

The Refractory Abner Cole

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One Sunday afternoon during the winter of 1829–30, E. B. Grandin’s print shop in the village of Palmyra, New York, played host to a singular confrontation involving Hyrum Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and one Abner Cole.¹ That Hyrum and Oliver would even be at Grandin’s on a Sunday was unusual; the “bargain” that Joseph Smith had made with Grandin to print the Book of Mormon—then at press at the print shop—expressly denied the Smiths access to the press on Sunday, and religious strictures seem to have generally kept them at home anyway on the Sabbath.² On this particular Sunday, however, Hyrum had experienced some “peculiar feelings” that “led him to believe that something was going wrong” at the print shop. After expressing his concern to Oliver and debating “some time” with him over the propriety of going into town on the Sabbath, Hyrum forced the issue by telling Oliver he would “not suffer such uneasiness any longer without knowing the cause” and that he, at least, was going. His insistence carried the argument, and the two young men set off for the shop.³

Arriving at Grandin’s, Hyrum and Oliver were surprised to see “an individual by the name of Cole, an ex-justice of the peace,” hard at work printing a weekly paper, the title of which, according to Lucy Mack Smith, was *Dogberry Paper on Winter Hill*. Neither Hyrum nor Oliver was aware of the paper’s existence, as Cole had reportedly distributed the “six or eight numbers” he had already published “ten or twenty miles into the country” to keep them out of the Smiths’ sight. After exchanging some strained pleasantries with Cole and learning that the older man rented the press from Grandin on evenings and Sundays, Hyrum noticed that in the paper’s prospectus Cole had “agreed with his subscribers to publish one form of ‘Joe Smith’s Gold Bible’ each week, and thereby furnish them with the principal portion of the book.” Looking further, Hyrum and Oliver apparently found where Cole had already “thrown together a parcel of the most vulgar, disgusting prose, and the meanest, and most low-lived doggrel, in juxtaposition with a portion of the Book of Mormon, which he had pilfered.” Shocked at his discovery, Hyrum asked Cole what right he had to “print the Book of Mormon in this manner” and reminded the editor that Joseph had secured a copyright for the book.⁴ Cole retorted that he had “hired the press” and would “print what I please, so help yourself.” Finding that nothing they said could “dissuade [Cole] from his purpose,” Hyrum and Oliver “left him to issue his paper, as he had hitherto done,” and returned to the Smith farmhouse. In consultation with Joseph Sr., they decided that Joseph himself, then living over 120 miles away in Harmony, Pennsylvania, should be notified of Cole’s activities.⁵

Joseph Sr. made the trip, reportedly arriving back in Manchester with the Prophet the following Sunday.⁶ The day on which they returned was “one of the most blustering cold and disagreeable that I ever experienced,” remembered Lucy, and father and son, having “breasted the storm all day long,” were “nearly stiffened with the cold” by the time they made it home. Following a short rest at the farmhouse, Joseph took advantage of his timely arrival and proceeded alone to Grandin’s, where he found Cole engaged in his usual Sunday activities. After “good naturedly” saluting the printer and examining his paper, Joseph reminded Cole of the copyright and insisted that he stop “meddling” with the Book of Mormon.⁷ At this, Cole reportedly “threw off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and came towards Joseph, smacking his fists together with vengeance” and challenged the Prophet to a fight. Remaining calm and trying to defuse the situation, Joseph simply smiled at the display, refused the challenge, and suggested—given the wintry season—that the enraged man keep his coat on. Following another frenzied outburst, Joseph again reminded Cole of the copyright and the legal avenues he, as copyright holder, could pursue that would serve his purposes far better than a brawl. No doubt impressed with the weakness of his position and

Joseph's relaxed demeanor, Cole finally calmed down and "concluded to submit to an arbitration." When the arbitration "decided that he should stop his proceedings forthwith," Cole abandoned his designs and, according to Lucy Smith, "made us no further trouble."⁸

Lucy's report notwithstanding, Cole continued to take a lively interest in the Prophet, his followers, and the Book of Mormon. This interest manifested itself in a variety of editorial comments and articles in his paper, ranging from "the lowest and most contemptible doggerel that ever was imposed upon any community" to well-reasoned arguments against the legitimacy of the Book of Mormon and the new religion.⁹ Except for a few noticeable gaps, Cole's withering remarks and satire on Joseph and the Book of Mormon were a regular feature in his paper—a paper printed, ironically, on the same press on which the Book of Mormon was printed. Long considered little more than a sidelight to the printing of the Book of Mormon, Cole's piracy of the text and his interest in the early church have caught the attention of several historians.¹⁰ The newspaperman's personal background and the tactics he employed to discredit Joseph and the Book of Mormon have received the most emphasis, although several questions about these two topics remain unanswered. Unresolved, too, are the timing of his purloining of the text and his motives for defaming the Prophet and his work. This paper examines these issues in an effort to shed additional light on one of Mormonism's earliest, most vocal, and most caustic critics.

Cole's Background

We have no record of Cole's date and place of birth, although later census records indicate that it must have been sometime between 2 June 1780 and 6 August 1784 and was most likely not in New York.¹¹ His father, Southworth Cole, first appears in the New York census in 1810, as a resident of Canandaigua.¹² Southworth's was a large family; besides his wife, six children—ranging in age from under ten to twenty-five—shared the elder Cole's home that year. By this time Abner was on his own, appearing in the same census as a resident of Geneva. No other persons were living with him, suggesting that he was not married at the time. Sometime over the next four years he left Geneva for Palmyra, and by 1815 he had married, his wife apparently bringing three children from a previous marriage with her into the union. By 1820 Cole had three sons and a daughter of his own and by 1830 had added one more of each to his quiver.¹³ To support his young and growing family, Cole worked as a lawyer of sorts during the week and, beginning in the fall of 1829, as editor and publisher of the *Reflector* under the pseudonym "Obadiah Dogberry, Jun."¹⁴

As brash and impulsive as Cole was with Hyrum and Joseph, it would be wrong to conclude that he was little more than the village hothead. Cole served as a justice of the peace in Palmyra from April 1814 to April 1815 and as one of thirty-two overseers of highways from April 1816 to April 1817.¹⁵ Although of limited jurisdiction, these elected positions were important in the life of any small town of the time and indicate that a fair number of Palmyra residents found Cole both competent and likeable—at least early in his career in the town. In 1818, however, shortly after being elected as a village constable, the town meeting voted to "reconsider the vote electing Abner Cole as constable" and subsequently replaced him.¹⁶ A brief character sketch of Cole—composed, it turns out, by himself¹⁷—that appeared in Grandin's *Wayne Sentinel* years later as part of a versified tribute to various newspapermen in the area gives some possible clues as to why some might have objected to his serving as a lawman, at the same time suggesting that Joseph's antagonist was not a man to trifle with:

Now last, not least, [wrote Cole of himself] my muse would name *Old Obadiah*, and his fame. Eccentric quite,—and full of fun,— Sad stories tells of wrong that's done— Flogs *fop* or *fool* where'er they'r found, And single-handed stands his ground— And with his pen discourses knowledge, The same as tho' he'd been to *College*.¹⁸

Cole's willingness and ability to "stand his ground" hints at an argumentative, even combative, streak in the *Reflector's* editor. Lucy's account of his rough treatment of Joseph bears this out, as does the "unpleasant sparring" Grandin witnessed later between Cole and another Palmyra resident at a "charity meeting" one evening. Cole badgered his opponent until the enraged man "was in his cups," recorded Grandin.¹⁹ Unable to restore order, the chairman of the meeting resigned on the spot. The tiff would have broken up the meeting except that the chairman's hastily appointed replacement was apparently able to bring the argument to a close.²⁰

Not all his differences with others ended so easily. During the summer of 1814, for example, Cole filed formal charges against at least two people in separate incidents, one of which involved damages amounting to \$800.²¹ In June 1818, the tables were turned when certain merchants in Palmyra sued Cole for \$150 he owed them for "goods wares & merchandize" that he "hitherto wholly refused and still refuses [to pay]," while one Gershom Gillet sued Cole the following year for the \$600 he owed him.²² The list goes on and on; in the Common Pleas of the May 1821 court term alone, Cole appears as a defendant in three of the thirty-one cases.²³ Most of these and the other suits of which we have record appear to involve unpaid debts, although in July 1818 Cole brought suit against one Levi Jackson for assault and battery—after which Jackson charged Cole with defamation of character.²⁴

Given Cole's public service and outspoken nature, it seems likely that he and Joseph had crossed paths long before they met in Grandin's shop. Indeed, their acquaintance probably went back over a dozen years, when both families lived on west Main Street following the Smiths' move to Palmyra about 1816.²⁵ Joseph would have been a boy of ten at the time and Cole, an overseer of highways, in his early to mid-thirties. Even though they were neighbors, points of contact between the two would have been limited at this time because of the difference in their ages; however, they doubtless would have known one another. Further contact would have been even more limited following the Smiths' move to their farm some two years later, but the family's regular visits to town on business or holidays over the ensuing years would have brought them into closer proximity numerous times. Lucy's account also suggests that the two of them were well acquainted; she represents Joseph and Cole—as well as Hyrum and Cole—as recognizing and saluting each other by name in Grandin's shop, without introductions.²⁶

Much about Cole's background remains obscure. It is clear from what information we do have, however, that by the winter of 1829–30 he would have been a formidable foe for young Joseph. By that time Cole was well known and well established in the community—if a little odd, apparently—and he was twice as old as Joseph. He was also witty and determined, and doubtless privy to some of Joseph's less-than-stellar moments as a youth. Long before his showdown with Joseph in Grandin's shop, Cole had surely already laid claim to whatever psychological high ground might emerge in a battle between the two.

Cole's Motives

A crossed-out sentence in Lucy's 1845 manuscript suggests that Cole had started his paper to offset his personal financial reverses, which had left him destitute of money and property by the autumn of 1829.²⁷ No records about Cole's personal finances confirming or contradicting the charge have come to light, but it is clear that his paper selling for one dollar, "payable in advance," for a four-month subscription²⁸ was a financial success. Precisely how many subscriptions Cole collected over the seventeen months the paper ran is unknown, but from the correspondence Cole printed in the paper's pages we know that people in Newark, Geneva, Canandaigua, Macedon, Manchester, Rochester, and even Syracuse, sixty miles east of Palmyra, were subscribing to the *Reflector*, suggesting a circulation of no mean proportions. At the close of the first series, Cole noted that the paper had "been sought for and read with avidity" and that its success had "exceeded our most sanguine expectations."²⁹ Four months later Cole could again write that "the liberal encouragement our paper has heretofore received, has induced us to offer another SERIES to the public."³⁰

The sales continued, and by 13 September 1830 Cole was bubbling that his paper, “unaided by missionary influence, has *crept* into very general circulation; so much so, that in all cases our *whole impression* has been disposed of at or before the expiration of each series.”³¹ Encouraged by the “liberal patronage” of his readers,³² Cole published a fourth and final series between October 1830 and March 1831 before moving to Rochester.

Just how crucial an item Cole’s running commentary on Joseph and the Book of Mormon was to the paper’s popularity is difficult to say. Probably few people, if any, subscribed to his paper solely for his coverage of these topics, but Cole’s geographical proximity to the scene of events certainly would have been a selling point for those interested in following the young prophet’s career. Indeed, considering the notoriety Joseph and the Gold Bible had already garnered by 1829, anything that anybody could say about the Prophet and his work—especially anything seemingly authoritative and also derogatory—was automatically good copy. Cole’s location and biting wit ensured that his treatment of Joseph was both, and he piqued enough readers’ interest that many actually began requesting more coverage of the Gold Bible question. Cole obliged by publishing the extracts from the Book of Mormon that so alarmed Hyrum and Oliver, placing the blame for his breach of the law on the “solicitation of many of our readers,” whose “excited ... curiosity” on the subject would not be satisfied “for some months to come” unless he gave them a sneak preview.³³ Cole’s coverage of Joseph was obviously a very popular feature of his paper and would have added materially to its success. We cannot quantify this popularity or determine its effect on Cole’s income, but the lengths to which the newspaperman was willing to go to satisfy his subscribers’ curiosity about the Book of Mormon suggest that these factors were substantial and that pecuniary concerns were at least partially responsible for Cole’s interest in the Prophet’s activities.

As real and important as the bottom line must have been for a man supporting a large family, Cole was motivated in his pursuit of Joseph by other considerations as well. A skeptic and a cynic of the first order, Cole was one of dozens of newspaper editors throughout the country who had taken upon themselves the task of policing society at large. These so-called “freethought presses” were a regular feature of the American newspaper landscape between 1825 and 1850, having emerged as a reaction to the religious excesses and emotionalism of the day.³⁴ Grounding themselves in the rationalism of the Enlightenment, editors like Cole scorned and ridiculed any perceived manifestation of unbridled ministerial authority or mindless acquiescence to the same, especially when it threatened to influence civil or secular affairs. Such influence need not be overt or demonstrable to catch their attention and unleash a barrage of commentary; any decision made in haste or reflective of religious values was suspect. Perceived hypocrisy, bigotry, and fanaticism in both religion and politics were duly exposed and ridiculed as well. Not necessarily nonreligious themselves, freethought editors were simply ultrasensitive to the separation that should exist between church and state and were critical of anything that seemed to elevate religious mores or blind emotionalism above reason and empiricism.

Cole and the *Reflector* fit the mold perfectly. Heading each issue of his paper with Alexander Pope’s well-known injunction, “Know then thyself, presume not God to scan! The proper study of Mankind is Man,” Cole filled its pages with a running commentary on the events and personalities of the day. His position and purposes were clear. Finding “most of our public journals” to be little more than “engines of party” and “supple tools of faction, whereby truth is often sacrificed at the shrine of some political Idol,” Cole saw himself “displaying aloft the sacred banner of all-powerful truth, nothing doubting that in the end we shall come off victorious.”

Morality and vital piety we shall always reverence [he wrote], while bigotry, hypocrisy, and fanaticism will receive no quarter [a]t our hands, and we shall ever glory in lifting the veil, tearing off the mantle, and stripping the cloak from the vain pretender, and hold him up to public ridicule.³⁵

Assuring his subscribers that his “labours in the cause of truth” would not be “exclusively confined to the narrow precincts of our own flourishing village,” Cole “cordially invite[d] the friends of REFORM in the neighboring VILLAGES to aid us in the cause, ... by giving us early tidings of such passing events as may require our chastening hand.” Noting that “the innocent will have nothing to fear” and that “the cause of the widow and fatherless will claim and receive our peculiar care and attention,” Cole nevertheless warned that he would “at all times, assume the prerogative of taking under our fatherly care and protection, *any* political demagogue, without distinction, who from turpitude, may require chastisement.” While Cole’s primary objective was to ferret out the “many offences against the *well-being* of the community, which, from their undefinable character, are not strictly cognizable in a court of justice,” he also promised to reprint “biographical notices and copious extracts from *rare* history” in the pages of his paper and pledged that the “arts and sciences, together with all useful knowledge, shall receive our feeble aid in their support and promulgation.”³⁶

At a time when the flames from revivals and camp meetings were blurring the already hazy distinction between “vain pretenders” and “political demagogues,” Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon were just two of the era’s perceived vices that the *Reflector*’s editor sought to expose. Others included the various Christian-sponsored reform movements of the time. As one who enjoyed his liquor, for example, Cole was quick to point out the “superstition and bigotry, in company of sordid avarice,” that he saw attending the Temperance movement:

The pulpit may thunder anathemas against the “hydra-headed monster” denominated Intemperance, as if it concentrated all the evils our frail natures are subject to; while on the other hand, the gates of paradise are almost gratuitously opened to all such as shall *piously* give their substance into the “Lord’s treasury,” to be drawn from thence by its agents, who, after *prudently* satisfying their own wants, appropriate the residue to the education of “poor and pious” young men, ... while the *real* poor and needy of our cities and villages perish for lack of sustenance.³⁷

Similarly, the national controversy surrounding Sunday mail delivery attracted Cole’s attention. To the horror of zealous Christian reformers, postal regulations of the time required the United States Post Office to transport and deliver mail seven days a week. By 1828, ministers from around the country were petitioning Congress to change the regulations to a six-day week, with no mail being moved and delivered on Sunday. Opponents of the proposed change argued that to stop the mails on Sunday would be mixing church and state.³⁸ The issue smoldered for several years, during which time Cole had plenty to say against the proposition. The *Reflector*’s 2 January 1830 issue, for example—the same issue in which Cole began printing extracts from the Book of Mormon—took up the controversy at several points. After calling one of the village’s rectors to repentance for “allow[ing] his name to head a ‘*Sunday mail*’” petition, Cole, in a separate article, ridiculed the current rumor that England had stopped mail delivery on Sunday. Later still, he reported on a town meeting that addressed the issue, then quoted extensively from an editorial in Grandin’s *Wayne Sentinel* that pointed out the dangers of confounding church and state on this issue. Cole concluded his attack with a satirical petition to Congress requesting that the mails be stopped on Saturday rather than Sunday, as the “*seventh* day of the week, most *heathenly* called Saturday (from Saturn,) is the true Sabbath, the same that Moses made the rebellious Jews observe and keep as holy time.”³⁹

None was safe from Cole’s attacks. Anti-Masons, outspoken ministers of other religions, political figures of both local and national prominence, other newspapermen—Cole went after them all with alacrity. As one might expect, some took exception to his tactics. Grandin, for example, spent a day in January 1831 trying to calm down one Ovid Lovell, who was upset about a certain *Reflector* article that he felt “*reflected* on his conduct in a certain matter.”⁴⁰ A month later, Cole’s incessant needling had so infuriated Palmyra’s Presbyterians that a group of them

visited Grandin and threatened to withdraw their patronage of his paper if he continued to grant Cole the use of his press. Grandin—himself a target of Cole’s criticism at one point⁴¹—refused to be cowed by their united front and turned them away, but not without learning firsthand about the power Cole’s pen wielded in the community.⁴²

While Cole cast his net wide in his hunt for subjects worthy of censure, religious personalities and issues were clearly his favorite target. Cole pursued this prey beyond the pages of his paper; in February 1831, for example, we find him opening a debate in Palmyra’s “Mechanic’s Institute” on the question, “Is there a Religious Sect in this country, whose Clergy, by their conduct in general, give evidence that they are aiming at the control of our Governmental Institutions?”⁴³ Yet in spite of this unrelenting attack on religion, he himself appears to have been a sincere believer in some sort of divinity.⁴⁴ The apparent contradiction is explained through a careful reading of his editorials, which make it clear that it was not religion per se he was opposed to, but the trappings of the overtly religious culture of the times. In an article unimaginatively entitled “Things I Dislike,” it was the “haughty, proud, arrogant, bigotted, and ignorant *Priest*,” the “sordid, avaricious, hypocrite, in the *guise* of a meek and lowly *christian*,” and the “wretch whose face represents a practical commentary on the book of *lamentations*” who took the heat.⁴⁵ After mocking his own family on Christmas Eve 1829 for “having gone to church ... to show some new clothing just made up in the newest fashion,” Cole put his criticisms to verse:

Religion—What Is It? ‘Tis not to go to church today,
To look devout and *seem* to pray,
And ere the morning sun goes down
Be dealing scandal through the town.
‘Tis not for sects and creeds to fight,
And call our zeal the rule of right,
When all we wish is at the best,
To see our church excel the rest.
Not every sanctimonious face,
Denotes the certain reign of grace;
A phiz that *seems* to scowl at sin,
Oft veils hypocrisy within.
‘Tis not to make our duties walk,
Or of our own good deeds to talk;
And then to practice secret crime,
By purloining our neighbors [dime].⁴⁶

Far from trying to destroy religion, Cole was trying to rescue it from the ministers and methods he felt were corrupting the original simplicity and truth of the biblical message. He was Israel’s defender rather than its assailant—in his words, the “young and humble shepherd of Israel” who would “combat most manfully, not only the champion but the whole host of the uncircumcised.”⁴⁷ Cole represented the battle in which he had engaged as a desperate one, and his disingenuous references to his own “imperfections,” the “many disadvantages” he labored under, and the “countless myriads” of the enemy served to strengthen the identification he wanted to make between himself and the faith’s historic champions.⁴⁸

Cole’s unflattering pseudonym, Obadiah Dogberry, served to strengthen this identification as well. The Obadiah after whom Cole named himself was doubtless the ancient prophet Obadiah, author of the shortest and perhaps one of the least known books in the Old Testament. Cole’s Dogberry could only have been the constable Dogberry in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*. Given Obadiah’s obscurity and the brevity of his message, one might think this prophet an unlikely mascot for someone who viewed himself as Israel’s champion. Cole, however, trying to pass himself off as the “young and humble,” come-from-behind hero, probably found the Prophet’s obscurity gratifying and his message of woe (albeit brief) to Israel’s destroyers relevant to his own cause. Cole would have appreciated Shakespeare’s Dogberry for similar reasons. Arguably a relatively minor figure in the play—he does not appear until the third act and is on the stage only four times—the unflashy constable, simple-minded to the point of buffoonery, nevertheless displays a profound reverence for virtue, justice, and deity, and his apprehension of the two “false knaves,” Borachio and Conrade, is an important turning point in the story.⁴⁹

In light of Cole's religious views, the editorial slant of his paper, and his own perceived role as a social critic, it becomes obvious that Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon would have been prime targets for his pen. A young, uneducated farmer's son claiming to have been visited by angels; a new book of scripture with allegedly miraculous origins; a community divided over the legitimacy of the supposed prophet's claims; a disconcertingly large and growing number of zealous followers—for one as jaundiced and suspicious as Cole, everything about the new movement would have smacked of the ignorance, emotionalism, and extremism he found so objectionable. Popping up under his very nose, the whole thing was too juicy a morsel for someone with his appetite to overlook.

Dating the Confrontations

Cole began laying the groundwork for a confrontation with Joseph Smith in the first edition of his paper, where he announced that "The Gold Bible, by Joseph Smith Junior, author and proprietor, is now in press and will shortly appear. Priestcraft is short lived!"⁵⁰ Cole fired several more shots of like character at Joseph over the course of September and early October, then said nothing of the young prophet or the Nephite record until 9 December. On that date, he announced to his patrons that he had "concluded to commence publishing *extracts* from [the Book of Mormon] on or before the commencement of the second series of his paper," scheduled to begin later that month.⁵¹ For some reason Cole was unable to keep to his time line; nothing appeared in the 16 December issue, and all he could do in the first number of the second series was take another potshot at Joseph ("'Bard of Visions' *rejected*," he wrote) and promise "'Gold Bible' next week."⁵² Everything came together for him eleven days later, however, and on the first page of the second number of the new series, bearing the date of 2 January 1830, Cole published 1Nephi 1:1–2:3.⁵³ Cole picked up where he had left off in the next number of the series, publishing 1Nephi 2:4–15 on 13 January—again, on the first page—and concluded his three-part piracy of Joseph's translation on 22 January, when he published Alma 43:22–40 on the third and fourth pages of the paper.

In her account of the whole affair, Lucy made no attempt to date Hyrum and Oliver's discovery of Cole's escapades or his later confrontation with Joseph. She provided some possible clues about these dates when she reported that Hyrum and Oliver came across Cole only after he "had already issued six or eight numbers," but her approximations do little good in this regard, as the eighth number of the *Reflector* rolled off Grandin's press 21 October 1829, more than two months before Cole began publishing the extracts.⁵⁴ More helpful in dating these events is the first sentence of a letter from Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith—living in Harmony, Pennsylvania, at the time—dated 28 December 1829. Oliver opened his letter apologetically, telling Joseph, "It may seem supefluous for me to write as Father [Joseph Sr.] is going directly to your country."⁵⁵ This imminent journey of Joseph Sr. to Harmony was almost certainly the trip he took for the express purpose of informing Joseph of Cole's illegal proceedings in the print shop.⁵⁶ Significantly, the day Oliver wrote the letter, 28 December, was a Monday. As we know that Joseph Sr. set out for Harmony "as soon as possible" after hearing about Cole, it is quite likely that the Sunday on which Oliver and Hyrum had discovered Cole in the print shop was the day before Oliver wrote the letter mentioning Joseph Sr.'s imminent departure—that is, Sunday, 27 December.⁵⁷ At this point no extracts had been published, but Cole certainly would have been well on his way to having the type set for the first extract from 1Nephi, which appeared in print just a few days later.

The 1853 version of Lucy's account represents Joseph Sr. returning from Harmony with Joseph Jr. "the ensuing Sunday," or, by the above calculations, 3 January 1830.⁵⁸ This would have required Joseph Sr. to make the 240-odd-mile round-trip between Manchester and the Prophet's home near Harmony in six days at most—no small feat, considering the time of year. As difficult as such a journey may sound, there is no reason to question Lucy's memory here. A later reference by Lucy to the expense incurred from making trips to Harmony this winter⁵⁹ suggests that Joseph Sr. made the journey by stage, most of which averaged about sixty miles per day at the time through regular and frequent substitutions of horses. Lucy also recorded that shortly after Joseph returned to Harmony, the family was "again compelled to send for" him to quiet fears about how printing costs for the Book of

Mormon would be paid.⁶⁰ From a contract the Prophet signed with Martin Harris to this end, we know that Joseph was back in Manchester on 16 January 1830—an unlikely, if not impossible, event had his confrontation with Cole happened much later than 3 January.⁶¹

If Joseph confronted Cole on 3 January, one may wonder how it was, then, that Cole went on to publish two more excerpts from the Book of Mormon over the course of the next three weeks. A careful reading of Lucy’s record, however, discloses the fact that Cole did not agree in the print shop to stop violating Joseph’s copyright but merely to “submit to an arbitration”—that is, have a third party review the affair and determine the legality or illegality of his printing the extracts.⁶² Organizing and conducting this review would have taken some time, of course, and probably accounts for Cole’s publication of two more extracts before he was forced to stop.⁶³

A likely timetable for the events surrounding Cole’s purloining of the Book of Mormon text, based on the above analysis of available information, might be this: Oliver and Hyrum found Cole in the print shop Sunday, 27 December 1829, as Cole was preparing the first extract for publication. Joseph Sr. left Manchester within the next couple of days, shortly after Oliver penned a short letter to the Prophet on Monday, 28 December. While Joseph Sr. was away, the first extracts were published on 2 January 1830. Father and son arrived back in Manchester on Sunday, 3 January; later that evening, after a brief rest, Joseph Jr. made his way to the print shop and confronted the belligerent Cole, who was preparing the second Book of Mormon extract for publication. Cole agreed to submit the matter to a third party for review, but that did not prevent him from publishing this second extract ten days later, 13 January. Joseph, in the meantime, had returned to Harmony, only to be summoned again to the Palmyra area—he was definitely there on 16 January—to quell fears about paying for the publication of the Book of Mormon. Cole was able to get one more extract out (22 January) before the third party decided in Joseph’s favor and ended the newspaperman’s mad career with the Book of Mormon text.

Cole’s Subsequent Activities: A Brief Overview

Cole said nothing in his paper about his failed bid to put a substantial portion of the Book of Mormon into his subscribers’ hands. Nor, for more than a month, did he even mention Joseph Smith or the Nephite record. When he finally did reintroduce the subject on 27 February 1830, it was only to compare the difficulty he had encountered in deciphering one of his correspondent’s handwriting with the challenge it must have been for “the inspired man who wrote the ‘Gold Bible’ on ‘plates of brass’” to translate from “the ‘reformed Egyptian’ language.”⁶⁴ The silence resumed until 16 March, when Cole excoriated one Luther Howard, who had requested that Cole remove his name from his list of subscribers, for “profess[ing], *ostentatiously*, to belong to a Calvinistic church—where himself and family display a fine profusion of clothing—while he *privately* advocates the ‘Gold Bible.’”⁶⁵ Over the next several months, Cole continued this policy of going after Joseph’s associates rather than Joseph himself, directing a barrage of withering criticism and satirical remarks between 19 April and 22 June at Hyrum Smith; an unidentified “honest Attorney” who had cast his lot in with Joseph; Oliver Cowdery; “one of **Jo’s greatest** apostles” (unnamed); an unidentified Book of Mormon witness; and another “apostle.”⁶⁶ Cole’s purpose during these months, as he explained later, was to “expose the hypocrisy and cant of [the Book of Mormon’s] pretended apostles” rather than to go after Joseph or the Book of Mormon itself, the latter being so obviously a “gross and bungling imposition” that it was hardly worthy of notice.⁶⁷

When he heard of Joseph’s success in casting an evil spirit out of Newel Knight in Colesville, however, Cole was unable to refrain from leveling a vicious personal attack on the Prophet himself. Implicitly identifying the Prophet with the “thread-bare juggler and fortune-teller” of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*,⁶⁸ the *Reflector’s* editor devoted an entire column of his paper to “that *spindle shanked* ignoramus **Jo Smith**.”

This fellow appears to possess the *quint essence* of impudence [wrote Cole], while his fellow laborers are not far behind him in this particular—they go from place to place disturbing in a greater or less degree, the

peace of the community—denouncing dire damnation on such as may withhold their approbation from one of the most ridiculous impostures, ever promulgated.

Cole closed the piece with a satirical recital of the events in Colesville, the account of which he had evidently received from Martin Harris.⁶⁹

Shortly before his attack on Joseph, Cole had introduced another tactic for poking fun at the Prophet and the young church. This consisted of composing his own book of “scripture”—“The Book of Pukei,” he called it—which parodied the obviously well-known story of Joseph’s finding and translating the plates, as well as the Book of Mormon’s contents themselves.⁷⁰ “Pukei” ran only two installments,⁷¹ but the idea of scripture-styled parodies appealed to several of Cole’s subscribers, some of whom generated parodies of their own about events in their particular towns and submitted them to Cole for publication. Two of these—the “Book of Daniel” from Lyons (no pun intended, apparently) and the “First Book of John” from Syracuse—made brief allusions to Joseph Smith before focusing on more immediate concerns, although at one point “Daniel’s” author directed his remarks specifically to “ye of the ‘*precious knowledge of Mormon*.’”⁷² The oblique attacks against the Book of Mormon and Joseph’s supporters continued during this time as well, with Cole duly noting everything from alleged spouse abuse to alleged tax fraud among members of the church.⁷³

Following the church’s success in northeastern Ohio late in 1830, Cole decided it was time to take the Book of Mormon and its believers more seriously. His hand was forced somewhat in this regard by a correspondent from Farmington, who noted with some concern that while “this most clumsy of all impositions, known among us as Joseph Smith’s ‘Gold Bible,’ is beginning to excite curiosity abroad,” no one close to the scene had provided the reading public with any background or explanation of the book. “To you [Abner Cole], and you alone, do we look for an expose of the principal facts, and characters, as [are] connected with this singular business,” wrote the correspondent. “I say singular, because it was hardly to be expected, that a *mummery* like the one in question, should have been gotten up at so late a period, and among a people, *professing* to be enlightened.”⁷⁴

Cole rose to the occasion, promising his readers “to give, ... so far as in us lies, ... a plain and unvarnished statement of facts” that might have anything to do with the “origin, rise, and progress of the book in question.” To place the subject in its proper context, Cole’s plan was to “introduce brief notices and sketches of the superstitions of the ancients”—especially alchemy—and of “ancient impostures” like Muhammad. “Legends, or traditions respecting hidden treasures” and “tales of modern ‘money diggers’” would be appealed to when appropriate, and “other impostors” like the Morristown Ghost, Jemima Wilkinson, and Joanna Southcote would be invoked for comparative purposes. “Our readers will perceive that we have an ample field before us,” the obviously excited Cole concluded. “How well we shall execute our task, time will determine.”⁷⁵

Cole followed his game plan.⁷⁶ Muhammad and Joanna Southcote were taken up in turn,⁷⁷ as were the “*peep stones*” and guardian spirits associated with the “*mania* of money digging” that had swept the region in recent years.⁷⁸ When it came time to introduce Joseph Smith into this witch’s brew of heresy and hearsay, Cole abandoned any effort to be either objective or civil. “We have never been able to learn,” he informed his readers, “that any of the [Smith] family were ever noted for much else than ignorance and stupidity, ... a propensity to superstition[,] and a fondness for every thing *marvelous*.” This included young Joseph, whose “mental powers appear to be extremely limited” and who had “but little expression of countenance, other than that of dulness.”⁷⁹ The idea of an ancient record was not original with this thick-headed youth, charged Cole, but rather was

suggested to his mind through the practices of one “vagabond fortune-teller by the name of Walters,” a “conjurer” whom Joseph and his fellow money-diggers had hired to locate buried treasure for them.⁸⁰ “The better to carry on his own deception,” recounted Cole, Walters read from an old copy of Cicero’s *Orations*, which he would then interpret “as a record of the former inhabitants of America, ... [containing] a particular account of the numerous situations where they had deposited their treasures previous to their final extirpation.”⁸¹ Blatantly borrowing from Walters’s ploy, continued Cole, Joseph had originally intended the Book of Mormon to be an ancient treasure map, giving “an account of the Ancient inhabitants (antideluvians,) of this country, and where they had deposited their sub[s]tance, consisting of costly furniture, &c. at the approach of the great deluge.”⁸² Only later did the idea of turning his mind into the basis of a new religion occur to him, Cole argued, after which the young pretender wrote the Book of Mormon by “promiscuously intermingl[ing]” portions of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.⁸³

At the same time he was unveiling his assessment of the Book of Mormon’s rise and progress, Cole also printed a number of notices and articles from correspondents to the West who were following the activities of Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, and Oliver Cowdery in Ohio and the Indian Territory.⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, these reports painted a less-than-favorable picture of events in the West and the character and activities of those converting to the church. More remarkable than their unflattering observations, however, is the fact that the topic of Mormonism was clearly the single most important feature of Cole’s paper during the spring of 1831. At least one article—either his own or a correspondent’s—on Mormonism appeared in each of the eight issues of the *Reflector* that Cole published between 1 January and 19 March 1831; four of the issues (1 January, 6 January, 1 February, and 9 March) contained two articles apiece, while the 14 February issue carried three. Cole’s ranting about anti-Masonry and Sunday mails took a second seat to this new phenomenon, which bid fair to hold a place of preeminence in his paper for some time to come. Indeed, following his own sixth article on the Book of Mormon—an exposé of the alleged contradictions between the Three Witnesses’ descriptions of the plates—Cole indicated that he had hardly scratched the surface of the Mormon phenomenon and promised his readers much more in the future.⁸⁵

Through all of this, however, and in spite of Cole’s crowing about his paper’s popularity, it appears that a substantial number of his readers had fallen behind on paying their dues. The situation had become critical by March 1831, and in the same issue in which Cole promised more on Mormonism (19 March 1831), he also announced that “the publication of this paper, will be suspended for a short period, for the purpose of enabling our friends and patrons, to send us our dues.” Few, apparently, were able (or, perhaps, wanted) to clear their debt in this regard, and Cole’s anticipated “short period” of suspended publication lengthened into a permanent silence. An entry in Grandin’s diary suggests he was close to getting an issue out the following April but that he apparently got no closer than printing up the proofs.⁸⁶ No later issues of the *Reflector* are known to exist.

By February 1832, Cole had moved to Rochester. There, under the same pseudonym, he continued in the newspaper business, publishing the *Liberal Advocate* between February 1832 and November 1834. Predictably, his editorial slant remained the same. Attacking the Christian establishment took most of his time, as it had in Palmyra, although by early 1832 he had apparently left Mormonism for bigger game. As in Palmyra, Cole eventually found his paper struggling financially in Rochester, as many of his subscribers—themselves struggling to make ends meet in the recession that followed upstate New York’s boom-town economy of the 1820s—failed to pay their dues. After repeated and sometimes vitriolic reminders to his delinquent patrons failed to produce the needed money,

Cole was forced to shut his press down after more than two and a half years of operation.⁸⁷ Yet his subscribers' neglect, it seems, had only hastened what was already in the works; on 13 July 1835, a mere eight months after the *Liberal Advocate* closed its doors, Cole died in Rochester.⁸⁸

Notes

1. Lucy Mack Smith is our sole source of information about the Smiths' confrontation with Cole in Grandin's print shop. Her account was first recorded about 1845 by Martha Jane Coray and is held in the Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter cited as Church Archives), under Lucy Mack Smith, "The History of Lucy Smith, ca. 1845." Following the completion of the original manuscript of Lucy's history in Martha's hand in 1845, church leaders asked her twenty-seven-year-old husband Howard Coray—one-time clerk for Joseph Smith in Nauvoo—to assist her in revising the manuscript for eventual publication. This revision, which included adding material from other sources as well as streamlining Lucy's original narrative, was completed by the end of 1845, at which time it received Lucy's final approval. Eight years later, Orson Pratt published this revised manuscript in England as Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: Richards, 1853). Given Lucy's close involvement with the original 1845 manuscript and the text of the 1853 publication, historians recognize both as primary sources of Lucy's history; accordingly, all quotations from her history used in this paper come from these two sources rather than from later revised editions. For a discussion of the development of the text and these later editions, see Scot F. Proctor and Maurine J. Proctor, eds., *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), xviii–xxix. Both the 1845 manuscript and the 1853 edition have recently been published in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:227–450. While he has made Lucy's record more available than it otherwise would be, Vogel's work suffers from countless transcribing errors and a highly revisionist tone in his notes. The Community of Christ (formerly Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) has republished the 1853 version of Lucy's history several times. For a listing of these editions, see James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whittaker, *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 387. Two recent editions by Latter-day Saint editors not discussed in the preceding book are Proctor and Proctor, *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (cited above) and George A. Smith and Elias Smith, eds., *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2000). The former is a hybrid of earlier versions, with an emphasis on Lucy's 1845 manuscript history; the latter is a reprint of the 1902 edition. Most recently, Lavina F. Anderson has published a critical edition of Lucy's history entitled *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001).

2. Smith, "History," Church Archives.

3. Ibid. The manuscript reads: "led him to believe something going was wrong." Original spellings have been maintained throughout this essay.

4. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 148–49. Joseph had secured the copyright on 11 June 1829. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 1:58–59.

5. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 148–49.

6. Ibid., 149. The 1845 manuscript indicates that the Prophet and his father returned on a Sunday but does not specify that it was the *following* Sunday.

7. Smith, "History," Church Archives.

8. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 149–50.

9. Smith, "History," Church Archives.

10. For discussions of this episode and Abner Cole's further involvement with the Book of Mormon, see Russell R. Rich, "The Dogberry Papers and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10/3 (1970): 315–20; Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:411–14, 2:223–50, 407–8; Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon: Evidence of Divine Power in the "Coming Forth" of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1960), 269–307, 437–38, 440–42; Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon: Attempts to Prove the Book of Mormon Man-Made Analyzed and Answered* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1959), 36–38, 50–56, 64–77; and Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 108–10, 112, 120–24, 140, 143.

11. This range of dates for Cole's birth is derived from the census returns for 1810 and 1830. The 1810 census, conducted 6 August, lists him as a male from twenty-six to under forty-five years of age; the 1830 census, conducted 1 June, lists him as a male from forty to under fifty years of age (microfilm of Population Schedules of the Third Census of the United States, 1810, New York, Ontario County, Palmyra Township [Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1958], and Fifth Census of the United States, 1830, Population Schedules, New York, Wayne County, Palmyra Township [Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1955]).

12. According to Orsamus Turner, Abner's father, Southworth Cole, settled in the Canandaigua area in 1797. O.Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase* (Rochester, N.Y.: Alling, 1852), 186.

13. In view of the incompleteness of these early censuses, my conclusions about the timing of Cole's marriage, his wife and her children, and the children they had together rest on a number of assumptions: first, that he had not been married and divorced by 1810; second, that the three children living in his household in 1820 who were listed as at least ten but under twenty-six years of age were his stepchildren rather than servants or distant relatives; third, that the four additional children living in his household in 1820 who were listed as under ten years of age were his biological children rather than servants or relatives; and fourth, that the two children living in his household in 1830 who were listed as at least five but under ten years of age were also his biological children. At one point in his paper Cole refers to "my children," suggesting that at least some of these assumptions are true; see the *Reflector*, 22 January 1830.

14. Cole spelled the pseudonym Obadiah for the first series but changed the spelling to Obediah in the later series. The first number of the *Reflector* was issued 2 September 1829. Cole had his hand in legal matters at least as late as March 1827, when the *Wayne Sentinel* announced that following "the foreclosure of a mortgage executed by Abner Cole," a certain parcel of land was available for sale. *Wayne Sentinel*, 2 March 1827. Turner also identifies Cole as "an early lawyer of Palmyra." Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement*, 186.

15. "Old Village Records," April 1814 and April 1816, microfilm, Palmyra King's Daughters Free Library, Palmyra, New York. I am indebted to Robert L. Lowe for helping me find this and the following reference.

16. *Ibid.*, April 1818.

17. Egbert B. Grandin, Diary, 1 January 1831, Church Archives.

18. "Address of the Carrier, to the Patrons of the *Wayne Sentinel*," *Wayne Sentinel*, 1 January 1831. In this and all subsequent quotations, emphasized words follow the original source.

19. The phrase *in one's cups* means to be intoxicated. Cole's opponent was apparently almost senseless with anger.

20. Grandin, Diary, 12 March 1831, Church Archives.
21. Common Pleas, 1805–1819, and Common Pleas, 1814, Special Bail, Ontario County Records and Archives Center, Canandaigua, New York.
22. Common Pleas, 1818, 1819, Narratio, Ontario County Records and Archives Center, Canandaigua, New York.
23. Common Pleas, Court Calendars, May 1821, Ontario County Records and Archive Center, Canandaigua, New York.
24. Common Pleas, 1818, Recognizances, and Common Pleas, 1819, Narratio, Ontario County Records and Archives Center, Canandaigua, New York.
25. Don Enders (senior curator, Museum of Church History and Art), personal communication to the author, 10 July 1999.
26. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 148–49.
27. Smith, “History,” Church Archives.
28. *Reflector*, 2 September 1829.
29. *Ibid.*, 16 December 1829.
30. *Ibid.*, 1 May 1830.
31. *Ibid.*, 13 September 1830.
32. *Ibid.*, 4 October 1830.
33. *Ibid.*, 9 December 1829.
34. Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).
35. *Reflector*, 2 September 1829.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. Joseph W. Barnes, “Obediah Dogberry: Rochester Freethinker,” *Rochester History* 36 (July 1974): 5–6.
39. *Reflector*, 2 January 1830.
40. Grandin, Diary, 28 January 1831, Church Archives.
41. Cole referred to Grandin’s *Wayne Sentinel* as a “sort of *milk and water paper*” whose editor (Grandin) was afraid to take a “decided and manly stand” on issues that might jeopardize his popularity with the community; see

Reflector, 2 January 1830.

42. Grandin, Diary, 16 February 1831, Church Archives.

43. *Ibid.*, 14 February 1831.

44. With his Enlightenment orientation, Cole probably would have considered himself a Deist rather than a Christian.

45. *Reflector*, 22 January 1830.

46. *Ibid.*, 2 January 1830.

47. *Ibid.*, 2 September 1829.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Much Ado about Nothing*, 4.2.22.

50. *Reflector*, 2 September 1829.

51. *Ibid.*, 9 December 1829.

52. *Ibid.*, 22 December 1829.

53. This and subsequent scriptural references refer to the verses as they appear in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon.

54. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 149.

55. Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, 28 December 1829, Joseph Smith Collection, retained copy in Joseph Smith Letter Book 1:4–5, Church Archives.

56. The Smiths sent to Harmony for Joseph two times during the winter of 1829–30—once in connection with Abner Cole and again in connection with concerns over how Joseph would pay for the printing costs of the Book of Mormon. The latter took place toward the middle of January 1830 (see text) rather than at the end of December. That, and the temporal proximity of the trip to Harmony mentioned in Oliver’s 28 December letter and the appearance of the Book of Mormon extracts in the *Reflector* (beginning 2 January), argues for a connection between this late December trip and the problem with Cole.

57. Smith, “History,” Church Archives. Vogel has arrived at this same conclusion about the dates, although he fails to address the complexity of the issue; see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:414 n. 238.

58. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 149.

59. *Ibid.*, 151.

60. *Ibid.*, 150–51.

61. See "Agreement between Joseph Smith and Martin Harris," in *Witness of the Second Elder: The Documentary History of Oliver Cowdery*, ed. Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, 4 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, forthcoming). I am indebted to Anderson and Faulring for directing my attention to this contract.

62. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 150.

63. Vogel suggests that Cole was able to continue publishing extracts for three weeks because Joseph Sr. had been delayed in his departure for Harmony, which pushed the Prophet's arrival in Palmyra back a week or more. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:407–8. No evidence exists for this hypothesized delay, however. A delay of a week or more would also rule out the possibility of Joseph having time to make it back to Harmony before returning again to Manchester by 16 January to enter into the contract with Martin Harris. Who or what comprised this "arbitration" is unknown.

64. *Reflector*, 27 February 1830.

65. *Ibid.*, 16 March 1830. Howard was the binder of the Book of Mormon and the proprietor of the *Anti-Masonic Star* (Grandin, *Diary*, 12 and 14 July 1831, Church Archives), which no doubt angered Cole even more.

66. See *Reflector*, 19 April, 1 May, 1 June, and 22 June 1830.

67. *Reflector*, 13 September 1830.

68. *Comedy of Errors*, 5.1.240.

69. *Reflector*, 30 June 1830.

70. For a discussion of the contents and characters mentioned in "The Book of Pukei," see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:231–37 nn. 20–28.

71. *Reflector*, 12 June and 7 July 1830.

72. *Ibid.*, 27 July, 4 August, and 14 August 1830.

73. *Ibid.*, 7 July and 6 December 1830.

74. *Ibid.*, 6 January 1831.

75. *Ibid.*

76. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 121–24, for an informative review and critique of Cole's analysis.

77. *Reflector*, 18 January and 14 February 1831, respectively.

78. *Ibid.*, 1 February 1831.

79. *Ibid.*

80. For a discussion of who this “Walters” might have been, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:231–33 n. 21.
81. *Reflector*, 28 February 1831.
82. *Ibid.*, 14 February 1831.
83. *Ibid.*, 28 February 1831.
84. See issues for 1 February, 14 February, and 9 March 1831.
85. *Ibid.*, 19 March 1831.
86. Grandin, *Diary*, 23 April 1831, Church Archives.
87. For Cole’s career in Rochester, see Barnes, “Obediah Dogberry,” 1–24.
88. *Wayne Sentinel*, 17 July 1835.