secrete treasures." No digging for such treasures is indicated in this history or any known Missouri source. The context is opinion, not divination. But in view of the document behind this incident, the opinion does not even appear to be that of Joseph Smith.

The History of the Church for 1838 is based on the "Scriptory Book," kept by George W. Robinson, whose position as "general church recorder and clerk for the First Presidency" had been reaffirmed at the conference of 6 April 1838. His record is the manuscript history from March to September of that year and includes official letters and many revelations. Although it begins with first-person dictation of the Prophet, it quickly moves to Robinson's own style and candid observations. As historian Dean C. Jessee notes, "With the exception of the first two pages, the journal portion of the record was written by Robinson as he observed Joseph's comings and
goings." Some of Robinson's personal comments were later rephrased to appear to be the Prophet's language. The published History is superb in giving facts from contemporary sources, but quoting it as Joseph Smith's words here is inaccurate.

The preceding 22 May 1838 entry has Joseph's comment on stone ruins in the vicinity of Adam-ondi-Ahman. But accurate evaluation of this statement depends on identifying the real source. In the "Scriptory Book" Robinson himself speaks about looking for settlement locations by retracing the steps of the Rigdon party:

President Smith and myself followed on in their course, but could not find them and consequently returned to the camp in Robinson's Grove. We next scouted west in order to obtain some game to supply our necessities but found or killed none. We found some ancient antiquities about one mile west of the camp, which consisted of stone mounds apparently low set in square piles, though somewhat decayed and obliterated by the almost continual rains. Undoubtedly these were made to seclude some valuable treasures deposited by the aborigines of this land.

The whole case for Joseph Smith's treasure digging in Missouri rests on this source. But it falls short for the following reasons: (1) the treasure comment is speculation—"undoubtedly" prefaces it; (2) since the language is Robinson's, Joseph Smith's views are unknown; (3) the men were hunting game, not treasure, and were only incidentally interested in the mound; and (4) they evidently did not dig in the ruins, since a guess is made at the underground configuration—"apparently low set in square piles." Indeed, there is a close similarity of Robinson's ruin to "the remains of an old Nephitish altar or tower" near Lyman Wight's cabin a few miles away. But treasure is not among the many traditions of what Joseph said of that site. A half-dozen journals also record Joseph's remarks a few years earlier at a burial mound in Illinois, with no recorded comment on treasure.

The real program in that area was laying out the new settlement of Adam-ondi-Ahman in Daviess County and surveying adjacent lands. Robinson clearly described what went on: "We continued surveying and building houses, etc. for some time day after day; the surveyors ran out the city plan, and we returned to Far West." These activities are also documented by a short-term convert, William Swartzell, who arrived from Ohio in late May, spent the night at Joseph Smith's, and traveled north with his party in his new job as surveyor. He was fifty-six years of age and not very flexible in a
new religious and physical environment. He soon renounced Mormonism and published his “private journal” to expose Mormon worldliness. Swartzell’s jottings pertain to digging wells and surveying lots in the Daviess County area. He complains of his “mush and milk” diet, Lyman Wight’s combativeness, and finally the militarism of the Danite group. Swartzell’s journal enlarges to expose all Mormon weaknesses he can find. But digging for riches is not mentioned.\(^{77}\) The same is true of others whose faith failed when Mormons began to stand aggressively for their rights. The most persuasive case is Ebeneezer Robinson, who perceived the Salem treasure trip as a scandal deserving exposure. Although a clerk and High Council member throughout the Missouri residence, Robinson writes a negative history of Joseph in Missouri without a mention of treasure searching.\(^ {78}\) John Corrill, Reed Peck, and John Whitmer also wrote up Mormon shortcomings in their justifications for leaving the Church—but without mention of treasure hunting. Nor is this found in the dozen good journals of the faithful who are extremely candid on Mormon military operations.

About two years ago a new Missouri treasure document surfaced, was purchased by the LDS Church Historical Department, and published in Dean Jessee’s *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*.\(^ {79}\) On its face it is a revelation in Joseph Smith’s handwriting, sent to a way station to encourage the Prophet’s brother as he neared the end of a long migration from Ohio to Missouri with his family. But confidence in its authenticity was shaken by the criminal charges of deception against the dealer who sold this treasure revelation to the Church. The handwriting is not wholly satisfactory, though judgment on that question may be subjective, since it is easier to expose a poor imitation than authenticate a historic document by handwriting alone. The Hofmann trial may disclose hard evidence on the questions of source of the document, the origin and treatment of paper on which it is written, and other issues which cannot yet be settled.

But there are a number of observable problems with this supposed Joseph Smith document. It has a Far West postmark with a 25 May date, making 1838 the only year when Joseph Smith could have written from that location. With the help of the LDS Historical Department staff, six Far West postmarks have been located, all of which match in the orange–brown color of ink used in 1838 and 1839, years which do not appear on the handstamps but are indicated within each letter. However, the disputed treasure revelation has an irregular dark red postmark. This Hofmann document is also out of
sequence in its type face. Known postmarks fall into two distinct groups and are reproduced here for comparison. The 1838 marks of 3 February, 3 June, 18 June, and 15 July have a common block-letter design that is symmetrical, with the "Mo." abbreviation using the lower case o and period. But after mid-July a different stamp appears, with more stylized narrow and wide strokes to form unbalanced letters, ending with the "MO" abbreviation in upper case without the period. This face appears in the handstamps of 3 October 1838 and 1 May 1839. Although the letters in the Hofmann stamp are badly formed, they clearly resemble the broad-narrow strokes of the later postmark, including the capital "MO" abbreviation. But since the revelation's handstamp of 25 May should fit that used in the first half of 1838, available postmarks indicate anachronism, not confirmation.

Moreover, a careful examination of the lettering raises the question of whether the treasure revelation merely imitates a postmark. The six authentic impressions are generally more solid than the Hofmann document because of ink saturation of the paper. The handstamps of 15 July 1838 and 1 May 1829 partially resemble the Hofmann document in that the stamp came down hard on the right, leaving a light dotted effect on the left. Under a magnifying glass, this freckling has random dots because the slight contact caught the raised grains of the paper in their uneven combinations. But the same thing is not true of the disputed treasure revelation. When enlarged, its postmark shows regularly spaced dotting and lining. For instance, the front leg of the R and right side of the M are made by close parallel lines. The conclusion can be phrased negatively and positively. No other handstamp shows heavy dots and lines alternating with even spaces, and every other handstamp shows ink flow and other evidence of the pressure of the printing stroke. But every letter in the disputed 25 May 1838 postmark has characteristics of a freehand sketch. Art designer Carma de Jong Anderson feels strongly that this apparent stamp was "drawn painstakingly by an unskilled person." The straight edges and geometric clarity of authentic engraving are lacking here. For instance, the Hofmann document offsets the F, straightens the top of the leg of the R, while exaggerating its bottom thrust, and also displays a misshapen S, whose lower curve breaks out of the rectangular frame that can be superimposed on the S in the authentic block prints.

Below this postmark is a puzzling address: "Mr. Hyram Smith, Plattegrove." Joseph Smith normally wrote the state even in ad-
Postmark of 26 February 1838, letter of Oliver Cowdery to his brothers Warren and Lyman

The variant 25 May 1838 postmark on the purported treasure revelation, differing in style from the known marks from February to July of that year.
Postmark of 3 June 1838, letter of Oliver Cowdery to his brothers Warren and Lyman, showing only light speckling following the random paper grains

Postmark of 18 June 1838, letter of Thomas B. Marsh to Wilford Woodruff, showing the typically solid ink saturation of an authentic stamp
Postmark of 15 July 1838, letter of Thomas B. Marsh to Wilford Woodruff, showing the pressure of the handstamp on the right and also the circular speckling framed by solid ink coating that characterizes the authentic impressions.

Postmark of 3 October 1838, letter of Joseph Smith, Jr., and Sidney Rigdon to Stephen Post, showing the second style of stamp of that year. The stamp of the purported treasure revelation resembles this, but with clear differences in letter formation and quality.
Enlargement of the 25 May 1838 postmark on the purported treasure revelation, lacking ink flow of the known handstamps of that year. Its dot and line pattern is too symmetrical and gross to be caused by paper graining.
Address side of the alleged 1838 treasure revelation, showing the irregular postmark, lack of state on a mailed item, and unidentified city
dressing handcarried letters, and it appears to have been his invariable practice to add the state on posted letters. And the handwritten postage of six cents adds a location difficulty, for it was the statutory amount for a letter sent within thirty miles of origin. But after careful searches of place names, I have been unable to find a "Plattes-grove" in upper Missouri, or even in the state. And there are serious obstacles with sentence construction and spelling. For instance, in documents ranging throughout the 1830s, the Prophet wrote great without a known exception. With over two dozen consistent examples, it is jarring to have the treasure revelation appear with the unprecedented grate, as though an imitator were aware that Joseph Smith handwriting should have misspellings but only guessed that this word should be incorrectly written. Since the 1838 treasure revelation fails too many of the checks that historians can make, it should not now be classed as an authentic Joseph Smith document.

The questionable Missouri revelation promises Hyrum Smith "a great treasure in the earth," but such language broadly resembles promises in revelations and some Joseph Smith blessings. Thus asking the meaning of treasure to Missouri Mormons is highly relevant here. Even if the doubtful revelation was authentic, its treasure phrase would fit ancient and modern revelations picturing the resources of the land given by God. Before showing why this is so, I will quote the entire document, followed by a summary of the historical setting at the time defined by the postmark, May 25 [1838].

Verily thus saith the Lord unto Hyrum Smith, if he will come strateaway to Far West and inquire of his brother, it shall be shown him how that he may be freed from det and obtain a grate treasure in the earth. Even so, Amen.

Like the 1836 eastern trip, the trip of early summer 1838 has a practical setting: Before Hyrum's move to Missouri, the Prophet had hammered out a program for supporting the Presidency with an annual stipend. While his brother journeyed, Joseph gave the main revelation on building Far West, commanding Hyrum as a member of the First Presidency not to "get in debt anymore for the building of a house unto my name" (D&C 115:13). Six weeks after Hyrum's arrival, financial reforms culminated with the revelation commanding surplus consecration and the continued duty of tithing. This was explicitly to finance ongoing temple and priesthood programs—and also "for the debts of the Presidency of my Church" (D&C 119:2), many of which had been incurred personally for the Church. Thus any
1838 promise to Hyrum on getting out of debt would be independent of "a great treasure in the earth." Yet the latter language, though questionably Joseph Smith's, parallels ancient and modern revelations to Israel on their promised land.

The first program of uprooting homes and gathering came as a shock to the Church at the end of 1830 (D&C 37). Then the revelation known as section 38 followed in the early January conference that John Whitmer said was filled with the "solemnities of eternity." It required great faith to sell farms and relocate, so section 38 has the theme of "the riches of eternity" (D&C 38:39).87 The related major subject was the material reward for sacrifice: "And it must needs be that the riches of the earth are mine to give" (D&C 38:39). In the abstract, this could refer to treasure digging, but it does not, for the document defines what God will give: "greater riches, even a land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . the land of your inheritance" (D&C 38:18–19). This was originally Moses' assurance of reward for leaving Egypt (Ex. 3:17). In the 1831 command, "greater riches, even a land of promise" was afterward summarized as the gift of "the riches of the earth" (D&C 38:18, 39).

One must beware of reading the writings of Old Testament prophets or Joseph Smith as simple prose without poetic elements. Emotional language uses symbols, alliteration, and reiteration. It often needs interpretation, a type of translation. The 1838 gathering was the second stage of that aborted in 1833 by the forced exodus from Jackson County; it was temporarily suspended until Caldwell County was created for the Mormons in late 1836. Hyrum had traveled to Independence in 1831 when priesthood leaders met to dedicate the center place. Missouri minutes record his public reading of Psalm 102, one filled with parallelism and the prophecy that "the Lord shall build up Zion."88 From that summer, he knew the modern revelations about the abundance of "the land of Zion": its righteous inhabitants would receive "the good things of the earth, and it shall bring forth in its strength" (D&C 59:3). Saints in Missouri would share in "the fulness of the earth" and "the good things which come of the earth" (D&C 59:16–17). This prophetic—poetic language is repeated in the 1838 "gathering together upon the land of Zion" (D&C 115:6), reiterating Old Testament promises that the "solitary places" would "blossom" and "bring forth in abundance" (D&C 117:7). If Hyrum's treasure revelation was authentic, there
would be no real difference between his "great treasure in the earth" and "the fatness of the earth" (D&C 56:18).

Economics and rebellion in the Church forced the First Presidency to leave Kirtland suddenly early in 1838. On 12 January the Prophet received a remarkable set of revelations still not well known. The one about leaving Kirtland came to "the presidency of my Church" and declared that "your labors are finished in this place for a season," adding the call to upper Missouri: "Therefore arise and get yourselves into a land which I shall show unto you, even a land flowing with milk and honey." 89 The Prophet and Sidney soon left for Far West, but Hyrum and his family did not arrive until late May. That spring brought the scent of prosperity as the Saints created new cities in a sparsely settled area. An editorial written at the time of Hyrum’s arrival informed the whole Church that Missouri Saints would "turn a solitary place into a fruitful field." Joseph Smith was nominal editor of the Elder's Journal, and this May article provides a major insight into his thinking because he either helped formulate the ideas or approved their publication. The paper noted that hundreds of acres of wheat and corn were under cultivation and that supplies were "somewhat scarce," getting good prices. This forecast of high profits is ironic because the military occupation largely destroyed Mormon crops that fall. But optimism was justified as they looked to "an abundant harvest." 90 This crop-raising economy was earthly wealth. Sidney Rigdon said so in outlining the Mormon program for building communities, education, and temples. With rich material blessings, the Saints would offer "the sacrifice of our first fruits" to God, "whose worship we esteem of more consequence than we do the treasures of Missouri." 91

President Rigdon’s speeches and writings were saturated with the Mormon theme of recreated Israel, an important caution on taking "treasure" in a nineteenth-century American sense. The most obvious use of that concept in the Bible and the Book of Mormon is the theme of the riches of the lands of inheritance. For instance, Moses promised Israel the Lord’s "good treasure" (Deut. 28:12). And this meant fertility of herds and of the earth: "The Lord shall make thee plenteous in goods, . . . in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy ground, in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers to give thee" (Deut. 28:11). Thus the model of Mormon treasure language is the Old Testament assurance of abundant resources of the promised land. Phraseology of riches consistently expresses this exodus-inheritance theme in ancient and modern revelation.
These scriptural precedents are also critical for interpreting
treasure language in the personal blessings given by the Prophet,
since he restored the role of ancient patriarchs who foretold through
symbols and dramatic comparisons. The Mormon historian finds
these pronouncements in personal histories of the Joseph Smith
period. They contain devotional phraseology above normal biblical
narrative. Here is the lofty fervency of the Psalms rather than the
descriptions of Genesis or Chronicles. The promises of these blessings
have deep meaning, but discernment is required to adapt rhapsodic
language to a practical frame of reference. The Prophet typically
reapplies terms and metaphors of Old Testament blessings of the
tribes of Israel. For instance, he laid hands on his father and promised
the “blessings of heaven above . . . and the blessings of the deep that
lieth under,” after reciting that he was heir to the prophecies upon
ancient Joseph.92 These words come from Gen. 49:25, Jacob’s
promise to that son.

In his blessings, the Prophet most frequently quotes Deuteronomy 33, Moses’ promises to the twelve tribes. In that reference,
predictions upon Joseph’s descendants explicitly relate to “his land”
(Deut. 33:13), and Joseph’s favored inheritance is an intense theme:
“the precious things of heaven . . . the deep that coucheth be-
neath . . . the chief things of the ancient mountains . . . the precious
things of the earth and fulness thereof” (Deut. 33:13–15). Just as
these divine covenants with Joseph are applied to their American land
by Book of Mormon descendants, they are reapplied to the Latter-day
Saints in early blessings. For instance, the Prophet’s most frequent.promise to family and Church leaders is an “abundance of the good
things of the earth.”93 In biblical context, this is the assurance of
wealth to do the work of the kingdom and restates the “fulness” of the
“precious things of the earth” in the blessing of Moses.

Moreover, Joseph Smith uses another Deuteronomy phrase that
could suggest money digging until one sees that the Prophet defines
it otherwise. The wealth of Zebulun and Issachar was sketched in
metaphor: “for they shall suck of the abundance of the seas, and of
treasures hid in the sand” (Deut. 33:19). Joseph Smith quoted that
passage to William Phelps’s wife Sally to explain the importance of
her husband’s long assignment to Kirtland during 1835. In a
postscript to one of William’s letters to her in Missouri, the Prophet
wrote that her husband would “return and teach you things that have
been hid from the wise and prudent, hidden things of old times, as
Moses said in Deut. 33d chap., 19th verse: ‘for they shall suck of the
abundance of the seas and of the treasures hid in the sand.’ Some of these things have begun to come forth.” 94 Here the treasures from the sand were the recently acquired papyri from Egypt. Joseph’s postscript was added to the letter in which William W. Phelps told how the mummies and papyrus rolls came to Kirtland, concluding: “These records of old times, when we translate and print them in a book, will make a good witness for the Book of Mormon. There is nothing secret or hidden that shall not be revealed, and they come to the Saints.” 95

The Abraham Papyri are similarly described in Phelps’s blessing two months after Joseph’s postscript to Sally. The Prophet then blessed her husband: “He shall have part in that that coucheth beneath: and it shall be revealed unto him things by the hand of the Lord’s anointed that have been kept secret from the foundation of the world, concerning the last days.” In reality, William W. Phelps was then a scribe writing new knowledge concerning Abraham that had been hidden from the world. 96 The Prophet also gave similar words to Oliver Cowdery, reciting his heritage of the ancient “blessings that couch beneath, even the hidden things of the ancient mountains, even the records that have been hid from the first ages; from generation to generation shall he be an instrument in the hands of God, and his brother Joseph, of translating and bringing forth to the house of Israel.” 97

Thus in the Prophet’s blessings to family and Kirtland leaders, the buried treasure concept has figurative application to newly restored scriptures. Joseph also promised Phelps the resources of the earth, but not on the condition of digging for them:

He shall be filled with a fulness of the good things of the earth: with houses and with lands, with the fruit of the vine and with the fat of the olive, and he shall feed on the finest of the wheat. And because of his liberal soul the Lord will make him rich, even with treasures of gold, silver, precious stones, and with all precious metals. 98

Here the Prophet outlines a full range of blessings with spiritual metaphor. Translated to life, the fruits of the land are the result of labor, not discovery. And biblical imagery is evident, for the Prophet nowhere encourages olive culture in Missouri. A parallel example is the early revelation using the biblical term chariots in reference to Missouri stagecoaches (D&C 62:7). In this figurative context, the “treasures” of precious things are promised with Mosaic phrasing. The discerning reader of these early blessings must sort out the
imagery from the message, for they are clearly patterned after the poetic–symbolic blessings closing Genesis and Deuteronomy.

In 1833, Joseph had given Hyrum a special blessing filled with biblical figures: “The goings of his feet shall ever be by streams of living water.” Closing with the theme that Hyrum would have means to serve God, the Prophet gave a panorama of wealth in terms of the cattle, asses, and camels of Genesis and also promised “an abundance of riches of the earth: gold, silver, and treasures of precious stones, of diamonds and platina.” These 1833 words to Hyrum are nearly identical to the imagistic inventory after the “good things of the earth” in the Phelps blessing. In that blessing underground discoveries were equated with new scripture, but general wealth was promised through a figurative list. Since Hyrum’s 1833 personal blessing has similar metaphor and lofty language, the inventory of riches also amounts to an assurance of earth’s resources. The Prophet’s blessings generally give comfort and instruction in specific terms, but promises of wealth are often elaborate with no particulars of when and where and how obtained. In the above 1833 blessing, Joseph promised Hyrum “an abundance of riches of the earth.” If it were proved authentic, Hyrum’s 1838 revelation would be equally general about “a great treasure in the earth.” Joseph Smith gives such assurances as intense metaphor in his personal blessings.

This survey of Joseph Smith’s usages of treasure shows how that term and its synonyms are predominately applied to the wealth of the land given the faithful. The Prophet’s applications of the treasure concept are mostly biblical and refer to natural resources, so much so that the first major exodus revelation promised “riches” that are equated with “a land of promise” (D&C 38:18). Jesus’ contrast of earthly and heavenly treasures appears in the revelations, and Joseph Smith’s private blessings sometimes use specific figures of precious metals and stones in promising prosperity. Although such riches are from the earth, nothing suggests hoards to be gained by digging. On the contrary, agricultural possessions stand beside mineral possessions in such blessings, showing that both come from practical enterprise. Moreover, biblical symbolism is vivid in these promises. Indeed, the personal blessings given by Joseph Smith describe treasures actually coming out of the earth only in the case of ancient records, and even there the figurative concepts suggest revelation as much as discovery. The Salem revelation (D&C 111) remains the only known document after 1829 in which Joseph Smith used treasure in
the sense of a hoard of riches, and that by way of correction, not approval.

"THE GIFT OF AARON"

"The gift of Aaron" first appeared in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, referring to powers of revelation that Oliver Cowdery should use as he began assisting Joseph Smith in Book of Mormon translation (D&C 8:6–7). Both men were later on the First Presidency committee to revise the Book of Commandments when the wording of this 1829 revelation was changed.  

However, its first printing referred to Cowdery's "gift of working with the rod." To some, this means that Oliver Cowdery had used a divining rod to locate buried wealth in pre-Mormon days. If this practice was Cowdery's gift, Joseph Smith apparently approved prior money digging or else asked him to put the rod to a higher use.

Some view Oliver Cowdery as a treasure diviner because of a local historian's theory in Oliver's boyhood area. Around 1801, a bubble of zeal burst for the Wood family and associates in Middletown, Vermont. They had enthusiastically claimed revelation setting up a new Israel and a new Jerusalem by using the Bible and treasure sticks. They were discredited after an intense night of unrest while waiting for God's destructions. About forty years later, the movement was investigated by lawyer Barnes Frisbie, who sought to prove that these money-digging Israelites were "one source, if not the main source from which came this monster—Mormonism." His evidence was their biblical restorationism plus a fugitive counterfeiter named Winchell or Wingate, who had an undefined relationship with Oliver Cowdery's father, William, in nearby Wells, Vermont. Frisbie heard that the stranger "stayed at Cowdery's some little time, keeping himself concealed." The Wood group supposedly learned their rodding from this faceless individual. But Frisbie gives no reason for including William Cowdery in the Wood group except as host to Winchell/Wingate.

This last point needs emphasis because William Cowdery is the only direct link between Mormonism and the Wood movement. Frisbie mentions him in two very disconnected paragraphs. At first he profiles William's supposed relationship with the counterfeiter. Then William is dropped for fifteen pages while full details of the Wood affair or "scrape" are told. But William Cowdery did not live near the Wood group, did not attend their meetings, nor is he even
mentioned as a distant sympathizer. To repeat, his one relationship
was supposedly boarding the pretender, who supposedly taught
divining to the Woods and used them as a front for a coining scam.
From this loose chain of association, Frisbie draws a strange conclu-
sion: "I have before said that Oliver Cowdery's father was in the
'Wood scrape.' " But William Cowdery's knowing a man who knew
the Woods does not make him a participant. Indeed, Oliver's father
is absent from all sources preceding Frisbie. An 1828 newspaper
history of the Wood episode refers to neither the mysterious counter-
feiter nor Cowdery. The main group of Middletown survivors of
the 1800 period—"more than thirty old men and women"—were
interviewed up to 1860, and they said nothing of a counterfeiter or of
Cowdery. The 1867 recollections of a minister who visited the
group in the final weeks of their movement include mention of the
counterfeiter but not Cowdery—when a disciple was asked where the
criminal stayed, he answered: "He keeps himself secreted in the
woods." Frisbie's own claims about the Cowdery connection to the
Wood group are both unclear and unsupported. This is the patch-
work of folklore, not tightly woven history.

Frisbie's summation soars even further beyond his facts: "I have
been told that Joe Smith's father resided in Poultney at the time of the
Wood movement here, and that he was in it and one of the leading
rodsman." That claim is empty, for family and town sources clearly
place the Prophet's father fifty miles away as a young married farmer
in Tunbridge, Vermont. Frisbie is here building his picture of a
Vermont money-digging team—Winchell/Wingate and the elders
Cowdery and Smith—to be later revived in Palmyra with their sons
added. But both Oliver and Joseph said they had never seen each
other before beginning the 1829 translation. Frisbie also claims,
without supporting evidence, that after leaving Vermont the
counterfeiter was in the Smiths' New York neighborhood, a con-
tention Frisbie claims "has been fully proven by men who . . . knew
him in both places." Hardly so, for the historian's sources associate
the counterfeiter with the Woods but not with New York Mormons.
In fact, Frisbie admits there is no document linking the counterfeiter
to the Mormons: "The name of the counterfeiter, whether it was
Winchell or Wingate, does not appear in any account that I have
seen, unless he had by this time assumed another name, but he had
been at Palmyra for some years and went with them from Palmyra to
Ohio." Again, after the claim that the elder Smith was a Wood
rodsman, Frisbie admits: "Of this I cannot speak positively, for the
want of satisfactory evidence." While speculating beyond his data, Frisbie overstates William Cowdery's role as a Wood participant, as already noted, and also makes him and Joseph Smith, Sr., the central characters in his plot of how Mormonism really began:

He then lived in Wells, afterwards in Middletown, after that went to Palmyra, and there we find these men with the counterfeiter, Winchell, searching for money over the hills and mountains with the hazel rod. And their sons Joe and Oliver, as soon as they were old enough, were in the same business, and continued in it until they brought out the "vilest scheme that ever cursed the country."111

This guesswork deserves little notice, but it was apparently taken at face value by Whitney Cross, the analyst of New York revivalism, who shattered chronology by referring to the Wood movement and adding: "One of the two leaders, named Winchell, and a follower, named Oliver Cowdery, moved to Palmyra, New York, where the latter in time became Joseph Smith's clerical assistant."112 The Wood movement deflated about 1801; Oliver was born in 1806, so he could hardly have been a "follower" of Wood or Winchell. Further, as we have seen, no Winchell is known in Palmyra or around the Smiths, nor does present evidence make William Cowdery a Wood adherent or a rodsman.

Here a good historian relies on secondary description and does not get his facts straight. Cross cites David M. Ludlum, who says that "Winchell and Oliver Cowdery, a son of a prominent actor in the Wood Scrape, subsequently moved from Middleton to Palmyra."113 Cross has simply taken the son for the father. But Cross's source Ludlum carelessly repeated Frisbie's exaggeration of the elder Cowdery's affiliation with the Woods. Although Ludlum made this mistake, he realized there were only common cultural roots, not direct relationships, between the Vermont millenialists and Mormon founders a quarter of a century later: "The strands of connection between the Wood Scrape and the Palmyra outcroppings are too tenuous to withstand historical criticism."114

One can begin to see the real people when the historical ghosts are removed. A newspaper reconstruction of the Wood affair was written forty years before Frisbie's, nearer the event and not infected with the goal of tying it to Mormonism. This account simply says that the discredited "leaders of the fraternity . . . removed into the county of St. Lawrence, New York, where it is said something of their former delusion stuck by them." This location is a hundred
miles from Palmyra, and there is no known New York interaction of
the Woods and the Smiths.

This best Wood source has the further value of listing multiple
uses of the rod:

They claimed also inspired power with which to cure all sorts of
diseases, intuitive knowledge of lost or stolen goods, and ability to
discover the hidden treasures of the earth, as well as the more conve-
nient talent of transmuting ordinary substances into the precious
metals. . . . The instrument of their miraculous powers was a cleft
stick, or rod, something of the form of an inverted Y. And when this
talisman was firmly grasped in either hand by its two points, it was
believed to indicate the proper course to be pursued, or point out some
substances of medicinal utility, or fix the locality of some valuable
mine—whichever of these the agent was pleased to wish.115

As will be seen, this forked branch is not the type suggested by
Cowdery’s revelation on the “gift of working with the rod.” But
though the direct Mormon–Wood connection fails historically, the
Wood example does show that the divining rod was used for guidance
in other matters besides searching for gold. Uncritical historians may
report valuable information along with unreliable conclusions. Thus
Frisbie quotes the letter of a visiting minister, who describes how the
rod pointed to “plants and roots that they used to cure diseases,” and
also answered yes—no questions on what tribe of Israel an individual
was from.116 Frisbie also seems to credit old-timer Jabez D. Perry in
picturing the rod as used “whenever they desired any information,"
not only for the right medicine in sickness “but also to know whether
they would live or die,” as well as “all their business matters.”117
While such answers might be manipulation, superstition, or at-
ttempts at true revelation, they show broader possibilities for
Cowdery’s instructions on the rod. Shortly after meeting Oliver,
Joseph Smith commended him on his “gift of working with the rod:
behold it has told you things.”118 Since this suggests general guid-
ance, Joseph Smith’s 1829 revelation did not necessarily refer to
money digging.

As discussed, the Wood episode is no more than a cultural
analogy. Joseph Smith’s reasons for approving the rod must be
reconstructed from Mormon sources. The rod instruction came in
April 1829, soon after the two men met early that month. It is one of
two revelations clarifying translation, but the third in this series
came earlier. That first message introduced Oliver to the concepts
behind the rod revelation. Thus section 6 defines the scope of approval for the rod in section 8.\textsuperscript{119}

Oliver Cowdery's first revelation commanded him to lay aside the world and build the restored kingdom: "Seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich" (D&C 6:7). Whatever prior use Oliver made of his "gift of working with the rod," this revelation directed him to heavenly treasure. Indeed, this first command names but one special power: "Thy gift" is "sacred and cometh from above." It is defined as the ability to "inquire" and "know mysteries which are great and marvelous." Thus Oliver is commanded to "exercise thy gift, that thou mayest find out mysteries, that thou mayest bring many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, convince them of the error of their ways."\textsuperscript{120} Thus his gift of knowledge of salvation will lead to the "greatest of all gifts," the "gift of salvation" (D&C 6:10–13).

Oliver's initial revelation closes with the command to seek heavenly "treasures" by assisting "in bringing to light, with your gift, those parts of my scriptures which have been hidden because of iniquity" (D&C 6:27). The revelation on the gift of the rod probably followed within a week.\textsuperscript{121} It continued the theme of learning ancient truths through translating: "Remember, this is your gift" (D&C 8:5). And it could be exercised by believing "you shall receive a knowledge concerning the engravings of old records" (D&C 8:1).

Then a second promise was made:

Now this is not all, for you have another gift, which is the gift of working with the rod. Behold, it has told you things. Behold, there is no other power save God that can cause this rod of nature to work in your hands, for it is the work of God. And therefore whatsoever you shall ask me to tell you by that means, will I grant unto you, that you shall know.\textsuperscript{122}

But there were strict limits to this promise: "Trifle not with these things. Do not ask for that which you ought not. Ask that you may know the mysteries of God, and that you may translate all those ancient records."\textsuperscript{123}

So the "rod of nature" in Cowdery's "hands" would be a means of gaining revelation on doctrine. The only known counterpart in early Mormon documents says the same, though reflected in a waffled mirror. One of the strangest witnesses to early Latter-day Saint convictions is Jesse Smith, the hostile brother of Joseph Smith, Sr.
Hyrum had written letters to his grandfather's family similar to Mother Smith's 1831 letter to her brother, announcing that God had "sent forth a revelation in these last days, and this revelation is called the Book of Mormon." Although Joseph's immediate family believed, his grandfather's family was divided, with the oldest son Jesse as bitter minority leader. Hyrum's correspondence has to be reconstructed through Jesse's replayed words, distorted by scorn:

But alas, what is man when left to his own way? He makes his own gods. If a golden calf, he falls down and worships before it and says, "This is my god which brought me out of the land of Vermont." If it be a gold book discovered by the necromancy of infidelity and dug from the mines of atheism, he writes that the angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge, even divine revelation which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years is at last made known to him. He says he has eyes to see things that are not, and then has the audacity to say they are. And this angel of the Lord (devil it should be) has put me in possession of great wealth, gold and silver and precious stones, so that I shall have the dominion in all the land of Palmyra.

Hyrum's earlier message that the record came from the "angel of the Lord" is clear, as is the "gold book," mocked again in the middle and given a closing sneer: "The story is that the gold book proved to be lead." The serious claims of the Joseph Smith family can be seen by Jesse's repeated scoffing at the same things. On the other hand, the "possession of great wealth" is a one-time jibe, possibly Jesse's ironic overstatement that those claiming "the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge" ought to get "gold and silver" in the bargain.

Jesse Smith also speaks of a rod possessed by Joseph's father, but his statement is probably distorted like his version of the Book of Mormon story. The rod information came to Jesse by an intermediary from Joseph Smith, Sr.: "Your father would not be implicated in this place, but for the message he sent by the hands of a fool to my brother Samuel." The messenger, who "believes all to be a fact," could be Martin Harris, or someone like him who had time and money to make the trip to St. Lawrence County. The month was June 1829, when the Book of Mormon was being finished and printing worries were beginning, so Uncle Samuel might have been approached for help, which would intensify the irony of Jesse's "great wealth" language. Uncle Jesse seems to know firsthand what the Palmyra messenger said about a rod, which is ridiculed not because it leads to treasure, but because it leads to information. Jesse scolds Hyrum,
“He says your father has a wand or rod like Jannes and Jambres, who withstood Moses in Egypt—that he can tell the distance from India to Ethiopia and another fool story, many other things alike ridiculous.”

So there are two rod sources in mid-1829. Cowdery’s revelation names his “rod of nature” in a phrase suggesting simply cut wood, perhaps in contrast to a magician’s wand made of rare materials. Then there is Uncle Jesse’s “wand or rod like Jannes and Jambres, who withstood Moses in Egypt.” Since his rhetoric associates the Smith rod with God’s enemies, a 180 degree correction must be made. Jesse consistently takes the words of his visionary kinsmen and makes exact reversals. His sarcasm changes their “gold book” to a “lead book” and makes their “angel of the Lord” into one of Satan’s angels. Jesse regularly changes the good source to an evil one, and the opposite of the wands of Jannes and Jambres would be the rod of Aaron.

As noted, the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants deleted two “rod” references and replaced them with “the gift of Aaron” possessed by Joseph’s new scribe. Although this supposedly shifted meanings, it looks more like clarification. The revision retained words about holding the rod: “You shall hold it in your hands and do marvelous works, and no power shall be able to take it out of your hands, for it is the work of God” (D&C 8:8). Such language does not really remove the rod but identifies it with Aaron. As will be seen, section 8 even implied this in its original form.

A surprising harmony exists between the two 1829 sources on the function of the rod. Uncle Jesse said the messenger claimed that “the distance from India to Ethiopia” was discerned through the rod—perhaps more heavy satire, since one expert on magic names these as the best sites for stones of special properties. Yet Jesse ridicules the idea of receiving information through the rod, whether or not his sneer correctly represents his source. The bitter uncle could have been expected to make the most of the Smiths’ divining for treasure, but instead he associates a Mormon rod with Pharaoh’s magicians. So his hostile letter pictures that rod as something more than a treasure rod.

In Oliver Cowdery’s revelation, “the gift of working with the rod” is subordinated to revelation, since no Doctrine and Covenants section has a more concentrated theme. The opening lines state the message of translating “by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart” (D&C 8:1–2). The closing
lines immediately follow the rod references and invite Oliver to “ask that you may know the mysteries of God, and that you may translate all those ancient records.”\(^{132}\) Asking for these two reasons refers to the double gifts of the short revelation: the “gift” of “the Spirit of revelation” in translation (D&C 8:3–4), and “another gift” of working with the rod (D&C 8:6).\(^{133}\) But that second gift serves the same purpose as the first: “Whatsoever you shall ask me to tell you by that means, that will I grant unto you, that you shall know,” referring to “the mysteries of God.”\(^{134}\) Both gifts result in revelation through inner faith, the single subject of the inspired message. Both the rod and translation stones are dependent upon “the Spirit of revelation—behold this is the Spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground” (D&C 8:3). These words call up a biblical epic of revelation and use of the rod. In Exodus, “the Lord spake unto Moses” is the constant means of moving Israel to the Red Sea. Moses’ authority and God’s power were then shown through a physical instrument: “But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea” (Ex. 14:16).

No known source tells whether Oliver did money digging before becoming the Book of Mormon scribe. And American divining does not really fit the inner sources of the new religion. To make a divining rod, the stem was cut just below forked branches. The diviner held one of the branches in each hand and located treasure or water by movement of the center stub under tension. But the forked stick is not the pattern for Oliver Cowdery’s rod, either in purpose or association with Aaron. True, section 8 told Oliver that the rod worked “in your hands.” However, a straight rod may also be held by both hands. In any event, section 8 approves a rod only for sacred information. It also suggests the rod that displayed God’s power in the Egyptian plagues, in striking the rock for life-giving water or in calling down strength on Israel’s warriors. That rod was a straight shaft, the shepherd’s staff possessed by Moses at his call (Ex. 4:2–4). Used by both Moses and Aaron, it was foremost the “rod of God,” also Moses’ rod, but formally called the “rod of Aaron.”\(^{135}\) It functioned as a visible sign of authority, just as Judah’s “scepter” was a sign of divine kingship in Jacob’s blessing or Elijah’s staff was held by the servant who went in his name.\(^{136}\) Thus the rod of Aaron was a staff of delegated agency, and the 1835 revision to “The gift of Aaron” suggests Oliver’s spiritual power to assist Joseph Smith as Aaron assisted Moses.
Here is a crossroads of method for the interpreter of Joseph's revelations. It is unwise to pursue environmental influences on too narrow a basis, for the Bible is the controlling background for this restorationist Christianity. As discussed, Oliver Cowdery's rod appears right after mention of Moses and the Red Sea miracle. Though "the gift of Aaron" was not substituted for the "rod of nature" until 1835, Oliver's role as spokesman for Joseph was present from the outset of their relationship. In 1830, the authority of the presiding prophet was emphasized, with Joseph receiving revelations "even as Moses" and with Oliver declaring them "even as Aaron" (D&C 28:2–3). This referred to Moses as the presiding prophet and Aaron as "mouth": "And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people" (Ex. 4:16).

Oliver Cowdery's mission to Ohio was soon a main force in converting Sidney Rigdon, who traveled to meet the Prophet and who was named scribe and spokesman in the absence of Oliver (D&C 35:17–23). As the First Presidency developed, Sidney Rigdon and Oliver Cowdery both had their place as assistants. When Oliver was heavily involved as Church editor in 1833, Joseph relied principally on Sidney as his counselor. A revelation then declared Sidney "a spokesman unto my servant Joseph," again Aaron's Bible role, since Joseph as the "revelator" was to guide the "spokesman" (D&C 100:9, 11). Two months later, Joseph Smith gave Sidney a patriarchal blessing, severely cautioning him against pride but outlining his call and potential: "A spokesman unto the Lord shall he be all the days of his life; and it shall come to pass that he shall hold the rod as of Aaron in his right hand."137

This blessing adds the rod to the image of Aaron as "voice," with one other relevant phrase added about Sidney Rigdon: "For the Lord shall reveal unto the Seer of Israel, and he shall declare it." Since Aaron's rod was really Moses' staff that had been touched by God, "the rod as of Aaron" is here a sign of a delegated representative. In Exodus, God commanded the miracles through Moses, but they generally took place as Aaron raised the rod. Thus the "rod as of Aaron" is probably a metaphor in Rigdon's blessing, but one that reveals the biblical basis of Joseph Smith's thinking. In Joseph's revelations, only two men are titled spokesmen. Because these two are also associated with the rod, Oliver's "working with the rod" suggests that the rod would bring revelation because it signified associate authority. This is the major distinction from Aaron's rod in early magical handbooks. Anyone could read the Bible and attempt
to duplicate any practice—anyone could attach Aaron’s name to magical wands or divining sticks. The name is not the issue but the authentic context of delegated power.

The revelation—authority aspects of Oliver Cowdery’s rod are clues to its method of operation. The Woods’ rods probably chose between alternatives, so the dips of the stem would answer questions on a yes—no basis. But the prophetic authority staff provides a better model, one harmonious with Joseph Smith’s known thinking as the leader of the restored Church. Some associates of the Prophet used a rod in special prayer. In 1841, Orson Hyde wrote from the Near East after dedicating Israel for the Gathering: “On what was anciently called Mount Zion, where the temple stood, I . . . used the rod according to the prediction upon my head.”\(^{138}\) He had previously prayed on the Mount of Olives, moving down to the edge of the city, erecting similar stone memorials at both places, and obviously praying again. So he used a rod of petition in some form. What personal prophecy was fulfilled? Perhaps that of Oliver Cowdery in ordaining Orson Hyde an Apostle and promising: “He shall have power to smite the earth with pestilence, to divide waters and lead through the Saints; he shall go from land to land and from sea to sea.”\(^{139}\) Did this transatlantic Apostle feel empowered to use a “rod of Aaron” once again to invoke plagues on modern Egyptians that prevented Israel from returning? Here the rod of authority would be the rod of prayer. Cowdery’s blessing is the only known source behind Hyde’s “prediction upon my head.” Thus Hyde’s use of the rod in Jerusalem suggests how Oliver might have understood his 1829 revelation.

A staff is also visible in Heber C. Kimball’s biography, where functions of prayer and special authority are blended. Heber recalled dreaming of Joseph Smith during Heber’s 1837 voyage to England. The Apostle stood near the front of the ship and was visited by the Prophet, who said, “‘Brother Heber, here is a rod (putting it into my hands) with which you are to guide the ship. While you hold this rod you shall prosper . . . and the hand of God shall be with you.’” In the dream the promise was fulfilled by the ship’s knifing through all obstacles. Heber’s was a straight staff: “This rod which Joseph gave me was about three and a half feet in length.”\(^{140}\) The dream must have approximated what Heber C. Kimball knew in reality, for his journal records several prayers answered by this means. His son gives the recollection of capable pioneer Sarah Granger Kimball:
Brother Kimball showed me a rod that the Lord through the Prophet Joseph had given to him. He said that when he wanted to find out anything that was his right to know, all he had to do was to kneel down with the rod in his hand, and that sometimes the Lord would answer his questions before he had time to ask them.\footnote{141}

Heber's son added: "My mother and my sister, Helen Mar, told me the same thing and added to it, that President Young received a similar rod from the Lord at the same time.\footnote{142} This description does not fit the Y-shaped rod that the diviners held by both hands.\footnote{143} But it fits the three-foot staff of Kimball's dream as well as the blessing of Sidney Rigdon, who was told he would "hold the rod as of Aaron in his right hand," perhaps a metaphor but one with literal imagery. If answers came to Heber C. Kimball before the questions were asked, then the rod functioned as an aid to faith, a symbol of authority in prayer rather than some physical pointer. As noted, Oliver Cowdery's rod instruction is the middle directive of three messages forming a cohesive context. And they contain classic summaries of the inner process of revelation: "peace to your mind" (D&C 6); "the Holy Ghost . . . shall dwell in your heart" (D&C 8:2); "your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right" (D&C 9:8). Mormon documents on the rod give no hint of an external, mechanical operation.

Heber C. Kimball's journal notes his staff in contexts of solemn prayer. In Nauvoo, after the Martyrdom, "he went home and used the rod. I got a witness Elder Richards would live—that we would overcome our enemies."\footnote{144} One cannot be sure, but Kimball's entries suggest more than yes—no questions. In Washington, three weeks before the Martyrdom, Heber detailed the most solemn priesthood prayer, the comfort he received, and then he added: "I inquired by the rod. It was said my family was well, that my wife would come to me in the east, and that Congress would not do anything for us."\footnote{145} A similar procedure recurs in the Kimball journal, 25 January 1845, in solving a mosaic of personal concerns:

The same evening I sat down in my house in the presence of my wife and inquired of the Lord by the rod as follows: If we should finish the temple—it was verily, yes. That my sins were forgiven and that I should overcome and get my appointment of my inheritance while in this probation. And that the temple committee were not enemies to the Twelve Apostles.\footnote{146}

Another complex answer came in the Utah period as the method is tersely noted: "In the evening it was told me by the Lord—rod—that
Congress of the United States would reject the Saints and would not admit us as a state government, and force their officers on us by their power." 147

Jesus' miracles sometimes involved physical aids, but faith was always the basis of God's blessings. Although Paul and Joseph Smith sent handkerchiefs as signs for successful healing, this was exceptional for both prophets. 148 The same thing is true of the Kimball rod authorized by the Prophet; it was used in special cases without establishing a Churchwide pattern. Here is a rod for answer to prayer, matching the context and symbolism of the 1829 directive to Oliver Cowdery. Continued use of the divining rod by any individual Mormon has little bearing on the meaning of Cowdery's gift in section 8. He and Joseph Smith were the parties to an understanding of its meaning, and no line of evidence establishes their use of a rod for material treasure on meeting in 1829. Thus their 1835 change of "the rod of nature" to "the gift of Aaron," apparently came from a desire to make a distinction between Oliver's gift and the divining rod. It also clarified a context present from the beginning. Moreover, actual practice is the check on verbal analysis, and Hyde's use of the rod apparently comes from Cowdery, while Kimball's periodic use traces to the Prophet. In the 1829 "gift of the rod," the original and continuing emphasis was on God's "gift" rather than the "rod," though the latter continued as a sign before God in occasional religious practice.

BEYOND ENVIRONMENT

Religion, science, and magic all have the same broad goal—explaining reality and controlling it. So if the young Joseph Smith crossed borders, would he necessarily lose credibility? He did for biographer Fawn Brodie, who portrayed an early schemer of "cunning and deception" who later put on a religious costume and played his new role with "a highly compensated but nevertheless very real sincerity." 149 One major problem with this theory is that Joseph's immediate family, wife, and major employers knew him in both eras and saw an equally sincere youth in the pre-Mormon period. For instance, Josiah Stowell, the main proprietor of the Spanish treasure dig, was quoted on the 1827 background of the Book of Mormon: "He never staggered at the foundation [of] the work, for he knew too much concerning it." 150 Stowell also specifically reviewed the transition years from 1824 to 1830 and was quoted in a simple testimonial
of the young Joseph Smith: "He has been acquainted with him six years and he never knew anything of him but what was right—also know him to be a seer and a prophet."\textsuperscript{151}

Fresh investigations of folk magic have made Joseph's dabblings in money digging more respectable, but at the possible cost of misinterpretation. Descriptive history is highly tolerant of most cultures and world views. Thus it is easy to place occult practices under the umbrella of religion, adopting a rationalization broader than Joseph Smith's. Community rumor in the Howe affidavits does not reflect Joseph's limited admissions in the 1825 notes on testimony, where the youth used "frequently" of divining lost objects but "occasionally" of treasure seeking, reinforced by "had always rather declined having anything to do with this business," which is the orientation of his own history and that of his mother.\textsuperscript{152} Will the open-mindedness of analysts of treasure digging suggest scenes broader than Joseph's realities? His later negative judgments on such searching correlate with the tone of the earliest trial notes and therefore suggest limited involvement. Thus the historian should be cautious about assuming that the later religious years continued a practice about which young Joseph had misgivings, evidently because of his religious experiences.

Abstract definitions separate religion and magic only partially and with great difficulty. Yet Joseph Smith sources show that the restored Church made important choices at several religious crossroads. One is Joseph's education from self-seeking to God-seeking. He was under condemnation in most of his accounts of first viewing the plates; his mother, Oliver Cowdery, and Joseph Knight all give the reason as covetousness, hoping to acquire some of the ancient objects for the semi-altruistic goal of enriching his family. The period of training that followed is summarized in the artless narrative of the Prophet's first autobiography:

For now I had been tempted of the adversary and sought the plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandment that I should have an eye single to the glory of God. Therefore I was chastened and sought diligently to obtain the plates and obtained them not until I was twenty one years of age.\textsuperscript{153}

One informed popularizer defines magic as the "technique of harnessing the secret powers of nature and seeking to influence events for one's own purpose."\textsuperscript{154} Most occult money digging did fit such a goal. Water witching is practiced today by hundreds who use it
merely as a mechanistic method.\textsuperscript{155} Formerly, supernatural treasure guardians were often appeased, which added ritual to money digging but not a religious purpose. On the other hand, Joseph Smith's revelations from the first insisted that all religious service and ceremony was exclusively for God's purposes. So there was a deep doctrinal tension between the published ideals of the new religion and any paranormal search for enrichment by individual Mormons. In Utah, Brigham Young acknowledged supernatural forces in some New York money digging. But he took the position of Mormon documents from the beginning—that seeking buried treasure was not the business of Latter-day Saints devoted to lives of eternal significance.\textsuperscript{156}

Several other basics of theology prevented the restored Church from approving magical practices and put individual Mormons in an inconsistent position if there was continuation of the occult.\textsuperscript{157} With other major religions, Mormonism holds deep convictions on the sovereignty of God, which traditional magic weakly acknowledges, if at all. Thus invincible procedures are designed to control supernatural forces in standard situations, not bend to the will of a higher power. The pattern of prayer in Gethsemane is not generally found in magical handbooks. But the revelations of the restored Church promised answers to prayer in accordance with God's will, not man's dictation. Thus David Aune, who has conceptual problems in separating religion and magic, finds a central difference when magic deviates from majority religion in methods and "when the goals sought are virtually guaranteed through the management of supernatural powers." In more concise terms, this is the contrast "between manipulative magic and supplicative religion."\textsuperscript{158} As discussed, the Prophet came to Salem, Massachusetts, in search of treasure and was told to wait for the "due time" of the Lord. Since his revelation there flatly said wealth would come later, it ruled out the power of any incantation or charm, had one been available to the Prophet. Thus D&C 111 required patient humility and did not fit a magical context of allowing a skilled practitioner to force an immediate result.

On a functional level, magic tends to work with objects and words by themselves, not inner spirituality or moral worthiness of the petitioner. As Aune observes, ancient pagan religions tended to do the same. While classical handbooks of magic mention patterns of worthiness, their amulets, elaborate ritual, and standard formulas monotonously stress the mechanical. Jesus insisted on the general principle of faith as a condition of signs, so scholars who treat his
healing words as ritual patterns are avoiding the real point of why miracles occurred. 159 Likewise, Hugh Nibley notes the similarity of the Book of Mormon Liahona and the little-known practice of arrow divination with the comment: “Religion becomes magic when the power by which things operate is transferred from God to the things themselves.” 160 Something of a reverse process was evidently at work as Joseph Smith adapted the seer stone of his environment to the intensely spiritual work of translating the ancient American plates.

There is another striking difference between the mature Joseph Smith and the mystic practitioner. After receiving the plates in late 1827, Joseph bore the burden of worldly survival and the production and publication of a major scripture among world religions. His life is well documented from that time, and all his visible goals were doctrinal and practical. In Ohio, he generated new scripture translations and revelations, shared in weekday instruction for the elders in theology and language, gave regular preaching at the center and in outlying areas. Joseph’s practical programs included securing lands for the Gathering, carrying out church businesses and publishing, and planning and building temples. These projects continued during the year of resettlement in Missouri, along with beginning a major history. And the Illinois crescendo left little time for anything else—constant public speaking, the temple, missionary supervision, the Gathering, evading false arrest, major family and social responsibilities, and management of economic, civic, and military affairs. To assume the Prophet had continued interest in treasure digging is to miss his intense devotion to restoring the ancient gospel and reestablishing Christ’s church and people. One flirtation with a Salem windfall means little in the light of overwhelming documentation in eternal concerns. If other Salem-like episodes were discovered, they would still be exceptions to Joseph Smith’s impressive record of working to capacity for family and God’s kingdom.

This is why the criticism of Brewster’s money digging during the Nauvoo period speaks clearly. Latter-day Saint spirituality ran in deep channels of prayer, public worship, and restored biblical ceremonies. Folk practices probably expressed religious strivings for some in their pre-Mormon period but were essentially confined to that time. And later temple ceremonies were given a thoroughly biblical and Christian content. Magic rituals and their paraphernalia were foreign to the new religion, perhaps not always suppressed on a private level, but clearly condemned when attempts were made to legitimate them as adjuncts to the faith.
In Joseph's lifetime, the Church acted against arts of divination, with initiative from local officers, evidently without consulting superiors. The two cases here were affirmed by leaders close enough to the Prophet to reflect his views. In 1841, Joseph's Apostle—cousin, George A. Smith, presided over the Staffordshire Conference and made a public report by calling on fellow Apostle Wilford Woodruff to explain the Church position:

The president then brought up the case of a Brother Moumford, who was holding the office of a priest, from whom fellowship had been withdrawn by the council of officers in consequence of his practicing fortune telling, magic, black art, etc., and called upon Elders Woodruff and Cordon to express their feelings upon the subject, when Elder Woodruff arose and spoke briefly upon the subject and informed the assembly that we had no such custom or practice in the Church, and that we should not fellowship any individual who practiced magic, fortune telling, black art, etc., for it was not of God. When it was moved and carried by the whole church that fellowship be withdrawn from Brother Moumford.\(^{161}\)

A clear summary of this action was then sent to Nauvoo and published in the *Times and Seasons* by Don Carlos Smith, unchallenged by his Prophet—brother.\(^{162}\) Another stand against occult practices was taken by Hyrum Smith in his Nauvoo role of Assistant President of the Church. A bishop's court had charged Benjamin Holt with "accusing certain persons of being witches or wizards and endeavoring to cure such as he said was bewitched, by art, and meddling with those things unlawfully." After the trial expanded the issues, Bishop David Evans ruled: "The decision of the court is that Brother Hoyt cease to call certain characters witches or wizards, and that he cease to work with the rod he calls a divining rod, and that he cease to burn a board or boards to heal the sick by art."\(^{163}\) The ruling was ratified when the case went to the High Council on appeal: "After investigation, President Hyrum Smith decided that Council confirm the decision of the bishop's court, which was voted by the Council unanimously."\(^{164}\)

There is consistency in disciplining those using rods and stones "by art" or "unlawfully," whereas limited religious uses of similar objects were not challenged. The general issue was sensibly discussed in print when the Prophet was nominal editor of the *Times and Seasons*. Gladden Bishop and others had claimed public revelation, raising the question of the difference between true and false prophecy. The result was a carefully reasoned editorial, "Try the
Spirits." It reviewed counterfeit prophecy and tongues, including the Kirtland Pentecostal extravagances that were corrected by Joseph Smith, a reminder that similar outward practices may have a godly or ungodly use. Indeed, the gift of tongues had special warnings attached to it. The editorial reasoned that false spirits could be detected by true inspiration, but outward tests were added: true revelation would not produce strange practices overawing others by outward display, by contortion of body or voice, by contradicting God's commands, or by competing with his appointed leadership.\(^{165}\)

Whereas the New Testament depicts inspired and uninspired expressions of the gift of tongues, the Old Testament emphasizes the tension between right and wrong use of prophecy. For instance, an accurate summary of Old Testament divination notes the "seership aspect of prophecy" as often misused: "The term could be used occasionally in a good sense, as we might speak of a prophet having clairvoyant gifts without thereby approving all forms of clairvoyance."\(^{166}\) So the whole Bible wrestles with the problem that a given external pattern may be approved by God at one time and not another. Thus it should pose no religious difficulty that Joseph's seer stone of his youth was later applied to the higher use of inspired translation of the Book of Mormon. There is even a claim that Joseph discovered the plates through the stone, though his own vision accounts do not hint at this, and in 1829 even scornful Uncle Jesse only knows "that the angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge."\(^{167}\) No doubt Joseph's fervent religious strivings were real, as he eloquently recounts them. This general unrest involved him to an unknown extent in money-digging ritual. Here it is easier to sketch a model than round it out in the absence of reliable data. Joseph was also involved in the forms of revival religion and then left them behind after visions came. Magical religion could serve the same function of inquiry, since the credibility of the answer is the real question for Joseph Smith. Early Pennsylvania German culture illustrates the marriage of piety and some magic, where spells and Christian prayers intermingle in trust that God can control supernatural forces.\(^{168}\) Such an environment tinted young Joseph Smith but did not change the unfailing devotional color of his early life. If Joseph Smith's early searches brought him to occult frontiers, his final answers were revelatory, biblical, and Christian. Some assume Joseph's lifetime involvement with stones used in his New York neighborhood for searching out riches or lost objects, but transformation is the core of Joseph's personality. Oliver Cowdery's
first revelations show the strictly religious use of the translation stone by 1829. Furthermore, a significant Nauvoo episode emphasizes its higher use.

In 1841, Wilford Woodruff along with the Twelve visited the Prophet. Joseph “unfolded” much and Wilford “had the privilege of seeing for the first time in my day the Urim and Thummim.”¹⁶⁹ That statement may not be technically true, since Brigham Young noted the same occasion and remembered that Joseph “explained to us the Urim and Thummim which he found with the plates” and afterward showed the “seer stone.”¹⁷⁰ Thus Joseph commented on both types of stones, but their common properties may have caused Wilford Woodruff to use the terms interchangeably. In Utah, President Woodruff must have had the same stone that the Twelve saw in Nauvoo, and he called it “the seer’s stone that Joseph Smith found by revelation some 30 feet under the earth, carried by him through life.”¹⁷¹ But this was not the double stone that came from Cumorah just under the surface, which Joseph said was returned to the angel. Concerning the Nauvoo visit of the Twelve, Brigham Young reported that Joseph “showed us his seer stone” and Brigham then explained: “He said that every man who lived on the earth was entitled to a seer stone, and should have one, but they are kept from them in consequence of their wickedness, and most of those who do find one make an evil use of it.”¹⁷² Here is the Prophet’s criticism of the treasure seekers of his environment, for him the most visible possessors of such stones. Moreover, his guarded disclosure to Apostles of seven years shows that the mature Joseph neither taught nor practiced treasure digging or they would have already been familiar with the stone and his views on it.

“Carried by him through life” was Wilford Woodruff’s phrase regarding Joseph and the stone, but “possessed by him through life” is the apparent intent of such language. The Urim and Thummim were the means of receiving most of the formal revelations until June 1829.¹⁷³ That was the time of completing the Book of Mormon, which was translated through the Urim and Thummim and also the seer stone. But no type of stone is involved in receiving revelation or translation after that. Orson Pratt watched the New Testament revision and wondered why the Book of Mormon procedure was not continued:

While this thought passed through the speaker’s mind, Joseph, as if he read his thoughts, looked up and explained that the Lord gave him the Urim and Thummim when he was inexperienced in the Spirit of inspiration. But now he had advanced so far that he understood the operations of that Spirit and did not need the assistance of that instrument.¹⁷⁴
The same logic would apply to the seer stone, which disappears from historical notice, apparently not operational in Joseph’s religious activities. The essence of the new religion was the inner experience of revelation, not its means, whether or not aided by objects like the stone.

“Religion” refers to inner strivings toward God, a definition applicable to the Prophet from youth to martyrdom. Yet strident critics deny this, charging that Joseph’s use of the seeking stone for translation involved the occult. But even before the Prophet outgrew the stone, he was applying it to higher spiritual goals after early experimentation with more worldly uses. According to Joseph’s mother, Oliver Cowdery, and his own accounts, his four-year tutorial at Cumorah instilled commitment and personal sacrifice in carrying out his translation assignment. The Prophet’s testimony asks for belief in his spiritual metamorphosis during years of preparation. Because Joseph himself was a new man, neither Bible nor stone was the same object it had been before. The early visions were the sure lights that guided the young traveler out of the dark forests of his culture. Believers in sudden salvation no doubt have trouble with this gradual and sometimes stumbling journey. Is the stone automatically superstition? That raises the question of defining religion by Christian and Jewish precedents. What is the Bible if not a record of the methods of God’s direction of men? One who considers that view will see these Joseph Smith issues in the revelation stones of the Old and New Testaments.

The last book of the New Testament was nearly the last written and divides its contents between a remarkable sequence of visions of the future and first-century revelations to the faithful. In the less symbolic contemporary part, the promise is made: “And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it” (Rev. 2:17). Commentators on this verse wrestle with the issue of religion versus cult. Out of many possible meanings, the trend is to see some sort of magic stone here—an amulet or charm to ward off evil, drawing power from a sacred name. The similarity with pagan practices is puzzling to many. The same problem exists in Old Testament analysis of the stones of the Urim and Thummim, for the concept of miraculous stones is avoided by many scholars who propose a drawing of yes—no lots with the two stones or their two faces. Although the lot can be biblical when combined with prayer to God, a more spiritual perception of the Urim and Thummim is available:
Actually, the combining of "dreams, Urim, and prophets" (1 Sam. 28:6) indicates that, even as the first and last terms denote revelations to the mind of the petitioner through a prophetic intermediary, so Urim denotes a correspondingly personal revelation, through the mind of that priestly intermediary who wore the shining stones of the breastpiece in Israel's sanctuary. . . . And the priestly oracles were not limited to yes—or—no answers . . . but provided detailed explanations (Judg. 1:1; 1 Sam. 10:22; 2 Sam. 5:23). Scripture condemns pagan, mechanical divination (Hos. 4:12). 176

In Revelation, John incorporates past religious symbols into his message. Thus the most internally consistent interpretation of the "white stone" combines with the book's assurance that the faithful will become "kings and priests" to the Most High (Rev. 1:6). These eternal priests will be in tune with God's will, like the High Priest with the breastplate of shining stones and the Urim. In Hebrew that term means "light," corresponding to the "white" stone of John's Revelation. This correlation should be obvious, but Joseph Smith is virtually alone in confidence that John sees the redeemed as full High Priests: "Then the white stone mentioned in Rev. 2:17 is the Urim and Thummim, whereby all things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms, even all kingdoms, will be made known." 177 As for genuine religion, Joseph Smith perceived the stone of John's vision not as a stone of chance but as a conduit of enlightenment and a reward of worthiness of character.

In leaving money digging behind, Joseph Smith also outdistanced the magical milieu of his teens. This fact should warn the careful scholar against making too much of the supernatural charms that were apparently held by the Smiths. Hyrum Smith's descendants possess what Pearson Corbett called three "emblematic parchments." 178 In purpose, they somewhat resemble Jewish phylacteries, which were worn in prayer and contained verses reminding the wearer of Jehovah's covenant promises. These family documents contain Old Testament quotes of prayer and promise, together with cryptic symbols designed to ward off evil and enemies. 179 But what does possession prove? Were they inherited by Hyrum, given to him from the outside, or even owned by him? If they were his, did he keep them as curiosities or use them—and if so, at what points in his life? Until such questions are answered, the objects merely illustrate the occult environment around the Smiths before Mormonism.

And no more than this can be made of the so-called Jupiter talisman, supposedly in possession of Joseph Smith at Carthage.
The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching

Mention of this first surfaced in 1937 when Charles Bidamon, who had been reared by Emma, listed items for sale that supposedly came from Joseph Smith. One was listed as "a silver pocket piece which was in the Prophet's pocket at the time of his assassination." Wilford Wood, a collector of Mormon memorabilia, purchased it in 1938 and received Bidamon's certificate that the Prophet possessed it when murdered. But Charles Bidamon was born twenty years after the Martyrdom; he claimed Emma as his source and said that "she prized this piece very highly on account of its being one of the Prophet's intimate possessions." One might wonder what is sales talk and what is history sixty years after Emma's death, particularly when one of her own sons should have retained the coin if it meant that much to their father.

Nor does the Jupiter talisman clear the next historical hurdle. James W. Woods was Joseph Smith's "principal lawyer" at the end. He went to Carthage with him, at Joseph's request went to Nauvoo the morning of the Martyrdom, and rode back to Carthage the next day to help recover the bodies. Later he gave detailed memories, copying "a receipt from Joe Smith's wife of the articles I found upon the person of Joe Smith." It was dated a week after the murder and signed by Emma, obviously at a time when she could begin to handle practical details. But the lawyer evidently collected the Prophet's personal effects the day after the Martyrdom. Emma signed for "one hundred and thirty-five dollars and fifty cents in gold and silver," along with the Prophet's gold ring and a half dozen other pocket items. But this detailed inventory names no item like the Bidamon talisman. The charm was distinct from money—it was an inch-and-a-half in diameter and covered with symbols and a prayer on one side and a square of sixteen Hebrew characters on the other.

To some, the talisman shows that the Nauvoo leader was tainted by traditional magic. But the Jupiter piece does not survive cross-examination any better than the Hyrum Smith family parchments. Joseph's possession of the talisman at any point of his life cannot be proved, nor can the talisman's meaning to him be explained, if he used it. On one side, the square of Jewish letters is bordered by several Hebrew words for the divine "Father." The other face has mystical symbols and an unpolished Latin sentence, "confermo O Deus potentissimus," apparently intended to mean, "Strengthen [me], Almighty God." Basic studies in both languages gave the Prophet the ability to recognize these Hebrew or Latin devotional terms. If he ever favored the coin, it could be for its divine names and the prayer alone.
The answer in history is so often limited by the structuring of the question. Current concentration on the environment of folk belief may lighten one corner and throw strange shadows elsewhere. Joseph Smith is best served by analyzing "environments" in order to determine the mixture of backgrounds that affected him. Some historians comfortably accept all allegations of money digging/magic on a general impression that where there is smoke there must be fire. Others insist on quality control—conclusions based on rejecting community hearsay and admitting evidence that is closely firsthand and free from intense bias. On this standard, only sporadic and temporary money digging appears. Even if it was proved authentic, the 1831 Martin Harris letter to William W. Phelps might reveal more about Harris's frame of thinking than what Joseph Smith said to him. Cultural parallels certainly help to formulate questions about the young prophet, but answers about his religious experiences must come primarily from him.

Joseph Smith's total environment juts higher than folk religion. His self-portrait is the youth with Bible, testing each church by scriptural specifications. This was also the dominating force in his family background and in his religious culture. The revival movement of Joseph Smith's area highlights rural Americans who were unchurched and considering some type of commitment. This can be somewhat quantified by the astounding number of biblical restorationists among the first Mormon converts. They combine the characteristics of Bible literalism, intellectuality, and spiritual witness. Their vital inner life appears in similar intimations and dreams about renewal of God's work. Since Joseph Smith is both head and part of this cultural stream, such powerful social and spiritual forces are clearly paramount for him. But divining for treasure is transitory in his life, just as money digging/magic is rare in the autobiographies of the early converts of New England, New York, and Ohio. Although generally written later, these recollections are outpourings of naive candor, revitalizing the main concerns of pre-Mormon life.

Seeking true religion is thus Joseph Smith's strongest background influence, and his considerable family history sources reinforce this conclusion. Grandfather Solomon Mack was a principled and energetic enterpriser, too busy for religion until poor health gave him time to reflect and be converted at the end of his life. Grandfather Asael Smith was a religious dissenter who deeply believed in God's universal salvation, held strong restorationist views, and insisted that true religion must meet the tests of "scripture and
reason.” ¹⁸⁷ Father Joseph Smith followed this tradition, and his mature years were punctuated by symbolic dreams of being religiously lost, finding solutions, and being promised more. ¹⁸⁸ Mother Lucy Mack Smith also fits this group of individualists. Receiving deep assurances through her private prayers, she first investigated Methodism and prayed for her husband’s soul when he resisted. In mid-life she affiliated with Presbyterianism, again without him. ¹⁸⁹ This family illustrates the climate of biblical searching, a more constant influence on young Joseph than patterns of folk magic. Lucy Mack Smith reacted to accusations by considering treasure rites incidental to the deep quest for religion that was their overriding family concern. Noting reports that the Smiths were preoccupied with “magic circles or soothsaying,” she bypassed the subject as trivial without affirming or denying: “We never during our lives suffered one important interest to swallow up every other obligation.” Although the quote often stops there in negative literature, Lucy’s next sentence completed her thought that their time was mainly used in religious seeking: “But whilst we worked with our hands we endeavored to remember the service of and the welfare of our souls.” ¹⁹⁰

Joseph’s autobiographies and Smith histories create a map. His historical terrain is not as important as his route through it. Whatever his trails of investigation, there was a consistently religious destination. In addition to being biased and exaggerated, the neighborhood affidavits address the wrong question. Young Joseph’s observable activities could be trivial, but his inner development is the real issue. In reviewing his youth and mature mission in Nauvoo, he insisted, “You never knew my heart.” ¹⁹¹ Only he and a few near him could speak on that subject. His mother watched his private life and pictured a religious quest: “For Joseph was less inclined to the study of books than any child we had but much more given to reflection and deep study.” ¹⁹² Likewise, his father compressed Joseph’s youth in a sentence, and the search for God was the controlling theme: “Thou hast sought to know his ways, and from thy childhood thou hast meditated much upon the great things of his law.” This father’s blessing also alludes to stunning answers, as do Joseph’s own vision accounts. ¹⁹³ The divine responses matched the quality of the young Prophet’s pursuit of truth. Indeed, driving inquiry is a core characteristic of his whole life.

Joseph Smith early produced a full review of his youthful searches leading to the First Vision, an intimate sharing of three years
of reading scriptures, questioning religionists, and thinking deeply about contradictions between the Bible and the available faiths: "At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously impressed with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul." Something far deeper was going on spiritually for him even in the years where evidence shows some involvement with money digging.

Conversion and progression are the themes of Joseph's early vision accounts, and the first was embedded in the 1830 statement of beliefs. In his 1834 answer to the Hurlbut-Howe affidavits, Joseph protested that he had already conceded human error before his enemies loudly tried to expose it: "But as the 'Articles and Covenants' of this Church are plain on this particular point, I do not deem it important to proceed further." In original usage, "Articles and Covenants" was the title given to what is now section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The First Vision appears there in guarded language, beginning a three-stage sequence. First, a synonym for revealing is used: "It was truly manifested unto this first elder, that he had received a remission of his sins" (D&C 20:5). This is clearly the 1820 appearance of the Father and the Son, since two of the four First Vision accounts give forgiveness as a main message, and Joseph notes no other revelation on this subject in this period. Following this divine communication, Joseph "was entangled again in the vanities of the world, but after truly repenting, God ministered unto him by an holy angel," who brought the Book of Mormon. So, "the vanities of this world" touched young Joseph between 1820 and 1827; for the time before the angel entrusted the plates to Joseph was also a probationary period.

There is a rough and biased definition of what Joseph probably meant by admitting "vanities of the world" in his 1830 statement on Church doctrine. It comes in the Palmyra Reflector series on the "Gold Bible" in early 1831. The paper specialized in broad satire, and its editor was an aggressive lawyer named Abner Cole. The thorough-going rationalism of his editorials left little room for religious experience; moreover, he started to print pirated Book of Mormon extracts before its publication but angrily backed off when Joseph Smith threatened to sue. Philosophically and personally, he seems motivated to gather the worst on the Smiths. Yet his 1831 exposure is actually more favorable than the 1833 affidavits, which should rouse suspicion of those who know the mob psychology of a time when political campaigns and public testimonials were intensely
partisan. As earlier noted, the 1833 statements described some Smith family money digging, but the most visible charges added laziness and lying, the last perhaps a raw judgment on Smith claims of the supernatural. Cole’s *Reflector* series mentioned no laziness and lying but heaped terse scorn on the family for their poverty, lack of education, lack of church affiliation, and superstitious money digging, which is so harshly attacked that exaggeration is obvious. 199 Since Cole mentioned contacting neighbors, his 1831 accusations probably include all their community could seriously say against Joseph Smith, who is basically vindicated here in his contention that his enemies could show no serious moral wrong in his youth.

Neither the Prophet’s 1830 review of the Restoration (D&C 20:1–13) or the 1834 answer to Howe’s affidavits came in a vacuum. Because each answered implicit or explicit accusations, Joseph Smith’s public statements on his youth essentially label seeking treasure as part of a way of life that he had long left behind. In judging the Prophet’s consistency, definition is demanded. The Stowell dig of 1825 and the 1826 trial involve supernatural finding with the aid of a stone. No evidence shows that the Mormon leader returned to such a procedure after beginning translation of the ancient plates in 1827. Indeed, there is but one known attempt to gain treasure afterward. But this 1836 Salem trip started with no occult method—instead with inside information quite like current attempts to find sunken gold by historical inquiry. 200 Moreover, Joseph’s eastern journey had a double purpose, for it was a major step in Church refinancing, especially through the Kirtland Bank. And even the Salem revelation is practical in the sense of associating future riches with future converts in the gathering from there—and by implication from everywhere.

No document from Joseph Smith shows a continuity of New York divining practices, including Oliver Cowdery’s revelation that originally spoke of “the gift of working with the rod” (D&C 8). That message promised knowledge of gospel truths, not locations of earthly hoards. Nor would these be the real topic in the questionable Missouri revelation to Hyrum Smith on “a great treasure in the earth.” It clearly claims to be a migration revelation, and in these Joseph Smith consistently followed Moses’ statements of the exodus—inheritance theme. Thus the purported message to Hyrum would restate the reward of the first migration command in New York, promising “the riches of the earth” (D&C 38:39), but these
were specifically "greater riches, even a land of promise" (D&C 38:18). Although this newly discovered Missouri revelation is historically suspect, the important conclusion here is that *treasure* has been simplistically used without facing the distinct Joseph Smith applications. In his specific uses of earthly *treasure* and its synonyms, the meaning of "hidden hoard" is the rare exception. Otherwise, Joseph Smith applies Old Testament language in three main meanings: (1) the resources of the land of promise, following the assurance to faithful Israel that the Lord's "good treasure" would be poured upon them "in the fruit of thy ground" (Deut. 28:11–12); (2) general personal prosperity of individuals, assured mainly in special blessings that reiterate the promises to the tribe of Joseph such as "the precious things of the earth and fulness thereof" (Deut. 33:16); (3) restoration of ancient scriptures through discovery or revelation, using Moses' phrase to Zebulun and Issachar literally or metaphorically—"treasures hid in the sand" (Deut. 33:19). Thus Joseph Smith's treasure definitions almost totally serve the deep Restoration concepts to which he gave his energies in manhood.

The fullest scriptural summary of Joseph Smith's process of development came shortly after the organization of the Church:

> Behold, thou wast called and chosen to write the Book of Mormon, and to my ministry. And I have lifted thee up out of thine afflictions and have counseled thee, that thou has been delivered from all thine enemies, and thou hast been delivered from the powers of Satan and from darkness! Nevertheless, thou art not excusable in thy transgressions—nevertheless, go thy way and sin no more. Magnify thine office.
>
>(D&C 24:1–3)

The overwhelming theme of Joseph Smith's life from this time is steady devotion to his calling, culminating in the decision to face martyrdom for the safety of his people. His inner thoughts and goals are spelled out in recorded prayers, extensive journals, a hundred detailed discourses, blessings given by him and to him, and the forthright words of his own revelations. These show mature spiritual purposes that reduce any treasure searching to a transitory exploring function for the Prophet's life. Joseph Smith's prophetic years tower above the past, as do those of Paul or Moses. Preoccupation with the early surroundings of such men is a barrier to understanding what they became.
The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching

NOTES

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1Joseph Smith, Jr., to Josiah Stowell, 18 June 1825, Canandaigua, N.Y. For a convenient transcription, see page 399 of this issue of *Brigham Young University Studies* or see *Church News*, 12 May 1985, 10. Unless otherwise noted, all documents cited are held by the Library—Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives. Historical quotations in this article are occasionally corrected in spelling or clarified through capitalization, punctuation, or writing out abbreviations. Glenn Rowe and Steven Sorenson of the LDS Church Archives assisted in locating *Far West*, Mo., postmarks. For helpful criticism, I am indebted to colleagues Ron Esplin, Edward Geary, and Dean Jessee. I also express thanks to Ron Walker for sharing Vermont research and to my assistant Barbara Jo Ryting for careful source checking.

2Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps, 23 October 1830, Palmyra, N.Y. For a convenient transcription, see page 403 of this issue of *BYU Studies* or see *Church News*, 28 April 1985, 6.


4Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," *BYU Studies* 10 (Spring 1970): 302. This article featured William Smith's recollections on the real values of the family and his refutation of the 1835 Palmyra affidavits. Although he was born in 1811 and perhaps knew little of Joseph’s Pennsylvania life, William is still an important witness to the incidental nature of treasure activity of the Smiths as he became an observant teenager. The specifics of family history remain a critical control on the use of general cultural patterns in attempting to explain Joseph Smith.

5For the Cowdery trial summary, see *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835), 202 (commenting on events before getting the plates from the hill); reprinted in Francis W. Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ in America*, 3d. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1960), 1:105.

6*Christian Advocate* (Salt Lake City), January 1886. For the various accounts of the 1826 trial and a copy of the constable's bill, see Marvin S. Hill, "Joseph Smith and the 1826 Trial: New Evidence and New Difficulties," *BYU Studies* 12 (Winter 1972): 223–33. Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ*, 2:359, conveniently prints two trial accounts, including W. D. Purple's statement that he "was invited to take notes of the trial, which I did" (Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ*, 2:364). What seem to be Purple's "notes" surfaced in Salt Lake City through a niece of the trial judge and are quoted here in the version of Episcopal Bishop Daniel Tuttle, who precised his "exact copy" by indicating that "Miss Pearsall tore the leaves out of the record found in her father's [uncle’s] house and brought them to me" (*Christian Advocate*, January 1886). The same document was published by Tuttle in a religious encyclopedia; reproduced in Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ*, 2:360–62. See also n. 30.

7Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Liverpool: Orson Pratt, 1853), 92; compare 106, which identifies the Urim and Thummim as that "which Joseph termed a key." The last term, applied to the pre-1827 period, suggests the reference quoted in the text refers to the seer stone. Joseph’s refutations are discussed in this section of the paper, whereas his mother’s most direct comment appears in the last section. The Harris interview appears in *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (1859): 163–70 and is reproduced in Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ*, 2:373–83. A related early document is Isaac Hale’s affidavit regarding the Stowell treasure dig. The affidavit appeared in the *Susquehanna Register*, 1 May 1834, before E. D. Howe’s publication. Isaac Hale’s quotation of the revelation to Martin Harris (DeC3) shows his mind at work—accurate in general information but placing details in an unfavorable light.

8For background, see Max H. Parkin, *Conflict at Kirtland: A Study of the Nature and Causes of External and Internal Conflicts of the Mormons in Ohio between 1830 and 1838* (Salt Lake City: Max H. Parkin, 1966), 120–28. Spelling of Hurlbut’s name conforms to the Painesville (Ohio) *Telegraph*, vital records, and later documents from him, though consistency is lacking.

9Joseph Smith, Jr., Diary, 28 January 1834, cited in Dean C. Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984), 26–27. This entry is retrospective; compare the Kirtland Council Minute Book, 18 March 1833: “Ordination of Doctor Hurlbut by the hand of Sidney Rigdon to be an Elder.”

10Kirtland Council Minute Book, 3 June (this excommunication date entered after 18 March), 21 and 23 June 1833, LDS Church Archives. See also Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1902–32), 1:354–55. These volumes have primary value as being dictated or approved by Joseph Smith until 1838, and after that official value as being compiled from good sources by his associates.

11Statement of E. D. Howe, 8 April 1885, Painesville, Ohio, Chicago Historical Society.

"To the Public," Painesville Telegraph, 31 January 1834.

First Presidency to the Brethren in Christ Jesus Scattered from the Land of Their Inheritance, 22 January 1834, Kirtland, Ohio, Letter Book 1, p. 81, LDS Church Archives; also cited in History of the Church, 2:247.

The Evening and the Morning Star 2 (April 1834): 150. Paraphrasing the non-Mormon committee’s goal for Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery thought their work was incomplete until they did similar investigation on Hurbut “to expose his character, and hold him up to the view of the community in the true light which his crimes merit.”

Joseph Smith “To the Elders of the Church of the Latter Day Saints,” Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 2 (December 1835): 228.


E. D. Howe, Mormonism Unveiled (Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834), with prefatory “Advertisement” dated October 1834. For the spelling of this title, compare Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language (New York: S. Converse, 1828), under “veil” and “vail.” Webster preferred the latter as more obviously indicating the Latin sound.

Painesville Telegraph, 28 November 1834.

Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 1 (December 1834): 42. See also the other obvious reference to Howe’s book on the same page. Speaking of Mormon detractors, Cowdery noted: “They have been giving in large sheets their own opinions of the incorrectness of our system, and attested volumes of our lives and characters.” The latter phrase noticed the affidavits, while “large sheets” was used in the sense of “large books,” with no other connotations at that date than Howe’s 290 page work. For this archaic usage, see the 1828 edition of Webster, An American Dictionary: “5. Sheets, plu: a book or pamphlet.”

Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery, Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 1 (December 1834): 40; also cited in Jessee, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 336–37.

In the King James New Testament, conversation generally translates anastrophë, a term profiled accurately as “way of life, conduct, behavior” in its uses there (F. Wilbur Gingrich, Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965]). Compare Paul’s “conversation” as his former life as a Pharisee (Gal. 1:13) and Peter’s advice to wives to win over husbands for the gospel by “conversation,” not talk (1 Pet. 3:1).

Uncertainty is used without sexual context here. In the 1828 edition of Webster, An American Dictionary, there was a neutral sense of “not pure.” In the two synonymous phrases quoted here, it corresponds to the previous adjective uncircumspect.

Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reappraised,” 288–89, lists stereotyped repetitions on these three themes in nine of the fifteen affidavits from the Palmyra–Manchester area.


Compare the social emphasis of the Nauvoo reviews of his youth by the Prophet. His “foolish errors” included “mingling with all kinds of society” (Times and Seasons 3 (1 April 1842): 749). For the edited manuscript, see Jessee, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 202. Joseph’s clarification note in the first person rules out serious sins and explains: “I was guilty of levity, and sometimes associated with jovial company, etc., not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been” (ibid., 666).

Cowdery’s first installment contemplated a narrative ‘until the time when the Church was driven from Jackson Co., Mo’ (Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 1 October 1834): 13. Yet the series ended where it had begun, at the outset of Book of Mormon translation. Since it closed with an extended answer to the affidavits, that was obviously one major purpose of the whole history.

Ibid. 1 (December 1834): 42.

Ibid. 2 (October 1835): 201; also cited in Kirkh, New Witness for Christ, 1:105. Cowdery’s final installment is printed in full here.

Compare the text quote at note 6 for the summary of the Joseph Smith testimony, the whole taking up about 200 words in the best transcript. If young Joseph was on the witness stand a moderate time (40 minutes), the surviving abstract would be about five percent of the total testimony, a selection probably not designed to be favorable to him. Furthermore, in the questioning about the narrow legal issues, his broader religious experiences were probably not even mentioned.

Ibid.

*Times and Seasons* 4 (1 December 1842): 32.


Brewster admits that he and his father did money digging at Kirtland but plays a rhetorical game in claiming the "weak brethren" of the *Times and Seasons* editorial included Joseph Smith, Sr., who supposedly induced him to dig for treasure. But the editorial speaks of those around Brewster who had been disciplined "by the Church," not at all true of the Prophet's father. In Brewster's view, the elder Smith persuaded the Brewster family to engage in money digging. On that side is the more frequent mention of the elder Smith than young Joseph in the Howe affidavits on the subject. Supposedly assisting Joseph Smith, Sr., in the persuading was Alva Beaman, perhaps the reason Brewster adds "others of high standing," since Beaman was president of the Kirtland elders quorum. Beaman is associated with money digging in New York by some source (see the Martin Harris interview with Joel Tiffany, *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 [1859]: 164; also cited in Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ*, 2:377). But Brewster's unsupported accusations are unsatisfactory. His claim on the blessing might be based on the treasure language appearing in a small percentage of the blessings given by the elder Smith, though the method of gaining the riches of the earth is not clear. For instance, the Wilford Woodruff blessing says that an angel will "show thee the treasures of the earth" (Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1983], 1:143, entry of 15 April 1837). Since Father Smith uses vivid blessing language, a careful reader is not sure how much literalism was intended either for angelic appearance or for treasure underground. Other blessings show that Father Smith could use such language in the sense of earth's resources, as he did 2 May 1836 for Lyman Leonard: "Riches shall flow unto thee. The great men of the earth shall bring thee treasures" (William Harris, *Mormonism Portrayed: Its Errors and Aburdities Exposed and the Spirit and Designs of Its Authors Made Manifast* [Warsaw, Ill.: Sharp and Gamble, 1841], 26). All these questions are peripheral here to the study of Joseph Smith, Jr.

Kirtland High Council Minutes, 20 November 1837; summary in *History of the Church*, 2:525–26. See also the earlier minutes of 30 October 1837, where the issue is whether the Brewster vision of Moroni was from God or Satan: "The Presidents John Smith and Joseph Smith, Sr., agreed with the council in this matter of faith, that it was a delusion, a trick of the devil. Brother Brewster spoke and said that as he had got so far out of the way, he would strive to get back as soon as possible." (Compare *History of the Church*, 2:520.)


For the shorter version, see Brewster, *Very Important to the Mormon Money Diggers*, 4. For Ebeneezer Robinson's longer version, see "Items of Personal History of the Editor," *The Return*, July 1889. These detailed recollections are generally based on skeletal facts but are written up to prove Robinson's theory that Joseph Smith had become a fallen prophet.

*Salem Gazette*, 30 September 1836.

Ibid., 29 July 1836: "The old Crowninshield Wharf, that former center and heart of business, and now almost dilapidated and useless slip, is certainly and forthwith to be rebuilt."


Lucy Smith, preliminary manuscript, rephrased in *Biographical Sketches*, 50.

"Census," *Salem Gazette*, 30 September 1836.

Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 24 August 1836, Boston, Mass., cited in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 3 (October 1836): 391.

Oliver wrote to his brother Warren Cowdery while shipboard on Long Island Sound on 4 August 1836, cited in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2 (September 1836): 373. The date was printed as 3 August but was corrected to 4 August in the following letter (Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 24 August 1836, 3:386), which also described taking the train from Providence to Boston early the next day.

Robinson, "Items of Personal History," *The Return*, July 1891.

In 1841, Erastus Snow was called to Salem by Hyrum Smith and given a copy of the Salem revelation on the "many people in this city" the Lord would gather. The story of his rich harvest is told in Andrew Karl Larson, *Erastus Snow* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1971), 67-74. For Nathaniel Ashby's conversion and Nauvoo home, see ibid., 80-82, 751. For newspaper references to Mormon conversions, see Donald Q. Cannon, "Joseph Smith in Salem," *Studies in Scripture, Volume One, The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Robert L. Miller and Kent P. Jackson (Sandy, Utah: Randall Book Co., 1984), 436.

Ebenezer Robinson's memoirs indicate that when he moved to Missouri in 1837, he had begun to doubt Joseph Smith. After the Martyrdom, he followed Sidney Rigdon for a time and was baptized into the Whittmerite church after David Whitmer's death in 1888. He closed his Salem sketch with "regret," since he portrayed short-term failure and had no belief in the positive results of the trip (Robinson, *Items of Personal History*, *The Return*, July 1891).

Brewster, *Very Important to the Mormon Money Diggers*, 4. Brewster's full sentence is the first quote of this section of the paper.

"Items of Personal History," *The Return, July 1891*. 54

Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 19 August 1836, Salem, Mass. No original can be located today, though the letter was described and copied by Joseph Smith III in 1879, *The Saints' Herald*, 26:257; also cited in Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 350.

*Essex Register*, 25 August 1836, closing by observing, "they had been for a week or two in the city."

Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 24 August 1836, 3:391.

*Boston Daily Times*, 24 August 1836.

Compare the 1817 language of Daniel Webster about "two tenements . . . under the same roof " (Oxford English Dictionary [1933], 11:185).

The composite picture is drawn from Cowdery's * Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* letters, Brigham Young's memoirs, Salem newspapers (compare Cannon, "Joseph Smith in Salem," 436), and the *Boston Daily Times*, 24 and 26 August 1836. See also *History of the Church*, 2:463-66. 55

See the minutes of the 6 April conference in * Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate 3* (April 1837): 488: "The nature of this debt had been changed, and was now a merchant debt." Compare the Corrill quote, n. 61.

Isolating 1836 New York debts needs further work, but two cases are quite clear. Winthrop Eaton is listed as a merchant on Water Street (near Wall Street) at the time of the Prophet's visit to Manhattan (Longworth's American Almanac, New York Register, and City Directory [New York: Thomas Longworth, 1836]). He sued through attorneys in Ohio for the amount of an 11 October 1836 note of $1143.01 plus $1200 for "money lent and on an account stated" as of 1 May 1837. Since an amount of this size would normally be negotiated in person, probably the Prophet or cosigner Oliver Cowdery called on this businessman in New York, and the note given a month after return may have related to delivery of goods then (Gauga County Court of Common Pleas, Book U, 277-78). Another evidence of New York City negotiation is the note of 12 October 1836 from Joseph Smith to the firm of Bailey, Keeler, and Rensin, in the amount of $1804.94 (located in LDS Church Archives). They were listed as New York dry goods merchants in the previously mentioned directory. The firm of Smith, Rigdon, and Cowdery is indicated in other Common Pleas cases in 1837, and the LDS Church Archives has a Smith—Rigdon ledger with entries from September 1836 through mid-1837. Although his figures seem extravagant, seceder John Corrill gives the sequence of building the temple (dedicated April 1836) and then trying the "mercantile business" to cover the construction deficit, going into debt for goods "in New York and elsewhere" (A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints [St. Louis: John Corrill, 1839], 26-27). A list of Ohio debts survived, apparently made in connection with Joseph Smith's 1842 bankruptcy application, probably about doubled then from interest. About half of approximately $33,000 owed was due to New York businesses, with most of the rest due to firms in Buffalo (cited in Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946], 201). Some accounts, like those of Eaton and the Bailey firm discussed before, probably go back to the summer of 1836 and are relevant to the New York visit. See also Warren Cowdery's editorial indicating credit buying at this period. Speaking of "one year ago," he reviewed the economy: "A great amount of merchandise was purchased on credit, and sold in this town during the summer, fall, and winter past" (* Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate 3* [June 1837]: 521).

Church member Ira Ames and seceder Cyrus Smalling both give the sequence of establishing credit with Buffalo merchants and on their recommendation extending it to New York suppliers. Both start these events in the spring of 1836 and speak of Hyrum Smith's and Oliver Cowdery's going to New York on store business (see the Ira Ames journal and also the 1841 letter of Cyrus Smalling in E. G. Lee, *The Mormons, or, Knastery Exposed* [Philadelphia: E. G. Lee, 1841], 12-13). Yet the trip with Joseph in July-August is the only known eastern trip for Hyrum at this time, so these references may really reflect the New York—Salem journey. Compare Brigham Young's 1852 reference to the Prophet's store-
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"Joseph goes to New York and buys 20,000 dollars worth of goods, comes into Kirtland and commences to trade" (Journal of Discourses (Liverpool: F. D. and S. W. Richards, 1854), 1:215). This seems an 1836 recollection, since the Prophet's only other New York trip was 1832, when he accompanied Newel K. Whitney, who selected goods then for his own store. (Statements of Ira Ames and Brigham Young are in Parkin, Conflict at Kirtland, 291–95.)

For the main sequence, see Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 4 and 24 August 1836. They left Kirtland 25 July, arrived in New York 30 July, left New York 4 August, arrived in Salem area 5 August, left Salem about 21 August (as discussed previously in this article), and were in Boston until at least 24 August, according to Boston Times articles and the 24 August 1836 Oliver Cowdery letter.

Joseph Smith's early History of the Church notes his return to Kirtland "some time in the month of September" (2:466). It also notes the first bank organization (2:467), which was redone 2 January 1837 as a business organization without a bank charter (2:470–73). The "constitution" adopted 2 November was printed on a single sheet in December 1836.

Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 4 August 1836, 2:375; this corrected date is in Oliver Cowdery to Warren Cowdery, 24 August 1836, 3:386.

History of the Church, 2:467–68.

Cowdery's New York Letter (4 August 1836) mentions "Draper, Underwood." Longworth's . . . City Directory for 1836 lists the former as "Draper, Toppan, Longacre & Co., engravers, 1 Wall." It lists the Underwood firm as "Underwood, Bald & Spencer, engravers, 14 Wall." The name of the latter firm is on the Kirtland bank notes: "Underwood Bald Spencer & Hufty N. York & Philad." (for photographs of Kirtland notes, see Milton V. Backman, Jr., The Heavenly Restound (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 316.)

The surviving stock ledger is held by the Chicago Historical Society but is available on microfilm at the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. Accounts of Sidney Rigdon, Jared Carter, and Isaac Bishop are opened 18 October 1836, within the first five pages of the book. The purchase of the safe is documented 16 October 1836 (Marvin S. Hill, C. Keith Roolker, and Larry T. Wimmer, "The Kirtland Economy Revisited," BYU Studies 17 [Summer 1977]: 462). The note to New Yorker Winthrop Eaton was made 11 October 1836, and its language is apparently quoted as made payable "at the Kirtland Safety Society Bank" (see n. 61).

History of the Church, 3:37 (22 May 1838). At the prophet's death, Willard Richards had compiled Joseph's history to late 1838 (see Dean C. Jesse, "The Writing of Joseph Smith's History," BYU Studies 9 [Summer 1971]: 441, 466).

Far West Record, 6 April 1838, LDS Church Archives; also in Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., Far West Record (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 156. Compare History of the Church, 3:13–14. The Kirtland Council Minute Book notes Robinson's appointment on 17 September 1837 as "general clerk and recorder of the whole Church"; see also History of the Church, 2:513.

Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 354.

The Scripory Book of Joseph Smith, Jr., 22 May 1838, 45.

Joseph Smith was not necessarily the source for Robinson's view of treasure, since there was common speculation on mounds. Compare Alphonso Wetmore, Gazetteer of the State of Missouri (St. Louis: C. Keenle, 1837), 254: "The mounds are no other than the tombs of their great men."

The quoted phrase is attributed to Joseph Smith in the "Scripory Book," 19 May 1838, 43. Varied recollections have in common Joseph Smith's view of an ancient altar or structure, not a treasure site. These recollections are conveniently gathered in John Wittorf, Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A., no. 113 (15 April 1969). Henene Pikale there is the adopted Polynesian name of Henry Bigler.

Zion's Camp journals and recollections indicate that Joseph considered the mounds burial places, which he verified by digging a foot in the Zelph mound and finding a skeleton and the arrowhead that evidently caused the death. History of the Church, 2:79, is dependent on Heber C. Kimball's journal; other reporters say little more. These include Levi Hancock, Reuben McBride, George A. Smith, and Wilford Woodruff. (Compare Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 4 June 1834, mentioning the "mounds" and finding only "skulls and their bones" [cited in Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 324].)

The Scripory Book, 45–46, the basis for History of the Church, 3:37–38. On 28 May, Robinson notes meeting Hyrum and Joseph, who "were going to seek locations in the north." The surveying quote of the text pertains to Hyrum's return trip 21 June. These dates and activities agree with Harrison Burgess, who wrote "1837" but described unique activities of 1838: "We arrived at Far West the 27th of May, 1837. The next day I went to Daviess County with Joseph and Hyrum Smith and some others to look out a new location. I remained there nine days and helped survey the site for a city." (Sketch of a Well-Spent Life, Laboris in the Vineyard (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884), 68.) The Hyrum Smith diary held by Eldred Smith has the isolated notation, "Arrived in the Far West, May the 29th, 1838." However, Robinson's daily record is more likely to be precise.
William Swartzell, *Mormonism Explored, Being a Journal of a Residence in Missouri from the 28th of May to the 20th of August, 1838* (Pekin, Ohio: William Swartzell, 1840). His preface reiterates that the pamphlet is "properly my private journal."*38* Compare nn. 38 and 51.

9See Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 359, for a photograph of the letter and address side of the single page document.

9Postmarks noted obviously lag behind the letters itemized here. The first is held by the Henry E. Huntington Library, and the postmark is reproduced with their permission: Oliver Cowdery to his brothers Warren and Lyman, 24 February 1838. The rest are from letters held by the LDS Church Archives and appear with their cooperation: Oliver Cowdery to his brothers Warren and Lyman, 2 June 1838; Thomas B. Marsh to Wilford Woodruff, undated but written on an Elder's Journal prospectus of 30 April 1838 and reproduced in the July issue of that year; Thomas B. Marsh to Wilford Woodruff, 14 July 1838; Joseph Smith, Jr. and Sidney Rigdon to Stephen Post, 17 September 1838; W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 1 May 1839. For a photocopy of Oliver Cowdery to his brothers, 2 June 1838, see Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 266 (the postmark page).

8I have examined about eight hand-delivered letters of Joseph Smith's and all but two have the state or county as part of the address. The suspected Hofmann letters are not figured in this comparison. Posted letters are indicated by postage entered or marks, and all the available Joseph Smith letters in this category have the state written, which would seem obviously necessary for a mailed item.


8For instance, see the list of Missouri post offices in Wetmore's 1837 *Gazetteer of the State of Missouri*. Searches at the LDS Genealogical Society and the State Historical Society of Missouri have likewise failed to verify a "Plattesgrove" or "Plattisgrove."

84The following twenty-six examples of great show Joseph Smith's long habitual pattern of spelling great correctly. His handwritten diary entries or letters all appear in Jesse's *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* in sequence: 1832 history (2); 27 October 1833 diary (2); 21 December 1833 diary; letters of 3 March 1831, 15 October 1832 (3), 18 August 1833 (6), 2 June 1835, 20 July 1835, 12 November 1838, 4 April 1839 (4), 9 November 1839, 18 August 1842. There are also a half dozen more forms of the same adjective or adverb that do not vary from the above pattern. The only known example of great is in the 4 April 1839 letter and correctly refers to the prison bars, with the confusion of great a few lines above, showing the Prophet's observable tendency of writing the as combination in the adjective great. Compare n. 85.

85For a photo of the original, see Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 359. A transcription of misspellings is made here for evaluation of authenticity. For instance, det has not been found elsewhere in Joseph Smith holographs, though dept appears once in his journal on 23 September 1835, showing the Prophet's apparent awareness of the correct pattern of spelling debt. (For the transcription and photograph of the journal entry, see Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 58, 188. Research assistant Deborah Browning Dixon located this example and a number of other stylistic variations from the problem revelation.)

86*History of the Church*, 3:31–32 is the summary of several sources showing that as Hyrum nears Missouri his brother was determined to work out a secure and adequate allowance for the First Presidency. Contemporary documents show that Joseph Smith was convinced that the growing church needed full-time administrators who were not to be subject to the past or future debts of the organization. Compare the 15 May 1838 entry of the Far West Record, indicating High Council authorization to pay the First Presidency a fair wage for their services. See also the note in Cannon and Cook, eds., *Far West Record*, 187–88, quoting the "Scriptory Book." Robinson's quoted view that this action was rescinded is not supported by further minutes or John Corrill's report that "it was thought best by the High Council to give them some certain amount each year which would be sufficient to support them" (*Brief History of the Church*, 29).

87For John Whitmer on the mood of the January conference, see *The Book of John Whitmer*, chap. 1; also cited in F. Mark McKierman and Roger D. Launius, eds., *An Early Latter Day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer* (Independence, Mo.: Herald House Publishers, 1990), 32. Even after section 38 on moving, Whitmer notes "divisions" and anger against the Prophet for requiring so much (*Book of John Whitmer*, chap. 1; also cited in McKierman and Launius, eds., *Book of John Whitmer*, 34–35). Thus, the context of section 38 is the stress of resettlement on a new land, not treasure digging. It is doubtful if Ohio was ever considered the permanent "land of promise," since earlier that fall the Missouri missionaries were told that Zion would be built "on the borders by the Lamanites" (D&C 28:9).

88Far West Record, 24 August 1831; also in Cannon and Cook, eds., *Far West Record*, 14. I have quoted verse 16, which was likely read by Hyrum: "Thy Zion Smith gave an exhortation, spoke of Zion and the gathering of the Saints into her, etc. and read a part of the 102 Psalm."
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89"Scriptory Book" 53: "Revelation Given Jan. 12, 1838," LDS Church Archives; also cited in Lyndon W. Cook, The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith (Provo, Utah: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1981), 332. As noted in the preceding discussion, "a land flowing with milk and honey" is the theme stated in Ex. 3:17, reiterated a dozen times in the Pentateuch, and restated in the first major revelation on the modern LDS exodus west from New York (DeC 38:18–19).

90 Eulogies Journal 1 (July 1838): 33–34. The piece has a dateline: "Far West, May, 1838."

91Orarion Delivered by Mr. S. Rigdon on the 4th of July, 1838 (Far West: Journal Office, 1838), 8; reprinted in BYU Studies 14 (Summer 1974): 523.

92Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, p. 9. LDS Church Archives; also transcribed in full in Buddy Youngreen, ed., Program, Joseph Smith, Sr. Family Reunion (N.p.: Buddy Youngreen, 1972), prefatory section. A summary is given in Joseph's diary on the date of the blessing, 18 December 1833; see Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 24.

93This phrase appears in the blessings of Samuel H. Smith and Frederick G. Williams, Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, pp. 10, 13, in contexts of Old Testament blessing language. The quoted phrase is slightly modified in the blessings of W. W. Phelps and Hyrum Smith, quoted in the following discussion in the article.


95 Ibid.

96Joseph Smith's blessing of William W. Phelps, 22 September 1835, Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, pp. 14–15. W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery were aiding in translating the Book of Abraham at this time (Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 60, and History of the Church, 2:286).

97 Joseph Smith's blessing of Oliver Cowdery, 18 December 1833, Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, p. 12. Several phrases from the blessing are quoted in the summary in Joseph Smith's diary of this date (see Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 23–24).

98 Joseph Smith's blessing of William W. Phelps, 22 September 1835.

99 Joseph Smith's blessing of Hyrum Smith, 18 December 1833, Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, p. 11, summarized in Joseph Smith's diary of that date (see Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 24).

100 First Presidency members were assigned to compile "the items of the doctrine" of the Church from the standard works, including "the revelations which have been given to the Church up to this date or shall be, until such arrangement is made" (Kirtland High Council Minute Book, 24 September 1834; also cited in History of the Church, 2:165). This resolution might suggest the correction of former wording through revelation. Present section 8 was section 34 in the Kirtland Doctrine and Covenants, issued in August 1835 with a 17 February 1835 preface signed by the Prophet, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams, the revision committee.

101 A Book of Commandments for the Government of the Church of Christ (Zion, Mo.: W. W. Phelps and Co., 1835), 73.

102 Barnes Frisbie, The History of Middletown, Vermont (Rutland, Vt.: Turtle and Co., 1867), 64. This is the earliest printing of a history that was reissued in Abbie Maria Hemenway, The Vermont Historical Gazetteer (Burlington, Vt.: A. M. Hemenway, 1871), vol. 3, with the quote here on 819. An abridgment of these accounts is found in H. P. Smith and W. S. Rann, History of Rutland County, Vermont (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason and Co., 1886), 65–60. This history also contains specific dates in Frisbie's life (889–90), showing how distant he was from the Wood affair. He was born in 1815 and married in 1843 after a late education and reading for law, resulting in bar admission in 1842. Thus his start of collecting serious history was about forty years after the discredited Woods had migrated. In fact, Frisbie's preface to his 1867 History mentions "the labor and attention I have given the matter during the last twelve years" (3), indicating serious collecting about 1855. (Compare n. 105 and the text there for Frisbie's development of a Mormon connection after 1860.)

103 Frisbie, History of Middletown, Vermont, 46; also cited in Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, 3:812.

104 "The Rodsmen," The Vermont American (Middlebury, Vt.), 7 May 1828.

105 Frisbie, History of Middletown, Vermont, 43; Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, 3:810. Frisbie explains here that most survivors knew only of the Wood movement and their local activities, evidently making his Mormon connection the speculation of a few people long after the fact.

106 Laban Clark to Barnes Frisbie, 30 January 1867, Middletown, Conn., cited in Frisbie, History of Middletown, Vermont, 57; also cited in Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, 3:816.

107 Like some who write today on Mormon origins, Frisbie features dark hints rather than definite information. For instance, the counterfeiter allegedly started his money digging at Wells, obviously an attempt to include William Cowdery, since he lived there. Yet this conclusion is based on no personal knowledge, only the "opinion of some with whom I have conversed" (Frisbie, History of Middletown, Vermont, 46; also cited in Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, 3:812).
Similar vagueness characterizes a neighboring attempt to bolster Frisbie’s evidence. Two years after Frisbie’s Middletown history, Hiland Paul and Robert Parks published their History of Wells, Vermont, for the First Century after Its Settlement (1869; reprint, N.p.: Wells Historical Society, 1979), 80–82. These two authors had no direct knowledge of the “Wood scrape” of 1800–01 since Parks was born about 1812 and Paul in 1836. Frisbie-like, they review their “considerable pains” to verify William Cowdery’s involvement with the Wood movement, concluding: “We find that Winchell did reside with Mr. Cowdery in the winter of 1799 and 1800.” Their chief basis for Cowdery’s involvement—and that of some other townsmen—is the quoted letter of Nancy F. Glass, writing from Illinois and giving recollections of late childhood: “I was born in the year ’90, and it must have been when I was 10 or 11 years old when the rodsmen were there; I was about 11 when we moved away from there.” She had specific memories of men coming to her house with their “witch hazel” pointers. Yet she had nothing certain to say about the Cowdery family, summing correctly that Oliver could not have been involved because he was not born, and continuing: “If any one was engaged in it, it must have been the old gentleman; I rather think it was, but won’t be positive.” Such lack of evidence is propped up by two more names: “As to Mr. Cowdery being connected with the rodsman, as stated by Judge Frisbie, we had it verified by Joseph Parks and Mrs. Charles Gar[d]ner of Middletown.” After the authors’ enthusiasm for the above nonevidence, one would expect direct quotes if any actual recollection of William Cowdery existed, but the above names are given without a hint as to whether they personally knew or simply repeated community rumor. At the time of the Wood affair, Joseph Parks was sixteen (Paul and Parks, History of Wells, 129) and Mrs. Gardner was ten (1850 U.S. Census, Rutland Co., Middletown Township, 343). Thus the History of Wells adds nothing historically to Frisbie’s weak inference on the supposed involvement of William Cowdery with the Woods. These early Vermont books strain at connections with intense hostility, Paul and Parks introducing William Cowdery by mentioning “the wonderful revelations that many dupes seek to follow” (79). The Woods moved away from Middletown after being discredited. But William Cowdery stayed in Middletown, where births of his children appear on the town records in 1802, 1804, 1806, and 1809 (Grace E. Pember Wood, A History of the Town of Wells, Vermont [N.p.: G. Wood, 1955], 86 ff.).

Another example of early community convictions is found in the statement of Ohio Lawyer S. S. Osborn to A. B. Deming, Naked Truths about Mormonism 1 (January 1888): 2. Osborn visited Middletown, Vt., in 1871, boarding with Hezekiah Haynes, who mentioned “the Wood scrape, and that Mormonism undoubtedly originated in that town.” Although Haynes was about twenty when the Wood movement flourished, neither visitor Osborn nor town historian Frisbie quotes any specific recollection from him.

Frisbie, History of Middletown, Vermont, 62; Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, 3:819. Town records of Tunbridge, Vt., locate the elder Smith there at his marriage and the births of three children through 1803. He also appears there on the 1800 census and in the land records in these years. Lucy Smith’s Biographical Sketches verifies the above information with independent family tradition, and she details her husband’s regular activities in Tunbridge and the adjoining towns in this period.

For Joseph Smith, see History of the Church, 1:32: “On the 5th day of April, 1829, Oliver Cowdery came to my house, until which time I had never seen him.” See note in History of the Church for the corrections in printed dates, which conform to the manuscript written during the Prophet’s life. For Oliver Cowdery, see Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 1 (October 1834): 14: “Near the time of the setting of the sun, Sabbath evening, April 5, 1829, my natural eyes for the first time beheld this brother.”

Frisbie, History of Middletown, Vermont, 62; Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, 3:819. Frisbie’s sources may have carelessly assumed that his counterfeiter was the same as the “vagabond fortune-teller by the name of Walters, who then resided in the town of Sodus . . . the constant companion and bosom friend of these money digging impostors” (Palmyra Reflector, 28 February 1831; also cited in Kirkham, New Witness for Christ, 1:291–92). Soon after this local publication, the story was exported by Palmyra anti-Mormons (Painesville, Ohio, Telegraph, 22 March 1831). However, the New York magician does not meet the conditions. Walters has the wrong name, lives in the wrong town, and does not fit Frisbie’s contention that the man went to Ohio with the Mormons. Frisbie claimed that he relied on those “who knew him in both places” (Frisbie, History of Middletown, Vermont, 62; Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, 3:819). But “knew” for Frisbie includes “knew about” or rumored—his pattern is to name firsthand witnesses when he has them. There is no support for Frisbie’s quoted view that Winchell/Wingate accompanied the Mormons “from Palmyra to Ohio.” Again, candidates with these names do not fit the conditions required, including Edward Bradley Wingate, a Nauvoo Mormon who married Sidney Rigdon’s daughter Sarah. Although the 1850 New York Census indicates his birth in New Hampshire, his birthdate is 7 August 1820, two decades after the “Wood Scrape” (Charles E. L. Wingate, History of the Wingate Family [Exeter, N.H.: James D. P. Wingate, 1886], 164). His father, Francis, is not documented as a Mormon and was born 13 August 1784, making him too young for the experienced counterfeiter of Frisbie’s story (ibid., 162).
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12Cross, *Barnard-Owe District*, 38–39. For Oliver Cowdery’s birthday five years after the "Wood scrapes," see Mary Bryant Alverton Mehling, *Cowing-Cowder-Cowder-Cowder Genealogy* (N.p.: Frank Allaben Genealogical Co., 1905), 172. He also gave this chronology in his Mormon historical work.


14Ibid. Despite this caution, recent Joseph Smith books uncritically tend to assume that William Cowdery was a Wood disciple. In the future a related pitfall may be assuming that Mormons with Rutland County origins are committed to treasure-digging beliefs. That is too simplistic, since newspaper comments and literary satire suggest that a minority of Americans ever had faith in the paranormal search for buried wealth.


18Book of Commandments 7:3.

19The very similar phraseology of sections 6 and 8 is matched by their close connection in time. Meeting 5 April (see n. 109), Joseph and Oliver began translation 7 April and “continued for some time,” after which section 6 was given (History of the Church, 1:32–33). This was perhaps a week of work, 15 April or later for receiving section 6. Section 8 then followed “while continuing the work of translation during the month of April” (History of the Church, 1:36). Perhaps section 8 came about 21 April, but definitely within that month. Joseph’s comments on dating were first published in the *Times and Seasons* 3 (1842): 852, 853.

20A full concordance to all the Doctrines and Covenants shows that Joseph Smith used mystery in the consistent sense of a truth pertaining to salvation, often implying God’s premortal plan for man. This is also the earliest Christian use of the term.

21See n. 119.

22Book of Commandments 7:3, present D&C 8.

23Book of Commandments 7:4, also D&C 8:10–11 with slight changes. Compare n. 120.


26Compare n. 125.

27Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith, 17 June 1829, 60. Samuel Smith was then fifty-one, born 15 September 1777, according to Lucy Smith’s *Biographical Sketches*, 38. He died "about the second day of May, 1830" (Petition of creditor Samuel Partridge, 20 November 1833, Potsdam, N.Y., in Estate of Samuel Smith, File 504, St. Lawrence County, N.Y., Surrogate’s Court; photocopy at Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo).

28Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith, 17 June 1829.

29The scriptural source of this language is 2 Tim. 3:8: “Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses,” referring to the Egyptian magicians who opposed the miracles of Aaron’s rod with their rods (Ex. 7:10–12). Their names were also in common use in English literature.

30Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith, 17 June 1829. In addition to changing Joseph’s “angel of the Lord” to one of the devil, Jesse closes his letter quoting the scriptural doom of the “devil’s and his angels” and adding: “These are the angels that tell where to find gold books.”

31See the reprint of Reginald Scot’s 1584 *Discovery of Witchcraft* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 249, giving traditions on the formation of stones of “certeine proper vertues” through astral influence: “as appeareth by plan ye prooufe of India and Aethopia, where the snone being orient and meridionall, dooth more effectuallie shew his operation, procuring more pretious stones there to be ingendred, than in the countries that are occident or septentrionall.” The 1584 London edition continued to be reprinted in following centuries.

32Book of Commandments 7:4; also D&C 8:10–11 with slight changes.

33For the context of the quotation, see the text at n. 122.

34For the context of the quotation, see the text at n. 123.

35The “rod of God” appears in Ex. 4:20 and 17:9. It is described as Moses’ rod in Ex. 9:23, 10:13, 14:16, 17:5, and Num. 20:11. Examples of the formal “rod of Aaron” are in Exodus 7 and 8, and Numbers 17.

36See Gen. 49:10 and 2 Kgs. 4:29–37. Compare Homer’s regular practice of gathering the Greek assembly by the herald with the staff of authority from the king.
Blessing of 13 December 1833, Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, p. 12.

Orson Hyde to Parley P. Pratt, 22 November 1841, Alexandria, Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star 2 (January 1842): 135; also cited in History of the Church, 4:459.

Blessing of Oliver Cowdery to Orson Hyde, Kirtland Council Minute Book, 14 February 1835; also cited with modification in History of the Church, 2:190. Compare Hyde's 1840 vision of divine destructions preceding Israel's gathering: "The destroyer of the Gentiles is on his way" (Orson Hyde to Rabbi Solomon Hirschell, Times and Seasons 2 [October 1841]: 553; also cited in History of the Church, 4:376).


Solomon F. Kimball statement, unsigned, undated, LDS Church Archives; also cited in Robert J. Woodford, The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1:188–89. Solomon Kimball quotes Sarah Granger Kimball's statement, which he says she signed 21 June 1892. Sarah (1818–98) was prominent in Nauvoo; her husband was Heber C. Kimball's cousin.

Ibid. Solomon F. Kimball (1847–1920) was twenty when his mother died. She was Vilette Murray Kimball (1806–67), the sister was Helen Mar Whitney (1828–96) (Stanley B. Kimball, Heber C. Kimball [Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1981], 511).

Compare the view of Heber C. Kimball's biographer: "Unlike the cane, there are no family traditions regarding this unusual rod; it has completely disappeared. Perhaps it was an aid to guidance and revelation. There is no evidence that it was a divining stick or 'water witch,' popular at that time" (ibid., 248–49).


Ibid., 6 June 1844. Kimball's later autobiography added another detail of the answer, though not identifying it as through the rod in publication: "I inquired of the Lord what we should do, and he revealed to me that Congress had not got it in their hearts to do anything for us, and we were at liberty to go away" (Deseret News, 28 April 1858).


"H. C. Kimball's Memorandum," 21 January 1862, LDS Church Archives, pointed out to me by Stanley B. Kimball. "Lord rod" is written without punctuation above the place where I have inserted it, and the entry is intitled "HCK."


Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 85.

Martha L. Campbell to Joseph Smith "by the request of Brother Stowell," 19 December 1843, Elmina, N.Y., LDS Church Archives.

Johsh Stowell, Jr., to J. S. Fullmer, 17 February 1843, Elmina, N.Y., LDS Church Archives. The quote comes from the postscript that begins "I now write you for my father."

See nn. 5, 6, and the text for the 1826 trial. For later hints that the venture was questionable, see History of the Church, 1:17, and Lucy Smith, Biographical Sketches, 92. Compare n. 202.

Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 7.


See John S. Carter, Journal, 27 March 1833, indicating an elders' court trial of a member: "Having lost some property, went to a woman who professes the art of telling secrets by cards." The incident is noted with inexact date in Davis Bitton, Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1977), 62.


A book that sensationalizes this pattern without religious context is Morton Smith, Jesus the Magician (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). It is also structured by the form—critical assumption that the Gospels radically evolved. Since it represents a shifting method of scholarship, it is not a trustworthy study of Jesus nor a historically responsible base of comparison for Joseph Smith.

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162 George A. Smith to Don Carlos Smith, 29 March 1841, Burslem, England, Times and Seasons 2 (June 1841): 434. The Nauvoo paper reported action “for using magic, and telling fortunes, etc.,” and indicated that the member had been “disfellowshipped,” which was ratified at the conference “by unanimous vote.”

163 Nauvoo High Council Minutes, 11 March 1843, incorporating the Eleventh Ward bishop’s court minutes. The following redundant run-on of the quoted sentence was crossed out: “that of heating a board before the fire, to heal the sick by art.” The practice seems a form of empathetic magic, intended to influence the outcome of a person favorably as the board was warmed.

164 Ibid. The case is summarized in History of the Church, 5:311–12, including ratification of the bishop’s ruling that Hoyt “cease to work with the divining rod.” This narrative is dependent on High Council minutes, not the Prophet’s dictation.

165 “Try the Spirits,” Times and Seasons 3 (1 April 1842): 743–48; also cited in History of the Church, 4:571–81. Although the latter source is headed by “The Prophet’s Editorial,” this evidently understates John Taylor’s role. “Ed.” followed the article on its first publication, and Joseph Smith was then listed as the editor. However, John Taylor was managing editor, and in the monthly issues of this period those items signed “Joseph Smith” are of more certain authorship by the Prophet. In any event, John Taylor explained the official position of the Church under the Prophet’s general supervision. For the special cautions on tongues, see the related editorial, “Gift of the Holy Ghost,” Times and Seasons 3 (15 June 1842): 925–26; also History of the Church, 4:26–32. For a typical caution of Joseph Smith on tongues, see his Nauvoo Relief Society discourse, 28 April 1842. “You may speak in tongues for your own comfort, but I lay this down for a rule that if anything is taught by the gift of tongues, it is not to be received for doctrine” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., The Words of Joseph Smith [Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], 119).


167 See n. 125 for full quote and source. For Joseph Smith’s consistent narratives, see Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 6:7, 76–77, 202–6, 213–14. Compare Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Confirming Records of Moroni’s Coming,” Improvement Era 73 (September 1970): 4–8. There is presently a single source close to Joseph Smith’s early speaks of discovery of the record through the stone. It is the 1859 Martin Harris interview with spiritualist Joel Tiffany, who reported Harris saying: “It was by means of this stone he first discovered these plates.” But Harris is also quoted as saying that “Joseph did not dig for these plates,” adding, “an angel had appeared to him and told him it was God’s work.” C’Mornomism, No. II, Tiffany’s Monthly 5 (1859): 163–70; also cited in Kirkham, New Witness for Christ, 2:376–83. Harris later told an editor that Joseph Smith was “directed by an angel” to the hill Gosa State Register [Des Moines], 26 August 1870; also cited in Joseph Grant Stevenson, Stevenson Family History [Provo, Utah: J. G. Stevenson, 1953], 1:157. In the questioned letter of Harris to W. W. Phelps, 23 October 1830, Joseph Smith is quoted as telling Harris that he found the ancient record “with my stone.” Even if this document was authentic, it raises the problem of whether Joseph Smith was quoted correctly, since Harris is a secondary source on Joseph’s private experiences at the hill. And the above Tiffany interview has this same hearsay problem, even if Harris is quoted correctly. The Mormon source saying most about see stones is Joseph Knight, Sr., and though his opening narrative is not preserved, it reports that the Prophet knew where the plates were on the hill because of “the vision that he had of the place” (Dean Jesse, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” BYU Studies 17 (Autumn 1976): 31).


170 “History of Brigham Young,” 27 December 1841, Desert News, 10 March 1858; also cited in Elden Jay Watson, ed., Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1801–1844 (Salt Lake City: Elden Jay Watson, 1968), 112a. Brigham Young’s report of the Prophet’s distinction between the “interpreters” and the single “see stone” is found in numerous informed sources. For instance, Joseph Knight describes Joseph’s use of “his glass” before getting the plates at Cumorah, but at that time he received the additional object “the glasses or the Urim and Thummim” (Jesse, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection,” 31, 33). Describing early translation, the Prophet said, “The Lord had prepared spectroscopes for to read the book” (Jesse, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 8). In 1829 Uncle Jesse Smith sarcastically refers to “your brother’s spectacles” (Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith, 17 June 1829, 59).


For additional information regarding the headnotes of the Doctrine and Covenants, see individual headnotes for references to *History of the Church*. Section 1 was given later, and sections 2 and 12 report words of angels.

Orson Pratt, Discourse at Brigham City, 27 June 1874, Ogden (Utah) Journal, cited in *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 36 (11 August 1874): 498–99. Compare Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith to President John Taylor, *Desert News*, 23 November 1878, reporting Orson Pratt's 12 September discourse at Plano, Illinois; after mentioning "being present on several occasions" of Joseph's revelations, Orson "declared that sometimes Joseph used a seer stone when inquiring of the Lord and receiving revelation, but that he was so thoroughly endowed with the inspiration of the Almighty and the spirit of revelation that he oftener received them without any instrument or other means than the operation of the Spirit upon his mind." Compare David Whitmer's late recollection that Joseph said in early 1830 that the seer stone would no longer be used in revelation, though they would continue to "obtain the will of the Lord" through the Holy Ghost (*An Address to All Believers in Christ* [Richmond, Mo.: David Whitmer, 1887], 32).

Rev. 2:17, New King James Version, used for its literalism in word order. This and modern translations correctly describe the name as "on the stone." Rev. 4:1 is the beginning of intense symbolism, with the first three chapters quite direct instructions to the Asian churches.


William Clayton, Journal, 2 April 1843, cited in Ehat and Cook, eds., *Words of Joseph*, 169; with slight word changes this is D&C 130:10. For the indecision of Bible commentaries, see Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmann's, 1977), 99: "There are perhaps a dozen or more plausible interpretations of the 'white stone.'"

Pearson H. Corbett, *Hyrum Smith, Patriarch* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1963), 453. There is also a dagger with religious—magical associations. This is the name and the parchments with masonry is questioned.

Old Testament references include quotes from Aaron's blessing on Israel in Num. 6:25, 27. For a facsimile of one parchment, see the *Salt Lake Tribune*, 24 August 1985, B–1. The accompanying article contains irresponsible conclusions, including the implication that "Holiness to the Lord" necessitates a magical connection, since it is written around the borders of another Smith family parchment. But that phrase also has biblical prominence, written on the high priest's plate (Ex. 28:36, 39:20). And several of a restored Israel (Zec. 1:17).


Statement of Charles E. Bidamon, 5 January 1938, nearly at the end of microfilm roll 16 of the Wilford Wood collection at the LDS Church Archives. Bidamon identifies the "silver piece" sold and continues: 'This piece came to me through the relationship of my father, Major L. C. Bidamon, who married the Prophet Joseph Smith's widow, Emma Smith. I certify that I have many times heard her say, when being interviewed, and showing the piece, that it was in the Prophet's pocket when he was martyred at Carthage, Ill. Emma Smith Bidamon, the Prophet's widow, was my foster mother. She prised this piece very highly on account of its being one of the Prophet's intimate possessions. This item appears as 7-J-B-21 in LaMar C. Berrett, *The Wilford Wood Collection*, vol. 1 (Provo, Utah: Wilford C. Wood Foundation, 1972), 173. Charles Bidamon was fifteen when Emma died and made the above statement fifty-eight years later. Since there are many shifts of memory association, it is possible that Emma really said that Joseph prised the coin when they first met in Pennsylvania. There is a most serious problem with reconstructing Joseph Smith's viewpoint from a very late secondhand recollection without any verifying contemporary data from his life.

*History of the Church*, 6:612, states he was chief attorney. For his movements, see his review of the Martyrdom in *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 July 1844): 563–64.

J. W. Woods, "The Mormon Prophet," *Daily Democrat* (Ottumwa, Iowa), 10 May 1885; also in Edward H. Stiles, *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa* (Des Moines: Homestead Publishing Co., 1916), 271. The two copies are nearly identical, and the 1885 printing reads: "Received, Nauvoo, Illinois, July 2, 1844, of James W. Woods, one hundred and thirty-five dollars and fifty cents in gold and silver and receipt for shroud, one gold finger ring, one gold pen and pencil case, one penknife, one pair of tweezers, one silk and one leather purse, one small pocket wallet containing a note of John P. Green for $50, and a receipt of Heber C. Kimball for a note of hand on Ellen M. Saunders for one thousand dollars, as the property of Joseph Smith. Emma Smith.


As examples, see the conversational discussions in Leonard J. Arrington, Brigham Young: American Moses (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), and Breck England, The Life and Thought of Orion Pratt (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985). The attraction of Bible seekers to Mormonism is highlighted by the similar searches of these two men of different personalities. And theirs is the predominant story of the converts who became the first leaders under Joseph Smith, as well as the rank and file of that period who left conversion memoirs. For the pattern, see Orson Pratt’s 1859 reflections. Attendance at the major Protestant groups was unsatisfying: “I had heard their doctrines and had been earnestly urged by many to unite myself with them . . . but something whispered to me so as I remained, therefore, apart from all of them, praying continually in my heart that the Lord would show me the right way” (ibid., 19).


See Lucy Smith, Biographical Sketches, chaps. 14–18.

Ibid., chaps. 11, 13, 21. Compare Lucy’s words in the preliminary manuscript of chap. 11. Her sincere attempts to find spiritual satisfaction in organized churches were frustrated, so she concluded: “There is not on earth the religion which I seek. . . . The word of God shall be my guide to life and salvation, which I will endeavor to obtain if it is to be had by diligence in prayer.”

Ibid., in the context of the early years on the Manchester farm before narrating Joseph’s visions.

Thomas Bullock report of Joseph Smith’s afternoon discourse, 7 April 1844, cited in Ehat and Cook, eds., Words of Joseph, 355; also cited in History of the Church, 6:317.

Lucy Smith, preliminary manuscript; also cited in Biographical Sketches, 84.

Blessing of Joseph Smith, Sr., to Joseph Smith, Jr., Patriarchal Blessing, book, vol. 1, p. 3; also cited in Younggreen, Program, Joseph Smith, Sr. Family Reunion, “Joseph” section. Compare the sentence above the one quoted in the text: “The Lord thy God has called thee by name out of the heavens—thou hast heard his voice from on high from time to time, even in thy youth.”

Jessee, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 4; compare Lucy Mack Smith’s similar words in the text at n. 190.

Joseph Smith, Jr., to Oliver Cowdery, Latter-Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate, 1:40; also cited in Jessee, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 337.

Present section 20 appeared in the 1833 Book of Commandments as section 24, labelled: “The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ.” For a brief discussion of the title, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Organization Revelations,” Studia in Statuare: Vol. 1, The Doctrine and Covenants (Salt Lake City: Randall Book Co., 1984), 109–10. Book of Commandments 24:6–7, with slight change D&C 20:5–6. The Kirtland modifications are also autobiographical and intensify the descriptions of the Prophet’s repentance. All the major vision accounts emphasize the Prophet’s remorse before the Book of Mormon was first revealed in 1823. Yet section 20 reports a manifestation of forgiveness of sins before that. In the First Vision account of 1832, the Prophet wrote that the Lord declared the churches wrong—but he had first opened with personal assurance: “I saw the Lord, and he spake unto me saying, Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments” (Jessee, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 6). In a private 1835 conversation, the Prophet repeated similar words as part of the First Vision (Jessee, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 75).

For the full story, see Lucy Smith, Biographical Sketches, chap. 33, which correctly names the Reflector publisher as a former justice of the peace named Cole. “A. [Abner] Cole, Esq.” appears as business manager in the Reflector, 19 March 1831.

The “Gold Bible” series in the Reflector was an attempt to depart from its normal broad ridicule and give “a plain and unvarnished statement of facts” on the Smiths and the origins of the new religion (Reflector, 6 January 1831). Despite this profession, the editor set up false inconsistencies—for example, claiming that the story of an ancient spirit appearing to Joseph was necessarily different from the coming of an angel. Nearly all he said about Joseph Smith is on the theory that the Book of Mormon is a deception arising out of magical fanaticism. But beyond this, the editor criticizes the Prophet only for poor education and subnormal intelligence (Reflector, 1 February 1831). The latter point is obviously false to anyone who has studied Joseph Smith’s life. The articles from the Reflector are reprinted in Kirkham, New Witness for Christ, 1:283–95.


The exclamation mark after “darkness” is carried over from the first printing in 1833, Book of Commandments, sec. 25.
Joseph Smith's direct comments treated money digging as incidental, without going into detail. Admitting that he had been a "money digger," he simply said it was not "a very profitable job to him," referring to the brief Josiah Stowell employment (Elder's Journal 1 [July 1838]: 43; also cited in History of the Church, 3:29). The remark is in the continuation of the Prophet's first-person letter that began in the previous issue, November 1837. The other direct statement is similar: History of the Church, 1:16. In his history the Prophet clearly featured those early events that were relevant to what he became—in other words, what linked with his adult mission. By this standard, his cursory mention of treasure seeking is an index of how little he later valued that youthful experience.
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