



Type: Magazine Article

Martin Harris: The Honorable New York Farmer

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (February 1969)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 18-21

Abstract: This article discusses the character of Martin Harris, one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, is examined. The author examines accounts of the associates of Martin Harris in the three decades he lived in Palmyra, New York.

Martin Harris

The Honorable New York Farmer

By Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson

●The non-Mormon life of Martin Harris is little known but of critical importance. Whether he is a believable witness of the Book of Mormon depends upon his character. This can be accurately appraised by investigating the third of a century that he lived continuously in Palmyra, New York, prior to testifying that he had seen the angel and the plates.

It is unfair to this witness to fix his image as the aged survivor who came to Utah at 87 and died at 92. Though his memory of the rise of the Church was undimmed, he was a shadow of the prominent believer who championed the cause of Joseph Smith before a disbelieving community. Martin Harris was over twenty years older than Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer. They reached the peak of their powers and success long after their testimony of the Book of Mormon. Harris differed from them as a substantial man of 46 who had already achieved considerable prestige before accepting Mormonism.

His conversion to the claims of Joseph Smith caused former friends to ridicule him and produced intense domestic conflict that resulted in a separation. A highly objective survivor of this period later wrote that no early resident of Palmyra “received so many rebuffs” and endured “so many unfeeling comments” as did Martin Harris.¹

It is therefore clear that much of what was said of Martin Harris the Mormon stemmed from religious prejudice. Yet none of his townsmen exceeded his established reputation as a responsible and honest individual.

That the man himself matched his prestige can be verified by gathering the evaluations of him made as a result of likely or demonstrated personal contact. The first anti-Mormon book, based on contemporary if generally contrived statements from the native locality of Martin Harris, admitted that “he was

considered an honest, industrious citizen, by his neighbors.”²

A similar admission characterizes every major assessment of this Book of Mormon witness, even those that allege flaws in his character. The evaluations of the man that are most significant come from about a dozen prominent acquaintances, none of whom displayed sympathy with his religious convictions.

The most detailed recollection of the background and personality of Martin Harris was printed in the *Palmyra Courier* in 1872 as part of a serial history of the town written by James H. Reeves, who was born in 1802 as a member of an early and prominent family.³ The series included five installments devoted to Martin and his father, Nathan Harris. This is the source of most of the stories of the prowess of “Uncle Nathan” as a hunter and fisher; that pioneer is also portrayed as a vital individual who dearly loved the sociability of the frontier gatherings. The elder Harris was “universally honored by his neighbors for his kindness of heart and willingness to assist those in need.” Reeves considered that Martin fell heir to “the energy and activity of his mother.” Until his connection with Mormonism, which is deplored, Martin Harris “was an industrious, hard-working farmer, shrewd in his business calculations, frugal in his habits, and what was termed a prosperous man in the world.”⁴

Others remembered this Book of Mormon witness on the basis of more casual contact. Stephen S. Harding, later territorial governor of Utah, recalled returning to Palmyra as a young man in 1829 to find that his birthplace was greatly affected by the appearance of the Book of Mormon. The affair “excited a good deal of curiosity and comment” mainly because “such a man as Martin Harris” was involved in it.

It was “truly phenomenal” to a prejudiced com-



munity that he "should abandon the cultivation of one of the best farms in the neighborhood, and change all his habits of life from industry to indolence. . . ."⁵ Both the prestige of Harris' pre-Mormon days and the contempt that many felt for him upon his conversion are revealed in this recollection.

A most valuable source of information about Martin Harris in the Palmyra community is the consistent opinion of journalists who had known him. The pioneer editor was generally an independent, tough-minded individual, and the fact that he was in the business of knowing community happenings makes all the more impressive the assessments of Martin Harris left by such men. J. A. Hadley ran one of the two major newspapers in Palmyra during the period of the production of the Book of Mormon and had personal contact with Joseph Smith and Martin Harris in considering the printing job of the Book of Mormon. He claimed to publish the first anti-Mormon news article, in 1829, in which he described Harris as "an honest and industrious farmer of this town."⁶ Orsamus Turner, of fame as both editor and historian of western New York, was a printer's apprentice in Palmyra during the years 1818-1820. In his admittedly sarcastic survey of Mormonism in 1852, he portrays Martin Harris as a religious fanatic, yet "the owner of a good farm, and an honest worthy citizen."⁷

Two printers who worked on the Book of Mormon had been formerly editors of the *Wayne Sentinel* in Palmyra. John H. Gilbert, chief compositor then, lived to tell and retell his connection with the Book of Mormon to visitors until his death in 1895. He left a statement portraying the general feeling against Martin Harris as unreliable on the subject of Mormonism, but otherwise the witness was "considered by his neighbors a very honest man."⁸ More prominent than Gilbert in the production of the Book of Mormon was

the editorial supervisor, Pomeroy Tucker, who later gained considerable stature in western New York as a politician and editor for forty years. He published his memoirs of Mormonism in 1867, in which he intermixes his personal recollections with community hearsay in a rambling fashion. Yet he did know Harris personally, as he states in his preface, having been brought into close contact in both negotiations and printing during the winter of 1829-30. Accepting the standard non-Mormon view of the fanaticism of Harris, Tucker nevertheless evaluates him personally as "honest and benevolent." He also gives his estimation of Harris' practical abilities: he was "a prosperous, independent farmer, strictly upright in his business dealings. . . ."⁹

It is obvious that such solid admiration for Martin Harris' ordinary life and career must be founded upon definite achievements. These are very important to trace from the time of his majority in 1804 until 1829, the critical year when he became a Book of Mormon witness. This period is remote and its records are incomplete, but investigation furnishes clear outlines of his occupational success and community service. These historical realities of his life definitely confirm his community reputation as a responsible, trustworthy citizen.

Martin Harris was a farmer of marked ability. For two decades prior to 1829, he had managed over 240 acres of productive land, together with associated interests. The first indication that Martin ran his own farming operation is the registration of his earmark for animals on May 22, 1808, two months after his marriage to Lucy Harris.¹⁰ Land records show that he received the first deeds to the above tract in 1813 and 1814, but it is very probable that he had farmed this land earlier and simply received his title then.

The Ontario County Agricultural Society was not organized until 1819, and after 1823 Palmyra belonged to Wayne County, which lacked such an association in the remainder of Martin Harris' Palmyra residence. During this period of probable participation, he is prominent. He won two fair prizes in 1822, eight in 1823, and three in 1824. He was named as one of the two town managers of the society for Palmyra in 1823. His prominence gives some insight into his farming activity. Since he was named in 1824 to judge swine, it may be assumed that he had displayed ability in raising animals. But his prizes in the above years are all in the category of cloth manufacturing. He produced linen, cotton and woolen ticking, blankets, and worsted and flannel fabrics. The degree of this activity points to sheep raising and regular textile manufacturing on his farm.¹¹ According to the contract of sale of part of his property in 1831, however, a great portion

of his land was sown in wheat, then the staple crop of the area.

Included in community service must be his participation in local campaigns of the War of 1812. Although wealthy enough to engage a substitute to accept his draft assignment, he mustered and served on several occasions for defense against British forces when his region was threatened with invasion.¹² His willingness to involve himself in community causes is shown by his election with a number of very prominent Palmyrans in 1824 to raise money to aid the Greek independence movement.¹³ The same point is made by his appointment in 1827 on the Palmyra "committee of vigilance" by the Wayne County anti-Masonic convention, a cause long since discredited but which then attracted many public-spirited individuals.¹⁴

But the most consistent community service of Martin Harris tells most about him. He was elected by his neighbors in the annual township meetings as overseer of highways for his district in the years 1811, 1813, 1814, 1815, 1825, 1827, and 1829. In almost all of the above years these officials were also assigned to be fence viewers.¹⁵ Such positions might be compared with the function of a non-commissioned officer who deals on a familiar level with small groups and therefore must possess tact and personal respect to succeed. The overseer of highways directed the work of neighbors on the roads in his district. It is obvious that Martin Harris was not a person with talents for high leadership as much as a local leader, extraordinary in his reliability and trustworthiness.

By 1829 it was well-known in Palmyra that Martin Harris believed in Joseph Smith and the golden plates. As just shown, that year his neighbors still elected him to oversee the highway work in his district. Two years before Martin Harris became a witness of the Book of Mormon, he was sworn without disqualification as a grand juror in his county. In the following year his name appears three times as a witness before the chief criminal court of his district.¹⁶

If the public credentials of Martin Harris' trustworthiness are impressive, they can be verified by recovering his confidential credit report. Loan officers measure both ability and reliability in venturing money, and one of considerable stature recalled Martin Harris' loan application in detail. The Book of Mormon witness could have had no more responsible reporting than from Charles Butler, who in 1830 was a lawyer and regional loan officer for the New York Life Insurance and Trust Company and in later life an impeccable New York financier and philanthropist. Early in 1830 it is evident that Martin Harris lacked money to pay the printer of the Book of Mormon, though valuable land was pledged as security. It was

probably at this time that he traveled thirty miles to Geneva to see Butler about a loan, taking with him the recommendation of the prominent Palmyra businessman Henry Jessup. Butler left several recollections of this event but comments most specifically upon the appraisal of Harris' financial and personal capacities in the following account:

"He brought a letter of introduction to me from a highly respectable citizen of that town, a Mr. Jessup, who was a leading man and an elder in the Presbyterian Church and on whose judgment I depended in respect to the character of the borrower and the value of the property in all cases of applications for loans from that quarter. From the letter of Mr. Jessup the bearer was introduced to me as a very worthy and substantial farmer, possessing a very excellent farm, which would furnish a very ample security for the amount of money which he wished to obtain, viz. \$1,300.00, and he commended Mr. Harris to me as a desirable borrower."¹⁷

It does not particularly concern this discussion that Butler determined that the purpose of the loan was to finance the Book of Mormon and rejected the application. In another memorandum recollection, Butler reports "my agent" as indicating that "this was one of the most respectable farmers in Wayne County."¹⁸

The most unusual tribute to this Book of Mormon witness came in an obituary written 34 years before his death. Probably because of the activities of another Harris, the report spread throughout U.S. newspapers in 1841 that Martin Harris had been assassinated in Illinois for lecturing against Mormonism. This was soon corrected by the *Painesville Telegraph*, which reported from Harris' residence in Ohio that he was still alive to read "what shall be said of him after his death."¹⁹ In the meantime Alvah Strong at Rochester had relied upon the nationally circulated story of the murder and had written his detailed estimate of his former acquaintance. Strong, a distinguished editor and respected community leader in Rochester, had earlier worked as a young printer in Palmyra just after the publication of the Book of Mormon and during the peak of Martin Harris' public preaching in that community. Based upon this and other personal knowledge, he summarized the admiration for this witness and the prejudice against his testimony that characterized the community that knew him:

"We have ever regarded Mr. Harris as an honest man. We first became acquainted with him at Palmyra, in the spring of 1828, shortly after the plates from which the Book of Mormon is said to have been translated, were found. . . . Though illiterate and actually of a superstitious turn of mind, he had long sustained

an irreproachable character for probity. . . . By his neighbors and townsmen with whom he earnestly and almost incessantly *labored*, he was regarded rather as being deluded himself, than as wishing to delude others knowingly; but still he was subjected to many scoffs and rebukes, all of which he endured with a meekness becoming a better cause."²⁰

The only extended evaluation of Martin Harris made in the period of his Palmyra residence is also the most complimentary. His exodus from Palmyra occasioned a touching tribute placed before the public by E. B. Grandin. Editor of the *Wayne Sentinel* in the crucial years of 1827-1832 and printer of the Book of Mormon, Grandin perhaps knew Harris more intimately than any non-Mormon in Palmyra. Grandin's diary is still in existence for the period immediately after these events, and it reveals him as a thoughtful, religiously independent man. This editor penned a valedictory upon the occasion of Martin Harris' leaving for Ohio with other early Latter-day Saints in 1831. It is impressive that direct approval of the honesty of the financier of the Book of Mormon should come from the man who had held continual business dealings with him. Martin Harris passed this practical test with distinction:

"Mr. Harris was among the early settlers of this town, and has ever borne the character of an honorable and upright man, and an obliging and benevolent neighbor. He had secured to himself by honest industry a respectable fortune—and he has left a large circle of acquaintances and friends to pity his delusion."²¹

The personal judgments on Martin Harris from his associates generally praise his character, not personal brilliance. In almost 40 years' residence in Palmyra, he was admired for his integrity but not trusted with offices requiring gifted leadership. Several of the editors of the period, self-taught by constant reading, considered him naive. Strong's adjective "illiterate," however, can only mean "uncultured," because Martin's pen was ready, and numerous recollections from Palmyra emphasize that he read scripture constantly and could quote the Bible from memory at astounding length. When the religious prejudice of all opinions of the honest farmer is taken into account, Martin Harris is really being called a man of the people, lacking the polish of intellectual training but admired for his solidity by many educated men. Such an individual lends great strength to the Book of Mormon, because his presence means that the Three Witnesses were in fact a cross section of their community. If ridiculed as a religious enthusiast, he is nevertheless a forthright, simple believer. It is an act of prejudice to dismiss one so clearly competent in ordinary life

without seriously considering the truth of his testimony of the Book of Mormon.

It was Grandin's associate in the printing of the Book of Mormon who perceived this issue. Pomeroy Tucker had "frequent and familiar interviews" with Martin Harris during the production of the book, and in the previous year, just weeks after the experience of Martin's seeing the angel and the plates, Tucker joined Grandin "in the friendly admonitions vainly seeking to divert Harris from his persistent fanaticism in that losing speculation."²² Martin's tenacity in these circumstances convinced Tucker that the honorable farmer "no doubt firmly believed in the genuineness of Joseph Smith's pretensions."²³ For all of his bias against the possibility of the divine origin of the Book of Mormon, Tucker lets Harris speak for himself by means of quoting his printed testimony that "by the power of God" the witnesses "saw the plates, and the engravings thereon," and heard "his voice" declare the translation correct. The reality of this experience and the honesty of Martin Harris are obviously harmonious. But if one rejects the supernatural event, he is left with the undisputed fact that the New York farmer was a man trusted implicitly by his community in practical affairs. Tucker was thoughtful enough to understand the dilemma of rejecting the printed testimony: "How to reconcile the act of Harris in signing his name to such a statement, in view of the character of honesty which had always been conceded to him, could never be easily explained." ○

FOOTNOTES

- ¹*Palmyra Courier*, May 24, 1872; cf. note 3.
- ²E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio, 1834), p. 13.
- ³Proof that Reeves is the author of these numerous but unsigned articles comes from the *History of Wayne County, New York* (Philadelphia, 1877), p. 134, which indicates its reliance on the historical sketches in Palmyra papers in 1870-71 "from the pen of James Reeves."
- ⁴*Palmyra Courier*, May 24, 1872.
- ⁵Letter of S. S. Hauding to Thomas Gregg, Milan, Indiana, February 1882, cit. Thomas Gregg, *The Prophet of Palmyra* (New York, 1890), pp. 36-37.
- ⁶"Golden Bible," borrowed article from the *Palmyra Freeman*, cit. *Rochester Advertiser and Telegraph*, Aug. 31, 1829.
- ⁷O. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase* (Rochester, 1852), p. 215.
- ⁸Memorandum, made by John H. Gilbert, Esq., Sept. 8, 1892, Palmyra, New York. This presently exists only in a typed copy. Cit. *Deseret News* "Church Section," August 15, 1942.
- ⁹Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York, 1867), pp. 41, 50.
- ¹⁰The earmark registration date appears in the Palmyra Town Record and the wedding date in the records of application for veterans' benefits by Martin Harris, based on service in the War of 1812, U. S. General Services Administration.
- ¹¹Identical reports of the Ontario Agricultural Fair appear in the *Wayne Sentinel* (in 1822 the *Palmyra Herald*) of Nov. 6, 1822, Nov. 19, 1823, and Nov. 17, 1824, and also the *Ontario Repository* of Oct. 29, 1822, Nov. 11, 1823, and Nov. 10, 1824.
- ¹²These details were recalled by Martin Harris and other veterans in later applications for benefits; see note 10.
- ¹³*Wayne Sentinel*, Jan. 21, 1824.
- ¹⁴*Palmyra Sentinel*, Oct. 5, 1827.
- ¹⁵Palmyra Town Record, entries at beginning of April in each year cited.
- ¹⁶Minutes of the Court of Oyer and Tenner, Book 1, Wayne County Courthouse, Lyons, New York.
- ¹⁷Manuscripts of Charles Butler, Library of Congress.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*
- ¹⁹*The Telegraph* (Painesville, Ohio), June 30, 1841.
- ²⁰*Rochester Daily Democrat*, June 23, 1841.
- ²¹*Wayne Sentinel*, May 27, 1831.
- ²²Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- ²³*Palmyra Courier*, June 11, 1858.
- ²⁴Tucker, *op. cit.*, p. 71.