
The Church Historian

D&C 47:1

From 1830 to early 1831, Oliver Cowdery served as the first Church historian. (Questions have arisen as to whether he officially held the office of Church historian.) Oliver recorded minutes of meetings, membership information, and priesthood ordinations. In fall of 1830, Oliver began his journey to the borders of the Lamanites. In his place, John Whitmer was appointed “by the voice of the Elders to keep the Church record.” He wrote, “Joseph Smith Jr. said unto me you must also keep the Church history.”¹

John was reluctant to accept the role of Church historian and said that he would “rather not keep the church history, but observed—‘The will of the Lord be done, and if He desires it, I wish that He would manifest it through Joseph the Seer.’” Doctrine and Covenants 47, dated March 8, 1831, is the manifestation of the Lord’s will in calling John Whitmer to the office of Church historian. For accepting the calling, the Lord promised him, “It shall be given thee by th[e] comforter to write these things.”² Three months later, John began his history—“The Book of John Whitmer.”

In July 1832 the Prophet Joseph Smith encouraged John to “remember the commandment to him to keep a history of the church & the gathering.”³ Later that year, the Prophet Joseph received a revelation expanding John’s duties: “It is the duty of the Lord[’s] clerk whom he has appointed to keep a history and a general church record of all things that transpire in Zion . . . and also [the] manner of life and the faith and works and also of all the apostates.”⁴

John Whitmer kept an historical record from 1831 to 1838. It is said that his record—

¹ John Whitmer History, 1831–circa 1847, 24. Joseph Smith Papers.

² Revelation, circa 8 March 1831 [D&C 47], in Revelation Book 1, 80. Joseph Smith Papers.

³ “Historical Introduction” in John Whitmer History, 1831–circa 1847.

⁴ Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832, in Letter book circa 1847, 1:1. Joseph Smith Papers.

illuminates many important concerns of the early church, including property issues, church discipline, the treatment of dissidents, and the establishment of a priesthood leadership hierarchy. ... Whitmer's work is particularly significant for the revelations, petitions, and letters that form a large part of his history.⁵

John also wrote in the history of the Church of his own excommunication and his desire to be forgiven:

Some temporal movements, have not proved satisfactory to all parties has also terminated in the expulsion of [many] members, among whom is W. W. Phelps and myself. ... Therefore I close the history of the church of Latter Day Saints, Hoping that I may be forgiven of my faults, and my sins be blotted out and in the last day be saved in the kingdom of God notwithstanding my present situation.⁶

John refused to surrender his written history to Church leaders. After his death in 1878, his history passed to his brother David Whitmer. In 1903 the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints obtained the John Whitmer history from a descendant of David Whitmer. In 1974 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints acquired a microfilm copy of the John Whitmer history. It was not until 2012 that John Whitmer's history was published as part of the Joseph Smith Papers project.

As to the office of Church historian, the calling continued after John Whitmer left the Church in 1838. During the lifetime of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the assignment passed to John Corrill, who apostatized, then to Elias Higbee, whose family cares prevented him from giving much service, and then to Willard Richards.

Recognizing the need to put Church records in order and write the history which had been largely unattended for years, Willard Richards moved to the Nauvoo residence of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He was appointed the private secretary to Joseph Smith, Church recorder, clerk, and historian, while at the same time serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. In November 1841 Joseph Smith wrote in his journal, "I have been searching all my life to find a man after my own heart whom I could trust with my business in all things, and I have found him—Doctor Willard Richards is the man."⁷

⁵ "Historical Introduction" in John Whitmer History, 1831–circa 1847.

⁶ "Historical Introduction" in John Whitmer History, 1831–circa 1847.

⁷ Journal History of the Church, November 21, 1841