

The Historians Corner

Edited by James B. Allen

“Turning Over Stones”—The Value of Primary Sources

The three items in this issue of *The Historians Corner* are all different subject matter, but their presentation as a group is connected with one central theme: the importance of going to original sources in our continual quest for historical knowledge.

A prominent historian once remarked that the historian's experience is something like that of an outdoorsman who loves hiking in the mountains but instead of just looking at the scenery, he turns over the stones. All sorts of new and interesting things suddenly emerge from under them. And so it is that as we ply through the little-used diaries, letters, and other papers of the past, a little time spent in examination, turning them over so to speak, often results in some unexpected and even exciting finds. What's more, these new discoveries are often more than just interesting curiosities, for sometimes even a small one adds important depth to our understanding of some past event.

Three cases in point. For many years Mormon scholars have been aware of the political Kingdom of God concept which characterized the thinking and planning of Mormon leaders over 100 years ago, but who has ever supposed that they went so far as to design a flag, or flags, for it? Michael Quinn has discovered three possible flags, and in the process, added a new phase to our knowledge of the Kingdom. In his description of the Stephen Post collection, Max Evans points out for us a rich field of research where many new stones may be turned. And David Williams, while doing research completely unconnected with Mormon history, discovered the

original of an interesting letter which throws important light on the background of anti-Mormon sentiment in the 1850s.

THE STEPHEN POST COLLECTION

Max J. Evans*

The Historical Department of the Church has received a collection of the papers of Stephen Post, an early member of the Church and a member and leader of a variety of schismatic groups. Post was born in New York state in 1810. He joined the Church in 1835 and moved to Kirtland, where he became a member of the second quorum of Seventy. Beginning almost immediately to engage in missionary work, he defended the Church and answered its critics. In 1837 it was said that "His defence [sic] of Mormanism [sic] we suppose is the best which can be made."¹ His first mission for the Church sent him to Michigan in 1839. His second call, beginning in 1844, was to Pennsylvania and New York.

Included in the collection are twelve volumes of journals, kept from the day of his baptism until his death in 1879. Most of the journal entries give an account of Post's missionary travels and his religious activities. Post was in Pennsylvania when the Prophet Joseph Smith was killed. The following is his account of learning of the martyrdom:

July Sun 7th [1844] . . . The Country is now filled with reports about the Mormon war[.] The general belief is that Joseph Smith is killed[.] the reports are rather contradictory & so I do not make up my mind on them, one thing is certain there has been a great excitement at Nauvoo. . . .

[July] 28 . . . I have now recieved confirmatory news by the "Nauvoo Neighbor" of the disturbance there[.] Joseph & Hyrum Smiths [sic] were murdered in Carthage Jail June 27 P.M. . . .

After the Prophet's death, Post continued his mission in the East, and apparently moved his family there. Although he was aware of the move West under the leadership of Brig-

*Brother Evans is supervisor of the processing section of the Church archives.

¹*The Christian Palladium*, 1 August 1837, p. 110.