

LIVING IN A CHAPTER OF HISTORY

BY MARJORIE H. RICE

While my husband and I were serving in the presidency of the Palmyra New York Temple, we lived in the historic Tomlinson Inn, where we learned much about the conversion of Brigham Young.

When we told our friends that we would be living in the Tomlinson Inn, most of them hadn't heard of it. Yet there were plenty of visitors to Mendon, New York, who knew the history of our 185-year-old home. Sometimes as we ate our Sunday meal we'd look out through the dining room window to see people taking pictures of the building.



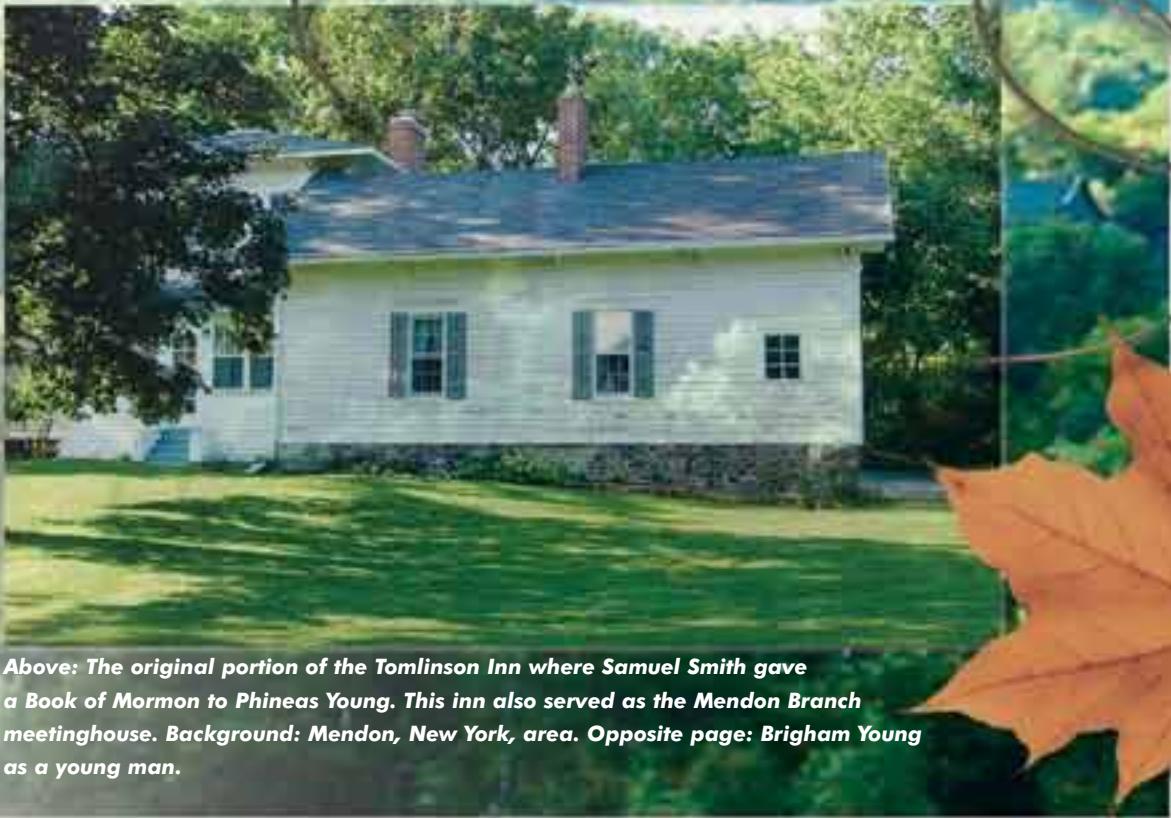
Cars would often pull into the driveway, and people would wander over the grounds. The bolder ones knocked on the door and asked if this was the place they thought it was.

Why all the interest? Because of a meeting that took place in April 1830 in this old home. Following is the story of the inn's Latter-day Saint history.

A Meeting at the Tomlinson Inn

One of the Prophet Joseph Smith's first actions after The Church of Jesus Christ

of Latter-day Saints was organized was to call his trusted younger brother Samuel to go forth and preach the restored gospel. Samuel's attempts to sell copies of the newly published Book of Mormon, with its seemingly incredible story of angels and visions, had met with little success until he arrived at the Tomlinson Inn in April 1830.



Above: The original portion of the Tomlinson Inn where Samuel Smith gave a Book of Mormon to Phineas Young. This inn also served as the Mendon Branch meetinghouse. **Background:** Mendon, New York, area. **Opposite page:** Brigham Young as a young man.

Samuel Smith gathered his courage, strode boldly into the inn, and walked across the room directly to Phineas Young. Holding out a Book of Mormon to him, Samuel said simply, "There is a book, sir, I wish you to read."

Surprised by the young man's direct approach, Phineas hesitated a moment, then asked, "Pray, sir, what book have you?"

"The Book of Mormon," said Samuel, "or, as it is called by some, the Golden Bible." Samuel then testified that the book was a revelation from God and added, "If you will read this book with a prayerful heart, and ask God to give you a witness, you will know the truth of this work." He requested that Phineas look at the testimony of the witnesses in the front of the book. After doing so and asking the young man his name, Phineas remarked that Samuel was one of those witnesses who testified of seeing and handling the gold plates from which the book was translated.

"Yes," said Samuel, "I know the book to be a revelation from God, translated by the gift and power of the Holy

Ghost, and that my brother Joseph Smith, jun., is a Prophet, Seer and Revelator."¹

Phineas was intrigued. He bought the book and took it home.

Neither Phineas nor Samuel realized that their short meeting at the Tomlinson Inn would later bring about the conversion of a man who would become a mighty prophet of the Lord.

A Vision in the Night Sky

About two and a half years earlier, on September 22, 1827, two young men living miles apart—who would later become neighbors and best friends—each saw an astonishing vision in the night sky. Their names were Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball. Heber was living in Mendon, New York, near the Tomlinson Inn, and Brigham was 45 miles to the east in Port Byron.

It began, Heber said, in the eastern horizon—a white smoke rising toward the heavens with the sound of a mighty wind. The smoke moved across the sky, in the



Left: Phineas Young lived in this home in Fishers, New York.

Below: The Young brothers in 1866 (from left to right), Lorenzo, Brigham, Phineas, Joseph, and John.



shape of a rainbow toward the western horizon. It grew wide, then bluish in color, and became completely transparent. As Heber watched with his family and several neighbors, a large, commanding army appeared, marching in platoons across the sky from east to west. "We could distinctly see the muskets, bayonets and knapsacks of the men," Heber recorded, "and also saw their officers with their swords and equipage, and [heard] the clashing and jingling of their implements of war, and could discover the forms and features of the men. The most profound order existed throughout the entire army; when the foremost man stepped, every man stepped at the same time; I could hear the steps. When the front rank reached the western horizon a battle ensued, as we could distinctly hear the report of arms and the rush.

"No man could judge of my feelings when I beheld that army of men, as plainly as ever I saw armies of men in the flesh; it seemed as though every hair of my head was alive. This scenery we gazed upon for hours, until it began to disappear."²

Brigham Young, who at that time was not acquainted with Heber, described what he had seen the same evening: "There was a great light in the East and it went to the West and it was very bright although [there was] no moon at that time." As he gazed at it with his wife, Miriam, they saw "great armies" marching across the night sky. The vision was "perfectly clear," and it remained for several hours.³

Heber and Brigham and their family members who witnessed the amazing scene felt it must have been a sign from God, but they did not know its meaning. Neither Heber nor Brigham knew the Prophet Joseph Smith or that he had received the gold plates containing the Book of Mormon that same day at the Hill Cumorah, just 20 miles to the east.

The following year, Brigham Young and Miriam moved to Mendon, New York, where Brigham's father, stepmother, and several of his siblings were already living. Brigham built a home and mill shop on his father's farm, less than a half mile northeast of where Heber Kimball and his wife, Vilate, lived. Brigham and Heber, just 13 days apart in age, and their wives, just 6 days apart, soon became close friends.



Left to right: Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young, and Phineas Young.

Background: Whitingham, Vermont, area, birthplace of Brigham Young.



Seeking the True Church of Jesus Christ

Brigham Young was given to deep religious longings and had spent several years investigating each of the major religious denominations in western New York. He wanted a church that did more than just preach of general Christian morals; he wanted a church with the authority of Jesus Christ, “a system of ordinances, of laws and regulations to be obeyed.” Brigham’s brothers, Joseph, Phineas, and Lorenzo, and his good friend, Heber C. Kimball, had also longed for such a church. But after years of fruitless searching, Brigham finally concluded, “I knew that Jesus Christ had no true Church upon the earth.”⁴ Phineas said that both he and Brigham were so disheartened by the fall of 1829 they couldn’t even pray with any enthusiasm.⁵

Yet Phineas, a lay preacher, encouraged Brigham, “Hang on, for I know the Lord is going to do something for us.”⁶ These were prophetic words from Phineas, for it was he who would soon encounter the missionary Samuel Smith in a meeting that would change the lives of Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball and their families.

Phineas Young Reads the Book of Mormon

After purchasing the Book of Mormon from Samuel Smith at the Tomlinson Inn, Phineas began to feel that Samuel had been deceived. He told his wife, “I have got a book here, called the Book of Mormon, and it is said to be a revelation, and I wish to read it and make myself acquainted with its errors, so that I can expose them to the world.”⁷ He set aside all other business and read the book within a week; then he read it again the following week. He didn’t find the anticipated errors but instead felt a conviction the book was true doctrine. The following Sunday, before his congregation, he found himself quoting scripture from the Book of Mormon and, under inspiration of the Spirit, he bore a powerful testimony of its truth.

Phineas, believing this book to be an answer to his family’s searching and prayers, passed the book on to his father. John Young read it and declared that it was “the greatest work and the clearest of error of anything he had ever seen, the Bible not excepted.”⁸ Phineas then passed the book on to his sister, Fanny, who also declared it a revelation. Fanny passed it on to Brigham, and the book



was later given to Heber Kimball.⁹

But Brigham had become so disillusioned with organized religion that he was very cautious. He studied and pondered the book for many months. By May 1831 the branches of the Church in New York had gathered to Kirtland, Ohio, without the Young family ever meeting another member of the Church.



Inset: Home of John, father of Brigham Young. Background: Brigham Young's homesite in the Mendon, New York, area.

From Seekers to Believers

In the autumn of 1831, five missionaries from the branch in Columbia, Pennsylvania, knocked at the door of Phineas Young's home and asked if they could hold a meeting there to preach the restored gospel. Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball attended the gathering, and they were touched by the Spirit. They "received the word gladly," and testified of its divinity.¹⁰

Shortly afterward, Brigham, with his father, John, his brother Joseph, and Heber Kimball, witnessed a second vision, this time in a grove of trees while gathering wood for Phineas. "We were pondering upon those things which had been told us by the Elders," Heber recorded, "and upon the saints gathering to Zion, when the glory of God shone upon us, and we *saw* the gathering of the saints to Zion, and the glory that would rest upon them; and many more things connected with that great event. . . . These things caused such great joy to spring up in our bosoms that we were hardly able to contain ourselves, and we did shout aloud 'Hosannah to God and the Lamb.'"¹¹

Longing to mingle with the Saints, Heber C. Kimball hitched his horses to his sleigh in the bitter cold of January 1832, and he, Brigham and Miriam Young, and Phineas and Clarissa Young took a freezing, 125-mile sleigh ride to visit the branch in Columbia, Pennsylvania. Apparently, Vilate Kimball stayed at home and cared for all the children so the other wives could go.

Brigham later recalled, "We arrived at the place where there was a small Branch of the Church; we conversed with them, attended their meetings and heard them preach, and after staying about one week we returned home, being still more convinced of the truth of the work."¹²

Brigham and Heber now understood the vision of the mighty army they had witnessed in the night sky four and a half years earlier. They realized it had appeared to them the very day the Prophet Joseph had received the gold plates from the angel named Moroni—September 22, 1827. Heber felt that it was a "foreshadowing . . . of the warfare to be waged between the powers of good and evil, from the time Truth sprang from earth and Righteousness looked down from heaven upon the boy Joseph, predestined to bring to light the buried records of the past."¹³

Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball Are Baptized

On April 15, 1832,¹⁴ a cold and snowy day, Eleazar Miller, one of those five elders from Pennsylvania,

baptized Brigham Young in his own mill stream and ordained him an elder, according to Brigham, "before my clothes were dry on my back."¹⁵ His friend Heber C. Kimball was baptized the following day, and their wives, Miriam and Vilate, were baptized within a few weeks.

Before Brigham joined the Church, he described himself as rather slow of speech. But with his acceptance of the restored gospel the Lord made "weak things become strong unto [him]" (see Ether 12:27). Just one week after his baptism, Brigham preached his first sermon and spoke for more than an hour. He later said, "I wanted to thunder, and roar out the gospel to the nations. It burned in my bones like fire pent up. . . . Nothing would satisfy me but to cry abroad in the world what the Lord is doing in the latter days."¹⁶

The Mendon Branch of the Church was organized in the spring of 1832 and soon numbered 30 members; 11 of them were Youngs.¹⁷ Nathan Tomlinson and his wife also joined the Church, and the Tomlinson Inn became the meetinghouse for the Mendon Branch.

By September 1833 the Tomlinson Inn's role in Church history had ended. Most of the members of the branch left Mendon to gather with the Saints in Kirtland, Ohio. Brigham's beloved wife, Miriam, who had died of tuberculosis a year earlier, was left resting in the little Tomlinson Corners graveyard just up the road from the inn.

A Mighty Prophet of God

Brigham Young never looked back, following the Prophet Joseph Smith until the day Joseph was martyred. And then Brigham, the humble carpenter and glazier who had yearned for true religion, became the Lord's chosen prophet to lead the Saints. He led them first to the Nauvoo Temple to receive ordinances and blessings restored through the Prophet Joseph. He led them across more than a thousand miles of hardship to a new home in the Salt Lake Valley. And there, with his long-time friend and counselor Heber C. Kimball at his side, President Brigham Young led a tried and proven people in building up the kingdom of God.

Living in the Tomlinson Inn

The Tomlinson Inn, where we lived from 1999 to 2003, felt good to us. The rippled glass windows reflect the rich patina of old floors that creak gently from the press of a thousand footsteps. With each click of a latch, the hand-carved panel doors with their antique knobs speak softly of that long-ago time.

An old, makeshift staircase in the back of the inn leads to the upper room where the Mendon Branch worshipped. The room still looks as it did in 1832. The exposed roof trusses are made of small tree trunks, and almost as much daylight comes up between the old floor boards as from the one small window. In this humble setting, Brigham shared with his fellow converts his testimony and gratitude

for the long-awaited restored gospel—and that copy of the Book of Mormon that introduced him to it.

History seems to settle over the Tomlinson Inn gently, like a warm cloak in a cold world. But the best part of living there was sharing its story with visitors who left misty eyed at the thought of a young missionary; a young, soon-to-be prophet; and a young Church that would roll forth to fill the whole earth. ■



Modern-day Tomlinson Inn.

NOTES

1. "History of Brigham Young," *Millennial Star*, June 6, 1863, 360–61.
2. Orson F. Whitney, *The Life of Heber C. Kimball* (1945), 16.
3. General Church Minutes 1839–1877, Jan. 8, 1845, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
4. Brigham Young, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, July 19, 1866, 2.
5. See Ronald K. Esplin, "Conversion and Transformation: Brigham Young's New York Roots and the Search for Bible Religion," in *Lion of the Lord: Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter (1995), 32.
6. Phineas Young to Brigham Young, Aug. 11, 1845, Brigham Young Office Files, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
7. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young 1801–1844*, comp. Elden Jay Watson (1968), xix.
8. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, xix.
9. Some writers point out that the copy of the Book of Mormon read by Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball could have been one Samuel Smith had placed in June 1830 with Mrs. John P. Greene, Brigham Young's sister Rhoda, who also lived in Mendon.
10. *The Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 19.
11. *The Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 19; emphasis added.
12. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, 2.
13. *The Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 17.
14. Brigham Young, "Remarks," *Deseret News*, Apr. 2, 1862, 1.
15. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, 3.
16. Brigham Young, *Deseret News Weekly*, Aug. 24, 1854, 1.
17. See "History of Brigham Young," *Millennial Star*, Aug. 13, 1864, 519.