



2017

## Eighth Witness: The Biography of John Whitmer

Kyle R. Walker  
*BYU-Idaho*

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



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

---

### Recommended Citation

Walker, Kyle R. (2017) "Eighth Witness: The Biography of John Whitmer," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 56 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss2/11>

This Book Review 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](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

Ronald E. Romig. *Eighth Witness:  
The Biography of John Whitmer*.  
Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2014.

*Reviewed by Kyle R. Walker*

Ronald E. Romig is the former archivist for the Community of Christ, and past president of the Mormon History Association and the John Whitmer Historical Association. He has recently been appointed one of three world church historians for the Community of Christ. He is the editor of a brief series of illustrated documentary histories, including *Emma's Nauvoo* and *Martin Harris's Kirtland*.

As the Whitmers were one of the three most prominent families in early Mormon history (the others being the Smiths and the extended Knight clan), a volume about their family is long overdue. Some readers initially might wonder why Romig did not focus on John Whitmer's better-known younger brother, David, but that thought is quickly put to rest as Romig documents early on in the volume the vast contributions John made to early Mormonism. During the earliest years from 1828 to 1833, John acted as a scribe for both the Book of Mormon and Bible translations and served as one of the eight witnesses of the Book of Mormon plates. John was designated an elder, an apostle (prior to the more formal Quorum of Twelve being established), and labored as one of the most trusted confidants of Joseph Smith. Following the mission to the Lamanites and the success in Kirtland, Ohio, it was John who was sent to provide important leadership to those early converts prior to Joseph Smith's arrival.

Perhaps John's most important and notorious role came with his appointment as Church historian on March 8, 1831. Although John was initially reluctant to accept such an assignment, recording in his history that he "would rather not do it" (122), he accepted the responsibility and produced one of the earliest, albeit sparse, historical records of Church events. Romig does a good job of documenting the importance and provenance of the history, as well as some criticism surrounding the

volume—recounting how John’s interpretation of the Saints’ experience in Missouri, which made up the final chapters of his history, was written after those events and was colored by the fact that he was expelled from the Church in 1838. His signature upon the preaching licenses of missionaries and at the conclusion of the minutes of early Church meetings confirms his contributions during these early years. Later, John served as a member of the Church’s literary firm and edited the Church’s newspaper *Messenger and Advocate*. Romig also notes that John perceived his role as Church historian as more expansive than simply keeping a history of early Church meetings, but that it extended to scribal duties in preparing Joseph Smith’s revelations for publication as the Book of Commandments, as well as the proposed publication of Joseph’s Bible translation.

Romig does an excellent job of documenting what is known about the extended Whitmer family, including limited but important information on the Whitmers’ German heritage. He also recounts the clannish nature of the family and how they remained supportive and in close proximity to one another throughout their lives, especially after they migrated to Missouri. Many rich sources regarding Oliver Cowdery and Hiram Page, both of whom married Whitmer sisters, are cited throughout the book, along with extensive research on David Whitmer’s life and movements during and after his affiliation with Mormonism. In a sense, this volume is a two-for-one; the history of David’s life parallels that of his brother John, and Romig included much of David’s history throughout the book. Romig also includes a brief summary of David’s “Whitmerite” church, which he established toward the end of his life but which never really expanded much beyond the extended family.

While Romig recounts known reasons why the Whitmers ultimately broke with Mormonism in 1838 (including not wanting to be governed in financial matters and a desire to return to a more primitive form of Mormonism), I was left wanting to know more about what led to the greater Whitmer family separating themselves from Joseph Smith and the main body of the Saints. The abrupt transition from admiring loyalty to disillusionment with Joseph Smith seemed too sudden of a break, which raised in my mind too many unanswered questions. Most of what was documented came from much later sources, which were insightful, but still felt like an insufficient explanation about what led to their ultimate separation. Part of that may be due to the lack of contemporary sources available during the turbulent Missouri period of Church history.

Interestingly, Romig does recount how the Whitmer clan, unlike many others who left the Church during this time, did not participate in persecuting or driving the Saints from the state. For example, though ordered to participate with the state militia at one point during the crisis, David Whitmer recounted that he refused to take a gun and later recorded that “God knows that I did not encourage the militia in the least to persecute the Saints” (368). John would not engage in persecution, though he did testify before the law in Richmond, the substance of which did not necessarily reflect favorably on Joseph (371–73).

John was one of the few remaining Saints who resided in Far West, Missouri, after the Mormons were driven from the state in the winter of 1838–39. He ultimately accumulated great wealth, built a large two-story home, and farmed hundreds of acres in the isolated community. Romig cites several little-known accounts about the appearance of Far West in the decades after the Saints were driven from the state. John and David remained close, despite living thirty miles apart in later life. David, who removed to Richmond, Missouri, similarly found success as a freighter and livery stable operator, and both men were greatly respected in the communities where they resided. The author documents a number of accounts in which both John and David were questioned about their views of early Mormonism during their final years, recounting how both brothers repeatedly confirmed their respective testimonies as contained in the Book of Mormon.

There were places in the text where I felt the author relied too heavily upon secondary sources, including frequently citing the *LDS History of the Church*, which has largely been supplanted by the *Joseph Smith Papers* volumes; but in other sections of the book, Romig brings to light previously unknown primary sources that were helpful in reconstructing the Whitmer story. The book is supplemented with many photographs, including many never-before-seen photos housed in the Community of Christ Archives, as well as photographs of documents that greatly contribute to the value of the book. An interesting chapter at the end of the volume, entitled the “The Whitmer Documents and Artifacts,” traces the provenance of John’s history, several family seer stones (including photographs), and the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Several maps throughout the book, along with a Whitmer genealogy chart, were also helpful in understanding family relationships and the movements and location of the extended Whitmer family properties. Romig also adds nearly a hundred pages of text in

twenty-five appendices—some of which seemed appropriate, while others seemed somewhat superfluous.

Romig has completed an important study on the extended Whitmer family and has done an admirable job in bringing together in one volume their intersection with Mormonism among multiple generations, as well recounting the family's essential contributions to the building up of early Mormonism.

---

Kyle R. Walker received his PhD in marriage and family therapy from Brigham Young University and is the author of several books on Mormon history, including *William Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet* (Draper, Utah: Kofford Books, 2015). He currently serves as a faculty member in the counseling center at BYU–Idaho.