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## Oliver Cowdery's Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism

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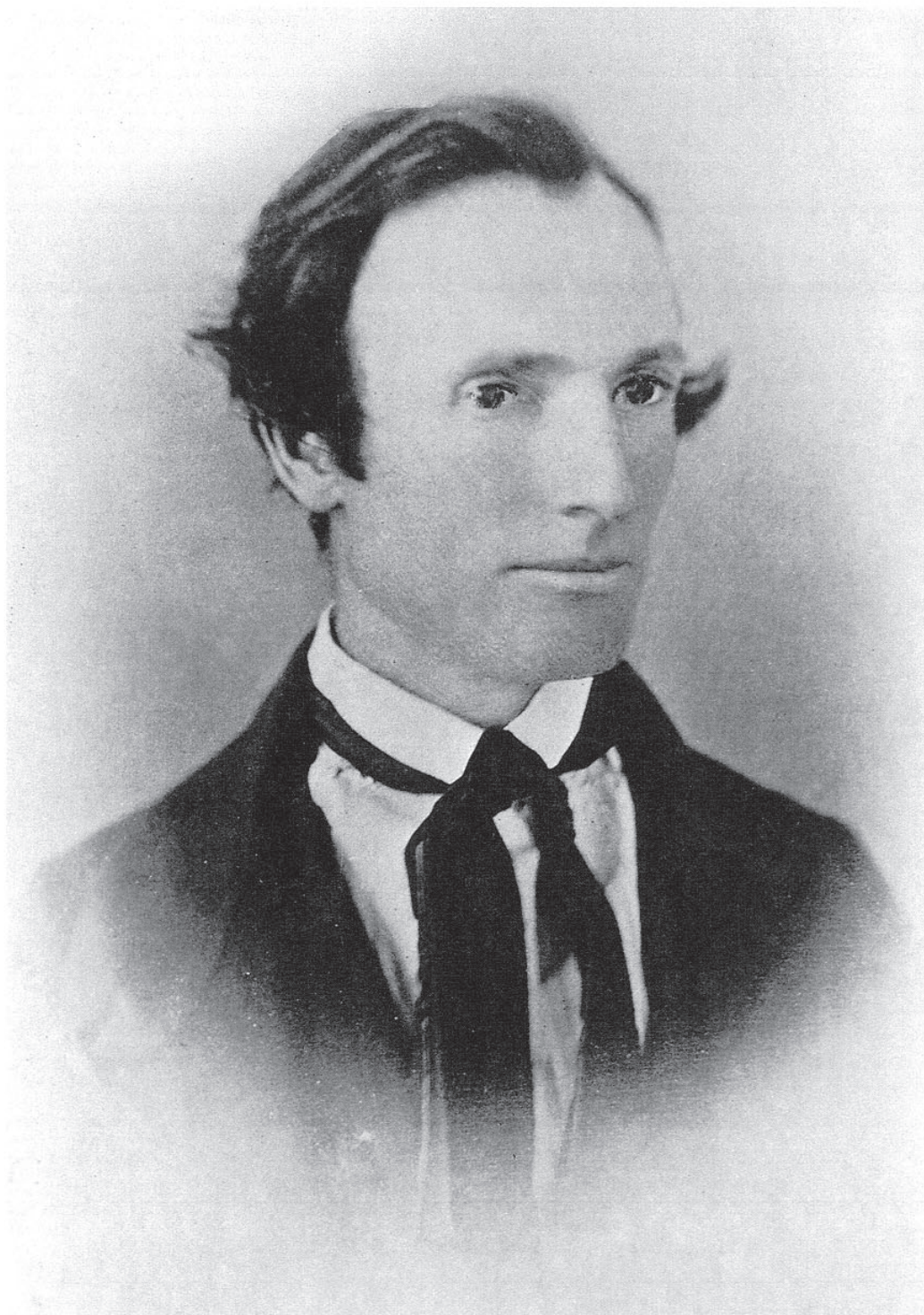
**Abstract:** Cowdery biographers have generally repeated a few brief facts before darting to Oliver's initial meeting with Joseph Smith in April 1829. A close look at the record, however, reveals a rich family history—a history that includes the death of Oliver's mother, the blending of three families, four moves between two states, and a plague that took a dear aunt and uncle. All of these details in turn shed light on two controversial theories bearing on the origins of Mormonism.

The first alleges that Joseph Smith Sr. and William Cowdery participated in a divining-rod incident known as the Wood Scrape, forming associations that impacted their sons' founding of the Church a quarter of a century later. The second purports that young Oliver knew minister Ethan Smith, read his work *View of the Hebrews*, and passed on knowledge of the book or a copy of the book itself to Joseph, who borrowed freely from it in producing the Book of Mormon. Both theories have spawned considerable discussion and research. The well-documented history of the William Cowdery family in Vermont, however, shows that both theories are long on speculation and short on fact.



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Courtesy LDS Church Archives

Oliver Cowdery, ca. 1840



# Oliver Cowdery's Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism

Larry E. Morris

Most of what is known about Oliver Cowdery's youth comes from a well-known summary offered by his sister Lucy Cowdery Young:

Now in regard to Oliver he was born in the Town of Wells in the state of Vermont[,] when he was three years of age Father married my Mother she resided in the Town of Poultney so Oliver was brought up in Poultney Rutland County Vermont and when he arrived at the age of twenty he went to the State of New York where his older brothers were married and Settled and in about two years my father moved there.<sup>1</sup>

Cowdery biographers have generally repeated these brief facts before darting to Oliver's initial meeting with Joseph Smith in April 1829. A close look at the record, however, reveals a rich family history behind Lucy's simple summary—a history that includes the death of Oliver's mother, the blending of three families, four moves between two states, and a plague that took a dear aunt and uncle.

All of these details in turn shed light on two controversial theories bearing on the origins of Mormonism. The first alleges that Joseph Smith Sr. and William Cowdery participated in a divining-rod incident known as the "Wood Scrape," forming associations that impacted their sons' founding of the Church a quarter of a century later.<sup>2</sup> The second purports that young Oliver knew minister Ethan Smith, read his work *View of the Hebrews*, and passed on knowledge of the book—or a copy of the book itself—to Joseph, who borrowed freely from it in producing the Book of Mormon.<sup>3</sup> Both theories have spawned considerable discussion and research. The well-documented history of the William Cowdery family in Vermont, however, shows that both theories are long on speculation and short on fact.

## William Cowdery's Forty Years in Vermont

Oliver's youth is best understood in the context of the four decades his father spent in Vermont (interrupted by a three-year stay in New York). William Cowdery Jr. was born in East Haddam, Connecticut, on September 5, 1765. Around 1787 he and his wife, Rebecca Fuller (born on January 2, 1768, also in East Haddam), moved to Wells, Vermont, where Rebecca's brother-in-law and sister, Rufus and Huldah Fuller Glass, had recently

settled.<sup>4</sup> Around 1827, William moved his family to western New York. Although this period has received little attention in biographies of Oliver Cowdery,<sup>5</sup> it is fairly well documented, with at least thirty references to William Cowdery occurring in original Vermont records and additional information in Cowdery family histories:

*Wells, Vermont*<sup>6</sup>

- October 17, 1788—birth of Warren Cowdery<sup>7</sup>
- September 1789—William Cowdery included in the list of free men in Wells<sup>8</sup>
- February 16, 1791—birth of Stephen Cowdery<sup>9</sup>
- April 1791–February 1793—various land sales to William Cowdery<sup>10</sup>
- February 20, 1792—William Cowdery sworn to position of surveyor of highways<sup>11</sup>
- July 1793—William Cowdery’s livestock earmarks identified in the town minutes<sup>12</sup>
- October 4, 1793—birth of Dyer Cowdery<sup>13</sup>
- August 13, 1796—birth of Erastus Cowdery<sup>14</sup>
- December 19, 1797—William Cowdery files an affidavit with the town clerk discussing four stray sheep: “The owner is desired to prove property pay charges and take them away.”<sup>15</sup>
- June 30, 1799—birth of Sally Cowdry<sup>16</sup>
- 1800—William Cowdre family listed in Wells census<sup>17</sup>
- March 12, 1802—birth of Lyman Cowdry<sup>18</sup>
- March 1803—William Cowdery sworn to the position of surveyor of highways<sup>19</sup>
- June 16, 1804—birth of Olive Cowdery<sup>20</sup>
- October 3, 1806—birth of Oliver Cowdery<sup>21</sup>
- January 1807–November 1808—various land sales from William Cowdery. The last known reference to William in the Wells town record is a sale to Socrates Hotchkiss on November 9, 1808, that included “all the land and buildings standing on the farm on which I the grantor now live.”<sup>22</sup>

*Middletown, Vermont*

- Early 1809—Cowdery family moves to Middletown<sup>23</sup>
- September 3, 1809—death of Rebecca Fuller Cowdery<sup>24</sup>
- March 18, 1810—marriage of William Cowdery and Keziah Pearce Austin<sup>25</sup>

*Williamson, New York*

- Summer 1810—family moves to Williamson, Ontario County, New York<sup>26</sup>



- 1810—William Cowdery family listed in Ontario, New York, census<sup>27</sup>
- December 18, 1810—birth of Rebecca Marie Cowdery<sup>28</sup>

#### *Middletown, Vermont*

- 1813–1814—family returns to Middletown<sup>29</sup>
- June 3, 1814—birth of Lucy Pearce Cowdery<sup>30</sup>
- February 23, 1815—land sale from William Cowdery to Moses Copeland<sup>31</sup>
- January 17, 1817—birth of Phoebe Cowdery<sup>32</sup>

#### *Poultney, Vermont*

- August 2, 1818—baptism of Rebecca Marie, Lucy, and Phoebe<sup>33</sup>
- 1820—William Cowdery family listed in Poultney census<sup>34</sup>

Oliver Cowdery was born in Wells on October 3, 1806, after a summer of drought in southwestern Vermont. According to a Wells historian, “no rain fell from seeding time to harvest. Crops were almost a complete failure.”<sup>35</sup>

The Cowdery and Rufus Glass homes were just a mile apart, giving the eight children in each family a good chance to get well acquainted with their cousins. There must have been frequent trips back and forth between the two homes, with the cousins enjoying boiled bag pudding or hot maple syrup served on platters of snow.<sup>36</sup>

William Cowdery and Rufus Glass were landowners who probably raised beef cattle, sheep, and hogs. William and his six sons no doubt cleared land with crude axes, planted hay and grain in the thin topsoil, and hoped the short Vermont growing season would yield a good harvest. In late winter and early spring, they tapped maple trees, collecting enough sugar to last the entire year. Like their neighbors, the family probably cooked meals of potatoes, turnips, pumpkins, beans, and ground corn over an open hearth.<sup>37</sup>

William came from a religious family. His father, William Sr., and his mother, Hannah



Courtesy Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

Marker at the birthplace of Oliver Cowdery, Wells, Vermont

Emmons, both belonged to the Congregational Church.<sup>38</sup> William Sr. served as a deacon in the Reading, Vermont, Congregational Church, preaching sermons after the death of the minister.<sup>39</sup> Oliver probably met his grandfather Cowdery (his only surviving grandparent) and listened firsthand to his Calvinist exhortations.

Oliver was two years old when the family left Wells early in 1809, but the move to Poultney—often thought to have taken place immediately—did not occur for another decade. The family moved first to a farm in Middletown, a township a few miles directly northeast of Wells. Oliver's mother Rebecca may have been sick with a chronic cough when they left Wells. Her health did not improve. Nine months later, in a portent of Oliver's own future, Rebecca died of consumption, most likely tuberculosis, at the age of forty-three. Oliver died also at age forty-three and probably from the same disease.<sup>40</sup>

One historian of Wells has suggested that after Rebecca's death, two-year-old Oliver went to live with his aunt Huldah Glass, his mother's older sister.<sup>41</sup> Various records indicate that Oliver may have lived with the Glass family for at least two extended periods, first from 1809 to 1813 and again between 1820 and 1822. The 1810 census record for William Cowdery, for example, lists only one male child under ten, although Lyman and Oliver were both in that age bracket. Furthermore, the Glass census record for 1810 lists two boys under ten, even though the Glass boys were all over ten. Oliver's living with the Glass family would be consistent with both census reports.<sup>42</sup>

Even if Oliver temporarily lived with the Glass family (proved possible but hardly certain by known records), William Cowdery still had seven other children to care for. Sometime in the six months after Rebecca's death, he courted Keziah Pearce Austin, a Middletown widow, who came from a respected Poultney family. They were married in Middletown on March 18, 1810. The union eventually combined three families—a child from Keziah's first marriage and eight Cowdery children were eventually joined by William and Keziah's three daughters.<sup>43</sup>

As Vermont historian Charles T. Morrissey details, "The years immediately preceding and following the War of 1812 provided all sorts of troubles for Vermont," including a depressed economy that likely factored in the family's migration by ox team to western New York in the summer of 1810.<sup>44</sup> William and Keziah's first child, Rebecca Marie, was born in Williamson, New York, that December.

Young Oliver, whose early years had already been traumatized by the loss of his mother, faced a double blow just four years later when a plague descended on Wells and the surrounding communities. Both Glass parents fell ill, first with chills and a high fever, followed by violent coughing,



vomiting, and diarrhea. Huldah died on March 21, 1813, at the age of fifty-one, and fifty-seven-year-old Rufus succumbed two weeks later.<sup>45</sup> (This epidemic was probably part of an outbreak of typhoid fever that struck the entire Connecticut River Valley between 1812 and 1815, claiming six thousand lives and affecting both seven-year-old Joseph Smith, who endured an excruciating leg operation, and his sister Sophronia, who almost died.<sup>46</sup>) One of Oliver's cousins, seventeen-year-old Arunah Glass, was left to care for himself, his three younger sisters, and possibly for six-year-old Oliver.

William Cowdery brought his family back to Vermont in 1813 or 1814, possibly because of the deaths of Rufus and Huldah (the Vermont economy certainly had not improved and was not the reason they returned). The Cowderys returned to Middletown, and the records of three events provide evidence of their continuous Middletown residence for the next few years: the birth of Lucy Pearce in June 1814, William's property sale in February 1815, and Phoebe's birth in January 1817. The family was therefore in Middletown—and Oliver was nine years old—during the summer of 1816, “the year without a summer,” when a foot of snow fell on about June 8, and fifteen sheep froze to death in a Wells barn. (This was also the third successive year of crop failures for the Joseph Smith Sr. family, driving them from Vermont to western New York.)<sup>47</sup>

Oliver faced several adjustments during the Middletown years. His oldest brother, Warren, married Patience Simonds in 1814 and had moved to Freedom, New York, by 1816.<sup>48</sup> The next year, Oliver's siblings Dyer, Erastus, and Sally joined Warren in New York.<sup>49</sup> Along with his new sisters, Oliver also had a new stepbrother to get used to, Silas Austin, who was seven years his senior. Silas Austin is mentioned in a journal entry Oliver made in 1836 on a trip through Ohio: “On my way I called on Silas Austin . . . he received me with a smile, and wished me to remember him.”<sup>50</sup>

Lucy Cowdery Young's summary of Oliver's youth does not mention Middletown, but this lapse is understandable since she was only three or four when the family left Middletown and moved a few miles west to the township of Poultney. This was familiar territory to Lucy's mother, Keziah, who had lived in Poultney both before and after her marriage to Harrington Austin. The Cowderys arrived in Poultney by 1818, and Rebecca Marie, Lucy, and Phoebe were baptized that August in the same Congregational Church that Keziah had joined in 1803.<sup>51</sup> According to Lucy, the family remained in Poultney for close to a decade, with Oliver leaving for western New York around 1825 and the remaining members of the family following two years later.

Few details of the Poultney years are known, but William Cowdery was a literate man who emphasized his children's education. At least four of his six sons became either doctors or lawyers. And although the upbringing

and education of the Cowdery children is virtually undocumented, a local history of Wells written in 1869 contains a reference to Oliver's education: "We well remember this same Oliver Cowdery when in our boyhood. . . . He attended school in the District where we reside in 1821 and 1822."<sup>52</sup>

The possibility of Oliver's attending school in Wells is curious because the Cowderys resided in Poultney during these years. Available records once again indicate, however, that Oliver may have been temporarily residing with his cousin, Arunah Glass, who had married in 1817. One reason could have been Arunah's inheritance of the debts of his deceased parents. As Richard L. Bushman has pointed out, New Englanders of this period lived precarious economic lives, often owing money to or being owed by scores of individuals. "A person could be prospering while alive," Bushman notes, "and suddenly be insolvent at death."<sup>53</sup> Arunah apparently lived on the edge of poverty, at one point receiving assistance from others in the community,<sup>54</sup> and Oliver may well have attended school while helping Arunah support a wife, son, and three sisters.

During the year of Joseph Smith's first vision, 1820, Oliver turned fourteen. The Poultney census record for that year does not list any boys at all residing with the William Cowdery family, while the four daughters still at home are accurately represented. (Oliver's five brothers were all old enough to be living away from home by this time.) Interestingly, the Wells census record for Arunah Glass lists one boy between ten and sixteen, as well as one boy under ten—and Arunah's only son was three.<sup>55</sup> Though not unimpeachable, those census records indicate that Oliver might have resided in Wells, where he took advantage of educational opportunities. The Wells school district records also support the theory that Oliver attended school there. In 1822, for example, two students between the ages of four and eighteen are listed in the Arunah Glass household, but Arunah had only one child at the time (Rufus, born in 1817), and his younger sisters were all over eighteen. In 1823 one student is listed for the Glass family.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, available records corroborate the claim that Oliver attended school in Wells in the early 1820s.

Oliver would have attended school during the long winter term, possibly studying composition and figures under Almon Hopson, an instructor who taught in Wells for twenty years. The school day began with reading of the Bible, and reading was stressed more than any other subject. Quill pens were difficult to make, and paper was "very coarse [*sic*] and scarce."<sup>57</sup> In this spare setting, young Oliver began to acquire the skills of logic and language that served him so well in future years.

Oliver left Vermont around 1825, but the exact year is not known. Lucy claims he left when he was twenty, and he turned twenty in October 1826.



However, Lucy mistakenly states that Oliver was born in 1805, so she could have thought that he turned twenty in 1825.<sup>58</sup> Whatever the exact date, Oliver had grown to young manhood in the Green Mountain State, and his family's time there becomes a source of controversy in discussions of both the "Wood Scrape" and *View of the Hebrews*.

### The Wood Scrape

The Wood Scrape actually took place in Middletown, Vermont, seven years before William Cowdery moved there (and four years before Oliver's birth). According to nineteenth-century Middletown historian Barnes Frisbie, Nathaniel Wood, a preacher who had tried unsuccessfully to become pastor of Middletown's Congregational Church, and several of his relatives broke from the Congregational Church and claimed they were "modern Israelites or Jews, under the special care of Providence; that the Almighty would . . . visit their enemies . . . with his wrath and vengeance." In 1799, with the Wood movement gathering momentum, a man named Winchell, who contemporaries claimed was a fugitive and a counterfeiter, arrived on the scene and initiated the group to the use of the hazel rod, a small shrub cut with two prongs. "From the use of this stick Winchell and the Woods pretended to divine all sorts of things to suit their purpose."<sup>59</sup>

With increasing zeal, Winchell and the Woods were soon using the rod to dig for buried treasure and search for missing persons. The frenzy reached its apex on the night of January 14, 1802, with the rodsmen preparing for a cataclysmic earthquake—even writing Passover messages on their doorposts—and with local "Gentiles" calling out the militia and standing guard for "destroying angels." "There was no sleep that night among the inhabitants; fear, consternation, great excitement and martial law prevailed throughout the night," historian Frisbie wrote in 1867.<sup>60</sup> But there was no earthquake, and the disgraced Wood group dispersed. Justus Winchell was "warned out" of town, and the Woods, who had previously been prominent citizens—with a former town selectman, constable, and justice of the peace among their numbers—bolted to New York.

Frisbie saw the roots of Mormonism in the Wood movement, claiming that Joseph Smith Sr. and William Cowdery were both involved with Winchell in Vermont around 1800 and that they resumed that association two decades later in New York:

There we find these men [Joseph Smith Sr. and William Cowdery] with the counterfeiter, Winchell, searching for money over the hills and mountains with the hazel rod, and their sons Joe and Oliver, as soon as they were old enough, were in the same business, and continued in it until they brought out the "vilest scheme that ever cursed the country."<sup>61</sup>



Locations in Vermont and New York significant to the early life of Oliver Cowdery

Frisbie himself, however, admitted that the evidence for these claims was thin. Describing Joseph Smith Sr.'s involvement in the Scrape, Frisbie wrote, "I have been told that [he] resided in Poultney . . . and that he was in it [the Wood movement]. . . . Of this I cannot speak positively, for the want of satisfactory evidence."<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Frisbie cannot place William Cowdery directly in the Wood movement:

Winchell, I have been told, was a friend and acquaintance of Cowdry's, but of this I cannot be positive, they were intimate afterwards; but Winchell staid at Cowdry's some little time, keeping himself concealed. . . . Winchell next turns up in Middletown . . . and here he began to use the hazel rod (whether he had before used it at Cowdry's, in Wells, I cannot say).<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, as Richard Lloyd Anderson has pointed out, Frisbie's Smith-Cowdery discussion appears separately from his main summary of the Wood Scrape. In that narrative, Frisbie offered a detailed description of the incident—with specific names, dates, and locations—but said nothing at all about Smith or Cowdery, nor did his star witness, Laban Clark, a preacher who was temporarily in Middletown at the time of the Wood movement. In 1867, Clark wrote a letter to Frisbie discussing the "rod-men," a letter that further complicated the picture by claiming the counterfeiter was named Wingate, not Winchell. Frisbie also explained that before 1860 he interviewed more than thirty men and women who were living in Middletown in 1800. According to Frisbie's summary, these survivors said nothing of a counterfeiter or of Cowdery.<sup>64</sup>



Despite Frisbie's seeming lack of evidence, his concept of a Winchell-Smith-Cowdery association has been revived by D. Michael Quinn, who considers it likely that Winchell mentored the Smiths in the occult and that Oliver Cowdery's "gift of working with the rod" came by way of Winchell's influence on William Cowdery.<sup>65</sup> In reaching these conclusions, Quinn assumes (1) William Cowdery was involved in the Wood Scrape, (2) William Cowdery gained knowledge of working with the rod from Winchell and transmitted that knowledge to Oliver, (3) Joseph Sr. moved temporarily from eastern to western Vermont around 1800 and also got involved in the Wood Scrape, and (4) Joseph Sr. was reunited with Winchell in New York in the early 1820s. A close examination of the existing documents, however, fails to support any of these assumptions.

(1) William Cowdery was never actually identified as a rodsman or as a participant in the Wood Scrape. Quinn's assertion that William was "described as a divining rodsman by his Vermont neighbors"<sup>66</sup> is not accurate. Frisbie claimed only that Winchell briefly stayed with Cowdery three years before the Wood Scrape, and the historian of Middletown was uncertain whether Winchell used the rod at that time. Frisbie, therefore, jumped to a conclusion when he argued that "Oliver Cowdery's father was in the Wood Scrape,"<sup>67</sup> and Quinn compounds this mistake by frequently asserting that Cowdery was identified as a Vermont rodsman.

As for the three Wells residents mentioned in an 1869 history of Wells, none made specific claims about William Cowdery. Nancy Glass (who was ten years old in 1800) wrote to the authors, "If any one [of the Cowdery family] was engaged in it, it must have been the old gentleman; I rather think it was, but won't be positive." The other two, Joseph Parks (fourteen years old in 1800) and Mrs. Charles Garner (age unknown), merely verified that Cowdery was "connected with the rodsmen."<sup>68</sup> All of this, recalled nearly seventy years after the fact, could simply be a confirmation that Winchell stayed with Cowdery. As Anderson has convincingly summarized, "William Cowdery's knowing a man who knew the Woods does not make him a participant. Indeed, Oliver's father is absent from all sources preceding Frisbie. . . . The main group of Middletown survivors of the 1800 period—'more than thirty men and women'—were interviewed up to 1860, and they said nothing of a counterfeiter or of Cowdery."<sup>69</sup>

Existing records of William Cowdery's stay in Wells offer no indication that he was involved in the Wood Scrape. Winchell was "warned out" of Middletown, and the Woods were pressured to leave—"seeing the 'slow moving finger of scorn' pointed towards them from all their neighbors; and fearing, moreover, that the heavy hand of the law would fall on them for their misdeeds."<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, Cowdery remained in Wells and appears to have been a respected citizen both before and after the Wood Scrape. In



1803, a year after the Wood Scrape, he was named as a surveyor of highways, a position he had held in the previous decade.

After leaving Wells, William moved to Middletown, the last place one would expect a disgraced rodsman to go—especially with huge mounds of dirt throughout the area serving as conspicuous reminders of Winchell's money-digging fiasco. And, in contrast to Nathaniel Wood's excommunication from the Middletown Congregational Church, William was married to Middletown resident Keziah Austin in the same church, by Congregational minister Henry Bigelow, whom Frisbie called "truly orthodox, and firm in his religious sentiments."<sup>71</sup> Nor can William and Keziah's move to New York be taken as an attempt to flee Middletown, because they returned three years later and remained in Middletown for another four years.

(2) As Quinn himself has noted, "the historical record is silent about how or when Oliver Cowdery obtained the divining rod he was already using for revelation before April 1829."<sup>72</sup> In fact, a revelation given to Joseph Smith within weeks of Oliver's arrival in Pennsylvania in April 1829 offers all that is known on this subject: "Now this is not all, for you have another gift, which is the gift of working with the rod: behold it has told you things: behold there is no other power save God, that can cause this rod of nature, to work in your hands."<sup>73</sup> According to Anderson, "no known source tells whether Oliver did money digging before becoming the Book of Mormon scribe."<sup>74</sup> In fact, Anderson argues that the rod had many uses in addition to locating hidden treasure. Even during the Wood Scrape, diviners used the rod to seek spiritual answers of all kinds, including healings and answers to prayers.<sup>75</sup> Whether Winchell's money-digging activities almost thirty years earlier had anything to do with Oliver's use of the rod is unknown. Perhaps, as Bushman has suggested, Oliver employed the rod to locate water and minerals, like many of his New England contemporaries.<sup>76</sup>

(3) The connection of the Smith family to the Wood Scrape appears even more tenuous, since Joseph Sr.'s well-documented history does not include a move to Poultney, Vermont. Since Frisbie asserted (based on an unidentified source who offered no specific details) that Joseph Sr. lived in Poultney and participated in the Wood Scrape, and since *a* Joseph Smith is listed in the 1800 census for Poultney, Quinn speculates that Joseph Sr. "may have visited Poultney or Middletown while the Wood movement was developing from the spring of 1800 to January 1802."<sup>77</sup> Vermont civic and religious records, however, place Joseph Sr. across the state in Tunbridge in 1798 (birth of Alvin); in February 1800 (birth of Hyrum); and in May 1803 (birth of Sophronia).<sup>78</sup> The name of *a* Joseph Smith is also listed in the 1800 Tunbridge census,<sup>79</sup> but since the listing does not accurately describe the family of the Prophet's father, Quinn counters that the Poultney Joseph



Smith listing seems just as likely a record of Joseph Smith Sr. But as Dan Vogel has perceptively observed, Lucy Mack Smith offers a solution to this conundrum when she stated that the family relocated temporarily to Randolph, Vermont (about ten miles northwest of Tunbridge), after Hyrum's birth.<sup>80</sup> The family could have been in transit when the census was taken, which would account for their not being listed. Furthermore, in her entire history, which is full of names and dates, Lucy never mentions Rutland County or Poultney. Finally, Poultney records clearly indicate that the Joseph Smith listed in the 1800 census had been a longtime resident. A Joseph Smith is included in the tax rolls for 1792, 1793, 1794, 1795, 1797, and 1798 (the last year such records are available).<sup>81</sup> Thus, Quinn's allegation that Joseph Sr. participated in the Wood Scrape runs counter to several historical documents and rests entirely on a speculation that suffers from a "want of satisfactory evidence," in the words of Barnes Frisbie.<sup>82</sup>

(4) Additionally, Joseph Sr. cannot be linked with Winchell in New York. Three years after the Smith family moved to Palmyra, New York, the *Palmyra Register* noted that the post office was holding an unclaimed letter for "Justus Winchel." A similar notice appeared in the *Wayne Sentinel* almost five years later (July 7, 1824). Relying on these notices—and on Frisbie's claim of a Smith-Winchell connection in New York (a claim for which Frisbie offers neither documents nor witnesses)—Quinn concludes that "Winchell followed Joseph Sr. from Vermont to New York" and that Winchell was likely one of two "occult mentors to the Smiths."<sup>83</sup> But Quinn's assertion fails three fundamental tests. First, there is no evidence that Winchell lived in the Palmyra area. Two unclaimed letters over a five-year period do not prove residence and may point to the very opposite; and, as Quinn notes, Winchell's whereabouts at the time of the 1820 census are unknown.<sup>84</sup> Second, a case has not been made that the Justus Winchel named in the newspaper notices is the same Justus Winchell who was warned out of Vermont in 1802. Winchell's son, Justus Jr., lived within twenty miles of Palmyra from 1817 to 1820, and a German-born Justus Winchell (no known relation) moved to within twenty-five miles of Palmyra sometime after 1820. Quinn can place *the* Justus Winchell no closer than Wayne, New York—twenty-one miles from Palmyra—where he died in 1823.<sup>85</sup> Third, nothing links Winchell with New York money-digging activities. It is particularly telling that the manifold affidavits collected by the likes of Philastus Hurlbut, Chester C. Thorne, and Arthur B. Deming—all of whom attempted to link the Smiths with shady occult practices, money digging, and fraud (the very accusations made against Winchell in Vermont)—say nothing about anyone named Winchell.<sup>86</sup>

Nor can William Cowdery be linked with Winchell in New York. This is a crucial point because Quinn relies heavily on Frisbie, who insists that

Winchell, Smith, and Cowdery were in the Wood Scrape in Vermont and were reunited in Palmyra.<sup>87</sup> But, according to Quinn, Winchell's alleged Palmyra visit or residence does not begin until 1819 and ends with his death in 1823, and William and Oliver Cowdery were clearly in Vermont during this period, as shown previously. Thus, the Winchell-Cowdery-New York claim falls flat in the face of the documentary evidence.

The primary historical documents fail to support Frisbie's—and Quinn's—Winchell-Smith-Cowdery allegations. Historian David M. Ludlum states the case succinctly: "The strands of connection between the Wood Scrape and the Palmyra outcroppings are too tenuous to withstand historical criticism."<sup>88</sup>

### *View of the Hebrews*

Ethan Smith (1762–1849), no relation to Joseph, was a prominent New England minister who published a number of sermons and books. From 1821 to 1826, he served as minister of the Poultney, Vermont, Congregational Church, and during that period published his best-known work, *View of the Hebrews*. This book "combines scriptural citations and reports from various observers among American Indians and Jews to support the claim that the Indians were the descendants of the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel."<sup>89</sup> By the early twentieth century and down to the 1980s, suggestions of a relationship between *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon were made by several authors.<sup>90</sup>

Proponents of this theory have pointed out that the William Cowdery family lived in Poultney when *View of the Hebrews* was published, and some have claimed an Ethan Smith–Cowdery association. Book of Mormon enthusiast Thomas Stuart Ferguson concluded, for instance, that the Cowdery family "had a close tie with Ethan Smith."<sup>91</sup> The most intensive examination of the possible Ethan Smith–Cowdery association appears in David Persuitte's *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, published in 1985. Persuitte calls attention to a brief note in the Records of Baptisms for the Congregational Church in Poultney:

1818

August 2 Mr. Cowdry's children viz Rebecka Maria Lucy and Phebe<sup>92</sup>

Noting the connection of the Cowdery family to the Poultney Congregational Church that Ethan Smith would preside over three years later, Persuitte claims, "It is reasonable to expect, then, that Oliver Cowdery eventually became acquainted firsthand with Ethan Smith."<sup>93</sup> However, Persuitte makes two mistaken assumptions in reaching this conclusion. First, he assumes the Cowderys moved to Poultney soon after William and Keziah's marriage<sup>94</sup>—an understandable assumption given Lucy Cowdery



Young's letter—and second, that the Cowderys had a long-standing association with the Poultney Congregational Church.

To support this second assumption, Pursuitte refers to two church records—an 1810 vote “to give Mrs. Keziah Cowdry a letter of recommendation”<sup>95</sup> and the 1818 baptismal record mentioned above. Pursuitte reasons that, since the Cowderys associated with the Poultney Congregational Church from 1810 to 1818, they probably continued in the church until 1825. As shown, however, the family resided in either Middletown, Vermont, or Williamson, New York, from 1809 to 1817 or 1818 and was therefore not at all likely to form a close association with the Poultney church during this period.

Convinced that he has established an Oliver Cowdery–Ethan Smith connection, Pursuitte quickly attempts to link Ethan Smith's ideas to the origin of the Book of Mormon:

Since Pastor Smith wrote his book to convince his fellow Americans of the religious importance of his ideas about the American Indians, we can speculate that he also used his pulpit to expound on them. In the congregation, Oliver Cowdery might thus have heard and been deeply impressed . . . [and] there was a reasonable period of time in which Oliver Cowdery could have supplied Joseph with a copy [of *View of the Hebrews*]. . . . Though Joseph later claimed that he did not meet Oliver until the spring of 1829, he might have said that to preclude any appearance of collusion. It is also possible that some other individuals were involved in the collaboration and that Oliver worked with them first and not directly with Joseph until later.<sup>96</sup>

In the face of such speculative musing (which is void of documentation), a close look at the historical records proves highly instructive:

- William and Keziah's three daughters—Rebecca Marie, Lucy Pearce, and Phoebe—were all baptized on the same day, at the ages of seven, four, and one, raising questions of how often the family attended church services. (William's orthodox parents, by contrast, had him baptized when he was one month old.<sup>97</sup>)
- Keziah's known contact with the Poultney Congregational Church in 1803<sup>98</sup> (when she joined), 1810, and 1818 all occurred with the same pastor in office, the Reverend Mr. Leonard, a popular minister who served from 1803 to 1821.<sup>99</sup> There is no record of her having contact with any other Poultney minister.
- Keziah lived in Poultney during the 1790s but was a resident of Middletown in 1800 and also in 1810, when she married William Cowdery.<sup>100</sup> She did not return to Poultney until 1817 or 1818. It is therefore likely that the May 26, 1810, letter of recommendation was obtained (possibly from Poultney church members who had known her years earlier) in relation to the move to New York, which took place in the summer of 1810.<sup>101</sup>

- Although Keziah was a member of the Poultney Congregational Church, and her three daughters were baptized, no other Pearce, Austin, or Cowdery family members are mentioned in church records.<sup>102</sup>
- The baptismal entry in 1818 is the last record of Cowdery association with the Poultney Congregational Church, and no document has been found linking Ethan Smith to any member of the Cowdery family. Even Persuitte acknowledges that Oliver's three half sisters were baptized three years before Smith became pastor.<sup>103</sup>
- No document has been found linking Oliver Cowdery to the Congregational Church or the writings of Ethan Smith.<sup>104</sup>

All of this does not prove that the Cowderys did not know Ethan Smith or that Oliver Cowdery was not aware of *View of the Hebrews*. What it does suggest, however, is that the theory of an Ethan Smith-Cowdery association is not supported by the documents and that it is unknown whether Oliver knew of or read *View of the Hebrews*. (Oliver's possible acquaintance with Ethan Smith is further diminished by his likely residence in Wells from 1820 to 1822, as discussed earlier.)

Nevertheless, some historians have continued to speculate that Oliver may have somehow obtained a copy of *View of the Hebrews* in Poultney and given it to Joseph Smith sometime before 1827, when Joseph reported obtaining the gold plates. Persuitte, for example, launches into a lengthy scenario according to which Oliver meets with Ethan Smith and is allowed free access to his library. When Oliver leaves Vermont in 1825, he takes with him the enlarged edition of *View of the Hebrews*, as well as a romance written by Ethan Smith (although no record exists of this volume). Soon Oliver meets with Joseph, and "the two get the idea of using Ethan Smith's romance as the basis of a history of ancient America that they can sell for profit."<sup>105</sup> They incorporate material from *View of the Hebrews* as well. Persuitte omits specific dates and locations from his Joseph/Oliver conspiracy, which he admits is "purely speculative."<sup>106</sup> Still, in a book that gives the appearance of treating historical matters seriously, taking such creative license seems out of place.

In a more recent—and more surprising—attempt to link Joseph Smith with *View of the Hebrews* through Oliver Cowdery, Richard S. Van Wagoner offers another amazing series of speculations. His springboard is an 1830 editorial in the *Ashtabula* (Ohio) *Journal* which states, "For we had known Cowdery some seven or 8 years ago, when he was a dabbler in the art of Printing, and principally occupied in writing and printing pamphlets, with which, as a pedestrian pedlar, he visited the towns and villages of western N. York, and Canada."<sup>107</sup>



Van Wagoner first suggests that young Oliver Cowdery may have been “employed by Smith & Shute, the Poultney firm that printed *View of the Hebrews*.” Next he conjectures that Oliver was a “traveling agent” for Smith & Shute and that Oliver “had copies of the 1823 edition of *View of the Hebrews* in his knapsack when he visited his relatives the Smiths.” This, in Van Wagoner’s estimation, explains how Joseph, in the autumn of 1823, began telling his family interesting details about the ancient inhabitants of America.<sup>108</sup>

While Persuitte’s scenario of Joseph receiving *View of the Hebrews* offers no dates, locations, or documents, Van Wagoner includes four specific details that do not withstand scrutiny.

(1) The *Ashtabula Journal*’s identification of Oliver as a “pedestrian pedlar” could be a case of mistaken identity. As Scott Faulring has noted, “Benjamin Franklin Cowdery was an older relative of Oliver who went through repeated hard luck in printing ventures in western New York. Before 1830, he had published eight newspapers, and about this time others in the trade evidently felt him ‘poorly qualified to speak for the printers.’”<sup>109</sup>

(2) Oliver Cowdery himself indicated he did not learn the printing trade until 1829. In December of that year, he was assisting with the printing of the Book of Mormon and wrote to Joseph Smith, “It may look rather strange to you to find that I have so soon become a printer.”<sup>110</sup> In addition, a nineteenth-century history of Poultney mentions several people associated with printing in Poultney (including Horace Greeley, who began work as a *Northern Spectator* apprentice in 1826), but does not mention Oliver.<sup>111</sup>

(3) Oliver Cowdery was only sixteen when the supposed 1823 Smith & Shute employment and trip to western New York would have been necessary. However, there is no record of Oliver being in New York between 1815 and 1824. Had he gone to western New York in 1823, he most likely would have visited his older brother Warren, who had been practicing medicine in the area for at least six years. In his apothecary ledger, Warren noted the names of Dyer, Erastus, and Sally Cowdery, but there is no mention of Oliver. Nor is a boy Oliver’s age listed in the 1820 census record for Warren Cowdery.<sup>112</sup>

(4) There is no evidence that Oliver met the Smiths before 1828 or that he then knew they were related (Oliver Cowdery was a third cousin to Lucy Mack Smith). Similarly, Lucy says the Joseph Sr. family met Oliver for the first time in 1828 and does not mention any awareness of their distant family connection.<sup>113</sup>

Like other attempts to establish an Ethan Smith–Oliver Cowdery–Joseph Smith connection, Van Wagoner’s version lacks support from primary documents.

## Conclusion

In the cold spring of 1829, when Samuel Smith and Oliver Cowdery set out on a 130-mile journey from Palmyra, New York, to visit the Prophet in Harmony, Pennsylvania, traveling through miserable weather—“raining, freezing, and thawing alternately, which had rendered the roads almost impassable”<sup>114</sup>—Oliver was only twenty-two years old. Contrary to well-known theories regarding the Wood Scrape and *View of the Hebrews*, his family history offered no evidence of preparation for the establishment of a new religion. And while his family’s history is well documented, his personal life seemed ordinary, with his birth record as the only primary Vermont document mentioning him by name. All of that was about to change. He faced an extraordinary future, full of “days never to be forgotten.”<sup>115</sup>

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1. Lucy Cowdery Young to Brigham H. Young, March 7, 1887, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

2. The earliest account of the Wood movement is in a newspaper article entitled “The Rodsmen,” published in *Vermont American*, May 7, 1828. This article summarizes the Wood Scrape but does not name any of the participants, nor does it mention a counterfeiter. This was followed by Barnes Frisbie, *The History of Middletown, Vermont* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1867), 43–64. Recollections by Wells residents are recounted in Hiland Paul and Robert Parks, *History of Wells, Vermont, for the First Century after Its Settlement* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1869; reprint, Wells, Vt.: Wells Historical Society, 1979), 79–82. For in-depth analyses of the Wood Scrape, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching,” *BYU Studies* 24 (fall 1984): 489–560; David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985), 56–59, 234–38; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 35–36, 121–30; Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:599–621.

3. Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews* was originally published in Poultney, Vermont, by Smith and Shute, the first edition in 1823 and the second in 1825. It was recently reprinted. See *View of the Hebrews: 1825*, 2d ed. complete text by Ethan Smith, edited with an introduction by Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1996). Linkage with the Book of Mormon was first suggested by psychologist I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), 124–25. B. H. Roberts discussed the question of whether *View of the Hebrews* could have influenced the writing of the Book of Mormon in his papers entitled “A Book of Mormon Study” and “A Parallel,” in Brigham D. Madsen, ed. *B. H. Roberts: Studies of the*



*Book of Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), reviewed by John W. Welch in *Pacific Historical Review* 55 (November 1986): 619–23. For various discussions on Ethan Smith's possible influence on the Book of Mormon or lack thereof, see Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2d. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 46–49; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 134–38; Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 55–59, 183–89; Robert N. Hullinger, "Lost Tribes of Israel and the Book of Mormon," *Lutheran Quarterly* 22 (August 1970): 319–29; Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1951), 2:391–96; Stan Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates: Thomas Stuart Ferguson's Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Free Thinker Press, 1996), 144–49; Spencer J. Palmer and William L. Knecht, "View of the Hebrews: Substitute for Inspiration?" *BYU Studies* 5 (1964): 105–13; Pursuitte, *Origins of the Book of Mormon*, reviewed by L. Ara Norwood in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 2 (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), 187–204; Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 463–67, reviewed by David J. Whittaker in *Journal of Mormon History* 23 (spring 1997): 189–95; Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon: Religious Solutions from Columbus to Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 18–69, reviewed by Kevin Christensen in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 2 (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), 214–57; John W. Welch, "View of the Hebrews: 'An Unparallel,'" in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 83–87. For specific discussions of B. H. Roberts's writings, see Brigham D. Madsen, "Reflections on LDS Disbelief in the Book of Mormon as History," *Dialogue* 30 (fall 1997): 87–97; Truman G. Madsen, "B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 19 (summer 1979): 427–45; Truman G. Madsen and John W. Welch, "Did B. H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon?" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985).

4. Mary Bryant Alverson Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy* (Frank Allaben Genealogical, 1911), 79. Mehling compiled parts of her book in the 1880s and obtained information from Oliver Cowdery's daughter, Marie Louise Cowdery Johnson. See also William Hyslop Fuller, *Genealogy of Some Descendants of Edward Fuller of the Mayflower* (Palmer, Mass.: C. B. Fiske, 1908), 199; Grace E. Pember Wood, *A History of the Town of Wells, Vermont* (Wells, Vt.: By the author, 1955), 87.

5. Three biographies of Oliver Cowdery have been published: Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962); Phillip R. Legg, *Oliver Cowdery: The Elusive Second Elder of the Restoration* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1989); and Joseph Hyrum Greenhalgh, *Oliver Cowdery: The Man Outstanding* (n.p., [1964]). In addition, Andrew Jenson published a key biographical essay of Oliver Cowdery in *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History, 1901–36), 1:246–51. None of these publications refers to original Vermont documents and none mentions the Cowdery family's stay in Middletown.

6. All Wells documents except the census report are from the Wells Town Record, an unpublished document located in the Wells, Vermont, town clerk's office. Much of the Wells record is available at the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City. Russell R. Rich conducted on-site research in Wells in 1974 and discovered several references to William Cowdery in the Vermont records for this period. William Cowdery's name is variously spelled *Cowdry*, *Cowdrey*, and *Cowdre*.



7. Mormon historians have generally accepted Mehling's claim that Warren was born in Poultney, Vermont. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 170. However, the Wells Town Record states that Warren was born in Wells. Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 146. While another section of the Wells record clouds the picture by stating Warren was born in Reding (probably referring to Reading, Vermont), the secondary sources state he was born in Wells. See Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 229–30.

8. Wells Town Record, List of the Free Men in Wells, September 1789, 105.

9. Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 229–30.

10. Wells Town Record, Land Records, April 12, 1791 (238), April 20, 1791 (236), April 22, 1791 (224), November 22, 1792 (414), February 28, 1793 (423).

11. Wells Town Record, Minutes of Town Meeting, February 20, 1792, 292.

12. Wells Town Record, Record of Ear Marks for Livestock, July 1793, 102.

13. Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 150–51.

14. Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 152–53.

15. Wells Town Record, Affidavit from William Cowdery, December 19, 1797, 159.

16. Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 154–55.

17. Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedules of the Second Census of the United States, 1800," Wells, Vermont, prepared by the National Archives and Records Service (Washington, D.C., 1960), 264.

18. Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 156–57.

19. Wells Town Record, Minutes of Town Meeting, March [?] 1803, 185. Apparently, William Cowdery was also elected tithingman in Wells on one or two occasions. Thanks to Richard L. Anderson for this information.

20. Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 158–59.

21. Wells Town Record, Record of Births, 158–59.

22. Wells Town Record, Land Records, January 8, 1807 (99), January 9, 1807 (376–77), December 24, 1807 (72), December 24, 1807 (441), November 9, 1808 (16).

23. Paul and Parks, *History of Wells*, 81; Fuller, *Some Descendants of Edward Fuller*, 199.

24. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 95.

25. The original marriage record for William Cowdery and Keziah Pearce Austin was found in the Middletown Springs town clerk's office by Deborah Morris in August 1998. It is also available on microfilm at the LDS Family History Library. See Middletown Springs (Vt.) Town Record, Births, Marriages, and Deaths, vol. 2, 34 (March 18, 1810).

26. Carl A. Curtis, "Cowdery Genealogical Material," 1970, 1, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as BYU Special Collections). Curtis was the son of Caroline Eleanor Cowdery Curtis, the daughter of Warren A. Cowdery (and niece of Oliver Cowdery).

27. Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedules of the Third Census of the United States, 1810," Ontario, New York, prepared by the National Archives and Records Service (Washington, D.C., 1958), 786. Richard L. Anderson informed me that William Cowdery was included in this census.

28. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 186.

29. Curtis, "Cowdery Genealogical Material," 1.

30. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 187.

31. Middletown Springs Land Records, 1814–21, 391. This record indicates that William Cowdery lived in Middletown in 1815 and sold thirty acres of land situated in the northern part of Middletown to Moses Copeland.

32. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 188.



33. "Historical and Genealogical Material, Poultney, Vermont, Part I, Historical," 1052, typescript, Poultney town clerk's office, Poultney, Vermont.
34. Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedules of the Fourth Census of the United States, 1820," Poultney, Vermont, prepared by the National Archives and Records Service (Washington, D.C., 1959), 250.
35. Wood, *History of the Town of Wells*, 29.
36. Wood, *History of the Town of Wells*, 7–8.
37. Wood, *History of the Town of Wells*, 8.
38. Karl P. Stofko, *Vital Statistics Records from the Records of the First Church of Christ, Congregational in East Haddam, Connecticut, 1704–1850*, 37; *Second Congregational Church and Ecclesiastical Society (East Haddam Connecticut), Church Records, 1733–1931*, 22.
39. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 79.
40. For the death of Rebecca, see Paul and Parks, *History of Wells*, 81. Scott H. Faulring has concluded that Oliver Cowdery was suffering from chronic pulmonary tuberculosis when he died. See Scott H. Faulring, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," FARMS Preliminary Report (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 40 n. 99, forthcoming in Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges, eds., *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 172 n. 106.
41. Elmer J. Culp, "Early Vermont Roots of Mormonism," 1980, 5, photocopy in BYU Special Collections. In a talk given to the Pawlett Historical Society on February 6, 1980, Culp argued that "there is evidence that Oliver went to live with them [the Glass family]" (5), but he does not say what that evidence is.
42. Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedules of the Third Census of the United States, 1810," Wells, Vermont, prepared by the National Archives and Records Service (Washington, D.C., 1960), 26; Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedules of the Third Census of the United States, 1810," Ontario, New York, 786.
43. Keziah Pearce was born in Canaan, Litchfield County, Connecticut, on July 1, 1773. Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 95–96. Her father, Phineas Pearce, moved to Poultney, Vermont, "soon after the surrender of Burgoyne." Joseph Joslin, Barnes Frisbie, and Frederick Ruggles, *A History of the Town of Poultney, Vermont* (Poultney, Vt.: Journal Printing Office, 1875), 319. The Phineas Pearce family (spelled *Pierce*) is listed in the 1790 U.S. Census for Poultney (Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedules of the First Census of the United States, 1790," Poultney, Vermont, prepared by the National Archives and Records Service [Washington, D.C., 1965], 245.) Keziah married Harrington Austin sometime in the 1790s; they lived in Poultney for a time, but by the time of the 1800 census, they were residents of Middletown (with Harrington listed in the 1800 Middletown census as "Horrington"). For the birth of Silas Austin, son of Harrington and Keziah, see Helen McGaughy and Pauline Austin, professional researcher files, correspondence in possession of the author; Edith Austin Moore, *Unplaced Austin Records*, 3 vols. (n.p.: By the author), 3:149. Harrington died between 1800 and 1810. The marriage record lists Keziah as a resident of Middletown, so it is possible that she resided in Middletown from 1800 to 1810.
44. Charles T. Morrissey, *Vermont, a Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 109. According to Cowdery tradition, the family left Middletown in the summer of 1810, returned in 1813 or 1814, traveling by ox team. See Curtis, "Cowdery Genealogical Material."
45. Fuller, *Some Descendants of Edward Fuller*, 199; Margaret R. Jenks, *Wells Cemetery Inscriptions, Rutland County Vermont* (Kirkland, Wash.: By the author, 1980), 19.



46. See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (London: published for Orson Pratt by S. W. Richards, 1853), 59–66; Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 32; LeRoy S. Wirthlin, “Nathan Smith (1762–1828) Surgical Consultant to Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 17 (spring 1977): 319–37. Charles T. Morrissey discusses an 1813 epidemic of spotted fever, or cerebrospinal meningitis; see Morrissey, *Vermont*, 109.

47. According to Richard L. Bushman, the cold weather during the summer of 1816 “is generally attributed to the volcanic explosion of Tambora on Sumbawa in 1815, which blew fifteen cubic kilometers of volcanic ash.” See Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 200. For more about the “poverty year” of 1816, see Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 66; Paul and Parks, *History of Wells*, 20; Morrissey, *Vermont*, 109 n. 99.

48. On Warren’s marriage, see Mehling, *Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy*, 170.

49. Stephen Cowdery’s whereabouts during this period are unknown. He is not mentioned in Warren’s records nor is he included in the 1820 census for either William or Warren. See Curtis, “Cowdery Genealogical Material,” Warren Cowdery Ledger, 1.

50. Leonard J. Arrington, “Oliver Cowdery’s Kirtland, Ohio, ‘Sketch Book,’” *BYU Studies* 12:4 (1972): 414. Silas Austin was born in Poultney in 1799 to Harrington Austin and Keziah Pearce. He married Emily Buckland in Licking County, Ohio, in 1819 and spent most of his life there. He worked as a blacksmith and served in the Mexican-American War. He and Emily had four children. Emily died in 1875 and Silas in 1886. They are buried in Harrison, Licking County, Ohio. See Helen McGaughy and Pauline Austin, professional researcher files; Licking County History and Court Records, Newark, Ohio; Moore, *Unplaced Austin Records*, 3:149.

51. “Members, The Congregational Church, Poultney, Vermont, 1782 to 1898, copied from Mr. Edward C. Ripley’s Papers,” typescript, 1067, Poultney town clerk’s office, Poultney, Vermont.

52. Paul and Parks, *History of Wells*, 79.

53. Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 21.

54. In 1826, Lyman Stevens of Wells was authorized by “the overseers of the poor” to assist Arunah Glass, but Arunah was to pay his own doctor’s bill (indicating the family suffered health problems that compounded their financial difficulties).

55. Bureau of the Census, “Population Schedules of the Fourth Census of the United States, 1820,” Wells, Vermont, prepared by the National Archives and Records Service (Washington, D.C., 1959), 259.

56. Wells town record, Land Records, 380. For 1823, see Land Records, 383. There is no district record for 1824, and Arunah is not listed in the record for 1825, but for 1826 and 1827, two students are listed with the Glass household. This could not have been Oliver because he was over eighteen—and also because he was apparently in New York at the time. See Wells Town Record, Land Records, 604, 651. Arunah Glass reportedly lived in Wells until 1855, when he moved to Illinois, dying there in 1860 at the age of 64. See Wood, *History of the Town of Wells*, 55.

57. Wood, *History of the Town of Wells*, 20–21.

58. Young to Young, March 7, 1887.

59. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 47.

60. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 54. Frisbie gives the year as 1801, but as Dan Vogel argues, “The year 1801 is probably an error since the earliest account of the Wood movement cites the date as January 14, 1802 (*Vermont American*, May 7, 1828).” See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:609 n. 15.

61. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 62. Frisbie adds, though, that the fact that Joseph Sr. “was a rods-man under the tuition of this counterfeiter after he went to Palmyra has been proven to my satisfaction, at least” (62).



62. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 62.
63. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 46–47.
64. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 42–63.
65. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 37.
66. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 318.
67. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 62.
68. Paul and Parks, *History of Wells*, 81, 82.
69. Anderson, “Mature Joseph Smith,” 522.
70. “The Rodsmen,” *Vermont American*.
71. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 93.
72. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 38.

73. Book of Commandments 7:3. The Book of Commandments is a collection of the Prophet Joseph Smith's early revelations, published in 1833. These revelations were incorporated in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835. The verse concerning Oliver and the rod now reads: “Now this is not all thy gift; for you have another gift, which is the gift of Aaron; behold, it has told you many things; Behold, there is no other power, save the power of God, that can cause this gift of Aaron to be with you” (D&C 8:6–7).

74. Anderson, “Mature Joseph Smith,” 528.
75. Anderson, “Mature Joseph Smith,” 524–25.
76. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 98.
77. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 125.
78. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:635, 638.
79. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:639.

80. Lucy Smith, “Preliminary Manuscript,” 1845, 25, LDS Church Archives. In her published work, Lucy dates the move to Randolph in 1802. However, the published account offers no support for a temporary residence in Poultney because Lucy's account has the family renting the Tunbridge farm and moving directly from there to Randolph. See Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 45.

81. “Historical and Genealogical Material,” 165–84.

82. Quinn fails to account for the obvious anti-Mormon bias of Frisbie, who at one point refers to “this monster—Mormonism” (Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 64), which makes his theories about Mormon origins suspect. Quinn also fails to explore the implications of his own claim that in 1800 *Joseph Smith* was “the most common name in America” (*Magic World View*, 125). The 1800 census lists eleven Joseph Smiths in Vermont and well over a hundred combined total in Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York. According to Vogel, none of these census records is an exact match for the makeup of the Joseph Sr. family. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:640. This makes locating the family solely on the basis of census records impossible.

83. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 125, 132.
84. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 124–26.
85. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 126–27.

86. Quinn attempts unsuccessfully to link Winchell with Luman Walters, named by Pomeroy Tucker as a money-digging associate of Joseph Smith. Stating that the family of Philastus Hurlbut “*may have been related*” to the family of Walters and that Hurlbut “*may have been related*” to Winchell, Quinn suddenly invents the phrase “Walter(s)-Winchell” as if the two are interchangeable. See Quinn, *Magic World View*, 122–23; italics added. However, he offers no documents associating the two men; nor does he acknowledge that even if Hurlbut was related to both of them (which itself is purely speculative), it would not necessarily mean they were related to each other. Quinn does not consider the possibility that Frisbie confused Winchell with Walters.

Persuitte suggests that “it seems to be a reasonable conclusion that Walters was Wingate/Winchell” (*Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 238). For information on the affidavits collected by Hurlbut, Thorne, and Deming, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:13–77, 167–81, 185–214.

87. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 61–62.

88. David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939; New York: AMS, 1966), 242, cited in Quinn, *Magic World View*, 386.

89. Richard C. Roberts, “View of the Hebrews,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1509.

90. See note 3 above.

91. Thomas Stuart Ferguson to Ron Barney, January 10, 1983, cited in Stan Larson, “The Odyssey of Thomas Stuart Ferguson,” *Dialogue* 23 (spring 1990): 83.

92. “Historical and Genealogical Material, Poultney,” 1052.

93. Persuitte, *Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 8.

94. Persuitte, *Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 235. Persuitte correctly notes that the Cowderys lived in Middletown before moving to Poultney but mistakenly believes the family arrived in Poultney in 1810. Brigham Madsen makes a much more serious error when he writes that Oliver Cowdery “had lived in Poultney for twenty-two years until 1825” (Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 27). This calculation misses Oliver’s birth date by three years (he was born in 1806, not 1803) and has Oliver in Poultney fifteen years longer than he actually was.

95. Persuitte, *Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 270. Persuitte reports that in 1977 he took photos of Poultney Congregational Church records and that they included information about the letter of recommendation and also state that William and Keziah’s three daughters were baptized in 1818 “on the faith of the mother” (*Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 270, 7). Persuitte obtained these records from the Poultney Historical Society but reports that they were stolen in the winter of that year. I could not find them when I searched the Historical Society’s holdings and the town clerk’s office in 1999.

96. Persuitte, *Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 8, 57.

97. *Records of the First Church of Christ, Congregational in East Haddam*, 37.

98. “Members, The Congregational Church,” 1067.

99. Joslin, Frisbie, and Ruggles, *History of the Town of Poultney*, 104.

100. Bureau of the Census, “Population Schedules of the Second Census of the United States, 1800,” Middletown, Vermont, prepared by the National Archives and Records Service (Washington, D.C., 1960), 110; marriage record for William Cowdery and Keziah Austin, March 18, 1810, Middletown Town Record, Births, Marriages, and Deaths, 2:34.

101. Curtis, “Cowdery Genealogical Material,” 1.

102. “Members, The Congregational Church,” 1065–71.

103. Persuitte, *Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 8.

104. Emily A. Ross to William Powell, April 22, 1976, LDS Church Archives. Asked to research whether Oliver Cowdery was a member of Ethan Smith’s congregation, Poultney resident Emily Ross was unable to locate any connection in the documentary record.

105. Persuitte, *Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 254.

106. Persuitte, *Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 254. The original manuscript of the Book of Mormon offers strong evidence that Oliver acted simply as scribe, not co-author. See Royal Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 61–93.



107. *Cleveland Herald*, November 25, 1830, clipping in Milton V. Backman Jr. and others, comps., *Contemporary Accounts of the Latter-day Saints and Their Leaders Appearing in Early Ohio Newspapers*, 2 vols., vol. 2, BYU Special Collections.

108. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 465–66. Apparently following Brigham Madson's lead, Van Wagoner erroneously claims Oliver Cowdery resided in Poultney from 1803 to 1825. Of course, Oliver was not actually born until 1806. Since Van Wagoner is discussing the possibility that Oliver was a traveling agent for Smith & Shute, this three-year mistake is crucial. It seems unlikely for Oliver to have had such a job at age sixteen, his actual age in 1823.

109. Scott H. Faulring to Larry E. Morris, October 29, 1998. The information on Benjamin Franklin Cowdery comes from Milton W. Hamilton, *The Country Printer, New York State, 1785–1830*, 2d ed. (Port Washington, N.Y.: Ira J. Friedman, 1964), 265–66, 92.

110. Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith, December 28, 1829, Joseph Smith Letterbook, 1:5, microfilm, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives.

111. Joslin, Frisbie, and Ruggles, *History of the Town of Poultney*, 89–94.

112. Curtis, "Cowdery Genealogical Material," Warren Cowdery Ledger, 2; Bureau of the Census, "Population Schedules of the Fourth Census of the United States, 1820," LeRoy, New York, prepared by the National Archives and Records Service (Washington, D.C., 1959), 150.

113. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 128.

114. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 130.

115. "Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps," September 7, 1834, [Letter I], *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 14.