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Review of Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volumes 7–9

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Abstract: Following the finest contemporary standards of documentary editing employed in such similar on-going, multivolume publication enterprises as *The Papers of George Washington*, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, and *The Papers of James Madison*,¹ these three volumes—volumes 7–9 of the Documents series—cover Latter-day Saint history from the arrival of the Saints in Commerce, Illinois, in 1839 after their expulsion from Missouri until the end of April 1842—a period of three very eventful years. In large and very readable text and consistent formatting, they cover the formative period of settlement in what became “Nauvoo, the Beautiful.”



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Documents, September 1839–January 1841

Vol. 7 of the Documents series of The Joseph Smith Papers,
edited by Matthew C. Godfrey, Spencer W. McBride,
Alex D. Smith, and Christopher James Blythe

The Joseph Smith Papers. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2018

Documents, February–November 1841

Vol. 8 of the Documents series of The Joseph Smith Papers,
edited by Brent M. Rogers, Mason K. Allred,
Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Brett D. Dowdle

The Joseph Smith Papers. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2019

Documents, December 1841–April 1842

Vol. 9 of the Documents series of The Joseph Smith Papers,
edited by Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimburger, and
Christopher James Blythe

The Joseph Smith Papers. Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2019

Reviewed by Richard E. Bennett

Almost fifty years ago, my wife, Patricia, and I had the distinct privilege to work for incoming Church Historian Leonard J. Arrington in combing through the archives of the Church History Library in Salt Lake City for source materials long since shelved, considered lost, or otherwise off-limits. Along the way, we also enjoyed working with a team of other dedicated scholars brought in to work under Arrington's kind and learned tutorship. Among them was a talented archivist/historian named Dean Jessee, who was an assiduous student of the document, particularly the papers of the prophet Joseph Smith Jr. Owning a passion for the original manuscript and for letting primary sources speak for themselves, Jessee was less the interpreter and more the preserver. The publication of the multivolume Joseph Smith Papers a half century on owes much to the quiet, painstaking, and transformative work of this good man. They are a legacy to his vision, drive, and effort through years of ups and downs too many and sometimes too painful to discuss

here. They are also a tribute to the leadership of Elder Steven E. Snow, recent Church Historian and Recorder from 2012 to 2019, who did so much to see these latest volumes published.

Designed to replace Joseph Smith's long-favored, but now outdated, multivolume *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (HC), edited in large measure by B. H. Roberts almost one hundred years ago, the Joseph Smith Papers (JSP) do not presume to be a history of the Church and are most certainly not a biography of Joseph Smith. While they present faithfully and honestly the documents themselves, the interpretations of these manuscript materials are deliberately left up to the reader to make. Clearly, they are not meant to be the final word on the writing of Church history; rather, they are designed to facilitate and promote further research and much more careful understanding of what Joseph Smith said, wrote, believed, or received. Nevertheless, as the introduction to volume 7 argues, these documents are "critical to understanding Joseph Smith as a person" (7:xxxvi). As testament to the outstanding value of this work, no future study of Joseph Smith, his feelings, convictions, and doctrines or of the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be done without rigorous use of the Joseph Smith Papers.

Following the finest contemporary standards of documentary editing employed in such similar on-going, multivolume publication enterprises as *The Papers of George Washington*, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, and *The Papers of James Madison*,¹ these three volumes—volumes 7–9 of the Documents series—cover Latter-day Saint history from the arrival of the Saints in Commerce, Illinois, in 1839 after their expulsion from Missouri until the end of April 1842—a period of three very eventful years. In large and very readable text and consistent formatting, they cover the formative period of settlement in what became "Nauvoo, the Beautiful." Featured are letters to and from the Prophet, his many sermons and revelations, minutes of meetings which he attended, sales and receipts, a wide range of legal papers, and a host of other papers. These three volumes speak of Smith's 1839 trip to Washington, D.C., in search of reparations from Congress for injustices brought upon the Saints in Missouri during the so-called "Mormon War"; the securing

1. David R. Hoth and others, eds., *The Papers of George Washington*, in various series (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998–); J. Jefferson Looney and others, eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, in various series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004–); and David B. Mattern and others, eds., *The Papers of James Madison*, in various series (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009–).

of the Nauvoo Charter; a wide range of land transactions with Horace H. Hotchkiss and other land owners; the establishment of the Nauvoo Relief Society and of the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge; doctrinally rich sermons addressing such topics as baptisms for the dead, the Book of Abraham, and the nature of the Spirit; and early efforts at building the Nauvoo Temple and the Nauvoo House. Included also are reports on the successful rise of the Church elsewhere, especially in Great Britain, in large part owing to the immensely successful mission of the Twelve Apostles there from 1838 to 1841. Despite the many deaths brought on by “ague” or malaria as the Saints toiled to drain nearby swamps, it was a generally optimistic time when the Church was reconstituting itself with a new cast of characters, newly appointed leaders, and exciting new temple-based doctrines and ordinances for the salvation of both the living and the dead. With all its financial troubles, the Church was once again rearing another temple, more magnificent than the edifice it had constructed in Kirtland, and was looking confidently ahead until troubling issues, especially from within, began to cast a new and menacing shadow over its future prospects.

This work is so incredibly comprehensive that *context* is as much the message of the JSP as *content*. Unlike contemporary Bibles of the British Foreign Bible Society and of the American Bible Society that were being published “without note or comment,” Joseph Smith’s papers never stand alone. As with the earlier six volumes in this Documents series, volumes 7–9 feature an archival “Source Note” on the history, provenance, and physical condition of each document; a “Historical Introduction” providing for rich historical context; the document itself presented in its original format, complete with spelling and grammatical errors; and finally, numerous helpful footnote citations and explanations. In total, there are a staggering number of footnotes in all three volumes—6,610 to be precise! In the back of each volume are pages and pages of helpful appendices, chronologies, geographical and biographical directories, excellent maps, organizational charts, essays on sources, cross-sectional references to corresponding sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, acknowledgments, and, finally, a very fulsome index.

The definition of what constitutes “Papers” certainly influenced the size and scope of this work and begs discussion because the Joseph Smith Papers, in the strictest sense of the word, are often not Joseph Smith Jr.’s papers at all. While letters to and from the Prophet certainly fit this category, Wilford Woodruff’s journal entries and those of a score of other journal records of Smith’s sermons and discourses are accounts of what

others thought they heard Smith say. Furthermore, minutes of city council and Nauvoo Legion meetings, phrenology charts, and the entire Act to Incorporate the City of Nauvoo—presented here in its multipage entirety—can hardly be considered documents that Joseph Smith authored, owned, or received. Of the 129 documents in volume 7 alone, roughly 25 percent of them fall into this questionable category. For a work that seeks to authenticate exactly what Joseph Smith said or wrote, this expansive effort at including more rather than less demands a great deal of explanatory editing and might even perpetuate the kind of misunderstandings and misconceptions the JSP were designed to eliminate.

Nevertheless, I applaud the deliberate editorial decision to err on the side of including too much rather than too little. Following more closely the rationale used in *The Papers of James Madison* editorial project than those of either Washington's or Jefferson's, the editors include far more than merely the correspondence of Joseph Smith. Just as the Madison Papers editors decided to include such other things as proclamations, messages, addresses, and various memoranda based "on the extent to which they illuminated Madison's thoughts or his personal or official life," so too have the JSP editors expanded the parameters of what constitutes "Papers." Once again, I quote from the Madison Papers: "The degree of involvement he had with the document, either as recipient or sender, is of paramount concern," whether or not it is "of intrinsic interest in adding a new dimension to our understanding of the man, and in the case of a lengthy document, whether it has been previously published."² One can quibble at the scope and definition of what constitutes Smith's documents, but one must agree that in the final analysis it is the mind and soul of Joseph Smith that are being preserved here, not his papers in the strictest sense.

There is so much more to commend than to criticize in these volumes. Although compiled by three different teams of editors—which unfortunately did not include a single woman scholar—there is surprising consistency in tone, style, and content throughout the volumes. The *Papers* have also gone through three independent levels of text verification. If there are any spelling errors, I have yet to find them. The professional care taken by the content editors as well as many other copy editors toiling in the background to produce so handsome a final product is abundantly evident.

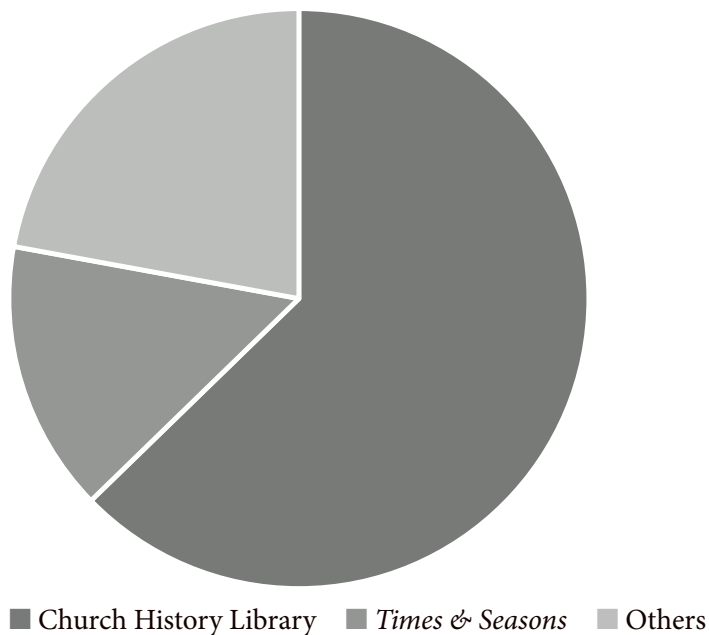
Likewise, the background legwork effort at tracking down the existence, authenticity, and whereabouts of the 330 documents in these three

2. Mattern and others, *Papers of James Madison*, 8:xxxii.

Table One
Number/Provenance of Documents Found in Volumes 7–9

Repository	Volume 7	Volume 8	Volume 9
Church History Library	84	60	63
<i>Times and Seasons</i>	12	18	20
National Archives	7	0	0
Brigham Young University	5	7	7
Abraham Lincoln Pres. Library	1	3	2
Community of Christ	3	0	3
Huntington Library	1	2	0
Hancock County Courthouse	0	1	4
Library of Congress	3	0	0
Illinois State Archives	1	1	0
Chicago History Museum	1	1	0
Missouri Historical Museum	0	1	0
New York Public Library	0	1	0
University of Utah	1	0	0
Yale University (Beinecke)	1	0	0
University of Illinois–Urbana	0	0	1
Utah State Historical Society	0	0	1
Historical Society of Pa.	0	1	0
Iowa Historical Society	1	0	0
Privately Held	0	1	0

Table One in Pie Chart Format
Provenance of Documents



volumes is highly commendable. As per the accompanying chart, while almost 66 percent, or two-thirds, of the documents are to be found in the Church History Library in Salt Lake City, 123 of them are available only in the Nauvoo newspaper *Times and Seasons* and at eighteen other repositories all across the country. While some are copies of originals long since lost, approximately 80 percent are originals. This encyclopedic effort bore rich dividends, one being the surprising decision of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to transfer to the Church History Library various documents of Joseph Smith long held in its vaults—an official nod in favor of the project and a welcomed effort at transparency.

One highly beneficial collateral benefit stemming from the Joseph Smith Papers project is the inevitable discovery of documents referred to by Joseph Smith and many others that are no longer extant or available—what I am calling the “lost Joseph Smith Papers.” Many letters that Joseph wrote are not to be found anywhere today, and the same with several letters written to him. Regrettably, Smith seldom wrote out his sermons, and several of them were never recorded by anyone. However, the integrity of this work inevitably notes such omissions. So, too, where only copies of the originals remain, the editors are quick to note that fact.

And since the *Papers* are a veritable parade of personalities, another rich contribution of the detailed editorial process is learning much about the scores of men and women other than Joseph Smith who are referenced throughout. The letters to and from such individuals as Almon W. Babbitt, Orson Hyde, Horace H. Hotchkiss, John M. Bernhisel, Senator Richard Young, and a host of others reveal much about their intent and personality to even the most seasoned Church historian. For instance, I came away with a much fuller understanding—and appreciation—of John E. Page than I ever had before.

This effort to verify the authenticity of what Joseph Smith actually said or wrote is indispensable to understanding the character of the man and the policies, doctrines, and nature of the Church he established. Not only historians but also students of the doctrines of the Church, particularly of the unfolding ordinances of baptisms for the dead and of the temple endowment, will do well to consult these particular volumes.³ While

3. Occasionally the editors get carried away and make some very opinionated statements that could bear much greater scrutiny. For instance, when speaking of Smith’s October 3–5, 1840, sermon on baptism for the dead, they suggest that he may have learned of it from reading Charles Buck’s *Theological Dictionary*. They also state that

many of Joseph Smith’s revelations, let alone his sermons and addresses, were never canonized, what is found here is essential to understanding the “plan of salvation” as Joseph expounded upon it during these early Nauvoo years.

And as for understanding Joseph Smith himself better, the many documents on land sales and various financial transactions clearly show a prophet-leader dealing with extremely difficult business matters that eventually led him to declare bankruptcy in late 1842—a matter well documented herein. Involved in so many challenging matters and unwilling, if not unable, to delegate effectively, Smith was overwhelmed by the “temporalities” of directing a rapidly growing, increasingly complicated, multifaceted church enterprise. It is astounding that he had the strength and the time to address simultaneously the “spiritualities” of revealing new doctrines, temple ordinances, and other saving principles.

These many worthy positives notwithstanding, these volumes are not without their deficiencies or shortcomings. I return to the matter of inclusiveness. The Joseph Smith Papers project prides itself on being the repository of “all” of Smith’s papers, when in fact a great many items here are but representative samples of such things as declarations, receipts, pay orders, recommendations, and so forth. In the interest of space, not everything of Joseph Smith’s can or ought to be included, particularly of the mundane and baneful. However, it is not always made clear why one particular document is included and others are not. There also seems to be confusion over the inclusion of so many legal papers—such things as powers of attorney, bonds, licenses, promissory notes, and so forth—when a separate Joseph Smith Papers Legal volume is forthcoming that will highlight all such records. A more careful delineation of which documents should go into which volumes would save space and reduce redundancy. Fortunately, most of these materials are—or will be—found on the JSP website.

More to the point, completely lacking are any of the papers of Joseph Smith’s brother Hyrum, who as a member of the First Presidency from 1838 to 1841 and then as Associate President and Presiding Patriarch of the Church from 1840 to 1844 wrote much on behalf of both himself and his brother and who traveled extensively and often spoke in his brother’s behalf. Hyrum received much communication involving both himself and Joseph. It is surprising that while the editors bent over backwards to include so many papers not directly authored by the Prophet, they failed

Smith’s interest in the ancient prophet Enoch may have been spawned by Richard Laurence’s book on the same—both highly speculative and unsupported claims.

to include hardly any of those of his patriarch brother. This omission is most telling in these volumes during the discussions of the problems Joseph Smith was facing with Babbitt and his adamant refusal to close down Kirtland as an alternative settlement site to Nauvoo. Hyrum was very much acting on behalf of his brother during all these difficult times as well as being land agent for the Church back East. To omit drawing from his papers, when some of them so obviously represent his brother's directives and considerations, does a disservice to the project. By extension, one also wonders whether various papers of Joseph's other counselors, including Sidney Rigdon, and even of his wife Emma Smith should not have been included in what is otherwise a very expansive interpretation of what constitutes the "Papers" of Joseph. Until the Hyrum Smith Papers are published—hopefully to the same standard of excellence as those of his brother—students and scholars will have to go elsewhere to get a more complete picture of some of these difficult matters.

A second criticism is the stubborn insistence throughout to refrain from referencing some of the finest secondary literature on both historical and doctrinal topics significantly addressed in the documents. This was likely a conscious decision on the part of the editors, like those of the various presidential papers, not to highlight or to appear to favor the work of contemporary scholars and biographers, since the Papers project is fundamentally documentary in nature and not interpretive. Their rationale was as follows: "Secondary sources of sound scholarship are cited when they will distill several primary sources or provide useful general content" (7:xliii). However, the editing is inconsistent in this regard, citing only occasionally such scholars as Alex Baugh, Stephen LeSueur, Todd Compton, and Jill Derr but leaving off almost entirely the works of Ryan Tobler, Robert Flanders, and, most annoyingly, Glen Leonard, whose work *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* remains the most thorough work on the history of Nauvoo yet written. Furthermore, some of the finest and most current research with so much "useful general content" on the Nauvoo Charter, the Nauvoo Legion, and temple ordinances seems to be deliberately avoided. And how can there be references to the Missouri petitions for redress without drawing more upon the work Clark Johnson has so faithfully compiled in his study of the same?⁴

Which leads me to a third and more telling criticism—the tentative, somewhat fumbling, and incomplete effort at explaining Joseph

4. Clark V. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833–1838 Missouri Conflict* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017).

Smith's involvement in plural marriage, particularly of the polyandrous variety. By the time volume 9 ends in late April 1842, Joseph Smith had married at least six other women, four of whom—Marinda Johnson Nancy Hyde; Sylvia Sessions Lyon; Lyon's mother, Patty Bartlett Sessions; and Presendia Huntington Buell—were already married to other men.⁵ To be sure, no contemporary document has apparently survived that speaks directly of such delicate matters, although to the editors' credit, volume 9 does include in the appendix an alleged letter of Joseph Smith to Sidney Rigdon's daughter, Nancy Rigdon, very likely concerning a proposition for marriage. The editors admit, "Although this letter's authenticity is contested, Joseph Smith both wrote and offered to write similar letters of explanation about the principle of plural marriage to other prospective spouses" (9:414). Clearly, there are enough references in various letters and sermons included herein that hint at the matter that even the editors felt compelled to address it. Even the chronologies at the end of each volume provide the dates of each of these marriages but do so without note or comment.

This is particularly frustrating and disappointing in the case of Marinda Hyde, whom Joseph Smith married likely in April 1842 while her husband, Orson Hyde, was serving a mission at Smith's request to Europe and Palestine. We are given here only a partial explanation and insufficient justification of a most difficult, somewhat perilous practice then developing. This is particularly perplexing when one considers how scrupulously careful the editors have been throughout these three volumes in explaining everything from language phraseologies, obscure individuals, scriptural references, difficult legal terms, mundane financial transactions, and a host of other satellite concerns. Buried in the biographical directory to volume 9, on page 459, the editors state that "plural wives of Joseph Smith and others are not listed here" and that "a list of Joseph Smith's plural wives will appear on the Joseph Smith Papers website," as if the names of these wives, some of whom are mentioned in the documents and all of whom are found in the chronologies, are not quite worthy of inclusion in the published volume or might generate unnecessary confusion or misunderstanding. I submit that this deficiency must be far better handled in later volumes to preserve the authenticity and integrity of the purpose and scope of the JSP, which so many have labored so long and hard to establish.

5. See Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Press, 1997).

To conclude, there will inevitably be later discoveries of additional Joseph Smith papers in the future, and as such become known, these volumes may well become out-of-date and incomplete. However, thanks to digital technology, the JSP website will inevitably include them in the years to come. I have no doubt that they will be described and authenticated in much the same excellent way the documents in these volumes have been handled in Dean Jessee-like fashion to preserve not just the Papers per se but the character and calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

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