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## The Kinderhook Plates

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**Abstract:** This article discusses how the Kinderhook plates remind one of the gold plates. They were metal plates clasped together with a ring with hieroglyphics imprinted upon them. They were taken to Joseph Smith to translate. He declared them to be genuine anti-Mormon literature and proclaimed them to be a hoax.

# THE KINDERHOOK PLATES

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*A recent rediscovery of one of the Kinderhook plates which was examined by Joseph Smith, Jun., reaffirms his prophetic calling and reveals the false statements made by one of the finders.*

A few years ago, two non-LDS professional engravers, Stanley B. Hill and Edward Pwiiski walked into the Chicago Historical Society and asked to view a bell-shaped brass plate known as a Kinderhook plate. Their purpose was to determine whether it had been engraved with a pointed instrument or etched with acid. What they found solved a seventy-four-year-old controversy and put the plates back into the category of "genuine" which Joseph Smith, Jun., had said they were in the first place.

What were the Kinderhook plates? How did Joseph Smith, Jun., become connected with them, and why was there a controversy over them? The following is the story which should be of interest to every Latter-day Saint.

On April 23, 1843, a group of men excavated an old earth mound just outside the town of Kinderhook, Illinois, and came up with a most interesting find. The excavation was headed by Robert Wiley, a local merchant of the town who had become extremely curious about the possible contents of the old mound ever since he had dreamed of finding treasure there. After digging down about twelve feet, they came upon "fire burned rock, charcoal, ashes, and badly decomposed human bones. Near the encephalon a bundle was found that consisted of six plates of brass of a bell shape, each having a hole near the small end, a ring through them all and clasped with two clasps."

The plates appeared to have some kind of writing on them but were so badly oxidized they could not be clearly distinguished until Dr. W. P. Harris, MD, treated them with a dilute solution of sulphuric acid which made them perfectly clear. They were completely covered with "hieroglyphics" on both sides.

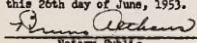
A certificate stating the facts of the find was drawn up and signed by nine of the men present and sent to nearby newspapers. Since Nauvoo was only a short distance away, the church periodical *Times and Seasons*, received the story quickly and published it with all details. Drawings of the plates as well as of the certificates were printed along with the story as related to them by the finders.

Interest ran high as to the meaning of the writing on the plates. The editor of the *Quincy Whig*, a non-Mormon paper wrote: ". . . By whom these plates were deposited must ever remain a secret, unless someone skilled in deciphering hieroglyphics may be found to unravel the mystery. Some pretend to say that Smith, the Mormon leader, has the ability to read them. If he has, he will confer a great favor on the public by removing the mystery which hangs over them. A person (Continued on page 656)

*Left: Plate number 5 of the Kinderhook Plates. Below: Same plate reverse side. A sizeable acid blotch appears on this side which was not there originally. It is entirely probable that Dr. Harris did this in his attempt to clean the plates with sulphuric acid. (Photos by permission of the Chicago Historical Society.)*



*Following is the notarized certificate of two Chicago engravers, Stanley B. Hill and Edward Pwiiski, stating that "The plate was engraved with a pointed instrument and not etched with acid."*

June, 26, 1963	
To whom it may concern:	
On the above date, we have personally examined a Kinderhook Plate in the Chicago Historical Society and to the best of our knowledge this Plate was engraved with a pointed instrument and not etched with acid.	
<i>Stanley B Hill - engraver</i> <i>Edward Pwiiski engraver</i>	
STATE OF ILLINOIS	} SS
COUNTY OF COOK	
Subscribed and sworn to before me this 26th day of June, 1963.	
 Notary Public	

## The Kinderhook Plates

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present when the plates were found remarked that it would go to prove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, which it undoubtedly will.

“. . . The plates above alluded to were exhibited in this city last week, and are now, we understand, in Nauvoo, subject to the inspection of the Mormon Prophet. The public

curiosity is greatly excited; and if Smith can decipher the hieroglyphics on the plates, he will do more towards throwing light on the early history of this continent than any man now living.”

John Taylor, editor of the *Times and Seasons*, in referring to the above statement said: “. . . We think that he, Joseph Smith, Jun., has done that already in translating and publishing the Book of Mormon and would advise the gentleman and all interested to read for themselves and

understand. We have no doubt, however, but Mr. Smith will be able to translate them.”

Mr. Wiley was not anxious to let the plates go to the Prophet since he hoped for a translation from the learned world. Eventually, however, a Mr. Savage borrowed the plates to show to some of his literary friends at which time they were shown to Joseph Smith, Jun.

Joseph Smith, Jun., pronounced them genuine and translated a part of them. He said, as found in his diary dated Monday, May 1, 1843: “I have translated a portion of them and find they contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the Ruler of heaven and earth.” (DHC 5:372. Italics added.)

The plates were returned to Robert Wiley who eventually gave them to Professor McDowell for the McDowell Museum of St. Louis, Missouri, where they remained until the Civil War when the Second Iowa Reserve sacked the museum and stole or destroyed its contents. Thus the plates disappeared.

For thirty-six years the plates went undisputed, but in 1879, Mr. Wilbur Fugate, one of the men present at the time of the find, wrote a letter to Mr. James T. Cobb stating that the plates were a “Humbug.”

The following is said to be a copy of that letter:

Mound Station, Ill.  
June 30, 1879

Mr. Cobb:

I received your letter in regard to those *plates*, and will say in answer that they are a HUMBUG, gotten up by Robert Wiley, Bridge Whitton and myself. Whitton is dead. I do not know whether Wiley is or not. None of the nine persons who signed the certificate knew the secret, except Wiley and I.

We read in Pratt's prophecy that “Truth is yet to spring out of the earth.” We concluded to prove the prophecy by way of a joke. We soon made our plans and executed them. Bridge Whitton cut them out of some pieces of copper; Wiley and I made the hieroglyphics by making impressions on beeswax and filling them with acid and putting it on the plates. When they were finished we put them together with rust made

## Have faith in the future . . .

RICHARD L. EVANS



With so many uncertainties and so many opportunities, we should like to say some things today to those who have come to commencement. Perhaps this is the shortest and most reassuring thing we could say: Have faith in the future. Faith in the future is not only desirable but absolutely essential to peace and to progress, and to preparation. If there were no faith, and no real reason for faith, there would be no real point in preparation. “There is no great future for any people whose faith has burned out,”<sup>1</sup> said Rufus M. Jones. “Don't be a cynic, . . .” said Emerson. “Don't waste yourself in rejection, . . .”<sup>2</sup> Carlyle commented: “We have our mind given us, not that it may cavil and argue, but that it may see into something, give us clear belief and understanding about something, whereon we are then to proceed to act. . . . Truly it is a sad thing for a people, as for a man, to fall into scepticism, into . . . insincerity; not to know a Sincerity when they see it. . . . The world does exist; the world has truth in it, or it would not exist! . . . A man lives by believing something; . . . a man who knows, as of old, that this world is a Truth, and no Plausibility and Falsity; that he himself is alive, . . . and that the world is alive. . . . Do not sink yourself in boundless bottomless abysses of Doubt, of wretched god-forgetting Unbelief; . . . It lies there clear, for whosoever will take the spectacles off his eyes and honestly look, to know! . . . A man lives by believing something. . . .”<sup>3</sup> And so to those who have come to a time of commencement we would say: Don't be discouraged; don't become cynical; don't be in too big a hurry; be patient. The Creator is still in command. There are still principles; there are still causes and consequences; there are still opportunities; there is still limitless progress to be made, truth to be discovered, peace to be achieved, solid purposes to be pursued. Continue to learn. Prepare as fully and solidly and purposefully as you can. Walk from day to day with a willingness to work, with a consistent, sincere living of life, with belief in the goodness and purpose of life, and with faith in the future. “The future belongs to those who prepare for it.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Rufus M. Jones (1863-1948), American Quaker educator.

<sup>2</sup>Emerson.

<sup>3</sup>Carlyle, *On Heroes*.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted by Charles B. Shuman, Annual Address of the President of the American Farm Bureau Federation, 1960, accredited to Emerson.

“The Spoken Word,” from Temple Square presented over KSL and the Columbia Broadcasting System, June 3, 1962. Copyright 1962.

of nitric acid, old iron and lead, and bound them with a piece of hoop iron, covering them completely with the rust.

Our plans worked admirably. A certain Sunday was appointed for the digging. The night before, Wiley went to the Mound where he had previously dug to the depth of about eight feet, there being a flat rock that sounded hollow beneath, and put them under it. On the following morning quite a number of citizens were there to assist in the search, there being two Mormon elders present (Marsh and Sharp). The rock was soon removed but some time elapsed before the plates were discovered. I finally picked them up and exclaimed, "A piece of pot metal!" Fayette Grubb snatched them from me and struck them against the rock and they fell to pieces. Dr. Harris examined them and said they had hieroglyphics on them. He took acid and removed the rust and they were soon out on exhibition.

Under this rock (which) was dome-like in appearance (and) about three feet in diameter, there were a few bones in the last stage of decomposition, also a few pieces of pottery and charcoal. There was no skeleton found. Sharp, the Mormon Elder, leaped and shouted for joy and said, Satan had appeared to him and told him not to go (to the diggings), it was a hoax of Fugate and Wiley's, but at a later hour the Lord appeared and told him to go, the treasure was there.

The Mormons wanted to take the plates to Joe Smith, but we refused to let them go. Some time afterward a man assuming the name of Savage, of Quincy, borrowed the plates of Wiley to show to his literary friends there, and took them to Joe Smith. The same identical plates were returned to Wiley, who gave them to Professor McDowell, of St. Louis, for his Museum.

W. Fugate

STATE OF ILLINOIS  
BROWN COUNTY. ss

W. Fugate, being first duly sworn, deposes and says that the above letter, containing an account of the plates found near Kinderhook, is true and correct, to the best of his recollection.

W. Fugate

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 30th day of June, 1879.

Jay Brown, J. P.

Anti-Mormons were quick to latch onto Fugate's story and broadcast it to the world and have done so from that day till this. One said: "This nails the prophet down for all eternity." Another felt it would be the death blow to the Church.

Mr. Fugate's tale may seem fairly sound to some, but to others there exist too many peculiarities in the story to accept it.

Let us examine some of those peculiarities:

First, when this letter was written the witnesses were either dead or presumed dead.

Second, the plates had disappeared. They had been gone since

may be satisfactorily answered when one realizes to whom he was writing this letter: Mr. James T. Cobb of Salt Lake City, a bitter anti-Mormon. He had twisted and distorted the truth many times before. Was this another time?

Some correspondence had preceded this. It was during this letter writing period that Mr. Fugate wrote this one declaring the plates a fraud, *not before*. Under these circumstances one is certainly justified in being suspicious of the whole story. Fifth, the original finders said the plates were of *brass*. Mr. Fugate said they were made up "out of some pieces of *copper*."



The Kinderhook Plates, sketched by an unknown artist, and published in the periodical Times and Seasons at Nauvoo in 1843. Reproduced here from the Documentary History of the Church, volume 5, pages 374-376. The six brass plates were found near Kinderhook, in Pike County, Illinois, on April 23, 1843.

the Civil War and were thought to have been destroyed with the museum which housed them. Thus Mr. Fugate was in a pretty safe position to say anything he desired about the plates. Who could dispute him? Third, of the witnesses to the find Mr. Fugate *alone* was the only one to declare the plates fraudulent. The others died without having said anything about a hoax or a joke. If this had really been a hoax, they would have been equally as anxious as he to spring the trap to get their joke. This never happened.

Fourth, Mr. Fugate waited a suspiciously long time, thirty-six years to be exact, which was thirty-five years after the death of his prey, before declaring the plates a "Humbug" when he could have done so within a few weeks after their discovery. Does this sound like a man who is anxiously waiting to catch something in a snare?

Why did he wait so long? What happened in 1879 that brought about this "confession"? Why not some other time? These questions

Sixth, Mr. Fugate left no doubt as to the method Wiley and he had supposedly used in making the characters on the plates. He said, "Wiley and I made the hieroglyphics by making impressions on beeswax and filling them with acid and putting it on the plates." In other words, if his story be true, the plates would have to be etched. No other possibility could exist.

The probability of an ancient inhabitant of America using acid to etch his plates is very, very slim and the likelihood of his using a pointed instrument is very great. Thus it would be natural to suspect that the plates if genuine would be *engraved* rather than *etched*. It is easy to see that Mr. Fugate's testimony could be checked on by a determination of this matter. If they were etched, his testimony could stand, but if engraved his testimony must fall.

To pursue either of these positions requires observation of the plate or plates by specialists who are experienced in noting the difference between etching and engraving. This

had never been done because the plates have not been available. But in recent years an attempt was made to locate the plates. Museums throughout the country were reached by letter. In time one of the plates was located in the Chicago Historical Society at North Avenue and Clark Street. It had come into their possession through Mr. C. A. Gunther who had purchased it from

Dr. F. C. A. Richardson, MD. as "A plate of brass known as one of the only two recognized original plates of the Mormon Bible." (Obviously this was in error since the plates of the Book of Mormon were of gold and were returned to Moroni.) Dr. Richardson had obtained it from the son of Professor McDowell who in turn had received it from a soldier who had taken it from the McDowell

Museum during the Civil War.

The plate is now identified as number 5 of the Kinderhook plates.

With one of the plates now available for investigation the key matter could be cleared up: Were they *etched* or *engraved*?

Mr. Fugate said Wiley and he had etched the plates. Yet two professional engravers were invited to view the plates in 1953 and give their unbiased opinion on them—which they did freely and without charge. They stated clearly that the plate was *engraved* with a pointed instrument.

The following is their notarized statement:

*"The plate was engraved with a pointed instrument and not etched with acid." (See reproduction page 636.)*

The plates are now back in their original category of *genuine*.

What scholars may learn from this ancient record in future years or what may be translated by divine power is an exciting thought to contemplate.

This much remains. Joseph Smith, Jun., stands as a true prophet and translator of ancient records by divine means and all the world is invited to investigate the truth which has sprung out of the earth not only of the Kinderhook plates, but of the Book of Mormon as well.

## To "a sceptical world . . ."

RICHARD L. EVANS



In speaking last week of commencement, we talked of belief and of faith in the future, and quoted some sentences from Carlyle to which, repeating some, we would add others: ". . . No man adequate to do anything," he said, "but is first of all in right earnest about it; what I call a sincere man. I should say sincerity, a deep, great, genuine sincerity, is the first characteristic of all men in any way heroic. . . . He must have truth; truth which he feels to be true. How shall he stand otherwise? . . . Belief I define to be the healthy act of a man's mind. . . . Doubt, truly, is not itself a crime. Certainly we do not rush out, clutch up the first thing we find, and straightway believe that! All manner of . . . inquiry . . . about all manner of objects, dwells in every reasonable mind. . . . [But] truly it is a sad thing for a people, as for a man, to fall into scepticism, . . . into insincerity; . . . For this world, and for all worlds, what curse is so fatal? . . . For Scepticism, is not intellectual only; it is moral also; a chronic atrophy and disease of the whole soul. . . . It seems to me, you lay your finger here on the heart of the world's maladies when you call it a Sceptical World. . . . It is out of this . . . that the whole tribe of social pestilences . . . have derived their being. . . . Do not sink yourselves in boundless bottomless abysses of Doubt, of wretched god-forgetting Unbelief; . . . A man lives by believing something. . . ."¹ So said Carlyle, and this we would add: The world, the universe, is a living, moving, ever-present evidence of a Creator, of an Intelligence beyond any or all of ours. Life cannot be explained away, nor can causes and consequences, nor can all of nature's marvelous manifestations—nor man—nor his mind. Voltaire said: "If a clock proves the existence of a clockmaker and the world does not prove the existence of a Supreme Architect, then I consent to be called a fool."² To some learned Frenchmen who had proved "by all manner of logic . . . that there could be no God, . . . Napoleon looking up into the stars, answers, 'Very ingenious, Messieurs: but *who made* all that?'³ "Epochs of faith, are epochs of fruitfulness"; said Goethe, "but epochs of unbelief, . . . are barren. . . ."³ With all this before us, God grant us the blessing of being believing, for the world does exist, and so does the universe, and so do we, and so does life, and so do our loved ones, and this is no whim or delusion, and the reality of all this is reason enough for humility, for goodness, for reverence, for respect, for living earnestly, for preparing fully, for keeping the commandments, and for holding to faith in the future.

¹Carlyle, *On Heroes*.

²Voltaire.

³Goethe.

"The Spoken Word," from Temple Square presented over KSL and the Columbia Broadcasting System, June 10, 1962. Copyright 1962.

## Your Boy Is Not Alone

(Continued from page 655)

always just plain "Brother" where the Church is concerned. We were pleased to receive recently a letter from church friends in Colorado Springs. They apologized for not knowing my rank when it came to addressing the envelope. That is the nicest compliment they could have given me.

It is important to remember that there are also many "Sergeant Petersons" in every branch of the service. The "Sarge" will have closer daily contact with your son. While not able to show any preference, he will be able to give a "brotherly boost" to sagging spirits during those first rough weeks of basic training.

These are the men to whom your  
(Concluded on page 662)