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Where Are the Original Manuscripts?

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Abstract: This article traces the history of two Book of Mormon manuscripts—the original manuscript and the printer’s manuscript. Joseph Smith deposited the original manuscripts in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House October 2, 1841. It was recovered in 1882. The printer’s manuscript is now in the possession of the RLDS church.

should partake of it also for i knew that it was desire
bove all other fruit and as i cast my eyes around
t that perhaps i might discover my farmnaly also
id i be held a river of water and it ran along and it
near the tree of which i was partaking the fruit en
ocked to behold from whence it came and i saw the
ead thereof a little way of and at the head thereof

...and i heard that the spirit there
all the while that i was in
at the fruit thereof it felt my voice and
great joy wherefore i began to be desirous that i
partake of it also for i knew that it was desire
all other fruit and as i cast my eyes around
t that perhaps i might discover my farmnaly also
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Where are the

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS



BY ALBERT L. ZOBELL, JR.
RESEARCH EDITOR

...now came and partake of the fruit
t mine eyes toward the head of the river
i might see them and it came to pay
tem but they would not come in to
take of the fruit and i beheld a road
extended along the bank of the river
nd led to the tree by which i stood and i also be
ld a Strait and narrow path which came al
y the rod of iron even to the tree by which i stood
nd it also led by the head of the fountain into a
large and spacious field as if it had been a world
nd i saw numberless concourses of people man
some are pressing forward that they might obtain
the path which led into the tree by which i sto
it ...

One of the little-known but extremely fascinating stories of Church history concerns the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Actually, Oliver Cowdery recopied the manuscript before anything was given to the printer. The Prophet's mother recorded:

"Joseph secured the copyright [of the Book of Mormon] and before he returned to Pennsylvania, . . . he received a commandment, which was in substance as follows:

"First, that Oliver Cowdery should transcribe the whole manuscript. Second, that he should take but one copy at a time to the [printing] office, so that if one copy should get destroyed, there would still be a copy remaining. Third, that in going to and from the office, he should always have a guard to attend him, for the purpose of protecting the manuscript. Fourth, that a guard should be kept constantly on the watch, both night and day, about the house, to protect the manuscript from malicious persons. . . . All these things were strictly attended to, as the Lord commanded Joseph." (Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, 1945 ed., p. 157.)

After the Book of Mormon came from the press in March 1830, what happened to these two manuscripts? Briefly, let us try to trace them to the present day.

After it had served its purpose, the printer's manuscript was evidently returned and Oliver Cowdery took possession of it, while the original manuscript remained in the possession of the Prophet. On October 2, 1841 in the presence of a number of elders, Joseph Smith deposited the original copy in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House.

Elder Warren Foote, who later came with the Saints to Utah, made this entry in his journal:

"I was standing very near the cornerstone, when Joseph Smith came up with the manuscript of the Book of Mormon and said he wanted to put that in there. . . . It appeared to be written on foolscap paper, and was about three inches in thickness." (B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, vol. 1:159.)

On October 12, 1878, Elder Joseph F. Smith, then a member of the Council of the Twelve, later President of the Church, received a communication from Frederick Kesler, Sr., bishop of the Sixteenth Ward in Salt Lake City, in which he testified that he saw the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jun., place the Book of Mormon manuscript in the southeast corner of the Nauvoo House. "I stood within eight or ten feet of him," he wrote, "heard and saw what he said and did, on that important occasion, which I freely testify to all the world." (*Deseret Evening News*, December 23, 1899.)

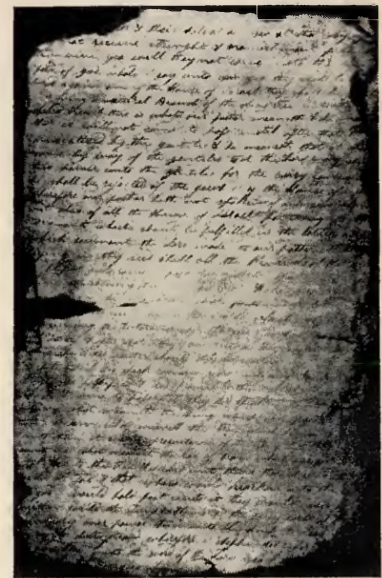
In the unfortunate times following the martyrdom of the Prophet, June 27, 1844, many members of the Church were not sure which way to turn. Some did not follow the leadership of Brigham Young. Ebenezer Robinson, one of these, was a valued printer and writer while a member of the Church, and he followed that vocation throughout the remainder of his life. In August 1890, in a small monthly magazine, titled *The Return*, published by him at Davis City, Iowa, we find this information of that period in Nauvoo. He relates:

"After the brethren had assembled at the southeast corner of the foundation [of the Nauvoo House] where the cornerstone was laid, President Joseph Smith said, 'Wait, brethren, I have a document that I wish to put in that stone,' and started for his house which was only a few rods away, across Main Street. I went with him in the house, and also one or two other brethren.

"He got a manuscript copy of the Book of Mormon and brought it into the room where we were standing and said, 'I will examine to see if it is all here,' and as he did so I stood near him at his left side and saw distinctly the writings as he turned up the pages until he hastily went through the book and satisfied himself that it was all there. . . .

"It was written on foolscap paper, and formed a package, as the sheets lay flat, of about two or two and a half inches thick, I should judge. It was written mostly in Oliver Cowdery's handwriting, with which I was intimately acquainted, having set many pages of type from his handwriting in the Church Printing Office at Kirtland, Ohio. Some parts of it were written in other handwriting.

"He took the manuscript and deposited it in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, together with other papers and things, including different pieces of United States coin. I put in some copies of the *Times and Seasons*; all were carefully encased in sheet (Continued on page 826)



Opposite: | Nephi 8:11-27 on a page from the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon. The enlargements are also from this page.

Above: Typical of some of the age-and-weather damaged pages from the original manuscript. This page is identified as 1 Nephi 15:15-25.

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Bibliotherapy

(Continued from page 813)

is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16:16.) That sounds as if Jesus thought baptism was pretty important, and who should know, better than he, what is in our interests? How wonderfully this minister's situation could be changed by a "treatment" from the books containing the direct revelations of the Lord to our day. We have made some valuable discoveries in our time, but the most important discovery ever made is when man discovers God and takes advantage of the blessings that are thereby made available to him.

Jesus said to Peter, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16:19.) This power is available at the very time when some are wondering if salvation was intended only for those who lived two thousand years ago, or if God has now changed his program or finished his work and gone out of business. How it would benefit the lives of everyone upon the earth to understand fully all that is involved in the fact that in our own day God has again appeared upon the earth to re-establish among men a knowledge of the God of Genesis. He has given us the certain information that the God of Genesis and the God of Calvary is also the God of the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times; and that the full benefits of the gospel are now available if we will only inform ourselves about them.

In the front of the Book of Mormon is a testimonial signed by eleven men in addition to the Prophet Joseph Smith.

There is not one among us who, if he understood the situation, would dare disbelieve that testimony. The greatest of all messages is that God had again spoken to man upon the earth, and the greatest of all good is for us to find out what he has said and then govern ourselves accordingly.

The habit of reading is the only enjoyment in which there is no alloy; it lasts when all other pleasures fade.

—Anthony Trollope

Where Are the Original Manuscripts?

(Continued from page 803)

lead to protect the contents from moisture, and a stone had been closely cut to fit into the cavity, which had been made in the cornerstone to receive these things, which stone was fitted in its place and cemented, where it was thought that the papers and other articles would be preserved without decay or injury for ages, if not disturbed."

The old wall of the Nauvoo House was torn down about 1882, and it was discovered that the cornerstone had not been tight, and that the elements had done irreparable damage to the manuscript and the other contents.

Mrs. Sarah M. Kimball of Salt Lake City visited Nauvoo in 1883 and was shown what was left of the manuscript by Major Lewis C. Bidamon, who had married Emma Smith, the Prophet's widow. He permitted her to select some of the sheets. She selected twenty-three pages, which appeared to be the most legible, brought them to Salt Lake City, and gave them to President Smith who placed them in the Church Historian's Office.

In May 1885, Elder Franklin D. Richards of the Council of the Twelve and his son, Charles C., arrived in Nauvoo. Major Bidamon was then operating a hotel in that city. In the words of Elder Richards:

"We were quite willingly shown all that remained [in Major Bidamon's possession] of the manuscript of the Book of Mormon. . . . The paper is yellow with age and from the moisture sweated from its own hiding place. It is brittle to the touch. Many of the leaves crumble like ashes, and some of them are broken away. It is necessary to handle them with the utmost care. The writing is faint and is not legible on many continuous lines, but fragmentary clauses and even whole verses are occasionally discernible. . . .

"When they were placed before our eyes we gazed with rapture and reverence upon them. Our hands trembled as we touched the frail edges of the leaves across which the well-beloved Oliver had traced the divine words coming from the Prophet's mouth. . . .

"When the proprietor saw the pro-



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found interest with which we regarded these things he spoke to us about them with great respect and generosity. We talked with him upon the subject of the writings at considerable length, and through his complaisance, when we came away, we brought with us all of the manuscripts and have them in our possession." (*Deseret News*, December 14, 1946, p. 7.)

Another report states that while Major Bidamon said that Elder Richards was welcome to it, he gratefully accepted twenty dollars for the old manuscript.

These pages remained in the Richards family for over sixty years. Then in December 1946, it was announced that President George Albert Smith had received the old manuscript from Elder Charles C. Richards.

At the Church Historian's Office a task of love and care and science was begun. A photographer was selected, and the matter was thoroughly studied. When the project was begun, ultraviolet lights were used in an attempt to bring out the handwriting, and fine-grained panchromatic film was used. The problem was to turn the pages as they were set up before the camera lens. Sometimes the staff members of the Historian's Office used paper to lift the manuscript sheets to turn them over. Even with all the care, some of the sheets of the manuscript broke apart before their eyes.

Some of the photographic results of that project may be seen as illustrations in this magazine. (See pages 802-803.)

Now, what of the other manuscript—the second copy that Oliver Cowdery made? After the book was printed, Oliver kept that copy as the Prophet had kept the first.

After the death of Oliver in March 1850, his copy came into the hands of David Whitmer, Oliver's brother-in-law. In the fall of 1878, Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith of the Council of the Twelve visited David Whitmer at Richmond, Missouri.

Elder Smith states:

"Father Whitmer showed us the manuscript in his own house in the presence of David C. Whitmer, the son of Jacob Whitmer, Philander Page, David J. Whitmer, son of David Whitmer, George W. Schweich, Col. James W. Black, Hon. J. R. B. VanCleave, and others. And

knowing as I did where the original was, [even then in the old cornerstone] I turned to the testimony of the eleven witnesses and asked Father Whitmer if he and the other witnesses signed their own names to their testimony to the Book of Mormon, when Father Whitmer unhesitatingly replied with emphasis, 'We each signed our own name.' 'Then,' said I, 'how is it that the names of the witnesses are found here written in the same hand?' Father Whitmer replied, 'I don't know. Oliver must have signed them.' Then I said, 'Where are the original documents?' He replied, 'I don't know.' . . .

"I do not blame him for supposing it was the original, for he knew no better, or perhaps had forgotten that a copy was made of the original." (*Deseret Evening News*, December 23, 1899.)

David Whitmer held this manuscript for nearly thirty-eight years, until his death which occurred January 25, 1888.

Herman C. Smith, a historian of the Reorganized Church, has been quoted by *The Saints' Herald*, the official publication of that church, as follows:

"The one [manuscript] used by the printer was doubtless left in the custody of Oliver Cowdery and by him transferred to David Whitmer, and finally fell into the hands of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and is still in good condition." (*The Saints' Herald*, September 26, 1949; vol. 96, page 920.)

The original manuscript that Oliver and others penned sometime earlier, as the words fell from the lips of the Prophet, was placed by the Prophet in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, October 2, 1841. All that is left, approximately 125 pages, some of which are worn and crumbled, are now in the possession of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City.

There is not another nation [the United States of America] under heaven, in whose midst the Book of Mormon could have been brought forth.

Discourses of Brigham Young, p. 109.