

“My Dear Sister”: Letters between Joseph F. Smith and His Sister, Martha Ann Smith Harris (1854–1916)

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Carole Call King did not fully realize the magnitude of her family inheritance. Actively involved in genealogy work, after the passing of her father in 1993, she inherited boxes of family records. However, somehow in the aftermath of the funeral, she inadvertently overlooked the contents of one box. Looking unlike other genealogy boxes, this box was placed on a shelf in the closet to get it out of the way until she could go through its contents at a later date. There it sat, nearly forgotten, until 1997 when the box caught her eye while she was putting away the vacuum. Taking the box from the shelf, she found three long, flat boxes inside wrapped in tissue paper underneath her mother’s simple chiffon wedding dress. Written on the boxes in her grandmother’s handwriting were the words “letters to mother.” Inside these boxes were hundreds of letters written to her great-grandmother, Martha Ann Smith Harris, daughter of Hyrum Smith and Mary Fielding. Included among them were nearly a hundred letters to Martha Ann from her brother, Joseph F. Smith.

The following year, BYU Professor Richard Neitzel Holzapfel contacted Carole after hearing about an 1854 letter written by Joseph F. Smith that contained a lock of his hair. In the course of their conversation, Professor Holzapfel learned about the letter collection and excitedly arranged a visit with her the following day. Carole graciously showed him the collection and, in the course of their conversation, gave him permission to publish the let-

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ters. These letters provide a treasure trove of personal insights into the lives of this early Church leader and his sister during a unique era of Latter-day Saint history.

Pen and paper served to strengthen the bond between Joseph F. and Martha Ann following the death of their mother in 1852. Seven decades of correspondence demonstrate the tremendous devotion between these orphaned children as they shared their innermost feelings, joys, heartaches, determinations, and family happenings. The letters also reveal Joseph F. Smith's profound ability to express himself. Furthermore, his capacity to communicate gets better with time. The letters range in date from 1854, when Joseph F. Smith was a fifteen-year-old missionary in Hawaii, to 1916, just two years before his death.

Additional Joseph F. and Martha Ann letters were collected and added to those in the possession of Carole Call King. The project now involves a total of 167 letters written by Joseph F. Smith and 44 letters written by Martha Ann Smith Harris. Some matters of interest contained in these letters include comments by Joseph F. Smith about the apostate Walter Gibson; the visit of Emma and Joseph Smith's sons, David and Alexander Smith (Joseph F.'s first cousins) to Salt Lake City from Nauvoo; his profound grief after the death of several children; and reflections about his father's and mother's deaths. The following chart summarizes the place where the letters were sent and the approximate years they were written.

Letters from Joseph F. Smith	
Place of Origin and Period Letters Were Written	Number of Letters
Sandwich Isles (1854-1858)	13
Nauvoo Legion/SLC Area (1858)	1
European and British Isles Mission (1860-1863)	5
Sandwich Isles (1864)	1
Salt Lake City (1868-1874)	31
European and British Isles Mission (1874-1875)	9
No address provided (1875)	1
Salt Lake City (1876)	3
European and British Isles Mission (1877)	1
Salt Lake area (1877-1884)	15
No address provided (1877-1884)	4
Exile/hiding in Sandwich Isles (1885)	3
No address provided (1885)	1
Exile/hiding—possibly Washington, D. C. area (1887-1889)	1
Exile—possibly Utah area (1889-1890)	0
No address provided (1889-1890)	2
Salt Lake City (1890-1916)	39
Provo (1890-1916)	22
No address provided (1890-1916)	15
Total	167

Letters from Martha Ann Harris	
Place of Origin and Period Letters Were Written	Number of Letters
Salt Lake City (1854-1867)	22
No address provided (1863)	1
Provo (1867-1916)	20
No address provided (1887)	1
Total	44

A Brief Overview of the Life of Joseph F. Smith

In the spring and summer of 1836, Elder Parley P. Pratt preached the restored gospel in the vicinity of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Pratt's message of the Restoration bore fruit, resulting in a number of baptisms, including Joseph, Mary, and Mercy Fielding. Mary soon moved to Kirtland, Ohio, where she married Hyrum Smith and took the responsibility of caring for his five children. Thereafter, Mary Fielding Smith's lot in life would be filled with hardship and trial.

Persecution against the Church forced Hyrum and his family to move from Kirtland to Far West, Missouri, in the fall of 1838. Then, on 1 November of that year, Hyrum and his brother, Joseph, were arrested and imprisoned. Their incarceration lasted nearly six months. Joseph F. was born on 13 November 1838, just two weeks after Hyrum's arrest. Mary would spend much of the next four months ill and bedridden. In late January 1839, she was so sick that she had to travel on a made-up bed in the back of a wagon to Liberty, Missouri, so she could visit Hyrum and show him their son. Continued harassment required Mary to move without the help of her husband in mid-winter to Quincy, Illinois. After Hyrum's release from prison in April 1839, the family settled in Commerce (Nauvoo), Illinois, where they enjoyed nearly a five-year respite. On 14 May 1841, Mary gave birth to her second and last child, Martha Ann.

In the spring and summer of 1844, the persecution against the Church again intensified. On 27 June, Hyrum Smith and Joseph Smith Jr. were martyred while jailed at Carthage, Illinois. By the fall of 1846, Mary and her family left Nauvoo and moved to Winter Quarters (Florence), Nebraska, where they remained until the spring of 1848. Circumstances were such that when the family moved west with other migrating Saints, nine-year-old Joseph F. would drive one of the family wagons to the Great Salt Lake Valley. Mary Fielding Smith died four years later from malnutrition and exhaustion. She was fifty-one.

Joseph F.'s life took another dramatic turn just a year and a half later. During the April 1854 general conference, President Brigham Young read

the names of those called to serve missions for the Church. Without any previous inclination or advance notice, the fifteen-year-old Joseph F. heard his name called from the pulpit as a missionary to the “Pacific Isles.” The difficulty and challenges of Joseph F.’s mission proved to be a superb training ground for his lifelong service in the Church. In 1858, after nearly a four-year absence, he arrived home where he joined the Nauvoo Legion in the Church’s effort to thwart Johnston’s army from coming into the Great Salt Lake Valley.

Following a peaceful negotiation between Brigham Young and the United States government, Joseph F. Smith turned his attention to other matters, including marriage. On 5 April 1859, he married Levira Smith, a daughter of Samuel H. Smith. Other wives would follow, including Julina Lambson (1866), Sarah Ellen Richards (1868), Edna Lambson (1871), Alice Ann Kimball (1883), and Mary Taylor Schwartz (1884). From these marriages would come forty-eight children.

After serving missions to the British Isles and another to the Sandwich Islands, the twenty-seven-year-old Joseph F. Smith received a call as an Apostle and was appointed Second Counselor to Brigham Young in the First Presidency. His service in the First Presidency would continue under Presidents John Taylor and Lorenzo Snow. Passage of antipolygamy legislation, along with Joseph F. Smith’s high profile within the Church, caused him to go into hiding from 1884 to 1891. On 17 October 1901, Joseph F. Smith was sustained as President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where he served until his death at the age of eighty. He died on 19 November 1918.

A Brief Overview of the Life of Martha Ann Smith Harris

Martha Ann Smith was born 14 May 1841 in Nauvoo, Illinois. Although we have less recorded history of her than we do for her better-known brother, she must have endured many of the same hardships of living at Winter Quarters, crossing the plains, and settling in Salt Lake City. After the death of their mother in 1852, Martha Ann and Joseph F. moved in with a close family friend, Hannah Grinnells. Hannah died a little more than a year later. Martha Ann then moved in with her mother’s sister, Mercy Fielding Thompson. It appears from Joseph F. and Martha Ann’s letters that Martha Ann also lived part of the time with Hyrum Smith and Jerusha Barden’s son, John.

Fifteen-year-old Martha Ann married William Jasper Harris on 21 April 1857. Heber C. Kimball performed the marriage. Just two days later, her husband left on a mission to the British Isles. While he was away, Martha Ann

moved in with her mother-in-law, Emily Harris Smoot, the plural wife of Bishop Abraham O. Smoot. William returned early in 1858 because of concerns over Johnston's army.

During the early summer of 1859, tragedy hit the Harris home. Lightning struck William while he was plowing a field in Salt Lake City. Besides being badly burned, he was caught in the reins and dragged unconscious by the runaway horses. Martha Ann nursed him back to health as best she could, but William never fully recovered. Eight years after this incident, Martha Ann and William moved to Provo with their five children. While in Provo, they added six more children to their family.

The Harrises struggled financially much of their lives. William worked at a variety of jobs, including that of a bodyguard for Brigham Young, a freighter, a policeman, and a miner. Martha Ann frequently supplemented the family income by sewing buckskin gloves and temple clothes. William Jasper Harris died on 24 April 1909, after being hit by a team of horses. Martha Ann remained widowed until her death on 19 October 1923 at age eighty-three.

Introduction to the 17 October 1854 Letter

Joseph F. Smith, in company with other missionaries, left Salt Lake City for the Pacific Islands on 27 May 1854. Stopping in San Bernardino and San Francisco, he and the other missionaries worked to earn money needed to further their journey. In early September, he and eight other missionaries set sail for the Hawaiian Islands, arriving in Honolulu on 27 September 1854. Upon their arrival, Joseph F. was assigned to labor on the islands of Molokai and Maui (the address from his 1854 letters suggests he may also have been assigned to the island of Lanai). Joseph F. spent a good part of his first month in Hawaii recovering from a serious illness. The following letter was likely the first one he wrote to Martha Ann since leaving Salt Lake City. Not quite sixteen years old, Joseph F. included a small lock of his blonde hair to help his sister remember him. The simplicity of the letter exposes his youth and lack of formal education; yet the tone expresses love and concern of an older brother for his dear sister.

The primary goals that guided the transcription of the Joseph F. Smith and Martha Ann Smith Harris letter collection were readability and accuracy. Transcriptions for each letter retain the original spelling, capitalization, punctuation, superscripts, underlined words, and strikethroughs whenever possible. The transcribers have done as little editing as possible, although modern rules were followed when questionable punctuation occurred. Empty square brackets [] are used to represent a hole, tear, or otherwise miss-

ing portion of a letter. Broken words that begin one line and finish on the next or words that end a line with a portion of the word written above or below it have been joined to read as a single word. New paragraphs have been indented regardless of the page justification on the original letter. All other anomalies have been marked with a backward slash mark (\) and a note of explanation. For sake of readability, the information provided in the address block, such as date and place written, have been standardized with a left-justified margin.

Lani \¹ Mauwi
Oct 17th
1854

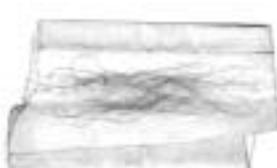
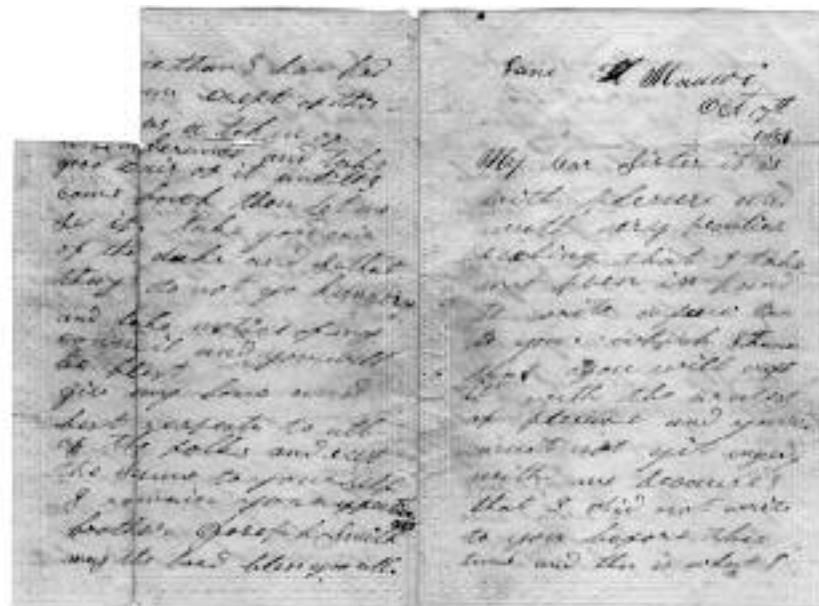
My dear Sister it is with pleasure and with very peculiar feeling that I take my pen in hand to write a few lines to you. which I know that you will except it with the greatest of pleasure and you must not git angry with me because I that I did not write to you before this time and this is what I [p. 2] call quite a present I came across this envelope which this letter is sent to you in. martha ann take good care of this letter when you cut it. remember who sent it to you. I want you to write to me when you git so as you can for this letter if nothing else. you must remember me in your prars day and night where ever you are or what ever circumstances you may be placed in [p. 3] I want you to [] at home the gr[] part of the tim[] your books diligently so that I may find a well lirned girl when I git home in order to lirn your book you must stop in the house and go to school and stop running about keep your self jest as still and composed as you can se if you cannot bete enybody in the famely me espeshely for you have had a better [p. 4] [] e then I hav had [] m. except of this [] as a tokun of remembrance and take good care of it untill I come back then let me se it. take good care of the duks and se that thay do not go hungry and take notice of my council and you will be blest

giv my love and best respects to all of the folks and except the same to your self I remain your affectionate brother Joseph Smith may the lord bless you all.

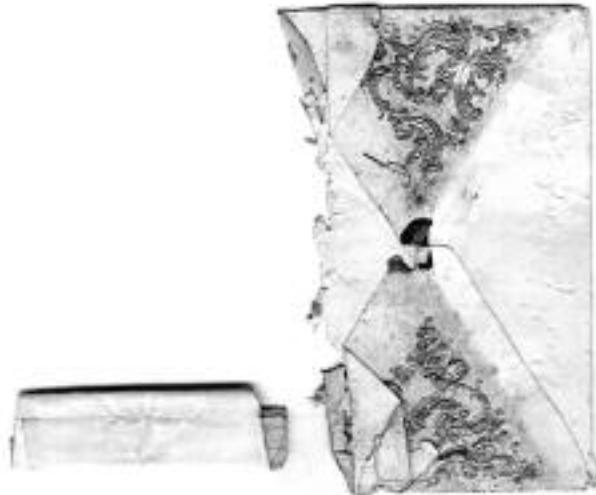
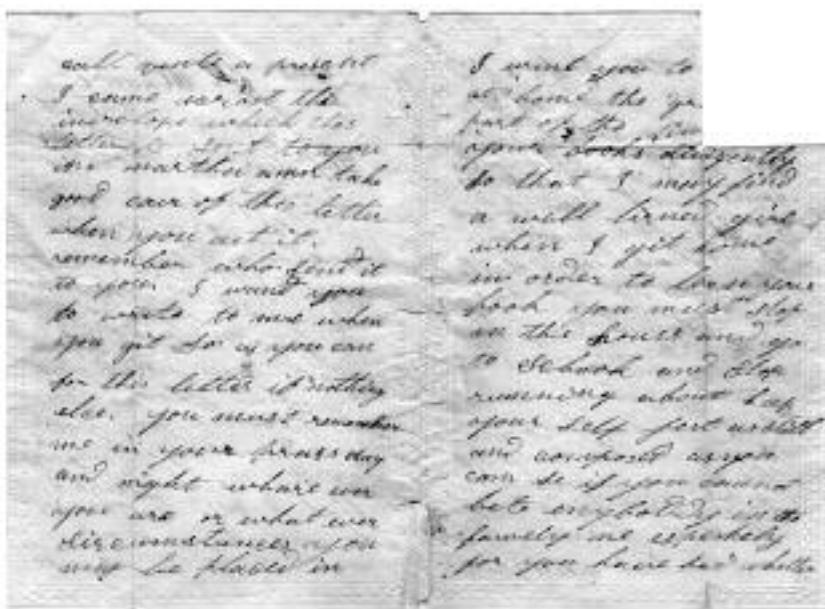
Over the decades, Joseph F.'s improvement in spelling, penmanship, and expression of thought exemplify much of the counsel he gives to Martha Ann. This recently discovered letter collection brings to light an exceptional man devoted to the Lord who desires to bless the life of his family through kindness, loving advice, and brotherly encouragement—certainly, the hallmarks of a prophet.

Note

1. Indecipherable strikeout.



Joseph F. Smith letter to his sister Martha Ann Smith (later Harris), 17 October 1854, pages one and four. A corner portion of pages three and four are missing. Also shown is the envelope and a lock of Joseph F.'s hair. The letter was written just two weeks short of his sixteenth birthday. The letter is part of a collection of 167 letters written by Joseph to his sister between 1854–1916. The collection also includes 44 letters written by Martha to Joseph. The collection was donated by Carole Call King (a great-granddaughter of Martha) to the LDS Church Archives. Photograph courtesy of David M. Whitchurch.



Joseph F. Smith letter to his sister Martha Ann Smith (later Harris), 17 October 1854, pages two and three. Photograph courtesy of David M. Chitchurch.