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West Virginia and Mormonism's Rarest Book

Lisle G. Brown

WEST VIRGINIA AND MORMONISM RAREST BOOK

By Lisle G. Brown

Although few West Virginians know it, a firm in their state played an important role in the production of the rarest Mormonism's book, Joseph Smith's *Book of Commandments*. This curious volume, smaller than a modern paperback book, has a remarkable history with enough drama to interest any bibliophile.

In 1830 Joseph Smith incorporated the Church of Christ, renamed The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1838 to avoid confusion with the denomination having a similar name founded by Alexander Campbell. Smith's followers were called Mormons, because of their belief in the Book of Mormon.¹ Smith claimed to be a prophet who received revelations from God, many of which he committed to writing. He allowed some of his followers to copy these documents, but this proved to be a wholly unsatisfactory method of distribution. At a conference of the church, held in November, 1831, at Kirtland, Ohio, the Mormons sustained Smith's proposal to publish the revelations. A Literary Firm, a committee composed of Smith and five other men, accepted the responsibility for publishing them.²

After the November conference Oliver Cowdery, a member of the Literary Firm, left Kirtland with copies of the revelations for Independence, Missouri (known as Zion to the Mormons), where the church had recently established a printing shop under the direction of William W. Phelps, a former New York newspaperman. When Cowdery arrived at Independence, he found Phelps could not print anything, much less a book, because of the lack of paper. On January 27, 1832, Cowdery

¹Mormons consider the Book of Mormon to be scripture, equal in authoritative with the Bible. The book is mainly the religious history of the descendants of Jewish exiles, who fled Jerusalem in 600 B.C. and sailed to the New World. Their civilization flourished until 400 A.D. The high point of the book is the appearance of the resurrected Christ to these people after his ascension in Palestine.

²Peter Crawley, "A Bibliography of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New York, Ohio, and Missouri." *Brigham Young University Studies*, 12 (Summer, 1972): 481.

wrote Smith: “We expect soon to be ready to print and hope Brother Martin can supply the paper.”³ Brother Martin was Martin Harris, a well-to-do farmer who had supplied the money in 1830 for publishing the Book of Mormon. As the wealthiest man in the church, it was only natural for Cowdery to suggest that Smith approach Harris for funds to purchase the paper for the church press. However, as was his custom, Smith did not react automatically to Cowdery’s suggestion, but he petitioned the Lord and received the following revelation:

It is expedient, saith the Lord unto you, that the paper shall be purchased for the printers of the book of the Lord’s commandments, and it must needs be that you take it with you, for it is not expedient that my servant Martin [Harris] should as yet go up unto the land of Zion. Let the purchase be made by the bishops:⁴

On April 1, 1832, Smith with other members of the Literary Firm left Kirtland for Independence, intending to purchase the paper en route with funds from the church coffers. Traveling south, Smith’s party passed through Warren, Chardon, Wellsville, and Steubenville, Ohio. At the last day, they booked passage on a steam packet for Wheeling. On April 4 Smith arrived at Wheeling, where he “purchased a lot of paper for the press in Zion.”⁵ The only paper mill in Wheeling in 1832 belonged to William Lambdin. Three years earlier Lambdin had erected his mill on four lots, extending from Water to Main streets, on the corner of Twenty-third.⁶ This mill was the only source for Smith’s purchase.

Leaving Wheeling, Smith sailed on the steamer Trenton for Louisville, where he changed to the Charleston, which took him to St. Louis. Making the final leg of the journey by stage, Smith’s party arrived at Independence on April 24. On May 1 the Literary Firm met and decided to print three thousand copies ‘Of the Book of Commandments. The Literary Firm charged Cowdery, Phelps, and John Whitmer (another member of the Literary Firm) “to review the Book of Command-

³Andrew Jenson, comp. “Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” MS. Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah, entry for Jan. 2,7, 1832.

⁴Unpublished holographic revelation to Joseph Smith, dated Mar. 20, 1832, in the Newel K. Whitney Papers. Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

⁵Joseph Smith, *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1951), Vol. I, 266.

⁶J. H. Newton. *The History of the Pan-Handle, Being Historical Collections of the Counties of Ohio, Brook, Marshall, and Hancock Counties, West Virginia* (Wheeling: J. A. Caldwell Co., 1879). 243.

ments and select for printing such [revelations] as should be deemed by them proper, as dictated by the Spirit and make all necessary verbal correction.”⁷ These men prepared A manuscript, from which the printers worked.⁸ After conducting additional business concerning the future settlement of Independence by the Mormons, Smith returned to Ohio, arriving at Kirtland in early June, 1832.

After Smith’s departures Cowdery, Phelps and Whitmer issued the Mormon Church’s first newspaper, *The Evening and The Morning Star*. These men felt that Smith’s revelations were so important that they included selected revelations in some of the issues of the newspaper. The December, 1832 issue announced that the Book of Commandments was in press, and copies would be available at twenty-five to fifty cents during the coming year.

As the church printer completed each signature of the book, the Literary Firm in Independence sent a copy to Smith for his inspection. On June 25, 1833, Smith wrote the printers, pointing out certain errors on one sheet, as well as directing that the book should not be bound. Since the church did not own a bindery, he wrote, to contract for binding the book would only delay it and add to its cost.⁹

Although the *Book of Commandments* was progressing rapidly towards completion, other events in Missouri were taking shape, which would affect the book’s production. The large and continual influx of Mormon settlers into Independence disturbed the original non-Mormon residents. The non-Mormons felt threatened by the Mormon cohesive communal society and alienated by the unorthodox Mormon theology. Open antagonism flared up between the two groups in the summer of 1833. On July 20 a mob of border ruffians swept down on the Mormons at Independence, and “in next to no time the two-story brick printing office, with all that it contained—building, press, type, sheets, paper, and all—were converted into a mass of ruins.”¹⁰

⁷Jenson, “Journal History”, Apr. 30, 1832.

⁸Only four leaves of this manuscript have survived. They are at the Department of History, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Church of Latter Day Saints, Independence, Missouri.

⁹Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. I, 362, 364.

¹⁰Charles L. Woodward. *Bibliographica Scallawagiana* (New York: Bangs and Co., 1880).

Amid the chaos of the sacking of Independence a few Mormons attempted to save some of the scattered sheets of the *Book of Commandments*. John Taylor said he “did not mind hazarding [his] life to secure some copies of the commandments.” Running to a fence, he pulled loose sheets through the logs where the wind had blown them, until his arms were filled. Suddenly he was discovered by the mob, a dozen of whom surrounded him and began stoning him. Clutching his precious bundle of paper, Taylor cried out: “Oh my God, must I be stoned to death like Stephen for the sake of the word of the Lord.” Taylor’s outburst momentarily unsettled the mob, permitting him to escape.¹¹ Mary Rollins, age fifteen, and her sister Caroline, age twelve, crept along another fence where they had seen some sheets blown by the wind. While the mob was distracted by the destruction of the printing shop, the two girls gathered all the sheets they could carry. A few of the mob saw the girls and chased them into a nearby corn field. Fortunately the tall stalks helped the youngsters elude their pursuers.¹² William E. M’Lellan ran the length of the street in front of the printing shop, scooping up all the loose sheets he could while dodging the mob.¹³ Except for the efforts of individuals such as these, none of the signatures of the Book of Commandments would have survived.

Individuals turned over the recovered sheets to Bishop Edward Partridge, who delivered them to Joseph Smith. Smith collated the sheets and distributed them to his friends, but there were not enough copies for all his followers. The Literary Firm made another attempt at publishing Smith’s revelations. In 1835 they succeeded in printing an enlarged and revised volume of the revelations under a new title, the *Doctrine and Covenants*. This volume has passed through many editions, and Mormons sustain it as inspired scripture, equal in rank with the Bible.¹⁴

¹¹John Taylor. Statement. date Apr. 15, 1858, MS, Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹²Mary E. Rollins Lightner, Letter to the editor, dated Feb. 12, 1904, *Deseret News*, Feb. 20, 1904.

¹³*Latter Day Saints Herald*, 31, 1884.

¹⁴Mormons also rank the *Doctrine and Covenants* with the Bible and Book of Mormon as scripture. They have also canonized another book of Smith’s writings and revelations, called the *Pearl of Great Price*. These four Volumes constitute the Mormon Church’s “standard works,” all equal in authority and doctrine.

A
BOOK
OF
COMMANDMENTS,
FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF THE
Church of Christ,
ORGANIZED ACCORDING TO LAW, ON THE
6th of April, 1830.

ZION:
PUBLISHED BY W. W. PHELPS & CO.
.....
1833.

The few surviving copies of the *Book of Commandments* remain the most prized volume among collectors of Mormoniana. Cowdery and Phelps had printed five signatures, comprising 160 pages of text, before the destruction of the press. Each book is unique, because of the various homemade bindings fashioned by their owners. The book is incomplete, ending in the middle of a sentence.¹⁵ Surely, Joseph Smith would be surprised to learn that this unfinished volume, which he envisioned as selling for fifty cents, brings nearly \$5,000 on the antiquarian auction block.¹⁶ Indeed, Lambdin could have hardly realized that some of the paper he sold to the Mormon prophet in 1832 would become worth its weight in gold!

¹⁵Among the four leaves of the printer's manuscript, owned by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is one bearing the printer's "take mark," showing the end of the printer's progress before the mob destroyed the press. It is likely that the completed volume would have included an additional ten to twenty revelations.

¹⁶*American Book-Prices Current* (New York: Columbia Press, 1971), vol. 74, 883. The last year that a copy of the *Book of Commandments* appeared on the auction block was 1968. It sold for \$4,500. Today a copy would bring even a higher price! There are less than twenty copies in various institutions, and an undetermined number in private hands. The total number of copies has been estimated at less than fifty.