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Reinventing Mormonism: To Remake or Redo

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Reinventing Mormonism: To Remake or Redo

When two individuals eat, sleep, and drink a specific subject for thirty years, and further concentrate their area of study by pinpointing the most critical issues within that delimitation, they can often ferret out the minutia and present a most convincing case for their particular point of view. Whether their case holds water in the final analysis depends on if the facts support the conclusion. Sometimes we make decisions based on what we suppose the situation to have been as determined from a single set of facts; however, these may or may not reflect the actual condition. At times, what appear to be provable facts are impaired because only partial evidence remains. In too many instances the primary documentation no longer exists and the principal parties who could have enlightened us are dead—the bane of historians.

The authors have amassed a sizable amount of documentation to support their particular thesis. As readers examine their material they will be impressed with the exacting care that has been taken to establish even minuscule points. They have developed an interesting array of subjects, logically spelled out and bolstered with references. It is understandable that some will be awed by particular evidence which may at times seem irrefutable.

As one who has had a long-time interest in the documents relating to the origins of the restored Church, I have had a personal acquaintance with both H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters for more than thirty years. I have known them as men who have literally spent their lifetime pursuing every avenue that might
bring the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Church under close scrutiny. They differ from many “armchair researchers” of the past and present who seek to examine the claims of Mormonism by working largely through the mails. Instead, Marquardt and Walters have taken to the field in an attempt to tramp out every inch of Mormonism geographically on the ground and in the public and private repositories where any vestige of related documents might be found. I have encountered them in person or their imprints in library after library and courthouse after courthouse over a multiyear period.

Individually these men have been both affable and friendly; however, their motives are patently clear. With the death of Wesley P. Walters in 1990, Michael has unhesitatingly picked up the old gauntlet and the traditional line of march. Inventing Mormonism was and is a continuation of a former thrust. It is for the most part exceptionally well documented and meticulously programmed as an exposé of Joseph Smith and certain cardinal claims of the Restoration—a new face on an old set of biases. Each of us certainly has his or her individual biases; I am merely pointing out that the authors have not changed their spots—only particular aspects of their approach. It is difficult to believe that their sole interest is to “understand, not to debunk,” as announced (p. 197). The very title Inventing Mormonism by definition impinges on the veracity of the Prophet and his associates by its up-front presupposition of a planned or calculated deception. Visions, seer stones, magical incantations, money digging, legal entanglements, and intemperance are all introduced in such a manner as to debase the character of Joseph Smith and his contemporary supporters.

As the reader will understand, numerous informational voids are to be found in the early history of the Latter-day Saint Church. For instance, only a few day-month-and-year dates are provided during the entire New England, New York, and Pennsylvania periods in Joseph Smith’s “Manuscript History of the Church.” Very often the words “in the spring of,” “in the month of,” or “in the year of,” are used because in the earliest

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period of the Restoration complete dates and events were not always recorded at the time and only meager source documents survived. This obviously leaves some marvelous gaps for those who would step into the vacuum and supply their own chronology. It allows them the opportunity to do some "Reinventing of Mormonism," or to "Remake" or "Redo" selected sequences.

If the long-established Latter-day Saint chronology of events can be thrown out of whack, then doubt can be cast on the integrity of the whole continuity of occurrences recounted by the Prophet and the brethren in the written history of the Church. This statement is by no means intended to suggest that when valid dates and events are discovered they should not readily be added to the early chronology of Mormonism. In an otherwise limited field of data all such information is gratefully received. Certainly missing links have and will continue to surface to help complete the scope. To their credit, Marquardt and Walters have made a definite contribution in a number of areas by supplying valuable documents and information on certain key events and personalities. Such is the case with their tracing of the "articling" process experienced by the Smiths during their attempt to gain title to the Farmington/Manchester farm. This is a nice piece of historical detective work. In other instances, however, their additions have not been as well directed.

At the beginning of the volume, Marquardt and Walters have placed a chronology of events as they suppose them to have transpired in the earliest years of the Restoration (pp. xxvi–xxxvi). This chronology has eighty-eight entries. Of that number I believe Latter-day Saints would generally agree with seventy-three directly out-of-hand, a decided majority. Ten of the remaining entries would probably fall into the category of dispute because of what may be simple historical errors or entries that in combina-

2 Simple questions of accuracy in the chronology might be asked: (1) "22 September 1827, Joseph Jr. . . . also finds with the plates a sword, breastplate, and a pair of spectacles (also called Urim and Thummim)" (p. xxx). Joseph Smith didn't specify a "sword" as part of the contents of the stone box at Cumorah. However, the sword was later displayed by Moroni at the Whitmer farm when the Prophet and the Three Witnesses viewed the ancient artifacts. Initially, at the Hill Cumorah, Joseph merely reported, "I looked in and there indeed did I behold the plates, the Urim and Thummim and the Breastplate as stated by the messenger" (Jessee, The Papers of Joseph Smith, 1:281). (2) 16 January, "An
tion represent an inordinate preoccupation with repeated implications against the character of Joseph Smith because of his treasure seeking. Joseph Smith did indeed at one time engage in digging for treasure, but it is the redundant comments on the subject that are objectionable. The remaining five entries are disputable because they represent major chronological discrepancies with the Latter-day Saint time line. These five items are listed herein followed by a brief discussion:

1. “1820–21, Joseph Smith, Jr., later reports he has a personal forgiveness of sins; he is an exhorter for the Methodist class in Palmyra and attends a local debating club” (p. xxvi).

2. “September 1824 to Spring 1825. Revival of religion commences with the Methodists, followed by the Baptists and Presbyterians, in the Palmyra vicinity. Joseph Jr. hears discourses by Reverend Lane of the Methodist church and attends meetings” (p. xxviii).


4. “Manchester, New York, 6 April 1830. The Church of Christ is organized; six revelations are received (BC 17–22; LDS D&C 21, 23; RLDS D&C 19, 21). Cowdery is ordained an elder. Joseph Jr. is ordained an elder, also prophet and seer by Cowdery. Joseph Sr., Lucy, Harris, and Sarah Rockwell are baptized in Crooked Brook” (p. xxxiv).

agreement between Joseph Sr. and Martin Harris on selling the Book of Mormon is witnessed by Oliver Cowdery” (p. xxxiv). In examining this document, Scott H. Faulring has come to the conclusion that we have been misreading it all these years. Rather than an agreement between Joseph, Sr., and Martin Harris, Scott believes that the signature is really the signature of Joseph Smith, Jr. However, he also believes that the supposed “Sr.” is neither an “S” nor a “J,” but rather an almost unconscious, uncorrected flourish of the pen by the Prophet. The signature is unmistakably identified as the Prophet’s when compared with his other period signatures. An agreement between Joseph, Jr., and Martin would certainly make more sense (interview between Scott Faulring and Larry C. Porter, 18 July 1995). (3) “September 1830, Joseph Jr. travels from Harmony to Fayette” (p. xxxv). Rather than arriving in September, however, Joseph stated that “We arrived at Fayette, during the last week of August, amidst the congratulations of our brethren and friends” (Jessee, The Papers of Joseph Smith, 322).
5. “Fayette, New York, 11 April 1830. A Fayette, New York, branch of the church is established. A revelation is received regarding individuals who have been baptized in other Christian churches (BC 23; LDS D&C 22; RLDS D&C 20). Cowdery delivers the first public discourse of the church and performs baptisms” (p. xxxiv).

For purposes of discussion, the first three items should be grouped together because of their implications for revivalism, the First Vision, and the conversion of some Smith family members to Presbyterianism.

The Latter-day Saint disagreement with item 1 is not so much in what is said, but rather in what is not said. Joseph did report “a personal forgiveness of sins,” as indicated by Marquardt and Walters. The Prophet recorded, “I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee,” as part of his First Vision experience in the spring of 1820. However, the writers don’t recognize that the First Vision even occurred and so chose to identify it only as a “reported” event by Joseph—thus the disagreement.

Marquardt and Walters prefer to think that the only time element which fits the descriptions of the Prophet regarding religious revivalism is the revival of 1824–25. However, Milton V. Backman believes that Joseph had a broader spectrum in mind:

Although Joseph Smith noted that the religious excitement was occurring in the area where he lived during his fifteenth year and that his vision took place in the spring of 1820, he did not necessarily state that the revival which he described was limited to a few months or to a particular year. In his 1832 autobiography, the Prophet declared that for three years, from the ages of twelve through fifteen, he was involved in serious religious reflections and from about 1818 to 1820 he was searching for religious truth and the right church. Based on this long quest, the 1838 history may imply a longer time span for the revival he referred to

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3 These words were spoken to Joseph by the Lord, according to the Prophet’s 1832 recitation of events associated with his First Vision experience; see Jessee, The Papers of Joseph Smith, 1:6.
than is generally assumed, and possibly Joseph Smith did not “intend to portray all revival events as happening just before his vision.” Although Joseph Smith stated that “an unusual excitement” was in evidence in the second year after this removal to Manchester, the results of this religious quickening might well have extended beyond Joseph Smith’s sacred experience in the grove, thus expanding the possible time period for the revival which initiated such great events in his young life.4

The latter portion of Marquardt and Walters’s chronology as outlined in item 1 above is valid. It is true that Joseph was an exhorter for the Methodist class, although he did not join that denomination. It is likewise true that young Joseph participated in a debate club, first in the village of Palmyra and later in the red schoolhouse on “Durfee Street” (North Creek Road), just northeast of the village proper.5

Latter-day Saint chronology places the events detailed by Marquardt and Walters in item 2 in the general context of the spring of 1820 rather than in this 1824–25 sequence. While it is certainly true that Rev. George Lane was the presiding elder of the Ontario District from 1824–25, it is also true that Lane associated with that area for an extended period of time. In July 1819, Rev. Lane was just fifteen miles away from the Smith home for a period of eight days attending the annual Genesee Conference at old Vienna (later Phelps, New York). Elsewhere in their text (pp. 28–29), Marquardt and Walters mention the Vienna conference and speak of Lane’s presence in these terms:

Lane was at Vienna in July 1819 attending the annual meeting of the Methodist Genesee Conference, at which he was appointed to serve in Pennsylvania. There is no record that he preached or that a camp meeting was held in connection with this conference. In 1826, when a camp meeting was actually held, the con-

ference minutes contain reference to the ministers who were put in charge of the arrangements for the meeting. *No indication of any such arrangements appears in the 1819 minutes.* (pp. 29, emphasis added)

Marquardt and Walters have missed an important point. Apologists have placed Rev. Lane at the gathering of numerous Methodists for a period of enlightenment. This gathering took place in Joseph Smith’s vicinity, and as Rev. Lane had the prospect of preaching a sermon, the Prophet might have heard such a sermon as early as 1819.6 Do the relevant factors exist to support such an encounter? Lane was in attendance at the annual Genesee Conference held at Vienna (now Phelps), New York, from 1 July to 8 July 1819, where he was named presiding elder of the Susquehanna District.7 He was there along with one hundred and ten Methodist ministers, their leader Bishop Robert R. Roberts, and a host of adherents to the faith. While it is true that the “Journal of the Genesee Conference” does not record Rev. George Lane as having preached during the conference, neither does it list the name of any other minister addressing the conference. The content of the minutes in the conference journal is concerned with only the temporalities or business aspects of the various sessions. For instance, Rev. Lane was among those “again received into the traveling connexion.”8 No one is listed by name as having delivered any of the conference sermons, and yet we know that many such preachments were given. The ministers not only concerned themselves with conducting business, but likewise took opportunity to preach to the congregation assembled for this auspicious occasion. This was an ideal time for the Prophet to have come under Lane’s instruction, particularly with Joseph’s professed interest in Methodism. Aside from whether or not a designated “camp meeting” was held in conjunction with the gathering, the very nature of the conference provided many opportunities for a

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7 Minutes Taken at the Several Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church . . . for the Year 1819 (New York: Totten, 1819), 51.
number of ministers to preach to the laity, who always came in
droves to hear their exhortations, and were enlivened by them.
Such conferences were not just dry-bones business but were high-
lighted with a goodly share of stirring sermons. Abel Stevens has
given us the general pattern followed at these gatherings:

These annual assemblies became imposing occasions. A bishop presided; the preachers from many
miles around, usually including several states, were pre-

tant; hosts of laymen were spectators. There was pre-

aching in the early morning, in the afternoon, and at night. The daily proceedings were introduced with
religious services, and were characterized by an
impressive religious spirit. They continued usually a
week, and it was a festal season, gathering the war-worn
heroes of many distant and hard-fought fields, renew-
ing the intimacies of preachers and people, and
crowned alike by social hospitalities and joyous devo-
tions. 9

Again, none of the names of the many preachers who taught
mornings, afternoons, and nights for a week in 1819 are listed. In
the “Journal of the Genesee Conference” only business items
appear. Lane was present and the opportunity to speak was there
for a seasoned veteran who had been on the circuit since 1804.
Likewise, Rev. Lane again traveled through the Manchester area in
the summer of 1820 on his way to the annual conference in
Lundy’s Lane, Niagara, Upper Canada; and also in July of 1822,
when he was again at the Genesee Conference held at Vienna, New
York. Joseph’s opportunities to meet or hear Rev. Lane need not
be sandwiched into just the period of Lane’s assignment to the
Ontario District, July 1824 to July 1825. 10 More than one window
of opportunity was present.

Joseph Smith conveyed to Oliver Cowdery his earliest experi-
ences in regard to this period for publication in the Messenger
and Advocate in what is the first printed history of Mormonism

9 Abel Stevens, The Centenary of American Methodism (New York:

Carlton and Porter, 1865), 112, emphasis added.

from within the Church. As preface to that series, Oliver Cowdery said, “That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons, that our brother J. Smith jr. has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable.”\(^{11}\) As the series unfolded, Joseph relayed to Oliver that in the proximity of his fifteenth year [aged fourteen and going on fifteen, 1819–20], “One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra and vicinity,” and that, “in common with others, our brother’s mind became awakened.”\(^{12}\) There is an obvious discrepancy between Joseph’s identification of the 1820 time frame and Marquardt and Walters’s “September 1824 to Spring 1825” placement of the Prophet’s coming under the tutelage of Rev. Lane. I think that Joseph recognized the difference.

Again Marquardt and Walters do not mention the First Vision in this context because they don’t acknowledge its factuality. However, the ramifications for believing Mormons are immediately apparent. Under the Marquardt and Walters time line the First Vision has not yet taken place by 1825, since Joseph is still in the process of investigating Methodism in that year (items 2 and 3).

Marquardt and Walters’s item 3 is similarly objectionable since they have substituted the climate of the 1824–25 revival for the 1820 conversion of Lucy Smith and other family members to Presbyterianism and the setting for the First Vision. A dearth of documents plagues our search of Smith family membership in the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra. If the first session book of that denomination had survived, it might have supplied us with some early mention of the Smiths’ affiliation. Regrettably, the first book had disappeared by at least 1932 and is unavailable. The second session book, which fortunately is still extant, identifies the Smiths as being under investigation for “Neglect of public worship,” and reports their excommunication on 10 March 1830 and 29 March 1830.\(^{13}\) However, the records which have sur-

\(^{11}\) *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 13.

\(^{12}\) *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (December 1834): 42.

\(^{13}\) “Records of the Session of the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra,” 2:11–13, microfilm copy in the Herald B. Lee Library, BYU.
vived do not specify when the Smiths joined the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra. At the time certain family members joined the Presbyterians, Joseph said, "I was at this time in my fifteenth year [1819–1820]. My Fathers family were proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy; My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my Sister Soph[onia]." The Prophet is again adamant in placing the conversion of these family members in the proximity of 1820 rather than the 1824–25 period as outlined by Marquardt and Walters.

In addition to the First Vision, which is closely allied with the conversions of some of the Smith family to Presbyterianism, another subtle casualty in the Latter-day Saint time line is quietly being bumped, unheralded by Marquardt and Walters. Understandably missing from their chronology during the entire period is any mention of the visits of the Angel Moroni, who of course would be for them a fictional personage. If the "September 1824 to Spring of 1825" revival sequence is confirmed for the authors, then the successive appearances of Moroni to Joseph Smith take a header, or are certainly curtailed timewise. But in Joseph's 1838 account the First Vision occurred in the early spring of 1820. This was followed by three and one-half years of preparation and finally the appearance of Moroni on 21–22 September 1823. Moroni then participated in four successive annual visits at the Hill Cumorah, concluding on 22 September 1827, at which time the plates were delivered into the Prophet's hands for translation. Obviously the 1824–27 time frame does not allow for the requisite four visits if the First Vision isn't a possibility until 1825 under the Marquardt and Walters chronology. Marquardt and Walters maintain that, "A revival in the spring of 1825 would place the first visit to the hill Cumorah in September 1825 and allow only one visit (September 1826) before Smith finally received the plates in 1827" (pp. 32–33).

However, another witness may unexpectedly substantiate Moroni's visits. One of the dates that both sides of the issue agree on is the death of Alvin Smith on 19 November 1823.

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14 Jesse, The Papers of Joseph Smith, 1:270.
Valuable testimonies both from Smith family members and close associates record that Alvin knew of Moroni and was closely leagued with his brother Joseph regarding the first appearance of the angel in September 1823. If substantiated, this means that the requisite period for Moroni’s succession of visits with Joseph from 1824 to 1827 remains intact. Lucy Mack Smith, William Smith, and Joseph Knight, Sr., all declare that Alvin was acquainted with facets of the Moroni experience before his death in November 1823.

Lucy Mack Smith affirmed:

The 3[rd] harvest time [1821, 1822, 1823] had now arrived since we opened our new farm [in the summer of 1820]. . . . After we [the Smith family] ceased conversation he [Joseph] went to bed. . . . He had not laid there long till a bright light entered the room where he lay he looked up and saw an angel of the Lord standing by him. . . . The next day he and his father and Alvin were reaping in the field together suddenly Joseph stopped and seemed to be in a deep study for sometime Alvin hurried him saying Joseph we must keep to work or we shall not get our task done. . . . His father saw that he was very pale and urged him to go to the house and tell his mother he was sick. . . . [Joseph went a short distance when] the personage whom he saw the night before came to him again and said why did you not tell your father what I told you. . . . [Joseph told his father, then went to the hill Cumorah as directed.] When Joseph came in the evening he told the whole family all that he had made known to his father in the field we sat up very late and listened attentively to all that he had to say.16

During the last days of Alvin’s life, 15–19 November 1823, he said to young Joseph, “I want you to be a good boy & do

everything that lays in your power to obtain the records be faithful in receiving instruction and keeping every commandment that is given you.”¹⁷ As Marquardt and Walters indicate, the farm had been “articled” for during the summer of 1820 (p. xxvii). Lucy dated the first visit to Joseph by the angel at the time of the third harvest, September 1823. This was followed by the devastating loss of Alvin in November of that same year. With his appearance in September 1823, Moroni is no longer crowded by Marquardt and Walters’s 1825 agenda, which allows for only one scheduled visit in 1826 before the Prophet received the plates in 1827. Moroni and Joseph are free to have their four annual visits, 1824–27.

William Smith places the conversion of members of his family to Presbyterianism prior to the visit of Moroni. He also identifies Joseph’s First Vision in advance of Moroni’s visit. William mentions Alvin’s participation in a family discussion following Moroni’s first appearances. He remarked, “The next day I was at work in the field to gether [sic] with Joseph and my oldest brother Alvin.” William then said that Joseph left the field at the behest of Alvin because he saw that he was not well. Joseph was sitting by the fence “when the angel again appeared to him, and told him to call his father’s house together and communicate to them the visions he had received.”¹⁸

Joseph Knight, Sr., was present at the Smith home on the evening of 21 September 1823. The following day, when Joseph recounted his conversation with the angel at the Hill Cumorah, Knight said that the Prophet exclaimed:

“why Cant I stur this Book?” And he was answerd, “you have not Done rite; you should have took the Book and gone right away. You cant have it now.” Joseph says, “when can I have it?” The answer was the 22nt Day of September next [1824] if you Bring the right person with you. Joseph says, “who is the right Person?” The answer was “your oldest Brother.”

¹⁷ Ibid., 51–52.
But before September Came his oldest Brother
Died [19 November 1823].

Lucy Smith, William Smith, and Joseph Knight, Sr., are all admittedly adherents to the faith, but they are also primary witnesses who placed these events before Marquardt and Walters's 1824–25 calendar, and before Alvin's death in November of 1823.

In items 4 and 5 of the Marquardt and Walters chronology, the authors are in effect declaring that not only is the Latter-day Saint calendar of years irregular, but also that events within specified years are not sequentially correct. It is their contention that the Church was organized at Manchester, New York, on 6 April 1830 rather than at the Peter Whitmer, Sr., farm in Fayette, New York (item 4). They also claim that events at the Whitmer home did not occur until 11 April 1830 when the Fayette Branch was first organized (item 5). The Latter-day Saint point of view would assert that the Church was organized at the Peter Whitmer, Sr., farm on 6 April 1830, and that the 11 April 1830 meeting at the Whitmers' home was merely the first public meeting following the previous week's organization.

Ideally, historians should have been able to resolve this and other questions by going to the county clerk in three different New York counties and researching their particular "Incorporation of Religious Societies" book. Accordingly, within those volumes should appear a listing of the desired religious society along with persons appointed as moderators and trustees, together with the date on which they were formed as a society in that particular county. Thus the Fayette, Manchester, and Colesville branches of the Church should have all registered according to New York law. I, along with many others, have beaten that trail to no avail, even throwing in the counties of Wayne and Chenango for good measure. A check of documents at the state archives in Albany has been no more fruitful. No evidence of any of these branches having registered during their nine-month stay in New York has

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yet been found—though all the requisite conditions were certainly met and recorded for the organizational meeting at Fayette.²⁰

Failure to find the desired evidence at one level moves us to another. Marquardt and Walters stress that some early Church publications identify Manchester as the site of organization on 6 April 1830, as opposed to the Whitmer residence at Fayette (pp. 153–72). Without a doubt Manchester played a key role in the period. Revelations were received there, and baptisms occurred in Crooked Brook. At the same time, revelations were also recorded at the Peter Whitmer, Sr., farm, and numerous baptisms were performed in Seneca Lake, Cayuga Lake, the Seneca River, Thomas, Kendig, and Silver creeks in Seneca County.²¹ A good deal of activity, proselyting and baptizing, went on in both Ontario County and Seneca County before, during, and after the organization of the Church. Although certain early Mormon publications designate Manchester as the organizational site, there were likewise later corrections and emendations, by the same leadership, identifying Fayette as the place of the formal organization on 6 April 1830. In the May 1834 issue of the Evening and Morning Star, the “Minutes of a Conference of the Elders of the Church of Christ, which church was organized in the township of Fayette, Seneca county, New-York, on the 6th of April, A.D. 1830,” are recorded for that conference as it assembled at Kirtland, Ohio, 3 May 1834. Joseph Smith is named as “Moderator” and Oliver Cowdery as a “Clerk”—repeating the pattern of original organization at Fayette on that same date four years earlier, a fact of which they were cognizant.²²

Just two days later, 5 May 1834, the Prophet again solidified his acceptance of that same date and place when he conducted a land transaction with John and Elsey Johnson. The indenture

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identifies him as “Joseph Smith Junior President of the church of Christ organized on the 6th of April, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty, in the Township of Fayette, Seneca County and State of New York.”

David Whitmer, one of the six organizers, affirmed, “The first organization was in Seneca county, New York, under the name of ‘The church of Christ.’” He then declared, “On the 6th of April, 1830, the church was called together and the elders acknowledged according to the laws of New York.” In 1887, David was again very positive in his assertion, “We met at my father’s house in Fayette, N.Y., on April 6, 1830, to attend to this matter of organizing according to the Laws of the land.”

The content of the Marquardt and Walters lead chronology and the supporting text that follows deserves careful evaluation because they have opened some fascinating avenues of pursuit which, when explored, may heighten our historical understanding of the period. Where such a profusion of documents has been cast into the arena, it would be ideal if the reader had the opportunity to examine each of the items separately. Such is obviously not practical nor are all the materials readily available. The majority of the documents check out as to content and reference. The interpretation of what is meant by the source is of necessity an individual matter. Occasionally a small glitch slips into the works. Marquardt and Walters refer to Samuel Jennings, a Palmyra merchant with whom the Smith family had dealings. They point out that at the death of Jennings on 1 September 1821, Joseph Smith, Sr., owed Jennings debts of $11.50 and $1 respectively, and cite his estate papers for “5 Jan. 1822, 8, line 23, and 10, line 10” (p. 11 n. 9) However, the correct reading should be, 5 June 1822, 10, line 23, and 12, line 10, for anyone searching for the source. Inasmuch as the writers have carefully singled out a variety of debts owed by various members of the Smith family to a variety of persons over an extended period, it might be well to point out that Joseph Smith, Sr., was not alone in this instance of indebtedness. Nineteen pages listed other residents who understandably

23 Geauga County, Ohio Deed Records Book 18, 478–79.
25 David Whitmer, An Address to All Believers in Christ (Richmond, MO: David Whitmer, 1887), 33.
owed monies to the deceased merchant at the time his business affairs were closed out.26

In part, Marquardt and Walters justify their detailed and painstaking investigation of Mormon claims and sources by asking:

Why should we be concerned about accuracy in these details? LDS church educator T. Edgar Lyon once remarked, "[W]hy should Latter-day Saints concern themselves with authentic history? What difference does it make to the tourist if he is told fact or fiction? Personally, I do not appreciate being victimized by someone who, while posing as an authority, disseminates error, however trivial it may seem." (p. 165)

This is certainly a less-than-subtle allusion to the historical narrative of the Prophet and others who assisted him in the preservation of that early history. By association these brethren are guilty of somehow "victimizing" individuals by the willful dissemination of error. Marquardt and Walters go on to say in conclusion, "When Smith told his life's history, his understanding at that later time shaped the story of his extraordinary visions. Magical incantations, guardian spirits, treasures in hills, use of a special stone for secular and religious purposes—these were all deemphasized while the story became conflated and simplified. Supernatural encounters were amplified and polished to accommodate more orthodox views. To us, the original accounts ring more authentic" (p. 198).

Marquardt and Walters express a desire for accuracy in detail, "however trivial it may seem." But surely this ought to apply to them as well as to early Mormons. The second part of the "Bibliographical Essay" in Inventing Mormonism is entitled, "2. The 1826 Examination" (pp. 222–30). In one section (pp. 222–23), they examine "Itemized Bills by Justice Albert Neely and Constable Philip De Zeng," making mention of the respective bills being bound in bundles in 1826 and placed in

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26 Samuel Jennings Estate Papers, 5 June 1822, p. 10, line 23; and p. 12, line 10, Ontario County Estate Records, Film #1991.272.5, Ontario County Historical Society Archives, Canandaigua, New York.
storage. Then their text shifts from a nineteenth-century scene to a twentieth-century event and the declaration: "These and other bills relating to Joseph Smith’s Bainbridge court hearings were removed by [Wesley P.] Walters and [Fred] Poffarl27 from the water-soaked box in which they were found and hand-carried to Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. They were received back by Chenango County in October 1971. Photographs are on file at the library of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia" (p. 223).

On the surface this description seems innocuous enough—two men removing documents from a water-soaked box and taking them to a manuscript library for examination and perhaps treatment, and then returning them to the county of origin. These appear to be the thoughtful acts of preservationists at work—seemingly with approval of the county, implied though not actually recorded. Now let’s take a second look for the sake of “accuracy,” and discuss some of the attendant circumstances. I had been microfilming materials related to Mormonism in the Guernsey Memorial Library and at the same time researching documents in the adjacent Chenango County Office Building in Norwich, New York. The county clerk, John P. McGuire, had allowed me access to the vault. I was looking for the very type of documents later found by Wesley P. Walters and Fred Poffarl, but I had no success. After I carefully checked the records in the vault, Mr. McGuire directed me to the cache of court records which had been placed in storage in the downstairs portion of the jailhouse. These documents had been placed under the immediate supervision of the sheriff, who had given the undersheriff the task of looking after them. Walters and Poffarl were not exaggerating; the documents themselves were water-logged and in water-soaked boxes. After two days of searching hundreds of documents, unfortunately at the wrong end of the room, I had to leave to keep some prior appointments. Shortly after I left, Walters and Poffarl called on Mr. McGuire and were granted the same privilege as I had been in examining the content of the vault. As they finished that project, a clerk in the county office building mentioned to

27 Fred Poffarl was an associate of Rev. Wesley P. Walters from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
them that Mr. Porter had been working under the jailhouse. On 28 July 1971 they investigated and were successful in locating the elusive bills and some other related records. Taking them from their packets, the men went to the Guernsey Memorial Library. One of the librarians, Charlotte Spicer, told me that they used the photocopy machine, but that it was of poor quality and they didn’t like the results. Mrs. Spicer related to me that they then determined to take the court documents elsewhere. Seeing the nature of the papers she advised them to return the documents immediately. She said that "Mr. Walters responded by saying, ‘that if they were returned the Mormons would dispose of them.’" They then left, removing them from the community and the custody of the county clerk. Fred Poffarl carried them east to Yale. Walters later claimed that they removed the documents without permission because the sheriff and the county historian “were both unavailable at the time.”28 At the instigation of Walters, some of the documents with accompanying commentary were published in August 1971 by Jerald and Sandra Tanner in *The Salt Lake City Messenger* under the title, “New Find Undermines Mormonism,” as an ongoing exposé of Joseph Smith.29

I was at that time doing continued research in the East. Richard L. Anderson alerted me to the Tanner treatise on Walters’s find. Eager to see the records, I proceeded to Norwich to verify their content. There I met Mae L. Smith, Chenango County Historian, but she was unable to show me the original court documents. She had only photocopies in her possession since the actual bills had been taken away. Mae further informed me that Wesley P. Walters had photocopied the original documents in his possession, and then sent these copies to the editor of the *Chenango Union* in Norwich as verification of an accompanying article on Mormonism which he asked the newspaper to print. The editor had suspected something was awry and called the attention

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of Mae Smith to the photocopies. She recognized that court documents had been taken without authorization and, working with the county clerk, contacted Mr. Edwin M. Crumb, Clerk of the Chenango County Board of Supervisors. Mr. James H. Haynes, Jr., Chenango County Attorney, was next directed to write Wesley P. Walters. Mr. Haynes responded on 16 September 1971:

Dear Reverend Walters:

Our County Historian, Mrs. Mae Smith, has asked me to write you concerning certain papers that were taken by you from County records stored in the cellar of our local sheriff’s office. I have letters about these records which you wrote Mrs. Smith dated August 21, 1971.

According to Mrs. Smith, these records were taken by you without her permission and she has written you requesting they be returned immediately.

Will you please contact Yale University immediately and ask that these papers be returned to Mrs. Smith, our County Historian, without any delay whatsoever.30

The documents were subsequently returned under duress. Obviously the records in that basement room were uncataloged, so there was no way of determining just how many documents had walked out the door. The observer can appreciate the justifiable dilemma of those who had the documents in their charge.

Someone might say, “Well, they did preserve them by their action—what other option did they have?” Well, let me suggest some alternatives. The county clerk, Mr. John P. McGuire, was a very responsible man, besides being the lawful caretaker of the records. I had worked with him over an extended period of time in targeting certain items of historical value for microfilming by the Latter-day Saint Church genealogical microfilmer. If he had been alerted to the historical value of these documents I haven’t the least doubt that he would have taken steps to see that they were removed from the basement and preserved in a safe place for

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further disposition. Other items of a historical value to the community were already in the vault. Too, Mae Smith, the Chenango County Historian, could have guaranteed their safety and made requisition to obtain possession of them, which was what ultimately happened.\textsuperscript{31} By taking them away, Walters and Poffarl committed the cardinal sin of possibly compromising their validity. Some felt they had tampered with the evidence during their disappearance. I personally believe that those documents that were returned are valid and intact. But, of course—and this is the problem—that cannot be proven.

Walters did give an extended explanation of the actions of himself and his friend in 1974, some time after the fact. He reported that he was in immediate contact with Mae Smith and others (a little over three weeks afterwards). His description would lead the reader to believe that everything was amicably smoothed over.\textsuperscript{32} However, I only know that I saw a bristling Mae Smith when I arrived in Norwich soon after the published report by Walters. She was not at all pleased with the methods of these two men in extracting official documents, a situation that had not changed a year later when I called at the Chenango County Historical Museum to see the elusive documents, which had since been returned. In the press to the fore historians cannot override their local counterparts. Something more was lost in that exchange than the momentary disappearance of records. That nonprofessional act created an air of suspicion in Chenango County officialdom where so much trust had been extended to generations of researchers before this mishap. In retrospect I can still hear the simple request of the county clerk, Mr. McGuire, to all comers, “When you take them out, just put them back where you found them.” A few details for the sake of accuracy can provide a wider

\textsuperscript{31} In 1974, Walters reflected on his action and did concede that, “In the light of subsequent developments perhaps it would have been wiser simply to have obtained from the county certified copies of all the bills and allowed them to be returned to the damp basement to disintegrate”; “Joseph Smith’s Bainbridge, N.Y., Court Trials,” 54. Partially repentant, but not quite. He still would not allow the Chenango County historian and others credit for knowing when items of historical value need to be removed from the dampness when their condition was discovered. Mae Smith has placed them in the security of a high and dry vault.

\textsuperscript{32} Walters, “Joseph Smith’s Bainbridge, N.Y., Court Trials,” 153–55.
spectrum of understanding when limited information may have given us a somewhat slanted view of the actual incident.

The writers have compiled what appear to be “plausible” answers to some long-time trouble spots. This will have an appeal to those anxious for a resolution of certain difficult questions. Marquardt and Walters have crafted their attack on the early historical institution of Mormonism with exceeding care and have written in a convincing style. Their approach will be disarming to readers who may not be able to discern the dividing line between fact and fiction.

The questions which they have raised have implications for readers that will demand the very best verifiable responses available. As their sources are further digested and critiqued the “winnowing” process will be more complete. Perhaps then the delineation of what is actual versus what might be classified as the “Reinvention of Mormonism” can be further affixed.