

# Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to Be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax

By [Stanley B. Kimball](#)

A recent electronic and chemical analysis of a metal plate (one of six original plates) brought in 1843 to the Prophet Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois, appears to solve a previously unanswered question in Church history, helping to further evidence that the plate is what its producers later said it was—a nineteenth-century attempt to lure Joseph Smith into making a translation of ancient-looking characters that had been etched into the plates.

Joseph Smith did not make the hoped-for translation. In fact, no evidence exists that he manifested any further interest in the plates after early examination of them, although some members of the Church hoped that they would prove to be significant. But the plates never did.

The complex yet fascinating story behind this little-known event in Church history follows:

## Historical Background

In Nauvoo, Illinois, during the first week in May 1843, the Church publication *Times and Seasons* printed an article entitled “Ancient Records” which reported the alleged discovery of six ancient brass plates in an Indian mound near the town of Kinderhook, fifty-five miles south of Nauvoo in Pike County, Illinois.<sup>1</sup>

A statement signed by W. P. Harris, M.D., of Barry, Pike County, informed the *Times and Seasons* readers of the discovery:

“On the 16th of April last a respectable merchant by the name of Robert Wiley, commenced digging in a large mound near this place: he excavated to the depth of 10 feet and came to rock; about that time the rain began to fall, and he abandoned the work. On the 23d he and quite a number of the citizens with myself, repaired to the mound, and after making ample opening, we found plenty of rock, the most of which appeared as though it had been strongly burned; and after removing full two feet of said rock, we found plenty of charcoal and ashes; also human bones that appeared as though they had been burned; and near the eciphalon [correctly spelled “encephalon,” or head] a bundle was found that consisted of six plates of brass, of a bell shape, each having a hole near the small end, and a ring through them all, and clasped with two clasps, the ring and clasps appeared to be of iron very much oxidated, the plates appeared first to be copper, and had the appearance of being covered with characters. It was agreed by the company that I should cleanse the plates: accordingly I took them to my house, washed them with soap and water, and a woollen cloth; but finding them not yet cleansed I treated them with dilute sulphuric acid which made them perfectly clean, on which it appeared that they were completely covered with hieroglyphics that none as yet have been able to read.”

The plates greatly excited public curiosity in the area, and within a week of their alleged discovery they were brought to Nauvoo for a short stay. An editorial comment in the same *Times and Seasons* article indicates how important the eager writer felt these brass plates might be:

“Circumstances are daily transpiring which give additional testimony to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. ... The following ... will, perhaps have a tendency to convince the sceptical, that such things [metal plates] have been used, and that even the obnoxious Book of Mormon, may be true.”

The editorial further reported: “Mr. Smith has had those plates, what his opinion concerning them is, we have not yet ascertained. The gentleman that owns them has taken them away, or we should have given a fac simile of the plates and characters in this number. We are informed however, that he purposes returning with them for translation; if so, we may be able yet to furnish our readers with it.”

A month and a half later the *Nauvoo Neighbor* press published a 12" x 15" broadside entitled *Discovery of the Brass Plates*.<sup>2</sup> (See p. 72.) This handbill contained a reprint of the *Times and Seasons* story, with the addition of facsimiles of all twelve sides of the six plates. Nothing further regarding the Prophet's opinion of the plates appeared on the broadside—only a statement that “the contents of the plates ... will be published in the ‘Times and Seasons,’ as soon as the translation is completed.”

These two oblique references to a “translation” were followed thirteen years later by a more direct published statement that until recently was wrongly thought to have been written by Joseph Smith himself. On September 3 and 10, 1856, the following paragraphs appeared in the *Deseret News* as part of the serialized “History of Joseph Smith”:

“[May 1, 1843:] I insert fac similes of the six brass plates found near Kinderhook, in Pike county, Illinois, on April 23, by Mr. R. Wiley and others, while excavating a large mound. They found a skeleton about six feet from the surface of the earth, which must have stood nine feet high. The plates were found on the breast of the skeleton, and were covered on both sides with ancient characters.

“I have translated a portion of them, and find they contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the ruler of heaven and earth.” (Then followed a reprint of material from the *Times and Seasons* article.)

Although this account appears to be the writing of Joseph Smith, it is actually an excerpt from a journal of William Clayton. It has been well known that the serialized “History of Joseph Smith” consists largely of items from other persons’ personal journals and other sources, collected during Joseph Smith’s lifetime and continued after the Saints were in Utah, then edited and pieced together to form a history of the Prophet’s life “in his own words.” It was not uncommon in the nineteenth century for biographers to put the narrative in the first person when compiling a biographical work, even though the subject of the biography did not actually say or write all the words attributed to him; thus the narrative would represent a faithful report of what *others* felt would be helpful to print. The Clayton journal excerpt was one item used in this way. For example, the words “I have translated a portion” originally read “President J. has translated a portion. ...”<sup>3</sup>

Where the ideas written by William Clayton originated is unknown. However, as will be pointed out later, speculation about the plates and their possible content was apparently quite unrestrained in Nauvoo when the plates first appeared. In any case, this altered version of the extract from William Clayton's journal was reprinted in the *Millennial Star* of 15 January 1859, and, unfortunately, was finally carried over into official Church history when the "History of Joseph Smith" was edited into book form as the *History of the Church* in 1909.<sup>4</sup>

By 1912, however, at least two items of evidence had come to light indicating that the Kinderhook plates were not authentic. One was a letter written in 1855 (but not published until 1912) by Dr. W. P. Harris—the same W. P. Harris who authored the statement that appeared in the *Times and Seasons* article. In this letter he wrote that in 1843 he had accepted the discovery of the plates as genuine. "I washed and cleaned the plates and subsequently made an honest affidavit to the same," he said. "But since that time, Bridge Whitton [a blacksmith in Kinderhook, Illinois] said to me that he cut and prepared the plates and he (B. Whitton) and R. Wiley engraved them themselves, and that there was nitric acid put upon them the night before they were found to rust the iron ring and band. And that they were carried to the mound, rubbed in the dirt and carefully dropped into the pit where they were found."<sup>5</sup>

The other item was a letter written in 1879 by Wilbur Fugate (another of those present at the excavation of the plates) to an anti-Mormon in Salt Lake City.<sup>6</sup> Fugate declared that the alleged discovery of the Kinderhook plates was "a HUMBUG, gotten up by Robert Wiley, Bridge Whitton and myself. ... None of the nine persons who signed the certificate [a document included in the *Times and Seasons* article] knew the secret, except Wiley and I.

"We read in Pratt's prophecy that 'Truth is yet to spring out of the earth.' [The quote is from Parley P. Pratt's 1837 missionary tract *Voice of Warning*.] We concluded to prove the prophecy by way of a joke. We soon made our plans and executed them. Bridge Whitton cut them out of some pieces of copper; Wiley and I made the hieroglyphics by making impressions on beeswax and filling them with acid and putting it on the plates. When they were finished we put them together with rust made of nitric acid, old iron and lead, and bound them with a piece of hoop iron, covering them completely with the rust."

Fugate then went on to tell how they secretly buried the plates and faked their discovery.

These accounts have generated much controversy for more than a hundred years since the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, the question being twofold: (1) *are the Kinderhook plates authentic?* and (2) *did Joseph Smith attempt to translate them?* In general, Latter-day Saint scholars and laymen have sought to confirm the story of the Kinderhook plates, feeling that such authentication would both defend the Prophet and make more plausible the account of the Book of Mormon having been taken from plates of gold. Antagonists, on the other hand, have sought to demonstrate that Joseph Smith was a false prophet.

## The Question of Authenticity

Because the whereabouts of the plates since at least 1844 had been unknown, their authenticity remained a matter of conjecture. But in 1920, one of them came into the possession of the Chicago Historical Society. Only then did direct testing become possible.

How the one remaining plate got to Chicago is an interesting story in itself—a story that is consistent with physical evidence (to be discussed later) that this plate is indeed one of the original Kinderhook plates brought to Nauvoo in 1843.

In 1845, a Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell established a college of medicine in St. Louis. The college had a museum of natural history that contained 3,000 items, among them “Antiquities, &c. of our country.” W. P. Harris, in his letter of 1855, said he had heard from a fellow physician “that R Wiley graduated [from the college] since finding the plates ... and that Dr. Professor McDowell on surgery has the plates now in his office.” It is now apparent that Wiley either sold or gave the Kinderhook plates to McDowell for the museum.

McDowell was a southern sympathizer who left St. Louis to serve the Confederacy as a physician during the Civil War. This made him very unpopular in St. Louis, and when the U.S. Army seized his college in 1861 for use as a prison, the 2nd Iowa Reserve Regiment sacked it.<sup>7</sup>

The Chicago Historical Society received one of the plates in 1920 as a gift from Charles F. Gunther, a noted collector of historical artifacts. Gunther had acquired it on 15 July 1889 from F. C. A. Richardson, M.D. (a member of both the St. Louis and the Chicago Academies of Science). Richardson in turn received it from a Dr. J. W. McDowell (not the same man as Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell), who got it from a soldier in the 2nd Iowa Reserve Regiment.

Since coming to public awareness in 1920, this plate has undergone a number of tests. For example, in 1953 it was examined by two engravers who made an affidavit stating that “to the best of our knowledge this Plate was engraved with a pointed instrument and not etched with acid”—a conclusion which contradicted the letters claiming the plates to be a hoax, and which therefore fueled the hopes of those who wanted the plates to be proven genuine.<sup>8</sup>

A much more rigorous study of the Chicago plate was organized in 1969 by Dr. Paul Cheesman of Brigham Young University. He secured permission from the Chicago Historical Society to bring the plate to BYU for exhaustive non-destructive testing—that is, analytical tests not involving actual damage to the plate. The results of these tests were to be compared with previous tests performed in 1960 and 1966. The plate was examined by physicists, engravers, a jeweler, a metalworker, and several photographers, with mixed results. The physicists concluded that the plate was acid-etched and of non-ancient brass; the others could not agree whether it was etched, engraved, or both. Dr. Cheesman concluded: “It appears we need to have a destructive analysis for further confirmation. Much more testing needs to be done.”<sup>9</sup>

There the matter rested until 1980, when I had the good fortune to secure permission from the Chicago Historical Society for the recommended destructive tests. These tests, involving some very sophisticated analytical techniques, were performed by Professor D. Lynn Johnson of the Department of Materials Science and Engineering at Northwestern University.

Dr. Johnson used a scanning electron microscope (SEM) to examine the grooves that form the characters on the plate to determine whether they were cut or scratched with a tool or whether they were etched with acid. A scanning Auger microprobe (SAM) was used to detect any nitrogen residues that might have been left in the grooves as a result of

etching with nitric acid. To determine the composition of the metal, an X-ray fluorescence analysis was done on a small amount of material removed from the plate (a destructive test). And finally, an edge of the plate was ground and polished so that the metal could be examined by microscope for impurities and inclusions (also a destructive test).

The extreme depth of focus and resolution of the scanning electron microscope (SEM) at high magnification make it possible to clearly distinguish between etching or engraving on metal surfaces. If a character were cut or scratched into the surface, the groove would contain secondary grooves and ridges running lengthwise within it where the engraving instrument forced a flow of metal. This would be especially noticeable at groove intersections, where metal would be pushed from the second groove into the first. On the other hand, etched lines would show no metal flows or secondary grooves; instead, a roughened, pock-marked etching would be seen.

Figure 1 shows part of one of the characters as seen in the SEM. The irregular, grainy texture characteristic of acid etching is evident, not a striated surface that would have been produced by an engraving tool. A thorough SEM examination of the characters on the plate brought Dr. Johnson to the conclusion that the characters on the plate were indeed prepared by acid etching, not by any form of tooling, scratching, or cutting.

It became apparent during the SEM study that a residue of some kind was present in some of the grooves. The scanning Auger microprobe (SAM) was used to analyze these residues. A clear indication of nitrogen was detected, which would be consistent with a copper nitrate residue and could indicate that nitric acid was used in the etching, as those who reportedly originated the deception had claimed.

The X-ray fluorescence test indicated that the plate was made of a true brass alloy of approximately 73 percent copper, 24 percent zinc, and lesser amounts of other metals. In addition, an examination of the small area of the plate that was ground and polished revealed a basically “clean” alloy—that is, there were very few visible traces of impurities such as particles of slag and other debris that one might expect to find in metal of ancient manufacture.

As a result of these tests, we concluded that the plate owned by the Chicago Historical Society is *not* of ancient origin. We concluded that the plate was etched with acid; and as Paul Cheesman and other scholars have pointed out, ancient inhabitants would probably

have engraved the plates rather than etched them with acid. Secondly, we concluded that the plate was made from a true brass alloy (copper and zinc) typical of the mid-nineteenth century; whereas the “brass” of ancient times was actually bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. Furthermore, one would expect an ancient alloy to contain larger amounts of impurities and inclusions than did the alloy tested.

Dr. Johnson and I did, however, take into account the possibility that the Chicago plate was only a copy of the original. In reference to this, he reported:

“In the course of examining the plate, an interesting anomaly was discovered. One of the characters on the plate (side B, column 3) has an angular dent near one end. [See Figure 2.] That this is a dent can be verified by noticing that a similar dent exists nearby, close to the edge of the plate. A larger magnification of the latter dent reveals a feature toward the right which would have been produced by a nick in the edge of the instrument that produced the dent. [See Figure 3.] This same nick shows up in the left-hand dent, partially obliterated by the intersection of the dent with one of the vertical strokes of the character. [See Figure 4.] This dent was interpreted in the 1843 published facsimiles of the Kinderhook plate as part of the character. [See illustration, p. 72.] The significance of this is that the facsimile must therefore have been made from this plate, rather than this plate being a copy based on the facsimile. If the present plate were a copy from the facsimile, this stroke would have been etched in with the other strokes, rather than being added as a dent.”

The conclusion, therefore, is that the Chicago plate is indeed one of the original Kinderhook plates, which now fairly well evidences them to be faked antiquities.<sup>10</sup>

## The Question of Translation

But what does the above conclusion mean in relationship to the earlier references to a “translation” of the Kinderhook plates by Joseph Smith? Did he actually attempt to translate any of the plates?

To answer that question, it is necessary to look at the events of April and May 1843 in sequence:

The plates were “discovered” on Sunday, 23 April 1843, and taken home by Dr. Harris for cleaning. Then, according to a story in the *Quincy Whig*, they were exhibited in Quincy during the following week.<sup>11</sup>

There is some question about who brought the plates to Nauvoo. The Quincy, Illinois, certificate printed in the *Times and Seasons* article said, “The above described plates we have handed to Mr. Sharp [a Latter-day Saint present at the excavation] for the purpose of taking them to Nauvoo.” However, Wilbur Fugate wrote in his 1879 letter: “The Mormons wanted to take the plates to Joe Smith, but we refused to let them go. Some time afterward a man assuming the name of Savage, of Quincy, borrowed the plates of Wiley to show to his literary friends there, and took them to Joe Smith. The same identical plates were returned to Wiley.”

Charlotte Haven, a somewhat antagonistic non-Mormon who was visiting her sister (a Mormon) in Nauvoo at the time, wrote a letter on May 2 that gives the following account:

“We hear very frequently from our Quincy friends through Mr. Joshua Moore, who passes through that place and this in his monthly zigzag tours through the State, traveling horseback. His last call on us was last Saturday [April 29] and he brought with him half a dozen thin pieces of brass, apparently very old, in the form of a bell about five or six inches long. They had on them scratches that looked like writing, and strange figures like symbolic characters. They were recently found, he said, in a mound a few miles below Quincy. When he showed them to Joseph, the latter said that the figures or writing on them was similar to that in which the Book of Mormon was written, and if Mr. Moore could leave them, he thought that by the help of revelation he would be able to translate them.”<sup>12</sup>

It is possible, then, that Mr. Joshua Moore was the one who obtained the plates by pretense and brought them to Nauvoo. In any event, the plates had apparently arrived in Nauvoo by Saturday, April 29, and had been shown to Joseph Smith.

William Clayton evidently had access to the plates at some point, for in his journal entry of Monday, May 1, he included a tracing of one of the plates. (Whether or not he was present when Joseph Smith saw the plates is unknown.) Two days later, on Wednesday, Brigham Young also drew an outline of one of the Kinderhook plates in a small

notebook/diary that he kept. Inside the drawing he wrote: “May 3—1843. I had this at Joseph Smith’s house. Found near Quincy.”<sup>13</sup>

Very soon afterward the plates were removed from Nauvoo, for the *Times and Seasons* editorial, which was written perhaps on Wednesday or Thursday (May 3 or 4), said: “Mr. Smith has had those plates, what his opinion concerning them is, we have not yet ascertained. The gentleman that owns them has taken them away, or we should have given a fac simile of the plates and characters in this number. We are informed however, that he purposes returning with them for translation; if so, we may be able yet to furnish our readers with it.”

The plates were apparently in Nauvoo, then, from Saturday the 29th through Wednesday the 3rd—a period of five days—and were then taken away. Later, however, they were evidently returned to Nauvoo for a time, for by June 24 the *Nauvoo Neighbor* press had access to them and was thus able to produce facsimiles for the published broadside. *A History of the Church* entry for Sunday, May 7, says: “In the forenoon I [Joseph Smith] was visited by several gentlemen, concerning the plates that were dug out near Kinderhook.”<sup>14</sup> Whether or not the plates were actually returned on that day—or indeed, whether Joseph Smith himself ever had the plates again—is uncertain.

In any case, the translation for which hope had been expressed in the *Times and Seasons* did not appear. In a letter dated April 8, 1878, Wilbur Fugate recalled: “We understood Jo Smith said [the plates] would make a book of 1200 pages but he would not agree to translate them until they were sent to the Antiquarian society at Philadelphia, France, and England.” Furthermore, a review of other entries in Joseph Smith’s history indicate that he was occupied during the following weeks with mayoral duties, Church business, the Nauvoo Legion, and four different trips to neighboring cities; there is no indication of translating activities.<sup>15</sup> Then on June 23, just one day before publication of the broadside that repeated the Saints’ hopeful expectation of an eventual translation, the Prophet was abducted by Missourians who tried to get him to Missouri for prosecution on charges of “treason.” He made it back to Nauvoo on June 30, but the *habeas corpus* proceedings took up more than two weeks of his time.

Just when the plates were taken from Nauvoo for the second and perhaps final time is uncertain. But we know that by fall of that same year they were back in Robert Wiley’s

possession, for on November 15 he wrote a letter to one J. J. Harding suggesting that he was interested in selling the plates to “the National Institute,” and that he was also interested in the “opinions of your different Entiquarian friends.” In reference to having the plates examined by “the Antiquarian society at Philadelphia, France, and England,” Wilbur Fugate went on to say: “They were sent and the answer was that there were no such Hyeroglyphics known, and if there ever had been, they had long since passed away. Then Smith began his translation.” (The reference to Joseph Smith having begun a “translation” of the plates is in error, since they were never returned to Nauvoo. The Prophet died a martyr the following year.)

However, the question of *when* the plates were taken from Nauvoo is not as important as the fact that they *were* taken away. In spite of the considerable excitement they generated in Nauvoo after their “discovery” the plates were allowed to leave the Saints, apparently without fanfare. No known record exists which intimates that Joseph Smith or those around him ever purchased or attempted to purchase the plates (as were the mummies associated with the Book of Abraham papyrus), even though their owner, Wiley, was prepared to sell them.

That the plates had aroused interest in Nauvoo is evident from two accounts that were not published until years later. In a letter written to a friend on Sunday, May 7, Parley P. Pratt said: “A large number of Citizens have seen them and compared the characters with those on the Egyptian papyrus which is now in this city.” A few lines previously, he had begun his comment on the plates as follows:

“Six plates having the appearance of Brass have lately been dug out of a mound by a gentleman in Pike Co. Illinois. They are small and filled with engravings in Egyptian language and contain the genealogy of one of the ancient Jaredites back to Ham the son of Noah. His bones were found in the same vase (made of Cement). Part of the bones were 15 ft. underground.”<sup>16</sup>

This calls to mind the statement from the William Clayton journal referred to above:

“I have seen six brass plates which were found in Adams County by some persons who were digging in a mound. They found a skeleton about six feet from the surface of the earth which was nine feet high. ... President J. has translated a portion and says they contain the history of the person with whom they were found, and he was a descendant of

Ham through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the Ruler of heaven and earth.”

It seems, then, that there was considerable talk about the plates in Nauvoo—and apparently as much misinformation and hearsay was current among people as there was fact. Pratt heard of a discovery in Pike County; Clayton said Adams County. Clayton said that the find was made six feet underground; Pratt, fifteen. Elder Pratt spoke of a cement vase—an item mentioned in no other account. Clayton mentioned a skeleton nine feet tall—also unmentioned in any other account. Clayton said that the plates gave a history of an Egyptian; Pratt mentioned a Jaredite.

The elements that these two accounts have in common suggest a basic gist to the hearsay stories circulating in Nauvoo and also that Joseph Smith with others saw and wondered about the nature of the material that had been brought to Nauvoo. But there is, obviously, leagues of difference between an actual translation of sacred records and a consideration of artifacts of uncertain origin—the former requiring study, prayer, and revelation; the latter characterized perhaps by an examination for points of similarity, etc., in a setting where various suggestions are likely aired by those present and elaborated on as discussion continued. And the actual presence of William Clayton or Parley P. Pratt in any discussion on the topic with Joseph Smith is simply unknown.

It is hard to imagine that the Prophet Joseph Smith wouldn't have been intrigued by the plates. When they were first shown to him, he may well have noted certain correspondence between some characters on the plates and “reformed Egyptian” and contemplated the possibility of authenticity and translation, as the Charlotte Haven letter suggests.<sup>17</sup> But how much of the conjecture that was current in Nauvoo at the time might be attributable to him would be a speculation in itself, impossible to verify from the available accounts. The one account that *was* published in the *Times and Seasons*, whose editors were equally as intimate with Joseph Smith as William Clayton and Parley P. Pratt, could only report that “Mr. Smith has had those plates, what his opinion concerning them is we have not yet ascertained.”

The central issue in the whole question of Joseph Smith's involvement in the Kinderhook plate episode is that the expected “translation” did not appear. And this fact may well explain the characteristic that has made this hoax most interesting—that it was never

carried to completion. That the Kinderhook plates were not authentic artifacts is no longer in doubt; but if the plates were faked, why wasn't the hoax revealed right away?

It has been suggested that the whole Kinderhook plate incident was, as Wilbur Fugate said in his 1878 and 1879 letters, a heavy-handed, frontier-style “joke.” On the other hand, the conspirators' objective might have been more pointed—to produce a bogus set of plates and then reveal the hoax in a shower of ridicule *after* the Prophet made a purported “translation.” In either case, they were frustrated in their scheme because no translation ever appeared. In fact, there is no evidence that Joseph Smith ever concluded the plates were genuine, other than conflicting statements from members who hoped that a translation would come forth—and in fact no evidence that the Prophet manifested real interest in the “discovery” after his initial viewing of the plates. The statement taken from William Clayton's journal didn't appear until September 1856 in Salt Lake City's *Deseret News*. At that point, time itself had eroded away the opportunity for a hearty joke, if that were the hoaxers' intent; and the absence of an actual translation in spite of the Clayton entry in the “History of Joseph Smith” could only have added to their frustrations—assuming that the hoaxers even knew of the *Deseret News* account, which appeared thirteen years later and a thousand miles away.

Another possible explanation for the hoax never having been carried through may lie in Robert Wiley's desire to sell the plates as genuine artifacts. For him to have exposed the hoax before the attempted sale would, of course, have scuttled any negotiations; and to expose it afterward may have landed the sellers and conspirators in jail for attempted fraud—turning the tables and making *them* the object of ridicule instead of Joseph Smith.

Significantly, there is no evidence that the Prophet Joseph Smith ever took the matter with the Lord, as he did when working with the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham. And this brings us to the other side of the story, for those of us who believe that Joseph Smith *was* the Lord's prophet: Isn't it natural to expect that he would be guided to understand that these plates were not of value as far as his mission was concerned? That other members may have been less judicious and not guided in the same way cannot be laid at the Prophet's feet. Many people, now as well as then, have an appetite for hearsay and a hope for “easy evidence” to bolster or even substitute for personal spirituality and hard-won faith that comes from close familiarity with truth and communion with God.

So it is that in the 100-year battle of straw men and straw arguments, Joseph Smith needs no defense—he simply did not fall for the scheme. And with that understood, it is perhaps time that the Kinderhook plates be retired to the limbo of other famous faked antiquities.

## Notes

“Ancient Records,” *Times and Seasons*, 1 May 1843, pp. 185–87. The *Times and Seasons* was published twice monthly, dated on the first and fifteenth of the month, no matter what the date of its actual release. This issue, dated Monday, May 1, picked up a story from the *Quincy Whig* that was published on Wednesday, May 3. Obviously it couldn’t have been published before the *Whig* story appeared, and in fact the editorial subhead above the story on “Ancient Records” reads “CITY OF NAUVOO, WEDNESDAY, MAY 1, 1843.” So the *Times and Seasons* issue in question was printed no earlier than Wednesday, May 3, and possibly a day or so later.

The full title is *A Brief Account of the Discovery of the Brass Plates Recently Taken from a Mound in the Vicinity of Kinderhook, Pike County, Illinois*. Available in the Library-Archives, the Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter referred to as Church Archives).

The journal referred to is in private possession. Dr. James B. Allen of Brigham Young University used it by permission in connection with his research on William Clayton, and I wish to thank him for sharing this citation with me. Other volumes of William Clayton’s journals for other time periods have appeared in print—see, e.g., James B. Allen and Thomas G. Alexander, eds., *Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton, 1840 to 1842* (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1974); William Clayton, *William Clayton’s Journal: A Daily Record of the 1846 Journey of the Original Company of “Mormon” Pioneers from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake* (Salt Lake City: Clayton Family Association, 1921).

*History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1932–51), 5:372–79. Formerly widely known as the *Documentary History of the Church*.

Printed in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 5 (July 1912), pp. 271–73.

Wilbur Fugate, Mound Station, Illinois, 30 June 1879 letter to James T. Cobb, Salt Lake City, as quoted in Wilhelm W. Wyl (Wymental), *Mormon Portraits* (Salt Lake City, 1888), pp. 207–8.

It would take a separate article to present all the information available on J. N. McDowell, his medical college, his museums, the sack of his museums, and the partial reorganization of his collections after the Civil War by the Academy of Science in St. Louis.

For a copy of the affidavit, see Welby W. Ricks, “The Kinderhook Plates,” *Improvement Era*, Sept. 1962, p. 636.

This excellent and detailed “Kinderhook Plate Report” is on file in the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. Other members of the committee were Richard Anderson, William Dibble, Max Weaver, Sam Rushforth, Ronald Jackson, Reed Durham, Larry Pope, Welby Ricks, and Dean Jessee.

One other topic that deserves mention is the matter of the size of the Chicago plate in comparison with a description given shortly after the plates’ “discovery.” Said the *Quincy Whig* article of 3 May 1843 (reprinted in the *Times and Seasons* article and in the *Nauvoo Neighbor* press broadside of June 24): “A Mr. J. Roberts, from Pike county, called upon us last Monday, with a written description of a discovery which was recently made near Kinderhook, in that county.” The article went on to describe the discovery, adding: “There were six plates—four inches in length, one inch and three quarters wide at the top, and two inches and three quarters wide at the bottom, flaring out to points.” Just what J. Roberts may have had to do with the discovery is unknown (his name appears nowhere else in connection with it), but the figures he gave the *Whig* appear to be estimates only. For in contrast to those estimates, which come to us second-hand, the tracings in the Clayton and Brigham Young journals, as well as the broadside facsimiles, all match the Chicago plate in size.

See note 1, above.

Charlotte Haven, “A Girl’s Letters from Nauvoo,” *The Overland Monthly*, 16 (Dec. 1890), p. 630. This letter is dated: “City of Nauvoo, May 2, 1843.”

Brigham Young papers, Church Archives. I wish to thank Dean C. Jessee of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History, Brigham Young University, for calling this item to my attention.

*History of the Church*, 5:384.

See *History of the Church*, 5:384ff.

The original of this letter is in the John Van Cott correspondence, Church Archives.

It would also take a separate article to discuss the amazing array of theories that have been put forward to explain the source or nature of the characters on the Kinderhook plates. It has been suggested at various times that they came from a Chinese tea chest, from a piece of Chinese jade jewelry, from the Lo Lo script of Yunnan, China, from Egyptian hieroglyphics, and from scripts originating in Crete, Cyprus, Sinai, Canaan, Byblos, Phoenicia, and elsewhere, including the Anthon transcript (a theory that must be discounted because no published version of the Anthon transcript was available at that time). Some have suggested that the characters derived from nothing but a lively imagination. The arrangement of the characters and the paucity of repeated signs and sign clusters does not suggest any real language.

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