

Highly anticipated Council of Fifty minutes now available.

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NOTES

ON THE JOSEPH SMITH PAPERS



Greetings

FROM THE 
GENERAL EDITORS

It's been an exciting few months for the Joseph Smith Papers, with our staff featured on podcast episodes and with the publication of our newest volume, [Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846](#). We highlight these and other happenings in the current newsletter.

You might notice that this issue of our newsletter is briefer than previous issues. We've decided to switch to shorter monthly issues so that we can provide you with more timely information. We hope you enjoy these updates from the Joseph Smith Papers.

Sincerely,

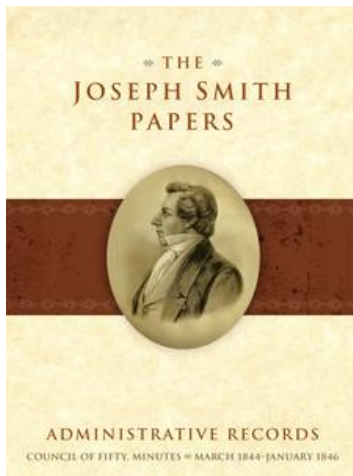
Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey
General Editors

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***Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–
January 1846 Is Now Available***


VOLUME UPDATES



"*Council of Fifty, Minutes* . . . opens a wide window onto a previously shrouded, but extraordinarily revealing, part of Mormon leadership and life during what were arguably the most turbulent and treacherous months of the church's history."

—Elliott West, University of Arkansas

The Church Historian's Press has [announced](#) the release of [Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846](#), the first and only volume in the Administrative Records series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*. This highly anticipated volume makes publicly available for the first time the complete minutes of the Council of Fifty, which Joseph Smith organized in March 1844.

The council was designed, according to Joseph Smith, "for the safety and salvation of the saints by protecting them in their religious rights and worship." However, the council was considered separate from the church; indeed, Joseph Smith and other council members viewed the council's formation as the beginning of the political kingdom of God on earth. The minutes reveal how council members wrestled with what it meant to establish the kingdom of God and how that kingdom related to the church and to civil governments.

Within this volume, readers will learn about the Council of Fifty's role in managing Joseph Smith's presidential campaign, governing Nauvoo, and planning the church's migration to the American West. The minutes, which begin in the months prior to Joseph Smith's martyrdom and continue until just before the Saints' western exodus, shed light on the development of Latter-day Saint beliefs and the history of Nauvoo and the church. The volume also presents new perspectives on American political culture, religious history, and western migration during the 1800s.

Council of Fifty, Minutes, was edited by Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Jeffrey D. Mahas, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat. Visit our website for more [information as well as videos](#) about this volume.

Join Us for Special Presentation



In conjunction with the publication of [Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846](#), the Joseph Smith Papers will hold a presentation and book signing on September 21 at Benchmark Books in Salt Lake City.

During the one-hour presentation, the volume editors will provide information on the Council of Fifty and will share insights they gained from examining the organization's minutes.

We invite all to attend this special event.

Details

Date: Wednesday, September 21

Time: 6:00 p.m.

Staff Discuss Insights on Joseph Smith



In July the Mormon Channel interviewed three members of the Joseph Smith Papers staff—product manager Ben E. Godfrey, managing historian Matthew C. Godfrey, and historian Mason K. Allred—about the project and about Joseph Smith’s personal life and unique role as spiritual leader and founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Each interview is presented in a separate podcast episode: [“Joseph Smith: Who Was He?,”](#) featuring Ben Godfrey; [“Joseph Smith: Understanding Controversies,”](#) featuring Matthew Godfrey; and [“Joseph Smith: A Modern Prophet,”](#) featuring Mason Allred.

All three discussed how Smith’s papers provide insight into his personality and struggles. Some struggles, according to Ben Godfrey, were with family, such as his difficult relationship with his brother William, and some were spiritual struggles, such as those that Joseph Smith said delayed him from obtaining the gold plates. Matthew Godfrey explained that Smith also grappled with learning how to run a church while dealing with the deaths of several of his children.

The Joseph Smith Papers staff also addressed controversial topics surrounding Smith’s life. For example, Matthew Godfrey discussed the first vision accounts: “We have to look at the context behind why [Smith is] creating these accounts, the audience to which he’s making these accounts, and remember that it’s human nature to remember things differently.” Godfrey suggested that having multiple accounts gives “a really well-rounded understanding of how Joseph Smith understood the first vision at different parts of his life and what it meant to him at different stages in his life.”

In considering Joseph Smith’s life, Ben Godfrey warned against presentism, in which we “reflect our own cultural values and biases onto the past, and we see them through that lens.” To come to know Joseph Smith, Godfrey suggested the following: “Read the revelations. Read the original manuscript editions. Read his journal entries. See what kind of a man he really was. And what you’ll come away with is a picture of a person that [you] didn’t know before.”

Allred noted that learning about Joseph Smith has become easier because of the increasing access to information. “We are in a position that is absolutely revolutionary for our knowledge about Joseph Smith.” For example, with the Joseph Smith Papers, “you’re getting the documents themselves,” Allred said. “This is the closest we can get to showing you everything that is known about what Joseph was doing in his life.” He added, “What that does is empowers you.”

Gain New Insight by Examining Multiple Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision



Although the most well-known account of Joseph Smith’s first vision of Deity is the version recorded in [JS History, 1838–1856, volume A-1](#), this version isn’t the first or most personal account to be made. It is actually one of four written by or under the direction of Joseph Smith. Individuals who had heard Joseph Smith speak about his first vision prepared five additional accounts. All of these accounts are available on the [Joseph Smith Papers website](#).

Each account differs in tone and details depending on the context in which it was written. “There was a different purpose in mind, a different audience in mind” with each iteration, says historian Karen Davidson in the video *Firsthand Accounts of the First Vision*. You can view this and other videos about the first vision accounts by visiting our [Videos](#) page.

Firsthand Accounts at a Glance

- [JS History, ca. Summer 1832, pp. 1–3](#). This account is the earliest, the most personal, and the only one that includes Joseph Smith’s handwriting.
- [JS, Journal, 9–11 Nov. 1835, pp. 23–24](#). Joseph Smith described his early visionary experiences to a visitor at his home in Kirtland, Ohio. His description was recorded, and Warren Parrish later copied it into Smith’s journal.
- [JS History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1, pp. 2–3](#). This best-known account of the first vision was later canonized by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a book of scripture called the Pearl of Great Price.
- [JS, “Church History,” Times and Seasons, 1 Mar. 1842, 3:706–707](#). This account is part of a brief church history that was prepared at the request of a Chicago newspaper editor.

Secondhand Accounts at a Glance

- [Orson Pratt, A\[n\] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, pp. 3–5](#). This is the earliest published account of Joseph Smith’s first vision of Deity. It was written by apostle Orson Pratt and published in Scotland in 1840.
- [Orson Hyde, Ein Ruf aus der Wüste \[A cry out of the wilderness\], pp. 14–16](#). Apostle Orson Hyde published this account in 1842 while proselytizing in Germany. He wrote the text in English and then translated it into German for publication. Both the [English](#) and the [German](#) versions are available.
- [Levi Richards, Journal, 11 June 1843](#). Following a church meeting at which Joseph Smith spoke of his earliest vision, Levi Richards included a brief account of it in his diary.
- [Interview, JS by David Nye White, Nauvoo, IL, 21 Aug. 1843; in David Nye White, “The Prairies, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.,” Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette, 15 Sept. 1843, \[3\]](#). In August 1843, newspaper editor David Nye White interviewed Joseph Smith while in Nauvoo, Illinois. His resulting news article included an account of Joseph Smith’s first vision.
- [Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844](#). After church member Alexander Neibaur heard Joseph Smith relate the circumstances of his earliest visionary experience, Neibaur recorded the circumstances in his journal.

The Joseph Smith Papers provides [images and full transcripts](#) of each account. The four firsthand accounts are also available with [regularized spelling and punctuation](#) in [ten languages](#). We encourage you to explore these accounts to discover additional insight on Joseph Smith’s first vision.

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