

*Documents, 1 January–15 May 1844*  
Vol. 14 of the Documents series of the Joseph Smith Papers  
Edited by Alex D. Smith, Adam H. Petty,  
Jessica M. Nelson, and Spencer W. McBride  
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*Reviewed by Richard E. Bennett*

**H**aving grown up on a diet of Joseph Fielding Smith's *Essentials in Church History*, B. H. Roberts's *Comprehensive History of the Church*, and the six-volume *History of the Church*, which for me and so many others was once the gold standard for the study of Church history, I am convinced that the Joseph Smith Papers are a shaft of incredible new light, a welcomed revelation of sorts, a coming-out party to document Joseph Smith's life and ministry.

Superbly well-edited by a dedicated team of scholars, archivists, and editors employed by the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Papers strive to meet the highest national standards of documentary editing. They consist of two volumes of Histories (1832–47), three volumes of Smith's Journals from 1832 to 1844, seven volumes of his Revelations and Translations, and a single volume of the Administrative Records and Minutes of the Council of Fifty. The fifteen-volume Documents series, however, is the "core" of both the print and digital editions, presenting, with some exceptions, all of Joseph Smith's papers from July 1828 until his death in June 1844. Additional volumes of Smith's voluminous legal and financial transactions in digital format are forthcoming.

Edited by Alex D. Smith, Adam H. Petty, Jessica M. Nelson, and Spencer W. McBride, *Documents, Volume 14* is the penultimate offering in the fifteen-volume series of documents that Joseph Smith generated as prophet, president, and trustee of the Church; mayor and chief justice of Nauvoo, Illinois; lieutenant general of the Nauvoo Legion; and candidate for the presidency of the United States. This volume covers the tumultuous four-and-a-half-month period from January 1 to May 15, 1844, which ended just weeks before Smith's assassination and was a most challenging time for Smith and the ever-growing number of

Latter-day Saints in and around Nauvoo as discord and division erupted among themselves and mounting tensions developed between them and surrounding communities. These themes of growth and rising tension permeate the documents featured in this volume.

The contributions of the Joseph Smith Papers project are many, but I begin with their pedigree, or provenance. In so many ways, the Papers are a stunning archival achievement. Every document bears a “Source Note” explaining in detail its size, physical state, distinguishing properties, and current location, followed by a statement of provenance, or origin. Taken as a whole, the Papers are the latest and by far most definitive effort yet made to amalgamate into one archival register or calendar all of Joseph Smith’s extant material. They hearken back to some of Smith’s most trusted clerks and scribes, including Willard Richards, church historian from 1842 to 1854; Thomas Bullock, clerk from 1845 to 1865; William Clayton, scribe from 1842 to 1844; and other early recorders and transcriptionists. Andrew Jenson, who began working in the Church Historian’s Office in 1891 and who served as assistant Church historian from 1897 to 1941, spearheaded the production of an “inventory” of Joseph Smith’s documents circa 1904 and carefully documented continuous acquisitions in the years following.

As time passed, however, many more documents were found within the department itself, squirreled away in various lost files or basement corners, hidden in other collections, or accessioned in new acquisitions. Consequently, in 1973, the department published a much-enlarged inventory, or more precisely an archival register, entitled “The Joseph Smith Collection at the Church Historical Department.” Meanwhile, so many more source materials continued to surface that almost a decade later the Department felt compelled to produce an addendum entitled “Joseph Smith (Supplement), 1833–1844,” at which time it closed the collection to further acquisitions, confident, perhaps, that few, if any, more papers would come to light.

Such would not be the case. By 1974, Brigham Young University’s Special Collections of the Harold B. Lee Library had acquired the papers of Bishop Newel K. Whitney’s impressive private collection, which alone contains twenty-one original manuscripts of Joseph Smith’s revelations and a vast array of financial records.

The rise of the so-called “New Mormon History” movement was also a catalyst for new acquisitions. The appointment of Professor Leonard J. Arrington as Church historian in 1972 ushered in a new era of openness and discovery, the so-called “Camelot” years (albeit with some stunning

reversals along the way), when, like a breath of fresh air, the gates were opened, and new works and interpretations of Latter-day Saint history began to flourish as never before. Over time this contributed to the First Presidency's decisions to transfer from its secluded vaults to the Church Historical Department such remarkable collections as the William E. McLellin Journals and later, in 2010, the Council of Fifty Minutes, which contain many of Joseph Smith's documents essential to the integrity of the Papers project.

Other key individuals also played a part. Without the intrepid efforts of longtime Church archivist Dean Jessee, there quite simply would never have been the Joseph Smith Papers. Jessee's unflagging efforts at locating, identifying, arranging, verifying, classifying, and even publishing documents of the first Latter-day Saint Prophet were indispensable precursors to the current Papers project. Indeed, they almost should be named after him.<sup>1</sup>

To these points of provenance must be added another: the "age of Aquarius" in which the internet refuses to let sleeping dogs lie. Members and non-members alike crave transparency, ambiguities in our history notwithstanding, and balk at arcane barriers to discovery. Recent Church Historians and Assistant Church Historians—in particular Marlin K. Jensen, Steven E. Snow, LeGrand Curtis, Richard Turley Jr., and Kyle S. McKay—have played an integral role in acquiring new documents, improving access, encouraging research, and transforming a once-perceived fortress into a welcome center, while preserving the integrity of the Church History Department and its inspired mission.

A second contribution of the Papers is the impressive research that has gone into its production. While the Papers do not pretend to be a biography, the fact is no future biography of Joseph Smith, his family members, or closest associates—even his enemies—can ever be written without utilizing this treasure trove of material. Consonant with the lofty editorial standards of the multi-volume George Washington and James Madison Papers projects, *Documents, Volume 14* features a very helpful historical introduction, an essay on editorial methodology, a historical review of the period in question, the aforementioned source notes for each document, and the careful transcription of each document arranged chronologically. There are likewise an astonishing

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1. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989, 1992).

2,394 footnotes, all of which testify to the meticulous research and study that went into this work of almost 700 pages.

The final 197 pages consist of excellent reference material, including notes on multiple-entry documents, especially Smith's discourses; a chronology of important events; a thirteen-page geographical directory; a three-page essay on sources; a forty-two-page biographical directory of the 134 most prominent persons mentioned in the text; a thirty-six-page works-cited bibliography; nine pages showing corresponding sections of the Doctrine and Covenants; and, last but not least, a forty-page index.

The editors of *Documents, Volume 14* have gone to considerable lengths to include almost every currently known document of Smith's life in this time period. They consist of ninety-nine documents, the majority of which are letters, and of these, forty-five are incoming and seventeen outgoing. They include letters from Parley Pratt, Reuben Hedlock, John E. Page, and many others and cover a wide range of topics. There are also thirteen discourses, with multiple versions of the same; some scattered legal documents such as deeds; memorials and minutes of meetings; and an April 25 revelation. As might be expected, the great majority of them are located in the Church Historical Department in Salt Lake City, while six are housed in the Newel K. Whitney Collection at Brigham Young University. Others are located at the National Archives and Records Services in Washington, D.C.; the University of Chicago Library; Yale University's Beinecke Library; and the Hancock County, Illinois, Historical Society. At least two are copies of originals still held in private hands. Twelve documents are to be found only in published format in three newspapers: the Nauvoo *Times and Seasons*, the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, and Thomas Sharp's *Warsaw Signal*. The editors have also left us with the promise that future accessions will be digitized and made available on the Joseph Smith Papers website.

A fine example of the inclusivity of research in this volume is to compare it with its companion volume, *Administrative Records: Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846* (2016). Not only does *Documents, Volume 14* highlight and explain more fully Joseph Smith's revelation of April 25, 1844, but it also prints in their entirety Orson Hyde's two letters to Smith and the Council of Fifty, dated April 26 and 30, 1844, respectively (413–32), both of which are missing from the *Council of Fifty* volume. The same holds true with Almon W. Babbitt's May 5, 1844, letter. Anyone studying the Council of Fifty will therefore have to research both volumes.

A third winning feature of *Documents, Volume 14* is its efforts at authentication, especially in its presentation of so many of Joseph Smith's greatest Nauvoo discourses. In a careful effort to ensure accuracy, eschew forgeries, and to authenticate what he actually said, every known account made by his scribes and others who heard him speak and who recorded his messages is reproduced with exactness. Nowhere is this quality of comparison more manifest than in the several separate accounts of Smith's famous King Follett address, which he delivered outdoors near the yet-uncompleted Nauvoo Temple during a session of the general conference of the Church on April 7, 1844. In what I believe to be the crown jewel and price of admission of the entire fifteen-volume Document series, the editors provide us with all seven currently known accounts, forty pages of text, and 138 footnotes of explanatory material. Smith's sermonizing on the nature of God, the premortal council of the Gods, the pathways and patterns of divinity, the creation (or more precisely the "organization" of the earth), man and woman's eternality as uncreated intelligences, the state of children in the resurrection, and many more topics on that spring day is captured with the utmost care and precision. The result is that the Joseph Smith Papers, and this volume in particular, may be trusted and relied upon as the authoritative rendition of Joseph Smith's Nauvoo sermonizing.

All of which points to yet another major contribution of this volume: new insights and understandings. I can only wish this volume had been available before I published my most recent work, *Temples Rising: A Heritage of Sacrifice* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), in which I argued that Joseph Smith taught the necessity not only of baptism for the dead but also of other saving ordinances, specifically endowments for the dead. My argument was based more on implication rather than specific statement, but *Documents, Volume 14* clarifies the point: "It is not only necessary that you should be baptised for your dead, but you will have to go thro' *all the ordinances* for them, same as you have to save yourself."<sup>2</sup> And again: "Then you must not only be baptized for them but thoy [they] must receive the Holy Ghost by Proxy and be sealed by it unto the day of their redemption *as all the other ordinances by proxy.*"<sup>3</sup>

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2. "Discourse, 12 May 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock," in *Documents, Volume 14, 1 January–15 May 1844*, ed. Alex D. Smith and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2023), 483, emphasis added.

3. "Discourse, 12 May 1844, as Reported by Samuel W. Richards," in Smith, in *Documents, Volume 14*, 486, emphasis added.

Even after a lifetime of studying the life of Joseph Smith, after studying all the thirteen discourses in this volume, I am struck by how much he had to say so earnestly and insightfully about the resurrection, Christ's redemption of the dead, and the all-compelling need for proxy saving temple ordinances. "We have the greatest hope," he concluded in his King Follett address, "in relation to our dead of any people on earth."<sup>4</sup> And "the greatest responsibility that God has laid upon us [is] to seek after our dead."<sup>5</sup> I am confident that many others will likewise discover in these Papers new insights and a deeper appreciation for the teachings of Joseph Smith than ever before.

This amalgamation and sequential ordering of so many different documents dealing with diverse topics and personalities provide us with yet another critical benefit: perspective. Considering all the many complicated business and political dealings in which he was involved, it is a wonder that Joseph Smith had the time or energy to expand upon so many defining tenets of his theology. One day there is a summons, another day charges against one or another, then letter after letter, interspersed on occasion, like a welcomed respite, with one of his defining discourses. One senses more clearly than ever before the pulse of everyday living, the pressure of mounting Nauvoo tensions, and the crowded busyness of it all.

A final and enduring legacy of the Joseph Smith Papers is that of being a springboard to future exploration and research. *Documents, Volume 14* in particular whets the appetite for more careful research into such topics as Smith's scribes and clerks, who carried so much of the load while acting in his behalf; Apostle John E. Page's intellectual defense of the Latter-day Saint message; evolving emigration patterns from Great Britain to Nauvoo in 1844; the restless state of Kirtland, Ohio, in 1844; the origins and development of Lyman Wight's Texas colony; the rise of the Council of Fifty and Smith's pivotal role within it; and intriguingly, Joseph Smith's reliance almost solely on the Bible for his sermons and discourses and surprising avoidance of Book of Mormon theology. These are but a few topics that bear much more study.

These many contributions notwithstanding, this work has its share of shortcomings. It is not what is found *in* it but what is omitted *from* it that I find disturbing. For example, I am haunted by the fact that Joseph Smith's brother, Hyrum Smith, is a total nonpresence. His papers are

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4. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff," in Smith, in *Documents, Volume 14*, 340.

5. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock," in Smith, in *Documents, Volume 14*, 323.

entirely omitted. As Assistant President of the Church and Presiding Patriarch, Hyrum often acted as President of the Church in his brother's absence. Yet Hyrum is strangely silent, as if the editors entertained the forlorn hope that someone, someday, will fill in the cracks and publish his papers to the same rigorous editorial standards as found here.

Nor are there any papers or letters of Emma Smith, the “elect lady” (D&C 25:3) and Joseph Smith's first and leading wife. While granted the Papers are of Joseph and not Emma, one has to wonder to what extent she wrote on behalf of her husband and the Smith family. As with Hyrum, she and her writings are worth at least an essay of explanation and consideration. This is especially the case since Emma was at the center of so much of the growing turmoil, questioning, and distrust that came to permeate these closing months of her husband's life.

Of no less concern is distinguishing the Prophet from the scribe, the mind of the President from the views of his clerks. At least seven of the longest, most historically significant letters and editorials of Smith in the first half of 1844 were written by William W. Phelps, dominating sixty-five pages of text. Joseph's other clerks—William Clayton, Thomas Bullock, and Willard Richards—also wrote many pages of what is presented as Smith's own writings.

In the case of Phelps in particular, although ghost writing is a perfectly acceptable form of expression, especially for exceptionally busy leaders, one must ask: When was Phelps speaking for himself and when as Joseph? In Smith's letter to John C. Calhoun (17–26), *General Smith's Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States* (135–57), and his letter dated April 15, 1844, to Congressman Francis P. Blair (378–86), the editors admit that the probable writer is Phelps; however, “the extent of his role is unknown” (380). It is this unknown quality of origination, inspiration, and composition that demands an essay of explanation, a study of the voice, style, insight, and understanding of each of the principal scribes and clerks of Joseph Smith and to what extent they represented their prophet leader.

Further to omissions, why are so many studies of leading scholars not included? Although the editors explain that only works of “sound scholarship” and those that “distill several primary sources” that give “useful general context” are cited in explanatory footnotes (xxxvi), missing are such classics as P. A. M. Taylor's *Expectations Westward*; Donna (and Marvin) Hill's *Joseph Smith, the First Mormon*; Bruce Van Orden's 2018 *We'll Sing and We'll Shout: The Life and Times of W. W. Phelps*; and most disturbingly, Glen Leonard's *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise*. Though cited in the index, this remarkable work of Nauvoo



is barely referenced. I also seriously question why so few documents housed in the archives of the Community of Christ are included in this volume.

I conclude with my final and most weighty criticism: I have previously lamented the failure of the Joseph Smith Papers project to address fully Joseph Smith's initiation and secret practice of plural marriage, the gathering storm that undergirds this wrenching period of his life. I do so here again. Not that the topic is omitted. It is unavoidable when such letters and published accusations as those from Francis M. Higbee on January 10 (47–51) and Orasmus F. Bostwick's notice of April 9 (360–63) accusing Smith of polygamy are faithfully included. To the credit of the editors, they make clear the point that Joseph Smith was secretly practicing plural marriage well before 1842, that he had outlined the doctrine of plural marriage in a revelation that was recorded in 1843 (D&C 132) but given years earlier, and that Hyrum Smith eventually accepted the practice of plural marriage in May 1843, marrying two plural wives in August of that year.

What is conspicuously absent, however, is any comprehensive description, explanation, or listing of Joseph Smith's many plural wives or a full and decent explanation of the secrecy enjoined involving the practice, the proverbial elephant in the room. There are scattered references and admissions, yes, as shown above, but no careful analysis. The motto seems to be "Mention when necessary, but avoid elaboration."

To illustrate, pages 32–44 contain two letters from David S. Hollister and Dan Jones, both dated January 8, 1844, concerning the Church's ownership of the steamboat *Maid of Iowa*, its troubling financial condition, operations, and whereabouts. It is a very complete study with no fewer than thirteen pages and sixty-five helpful footnotes detailing every aspect of the history, economics, seasonal operations—even nomenclature—of steamboat travel on the Mississippi and of the management, legalities, financial setbacks, and controversies pertaining to this vessel in particular. One could ask for nothing more, please.

In contrast, the matter of Joseph Smith's guardianship of Maria and Sarah Lawrence, who were eventually secretly sealed to him in 1843 at the ages of 19 and 17, respectively, receives comparatively scant attention (112–14). According to Todd Compton's pathbreaking study, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, the Lawrence family was converted near Toronto, Canada, in August 1837 and moved to Nauvoo sometime in 1840 or 1841. The father, Edward, died in 1840 and the mother, Margaret, remarried Josiah Butterfield, a widower and former high councilor in Kirtland. For reasons yet unclear, Joseph became guardian of the two young women, which, along with ownership of



the Lawrence estate, became a bitter point of contention between the two men. Furthermore, William Law, also from Canada and who knew the family well and who became Joseph's second counselor (1841–44), became alienated from the Prophet in large measure because of polygamy and “chose the marriage of Smith and Maria Lawrence as a test case with which to prosecute Smith for adultery.”<sup>6</sup>

It was this controversy with Bostwick that led William W. Phelps to publish an article entitled “Voice of Innocence” in the *Nauvoo Neighbor* on March 20, 1844, which denounced those charging Smith with immoral conduct. Written in Joseph Smith's office and most likely at Smith's request, one wonders why it is not included along with all of Phelps's other writings described above? This highly charged affair led directly to Joseph Smith's open repudiation of a practice he was secretly conducting, damaged his credibility, led to an open rupture between him and William Law and others, and contributed to his eventual assassination. I suggest that this would have been the ideal time for the editors to stop all engines and fully address the issue openly and candidly. Instead, we have only two pages and a few scattered footnotes.<sup>7</sup>

To conclude, the Joseph Smith Papers are not perfect or fully complete. There are troubling omissions and oversights, some of the most glaring of which I have mentioned. Nevertheless, the Papers, and more particularly *Documents, Volume 14*, are remarkable, an enduring legacy for a whole bundle of reasons—provenance, research, authentication, new insights, perspective, and pointer to future study. Everyone who has ever been involved since the beginning with finding, preserving, describing, editing, and now publishing them deserves mountains of praise and only mild measures of criticism.

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6. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 476.

7. “Voice of Innocence” was published in the *Nauvoo Neighbor* on March 20, 1844, and has been faithfully reproduced in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr and others (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 151–56.