

Charming Feb 17th 1843

Mr J S Fullmer

I recd yours of the 10 Feb on the 14th
and have been so busy that I could not
answer it until now & now I will as
near as I can at this time you will
know tis a perplexing time for business
men & my mind is fully engaged in my
business on acct of the great decay of
the currency I will give you a
short history of what I know about
Joseph Smith Jr I have been intimately
acquainted with him about 2 years he
then was about 20 years old or there
about I also went to school with him
one winter he was a fine likely young
man & at that time did not profess
religion he was not a popular man
although I did once in a while hear him
swear he never gambled to my
knowledge I do not believe he ever died
I will know he was no stage coach for he was
no judge of horses I told him one that is all
I ever knew he dealt in the kind I never
new him to get drunk I believe he would
now and then take a glass he never put on
ed to play the slight of hand nor Black
leg it was fashionable at that time to drink
Siquor I do not believe in any religion
& therefore am friendly to all I believe
that there is a heaven & hell & those that do not
right but through their lives will be damned
but still I believe I do right myself I
state this for facts that any thing from what
I have said about Joseph Smith that is worse
than I said is false & untrue

Holograph of Josiah Stowell Jr.'s February 17, 1843, letter to John S. Fullmer. In this letter, Stowell conveys his impressions of Joseph Smith, with whom he was "intimately acquainted . . . for about 2 years." Courtesy LDS Church Archives.

The Josiah Stowell Jr.—John S. Fullmer Correspondence

Mark Ashurst-McGee

Published here for the first time is a strong letter from one of Joseph Smith's early acquaintances, an independent witness who substantiates the youthful Prophet's good character.

In 1843, Mormon missionary John S. Fullmer encountered difficulties proselyting in Pennsylvania due to widespread rumors regarding Joseph Smith's youthful activities in that state and in New York. In an effort to overcome local opinion, Fullmer wrote to Josiah Stowell Jr. asking for a statement regarding Joseph Smith's character. Josiah and Joseph had been schoolmates and friends from 1825 to 1827, when Joseph worked for Josiah Stowell Sr. The following letter of response from Josiah Stowell Jr., including a postscript by Josiah Stowell Sr., conveys their firsthand knowledge of Joseph Smith's character.

Most people who wrote about Joseph Smith during his lifetime were either faithful Latter-day Saints or carping critics. As one would expect, their respective viewpoints tended to influence that which they wrote. Unlike his father, however, Josiah Stowell Jr. never converted to the new faith. In fact, he kept aloof from all denominations. His letter of reply to John S. Fullmer thus provides a rare report by one who was both impartial in his religious convictions and well acquainted with Joseph during the time the Prophet was preparing to receive the golden plates. In addition, the elder Stowell's postscript provides us with the testimony of one of the earliest believers in the divinity of Joseph Smith's prophetic mission. The interchange between Fullmer and the Stowells offers two distinct and significant perceptions of the young Joseph Smith.

An early settler of Bainbridge, New York, Josiah Stowell Sr. owned hundreds of acres in the area, where he farmed and operated sawmills on the Susquehanna River.¹ According to local historian William D. Purple, "Mr. Stowell was a man of much force of character, of indomitable will, and well fitted as a pioneer in the unbroken wilderness that this country possessed at the close of the last century." Purple added that Stowell "had been educated in the spirit of orthodox puritanism" and that he was "a very industrious, exemplary man."²

When Stowell met Joseph Smith in October 1825, he hired Joseph and his father to help him locate a legendary Spanish mine and to work on his farm.³ While searching for the mine, Joseph boarded at the home of Isaac Hale and there met Isaac's daughter Emma, whom he would later marry.⁴

In March 1826, Peter Bridgeman, the nephew of Josiah Stowell Sr.'s wife, Miriam, brought Joseph Smith to trial for deceiving Stowell. During the trial, however, Stowell testified in defense of Joseph. Purple, who attended the trial, wrote that "as the testimony of Deacon Stowell could not be impeached, the prisoner was discharged."⁵ Stowell would also testify on Joseph's behalf in his 1830 Bainbridge trial.⁶

Perhaps because of Stowell's confidence in him, Joseph told him about the visits of the angel Moroni. When Joseph went to recover the golden plates on September 22, 1827, Stowell was at the Smith home.⁷ Stowell later became a member of the Colesville branch of the Church. Although he never gathered with the Saints after their departure from New York, he remained firm in the faith throughout his life.⁸

Josiah Stowell Jr., youngest of the eight Stowell children, was sixteen when he met Joseph Smith, who was then nineteen.⁹ The two attended school together while Joseph was in Chenango County. Josiah probably also worked with Joseph on the Stowell farm.¹⁰ By 1833, Josiah Stowell Sr. had moved westward down the Susquehanna River to the village of Smithboro, Tioga County, New York. Josiah Stowell Jr. also moved west, settling near his father.¹¹ The elder Stowell passed away in this area sometime in the middle-to-late 1840s.¹²

John S. Fullmer was born and raised in Huntington Township, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. He later moved to Nashville, Tennessee. While living there, he received letters from his family, who had joined the Church in Ohio. In 1839, Fullmer rode his horse to Nauvoo to investigate his family's newfound faith. After being baptized by Joseph Smith, Fullmer moved his wife and children to Nauvoo.¹³ In 1840 the Prophet employed Fullmer as a clerk and secretary, and the two soon became friends.¹⁴

In 1842, John S. Fullmer received a call to serve a mission.¹⁵ In the course of his labors, he made the acquaintance of Josiah Stowell Jr. The two discussed the subject of the Restoration, and Stowell shared his recollections of Joseph Smith. Stowell also mentioned that he had defended Joseph's reputation whenever he had heard it slandered.

Leaving New York, Fullmer traveled southward into Pennsylvania. A few weeks later, he wrote to Stowell from Cambria, a tiny hamlet situated along the southeast slopes of the Appalachians in the northwest corner of Huntington—Fullmer's home township.¹⁶ Fullmer probably came from this corner of Huntington Township. It was a standard practice for LDS



John Solomon Fullmer (1807–1883) in his later years. In 1843, while on a mission in Pennsylvania, Fullmer asked Josiah Stowell Jr. to refute slanderous charges against Joseph Smith then in circulation. Courtesy LDS Church Archives.

missionaries to return to their hometowns to preach the gospel. If so, he may have been strongly motivated to change the opinions of his former neighbors and family connections.¹⁷

Fullmer wrote to Stowell regarding a number of epithets ascribed to the young Joseph Smith and requested that Stowell write concerning his personal knowledge of Joseph's character. Fullmer entreated Stowell to write back as soon as possible and further asked that he have his father add something to the letter. Three days after receiving Fullmer's letter, Josiah Stowell Jr. responded, providing a pithy, point-by-point rebuttal to the charges laid at the feet of his former acquaintance. In a postscript, he recorded his father's dic-

tated testimony regarding Joseph Smith's character and the truthfulness of Mormonism. The postscript demonstrates that the elder Stowell still considered himself a faithful member of the Church.¹⁸

The extant letter from Fullmer to Stowell is a handwritten copy that Fullmer made before sending the original.¹⁹ Written sideways in the lower right-hand corner of the verso, Fullmer penned, "Copy of a Letter to Josiah Stowell, *Verbatim et literatum*." The Latin phrase, which means "word for word and letter for letter," indicates that the extant holograph faithfully represents the original letter. Fullmer made this copy in ink on the front and back of a 7¾" by 12½" sheet of paper.²⁰ Josiah Stowell Jr. responded in ink on one sheet of paper (12½" by 15") folded widthwise to form two leaves. Stowell wrote on the front and back of the first leaf. Then he folded the letter up, addressed it on the back, and sealed it with wax. The LDS Church Archives cataloged the Fullmer and Stowell letters in 1980 and 1972, respectively. Information about the dates of acquisition is not known.

John S. Fullmer's Letter to Josiah Stowell Jr.²¹

Cambria, Luzerne Co. Penn.

Josiah Stowell Jr. Esqr.}

February 10th

1843

Elmira N. Y.

Dear Sir,

I hope you will pardon ~~pardon~~ me for the liberty I am taking in addressing you this letter, which is intended, not as an obtrusion, but to elicit a statement of facts which came under your own personal observation, or such as you know to be facts from circumstances with which you are well acquainted, relative to the youthful, and also more mature character of Joseph Smith Jun.²² your play mate and school fellow, but now the leader of the "Latter day Saints."

I have been laboring now for some weeks in this section of the country, by way of preaching the gospe[l]²³ as understood by the said Smith and others, and find here a great deal of opposition & persecution, in consequence of the reputed bad character of Mr. Smith in his youth, and the consequent deception²⁴ he is practising upon the public.

Being convinced of the great injustice done him everywhere in alledging charges of the most heinous ch[ar]²⁵=acter against him, which are verily believed by the people here, and greatly to the prejudice of the spread of the gospel in this section; and having recently had an opportunity of conversing with you, (while at your house together with Mr. Bird) on the subject and learned that you were his youthful companion, and had, on many occasions, defended his character from the fulsome abuse of the slanderer; I cannot forbear to solicit from <you> a statement of such things as you feel warranted in making in his defence and in defence of the truth, & more especially as you are not a member of the <church.>

It is here stated and verily believed, that he, Smith, was a gambler, a Black leg,²⁶ a notorious horse jockey,²⁷ an adept at the slight of hand or juggling,²⁸ and was notorious for frequenting grogshops, and intemperance, and that he was also exceedingly profane, &c. &c. Now²⁹ if this matter can be answered to the satisfaction of some half [*verso*] a Dozen persons in this neighborhood, it would have quite a beneficial effect here; besides, it would be a vindication of the character and reputation of one who is receiving more than his share of misrepresentation and abuse. I have openly and boldly denied these charges, and although not required to prove a negative, have <still> agreed to do so in several instances, which if I can do, through you, will set the matter at rest in this place.

I hope you will take the trouble, (if you think me reasonable in requesting it,) to answer in reply to those charges as soon as circumstances

will posibly admit of your doing so; <I should be pleased to have you>
~~mark~~ make also such general remarks as the occasion seems to require.
I should be pleased also to have the old gentleman, your father, subscribe
to as much of your reply as he is knowing to.

Address to Cambria &c. as above.

Give my compliments to all that I had the pleasure of seeing at yr.
house. & to Mr. Bird, should you see him.

Very Respectfully

Jno: S. Fullmer



P.S. I would gladly pay the postage on this letter; but to tell the truth I have
not got it. am laboring with<out> purse or scrip, & without compensa-
tion, only such good as I may be the means of doing while on my mission.
<& may God bless you & yours->

send yours without paying postage.

J. S. F.

Josiah Stowell Jr.'s Reply to John S. Fullmer³⁰

Chemung³¹ Feb 17th 1843

Mr J S Fullmer

I rec[eive]d yours of the 10 Feb on the 14th and have binn so busy that I
could not answer it until now & now I will as near as I can at this time you
will know tis a Perplexing time for business men & my mind is fully
Engaged in my buisness on ac[coun]t of the great derangement of the
curency[.]³² I will give you a shrot history of what I know about Joseph
Smith Jr I have binn Intemetely acquainted with him about 2 years he then
was about 20 years old or there about I also went to school with him one
winter[.]³³ he was a fine likely young man & at that time did not Profess
religion he was not a Profain man although I did onc[e] in a while hear him
swair he never gambled to my knowledge I do not believe he ever did I well
know he was no Hoars Jocky for he was no Judge of Hoarses I sold him
one[.]³⁴ that is all I ever knowd he dealt in the kind[.] I never new him to
git drunk I believe he would now and then take a glass he never Pretend=ed
to Play the Slight of hand nor Black leg, it was fashionable at that time to
drink Liquor I do not Believe in any religion & there fore am friendly to all
I Believe that there is a heaven & hell & those that do not right here through
there lives will be damn=ed but still I believe I do right myself I State this
for facts that any thing from what I have said about Joseph Smith that is
wors than I say is fals & untru [*end of first page*] I am [a]fraid you Cannot
read what I have wrote my pen is Poor I am in a glassy³⁵ & tired after doing
a hard days work

I am yours truly

Josiah Stowell 2

8. In 1843, Josiah Stowell wrote to Joseph Smith that he had remained true to the faith and that he desired to gather with the Saints. Martha L. Campbell on behalf of Josiah Stowell Sr. to Joseph Smith Jr., December 19, 1843, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives. In the mid-1980s, a spurious letter from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell concerning treasure seeking gained considerable public attention. Later, it was discovered that this letter was the handicraft of document forger Mark Hofmann. Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 74–76, 356; Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders, with a New Afterward*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 557. Hofmann also forged a treasure-seeking contract among Josiah Stowell Sr., Joseph Smith Jr., and others. Turley, *Victims*, 104–5.

9. Josiah Stowell Jr. was born to Josiah Stowell Sr. (1770–184?) and Miriam Bridgeman (1773–1833) in Bainbridge, New York, on April 16, 1809. He and Polly Martha Smith (1812–85) had ten children. He died in Sugar Run, Pennsylvania, in 1875. Stowell, *Stowell Genealogy*, 229–30, 427–28; *PJS* 1:517.

10. Josiah Stowell Jr. became a farmer and a lumberman like his father. *Stowell Genealogy*, 428. So rather than hiring out his labor, he probably spent his youth working in his father's sawmill and on his father's farm, where Joseph Smith worked.

11. Most documents place Josiah Stowell Sr. in Smithboro, Tioga Township, Tioga County. On Josiah Sr.'s relocation, see Larry C. Porter, "The Colesville Branch and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (1970): 376. See also warranty deed between Stowell and Cyrus McMaster, dated April 25, 1840, which names the former as "Josiah Stowell of Smithboro, New York." Cyrus McMaster Papers, LDS Church Archives. *Stowell Genealogy*, 427–28, states that Josiah Stowell Jr. resided in Smithboro and that all of his children were born there. However, Fullmer addressed his letter to Elmira, in the adjacent county of Chemung, and Stowell replied from the village of Chemung, on the Chemung-Tioga county line. On Elmira, Chemung, and Smithboro, see J. H. French, *Gazetteer of the State of New York: Embracing a Comprehensive View of the Geography, Geology, and General History of the State, and a Complete History and Description of Every County, City, Town, Village, and Locality*, 8th ed. (Syracuse: R. P. Smith, 1860), 218, 220, 653.

12. *PJS* 1:517.

13. John Solomon Fullmer was the son of Peter Fullmer and Susannah Zerfass. In 1837 he married Mary Ann Price (1815–97). He later took two additional wives: (1) Olive Amanda Smith (1825–85), m. 1846; and (2) Sarah Ann Stevenson (1835–1901), m. 1856. Fullmer had thirty-one children. He was ordained an elder in 1839. He was ordained a high priest by 1844. AncestralFile, ver. 4.19, Salt Lake City, ID # 1RW9–QF; *The John Solomon Fullmer Story, Written by His Granddaughter Clara Fullmer Bullock*, 2d ed. (n.p.: 1968), 1, 3, 109–19; Frank Eschom, *Pioneers and Prominent Men of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Utah Pioneers Book Publishing, 1913), 881; Journal History of the Church, October 8, 1844, 2, LDS Church Archives.

14. "Biographical Sketch of Jno. S. Fullmer," 311–12, in John Solomon Fullmer Letterbook, LDS Church Archives; *John Solomon Fullmer Story*, iv, 3–4, 10. Phebie Jane Fullmer Perry and Lutitia May Fullmer Measom, "History of Mary Ann Price Fullmer," 1, LDS Church Archives. Fullmer also served after his mission as a colonel and as paymaster general in the Nauvoo Legion. He accompanied Joseph Smith to Carthage and stayed in jail with him the night before he was murdered. In 1844, Fullmer was sent to bring back the James Emmet company, and in 1845 he was appointed to the Council of Fifty. In 1848 he journeyed to the Salt Lake Valley with the Willard Richards company. There he served in the territorial legislature before and after his mission to the British Isles

(1852–55), where he presided over the Liverpool, Manchester, and Preston Conferences. He died in Springville, Utah, in 1883. *John Solomon Fullmer Story*, 10, 17–22, 29–46, 106–7, 109, 113, 121; Esshom, *Pioneers and Prominent Men*, 881; “A Veteran Gone,” *Deseret News*, October 17, 1883, 617. D. Michael Quinn, “The Council of Fifty and Its Members, 1844–1945,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 2 (1980): 194; William G. Hartley, *My Best for the Kingdom: History and Autobiography of John Lowe Butler, a Mormon Frontiersman* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1993), 169–81; John Solomon Fullmer, *Journal*, 1855, LDS Church Archives; “Meeting of the Legislature,” *Deseret News*, December 14, 1859, 324.

15. Fullmer departed for his mission on or near October 28, 1842. John S. Fullmer to George D. Fullmer, October 25, 1842, John Solomon Fullmer Letterbook, 175, LDS Church Archives.

16. On current maps and in most local histories, this hamlet is named “Cambra.” However, some early residents evidently called the hamlet “Cambria.” Like Fullmer, one early history of the area used the name “Cambria” to describe one of several “pleasant villages” consisting of ten to twenty-five dwellings each. Stewart Pearce, *Annals of Luzerne County: A Record of Interesting Events, Traditions, and Anecdotes from the First Settlement in Wyoming Valley to 1866*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1866), 202.

17. Summarizing his mission experiences, Fullmer wrote, “I have had some hard fought battles to live through; but thank God, the colours that I defended were never struck; there was no need of it, but were kept floating in the breeze.” Fullmer preached the gospel to several of his extended family, at least three of whom converted. He returned from his mission on June 28, 1843. John S. Fullmer to George D. Fullmer, December 19, 1843, John Solomon Fullmer Letterbook, 178–81.

18. The elder Stowell may have been living with Josiah Jr. by this time. Porter, “Origins of the Church,” 209–10.

19. Compare with the handwriting in Fullmer’s British mission journal and his letterbook. John Solomon Fullmer, *Journal*, 1855; John Solomon Fullmer Letterbook. This latter source shows that Fullmer often made copies of his outgoing correspondence before sending it.

20. A few unimportant changes have been penciled in by an unidentified redactor. Because these appear to be later inclusions, they are discussed in the notes but not included in this transcript.

21. John S. Fullmer to Josiah Stowell Jr., February 10, 1843, LDS Church Archives.

22. A comma has been penciled in at this point. It appears to be a later inclusion.

23. Edge of paper.

24. At this point, “it is said” has been penciled in interlinearly. This appears to be a later inclusion.

25. The edge of the paper has disintegrated here.

26. “A turf swindler; also, a swindler in other species of gambling.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “black-leg” (hereafter cited as *OED*). Webster’s 1828 dictionary defines “turf” as “3. Race-ground; or horse-racing.” *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “turf” (hereafter cited as *ADEL*, 1828). See also *OED*, s.v. “turf.” By calling Smith a “black leg,” Cambria residents were apparently saying that Joseph Smith had been one to bet on horses. This interpretation coincides with Fullmer’s placement of the term “black leg” between “gambler” and “horse jockey.”

27. “2. A dealer in horses; one who makes it his business to buy and sell horses for gain. Hence, 3. A cheat; one who deceives or takes undue advantage in trade.” *ADEL*, 1828, s.v. “jockey.” See also *OED*, s.v. “horse-jockey” and “jockey.”

28. “Playing tricks by slight of hand; deceiving.” *ADEL*, 1828, s.v. “juggling.” See also *OED*, s.v. “juggling.”

29. A comma has been penciled in at this point; it appears to be a later inclusion.

30. Josiah Stowell Jr. to John S. Fullmer, February 17, 1843, LDS Church Archives.

31. Fullmer mailed his letter to Elmira, the county seat of Chemung. The village of Chemung, however, did have a post office and was apparently closer to the residence of Josiah Stowell Jr. On Elmira and Chemung, see French, *Gazetteer of the State of New York*, 218, 220.

32. According to *Stowell Genealogy*, Josiah Stowell Jr. was a merchant, lumberman, and farmer (428). The primary crops in Chemung County were broomcorn and tobacco. French, *Gazetteer of the State of New York*, 220. In 1842, America finally overcame the depression that had begun in 1837 in response to Andrew Jackson's disestablishment of the Bank of the United States and species circular. Although the bank's charter expired in 1836, it continued as a state-chartered bank until 1841. The demise of a standard national currency and a subsequent deluge of local currencies (such as notes from the Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Banking Company) reduced currency confidence. The enactment of the Independent Treasury Bill in 1840 and its repeal in 1841 also contributed to the currency problem Stowell Jr. broaches in this letter.

33. On Joseph Smith's schooling in this area, see H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (n.p.: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 44.

34. In 1829, Joseph Smith gave a note to Josiah Stowell Sr. for a horse. Joseph Smith Jr. to Oliver H. Cowdery, October 22, 1829, Joseph Smith Letterbook, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives. When Joseph Smith was brought to trial in Bainbridge in July 1830, he had not paid on his note. The judge queried Josiah Stowell Sr. as to the purchase. Stowell testified that he had sold a horse to Smith and that he would do so again. This shows (1) that a rumor about "horse-jockeying" had already begun and (2) that Stowell did not feel he had been "jockied." In his 1839 history, Joseph Smith wrote that this court had convened "on account of the scandalous falsehoods which had been circulated." *PJS* 1:253, 312–13.

35. "Glassy" can mean "frail" or "lacking fire or life, dull," as in "glassy-eyed." *OED*, s.v. "glassy." Stowell may have been starting to write something like "I am in a glassy state," and then changed his train of thought to something like "I am glassy and tired." His fatigue may account for the inconsistent change in grammatical construction. Or, perhaps being in a glassy is something like being in a dither.

36. Initials for the Latin phrase, *nota bene*, meaning "note well"—or, perhaps the German phrase *nach Brief* (after the letter), which serves the same purpose as "P.S." for postscript.

37. See-er, or seer; one who can see things not otherwise visible to the natural eye.