Finding Documents on the Joseph Smith Papers Website

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The Joseph Smith Papers website is a wonderful resource. With thousands of documents and hundreds of resource pages, though, it can sometimes feel like you’re searching for a needle in a haystack.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how you might use the website to learn more about quotations and documents associated with the Prophet Joseph Smith.

To get started, consider that you or one of your students is reading Saints: The Standard of Truth. The last page of chapter 3 (“Plates of Gold”) ends with the following discussion between Joseph Smith Sr. and his son Joseph Jr.:

His father asked at once if he had the plates.
“No,” he said, “I could not get them.”
“Did you see them?”
“I saw them but could not take them.”
“I would have taken them,” Joseph Sr. said, “if I had been in your place.”
“You do not know what you say,” Joseph said. “I could not get them, for the angel of the Lord would not let me.”
Checking the notes section, you find note 32: “Smith, Biographical Sketches, 86.” It is a source you are not familiar with, but since it’s about an experience in Joseph Smith’s life it seems reasonable that the website could have additional relevant information. Hoping to learn more, you visit josephsmithpapers.org to begin your search.

Selecting which words to search for is often a process of trial and error. For example, if you search for only a few words, you may receive too many search results. If you don’t find your search target on the first try, you may wish to add or remove a few words from your search. Don’t be afraid to experiment.

There are many ways you might search to find an original source for the dialogue referenced in Saints. Table 1 illustrates how widely your search results can vary if you do not search for exact phrases. Adding quotation marks signals the search engine to return only documents which contain the exact search phrase. Searching without quotation marks returns documents that contain all the individual words anywhere within a document.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Words</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Search Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I could not get them, for the angel of the Lord would not let me</td>
<td>Searching for an extended phrase; no quotation marks</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plates angel Lord</td>
<td>Searching for a few key words</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the angel of the Lord would not let me</td>
<td>Searching for a phrase; no quotation marks</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the angel of the Lord would not let me”</td>
<td>Same search as above, except enclosed in quotation marks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would have taken them</td>
<td>Searching for an alternate phrase; no quotation marks</td>
<td>2,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I would have taken them”</td>
<td>Same search as above, except enclosed in quotation marks</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Sample Search Results

Both searches that included quotation marks returned the same document result: “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845, Page 89.” (Biographical Sketches was the original title for Lucy Mack Smith’s history when it was published in Liverpool in 1853.) With only one search result, our choice is easy. If your search yields multiple document options, the website provides four lines of text from the matching documents to help guide you in your selection. Finding the right document can often take several attempts.

Clicking on the “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845, Page 89” link, we see the source document for the quotation from Saints. Page 89 from Lucy Mack Smith’s 1845 history (image C) appears on the left side of the screen. A transcript of page 89 (image D) appears on the right side of the screen. Our...
matching search text is highlighted in yellow. We can now view the quotation in context and easily read previous pages or following pages.3

When viewing a document transcript, you can show or hide editing marks. The editing marks show original line breaks, cross-outs, and other textual variations in the original document. For example, with editing marks turned on this sentence from the transcript is:

“I would have taken them,” rejoined his father, “with much earnestness, “had I been in your place.”
Here is the same text with the editing marks turned off:

“I would have taken them,” rejoined his father, with much earnestness, “if I had been in your place.”

So far, finding a quotation on the Joseph Smith Papers website has been similar to looking it up in a book. The real power of the website starts to accrue at this point, as you are able to take advantage of the numerous resources and additional information available—all of it cross-linked. In addition to reading the text, you can review a table of contents for your search document, read source information about the document (by clicking the “Source Note” link), or learn more about the historical context of this document (by clicking the “Historical Introduction” link).

The source note for this document (image E) explains that “Lucy Mack Smith, the mother of Joseph Smith, dictated a rough draft version of her history to Martha Jane Knowlton Coray (with some additional scribal help from Martha’s husband, Howard) beginning in 1844 and concluding in 1845.” The Historical Introduction is lengthy but begins by explaining:

In June 1844, the church suffered the loss of its president and prophet, JS [Joseph Smith], and his brother, church patriarch Hyrum Smith. The Smith family, already devastated, endured another heartbreak a few weeks later with the death of JS’s brother Samuel. That fall their widowed mother, Lucy Mack Smith, perhaps in part as a salve to her grief, began recording her family’s story. Writing to her only surviving son, William, on 23 January 1845, Smith informed him, “I have by the council of the 12 [Apostles] undertaken a history of the family, that is my Father’s Family and my own.”

You are also given the opportunity to “View entire transcript” (in this instance, all 354 pages of Lucy Mack Smith’s History). You can see information about the document itself (using the “Document Information” link) (image F) and obtain citation information by clicking on the “Cite this page” page—which is very helpful if you are preparing a lesson handout or your students are writing a research paper. The citation information provided for this document is:


At this point in your search, you can branch out and start exploring. Throughout the document transcripts are numerous highlighted words, such as: “His father then said: ‘Did you see them?’” Each highlighted word is hyperlinked to additional information. If you click on “father,” for example, a pop-up window with summary information will appear (image G).

If you click on the the “View Full Bio” link, you will see a complete biography for Joseph Smith, Sr. (image H).

Each statement in a full biography is followed by a footnote that links to the source information for that fact about their life. For example, footnote 5 (which follows “Son of Asael Smith and Mary Duty”) provides this source information in a new pop-up window (image I).

Immediately beneath every full biography is a section labeled “Links” that includes a hyperlinked list of other documents on the website in which
this individual appears (as the author, the recipient, or someone who is simply mentioned). In the case of Joseph Smith Sr., the complete list is hundreds of documents long (image J).

You can select any of those document links and continue learning!

Like most research skills, your experience using the Joseph Smith Papers website will probably reflect two old adages: “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again!” and “Practice makes perfect.” Some individual details of the way the Joseph Smith Papers website works will almost certainly change over time, but the basic principles discussed here will still apply. A world of new information awaits you—limited only by your curiosity and available time.

Notes


3. I recommend searching the Joseph Smith Papers website using a desktop or laptop computer or a sufficiently sized tablet. A smartphone works well, but it will generally be a slower process.