

# The Historians Corner

Edited by James B. Allen

**AN INVITATION:** We appreciate the kind responses we have received over the years to "The Historians Corner," and we also appreciate the many items that have been submitted for consideration. While we still have a small backlog, it is not inexhaustible, and we again invite the submission of items appropriate for this section of *BYU Studies*.

What is appropriate? First, we are especially interested in any significant unpublished document that gives us new insight or expands our knowledge of important aspects of Mormon history: a letter, a significant diary entry, an important address, or some other such item. We expect you to write a short introduction that will place the document in perspective. Second, you may have special insight into some phase of Church history that would make a significant essay, yet it is not quite enough for a full-length article. We have published many such short pieces and would invite the submission of others.

This issue of "The Historians Corner" contains examples of both kinds of material, all significant in some way to the Nauvoo period. First is a previously unpublished transcription of a most interesting 1840 sermon by Joseph Smith. Dean C. Jessee has carefully identified it as probably the most authentic account extant of that particular address. Its significance lies partly in the insight it provides into some of the Prophet's concerns and hopes as he led out in planning and building the city of Nauvoo. Next is an important essay by Ronald K. Esplin, a Ph.D. candidate at BYU who is writing a dissertation on Brigham Young during the transition period from the death of Joseph Smith to the founding of Utah. His research provides the basis for challenging the claim of some scholars that it was Brigham Young who began the policy of withholding the priesthood from Blacks. While *BYU Studies* has no plans to pursue this matter further, it was felt that at least this much should be said here in order to provide supporting evidence for the traditional Mormon view that Brigham Young was only continuing a policy he had received from his predecessor. Esplin recognizes the problem of specific documentation, but his judicious appeal to strong circumstantial evidence provides a responsible alternative to other interpretations. Finally, Lyndon W. Cook

has edited and extensively documented an interesting letter that demonstrates the involvement of Joseph Smith's friends in efforts to assist him in his difficulties with the law.

## JOSEPH SMITH'S 19 JULY 1840 DISCOURSE

Dean C. Jessee

An occasional theme among Latter-day Saints during times of political crisis has been the prediction attributed to Joseph Smith that the U.S. Constitution would one day hang by a thread and that the elders of the Church would at some critical juncture be instrumental in saving it. The source of this statement is thought to be an unpublished address titled, "A Few Items from a Discourse Delivered by Joseph Smith, July 19, 1840," filed in the Joseph Smith Papers in the LDS Church Archives. Written neatly on 8"×12" paper, the document is obviously a copy since it shows none of the usual characteristics of an original report. The paper appears to be of post-Nauvoo vintage, and the handwriting does not correspond to that of any of Joseph Smith's known clerks. Nor is there reference in the Prophet's History to his having delivered a discourse on 19 July 1840. Furthermore, at two points in the text, there appears to be a serious problem of continuity, suggesting copyist's errors or some other flaw in the manuscript. Consequently, in the absence of an original text, and without information about its origin and authorship, the reliability of this document has remained somewhat tenuous.

Now, the recent surfacing of the original manuscript<sup>1</sup> from which the foregoing copy was taken not only gives some clarification to the question of reliability but also emphasizes, to students of history, the value of tracing one's information to original sources. The 1840 Joseph Smith discourse is one of four reported longhand in a small notebook (3 3/4"×5 1/2") in the handwriting of Martha Jane Knowlton and Howard Coray.

Martha Jane Knowlton was living with her family in Hancock County, Illinois, when the Latter-day Saints began moving there in

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<sup>1</sup>The manuscript was found in the Joseph F. Smith Papers in the LDS Church Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as Church Archives. It is now filed in the Martha Jane Coray Collection.