

what point in time Emma might have been told of the marriage. But we must remind ourselves that this document, like so many others we have used, is imperfect, a faded photocopy of a 1916 letter reflecting an elderly man's memory of a conversation that took place more than thirty years earlier.<sup>23</sup>

So there we are. But where are we? Faced with a folk legend, with genuine documents that tell no tales, and dubious ones that contradict themselves and the contemporary accounts, perhaps it is best for us to respond as we must to many paradoxes of our history: consider thoughtfully and then place all the evidence carefully on the shelf, awaiting further documentation, or the Millennium, whichever should come first.

## LICENSING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Donald Q. Cannon

Even in its infant stages The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints instituted various procedures which would allow its members to be organized and regulated more effectively. One such procedure was the practice of licensing. Church leaders issued licenses to all men holding priesthood offices and also to all missionaries called to preach the gospel.

Licenses provided a means of regulating the conduct of Church members. Only those with a bona fide license could serve in the Church or engage in missionary work. This custom, however, served another important purpose. The license of an elder provided him with appropriate credentials so that Mormons and non-Mormons could rest assured that he represented the Church.

At first, the licenses consisted of a handwritten statement signed by the appropriate Church authority. Joseph Smith Sr.'s earliest license serves as an appropriate example. (See Joseph Smith Sr. license on page 97.)

Later the Church began to use a printed form which included a space for the elder's name, the date, the place, the clerk's name, etc. An example of the early form is the license of Charles C. Rich. (See Charles C. Rich license on page 98.)

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<sup>23</sup>David McKay to Mrs. James Hood, 16 March 1916, photocopy of holograph, Church Archives. David McKay is the father of LDS Church President David O. McKay.



I License Liberty Power & Authority  
Given to Joseph Smith Senior signifying & proving that  
he is a Priest of this Church of Christ established & regularly  
Organized in these last days of the world on the 6th day of  
April All of which has been done by the will of God & according  
to his holy calling & the gift & power of the Holy Ghost agreea-  
ble to the Revelations of Jesus Christ Given to Joseph Smith Junr...  
the first Elder of the Church signifying that he has been baptized  
& received into the Church according to the Articles & Covenants of  
the Church & ordained under the hand of Oliver Cowdery who is an  
Apostle of our Lord an Elder of the Church

Signed by Joseph Smith Jr. First Elder  
Oliver Cowdery Second Elder

Given to the Beamen in conference held in  
Lagette Seneca County N.Y. June 9th 1830.

Photocopy courtesy of Archives and Manuscripts  
Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University

Joseph Smith Sr. License



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

THIS Certifies that *Charles C. Rich*

has been received

into the church of the Latter Day Saints, organized on the sixth of April, in the year of our Lord, one thousand, eight hundred, and thirty, and has been ordained an elder according to the rules and regulations of said church, and is duly authorized to preach the gospel, agreeably to the authority of that office.

From the satisfactory evidence which we have of his good moral character, and his zeal for the cause of righteousness, and diligent desire to persuade men to forsake evil and embrace truth, we confidently recommend him to all candid and upright people as a worthy member of society.

We, therefore, in the name, and by the authority of this church, grant unto this our worthy brother in the Lord, this letter of commendation as a proof of our fellowship and esteem: praying for his success and prosperity in our Redeemer's cause.

Given by the direction of a conference of the elders of said church, assembled in Kirtland, Geauga county, Ohio, the third day of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand, eight hundred, and thirty six.

*Rich, Charles C.*

*in G. W. Kirtland* . Clerk. *Joseph A. Smith* Chairman.  
*Kirtland Ohio April 18<sup>th</sup> 1836*

Charles C. Rich License

By the 1840s and 1850s the forms had become quite elaborate, including a decorative border design, etc. The elders license of Gibson Smith serves as an example of the more sophisticated form. (See Gibson Smith license, p. 100.)

Although the terms *license* and *certificate* were often used interchangeably, particularly in the early days, there was actually a difference. The certificate was used in very much the same manner that membership records are used today, that is, as official evidence of membership in the Church. The certificate was carried by the individual and presented to the presiding officer of the branch of which he desired to become a member. The license, on the other hand, was issued to the priesthood bearer, who carried it as identification both for the benefit of members in other branches and for nonmembers whom he might encounter. That both licenses and certificates were issued can be seen in the case of Gibson Smith. (See Gibson Smith license and certificate, pages 100 and 101.)

In addition to the certificate and licenses issued by the Church, in some cases elders had to apply for licenses from the government officials in the area where these elders were laboring as missionaries. Brigham Young, for example, had a license to preach issued by officials in Preston, Lancaster County, England. (See Brigham Young license, p. 102.)

That licensing was a common practice in the early days of the Church is attested to in the official history of the Church, journals, biographies, and scholarly studies of the Latter-day Saint missionary system—sources that provide useful insight into licensing practices and procedures. The *History of the Church* makes several references to licensing, including cases of licenses being revoked.<sup>1</sup> The revoking of licenses was tantamount to being disfellowshipped in the twentieth century. In March 1836 the Church leaders concluded that it was necessary to issue a set of resolutions concerning licensing:

*Resolutions on Ordinations and Licenses.*

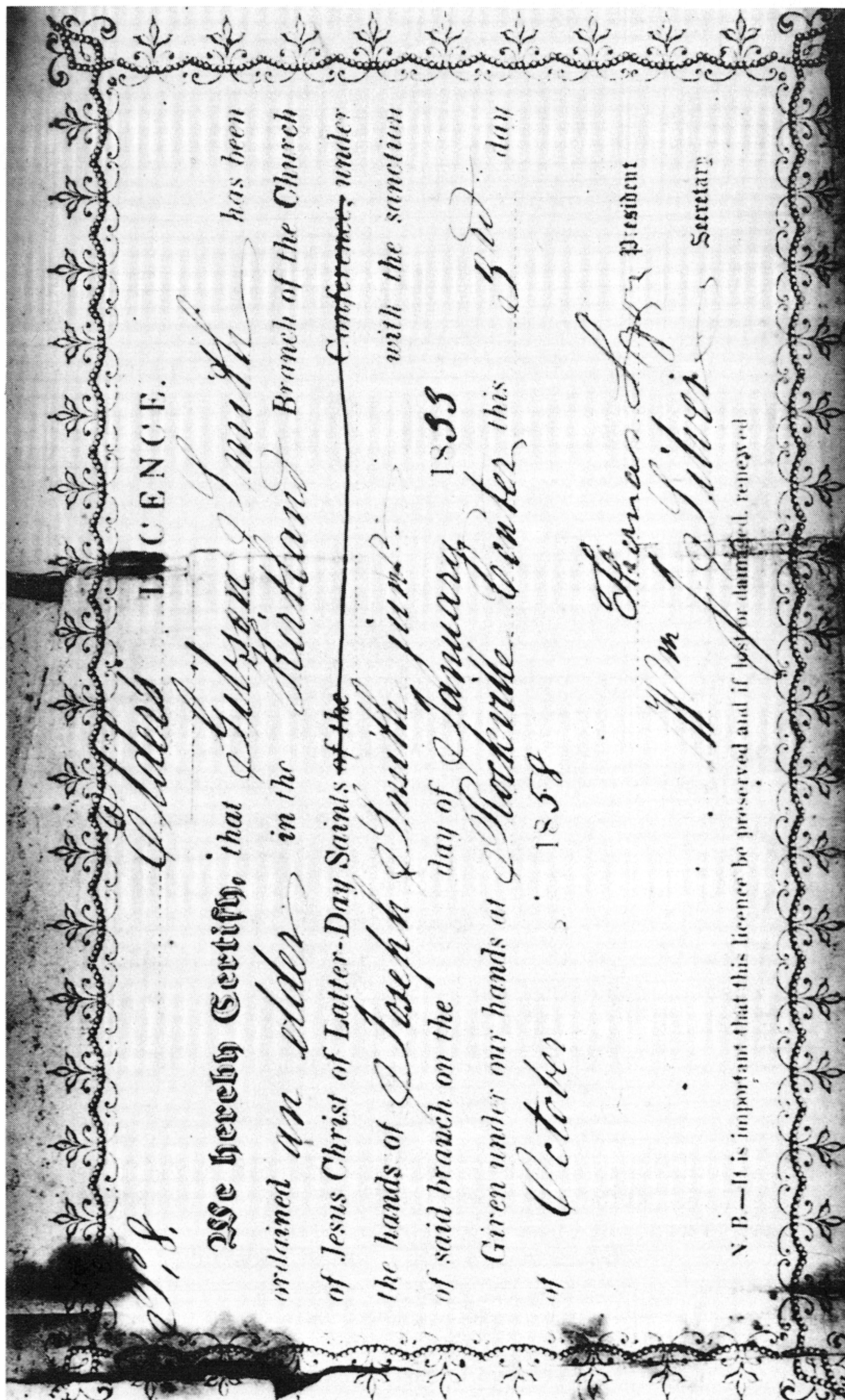
Whereas, the records of the several conferences held by the Elders of the Church, and the ordination of many of the official members of the same, in many cases, have been imperfectly kept since its organization, to avoid ever after any inconvenience, difficulty or injury, in consequence of such neglect, your committee recommend:

First—That all licenses hereafter granted by these authorities [*sic*] assembled as a quorum, or by general conference held for the purpose of transacting the business of the Church, be recorded at full length by a

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Desert News, 1932–1951), 1:354 and 2:241.







*Elders* CERTIFICATE.

We hereby Certify, that *Frederick Gibson Smith* is an elder of  
the *Rockville Center* Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day  
Saints of the *New York* Conference, in good standing; and as such we  
recommend *him* to any Branch with which *he* may desire to unite.

Date, *October 3* 185*9*.

*Francis B. Buckner* President.

*Wm. H. Smith* Secretary.

This Certificate is not intended to be shown to the private members of a branch; but should be presented to the presiding officer of the branch  
of which you desire to become a member.



Lancashire  
to wit.

English license.

THESE are to certify, that at the General Quarter Sessions of the

Peace, held by adjournment at *Preston* in and for

the said County, the *eight* day of *April*

in the *third* Year of the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria,

*Brigham Young*

came before

the Justices present, and did then and there in open Court, take the Oaths appointed to be taken in the Stead of the Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy, and also the Abjuration Oath; and did also then and there make and repeat the Declaration against Popery; and also the Declaration required to be taken by Dissenting Ministers, and subscribed his name severally thereto, pursuant to the several Statutes in that behalf made and provided.

*Edw. 22th*

Deputy Clerk of the Peace in and for the  
said County of Lancaster.



Brigham Young License

clerk appointed for that purpose, in a book to be kept in this branch of the Church, until it shall be thought advisable by the heads of the Church to order other books and appoint other clerks, to record licenses as above; and that said recording clerk be required to indorse a certificate under his own hand and signature, on the back of said licenses, specifying the time when and place where, such license was recorded, and also a reference to the letter and page of the book containing the same.

Second—That this quorum appoint two persons to sign licenses given as aforesaid, one as chairman, and the other as clerk of conference; and that it shall be the duty of said persons appointed to sign licenses as clerk of conference immediately hereafter, to deliver the same into the hands of the recording clerk.

Third—That all general conferences abroad give each individual whom they ordain, a certificate, signed by the chairman and clerk of said conference, stating the time and place of such conference, and the office to which the individual has been ordained; and that when such certificate has been forwarded to the person hereafter authorized to sign licenses as clerk of conference, such person shall, together with chairman of conference, immediately sign a license; and said clerk of conference shall, after the same has been recorded, forward to the proper person.

Fourth—That all official members in good standing and fellowship in the various branches of this Church, be requested to forward their present licenses, accompanied by a certificate of their virtuous and faithful walk before the Lord, signed by the chairman and clerk of a general conference, or by the clerk of a branch of the Church in which such official member resides, by the advice and direction of such Church, to the clerk of conference, whose duty it shall be to fill a new license, as directed in the third article; and that all licenses, signed, recorded, and endorsed, as specified in the first article, shall be considered good, and valid to all intents and purposes, in the business and spiritual affairs of this Church, as a religious society, or before any court of record of this or any other country, wherein preachers of the Gospel are entitled to special privileges, answering in all respects as an original record, without the necessity of referring to any other document.

Fifth—That the recording clerk be required to publish quarterly, in paper published by some member or members of this Church, a list of the names of the several persons for whom he has recorded licenses within the last quarter of a year.

Sixth—That this quorum appoint two persons to sign licenses as chairman and clerk of conference *pro tem.* for the standing chairman and clerk, who shall be appointed as named in the second article, and also to act in their absence, in signing other licenses, as specified in the foregoing article.

President Joseph Smith, Jun., was nominated as chairman, Frederick G. Williams, as clerk, and Sidney Rigdon as chairman *pro tem.* and Oliver Cowdery as clerk *pro tem.* Vote from the several quorums called, in their order, and passed unanimously.

President Joseph Smith, Jun., made some remarks upon the resolution offered to the Council on the 12th of February. Followed by



President Thomas B. Marsh, who called a vote of his quorum to ascertain whether they would repeal their amendment of the 13th of February. And nine of the Twelve voted in the affirmative, and three, viz., John F. Boynton, Lyman E. Johnson, and Orson Pratt, in the negative. And the original resolution of the 12th of February was passed.

Dismissed by prayer, half-past nine o'clock.

OLIVER COWDERY, Clerk.<sup>2</sup>

From the foregoing resolutions it is apparent that

1. all licenses had to be recorded;
2. all licenses had to be signed by the proper authorities;
3. both licenses and certificates were issued;
4. licenses were valid for all business of the Church;
5. a list of all licensed persons was published quarterly.

Indeed, an intricate system of licensing had developed by 1836.

Licensing had an effect on the holder's feelings as well as on nonmembers. The Prophet's brother, William Smith, expressed his feelings about the impact of licensing upon his ministry when he wrote, "This made me feel more and more the importance of my mission."<sup>3</sup>

Almost all of the scholarly studies of Latter-day Saint missionary work have come to grips with the practice of licensing. In his pioneer study, George Ellsworth sees the introduction of licensing as an indication of the transition from a freelance to an organized system.<sup>4</sup> Leonard Arrington, in his biography of Charles C. Rich, explains that Brother Rich was authorized to act as an elder by virtue of the license in his possession.<sup>5</sup> Barbara Higdon's dissertation contains a section entitled "Credentials of Missionaries" wherein she writes: "The Latter Day Saint elder might feel that the Lord had ordained and directed his missionary activities, but the non-Mormon needed tangible evidence that the poorly-dressed man who stood before him was a minister. Thus the idea of licensing occurred early in the movement."<sup>6</sup> In his study of the Southern States Mission, LaMar C. Berrett indicates that each missionary had to have the "necessary credentials" to verify his calling as a missionary.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 2:403-05. These resolutions were also published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, 2:266-77.

<sup>3</sup>William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Steam Book and Job Office, 1883), p. 90.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel George Ellsworth, "A History of Mormon Missions in the United States and Canada, 1830-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1951), p. 224.

<sup>5</sup>Leonard J. Arrington, *Charles C. Rich: Mormon General and Western Frontiersman* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara J. M. Higdon, "The Role of Preaching in the Early Latter-day Saint Church, 1830-1846" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, 1961), p. 39.

<sup>7</sup>LaMar C. Berrett, "History of the Southern States Mission, 1831-1861" (M.S. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1960), p. 38.



As the system developed, at each conference of the Church a clerk was appointed to record certificates and to issue licenses. Consequently, as an elder moved from branch to branch he could be properly identified, and his license enabled non-Mormons to determine the validity of his calling. Thus the practice of issuing a license to priesthood holders and missionaries enabled the early Church to regulate its internal affairs and control its proselyting system.