

There Shall Be a Record Kept among You

Elder Marlin K. Jensen of the Seventy, the current Church historian and recorder, recently talked with Church magazines about the past, present, and future of this important office.

Why are Latter-day Saints taught that it is important to keep records and to gather and preserve Church history?

Elder Marlin K. Jensen: The scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, make clear that “remembering” is a fundamental and saving principle of the gospel. We keep records to help us remember. Remembering the past gives us needed perspective as God’s children to have faith in our future destiny and thus to live more faithfully in the present.



On April 6, 1830, the day the Church was organized, the Lord commanded the Prophet Joseph Smith, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1). This is the revelation upon which the office of Church historian and recorder is based.

On that day the Prophet learned how important it is to the Lord for a history of the Church to be kept, and he soon called Oliver Cowdery to be the first Church historian and recorder. In the beginning Oliver recorded minutes of meetings, patriarchal blessings, membership information, and certificates of priesthood authority. He also began what might be called a narrative history of the Church.

Record keeping began with a commandment from God and continues to the present day.

What does the calling of Church historian and recorder entail?

Elder Jensen: The work of the Church historian and recorder is largely one of record keeping. It includes the gathering and preserving of Church history sources, the

recording of ordinances, and the collection of minutes. The scriptures also suggest there is a responsibility to ensure the records are used “for the good of the church, and for the rising generations” (D&C 69:8).

The roles of historian and recorder are complementary and at times almost indistinguishable. I think that’s why, in the early days of the Church, sometimes a recorder was appointed and sometimes a historian and why over time the roles were joined together in one calling.

What is the purpose of recording and teaching Church history?

Elder Jensen: The primary purpose of Church history is to help Church members build faith in Jesus Christ and keep their sacred covenants. In fulfilling this purpose, we are guided by three main considerations:

First, we seek to bear witness of and defend the foundational truths of the Restoration.

Second, we desire to help Church members remember the great things God has done for His children.





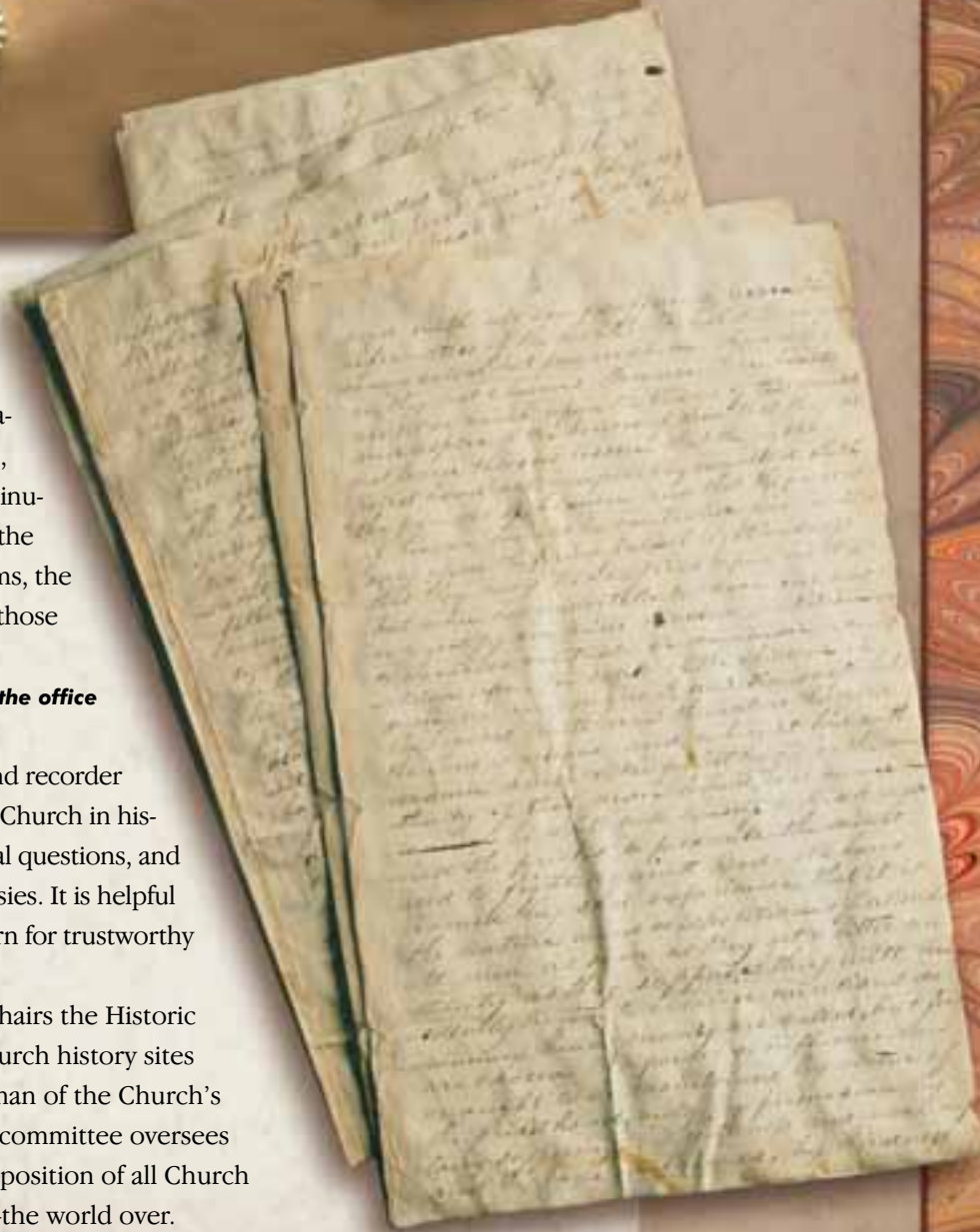
Opposite page: Oliver Cowdery served as the first Church recorder. Below: Pages of this Joseph Smith journal show the revelation that became Doctrine and Covenants 121.

Third, we have a scriptural charge to help preserve the revealed order of the kingdom of God. This includes the revelations, documents, procedures, processes, and patterns that provide order and continuity for the exercising of priesthood keys, the proper functioning of priesthood quorums, the performance of ordinances, and so on—those things that are essential to salvation.

How else does the Church benefit from the office of Church historian and recorder?

Elder Jensen: The Church historian and recorder can provide an authoritative voice of the Church in historical matters. There are always historical questions, and sometimes there are historical controversies. It is helpful to have an office to which anyone can turn for trustworthy answers.

The Church historian and recorder chairs the Historic Sites Committee, which administers Church history sites and landmarks. He also serves as chairman of the Church's Records Management Committee. This committee oversees the creation, management, and final disposition of all Church records—ecclesiastical and corporate—the world over.



OLIVER COWDERY WRITING WITH A FEATHER PEN, BY ROBERT T. BARRETT; PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG DIMOND AND JED CLARK; BORDER © ARTBEATS

LEARN MORE ABOUT CHURCH HISTORY

The Internet makes Church history more accessible than ever. Following are some of the resources available in English on the Church history Web site at www.lds.org/churchhistory:

- Joseph Smith Web Site, which reviews the life and mission of the Prophet. It features historical photographs and documents.
- Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel, 1847–1868, which is a searchable database of individuals and companies traveling west to Utah.
- Historic Sites, which shows the location, pictures, and brief history of major Church sites.
- Museum of Church History and Art, which shows art and artifacts that document the history of the Church and its members.



Among the most essential and sacred records are those evidencing the performance of temple ordinances. They are preserved as a part of what I feel is that book “which shall be worthy of all acceptance” (D&C 128:24). Members can have confidence that all records, including those of their temple ordinances, are safe.

How is the Church using technology to carry forth the work of the historian’s office?

Elder Jensen: I work with the Family and Church History Department, which collects and preserves the essential materials of Church history. We are developing a technology plan that will better enable us to collect, preserve, and make Church history available for a global Church membership. Obviously the Internet will play an increasingly important role in what we do.

The books, documents, artifacts, historic sites, and pictures that we have collected through the years constitute in a sense the “crown jewels” of the Church’s history. We feel an obligation to share these in approved and appropriate ways with members everywhere. Viewing a page from the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon on the Internet or taking a virtual tour of the upper room of the Smith family cabin where Moroni appeared to young Joseph Smith are experiences that will connect members to our past in faith-promoting ways.

Technology will also better enable us to train and assist local leaders, clerks, and others who are responsible for the compilation of annual histories for stakes, wards, and missions. With the help of technology, historical information will flow more easily to and from Church headquarters.

How can the history of the Church become a heritage for all of us, whether we are new members or have been in the Church for generations?

Elder Jensen: Someone once said that a people can be no greater than its stories. The history of the Church begins with the compelling account of Joseph Smith and his search for the true Church. When we believe Joseph’s account, we become part of a great body of believers whose lives change by embracing the restored gospel.



This experience becomes a very important part of our common Latter-day Saint heritage. It also helps explain why the history of the Church's beginnings is so critical to the Church's existence and continued growth and vitality.

There are other great stories in our history that deserve to be known and taught at church and at home. The lessons of Kirtland, the trials of Missouri, the triumphs and eventual expulsion of the Saints from Nauvoo, and the westward trek of the pioneers are stories that inspire Latter-day Saints in every land and language. But there are equally moving stories about

the rise and progress of the Church and the impact of the gospel in the lives of ordinary members in every nation touched by the restored gospel. These need recording and preserving as well.

The relationship between Church and family history is also worth considering. Usually a study of one will lead to a study of the other. Many of the Church's greatest stories are contained in personal and family histories, and these are a part of our individual and family heritages.

Finally, we need to remember that acquiring a heritage of Church history requires more than simply reading a history book. It includes visiting a historic site, visiting a



In the mountains south of Salt Lake City, the Granite Mountain Records Vault houses microfilm copies of much of our Church and family history. Inset: An architect's rendering of the new Church History Library, to be completed in the summer of 2009.

PHOTOGRAPH OF GRANITE MOUNTAIN RECORDS VAULT BY ELDON K. LINSCHOTEN

As today, ancient prophets, like Nephi, kept a record of their history. Bottom: A replica of the Book of Mormon plates.

museum to view historical artifacts, attending a family reunion, or keeping a personal journal. The key is for everyone to have personal involvement of some type with the past.

What do you think has been most meaningful to you personally about serving as Church historian and recorder?

Elder Jensen: I have come to realize that the scriptures contain sacred history. When the prophets wrote to us, they wove sermons and teachings into their historical narratives. For example, the Book of Mormon begins with the story of Lehi and his family. It is scripture, but it is also a narrative history. The Book of Mormon represents the finest type of historical writing we have. It is also

the best example of the connection between history and doctrine. I've come to understand and appreciate the power of scripture and history working together.

I have gained a testimony that all things are present before God—past, present, and future. That really harmonizes with the scriptural definition of truth, which is “knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24). We live in the present. We can't see the future, but the past is available for us to see—if it has been preserved. Our past can give us a perspective and a foundation that we really can't get in any other way. Whether it is the history of our grandfather or the



history of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the history of the trials of the Latter-day Saint pioneers during the early days of the Church or the history of Latter-day Saint servicemen during World War II—lessons from the past help us cope with our present and give us hope for our future.

I have come to appreciate the Prophet Joseph Smith more than ever before because of his monumental accomplishments as the founding prophet of this dispensation.

Of all the things I've come to treasure, I think the most important is the conviction that if we're honest in heart and desire to know God, we can come to know Him and feel accountable to Him. We have the example of the Prophet Joseph Smith to thank for that. He modeled it, he taught it, and he held out the promise that we can come to know Christ also. That's priceless to me. ■



A CURRENT PROJECT OF INTEREST

Joseph Smith Papers

Elder Jensen: I think the most significant project we are working on right now is the Joseph Smith Papers Project. This is a monumental multiyear effort to gather the documents that the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote, caused to be written, or received, as well as the sermons he delivered, the correspondence that came to him, the legal matters in which he was involved, and revelations he received. We plan to publish those papers in a series of volumes.