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The Certainty of the Skeptical Witness

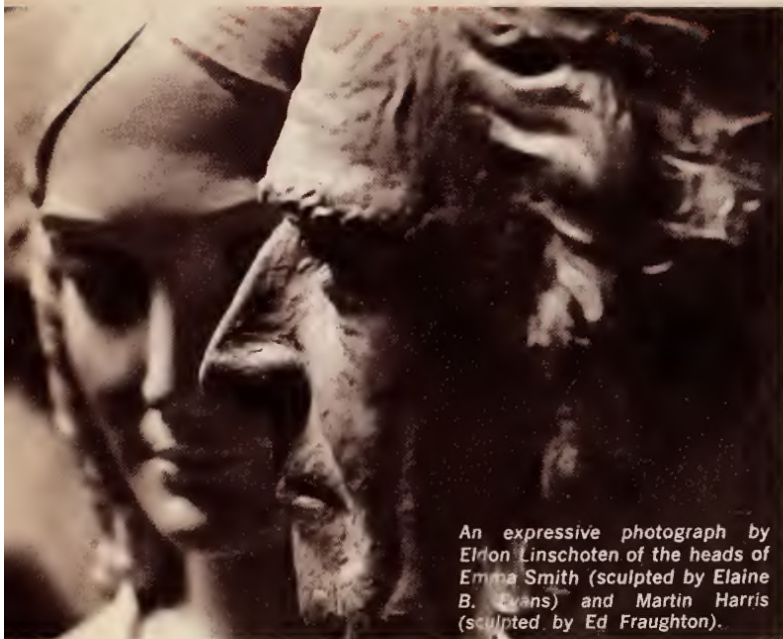
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Abstract: This article discusses Martin Harris, a witness of the validity of the existence of the gold plates, stood firm in his testimony of the Book of Mormon and gave his report to all who would listen.



An expressive photograph by Elton Linschoten of the heads of Emma Smith (sculpted by Elaine B. Evans) and Martin Harris (sculpted by Ed Fraughton).

The Certainty of the Skeptical Witness

By Dr. Richard Lloyd Anderson

Martin Harris was not surpassed in doubt by Thomas nor in absolute assurance by any ancient apostle. If his testimony of the Book of Mormon was ridiculed by unbelievers as superstition, he did not reach such certainty easily, for no witness required more evidence for his faith. This successful farmer of middle age was a seasoned trader, fully aware of the possibility of deception in a business transaction or religious experience. And his examination of Mormonism proceeded with the methodical care that built his material estate.

When he investigated Joseph Smith's claim of possessing an ancient record, Martin waited until his wife and daughter had made personal inquiries first. Only after he saw that his own family was impressed (according to an 1859 interview) did he visit the Smiths. In that household he "talked with them separately, to see if their stories agreed. . . ." After

satisfying himself that the accounts of the Smiths harmonized with Joseph's, he was permitted to lift the box containing the plates, which he concluded must contain metal as heavy as lead or gold, "and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead."¹

But this was not enough. How could the untrained farmer know that Joseph's record was ancient? Apparently to satisfy his doubts on this point he took a copy of the characters transcribed from the plates to prominent linguists, including the famous Charles Anthon of Columbia College. The professor's recollection of the interview emphasized that the Book of Mormon witness had come for his opinion "as a last precautionary step"² in order to be sure that "there was no risk whatever in the matter"³ before pledging his money for the printing.

Even after entering into the work of translation in 1828 as Joseph Smith's first secretary, Martin Harris was vigilant. Upon returning to the Church in 1870 Martin reminisced of these days. The summer translation project was tedious, especially to active men accustomed to physical labor, so their tension was relieved by periodic recesses to the nearby Susquehanna River, where they exercised by throwing stones into the water. Finding a stone "very much resembling the one used for translating," a substitution was made without Joseph Smith's knowledge. The translator became confused and then frustrated, exclaiming, "Martin! What is the matter?" His scribe's expression revealed the situation to the Prophet, who demanded an explanation. The answer shows how constantly the secretary was on guard against deception: "To stop the mouths of fools, who had told him that the Prophet had learned those sentences and was merely repeating them. . . ."⁴

It is impressive enough that Joseph Smith's claims were taken seriously by a mature man conditioned by life to use his analytical powers in all circumstances. But after two years of belief, the vision of June 1829 transformed faith to certainty. Harris' prior history shows why Joseph Smith singled him out on the morning of this vision as in special need to "humble yourself" and why his struggle for faith before the vision was more severe than that of his younger associates. Upon failure of repeated prayers of Joseph Smith and the witnesses, Martin acknowledged that his attitude was probably the cause of their failure to obtain the promised revelation, and he withdrew. After the angel appeared and showed the plates to the remaining group, the Prophet found Martin Harris, and during joint prayer both were overwhelmed with the reality of the same vision. Joseph Smith remembered Martin's cry of conviction: "'Tis

enough; mine eyes have beheld!"⁵ The ecstasy of that experience was indelibly stamped upon the mind of the former doubter. Lucy Smith especially remembered the return of Martin Harris to the Whitmer home immediately after the vision: "He seemed almost overcome with joy, and testified boldly to what he had both seen and heard."⁶ The force of this conviction never diminished in nearly a half-century's ideological transition and personal trial.

Martin Harris' certainty that he had seen the angel and the plates is verified from the beginning of his Mormon career. As offensive to unbelievers as it was convincing to believers, his testimony was sarcastically reported by the *Painesville Telegraph* as given publicly in a hotel on Martin Harris' arrival there: "He told all about the gold plates, Angels, Spirits, and Jo Smith. He had seen and handled them all, *by the power of God!*"⁷ Others did not come to scoff. One in this category was an editor of a different temperament, W. W. Phelps. Shortly before Martin Harris left New York for his Ohio residence, Phelps (then seriously investigating Mormon claims) recorded the following impression in a private letter: "Mr. Harris, whose name is in the book, is a wealthy farmer, but of small literary acquirements; he is honest, and sincerely declares upon his soul's salvation that the book is true. . . ."⁸ It was inevitable that Martin was subjected to cross examination. Another like Phelps was the intelligent and perceptive Joseph Fielding, who arrived at Kirtland, Ohio, shortly after his conversion and soon afterwards reported, "Martin Harris, one of the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon, gave me a particular description of the plates and of the Urim and Thummim, etc."⁹

Although Martin Harris was honored by appointment to the first high council of the Church, his main contribution was in the missionary service of formal journeys and private conversations. He and his brother Emer baptized a hundred converts in a few weeks,¹⁰ and Martin was imprisoned for his forthrightness in proclaiming the restored gospel.¹¹ But the trials of Job descended upon the Latter-day Saint community of Kirtland, and the witness was affected. The first steps toward plural marriage rankled him, and unlike Job he felt that the loss of property in the failure of the Church bank was inconsistent with divine favor. Consequently, as he explained in 1855, he "lost confidence in Joseph Smith" and "his mind became darkened."¹²

Disillusioned Mormons now tempted the witness to recant. He and other prominent dissenters in the Church were formally excommunicated in the last week of December 1837.¹³ These men, who shared Martin Harris' skepticism on Church policy, admired

the sweep of Mormon doctrine but were talking of forming a reorganized church that would retain the great doctrinal concepts but jettison what was to them irrational. In a private meeting in early 1838, several former leaders insisted that the Book of Mormon was "nonsense." A contemporary letter from Kirtland reported: "Martin Harris then bore testimony of its truth and said all would be damned if they rejected it."¹⁴

Although the Latter-day Saints moved from Kirtland, Ohio, to create a dynamic history in other states, Martin Harris remained at Kirtland for the next 30 years in the condition of a fossil embedded in an earlier layer of sediment. His constant and vocal testimony to scores of visitors is all the more remarkable in the light of the psychology of the man in this period. Social pressure should have worked against his bearing testimony at all. No other Book of Mormon witness remained in Kirtland, and he had practically lost touch with them after 1840. Not only had the Latter-day Saints deserted him (in his point of view) by moving away, but his second wife, Carolyn Young, immigrated to Utah in 1856 with their four children then born. As the years passed in Kirtland, Martin Harris was increasingly a solitary figure in non-Mormon society, which only ridiculed him for his persistence in declaring that he had seen the angel and the plates.

Martin Harris also felt strong resentment against Church leaders, in large part stemming from the blow to his ego in never being given a major office. If such thinking is obviously immature, it was nevertheless real to the man who had sacrificed domestic peace, fortune, and reputation to bring about the printing of the Book of Mormon and the founding of the Church. Real or supposed rejection breeds hostility and, at its worst, retaliation. Though such feelings were clearly held, in the face of them Martin Harris insisted that the Mormon cause was founded on objective truth as he had experienced it in his vision of 1829.

The foregoing tendencies explain the spiritual wanderlust that afflicted the solitary witness at Kirtland. In this period of his life he changed his religious position eight times, including a rebaptism by a Nauvoo missionary in 1842. Every affiliation of Martin Harris was with some Mormon group, except when he was affiliated with the Shaker belief, a position not basically contrary to his Book of Mormon testimony because the foundation of that movement was acceptance of personal revelation from heavenly beings. One may well ask, since religious instability is so much in evidence, why Martin Harris did not abandon his signed testimony. Freely seeking and bound by no Mormon ties, the only constancy of this period is

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seven by eight inches,
and weighing 40 to 60 pounds

his witness of the Nephite record. If Martin Harris' experience was an invention or emotional aberration, why didn't it go the way of his other religious flirtations? But if his doctrinal commitments in Kirtland were fickle, his testimony of the angel and the plates remained an immovable certainty.

Throughout the Ohio residence, Martin Harris was a forceful missionary for the Book of Mormon. Some two years after Joseph Smith's death the unstable Kirtland branch was largely converted to the pretensions of James J. Strang to Mormon leadership. Apparently a disciple, the Book of Mormon witness embarked for England with the Strangite leader Lester Brooks. But private correspondence from this companion proves that Martin was not committed to the Strangite cause and for this reason was hastened back to the States.¹⁵ Yet the eyewitnesses of the mission to England in 1846 agree that he powerfully reiterated his Book of Mormon testimony.

George Mantle later recalled attending a conference in Birmingham when Martin Harris unsuccessfully demanded the right to speak and was publicly repudiated by the presiding officer, Cyrus H. Wheelock. The latter's contemporary journal confirms Mantle's recollections. These may therefore be relied upon, especially since Mantle gave a matter-of-fact report of the words of Harris "that have from that time to this remained stamped on my memory":

"When we came out of the meeting Martin Harris was beset with a crowd in the street, expecting that he would furnish them with material to war against Mormonism; but when he was asked if Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, he answered yes; and when asked if the Book of Mormon was true, this was his answer: 'Do you know that is the sun shining on us? Because as sure as you know that, I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, and that he translated that book by the power of God.'"¹⁶

After the return of Harris from England, his life continued to be centered in Kirtland, except for occasional trips to his former home in Palmyra, New York,

where he still held land. Combining social visits with business, he also felt the religious duty to share his conviction with all who would listen. For instance, a Rochester editor reported such a missionary call in 1849, wherein the Book of Mormon witness supported his testimony "with the fluency and zeal of a devotee."¹⁷ Martin Harris was a man with a burning message. While traveling to England in 1855, David B. Dille stopped at the Harris home in Kirtland and that same year recorded his visit in detail. Martin was bedfast, so sick that he had not eaten anything in three days. But he bore his testimony with enthusiasm:

"I know that the plates have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice declared it unto us. . . . And as many of the plates as Joseph Smith translated I handled with my hands, plate after plate.' Then describing their dimensions, he pointed with one of the fingers of his left hand to the back of his right hand and said, 'I should think they were so long, or about eight inches, and about so thick, or about four inches. . . .'"¹⁸

Many of the accounts of interviews with Martin Harris stress that expressing the intense conviction of his testimony reinvigorated his weak frame, and the Dille interview is impressive in this respect. The 72-year-old man insisted on getting dressed at once, ordered a meal, and spent the rest of the day in animated conversation with the young missionary, even hearing him preach that evening. Dille later recalled that after this meeting, the missionary spirit of the witness was high: "Just let me go with you to England. . . . You do the preaching and I will bear testimony to the Book of Mormon, and we will convert all England."¹⁹ This interview must be typical of a dozen recorded conversations with Martin Harris at Kirtland that are preserved in lesser detail. Scores of people talked with him directly about his testimony, which was given with consistent particulars and uncompromising conviction.

Upon his decision to return to the Latter-day Saints in Utah in 1870, the patriarch expressed his views to a more attentive audience. His precise views upon returning were recorded in some detail by a disinterested witness, thanks to the foresight of Edward Stevenson, his companion on the return trip, who arranged an interview for the *Iowa State Register* in Des Moines. These are sample impressions from the non-Mormon editor:

"Mr. Harris is now in his 88th year, though still quite vigorous and sprightly, and he is *Mormon*, soul and body. . . . The old gentleman evidently loves to relate the incidents with which he was personally connected, and he does it with wonderful enthusiasm. . . . Joseph Smith was the first to handle the tables,

“It is not a mere belief, but is a matter of knowledge. I saw the plates. . . ,” he replied.

and Martin Harris, one of the appointed witnesses, the second. Mr. Harris describes the plates as being of thin leaves of gold, measuring seven by eight inches, and weighing altogether, from forty to sixty pounds. . . . He believes in the visitations of angels in bodily form, for he has seen and conversed with them, as he thinks, and is satisfied.”²⁰

Interviewed by Utah editors, listened to attentively by thousands in two Tabernacle speeches in Salt Lake City, and by hundreds in talks in wards and private conversations, the aged Harris never tired in repeating his story. During his stay of some six weeks in Salt Lake City he stayed at the home of his grand-niece, Irinda Crandall McEwan, who later recalled the numerous callers to whom Martin bore his testimony. Her speech at a family reunion was summarized by the able and objective president of Brigham Young University, Franklin S. Harris:

“[H]undreds of people came to see him, including President Brigham Young, to talk over with him the details regarding his contact with the Book of Mormon story and of the appearance of the angel to him. She said that anyone who heard Martin Harris describe the scenes and bear his testimony to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon could not help but be deeply impressed with his sincerity and his absolute conviction of the truth of what he was saying.”²¹

It is well known that Martin Harris lived another five years in Utah and died July 10, 1875, with his lifelong testimony of the Book of Mormon upon his lips. He resided the entire time with his oldest son by Carolyn Young, Martin Harris, Jr., who lived in Smithfield until 1874 and then moved to Clarkston. Over thirty-five people have left their impressions of talking with the elderly witness during his Utah residence. When and where such interviews took place is not as important for the present purpose as what he said. A survey of his typical language reveals the positiveness of his assertions.

John Thompson, a friend in Clarkston, related that he brought two unbelievers to his notable neighbor:

“One of them asked Mr. Harris if he believed the Book of Mormon to be true, and he told them *no*. They told him they had heard that he had never denied the

truth of the book. He told them that he knew it was true and that was past believing.”²²

A half-dozen recorded interviews report the same response. Thomas Godfrey remembered that Martin Harris insisted that “knowledge supercedes belief,” because “I saw the angel and saw the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated and heard the voice of God declare it was translated correctly.”²³ Alma L. Jensen, present on the same occasion, gave an independent recollection of the same language but remembered the additional detail that Martin Harris physically pointed to his eyes and ears while talking to emphasize the personal knowledge of his senses.²⁴ Robert Aveson, a lifelong printer, recalled the exact day on which he had a long interview with the 91-year-old man, who “walked in a stooping position.” He asked directly about seeing the plates and the angel and received the clear reply:

“It is not a mere belief, but is a matter of knowledge. I saw the plates and the inscriptions thereon. I saw the angel, and he showed them unto me.”²⁵

A farmer by occupation, Martin Harris dealt with physical objects in nature, and this furnished the language of simple comparison by which he emphasized the absolute reality of his vision. Such vivid illustrations were not easily forgotten by those who listened. Edward Moroni Thurman was about twenty-five when he saw him at a blacksmith shop and asked whether the Book of Mormon was true. The reply was a question of whether Thurman could see a nearby apple tree, and he was told that the vision was as factual as that simple sight before them.²⁶ Accosted on the street by a group of challenging teenagers of Clarkston, the intense nonagenarian countered with the question of whether the group could see a nearby chopping block. Upon their assent, he replied, “Well, just as plain as you see that chopping block, I saw the plates; and sooner than I would deny it I would lay my head upon that chopping block and let you chop it off.”²⁷ Twelve-year-old William Glenn stood by as his mature companion questioned whether Martin Harris was sure that he had seen the angel and the plates, and the spirited answer made an indelible impression upon the young Scottish immigrant. Martin Harris held out his right hand and insisted:

“Gentlemen, do you see that hand? Are you sure you see it? are your eyes playing you a trick or something? No. Well, as sure as you see my hand so sure did I see the angel and the plates.”²⁸

The wife of Martin’s nephew asked for the truth in a private conversation and was told, “Just as sure as the sun comes up in the east and sets in the west, I did.”²⁹ The more normal form of the latter metaphor was a certainty “as surely as the sun is shining on us,” a

statement that can be documented in England in 1846, in Kirtland in 1869, and in Utah in 1871. William H. Homer remembered that after Martin Harris made this comparison he added, "I might as well doubt my own existence as to doubt the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon or the divine calling of Joseph Smith."³⁰

The average Latter-day Saint who asked Martin Harris about his testimony was not a naive believer who openly or subtly asked for mere confirmation. A good share of the answers here surveyed were to questions that deliberately tested the genuineness of the experience. In the period of Martin's most complete estrangement in Kirtland, David Cannon asked "if there was any possibility of him having been deceived in regard to the visitation of an angel," and the firm response of the older man completely satisfied the cross-questioning of the independent missionary.³¹ Later in Utah a highly practical man of 30, George Godfrey, attended the venerable Harris in his last illness and deliberately waited for a semiconscious moment to suggest that his testimony was partially based on deception. The response was vigorous:

"I know what I know. I have seen what I have seen, and I have heard what I have heard. I have seen the gold plates. . . . An angel appeared to me and others. . . ."³²

Filled with constant missionary zeal, Martin Harris in his closing years displayed a deep desire that his message might not be limited to the few who were able to talk directly with him. John E. Godfrey remembered the spontaneous response to his visit in the last year of the witness's life: "I am pleased to have you come, and I wish I could bear my testimony to the whole world."³³ Young William Pilkington lived in the Harris home during this final period and never forgot how insistently the old man charged him to repeat to others his personal experience of seeing the angel and the plates: "And he would hold up his right hand and swear himself that he was telling the truth."³⁴ His bishop in Clarkston was impressed with the remarkable clarity of Martin's mind up to the end. When he reiterated his testimony in the closing days of his life, the 92-year-old witness added:

"I tell you of these things that you may tell others that what I have said is true, and I dare not deny it; I heard the voice of God commanding me to testify to the same."³⁵

The agreement of repeated interviews with Martin Harris proves that his intense certainty never varied from his vision of the angel and the plates in 1829 to the moment of his death in 1875. Exactly one-half of his 92-year span preceded the vision, which came only after prayer that followed his most careful in-

vestigations of the processes of finding and translating the Book of Mormon. The doubter was transformed into an unshakable advocate, who throughout his remaining 46 years insisted without compromise on the objective reality of his experience. Martin Harris' precise words in a private letter best summarize his mission as a modern witness:

"[N]o man ever heard me in any way deny the truth of the Book of Mormon, the administration of the angel that showed me the plates, nor the organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints under the administration of Joseph Smith, Jun., the prophet whom the Lord raised up for that purpose in these the latter days, that he may show forth his power and glory."³⁶

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Joel Tiffany, "Mormonism—No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly*, Vol. 4 (May 1859), pp. 168-70.
- ²Letter of Charles Anthon to E. D. Howe, New York, Feb. 17, 1834; cit. E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio, 1834), p. 271.
- ³Letter of Charles Anthon to Rev. Dr. Coit, New York, April 3, 1841; cit. John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* (New York, 1842), p. 235.
- ⁴Edward Stevenson, "One of the Three Witnesses," *Deseret News*, Dec. 13, 1881.
- ⁵Joseph Smith, "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, No. 21 (Sept. 1, 1842), p. 898.
- ⁶Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith* (Liverpool, 1853), p. 139.
- ⁷*Painesville Telegraph*, Mar. 15, 1831.
- ⁸Letter of W. W. Phelps to E. D. Howe, Canandaigua, New York, Jan. 15, 1831; cit. Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
- ⁹Letter of Joseph Fielding to Parley P. Pratt, Preston, England, June 20, 1841; cit. *Millennial Star*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (August 1841), p. 52.
- ¹⁰*The Evening and the Morning Star*, Vol. I, No. 9 (February 1833), p. 70.
- ¹¹Letter of Emer Harris to George James, May 7, 1833, Springville, Pa.; ms. Brigham Young University Library.
- ¹²Letter of Thomas Colburn to Erastus Snow, St. Louis, May 2, 1855, cit. *St. Louis Luminary*, May 5, 1855.
- ¹³Letter of John Smith to George A. Smith, Jan. 1, 1838, Kirtland, Ohio; ms. Church Historian's Office.
- ¹⁴Letter of George A. Smith to Josiah Fleming, March 30, 1838, Kirtland, Ohio; ms. Church Historian's Office.
- ¹⁵Letter of Lester Brooks to James M. Adams, Jan. 12, 1847, LaPorte, Ohio, ms. Yale University; also cited by Milo H. Quaipe, *The Kingdom of Saint James* (New Haven, Conn., 1930), p. 243.
- ¹⁶Letter of George Mantle to Marietta Walker, Dec. 26, 1888, St. Catherine, Mo.; cit. *Autumn Leaves*, Vol. 2 (1889), p. 141.
- ¹⁷*Rochester Daily American*, Nov. 16, 1849.
- ¹⁸Statement of David B. Dille, Sept. 15, 1853, deposited in *Millennial Star* office; cit. *Millennial Star*, Vol. 21 (Aug. 20, 1859), p. 545.
- ¹⁹The History of D. B. Dille, an autobiography written about 1886, microfilm of ms. at the Genealogical Society library, Salt Lake City.
- ²⁰*Daily Iowa State Register*, Aug. 28, 1870; also cited in the valuable compilation of Joseph Grant Stevenson, *The Stevenson Family History*, Vol. I (Provo, Utah, 1955), pp. 156-57.
- ²¹Signed report of Harris Family Meeting at Geneva Resort, Utah County, Utah, August 3, 1928; ms. at Brigham Young University.
- ²²Autobiography of John Thompson, written 1922, presently owned by his daughter, Jane Dahle.
- ²³Affidavit of Thomas Godfrey, July 2, 1933, Church Historian's Office.
- ²⁴Autobiography of Alma L. Jensen, written 1932; Xerox copy Brigham Young University Library.
- ²⁵Robert Aveson, "Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon," *Deseret News*, April 2, 1927.
- ²⁶Private family records of Edward Moroni Thurman, copied by Ray S. Thurman, Grover, Wyoming.
- ²⁷Statement of Comfort Elizabeth Godfrey Flinders to N. B. Lundwall, Sept. 2, 1943, Ogden, Utah; cit. *Assorted Gems of Priceless Value* (Salt Lake City: 1944), p. 351.
- ²⁸Statement of William M. Glenn to O. E. Fischbacher, May 30, 1943, Cardston, Alberta, Canada; cit. *Deseret News*, Oct. 2, 1943.
- ²⁹Family letter of Charles Martin and Shirley Harris, Aug. 14, 1962, addressed to Joyce Harris Lillywhite.
- ³⁰William Harrison Homer, "The Passing of Martin Harris," *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 29 (March 1926), p. 470.
- ³¹David H. Cannon, "A History of the Cannon Family," speech given Feb. 19, 1922, copies of which are held by descendants; also cited in *Cannon Family Historical Treasury*, ed. Beatrice Cannon Evans and Janath Russell Cannon (Salt Lake City, 1967), p. 250.
- ³²Affidavit of George Godfrey, Oct. 29, 1921; original still held by attesting notary John J. Shumway, Garland, Utah.
- ³³Affidavit of John E. Godfrey, June 2, 1933, Church Historian's Office.
- ³⁴Pilkington made numerous statements, the originals of most of which are at the Church Historian's Office. "The Dying Testimony of Martin Harris," quoted here, is photographically reproduced in Wayne Cutler Gunnell, "Martin Harris, Witness and Benefactor to the Book of Mormon," BYU thesis, 1955, pp. 104-11.
- ³⁵Letter of Simon Smith to President Joseph Smith III, Dec. 29, 1880, Clifton, England; *Saints' Herald*, Vol. 28 (Feb. 1, 1881), p. 43.
- ³⁶Letter of Martin Harris, Sr., to Hanna B. Emerson, January, 1871, Smithfield, Utah Territory; cit. *Saints' Herald*, Vol. 22 (1875), p. 630.