ELIZA R. SNOW AND THE PROPHET’S GOLD WATCH: TIME KEEPER AS RELIC

Jennifer Reeder

WHEN BRITISH TRAVELER EMILY PFEIFFER visited Utah in the early 1880s, she met Eliza Roxcy Snow, leader of Mormon women and widow of both Brigham Young and his predecessor, Joseph Smith. Pfeiffer described Snow as having “the sort of dignity which comes from the possession of, and living up to, an idea,” even a “Hebrew prophetess.” Pfeiffer reported that “Sister Smith took from her neck a chain to which was attached a large ornamented gold watch, a relic, as she told us, most precious to her, it having been the property of the murdered prophet whose wife she had been.”¹ A relic seems out of place in Mormon culture, yet this was Snow’s own word in describing her watch. More than a cherished keep-

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sake, the gold watch tangibly linked Snow and others to Joseph Smith with deep homage.

A relic is, simply defined, a physical object accorded spiritual significance because of its association with a holy person. Historian Thomas Head classified relics as “not merely a symbol of the saint; they also denoted the saint’s continued physical presence in this world.” In a detailed examination of relics and their social and cultural influence, James Bentley described how dead saints continue to live and remain active through their relics. Sacred medieval relics indicated a shared set of beliefs clustered around social events; meaning and value emerged from the desire to acquire such relics and the visits of the devout to their shrines. Relics imbue religious cultural heritage with reverence, emotion, and attachment.

Cultural artifacts treated as relics are also part of the Latter-day Saint tradition. Examples include traveling exhibitions of the death masks of Joseph and Hyrum Smith and John Taylor’s watch from in Carthage Jail, which memorialize the martyrdom. Other objects have not become part of our system.” Historian Davis Bitton theorized that the ritualization of cultural memory as evidenced in a historic site or shrine “was an appropriate symbol of the sacrifice of those who erected it, or the divine power manifested in it,” “to maintain an identity and celebrate history.” Clark, On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949), 292; Bitton, “The Ritualization of Mormon History,” Utah Historical Quarterly 43 (Winter 1975): 76, 84.

Relics served to objectify and transmit the power (Latin virtus) of the saints.” Thomas Head, “Relics,” in Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs, edited by Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 815–19. Patrick Geary, “Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics,” in The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective, edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 174, notes that a relic comes from a very specific set of shared beliefs. While many traditional relics consisted of body parts, significant objects belonging to the deceased saint, such as clothing, were also considered relics.


David Henry Cannon remembered how his father, George Q. Cannon, made the death masks and the honor and reverence of the process. David Henry Cannon, “The Cannon Family—1847,” Our Pioneer Heritage, ed-
been subdivided in hopes of extending a person: Canes crafted from Joseph Smith’s coffin⁵ and handkerchiefs cut from Eliza R. Snow’s temple robes⁶ became prized possessions, valuable by association and fostering attachment to the person as well as to a larger cause.

One relic, little-known today but showcased frequently between 1879 and 1885, was the gold watch that Joseph Smith gave to Eliza R. Snow, which Snow later showed to Emily Pfeiffer. This artifact emerges in second-hand reminiscences of important Nauvoo events. Certainly Snow wore it throughout her life as seen in at least five photographs. The watch, currently in the First Presidency’s possession, was transformed into a venerated relic as Snow exhibited it throughout her travels, allowing children to hold and kiss the timepiece as a vestige or metonym of Smith years after his martyrdom.⁷ These children then treasured their own testimonies of Smith and testified of

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⁷The watch appears in the minutes of at least fifteen different Primary organizations throughout Utah Territory and in at least eighteen personal diaries or reminiscences. According to Jonathon Gil Harris, “Shakespeare’s Hair: Staging the Object of Material Culture,” Shakespeare Quarterly 52 (Winter 2001): 484: “Whether repudiated or succumbed to, disdained or celebrated, the object remains a thing whose very objecthood is registered
him to others, incorporating a tradition of reverence and attachment. The tactile experience of an object of such value linked them to a legacy many of their parents and grandparents had shared firsthand. The testimony of memory along with history is a powerful witness about association and meaning.

Examining the watch as a relic reveals multiple layers of meaning in what medieval historian Eugene Vance described as “how social events cluster themselves...to produce new interdiscursive configurations specific to this or that cultural moment and its texts.”

First, this study will examine the watch in Joseph Smith’s possession, looking at the historical use of his other contemporaneous watches as well as examining details of this specific watch. I will then examine Snow’s possession and display of this watch, as recorded in minutebooks and reminiscences, indicating meanings associated with Snow. Rhetoric about the watch from first- and second-hand accounts of Snow’s travels shows the watch as a corporeal connection between her and Joseph Smith, both in their leadership roles and in their plural marriage. The possession and display of the watch communicated these important relationships and became imbued with reverence, emotion, and attachment, suggesting the inherent power of a holy relic.

SMITH’S WATCH

The gold watch Joseph Smith presented to Eliza R. Snow was one of several with which he is associated. Watches functioned historically in two ways: first, Smith used them as an economic commodity tendered as payment or offered as collateral. Second, he offered them as gifts representing friendship or affection. Watches, like clocks, often appeared on tax and estate records as a measure of

in the present instant of the early modern subject’s or the postmodern critic’s struggle with her desire. The object is apprehended, therefore, as a static entity.”


Eliza R. Snow, seen wearing her gold watch tucked into her belt, ca. 1875. Photo courtesy of Carol Cornwall Madsen.
real worth and were also used as a form of payment. Documenta-

10 tion exists of at least five instances when Smith used a watch as a me-

10 dium of exchange. Between 1832 and 1838, he paid Judge Benjamin B. Bissell of Painesville, Ohio, for legal services with a gold watch worth $150. Frederick G. Williams recorded an unspecified business arrangement with Smith at some point between 1832 and 1836 involving a silver watch worth $50. Samuel C. Brown presented Smith with a gold watch on February 15, 1843, a gesture of enough importance, probably due to its economic value, to appear in the Church’s historical record. On an unspecified date, Smith gave Newel K. Whitney, a trusted friend, a watch. Finally, the English Saints at Nauvoo gave Smith a silver key-winder watch, again, on an unspecified date. According to anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, the inventory of Brigham Young’s estate in 1855 includes one gold watch and chain, $750, one gold watch valued at $100, and four gold watches, $65 each. Elias Smith, “Consecration of Property,” Our Pioneer Heritage, 16:316. “Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner,” Our Pioneer Heritage, 5:311, paid her rent in ca. 1838–39 with a gold watch, which cost two hundred dollars.

11 John L. Von Blon described this watch with solid gold case, face, hands, and numerals, with thirteen jewels and a separate key winder. The watch was made in England between 1810 and 1818. Von Blon, “Brief History of the Joseph Smith Watch [ca. 1941],” Archives of the Family and Church History Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter LDS Church Archives).

12 “Statement of Facts Relative to Joseph Smith and Myself,” holograph, n.d., Frederick G. Williams Papers, MS 782, LDS Church Archives.


14 See photograph, Church History in the Fulness of Times: The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church Educational System manual (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000): 116. This watch is now in possession of the Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City.

15 Currently on display at the Community of Christ Museum, Independence, Missouri.
value devolves from transactions;\textsuperscript{16} the transfer of a watch from one party to another connotes real worth in an exchange of various kinds of services and relationships.

Watches, for Joseph Smith, were also an element of his marital relationships. The \textit{Palmyra Reflector} reported the arrival in Ohio of "Joe Smith with his \textit{better half}," his wife, Emma Hale Smith: "the prophet well clad, while the female exhibited a gold watch — a profusion of rings."\textsuperscript{17} Sarah Kimball reported that Emma, at her wedding to Lewis Bidamon in December 1847, had "a gold watch and chain."\textsuperscript{18} It is not known whether this is the same watch she had had in Palmyra. There is no documentation on the origin of either watch (if they were different). Possibly the watch was a gift from Joseph, since he was connected to other wives with other watches. For example, on August 23, 1843, Emma demanded that Flora Ann Woodsworth, one of Joseph's plural wives, return to Joseph a gold watch he had given her.\textsuperscript{19} It is not clear whether Smith intended the gold watch he gave Snow to be a gift from husband to wife or from Church president to secretary, although Snow later used the watch in public settings to illustrate the principle of plural marriage, as discussed below.

Snow’s gold watch was a valuable one. It bears hallmarks, also known as assay or standard marks, which guarantee the purity of the

\textsuperscript{16}Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in \textit{The Social Life of Things}, 3–63, discusses the inherent meaning of an object in human transactions, attributions, and motivations. The present value of any given object derives diachronically from its differential relations to its known (or assumed) past.

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Palmyra Reflector}, March 1, 1831, quoted in Francis W. Kirkham, \textit{A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon} (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Company, 1959), 391. The article uses the gold watch and rings as evidence that "\textit{Mormonism} is a thriving business."

\textsuperscript{18}Sarah M. Kimball, Letter to Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde, January 2, 1848, holograph, Marinda Hyde Papers, 1838–49, LDS Church Archives.

Cover of Eliza R. Snow’s watch showing inscriptions: “1844 / JS to ERS / 1887 to JFS.” Courtesy Church Historical Department.
metal, indicate the sponsor of the craftsman, and tell where and when the article was hallmarked. The crowned leopard was an assay mark used by the Goldsmiths’ Company of London Hall before 1823. The crown emblem on the watch is situated over the “18,” specifying 18-carat gold purity. The lion passant was the standard mark on 22-carat gold, indicating a composition of different parts of gold. “F” also appears on the watch, dating its manufacture to 1821, according to a Goldsmiths’ Hall chart. Other distinguishing marks include the initials SH and JW, probably those of the watchmakers. On the opposite inside cover are found engravings made later, after Smith’s death, discussed below. While these hallmarks certify the watch’s authenticity, possession of the watch later became its own hallmark, certifying a relationship to the Prophet.

Traditionally, this particular watch played a role in the organization of the Nauvoo Female Relief Society in 1842, even though its provenance is somewhat conjectural. Memory, while perhaps not entirely factually accurate, reveals important associations and lived meaning for participants. Although the watch is not explicitly mentioned in the organization’s minutes, Martha McBridge Knight, present at the meeting, remembered that “Joseph Smith had to leave before the meeting was dismissed, so he took his watch out of his pocket and laid it on the table by Eliza R. Snow, the secretary of the meeting, and said, ‘Begin your meetings on time and end them on time.’ He left the watch on the table and Eliza R. Snow kept it in her possession until her death.” An engraving inside the watch identifies Snow as the owner in 1844, although the origin and authenticity of these en-

20 For a list of antique hallmark explanations, see F. J. Britten, *Old Clocks and Watches and Their Makers* (Suffolk, Eng.: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1977), 412–16.
21 Ibid., 415.
22 Mary Louise Belnap Lowe, Statement, May 12, 1941, typescript, microfilm, LDS Church Archives. Lowe, age seventy-one, was recalling stories told to her by her mother and grandmother, Adaline Knight Belnap and Martha McBride Knight, who were both present at the organizational meeting on March 17, 1842. Susa Young Gates, one of Brigham Young’s daughters who grew up in the Lion House under the same roof as Snow, dramatized the event with the Prophet telling Eliza, “Here is a timepiece, and you may keep it, from me.” “The Mother of Mothers in Israel: Eliza R. Snow,” Re-
gravings are unknown. Perhaps Smith only loaned the watch for the
duration of that first meeting, then officially bestowed it later, or per-
haps it was on loan at the time of the martyrdom and Snow became
the de facto possessor. Snow's name does not appear on the Relief So-
ciety records in 1844, so a gift at that time would have been made in
private.

Despite some vagueness on the watch's exact provenance and
transmission, a connection between Smith and Snow is sure; and
Snow certainly made use of it thereafter, as did others in their associa-
tions and memories, thus creating the collective meaning that marks
a relic. As anthropologist Patrick Geary states, "Relics of saints,
whether particles of clothing or objects associated with them during
their lives, . . . had no obvious value apart from a very specific set of
shared values." In the case of this watch, it was also connected with
Mormon women's institutional efforts (Relief Society and Primary)
and plural marriage. The documentation of Smith's participation in
Nauvoo Relief Society meetings indicates his proclivity for punctual-
ity, order, and proper governance. He instructed the women to keep
accurate records as precedents for policy, effect an organization in

Relief Society Magazine 3 (April 1916): 184. This folk belief has also made its
way into other sources, all three of which seem to be derived from Gates:
Ivan J. Barrett, Heroic Mormon Women (American Fork, Utah: Covenant
Communications, 1991), 123; Janet Peterson and LaRene Gaunt, Elect La-
dies: Presidents of the Relief Society (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990),
29–30; and Keith and Ann Terry, Eliza (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Butterfly,

The engraving says: "1844 JS to ERS, 1887 to JFS." Maureen
Ursenbach Beecher examined the watch while it was on display in the Relief
Society Building and sketched the engravings. The watch itself was photo-
graphed for this article.

Patrick Geary, "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval

According to James Dunn, "How Advantages, Temporal and Spiritu-
tual, Are Lost," Improvement Era 6 (February 1908), 282–83, "The Prophet
taught that when an hour is appointed for the meeting of the Saints, the
angs will be there, but if the meeting does not begin at the time appointed,
the angels leave, as they have no time to idle away, waiting on the tardiness
of mortals. If the presence of the angels is a blessing, then we lose that bless-
ing when we fail to be punctual to the appointed hour of meeting."
the "proper order," meaning part of the complete order of the priesthood, and elect their own officers. Smith "turned the key" to

26Joseph Smith, as quoted in "A Record of the Organization and Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," Minutes, holograph, LDS Church Archives, in Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2 vols., DVD (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young
the women, endowing their activities with authenticity, authority, and legitimacy. The watch that Smith left on the table may thus be interpreted as a symbol of his instructions for the women to act institutionally in proper order.

**SNOW’S WATCH: ORGANIZATIONAL ELEMENTS**

Joseph Smith’s gift of the gold watch to Eliza R. Snow signaled a link between the two, organizationally and, in Snow’s own interpretation, personally. Snow’s perception of the watch as a relic and her public presentation of it as such reveals her homage for Smith. Snow’s watch kept time and order in Church organization; the watch also symbolically communicated an influential leadership role linked to Smith’s authority. Snow followed Smith’s order in leading the women’s organizations, using his words and his authority. Furthermore, the watch became a public symbol of her personal role as one of the Prophet’s plural wives and as a proponent of the institution of plural marriage.

The location of the Nauvoo Relief Society meeting provides an important institutional link for the watch. Snow not only served as secretary in Nauvoo but also preserved the records through a twenty four-year hiatus from 1844 to 1868. During that hiatus, Snow maintained a public presence as unofficial poet laureate for the Church, documenting both the persecutions and blessings of Church membership while developing a keen sense of her own place within the Church community. In 1868 when Brigham Young gave her a mission in the newly reorganized Relief Society, he said, “I want you to instruct the sisters.” Snow then made a new realm in which to share her views of the Restoration, based on personal experience, revelation, and relationships with other significant leaders. While her po-

University Press, 2002), April 28, 1842, 1:19 (hereafter Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes).

27Ibid., March 17, 1842, April 28, 1842.


etry output waned, her speeches, letters, editorials, and travels increased dramatically, making her accessible to the entire Utah Territory. In this capacity, she influenced the community, particularly women, in the Relief Society, Retrenchment, and Primary Associations, and in her involvement in community affairs of home manufacture and cooperatives, silk, grain, the Deseret Hospital, the *Woman’s Exponent*, and mass meetings in defense of plural marriage. As Snow traveled and directed, met and spoke, she wore the watch as a badge of identity. Much as the hallmarks on the watch authenticated the timepiece, the watch signaled for Snow—and for those who saw the watch—a crucial element in her authoritative organizational role as “Presidentess” of all women’s organizations and universally recognized female leader of Mormon women within the overall Church organization.\(^{30}\)

In Nauvoo, Joseph Smith and others taught the women that their organization’s role was that of companion to the priesthood.\(^{31}\) Snow took that partnership seriously in every facet of her life.\(^{32}\) Her affiliation with the group during its foundational period facilitated her ability and ease in teaching organizational principles to the second generation of Relief Society members, as well as to the Primary and Retrenchment Associations.\(^{33}\) Just as she always carried the watch, Snow also brought the Nauvoo minutes with her,

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\(^{31}\) See especially Smith’s sermons to the women, Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, March 30, 1842, and April 28, 1842. On May 27, 1842, Newel K. Whitney taught, “Without the female all things cannot be restored to the earth—it takes all to restore the Priesthood.” On August 13, 1843, Reynolds Cahoon said the Relief Society “is according to the order of God connected with the priesthood.”


\(^{33}\) For example, T. Callister, bishop of Fillmore Ward, while struggling to organize his Relief Society, told the sisters “he did not understand as fully as he would like about the organization of such societies, but he would in-
reading aloud often to groups of women to illustrate points of governance. Men and women accepted her leadership in preserving the purity of the organization.

As a significant part of her leadership, Eliza R. Snow helped to organize the Primary Association on the general level beginning in 1878 and thereafter instructed the various ward organizations. It was only to congregations of children that Snow displayed her gold watch, most likely as a pedagogical method and always in association with a testimony of Joseph Smith as a way of ordering the kingdom. While Snow’s preaching to adults contained organizational and historical references and did not involve visual aids other than the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes, her instructional approach for children included stories, songs, recitations, and question and answer form himself as soon as possible, and then he would meet with them and complete the organization.” Fillmore Ward, Millard Stake, Relief Society Minutes, vol. 1, 1868–77, May 28, 1868, p. 5, LDS Church Archives. That information came shortly thereafter in the form of a letter from Eliza R. Snow, outlining key governance issues as practiced in Nauvoo and later developed in Salt Lake City.

For example, Bishop David Evans requested that Snow read the Nauvoo record at the organization of the Lehi Ward Relief Society. Lehi Ward, Utah Stake, Relief Society Minutes, Vol. 1 (1868–79), LDS Church Archives. Snow brought the minute book to a meeting in Draper Ward, East Jordan Stake, Relief Society Minutes, Vol. 1-supp. (1868–72), May 26, 1870, p. 51, LDS Church Archives. At a Relief Society meeting in Ephraim, June 25, 1875, Snow called “the minutes of this First Meeting . . . a Treasure beyond Price.” Woman’s Exponent 4, no. 5 (August 15, 1875): 42. Snow also wrote an important description in “The Female Relief Society: A Brief Sketch of its Organization and Workings in the City of Nauvoo, Hancock Co., Ill.,” Woman’s Exponent 1 (June 1, 1872): 2; cont. in 1 (June 14, 1872): 2. She also pondered the doctrinal significance of the teachings recorded in the minutes. Eighteenth Ward, Salt Lake Stake, Relief Society Minutes, vol. 1, 1877–82, March 4, 1879, p. 47, LDS Church Archives, records her saying, “A day or two ago I was reading the minutes of our meetings in Navuoo [sic]. Jos. Smith at one time dwelt considerably upon the privilege of the sisters.”


Snow’s sermons verbally link her to echelons of distinction, perhaps unfathomable to children through words. For example, when she
periods. She also prayed, with the children repeating the prayer line-by-line in unison after her. The relic became a didactic tool for Snow and thousands of children across the territory; the shiny gold watch and its cool weight in their hands made an indelible impression. Such “unofficial narratives” as children’s reminiscences and secondhand accounts of Snow’s speeches perform important functions, according to folklorist William A. Wilson. “These narratives help contemporary Mormons identify with the dramatic events of their collective past, testify to the truthfulness of their church’s teachings, and persuade them to dedicate themselves fully to the Mormon cause.”

John T. Beatty participated in the Tocquerville Primary organization in 1881 at age eleven; as an adult many years later, he remembered how Snow “let every child there hold her gold watch and told us how the prophet Joseph Smith gave it to her.” Minutes of the Washington Primary record that Snow “showed the congregation a watch that belonged to Joseph.” At Lehi, “Sister Snow also related many little Stories, and concluded by Showing the children the gold watch that once belonged to the Prophet Joseph Smith.” These stories highlighted the Prophet, making a dead name larger than life for the children. When “Sister Snow showed a watch that the Prophet Joseph carried for several years” in the Mona Primary, she taught about the spoke to the Weber Stake Relief Society, May 9, 1879, she “expressed her gratitude to God for the organization of the Relief Societies; she had been connected with the first Relief Society organized by the Prophet Joseph Smith in Nauvoo on the 17th of March 1842, and remembered he said that it should become a great power and have great influence.” Weber Stake, Relief Society Minutes, vol. 6, 1877–1900, p. 54, LDS Church Archives.


Washington Branch, St. George Stake, Primary Minutes, vol. 1, 1880-87, November 19, 1880, p. 18, LDS Church Archives.

Lehi Ward, Alpine Stake, Relief Society Minutes, vol. 2, 1878–82, November 22, 1879, p. 139, LDS Church Archives.
influence of this “first Prophet in this dispensation.” In Santaquin, “Sister Snow made a few very encouraging remarks upon punctuality and showed to the children the Watch that used to belong to the Prophet Joseph Smith.” Again the watch witnessed both its literal function as a timepiece and its symbolic function of Joseph Smith’s emphasis on institutional order.

Also of interest are the less accurately remembered tales about Snow’s gold watch. In Wilson’s terms, “rather than viewing these stories as a gateway to the past, it would probably be better to consider them valorizations of the past according to present needs.” In the Davis Stake Primary, Zina D. H. Young, Snow’s traveling partner and sister-wife, taught the children about the persecutions Smith endured and his enemies’ anxiety to imprison him. She then “showed the children a watch that was owned by the Prophet Joseph and he had it on his person when he was killed.” This report is mistaken. The watch Joseph Smith was wearing at Carthage Jail is owned by the Community of Christ and displayed at the Joseph Smith Historic Center in Nauvoo. Most likely it never belonged to Young. Perhaps the secretary misidentified Snow’s watch in Young’s possession, or, more likely, Young showed a completely different watch. Still, this example shows how the secretary valorized the past. Most likely only one watch existed between Snow and Young, and this description seems to be associated with an entirely separate watch. Mary Woolley Chamberlain incorrectly remembered the watch carried by Snow and Young on their trip to southern Utah in 1880-81 as belonging to John Taylor, “which saved his life by warding off the bullet when he was shot in Carthage.

42Santaquin Ward, Nebo Stake, Primary Minutes, vol. 1, 1878–80, November 15, 1879, p. 59, LDS Church Archives.
43Wilson, “Mormon Narratives,” 305.
44The minutes add: “Said one of his wives had the Penknife that made some of the pens that wrote the Book of Mormon.” Davis Stake, Primary Minutes, vol. 2, 1880–1904, July 16, 1880, p. 2, LDS Church Archives.
45A photograph of the watch is found in Shannon M. Tracy, In Search of Joseph (Orem, Utah: Kenninghouse, 1995), 41.
Jail.\textsuperscript{46} Despite the imprecise detail and incorrect associations, these accounts show that the watch connected these women to Joseph Smith, made him more real to the children, and inculcated in them an attitude of homage to the slain Prophet.\textsuperscript{47}

Because Snow traced the ownership of her gold watch to Smith, and because of his prophetic authority in the Church, the transfer of the watch can be read, anthropologically, as a transfer of a portion of that institutional power to her.\textsuperscript{48} In 1884, Snow gave the watch to Joseph F. Smith, nephew of Joseph Smith.\textsuperscript{49} Joseph’s gold watch can be interpreted as a spiritual commodity, because as another anthropologist writes, exchange creates value.\textsuperscript{50} Thus Snow’s possession of the watch signified her power through association with the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Snow communicated her relationship to Smith by showing the watch. By allowing others to see and touch it, she invited them to participate in and act upon their new connection in the religious community through a gesture of shared identity. In the Big Cottonwood Primary, the children were taught about “Joseph Smith, the prophet of this dispensation, and Sister Eliza showed them his watch; wanted to see them improve.”\textsuperscript{51} In Scipio, “Sist. Snow then let them view a beautiful gold watch formerly owned by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Told them what would result from there [sic] being faithful in the Primary association.”\textsuperscript{52} Although it was not a financial transaction, Snow shared her watch and relationship in hopes that it would yield increased commitment and testimony. The watch fostered attachment.

\textsuperscript{46}Chamberlain, “A Sketch of My Life.”

\textsuperscript{47}Folklorist William A. Wilson, “The Paradox of Mormon Folklore,” \textit{BYU Studies} 17 (Autumn 1976): 45, notes that while folklore may be factually false, it is psychologically true and reflects a larger group consensus.

\textsuperscript{48}Geary, “Sacred Commodities,” 176.

\textsuperscript{49}Snow died December 7, 1887. Unfortunately, her probate records have not been found. As an apostle, Joseph F. Smith traveled throughout the territory often with Eliza. Perhaps because Snow had no children of her own, she saw Joseph F. as a legitimate heir for this family heirloom. He became Church president in 1901.

\textsuperscript{50}Appadurai, “Introduction,” in his \textit{The Social Life of Things}, 3.

\textsuperscript{51}Big Cottonwood Ward, Granite Stake, Primary Minutes, vol. 1, 1881-84, May 22, 1881, p. 3, LDS Church Archives.

\textsuperscript{52}Scipio Ward, Millard Stake, Primary Minutes, vol. 1, 1880-84, Nov-
to the group with a different kind of market value—the true value of a religious relic.

Adult minute-takers associated principles that Snow preached with the watch, indicating more links and the inherent value of the price paid by Joseph Smith. Most likely, the children did not read the editorial Snow penned for the *Woman’s Exponent*, which testified of Smith’s role in opening the dispensation of the fulness of times. Her factual report of Smith’s philanthropy, integrity, and work ethic probably would not have appealed to children as much as the dramatic vignettes she shared with them. In Goshen, Snow “showed the Watch which the Prophet used to wear, narrated some of the persecutions which the Prophet was subjected to,” and appealed to their emotional identification with those earlier trials. At a Primary meeting in the Davis Stake, Snow told about a time when Smith “had to have a guard day and night to keep him from his enemies. One evening he happened to go to a house where the children were holding meeting and he overheard them praying for him. He went home and dismissed his guards telling them that he was sure of a good night’s rest for the children had been praying for him.” In Salt Lake City Fifth Ward on February 6, 1882, “Sister Eliza asked the children if they prayed and asked blessings on their food; told them that in the time of Joseph Smith, the children had little meetings and bore testimony and had the good spirit with them.” Although the children were living through significant anti-polygamy persecution, they had not experienced the intense turmoil of Missouri, Illinois, and the westward trek; but such accounts linked their experiences with those of their parents’ and grandparents’. As William Wilson stated, “Experience is not some sort of primeval reality whose nature we have only to plumb and then we will have discovered truth. The way we experience events and bring them to consciousness will be determined by what we take to them, suggesting that not only narratives about experiences but the

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55 Davis Stake Primary Minutes, July 16, 1880.
experiences themselves are socially constructed and that it might therefore be a mistake to exclude the latter."  

The children also connected personally with the watch. Phoebe M. Carling Porter could not attend the special Primary organization meeting in Orderville, Utah, when Eliza R. Snow and Zina Young visited. She recorded how her father, a member of the bishopric, brought the guests home, where Snow allowed Phoebe to hold and kiss the watch. Phoebe wrote, “I remember how sacred the watch seemed to me.” A ten-year-old Scandinavian girl who attended the organizational meeting at the Bear River Ward Primary was impressed with Snow and her watch; as an adult, she related the incident often to her own children.  

Violet Lunt Urie of Cedar City, Utah, left a touching account in her autobiography:

One of the most unforgettable things of my life was when Eliza R. Snow came to Cedar City in 1880 to organize a Primary Association. I was about six, and there were perhaps twenty of us who were charter members of that Primary.

During the organization meeting Sister Snow showed us a watch which had been the Prophet Joseph’s. She told us about the Prophet and the watch. She let each of us hold the watch for a short time. I remember as I held the watch in my tiny cupped hands, she gave us an ad-


58Our Pioneer Heritage, 15:174–75. This was apparently the same visit that Olive Fackrell Norwood, then a child, described as occurring on February 16, 1881, when Snow and Young organized the Orderville Primary. “I went with mother. . . . In this meeting, Sister Eliza R. Snow, Joseph Smith’s wife, showed us the Prophet Joseph’s gold watch. She let me hold it so I could say ‘I held the President’s watch.’” Adonis Robinson, also present, added the detail that Snow spoke in tongues and Young interpreted but remembered Snow’s story as being that Joseph was wearing the watch “when he was martyred in the Carthage jail” and that “it had been given to Eliza when she was made president of the Relief Society organization.” Both quoted in Margaret K. Brady, Mormon Healer and Folk Poet: Mary Susannah Fowler’s Life of “Unselfish Usefulness” (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002), 61–62.

59Nina F. Moss and Edith H. Terry, “Box Elder,” Our Pioneer Heritage, 15:182. The woman is identified only as “my mother, a Scandinavian immigrant girl of ten.”
monition not to ever forget that we had held the Prophet's watch. I believe that I am the only one living who was in that group. I imagine the rest remember as I shall always, the story Sister Snow told us of the Prophet and of the wonderful moment when we held his watch.⁶⁰

Likely other children were equally impressed with the direct connection they felt to Joseph Smith after holding the watch. Children like Violet came to relate to both Snow and Smith as they saw, held, and even kissed the watch in that “most unforgettable moment.” The children also sensed the need to share with others, to testify of their experience with the relic, and to teach their children of this association. Thus, as the watch passed literally from the hands of Joseph Smith to Eliza R. Snow to Joseph F. Smith, its testimony filtered through to the children and on to future generations, aligning them in a common cause.

**SNOW’S WATCH AND PLURAL MARRIAGE**

In addition to its institutional meaning as a relic, Snow’s gold watch also symbolized her marriage to Smith as his plural wife, a union that she referred to in her Nauvoo journal only in vague references and metaphors and in encoded expressions in her poetry.⁶¹ Twenty-four years after the public announcement of plural marriage, Snow, in “A Sketch of My Life” (1876), carefully described her testimony of plural marriage and her adherence to the principle.⁶² Although little is known about the intimacy of Snow’s marriage to Smith, Wilford Woodruff paid tribute to her supportiveness in an 1857 letter to Snow: “Many an hour has Joseph spent in gloom and sorrow because of Fals [sic] Brethren and wicked men. Even the hearts of the saints were so barred by fals tradition that He Could not unbosom his soul in the House of His Friends. This Caused him pain. Then thou dist Comfort him. Thy friendly thoughts and acts and words inspired Gods Eternal truth was like a flaming shaft.

⁶⁰Violet Lunt Urie, autobiography [ca. 1860], typescript, 5, LDS Church Archives.


Though launch [sic] by a female hand, that hand was nerved by faith and power that it pierced the walls of Darkness fear and death and gave the Prophet Joy."  

Where the watch was concerned, however, Snow waited until Emma Smith’s death before making a more public claim of that relationship by exhibiting the watch. Emma died on April 30, 1879, and the *Deseret News* published the news on May 13. Only two days later, Snow publicly displayed her gold watch for the first known time as a memento of her marriage to Smith. Why had she delayed? Perhaps it was her way of showing respect for Emma Smith. Or perhaps she waited until Emma could not challenge her association of the watch with the marriage. In both May and June 1879, she again displayed the gold watch. That fall, on October 18, Snow published a letter to the *Deseret News* editor: “Joseph the Seer’s Public Marriages. His Wife Emma’s Consent Thereto,” in response to “The Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” an interview that Joseph III conducted with his mother, in which she denied Joseph Smith’s participation in polygamy. It was also in the fall of 1880 that Snow started calling herself Eliza R. Snow.
Smith. Snow’s Relief Society speeches unmistakably connect Smith to polygamy and herself to him, not only in the principle of polygamy, but also in her role to instruct, testify, and lead the women of Zion and their children.

The principle of plural marriage was not reserved for adult discussion only. Four months before Emma’s death, in January 1879, the U.S. Supreme Court had confirmed the constitutionality of the 1862 Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act in Reynolds v. the United States. Snow and other leaders recognized the need to teach children about the practice. The gold watch was a safe and positive means to legitimate the practice for children. In Santaquin, after Eliza Snow, Zina Young, and Mary Isabella Horne made “instructive remarks,” the bishop stepped forward and told the children “that now they had seen Joseph’s watch that it was Joseph’s wife that had showed [it] to them.” The testimony of other adult leaders indicated their own understanding of the principle, their adherence to it, and their need to teach children of its importance. Forty-eight-year-old Charles L. Walker attended the Primary meeting in St. George in which “sisters ER Snow Smith and Zina D. Young . . . both declared that they were the wives of Joseph Smith the Martyred Prophet. Sister Eliza showed a watch that Joseph carried while living.” While the watch bore testimony of Joseph Smith, Eliza Snow and Zina Young bore testimony of their connection and relationship to him through plural marriage. Thus, as the watch signified Smith, the women signified the principle. The children, then, learned about the principle of polygamy by the same means through which they learned reverence for the Prophet. As a relic, the gold watch extended the reality of both Smith and his wives to the children, creating attachment to a sacrosanct group and reifying celestial principles. While Snow publicly testified of plural marriage, she pri-


68 Santaquin Ward, Nebo Stake, Primary Minutes, vol. 1, 1878–80, November 15, 1879, p. 59, LDS Church Archives. See also Washington Branch, Primary Minutes, November 19, 1880.

vately carried a piece of her beloved Joseph on a chain around her neck, resting next to her heart. Thus, she herself became an icon, a relic carrying something of the sanctity of plural marriage.  

The last known time when Snow exhibited the gold watch occurred at the Cache Stake Primary conference in Logan on October 24, 1885. She was eighty-one, traveling and speaking less. “She called the Primary children hers and loved them all.” She told them about her trip to the Holy Land in 1872–73, bore testimony of Christ and enjoined them to be punctual, honest, and obedient. She also spoke of Joseph Smith and displayed his watch.

Jane E. Molin, the Cache Valley Stake Primary president, spoke after Snow’s remarks, testifying that “Sister Smith was the mother of us all because she was a mother in Israel.” As mother she maintained order and relationships, linking the mythic figure of Joseph Smith whom later nineteenth-century children never knew firsthand to an object they could touch. As a relic, Smith’s gold watch became a conduit, transmitting his spiritual significance to the children. While Emily Pfeiffer almost certainly did not view Eliza R. Snow’s gold watch with anything like Snow’s reverence, she unquestionably captured its significance as a sacred relic and intuited Snow’s role as a “Hebrew prophetess.”

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70 Geary, “Sacred Commodities,” 176, defined relic as: “Relics were the saints, continuing to live among men. They were immediate sources of supernatural power for good or for ill, and close contact with them or possession of them was a means of participating in that power.”

71 Logan Utah Cache Stake, Primary Minutes, vol. 1, 1881–1911, pp. 28–30, LDS Church Archives.