
Burned or Stolen: The Lost 116 Pages

D&C 10:8, 11

There are two theories—stolen or burned—about what happened to the 116 manuscript pages that contained the Book of Lehi and possibly the first two chapters of the Book of Mosiah.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said the manuscript was stolen. His preface to the 1830 Book of Mormon reads,

To the Reader— . . . I would inform you that I translated, by the gift and power of God, and caused to be written, one hundred and sixteen pages, the which I took from the Book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi, by the hand of Mormon; which said account, some person or persons have stolen and kept from me, notwithstanding my utmost exertions to recover it again.¹

Lucy Mack Smith believed that it was Lucy Harris, the wife of Martin Harris, who stole the manuscript. She wrote,

There is no doubt but Mrs. [Lucy] Harris took it from the drawer, with the view of retaining it, until another translation should be given, then, to alter the original translation, for the purpose of showing a discrepancy. . . . She intended to keep the manuscript until the book was published. And then put these one hundred and sixteen pages

¹ Joseph Smith, preface, 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon.

into the hands of someone who would publish them, and show how they varied from those published in the Book of Mormon.²

Contemporary John A. Clark viewed the theft of the 116 page manuscript involving more persons than Lucy Harris:

[Lucy Harris] seize[d] the manuscript and put it into the hands of one of her neighbours for safer keeping. When the manuscript was discovered to be missing, suspicion immediately fastened upon Mrs. Harris. She, however, refused to give any information in relation to the matter, but simply replied: "If this be a divine communication, the same being who revealed it to you can easily replace it."³

Contemporary Orsamus Turner wrote of Lucy Harris burning the manuscript:

The wife of Harris was a rank infidel and heretic, touching the whole thing, and decidedly opposed to her husband's participation in it. With sacriligious [*sic*] hands, she seized over an hundred of the manuscript pages of the new revelation, and burned or secreted them."⁴

In an 1884 interview of former Palmyra resident Lorenzo Saunders by E. L. Kelly, Saunders claimed that Lucy Harris confessed to being a party to the incendiary demise of the manuscript. He stated,

I know what course she took, and when she burned up those papers. I heard her say she burned the papers, she was pretty high on combativeness. . . . She says she burned them up. And there was no mistake, but she did. They never was found; never come to light. I lived till I was 43 years old right there; and she never denied of burning the papers, he [Martin] brought them home to proselyte her and she burned them.⁵

Historian Thomas Cook in 1930 claimed that Lucy Harris threw the manuscript into a fire with no alteration of any word of the manuscript: "At one time while engaged in a

² Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, p. 85. Joseph Smith Papers.

³ John Alonzo Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* (Philadelphia: W. J. & J. K. Simon, 1842), 247–248.

⁴ Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1852), 215.

⁵ Lorenzo Saunders, interviewed by E. L. Kelly, November 12, 1884, p. 3, Township of Reading, Hillsdale County, Michigan, Special Collections, Merrill-Cazier Library.

heated argument with her husband [Lucy] grabbed up a bundle of his manuscripts and threw them into the fire.”⁶

Joseph Smith believed that someone or some persons had stolen the manuscript and that “by stratagem they got them away.”⁷ Lucy Harris was suspected as being the thief. She adamantly denied any responsibility for the loss, although many believed her responsible for the theft. Without her confession and others not claiming the deed, speculation has run rampant as to what happened to the manuscript. Opinions vary and answers are few.

The most definitive answer was revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith in July 1828 by the Lord: “Because you have delivered the writings into [Martin’s] hands, behold, wicked men have taken them from you. . . . They have altered the words, they read contrary from that which you translated and caused to be written” (D&C 10:8, 11).

⁶ Thomas L. Cook, *Palmyra and Vicinity* (Palmyra, NY: Press of the Palmyra Courier-Journal, 1930), 206.

⁷ Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:21.