

Why a Joseph Smith Papers Project Now?

By Ronald K. Esplin

The Joseph Smith Papers Project seeks to do for Joseph Smith what has been done (and is being done) for George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and other important early Americans: Make their papers easily accessible and more intelligible by publishing them in a carefully prepared, comprehensive scholarly edition. Historians rely on documents to gain insight into the facts, relationships, and other realities of the past, the raw materials from which they construct their narratives and interpretations. The task of scholars functioning as documentary editors is to help readers and other scholars understand the documents without getting too much in the way themselves, leaving others to construct their own narratives from these (and other) documentary resources.

The task of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, then, is to make available complete and reliable texts of all surviving Joseph Smith documents and present them with supporting information, including historical context, that help make them as intelligible to modern readers as they would have been to participants in the history they document. We are preparing and publishing not histories of Joseph Smith or early Latter-day Saint history, but the “raw materials” from which such histories can be written. Our task is not to “connect the dots” or present a narrative so much as to provide information that will allow others to do so. Though stuffed with nineteenth-century documents, neither will our set of reference volumes be a documentary history, bringing together everything about Joseph Smith—but a documentary edition of papers that were authored by Joseph Smith, or in some cases “owned” by him (as with incoming correspondence), or that were created by those working under his direction.

What is documentary editing and why is it important?

Historical documentary editing is the field of scholarly endeavor dedicated to gathering, transcribing, annotating, and publishing the documents of historical figures, events or movements. The field began as a modern professional endeavor following World War II and has expanded over the last half-century, as demonstrated by the work of the Association for Documentary Editing and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), a division of the National Archives and Records Administration. Both organizations help develop and maintain professional standards of historical documentary editing and the NHPRC endorses projects that meet those standards. After reviewing each project with an eye to scholarly standards, the NHPRC certifies them, as it did in 2005 with *The Joseph Smith Papers*. It is also a funding agency, but the Smith Papers project did not request funding.

The larger American initiative to present the papers of the Founding Fathers, one inspiration for this project, made its way into the pages of the 15 March 2005 *Wall Street Journal*. While acknowledging the importance of the projects, the author lamented the slowness of the work on a life (Jefferson's) which is taking as long to publish as it took him to live. Indeed, documentary editing, like most careful scholarship, *is* time and resource intensive. Finding documents, transcribing and verifying documents, researching the context for documents, and preparing thousands of them for publication is a lengthy and complex process. With the support of the LDS Church's Family and Church History Department, including an essential cadre of manuscript specialists; and with generous funding from Larry H. and Gail Miller, allowing us to employ additional scholars; and, with all this enhanced by a significant cadre of dedicated volunteers—we anticipate being somewhat less tardy than the seminally important papers of the Founding Fathers which the *Journal* article described. But doing properly a comprehensive edition is still a daunting challenge that will occupy us through much of the next decade.

Permit me to illustrate with personal references why such documentary editing projects as the Joseph Smith Papers are important—and worth the extensive resources required. In 1969 I entered an M.A. program in history at “Mr. Jefferson's university,” the University of Virginia. My program provided the opportunity to potentially complete the degree in a single year if a major seminar paper could be adequately upgraded to a

thesis during that year. That I was able to do this I owe in no small measure to the dedicated work of document editors working under the direction of the Franklin scholar Leonard W. Labaree. My topic involved the young Benjamin Franklin, and fortunately *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* had already been published for the relevant years. I made obligatory and instructive research visits to such places as the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia and the New York Public Library. But without the existence of this priceless collection of published papers I could not have completed my project within the year.

The year I went to Virginia, a scholar with the support of a prestigious national fellowship published a biography of Brigham Young. In part because I had already concluded to do my dissertation on Brigham Young, I took a keen interest in this book and found its use of primary materials seriously deficient. Rather than spending the requisite time and effort to mine the massive Brigham Young (and related) collections in the LDS Church Archives, the author camped in the New York Public Library and other eastern institutions. There he found relevant materials, to be sure, but in effect ended up writing his biography mainly from the published accounts of Young's enemies, never consulting the papers of the man himself. Later, when I worked in the Church Archives, we symbolically and light-heartedly dedicated to this scholar a room filled with the sources that he had failed to consult. But of course it is no laughing matter: these sources should have been consulted. I well understood from my own experience that once such papers are in print and easily accessible, they will be used. Indeed, one could then no longer write responsibly or credibly without using them.

A comprehensive edition of the Smith Papers will encourage more and better scholarship—and better scholarship more easily—than one could do without them. Such an edition will also encourage scholars to use materials from Joseph Smith himself and not only those from his critics. Other scholars will, of course, have views of Smith and his work that differs, sometimes dramatically, from the views of the Latter-day Saint scholars preparing these volumes. But with convenient access to *The Joseph Smith Papers*, including reliable transcriptions and related information, scholars in the future will inevitably be better acquainted with Joseph Smith's life and works through his own papers than has ever been possible before.

And not only scholars. As one reviewer noted recently regarding the impact of such projects, not only historians depend on modern published editions: “The easy availability of modern, comprehensive editions of the papers of the Founding Fathers has allowed good writers without extensive historical training to write intelligent, readable books for broad audiences,” wrote Gary Nash (Washington Post, 28 August 2005). Anyone writing about Joseph Smith and early Mormonism will do so more intelligently, more accurately, and more easily once these published *Papers* are at hand.

Overview of the Project

Our project has two genealogies. The national field of scholarly documentary editing both inspired our work and shapes it. Efforts to publish the papers of America’s founding fathers might be traced back to early nineteenth-century historians such as Jared Sparks who published heavily edited selections from the letters of George Washington. But modern professional-grade historical documentary editing in the United States is generally said to have begun in the late 1940s when Julian Boyd began work on a comprehensive edition of *The Thomas Jefferson Papers*. Unlike the work of Sparks and others like him, Boyd’s edition set new standards in both quality and comprehensiveness. No selections, no editing out, no prettying up things one might view as unseemly or undignified. Instead, the full document, document after document, presented with readable but more accurate texts and careful annotation.

Today, 60 years later, that work continues. Barbara Oberg, current successor to Julian Boyd as general editor (and one who has been a consultant to our project), is housed with her staff at Princeton University where additional volumes of the Jefferson presidential papers are being readied for publication. Meanwhile, a related team in Virginia works on Jefferson's retirement papers. The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, started in the mid-50s at Yale University and with three dozen volumes published, also continues.

Many other major projects are underway across the country. Today the initiative has moved far beyond the Founding Fathers and the subjects are as varied as was American life. Among documentary editions of American religious figures, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, sponsored by the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, stands out.

Harry S. Stout, director of the Jonathan Edwards Center and editor of many of its volumes, serves on the National Advisory Board of The Joseph Smith Papers, as does Stephen J. Stein, emeritus professor of religious studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, who has edited important volumes of The Works of Jonathan Edwards. Mary-Jo Kline, author of *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, a widely-used handbook on documentary editing and a hands-on documentary editor as well, also serves on this Joseph Smith Papers board as does Terryl L. Givens, James A. Bostwick Chair and Professor of Literature and Religion, University of Richmond.

Our second genealogy harkens back to Mormonism's own pioneer historians. The first volume of our History Series will present their earliest efforts, beginning in the early 1830s and continuing throughout the decade. In 1838 in Missouri, Joseph Smith launched a new initiative that occupied him and clerks, notably Church Historian and Recorder Willard Richards, in Nauvoo, Illinois, in the 1840s. This eventually resulted in an extensive compilation of documents known as the History of the Church and published serially, first in Nauvoo's *Times and Seasons* and later in the *Deseret News* and *Millennial Star*. This pioneering effort to gather and publish documents preserved many that might otherwise have been lost. At places it also relied on (and thus preserved) information from participants in important events who could still be consulted. The manuscripts for this history will also appear in our History Series.

The modern roots of our project date to the late 1960s when Dean Jessee joined the staff of the Church Historian's Office, the descendant of Willard Richard's pioneer office. Among all the nineteenth-century documents in the collection, none fascinated young Jessee more than the Joseph Smith manuscripts. Aware of the Founding Fathers initiative, Jessee early concluded that one day the same should be done for Joseph Smith. In the late 1960s Truman Madsen, director of Brigham Young University's Institute of Mormon Studies, invited Jessee to contribute to special historical issues of *BYU Studies* that would focus on the places of early Mormon history, starting with New York. Jessee elected to prepare for publication selections from Joseph Smith's papers. In 1972, when the Church Historian's Office became the Historical Department of the Church, Leonard Arrington was named church historian. His charge to his staff, including Jessee, to publish histories and documentary collections drawn from the rich holdings of the

archives, spurred Jessee forward in a broader effort to gather and present the papers of Joseph Smith. In 1984 (second edition 2002) Jessee published *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, a collection of all surviving documents in Smith's hand or which one can reasonably assume to have been dictated by him. By then Arrington's History Division of the Historical Department had become the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University, and under the auspices of that institution, Jessee continued his work. In 1989 and 1992, he published the first two (of a projected dozen) volumes of *The Papers of Joseph Smith*.

Fast forward to the spring of 2001 when university and church leaders authorized the establishment of an expanded Joseph Smith Papers Project that would bring together additional resources and personnel to implement a comprehensive plan to publish what was by then a growing collection. A team comprised of scholars from Brigham Young University (including Jessee) and the Church Archives set out to build on and extend Jessee's earlier work. Presently Jessee, Richard Bushman and I oversee as general editors the work of a large cadre of several dozen scholars, archivists, researchers, and transcribers who staff the expanded Joseph Smith Papers Project.

As noted, *The Joseph Smith Papers* will be a comprehensive edition adhering to the scholarly standards and conventions adopted by other papers projects. It will not be a "documentary history" of all significant documents bearing on the life of Joseph Smith, but it will be a comprehensive edition of all extant Joseph Smith documents. This will include letters, journals, minutes, histories and other documents which meet our criteria. Our current commitment is to a hardbound library edition, though we intend to later deliver online content, too. The edition will consist of several series, each with several volumes. Teams are working concurrently on the initial volumes of four series: Journals, Documents, History, and Legal and Business. Planned, also, are a Revelations and Translations Series and an Administrative Series.

Today's project is not just larger (in scope, in number of volumes, and in number of people involved) but more complex than anything done on Joseph Smith up to this time. Good as was the foundation laid by Jessee, with additional resources we can now do what Jessee could only dream of doing alone. To help readers, our scholars are developing materials that support and provide context for the texts. These include

biographical and geographical directories, glossaries, newly rendered historical maps, a chronology covering the period of each volume, and other charts and aids.

The texts themselves will also be richly annotated. While we have thus far avoided the multi-page “notes” that occasionally intrude in some editions, we will provide extensive annotation. We do this in part because of our intended audience. Most editions need be concerned mainly with scholarly readers, but *The Joseph Smith Papers* has two audiences, each of which may require different kinds of explanations. Scholarly readers may understand the American historical context for our story but know little of Mormonism. Latter-day Saint readers will know a good deal about the church and its history but much less about the broader historical context. All readers will benefit from understanding better the detailed historical circumstances from which the documents emerge and which they, in turn, illuminate.

Who will care about—and use—this edition?

Clearly many Latter-day Saints will appreciate any publication that allows better access to Joseph Smith and his world, as these volumes will. But to what extent is this important to others?

I have long been intrigued by the early and sustained attention Joseph Smith and his small movement had in nineteenth-century press coverage and popular imagination. From the very beginning, Smith’s movement attracted more attention than seemed warranted by its size or anything yet accomplished. In 1831, just months after Smith and his small bands of believers left New York for Ohio, James Gordon Bennett, an influential New York City newspaper editor, traveled through Joseph Smith’s Palmyra neighborhood, talking with those who knew him and taking careful notes. These formed the basis for an early newspaper article on Joseph Smith and the “Mormonites,” the first of many that Bennett and his fellow New York editors would write over the years. For better or for worse, interest remained high throughout Smith’s lifetime, and after he was gone people still wrote of the founder of the “strange” and “un-American” system of religion and politics in remote Utah.

Today many scholars are interested in and want to know more about the life and work of a religious leader with unusual prominence (or at least notoriety) in his own day

and whose influence not only continues but is expanding. Beyond the fact that he was a colorful, unusual American phenomenon, that the religion he founded not only survived but flourishes and continues to expand increases the numbers of those who will be interested in these materials. Today some scholars see Joseph Smith as the founder of a new religious movement that reaches beyond its American birthplace, one that might yet prove to be a new global religion.

Whatever that future potential, today's scholars of American religious history recognize Smith as a significant part of the nineteenth-century American religious landscape and acknowledge the importance of having access to his papers. This has been clear as we have interacted with potential scholarly publishers. It was also explicit in the blind reviews of our project solicited by the NHPRC before they granted our application for endorsement. Every reviewer noted the importance of Joseph Smith. The main question, then, was not the importance of the project, which all agreed on, but whether or not we had demonstrated that we were up to the task of doing professional, credible work.

And we are up to that task. These volumes will meet the standards set by the NHPRC and will be works that scholars can rely on and use with confidence. In addition to capable scholars editing each volume, we have a panel of the best Latter-day Saint scholars with expertise on the Joseph Smith period of our history helping to enrich our work and ensure accuracy. Moreover, our project has had and will have more peer review than most projects of this nature and has benefited from the suggestions of many experts. We have consulted with and invited detailed critiques from nationally known non-LDS scholars, several of whom will read each volume before publication.

How does the work proceed? Examples of challenges and payoffs

Once a project has been defined and staffed, the first stage of any documentary editing enterprise involves finding and gaining control of the documents. In this area, the Joseph Smith Papers project had two huge advantages: the LDS Church Historian has had custody of most of the manuscripts since historian Willard Richards boxed them up in Nauvoo, Illinois, in the 1840s for the trek to the Salt Lake Valley. Also, as has been noted already, Dean Jessee has been engaged in this work since the late 1960s. But our experts

have also searched for—and found—additional documents in repositories across the country. And our archivists have identified additional Joseph Smith documents within the large nineteenth-century collections “at home.” Our electronic control file now has more than 5,000 entries and we have physical files on the several thousand documents which the project will publish.

Getting the text right is “job one,” the highest priority, for any quality documentary editing project. If the text is not accurate, little else matters. To ensure correct readings, we work our way through the text a minimum of three different times with different sets of eyes. Often we use high resolution color scans which can be enhanced and magnified, but the last check is by a text expert with access to the original document and additional technology (such as microscopes and ultra-violet light) for a final look at problem areas. While there is no way to ensure 100% accuracy throughout given the scrawls of rushed penmen and the deteriorating condition of some documents, we have made hundreds of corrections large and small in supposedly well-known texts and transcribed all with great care. We can promise and will deliver more accurate texts than anything available before.

Long ago Dean Jessee corrected textual errors in some otherwise familiar texts. For example, when transcribing one of Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo diaries, pioneer historians read that “Emma had another child” and then added a phrase about the infant not surviving. Apparently they surmised that they would have known the child had it survived, and they knew of no birth at this time. What the diary really says is that “Emma had another chill”—another bout, in other words, of malarial chills and fever!

Recently the team editing the second volume of the Journals, made another interesting correction. In 1843, right after Smith had been arrested in Adams County and then released following a *habeas corpus* hearing, he spoke about what had occurred. The account is in the hand of Willard Richards, who was doing his best to stay up with the spoken word. Richards could write legibly, but when writing hurriedly words often degenerated into a hard-to-decipher scrawl. This account of Joseph Smith commenting on the legal proceedings and the personnel of the court has been published before, including Smith’s supposed statement that those involved were a “spiritually minded circuit judge and a few fit men.” Our revised reading has them as a “spindle-shanked circuit judge and

a few fat men." Far from praising them, in this instance Smith was mocking those involved who had caused him such trouble—a reading not out of harmony with other accounts of his sometimes defiant stance toward detractors and adversaries.

Studying the texts and their contexts so intently and comprehensively yields other kinds of insights, too. Unraveling obscure references, trying to understand unusual settings, and exploring long-forgotten history has taken us into many nooks and crannies, shedding light on things we didn't understand well before. These new understandings are informing the essays, introductions, and annotations of the edition, allowing readers better access to this world than ever before. This is true in every area of our work, but nowhere will this be more evident than with the Legal Series. Smith was involved in several times as many judicial proceedings as we knew about at the outset—nearly two hundred times before a magistrate as witness, plaintiff, or defendant. The extensive toll in terms of time and energy, not to mention finances, required to fend off legal challenges makes one wonder how he had resources enough for much else. As our legal team has come to understand prevailing law in the jurisdictions where Joseph Smith functioned, we have learned more about what he did and why he did it. It appears to our experts that Joseph Smith came to understand the law, went to great lengths to work within the framework of the law, and was “straighter” with the law than some of those who chose to use it against him. In any event, modern readers will discover that understanding that legal context is enormously helpful in understanding the man and the times.

Our work on the 1830s journals has taught us a great deal—about the Hebrew school and other initiatives preceding the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, about the Danites and the dynamics that led to confrontation and violence during the Missouri conflict of 1838, about church organization and record keeping, and a dozen other topics.

Our work on the early revelations presented in Documents 1 has made more evident the surprising extent to which the early church was built on revelation. It has long been clear that the revelations were treated with respect and viewed as different, more important, than other records. But it is surprising to find that well over half of the extant documents that comprise Documents 1 are revelations—and that without the revelations, in the early years there is no story. Moreover, the revelations were central in another way: nearly every major early initiative grew out of them. In the 1830s the revelations were

called “commandments” and were viewed as such: revealed counsel that God expected his followers to heed. The Saints had faith in the revelations, none more so than Joseph Smith himself. When revelation counseled moving to Ohio in 1830, or named their new Ohio home a gathering place and soon after required the building of a temple there, or required the establishment of a second gathering place nearly 900 miles away when there were barely means enough to sustain one, they acted. Again and again.

Conclusion

One scholar who provided a blind review of our project for the NHPRC concluded that it was important on two levels. It would serve to illuminate the life and times of a major American religious figure, a benefit for all who would understand the religious history of our country. But the work would also, this reviewer concluded, serve as a source of inspiration to Latter-day Saints. He (or she?) did not see these outcomes as incompatible but urged "extreme caution" in putting an official stamp of approval on the one without implying any endorsement of the other.

We do not seek any such stamp of approval, official or otherwise, on "the religious validity of Joseph Smith's life and work" (to quote the reviewer). Indeed, the goal of the project is not so much to affirm Smith's life or work as to present the surviving records that will help us all to better understand them. Fundamentally, rather than building a particular case, we are after insight and understanding of the man, his work, his world. We see no need to protect him and his reputation from himself, even if that were possible. Convinced as we are that both scholars and Latter-day Saints will be well-served by a comprehensive scholarly edition of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, we have set ourselves the task of presenting the full record in such a way as to be as accessible and intelligible as possible. Nothing less would be worthy of our efforts as scholars or worthy of the man.