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## Martin Harris's 1873 Letter to Walter Conrad

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## MARTIN HARRIS'S 1873 LETTER TO WALTER CONRAD

### EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come; That we, through the grace of God the

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<sup>23</sup>Algernon Sidney Gilbert operated the Gilbert–Whitney Store in Missouri; John Whitmer was one of the eight witnesses of the Book of Mormon; William W. Phelps, a prominent Church leader, edited the *Evening and Morning Star*; Edward Partridge was the first bishop of the Church. All were members of the united or literary firms (Cook, *Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp. 84, 25, 87, 54).

<sup>24</sup>See Louis C. Zucker, "Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew," *Dialogue, A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 (Summer 1968): 41–55. This is the only attempt in LDS literature to deal specifically with the possible origins of these pseudonyms (see especially pp. 48–50). Mormon leaders were again forced to use code names in the 1880s due to the anti-polygamy crusade. In a similar fashion, many of these pseudonyms were not known until recent years. See Gustive O. Larson, *The "Americanization" of Utah for Statehood* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1971), p. 120, for a list of the "cohab code" from the journal of Moses Franklin Farnsworth. Unlike the codes of the 1830s, the codes of the 1880s were more contemporary or were drawn directly from the Bible.

<sup>25</sup>Paul Nolan Hyde, "The Pseudonym Revelations: An Historical and Linguistic Approach," unpublished essay prepared for the Church Education System Symposium, Brigham Young University, August 1981; copy in my possession.

Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record. . . . And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true. . . . And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates and the engravings thereon; and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true.

So states the declaration signed by Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer and published in the Book of Mormon, a declaration which has come to be known as "The Testimony of Three Witnesses."

In the following letter to Walter Conrad, Martin Harris, Sr., reaffirms this testimony. The letter, written in 1873, forty-four years after Harris's original witness and just two and one-half years before his death, is the last known signed affirmation by him of his experience with the gold plates of the Book of Mormon. Although Martin Harris, Sr., left the Church within a decade of this vision, he never denied his testimony that an angel of the Lord showed him the gold plates and the voice of the Lord bore divine witness of them.

Martin Harris was born on 18 May 1783 in Easttown, Saratoga County, New York. Later his family moved to Palmyra, Wayne County, where he met the Prophet Joseph Smith in the fall of 1827. During the time Joseph Smith was translating the Book of Mormon from the gold plates, Martin Harris served as his first scribe, recording what the Prophet dictated. In 1830 Martin Harris mortgaged and later sold his farm to raise \$3,000 needed to pay the bill for the first printing of the Book of Mormon.

But when the Saints moved from Kirtland, Ohio, to Missouri, Martin remained behind, cutting himself off from the body of the Church. It was not until 1870 that Martin Harris migrated to Utah and was rebaptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

From the time he first saw the plates until his death on 10 July 1875 in Clarkston, Cache County, Utah, Martin Harris continued to bear testimony of the Book of Mormon. His "last audible words . . . were something about the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Harris, Jr., to George A. Smith, 9 July 1875, as cited in Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson Historical Co., 1901-36), 1:271.

## ACQUIRING THE MANUSCRIPT

Brent Ashworth

Early in the spring of 1982 I acquired the 1873 Martin Harris, Sr., letter. A collector friend of mine had purchased it from another collector, who had acquired it from an old Utah collection of stamped covers which had been assembled over a period of many years. When I first acquired the Harris letter, neither the person I acquired it from nor I were certain of its authenticity. It became immediately obvious to me that the handwriting of the body of the letter was quite different from the signature. I spent much time in the ensuing nine months trying to satisfy myself of the letter's authenticity. I discovered that the handwriting of the body of my letter matched very closely handwriting in a couple of letters in LDS Church Archives addressed to Brigham Young from Martin Harris, Jr. Since Martin Harris, Sr., would have been eighty-nine years old at the time the letter was drafted, and since he was living with his son Martin, Jr., at the time, it seemed to make sense that he would use his son as a scribe.

Next I was faced with the task of authenticating the signature itself. One of my problems was that there is very little original material signed by Martin Harris, Sr. Another thing that added to my confusion over the signature was the portraits contained in B. H. Roberts's *Comprehensive History of the Church* and reprinted in several other histories of the Book of Mormon. Although these engravings have a purported signature of each witness under each portrait, it is apparent that Roberts and others had been using the signature of Martin Harris, Jr., rather than the elder Harris's signature.

By early fall of 1982, I obtained, through the assistance of BYU Professor Richard L. Anderson, a copy of an application for a military pension which Martin Harris, Sr., had filed in 1871. The witnessed signature on the application appeared to me to be almost identical to that on the 1873 letter.

In order to obtain expert confirmation of the signature, I gave a copy of the letter to LDS historian Dean Jessee, one of the handwriting experts of the Church. The Friday before the October 1982 general conference of the Church, I called Dean to get his analysis of the handwriting and signature of the letter. He indicated that he had done a preliminary study which agreed with my supposition that the son had acted as scribe; also the pension application signature agreed very favorably with the signature on the 1873 letter.

A couple of events occurred during general conference weekend which prompted me to contact the Church the following Monday, 4 October 1982. First, on Sunday, 3 October, I was moved by Elder Boyd K. Packer's conference address in which he announced that the Brethren had agreed to add a subtitle "Another Testament of Jesus Christ" to the Book of Mormon. I felt that I did have a letter which substantiated that new subtitle, a letter which would be of benefit to the mission of the Church at this particular time. The following Monday, after consulting with family members, my wife and I decided to contact Elder G. Homer Durham, the Managing Director of the Church Historical Department. Elder Durham seemed very interested, as was President Gordon B. Hinckley, when later that day I showed them the Harris letter. The decision was made that Monday afternoon by the Historical Department personnel to call a news conference for the following morning, 5 October, at which the letter and its contents were announced.

I think the real significance of the 1873 Martin Harris letter lies in the fact that it is presently the only known signed statement of Martin Harris restating his witness to the Book of Mormon.

Smithfield  
 Smithfield, N.H.  
 Jan 15<sup>th</sup> 1873

Brother Walter Conrad

Dear Sir— Your letter of the 1<sup>st</sup> inst has been perused with much pleasure, and I am pleased to reply, it is truly gratifying to hear of the continual increase of influence manifested by the book of Mormon, and as you have entreated me to write my witness I send that I had have graciously embraced a stamp for the same, I now solemnly state that as I was praying unto the Lord that I might behold the ancient records, to them I came to view a holy Angel, and before him a table and upon the table the holy spectacles or Urim and Thummim and other ancient relics of the Prophets, and he, the Angel did take up the plates and turn them over so as we could plainly see the engraving thereon, and there came a voice from Heaven saying, "I am the Lord," and that the plates were translated by God and not by man, and also that we should bear record of it to all the world, and thus the vision was taken from me.

And now dear Brother, I would that you

Courtesy of Brent Ashworth

Martin Harris, Sr., Letter to Walter Conrad

Smithfield

Cache Co. Utah.



Jan. 13<sup>th</sup> 1873

Brother Walter Conrad,

Dear Sir,— Your favor of the 7<sup>th</sup> inst. has been purused with much pleasure, and I am pleased to reply, it is truly gratifying to hear of the continual increase of influence manifested by the Book of Mormon, and as you have entreated me to write my witness of said Book (and have graciously enclosed a stamp for the same) I now solemnly state that as I was praying unto the Lord that I might behold the ancient record, lo there appeared to view a holy Angel, and before him a table, and upon the table the holy spectacles or Urim and Thummim, and other ancient relics of the Nephites, and lo, the Angel did take up the plates, and turn them over so as we could plainly see the engravings thereon, and lo there came a voice from heaven saying “I am the Lord,” and that the plates were translated by God and not by men, and also that we should bear record of it to all the world, and thus the vision was taken from us.

And now dear brother, I would that you

might look upon my countenance and know that  
 I do not mean to be deceived but it pleases  
 the Lord that I must be content to write  
 these few lines. Yours in the Gospel of Christ  
 Martin Harris


  

  
 17  
 JAN  
 Mr. Walter Conrad  
 20<sup>th</sup> Ward  
 Salt Lake City  
 U.S.



might look upon my countenance and know that  
I lie not neither was I deceived, but it pleases  
the Lord that I must be content to write  
these few lines, Yours in the Gospel of Christ

Martin Harris

Mr. Walter Conrad  
20<sup>th</sup> Ward  
Salt Lake City  
UT.