at least in regard to these Americans, in his assessment that they
cared more for equality than liberty. If they had cared for liberty as
a principle they might have allowed the prophet and his people more
time to see what the direct effects of the kingdom might be, with the
possibility that there would have been no disruption of their
prevailing institutions.

An alternative would have been to drive the Mormons out at gunpoint
without resort to the murders of Joseph and
especially Hyrum Smith that stamped the affair as more than a fight
for political control, civil rights, or
supremacy of the law. [137]

Notes:

{not copied}

Copyright Illinois State Historical Society Summer 2004
Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights
Reserved

No. 5

Kinderhook plates: Examining a nineteenth-century hoax, The
Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society,
Summer 2003 by Jason Frederick Peters

In the 1830s and 1840s, frontier Illinois contained a very volatile
mix of people. This new environment facilitated a leveling factor that
brought people from all parts of the country and from all walks of
life. These people transplanted their beliefs, attitudes, and values
into their new surroundings. Not surprisingly, the first structures
built in these new Illinois settlements were churches, schools, and
meeting places, most times well before the installation of merchants
and tradesmen.1 Entering into these newly established settlements were
the effects of religious revivalism originating in the East and New
England. The most important group emerging from this movement was the
Mormons, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS).

Led by the charismatic Joseph Smith, the Mormons emerged from the
millenialist groups of the second Great Awakening to establish
themselves as a large and fast-growing religious sect. Smith's message
and the Mormon religious doctrine were based upon the Book of Mormon,
Smith's own translation of metallic tablets, or plates, said to
contain the history of the ancient inhabitants of North America. These
ancient plates were said to be made of gold and were presented to
"The Kinderhook Plates: Examining a Nineteenth-Century Hoax"
by Jason Frederick Peters

The Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 96, no. 2 (Summer 2003):130-45

In the 1830s and 1840s, frontier Illinois contained a very volatile mix of people. This new environment facilitated a leveling factor that brought people from all parts of the country and from all walks of life. These people transplanted their beliefs, attitudes, and values into their new surroundings. Not surprisingly, the first structures built in these new Illinois settlements were churches, schools, and meeting places, most times well before the installation of merchants and tradesmen. Entering into these newly established settlements were the effects of religious revivalism originating in the East and New England. The most important group emerging from this movement was the Mormons, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS).

Led by the charismatic Joseph Smith, the Mormons emerged from the millennialist groups of the second Great Awakening to establish themselves as a large and fast-growing religious sect. Smith's message and the Mormon religious doctrine were based upon the Book of Mormon, Smith's own translation of metallic tablets, or plates, said to contain the history of the ancient inhabitants of North America. These ancient plates were said to be made of gold and were presented to Smith by the angel Moroni. After the Mormons moved from the New York area to Kirtland, Ohio, and to Missouri, they ran into public resentment and violence, forcing them into exile in Illinois. The Mormons later fully established themselves and their church at Commerce, Hancock County, Illinois in 1839. Commerce, later renamed Nauvoo, soon grew to be one of the largest settlements in the state. The influence and effects of the Mormons soon spread to other areas of the state through their extensive missionary work and pamphlets.

The spread of Mormon influence in west-central Illinois in the early 1840s left most people divided into one of two camps. One either fell on the pro-Mormon side or the anti-Mormon side. As tensions in Hancock County grew, the aftershocks reverberated throughout the state. Rumors spread of polygamy and theft on the anti-Mormon side. Having become familiar with Mormon doctrine and traditions by the pamphlets spread by nearby Mormon churches as well as the information passing through the small village, three citizens of Kinderhook, in western Pike County, Illinois, set plans in motion to expose the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith as a fraud. Bridge Whitten, Robert Wiley, and Wilburn Fugate planned their own version of the Mormon myth. The three entered Whitten's blacksmith shop where they created their own plates from brass and planted them in a local Indian mound. After doing so, the three hoped to plan a "discovery" and circulate their story in hopes of attracting Smith's attention. They then hoped to fool Smith into releasing some statement concerning the authenticity of the plates in order to expose him as a fraud. While their very intentional and well-planned hoax did not achieve its original goal, it did have a huge effect on the church for quite some time. The confusion surrounding the murder of Smith and the subsequent immigration of the church to Utah caused the hoax to remain unaddressed by Smith. The fact that Smith had never
officially commented as to whether or not the plates were authentic led many members of
the church to take the plates at face value and never question their authenticity. Whether
Smith accepted the plates or not is conjecture, but the church and its establishment
defended the plates until 1981. This position has provided a source of controversy for the
church ever since. The fact that the Kinderhook Plates, an admitted hoax, was defended
by many important members of the church for over one hundred years has created a
major discrepancy in the chronological history of the church. This discrepancy has yet to
be properly and officially addressed. Even if Smith never officially commented on the
authenticity of the plates, many others have, which has left the church and its followers
with a problem that has been left unresolved for nearly one hundred and sixty years.

The Mormon movement can be traced back to the mid-1820s. In September 1827, Joseph
Smith claimed that, after dreaming of a treasure buried in a hill close to his home near
Manchester, New York, the angel Moroni appeared before him and supplied him with a
series of golden plates engraved with ancient characters. Upon translating these plates,
Smith found they contained an account of the ancient inhabitants of North America. After
publishing these translations, known as the Book of Mormon, Smith established the
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in April 1830. In the earliest stages of the
development of the church, the Mormons believed that they were living in the "end
times" foretold in the Bible, thus initially linking the Mormon faith with the wider
millenialist movement of the period. Hoping to develop a greater following, Smith and
the church soon relocated to Kirtland, Ohio in the spring of 1831.

After moving to Ohio, the church began to expand. Later in 1831, Mormon missionaries
moved into Missouri to obtain new converts. At the same time, Smith began expanding
the Mormon religious canon by beginning to work on translating the "Book of Abraham"
from a papyrus obtained by some of the saints at Kirtland. However, this period of
growth was met with trials and resistance. Mob violence had threatened the settlements of
Mormon missionaries in Jackson County, Missouri and, by 1837, economic troubles were
threatening to force the Mormons from Kirtland.

The move from Kirtland to Missouri in January 1838 was met with an order issued by
Governor Boggs forcing all Mormons from Missouri later that year. In searching for a
new place to locate, Smith and the Mormons spent the winter of 1838-39 exiled in
Quincy, Illinois. In the spring of 1839, a location was found and Smith purchased the
site of Commerce in Hancock County, Illinois, about forty-five miles north of Quincy.
While still troubled with pending litigation and retribution from Missouri, Commerce,
renamed Nauvoo in 1840, provided the Mormons with a base of operations and the town
soon grew to be one of the most prosperous in the state. By 1842, Nauvoo had a
population of around ten thousand inhabitants.

Once fully established in Nauvoo, Smith worked toward achieving two main goals:
solving the troublesome Missouri problem and further defining the Mormon doctrine for
his followers. The Mormon expulsion from Missouri as well as their financial losses was
a major problem for the church. In the fall of 1839, Smith visited Washington, D.C. with
the aim of obtaining some financial renumeration for the Mormon losses in Missouri.
Although sympathetic to his cause, President Martin Van Buren pledged no support and the Mormons deemed the trip a failure.11 Further attempts by Missouri officials to extradite Smith as well as a constant threat of invasion from anti-Mormons from Missouri caused the Mormons to form a militia group, the Nauvoo Legion. The Legion fueled growing distrust from the non-Mormon residents of west-central Illinois.

Competing with this Missouri problem was Smith's need to further define the Mormon religion. "The Book of Abraham" was published in March 1842 and expanded the Mormon canon. This new work was available in the Smith-edited Times and Seasons newspaper.12 Although the Mormons had engaged in publishing in both Kirtland and in Missouri, in Nauvoo they began to spread the Mormon message more fully and effectively. By early 1843, the message appealed to the individual convert and came to be better defined. The Mormons hoped that by better defining their own religion and purpose, their message could become more accessible and produce more converts. The Nauvoo publication, the Wasp, changed its name to the Nauvoo Neighbor in March 1843.13 A month later, Smith began to break ties with the millenialist movement by denouncing Millerism and William Miller.14 Although these new developments helped to solidify Mormonism to its followers, the growing anti-Mormon sentiment was rumbling in the distance.

Located some sixty miles south of Nauvoo, Pike County constituted a major part of the "Military Tract," a section of land north of the intersection of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers granted to the veterans of the War of 1812 by President James Monroe in 1817.15 Settlers began to move into the area in the early 1820s and, by the mid-1830s, several small villages, including Pittsfield, Atlas, Barry, and Kinderhook, were established. During the late 1830s a Mormon influence began to take shape in Pike County. Mormontown, about two miles east of Pittsfield in the eastern part of the county, claimed four hundred voters by 1845. [16] Another church a few miles south of Kinderhook, in the western part of the county, claimed a congregation of over one hundred members in the early 1840s. [17]

Continued from page 1.

Officially established in April of 1836 by New Yorkers Bridge Whitten and Chester Churchill, Kinderhook had grown gradually in population since the earliest settlers in the late 1820s. By 1840, it was a self-sufficient, thriving little village. A post office, church, school, blacksmith, mill, as well as a few merchants all supported this growth as well as the subsistence farmers of the surrounding area.18 Consisting mainly of easterners from New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, the village of Kinderhook was situated on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi river.19 Scattered along the bluff and throughout the bottomlands were the remnants of the not too distant, earlier Indian settlements. Indeed,
Indian burial mounds peppered the sides of the bluffs for miles. Although many of these areas were popular with relic hunters, they were generally avoided by the newcomers.

While farming was the most common occupation, Kinderhook's proximity to the Mississippi River allowed the villagers access to the commercial trade of the river as well as a reasonable amount of contact with nearby Hannibal, Missouri and Quincy, Illinois. This allowed the merchants and citizens of Kinderhook to obtain products and information sooner than more isolated settlements. Although some of the early settlers would have at least heard of the Mormons, there is little evidence of Mormon influence in the village itself. Baptist and Methodist churches dominated the landscape and the villagers remained outsiders to the Mormon movement.

Joseph Smith himself had passed through Pike County in June of 1834 on his way to rescue Mormon settlers in Missouri. In a vision on a mound near Pittsfield, Smith claimed to have learned the name of the man who was buried there. He identified the man as Zelph, a Lamanite, and the mound has kept this name ever since.20 Before leaving Illinois, the Mormon group camped near Atlas, some fifteen miles south of the settlers at Kinderhook.21 Although Smith and his group did not stay in Pike County, Mormonism soon entered the area.

By the early 1840s, Mormon churches had begun to pepper the Pike County landscape and began spreading the Mormon message. Many of these Mormons may have brought their faith with them to the area, but missionary work and pamphlets spread the word of the church as well. The most important of these early Mormon pamphlets was Parley P. Pratt's A Voice of Warning and Instruction to all People, or, An Introduction to the faith and Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The publication contained a synthesis of the Mormon theology based around Biblical prophecy with a sprinkling of "end-times" millennialism. The pamphlet was one of the earliest Mormon publications to be circulated, aside from Joseph Smith's original Mormon canon. Parley Pratt traveled extensively and devoted a great deal of his life to missionary work.22 By 1846 Pratt claimed that over thirteen thousand copies of A Voice of Warning were in circulation; and one of the copies would end up in the village of Kinderhook.23

How A Voice of Warning came into the possession of Robert Wiley, Wilburn Fugate, or Bridge Whitten is impossible to ascertain. It may have come from one of the nearby Mormon churches or through the local post office. The three conspirators were familiar with this work, however, and soon set their plans in motion to publicly embarrass the Mormon prophet. As Wilburn Fugate explained in his June 1879 letter: "We read in Pratt's prophecy that 'Truth is yet to spring from out of the earth.' We concluded to prove the prophecy by way of a joke."24

Although the three men were fairly prominent and important in the village, very little information about them has survived. Bridge Whitten, perhaps the most notable of the three, co-founded the village. He and Chester Churchill had obtained the property in which the village was located and soon incorporated it, dividing and selling it by the lot. He practiced the trade of a blacksmith and also became the village's first postmaster.25
Born in North Carolina in 1799 or 1800, Wilburn Fugate migrated to Kinderhook in the late 1830s. He farmed near the village with his wife, four sons, and a daughter.26 Very little information survives about Robert Wiley other than the fact that he was a "local merchant."27

Working in Bridge Whitten's blacksmith shop located near the post office in late March and early April 1843, Whitten, Wiley, and Fugate created their "ancient" plates. Whitten cut the six, bell-shaped pieces while Wiley and Fugate carved hieroglyphics in beeswax with a sharp instrument. These engravings were then filled with acid and put on the plates, etching them. Once the etching was done, the plates were stuck together with a rust made from iron, lead, and nitric acid. The package was then tied with a piece of "hoop iron" and prepared for burial.28

An area near the village cemetery was designated as the site for the burial. This area, which was situated along the bluffs, contained several Indian mounds. Located between the cemetery and the edge of the bluff, this spot was popular with local relic hunters because the spring rains would often wash Indian artifacts out of the ground.29 Robert Wiley began preparing a mound in this location on Sunday, 16 April.30 Wiley dug about eight feet into the mound and then planted the plates, along with a few bones and some pottery underneath a large, flat rock.31 With the plates now planted, the three formulated their story.

Wiley then approached a local Mormon elder, J.P. Sharp as well as Dr. W.P. Harris, who evidently had some Mormon leanings as well, to accompany him on an excavation he was planning. Wiley told the men a story that, in many ways, mirrored the Mormon myth of Joseph Smith, Moroni, and the golden plates. Wiley stated that for three nights in a row he had dreamed that a certain Indian mound near Kinderhook contained a treasure, and that he had labored in secret with no success and that now he was gathering a group of men to excavate the mound. Taken in by this story, Harris and Sharp agreed to accompany Wiley and Fugate as well as five other citizens of Kinderhook. The nine men came to the mound on Sunday, 23 April 1843 and began to dig.32 After digging down about eight feet, they reached the limestone rock beneath which Wiley had planted the plates. The rock was moved and a cache of bones and pottery were found. Wilburn Fugate picked up the rusted-together plates and exclaimed, "A piece of pot metal!" Fayette Grubb, one of the local diggers, took them from Fugate and hit them against the rock, knocking the six plates apart. Dr. Harris examined the hieroglyphics as the Mormon elder Sharp jumped for joy.33

Although Sharp and Harris wanted to take the plates to Joseph Smith immediately, Fugate and Wiley instead waited. After coordinating their story, the plates were cleaned by Harris and given to Joshua Moore of Quincy for the purpose of taking them to Nauvoo.34 The nine men present at the discovery then signed an affidavit establishing the authenticity of the discovery. Although the affidavit stated that the plates were given to Sharp to take to Nauvoo, it is neither possible to determine why Moore made the trip nor why the conspirators themselves did not transport the plates.
Moore arrived in Nauvoo on Saturday, 29 April.35 On Monday, 1 May, the Kinderhook plates were shown to Joseph Smith himself. According to at least two different accounts, Smith stated that the objects on the plates were very similar to those found on the original golden plates. [36] William Clayton evidently recorded in his journal on this date that Smith had "translated a portion of them" and found that they contained "the history of the person with whom they were found." This person is identified in the journal as a descendant of Ham. [37]

Earlier that same day, a "Mr. J. Roberts" arrived at the offices of the Quincy Whig newspaper in Quincy, Illinois with the story of the plates. The story given to the newspaper was the same that was given to Harris and Sharp, that Wiley had dreamed of the discovery before the event itself. The story would be published two days later on 3 May. [38]

Continued from page 2.

Once the plates were in Nauvoo, they sparked a minor sensation in the area. Many expected nothing less than a sequel to the Book of Mormon. This sentiment is also alluded to in the title of the 3 May 1843 Quincy Whig article: "Singular Discovery - Material for Another Mormon book." The same article also expressed its hope that Smith would publish a translation. It stated that, in doing so, Smith would "do more towards throwing light on the early history of this continent than any man now living."39 This interest seemed to mirror the interest of several important Mormons as well. Brigham Young viewed the plates on Wednesday, 3 May, traced an outline of one of the plates in his journal, and added the note - "...found near Quincy."40 Parley P. Pratt, author of A Voice of Warning, noted in a letter of 7 May 1843 that the plates were "filled with engravings in Egyptian language and contain the genealogy of one of the ancient Jaredites back to Ham the son of Noah."41 John Taylor, a close friend of Smith and a future church president, was also made aware of the plates and was so interested in the prospect of a sequel to the Book of Mormon that he published the story. Even without a written, official statement from Smith concerning the issue, it seems that, to most (including Taylor), the authenticity of the find was not questioned.

Under the direction of Taylor, the Mormon publications of Nauvoo brought the story to the people. Taylor, along with Wilford Woodruff, edited both the Times and Seasons and the Nauvoo Neighbor. Both publications were very well established in the Mormon community. The Times and Seasons even had a period of seven months in which it was edited by Joseph Smith himself.42 On 10 May the two newspapers reprinted the 3 May Quincy Whig article while adding their own "Ancient Records" article, the affidavit signed by the nine witnesses, and a letter from Dr. Harris explaining the validity of the discovery. The "Ancient Records" article used the plates as further proof of the validity of
the Book of Mormon. While Taylor's article admitted the fact that Smith's opinion concerning the authenticity of the plates was not yet known, it was obvious that the author, as well as many citizens of Nauvoo, had "no doubts, but Mr. Smith will be able to translate them."43

By the time these publications were causing a stir in Nauvoo, the plates were on their way back to Pike County. On 7 May Smith was visited by "several gentlemen" about the plates.44 Although it was never recorded whether Smith had made an offer to purchase them or whether an offer of sale was made to him, woodcuts or tracings were made of the plates for future use and the originals were returned to Pike County. The tracings turned up in a broadside published by John Taylor through the Nauvoo Neighbor on 24 June.45 Although the plates had left Nauvoo, interest in them had not completely subsided. Taylor continued to sell the broadside through the Neighbor for twelve and one-half cents a copy as late as January 1844.46 A quote in the 15 January 1844 Times and Seasons asked the question as to why "the plates recently found in a mound in Pike County, Ill." proved the Book of Mormon to be true. Their answer-"Because it is true!"47

Although Nauvoo continued to buzz with stories of ancient artifacts, Smith had little time to address them. On 5 June an indictment of Joseph Smith was obtained in Missouri for treason.48 On 23 June, one day before Taylor published his broadside, Constable Wilson of Carthage and Sheriff Reynolds of Jackson County, Missouri arrested Smith in Dixon, Illinois. Although the writ of habeas corpus was served the next day, Smith would have to prepare to stand trial for treason in Nauvoo on 1 July.49 Due to a lack of substantial evidence, Smith was acquitted on 2 July.50

The next eleven months left little time for such matters as ancient plates. In an effort to address the accusations regarding Mormon voting methods, Smith announced his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States.51 For those who already opposed or disliked Smith and the Mormons, the idea of Smith as a candidate for President was the last straw. During the early months of 1844, tensions mounted and focused on Nauvoo. However, the plates had not faded from the imagination of the people of the Hancock County area. On 22 May 1844, the Warsaw Signal noted that Smith was "busy in translating them" and that, when issued, the translation would be "nothing more or less than a sequel to the Book of Mormon."52 This translation, however probable, was not to be.

By June of 1844, rumors concerning a possible invasion of Nauvoo were rampant. Further aggravation from Missouri officials, as well as the threat of intervention from the state of Illinois kept the Mormon population on edge. The town prepared to defend itself. When Smith pushed the city marshal to destroy the printing press of the anti-Mormon newspaper, the Nauvoo Expositor, his actions fueled the fire of anti-Mormon sentiment in west-central Illinois. The anti-Mormons persuaded the governor to call out the state militia to arrest Smith for inciting a riot and for a general disregard for the law. Smith responded by declaring martial law in Nauvoo. On 25 June Smith was arrested and taken to Carthage, where he and his brother, Hiram, were shot and killed by a mob on 27 June 1844. Brigham Young returned to Nauvoo in August and assumed leadership of the
largest faction of the church. The attacks from anti-Mormons continued and, after the church split into two factions, the group led by Young deserted Nauvoo, crossed the icy Mississippi river and headed west in February 1846. Other groups followed in September. Lost in the confusion, the story of the Kinderhook plates seemed forgotten.

During the early part of the 1850s, the church began to re-establish itself in the Salt Lake Valley. While these new surroundings brought unexpected obstacles, the reaffirmation of church doctrine and tradition brought the unity the church needed. Incorporated into this redefinition of church history was the story of the Kinderhook plates. Although Smith had never officially commented on the plates during the excitement the plates caused in Nauvoo, many other important members of the church had. And since Smith never declared the plates a hoax, the story was taken at face value. A broadside resembling the Neighbor publication appeared as part of apostle Orson Pratt's 1851, A Series of Pamphlets. The 1852 work, The Mormons: or Latter-day Saints by Henry Mayhew viewed the "glyphs" on the plates as proof that the original golden plates of the Book of Mormon were definitely not an anomaly. This opinion was taken further in Mormonism: Its leaders and designs by John Hyde, Jr. The 1857 work compared the glyphs of the plates with the descriptions of those on the original golden plates and found the two similar. Thus, Mormon scholars used the Kinderhook plates as an example with which to prove the authenticity of the original golden plates. Hyde was so sure of the connection that a tracing of one of the plates appeared on the cover of his book.

The church's decision to publish a serialized history of the Mormon church in the 1850s furthered the belief in the authenticity of the Kinderhook plates. Smith had started his own chronology years before, but had to give up the task when the business of Nauvoo and the church eliminated the necessary time. Published in the Deseret News, the serialized history was compiled through the journals of others, especially Smith's personal scribes, and was changed, for continuity's sake, to look as if Smith had written it himself. In most cases it helped to fill blank spots in the chronology but, in the case of the plates, it inadvertently led to further controversy.

William Clayton's journal of 1 May 1843 stated that "President J." had translated some of the glyphs on the plates. In the Deseret News of 3 September 1856, the journal, changed to Smith's point of view, read: "I have translated a portion of them ... " Because the authenticity of the plates was not in question at the time, the article was not questioned either. Another Mormon publication, the Millennial Star, even reprinted the article on 15 January 1859. [58]

With no official statement from Smith except his secretary's altered journal, the plates were taken as fact and
became a non-issue for the church.

Continued from page 3.

Back in Pike County, the interest in the incident had died down. The Mormons had left Nauvoo and many Mormon congregations in western Illinois had followed them. The Mormon church south of Kinderhook was abandoned and was later moved for use as a warehouse. By 1850, Robert Wiley had left Kinderhook for medical school in St. Louis, Missouri. Blacksmith Bridge Whitten had left Pike County in the late-1840s for the Alton, Illinois area. The only conspirator left in the area was fifty-year old Wilburn Fugate, with his wife and six children. In Kinderhook itself the story of the plates was just a humorous story that Fugate kept between himself and his family.

In 1854, Robert Wiley graduated from a medical school in St. Louis. The school had been established by Dr. J.N. McDowell in 1845. Wiley gave the plates to McDowell for the museum of antiquities on the campus. During the Civil War, McDowell, a southern sympathizer, served as a physician for the Confederacy. Viewed as a traitor in St. Louis, McDowell's college was turned over to the United States army in 1861 and was used as a prison. Members of the 2nd Iowa Reserve regiment ransacked the prison and the plates disappeared. With the plates gone, it seemed the story would soon be forgotten. However, one of the conspirators would soon come forward and rekindle a debate over the authenticity of the plates.

The first major challenge to the church's position on the Kinderhook plates came from one of the original three conspirators, Wilburn Fugate. In a letter to James T. Cobb in June 1879, a nearly eighty-year old Fugate described the plates as "a HUMBUG gotten up by Robert Wiley, Bridge Whitten, and myself." Fugate continued to trace the events from the reading of Pratt's A Voice of Warning to the manufacturing of the plates, through the staged discovery itself. Cobb, an anti-Mormon living in Salt Lake City, made the letter public and touched off a controversy that would persist for the next one hundred years. Many Mormons hoped to prove the authenticity of the Kinderhook plates in order to further validate the discovery of the original golden plates. Anti-Mormons, however, hoped to use the plates to expose Smith as a false prophet.

Fugate's letter that exposed the plates as a hoax was a direct challenge to the Church's position on the subject and had the potential to cause a great embarrassment. Many of the Nauvoo men who had addressed the discovery of the plates had become very important members of the church. After the death of Brigham Young in 1877, John Taylor became the third president of the church. He was followed by Wilford Woodruff in 1887. While in Nauvoo, Taylor and Woodruff edited the Times and Seasons and the Nauvoo Neighbor, publishers of the Kinderhook plates broadside. The Mormon Church was already under fire for their doctrine of polygamy; this new controversy would have to be addressed and dealt with soon.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Mormon scholars, including noted historian B.H. Roberts, began compiling and expanding the History of Joseph Smith published in
the Deseret News and Millennial Star in the 1850s into the multi-volume, History of the Church. 67 Included in this work was the May 1843 journal entry of Smith's secretary, William Clayton, concerning the plates, which had been altered to seem as if written by Smith. In order to address the situation, Roberts explained the church's position on the plates in a lengthy footnote. He argued that since Fugate waited until 1879 to expose Smith as a fraud (when the plates were conveniently missing), Fugate's story, not the plates, was a hoax. 68 Aside from the thirty-six year wait and the unavailability of the plates, the fact that the other conspirators were not available for comment had convinced the church that Fugate's only motive was to discredit Joseph Smith. 69 The church dismissed the letter. After the initial publication of the History of the Church in 1909, this became the official church position on the subject and influenced all church publications on the topic for the next seventy years.

On the other side of the argument, many anti-Mormons viewed the Fugate letter and other newly-discovered evidence as proof of Smith's dishonesty. The Overland Monthly journal published many letters of Charlotte Haven in December of 1890. Haven had written the letters in Nauvoo in the early 1840s. Her letter of 2 May 1843 stated that Smith had compared the glyphs on the plates with those he had seen on the original golden plates and felt that, "with the help of revelation," he could translate them. 70 Later, in 1902, non-Mormon William A. Linn addressed the Kinderhook plates fraud in his expose, The Story of the Mormons." Adding fuel to this fire, another letter was discovered that proved that the hoax had been exposed long before Fugate's letter. A letter dated 25 April 1855 by Dr. W.P. Harris was discovered by a Quincy citizen in 1912. Harris was a witness to the discovery and the author of the letter to the Times and Seasons / Nauvoo Neighbor attesting to the authenticity of the discovery. Harris wrote that some time before 1850, Bridge Whitten had revealed the hoax to him personally and he believed the plates to be fakes. The Journal of the Illinois Historical Society published the letter in July 1912 and renewed some degree of interest in the subject. 72 By the following September, Fugate's son told his father's story in a Chicago Examiner article curiously titled, "Second Book of Mormon Branded an old Hoax." 73

In 1920 one of the plates turned up in the possession of the Chicago Historical Society. Mislabeled as one of the original Book of Mormon plates, the plate was a gift from a collector of artifacts who had verified that the plate had originally been stolen from McDowell's museum by a member of the 2nd Iowa Reserve. 74 Although the importance of this discovery was paramount to the study of the hoax, it was largely ignored until the 1950s. While this lack of interest could point to an apathetic response from the church at the time, it did not mean that they had changed their position. The plates were either a non-issue because the church felt that they had already addressed them or because they did not want to draw attention to something about which they were not entirely sure. With one of
the original plates available for study, Mormon historians and archaeologists hoped to silence the critics and prove their authenticity. Archaeologist Welby Ricks conducted the first serious look at the plates from this standpoint. President of Brigham Young University's (BYU) Archaeological Society, Ricks examined the background of the find as well as new scientific information. Citing the ulterior motives of Fugate's letter, Ricks restated the Mormon position of the previous eighty years. He did, however, add new evidence to support this in the form of an examination of the plate at the Chicago Historical Society. Ricks had the plate examined by engravers from Chicago who stated that "the plate was engraved with a pointed instrument and not etched with acid," thereby disproving Fugate's story. Published in the Mormon Improvement Era in September 1962, Ricks's study validated the church's contention that the plates were "genuine." [75] Further validating the church position on the matter, this viewpoint would continue to be defended and published in Mormon histories as late as 1973. [76]

Continued from page 4.

During the last half of the twentieth century, many anti-Mormon groups began to gain a small following and openly challenged the church. The plates were very popular with these groups and one of their first publications was Dr. James D. Bales's 1958 The Book of Mormon? Bales addressed the Kinderhook plates and came to the conclusion that "only a bogus prophet translates bogus plates."77 Infamous anti-Mormons Jerald and Sandra Tanner addressed the plates in their 1972 work, Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?78 For the most part these accounts should be considered as radical and biased. However, they did find favor with a small audience, which made the need for a proper scientific study as well as an official church stance on the subject very important. Using the findings of the study, the church could then further establish, or validate, an official position on the plates. With the anti-Mormon interest in the plates not subsiding, the church looked to science and history to solve their problem. In 1980, Mormon professor Dr. Stanley Kimball of Southern Illinois University obtained permission from the Chicago Historical Society to perform destructive scientific tests on the plate. Previous non-destructive tests were: made in the 1960s, the most recent by Dr. Paul Cheesman of BYU in 1969. Cheesman's tests were found to be inconclusive. Using a scanning electron microscope and various other means, Dr. D. Lynn Johnson of Northwestern University, working on Kimball's behalf, concluded that the plates had been etched with nitric acid and were made of a brass alloy typical of a nineteenth-century blacksmith shop.79 Kimball published his findings in the August, 1981 issue of the Mormon publication the Ensign. Kimball used the new scientific data as well as the recently-discovered clayton journal to formulate the church's new official position on the incident. He concluded that the plates were a crude frontier hoax—a hoax that Joseph Smith simply ignored, therefore
exonerating him from the incident entirely.80 Most of the church accepted this position and it was restated by Kimball in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism in 1992.81

To examine the importance of the Kinderhook plates, one must first recognize the importance of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in American culture, religion, and history. The LDS church began as a small millennialist sect in the early nineteenth century and grew to become a well-established, worldwide, recognized faith. The history of this faith is very important to the members of the church and, therefore, it is very important that this void in the historical record of the church be filled. The story of the Kinderhook plates will always continue to resurface unless it is properly and honestly addressed.

While the Church feels satisfied with the new position that the Kimball article presented, many issues were left unaddressed. The article does well to present its case for Joseph Smith's own position on the plates. However, it fails to recognize that, even if Smith was not fooled in 1843, the church itself was fooled for the next one hundred and thirty years. The Kimball article mentioned the Church's response each time the issue of the plates came up, but it failed to recognize that each response up to 1981 was the same-that the plates were genuine. This discrepancy in the historical documentation of the church, therefore, requires a certain degree of clarification-and this can only come from the church itself.

Although Smith's opinion of the plates is unclear, the position of the church and various church members has been very well documented. The third and fourth presidents of the church, Taylor and Woodruff, had sold a broadside containing the facsimiles of the plates, as well as a published editorial containing their validity in Nauvoo in 1843 and 1844. Parley P. Pratt had also acknowledged his belief of the validity of the plates in a letter the same year. This viewpoint was restated repeatedly by Mormon historians until 1981, when the plates were finally scientifically proven to be a hoax. After 1981, the plates have referred to as a hoax and this opinion has rarely been questioned since. Here lies the discrepancy in the history of the church. Only after the church recognizes this discrepancy in their history and opens dialogue on the subject can this "frontier hoax" finally be resolved.

Notes


3 Ibid., 76-7.


7 Joseph Smith, History, Vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980), 1, 175.


11 Arrington and Bitton, The Mormon Experience, 51.


14 Ibid., 326. William Miller was the leader of a millenialist sect during the early nineteenth century. As with most millenialist groups, Millerites believed that they were living in the "end time" foretold in the Bible. Miller predicted the date of the second Coming of Christ as 22 October 1844. Miller had made similar predictions and when 22 October had passed, he announced a more indefinite date. Although his movement lost steam after this event, the church survives today as the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. See Robert V. Remini, The Jacksonian Era, 2nd ed. (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1997), 104-5 and C. S. Griffin, The Ferment of Reform, 1830-1860 (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 45.


16 Ibid., 239.


18 Kinderhook Centennial Souvenir (Kinderhook), 24, 25, 26 September 1936, 1-2.


21 Ibid., 80-3.


23 Parley P. Pratt, A Voice of Warning and Instruction to all People, or, An Introduction to the Faith and Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. 5th ed. (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1854), v.

24 Letter from Wilburn Fugate to James T. Cobb, June 30, 1879 as quoted in Welby W. Ricks, "The Kinderhook Plates." Improvement Era 65 (1962), 656.

25 Kinderhook Centennial Souvenir. (Kinderhook), 24, 25, 26 September 1936, 1-2. Some additional information on Bridge Whitten has been obtained through several property abstracts that trace his ownership of section 24 in Kinderhook township, Pike County, Illinois.

26 1850 Census of Pike County, Illinois. Township 4S R7W.

27 "Singular Discovery-Material for Another Mormon Book" Quincy Whig (Quincy), 3 May 1843, 2.

28 Letter from Wilburn Fugate to James T. Cobb, June 30, 1879 as quoted in Ricks, "The Kinderhook Plates," 656, 658.

29 Wilburn Fugate's son, John, relates this story in "Second Mormon Book Branded as Old Hoax," Chicago Examiner (Chicago), 26 September 1913, 1.

30 "Singular Discovery-Material for Another Mormon Book," Quincy Whig (Quincy), 3 May 1843, 2.

31 Letter from Wilburn Fugate to James T. Cobb, June 30, 1879 as quoted in Ricks, "The Kinderhook Plates," 656, 658.


33 Letter from Wilburn Fugate to James T. Cobb, June 30, 1879 as quoted in Ricks, "The Kinderhook Plates," 656, 658.

34 Charlotte Haven, "A Girls' Letters from Nauvoo," The Overland Monthly 16 (December 1890), 630.

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.


38 "Singular Discovery-Material for Another Mormon Book," Quincy Whig (Quincy), 3 May 1843, 2.

39 Ibid.

Continued from page 5.


41 John Van Colt correspondence, LDS church archives, Salt Lake City, Utah as quoted in Stanley B. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates brought to Joseph Smith appear to be nineteenth-century hoax" Ensign, 11 August 1981, 73.


43 "Ancient Records" Times and Seasons (Nauvoo), May 1[0], 1843. Vol. 4, 186-87.


46 Nauvoo Neighbor (Nauvoo), 17 January 1844.


49 Ibid., 439-43.

50 "Evidence taken on the trial of Mr. Smith, Nauvoo, 1 July 1843" [microfilm]. (Nauvoo: Woodruff and Taylor, 1843).

51 Arrington and Bitton, The Mormon Experience, 52.