

Walking-on-Water Stories and Other Susquehanna River Folk Tales about Joseph Smith

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For nearly forty years, I have lived practically on the banks of the Susquehanna River in upstate New York. Shortly after moving to the area, I began to hear reports of accounts of Joseph Smith's walking on water. At first, as a matter of faith, I simply dismissed them. My realist and scientist nature told me that the current in the river would make it almost impossible to engineer a structure that would secure hidden boards. In 1997, as part of a project to gather local history for the Pioneer Sesquicentennial, I began studying LDS Church history along the Susquehanna and became more aware of the folklore and stories that surrounded Joseph's time in and near the Susquehanna River. The purpose of this article is not to determine the validity of these tales but rather to document their existence.

Joseph Smith was hired by Josiah Stowell (also spelled Stoal) of Chenango County, New York, in October 1825 to search for lost silver mines. Stowell lived in South Bainbridge (now Afton), New York. Although Joseph left for short periods of time, he visited or lived in the Susquehanna River area for over five years, during which time he met and married Emma Hale, translated most of the Book of Mormon, received the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods from heavenly messengers, and gained a significant group of followers, including the ever-faithful Joseph Knight family.

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Walking-on-Water Stories

From this period of time, a body of legends and folklore about Joseph Smith emerged and continues to be perpetuated today in Broome and Chenango Counties, New York, and Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. The most common, most entertaining, and most oft-repeated folk tale is associated with Joseph Smith's walking on water. Some put the event in Pennsylvania and others in New York. Typical is the Baptist minister in Unadilla, New York, who, just a few years ago, told two LDS missionaries that Joseph Smith was a "fraudulent man" because he put planks just below the surface of the Susquehanna River in Afton, New York, to show that he could walk on water.¹ Stanley J. Thayne, a former missionary in the Pennsylvania Harrisburg Mission of the LDS Church, which included the Susquehanna area, stated that walking-on-water tales "were a daily fare for us missionaries as we tracted door to door in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania."² It seems that walking-on-water stories persist because people want to believe Joseph Smith was a deceiver.

In the literature printed during Joseph Smith's lifetime, there are several references made concerning attempts by Mormons to walk on water. These stories are usually vague as to the location where the event was supposed to have happened and often do not contain significant details of the purported event. For example, an 1834 account said that a "gifted elder announced that he could walk and preach," but it was soon discovered that the "Mormon preacher" had "a line of plank laid in a particular direction completely across the pond, sunk about four inches under the surface of the water." The miracle was prevented from happening "by sawing the concealed bridge in pieces, just where it crossed the deepest and most dangerous part of the pond."³ 1835, John Ellis, writing from Salem, Pennsylvania, said, "I saw a few days since a paper called the 'Temple of Reason' published at Philadelphia, by the Infidels—It boasts that theological dogmas will be met by reason. It contrasts, Christianity with Mormonism, refers to the miracles wrought by the Mormons, their walking on the water, or rather, getting drowned in it."⁴

An 1838 account published in England reads, "On another occasion it in [is] said, that [Joseph Smith] undertook to walk across this holy river, but it was found that he had placed 2 ropes under the water drawn from bank to bank. Some wag cut the ropes during the pretended miracle, & and had it not been for the timely interposition of a party who had stationed themselves favourably for the purpose, Joe Smith would at this moment been in the land of spirits. These are the tales told of this mod-



Aerial photograph (looking west) of Oakland (formerly Harmony), Pennsylvania, and the Susquehanna River, ca. 1978. From late 1827 until August 1830, Joseph and Emma Smith lived in a home situated slightly west of the parking lot shown right of center. Photograph by Jed A. Clark, courtesy of the Ensign.

ern imposter.”⁵

Significantly, Joseph Smith’s published history states that “apostate lies, and ‘walk on the water’ stories” had made their way from America to England.⁶ Later in Smith’s life, Latter-day Saints denied any truthfulness to the walking-on-water tales. In an 1844 editorial in the *Times and Seasons* announcing the candidacy of Joseph Smith for president of the United States, the editor refers to the “old fabrication of ‘walk on the water’” as a “story [that] has been put into requisition to blast our fame.”⁷

Several accounts purporting Joseph Smith’s attempts to walk on water using boards appeared after his death. For example, the following account appeared in an 1869 gazetteer:

Joe Smith, the founder of Mormonism, operated quite extensively in this town and vicinity during the early years of his career as a prophet. To convince the unbelievers that he did possess supernatural powers he announced that he would walk upon the water. The performance was to take place in the evening, and to the astonishment of unbelievers, he did walk upon the water where it was known to be several feet deep, only sinking a few inches below the surface. This proving a success, a second trial was announced which bid fair to be as successful as the first, but when he had proceeded some distance into the river he suddenly went down, greatly to the disgust of himself and proselytes, but to the great amusement of the unbelievers. It

appeared on examination that plank[s] were laid in the river a few inches below the surface, and some wicked boys had removed a plank which caused the prophet to go down like any other mortal.⁸

Similar stories appear in the 1880 *History of Chenango County*, in the 1880 *Binghamton Republican*, in the 1885 *History of Broome County*, and in a 1907 Montrose, Pennsylvania, newspaper.⁹ It is significant to note that the story appears in the secondary literature much earlier in New York than in Pennsylvania. For example, Frederick G. Mather interviewed four people in New York and five people in Pennsylvania for his 1880 *Binghamton Republican* article. The interviewees from New York mention the walking-on-water tale, but the Pennsylvanians do not. Furthermore, no mention of the account has been found in any nineteenth-century text that places the events in Susquehanna County. The account is not included in Blackman's *History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania*, which was published in 1873, nor is it included in Stocker's 1887 *Centennial History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania*.¹⁰

Folk tales are still being told surrounding the question, "If Joseph Smith did try to walk on water, who removed the boards that caused Joseph Smith to fall into the river?" Theodore Elliott of Sidney, New York, said that "his son Bob met an old lady in Afton who was fearful that the Mormons would come and kill her because one of her ancestors removed one of the planks which Joseph Smith had placed under the water that caused him to fall into the water."¹¹ Charles J. Decker, Afton Town historian, said that "Eva Halleron told him that one of her relatives was involved in the removal of the planks." Charles also said that "Russell Butler (whose mother was surnamed French) told him that Charles French said that his father was the one who pulled the planks."¹² George Collington (ca. 1812–?) of Colesville said "he was not present when Joe Smith tried to walk upon the water. But others accuse Mr. Collington of taking up the Prophet's bridge and letting him souse into the river."¹³

This printed tale was not confined to paper. An iron New York State historic marker was placed along the Susquehanna River at the Broome-Chenango County line about 1933. This sign read: "Joseph Smith, Founder of Mormonism, Endeavored in 1827 to Walk on Water Nearby, The Venture Was Not a Success."¹⁴ Longtime Afton resident Hyman Wilcox says that he remembers that the sign was on Route 7 west of the river near the Nineveh Bridge.¹⁵

According to records found in Albany at the New York State Education Department (Historic Marker Program), Bert Lord was the one who wrote the text for this sign. The paperwork to have the historic

site marked was received at the Division of Archives and Historian on 8 May 1929. The reason given to have the sign erected was a “fact mentioned in [a] book by Lu B. Cake on Mormonism. Also [it] has been handed down by tradition.” The application form asked the following question: “What person, incident or event is associated with it and what are the dates?” Bert Lord answered with, “In 1827 Joseph Smith endeavored to walk on the water near Nineveh N.Y. He had planks placed a little under the surface of the water. Some roughish boys removed one and when he reached this place his faith gave way and he went down. The demonstration was at evening time.” The request said that the sign “should be placed between highway and river near the Broome & Chenango County lines.” The sketch on the application showed that the historic sign should be placed in Chenango County.

This historic iron marker is not standing today, and written correspondence found in the New York State archives in Albany tells the story of what happened to it. First, a letter written on 11 September 1933 by Schuyler F. Herron of Vermont asked that the sign be removed and destroyed. In a second letter written by Herron on 25 September 1933, he wrote: “My interest is partly personal (concern for the Education Dep’t of my native state and for my Mormon friends) and partly academic or impersonal (an aversion to intolerance as a liberal in theology) so I am writing at this in length. I hope to learn that the marker has been removed and destroyed.” In an August and September 1835 letter from Sylvester W. Cannon of the Presiding Bishopric in Salt Lake City, Cannon asked that the sign be removed and destroyed because “it is entirely false and misleading.” Finally, on 13 September 1935, Irving S. Adler of the State Education Department requested that the district engineer in Binghamton remove the sign. “We should appreciate it if you will ask your men to see that it is taken off the road,” he wrote. “It might be a good idea to have it destroyed after removal.” If we assume that this historic iron marker was removed in a timely manner, it stood for only a short time, approximately two years, from 1933 to 1935.¹⁶

In an August 1986 letter, Walter Rose said that the “sign was removed at the request of U.S. Representative Bert Lord because it was considered unfounded.”¹⁷ However, in 1938, Bert Lord told a different story:

The State Department in the Education Building in Albany which erects markers of great events has erected one at Nineveh on the border line between the Counties of Chenango and Broome. Here it is said that Smith staged an evening when he was to walk on the water. He had constructed planks which were just a few inches under the water where he was to do the walking. I assume feeling he would feel more secure with the planks under him than just treading the water. A great crowd assembled

after evening fall and while he was demonstrating his walking on the water he got out some distance from shore and suddenly went down all over. It seems that some mischievous person had removed one of the planks and although Smith seemed to have all kinds of spiritual faith when he came to where the plank was removed he went down. He explained this to his audience by saying that so long as he trusted in the Great Spirit he walked on the water alright, but when he felt stronger and trusted in Joe Smith he went down. Of course the plank helped his spiritual courage and the success of the evening very materially. The marker erected at this point stated the fact that he gave a demonstration of walking on water on a particular date, which I believe was about 1828, but that it was not a success. Some Mormon Elders going thru saw this marker and for some unknown reason it very soon disappeared. I was talking with one of them later on and he told me they had no account of this event in their Bible and they were very much opposed to having the marker remain. I assume they have some idea what happened to it.¹⁸

The location of the walking-on-water story varies depending upon who tells the tale. Nan Hill says that the experiment was “tried in two different places—one supposed to have been Perch or Pickerel Pond, and the other on the Susquehanna River near the residence of the faithful Joe Knight. The river episode was the time boys moved the ‘planks’ and Smith fell in, thereupon upbraiding his followers for lack of faith.” Pickerel Pond was part of the Knight farm where early baptisms took place. There is also a Perch Pond in the area, and the two ponds seem to get confused in the telling of folk tales.¹⁹ Eighty-five-year-old Hyman Wilcox told me in August 2004 that his father was of the opinion that the walking-on-water event “took place on the lower end of the forty-acre Big Island in the Susquehanna River between Afton and Nineveh.”²⁰

Another account has the walking-on-water site at the Cornwall farm on the east side of the river south of Afton, New York.

It was haying time and the Cornwalls were mowing near the river and they discovered tracks through the brush to its bank. The boys made an examination which developed a plank bridge just under the water which extended across a lever branch of the river to its opposite side. The plank[s] were supported by legs driven into the ground, upon which they were supported, and a tall straight tree was plainly visible in its line. The mowers procured a saw and weakened the third plank so that no one could step upon it without going into the river to its bottom. That night from a good vantage point the boys watched for its development. After dark[,] on came Smith with a number of his proselytes to see walking on the water verified. Smith stepped forth with confidence and turned to address his hearers, telling them that this performance was wholly a matter of faith and that their faith for its success was as necessary as was his own, and continuing we will all thus continue our faith—and walking onward until coming to the weakened legs, down went the prophet breast deep into the river. He clambered out of the water with the answer that their faith had weakened and that his alone was not sufficient to support him on the water.²¹

In my interviews, I found the walking-on-water stories in New York fairly consistent, except for the location as to where it supposedly happened. But I found the stories in Pennsylvania much more bizarre and varied. The most unique walking-on-water story that I heard was told to me by the director of counseling at Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York, in February 2004. Although Gary Robinson had moved from Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, thirty years earlier, he said that he grew up about one mile from the site of Joseph and Emma Smith's Harmony home. Gary heard the local folklore about Joseph Smith as told by old timers. He reported that he heard the following walking-on-water story told over and over:

There were two men under the water with breathing tubes holding Joseph up on a board as he walked, and the two men were discovered when they came up for air. The board on which Joseph Smith was standing was tipped, causing him to fall into the water. All of this allegedly was witnessed by a crowd of spectators called by Smith and/or his early followers to the river's edge at the preappointed time. Townsfolk were told to come and see Smith preaching and walking on the water.²²

A most interesting account was written in 1899 by humorist Lu Cake:

Here I copy from the history and records of this same town of Afton, New York, Joe's water-walking trick and his trial for a criminal offense. The river is where Joe tried to walk; the river that hid from Joe the fact that the board he placed under the water to walk on was misplaced; the river that swallowed Joe as the sea overwhelmed Pharaoh, and prevented the spectators swallowing the blasphemous trick. The river is one of God's honest creations; and Joe could not bribe it to act dishonestly to aid him, as he did Martin Harris, and Whitmer and Cowdery in the Gold Bible trick. The river is rippling and chuckling with laughter over Joe's spectacular dunking, and so are the people, unto this day.²³

In an interview in July 2004, Sandra Becker, who is a member of the Bainbridge Baptist Church, thinks that "Joseph Smith never did try to walk on water. He was trying to start a new religion in the area and people were not accepting of it. He was boastful and someone said 'I bet you can also walk on water, but we can see the planks.' This was just an expression indicating that we are not buying your story."²⁴

In April 2004, I interviewed Donald Day of Hallstead, Pennsylvania. Donald is a member of the Susquehanna Depot Area Historical Society in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania. Donald worked thirty-seven years as a game warden for the Pennsylvania Fish and Game Department. His area covered Oakland where the Aaronic Priesthood Monument is located. He calls it the "Mormon Monument." Don said he has heard the Joseph

Smith walking-on-water story many times, and the people who tell the story say it took place in the Susquehanna River behind the Mormon Monument. He said he had never heard of the “breathing tube” version of the story, but the version he heard is the usual one where Joseph walked on boards that were placed in the river, and Joseph fell into the river when he stepped in a location where there were no boards.

Stanley J. Thayne, currently doing research as an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University, also interviewed Donald Day from Hallstead, Pennsylvania. Day told Thayne that one version of the story was that when Joseph fell in the water, “he was missing for several days afterwards. The implication is that he went under and floated downstream a ways, and went into hiding. He did not meet the public anymore. In other words, he was ashamed. He was shamed for failing to walk on the water, and being found out.”²⁵

Thayne also interviewed Eugene Price in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, in August 2004. Eugene said that he heard three versions of the story—“one is the usual plank version mentioned above, another is that the river simply washed part of the structure away, and the third is that the water level dropped during the night and exposed the structure, revealing his plot.”²⁶ As a young missionary in the Susquehanna area, Thayne heard a rope bridge version of the story. “A local man floated down from above with a bowie knife, using a reed for a snorkel, and cut the ropes as Joseph was crossing.”²⁷ Christopher Jones, former owner of the Josiah Stowell home, believes that the water-walking story was possible. He writes:

Josiah had a stream that ran through his property and he had built a saw mill on the stream, the ruins of such are still visible today. It was from this mill, that planks could have easily been supplied as he worked together with Josiah Jr. Of course, if this bit of folklore is based on truth, I'll never believe Joseph was serious or tried to deceive anyone, but was merely having a good joke on his antagonists. I like reading the Joseph Smith History 1:28 for his own expression “I was guilty of levity, and sometime associated with jovial company, not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been.” But this will not seem very strange to anyone who recollects my youth, and is acquainted with my native cherry temperament.²⁸

In spite of all the variations in these stories, there may have been some incident that bore a grain of truth. Accounts of baptisms of converts may have led to the stories about walking on the water by scoffers. There are some parallels between the walking-on-water stories told in New York and baptisms that took place at the outlet to Pickerel Pond on the Joseph Knight farm. The New York State historic sign that said the

“venture of walking on water was not a success” once stood not far from the Knight farm, and it is well documented that Joseph Smith performed baptisms on the Knight farm in late June 1830. It was on this occasion that Emma, the Prophet’s wife, and several others were baptized. A small dam was constructed across the stream coming from Pickerel Pond to create a pool for the baptisms. However, during the night, some men broke down the dam that was built. When Joseph and his followers returned the next day, they had to rebuild the dam before proceeding with the baptisms.²⁹

Local Afton town historian Charles J. Decker suggested the possibility that the water-walking story grew out of the retelling of these events. “One can see the parallels,” Stanley J. Thayne writes. “Joseph was seen building a structure in the water, men came at night and destroyed his structure (which may have involved removing boards, or planks), and several townspeople gathered the next day to see Joseph’s purposes foiled, saw him in the water (performing baptisms).” Thayne then concludes, “Over time Joseph’s reason for building the structure and the reason he was in the water may have been embellished upon, hence the water-walking stories. We cannot know if this is how the tales came to be, but it is a possibility.”³⁰

In 1984, John Goodell, a United Methodist Church minister, wrote:

There is little to indicate that the story [water-walking] in any of its versions is true. First of all it supposedly happened in 1827, well before he was involved with establishing a new religious movement. Second, the story has too much of the character of that brand of Yankee humor in which the know-it-all outsider is done in by the supposedly inferior locals. Third, all reporting of the story in print occurred long after Mormonism was established as a religious force to be reckoned with.³¹

Treasure Seeking

The only known treasure dig in Pennsylvania in which Joseph Smith Jr. participated was in November 1825 in the Township of Harmony (now called Oakland). For years, Josiah Stowell had attempted to locate a Spanish silver mine along the banks of the Susquehanna River. Stowell hired both Joseph Sr. and Joseph Jr. to come to his home in South Bainbridge (now called Afton) to do some treasure digs in the Harmony area and to work on his farm. They then proceeded with a small band of treasure seekers to Harmony. This is when and where Joseph first met his future wife, Emma Hale. There were legends that Spaniards came up the Susquehanna River, lured by Indian tales of glittering metal in northern streams. There were tales of a cave and of buried treasure. There is even



“Treasure Mine” excavated a few miles northwest of the Isaac Hale property near present-day Oakland (formerly Harmony), Pennsylvania, 23 April 2004. The excavation possibly dates back to about the same time Joseph Smith was hired to dig for treasure in this area by Josiah Stowell. The excavation is indicative of the treasure-seeking culture of the people of the region. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

a hill called “Old Spanish Hill” near Athens, Pennsylvania, about ninety miles farther down the Susquehanna River from Harmony.

In my visit to Athens, the librarian and a worker at the Tioga Point Museum both told me that they had never heard of any stories about Joseph Smith. But one printed reference referring to Joseph Smith says that “with his seer stone and disciples,” he came “searching our [Spanish] Hill at midnight for hidden gold.”³² There are many other references in literature where Joseph Smith used a seer stone to hunt for treasure, but seer-stone stories do not seem to be part of Susquehanna River folklore today.³³

Joseph Smith’s later written accounts limited his treasure-seeking activities to his one experience with Josiah Stowell in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Local folklore says that Joseph continued similar activities in Chenango and Broome Counties in New York. The material dug for varied considerably. Local residents said that he dug for salt, gold, silver, and money over a wide area. No treasures were ever found at these sites,

supposedly because of lack of faith or the breaking of the silence required of participants.³⁴

These digging stories are sometimes confused with the accounts of the discovery of the plates for the Book of Mormon. For many years, a New York State historic sign stood near the bridge over Cornell Creek on Route 41 about two miles south of Afton. Its inscription was as follows: “Joseph Smith in 1827 dug for and claimed to find some of the plates of the Mormon Bible, one-half mile up this creek.” This incor-



J. Taylor Hollist (left) and Charles J. Decker, Afton, New York, town historian (right) with a New York State historical marker, July 2000. The marker reads: “Joseph Smith in 1827 dug for and claimed to find some of the plates of the Mormon Bible, one-half mile up this creek.” The marker was situated for several years on Route 41 about two miles south of Afton. It is presently housed at the Afton Historical Society. Photograph courtesy J. Taylor Hollist.

rect marker was removed and is now on display in the storage barn of the Afton Historical Society. Anyone who hikes up Cornell Creek one-fourth mile from where this sign once stood will find an old, once-favorite picnic site that locals call “the rocks.”³⁵ One old postcard called it “the devil’s hole” or “one of the diggings sites of Joseph Smith, the Mormon founder.”³⁶

Spaulding Theory for the Origin of the Book of Mormon

I am always amazed whenever I hear stories that Solomon Spaulding was author of the Book of Mormon because I thought that theory had been put to rest years ago.³⁷ While my wife and I were attending the annual meeting of the Greater Oneonta Historical Society in October 2004, Jim Loudon said that “the manuscript for the Book of Mormon was

found in Hartwick Seminary.” Jim said it with much conviction, as if it were a historical fact that the document was the Book of Mormon. As a result of this conversation, I talked to Anita Harrison, Hartwick town historian, and was told over the telephone that the widow of Solomon Spaulding lived on North Street in Hartwick, New York, and that *The Manuscript Found* by Reverend Spaulding was found in an old trunk in the attic of this home. Anita sent me a photocopy from the 2002 history of Hartwick, which reads as follows:

In 1820 in the house of John Davison, (later Jerome Clark’s attic) lay an old trunk containing the hand-written script of a romance entitled *The Manuscript Found* by the Reverend Solomon Spaulding. This work was written in 1812, in Conneaut, Ashtabula County, Ohio, where the exploration of earth mounds containing skeletons and other relics fired Spaulding’s imagination and suggested the idea for his story. Spaulding frequently read the manuscript to circles of admiring friends in Conneaut, Ohio. Later the script was taken to Pittsburgh and left with a printer named Patterson in the hope of having it published. The manuscript was finally rejected. Spaulding died in 1816 and in 1820, his widow married John Davison of Hartwick. She brought the trunk containing her first husband’s manuscript with her to her new home with Davison. Mormonism flourished and moved westward. In the course of time, a Mormon meeting was held in Conneaut, Ohio and out of curiosity was largely attended by the townspeople. Some readings were from the Book of Mormon. Some of the similarities between Joseph Smith’s book and *The Manuscript Found* which Solomon Spaulding had read aloud to friends in the same town many years before were noted. They recognized the same peculiar names, unheard of elsewhere, such as Mormon, Maroni, Lamenite, and Nephi.³⁸

In 1969, Ed Moore, in one of his weekly historical articles in an Oneonta, New York, newspaper, quoted much of the above paragraph and then concluded: “Mrs. Davison moved from Hartwick about 1828, leaving the trunk in charge of Jerome Clark. In 1834 one Hurlbut sought out Mrs. Davison and said that he had been sent by a committee opposed to Mormonism to procure the manuscript so that this might be compared to the Mormon Bible. Upon his promise to return it she wrote Clark to give it to Hurlbut. The manuscript was never returned and letters demanding it were never answered.”³⁹

Stanley Thayne interviewed Donald Day in August 2004 in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. In the interview Day said:

Solomon Spaulding was a Baptist Minister living in Conneaut, Ohio. Having a broad knowledge of the Bible, he wrote what he called *Paradise Lost* [*Manuscript Found*], which was based on the Bible, but was written as a narrative. Solomon, when he moved to a little town in Washington County [Pennsylvania] called Amity, was known as ‘Old It-Came-to-Pass,’ because he used that [phrase] so much in his

book. After he had written the book, and it was gone, if you came to Amity where he died, that's what he was known as. When he appeared in Washington County, he was an old man and lived in a big log house (we don't call them log cabins because they weren't cabins, they were houses—and his was even a double sized one). It was there when I came and got to know Amity. Spaulding is buried in the Presbyterian cemetery there [in Amity]. The history of Amwell Township, which is where Amity is located, goes on to say that Spaulding wrote in stages. Since there was no entertainment in those days, people knew from chapter to chapter what his book was about, and they would wait for the next one to come along. More people were knowledgeable about it than would be about the average book being written because they would await the oncoming chapters of "Old And-it-Came-to-Pass." Oliver Cowdery had something to do with the publisher where Spaulding sent the book. While one can not say for sure, they think he [Spaulding] sent it there, promising to pay the printer when the book sold, because he didn't have any money to have it published. When the *Book of Mormon* was published, right away, anybody who had any knowledge of Spaulding's writing recognized it immediately as something they knew about.⁴⁰

Other Folk Tales

In my interviews of stories about Joseph Smith, the following was told to me. "He could not keep a job because he kept stealing from his employer. He was a horse thief and was put into prison for it."⁴¹ William and Sarah Woolever said that when they first moved to Oneonta, New York, in 1964, they ate in a neighboring village at the Mt. Vision Inn. Since they were new to Otsego County, the lady who cooked their dinner related stories about the area. She said that the village was called Mount Vision because Joseph Smith had a vision there.⁴² In actuality, Mount Vision received its name in 1810. At that time, the village needed a name for its new post office. A local tavern owner, John R. Bowdish, was awed by the view across Otego Valley and, as a result, named the hamlet Mt. Vision.⁴³

Stanley Thayne said that while he was serving as a missionary in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania, "there were rumors among members of the LDS Church in the area that Joseph Smith placed and dedicated temple cornerstones in the hills of Oakland (which was called Harmony in the early nineteenth-century). An old map⁴⁴ that identified the 'first Mormon Temple' in the region, and a current plot map and deed that labels the plot as 'Melchizedek Priesthood Properties' added to the intrigue and mystery."⁴⁵

This folk tale was probably aided by Wilford C. Wood, who was instrumental in obtaining some historic properties for the LDS Church. In a photograph taken about 1946, Wilford is pictured standing on some large stones with the caption "Wilford Wood examines large temple

stones which were the foundation of the first Temple that the Prophet started to build in Oakland, Susquehanna [County], Pennsylvania. This is where the Prophet Joseph Smith received the Melchizedek Priesthood under the hands of Peter, James and John.”⁴⁶ The map notation of “Foundation of 1st Mormon Temple” was best addressed by Emily C. Blackman when she says, “On a large track of land (540 acres) which he [Selah Payne] purchased near Ichabod Swamp, he designed a kind of African College, but after laying the foundation, the enterprise was abandoned for want of funds.” There is a footnote referencing the African College as follows, “this is incorrectly marked on the new atlas as ‘Foundation of the first Mormon Temple.’”⁴⁷

Josiah Stowell stayed in New York as the main body of the LDS Church moved to Ohio, then Missouri, and then Illinois. In 1843, Stowell said this about Joseph Smith: “I know him to be Seer & a Phrophet & Believe the Book of mormon is true[,] & all these Stories is fals & untrue that is told about Joseph Smith.”⁴⁸ Josiah Stowell Sr. did not specify which stories were untrue, but we can get some hint as to which folk tales were not true as we read the following quote in this same 1843 letter written by his son. Josiah Stowell Jr. said this about Joseph Smith:

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 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[,] 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 Pretended to Play the Slight of hand nor Black leg, it as fashionable at that time to drink Liquor[,] I do not Believe in any religion & there fore am friendly to all[,]⁴⁹

The above letter was in response to a letter from John S. Fullmer, then serving an LDS Church mission in northern Pennsylvania. Fullmer asked the Stowells to respond to the stories he heard about Joseph Smith—that he “was a gambler, a Black leg, a notorious horse jockey, an adept at the slight of hand or juggling, and was notorious for frequenting groghshops, and intemperance, and that he was also exceedingly profane, &c. &c.”⁵⁰ A “black leg” was a swindler, especially at horse races. By saying that Smith was a “black leg,” Pennsylvania residents were saying that Joseph Smith had been known to bet on horses. As used in this narrative, “horse jockey” means “a dealer in horses; one who makes it his business to buy and sell horses for gain.” In 1829, Joseph Smith gave a note to Josiah Stowell Sr. for a horse. When Joseph was brought to trial in Bainbridge in July 1830, he had not paid on this note. The judge inquired

about this purchase, and Stowell testified that he had sold a horse to Smith and that he would do so again.

Most people who wrote about Joseph Smith during his lifetime were either Latter-day Saints or “faultfinding” critics. Josiah Stowell Jr. never did convert to the new faith like his father, so he gives a more objective viewpoint to these folk tales when he says, “I do not believe in any religion & there fore am friendly to all.”⁵¹

Josiah Jr. said that he had been acquainted with Joseph for about two years and also went to school with him one winter. From all this, we see that Josiah Jr. was an independent witness who testified in 1843 of the good character of the youthful Joseph Smith.

From the preceding accounts, we might draw the conclusion that folklore regarding Joseph Smith is still alive. However, many of those interviewed were what we now refer to as senior citizens. I found that many people were reluctant to tell me the stories because they did not want to hurt my feelings, as they believed things about Joseph Smith that were not pleasant. Stories of seer stones and gold digging have almost disappeared from the oral tradition. Walking-on-water stories are still being told. Latter-day Saint missionaries still hear them told in the area as if they were true. However, they do not seem as frequent as they were even thirty-five years ago when I first moved to the region.

As the oral tradition of passing down stories fades, the folklore surrounding Joseph Smith also fades. The written accounts of the late nineteenth century may preserve some of that folklore as if it were true, but current writers such as John Goodell find little credence in the stories. The stories as folklore are a part of the fabric of Mormon history.

Notes

1. Jeremiah Lemon and Joshua Cutler interview, September 2003.

2. Stanley J. Thayne, “Water-Walking, Temple Stones, and the Golden Bible: Early Mormon and Anti-Mormon Folklore in the Susquehanna Area,” unpublished paper delivered at the Association for Mormon Letters Annual Conference, Salt Lake City Public Library, 5 March 2005, 1. Copy in possession of the author. Thayne served in the Montrose, Pennsylvania, area, which covered all of Susquehanna County from May-November 1999.

3. *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2, no. 19 (April 1834): 151. The article said that the quote was taken from the (Philadelphia) “Saturday Courier” of 19 April under the heading “Tragical Event.”

4. Joseph Badger (Editor), *Christian Palladium* 4, no. 11 (1 October 1835): 174.

5. [Richard Livesey?], *More Trickery of Mormonism Brought to Light Giving the full particulars of the schemes and practices of Joseph Smith, the angelite* (n.p.: Ambler printer, Lancashire Record Office, [ca. 1838]). It should be noted that it is not clear where the above cited pamphlet is from. The transcription was taken from a photocopy found in L.

Tom Perry Americana Collection, Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. The page appears to be a verso and was copied next to the title page (recto) of *Remarks on the Doctrines, Practices &c. of the Latter-Day Saints* (Preston: J. Livesey, n.d.). It appears to have come from the Lancashire Records Office and was probably bound in a larger volume of several 1838 pamphlets. The next pamphlet appearing in this collection is Richard Livesey, *An Exposure to Mormonism* (Preston: J. Livesey, 1838). Larry W. Draper, L. Tom Perry Special Collections curator, identified a pamphlet by an unknown author that is probably *More Trickery of Mormonism*. BYU currently does not own a copy of this pamphlet, but Draper is trying to locate and obtain a copy. The author gratefully acknowledges Stanley J. Thayne for providing this information.

6. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 3:22.

7. See "Who shall Be Our Next President?" *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 4 (1 January 1845): 441.

8. Hamilton Child, "Village of Afton," in *Gazetter and Business Directory of Chenango County, New York* (Syracuse, New York: Hamilton Child, 1869), 82.

9. Margaret Hawkes, "'Our Great Theologist'—Read at the Historical Society Meeting, 1907," *The Montrose Democrat* (Montrose, Pennsylvania), 31 January 1907.

10. See Stanley J. Thayne, "A Mormon Missionary's Response to Joseph Smith Water-Walking Folklore of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania," *Susquehanna County Historical Society Journal of Genealogy and Local History* 16, no. 1 (May 2005): 6–7; and Emily C. Blackman, *History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania* (Baltimore: Regional Publishing Co., 1970). Sections dealing with Joseph Smith are found on pages 102–5 and Appendix I, 577–82.

11. Theodore Elliott interview, September 2004.

12. Charles J. Decker interview, 31 March 2005.

13. [Frederick G. Mather], "The Early Mormons. Joe Smith Operates at Susquehanna," *Binghamton Daily Republican* (Binghamton, New York), 29 July 1880, as cited in Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents, Volume 4* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 157.

14. Cited in an unnamed Norwich, New York, newspaper dated 14 December 1932, under the heading, "Afton Get Plaques For Points As Named." The state of New York appropriated \$25,000 to be used for historic iron markers.

15. Hyman Wilcox interview, 11 August 2004.

16. All the documents cited appear in the report of the New York State Education Department Historic Marker Program, New York State Archives, Albany, New York. In 1929 when this report was submitted, Bert Lord was serving in the New York State Senate. He had previously served as Afton town supervisor and in the New York State Assembly. He later served in the United States Congress (1935–39). See "Memorial Services held in the House of Representatives of the United States, Together with Remarks Presented in Eulogy of Bert Lord, Late Representative from New York," United States Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1941.

17. Walter Rose letter, 26 December 1986, copy in the possession of the author.

18. Bert Lord to Alta Thompson Backus, 13 January 1938, Bert Lord Papers no. 1776, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

19. Nan Hill, "The Beginnings of Mormonism," undated manuscript, Oxford Historian's Office, Oxford, New York, as cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 205. Charles J. Decker, Afton town historian, says Hill's paper was probably written in the 1920s.

20. Hyman Wilcox and Nina Presley Wilcox interview, 11 August 2004.
21. Harvey Baker, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Oneonta Herald* (Oneonta, New York), 18 January 1900, as cited in Vogel, *Earl Mormon Documents*, 196. Cornwall is sometimes given as "Cornwell" and also "Cornell." Charles J. Decker, Afton town historian, says that old timers pronounced the name "Corn" with an "L" stuck on the end. Decker said that his grandmother, Daisy Hurd Decker, pronounced it "Corn'L."
22. Gary Robinson interview, 6 February 2004. Stanley J. Thayne said that he heard similar versions as a missionary serving in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania.
23. Lu B. Cake, "Old Manuscript Found, Peepstone Joe and the Peck Manuscript" (New York: L. B. Cake, 1912), 13. Charles J. Decker, Afton town historian, said that Lu B. Cake was born in Iowa, trained to be a lawyer, and married Ella June Meade of Afton, New York.
24. Deborah Nickerson and Sandra Becker interview, 1 July 2004.
25. Donald Day interview with Stanley J. Thayne, August 2004, copy in possession of the author.
26. Eugene Price interview with Stanley Thayne, August 2004, in Thayne, "A Mormon Missionary's Response," 4.
27. Thayne, "A Mormon Missionary's Response," 4.
28. Chris E. Jones to J. Taylor Hollist, 12 April 2005.
29. See *History of the Church*, 1:86–88.
30. Thayne, "A Mormon Missionary's Response," 5.
31. John Goodell, "Joseph Smith in Susquehanna Country: Mormon Beginnings," *Notes and Sketches From Along The Susquehanna: Essays in Celebration of American Methodism's Bicentennial* (Rutland, Vermont: Academy Books, 1984), 45.
32. Elsie Murray, *Carantouan: Old Spanish Hill* (n.p.: Northumberland County Historical Society, 1948), 15. The pamphlet was reissued in 1978 by the Tioga Point Museum in Athens, Pennsylvania. Writer Carl Carmer states, "And some fanciful and unreliable folk used to say that Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith in his early days searched the windy summit of Carantouan for buried gold on a moony midnight, seerstone in hand, eager disciples behind him." Carl Carmer, *The Susquehanna* (New York: n.p., 1955), 18. Carmer is a great story teller, but he never gives references.
33. See A. W. B. [Abram W. Benton], "Mormonites," *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, New York), 2, no. 15 (9 April 1831): 120; in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 94–99. A. W. B. is presumably Abraham Benton. The Bentons were prominent members of the Universalist Church in South Bainbridge. See also Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet" (MA thesis, Utah State University, 2000).
34. Dan Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 219–31.
35. Charles J. Decker, Afton town historian, thinks the sign may have been hit by a snowplow. In the New York State Archives in Albany, there is a letter to the State Education Department dated 11 March 1937 from Reed W. Brinton of the Eastern States Mission (headquarters in New York City) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which says: "The Church does not resent this marker, but feels that it is not of significance inasmuch as it is historically incorrect and therefore not truly representative of your good work and purpose."
36. Afton Historical Society Calendar for 2005.
37. From the Oberlin College Web site under the heading "The Spaulding Manuscript," we read: "The manuscript is thought by some to have a certain very general resemblance to the outline of the Book of Mormon, but is not at all written in phrase-

ology resembling the phraseology of the Bible, which is characteristic of the Book of Mormon.”

38. Hartwick: *The Heart of Otsego County New York, 1802–2002* (Hartwick, New York: Syblables Press, 2002), 141–42.

39. Ed Moore, “A Religious Mystery,” *The Oneonta Star* (Oneonta, New York), 21 October 1969.

40. Donald Day interview with Stanley J. Thayne, August 2004, copy in possession of the author.

41. Deborah Nickerson interview, July 2004. Nickerson was likely referring to the charge that Joseph Smith stole a horse from Josiah Stowell. Regarding this incident, Josiah Stowell reported: “Did not the prisoner, Joseph Smith have a horse of you?” Josiah answered, “I hold his note for the price of the horse, which I consider as good as the pay; for I am well acquainted with Joseph Smith, Jun. and know him to be an honest man; and if he wished, I am ready to let him have another horse on the same terms.” *History of the Church*, 1:90.

42. This story was related to my wife Suzanne and me several times by the Woolevers (nicknamed Bill and Khuki). Bill came to Oneonta to teach geography at State University of New York. In August 2004, I tried to obtain more details about this folk tale from the Woolevers, but they said they did not know the name of the woman.

43. See Bernice Wardell, *History of Laurens Township* ([Laurens], New York: n.p., 1975). Otego Creek is in Otsego County (different spelling).

44. F. W. Beers, *Atlas of Susquehanna Pennsylvania* (New York: A. Pomeroy, 1872), 17.

45. The deed is available at the County Offices in Montrose, Pennsylvania.

46. Undated photograph of Wilford C. Wood, found in the Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, Historical Society, Montrose, Pennsylvania. A *Church News* article about Harmony, Pennsylvania, was found with the photograph. See “Church Obtains Historic Property at Harmony, Pennsylvania,” *Church News* 5, no. 39 (21 September 1946): 1, 8.

47. Blackman, *History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania*, 105.

48. Josiah Stowell Sr. to John S. Fullmer, 17 February 1843, as cited in Mark Ashurst-McGee, “The Josiah Stowell Jr.-John S. Fullmer Correspondence,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 114.

49. Ashurst-McGee, “The Josiah Stowell Jr.-John S. Fullmer Correspondence,” 113.

50. Ashurst-McGee, “The Josiah Stowell Jr.-John S. Fullmer Correspondence,” 113.

51. Ashurst-McGee, “The Josiah Stowell Jr.-John S. Fullmer Correspondence,” 113.