

Was There a Library in Harmony, Pennsylvania?

“[God] gave him power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon.” (D&C 20:8)

In 1982, Erich Robert Paul published an article in *BYU Studies* entitled “Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Library.”¹ Essentially Paul shows that, while Joseph Smith had potential access to a wide range of books there, “it is likely that during the 1820s he simply was not a part of the literary culture.”²

Because Joseph spent little time, however, in the Manchester/Palmyra area from 1825 to 1829 (he moved to Harmony, Pennsylvania, in 1827 when he and Emma married), the logical extension of Paul’s study is to ask the further question, “But was there a library in Harmony, Pennsylvania?”

Even more significant than the information environment of Palmyra was that of Harmony. If Joseph Smith had wanted to do any kind of research while he was translating the book of Lehi onto the 116 pages in 1828 or while he was translating the bulk of the Book of Mormon during April and May, 1829, he would have needed to use libraries or information sources in or around Harmony where he was living at the time.

Harmony was a small town on the border between the states of New York and Pennsylvania. The region was very remote and rural. Recently we asked Erich Paul if he had ever explored the possibility that any libraries existed around Harmony in the 1820s which Joseph Smith might have used. He responded: “In fact, I checked into this possibility only to discover that not only does Harmony and its environs hardly exist anymore, but there is no evidence of a library even existing at the time of Joseph’s work.”

Accordingly, those who have considered western New York as the information environment for the Book of Mormon may be 120 miles or more off target. One should think of Joseph translating in the Harmony area and, as far as that goes, in a resource vacuum.

Even if Joseph had wanted to pause to check his details against reputable sources, to scrutinize the latest theories, to learn about scholarly biblical interpretations or Jewish customs, or to verify any Book of Mormon claims against the wisdom or theologies of his day—even if he had wanted to go to a library to check such things (something he showed no inclination to do until later)—there simply was no library anywhere nearby for him to use.

While this is only a piece of circumstantial evidence for the Book of Mormon, it is still a piece. Perhaps a significant one.

Research by John W. Welch, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (January 1994): 2. For a map highlighting church history sites in Western New York, see John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), chart 12.

Notes

1. See *BYU Studies* 22/3 (1982): 333–56.

2. Robert Paul, “Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Library,” *BYU Studies* 22/3 (1982): 333–56.