

Saving the Book of Commandments

Fifteen-year-old Mary Elizabeth Rollins and her 13-year-old sister Caroline lived in Independence, Jackson County, Missouri, in 1833. At this time, revelations Joseph Smith had received were being printed by William W. Phelps, who had opened a print shop and newspaper office on the upper floor of his home. The printed revelations were to be bound into a book called the Book of Commandments.

By July the non-Mormons in the area were angry because of the growing number of Mormons. Earlier in the year some people in Missouri had been trying to get the Mormons to move away from Jackson County. When Brother Phelps wrote a newspaper editorial that was misunderstood by the non-Mormons, it increased their anger. The non-Mormons held a town meeting and ordered the Mormons to leave their new homes or be killed. Mormon leaders called to the meeting were told they had only 15 minutes to move out of the county.

Before the 15 minutes had passed, the mob broke into the home of Brother Phelps. "Sister Phelps was alone with her children when the threatening mob surrounded the house." She quickly took "her sick baby in her arms [and] hurried with the other children . . . to safety in the woods close by. Concealed in a corner of a nearby fence, Mary Elizabeth and Caroline watched with horror as the angry men rushed into the house [and threw] the family's [things] into the street. Upstairs the mob found the valuable press and . . . eagerly they hurled the [printing press and type out the window] to the street below." Someone said, " 'So much for the Mormon commandments,' [and then] dumped the huge sheets of printed pages

onto the pile of [trash] in the street. Mary Elizabeth decided to try to save the revelations. 'They will kill us!' warned Caroline," but she agreed to help.

When the mob had their backs turned, the girls ran into the street and filled their arms with the pages. They "were just turning away when some of the mob spotted them. . . . Squeezing through a gap in the fence, [the girls] found themselves in a cornfield, hidden . . . by thick rows of [cornstalks]." The men searched through the corn but could not find the girls, who had placed the "precious printed sheets on the ground [and] covered them with their bodies."

When the sound of footsteps faded, the girls made their way to an old log stable. "They approached cautiously . . . [and] found Sister Phelps and her older children, carrying branches to pile up to make beds for the night." Knowing Brother Phelps would know what to do with the papers, the girls gave them to Sister Phelps.

Mary Elizabeth and Caroline were sad that they had not had time to read the revelations they had risked their lives to save. However, before long "Oliver Cowdery made up copies of the book, incomplete as it was, and gave one [book] to [Mary Elizabeth]. Two years later the revelations in the little Book of Commandments were [reprinted], together with [other revelations]." Today we have these important revelations printed in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Adapted from Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, "Discover Your Heritage: 'They Will Kill Us!'" *New Era*, Sept. 1974, 36–37.

Summary

In July 1833, people in Independence, Jackson County, Missouri, were angry with the Mormons and wanted them to leave. A mob broke into William W. Phelps's print shop and threw his printing press and printed pages out the window. The pages contained revelations given to the Prophet Joseph Smith that were to be bound into a book called the Book of Commandments. Two girls, Mary Elizabeth Rollins

and her sister Caroline, were hiding nearby and decided to save as many pages as possible. They ran out, filled their arms with papers, and hid in a cornfield. The mob tried to find the girls but failed. The pages the girls saved and others were later used to make up copies of the Book of Commandments. Today the contents of this book are part of the Doctrine and Covenants.

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