The Journey of an 1830 Book of Mormon

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When the Book of Mormon was first published in 1830, there were 5,000 copies printed. It is unclear how many of those copies still exist today, but each was worth approximately $5,000 in the 1980s. One such copy, after being passed from one person to another for over a century, finally fell into the hands of Gerald E. Jones. Using a note left on the inside cover by a former owner, Jones was able to track the journey of the book and discover who many of its owners were.
Samuel Smith starts his missionary journey.
The Journey of an 1830 Book of Mormon

Gerald E. Jones

And again, verily thus saith the Lord, let my servant Orson Hyde and my servant Samuel H. Smith take their journey into the eastern countries, and proclaim the things which I have commanded them; and inasmuch as they are faithful, lo, I will be with them even unto the end. (Doctrine and Covenants 75:13)

On 1 February 1832, one week after the Prophet Joseph Smith received the foregoing revelation at a conference in Amherst, Ohio, Elders Hyde and Smith left on their mission to the eastern states. In their first day’s journey they traveled from Kirtland to Painesville, Ohio, where they “visited some of the Brethren and tarried over night with them.”

The mission of Hyde and Smith would last 11 months and take them from Maine to Rhode Island. After laboring more than 5 months, the missionaries baptized their first convert, Melvin Wilbur, on 18 July 1832 in Providence, Rhode Island. They gave him a copy of the Book of Mormon. I now own it.

Like many collectors, I have seen my appreciation of this rare, well-traveled book grow as I have explored its ownership history and travels and have contemplated how many lives it has touched and continues to touch. The book is a stirring reminder of the epochal early days of the restoration. Handling it—gently rubbing its smooth leather cover, thumbing through its discolored pages, feeling its weight, and perhaps holding it to the breast—is to touch history in an indelible, transforming way.

While the book’s full history remains obscure, what is known in general outline—the book’s provenance and use, primarily in 1832, as a missionary tool—is enough to transport one on a delightful journey through time.

Seeking a Perfect Match

I have always liked old books, and for many years old Latter-day Saint books have held a special place among my interests. Shortly after arriving in Berkeley in 1971, I took up my usual habit of haunting used-book stores. In a store that no longer exists, I spotted an intriguing book on a shelf behind the counter. On closer inspection, I was pleasantly surprised to find that it was a Bible published by the American Bible Society in New York City in 1830. I knew what an 1830 Book of Mormon looked like, and this particular Bible was a match in both size and appearance. I bought the Bible and hoped to complement it one day with a first-edition Book of Mormon. A decade later I had saved enough money to seriously start looking for one.

At that time the going price for an 1830 Book of Mormon in good condition was $5,000. After a lot of looking, I found two copies for sale at a book dealer’s shop in San Francisco. Unfortunately, as is fairly common, both copies were flawed. The labels on the spines were missing, and one copy was warped from water damage. A subsequent trip to Zion’s Bookstore in Salt Lake City led me to proprietor Sam Weller’s famous safe and the best copy I had seen. But this copy too had a serious defect—the spine was only partially intact, due to a diagonal cut by a sharp object. My 1830 Bible, in contrast, was in almost perfect condition, and I wanted a Book of Mormon to match it.

When I explained my desire to Mr. Weller, he said that if I returned the next day he would show me an 1830 Book of Mormon that was owned by his deceased father. When I saw the book, I was very pleased overall but disappointed that it contained handwriting. I felt, as many book lovers do, that such markings mar a book and compromise its value. Most other copies I had seen were “clean” and therefore preferable, or so I thought at the time.

The brown leather binding was plain except on the spine, where, like my Bible, a few gold lines had been stamped and a black label with the book’s title printed in gold letters had been glued. The labels were not an exact match: the one on the Bible is an eighth of an inch wider. Despite the notations in Mr. Weller’s Book of Mormon, its size, binding, label, and general condition matched my Bible well enough that I wanted to purchase it. (I have since come to appreciate that the notations in my 1830 Book of Mormon enhance its distinctive character and are a treasured legacy from former owners.)

As one of 5,000 copies printed by E. B. Grandin in Palmyra, New York, in 1830, my Book of Mormon
was bound by a local book binder with a stock leather binding probably made by a supplier. The black title patch has two gold lines at the top and bottom, which match the five double lines on the spine. This style of binding was standard in 1830, and a number of books were bound in matching style, including my 1830 Bible. Sometimes the leather binding on books of that era had flaws. My Book of Mormon has a circular leather patch (2¼ inches across) at the top of the front cover, used by the manufacturer to repair a hole in the original leather. On the back cover are two small holes apparently caused by subsequent wear.

When I purchased my 1830 Book of Mormon, Mr. Weller provided a half-leather box that looks like a leather-bound book on the outside but is hollow and opens like a book. It made an elegant protective case for my Book of Mormon, and naturally I wanted one for my Bible as well. After learning from Mr. Weller that these handsome boxes were made by a man in New York at a cost of $100 each, I pursued the matter and purchased one, thus completing my matching set of two very collectible books of scripture.

A Book Placed in Providence

All existing copies of the 1830 Book of Mormon undoubtedly have interesting histories, but I suspect that few would match Melvin Wilbur’s for travel within the United States. Printed in Palmyra, the book went to Kirtland and was then carried by Elders Hyde and Smith to Boston and from there to Providence, where it was given to Melvin Wilbur.

The Book of Mormon has always been the premier missionary tool of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. The 1830 editions are doubly precious because they are artifacts from the foundational era of missionary work undertaken at the opening of this last dispensation of the gospel. Knowing that my 1830 copy accompanied missionaries as notable as the Prophet Joseph Smith’s brother Samuel (the first missionary of the restored church) and Orson Hyde (later an apostle) in their labors, I regard the book with a special reverence. Its travels are in part interwoven with the missionary activities of Elders Smith and Hyde in 1832. We are fortunate to possess the daily missionary journals of both elders.

Elder Smith relates their entry into Rhode Island and the subsequent events of that day as follows:

13th. [July 1832] Left Dorchester and went on towards Providence. Traveled a part of the way
and then got into the stage and rode into Providence. Stopped to the house of one Miss Hawkins. Some of the people were believing. They had heard Sister Viena tell concerning the Book. Some of them came in the same evening and we taught them.

Orson Hyde’s account adds other details for the same date:

Left Mr. Cramer’s for Providence, R.I.; traveled on foot 20 miles, and then got into the Stage and rode into Providence 20 miles further. Called on a Mr. Love; found his wife believing so we found friends and the Lord opened the way before us.3

The missionaries held meetings during the evenings of 14–16 July. Elder Hyde alone records the difficulties with a rabble on the last night:

They were of the baser sort, but the Lord enabled me to speak the work with boldness and confidence, and I told them about it; and as soon as meeting was out they set up a cry and uproar, and they were determined to tar and feather us. But as kind heaven would have it one man, a friend, heard the collection, and came to us and told us to be off, for mischief was devised against us. Accordingly we passed off in the crowd unmolested and they lost their prey.

Both men gave an account of the next day’s events. Elder Smith recorded more names in his account, which follows.

17th. Visited some of those that were believing and we concluded to meet with a few that believed, that we might comfort one another and that we might teach them more and to know how many were ready to go forward in baptism and to conclude upon the time and place of baptism. We concluded to meet at Sister Hawkins’ and we came together and the people many of them mistrusted that we were going to have a meeting at Mr. Wilber’s and they gathered around the house a great multitude and many crowded into the house and Mr. Wilbur told them that we were not there and many of those that were outdoors would not believe and they threatened that they would search the house and find us and tar and feather us and there were two young women that came and told us and there was a considerable number gathered around the house where we were and declared that if we were in the house that they would have us, but the people of the house did not let them in and told them there was no meeting there and the street was full and those that saw them said they thought there was a hundred people in the road, but we kept still that we did not talk to be heard, thus we were undisturbed. None of those that were believing concluded to obey by going forward in baptism save one Mr. Wilbur concluded to go forward in baptism.

Only Elder Hyde recounted the trouble that he and Elder Smith encountered following a baptism the next morning, and only Elder Smith recorded the person’s name as well as the name of another convert who was baptized later that day. Elder Hyde wrote:

July 18th, 1832: Baptized one in the morning early before the mob and people got to stirring much, but on our return from the water a part of the mob met us in the street, and one of them presented me with a paper containing 4 sheet iron plates with rings through the back in the form of a D with hieroglyphics [sic] marked on them with chalk. Went about the City considerable and every eye was upon us, and many were busy laying plans to take us when it came night; and I told Samuel that we would get out of this City as soon as possible. Accordingly we left the City after baptizing one more and confirmed them at the water’s edge. We left for North Providence about 5 P.M., put up with Mr. Angel, whose wife was a sister of Virenna’s; friendly.

Elder Smith’s account fills in needed details, including the identification of Melvin Wilbur:

18th. Early the next morning he [Melvin Wilbur] came down to be baptized and we went with him away into a by place and baptised him and then we went back to Sister Hawkins. Brother Wilber went home and we ate breakfast and then went to Brother Wilber’s. His wife was very much opposed or unbelieving. Found fault with him for being baptized so soon and not telling the people and his family of it, and we reasoned with her and also with others and then we went to see a man by the name of Ashton and he was not at home and we also went to see others and Brother Wilber got George Miller and went to the water. We went to Sister Hawkins and got our clothes and went to the same place where we baptized in the morning and Brother Wilber and
George Miller came and met us and there we baptized George Miller and confirmed him by the laying on of hands. Brother Wilber had an infirmity for a long time and we laid our hands on him and told him that his infirmity should be healed according to his faith, having great faith that he would get entirely well and Brother Miller had a lame leg and we laid our hands upon his leg also. They accompanied us a short distance and we left them and went about five miles to Wm. Angel’s, whose wife was a sister of Sister Viena Lacways.

On 20 July both elders recorded the fact that they ordained Melvin Wilbur an elder. Whether they gave him the Book of Mormon at that time or earlier is not known. Elder Hyde added that they “gave him a license to preach the Gospel” and that they “tarried all night with Virenna’s at Fox Point Wharf in the City.” Two days later they conducted a public meeting in which the newly ordained Elder Wilbur spoke, thereby gaining Elder Hyde’s approval. I would like to think that Elder Wilbur used his Book of Mormon as the text for his remarks on that occasion.

I am unaware of any journal that Melvin Wilbur may have kept, so what I have been able to piece together on his life is sketchy. Genealogical records tell us he was born on 10 August 1801 or 1802 in Bridgewater, Plymouth County, Massachusetts, the son of Lemuel Wilbur and Jane Leach. He married Eunice Dennis in 1824. Four of their eight children were born in Providence, the fourth being William, born about 1834. One database lists 14 July 1832 as Melvin’s baptismal date rather than 18 July, the date recorded by the two missionaries. The Wilburs moved to Missouri, and evidently a daughter, Phoebe Eunice, was born there on 25 April 1837. Melvin filed a petition with the state for expenses incurred in his family’s expulsion, which included a move from Richmond to Far West and thence to Quincy, Illinois, in November 1838. A seventh child was born to the Wilburs in Nauvoo in 1844. A member of the Nauvoo Fourth Ward, Melvin was endowed in the Nauvoo Temple on 31 December 1845. The Wilburs’ last child was born in Council Bluffs in August 1849. Melvin died in Salt Lake City on 15 November 1885 at the age of 83 or 84.

**New Owners, New Horizons**

Melvin Wilbur probably took the book with him to Nauvoo, where it changed hands, being given sometime to the next owner of record, Dwight Eveleth. Like Wilbur, Eveleth was a native of Rhode Island. He took the book with him to San Francisco, where it remained for more than 40 years.

Dwight Eveleth’s early history is obscure. He was ordained a teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood, perhaps in 1841, and he married Sarah Sheridan in Providence, Rhode Island, on 24 December 1846. Apparently Eveleth had been a storekeeper in Nauvoo and owned two lots there for a brief period. How he obtained Melvin Wilbur’s Book of Mormon is unknown. A page glued on the inside front cover of the book provides only this information:

“The Book of Mormon

CHAPTER I.

Now I, Moroni, after having made an end of abridging the account of the people of Jared, I had supposed not to have written more, but I have not as yet perished; and I make not myself known to the Lamanites, lest they should destroy me. For behold, their wars are exceeding fierce among themselves; and because of their hatred, they put to death every Nephi; and they will not deny the Christ. And I, Moroni, will not deny the Christ; wherefore, I wonder whithersoever I can, for the safety of mine own life. Wherefore, I write a few more things, contrary to that which I had supposed: for I had supposed not to have written any more; but I write a few more things, that perhaps they may be of worth unto my brethren, the Lamanites, in some future day, according to the will of the Lord.

CHAPTER II.

The words of Christ, which he spake unto his disciples, the twelve whom he had chosen, as he bade his hands upon them. And he called them by name, saying, Ye shall call on the Father in my name, in mighty prayer; and after that ye have done this, ye shall have power that on him whom ye shall lay your hands, ye shall give the Holy Ghost; and in my name shall ye give it; for thus do mine apostles. Now Christ spake these words unto them at the time of his first appearing; and the multitude heard it; but the disciples heard it; and on as many as they had their hands, fell the Holy Ghost.

This book was the property of Brother Dwight Eveleth who came from the East to this State [California] in the early fifties and settled in San Francisco. In 1857 when the Elders were all called home, Pres. Geo. Q. Cannon left Bro. Eveleth in charge of affairs of the Church in this State. Bro. Eveleth died in 1869 of Small pox. Sister Eveleth
his wife has kept the book till now, July 28th, 1898. When, tho firm in the faith, yet surrounded by her family who are indifferent to the Gospel, and realizing that her end is near, she gave it to me. Ephraim H. Nye.

Ephraim Nye, the book’s third owner, was president of the California Mission from 1896 to 1900. Born at Ashford, Kent, England, on 8 August 1845, he was baptized in 1857. He emigrated to Utah and later returned to his homeland to labor as a missionary from 1881 to 1884. July 1902 saw him as president of the Southern States Mission. He died in Columbia, South Carolina, in May 1903. Another written note in the book indicates that President Nye took the book with him to Atlanta, where the mission headquarters were.

Although the book’s owners during the next few decades remain unknown, a handwritten note on the first blank page of the book offers some food for thought. The note, written in black ink by a Utah State Supreme Court justice, reads in its entirety as follows:

Who the owners of this volume have been is now a matter of conjecture. Apparently Melvin Wilbur of Rhode Island was among the early owners if not the first. Next appearance is in California as appears from the typewritten slip pasted on the front cover. F. R. Lavelle, a Scribner book man suggested that it had been owned by someone in the southern states by whom it had been given to a Mormon missionary and then brought to Utah. When I purchased it he said he was pledged not to reveal the seller; but gave me the information that it was a relative of Martin Harris, one of the “Three Witnesses.” The volume bears all the evidence of a first edition and in any event is now 107 years old when I purchased it June 17, 1937.

David W. Moffat, now a Justice of the Supreme Court of Utah and residing at 286 Vine Street, Murray City, Utah.

Judge Moffat or his estate sold the book to Sam Weller’s father, and the book later passed from Sam Weller to me, the current owner.

A Book to Share

It is not known how many copies of the 1830 Book of Mormon still exist. Damaged copies have been broken apart to be sold by the page and thus are scattered. Many have found their way into libraries around the country and into display cases
in temples and museums as well as in the Missionary Training Center in Provo. A few reside in private collections. The number of extant copies is estimated to be from 100 to 300. These rare books are in various stages of preservation. On many copies the title patch on the spine has been lost or damaged, the pages missing or torn, and the paper turned a brownish color (called foxing) due to chemical reactions. Some copies bear the signatures of early church leaders, greatly increasing their value.

While my 1830 Book of Mormon would be a prize commodity in the collectibles market, I see it as a book to appreciate and share rather than as a mere investment without intrinsic value. I have tried to teach others the true value of such a treasure. As an artifact of the restoration, the book is a tremendously effective visual aid for teaching virtually any topic related to the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I have taken my book to institute classes and to sessions with early-morning seminary teachers. Faculty and students alike have appreciated holding and examining this relic of the restoration.

Even more meaningful to me, my children have come to appreciate the book and all it represents. I always tell those who examine the book that Samuel Smith and Orson Hyde handled it and gave it to a convert. And of course there is the possibility that even Joseph Smith may have held it. Since I purchased the book, I have been spurred to accumulate a number of first-edition copies of the Book of Mormon in foreign languages, and returned missionaries who can read those editions have enjoyed studying them. All of this has been gratifying to me as I have tried to teach others the value of our Book of Mormon heritage.

From what little I have been able to learn about the history of one 1830-edition Book of Mormon, I believe that if the journeys of other surviving copies were known in full, in many cases the tales of ownership and travel would be fascinating—and especially moving when they involved the conversion of souls.
ished a product similar in appearance (see Lechman, “Pre-Columbian Sur- face Metalurgy”, who quotes Henry Hoier and Gay Stresser-Pean, “The Haustat Region: A Second Locus for the Pro- duction of Bronze Alloys in Ancient Mesoamerica,” Science 257, 28 August 1992, 1215). Moreover, Nephi’s original plates might have been of different composition than Mormon’s plates.

The Book of Mormon Plates
Janie M. Sjodahl

Like the article itself, the following notes are as they appeared in the original article from the April 1923 Improvement Era, with the exception that publication data has been added in brackets. 1. This is quoted from [Gregg Thomas., The Prophet of Palmyra (New York: J. B. Alden, 1890)] and may or may not be authentic.

2. An excellent little book by George Reynolds [Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883].

3. The American edition, published at Nauvoo, 1842, has 566 pages, 5/ by 3½ inches, including the margins.


Epigraphic Considerations on Janie Sjodahl’s Experiment with Nephih Writing John Gee

1. Robert Deutsch, Messages from the Past Hebrew Bulla from the Time of Isaiah Through the Destruction of the First Temple, Philological Monographs Collection and an Ep-D-Date Calendar (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publications, 1999).


The Book of Mormon Art of Arnold Friberg, “ Painter of Scripture” Vern Swanson


4. Arnold Friberg notes [February 2001], SMA Library.


6. Margot J. Butler, Special Education Co-ordinator, Church Education System, Salt Lake Valley North Area, transcript of an interview with Friberg (3 June 1996). This and other quotes from the transcript were modified by Friberg upon reviewing this article in manuscript form in February 2001.

7. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


13. Arnold Friberg notes (February 2001), SMA Library.

14. All the comments are from Butler’s 1986 interview, modified by Friberg in February 2001.

15. Friberg statement to Vern Swanson, December 2000.

16. See Noel A. Carmack, “Images of Christ Through the Destruction of the First Temple, Philological Monographs Collection and an Ep-D-Date Calendar (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publications, 1999).” 17. It was exhibited in December 2000 at Williams Fine Art in Salt Lake City on the occasion of a show of Friberg’s work.

The Journey of an 1830 Book of Mormon Gerald E. Jones

1. Journal of Samuel Smith, Historical Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

2. I have obtained three other 1830 books that closely match my 1830 Book of Mormon and Bible not only in the type of binding but also in the size and placement of the lines of type on the spines. I have not seen a study of book binding (process, materials, appearance) in America in that era. That study still awaits the work of a serious student.

3. Journal of Orson Hyde, Historical De- partment Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

4. The only other notations in the book are by Melvin Wilbur. On the top of the first blank page is his very legible signature and beneath it, in two lines, the words “Providence, R.I.” The other notation is found at the top of page 574 (the title page for the book of Mormon), where he wrote, again in two lines, “Melvin Wilbur Book.”

The Book of Mormon as a Collectible Matthew R. Sorenson and John L. Sorenson

1. This article was prepared using obser- vations by Curt Bench [Benchmark Books, Madeleine Garrett (University of Utah Marriott Library Special Collec- tions), Richard Horley (Pioneer Books), Joan Nay (Sam Weller’s Bookshop), Ken Sanders (Ken Sanders Rare Books), Kent Walgari (Sallyway’s Used and Rare Books), and others who choose to remain anonymous.

Other Ancient American Records Yet to Come

Monte S. Nyman

1. In A Guide to Publications on the Book of Mormon: A Selected Annotated Bibliography (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1996), there is no mention of books or articles about future records to come forth as promised in the Book of Mormon. Some time ago I published a book with a chapter on the subject (chapter 5 of Two Sticks One In Thine Hand [Salt Lake City: Geno Press, (1973), 139–50]. Although this publication was included in the FARMS bibli- ography, the subject of the above chap- ter was not annotated. Perhaps this subject has been treated elsewhere, but not to my knowledge, although ex- cepts from an unpublished manu- script that briefly outlined some of these records were printed in theRLDS publication. The Witness (winter 1992).

2. See Henry I. Cadbury, “The New Testament and Early Christian Literature,” The Interpreter’s Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick et al. Although I do not agree with the conclusions of the article cited here, it represents the thinking of many Bible scholars re- garding the dating of 2 Peter and why scholars reject the authorship of Peter’s epistle. The claim that the epistles of John were written after his gospel is much more widely accepted and is probably correct. The dating of John’s epistles also confirmed in the article cited above.

3. The brother of Jared was one of those who had written his vision of the end of the world. The vision was recorded in the sealed portion of the plates given to Joseph Smith. These will be dis- cussed later.


5. John were written after his gospel is much more widely accepted and is probably correct. The dating of John’s epistles also confirmed in the article cited above.

6. Joseph Smith said that the fulness of the gospel was found in the Book of Mormon plates (Joseph Smith—History 1:34). The Doctrine and Covenants repeatedly states that the Book of Mormon contained the fulness of the gospel (see D&C 1:2–23; 14:10; 20:9; 27:5; 35:12; 17:39; 41, 42:12; 45:28; 66:2). For a definition of the fulness of the gospel given within the Book of Mormon, see 1 Nephi 27:13–21.

7. Some consider 2 Nephi 27 to be partly from the text of Isaiah 29 with Nephi’s comments interspersed. Because Isaiah 29 in the Joseph Smith Translation contains almost the exact wording of 2 Nephi 27, I accept the whole chapter of 2 Nephi 27 as the original text of Isaiah except for the introductory verse and a slight paraphrasing of verse 32. 3 Nephi 28 also implies that Nephi had concluded his quoting of Isaiah and was now adding his com- ments.

8. See Sidney B. Sperry, Doctrine and Covenants Compendium (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), p. 4. Nephi speaks of how “in that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, and for the breastplate of his people” (Isaiah 28:5). The context of that chapter is Elymais, or northern Israel, in the day of its wickedness, prior to being taken into captivity by Assyria in 721 B.C. Typical of Old Testament prophecy, a message of doom (captivity) is followed by a mes- sage of hope referring to the restora- tion of the latter days as “in that day.” The residue is probably the remnant of the tribes of the north that would someday return (see Isaiah 6:3; 7:3) (the name Shear-jashub means “a remnant shall return”).

9. The “crown of glory” suggests the tem- ple endowment and sealings in other scriptural passages. Enoch was cam- manded to ascend Mount Sinai, where he was “clothed upon with glory” (see Moses 7:2–3). President Joseph Fielding Smith believed that Peter, James, and John received their endowments on the Mount of Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1–9) when they were given the keys of the kingdom (see his Doctrines of Salvation, comp. Bruce R. McConkie [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999], 2:165). The Lord has often used the mountain for his holy place when there were no tem- plates available (as he did with Moses in Exodus 24:12–13:31 and with Elijah in 1 Kings 19). While we have no direct scriptural statement that the “rich treasures” mentioned in D&C 84 are genealogical records, the above script- tures suggest that such records will constitute at least part of that legacy. One of the most significant results of the latter-day restoration is the