



2016

Understanding the Council of Fifty and Its Minutes

Ronald K. Esplin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



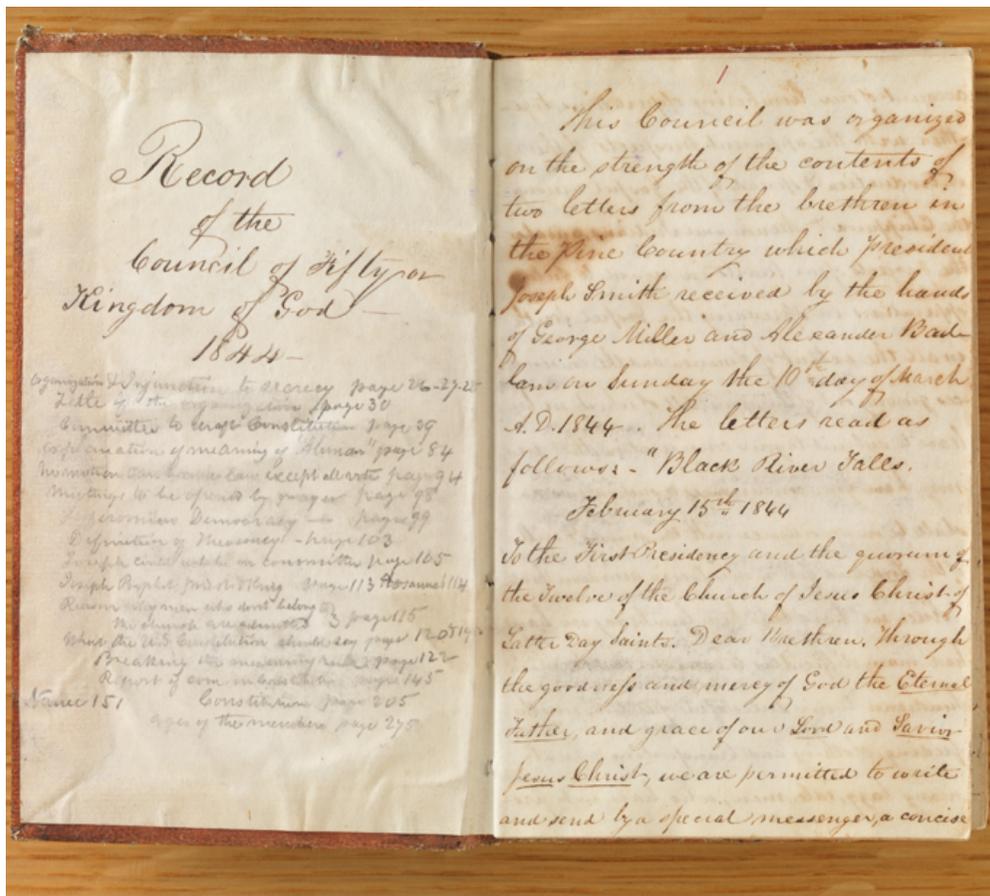
Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Esplin, Ronald K. (2016) "Understanding the Council of Fifty and Its Minutes," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 55 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol55/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



First pages of William Clayton's first record book of the Council of Fifty, "Record of the Council of Fifty or Kingdom of God—1844." The record begins, "This Council was organized on the strength of the contents of two letters from the brethren in the Pine Country which President Joseph Smith received by the hand of George Miller and Alexander Badlam on Sunday the 10th day of March A.D. 1844." An index was later added to the title page. The books are preserved in the Church History Library. Photograph by Welden C. Andersen. Courtesy Church History Library. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Understanding the Council of Fifty and Its Minutes

Ronald K. Esplin

Students of early Mormon history have long known about the once-secretive Council of Fifty in Nauvoo and learned much about it.¹ However, the records of the council were never available for research until now. The closest I came to the records of the Council of Fifty before the First Presidency made them available for the Joseph Smith Papers was in about 1977. Elder Joseph Anderson of the Seventy, then serving as executive director of the Historical Department, had served for decades as secretary to the First Presidency. When premeeting conversation around a conference table one day turned to the Council of Fifty, Elder Anderson asked what it was. That historians knew much about a council he knew

1. For some of the earliest scholarly work, see James R. Clark, “The Kingdom of God, the Council of Fifty, and the State of Deseret,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1958): 132–48; and Alfred Bush and K[laus] J. Hansen, “Notes Towards a Definition of the Council of Fifty, 1957” (Special Collections, University of Utah Marriott Library). Hansen went on to do the most extensive work, including his *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), a book that helped imprint its subject on the Mormon historical landscape. Based on additional records, in the early 1980s seminal pieces in *BYU Studies* by Michael Quinn and Andrew Ehat detailed membership and shed new light on the rules and functioning of the council; see D. Michael Quinn, “The Council of Fifty and Its Members, 1844 to 1945,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 2 (1980): 163–97; and Andrew F. Ehat, “‘It Seems Like Heaven Began on Earth’: Joseph Smith and the Constitution of the Kingdom of God,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 3 (1980): 253–79. The most recent book-length treatment is Jedediah S. Rogers, ed., *The Council of Fifty: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2014).

nothing of surprised him and elicited his reminiscence about President Heber J. Grant introducing him to the contents of the First Presidency's file room when he first began working for the President in 1922. After President Grant pointed out the location of various records he would be using or caring for, he pointed to a box labeled "Council of Fifty" and announced, "You won't be needing those." Elder Anderson noted that he had passed by the box many times over the years but never knew what was in it. Now we know—and the publication of the Nauvoo minutes stored in that box as part of the Joseph Smith Papers makes the records accessible for all. In September 2016, the Church Historian's Press will release *The Joseph Smith Papers, Administrative Records: Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*.² An excerpt of that volume, "Afternoon Meeting of the Council of Fifty, April 11, 1844," follows this article.

The History of the Record

William Clayton, appointed clerk of the Council of Fifty when it was organized in March 1844, inscribed the original minutes on loose sheets of paper. In the summer of 1844, soon after the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Clayton began copying the minutes into a small bound book with pages six inches tall and just under four inches wide. When Brigham Young reorganized the council in February 1845, Clayton as clerk continued keeping minutes on loose pages that he later copied into that same small book, and then into another, and finally a third. Each small book bears the title "Record of the Council of Fifty or Kingdom of God." By the time the exodus from Nauvoo began in February 1846, Clayton had inscribed into the three small books 780 pages of minutes documenting meetings of the council under Joseph Smith in 1844 and Brigham Young in 1845 and early January 1846. As the time for leaving Nauvoo neared, Clayton apparently rushed to finish his record. He included minutes for the two council meetings held the second week of January 1846, but he never copied into his permanent record the minutes for January 18 and 19, the last two Nauvoo meetings. Because Clayton created these Nauvoo minutes as a continuous record,³ the Joseph Smith Papers volume includes all of them.

2. The volume is edited by Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Jeffrey D. Mahas. General editors are Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey.

3. In addition to each volume having a nearly identical title page, each has an abbreviated title on the spine with the 1–3 volume designation added. Volumes 1 and 2 end with a note referring the reader to the next volume.



The Nauvoo Council of Fifty record. William Clayton, the first clerk of the Council of Fifty, kept the minutes of the Nauvoo-era council meetings and copied them into these three small blank books. The books are housed in the Church History Library. Photograph by Welden C. Andersen. Courtesy Church History Library. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

It appears that Clayton kept the three small books in his possession until he gave them to Brigham Young in Winter Quarters in April 1847.⁴ In 1857, President Young transferred them to George A. Smith and Wilford Woodruff to extract information “for the history.”⁵ After they returned the minutes to Young in 1862,⁶ he apparently kept them in his possession until George Q. Cannon became custodian of the records sometime after his appointment as council recorder in 1867.⁷ Cannon still had control of the books when John Taylor sought them in March 1880 so that he and associates could read the Nauvoo minutes before reconvening the council.⁸ After the reorganized council held its final meetings in the mid-1880s, the records appear to have remained in the custody of the First Presidency, where Joseph Anderson encountered them in 1922 with President Grant, who became a member of the council in the 1880s and was one of the last remaining members.

Although these records were not among the Joseph Smith documents the Office of the First Presidency inventoried and made available to the Joseph Smith Papers project early on, I anticipated that as work on the Joseph Smith Papers progressed to the point where

4. William Clayton, Journal, April 14, 1847, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

5. Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal: 1833–1898 Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 5:125, 139 (November 26 and December 18, 1857). Wilford Woodruff and George A. Smith were preparing a history of Brigham Young that was published serially in the *Deseret News* beginning in 1858.

6. Woodruff, *Journal*, 6:28 (February 26, 1862).

7. Council of Fifty, Minutes, January 23, 1867, Papers, 1845–1883, Church History Library.

8. Franklin D. Richards, Journal, March 3, 1880, Richards Family Collection, Church History Library.

the minutes were relevant and needed, they would be made available. That proved to be the case. The records were transferred to the Church History Department in late 2010, and scholarly work on them began in 2012. An article about the Joseph Smith Papers in the September 7, 2012, *Church News* made public First Presidency approval for Church History Department staff “to use the Council of Fifty minutes as reference and footnote material in upcoming Joseph Papers books and to eventually publish the minutes in full as a separate volume.” The third and final volume of the Journals Series of the Joseph Smith Papers, published in 2015, made use of the previously unavailable records in annotating entries from the organization of the council in March through May 1844.⁹ From fall 2016 forward, the full record will be accessible in the print edition of the Joseph Smith Papers.

The History of the Council of Fifty

The evening of November 12, 1835, Joseph Smith met with members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Six months earlier, Smith had organized the quorum and instructed them in their duties in preparation for a quorum mission. Having returned in late September, they gathered now to be instructed in matters pertaining to the House of the Lord. But first Smith shared with them a concern that had weighed on his mind when he had gone to Missouri in 1834 with the Camp of Israel, the military expedition later known as Zion’s Camp. What if he had died? “I supposed I had established this church on a permanent foundation,” he told them, “and indeed I did so, for if I had been taken away it would have been enough.” Bishops functioned in both Missouri and Ohio, and in 1834, the year of the expedition, he established local presidencies and high councils in both Church communities to supplement the presidency of the high priesthood, soon to be known as the First Presidency. The winter after Joseph Smith returned to Ohio, he organized the Twelve and the Seventy. Much, then, of the organization required for a growing community was in place by fall 1835, but he foresaw more. “I yet live, and therefore God requires more at my hands,” he stated to the Apostles that November.¹⁰

9. For example, Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, vol. 3 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 200 n. 882; 201 n. 884; 202 nn. 885, 891; 206 n. 901; 227 n. 1021.

10. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*,

Much of what remained had to do with the temple,¹¹ the subject of this gathering with the Twelve, but in Nauvoo Joseph Smith also created additional institutions. Some but not all were temple-related. In March 1842, he oversaw bringing the women into a Church organization “after the pattern, or order, of the priesthood.”¹² In September 1843, he established a “quorum” of men and women who had received temple ordinances and who would oversee work in the Nauvoo Temple upon its completion.¹³ And in March 1844, less than six months later, he organized what was his final institution—the Council of Fifty. Although the council functioned for less than three months before his death, it nonetheless played a significant role during those months (and in the year and a half that followed) and left a lasting imprint on its members.

Unlike prior entities organized by Joseph Smith, the Kingdom of God, soon called the Council of Fifty in reference to its approximate number of members, was not an ecclesiastical or church institution but one concerned with civil and political affairs. Though emerging from an understanding of prophecy and revelation, the council was distinct from the Church even as it sought to create conditions that would protect the rights of the Church and its members. Joseph Smith and his associates saw the council as a form of government under priesthood leaders informed by revelation—a “theo-democracy,” they sometimes called it, referring to its distinctly Mormon blend of government by the revealed will of God *and* the common consent of the governed. The institution also had millennial overtones, a harbinger of things to come. For Joseph Smith and his associates, the council was the nascent “kingdom of God” on earth to one day govern men in the civil sphere. Council members spoke of the council as the beginnings of the kingdom

edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 96–97.

11. See Ronald K. Esplin, “The Significance of Nauvoo for Latter-day Saints,” *Journal of Mormon History* 16 (1990): 71–86; and Larry C. Porter and Milton V. Backman Jr., “Doctrine and the Temple in Nauvoo,” *BYU Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (1992): 41–56.

12. “First Organization,” ca. July 1880, Relief Society Records, quoted in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 6–7.

13. Hedges, Smith, and Rogers, *Journals, Volume 3*, 104–5 (September 28, 1843); see also “Glossary,” on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, s.v. “Quorum,” <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/quorum>.

And the April 7, 1842, Revelation?

Since the 1950s, studies of the Council of Fifty have referenced a typescript housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections in the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, as evidence that the full name of the council was revealed to Joseph Smith in April 1842, nearly two years before the council was organized. Although it is plausible that such a spring 1842 “event” precipitated discussion of a political “Government of God” before the July 15, 1842, publication of an essay by that title in the *Times and Seasons*, there is no corroborating evidence.

The typescript preserves cryptic notes of the April 10 and 21, 1880, meetings of the Council of Fifty when John Taylor reconvened the council for the first time since Brigham Young’s death. Andrew F. Ehat, one of the scholars who cited the transcript, learned from the late Chad J. Flake, then a curator in Special Collections, that Flake had created the typescript from a record donated to the university by the family of L. John Nuttall, a document later transferred to the Church Historian’s Office. Ehat was subsequently permitted to see the original in Salt Lake City. Jeffrey D. Mahas, a historian with the Joseph Smith Papers, confirmed that the original penciled notes are in the hand of L. John Nuttall, secretary to John Taylor.

Nuttall’s brief notes are on one of two loose sheets (the second is a list of members). Because no other minutes for this April 10, 1880, meeting exist, Nuttall’s brief and problematic notes stand alone. Nuttall wrote:

The name given this Council on the day it was organized by the Lord. April 7th 1842. was read from the Revelations as follows: “The Kingdom of God and His Laws with the Keys and powers thereof and Judgment in the hands of his servants.”

Some of the first members spoke upon the objectives of the Council &c. & repeated many things that had been said by the Prophets [names of seven who spoke follow].

Mahas located diaries of many who attended the April 10, 1880, meeting, some of whom had read the 1844 minutes in March. Those who alluded to the history of the council appear to have understood—and one explicitly mentioned—that Joseph Smith

Daniel saw in vision¹⁴ and a pattern of how Christ might rule when he returned to reign as Lawgiver and King.

However, in 1844 and 1845, what engaged them more were immediate practical challenges. The minutes—and the meetings they document—concerned themselves mainly with these proximate matters. Meetings of the council became Joseph Smith’s forum of choice for managing his political campaign and several other ongoing initiatives—especially the one William Clayton highlighted in his record the day the council was organized:

All seemed agreed to look to some place where we can go and establish a Theocracy either in Texas or Oregon or somewhere in California &c. The brethren spoke very warmly on the subject, and also on the subject of forming a constitution which shall be according to the mind of God and erect it between the heavens and the earth where all nations might flow unto it. This was considered as a “standard” to the people an ensign to the nations.¹⁵

This was to be a religious and political undertaking to seek a place beyond the borders of the United States where Latter-day Saints could

14. Daniel 2:34–35; see also D&C 65:2 and David J. Whittaker, “The Book of Daniel in Early Mormon Thought,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 155–201, available online at <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1128&index=13>.

15. Minutes, March 11, 1844, Council of Fifty. This intent to form a new government outside the boundaries of the United States and to design that government as a theocracy help explain the requirement of secrecy about activities of the council and its records.

organized the council on March 11, 1844. No diary mentions an 1842 revelation or any early record other than the 1844 minutes themselves—which unambiguously document the revelation of the name of the council on March 14, 1844, three days after the council’s formal organization.

The enigmatic reference to 1842 with no known authority or corroboration in cryptic notes nearly forty years after the fact should not be taken as evidence for an otherwise unknown 1842 revelation.

—Ronald K. Esplin

form a new government that would protect them in the exercise of their religion—and similarly protect the rights of any who cared to settle under their banner. A number of council initiatives were designed to help realize this larger objective.

What We Learn from the Council Minutes

Because record keeping in the 1840s was much better than what came before, indeed among the best in all early Mormon history, many aspects of the council's "program" have long been known. Other documents—letters, petitions, diaries, even other minutes—contain information about matters discussed in the council. Also, some participants later spoke about their involvement with the council, and, as noted, in the 1850s historians extracted information from council minutes for the history. After more than half a century of probing these other records in an effort to understand the Council of Fifty, historians came to understand the broad outlines of council decisions and initiatives—even if it was not always clear in what forum a discussion occurred or on what grounds a decision was made. Still, the minutes provide much information not heretofore known and provide a clearer and more detailed picture. Not surprisingly, this new information will compel reexamining and adjusting some earlier explanations.¹⁶

The records provide significant new information and perspectives on a number of matters that deeply concerned Joseph Smith during the last months of his life and became central to Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve after his death. For example, other records preserve something of both the idea and the term "theo-democracy," but we now have discussions about it. We have long known that the Council of Fifty had an interest in Texas, but now we have a more complete view of the matter. What the records provide us, then, is not a hidden history but a fleshing out of some aspects of that history. Where we understood certain decisions and could see the unfolding of certain policies, we can now have a seat at the table when decisions were made—and better understand the reasons for them. The minutes also provide a clearer view of the larger goals from which individual initiatives and decisions emerged.

16. As a graduate student in 1971, I wrote what I then considered a useful paper; it may still be useful as a collection of Brigham Young's later thoughts on the subject but needs updating in light of the minutes. Ronald K. Esplin, "The 'Council of Fifty' in History and Theology: An Inquiry into the Role of the Government of God in the Last Days," unpublished paper, 1971, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

An overview of the meetings and the minutes is instructive. Occasionally council meetings were relatively short, but most lasted several hours, and on days when the council met twice, its participants “spent the day in council,” as some noted in their diaries. Clayton’s record has entries on seventeen different days between March 10 and May 31, 1844. The council held two sessions on eight of those days, for a total of twenty-five meetings recorded by Clayton before Joseph Smith’s death. For the council under Brigham Young, Clayton’s record documents meetings on twenty separate days, on seven of which the council met twice, for a total of twenty-seven meetings. Although the number of meetings is more or less comparable, more of the one hundred thousand words in the total record are devoted to the post-1844 minutes than to the Joseph Smith era. Whether Clayton adjusted his minute-taking style on his own or was instructed to keep a more detailed record is not known, but in 1845 Clayton captured considerably more discussion and debate than earlier.

Entries for the first four meetings in March 1844 are among the least detailed. The original and no doubt more complete minutes of these meetings seem to have been burned, leaving Clayton to recreate his shorter entries for those days from memory, his own diary, and other documents. The minutes for March 26, 1844, two weeks after the organization of the council, illustrate another limitation. Clayton kept several pages of minutes for each of the two (morning and afternoon) sessions, but in both cases the record is essentially transactional in nature, omitting the details of significant events during the hours of meeting that were not related to the immediate business at hand. At a pause in the morning session, the minutes note, “Pres. J. Smith continued his instructions on heavenly things and many other important subjects.” Nothing of what he said is recorded.

This matters. In general, we want to know what he said of “heavenly things” and not only what other “important subjects” he addressed but what he said about them. Could these “instructions” on “important subjects” have included what came to be called Joseph Smith’s Last Charge to the Quorum of the Twelve? A study of accounts of that event suggests not only that it occurred in a Council of Fifty meeting but also that it was this day, March 26, likely in the morning—but the record is silent. There is reason to believe that Sidney Rigdon did not witness the “last charge,” and there is no evidence that Rigdon attended the morning session, compared to certain evidence that he attended in the afternoon. Not only was he involved in the afternoon’s “transactional” business, but near the end of the meeting, “as there was no [more] business before the house,” Elder Rigdon “addressed the council on the subject of the

Kingdom of God.” The minutes note his “most spirited and animated manner,” but provide almost nothing of the substance of his remarks, which, characteristically for Rigdon, may have been lengthy.

Some later minutes in 1844 are more complete, and, as noted, minutes for 1845 are more extensive still. Had Clayton been writing with the same detail in March 1844 as he did in March 1845, presumably we would *know* if the Last Charge was among Joseph Smith’s “important instructions” the morning of March 26, 1844, which seems likely and which later minutes tend to confirm. One year later, March 25, 1845, the Last Charge and the longest written summary of the event make an appearance in the minutes when Orson Hyde presented his draft account of the event for approval prior to publication. Young by implication confirmed that the event occurred in the council in 1844, and he did not dispute the general accuracy of Hyde’s account,¹⁷ but he tabled the matter, ending discussion. Hyde intended that his account of the event be part of his pamphlet against Rigdon, but Young instructed him to finish his writing about Rigdon without trying to make a case for the Twelve—and then let “Rigdon and Rigdonism” alone.

Several of the April and May 1844 minutes are more detailed—and therefore more complete—than the March example. For instance, minutes of the afternoon session on April 11, 1844, reproduced in this issue, capture important statements by Joseph Smith on freedom and religious liberty. In contrast, the morning minutes that same day say little about what some may see as the most sensational event associated with the council: “receiving” Joseph Smith as king. That this event occurred, even that it happened on April 11, has been known, but without detail and context. The actual minutes treat this matter-of-factly and with less information than is in William Clayton’s diary, mined by Andrew Ehat for his *BYU Studies* article more than thirty years ago.¹⁸

Judging only from Joseph Smith’s diary or even from the minutes themselves, the council, organized within hours of a meeting to consider a

17. The limitations of Hyde’s account and Young’s lack of enthusiasm for it will be discussed in my article on this topic in a forthcoming issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly*. See also Alexander L. Baugh and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, “‘I Roll the Burthen and Responsibility of Leading This Church Off from My Shoulders on to Yours’: The 1844/1845 Declaration of the Quorum of Twelve Regarding Apostolic Succession,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 3 (2010): 4–19.

18. Ehat, “‘It Seems Like Heaven Began on Earth,’” 268; and James B. Allen, “*No Toil nor Labor Fear*”: *The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2002), 121.

proposal from the Wisconsin Pineries¹⁹ to locate a settlement in the South, seems to spring from idea to embodiment overnight. In reality, it emerged from fertile soil and fit comfortably both within a long-developing discourse and the concerns and activities of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo in spring 1844. Its roots reached back to the 1830s, and its immediate context explains much of its initial business. For example, the council became the embodiment of Joseph Smith's ideas about councils and governance that emerged when he instructed the first high councils in 1834 and when organizing the first Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1835. Early revelations suggest a future in which a literal Kingdom of God would exist on earth, and in June 1842 Smith published as editor of the *Times and Seasons* a lengthy editorial entitled "The Government of God." The unsigned editorial spoke of the government of ancient Israel as a theocracy, with "God to make their laws, and men chosen by him to administer them." So it will be again, it proclaimed, when "the Lord shall be king over the whole earth."²⁰ The council was understood to be the seed of that future government.

One fruitful way to look at the Council of Fifty in Nauvoo in 1844 is to see it as a new venue for advancing long-standing causes. Interest in the American Indians is a case in point. Efforts to acquaint the Indians with the Book of Mormon and forge friendships with them dated back to Oliver Cowdery's "Lamanite Mission" of 1830–1831 and continued with efforts associated with the 1835 mission of the Twelve. In the winter of 1839–1840, Joseph Smith sent Jonathan Dunham west to the Indians near Council Bluffs and then recalled him to visit Indians in New York. At least by 1839, these were not only—and perhaps not mainly—proselytizing missions but focused on uniting the tribes and making allies of them. Jonathan Dunham, a key player in the endeavor, understood from Smith's 1839 instructions that "a new scene of things are about to transpire in the west, in fulfilment of prophecy" and that there was "a place of safety preparing for [the Saints] away towards the Rocky mountains."²¹ Dunham was later sent back more than once to the Indians in western Iowa near the Missouri River, hundreds of miles west of Nauvoo—including as a member of the Council of Fifty, where instructing and

19. Hedges, Smith, and Rogers, *Journals, Volume 3*, 200–203.

20. "The Government of God," *Times and Seasons* 3 (July 15, 1842): 856–57.

21. Thomas Burdick to Joseph Smith, August 28, 1840, in Joseph Smith Letterbook 2, pp. 174–76, Church History Library, and online at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/letter-from-thomas-burdick-28-august-1840&p=1>.

uniting the Indians was a frequent topic. In 1845, Dunham died while on assignment from the Council of Fifty to attend a great council of Indian tribes near Iowa's western border.

Interest in the American West as a place of refuge was another central concern of the Council of Fifty that predated its organization. The Indian initiatives and the desire to find a new home, a place of safety in the West, were related, of course. In February 1844, three weeks before the Council of Fifty was organized, the endeavor took on a new urgency when Joseph Smith "instructed the 12 to send out a delegation—& investigate the Locations of Californnia & mex oregon & find a good Location where we can remove after the Temple is completed.—& build a city in a day—and have a gover[n]ment of our own."²² In Wilford Woodruff's words, this was to be "an exploring expedition to California & pitch upon a spot to build a city." His diary noted that among those selected were Jonathan Dunham and others who would soon advance the same cause as members of the Council of Fifty.²³ Indeed, this entire late February initiative was subsumed into the council once it was organized.

Joseph Smith's 1844 campaign for the presidency of the United States is another example of the council as a continuation of ongoing initiatives. His political campaign had been simmering since fall 1843 and was in full boil before the organization of the Council of Fifty. But after its organization, the council provided the setting for much campaign business, including the selection of Sidney Rigdon as running mate. The minutes provide an additional perspective on the campaign and on Joseph Smith's views on government and the U.S. Constitution more generally.

From the perspective of the council, one can see how the 1844 election campaign fit with other initiatives as part of a broader strategy. A main plank of Smith's political platform for the campaign was the protection by government of the religious and civil rights of all, not just Latter-day Saints. As the tragic experience of Latter-day Saints in Missouri demonstrated, rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence and supposedly guaranteed by the Constitution could be violated by the states with impunity, leaving citizens with no effective recourse. Candidate Smith publically vowed to change this. The matter was also a recurring topic in the council, where he declared, "In relation to the constitution of the United States, there is but one difficulty, and that is the constitution provides the things which we want but lacks the power to carry the laws into effect. We want to alter it so as to make it

22. Hedges, Smith, and Rogers, *Journals, Volume 3*, 180 (February 20, 1844).

23. Woodruff, *Journal*, 2:351 (February 21, 1844).

imperative on the officers to enforce the protection of all men in their rights.”²⁴ In his public interface with political leaders, Smith petitioned for redress for past grievances and sought for assurances from presidential candidates that minority rights would in the future be protected. Only when none of these efforts gained traction did he decide to run himself—with a promise to protect the rights of all.

The council discussed a more radical plan if all else failed: seek a place outside the boundaries of the United States where the Saints could have a government of their own that would protect all rights for the Saints. Having experienced the painful results of the lack of protection for civil rights and religious freedom, and increasingly discouraged about the prospects improving, they were ready to embrace such a solution.

The council was a deliberative body (later minutes record extensive discussion and the impatience of some with talk and more talk), with business conducted according to rules of parliamentary procedure. Temporary committees formed for specific tasks dissolved when their work was done. Other than the recorder (Willard Richards) and clerk (William Clayton), the council had only one permanent office—the standing chairman. Only the standing chairs, Smith and then Young, stood apart from the main internal organizing principle: seating and voting—and on occasion speaking—by age, oldest first. Discussion was to be full and free, and each member was under obligation to speak his mind, the more so if he disagreed with a proposed course of action.²⁵ After discussion, however, action required unanimity. If full discussion produced no consensus, the matter was to be tabled, though in practice members sometimes punted and deferred to the chairman when a course of action was not agreed on.

Although members of the council envisioned a future day when the council would become a powerful government of God under Christ, the immediate usefulness of the council was as a forum for advancing a “temporal” or political program of protecting the Church and advancing its interests. It was a suitable forum not only because many of the Church’s leaders were members and played central roles but because it was also composed of a broader group of talented men, some of whom were not otherwise prominent—and several men who were

24. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 18, 1844.

25. At the organizing meeting, March 11, 1844, Joseph Smith said that he did not wish to be surrounded by “dough heads,” and if they did not “exercise themselves in discussing these important matters he should consider them nothing better than ‘dough heads.’” Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 11, 1844.

not Latter-day Saints. After a man was invited to become a member of the council, generally by the standing chairman, admittance required a vote of existing members and a promise by oath to keep the doings of the council secret. All members were required to attend or be formally excused. Alternates could be admitted to temporary membership (as with regular members, by vote and under oath) in the place of those on assignment or otherwise absent for an extended period.

Church leaders, especially the President of the Church and members of the Quorum of the Twelve, took the lead in founding the council and throughout its existence. One could see it as a council dominated by Church leaders—but one that at the same time had nothing to do with Church matters such as proselytizing, ordinances, temple, or ecclesiastical governance. On April 18, 1844, the council discussed how council and Church related. In lengthy discussion, members expressed many views. Joseph Smith then summarized:

There is a distinction between the Church of God and the kingdom of God. The laws of the kingdom are not designed to effect our salvation hereafter. It is an entire, distinct and separate government. The church is a spiritual matter and a spiritual kingdom; but the kingdom which Daniel saw was not a spiritual kingdom, but was designed to be got up for the safety and salvation of the saints by protecting them in their religious rights and worship. . . . The literal kingdom of God and the church of God are two distinct things. The gifts of prophets, evangelists, etc. never were designed to govern men in civil matters. The kingdom of God has nothing to do with giving commandments. . . . It only has power to make a man amenable to his fellow man.²⁶

Although some have seen this council as a separate or even superior center of “Church” or “priesthood” authority, there is no hint of that in the record. The organization was involved only in the temporal or political or practical program of protecting the Church and providing space for it to flourish; it focused on the “temporal” or political or external program of interfacing between the Church (and its leaders) and the larger world. There is in the record no discussion of or exercise of priesthood keys, no ordinations, no ordinances, and no explanation of temple teachings or other Church doctrine.

The program of the council might be described in terms of its short-term practical projects, its overarching long-term goal, and its millennial aspirations. The practical program of the council during Smith’s lifetime was straightforward. Those initiatives, some of which began

26. Council of Fifty, Minutes, April 18, 1844.

before the council was organized and were brought into the council, included managing Joseph Smith's presidential campaign, uniting the western Indians, and petitioning Washington for authority to protect emigrants to the West. Even as they faced immediate exigencies, the council and its members remained committed to the longer-range project of establishing a new home for the Saints outside the boundaries of the United States where they might have a government of their own that would protect their rights and those of any who chose to join them. As Heber C. Kimball said to the council in March 1845, "I feel as though there was something deficient all the time when I reflect that we have not yet sent out men to find a location where we can erect the standard of liberty. When we get that done the nations will flock to it and many of us will live to see it."²⁷

The organization of the council and some of the discussion within it also hint of its millennial aspirations: that it was seen as a pattern or model of how government might function under the King of Kings when Christ would return to reign. That vision was one reason for having non-Latter-day Saints in the council. Members of the council saw themselves as modeling a form of government suitable for a theocracy—or theodemocracy—under Christ. During his millennial reign, Christ would rule over all the earth, and those not members of his church would also have representation. (See the April 11, 1844, minutes, in this issue, for more on non-Mormons in the council.) Another form of millennialism sometimes surfaced in council discussions. At such times, the practical and the millennial tended to merge: If God so willed, perhaps Christ's reign could begin now—or at least soon—instead of in some far distant time. God will eventually intervene . . . why not now?

Some documents mentioning these long-unavailable records have hinted about "hundreds of pages" of minutes, implying that they might contain "lost sermons" and perhaps new teachings from Joseph Smith. As we have seen, while there are hundreds of pages in these volumes created by William Clayton, they are very small pages—and the largest portion preserves discussion in meetings of the Council of Fifty in 1845, after Joseph's death. Although the hundreds of pages of the Nauvoo record of the Council of Fifty constitute a substantial volume in the Joseph Smith Papers, the volume does not present hundreds of pages of heretofore unknown information about Joseph Smith and his teachings. However, what the record does contain is significant. The records of the

27. Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1, 1845.

Kingdom of God or Council of Fifty are valuable not because they open up a world we knew nothing of, but because:

- They preserve additional teachings and statements of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young on government and related topics,
- They allow us to go behind policies to the discussions that preceded them,
- They provide context for actions and decisions that we did not fully understand,
- They provide reactions to and commentary on events as they unfolded,
- They convey the intensity of feelings about the injustices the council members and their co-religionists had suffered.

Those who read the minutes will find them profitable and instructive as they learn things they did not know before. And the availability of these minutes allows the Joseph Smith Papers Project to deliver on our long-term commitment to provide, either in print or on the web, *all* of the extant papers of Joseph Smith.

The Document

The documentary transcript and annotations on the following pages are excerpted from *The Joseph Smith Papers, Administrative Records: Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*. These sample pages offer a complete transcription of the afternoon session of the April 11, 1844, meeting. This sample includes not only an extended statement but perhaps the most powerful statement of Joseph Smith on a topic he felt passionate about: the inalienable right of every woman and man to voluntarily choose “his God, and what he pleases for his religion.” It is the first law of all that is sacred, said Smith to the council, to protect “those grand and sublime principles of equal rights and universal freedom to all men.”

Ronald K. Esplin is a general editor of the Joseph Smith Papers. He served as the project’s managing editor until 2012. He received degrees in history from the University of Utah, the University of Virginia, and Brigham Young University. Most of his publications have involved Brigham Young and early Utah or pre-Utah Mormon history, including *Men with a Mission: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles, 1837–1841*. Many of them also concern Joseph Smith and early Latter-day Saint leadership.

This paper is adapted from a presentation given June 6, 2014, in San Antonio, Texas, at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association.