

# The Joseph Smith Journals

*The Prophet Joseph's seven journals are among the most important records that help us understand him and the development of the Church during his life.*

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Editors of volumes in the Journals Series in the forthcoming *Joseph Smith Papers*, a multivolume work in progress at the Family and Church History Department. Over the next several years, it will publish all of Joseph Smith's letters, journals, histories, revelations, and other documents.

**T**he Prophet Joseph Smith purchased his first journal on November 27, 1832—possibly in response to a revelation he received the same day concerning the necessity of Church record keeping (see D&C 85:1–5). It was a small pocketbook of 104 pages that he called a “Book for Record.”

The first words he wrote express his sincere intention “to keep a minute account of all things that [came] under [his] observation.” Joseph Smith, however, was more comfortable with the spoken word and expressed his frustration with the limitations of writing.<sup>1</sup> As a result, there were periods of effective journal keeping, but there were also gaps when months and even years went by in silence. Still, he returned again and again to journal keeping, or he arranged for others to carry on in his stead. Eventually, with the help of the faithful and dependable scribe Elder Willard Richards, the Prophet succeeded in establishing a method of steady journal keeping.

The series of journals produced by and for the Prophet contain several of the earliest existing copies of his revelations, and they provide the only detailed accounts of several

of his sermons. They are some of the most important records for understanding Joseph Smith and the development of the Church during his lifetime.

Following is a brief description of each of the Prophet's seven journals and information about several of the scribes who helped him keep them.

## **First Ohio Journal: 1832–34**

The Prophet Joseph faithfully kept this first journal every day for nine days, then stopped for almost 10 months. He resumed in October 1833, when he left home on a proselytizing mission to Upper Canada. The entries during this mission are a rich source of insight into his sincerity and the spiritual and emotional dimensions of his personality. For example, Joseph recorded for October 12: “I feel very well in my mind. The Lord is with us, but [I] have much anxiety about my family.” Later that day he received a revelation assuring Sidney Rigdon and him of their families' well-being (see D&C 100:1). On his return to Kirtland, Ohio, on November 4, 1833, Joseph dictated a journal entry to Oliver Cowdery, the second elder of the Church: “Found my family all well according to the promise of the Lord, for which blessings I feel to thank his holy name.”

Before long, he turned to other scribes for help. In addition to using Oliver Cowdery as a scribe, the Prophet called upon Elders Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, his counselors in the First Presidency. In March 1834, while on another mission, Joseph Smith asked his traveling companion, Elder Parley P. Pratt, to help him keep the journal.



Not all of the entries appear in chronological order. On several occasions, Joseph backtracked to record an earlier event. He also used the journal to keep financial records and other miscellaneous notes, which are interspersed throughout the book.

The journal's most consistent entries are between late February and April of 1834, when the Prophet was recruiting help and raising funds for the expedition to relieve the Latter-day Saints who had been driven from their homes in Jackson County, Missouri.

**Above: The first page of Joseph Smith's first Ohio journal. Inset: The front cover of this journal, bearing the Prophet's signature. Map: The Prophet's first and second journals were written in Kirtland, Ohio. His third and fourth were written in Far West, Missouri. His fifth, sixth, and seventh journals were written in Nauvoo, Illinois.**



**The Prophet's second Ohio journal (above) contains a historical account of Joseph Smith's First Vision (depicted below), and it records the conferral of priesthood keys by Moses, Elias, and Elijah in the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836 (opposite page).**

### **Second Ohio Journal: 1835–36**

The Prophet's second journal was a medium-sized ledger of 220 pages called a "Sketch Book." It contains Joseph's activities in and around Kirtland from late September 1835 to early April 1836. Joseph and Oliver began the record and then quickly turned it over to Frederick G. Williams. Soon afterward, the Prophet asked Warren Parrish to serve as a full-time scribe. Although Warren wrote most of the journal, Joseph Smith dictated much of it to him. The dictated entries are generally much longer than the entries Joseph wrote himself. And, while somewhat less personal, the dictated entries still bear the marks of Joseph Smith's style. The entries recorded by Warren Parrish and other scribes account for every day of the period covered by the journal.

This second journal contains an account of Joseph's First Vision, where God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph in a grove of trees near his home. It also tells of the angel Moroni's appearances to Joseph Smith in 1823. The journal records the Prophet's early efforts to translate the book of Abraham. Of particular theological significance is the January 21, 1836, vision of the celestial kingdom of heaven and the revelation that "all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God" (D&C 137:7)—foreshadowing the doctrine of redeeming the dead through vicarious ordinances.

The focus of the journal, however, is the preparation for the special solemn assembly held three days after the dedication of the

Kirtland Temple. In the solemn assembly, Church officers would be "endowed with power from on high" (D&C 105:11) to preach the gospel throughout the earth. Hence, the priesthood officers needed to be prepared. The journal reports the several councils and private meetings held to achieve harmony and work out personal differences among the brethren.

The Prophet spent a great amount of time reorganizing priesthood quorums and councils so they would be properly organized for the solemn assembly. He insisted that the brethren be trained in the School of the Elders and in the associated Hebrew school. The journal tells of Joseph's enthusiastic and dedicated study of the Hebrew language during this time. It traces the Prophet's efforts in these endeavors and concludes by describing the dedication of the temple, the solemn assembly, and the Sunday meeting of April 3, 1836. On this Easter morning, the resurrected Christ appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith and Elder Oliver Cowdery. Moses, Elias, and Elijah then appeared and



LEFT: STILL IMAGE FROM THE RESTORATION; RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW REIER TAKEN ON THE SET OF JOSEPH SMITH: THE PROPHET OF THE RESTORATION



conferred priesthood keys on the Prophet Joseph and Oliver Cowdery. This entry is now found in *Doctrine and Covenants* 110.

#### **First Missouri Journal: March–September 1838**

Joseph Smith's first Missouri journal is recorded on 69 pages of a large ledger. In this and the remaining journals, Joseph assigned his scribes to observe his activities and record them on their own. Although Joseph Smith's personal involvement was diminished, the perspectives of the scribes do provide different vantage points on the Prophet's life that we would not otherwise have.

This journal begins with a brief retrospective account, apparently dictated by Joseph Smith, of his arrival in the Latter-day Saint community of Far West in Caldwell County, Missouri. He had just fled the dangerous environment of apostasy and legal harassment in Kirtland following the financial collapse of the Kirtland Safety Society.

The entries that follow, however, are letters, revelations, and other documents copied into the journal with little or no connecting narrative. The journal was titled "The Scriptorium Book," apparently to indicate that it was a repository for various "scripts," or written texts.<sup>2</sup> Most of the letters and other items recorded in April 1838 document the events leading up to the excommunications of Church leaders Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer.

Except for one revelation, the journal was written by the Church's general clerk and recorder, George Robinson. When Brother Robinson's documentary record was finished, he began writing contemporary journal entries. By this point Brother Robinson had been appointed a scribe

to the First Presidency, and the journal focuses not only on the Prophet but also on his counselors—Sidney Rigdon and Hyrum Smith.

Between April and June 1838, Brother Robinson regularly kept the journal and recorded the First Presidency's efforts to plan the Latter-day Saint community of Adam-ondi-Ahman in neighboring Daviess County. Brother Robinson also recorded a number of the Prophet's revelations, including the revelation on tithing (see D&C 119).

Entries are consistent and detailed from late July to early September. These entries document the beginning of violent persecution of the Saints in northwestern Missouri. On September 2, 1838, George Robinson described the atmosphere in the area: "This looks a little too much like mobocracy; it foretells some evil intentions; the whole upper Missouri is all in an uproar and confusion." At the close of the journal, Latter-day Saints in Far West and other parts of Caldwell County, Missouri, began heading north to protect those in Daviess County from vigilantes.

#### **Second Missouri Journal: September–October 1838**

Scribe James Mulholland was one of many boarders in the Prophet's home over the years. He kept the Prophet's second Missouri journal in three pages of a handmade pamphlet. The entries cover only one month—from early September to early October. The journal, titled "Memorandum Etcetera," consists of brief notes regarding Joseph Smith's comings and goings, often tracking these movements to within the half hour. Written during a time of increasing conflict in Missouri, the journal may have been commissioned by the Prophet to provide a record that could be used in a court of law to document his daily whereabouts.

James Mulholland was not privy to the Prophet's intentions and activities, as was First Presidency scribe George Robinson. The last entry, dated October 5, 1838, concludes with "Did not see him all the afternoon; understood that he went from home." In fact, Joseph Smith had gone to De Witt, Missouri, to help the Saints who had been besieged by vigilantes.

**Below: The Prophet's first Illinois journal was a 15-page handmade "Minute Book," shown here with a replica of a handmade quill pen.**

#### **First Illinois Journal: 1839**

After a grueling confinement throughout the winter in Liberty Jail, the Prophet Joseph and his fellow Latter-day Saint prisoners were granted a change of venue for trial. Apparently to spare the state from the publicity of a trial, the guards allowed their prisoners to escape while en route to the new venue. They crossed the Mississippi River into Illinois on April 22, 1839, where they joined the Saints from Missouri, who had received a sympathetic reception from the citizens of Quincy, Illinois. That same day the Prophet hired James Mulholland to again keep a journal for him. From April to October 1839, Brother Mulholland recorded the Prophet's activities in 15 pages of a handmade pamphlet titled "Minute Book."

The journal traces the Prophet's efforts once again to gather the Saints and to build the kingdom of God. He purchased land upriver at Commerce, Illinois, and instructed the Saints to move there. Though the area was plagued with malaria-carrying mosquitoes, the Saints began draining the swampy lowlands and transforming Commerce into a beautiful city, which they later renamed Nauvoo.

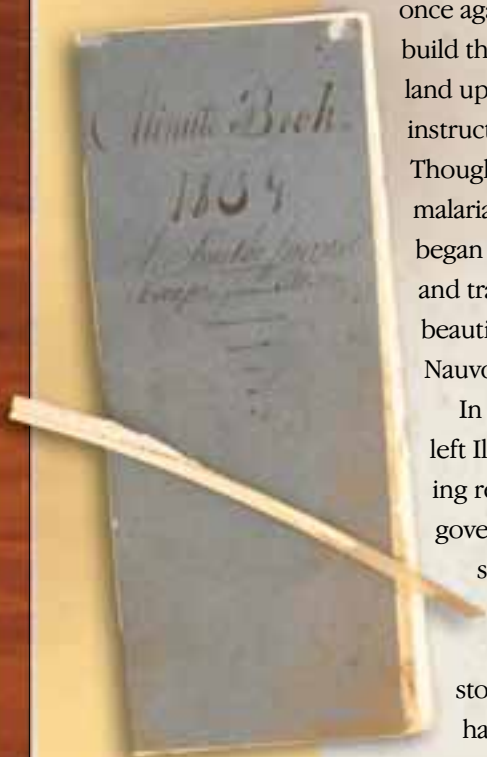
In late October 1839, Joseph Smith left Illinois for Washington, D.C., seeking relief and redress from the federal government for the deprivations suffered by Latter-day Saints in Missouri. Two weeks before Joseph left, James Mulholland stopped keeping the journal. He may have stopped because he, like many others, had fallen ill, probably with malaria. He died while the Prophet was away.

#### **Second Illinois Journal: 1841–42**

In December 1841, a few months after his return from missionary service in England, Elder Willard Richards began the longest and most consistent journal of the Prophet's life. This and the succeeding Illinois journal contain entries for virtually every day from mid-December 1841 until the Prophet's death in June 1844. Elder Richards began this journal in a large ledger titled "The Book of the Law of the Lord." This record appears to have been created to fulfill the injunction to "keep a history, and a general church record of all things that transpire in Zion, and of all those who consecrate properties" (D&C 85:1). Transcripts of several revelations precede the 89 pages of journal entries, which are interspersed in a record of numerous donations to the Church.

This journal describes many significant events in the Prophet's life such as the creation of the Relief Society and construction of the Nauvoo Temple. The entries describe Joseph's activities as President of the Church, mayor of the city, storekeeper, chief justice, newspaper editor, commanding officer of the Nauvoo Legion, and other positions. The journal entries also contain revelations, a record of court cases, and correspondence with Joseph's wife, Emma, and others.

In June 1842, when Willard Richards departed for Massachusetts to move his family to Nauvoo, he transferred this journal to William Clayton. With periodic help from Eliza R. Snow and an unidentified scribe, Brother Clayton kept the remainder of the journal and donation record. The events of December 20, 1842, were the last entries recorded.





**Above:** The third Illinois journal is a four-volume set for which Elder Willard Richards acted as scribe. The desk and document box shown here are believed to have come from the Smith family home in Nauvoo. **Inset:** This journal entry of April 6, 1843, records the opening day of a Church conference in Nauvoo.

### Third Illinois Journal: 1842–44

Though half of the pages were still blank in the previous journal, a new journal, titled “President Joseph Smith’s Journal,” was started beginning on December 21, 1842, with Willard Richards again acting as scribe. This effort would eventually result in a four-volume, 1,045-page journal. It contains almost daily entries until June 22, 1844—just five days before the Prophet and his brother Hyrum were murdered.

The journal entries bear the stamp of their scribe, Elder Richards, but they capture the Prophet’s personality and character in ways that Joseph likely would not have written about himself. The entries range from lighthearted anecdotes to detailed accounts of legal cases over which Joseph Smith presided in the courts of Nauvoo. This wide scope of information helps us better understand the Prophet Joseph Smith. Some entries even provide insight into what he expected of the record keeping in his journal. For instance, on March 4, 1843, the Prophet told Elder Richards, “There

is one thing you fail in as historian—the naming or noticing surrounding objects, weather, etc.” Joseph’s review of this journal, though infrequent, demonstrates the importance he attached to providing historical context to the events of his life and the early Church.

Although the Prophet’s efforts to keep a record of his personal and ecclesiastical life waxed and waned, he eventually succeeded, with the help of others, in keeping a regular record of his doings. His journals serve not only as the basis for early Church history but as an example to us of the importance a record of our own life can have in the lives of our descendants. ■

*Spelling and punctuation modernized in all journal quotations; the journals are in possession of the Church History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah.*

### NOTES

1. See, for example, letter from Joseph Smith, Greenville, Indiana, to Emma Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, June 6, 1832, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois; letter from Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, Independence, Missouri, Nov. 27, 1832, in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, pages 1–4, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
2. See Noah Webster, ed., *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1845), “scriptory,” 731.