

The Founding Father of the Joseph Smith Papers

Remembering Dean Jessee

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This article was originally given as remarks at the funeral service for Dean Jessee (1929–2025) on January 10, 2026, at the Chevy Chase Ward meeting-house in Murray, Utah. Jessee was a noteworthy and productive historian who spent much of his professional life working on the papers of Joseph Smith.

In December 2024, Dean asked me if I would speak at his funeral. Not feeling well, he was making plans to leave us. Fortunately, he stayed another year. During that year, I continued to interact with him by phone, email, and in person; to learn from him; and to continue to be blessed by his life. Now, a year later, I'm pleased to be able to fulfill his request.

Many of Dean's colleagues here today will know some, perhaps much, of what I will share. Most of his family probably will not, and I hope that what I will share will help his family understand the significance of his scholarly career.

Dean was first a family man. The large and wonderful family Dean and June Jessee¹ brought into the world and nurtured, here today, will be a lasting monument to them as faithful Latter-day Saint parents and believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in eternal families, and the importance of families. Their family will be their legacy forever.

1. Margaret June Wood Jessee was born on March 7, 1935, and passed away on September 15, 2013.

Not every man leaves so many who call him blessed, and very few leave a second legacy in a different realm that will also be lasting. Dean Jessee does. In addition to having a large family, Dean was also a scholar, and his contributions in that realm will also live on. I want to begin with comments from Dean's colleagues and end with a declaration from Dean. In between, I will share aspects about his meaningful, even remarkable, career.

Several of Dean's colleagues sent me brief notes when they learned of his passing.² One said, "He was a wonderful colleague." Another said that he was a "kind and humble man." Jill Derr wrote a note that speaks for all of us who worked with Dean: "Dean was a scholar without peer. His care and precision in editing the Church's most significant documents is an inestimable contribution. I respected Dean as a meticulous scholar and patient mentor and loved him as a friend. I admired his total lack of pretension and his understated wit. . . . My prayers are with his cherished family, and I am grateful that he and his beloved June will be reunited at last."

Another expressed sadness to see him leave but also optimism: "I believe that Joseph [Smith] was among the first to greet him." I suspect that is true.

Dean Jessee's influence on those of us who worked with him was profound, but the results of his love of Joseph Smith were broader than that and will be even more lasting.

Exploring history on the shelves of the University of Utah in 1970, an activity he enjoyed, Dean came upon *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. These books were the early fruit of what became a decades-long effort to gather, transcribe, edit, and publish the literary output—the papers—of that founding father, making them available to the world. That impressive collection of history inspired in Dean Jessee something that has come to bless us all. He said to himself, "Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of the Restoration, deserves such a collection on the library shelves of the world so that his legacy can be better understood and be accessible to all."

Dean began gathering surviving manuscripts created by Joseph Smith and his associates during his lifetime. For three decades, this was Dean's personal passion, his personal mission—one man at work with occasional research assistants. From what he gathered, transcribed, and

2. Quotes without sources are from personal communications with the author.

organized, he eventually published two volumes of Joseph Smith's documents and drafted another.³

Then it became something bigger. Instead of one man working alone to fulfill that vision, eventually more than six hundred people were involved in the effort that Dean Jessee founded. More than half a century after his initial insight, Dean lived to see the twenty-seventh volume of the Joseph Smith Papers released to the public on June 27, 2023.⁴ That marked the completion of the Joseph Smith Papers print edition. It also constituted the shelfful of books that Dean first envisioned in 1970.

Those books are on the shelves of libraries all over the United States and elsewhere because we learned a lesson from Dean's first volume. We learned that even though Latter-day Saints will buy a book on Joseph Smith, if it is not on library shelves, scholars won't know about or use it. Thanks to Larry and Gail Miller donating the books to libraries that agreed to catalog and shelve them, they are everywhere. That is part of Dean's lasting legacy.

I once joked to a small audience that Dean Jessee was the grandfather of the Joseph Smith Papers. Dean immediately interjected and teased that if he was the grandfather, I was the den mother. It would have been more accurate had I said that Dean was the *founding father*, but it is true that I had a ringside seat to the great monument of Dean Jessee's vision. I can tell you that there would not be a Joseph Smith Papers today without Dean Jessee. The printed books; the massive, still-expanding website⁵; a TV series⁶ forever in reruns—they are a very big deal with far-reaching effects, all springing from Dean's vision and commitment to fulfill it.

The Joseph Smith Papers have changed our understanding of Joseph Smith and of early Latter-day Saint history. They have even changed the relationship of Church leaders to history and to historians.

3. Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Deseret Book, 1984); Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (Deseret Book, 2002); Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Deseret Book, 1989–92).

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

5. "The Joseph Smith Papers," The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/>.

6. *The Joseph Smith Papers: Television Documentary Series*, 2 seasons, Larry H. Miller Communications Corporation, aired 2008–10, <https://www.byutv.org/joseph-smith-papers/episodes>.

In 2007, PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) aired a documentary called *The Mormons* by Helen Whitney. Several of the clips aired in that national broadcast featured Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. When Whitney asked him if there was “tension between faith-promoting history and factual, scholarly history,” he answered, “I don’t know of any institution that has had complete peace with its historians, with its storytellers.”⁷ Five years after that broadcast, I had a chance to tease him about that comment when he spoke to the Joseph Smith Papers staff. He chuckled and said that he misspoke. What he meant and should have said was that he knew of no institution completely at peace with its *history*. Why? Because mortality is messy, and therefore, history is messy, including the Church’s history.⁸

In the 2007 PBS clip, Elder Holland added, “I am not afraid of history. Whatever our history is, that’s our history.” However, he wanted Church history to be taught to his children and to the children and youth of the Church by “friends,” not “enemies.” He hoped for teachers who knew the facts but also “are genuinely anxious to teach in a way that is appropriate and enlivening.”⁹

Dean Jessee was the kind of teacher and writer whom President Holland wanted to teach his posterity and the youth of the Church, and it is partly because of Dean that we have in the Church today a different relationship to our shared history than we had a generation ago.

I believe Elder David A. Bednar would second that. When the last volume of the Joseph Smith Papers was released on June 27, 2023, he personally thanked this indispensable “founding father” of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Elder Bednar also urged those present that day to “relish the moment,” this “culmination of so many years of such excellent work by so many.”¹⁰

At a press event earlier in the day, Elder Bednar noted the broad benefits from what Dean set in motion. Even though the full value of the project is not yet visible, Elder Bednar said that “the reach of historians and scholars into the past ‘portends remarkable things for the reach into the future.’” The lessons learned and the work done with the documents

7. Jeffrey R. Holland, interview by Helen Whitney, *The Mormons*, PBS, May 4, 2006, aired April 30, 2007, <https://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/holland.html>.

8. See Ronald K. Esplin, Diary, June 5, 2012; see also Ronald Esplin to Mathew J. Grow, email, November 5, 2025.

9. Holland, interview.

10. Transcription of Elder Bednar’s remarks at the last Joseph Smith Papers social hosted by Gail Miller, June 27, 2023, in author’s possession.

“will only make us more effective in telling the story of the ongoing Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in all the world as we move into the future.”¹¹ Though “remarkable blessings . . . have come” into “the lives of individuals and to the Church itself” because of the Joseph Smith Papers, Elder Bednar believed that this was only the beginning. Turning colloquial, he asserted, “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”¹²

I will now describe some of the backstory about how all this came to be.¹³ Many played important roles, roles that, looking back, I see as heaven-blessed and often heaven-directed, as providential. Consider the metaphor of Assistant Church Historian Richard Turley, a colleague of Dean’s and mine. In his metaphor, each member of a great orchestra brings skills and comes prepared to contribute—so much so that sometimes each member may think that he or she is the music. But then he or she looks up and remembers that there is a conductor bringing it all together, creating what none of the musicians could do alone.

Because there is a conductor, we often end up playing a different role than the one we thought we prepared for, even doing something very different from what we expected to do. Dean was an example of that. He played a crucial role, but it is not the one he planned for or one that could have happened without an unwelcome, jolting course correction in his own life.

Dean was a man of many talents. His boyhood home in Springville, Utah, near the Springville Art Museum, influenced his love of art, but he also brought talent, enough to attend Brigham Young University (BYU) on an art scholarship. After his mission and his education, he decided that what he really wanted to do, something he loved even more than art, was to teach young people the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He landed a job as a seminary teacher, briefly at Payson High School and then in 1960, at West High School in Salt Lake City, where he settled in. At West High School, he found not only a job but a *career*. He saw himself as a career teacher, sharing the gospel he loved with students

11. Trent Toone, “After Two Decades, Church Celebrates Final Volume of the Joseph Smith Papers Project,” *Church News*, June 27, 2023, www.thechurchnews.com/history/2023/6/27/23759796/joseph-smith-papers-final-volume-published-hyrum-smith-martyrdom-elder-david-a-bednar/.

12. Toone, “After Two Decades.”

13. Dean and I worked together as colleagues and friends beginning in June 1972. Some of the following narrative he recounted to us over the years. From 2023 to 2025, I interviewed Dean and exchanged emails with him (for a chapter on his earlier career that I had not witnessed) to confirm details. I also relied on Dean’s 2023 autobiography, written for his family. Dean Jessee, “Reflections,” unpublished manuscript, 2023.

he loved. Students liked affable, friendly Brother Jessee, and if they paid attention, they always learned in his class. Even if they didn't pay so much attention, they felt his spirit.

For a time, things went well, very well, until it ended abruptly. His supervisor retired and was replaced by a younger man. As with the former, the new supervisor occasionally attended Dean's classes. In the absence of praise and criticism—no mention of deficiencies or suggestions of what he might do better—Dean had reason to think he was doing well. But the new supervisor apparently decided that quiet, unassuming Brother Jessee was not the best fit for rowdy high school students. As the 1963 school year drew to a close in the spring, with no forewarning, the supervisor informed Dean that his contract would not be renewed.

With five children and more on the way, this was a deep crisis for the Jessee household—not that Dean couldn't support his family. He had other talents: art, of course, and lithography (offset printing). He had a part-time job as a lithographer, which for a time became a full-time job. But now he had *no career*. The career he loved and expected to spend his life dedicated to was gone. Dean had a master's degree in Church history and a few graduate courses beyond that, but he had no opportunity (without jeopardizing his family) to return to full-time schooling for the PhD degree that would allow him access to the academic world. How could he support his family and go to school?

This was a crushing blow for Dean personally. But his perspective changed over time. "Eventually I . . . came to see that had this not occurred, I never would have known Joseph Smith."¹⁴ That is quite a statement—that this trauma was necessary for him to know Joseph Smith. But in retrospect, I, too, see that as a true statement.

While researching for his master's degree, Dean frequented the Church Historian's Office. His continuing interest in Latter-day Saint history took him back there again and again. Thinking that perhaps he could work there, in early 1964, he wrote a letter to the Church Historian, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith. Elder Smith's answer by return mail insisted that they had no job openings and that Dean was overqualified. The latter assertion was not a simple brush-off but a true statement. At the time, the Church Historian's Office employed clerks, not professionals.

Having been rebuffed by the top man, Dean didn't expect an affirmative answer when, in the Church Historian's Office that fall, he light-heartedly asked a young file clerk if there were any job openings. Her response that there might be one surprised him. "Go see that man,"

14. Jessee, "Reflections," 30.

she said, pointing to Earl Olson, the assistant Church historian and an important man in the Church Historian's Office.

Olson told Dean that they did have an opening: "Go see Elder Smith." [laughter] He did and once again was rebuffed—this time in person. Dean remembered being told, "You seem like a nice young man, but we don't have any openings," and "You're over-qualified."

He left the office disappointed. But he soon learned that there was indeed an opening; there had been a misunderstanding. Once that was sorted out, he had the job if he was willing to come work at a file clerk's salary in a file clerk's job. His first assignment was not just clerical but mind-numbingly tedious.¹⁵ Dean never told me this, but I'm certain that he started with a lower salary than he was making as a lithographer or that he could have made with his art. He was so committed to finding a place in history that he was willing to sacrifice. Bless June for supporting him in that.

But another challenge remained. The Church Historian's Office on the third floor of the Church Administration Building was jam-packed, and there was no office or even space for a desk. The only solution, Dean was told, was to squeeze another desk into "the cage." The cage was a large wire-mesh wall separating the library's other materials. Dean's desk would enjoy privileged space among the treasured manuscripts that Dean had sought but failed to see for his master's thesis. At the time, not only graduate students but even established scholars faced the same hurdle: They had no access to those manuscripts. And now, suddenly, as if he were Br'er Rabbit thrown into the briar patch, Dean found himself surrounded by manuscripts! Among them were the Joseph Smith documents that, to the benefit of us all, he later came to focus on.

Although Dean was hired as a clerk in November 1964, he, a curious young scholar, was soon poking around into this and that, learning from this manuscript and figuring out that document, learning more day by day about the records and about the early history they preserved. What he learned he kept largely to himself because he had no opportunity to write and publish. That was not his assignment nor that of others in the Church Historian's Office at the time, except for the Church historian.

15. Dean later wrote of his first assignment: "When I recall that my first three days' work at the HO [Historian's Office] in 1964 was spent in typing subject headings on library cards that read, 'Church, About,' it makes me shudder. When it was pointed out that every card in the library would fit that designation, the practice was stopped, after 1,500 cards had been typed." The incident "is a standard joke among the catalogers now," he wrote in 1970. But in 1964, it was for him a first-day introduction to what he later described as the painful "transition from the 19th to the 20th century in the HO." Dean Jessee, *Diary*, August 14, 1970.

That began to change in March 1968 when Truman Madsen asked Dean to contribute to special issues of *BYU Studies* on early Church history that Truman was overseeing. Though Dean was not yet a published scholar, Truman knew by reputation that Dean Jessee was the one man in the Church Historian's Office who could help him. He asked Dean to write, and Dean was soon publishing scholarly articles, exploring the very documents he had lived with for the past five years. These journal articles in *BYU Studies* (1969–71) launched Dean's illustrious publishing career as a scholar, historian, and documentary editor.¹⁶

During his first half dozen years working at the Church Historian's Office, Dean became a jack-of-all-trades. He filed and cataloged and tried to improve procedures. He followed up tips for acquisitions and conducted oral history interviews. He answered letters. He received research requests by General Authorities. He filled out reports for department leaders. Richard Anderson, Leonard Arrington, and other scholars asked Dean for help in locating sources, and they received it. As the only professionally trained historian on staff, Dean developed a broad portfolio—broad enough that by late 1970, he faced a choice.

In 1969 and again in 1971, Earl Olson hired professionals with archival training and experience: Jeffrey Johnson and Max Evans. For years, Dean had felt isolated and alone as he pushed for changes in an office with roots in the pioneer era. Now, he not only had allies but colleagues with more experience than he in things archival who could be expected to move matters in the right direction.¹⁷ With that changed landscape, Dean's answer when asked if he wanted to continue working on archival matters or focus on writing history was certain: *history!*¹⁸ However, there is no

16. Jessee's articles in *BYU Studies* during this period are Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–94; Dean C. Jessee, "The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (1970): 259–82; and Dean C. Jessee, "The Writing of Joseph Smith's History," *BYU Studies* 11, no. 4 (1971): 439–73, which received the best article award from the Mormon History Association. However, in 1968, Jessee wrote nonacademic pieces about David O. McKay and Joseph Fielding Smith for Preston Nibley, *The Presidents of the Church* (Deseret News, 1968), 306–407, 408–21.

17. Dean confided to his diary his joy at no longer being alone in his effort to improve the way things were done in the "old" Church Historian's Office. The day Jeffrey Johnson arrived for work, September 8, 1969, Dean wrote that the old office "received an injection of hope for the future." He felt the same when Max Evans began on February 1, 1971. "What a blessing, to have another trained mind on board along with Jeff Johnson." The two became Dean's allies in prodding the institution to modernize, and both later made their mark on Utah's state institutions for history.

18. Jesse, Diary, December 16, 1970, and January 8, 1971.

question that Dean, along with Loraine Arnell (his first supervisor), Earl Olson, and especially Jeffrey Johnson and Max Evans, laid the groundwork for changing the Church Historian's Office from a pioneer institution set in its ways into the professional archive and library of today. The great atrium of the Church History Library proclaims in large gold letters, "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you" (D&C 21:1),¹⁹ a statement that extends an invitation to enter and use the treasured manuscripts therein.

Such an outcome was barely imaginable when Dean started at the Church Historian's Office. The prevailing perspective when Dean began working there was that the office existed to preserve precious documents of the Church's history with little concern for making them available to researchers or eventually the public. When the Church Historian's Office moved in late 1972 from the Church Administration Building to the East Wing of the new Church Office Building, archivist Jeffrey Johnson retrieved the brass plate above the door that had long proclaimed the rule of the office: "Library—No Admittance," it warned.

Dean and several associates, the small cadre of professionals working to modernize and professionalize the venerable repository, believed that the documents should be available to scholars and that it would benefit not only scholars but the Church if they were. Happily, not only young archivists but a few others held this view. President Howard W. Hunter, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles at the time, was appointed Church Historian in January 1970. He also believed that allowing scholars to study the records documenting the Church's singular history would result in good.

Popular imagination credits Leonard Arrington, called as Church historian in 1972, with "opening the archives"—that is, making the documents available for research. But he and his team were the beneficiaries of a process that began eighteen months earlier under the direction of Elder Hunter. Thanks to Dean Jessee's diary, we know the exact date the decision was announced to the Church Historian's Office staff. On June 9, 1970, Dean wrote that after a "supervisors meeting with Elder Hunter this morning[,] Earl [Olson] came in and announced that henceforth there would be no restriction on access to material or censoring of notes

19. A revelation dated April 6, 1830, the day the Church was organized, began with these words. Because this was viewed as a divinely mandated commission or injunction, members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are assigned to oversee the work of the Church History Department even today.

taken by those doing research in the H[istorian's] O[ffice]." Elder Hunter "stated that the material there could be used as freely as the age and condition of the material would permit."

To describe this as a sea change would be an understatement. Old-timers in the office were aghast. For many, after operating so long within a different paradigm, it was unsettling indeed. But not for Dean Jessee. The closing line of his diary entry expressed his joy: "There should be dancing in the streets." [laughter] Implementation was not immediate, but the process that began that day eventually saw the historical treasures available not only to Dean Jessee, now an insider, but to others too.

When professional historian Leonard Arrington became Church historian in 1972, he assembled a cadre of scholars to explore the incomparable records now open to scholars, to learn from them, and to publish what they learned. The only person from the existing staff of the Church Historian's Office he invited to join his new History Division scholars was Dean Jessee. Though Dean had been doing serious scholarly writing work for only a short time, he had assisted Leonard in some of his own research, and Leonard saw him as a fellow scholar. For nearly a decade, the History Division was Dean's professional home.

Ironically, as much as Leonard valued Dean's early work on Joseph Smith, he asked Dean to pause it for a time. He wasn't sure the Church was ready for an unlearned farm boy who didn't spell and write the same way educated people write in our day. Joseph's carefully transcribed words reproduced as he wrote them might be too jarring. Instead, he urged Dean to do something on Brigham Young.

Thus, Dean's first book was on Brigham Young, not Joseph Smith: *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons*, published in 1974.²⁰ Leonard intended that book as a landmark first volume of a grand series called the Heritage Series. The book did well and remains a treasure on many bookshelves. But it was the first *and last* volume in that series because, ironically, the Church was not ready for an unrefined, unfiltered Brigham Young either. [laughter]

In 1980, the History Division became the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History. In late 1982, the historians physically moved from the Church Office Building in Salt Lake City to BYU in Provo. Continuing their work from a distance as BYU professors had advantages. One benefit was that the Church would no longer be viewed as

20. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons* (Deseret Book, 1974).

responsible for the work of those historians, since they would not be writing from the Church's own downtown campus.

For most of us, there was no choice on whether to leave. If we wished to continue researching and writing with Leonard Arrington, we went with him to BYU. Because Dean had been in the Church Historian's Office before the creation of the History Division, he had a choice—a tough choice, as it turned out.

The original plan was for Dean to stay in the Church Office Building with the larger department. They needed someone with his skills and wanted him to stay as the “resident historian,” a role much like the one he had come to play before the creation of the History Division. Also, more committed than ever to a project on Joseph Smith's papers, he wanted to stay in Salt Lake City with the documents he loved. As he told Leonard a few months earlier, it was not acceptable that “there [was] not yet an edition of the papers of the founding prophet of this dispensation after 150 years.”²¹ The Historical Department,²² not BYU, held the documents.

However, Dean could also read the tea leaves. As it became increasingly clear that Historical Department leaders intended no more publishing under their auspices for the foreseeable future, he reconsidered. Reluctant as he was to leave the documents, as Dean expressed to me at the time in a typical Dean Jessee witticism, “What is the use of staying with the pantry and all its ingredients if you aren't allowed to cook a thing? Better to work as a cook with less ingredients and do what you can.” My reaction was unequivocal: “[Dean] has decided to join us! Which will be an important boost for the Institute. We are all pleased, indeed. His addition will greatly strengthen the Institute.”²³

But was it too late? When Dean asked Leonard three months earlier about the possibility of going to BYU, the best Leonard could offer then, after other transfers had been finalized, was a promise to bring Dean aboard if there was an opening. However, Elder G. Homer Durham, to whom Dean now reported, honored Dean's decision to leave. By the end of March 1981, Elder Durham made arrangements for Dean to be transferred to BYU.²⁴ When Dean made that momentous decision, he could

21. Jessee, *Diary*, February 7, 1980.

22. The Church Historian's Office later became the Historical Department. Today, it is known as the Church History Department.

23. Ronald K. Esplin *Diary*, March 5, 1981. Before this conversation, I thought Dean might “dig in and stay even if he couldn't pursue his writing and research as he wanted to. For now.”

24. Jessee, *Diary*, December 1, 1980, and March 30, 1981.

not have foreseen a return to Salt Lake City a quarter of a century later, back home, as it were, with full access to the documents—even to manuscripts he only dreamed of seeing in the 1980s. And when we returned, it was to a very different attitude about publishing than when we left.

Even though Dean did not have a PhD like many of his colleagues, he belonged at BYU, and he served there for twenty years. Recognizing his skills and contribution, BYU awarded him the academic rank of associate professor. Dean was as capable as any of his colleagues of earning a PhD, but he never had the opportunity. This concerned him enough that he asked Leonard about a leave of absence to get the degree. Leonard replied, in essence, “Dean Jessee, what are you thinking? You know your craft. The Church will be better served if you stay here and apply it than if you leave us to go after a credential.” Leonard saw seeking a credential at that stage in Dean’s productive career as an unnecessary distraction. In Leonard’s view, it was better for Dean to continue researching, writing, and publishing important scholarship. And he did.

When Dean retired from BYU in 2000, I was director of the Smith Institute. That made me his nominal boss even though he still mentored us all. “I will retire whenever you need the slot,” he told me. That is, he would retire whenever I thought it best to free up a faculty position so that we could hire a young scholar. “But only on one condition,” he added. “Nothing changes except where I get my paycheck.”

Dean chose to keep working in retirement. He continued traveling to BYU, where we kept a place for him until 2005. When the Joseph Smith Papers moved north to the Church Office Building, he joined us there, coming into the office until 2008. When the Joseph Smith Papers moved to the new Church History Library, once again, he continued to contribute and mentor. Dean kept his end of the bargain, and we kept ours: For many years, nothing changed except where he got his paycheck.

During his BYU years, Dean turned his uninterrupted attention to Joseph Smith. He published his second book—his first book on Joseph—in 1984: *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*.²⁵ Though it was Dean’s first book, one might think of it as the last book in the Joseph Smith Papers Project because, conceptually, it pulls from all the volumes every letter and diary entry Joseph Smith wrote in his own hand or dictated. Dean helped us understand that Joseph’s *personal* writings, often the most intimate and revealing ones, are among the most important. The book was an immediate success, eventually selling twenty thousand

25. See note 3.

copies in two editions,²⁶ and it is likely the best-selling scholarly history book Deseret Book published in the twentieth century.

Leonard Arrington worked with Dean on *Personal Writings* both before and after the move to BYU. Once Dean finished that project, he planned a papers of Joseph Smith project that would contain between nine and twelve volumes modeled on *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* he first saw on library shelves in 1970. These were to be Dean Jessee's books—aided (he would always add) by talented research assistants. But this was *his* project.

When I replaced Leonard Arrington as director of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute in the summer of 1986, one of my priorities was to see that Dean received needed permissions to access sources and to publish his work, both complicated now that we were at BYU and no longer part of the Historical Department. It was possible only because of the cooperation and strong support of the Church History advisers from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Boyd K. Packer and Elder Dallin H. Oaks.²⁷ Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who, with Elder Oaks, met quarterly with scholars overseeing religious scholarship at BYU, also played an important role.

I first discussed the papers of Joseph Smith with Elder Maxwell and Elder Oaks when they visited BYU in late September 1986, and by November, Dean had a formal proposal ready to present to them. Only one month later, record time compared to our later experience, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles authorized Dean Jessee to publish the “journals and diaries” of Joseph Smith with “the possibility of the remainder of the papers project to follow.”²⁸ While not endorsing the larger project, their approval for Dean's initial proposal implied that further approvals would come if all went well with the publication of Joseph's diaries. Their approval also implied Dean could access documents in the First Presidency's possession that were needed to complete the diaries project. Dean eventually had access to all that he needed, but

26. A revised edition was published by Deseret Book in 2002.

27. The Church Historian's Office, known today as the Church History Department, has two advisers from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who represent the department to the First Presidency. At this time, Elder Packer was the senior adviser and Elder Oaks was his associate. One reason that Elder Packer and other Apostles favored Dean's proposal was that they were pleased with *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* and hoped to see more such materials in the hands of Church members. See Dean Jessee Diary, November 13, 1986.

28. Jessee, Diary, September 23, 1986, November 17, 1986, and December 18, 1986.

that proved more complicated and required longer than receiving the initial project approval.

The First Presidency's initial explicit approval for publication of only the diaries created a dilemma. Because Joseph Smith did not put pen to paper on any diary until November 1832, publishing only his diaries meant omitting foundational backstories—no First Vision, no Moroni, no Book of Mormon, and no priesthood restoration. Dean's solution was to make volume 1, published in 1989, a book of *Autobiographical and Historical Writings*.²⁹ The first half of the journals, those for 1832 to 1842, would constitute volume 2, published in 1992.³⁰ As with Dean's prior two books, both received the Mormon History Association award for best documentary publication in the years they were published.

Dean's idea was a good, a necessary solution. But pausing the publication of Joseph's diaries to prepare an introductory history volume pushed publishing Joseph's later Nauvoo diaries well into the 1990s, years after the First Presidency's initial approval, which brought new challenges. Dean forged ahead, but publication stalled. Immediately after providing all of volume 2 of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* to Deseret Book in May 1992, Dean set to work on volume 3. By September 1993, he finished an early draft of the book for my review. Dean hoped to publish it by 1994, the sesquicentennial of the martyrdom, but Deseret Book told him that it could be done no sooner than 1995.³¹ And then things got complicated.

Multiple issues delayed progress. To ensure the volume was as accurate and complete as possible, Dean needed permission to refer to and hopefully include information from the Nauvoo diaries of William Clayton, Joseph's clerk and close associate. But those were in the First Presidency's custody and were opened only occasionally and to specific scholars. We considered seeking permission to combine Clayton's diaries with those of other Nauvoo clerks in a volume called *The Nauvoo Clerks of Joseph Smith*. Dean could then refer readers there. Even though Dean and James B. Allen, Clayton's biographer, had worked on those texts, preparing them for publication would cause even more delay—if approval could be obtained.³²

29. See note 3.

30. See note 3.

31. Jessee, Diary, September 14, 1993, and April 20, 1994.

32. Yale University Press will soon release a scholarly edition of William Clayton's Nauvoo journals edited by scholars in the Church History Department who worked on the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

Another hurdle was that the diaries in the draft of volume 3 of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* included almost every issue in Church history that might be considered problematic or sensitive: the Council of Fifty, the temple, plural marriage, and tensions between Joseph and Emma over plural marriage. None of those were issues in volume 2. Dean's permission from the First Presidency to publish Joseph's journals came almost a decade prior, and there was now a different First Presidency. Before publishing volume 3, all this would have to be revisited. There was also the matter of final access to important sources in the First Presidency's custody, and though permission came in due course, access to the records was much slower.

These challenges delayed the approval and publication of volume 3. From 1990 to early 2005, Elder Maxwell was the senior adviser to the Church History Department, and Elder Oaks was his associate until early 2000. They supported the publication of volume 3 and, I believe, expected to guide it through the approval process. However, although the book was never formally turned down, it was never approved for publication during their tenure.

The advisers' regular meetings with the First Presidency about Church history and department matters often had lengthy agendas, and Elder Maxwell did not want the publication of this important and potentially controversial book to be one in a long list of items to be quickly or routinely considered. He did not want it to be summarily turned down and didn't expect it to be summarily approved. This volume needed time for discussion. I remember being in Elder Maxwell's office discussing matters of history—including this volume—when he informed Elder Oaks that he now had "Brother Jessee's work" on the calendar in a way that would allow for such discussion and, hopefully, approval. Elder Oaks responded that the planned date was when he would be on a two-week assignment in the Philippines. Elder Maxwell chuckled, said he was not prepared to discuss the volume alone, and took it off the agenda.

The book was still awaiting approval in early 2000 when Elder Holland was assigned to work with Elder Maxwell as a Church History adviser, replacing Elder Oaks. When he learned that Dean's volume 3 had not yet received publication approval, Elder Holland asked for a review copy so that he could be fully informed about its contents and hopefully assist us. To ensure that Elder Holland had the best possible version, Richard Jensen, Dean Jessee, and I read every page, every footnote, making improvements where we could. Dean then consolidated our changes into a final version. At the same time Elder Holland received it, a copy also went to leaders in the Church Archives so they could be informed

and assist us in gaining approval. That copy landed on the desk of Ron Barney, who put it on top of his file cabinet.

The new printouts of that unapproved, unpublished volume proved to be the catalyst that changed everything. The copy that landed on Ron Barney's file cabinet became part of the inspirational story of how Larry and Gail Miller came to fund the Joseph Smith Papers Project after Larry's own spiritual experiences convinced him that he was to do something to support "the work of Brother Jessee."³³

That unpublished draft was not only the catalyst for the funding of the Joseph Smith Papers Project beginning in March 2001. It was also the catalyst for a renewed discussion among relevant Church leaders about the "work of Brother Jessee" to publish the papers of Joseph Smith more broadly. In April 2001, only five weeks after the Millers' funding commitment, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles approved, subject to final review, a larger project (including but not limited to volume 3) to publish the papers of Joseph Smith.

The frustrating delays seemed interminable. However, in time, Dean came to see it as providential that he had not been allowed to push ahead as originally planned. Only later, for example, did we gain access to the minutes of the Council of Fifty, a necessary record for annotating the last months of Joseph Smith's Nauvoo diary. And only later did we learn of and gain access to the Book of Commandments and Revelations, the very book that John Whitmer carried from Kirtland, Ohio, to Missouri in late 1831 to be used for publishing the Book of Commandments.³⁴ Dean's long experience with revelation manuscripts was key to understanding what that manuscript was when we finally gained access to it. Had we proceeded as planned to publish the early revelations, it would have been necessary to redo the work once we had access to much earlier manuscripts. Also, as Dean was the first to admit, as diligent as he was, as careful as he was—and I will add as good as he was, and he was excellent—he could not do alone what a team could do together.

With funding from Larry and Gail Miller, with renewed authorization from the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, no longer would this be a one-man project, with only Dean Jessee and research assistants. Jed Woodworth, the first full-time scholar to work

33. Larry H. Miller, interview by Ronald O. Barney, August 2, 2006, Conference Center Studio, Salt Lake City, video and transcript in Church Archives.

34. "Series Introduction: Joseph Smith as Revelator and Translator," in *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, ed. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2011), xxv.

on the project, began in July 2001, and many more followed. Dean oversaw the reshaping of his original plan of nine to twelve volumes of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* into a much larger Joseph Smith Papers Project of at least two dozen volumes. When completed in 2023, the print edition totaled twenty-seven volumes.

Still to come are the volumes of the Joseph Smith Legal Records series. Legal papers figured in both Dean's original plan and the revised, more ambitious plan. In the 1990s, aware that Gordon Madsen was searching in courthouses in the East for original legal documents dealing with Joseph Smith, Dean asked Gordon to work with him to prepare a volume of such documents. Later, Gordon mentored Attorney Jeffrey Walker in nineteenth-century law, and they began working on a larger legal series to be part of the expanded plan. Their work was blessed by additional documents located by Church History Department employee Scott Bradshaw, who was sent into the field by Richard Turley in the 1990s to locate documents in local repositories.³⁵

In 2017, the Legal Records series became a separate project, coordinating with but outside of the Joseph Smith Papers Project in the Church History Library. Today, it is under the umbrella of the project authorized by the First Presidency to produce, based on new research (from the Joseph Smith Papers and more), a new biography of Joseph Smith. The several volumes of the Legal Records series will join the current twenty-seven volume print edition as fruits of Dean Jessee's vision and ambition.

None of these publications could have occurred without trust. Dean was one key to that trust. Elder Maxwell was also essential. Elder Maxwell trusted the historians, including Dean Jessee—perhaps especially Dean Jessee—and his Brethren trusted Elder Maxwell. The same could be said of Elder Packer, who knew about Dean's work and interacted with him personally. That trust was a prerequisite to gaining formal approval for the Joseph Smith Papers Project in 2001.

As noted, Dean's later access to the sources necessary to ensure accuracy before publication was slow in coming. Even after the First Presidency had approved, the keeper of the records was hesitant to open them to outsiders. If you were responsible for the impressively titled *Book of the Law of the Lord*,³⁶ perhaps you would feel the same! On more than

35. Scott Bradshaw to Richard Turley, February 10, 2026, copy in possession of author. Some of the documents located and photocopied by Bradshaw and Madsen in the 1990s have since been lost or stolen from local repositories.

36. For more information about the *Book of the Law of the Lord*, see "Introduction to the *Book of the Law of the Lord*," Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press,

one occasion, I witnessed the intervention of Elder Packer and Elder Oaks to directly open the path for the access Dean needed to finish his work on that source and others.

I also witnessed what happened later with the Book of the Law of the Lord, an experience that demonstrates how completely Dean gained the trust of the careful keeper of records. In early 2005, when Dean needed one final look at the portion of Joseph Smith's diary inscribed in the Book of the Law of the Lord to verify his transcription before publication, he asked me to accompany him to the Church Administration Building to assist. On his first visit years earlier, he was given photocopies of the relevant pages with people overlooking what he did with them. On this occasion, January 14, 2005, the secretary took a heavy volume under his arm, marched us up to the fifth floor, placed us in a room, set the book on the table, and left us to our work. "Have fun," he said warmly as he turned to leave. "And if [you] leave the building with it, you're dead," he added jokingly.³⁷

Not only did the man not return, but he trusted Dean so much that he left the building before we did. After hours of verifying the transcripts, we carried the book downstairs, and he was nowhere to be found. When the man at the security desk declined to be responsible for it, we had difficulty finding someone to safeguard the volume so we could go home.

Dean was an essential part of earning the trust required for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Permission, cooperation, and access were all facilitated because of the man Dean Jessee was.

Richard Bushman, Joseph Smith's biographer, once said that one reason for Joseph's power was that he had the revelations "at his back." According to Bushman, no one believed the revelations more than Joseph Smith.³⁸ Perhaps. But I can tell you that Dean Jessee believed the revelations and he loved the revelations—especially the manuscripts (of which he was a foremost expert).

One of the documents Dean published in the first volume of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* was an interview by a newspaper editor who traveled from Pittsburgh to interview Joseph Smith. "Speaking of revelations, he stated that when he was in a 'quandary,' he asked the Lord for a revelation, and when he could not get it, he 'followed the dictates of his

accessed May 4, 2026, www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-the-book-of-the-law-of-the-lord/1#facts.

37. Esplin, *Diary*, January 14, 2005.

38. Richard Lyman Bushman, with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 173.

own judgment.’ . . . But he never gave anything to his people as revelation, unless it was a revelation, and the Lord did reveal himself to him.”³⁹ Joseph believed that. Dean Jessee believed that. And Dean helped us know and better understand Joseph and his revelations.

I want to close with Dean, the scholar, talking about his faith. After decades of studying the life, work, and documents of Joseph Smith, Dean said that what mattered most to him was that Joseph helped us understand the revelations from heaven and to come closer to the Savior, of whom Joseph testified and taught.

To a news reporter in 2008, Dean expressed one way his scholarship strengthened his faith. As a writer and editor, he knew that the process of creating a coherent, readable manuscript included writing multiple drafts and editing, refining, and improving those drafts. His deep study of the original manuscripts of the Book of Mormon showed none of that. Instead, the manuscripts were often “one continual sentence,” without punctuation. This testified to Dean that the Book of Mormon was what Joseph Smith said it was: a revealed text from God. “I could tell, this man was telling the truth,” Dean said. “This is a dictated record,” a record Dean believed in and a record that matters because it teaches us about Christ. “In my estimation, the thing that’s the most important contribution of Joseph Smith to mankind is the understanding he gave of the atonement of Jesus Christ that comes in the Book of Mormon.”⁴⁰ Amen, Brother Jessee!

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Ronald K. Esplin was Dean Jessee’s colleague in the History Division of the Church Historical Department in the 1970s and then in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University in the 1980s. From 1986 to 2002, Esplin was director of that institute. He retired from BYU as a professor of Church History in 2005 when the Joseph Smith Papers Project moved to the Church History Department in Salt Lake City. Esplin served as a managing editor of the Joseph Smith Papers Project from 2000 to 2012, after which he continued as a general editor until the project was completed in 2023. He retired from the Church History Department in 2016 and presently serves as director of the Brigham Young Papers.

39. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:443.

40. Aaron Shill, “Testimony Drives Dean Jessee’s Work,” *Deseret News*, August 15, 2008, <https://www.deseret.com/2008/8/15/20379461/testimony-drives-dean-jessee-s-work/>.