



Type: Journal Article

James H. Hart's Contribution to Our Knowledge of Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer

Author(s): Edward L. Hart

Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1996-1997), pp. 118-124

Published by: BYU Studies

Abstract: Most Latter-day Saints take for granted the existence of portraits of the Three Witnesses, but in fact no likeness of Oliver Cowdery was available to the Church until 1883, and then it was touch-and-go whether one would be obtained. Had it not been for the faith and tenacity of James H. Hart, who pursued the portrait when others had failed, we might never have known just what Oliver Cowdery looked like. In the course of following the trail of the portrait, Hart was also able to conduct important interviews with David Whitmer.



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on The Book of Mormon. Archived by permission of BYU Studies.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>



James H. Hart, 1825-1906. Courtesy Edward L. Hart.

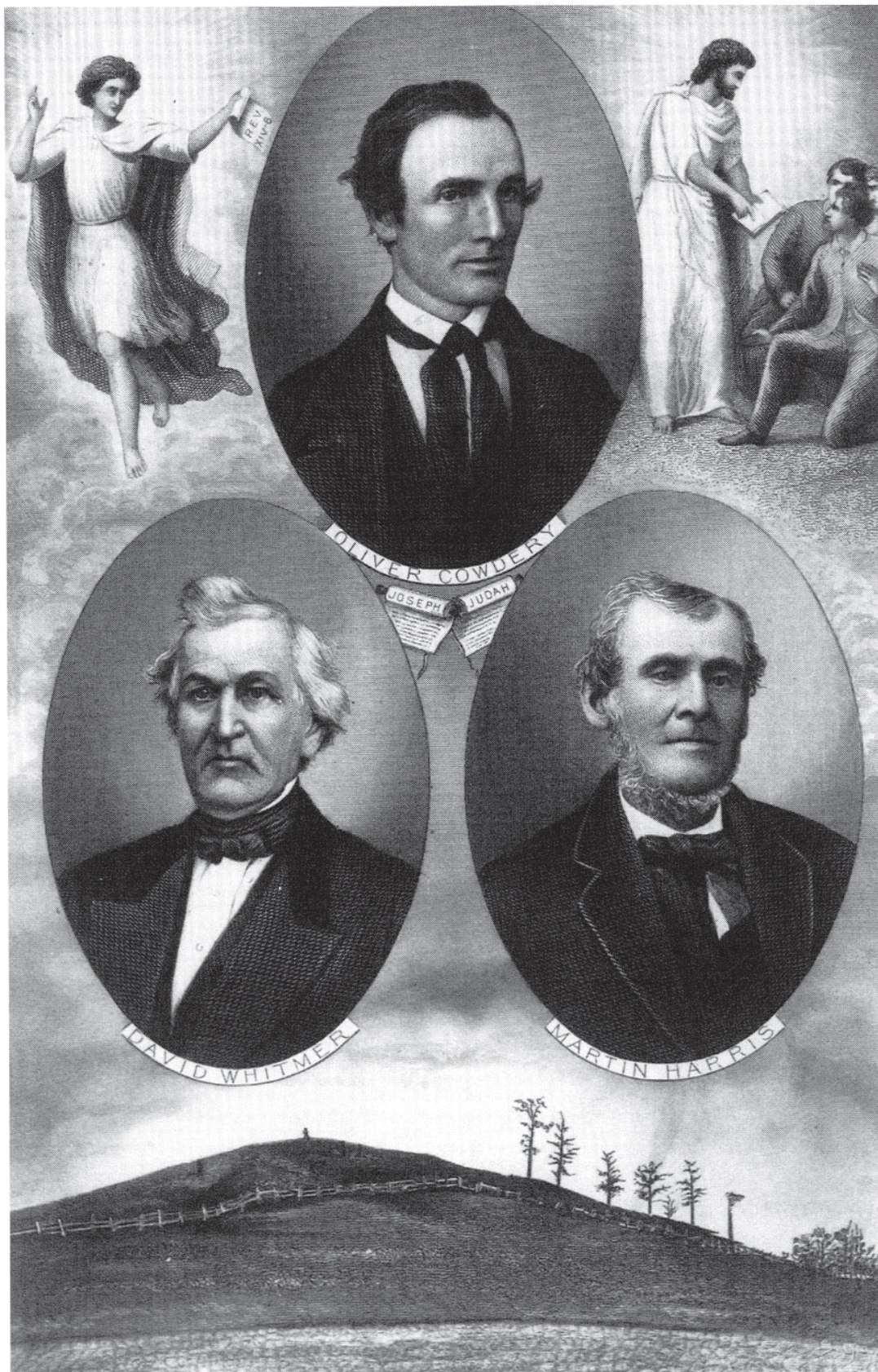
James H. Hart's Contribution to Our Knowledge of Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer

Edward L. Hart

Most Latter-day Saints take for granted the existence of portraits of the Three Witnesses, but in fact no likeness of Oliver Cowdery was available to the Church until 1883, and then it was touch-and-go whether one would be obtained. Had it not been for the faith and tenacity of James H. Hart, who pursued the portrait when others had failed, we might never have known just what Oliver Cowdery looked like. In the course of following the trail of the portrait, Hart was also able to conduct important interviews with David Whitmer.

Junius F. Wells, editor of the *Contributor*, a Church publication, could find no picture of Cowdery when he planned to publish portraits of the Three Witnesses in the October 1883 issue. He knew that an oil portrait and a daguerreotype photograph, taken of Cowdery four years before his death, were in Missouri in the hands of Cowdery's daughter, whose husband, Dr. Charles Johnson, was adamant about not letting the likenesses go. Wells, with the aid of others, had tried unsuccessfully to obtain the daguerreotype and as a last resort turned to James H. Hart for assistance.¹ "As it is my special mission to obtain it," wrote Hart, "I shall no doubt be successful."²

At the time Wells called upon him for help, Hart was immigration agent for the Church in New York³ and was on one of his regular visits West between immigrant ship arrivals. He immediately made plans to stop over in Missouri on his return trip to New York. He went first to see David Whitmer in Richmond, expecting to find the Johnsons there also. Whitmer informed him that the



The first LDS publication of Oliver Cowdery's portrait. This frontispiece for the October 1883 *Contributor* shows the Three Witnesses over an engraving of the Hill Cumorah. The angel on the left holds a scroll that reads, "Rev. XIV-6." At the top right is a heavenly being showing the golden plates to three men. Under Cowdery's portrait are the sticks or scrolls of Joseph and Judah brought together. Courtesy Edward L. Hart.

Johnsons, along with Whitmer's sister (Oliver Cowdery's widow), were in the extreme southwest corner of the state, South West City. Whitmer was not optimistic that Dr. Johnson would permit the portrait or the daguerreotype to be taken away.⁴

The railway stop nearest to South West City was Seneca, twenty-eight miles away. At Seneca, Hart hired a buggy and driver.⁵ The month was August, and the heat, dust, and flies assailed the horses, the driver, and Hart—always the immaculate English gentleman, with a full beard, top hat, and cane. Undeterred, Hart continued to the Johnson home.

"The doctor was at first quite hostile," Hart wrote, "but after laboring with him several hours, during which his wife and Mrs. Cowdery warmly seconded my pleading, some kind spirit came upon him and he gave me the choice between the oil painting and the daguerreotype."⁶ Hart wisely chose the daguerreotype and returned to Seneca the way he had come. He continued on to New York, where he placed the picture in the hands of H. B. Hall and Son, engravers. Since the engravers already had the likenesses of the other two Witnesses, they were able to complete the frontispiece in time for the October 1883 issue of the *Contributor*.

On a subsequent trip West, Hart repeated his journey to South West City to return the daguerreotype to its owners. Hart's acceptance of the assignment to procure the likeness as a "special mission" made him willing to expend a great deal of effort, which, along with his determination, conversational skill, and charm, resulted in the procurement of the portrait of Oliver Cowdery now familiar to virtually all Latter-day Saints.

During his journeys to obtain the daguerreotype and return it, James Hart had two opportunities to interview David Whitmer in Richmond, Missouri. Hart was one among several who reported that Whitmer remained firm to the end in his testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. Even though others also reported on Whitmer's testimony, some distinctive features of Hart's interviews lend a credibility that make them worth examining.

To begin with, Hart, sometime editor of the *Bear Lake Democrat*, which changed its name later to the *Southern Idaho Independent*, and associate editor of the *Paris Post*, was a skilled journalist and employed a form of Pitman shorthand to take down verbatim

his interviews with Whitmer, often putting portions in quotation marks. Immediately after the interviews, while his memory was still fresh, he transcribed his shorthand notes into his journal. Subsequently, Hart expanded the interviews by providing background and setting and then sent the write-ups to his hometown newspapers and to the *Deseret News*.

On his return visit to David Whitmer, Hart showed him what he had written, and Whitmer “fully endorsed [it] as a correct expression of his sentiments.”⁷ The final stage for Hart was the transformation of the prose versions of the interviews into a long poem divided into iambic pentameter quatrains composed of two couplets. In this final form, called appropriately “An Interview with David Whitmer,”⁸ Hart was able to be even more expansive with details “recollected in tranquility.”⁹

To show how the first David Whitmer interview progressed from journal entry to *Deseret News* account to poetry, I give one example by way of illustration, beginning with the opening sentence of the journal entry:

August 21st 1883
Richmond Mo.

I met David Whitmer and his son David and had a pleasant conversation with them.¹⁰

For the *Deseret News* account, Hart provided a setting and details about the weather:

Seneca, Newton County
Missouri, Aug. 23^d, 1883

Having some business in Richmond, Ray County, I took occasion to call on Mr. David Whitmer, who was suffering considerably from the intense heat, but I had, notwithstanding, a long and pleasant conversation with him and his son, David Whitmer, Jr.¹¹

The first stanza of Hart’s poem adds further detail about the age and personal appearance of David Whitmer:

I met an aged man the other day,
In Richmond, Missouri, in County Ray.
His step was feeble, but his eye was bright,
And in it beamed intelligence and light.

This poetic version allows us a personal glimpse of Whitmer that we do not get in the two previous versions: his age, the feebleness

of his step, and the “intelligence and light” that beamed in his eye. The imagery makes it possible for the reader to visualize the scene, and the straightforward colloquial tone together with the versification adds force and dynamism to the statement, thus sharpening considerably the focus of the interview.

And so through the entire text of the journal entry, the full news dispatches, and the complete poem, the reader finds no alteration of substantive facts, but rather a fullness in the strengthening and vivifying enhancement of their statement. When the poem was privately printed in blue ink on a parchment broadside, James H. Hart wrote in a footnote:

It is worthy of historical mention that the above poem was read and approved by David Whitmer. At a subsequent visit by the author, shortly before David's death, in the presence of his grandson, now the custodian of the manuscript of the Book of Mormon, and other relics, he expressed much pleasure in the receipt and reading of said poem, and acknowledged it as authentic in its entirety.¹²

James H. Hart's “special mission” proved to be successful not only in obtaining a portrait of Oliver Cowdery, but also in making a lasting contribution to our knowledge of another Book of Mormon witness, David Whitmer.

Edward L. Hart is Professor Emeritus of English, Brigham Young University.

NOTES

¹For a full account of Wells's attempts to obtain Cowdery's likeness, see Junius F. Wells, Editorial, *Contributor* 5 (October 1883): 34–35. Other background information throughout is from Edward L. Hart, *Mormon in Motion: The Life and Journals of James H. Hart, 1825–1906* (Salt Lake City: Windsor Books, 1978).

²James H. Hart to *Deseret News* (dispatch sent from Seneca, Newton County, Missouri), August 23, 1883, published in the *Deseret News*, September 4, 1883.

³Hart also served as first counselor to William Budge in the Bear Lake Stake presidency.

⁴Hart to *Deseret News*, September 4, 1883.

⁵Hart to *Deseret News*, September 4, 1883.

⁶Hart to *Bear Lake Democrat* (dispatch sent from New York), August 29, 1883, published in *Contributor* 5 (October 1883): 35.

⁷James H. Hart to the *Bear Lake Democrat*, March 18, 1884, published March 28, 1884. The complete texts of Hart's interviews with Whitmer are also reproduced in Lyndon W. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991).

⁸The poem has been reprinted many times. The full text of the poem can be found in *Contributor* 5 (October 1883), the same issue that carried the frontispiece of the Three Witnesses.

⁹From Wordsworth's "Observations Prefixed to Lyrical Ballads" in *The Great Critics*, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3d ed. (New York: Norton, 1951), 514.

¹⁰James H. Hart, Journal, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as BYU Archives). Hart wrote this entry in longhand, but his journal contains a great deal written in shorthand.

¹¹Hart to *Deseret News*, September 4, 1883.

¹²A copy of this printing of the poem and footnote is pasted in James H. Hart's scrapbook, now in author's possession but shortly to be turned over to BYU Archives.