

The Treasure

By the summer of 1827, when newlyweds Joseph and Emma Smith¹ were living with Joseph's family in Manchester, New York, people began to hear from the Smith family about a treasure Joseph had found. They told the story of a book written on plates of gold which had been buried in the ground in a Manchester hill (later called the Hill Cumorah) about two miles southeast from their home. This glacial drumlin had been, according to one scholar, "the site of treasure digging both before and after Joseph Smith's receiving the golden plates."²

This chapter attempts to recover from available sources the earliest versions of this saga. Certainly no single account gives a complete picture of events pieced together years later. But important patterns and similarities recur among the various early accounts. In contrast to the account which was later told, the earliest versions linked the finding of the plates with the practice of searching for buried treasure. They also linked obtaining the plates with magical rituals traditionally associated with winning treasure from its guardian spirits.

Willard Chase was a neighbor and friend of the Smith family. He had known them since 1820 and later recalled that the family followed the money-digging business "until the latter part of the season of 1827." That June, Joseph Smith Sr. told Chase a remarkable story, whose beginnings went back more than three years to September 1823:

That some years ago, a spirit³ had appeared to Joseph his son, in a vision, and informed him that in a certain place there was a record on plates of gold, and that he was the person that must obtain them, and this he must do in the following manner: On the 22d of September, he must repair to the place where was deposited this manuscript, dressed in black clothes, and riding a black horse with a switch tail, and demand the book in a certain name, and after obtaining it, he

¹ Joseph Knight Sr. wrote that Joseph Smith "looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale" who was the right person to bring with him to the hill to obtain the book. Joseph Knight Reminiscences, CHL. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *Brigham Young University Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976):31; see also Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 4:13.

² Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *Brigham Young University Studies* 24 (Fall 1984):435.

³ Joseph Smith Jr. evidently did not give the messenger a name while he was in New York. In his 1838-39 history he mentioned that the personage who appeared to him stated "his name was Nephi" (Manuscript History, Book A-1:5; also in duplicate Book A-2:6, both in CHL). In other sources the person who buried the gold plates and appeared to Smith is named "Moroni," son of Mormon. In the manuscript history above the name "Nephi" has been added the name "Moroni" with a footnote added after Smith's death giving three references where the name was published as "Moroni." *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (April 1835):112; 1835 D&C 50:2 [p. 180], name added to the 1830 text in 1835 (see LDS D&C 27:5 and RLDS D&C 26:2); and *Elders' Journal* 1 (July 1838):42-43, Far West, Missouri.

must go directly away, and neither lay it down nor look behind him.⁴ They accordingly fitted out Joseph with a suit of black clothes and borrowed a black horse.

Chase reportedly was told that Smith in fact went to the stone box in which the gold record was deposited and removed the book:

but fearing some one might discover where he got it, he laid it down to place back the top stone, as he found it; and turning round, to his surprise there was no book in sight. He again opened the box, and in it saw the book, and attempted to take it out, but was hindered. He saw in the box something like a toad, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and struck him on the side of his head.

On his third attempt Smith tried to take the book again but was struck by the spirit. On asking "why he could not obtain the plates," he was told that he had not obeyed the orders of the spirit. He was then instructed to bring his oldest brother Alvin:

come one year from this day, and bring with you your oldest brother, and you shall have them. This spirit, he said, was the spirit of the prophet who wrote this book, and who was sent to Joseph Smith, to make known these things to him. Before the expiration of the year, his oldest brother died; which the old man said was an accidental providence!

When Smith returned a year later, the spirit asked about his brother. Learning he was dead, the spirit "commanded him to come again, in just one year, and bring a man with him. On asking who might be the man, he was answered that he would know him when he saw him."

According to Chase's account, filtered through his and Joseph Sr.'s perspectives, Joseph Jr. first decided that the next year he should bring Samuel Lawrence, another treasurer seeker and seer in the Manchester area:

Joseph believed that one Samuel T. Lawrence was the man alluded to by the spirit, and went with him to a singular looking hill, in Manchester, and shewed him where the treasure was. Lawrence asked him if he had ever discovered any thing with the plates of gold; he said no: he then asked him to look in his stone to see if there was any thing with them. He looked, and said there was nothing; he told him to look again, and see if there was not a large pair of specks with the plates; he looked and soon saw a pair of spectacles, the same with which Joseph says he translated the Book of Mormon.

⁴ It is noteworthy that no scriptural passages were cited in Joseph Smith's 1832 account of the messenger's visit, unlike his later account. In Oliver Cowdery's description published in the 1835 *Messenger and Advocate*, the angel quoted many biblical verses. In Smith's 1838-39 narrative history, passages of scripture appear but are revised with new emphasis.

Lawrence told him it would not be prudent to let these plates be seen for about two years . . . Not long after this, Joseph altered his mind, and said L[awrence]. was not the right man, nor had he told him the right place.⁵

One hundred miles to the south, a resident of Colesville for whom Smith worked briefly, recounted a very similar story. Joseph Knight Sr., whose recollections were written sometime between 1835 and 1847 when Knight died at age 74, also told of the spirit, requesting that Joseph bring Alvin to the hill. Knight does not mention Lawrence, but his account adds the identity of a third person Smith felt compelled by the spirit personage to take to the hill in order to obtain the treasure—his future wife Emma Hale:

From thence he [Joseph Smith] went to the hill where he was informed the Record was and found no trouble for it appeared plain as tho[ugh] he was acquainted with the place it was so plain in the vision that he had of the place he went and found the place and opened it and found a plane [plain] Box he oncovered [uncovered] it and found the Book and took it out and laid [it] Down By his side and thot [thought] he would Cover the <place> over again thinkinking [thinking] there might be Something else here But he was told to take the Book and go right away and after he had Covered the place he turned round to take <the> Book and it was not there and he was astonished that the Book was gone he thot he would look in the place again and see if it had not got Back again

he had heard People tell of such things and he opened the Box and Behold the Book was there he took hold of it to take it out again and Behold he Could not Stur the Book any more then he Could the mount[a]in he exclaimed why Cant I stur this Book[?] and he was answer[e]d you have not Done rite [right] you Should have took the Book and a gone right away you cant have it now Joseph Says when Can I have it[?] the answer was the 22nt Day of September next if you Bring the right person with you Joseph Says who is the right person[?] the answer was your oldest Brother

But before September Came his oldest Brother Died then he was Disap[po]inted and did not [k]now what to do But when the 22nt Day of September Came he went to the place and the personage appeared and told him he Could not have it now But the 22nt Day of September nex[t] he mite [might] have the Book if he Brot with him the right person Joseph Says who is the right Person[?] the answer was you will know then he looked in his glass and found it was Emma Hale Daughter of old Mr Hail [Hale] of Pensylvany a girl that he had Seen Before for he had Bin Down there Before with me⁶

⁵ Affidavit of Willard Chase, Manchester, Ontario County, New York, December 11, 1833, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 240, 242-43; emphasis omitted. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 2:66-68.

⁶ Joseph Knight Reminiscences, CHL. See Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 30-31, and Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 4:12-14. Joseph Knight Jr., recalled the following: "I think it was in November [1826] that he [Joseph Smith Jr.] made known to my Father and I that he had seen a vision, that a personage had appeared to him and told him where there was a gold book of ancient date buried, and that if he would follow the direction of the angel, he could get it. We

Catherine Smith, younger sister of Joseph Jr. and a teenager in September 1827, told about her brother receiving instructions to bring Alvin to the hill:

He raised the lid again, and there was the record, just as it laid before. He reached forth his hands to take it and he felt a pressure pushing him away. He tried the second time, and the third time he fell to the earth with the pressure, and he cried in the bitterness of his soul: Lord, what have I done, that I can not get these records? Moroni said: You have not obeyed the commandments as you were commanded to; you must obey His commandments in every particular. You were not to lay them out of your hands until you had them in safe keeping. Joseph said: What shall I do? He said: Come here again next year at this time and bring your oldest brother with you, and you can receive the records.⁷

About 1830 Fayette Lapham visited the Smith family with a friend, Jacob Ramsdell, and talked with Joseph Sr. about finding the buried record. Lapham's narrative, which was published in 1870, is very similar to the versions related by Chase and Knight—including the details about instructions to bring Alvin, and then Emma, to the hill in order to placate the guardian spirit:

He [Joseph] then told his father that, in his dream, a very large and tall man appeared to him, dressed in an ancient suit of clothes, and the clothes were bloody. And the man said to him that there was a valuable treasure, buried many years since, and not far from that place; and that he had now arrived for it to be brought to light, for the benefit of the world at large; and, if he would strictly follow his directions, he would direct him to the place where it was deposited, in such a manner that he could obtain it. He then said to him, that he would have to get a certain coverlid, which he described, and an old-fashioned suit of clothes, of the same color, and a napkin to put the treasure in. . . . when he had obtained it, he must not lay it down until he placed it in the napkin. . . . Joseph mounted his horse. . . . Taking up the first article, he saw the others below: laying down the first, he endeavored to secure the others; but before he could get hold of them, the one he had taken up slid back to the place he had taken it from.

Smith was struck down and fell on his back. The personage then told him that

were told it in secret." "Joseph Knight's incidents of History from 1827 to 1844," compiled by Thomas Bullock, from loose sheets in Joseph Knight Jr.'s possession, August 16, 1862, CHL, as cited in William G. Hartley, *Stand by My Servant Joseph: The Story of the Joseph Knight Family and the Restoration* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for LDS History/Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 11.

⁷ Reported in "An Angel Told Him. Joseph Smith's Aged Sister Tells About Moroni's Talk," *Kansas City Times*, April 11, 1895, 1, Kansas City, Missouri, quotation marks omitted. Catherine's name is also spelled Katharine.

When the treasure was deposited there, he was sworn to take charge of and protect that property, until the time should arrive for it to be exhibited to the world of mankind; and, in order to prevent his making an improper disclosure, he was murdered or slain on the spot, and the treasure had been under his charge ever since. He said to him [Joseph] that he had not followed his directions; and, in consequence of laying the article down before putting it in the napkin, he could not have the article now; but that if he would come again one year from that time, he could have them.

The year passed over before Joseph was aware of it, so the time passed by; but he went to the place of deposit, where the same man appeared again, and said he had not been punctual in following his directions, and, in consequence, he could not have the article yet. Joseph asked when he could have them; and the answer was, "Come in one year from this time, and bring your oldest brother with you; then you may have them." During that year, it so happened that his oldest brother died; but, at the end of the year, Joseph repaired to the place again, and was told by the man who still guarded the treasure, that, inasmuch as he could not bring his oldest brother, he could not have the treasure yet; but there would be another person appointed to come with him in one year from that time, when he could have it.

Smith was told about an important person he soon would meet:

Joseph asked, "How shall I know the person?" and was told that the person would be known to him at sight. During that year, Joseph went to the town of Harmony, in the State of Pennsylvania, at the request of some one who wanted the assistance of his divining rod and stone in finding hidden treasure, supposed to have been deposited there by the Indians or others. While there, he fell in company with a young woman; and, when he first saw her, he was satisfied that she was the person appointed to go with him to get the treasure he had so often failed to secure.⁸

In 1879 Hiel and Joseph Lewis, cousins of Emma Hale Smith, wrote a joint account on how Joseph Smith discovered the plates. Their account is likely based upon Joseph Lewis's recollections as he was twenty years old in early 1828. The account recalled the importance of their cousin Emma to Smith's narrative:

He [Joseph] said that by a dream he was informed that at such a place in a certain hill, in an iron box, were some gold plates with curious engravings, which

⁸ Fayette Lapham, "Interview with the Father of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, Forty Years Ago. His Account of the Finding of the Sacred Plates," *Historical Magazine* 7 (May 1870):306-7. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 1:458-61. William R. Hine said, "Jo told Emma he had a revelation about the plates, but that he could not obtain them until he had married her." *Naked Truths about Mormonism* 1 (January 1888):2.

he must get and translate, and write a book; that the plates were to be kept concealed from every human being for a certain time, some two or three years; that he went to the place and dug till he came to the stone that covered the box, when he was knocked down; that he again attempted to remove the stone, and was again knocked down; this attempt was made the third time, and the third time he was knocked down.

Then he exclaimed, "Why can't I get it?" or words to that effect; and then he saw a man standing over the spot, which to him appeared like a Spaniard, having a long beard coming down over his breast to about here, (Smith putting his hand to the pit of his stomach) with his (the ghost's) throat cut from ear to ear, and the blood streaming down, who told him that he could not get it alone; that another person whom he, Smith, would know at first sight, must come with him, and then he could get it. And when Smith saw Miss Emma Hale, he knew that she was the person, and that after they were married, she went with him to near the place, and stood with her back toward him, while he dug up the box, which he rolled up in his frock.⁹

Smith's mother, Lucy, added her own recollections about the gold record in her memoir. She dates Joseph's first trip to the nearby hill as just before Alvin's death in November 1823 and emphasizes Alvin's place in these events. She thus indirectly suggests why Joseph may have felt the guardian spirit required Alvin's presence at the hill:

<He vis[i]ted the place where the plates were laid and thinking> he could keep every commandment given him <supposed> that it would be possible for him to take them from their place and carry them home. But said the divine messenger you must take them into your hands and go straight to the house without delay <and put them in immediately and lock them up>.

Accordingly when the time arrived he went to the place appointed and removed the moss and grass from the surface of the rock and then pryed up the flat stone according to the directions which he had received. He then discovered the plates laying on 4 pillars in the inside of the box. After some further conversation Joseph he put forth his hand <and> took them up <but> when he lifted them from their place the thought flashed across his mind that there might be something more in the box that would be a benefit to him in a pecuniary point of view. In the excitement of the moment he laid the record down in order to cover up the box least some one should come along and take away whatever else might be deposited there.

When he turned again to take up the record it was gone but where he knew not nor did he know by what means it was taken away. He was much alarmed at this. <He> kneeled down <&> asked the Lord why it was that the record was taken from him. The angel appeared to him and told him that he had not done as

⁹ Joseph and Hiel Lewis, "Mormon History. A New Chapter, About to Be Published," *The Amboy [Illinois] Journal* 24 (April 30, 1879):1. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 4:303-4. Rather than an iron box it should be a stone box.

he was commanded in that he laid down the record in order to secure some imaginary treasure that remained.

Joseph was then permit[t]ed to raise the stone again and there he beheld the plates the same as before. He reached forth his hand to take them but was <thrown> to the ground. When he recovered the angel was gone and he arose and went to the house.¹⁰

William Smith remembered that Joseph had told the family concerning his first attempt to receive the plates:

When he went to get the plates he found them as he was told he should. He took them from the stone box in which they were found, and placed them on the ground behind him, when the thought came into his mind that there might be a treasure hidden with them. While stooping forward to see, he was overpowered, so that he could not look farther. Turning to get the plates, he found they had gone; and on looking around found that they were in the box again; but he could not get them.¹¹

According to Mother Smith, Joseph was instructed that "when you get the record take it immediately into the house and lock it up as soon as possible."¹² She adds that Alvin told Joseph that they would "have a fine long evening <and> all set down and hear you talk." Joseph told the family about the plates and asked them not to discuss what he said outside their family. She then describes how in the evenings the Smith family would meet and listen to Joseph's religious teachings. They also heard Joseph tell stories of the continent's former civilizations.¹³

Alvin, his mother remembers, was especially interested in the record. On his death bed he told Joseph, "I want you to be a good boy & do everything that lays in your power to obtain the records be faithful in receiving instruction and keeping every commandment that is given you."¹⁴ According to Lucy:

Alvin had ever manifested a greater zeal and anxiety if it were possible than any of the rest with regard to the record which had been shown to Joseph and he always showed the most intense interest concerning the matter. With this before our minds we could not endure to hear or say one word upon that subject, for the moment that Joseph spoke of the record it would immediately bring Alvin to <our> minds.¹⁵

¹⁰ Lucy Mack Smith, draft manuscript. See Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 345-47.

¹¹ "The Old Soldier's Testimony. Sermon preached by Bro. William B. Smith, in the Saints' Chapel, Detroit, Iowa, June 8th, 1884. Reported by C. E. Butterworth," *Saints Herald* 31 (October 4, 1884):643.

¹² Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 340, see also 346. Not in Coray final manuscript.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 342-45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

Lucy continues her narrative, "but none were more engaged than the one whom we were doomed [to] part with, for Alvin was never so happy as when he was contemplating the final suc[c]ess of his brother in obtaining the record. And now I fancied I could hear him with his parting breath conjuring his brother to continue faithful that he might obtain the prize which the Lord had promised him."¹⁶

Clearly the gold plates story had been repeated outside the Smith family before September 1827, and no doubt seemed familiar to those who heard it and were acquainted with stories about the treasure-digging activities of the Smith family. A number of accounts have survived describing how Smith claimed he finally obtained possession of the gold plates.

According to his mother's detailed account, on September 20, 1827, Joseph Knight Sr. and his friend Josiah Stowell arrived at the Smith family frame house.¹⁷ Knight heard that Joseph was to get the record on September 22. This was why he was at the Smith home before Joseph went to get the plates,¹⁸ and "they remained with us untill the 22."¹⁹

On the morning of the twenty-second, Joseph and Emma left the Smith home "taking Mr. Knight's horse and wagon" without his knowledge to travel to the hill about two miles away.²⁰ When they arrived at the hill, Joseph left Emma with the wagon while he went to the side of the hill. Joseph said he then took the plates out of a box in the ground and hid them in a fallen treetop, concealing them with the bark of the tree.²¹ He returned to Knight's wagon, where Emma was waiting, and they started back to the house.

Meanwhile at the Smith home, according to Lucy, "when the male part of the family sat down to breakfast Mr. Smith enquired for Joseph, <for no one but myself knew where he was> (as no one knew where he had gone but myself). I told him that I thought I would not call Joseph, that I would have him set down with his wife." That "no one knew" where Joseph had gone that morning is questionable. Joseph Knight Sr. knew Joseph Jr. was expected to retrieve the plates.

¹⁶ Ibid., 465.

¹⁷ Ibid. 376. See Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 32. Martin Harris said that Josiah Stowell "was at this time at old Mr. Smith's digging for money." *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):165. According to Knight, it was Stowell who took Joseph and his new wife to Manchester after their marriage.

¹⁸ Joseph Knight Sr. wrote that Joseph "had talked with me and told me the Conversation he had with the personage which told him if he would Do right according to the will of God he mite [might] obtain [the plates] the 22nt Day of Septem[b]er Next and if not he never would have them." Joseph Knight Reminiscences; see Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 32.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 376. Lucy's narration has Joseph Knight Sr. and Josiah Stowell still at their home after Joseph locked up the plates in a chest. Knight wrote, "I went to Rochester on Buisness [Business] and return[e]d By Palmyra to be there about the 22nt of September. I was there Several Days." Joseph Knight Reminiscences; see Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 32. Stowell and Knight appear to have visited with the Smith family for more than a week after they arrived on the twentieth.

²⁰ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 376.

²¹ Here we follow Martin Harris (*Tiffany's Monthly* 5 [August 1859]:165) and Willard Chase (*Mormonism Unveiled*, 216) that the hiding place was in a fallen tree top. As to the type of tree, Lucy Smith said that Joseph hid the plates "in a cavity in a birch log" (*Lucy's Book*, 385), and Martin Harris mentioned that they were hidden "in an old black oak tree top" (*Tiffany's Monthly* 5 [Aug. 1859]:165, see also 166).

One of the reasons Knight and Josiah Stowell were at the Smith home was because of the importance of the September 22 date. Lucy asked her husband to cover her son's absence—"do let him eat with his wife this mornin'g."²²

Joseph Knight soon discovered his "Horse and Carriage was gone."²³ Lucy remembered that "Mr. Knight came in quite disturbed. Why, Mr. Smith, said he, my horse is gone. I can't find him on the premises and I want to start home in half an hour. Never mind the horse, said I, Mr. Knight does not know all the nooks and corners in the pasture. I will call William (this <was> my 5th son), he will soon bring him. This satisfied him for a little while but he soon made another discovery, his waggon was gone, & now he concluded that the Horse and waggon had gone together and some rogue had gone with them both." Knight evidently went out to look for them, and "while he was absent Joseph returned."²⁴ Knight recalled, "after a while he [Joseph] Came home and he turned out the Horse all Come into the house to Brackfirst [Breakfast]. But no thing said about where they had Bin."²⁵

The plates were now, according to Joseph, hidden in a fallen treetop,²⁶ but a better place to deposit them was needed. According to Lucy, Joseph "asked my advice what it was best to do about getting a chest made." They decided to have one made but lacked the money to pay for it.

The next day <Mr. Warner> came to him and requested <Joseph> to go with him to a widow's house <in Macedon by the name of Wells>, that she wanted <a wall and as she wanted some labor done in a well>, would pay him the money for it. He <he accompanied> Mr. Warner to Macedon <according to> Mrs. Wells <request. This> woman [no] one of the family had ever seen or heard of before although she sent purposely for Joseph. We considered it a provision of Providence to enable us to pay the money we were owing the cabinet maker.²⁷

The story now went abroad from the Smith family that Joseph Jr. had obtained some gold plates which had been buried in the ground. Since Joseph and his father had been involved with a treasure-seeking group, his former partners wanted their share of the find. As Martin Harris explained, "The money-diggers claimed that they had as much right to the plates as Joseph had, as they were in company together. They claimed that Joseph had been [a] traitor, and had appropriated to himself that which belonged to them. For this reason Joseph was afraid of them."²⁸

²² Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 377.

²³ Joseph Knight, *Reminiscences*; see Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 33.

²⁴ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 377-78. Whether Joseph Knight was really planning on returning home "in half an hour" or waiting until Joseph told him about recovering the gold plates is not known.

²⁵ Joseph Knight *Reminiscences*, see Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 33.

²⁶ Affidavit of Willard Chase, December 11, 1833, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 246. Joseph Sr. asked Emma "if she knew aught of the record, whether Joseph had taken them out or where they were. She said She did not know" (*Lucy's Book*, 382).

²⁷ Lucy Mack Smith, draft manuscript. Variant reading in *Lucy's Book*, 379-80. Lucy stated, "There was not a shilling in the house."

²⁸ *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):167. David Whitmer in a newspaper interview said: "I had conversations with several young men who said that Joseph Smith had certainly golden plates,

According to Lucy, Joseph Sr. was informed that a group of "10 or 12 men were club[b]ed together with one Willard Chase a Methodist class leader at their head," and they had sent for an unnamed conjuror "to divine the place where the record was deposited by magic art." "Accordingly," she continued, "the morning after we heard of their plans Mr. Smith went over a hill that <lay> east of <us> to see what he could discover among the neighbors there. At the first house he came to he found the conjurer, Willard Chase and the company all together. This was the house of one Mr. Laurence."²⁹ Joseph Knight later wrote: "I will Say there w[as] a man near By By the name Samuel Lawrance [Lawrence] He was a Seear and he had Bin to the hill and knew about the things in the hill and he was trying to obtain them."³⁰

While Joseph Jr. was working in Macedon, helping Mrs. Wells with her well, Emma took a stray horse that had been on the Smiths' premises for two days (according to Lucy) and rode to Macedon. Joseph came up out of the well because he had perceived that Emma was coming to see him. She informed him that the money-diggers claimed to have located the hiding place of his golden book. Joseph looked in his peep stone and said to Emma that the plates were safe. Joseph promised Mrs. Wells that he would come back when he could, mounted a horse "in his linen frock" (smock or work apron), and rode back home with Emma.³¹

Joseph then walked by himself to where he hid the gold plates on or near the hill. Several people remember the story they heard of how he brought the plates back to the Smith house. According to Lucy's version, Joseph

. . . took the plates from their [hiding] place and wrapping them in his linen frock put them under his arm and started for the house. After walking a short distance in the road, he concluded it would be safer to go across through the woods. In a moment he struck through the timber where there was a large windfall to cross. He had not proceeded far in this direction till, as he was jumping over a log, a man spran[g] up and gave him a heavy blow with a gun. Joseph <leveled> him to the ground.³²

Smith claimed he knocked down several men as he ran home, arriving out of breath. When all the commotion settled, Joseph showed those present his dislocated thumb, which his

and that before he attained them he had promised to share with them, but had not done so, and they were very much incensed with him." *Kansas City Daily Journal*, June 5, 1881; reprinted in the *Deseret Evening News*, June 11, 1881; *Saints Herald*, 28 (July 1, 1881):197; and *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 43 (July 4, 1881):422.

²⁹ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 381.

³⁰ Joseph Knight, *Reminiscences*; see Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 32. Exactly when Joseph Sr. went to the Lawrence home is not known. Lucy places the visit after Joseph recovered the plates, and this is the account we follow in our reconstruction. Knight has the visit to the Lawrence home occurring the night of September 21-22.

³¹ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 383-84.

³² *Ibid.*, 385-86. This is the only account that mentions a gun. Martin Harris understood that he was struck by a club. *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):166.

father put back in place.³³ Joseph Jr. then "related to our guests [Joseph Knight and Josiah Stowell] the whole history of the record."

Josiah Stowell was still at the Smith home at the end of September. Martha L. Campbell wrote, referring to Stowell, "if I understood him wright he was the first person that took the Plates out of your hands the morni<n>g you brought them in."³⁴ After this Joseph went to Willard Chase's house and talked with him. Chase recalled the story that Smith told him, which is similar to the accounts of Smith's mother and Joseph Knight:

That on the 22d of September, he arose early in the morning, and took a one horse wagon, of some one that had stayed over night at their house, without leave or license; and, together with his wife, repaired to the hill which contained the book. He left his wife in the wagon, by the road, and went alone to the hill, a distance of thirty or forty rods from the road; he said he then took the book out of the ground and hid it in a tree top, and returned home.

He then went to the town of Macedon to work. After about ten days, it having been suggested that some one got his book, his wife went after him; he hired a horse, and went home in the afternoon, staid long enough to drink one cup of tea, and then went for his book, found it safe, took off his frock, wrapt it round it, put it under his arm and run all the way home, a distance of about two miles. He said he should think it would weigh sixty pounds, and was sure it would weigh forty.

On his return home, he said he was attacked by two men in the woods, and knocked them both down and made his escape, arrived safe and secured his treasure.—He then observed that if it had not been for that stone, (which he acknowledged belonged to me,) he would not have obtained the book.³⁵

Martin Harris, a wealthy farmer of Palmyra who knew the Smiths as treasure seekers, heard about the find. Harris indicated that he "had a revelation the summer before, that God had a work for me to do."³⁶ Lucy Smith mentioned that Harris was aware of the existence of the gold plates for some time: "Here let me mention that no one knew anything of this buisness [business] <from us> except one confidential friend of My Husband's to whom he named it some 2 or 3 years before."³⁷ Martin said he heard about the gold plates "about the first of October, 1827." Harris said:

³³ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 386-88. The story at this point is taken from Lucy Smith's account. Benjamin Saunders said, "I saw his hand all swel[l]ed up." Benjamin Saunders interview, 1884, in the W. H. Kelley Collection, "Miscellany 1795-1948," 23, CCLA. During the scuffles Smith was struck on his side. *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):166; *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY) 2 (February 14, 1831):101; *Historical Magazine* 7 (May 1870):307.

³⁴ Martha L. Campbell (by the request of Josiah Stowell) to Joseph Smith, December 19, 1843, Joseph Smith Collection, CHL. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 4:83.

³⁵ Affidavit of Willard Chase, December 11, 1833, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 245-46.

³⁶ *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):163.

³⁷ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 380. Lucy further stated, "The reader will notice, that on a preceeding [preceding] page I spoke of a confidential friend to whom Mr. Smith [Joseph Sr.] mentioned the

The first time I heard of the matter, my brother Presarved [Preserved] Harris, who had been in the village of Palmyra, asked me if [I] had heard about Joseph Smith, jr., having a golden bible. My thoughts were that the money-diggers had probably dug up an old brass kettle, or something of the kind. I thought no more of it. This was about the first of October, 1827.

Martin also recalled being told by the Smith family how Joseph obtained the gold plates. (The horse and wagon which Harris remembered as belonging to Stowell were actually owned by Joseph Knight):

After this, on the 22nd of September, 1827, before day, Joseph took the horse and wagon of old Mr. Stowel[1], and taking his wife, he went to the place where the plates were concealed, and while he was obtaining them, she kneeled down and prayed. He then took the plates and hid them in an old black tree top which was hollow. Mr. Stowel[1] was at this time at old Mr. Smith's, digging for money. . . .

When Joseph had obtained the plates he communicated the fact to his father and mother. The plates remained concealed in the tree top until he got the chest made. He then went after them and brought them home. While on his way home with the plates, he was met by what appeared to be a man, who demanded the plates, and struck him with a club on his side, which was all black and blue. Joseph knocked the man down, and then ran for home, and was much out of breath. When he arrived home, he handed the plates in at the window, and they were received from him by his mother. They were then hidden under the hearth in his father's house. But the wall being partly down, it was feared that certain ones, who were trying to get possession of the plates, would get under the house and dig them out.

Harris said that the above events occurred before he talked with Joseph:

A day or so before I was ready to visit Joseph, his mother came over to our house and wished to talk with me. I told her I had no time to spare, she might talk with my wife, and, in the evening when I had finished my work I would talk with her. When she commenced talking with me, she told me respecting his bringing home the plates, and many other things, and said that Joseph had sent her over and wished me to come and see him.

Harris "waited a day or two," had breakfast, and then "told my folks I was going to the village, but went directly to old Mr. Smith's." While there Harris requested Smith "to tell me the story, which he did as follows. He said: 'An angel had appeared to him, and told him [Joseph] it was God's work.'" According to Harris, the angel "told him he must quit the company of the money-diggers."³⁸

existence of the record 2 or 3 years before it came forth. This was no other than Martin Harris" (394).

³⁸ *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):164-69.

Harris discussed Smith's story with the Reverend John A. Clark. Clark later recalled, "According to Martin Harris, it was after one of these night excursions, that Jo, while he lay upon his bed, had a remarkable dream. An angel of God seemed to approach him, clad in celestial splendor."³⁹

Almost all who heard versions of the story remembered in particular Smith's interaction with this messenger or spirit associated with the gold record. Abigail Harris, wife of Lucy Harris's brother Peter Harris, remembered a visit by Smith's parents: "They told me that the report that Joseph, jun. had found golden plates, was true, and that he was in Harmony, Pa. translating them—that such plates were in existence, and that Joseph, jun. was to obtain them, was revealed to him by the spirit of one of the Saints that was on this continent, previous to its being discovered by Columbus."⁴⁰

Henry Harris, who lived in the area at the time, heard about the gold plates from Joseph Jr. and remembered Smith's interaction with an angel and his use of a stone known as a seer stone:

After he pretended to have found the gold plates, I had a conversation with him, and asked him where he found them and how he come [sic] to know where they were. He said he had a revelation from God that told him they were hid in a certain hill and he looked in his stone and saw them in the place of deposit; that an angel appeared, and told him he could not get the plates until he was married, and that when he saw the woman that was to be his wife, he should know her, and she would know him.⁴¹

Benjamin Saunders, who was thirteen years old at the time, remembered hearing the story at his home:

I heard <Joe> tell my Mother and Sister how he procured the plates. He said he was directed by an angel where it was. He went in the night to get the plates. When he took the plates there was something down near the box that looked some like a toad that rose up into a man which forbid him to take the plates. He found a big pair of spectacles <also with the plates>. As he went home some one tried to get the plates away from him. He said he knock[ed] the man down and got away. Had two or three skirmishes on the way. I saw his hand all swel[l]ed up and he said it was done in hitting the enemy.⁴²

³⁹ *The Episcopal Recorder* 18 (September 5, 1840), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, letter dated August 24, 1840; John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way* (Philadelphia: W. J. & J. K. Simon; New York: Robert Carter, 1842), 225. Oliver Cowdery wrote to William W. Phelps that Joseph had previously been acquainted with the place where the record was deposited. *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (February 1835):80, Kirtland, Ohio.

⁴⁰ Statement of Abigail Harris, November 29, 1833, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 253.

⁴¹ Statement of Henry Harris, in *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴² Benjamin Saunders interview (1884), 22-24, CCLA. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 2:137-38.

During the time Smith reportedly had the gold plates in Manchester, they were said to have been hidden in various places. Several accounts have survived which detail the help of Alvah Beeman. Lucy Smith remembered that Beeman "came from the village <of Livonia>, a man in whom we reposed much confidence. . . . [I]t was resolved that a portion of the hearth should be taken up and the plates buried under the same." This was just before a "large company of men came rushing up to the house armed with guns" looking for the gold plates.⁴³

Martin Harris mentioned "old Mr. Beman" as one of the treasure seekers who had been "digging for money supposed to have been hidden by the ancients."⁴⁴ The gold plates were eventually "put into an old Ontario glass-box." Harris said, "Old Mr. Beman sawed off the ends, making the box the right length to put them in, and when they went in he said he heard them jink [clink], but he was not permitted to see them. He told me so."⁴⁵

Beeman's daughter Mary related what she heard about her father and the gold plates:

Father [Alvah Beeman] became acquainted with Father Joseph Smith, the Father of the Prophet, he frequently would go to Palmira to see Father Smiths and his family, during this time Brother Joseph Smith came in possession of the plates which contained the Book of Mormon.

As soon as it was noised around that there was a golden Bible found (for that was what it was called at that time) the minds of the people became so excited and it arose at such a pitch that a mob collected together to search the house of Father Smith to find the records. My Father was there at the time and assisted in concealing the plates in a box in a secluded place where no one could find them.⁴⁶

After being hidden under the hearth, the plates reportedly were placed in the Smiths' cooper's shop.⁴⁷ Finally the plates were "nailed up in a box and the box put into a strong cask made for the purpose, the cask was then filled with beans and headed up."⁴⁸

Fearing the hostile money-diggers around Manchester, Emma's family allowed her and her husband to move back home to Harmony, Pennsylvania. Her brother Alva helped transport the couple and their barrel of beans to the Hale property where Joseph would start dictating the

⁴³ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 391.

⁴⁴ *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):164. Alvah (or Alva) Beeman (also spelled Beman and Beaman) was born on May 22, 1775. Joseph Knight wrote, "Beeman took out his [divining] Rods and hild [held] them up and they pointed Dow[n] to the h[e]arth whare they ware hid. there Says Beeman it is under that h[e]arth." Joseph Knight Reminiscences; Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 34. Since Lucy Smith and Mary Adeline Beeman Noble said that Alvah Beeman helped hide the plates in the hearth, perhaps he was just demonstrating the power of his rods.

⁴⁵ *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):167. Joseph B. Noble (son-in-law of Alvah Beeman) wrote that Beeman "was permit[t]ed to handle the plates with a thin cloth covering over them." Joseph B. Noble Journal, CHL.

⁴⁶ Mary Adeline Beeman Noble Journal, written after September 1834, CHL. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 3:308.

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 392.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 401. Also Martin Harris in *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):170. Orson Pratt wrote in 1840 that the plates were put "into a barrel of beans." Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:401.

text of his book. In 1829, after the dictation was completed and the type was being set, Smith wrote a letter from Harmony to Oliver Cowdery about their stay in southern New York and Pennsylvania: "The people are all friendly to <us> except a few who are in opposition to ev[e]ry thing unless it is some thing that is exactly like themselves and two of our most formadable persacutors are now under censure and are cited to a tryal in the church for crimes which if true are worse than all the Gold Book business."⁴⁹

Emma's father, Isaac, later remembered his daughter's and son-in-law's stay at his home:

I was informed they had brought a wonderful book of Plates down with them. I was shown a box in which it is said they were contained, which had, to all appearances, been used as a glass box of the common sized window-glass. I was allowed to feel the weight of the box, and they gave me to understand, that the book of plates was then in the box—into which, however, I was not allowed to look.⁵⁰

In the spring of 1828 Martin Harris arrived at Harmony to assist Smith as a scribe during the process of translating. Surviving accounts of the translation process suggest that Smith worked without directly using the plates—this despite all of the difficulty in obtaining, hiding, and bringing the plates along. When it came to translating the crucial plates, they were no more present in the room than was John the Beloved's ancient parchment, the words of which Joseph also dictated the next year.⁵¹ Richard Van Wagoner and Steven Walker in their study observe:

The plates could not have been used directly in the translation process. The Prophet, his face in a hat to exclude exterior light, would have been unable to view the plates directly even if they had been present during transcription. A mental picture of the young Joseph, face buried in a hat, gazing into a seer stone, plates out of sight, has not been a generally held view since the early days of the Church. The view raises some difficult questions. Why, for example, was such great care taken to preserve the plates for thousands of years if they were not to be used directly in the translation process?⁵²

Isaac Hale's summary of the process suggests his incredulity: "The manner in which he [Joseph] pretended to read and interpret, was the same as when he looked for the money-diggers,

⁴⁹ Copy of letter of Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery, October 22, 1829, transcribed in 1832 into Joseph Smith's Letterbook 1:9, CHL; Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed., (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 251-52.

⁵⁰ Affidavit of Isaac Hale, March 20, 1834, in *The Susquehanna Register, and Northern Pennsylvanian* 9 (May 1, 1834):1; reprinted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 264.

⁵¹ H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text and Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 33; BC 6; LDS and RLDS D&C 7 (April 1829).

⁵² "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15 (Summer 1982):53.

with the stone in his hat, and his hat over his face, while the Book of Plates were at the same time hid in the woods!"⁵³

David Whitmer of Fayette, New York, an early disciple of Joseph Smith who became acquainted with him in 1829 while the book was still being dictated, recalled in 1881: "He [Joseph] did not use the plates in the translation, but would hold the interpreters to his eyes and cover his face with a hat, excluding all light, and before his eyes would appear what seemed to be parchment" on which he would see the characters on the plates and the translation. Joseph would then read the words that he saw to his scribe.⁵⁴ In an 1885 interview, Whitmer said that Joseph used a seer stone "placed in a hat into which he buried his face, stating to me and others that the original Character[s] appeared upon parchment and under it the translation in english which [enabled him] to read it readily."⁵⁵

It is not clear from the early accounts whether Smith used a single seer stone or, in another tradition, two seer stones as a pair of spectacles to read the meaning of the text. Either way the various accounts emphasize Smith's continued use of a seer stone.⁵⁶ In Joseph Smith's 1832 account, he mentions that there were spectacles "to read the Book."⁵⁷ Joseph Knight, who visited Smith in Harmony, wrote:

Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Dark[e]ned his Eyes then he would take a Sentence [Sentence] and it would appe[a]r in Brite Roman Letters then he would tell the writer and he would write it then <that would go away> [and] the next Sentence would Come and so on. But if it was not Spelt rite it would not go away till it was rite. So we See it was marvelous thus was the hol [whole] translated.⁵⁸

⁵³ *Susquehanna Register* 9 (May 1, 1834):1; reprinted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 265.

⁵⁴ *Kansas City Daily Journal*, June 5, 1881, 1; reprinted in the *Deseret Evening News*, June 11, 1881; *Saints Herald* 28 (July 1, 1881):198; *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 43 (July 4, 1881):423; and Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 5:76.

⁵⁵ Interview of David Whitmer by Zenas H. Gurley, Jr., January 14, 1885, typescript, CHL. The bracketed words "enabled him" came from *Autumn Leaves* 5 (1892):453, Lamoni, Iowa. See Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 157-58.

⁵⁶ On the method by which the Book of Mormon was said to have been translated, see, under various titles, James E. Lancaster in *Saints Herald* 109 (November 15, 1962):798-802, 806, 817; reprinted in *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 3 (1983):51-61; *Restoration Studies III* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1986), 220-31; and Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 97-112. James Lancaster wrote, "An examination of the eyewitness testimony produces the following consensus on the method of translation of the Book of Mormon: . . . the plates were not used in the translating process and often were not even in sight during the translation." *Restoration Studies III*, 226.

⁵⁷ Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith* 1:9.

⁵⁸ Joseph Knight, *Reminiscences*; see Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection," 35. Regarding the Urim and Thummim, see Kenneth Sowers Jr., "The Mystery and History of the Urim and Thummim," *Restoration Studies II* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1983), 75-79. Concerning the seer stone in a hat, see J. L. Traughber, Jr., "Testimony of David Whitmer,"

The biblical term "Urim and Thummim" in Knight's account seems to be a later term used to apply to the seer stone and sometimes to two magical stones in frames like spectacles. Lucy Smith remarked, "Joseph kept the urim and thum[m]im constantly about his person," even having it with him while he was working down in a well.⁵⁹ It was by the "Urim and Thummim," according to Lucy, that Joseph received a commandment that he should baptize Oliver Cowdery and that Cowdery should baptize him.⁶⁰ At one time an intimation "was given through the urim and thum[m]im" as Joseph "one morning applied the latter to his eyes to look upon the record, instead of the words of the book [of Mormon] being given him, he was commanded to write a letter to one David Whitmore."⁶¹

Accounts also differ about what supposedly happened to the gold plates.⁶² David Whitmer told an interviewer in 1884 that the plates "were taken away by the angel to a cave, which we saw by the power of God while we were yet in the Spirit."⁶³ William Smith said in 1841 that Joseph "was directed by a vision to bury the plates again in the same manner; which he accordingly did."⁶⁴

Brigham Young, who joined the church in 1832, spoke of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery going to the Hill Cumorah: "The hill opened, and they walked into a cave." Orson Pratt referred to "numerous records of the ancient nations of the western continent," in another area of the hill.⁶⁵

Taken together, these earliest accounts about the gold plates place the event within the larger context of treasure hunting. Smith reported that he obtained the gold plates from the ground where they had been hidden for 1,400 years. Like his earlier attempts to locate lost objects and valuable treasures in the earth, he located the plates by means of the stone.⁶⁶ He

Saints Herald 26 (November 15, 1879):341; and David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: Author, 1887), 12, 30, 37.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 384.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 439. See Marquardt, *Joseph Smith Revelations*, 46; BC 15:6-7; LDS D&C 18:7; RLDS D&C 16:2.

⁶¹ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 446.

⁶² Folklore has it that Joseph returned the gold plates to a cave in the Hill Cumorah in Manchester, New York. For a collection of these stories, see Paul Thomas Smith, "A Preliminary Draft of the Hill Cumorah Cave Story Utilizing Seven Secondary Accounts and Other Historical Witnesses," March 1980, privately circulated.

⁶³ Interview of David Whitmer by Edmund C. Briggs, in *Saints Herald* 31 (June 21, 1884):396; and Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 127.

⁶⁴ William Smith interview, *The Congregational Observer* 2 (July 3, 1841):1.

⁶⁵ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 19:38, June 17, 1877; quoted in *The Contributor* 3 (February 1882):137; *The Juvenile Instructor* 31 (September 1, 1896):514; and Reed A. Benson, "Sword of Laban," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992), 3:1,427-28. Young remembered that "Joseph Smith said that Cave Contained tons of Choice Treasures & records." Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833-1898*, typescript, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983-85), 6:509, entry for December 11, 1869, original in CHL. Orson Pratt's comments are in the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 28 (July 7, 1866):417.

⁶⁶ Interview of Martin Harris, *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):163, 169.

removed his find from its depository and laid it down. After laying it down, however, it suddenly disappeared and went back into the box. This is similar to another treasure dig he participated in, with the guardian standing by and protecting the item.

The guardian spirit is a consistent focus of these early stories. Whether the guardian of the plates was a spirit or angel, its purpose was to watch over the buried box and its contents. Smith went to great lengths to obey the spirit's commands. He wore special clothes. He was given a simple command not to lay the plates down. When he did, the spirit struck him and kept him from obtaining the treasure. Because he did not do as he was instructed, Joseph was told to come in another year and bring Alvin with him.

Many aspects of the story told in New York and Pennsylvania were later revised. This included Joseph Smith's looking into the stone and seeing that he should bring Emma Hale to the hill, and especially details that linked the gold plates and treasure hunting. Rodger I. Anderson commented on why such details were omitted from Smith's historical accounts:

His earlier story of the mobile plates which vanished and reappeared so mysteriously was not mentioned because of its similarity to the elusive treasures he was accused of hunting; the spirit's command to bring Alvin to the hill and after Alvin's death, Emma, was deleted because it smacked more of ritualistic magic than religion "pure and undefiled"; and Joseph Knight's recollection that Smith had "looked in his glass" to find the right person was discarded because of its resemblance to the glass looking charge he had been convicted of in 1826. Smith had learned from bitter experience that not all regarded such activities as divine.⁶⁷

In the 1832 retelling of the gold plates story, Smith was not given elaborate tasks to break the spell but was simply informed by the angel that in "due time thou shalt obtain them."⁶⁸ By the time of Smith's 1838-39 account, he was instructed from the very start that there would be a four-year waiting period: "I made an attempt to take them out but was forbidden by the messenger and was again informed that the time <for> bringing them forth had not yet arrived, neither would until four years from that time."⁶⁹

The early story as Joseph Smith related was important since it established the belief that he had a record. His immediate family was also essential to him as they were among the first to believe him. Chapter 6 will summarize the activities of the Joseph Smith Sr. family after they arrived in Palmyra.

⁶⁷ "Joseph Smith's Early Reputation Revisited," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 4 (1980):98; see also Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 47.

⁶⁸ Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith* 1:8.

⁶⁹ Manuscript History, Book A-1:7, CHL; Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith* 1:281; Joseph Smith-History 1:53, Pearl of Great Price.