

Behind the Scenes of the Joseph Smith Papers Project

A Conversation with the Editors

*Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, Elizabeth Kuehn,
Jeffrey Mahas, and Jessica M. Nelson*

Moderated by Nathan Waite

The following document is a transcript of a roundtable discussion on the work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. The roundtable on June 10, 2023, moderated by Nathan Waite and featuring Robin Scott Jensen, Jessica M. Nelson, Jeffrey Mahas, Elizabeth Kuehn, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, was held in the Joseph A. Floreano Rochester Riverside Convention Center in Rochester, New York, as part of the annual Mormon History Association (MHA) Conference. In the conference program, this session was titled “The Work of the Joseph Smith Papers: A Roundtable.” The recorded remarks have been edited for clarity and readability.

Nathan Waite: Welcome to this session. My name is Nathan Waite, and I am on the editorial team for the Joseph Smith Papers and the Church Historian’s Press. I’m excited to talk today about the work of the Joseph Smith Papers with some of my colleagues here. We’ve got some prepared questions that I’ll give the roundtable members a chance to respond to. That might give us follow-up questions. We’ll go for about an hour with that. Then we will open it up for questions you [the audience] might have. We are looking forward to some really fun conversations today. But first, I want to introduce today’s panelists.

Robin Scott Jensen is a historian/archivist for the Joseph Smith Papers and coeditor of all five volumes of the Revelations and Translations series. He also served as an associate managing historian for the project. He has an MA in American history from Brigham Young University [BYU], a second MA in library and information science from the University of

Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and a PhD in history from the University of Utah. He knows nothing about sports but is incredibly good at connecting with and advocating for his fellow team members.

Jessica M. Nelson completed a BA in American studies at BYU and a master's in history at Utah State University, where she held the Milner/Butler Editorial Fellowship at the *Western Historical Quarterly*. She joined the Joseph Smith Papers in 2018 as a historian and documentary editor. Her current work includes editing the collection of Eliza R. Snow's discourses. She is also an avid cyclist and wins a lot of the road races that she competes in.

Jeffrey Mahas is a volume editor for the Joseph Smith Papers, contributing to several volumes of the Documents series, the Council of Fifty volume, and the Legal Records series online. He received his MA in U.S. history from the University of Utah. He can answer any question you have about Nauvoo. In another life, he would have made a great geologist or paleontologist. He is also probably the world's greatest dad.

Elizabeth Kuehn is the lead historian for the Financial Records series and a volume editor for the Documents series, including lead editor of *Documents, Volume 10*. She has an MA in European and women's history from Purdue University. She has basically held down two full-time jobs recently, because she's serving as MHA's program cochair. Also, if you're interested, she can take you on a tour of where all the merchants kept shop in Buffalo, New York, in the mid-1830s.

Finally, Mark Ashurst-McGee is the senior research and review editor for the Joseph Smith Papers. He is currently working on the Joseph Smith Bible translation. He is our documentary editing expert and developed many of the textual procedures and standards that we follow on the project. He holds a PhD in history from Arizona State University. He's an outdoor adventurer and has been mountaineering all over the place and once swam across the Rio Grande.

The first question. The aim of the Joseph Smith Papers is to gather, transcribe, contextualize, and make accessible every document that was created, authorized, or received by Joseph Smith. What benefits and what limitations have you seen with that documentary editing approach to Joseph Smith?

Let's start with that.

Jessica M. Nelson: Based on those criteria, there are some important documents in the Nauvoo era that just don't get included. One of

those is “The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo.”¹ We debated for a while whether that should be included in some way because it did make it onto [Joseph Smith’s] desk. Ultimately, it wasn’t sent to him or authorized by him. So it’s not a part of our annotated Joseph Smith collection. That’s an example where a really important, relevant document about Joseph Smith doesn’t fit the criteria, so it’s not in the volume.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Unfortunately, I think that applies to a lot of women’s voices in the Joseph Smith era. We have really rich records for some time periods. For instance, in 1837, we have Vilate Kimball and Hepzibah Richards and Mary Fielding writing valuable, wonderful letters that talk about the tensions in the community and where Joseph is positioned and all these details that we drew from heavily. But they don’t meet our criteria for a Joseph Smith document because it is Mary writing to Mercy; it’s Vilate writing to Heber; later, [it’s] Hepzibah writing to Willard Richards, her brother. So those don’t fit our narrow criteria of going through or to Joseph Smith.

Unfortunately, the framing of documentary editing can leave out women’s voices, with it being a Joseph Smith–centered project. That’s not to say that there aren’t plenty of women who write letters to Joseph. Emma writes several letters that we have, of course. So there are women’s voices in the papers. It’s just those tangential voices that you know exist, but you have to find creative ways to bring [them] in and say, “These are happening too.” But they are not a featured transcript.

Nathan Waite: I think that’s a real benefit that annotation brings and a real reason the annotation of the Joseph Smith Papers is so important. Because it allows you to bring in those women’s voices and contextualize the documents even if they’re not featured.

Jeffrey Mahas: I have a lot of thoughts for this question. I joined the Joseph Smith Papers ten years ago, shortly before the first volumes in the Documents series were published. The first couple of volumes going through early Kirtland and Missouri had largely been written but hadn’t been published yet. I had a first-row seat to see how we approached the

1. “1.10 William W. Phelps with Emma Smith Revisions, ‘The Voice of Innocence from Nauvoo,’ February–March 1844,” in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow (Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 151–56, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/church-historians-press/the-first-fifty-years-of-relief-society/part-1/1-10>.

challenge of selection. In these early volumes, we were including almost everything we have that met our criteria as a Joseph Smith document. There's so little in the early history of the Church that we were able to include these early licenses. We were able to include all of these minute entries. But as we approached Nauvoo, we just had the number of documents increase exponentially.

You look at everything Joseph is doing in Nauvoo. He's a newspaper editor. So we had to approach the problem: How do you represent his work as the editor of the *Times and Seasons*? How much do you attribute to him? How much do you think is being done by other people? How do you represent that? Those are questions that we had to answer.

He's the trustee of the Church. You suddenly have hundreds and hundreds of promissory notes, of deeds, of bonds, of mortgages, of all kinds of records. You can no longer put all of these in a book. He's the mayor of Nauvoo. He's passing ordinances, signing ordinances, signing pay orders for the city. You have thousands of documents relating to the administration of Nauvoo. How do you feature all of that? He's the judge of the Nauvoo mayor's court and the chief justice of the municipal court. How do you represent all of that?

We had to be creative. We came up with a list of the core documents we were including. Any revelation we will include. Any correspondence we'll include. Any sermon we'll include. Otherwise, we had to be selective about what we could include. That means that not everything that we have is featured in the print volumes.

There can sometimes be inconsistencies from one volume to the next. On one volume that I worked on, *Documents, Volume 13*, we were trapped into a certain time frame. We couldn't start the volume any earlier, and we couldn't move any later. We had these specific six months, and it just happened to be six months where there were fewer core documents. So we got to be less selective. We got to pull in a lot of minutes or financial records or legal records that wouldn't otherwise be included. But some volumes—*Documents, Volume 15* covers what, six weeks? So they had to be very selective. There's so much in that time frame.

One other thing I would add. The blessing and the curse of our approach is that it really ties us to contemporary documents. What's in the documents? Sometimes the most important events of a time or a period in Joseph's life are not going to be represented. In *Documents, Volume 13* that I worked on—probably the most important event for Joseph and for the history of the Church in that period occurs in late September when Joseph receives the fulness of the temple blessings. This is going

to be one of these pivotal moments in Joseph's life. The members of the Church who were privy to it saw it as a key turning point in the history of the Church and the Restoration. And there's not a single document that's going to talk about that. So we had to try to balance: How do you make sure that, for these key moments in Joseph's life, you're making people aware of them even when they are not represented in the volume?

Mark Ashurst-McGee: I think I want to take even another step back from where Jeffrey has been because this question is resting on some fundamental questions that you face at the very beginning of a documentary editing project. This might sound stupid, but the first thing is subject selection. That sounds really easy. Joseph Smith—he's the founder of the Church. But there are many examples of how quickly you get into the weeds there.

I'll give just a couple of historical examples. What's considered the first major professional modern documentary edition in the American history tradition of documentary editing is the Thomas Jefferson papers.² They decided that they were going to do Jefferson and move forward with that. Well, not too long after, what grew out of that was the John Adams Papers. Except when Lyman Butterfield started building the control file for that project, the correspondence was so dense between John and Abigail, and between John and John Quincy, between John Quincy and Abigail, and some other family members that he quickly realized this was not the John Adams Papers. This was the Adams Family Papers.³ Or consider Marcus Garvey: The Marcus Garvey project changed from the Marcus Garvey Papers to the Marcus Garvey and the UNIA [Universal Negro Improvement Association] Papers because his work with the UNIA was so enmeshed in terms of documentary production.⁴

2. The Papers of Thomas Jefferson is a project at Princeton University working to publish a comprehensive edition of Jefferson's papers. The first volume produced by the project was published in 1950. "The Papers of Thomas Jefferson," Princeton University, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/>.

3. The Adams Papers and the Adams Family Papers are produced by the Massachusetts Historical Society. "Adams Family Papers," Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://www.masshist.org/adams/adams-family-papers>.

4. The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers Project is a documentary editing project produced at the James S. Coleman African Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles. "The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers Project: A Research Project of the James S. Coleman African Studies Center," UCLA African Studies Center, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://www.international.ucla.edu/africa/mgpp/project>. See also C. Gerald

We could have done the Joseph and Emma Smith Papers or something like that. But in doing the Joseph Smith Papers, the fact of the matter is that it's largely documents by men, for men. It is what you get when you make that selection. The annotation does bring in a lot of women's voices and information about women because they're all around and they're significant and they factor into things. But we don't go out of our way to bring them in because we have a really consistent style of what kinds of things we annotate and how we annotate them. I think it's good. When the women come into the annotation, it's because they should be there. It's not gratuitous.

The other really fundamental early decision in documentary editing is whether you're going to do a comprehensive edition or a selective edition. We absolutely had an ideal of doing a comprehensive edition. But as Jeffrey said, we can't do everything in paper. You really wouldn't want to do everything in paper because there are hundreds of priesthood licenses and all kinds of routine documents that you just don't want to print.

I want to take this opportunity to point to the website, which has a much more comprehensive collection of [Joseph] Smith documents. Even more than that, it has a full comprehensive list of documents in what we call a calendar of documents. I think that's something that a lot of people don't know about that's really, really important. If you want to have a good understanding of the Smith corpus, you need to look at the calendar that's on the website.⁵

Nathan Waite: [It] shows a day-by-day chronology, essentially. It shows all the documents for this day and goes through the course of his entire life, document by document, day by day.

Robin Scott Jensen: Extant or nonextant documents.

Nathan Waite: Exactly.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: And even includes all the different *versions* of a document.

Robin Scott Jensen: Documentary editing is not a neutral act. Back to the question, at every single step of the gathering, transcribing, contextualizing, and making accessible, there are decisions that need to be

Fraser, "A 10-Volume Look at Garvey," *New York Times*, April 2, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/04/02/rts/a-10-volume-look-at-garvey.html>.

5. To view the calendar, see "Calendar of Documents," The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed June 26, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/reference/calendar-of-documents>.

made. Some of those decisions are very obvious. Do we include a letter that's in Joseph Smith's own handwriting that is signed by him? That's a pretty obvious decision. Do we include a document written by W. W. Phelps because Joseph Smith told him to write it? That's a little bit harder decision. Do we transcribe this letter as a capital S or a lowercase s? Some of these decisions are monumental. Other decisions might not seem so important. But documentary editing is not neutral. It is decision after decision after decision. Where that matters is we have now published these volumes for you all to use, and they are tremendous resources. (Not to toot our own horn, but we have a panel here about tooting our horn.) We hope to see the scholarship on Joseph Smith balloon because of this. I think that will happen. The ease of access for scholars to go to their library or their shelf and pull out a volume of the Joseph Smith Papers is tremendous. This is a tremendous, monumental day in Mormon studies.

But pulling out a book of published sources fundamentally does not capture the state of the archival record. Documentary editing is not a perfect representation of what the records look like. Anywhere from the very obvious (materiality of the text is not the same) all the way to all these decisions that I talked about. Users of the Joseph Smith Papers are not confronted with those decisions. I have learned on the Joseph Smith Papers that in making those decisions, in discussing those decisions with my colleagues, we have learned things about Joseph Smith. Those lessons about Joseph Smith aren't always in the annotations or introductions or source notes or transcriptions. They're in our heads. They're on the cutting room floor. They're in how we live and breathe Joseph Smith.

As you pull down that volume and use the volume in your scholarship, it is so nice that rather than having to go to the archive and do all this primary research, you can just skim through the printed word. But as you are reading the printed word, you are distancing yourself from the archive, from the document itself. That is a tension—a challenge—that historians have grappled with forever. But it's a real challenge that I hope users of the Joseph Smith Papers will remember. So when we talk about the benefits and the challenges, the very act of using the volume contains both, I believe.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: That's another place where the website is good because the website has high-resolution scanned images side by side with the transcript. It doesn't have an index like the printed volumes. But you can do word searches and have the images. Between the

published paper volumes and the website, you have different angles for getting at different problems.

Jeffrey Mahas: Someone literally right before this session asked me a question at the Church Historian’s Press booth: “Why is the Revelations and Translations series published differently from the Documents series?” I could explain: Well, there [in Revelations and Translations], we put the high-resolution printed photos of the texts side by side with a very detailed transcript, more detailed than usual. We figured these texts, these revelations, these books that are produced by Joseph Smith were where a lot of the interest was going to be. If you are reading Joseph’s letter to Thomas Ford, you probably don’t care about capitalization at all. But you might if it’s the Book of Mormon or the book of Abraham. Or you might not care about punctuation. But on some of these other texts, you might care more. So you have the images there to look at.

Robin Scott Jensen: I forgot one point I was going to make. Another way that the Joseph Smith Papers [Project] is a misrepresentation of the archive is that at no time were all of the documents contained in the Joseph Smith Papers volumes on Joseph Smith’s desk. This is a collation, a collection, a curation of the historical record that is not something that Joseph Smith himself confronted. This is a representation of his life, of his writings as best as we can. But it’s also not a record of his archival work, his record-keeping work.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: And we’re pulling stuff from here in New York all the way to the Huntington Library in California and everywhere in between. But I’d say we had about eighty-five percent of the corpus in Salt Lake City, or something like that. The Community of Christ, of course, had some very important documents. But there’s stuff from coast-to-coast that we’ve collected.

Jessica M. Nelson: Just a plug for an interesting and unique document that fits with what Robin was saying. Sometime in the spring of 1844, Joseph signed an autograph book for a young woman visiting Nauvoo.⁶ Her name was Barbara [Neff], and her friends had signed it, and she had other people in Nauvoo sign it. Eliza R. Snow wrote a few poems in it. It’s one of the few documents that we have written in his [Joseph Smith’s] handwriting and signed by his own name in 1844. It ends up

6. “Poem to Barbara Neff, between circa 6 and circa 13 May 1844,” in *Documents, Volume 14: 1 January–15 May 1844*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Adam H. Petty, Jessica M. Nelson, and Spencer W. McBride, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2023), 507–8, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/poem-to-barbara-neff-between-circa-6-and-circa-13-may-1844/1>.

with this autograph book that comes into Utah. So it was never something he even possessed or sent out. But it was retained in this other book that has a much different history than some of these other documents and the way they were stored.

Jeffrey Mahas: To piggyback off both these comments, one of the genres of documents that I think people are really interested in, which I actually think is really problematic but that we feature, is Joseph's sermons. When you go into our volumes, you're going to see categories: discourses or remarks. The challenge that we faced with the Joseph Smith Papers is that—from what we can tell, other than the Kirtland temple dedicatory prayer—Joseph never got up to give a discourse with a written text. So we're relying on, at best, scribes who are making notes and, at worst, just people who are in the audience who later write down what they remember Joseph saying. You'll often see people reproducing these sermon notes as if this is an exact quote of what Joseph said. I think it's important to remember this was mediated through probably several levels: What did they understand that Joseph was saying? What did they write down? And what has survived? I think there are a lot of challenges as we try to understand what Joseph is teaching in a public setting in these discourses. There's a challenge with the text that we have there. How do we represent them, and how do we understand them? Because other than one or two instances, Joseph doesn't review—that we know of—these notes of sermons and discourses that he's giving. So would Joseph agree with what the scribe wrote down? We have no way of knowing for sure.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Well, we have a clue. Because in the couple times that he does review it, he does make interventions.

Jeffrey Mahas: Yes. In April 1843, Joseph reviews William Clayton's conference minutes and [basically] says, "These are terrible. Start over."⁷ So we don't know if Joseph would agree with the notes we have of the King Follett discourse or any other discourse that Joseph gave.

Elizabeth Kuehn: And sometimes reception can be at opposite ends. There is a discourse in June of 1842 that we have John D. Lee recording,

7. On April 23, 1843, Joseph Smith "<heard read> minutes of special conference." According to his journal, these minutes "were not explicit enough," so he "said he would dictate them over again." See "Journal, December 1842–June 1844," in *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2011), 372, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/182>.

and we have William Smith recording. John D. Lee says, Oh, he told us to repent, and we need to be better; this was a soul-searching sermon, and I need to do better to build the kingdom of God.⁸ In the *Wasp*, William Smith says, Joseph harangued all those sinners and gave them what for, and does not lump himself in with those being harangued.⁹ So you can see how reception is very mediated to the individual. John D. Lee is being called to repentance, and William Smith is saying, Yeah, call out all those sinners in Nauvoo. It's a fun kind of mediation.

Nathan Waite: I've never thought about it just this way. But one of [the] main things the Joseph Smith Papers is trying to do is say, Stop using the printed version of the *History of the Church* for your Joseph Smith quotes. Stop using *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. Let's get back to the original. Let's get back to what he actually said. But this is a good point. With a lot of the things, especially discourses, we're never going to get back to exactly what he said. It's always going to be mediated by the scribes or by the people recording him.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: There are no stenographic reports. It's all longhand reports.

Nathan Waite: Yes, this is before we had shorthand.

Jessica M. Nelson: Well, in taking a step back further, this presents itself as a unique papers project in that we're trying to capture spoken, verbal words in text because this man is a prophet and people look at him that way. Whereas in other projects that we compare ourselves with, work with, or model ourselves after, they are not doing the same thing—trying to capture what Thomas Jefferson said—in the same way because his words have different meaning from Joseph Smith's and someone like that.

Jeffrey Mahas: A simple comparison: the Jonathan Edwards papers. He wrote down all his sermons, so you can publish them and know what he said.¹⁰ Joseph doesn't do the same. [*agreement from panelists*]

8. "Discourse, 5 June 1842, as Reported by John D. Lee," in *Documents, Volume 10: May–August 1842*, ed. Elizabeth A. Kuehn, Jordan T. Watkins, Matthew C. Godfrey, and Mason K. Alfred, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 126–30, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-june-1842-as-reported-by-john-d-lee/1>.

9. "Discourse, 5 June 1842, as Published in *Wasp*," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 3, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-june-1842-as-published-in-wasp/1>.

10. The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University publishes the Works of Jonathan Edwards Online. This is a collection of sermons, manuscripts, and published works by Edwards, a prominent preacher and theologian in Massachusetts in the eighteenth

Nathan Waite: I wanted to ask what changes you've seen happen over the course of the project, such as decisions we made or course changes. What's happened along the way that's changed our approach to the Joseph Smith Papers?

Jessica M. Nelson: I've been here the fewest number of years, so I don't have as much of a perspective. I will defer to my colleagues.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Starting with the Kirtland Bank, we had to start tackling financial records. It's in 1836 that we have Joseph finally engaging in business ventures in any kind of large-scale way. With Sharon [Nielsen]'s help (I'll call her out in the audience), we had to navigate creating genres and ways to understand financial documents that the papers, to this point, had not engaged with at the same level.¹¹ There had been deeds; there had been promissory notes. But suddenly, we were dealing with bank ledgers and many different types of financial records. I think that was one big change that has now snowballed into a separate series that we're working on to try and represent trustee records, tithing records, and the full corpus of Joseph's financial papers.¹²

Another change—Mark has correctly noted that this is largely men talking to men, about men. But that's not to say that the women aren't there. There are ways that we worked to call them out a little bit more, to give them attention. In just about every deed of a married couple, a woman has to give up her dower rights to a property, and so she is signing it, if she can. If she is not able to sign her name, she's making her mark. A decision was made to include women's names with every deed that that applied to. So they were named there.¹³

Mark Ashurst-McGee: May I add a quick footnote to that? Whenever the journal says, Joseph Smith is staying at Brother So-and-So's house, the footnote will say, Brother and Sister So-and-So lived here. We did things like that.

century. "Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University," Yale University, accessed April 28, 2025, <http://edwards.yale.edu/>.

11. At the time of this roundtable, Sharon Nielsen was the web editorial lead for the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

12. See "Browse the Papers: Financial Records," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/financial-records>.

13. See "Deed from Daniel H. and Eliza Robison Wells, 4 February 1843," in *Documents, Volume 11: September 1842–February 1843*, ed. Spencer W. McBride, Jeffrey D. Mahas, Brett D. Dowdle, and Tyson Reeder, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2020), 388–93, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/deed-from-daniel-h-and-eliza-robison-wells-4-february-1843/1>.

Jeffrey Mahas: Because it's probably not Newel K. Whitney that's cooking for Joseph.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Right. And also, I think there was encouragement in the annotation. There's sometimes a scholarly negligence, where it's stated Newel K. Whitney and wife. Well, Elizabeth has a name. Let's call her Elizabeth Ann Whitney. Let's name her in the records. In that light, we've also worked to identify and give biographies to the plural wives of Joseph Smith in our biographical directory.

Jeffrey Mahas: One change that I noticed [is] that [readers are] the recipients of [staff knowledge] in the published volumes. By design, there was a lot of specialization over time among the staff. One of the changes that I saw over time is that you find specific people who would either be assigned to or latch on to a topic and would become the experts on that topic. I think Robin really became [the expert] with revelations and translations. He became someone that a lot of people went to. Elizabeth took it upon herself to get to know financial documents, and anytime anyone in the project was annotating the financial documents, one of the first things they would do is take it to Elizabeth and ask, "What is this?" [David] Grua specialized in legal, and he would review legal documents. If you want to know where someone lived in Nauvoo, I'm your guy. I can tell you that I helped a lot with maps and other things. Mark helped with everything.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Handwriting. Well, textual issues. Sharalyn Howcroft was our handwriting identification expert.¹⁴

Jeffrey Mahas: Yes. Whenever I got a tricky document, I'd take it to Mark and say, "What on earth is going on here?" And we'd try to figure it out. We benefited from the best collaborative environment I can possibly imagine. In the printed volumes, you're going to see sometimes three, four, five editors listed. But the reality is, each of those volumes is the product of a team of dedicated historians and editors and others who are really pouring themselves into it. We're all working together. It really feels like every volume, every publication, every web release is a joint victory lap for everyone on the project.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Looking back, I see two major changes over the course of the project. One was in the Documents series. We started out comprehensive and then had to become selective. And there was a big debate. Maybe it was a debate between Robin and me. Robin wanted

14. At the time of this roundtable, Sharalyn D. Howcroft was the project archivist for the Joseph Smith Papers.

to represent the corpus of Joseph Smith's documents. The Joseph Smith documents get, in general, more and more and more as time goes by. There are very few at the beginning and a whole lot more by the very end. If you're going to represent the corpus of documents, then you are selecting all the way through in order to represent the corpus as it grows.

There was the other point of view, which I took but never felt totally great about. We're doing the papers of Joseph Smith because we want to understand Joseph Smith. So there was an idea that early on in his life, where we have relatively few documents, we use all of that so we can get a better idea of those years. Later on, we'll have a much better idea of *those* years because of the wealth of documentation. So that was one change and that happened starting with *Documents, Volume 7*, as soon as we get to Nauvoo. Before Nauvoo, it's virtually comprehensive, and afterward, it's selective. That's one big change.

The other big change was that we had really big plans for a Legal series, including paper volumes. Our relationship with attorneys and the outside legal team didn't work out. It split into two different ways, with them going off in one way to draft print volumes with some legal commentary and us going another way and presenting the legal papers in our own consistent style on the website.

Nathan Waite: But one thing that [it] allowed us to do is be comprehensive, right? There is so much legal content on the website. Hundreds and hundreds of documents, dozens and dozens of cases. Maybe hundreds of cases, right?

Jeffrey Mahas: [Around] two hundred cases, I believe.

Nathan Waite: The fact that it went online meant that we could present all that documentation and do a great job.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Yes, and that's for all the series.¹⁵

Robin Scott Jensen: I just have one anecdote. There are a lot of things that changed. On this panel, Mark's been here the longest. I started a couple of years after Mark. But there have been a lot of things that have changed, including physical location. We used to be down at BYU, and then we moved up to the Church. A lot of things.

One example or anecdote that shows the conversation and the complexities of documentary editing: In the Documents series, we knew that

15. The Joseph Smith Papers website is organized in seven series: Documents, Journals, Administrative Records, Revelations and Translations, Histories, Legal Records, and Financial Records. "The Joseph Smith Papers," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org>.

we would present the revelations of Joseph Smith: Joseph Smith as revelator. That's a very important genre of documents. We knew that the revelations needed to be placed in their context. But the revelations were important to the early Latter-day Saints, so they were copied multiple times. There are a lot of different versions, all the way from when they were first recorded up through the end of his [Joseph's] life, when they're published in 1844 in an edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Initially, we thought we would include the latest version of the revelations—or in other words, that 1844 edition—because that then shows the final word, as it were, on Joseph Smith's understanding of these revelations. He made changes, corrections to them, throughout their publication history. If we presented the 1844 version of the revelation, that would give a sense that this is the final word on these revelations by Joseph Smith. The more we thought about it, the more we realized that doesn't work. That's presenting an 1844 text, as it were, in the 1829 context.

It's possible to justify and to argue for that. I think that there is a case to be made. But since the Documents series are a chronological framework from beginning to end, we thought it made sense to go with the earliest version of the revelation we had access to. The challenge, of course (and this gets back to my earlier point), is that except for maybe one or two instances, we don't have any original dictated copies of the revelations. So we're still presenting documents that are not specifically tied to that particular date. We've got 1829 and 1830 revelations that are actually, technically, 1833 texts published in the Book of Commandments. But that is, again, the reality of the state of the records.

That's one change, and we had to do a lot of that work because we had already done a lot of annotation. Well, not for the 1844 text. But when we reverted back to the earliest text, some of that annotation changed because some wording changed. Then we had to make decisions of, Do we point forward to talk about anticipating changes to the text, or does that rip the readers out of the context? So these are the kinds of conversations that we had. Yes, there were a lot of conversations.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: I'll add that we did get that worked out before we had published any of them. So starting with the first volume of the Documents series, we had a consistent method. We can talk for hours about little changes. But I think the major takeaway should be that we spent half a decade getting all our ducks in a row, which is actually the usual situation for large documentary editing projects like ours. I hope your [the audience's] takeaway is that the product is remarkably consistent.

Nathan Waite: I wanted to follow up with what you were saying, Mark, about this big shift from comprehensive to selective. I think we have a real, tangible example of that.

When I started on the project, my first full-time assignment was to work on the Histories series. We ended up with two history volumes: the *Joseph Smith Histories* and the *Assigned Histories*.¹⁶ That second volume, which I love with all my heart, has the John Whitmer history; it has the John Corrill history. Some really interesting stuff in there. But if we were to go now and say, “Let’s do this volume,” we would say, “No way!” because our conception of the size of the project and what counts as those papers is very different. The *Assigned Histories*, I think, is a function of having been one of the earliest things we did because it is a little bit of a step away from Joseph Smith. I think it would have ended up on the website and not in a print volume. But I’m glad it ended up in a print volume because I love that volume.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Nate did maybe the lion’s share of work on that volume.

Nathan Waite: We need to credit Karen Davidson as well. She did an awful lot of work on that.¹⁷

Other thoughts on these questions? Or are you ready to tackle another one?

Okay. Will you talk about one specific document that you worked on that you think is really significant or illustrates something important? Jessica, tell us about that.

Jessica M. Nelson: I came onto the project in the summer of 2018 and started working on some of the documents as we were wrapping up volume 12. One of the documents in that little, small set that I was learning and that I worked on was a letter from a man named Thomas Rawcliff.¹⁸

16. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2012); Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds., *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2012).

17. Karen Lynn Davidson was the lead historian on the two histories volumes in the Joseph Smith Papers.

18. “Letter from Thomas Rawcliff, 24 May 1843,” in *Documents, Volume 12: March–July 1843*, ed. David W. Grua, Brent M. Rogers, Matthew C. Godfrey, Robin Scott Jensen, Christopher James Blythe, and Jessica M. Nelson, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2021), 328–42, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-thomas-rawcliff-24-may-1843/1>.

I think it gives a really interesting perspective on Nauvoo. He's someone whose parents had joined the Church in England, and he knew a lot of the people who came over and were settling in Nauvoo and those neighboring areas. He writes with a lot of concern for these people, who he felt had been told a lot of great things about what it would be like to be with the body of the Saints but who were struggling and trying to find jobs. It was really, really difficult. I've found his perspective and his advocacy for these poor British Saints, who had sacrificed a lot to be there, to be very informative because it's not a voice you would put in an antagonistic camp. He was very sympathetic but also kind of a neutral voice, advocating for a people he really loved and cared about. He didn't want them to be taken advantage of. That was, I thought, an interesting and important document that made it into that volume.

Similarly, another British-related document in *Documents, Volume 14* is a letter from a man supervising the mission over there.¹⁹ His name is Reuben Hedlock. He describes the Church activity and what it was like to try to facilitate emigration, making sure people had their information about that and trying to follow [direction] from Church leadership. But also, it tells us a lot about what people thought about the Church in that area. There is an interesting and really tragic story of someone drowning during a baptism. That got an elder in prison. Her husband, who tried to save her as she was drowning, also ended up in prison. There's a criminal trial for them. So it's a little bit about the opposition to the Church outside of the American context in these working-class neighborhoods in Great Britain.

Nathan Waite: And that's kind of unexpected. [A reader may think,] Using the Joseph Smith Papers, I'm not going to find out about the inner workings of the Church in England. But it's because they were sending reports to the Prophet.

Jessica M. Nelson: Yes, exactly. This is a very long and extensive document. It receives thirty-two pages of treatment in *Documents, Volume 14*. We are kind of biased because what you work on is what you know. Those were two that I thought were interesting and important perspectives on the Church, especially outside the United States.

19. "Letter from Reuben Hedlock, 10–21 January 1844," in *Documents, Volume 14: 1 January–15 May 1844*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Adam H. Petty, Jessica M. Nelson, and Spencer W. McBride, *Joseph Smith Papers* (Church Historian's Press, 2023), 53–85, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-reuben-hedlock-10-21-january-1844/1>.

Elizabeth Kuehn: One document in the last ten years is a little bit of a challenge for me. So I may take a leaf from Jessica’s book and do two. But in 1842, we have some rare examples of documents connected to plural marriage. These are in *Documents, Volume 10*, and they are from the Whitney family archive. The Whitney family kept these, preserved them, even though they were told to destroy them. But they chose not to do that. One is the copy of a revelation that is essentially telling Newel K. Whitney how to seal his daughter Sarah Ann Whitney to Joseph Smith as a plural wife.²⁰ The other is an August 1842 letter that Joseph is writing to Newel K., Elizabeth Ann, and Sarah Ann Whitney, their daughter.²¹

These are some of the few primary source documents we have around plural marriage. But they also proved pretty daunting in trying to figure out the balance of annotation, how we talk through these things, and how we explain these to readers on a scholarly level, as well as provide a member-facing explanation. These, I felt, were some of the most trying documents I worked on but also, in some sense, the ones that I feel the most pastoral connection to. Because that then leads to a lot of conversations with those who are struggling with these topics in the larger picture of Joseph Smith’s history.

I’ll quickly do a second one. It’s kind of a cheat because it’s over four hundred pages long. But it’s the Book of the Law of the Lord.²² These are Nauvoo tithing records that Joseph Smith instructed to be kept starting in 1842. The name of every single Saint at that time period who donated tithing is in these books, with what they donated and the degree to which they donated. They are often donating goods in-kind. So you get some really interesting entries that speak to the Nauvoo economy or how the Nauvoo economy is struggling when someone’s paying their tithing in newspapers or in garden produce or they are giving a nickel because that’s what they have. It’s a very interesting insight to the sacrifice of Saints both in the Nauvoo area as well as many, many in the British Isles, who are also sending tithing and donations to the Nauvoo Temple.

20. “Revelation, 27 July 1842, in Unidentified Handwriting–B,” in Kuehn and others, *Documents, Volume 10*, 308–14, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-27-july-1842/1#historical-intro>.

21. “Letter to Newel K., Elizabeth Ann Smith, and Sarah Ann Whitney, 18 August 1842,” in Kuehn and others, *Documents, Volume 10*, 436–40, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-newel-k-elizabeth-ann-smith-and-sarah-ann-whitney-18-august-1842/1>.

22. “The Book of the Law of the Lord,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/the-book-of-the-law-of-the-lord/1>.

Nathan Waite: The Book of the Law of the Lord will be published later this year on the website. Because it will highlight everyday Saints, not just your top leaders, there are many people who will show up there who don't show up in other places.

Also, as a follow-up question to something you said, Elizabeth: The general kind of idea seems to be that documentation around plural marriage is—if it's contemporary, it was by someone with an axe to grind. It's from a hostile source. Then it's only our later documents that other [faithful] people were involved in. You've mentioned this little Whitney collection as an exception. Would you say, in general, that's one of the only exceptions? Is it generally true that we don't have in the Joseph Smith Papers any contemporary references to or documents about plural marriage?

Elizabeth Kuehn: It is a very small number, and I might invite Robin to speak on this too, since he's worked quite a bit on it as well. But we have very few from Joseph that I would consider authorized from Joseph. We, of course, have William Clayton's journal, which is a very rich resource but from a very unique perspective—singular, I might say. We have a handful of contemporary records, a majority of which are thanks to the Whitney family.

Jeffrey Mahas: We have one letter, for example, from Eliza R. Snow that she writes in her journal.²³ But it doesn't record any details of plural marriage. You can see affection and care is in this letter, but there's no mention of her relationship to Joseph in it.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Other than that she had been sealed the previous year.

Nathan Waite: You have to read between the lines.

Robin Scott Jensen: To Jeffrey's point (I think Jeffrey made the point), some events that we wish were documented better are not, and plural marriage was one of those. As I think about it, it's actually kind of remarkable. There's not many, but it's remarkable that there are some. I mean, Joseph Smith is telling the Whitneys to destroy this letter.²⁴ It makes me think immediately, Oh! How many other letters were written like that that were destroyed? If he's so careful in documenting these

23. "Poem from Eliza R. Snow, 12 October 1842," in McBride and others, *Documents, Volume 11*, 150–55, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/poem-from-eliza-r-snow-12-october-1842/1#historical-intro>.

24. In his letter to the Whitneys referenced by Elizabeth Kuehn earlier, Joseph Smith instructed them to "burn this letter as soon as you read it." "Letter to Newel K.," 436.

activities, he's clearly going to then *not* document certain things because of the sensitive nature of them.

Jeffrey Mahas: It was actually easy for me to come up with my favorite document that I've worked on. When I started the project ten years ago, I was hired by Mark to be his research assistant. We were originally putting together *Documents, Volume 6*. A week or so after I started, I was hard at work on that, and Mark brought me in and said, "We are changing tactics." I was only told, "I need you to help do research for *Journals, Volume 3*, the final volume of the Joseph Smith journals. I want you to work on background of the Council of Fifty for the annotation for *Journals, Volume 3*." I did not know (very few people on the staff knew at that point) that we had received permission to publish the Council of Fifty minutes.

I started researching, gathering all of the secondary and primary source literature that I could find that mentioned the Council of Fifty. One story I'll tell is while in the middle of this, I came across the references to there being three little books of minutes of the Nauvoo-era Council of Fifty. I went to Mark's office, and Mark had a little book on his desk that I didn't notice. I proceeded to say to Mark, "Where are these minute books? We know that there were these minute books." Mark patiently listened and was saying, "Yes, it would be very helpful." Mark was verifying the transcripts of the minutes at that very time, I later found out. I was very privileged to be one of the historians who got to ultimately work on that volume, and I, to this day, can't believe my luck.

I still think I died and went to heaven ten years ago because I would spend every day working with Mark, with Matt Grow, with Ron Espin, and Gerrit Dirkmaat. We would meet together, read the minutes together, try to figure things out, assign out annotation. But getting to be one of the first scholars to look at these records that no one had looked at for almost one hundred years was really an incredible privilege, and I just can't believe that I got to work on that. I think of all the things that I've done, that's probably the most important. Because those of you who have been in Latter-day Saint history a long time, how many people thought that the Church would ever publish the Council of Fifty minutes? I think that was assumed to be totally off the table, and now it's published.²⁵ It's out there. It's done. I mean, how incredible is that?

25. Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Espin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Jeffrey D. Mahas, eds., *Administrative Records, Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2016).

Mark Ashurst-McGee: I'm just going add to that. It was really fun because Jeffrey said to me, "Is there any way we can get the Council of Fifty minutes? I just think it would be really helpful!" [audience laughter] I wasn't allowed to say anything. So I'm just saying, "I totally agree with you. I think that would be super helpful." And I had the volume on my desk. [audience laughter]

We're actually still collecting Joseph Smith documents. And if you know of any, please let us know, and we'll check and see if we know about it yet or not. But we just keep looking. On Thursday, I was at the [New York] Ontario County Records [and Archives] Center with Jeffrey and David [Grua], and they found a new document that we never knew of before. So we're still looking.

But back to the Council of Fifty minutes. That's different than finding a legal record or a line in a docket book or even a letter. It's just an incredible resource packed with hundreds of pages of information. I think a few more documents will keep trickling in through the years. But I highly doubt we will ever have something like that happen ever again, where we get such a huge wealth of information that we can add to public historical knowledge.

Robin Scott Jensen: With all due respect to my colleagues, I actually worked on the most important documents of the Joseph Smith Papers. [audience laughter]

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Which all Latter-day Saints already have in their scriptures. [audience laughter]

Robin Scott Jensen: At the Casper [Wyoming] meeting of the Mormon History Association in 2006, a couple of us were called into a hotel room, and it was announced to us that we had an item from the First Presidency's vault titled the Book of Commandments and Revelations. That became the second volume published—first *Journals, Volume 1*, and then second, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1*.²⁶ I was a really young scholar who had just barely been promoted from research assistant to historian, and I didn't know what I was doing. The impostor syndrome was extremely intense. But I went up to Ron Esplin, and I said, "Ron, I beg of you. Let me work on this volume." So I ended up working on that volume, and it changed my life.

26. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2008); Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2009).

For those who don't know, the Book of Commandments and Revelations is the earliest compilation of revelations in book form that they took to Missouri to print the Book of Commandments in 1833. To have access to this source gave us access to, in many cases, the earliest versions of the revelations. Not only do we have the early versions of the revelations, but we see how they're editing them for publication. It just gives us a sense of understanding for [that] moment in time and of how the revelations were perceived at that time. It was an absolute treat and privilege to have worked on that important manuscript.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Also, [we] see how that early on, they were putting that much care, comparatively, into preserving those texts. It is really impressive. This was something special that they were doing, the care that they were putting into this at that time.

Jessica M. Nelson: So I'm in contrast with my colleagues, who have been able to work on a lot more cool and important things, and that suits them very well. [laughter] For me, I guess, one thing that was cool about the documents that I've worked on is they created a fuller picture of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo than we've had. A lot of times, when scholars go to cite things, they wouldn't have seen these kinds of documents before. Or they are talking about some of these other important texts or important projects, like the Council of Fifty—things that draw our attention a little more. There are these moments that are interesting, that tell a story or more of a story [to] fill things in, but they're not as significant in a sense. Also, they haven't been seen before or talked about widely by scholars or cited before. So the fact that these kinds of documents are presented along with some of the other ones—like in *Documents, Volume 14*, we have documents from the Council of Fifty alongside these other ones. It's just a cool aspect of the project.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Definitely. One of my favorites, maybe for whimsical reasons, is about a lost cow. It was donated to the tithing office and wanders off. Tithing can walk in Nauvoo. [audience laughter] So you have William Clayton writing in, saying, If anyone sees this cow, can you get it back to us? It's tithing.²⁷ It's like Jessica said: It's these singular moments that help put you on the ground in Nauvoo and remind you that this is a very different world than the one we live in.

Nathan Waite: I've got one more question, and then I will invite the audience to join the conversation.

27. See "Notice, 21 May 1842," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/notice-21-may-1842/1>.

Documents, Volume 15, the last print volume, is coming out later this month.²⁸ We've got the Legal series ending, whenever Jeffrey gets finished. It's projected for January of next year. We've got the Financial series wrapping up in the next couple of years. There's the Administrative Records series. So we really are drawing to a close on this project. But where does documentary editing go from here? Or where do you think it's going?

Robin Scott Jensen: Before I answer that, let me say one thing. The six of us here are a fraction of the representation of the Joseph Smith Papers. We weren't asked the question of what did we learn the most or what did we find most valuable. One of the most valuable things that I have experienced on the Joseph Smith Papers is working with my colleagues—the collaboration, the friendships. Hopefully it comes out that we enjoy one another's company, and we're friendly. We like working with each other. It has been an absolute treat working with my fellow colleagues—here up front but also in the audience and elsewhere. The Joseph Smith Papers has been a tremendous opportunity and blessing in my life.

So where does documentary editing go from here? Who was it that said historians make terrible prognosticators? There are so many possibilities. [*audience laughter*]

Mark Ashurst-McGee: We are historians of the Prophet. Not historians and prophets. [*audience laughter*]

Robin Scott Jensen: I have a million thoughts in my mind. Latter-day Saints are a record-keeping people. We have a lot of records. There are a lot of opportunities to reproduce and share those records with scholars and with Latter-day Saints. Yet I think that with improved technology and with cultural changes and whatnot, documentary editors also need to adapt.

One of the changes that we experienced was the implementation of the web presence. It was originally just a print series, and then we incorporated the web. What a tremendous blessing that has been. But I think as we see society use historical sources differently, we have to change. Documentary editing has done a lot for Latter-day Saint history. The practice of documentary editing is long and rich within Mormon

28. Brett D. Dowdle, Adam H. Petty, J. Chase Kirkham, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, David W. Grua, and Matthew C. Godfrey, eds., *Documents, Volume 15: 16 May–28 June 1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2023).

studies. I have a paper that I want to open, kind of jokingly, saying that the Book of Mormon is the first Latter-day Saint documentary edition. But we've had a long, rich history of documentary editing serving a particular purpose within our culture, in the writing of our history, [and] within society in general. So documentary editors need to be aware of those cultural changes and shifts.

We need to learn from a lot of different fields. Documentary editors are made up largely of historians, but there are a lot of things we can learn from our fellow English literary professors. I want to make a plug for archivists as well. There is a lot of overlap between what documentary editors do and what archivists do.

We have a conference this coming September at the end of the Joseph Smith Papers.²⁹ I might have a little bit smarter things to say at that point.

Jeffrey Mahas: I know Elizabeth has thought a lot about it, so I'm going to listen to her.

Elizabeth Kuehn: I would defer to Robin. I do think that the Joseph Smith Papers has presented a singular model of documentary editing. Yet for those more well-versed in the field, documentary editing can be a very dynamic approach to presenting documents, to presenting text. I hope the future includes some innovation. I would love to see us move more in the vein of some of the really innovative stuff like the Adams Family Papers, where you bring in multiple voices, where you weigh women's voices and men's voices as equally as you can, given the documentary record. I just think that there's a lot more you can do with the records and presenting records online than we've tried to do. So I hope there's innovation.

Robin Scott Jensen: Could I add one more thought? There is a danger in doing documentary history because documents are written by a certain subset of society. I would love to see what it would look like to incorporate material culture into documentary editing. I think some of the earliest sources we have in our early history are samplers done or created by the Whitmer women [see figs. 1 and 2]. What does that look like in the documentary editing world? If we're only focusing on documents,

29. The Joseph Smith Papers Project held a conference on September 15–16, 2023, titled “What Have We Learned from the Joseph Smith Papers Project?” Thirty-one speakers, including President Dallin H. Oaks of the First Presidency, presented at the conference. “2023 Joseph Smith Papers Conference in Review,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/2023-news>. See also “How the Joseph Smith Papers Became a Project of Consequence,” herein, 143–63.



FIGURE 1. Embroidered sampler by Mary Whitmer. Courtesy Church History Library.

on records, on written word, we're losing out on a lot of voices that we shouldn't be losing out on. So I would love to figure out what an expansive documentary edition looks like—you really can't call it "documentary editing"—but [more like a] material culture-type record.

Jeffrey Mahas: For example, you talked about plural marriage. There are not a lot of records in there. But what does it mean that when Helen Mar Kimball goes to get married to Horace Whitney, she stops at Carthage Jail and takes a shaving of the well curb where Joseph died that's bloodstained, chips it off, and treasures it for the rest of her life?³⁰ You

30. This wood chip is available in Whitney Family Documents, 1843–1912, images 6–7, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/473d6bd1-1a13-4010-b715-f6a192b7a118/0/5>.

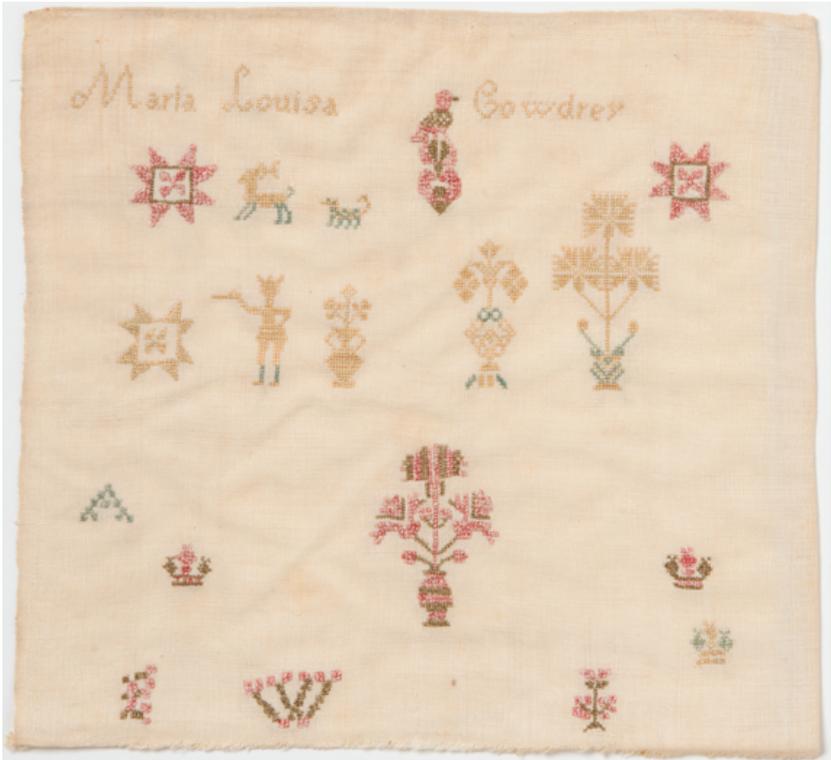


FIGURE 2. Embroidered sampler by Maria Louise Cowdrey. Courtesy Church History Library.

may not have anything from Helen from Nauvoo, but you have her collecting that artifact.

Robin Scott Jensen: You have canes. You have hair. You have a lot of artifacts that tell stories that were meaningful, that convey history from one generation to another. That's what the written word did. That's what these artifacts do, [such as] the seer stone. We've got a lot of things that convey history that the documentary record ignores or we ignore because we are not expanding our view.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: And there's a continuum there. We have artifacts that have text on them, like a cup given to Joseph Smith with an inscription or a sword with an inscribed blade or hilt.

Robin Scott Jensen: He's signing a lot of books. He's not the author of that book, but there's an inscription or signature in the book. What does that mean?

Mark Ashurst-McGee: He has a cane with his initials on it. There's actually formal text on nonbook, nonmanuscript artifacts that we should include in our edition.

Jessica M. Nelson: The main crux of these kinds of products is to make sources available and for people to use them. This project is incredible for how productive it's been able to be [during] the tenure that people have been working on it. And it's very resource intensive. It is not likely that other projects will have the same amount of institutional resources behind them. But the impulse, direction, and work expected of us to put sources out there will remain and will continue, especially [with] women's collections. Some of that will hopefully be creative, like you were saying. But the idea is, technically, to get as many sources out there as we can. So a lot of that will be web facing. Some of it might have a print volume component to it. For example, I am working on Eliza R. Snow[s] discourses. Right now, we have over twelve hundred documents available on the website that you can view.³¹ There will be a reduced percentage available in a print volume, with some annotation in it, of course. What's great about all this is that these are reliable primary sources, and that's, hopefully, what we'll get to continue to do, although it will look a little bit different.

Nathan Waite: All right, what questions do you folks have? [*referring to the audience*]

Audience comment: A lot of comments. I'm overwhelmed by all that you guys have done. I hope you have a sense of how this is going to impact you all for the rest of your lives. So many of us are just so grateful for what you and a hundred-plus other people have contributed to this. The scholarship is amazing.

Back to your comments on the first question. I really appreciated Elizabeth and Mark both clarifying why women's voices aren't heard. And it makes sense. I mean, we all revere Joseph Smith in the same way. And any intelligent woman wouldn't want gratuitous women just added for the sake of adding women to it. We certainly understand why this is a male-focused collection of volumes, as it should be.

It occurs to me at the same time—this past year, we've been given *Saints* that has been so greatly driven by women's journals and women's voices, in a way we have never seen before. So I just wanted to remark on that.

31. See The Discourses of Eliza R. Snow, Church Historian's Press, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/eliza-r-snow>.

Also, I think there was a comment on samplers as documentary evidence. I'm there! What a wonderful notion that is! I think there should be a volume 28 or whatnot. It's kind of a cool notion. You have piqued my interest.

Audience question: Thank you all. This was fantastic. Really fun to actually see all your perspectives and everything you have shared with us.

I have two questions that came up as you guys were chatting. One: You mentioned, Mark, that from here all the way out to the West Coast, the documents were all over the place. Are there any Joseph Smith documents that you have found or that there might be that are not in the United States? And the second question: There are Joseph Smith documents in private hands. I think of people like Reid Moon and a handful of other private collectors and all their associates out there. I know that there have been some efforts to get images and things. But are there Joseph Smith documents out there in private hands that have been purchased for lots of money that you guys are still trying to get ahold of?

Audience member: Half of the Legal series came from private collections.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: And courthouses. But I would like to defer this question to Sharalyn Howcroft. She has the answers to both of your questions.

Sharalyn Howcroft: We have a lot of documents that come from various repositories. The big names on that list are the Church History Library, the Community of Christ Library and Archives, the Chicago History Museum, the State Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The New York Library also has some, as do the Huntington Library, Beinecke Library at Yale, and Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. We've had an individual who had material in his private possession that he brought to Salt Lake from Japan. He correlated that trip with his visit to Salt Lake City for general conference. He brought the document to the Church History Library to be scanned. That's the only one I can think of in terms of documents all over the world.

There were collections that we were aware of that we knew to have some Joseph Smith documents in them, but we did not know who the purchaser was. Those are the things that give me heartburn at night. It is one thing to know that something slipped out of your hands. It is another thing to know precisely what it was that slipped out of your hands, which is challenging. However, once we started gaining momentum with the [Joseph Smith] Papers Project, it was really amazing how

collectors and sellers of early Latter-day Saint documents realized what we were doing and really wanted to be part of it. You mentioned Reid Moon. He has been excellent to work with. In working with him on various things, we've been able to verify some documents that he was going to purchase. So it was advantageous for him to have information that we knew about these documents. We have a very good, healthy reciprocal relationship with him. Brent Ashworth has been great to work with too. There's a whole host of folks. I feel like by naming two, I'm slighting others, and that's not my intent because, on the whole, people have been fabulous to work with in the process.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Yes, on the whole, but not entirely. Some collectors and dealers have been horrible to work with. There are a lot of documents that have been stolen from the courthouses and enter the private market, and then you have to try to track those down. Or things pop up here and there and you wonder, How's that in the private market? That should be here. You're trying to track where these things have gone and been and where they might be.

Jeffrey Mahas: To that point, we've had to be careful with language because we've got detailed source notes. It's a running joke in the Church History Department about how boring our source notes are. But they're very important. With the Legal series, we have a lot of heartburn over the language in the source notes because many of these documents are in private possession after disappearing from courthouses and other government repositories under questionable circumstances. We have to be careful describing the provenance of these records, merely stating that at some time they left the courthouse.

Robin Scott Jensen: To be fair, to try to complicate that story, there have been instances where, through agreement—whether it's legal or not—people would go in and say, “Hey, I have a deal for you. I will microfilm all your original courthouse records. You don't have to have the cost of storage. All I ask in return is that you give me the originals.” Then all of a sudden, you have a bunch of Abraham Lincoln and Joseph Smith signatures. All you have to do is photocopy or essentially microfilm them. So there was some agreement, sometimes, with these. It's not always the case. So when we say “steal,” sometimes people assume the very worst, and in some cases, it was the very worst. With other cases, people in both parties thought this was kind of an agreement. And more and more common today, there are situations where the person who now owns the documents bought them in the private market and was not the one who originally obtained them from a courthouse.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: I just want to add that every single thing we've talked about here has rabbit holes that go as deep as you ever want to go. Every single one of these issues.

Sharalyn Howcroft: One of the things that needs to be taken into account, when it comes to these local government record agencies, is that they work under a records management policy. Records management and archives are connected disciplines but have distinct methodologies from each other. One thing with records management is that if documents no longer meet an administrative or operational value for the institution or organization and its day-to-day operations, they have the right to discard or destroy the records.

Now, some of these places also have state laws in force indicating that if they are going to discard or destroy things, they need to appeal to an oversight committee at the state archive level. That decision isn't made locally. The problem that we have is that those types of statutes began to be enforced in the late 1990s. That means anything before that, in some of these records places, the local agencies could have discarded or destroyed their legal records without state oversight, and we wouldn't even know what happened to the records. An example of records disposal that occurred is when local government agencies offloaded tens of thousands of loose court documents to manuscript dealer King V. Hostick to free up space in their county buildings.³²

Audience question: I was wondering if you could give us a little bit of a formal order of how you would work, like a given day. Would you start with prayer? Working individually? I mean, how was your day?

Nathan Waite: A day in the life of a Joseph Smith Papers staff member.

Robin Scott Jensen: I come to the office Monday morning, and I wonder where everybody is, because it's post-COVID, and we're all working from home. Just kidding. Yes, you know, none of us are actively working on the Joseph Smith Papers volumes anymore. It depends on the stage of your volume. So if you are doing actual volume production, you are looking at documents, you're doing a lot of research, or you're working on a particular document figuring out some context. Sometimes, if you're working on the transcription, you order down the original manuscripts and you're

32. King V. Hostick (1914–1993) was a manuscripts dealer in Illinois who specialized in Abraham Lincoln documents. He also wrote publications on Lincoln. Hostick was the director of the Illinois State Historical Society for a time, as well as the Abraham Lincoln Association. See “King Victor Hostick,” Find a Grave, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/102538435/king-victor-hostick>.

doing verification. The collaboration is usually walking up and down the halls saying, “Hey, Mark, I have a question about this,” or, “Hey, Jeffrey, can you help me find out where this person lived in Nauvoo?” “Elizabeth, I need help with this find.” Anyway, this is the specialization that they were talking about earlier. The collaboration is in volume meetings, where we meet regularly, sometimes once a week, sometimes more than that, sometimes less than that. We have staff meetings. What am I missing?

Nathan Waite: What I’d add to it is meeting with [the Joseph Smith Papers editorial staff].

Robin Scott Jensen: There’s a really close collaboration between the historians and the editors. So at a certain point in the collaboration, it is not so much between historians, but it’s between historians and editors. Nate’s teams go through and help with wording, source checking, all this stuff. There’s a collaboration—“Do you really need this phrase?” “Yes, I absolutely need this phrase.” “Are you sure?”—things like that.

And then there is the review process.

Nathan Waite: Yes, that’s what I wanted to talk about. So if you were in yesterday’s session, Matt Godfrey talked about this a little bit.³³ He’s never been reviewed as thoroughly as [when] he was on the Joseph Smith Papers. And that’s really true, right?

You go through your team of scholars just working on the book with you. Then it goes through the general editors. Then it goes through Mark as the research and review editor. It goes to outside reviewers. It goes to the executives of the department. You are having every word scrutinized in ways you wouldn’t if you were sending a book to a university press. Can every single fact here be backed up with a source that’s in a footnote? It is just extremely rigorous, every step of the way. So I think our historians probably devote a smaller portion of their time to actually working on the document than people might think. The rest is going through this process of making sure it meets the standard to be published.

Jeffrey Mahas: Yes. I would just add, What does a typical day look like for many of us? It’s very busy. Because you’ve got documents at all of these various stages of production. You’re going to sit down and say,

33. Matthew C. Godfrey was the managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers from 2013 to 2021 and also worked on several volumes in the Documents series. At the time of this roundtable, he was a general editor of the papers. The session Mahas refers to was a panel discussion published as Grant Underwood, Matt Grow, Ron Esplin, Matthew C. Godfrey, Sharalyn D. Howcroft, and Elder Kyle S. McKay, “The History and Impact of the Joseph Smith Papers: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Journal of Mormon History* 51, no. 2 (2025): 37–64, especially 50–51.

Today, am I verifying a document? Today, am I writing an introduction for a document? Am I researching for that introduction? Am I writing annotation for that document? Am I responding to Mark's edits? Am I responding to my colleague's edits? Am I responding to my editors' edits? Am I responding to a source checker's edits? Am I responding to a higher-up review?

Robin Scott Jensen: Or am I going to sit in my office and cry because I'm too busy? [*audience laughter*]

Jeffrey Mahas: But the reality is all those steps are taking place at the same time. So your day is more like: I'm going to start by transcribing this document, then I'm going to work on this annotation. Then I'm going to work on this introduction. Then I'm going to respond to Elizabeth's comments because those were due two weeks ago. Oftentimes, historians would be assigned to multiple volumes at once. Not only are you doing that whole process but you're doing that process times two at the same time.

Elizabeth Kuehn: For different time periods.

Jeffrey Mahas: For different time periods.

Nathan Waite: And one more thought I'll add to that. The bread and butter of the Joseph Smith Papers is the transcripts, right? That is our core offering, and that takes a lot of time and a lot of effort. Because we are doing it online, everyone has had to learn how to encode documents in XML [Extensible Markup Language]. It means having specialized software to say, Hey, this is where the insertions are. This is where the strikethroughs are. It just takes hours and hours and hours of many, many people's effort to make sure that those transcripts are correct before they go online.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: So the hallmark of modern professional documentary editing in the American history tradition is independent verification of transcripts. This is not me in my basement making transcripts. Everything gets transcribed, and it goes somewhere else for first-level verification, somewhere else for second-level verification, somewhere else for third-level verification. There are different verification techniques, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. So we use different verification techniques at different stages. They are never going to be absolutely perfect. Some handwriting is just simply illegible. But we hope that you feel confident that we are offering you reliable transcripts.

Audience comment: Mark, I transcribed one of the longest documents in your entire collection. It was 211 pages of the last lawsuit of all the real property in Nauvoo. I'm Joe Bentley, and we've never met. But we have worked together for five years. So I've had a question about that.

I've transcribed that. I took a whole month of vacation to transcribe the whole 211 pages. I've wondered what stage the verification was at.

Nathan Waite: I can answer that question best. What we ended up doing with that—because we wanted to make sure that we use your work, because, again, it has to be verified, right? We figured out the best way to use your work was to have someone else independently transcribe it. Now, we have an editor who is digitally using those two transcripts and comparing them. What comes out of the other end of that will be the verified transcripts. So your texts will be the base that ends up online.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: That really is the model method for first-level verification.

Audience question: With all due respect to all of you and the tremendous work you've done and are still doing—and it's priceless, the importance of the documents you've done—I must say that I think some of the most important and most interesting documents are in the Legal series.

The other thing I wanted to mention is the commentaries [annotations]. These documents are deadly dull, quite awful. Alex Smith said it yesterday. He said, "How do you read those nineteenth-century handwritten scripts? You can't understand the syntax, the context, or even the grammar."³⁴

It's a task that requires commentary. I have to commend those who wrote the commentaries, like Jeffrey and Elizabeth and David Grua. I think the commentaries have been inspired. They have been very effective. I think it helps to tell the story the documents don't always tell.

Nathan Waite: And some of the untold stories have been in the legal documents; those introductions are really doing more work than they were intended to.

Jeffrey Mahas: The original idea with our Legal series online was that we were just going to put up the documents. When we put up the first case, Matt Grow³⁵ looked at it and said, "What is this? I have no idea what this is." Then he said, "We need to provide some kind of introduction."

34. Alex Smith was a historian on the Joseph Smith Papers at the time of this roundtable. He spoke during a session on June 9, 2023, "The Ball Struck My Watch and Forced Me Back: An Historical and Forensic Reexamination of John Taylor's Famous Carthage Jail Watch." Some of the information presented during this session was published in Brian A. Warburton, "A Forensic and Historical Look at John Taylor's Watch: Evidence of Divine Mercy," *BYU Studies* 63, no. 2 (2024): 41–67.

35. At the time of this roundtable, Matthew J. Grow was the managing director of the Church History Department.

So we've produced short, brief introductions to all of Joseph Smith's legal cases on the website to give you that introduction to what's going on.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: You have all these little pieces that come along in the legal process, and if you don't know the arc of that process, then you just have this collection of pieces. It just *has* to be introduced.

Jeffrey Mahas: I think David is presenting at the Joseph Smith Papers Conference in September. There's a great example of a case I helped him work on, where it seems like a really dry case; you have no idea what's going on. Well, the background for this case is there was a lynching in Nauvoo. A Black man is accused of robbing a store, and a bunch of men, a drunken mob, grab him in Nauvoo, take him out to the woods, and beat him. He comes to Joseph asking for help, and Joseph starts the process of trying to prosecute the men who were responsible for this lynching. It's a fascinating story. It's one that has not really been told before. By piecing together these legal documents, we were able to tell this story, to recover this man Chism's experience and Joseph's attempt to try and bring justice to his case.³⁶

Audience question: I have a couple of questions. The first question is, The commercial performance of the volumes—is that tracked? Have some sold more than others? The other question is, Have any of these volumes been quoted in general conference talks or at other places of general gatherings of the Church?

Nathan Waite: I'll answer the first question and let the others think about the second.

So the first volume, *Journals, Volume 1*, was a blockbuster. We sold tens of thousands of copies, over sixty thousand, which is an absurd number for documentary editing. It benefited from a lot of publicity for being the first one, right? The second one was [the] one Robin was talking about, the Book of Commandments and Revelations. It was beautiful and had this new information in it. That one sold quite well as well. As time has gone on, sales have dipped down to less astronomical numbers. But we sell, I'd say, two [to] three thousand of each volume in the Documents series, which again, in the field of documentary editing, is really, really good. But that's about all we end up printing—two to three thousand copies of each one—and we sell most of those. Then we'll see if there's a bump at the end of people trying to collect the whole thing.

36. For more information, see "Introduction to *City of Nauvoo v. Eastin*," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-city-of-nauvoo-v-eastin/1>.

There's also the fact they're available on the website, and we want that to be available, so people don't have to buy the volumes to get the content, including all the annotations.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: For comparison, the Jefferson papers, their print run was twelve hundred; Ben Franklin, eight hundred; and it kind of goes down from there. We're usually selling about three thousand. Which is the best volume? Which one sold most?

Nathan Waite: *Journals, Volume 1* for sure.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: Oh, that one I worked on. Yes! [*audience laughter*]

Nathan Waite: Use in general conference or from the pulpit? Any thoughts on that?

Jeffrey Mahas: Elizabeth is not going to toot her own horn. We have a great example. Elder [Quentin L.] Cook was one of our apostolic advisors who reviewed *Documents, Volume 5*, the Kirtland volume that Elizabeth worked on. Elder Cook has cited that volume a couple of times in general conference as he has told stories from Church history in Kirtland.

Audience question: What have you learned about Joseph Smith that you didn't know before you started working on this project? Who is he to you now?

Elizabeth Kuehn: It's a great question, and it's not always easy to answer. But one of my favorite things that I've discovered in the financial records is that he is far more generous than we have any idea of.

Audience member: He gave away the store, right? Literally.

Elizabeth Kuehn: Yes. Brigham [Young] has a fun account in the *Journal of Discourses* that talks about that.³⁷ But now we see it in the ledger, right? One of my favorite entries is—and you can just feel the frustration that Newel K. Whitney is having as he is making this notation—ten dollars to Joseph for a stranger in the street.³⁸ Joseph runs into the store and grabs money, runs out again, and Newel's saying, Look, I'm trying to keep books here. That's not Joseph's focus, right? He's not thinking in those [financial] terms. He's thinking, What do people need? And it is a real testament.

37. See Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, 1855–86), 1:215 (October 9, 1852).

38. See “Joseph Smith's Store Daybook A, January–July 1842,” [294], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 3, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/joseph-smiths-store-daybook-a-january-july-1842/298>.

One thing that became clear over the course of looking at Joseph's finances from Kirtland to Nauvoo is why he filed for bankruptcy in 1842. That's because he takes on all the debts of the Kirtland era, and especially the Kirtland Temple, which had been separate debts. Those debts had been the Kirtland Temple committee's, which Hyrum, his brother, was a part of. But Joseph had not signed any of those personally as principal. He was not liable for those debts. Yet by the early 1840s, he has taken those on personally, and they essentially sink him financially. So you see this willingness to injure himself financially for the good of others.

Jeffrey Mahas: Elizabeth and I worked closely together on another example like this in Nauvoo. There are several sermons that Joseph gives later in the Nauvoo experience where he's saying, You need to buy land from me. He comes off as really harsh, and you may think, Oh my goodness. Look at this Joseph Smith. He's a land speculator, out there trying to get money. But what happens is Henry Sherwood, his agent, does a review of all the property they purchased in Nauvoo, and he reports back to Joseph in 1840. He [essentially] says, Joseph, you have given away over forty percent of the lots in Nauvoo without any expectation of repayment.³⁹ You can see Joseph by 1842 thinking [essentially], Oh my goodness. I've got this huge debt, and I've been giving away so much of the city. I really need to work on trying to pay off the rest. But this is another example where you can see Joseph is this financial scapegoat, taking on himself the debts to provide for the Saints in Zion.

Elizabeth Kuehn: But that land was being given to widows, to orphans, and to impoverished British Saints who had come over and spent every dollar they had to get to Nauvoo and now had nothing, and they had to be provided for. A means had to be found.

Audience question: How about descriptions of Joseph Smith's personality or character?

Robin Scott Jensen: It's impossible to pin Joseph Smith down. That's the thing I learned. I love reading studies on Joseph Smith. I love seeing what scholars do with the Joseph Smith Papers. Maybe I'm revealing myself too much. Anytime I read something from my historian colleagues

39. See "Trustees Land Book A, 11 September 1839–30 April 1842," [44], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 3, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/trustees-land-book-a-11-september-1839-30-april-1842/54>. This record indicates that as of October 1840, the Church had sold about \$98,000 worth of land in Nauvoo (\$83,000 from the Hotchkiss purchase and \$15,000 from the Galland purchase), with \$40,000 of that having been sold to "widows and other poor of the church thus apparently will not be able to pay."

who want to say, “Oh, Joseph Smith did this,” or “Joseph Smith thought this,” or say, “This is what Joseph Smith was trying to do,” in the back of my mind, I’m thinking I can probably come up with a counterexample.

He’s not as systematic as you think. He’s kind of winging it, we might say. It’s not very possible to pin Joseph Smith down, except perhaps he was his first and staunchest believer of his revelations, his experiences. Maybe even in that, in the details, you can’t pin it down. But there really is this sense that he believed in himself. He believed the revelations he brought forth. So those are two counterexamples. That’s kind of my impression of Joseph Smith.

Mark Ashurst-McGee: We developed all kinds of ideas about Joseph Smith. But also, we totally see ourselves as producing a documentary edition for others to use to do that kind of work.

Jessica M. Nelson: I think by the end of his life, Joseph Smith had arrived. The type of correspondence he’d been receiving from random citizens around the country said, I heard that you were having this petition. You wanted to do these things. I want to join you. They are addressing it to General Smith. His political thinking has sort of evolved. The imagination that he had for what the world could be and could look like had drawn certain people to him, and it’s kind of sad there’s a cutoff point. But we see a culmination of his thinking, and I appreciate that and the nuances of that in a different way than I had before.

Nathan Waite: Please join me in thanking our panel. [*audience applause*]