Five Who Handled the Plates

Author(s): Richard Lloyd Anderson
Source: Improvement Era, Vol. 72, No. 7 (July 1969), pp. 38–47
Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: A review of five of the Eight Witnesses who handled the golden plates—the four Whitmer brothers and Hiram Page. The testimony of the five witnesses never failed. “In fellowship or alienation, youth or age, persecution, poverty or affluence, four Whitmer brothers and Hiram Page never altered their plain testimony that they handled the original metal record of the Book of Mormon.”
"We have seen and hefted—"
"We did handle with our hands—"
"We also saw the engravings—"
"And we lie not . . . ."

With these simple claims, eight farmers and artisans publicly reported that Joseph Smith had shown them ancient plates of the Book of Mormon. A practical group who worked with their hands, they were better able to evaluate the "appearance of gold" and the "curious workmanship" than eight picked at random from a modern city.

The Prophet dated the vision of the three witnesses in June 1829, commenting that the "additional testimony" of the eight took place "soon after." Lucy Mack Smith was nearby when both events took place, and she recalled that "in a few days" after the vision of the three, the believers from Seneca County, New York, visited the Smiths in Manchester, near Palmyra:

"Soon after they came, all the male part of the company, with my husband, Samuel, and Hyrum, retired to a place where the family were in the habit of offering up their secret devotions to God. They went to this place, because it had been revealed to Joseph that the plates would be carried thither by one of the ancient Nephites. Here it was, that those eight witnesses, whose names are recorded in the Book of Mormon, looked upon them and handled them."

The eight men were Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith, Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith.

The Smiths are better known than the four Whitmer brothers and their brother-in-law, Hiram Page,
and this article will survey the lives and testimonies of this latter group, with occasional reference to the remaining Whitmer brother, David, one of the three witnesses. This group resided in the same neighborhood in Fayette township, and the Church was organized at the home of the family head, Peter Whitmer, Sr. Just one week before this event (which took place less than a year after their experience with the plates), a young Baptist minister visited this household. David Marks recorded his impression of “attending a meeting in Fayette” on March 29, 1830, “at the house of Mr. Whitmer.” Although this young minister seems to have been confused in some details by what many people told him, he remembered “two or three” of the Whitmer sons among “eight, who said they were witnesses. . . .” They had seen “certain plates of metal, having the appearance of gold. . . . These eight, we understood, were in company with Smith and three others.”

The Whitmer family had lived near Waterloo, New York, for just two decades when they extended their hospitality to Joseph Smith and believed in his divine call. In the early part of this period a standard guidebook characterized their township: “The inhabitants [are] principally of German extract, who came hither from Pennsylvania.”

The Whitmers were of this class. In several later interviews, David located the date of the New York move, which took place when he was four years old (1809), and the inclusion of Peter Whitmer on the 1810 census at Fayette confirms the family tradition. The proximity of the Whitmers to other pioneer settlers in the region (the Jalleys and the Schotts) through three censuses tends to show a single residence, confirmation of David’s statement that the family remained in the same place until their move west with the Mormons in 1831. The deeds to Peter Whitmer came in four transactions between 1819 and 1827, but almost all settlers of this region contracted for their land and farmed it for several years before gaining formal ownership.

Peter Whitmer and his sons were respected citizens of their township. The father was elected overseer of highways in his district in 1826 and 1827, and was also a local school trustee. Diedrich Willers, Jr., onetime Secretary of State of New York, prepared a careful history of Fayette late in the nineteenth century and then said of Peter Whitmer, Sr.: “He is spoken of by old Fayette residents as a worthy and industrious citizen.”

Diedrich Willers, Sr., the respected German Reformed pastor of the Whitmers, viewed Mormon converts as superstitious, which colored his comments on the elder Peter Whitmer, but he described him as “a quiet, unpretending, and apparently honest, candid, and simple-minded man.” Local sources indicate that the Whitmers worshiped regularly at the early log structure of Zion’s Church, a German-speaking congregation whose site is about a mile south of the Whitmer farm.

Not only the father, but also the sons Christian, Jacob, and John Whitmer are found in Willers’ church records as early as 1822. In 1825, Christian and Jacob, the two oldest sons, married sisters of the prominent Schott family. That year the 27-year-old Christian Whitmer was appointed ensign, one of three commissioned officers in the company of Seneca Grenadiers of the 102nd New York Regiment of militia. It is clear that this oldest Whitmer son was highly responsible and a recognized leader. He was also elected as one of six constables of Fayette township in 1828 and 1829, the year he became a witness of the Book of Mormon.

The newly organized Church assigned the youngest of the Whitmer brothers, Peter Whitmer, Jr., to travel west on a mission to the Missouri frontier. The sincere preaching of the young tradesman was remembered by several. Lyman Wight recalled his testimony “that he had seen the plates . . .”

His own terse diary recalled on occasion: “[W]e declared the Book of Mormon . . .” Following the pattern of the apostle Paul, these missionaries supported themselves
during their stay in frontier Missouri. Peter Whitmer, Jr., was an accomplished tailor and at this time was engaged by General Alexander Doniphan to make him a suit. But something higher than an occupation was uppermost in the mind of Peter Whitmer, Jr. The brief notes of a conference speech capture his testimony and its basis after returning from this early mission:

"My beloved brethren, ever since I have been acquainted with the writing of God, I have viewed eternity with perfect confidence."15

As the program developed for settling Jackson County, the Whitmer family and others located in a special settlement in the present Kansas City area. Among them was the Book of Mormon witness Hiram Page, a native of Vermont, who had earlier moved into western New York, married Catherine Whitmer in 1825, and then resided near his wife's family in Fayette. Some of the severest Missouri persecutions came to witnesses of the Book of Mormon. Late in 1833 John Corrill reported of Christian Whitmer: "They also took him and pointed their guns at him, threatening to kill him if he did not tell them where the brethren were."16 Another correspondent wrote in the midst of this terror: "[T]he enemy . . . had thrown down 10 or 12 houses, and nearly whipped some to death, among whom was H. Page."17

Earlier that year, John Whitmer had joined other Mormon leaders in offering themselves as hostages to stop the abuse of their people.

In poverty but great faith the Latter-day Saints regrouped in Clay County after their Jackson County expulsion. All of the Whitmer witnesses were prominent enough in this early Missouri period to sit on the high council. But death removed the oldest brother, Christian, in 1835 and the youngest, Peter, in 1836, both weakened by chronic infections. Stalwart in their defense of the faith, both were paid a touching tribute from the personal knowledge of their brother-in-law Oliver Cowdery:

"By many in this church, our brothers were personally known: they were the first to embrace the new covenant, on hearing it, and during a constant scene of persecution and perplexity, to their last moments, maintained its truth—they were both included in the list of the eight witnesses in the Book of Mormon, and though they have departed, it is with great satisfaction that we reflect, that they proclaimed to their last moments, the certainty of their former testimony. . . . May all who read remember the fact, that the Lord has given men a witness of himself in the last days, and that they have faithfully declared it till called away."18

The next casualties among the Whitmer group were spiritual. John had been a trusted missionary, and in 1838 he was Church Historian and counselor to his brother David in the Missouri presidency. Because he and W. W. Phelps, the other counselor, had taken personal title

Old newspaper report shows Christian Whitmer as a constable.
Regardless of how you want to accumulate funds of approximately $2,400.00 for a mission, First Security Bank can assist you.

Three types of savings plans are available, together with variations or combinations to fit your individual needs. These include:

- **5% per annum Short-Term Savings Certificate** with interest credited to a Passbook account every 90 days.

- **5% per annum Long-Term Savings Certificate** with 5% interest guaranteed over a 5-year period even if present interest rates should go down. This plan yields 5.60% when interest is accumulated over 5 years.

- **Passbook Savings**, a special mission account. Any amount may be deposited at any time. Interest at current 4% per annum rate is compounded.

Many families use a combination of plans.

**MR. & MRS. A’S PLAN**

You may be interested in the specific plan designed by Mr. and Mrs. A. In the early summer of 1968 they decided that they wanted to accumulate a fund so that 5 years hence $100.00 a month could be sent to their son all the time he would be on a mission.

They had $624.96 in cash at that time, so they put it in our 5% per annum 5-Year Savings Certificate. Interest is guaranteed. So the $624.96 will earn $175.04 interest in 5 years. By 1973 it will have grown to $800.00.

To accumulate $1,800.00 more, Mr. A. decided to save $30.00 a month for 5 years. He instructed us to automatically transfer that amount each month from his checking account and put it in a Special Mission Passbook Savings Account.

Mr. A. also told us to buy a 5% Short-Term Savings Certificate each time $500.00 has been accumulated in the Passbook account. Also to have all the interest paid quarterly on the 90-day Savings Certificates credited to the Passbook account.

"The way I’ve figured it," said Mr. A., "I’ll have saved $2,424.96. If my son should go on a mission, he’ll receive $100.00 a month — and the account will still have $579.11 in it, perhaps for a post-mission trip."

Amount saved ........................................ $2,424.96
Interest paid by Bank .................................. $554.15
Amount paid Missionary .......................... $2,979.11

**SAVING $500 A YEAR**

Depositing $500.00 once a year each year for 5 years will create a fund that will return to your missionary $100.00 a month for 24 months. And the 24th month’s check would be for $778.80 — not just $100.00.

Amount saved ................................................... $2,500.00
Interest paid by Bank .................................. $578.80
Amount paid Missionary .......................... $3,078.80

**PLAN FOR YOUR FAMILY**

Each family’s requirements vary, but we at First Security Bank have the “know-how” to tailor a plan so that you would receive maximum interest.

We hope you will come in and discuss your specific problem — whether your savings plan be long or merely for a short period of time.

Federal regulations stipulate the maximum interest which may be paid by national banks. At the present time these maximums are 5% per annum on savings certificates and 4% per annum on passbook savings. Examples shown are based on present maximum permissible rates.

**LOOKING AHEAD!**

Savings plans to finance Missions for Sons, Daughters, Grandsons, Granddaughters
Neither Hiram Page nor the Whitmer brothers ever altered their testimonies
to the gathering site of Far West, the resentment of the Missouri members resulted in criticism and then formal suspension of that presidency from office. Declining to be excommunicated because the Missouri witnesses was no facade but the expression of a profound personal experience. Subsequently, when William E. McLellin sought to enlist them in his reorganized church in 1847, they agreed to become leaders in emotion-charged circumstances. But not long after McLellin left, Hiram Page began a series of letters to Kirtland confessing that the Missouri witnesses failed to discern the true power of God in these actions. Speaking specifically for the surviving Whitmers and himself, Page admitted, "we have been lying dormant," and yet he envisioned no practical involvement, since "the way is not opened for us to organize as we would. . . . " Although inactive, a decade after their apostasy the remaining eight witnesses still devoutly believed that God had established a latter-day work.

The second force upon the estranged witnesses was a secularization of their lives. Their essential problem was to make a living, and artificial religious convictions would certainly tend to fade to irrelevance. For instance, Jacob Whitmer settled in Richmond, Missouri, and he faced life in 1838 with few assets and a family of seven. His struggle in this period was later outlined on the basis of information from his remarkably successful lawyer-son. From 1840 to 1843 Jacob was virtually an invalid and unable to work, at the end of which period "his limited means were well nigh exhausted." A shoemaker by trade, he worked from 1843 to 1845 to buy a small acreage and erect a shoe shop on it. In the next decade he evidently followed the pattern of many early tradesmen by farming during the summer and working his shop during the winter. At his death in 1856, his industry had resulted in ownership of 113 acres. But alienated from his Mormon associates for 18 years and preoccupied with material survival, Jacob Whitmer had never waned in his conviction regarding the plates. In 1888 his second son told Andrew Jenson, "My father, Jacob Whitmer, was always faithful and true to his testimony to the Book of Mormon, and confirmed it on his death bed."

Hiram Page's experience paralleled that of Jacob Whitmer. Starting life again with a family of eight in 1838, he disclosed no real estate assets on the 1850 census, two years prior to his death. Although family and neighborhood tradition indicate that Page had been a doctor when young, he was evidently untrained in that field and was generally a farmer, so listing himself on the census just mentioned. Conflict with religious associates and the fight for economic survival breaks the idealism of many a man, but Hiram Page's enthusiasm for the Book of Mormon was strong in adverse circumstances. Replying directly to an inquiry about his testimony, he mentioned early spiritual experiences and reaffirmed his practical knowledge of the plates: "As to the Book of Mormon, it would be doing injustice to myself, and to the work of God of the last days, to say that I could know a thing to be true in 1830, and know the same thing to be false in 1847. " Hiram Page's letters are warm toward his former associates, sending special greetings to Martin Harris, a fellow witness. His second son was 20 at his father's death in 1852 and later told Andrew Jenson: "I knew my father to be true and faithful to his testimony of the divinity of the Book of Mormon until the very last. Whenever he had an opportunity to bear his
Conoco's franchise agreement offers jobbers more opportunities to grow.

You've been thinking about buying that choice corner lot. It would make a great location for a service station... or would it? How much should you offer? What's its potential as an investment? Should you gamble on it, or shouldn't you?

A tough decision? You bet it is, if you're going it alone. But if you were a Conoco jobber, at your request, we would lend you knowledgeable people to evaluate the property. They'd tell you what it was worth to you. And with their latest site analysis methods, they could tell you what potential a service station on that site could have. Finally, they'll make a recommendation that you invest or not invest.

If you decide to invest, we'll provide you with additional help in the form of plans and technical assistance. And, if you need it, we may be able to help you arrange for financing.

If you're a jobber who wants to work with a company that will do everything in its power to help you grow, write today. We'll tell you about our 4 grade gasolines, local advertising, facilities planning, our monitored maintenance program, and all our other jobber franchise benefits. Then compare your present supply agreement with our franchise agreement. We think you'll want to do business with the Hottest Brand Going... Conoco.

Call (name of Div. Mgr. in State Publication) or contact Mr. C. O. Macleod, Coordinator, Distributor Relations, Continental Oil Company, Houston, Texas 77001. He'll put you in touch with the right man... right away.

More Ride For Your Money, Conoco... Hottest Brand Going!®
Newspaper clipping shows David and Christian Whitmer active in Seneca Grenadiers.

The completely candid temperament of John Whitmer furnishes one of the best tests of the truth of his claim to have seen and handled the plates. As a trusted leader on the inner circle of decisions, he was editor of the Messenger and Advocate almost a year. In his closing editorial in 1836, John Whitmer shared his experiences as a member of the Church “from its beginning”:

“Therefore I desire to testify to all that will come to the knowledge of this address, that I have most assuredly seen the plates from whence the Book of Mormon is translated, and that I have handled these plates, and know of a surer that Joseph Smith, Jr., has translated the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God. . . . “

From this peak of conviction, the same man descended to the depths of doubt within three years. Skeptical of Joseph Smith personally because of the failure of the Kirtland Bank, and rejected by his companions in gospel service, John Whitmer made common cause with other non-Mormons in ridiculing the faith of Theodore Turley, the business agent of the Church who remained to wind up financial affairs at Far West after the Mormons were driven out. But Turley openly accused Whitmer of inconsistency; answering in the presence of his anti-Mormon friends, the Book of Mormon witness made two revealing statements. First, he admitted, “I now say, I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides. I handled them.” When Turley next asked bluntly why Whitmer now doubted the work, the witness indicated his inability to translate the characters on the plates: “I cannot read it, and I do not know whether it is true or not.” From the strict point of view of evidence, this report is most impressive. With social pressure to deny and personal motivation to explain away his experience, John Whitmer insisted that he had in fact handled the plates.

John Whitmer stayed in Missouri and farmed land on the site of the former city of Far West and its temple lot. His material success is measured by his estate inventory at death, listing ownership of 625 acres, much livestock and farm equipment, to which must be added the fine two-story house that still stands. The evaluation of his community on his 40 years of residence in Caldwell County is shown by the local obituary that alluded to the Mormon expulsion: “Mr. Whitmer
remained at Far West and has since been a highly respected and law abiding citizen.”

Although rural Caldwell County was relatively inaccessible, John Whitmer told his story of seeing the plates to a wide variety of visitors. In 1861, Jacob Gates talked with him over four hours and wrote in his journal, “[H]e still testified that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of the Lord. He also said that he believed that . . . Brigham Young was carrying out the doctrine and system which Joseph Smith taught but he (Whitmer) did not believe in a man’s having more than one wife. . .”

Like other Book of Mormon witnesses whose lives are well-known, John Whitmer’s reiteration of his testimony was a moving experience when William Lewis pressed the inconsistency of his inactivity: “At last he did say, wiping the tears off, that the day would come when we would all see eye to eye.” The bitterness of the days after his excommunication were gone, and what remained in John Whitmer’s mature years was the vivid memory of participation in the translation of a record of scripture:

"[O]ld Father John Whitmer told me last winter, with tears in his eyes, that he knew as well as he knew he had an existence that Joseph translated the ancient writing which was upon the plates, which he ‘saw and handled,’ and which, as one of the scribes, he helped to copy, as the words fell from Joseph’s lips, by supernatural or almighty power.”

What motivated John Whitmer to reaffirm his testimony constantly to the end of his life? Financially successful and respected by his neighbors, this quiet personality shunned notoriety. Yet the affirmative men-
FOOTNOTES
1These phrases from "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses" are identical in the 1830 or present edition of the Book of Mormon. Capital letters are added to the first three clauses.
2Lucy Smith, Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith (Liverpool, 1853), p. 140.
3David Marks, The Life of David Marks (Limerick, Maine, 1831), p. 340. His language is undoubtedly inexact in implying the appearance of the angel to all witnesses.
5Kansas City Daily Journal, June 6, 1881. Family tradition and the birthplaces listed on the 1850 census indicate the birth of Catherine Whitmer, September 27, 1807, in Pennsylvania and the birth of Peter Whitmer, Jr., April 1809, in New York.

In fellowship or alienation, youth or age, persecution, poverty or affluence, four Whitmer brothers and Hiram Page never altered their plain testimony that they handled the original metal record of the Book of Mormon.

Diedrich Villers, Centennial Historical Sketch of the Town of Fayette (Geneva, New York, 1900), p. 49.


Ibid. See also Courier Printing Company (ed.), Manual of the Churches of Seneca County (Seneca Falls, New York, 1898), p. 102.

Seneca Farmer (Waterloo, New York), March 23, 1825.

Fayette Township Record, at Waterloo Library and Historical Society, Waterloo, New York. John Genung, president of the society, materially assisted in locating these references.


Ibid. See also Courier Printing Company (ed.), Manual of the Churches of Seneca County (Seneca Falls, New York, 1898), p. 112.

Seneca Farmer (Waterloo, New York), March 23, 1825.


Ibid. See also Courier Printing Company (ed.), Manual of the Churches of Seneca County (Seneca Falls, New York, 1898), p. 112.


History of Ray County, Missouri (St. Louis, 1881), p. 530. This sketch is the basis of other information in this paragraph, confirmed by other sources.

Probate papers, Ray County, Missouri.


The Historical Record, Vol. 7 (October 1888), p. 614.


Memoranda of Theodore Turley, April 4, 1839, Church Historian’s Office. As in all quotations of this article, editorial changes have been limited to punctuation, spelling, verb forms, and capitalization.

Kingston Sentinel, cit. Richmond Conservator, July 26, 1878.

Journal of Jacob Gats, March 18, 1861.


Article of early 1878 from the Kingston Sentinel, cit. Saints’ Herald, Vol. 25 (February 15, 1878), p. 57. The date and delivery of the speech on January 13, 1878, was verified in an independent letter, cit. ibid., p. 58.

Completion
By Dorothy Cameron Smith

Life is not always beautiful—
It can be ugly.
One cannot appreciate it
Until the joys and the sorrows
Are intermingled,
Just as the bright colors
on a canvas
Need the dark shadings
To accentuate the highlights.

July 1969

Take a Good Look...

It’s Your World, You Know

Look at it through the eyes of the world’s greatest reporters and the finest, largest news services. Tomorrow’s conversation is in today’s Deseret News.

DESERET NEWS

Add an outdoor living room with a real GAS Light

-and a GAS Barbecue!

MOUNTAIN FUEL SUPPLY COMPANY

For TOTAL comfort and convenience — it’s natural GAS!