

Rare Mormon documents go on display for first time

by [Peggy Fletcher Stack](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue

For the first time ever, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has assembled some of its most treasured historical documents into a single exhibit and is inviting the public to view them.

In early September, 26 books, manuscripts, and other papers that date from before the faith's founding in 1830 will be on display at the LDS Church History Library in downtown Salt Lake City. The exhibit is slated to last for at least five years.

Taken together, the documents are worth several million dollars, so church officials waited to showcase them until their safety could be secured, said Steven E. Snow, LDS church historian and recorder.

"This exhibit is not intended to silence critics" of Mormon history, Snow said. "But members will find it faith promoting."

It comes at a time when LDS officials have worked for more transparency about their faith's past, making more documents available online, publishing scholarly essays about controversial episodes, and opening archives to outside researchers.

A page from the original Book of Mormon—which Latter-day Saints believe founder Joseph Smith translated from an ancient record—is "the single most valuable manuscript because of its importance to the church," said Richard E. Turley, assistant church historian and recorder.

It is written with "one endless flow," as Smith dictated it to scribes, Turley said, without breaks for paragraphs or, as in the modern version, verses.

Compare that with Smith's earliest personal journal entry November 27, 1832, which is another item in the collection. Smith wrote a sentence, scratched it out, started again, and concluded the entry by jotting down "praying to God for help," Turley said.

Smith's dictation of the Book of Mormon manuscript in a single draft, which he completed in 60 to 90 days, "was nothing short of marvelous," Turley said. "To Latter-day Saints . . . it means the first manuscript, the Book of Mormon, is something created by the gift and power of God."

Other items in the exhibit include:

- A Book of Commandments, an early collection of Smith's revelations. Only 29 copies exist.
- A handwritten letter dictated by Smith to church members from Missouri's Liberty Jail, where he and others were imprisoned. Portions of the letter became part of the Mormon canon's Doctrine and Covenants.
- Minutes of LDS organizations launched by Mormon women—the Young Ladies' Retrenchment Association (forerunner of today's Young Women organization for girls ages 12 to 17) and the Primary (for children under 12).

Seeing these minutes "should give modern Mormon women an understanding of their history and the autonomy of women at the time," said Jenny Reeder, women's history specialist for the LDS Church History Department.

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